

Barber Conable

May 17, 1974

The first thing he said was that he was going to go to Harvard for one month after the election "to think about my role. If I'm defeated, I'll have to think about my role. If I win and people start looking right through me because we're such a small party, I'll want to think through my role too."

When Dorothy told me that Barber had said I could look at his appointment books for 1973, he noted that he had a map on the wall where he put a pin in each place he had spoken. "Rochester got so crowded with pins there wasn't room for any more, so I stopped putting them there. And there are a lot in Batavia. I'm there so much they think they own me."

He talked some about impeachment and how he was really worried for the party. "I don't give a damn about Nixon. I don't give a damn what happens to him. But I'm terribly concerned about this party of ours. There are still 25 to 30 per cent of the Republican hard core out there who equate the President with the party, and the abandonment of the President with the abandonment of the party. After the Times Union front page story which (erroneously) quoted me as saying that resignation was an option for the President, I got calls from my party people in the rural counties. "What are you doing, Barber? You aren't going to

abandon the party, are you?" I'm afraid a lot of Republicans can't survive without their hard core. So if we make any move at all, we've got to do it as a party. I'd even agree to go to the President and urge him to resign--a move which I regard as not very productive--if only we could go as a unified party. That way, the party will be acting and not just individuals. I don't think we can survive it as a party if every Republican acts separately. I'm worried about the two party system. That's why I said the leaders should stop calling for his resignation. I was the only one who felt that way, and I leaned on John Rhodes to call a leadership meeting so that we could plan a party strategy. We decided that each of us would take about twenty of the fellows and initiate a little dialogue, asking them what they want the leadership to do. We might be able to work out a party position that way. We've got to act like a party. What a mess that man has gotten us into."

He talked about organized labor and their strategy in the campaign. He started the conversation saying "I'm going to be embattled", the very word he had said when we had our intern selection meeting. He said he can't figure out whether organized labor wants to make him the issue this time or not. And whether they realize the consequences of it. "I had some fun with the postal workers who came in here the other day. They had been at the Labor Council meeting in Rochester where we brayed and bellowed at each other. I asked them whether the Labor Council really wanted to make me the issue this year and did they really want me to respond by making them the issue. I said that if they wanted to

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make bossism the issue, I couldn't think of a better target to run against than George Meaney. But did they really want to draw the line against me? I asked them "Do you have any trouble walking in here and talking to me? Do you want to have the kind of campaign that will result in closing my door to you? Do you really want to be shut out entirely?" I wanted them to go back home and tell the other leaders. Labor has never considered me a friend, but they've never singled me out as the enemy either. I can't understand what they think they're doing now."

Somewhere in the previous quotation there should appear the comment "Do they really want Joel Broyhill to become the dominant voice on the Republican side of Ways and Means--because that's exactly what would happen if I were defeated?" (This will have to be inserted in the previous paragraph.)

One day I talked to Barber and he said "I 've joined the Wednesday Club. Some of my conservative friends are all upset about it. They've come over to ask me, Barber, what are you doing? I'm trying to keep in communication with all the elements of the party. I've been going to the 'Good Guys' meeting lately too--although they may not let me in anymore. Besides there are some conservatives in the Wednesday Club--Gerry Pettis is a member. And, frankly, I was worried with Peter Freylinghuysen and \_\_\_\_\_ leaving Congress, that someone had to be in the Wednesday Club who would help them keep touch with reality."

Another conversation I had with Barber was on the night that President Nixon invited him to take a ride on his yacht, the Sequoia. Harry was not in favor of Barber going, on the grounds that he couldn't win and that any publicity he got would be bad publicity. He objected on the further grounds that Nixon was just using Barber for Nixon's own purposes. Barber said, "I'm not going to run away. I know I can't win, but I'm not going to run away. For years I've been complaining that I've never so much as seen the inside of the Oval Office. And though I would much rather go under other circumstances--a couple of years ago--, I'm not going to run away. I guess I want to participate. And I think my people would want me to participate, to have some input into the situation. What a mess we're in when you have to worry about a thing like this. Now I'm going to have to do the hardest thing of all--go home and face my wife. Oh, how she hates Nixon. She would just as soon spit on him as not. She hates him for making our lives so miserable."

With respect to the prospect that he might be opposed in the election this year by Midge Costanza. "I'm afraid my district isn't ready for an Italian woman. The district is probably 30% Italian. But Italians are patriarchal, not matriarchal--unlike the blacks. So I'm afraid they would resent her because she's a woman. I also remember when one of my best friends, Mike Macaluso ran for the Assembly from Batavia. He got clobbered out in the country because his name was Macaluso. I hate that, but I'm afraid it's true."



"If Midge runs, my strategy will be to ignore her until she begins to get somewhere. Then, I'll run against George Meany. And I won't call her Midge; I'll call her Margaret. I find her a very attractive girl. She's intelligent and articulate--a very smooth speaker. But I think labor is just using her. Flavin will take anyone he can find for the purposes of bludgeoning Barber Conable."

During our lunch at the Capitol Hill Club, the most interesting things he said had to do with his decision not to have a high paid staff person in his Rochester district, and the strong sense that he conveyed toward the end of that conversation that these decisions are as much situational and contextual as they are, perhaps, rational. He stressed both the rational and the contextual--but the thing I learned most from the conversation was the contextual idea. That is, you may want to make staffing decisions on the basis of a desire to make some comparison with what has gone before. Staffing decisions are, themselves, highly political decisions. Staff decisions are stylistic decisions--Studds wanting to contrast his operation with that of Keith, Barber trying to contrast himself with Austin Erwin, and Ham Fish being hemmed in by what his predecessor Joe Resnick did, who in turn was trying to make a stylistic differentiation between himself and Ernie Wharton. I guess the generalization is that "for some congressmen, the decisions about how one tends the district are decisions made with direct reference to what the predecessor had done--either the predecessor's style must be followed or there is a deliberate effort to make a contrast with the

predecessor's style." Barber noted that all the young Republicans in the South were doing well and were not defeated because they were all behaving in ways that made a sharp contrast with their older Democratic predecessors.

Why no high paid staff person in the district? "I wanted to submerge the district function. If you have a big district staff, create expectations, you encourage people to come to you and you get a huge case load. I would rather have the people who really want help and need help have to work a little bit to get it. I wanted to screen out the nuts. That is why I don't have a lot of office hours, quite frankly. So, I deliberately wanted to underplay the district activity. Secondly, I wanted to have the image that "Barber does it himself." If people know that Olga is just a conduit, they will feel that the decision is made in Washington and is made by me. Once in a while I get a complaint that I didn't send a representative to a meeting. But I don't want anyone else speaking for me. Thirdly, I wanted the casework done in the Washington office so I would be better informed on what our office is doing, who we are helping, and how. If there's anything I hate it's having someone come up to talk about something the office is doing and my not knowing what it is all about. Finally, a little contrapuntal contrast with Frank doesn't hurt me in my opinion. He plays up district services and has much more identification as the local Congressman than I have. They think of me as coming from Batavia. No matter what I did, I could never achieve the magnificent local

identification that Frank has. I would always stand in his shadow. He has created expectations that people don't have of me. He leaves Washington every Thursday night; I leave on Friday nights--usually I'm busy with Ways and Means or writing my newsletter on Friday. I'm trying to gain my identification in a different way. So, there are several reasons--put them altogether, they spell Olga."

He said "Who knows whether it's the right way"; and I noted that there were many differences among congressmen. He said that there were and he said "Poor Ham Fish has five district offices and is running himself ragged trying to keep up with his predecessor Joe Resnick. Resnick had a lot of money and he was trying to create a contrast between himself and old Ernie Wharton who was the Congressman he beat. Now Ham Fish feels he has to do what Resnick did--that Resnick created these expectations and he has to meet them. (I was the Joe Resnick of my district when I was in the State Senate, I put 35,000 miles on my car in two years travelling around the district. I talked to every service club I could find. I was trying to create a contrast between myself and old Austin Erwin, who had gotten completely out of touch when he served in that Senate seat."

He asked me if I was going to travel with him and I said maybe towards the end. He said that he would "taper off" on the last two or three days. He said that the tradition was that on Election night he and his wife and the Upsons and his campaign manager and sometimes Tom Benton and his wife would go to McCombs' Place (a restaurant in Churchville, I think). Then after dinner they would go to a couple of

the local headquarters and then down to the Rochester headquarters.

"I taper off in the last two or three days. By that time I'm pretty tired and if I haven't got it won by then, I'm dead. I remember in my race for the State Senate, I thought I had lost it at the very end. I was dead tired and dragging and my campaign manager wanted me to make one more trip through Holley that last weekend. I looked at my wife and I said, the hell with it, I'm just too tired and I'm not going to make much of a campaign in this condition. But I was afraid I had lost it. The reason was that a couple of days before I had gone over to talk with Lon Waters in Orleans County. He had told me that I was in a lot of trouble all around. But he was upset because he had been left off my campaign committee. (Barber went into a long discussion of how during this conversation with Waters, Waters called different places in different counties and got very biased reports about how Barber was doing--the net of which was to make Barber very discouraged. I can't remember all the details but Barber goes through it with great relish.) The results were staggering. I got more votes than all my opponents put together, and twice as many votes as the nearest person to me. I carried Batavia by 25 to 1 and Genesee County by 12,000 votes. I carried Orleans County by 3,000 votes. If you exclude Wellsville, where one of my opponents was the mayor, I carried Allegheny County. I got 2,000 votes in Livingston County where Jim Emory was considered unbeatable. That was the greatest victory of my life. We had started in the summer and worked as hard as we could work all summer and all

fall. As a result of that election, I got a reputation as a tough campaigner. And when Harold Ostertag retired, everybody assumed that I wanted it and that if I wanted it, I could get it. Actually I was looking forward to becoming a leader in the New York State Senate. It was a pretty raunchy bunch there and I would have had a good chance to become a leader."

We talked about Barber's career and he made the general point that you had to have a great deal of luck in order to advance inside the House, just as you had to have luck to become a Congressman in the first place. But we agreed that whereas it takes luck to get where you get in the House, only a certain number of people are in a position to take advantage of that luck. That is to say, you can look around at any point in time and see certain people that have no chance whatsoever of becoming especially important in the institution--other than in a strictly seniority sense.

He talked about a number of interesting points in his career. He mentioned, again, the relationship with Gerry Ford, which goes back to the meeting of the 89th Club and the Ford-Halleck contest. He was talking about how he was trying to get Gerry Ford to come to Rochester in October to dedicate the National Institute for the Deaf building and facilities at RIT. He said he thought Ford would come and he detailed how he had talked to Ford yesterday. Ford had asked him how he thought he (Ford) was doing and Barber told him he thought he ought to do some foreign travel. (Barber laughed) He said that Gerry thought that he

(Barber) was very important in having Gerry chosen as Vice-President. "Every time Betty Ford sees me, she calls me a devil." He said what actually happened was that when some of the members of the House started circulating a petition in favor of Gerry Ford as the vice-president, Barber called the White House and told the White House that if the President was going to choose his Vice-President he had better do it very quickly because if he didn't, there would be overwhelming sentiment in Congress for Gerry Ford and the President would find himself in a confrontation with the Congress. Actually, Barber thought the President did not want Gerry Ford. But Barber says he gets the credit for being the first person to call the White House on the matter. He also noted that Gerry Ford had asked him particularly and personally to be at the ceremony when Nixon announced his choice as Vice-President. He said Ford wasn't sure when he asked Barber that he would be chosen, but he had a pretty good idea. The reason he had the idea was that Nixon had told Ford that whoever was going to be chosen vice president would be called by him at 7:30 that evening. And when Ford had checked with Hugh Scott, Scott said that the President had said nothing at all to him. Ford surmised that Nixon was trying to tell him to stay home that evening. In any case, the point is that Barber has always had a very close relationship with Gerry Ford, starting almost the first day Barber got to Congress and continuing right on up to the present time. But, like so many other relationships in politics, Barber considered it quite lucky and fortuitous.

He went on to talk about his career and luck some more. I'm

absolutely convinced that I would not have become a member of S.O.S. had it not been for one very chance remark I made on the House floor one day. We had two items of business up that day--first the seating of the Mississippi delegation and secondly, a resolution to deny all aid to Nasser after he had just told us to go drink the Red Sea. The Republicans were playing politics with those issues. We supported the seating of the Mississippi delegation. In that debate, Mac Mathias had gotten up and made an emotional speech saying that the party of Lincoln certainly had to support the rightfully elected representatives of the State of Mississippi. A little later, the Republicans were supporting the resolution against Nasser; and the Democratic coalition began to break up as Manny Sella led a delegation of New Yorkers into the well to support the resolution against Nasser. I turned to Bob Wilson who was sitting next to me on the floor and I said, "We may not be the party of Lincoln but we're certainly the party of Abraham." He thought that was a very funny comment. I had known Bob because he was the Republican Congressional Campaign Chairman and I had met him when I went to the campaign school for Republican candidates. When the members of S.O.S. were looking to fill the two vacancies, I'm sure they consulted with Bob, who was a member and who knew the freshmen better than anyone else. I'm also convinced that he probably told them that they should take me in because I had a great sense of humor." I'm further convinced that if I had not been a member of S.O.S., I would not be where I am today in the House. It gave me internal lines of communication and internal

visibility that I would not have had otherwise." I think I could fill the rest of the sequence in, in part. At least I know he believes that he would not have gotten Ways and Means had he not gotten S.O.S.

"You can't plan your career in the House. There's just too much luck involved. But you can fail to plan for anything. What is it that the life insurance companies say, "Not everyone plans to leave their family destitute but some plan to avoid it." Some people never get themselves together enough to do anything in Congress. For some, the status of just being a Congressman is all there is. So you can plan to make a contribution to Congress. But many people have potential that is never realized. They get the wrong assignments or they bloom too late or they get side-tracked in one way or another. If I were still on Science Astronautics, I'd be a pretty unimportant fellow around here. Of course, I have been trying to get something else long before this. Actually, my staff always thought of my first committee assignment as a launching pad. They thought I should go to some place that would help me to go someplace else. They didn't think I should just do what I would like to do. So I guess there is some planning involved."

One of the topics of discussion the day we had lunch was the Right to Life people who were going to come in to see him. He said he thought they were going to give him an ultimatum--that if he didn't sign the discharge petition for the Hogan Amendment, they were going to threaten to beat him in the election. He was not going to sign the Hogan Amendment petition, but he certainly didn't want their opposition



if there was any way he could help it. But he sees them as very intense and very difficult to deal with because they feel so strongly about this one issue. "There's nothing worse than intense opposition for a politician. I know, I'm a politician. Give me intense supporters. ' /