Melvin R. Laird, who as President Richard M. Nixon's first secretary of defense quietly challenged the administration's hawkish military policies during the war in Vietnam, prompting deep suspicion — and even spying — between the White House and the Pentagon, died on Wednesday, Nov. 16th 2016 in Fort Myers. He was 94.

His son David said the cause was complications of respiratory failure. Laird lived in Fort Myers and died in a hospital there.

As the nation's top military official during Nixon's first term, Laird repeatedly pressed the White House to wind down U.S. troop involvement in Vietnam and initially opposed the resumption of bombing of North Vietnam and the invasion of Cambodia. But Laird — who with his broad, blunt features, receding hairline and severe crew cut suggested the visage of a Marine drill sergeant — was no dove.

Before leading the Pentagon, as a consistently pro-war Republican congressman from Wisconsin, he had regularly criticized President Lyndon B. Johnson, a Democrat, for his conduct of the war, saying he had escalated it too gradually.

In June 1965, Laird said it was evident that Johnson was aiming not at victory but at a "negotiated settlement" and that the administration should make "more effective use of airstrikes" against Hanoi and its ports.

But by late 1968, when President-elect Nixon picked him for defense secretary (after Sen. Henry M. Jackson, a hawkish Democrat from Washington state, had declined the post), Laird believed that diplomacy was the only way to end the war.

Under Laird's leadership, the military eventually eliminated the draft, first by scrapping a system of deferments, which tended to benefit college students and otherwise privileged young men, and replacing it with a lottery system. He then presided over the establishment of an all-volunteer military in the early 1970s.

Nixon came to favor what became known as "Vietnamization" — a policy of turning over ground combat to South Vietnamese forces. But along with his national security adviser, Henry A. Kissinger, Nixon believed that the only way to force a negotiated settlement with the communist North was to bomb it, resuming raids that had been halted by Johnson. Laird argued that the public would not support a new wave of bombing.

For the same reason, he initially opposed a plan to bomb North Vietnamese troops who had created sanctuaries inside the Cambodian border. His resistance raised the suspicions and ire of Nixon and Kissinger.

But on March 18, 1969, three days after the communists had fired five rockets into Saigon, the South Vietnamese capital, Laird relented, agreeing to bombing missions inside Cambodia. He
soon objected, however, to a White House order that the Air Force write two sets of records: one saying the bombing was inside Vietnam, the other — kept secret — saying it was in Cambodia.

"The decision to keep the operation hidden from the public eye had a major impact on Laird's dealings with the White House," Dale R. Herspring, a political science professor at Kansas State University, wrote in *The Pentagon and the Presidency* (2005). "He had argued against both the operation and the secrecy surrounding it. From then on, his relationship with the White House became increasingly adversarial."

So adversarial, in fact, that Nixon had a wiretap placed on the phone of Laird's chief aide. At the same time, the Joint Chiefs of Staff had a young sailor working in the White House supply them with copies of secret documents from Kissinger's office.

"Everyone appeared to be spying on everyone else," Herspring wrote.

Laird's opposition to escalating the war was based on his primary concern: facing down the nuclear threat posed by the Soviet Union. The money being spent on the war, he argued, would be better spent on new weapons systems, to keep up with Moscow.

In 1962, while a congressman, Laird published a controversial book, *A House Divided: America's Strategy Gap*, in which he proposed that nuclear war was not unthinkable.

He advocated that the United States move toward a "first strike" nuclear capability against the Soviet Union. He later retracted that position, but he continued to criticize Robert S. McNamara, the secretary of defense in the Kennedy and Johnson administrations, on the nuclear issue.

"There is no substitute for military superiority as the best insurance" against a nuclear exchange, Laird said in a 1966 speech.

McNamara believed, by contrast, that since the U.S. had sufficient nuclear power to absorb a first strike and still destroy the Soviet Union, there was no need to build more weapons simply to maintain quantitative superiority.

The Nixon White House did reach a strategic arms limitation agreement with the Soviet Union in 1972, and some military analysts gave Laird much credit for it, suggesting that Moscow had fully heard him when he said that the United States would expand its nuclear forces if the Soviet Union did not sign the pact.

"Given the problems and the challenges that he inherited, I think he was our most effective secretary of defense," Lawrence J. Korb, a former assistant secretary of defense in the Reagan administration, said in an interview in 2007. "His goal was to get us out of Vietnam so he could revitalize the military, and he got that done."

Melvin Robert Laird Jr. was born in Omaha, Neb., on Sept. 1, 1922, a son of the Rev. Melvin R. Laird, a Presbyterian minister, and the former Helen O' Connor. Within a year, Laird's family had
moved to his mother's hometown, Marshfield, Wis., where they held extensive timber and sawmill interests. Melvin Laird Sr. was later elected to the Wisconsin Senate.

After graduating from Carleton College in Northfield, Minn., in 1942, Laird enlisted in the Navy and was commissioned a lieutenant. He was wounded while serving on the destroyer USS *Maddox* in the Pacific and was awarded the Purple Heart.


Besides her and his son David, from his first marriage, Laird is survived by two other children from his first marriage, Alison Laird-Large and John; a stepdaughter, Kimberly Dalgleish; four grandsons; and one step-granddaughter.

Laird was home on leave from the Navy in 1946 when his father died. Soon after, at 23, he was elected to fill his father's seat in the Wisconsin Senate. Six years later, in the landslide victory of Dwight D. Eisenhower, Laird was elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. He served nine terms in the House representing a district of mostly dairy farms and forests in north-central Wisconsin.

During the civil rights era, Laird was instrumental in weakening several Southern-backed proposals that would have limited the federal government's ability to desegregate public schools. Considered a consummate inside player, he was named chairman of the House Republican Conference and chairman of the Republican Platform Committee for both the 1960 and 1964 presidential campaigns.

It was in 1964 that Laird cemented a relationship that would influence the rest of his political career. He helped mastermind a coup that ousted Rep. Charles A. Halleck of Indiana as House Republican leader and elevated Gerald R. Ford of Michigan to the post. Ford and Laird cooperated closely on legislation for years, including on military matters while Laird was defense secretary.

And when Vice President Spiro T. Agnew resigned in disgrace in October 1973 after pleading no contest to accepting bribes, Laird did much to persuade Nixon to replace the vice president with Ford.

By then, for Nixon's second term, Laird had moved from the Pentagon to the White House to replace John D. Ehrlichman as the president's chief domestic policy adviser. (Laird was succeeded by Elliot Richardson at the Pentagon.) Ehrlichman had been forced to resign, and later spent 18 months in prison, for his role in the cover-up of the Watergate break-in.

By the time Nixon, facing impeachment, had resigned, on Aug. 9, 1974, Laird had left the White House as the Watergate crisis deepened to become the senior counselor on national and international affairs for the Reader's Digest Association.
When he took over as president, Ford asked Laird to return to government as his chief of staff, or to accept a Cabinet post. But Laird chose to stay with Reader's Digest. Still, throughout the Ford administration, he remained perhaps the most influential member of the president's "kitchen cabinet."

In 1974, Ford presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. In his later years Laird wrote frequently about public affairs.