

H. R. H. Prince Bernhard of the Netherlands: An Authorized Biography

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Chief of Staff, general Walter Bedell Smith. Bedell Smith was destined to become one of his closest friends. ...

Being above all a realist, [Joseph] Retinger understood that even a united Europe could not stand by itself without America. In 1952 he became deeply concerned about the rising tide of anti-Americanism in practically every country of Western Europe. It was not confined to Communist-influenced or left-wing circles, but was equally prevalent among conservatives and liberals. The United States was disliked, feared, and sneered at with a unanimity that was remarkable among the peoples of Europe. This feeling threatened the solidarity of the Western world's defences against Communism. Retinger was not the type of man to sit wringing his hands. He evolved a brilliant plan for coping with this situation, but he needed powerful assistance to put it into effect. So he asked his friend Dr Paul Rijkens to get him an appointment with Prince Bernhard, who has described their meeting:

"It all started when Retinger came to me and sat here in this room and told me about his worries concerning the rising tide

of anti-Americanism in Europe. I was worried about it, too. It seemed illogical in the face of the Marshall Plan, military assistance, NATO, etc., which had done so much for all of us. I suppose it was partly the natural human instinct to bite the hand that feeds you, and partly real grievances. I said to him, 'Yes, you're quite right. It's very bad.' Retinger said, 'Well, would you like to do something about it?' And I said, 'Of course.' ..."

[Retinger's plan] consisted of two parts. The first was to get the leaders of opinion in the most important European countries to make an appraisal of where the Americans were wrong, apart from being rich, powerful, generous, and rather stupid, and what they could do to put things right. The second was to present this frank critique to leaders of American opinion and give them an opportunity to answer the indictment at a completely private meeting of top-level people from both continents [Bilderberg].

Bernhard was all for it, but an unusual instinct for caution made him say, "It sounds wonderful, but I'd like another opinion. Let's find out what van Zeeland thinks about it." (Van Zeeland was Prime Minister of Belgium.) Van Zeeland thought something should be done, and quickly. Reinforced by his approval, Bernhard went to work with Retinger reckoned, could supply the answers. The idea was to get two people from each country who would give the conservative and liberal slant. Then Bernhard, using his personal prestige and royal leverage, induced, with the help of Retinger, who knew practically all of them, most of those selected to co-operate.

It was quite a list. Van Zeeland wrote a paper for Belgium, Hugh Gaitskell and Lord Portal spoke for Great Britain, Prime Minister Alcide de Gasperi for Italy, Foreign Minister Ole Bjørn Kraft of Denmark for Scandinavia; Guy Mollet (former Socialist Prime Minister) and Conservative Prime Minister Pinay for France, and Max Brauer, Otto Wolff von Amerongen, and Dr Müller for West Germany. Prince Bernhard himself handled the complaints of Holland, with the help of leading Dutch politicians and industrialists.

When all the reports came in Bernhard and Retinger found that many people of different countries and different parties gave the same reasons for disliking Americans, although there were, of course, some people with special grouses of their own. Bernhard, Retinger, and Rijkens synthesized the answers into a single report covering the main criticisms. Then Bernhard sent it confidentially to some of his American friends with the proposal that they organize an answer.

The election of 1952 was in full swing in the United States, and political brickbats were flying. Nobody had any time for Prince Bernhard. Averell Harriman [**CFR member 1924-**] said, "I won't touch it. It's dynamite." Eisenhower [**CFR member 1949-**] said, "Great! I'd like to use it in the campaign," to which Bernhard replied, "Good God, NO!"

The matter had to go over until after the election. Then Bernhard went to the United States - and, incidentally, got the bad news

from Walter Reed. He saw a number of American politicians, and after several more rebuffs he went to his friend Bedell Smith **[CFR member 1952-]**, who was then head of the C.I.A. Smith said, "Why the hell didn't you come to me in the first place?"

Even then things moved slowly. Smith became Under-Secretary of State for newly elected President Eisenhower, and was engulfed in the business of putting a new administration together. He finally turned the matter over to C. D. Jackson **[CFR member 1950-]**, a special assistant to the President, and things really got going. Jackson got in touch with John S. Coleman **[CFR member 1955-]**, President of the Burroughs Corporation of Detroit, who was a member of the newly formed Committee for a National Trade Policy under the presidency of Senator Robert Taft's brother, Charles Taft. This committee undertook to draft an American reply, and a number of private citizens. Other famous Americans were invited. Most of the administration officials ducked nervously, so the American delegation was rather weighted towards industry, but it included such eminent Americans as Joseph E. Johnson **[CFR member 1947-; NOT an initial BB visitor; first went in 1955]**; , of the Carnegie Endowment of International Peace, Dean Rusk **[CFR member 1952-; NOT an initial BB visitor; first went in 1955]**, then head of the Rockefeller Foundation, as well as David Rockefeller **[CFR member 1942-; director]** and H.J. Heinz II **[CFR member 1952-]**.

All this took time, which is why the first meeting did not take place until May 1954. By then, in spite of Eisenhower's personal popularity, the United States was at an all-time nadir of popularity

in Europe. As the Europeans saw it, a soldier was in the White House, even though he was the least militant of military men. The Government was in the hands of the conservative Republican Party for the first time in twenty years. And, worst of all, Senator McCarthy was roaring through the land witch-hunting for Reds. His arrogant stooges had just completed their book-burning tour of American embassies in Europe, and the whole American career image of America, erstwhile land of democracy and freedom, was covered with mud.

Under these circumstances it looked as though there would be a heated session at the Hotel de Bilderberg. Prince Bernhard, who was chairman, said, "The meeting was most encouraging because people accepted the idea that there would be no publicity, and everybody could speak for himself, irrespective of his position, quite frankly-and fight!"

At the memory Prince Bernhard's eyes lit up, and he said, "It was a beautiful meeting because sparks were flying like crazy between Americans like C. D. Jackson and Britishers like Sir Oliver Franks and Denis Healey and Hugh Gaitskell."

Jackson himself described the meeting as follows: "It was all very new and different. We were tucked away in a forest way back in Holland. There were no reporters. Tight security with guards all over the hotel. In the opening hours every one was uneasy, nervous, sniffing each other like strange dogs. They were afraid to talk very much.

"Prince Bernhard was everywhere using his charming wiles. People began to thaw. Then they began to fight, which was good. The Prince kept things in hand. ...

Naturally the Europeans were continually needling the Americans about McCarthy. Many of them seemed genuinely fearful that the United States was heading for a Fascist dictatorship. Therefore, on the third day, Prince Bernhard announced, "Even though it is not on the agenda, there has been so much talk of McCarthyism that, if there is time, I am going to ask Mr Jackson to tell us the American view on that." ...

[Jackson] pointed out that in the American system of government and politics, "We are certain to get this kind of supercharged, emotional freak from time to time." Then he reached back into history for the same sort of demagogue, telling them of the spectacular but short-lived careers of Father Coughlin and Huey Long.

He said that he knew it was hard of Europeans to understand how a Senator of the President's own party could say things on the floor of the Senate completely at variance with the Government's policy. But, he pointed out, there was no way to stop a United States Senator when he went on a rampage. Party discipline was non-existent in that case. Therefore, Jackson said, the Europeans were right to be interested in this peculiar phenomenon of Senator McCarthy, but wrong to be fearful that he was the first step towards Fascism.

Finally Jackson made a rash prediction: "Whether McCarthy dies by an assassin's bullet or is eliminated in the normal American way of getting rid of boils on the body politic, I prophesy that by the time we hold our next meeting he will be gone from the American scene."

The fact that within a comparatively short time McCarthy was rebuked by the Senate and lost virtually all his prestige and power made the Europeans feel that they had heard the truth about America. George McGhee of the United States Department of State says, "The really bad misunderstandings between Europeans and Americans were dissipated at the first Bilderberg. Since then there has never been such a sharp division between us and Europe." ...

Joseph E. Johnson became the first Secretary on the American side. Otherwise the organization was kept as loose as possible to allow maximum flexibility. To insure this the Steering Committee tries to have a turnover of at least twenty percent of new faces at each meeting. This was made clear at the outset, so that people who are not asked back every time would not consider it an affront.

Combined with this is the unwritten rule that anybody who has ever been to a Bilderberg Conference should be able to feel that he can, in a private capacity, call on any former member he has met. To this end a list of names and addresses is maintained to which all participants have access. This makes possible an expanding

continuation of association for people who might not otherwise have met.

Three days at a Bilderberg Conference are not only a stimulating but also an extremely exhausting experience, especially for Bernhard and the other members of the Steering Committee. H. J. Heinz II described a typical day:

"We sit from nine o'clock in the table. Right after lunch we go at it again until seven o'clock. Fifteen minutes to wash up, and then an executive session of the Steering Committee. That lasts an hour, and then we have dinner. After that we talk some more, informally. It's a fifteen-hour day, at least!"

Another member of the group said, "We meet in such beautiful places, but we never have time to look at the scenery."

Since 1954, meetings of the Bilderberg group have been held once a year, sometimes twice. The Steering Committee meets more frequently. The regular sessions are attended by from fifty to eighty people. Each meeting is held in a different country, but follows the same pattern. An entire hotel is taken over and closely guarded. The members all live together, eat and drink together, for three days. Wives are not invited. Dr Rijkens says,

"More important things are done and better understandings are often arrived at in private conversations at lunch or dinner than in the regular sessions. Through the years we have achieved a sort of brotherhood of friendship and trust."

The expenses of each meeting are borne by private subscription in the host country, and Prince Bernhard always presides-though not by his own choice. At the very first meeting he tried rotating the chairmanship, putting van Zeeland in the second day and Mr Coleman the third. It did not work. The other Europeans thought that van Zeeland was too political and the American Democrats felt that Coleman was too old-guard Republican. They all begged him to become permanent chairman. Because he was royal and therefore apolitical, and, furthermore, came from a small nation with no large axes to grind, he was, in fact, the logical choice. In addition every one agreed that he handled the meetings extremely well. Mr Heinz says, "If Prince Bernhard had not existed Retinger would have had to invent him."

Prince Bernhard in his methodical way prepares very carefully for each meeting by an intensive study of all the subjects on the agenda. Then he takes copious notes at the meetings, and at the end of each session tries to sum up what has been said and perhaps add a few impartial words of his own to clear the air. In spite of his preliminary work, Prince Bernhard confesses:

"I always go to the meetings with a feeling of great nervousness. There are so many explosive possibilities. But it is always tremendously stimulating and enormously interesting-in fact, great fun.

"One thing that worries me beforehand is suppose some key person does not show up and the discussions are a flop? We have had very little trouble with that."

One meeting Bernhard was particularly nervous about was the one at St Simons Island, Georgia. United States Senator J. William Fulbright, Senator Wiley and several American congressmen were coming for the first time. The rule of the meetings is that each man is allowed five minutes to talk, and at the end of this time the Prince is allowed five minutes to talk, and at the end of this time the Prince begins to make signals. But he generally gives them a minute more before taking action. "Once or twice I've had to be unpleasant to somebody, but that is very difficult for me," he says. "It is also difficult to keep a big boy from talking too long. I swing my wristwatch in front of his face and say, 'Ah, ah, more than five minutes!' And if somebody makes a really short speech I say, 'Now that is wonderful. The shorter the speech the more it sticks in our minds.' But that does not always help, you know. Some people are very difficult."

At St Simons some of Bernhard's American friends said, "What are you going to do with the American politicians? You just can't shut up a United States congressman or senator. They aren't used to it."

Bernhard didn't quite know himself. But before the meeting he went to the American politicians and in his most ingratiating way said, "Now, look, gentlemen, my American friends are afraid to tell you this, but we have had this rule about five-minute speeches at all our meetings. So would you be very kind and do me a favour, a personal favour, and stick to the rule, because I will be finished for the future if I let you get away with a long speech."

"They said they would be delighted; no problem at all. 'It is perfectly O.K. with us.' And they never broke the rule at all. The only person I had trouble with was a European."

The only meeting, other than the first, at which Bernhard did not preside all the way through was the one in Switzerland in 1960. He arrived from one of his "selling trips" looking utterly exhausted and with a bad cold. After presiding at the opening session he developed virus pneumonia. He chose E. N. van Kleffens to take the chair. Prince Bernhard says, "This satisfied everybody, because van Kleffens had once served as President of the Assembly of the U.N."

The Bilderberg meetings are never dull. Even though the group has become, as McGhee says, "like belonging to a fraternity," sparks have flown at nearly every one. At St Simons in 1957 the French, British, and Americans almost came to blows over Suez. At another it was Quemoy and Matsu. The Europeans could understand the American attitude about Formosa, but defending the off-shore islands seemed to them military madness for the sake of tweaking the dragon's tail. "At least we made them understand the necessity of taking more interest in the Far East," says McGhee.

Other hot issues have been the Common Market and British and American attitudes towards it. And Cuba! There is always something to make the sparks fly; and, like lightning, these electrical discharges clear the atmosphere.

Any attempt to evaluate the effect of the Bilderberg group is made nearly impossible by the very nature and object of the conferences, which is not to act or even to convince, but rather to

enlighten. As Prince Bernhard says, "You are not asked to agree, merely to listen."

At one point the inevitable lack of concrete results you could put your finger on made Prince Bernhard wonder if it was worth while continuing. He sent out a query to that effect to the members. A storm of protest, especially from the Americans, convinced him that he should go on. ...

However, the intangible results are admittedly the greatest—the bringing together in friendship, even intimacy, of the leaders from many nations and the effect of their confidential reports on the governments of their countries. An example is the case of the United States during President Eisenhower's administration. When asked if he thought Eisenhower had been influenced by the Bilderberg discussions Prince Bernhard said,

"I don't know. Of course, I talked to Ike about it when I needed his help to give American officials the green light to come to the conferences. Although C. D. Jackson and Bedell Smith were in favour of it, there were a lot of people in the State Department who thought one should not go. They would not allow their people to come at first. Then after the first meeting they lifted the ban. Anybody could come. The same thing happened with de Gaulle. As to whether Ike paid any attention to the reports of our discussions, I could not say."

However, General Eisenhower said to this writer:

"I always had one of my people go to the Bilderberg Conferences [Dr. Gabriel Hauge]. I'm in favour of anything—any study of that kind which helps international

understanding. The Bilderberg meetings enlightened me; I'd get viewpoints from other than official channels. Not that I always agreed with them; there were so many points of view that somebody had to be wrong; but it was still important to know them."

The present American Government is even closer to Bilderberg because President Kennedy has virtually staffed the State Department with what C.D. Jackson calls "Bilderberg alumni"- Secretary of State Dean Rusk, Under-Secretary of State George W. Ball, George McGhee, Walter Rostow, McGeorge Bundy, Arthur Dean, and Paul H. Nitze over at Defence. However, the Steering Committee tries to keep a fairly even balance between Republicans and Democrats. ...

[Interviews George Ball, who also talks about Dean Rusk's support]...

The Italian Ambassador in London, Signor Quaroni, said "What a pleasant change [Bilderberg is]! In other places diplomats always lie to each other." ...

Even if Europe moves too slowly towards political unity Prince Bernhard optimistically believes that it will arrive if the whole place is not blown up first. He foresees a United States of Europe in which borders are reduced to an absolute minimum, and there is a common currency, a common financial policy, a common foreign policy, and a common policy of trade. The nations will give up so much of their sovereignty as is necessary to implement this. However, the Prince thinks they will retain their national identities.

Prince Bernhard in his higher flights of optimism even look to the day, fifty or a hundred years from now, when the Iron Curtain may

be rolled up and put away. He believes that as the old Bolsheviks die off and the young Russians, who have lost the hot crusading fervour of the Marxist Revelation, take over, there will be a return to a more democratic type of socialism and a loosening of discipline that will make it possible to bring those lost lands back into the European sphere.

"Allen Dulles laughs at me... but I think that the Russians will again become friends with us, as they have been before.

"For this I know, and even Allen Dulles agrees, that Communism inside Russia is not the sacred shibboleth it used to be. A lot of Russians frankly admit that they use it in other countries as propaganda in order to bring them into their sphere. But that in Russia itself it is getting a little out of date. That's a lovely thought, but when it will come, or if it comes in time, who shall say."

Meanwhile Retinger brought in many men of the non-Communist but radical left who might not have responded to an invitation from Prince Bernhard. However, even these would probably not have consented to attend a conference with the men of the conservative right had they not been reassured by having in the chair a completely non-political figure. As Dr Rijkens said "No one but Bernhard could have induced such old antagonists as Guy Mollet and Antoine Pinay to sit at the same table."