

Let Them Eat Cake

Sally Quinn's Rx for America's Ills

Unbeknownst to most Americans, a crisis of the highest magnitude has erupted in elite circles in Washington. The cause is the decline of the dinner party, a development traced by experts to heightened social and political tensions between Democrats and Republicans. Word of the emerging crisis has reached across the Atlantic in the form of a *Sunday Times* piece by James Adams. He informed readers of a "balkanization of Washington into warring factions which rarely meet over crossed canapes".

A few months back Sally Quinn addressed this issue on *The Washington Post* op-ed page. Her article, "Guess Who's Not Coming to Dinner? The Decline of the Washington Social Scene May Actually Be Bad for the Country", sought to answer the burning question: "Why is the Washington party no longer a central political ritual for anybody?"

According to Quinn, wife of the newspaper's former editor Ben Bradlee, Washington social life is in disarray, a development painted in apocalyptic terms. She mourns the passing of the Washington hostess, "the key figure in that social scene", frets that the embassy circuit is dead and laments that the democratic process has resulted in the selection of presidents "who have abdicated the role of social leaders". As a result, "The city has lost its social axis, propelling its disparate groups apart and creating a vacuum."

Most to blame for the current state of affairs are the Republican hordes who entered Washington with the GOP's triumph in the 1994 Congressional elections. Quinn repines that these scoundrels are "on everyone's A list" yet have "scorned traditional Washington dinner parties" and "revile the Georgetown salons as hotbeds of iniquity".

Quinn spots an "interesting reordering of class war going on here too. Whereas once the Republicans were the nobility and the Democrats were the proletarians, now the social positions seem reversed, especially among the Republican hard-liners. With their spartan carry-out and beer parties, their style is more like that of the ascetic communists they once reviled, than the ruling class they aspire to be."

The Democrats are scarcely better. With the exception of Mack and Donna McLarty, Laura Tyson, Strobe Talbott and a few others, "very few people in this administration accept invitations to dinner. And people work so late that a would-be host or hostess has to have nerves of steel to actually plan a seated dinner."

Though unremarked by Quinn, the head occupant in the White House hardly serves as a role model of social propriety. Given Clinton's notorious addiction to fast food, White House staffers' idea of a graceful evening is a night at McDonald's cramming french fries into their mouths with their cellular phones lying in pools of ketchup and special sauce.

In Quinn's Babylon, Marcel Proust would be eating take-out pizza.

As always, bipartisanship is perceived as the only way to save America. Quinn says sadly that the capital's current "hard-line" social posture prevents Republicans and Democrats from getting to know each other, leading to stalemate and gridlock as opposed to the virtuous path of negotiation and compromise. To buttress this assertion, she cites everyone from Arthur Schlesinger, Jr. (cocktail parties are "occasions where the sternest purpose lurks under the highest frivolity") to Henry Kissinger (it is at the establishment's "dinner parties and receptions that the relationships are created without which the machinery of government would soon stalemate itself").

Could there be on Quinn's part resentment over her own failure to replace Pamela Harriman — Clinton's ambassador to France — as the new Washington Hostess? "Members of the Washington establishment are not only dying to meet and befriend those in power, they have to", she writes. "It's not very exciting or productive to mingle only with themselves. But hanging on to some vestige of social life is difficult when the people in power don't come." ■

Narco-Tuna, continued from p. 1

tion was also given to the State Department by DISIP, the Venezuelan intelligence service.

In point of fact, only months before Colson's outburst the DEA detained The Nataly I, a Colombian tuna trawler, off the Galapagos Islands. Inside its holds, hidden in boxes made for tuna, were twelve tons of cocaine destined for Mexico.

Fishing fleets have been associated with smuggling ever since Phoenician excise-men levied export duty on the cedars of Lebanon. The flows of cocaine and heroin from Colombia and Venezuela (approximately 90 percent of world output, according to the DEA) as well as from south-east Asia and other Andean countries have been transported to a considerable extent by fishing fleets. The tuna fleets are particularly important. Long-distance cruisers of the ocean, with a range of 10,000 miles, they are capable of pursuing their prey clear across the central Pacific. A second virtue of tuna fleets, from the point of view of the smugglers, is that the 250-foot boats — costing around \$12 million each — have multiple holds in which it is easy to conceal contraband.

Through the late 1970s the Colombian cartels steadily built up their tuna fleets, sending drug cargoes directly to the United States, through such ports as Miami. The "drug war", which began about half way through Reagan's first term, forced a change in trafficking strategy. (The "war" itself was primarily a way of funneling money to regimes crushing popular insurgencies.) The cartels began to use Mexico as an *entrepot*, with the Mexican and Colombian tuna fleets taking their cargoes up to Mexico's west coast to Ensenada and other tuna processing plants.

In the late 1970s President Jose Lopez Portillo invested \$1.7 billion in the government-owned tuna fleet, supplying the boats with cheap oil from the state refineries. By the late 1980s the Mexican fleet — with 70 big boats — was dominant in the smuggling operation and its growth became a paradigm of Mexican politics. Then, as the fleet began to haul in enormous revenues on "atun blanco", as one Caracas newspaper called cocaine, the fleet and canneries were privatized. Their shares were divided up between various prominent Mexicans in the ruling PRI.

One of these investors was Raul Salinas de Gortari, brother of the former Presi-

dent and now in prison as a suspect in the assassination of presidential candidate Luis Colosio. Salinas's wife was arrested while trying to withdraw money from a \$100 million account in Switzerland. The Mexican parliament recently agreed to investigate Salinas's tenure as head of Conasupo, the state-owned food agency. The suspicion is that Salinas skimmed hundreds of millions off Conasupo's operations and used warehouses and transportation networks for drug shipments. Among Salinas' holdings was one of the biggest canneries on the west coast of Mexico. The current Fisheries Minister of Mexico, Carlos Camacho, is also heavily invested in the Mexican tuna industry.

In the early 1990s, a shadow fell across the sunny world of *atun blanco* smuggling. This shadow was cast by the campaign of Earth Island Institute, based in San Francisco, to set a dolphin-safe standard for tuna fishing. Soon the US and EEC countries passed laws making it illegal to import tuna caught by methods endangering dolphins. The methods in question were largely developed by US tuna fleets in the 1960s, targeting the yellowfin tuna of the eastern tropical Pacific. Schools of this particular species swim below dolphins and the tuna fleets would look for dolphin, encircle them with a purse seine net and winch them and the tuna out of the water. As many as ten million dolphins were thus killed between 1970 and 1990.

With these new laws the lucrative tuna markets of the US and western Europe were closed to tuna caught by the Mexican, Venezuelan and Colombian fleets, which continued to use the old purse-seine technique. One ironic consequence was a tuna glut on Mexico's domestic market. The prized fish became a Conasupo staple for prisoners, school children and the destitute. The Mexican tuna fleet began to shrink, thus limiting overall smuggling capacity. At this point, the interests of the narco-traffickers and the theories of neo-liberal trade economists began to merge.

In 1991 the Mexican government, then headed by Carlos Salinas, challenged the dolphin-safe tuna laws before a GATT tribunal and won a decision against the United States. But at that time the US had veto power over GATT rulings affecting US domestic standards and the Bush administration promptly exercised this veto.

Natural Containers

The wildlife import trade has enjoyed a long and fruitful relationship with the cocaine and heroin industry. One favored way of importing cocaine into the US is via shipments of boa constrictors. Condoms containing eight ounces of cocaine are inserted into their rectums, which are then sewn up. Tropical fish coming out of south-east Asia are shipped in water-filled plastic bags which also contain a gel of diluted heroin. The bigger fish have the drugs implanted in their bellies. For years a favored way of exporting drugs out of Africa was to place them inside ivory elephant tusks.

One of the biggest wildlife exporters for many years was Michael Tsalickis, an American operating in Brazil and Peru. He had ties to the CIA and to a fugitive Nazi, Rafael von Steinbeck. Tsalickis sent species out of the Amazon to Miami and also exported rosewood. These wildlife and rosewood timber shipments carried his drug cargoes. His usefulness to the US government eventually wore out and in 1988 he was arrested in one of the largest cocaine busts in American history. He was seized along with 7,000 pounds of cocaine — estimated worth \$1.4 billion — in his wildlife warehouse in Tarpon Springs, Florida. ■

With the passage of the NAFTA agreement at the end of 1993, the picture changed. The Mexican government issued two threats. First, it would go before a NAFTA tribunal and argue that embargoes on Mexican tuna constituted a restraint on free trade. Next, it would go to GATT's successor, the World Trade Organization, and lodge the same complaint in a venue where the US no longer had veto power.

With these two threats Clinton and Gore faced a dilemma. They knew that they would lose in any NAFTA or WTO venue, since an important goal of these free trade agreements was precisely to outflank national environmental laws. But if the first major suppression of US sovereignty were to occur over so public an issue as dolphin-endangering tuna, the Clinton administration would face public outrage from a vital sector of its own supporters. It was one thing to have a WTO ruling, acting on a case brought by Venezuela, striking down portions of the 1990 US Clean Air Act forbidding the import of reformulated (i.e. "dirty") gas. This created no stir in the press. Nor did the PCB ruling, first exposed in *CounterPunch*. But dolphin-safe tuna is political dynamite.

In the fall of 1995, President Ernesto Zedillo came to Washington for talks with Clinton and Gore. The prime topic was a rescheduling of Mexican repayments of US bailout money following the peso's collapse in late 1994. Next on the agenda was Mexican tuna. Zedillo again raised the specter of a WTO complaint; Clinton

and Gore assured him that the problem would be more prudently solved through domestic legislation.

The Clinton administration kept its word and duly recruited Senator John Breaux of Louisiana and Alaskan Senator Ted Stevens to gut the Marine Mammals Protection Act and overturn the US ban on dolphin-unsafe tuna. We described this episode and the shameful, complicit role played by five major enviro

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groups here in *CounterPunch* at the end of last year.

Partly as a consequence of our exposé, faxed to many thousands of dolphin allies who promptly laid siege to their senators, the Breaux-Stevens bill floundered. The administration regrouped in the House, using two friendly Republicans, Wayne Gilchrest of Maryland and James Saxton of New Jersey (Clinton's so-called "sensible center"). Other recruits included the lobbying might of Burson-Marsteller and Ted Krohn Miller, a former Stevens staffer now paid \$10,000 a week to lobby for the Mexicans. On May 8, the dolphin death bill cleared Don Young's House Resources Committee.

Even so, given the volatility of dolphin politics and the importance of the enviro vote to Clinton's reelection, it's far from certain that the domestic dolphin death bill will succeed. The Mexicans will no doubt once again threaten to go to the World Trade Organization. The mid-range certainty is that dolphin embargo laws are in immediate jeopardy and the Mexican tuna fleets, owned by the narco-traffickers and high-ranking Mexican officials, will once again expand.

As this tuna fleet history suggests, free trade agreements have become an immense boon for the world's drug-smuggling cartels. Since the passage of NAFTA, the inspection of commercial cross-border traffic between Mexico and the US has been dramatically reduced. The trade agreements have liberalized international banking rules, making it much easier to launder billions in drug revenues.

Cocaine Corruption

The complicity of Colombian politicians with the drug cartels is well-known. The current president, Ernesto Semper, has been in serious trouble ever since it was revealed that the Medellin and Cali cartels invested \$6.1 million in his election campaign. One of the key figures handing out the money was Victor Patino of the Cali cartel, who controls Colombia's tuna fleet.

In Mexico the pay-offs are even larger. *El Financero*, Mexico's leading business newspaper, estimates that ruling PRI officials get pay-offs of \$500 million a year. The same paper claims that similar disbursements are made to US government officials in the Customs Service, DEA and State Department at very high levels. ■

Last month Thomas Constantine, head of the DEA, went to Mexico to berate bank officials there for their lax attention to the laundering of drug money. The paradox is that the number one culprit in this field is the US banking industry. A recent GAO report cites Citibank as the foremost money laundering institution in the world. It was Citibank through which Raul Salinas passed his drug money.

Other free trade features agreeable to the world's cocaine and heroin traders are liberalized foreign investment rules, less regulation of currency and the privatization of ports. Alan Garcia, former president of Peru, has said that the free trade agreements have allowed "the drug cartels to become Latin America's first multinationals".

The confluence of US covert intelligence with the world drug trade has been the subject of much interesting work, notably Alfred McCoy's *Politics of Heroin in South-East Asia*. CIA operations require "black" money and gangster assistance

and the drug trade affords both. In the 1980s Reagan-Bush contra supply operations disclosed a willingness on the part of US administrations to work with drug smugglers throughout Central America. (Historians of such alliances will recall US government collusion with Lucky Luciano in the mid-1940s.) The US has always exercised its preferential option for corrupt governments involved in the drug trade — such as for example that of Anastasio Somoza in Nicaragua — over reforming regimes engendering political instability.

Such long-term US policy would explain the present stance of the US State Department in refusing to press any laws which would damage the international drug trade. Well qualified to understand this priority is the new "drug czar", General Barry McGaffrey, previously head of the US Army's Southern Command. His first act was to certify Mexico as a cooperator in the drug war. How the Mexican PRI, elbow-deep in narco-trafficking, must have laughed at that! ■

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