

1. Record Nr.	UNINA9910969929803321
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Titolo	With honor : Melvin Laird in war, peace, and politics / / Dale Van Atta ; foreword by Gerald R. Ford
Pubbl/distr/stampa	Madison, Wis., : University of Wisconsin Press, c2008
ISBN	1-282-42427-0 9786612424274 0-299-22683-2
Descrizione fisica	1 online resource (660 p.)
Disciplina	355.6092 B
Soggetti	Cabinet officers - United States Vietnam War, 1961-1975 - United States Legislators - United States Legislators - Wisconsin United States Politics and government 1963-1969 United States Politics and government 1969-1974
Lingua di pubblicazione	Inglese
Formato	Materiale a stampa
Livello bibliografico	Monografia
Note generali	"An abridged edition [of The Laird legacy], entitled With honor : Melvin Laird in war, peace and politics (ISBN 978-0-299-22680-0 [i.e. 978-0-299-226808]), is published by the University of Wisconsin"--The Laird legacy, t.p. verso.
Nota di bibliografia	Includes bibliographical references (p. 603-614) and index.
Nota di contenuto	""Contents""; ""Foreword by Gerald R. Ford""; ""Acknowledgment""; ""Prologue""; ""1. The Man from Marshfield""; ""2. Guns and Butter""; ""3. A House Divided""; ""4. Laird Also Rises""; ""5. Cloud Riders""; ""6. Into the Quagmire""; ""7. Fight Now, Pay Later""; ""8. The Resurrection of Richard Nixon""; ""9. Looking for an Exit""; ""10. Off the Menu""; ""11. Going Public""; ""12. Dueling Machiavellis""; ""13. Ending the Draft""; ""14. Objections Overruled""; ""15. Black September""; ""16. Friends in High Places""; ""17. "Management by Walking Around""; ""18. Minority Report"" ""19. The Secret War""""20. The Hawks Have Flown""; ""21. Withdrawal Symptoms""; ""22. Easter Offensive""; ""23. No Time for Quitters""; ""24. Watergate""; ""25. Picking a President""; ""26. Kitchen Cabinet""; ""27. A

Sommario/riassunto

In 1968, at the peak of the Vietnam War, centrist Republican Melvin Laird agreed to serve as Richard Nixon's secretary of defense. It was not, Laird knew, a move likely to endear him to the American public but as he later said, Nixon couldn't find anybody else who wanted the damn job. For the next four years, Laird deftly navigated the morass of the war he had inherited. Lampooned as a missile head, but decisive in crafting an exit strategy, he doggedly pursued his program of Vietnamization, initiating the withdrawal of U.S. military personnel and gradually ceding combat responsibilities to South Vietnam. In fighting to bring the troops home faster, pressing for more humane treatment of POWs, and helping to end the draft, Laird employed a powerful blend of disarming Midwestern candor and Washington, D.C. savvy, as he sought a high moral road bent on Nixon's oft-stated (and politically instrumental) goal of peace with honor. The first book ever to focus on Laird's legacy, this authorized biography reveals his central and often unrecognized role in managing the crisis of national identity sparked by the Vietnam War and the challenges, ethical and political, that confronted him along the way. Drawing on exclusive interviews with Laird, Henry Kissinger, Gerald Ford, and numerous others, author Dale Van Atta offers a sympathetic portrait of a man striving for open government in an atmosphere fraught with secrecy. Van Atta illuminates the inner workings of high politics: Laird's behind-the-scenes sparring with Kissinger over policy, his decisions to ignore Nixon's wilder directives, his formative impact on arms control and health care, his key role in the selection of Ford for vice president, his frustration with the country's abandonment of Vietnamization, and, in later years, his unheeded warning to Donald Rumsfeld that it's a helluva lot easier to get into a war than to get out of one. "