

The Mandate to Live Well

Some time after the parsimonious days of Harry Truman it became an accepted political fact that Presidents and those around them by right of election were due a voluptuous life-style and great wealth.

There have been periods in these last two decades when the pursuit of personal gratification by Presidents seemed to overwhelm their sense of mission. Dwight Eisenhower sought out the best links in the nation for himself and his golfing cronies on occasions when he should have been at his desk handling national problems. John Kennedy's social evenings were a lot more successful than some of his dealings with Congress. People still roar with laughter recalling that Lyndon Johnson, when told by a Marine that he was headed toward the wrong Government helicopter, looked down and said, "Son, they are all my helicopters."

The congressional report on Nixon's taxes profiles in shocking detail just how far the kingly assumption has gone. Private parties as well as picture windows and a chimney fan at San Clemente were considered things due from the taxpayers. Nixon, of course, says he was not responsible for any errors in his tax returns. But the notion got around in his White House somehow, and there is no record of him or his family protesting as they indulged themselves.

Wanting the President to have everything he needs to do his job is natural for Americans. As our immense wealth created rich life-styles for professional and corporate people, the desire for the same amenities affected some Government people, particularly in the Executive Branch. But gaining wealth and luxury is a principal end in the private world. It has never been a purpose of honest politicians in public service.

With few exceptions, the long line of Presidents right up to Truman took their job with a remarkable purity of purpose, sublating their other appetites and seeking gratification from their service to the nation. Men like Thomas Jefferson appreciated what money could do, but they designed the presidency to protect it from the corruptive influence of wealth, and their years of service were marked by a modesty that they felt important to democracy.

If recent Presidents have relished the perquisites, their aides have liked them even more, which has contributed to the problem. One can recall Pierre Salinger, Kennedy's press secretary, ensconced on the fantail of the presidential yacht, his cigar aglow as White House waiters plied his friends with food and drink, and soft music wafted over the waters of Palm Beach. "You'd better enjoy it now," said one observer to Salinger, "because when you go out of office, it's all over." Salinger grinned widely, tapped the ash off his cigar, and replied: "Do I ever know it."

It is difficult to count the White House aides who have rushed out of service and made money on their memoirs, the books based on secret Government papers that they have kept. A grand distortion was reached when the estate of the late Robert Kennedy sold his account of the Cuban missile crisis for at least a million dollars. It was written from secret Government documents and Kennedy's recollection of his participation, for which he had been paid a salary from public funds. We have recently seen men hunger for White House positions, partially motivated by their hopes to turn that experience into lucrative businesses or law practices.

Looking back over the last five years, it is apparent that White House Aides H.R. ("Bob") Haldeman and John Ehrlichman were most successful at redecorating their White House offices, assembling Nixon's lavish complex of quarters from coast to coast, and manipulating the President's private fortune.

It perhaps is no wonder that there is a new wave of nostalgia for Harry Truman. When he was in the White House he had a roll of 3¢ stamps that he had bought with his own money and that he licked and put on personal letters to the folks back in Missouri. The Trumans paid for refreshments on the presidential yacht when they used it on weekends. "If you can't keep the two separate, yourself and the presidency," Truman once said, "you're in all kinds of trouble."



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