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JOHN SEARS (August 26, 1977)



Sears first became acquainted with President Nixon in the Mudge law firm. Sears joined the Nixon campaign in 1966 at a time before John Mitchell had joined the Mudge law firm. After Nixon was elected President he became a deputy counsel in the White House. He carried on liaison duties with the Republican party and dealt with political matters on the Hill, also dealt with outside special interests. He was ~~valued~~ or expected to offer political judgementy ~~he~~ became involved in the decisionmaking process on investment policyx. One of his major responsibilities was helping the administration win the vote on the ABM in 1969. Most of his work involved contact with Congress. He gave advice on the best means to approach people in Congress and people outside of Congress who could affect Congressmen in crucial votes. He worked closely with Bryce Harlow. Practically everybody in the White House was working on the ABM at the time that that was of crucial importance. He found the White House a highly competitive atmosphere. On paper it was ~~a~~ highly structured, but in reality people pitched in, played ~~jobs~~ ^{roles} that they were able to play, and moved in where their interests carried them. Competition ~~was~~ in the White House, he found, was ~~not~~ so much ideological as based on differ~~ing~~ ~~ing~~ ~~or~~ personalities or clashes of ambition. Sometimes these clashes of ambition would be cast in ideological form. It was a tendency once you discovered what a fellow's views were to identify him with those views and then criticize him on the basis of the views, although the real rivalry might be simply a personal one. People sometimes would adopt different ideologies in different contexts in response to the competitive situation prevailing at the moment. Sears had the impression that the White House people closest to the President when they first came into power did not have a clear idea what they wanted



to do. He also felt that they did not know people in the sense of knowing how people respond politically. Sears felt that it's easy to tell what a President's priorities are simply by the way he spends his time. If he spends a great deal of time on something, that means that he gives it a high priority. People he spends time with are the people who have power in the White House. One source of power is being able to affect how the President spends his time. People who are close to him affect what he devotes time to, which in turn affects the priorities of the administration. Nixon had relatively little interest in domestic policy. He was deeply concerned with foreign policy. His highest priority was to reach détente in foreign policy. He felt that he could not really do much to control domestic policy. He realized ~~that~~ he had limited control over foreign policy as well, but in the domestic area he thought the President had really very little control. Also it must be said that domestic policy tended to bore the President. He did have some general economic objectives. He wished to keep the economy sound and growing. His chief objective in domestic policy really seemed to be to hold his problems at bay to give him freedom to deal with his foreign policy priorities. He did take some interest in some aspects of domestic policy such as revenue sharing. The President was interested in improving the budget-making process and the management process of government through the creation of the Office of Management and Budget. The people close to the President had little appreciation of how it is possible to get control over government and to wield political influence through the use of patronage--through the recruitment of personnel. Sears feels that they were to a great extent reacting against the memory of the spoils system. The President's personal ideology was that of the



problem-solver; he was also personally conservative. Nixon did, however, realize the political necessity for pushing toward the ^{Centre,} ~~Senate.~~ He had the goal clearly in mind to work toward better working relationships in the field of foreign policy. He was also interested in the mechanics of foreign policy. This was not true under domestic. Sears feels that it is natural in any administration for personal factions to develop in the White House. It is also natural to allow a little time for a shakedown in a new administration. In the early days of the Nixon administration there was lively controversy in the White House. Sears feels that this was by no means a bad thing. There was, for instance, a controversy and rivalry between Moynihan and Burns. People tended to choose up sides in such controversies. Sometimes the sides people took were not necessarily what one would have expected. On the basis of philosophy one might expect, for instance, that Finch and Moynihan would have been fast friends, but this was far from being the case. In the rivalry between Moynihan and Burns, Moynihan emerged as the victor in the short run. However, the real ultimate victor was John Ehrlichman, who rose to a strategic position by being called upon by the President to mediate between Moynihan and Burns, and behind Ehrlichman was always Bob Haldeman. There were other natural rivalries in the Nixon administration, pre-eminently that between Haldeman and Ehrlichman on one side, and John Mitchell on the other. Sears himself did not get along particularly well with Haldeman and Ehrlichman. Bryce Harlow, Finch, and Sears to some extent were able to maintain independence from any of the rival factions within the administration. Many of the people close to Nixon had little appreciation of how patronage could be used to achieve policy ends. Harlow and Finch did have this appreciation, but their influence was limited in this area.



John Ehrlichman, who had great influence over personnel, had no sense of patronage whatever. He, for instance, was the one who was responsible for the ridiculous plan to send out questionnaires to everyone in Who's Who asking them if they would be interested in a job in the new administration. This produced a ^{vast} ~~mass~~ outpouring of applications for jobs when there actually were not that many jobs available, leading to a lot of disappointed people. Many of the applications were never even opened. Ehrlichman's great skill was being able to play the role of referee between rivals in the White House, which placed him close to the President. Haldeman and Ehrlichman had no experience in dealing with Congress and little understanding of how Congress worked. Sears, for instance, relates a ~~short~~ story that he puts on a background basis: During the ABM controversy, Haldeman and Ehrlichman thought they could approach Charles Percy on the basis of being fellow Christian Scientists. They had him down to the White House and thought they had persuaded him to support the ABM, and were greatly angered when they learned that Percy had gone against the ABM. The relationship between Haldeman and Ehrlichman with Percy after that was unfriendly. Sears played a role in setting up the meeting between five liberal Republican senators and the President on the ABM. This was a helpful meeting, although it did not produce actual positive results. In meetings with his close associates Nixon had a tendency to say whatever came off the top of his head. He ran through ideas in a casual manner and spoke in a way that Sears frankly would sometimes feel to be irrational. People close to the President learned to distinguish between his ideas and not necessarily carry them out in every case. That is, people who were close to him before he became President. Rosemary Woods, for instance, while Nixon was still in the law firm, would write down



reams and reams of material--things that he told her to do. When she left the office, she would often throw half of them away; she had a sense of what should be done and what should not be done. Haldeman and Ehrlichman, on the other hand, did not have this sense, and tended to do literally everything that Nixon told them to do. Sears thinks that this was a major contributor to Watergate. Haldeman and Ehrlichman, and Colson also, did things for Nixon that ~~they~~ Nixon told them to that they would have been better off not doing. On the ABM vote Sears had a very accurate count quite early as to who was going to vote which way. He was not even surprised when Mrs. Smith voted for the ABM on the second vote. The surprises tended to come later on the votes on confirmation of Supreme Court Justices. By that time Sears had left the White House.

Sears found the White House not a very pleasant place. There were many clashes of personalities. He endeavored to keep his frustration down, but he found this difficult.

One of the major sources of frustration in the Nixon administration was that the President would tell people he was very close to them--assure them that they could call on him at any time for support and that he would back them up. He did this, for instance, with Bill Rogers at the State Department. Often these people later found out that this was not true, and that of course was very disturbing to them.

Sears did not feel that the Reagan challenge to President Ford in 1976 was an ideological challenge. It is true that Reagan appealed to conservatives in the sense that he appealed to people who pay their bills on time and do not like to owe people money. But Sears ~~himself~~ thinks of himself as centrist in politics. He thinks that the right and left fragments play a valuable



role in politics, developing new~~x~~ ideas and debating with each other, but that they are not really the ones who are able to carry out the essential function of problem-solving in government. This function is best carried out by the middle of the political spectrum. Unfortunately, Lyndon Johnson, Sears feels, gave political centrism a bad name. ~~He~~ Johnson destroyed people's confidence in the middle by seeming to associate that with trades and deals, getting labor and management to get together on a deal which would seem to be made ⁵⁰ ~~at~~ the disadvantage of the general public. This induced a cynicism in the country about the political center. The middle of the road, Sears feels, is now not politically fashionable. Sears feels that Ronald Reagan, to whom ~~i~~ he is still very close, does not have a dogmatic political philosophy--he does not insist on his associates toeing the line on political philosophy. Sears~~ax~~ acknowledges that ~~ix~~ it was a mistake not to draw Drew Louis into the negotiation to bring Schweiker onto the Reagan team in 1976. He says that this oversight was largely due to lack of time. They felt they had to move very quickly. He feels that if Drew Louis had supported the Reagan-Schweiker ticket that they would have been nominated at the convention.

END OF INTERVIEW