

*Interviewer:* This is an interview with the honorable Bob Michel for the Bryce Harlow Oral History Project. Thanks you again, sir for talking to us about Bryce Harlow. Let's start by having you tell us how you first met Bryce Harlow.

*Bob Michel:* I'm trying to think when it was that I first met him. Many, many years ago I came to Washington in 1949 as administrative assistant and he was with Ike. He knew that I was a combat infantryman from World War II and that as a junior congressman. Well, I would get down to the White House once in a while, but nothing like it was later on when I became Leader.

I knew, of course, of what great work he had done on the House Armed Services Committee for many years and the reputation he had, and so whenever it was a question of our looking for good advice, we'd get it from Bryce, with no frills. I think the most significant thing as far as I'm concerned was the time when in my seventh term in the Congress, they were having problems up at the White House with congressional liaison and there'd been talk among some of the members that, well – "Bob, you're quite popular among both sides of the aisle and they need to shape up the doggoned congressional shop down there at the White House, and you ought to go down there and take a hold of that thing."

Well, the word got around and Bryce called me and asked me whether or not I would consider it, and I said, "Well, that's a very serious decision for me because here I am in my seventh term in the House of Representatives," bearing in mind – this was just before Watergate now, but not knowing for sure what was going to happen there yet. You know, that was all speculation at that time. And so it got to the point where Bryce called me and said, "Bob, we ought to really come to some kind of decision here." He said, "What about – " and I was in Peoria at the time. He said, "What about putting Air Force One down in Peoria and pick up your bride and go out to San Clemente?" And I said, "Well, Bryce, if I go that far, there's no turning back," because you never tell the president no.

I said, "I've got one more phone call I got to make to my good friend Mel Laird." He was Secretary of Defense and was over in Europe, and when he got back to New York – he was coming back that weekend. I called him right away and I said, "Mel," and he said, "Well, I think I know what you're calling about. I gave you the very highest recommendation," and I said, "But what do you really think?" And Mel's response was, "Well, you know, Bob. We had a lot of great times being members of the House. We

could do most anything we wanted to do, you know, we were our own bosses and as long as we kept our skirts clean.” He said, “You know, I’m in a pretty significant position as Secretary of Defense, but I’m not the boss.” I said, “I think I get what you’re telling me; that we’ve got a pretty free latitude up there serving in the House of Representatives and once I go down to the White House, that would make quite a difference,” and so I opted against going.

I called Bryce and told him that I just didn’t think I wanted to do it, that there’s probably a future for me in the House. And, of course, as it all turned out --

*Interviewer:* It was the right decision.

*Bob Michel:* Yes. I would have got caught up in that Watergate routine.

*Interviewer:* How did Bryce react to your decision?

*Bob Michel:* Well, we were good friends and he was most anxious to have me say yes. But he understood. And if there was no other way of convincing me that that’s what I ought to do, he would search elsewhere. And so there was never any animosity or ill feelings or anything of that nature. One could never have any kind of ill feeling after any conversation with Bryce.

*Interviewer:* Why do you think he was so effective, dealing with the Congress?

*Bob Michel:* Well, simply because – as a matter of fact, even when I was a leader in the House for 14 years and there were different folks up there at the White House from Jim Baker to Mike Deaver and – well, my dear friend Ken Duberstein, and Timmons and – but it was always the White House first, you know, and not the Congress. And no matter what the decision was, everybody on the White House staff was always looking out for the president – number one, you know. But Bryce was very good at that, and people understood that. He was representing the president where he was, but he had a certain gift of communication and a way of getting along that you never felt offended when he asked if you could do something for them or help them out in any given way, and if you ask for something and you couldn’t get it from the White House, why Bryce had just a nice way of telling you that it couldn’t be done. He just had a unique – such a unique personality and soft touch – I should say without being a soft touch. He was just a very accommodating individual. There couldn’t be anybody

better. He just had a good gift of knowledge for how the system works and how you treat individual members.

*Interviewer:* Human relations, I guess is what they say.

*Bob Michel:* Yes. He was the ultimate. There was no question about that.

*Interviewer:* Bryce is known for having a great sense of history, of knowing that what happened before he came to town, even when he was working as a staffer on the Hill and then in the White House. I wanted to get your thoughts on whether you think that's unique in Washington; whether it be in the House or the White House. Do you think most people have a good sense of history?

*Bob Michel:* Well, not really. I mean, we look at the situation today. I don't know how many of these young folks that come in as interns to get started, whether or not they've really studied their history books, and if they're guided by what they read in some of the polls, some of our younger people haven't really been attuned to historical references. But Bryce had made a point of digging in to know what the historical consequences were, and then he just retained a great institutional memory upon which he could recall and say or write what he had read about and put it to practice. Not everybody has the gift to do that nor would be willing to take the time to research it as Bryce did.

*Interviewer:* You probably get asked this question a million times as a former leader of the House, but you mentioned the climate today, and I wanted to also get your thoughts on whether the idea of winning was as important in Bryce Harlow's time as it is now or did the atmosphere back then lend itself more to compromise?

*Bob Michel:* Well that may be difficult to say for sure. Bryce would want to be on the winning side of an issue, but you were never offended by the manner in which he presented the case. He just had that special knack to not offend people in arguing for his point of view. He did it in such a gentle, persuasive way, however, and always backed himself up with good facts and good substance.

*Interviewer:* Do you think there were people maybe on the Republican side either in the White House or Congress or whatever that wished he was a little bit more partisan?

*Bob Michel:* No, I don't think so. I think we all accepted Bryce for the personality that he was, and that he was here at the right time with the right touch, and that was so harmonious with Ike. I mean, it

just seemed like they were father and son, without any differences; that they were just in perfect harmony and accord.

*Interviewer:* Bryce, along with the integrity and the honesty, is also credited with having great political instincts. I wanted to get your thoughts on that, too. Do you think political instinct is something that could ever be taught to people?

*Bob Michel:* No. You read Political Science 101 or one thing or another, but there's nothing like the experience, and particularly working for Ike while he was a five-star general, right at the top. Bryce knew from his knowledge of having to deal with all the things he had to deal with over the course of his life, that there are political decisions even in the military that had to be considered and taken into good account. But that doesn't say that some of our military people are the most politically astute people. Actually, that's where Bryce really helped fill whatever gap Ike had, in not having a sense of feel politically; that Bryce could fill in that gap because he always kept his feet on the ground and his ear to the ground and could give the president good advice. And coming from Oklahoma – well, it was just a good background for him. Of course, Ike, you know, being an old Kansan – there was a great deal of community interest there from a heritage point of view.

*Interviewer:* And Harlow, of course, continued to be Ike's eyes and ears-

*Bob Michel:* Right.

*Interviewer:* -in Washington after he had left the White House. How would you say Bryce Harlow influenced your own career or helped you be more effective?

*Bob Michel:* Well, I don't know for sure. He was such a good role model, you know. I came here fresh out of nowhere out in Illinois and didn't have any political science or press journalism or anything when I came down as an AA, as an assistant to my predecessor, and my predecessor was a pretty controversial figure because he became in his second term, chairman of the House Un-American Activities Committee, which was very controversial at that time. And I tell you, by observing Bryce and the manner in which he operated and dealt with the press and with difficult situations, you could always learn a lot. "Well, how would Bryce handle this thing?" And he was here and around enough that if you were to have to choose a good role model, you'd say, "Well, try to mirror what old Bryce is doing."

*Interviewer:* We spoke with all of the Harlow children over the past couple of weeks for this project, and one of the things they all said was how their father had this respect for government service as a profession.

*Bob Michel:* Oh, yes.

*Interviewer:* Do you think that's lacking nowadays? Do you think there are young people that don't want to choose government service as a profession?

*Bob Michel:* Well, I think there's no question that the whole climate is such that it is not conducive to encouraging young people to participate in the process. As a matter of fact, I'm on the Federal Election Reform Commission. How do we get people more interested in participating and voting and what do we have to do? Then there are those who want to make it easier so we can vote by mail or don't even have to register, and anything to get people back involved in the system. Well, I think Bryce would look somewhat askance of that and say, "Well, I tell you, you just can't leave it to others, and you've got to dig into it yourself and be a participant if you really want to improve this thing, and don't be one of those sideliners and give in to criticizing and harping rather than how can I help; what can I do." You just got that feeling that he had just a great respect for the Constitution of the United States and our form of government – three co-equal branches of government. Jeez, I don't know how many times it would come up in that way. He was well-grounded in the fundamentals and that, of course, served him so well all through the years.

*Interviewer:* Do you think people of today who are a little bit more apt to work across party lines and, you know, do all the things – or exhibit the traits that Bryce had – do you think that that's a hindrance to people working in today's climate? Do you think it's gotten that bad?

*Bob Michel:* Well, as a matter of fact, Tom Foley and I were asked by a couple of the younger members, bipartisan, to come to a meeting where they wanted to establish the Middle Aisle Caucus, trying to get back to talking to one another, and we went to the first one. They asked us back when they had about 34 Members, I think it was, who had signed up, about evenly divided between the parties. We had a nice breakfast and they were asking us questions about how do you do this thing, and not that any one of us had the answer because it's really got to come from the top I think. It's nice for the young – actually there weren't only young members there, first term or second term. There were some more senior members who

had recognized that, gee whiz, it's got to get back to the days where it was like you – Bob and Tom – and the relationship you had. As respected leaders, you know, you respected one another, you gave no quarter when it came to arguing the issues, always respecting one another, but still there was the respect for the individual. I was making the point with them that we – when Tom and I were leaders – we alternated on our weekly leadership meetings in each other's offices. You know that's something for the Speaker to concede to the Minority Leader, but he and his staff would come over one week to our office and we would go over there the next week just as one of those things to buttress the fact that we were talking to one another and getting along well as we could, even though being political adversaries. We were not enemies. We were political adversaries. That's one of the pieces of advice we'd always try to give these folks. Some of them in that group of freshmen, for example, that came in when Newt took over from me as the Leader made it part of their campaigns to trash government. I mean, they didn't really think, "I'm going down to Washington to improve things." It was just that government was bad. There were a number of them. And then here they are elected the first time in the majority, and never having experienced what it is to be in the minority, they've lost a lot in that whole business of how do you deal with people of another faith, of another point of view.

*Interviewer:* Do you think it's easier for the press to cover, you know, sort of the more extremes, the "bad apples" I guess as opposed to people like Bryce?

*Bob Michel:* Well, I suppose. The press, you know, when they pick people for any show, for example, they usually want controversy. They want entertainment – "let's you and him fight" – and the more extreme views you can get clashing with one another the better they seem to like it when, quite frankly, I get tired of listening to these people shouting at one another. I want to hear some of them say, "You made a good point. I could buy that except that I would maybe vary to this degree or that degree," and then you'd feel like boy, there's at least a rational discussion taking place here.

*Interviewer:* Do you think there are other Bryce Harlows, though, that are working in Washington today?

*Bob Michel:* Few and far between. We all say whatever happened to Bryce? Whatever happened to that spirit, that personality?

*Interviewer:* As sort of a final thought, what are the most important lessons to be learned from Bryce Harlow and his career and what he did in Washington?

*Bob Michel:* Well, that you just don't have to be a fire-eater to be effective. Much more so that you can have a soft voice and be very effective because you listen a lot and you didn't take the positions you had to dominant the doggoned conversation. There's just as much to gain from listening as there is from your talking, probably much more so, and that he had, as I said a number of times, that unique gift and quality in his personality to make – I don't know if he had any enemies, but if he had, those who didn't think very much of him, I don't know how they could be offended sitting across the desk or the table talking with him. There's just no way that he would exacerbate a situation that might have been rather tense. His whole method of operation was one of ameliorating those differences and calming the waters, and that's where he made such a good name for himself.

Of course, subsequently, you know, when we have these Bryce Harlow dinners honoring Bryce and the people, maybe a businessman or a member of Congress whose reputations mirror Bryce's. I know one year they honored me, and I just felt very humble at the time. I said to be likened in any fashion or form to Bryce Harlow, put us on a pedestal as the ultimate. It was the highest compliment that could be paid, and I think I expressed myself in some respect that way at that time. I appreciated very much receiving the award because it was something extraordinary special – to have even been thought of at times to have the same qualities, the personality, and character as one great Bryce Harlow. I wish there were more.

*Interviewer:* Congressman, thank you so much for talking to us for the Bryce Harlow oral history project.

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