

AFTER ELK CREEK: EVERYTHING

Encounters with Arthur Sylvester, Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs

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Since Osama bin Laden's September 11 coming out party, the odds have changed a little, but not much. Up to then, in Washington, D C., the easiest bet to win was that none could name three to Generals, and jobs held, a baffling challenge to wagers. Hardly a person in the nation's capital was that "hep", and a lot of money changed hands when the inability was revealed.

Contrasting severely with WW II, when Generals like George S. Patton, Joseph "Vinegar Joe" Stillwell, the great shogun, Douglas McArthur, Omar Bradley, paratroopers Matthew Ridgeway and James M. Gavin... and many more were "bankable" known leaders, who delivered victories.

When the go-get- 'em call went out, a great many hands were up-fronted and "roles and missions" bracketed with them. That this change would come about was unbelievable; even more so, the identity of the "whodunit" staggering. His name was Arthur Sylvester, who ran the "one man bureau" in Washington for the Newark Evening News in New Jersey. He had gone with John F. Kennedy and seven or so press types to New Hampshire, and his first pulse-feeler for his appeal as Presidential material. New Hampshire mostly ignored them, so they had a lot of "talkie-talkie time", Kennedy posing questions. If Sylvester was in his shoes and got elected, what would be the first thing he'd do? Art was used to the free whiskey of New Jersey boss Frank Hague, and Kennedy's firewater loosened his tongue.

"The first thing I would do is shut the mouths of every General and Admiral. They make speeches all over the country to all kinds of audiences. They seem to speak with more authority than elected and appointed office holders in any given administration. Shouldn't be that way. Anyway, you asked me and I told you. The conversation direction changed and for all evidence known then was just a "law aside."

But glory be, Kennedy got elected. And he also remembered, and so did the Kennedy Press Secretary Pierre Salinger, who knew Sylvester would be an armpit nuzzler, and "wow" Arthur Sylvester became the Assistant Secretary of Defense, Public Affairs. My job then was Chief of Public Affairs for the North American Air Defense Command, a creature called a "special command" since it had units from the U.S Air Force, Army, Navy and Marine Corps, as well as the Royal Canadian Air Force. Sylvester said I should come to Washington soonest, so we could talk about the way things were going to be. Not a good sign, methinks, so I checked with the Pentagon Press Desk and asked if he had any military background at all, particularly where I was. He had only called in once in seven years asking what the acronym, ADC stood for, and was told Air Defense Command.

Even more ominous was that he took on the Navy's Chief, highly respected Arleigh Burke. Sylvester had asked to see an upcoming speech text, read a couple of pages, told him to cancel the platform engagement... and get out of it as gracefully as he could.

From that day forward to now military professionals have been muzzled. The Pentagon shook, and others committed for public appearances began to find requirements to attend their mother's funerals.

To be invited, make that ORDERED, in for a Sylvester tête-à-tête, gave me a queasy feeling in my stomach. After all, I had been a longtime speechwriter. But in I went. He shook hands, waved me into a chair beside his desk, and started talking. I thought I heard him saying that I was highly respected, the longest timer in public affairs, so "I have to take you on!"

"So you know where I am coming from. I hate the military, probably the most over-rated professionals on earth." He said he had one experience with military service that stuck in his craw from his youth when he had gone to a summer camp along an Atlantic Beach. He said his officer was a postal clerk in civilian life, one of those too-big-for-his-britches guys once donning a uniform. Sylvester, through no fault of his own (that's the way hated are cooked up) was late to report for an inspection formation.

"So what did this martinet do—he had me lay out on the beach sands every bit of military equipment I had, looked it over, told me to repack and march a mile down the sands, turn, return, take off the pack and lay it out for a look-over. Under my breath, you jerk, I told myself, the day would come and I would get even. And Barney...MY DAY has come. It's payback time for that pipsqueak. In telling you this, I want you to spread far and wide who Arthur Sylvester is, where he comes from and why. Get me?"

Imagine that a man like that, so petty, would rise to power in high places. He had no balance. He was a newspaper hack. He actually walked up to the microphone stand at Andrews Air Force base where incoming VIPS made their arrival statements and took the mike away.

The first amendment that said Congress would make no law abridging freedom of speech and the press was literal to him. RADIO and TV hadn't been invented yet when the Founding Fathers doodled about—too bad for them, as Sylvester saw it. And he appeared before Congress and testified that a government had an inherent right to lie to the public if it had chosen to do so.

All our encounters were at his order. He said I was the worst example he could think of as a P.R. opportunist. Got away with too much, he said. He lunched every day at the downtown Washington National Press Club, and gave tips about upcoming breaking news. After the third glass, others came up to the bar as he noisily blabbed.

When JFK was gone Arthur Sylvester was soon out of his “cushy” suite in the Pentagon. He was not a lunch-buncher any more, a bore expressing his opinions, the insider now out.

Still in uniform I was walking down Lexington Avenue in New York, and somebody yelled my name loud enough to be heard over the roaring traffic. I turned and there was Arthur Sylvester beckoning me to wait. There was no open manhole I could step into. What a change! He was out of power, a has-been. He wanted someone to talk to, have a drink with. I told him there was nothing I’d rather do, but I was late for a very important appointment. He was the one who said a government has an inherent right to lie, and without quoting the Sylvester source, I used it to get out of there.

When generals were appointed to take on Bin Laden, the public of today asks “who-dat?” Known leadership figures, with credentials for having won battles, the instantly recognized and reassuring, how many do you recognize?

Arthur Sylvester, the vengeful little man of forty years ago, interferes still. Pipsqueaks still reach out into the new century. Not many remember Arthur Sylvester, but I do, face-to-face conversations. For me, he is not forgettable; illustrating how high incompetence can fly.