

Capital Follies

by Jon Meacham

PITY THE FLIGHT OF THE LATE millennial Washington satirist. What's left to parody when the most-read insider book of recent years can, with a narrative voice that mixes Joe Friday with Judith Krantz, spin uncontroverted tales of presidential phone sex and stained Gap dresses, hat pins and Kleenex, Linda Tripp and Lucianne Goldberg? Jonathan

Swift would have envied the Starr Report—and the independent counsel's ghostwriters had it all under oath.

So it is high testament indeed to Christopher Buckley's extraordinary talent that he has once again produced a terrific Beltway novel, one that takes readers on a first-hand tour of the capital's little-known folkways, deftly skewering the pretensions of the pundit class and the Establishment's sense of entitlement. And did I mention the alien abductions?

The plot goes roughly like this: John Oliver Banion, a buttoned-down commentator in his late forties with tortoiseshell glasses, his own Sunday morning TV show and a wife named Bitsey, is at the top of the Washington food chain. Author of books like *Pig's Breakfast: The Failure of U.S. Foreign Policy from Cuba to Beirut*, *Colossi of Rhodes*, an "admiring" study of Rhodes scholars, and *Screwing the Poor*, a best-seller on welfare reform, Banion comfortably dashes off a newspaper column, gives pricey speeches and relies on his impoverished Georgetown research assistants.

When we first meet our hero, he is slapping around the president of the United States on the air. "Mr. President," Banion said, "I want to ask you why, in light of your administration's below-par performance in a number of areas, you haven't fired at least two-thirds of your cabinet, but first ..." It was a trademark Banion opener: establish the guest's inadequacy, then move along to the even more pressing issue. The president maintained a glacial

equanimity. For this he had gotten up early on Sunday and helicoptered all the way back to Washington. The press secretary would suffer ... The president smiled, suppressing his desire to pick up the water pitcher and smash it against the forehead of this supercilious twerp."

Buckley knows his territory, and the words he puts in the mouths and heads of powerful people have the ring of truth—which is, of course, the mark of a great satirist. Once a speechwriter for Vice President George Bush, Buckley

has written two other dead-on Washington novels: *The White House Mess*, a perfect send-up of the classic capital memoir, and *Thank You For Smoking*, an excellent novel about the travails of a public relations flack for Big Tobacco. When Banion leaves the studio en route to a cave-dweller brunch, Bitsey calls him on his cell phone, worried that the president, who is supposed to come to dinner at the Banions' the next week, will cancel. "It gave him a thrum of pleasure that Bitsey was anxious," Buckley's narrator writes. "Dear thing—didn't she understand that presidents came and went?"

How to puncture Banion's perfect, buckraking world? Buckley chooses a secret government agency, Majestic 12, that was founded in "that golden Cold War summer of 1947." Its purpose: to stage UFO sightings and the crash at Roswell in order to "convince Stalin that UFOs existed and that the United States was in possession of their technology. That would keep Uncle Joe on his toes." But Buckley doesn't just know the mores of Georgetown and Cleveland Park: He also understands the bureaucratic imperatives that drive the agencies downtown. "Then," he notes, "as with so many other government programs, the original plan gave way to bigger things." The directors of Majestic 12 decided "that as long as they were at it, MJ-12 could serve another, even higher purpose: keeping the tax-paying U.S. citizenry alarmed about the possibility of invasion from outer space, and therefore happy to fund expansion

of the military-aerospace complex. A country convinced that little green men were hovering over the rooftops was inclined to vote yea for big weapons and space programs." How? Run a black operation to tow pie-shaped discs behind camouflaged aircraft, leave scorch marks in the grass and traumatize pets. That soon grew boring: MJ-12 had to figure out a way to give folks a look at the aliens themselves. ("This was trickier," Buckley writes. "For one thing, it meant finding dwarfs with security clearances.") And so the era of alien abductions began, with agents drugging the odd farmer or farmer's wife, acting out an alien pantomime, and then turning them loose. Why farmer-types? "The idea was that alien abductees should be just credible enough to spread the word but not so respectable that their testimony would precipitate an urgent search for the truth. They would not, for instance, want to snatch someone as prominent as, say, the chairman of the Federal Reserve. That would, in all likelihood, lead to trouble."

"They" were right. The trouble started one Sunday morning when Nathan Scrubbs, an operative, has one too many pepper vodka Bloody Marys to chase away the blues. (His cover was working at the Social Security Administration: "The hours were long. It did not make for a dazzling social life. Hi. What do you do? I work for the Social Security Administration. Really? That's cool. Excuse me, I have to go repark the car.") Drunk, Scrubbs catches Banion's condescending TV act and orders up an unauthorized abduction. Banion, drugged and conned in a patch of woods at Burning Tree, becomes a true believer. Chaos follows: He loses his sponsor, his show, and his wife. Banion becomes the apostle of the UFO subculture and leads a Millennial March on the Mall. In Buckley's hands, the wacky journey is a pleasure to read. The fact that a man who has spent years pondering Washington can so easily evoke the world of alien obsession and UFO believers should give the capital some pause, I would think: Maybe the two aren't so different after all.

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LITTLE GREEN MEN

by Christopher Buckley
Random House, \$23.95

Tidbits & Outrages

IQ & Crime—The Missing Link 1

A St. Louis man dialing for a prostitute accidentally reached the police department instead. After arranging for a rendezvous with a police dispatcher and giving her his Master Card number, he was cited for a misdemeanor.

OK, but can they do the Macarena?

American scientist, Dr. Hector Corona, has reported that dolphins pick up radio tunes from passing boats and sing along to Maria Carey and Bryan Adams.

Objective Journalism

A recent law journal article began:

“WASHINGTON — On a chill, gray morning, with the nearby Washington

Monument penitently sheathed in a condom of repair scaffolding, our nation's second presidential impeachment trial commenced.”

He forgot to say “Please”

In Farmingdale, N.Y., a would-be bank robber was foiled when his teller simply said “no” when ordered to empty her cash drawer.

...details...

...declared that the ...
...Afghanistan in October ...
...Osama Bin ...

...bids assass-
...structure.”
...structure

IQ & Crime—The Missing Link 2

George and Antonio Morgan were arrested and convicted of murder after answering a call from the police to their victim's missing pager.

It'll put the glow back into your face

In November, the Ukrainian tourist agency Liko-L began guided tours of the Chernobyl nuclear reactor because the government has reported the radiation levels are low and “not dangerous.”



Greetings From

UKRAINE

JOSHUA BARLOW