



THIS TOWN

*Forgive Washingtonians if they seem a bit obsessed, a tad self-absorbed.
They've got things on their minds.*

BY JIM NAUGHTON



I am writing on April 6, the day of the annual Cherry Blossom Festival Parade here in Washington. The sky is blue, the air is soft, and the proper dignitaries have assembled along the Tidal Basin. Everything is in place, in fact, except for the blossoms themselves. They were at their peak last weekend. Many have fallen from the trees by now. Had Thursday's storm been a bit more forceful, the graceful, gnarled branches might all have been bare. This is what I love about the cherry blossoms—not so much their airy beauty, but their refusal to cooperate.

For me, much of what one needs to know about life in official Washington is summed up in our highly formal, tightly managed, and ultimately absurd response to the blooming of flowers. It captures us at our most earnest, our most cynical, and our most self-defeating, as we attempt to impose order and wring effects from a phenomenon over which we wrongly assume a sense of control.

Let me make this point in another way.

A year or so ago, my wife and I attended a friend's wedding at which, following the best man's toast, talk at our table turned to the public remarks made at our own weddings. Seated with us was a prominent young conservative couple—he a writer, she a think-tank publicist. The woman related proudly how her husband's best man told their guests that this marriage would succeed because she possessed three essential virtues. The first two had to do with sound teeth and card-playing skill. The third was her inability to justify more than three functions of a strong central government.

We in Washington are no more likely to engage in unintentional self-parody than the residents of, say, New York. But we do, I think, hold more tightly to the illusion that firm principles, strong intellects, and a well-crafted, but suitably flexible schedule will ensure our success at work and in love, and enhance our appreciation of cherry blossoms. We blend, and no doubt confuse, the political and the personal. We assume that the mind will order the heart, and that the heart will not protest. We believe, given proper connections, that fate, like grain treaties, can be negotiated.

Before I elaborate further, I should make it clear that the Washington I am talking about is not so much a place as a culture, a set of folkways that have developed to facilitate the pursuit of power and the exchange of information. I should also make it clear that when I first

moved here four years ago I hated the place.

Imagine a town peopled entirely by former student-council presidents. This was my first impression of official Washington. People were chipper. They were cerebral. They were unbearable.

The city had no baseball team, it had no neighborhood bars, it had no street life. Spontaneity was regarded with suspicion. One felt undressed without a necktie.

People had odd habits, too. Watching *Nightline* was considered the optimal conclusion of an initial date. A colleague wrote memos to her husband and compiled "talking points" for showdowns with her babysitter. Worst of all, the town was awash in opinion. Washington is the only city where people have platforms and expect that you do, too. It seemed to me the only difference between a party and a political science quiz was chardonnay.

My biggest problem in adapting to Washington was an inability to learn the language. Government officials were always said to have "signed off" on something, but I never knew whether this meant they'd said yes or no. People were valued for what they could "bring to the table," and for a while I thought we were talking about meals. It took me weeks to work "That's a non-starter" into everyday conversation. ("How about Chinese tonight, dear?" "That's a non-starter, hon.")

I was also frustrated by my failure to make any headway in my profession. There was so much I didn't know. Though I've been a journalist for nearly nine years now, it is only recently that I've learned how to read a newspaper. For instance, "a source familiar with Sununu's thinking" can usually be translated as "Sununu." Or, in stories favorable to James Baker or critical of his rivals, "an official" should generally be read as "James Baker."

My inability to grasp even such simple facts began to make me paranoid. I thought people wore credentials around their necks to let me know they were welcome in places I was not. (These suspicions were fed by guys who wore these tags in the sauna at the Y.) A beeper was another of the symbols of power I conspicuously lacked. It depressed me to know no one cared whether I was "in pocket" or out. On a particularly glum day I decided that a Volvo motorcade (an amusing sight, actually) had been organized to remind me that nothing I was doing was so important that it could not wait until the King of Sweden reached his hotel.

Not that living in Washington was without its rewards. I left work one evening to find myself strolling up 15th Street with Eduard Shevardnadze and his entourage. We spot Ted Koppel occasionally in a favorite restaurant. There are any number of opportunities to marvel at the youth—and the hair!—of the women who date aging liberal senators. But, while I get as big a kick out of these sightings as the next person, they do not exactly make the case for setting down roots some place.

Now perhaps if Shevardnadze had asked my opinion on conventional force reductions, or at least where his friends could have gotten some decent-looking suits; or if Koppel, noticing the discernment I had shown in choosing the veal with pine nuts, had invited me to be a guest on his show, I might have felt differently. But no.

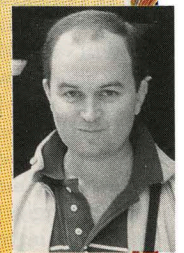
What finally brightened my spirits about life in official Washington was that I found it incredibly dull. Socializing almost always seemed to have some professional purpose. No one at any of the receptions I attended seemed to be experiencing anything that could be construed as fun. I wondered, could this be? Why did people of such obvious intelligence stand around swapping what sounded like paragraphs from unpublished op-ed pieces.


The reason, I discovered, was simply that much of what goes on here is incredibly complicated. Success, in many cases,

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Naughton, a 1979 SU graduate with a dual degree in magazine journalism and American studies, was also editor-in-chief of the *Daily Orange*. Immediately upon graduation, he went to work for the *New York Times* as a sportswriter. He has worked since for the *New York Daily News* and the *Syracuse Post-Standard*, while earning an M.A. in history from the Maxwell School in 1982.

He lives in the District with his wife, Elizabeth Kastor, and a son born in March, Benjamin.





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requires a soul-sapping obsessiveness. To take the business of federal government seriously meant plunging into pile after pile of seemingly undifferentiated detail and emerging with a solution. Or it meant catering to lawmakers, regulators, or foundation executives who seem to hold your cause in their hands. It meant keeping up with absolutely all the news, as well as the gossip, because in the web of official Washington, pressure at any point reverberates throughout the community. Finally, if one was successful, it meant knowing that one had, in some way, changed lives. One may only have seen to it that more milo would be planted next year, but that matters mightily in the Midwest.

This kind of work does not necessarily make for glittering party conversation, nor do observations about politicians whose careers are necessarily prefaced on offending as few people as possible. This is not to say the work is any less important, rather to point out that it makes for a fairly narrow and intensely work-oriented culture. The Kennedy Center, for instance, is the Dodger Stadium of the performing arts, with audiences leaving early, not to beat the traffic, but to ensure a good night's sleep.

The most touching thing (I use the words with extreme caution) about official Washington, however, is not its dedication, but its insecurity. Most of the people who work here are conscious of the danger of warping themselves. They make a show of having other interests. The interests are generally those of a driven person: distance running, collecting hard-to-find antiques, memorizing batting averages. They are as anxious as anyone I've met for reassurance, eager to be told that what they are doing matters, that it will lead somewhere, that it will be appreciated.

This city is home to a self-consciousness that is, I think, unique. I will wager that the citizens of Tulsa, before they take a strong political stand, do not agonize among themselves about how the move will be perceived by those who live beyond the highways which link them to the outside world. In Washington, every time someone sneezes, a political opponent suggests that these are not the allergies of people "beyond the Beltway." Washington is odd this way—an arrogant supplicant, behaving with utter disregard for political realities in the rest of the country while asking unceasingly how this will play back home.

Official Washington is embodied in such

seeming contradictions. This Town, as too many people call it (As in, "If you want to get anything done in This Town, you better get to know Bob Strauss," or, "That's all well and fine back in Minneapolis, but it will never work in This Town"), seeks direction but wants to lead; hunts for new ideas, but is paralyzed when they appear. This Town venerates the power by which it claims to be unimpressed and justifies this attitude on the basis of personal loyalties: "I've known the undersecretary for months now."

This Town owes something of this peculiar character to the odd sort of people who come here, and I count myself among them. We are dreamers of unusually circumscribed dreams. The point is not fame, the point is not fortune, the point is service to some deeply held and most likely arcane conviction, unless it is the pursuit of some equally arcane and self-gratifying scholarly or journalistic research.

This, of course, is when the point is not simply greasing wheels. This is a town of administrative assistants, clerks of the court, advance staff, events planners. Washington is home to the Association of Associations. (You can look this up.)

It is also home to more lawyers and lapsed lawyers than any city in the world. One can't toss a stone without plunking an attorney, which, as you might imagine, accounts for a good deal of the stone tossing that gets done. One out of every 10 parishioners at my church is a lawyer. Nine of the 15 people in our book club are lawyers. The rest are journalists. They are, remarkably enough, all quite pleasant. I mention this because the odds against any group of 15 lawyers and journalists being composed entirely of pleasant people are so long that such an occurrence is statistically, and perhaps historically, significant.

It was this book club that taught me my greatest lesson about This Town. Washington is a secret city. I don't mean FBI, CIA kinds of secrets, or government-scandal kinds of secrets, although we've got that, too. I mean that people keep what is best about themselves secret. Perhaps you've seen the old *Saturday Night Live* skit, "White Like Me," in which Eddie Murphy becomes a white man and finds, to his great surprise, that when white people are alone together they give each other things for free. Something similar happens in official Washington. When one finds a suitable subculture, say a book club, a con-

genial church, the friends of special friends, one ceases to act one's role and commences to be one's self. This happens everywhere, I know, but it is all the more welcome in a city where the former so often subsumes the latter.

I think of these groups as alternative Washingtons and it is in these alternative Washingtons that I aspire to live. The neighborhood where my wife and I bought our home is a delightful mix of aging hippies, working-class black families, and chastened yuppies like ourselves. The church I mentioned, Holy Trinity, is by my lights the most spiritually enriching and intellectually challenging in Catholic Washington. And our book group discussions are brief but deep communions with people whom, no doubt, I otherwise would have stereotyped as drones.

When one is less angry at a place, one is also able to see its virtues more clearly. I've begun to develop an affection for parts of the Marble City, that expanse of government buildings, monuments, and cultural mausoleums that sits in the middle of town like a massive civics class theme park. No, most of its attractions do not bear regular revisiting, and yes, it does mean more to visitors than it does to residents. But I'm glad to have the Vietnam Veterans Memorial nearby because it is the closest thing we have here to a pilgrimage church and visits there are a consistently moving experience. Union Station is among the loveliest public spaces in the country—stately, clean, and capacious, the embodiment of a 19th-century ideal. And then there is the Air and Space Museum, a reason to have children, or to be one. My son better like it.

The Marble City notwithstanding, it is only recently that I learned what a limited sense of Washington I still possess. This is, after all, a primarily black city with a rich local, rather than national, history. It is a place that does not much resemble the contemporary Dodge City conjured by urban affairs expert Charleton Heston and his gentle compatriots at the National Rifle Association, but which is struggling with a drug epidemic that has ravaged its poorest neighborhoods while leaving much of white Washington eerily calm. It is also the hub of a wheel of racially and economically varied suburbs, from Prince Georges County, home of an expanding black middle class on the east, to the horsier environs of Fairfax County to the southwest. In what we used to think of as the hinterlands rise

once small towns whose still-small names (Tysons Corner) mask the fact that they now boast more office space than downtown Seattle.

My truest sense, though, of how vibrant and how real this area is has come over the past few months. I am on a leave of absence which, for half a semester, allowed me to teach an English course for students preparing for their Graduate Equivalency Degree examinations. The class, and the free school that sponsors it, are a haven for Asian, Hispanic, and African immigrants, some of whom are still learning the language and others who have already made the first steps into the city's service economy. My first night I swore that I recognized a woman who worked in the *Washington Post's* cafeteria and another who had waited on me in a Mexican restaurant.

It was a moment when I was struck not so much by official Washington's blindness to the striving all around it, but by my own. I felt, that evening, as though there was more to be gained in exploring this Washington than in railing against the other one.

I have been trying to be true to that revelation, but opportunities for indignation are always close at hand. The other day a friend was telling me about an acquaintance's new beau. The man is a White House speech writer and my friend said he coined the phrase "just war" to help President Bush describe our involvement in the Persian Gulf. I mentioned that St. Augustine had polished the same coin with some distinction 1,500 years ago, but we agreed that Augustine never applied it specifically to Operation Desert Storm, and so a certain amount of credit was due.

It was, I believe, that great statesman Elvis Costello who offered the best advice on life in *This Town* when he sang, "Well, I used to be disgusted, but now I try to be amused." Or was that a source familiar with Sununu's thinking?

Anyway, don't come to Washington. But if you do come, stay. ■

WALTER P. CALAHAN, a 1978 graduate of the Newhouse School's photojournalism program, provided portraits for the Washington, D.C., section. He is a free-lance photographer, working in Washington.

DAVID BRODA also provided portraits for the Washington section. He is a 1976 graduate of the College of Arts and Sciences, now employed in the Syracuse University Photo Center.

MARTY BLAKE, who created the illustrations for this special section, is a 1979 graduate of the College of Visual and Performing Arts. Blake, who grew up in Washington and now lives near Syracuse, is a freelance illustrator.

FEDERAL BRANCH

Greenberg House gives Syracuse University a much needed headquarters in the nation's capital.

Kevin Gottlieb is a savvy political animal, possessed of boundless energy. A veteran of the D.C. inside track, he has worked with senators Gaylord Nelson, Alan Cranston, and Donald Riegle as a policy analyst. Today Gottlieb, who graduated from the Maxwell School in 1970 with a doctorate in political science, runs his own policy-analysis firm.

"When I left Maxwell, I vowed to find a way to bring students to Washington to learn how policies are made," says Gottlieb. "It was an opportunity I wish I had as a graduate student. So when Guthrie Birkhead, former [Maxwell School] dean, and Bernard Jump, director of the public administration program, asked me to consider creating a regular seminar, I took it on immediately."

The three-week seminar, open to SU students only, includes both classes and an internship at a Washington-based agency. "These classes crackle with intensity," says Gottlieb. "With a faculty made up of senators, agency directors, and journalists, lively interchange is the order of the day." Faculty members have included former Senator Gaylord Nelson, Assistant Secretary of the Treasury Sidney Jones, and PBS correspondent Paul Duke.

The seminar is a hot item among public administration students. The 25 available slots are filled by lottery. This past semester, 54 more signed a waiting list.

Gottlieb's public-policy seminar is just one example of on-site education taking place at Greenberg House, Syracuse University's new, permanent home in Washington, D.C. This four-storey building in the Woodley Park area is, like Lubin House in New York City, a University outpost in a key American city, serving a full range of academic, development, and social purposes. Paul Greenberg, a real estate executive and 1965 SU grad in political science, provided initial funding to purchase the building.

For William Sullivan, director of the Maxwell School's Midcareer Program, Greenberg House is an ideal place to host programs for federal administrators. This spring, Sullivan, in conjunction with the School of Information Studies, conducted a seminar on information-resource management—part of Maxwell's Executive Education Program for members of the government's Senior Executive Service.

"Having an in-town location gives us a competitive edge," says Sullivan. "In a time when budget constraints are the norm, we can

still offer midcareer training to government workers just as schools located in or near the capital do."

Maxwell and other Syracuse alumni find the Greenberg House a convenient site for a variety of activities. Three separate alumni groups (Maxwell, Newhouse, and the SU Club of Wash-



Kevin Gottlieb (front left) and the annual Washington seminar at Greenberg House.

ington) regularly schedule meetings and events there. Two hotlines offer information about upcoming activities and about jobs in the public sector. And, of course, big-screen television is at the ready for SU sports broadcasts.

Greenberg House also welcomes casual visitors. Drop-in alumni and friends find a ready supply of SU literature, ranging from undergraduate admissions information to the latest issue of the *Syracuse Record*. They also find Dugald Gillies '68, director of development in Washington.

Dug (pronounced Doog) has managed the Greenberg House since its opening last March. He's a busy man, contending with everything from seating Kathleen Kennedy Townsend at the Maxwell "Problems of Governance" symposium last December to keeping the big orange SU flag flying from the house portico.

"I'm impressed not only with the quick popularity of the house," he says, "but also with the diversity of activities. The people who use the house seem equally impressed."

It's not surprising, Washingtonians, SU alumni or not, quickly catch on to a good thing.

—KATHRYN LEE

KATHRYN LEE is a member of the SU Publications Office staff and a frequent contributor to this magazine.