

John Doar: Balance, Facts and a Thirst for Challenge

By Joel Dreyfuss

John Doar comes across most obviously as the strong, silent type.

"He's John Wayne," says a former Justice Department associate.

"He's a plainsman," says Stephen J. Pollak, a former aide. "He would have done well on the frontier. He's an 'I'm from Missouri' kind of man."

"A kind of Abraham Lincoln," suggests Rep. Andrew Young (D-Ga.). "I get the impression of a guy who is really dedicated to public service and the law."

There is general agreement about some of the characteristics of the man who is chief counsel for the House Judiciary Committee's investigation into the possible impeachment of President Nixon: a strong-willed, idealistic, thoroughly fair individual with a lot of courage.

It is also generally agreed that he will need those attributes on this assignment, which some view as "the biggest case of the century." Doar, a liberal Republican, has members of both parties at his

heels, urging quick resolution of the investigation, each side for its own partisan reason.

For a man who has been at the center of the storm so many times, first in the civil rights movement, in the vicious New York City teacher's strike of 1969 and in the anti-poverty program, Doar miraculously has managed to retain his integrity. He commands a kind of uniform praise matched by few others in Washington.

Finding out what makes him this way is difficult because he has surrounded himself with a sepulchral silence.

In an age when public relations often is synonymous with public service, his solution to the demands of the media is unusual and simple: absolutely no interviews. He made that clear when he took the \$36,000-a-year job. "I've passed the messages on to him," says an aide to House Judiciary chairman Peter Rodino (D-N.J.), "but he just

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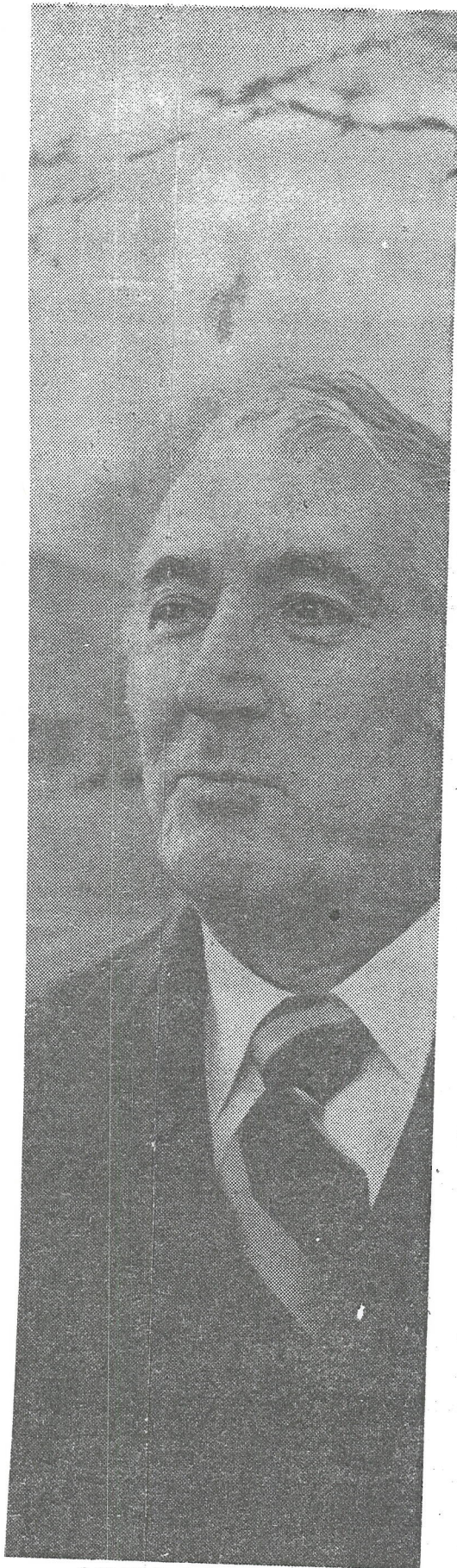


Associated Press

John Doar, right, in 1962, with James Meredith, the first black registered at the University of Mississippi.



John Doar, chief counsel for the House Judiciary Committee's investigation into possible Rodino (D-N.J.).



By Bob Burchette—The Washington Post

impeachment, left, with Rep. Peter

doesn't have the time. He's working every night until 11-12 o'clock."

Hard work is something associated with the Doar family. His grandmother came to this country in 1848, at age 14. She went to the Midwest and married a logger. She had seven children, two of whom survived. One was John Doar's father, William Thomas Doar, who became a lawyer.

John Doar was born in Minnesota Dec. 3, 1921, but the family soon moved to New Richmond, Wis., a quiet little town that has since become a suburb of the Twin Cities.

"The family background is something like the Kennedys," says John McNally, a longtime friend of the family who played for the Green Bay Packers as "Johnny Blood."

The Doar family didn't acquire the Kennedy wealth but they obviously became comfortable. John and his brother, Tom, went to private school in St. Paul, Minn. and John eventually went to Princeton, with time out for service in the Army Air Corps in World War II.

"John was always a confident fellow," said McNally. "When he was 7 or 8 years old, he came home from school one day and was talking about basketball at the dinner table. Finally, his father asked him whether he could play.

"He said: 'I'm the best guard I've ever seen.'"

The 6 foot 2 inch Doar went on to play basketball at Princeton. "He was not an athlete in the sense that Bill Bradley was," said McNally, "but the gifts he's got, he uses."

After graduation from Princeton in 1946, Doar went to Boalt Hall School of Law at the University of California at Berkeley. When his father became ill, he came home and joined the family practice.

McNally recalls an incident that may have prompted Doar's decision to leave New Richmond. In 1959, the two of them went to Milwaukee in connection with a lawsuit. The New York Giants baseball team was staying in their hotel, and while standing in the lobby, Doar was impressed by the attention a pitcher for the Giants was getting

from fans seeking his autograph.

"I guess I'm in the wrong business," McNally remembers Doar saying. Six months later he was in Washington.

He was appointed to the Justice Department by President Eisenhower in 1960, near the end of his term. As one friend recalls it, Doar thought his desire for public service was going to be cut short by the election of John Kennedy.

Doar was on the telephone in his office one day, talking to a young lawyer who had applied for a job. "I don't think you should come down for an interview now," Doar said. "With the election, I don't even know if I'll be here."

Doar looked up and saw Attorney General-designate

Robert F. Kennedy standing in the doorway. "Tell him to come down, Mr. Doar," Kennedy reportedly said. "You'll be here."

It was in the years that followed that Doar acquired much of his reputation. The stories about him in the rain from Selma to the South; Doar marching in Montgomery, holding up a man on crutches; Doar wading into tense situations without regard for his personal safety; Doar prosecuting and winning the first cases in memory against whites accused of criminal acts against blacks.

"When he was around," recalls Wallace Terry, a former reporter for The Washington Post and Time magazine, "Justice was being served. He was solid. He

gave you the impression that he knew where justice was, that he was on your side. He never had to speak it. You just knew it."

Terry's impressions convey a consensus among many of the civil rights participants and observers at the time. The acceptance of Doar's integrity was so total that few paused to think about the reasons for it.

"It never dawned on me to ask him," said Terry, "or even want to know his background. He kind of unfolds himself to you in layers, without telling you very much. I still don't know whether he plays tennis or smokes or drinks scotch.

"Believe me, I was shocked to hear he was a Republican. There was no way to imagine he had any political interest or bent. He



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was never flamboyant. He was never stumping politically like Joe Califano or (Nicholas) Katzenbach."

Invariably, the story of the tense moments after the funeral of slain civil rights leader Medgar Evers comes up. A crowd of angry black mourners was confronted by police in Jackson, Miss., and Doar, in shirtsleeves, stepped in to defuse the incident.

"One way to make points with him is to not write that story of how he stopped the riot in Jackson," warns a friend. "That really drives him up a wall. He feels it's been blown out of proportion. He feels that he knew everybody and that anybody could have done it."

The incident is usually seen as an example of Doar's ability to draw the respect of all sides in the South but one former aide accuses Doar of a certain paternalism.

"They (Doar and other Justice Department officials) were like umpires between black and white in the South and they knew best for everybody," he says.

Others disagree. "He's not a bleeding heart," says another former employee. "You just can't tell him a weepy story and make him go to bat for you. He is his own man and sets his own standards."

The personal aspects of his life elude even some who were close to him day after day. "My relations with him were on the job," said Pollak. "He makes strong personal attachments to those with whom he works, who prove to meet the kinds of standards he advances."

Loyalty must be one of those standards. Those who are close to Doar are careful about what they say and want taken off the record anything that may even appear to be derogatory.

"I asked John if I should talk to you," Pollak admits. "He said, 'Do what you want.'"

There is no question either, about Doar's professional competence.

"He works like a son-of-a-bitch," said one man who was in the Justice Department with Doar and Pollak. "He's one of the hardest-preparing lawyers I ever saw. He wants facts, facts, facts..."

Pollak agrees. "He was never given to accepting a

'geewhiz' preparation of a case. If you had an ethically strong case, he was never satisfied to have that and go to the judge and say, 'Look judge, these people are getting screwed.'"

"One of his favorite phrases is 'a romance of records,'" says another former employee. "A lot of people who worked for him now believe it."

Charles Morgan, an attorney for the American Civil Liberties Union who handled many civil rights cases in the 1960s, recalls Doar's handling of one of the first challenges to the all-white jury system in Loundes County, Ala.

"The evidence they compiled almost went to the ceiling, just reams of material on every juror who ever served, on how many times they served, on who was excluded. He not only showed that blacks were kept off the jury but most whites in the county."

On the personal side, there are glimpses of the John Doar rarely seen by the public.

"He's an Irishman, you know," says Burke Marshall, now the deputy dean of the Yale Law School in New Haven, Conn. "People forget that because he's from New Richmond. He's got a lot of that Irish charm and wit. He appears in public to be rather stern, especially when he is dealing with important issues, but he's warm, lively and entertaining."

Doar has four children, ranging in age from 5 to 22. He divorced his wife, Ann, last year, after several years of separation. Friends agree that he's a good father who spends as much time as possible with his children, often at a farm in upstate New York.

"His youngest son was born in '62 or '63," recalls Marshall. "John was busy tearing around the South so he was not named. He came home from the hospital and after two or three months there was still no name."

"One day I took a hat and put names in it like Ross Barnett Doar, George Wallace Doar and so forth. I went over to John and told him to draw a name. He declined, but a few weeks later he named his son — Burke."

"He's attracted to young

people," says Pollak. "He liked to bring young people into the (civil rights) division. He liked to see them come in, and he set high standards for them."

"He's a fascinating conversationalist," says another friend. "At a party, he's apt to go talk to the lonely person standing in the corner. He also tends to read more widely than most lawyers. He reads a lot of literature and poetry."

Doar hasn't lost his interest in sports. "He's a great football fan," says Pollak. "He always went to the Redskins games, even when they weren't that good."

"Even as a kid," says his brother, Tom, who practices law in New Richmond, "he had the ability to attract others and to help them. Even if it was raking the lawn, there were others to help because they wanted to be around him."

But Doar was never a Tom Sawyer luring others into doing his job. "What makes me respect him is that he was so honest about himself and about his demands on others," says Pollak.

"I think it's wrong to paint him as a saint," says Owen. "It's right to paint him as an extremely decent human being with a great deal of humanity."

"But he's a good guy," says Owen. "He's full of fun. He enjoys tough problems and he loves to run against them. If you run with the current you atrophy and die. His joy of life comes from not getting into that rut."

New York Times columnist and former Nixon aide William Safire said in a column last month that Doar's rigidity prevented him from making the right decision when he was head of the besieged New York Board of Education during a teacher's strike in 1969.

Rev. Milton Galamison, a board member at the time, disagrees.

"On the board, many times we were under pressures from upstairs to do things we didn't feel were right," said Galamison. "My feeling is that John functioned admirably in that crisis. If we could find out what elements manufacture people like (John Doar) we'd have a lot more of them."

Lawyers have never had a great deal of public confi-

dence, if the opinion polls are any indication. However, in the wake of the Watergate scandal, the number of lawyers who have fallen has caused alarm in professional circles and a call for self-evaluation.

Charles Morgan of the ACLU takes on the subject by dealing first with Doar and then with the profession they have in common.

"Doar? You're born like that," says Morgan. "Much of education in America is a means of rationalizing. The tradition law school education is a means of acquiring the capacity to rationalize away the things our parents taught us were right or wrong."

"It's a basic difference between Hugo Black, coming out of Alabama, reading the Constitution on the First Amendment and saying, 'It says here "Congress shall make no law ..."' and Erwin Griswold, a Harvard Law graduate, arguing away what is clearly written."

In Morgan's view, Doar, like Black, is the small-town boy who has never given up the values he acquired in childhood.

There is also a matter of balance. How much did the man bring to the situation and how much was he formed by his experiences?

Larry Still, who covered the civil rights movement for Johnson Publications, says: "He seemed to have gotten strength from the movement. He seemed to have been influenced by the character of the people involved in the movement."

There is also the view that those very experiences hardened John Doar, preparing him for the current task he faces.

There is little doubt that Doar was aware of what he was getting into. His thirst for challenge made his acceptance inevitable and, as Wallace Terry points out, "I don't think he would ever do anything he didn't want to do."

There is also a feeling among those who know him that Doar will not be awed by the task he faces. Morgan recalls sitting in a bar in the South with Doar more than a decade ago: "He said, 'One thing about us, Charles. No matter what happens to the world, we know how to try a lawsuit. Whatever happens, we're just tradesmen.'"