

Misusing the White House Machine

One of the finest machines ever devised by man is the White House and those institutions and individuals who are called into close orbit around it. It has been the creative center for our way of life. And for those lucky enough to be summoned to serve, it has been an exhilaration unequalled by anything else.

James Rowe, who was one of Franklin Roosevelt's bright young men, still recalls with profound satisfaction trying to pull the country out of the Depression. Each day was a new surge of creation. If the ideas did not work, Rowe once said, they tore them up that night and started fresh the next morning.

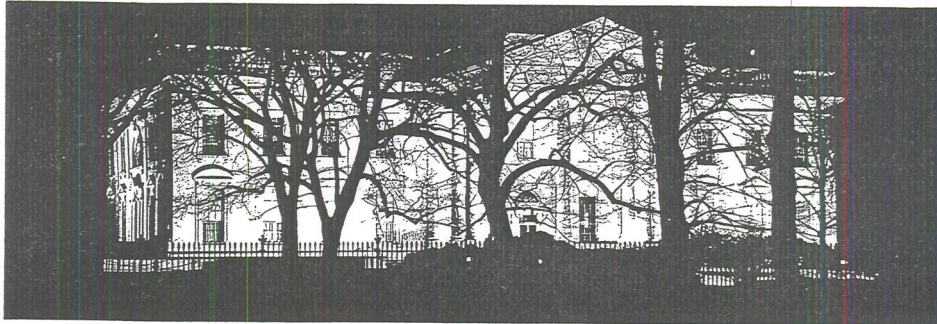
Clark Clifford remembers the happy days of Truman's White House. He began the study for the unification of the armed services and worked closely on the Truman Doctrine and the Marshall Plan. There was ferment and achievement.

In Eisenhower's time the same joy of service at the pinnacle was apparent. Even Emmet John Hughes, who developed some deep-set differences with the President, found that in Ike's White House the challenge was to come up with new ideas in an effort to nudge the nation toward a better life.

There are still misty memories from the Kennedy days of Walter Heller, a kind of economic Ichabod, loping happily through the corridors of the White House advocating the New Economics, a system that eventually yielded this nation the longest continued economic expansion (105 months) in our history.

And Joe Califano, the jolly domestic czar for Lyndon Johnson, was in a state of near ecstasy helping to sculpt programs on housing, civil rights, health and education.

DENNIS BRACK—BLACK STAR



The foreign end of Richard Nixon's White House had and has some of the same spirit under Henry Kissinger. At first there was even a whiff of it in domestic matters, when Pat Moynihan, a rollicking Irish professor who dared break open champagne in his office, held sway, devising the family assistance plan and nurturing revenue sharing.

Then came the era of John Ehrlichman and Bob Haldeman.

That beautiful White House machine stopped, on the home front at least. It was turned into a private instrument of revenge and fear. Hatred replaced hope. While Ehrlichman's domestic division produced programs, they often were little more than cardboard props. There was no soul in them, no commitment behind them. They languished and no one cared. We now see from Ehrlichman's own testimony that he was busy grappling for power, covering up dirty tricks and investigating the drinking and sexual habits of opponents. Haldeman, as he told it on the Watergate stand, conceived himself and the President to be in a state of siege, with Communists and other monsters just outside the White House gates. His energy was devoted to identifying enemies and destroying them, leaking squalid accusations and encouraging dirty political tricks, violating Richard Nixon's public entreaties to turn back to "the spirit of '76." What an appalling picture of a place that once was a symbol of much of the best of us.

Think what they lost—and we lost, think of the power of the presidency that they let rust as they pursued their wretched intrigues. They could have devised a domestic record of the same quality if not quantity as the foreign one and, more important, they could have raised a new symbolism of excitement and adventure in our national life.

What if Nixon and his men had reached out, as only a President can do, and summoned the best of American life to come to the White House and talk openly and warmly with them? What if they had set aside an evening a week for dinner with a dozen of the best men available from any field—farmers, artists, physicians, flyers, vintners, bankers, engravers? What sparks might have flown and what ideas might have been generated in such bull sessions! Or what if the President had been urged to borrow a little tactic from our parliamentary cousins and asked Congress if he could go to the Hill once a month and stand in the House chamber and answer questions carefully screened and controlled? Minds might have met and ideas been generated, human responses released.

The American people give the President and his staff the use of that marvelous White House machine, and its only limits are the law and the minds and the hearts of the men who use it. And that, we see now, is the problem.

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