

Eye on Washington by Nicholas F. Benton

Economy seen as Bush's downfall

Clark Clifford reveals a "wait for the crash strategy" is Democratic plan to topple Bush.

Democratic Party stalwart Clark Clifford had some revealing remarks for this reporter when we spoke during a reception here June 12.

Clifford stood out in a hall filled with Democratic Party stars because of his preeminent role as a shaper of the party's policy.

He and Pamela Harriman, the sponsor of the evening's fête, a fund-raising banquet for Democrats for the 1990s, were the two most influential party leaders in a room otherwise filled with familiar faces of congressmen and former national chairmen of the party.

Clifford effects a humble "who, me?" demeanor that belies his true role. For the uninitiated, he looks like an amiable octogenarian trying to swim gracefully in a room full of young bucks half his age.

But all those, including the likes of Rep. William Gray (D-Pa.), who were about to be elected to fill the new posts in the party's House leadership, knew that sidling up to Clifford and paying their respects was an indispensable part of their evening rounds.

Anyone who questions Clifford's clout should recall how he handled the potential rift in the party between the Michael Dukakis and Jesse Jackson forces during the presidential primaries last year. Jackson was brought in to meet with Clifford in a well-publicized pow-wow, just when Jackson was making noises about pushing the fight for the Democratic nomination right onto the floor of the party convention.

Whatever Clifford said to Jackson in that meeting, it worked. Jackson came out as tame as a kitten, insisting

that the party would come before any personal ambitions.

Clifford, who virtually ran the Truman administration and has been a top figure in the party throughout the postwar period, resorts to the old method of talking to everyone while holding onto their forearm.

It's a little less intimidating than grabbing someone by his lapels and shoving him up against a wall, but it is designed to have a similar disarming effect.

This reporter's approach to Clifford was to ask him about how he felt President Bush was handling the "China situation."

Was Clifford willing to go on record, on behalf of the Democrats, putting Bush down for his at best tepid response to the crackdown and mass slaughter of the students in Beijing?

"I think Bush has handled the situation just super," Clifford beamed.

"Well," I asked, "What do you think is going to be Bush's Achilles heel, then?"

"I think it is going to be the economy," he said without hesitating, but giving my forearm an extra little pinch.

Certainly, Clifford and his friends aren't blind, even if Bush is trying to ignore the issue. The Democrats are certainly glad to cash in on Bush's blundering.

I asked Clifford, "I wonder about the blurring of the distinction between the two parties on vital issues that have historically distinguished them. What is your thinking on this?"

"I do not worry about this. Events will take care of it. You do not have to create any issues. They will become

clear soon enough," he said.

"By such issues, you are speaking primarily of the economy, aren't you," I said.

"Yes, but other issues as well," he intoned.

I asked about the current bloodletting in the Congress. What effect would this have on the ability of the party to function?

Clifford told me to check the record on the response of Republican chairman Lee Atwater when the news of scandalous leaflet attacking Rep. Thomas Foley (D-Wash.) first broke.

"Look at what Atwater told the *Wall Street Journal*," Clifford advised me. "There, Atwater does not disassociate himself from the contents of that leaflet."

"You mean," I asked, "that Atwater distanced himself from that memorandum only after meeting with President Bush?"

"Check the record," Clifford pointed out. "It will confirm what I say. It is a matter of record."

I interpreted Clifford's response to mean that the "ethics war" in the Congress was still on—that there was still plenty of "getting even" to take care of, and that Clifford was not about to call a truce.

I asked about his views on whether or not Jackson should run for mayor of the District of Columbia. Clifford's response might indicate whether such a move was sanctioned by the party, or not.

"I can't answer that one. I don't know if it would be a good idea or not," Clifford said. "You know, Jesse doesn't have any experience in government, and a job like that takes a lot of administrative experience."

I took that answer as a firm "no." From Clifford's point of view, I surmised, the party would benefit most if Jesse just went away.