

Laird---'Nixon to Answer Questions'

By David S. Broder
Washington Post

Washington

President Nixon is willing to respond to "all questions" about his role in the Watergate affair after the major witnesses have given their stories to the Senate investigating committee, the new White House domestic counselor, Melvin R. Laird, said yesterday.

In an interview with the Washington Post, the former defense secretary said Mr. Nixon would not "respond to every witness" but would answer "questions, all questions . . . when we get near the conclusion of the hearings."

Laird said he has discussed the timing of a press conference with the President and "I think he's willing to do that . . . I don't think there will be any problem with that."

Laird also strongly suggested that despite his recent elevation on the White House staff, Ronald L. Ziegler will be replaced as the President's principal press spokesman by his current deputy, Gerald L. Warren.

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"I have an appreciation for Ron's problem," Laird said. "I'm convinced he didn't knowingly mislead (the press.) But from the information I've been able to get, I think it's good to have some other press spokesman for a while."

"Sometimes people are caught up in a series of circumstances where you have to make certain changes. And I think those changes will be made. I don't think you have to make a big announcement over something like that."

Ziegler, recently designated as an assistant to the President as well as press secretary, has been under fire from press groups for providing inaccurate information to reporters during the period of the Watergate crime and the alleged White House coverup.

Former White House counsel John W. Dean III has testified this week that Ziegler was rehearsed by other White House staff members for his press briefings on Watergate and was repeatedly denied knowledge of what relay had taken place.

Laird said Ziegler's experience showed "anybody who's going to brief the press has to be in every meeting."

"I think that can be changed," he said, referring to the shielding of the press secretary, from vital information. "I think Jerry (Warren) has to take over that responsibility, and I hope he can. I'm not sure, but I hope that he can."

REPORTS

In a wide-ranging interview in the west wing White House office he has taken over from his resigned predecessor, John D. Ehrlichman, Laird also said:

• He is cutting back the domestic council staff he inherited from Ehrlichman and trying to shift decision-making to the cabinet departments.

• He has asked first-term domestic counselor Daniel Patrick Moynihan, now ambassador to India, to suggest ways of reviving the family assistance welfare reform plan abandoned by Mr. Nixon this year after an unsuccessful, three-year effort for congressional passage.

• He is doubtful that the President's expressed wish to scrap controls and return to a free economy can be accomplished in the face of a "very difficult" worldwide food shortage, but acknowledged that the temporary freeze of market prices itself is "causing some problems" of future food supply.

SUBDUED

Recalled to government service early this month in the wake of the Watergate scandals, the former Wisconsin congressman and defense secretary seem more subdued than customary in an hour-long interview.

Asked about the mood of the White House and the President, Laird paused for a long moment and said:

"Well, of course, this is a tough period for the President. No question about that. But I have the feeling . . . that morale about getting on with the business of government has improved."

The new presidential adviser said that one of the "pluses" from the Watergate may be that "the operations of the executive branch will be strengthened."

"We just have to open this place (the White House) up," he said, "but it's not easy to do. There's been a tendency on the part of people to concentrate everything in the White House and the White House staff. The situation has to be switched back, so the departments and the line agencies really have the staff to do the work and can carry on their consultations with the governors, the mayors and the congressmen on their own programs."

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