

A Moment from FMCS/USCS History

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John Steelman: Super Mediator Plus

John Steelman, a bigger than life character who mediated from the 30s to the 50s, died at age 99 in July 1999. Typical of the man, Dr. Steelman had earned doctorates in both sociology and economics. Historian David McCullough, in his book on President Truman, described Steelman as: "a big, gregarious, gun chewing, former economics professor and labor specialist from Alabama."

Secretary of Labor Frances Perkins invited Steelman to Washington to join her Department's United States Conciliation Service (USCS), the predecessor to FMCS, in the mid 30s after a single meeting with him. Ken Hechler, in his Truman book, wrote of Secretary Perkins' and Steelman's first encounter: "---- she was impressed with a huge, open-faced, smiling man who taught economics but talked like a down-to-earth fellow and had a sensible comment on any topic that came into the conversation. He seemed to know what he was talking about on all the labor issues that interested Secretary Perkins." Within a year of Steelman joining the USCS, Perkins appointed him USCS Director, and within another year, he replaced her as the Department of Labor's contact with the Roosevelt White House on labor-management matters.

During his tenure as director (1937 to 44), the USCS expanded to deal with the tremendous increase in collective bargaining during the Roosevelt New Deal and the economic expansion of WWII. Steelman described the mediator's role during that period as primarily teaching both sides to negotiate, since the process was so new the parties lacked experience in collective bargaining.

When Truman succeeded to the Presidency in the Spring of 1945, he appointed Steelman a special assistant in the White House. In that position, which he held until the Eisenhower Administration in January 1953, he continued his mediation work. During that period of numerous high profile disputes, Steelman's mediating upstaged the directors of USCS, and later, the FMCS, as well as the NMB. Steelman used the prestige of the White House and a rolodex of everyone he ever met to mediate disputes featured as front page news throughout the country.

Of his many high profile national disputes, probably the most dramatic involved a nation wide railroad strike with a settlement announcement resembling a Hollywood script. In late 1945 and early 1946, the U.S. experienced the largest number of major, concurrent strikes at any time before or since. As those strikes ended with Steelman's involvement, five million strikers returned to work just as a nation wide railroad strike began. With the national economy struggling to adjust to peace time needs, a strike in that most crucial industry was devastating to the economy after just two days. While Steelman continued to mediate the dispute, President Truman went before a joint session of Congress on a Saturday afternoon to announce his intention to use unprecedented authority to draft the strikers into the army and to nationalize the railroads. Mid-way through the President's speech, a congressional aide rushed into the House chamber and handed the President a note from Steelman announcing a settlement reached moments before.

Stelman's White House role involved more than labor disputes, although for most individuals that might have been sufficient. Clark Clifford, in his memoir, depicted Steelman as his adversary within the Truman White House with presidential staff supporters in camps around each of them. Clifford said he concentrated on policy, while Steelman handled operations. A Steelman anecdote supports that division of responsibility: During the 1948

presidential campaign with Clifford traveling with President Truman as his speech writer and strategist, Steelman said the President told him to take care of the White House while he, the President, was out taking care of the Republicans.

Steeleman's vigorous recruiting of Cy Ching to be the first director of FMCS may stand as his most direct and lasting influence on the FMCS. But certainly, his high profile mediating, during a pivotal and formative thirty year period, popularized and increased the acceptability of mediation, and made the work easier for those of us who followed. For Steelman's long ago pioneering mediation work, succeeding generations of mediators owe him their thanks and recognition. If there was a "Mediator Hall of Fame", certainly John Steelman would be a ranking member.