

OUTLOOK

Recalling dark days of the Watergate era



George F. Will says Robert Bork's book offers grim comparisons for today's political issues of gridlock over budgets and sequestration.

WASHINGTON — "When I first met Richard Nixon," Robert Bork says in the book he completed a few weeks before his death in December, "I could see in his expression the conviction that someone had blundered badly."

With the dry wit that, together with his mastery of the dry martini, made him delightful company, Bork says the president, who "almost visibly recoiled," evidently considered his red beard emblematic of Ivy League left-wingery. Nixon probably thought the barbarians were within the gates.

They were. On Nixon's staff. "Saving Justice: Watergate, the Saturday Night Massacre, and Other Adventures of a Solicitor General," Bork's recounting of events of 40 years ago, is an antidote to today's tendency to think that things in Washington have never been worse.

Bork became Nixon's solicitor general in June 1973, 12 months after the Watergate burglary. Then Bork, fresh from Yale Law School's faculty, met Nixon: "Apparently unsure if he was really dealing with a conservative Ivy League professor, he assured me his conservatism was something of a pose to keep others from moving too far left." Conservatives knew this.

In the summer of 1973, Vice President Spiro Agnew asked to see Bork, but "really had nothing of substance to say." Bork would soon learn why Agnew wanted to establish a relationship. A few weeks later, Nixon's chief of staff, Al Haig, asked Bork to become Nixon's chief defense counsel concerning Watergate matters and told Bork that Agnew was under criminal investigation for accepting bribes while governor of Maryland, payments that continued while he was vice president.

While pondering Haig's offer, Bork sought the advice of a Yale colleague, with whom he spoke on a "dark, semi-rural road" in suburban Virginia: "It's an indication of the paranoia of the time that I really wanted to be someplace where it was impossible to be overheard." By September, Bork and a few others knew the nation faced a novel possibility — a double impeachment, which could elevate to the presidency the speaker of the House, Oklahoma's Carl Albert, who the year before may have been intoxicated when he drove his car into some other cars outside Washington's Zebra Room saloon.

Agnew, says Bork, "was never one to miss out on making a little extra cash," so he said that if he was forced out of the

vice presidency "he hoped to remain in the administration a few more months to ensure his pension would vest."

When Bork and Attorney General Elliot Richardson were being taken into the Oval Office to explain to Nixon why Agnew should be indicted, Richardson got Bork into a White House restroom to talk. He turned on the faucets "in the expectation that the noise of running water would make our conversation inaudible if anybody was eavesdropping electronically."

Claiming "vice-presidential immunity," Agnew said he could not be indicted until he had been impeached and removed from office. Bork and others rejected this because the vice presidency is not sufficiently central to governance. Yet in those fevered days, a Justice Department memo suggested that even a president could be indicted before impeachment because with the aid of modern technology he could run the executive branch from jail. But, the memo said measuredly, this "might be beneath the dignity of the office."

On an October Saturday, when Nixon ordered Richardson to fire Archibald Cox, the Watergate special prosecutor, Richardson and his deputy resigned, urging Bork to execute Nixon's lawful order, which he did. By the two resignations, he became acting attorney general, in which capacity he protected the ongoing investigation of Nixon.

At work the Sunday morning after the "Saturday Night Massacre," his first official act as attorney general was to sign lease renewal forms for an oil field in Natrona County, Wyo., that became famous during President Warren G. Harding's unsavory administration. The field's name — Teapot Dome — was shorthand for political corruption, until displaced by Watergate.

Watergate now seems as distant as the Punic Wars. Nixon, born 100 years ago in January, is remembered for large diplomatic as well as criminal deeds. Agnew is deservedly forgotten. Bork deserves to be remembered by a grateful nation for the services he rendered in preventing disarray in the Justice Department at a moment of unprecedented assault on the rule of law, and for facilitating the removal of a president during Washington days that were darker than most people today can imagine. His book confirms the axiom that our ignorance of history makes us libel our own times.

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Obama must appoint an energy commission

Editor's note: General Motors Chairman and CEO Dan Akerson's essay is excerpted from his speech Wednesday at the IHS CERAWeek conference.

By Dan Akerson

The energy outlook in the United States today reminds me of a famous quote from the late author and playwright Larry L. King, who said, "For a few precious moments, I am back in old Texas, under a high sky, where all things are again possible and the wind blows free."

Unexpectedly, the United States is on the cusp of achieving energy security for the first time in more than a generation due in large part to the revolution in oil and gas production that's playing out in Texas and across the country. It will truly make "all things possible," including cleaner air and low budget deficits, if we play our cards right.

The opportunity before us is huge. Indeed, the U.S. Energy Information Agency reports that the United States could become a net exporter of natural gas by 2020 and net imports of energy could be cut roughly in half on a percentage basis by 2035.

In addition, Dr. Daniel Yergin of IHS, Inc. reports that the unconventional oil and gas industry could directly and indirectly employ 3 million people by 2020 and deliver \$113 billion in annual federal and state tax revenues.

The question now is what should the public and private sectors do to ensure that this extraordinary dividend is fully realized and rewards generations to come?

Every sector of the economy has a role to play, including the auto industry, which accounts for about 60 percent of total transportation energy usage in the United States.

General Motors will meet its obligation by deploying technologies that will satisfy customers and make an enormous contribution to energy security at the same time.

First, we will reduce vehicle mass by up to 15 percent using efficient engineering and advanced materials like nanosteel, carbon fiber, aluminum and high-strength steel.

Next, we will deploy natural gas and clean diesel engines where they make business sense. For example, we will launch a new B20-ready Chevrolet Cruze diesel this year, and we recently expanded our LNG and CNG portfolio to include ¾-ton bi-fuel pickups and dedicated CNG-powered vans.

We are also improving the efficiency of our gasoline engines using a suite of fuel-saving technologies, which means

the death of the V-8 engine has been greatly exaggerated. And it's mainly good news for Corvette and GM pickup fans.

Finally, the trend of using electricity to improve performance and fuel economy is going to grow rapidly. In fact, GM expects to have an estimated 500,000 vehicles on the road with some form of electrification by 2017.

So what does all of this mean for energy security? GM's commitment will save an estimated 12 billion gallons of fuel over the life of the vehicles we build between 2011 and 2017. That's 675 million barrels of oil we won't need — a figure nearly equal to our oil imports from the Persian Gulf in 2011.

Everywhere you look there are opportunities to seize the energy high ground. Indeed, our leaders have been presented with a historic opportunity to create a national energy policy from a position of strength and abundance.

How then should the country proceed? I believe the president should immediately appoint a Blue Ribbon Commission to develop a 30-year energy policy framework with checkpoints every five years.

The pillars of such a plan must include energy diversity, so we do not become dependent on any one fuel or energy source.

Energy efficiency must remain a core component so we can absorb the impact of prosperity and population growth.

And we must continue to make meaningful investments in nascent technologies to drive CO2 emissions even lower.

The commission itself needs to include a broad cross-section of energy producers and consumers, and they should be given a straightforward charge: Develop a plan to improve our standard of living.

In my lexicon, "standard of living" means affordable energy with certainty of availability, cleaner air and water, lower CO2 emissions, a significantly lower trade deficit and balanced budgets.

We are making progress on some of these fronts. But imagine what could be accomplished if the oil, gas and mining industries, renewable energy companies, utilities, labor groups and producers of consumer durable goods like GM worked together to create our first sustainable consumer-driven energy policy?

It would give us the freedom to focus on the needs of customers and the planet "under a high sky... where all things are again possible... and the wind blows free."

Akerson is chairman and CEO of General Motors Co.



Death of Chavez offers chance for U.S. to foster change

Venezuela's Maduro deserves support from administration

By Tony Payan

The March 5 death of Hugo Chavez, Venezuela's president since 1998, means that change is coming. The change is not necessarily for the better — but it may represent an opportunity to reboot the relationship between the United States and Venezuela, and perhaps between the United States and all of Latin America.

President Barack Obama did the right thing by reaching out to Venezuela as a nation. He correctly sees Chavez's death as a "new chapter" in the history of Venezuela. But he should now reach out to Vice President Nicolás Maduro. This may sound counterintuitive, but here is why.

Chavez's death portends a perilous road ahead. The country will have to hold elections within a month, and Maduro will surely run.

Within hours of the president's death, Maduro was laying the groundwork

by accusing the United States of espionage, expelling an American diplomat, blaming a U.S.-led plot for the cancer that killed Chavez, and appealing to the United Socialist Party of Venezuela to maintain unity. Maduro sounded more like a candidate than a vice president in mourning.

The United States must look past this rhetoric. Maduro stands a good chance at winning the presidency and will need the domestic and international support that the charismatic Chavez did not require.

In reaching out to Maduro, however, the United States must not overlap its hand. Doing so would make Maduro the inevitable successor — and create for him the opportunity to rally support by portraying America as the enemy — instead of having to run on a crumbling economy and an excessive personalization of power in Venezuela.

At the same time, the U.S. should assure the opposition that it supports no one in particular. Chavez's death will embolden a united opposition, which could rally around Henrique Capriles, the governor of Miranda, whom Chavez defeated in the 2012 elections.

Capriles could win, but his election will be an uphill battle; to win he will have to appeal to many of Chavez's supporters.

Were he to win, Capriles would face a deeply divided country and the monumental tasks of decentralizing power, restoring the economy and finding a way to unite a country burdened by crushing poverty, income inequality and high crime rates. If Capriles comes to power with only the support of the upper and upper-middle classes of Venezuela, he will not be able to effectively govern; interference from the military and a grassroots movement against his administration could cripple his government.

Thus, Maduro may be the best hope for the United States. He would represent the interests of the many unhappy poor — not only in Venezuela but throughout Latin America.

Chavez's death may create the opportunity for Maduro, with U.S. support, to make gradual changes within Venezuela and the country's relations with the United States.

What is not likely to change, however, is the flow of oil from Venezuela to the United States. Chavez's death does not

represent a threat to oil supply from Venezuela. The country remains an important energy exporter, and it depends on that income.

Venezuela's relations with its neighbors — Brazil, Colombia and Cuba — will likely continue unchanged in the short term, precisely because Venezuela's commercial relations are too important.

If Maduro wins the presidency, a hard stand vis-à-vis the United States will benefit him and his party politically and will represent an escape valve for many Latin American citizens who feel the continent's prosperity has done little for them. But this should not deceive the United States.

Chavez was, in a way, a one-of-a-kind man, and his power stemmed from his personality. There is no one who can take his place, and whoever comes next will need to build coalitions at home and abroad to maintain legitimacy.

This is an opportunity for change, and it must be seized with thoughtfulness and diplomacy.

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