

Way Back ^{WASH POST}

When Politics Was Primitive

"Grandpa," the little ones ask, "tell us how they gathered political intelligence in the brave old days of yore."

I am always embarrassed by questions like that. Our means seem so primitive, so crude, so uninspired when contrasted with today's sophisticated methods: the superbly engineered bugging devices installed so hygienically with surgical gloves, the dissemination of forged statements, the surveillance of reporters, the rigged polls.

If I had to tell the truth I would have to explain that our systems were downright risible, even when conducted by what, in our innocence, we thought was the greatest political propagandist the world has ever seen, Charles Michelson, Director of Publicity for the Democratic National Committee from 1929 to 1943. All that simple old fellow thought to do to amass political ammunition to elect Franklin D. Roosevelt three times was to clip newspapers and the Congressional Record and file what he clipped.

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He didn't have to forge a single statement, deeming the real ones more than ample for his purposes.

Michelson and his assistant in the file room, Katherine C. ("Casey") Blackburn, cross-indexed the material without the benefit of computers. But however it was done, there wasn't a Democrat running for governor, senator or representative anywhere in the country who couldn't get chapter and verse from Charley on a few hours notice on what his opponent had said on any given proposition.

Michelson—I remember him as a grey, tousled, elfin figure, smiling gently, huddled over a typewriter and barricaded by cigarette smoke—was never greedy. He never asked that his enemy write a book: Speeches were enough. There was bound to be something in one of them, delivered on some occasion in the forgotten past, that contradicted by 180 degrees whatever he was currently advocating or denouncing.

He thought up some pretty cutting phrases, too, but I suppose they couldn't stand comparison with those stylish alliterative elegancies buffed up by Demosthenes Agnew's stable of literary advisers. The best Charley the Mike could do for some aspiring Democrat who wanted to call his opponent a liar was: "My esteemed contemporary is perfectly neutral—as between stating fact and fiction."

Nevertheless, the Republicans thought Michelson pretty formidable. He was the most feared man, next to FDR himself, in the Democratic campaigns and the one whom the GOP would have most liked to be rid of. They accused him, quite accurately too, of delivering half-a-dozen speeches a day—through surrogates, of course—in the White House, the halls of Congress, at rallies, corn-huskings, union halls and \$5-a-plate dinners (No, not \$1,000; just \$5). Michelson issued the requisite pro forma and transparent denials, and felt himself as much abused by the charges as St. Patrick would have on being berated for riding Ireland of snakes.

Michelson and his pitiable files were particularly deadly against Democratic turncoats, increasing in number as the New Deal years wore on. Jouett Shouse and John J. Raskob, who had hired him for the Democratic committee in the first place, Gen. Hugh "Ironpants" Johnson and Al Smith felt the thrust of the daggers in particular. It was duck soup for Charley to find old quotes of theirs supporting men and positions they later came to denounce; after all, it was he who had written those earlier quotes in the first place. Of Raskob's pronouncements, Michelson coined the word "Dupontifical."

Correctly or otherwise, it was Michelson who hung the Depression around Hoover's high-collared neck—and on the Smoot-Hawley tariff law—and made it stick, I suspect, for all time.

Michelson had the advantage, no doubt, of operating in a less complicated age. You attacked your opponent on his position and his public statements and not on what you stole from his psychiatrist's safe.

Roosevelt, long memories will recall, made a climactic campaign speech in 1932 in Pittsburgh on his favorite thesis that Hoover was a spendthrift who unbalanced the budget. Within months of his inauguration FDR indulged in deficit spending that made the Great Economist's earlier venture indiscernable in comparison.

Four years later, forced once again to make a speech in Pittsburgh, Roosevelt asked another of his political advisers and speech writers, Judge Sam Rosenman, how he was going to get out of the blatant inconsistency.

"Deny you were ever in Pittsburgh," Rosenman said.

The advise was more than a cynical wisecrack. What the canny old man meant was that when you're caught out in a monstrous blooper there's nothing for it but to accept the resulting thrashing.

Nowadays all a President has to do is say he's appalled and blame the Sauerkraut Mafia.