

David S. Broder

Republicans Put Careers On the Line

The post-Watergate political world began to emerge last week—and a confusing world it is!

It is not just newspapermen and voters who are having trouble deciding whether the political espionage case is an "episode" in the Nixon presidency or a major turning-point in American political history. Tough, top-notch politicians are gambling their presidential futures on diametrically opposite calculations of what that event will mean.

Take the decision by Melvin R. Laird to become what is, in effect, deputy President for domestic affairs. Laird is a man of extraordinary political talent and of presidential-size ambition.

Last Nov. 19, when Mr. Nixon was flushed with satisfaction at his 49-state landslide, this reporter was bold enough to suggest in print that the success of his second term would depend on his ability to attract "partners of (Henry) Kissinger's status on the domestic side of government." The "only three men who measure up to this need," that column said, were Nelson Rockefeller, who was clearly unavailable, Melvin Laird and John Connally.

That Mr. Nixon has, despite the Watergate calamity, been able to persuade both Laird and Connally to join his White House team, at least temporarily, is important evidence of his ability to survive this latest crisis.

Connally and Laird are both legitimate 1976 presidential contenders. Both had the option of seeking their way on their own, without coming back to help rescue an embattled lame-duck President.

Both men have patriotic instincts, but no one who knows them will believe the decision was made on the basis of sheer sentiment.

They must have calculated that it may yet be an advantage to them to be part of the Nixon team. And that calculation — by such men — is bound to impress other politicians.

On the other hand, politicians will also weigh the fact that in the first two major elections since Watergate engulfed the old Nixon hierarchy, two politicians closely identified with the President have gone down to defeat, on issues of political chicanery.

Mayor Sam Yorty of Los Angeles, although a nominal Democrat, has been a longtime supporter of the President's, overtly or covertly aiding his campaigns. He was beaten for re-election last month by the same man, Thomas Bradley, he had defeated four years ago. The post-election surveys indicate that Yorty's use of campaign funds was a major factor in public disenchantment with him this time around.

Even clearer is the defeat of New Jersey Gov. William Cahill in last week's Republican gubernatorial primary. Cahill, too, is a Nixon ally. The President campaigned for him in 1969 and brought him to the White House for a victory celebration. Now, Cahill has been trounced, because of allegations of improprieties in the handling of finances in that 1969 campaign.

There are many such contradictions in today's politics, and that is why the professionals are having such difficulty deciding what course to pursue.

In Virginia last weekend, ex-Democratic Gov. Mills Godwin Jr. went through his expected "Connally act," despite his Watergate worries, and accepted the Republican nomination for governor.

On the other hand, the incumbent Republican governor of Virginia, Linwood Holton, an ambitious politician with no office to seek, chose the same week to end his past role as White House spokesman at the National Governors' Conference.

Instead of defending the President, as in the past, Holton publicly prodded him to start holding press conferences and answering Watergate questions.

It was not lost on the politicians that at the very moment Godwin was joining the Virginia GOP, Holton chose to be hundreds of miles away, at Belmont Park, sharing the television spotlight with Secretariat and a 1976 Republican presidential hopeful named Nelson Rockefeller.

The New York governor has said nothing so far in defense of the President, despite what his staff says have been repeated White House hints that he should speak out. On the other hand, his cross-country rival, California Gov. Ronald Reagan (R), has appointed himself as commanding general of the West Coast White House defense forces.

One of them is guessing right, and one wrong, for the future—but which?

Sen. Charles H. Percy (R-Ill.) chose the height of the Watergate controversy to announce formation of his 1976 pre-presidential campaign committee. Percy has been whacking the White House harder on Watergate than any Democrat.

Is he gauging public opinion correctly, or is Spiro Agnew, who has brushed aside conservative supporters' pleas for caution, and waded in on behalf of the President?

These questions cannot be answered today — but the spectacle of these men gambling their futures on their differing calculations of Mr. Nixon's future is a fascinating one.

That's a rough game out there now, and someone is going to be hurt.