

A LITTLE MORE CONVERSATION: THE PRESIDENT AND THE KING

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Historical events, like politics, can make strange bedfellows. Think of Franklin Roosevelt and Winston Churchill grudgingly joining forces with Joseph Stalin, Donald Trump cheesing for the cameras with Kim Jong Un, and Julia Roberts marrying Lyle Lovett. All of these combinations were important or strange in their own right, but, in terms of sheer weirdness, they do not reach the heights of the bizarre pairing that is the subject of tonight's discussion. Almost exactly fifty years ago, the fates allowed two dynamic, yet polar opposite, forces to meet in a uniquely American moment. Tonight, we will discuss the day that the King of Rock 'n Roll came calling on President Richard Nixon.

It was late December, 1970 in Memphis, Tennessee. Elvis Presley was disgruntled. His father and his wife were on his case over the extravagance of the Christmas presents that he had purchased for the upcoming holiday. This was not all that surprising considering he has spent over one-hundred thousand dollars (more than \$600,000 in today's money) on 32 handguns and 10 Mercedes-Benzes for various friends and hangers-on. Not wanting to be lectured on spending the cash he had earned on stages and movie screens across the country since the mid-1950s, Elvis decided to split town, catching the first flight he could book out of Memphis, which happened to be heading to Washington, D.C.

The King's arbitrary stay in our nation's capital was a brief one. With no particular agenda other than some holiday family avoidance, Elvis got bored after less than a day

and decided on a whim to fly cross-country to California to hide out in his recently-purchased L.A. mansion. It was there that an idea made its way past the hair product and pork chop sideburns to take nest in Elvis's brain. Though he enjoyed extraordinary wealth and fame, there was a hole in Elvis's soul which left him unfulfilled. He lacked one solitary item that could finally be his crowning achievement. Yes, Elvis had the same dream that I'm sure many in this room (Zoom) have had over the years. He wanted his very own badge from the Bureau of Narcotics and Dangerous Drugs.

Although the object of Elvis's desire may seem surprising on its surface, it was actually the marriage of two of his life's passions: law enforcement and drugs. Presley had always admired the police. In almost every town in which he performed, Elvis would make it a point to stop to visit with local police officers. And although the police certainly enjoyed their exciting brushes with fame, the meetings were not completely altruistic on Elvis's part. He sought, and was typically granted, badges, guns, and even official titles within departments. Among others, he held a Lieutenant Detective badge from the City of Los Angeles, a Sheriff's badge from Shelby County, Tennessee, a Deputy Sheriff badge from Hinds County Mississippi, a Deputy Sheriff badge from Mobile, Alabama, a police badge from Cincinnati, Ohio, a Reserve Captain badge from the City of Memphis, a Deputy Sheriff badge from Cumberland County, North Carolina and even a constable badge from the City of Kent in South England.

Even if the police agencies who bestowed these titles upon Elvis considered them to be honorary in nature, the King most certainly did not. When in Memphis, he regularly monitored his personal police radio, and when a serious crime or car accident took place, Elvis was known to arrive there simultaneous to the police force.

Sometimes, without being asked, he would work traffic at car wreck scenes. (Imagine sitting in traffic on a rainy Tuesday afternoon in Memphis and realizing that the guy who just sent you on a detour with a flashlight was the most famous rock and roll performer of all time.) To take matters even further, Elvis had his own set of police blue lights that he would periodically strap to the roof of his car when he felt, for example, that a citizen needed to be pulled over for speeding. Upon pulling an oblivious person over, he would typically lecture the driver about traffic safety, sign an autograph, and send this clearly stunned person on their way. [A note to the audience: This seems to have been acceptable if you were Elvis Presley. For the rest of us, at least here in Kentucky, it's a class D felony.]

*** *show police and badge pics.***

As you can see, Elvis had great affection for his police gear and for his side gig as an off-the-record part-time cop. However, directing traffic with the local Sheriff's Department didn't carry the gravitas of a federal badge, and Elvis decided that that was exactly what he needed. This would serve the dual purpose, in the King's mind, of allowing him to work in law enforcement at a more esteemed level, and, presumably, as an added perk, to carry drugs domestically and even internationally without being hassled. That freedom was important to Elvis, as by 1970, he was inarguably a functioning drug addict.

Elvis's descent into the world of addiction was a gradual one. With his conservative, churchgoing southern upbringing, and lifelong esteem for law enforcement, Elvis remained relatively clean during the early stages of his career. In fact, it wasn't until he was drafted in the Army in 1957 that he was first introduced to

amphetamines. But after his military service, as his musical career progressed, prescription drugs became a mainstay of his day-to-day life. His personal physician, Dr. George Nichopoulos, prescribed vast quantities of pills for the various ailments of which Presley complained, whether real or imagined. He narrowly avoided death many times, including an incident in which a girlfriend saved him from drowning in his bowl of chicken noodle soup. By the time the 1970's rolled around, Elvis was ingesting everything but Flintstone vitamins, as evidenced by the toxicology report following his death in 1977. That report indicated that Elvis's blood contained a deadly cocktail of Dilaudid, Percocet, Demerol, Codeine and Quaaludes, among other things. With that large and regular intake of prescription drugs, Elvis really needed that badge, a desire which was clear to those close to him. Priscilla Presley encapsulated Elvis's desire clearly in her memoir. "The narc badge represented some kind of ultimate power to him. With the Federal Narcotics badge, he believed he could legally enter any country both wearing guns and carrying any drugs he wished." So with this goal clearly in mind, Elvis soared across the country back towards Washington D.C., the town that he had left just one day before, to hatch his master plan of getting his royal hands on that badge.

On the other end of the counterculture world in which Elvis resided sat President Richard Milhouse Nixon, elected as the 37th President of the United States in 1968. If Elvis Presley was the personification of sex, drugs and rock 'n roll in the United States in the 1960s, Nixon was the embodiment of The Establishment, and in 1970, he was at the height of his powers.

If one were to ask 100 people to give a fact about Richard Nixon, 94 of them would say that he was the only American President to resign from office following the

Watergate scandal in 1974. (The other six thought you said Otis Nixon, and answered that he played center field for the Braves.) But it is easy to forget that early in his presidency, Nixon was relatively popular, and that he achieved many tangible accomplishments until things went south. The moon landing took place under his watch in 1969. Nixon also helped establish the Environmental Protection Agency. He expanded social program significantly. Though he did not enact the civil rights laws, he enforced desegregation in the South. He opened communication and relations with China and the Soviet Union. His popularity is evident from his reelection in 1972, one of the greatest landslide victories in U.S. presidential history, in which he defeated George McGovern by an electoral count of 520 to 17. Clearly, in 1970, the counterculture was still around, but The Establishment, with Nixon as its figurehead, was firmly in control.

Despite his political success, Nixon was not exactly a cool guy. He classified himself as an introvert, but those around him were less kind, referring to him as awkward, uncoordinated and uncomfortable in social settings. He was notoriously bad at small talk. He spilled soup on himself so frequently at state dinners that he ordered it removed permanently from the menu. Though he ultimately dealt with some substance issues of his own, the Quaker-raised Nixon was the epitome of stiff, milquetoast corporate America. And he was about to have an encounter with the King of Rock 'n Roll.

Somewhere over middle America, Elvis penned the letter that he hoped would be his envoy to the president, and thus his ultimate goal of the federal badge. Written on American Airlines stationery, Elvis's letter read as follows:

Dear Mr. President:

First I would like to introduce myself. I am Elvis Presley and admire you and have great respect for your office. I talked to VP Agnew in Palm Springs a while ago and expressed my concern for our country. The drug culture, the hippie elements, the SPS, Black Panther etc. do not consider me as their enemy or as they call it the Establishment. I call it America. I love it. Sir I can and will be of any service that I can to help this country out. I have no concern or motives other than helping the country out. So I wish not to be given a title or an appointed position. I can and will do more good if I were made a Federal Agent at Large, and I will help but by doing it my way through my communication with people of all ages. First and foremost I am an entertainer but all I need is the federal credentials. I am on the plane with Sen. George Murphy and we have been discussing the problems that our country is faced with. So I'm staying at the Washington hotel room 505 – 506 – 507. I have two men who work with me by the name of Jerry Schilling and Sonny West. I am registered under the name of Jon Burrows. I will be here for as long as it takes to get the credentials of a federal agent. I have done an in-depth study of drug abuse and communist brainwashing techniques and I am right in the middle of the whole thing, where I can and will do the most good. I am glad to help just so long as it is kept very private. You can have your staff or whoever call me anytime today tonight or tomorrow. I was nominated the coming year one of America's ten most outstanding young men. That will be on January 18 in my hometown of Memphis, Tennessee. I am sending you the short autobiography about myself so you can better understand this approach. I would love to meet you just to say hello if you're not too busy.

Respectfully,

Elvis Presley

PS I believe that you sir were one of the top 10 outstanding men of America also. I have a personal gift for you which I would like to present to you and you can accept it or I will keep it for you until you can take it.

The written request now accomplished, Elvis arrived in the nation's capital in the early morning hours of December 21, 1970, and traveled, uninvited, to the White House. Arriving by limousine at 6:30 in the morning, he dropped off his letter at the West Gate of the White House. The President does not typically respond to random letters dropped at his doorstep, even those hand-delivered by celebrities, but as luck would have it, Nixon aide Bud Krogh happened to also be a big Elvis fan, who wanted desperately for a meeting to take place. Later that morning, White House staff issued a memo to the President encouraging that he meet with Presley. The memo recommended that the President use the meeting to encourage Elvis, ironically, to work in the fight against drug use in the entertainment industry. The memo referenced the recent drug-related deaths of Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin. It also suggested that the president encourage Elvis to host an hour-long anti-drug TV special, encourage his fellow artists to create a rock 'n roll musical entitled "Get High on Life," and to record the "Get High on Life" soundtrack at the federal rehab and research facility in Lexington, Kentucky. With these stellar ideas at his disposal, the President gave the green light to the meeting, and the Elvis camp was contacted for a meeting to take place that very day.

Elvis arrived at the White House at noon. Understanding the formal and serious nature of the event, Elvis dressed in a purple velvet suit with a huge gold belt buckle. He

topped off the outfit with a pair of ostentatious sunglasses. Very understated. Nixon, the counterpoint to the King, wasn't quite as flamboyant, wearing a dark suit with white starched shirt and tie.

***pics of Elvis and Nixon**

Elvis did not come empty handed. He presented, as a gift to the President, a World War II Colt 45 pistol in a wooden display case which he had literally yanked off the wall of his Los Angeles mansion prior to his impromptu mission to Washington. He presented this gift to the President, and then proudly showed off his collection of police badges to the Commander in Chief.

The soon-to-be famous Nixon White House recording system had not yet been installed, so the record of the conversation comes largely from the notes of Bud Krogh. Incidentally, Bud later went to federal prison for 4½ months for his role in the Watergate scandal. But Bud's record of the event provides us insight into the conversation between the two very differing personalities.

Elvis, possibly revealing some insight into a musical rivalry, took the opportunity to inform the president that the Beatles were a major force of anti-American spirit in the United States. Mr. Krogh's notes indicate that the President expressed surprise at this statement. Elvis's update on the national musical scene now complete, Presley went on to the real heart of the matter, namely, his concern over the drug culture and desire to attain the federal badge.

Presley verbalized what he had written in his letter by informing the President that he had been studying drug culture and communist brainwashing for the past 10

years. He told Nixon that he was accepted by the hippies and could therefore infiltrate those groups without suspicion. He told the President that he was on his side and ready to help the cause of America. His credentials now presented, Elvis then asked the President directly for the Federal Narcotics and Dangerous Drug badge. The President looked to his aide, Mr. Krogh, and asked "Can we get one?" Bud nodded in the affirmative, and it was thus ordered by the President.

A clearly excited Elvis responded emotionally. An official post-meeting White House memorandum described the reaction as follows: "At the conclusion of the meeting, Presley again told the President how much he supported him, and then, in a surprising, spontaneous gesture, put his left arm around the President and hugged him." One can almost see the extraordinarily stiff and awkward Nixon react to this physical display of emotion from Elvis as an ordinary person would to being embraced by a flaming cactus.

According to the official White House record, the meeting lasted just 15 minutes, from 12:45 P.M. until 1:00 P.M. Nixon later sent a brief but courteous letter to Elvis thanking him for the gift and wishing him, Priscilla, and their daughter Lisa a happy and peaceful 1971. The two would not meet or speak again.

At the request of Elvis, the meeting remained largely unknown to the general public in the years that followed. However, it has since become a celebrated moment in presidential history. The official White House photo of the two together at the meeting is the single most searched and requested picture on the National Archives website. The gift shop from that same agency sells T-shirts, mugs, and various other memorabilia

bearing the image of the President and Elvis together. In 2016, a movie, entitled *Elvis & Nixon*, was made dramatizing the incident. The film starred Kevin Spacey as Nixon.

So why was this fifteen-minute meeting between these two men so remarkable? Nothing was particularly accomplished by it. Elvis never starred in a “Get High on Life” musical or TV special. And though he got his federal badge, it did not place him completely above the law as he had hoped. His use of drugs continued, and he would be dead from an overdose seven years later. Nixon did not get to utilize Elvis in the War on Drugs that he declared in 1971. The meeting did not help Nixon become more hip, and he would be forced out of office in shame four years later. But although there may have been no tangible results from the meeting for either party, or even the country as a whole, it remains an iconic White House incident. For that one brief instance in December 1970, the King and President of United States held court in a beautiful, awkward, truly American moment.