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Twelve Steps Away from the
World's Most Powerful Office

By Jim Newton

WASHINGTON (BP)--"You don't ordinarily think about the awesome power, and that you're just a few dozen steps from the most powerful office in the world," mused White House assistant Richard Brannon, "but when you do, it's rather sobering."

Brannon, an ordained Baptist minister and former pastor of churches in South Carolina and Alabama, is an active churchman and a White House aide serving as associate director of the Office of Presidential Personnel.

It is his responsibility to assist in identifying and recommending to President Gerald Ford individuals for presidential appointment to executive-level positions on the "super-grade" level, including ambassadors and cabinet-level appointments.

"You're so busy working with fever and intensity just to get today's and this week's work done, you never think much about the power, the responsibility," Brannon observed. He does not have as much personal contact with President Ford as does the director of the Office of Presidential Personnel, Douglas Bennett, but does have some, Brannon noted.

"Every minute of every day and night is structured for him (the President)," Brannon said, "His work schedule and appointment schedule are both highly regimented."

Brannon said he was both fascinated and challenged by the opportunity to be a part of the White House staff.

Yet, sometimes the red tape and paper work become routine and even boring, he noted. Still, "Otherdays are electrifying with exciting events."

The hours are long and hard--12 or 14 hours a day of high intensity responsibility and work. There are constant meetings and staff conferences. And the paper work on the desk stacks up. The pressures of time are ever present. "You never seem to get it all done, you just do your best to stay on top of it," Brannon said.

Brannon is not the first Baptist minister to serve as a White House aide. Indeed, there has been a Baptist in the White House much of the time since Lyndon B. Johnson became president in 1968.

Bill Moyers, President Johnson's right-hand aide who rose to become "special assistant in charge of everything" and White House Press Secretary, is probably the most prominent Baptist minister to serve there.

Wallace Henley, most recently pastor of Spanish Fort Baptist Church near Mobile, Ala., who was recently named director of communications for World Vision International, served as a junior-level White House aide working under Baptist deacon Harry Dent during the Nixon Administration.

Brannon's job is considered a middle-level position, a slot higher than Henley's and a notch lower than Moyer's

How did a Baptist pastor end up in the White House handling executive level presidential appointments? For Brannon, it began with preaching the importance of Christian citizenship from the pulpit. A native of Texas, Brannon is a graduate of Baylor University in Waco, Tex., and earned the doctor of philosophy degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth.

After several student pastorates in Texas, he served as pastor of First Baptist Church in Batesville, Ark., and later for eight years was pastor of Huffman Baptist Church in Birmingham, Ala. From there he moved to Columbia, S.C., where he was pastor of Kathwood Baptist Church from 1965-70.

A deacon at Kathwood church in Columbia was a political organizer named Harry Dent, who worked with Sen. Strom Thurman in organizing the 1968 campaign that enabled Richard Nixon to defeat George Wallace in seven states in the South. When the campaign was over, Dent went to Washington, and recommended his pastor to a position as special assistant to Donald Rumsfeld, director of the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO).

"I had been preaching that Christians have a responsibility outside the walls of the church for years, and when the opportunity came to see our system of government at work first hand, it was too tempting to turn down," Brannon said.

Later, Brannon took on another special assignment. He was asked to help George Schultz, then director of the Office of Management and Budget, to organize a special Cabinet Committee on Education to involve citizens from the South in handling public school desegregation with a minimum of turmoil.

Following this assignment, Brannon became a special assistant to Elliot L. Richardson, secretary of the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, a position he held for three years. Once Richardson asked Brannon why he had left the Baptist pastorate to enter government service, Richardson was doodling at the time he asked the question.

"Because here is where the decisions are made that most affect the lives of Americans," Brannon replied to Richardson. "And I thought I should try to influence those decisions." Richardson didn't say anything but looked up from his doodling and just nodded his head in affirmation, because he understood what was going on deep inside, Brannon recalled.

"I believe that government has a powerful influence for good or for ill," Brannon explained. "Inch by inch, government has eaten away at the individual human liberties our forefathers fought to obtain 200 years ago. I believe it is in the interest of the American people to have less government, not more government."

Brannon said he was especially concerned about federal restrictions and regulations that affect religious institutions. "Whether we like it or not, he said, "the fact is that more and more federal regulations are being imposed on religious institutions, especially such institutions as hospitals, homes for the aged and for children, colleges and universities, etc."

Brannon expressed special concern about federal regulations affecting religious broadcasting, and said he was trying to use his influence to deal with this problem.

"In my role at the White House, I'm trying to select good people who are qualified to do a competent job in the upper levels of government service," he said. "And this is serious business."

Brannon, an active member of McLean Baptist Church, in a Virginia suburb of Washington, did not discount the possibility that one day he might return to the pastorate. "The thing I miss the most," he said, "is the opportunity to preach."

Brannon is also active in the White House Prayer Fellowship, a group of White House employees and Executive Branch leaders who meet every other Tuesday morning for breakfast, a devotional period and for prayer. About 30-40 persons of all levels of government and all denominations are participants in the fellowship.

"There is no spectacular about it, just a time when men of different religious backgrounds come together for devotion, sharing and prayer. It doesn't have the depth or intensity of worship in a local church and is no substitute for the church. But I do believe it is always good and useful for people to meet and pray together," he said.

President Ford occasionally attends the prayer fellowship meetings, but he does not make a show of it, Brannon said.

"The President is a religious man, but his faith is not a spectacular kind. He is a man of prayer and devotion. This is not anything new for him. He has made a deliberate attempt not to exploit his religious convictions politically," Brannon said.

Comish Resigns Sunday
School Board Position

NASHVILLE (BP)--Allen B. Comish, director of the church services and materials division of the Southern Baptist Sunday School Board since March 1, 1971, has submitted his resignation from that position effective June 21, 1976.

In a letter to board President Grady C. Cothen, Comish pointed out that "many of the initial objectives and goals I had set for the division have been accomplished. Because of the growing pressures of the work and the circumstances involved, it is best for me to turn to another direction in the fulfillment of my calling of God."

Comish told Baptist Press that he would announce his future plans at a later date.

Commenting on the resignation, Cothen said: "We appreciate the service of Dr. Comish with the Sunday School Board. We wish him well now as he leaves after more than 15 years as employee and trustee of this agency."

Comish, a Louisiana native, had served previously with the board as superintendent of intermediate work and superintendent of training for the Sunday School Department, 1958-59. He had been a trustee of the agency in 1967-71.

A graduate of Southeastern Louisiana University, Hammond, with the bachelor of arts degree, Comish holds the master of religious education degree from New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary and the doctor of religious education degree from Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary. He was honored by Mercer University, Macon, Ga., with a doctor of divinity degree.

In addition to his service with the Sunday School Board, Comish was pastor or associate pastor of three churches in Georgia. He has held various leadership positions in the Georgia Baptist Convention, including the chairmanship of its executive, administrative, and education committees. He was moderator of the Columbus Baptist Association, Ga., 1963-64, and secretary-treasurer of the SBC pastors conference, 1968-69.

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Cooperative Program 14.25
Percent Ahead of 1974-75

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NASHVILLE (BP)--With three months to go in the 1975-76 fiscal year, undesignated contributions to the Southern Baptist Convention's national Cooperative Program unified budget are running more than \$3.9 million ahead of the 1974-75 pace.

The amount represents a 14.25 percent increase--a pace which will result in about \$47 million in undesignated contributions by the end of the year, according to Billy D. Malesovas, director of financial planning and assistant to the treasurer of the SBC Executive Committee.

That would exceed basic operating and capital needs requirements of SBC agencies, which total \$42,080,000, but fall short of the overall goal, including challenge funds, of \$51 million which would allow the SBC to fund areas of need in world missions, Malesovas said.

Through May, the undesignated contributions totaled \$31,489,678 and designated contributions added up to \$34,046,045, for an overall total of \$65,535,723. The overall total represents at \$6,369,129--or 10.76 percent--increase over 1974-75.

For the month of May alone, churches in the 12.7-million-member denomination gave \$3,730,247--only slightly more than \$3,723,135 given last May.

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Johns Elected As
President of Furman

GREENVILLE, S. C. (BP)--John Edwin Johns, president of Stetson University, DeLand, Fla., since April 1970, has been named ninth president of Furman University here.

Johns, 54, will take office August 16, succeeding Gordon Williams Blackwell who will retire after 11½ years in the top administrative post at the Baptist co-educational college.

Johns graduated cum laude from Furman in 1947, receiving the Bradshaw-Feaster Medal for General Excellence. He earned the master of arts and doctor of philosophy degrees from the University of North Carolina. He has been awarded honorary degrees in literature and the humanities by Rollins College, William Jewell College, Furman and Stetson.

Johns joined the Stetson faculty in 1948, achieved the rank of full professor in the department of history and political science, and served as department chairman until he resigned that position to become business manager of the Baptist university in 1963. In 1968 he was named vice president for finance. He was also a member of the Stetson graduate faculty.

Johns is a past president, director and member of the board of editors of the Florida Historical Society. He has served as chairman of the Presidents' Council of Independent Colleges and Universities of Florida and as president or director of numerous civic activities.

A World War II U. S. Army Air Corps pilot, he received the Distinguished Flying Cross, Air Medal with Four Oak Leaf Clusters, Presidential Unit Citation with Cluster and the European Theatre Ribbon with three battle stars.

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N. C. Pastor Wants
Study of SBC Symbol

Baptist Press
5/31/76

NORFOLK (BP)--A pastor from North Carolina says he will present a motion at the Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) annual meeting here, June 15-17, asking the SBC Executive Committee to study the "confusion resulting from the use of the name 'Baptist church' by independent congregations and organized denominations."

Ray K. Hodge, pastor of First Baptist Church, Kinston, N. C., said he will move that the SBC Executive Committee also be asked "to suggest ways that cooperating SBC-affiliated churches can identify themselves so as to clearly distinguish them for our own people and for uninitiated non-Baptists and Baptists."

He said his motion will further ask the Executive Committee "to consider the recommendation to an appropriate convention agency the design of an identifying symbol for voluntary use on bulletin boards, bulletins, stationery, and publications of cooperating churches and institutions affiliated with the state conventions and the Southern Baptist Convention."

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