

*Steve Silver:* This is an interview with the Honorable Secretary Mel Laird, as part of the Bryce Harlow Oral History Project. Mr. Secretary, thank you so much for joining us and talking about Bryce Harlow.

*Mel Laird:* I don't want you to overlook my years in Congress. That is where I got to know Bryce very, very well.

*Steve Silver:* Sure. We'll cover that too.

*Mel Laird:* I think you've got to put that in there.

*Steve Silver:* Could you start by telling us how you first met him, and really got to know him?

*Mel Laird:* I first met him when I was visiting Washington in 1951. Glen Davis and Jerry Ford were handling the Civil Functions Appropriations Bill, which is the Corps of Army Engineers Construction Bill, on the floor of the House. I was there as a young state senator, just kind of getting acquainted with the Congress.

It was a trip to become acquainted with some of the House Members procedures. I thought I might run for Congress at some future time. Jerry and Glen introduced me to Bryce Harlow, who was a clerk at that time for the House Armed Services Committee, working as an assistant to Carl Vinson, who was chairman of the committee.

*Steve Silver:* Could you talk a little bit about how reputation was such an important part of Bryce Harlow's career? Could you talk about how he was regarded in Congress and also in the White House?

*Mel Laird:* He was trusted a hundred percent, not only in the Congress, but also in the White House. He went over to the White House in 1952 to work for General Jerry Persons, who was a great confidante of President Eisenhower. He was the number two or number three man in the Congressional Relations Office under the General. He soon rose to the top, and was top assistant to General Persons during the Eisenhower administration for congressional liaison. Jerry Persons retained the title, but Bryce did all the work. And he created all the contacts, and developed the legislative strategy.

*Steve Silver:* Could you talk a little bit about the relationship that Bryce Harlow had with President Eisenhower. What did Ike mean to him? And what did he mean to Ike?

*Mel Laird:* They were very close personally. And I know that, because Ike always told me what a loyal and dependable staff man he was. He depended on Bryce's loyalty. Bryce, you know, was a close friend of mine. He was always in there promoting me with Eisenhower, as you probably know. I wouldn't have been on Ike's list for president. He listed ten people who were best qualified for president. I'm sure that that was Bryce's list. If Bryce said that, Ike would put the names out that way. Ike really didn't know the politicians very well, the way Bryce did.

I traveled with Bryce and Ike during the 1956 campaign. I was along to introduce Ike to the politicians coming up to the podium (the House members and the Senate members). So you know, you give him a little coaching, and he did a helluva job. But he didn't always know who they were. He had to have a little help there. Bryce and I would alternate on that because Jerry Persons wasn't very good on that either.

But Bryce was terrific. Bryce and I traveled together in the Nixon campaign in 1968. We went all over the country together and we decided that we should alternate; that he should be on the plane one week, and I be on another because you never really knew what was going on in the rest of the country. You got too close to that campaign on the campaign plane. And so that was our decision. And we did alternate.

*Steve Silver:* I want to ask you about that in a second. After President Eisenhower left office, Bryce, from what I understand, became sort of his eyes and ears in Washington. Do you think that was an important role for Harlow?

*Mel Laird:* Well, he was with Procter & Gamble at the time.

*Steve Silver:* Right.

*Mel Laird:* He was not working for Ike. You understand that.

*Steve Silver:* Okay.

*Mel Laird:* Neil McElroy was the head of Procter & Gamble at the time. He had served as Secretary of Defense for a few months (maybe fifteen or sixteen months?). But anyway, he gave Bryce complete latitude to work closely with Eisenhower. Whenever Eisenhower needed any help, or needed some writing or anything like that, Bryce would always take care of it.

Bryce also worked with me when I took over the platform committee in 1960 in Chicago, and again in 1964 in San Francisco.

Bryce was the principal writer. And we were very, very close. I remember Ike calling both of us up at the Blackstone Hotel, where we had adjoining rooms. He ate us out over the phone, something rather fierce, because Nixon had agreed to the so-called Park Avenue Accords. You probably don't remember that.

*Steve Silver:* No. Could you tell me about that?

*Mel Laird:* Well, one account was that the defense budget needed more money. Kennedy had been making the point on the missile gap.

There was no missile gap. Kennedy finally admitted that after the election. So did McNamara, as soon as they got in office. But anyway, Nixon agreed to add money to the defense bill. He also added about seven different things that should be changed in the platform. This drove President Eisenhower up the wall. He said, "He doesn't know what should be in that defense bill. I know more about that defense bill than he ever will."

*Steve Silver:* He was a former general.

*Mel Laird:* He said, "Now you and Bryce get over there and see Nixon when he comes to town. He's coming to town tonight. And you tell him that he has to decide whether he wants Rockefeller's support or mine."

He was up at Newport, playing golf. And he wasn't getting in to Chicago until – this was at the Chicago Convention in '60 – until about maybe forty hours or forty-eight hours. We did meet with Nixon as soon as he got in. We explained how Ike felt. Bryce was the writer, and I was presiding over the platform committee. Nixon said to me, "Well Mel, you and Bryce know what you have to do. You know what the game plan is. Take care of the old man." You know what I mean?

*Steve Silver:* Absolutely.

*Mel Laird:* We had great times together. I remember we used to entertain the press. We'd take them one-on-one when we were out on the campaign trail. In the Eisenhower campaign (the '56 campaign) I remember Bryce and I took Gloria Steinem and several others for dinner, because we had a few stories we wanted to plant with her.

She was along as a reporter for her magazine. We weren't successful, but did some good.

But we did that with a lot of people. I remember the '68 campaign. Bryce was not on the plane because it was his week off. But we had talked about this. We were constantly talking back and forth. It was decided that I would ride the press plane between Bismarck and Boise. And then I'd plant the story that Johnson had a secret plan over in the Pentagon to start withdrawing forces from Vietnam, and that I had that on good authority as a member of the Defense Appropriations Committee. All hell broke loose, you know?

Humphrey was going to make a speech indicating that there would be some withdrawal, in Pennsylvania, two days after I made this. And of course, Johnson got to Humphrey, and got the speech canceled. He put Clifford on *Face the Nation* that Sunday, saying there was no plan, and they weren't going to withdraw a single troop from Vietnam. If Humphrey had broken just a little bit with the president on that, Humphrey would have been president of the United States.

That night I had another press conference in Seattle. Nixon knew all about my meeting with the press, but he didn't go to the press conference. I had the press conference all by myself in Seattle. And this was the plan that Bryce and I had worked out.

*Steve Silver:* How was Bryce in meetings with high-level people? What was he like? What was his demeanor like?

*Mel Laird:* He was rather reserved, you know, not much talk, but to the point. He always did the right thing. He'd give me more ideas than I knew what to do with as Chairman of the House Republicans. And even in those platform things, he was the person that liked to plan and see that all the pegs fitted in the various holes. He was a planner; an idea man par excellence.

You know I love Bryce.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah. I know you guys were very close friends too.

*Mel Laird:* You know we went back to the White House together. You know that.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah. You went back for Nixon's administration, correct?

*Mel Laird:* Ehrlichman and Haldeman were fired. Bryce had gone back to Procter & Gamble, and I had gone and just started with Reader's Digest.

And we had the House and Senate leadership, including Mansfield and Carl Albert. And the Republican leadership came to us, and said, "You've got to go back over to the White House. Both of you have to go there as a team."

So Bryce said he wouldn't go unless I'd go with him. My wife didn't want me to go over to the White House. Nixon called us up to Camp David and we went up together. And I remember sitting there for a couple of hours. And I put it to him, and Bryce followed up too, about whether he was involved with a cover up. And he denied emphatically that he had anything to do with the cover up at all; told that to both Bryce and to me. Well of course, it turned out to be a lie.

*Steve Silver:* Exactly.

*Mel Laird:* And I didn't find out about that it was a lie until some time in – well, when was it? It must have been early June. I don't remember the date exactly at this moment, but it was before it became public knowledge that they had tapes.

It was before Butterfield made his pronouncement. But my general counsel and defense was a guy by the name of Fred Buzhardt. Did you ever hear of him?

*Steve Silver:* No. I don't think I know that name.

*Mel Laird:* He was my general counsel. He came over to the White House at about the same time I did. He took Dean's place as general counsel. He was one of the people who urged me to go back to the White House. I don't know; he was urging Harlow, too. He came to me and told me about the tapes, and that Nixon was involved in the cover up.

*Steve Silver:* What was your reaction to that?

*Mel Laird:* Well, I was upset about it, because he had lied to me.

*Steve Silver:* Right. What kind of an effect do you think Watergate had on Bryce Harlow?

*Mel Laird:* After that, Bryce didn't know that he was lying, because Buzhardt came to me and told me. I went and told Bryce the next day. And he wouldn't believe me. So I said, "Well I can't get Buzhardt to come up and tell you, because he did that out of loyalty to me." He had been listening to the tapes. But he thought, because he'd urged me to go, because he'd been my general counsel over in Defense, and now was over in the White House, that he had to tell me. Finally, I got Bryce to come out to the house. I think it was at the house, but it may have been the Carlton Hotel. (I could check that).

I convinced Buzhardt that he should tell Bryce. At that time, no one else in the White House knew about his being completely implicated in the cover up.

I actually was pretty disappointed, too. I told Bryce I was leaving. And I told -- but Bryce then talked with a bunch of people -- Ford and Hugh Scott. And they all converged on me not to leave, and stay until at least the budget was prepared.

And Harlow said he was going to get out as soon as he could. But he thought you had to stick around for the good of the country.

*Mel Laird:* Together, we went through the thing with Elliot Richardson on firing Cox. And Elliot had promised us that at three o'clock in the afternoon, he was going to go over and take care of that. He gets over there and the staff convinced him not to do it. Well, you know the whole story.

*Steve Silver:* Right. Why do you think Bryce was so good at dealing with members of Congress when he was in the White House?

*Mel Laird:* Because he was very humble. He never gave the impression that he knew more about any subject than the principal he was talking to. It all came through in the conversation. But he never maintained a superior attitude or of the fact that he had a superior intellect to anybody that he was talking to. And of course he did.

That's a lesson that's hard for some people to understand. Schlessinger never understood it.

And McNamara didn't. I mean McNamara had that Ivy League approach to everything; whiz kid approach. And so did Schlessinger. That's why Ford fired him finally. Ford said that, "Jeez, he talked to me like I was a dumb son of a bitch." But he knew more about defense than Schlessinger would ever know.

He'd served on that Defense Appropriations Committee for let's see, he served eighteen years.

I'm talking about Ford. But I think we're getting away a little bit from Bryce here.

*Steve Silver:* Was Bryce Harlow good at giving other people, or letting other people take credit for things?

*Mel Laird:* Always; always.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah? Do you think that was important to how he established himself?

*Mel Laird:* Absolutely. He always stayed out of sight, but he wrote the script. When we got that big defeat of Goldwater in '64, we had to regain control of the party, and a set of principles. The Senate appointed seven members, and the House appointed seven members. I was chairman of a group to set forth the Republican Party principles after this big defeat.

Bryce served as secretary of our group and wrote them, but of course, we all had our input. We worked hard on it. He was fantastic.

*Steve Silver:* Did he get along well with Democrats in Congress, as well as Republicans?

*Mel Laird:* Yes, I think he did. He, of course, was a Democrat.

*Steve Silver:* Right; the early part of his career.

*Mel Laird:* Yes. When he came to work in the Congress, he was a Democrat, an Oklahoma Democrat.

So he got along very well. That was one thing that he always cautioned me about too, and gave me direction. I had the greatest relationship with the committee chairmen under whom I worked – John Fogerty from Rhode Island, and George Mahon from Texas. I mean, we had such a relationship that we even campaigned for one another in our districts. I campaigned in Mahon's district, and I campaigned in Fogerty's district. They did the same thing for me. We'd go to the floor of the House, and we'd be together. I was ranking member on HEW and later on Defense after Ford became Leader.

That was really what Bryce thought you should do. You should work it out in committee. You go to the floor united. Don't take any amendments. You are in agreement on both sides of the aisle. You legislate much better through committee. That was something that he learned early on from Carl Vinson.

*Steve Silver:* Do you think Bryce Harlow ever considered himself like a Washington insider? You mentioned the trips you had to taken to be more in touch with real people during the campaign. Was that important, do you think, to him, to his career, to not be stuck inside the beltway?

*Mel Laird:* Oh yeah; very much so.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah?

*Mel Laird:* He was good. And I'll tell you, the press respected him. The press respected Bryce. He was a good leaker, and he leaked well. But they always just knew they could count on it.

*Steve Silver:* Do you think that's different versus how it is today? Do you think the press doesn't have as much respect for people who work inside the administration like that?

*Mel Laird:* Right. I think that's true.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah. Do you think politics now is less connected to real people than it was back then?

*Mel Laird:* Sure it is; there's no civility left in politics today. There's no trust between Democrats and Republicans. They're at each other's throats. I think that's caused by the press. I mean you got all these twenty-four hour news things on all the time. They have to look for stories. These guys are out promoting themselves all the time, day and night. They just don't work together like they should or have any fun together.

*Steve Silver:* Do you think it's just easier for the media to cover sort of the bad people than the good people like Bryce Harlow?

*Mel Laird:* Well, Bryce never wanted to be covered, you know. He would talk to you. He was a favorite guest at Godfrey Sperling's breakfasts at the Carlton Hotel; not the Carlton Club. Bryce was a member of the Carlton Club, but this was at the Carlton Hotel. And Bryce was a favorite. There were about thirty members of the press, the top reporters and columnists that would meet at the Sperling

breakfast. Bryce was probably, if not the most favorite guest, it was pretty damn close. That's where Bryce did great work. Those were strictly off the record.

*Steve Silver:* Did he not want the attention?

*Mel Laird:* No, he didn't want the attention. He felt that he'd be ineffective if he started getting too much attention. He really did.

*Steve Silver:* Do you think it's easy to teach people the kind of integrity that Bryce Harlow had, or does it really just have to be inborn, do you think, to the person?

*Mel Laird:* Well, I think it depends on how you're brought up. And Bryce respected true Christian values. I mean it hurt him just as much as it did anybody when we told him that Nixon was lying. Maybe we should have known then. Maybe we were naïve. But Bryce and I, when we sat there at Camp David and put the question to him, we wanted to believe, and we did believe. And it was a heartbreaker for Bryce. I know what a heartbreaker it was when he found out that he'd been lied to.

*Steve Silver:* Do you think politics could ever get back to the level of civility it had when you and Bryce were working?

*Mel Laird:* I hope so. I've been working with Dave Abshire in a little group to try to restore some of the civility that used to occur. But we haven't made a hell of a lot of progress yet, because this Supreme Court thing is going to be bad and it's unnecessary to have it that way.

*Steve Silver:* Uh-huh.

*Mel Laird:* Your question is a good question. And I would like to be optimistic about it. But it's kind of like General Abrams. You know, he was a great commander. And he reported to me for many, many months in Vietnam. He just couldn't understand why there wasn't a single good report. In 1968, in Tet, we beat the hell out of the North Vietnamese. They had a casualty or kill rate of over a hundred thousand troops. The South Vietnamese, after we went through Vietnamization and got them up to speed and where they were strong, and where we were supporting them, won every battle. There wasn't a single American involved. But they won every single battle up to mid-1975. Then in '75, we cut them out. We wouldn't give them any ammunition, or spare parts, or

anything else. Congress – it was two hundred and seventy-five million dollars they asked for. The Congress said no.

I would like to be an optimist. But the way things are going right now, I'm a little pessimistic. I was telling you the story about Abrams, and how he couldn't ever get any good news out of Saigon. He said, "I've got five hundred reporters here. They're all running around, trying to develop a story. They want five hundred different stories." He said, "It's just impossible to really get the truth out, because they all want to have a separate byline." Do you follow me?

*Steve Silver:* Yeah.

*Mel Laird:* I referred to that a little earlier.

But we didn't really finish the talk. You came in with this idea of whether I'm pessimistic or optimistic about getting back to a more civil way to handle legislative affairs. And I watch this thing right now with the Supreme Court.

There's going to be a real Donnybrook on the Supreme Court. I mean, they're not very friendly, the way they handle these things.

Let me tell you a story. McCormick was the speaker. He followed Rayburn. There were all kinds of people that wanted a little dining room that was just off the Members' dining room in the Capitol. You had your own waiter, and you had your own dining room. He came up to me and said, "Mel, I want you to come down to my office tonight. We'll have a little drink before I go up to have dinner with the Missus."

He always had dinner with his wife. But after that dinner, he'd come down to Paul Young's about seven o'clock at night, and have dinner with a bunch of us. But he'd never eat, as he'd already had dinner with his wife; very unusual guy.

*Mel Laird:* He said, "Mel. I want you to have that dining room. I'm going to get a lot of hell about it, but I've been watching you out there on the floor. You're always prepared. You're always doing a good job for the Congress." Again, he said, "I'll get a lot of hell for this, but it's yours." Well you know that never would happen today. I remember the old Boggs wanted that dining room. It was really a nice thing to have, as Chairman of the House Republicans. The Speaker had a place he could use. Then I had a place I could use.

And it was just very important. I don't think that'd happen today. Do you?

*Steve Silver:* No, probably not; probably not at all. Do you think that there aren't a lot of people right now that want to go into Washington politics as a profession because of how bad it is?

*Mel Laird:* I think it's frightening some people away.

*Steve Silver:* Right.

*Mel Laird:* I think that's a shame. It's certainly frightening some people away from taking jobs. I had to go out and set up a team over at the Pentagon. I had over five hundred and forty appointments; then the military appointments too. I think that it was easier to recruit. I got Dave Packard as my Deputy. I got the best people in the country, all agreeing to come to Washington to work. Dave Packard gave up a great deal. He gave up dividends and stock appreciation, some sixty-eight million dollars. But it was not hard to recruit at that time. It's hard to recruit now.

*Steve Silver:* How do you think we solve that? Do you think we need to highlight the Bryce Harlows; the good people, to maybe inspire more people?

*Mel Laird:* Yes, you have to do that. Have you read the paper that Dave Abshire is putting out on civility in government?

*Steve Silver:* A little bit. Yeah.

*Mel Laird:* Max Kaplan came on that steering committee and we're trying to do something in that area. Whether it will be successful or not, I can't tell you. We're sure as hell going to try.

*Steve Silver:* Just to bring it all back together, Mr. Secretary, how do you think Bryce Harlow influenced your own political career? What are the more important things you learned from working with him, and just really knowing him?

*Mel Laird:* Don't open your mouth until you're sure of your facts.

*Steve Silver:* Always have your facts?

*Mel Laird:* Too many people are talking too fast, and talking too much. Bryce always felt that way.

*Steve Silver:* I just wanted to thank you again for your time Mr. Secretary. It's been great talking to you.

*[End of Audio]*

(Addition)

*Mel Laird:*

I wanted to add that Bryce felt it was very important to see that an aircraft carrier was named for Carl Vinson while Vinson was still alive. He was very loyal to "Uncle" Carl. Vinson gave him his start on the Armed Services Committee. However, the Navy said they had a long-standing policy not to name ships after living individuals. But Bryce and I were successful in overriding the Navy.

We had a contractor down in Newport News constructing the carrier model. We wanted to present it to Vinson down in Georgia when it was done. So the president, myself, (Senator) John Warner, and Bryce all went down there on Air Force One for the announcement on Vinson's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.

I had never seen anyone more pleased than Bryce Harlow at the naming of the U.S.S. Carl Vinson.