

Bebe Rebozo

A day in the life of Key Biscayne's 'mayor'

By [Name] 1971, Newsday

Key Biscayne is a small, quiet and pretty place in the Florida sun. It has one bank, one yacht club, several hotels and a multitude of palm trees. Many of its residents know each other.

If Key Biscayne were to have an unofficial mayor or unofficial leading citizen, that man might very well be a local millionaire of Cuban descent, who has worked his way up from poor boy to world celebrity.

That one local bank is his. That yacht club is in his debt since he rescued it from financial disaster, and his is the most celebrated boat at its dock.

He makes his first appearance in the Key Biscayne sunshine in the early hours of most mornings, emerging vigorously from one of the houses in a well hedged and closely guarded presidential compound. He is a chunky man, about 5 feet 6 inches tall, 58 years old, and well tanned, with black hair silvering at the temples. He is always neatly dressed.

He is neither a government employee nor a government official. But his name and face

are famous for the same reason that he is able to occupy the only one of five houses inside the presidential compound, guarded by the Secret Service, not used by official personnel.

He is Charles Gregory Rebozo, known as Bebe, and he enjoys the very important position of closest friend to the President of the United States.

Privately public

Rebozo is at once one of the most public and the most private men in America. His face has adorned the cover of *Life* and prominent spots in other magazines. His name regularly appears in news articles around the world. He enjoys hobnobbing with famous political figures, relaxing with the

President, and receiving some of the attentions that such status can bring. But he maintains a shell of privacy around a but the most formal aspect of these activities, and also around his personal life and business.

By 7 a.m. of most mornings Rebozo has started his business day. He has left the presidential compound and is often to be found at a conference breakfast at the Royal Biscayne Hotel, the Key Biscayne

Hotel or the Sonesta Hotel.

From there, on most days, he travels to a small bank nearby, a bank of which he is the board chairman and president. The time at which he makes that trip generally is changed from day to day to avoid encounters with the press.

If, on his way to the bank, he passes any of the many local residents who he knows, he will give them a friendly wave. To most of them, he is a friendly but shy man who helps out in community activities.

Once in his office at the bank that he founded, where pictures of President Nixon and former Sen. George A. Smathers (D-Fla.) hang on the wall, he goes to work.

Hard-driving businessman

A study of Rebozo reveals that he is a hard-driving businessman, shrewd, and usually tough and exacting in making a deal. He has been described as an ultra-conservative in business matters by one associate, who jokingly says that Rebozo is "so careful that he wears a belt and suspenders."

Rebozo is capable of great tact and charm, many of his friends say. Donald Berg, owner of Key Biscayne's Jamaica Inn, a favorite Rebozo watering spot, describes him as "a real gentleman and a very kind man."

One middle-class couple that retired to Key Biscayne recently gushed: "He's so democratic, he'll always come

over to your table at the yacht club and smile and pass a few words — publicity hasn't turned his head."

The other side

He also is capable, however, of quick flashes of anger, an occasionally demanding attitude, and of throwing his weight around, particularly if he thinks he is being picked upon. A waitress in a Key Biscayne hotel remembers how Rebozo tried to have her fired when she told him that she resented his attitude as former

baritone at the Jamaica Inn said that he could be "arrogant and demanding."

Rebozo enjoys many forms of relaxation. He likes to boat, fish, drink at Tropic Shores in New York and be seen with sports personalities. He became a friend of the late heavyweight champion Rocky Marciano and attended fights with him. And in 1960 he teamed up with Atlanta restaurateur Harry Danner and other undisclosed partners in an abortive bid to get the Miami

franchise from the American Football League.

But the study of Rebozo indicates that he most prefers the company of politicians and businessmen who move in political circles. In the early years, it was Smathers and the

men around him. Later, it was Mr. Nixon and Smathers and the political figures that Smathers brought down to Florida for a few relaxing days in the sun.

Rebozo is proud of a wristwatch that was presented to him by Lady Bird Johnson, and he has entertained her husband and other Washington figures in company with Smathers. And he has occasionally entertained Sen. Russell B. Long (D-La.), the former Senate whip. One of Rebozo's favorite pre-Nixon pictures was taken in 1955 and shows him on his boat with his guests: Johnson, Smathers, the late Sen. Richard Russell (D-Ga.), former Sen. Earle Clements (D-

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Ky.) and Sen. Stuart Symington (D-Mo.)

Son of immigrants

Rebozo was born Nov. 17, 1912, the youngest of nine children of parents who had arrived in Tampa from Havana. He was nicknamed as a child because of a brother's trouble in properly pronouncing the word "baby." He went to



President Nixon and his host, Bebe Rebozo, board Rebozo's houseboat at Key Biscayne for a cruise to the Florida Keys in August, 1968, three months before Mr. Nixon was elected. Dockmaster is at right.

school in Miami, where the family had moved, and helped swell the family income by delivering newspapers and plucking chickens.

Rebozo married his 17-year-old sweetheart, Clara Gunn. But, according to some published reports, they never lived together as man and wife, and the marriage was annulled several years later. He married her again in 1946 and moved out in 1948, and they were divorced in 1950, childless.

He is devoted to his mother, Carmen, now in her 90s, for whom he has named a real estate corporation. She lives in a home that he maintains for her in Coral Gables.

He went through Miami High School, where he became a friend of such schoolmates as W. Sloan McCrea, who later became a banker and an important business associate, and Smathers, who later became U.S. senator and the man who introduced Rebozo to Nixon.

Learning to fly

Rebozo worked first as a chauffeur for the Florida Year Round Club, and then as a mechanic's helper in the Biltmore garage. Finally, in 1933, he opened his own gas station in Miami. As he built up the gas station, he also learned to fly.

Just before the United States entered the war in 1941, Rebozo mortgaged his gas station to expand the business, and during the war he specialized in recapped tires. Business boomed in that era of rubber rationing, and he became one of the biggest suppliers of recaps in southern Florida.

During the war, Rebozo became a civilian navigator in a Miami-based unit of the Air Transport Command. He

to Africa, but his duties, which always returned him to Miami, left him ample time to check on the gas station.

The Goon Squad

It was in that period that Rebozo began to associate politically with what later became known as the "Goon Squad," a small group who had hitched their fortunes to Smathers' rising political star. After the war, Rebozo moved more directly into the Smathers or-

ganization. He became the No. 1 aide to McCrea, by then the No. 1 aide to Smathers.

Many of the other members of the group would later hold top positions in the Democratic Party and in state and federal government or would become men of importance and power in Florida business circles.

Today, among other holdings, Rebozo can count a lion's share of the Key Biscayne

Bank & Trust Co., of which he is the president and chairman, part of an adjoining office building; a house on Key Biscayne; large chunks of stock in corporations that own most of the only undeveloped island in Miami's harbor; a flourishing title company in neighboring Monroe County; a string of coin-operated laundries; a combination of a gas station and stores; a land bank in undeveloped western Dade County, and some strategically placed building plots in the Greater Miami area.

Millionaire

The last available net-worth statement was filed by Rebozo on Sept. 1, 1967, with the Small Business Administration in connection with a loan that he was repaying to that federal agency.

In that statement, Rebozo valued his own holdings, after the deduction of debts, at \$682,295.61. In the intervening years, a number of Rebozo's investments have grown in value; in some cases, property listed on the 1967 statement has since been sold for several times the value listed there;

additional properties and holdings have been acquired and some holdings were not included in the 1967 statement. Allowing for those factors, Rebozo's present net worth goes well over \$1 million.