

Decency and loyalty: Linwood Holton learns the President's views

by Frank Rich

Among the victims of White House-executed political fratricide during Richard Nixon's first term, perhaps none seemed less likely to get the Presidential shaft than Linwood Holton, Virginia's first Republican governor since Readjuster days in the 1880s. Unlike Walter Hickel or Charles Goodell, Holton was, is, and will probably always be a Nixon Republican's Nixon Republican. He had never trumpeted major misgivings with Nixon policy to the public (and generally maintains he has none). He has never played footsie with Administration-blacklisted liberals or their ideologies—and, indeed, unlike Nixon men ranging from Spiro Agnew to Henry Kissinger, he does not have even one fleeting flirtation with the aborted presidential campaigns of Nelson Rockefeller on his record.

Holton now stands stripped of his political power and possibly his political future in his home state. Not only did he miscalculate White House willingness to play politics with civil rights enforcement, but he underestimated the extent of the Administration's reaction to deviationism. The

Nixon whose policies and character Holton lauds to this day is a man who stabbed the Governor in the back by helping his life-long political enemies, some of them Democrats, take over Virginia's Republican Party during the past two years.

This extreme reaction reveals, above all, the importance of Nixon's desire to dissociate himself from integration. The tale also shows how vicious the White House inner circle can be in retaliation against even an old, incredibly loyal cohort.

What Holton did to invoke the Presidential wrath goes back to the summer of 1970, when a number of Virginia cities had been ordered by a federal court to use busing to eliminate school segregation. In Richmond, the Old Confederacy's capital, one third of the 50,000 students enrolled in public schools were affected, and opposition to the decision raged. The federal judge, Robert R. Merhige, Jr., and his family were threatened with violence; local politicians gathered signatures on fierce petitions; and the KKK came out of the woodwork and rallied to the cause.

While Holton repeatedly aped the Nixon line of opposition to forced

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busing throughout that long hot summer, he refused to bring the state into the case at the lower court level. Holton had the option of sending his own three school-age children to any public schools he wished since the Governor's Mansion is technically state and not city territory. But on the first day of school, Holton and his wife Jinx escorted their children to the schools they would have attended if the Governor's family didn't have that freedom of choice. Schools in the neighborhood of the state Capitol average enrollments that are three-quarters black. There was little precedent for the Governor's deed in the history of Virginia—birthplace of “massive resistance” to school integration during the fifties. In a real way, Holton's act symbolically closed one era for the Old Dominion and opened another.

Although much of the local press condemned Holton, many of the nation's major newspapers and news magazines went wild with enthusiasm. The Governor explained to reporters matter-of-factly that he was, after all, just a conservative Republican obeying a court decision he was powerless to counteract. “It's always hard for a child to change schools,” Holton said at the time. “They don't want to leave old friends. But my children go where

they are assigned.” The next day, a *Washington Post* editorial explained, “The importance of [his] action, in its impact both in Virginia and throughout the South, is hard to overstate.” Richmond's schools integrated with only scattered and trivial racial incidents.

The Good Soldier

Holton's identification with Nixon is so intense that it is doubtful that he saw his actions of that August morning as the start of a drama of retribution. Until then his relationship with the President had been just fine; Holton was always the good soldier. His association with Nixon ran back to 1965, when the then political has-been came down from New York to campaign for Holton during his first, unsuccessful, race for governor. A year later Holton took time off from his Roanoke law practice to serve as one of the five original members of the Peter Flanigan-Maurice Stans committee formed to organize Nixon's political comeback. This gesture prompted David Broder and Stephen Hess to write in *The Republican Establishment*: “Holton is another example of Nixon's theory that losers are more grateful for campaign help than winners.” At the GOP national convention in 1968, Holton played a major supporting role in helping Strom Thurmond keep Southern delegates out of the clutches of Ronald Reagan. During the election campaign itself, Holton served as regional manager for four Southern states, all of which went for Nixon-Agnew in November.

Shortly after Nixon's inauguration, Holton, facing his second gubernatorial campaign, visited the President he had helped elect. After the meeting he told reporters: “I'm wrapped up in Nixon. I couldn't get away from that even if something turned bad. So I'm going to push the Nixon association as hard as I can. I'm proud of my association with him, and I think he's going to make me Virginia's first

Answers to March puzzle:



Republican governor.”

Nixon did pull into Roanoke during the last week of the campaign that November, and with his vocal endorsement a potent factor, voters gave Holton his long-sought victory. It was only eight months later that the Governor took his children to school and the Nixon Administration started to usher him into oblivion.

The Big Mistake

The week that Holton took office in January, 1970, John Osborne wrote in *The New Republic* that the basic Nixon-Mitchell doctrine on civil rights enforcement, succinctly put, was “that as a matter both of political wisdom and of constitutional propriety, the courts rather than the executive branch of the federal government should bear the burden and onus of enforcing racial integration of public schools in the South.” It was a doctrine that no Virginian with political aspirations could quarrel with—and certainly Linwood Holton, with his conservative disdain for government bureaucracy, agreed with the philosophy and politics of the strategy.

But Holton presumed that even as this conservative retrogression from activist Johnson Administration policy was carried out, Republican politicians could still strike a conciliatory tone as they all the while respectfully aired their criticisms of busing and the courts. So, in his inaugural address, Holton set forth his own version of “Bring Us Together.” “As Virginia has been a model for so much else in America in the past,” he said, “let us now endeavor to make today’s Virginia a model in race relations. Let us, as Lincoln said, insist upon an open society ‘with malice towards none; charity for all.’”

There was no public grumbling about this statement, and Holton went on to move Virginia—for years held back by the reactionary and racist Byrd machine—into the 20th century. His first act as governor was

to ban discrimination in state hiring practices, and soon he was appointing blacks to important posts.

Busing, though, was something else. “It’s important to recognize,” says Holton, “that all the flak I got came not from a speech saying we’d make Virginia a model of race relations or from my appointments or from the order ending job discrimination. It was when I refused to have the state intervene in the district court proceedings. I said integration is working and my conviction is still that it was right—and Virginians now more and more see that. Just recently a Washington official came down to see the schools here and said, ‘Lin, I don’t believe that this can be done anywhere else in the country.’ I told him, you should have been here and heard what people were saying in September, 1970.”

Wrong Side of the White House

What some people were saying then—and might say again if the Supreme Court upholds a later Merhige decision that would consolidate Richmond’s schools with those of its white suburbs—was not kind. Typical of the feeling that the Governor aroused among some old-line Virginia politicians is a jocular statement made by a free-wheeling Richmond city councilman a year ago. “This gutless, spineless, no good governor,” said Howard Carwile, “has traveled across the land degrading our cause. . . . Sometimes when I think of that man I think of euthanasia at the same time.”

Since Holton did not endorse busing any more than Nixon did, the contrast between their approaches to the issue had more to do with tone than substance—differences of “shading and emphasis,” as Holton puts it. If the Governor made any political point at all by taking his children to school, it was perhaps that desegregation in the South can often mean a child going to a neighborhood school and not one 15 miles away. But 1970 was an election year, and

Holton had given the appearance of being on the “wrong” side as far as the White House was concerned: by speaking in calm tones rather than divisive ones, Holton had played his big scene wrong. Thanks to a ready-made political situation in the state that year, Nixon had the cards to isolate and humiliate the Governor.

Earlier in 1970, Senator Harry Byrd, at odds with the Democratic Party and up for reelection, announced he would run as an Independent. The Democrats nominated liberal George Rawlings, who won an upset primary victory in 1966 over Byrd stalwart Howard Smith, then-chairman of the House Rules Committee. Believing Virginians might want a choice less extreme than A or Z, and encouraged by his own decisive victory, Holton decided his Party should fill the gap, and elect Virginia’s first Republican Senator.

Richard Nixon did not want any part of it. Smarting from close defeats on Haynsworth, Carswell, and ABM, he wanted to keep Byrd in the Senate, no matter what his party affiliation. Nor did he want to do anything that might alienate Byrd-lovers—who might, after all, be choosing between Nixon and Wallace again in two years. White House henchman Harry Dent and his former boss, Strom Thurmond, began to push and prod Virginia’s Republicans to endorse Byrd.

The idea was anathema to Holton, whose whole career had been dedicated to achieving two-party politics in Virginia and was now convinced that Republicans had a good chance of winning the seat in the fall.

The Fire Engine Crashes

On the eve of the June party convention in Richmond, pressure grew. Thurmond publicly attacked Holton’s desire to nominate a candidate, and Dent showed up to lobby among the delegates. It all looked grim for the Governor’s grand plan, until he made his now-famous “fire-

engine” speech, an address he recalls with pleasure. Pleading with the delegates, he said, “You are the biggest and the best, the longest and the strongest. You can’t go home having done nothing. . . .” He said that failing to nominate a Republican candidate after his great victory the year before would be “just like having the biggest, newest, shiniest fire truck and not taking it to the fire.”

The convention went on to nominate Ray Garland, a personable but obscure General Assembly member from Roanoke. Syndicated columnists focused in on the race, for it seemed to be some kind of a test of the future of Southern Republicanism, although it was unclear exactly what the results might mean. “It is an odd fact,” wrote Joseph Alsop in July, “but it is still a fact that President Nixon regards his own party’s doings in Virginia as just about the worst political news he has heard all year.” “The Virginia race,” the Ripon Society said, “was a real litmus test for Republicanism in the South. . . . [Republicans who vote for Byrd] are not loyal Republicans, but hard-core right-wingers.”

Then in August, Holton took his kids to school. Rather than back up the Governor and indirectly support his Senate candidate, the President let him sink once and for all.

Holton had not only gambled incorrectly that his friend in the White House would support his calm way of handling the Administration’s anti-busing policy, but he had gambled wrong on the people. J. Harvie Wilkinson, III, now a law clerk to Supreme Court Justice Lewis Powell, but then a GOP congressional candidate in Richmond, saw it this way: “Intervention and non-intervention in the courts was not central to the public perception of the busing issue. What the public perceived was a cheerful acceptance of the order—Holton merrily sending his kids off to school.”

Both Garland and Holton emphasized their philosophical opposition to busing right down to the end. “But

what Holton didn't do was demagogue the issue," says Garland. "If he had done that he could have been a greater political hero than Harry Byrd, he could have beaten Byrd. But he didn't throw down the gauntlet, and the irony was that a federal judge named under a Democratic administration, with support from Byrd and his establishment, made the order and Holton got hung for it politically."

And so, the Governor's fire truck smashed into a tree. The returns showed 51 per cent for Byrd, 34 for Rawlings, and a meager 15 for Ray Garland, the "litmus test" of a new Southern Republicanism.

Still Faithful

When the dust cleared, Holton conceded he had been "clobbered" and credited the defeat to the magic of the Byrd family name. The Governor was not going to end his love affair with the Nixon Administration, nor would he turn the Party over to Byrd Democrats and their Republican sympathizers who saw themselves vindicated by Garland's defeat and Nixon's approval of Byrd.

Holton pursued a legislative path more or less pre-ordained by his predecessor, Byrd Democrat Mills Godwin, but he was able to use executive orders, public statements, and patronage powers to effect somewhat controversial changes in state policy. Holton beefed up anti-pollution agencies with environmentalist appointees, exceeded his own goals for minority hiring, and refused to take a law-and-order line on student anti-war demonstrators.

He never indicated any resentment of the national Republican Administration that had pulled the rug out from under him. That December the President, with Dent's aid, set up his first post-election meeting with a top Virginia leader—former Governor Mills Godwin, a Democrat, the man who defeated Holton back in 1965. According to one observer, presidential adviser H. R. Haldeman "didn't

like Holton. He hadn't been dependable, hadn't taken the party line—and a lack of allegiance is the highest crime in the Nixon Administration."

The odd thing about it all was the fact that, in most ways, Holton ran a state administration that emulated the national one in every way possible. "Holton doesn't want to change the fundamental fabric of society, doesn't trust the federal bureaucracy or the welfare state," says Ray Garland, "but on the local level Holton can be effective on nuts and bolts: schools, mental health, prisons. There's no conflict there. The main thing that brought Holton down was racism. After 350 years of history, he said no to racism in the Governor's office of Virginia."

Lawrence Douglas Wilder, Richmond's black Democratic state senator, says that although "criticism of the Governor won't be brooked in the black community for the most part," Holton's departures from the past "were not all that radical. Whatever Holton will do, he will always be a Republican. He recognizes that blacks are human beings and are equal to the task of performance, but I'd like to see more black people in positions that can meaningfully affect their lives and less window dressing. . . . He indicated he would appoint a black judge—a very powerful position here—and he has had the opportunities and not done that. I think all the right-wing criticism has slowed his zeal on civil rights."

Nearly all the time Holton does exactly what is expected of him according to Nixon orthodoxy. Like the President, he has spent a lot of time tinkering with executive branch bureaucracy, consolidating agencies and creating new super-administrative posts. Last year, for instance, he created six cabinet-level posts, which he trumpeted in an avalanche of public relations not unreminiscent of Nixon's televised presentation of his "extra dimension" cabinet following the 1968 election. The new cabinet secretaries have yet to find such a

clear role in state government.

While compatible with Nixon in every other way, when it came to racial issues, he set himself up for another White House brush-off. In 1971 he took a visible step away from Nixon when he “respectfully disagreed” with the President’s proposal that Congress prohibit the use of federal funds for busing; logic told him that such action would reduce the states to pawns in the battle between the Executive and the courts. When interviewed on *Meet the Press*, Holton carefully called his differences with the White House minor, claiming the President received misinformation. “I’m closer to it,” Holton said. “I’ve seen it work. The children get along beautifully. . . . People at the presidential level and others in the White House haven’t seen it working. We have found that we can adapt to it.”

Nausea Averted

Schools opened in Virginia in 1971 with even fewer incidents than the year before. Roy Wilkins, who two years earlier had called a Mitchell-Finch statement suggesting the possibility of delay in Mississippi school desegregation “breaking the law” and “almost enough to make you vomit,” came to the Virginia NAACP conference and labeled Holton “one of the most promising governors Virginia has produced.” In October, 1971, amid speculation that he would replace Agnew on the ticket in ’72, Holton boldly told the *Chicago Daily News* “I just don’t think [Agnew’s] is the sort of philosophy on which the Republican Party can move forward in my area.”

Holton and the Republicans had a second chance that November. Virginia’s liberal Democratic Lieutenant Governor, J. Sergeant Reynolds, had died and a special election was called; the Democrats nominated a moderate, and liberal Henry Howell was running as an Independent. At the Republican convention, the pro-Byrd forces from the year before, led by men like

Congressman Joel T. Broyhill, pushed for the nomination of a conservative. Holton pressed for and got his own candidate, George Shafran, more moderate but still an avowed busing foe. Shafran ran a miserable third, splitting the conservative vote and giving the victory to Howell. A Richmond editorial writer commented: “On the basis of Republican showings in the two most recent statewide elections, the electorate obviously nourishes serious doubts about the leadership of the governor. If he were to run for office today, it is doubtful that Mr. Holton could be elected state dogcatcher. . . .”

The Governor’s influence, already seriously emasculated, continued to decline within the Party. His defeats might not have been so disastrous if Nixon had stood behind him, risking short-term defeat for future GOP gains in a rapidly changing South. Or if Nixon had supported Holton merely out of loyalty or because it was the right thing to do. But as anyone not “wrapped up” in the President would know, Nixon seemed more interested in milking the passions of the moment for immediate, tangible political dividends—the Southern Strategy. Holton’s fatal flaw was not so much that he misjudged the dynamics of two elections as that he actually believed that Nixon wanted the New Republican South to be something other than the Wallace South re-named.

After Holton’s second defeat, Nixon once again used the White House invitation: While the Governor visited Israel in March, 1972, a dozen Richmonders—Old Republicans, New Republicans, Democrats, and Independents—visited the President to air their gripes about Holton. Resentments ran deep, and Republican complaints went well beyond busing and recent election embarrassments.

The same month the anti-Holton forces had their meeting with Nixon, the Governor took a hard line on a proposed constitutional amendment on busing. “It would be tragic,” he

said, "and would take this nation back from a position it has finally reached of recognizing that black people are citizens of this country and are entitled, without having to fight for their rights, to all of their rights."

Holton opposed the General Assembly's joint resolution urging Congress to pass an anti-busing amendment, but called the new statewide open-housing legislation "probably the best [law] that's passed since the Civil War." Although full of loopholes, this was the first open-housing law in the Old Confederacy—but while Holton twisted a few Republican arms for votes, the bill had not been part of his legislative package.

Perils of Foreign Travel

While Holton was visiting Japan in May he missed out on another White House political meeting—this one between Mills Godwin, now a converted "Democrat for Nixon," and John Mitchell. Three heads of the national Republican campaign effort in Virginia for 1972 were announced, after no visible consultation with the Governor. The triumvirate included a Byrd Democrat, a conservative Republican, and a Holton Republican. The Governor would campaign for Nixon again, but only outside of Virginia.

The next month it was all officially over. The Party's state chairman, Warren French, a Holton man, was challenged by conservative Raymond Obenshain for the party leadership and lost by a whopping three-to-one margin among the delegates. The Governor, sensing the inevitable, played tennis during the balloting.

Since then, Holton, who cannot succeed himself, has continued to suffer embarrassments during the final, lame-duck year of his term. In 1972 Republicans nominated William Scott, a Northern Virginia congressman with views frequently described as Neanderthal, to run for the Senate against moderate incumbent Democrat William Spang. Scott, with big,

right-wing money behind him, won handily—the only major Republican Senate upset of 1972.

Holton reportedly had little affection for Scott but served as a party loyalist in the campaign, appearing with Nixon and the Senate nominee in a "unity" rally a week before the election. It is doubtful that Holton guessed too much in advance that Scott would become the state's first GOP senator in modern times; most political observers didn't see the upset coming. It was a cruel vindication of Holton's faith in Virginia Republicanism. According to Ray Garland:

The character of the Republican Party is very definitely changing—just about 180 degrees from what we were all the years of this century until this past year. . . . We were essentially an anti-establishment party and had no power except in the Ninth District [in the mountainous West]. Ten years ago a Republican in the House of Delegates would be treated with almost no consideration and would get no meaningful committee assignments. The anti-establishment image we developed was what to a large extent elected Holton. Now that we are worth something, we've been taken over. I see parties switching roles in five years, with the Byrd Democrats and financial establishment calling the tune in the Republican Party.

The Party has always had this difficulty, always been a Janus looking in two directions at once: conservative on the national level, sending conservatives to Congress, but progressive on the state level. This dichotomy will be over soon.

Very soon. This June the Virginia GOP intends to either endorse or nominate for governor none other than Mills Godwin, the one-time "massive resistance" demagogue who defeated Holton in 1965. Along with Obenshain and most of Virginia's GOP congressional delegates, Holton is doing his bit to welcome the ex-governor into the Party, although he says his endorsement is contingent on an outright switch by Godwin to the Republican Party. (The majority of Republicans, though, couldn't care less and will give Godwin the nod to oppose Henry Howell whether he meets the Governor's idealistic terms

or not.)

If Godwin wins, Holton will undoubtedly take up a role as the Party's most prominent eunuch, to be trotted out for fund-raisers, dinners, and other GOP pep rallies. In public, at least, Holton insists he still has some clout. "You can cover all shades of ideology, from what the press calls moderate to conservative—and even liberal. The Party is a broad umbrella. There's clearly room for everyone and a very happy majority. Dick Obenshain and I are very compatible. . . there are no fundamental disagreements between us, just differences in emphasis." But it seems rather unlikely that an Obenshain-run GOP is going to give another chance to the man whom the President so unceremoniously dumped in 1970. As one Democratic politician says, "The GOP is finished with Holton. Obenshain is saying to him, you be governor because you were elected—but from now on we're running the show. The Republican Party in Virginia now is as bad in outlook as the Byrd machine ever was; and, after all, even the Governor must know that if there were an election tomorrow, he'd have an awfully difficult time."

The simple fact is that many of Holton's greatest admirers now, outside of liberal Republicans from the mountains and Northern Virginians, are the Democratic Party's liberal/Howell wing. One major state politician of this stripe, who asked to remain anonymous, says, "I think he's been a good governor. . . . There's nothing basic he's done I disagreed with."

As things stand now, about the only hope for Linwood Holton is a Godwin defeat this November; that might abort the official marriage of Byrd Democrats and Obenshain-conservative Republicans and keep the Virginia GOP fluid for a while to come. If this happens—and if it happens in conjunction with a post-Nixon national GOP move in the direction of a Percy rather than an Agnew—Holton might be able to run

as a Republican against Harry Byrd for the Senate in 1976. But this seems unlikely. Far more probable is the chance that Harry Byrd may be running for reelection in 1976 as a Nixon Republican.

This leaves Linwood Holton somewhere in the general vicinity of nowhere.

But you'd never know it: Nixon can still count on the governor of Virginia for such favors as his March appearance before the Senate Government Operations Committee, in which Holton contended that the new Federalism of revenue sharing would more than make up for Nixon's drastic budget cuts on domestic anti-poverty programs, like the Office of Economic Opportunity. Holton, almost unique among the nation's governors, plugged the Nixon argument that the slashing of such programs was really aimed at cutting off bureaucrats rather than the poor—although surely Holton knows that a successful project like OEO's Legal Services program already fulfills that conservative role by helping the poor break through the red tape of federal bureaucracy.

Even Holton's greatest admirers, able to forgive nearly anything else, chafe at his support of Godwin as his successor. One black leader says, "There's no way that Linwood Holton, who made that inaugural address in 1970 and spoke of new, broad vistas for Virginia, can believe that Mills Godwin can be any part in leading Virginia down that path."

Such Holton performances add fuel to the speculation that the Governor, who talks often of moving into public-interest law when he leaves office, is actually doing his best to assure himself a fat Nixon Administration appointment of a non-controversial nature (like an ambassadorship) come next January. It's not much of a prize, but if Linwood Holton has learned anything from his association with the President through the years, it's that he'd better take what he can get. ■

How to keep them buying even though they know you're lying

