

10 MILES SQUARE

"...such District (not exceeding ten miles square)...[shall] become the seat of the government of the United States."

—THE CONSTITUTION OF THE UNITED STATES

House Divided

In Washington, even apartment-hunting is partisan.

By Amy Sullivan

Americans around the country are familiar with the housing crunch: Prices keep rising, occupancy rates are at near-record highs, and—particularly in major cities—competition for those rare vacancies can be fierce. In pursuit of a roof over her head, the typical house hunter may find herself setting aside visions of the perfect urban loft and considering a less-than-convenient location, no parking, an EZ-Bake-sized oven, and an inescapable dog smell. In Washington, D.C., the question becomes one degree more complicated. "Can I live without air conditioning?" is a crucial consideration, yes. But not nearly as difficult as, "Can I live with (or rent from) a Republican?"

Desperate times, however, call for desperate measures. In early June, the late hours that this job requires finally got to me, and I decided the time had come to ditch my cheap but far-off apartment for one closer to the office. Which is how, several days later, I found myself standing in the kitchen of a prospective landlord, staring at an assortment of red-white-and-blue elephant magnets on his refrigerator, and frantically considering possible answers to the question he had just

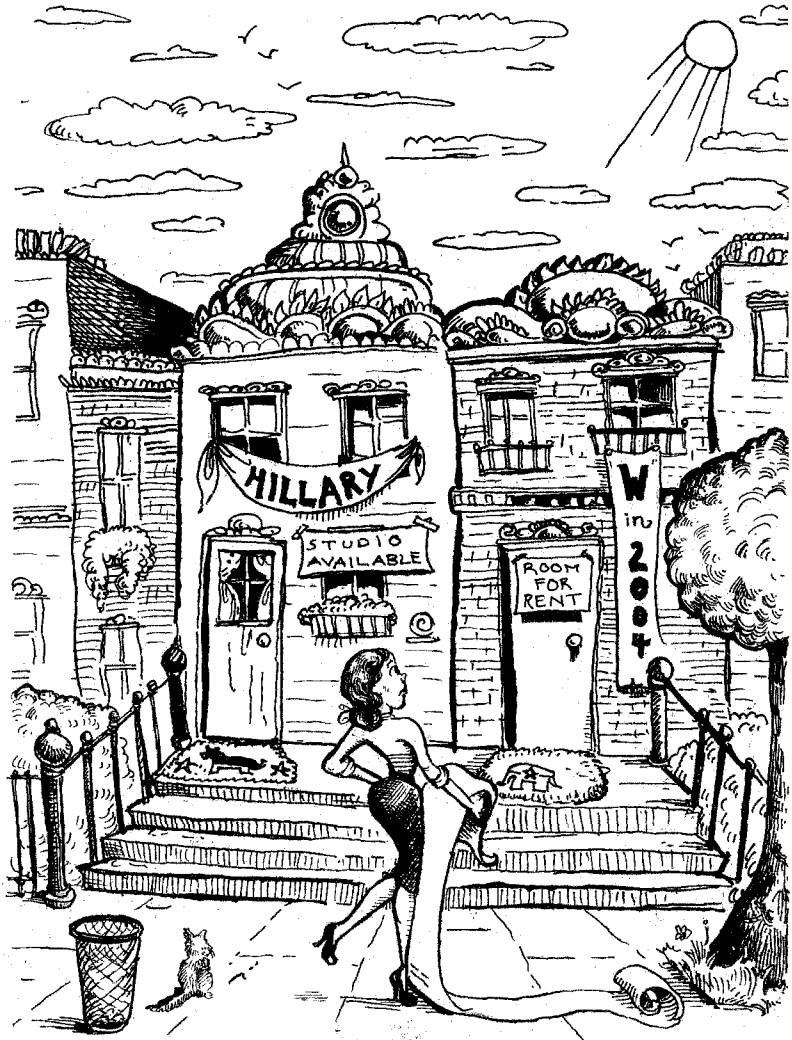


Illustration by Molly Crabapple

The Washington Monthly's Monthly Journalism Award

Susan Kelleher & Duff Wilson

The Seattle Times

(June 26 - 30, 2005)

"Suddenly Sick: The hidden big business behind your doctor's diagnosis."

The obesity epidemic and other apparent public health crises may be manufactures of the pharmaceutical industry, two Seattle Times reporters found. The Times reports that though 75 percent of Americans have been diagnosed with hypertension, high cholesterol, diabetes, or obesity, "millions of them are not truly sick and may never be, even without medication." Why are they getting diagnosed? Studies funded by pharmaceutical company money have expanded definitions of diseases—and then recommended new, expensive remedies to solve the problems they created.

The Monthly Journalism Award is presented each month to one or more newspaper, magazine, radio, or television stories (or series of stories) that demonstrate a commitment to the public interest. We are particularly interested in reporting that explains the successes and failures of government agencies at all levels and of other institutions such as the media, corporations, unions and foundations that contribute to the existence or solution of public problems. Please send nominations (including a copy of the article or broadcast text) to The Washington Monthly Journalism Award, 733 15th Street, NW Suite 520, Washington, DC 20005. Or email us at editors@washingtonmonthly.com.

asked me. "So, what kind of magazine is *The Washington Monthly*?" It sounded harmless enough. But just the fact that he asked meant that I'd already slipped up, sending my initial email inquiry from a work account instead of the more anonymous Hotmail address. Drat.

"Um, it's political," I replied, trying to focus on counting kitchen cabinets and figuring out where my slow cooker would go. (You can take the girl out of the Midwest, after all, but she's still going to need to make goulash from time to time.) Maybe he would lose interest, and I could switch conversation topics. "That's interesting," he said instead. "Liberal or conservative?"

I quickly reviewed my options. It was too late to try to pass the magazine off as the glossy and apolitical *Washingtonian*, even though most people confuse the two anyway. Should I lie? It didn't seem like the best way to start with the guy who would determine whether or not the hot water heater would get fixed in the middle of winter. For a few brief moments, I wondered if I'd made a mistake—rendered temporarily stupid, I tried to remember whether elephants were the good guys or the bad guys. *I like elephants. Yes, but that's why it's counterintuitive. You're not an elephant, you're an ass.* Yes, I was. I really needed to move, the place wasn't bad—anchors-away decorating scheme in the bathroom aside—and here I was picking an unnecessary partisan fight.

In the end, I opted for the standard weaselly response that I give most conservatives. "We're kind of, you know, in the middle...taking on both sides, that sort of thing." It sounded just as lame as it always

does. Feet were shifted, throats were cleared, and we both quickly made excuses to bring the apartment showing to an end.

This all must sound faintly insane to anyone who doesn't live in the Washington area, and perhaps even to some who do. If you need a place to live, and someone is looking for a tenant, what on earth does partisan affiliation have to do with it? But that's just the point. Partisan identity has everything to do with living in Washington. It affects what bars you frequent, who you date, and whether that car with the "W" bumper sticker lets you merge into its lane.

Sometimes, on those occasions when times are really tight—say, when your only other option is to slink back home and live with your mom, dad, and the cat—partisan differences can be overcome. One year, I saved money for graduate school by sharing a house with three conservative evangelical women; we became good friends and tensions in the house were low as long as I ignored the photo on the coffee table that showed them protesting outside the Supreme Court during the 2000 recount with signs that read, "Gore, You Run Like a Girl!" And for the past few years, I have rented an apartment from two lovely friends who couldn't be farther from me on the political spectrum. We avoided each other for several months following last fall's election, and it's understood that they think my political comrades are godless heathens who would run the country into a sinful pit of despair given the chance, but aside from that, we get along swimmingly.

Still, you can never be too careful. In this city, as in few other

places, identifying as a Democrat or Republican doesn't just indicate the way you vote at the polls. It's who you are, it's what motivates your career choices, it's why you work long hours for low pay and—if your side is out of power—often little political reward. At the end of the day, you can only plaster on a smile for so many “Oh, ho, ho...we all know Republicans/Democrats are a bunch of corrupt liars” cracks, whether they come from your neighbor or housemate or landlord.

So, when I found what appeared to be the perfect apartment late last month, I was guard-

ed. Judging from the online photos, the place looked adorable. When I emailed (from my Hot-mail account) to set up a time to see the apartment, the landlord wrote that he and his partner lived on the second floor of the house. A gay couple! Unless they were Log Cabin, that could only be a good sign. The visit went well, and Ed and I ended up chatting away in the kitchen until he asked me whether the apartment was convenient to my office. “Absolutely,” I replied. “I work near the White House.” Ed became quiet, and we were on our way the door with perfunctory goodbyes when he looked down at my rental application.

“Oh, you're a journalist!” he said. “For *The Washington Monthly*! When you said you worked near the White House, I thought...well, I thought something else.” Smiles all around. “Oh, no,” I assured him. “We're not involved with all that.” Relieved, we shook hands heartily.

I'm moving in next month. And I'll be bringing my Bobby Kennedy poster with me. Because while we in the nation's capital would like to see a little more bipartisanship in the House, we don't necessarily need to start at home.

Amy Sullivan is an editor of *The Washington Monthly*.

JARGON WATCH:

The uproar over Senate Democratic Whip Dick Durbin's June remarks comparing the abuses at Guantanamo prison to the crimes of Nazi Germany reminded us once again of what should be a hard and fast rule of politics: Nazi/Hitler comparisons—while always tempting—are never a good idea.

“If I read this [a list of abuses at Guantanamo prison]...and did not tell you that it was an FBI agent describing what Americans had done to prisoners in their control, you would most certainly believe this must have been done by Nazis, Soviets in their gulags, or some mad regime—Pol Pot or others.”

—*Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), on abuses at Guantanamo, June 14, 2005*

Apology made: 3 days later; “I have learned from my statement that historical parallels can be misused and misunderstood.”

“The audacity of some members to stand up and say, ‘How dare you break this [filibuster] rule!’ It's the equivalent of Adolf Hitler in 1942 saying, ‘I'm in Paris. How dare you invade me. How dare you bomb my city. It's mine.’”

—*Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.), on the filibuster debate, May 19, 2005*

Apology made: 2 hours later; “It was a mistake, and I meant no offense.”

“Sixty years ago in Nazi Germany, it was state policy [that] in order to perfect humanity, it would be required to destroy humanity. And the medical experiments at Auschwitz were carried out for that explicit purpose.”

—*State Sen. Bruce Chandler (R-Wash.), on stem cell research, March 16, 2005*

Apology made: 3 days later; “The references made to the Holocaust were regarded by some, understandably, as insensitive and inappropriate.”

“Hitler never abandoned the cloak of legality. He recognized the enormous psychological value of having the law on his side.... That's what the nuclear option seeks to do.”

—*Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.), on the nuclear option, March 1, 2005*

Apology made: None yet, although Santorum called for one, charging that Byrd's comments were “inexcusable.”

“Now forgive me, but that is right out of Nazi Germany. I don't understand... why all of a sudden we are passing laws that sound as if they are right out of Nazi Germany?”

—*Sen. Phil Gramm (R-Texas), on a Democratic tax proposal, Sept. 5, 2002*

Apology made: Not only did Gramm not apologize, he also repeated the analogy a few minutes later.

Killing Them Softly

Why the mild-mannered Dick Durbin became the GOP's top target.

By David Corn

On June 14, Sen. Dick Durbin (D-Ill.), the Democratic whip, went to the Senate floor to say a few things about an issue that had long concerned him: the handling of prisoners and detainees at Guantanamo. He noted that the Bush administration had set aside longstanding treaties, and that Congress had neglected to “hold the administration accountable for its failure to follow the law of the land when it comes to the torture and mistreatment of prisoners and detainees.” He said that for two years he had urged the Republicans to hold hearings on this issue. He pointed out that the Supreme Court had rejected portions of the Bush administration’s detention policies. He cited an email from an FBI agent who complained that Guantanamo interrogators were using “torture techniques” and a report from another agent who had observed detainees “chained hand and foot in a fetal position to the floor, with no chair, food or water.” The prisoners, he read, were often covered in their own urine and feces and had been left in these conditions for 24 hours or more.

Durbin then raised his eyes from the report and addressed the chamber: “If I read this to you and did not tell you that it was an FBI agent describing what Americans had done to prisoners in their control, you would most certainly believe this must have been done by Nazis, Soviets in their gulags, or some mad regime—Pol Pot or others—that had no concern for human beings. Sadly, this is not the case. This was the action of Americans in the treatment of their prisoners. It is not too late. I hope we will learn from history. I hope we will change course.”

Conservatives went ballistic. Right-wing bloggers and media blasted Durbin and accused him of having compared American soldiers to Nazis. Talk show hosts derided him as “Turban Durbin.” Columnist Michelle Malkin branded him a traitor: “There is a war on. Durbin has shown us which side he’s on.” In the *Weekly Standard*, radio ranter Hugh Hewitt called for the Senate to censure Durbin. Newt Gingrich demanded similar action, and Sen. Trent Lott (R-Miss.)—who knows about controversial statements—urged Durbin to resign his leadership position. Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld equated Durbin with Jane Fonda. Other administration officials and Republican senators piled on. Less than a week after Durbin’s speech, a Google search for “Durbin

Guantanamo Nazis” produced 44,000 hits. As the assault continued, even Chicago Mayor Richard Daley, a Democrat whose son is currently serving in Iraq, publicly scolded Durbin, his political ally.

Durbin’s comments—though not necessarily inaccurate—were ill-advised. As a rule, politicians ought to steer clear of comparisons to Hitler, Nazis, the Holocaust, and the like. Still, this rule has been broken before without reactions coming close to this level of fury. In March, Sen. Robert Byrd (D-W.Va.) compared the Republican threat to end the judicial filibuster to Hitler’s grab for power. A few months later, Sen. Rick Santorum (R-Pa.) likened Senate Democrats who opposed the “nuclear option” to Hitler. Both comments drew complaints—but nothing like what happened to Durbin. What was it about his remarks that caused the right-wingers to aim such massive firepower at a 60-year-old, second-term senator whom most Americans had never heard of until that week?

The answer is that they went after Durbin because he’s a threat. A triple threat, in fact. Today’s Republicans may not be competent at planning wars or managing the federal treasury, but when it comes to the politics of attack, they know what they’re doing. And they know whom to target. In the last six months, Democrats have scored political successes with an oppositional strategy that has made life difficult for Republicans on Social Security reform, judicial nomina-

David Corn is Washington editor of *The Nation*.