

You Can't Win 'em All

Dealing with Presidential Phone Systems Before Cellular

Introduction:

What did people do before mobile phones? They installed many, many landline telephones, especially for the President.

During the LBJ Presidency, two telephone companies provided service to LBJ's Texas Ranch. Johnson's people wanted a phone to be within two minutes of the president at any time, even on his sprawling personal property.

Don Kimberlin recently read an excerpt from *The Heritage of Time: The People and Times of GTE Southwest 1876 - 1988*, by Larry Johnson. (1990) GTE Southwest Incorporated, San Angelo, Texas. It described, in part, the scope and setup of the telephone network installed at the LBJ ranch to service Presidential communications needs.

After reading this excerpt, Don contributed a personal "chance encounter" tale of his own, associated with presidential telephone networks during his time with AT&T in Miami. (Ed.)

A lot of the description of the LBJ Ranch telecommunications system installation and operation (see "Introduction," above) rings true to my time at AT&T in Miami. The typical traveling US presidential setup of the 1950s-60s, was often simply code-named "POTUS" for "President of the United States." During my AT&T tenure in Miami, we'd have a POTUS setup whenever Richard Nixon came to town to stay at his Key Biscayne residence.

Trading Off Telephone Operators

More for show than for necessity, AT&T had an arrangement where, on orders, we could flip a switch on the Private Line Testboard that would switch the channels of two Miami-Washington dial trunks from the 4A switching machine to jacks on a manual operator switchboard.

Two gray business-suited White House Communications Agency male telephone operators would arrive to sit down at that switchboard in the Southern Bell building, where dedicated phone lines to Nixon's various places in the Miami area radiated out, and play Telephone Operator For The President.

There wasn't anything in it that we could not have done with patch cords in

an instant, nor anything that Telco operators could not have done, but Washington wanted it done their way, and being the political animal that Telco has always been, it was done the Washington Way.

It Always Happens During the Night Shift

As to LBJ, his telephone mania even reached me personally in a remote corner of the AT&T network at Lake City, Florida on a night shift. Lake City, Florida sits at the junction of I-75 going north/south and I-10 going east/west (formerly US 441 and US 90).



There, two major AT&T microwave routes crossed. The tower and office were located on the third floor of the Southern Bell building in downtown Lake City. At night the only people in the building were a couple of telephone operators on the second floor and one of our AT&T crew on the third floor. We never even really saw each other.

Up in the AT&T premises were the microwave bays of two full cross-country TD-2 (4 GHz) microwave routes of 10 working and two spare 600 channel or one TV basebands in each of four directions.

On some (like the video), the entire baseband went through or turned a corner (for example, NASA had a couple of video channels that ran north from Orlando to Lake City, then changed to the westerly route along the Gulf toward Houston).

On most, however, we had LMX600 SSB carrier terminal bays that broke down to 60 channel supergroups or 12 channel groups of voice-grade chan-

nels, which could be dial trunks between cities, dedicated analog computer circuits for modems, or a variety of dedicated channel voice lines.

One of those apparently was dedicated to voice channels for LBJ from Washington.

The phone rang late one night, and it was an excited sounding Army officer who had apparently attended enough of a lecture about how the phone network operated to make him dangerous. I had heard one or two similar calls at other spots in my time in Florida, but this was the first one I took.

"Turn Up the Volume!"

I, Plain Civilian, got that call in the wee hours. The shavetail officer on the other end had learned enough to find out that some circuit to LBJ's ranch was inaudible to the President, and he'd learned enough to read some circuit layout cards and gotten his hands on an AT&T internal phone book.

He wanted me to "turn up the volume" so LBJ could hear down in Texas. I was simply unable to get him to understand that LBJ's circuit was but one of 60 in a supergroup that was coming to me from Atlanta, then turning west toward Houston, and the one bit of "volume control" I had on a supergroup connector would, if it accomplished anything, destroy the level settings on 59 other circuits in that supergroup.

"Help Desk"

All I could get was, "Isn't POTUS worth that?" I had to get arrogant and ask him if it was a nuclear disaster event or not. He finally blustered and blew up enough that he slammed the phone down and hung up, probably to go off and complain about the uncooperative Telco. At any rate, I never heard about it again, even though I suspected there would be some nasty repercussion through the AT&T ranks about my poor customer service handling. I imagine LBJ's phone got fixed shortly thereafter, by someone who could smooth the officer's feathers.

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To read more about the LBJ Ranch phone system, visit the following website:
<<http://www.privateline.com/TelephoneHistory5/Johnson.htm>>