

Roy Ash: A Dominant Policy Voice

The increasingly dominant policy voice in the post-Watergate White House is not old political pro Melvin Laird but Roy Ash and his fellow business management experts at the Office of Management and Budget (OMB)—a development that may forebode a return to the unhealthy climate of pre-Watergate days.

Lacking his own staff and constantly pledging his early return to retirement, Laird never really filled the policymaking vacuum created by last April's hasty departure of top presidential lieutenants H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman. Instead, OMB director Ash has quietly seized control of the government's domestic policy.

That undermines hopes that the trauma of Watergate had taught Mr. Nixon basic political lessons. Ash resembles the Haldeman-Ehrlichman model in lack of political sensitivity and contempt for Congress. Moreover, those grievous deficiencies figure to remain in the White House long after Laird has gone, taking with him his political expertise and conciliatory attitude toward Congress.

Indeed, even while there as presidential counselor, Laird's political finesse is sometimes trampled by the OMB bureaucratic juggernaut. A classic case concerns recent backstage developments in a struggle waged for

five years over regional economic development. Congressmen and governors of both parties favor state-federal regional commissions (on the model of the Appalachian commission); President Nixon wants the program killed.

The President is backed up by Ash and OMB plus the Domestic Council staff inherited from Ehrlichman by Laird. But Laird himself knew Congress might override a Nixon veto of the regional development bill. Consequently, he skillfully engineered a compromise, based on an amendment by Republican Sen. Henry Bellmon of Oklahoma for the study of balanced national economic development.

But OMB was not interested in compromise. Walter D. Scott, a 41-year-old management expert recruited by Ash this year from the Chicago office of Lehman Brothers to become OMB's associate director, drafted a secret memorandum which implied Congress should be ignored because it really doesn't know its own mind. Despite passage of the Bellmon amendment under Laird's guidance, a contemptuous Scott wrote, "we don't believe that Congress is primarily concerned with that issue." Instead, he suggested phasing out regional development programs. Laird was not even shown the memo.

Bellmon, fiercely independent, hit

the ceiling. Meeting with Scott last week, he believed he received OMB's pledge to respect congressional wishes. But that does not express the prevailing attitude of OMB, powerful enough now and to become even more powerful once Laird leaves.

Actually, Alexander Haig, White House chief of staff, is today the President's most influential aide. But since replacing Haldeman, Haig has been immersed in Watergate and the Agnew affair. Control of domestic policy has been between Laird and Ash.

Laird has been hobbled from the start. Envisaging his White House post as a short-term rescue mission, he declined to replace Ehrlichman's Domestic Council staff with his own men.

In contrast, Ash had been reinforcing competent budget bureau civil servants with outside management experts such as Scott. Such an OMB policy takeover would have been mercilessly crushed by Ehrlichman. But Laird has no interest in fratricidal struggles.

Laird does get last crack at the President on policy decisions, and the gregarious and charming former Wisconsin congressional leader would seem far too much for the button-down Ash. (Conferring with Ash, one White House insider told us, "is like sitting

in a room with some chilled liver.")

But Mr. Nixon has never been fond of Laird personally. What's more, Laird's stock in the Oval Office fell when Albert Sindlinger's confidential surveys, slipped into the President's night reading, showed consumer confidence dropping sharply after Laird's trial balloon for a variable tax increase. Laird grumbles that some White House staffers keep score of "wins" and "losses" for advisers and are giving him a low batting average. In truth, those staffers — mostly Haldeman-Ehrlichman holdovers — have come to view Ash as where the power is today and will be tomorrow.

Even so, Laird's political wisdom of

a quarter-century in Washington is invaluable. Alone among Mr. Nixon's senior staffers, he predicted the House would spurn Vice President Agnew's call to investigate him. He urged Mr. Nixon to sign the farm bill, successfully, and pleaded with him to release the presidential tape recordings, unsuccessfully.

When Laird departs (between Christmas and Easter, friends say, but probably closer to Easter), Mr. Nixon will be left with Ash and his non-political managers. Clearly, Watergate did not reinstate the politician at the White House after all.