

Thomson, Moyers, and Ball: Prophets Without Office

by Roger Morris

On a soft spring evening in Washington four years ago, the American Foreign Service Association held one of its clubby little dinner-seminars for a selected brace of bureaucrats and temporary establishment exiles. The topic was official dissent in foreign policy, and the speaker was James C. Thomson, Jr., a young scholar on Asia who had resigned early from Lyndon Johnson's National Security Council staff and then written and spoken out against the Vietnam war and its practitioners—all of which won him nothing but scorn from his former employers.

In Thomson's audience that night, however, was at least one old boss with a somewhat different view. A former undersecretary of State and UN ambassador, at that point working as a Wall Street financier while awaiting a Democratic restoration, George Ball had been the highest-ranking, most conspicuous and celebrated of the official doves on Vietnam. And when Thomson remarked that he and other dissenters might have broken the club rules so much as to be barred from any future government office, Ball reacted with avuncular sureness. "We'll take care of

you, Jim," he murmured in the back of the room. "We'll take care of you."

Four years later, with Jimmy Carter in the White House, Ball had not "taken care" of returning *himself* to power, much less Thomson or most of the other former officials who had shown the vision and courage to oppose the most ghastly foreign policy mistake of the century. For the most part, the Vietnam dissenters would remain—by default or by choice, more often by banal nepotism than by conscious black-listing—prophets without office under the Democrats, just as they were under the Republicans. But if they weren't consciously discriminated against for their views on Vietnam, the pity is that there wasn't conscious discrimination in their favor because of those views. Rather than focusing on bringing into the State Department people with certain admirable beliefs, the Carter administration concentrated on getting old faces, the expert and the trusted. The account of how that was accomplished, and how those who were right on Vietnam were largely overlooked, is another revealing and sad glimpse into how foreign policy is run.

The story begins with the people who *did* get the important national

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security positions in the White House and the State and Defense Departments. The process was all too familiar. At the cabinet level it was the hoary tradition of knowing and discreetly backing the right presidential horse. Cyrus Vance at State, Harold Brown at Defense, Michael Blumenthal at Treasury, and Zbigniew Brzezinski at the White House had all met and impressed Carter as fellow members of the Trilateral Commission, a club of foreign policy moguls and younger politicians that was conceived by Brzezinski and financed by David Rockefeller—among other reasons, precisely to foster the formation of such contacts. As with the Council on Foreign Relations and other, similar, settings, the bland papers and illustrious if dull meetings of the Commission offered an uncontested showplace for the apparent stature and authority of the establishment, and thus a powerful soft sell on a then-obscure governor like Jimmy Carter.

Vance et al. were men who understood, accepted, and, of course, carefully practiced that ritual soft sell with what obviously became ample success. Their sheer availability and proximity mattered more than actual past records. When President-elect Carter turned to Vice President-elect Mondale (also a member of the Commission), when he looked at his own campaign "task forces," when he consulted Democratic politicians or even Henry Kissinger, Vance and the others would be prominently, favorably mentioned.

Along with them there were younger men, the aides and proteges who would do most of the substantive work of the campaign and transition, the writers and briefers and bureaucratic go-betweens who would in the course of their tasks have their tickets punched for sub-cabinet offices like the ones Vance, Blumenthal, and Brown had held in the Johnson years. Here the sociology of job-filling was more varied than it had been with the

choices at the top, but hardly more open.

On the surface, the new regime went through well-publicized motions toward a broad recruitment for its national security positions. Members of the transition staff at the State Department were asked to assemble lists of candidates for a dozen key posts, from the undersecretaries through the regional assistant secretaries and their deputies. The Carter organization's renowned Talent Inventory Program compiled additional names for the foreign policy positions. Many of the TIP prospects were drawn deliberately from outside the East Coast. But after the TIP and transition staff candidates had been discussed in late December 1976 for possible submission to Secretary-designate Vance, the lists of fresh names soon disappeared. The jobs, you see, had already been taken. TIP was overruled, as one disillusioned participant put it, albeit too simply, by "the friends of Tony Lake."

Never Past the Line

At 38, William Anthony Lake was a popular protege of Vance and others in the establishment. Having served dutifully as a Foreign Service aide to Ambassador Henry Cabot Lodge in Saigon, Undersecretary Nicholas deB. Katzenbach in the State Department, and Henry Kissinger in the White House, he resigned over the invasion of Cambodia in the spring of 1970. During the following years, Lake wrote with co-authors a handful of articles criticizing various policies, edited a conventional Council on Foreign Relations book on the "lessons" of Vietnam, and eventually, as one of the wiretap victims, sued Kissinger et al. for damages. But at no point had the articles been too frank, or the opposition too deep, to take him past the line of club respectability. In 1972 he had known Vance while working as a foreign policy assistant in the stillborn Muskie campaign. In the summer of 1976 he was,

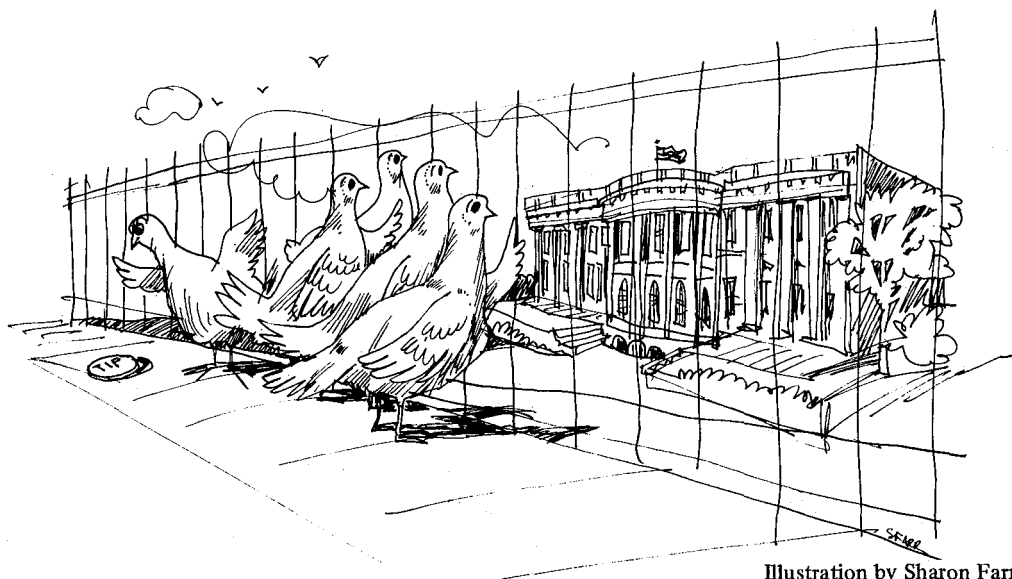


Illustration by Sharon Farr

on Vance's recommendation, among the first ones hired for Carter's expanded Atlanta staff. After the election, Lake headed the State Department transition staff; and with Vance's appointment as secretary, his succession to office was assured.

So too was the State Department employment of Richard Holbrooke, an old friend of Lake's whose career had covered much the same narrow terrain in Washington, but with visibly more naked self-promotion, less ability and experience, and fewer trusting patrons. With Brzezinski's backing, Holbrooke had also been an enthusiastic recruit to the Atlanta staff. And in December it would be Lake and Holbrooke who supervised the reviewing of the personnel lists.

As several eyewitnesses describe those deliberations, most of the nominees were appraised according to a brief litany that ranged from "too young" to the ultimate disqualification: "Who is *he*?" In any case, Lake reportedly went off to consult the Secretary and returned a few days later with the announced appointments, which, it turned out, showed that the talent search had been easier than many imagined.

The relatively few available State Department plums went to the inner circle: Lake would be director of Policy Planning; Holbrooke Assistant Secretary for East Asia; Carter advisor

and Yale Professor Richard Cooper undersecretary for Economic Affairs. Campaign and patronage politics were equally decisive in the lesser precincts of the UN. Ambassador Andrew Young would name C. William Maynes Assistant Secretary for International Organization Affairs, reportedly largely because Maynes, a former Foreign Service officer, gave Young an impressive briefing on the UN. With similar inspiration, Young also appointed as his principal deputy Donald McHenry, one of the few blacks in the State Department and a former aide to William Rogers.

By all accounts, the rest of the jobs were settled according to time-honored criteria. To avoid political controversy, the Near Eastern Bureau was simply left in the hands of the colorless, custodial career bureaucrat whom Kissinger had placed there. The European, Latin American, and African bureaus also went to career officers. In return for these rewards, the Foreign Service reluctantly accepted political appointments like Holbrooke's, which otherwise would have been particularly vulnerable to opposition on grounds of lack of experience and stature.

Equally important (every bit as much in the mystical corridors of diplomacy as in the Departments of Agriculture or Transportation) was

the gentlemanly bureaucratic incest and back-scratching among appointees. Thus, Richard Moose—former FSO and aide to Walt Rostow, Kissinger, and the Senate Foreign Relations Committee—was named State's Deputy Undersecretary for Administration mainly because, say several sources, Lake recommended him to Vance as bureaucratically "savvy," notwithstanding Moose's near-total lack of administrative or managerial experience. Moose, in turn, is said to have urged the appointment of Dan Spiegle, one of Moose's close associates in the Senate, as Vance's special assistant—a friendly ear at the Secretary's door. For his part, Vance practiced similar office politics in keeping as Undersecretary for Political Affairs Philip Habib, a career relic who shared Vance's enthusiasm for the Vietnam war, and in hiring as the department's Executive Secretary C. Arthur Borg, once Dean Rusk's unflinching aide.

Elsewhere, Lake and Holbrooke pushed the appointment of former John McCloy aide David Aaron as Brzezinski's deputy (having two years before pushed Aaron as an aide to then-Senator Walter Mondale). To complement Aaron at the White House, Lake and Holbrooke backed another FSO and an old friend from Vietnam, Peter Tarnoff, as another special assistant to Vance. They also campaigned for the appointment of former Pentagon official, *New York Times* reporter and Lake co-author Leslie Gelb as director of State's Office of Political-Military Affairs, a province of obvious interest to both policy planning and the East Asian bureau.

But if all this thoughtful career placement seems a bit inbred, consider the history of the Moose-Eagleburger axis, in which Carter's advent is only the latest episode. Having admired fellow FSO Lawrence Eagleburger when both served in State's executive secretariat in the mid-1960s, Moose helped support Eagleburger's promotion to the National Security Council

staff in 1966; when Eagleburger became one of Kissinger's chief aides during the Nixon transition in 1969, he recommended Moose as NSC staff secretary, though Moose left shortly thereafter in a falling out with Kissinger. In 1976-77, as the outgoing Deputy Undersecretary for Administration, Eagleburger reportedly backed Moose as his replacement, and Moose, according to the same reliable sources, promptly urged Eagleburger's now-pending appointment as ambassador to Yugoslavia.

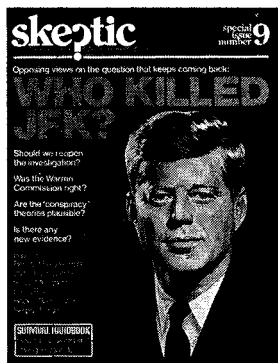
These loyalties should not be confused with questions of substance. For the last eight years, Moose, in the Senate, was ostensibly a vigorous opponent of Kissinger's policies, and Eagleburger, in the upper reaches of the Nixon-Ford regimes, an ardent defender of same. Nor is there any automatic relation between this kind of incest and the competence of its beneficiaries. Most observers both in and out of government have no doubt of Eagleburger's considerable intellect and bureaucratic skills. But the same cannot be said for many of the others who will now play vital roles in shaping policies and appointing still other influential officials to the new administration.

When the TIP lists had been disposed of and the announcements made, this then was the sort of government that presided over foreign affairs. Though the appointees were by no means limited to the "friends of Tony Lake" (it was part of the process, after all, that everybody had a "friend" somewhere), it was also clear to most of those involved that Lake's influence with Vance was often decisive. It was influence spent in conventional ways and toward predictable ends. The men backed by Lake, and with lesser clout by Holbrooke, were in the mold either career survivors or congenial in-and-outers. None carried the weight of public controversy. None brought with him a troublesome reputation for independence or insubordination. None, it must be said, eclipsed Lake or even Holbrooke in

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terms of apparent influence with Vance, at least for the moment. And none, except Lake himself by his 1970 resignation, could qualify as an authentic dissenter against the Vietnam war.

The Missing Generation

Flying back to Washington from Plains in mid-December and sitting within earshot of reporters, Mondale had asked Vance about "this problem" of State Department appointments. Why was there such a gap, asked the Vice President-elect, between the junior men like Lake and Holbrooke and the senior people like Vance? Weren't there good people somewhere in that range to fill some key slots? History, by way of *Time*, does not record Vance's reply. But Mondale's missing generation, whether or not he knew it or Vance admitted it, was in some measure the men who had opposed the war.

There was no single or simple answer to why they were not there. At the top, Ball seems to have lost the Secretary of State sweepstakes for reasons that had relatively little to do with Vietnam. Early last year he made the colossal blunder of telling reporters he was *not* one of Carter's foreign policy advisors, after Carter had told reporters he was. Eventually Ball did come to Carter's camp, but later than either Vance or Brzezinski, both of whom opposed him. His pronouncements on the Middle East, too clearly critical of Israel and of past U.S. policy, were a major political liability. His reputation for strong views and cabinet-table eloquence won him no votes among his would-be peers like Brown and Blumenthal, whatever the issue at hand.

Not least, after several years at State in the 1960s, Ball was a man with his own circle of aides and old bureaucratic allies, a condition that made him, as one of them told a reporter, a "disaster" as far as men like Lake and Holbrooke were concerned. And it was simple pride that

apparently kept Ball from accepting what he knew would be the vastly lesser offer of an ambassadorship, even to an outwardly prestigious post like Paris. "How could I do *that*?" Ball reportedly said to a Wall Street associate. "Hell, I'd be taking orders from people who used to be my junior assistants." So the elder dove would be nowhere in the new regime, as much because of current politics as past policy disputes on the war.

It was much the same with the other senior dissenter, Washington attorney Paul Warnke, who as an assistant secretary of Defense in 1967-68 was widely credited with internal opposition to the Johnson war policy. Like Ball, Warnke was a comparatively late recruit to Carter but clearly a candidate for secretary of either State or Defense. And again, like Ball, he would be passed over to a large extent for reasons more current than Vietnam. There was a political liability in Warnke's liberal views on strategic policy—these nearly got him rejected by the Senate when, as a gesture to a restless Democratic left, Vance appointed him head of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and chief U.S. SALT negotiator.

Warnke was thus "inside" at the kind of lesser, subordinate job that Ball would not brook—one of the "walking wounded," as a former Pentagon aide of his called him. But for the most part, both he and Ball had simply played the system and lost, not unlike a half-dozen other men from the Johnson years with very different records. In neither man had the war left a lasting aversion to the people and methods of government, or a distaste for the politics of foreign policy job-seeking. That Ball languished in Wall Street and Warnke took orders from Cyrus Vance and other, less gifted men was the luck of the roll, not some fated punishment for their foresight ten years before.

But it was very different for men younger than Ball and Warnke, men in their thirties and forties like

Thomson, or Bill Moyers, who had opposed the war as LBJ's press secretary, or William Watts, who had resigned from Kissinger's staff with Lake at the time of the Cambodian invasion, or Richard Steadman, who as a Pentagon aide had nourished Warnke's dissent, or Morton Halperin, who had fought against the war policy under both Johnson and Nixon and been wiretapped by the latter, or John Marks, who left the Foreign Service to oppose the war as a Senate aide and later as a writer. Moyers let it be known that he was interested in the directorship of the CIA, but after a brief flurry of consideration, he was turned down; he and Steadman would be offered second-level positions in the new regime, but would decline them. Thomson and Watts sought nothing and were offered nothing. Halperin and Marks, by several accounts, were specifically ruled off those Potemkin lists at the Vance State Department, judged too radical and untrustworthy by the carefully jockeying men who put forward names with an eye on possible embarrassment as well as bureaucratic advantage. Nobody wanted to place a potentially stronger rival or to provide superiors with a dependably unorthodox and independent view.

Texture and Direction

What distinguished the dissenters from the Carter officeholders most sharply was not their views or courage on the war, but the texture and direction of their lives during the Nixon-Ford years. Moyers in a distinguished career in television journalism, Watts as president of his own research group, Halperin and Marks as writers and civil liberties activists, Steadman as a business success in Manhattan, Thomson as a scholar and administrator at Harvard—all had fashioned lives and careers independent of some future restoration.

The men who took foreign policy power under Jimmy Carter came from a different world, largely bounded by

corporate and foundation sinecures, ruled by men who themselves wanted nothing more than to return to government. In that world, jobs were indeed way-stations, and in a basic sense, a form of exile. And the character of it all imprinted itself on the men and their methods as they came together to form a new government. If the dissenters from the Vietnam war were not a part of that government, it was as much because the system was anathema to them as because they were now, for their dissent, anathema to the system.

And that is why they will be missed so badly, by the rest of the country if not by their nervous peers now on the Treasury payroll. Not that Ball or Warnke do not labor under the same narrow corporate lawyer's vision of the universe, or that some of the dissenters are not now capable of mistakes on other issues as grand as their insight on Vietnam. But the fact remains that these were figures who saw more clearly than do the men now governing the complex reality of a foreign society—a perceptiveness the new administration could well use in the Middle East and Southern Africa. They saw more clearly, too, their own nation's politics and common sense—an understanding President Carter and his men could bring to bear on strategic arms questions and other issues of public mythology and official ignorance. Most of all, they variously bucked and broke with the system when it went mad—the most valuable quality in any public servant.

In that final sense, the dissenters are not there because of their dissent. They are absent because the foreign policy establishment is simply not yet able to accommodate, much less encourage, the traits of character and intellect that ignite dissent to begin with. Still the most potentially deadly public business, the making of foreign policy is still organized in the last of the great smoke-filled rooms of machine nepotism, and the human meaning of our most savage international debacle is still unlearned. ■

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