



We are happy to name Melvin R. Laird the 72nd inductee in Marshfield's 150: Heroes and Leaders, Past and Present register. Melvin Laird was nominated by Brian Finnegan, Resident Research Facilitator, Division of Education, Marshfield Clinic Health System.

"While America knows Mel Laird best as the U.S. Secretary of Defense (1969-1973) and as a Presidential Counselor for Domestic Affairs in the White House (1973-1974), we in Marshfield know him even better as a neighbor and friend." (1)

Mel Laird grew up in Marshfield on Cherry Street (across from Faith Lutheran Church), graduating from Marshfield High School in 1940, as a member of the first class to graduate from the new school (now Marshfield Middle School). He is the son of Melvin R. Laird, a Marshfield Presbyterian pastor and Helen Connor Laird, who served the state many years on the University of Wisconsin-Madison Board of Regents. Mel had three brothers: William Connor, Richard, and David. He graduated from Carleton College in Minnesota and then enlisted in the United States Navy. Mel received an ensign's commission in April 1944 and served on the destroyer USS Maddox in the Pacific. A recipient of the Purple Heart and several other decorations, Laird left the Navy in April 1946. (2)

Laird married Barbara Masters in 1945 and they had three children, David, John and Alison. At the age of 23, Laird was elected to the Wisconsin State Senate, succeeding his father, who was recently deceased.

Laird remained in the Wisconsin Senate until his election in November 1952 to the United States House of Representatives. Subsequently reelected eight consecutive times, he was chairman of the House Republican Conference when President Nixon selected him for his cabinet. As a particularly active congressman, Laird became known for his work on both domestic and defense issues, including his service on the Defense subcommittee of the House Appropriations Committee. (2)

One of his greatest lasting contributions was in national health care. Laird often said Marshfield Clinic doctors encouraged him to get involved in health care-related issues after he was elected to Congress. While serving on the Health, Education, Welfare (HEW)-Labor subcommittee as ranking member, he formed a partnership with Rep. John Fogarty, Democrat of Rhode Island. Together they worked to increase support for and expand the National Institutes of Health (NIH). Both Congressmen strongly believed increased NIH research funding was necessary for the country's future prosperity. They successfully advocated for increased NIH budgets over multiple presidential administrations. Their bipartisan partnership also helped develop various NIH research programs. The results were eight regional cancer centers, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) building in Atlanta, the National Library of Medicine in Bethesda, several new Institutes of Health, and increases in all phases of medical research and education. Laird and Fogarty stood together on the House floor, voted together in all House-Senate conferences, and served together as U.S. delegates to the World Health Organization (WHO).(2) Their relationship is a wonderful example of what can be accomplished when passionate legislators work together.

Laird received many distinctions for his medical research advocacy and support of health care objectives. In addition to his delegation to the WHO by Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson, Eisenhower described Laird as "one of the ten men best qualified to become President of the United States."(2) Laird received several honorary Doctor of Law and Humanities degrees, including one from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1982. Among the most prestigious of his awards were the Lasker Medical Research Award and the U.S. Presidential Medal of Freedom, the nation's highest civilian award.

Back in Wisconsin, Laird knew all six of Marshfield Clinic's founders in a personal capacity. He was there at the beginning of the research foundation, helping to secure its first grant for medical research – a study that identified Farmer's Lung Disease and contributed to its prevention and treatment. Laird organized a meeting between the researchers in Marshfield and the NIH staff in Bethesda, Maryland to discuss the project. The NIH grant was awarded the next year, 1969, and the research foundation was launched with a momentum that continues to the present day.

In 1969 when President Richard Nixon appointed him Secretary of Defense, Laird was aware of the congressional desire to cut the rising costs of the Vietnam War and the growing public demand to bring American troops home. Laird publicly pushed for a slow, steady withdrawal of U.S. forces in a policy he developed called "Vietnamization."

On January 27, 1973, just two days before Laird left office, the Vietnam War peace accord was signed. It called for the complete withdrawal of U.S. forces within two months, the establishment of an international commission to settle disputes between the signatories, and the release of U.S. prisoners of war in North Vietnam, a term Laird worked persistently to secure. Laird also suspended the unpopular draft, paving the way for an all-volunteer military force. (2)

In the early spring of 1973, Laird was prevailed upon to accept the position of White House Counselor to the President. Laird also served as member of the National Security Council. He left the White House shortly after the Ford confirmation, but continued

a close relationship with Gerald Ford. He then began a career as a private citizen with Reader's Digest, other corporate boards, and various charitable organizations.

Mel never forgot his hometown of Marshfield and the important medical research efforts going on at Marshfield Clinic. Therefore, there was no hesitation to lend his name in the fundraising efforts for a new research building. The Laird Center for Medical Research was opened in 1997 with many well-publicized fundraising efforts, such as The Laird Express train. This open house event featured President Gerald Ford, Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, Governor Tommy Thompson, and other notable dignitaries making the trip to Marshfield to honor Melvin R. Laird.

After his wife Barbara's early death, Mel married Carole Fleishman in 1993, and they lived in Fort Myers, Florida. Melvin R. Laird passed away in November of 2016 and is buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

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(1) "Why Melvin R. Laird" 1994 promotion for the Laird Center building campaign, created by Marshfield Clinic.

(2) Van Atta, D. (2008). With Honor: Melvin Laird in War, Peace, and Politics. University of Wisconsin Press.