

Michael Balzano

A former garbageman joins

By Sara Jane Goodyear

WASHINGTON — "I am not a 'bloodless bore with'—what was it they said—'all the color and charisma of an amoeba.'"

Mike Balzano's voice rose steadily as he strode over to his desk and ran his finger down a red underlined copy of that morning's New York Times. The fact that the reference was to President Nixon's staff in general, not Balzano specifically, didn't improve the story in his estimation.

"What do those guys know about charisma?" he demanded. "To them charisma is blue eyes and an open shirt and a lock of hair down to here." He rubbed his finger across his right eyebrow.

WITH THAT, Dr. Michael P. Balzano, the one-time garbageman turned Presidential assistant, draped himself across one of the wing chairs that are so prevalent in the Old Executive Office Building. For the next couple of hours, out poured a stream of down-to-earth philosophy sprinkled with funny stories, expletives, references to Plato, and an occasional, "Don't use that—it could get me fired."

He talked about VISTA and the Peace Corps, programs under Action, he agency President Nixon has named

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him to head. And he talked about himself.

Balzano seems a contradiction in an administration often described by such words as "dull," "bland," "colorless."

"My ability to converse with low economic groups has convinced many people around Washington that I'm still a garbage collector," Balzano said.

"But," he continued, "one of the greatest advantages of my life is that I have been constantly underestimated."

A life-long Democrat, Balzano voted against President Nixon in 1960 and 1968. In 1972, he abandoned the Democrats to support Nixon.

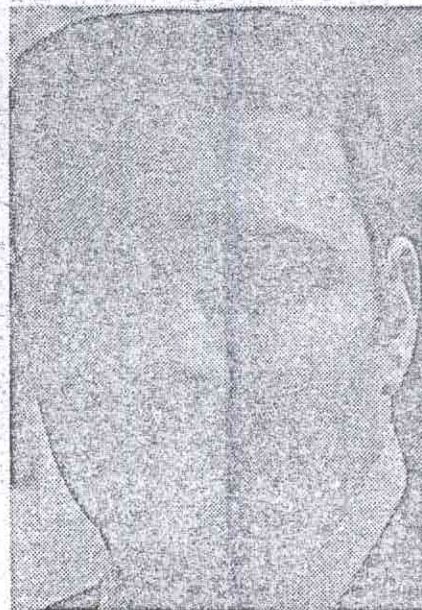
"MY PARTY changed on me," he said, thoughtfully fingering the change from the cup of coffee his secretary had brought him. "The Democratic Party lost contact with my people."

Not surprisingly, pictures of Balzano with the President and Vice President hang on his office wall. Along with them is an autographed photo of Chicago's Democratic Ald. Vito Marzullo [25th] standing with Balzano and their wives.

Balzano met Marzullo after Marzullo's widely publicized denunciation of Sen. George McGovern.

Balzano explained who he was. Marzullo asked incredulously: "You mean there's an Italian in the White House?"

Balzano has worked at so many jobs in his lifetime that he ran into a problem filling out the standard government forms for security clearance. The ques-



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tion, "Have you ever been fired from a job?" stopped him short.

"MY WIFE AND I were hysterical," he said. "I couldn't remember them all. I used to go to work on Monday and be fired by Wednesday."

"But they said to list everything I could remember. It drove the FBI mad tracking down those jobs. I thought they were going to send me a bill."

By his own description, Balzano is an example of the "Horatio Alger work ethic." He grew up in the Italian sec-

the Nixon team

tion of New Haven, Conn., where his parents worked in factories. In school, he failed grade after grade, marking time till he could quit at 16.

Then he worked at a variety of heavy, physical jobs. He especially liked the job on the garbage truck because it gave him much of the day free. Perhaps he'd still be there if he hadn't slipped on the ice and hurt his back.

Unable to do physical labor, he went to work as an apprentice lens grinder. As time passed, he became increasingly sensitive about his lack of education.

"I could read—comic books—and I could write, but I misspelled every other word," he said.

AFTER SPENDING four years in night school earning his high school diploma, he couldn't pass college entrance exams. But he convinced the University of Bridgeport to let him attend night classes. His grades were so high that they took him in as a full-time student, and he graduated first in his class.

He went on to get his doctorate in political philosophy at Georgetown University in 1971. His doctoral thesis, which was a critique of VISTA, and newspaper accounts of his remarkable rise drew government attention. After a few months with Action and then the Office of Economic Opportunity, he was named staff assistant to the President.

He quickly became the administration link with blue-collar workers, and especially ethnic groups. When he takes over Action [the appointment is subject to Senate confirmation], his initial emphasis will be on VISTA, and his strong ethnic ties may be expected to produce some changes.

"My orders from the President were to take that program and broaden the base both of those who want to volunteer and those who benefit from the program," Balzano said. "He wants to expand the scope."

To Balzano that means, among other things, reaching out to the ethnics. "There are so many problems of need in blue-collar and near-poor communities and there are no programs for them," he said.

On the volunteer side, he wants to step up efforts to hire skilled technicians, including those over 50, instead of concentrating on "B. A. generalists" as once was the case.

And he wants to keep volunteers in their own communities.

"After all, who knows his way around the Polish community better than a Pole?" he asked.

VISTA, says Balzano, is a natural program for "the entire Nixon idea of returning power to the people." Balzano envisions offering help to ethnic communities on a cost-shared basis.

"For a lot less money you can accomplish 10 times what you can in a program that just pays salaries and creates dependencies," he said.