

Goodbye and hello again

This is a personal column. It is written with the certain sadness that attends leavetakings and is the last column I shall write for *California Journal* from Washington, where I have been based the past seven and one-half years. These were the concluding years of the most damaging and divisive war in the history of the United States. They were the years when our national profligacy was confronted by the realities of scarcity and deficit. They were the Nixon years, and a time of testing for our constitutional system.

For any reporter this was a challenging and rewarding time to work in Washington. I had the good fortune to come here as a member of the Washington bureau of Ridder Publications, then a three-man bureau serving newspapers in eight cities. It was an ideal training ground for a Washington reporter, largely because Walter T. Ridder created a civilized environment in which reporters were free to develop their professional skills and to follow their journalistic inclinations. With Walter's encouragement, I went to Vietnam and Laos with Representative Pete McCloskey and wrote a book about McCloskey's ill-fated but prescient challenge to Richard Nixon. (McCloskey and Representative John Ashbrook, also challenging Nixon, were criticized by their own supporters for saying that the President was "immoral." Let those who celebrate the virtues of the political center bear witness to the need for principled politicians of the left and right.) I joined the national staff of *The Washington Post* in 1972, which meant the privilege of working with David S. Broder and many other fine people. After he won the Pulitzer Prize for distinguished commentary in 1973, Broder said: "I think this is a time when people will look back and say what they said about *The New York World* of the 1920s — that to have been a reporter on *The Washington Post* at this time was the best thing that could have happened to a newspaperman. It's a hell of an exciting place to work."

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For me, as for most of us, the most exciting story was the fall from grace, and then from power, of Nixon. I had nothing to do with exposing the crimes of Watergate but much to do with exploring the attitude that led to the crimes. On July 29, 1973, I quoted a Nixon aide as saying: "There was a sense in which White House people were cut off from other institutions, institutions which enable you to cushion differences. These institutions were Congress, the press, the Republican Party and Washington social life, by which I mean not high society but the society of Washingtonians. This had profound effects on the mentality and outlook of the administration. If you see a liberal senator once a week over a drink, it's going to be difficult to regard him as the incarnation of evil. But they formed their opinions from speeches or from stories they read in the newspapers and, for the most part, they never learned the nuances. Not knowing Washington, they never became a part of it. They worked 14 hours a day and talked only to themselves and their families. What they did became a self-fulfilling prophecy."

As I write this column, the news is that H.R. Haldeman and John Mitchell have lost their last appeals and are going to prison. Suspicious, cynical Mitchell, who in 1970 proclaimed Nixon "probably the most informed President there's ever been." Those who were not informed, Mitchell told the *Los Angeles Times*, were the "stupid kids" and "these stupid bastards who are running our educational institutions . . ." Unsmiling, composed Haldeman, acting like a parody of the press caricatures of Nixon's tight-lipped

gatekeeper. The same day that *The Post* told of Haldeman's and Mitchell's sentencing, it reported in an adjoining column that the Supreme Court had set aside a murder conviction in Louisiana of a 19-year-old who had killed a policeman in a shootout. The Louisiana law, said the court, was defective because it did not allow for mitigating circumstances in any murder of a law enforcement officer. The murderer, poor and Black, will have a new trial. The once-powerful presidential aides would go to jail. The system is working. Nixon, coming after Lyndon Johnson, may have destroyed the lingering presumption of presidential goodness. But he demonstrated, in a way he never intended, that the system really works.

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It works in the Congress, too. A column I wrote for *California Journal* in 1970 described the myriad frustrations experienced by California congressmen as they bumped up against the walls of House tradition. Representative Jerome Waldie was at the time considered a model of exceptional daring, not to mention foolhardiness, because he introduced a no-confidence motion against aging House Speaker John McCormack. Representative Thomas Rees complained that the congressional system "treats men in their mid-forties as if they are in diapers." Waldie and Rees are gone from the House now, along with most of the senior congressmen they battled in those days. But Congress is a better place for their successors after a series of reforms that have curbed the authority (and sometimes tyranny) of committee chairmen. President Carter, says Representative John Brademas of Indiana, has learned that the congressional leaders are not employees of the White House. And the House leaders have learned that the individual members of the Congress are not their employees, either.

The Washington Perspective column started out as a "letter from Washington," first an actual personal letter to my friend Jud Clark of California Research Consultants and then a column of that name. It evolved into its present form over the years with the considerate guidance of Thomas Hoerber and Ed Salzman. In an early column of February 26, 1970, I reflected on the provinciality of Californians in Washington who were convinced of the superiority of their way of life back home. These convictions have been shaken by events, and the way of life has changed. "You are going back to California just when the water has run out," say my friends in Washington. Or just in time for The Great Earthquake. Or in time to see that expectations of the good life are going, going, gone.

There is much to all of this, I suppose, and yet it can be said with equal accuracy that the changes and the reduced expectations have recreated the challenge which brought our forefathers to California in the first place. Before California was the land of milk and honey, it was the frontier. Now it is the frontier again, at least in the sense that the state's difficulties typify the problems and opportunities facing the nation. As they say in television, only time will tell how the Carter folks measure up to these challenges. I'll miss covering them, but not too much. For me, the sadness which I feel at leaving Washington is diminished by the recognition that I'm coming home.

Lou Cannon is now The Washington Post's western-states correspondent based in Los Angeles. Starting next month, this column will be written by Leo Rennert of the McClatchy Newspapers.

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