

Assistant SECNAV – Almost by Hugh Smith (24)

The year was 1969. I was a Senior Consultant with an International Consulting firm. I had just completed a year-long assignment reengineering the production facility at Hawthorn Mfg. (the world's largest tent manufacturer) in New Haven, Mo. Hawthorn made many styles of tents from small children's pup tents to large disaster tents. They also made special tents for Sir Edmund Hillary's expeditions. For reasons that I will not detail here, it was the most difficult assignment in my career. While awaiting reassignment, I received word that a new client in St. Louis needed emergency assistance while they were awaiting the assignment of a full-time consultant. My Wife Martha, our two-year-old daughter and our dog Bijou headed to St. Louis. The manufacturing facility for the Midwest Curtain and Drapery Company was located on Washington Avenue in Downtown St. Louis. The owner of the company was Bruce Selkirk. As a young Naval Officer, Bruce was a survivor aboard the USS Lexington (CV2) when she was sunk during the Battle of the Coral Sea. Bruce and I immediately "Bonded". At the end of the workday, Bruce and I would meet in the Board Room with the other executives and breakout the Bourbon as we reviewed the days progress and swap a few sea stories. When my assignment was completed and as I was bidding farewell Bruce confided in me that he was a major financial contributor to Richard Nixon presidential campaign. In return, Nixon promised to nominate him as his Secretary of the Navy. Bruce said he wanted me to join him in Washington as his Ass't. Secretary of the Navy. Of course, I was ready and willing.

When I saw that the new administration was starting to "fill slots", I called Bruce and asked when we would be moving the Washington. That is when Bruce gave me the bad news. The White House had informed him that the President had a "political debt" owed to Governor Chafee of Rhode Island. In payment, Chafee wanted to be appointed Secretary of the Navy. The President offered Bruce the appointment as Assistant Secretary of Defense for Research and Development, which Bruce politely declined, noting that his only desire to serve was as SECNAV. Thus, I became the Assistant Secretary of the Navy - ALMOST.