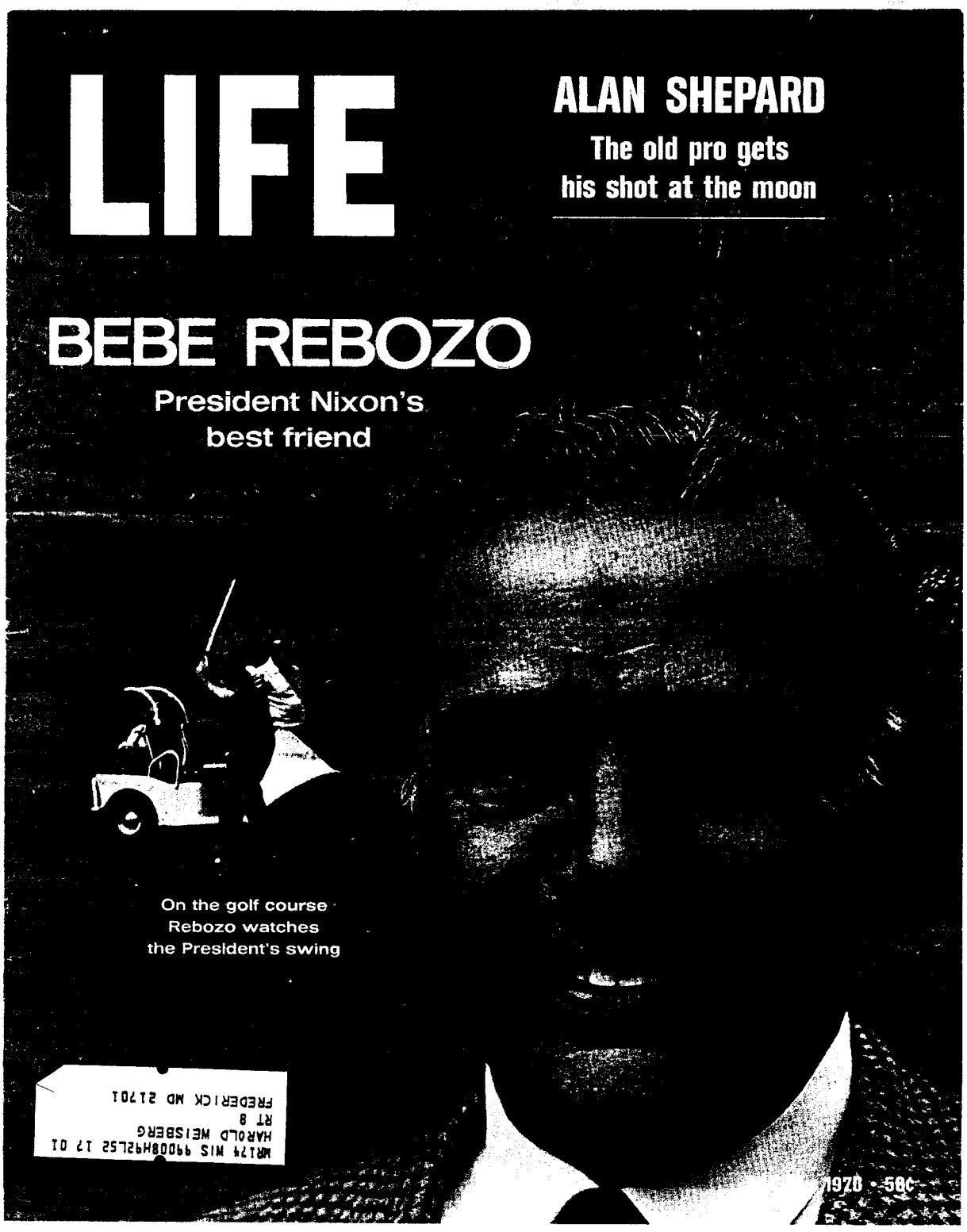

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EDITORS' NOTE

Covering Bebe Rebozo—with help from his friends

When Associate Editor Colin Leinster arrived at Key Biscayne to do this week's lead story on President Nixon's intimate friend Bebe Rebozo, he faced one paramount difficulty: Rebozo would not talk to him. Rebozo abhors the publicity which has beset him since Nixon became President and, like Howard Hughes and Greta Garbo before him, has gone to great lengths to avoid the press. He works at odd and unpredictable hours at his Key Biscayne bank, and has broken off old friendships with journalists.

COLIN LEINSTER

"I made several attempts to see Rebozo, all without avail," says Leinster. "One evening I passed by his bank and saw him through the window, working at his desk in his shirtsleeves. I waved to him—and he actually waved back. So I dashed to the doors, only to be met by his secretary, who blandly assured me that Mr. Rebozo was not in.

"When I began interviewing Rebozo's friends, to build up a portrait of him at second hand, I ran into the opposite problem. It seemed that everybody on the island was a close personal friend of the President's best friend. After a couple of days, I had some really terrific stuff. But when I started checking it out, almost none of it turned out to be true. I soon found out that the more eager people were to talk to me, the bigger the lies they told. In the end, the people who were most useful turned out to be those who had known Rebozo before he was famous: journalists, old business associates, school buddies and teachers.

"I did have one great stroke of luck on the story. After about two weeks in Key Biscayne and Miami, I felt that I had pretty well pieced together the Bebe Rebozo story. But there was a gap in the immediate postwar years when Rebozo, who was then a garage owner, somehow got accepted by the Miami party set. Flying back to New York, I got into conversation with the woman in the seat next to me and discovered that she had known Rebozo at precisely that time, and remembered him well.

"I came out of the story feeling rather sorry for Rebozo, even though I had not met him. True, he's come a long way, and all the people he would once have liked as friends now claim that they are. In fact, everybody on the island claims to be his friend. And yet I can't help feeling that, for all that, he's probably lonelier than ever."

Ralph Graves

RALPH GRAVES
Managing Editor

A shy millionaire bachelor is closer

NIXON'S FRIEND BEBE

by COLIN LEINSTER

Bebe Rebozo rides with the triumphant President-elect and his wife Pat as they drive from the Miami airport for a three-day post-election vacation in Key Biscayne. A year later, the President and his friend—both are avid sports fans—attend a Miami football game and cheer on the Dolphins.

Charles Gregory ("Bebe") Rebozo is President Nixon's best friend. It is no small distinction. Every President gathers around himself, formally and informally, a double platoon of aides, assistants and advisers, and each of them to some degree has his friendship. But there can be one—only one—presidential best friend.

What this friendship requires of the President—who speaks of himself as "reserved"—is difficult to judge. For Rebozo it means being unobtrusively around when the President wants him around, whether for a world tour or a casual visit to the ball park. It means acting as a conversational backboard for Nixon—no more and no less. It means evolving a relationship with the presidential family something like that of a favorite uncle. It means accepting last-minute invitations for the weekend at Camp David or San Clemente, or cruising the Keys for hours, talking only inconsequentially or not at all. It means not crowding the man—but not groveling either.

Bebe Rebozo is 57, the same age as the President, but a bachelor. Like Nixon, he is self-made. He is a millionaire now, the son of poor parents who came to this country from Cuba, a tough and silent man. Altogether he is a slightly mysterious figure to be so close to the President, literally and figuratively: he lives next door to Nixon in the big presidential compound at Key Biscayne. The two have known each other for 20 years, from the time Nixon first ran for the Senate. They were friends through Nixon's Vice Presidency. As Nixon watched the results of his 1960 race against John Kennedy come in on television, Rebozo was there in Los Angeles with him. He remained Nixon's friend during Nixon's years in political wilderness, and is closer than ever to him now, during Nixon's Presidency. Sometimes it seems as though he is *always* there.

"Bebe Rebozo is the only person Nixon can relax with, particularly when he's under pressure," says an observer who knows them both well. "He's the only person Nixon really trusts. He can talk to Rebozo, ask him questions. He knows Bebe will give him honest replies. They can talk about anything—about Agnew, the Cabinet, the White House staff. And nothing Nixon says is ever going to go any farther. The President knows that."

Another knowledgeable reading of the friendship: "Bebe doesn't present Nixon with any intellectual problems, so Nixon doesn't feel threatened." A third, from a less friendly observer: "Nixon likes to be alone, and with Bebe along, he is."

Rebozo goes to Washington most often to meet Nixon and travel on to Camp David with him for long, quiet days away from pressure. It is typical of Rebozo's sense of his own and

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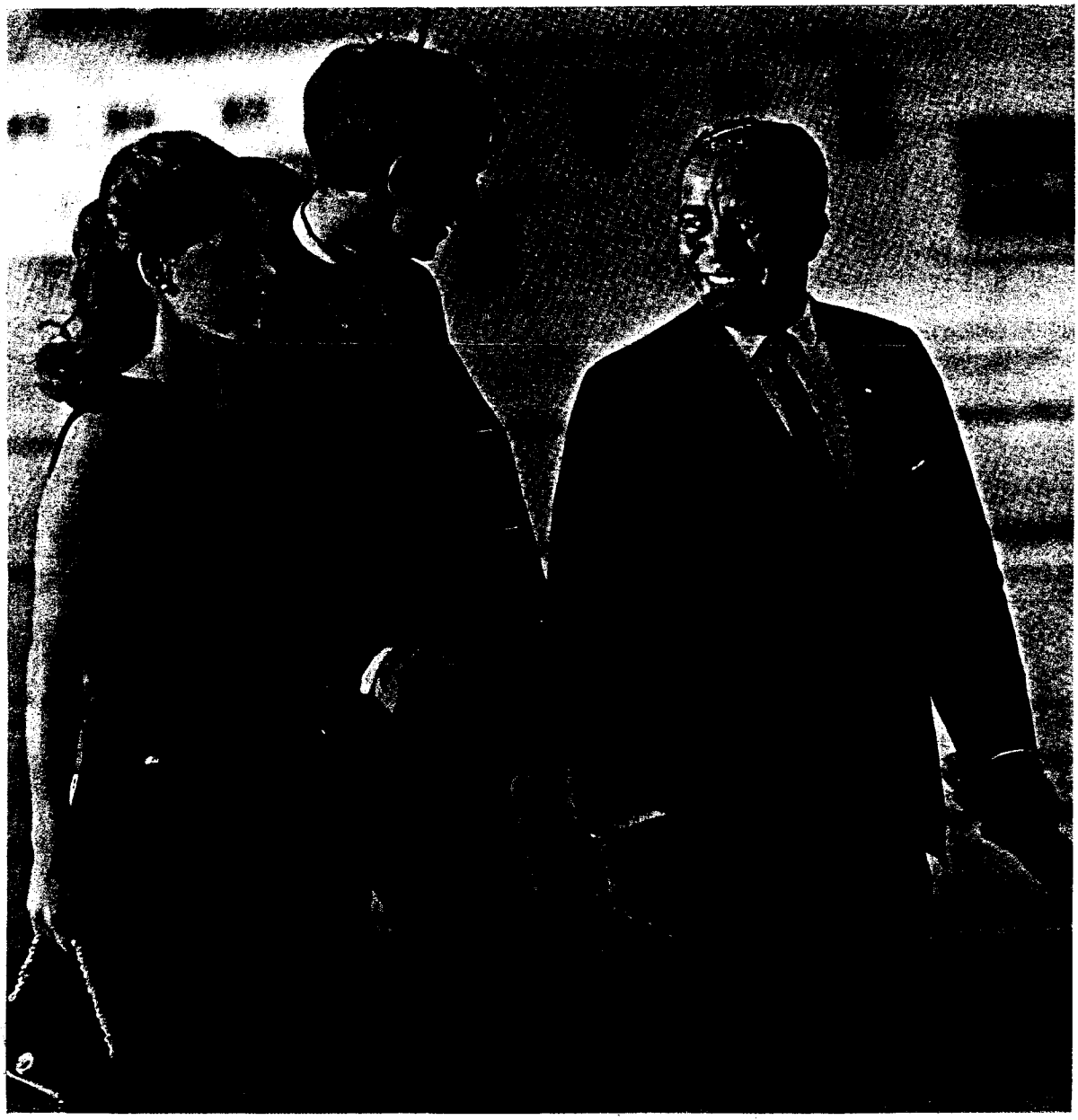
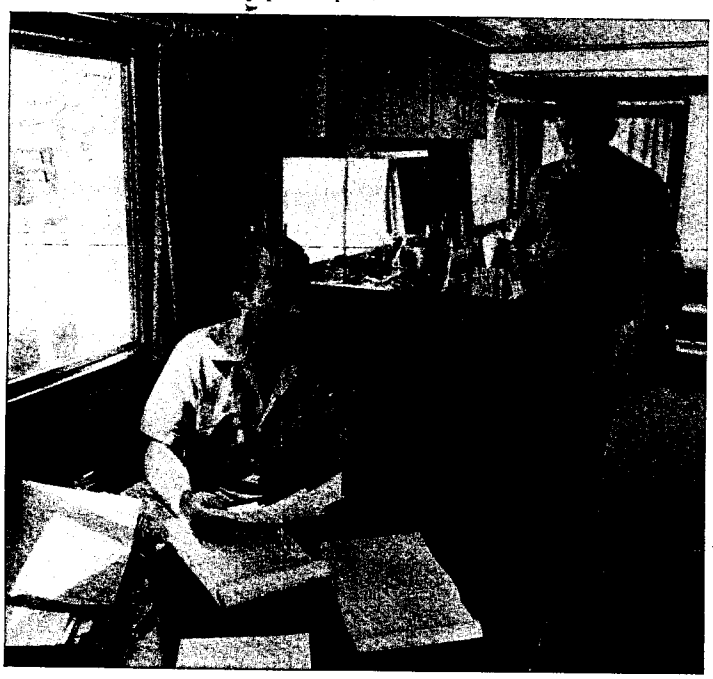
to the President than any other man



Rebozo is a friend of all the Nixon family, and is often the only "outsider" at their gatherings. Here, he escorts Julie and David Eisenhower to a rally in San Antonio.

They are relaxed when they are together

Rebozo always leaves it to Nixon to break the silences that occur on Rebozo's boat. He busies himself in the galley (above and below) while Nixon prepares a speech.



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Nixon's positions that he never assumes in advance that he will be asked to stay overnight at the White House. He always makes a hotel reservation for himself. If Nixon invites him, he gives up the hotel room.

There is seldom a special Nixon family gathering anywhere now without Rebozo, and often he is the only "outsider." Closer than a brother to Nixon, he has also become far more than a Key Biscayne neighbor to the rest of the family. Last month, for example, he attended the reunion dinner of the Nixon and Eisenhower families celebrating Julie and David's college commencements, Susan Eisenhower's high school graduation and that of her father 26 years ago from West Point. Later, he was at Camp David for Father's Day and for the Nixons' 30th wedding anniversary. Almost invariably he is on hand for the Nixon girls' birthdays, and when Julie, newly married, cooked dinner for her father's 57th birthday six months ago, Rebozo flew to Northampton, Mass. with the family.

Bebe Rebozo's dialogues with the President produce no surprises, but that is not their purpose. It is a relief for the President to hear, from someone who stands quite outside the Washington pressure cooker—someone with nothing to "sell"—opinions that echo his own. Their interests and tastes in almost every area except one are parallel to an extraordinary degree, even for best friends. Nixon is quintessentially a political man; Rebozo is quite the opposite and didn't even become a Republican until after Nixon was elected President. Apart from that, as a Key Biscayne resident notes, their similarity includes even their wardrobes: "Blue suits are a badge of respectability for both of them. Bebe is Nixon's class of people." Nixon's rise to the Presidency has, however, meant at least one change in dress for his friend. "In the old days, Bebe used to wear what he liked. Now when he goes to see Nixon he always wears a jacket. Even if he knows damn well they're only going fishing or for a walk, he wears one. Then, if the President doesn't have one on, Bebe takes his off, too. But not till he's seen what Nixon is wearing."

For years Rebozo had a reputation as a ladies' man and was seen with a variety of statuesque women at Miami night spots. He has changed that image, too. Since Nixon's election, his only public date has been auburn-haired, twice-divorced Jane Lucke, a 35-ish mother of two who lives with her mother in Key Biscayne. Rebozo took her to the Johnny Cash night at the White House, and she was seated at the President's right for dinner.

At times now, Rebozo shows signs of irritation at the invasion of what has been his special, protected, inconspicuous place beside Nixon. A magazine came out with a story on the President at Key Biscayne, and local people asked both Nixon and Rebozo to sign copies. "Bebe got sulky," one person recalled. Nixon kidded him, "Come on, you've got to sign too." When Rebozo still looked mulish, Nixon teased, "Come on, Bebe. Your signature's worth more than mine anyway." Finally, Bebe signed, but the protective instinct was clearly there. At the English Pub in Key Biscayne, where the two occasionally still dine, Rebozo has on occasion ticked off the waiters and waitresses. It is none of their business, he says, to tell reporters what the President had to eat (always chopped steak, medium rare), who paid (always Bebe) and how big the tip was (always generous).

Rebozo has, naturally, emerged as Key Biscayne's Number One local citizen. "Poor Bebe," said a business colleague who has known him since the war. "He never had more than five friends all his life, and now he finds everybody on the island is his best friend. Mind you, he handles it well. He's charming and all that, but he's very firm." An example of firm-

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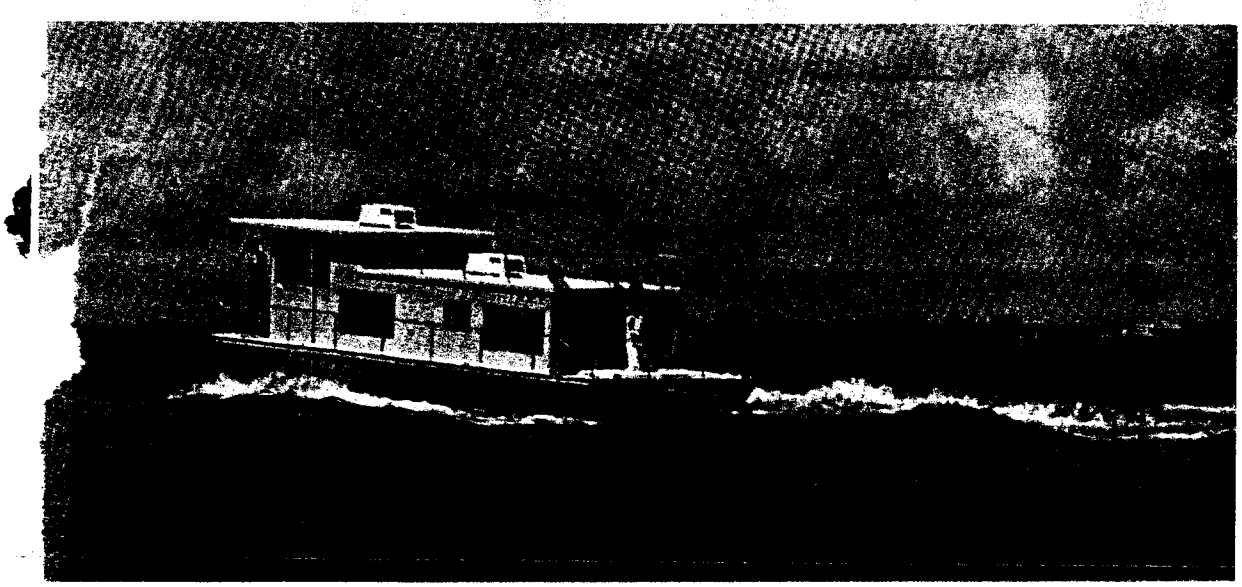

With a Secret Service man at the bow and the then presidential candidate at the stern, Rebozo heads his boat out into Biscayne Bay (above). Since Nixon's nomination, the *Cocolobo*, named for a Florida shrub, has been regularly searched by Navy frogmen. After an hour of work and fresh air, the friends, below, return to the dock.

'He was even nice to nobodies'

Rebozo, above, as he looked at 17 in his Miami High School class yearbook of 1930. Former teachers and friends remember him as a charmer. "Popular with both teachers and students. He was even nice to nobodies," a teacher recalls. He was only average in sports but did well in classwork.

The young Rebozo loved to wear white suits, friends recall, and was a good dancer. His graduating class voted him "best-looking," along with Agatha Reily (above). A line in the yearbook read: "He, of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving of a fair lady."

When he returned home to Miami after the war, Rebozo (above) went back to his garage and tire business and began to dabble in real estate. At the same time, he started to make the social scene where, a woman recalls, Rebozo "did everything right."

Rebozo enjoys being a host. Above, aboard an earlier *Cocolobo*, his guests for a late '50s trip were the then Senate Majority Leader L.B.J. (seated) and, from left, U.S. Senators George Smathers, Richard Russell, Earle Clements and Stuart Symington.

At a Miami boys' club, longtime staunch contributor Rebozo introduces the Vice President to a club official (above). Below, he attends Miami's Zoo Ball in December 1969 with Jane Lucke, whom he dates regularly and has taken to the White House.

As commodore of the Key Biscayne Yacht Club in 1961, Rebozo solved its financial crisis and cooked *picadillo* for the members.

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ness came shortly after Nixon's election. Rebozo took a telephone call at the yacht club and returned to his table cursing. "Son of a bitch!" he said. "That was a guy I haven't seen since high school. Now he wants me to help him out in a deal by putting in a word with the President." As a friend remarked at the time, "If anybody thinks he will be able to use his relationship with Bebe Rebozo to make any kind of hay with the Nixon administration, I think he's going to be sadly disappointed."

Rebozo was born in Tampa, Fla., Nov. 17, 1912—he is three months older than Nixon—the youngest of nine children of parents who came to the United States from Havana. By the time the family moved from Tampa to Miami, he had already been nicknamed "Bebe"—a brother had had problems saying "baby" in Spanish and the nickname stuck.

By the time he was 10 he was selling papers, and while still in school made his first real estate investment. Rebozo put $25 down on a lot in Canaveral. He never saw his first land. He lost it during the Depression by failing to keep up the payments. In fifth grade he took an after-school-and-Saturday job that he loathed, killing and plucking chickens. "I had never killed a chicken before and I've never killed one since. . . . I don't like to see things killed. That's why I've never hunted. . . . It took me a long time to get where I could catch a fish and keep it."

Bebe was small and slightly built as a boy (he is a stocky five foot eight now), but he learned, among other things, that the way to stay unbullied was to be unobtrusive, to smile a lot, to be charming and to speak only when spoken to. In his senior year at high school he was voted the best-looking boy in the class.

After graduation he got a job with Pan American as one of their first 10 stewards, and for a year worked on the flying boats linking Miami, the West Indies and Panama. He lived frugally, saved all he could, and in 1931 was able to quit and open a filling station in Miami. He operated that for a year, sold out and took a job that involved chauffeuring tourists around and—when asked—talking to them. In

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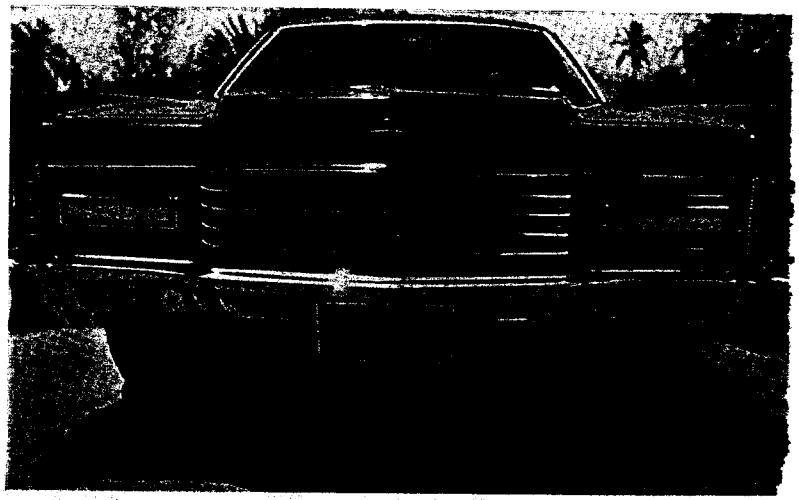
"Bebe's home couldn't belong to anybody but a bachelor," one woman said. Shortly after the '68 election, before a press party at his $100,000 home, Rebozo removed two pictures from over the fireplace, and taped up a poster of the Nixons (above). When the press arrived, he disappeared.



The No. 1 plate (right) was snapped up by Rebozo 10 years ago when an acquaintance was slow in renewing it. Such plates are issued for $48 a year, entitling owners to skip the 25-cent causeway toll and ride free between Key Biscayne and the mainland. Nixon makes the trip by helicopter.

The good life of the Key's No. 1 citizen

CONTINUED

the mid-'30s he quit that job (he has never stayed too long in one slot, always sensing when the time had come to move on) and used his savings to open up "Rebozo's Service Station and Auto Supplies," a business specializing in the sale of retreaded tires.

When the war came, Rebozo went back to Pan Am as a navigator on contract flights for the Army's Air Transport Command and made about 100 ferry trips across the Atlantic to Africa and India. A brother, meanwhile, ran the business and it prospered—retreaded tires were suddenly desirable—so that on his return, he found himself in good shape financially. He began to move into local Miami society. A woman who remembers him from then said, "One night a party I was going to was a man short. A friend knew about Bebe, so he was invited." The group expected someone who looked as if he worked in a garage, but Rebozo arrived immaculate—though not too much so—his clothes just right: "Nothing of the flashy gigolo we'd been half expecting, and not too collegiate either. I guess we all watched him pretty carefully—to see if he was watching us to see which fork to use and so on. But he didn't. He did everything right. He obviously had nice instincts, you know." Long after she moved from Florida, the woman said, she sometimes wondered what happened to that carefully correct but interesting Cuban mechanic.

In 1946, Rebozo married a local girl, Clare Gentry. The marriage ended four years later in divorce. "We just didn't make it," Rebozo later said. "That happened when I was young." Says a friend, "He'll never let on, but the whole thing upset him very much. He isn't about to try it again."

Meanwhile, he was operating in real estate, making down payments "on every good property I could afford." He opened a self-service laundry, and built it into a chain. He was a principal in two finance companies. By the mid-1950s, he had begun to buy island properties in Biscayne Bay. He is the sole owner of the Monroe Land Title Company in Key West, Fla., a major stockholder of the Key Biscayne Bank, which he founded in 1964, and has interests in shopping centers.

As attractive a target as he has been for investigations of all sorts, only two question marks have so far been raised about Rebozo's business operations. A year ago Congressman Wright Patman, a Texas Democrat, said Rebozo had obtained an $80,000 loan in 1962 from the Small Business Administration in connection with his Key West company, and that the loan had been made despite objections from local members of the SBA staff. There was further criticism when the SBA guaranteed the rents in the Centro Commercial Cubano, a Miami trading mart for Cuban refugee merchants in which Rebozo and associates invested $900,000. The guarantee, which amounted to taking all the risks out of the investment, was announced by Thomas Butler, the Miami-based regional director of the SBA, who is also a stockholder in Rebozo's bank and an owner of two lots on Fisher Island, where Rebozo has large interests. (Butler bought his lots in 1963 for $10,000; they are now worth about twice that.) In a newspaper interview, Butler dismissed questions about his investments in Rebozo's business ventures as "trying to make something out of nothing."

Always in his business dealings, says a local man who has dealt with him for 20 years, Rebozo's tactics have remained the same. "If he wants to do business with you, he'll keep on and on at you—not obnoxiously, but persistently and calmly. He's taken risks, including some big ones, but only after he's carefully and cautiously weighed the odds."

Another businessman says, "One thing about Rebozo is, he levels with you. He doesn't promote, he doesn't exaggerate. He isn't a high flier." Says a third: "He's a plugger, the same methodical kind of guy Nixon is."

Rebozo's exact worth is not known. Recent estimates have ranged from something under $1 million up to $5.3 million. In July 1968, when he bought his present boat, he put his income at $4,200 a month.

Whatever his worth, Rebozo still works 60 and 80 hours a week. He is a generous man who prefers to be the host, not the guest. The Boys' Clubs of America in Miami has long benefited from money donated secretly by Rebozo. In fact, apart from his $100,000 home, he spends very little on himself. His boat, the *Cocolobo*, is one of the smallest moored at the Key Biscayne Yacht Club dock, though he seems to get more fun out of that than anything else. Recently he stood on the deck with a beer in his hand and told his guests, "Anybody that doesn't think this is fun is a son of a bitch."

In 1960, the yacht club was in financial difficulties, and the following year Rebozo was appointed commodore to try to sort things out. "He went at it like an efficiency expert," a member recalls. "He closed the club down and went over the books. He found out much of the money was being wasted on food, so he hit on the idea of having members take turns buying ingredients and cooking food which could then be sold. He tried to work in an international flavor. One person would make French food, another German and so on. Bebe took care of Spanish nights. He is a hell of a cook. You should try his *picadillo*." At the same time, Rebozo fired and hired, and the club was soon solvent again. Not surprisingly, its members are quite protective about him. At a Friday evening party there recently, they were eager to discuss their friendship with Bebe and to say what a fine fellow he was: "Do anything for you." "Great guy." "Not a mean bone in his body." Finally, however, another member wandered up and said, "Bebe Rebozo is just a great big dollar sign." He was whisked away—"He's a new member."

According to friends, Rebozo has advised Nixon on financial matters. Before the 1968 election, Nixon put his gross assets at $800,000 and his liabilities at $300,000. He said $400,000 stemmed from Florida real estate investments. After the election, because of possible conflict of interest with various federal projects in the area, Nixon sold back his investments in Fisher Island to the holding company at a 100% profit of $175,000. In addition to the Key Biscayne property he bought for his Southern White House, Nixon also owns two empty lots next to one owned by Rebozo in the swank Cape Florida area of the Key. Their value is more than $100,000, approximately double what he paid in 1967.

Rebozo and Nixon first met back in 1950. An old high school friend of Rebozo's, George Smathers, was running for the Senate in Florida at the same time Nixon was running for the Senate in California. Though of opposite

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How one should greet the President's best friend has not been decided upon by Amy Vanderbilt. Below, at Key Biscayne's Community Church, the Rev. Arthur Geschwind offers one solution.

Other presidential pals

COOLIDGE STEARNS

Eisenhower needed golf partners, Truman needed poker players, Coolidge —naturally—prized silence, while George Washington appreciated a rousing military tune now and then. Since the office was first filled in 1789, the President of the United States has needed a friend, someone to talk to, gossip with, confide in, hide behind, kid, cajole, even roughhouse with. In short, like everyone else, the Chief Executive needs someone to help him relax. Presidential pals have been as diverse as the officeholders themselves, but some common traits appear indispensable: they must be respectful, yet unawed. They must be good listeners, yet have firm opinions. They are almost always witty, yet must be able to absorb presidential attempts at joke-making, practical or otherwise. And, most important, they must be jealous guardians of the secrets and small talk they share, for no one likes to hear stories about what he did when his guard was down—particularly Presidents.

It doesn't appear to hurt if they can sing, either. John Kennedy's pal Dave Powers used to belt out Irish ballads for the boss, as did F.D.R.'s adviser Tommy ("The Cork") Corcoran. It is also said that practically the only thing that could make George Washington smile was Alexander Hamilton, the first Secretary of the Treasury, singing *The Drum.*

Conversely, Calvin Coolidge's longtime friend Frank Stearns was prized for his reluctance to make any noise at all. The two would sit in the President's office for hours, both smoking cigars in total silence. On his first day in office, Coolidge summoned and saw Stearns five times, but didn't speak to him once. "The President was lonesome in his new quarters," Stearns later remarked. "He just wanted somebody familiar around."

Woodrow Wilson became personal friends with Colonel E. M. House only after he had served for some time as Wilson's chief political adviser. Franklin Roosevelt similarly became very fond of two of his top aides, Louis Howe and later Harry Hopkins, both of whom were invited to live in the White House. Hopkins stayed on for three and a half years. Harry Truman, on the other hand, brought his poker-playing friends from his home state and got them government jobs in Washington, where they

POWERS KENNEDY

became known, not too respectfully, as the Missouri Gang.

Eisenhower liked to relax with his brother Milton and with Treasury Secretary George Humphrey; John Kennedy swam with balladeer Powers, sailed with Navy Under Secretary Paul Fay, but was unquestionably closest to his brother Robert. Lyndon Johnson seemed to relax best with longtime friend and fellow Texan Judge A. W. Moursund.

Only one man, businessman George E. Allen, has managed to befriend three Presidents, trading jokes with Roosevelt, playing poker with Truman and golf with Eisenhower. It was with F.D.R. that Allen learned not to feel too self-important about a presidential friendship. Inquiring why he had been invited for an automobile ride with the Chief Executive of the United States, Allen was told: "The boss didn't have anything to talk about, and he thought you would be pleasant to talk about nothing with."

EISENHOWER ALLEN

CONTINUED

parties, the two had been friendly in the House of Representatives and Smathers suggested that Nixon go down to Florida to take a look at the state. Loaded with work, Nixon did so and, at Smathers' suggestion, called Rebozo when he arrived. Smathers had primed Bebe to "show Nixon a good time."

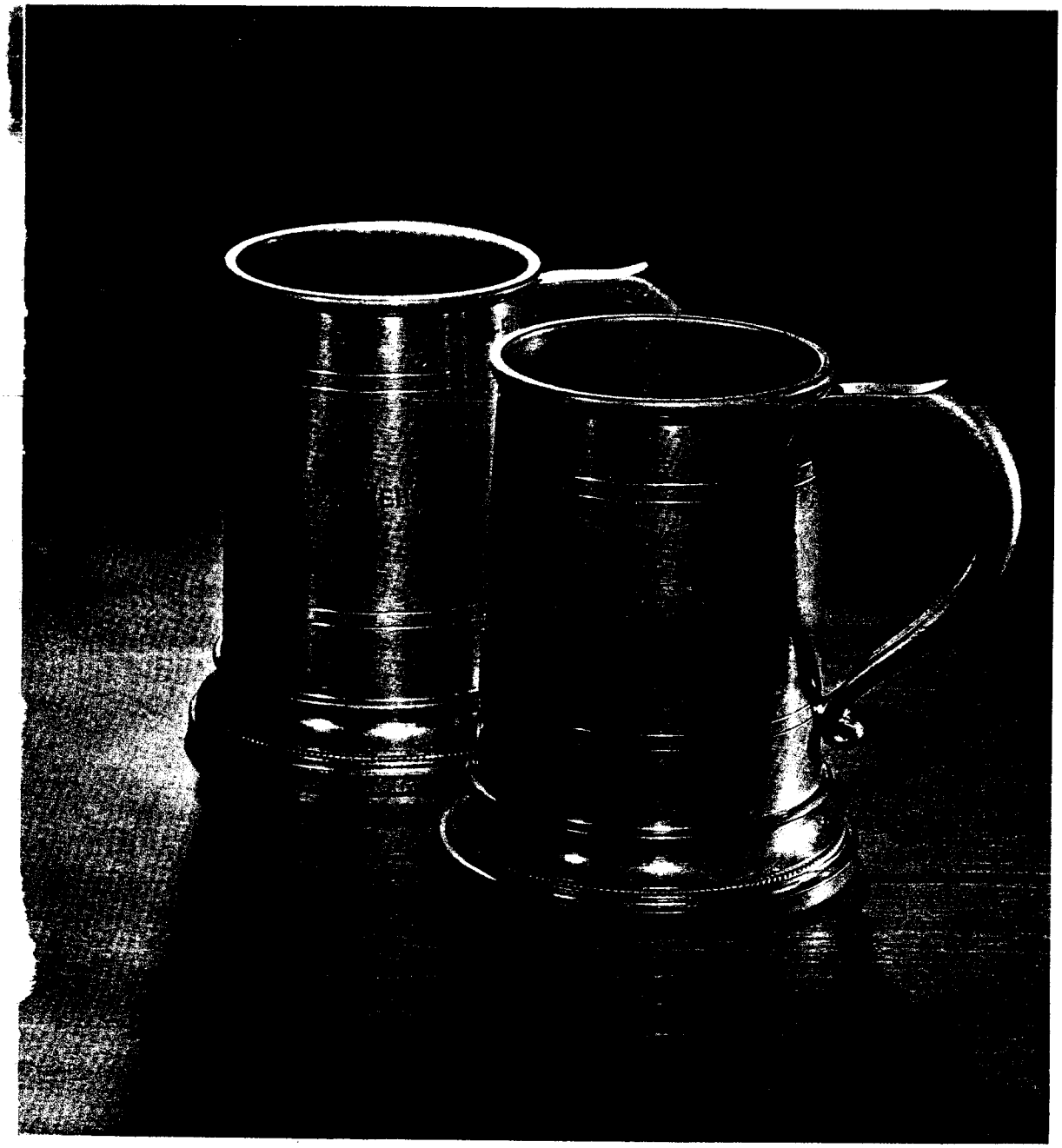
As it turned out, a good time was the last thing Nixon wanted. He retreated into the Key Biscayne Hotel to work. All that first day Rebozo, sensitive to Nixon's wish to be left alone, kept away. Next day, after much soul-searching and mindful of Smathers' request, he called Nixon and asked if he'd like to go out on his boat. Nixon accepted. "I doubt if I exchanged half a dozen words with the guy," Rebozo later recalled. Nixon spent the day on the boat working, and Rebozo spent it worrying whether he'd done the wrong thing. But on his return to Washington, Nixon wrote him a warm letter of thanks, and a friendship started.

Nixon began to visit Florida more and more, and on each trip he looked up his new friend. They found they had a great deal in common. Their ideas of a good time were the same: evenings at Bebe's home, listening to show tunes on the hi-fi rig, talking sports or watching sports on the television; rounds of golf at which neither was much good but where conversation wasn't necessary; silent walks along the beach; trips in Bebe's boat where they could sit in the sun, talking if they felt like it, or working if they felt like that. They went to baseball and football games. Rebozo was an avid fan of the teams at Miami U., and he took Nixon to their games, introducing him to coaches and players, all of which Nixon loved.

Some evenings, they would sit in Rebozo's yard and Bebe would prepare steaks over his charcoal grill or rustle up something Spanish while Nixon mixed martinis. Or they would go out to the Jamaica Inn or the English Pub, mingle with the tourists and locals and dine there. They soon joined the Pub's "Pewter Vessel Drinking Society," where, for $20, each received a pewter beer mug engraved with his name. The mugs still hang there.

One other thing the two friends share is a dislike for the press. Rebozo feels that Nixon has always been badly treated and that he himself had a taste of it on his Small Business Administration loan. Today he will not give interviews, even failing to return calls from local newspapermen he has known for 20 years.

Bebe's distrust of the press has contributed to what one of his friends has described as a "Howard Hughes syndrome." He has not become secretive, exactly, but he is to be found at his regular haunts less often now. He shows up at his bank at odd hours. One time he is often there is early on Friday afternoons. The phone will ring. The President wants him to come to Camp David for the weekend. Bebe Rebozo welcomes the call. Within an hour he is at the airport, impatiently waiting for the jet north. ■



Almost 20 years ago, Senator Nixon and Bebe Rebozo together joined the Pewter Vessel Drinking Society at Key Biscayne's English Pub. Their engraved pint tankards still hang there behind the bar.