

## Mitchell's Musings 4-1-2013: Meany's Political Boiden

Daniel J.B. Mitchell



In earlier musings, we have looked at the political influence of organized labor during the 1960s and 1970s using various surreptitious presidential tape and other recordings. In the 1960s, during the Kennedy-Johnson era, labor figures such as AFL-CIO president George Meany had access to the White House despite conflict with unions over the official anti-inflation wage-price guideposts. After the 1968 election of Richard Nixon, a Republican, the linkage continued but through George Shultz who played various roles including Secretary of Labor, Director of the Office of Management and Budget, and Secretary of the Treasury. President Nixon viewed Meany as unreasonable – particularly in the context of his mandatory wage-price controls program. Nixon hoped to appeal to union workers directly, bypassing Meany, particularly as the 1972 elections approached.

As it turned out, after the Democrats chose George McGovern as their 1972 nominee – largely due to the divisive Vietnam War issue – the AFL-CIO and Meany did not endorse any candidate and Nixon was re-elected in a landslide. Apart from the Vietnam issue, however, another background factor was that the political parties in the early 1970s were not anywhere near as polarized as they are today. Meany disliked both Nixon and McGovern but there were Republicans in that period he could support. And Nixon's labor record included such actions as signing the Occupational Health and Safety Act of 1970. Later Nixon would espouse an employer mandate for providing health insurance – an effort that did not succeed; in September 1974 he signed the Employee Retirement Income Security Act which protected and insured defined-benefit pension plans.

By 1974, however, Nixon was becoming enmeshed in the Watergate scandal. Conceivably, that scandal could have chipped away at voter support for Republicans in the House and Senate. In New York State, Republican Senator Jacob Javits was running for re-election against Democrat Ramsey Clark (who had been U.S. Attorney General under Lyndon Johnson) and Conservative Party candidate Barbara Keating. A Conservative in the race could have peeled off Republican votes, throwing the election to Clark. However, Meany and the national AFL-CIO supported Republican Javits as a friend of labor. You can hear a five-minute radio ad that I have posted in which Meany himself as the spokesperson runs through labor's agenda and concludes with an endorsement of Javits: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=L-pO6pI0jCw>. Clark – who Meany would have regarded as a detested McGovern-style Democrat – is not mentioned.<sup>1</sup>

---

<sup>1</sup> Clark at the time was an anti-Vietnam War Democrat as was McGovern. Subsequently, Clark moved further and further to the left.

It is hard to assess how effective the support of Meany for Javits was in that election. Meany's accent ("earl" companies, tax "boiden") would clearly have labeled him as a genuine New Yorker – at least from the City if not the state. And the agenda he espoused – taxes on the wealthy, worker safety, universal health care, full employment - in the first part of the ad would generally have appealed to a liberal electorate that might otherwise have tended to vote Democratic. The ad essentially ties Javits to that agenda. In the end, Javits won with a plurality of the votes – 45% - with Clark receiving 38% and Keating 16%.

Of course, organized labor still plays a role in national, state, and local political campaigns – although five-minute radio ads – as opposed to 30-60 second TV and radio soundbites – would be unusual today. The difference is that although its percentage of the workforce was already noticeably eroding by the 1970s, a major union leader – particularly the AFL-CIO president – would have been understood by listeners as an important figure. His personal endorsement of Javits would have carried weight.

Some radio listeners in 1974 may have been influenced in their voting behavior by the Meany endorsement – either positively or negatively. It would be hard to achieve the same effect today if, say, the current AFL-CIO president – Richard Trumka – transcribed a similar campaign endorsement.<sup>2</sup> The name recognition for the president of the AFL-CIO would not be there today. And, of course, in today's more polarized political climate, it would be hard to find a significant Republican office seeker that Trumka would or could endorse or who would want such an endorsement. In the words of the old Dylan song, *the times, they are a-changin'*.

---

<sup>2</sup> Trumka claimed that unions played an important role in the Obama reelection of 2012: [http://www.salon.com/2012/11/12/labor\\_chief\\_richard\\_trumka\\_we\\_wont\\_be\\_taken\\_for\\_granted/](http://www.salon.com/2012/11/12/labor_chief_richard_trumka_we_wont_be_taken_for_granted/). But the impact was through money and mobilization rather than reliance on a recognized personal endorsement. And he has expressed concern about the degree to which Obama backs labor's agenda: <http://expressmilwaukee.com/article-20785-the-newsmaker-memo-an-interview-with-afl-cio-president-richard-trumka.html>.