



L'etat, C'est Us

By Roger Wilkins

Ever since Life magazine published a photograph of Ted Sorensen walking up the path from the northwest gate to the White House in 1960 with a caption quoting him as saying, "I will be concerned with the programs and the policies of President John F. Kennedy," other young men in other years have dreamed of making that walk and exercising that power for a President of their own. Today scores of such people are circling and serving the candidate of their choice, and a few of them will someday walk through the gate and settle into an office somewhere near the President's.

John D. Ehrlichman paused during a promotional tour for his new book to talk last week about his own trip to the West Wing and about the exercise of power once he got inside. The campaign of 1968 began for him in 1967 when he was invited to come to New York for a strategy session on the question of whether Richard Nixon should make another run for the Presidency. He says that though he was flattered to be included in those discussions and though he was somewhat bored with his growing law practice in Seattle, he had no ambition, I rode up to Opa-Locka in the power.

"It came about step by step," he now recalls. "First they wanted me to handle the convention for them and I talked it over with my law partners and they agreed I ought to take the time to do that. Then, after the convention they asked me to be their tour guide, so I did that. After that it was scheduling. And finally, I was close enough to the candidate to protect him from some of his self-destructive tendencies. I guess he trusted me because he knew I intended to go back to Seattle and didn't want anything from him.

"Finally, in Florida, after the election, I rode up to Opa Locka in the limousine with the President-elect and he asked me to be counsel in the White House for just one year. Greed took over then, I guess, since I could see that job enhancing my professional stature and, besides, I thought I could do some useful work on the problem of conflicts of interest in the Government. I said yes and a couple of days later I was unveiled as the President's counsel in front of a horde of newsmen and camera crews at transition headquarters at the Pierre.

"Then," he continued, "people started making things very comfortable for me. My doors were opened and my shirts were washed. On the third day at the Pierre, some guy from the C.I.A. showed up with reams of secret aerial photographs of the People's Republic of China. The Signal Corps showed up offering to install

a bunch of color television sets in my house. Then all of a sudden I was involved in picking the President's Cabinet. There's no way to prepare for that kind of responsibility. People just assumed I knew things I didn't know. It was more than culture shock, it was almost a physical thing. With all those angel wings bearing you up and offering indisputable proof of your greatness, it's not hard to believe that you're something special."

Inside the White House, it was a different world. In retrospect Ehrlichman thinks that there was prophetic symbolism in the fact that his office, tucked away on the third floor of the West Wing, afforded no view of the outside world or the people who inhabited it. "We didn't have to go outside the building for lunch, so when we sat around talking economic policy, we didn't even know what the price of a hamburger was."

Working there was different from anything Ehrlichman had ever known. "It's not like working at G.M.," he said, "it's more like going to work for Howard Hughes." Everything is focused on the President. If he wants to talk about baseball all afternoon, then a busy assistant misses appointments, lets his work go and talks about baseball. Since the President's attention is the source of all power, there is intense competition for it. And in the Nixon years at least, bearers of bad tidings and those who insisted on disagreeing with the President's view of things did poorly in that competition. There were few brave or foolish enough to challenge the President's view of reality. On the contrary, there was a strong tendency to reinforce his illusions about himself and everything else.

Despite what he has seen, this man who became one of the most powerful of all Americans under Richard Nixon harbors few doubts about the amount of power accumulated in the White House. He thinks it is good for the country. "The magic of the place," he says, "is the President's ability to mobilize action." And he thinks that at least for the foreseeable future, Presidents, as a result of Watergate, will be more open and less illusion-bound.

When asked about what to look for in picking a President, Ehrlichman is a bit less optimistic because he thinks that the process by which Americans select Presidents eliminates a lot of the people with attributes necessary to handle such power and that it stifles those attributes in the people who choose to stay in the race. And the quality that this man who has been there puts first is "the human sensitivity for the ordinary day-to-day thoughts, worries, concerns and joys of the plainest citizens in the land."

Roger Wilkins is a member of the Editorial Board of The Times.