

Barber Conable

March 13, 1980

I bumped into Barber Conable at the Midwest Coalition luncheon. "I'm very depressed. I'm thinking of quitting. My wife and I are having a big fight about it. I feel lower than a snake's belly." I said I'd like to come talk to him about it and he said, "You'd better come soon."

I spent two hours talking with Barber about his retirement decision. I'm torn as to whether or not I should commit any of this to paper; and I've decided to commit some of it to paper. Harry joined us for part of the talk. In essence we were arguing the case that Barber could redefine his job somewhat and stay. At one point he summed up his reasons. "For one thing, I think the country's in a terrible mess and I don't want to be held responsible for what is going to happen. Frankly, I'm in a panic about the country. I hate it when people come up to me and say you can do something about it. You have clout. You are respected. The truth is, no one around here has much clout. But I don't want to serve another four years--or another two years under Jimmy Carter--or Ronald Regan either for that matter. Carter isn't plugged in at all to the minority. We have no input into his decisions--nor does anyone else in Congress for that matter. He's still the outsider. I thought he could be a great president. But he's a terrible president. He takes the shortest possible view of everything. He has no policy, no philosophy. You can't predict what he will do from one day to the next. He's benefitting from the crises he created and he's only playing at leadership. I'm terribly terribly frustrated. People say we need you nationally. But I have no influence nationally. I'm tired of having so little influence over events. And there's the politics of the committee. So long as we're in the minority I have to be twice as smart and 17 times more devious than Al Ullman to get even a little bit done, and I'm sick of that.

"I would love to live without having Linda give me a card everyday telling me what to do. I'd love to escape the pressures but yet the pressures are inherent in this job."

"Another factor is that I'm 58 years old, I've been here 16 years and I'm getting tired. My second arch doesn't have the spring in it that it once had when I go up the stairs. Just look at that map over there behind the door, 40 trips home last year--and every year for 16 years. If I stay I'll have to redefine the nature of the job. I may not be able to do that any more. Yet that's what a representative is paid to do. If I couldn't do perform that part of the job, I would lose my self respect. My reputation is high now, as high as it will ever be. Maybe, too, if I stay around people will find out I'm a fraud--that I don't really know everything about welfare reform that people think I know."

"Then there's the family side of it. My wife desperately wants to stay in Washington. She has a job here and has carved out a life for herself. If I retire, I don't want to stay in Washington. What I'd really love to do is to go to Alexander, sit down at my typewriter and see what comes out. She would hate that and is afraid she would become a housewife again. Last weekend we had a terrible row about it all. I said I was going to announce my retirement this week and after a long argument I agreed to put it off for a while.

Another problem is redistricting. In 1982 my district will be changed drastically. I don't want to leave a new district to some young person without political base. And I don't want to appear to be running away from a new district either. If I retire, the nominee will probably be Fred Eckert. I'm not greatly enamored of Fred Eckert, but some good, new people be coming in from other districts. If Ronald Reagan runs, the Democrats will survey the state and they'll carve up my district and throw me in with Jack Kemp. Then if I retire in 1982 it will look like I'm running away from a fight with Jack Kemp."

"Then I'd like to do something different. I've been in the job 16 years, longer than I've been in any one job in my life. I'm used to moving around and I know I could find plenty to do. (I might even take my tomahawks on tour!) But I won't know what my options are until I retire and say 'Here I am girls.' I could make \$250,000 without even trying as a lobbyist. But being a lobbyist is a terrible job. Nothing is grubbier than an ex-congressman lobbying. And who needs the money. If I don't change now I'll retire when I'm 60, get my pension and then I never will do anything. In fact one reason for staying is to get my pension. If I retire early I will have the discipline of having to find something else to do for the next two years; and that will get me started." Then he ended "So you see, there are a lot of factors I'm putting together."

As he signed the mail he kept ticking off the invitations to speak that he had rejected. Point was that people want something all the time. I kept telling him he should do more wholesale and less retail and it was his way of showing me that he rejected a lot of speeches. He said that if there were no restrictions, he could make 80,000 a year making speeches.

"Last night I went to the Republican House-Senate dinner, \$1000 a plate. I had to go. You have an obligation to ~~do~~ the party. Everyone else was there and if I hadn't gone they would have noticed. The homebuilders insisted I sit with them. They had bought a table for \$10,000. So I sat there between two homebuilders who talked in my ear all night about interest rates while I picked at my filet mignon." When I said he didn't have to go, he leaned over, kicked my foot and said "The trouble with you is, you think I'm different. Well, I'm not all that different."

Then at some point in all this he leaned over to me and shouted what I

remember most about the whole conversation. "It's a crappy job. It's a crappy job. It's a crappy job." He said this with more animation than anything else.

At another point, he said Harry and I were just persuading him to stay because we thought he wanted to be coaxed. I told him I came over because I had never seen him so serious about quitting and wanted to throw some options at him. Harry said sharply, "We're friends of yours."

"If George Bush becomes President, I'll be Secretary of the Treasury. Nothing has been said to that effect, but I believe I will be."

"I've lost touch with my staff--all except Linda and Harry. They know what to do in every situation. They can speak for me on anything. There isn't anything that I can do that they can't do--except vote."

"People come up to me and say, you have a wonderful staff. And do you know what they mean. Linda. She has just the right touch with everyone she talks to. She's a wonder. She's married to a hopeless alcoholic. She supports the family--a husband and two kids. And she's unfailingly helpful and cheerful.