

Why Lindsay Can't Run

By Jeff Greenfield

“...Only a few of us know the real reason for the Mayor's recent decision not to run again. To discover it, you must go behind the closed doors of Gracie Mansion...and into the kitchen...”

For most New Yorkers, the motive for John Lindsay's decision to forgo a third term is shrouded in secrecy: he didn't think he could win, the pundits say. Or maybe he just wanted a rest. Or time to plan his next move.

Only a few of us know the real reason for the Mayor's decision. To discover it, you must go behind the closed doors of Gracie Mansion . . . and into the kitchen.

Let us go back to the 1969 campaign, to an October Sunday, just after 8 a.m. Several of the Mayor's key aides—A., G., D., K., L. and M.—are gathered in the conference room to help Lindsay prepare for a key television debate. Their minds are fixed on one thought—breakfast.

“I'll get some food down here,” Lindsay announces. Silent cheers from the *minyans*. Every few moments a furtive glance is aimed at the door. Finally, the feast appears: an urn of lukewarm coffee and a basket of day-old toast.

K. leaps to the telephone (an instinct which has overtaken his sex drive and is moving up on respiration). “Earl? K. Get over right away to the York Deli and get eight—make it twelve—bagels and lox, heavy on the cream cheese.”

“Good God,” L. mutters. “I hope Marchi or the Proc wins. At least they'll get some decent Italian food around here.”

This, in microcosm, is the key division between John Lindsay and the ethnic New York voter. Ever since the days of Boss Tweed's Christmas turkeys, the way to a New Yorker's heart has been through his stomach. Politicians eat their way through egg rolls, pizzas, ribs, and knishes. The secular communion of party politics is the fruit-cup-roast-beef dinner for 3,000. Even our slang reflects the gastronomic base of voting: a job-holder is “eating from the public trough.”

It was this fundamental political rule



that John V. Lindsay systematically flouted. Perhaps it was his origins—it is a known fact that WASPs regard public enjoyment of food as evidence of degeneracy (anyone who has ever attended a champagne-and-cucumber-sandwich wedding can so testify). Perhaps it was poor advice (“Go easy on the food, John—it'll prove you're an economizer”). Whatever the source of the policy, Lindsay's kitchen cabinet managed to specialize in unfulfilled expectations.

Picture a Gracie Mansion dinner: the polished dining room table, the crystal goblets reflecting the crystal chandelier, the Wedgwood china, the sterling silver. And *voilà*: out comes a loin of pork and brown betty. One aide who has spent seven years bringing sandwiches to his mayoral conferences recalls that “two items always seemed to be on the menu. One was doughnuts . . . little, brittle doughnuts. The other was tuna surprise.”

Unfortunately for Lindsay, eight years' worth of luncheon and dinner guests turned out to be a sizable constituency. When the Mayor commis-

sioned a top-secret poll in 1973, it revealed that Lindsay was eight points shy of making a primary runoff. The poll also showed that 11.5 per cent of the respondents said that “any man who would serve Noodles à la Velveeta nine times a month doesn't deserve to be Mayor.” And so Lindsay threw in the napkin. (The Mayor always had caterers serve his meals to foreign dignitaries; this explains his high standing in the capitals of Europe.)

I remember vividly my last meal at the Mansion, a little less than a year ago. As we gathered around the table for lunch, and my stomach tensed, out came the first course: avocado with shrimp! I couldn't believe it. Ravenously, I devoured the appetizer and waited. And waited. Finally, the waiter emerged with a bowl of strawberries. I motioned him over.

“Didn't you forget the main course?” I asked.

He looked at me as though I was crazy.

“That was the main course,” he said.

Poor John. Right to the end, he never understood the gut issue. ■

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