

Many Pressed Laird to Join Nixon's Staff

By Michael Getler
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Former Defense Secretary Melvin R. Laird was under heavy pressure from a number of top Republican, business and labor leaders for the past month to overcome his reluctance to sign on with the White House and help lift the Nixon administration out of its Watergate-produced stagnation.

Yesterday the former eight-term congressman from Wisconsin and defense chief in the first Nixon term agreed to become the President's top counselor on domestic affairs.

His decision came after a weekend meeting with the President.

It also came after weeks of pressure from people such as New York Gov. Nelson Rockefeller, California Gov. Ronald Reagan, AFL-CIO chief George Meany, Chase Manhattan Bank Chairman David Rockefeller, Federal Reserve Board Chairman Arthur Burns and eight-term congressman leaders Gerald Ford and Hugh Scott.

Behind the pressure, according to close associates of Laird, was growing unease about the U.S. economic slide, steadily worsening White House relations with Congress, and the overall malaise within the government since Watergate.

While pressure, in part from the outside, was bringing Laird back into the administration pressure mostly from the inside was ending the 26-year Army career of four-star General Alexander M. Haig.

Haig agreed yesterday to retire from the Army, where he was vice chief of staff, and stay on as President Nixon's chief of staff in the White House, taking over the duties once exercised by H. R. (Bob) Haldeman.

Haig has had a meteoric rise in the Army hierarchy, rising from colonel to four-star general in four years, mostly as a result of his duties as a special deputy to presidential adviser Henry A. Kissinger.

was also causing some concern among a few generals, and had he stayed in the job and on active duty much longer, his clout coming back to the service might have been reduced, especially in a new administration.

Haig can be recalled from retired to active duty status by the President in the future, as was done years ago in the case of Adm. William Leahy and Gen. Maxwell Taylor.

The general has a reputation as a bright, ambitious, get-the-job-done officer, and is regarded as "intensely loyal to the President."

Haig was known to be reluctant to stay in the White House at first, but a number of associates believe he may have changed his mind under pressure from the President, who has come quickly to depend on him a great deal.

Ironically, the announcement on Haig came the same day as a suit was filed in U.S. District Court here against his retaining his job while on active duty.

Haig's retirement is effective Aug. 1, a move that enables him to get enough time in his present four-star rank to retire in that same grade, and which will also give him time to move out of his home at Ft. McNair.

With Laird and Haig now full-time at the White House, they form a growing group of ex-Pentagon officials who work for the President. Others include the new White House counsel J. Fred Buzhardt, and special assistant William J. Baroody, both of whom were among Laird's top lieutenants at the Pentagon.

All are generally conservative in their defense views.

While Laird is pictured as under pressure from the outside to take his new job, the ex-congressman—who still goes to Capitol Hill for his haircuts—could wind up advancing his political future and his ambitions on the presidency.

Laird reportedly has asked to be kept completely away from any responsibilities with respect to Watergate affairs. If he manages to avoid being tarred by that scandal and "gets the country moving again" on pressing domestic issues, Laird's Republican fortunes could grow.

One of the men Laird might eventually be vying with for power in a post-Watergate Republican scramble might be his successor at the Pentagon, Elliot L. Richardson, who is now attorney general.

Laird had no plans to run for any office in 1974 and was reportedly counting on membership on a few corporate boards and serving as chairman of the Wolf Trap Foundation for the Performing Arts to keep him busy for a while.

Haig moved over to the White House early in May, supposedly on a temporary basis, to fill in after Haldeman resigned. But his appointment has been under fire ever since on grounds that it is illegal for an active duty military man to serve in a civilian office.

White House and Pentagon lawyers rejected those arguments, but privately many officers admitted the legal case for keeping an active-duty general in that job was weak and could not have won congressional approval. Studies had quietly been underway for weeks to figure out ways to get Haig off the active duty list.

At 48, Haig appeared to have an even brighter Army future. But his lingering service in the White House