

WXPost DEC 20 1973

Laird Urges March 15 Deadline For House Vote on Impeachment

By Carroll Kilpatrick
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Former Secretary of Defense Melvin R. Laird said yesterday at a farewell news conference at the White House that the House should set a deadline of March 15 to vote on the impeachment issue.

Announcing his own intention to resign as presidential counselor on Feb. 1, Laird said Congress owed it to the American people to resolve the impeachment issue promptly.

He said he agreed with Sen. George D. Aiken (R-Vt.) that the time has come to impeach the President or get off his back. That is the approach most Americans will support, Laird said.

The 50-year-old former Defense Secretary said that he originally had planned to leave his post as presidential counselor on Jan. 1 but that both President Nixon and Vice President Ford urged him to delay his departure until Feb. 1.

Laird said he would remain on the job until Feb. 1 to help prepare the State of the Union and budget messages.

After retiring as Defense Secretary in February, Laird returned to the government in June to help the Watergate-besieged President try to shore up his relations with Congress.

An eight-term member of the House from Wisconsin before being made Defense Secretary in 1969, Laird has worked primarily on legislative problems and only incidentally on Watergate issues.

He said he would become senior counselor for national and international affairs at the Reader's Digest on Feb. 1 and would work part-time for several foundations. His office will be in Washington.

He denied that he was leaving the White House because of lack of access to the President. Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.) said this week that Laird and fellow counselor Bryce Harlow are leaving because Mr. Nixon wouldn't listen to them.

Declining to comment directly on the Goldwater statement, Laird insisted that his relations with the President were friendly and that he had had "no problem as far as access was concerned."

When a reporter asked if he felt like someone leaving a sinking ship, Laird responded: "I don't feel that way at all."

In urging the House to resolve the impeachment issue at the earliest possible date, Laird expressed the thinking of many persons close to the President that the longer the issue drags on the worse for him, the party and the country.

Administration leaders also would like an early vote because they think a majority cannot now be mustered to vote a bill of impeachment. Yesterday Laird repeated a prediction he had made earlier that a majority does not favor impeachment.

On Capitol Hill, Chairman Peter W. Rodino of the House Judiciary Committee, which is considering impeachment, said he hoped the committee could report to the full House in April.

Mr. Nixon, in a long letter praising Laird's work in government, said he was accepting his resignation "with deepest personal regret."

"As we both know," the

President wrote, "these past months have been particularly challenging, and it has been heartening to me that I have always been able to look to your sound judgment and wise counsel when it was needed most."

"More than anything else, I have valued your loyal friendship during this difficult period."

No successor to Laird was announced, but he has said that much of the work he has done with Congress can now be done by the new Vice President.

Laird said he expected to write for The Reader's Digest as well as work on executive problems. His first article, in the February issue, will be on national security issues and detente, he said.

Harlow is expected to continue at the White House somewhat beyond Feb. 1; no exact date for his departure has been fixed.