

Laird Warns Nixon of Bid To Impeach

By David S. Broder

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White House domestic adviser Melvin R. Laird said yesterday he has told President Nixon to expect an impeachment move in Congress if he rejects a possible Supreme Court order to produce the Watergate tape recordings.

"But," Laird said, "I also told him I think the vote would be negative," that is, against impeachment, in the House of Representatives.

Laird did not go beyond those statements in a meeting with a group of reporters, but he is the first high White House official to discuss publicly the possibility of a serious impeachment effort.

The Constitution says that impeachment requires a majority vote of the House, and conviction and removal from office a two-thirds vote by the Senate.

Mr. Nixon has lost in both the district and circuit appeals courts on his contention that he is immune from a subpoena ordering that he turn over tapes of White House conversations to the Watergate grand jury. He has hinted that he might refuse to obey anything except what he calls a "definitive" Supreme Court decision.

Laird also disclosed that "several weeks ago" he had discussed with House Minority Leader Gerald R. Ford (R-Mich.) the possibility of Vice President Agnew resigning and Ford replacing him.

Laird volunteered that information, while denying again that he or the White House had pressured Agnew for a resignation.

He indicated, without being

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specific, that the discussion with Ford arose in conjunction with the calls Laird made to several Republican congressional leaders more than a month ago, cautioning them not to go too far out on the limb in defense of Agnew.

"I talked to Jerry (Ford) several weeks ago about the possibility of this (the resignation) happening and I knew of his interest" in succeeding Agnew, Laird said.

Laird said he talked to Ford again on the evening of Agnew's resignation last week, learned that Ford and his wife had discussed the vice presidential possibility and that Ford was definitely interested.

From that point on, Laird said, he served as an unofficial campaign manager for Ford, dissuading House Republicans from giving the minority leader a formal vote of endorsement, but conveying to the President the "broad support" in Congress for the choice Mr. Nixon eventually made.

Laird said Ford was first on his personal preference list and New York Gov. Nelson A. Rockefeller second.

Laird said that on the basis of his soundings, he told Mr. Nixon that Congress would confirm any of the four major possibilities—Ford, Rockefeller, California Gov. Ronald Reagan and former Texas Gov. John B. Connally—but added, "it would have taken a little longer with some than with others."

"I think it was important not to have a big battle right now on this issue," Laird said.

The former Wisconsin congressman and Defense Secretary also said he believed "not more than four or five Republicans" in the House and Senate would have voted against Connally, had the recent convert to the GOP been Mr. Nixon's choice. He said most of the opposition in Congress to the Connally speculation came from Democrats "who objected to his switch."

Laird indicated, as he has previously, that he believes Connally gave up his best chance for a presidential nomination when he switched parties. "The Democrats do not have a strong candidate" for 1976, he said. "Connally could have won the primaries. So I think he made a great personal sacrifice to become a Republican. He should be welcomed..."