

*Steve Silver:* This is an interview with Mark Shields for the Bryce Harlow Oral History Project.

*Mark Shields:* Happy to be with you, Steve. I'm been honored to be included.

*Steve Silver:* Let's start, by having you tell us how you first got to know Bryce Harlow.

*Mark Shields:* By the time I got to know Bryce Harlow, I was just a green editorial writer and columnist at "The Washington Post" and he was already a firmly established legend in town.

And I guess my most intense exposure was we were doing a show called "Inside Washington" on PBS, and I had a chance to interview him and we spent a lot of time before and after, and then from that point forward he was always available. I was initially impressed and continually impressed.

*Steve Silver:* Why do you think Harlow's judgment was so valued by the presidents that he counseled?

*Mark Shields:* Because it was good. Because it was sound. Because there was no other agenda he had. He was a public servant in the truest sense.

But, he was a man who had a very quiet voice. He was a man of small stature. I mean, just the opposite of what one thinks of as a major Washington lobbyist, walking in at 6'2" and dominating a room by his sheer physical size or animal magnetism, or whatever else – or bombast.

Those who, unfortunately, are exposed to discourse on television now, which is sadly the equivalent intellectually of, "your mother wears Army shoes."

Bryce Harlow was quiet. But there was never a question that his counsel was rooted in the basis of his superb judgment. Politically he was gifted, don't get me wrong. But his wisdom was distilled through the true crucible of World War II and his service with Gen. George Marshall and through that amazing saga of history.

A succession of American leaders of all political stripes saw in him those rare qualities: judgment, candor and wisdom that are sadly in short supply today.

*Steve Silver:* What kind of a relationship do you remember that he had with the Washington press corps? Did he get along with the press?

*Mark Shields:* He was generally regarded and I personally regarded him as the straightest and wisest of shooters.

He was not afraid. He was not a gossipmonger. If you wanted to know what Senator Skirtchaser had been up to last night, you would never find out from a conversation with Bryce Harlow. But if you wanted perspective and you wanted insight and you wanted wisdom, Bryce Harlow was the place to go.

I once wrote that if wisdom were oil, Bryce Harlow all by himself would be OPEC.

I can recall when Ronald Reagan, after the attempted assassination in 1981, was politically invincible and then-House Speaker Tip O'Neill observed, "My goodness, this fellow's just totally dominating the political world."

The speaker was not alone in that assessment. I asked Bryce Harlow, "Is Reagan the new FDR?" Bryce responded, "Oh, he's very popular, but don't forget one thing. Between now and the end of the (20<sup>th</sup>) century, both the Democrats and the Republicans will win the White House again – in spite of themselves."

Bryce Harlow understood that glory, fame and popularity were temporary. He recalled that Ike was so popular that people were ready to put his face on the \$5.00 bill, but that given the nature of politics, there are downs that inevitably go with those great ups.

And he was just wise that way. For example, his advice was never to do anything you don't want to see on the front page of "The Washington Post" tomorrow. That is pretty good advice for anybody.

*Steve Silver:* That was actually the perfect lead in to my next question because I was going to ask, a lot of the people that I have interviewed have talked about Harlow's sense of history about –

*Mark Shields:* Yes.

*Steve Silver:* – how he knew what happened before and the impact of what will happen afterwards and as somebody who has observed politics, I want to ask whether you think that's still common today amongst staffers for Congress or the White House. Do people, especially younger people like me, have that same sense of history do you think?

*Mark Shields:* Zealous term limiters would be horrified that here is Bryce Harlow, a man who served the country so ably and so well from FDR through Ike through Richard Nixon and Gerry Ford, who was just a wise counselor.

Term limiters would say, “Oh, this is awful. We must get new people in here constantly.”

Obviously, we always welcome new people – new blood and new ideas – but the institutional memory, understanding and perspective that Bryce Harlow brought was invaluable.

Priceless. He had not only seen it all before, but there was no cynicism. I recall his wonderful story about helping presidents keep their perspective when powerful committee chairmen on Capitol Hill or captains of industry would gripe to Harlow. “If I could just have five minutes with the president I’d be able to turn him around and help him see the light.”

And Bryce Harlow said, “I don’t care how powerful the congressional chairman was or how powerful the CEO was, once they were actually in the Oval Office, they turned to putty, saying, ‘Mr. President, we’re with you all the way. We’re praying for you; you’re doing a wonderful job.’”

He said once they step into that Oval Office, all the candor is stripped away – goes out the window.

And I thought of that, especially with President Bill Clinton, where there’d be fury, but Clinton had a special charm and Bryce would have gotten a big kick out of that ability of Bill Clinton to totally disarm his critics when they came face to face.

*Steve Silver:* Harlow, of course, went on to become a well-known lobbyist –

*Mark Shields:* Yes, he did.

*Steve Silver:* – after serving in the White House. I wanted to get your take on how press coverage within Washington, or just in general – press coverage of the lobbying profession has changed since Harlow’s time versus now?

*Mark Shields:* Press coverage has changed because the lobbying profession has changed.

Bryce Harlow was a political wise man, and he was certainly neither non-political nor apolitical by any definition. But, again he was an absolute straight shooter. He was incredibly sophisticated and incredibly effective.

But always there was the sense of what he was telling you was his best judgment. As he put it to me – trust is the coin of the realm. Once that is lost, there's nothing else; whether you're a president or a lobbyist or a reporter.

He understood how important that trust was and he never trifled with it and he never tarnished it.

*Steve Silver:* What about press coverage of those who advise presidents, or maybe has that changed, too? And if you could talk about some of the changes in how presidents are advised.

*Mark Shields:* I think it's fair to say that the Vietnam-Watergate experience left in their wake a far more skeptical press and a far more mistrustful public. Perhaps naively so we just didn't think that presidents, as a matter of course, could lie to the American people.

It has struck me that there would be a far greater sense of rage in the country about the total absence of weapons of mass destruction in Iraq or the fact that Saddam Hussein had nothing to do with 9/11 and was not harboring al Qaeda or anything of the sort and all the allegations that were made, if we hadn't been through Vietnam and Watergate.

That erosion of trust and confidence had lowered our expectations.

Bryce was also a man who had a passion for anonymity. He was not somebody who was self-promoting and figured well, I'll pick up three clients by getting the profile piece.

That was not the Bryce Harlow style. That was not the Bryce Harlow sense of values. He viewed it as a marvelous opportunity, a great privilege to give advice and counsel to a president of the United States and again, trust is the coin of the realm.

*Steve Silver:* So was he out there working the talk show circuit or –

*Mark Shields:* No, no, no. I mean, he was not. And he probably wouldn't have been good on the talk shows because he was so thoughtful and there was always context.

He provided context and he provided perspective, and he could say, you know, this came up in 1945. And Eisenhower faced this in his second term. It was that sort of perspective that those of us who yearn for it treasure in him.

*Steve Silver:* Did he keep any kind of an enemies list? Did he have – how did he react to people who didn't --

*Mark Shields:* No, it's a good question, Steve. That's why he's such an anomaly and almost an historical aberration. This was a man who never demonized political adversaries.

He understood that there are no permanent allies; there are no permanent adversaries but instead you have permanent interests.

He assembled coalitions, and he understood that coalitions had to be built, and that the person on the other side of an argument you may think was wrong, but you didn't think they were evil, and you never suggested they were evil or ethical eunuchs or moral lepers or whatever the particular expletive or pejorative is at the moment.

And that again made him special and enabled him to reach across the aisle. And to be trusted, again. Trust on both sides.

*Steve Silver:* You mentioned the passion for anonymity, which is a phrase that's come up so many times that I remember you used. And I wanted to ask do you think it's important that history remembers the great White House staffers, or should there still be that passion for anonymity?

*Mark Shields:* I think it's important to remember that there were individual Americans – patriots – who made an enormous contribution to the well being of the country.

And whose contributions ought to be remembered, cherished and treasured by all of us who follow. That they did this and they did it without fanfare, without self-promotion, with no billboards or skywriting. They did it without any reason than knowing that they had done a superb job and that their judgment was of a quality you could take to the bank.

*Steve Silver:* We've touched on a lot of this, but I wanted to ask you what made Bryce Harlow such a unique figure in Washington? What separated him from the crowd, I guess?

*Mark Shields:* Perspective, judgment, and integrity. What set him apart was that Bryce Harlow was not somebody who just worked for one president, one campaign, and then went on to work in the White House or whatever. Without besmirching those who are working there now, it's hard to imagine that they could go on to become what Bryce Harlow was.

Because for one thing Bryce Harlow, even though he was fiercely loyal, never submerged his own integrity or identity into the person for whom he was working.

His loyalty to the person was total, but he never became a slavish sycophant to that person. And that's the perspective he brought, so the principal to whom he was giving that counsel knew that Bryce Harlow was loyal, but that Bryce Harlow was not just there to kiss the posterior of the president or whoever else was involved.

*Steve Silver:* Considering the current atmosphere in politics, the poisonousness of it, do you think Harlow's politics, the integrity, this ability, the bipartisanship; do you think that is an anachronism? Does he just belong to a different era? Or could there be another Bryce Harlow?

*Mark Shields:* Well, I think there could be. It's going to require somebody winning the presidency by the margin that Eisenhower won it or the way Roosevelt won it. Because now things are so closely divided and so fiercely fought over that there is no longer a premium on my reaching across the aisle to work with you on an issue. Now if I even throw a friendly arm around the shoulder of an individual on the other side, my loyalty to the party is questioned.

I think if somebody were to win the presidency with 55 or 56 percent and carry 35 or 40 states in the process, then I think there is a possibility. If that winner were fortunate enough to find a junior Bryce Harlow, then there is hope.

But it would have to start by de-demonizing the process that those on the other side don't love their country or those on the other side are just vicious unprincipled SOB's.

*Steve Silver:* Considering that there are no laws named after Harlow, or there's no Bryce Harlow Act or there's no big government buildings in town, a lot of people have sort of inferred that he's had kind of an invisible influence but still an important influence on Washington politics.

Is that common? Are there a lot of people out there that we don't know about?

*Mark Shields:*

Sure, there are. Consider, for example, the late Mike Mansfield, who was the longest-serving majority leader of the United States Senate.

Again, a man who enlisted in the Navy at the age of 14 to serve in World War I, was thrown out of the Navy and joined the Army because they told him they'd send him to China – which the Army did not.

After his Army tour, Mansfield joined the Marine Corps and the Marines did send him to China.

He came back and went to work in the mines of Montana and fell in love with a schoolteacher, who said unless you get an education you'll have no time with me.

I say this because Mike Mansfield went on to become a scholar, a history professor of Asian history and Senate Majority leader, who, like Bryce Harlow, could speak truth to power about the folly and the tragedy of Vietnam.

Yet when he died in 2001, I went to his funeral and 35 United States senators were there even though he'd been gone from the Senate for 20 years at that point, after which he was appointed by both Presidents Carter and Reagan as ambassador to Japan.

It was just remarkable that he would have that kind of trust and confidence from two such politically opposite figures.

His memorial marker at Arlington Cemetery reads, "Michael J. Mansfield, 1903-2001." Simply, "PFC, United States Marine Corps."

*Steve Silver:*

That's it?

*Mark Shields:*

That's it. We should stand in awe and say no, you should know about this man. You should know, as you walk through there.

People should know that someone could be a person of integrity, of honor, of loyalty, and yet be successful.

He was the gold standard of Washington lobbyists.

*Steve Silver:* As sort of a final thought, then, I guess. What are do you think the most important lessons that future generations who serve in lobbying but in government as well should learn from studying Bryce Harlow?

*Mark Shields:* Well, trust is the coin of the realm.

Those who are adversaries are adversaries today; they are not enemies.

And that in the final analysis, you've got look yourself in the mirror. And that's the face you have to shave every day. And you'd better be able to say I'm comfortable with myself. I like myself, I like what I did today, and I think Bryce Harlow could answer all of those questions in the affirmative.

*Steve Silver:* Mark Shields, I've enjoyed our conversation.

*Mark Shields:* Okay, so have I.

*Steve Silver:* Thank you.

*Mark Shields:* No, thank you.

*[End of Audio]*