

Even though Melvin R. Laird combined his resignation as President Nixon's chief domestic counselor with a denial that he had been disappointed over his relations with the President, it is no secret that Mr. Laird's influence could never match that of the diminished inner circle of the White House palace guard. The marginal nature of the Laird role was accurately summed up in Senator Goldwater's observation that Mr. Nixon "sits by himself and tells himself what he's going to do."

More surprising than Mr. Laird's resignation was his appeal to his former colleagues in the House of Representatives to bring the question of Mr. Nixon's impeachment to a head not later than March 15. Whatever the accuracy of his prediction that an impeachment resolution would end in failure, Mr. Laird is right in viewing the government as crippled so long as the case of Richard M. Nixon continues in limbo.

The House Judiciary Committee, which at long last appears ready to appoint a chief counsel, has thus far moved at too leisurely a pace in considering impeachment. While thoroughness and fairness are absolute prerequisites, any hint of footdragging will raise questions which could undermine the impeachment process before it gets under way. The public will ask, for example, whether delay is intended merely to let members of Congress sample public opinion before taking any political risks. Or whether the Democrats are more intent on keeping the Watergate issue alive to help them in the 1974 elections than on resolving the present government crisis.

Even the semblance of delay for political purposes would merely protract the crisis of confidence. Mr. Laird is entirely right in urging House members to "accept their constitutional responsibilities." To do less would be to make the Congress an accomplice in the Administration's assault on popular faith in the political system and the government.