

P or 5/30/74

The Ambiance in LBJ's Oval Office

It is doubtful that any Presidents in our history would sound like Richard Nixon even if they had been bizarrely motivated to record every word said in their offices.

This is not to say that other Presidents—Lyndon Baines Johnson included—never “took the name of the Lord in vain” or evaded questions or misled Congress and the media, or that they did not pay close personal attention to their images in the press. But even granting that the 1,308-page submission of lawyer’s brief and Presidential transcripts is but a glimpse of the Nixon presidency, the conversation is so sordid, the discussions so amoral, the instinct for self-preservation so basely animalistic, the national interest so notably ignored, the perjury and pay-off options reviewed so obviously criminal, that I doubt there is any precedent for it. Certainly not during the presidency of Lyndon Johnson.

No one who worked for Lyndon Johnson would call him a saint. If anyone had attempted to canonize him, he would have wondered what they really wanted from him. Indeed, during a rough and tumble legislative fight in the Senate, he once remarked of Majority Leader Mike Mansfield, “why do I have to have a saint for Senate Majority Leader? Why can’t I have a politician the way Eisenhower did?”

Lyndon Johnson was quick to see the weaknesses and mistakes of legislators, cabinet officers and even his own staff, and he sometimes made fun of them, often with a knife as sharp as Herblock’s pen. His imitations — Everett Dirksen particularly comes to mind — were magnificently amusing, but rarely gentle. He would talk of a congressman not being certain he had his own vote, or not being able to get the Lord’s Prayer through Congress on Sunday morning or to pour ---- out of a boot if the directions were written on the heel. His earthy language almost invariably was part of a story that drove home a point. It was not, as Nixon’s is, the language of a teenage tough who thinks the frequent use of profanity and Anglo-Saxon expletives as adjectives demonstrates machismo.

LBJ could be tough. There were occasions during the 1968 presidential campaign when he thought that Humphrey was losing because he would never go for the Nixon jugular. “You know the difference between Hubert and me,” he told me on one of those occasions. “When Walter Reuther

For all their special relevance to an investigation of Watergate crimes and improprieties, President Nixon’s tape transcripts have provided a unique glimpse of the ambiance inside the White House—of the character of the President and the men around him, and of their way of transacting business. Is the picture that emerges distinctive or is this pretty much the way things have always been? Today we begin a series of articles by associates (devoted partisans all) of former Presidents, addressing themselves to this subject. The first is by Joseph A. Califano Jr., who was Special Assistant for Domestic Affairs to President Johnson.

walks into the Oval Office and sits there with his hand in his pocket, telling Hubert that unless he puts more money into the Detroit ghettos they’ll burn the city down, Hubert will sit in this rocker listening and smiling, but thinking all the time: how can he get Reuther to take his hand out of pocket so he can shake it. When Reuther comes to me with a threat like that, I’m sitting in this rocker, listening and smiling, but thinking all the time: how can I get him to take his hand out of his pocket so I can cut his - - - - off!”

Johnson certainly could get angry at his opposition. In January of 1966, he directed an aide to blast the steel companies in the midst of a major price rollback fight during the Vietnam War. The aide’s characterization of them as “war profiteers” made headlines, but it was mild compared to Johnson’s earlier reaction when the steel executives raised their prices late on the afternoon of New Year’s Eve. Nor did he appreciate the roasting the Catholic bishops gave him about his views on birth control. But in both these cases—and a host of others—he made sure that neither he nor his staff ever cut the cord permanently because, as he put it, “We need to hold this thing together. We need those steel companies to train and employ blacks,” and “we may reach the point where the only people that will support the poverty program will be the Catholic bishops.”

His humor could be needle-pointed,

particularly about the press. When the White House press corps caught him proclaiming, before countless millions of South Koreans in Seoul, that his grandfather fought at the Alamo, he cracked, “If Hugh Sidey ever had a crowd like that, he’d claim he was a great grandson of George Washington.” And, late one evening during the Washington riots that followed the Martin Luther King assassination, I told him of a report that Stokely Carmichael was organizing a group at 14th and U Streets to march on Georgetown and burn it down. “Georgetown,” he said with a mischievous twinkle, “I’ve waited 35 years for this day.”

These differences in tone between Johnson and Nixon are symptomatic of the major difference that strikes me on reading the edited transcripts: for Nixon in the taped privacy of his Oval Office, the singular, overriding interest was self-preservation in the most demeaning save-my-skin-first sense. In the Johnson Oval Office, there was of course a healthy measure of self-interest, but the overriding concern was to determine what was right for the coun-



try as best as he and his advisers could perceive it, and then try to get it done.

There were three major areas of Johnsonian concern: one, economic pol-

icy, has played a major role in the administration of every President since Herbert Hoover; the other two, the Vietnam war and the civil rights-poverty programs, were special to the Johnson Presidency. Johnson opted to fight inflation with increased personal and corporate income taxes, to pursue the frustrating war in Southeast Asia and to move much faster than the nation as a whole on the race and poverty issues. In all three areas, Johnson took the distinctly unpopular course, though he rarely if ever so characterized it publicly. Such conclusions and analyses were discussed largely within the confines of his untaped conversations in the Oval Office.

And there were people Johnson did not like. To say he was not a fan of Robert Kennedy would be the understatement of his administration. But contrast his attitude about Robert Kennedy with Nixon's covert Chappaquidick operation to destroy Edward Kennedy. Doubtless Johnson talked to many people yet to be heard from about his decision to withdraw as a presidential candidate in 1968, most of all Lady Bird. But his conversation with me after lunch four days before he announced that decision may make the point of difference better than any of my own personal impressions.

Johnson was sitting at the table behind his desk signing some routine appointments and letters; he had just returned from lunch with Harry McPherson and me. McPherson was writing the now famous withdrawal speech

and I was helping on the portion of it devoted to economic policy. The entire lunch had been devoted to the speech with few digressions—a rare two hours of verbal and intellectual concentration for LBJ. Johnson sent McPherson back to write another draft; he took me to the Oval Office with him.

At first, he asked if I would take over the poverty program since Sargent Shriver was going to Paris as our ambassador. Typically, he asked me to take it on as an additional duty—and sensing the horror on the face of a White House aide who was already working fifteen hours a day, he said: "I will only ask you to do it if I run again." For some reason, it was intuitively clear to me that he had virtually decided not to run again. He must have sensed what I felt, and as best as I am able to reconstruct it, the conversation went like this:

C I have never really focused on that possibility.

P Well, focus on it now. Who do you think will get the nomination?

C Bobby Kennedy. My guess is that he would easily take McCarthy's people away from him.

P What about Hubert?

C I don't think he can beat Kennedy.

P What's wrong with Bobby? He's made some nasty speeches about me, but he's never had to sit here. Anyway, you seem to like his parties.

C [Nervous smile]

P Bobby would keep fighting for the Great Society programs. And when he sat in this chair he might have a different view on the war. His major problem would be with appropriations—getting the programs funded. He doesn't know how to deal with those people and a lot of them don't like him. But he'll try.

C Mr. President, if you run, I think you'll win.

P Win what? The way it is now we can't get the tax surcharge passed and Ho Chi Minh and Fulbright don't believe anything I say about the war.

On March 31, 1968, Johnson withdrew as a presidential candidate. Four days later, Martin Luther King was assassinated and rioting broke out in over 50 cities. Two months later, Robert Kennedy was assassinated and the shocked nation plunged deeply into bitter grief. Congress passed the tax surcharge and the only Fair Housing Act in our history. The Paris peace talks opened the door to negotiations and Gen. Creighton Abrams was ordered to begin what later became known as the Vietnamization program.

How many of us have stopped to think: What would those last nine months of 1968 been like, if each action Johnson took on those issues and events had been measured or perceived against its impact on his re-election campaign?