

Laird Looks to Future Ford Role and Own Retirement

By Lou Cannon

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Melvin R. Laird, the free spirit of the embattled Nixon administration, believes that his own efforts to create a "new spirit of accommodation" between the White House and Congress will be "largely done" if Gerald R. Ford is confirmed as vice president.

Laird, looking backward at the Nixon administration's record of the past six months and forward to his retirement from public life, says that he expects Ford to take over his own role as the administration's friendly broker on Capitol Hill.

Despite the Watergate-induced tremors that have shaken the Nixon administration to its foundation during the past week, Laird believes that the administration and Congress have begun to overcome old animosities and work together during the past four months.

He points to the agreement that ended the Cambodian bombing, the passage of the highway and farm bills, approval of the Action volunteer agency bill and ongoing efforts to achieve compromise solutions on revenue-sharing measures for education and community development.

There are many uncommon ingredients to the accommodations reached by Congress and the administration on this diverse legislative program. All, however, have one common thread in that Laird was heavily involved in the hammering out of a compromise solution.

"What Mel lacks in humility he makes up for in ability and respect on Capitol Hill," says one White House official who is not known as a Laird admirer. "He has ruffled some feathers in the White House but he has helped us with Congress."

Perhaps the best testimony to Laird's effectiveness on the hill comes from a liberal Democratic senator—Alan Cranston of Califor-



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nia.

Last month Cranston became alarmed at the apparent efforts of Nixon political appointees, none of them physicians, to exercise decision-making authority over the chief medical director of the Veterans Administration, Dr. Marc J. Musser.

Cranston called hearings of the Veterans Affairs Subcommittee on Health and Hospitals to investigate what he considered unwar-

ranted political interference in medical decisions and an attempt to force the resignation of Musser. He also called upon Laird for assistance.

On Oct. 5, after three days of negotiations, Cranston received assurances from Laird that Musser would continue to run the VA Department of Medicine and Surgery and would be asked to serve another four-year term when his appointment expires on Jan. 4, 1974.

"I am most grateful to Mr. Laird for the fair and forthright way he has proceeded in this matter," Cranston said. "The situation had reached almost crisis proportions, and his evenhanded approach has avoided a major confrontation, and, in my view, a disastrous undermining of the professional nature of the VA medical program."

But if Laird has avoided some confrontations with Congress, he has provoked several within the Nixon administration itself.

Three weeks after his appointment as domestic counselor, Laird suggested in a tape-recorded interview that Ronald L. Ziegler step aside as President Nixon's principal press spokesman. And early in September, Laird enraged Treasury Secretary George P. Shultz, then on a mission to Japan, by suggesting that the administration adopt a refundable surtax, which Shultz strongly opposes.

Shultz, who complained that Laird always holds press conferences on economic matters when he is out of town, advised Laird to "keep his cotton-pickin' hands off economic policy." The next day Shultz sent Laird a pair of white gloves

as a reminder.

Laird has remained undeterred by the negative responses of Ziegler, Eshultz and others within the administration. His partisans on the hill point out that Ziegler stopped doing the White House daily briefings soon after Laird's comment. And Laird has spoken out frequently on his economic ideas despite Shultz's negative reaction.

At a recent White House briefing of subcabinet officials Laird replied to one aide who was concerned about accurately reflecting administration policy in his speeches by telling him that the administration needed

"conversation, confrontation and a little fun." It is Laird's belief that the celebrated and recent openness in the White House is not enough.

"Everyone asks about access," Laird said in a copyrighted September interview in U.S. News and World Report. "Access is important, but that isn't the most important thing. The most important thing is to have conversation and confrontation of ideas before policy decisions are made. We are developing that."

However, Laird failed to impress President Nixon on the most significant "policy decision" he recommended—turning over the Watergate tapes to U.S. District Judge John J. Sirica before Mr. Nixon was compelled by court order to do so. It was Laird's view that the President should act not for legal reasons but for political ones, and that a prompt turnover of the tapes would restore presidential credibility and enable Mr. Nixon to truly put the Watergate issue behind him.

The disclosure that Laird, as well as experienced White House counselor Bryce N. Harlow, had made the recommendation to turn

over the tapes came on July 27 from Laird's old congressional buddy and frequent golfing partner, Gerald Ford. When a reporter suggested that perhaps the President's rejection of this counsel showed that neither Laird nor Harlow was really influential at the White House, Ford smiled and replied:

"You can't win them all."

The relationship between Ford and Laird has usually been both supportive and reciprocal.

After Laird left his job as secretary of defense at the end of 1972, Ford lobbied regularly with the President to bring him back into the cabinet as a congressional troubleshooter.

Laird, in turn, promoted Ford as the best choice to replace Vice President Spiro Agnew and spent most of the week with the Michigan congressman the week that Agnew resigned.

"I know Gerry Ford backwards and forwards and

every other way," Laird told the Business Council in Hot Springs, Ark., the night Ford was named to replace Agnew.

He said that night that Ford was his first choice and New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller his second choice for vice president and added that he thought the 60-year-old Ford would be a candidate for President in 1976.

Laird somewhat modified his view about Ford's presidential prospects when he met with a group of Washington reporters at an Oct. 16 breakfast session. But he also praised Ford to the skies.

"Ford comes from Congress," Laird said. "He is a leader in Congress. He gets along well with everyone. He will be very supportive of the President. And it's important the man in the job not use it primarily for running for President. There's nothing wrong with Ford changing his mind about running for President, and he very well could but he doesn't have the same eagerness for the job that (California Gov. Ronald) Reagan and Rocky do."

Last week Laird expanded on his remarks to say that Ford as vice president could

take over his own role with the Congress, leaving Laird free to return to private life.

Laird pointed out that he had characterized his own appointment as a temporary one at a press conference on June 6, the day he was appointed.

"With Ford as vice president my work will be largely done," he said.

Laird defined this work as helping to create "a climate for a new spirit of accommodation" between the administration and Congress. In Laird's view this means holding fast to certain principles of legislation but giving in on details, formulae of allocation and the authorship of legislation.

"He is a principled pragmatist," says William Baroody, his aide of 13 years. "He's going to stand tough on principle—but not dig in on less consequential matters."

The Laird approach produced an Action bill that had Democrat Cranston as the principal author, a highway measure that divided the difference between advocates of urban mass transit and more interstate highway and a Cambodian compromise that won the support of such Democratic senators as George McGovern and Hubert Humphrey but was opposed both by President Nixon, until he saw he had

no choice but to accept it, and Sen. Edward Kennedy.

Now, Laird is warning that the Nixon administration may be on the verge of setting up its own version of the myriad categorical programs that special revenue-sharing was designed to replace. Laird, echoing a position he and economist Milton Friedman took in "The Conservative Papers" in 1968 wants an overall "income strategy" to help poor people rather than a collection of separate programs.

"I'm against cash assistance for housing," Laird says. "I'm against cash assistance in the food stamp program. I'm against cash assistance as far as health is concerned but eventually you've got to get all these separate cash programs brought together and have

an income strategy program and not piecemeal separate cash programs all over the government."

Laird's most steadfast concern has been his worry that the Soviet Union is dangerously outstripping the United States in weaponry—and here, too, his outspokenness runs counter to the Nixon administration's infatuation with detente.

"There is great talk of detente, but the only manner in which detente can be proven is by deeds not words," Laird said at the breakfast meeting with reporters. "The Soviet Union, as far as I'm concerned, has not been performing as if detente were here."

Laird dismisses press assessments that such talk shows he is too outspoken to be part of the administration. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, says Laird, plays a different role in the administration and is less free to point out the deficiencies in detente.

But there is substantial reason to believe that Laird's outspokenness, as much as anything, will hurry a departure to private life that Laird clearly desires. President Nixon is known to respect Laird and his abilities, but the two men, in the words of one White House official, are "hardly drinking buddies."

Whatever closeness did exist between them was probably dispelled by a remark Laird made Aug. 28 in San Clemente when asked if the President's shoving of Ziegler before a New Orleans speech showed that Mr. Nixon was under strain.

"It might have been better if the President had taken a long rest" following his July bout of pneumonia, Laird replied.

There are reports, neither confirmed nor denied by Laird, that he will ultimately show in the anticipated presidential campaign of Rockefeller—especially if Ford becomes vice president and then retires in 1976.

For now, however, Laird simply wants out of politics and government.

"I've been in this political business for a long time," he said in a recent interview. "I had made up my mind (to retire)—and I'm going to do

that. My wife, too, is not interested in staying in politics any longer. We enjoyed it, but just frankly want to get out. I want to get out and try a little easier profession."

A graduate of Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., Laird has spent almost his entire life in government, as a Wisconsin state senator, member of Congress, Secretary of Defense and White House staff member. Before election to Congress in 1952, he served briefly as secretary-treasurer of a lumber company.