

Rowland Evans and Robert Novak

Can Laird Decentralize The Power?



At a long and very private dinner in Paul Young's restaurant here last Tuesday evening, outgoing White House consultant John B. Connally told incoming White House domestic czar Melvin R. Laird about some of his frustrations, then warned: move in fast and take complete charge.

Laird agreed that his first target must be to end the internal power struggles which still threaten the post-Watergate White House. The vacuums created by the forced departure of H. R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman are far from filled.

But an even more challenging problem, Laird and Connally agreed, is to reverse what they both regard as the incredible and dangerous flow of power from the departments and agencies and its concentration in the White House. That power flow was engineered by Haldeman and Ehrlichman over four years with the obvious consent of President Nixon. Thus Laird's determination to reverse the flow of power, difficult enough anyway, may be made more so by the President himself. But even if Mr. Nixon resists, Laird's intimates say he is committed to returning power to the departments

and ending what he and other politicians consider the most dangerous accumulation of raw and unsupervised power within the White House ever in peacetime.

Laird has now counted 68 White House aides who, at the start of Mr. Nixon's second term, were working directly under Ehrlichman and responsible only to him. It was that huge staff which gave Ehrlichman sole control over the entire domestic side of the federal government. He ruled it, both Connally and Laird discovered, with an iron hand.

Thus, Connally intimates have told Laird that Ehrlichman's ouster of James E. Akins as top White House staffer on the energy crisis was dictated by Ehrlichman's fear that Akins knew too much — that is, far more than Ehrlichman — about the coming oil-and-gas shortage.

"Ehrlichman saw Akins as a threat," one Connally insider told us. "Ehrlichman wanted to run the whole show, and the President apparently wanted him to run the whole show." The result: a dangerously weak energy policy.

Trimming that swollen staff back to a maximum of 30 aides is one side of

the coin of Laird's problem in reversing the flow of power into the White House. The other side of the coin — convincing cabinet members that they must now start running their own affairs for the first time in the Nixon administration — is going to be harder.

Laird is now quietly visiting each cabinet department, spreading this alien doctrine to cabinet members and their top staffs: Don't send your problems over to the White House anymore; handle them yourselves. For some of the passive, obsequious yes-men of the cabinet who were turned into limousine puppets by the Ehrlichman-Haldeman White House, the Laird order means trouble.

"Some of these guys haven't made a decision for months," one Laird lieutenant told us. "They've almost forgotten how."

Since he moved into the White House last Monday, Laird has been pounding hard on this theme: Stop shunting hard decisions off to the White House.

If Laird's scheme to reverse the power flow works, each department will gain influence over such matters as presidential vetoes of departmental bills, appointments to high office in

each department and development of administration policy.

It means, in short, a power revolution within the Nixon administration, requiring almost as much change and perhaps as much time as normally occurs when one administration replaces another.

In addition, Laird plans other changes which could transform the White House from a dictatorial palace to a place where the President lives and the cabinet meets to help him make decisions. One such change: ending near total authority over middle-level personnel by a single office in the White House. To supervise the more loosely structured, decentralized personnel policy he has in mind, say Laird intimates, Laird will put newly returned presidential aide Bryce Harlow in charge of post-Watergate personnel policy.

If Laird is able to make these changes, the result will be a profoundly new and improved tone throughout the second Nixon administration. If he cannot, Laird's tenure as domestic White House chief may be distressingly short.