President Nixon, Bebe Rebozo on a Private Boating Trip
. . . as confidant of President, Rebozo won't talk of their friendship

The President's Best Friend: Man of Many Paradoxes

Miami Nov 72

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Nixon's pal Bebe:

He's a combination man-about-town and wallflower, Great Gatsby and Horatio Alger hero, fishing buddy to the Who's Who of 1950-on politics and past president of the Southwest Kiwanis Club.

NAME: Charles Gregory Rebozo. (But everybody calls him Bebe, even the busboys at the Key Biscayne Hotel.)

ADDRESS: The Key Biscayne White House compound on Bay Lane.

AGE: 59.

OCCUPATION: Banker, mostly. But he started off as a filling station owner and moved into small loans and big real estate. He's still in real estate. Bigger.

POLITICS: A lifelong Democrat, he re-registered Republican after his friend, Richard Nixon, won the presidency in 1968. His first political activity was as a top lieutenant in the "goon squad" of local campaign workers who helped his Miami High friend, George Smathers, defeat Pat Cannon for Congress in 1946 and Claude Pepper for the U.S. Senate in 1950. Now, he says, politics is just a hobby — lots of talk, little action.

MARITAL STATUS: His marriages to a high school sweetheart twice ended in the courts. He dates a Key Biscayne divorcee who looks a lot like his ex. As a bachelor, he's an always ready host and an available, anytime-anywhere guest for the President.

CHARACTER TRAITS: Although he's not as much of a privacy-freak as Howard Hughes, Rebozo has pioneered new frontiers in discretion. Whatever he knows about the President and the First Family, he's not telling.

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IT WAS 1951 when George Smathers, newly sworn in to the United States Senate, decided he and the new senator from California, Richard Nixon, needed a rest. So he called his friends Bebe Rebozo and Sloan McCrea. McCrea was busy. Rebozo wasn't. They went fishing in Florida.

And although one acquaintance recalled Rebozo's remarking that "I don't believe Senator Nixon enjoyed himself," since the campaign-exhausted Californian spent most of his time basking silently in the sun, his thank-you note from Washington was warm and exuberant.

"We just hit it off, I guess," Rebozo once told a reporter in a typically low key pronouncement.

REBOZO CONTINUED to "hit it off" as a fishing host to Smather's and Nixon's Senate colleagues. The guests aboard his fishing boat included Sens. Johnson of Texas, Clements of Kentucky, Russell of Georgia, Symington of Missouri, Long of Louisiana.

Lady Bird Johnson gave Rebozo an engraved wristwatch as a gift from the family long before Johnson became President. The occasion was a dinner and theater party hosted by Rebozo in Coconut Grove.

The closest friend, however, remained Nixon.

And as the Californian rose in politics, up through the vice presidency under Eisenhower and finally to the GOP presidential nomination in 1960, he and Rebozo grew closer.

ON NOV. 8, 1960, the night Nixon lost the presidency by a slim margin to John F. Kennedy, Rebozo sat in a suite with Nixon's wife, Pat, the two Nixon daughters and the candidate's secretary.

Rebozo, meanwhile, was maturing here as a businessman, civic leader and social figure.

One of nine children of a Cuban cigar worker from Tampa, Rebozo came to Miami in 1919. Although he rubbed shoulders at Buena Vista Elementary and Miami High School with the WASP elite — Smathers, McCrea, and the late Washington Post-Newsweek publisher, Philip L. Graham — the young Rebozo was far below them financially. His first job was to help Darrey Davis, later to become a higher-powered downtown lawyer, deliver Miami Heralds (Rebozo, at 10, was considered too young to have his own route.)

AFTER HE DID get his own newspaper route, Rebozo wanted more. He had heard about the magic of Florida boom-days real estate and saved up $25 for a down-payment on a lot he had never seen in Canaveral. He later lost it when he was unable to keep up the payments during the depression. For a while, he had a job killing and plucking chickens. He didn't like it.

As his high school chums went off to college, Rebozo went to work. He was a steward for Pan Am, later a limousine driver. He saved up another $60 and bought a service station at SW 33rd Ave. and the Tamiami Trail.

He expanded the service station into a tire recapping business (which went very well during the tire rationing days of World War II.) He would look after it between his flights as a navigator ferrying planes to Africa for the Air Transport Command.

AFTER THE WAR, the business got better. Rebozo invested his money in land. He bought a coin laundry. By 1950, he was into the small loan business.

And by the mid-50s, he was the kingpin among the financiers buying Lummus and Fisher Islands in Biscayne Bay.

He became president of Junior Achievement, president

of the Miami Boys Club, president of the Southwest Kiwanis Club (where he, at least once, took former Kiwanian Nixon for lunch) and commodore of the Key Biscayne yacht club.

In 1966, the former vice president came to Key Biscayne for a bank groundbreaking. Rebozo was chairman of the board.

SOCIALLY, Rebozo was becoming known as a man-about-town, his well tailored presence appearing frequently at restaurants in the company of beautiful young women.

But though handsome in the Latin sort of way — stocky, five-eight, olive-skinned and jet-black haired — and courtly, Rebozo doesn't necessarily fit the Don Juan-Caesar Romero mold.

"He's dear when you get to know him, but he does not have a magnetic personality," said one Miami Beach socialite. "Deep down in his heart, Bebe is a tourist. He wears tourist 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."

SAID ANOTHER: "He could stand in a corner all night and not draw a crowd."

But then — in defiance of the opposites-attract theory of magnetism — much the same could be said of Wall Street lawyer Richard Nixon.

And while the pair is seen at football games, Broadway shows, White House parties and such, Mr. Nixon and Rebozo are more often noticed going off from Key Biscayne, San Clemente or Camp David for drives by themselves or out for a jaunt aboard Rebozo's houseboat, Coco Lobo. "We do some fishing, some swimming and a lot of sunbathing," Rebozo once said of their boating outings. "And we work, too. Dick takes along his briefcase and I take along mine. We both like quiet surroundings, and he especially finds the atmosphere of Biscayne Bay a good place to think."

ANOTHER THING Mr. Nixon appears to like about Rebozo is the safety from being hustled. "I think the most important reason for their friendship," said one acquaintance, "is that Bebe is a person without guile and without angles. He also is completely devoid of cynicism. Bebe would never ask anything for himself . . ."

There have been rumblings, however, that Rebozo has profited from having friends in high places — generally faint, non-explosive rumbles, but ones which surface nonetheless:

- There was the $80,000 Small Business Administration loan and $2.4-million rent guarantee given Rebozo in 1962 for an all-Cuban shopping center, largely due apparently to a letter on the stationery of the Senate Select Committee on Small Business and signed by its chairman, George Smathers. The loan, due in six years, was twice extended. House Banking and Currency Chairman Wright Patton (D., Tex.) complained about it in a speech on the House floor.

- Rebozo's Monroe Land & Title Co. in the Keys was in 1971 given a seven-year, $233,315 contract by the National Park Service for work on Everglades National Park land — a contract awarded on the fourth bidding after Rebozo's firm had been underbid the first three times by Title Guarantee Co. of Coral Gables. The rival firm's owner called it collusion.

- When Rebozo sold his Islandia holdings to the U.S. in 1970 for inclusion in the national monument, the government agent who made the $216,500 settlement said he had been told by bosses to treat the Nixon confidante "with kid gloves." He later retracted that statement.

IN SOME INSTANCES, however, it appears to be Rebozo's high-placed friends who have profited more from the relationship.

Mr. Nixon, talked into buying into the Fisher Island deal here after he left the vice presidency, sold his share when he became elected President. The selling price: about $400,000 — twice his estimated investment.

In 1970, Rebozo sold Smathers some land near the extensions of NW 152nd Avenue and 90th Street for $400. About a year later, the Key Biscayne banker sold 150 acres of the land in the same neighborhood — bought for $18-an-acre in the early 50s — to Florida Power & Light Co. for $860 an acre.

ALTHOUGH REBOZO'S land holdings are vast, the most important piece of real estate he owns, the most distinctive anyway, is the lot at 490 Bay Lane, Key Biscayne.

It's at the center of the five-house Nixon compound on the Bay. The other four homeowners, including Smathers, sold out.

Before the 1968 election, Rebozo declined to speculate on whether Mr. Nixon might establish a White House compound on the key. And although he didn't rule it out, he said — as he had when asked the question during his friend's 1960 candidacy — that vacationing on Key Biscayne might present "some security problems."

On the whole, he wasn't overly encouraging about the prospect of the First Family's establishing a vacation base here.

Which could go to show he didn't know what his friend had in mind.

Or maybe he just wasn't saying.

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