

Behind the Claus Ouster

By Russell Baker

OBSERVER

WASHINGTON, Dec. 13—The White House announced today that President Nixon has accepted the resignation of Santa Claus.

Reports that Claus's resignation had been picked up in a moment of Presidential pique after the old man had refused Mr. Nixon's request for a new mountain for Christmas were "non-sense," according to White House publicists. So is the White House's statement that Claus "had long expressed a desire to leave public life and spend more time at home with his family."

It is no secret in Washington (see Jack Anderson's column of Jan. 6, 1971) that Claus and Mrs. Claus have not been on speaking terms since 1969 when Claus made his annual round-the-world trip by Pan American instead of sleigh and carried on scandalously with two stewardesses over the Christmas punch bowl in the first-class lounge.

Claus's home, moreover, consists of a large number of surly, underpaid elves who work under barbarous conditions in an unheated factory next to his house, and twelve reindeer. Two years ago he required the legal services of Edward Bennett Williams to defend himself before the N.L.R.B. against charges of sweating elf labor in a cold shop.

So much for White House pieties about Claus's yearning for private life. The facts behind his resignation are rather more interesting. In fact, the debate over Claus's resignation has pitted the President's political executioners against his image polishers.

The former take intense pride in their own ruthlessness. Among each other they compete with boasts calculated to show that one is more savage than the other in his loyalty to President Nixon. If one boasts that he would gladly kick out his grandmother's last tooth for the President, another immediately announces that he would give his own son a crewcut.

With such men at the President's elbow, what more natural than that one night one should say, "I'd kick Santa Claus in the kidneys for the President?" And that another, forced to raise the ante, would reply: "Call that loyalty? Why, I'd fire Santa Claus for the President."

This offer had an attentive audience. The President has been sick and tired of Claus for some time. Privately, he has complained that Claus has consistently failed to speak out for the

work ethic. The random handouts with which Claus has been associated have always been regarded within the Administration as evidence of leftish economic tendencies.

It is likely that Claus would have gone the way of George Romney and Father Hesburgh long before now had the President's image advisers not insisted that he be kept until after the election.

The breaking point came the day after Thanksgiving when the President made a secret trip down from the mountain to meet with Claus. The President's mood was not improved by being forced to stand in line until his turn came to approach Claus on a gaudy throne.

Nor, we may imagine, was his temper brightened by listening to the attending mothers and fathers comment among themselves about what a lovable man Santa Claus was.

Certainly we know that when the President's turn came and he sat down on Claus's lap to have his picture taken, his reply to Claus's first question—"And what do you want me to bring you for Christmas, Mister President?"—was not, as alleged in certain news magazines, "a new mountain and a Washington Redskins' football helmet."

Not at all. What the President said was, "You think you're more lovable than I am, don't you, Claus?"

Claus denied it, but the more lovably he denied it, the more vehement the President became until, at length, he proposed a competition.

Claus would sit on his throne and the President would sit in his President's chair, and everybody would line up, and as the file went past everybody would have to decide whether to sit on Claus's lap or on the President's lap, and that way they could tell who was the most lovable.

Claus protested because he knew that all the people in the line would be oil kings, textile dukes, banking earls, electronics marquesses, aerospace barons and publishing baronets, and he was right. Every last person chose to bypass Claus's lap for the President's, and their Christmas wishes have been coming true ever since.

Claus will be on the street corner shaking a bell over an empty pot today. One would think he'd get out and get a job instead of waiting for a handout.