
John R. Coyne, Jr.

A Mole's Eye View of the Ford White House

*Were joke-writers really needed
in the Ford White House?*

Not long after Nixon boarded the last flight to San Clemente, an unpredicted torrential rain fell briefly on Washington. *Time* magazine brought out a special edition entitled "The Healing Begins." The Nixon pictures in the White House compound came down, and the Ford pictures went up. And Gerald Ford told us that "our long national nightmare is over." One unreconstructed Nixonite put it differently, however. "The Party's Over," he said. "Now, it's Bring on the Clowns."

For the first couple of weeks, nothing much happened, and then began the phenomenon of the appearing heads. The office door would open, and someone would put his head around the corner and look the office over very carefully, as if taking mental measurements. After a while the head would say something like, "Oh, excuse me," and then withdraw. I sat among my already packed boxes and watched the heads appear. During my months with Nixon I had kept a large photograph propped up against the wall. It showed Agnew, wrapped up in a black raincoat on an overcast day, scowling and squinting as he reviewed an honor guard of Portuguese troops, with long bayonets attached to their rifles. (He looked very *right* there.) The heads inevitably paused when they came to that picture.

For a time the heads appeared warily, and the lips didn't move. We were, of course, all under deep suspicion, the common assumption being that anyone sitting in those offices must have been in some way involved in bugging people, playing dirty tricks on them, and in general subverting the Constitution. Some of us, perhaps, could be rehabilitated. But it would require a lengthy period of intense denazification.

Throughout the compound, the purges of those publicly identified with Watergate and most of the new super loyalists began almost immediately. But the rest of us just sat and waited and watched the heads. Finally, one of them spoke. This head, from which the eyes seemed to protrude somewhat wildly, was attached to the body of Milton Friedman, an old Capitol Hill war-horse who had become Ford's chief speechwriter after Aram Bakshian and I had turned down the job. (That designation, while accurate on paper, is somewhat misleading. Ford's chief writer was actually Robert Hartmann, a former newsman of legendary drinking habits who insisted on having the final editorial say on any piece of writing before it went in to Ford.) Friedman was an older man, amiable, a gangling sort of fellow with an odd loose gait who frequently seemed to be arguing with himself in the halls. Peculiar things were always happening to Friedman. One night, for instance, he fell asleep on his office couch and awoke to find a mouse running across his face.

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Apparently, Dave Gergen, the last director of the Nixon writing department, who for the time being had been asked to stay on, had told Friedman that Bakshian and I were innocent of any Watergate crimes, and so it was safe to talk to us. (This was true, and it was one of the reasons we enjoyed working in the Nixon speech operation. Early on, Gergen told the writers that they were free to turn down any assignment connected with the murkier aspects of the Watergate defense.) Bakshian and I were, apparently, going to be asked to stay on, at least through the transition, and although both Bakshian and I had done a number of Ford's speeches, Friedman decided to offer us some advanced tutelage on the subject of writing for Ford.

Ford, he told us very seriously, suffered something called "swimmer's breath," the result of which affliction being an inability to make it all the way through a long sentence without drawing a shuddering gasp somewhere in the middle. Also, said Friedman, Ford was a very slow reader. So where it took, say, ten to twelve pages of speech text to get Nixon through twenty minutes, Ford needed only five or six. Further, explained Friedman, Ford had trouble with long or unfamiliar words or phrases, tending to get them tangled in his tongue. Ford's problems with words were to become legendary, as when he mentioned the disease "sickle cell Armenia"; introduced Elliot Richardson as "Elliot Roosevelt"; referred to the "great people of Israel" in a toast to Anwar Sadat; praised the "ethnic of honest work" in New Hampshire; and pronounced "holocaust" as "holy coast." Perhaps the single best one came at a White House breakfast, where he announced that Daniel Moynihan's successor at the UN "will follow the same policy of challenging some of the Third and Fourth World powers, calling a spade a spade." (As one newsman put it, he might as well have said the jig is up in Angola.) And once, in a speech to the Future Farmers of America, he suggested it would be advisable for us all to take "a trash inventory of our homes." (That's just about where Republicans are today.)

And so we wrote them short and simple. The problem was that there wasn't much of anything to say, and for a time neither the writers nor Ford's advisers could come up with anything. It wasn't Ford's fault, of course. After the sixties, after Watergate, after Nixon, there was simply no context left within which his presidency could sensibly fit. The Republican Party was—and remains—a shambles, an empty structure without goals, policies, or a coherent philosophy. Thus, when Ford broke out of the White House during the disastrous congressional campaign of 1974, and raced across the country speaking for every Republican in sight (many begged him not to come), he had not a clue as to what to say. Nor could the four of us who wrote his speeches manufacture a great deal. We tried various approaches, the most dependable being to look over the transcripts of the speeches as given on the previous day, picking out those sections we had written that he used—and therefore seemed to like—and working them into new drafts.

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Then there was the problem with Ford's style. On the stump, he was an enigma. We wrote the speeches short and simple, careful not to trigger an attack of "swimmer's breath." But when he gave them, Ford suddenly seemed to develop a Fidel streak, rambling on at times for 45 minutes, swimmer's breath or no, picking up some of the prepared remarks and garbling them, frequently breaking down into total incoherence.

The problem was perfectly understandable. Having nothing to say, Ford, in desperation, kept pushing against the outer limits of the rhetorical barrier, hoping that somehow he'd break through into some sphere of sense and ideas. But he didn't, and we kept thrashing around for new approaches, each one worse than the one preceding it. It was this frantic thrashing that eventually led to my first personal falling out with the Ford people.

The problem began with Paul Theis, the new chief speechwriter, and ended with Robert Hartmann. Theis would fuss over drafts until the very last minute, crossing out anything remotely controversial and blanding them down until they were as innocuous as cottage cheese. At the other end Robert Hartmann, Ford's old adviser and crony from the Hill, guarded his position as final editor jealously.

Sick of the bland diet, I had written an Agnew-style conservative stem-winder for delivery in Utah, where Ford would be speaking for the senatorial candidate Jake Garn. It had been a long trip and Hartmann had looked at the draft too late in the day to do much editing. But one phrase had jumped out at him, something about the bureaucracy being "jerry-built" over decades. The point, apparently, was that someone would associate the "jerry" in "jerry-built" with Jerry Ford, and Theis had put in a panic call for me to come to his office to discuss the enormity of the implications. As he jabbered about it, the whole thing seemed so trivial and somehow extremely distasteful, and I swore and stamped out.

Later, after Ford had given my speech as it was written, Senator-elect Garn told CBS News on election night that he thought it might have been that speech, more than any other single factor, that finally helped put him over the top. I was pleased, of course, since no other Republicans in the country said that about any of the speeches Ford gave for them. But by then it was clear that I would have to leave soon, either voluntarily or by invitation.

One morning, I recall, a lady who was highly thought of by Ford and had been brought down from the Hill to help run the '74 campaign sent out an emergency call. She was being interviewed by a group of journalists and wanted us to write an explanation for her of what Ford meant by the phrase, "veto-proof Congress." This was one of the key phrases in the campaign she was helping to orchestrate—we were fighting for the survival of "the two-party system," one of the reasons being that "one-party domination" would lead to a "veto-proof Congress." And vice versa. It seemed incredible that this key adviser and strategist didn't understand one of the few things said during the campaign that made any sense at all. But in general, that's the way it seemed to be with the Ford people.

I had a four-martini lunch with a group of former Nixonites that noon, and in the afternoon I found that I couldn't hit the typewriter keys well enough to write the lady's paragraph on the "veto-proof Congress." Nor did I care in the least, I realized. And so, for the first time, another writer had to pick up my assignment. That would have appalled me during the Nixon-Agnew years. But by late 1974, with Ford in the White House, it didn't seem to make any difference. Once, when we all seemed involved in a civil war with the future of the nation at stake, even the silliest projects—making inserts, outlines, and cards, for instance—seemed imbued with at least a modicum of purpose and sense. But after Nixon-

Agnew, for many of us, that was no longer true. There was no real purpose, no philosophical underpinning, no emotion; there were no programs or policies or goals; and it became increasingly difficult to write those senseless speeches, those silly jokes, the proclamations of National Pickle Week, those fudged-up signing or veto statements, those letters, TV clips, and telephone calls.

There was a great sense of drift in the Ford White House during those days, much of it the result of the hordes of people who wandered in and out, as Ford's advisers attempted to put together a staff. In the writing department, as in most other departments, the Nixonites were steadily purged well into 1975. Their replacements were often odd types, men who had grown old in hack jobs on the Hill or in the bureaucracy with a surprising number of quirks. The Nixon writers, each of them, had been people of ability, competence, and talent, and each of them had a sense of purpose, even if misplaced. But the Ford replacements were a different breed, frequently lending the whole operation an air of low comedy.

There was the man from one of the agencies who one day, while rumaging around his new office, came upon a man's black raincoat, in the pockets of which were a matchbook from a San

Francisco topless bar and a pair of bikini panties. He burst into the secretaries' section of the chief speechwriter's office, waving the panties in the air, red-faced, and shouting about morality. The secretaries laughed at first, thinking he was joking. But he wasn't. "A *very* strange duck," said one of them later.

There was the would-be writer who briefly occupied Pat Buchanan's handsome old office. He was assigned a secretary, young and attractive, who had frequently filled in for the regular secretaries in various writers' offices, among them Buchanan's. This older writing try-out spent a good deal of time wandering around near her desk, where he engaged in a peculiar ritual. As he talked to her he'd unzip his trousers, then make various careful readjustments. Perhaps it was just an unconscious habit. Perhaps he had trouble keeping his shirt tucked in.

But whatever the problem, it finally proved too much. He was bad-mouthing Buchanan, as he liked to do, and had gone through the zipper routine. The girl burst into tears. "At least," she sobbed, "Mr. Buchanan was a *gentleman*."

Stories of this sort floated through the early Ford White House. The guards of the Executive Protective Service, for instance, were horrified by the drinking habits of a trusted Ford aide, who, they maintained, was frequently seen in the morning drinking straight from a bottle he kept in a desk drawer. According to the guards, he encouraged his secretary to do likewise, and one of them claims to have found her one morning, passed out on her office floor with her skirt over her head. There had been, as the world knows, bad things happening in the Nixon White House. But they were of a very different magnitude.

Later, after Donald Rumsfeld got a firmer grip on things, the atmosphere reportedly improved somewhat. But there were problems to the end, many of them the direct result of the quality of the staff. The writing department, consistently one of the best and most effective under Nixon, never recovered, and to the end most of Ford's speeches were at best banal and at worst embarrassing. Paul Theis simply wasn't up to the job, nor was his successor, Bob Orben, the right man. Orben was a talented and well-liked professional. But he had made his reputation as a professional joke-writer who had once worked for Red Skelton, and he had originally been brought to the White House to undertake the futile task of making Gerald Ford funny.

There is something about a professional gag-writer working as



chief speechwriter for the President of the United States that just doesn't wash, something that at the very least should drive political presidential image-builders up the wall. During the primary campaign of 1976, several reporters with whom I had been traveling were passing around an ad, photocopied from the 1976 *Writer's Market*, a publication that solicits free-lance material. The ad read: "We are looking for funny, performable one-liners, short jokes, and stories that are related to happenings in the news....The accent is on comedy, not wit. The ultimate criteria [sic] is, 'Will this line get a laugh if performed in public?' Material should be written in a conversational style....We are particularly interested in material that can be used by speakers and toastmasters; lines for beginning a speech, ending a speech, acknowledging an introduction, specific occasions." The address of the organization placing the ad was Washington, D.C. The name of the organization was Orben's Current Comedy and Orben's Comic Fillers. The editor was Bob Orben, also Gerald Ford's chief speechwriter.

The writing operation is only a small part of the whole White House operation, but it can be an extremely important one, especially when the man you write for has no words of his own. Toward the end, Ford's advisers seemed to realize this, and began to search out talented people to help Ford get reelected. When they found them, they frequently also found that they were former Nixon staffers whom they had purged when they first came in.

My departure came in the winter of 1975. Bill Steponkus, a former speechwriter who had gone back to work on the Hill but retained close ties to the Ford people, called to tell me I would soon be getting my walking papers because "someone over there" didn't like me ("over there" was the West Wing of the White House). I never found out who it was. Some said Hartmann. But others in a better position to know said it was Donald Rumsfeld, Ford's chief of staff. As soon as Rumsfeld arrived, they said, he did a thorough staff review and was appalled to find not

just a Nixon holdover but an Agnew holdover still on the staff. If it was a public relations liability for a Ford speechwriter to have written for Red Skelton, it was even worse to have worked for Agnew. But whatever the reasons, it made no difference. It was time to go. Everything had become trivialized, and now it was all equally important or equally banal—messages to Congress, WIN buttons, bikini panties. As Victor Gold, Agnew's press secretary, used to say, the elastic in my brain just wouldn't stretch any further.

The temptation, of course, is to blame Ford for the banality of his administration and to laugh along with those critics who liked to call him "a dumb Nixon." But you can't call a man who accomplished what he accomplished dumb. Nor was it his fault that he inherited an administration in disarray and disrepute. But there was something lacking, something we have come to look for in our Presidents. That may be unfortunate, but it's a fact of American life. Ford was a smart and successful man. But he lacked some extra dimension. Nixon may have been searching for the self he wanted to be in the eyes of others. But Ford never seemed able to decide on what self he wanted others to see. Hence, his terrible image-building problem during the primaries, when the same Ford never seemed to appear twice.

Nor did he ever successfully convince people that there was anything very much beneath the surface. The problem with Agnew and perhaps Nixon was the great gap between rhetoric and reality. Yet we always knew there was something struggling underneath. With Ford it seemed to be all rhetoric, with nothing special at all inside trying to get out. And in 1976, this was a distinct political liability. People had had enough of politicians saying one thing and doing another. But they had also had enough of politicians whose rhetoric and actions had nothing much to do with anything at all. People were hungry for character and intelligence, with those qualities precisely reflected in rhetoric and a program for the nation. The time was ripe for a new synthesis, a new context, and the old establishment politicians like Ford had had their day, a day that will probably never come again. □

Stephen Miller

RFK: Ruthlessness Reconsidered

*When does a passion for the poor leave off
and the passion for power begin?*

When he embarked upon his massive study of Robert Kennedy,* Arthur Schlesinger must have had his doubts. As a close friend of the Kennedy family, he must have wondered whether he was the right man for the job—knowing, among other things, that many readers would dismiss him as a court historian, regarding the twists and turns in his argument with more than a modicum of suspicion. It is to Schlesinger's credit that he faces this difficulty squarely; in the foreword he "declares an interest," confessing that he was "a great admirer and devoted friend of Robert Kennedy's." Since he was such a devoted friend, one can understand why he is at pains to convince us that Joseph Alsop was right when he said that so many people have Robert Kennedy "absolutely wrong." "They think," Alsop continued,

"he is cold, calculating, ruthless. Actually, he is hot-blooded, romantic, compassionate."

In one sense, Schlesinger succeeds at his task; this reader at least ends up liking Robert Kennedy. But Schlesinger's book is not simply a memoir of Robert Kennedy as he and others knew him. It is an ambitious work of historical and political analysis, one in which Schlesinger labors to substantiate his claim that Kennedy was "the most creative man in American public life when he was killed," someone who had the makings of a great President. And judged *not* as a memoir by a devoted friend but on—shall we say—"public" grounds, the book is utterly unconvincing. Even though Schlesinger, as a master of extenuations, continually weights the evidence in Robert Kennedy's favor, the evidence overwhelms the general argument. It is clear that Robert Kennedy lacked the

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* *Robert Kennedy and his Times*, Houghton Mifflin Company, \$19.95.