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White House required prolific pen

While he was a legal adviser to Ronald Reagan, John Roberts Jr. wrote thousands of memos on matters serious and sometimes trivial

By Michael Martinez and Vincent J. Schodolski,
Tribune national correspondents

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SIMI VALLEY, Calif. -- What do Michael Jackson, Frank Sinatra and National Duck Stamp Week have in common?

They were subjects of memos written by Supreme Court nominee Judge John Roberts Jr. when he was a young, rising star in the Reagan White House.

The Harvard Law School graduate often was assigned tasks befitting a young recruit in the Reagan Revolution, according to a review of 38,000 pages of Roberts' work between 1982 and 1986 for President Ronald Reagan, whose presidential library sits atop a summit in the Simi Hills.

As a legal adviser, Roberts sometimes was involved in researching trivial matters, including commenting on a declaration for National Duck Stamp Week or other national weeks intended to heighten awareness of causes like physical fitness.

He had no objections to the duck postage.

Roberts also had to review legal problems on providing autographed pictures of the president to various organizations.

Shortly after entering the White House as a lawyer working for presidential Counsel Fred Fielding, Roberts even had to write a memo on White House letterhead asking for a television set and radio for his office.

Three days before Christmas 1982, he also had to put in writing a request for "a photograph of the President for The Roberts Family. Many thanks!"

He had brushes with celebrity too--if only by memo.

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On May 9, 1984, Roberts wrote about plans for the president to give Michael Jackson an award bearing the presidential seal.

Roberts had objected to an earlier text of the award citation that appeared to praise Jackson for his commercial success.

The revision was approved.

"This version simply notes that his success--an objective fact--is the product of a drug-free lifestyle," Roberts wrote.

Days later, Roberts wrote to Fielding on May 11, 1984, about the upcoming Jackson award ceremony on the South Lawn of the White House.

In remarks prepared for the president, Reagan was to make humorous comments, including one in which he was to present a "message of love" from "about 100 of our women who work in the White House."

The president was then to say, "They all said their name is Billie Jean."

Roberts objected.

"Cognoscenti will recognize the allusion to a character in one of Mr. Jackson's more popular ballads, a young lass who claims--falsely, according to the oft-repeated refrain of the singer--that the singer is the father of her illegitimate child," Roberts wrote.

"This may be someone's idea of presidential humor, but it certainly is not mine."

On at least one occasion, White House lawyers such as Roberts got trumped by the likes of late crooner Frank Sinatra's pals.

According to a Feb. 28, 1984, memo from Roberts to Fielding, Roberts wrote about how William Whyte, president of the USO, had sent a letter to the administration asking Reagan "to intercede with Frank Sinatra to convince Sinatra to perform for the USO."

Then, "Ambassador [Helene] von Damm short-circuited proper channels and hand delivered a copy of the letter to the president. The president apparently is now drafting a letter to Sinatra."

In 1985, the invitation for a Christmas party even fell under Roberts view.

"Unless you disagree," he wrote in a Nov. 26, 1985, memo to Fielding, "I propose to use the same style invitation for our Christmas party ... as was used last year. The only change I am considering is a more festive color of ink (Green)."

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