



America's Newspapers

Idaho history-Idaho's Influence in the White House

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Between 1970 and 1986, Idaho enjoyed a run of incredible influence at the highest levels of the federal government. Four Idahoans -- Bill Eberle, Walt Minnick, Cecil Andrus and Peter Johnson -- held senior positions either working in the White House or heading major government agencies. This first of two parts details the years between 1970 and 1975.

Nixon appoints first ambassador from Idaho

In the winter of 1970, Bill Eberle's 12-year-old daughter answered the phone, and to her amazement on the other end was President Richard Nixon. The president was calling to appoint Eberle to the post of U.S. Trade Representative, with the rank of ambassador -- making the Boise native Idaho's first ambassador.

Eberle remembers the call well: As the president was elevating him to the rank of ambassador, his wife yelled from the kitchen, "Bill, come in here and take the garbage out!"

And so began Idaho's decade of influence in the White House.

Eberle had been involved in politics since law school when he worked for the National Young Republican Organization. He continued that involvement in Idaho and the Pacific West while on the Eisenhower campaign, then in the State House of Representatives where he served four terms, two as Speaker of the House.

In the private sector, he helped found the Boise Cascade Corporation. He negotiated many merger and acquisition transactions, including a discussion with the American Standard Corporation. "About a week after the discussions, the President of American Standard called me out of the blue, said he was retiring, and wanted me to take his place," Eberle recalls.

Expanding trade around the globe

As CEO of American Standard, Eberle found himself running one of America's largest multi-national corporations operating in 43 nations. That led the Nixon Administration to invite him to participate in a trade advisory group (with cabinet status) and later earned him the appointment as the U.S. trade representative and director of the Council on International Economic Policy in the Executive Office of the President, responsible to both the president and Congress.

At the time of his appointment, the U.S. had not conducted multi-lateral trade negotiations for 12 years -- something he instantly rectified, launching the Tokyo Round of negotiations, and paving the way for the boom in trade between the U.S. and Japan, and the expansion of the European Union. He shepherded the Trade Bill of 1975 through Congress, which included among other things, "Fast Track" negotiating authority for the president. The bill remains the basis of U.S. international trade even today.

The beginning of the war on drugs

Shortly after Eberle's career began in the White House, Walt Minnick, who decades later would run for the U.S.

Senate from Idaho, began his government career as an economist with the Pentagon. Soon thereafter, a law school friend working in the White House contacted him about working on a new drug task force. After interviewing with John Erlichman, Nixon's domestic affairs advisor, Minnick was put to work in the White House.

As the senior staffer overseeing federal drug interdiction projects, he began with \$65 million and ended with a \$1.5 billion budget. Eventually Minnick's efforts lead to creation of the Drug Enforcement Agency.

Minnick recalls coordinating one of the first international heroin busts. The CIA had captured a functioning heroin lab, and brought the equipment to the United States. Minnick set up the entire lab in the Cabinet Room adjacent to the Oval Office.

In the process of setting up the lab, a technician mixed some chemicals together, flooding the room with fumes. For a brief moment, the White House had a functioning drug lab.

The president entered the fume-filled room and picked up a bag of heroin confiscated in the bust. The porous bag contained 95% pure heroin, which the president soon had all over his hands, prompting one staffer to order, "Mr. President, don't lick your fingers!"

Minnick left the White House on the Monday following the "Saturday Night Massacre" of Oct. 20, 1973, when Nixon forced the resignations of Independent Counsel Archibald Cox, Attorney General Elliot Richardson and Deputy Attorney General Bill Ruckelshaus. Even with Minnick's departure, Idaho's influence in the White House was only just beginning.

Bill Eberle with Gov. Don Samuelson on Feb. 21, 1970.

Walt Minnick

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Correction: The photo on the Idaho History page in Tuesday's Life section pictured Ted Eberle with Gov. Don Samuelson. The cutline incorrectly identified one of the men.

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