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P6/b6

Subject: Enzo

Received(Date): Mon, 5 Mar 2007 06:40:29 -0500

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From: Weinstein, Jared B.

To: Recher, Jason; Hagin, Joseph W; Meyers, John M.; Beyer, Todd W.; Bennett, Melissa S.; Keller, Karen E.; Haines, Mary A.; Newton, Julia K.; Sherzer, David; Deckard, Josh; Draper, Eric; Morse, Paul L; Perino, Dana M.; Carroll, Carlton F.; Edwards, Chris

Sent: Mon Mar 05 06:01:53 2007

Subject: times-picayune: bush's chief of protocol bows out

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Bush's chief of protocol bows out

New Orleanian held key White House job

Friday, March 02, 2007

By Bill Walsh

Washington bureau

WASHINGTON -- Donald Ensenat, who recently left the job as U.S. chief of protocol, likes to tell people that the position dates to ancient Greece.

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The term "proto" meant first and "collon" meant glued, a reference to the written summaries Greek diplomats attached to the outside of their dispatches. In six years in the job, Ensenat gave the old term a new twist: More than any other protocol chief in memory, Ensenat was glued to the president's side.

"I think he was very respected in the diplomatic community because they knew how close he and the president were," said Tom Kuhn, a Yale University classmate and president of the leading electric company trade group, the Edison Electric Institute. "It enabled him to be very effective."

Bush has shown he highly prizes friendship and loyalty, and Ensenat, 60, a New Orleans native, rates high marks in each. The two met at Yale where they were fraternity brothers and lived together in a Texas apartment afterward. Bush's father appointed him as ambassador to the Kingdom of Brunei. Ensenat and the younger Bush have been friends for more than four decades.

When he left the job Feb. 16, "Enzo," as the president calls him, was the second-longest serving protocol chief behind Selwa "Lucky" Roosevelt, who held the position during President Reagan's two terms.

"Washington being what it is, I think I would hire a close friend in a job like that, too," said John Weinmann, a fellow New Orleanian who was chief of protocol in the first Bush administration.

Post is misunderstood

Ensenat, who held the rank of ambassador, said the post is widely misunderstood. He said it bears little resemblance to the 1984 comedy "Protocol," starring Goldie Hawn, who plays a comely blond waitress co-opted by the State Department in a scheme to persuade a Middle Eastern emir to allow a U.S. military base in his country.

In most of the official White House and State Department diplomatic pictures, Ensenat is off to the side or in the background. He was always on the edge of the limelight, but rarely in it.

Ensenat said that two-thirds of the job involved arranging the nuts and bolts of visits by foreign dignitaries from the moment their planes touch down through a meet-and-greet with Bush to the farewell handshake on the tarmac.

"During the visit, I'm the face of the administration," Ensenat said.

When Ensenat, a New Orleans lawyer, accepted the job, he had every reason to believe it would be relatively light duty. It was no secret that candidate Bush didn't travel much outside the United States and also wasn't much for formal entertaining.

Not long after Bush took office in 2001, the two found themselves standing next to each other awaiting the first meeting with Russian President Vladimir Putin in Slovenia. With the international press corps poised to record every moment, Bush leaned over to his former frat brother and whispered, "Enzo, this is a long way from DKE House, isn't it?"

9/11 changed all

No one could have predicted what an understatement that would be. Later that year, terrorists attacked the United States and threw diplomatic relations into overdrive. The ensuing five years would see a surge in diplomatic visits to the White House. Ensenat counted 2,172 in all, a record pace.

"9/11 changed everything," he said. "Terrorism jumped to the head of the agenda. There were increased visits. Security ramped up tremendously. The motorcades were bigger and the logistics were bigger."

Logistics are the core of the protocol chief's job. Besides shepherding foreign dignitaries through the White House, Ensenat was responsible for overseeing the details of Bush's foreign trips, a total of 30 to 80 countries, each with a three-month planning lead time.

Ensenat said he was part of the "traveling squad" of advisers that stuck close to the president. Among other things, it fell to Ensenat and his 60-person staff to make sure that everyone got introduced by the correct title and the right order according to their diplomatic rank.

"Everyone has a pecking order," he said. "It's useful in making sure no one gets their nose out of joint and there is no diversion from the business at hand."

By 2003, the outpouring of international empathy the United States enjoyed after 9/11 had morphed into angry protests across the globe against the imminent invasion of Iraq. Ensenat said he saw little change on the diplomatic front.

Even from the French, who led the opposition to the war?

"The French are a special case," Ensenat said diplomatically.

Odd gifts to president

Ensenat's diplomacy seems to be a character trait. Asked about the strangest gift Bush received from a foreign dignitary, Ensenat described a seashell portrait of the president, but declined to identify the gift giver. He also demurred in saying who gave Bush a rare breed of dog, a breach of international protocol that you don't give animals to heads of state. The dog was holed up at the National Security Agency for two days before being adopted.

Ultimately, after six years the demands of protocol wore thin. Ensenat said he was leaving because of the "great sacrifice" it has put on him and his family. His wife, Taylor, divided time between Washington and New Orleans, but the time apart took a toll. He used to tell people that he would be lucky if by the end of his term he wasn't divorced or broke.

As it turned out, he is neither. Back in New Orleans, he has gone into business with fellow Bush loyalist Joe Canizaro, a developer, banker and venture capitalist. Ensenat said he may open up a Washington lobbying office, too.

He also hopes to keep up with his old friend the president. It shouldn't be hard. The two are neighbors. Four years ago, Ensenat and Canizaro bought a 600-acre ranch about five miles from Crawford, Texas, where Bush makes his home.

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