

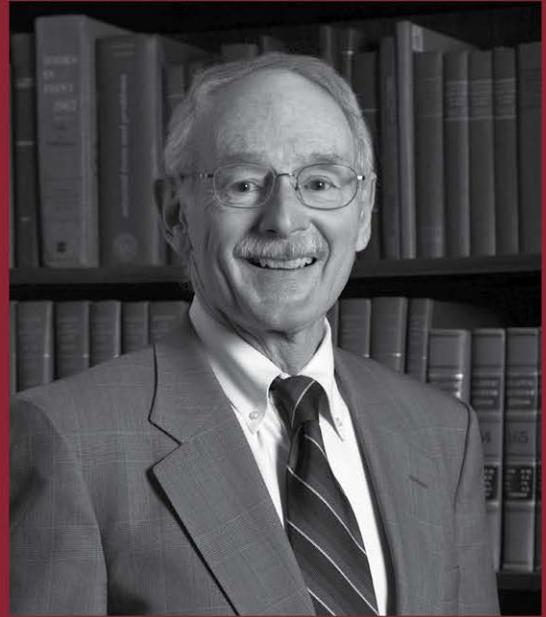
*Melvin Laird and the Foundation of the Post-Vietnam Military*, the seventh volume in the Secretaries of Defense Historical Series, examines former Congressman Melvin Laird's efforts to reconstitute the Department of Defense during the last years of the Vietnam War. From the outset, he exercised a measure of independence. As a condition for accepting the post, President Richard Nixon acceded to Laird's demand that he be allowed to make appointments free from presidential veto. The new secretary quickly staked out positions that challenged the president—especially on the Defense budget and the pace of Vietnam troop withdrawals. Laird entered office with strong views on national security and with growing misgivings about the Vietnam War. The costly struggle had weakened the U.S. economy, its armed forces, and the military commitment to NATO. In Laird's view, the conflict was peripheral to core U.S. security interests. It allowed the Soviet Union an opportunity to enhance its conventional and strategic position in the second half of the 1960s.

On the major issue of the time, the Vietnam War, Laird played an influential, leading role in shaping and carrying out the U.S. Vietnamization program to improve and modernize South Vietnam's forces so they could replace the withdrawing American combatants. To Laird, Vietnamization was militarily pragmatic, politically feasible, and supported the Nixon Doctrine of encouraging allies to assume greater responsibility for their own security. During Laird's tenure, South Vietnam's armed forces doubled in size while the number of U.S. military personnel in-theater dropped from 540,000 in 1969 to less than 24,000 in January 1973, when the Paris peace agreement was signed.

Laird acted to mitigate the adverse effects of the Vietnam War on the department and to prepare the nation's armed forces for the future. Foremost was the transition from a conscripted military to an all-volunteer force, a fundamental policy shift that ended an unpopular and inequitable draft system. He developed the concept of the total force, relying on the National Guard and reserve components to perform essential missions. Laird worked to improve the capabilities of the guard and reserves so they could augment the active force in future emergencies. Laird pushed the Pentagon to combat racial discrimination, improve race relations, handle a growing drug

abuse problem, and improve opportunities for women serving in uniform. Spurred by an ongoing social and cultural transformation, Laird helped set in motion changes that would prevent a return to the conscripted armed forces of the past, which had restricted the role of women and minorities.

Throughout Laird's service as secretary, he sought to carry out policies that the nation could afford, to keep the nation's defenses strong, and to weigh the political costs of defense policies.



Richard A. Hunt obtained his Ph.D. from the University of Pennsylvania following military service in North Carolina and Vietnam. He served at the U.S. Army Center of Military History, first in the Vietnam history branch and then as chief of the Center's oral history program. He is the author of *Pacification: The American Struggle for Vietnam's Hearts and Minds* and other books, articles, and reviews on the war in Vietnam.

*Front cover:* National Security Adviser Henry Kissinger, President Richard Nixon, and Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird depart from the Executive Office Building, 1 November 1971. (Nixon Presidential Library)

*Back cover:* Melvin Laird in his White House office when he served as counselor to the president for domestic affairs (1973–1974), 27 December 1973. (Nixon Presidential Library)