

*Steve Silver:* This is an interview with William Safire for the Bryce Harlow Oral History Project. Mr. Safire, thank you again for talking to us about Bryce Harlow.

*William Safire:* I'm delighted. He was a friend and a colleague and was a member at the very beginning of the Judson Welliver Society. That's named after Judson Welliver, who was the first White House speech writer in the Calvin Coolidge administration. His title was literary clerk. Since then, White House speech writers formed an organization named after him. Bryce was one of the early members because of his work on speeches for Dwight Eisenhower.

*Steve Silver:* Sure.

*William Safire:* And he had a hand in some of the Nixon speeches, too. He was in a higher category in the hierarchy than the speech writers. But he would remember his old profession and give his input whenever he was called upon.

*Steve Silver:* And I take it that society's still in existence today?

*William Safire:* Yes, I'm the president and one of these days I've got to call another meeting. We get together every two years.

Now, to recollections of Bryce....

My first recollection of him was something that happened back in '67 when we were just getting organized for the Nixon national comeback. *Time Magazine* was planning a cover story on this in 1967. In that planning some faithless member of *Time Magazine* sent us Nixon people, its file – internal documents that were being used by *Time* of all its interviews with people that were not for attribution. I say that was faithless because background interviews should never get out of a newspaper or journalist's control.

*Steve Silver:* Right.

*William Safire:* Anyway, somebody at *Time* who was obviously sore at *Time* editors sent a whole bunch of things about who was saying what about Nixon behind his back. Nixon was trying to make his comeback and this was very important to know, so this was an intelligence bonanza for Haldeman. And I remember one of the quotes that was said, not for attribution, was from Bryce Harlow, who was not on anybody's team at the time. He said something to the effect that Nixon is a party loyalist who has stepped up to the tough ones as well as the easy ones. Well, that was one of the few

really nice things that anybody was saying behind Nixon's back. And that tipped us to the fact that Bryce Harlow would be a really good person to bring on board. So Nixon went out after him, and not to Nixon's surprise, Harlow was quite willing to work with him. That was an important move because Bryce was known then, as he was known later, for his judgment. His judgment was right about Nixon, and Nixon used it later on.

I also remember that after Watergate, when Bryce was asked how come he wasn't involved in any of the Watergate scandals, or cover-up, or anything like that. His reply was, "They didn't trust me to do wrong right." Now that was a typical, well-phrased Bryce Harlow statement.

*Steve Silver:*

That was Harlow's quote? I've heard that before.

*William Safire:*

I don't know if I used it in *Before the Fall*. I may have. I did recount in *Before the Fall*, that Bryce was somebody who had, A) a good memory, and B) experience far beyond most of the people who were around Nixon, in the late 60's and for that campaign. As soon as Nixon became president, Nixon asked Bryce to brief the new appointees, the new White House aides, and Halderman called a meeting and I remember it because it was the Sapphire room, spelled S-A-P-P-H-I-R-E, at the Hotel Pierre in New York, which was the transition headquarters or the interregnum headquarters. Bryce sat down with what must have been 20 or so of the new staff, which included Henry Kissinger, John Erlichman, Pat Moynihan, and Arthur Burns. He looked around the room and he told us that in getting calls and making calls from the White House there's no such thing as a private call.

Then he called on an experience that I vaguely remember when I was a young political operative. He said a call from the White House, I'm paraphrasing here, is a call from the high levels of an administration. It's not a private call; it carries influence and enormous weight, more than you think. He recounted the Bernard Goldfine episode with Sherman Adams, when Sherman Adams was the assistant to the President Eisenhower, and Bryce was a young aide, or speechwriter for all I know. Adams made a call to some regulatory agency ostensibly to just enquire about the status of one Bernard Goldfine, who was a big contributor to Republican causes. And Adams insisted later, when this scandal broke about it, that he was just finding out information about a query about the constituent from New Hampshire. Bryce's point to all of us was, "Remember that; I lived through that; it caused the ruination of Sherman Adams, and a great embarrassment to his president

Eisenhower. And don't any of us do that." That was a combination of just shrewd good judgment and the fact that he lived through the previous presidency. So had Nixon, as vice president, but none of the guys around there in that room had thought of that, and as a result of Bryce's recollection, people knew that there were no such things as 'private calls.'

Now let's see what other episode – I remember him playing tennis; Bryce was a tennis player, and Spiro Agnew, the vice president, was also a tennis player. In the mid-term campaign of 1972, when Agnew was traveling around the country and both Pat Buchanan and I were dispatched from Nixon's speech writing staff to help him with his controversial and highly effective speeches, Bryce was along on that and he would occasionally edit our speeches. But I guess one of his most important things was to rein in Agnew from saying anything that might backfire, and also to play tennis with him. The two of them would go out on the tennis courts and it would take some of the poisons out of Agnew's system. Bryce was always a moderating force; would cool off Agnew from time to time. The fact that he could play tennis with the vice president was a useful thing.

*Steve Silver:* Sure. Absolutely.

*William Safire:* Those are my brief recollections of this chain-smoking gentleman. He was short, as you know.

*Steve Silver:* Right, absolutely.

*William Safire:* And one of my favorite lines of his was when he had a meeting with Rogers Morton, who was the head of the Republican National Committee, and I think he was six-foot-eight. And Bryce came back from the spirited and difficult meeting when Nixon wanted the Republican National Committee to do something that they didn't want to do. Bryce came back and said, "I saw Morton and we had an eyeball to kneecap confrontation."

*Steve Silver:* That's a great line.

*William Safire:* Yeah. So those are my recollections.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah. What were some of things that he maybe taught you about speechwriting or just things that you had picked up from working under him?

*William Safire:* Not about speechwriting so much, but about the need for calm in tight situations, and in never raising your voice. Well, I shouldn't say not in speech writing because he did go over some statements on various campaign planes when I rode with him. He would treat every statement as a potential way to get into trouble, and he would edit out the trouble. He would demand, in his gentle and quiet way, accuracy. And little accuracy, I mean, small details that he said can trip you up, and if you're wrong about a minor thing in a statement, can cast doubt on the whole statement. His inherent, cautious optimism rubbed off onto everybody. And so when you're an aide to a president and you're talking to somebody who has been an aide to previous presidents, who has been through the fires and retained his integrity, and retained his calm through the most stressful times that reassured you that, hey, after this is all over there's a future. Bryce wasn't on the greasy pole clambering to get to the top. He was always sought after rather than seeking. And that was a lesson to some of us.

*Steve Silver:* Do you think the quality of political speech writing today is as good as it was when Harlow was doing it?

*William Safire:* I think it's improved.

*Steve Silver:* Yeah?

*William Safire:* Yeah, Mike Gerson for example, who was the lead speech writer until recently of George W. Bush, did a superb job on a couple of major speeches in England, for example, at Westminster – that ranks very high. And of course Reagan's speeches were superb speeches, but much enhanced by his delivery. He could take a medium speech and make it an extremely powerful one. So we stand on the shoulders of giants, a metaphor that has been raised at the Judson Welliver Society. When Ted Sorenson, who wrote speeches for Kennedy, comes to those meetings, and reassures the young speech writers who look at him with wonderment and great pride that they're following in those footsteps. He can egg 'em on, and this generation benefits from the need for understandable, short speeches. They're getting shorter all the time, 10, 12 minutes; not the State of the Union types but the inaugural types. And so I think we have a tendency to look back and say, "Boy, in the past they made great speeches," and talk about the Kennedy inaugural and Lincoln second inaugural, which were mountaintop experiences amongst speech writers. But most of the speeches of 40 to 100 years ago were pretty dry, dull and laden with detail. Now we have many more good presidential speeches.

*Steve Silver:* Harlow is known of course for having a great sense of history, going back to his days as a young congressional aide. In the House library you eluded to some of that, and some of the other people that I've interviews have told me that this sense of history is really what made him very effective. My question I want to get your thoughts on – do you think people who advise presidents, and even congressional leaders today, still have that strong sense of history of what happened before they were there?

*William Safire:* I was impressed with his sense of, “this is what we’ve been through before, the history of our times, of the Eisenhower administration.” It’s a more immediate history that he could bring to bear. Another thing he brought to bear was his southwestern roots. Both he and Moynihan were born in Oklahoma. Am I right about that?

*Steve Silver:* Yes.

*William Safire:* Most people think of Moynihan as Harvard; New England.

*Steve Silver:* Tulsa I believe.

*William Safire:* And so was Bryce. They had this great advantage over all the other guys who were mainly coastal I guess, east and west. But he would occasionally remind us that, of what would later become known as the heartland and the feelings of people who were not sophisticated.

*Steve Silver:* Do you think that it’s important that we remember the great White House staffers like Bryce Harlow, or is the nature of the job such that they should sort of remain maybe a little bit more anonymous in history?

*William Safire:* Well, the passion for anonymity has passed. Bryce was one of the last of the Mohicans on that. He really did not make an effort to get himself covered. And he was not preparing for his post-White House employment while he was in the White House. I mean he came to him, he was with Procter & Gamble and all that, but he had no need to claim, “I wrote that speech,” or “I’m responsible for that elegant phrase or powerful phrase.” He was of the Louis Brownlow school, who was the man who coined the phrase of presidents’ aides should have “a passion for anonymity.” That’s what Bryce had. It’s hard to say this about someone who was attracted to and knew how to wield power, but Bryce was a genuinely modest man.

*Steve Silver:* Do you think the level of integrity that Bryce Harlow is very well known for could ever be taught to people, or do you think that just comes from who he was?

*William Safire:* I think it can be sharpened by reminding people of lessons of the past, just the way Bryce reminded us at that meeting of the power of a phone call, and the fact that there was no such thing as a private phone call from the White House. Integrity is something to develop over a lifetime, and something you hone over a lifetime. And when you get into the crucible of the White House, or any top job where power is located, that tests your integrity. And if you're able, as Bryce did, to surface in more than one administration as a trusted aide, you have that twice-tempered steel.

*Steve Silver:* As a final thought, what do you think are the most important lessons that future generations should learn from Bryce?

*William Safire:* Integrity, as you pointed out, and not a flaunted integrity – a quiet integrity. That induces others to follow you and to pick up the essence of your integrity, rather than have it jammed down their throats. He did not wear his integrity on his sleeve. He was much more effective because he was soft-spoken. And perhaps because he was soft-spoken and diminutive, he didn't come on too strong, and didn't feel the need to dominate or become a household word. This is a great strength, and if you're a man in power, a president, that's the kind of man you need at your side. Roosevelt had it with Harry Hopkins, and while Bryce was not as close to Nixon as Harry Hopkins was to FDR, he was in close enough, and Nixon used him not nearly enough when it came to the crunches.

*Steve Silver:* Well thank you again for talking to us.

*William Safire:* My pleasure.

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