

Nixon and Laird: Divergent Views

The astonishing disagreement between Richard M. Nixon and Melvin R. Laird over amnesty for Vietnam draft dodgers underscores as nothing else the President's dangerous isolation from the shrewd politician who has just ended eight frustrating months as domestic counselor.

Not only disagreement on one issue but antithetical political philosophies and noncommunication between two old allies are glaringly revealed by their conflicting response to a Veterans of Foreign Wars (VFW) protest over Laird's avowed interest in "conditional amnesty."

Without consulting or informing Laird, President Nixon told the VFW his opposition to amnesty remains totally inflexible. Without consulting or informing the President, Laird told the VFW that changing conditions have modified his own earlier opposition to amnesty.

Nothing could better demonstrate the basic incompatibility of the two men. In telling the VFW that "throughout my career of public service, I have learned to avoid absolute, dogmatic positions," Laird was implicitly contrasting Mr. Nixon's rigidity. But beyond the contrast, the VFW correspondence revealed the degree to which the President had simply stopped talking to his domestic counselor.

With U.S. forces no longer fighting in Vietnam, Laird has long felt something must be done about 30,000 to 40,000 young men who fled this country to escape the draft. He said nothing to the President, but in a Jan. 5 interview with a Scripps-Howard reporter suggested amnesty for the exiles in return for "some sort of service" to their country.

Reading that interview, the VFW hierarchy was outraged. On Jan. 7, na-

tional commander Ray R. Soden sent Mr. Nixon a smoldering letter which reiterated the VFW's "total and unremitting opposition to any form of amnesty." He expressed "shock and a deep sense of betrayal" by Laird's new position, adding that he considers Laird's "actions and apparent sentiments" about amnesty "to be unconscionable" and "a break of faith both with you and with the strong men and women who served, suffered, and in 57,000 cases, died." Soden's request: "a personal reaffirmation from you on this matter."

Rapid correspondence not being the strong suit of the Nixon White House, no reply was sent the VFW until Jan. 23. During those 16 days, Mr. Nixon did not seek out Laird, target of VFW rage. Nor did he consult counselor Bryce Harlow or the Domestic Council's staff.

Instead, staffers who routinely handle correspondence checked the President to make certain he still opposed amnesty in any form.

He did. His Jan. 23 letter to Soden, not released to the press, reaffirmed his stand. "The few who refused to serve or deserted their country," he wrote, "must pay a penalty for their choice . . . We cannot provide forgiveness for them . . . The price is a criminal penalty." That, the President added, "still reflects my view." He shrugged off "recent reports in the press which have been attributed to others," without a gesture at defending Laird.

Laird did a quiet burn after receiving a carbon copy of the VFW's letter to Mr. Nixon. An old Navy man who won a Purple Heart and rose from the ranks to become an officer during World War II, VFW member Laird used Navy language to grumble that

the VFW had "put a comrade on report."

On Monday, Jan. 28, beginning his last week at the White House, Laird sent his own letter to Soden. "Neither the political system nor the judicial system of the United States works on 'blanket' and arbitrary approaches," he wrote . . . "We pride ourselves on administering justice with mercy and understanding." While opposing general amnesty, he proposed a case-by-case approach.

During Laird's White House tenure, he never discussed this with the President. Neither has anybody else, high White House officials told us. Mr. Nixon is not only isolated from the outer world but sealed off from his own staff's uncongenial advice. Knowing his revulsion for advice contradicting his own axioms, his aides protect themselves by holding their tongues.

Thus, President Nixon is probably wholly unaware of bipartisan feeling in Congress that something eventually must be done about amnesty, a feeling fully perceived not only by Laird but, more importantly, also by Vice President Gerald R. Ford. As representative of Michigan's 5th congressional district, Ford answered mail by suggesting conditional amnesty—that is, for violators who put in substitute service for their country.

Laird, leaving the White House with his store of political wisdom sadly untapped by the President, has said Ford will now assume many of his duties. Ford is also sensitive to political trends and the need for flexibility. But whether he will prove to be one small whit more successful than the unusually articulate Laird in getting through to the President is extremely doubtful.