

White House Parley on Aging May Be Political Arena

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WASHINGTON, Oct. 24—

With more than a year to go before the next Presidential election, politicians seem to be converting the White House Conference on Aging, scheduled for next month, into a 1972 campaign staging ground.

The White House is laying plans to use the conference as a platform for President Nixon's appeals to over-65 voters.

Democrats and organized labor, meanwhile, are maneuvering to produce a set of conference proposals that would demonstrate how little has been done, in their view, for the aged by the incumbent Republican Administration.

Spokesmen for the elderly, far from resenting the sudden attention to a segment of the voting population that includes more than 19 million people and has been overshadowed by attention to the new under-21 voters, are relishing the opportunity to convert the conference into a focal point for the politics of aging.

Eve of Election Year

By an accident of bureaucratic planning, the conference will assemble here three days after Thanksgiving—and on the eve of election year 1972.

Its delegates, frustrated by what they consider decades of lip service to the problems of the aged, will display a militancy matching the mood of their younger American offspring.

They will recite statistics that provide a framework for their lives, such as the following:

¶One in 19 Americans lives in the environment of loneliness, illness and idleness that is the nation's reward for longevity.

¶One-fourth of those over 65 are officially designated among the impoverished.

¶Nearly half the aged blacks make their homes in central cities whose abandonment mirrors their own.

But the statistic that will play the biggest part in determining how the White House conference comes to grips with the issues of aging is the fundamental one of more than 19 million eligible voters.

The White House has made it clear to conference officials that it wants a favorable image of President Nixon to emerge from the debates over retirement income, national health insurance, nursing home care and similar issues. Simultaneously, it has balked at the planners' efforts to guarantee such a result by adopting programs now that will help the aged.

Democrats whose Congressional committees have examined the problems of the elderly for decades are suddenly re-examining them in hearings that afford an opportunity to warn the White House that many believe conference rhetoric will not suffice.

Activist leaders of groups representing the elderly have maneuvered Democrats and labor officials into key positions on conference panels in the hope of forcing a President seeking re-election to deliver on concrete proposals for assistance that will be developed by the panels.

President Nixon's first three White House conferences—on

hunger in 1969, on children last year and on youth earlier this year—produced recommendations at odds with White House political goals, detailed criticism of the Administration and reports that have been all but disregarded. By March, it appeared to many that the conference on aging was likely to yield similar results.

Spokesmen for blacks, Indians, Spanish-speaking Americans and the blind and even experts in rehabilitation were complaining that their roles would be minimal.

At hearings by the Senate Select Committee on Aging, the White House was accused of stacking preconference technical committees with Republicans.

Representative David Pryor, Democrat of Arkansas, held unofficial hearings on nursing home conditions in a house trailer to dramatize what he regarded as inattention to that problem.

The White House called in Arthur S. Fleming, retired president of Macalester College in Minnesota, who was an Eisenhower era Secretary of Health, Education and Welfare, to be chairman of the conference.

Mr. Nixon knew that, among Republicans, Mr. Fleming's credentials among the elderly were unequalled.

At the first White House conference on aging, during the last days of the Eisenhower Administration in 1961, Mr. Fleming secretly engineered an endorsement of Medicare, which his superiors, including the unsuccessful Presidential candidate, Richard Nixon, had opposed.

Since March of this year, Mr. Fleming has worked quietly in much the same fashion to attempt to strengthen the conference's image.

His style is described by Charles H. Chaskes, president of the National Association of State Units of Aging, as a "grand manner; he's not averse to calling Cabinet members to a meeting."

In June, Mr. Fleming set these immediate goals:

¶To involve Mr. Nixon personally in the nursing home issue.

¶To create a Cabinet committee on aging.

¶To produce a series of specific benefits for the elderly before Thanksgiving to take the edge off anti-Administration sentiment at the conference.

One associate said Mr. Fleming's objective was to "recognize the conference process as a political lever and use it to get results."

Mr. Fleming achieved the first two goals. By the end of June, the President had delivered an address in Chicago declaring that Medicare and Medicaid funds should not go to substandard nursing homes.

That policy was solidified in an Aug. 6 order issued by Mr. Nixon during a tour of a model nursing home in, not coincidentally, New Hampshire, where the first Presidential primary will be held. The order directed that efforts to upgrade staff nursing home standards were to be "consolidated" at the Department of Health, Education and Welfare.

Officials in the department had argued that the order should specify that the activi-

ties be "coordinated" by the department, but Mr. Fleming prevailed in retaining the stronger language.

One argument he was said to have used to persuade the White House of his logic was that elderly voters were too sophisticated—and, by now, too demanding—to be satisfied with another round of rhetoric.

'Mashed Potatoes' Scorned

"The recommendation went something like this," said an informant. "O.K., the President wants to capitalize on this, but don't send him out in the field with a bunch of mashed potatoes."

In the case of the Cabinet committee, John D. Ehrlichman, Mr. Nixon's domestic affairs adviser, and H. R. Haldeman, White House chief of staff, were reported reluctant to give the panel any specific mandate other than to achieve "the good life" for the elderly.

But conference officials retorted that such a superficial role was not politically helpful. In their view, the Administration could attain specific achievements without spending huge new sums of money if it coordinated activities of various agencies through the Cabinet committee.

For example, one possibility is to provide public transportation for inner-city elderly. The Department of Transportation has funds for equipment, but not for operating vehicles. The Labor Department, H.E.W. and the Office of Economic Opportunity have money for personnel. The solution, Mr. Fleming's staff suggested, was simply to pool resources.

Flemming Allies Hopeful

With the conference drawing near, such concrete programs have yet to emerge, however, and Mr. Fleming's allies now say they are only "hopeful" of achieving the goal of dulling conference criticism of the Administration by giving delegates something to praise.

They assert that Mr. Nixon is enthusiastic about programs when they can get his ear, but that all too often they cannot get past his aides.

The allies appear to be unconcerned about possibly incurring the wrath of White House officials.

Referring to Mr. Ehrlichman, one conference activist said, "What can he do now? Nothing, or he'll jeopardize 19-million countable votes."

To mollify some critics, Mr. Fleming created co-chairmanships of conference panels and made the appointees to them, mostly Democrats, labor officials and representatives of the lobbies for the aging. He also designated them the presiding officers of the panels.

He inserted in the conference schedule an open forum, with the retired Chief Justice, Earl Warren, as chairman, and set up a series of unofficial panels whose reports on such topics as the black aged or consumer problems will become part of the official record.

Such moves have won a grudging respect from such activists as Nelson H. Cruikshank, a one-time labor official who is president of the National Council of Senior Citizens.

Before Mr. Fleming's appointment, Mr. Cruikshank was

warning that the conference might "set back this nation's efforts on behalf of its older population."

Now he says, "We've got our fingers crossed."

Not all the critics have been silenced. Democratic Presidential aspirants keep popping up at meetings of senior citizen groups to assert that the White House has forgotten the aged.

And in Congress, the latest round of House hearings has begun. Representatives John Brademas, Democrat of Indiana, and William J. Randall, Democrat of Missouri, initiated what both called "extensive" hearings in separate subcommittees.

Mr. Fleming had to appear before both on successive days to give the identical testimony.

Everyone involved keeps asserting that it is time for action instead of rhetoric, but hardly any action is expected, other than Mr. Randall's plan to make several "field trips" with his committee during the campaign year 1972.

Nutrition to Be Studied

Two years after the White House Conference on Nutrition examined the concerns of the elderly, the White House Conference on Aging will examine, among other things, nutrition.

With so many efforts under way to re-examine well-known problems and reissue well-developed statistics, some even question the value of holding a conference on aging.

But those who favor conducting it cite the accident of timing that schedules it on the eve of a national election year.

"I'm not going to question his motivation, but in the last several months the President has shown an interest in the elderly," said Mr. Chaskes. "If the fact that next year is an election year is what precipitated it, so be it."

Or, as one conference strategist stated it, "We'd be derelict if we didn't try to use this to magnify, in quantum jumps, the political leverage of the elderly to achieve their objectives. You can't do that in an off-year."