

The Passing of the Blue Blazer

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When I became the Chief American Correspondent of a paper whose mission, way back then, was to prompt and protect the thinking of one city, Manchester, I was disturbed at the thought that I was going to have to move myself and my family from New York to Washington. Washington, of course, was where all the chief foreign correspondents were based. To my great relief, I soon had a letter from my editor—a small, canny, spiky-haired, bespectacled imp of a Lancashireman. He wrote quite simply: “No, I don’t want you to move to Washington. I don’t want you to report Washington, except from time to time. I want you, all the time, to report America. New York is the best news base, and the best home base for travel.”

That wise and wily sentence is one that might not only be passed on to editors of papers around the world. It would serve a useful purpose if it could be engraved or done up in needlework, framed, and hung in the Oval Office of the White House. It would remind every President of a truth that every President, especially in his second term, is in danger of forgetting: that the White House is not home or anything remotely like the homes of the two hundred million people he is there to represent. The White House is a temporary Versailles and not the best place in which to maintain what Teddy Roosevelt called “a sense of the continent.”

You have to have been in the White House as a guest to appreciate its elegance and patrician comfort, and to be treated like some venerated old monarch in luxurious exile in order to feel the benign truth behind the phrase coined by the historian Arthur Schlesinger, Jr.: “the Imperial Presidency.” He was referring to the White House—I almost said the Court—of Richard M. Nixon. And certainly there’s been no Presidency in our time, or

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perhaps in any time, when the White House more resembled a royal palace. Mrs. Kennedy had done the place over into an eighteenth-century French mansion more exquisite than most royal palaces. Mr. Nixon added some folderols of a monarch's office as imagined by Hollywood. He summoned for ceremonial occasions a row of trumpeters in uniform, with tight, white rumps and knee britches, looking for all the world like the wedding guard of honor designed for Rupert of Hentzau (Ronald Colman) and Madeleine Carroll. The television pictures of this absurdity evoked such hilarity and mirth (not least in the British Royal Family) that these yeoman of the guard were soon disbanded. But what Mr. Nixon had revealed, in exaggeration, was a perception of himself to which a President, after a year or two, is in danger of succumbing. That he is in charge of—that he rules—a nation and that the word is handed down from the White House, not up from the people. It may be said that every Prime Minister probably feels the same in his official residence. I doubt it. Once, at a White House dinner, I sat next to the son of the British Prime Minister, who was at that moment the President's guest of honor. The son had been received, as everyone is, by a young marine officer in a spanking dress uniform. His lady companion took the marine's proffered arm. They were led through a small suite with a small orchestra playing waltzes by Strauss. Other beautiful rooms or galleries they passed through were ablaze with gilt and glass. On into the main reception room. More marines, more impeccable manners—the reception line—the shaking hands with the king—I mean the President—and the First Lady. Cocktails and smiling chatter. And on into two linked dining rooms—and a splendid banquet sparkling with a hundred candles. A soothing fountain of music showered from another room. "Home," said the Prime Minister's son, "was never like this." And, in truth, by comparison, No. 10 Downing Street is a modest upper middle-class townhouse. Apart from this beautiful protective shell in which the President lives, there is the constant human situation, in which he is surrounded by people who defer to him and who pass on to him every day their own view (which might be as blinkered as his) of what is happening, what is being felt and thought, on the Great Outside. The outside is the United States and its people. Only in the past month or so did Mr. Bush attempt to listen to their troubles, to emerge from his cocoon of complacency ("Yes, there are people having a bad

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time, but the economy's growing, 93 million at work—things are getting better all the time.”). This reminded me of the fatal 1932 assurance Herbert Hoover issued from the White House to millions shivering in tar-paper shacks down by the rivers, and to the one-quarter of the working people of America who had no work: “Prosperity is just around the corner.”

Some of you may have expected me to talk about the failures of the Bush campaign, for, only two days after the election, the papers are full of reasons and excuses and explanations by Republicans about failures of technique: he should have had sharper figures, he should have been more insulting earlier, he should have used more women, he should have hired as mean a man as the one who invented the infamous Willie Horton television commercial last time. (He was the Massachusetts black man who, given parole by Democratic Governor Michael Dukakis, promptly raped a woman.) One bitter intimate who could enjoy the frankness of having left the administration came a little closer to the central truth when he moaned: “He surrounded himself with second-rate talent and clones. He was only comfortable with a white-bread crowd, a bunch of white male Protestants and number-crunchers.” I can sympathize with that man's view. I and my generation are probably more comfortable with WASPs (and a Catholic friend or two) than with the polyglot (white-black-Latino-brown-Asian), multicultural society that America has increasingly become. But Bill Clinton has reached out to it, listened to it, and is at home with it, his generation is a link with it. This was never clearer than on Thursday morning, when the New York Times carried a front-page photograph of the President-elect with his mother and pals at a friend's house. Clinton in threadbare jeans, a checked wool shirt, unzipped windbreaker, bulging Reeboks. Mostly young pals in laughing bunches similarly dressed, or undressed. Not a suit, not a necktie, not a button-down shirt in sight. “Well,” I said to my wife: “Can you believe this? There is the next President of the United States and his buddies.” I wasn't suggesting that Mr. Clinton was putting on an act, as poor Mr. Bush had to do when he wolfed a hamburger at the local lunch counter and said, “Gee whilikins, this is great.” “Clinton,” said my wife sternly, “is the President of those people and he dresses like them.” Quite right. Unbuttoned, one way or another, is his natural style. Along with the passing

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of George H.W. Bush, we shall see, I fear, the passing of the blue blazer.

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