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CASEY: A Caldwell Butler history lesson on impeaching a president

By Dan Casey

As a freshman congressman in 1974, U.S. Rep. M. Caldwell Butler, R-Roanoke, rose above partisan hackdom to vote for articles of impeachment against then President Richard Nixon. One of these days soon, his political descendant, freshman U.S. Rep. Ben Cline, R-Rockbridge, may be faced with the same question.

During the summer 45 years ago, a congressman from Virginia's Sixth Congressional District stunned the nation. In July 1974, Rep. M. Caldwell Butler declared President Richard Nixon a liar and an obstructer and said it was the duty of Republicans to impeach him.

Most others in the GOP took a road more traveled and stuck by the scandal-stained Nixon. But the freshman Republican from Roanoke broke party ranks and rose above partisan hackdom to the status of statesman.

An Eagle Scout and ex-law partner of then-Gov. Linwood Holton, Butler did it with a speech he typed himself, in all capital letters, working alone in his office.

In a letter, his own mother had warned it would spell Butler's political doom. He replied in writing, "Dear Mother, you are probably right. However, I feel that my loyalty to the Republican Party does not relieve me of the obligation which I have."

Butler later acknowledged he wept after voting for articles of impeachment. But his mother's political calculation was wrongheaded.

In November 1974, as lingering voter anger led to defeats of many congressional Republicans who had supported Nixon, Butler swamped his Democratic opponent by an 18-point margin. In 1976 he won by 24 points. Nobody even challenged him in the 1978 and 1980 elections.

Butler's speech remains famous. Obituaries published across America when he died in 2014, at age 89, cited it as evidence Butler was "free from politics." That's the kind of thing you hear voters wishing for amid today's Washington gridlock.

It's also a lesson worth remembering because we're a week and a day out from Special Counsel Robert Mueller's testimony before the current House Judiciary Committee about the Trump-Russia investigation.

So here's the guts of what Butler said back then, with redactions for the sake of space and continuity:

"For years we Republicans have campaigned against corruption and misconduct in the administration of the government of the United States by the other party. Indeed in my first political experience in 1952, Trumanism was the vehicle that carried Dwight D. Eisenhower to the White House. And, somehow or other, we have found the circumstances to bring that issue before the American people in every national campaign.

"But Watergate is our shame. Those things happened in the Republican administration while we had a Republican in the White House and every single person convicted to date has one way or the other owed allegiance to the Republican Party.

"We cannot indulge ourselves the luxury of patronizing or excusing the misconduct of our own people. These things have happened in our house and it is our responsibility to do what we can to clear it up. It is we, not the Democrats, who must demonstrate that we are capable of enforcing the high standards we would set for them.

"I agree with the sentiments often expressed today and yesterday that the Congress of the United States and each member is indeed being tested at this moment, but the American people may also reasonably inquire of the Republican Party, '˜Do you really mean what you have said?'

"My colleague, the gentleman from California, [Rep. Charles] Wiggins [R-California], in his very able opening remarks of this morning, reminds us once more that we must measure the conduct of the president of the United States against the standards imposed by law, in which he is eminently correct.

"I would like to share with you for a moment some observations I have with reference to these standards.

"Impeachment and trial in the Senate is the process by which we determine whether or not the president of the United States has measured up to the standards of conduct which the American people are reasonably entitled to expect of him. The conduct which the American people are reasonably entitled to expect of the president of the United States is spelled out in part in our Constitution and in part in our statutes. '¦

"It is my judgment also that the standard of conduct which the American people are reasonably entitled to expect of their president is established in part by experience and precedent. That is one reason why I am so concerned by what has been revealed to us by our investigation.

"It will be remembered that only a few hours ago the gentleman from Iowa, [Rep. Wiley] Mayne [R-Iowa], has argued that we should not impeach because of comparable misconduct in previous administrations.

"There are frightening implications for the future of our country if we do not impeach the president of the United States. Because we will, by this impeachment proceeding, be establishing a standard of conduct for the president of the United States which will for all time be a matter of public record.

"If we fail to impeach, we have condoned and left unpunished a course of conduct totally inconsistent with the reasonable expectations of the American people; we will have condoned and left unpunished a presidential course of conduct designed to interfere with and obstruct the very process which he is sworn to uphold; and we will have condoned and left unpunished an abuse of power totally without justification.

"And we will have said to the American people: '˜These misdeeds are inconsequential and unimportant.' '¦

"The people of the United States are entitled to assume that their president is telling the truth. The pattern of misrepresentation and half-truths that emerges from our investigation reveals a presidential policy cynically based on the premise that the truth itself is negotiable."

One can't read those remarks without drawing the conclusion Butler believed that, for a president of the United States, lying and obstruction were absolute disqualifiers.

And, as we all know, on Aug. 9, 1974, Nixon became the first president ever to resign from office rather than face impeachment in the House, and a conviction in the U.S. Senate.

There are certain parallels to today and President Trump's actions, the Trump-Russia investigation, the Mueller Report and the hearings before the House Judiciary Committee next week.

There was no definitive evidence in 1974 that Nixon knew in advance of the Watergate break-in. All of his crimes occurred in its aftermath, as he sought to obstruct that investigation.

The same thing appears to be true with Trump-Russia. Mueller himself has said his investigation uncovered no hard evidence the president or his campaign conspired with Russia to help Trump's 2016 election.

Pointedly, however, Mueller also declared his report in no way exonerates Trump of obstructing that probe. There's a pattern of evidence suggesting the president did.

Here's another parallel: The Sixth Congressional District is currently represented by another freshman Republican who sits on the Judiciary Committee.

For that reason, many eyes will be on U.S. Rep. Ben Cline, R-Rockbridge, next week.

We may find out then whether Cline believes ' as Butler did ' that truth and honor trump party label and political expediency.

Or maybe not.

Stay tuned.

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CASEY: Laid off after 62 years on the job

By Dan Casey

Roger Journell, 81, was still a teenager when he got hired at GE Power's industrial controls manufacturing plant in Salem. That was Jan. 30, 1957, and his starting wage was $1.42 per hour. But his last day is Friday. He and the rest of the hourly workforce there have been laid off, as their jobs migrate overseas to places like India and China.

The year Roger Journell began working at General Electric in Salem, Elvis Presley scored a hit with “All Shook Up.” The Soviet Union launched Sputnik, beginning the Space Race. And to the horror of New York baseball fans, the Brooklyn Dodgers picked up and moved to Los Angeles.

All that happened in 1957. The Dodgers remain in California, but Elvis and the Soviet Union are relics on history’s junk pile. Nobody can say that about Journell, now 81. He still works at GE.

His last day is Friday. And above all else, this is what he wants the Roanoke Valley to know:

“I am not retiring,” Journell insisted. “I’m being laid off.”

This month, the multinational corporation wraps up a long wind-down at its Salem plant, which opened in 1955 and for decades has provided some of the best-paying blue-collar jobs in the Roanoke Valley.

For 64 years, those workers, who numbered around 3,000 at the plant’s zenith, built custom industrial controls for huge factories, the military and most recently, for electric power plants. Now their work is being moved overseas, to places like India and China.

GE announced in 2018 that manufacturing operations in Salem would cease this year. Since then it has laid off more than 200 hourly workers. Journell is among the final handful to go.

The company continues to employ more than 300 professionals in southwestern Virginia, Adam Tucker, a spokesman for GE Power, said.

Worldwide, GE employs roughly 283,000 people. Although the company couldn’t tell me who tops the longevity pecking order, “it is accurate to say that Roger’s tenure places him as one of the company’s longest-tenured employees,” Tucker said.

“People like Roger make GE great,” Craig Strong, GE site manager in Salem, said. “We are grateful to Roger for his more than 62 years of dedicated service. Without question, he has made a significant positive impact to GE. But more important is the positive impact Roger has made on those of us who have had the honor of working alongside him during his career.”

Journell applied for a job at the plant in December 1956, the same year he graduated from Pearisburg High School and got married. By then, the farm-raised 18-year-old had tried his hand stocking shelves on the night shift at a Food Fair supermarket in Fairfax County.

He didn’t care for Northern Virginia much, Journell recalled in an interview at GE Thursday. Even back in those days, the traffic up there was unbelievable.

As the fourth-born of eight children, “I wanted to come home for Christmas [1956],” Journell told me. The bosses at Food Fair “didn’t want to let me off, but I went anyway.” One of his brothers then working at GE encouraged Journell to apply for a job at the Salem plant.

His first day at GE was Jan. 30, 1957. His job title was “miscellaneous machine operator” and it paid an hourly rate of $1.42.

“My check wasn’t but 50-some dollars a week — that was the gross,” Journell said. Since then, he’s held 15 other jobs at the Salem plant, including grinder, punch press operator, lathe operator, machinist and inspector.

“I’ve always been kind of mechanically inclined,” he told me. “I kind of learned that helping my dad on the farm with machines.”

Journell’s longest gig has been as an expediter in the company’s Incoming & Receiving department. That’s a worker who checks every nut, bolt and other article that comes in, and makes sure the inventory is correct on a daily basis, and that everything’s stored in the correct place in the stock room.

It’s a job that keeps Journell running around most of the Salem complex.

“He’s really, really thorough in his job,” said Ethel Webb-Hall, a GE co-worker who urged me to write about Journell. “He’s worried about every little part, and the count, and where it’s put. In the last year, we all knew we were closing — lots of people gave up caring. But not Roger. He’s really, really dedicated.”

“He’s one of the guys you go to if you have an issue,” said Vicky Hurley, president of Local 82161 of the IUE-CWA, the union that represents hourly workers at GE in Salem, including Journell. “He can get things straightened out.”

The company has undergone a bunch of name changes since Journell started there. In 1957, it was GE Drives & Controls, he told me. That later changed to GE Power & Water, and then GE Management; and now just GE Power. Journell allowed that there may be one or two names he’s forgotten.

At first, Journell and his wife lived with her relatives in Narrows, and he commuted more than 60 miles each way daily. Then he found a room to rent near the Salem Civic Center and drove back to Narrows on weekends.

Not much later, he and his wife rented an apartment on Front Street in Salem, then another one on Indiana Avenue, before they finally rented a house in Northwest Roanoke’s Cherry Hill neighborhood off Shenandoah Avenue.

Many of the plant’s employees lived in Cherry Hill because it was only minutes away from the factory. Journell and his wife, JoAnn, bought a plot there, and somewhere around 1962 built a three-bedroom rancher with a finished basement.

By that time, Journell’s job was to set up punch presses in the machine shop. His wage was just over $2 per hour. The house cost $13,200. He paid off the 30-year-mortage in the early 1990s, right on schedule.

In the early days of his employment at GE, the work was more difficult, because “we used World War II surplus lathes and other machinery,” Journell said. Now, most of those tools are computer-controlled. The most dangerous job, which Journell performed at different times, was operating punch presses that popped holes into sheet metal.

Although Journell said the plant has a good safety record, “more than a few [workers] lost hands, or had them crushed” in punch presses.

His fondest memories are “the people, the co-workers. We all worked together as a team. We were in the learning phase.”

Journell and his wife, who divorced in the late 1960s, had three children. One of their daughters lives in North Carolina; another’s in Tennessee. Their son Keith lives in Vinton. JoAnn, who worked for a time at GE, remarried but is deceased. They had three grandchildren, too.

Journell never remarried. With a smile, he said he’s had his share of girlfriends — but he’s single right now.

By most standards, the layoff package Journell and the other union workers are receiving is fairly generous. All of them are getting a year of full health benefits at no cost, plus two weeks pay for each year they worked.

For older workers such as Journell, there’s no cap to that severance — that means his severance is 124 weeks of pay, at an hourly rate Hurley, the union president, said is “above $30.”

Why work into your 80s? Why didn’t he retire long before now?

“I like working,” Journell told me. “I enjoy it. I’m not one to lay in bed until 10, 11 every day. If the plant wasn’t closing I wouldn’t be leaving right now.”

He said he’s had “lots of offers” on LinkedIn, the employment-oriented social media website he’s a member of. But he’s probably not going to take one of those.

Human Resources from GE corporate has recently been calling Journell’s home and cell phones and leaving messages, he told me.

“They wanted to know if they could help me find a job elsewhere,” Journell said, chuckling.

What’s he going to do?

“I’ve kind of let my house go,” he said. “I need to do some work on it. With me being a bachelor, and working like I’ve been working [overtime] the last several months, it needs a lot of work.”

Any plans to travel?

“I don’t plan stuff much in advance anymore,” Journell told me. “If I want to do something, I’ll just do it.”

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CASEY: After patio's construction, couple charged with crimes

By Dan Casey

Brian and Ellen Carroll wound up in court Thursday, charged with misdemeanors, months after building a beautiful patio behind their home in Raleigh Court. What was their crime? They're still trying to figure that out.

You could forgive Ellen Carroll if she felt butterflies in her stomach Thursday afternoon as she and her husband, Brian, sat down on a bench in a crowded Roanoke courtroom.

They’ve been married 35 years, and raised three kids who are grown and out of the home. Brian, 62, is a geologist. Ellen, 60, is a nurse. Her dad was a police officer. She was raised on the straight and narrow.

“This is the first time I’ve ever been to court before,” Ellen whispered to me. “I’ve never been to court for anything.”

The couple’s appearance before General District Court Judge Scott Geddes was hardly voluntary. This was no parking ticket case, or a minor moving violation like forgetting to wear a seat belt. She and Brian were each charged with misdemeanors. Those are crimes, albeit minor ones. They were facing fines of up to $1,000.

Brian was prepared. Into court, he carried a quarter-inch-thick sheaf of documents. He also had a two-page typed statement, roughly 300 words, that he intended to read to the judge. It began with a plea for mercy.

“Your honor,” it began, “I would like to start by apologizing for wasting your time, the court’s time, and the police’s time regarding this issue.”

How did two respectable citizens wind up in this situation? What grievous offense did the Carrolls commit? That’s what they’d like to know. They thought they were improving their home, and increasing its value, which means they would pay more in real estate taxes.

Between them they’ve taken off four and a half days of work to resolve various city zoning issues, and they still don’t quite understand. If this was a Sherlock Holmes mystery, you could title it, “The Case of the Criminal Patio.”

The couple probably never would have wound up in Geddes’ courtroom had they not sold their house in Hunting Hills in Roanoke County, and moved into Raleigh Court in the city in April 2017. They bought the York Road home from architect Richard Rife and his wife Luanne, a reporter for this newspaper.

The problems began in February 2018, when they received a certified letter from city Codes Compliance Inspector Dale Crawford about two off-street parking spaces behind their house. The notice mystified the couple because the spaces were present before they bought the place. The Rifes installed them in 2016.

Brian said he called Crawford, who told him he had 10 days to remove the poured-concrete parking spaces or get a permit for them.

But the city had already issued a permit for the parking slots in 2016. “[The parking spaces] were done quite legally before Brian and Ellen bought the house,” Richard Rife told me.

But Brian had to prove that. So one day in March 2018 he took some time off work and visited Roanoke City Hall.

“It was over six hours, going from one office to another,” Brian told me. Eventually, he said, a clerk in the permit center found the 2016 permit Richard Rife had obtained. Two other clerks, Brian said, seemed bewildered as to why the citation had been issued. They told him they’d get back to him.

He followed up with an email to Jillian Moore, the city’s zoning administrator — that was the second email Brian sent her about the issue. He said he received no reply to either one. After that, the Carrolls didn’t hear any more from the city about those parking spaces.

In May, the couple hired a contractor, Aaron Sells, to install a back patio. On June 7, about a week after Sells started work, they arrived home and found a “stop work” order posted on their property. It was issued by Crawford, the code compliance officer.

“Permit required for excation [sic] and patio area,” Crawford wrote on it. The same day, by certified mail, Crawford sent them a zoning violation notice. That was the second such notice the Carrolls had received in four months.

They contacted Sells, who didn’t return my phone call about this matter. Sells told the Carrolls the city told him no permit was required because the patio was smaller than 5,000 square feet and the patio’s retaining walls were lower than the minimum height for which a permit would be required.

After Sells spoke to Crawford, Brian said, Sells went and got a permit and resumed work.

The Carrolls also hired a contractor to renovate their rear mudroom, move their back door, and install new stairs and electrical outlets. That contractor obtained building permits for the work, too.

City records show building inspectors visited the work site June 26 and July 13. But because of heavy rain last summer, it took until September for everything to get done.

Nothing seemed amiss to the Carrolls until Feb. 22, Ellen Carroll said.

“We got a phone call saying we needed to go down to the police station to pick up a summons,” Ellen said. Actually it was two summonses — one for Brian and one for Ellen. Those said “CLASS U MISDEMEANOR” in big, bold black letters.

The couple called the city. They learned they hadn’t had final building inspections on the patio, stairs or electrical work for the mudroom. And the permit for that stuff had expired. That was the explanation for the criminal summons. They made arrangements for final inspections. Those happened Feb. 27.

“The final inspection for the permit was approved in February 2019 and the zoning violation was closed,” said Melinda Mayo, city spokeswoman.

But nobody informed the Carrolls that they didn’t have to appear in court. And the couple didn’t dare not show up. After all, they’d been each been charged with a crime.

It took Judge Geddes less than 15 seconds to dismiss their charges, after Assistant Commonwealth’s Attorney Joshua Dietz informed him the Carrolls were in compliance with the city code.

“Your honor, can I say something?” Brian asked. He wanted to read that two-page statement he’d written. The whole thing is pretty good. Here are some choice bits:

“I am reluctant to undertake any more work on our home, and would like to know: Does every citizen enjoy the experience of being subpoenaed to court because a permit has expired? Shouldn’t the citizen or the contractor who pulled the permit receive notice, before the police and the court have to dedicate time and money? Do we need to obtain a permit to spread mulch and continue our plantings in our back yard?”

But the judge dissuaded Brian. “I’ve already dismissed your case,” Geddes said. So Brian walked out of the crowded courtroom without reading any of it.

Thursday in court, I gave a handwritten note to Crawford, the code enforcement inspector, that I needed to talk to him or his supervisor about the Carrolls’ case.

Thursday evening I followed up with a lengthy email to Crawford’s supervisor, Barry Stacy. He was off on Friday.

Friday morning I forwarded that email, which posed four questions, to City Attorney Dan Callaghan. And Friday afternoon I got answers from Mayo, the city spokeswoman.

Some of those don’t seem to make sense.

Question: Why weren’t the Carrolls notified there were unresolved issues with their building permits before those criminal summons were issued?

Answer: “On Jan. 30, 2019, a Code Enforcement inspector tried to contact the permit holder by telephone and heard the following recorded message ‘magic jack customer not available’.”

But Mayo couldn’t tell me the number the inspector called.

The Carrolls don’t have a landline phone, and the one they used to have, in Hunting Hills, has been disconnected (I called it). Neither Brian nor Ellen got a call on their cellphones, they said.

Brian’s cell phone was listed on emails he’d previously sent the city. And somehow, Roanoke police had their cellphone numbers.

That’s how the cops informed them they’d been issued summons, and charged with crimes.

Mayo acknowledged the February 2018 zoning violation for the parking strips was issued in error.

“An apology was given,” she added. Brian Carroll said he recalls no apology. Nor does Ellen.

Here’s the last question I posed: Isn’t there a faster and friendlier way of resolving this without getting the police and courts involved?

Answer: “The measures in place to address violations are necessary in order to ensure property owners comply with the City Code. The city is always willing to work with property owners to resolve any issues that arise when a violation is cited.”

After hearing the Carrolls’ story, and the city’s answers, I remain skeptical about that.