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The President Takes A Writer to Lunch

By Russell Baker
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AFTER ALL the political protests about President Ford's refusal to receive Alexander Solzhenitzyn at the White House, the President first tried to recoup by telling the famous novelist to drop in anytime and then, when Solzhenitzyn refused, by persuading some other famous writers to visit.

In this way, the President's image molders reasoned, they would at least re-establish his reputation in the artistic world as a man hospitable to literature. When they sent for the White House file on acceptable authors, however, they ran into trouble. There was scarcely a writer on file whose attendance at the White House could be tolerated.

Henry James was black-listed as "political dynamite." "A voice of the Eastern intellectual establishment," the file said, "James frequents mostly British-type country houses, worries constantly about etiquette and speaks in endless compound-complex sentences with intricate interior punctuation. Identification with James would kill us in middle America."

Ford wanted Marcel Proust, but Proust's dossier wrote him off as "socially impossible," pointing out that he would not meet the President outside a cork-lined room, nor before 2 o'clock in the morning, and that he would then speak one sentence which would last for seven hours and 45 minutes.

This would not deal with the approaching football season, the CIA profile predicted, but with the changing effects of shifting sunlight on the color of hawthorns, a subject on which the President was ill-equipped to feign some eight hours of intense interest.

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CHARLES DICKENS was out of the question. "This notorious propagandist for welfare-type people is openly opposed to child labor, urban slum conditions and debtors' prisons," the Dickens file stated. A memo from the Republican National Committee noted that the President would risk offending his own economists if he allowed himself to be identified with the famous agitator for these advanced 19th-century ideas.

Mark Twain was ruled out. He had written dialogue for black characters in illiterate dialect and was, therefore, almost certain to cost the President liberal votes for entertaining a racist.

"Leo Tolstoy?" the President suggested. Impossible, the FBI reported. The FBI had been bugging Tolstoy and its tapes were such hot stuff that they had been amusing stag diners after hours in the White House for years. The FBI was surprised Ford had never heard them.



DICKENS
Too radical



JAMES
Too elegant

In any case, Tolstoy had left his wife in old age and the tapes of his antics with peasant girls behind the wheat sheaves were x-rated. Entertaining a man like Tolstoy would be only slightly less damaging than being seen in a Maryland roadhouse with Linda Lovelace.

"I've always liked Ernest Hemingway," said the President.

"Don't breathe that name!" cautioned the Literary Political Police. And for good reason. The files showed Hemingway was a passionate devotee of bullfighting. It would have cost the President the vote of the entire kindness-to-beasts bloc, which is approximately 97 per cent of the electorate.

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SOMEONE SUGGESTED Norman Mailer. It was seriously considered. The dossier showed there was a 50-50 chance Mailer would challenge the President to a boxing match in the East Room.

Balzac was rejected out of hand. The entire electorate believed he wrote dirty books, and since nobody had ever read one, it would be impossible to persuade them otherwise.

That left William Faulkner and F. Scott Fitzgerald, who both drank; Robert Frost, who was a Kennedy man, and Thornton Wilder, who was tired of being the only writer respectable enough to be invited to the White House and might reject the invitation.

"There must be one writer we can have in," said the President.

"There is," said Henry Kissinger. "Me."

The President apologized. He had forgotten that Kissinger was also a writer. "I'll have Henry," the President told Mrs. Ford. "He can do everything."

And the President and Kissinger had a fruitful exchange of prose.