

Baker's Martyr Instincts Watergate Figures Tempt

By Bobby Baker with Larry L. King

I was taking the holiday air at my old haunt, the Carousel Motel in Ocean City, over the Labor Day weekend in 1972, and had just returned from a walk along the beach when the switchboard operator told me that she had two "urgent" telephone messages for me. The first was from my family home in Pickens, S.C. I returned it and learned that my mother had just died. This should not have been a surprising message, given her long history of bad health, but I suppose we are never fully prepared for the shock. My grief was dry. I didn't shed a tear, but felt a numbing loss. I told my brother that I would be in Pickens the following day, to stand in the receiving line at the funeral home, and in the trauma of the moment I forgot the second of the "urgent" calls.

After a shower, while changing clothes, I came across the second message slip, which I had stuck in my pocket. It instructed me to immediately call a Mr. Gregory in Key Biscayne, Fla. Staring at the unfamiliar name a while, I had a hunch. I then called the Miami operator and found that the phone number "Mr. Gregory" had left was that of the Key Biscayne Bank and Trust Co. Since I knew no one there except Bebe Rebozo, I knew he had to be "Mr. Gregory."

I WENT TO A safer phone than I thought my Carousel room might provide and called the Key Biscayne number. Though it was a Sunday afternoon, Bebe Rebozo's secretary answered. I told her to tell him that "Bill Thompson" was calling. Bebe came on the line and said, "We need to talk about that business venture and I'd like you to fly here immediately." I said, "Well, Mr. Rebozo, can it wait? I just got word that my mother died and I've got to be home by tomorrow afternoon." He said, "I truly hate to bother you in such a sad time, and I extend my condolences, but this is a matter of the greatest importance. If you can arrange to get here late tonight, we can meet for breakfast. I'll have you on your way by noon." He said he would make reservations for me at the Key Biscayne Hotel and would see me there at 7 o'clock the following morning.

We had breakfast in my suite. As soon as he entered, Bebe pressed one finger against his lips until he'd turned the television set on to a high decibel level. We sat close together. Bebe Rebozo said, "Bobby, I know you're a Democrat, but how do you

As secretary to the Senate's Democratic majority from 1955 to 1963, Bobby Baker was a power broker; he helped those who could help him. Until he ended up in federal prison. This is the fifth of six installments from "Wheeling and Dealing: Confessions of a Capitol Hill Power Broker" by Bobby Baker with Larry L. King.

feel about Senator McGovern?" I said, "I think he's a very decent man, but he's not my cup of tea. I believe the nut liberals have captured him, and I'm afraid of some of their wild schemes. I don't think he'd be good for the country." While I figured that this was what Rebozo hoped to hear, it also represented my true feelings. I did not, however, tell Bebe that I was far from overjoyed at the prospect of four more years of Richard Nixon.

REBOZO NODDED. He tapped me on the knee and said with a half smile, "Good! Would you like to help our president?"

I gave careful thought to my response and then said, "Well, I'm not real sure how I'd go about it. I'm not exactly the most popular man in America, you know."

"What do you know on Larry O'Brien?" Bebe Rebozo blurted.

I said, "Bebe, I don't really know anything on him. I don't like the bastard and I know enough about politics to figure he's probably vulnerable in the campaign contribution category, but I couldn't prove a thing."

"Try," he said.

"I just don't have the goods," I said. "Honest. I was never close to the man; we never operated in the same ballpark even though we were on the same team."

Rebozo wrinkled his brow and looked disappointed. He said, "What Democrat can you give us? They're trying to kill us with this Watergate fiasco. We gotta fight back."

What Democrat can you give us? If I'd had any doubts that my new harassments were tied to Republican fears of a Watergate explosion, they flew off on quick wings.

REBOZO SAID, "We need to nail O'Brien. Have you heard anything about what really happened at Chappaquiddick? Did O'Brien play a big role in that?"

"Bebe," I said, "I was out of fashion among Democrats long before Chappaquiddick. Except for Jack Kennedy himself, I was never even reasonably close to the Kennedy people. I'm afraid I just can't help you."

Rebozo said, "Well, keep your ears open. Think about it."

We shook hands and as I left he said, "I'll be in touch with you." I thought, Yeah, I'm afraid so.

My thoughts were a jumble of my mother's death and my new dilemma: Obviously, the Nixon crowd intended to force me to the wall in their desperate effort to dig up new dirt on prominent Democrats. I was fatigued and dispirited when I arrived in my home town, just in time to take my place in the funeral home receiving line that night. The funeral was on Tuesday. I went through it in a fog and then, after a day spent with relatives who'd gathered for my mother's last rites, I hurried back to Washington.

ALMOST IMMEDIATELY, I had another message from "Mr. Gregory." It asked that I call him at an unfamiliar number in Key Biscayne. I did this from a pay telephone and was instructed to call President Nixon's personal attorney, Herb Kalmbach of Newport Beach, Calif., who then was staying at the Regency Hotel in New York. "Call as Bill Thompson," Bebe Rebozo instructed. "Use a safe telephone."

Once I'd reached Herb Kalmbach, he asked me to meet him the next day in the main lobby of the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York City. "There's a big clock there," he said, "or I think it's a clock. It's a round ornament imbedded in the tiles in the center of the lobby. There are divan-like seats on all sides of it. Sit facing the Lexington Avenue entrance."

I had never met Herb Kalmbach and knew little about him; Watergate had not yet catapulted him to infamy. Almost on the dot of the appointed hour, a distinguished-looking, impeccably dressed man entered the lobby of the Waldorf and after circling the centerpiece clock a half dozen times, like Indians zeroing in on a wagon train, he stepped forward and said, "Mr. Bill Thompson?" I said, "Yes, good to see you." We shook hands. Mr. Kalmbach seemed frightened. In a low voice he said, "Follow me about 20 paces to the rear and we'll find a quiet place for lunch." We went downstairs — the Waldorf main lobby is on the second floor — and I kept the required distance as Herb Kalmbach turned right

to walk parallel with Lexington Avenue and then crossed 49th Street. He turned right again, then turned sharp left to enter the Barclay Hotel.

OVER LUNCH, Herb Kalmbach seemed almost desperate to uncover dirt involving Larry O'Brien. "As I told Bebe," I said in hushed tones, "I just don't know a thing on the man." I was at a loss. Then Kalmbach said, "Tell me about the TFX fix." Halfway through my recitation of how big politicians and big defense firms reach mutually beneficial accords, he impatiently waved his hand and said, "I know all that. Did O'Brien have anything to do with the TFX decision?" I said that I doubted it; that, in the period we were talking about, O'Brien had been more Indian than chief. His prominence had come at a later date. "Hell," I said, "until

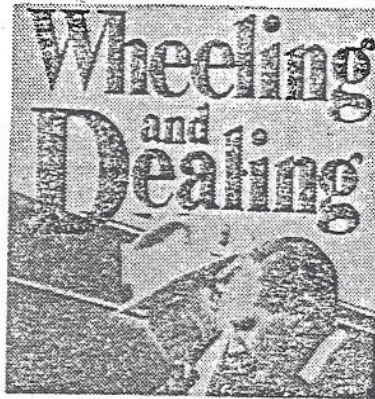
Larry O'Brien latched on to Jack Kennedy's coattails, he was just another Boston wardheel who'd failed at running a second-rate hotel. I doubt if President Kennedy thought enough of his abilities, outside of O'Brien's political grunt work and a minor talent for tactics, to bring him on the inside. I can guarantee you he wasn't on a level with Bob McNamara and the other biggies who made the TFX decision. O'Brien didn't amount to much more than a popcorn . . . until Lyndon Johnson made him postmaster general."

"Well," Kalmbach said, "Do you have anything on him from the Johnson era?"

"NO," I SAID. "Mr. Kalmbach, you gotta remember that by the time LBJ got to the White House, I wasn't around anymore."

This old news made Herb Kalmbach morose. He toyed with his food, pushing it around on his plate, barely nibbling at it. I had the notion he didn't particularly enjoy what he was doing, though maybe this was because he was failing to bring home the expected bacon. After a bit he said, "Well, it might be convenient for you should your memory improve." It was then I knew he was tough: not at all the goody-goody he later would represent himself as being during the Watergate hearings and at his subsequent trial. I said, "Look, Mr. Kalmbach, I'm damn near desperate to live my life without additional complications. If I had what you wanted, I'd give it to you. My martyr instincts are pretty damn well depleted by now. But I don't think it would do anybody any good for me to make up . . . information."

"Oh, no, no," he said, hastily.



"That would be counterproductive. We've got to be certain of our facts. But we do hope you'll continue to search your memory." We talked politics for a bit in general terms; I then launched into a long discourse about my recurring problems with

the Justice Department. Mr. Kalmbach's eyes seemed to glaze over; I had the impression he was pretending to listen but that his mind was on vacation in a distant place. This is a smart man, I thought, but he's a cold fish.

HERB KALMBACH SOON called for the check, paid cash, and suggested that I linger at the table until he'd left the restaurant. Throughout our meal, his eyes had darted and searched the room as if someone might be coming after us with a bench warrant. Kalmbach gave the room a final sweeping search, nodded abruptly, and took his leave. The next time I saw him he was on television, describing himself to the Ervin committee as a duped and innocent man.

Tomorrow: The last of LBJ

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