

# The Senate's Keeper of Secrets

## LESLIE L. BIFFLE

Pages from  
the Political  
Past



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Institutions in this country are in truth run by largely anonymous folks who remain carefully hidden behind the scenes and the United States Senate is no exception to this rule. Very rarely does any functionary receive much in the way of notice from the news media and usually only then due to some indiscretion or scandal. Leslie L. Biffle worked for the Federal government for more than forty years, capping his career as Secretary of the United States Senate.

Few remember "Les" Biffle today, but during his time this unassuming little man from Arkansas wielded enormous influence in government circles and was referred to by some as "the prince of wire pullers". One of Biffle's closest friends in the United States Senate was another unprepossessing little man from the Midwest, Harry S. Truman. 1945 was a big year for both men who were elevated to higher positions due to the death of their predecessors. Truman succeeded to the Presidency following the death of Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Biffle was elected Secretary of the United States Senate after the sudden demise of Colonel Edwin A. Halsey.

Leslie L. Biffle was born in Boydsville, Arkansas, a town of some two hundred-odd souls, in 1889. Les Biffle grew up in Piggott, Arkansas where his father operated a general store and was active in local politics. The elder Biffle served at one time or another as Sheriff, County Clerk and Circuit Court Clerk.

Leslie Biffle went to Washington, D. C. to become the secretary to Congressman Robert Bruce Macon in 1909. While Les Biffle would continue to call Arkansas "home", he was to live in the nation's Capitol for the remainder of his life. When Congressman Macon was defeated for reelection in 1914, Biffle found a job in the Senate's document folding room. One of the more powerful Democratic leaders at the time was Arkansas Senator Joseph T. Robinson; Biffle knew Robinson well and it was an association that was helpful to Leslie Biffle professionally and politically. Senator Robinson named Biffle assistant Secretary to the Minority in 1925. When the Democrats took control of the United States Senate in 1933, Biffle was named Secretary to the Majority.

Joe Robinson, a volatile and caustic man, gave Biffle explicit instructions: "Keep your eyes and



Leslie L. Biffle

ears open and your damn mouth shut!"

Fortunately, Biffle excelled at discretion and was said to be able to whisper without even moving his lips. Biffle cheerfully performed daily numerous favors for senators and became a master of the intricate Senate rules. Les Biffle also demonstrated a knack for expertly counting votes, an invaluable talent in legislative battles. Biffle was also equally expert in the uncertain art of politics, certainly a highly prized ability in the nation's most august legislative body.

Les Biffle, known to many of his friends as simply "Biff", was always immaculately dressed and possessed a gregarious nature. His appearance, however, was anything but impressive; five feet seven inches tall, Biffle had a head of graying curly hair and resembled nothing more than a clerk. In a city where rumors swirled constantly, Biffle was the soul of discretion and kept the secrets of his employers. Biffle, a Democrat, was equally helpful to Republican senators and when Secretary of the Senate Edwin A. Halsey died in February of 1945, the GOP members joined with Democrats in electing Biffle to succeed Halsey by acclamation. It was an historic occasion, as it was the first time both parties had joined together to elect a Secretary of the Senate unanimously.

Leslie Biffle supervised a large operation; to give one an idea of the scope of Biffle's responsibilities, the Secretary of the Senate oversaw more than a thousand employees,

including 59 pages, 37 Capitol Hill police officers, as well as the ladies who worked as attendants in the various women's restrooms throughout the Senate. The Secretary of the Senate also had physical custody of many vital documents, including the responsibility for transmitting all messages from Presidents to the Senate.

The Secretary of the Senate occupied an impressive and beautiful ceremonial office in the Capitol. During the time Biffle was the Senate's Secretary, his office was the scene of many luncheons and more than a few senators would drop by for a drink. "Biff's Diner" was a popular destination and no one enjoyed the fare and fellowship more than Harry Truman. The first telephone call Truman made as President of the United States was to Leslie Biffle and Biffle watched with most of the Cabinet as his friend from Missouri took the oath of office. Truman had eaten lunch in "Biff's Diner" the day FDR died and returned the next day as President to join several members of the Senate, including Tennessee's Kenneth McKellar, enjoying a menu of Puget Sound salmon, roasted potatoes and green peas.

Truman wanted to actually go inside the Senate Chamber to the floor of the Senate, but Biffle gently told President Truman it "would upset the entire applecart" and dissuaded him from passing through the swinging doors leading to the Senate floor. Biffle's friendship with Truman was such that a special phone was installed in the Secretary's office that was

directly connected to the White House. If Biffle used his special line, Truman himself usually answered the telephone.

It was Les Biffle who calmly walked up to the dais as Harry Truman was addressing the Congress about a crippling railroad strike, to hand the President a little note. Truman paused, read the note and dramatically announced the railroad strike had been settled on the terms Truman had desired. There were some skeptical enough to accuse Biffle and the President of having arranged the scene in a bit of political theatre.

Since first arriving in the nation's Capitol, Leslie Biffle had been taking notes, recording events and anecdotes, which he logged on a series of index cards. Biffle frequently spent evenings at his Washington apartment working on his note cards. Les Biffle maintained a rather nice lifestyle as Secretary of the Senate. He and his wife, Mary Glade, occupied a penthouse apartment at the Westchester Apartments on 4000 Cathedral Avenue in Washington, D. C. The Biffle apartment featured a garden terrace with a spectacular view of the capitol city and Biffle himself grew tomatoes, which he used to make his own homemade brand of tomato juice. The Biffle tomato juice was frequently used as a cure for those unfortunate senators who had imbibed too much the night before. The Biffle penthouse was decorated quite nicely and had two baths and five spacious rooms, allowing Leslie

and Mary Glade Biffle to live quite comfortably and entertain as they wished. A similar apartment at the same location today would sell for around a million dollars.

Les Biffle started to receive more attention once his friend Harry Truman became President. The warm friendship between the two men was hardly a secret in Washington and the former Missouri haberdasher oftentimes brought gifts of neckties to Biffle when visiting the Secretary's office. Biffle, a shrewd political observer, was thought to be perhaps the most important informal advisor to the President. Biffle's career was briefly interrupted when the Republicans won control of the Senate in 1947. Biffle was replaced by Carl Loeffler, an employee of the Senate for more than fifty years by the time he became Secretary of the Senate. Biffle was named as Executive Director of the Democratic Policy Committee, but his exile was brief.

Biffle was one of the very few in Washington who believed Harry Truman could be elected in 1948. Biffle bought a dilapidated truck and dispensed with his usual dapper clothes in favor of a pair of overalls and set out on a six-week trip across the country in the guise of a chicken farmer. As Biffle sold eggs from the back of his truck, he listened carefully as folks opined on the coming election. Biffle soon concluded Truman would do well in the farm states and defeat Republican Thomas E. Dewey. Few others in official Washington shared Biffle's optimism about Truman's chances, yet the clever little man from Arkansas was proven to be right.

Not only was Harry Truman elected, but the Democrats regained a majority in the United States Senate. Leslie Biffle was returned to office as Secretary of the Senate again in 1949. It was also in 1949 that the citizens of Piggott, Arkansas proudly recognized their native son, sponsoring a "Les Biffle Appreciation Day". Vice President Alben Barkley, one of many visiting dignitaries, unveiled a bronze bust of Leslie Biffle that still sits in the local post office to this day.

After Truman had won a term in his own right, Biffle's friendship with the President seemed to diminish somewhat. Truman recorded a few caustic notes about Leslie Biffle in his diary and seemed to believe Biffle had attempted to aid Senator Barkley in securing the Democratic presidential nomination in 1948, which would explain Truman's cooler attitude toward the little

man from Arkansas. Biffle remained Secretary of the Senate until 1953 when the Republicans once again came to power. It is doubtful Biffle wished to retire, despite having forty-four years of service to the government, but there was a new Minority Leader for Senate Democrats: Lyndon Baines Johnson of Texas. Johnson would reshape the Senate in his own image and become one of the most legendary Senate leaders in history. Evidently there was no place in Johnson's Senate for Leslie Biffle. Bobby Baker, who had begun working in the Senate as a page during Biffle's heyday and would rise to serve as Secretary of the Senate Majority Conference, wrote that he thought LBJ had "an antipathy" to Les Biffle. Baker speculated that Biffle was not acceptable to the domineering Texan because Biffle was somewhat of an institution in the Senate and was not beholden to Johnson. Baker felt LBJ wanted his own man as Secretary of the Senate and Johnson did not call Biffle back to serve in his old post.

Les Biffle officially retired from the United States Senate and opened an office in the LaSalle Building on Connecticut Avenue and worked as a "business consultant" for the remainder of his life. Most likely, Les Biffle was less a business consultant than a lobbyist, an occupation that would have come naturally to a shrewd and discreet man like Biffle. Biffle understood how government worked, had easy access to not only many senators, but also most agencies and departments in official Washington. Over the years, Biffle's intelligence and influence had been recognized and he had been offered jobs outside the government for as much as \$30,000, which would amount to roughly \$360,000 in today's currency.

Quite likely Les Biffle made a very good living as a lobbyist/consultant following his retirement from the Senate. The meticulous records kept by Les Biffle never became the source of a book and eventually disappeared, as the Biffles were childless. Leslie Biffle died in a Washington nursing home from double pneumonia on April 6, 1966. Biffle had become a fixture in Washington, D. C. and even in death, he did not go back home to Arkansas, as he was buried in Fort Lincoln Cemetery in Maryland. The dapper little man from Arkansas, so discreet in life, carried his secrets with him to his grave.

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