

Fifteen Ways of Looking at Politics

Scenes from a Democratic Life

By Lawrence F. O'Brien

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The Choice

The son of a Springfield, Mass., cafe owner with a keen interest in Democratic party politics, Larry O'Brien managed the successful 1948 congressional campaign of his friend Foster Furcolo. But O'Brien's first taste of Washington politics, as Furcolo's assistant, was wearying and disappointing. O'Brien left Furcolo after seeing him through the 1950 election and returned to Springfield. The move left Furcolo embittered toward his old pal.

O'Brien decided he was through with politics. Soon though he found himself sought after by a young congressman named John F. Kennedy, a man with ambitions for statewide office. The two talked at a Boston hotel a year before Kennedy's successful race for the Senate against Henry Cabot Lodge.

"Larry, I want to meet the party workers in western Massachusetts," he said. "You can at least help me there, can't you?"

It seemed like a modest request, so I said yes, I could probably help in that regard.

"How should we do it?" he pressed. He knew that the kind of gathering he would hold in his highly political district in Boston might not be appropriate for the lower-keyed politics of Springfield.

"I'd suggest an informal reception early in the evening," I said. "Just coffee and sandwiches, no drinks. You meet everyone personally, shake their hands, and make brief, informal remarks."

"Terrific," Kennedy replied. He was leaning forward over the table, eagerly talking in everything I said. This was politics—this was progress. "Where will we have it?"

"I'd suggest Blake's Restaurant," I told him. "They've got an upstairs room that will hold several hundred people."

"What about the invitations?"

"I can take care of them," I said. "I've got lists of all the people you ought to meet."

Kennedy was beaming when we left the Ritz-Carlton. Then a few weeks later, after I'd sent out the invitations to the reception, which was in June, I received an unexpected call from Kennedy.

"Larry," he said, "your friend Furcolo just called me and said he was really bugged off about my coming into his district without clearing it with him. It doesn't bother me, but I thought you ought to know."

"It doesn't bother me," I assured him.

I understood Furcolo's anger, of course. It's traditional that if one congressman is visiting another congressman's district, he "clears" the visit, or at

least gives advance notice. That way, the host congressman won't be embarrassed by having some constituent or reporter break the news of the visit to him. He can always say, "Why, yes, of course, I told my distinguished colleague he was welcome to visit our district."

Kennedy could play by the rules when he chose to, but he didn't choose to with Furcolo and he wasn't about to clear anything with him.

But that wasn't the end of it. The day before the reception, Kennedy called again, this time from New York. I took the call in the phone booth in the cafe.

"Larry," he began. "Foster called again."

"Yeah?"

"He says I should cancel our reception."

"For any particular reason?" I asked. This whole thing was getting absurd.

"Yeah," Kennedy replied. "He said he hated to tell me this, but I should cancel because O'Brien was in trouble and might have some legal problems."

I couldn't believe what I was hearing. I had no legal problems, none whatsoever. I could only assume that Furcolo was so anxious to keep Kennedy from association with me that he had fabricated the story as a desperate ploy to scare Kennedy into canceling the trip. I was stunned, then increasingly angry. I had thought I was out of politics, but here I was in the middle of the worst kind of political backstabbing.

I bit my lip and cursed silently, until finally Kennedy said, "Well, what do you think of that?"

"I haven't any comment on it," I said.

"What's your advice?"

"My advice, if you're worried about it, is to forget the meeting tomorrow. It doesn't matter to me, one way or the other."

Kennedy paused a minute, then said: "Where am I supposed to meet you and what time?"

"At noon outside Howard Johnson's Restaurant," I told him.

"I'll see you there," he said and hung up.

In the dozen years ahead, when I was impatient or angry with Kennedy, I would sometimes think back to that time when he had to make a quick judgment between Furcolo and me. Furcolo was a member of Congress; I was a cafe owner whom Kennedy knew precious little about. The easy thing, the safe thing would have been to plead illness and cancel the reception. Why risk involvement with some local pol who might be in some sort of trouble? But Kennedy chose to trust me rather than Furcolo, and I would have to say that I don't know another man in politics who would have made the same decision.

The Fighters

Not long after Sen. Kennedy's marriage to Jac-

queline Bouvier, Larry O'Brien and his wife, Elva, who still lived in Massachusetts, visited the newlyweds for a weekend in Washington.

One afternoon that weekend, the three Kennedy brothers and I and several of their friends walked to a nearby park for a game of touch football. Jack was still on crutches and I was never a touch-football player, so we watched while Bob and Ted and their friends played.

At the other end of the park some young fellows, who we assumed to be Georgetown University graduate students, were hitting fly balls, and their baseball kept landing in the middle of our game of touch football. Ted yelled to them to stop but the ball kept coming, until it was apparent that it was deliberate. Finally Ted and one big fellow exchanged angry words and I could see a fight was coming. Ted was ready and willing, but Bob broke in and announced that he'd do the fighting. It was like a scene in ancient Rome, with both sides putting forth their gladiator.

Ted was the biggest of the brothers and would have had no trouble with the fellow, but Bob gave away about 30 pounds. It was an uneven match, which was no doubt what Bob wanted, but no one tried to stop it. The two of them fought their way all around that park, with the rest of us in a circle around them, shouting encouragement. It became a bloody brawl, with each man determined to score a knockout. But neither could and finally the fight stopped when they simply couldn't raise their arms any longer.

Throughout the battle, I kept suggesting to the senator that perhaps he and I should return to his house and await the outcome there. I thought it was foolish for Bob to get into a public brawl, and I was afraid that the police might come or the newspapers might learn that Bob Kennedy had been in a fight while Senator Kennedy cheered him on. It wasn't exactly the image we wanted for our senator. But Jack was not about to leave. I thought to myself, "My God, this is the story of my life."

That night, back at Jack's house for dinner, Ethel Kennedy commented on the condition of her husband's face.

"Goodness, Bobby, you're all bruised up. That must have been a rough game of touch."

"Yeah," Bob mumbled and went on with his eating.

Little Black Bags

When Jack Kennedy began his race for the Presidency O'Brien traveled around the country for him, conferring and organizing. West Virginia turned out to be a crucial primary state in 1960. There, Kennedy's chief opponent, Hubert Humphrey accused Kennedy of buying the election.

The irony of Humphrey's charge was that about a week before the election a nationally known politician, a man I assumed was working in Lyndon Johnson's behalf, appeared in Charleston carrying, literally, a black bag filled with money to invest in the Humphrey campaign. He approached a local political leader, a man who had pledged his support to Kennedy, and said he had \$17,000 to spend on behalf of Humphrey.

The local man stalled the visitor and came immediately to report the matter to me.

"I appreciate this," I said. "But let me ask you something. Why are you telling me this?"

"We have an understanding," the local politician said. "Our organization is for Kennedy. I thought you'd want to know, because I suspect this fellow is going all over the state."

"How long do you think he'll wait for your answer?" I asked.

"Perhaps forty-eight hours."

Lawrence F. O'Brien is a former chairman of the Democratic National Committee.

"Then let him cool his heels," I suggested. "That'll give me time to alert our people around the state."

"Fine."
"My only other suggestion," I added, "would be that you take his money and donate it to your favorite charity."

He laughed and departed, and I never knew if he made a charitable donation or not.

There is a postscript to the story of the mysterious bagman. Some years later I told the story to one of Lyndon Johnson's closest associates.

"That son of a bitch," he exclaimed. "We gave him \$20,000—he skimmed \$3,000 off the top!"

Limits of Power

But even the power of the Presidency had its limits and they came sharply into focus during the long night of violence after James Meredith's attempt to enrol at the University of Mississippi.

We were getting grim reports from Mississippi. Nicholas Katzenbach, the Deputy Attorney General who was with the U.S. marshals in the university's Administration Building, reported by telephone that an angry mob was forming and that the state troopers were nowhere to be seen. We adjourned to the Oval Office, where the President paced the floor.

"What's going on?" the President kept asking his brother. "I thought this had all been agreed to."

Bob was equally disturbed. He had trusted Governor Barnett, but apparently Barnett had double-crossed him and the President.

Kennedy had scheduled a television speech on the Oxford situation for 7:30 that evening, but he postponed it as matters worsened. The U.S. marshals, led by the late Jim McShane, had formed a protective ring around the Administration Building and, as a result, had become the targets of the bottle-throwing, brick-heaving mob. The marshals were armed only with tear gas. Kennedy went ahead with his speech at 10 p.m. and, immediately after the speech, called and talked with Katzenbach again. He could hear gunfire in the background as Katzenbach told of wounded marshals being carried into the building. "It was like the Alamo," one participant related later.

According to Katzenbach, there seemed to be a real possibility that the building might be overrun and some of the marshals killed. Meredith himself, who had been hidden in a dormitory room, was in imminent danger if he were discovered by the mob.

Kennedy finally ordered U.S. Army troops to the campus. The troops had to come from Memphis, but as the hours passed, they made no progress toward Oxford. Katzenbach warned that the marshals could not hold out much longer if the troops did not arrive.

"Where are the troops?" the President demanded of Cyrus Vance, the Secretary of the Army, but no one seemed to know. The President talked on the phone at one point and the general indicated he was awaiting orders from the Pentagon.

In his frustration, Kennedy spoke angrily and bitterly to us about the military. "They always give you their pitch about their instant reaction and their split-second timing, but it never works out," he said. "No wonder it's so hard to win a war." I felt he was also reflecting on his experience with the military and the CIA during the Bay of Pigs fiasco.

As dawn approached, an uneasy truce settled over the campus—the marshals had held off the mob. Eventually the troops arrived and Meredith enrolled in the university. We at the White House were stunned with disbelief. It was amazing for us and for Kennedy. To see how even a President could be misled and disobeyed.

Irish Eyes

In June 1963, when Kennedy was about to leave on his European trip, he arranged for all members of the White House staff of Irish descent to be flown to Ireland for his visit there. We soon discovered a high percentage of "instant" Irish-Americans on the staff and a party of about 50 of us set off for Ireland on one of the presidential back-up planes.

We met the President—fresh from his triumphant stop in West Berlin—at the Dublin Airport and he began a tour of the country of his ancestors. I went with him by helicopter. The visit deeply moved him and rekindled in him a sense of his Irish heritage.



From left: Pierre Salinger, President John F. Kennedy, Kenny O'Donnell, Larry O'Brien after 1960 Wisconsin primary.

Photograph by Stanley Weyman

When we reached County Cork, where my parents were born, a motorcade took us to the Cork City Hall, and there, along with the city dignitaries, was my aunt Julia Sweeney, my mother's youngest sister. Kennedy had assigned someone to find out which of his staff members had relatives still living in Ireland. My Aunt Julia lived in Dunmanway, a town near Cork and Dave Powers had several cousins, who were also at the City Hall ceremony.

My Aunt Julia, an articulate, gray-haired woman with a slight brogue, was making the most of her opportunity. She had brought some neighbors with her and they were thrilled to watch from the VIP section as Kennedy addressed the huge crowd and even more thrilled when, at the end of his remarks, Kennedy said:

"Two of my close associates, Larry O'Brien and Dave Powers, have relatives who are with us today, and I'd like to ask Larry and Dave to introduce them."

So Dave and I presented our Irish relatives while the audience cheered.

At the reception following the speech, my Aunt Julia was introduced to the President.

"I'm pleased to meet you, Mr. Kennedy," my aunt said. "You're very fortunate to have my nephew Lawrence working for you."

The President grinned at her and said, "You may be right."

As the reception ended, I said my good-bys to Aunt Julia, and she looked at me in surprise.

"Lawrence, aren't you going to stay for a few days?"

Fifty thousand people were cheering outside, the motorcade was starting to move, and I told my aunt that I'd better leave Cork immediately or I might never get out. On a later trip to Ireland, I visited Aunt Julia's home in Dunmanway and noted three pictures on her wall—Jesus Christ, John F. Kennedy, and Lawrence O'Brien.

At Shannon Airport, a day or two later, we were all to leave Ireland—Kennedy to continue on to Italy, the rest of us to fly back to Washington. As Kennedy boarded his plane, a choir sang a beautiful version of "Come Back to Erin" and Kennedy was deeply and visibly moved, as were we all. If there was a dry eye at the airport, I missed it.

Not long after our return Drew Pearson obtained a list of the White House staff people who'd flown to Ireland and published a column about the waste of the taxpayers' money. That was one column that nobody in the White House gave a damn about.

Dallas

In November, 1963, during a trip to ease over political differences in Texas, Kennedy was shot. O'Brien, who was several cars behind Kennedy in the motorcade, rushed to the hospital.

I ran through a maze of corridors until I reached an ante-room where Jackie and Nellie Connally, Governor John Connally's wife, were sitting together. Jackie's pink suit was spattered with blood and she was sitting like stone. Then Ken O'Donnell whispered to me there was little or no chance the President would live. I turned to Jackie to try to comfort her, but I could not speak.

The next hour was a nightmare.

It was chaotic, doctors, nurses running in and out. Medical equipment being wheeled into the room. At one point Jackie and I stepped into the adjoining room where the President's body lay. All I recall is I thought he looked as he always had.

Mac Kilduff, the acting press secretary, kept checking with us. He was distraught. What could he tell the press, he asked? What could he report to the Vice President, who was in another part of the building?

At one point Mac said, "He's dead, isn't he?" near tears. "I've got to tell the press."

"You can't say anything," Ken told him, and the confirmation of the President's death was kept from the world for perhaps half an hour, simply because Ken and I could not bring ourselves to accept it.

LBJ's Gift

The new President asked O'Brien to stay on and O'Brien found him persuasive. He had had a taste of LBJ hospitality back in 1961.

Johnson led Elva and me from room to room, not for just a glance but for detailed commentary on the furniture and mementos that each room contained.

In his bedroom he dug into a drawer, came up with a sportshirt, and pressed it upon me.

"Larry, I want you to have this," he said. "to keep."

Then he seized a bottle of perfume from Mrs. Johnson's dresser drawer.

"Here, Elva, this is for you," he commanded.

Finally the tour ended and we went to dinner. Two other couples were present—the Bobby Bak-ers and Congressman Jack Brooks and his wife. After an excellent Mexican dinner, Johnson invited the men into his den where he took out his scrapbooks and reminisced at length about his political career. His stories of Texas politics were often hilarious, and there were many affectionate references to Sam Rayburn.

I had put my new shirt on a chair in the hallway and as we said our good nights, I forgot it. But as Elva and I were walking down the sidewalk toward our car, the door burst open.

"Larry, you forgot your shirt," Johnson called and hurried out to give me my gift again. The shirt, which had an LBJ monogram, was too large for me, but I sometimes wore it around the house on week-ends.

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O'Brien, from page 19

A Presidential Phone

O'Brien became close with Joe Califano, Johnson's right hand man in the White House and in that friendship saw another side to the demands Johnson-style politics put on subordinates.

Joe Califano had a "hot line" to the President on his desk, and when it rang he could be counted on to burst into action. One day, however, the hot line rang and Califano didn't respond. He missed the call, because he was otherwise occupied in the small bathroom that graced his large White House office.

The President later demanded an explanation as to why Joe had not responded to his call, and Califano explained the problem as discreetly as possible.

"We'll have no more of that," Johnson roared, and the next thing Califano knew, the President had arranged

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O'Brien, from page 36
for a telephone extension to
be placed in his bathroom.

Rockefeller's Place

Despite his years in Washington, O'Brien still played the game with tricks learned in Springfield.

In the summer of 1965 when President Johnson journeyed to the Statue of Liberty for an elaborate ceremony at which he signed into law the historic immigration bill. This was, in theory, a nonpartisan event, with leaders of both parties invited. But the word was out for all of us to do all we could for Abe Beame, who was then running for mayor of New York. The President took a helicopter to Liberty Island and the rest of us went over by ferry. When the ferry docked, the politicians scrambled ashore in a great hurry, all wanting to claim a place near the President for the bill-signing ceremony, so they would be in news photographs of the event. I wanted to give Abe Beame a head start, so as he hurried off the boat, I blocked the path of Governor Nelson Rockefeller. I was standing in front of Rockefeller, and it slowly dawned on him that it was no accident that whenever he moved right, I moved right, and when he'd move left, I'd move left. Finally he growled, "Damn it, O'Brien, I'm the governor of New York and I have a right to get off this boat. Get the hell out of my way!"

In later years, when I'd sometimes see Rockefeller at the White House, he would make some joke about, "Hey, Larry, who are you pushing around these days?" I would always pretend not to know what he was talking about.

Lodge in Vietnam

For all the high spirits and achievements of 1965-66, we were increasingly aware of an ever-darkening cloud on the horizon, the war in Vietnam.

There would be periodic reports on Vietnam, usually by Secretaries Rusk or McNamara or by Dick Helms, the CIA Director. They would have charts and maps and would give reports about body counts and kill ratios and bridges bombed. They were extremely confident

and, although some of us may have been skeptical, we never felt we were in a position to challenge the wisdom of the experts.

Henry Wilson and I privately commented about these briefings—we'd say the North Vietnamese must be the best engineers in the world, because they'd obviously rebuilt every bridge in their country at least ten times. We shared a laugh when I was told that Henry Cabot Lodge, our ambassador to Vietnam, had asked to have me assigned to Vietnam. Lodge had decided that what the South Vietnamese needed was greater political cohesion, and since I was the celebrated political organizer, obviously I was just the fellow to come over and tighten things up. President Johnson, to his credit, vetoed the plan.

The Public Face

As the Vietnam war became a domestic as well as foreign problem, O'Brien sent Johnson memos on the political ramifications. But for the public, political leaders had another line.

I sent another memo on Vietnam to the President. This one stressed the political problems the war was causing and it reflected my continuing conversations with many very disheartened Democratic leaders. I had been particularly impressed by my talks with Mayor Daley. We spoke by phone from time to time and he, too, expressed increasing concern about the war. It wasn't that he insisted on withdrawal or had any specific proposals to make; Daley was just another confused fellow questioning whether we were headed in the right direction. "I've got a lot of people out here who are wondering about it," he would say. "How can you explain all those boxes coming back?" I would urge him to repeat his doubts to the President. I don't know if he ever did, but I made a point of advising the President of Daley's concern.

Of course, what Daley said to me was his private opinion. If a reporter had asked him about Vietnam, he would have said, "I'm behind the President all the way."

"Like the Old Days."

The night Johnson withdrew from the 1968 race O'Brien got a call from Robert

Kennedy who was after the presidential nomination.

Bob's call came a little before midnight.

"I hope I got to you first," he said.

"You did, Bob," I told him.

"Larry, I'm glad we've kept in touch and I'm glad we've understood each other all the way. Your position has always been a fair one and, now that Johnson has made this decision, I hope you'll join me."

I replied that, under the circumstances, I would of course seriously consider it. Bob did not press me for an immediate yes or no, but he was very excited.

"Here we go again, Larry," he told me. "It's going to be like the old days. You'd better get a good night's sleep tonight because I'm not going to let you sleep from now on. It's a new ball game now."

A Lost Chance

But in Los Angeles, another assassin's bullets changed that ball game. Later Hubert Humphrey tried to convince O'Brien to join his campaign but O'Brien was concerned about Humphrey's Vietnam stand. Their meeting turned out to be a lesson in the politics of trying to have it both ways.

In July I had lunch with him at his Capitol office. The purpose of our meeting was to discuss his position on Vietnam. I had decided that if his position was acceptable to me, I would join his campaign through the convention.

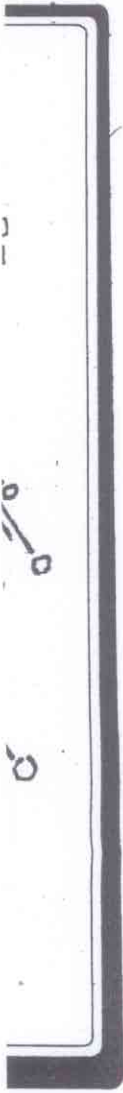
Hubert read me a statement he said he would soon be making public. In it, he favored a bombing halt and a negotiated end to the war. It satisfied me, and I agreed to join his campaign through the convention. Hubert told me he was to meet with the President that evening and he would tell Johnson about his new position on Vietnam.

"How do you think he'll respond?" I asked.

"I don't know," Humphrey admitted. "I don't think he's going to hug me with joy."

That weekend I watched the papers for word of Humphrey's statement, but none appeared. I saw him on Monday and asked how his meeting with Johnson had gone.

"It didn't work out," Humphrey admitted. "Other people were present and we didn't have a chance to talk. But I'll meet with him again



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soon."
About a week later Humphrey visited Johnson at the ranch and on his return, he told me that the President had advised him of a major new development on Vietnam. Naturally, he said, he should not make any statement until after the President had made his announcement. He added that for security reasons he couldn't reveal the details, but he indicated that the President was about to take a step that would please the antiwar people. That was the last I heard of Humphrey's statement, and his position on Vietnam was to haunt us throughout the convention and campaign.

Ms. Chairperson

O'Brien took over the chairmanship of the Democratic party in 1970 but in 1972 he ran into another presidential candidate who had problems with a delicate balancing act. After the convention George McGovern asked O'Brien to stay on as chairman for the '72 campaign. Reluctantly, O'Brien agreed.

McGovern reappeared and said he needed to speak with me privately again.

My associates left the room. McGovern seemed upset. He said, "Larry, you know how busy I've been, picking a Vice President and working on my acceptance speech. I just didn't realize what's been going on. I've just been told that the women's caucus is mad as hell at me and they're demanding a woman as chairman. How would you feel about being co-chairman with Jean Westwood?" (the national committeewoman from Utah)

I told him there was no provision in the committee rules for co-chairmen. I added that, if I stayed, it would only be through the election and that it would be fine with me if he wanted to name Westwood after that.

"I'm not sure I could sell that," he said. "These women are adamant. Some of my people think there has to be a change."

I was more stunned than angry. "You're the nominee of the Democratic Party," I said. "You say you haven't caught up with what's going on. I've never dealt with a candidate who doesn't make his own decisions."

McGovern looked unhappy but made no reply. "I have a suggestion," I said finally.

"The National Committee is waiting for us. Let's turn back the clock to before we had this discussion. It's unfortunate that you insisted on my coming here at all."

"I guess we have no alternative," he said.

"Okay, the clock is turned back."

[Westwood was named chairman.]

A Final Choice

Later McGovern talked O'Brien into working in the campaign after dangling the post-Eagleton vice presidential nomination at him.

Later that morning I received an indirect report that Sarge Shriver was McGovern's choice. I was not surprised, as I knew that Henry Kimelman, his campaign treasurer, Frank Mankiewicz and Pierre Salinger had been campaigning hard for Shriver. I knew Sarge would do a good job—as, indeed, he did, for Sarge is an articulate, intelligent and energetic man.

Early that afternoon, McGovern called.

"Larry," he began, "I've got something to say that will be disappointing to you. I've made my decision and it's Sarge Shriver."

I was prepared to applaud his choice, but instead I found myself resenting his suggestion that I would be disappointed. I'd said nothing to him to indicate that I wanted to be on the ticket or that I'd be disappointed if I wasn't.

"However," he went on, "you'll be pleased to know that in our polls you did well. But you're identified as a politician, and we feel we should stay away from a political image."

By then I was pretty irritated. The gist of what he had said was, "Larry, you're a good fellow, but you're a politician and therefore unfit for high office." What, I wondered, were Eagleton, Humphrey, Muskie, and Shriver—what was McGovern himself—if not politicians?

But the profession of politics is not like other professions. You are left with memories and scrapbooks, but little provision for your later life. After a lifetime of uncertainties, there comes a point when you must think of yourself, your family, and your future. Do I miss it? Of course I do. Do I have plans to return to it? No, I don't. ■