

# Skilled Presidential Assistant

Melvin Robert Laird

By ANTHONY RIPLEY

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WASHINGTON, June 6 — Melvin Robert Laird, named as counselor to the President for domestic affairs, spoke today to reporters at the White House and the key element he brings to that troubled center of executive power was quickly apparent.

The one-time Secretary of Defense and former United States Representative from Wisconsin for 17 years said he

would maintain the "broadest, most open lines of communications" with Congress. He spoke of it as an institution that "I love so much."

His appointment puts at the right hand of the President a skilled, hard-working and respected politician, in sharp contrast to what one Republican Senator called the "faceless ghosts" of the President's first four years.

"I'm delighted," said Senator Hugh Scott of Pennsylvania, the Senate minority leader. "He will have the highest respect of both parties in Congress. He knows the problems and he is a problem-solver."

## Aggressive Defender

Mr. Laird had his share of problems in the four years he served as Secretary of Defense. In the face of spreading antimilitary sentiment that grew from an unpopular war in Vietnam, he aggressively defended the Administration and the military establishment.

At the same time, he presided over a one-million-man cut in the armed forces, began the formation of an all-volunteer army, directed the phase-out of American involvement in South Vietnam, and even managed—for the first time in American history—to win an increase in the American military budget after the end of a war.

Mr. Laird followed the long reign of Robert S. McNamara and the interim appointment of Clark Clifford as Defense Secretary.

"McNamara was regarded as abrasive and arrogant in his dealings with the Congress," a long-time Pentagon observer said. "Mel was a member of the 'club' in Congress and a very skillful politician."

He spent much of his time

going to Capitol Hill, meeting with committee chairmen talking to members in the lobbies and telephoning his many old acquaintances.

## McNamara's Methods

Mr. McNamara had asserted civilian control over the military in the budget process by having civilian experts draw up budgets and assess needs, then presenting them to the top officers for their comments and arguments.

Mr. Laird let the military take the initiative again on such proposals, with his civilian analysis challenging them later.

Rear Admiral (ret) Gene La Rocque, director of the Non-profit Center for Defense Information and a retired Rear Admiral, called Mr. Laird "terribly effective in persuading Congress to do what the military wanted."

He moves to the White House with his credentials intact despite the Watergate scandals.

Jerry W. Friedheim, chief spokesman for the Pentagon during much of Mr. Laird's tenure, said G. Gordon Liddy, who was convicted last January in the Watergate burglary, and David R. Young Jr., a member of the White House group assigned to plug information leaks, made several attempts to get access to background information on Dr. Daniel Ellsberg at the Pentagon.

Mr. Friedheim said they were refused because of Mr. Laird's policy that all such requests should always come through proper channels and they were operating out of channels.

## Remarks Questioned

Mr. Laird was asked today about remarks made after his retirement early this year, when the Watergate investigations began to accelerate.

He conceded that he had said, "If the President is directly involved, I wouldn't want to know about it."

He said the remark was based on his "great concern over the Presidency," and added, "I have been assured of his noninvolvement and I accept that."

Mr. Laird was born on Sept. 1, 1922, in Omaha. His family moved to Wisconsin when he was a year old.

Mr. Laird was graduated from Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., and entered the Navy in 1942.

He was wounded in a Jap-

anese suicide air attack in the Pacific, and returned home to campaign for his father's seat in the Wisconsin State Senate and was elected.

## '64 Platform Leader

In 1952, he was elected to the House of Representatives, and as a conservative Republican, headed the 1964 platform committee of the Republican National Convention that nominated Senator Barry Goldwater for President.

Mr. Laird and his wife, the former Barbara Masters, live in suburban Bethesda, Md. They have three children—John, David and Mrs. Alison Kelley.

When he relaxes, he likes to fish and play golf and tennis.

During Mr. Nixon's last campaign, Mr. Laird's flair for politics was used, both as a stand-in for the President and in attacking Senator George McGovern's proposal for a \$30-billion cut in defense spending.

He characterized such cuts as "tantamount to a white flag of surrender."

No such phrase came to him today as he took over a White House post while a blanket of suspicion covered the capital.

At first he said, "I'm grateful to come back into government."

But as the questions bore in more closely, he said: "Government in some quarters is at a standstill. I reluctantly decided I must come back."

## Nixon to Speak Tomorrow At University in Florida

WASHINGTON, June 6 (UPI)—President Nixon will deliver the commencement address Friday at 10:30 A.M. at Florida Technological University in Orlando, the White House announced today. The president will then fly to his home in Key Biscayne for the weekend.

Since April 30, when Mr. Nixon addressed the nation on the Watergate affair, he has made only three public appearances. He spoke at military installations in Mississippi and in Virginia, and to former prisoners of war at the State Department.

Secret Service agents were reported to be on the campus of Florida Tech, a state-supported school of about 6,000 students.

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