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Eight Weekends With Politics

Mr. Bryce Harlow speaking on "Compromise and Democracy: Legislative Action."

A quarter century ago this coming August, I arrived in the Nation's Capital, so excited I could hardly contain myself. What a thrilling moment it was when America's great monuments and buildings first came into view. I vividly recall their gleaming white majesty in the early morning sun, as I peered exultantly from the window of my train.

I was arriving in Washington to become the Assistant Librarian of the House of Representatives. It was a patronage job. This job "belonged," as they say in Congress, to an Oklahoma Representative with whom my father, long prominent in state affairs, had been personally and politically friendly over many years. It was a good job back in 1938. It paid \$200 a month. On that sum, in those days, a young bachelor could live like a king.

But it was more than comfortable pay and a veneration of America's past that had brought me East. I came, really, to finish a Master's Degree in Political Science. I intended thereafter to return home to teach or, alternatively, to forsake the Southwest and enter that tight little governmental fraternity within the State Department known as the Foreign Service.

I relate this personal lore not simply to relive a delightful episode; rather, the point is that I had arrived in Washington fresh from indoctrination by the political science faculties of the Universities of Oklahoma and Texas -- arrived, therefore, with the belief that a Congressman was no more than a pre-eminent wardheeler, competent only in shady manipulations, interested only

in self-advancement, inattentive to public duties -- in short, a rascalion unworthy of his or anyone else's trust.

My first contact with the soft underbelly of Congress known as the patronage system dramatically confirmed the insight of my teachers. My boss, the Librarian of the House of Representatives, I discovered most disconcertingly, had a fourth grade education. A massive man in his 60's weighing some 240 pounds, as distinguished in appearance as Charles Evans Hughes, he had ridden with the posses out west in the days of the real New Frontier and served two terms in a legislature where the members still toted guns right up to the chamber's door. He was tough, mean, unlettered and grandly primitive.

He was supremely unqualified in every respect to be librarian of anything, much less the United States House of Representatives. But this mattered not at all, for his job called upon him to do nothing whatsoever, and he did that quite well.

One night during my first six months in the Library the Acting Clerk of the House Document Room hanged himself in his office while I was next door grinding away on my Master's Thesis. Poor soul. His Congressional sponsor had died. So he had lost his job. In 1938 there was no place else to find work. I thought it such a pity that I wrote a letter to Drew Pearson. My theme was that while the Congress was at that very time self-righteously enacting the Hatch Act, purging Executive Branch employees of political taint, there, lurking beneath the carefully adjusted Congressional halo, was the character-eroding, sleazy, cruel and evil patronage system. It seemed hypocritical to me, not unlike the present-day preoccupation of Congress with conflicts of interest involving others than themselves. Drew, of course, ignored my indignant note. He knew it must have come from a greenhorn new to the ways of Washington.

Once these distractions from my work had grown routine, my attention began to focus on the main business of the Congress. My job required me to be on the Floor of the House every hour it was in session, so I could not escape the debate if I tried. And after months and months of listening to it, believe me, I tried!

But as the Members drifted in and out of my Floor Library day after day, I became aware that major issues do shape up within and between parties. And, day in and day out, as I watched the party leaders at work, from Speaker Bankhead to then Majority Leader Sam Rayburn, to Majority Whip John McCormack, to Minority Leader Joe Martin and his chief lieutenant, Charles Halleck, -- as I watched the Committee Chairmen adroitly steer their bills over and around parliamentary obstacles, -- as I became aware that Congressman after Congressman was possessed of at least one exceptional quality, whether physical appearance, or debating prowess, or expertness in a given problem area, or story-telling skill, or personal force -- and, then, as I noted that in both parties the Members of Congress, in large majority, were hard-working, seemingly indefatigable, most of them well-versed in their specialties -- well, my faculty-implanted sneer began to fade away. It has never returned.

This House experience was to be treasured; it was a wonderful laboratory course in public affairs. The power and prestige of the Speaker of the House became vivid there. Never again would he be a distant dignitary with a dry-as-dust list of meaningless duties which had to be quickly memorized in Government I and as quickly forgotten. The dignity of Speaker Bankhead was a mighty force for order in the House. When on rare occasions he left the Speaker's chair to address the House or the Committee of the Whole in behalf of some Rooseveltian measure, the hush that fell upon the chamber, the deference accorded him, the party unity he thus engendered, were profoundly impressive to this young student from the prairies.

So was his swift discipline when a fist fight broke out one day on the Floor, a virtually unheard of incident. I watched incredulously as the Sergeant-at-Arms presented the Mace -- the symbol of authority of the House of Representatives -- to the enraged combatants, one of whom lay prostrate, felled by a legislative fist. I marvelled at their immediate capitulation to this august confrontation. The vast power of recognition, the quiet nudges for votes in the cloakroom, the close articulation of influence and action with Rayburn, the scheduling of votes at strategic moments, the timing of crucial debates, the amenities in handling the Minority Party, the stick and carrot influence implicit in his every act -- all these attributes of the Speakership became graphic and deeply meaningful for the first time.

And the same enlightenment grew in respect to other power centers in the sprawling House. Rayburn's stern and insistent pressure for party regularity; McCormack's happy fencing across the political aisle with Halleck and Dirksen; the surprising mastery of legislative detail by Committee Chairmen and senior minority members; the frenetic Democratic and Republican whip structures rallying the faithful for cliff-hanging votes; the hubbub of lobbyists at every entrance of the House; the busy logrolling among the Members; the clever parliamentary ploys of veterans in House procedures; the heated rivalries among House employees; the vigorous campaigning among Congressmen for choice Committee assignments; the quiet competence and indispensability of the House Parliamentarian -- yes, all this was an education, rich, utterly absorbing, unforgettable.

But there were other aspects of Congress to be learned. One was that some Congressional jobs pay more than others. So, at the urging of "my Congressman," and for a salary increase of \$40 a month, I became an Administrative Assistant (called then a Secretary) to a Congressman. What a different world! And just as intriguing as the one I had left.

I swiftly learned that the office of a Congressional Secretary can be a sweat shop. There were two of us in the office. We had to compose and type and mail at least 100 letters a day to stay even, while handling the visitors and the phones and the Congressman on the side. We worked 10 to 12 hours a day, at least three nights a week, all day Saturdays, and usually Sunday mornings. But it was worth it. The word "constituent" came alive. It meant the old man living in a shanty in the across-the-tracks area of Tulsa, Oklahoma, who once a month would pencil us long letters on tablet paper. It meant the bank president, the teachers, the doctors, the veterans. It meant the politicians, the farmers, the women, the school kids, the ministers and the Boy Scouts. It meant the DAR, the League of Women Voters, the Chamber of Commerce and the AF of L. It meant the interventionists, the isolationists, and the Republicans as well as the Democrats. It meant, in a way, the state governor, too, and even the President, Cabinet Officers and their assistants. I learned that, to a Congressman, constituent means opportunity. But he also means trouble. He has to be handled with great care. He arrives by telephone, by letter, and endlessly in person. He is demanding, respectful, angry, appreciative, pleading. He needs help. He wants to say thanks. He has a complaint. He wants a job. He seeks official information. Some just want to meet their Congressman. One wanted my Congressman to compose the music for the lyrics of a cowboy ballad he had composed. I remember, too, the patriotic society that wanted to plant a tree on George Washington's birthday. In a rapture of patriotism, they asked for soil from the grounds of Mount Vernon, the Washington Monument, the Lincoln Memorial, the U. S. Capitol, and the White House to put at the base of the tree. We earned their everlasting gratitude by sending little bottles of vari-colored dirt collected from a parking lot behind the New House Office Building.

And so, I came to realize that being a Congressman is a tumultuous experience, and labor never-ending. I learned that it involves a maze of issues, hundreds of influential people, thousands of little people. It calls for a gift of expression, a gregarious spirit, inexhaustible energy -- and patience, patience, patience. It requires struggling with aggravating and niggling detail while the whole nation cries out for statesmanship. It requires statesmanship while the whole Congressional District cries out for concentration on local detail. It is a grinding, exhausting, frustrating and largely thankless task, this business of being a Congressman. There is reason to feel sorry for these badgered people, until one reflects that no-one makes them run for re-election.

But let's move on, to see our Congress from another perspective. Handling Congressional problems for General Marshall and Secretary of War Stimson, I found that the Congress looks and acts utterly differently from the institution seen by a member of the Congressional fraternity. In World War II years, on the receiving instead of the calling end of the Congressional line, I discovered that there really is such a thing as Congressional influence and power -- that some Congressmen who seemed so nice on Capitol Hill can be fearsomely truculent when their requests are denied by functionaries downtown -- that various Congressmen must be accommodated in order to advance an executive department's interests while others, unimportant to the department, who make identical requests are to be denied -- that soldiers can be transferred and given special assignments, even discharged and promoted, through certain pressures from Capitol Hill -- that the military can play politics just like Congressmen can -- that military installations and special announcements and trips and cocktail parties and every conceivable gimmickry can often seduce a recalcitrant legislator -- and that allied civilians organizations and contractors and veterans groups and the National Guard and the Reserves --

yes, even the press and the President -- can all be used to bludgeon the legislator who won't be seduced.

To correlate such antics into some orderly scheme, one device among others that we contrived was to designate me as the repository of all significant Congressional mail involving the military that was received by President Roosevelt, the Secretary, the Under Secretary and Assistant Secretaries of War, the Chief and Deputy Chief of Staff, and all other policy leaders of the Army. It worked splendidly. A Congressman would first telephone a request to me. I would turn him down. Then, with heightening frustration, he would start, by the phone and letter, up the hierarchical line. Each communication, regardless of its addressee, would be automatically referred to me for preparation of a reply. Ever sweetly, but ever firmly, and ever over the other person's signature, back would go my initial no. Not until the war was over did my friends at the Capitol learn of this impregnable system of managing the views. The process did put a premium on imagination. Saying no to the same request from the same man five or six times in different words for different people can become quite a chore. But I had plenty of practice. One Yuletide Season General Marshall made me write letters to fifty Congressmen saying "Merry Christmas and Happy New Year." I was sternly ordered that no two of these greetings could be alike. Try that sometime if you want a real challenge. It's the last ten that do you in.

These wartime days were my first initiation into the mysteries of the Congressional Committee process, as seen from the Executive Branch. Because of my Congressional savoir faire, it was my occasional duty to pilot Secretary Stimson and General Marshall, among others, to the Capitol to see Speaker Rayburn or to appear before a Committee of Congress. For a Reserve First Lieutenant, unfamiliar with Service customs and traditions, this was at the outset a nerve-racking responsibility. I was never quite sure whether or not I might commit an

unpardonable sin by sitting on the wrong side of the great man in the car, or by not opening the door, or by walking beside him instead of in front or behind, or by wrongly getting on or off an elevator before or after he did, or by talking when he wanted me muted, or by being too subdued when he seemed inclined to visit. All I was sure of was that error could be fatal.

But I somehow survived this ordeal, and so from time to time was privileged to watch at close range the impact of such a person as Marshall on a group of Congressmen assembled in Committee. It was awesome. Marshall's peerless self-discipline, unshakable poise, almost formidable dignity, and clearly evident integrity and selflessness made him the personification of the West Point code of honor, duty and country. He bowled over the Committees. Try as this superb soldier did to be deferential to his civilian superiors in Congress, as regulations required him to be, they would be still more deferential to him. But when on rare occasion a Member would try to press him beyond what he felt were the proprieties of the situation, he could at once lower the room temperature 50 degrees with a clipped, hard, peremptory answer which never failed to terminate that particular discussion then and there.

Yet I did see the Committees truly probe. My eyes were opened to the high degree of specialization in the problems of our country that Congressmen acquire through years of service on one Committee. The great power of the Committees also became apparent, not only to work their will independently of even a Marshall or a Roosevelt, but also to force Executive Branch personnel to scurry frantically about to supply data by specified dates, to return edited testimony within 24 hours, to provide witnesses at a moment's notice. I found that the Committees could harass, humiliate and investigate at the drop of a whim, and be amiable and cooperative one day, yet impossibly irascible the next. I learned that some Committee employees are inclined to be more dictatorial than any Congressman ever thought of being. In these World War II hearings I

glimpsed, too, the parochialisms of Congressmen and how this impinged upon national policy. Isolationists and conservatives from heartland America would suspiciously view every proposed move; interventionists and liberals from coastal America would cheer the Executive Branch on. Agricultural Congressmen on the Committees would demand deferments or draft exemptions for their farmer constituents. Labor Congressmen would insist upon deferment of key workers. Business-oriented Congressmen would react similarly in behalf of management. I noted that ordinarily the end product of this interplay of interests was an intricate compromise. Sooner or later the legislative sculptors would chisel out a masterpiece called "the art of the possible." While the objet d'art might have three legs, one eye and a badly curved spine, the darn thing would stand upright and take a fearful pounding without shattering. Ungainly but sturdy, you might say, is the ordinary output of the legislative studio.

Parenthetically, I have seen over the years only a handful of witnesses as able as General Marshall to take charge of Congressional Committee proceedings. Cordell Hull was one. John L. Lewis another. Leon Henderson by his intellect and Harold L. Ickes by his belligerence did nearly as well. Howard Hughes, on one occasion daunted an investigator in this same fashion. General Eisenhower, in his NATO prime, could capture an entire Committee by sheer force of personality. There seems to be at least a touch of similar magic in Secretary of Defense McNamara today.

It is a rare quality, however, that allows one the luxury of arrogance before one of these Committees. It is not toughness that makes it possible, for on the incisors of these Congressional inquisitors you will find the dried blood of many a tough man. Nor is it personality alone, that will win the day. Only a person extraordinarily gifted can block or divert the power of

Congressional Committee set upon working its will. The people who get away with it are few and far between.

After five years in uniform and three years at the Capitol, I was indescribably tired of Washington and went home. But, within a year, I found myself, to my surprise, back again, and back on Capitol Hill, this time as a Professional Staff Member of the newly created Committee on Armed Services of the House of Representatives. I had been recalled from Oklahoma to help paste this new Committee together. So here was a new vista, a new legislative vantage point -- and again, a brand new Congress, for how remarkably different a Congressional Committee is from the House Chamber, from a Congressman's office, and from working with Congress from the Pentagon! At last, it was my fortune to observe closely the power of a Committee Chairman, even to help use that power. At last, a chance to feel the influence of lobbies, whether of the government or of private groups. At last, a chance to measure the forces which actually draft our laws in the Committee-dominated Congress. At last, a chance to study the problem of seniority, the competence and influence of Congressional staffs, the power of the Rules Committee, the real give-and-take between the Majority and Minority, the mysterious goings-on in the secret conclaves of executive sessions and Senate-House Conference Committees, and the processes used to control Committee bills on the House Floor.

For five years I was immersed in these activities as Professional Staff Member, Special Assistant to the Chairman, Chief Clerk and Staff Director. During three of those years my tutor was the astounding Carl Vinson of Georgia, today the Dean of the House of Representatives, who has been in Congress for 50 consecutive years, longer than any man in our nation's history.

Vinson taught me that real power is personal, not official, that force comes from within and is married to intelligence and hard work. He showed, in Committee, at virtually every

meeting, how true it is that knowledge is power. He ran -- and still runs -- the Committee as a personal fiefdom. If he couldn't bull his way to a desired end, he would wheedle his way. If he couldn't do either, he would in a flash change course and triumphantly lead his captive flock in the direction they had demanded to go. He dominated the witness interrogation. He cavalierly ignored fledgling Committee members. He made decisions one after another with a whimsy of steel.

He came to work at six in the morning, opened his mail himself, read his District newspapers, distributed assignments to his staff, and by 7:30 was ready for breakfast, a half day's work already done. By 8:30 he was closeted with Secretaries of Defense or Army, Navy or Air Force, or with top ranking servicemen, preparing for an upcoming hearing, investigation or debate. By April of each year he had the Armed Services legislative calendar cleared of nearly every important bill, long before other Committees had hardly begun. Then he would depart Washington for a week or two at his Georgia farm to regain strength from contact with the red Georgia loam. An unmatched legislative power was his -- due to an unmatched diligence and a canniness gained from four decades in Congress. It was the power of a Chairman, yes -- but a Chairman can be weak as well as strong. I quickly learned from Carl Vinson that it's mostly the man, not the job, that gives one power in public life.

It was side-splitting to watch this human bulldozer perform in conference committee with the Senate. The Senators never had a chance. After the first appropriate obeisance to Senate seniority and to the Senator serving as Conference Chairman, "Uncle Carl" would take over. At one such meeting I remember a very senior Senator saying in pleading tones, "Carl, won't you please let the Senate have its way on just one item?"

People like Vinson are phenomena. It is wrong to generalize from such benevolent despotism that Committee Chairmen are or can be petty tyrants. Some are. Many more try to be but do poorly at it. A Congressman, mind you, reports only to his constituency and to his God, usually in that order. Each of these independently elected men is tough, ambitious, combative and at least a cut above average in brain power. Such men don't push easily. Only a Vinson or a Lyndon Johnson, the latter trained by Vinson, can bend the iron of their colleagues by their steel. A rarely gifted and colorful personality like Dirksen can achieve comparable results through softer techniques -- but again, this requires a clearly superior talent to which other members will willingly heel. This human factor must never be overlooked in measuring the course of public affairs.

Witnesses, pressure, drearily repetitious testimony, crackpots, blandishments from favor seekers from the government and from all America, even attempted bribes, peremptory Congressional demands for special consideration -- tension and heavy labor day in and day out, all at the pell mell pace set by Vinson -- that was life at the House Armed Services Committee. We fought unification. We sided with the Joint Chiefs of Staff against President Truman and Secretary of Defense Louis Johnson, and were vindicated when, to our surprise, the Korean War came along. We ran roughshod over the House. We did almost as well in overrunning the Senate. We were a rampaging political frigate captained by the indomitable, damn-the-torpedoes, full-speed-ahead "Six Star Admiral," Carl Vinson. He built America's two-ocean navy before the war (selling the idea to Roosevelt as a relief program). He redesigned the Defense Department after the war. If you wish to grasp the full import of "Committee Government," as Woodrow Wilson described it, just spend a while contemplating this giant from Georgia. He is the apotheosis of the system.

From this heady Committee experience a series of happenstances ricocheted me, against my better judgment and over my protests, back into the Executive Branch, this time into The White House to labor on writing and Congressional affairs for President Eisenhower. In those 8 years, during six of which his political opposition controlled the Congress, I gave thanks for the associations accumulated over the years in the Congress. For you see, in peacetime the President proposes but the Congress disposes, and I needed every last one of my friends to help get the President's jobs done. The truth is, all this razzle-dazzle about a "great President" being one who dominates Congress and whiplashes it at will is nonsense conjured up by people who favor the policies or politics of the particular Presidents they advertise. Deep national trouble undergirds every so-called great President save possibly Andrew Jackson. Unless the public, and therefore the Congress, are at the point of desperation, hence eager to capitulate to the Nation's Chief Executive, a President can rail and push and demand and wax indignant to his heart's content. But the Congress will stand immovably there and, cow-like, will chew the legislative cud placidly, masticating oh so slowly, before deciding, finally, to swallow. What President Eisenhower liked to call "tub-thumping" just won't work with Congress in ordinary times, for which fact, by the way, we who love freedom ought to give a cheer.

True though this is, I left the White House profoundly impressed with its enormous power. In 1959, in six weeks, we turned the Congress, against its will, 180 degrees off course just by remorseless use of White House power. By press conferences, Presidential letters, addresses to the nation, dramatic personal appearances, consultations with key Congressman, among many other devices, a President can overwhelm competing issues of the day and make his own concern the concern of everyone from coast to coast. Maybe the results turn out poorly for the President on occasion, but the issues will be the President's issues, not someone else's.

Even so, the Congressional picture, seen from The White House, is forever disheartening. Trouble looms everywhere. If foreign aid isn't being scuttled, the UN bond issue is. If aid to education isn't being cut to pieces, the tax bill is. If you pay attention to the Democrats, the Republicans take to the warpath. If you court the Republicans, the Democrats cry foul. Chairman Cannon, Subcommittee Chairmen Passman and Rooney, Chairman Howard Smith, Chairman Cooley, Chairman Vinson, Chairman Mills, even Chairman Adam Clayton Powell, are maharajahs. Each requires endless cajolery. Each will revert at once to hostility or immobility unless the most exquisite pains are taken to stay adequately in touch. Senators Byrd, Eastland, Russell, Kefauver are as likely to bite as to kiss, and one never knows until osculatorily poised whether the venture will end with a coo or a scream. Nor have we factored in the Dirksen-Halleck combination, the elected Republican leaders, who can jimmy the whole works if slighted or taken for granted. The bands of liberals range undisciplined and dogmatically certain of their views no matter who inhabits The White House. They violently assault each other to keep in fighting trim when they run out of Presidents or wandering Republicans to attack. The right wingers can be depended upon to act much the same.

Into this upheaval The White House sturdily tries to inject enough order and common purpose to enact a coherent program, realizing that gaining approval of one request in three will be a miracle. And, I assure you, as I reflectively rub my scar tissue, that when the opposing party is running the Congress, you can count on chicanery of every conceivable kind. Popular recommendations from the President are increased to the point of unacceptability, then returned for veto. Unpopular recommendations are tabled and passionately reviled. Opposition leaders claim parentage of Administration initiatives. Investigations multiply like rabbits. What's good is made to look poor, and what is poor is made to appear heinous. Friendly relations persist

throughout it all, however, for, as the pros say, politics is politics, and there's nothing at all personal about these deliberately inflicted tortures.

A bit strangely each year, despite the rivalries and unending chaos, the President proposes and the Congress enacts enough appropriations and bills to meet the essential business of government. Defense is provided for. The other departments get most of what they ask, and some get a little extra. The space program grows right along. Public works get approved. Farm bills always face disaster, right up to approval. Foreign aid is expected to be enviscerated each year but somehow the essentials survive.

Some of the very prominent measures always fail, of course. These are the ones that grab the headlines while the housekeeping of government goes routinely along. These great political bills ordinarily involve a sharp change in direction in our national life, which is why they are political and why they are prominent. Aid to education, medicare, domestic peace corps, tax reform, urban affairs department -- measures like these force sharp cleavages in Congress, build coalitions, arouse passions, generate roadblocks, and disrupt the Capital's tranquility. If, nevertheless, the public at large remains unmoved, so will the Congress. If the public becomes aroused and demands approval of such ventures, in reasonable time the Congress will act.

Which brings us to some discussion points which I shall enjoy exploring as long as you wish.

There are barricades against action strewn all over the government, in the Executive Branch as well as in Congress. The Rules Committee blocks some bills. That's bad. But so does the Bureau of the Budget. Is that just as bad? The Committee Chairmen are petty tyrants, unreceptive to Presidential wishes. That's bad. But departmental Secretaries often flaunt Congressional desires. Is that just as bad? The long wrangles in Congress hold up actions

urgently needed for progress in America. That's unconscionable. But the Executive Branch secretly deliberates for months, sometimes years, before even deciding to recommend Congressional action. Is that any better? The lack of party discipline at the Capitol blocks a party program. That's deplorably confusing. But parts of the Administration get into disputes, mostly private, and produce directly contradictory programs. Is that bad? A Congressman "wastes" time on petty matters and ought to be freed of these so he can solve the problems of the nation. But a President salutes the National Sandwich Month, receives beauty queens, starts 50 mile hikes, lights the Christmas tree, and welcomes school children, Boy Scouts and local politicians while our alliances crumble, the cold war rages, and unemployment persists. Is this bad for America?

Now that today I am a registered lobbyist, warily skirting the government rather than warily governing, I dare say, to get our dialogue under way, that most people who rail against the weaknesses of our governmental system mean, really, that their pet schemes are being foiled or their particular philosophy of government is being frustrated. An enjoyable thing such people can do in these matters is to invert the existing situation politically, then see whether or not one's reforms sound as attractive as before. Testing one's nostrums in this way is the best protection against advocating arbitrary government that I know.