

# Roy Meachum

## Political lessons

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After working inside Lyndon Johnson's White House and subsequently covering the congressional sex scandals

— Elizabeth Ray, Wayne Hays and others — I accepted that honor and truth and politics are the strangest of all bedfellows.

Around LBJ gathered some of the most honorable ladies and gentlemen I have ever known: Liz Carpenter, George Reidy, Bill Moyers, Horace Busby and Doug Cater come first to mind. (Doug, by the way, wound up as president of Chestertown's Washington College.)

However, the prevailing spirit derived from paranoia, long before Vietnam protests caused a circling of the wagons. Those who opposed Johnson, on any point, however unimportant, were subjected to personal attack, no holds barred. These frequently breathtaking assaults on human dignity sought to bypass issues and concentrate attention on flaws and failings in the individual opponents, placing those people on the defensive.

The tactic was not unique to the White House, nor invented by President Johnson. Congressional leaders trotted out the same technique when Elizabeth Ray's public confessions encouraged others to step forward with similar tales of sex swapped for employment at hefty wages.

One representative, not Wayne Hays, put me in touch with his legislative assistant's ex-husband, who wove a story about his former wife once fantasizing about organizing a prostitution ring. Of course the charge raised the question of why the congressman hired the woman in the first place, but the dirty side of political survival possesses no reference except itself.

When this column started, I did not understand, or was unwilling to believe, that the dark lessons learned on the national political scene would apply to local matters. My naivety persisted for months. The whispered mutterings in my ear about various people and their base motives for defying official acts could be chalked up to the context of personal relationships. After all, what are good friends for?

Only the most self-contained can resist laying off their worries on others. True or untrue, it doesn't matter. Our best friends are those with whom we can share the deepest doubts, including reservations and criticisms concerning others. Those friends can be trusted the most who do not always agree. Having

someone to whom we can pour out our emotional failings about, and freely, comes under the heading of a gift from God. Mine came in the form of the red-headed Quaker woman who is my wife.

My other friends — and I can support only a few — learn to live with my attempts at honesty. They know they can count on my public silence on private matters.

Because of my professional obligations and my deep-seated need to retain my professional integrity, as I have warned before, I cannot be relied upon to shape my opinions on public matters to suit my personal relationships. At the same time, I refuse to use information provided in an intimate context to my professional advantage.

If this appears confusing, then let me attempt clarification.

In recent years, since beginning this column, all sorts of unsupported allegations have come my way; most have been regarded as "blowing steam," even when the natural suspicion occurred that people, generally politicians, might be seeking some payoff. Sometimes I have fallen for their "line,"

and allowed misshapen views to influence the regard with which I have considered certain men and women. As these errors become apparent, I attempt correction.

Because of my personal limitations and failings, I know I can be wrong. In previous columns, I reserved the right to contradict myself as I learn more. Above all, under Sharon's fiercely honest eyes, I try to keep an open mind. But sometimes I have submitted, unwittingly — but that's no excuse — to manipulation.

For a long time, blinded by my own wonderment with living in this very special city, I enjoyed a close relationship with the mayor. I accepted Ron Young's word as gospel on most matters that affected local life and custom, particularly politics. At the same time I accepted his dark mutterings about those who opposed his official acts, not as gospel, but as rooted in reality.

The shift in my regard for Ron Young's treatment of his official role and my subsequent acceptance of the need to perform the professional watchdog's position I had avoided, for the most part, over City Hall — these changes did not come overnight. How-

ever, at every step I resisted acknowledging that my "friend" had been playing hard-ball politics with my bald but trusting head.

During the period of our closeness, other people had tried to get my attention. For example, I refused to believe anyone but my "buddy," Ron Young, was really responsible for the city's remarkable rebirth, as he asserted: this was the basis for my overwhelming respect for the mayor. When he spoke of anyone else's role, he relegated all others to subordinated, supporting functions. All concepts and ideas were his alone: here was the mayor's golden passport to that kingdom where he could do no wrong.

But the fault was mine, not Young's. I used him to perpetuate my dream that, in coming to Frederick, Sharon and I had discovered some demi-Paradise, another Eden. This view necessitated some figure to give my thanks; the mayor seemed to provide the proper characterization. Of course, in the process, I abandoned the lessons of my professional past. In recent months I have attempted to compensate for my errors, but also to refrain from "taking out" on the mayor my frustration with the realization that I had been so dumb.

On balance, Ron Young has been a good mayor for this city. If not the "great" public servant I once considered him, he once showed the happy knack for converting good ideas into the common good. Even men and women whom he shoved aside in his ambition still accept Young for his personal, and political, contributions for the growth of Frederick.

On the other hand, a consensus now exists that the mayor has lingered too long in City Hall. Over the last year, faced with the threat of independency from a newly elected majority on the Board of Aldermen, Young apparently has tightened his hold over the municipal machinery. Considering his 17 years in city government, as alderman and mayor, he has participated in the hiring and promotion of virtually every department head and official; there would be a natural tendency to pay close attention when the mayor speaks. I have been told he exercises his "clout" to keep in line any attempt to stray from his ordained direction.

Aldermen as well as city clerks either dance to the mayoral tune or pay the price. City Hall has become Ron

Young's castle. Democracy no longer exists in Frederick City. Here was the basis upon which the mayor could go back on his own frequent protests of his personal integrity and open a convenience store selling beer and wine on the crowded Golden Mile. This was no conflict of interest, he assured reporters, citing an opinion by the city attorney, who was hired by and reports to the mayor.

That incident, and his handling of the reaction, first reminded me of those days in Lyndon Johnson's White House. The crotchety old Texan held firmly that high office permits definite privilege, especially the high-handed wielding of power.

However, a remembrance of LBJ could not be avoided when I heard of the mayor's blistering assault on the Board of Aldermen's Betty Floyd, and for a report delivered by the League of Women Voters before the planning commission. League President Bonnie Bailey-Baker delivered her organization's recommendation that the city's two-person planning staff be enlarged; the report did not criticize the mayor who, by the way, does not sit on the planning commission. Furthermore, lawyers, developers and anyone who must rely on the city planning staff has been pushing for more help in that office for years. Singling out Betty Floyd both denigrated the league and was too obvious an attempt to distract from the problem, admitted by everyone, it seems, but Ron Young.

The mayor should have thanked Ms. Bailey-Baker and her colleagues, but he ridiculed the notion that the League of Women Voters cared anything about municipal affairs. If Mrs. Floyd were responsible, as charged, for bringing the league into a more active participation in Frederick City, Young should have thanked her. I thank them both — whatever the facts.

I am also most grateful to Mayor Ron Young for confirming the correctness of my changed view, that he is a politician who must be watched always and believed very seldom. Those old Washington lessons do apply in Frederick.