

The Laird Play That Backfired

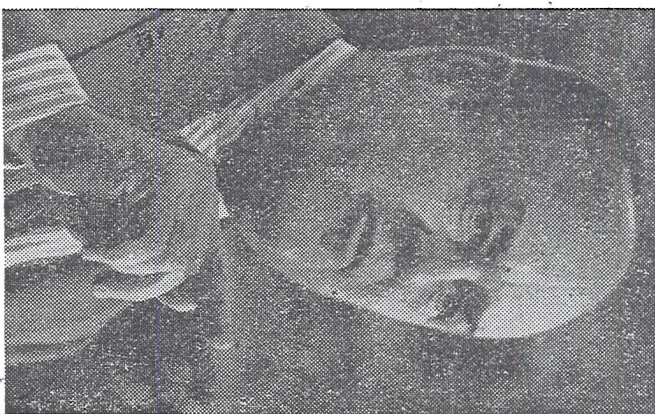
President Ford's Mayaguez harvest with the right wing of the Republican Party came precisely when needed most, after a spectacularly unsuccessful play by Melvin R. Laird had accelerated steady erosion of conservative confidence in the President.

Laird's attempt to draw conservative fire away from Mr. Ford by suggesting that Ronald Reagan challenge Nelson Rockefeller for vice presidential nomination was one of the least successful ploys by that inveterate political gamesman. On the eve of the Mayaguez rescue, Laird succeeded in alienating both the Rockefeller and Reagan camps while giving conservatives the impression that Mr. Ford was dealing from weakness.

Laird's blunder was mitigated by the universal conservative approval of Mr. Ford's decisive use of force in rescuing the merchant ship. Nevertheless, the White House has been shocked to find many key conservatives not yet ready to endorse their incumbent President for 1976—an extraordinary condition for Republicans. They are waiting to see whether the Mayaguez incident or the Laird ploy best reflects the presidency of Gerald R. Ford.

The lesson for the White House ought to be clear: The formula for loyalty from the party's dominant conservative wing is decisive action, preferably with a rightward slant, rather than backroom political horse-trading. Whether that lesson has in fact been absorbed is put in doubt, however, by confident statements from presidential aides that Mr. Ford nailed down the Republican nomination the night he called out the Marines.

On that night, Mr. Ford's stock in the Republican Party had bottomed out, thanks partly to Laird, his usually astute adviser and longtime friend. But Reagan-vs.-Rockefeller, if not fully orchestrated at the White House, was more than merely Mel Laird's fertile imagination at work.



Melvin Laird

Five days before Laird unveiled his play to a breakfast of Washington correspondents, it was privately submitted via transcontinental telephone to a Reagan intimate in California by a Ford emissary in Washington. The emissary, a former Nixon aide now in Mr. Ford's political inner circle, suggested Reagan might best represent conservatism by challenging Rockefeller.

The Reagan insider immediately rejected the idea, presaging an angry reaction when Laird went public. "What kind of idiots does Mel think we are?" asked one adviser to Reagan. The Reagan camp correctly concluded that Laird was offering a dubious opportunity to challenge Rockefeller with no guarantee of success while risking Reagan's credibility among



Ronald Reagan

conservatives. The reaction in the Rockefeller camp, though obviously better shielded, was equally intense.

Worst of all from the President's standpoint was the response from uncommitted conservatives. "The problem is Ford, not Rockefeller," one party leader bluntly told Dean Burch, former political operative for Barry Goldwater and Richard Nixon now heading Mr. Ford's campaign planning group. In response Burch virtually disavowed the Laird ploy.

That was the dismal situation when Mr. Ford called out the Marines. "That's what I've been wanting for nine months," one party fundraiser telephoned presidential counselor Robert Hartmann. Human Events, the right-wing journal which has savaged Mr. Ford since he entered the White

House, devoted its front page this week to a laudatory account of the way he handled the incident. The habitually cautious Reagan, a longtime friend told us, will be more careful now in challenging the President.

But Mr. Ford's nomination is not yet at hand. Republican state chairmen from 13 Southern and border states, who last month warned the White House that Reagan was the party's choice over Mr. Ford in all those states, compared notes over the telephone late last week. They agreed the President's Mayaguez performance had been heartwarming but that they would stay uncommitted for now. Thus, working the long distance telephone to sign up Ford's endorsers, Burch kept getting refusals.

That hesitancy stems from suspicion among conservatives whether the Mayaguez incident truly reflects Jerry Ford as President. They demand more demonstrations of decisive action, plus ideological constancy—vetoing spending bills, nonrecognition of Cuba, non-transfer of the Panama Canal Zone, tougher detente negotiating.

That is scarcely what Mr. Ford and his senior aides have in mind. While grateful the President last week had a chance to display firm leadership, they believe his real strength lies in conciliation, moderation and mutual trust with the people.

What's more, hearing loud hurrahs from the right recently, Mr. Ford's advisers may now return to underestimating the Reagan threat. One senior aide, exhilarated by the rescue of the Mayaguez, told us Laird's ploy merely declares the truth: Reagan really is after second place, not first, on the ticket. Whether he honestly believes that or not, such words from the Oval Office suggest that President Ford's troubles with fellow Republicans are not over.