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The Privacy of Presidents

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A departing White House official recently wrote to a friend that the wall separating the outer from the inner offices of the White House is thick and few penetrate it.

This would seem to be confirmed by Jonathan Daniels' disclosure of the Roosevelt family secret that F.D.R. had a lasting relationship with Mrs. Roosevelt's social secretary in their earliest and latest days in public life.

There is more involved here than a belated bit of gossip. A point is to be made about how much we know about the private and public lives of presidents.

Roosevelt's attachment with Mrs. Rutherford lasted until the end. The young and pretty social secretary of Roosevelt's thirties was with him in his sixties when he died in Warm Springs, Ga.—a fact which was for years carefully kept from the press and public.

Many who thought they knew a good deal about Roosevelt and his four administrations were surprised by Daniels' disclosures. These matters are often loosely bruited about in Washington but rarely so authoritatively stated.

Daniels, a Raleigh, N.C., newspaper editor, is a son of Josephus Daniels, secretary of the navy in the early part of the century when Roosevelt, an assistant secretary of the navy, was entranced by his wife's social secretary. The younger Daniels was in the White House in both the Roosevelt and Truman administrations.

Roosevelt's little affair, although clearly a matter of importance in his personal life, had little significance in his public life. Yet the incident illustrates how little is known of the private lives of presidents.

How much more we know of their public lives is open to debate. We know more about their public lives than we do about their private lives. But we can

not claim to know how they make their decisions, nor if they anticipate the consequences of those decisions in matters of the utmost importance despite all pretenses of inside information. It is not known yet how, or even if, Mr. Truman decided to use the atomic bomb. He may well have only found himself in the flow of events which were irreversible

without there ever having been a conscious decision to use or not use the bomb. Perhaps it is as simple as this: Once the bomb was made it had to be used whenever it could have a decisive effect in war.

Nor is it known now, and never may be known, whether the increasing involvement in Vietnam was accidental or a carefully contrived plan to carry us by easy stages into a major war.

We do not always get all the facts at the time primary decisions are made any more than we got the facts about Mrs. Rutherford's presence in Warm Springs when Franklin Roosevelt died.

Nor were we told in Vienna of the ominous exchange between John F. Kennedy and Nikita S. Khrushchev which preceded erection of the Berlin Wall. We wait until years later when White House intimates write their recollections of secret visits

A mystery of history still why and who was responsible for the failure to enter Berlin as the final act of World War II and thus head off the problems that have arisen since.

The full account of the Bay of Pigs fiasco is still hidden behind Kennedy's statement that he would take the blame but not tell the story.

Today serious questions are being raised on the competence and scope of the Warren inquiry into the murder of President Kennedy. The more heard of this the more it appears that the Warren inquiry was strongly motivated by a desire to quiet public anxiety and doubt.

This is probably far afield from Jonathan Daniels' romantic tale of F.D.R.'s attachment to Mrs. Rutherford. But those of us who are supposed to inform the public, and who do not know about Mrs. Rutherford, begin to wonder how much else we do not know about much more important, if less provocative, subjects.

The current vogue is to speak of a credibility gap. This evidently means that President Johnson can't be believed in what he says but only in what he does. That judgment is too harsh. But there still is a great deal we do not know about what any president does and the reasons and motives for his actions—much less of his private life in spite of all the intrusions of the press and public.

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