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SEPT. 20

"THE POLL THAT NEVER WAS"

EXCERPT FROM A TALK BY REP. GERALD R. FORD (R-MICH.), MINORITY LEADER OF THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, TO THE WASHINGTON PROFESSIONAL CHAPTER OF SIGMA DELTA CHI, PROFESSIONAL JOURNALISM SOCIETY, SEPTEMBER 20, 1966,

In the past few days there have been quite a few polls published that look encouraging to Republicans. In Sunday's (Sept. 18) Washington Post, for example, Dr. Gallup reports: "Johnson's Popularity Drops Further, Now at 48%" and just above it: "Democrats Losing Ground Rapidly As Elections Approach," according to Lou Harris. Mr. Harris finds that nationally, including the once Solid South, voters divide 52 to 48 per cent in favor of Democratic candidates for Congress, which is a gain for Republicans of three percentage points over a month ago and of five percentage points since the start of this session of Congress. So I think we have had some success in getting our message to the people, even though we are outnumbered more than two-to-one, and I think there is a real chance of restoring two-party government in Washington this November.

I know you came here to hear partisan opinions and predictions about this year's election from Sen. Morton and myself, and I will be glad to oblige you in the question period, to which I propose to yield most of my time. I also have the hunch you don't want to hear any standard campaign speech any more than I feel like giving one in this congenial setting. So I would like to discuss with you just briefly--and I don't know whether this is a question of journalism, history or political science--what seems to me to be a very intriguing story. It's a story that hasn't been written yet, and it might be called the mystery of "The Poll That Never Was."

This should be of particular interest to Sigma Delta Chi because it involves some of your members and a cause in which you have been in the vanguard: the Freedom of Information bill which we enacted at this session. It should also be of interest because we all know who is the chief poll-watcher in this town, and how he often pulls polls of his own out of his coat pocket to counter unflattering polls produced by published surveys.

Most of you will remember the big rhubarb about polls during the 1960 Presidential campaign. But to refresh your memory, let me read from an unbiased source--Ted Sorenson--in his book, "Kennedy."

'One major issue in the debates, which related to Kennedy's entire campaign and which worked to his advantage, was that of American prestige abroad. The decline in that prestige, as evidenced by a variety of riots and adverse reactions in foreign capitals, fit well into Kennedy's major themes. Nixon retorted that our prestige was at an all-time high. Upon learning that the administration had refused to release to the Congress certain USIA overseas surveys on this subject, Kennedy called upon Nixon to show his influence and answer Kennedy's charges by obtaining their release. Nixon said the polls supported his contentions--but the polls remained secret.

"In October Mike Feldman in Washington was told he could obtain copies of the polls from a source outside the USIA. He telephoned me about his acquisition, and I asked him to forward them to me at our next overnight stop. The polls strongly backed the Senator's position and made Nixon's claims about them look like deliberate misinformation. To avoid charges that he improperly obtained classified material, Kennedy turned the polls over to the New York Times, which immediately printed them without mention of how they had been acquired, and the Senator was then free to quote them as official proof of our plummeting prestige. An Eisenhower aide promptly asked USIA Director George Allen to issue a statement saying his polls showed American prestige at a record high, but Allen refused, and the issue continued to help Kennedy."

When Senator Kennedy became President Kennedy, however, the press insisted he release the official foreign opinion polls that he had severely criticized President Eisenhower for withholding. He did so, on the day of his first State of the Union message. Needless to say, they had been so thoroughly leaked they got very little attention, but precedent had been set.

(MORE)

Following the Bay of Pigs fiasco, questions were raised about U. S. prestige and the press demanded the official polls. Refused at USIA, they carried the battle to the Moss subcommittee--which had been most active in battling Executive Branch secrecy during the Eisenhower years, and a long argument ensued. This was resolved in February, 1963, by an agreement between Congressman Moss and Ed Murrow, then Director of USIA, to declassify these confidential government polls after they had mellowed for two years. A batch of two-year-old polls were then released, but they covered only the first month of the Kennedy Administration. Later, when President Kennedy's prestige abroad soared following the Cuban missile crisis in the 1962 Congressional campaign, this age-dated agreement stood in the way of making the official polls public. So, they were again leaked to the New York Times.

However, the Moss-Murrow agreement still stands, officially, and has been reaffirmed by every USIA Director since. Carl Rowan, one of your S.D.X. award winners, who tried to do an honest job when LBJ gave him this difficult assignment, came to Congress asking more funds for such polls, and testified in March, 1964:

"The great advance in 1963 was the successful completion of the First World Survey of public opinion. A similar but more comprehensive survey is under way this year."

Mr. Rowan asked, and got, additional appropriations for the Third World Survey, which was to be taken during calendar 1965, and a Fourth World Survey scheduled for calendar 1966, that is, this year. Under the Moss-Murrow formula, these would have been declassified and made available to the press and public in mid-1967 and mid-1968.

Meanwhile, however, USIA got a new director, Leonard Marks, who is, I understand, a member of this chapter of S.D.X. as well as being a very able lawyer. The First and Second World Surveys, which covered only the first few months of Mr. Johnson's Presidency after President Kennedy's assassination, were duly declassified in 1965 and 1966. I have examined them and, in sum, they show American prestige on a graphic curve going upward after the Cuban Missile Crisis and off the edge of the page into 1964. There they stop. The Third World Survey, taken in 1964, is not supposed to be released until next year, after the November elections, and it would be the first to give any valid reading on what public opinion abroad--particularly among our key NATO allies--thinks about President Johnson's leadership. As of now, there is no official measurement of American prestige under LBJ to be compared with the high and low points of the Kennedy and Eisenhower Presidencies.

Now here I am going to speculate a little. The Administration has that Third World Survey, and I understand others, which it has not released nor even "leaked." As a matter of practical politics, it must not show a very favorable comparison with the Kennedy surveys--and one may sympathize with the President for having enough trouble in domestic popularity polls with the Kennedys.

But what about the Fourth World Survey? This one would be due for public inspection in 1968, and President Johnson surely has that year ringed on his calendar. Well, that is the poll which I referred to earlier as "The Poll That Never Was." Here again I am speculating, but I am sure Mr. Marks gives good counsel to his client, and his boss, and that having seen the findings of the still-secret Third World Survey, the Administration decided to call the whole thing off. I don't believe there will ever be a Fourth World Survey of Foreign Opinion of the United States, taken during the escalation year of 1966 and due for public consumption in the Presidential election year of 1968. I imagine Mr. Johnson has read Ted Sorenson's book, too.

Still, I think we ought to know where we stand in our role as leader of the free world. I think there is abundant evidence, in every day's news, that U.S. prestige has eroded dangerously, particularly in Western Europe. President Johnson has been unable to get any of our Western Allies to help us fight the war against Communist aggression in Vietnam. In fact, he has not even been able to get them to stop helping the enemy. Perhaps we cannot fairly blame LBJ for his difficulties with Gen. DeGaulle; but what about the others who responded, in token at least, during the Korean conflict?

I believe the American people share my feeling that President Johnson, in his preoccupation with the Vietnam War and the Great Society, has neglected our important role as leader of the Free World.

In a nationwide sampling taken last June by the independent Opinion Research Corp. of Princeton, New Jersey, for the Republican National Committee, potential voters were asked to rate President Johnson's performance on a variety of issues,

among them "improving U. S. prestige throughout the world." The results show a steady decline in the confidence of his countrymen.

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I hope that the curiosity of the Washington press on this important issue will be as intense and impartial as it was in 1960 and in 1962. Although I'm aware that the new Freedom of Information Law does not take effect until after the November elections, this may be a good test of its spirit. Why should the Third World Survey of public opinion about U.S. aims during the Johnson Administration remain secret while the ups and downs of the Eisenhower and Kennedy Administrations have been spread upon the public record? What is there to hide?

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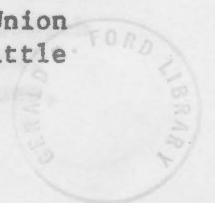
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