A Quiet Sort of Man

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MIAMI—One Miami Beach socialite says Charles Gregory "Bebe" Rebozo "could stand in a corner all night and not draw a crowd."

That's just fine with the millionaire pal of President Nixon. He'd like to keep it that way, but his friendship with the world's most publicized person may rob him of his hard won privacy.

An attack by Rep. Wright Patman (D-Tex.) also promises to dent his privacy and even cause him some trouble.

Patman has charged Rebozo with using a Small Business Administration loan to finance a shopping center to get Cuban exiles started in business and turn a neat, no-risk profit in the process.

Patman said Rebozo, who declared a new worth of $600,000 in his 1962 application to the SBA, was given an $80,000 loan for the shopping center and was guaranteed the rent, which could spiral to $2.4 million.

That year, when the loan was made, Rebozo's good friend Nixon was a private citizen, but another good friend, former Sen. George Smathers (D.-Fla.), was chairman of the Senate Small Business Committee.

Also, Miami SBA Regional Director Thomas A. Butler is a close business associate of Rebozo.

Rebozo is used to moving in the shadows of the well known, and is using the technique in an apparently unselfish friendship with Nixon.

Nixon and Rebozo met in 1951. Nixon was exhausted from his successful campaign for the U.S. Senate and wanted a quiet place to recuperate.

Smathers, who became Nixon's friend when both were freshmen in the House in 1947, arranged for Nixon to meet two friends from his high school days, W. Sloan McCrea and Rebozo. McCrea had to be away during Nixon's planned Florida stay, so Rebozo offered his home.

"We just hit it off, I guess," Rebozo said.

Rebozo since then has been a frequent companion of the first family, and there have been few important Nixon family events at which he has not been present.

The night Nixon lost the presidential election to John F. Kennedy, Rebozo was the only "outsider" present, gloomily watching television with Pat Nixon and the two Nixon girls in a Los Angeles hotel room.

Nixon's favorite vacation retreat has become a five-house complex on Key Biscayne. Nixon owns four of the houses—one for himself, one for guests and two for servants and Secret Service men. The fifth house is Rebozo's.

Rebozo makes frequent trips to Washington to see his old friend and spent last week with the President at his summer retreat in California.

Last Dec. 16 he quietly changed his registration from Democrat to Republican. But he is not active in politics.

The short Florida native of Cuban descent is well known for his ability to hold his tongue, and his acquaintances say this is part of the reason why his association with the President has been so stable for so long.

"You'll never find him out front waving a flag for anything," said one acquaintance. "He's basically a shy man and has always shunned any kind of publicity or notoriety."

His close friendship with Nixon has deepened that feeling.

"It's almost a religion with Bebe—he's not going to let his friendship with Dick Nixon be used by anybody," another close friend of high school days declared.

For this reason, apparently, Rebozo has shied from all contacts with the press. He refuses to respond to telephone calls and questions from the press and has granted only one interview, that to a friendly Miami reporter in September, 1968.

"He's dear when you get to know him, but he does not have a magnetic personality," said another Miami Beach socialite. "Deep down in his heart Bebe is a tourist. He wears touristy bathing suits when he is on the beach and his paunch is growing. He looks like any other middle-aged man on the beach, and certainly not like an international lover."

Despite the description, Rebozo is not a flashy dresser, preferring conservative suits and sportswear on his stocky, 5-8 frame. His olive complexion has been darkened by months in the sun, which has not diminished his full head of black hair, combed straight back.

Rebozo has been seen occasionally on the town with attractive women, but never frequently enough to inspire any rumors of romance.

He was married to Mrs. Clare G. Gentry, a divorcee

with two children, in 1946. She divorced him in an uncontested suit four years later. She charged he had left her in 1948, and returned at her pleading a few times after that, but then left for good in the summer of 1949.

It was in 1946 that Rebozo began gathering his fortune in earnest. Using money made on service stations, he began making down payments on "every good property buy I could buy."

His first major venture was a purchase of 180 acres in Coral Gables in 1946, from which he sold lots for the next decade.

Miami credit bureaus list his assets at between $500,000 and $1 million, but in addition he has several land holdings. He is chairman of the board of the Key Biscayne National Bank, and he owns the Monroe Title Co. of Key West.

He heads a corporation that owns nearly all of Fisher Island, a property just off the south tip of Miami Beach, which promises to be a gold mine if it is ever connected to the mainland by a bridge or a tunnel.

He was the chief engineer in a land deal in which Nixon nearly doubled an investment of $175,000 to $200,000.

Nixon purchased 175,000 shares of the corporation owning the island in 1962.

Last February, Nixon, whose aides said he was avoiding any conflict of interest involving the property, sold the real estate back to the corporation for $350,000.

Rebozo was the youngest of the family, and just after he was born, one of his brothers, barely out of his babyhood, christened him "Bebe" because he couldn't pronounce baby.