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Confirming Roy Ash

In anticipation of the retirement of J. Edgar Hoover, Congress several years ago passed a law requiring Senate confirmation of all future FBI directors. The wisdom of this was dramatically demonstrated when the confirmation fight over L. Patrick Gray III uncovered his unfitness and kept him from becoming the permanent head of the FBI.

Despite the strong opposition of Mr. Nixon, Congress has now just passed another law broadening the confirmation process to include the director of the Office of Management and Budget (OMB), a position presently held by Roy L. Ash, former president of Litton Industries, and a protege of H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, the top White House aides ousted in the Watergate scandal.

The President can, of course, veto the bill, but if he does it will be a rank abuse of the veto power, for all other appointees of Ash's stature must be confirmed by the Senate. When the budget office was first created in 1921, it was merely a small appendage to the White House, but today the head of OMB is more powerful than most Cabinet members.

There is no good reason for excepting the budget director from confirmation. Moreover, in the case of Ash, there are grave questions about his personal qualifications that need to be thoroughly investigated before he becomes permanently entrenched in his new role.

Besides the criticisms of Ash arising out of his private career, he has also inspired fresh doubts by actions and statements made by him since joining the Nixon team earlier this year. Most recently he wrote a special article for the New York Times, defending Mr. Nixon's economic policies, which George Meany, president of the AFL-CIO, called "a compilation of lies."

Meany is not known for verbal restraint, but in this instance he was on solid ground. Ash, for example, claimed the administration had reduced "the rate of inflation from 6.7 per cent when the President took office to 2.9 per cent today." This comes about as close as you can get to the big lie, for the facts are the exact opposite.

The consumer price index for January, 1969 (the month Mr. Nixon took

office), showed a rise of only three tenths of 1 per cent, or an annual rate of increase of 3.6 per cent, instead of the 6.7 figure invented by Ash. The latest index for the first quarter 1973 shows prices rising at an annual rate of 8.8 per cent, the worst since the Korean war more than 20 years ago and at about twice the rate inherited by Mr. Nixon four years ago.

This is also three times higher than the 2.9 per cent figure which Ash says is the present rate of inflation. What is the public to make of this? If it can believe the statistics of the budget director, who in government can it believe?

Ash has already been told to his face by Sen. William Proxmire (D-Wis.) that he should resign because of "direct and palpable conflict of interest" with his previous job as head of Litton Industries, a major defense contractor.

Litton is currently engaged in disputes with the government over huge cost overruns. It is, for instance, asking the Navy for almost \$544 million above the original estimates on a number of ship contracts. In one, involving nuclear submarines, Vice Adm. Hyman Rickover has accused Litton of "misrepresentation, if not fraud" in trying to blame the Navy for the cost overruns.

Moreover, on another contract for landing-helicopter assault ships—which Litton is claiming \$270 million in additional costs—the company is already two years behind schedule because of production and personnel difficulties. The conflict of interest problem is aggravated because Ash has indicated no intention of excusing himself from dealing with defense contracts.

Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.), a member of the House Armed Services Committee, has also called upon the Securities and Exchange Commission to investigate the alleged "unloading" by Ash of 85,000 shares of Litton Industries stock on the basis of inside information not available to the public.

If ever confirmation hearings were in order for a key government official, they are for Ash. Considering the trouble the President is already in over the conduct of some of his other close associates, he ought to welcome the scrutiny of his budget director.