

Report of Nixon 'Cleanup' Move

Washington Post Service

Washington

Former Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird reportedly has turned down a bid from President Nixon to take over the top White House administrative post with a mandate to clean house in the wake of the Watergate scandal, the Washington Post has learned.

Sources on Capitol Hill said yesterday Laird had told associates he had been asked to come in and "straighten up the mess" that has rocked the Nixon administration and shattered the morale and direction of the White House staff.

The bid to Laird marks the first tangible evidence that President Nixon has decided that top-level staff changes must be made. Presumably Laird would have taken the post now filled by H. R. Haldeman, the White House chief of staff. Federal investigators have said that Haldeman was involved in the Watergate case.

Word of the bid to Laird came as Vice President Spiro T. Agnew, firmly countering second-hand reports that he was unhappy with the President's handling of the Watergate affair, lined up solidly behind Mr. Nixon.

Appearing before television cameras and newsmen in an Executive Office Building anteroom, Agnew expressed "full confidence in the integrity of President Nixon and in his determination and ability to resolve the Watergate matter to the full satisfaction of the American people."

Taking note of the second-hand reports, Agnew emphasized that "I do not speak through such unidentified sources," and he warned about "jumping to conclusions" in the case itself at a time when "we are inundated with rumor, hearsay,

grand jury leaks, speculation and statements from undisclosed sources."

CARELESS

Beyond the conviction of seven men in the case, Agnew said, "not much reliable information is currently available," and he warned that "careless comment" might easily compromise the prosecution's position by prejudicing the right of a defendant to a fair trial.

According to White House press secretary Ronald L. Ziegler, Mr. Nixon spent much of yesterday in his Executive Office Building suite, conferring with various aides on the Watergate and other matters.

Ziegler insisted that the

See Back Page

Tom Page 1

White House staff remained intact, with all aides — including all those mentioned in connection with the Watergate — continuing in the same functions.

Ziegler, to repeated questions, said no staff resignations had been submitted or accepted. Specifically, he said Attorney General Richard Kleindienst had not resigned, and when asked whether he expected to stay on as press secretary, Ziegler replied: "I expect to, yes sir."

AGGRESSIVE

Ziegler, faced with aggressive interrogation by the press, disclosed that for the last two or three weeks, Haldeman has not been presiding over previously regular early morning meetings of senior White House aides.

The press secretary said the senior staff meeting had been scrapped because "we could be more productive" by meeting "with individual members of the staff and with department heads in separate meetings." He said the change was unrelated to the Watergate developments.

During the briefing, Zie-

More Watergate news on Pages 11 and 12.

gler himself came under heavy fire concerning his own credibility, in light of past statements saying no White House aides were involved in the Watergate.

A reporter, noting that Ziegler on March 30 had said no one in the White House had any involvement — nine days after Mr. Nixon was to have begun his own investigation — asked Ziegler:

"Was that statement a lie or was that statement intended to mislead us?"

"Well," Ziegler answered, "I made a number of long statements during that period . . . anything that I offer here in response to a question is based on information that I have available to me."

Asked whether he was aware, when reporting favorable public response to the President's Vietnam bombing policy last May, that supporting telegrams had been paid for by the Nixon re-election apparatus, Ziegler said: "No, of course I was not."

Associates of Laird said they interpreted the mandate he had received to mean Laird, working directly under the President, would have had the responsibility to get to the bottom of the Watergate affair, fire any White House staffer involved in it, and reorganize the staff to restore public confidence.

"I said, 'No, I wouldn't,'" one associate said Laird told him. "I promised myself when I stepped down from the Defense Department that I'd take no fulltime job for six months and I intend to keep that promise."

In Marshfield, Wis., where Laird is visiting his ailing mother, Edward Heller, publisher of the Marshfield News-Herald, interviewed Laird and quoted him as saying: "I was drafted four years ago to end our involvement in Vietnam and to end the draft, and I cannot be drafted again."