

Maine Dinner

Why Republicans Were Laughing

By Mary McGrory

Washington Star-News

Republicans might learn something from the fund-raising dinner held for Representative William Cohen of Maine.

First, serve lobster. Republicans wearing bibs and tearing at lobster claws cannot look or be serious.

Second, Do not mention the leader of the party by name. Out of sight, out of mind.

Analysis
and
Opinion

Third, have Elliot Richardson as the guest speaker. Unemployment has brought out a capacity for drollery previously unsuspected of him and totally beyond other Republicans in this winter of their woe.

The clergyman who gave the invocation at the gathering of some 200 friends of Cohen, a 33-year-old freshman with a bright future and a substantial campaign debt, thanked the Lord in advance for "laughter and merry times together." It was a prayer that became a fact.

What added greatly were those undercurrents which can turn an evening into an occasion. They were provided by the presence of two prominent associates of the President and people wondered what it meant.

Vice President Gerald R. Ford turned up at the reception, socialized widely and gladly posed with Richardson, whose resignation helped plunge the President into the abyss where Republicans now dwell.

He could not stay for the lobster, Ford explained, because he had to press on for dinner with the presidents of three television networks. That is not company the White House keeps, and it seemed that Ford was going his own way.

The mistress of ceremonies was White House counselor Anne Armstrong, the handsome black-haired Texas lady who explained there had been nothing "awkward" about her coming.

She called Richardson "one of the truly great, outstanding men of our era."

from a glass by the lectern, he observed, "That, by the way, is water."

Richardson twitted Cohen, who introduced him as "a man of fire and intelligence" for not having once referred to him as "a national folk hero." He went on to speak of a New Orleans commentator who told him, "You were almost a national folk hero."

"I didn't mind the 'were'," said the former starchy Yankee. "It was the 'almost'."

What Richardson wants to be, of course, is president. But how? He is Mr. Conscience to liberals of both parties, but Mr. Trouble to the regulars of his own who prize loyalty above all other qualities, and who are unassuaged by Richardson's meticulous failure to criticize the President. Richardson has potential, but no base. All he has is an office in the Woodrow Wilson center. He is in demand as a speaker, but if he chooses to support only those who are demonstrating conscience in the present crisis, he may not get around the country too much.

He has a theme. He spoke of "the need to bring to an end the old fakery in politics."

He subtly cast his remarks in the mold of Boston, where "dirty tricks" are routine. He told of the evils of "turning out the faithful — even the faithful dead." The second evil was "cutting up your opponents" as he described the hired whisperers who go from bar to bar speaking calumny. Some of it haunts him from 1962. He described crises-creating and promises-breaking.

Take away the Boston touches, and it sounded a bit like the 1972 campaign, in which he served as a surrogate candidate.

"It makes sense to level with them," he said of the American people, who are now pursuing white papers from the White House.

The new politics — and it is a new phase for him — "is more and more gaining momentum," he reported.

Reporters asked him later where he saw it happening. He answered that he saw evidence on Capitol Hill.

"I'd like to give it a push," he added.

Nobody ever thought of Richardson as a wit until the Cohen dinner. But if he can make Republicans laugh today, he may yet become a folk hero to them. Nobody else has been able to do it lately.

This is hardly the White House view of the former practically everything of the Nixon cabinet. During "Operation Candor," he was cut up behind the scenes at the executive mansion as a person whose veracity and drinking habits left much to be desired.

Richardson took a sharp note of the latter in his opening remarks. Taking a sip