

LaRue: Bringing Dixie Home to Nixon

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Post 11/3/72
By Myra MacPherson

Frederick Cheney LaRue is Mr. Nixon's southern boy.

While he didn't invent the "Southern strategy," LaRue, a wealthy Jackson, Miss., oil man, has helped operate it since Mr. Nixon's 1968 campaign days.

But more than that, LaRue is John Mitchell's surrogate in the campaign to re-elect the President—a campaign that Mitchell has abandoned only officially. Mitchell still shows up regularly at the Committee for the Re-election of the President.

A one-time unsuccessful dabbler in a Las Vegas gambling casino who has surfaced as one of the most mysterious men in or close to the Watergate bugging and espionage op-

eration, LaRue "keeps Mitchell's hand in when he's not here," one committee source said. LaRue's title is special assistant to campaign chief Clark MacGregor but he is known as "Mitchell's right-hand man," and the "go-between between MacGregor and Mitchell," former Attorney General and Nixon campaign chairman until he resigned July 1.

LaRue is a latter-day Faulknerian character, an insignificant-looking man who left the South for big-time politics—bringing with him the political practice of covert, behind-the-scenes manipulation. A man who passionately sought anonymity throughout his wheeler-dealer days, LaRue, a former unpaid White House counsel, was virtually

Dixie Home to Nixon

a shadow until the bugging break-in of the Democratic National Committee's Watergate headquarters.

Friends and enemies alike describe LaRue as an unprepossessing, nondescript man—a cigar- and pipe-smoking, balding 44-year-old who looks 50, is of middle height, wears glasses and squints a little. The looks deceive anyone who tackles him in golf or tennis. "He just beat the hell out of me in one tennis game," said one acquaintance. "He's madly competitive, plays for blood."

LaRue is an important man.

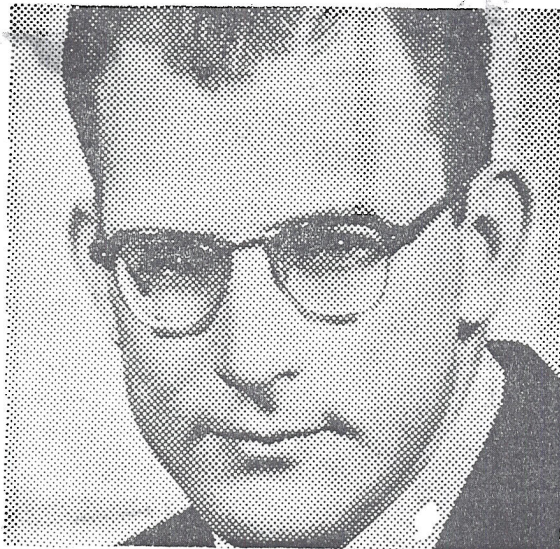
• According to newspaper reports, LaRue was one of the men in charge of shredding; directing a massive "housecleaning" to de-

stroy important re-election committee memos following the bugging break-in of the Democratic National Committee.

One former White House acquaintance said, "I really couldn't say that LaRue would have dumped those records. Hell, all I know is if it had been up to LaRue there would have been *no* records to dump."

According to Alfred Baldwin—a key government witness before the grand jury investigating the Watergate incident who worked for the re-election committee—another committee member issued Baldwin an unregistered gun that once belonged to LaRue. Baldwin, who said he participated in the Watergate raid, recalled a casual conver-

See LaRUE, B3, Col. 1



Fred LaRue in 1963.

sation with LaRue who, Baldwin said, "told me the pistol I was carrying had once been his weapon. As far as I knew, he was not in security work and I did not know why he would have needed a pistol. But I asked no questions."

• As Mitchell's ghost, LaRue is powerful at the committee. Barry Goldwater, for whom LaRue worked during Goldwater's 1964 presidential campaign, grumbled the other day, "I don't know who the hell to report to over at that outfit" (the re-election committee). But he added, "When you get to the nit-pickin' and nut-crackin', the guys running it are LaRue and Mardian."

Robert Mardian was an assistant Attorney General under Mitchell.

• La Rue's political style underscores the secretiveness, silence, loyalty and in-group around President Nixon.

Although he was a White House aide for three years, La Rue was never listed in the White House staff directories and some White House aides today say, "I never heard of him when he was over here." There are no pictures of him; his committee biography reveals only the skimpiest age-rank-serial number facts.

• Today La Rue—who helped woo Wallace votes to Nixon in 1968," is apparently still keeping the "Southern Strategy" is alive and kicking. At least two men, one of them a Republican, running against Mississippi Democratic Sen. James O. Eastland—long considered a White House friend—claim La Rue meddled in campaigns this year aimed at defeating the crusty 67-year-old anticivil rights chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

One Jackson, Miss., newspaperman said, "Fred runs a lot of messages for Eastland

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down here. The administration really owes so much to Eastland. He protected the Justice Department from the beginning in the ITT case and then there was the Senate approval of Nixon's Supreme Court Justices and Kleindienst." During the hearings on Kleindienst's nomination for Attorney General, Eastland said Kleindienst was being "persecuted" and fought against expanding the Kleindienst-ITT probe.

Last spring, Eastland's primary election

opponent, Mississippi lawyer Taylor Webb, said that LaRue had persuaded a Texas advertising agency to drop his (Webb's) campaign account. Webb said no one in Mississippi would handle his advertising campaign, highly critical of Eastland. Mississippi newspaper reports at that time said Texas sources admitted the "President definitely played a role" in the decision to call off the agency.

Webb, now suing the agency, said in a regretful voice that his legal situation did not permit him to talk about the case or LaRue but that he stuck by his original story. "They took my campaign away from me the day they took my agency away from me," he said.

Gil Carmichael, a Republican businessman who describes himself as having "worked like hell for Nixon" and is "moderate" enough to believe "blacks are underpaid," is another story.

"The White House just pulled the rug out from under him," said one Mississippian.

Helping to pull the rug was LaRue, according to Carmichael, reached as he crisscrossed the state in his current campaign against Eastland—whom Carmichael terms "The Kingfish," "The Godfather" and the possessor of the South's "most powerful political machine."

"LaRue is the liaison man between Eastland and the White House," said Carmichael. "Six months ago LaRue gave me a real tough talk, said I was going to make an 'enemy' of Eastland if I ran against him. Asked if he thought that was a threat, Carmichael laughed and said, "that's a pretty good way to put it."

Carmichael soon had his "suspicions" about LaRue: "From the time I talked to him things began to happen."

Carmichael recounted that he had had his picture taken with President Nixon and like several other senatorial candidates, wanted to use it for campaign purposes. "Everyone else got theirs, but mine 'just got lost.' Then I wasn't on the podium at the convention when they introduced all the other senatorial candidates. The only thing I can put my finger on is Mr. LaRue was protecting Mr. Eastland. But the worst thing that aggravated me was Kleindienst coming down to endorse Eastland to a 'fat cat crowd.' That's that whole Kleindienst-Mitchell-LaRue group."

Eastland says in his soft voice, "Well, lady, I don't know anything about any of that," and didn't know anything about LaRue working in his behalf. "Course, I'd judge he'd vote for me. He's a friend of mine. I expect I'll get half the Republican votes down here."

Eastland and Fred's father, Ike Parsons LaRue Sr., were "intimate friends" who "went fishing," Eastland says. I. P. LaRue Sr.—who left the oil fields of Texas for Mississippi in the '30s—struck it rich in Bolton oil field, about 25 miles west of Jackson, in the '50s. Fred, who got a degree in geology

at the University of Oklahoma in 1951 was back working for his father. LaRue companies discovered seven oil or gas fields in the 8 tics, Eastland paused and said, "Indirectly."

LaRue money was, as they say in the South, "spread around" in lots of campaigns. One Mississippian said, "Whether it's warranted or not, the LaRues have a reputation of backing anybody. Whoever wins, you're covered—you've got some friends on the oil or gas boards."

Today the money is reported to have dwindled — one acquaintance said "I think

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2 state in the '50s, at one time, one company, Larco Drilling and Exploration Corporation, drilled about 30 wells a year. One of their oil fields was reportedly sold for \$30 million in the late 1950s.

4 Asked if LaRue's father was ever in poli- Fred piddled some of it away in bad investments," LaRue himself said last spring, "I'm no millionaire."

Fred's brother, Ike, says most of the oil investments, including Larco, have been sold and the family now owns mostly real estate — a bowling alley, a dude ranch resort in Ocean Springs, Miss., and other land.

Last spring, Fred LaRue said the family "lost our rear ends" when they bought the Castaways in Las Vegas in 1963. The small hotel and casino was "just a shack" by Las Vegas standards, according to oddsmaker Jimmy the Greek Snyder.

"The LaRue's? Never heard of them. If they were anything important, I would have known them," he said.

The LaRue's sold out in 1964. According to a Long Island Newsday story by Martin Schram, Fred LaRue's name never showed up on the Castaways lease — just Ike's, although another partner said both LaRues were partners.

Mississippians say Fred and his brother, Ike, their sister, Ruthie Owens, and their widowed mother, are close and close-mouthed. The family is so tied in each other that it is "kind of disgusting to other people, I think" said Ruthie the other day.

Until recently all of them owned homes in what is called the LaRue compound on a river outside of Jackson, which consists of their own tennis court and \$100,000 homes. The homes are being sold. Ruthie says, after

a pause, that she isn't sure why they are being sold and didn't know exactly where Fred's wife, Joyce, and their five children would move.

When LaRue is in Washington, which is most of the time these days, he stays in his Watergate apartment. His sister says LaRue's wife has been a "real good sport" about his traveling. "They've done a marvelous job of working this out. It'd be awful hard for me to take."

Ike Jr. is affably taciturn, volunteering no information, responding in monosyllables to questions.

The family is especially silent about the hunting accident in the late '50s when LaRue accidentally shot and killed his father. Ike says, "Dad died in 1957. He was killed in a hunting accident, yes." Responding to another question, Ike said "Fred was involved, yes." LaRue's sister says she does not know the details. "I never asked. It was just one of those unavoidable things." Eastland, added that Fred was "busted up over the whole thing for years."

No one in the family could recall any interesting details about LaRue, the youngest in the family, who carries the nickname of "Bubba." His sister says, "He's quiet almost pensive at times." Asked if he thought Fred was modest, Ike Jr. said "I wouldn't say so."

LaRue shows little anger and quietly recedes into the background at meetings.

Although he is now carefully insulated from the press behind a screen of press aides at the re-election committee, there was a time when nationally known newspaperman met him occasionally. Opinions on LaRue varied.

But, in Mississippi LaRue evokes considerable skepticism, wariness and downright dislike, particularly among liberals—"Whatever that means in Mississippi" one Democrat said with a laugh. Pat Derian, Democratic national committeewoman in Mississippi, said "He's a hustler who'll do anything."

LaRue moved into national politics when he was Mississippi's Republican national committeeman from 1963-68.

Goldwater remembers him helping in his 1964 campaign ("He is a top source in the South") and as a good friend—although LaRue reportedly said of Goldwater after that campaign, "That's the last time I'm running with a dummy."

Goldwater doesn't know when LaRue met Mitchell but he said LaRue "advised Mitchell on what to do about the South" in 1968.

LaRue's job, according to Joe McGinnis in "The Selling of the President," was to woo Southerners away from George Wallace but in such a way that it would not upset the people in the rest of the country.

LaRue was anonymous enough for McGinnis to tag him as being from Atlanta rather than Jackson.

LaRue had a map of the South with pins stuck in it to represent areas where "Strom Thurmond commercials" were used. Thur-

mond talked about crime and busing and the Supreme Court and in LaRue's words, the commercials were used "very selectively." They never got north to Washington or New York.

LaRue's memos stated that the "anti-Wallace message" will be indirect—"between the lines" and "regional code words." McGinnis' interpretation of this is, "It was all right to chase the Wallace vote but not all right to get caught."

LaRue's propaganda suggestions included special Country and Western-style ballads talking about how Nixon would "Bring Our Country Back" to the "good" and "decent" life. There were enough stanzas to "allow issues to be included or excluded as the local situation indicates."

LaRue argued that the songs must be aired to do the most good, reaching those who "watch Country and Western and wrestling." They were placed on shows like the Wally Fowler Gospel Hour and Chattahoochee RFD.

LaRue's role was very obscure at the White House—where he worked without pay, apparently for the love of it. "He's just a guy who likes to hang around," says Clark Reed, Mississippi's state Republican party chairman. Last spring, LaRue himself said he just came along quietly with Mr. Nixon—"I guess you sort of ease into that situation."

One minor thing people can pinpoint LaRue did that was serve as a liaison to Southern leaders for the Cabinet Committee on Education. A Nixon organization billed as helping to desegregate schools, it was controversial. Some education experts said it

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did some good, but those in the civil rights movement generally regarded it as no more than cosmetic window dressing.

These days, LaRue has pretty much given up his leisure time in Jackson's oldest country club and the Petroleum Club, as well as the fishing and hunting and tennis.

LaRue is regarded by many as a man who has left home mentally as well as physically.

"I think he's just enamored of big-time politics," said one acquaintance. "He's just left Mississippi."