

Interview with
TOM KOROLOGOS



by

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Final EDITED Transcript of an Interview with Tom Korologos former Deputy Assistant to the President for Legislative Affairs in the Ford administration--July 3, 1985

Q: You served for several years when President Nixon was in the White House. You also served President Ford from August 1974 until January of 1975. This gives you a rather unique comparative perspective. Can you tell me how the Nixon legislative operation was organized? Did you work with particular issue areas, a particular chamber, or was it more informal than that? Were things different in your short term of service under Ford? What were your duties in the Ford administration?

A: "In the Nixon administration, Bill Timmons was the director of the legislative affairs unit at the White House. Clark McGregor came in after his Senate race against Hubert Humphrey in Minnesota. I worked in the Senate. We had two people in the Senate and three or four on the House side. Our organization was totally informal in the Nixon administration. We worked on every issue. Everybody worked on everything. Bill Timmons stayed on after Vice President Ford took charge of things and so did I.

The duties of an individual working as a liaison for the President of the United States fall in three major areas. The first occurs when the President expends political capital by addressing issues on television and going to the country for support. When this happens you get together with the departmental liaison people and tell them which members they should touch base with when a particular issue is going to be raised. Most of the domestic issues are handled by the departmental liaison people because they have the best contacts and working relationships with members of Congress in their subject domains. Defense and national security are the high visibility areas where a President tends to use up most of his political capital.

A second major responsibility comes when the President decides to use the veto. The veto changes the entire political environment. When a President vetoes a bill the issue disappears and you have a situation where it is strictly us against them. It becomes an institutional challenge of major proportions. The liaison people are depended upon for their evaluations of whether they can get the number of votes necessary to sustain the veto.

The third major responsibility that I had is unique to the Senate side. It involves doing the legwork on confirmations of Presidential appointments. Most nominations are routine but anytime a presidential nominee runs into troubles you have the potential for a major expenditure of political capital by the President.



As a liaison, you meet with everybody and you try to find out who the individual Senator is most comfortable meeting with. I usually dealt with leadership. A good deal of my time was spent just hanging around Hugh Scott's office. The departmental guys met with the other Senators. We didn't want to confuse someone as important as the Senate Minority leader by forcing him to deal with a half dozen different people representing the President's legislative priorities."

Q: Much that has been written seems to indicate that President Nixon was a private man who did not want to have a lot of contact with the Congress. Over time, he began to resent the intrusions that he saw Congress making on his executive authority. What kind of attitude filtered down to the legislative liaison people? Did that attitude or direction develop over time?

A: "Richard Nixon was a very shy individual. He hated meetings and he did not like to be with people. He was not a gregarious outgoing type of individual. He was not suited by personality to become a politician. For example, Nixon always felt that the President's time could be better used in things other than going to the press conference announcing the Justice Department's legislative program. We tried to convince him that these appearances were necessary to create an environment of good will but that just didn't have much of an impact upon his way of approaching things.

Nixon was a lawyer and his professional inclinations were written all over his actions. Lawyers like paper and President Nixon preferred to review the options on paper. He was just terrible when we would bring people down from Capitol Hill to see him. I remember that we won the vote on the ABM treaty. We knew it was touch and go so we isolated some of the individuals who looked uncertain about voting against us. Senator Winston Prouty (R-Vermont) was one of the people we had targeted for special Presidential attention. Nixon told Prouty that he knew the people in New England and that he could understand if Prouty had to vote against us on the treaty. We almost fainted. That wasn't the script at all and it wasn't the way to pick up a wavering vote. We constantly urged him to stick to the talking points in his meetings with Hill people.

Nixon was a lawyer. Eisenhower was a general. Ford was a Congress creature. Presidents are what they are when they come into office. Their modus operandi, their mentality, and their

operational preferences are predetermined before they arrive in the Oval Office. Ford was a Congress type who liked to make his decisions in meetings with a large number of people assigned to represent alternative viewpoints. Ford had been on the Hill for 25 years working with defense appropriations. He was senior enough to be called upon for service in his party's delegations to the various Conference Committees. You go to those meetings and someone says ten will be enough. Someone else says ten is too many and six sounds right. Then someone with the experience and issue approach of a Gerald Ford says seven and the deal is struck. That is what they do up on Capitol Hill.

We had to teach Gerald Ford some things about bargaining when you are the President of the United States. At the beginning, he just rolled over every time Senator Long came up to strike a deal in his capacity as Chairman of the Senate Finance Committee. As time went on I saw a sudden metamorphosis in Ford. By the time he had come back from the Caribbean summit, where he was dealing with other world leaders, he had learned that sometimes you need to be firm with the Congress. Ford had learned to beat people over the head with the administration's needs when it was called for.

Ford really enjoyed meeting with Congressmen. They had been his friends for 25 years. He liked the dances and the press outings. Nixon set up one half hour each day to handle congressional requests. You would get a series of five minute vignettes with the Cotton Queens and special presentations of brass eagles. Pretty soon the Congressional half hour was stretching to an hour. Then the requests started coming in for the dinners and the fundraisers. Nixon didn't want to see his time occupied in that way. He resented the escalation that came from the initial effort to follow our advice and placate congressional requests."

Q: What can you tell me about the flavor of the individual reactions in Congress to Ford? Were the members delighted or mystified? What were they expecting? Was there an immediate change in the number of requests you started getting from the members?

A: "There was a sense of great relief. Nixon had wanted John Connally to be his successor but that would have been the cause of some blood spilling in the Republican party at the



congressional level. You have a majority of Democrats who, by their very nature, do not want to support a Republican. You had to hold hearings in both Houses of the Congress because of the unique constitutional character of the situation. The only way to get Congress out of its bunker mentality was to bring it one of its own as the nominee for Vice President. This is the major reason Ford eventually was chosen by the President.

It is true that there was an immediate escalation in the number of requests for Presidential attention. The Nixon people in the liaison shop like myself and Bill Timmons had some black marks against them. We had to approach our job as if we were just starting out again. We could not afford to hold any grudges. We had to go see Tip O'Neill and Lowell Weicker and tell them that President Ford was sure to need their help. We still had programs in the works and the war in Vietnam was grinding down. There was a great need for continuity and we worked very hard to provide that.

President Ford had been in office only a few days and already the Oval Office had become like his House office. There were people from the Congress just wandering in to say hello. They didn't necessarily have any substantive purpose. They wanted reassurance just as their constituents did. Jerry Ford played it very loose. I remember walking past one day in the hallway and being summoned in by the President. He called me in to have a soft drink. There was no particular business he had to discuss but he wanted to discuss politics with someone as he took a moment to relax. Mike Mansfield came up to see him one day and the whole purpose of the meeting was to give the President a brand of pipe tobacco that they both liked. We went down to Senator Sparkman's birthday party just to create good will. After awhile it became necessary to put a leash on the President. He was a man of congressional moods and habits. He would go anywhere and do anything if a member of Congress requested it."

Q: It is an old pearl of political wisdom that Presidents with legislative experience have an easier time in dealing with the Congress. Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan were both criticized initially for their lack of experience in legislative matters. What is your impression of whether Ford's 25 years in the House made a difference in terms of the way he conducted himself in the Presidency?

A: "The premise behind that so-called wisdom is wrong. President Reagan had a phenomenal record in his first year. He

got his way on AWACS, MX, and the tax bill. Ford's record presents a very different case. He vetoed 66 bills. The Democrats in Congress would take a \$500 million disability bill and jack it up to \$1.5 billion forcing a veto while our opponents howled that we were against disability. Ford's political strategy was a 33 plus one strategy. They calculated where the votes were and what it would take to sustain a veto. Veto strategies are not successful. They are by definition confrontational. The Democrats forced us to accept a mizer label.

Ford's attitude and background were helpful to him but they were not determining factors in the progress of his presidency. He had no electoral mandate. There wasn't a single member of the Congress who owed his election to Gerald Ford. You can see the potential with someone like Reagan. I believe that only one Senator was able to run ahead of presidential candidate Ronald Reagan. That kind of mandate creates political capital. Ford had no political capital to cash in on."