

Melvin Laird vs. H. R. Haldeman's 'Ghost'

Although Melvin R. Laird's success as President Nixon's White House domestic chief depends on his ability to dominate the staff left over from the discredited Haldeman-Ehrlichman regime, he is encountering ominous resistance to change.

The prize exhibit is Frederick Malek, one of H. R. Haldeman's most trusted and confidential aides and deputy director of the Committee to Re-Elect the President (CRP). Malek told us openly and candidly he had every intention of staying on as No. 2 man in the Office of Management and Budget (OMB) for at least another year.

Malek was Haldeman's personnel chief for the entire Nixon administration before moving to CRP last summer. Immediately after the election, Haldeman and the White House Domestic Chief John Ehrlichman installed Malek as top deputy in OMB.

A self-made millionaire, Malek exemplifies the hard-nosed Haldeman lieutenants so feared and hated throughout the Nixon administration. Even though Malek has thus far escaped any Watergate taint, his key job at CRP combined with his Haldeman link puts him near the top of the White House housecleaning list that key Republi-

cans have drafted.

Malek's frank acknowledgment that he has no intention of quitting his powerful policy post, despite the fall of Haldeman and Ehrlichman and the near ruin of President Nixon, is symbolic of the steadfast strategy of the pre-Laird White House staff. For Laird, it carries dangerous implications that the President himself may have given his blessing to the steadfast strategy.

When Laird told The Washington Post last Wednesday that replacement of Ron Ziegler as presidential Press Secretary was one of "certain changes" necessary in the White House staff, the San Clemente White House immediately contradicted him. A "spokesman" (probably Ziegler himself) was authorized by Mr. Nixon to say Ziegler would stay on, and that the President disagreed with Laird that Ziegler's usefulness had been impaired by the Watergate scandals.

The next day, the insult was deepened when Deputy Press Secretary Gerald Warren, Laird's choice for Ziegler's job, said: "Laird was expressing some personal views."

This long-distance, public disagreement between Laird, the enormously influential Republican leader with

powerful credentials in Congress, and the President's pre-Watergate White House aides is foreboding because of what it may suggest about the President himself. Mr. Nixon does not now have, and never had, the slightest intention of changing the ways of his White House Staff or his own ways.

To the growing number of congressional Republican critics of Mr. Nixon, it hints, furthermore, that Laird was taken on for public relations reasons alone, for cosmetic but not real change.

If so, the struggle between Laird and Haldeman's ghosts will soon be dominating the Nixon administration, with Laird's tenure as White House domestic chief dependent on the result.

Scores of top-level aides, some in the White House and some placed by Malek at Haldeman's orders in strategic spots in every department and agency, have political, ideological and personal ties to the ousted Ehrlichman-Haldeman regime. They were Haldeman's government-wide eyes-and-ears. These include Lawrence Higby and Bruce Kehrli, who had immense power as Haldeman's two top aides and still continue to wield it in the Laird White House. So does

Richard Howard, deputy to departed special counsel Charles W. Colson (chief political adviser to Mr. Nixon during the Watergate era).

With Haldeman and Colson gone, the residual power of such aides would be zero once Laird takes hold—unless the President chooses to throw his mantle of protection over them as he has done for Ziegler. Without that mantle, they will soon be gone. With it, they may stay—and Laird may be gone.

Some thoughtful presidential aides suspect the remarkable Watergate memorandum submitted last week to the Senate committee concentrated on the defense of Haldeman and Ehrlichman rather than the President, thus reflecting the power of Haldeman-Ehrlichman staff holdovers. That is sufficient reason, they feel, for their quick departure.

But beyond that, the ghosts symbolize the danger of bloated White House power, unprecedented in peacetime history, and the Watergate scandal. Laird's purpose—to strip the White House of its overcentralized power mechanisms and to clean out that stench of Watergate—would be wholly beyond reach without an antiseptic housecleaning.