



Post 5-28-74

Washington Merry-Go-Round by JACK ANDERSON



WASHINGTON — 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 pattycake 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 employes 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 coverup...The White House is obstructing the Senate Watergate Committee's investigation of presidential pal Bebe Rebozo. Aides have produced written authority 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 Ziebert'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.

'PHANTOM BRAKES'

General Motors hasn't bothered to warn the owners of one million 1968-72 Cadillacs still on the road that a mysterious

brake failure, called "phantom brakes," may plunge them into an accident at any time.

Nor has GM notified the federal government, which monitors such defects. Yet the strange brake malady, which can afflict a Cadillac without warning and vanish before it reaches the garage, has been known to GM since 1968.

There have also been rarer reports of "phantom brake" failures in Chevrolets and Oldsmobiles.

GM has denied to us that any of its cars have dangerous brakes. Said a spokesman: "The brakes on the Cadillac...are among the most effective in the industry... tested thoroughly under the most exacting conditions for millions of miles.

"Every failure," he added, "has a specific definable cause. Whenever an alleged braking complaint is filed, Cadillac attempts to determine the cause." The same is true, he said, for other GM models.

Yet we have had access to documents, which GM seems to have hidden in its deepest files. These reports, which we have made available to the Center for

Auto Safety, dispute the disclaimer from Detroit.

Not only have "phantom brakes" caused sudden crashes, according to the documents, but the GM wizards may not even know what causes the terrifying brake failures.

A typical experience was reported by Mrs. Ethel Harris who was driving her Cadillac sedan in New Kensington, Pa., at about 35 miles per hour. Ahead, she saw cars stopped at a light.

She pressed on her brake pedal, but to her horror the pedal sank flat on the floor. Thinking quickly, she swerved off the road to avoid injuring those in the cars ahead.

Her decision sent her to the hospital, with a broken nose and bad bruises. The Cadillac crashed into a house, causing \$2,000 damage to the car and \$1,000 damage to the home.

Police on the scene tested her brakes and reported the pedal "went all the way to the floor." Yet a few days later, a GM representative found a "good brake pedal" and full brake cylinder. The GM man listed the cause of accident vaguely as "brake pedal fade."

The GM documents cite "phantom brake failure" as the cause of a crash in Colorado involving a new Cadillac. And in Georgia, a Fleetwood owner reported two "phantom brake failures" before a third one sent him jolting into the rear end of a Pontiac, causing two injuries and \$2,800 worth of damages.

In the limited number of Cadillac documents we were able to survey, there were 28 "phantom brake" reports. But the documents hint of many more cases. States one Cadillac official: "We have experienced several of these cases and so far have not been able to diagnose the cause."

The suppressed facts in the GM documents is supported by additional evidence of our own. The Center for Auto Safety has also received complaints from Cadillac owners.

A military officer wrote, for example, that he watched in horror as his wife pumped "the brakes down to the floor" and the big Cadillac rolled helplessly into a crash.

There have been complaints, too, from the owners of other GM cars. An Illinois lawyer wrote to us about a Chevrolet Impala whose "brake pedal went to the floor without any braking action," causing three injuries. Yet mechanics who checked the cars shortly before the accident found no defect.

The auto safety center received a similar complaint from a driver whose Oldsmobile crashed through a store window.

GM sent the master cylinders of "phantom brake" cars to brake experts at Delco Morraine, according to the internal documents. But no final solution to the problem was found.

The center is preparing a complaint to the Transportation Department that GM has had more than five years to find out the reason for "phantom brakes" and to recall the 1968-72 Cadillacs for repairs.

If the Transportation Department finds that GM purposely concealed the "phantom brake" dangers from the government and Cadillac owners, the center will call for federal prosecution.