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THE NIXONS' CLOSEST FRIEND

In a remarkable interview, Bebe Rebozo, who has been with the First Family through all the months of Watergate, tells how they are bearing up under the strain

BY NICK THIMMESCH

"I will tell you, I would rather have served six months in jail than to have gone through all I have in the past year." The speaker is Charles Gregory (Bebe) Rebozo, who has been pursued for months by a relentless army of newsmen and investigators, their curiosity fired by the strange story of the \$100,000 contribution from Howard Hughes, by Rebozo's congenital secretiveness and, of course, by the fact that he is well known as the President's closest friend.

As we talked in Rebozo's office in his Key Biscayne bank, cluttered with memorabilia of the famous men he has known (George Smathers, John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson, Nixon), he mentioned that there was even then a photographer camped outside the door. "They've all been here," he said. "The networks, the guys with the long lenses, reporters who think I've done everything bad under the sun. It is very painful when people make up stories about me. That's the worst that has happened—the criticism. I have been harassed unmercifully by the IRS and by the Senate Watergate Committee. This is a penalty I must pay for my friendship with the President."

But Rebozo's problems are small

compared with those of his friend, and I asked him how Nixon has borne up over the past year. "Some statements I would make about him," Rebozo said, "would seem to be hogwash in the light of all the news we've had. I don't want to sound corny, but he is thrilled at the sight of the American flag. His hobby is his government work. I can't get him to take time off; he puts all his time into his work. He's been that way all the years I've known him."

Rebozo has been, as he puts it, "at the President's side practically every weekend." Bebe was standing by as the government was shaken by the resignations of key White House staffers, as once-trusted aides were indicted and highly regarded men like Elliot Richardson, Archibald Cox and William Ruckelshaus were catapulted from the administration, as though shot from a cannon.

"I keep telling him," Rebozo said, "won't it be great when we're both out of this? And he says, 'Bebe, that's a long way off.'"

"The only time I heard him discuss resignation was when he played the devil's-advocate role once at Camp David with his family. They argued against it, of course.

"I have discussed resignation with the President many times. Even before the nineteen-seventy-two election I told him, 'I would like to see you get out now.' He always said, 'No, Bebe, we'll go for another term.' He said he had to see it through.

"In recent conversations I told him that he would be personally better off if he were out. It's like a fight manager saying, 'You better get outta there, they're beating your brains out.' I told him he has to start living a normal life again.

"But while I was saying he would be better off personally, I always told him that he couldn't let people down by resigning. What was his response? Well, he gave me a look as though to say, 'I have heard that before, Bebe.' And I say to myself, What is a punk kid like you, Bebe, without a college education, doing talking to the President of the United States that way?"

Rebozo has long been a kind of Latin uncle in the Nixon family, and is much beloved by Pat, Tricia and especially Julie. And he has spent a great deal of time with the family in recent months. "They're phenomenal," Rebozo says. "They want him to stay in there. This ordeal has brought them even closer. Pat has held up very well. The only time I ever saw her cry was after the nineteen-sixty election. The girls take it all in by reading the papers and watching television. The President asks them not to do this, but they do it anyway.

"Julie is sensitive, brilliant and compassionate. She is a sounding board for the President. Tricia lives in New York, and we don't see her that much. On the surface she is not as emotional as Julie, but she is very strong.

"The President just holds it all in. I don't think that's good for anybody." He points to his head with his index finger. "I think the strength is right there. I don't see how any human being can take it. But he has a powerful mind and acts as though he is saying, Forgive them, they know not what they say."

I asked Rebozo if Nixon felt betrayed by his underlings—the once-key men now under indictment or awaiting jail.

"He wouldn't tell/turn to page 22

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you, even if he did feel betrayed," Rebozo said. "He would keep it to himself.

"Haldeman did a good job," he went on, "but it would have been much better for the President if he'd had a guy at his right hand who knew politics. Many of these problems could have been avoided."

Rebozo also feels that the President "should have stayed out of revealing his income taxes," and, of course, one of the people who urged him to do that was Press Secretary Ron Ziegler. "Public relations for the White House hasn't been very good," Rebozo said. "Ron Ziegler is a nice young man, but he doesn't know public relations."

"Inwardly," he went on, "the President has got to be disappointed in some of the men he had under him. But he's got enough cheeks to keep turning."

Rebozo's references to Nixon as a brave, suffering, almost Christ-like figure are repeated when he describes Nixon's bout with pneumonia. "The problem with him," Rebozo told me, "is that he always uses mind over matter. He won't let himself feel bad. His temperature zooms up, but he doesn't think he is a mortal man.

"He doesn't feel the country can have a weak leader. I remember after Agnew resigned, people high in the White House came to the President and said, 'Don't nominate a Vice-President yet—let them wait until the impeachment proceeding is under way.' But he said, 'No, we must have a Vice-President. The country can't be without a Vice-President. I'm going to nominate Jerry Ford.'"

For Rebozo to be there during such moments of history is an experience that makes him regret that he didn't go to college and that he didn't read more. It also makes him angry at those who annoy the President and at what he considers petty-minded newsmen challenging Nixon's finances. "He's never cared about money in his whole life," says Rebozo—who has cared about money a great deal.

He talks of the "cogs turning in Nixon's brain," of the President's "cubby-hole mind" where all manner of information is stored. And yet Rebozo speaks of the President's intellect in a different way when it comes to his tax problems. "In that innocent mind of his," says Rebozo, "he left his tax work for others to do because he was working on world problems."

Rebozo's face grows hard when he speaks of Nixon's tormentors. He is hostile toward the press, and admittedly he has been burned by some bad stories. One suggested he was in on the plot to assassinate John F. Kennedy, and another accused him of recruiting the Cubans who were involved in the Watergate break-in. He is referred to in print as a "Cuban exile," therefore supposedly influencing the President to remain anti-Castro against Dr. Kissinger's wishes. (Actually,

he was born in Tampa, Florida, and never lived in Cuba.)

"I wonder what's going to happen to the press in the years ahead," Rebozo says darkly. "I believe in a free press, but . . ." and then he muttered about some kind of "regulation."

Some people feel that Rebozo's attitudes toward the press and many other things mirror those of the President. They have, after all, been friends for 24 years and have shared countless hours together. Most people who know them both feel that they are a great deal alike; both are naturally quiet, retiring, and like their privacy; they believe in the work ethic, overt patriotism and admire self-made men; they share a disdain for crowds and big parties, like sports and Spanish cooking and drink very little. They are also both 61 years old. "One reason I think they get along so well," said one friend of Rebozo's, "is that they are both old maids."

Yet Nixon and Rebozo each have qualities the other doesn't. The political fire has always burned in Nixon's belly. Nixon never showed an interest in making or ability to make money. Nixon is a lifelong family man. Nixon worked his way to the big time, constantly traveled abroad, became a world figure because of his career and wants to be remembered by posterity. Rebozo shunned political life, displayed zeal and success in business enterprise. He had two odd marriages to the same woman, has no children, and his friends say he'll never marry again. Rebozo became prominent through association with others, is known nationally only through his friendship with Nixon and would probably just as soon be forgotten by the public as soon as possible.

Also Rebozo is not as introverted as Nixon and has a far wider circle of friends. In January, 1973, he returned to Florida from a visit with Nixon and found a letter from former President Lyndon Johnson, inviting him to visit the ranch in April. But within an hour the news flashed that President Johnson had died.

That invitation wasn't publicized by Rebozo nor was his relationship with Johnson. He had visited the ranch before and had entertained Johnson on his houseboat. In fact, he has had more Democratic friends than Republican, usually voted Democratic and registered Republican in 1968 only out of respect to Nixon.

Indeed, Democrat George Smathers, a charming wheeler-dealer during his years in the Senate, is the key to what some people regard as the mysterious house of Rebozo. Smathers grew up with Rebozo in the Buena Vista section of Miami during the '20s. The Smatherses had some money, the Rebozos didn't, but George Smathers made friends with the Rebozos, mostly through playing sandlot baseball with Bebe's older brother, Willie. Among Bebe's other schoolmates at Miami

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High School was Sloan McCrea, now a powerful Miami businessman. "Bebe was warm, unselfish and polite," McCrea says. "He had the qualities found in a person coming from a poor family. Bebe's mother instilled these qualities in her son. She is a gracious woman."

Rebozo is very proud of his mother and how hard she worked to keep the family of nine children together. "My mother is ninety-six now," he says. "When I see her face, I know she is feeling bad about all this publicity about me. My mother tells me she is afraid somebody is going to kill me. I tell her no, no, that won't happen. But this is very hard on her."

"My father had a tough time in the 'twenties and in the Depression. He was a cigar maker. He required us to speak only Spanish at home. I was very conscious of being Latin."

"I worked in the 'thirties, from eight A.M. until ten P.M. and got two dollars and sixty cents a day. My friend, who worked with me, got three dollars. I never could understand that."

Senator Smathers remembers the Rebozo family as "poor, but they always got enough to eat. The older brothers and sisters helped support the family. Bebe's mother could only speak Spanish. There wasn't any feeling about Cubans in those days—no bias. I used to swim with Bebe off Key Biscayne."

Although Smathers and Bebe were friends in high school, after graduation Smathers went off to college and Bebe went to work.

"I felt bad about not going to college," Rebozo says. "I wanted to study law. I always said to myself, 'That was a four-year stupid mistake, not going to law school.' But if I had become a lawyer, I wouldn't have made the money I have."

Bebe got a job as a filling-station attendant, but it was hard for him to let his high-school days fade. After all, his 1930 yearbook had the entry, beneath his smiling picture, "He, of all the men that ever my foolish eyes looked upon, was the best deserving of a fair lady."

In high school, Bebe had earnestly courted Clare Gunn, a beautiful, lively, middle-class girl. He pursued her further after graduation, and somehow (there are several versions of the story) they took out a marriage license in Fort Lauderdale on July 14, 1931, and were married. Clare got an annulment in 1934 on the grounds that the marriage had never been consummated. "His mother never knew about it," Smathers says. "It was all over in two months."

The story of Rebozo's romance remained a secret until 1970, when elements of it appeared in print. Even then Rebozo refused to discuss it with writers and he answered my questions with some reluctance.

"Yes, when we were both eighteen, I did marry Clare Gunn and she went up to north Florida later and got an annulment," he said. "We were married again when we were thirty-three. She had remarried and her husband had been killed in the Pacific. He was a wonderful fellow. They had two sons."

"It was both love and rescue," Sloan McCrea says about their second try at marriage. But, as Bebe said later, "we just didn't make it." They separated in 1948, were divorced in 1950 and Clare remarried in 1953. But Bebe wasn't out of her life yet.

"Years later," Rebozo went on, "Clare's sister called and told me Clare was very ill with cancer. She wanted me to go see her." Bebe visited her frequently as she lay dying. "He'll never marry again," one of his close friends says now. "He went through too much."

Through the years after high school Bebe worked hard in the classic American pattern. He was an airline steward for Pan Am, a gasoline-station owner, and then acquired a tire-recapping business. During World War II he was a navigator on contract flights for the Army Air Transport Command, ferrying planes to North Africa. He started buying land, and in Florida during those years that usually led to affluence.

As Smathers began his political career, they renewed their friendship. "Bebe," Smathers recalls, "was a splendid

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host." Smathers and his business buddies were a rising class in booming Miami, and Rebozo rose with them. Once in Congress, Smathers began sending new cronies down to Florida. "Senator Smathers had all these Northern friends who wanted to come down for sun and relaxation," says Rebozo, "so I knew Democrats for many years. I knew Jack Kennedy, and I always liked him. If they were doing all this to him now, I would feel the same way. I would stand up and defend him against those who would destroy the Presidency.

"I also knew Senator Russell, Senator Long, Stuart Symington and Lyndon Johnson. And I knew Senators [Henry] Jackson and [Warren] Magnuson.

"In all those years, I never asked any of these men for a favor other than for a charity or an activity like the Boys Club, but I have been harassed and hounded by the IRS."

So what did Bebe do for his new friends? Well, he took them out on his boat for fishing, cruising, swimming. He cooked Spanish dishes, broiled steaks, served drinks and cigars, and if he took his guests to a restaurant, he always picked up the check. Bebe became known as a great guy who wasn't pushy, wasn't a name-dropper and didn't want anything.

Richard M. Nixon and Smathers had known each other since 1947, when they were in Congress together, and both were elected to the Senate in 1950.

"Nixon had a cold after that election, so I suggested to him that he go down to Florida and rest," Smathers recalls. "I arranged for him to meet Bebe." Nixon turned out to be rather dour. Rebozo tried to interest him in fishing, but with small success. Rebozo told Smathers later that he didn't think that "we'll see him again."

Actually, Nixon had liked the way Rebozo minded his manners and left him alone. He visited Florida again and they became friends. Rebozo realized that Nixon was a man who liked his solitude, and he obliged. Rebozo also learned there was a place for him in Nixon's family, and he was invited to spend holidays with them—Thanksgiving, Christmas, Easter—and special occasions like birthdays. Pat Nixon confessed to developing a "sisterly" feeling about him. Tricia and Julie, then quite small, looked up to him as an uncle.

"I remember him from the very beginning," says Julie. "He's always been a friend of every member of our family. He's the most wonderful friend my father could ever ask for. He gives and gives and gives. They share so many things. He's like my dad. They both get pleasure out of old-fashioned things, like the popcorn machine Bebe brought home one time."

Julie cites other things that endear Rebozo to the Nixon family. "He won't repeat a story," she says. "You

can relax completely with him. Some people like to write that he is a mystery man or has a shadowy past—which isn't true. They do that because he's my father's friend. And because Bebe has a dark complexion they like to make him out to be in the Mafia or something.

"He cared about all of us," she recalls. "And he just became one of us. I remember when I was only five, he was dating a girl named Cathy. I wanted them to get married, so I told Bebe to take her into a room and propose to her. He sat in there with her for twenty minutes. When he came out, he bent over and said, 'Cathy won't have me.' I was disappointed.

"Bebe has a wonderful sense of humor. In nineteen sixty-nine Dad came up to Amherst because I was going to cook a birthday dinner for him. I made a chicken-divan casserole and a salad. In came Bebe with my parents, and when they all sat down Bebe suddenly pulled a milk shake and two sandwiches out of his coat and told me he wasn't sure how my cooking was going to be."

In addition to such lighthearted moments Bebe has been with the President during many dark times, and it is to be wondered how much Bebe's conservative ideas have rubbed off. "Bebe doesn't presume to advise," says Julie, but Patrick Buchanan, a Presidential speech writer and one of Nixon's links with the party's right wing, sees it a little differently. "Bebe is a savvy guy with an instinctive reaction to contemporary issues," he says. "When he and the boss talk, they don't follow the usual orderly process that the boss likes. Bebe is a friend as well as a confidant. They share many views because they are self-made men and private people.

"Barry Goldwater keeps saying the boss needs to get with the boys and let his hair down. Goldwater is wrong on this. The boss relaxes best with an old friend like Bebe. The two of them can sit there, even on an election night, and instead of watching returns turn on a football game. And Bebe is one guy the boss can really be informal with. I remember once in nineteen sixty-six we were on a plane to Miami and the boss told the stewardess that if she were getting a magazine for Bebe, it better be a picture magazine. Bebe just laughed."

So Bebe laughs at the jokes, walks the beaches, pilots the houseboat, handles the fishing gear, watches the movies, takes strolls through the woods, goes for automobile rides—all with Richard Nixon. In fact, the word around Key Biscayne is that Bebe has become more reclusive in recent years and far less inclined to join friends for dinner or go to their cocktail parties.

He can, however, often be found during the day at his Key Biscayne bank in which he takes great pride. Rebozo was so proud of his bank, started in 1964 with \$2.3 million in deposits, that he put a miniature lighthouse in the lobby to show how de-

posits increased every year. By 1969 the \$10.7-million mark was reached, and in mid-1973 it was \$20 million. But last fall he took the lighthouse down.

"Deposits are down six million dollars and our profits are down two hundred fifty thousand dollars from last year," he said, "all because of bad publicity. But the way I look at it I came into the business world with sixty dollars, so if I lose everything today it's only sixty dollars. I'm the luckiest guy I know."

Lucky or not, Rebozo has long been viewed with suspicion by the press and increasingly so by the public. His friends feel this is unfair and argue that his good qualities are rarely publicized. He has given a great deal of time and help to the Boys Clubs of America and other worthy charities, and has been known to arrange medical care for poor boys unable to afford it.

Rebozo has been the subject of a number of investigations in the past both by the press and by Representative Wright Patman, chairman of the House Banking and Currency Committee, but so far nobody has managed to implicate him in any criminal action. Rebozo, like many a Florida businessman, took advantage of that state's easy real-estate laws to make money, and he's not sorry for it. Certainly his friendship with bankers, businessmen and political figures helped, if only to establish him as worthy of loans and other considerations.

No question either that properties bought by Nixon, on Rebozo's advice, made good profits for Nixon. The President netted a \$180,000 profit—100 percent—from one deal, and made another \$100,000 on two Key Biscayne lots that he had held for only a few years. Nothing illegal. Just a small killing, Florida-real-estate style.

A logical, perhaps cynical question at this point is, What does Bebe get out of all this? Smathers, who perhaps understands Bebe best, says: "What Bebe gets out of his friendship with the President is strictly personal and emotional. Bebe doesn't want position. He doesn't need great ego nourishment. Being a friend of a President is enough to make anybody proud. Bebe admires the man as a man and gets satisfaction from that."

Whatever Rebozo receives from this relationship, it is not something he is willing to discuss. Nor is he willing to talk about the charges that have been raised against him. Some of his friends think he makes a serious mistake by being so closemouthed; that even though he may have nothing to hide his manner suggests that he does.

In any event, his lifelong privacy has been invaded, and there seems little he can do about it. "They jump from one thing to another," he said plaintively about the investigators who are ceaselessly poking into his business affairs. "I hope they are finished now."

Given the trials yet to come, it doesn't seem likely. ■