

Part 3/31/74

# A Hush, A Gasp, An Outburst

By Dorothy McCardle

The script called for appropriate remarks by President Nixon, his guest-of-honor Melvin R. Laird and a half-dozen prominent Republican and Democratic leaders.

The occasion was the black-tie White House dinner which Mr. Nixon gave Tuesday night to give Laird the Medal of Freedom, the highest civilian award a President can make. Laird is the former Secretary of Defense who most recently had been Mr. Nixon's White House counselor for domestic affairs.

The press was not present, nor were the speeches recorded but waiting to begin their scheduled tributes were Sen. Barry Goldwater (R-Ariz.), Senate Minority Leader Hugh Scott (R-Pa.), Senate Majority Leader Mike Mansfield (D-Mont.), Rep. Leslie Arends (R-Ill.) and former Secretary of State William P. Rogers.

Suddenly, somewhere between the fish course (striped bass) and the entree (chateaubriand) there was the sound of silver clinking against crystal, and 108 guests seated at 13 tables fell silent.

The wife of the commandant of the Marine Corps, Mrs. Robert E. Cushman Jr., was standing up, delivering a tribute of her own that had not been programmed at all.

Guests could hardly miss the thrust of Mrs. Cushman's outburst—a passionate attack on the press and others for "brutal and unfair" charges against the President in the Watergate scandal.

"It only lasted a minute or so but it seemed a lot longer," recalled one

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dinner guest. "A hush fell over the room, eyebrows went up and there were audible gasps. Many people just stared at their plates."

There was polite applause as Mrs. Cushman, unknown to many of the guests, sat back down at the table presided over by Gen. Alexander Haig, Jr., chief of Mr. Nixon's White House staff. At a neighboring table sat the President and Laird.

While Mrs. Cushman ate her chateaubriand, some guests were asking their neighbors who she was. Few expected her to rise to her feet a second time, much less a third.

A short time later, however, they were startled to hear Mrs. Cushman once again rapping for attention, only to be drowned out by the Strolling Strings playing background dinner music. Unfulfilled, she reluctantly sat down.

But shortly after scheduled speakers had paid their tributes to Laird, Mrs. Cushman rose still a third time, again tapping her goblet for silence.

"Everybody hung their heads and looked at their plates or at the ceiling," said Mrs. Gaylord Nelson, whose husband, the Democratic senator from Wisconsin, was sitting at Mrs. Cushman's table.

This time Mrs. Cushman launched into an appreciation of President Nixon, calling him "one of the greatest Presidents in history."

Beseeching the audience to applaud Mr. Nixon, she proposed a toast that brought people to their feet appropriately clinking their wine glasses.

"Oh, my dear Mrs. Cushman," one guest told her when everybody was seated again, "you are going down in history."

Mrs. Cushman, however, was uncertain.

"Did I do all right?" she asked Gen. Haig.

"You did just fine, Mrs. Cushman," Haig was overheard to answer.

By the end of the week, she may have been having second thoughts. A Marine Corps spokesman for Mrs. Cushman said she wasn't discussing the incident since she had been speaking "to a private group."

Nor was Gen. Cushman available for comment.

A career Marine who served as then-Vice President Nixon's national security aide from 1957 to 1961, Cushman, 59, and his wife of 34 years had sat at different tables the night of the dinner.

"I'm not sure what he was doing during her tirade," said one guest. "He probably was holding on to his four stars and hoping he wouldn't be demoted to PFC."



By Margaret Thomas—The Washington Post

*Marine Corps Commandant Robert E. Cushman Jr.  
and his wife.*

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