

John Corry

Capital Contempt

MEG GREENFIELD'S WASHINGTON

Washington may not tell you anything you did not already know, or at least suspect, but it was written by the late Meg Greenfield, and so you should pay attention. As editorial-page editor of the *Washington Post* from 1979 until her death in 1999, she influenced political life in the capital while also being one of its pre-eminent insiders. Apparently, though, she never really liked the place. It seems the atmosphere there was poisonous, and Greenfield found most politicians and the people around them to be either vacuous, hypocritical, or boring.

Nonetheless *Washington*, the memoir she left behind her, eschews gossip and scandalous stories. It names few names, and for the most part the people who are named are the people Greenfield admired.

But otherwise official Washington comes off badly. It dehumanizes its principal players, Greenfield writes. Politicians may find “such abnormal absorption in career as to rule out the possibility of practically every grace, courtesy and consideration for others that people regard as the minimal requirements of family and communal life.” Meanwhile the “basic linguistic unit of speech in politics...is a statement that is already somewhere between one-eighth and one-fourth of the way to being a lie.”

Greenfield's stern judgments, made more in sorrow than in anger, are rooted in professional experience. In 1961, when the old *Reporter* magazine dispatched her to Washington, she found “a strange society, overly hierarchic and frequently sophomoric,” but with “relatively healthy social constraints.” The

old bulls who ran Congress had their faults, although they operated man to man. Human frailties were tolerated (and often taken advantage of) but the modus operandi was give and take, and sometimes useful work got done.

But much has changed since then, and little of the change has been for the better. Life in Washington, according to Greenfield, has become “more unmoored from reality and more remote from the way business is ordinarily conducted among human beings.” Man to man has given way to every man for himself, and the old give and take has been replaced by the poll-driven pursuit of cosmeticized public images. “For it is preponderantly virtual life—simulated life, fabricated life,” Greenfield wrote, “that is coming to the fore.”

And, alas, the press has made things worse. Reporters have become insensitive and cold-blooded. “They have in so many cases ceased thinking of the people they write about as people at all,” Greenfield wrote, and included her own newspaper in the criticism: “A paper like the *Post* is a two-ton truck, and we run over a lot of people without knowing it, and then we just roll on without even the most casual glance in the rearview mirror.”

Washington, gracefully written, judicious and often witty, is, in fact, a plea for better manners and more considerate behavior toward one another on the part of politicians and the journalists who cover them. This would make the capital a more civilized place, and, Greenfield thought, also make the politicians and journalists less insular. They would be more in touch with

“out there”—the world of ordinary people outside of official Washington.

Clearly Greenfield was on to something. Washington life is virtual life, and the politicians and journalists who practice it are divorced from “out there.” But Greenfield also ignores much of what separates Washington from “out there.” Virtual or not, Washington life is also an agreeable life, and the politicians and journalists—the “public people,” Greenfield calls them—live in very comfortable circumstances. They enjoy amenities not available to the people “out there.”

Much of this is fueled by money, although *Washington* never mentions it. Money, however, is more than just the mother's milk of politics in Washington; the fat salaries, fees, and commissions sustain a way of life. They also inflate egos, confirm identities, and separate the public people even further from “out there.” Washington is money-conscious in a way that New York, say, or Chicago is not.

Greenfield, though, seems indifferent to this. As a pre-eminent insider she had to either accept things as they are or lose her insider status. She may have despised virtual life, but other than a call for better manners she had no prescription for changing it. She does not propose, for example, to move Agriculture to Des Moines, or Energy to Denver, while scrapping Education entirely. Official Washington would remain intact.

And its politics would remain intact, too, of course. Some Washington journalists may be biased, Greenfield says, but overwhelmingly they report the news only as they see it. In fact, though, they see it through an ideological prism. Only conservatives support the Bush tax cuts, for instance; moderates oppose them. In news stories, there are no liberals or left-wingers in sight. Washington journalists should all be term-limited, and then rotated “out there.” The terminology ordinary people use is more apt. ▶

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The Ugly President

WISCONSIN STATE JOURNAL

The power of faith as expounded by Prof. Rodney Stevenson, resident thermostat of the Diversity Climate Committee:

Racial profiling has resulted in prison color ratios that are seriously out of sync with the general population. Doing away with profiling will bring parity

CURRENT WISDOM



to the pen (or would, if justice were really blind).

Racial preference moves student ratios closer to general population proportions. Doing away with preference will perpetuate the effects of centuries of discrimination. And since grade point averages and standardized tests are culturally biased, color-blind admission lets less-qualified whites into the lecture hall while more-qualified people of color are left out on the street, where they have a greater chance of being picked up by the police.

—RODNEY STEVENSON,

PROFESSOR OF BUSINESS, CO-CHAIR PLAN 2008
DIVERSITY CLIMATE COMMITTEE, UW-MADISON

(May 4, 2001)

ARGUS LEADER

(SIOUX FALLS, SOUTH DAKOTA)

In old Sioux Falls, Mr. Ken Cole, local humorist, resorts to the light touch—all for naught against the tin ear of Dennis R. Bishop, agelast:

I can't believe the *Argus Leader* would publish Kevin Cole's letter suggesting that if you are a Democrat, you should be ground up at a meatpacking plant.

His sick letter should be turned over to the police.

We preach to the kids if someone in school threatens other students to turn them in.

—DENNIS R. BISHOP, SIOUX FALLS

(March 27, 2001)

THE NATION

A month after virtually all the public reviews of the Florida vote by newspapers and other electoral monitors agreed that George W. Bush won the presidential vote in that state, The Nation is still convinced of fraud—but then these fantas-ticos are still in doubt about Alger Hiss and the geographical hypotheses of the late Christopher Columbus:

The mild and moderate character who ran for President, claiming to want more or less the same things Al Gore wanted, has been replaced by a hard-edged, rather maladroit right-winger. Bush brushed aside his own rhetorical flourishes toward bipartisan civility and has engaged in a bare-knuckle (and politically tone-deaf) style of governing that most resembles the notorious theft in the Florida recount operation: Take no prisoners, obliterate the facts and rules of reason, forget the dubious legitimacy upon which this presidency is based. A more likable and personally persuasive leader (think Reagan or Clinton) might have pulled it off.... This President's beginning is not just ugly, it's ominous.

(May 14, 2001)

THE METROPOLITAN

(METROPOLITAN STATE COLLEGE,
DENVER, COLORADO)

Heroics still attempted in the Bush Dark Ages by a member of Colorado's equivalent of the Falun Gong:

I am a radical teacher. Radical teachers are not wanted in American public schools. As a social studies teacher, critical analysis of America and its institutions can be a risky endeavor. Encouraging young people to challenge the system is dangerous. Having beliefs contrary to standard American ideology is not wanted in the schools, and many times not allowed. Acting on those beliefs is career suicide.... If teaching for social justice is an agenda, then I am guilty. I was accused of trying to push my socialist views on children. If teaching human values are more important than profit values is considered socialist, then I am guilty. I was accused of teaching the facts with a bias and

not letting students think for themselves, as if "facts" exist in a vacuum, with no room for interpretations. If teaching that African-American males are 7 percent of the American population, yet make up almost 50 percent of the prison population, is not letting students think for themselves, then I am guilty.

(March 30, 2001)

WASHINGTON POST

On the floor of the United States Senate just prior to that body's acceptance of a rather emaciated tax cut, the Hon. Hillary Rodham Clinton propounds a belief in "economic policy" that proves she is neither a Keynesian nor a supply-sider, but rather a Plunkitt of Tammany Hall:

"The disbelief just got bigger and bigger," said Sen. Hillary Rodham Clinton (D-N.Y.). "As the minutes went by and the hours, it became abundantly clear that this has nothing to do with an economic policy. This is nothing but a big tax cut."

(May 23, 2001)

WASHINGTON POST

This is the fine thanks we get from frequent Current Wisdom contributor Richard Cohen, for making him over the past decade the butt of our condign ridicule:

For the Senate, the question is whether Olson told the truth when he said that he had nothing to do with the "Arkansas Project," a sleazy journalistic endeavor initiated by *The American Spectator* magazine and funded (\$2.3 million) by Richard Scaife, the Mellon heir. The project's most famous product was an expose of Bill Clinton's personal life. He was, it turned out, a womanizer [sarcasm!]. ... the *Spectator's* so-called "Troopergate" story appeared in 1993. The next year, Olson, undeterred [irony!], became the magazine's lawyer, and two years after that he joined its board of directors. This was a statement: these were his people.... What really matters is Olson's participation in the widespread effort to force Bill Clinton from office—by any means possible [understatement!].

(May 24, 2001)