

That Sense of Fairness

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Participant: James T. Lynn

Participant Title: Director of the Office of Management and Budget, Secretary of Housing and Urban Development

Participant: Herbert J. Storing

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SCENE SETTER: Gerald Ford liked to be briefed through well-researched position papers and person-to-person conversations in which nuances and tradeoffs could be addressed. His style differed greatly from that of President Nixon, as Ford also valued hearing from a wide variety of people.

James T. Lynn: Seeing the President's evolution on how he wanted to do business was one of the most intriguing things. Richard Nixon wanted the written word, that's well known. He didn't want the oral. Gerald Ford came in, and the first three days he was in office he said to many different people, "Now, I'm a person who likes to just get a bunch of people around a table and have it out head-to-head with them." If you heard him in the first few days, a paper would be meaningless. It wasn't three weeks later that I was in a meeting with him, and he was growling because he hadn't had the paper first. And what he evolved was the best of the systems, which is to get the combination of the well-prepared paper, which everyone has had an opportunity to see, comment, and refine, and then have the head-to-head discussion where the President can really get the feel for things that a person's not willing to put in a paper. Because, let's face it, in a political world and in a world of leaks, and in a world where not everyone can get the exact nuance in writing of what their position really is, a head-to-head discussion gives the President an opportunity to verify various positions of the players, to sniff out the nuances and the tradeoffs. Now this was a fundamental difference between those White Houses.

Herbert J. Storing: I just want to say, why do you think that change occurred? You said—I know you want to pursue the question of whether there was a difference, but leaving that aside—from what you've said, I can see two possible reasons. One would be, one might have to do with your own experience under the Nixon administration, and I was interested in knowing whether it Ford's initiative that caused this new system, Jim? What was the reason for this, as you describe it, quite significant—

Lynn: Multiple reasons. First of all, there was the feeling that has already been expressed that the Nixon White House was a very tight, closed-in place where one or two people were running the whole thing, and one reason was to create a change. Remember, we were looking for different ways of doing things, and this was a very different way that would impact on public perception. So it was done from that perspective. It was done secondly because Gerald Ford, as a human being, had a sense of fairness. It was done thirdly, in my judgment, because I think President Ford, based on his Hill experience, had learned that you're very well advised to touch all the bases. Now, somebody once described politics as like baseball. All you've got to do is touch all the bases. But as one old-timer told me when I first came in the government, there are two fundamental differences: one is, there are a hell of a lot more bases than three or four, and secondly, their geographic location is constantly changing. And if you come at it with that viewpoint, you then want, if you're sitting in the White House, not to be blindsided. In the head-to-head you may get some nuance, either political or substantive, that you won't otherwise get. And from the standpoint also of good sound policymaking, you want multiple views. But it's all those elements combined and probably others.

End of excerpt.

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