

Nixon and Laird: Breaking Off

When and if Rep. Gerald Ford (R-Mich.) is confirmed as Vice President, and thus becomes presiding officer of the U.S. Senate, it is a sound bet that he will soon supplant Melvin Laird as Mr. Nixon's "big man" on Capitol Hill.

Mel Laird, former secretary of defense and a former influential congressman who helped make Ford the House Republican leader, is supposed to be the President's very special adviser on congressional and domestic affairs, especially from the point of view of political impact. But it is, in fact, a hollow relationship.

It's hard to say whether the White House is more fed up with Laird, or Laird more fed up with the White House. But up to now it has not suited the purposes of either Mr. Nixon or Mr. Laird to sever the connection officially. Despite Laird's momentary revival as an apologist for the firing of special Watergate prosecutor Archibald Cox, the confirmation of Ford would seem to be an appropriate moment. The connection is still deteriorating; it can only be a matter of time until it is formally broken.

When Mr. Nixon got the former Secretary of Defense to join his staff last summer, there was much talk of Laird becoming the new No. 1 adviser and of "opening up the White House." Even then there was a suspicion that this was mostly cosmetic—to suggest a fresh post-Watergate image. And that's about the way it has turned out.

There's no question that Laird has always carried clout on The Hill, so even the cynics were impressed when he announced that the White House was eager to drop its running fight with Congress and to establish a good working partnership with the legislative branch. Since then, an unbroken

series of presidential vetoes has reduced Laird's pledge to absurdity. Maybe Ford can do better, but it's doubtful.

The tip-off that the final break between Laird and the administration is near came last week when the so-called No. 1 adviser made public statements on two critical issues that went against the grain at the White House. They could hardly have been more embarrassing to the President, even though Laird was clearly giving Mr. Nixon his best judgment, which is what an adviser ought to do—only privately.

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Mr. Laird has consistently urged the President to be forthright about Watergate, and he went so far as to warn his principal that he would be courting impeachment if he did not give up the Watergate tapes. Several months ago, John Connally was banished from the White House for recommending openness about Watergate, but was quickly restored to favor when he later publicly upheld Mr. Nixon's right to withhold the tapes. Mr. Laird could hardly be unaware of that.

The former defense secretary has also just clashed with both Mr. Nixon and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger at a tense moment on their policy of detente with Russia. He thinks the administration is being too soft on the Soviets. In all fairness, he was say-

ing this even before the war in the Mideast broke out.

Early in September he said, "There is talk of detente, but the security of the United States is not assured by such talk—it takes deeds and ironclad guarantees as well. . . . I don't care if I am in a minority, I feel compelled to state my concern." And he did.

Kissinger is not the only Cabinet member Laird has recently taken on. Last month the latter floated a report that the President was considering a tax increase. The next day Treasury Secretary George Shultz ridiculed it, and suggested that Laird "keep his cotton-pickin' hands off economic policy."

The tax idea was about as welcome to Mr. Nixon as Laird's suggestion that the President liquidate his press secretary, Ronald Ziegler. A White House official promptly said, "The observation that Ziegler's usefulness is impaired is not shared by the President." Ziegler is still very much around.

The special adviser also took a whirl at revising the President's old proposal of a minimum income welfare plan. "We have to get that idea back in the forefront," Mr. Laird said. The White House froze. So did the recommendation.

When the scandal involving Spiro Agnew first exploded, Mr. Laird was criticized for calling up key Republican congressmen and cautioning them against going "all out" in defense of the then Vice President. Today, that advice looks pretty good.

Come to think of it, a lot of the advice the special adviser has given Mr. Nixon looks pretty good in perspective. The trouble is, the President didn't want to hear most of it. What nearly all Presidents really want to hear, as Mel Laird can now testify, is yes-man advice.