

Joseph Kraft

The Rockefeller Role

11/9/75

Dirty stories are now making the rounds about how Nelson Rockefeller happened to become chairman of the President's commission on the Central Intelligence Agency. They are almost certainly false. But they say a good deal about the difficulties Mr. Rockefeller will encounter in making the job of Vice President operational.

The genesis of all the rumors lies in the curious timing of Mr. Rockefeller's appointment to the CIA commission. He himself was only told of the appointment on the afternoon of Saturday, Jan. 4.

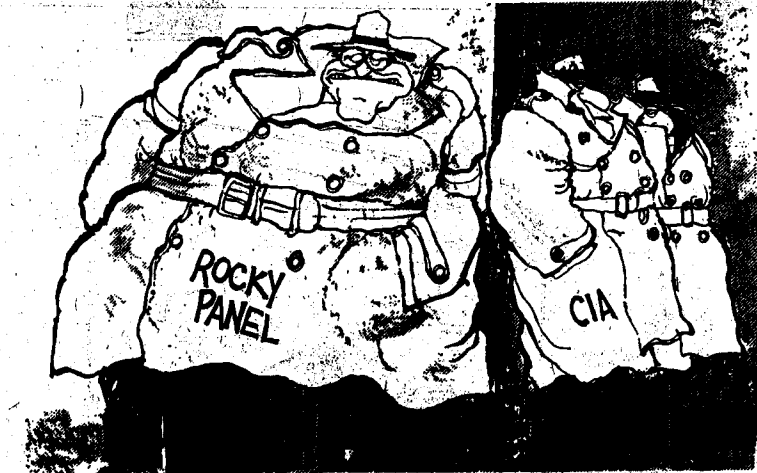
Earlier that day he had indicated that he expected to concentrate entirely on domestic business. Reporters had been informally told by press secretary Ron Nessen that the CIA commission would not contain any administration officials.

But at the last moment, Henry Friendly, a distinguished federal judge from New York, told the White House he could not serve on the commission because of a conflict with judicial responsibilities. Erwin Griswold, the former Harvard Law School dean, who was to have been commission chairman, felt it would be better if he served only as a commission member because he was still being questioned by Watergate investigators on his role in the settlement of the ITT antitrust suit.

In that almost desperate situation, with the potential stars of the commission both pulling back, Mr. Rockefeller was added at the last moment as chairman. But in absence of knowledge of that, two conspiratorial theories about the last minute shuffle gained currency.

One theory has to do with Secretary of State Henry Kissinger. The notion is that Dr. Kissinger is somehow mixed in with the improprieties which the CIA may have committed.

The Machiavellians argue that Dr. Kissinger prevailed upon Mr. Ford to



By MacNelly for the Richmond News Leader

"I think we're being followed."

appoint his close friend and protector, Vice President Rockefeller, to head the CIA commission. Their theory is that Dr. Kissinger insisted on having Mr. Rockefeller as the head of the commission as a matter of self-protection.

It just so happens that that theory is not true. It was not Dr. Kissinger who suggested Mr. Rockefeller for the CIA commission. The suggestion came from a member of the White House staff, and the Secretary of State acquiesced. Moreover, hard as it may be for Nixon-haters to believe, it seems to have been the administration of Lyndon Johnson that initiated the CIA improprieties now in question.

The other theory is that Mr. Ford's White House staff is worried about Nelson Rockefeller. Donald Rumsfeld, the chief of staff, is in particular said to believe that Rockefeller harbors presidential ambitions, and it is asserted that they want to fence him out of domestic responsibilities.

Against that background the theory is that the commission chairmanship was the perfect out. It is supposed that Mr. Rockefeller is now tied down with a thankless and difficult job which keeps him out of domestic affairs for the next three months. In the course of leading the inquiry on an exceedingly touchy subject he is supposedly certain to make political enemies. It may even be, the theory concludes, that he will lock horns with Ronald Reagan, another Republican presidential aspirant said to have been feared by the Ford staff who has also been parked on the CIA panel.

The trouble with that theory, of course, is that it isn't true either. Mr. Rockefeller, while devoting some time to the CIA inquiry, is still keeping his hand in on the domestic side. He has apparently been charged with the task of finding a new man to lead the Domestic Council. He continues to enjoy good personal relations with President Ford who speaks of him as a "partner."

But even though these suspicions are demonstrably over-elaborate, even though they are far too Machiavellian and conspiratorial to fit the style of President Ford, they say something.

At the very least it is clear that the Vice President is a kind of utility infielder. He does not have a regular operational role in government. In a pinch, when there is a sudden pressing need to fill a vacancy, his name automatically surfaces. So Vice Presidents are constantly being pushed into jobs, as Mr. Rockefeller has been on this occasion, which lead nowhere.

Moreover, the experience of practically everybody in Washington is that, no matter what the rhetoric, Vice Presidents do not enter importantly into the work of an administration. That not unfounded supposition inevitably breeds well-poisoning stories whenever a Vice President does, or is allowed to do, anything. So it is only by holding fast together against the prevailing winds of gossip and suspicion that Vice President Rockefeller and President Ford can work in harmony.

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