



BOB WHITE – WISE AND SEASONED LEADER WHO GUIDED COMMITTEE FOR 20 YEARS

Long before he became chair of the St. Paul-Minneapolis Committee on Foreign Relations, Robert J. White was deeply engaged in world affairs. A quarter century marked by diverse experiences in the military, travel to many countries, finance, journalism and leadership prepared him well to guide the Committee for 20 years. His tenure was the longest for any of the organization's chairs.

"He was one of my great mentors," said Barbara Frey, who succeeded White as chair in 1995. "He was always respectful, and diplomatic. He had an intellectual thirst, and was always engaged. I learned a lot from him about how to be a good chair. I was head of a little non-governmental organization when Bob lifted me out of that and made me secretary of the Committee in 1992. He basically said, 'You are worthy.'"

Bob White grew up in Minneapolis. He graduated from Breck School and the U.S. Naval Academy, then served seven years, starting in 1950, as a Navy officer and a fighter pilot. His service included duty on a destroyer during the Korean War. After he left the Navy and returned to the Twin Cities, he joined the White Investment Co., a Minneapolis financial services firm founded by his grandfather. Later, he became president of the firm. In 1959, at age 31, he was named chairman of the local chapter of the Foreign Policy Association. Past rosters show him as a member of the Committee going back to at least the fall of 1965. He joined the Minneapolis Tribune in 1967 as an editorial writer specializing in international topics. In 1970, he took over Robert W. Smith's duties as secretary of the Committee when Smith, then editor of the Minneapolis Star, moved up to become the Committee's chair (Smith was named associate publisher of the Minneapolis Star and Tribune, then separate papers, in 1972). After Smith died in December of 1975, White became the Committee's chair.

Close to Council

Correspondence with the Council on Foreign Relations underscores the deep ties White forged with various officials at the Council. He worked closely with them to identify and bring in speakers. Shortly after becoming secretary, he observed that "the competence and frankness of speakers seem to weigh more heavily with our members than does the discussion subject." Council officials clearly valued his roles in suggesting and evaluating speakers for the other committee affiliates and as "a listening post" monitoring public opinion in the region for them.

White and Rolland Bushner were good friends. Bushner, later a State Department diplomat, joined the Council in 1963 as the organization's liaison to the committees. He remained in that job until 1987. Like White, Bushner was a military pilot, in his case flying bombers in Europe during World War II. White consistently addressed him as "Bush" in letters and memos. The two men communicated mostly on routine matters, but occasionally had candid exchanges about potential speakers and various other Committee business. Soon after White became secretary, he was pointing Bushner to possible speakers for the other committees. Late in 1971, after White returned from a Stanley Foundation conference at the United Nations in New York, he recommended four speakers he had heard there to Bushner. "Such background information about speakers you hear is really valuable to me," Bushner replied. In 1973, when White was about to become a member of the Council, Bushner



said such status would be highly unusual. "There are 36 committee secretaries, of whom only one or two are Council members," he noted in a letter to Robert Smith.

Gently Skewering a Speaker

As secretary, White regularly sent Bushner detailed, diplomatically phrased post-meeting reports on speaker presentations and the discussions that followed. Yet with carefully chosen words, White would let Bushner know when he felt a speaker came up short. In 1974, Albert Coppe, a former European Community leader who was an economics professor at the University of Louvain in Belgium, spoke to the Committee. The Council had recommended Coppe. After his talk, on U.S.-European relations, White wrote Bushner that the meeting was "quite satisfactory, but I would not rate it among our best. Mr. Coppe speaks well and, although he added little to what most of his listeners knew, (he) added a helpful European perspective." But then White uncorked a curve ball that struck home. "Incidentally, I think Mr. Coppe is not particularly close to U.S. economic affairs," he wrote. "When we were walking across the University of Minnesota campus, we saw Walter Heller, whom I introduced to our visitor. I later identified him to Coppe as president of the American Economic Association and chairman of the Council of Economic Advisors under Kennedy and Johnson. Coppe did not know of him."

White's editorial responsibilities led him to many corners of the world. He also traveled abroad frequently on pleasure trips with his wife, Adrienne. Late in 1972, he visited Peru, Ecuador, Colombia and Venezuela for the newspaper. Soon after the Arab-Israeli War in October of 1973, he made a five-week swing through Israel and six Arab countries that had been involved in the war, then described what he learned to Committee members at a luncheon. He traveled to South Asia and Europe for the paper. In the fall of 1977, he became one of the first journalists at the Tribune to win a "Smith Sabbatical," established to honor the Minneapolis papers' late publisher. A grant from the program paid for a six-month study of the Middle East and Latin America. Again, White returned to address the Committee, this time on the topic of "Hope for the Third World? There Had Better Be." White could be self-deprecating about his travels abroad. "Assignments in several parts of the world over the years would have tugged me further toward pomposity were it not for White's Law," he once quipped. "Most places I've visited and written about get worse afterward."

Travels Produced Contacts

His travels as a journalist generated many contacts, which he worked to help the Committee land speakers. In 1982, White won an Overseas Press Club award for his reporting from Central America. That year, he helped bring in as speakers two U.S. diplomats who had become critics of U.S. policy in Central America, Lawrence Pezzullo and Robert E. White. Pezzullo, who had been the U.S. ambassador to Nicaragua, was credited for his diplomacy in establishing a working relationship between the U.S. and Nicaragua after the revolutionary Sandinistas ousted the Somoza family dictatorship that had ruled the country for nearly half a century. Robert E. White, who had been U.S. ambassador to El Salvador, had charged the El Salvadorian government with atrocities against civilians.

When the Star and Tribune were merged in 1982, White was named editorial page editor for the combined Star Tribune. He stepped down from that post in 1992, but wrote a twice-weekly column until he retired in 1996. In one of his most memorable columns, White took former Secretary of Defense Robert McNamara to task for writing in his memoir that expert advice on Vietnam was unavailable when that conflict was heating up in the early 1960s. "As the war's cost in blood and dollars mounted, and as its futility became more evident, many of us found our earlier support waning," White wrote. "Molting hawks grew dovish feathers. The charge, with evidence to back it up, is that a leading policymaker (McNamara) at some still undisclosed time pursued a policy he knew even then was tragically wrong."



Bob White remained on the Committee's board until his death, in 2011. One of his three daughters, Sarah, described him as a "renaissance man" with extensive knowledge of history, politics, economics and science. "He was an engineer who loved words and writing and was in love with the language, and a poet at heart," she said shortly after his death. He composed his own obituary, which said "He loved family, friends, good writing and short sentences."

