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HOW NOT TO BECOME PRESIDENT

by Max S. Lale

President Rayburn? It could have been.

That President Franklin D. Roosevelt in 1944 did not choose as his final vice president "Mr. Sam," the venerable Speaker of the House of Representatives, may have been because three Marshall brothers could not agree politically.

Marshall was not unaccustomed to political attention. Only three generations earlier the city had been the residence of two Texas governors, Edward Clark and Pendleton Murrah. It was the residence of two Texans in the United States Senate, J. Pinkney Henderson and Louis T. Wigfall, and it had sent to the House of Representatives Lemuel D. Evans, the Know Nothing candidate who sneaked into the Congress on another wave of skepticism, later to become a consultant to the Lincoln White House.

The Marshall brothers, three of seven born to William and Willie Henry (Boothe) Blalock, were Horace, Jesse, and Myron Blalock, members of a pioneer Harrison County family who settled a few miles south of Marshall (near Grange Hall).¹

Widowed shortly after the birth of her seventh son, Richard, the mother inculcated in her brood the virtues of self-reliance and responsibility. Beginning with Horace, each child helped the younger siblings gain an education and stature in the community.

Fiercely protective and loyal within the family, the seven brothers yet stood on principle in matters politic, even if this meant violating family loyalties. Horace was a former Marshall postmaster and old-school Democrat turned Texas Regular. Myron was a near-icon of the compromise wing of the Southern party. Jesse, the only self-avowed Republican in Marshall, added a certain piquancy to the political mix.

Horace, with younger brothers "helping," had hawked vegetables and melons from a wagon on the residential streets of Marshall as a means of keeping the family afloat. With his assistance and that of succeeding brothers, his generation came to include two other notable attorneys in addition to Myron. They were Jack, of Houston and Washington, D.C., and Richard, student body president during his years at The University of Texas and later Myron's partner.

Schooled by heritage and culture in the conservatism of the Southern Democratic Party, the two Blalock brothers who influenced the outcome of a presidential election took divergent paths in their interpretation of party principles. The effect of this division reached a climax in 1944 when the Texas party split into pro- and anti-Roosevelt factions.²

It was a painful dilemma, especially inasmuch as brothers Horace and Myron, along with another brother, Bryan, lived as near neighbors in a middle-

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class neighborhood in the south part of Marshall. Jesse, as a Republican, played no overt part in the intra-party squabble and lived apart from the other siblings, and Richard, the youngest and most affluent member of the family, lived in an up-scale home somewhat removed from the three-brother neighborhood.

Given Myron Blalock's background, his was perhaps the most painful experience. He had served in the Texas House of Representatives from 1913 to 1918. After World War I, he had been appointed chief justice on the Texas Court of Civil Appeals in Texarkana. He had served as Democratic national campaign committeeman in Texas during the 1936 and 1940 presidential campaigns. At the convention in 1936 he had opposed the successful move to repeal the two-thirds rule for nominations, believing that repeal would diminish the role of Southern states. Because he was acceptable to both Roosevelt factions, he was chosen as national committeeman from Texas from 1944 to 1948.

Led by a group of rich and powerful men who opposed President Roosevelt, the Texas Regulars (as the dissidents were called) eventually forced a split delegation to the national convention. Horace, though not rich, as were the dissident leaders, served as senatorial district campaign chairman despite living in the same small northeast Texas town along with one of the most powerful fourth-term loyalists, his brother.

In the weeks leading up to the convention, "word leaked from the White House that Roosevelt favored Rayburn for the presidency," according to Anthony Champagne, Dallas political scientist and author of *Congressman Sam Rayburn*.³ In this detailed study of Rayburn's hold on the Fourth District, Champagne set the stage for the disappointments of 1944. In an introduction to the volume, Carl Albert cited as reasons for Rayburn's stature his colleague's "acting dynamically while holding the balance between the interests of his district and the broader ones of the nation as a whole."⁴

Albert, later a Speaker of the House from the black hat, Little Dixie district across Red River from Rayburn's, had observed and studied at first hand his mentor's style and methods.

Champagne noted that Edward Flynn, the political boss of the Bronx and former national Democratic chairman, "thought Rayburn a good choice for the office." There even had been a booklet for Rayburn at the 1940 convention.

All things considered, Myron Blalock believed that an unprecedented fourth term for an obviously dying president was justified. Brother Horace did not.

The prospect in Roosevelt's mind of losing Texas because of a party split, with two Marshall brothers at the center of the contention – and one of them the national committeeman from the state – was too much. And Harry Truman go the nod!

There is a postscript to the story which remains a tantalizing mystery.

In Bonham, Rayburn's home town, there still are some who are unaware that the first contribution to the Rayburn Library was a \$10,000 check which the congressman received from *Collier's* magazine for public service. I once

heard the Speaker comment unfavorably, in no uncertain terms, about the disparity between the absence of government funds for "his" library and Truman's library.

Other gifts followed, however. Champagne notes that Rayburn's old friend in Marshall, Myron Blalock, contributed \$50,000, which Richard Blalock, his youngest brother and law firm partner, once acknowledged to me he had delivered in \$1,000 bills.

Was this an apology to Rayburn for the roles he and his brother had played in making Truman president instead of Rayburn? In the absence of confirming documentation, we may never know.

In any case, when Myron Blalock died in 1950, Rayburn flew in for his funeral, sitting in isolated grief on the first pew of the First United Methodist Church in Marshall.

Sam Rayburn's shot at the White House already had experienced its own funeral.

NOTES

¹*New Handbook of Texas*, (Austin, Texas, 1996), p. 580.

²See "For Rayburn, Good Work began in Home District," *Fort Worth Star-Telegram*, July 17, 1984.

³Rutgers University Press, 1984.

⁴In this connection, it should be noted that Rayburn, in the fall of 1941, spoke from the floor of the House in favor of extending the national service "draft" act, originally adopted for only one year, a proposal which carried by one vote only months before Pearl Harbor.