

“President Nixon hastened to follow his ‘dogs’ remark with an assurance that there are lots of nice girls in Washington. He didn’t mean a thing, see? He was just being one of the boys.”

Mixing Socrates Joe Pyne and Irwin Corey

By Tom Donnelly

If he had it to do over again, the chances are that President Nixon wouldn’t have told that former POW to “watch out for some of the dogs they have you sit by” at Washington parties, wouldn’t have called Iceland’s Keflavik Air Base “this godforsaken place” and, in toasting his hosts, wouldn’t have referred to them as the leaders of “Ireland.”

In trying to figure out a reason for these peculiar lapses on the Chief Executive’s part, two things must be remembered. One, he is inclined to make gaffes when he feels he’s up against the wall; and Two, he’s no good at small talk.

In either case I say we all ought to have a little sympathy. It can’t be easy for a man to have to face up to the truth that he is the first U.S. President to have seriously offended Iceland.

Come to think of it, I do believe somebody like Rutherford B. Hayes got off a crack that irritated Icelanders in the long ago, but the remark, whatever it was, and its consequences, whatever they were, seem lost in the dim mists of history. In time the merciful veil of years will also hide the Nixon bloopers from view.

But right now they’re hotter than hot. I can’t remember when the women of Washington have been in such a collective boil. “Sexist beast!” is one of the milder epithets I’ve heard hissed in his direction. A Washington hostess who once had him to tea in his senatorial days says if she got another chance she would load the canapes with ground glass; the petits fours, too.

The hostesses aren’t talking for publication, of course. They will be discreet, even though they haven’t received a very inspiring example from on high. One hostess stated the reason for her discretion most succinctly: “You can’t be sure *who* is going to be in the White House for the next three-and-a-half years.”

I personally don’t believe President Nixon’s remark about “dogs” reflects any deep antifemale bias. I don’t even think it reflects a studied opinion about the charms of Washington womanhood. I’m sure that he was simply indulging in some man-to-man talk with a soldier.

Virile he-guys classify women as babes and dogs, don’t they? Or at least they did when Mr. Nixon was a lot younger than he is now. And not just soldiers and marines and mechanics. Remember “Marty,” the gentle Bronx butcher, reassuring his Plain Jane?: “You ain’t such a dog as you think you are.” President Nixon hastened to follow his “dogs” remark with an assurance that there are lots of nice girls in Washington. He didn’t mean a thing, see? He was just being one of the boys.

When he found himself on one occasion in the company of tennis stars Alex Olmedo and Althea Gibson, he said, “You can’t just play safe. You’ve got to play to win. That’s the world today.” That’s how a President talks to tennis stars. See?

When he met up at the Lincoln Memorial with those college kids who were demonstrating against the war he talked to them about football. Because that’s what you talk about to college kids. Unless they’re a bunch of peace-crazy radicals. In which case you may have wasted your breath but at least you *tried* to establish contact.

He probably shouldn’t have attempted to descend to the level of those college types. As H. R. Haldeman once put it, Richard Nixon “has no time for small talk, or the ordinary kind of bull when people sit down together. He’s best when he’s dealing with problems—you have to keep off his back and let him deal with larger things . . .”

Richard Nixon’s accustomed mode of utterance when he deals with larger things seems to some people to be less than lovely. “Isn’t it wonderful,” he said, shortly after President Eisenhower’s election, “to have finally a Secretary of State who’s on our side of the table?” “Who is Mr. Stevenson,” then-Vice President Nixon asked in 1958, “to be talking about the low road when he is the man who puts his arm around Harry Truman?” In 1967 he conceded that maybe he tended to oversimplify. “That’s the way I am,” he said. “I ask questions to wake up the guy in the audience. It’s the Socratic approach. I didn’t invent it. But it drives the intellectuals nuts.”

If his big talk sets the teeth of millions on edge, other millions find it estimable. However, precious few (Pat and Julie and Tricia, maybe) get a charge out of

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his small talk, which tends to go like this: “The worst thing in the world is to eat heavy food when you have a lot of work to do.”

Dialogue like that may be what caused Maxine Cheshire of The Washington Post to tell Charlotte Curtis of the New York Times, during a joint TV appearance, that Washington under the Nixon administration had something of the gaiety and verve of Paris under the Nazis.

The “dogs” lapse I dismiss, but the Icelandic gaucheries I take more seriously. They may indicate that President Nixon has something on his mind, something that makes him tired, nervous, distraught and apprehensive. He got very tired in the last days of his great contest with John F. Kennedy, and in “The Making of the President 1960” Theodore H. White says candidate Nixon showed the strain by announcing to the populace that his policy was “Peace and Surrender” instead of “Peace without Surrender.”

He said, “We are going to make far more progress in education in the next four years than we did under the present administration”; which wasn’t a very nice way to talk about his own administration. He baffled folks with such befuddled pronouncements as, “I will say this of my opponent, no man has done a better job of fighting communism in the U.N. than Henry Cabot Lodge.”

President Eisenhower’s remark to the effect that if he had a week maybe he could think of an important decision his Vice President had participated in must have really gotten under his Vice President’s skin. Because in that 1960 campaign then-Vice President Nixon got off this all-time classic: “I have sat with the President as he made those lonely decisions.”

But let us close on an inspirational note. One of his biographers (Bela Kornitzer, author of “The Real Nixon”) quotes the President’s mother, Hannah Milhous Nixon, as follows:

“It was during the Teapot Dome scandal. Day after day the papers headlined stories of corruption. One day Richard was lying in front of the fireplace with newspapers spread all over the floor. Suddenly he said; ‘Mother, I would like to become a lawyer—an honest lawyer who can’t be bought by crooks!’”

Now wasn’t that a beautiful thing for a little tad to say to his mother?