

... and Melvin Laird's Rescue Mission

Melvin R. Laird's eleventh hour rescue expedition into Richard M. Nixon's White House, stubbornly resisted by both men all spring for divergent reasons, was finally forced on them last weekend at Camp David by the desperate bleakness of the situation.

Conflicting with his own desires and a pledge to his family, Laird accepted the top domestic post at the White House only after he saw domestic policy there had become immobilized by the Watergate scandal. President Nixon, who prefers advisers who give no advice and is not overly fond of the advice-prone Laird, offered the job only after incessant importuning by congressional Republicans when he saw every other course closing fast.

Accordingly, while Laird's appointment has rallied flagging Republican morale on Capitol Hill (where presi-

dential resignation talk had been rising), the future partnership between the two is uncertain. Laird has been clinically critical of almost everything done at the White House the last two months and will push for dramatic changes not congenial to Mr. Nixon's habits or personality. That they understand each other perfectly scarcely will ease the tension.

The Laird-to-the-White-House campaign began last fall long before Watergate's full eruption when far-seeing ex-Nixon aide Bryce Harlow, critical of the closed operation run by H. R. (Bob) Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, privately boosted Laird as a superior-presidential assistant. Laird would have no part of it, particularly so long as Haldeman and Ehrlichman were around.

Nor would the White House. Laird's

influence there, fading in his latter months as Secretary of Defense, hit bottom last December when he opposed Mr. Nixon's bombing of Hanoi for fear it might upset the return of American POWs. During one meeting, Haldeman was coldly outraged at Laird for holding up the President's decision, treating Laird as an interloper.

Even when the Watergate scandal exploded four months later, the White House did not summon Laird. Despite repeated newspaper stories that he was being hired, Mr. Nixon did not even contact him. Junior Nixon aides confided the President wanted no part of Laird after last December. Pressure came not from the White House on Laird but from Laird's old colleagues in Congress.

On April 17, the two top Republican congressional leaders—Sen. Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania and Rep. Gerald Ford of Michigan—asked the President to name a Laird-style chief domestic aide who would consult the Hill. On April 30, Scott and Ford relayed word to Mr. Nixon through White House lobbyist William Timmons that Laird was their one and only choice. The President did not respond.

Meanwhile, little that the White House was doing pleased Laird. He strongly disapproved of musical chair Cabinet shifts as meaningless cosmetics. He wanted Mr. Nixon to take the initiative in naming a Democrat as independent Watergate prosecutor. He opposed naming Gen. Alexander Haig "interim" chief of staff, correctly predicting it would end a brilliant military career. He was appalled by inaccuracies in Mr. Nixon's May 22 "national security" statement. As recently as May 25, Laird was

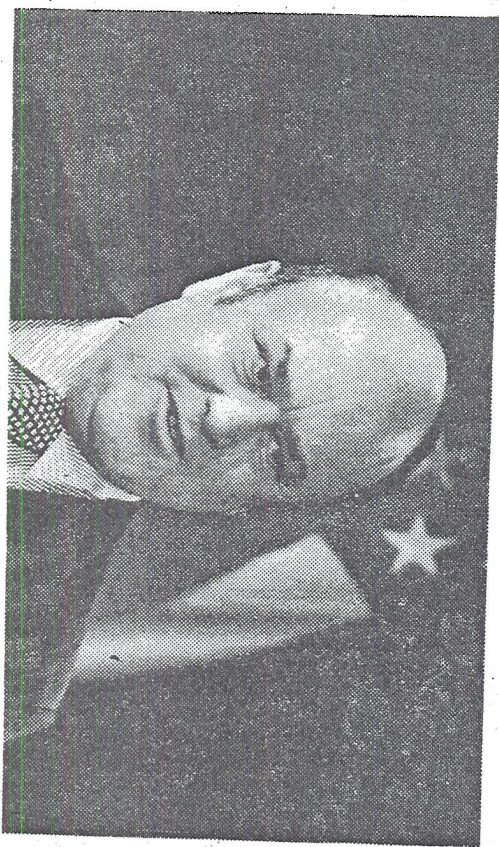
telling friends he would not return to the Nixon administration. But Scott, Ford and Harlow were working hard, both on Laird and on the President. Serious discussions began by May 27.

Laird's many demands included: Cabinet status and a seat on the NSC, neither of which domestic policy chief Ehrlichman had; guaranteed access to Mr. Nixon. When Laird and the President finally met at Camp David last Sunday, Mr. Nixon assured him he took no part in the Watergate cover-up. Laird accepted the job that day.

From the start, Laird will call on Mr. Nixon to do things he habitually shies away from. Laird wants to open the White House, both to congressmen and the press. Not only will Mr. Nixon experience the alien phenomenon of actually hearing wholly independent advice from a wholly independent aide, but it will often be uncoventional. Laird feels the Vietnam war is now up to Saigon and will oppose resuming U.S. air support under any conditions. He will push domestic policy gently leftward.

Nearly two months ago, Laird privately agreed with a colleague that Mr. Nixon should react to Watergate by adopting major reforms in one fell swoop; piecemeal changes under constant accelerating pressures would be a dangerous process. Now, Laird himself is the latest link in the piecemeal chain.

But the larger handicap is something quite different: potential conflict between the President and his new chief adviser, unquestionably the strongest inside man Mr. Nixon has ever hired. The question: Will the dire necessity that brings them together keep them together and save the Nixon presidency?



"Laird wants to open the White House."

By Charles Del Vecchio—The Washington Post