

## Budget Segment

March 28, 2011

Robert W. Dorsey

Introduction: This budget segment was placed in our venerable Budget Box on May 4, 2009, where it rested comfortably for eighteen months until rescued by Dale Flick for his budget assignment. Thank you, Dale. A few changes have been made to accommodate the brief passage of time.

### Sandbagging Richard Nixon

The sandbag hangs precariously over the head of Richard Milhous Nixon. It dangles by a thread in the March wind, ready to plunge downward onto the target, the Vice-President of the United States, as he addresses the assembled throng. The perpetrator of this assault on Mr. Nixon stands breathlessly in the wings to see whether one of his projectiles will hit home. But wait, wait, wait; let's not get ahead of ourselves. Let's set the stage.

It is 1954 and a co-op student with the Messer Construction Company may be involved in more drama than he bargains for -- on this salubrious spring day. The setting is a large building under construction. Only recently has it been designated to become Robert A. Taft High School. The site is on Lincoln Park Drive later to be named Ezzard Charles Drive.

Though not particularly interested in politics at the time, the co-op is aware that the school's namesake, Robert Alphonso Taft, is known as Mr. Republican and is highly

respected by leaders in both political parties. He recalls that Senator Taft had recently lost a bid for the presidency of the United States when party leaders in 1952 selected Dwight David Eisenhower after a brutal primary campaign, and a late-into-the night roll call of convention delegates. While Ike went on to win a landslide victory, Taft went back to work as a leader in the U.S. Senate. He was regarded as one of the most ethical, hardest-working men in Washington. Tragically, within months he was diagnosed with cancer and died a short time later, in 1953. Flags hung at half-staff across the country. It seemed fitting to name a prominent local building for such a well-respected, life-long Cincinnati.

The edifice to be given Taft's name had been designed by the architectural firm of Tietig and Lee. It is a hybrid of traditional school design and art deco. (Rudolph Tietig was the grandfather-in-law of Club member, Tony Covatta.)

Jump ahead to 2009. Sadly the building is now gone. A trip past the site brought pangs to the long-ago co-op on two counts: one was to see the pile of rubble that had been components of a building that he had helped, in a small way, to construct. Another pang was to once again realize the wastefulness of our society. The ultimate consumer culture even consumes its buildings—in 30 to 60 year gulps. Yes, I know, technology changes and all that—but, the thought of the destruction of this 54-year-old building causes a heightened appreciation for a Literary Club that lovingly preserves a 174-year-old club house. (And, I might add parenthetically, diagonally across Fourth Street from the Club is

the marvelous 97-year-old Guilford School, given an extended lease on life by the Western and Southern Life Insurance Company.)

A pragmatic thought is that ours is a dynamic society which thrives on change, including the design and construction professions. A new Taft Technical High School occupies the site, where Cincinnati Bell sponsors programs to prepare student to survive in this dynamic society. One hopes that some literary skills are also gained along the way. The new twenty million dollar Taft High was designed by the Mason, Ohio firm, Voorhis Stone Welch & Crossland.

That trip past the Taft School site in 2009 brought back the happy days working there and takes us back to 1954. Co-op, was then, and is now, a vernacular term designating a student employed through the co-operative education program established at the University of Cincinnati in 1906 by Herman Schneider. The model is now employed by hundreds of colleges and many high schools. The more sophisticated term now is professional practice, but co-op remains the preferred term to practitioners. As I wrote this paper, an earlier opus by the late Jim Alexander came to mind. His valedictory Club reading was “I Was a Co-op Once and....”, relating his many delightful experiences in the late 1930s and early 40s in New York and Chicago.

More than a decade after Jim’s experiences, this co-op at Taft High is charged with line-and-grade, using a surveying instrument and other tools to provide layouts and benchmarks for the tradesmen on the job, plus miscellaneous other duties. The role is

moderately important. It requires good knowledge of the overall building and the many drawings assembled for its construction. The Messer Company is known for giving co-ops all the responsibility they can handle. The work brings close working relationships with construction craftsmen, an aspect of the job he loves. They yell, “Hey, college kid, get your ass over here and give us this bench mark.” Or if he is not quite quick enough, “Come on, stop thinking about those co-eds, and help us with this layout.” The banter is mostly in good fun, particularly since they realize that they are earning five to seven times the wage of the co-op. However, the project superintendent, the co-op’s boss, warns the young man to avoid a certain steelworker or “rodbuster” whom we’ll call “Old Pete.” His real name is lost to memory but his image is not. Prowling around the site, with heavy reinforcing bars in his hands, a chaw of tobacco in his mouth and a greasy cap on his head, in those pre-hard hat days, he is a formidable sight. We’ll call him Old Pete because he is at least 45 years old, maybe even 50.

It seems Pete had had a run-in with a previous co-op, and resents all college kids on the site. The way the system worked was to have two students assigned to a job, alternating from classroom to employment on half semester terms. Although the overall sequence added an extra year to typical engineering, design, or business programs, it allowed students of modest means to work their way through the university, which is still affectionately known to many as “working class U.” Anyway, the superintendent says Old Pete eats co-ops for breakfast, so watch out!

On this fine spring day, the superintendent is all business. He instructs the co-op to check the reinforcing bars in a curved retaining wall to assure their proper placement. The superintendent is wise to have concern about the reinforcing, because it is a relatively complex pattern of structural bars and they are all important to the stability of the wall. So the co-op dutifully takes the drawings and inspects the reinforcing. Uh-Oh, all is not right in the sunshine. Check again. Sure enough—some bars are missing! In retrospect, the damn wall is now demolished, and who cares if the bars were right or not. Well, the co-op cares and he is faced with a dilemma. The carpenters are busily building one side of the form and when the second is in place, there will be no opportunity to install the correct reinforcing. Something has to happen--right now.

Should the co-op tell the superintendent? Nah, that is not the manly thing to do. So, how about going to visit Old Pete in his den,—a shabby shed full of reinforcing bars, wire, and bar cutters,—and reeking of chewing tobacco. The co-op cautiously enters. He is not received with alacrity. A carefully placed suggestion that Pete might wish to check the bars in the retaining wall; that the pour is scheduled for that afternoon, causes snorts of derision laced with typical job-site profanity. The co-op carefully makes his exit, and then finds a safe vantage point to see what happens.

With a roll of drawings under one arm and a cluster of bars under the other, Old Pete approaches the wall, barks at the carpenters, and carefully places the additional bars. He does take pride in his work, as do most of the men on the job (no women). Nothing more is said about the incident to anyone, but the co-op notices just a little less antagonism in

the rodbuster's demeanor; in time he becomes almost friendly. Co-oping, he decides, is not just about nuts and bolts, but also about learning a little applied industrial psychology.

Where is Richard Nixon in all this? On a later spring day, it is building dedication time, and arrangements are being expedited. A speakers' platform facing Lincoln Park Drive is topped with a bold canopy. Brilliant red, white, and blue bunting hangs in dazzling array, but the winds of March insist on blowing the bunting up onto the roof of the canopy.

Nature is not impressed with the ceremonial exploits of mere humans. The superintendent instructs the co-op to solve the problem. New-found friend, Old Pete, suggests a remedy. He has several small cloth bags in which nuts and bolts are delivered—just a little larger than Bull Durham tobacco bags. The co-op is directed to fill them with sand and staple them into the bunting as ballast. With the time of the ceremony at hand, the co-op hurriedly climbs a ladder and staples many small sand bags into the unruly red, white and blue; too hurriedly, it turns out, wrapping up just as the long black limousines arrive, complete with motorcycle police and blaring sirens. The dignitaries, include Mayor Donald Clancy, Robert Taft Jr., (the Senator's son, later a member of the Literary Club), two or three congressman, a couple of grim looking men in dark suits, and the Vice-President of the United States. It is all pretty impressive. The 41-year-old Nixon is a rather handsome man. The ski-jump nose, that later cartoonists will later love to exaggerate, is not at all prominent. He smiles broadly and shakes every hand in sight on his way to the speakers' platform. The crowd applauds.

As proceedings continue, the wind picks up and the bunting flaps vigorously in the breeze. Horrors! The sandbags begin unrolling from the fabric. The co-op watches with trepidation as one, than another little bag wriggles loose from its moorings. They are hanging exactly over the dignitaries on stage. The wind of nature and the wind of speakers increase. Some little bags slowly hang down until just connected by threads. The tension in the co-op's throat mounts. And then-----Kerplop, down comes one, harmlessly— to the platform. Whew! But the next one falls in Don Clancy's lap. The third tumbles down onto Robert Taft Jr.'s shoulder. The co-op begins looking for a place to hide. But wait! Wait. What may happen next? Will one of his sandbags cascade onto Richard Milhous Nixon? Many workers on the job are gathered in the building behind the speakers' platform to watch the show, and both gasps and chuckles greet each falling missile. Another evades all targets. People on the platform, including those grim guys in dark suits, look around at each other in bemusement. The Vice-President finishes his speech with abundant praise for Mr. Taft (whom he knows had low regard for the V.P.) As he returns to his chair, a sandbag is dangling above his head. The co-op definitely has mixed feelings. What a blast if he sandbags Richard Nixon! On the other hand, how will he escape the secret service? (A later Broadway show will feature the song, "The Secret Service Makes Me Nervous.")

The thread holds. The mixed feelings remain. The party departs. Some dignitaries grin at the little cloth bags dotting the platform. Then the co-op sees the superintendent looking his way. What Now? How will this look on his performance report? He can imagine the document in the archives of the University of Cincinnati ... "This co-op tried to sand-bag

the Vice President of the United States.” Then everyone, including Old Pete, bursts out laughing. The job is totally staffed by union personnel (except the co-op) and the men are predominantly Democrats.

The next day’s Cincinnati Post carries a mention of the sandbags in Al Schottelkotte’s column, and the co-op relives the epic event in his weekly letter home, to the delight of his life-long Democrat parents.

Richard Nixon’s career ebbed and flowed. When, during Watergate, he instructed his lieutenants to stonewall, he should have said “sandbag.” He even became the subject of an opera, *Nixon in China*, with music by John Adams. That opera was sponsored in Cincinnati a few years ago by Literarians, Ted Silberstein and Harry Santen and wives. Robert A. Taft’s name remains on the new Technical High School, scheduled to ceremoniously open as we speak. The school’s basketball team, the Senators, just won an Ohio basketball championship. A handsome carillon in Taft’s honor graces a lawn near the U.S. Capitol Building. The trend is away from naming schools after individuals and toward events and environmental phenomena. Time marches on and the co-op marched on to other employment and adventures, but he remembers fondly his days with Messer Company.

Epilogue:

The Taft family, of course, has a long association with the Literary Club. Alphonso became a member in 1860. Charles P., Horace D., Peter R. came soon after, and William

Howard Taft was initiated in 1878. Then there is a gap until 1958 when the aforementioned Robert A. Taft, Jr. joined. It is interesting that neither Mr. Republican nor his brother, prominent Charterite, Charles, ever became members, particularly since their family was instrumental in the Club's securing the property at 500 East Fourth Street in 1930. There is probably grist for a Literary Club paper here.