

Postmaster Accused of Using Politics

By Jack Anderson

At the instigation of the White House, Postmaster General Ted Klassen held off postal rate increases during the 1972 campaign in order to avoid stirring up voter discontent against President Nixon.

Instead, Klassen cut back on postal workers and caused a slowdown of the mails. This developed into a mail debacle after the election, with Christmas deliveries stacked up days behind schedule and postmasters all over the country dumping mail on each other.

Yet when Klassen was hauled before the Senate Post Office Committee in early 1973 to explain the postal foul-up, he blamed it all on his zeal to cut costs. He deliberately misled the Senate by failing to mention the deal he had made with the White House to slash the postal force rather than raise postage prices.

Klassen played political patycake with the President's campaign aides, despite the fact that the Postal Service had been reorganized as an independent agency for the specific purpose of removing it from politics.

In the past, the Post Office had often operated as a political arm of the President. But under the reorganization, it was supposed to be totally free of White House control, much less political influence.

The story of how Klassen put politics ahead of postal service is told in a secret White House memo. He was summoned before John Ehrlichman, then the White House domestic chief. The secret meeting was also attended by White House efficiency expert Fred Malek, whose job was to gear government action to getting President Nixon re-elected.

Reporting on the meeting in an April 17, 1972, memo, Malek described a plan to cut the summer employment program and put a freeze on hiring at the Postal Service. This would save the money that otherwise would have necessitated a rate rise, it was agreed.

"It was the combined judgment of the assembled group," wrote Malek, that this "course of action was within the range of political acceptability."

He reported that the freeze on hiring should result in a reduction by attrition of 5,000 to 6,000 employees per month for the next 5-6 months. While he realized this "substantial number" would cut into services, he argued this "would seem preferable to a rate increase."

Malek suggested another meeting "in about three months to assess progress and to determine actions and their political consequences." Three months later, the hiring freeze had crippled the Postal Service, mail deliveries were bogging down and Klassen was making speeches about how he was cutting costs.

He didn't mention that the sole purpose of his economies was to prevent a postage stamp increase, which postal technicians wanted in January, 1973. Under the law, this would have required an announcement a few weeks before the November, 1972, election. Of course, the price of mailing a first-class letter has now gone up from eight to 10 cents.

Footnote: Malek told us he "attended the (secret) meeting as an observer, just to learn what the postal plans were." A spokesman for Klassen told my associate Les Whitten that Klassen had actually blocked a White House move to add extra summer workers and had decided on the freeze well before the controversial meeting with Ehrlichman and Malek. The spokesman denied Klassen's actions were designed to further the Nixon campaign.

Washington Whirl: Richard Sprague, the crusading U.S. attorney who believes in going after the top man in a criminal conspiracy, successfully prosecuted former mine workers boss Tony Boyle for murder. Now Sprague has finished reading the White House transcripts. His case against Boyle, he told us, wasn't as strong as the evidence implicating President Nixon in the Watergate cover up. . . . The White House is obstructing the Senate Watergate committee's investigation of presidential pal Bebe Rebozo. Aides have produced written author-

ity from the President, claiming executive privilege and directing them not to testify about crucial matters. The President's secretary, Rose Mary Woods, and brothers, Donald and Edward, have also delayed responding to Senate subpoenas. Apparently, the White House strategy is to hold back until the committee goes out of business next May 28. . . .

Rep. Otto Passman (D-La.), the old House curmudgeon, offered to bet anyone at Duke Zeibert's restaurant, \$5,000 the other night that the House won't impeach President Nixon. Passman told us afterwards that he was joshing, that he wouldn't bet more than 35 cents on anything. But he swore, sans \$5,000, that the President will be exonerated. . . . The White House placed an order a few days ago for electronic parts suitable for tape recorders or other electronic devices. But the parts, unhappily, will arrive too late to correct the inaudibles and unintelligibles in the famous White House transcripts. . . .

A secret White House memo shows that not all civil servants caved in to the pressure of President Nixon's aggressive campaign aides in 1972. When aide David Cahill tried to put the bite on Cost of Living official Dick Cheney for campaign funds, Cheney was so irritated that he complained to Nixon campaign headquarters. "Dick felt someone should be aware of this activity," states the memo. . . .