

MEMORANDUM

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THE WHITE HOUSE
WASHINGTON

Monday, December 16, 1968

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It was a nightmare of a day in the White House with the dark black coils of a nightmare twisting underneath the surface of a day that was jam-packed full with calls, appointments, house guests, engagements.

I had an early breakfast with Lyndon and worked at the desk with Marilyn and then with Bess on the Christmas party. One every day this week. And then a host of calls about Tony -- to Diana and Martiana and to Dr. ^{Vass} ~~Vaass~~ who would see him today and will get him in the hospital tomorrow morning for thorough tests. Tony is the main part of the nightmare. His dragging right leg and his speech that halts in mid-sentence because he forgets and the all too-frequent laugh. And the horror of it is that he knows that something fearful is happening to him. He told Martiana that he laughs because he doesn't know what else to do. It's a sort of social crutch I guess. But we are full of resolution to attack this thing headon and to find out what it is, to use every intelligence and facility at our command to combat it.

I called Clark Clifford and Carol Fortas -- two of my chief advisors -- and made dates to see them. And Barefoot Sanders who is suggesting that we have a reception for the Congress right after January 3rd. I recommended against it, and so did Bess. Then more work with Marilyn and Liz. And finally a break to go up to the

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Solarium and have lunch with my house guests.

A week or two ago I had invited ^{Pattila} Bell ~~Batila~~ Tippitt, my Selma, Alabama cousin to come up with her husband and spend a few days sight-seeing and family visiting -- explaining carefully to her that I would have a heavy work schedule. But in between her sight-seeing we could have time for lunch or maybe sit by the fire and drink and talk about Uncle Claude and Aunt Effie and wading in the streams at Billingsly. I did not dream that their arrival here would be in quite such a time of tension and trouble. But at any rate lunch up in the Solarium -- that hospitable room that has housed so much of our family life -- was a pleasant time. Eloise Thornberry, pretty and gay, on her way to a committee meeting about deaf people, was a great help. And dear Maftiana, unobtrusively helping Tony around. And we did talk about old times -- Bell and Tony and I -- as we looked out at the Washington Monument and remembered summers in Alabama and cousins and our great old white columned house. But it was brief for me.

And then I went down to the Lincoln Sitting Room to record for the ABC show. Simone rides herd on it. How I shall miss her. It's the very end of this week that she will go.

It went rather smoothly. I tried to immerse myself in the feel of the show, of the house, of my deep regards for it. And then at last

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a bonus -- the "no think" time -- going to the beauty parlor -- a marvelous release from effort -- at least "no think" for a part of it although I carried the usual straw bag full of work for under the dryer -- that being mostly going over the list of the press ladies who would arrive for the party at 6:00.

And then back to the White House and an hour's work with Helene. And then into Lyndon's room where he had been trying to get a nap. It was obvious that his cold had worsened. He has had a dragging cold for ages -- weeks -- it seems. He looked up at me and said, "I don't believe I can make it." He really looked bad. I said, "You ought not to go out there in that cold. You ought to have gotten the Vice President to do this." Knowing that it was now too late we would be there in moments. I felt angry with myself that I hadn't taken charge of this sooner, but I cooperated even shoved in getting him to do something I knew he ought not to do simply because there was a crowd waiting and TV lights set up and he was expected. And then we walked out about 5:30 -- Lyndon and Luci and Lyn and I -- got into the big black car and drove to the Ellipse to light the Christmas tree for the sixth and final time.

Stew Udall presided at the ceremony. And it was bitter cold up on the platform. As we mounted the steps someone had tried to hand

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Lyndon his hat. He had brushed it aside. And there he was, hatless, though several of the men had very sensibly held onto their hats.

It was a brief, stirring, dear ceremony -- Christmas carols by a robed choir, a brief presentation of red roses to me by a girl scout, and a short, patriotic speech by a Boy Scout. Lyndon always arises and congratulates both of them, and so do I. And they've never failed to be really good. Some words of welcome by the Mayor. And the wind was so fierce it was practically lifting our hair right off of our scalps.

And then Lyndon's talk -- "My prayer now as it has been in each of these other Decembers is for peace and reconciliation abroad, justice and tranquility at home."

And finally the pressing of the button that lit the 74-foot spruce tree into its glory of blue and white and yellow lights and the 50 trees of the States that grouped around it on the Ellipse. And it was a glorious sight. We were all caught up in the feeling that this was indeed the last time for us. But I am getting a little impatient now of "last times", and just as ready to get on with whatever comes after. And then the Marine band struck up the National Anthem and we all pulled up an extra two inches taller. And of course the helm, the delight of the evening, was as usual Lyn -- also the most sensibly dressed man present in matching leather coat and cap with the

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flaps that came snugly over his ears, all big-eyed and delighted at the Christmas trees, waving to the crowd from his Granddaddy's arms. And then reaching over for Walter Washington's cute little granddaughter to give her a kiss. And then very quickly we were back in the car. Scarcely more than 30 minutes had elapsed before we returned thoroughly chilled to the White House.

I do not remember just at what moment it was that the second chapter of the nightmare unfolded. Someone of my staff -- it may have been Sharon or Marcia -- told me that Liz had been called shortly before and asked to rush to the hospital and bring someone with her. Les had been choking. They had given him an emergency tracheotomy in his own hospital bed without even taking him to the operating room. Dear Simone had been with her. She is a good friend to all of us. And so this then was the setting for my last party for the press ladies -- much planned and much looked forward to.

They were invited up to the second floor and I greeted them just inside the door of the Yellow Room. No announcer necessary here since I knew every one of them from river rafts and forest trails and art galleries and White House parties. A fire burned merrily in the Yellow Room, and there were Christmas decorations everywhere.

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A bar was set up out in the hall. A small group of the Marine band in their red coats were playing Christmas music down toward the east end of the hall. And the family sitting room was opened up invitingly and a delicious spread in the family dining room.

There were the regulars -- Isabelle Shelton and Dorothy McCardle and Helen Thomas, without Frances Lewine who is on vacation. And old-timers -- ^{her}Esther Mae Tufty and Isabelle Griffin who goes back with me to about 1938 I think. And Hope Rydings Miller and Josephine Ripley. And pert little Bonnie Angelo. And Norma Milligan, wearing an LBJ pen. I think in spite of anything that NEWSWEEK has said about us that she has always had a certain sympathy and understanding for us.

And Texans -- Margaret Mayer, whom perhaps I've known the longest of all. And Sarah McClendon, thorn in the flesh for all Press Secretaries, but nice enough to me. And Karen Kleinfelter. And I think Wauhilla LaHay who perhaps felt more sentimental about this evening than anybody, although the whole evening had a certain sadness right below the laughter and merriment. And everybody was saying, "Oh, we are going to miss you so. It will be a hard act to follow."

And there was Chris Saddler -- Lynda Bird's boss and friend. And Nan Robertson who writes very high-class stories I think. And

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Lanelle Aikman who worked with me on the White House books from the National Geographic. And Betty Beale -- one of my favorites, and who was admiring the Glackens and telling me (and how right she is) that I should have tried harder long ago to get publicity about every gift that came to the White House. And she said that she through a column had brought about the gift of the Indian paintings that hang in the Library. And Nancy Dickerson, looking terrificly smart. And Julie Moon. And Nelman Novan, Faye Ritter and Sissy Morrissey. The name of every one brings up memories. I doubt if there is a group that I know better here in Washington than these press women. And I have really enjoyed them.

The news of Les' condition had carefully been kept quiet by me and my staff. But Liz' absence meant to them that he was not doing well. Wild horses could not have kept Liz from this party if he had been all right.

And so on the surface I laughed and joked and talked and really enjoyed them. And underneath there was the chill level of tension about Tony and about Les.

As they left about 7:30 I told them to be sure and pick up their Christmas gift at the east end of the hall. Liz' office with much imagination and hard work had put together a montage of pictures

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of all of our trips over the five years. And these were wrapped around a waste basket, laminated onto it by some process. And I at least was crazy about them.

Quite a few of the ladies had told me during the evening that the small Christmas tree I had given them a year or two ago was actually growing in their back yard.

We will have a lot to remember each other by.

When the last one was gone, I went and called Liz. Her voice was full of tears but controled. She said Les was in the intensive care ward, but she believed the danger was passed. And the awful part was that they couldn't really figure out why all of it was happening.

I went down to the theatre to say hello to all of my houseguests who were watching a movie -- grateful that we had this to offer them since my time was so fragmented. And then back exhausted to the second floor, called Chief Dunn and got a rub while I made a series of calls -- Marcia and Sharon, Simone and Diana -- about the next day's business and troubles.

I thought with rye amusement something that Lyndon had said this morning. It went about like this: "I told the Dallas News that there are ten sons-of-bitches in the United States -- the two news

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magazines and the two news services and the New York Times", and here I lost count. And he went on to say, "It satisfied me, it cleansed my soul, but I will never recover from it." He had gone on reminiscing about Strom Thurmond and said, "He has stuck the knife in me deep in my heart. But I think he has done it courteously and honestly. I think he has a certain liking for me. He is just true to his convictions."

I too believe that that is a fair evaluation, and he is easier to take than some of our Democrats.