
Washington, the American Mecca

It's June in Washington. It's June all over the country, of course, but to the capital city the month has special significance. It inaugurates the annual trek of gaping sightseers from all over the country to this American mecca.

Soon the vacationing schoolteachers will be ah-ing and oh-ing before the wondrous temples of government, while prize-winning high school students will pay their worshipful respects to the pompous dignitaries and official hirelings who carry on the affairs of state. Honeymooning couples, already taking one another for granted, will transfer their admiration and adoration to the indicia of political power, while farmers, satiated with the wonders of nature in their native habitats, will be propitiating the gods of government in their air-conditioned apses. In summer, it is the proper thing for Americans to come to Washington and view with awe.

If you were to ask these visitors, they would tell you that they came here only to admire the beauty of the town. And, to be fair, this is a beautiful town. Why shouldn't it be? It is like a harlot who never soils her hands with useful work, and whose

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only occupation, outside of harlotry, is to preen and primp—at the expense of her admirers. Washington is, and ought to be, the most beautiful city in the country; it is also the most useless.

Putting aside the aesthetic thrill which these gapers get out of the visit, they cannot but carry away with them an overpowering impression of the glory and grandeur of the government domiciled here. It must be a wondrous government that operates in this wondrous environment. And when they get back home they will tell of the invigorating, almost healing, experience of having seen the anointed and brushed the robes of greatness; even as did those who in ancient times visited Rome. They will have visited the holy of holies. And all their lives thereafter they will tell, and magnify the tale, of their almost sacred pilgrimage.

By the easy processes of the simple mind, this adoration of the domes and the masonry and the statuary will spill over to the denizens of the city—to the Pharisees and Sadducees who are integrated with the monumentalization of government. They are the bureaucrats, the truly blessed. To see them in their charmed cubicles, deeply immersed in papers, is to realize that they are different from the ordinary run of mortals, and that the difference is one not of degree but of kind. One reads sometimes of a bureaucrat who has fallen from grace, by taking a bribe or surreptitiously letting a foreign nation in on official secrets. But, a single transgression does not disprove the infallibility of the class.

There are elected officials here too, but the aura that surrounds them is not comparable with that which surrounds the bureaucrats. The former must descend from the clouds at election time and simulate the life of ordinary men. The bureaucrat always stands aloof. He is a special person, educated and

trained for the priesthood, and his adeptness with the exotic rituals of government sets him off from the rest of mankind. He wields power without benefit of votes. He is anonymous, ubiquitous, indispensable. And, in a way, he enjoys immortality; administrations and congressmen come and go, but the bureaucracy goes on forever. It is the soul of that superperson called government.

The summer pilgrims who come to Washington ostensibly to see, but not unprepared to worship, are aided in their devotions by the droning guides. Perhaps it is only by dint of constant repetition, but it is a fact that these carefully trained expositors of the wonders of the national shrine develop an intonation strongly reminiscent of the ritualistic Sunday sermon. Every bit of monumentalized government is described with reverence. Stress is laid on the tradition, the historical significance, the inner meaning of each piece of stonework, until the weary minds and legs of the pilgrims are left limp with adoration, and are willing to settle on a religious acceptance of the whole thing.

There must be a purpose in all this architectural pageantry, this careful manicuring of parks and the elaborate horticulture, a purpose quite unrelated to mere aestheticism. And, judging by results, the purpose must be like unto that of the stained-glass windows and the gargoyles that adorn cathedrals: to bring the visitor into spiritual consonance with his surroundings. It is a religious purpose. This is the place where the great god government performs its miracles, this is where the "general welfare" is attended to. Here the demigods plan and direct the destinies of one hundred and sixty million mortals, here the souls of the well-taxed flock are prepared for a heaven on earth.

Politically speaking, it is good business to glamorize and glorify this modern Jerusalem. For, it is a certainty that only

a fraction of the would-be worshippers get to Washington each year; and it is a certainty that each one who does partake of the religiosity of political power becomes a missionary to the folks back home. Thus, the country is made conscious of the fact that the government is great, good, glorious, and superhuman.

The debunking of Washington is the great need of the country. It is a colossal job, seeing that billions are spent each year for the specific purpose of deifying political power. But, it is a job that ought to commend itself to the young writer looking for a rather virgin field to work in. It will require the satirical skill of a Stephen Leacock, the epigrammatic ingenuity of a Charles Graham Sumner, the classical incisiveness of an Albert Jay Nock. Perhaps a Gilbert and Sullivan would be most effective.

The job should be approached from a basic premise, namely, that all the legitimate functions of the national government could be carried on, as someone has said, "in a good-sized kitchen"; surely, in not over one-tenth the floor space now occupied, and with one-tenth the present personnel. That means the country would have to be instructed in the proper functions of government—the functions for which it is designed and in which it has some competence: briefly, the dispensation of justice, cheaply, and the maintenance of order. When it goes beyond these limits, government becomes a harmful intruder into the affairs of men. There is nothing the government can do that free men cannot do better.

With that as a starting point, the debunking can proceed with ease. It can be shown that the only thing government can do when it goes beyond bounds is to confiscate private property; it cannot produce anything. Its excuse for confiscation is always that it distributes the proceeds among the "deserving poor";

the fact is that most of what it takes it keeps and spends on itself. There is no justice in that. Oh yes, it can give special privileges to certain citizens at the expense of others, which is a flagrant injustice, and when it does so its purpose is to gain support from those thus advantaged. It buys power with other people's money.

Practically speaking, the acquisition of political power is in proportion to the acquisition of economic power. Policemen (including bureaucrats) have to be paid. So, then, the power of government is dependent on the taxes it collects. The more dollars the government has to do with, the more it will do. Conversely, when the people keep their dollars, the more independent they are of the interloping government. The government, being expert in these things, is well aware of the relation of the freedom of the people to their opulence, as well as the relation of its own power to their proverty, and therefore is bent on depriving them of their dollars. It is as simple as that.

Now comes the crux of the debunking formula: What is government? It is a body of people—just ordinary mortals—whose primary purpose is to get on in life with the least possible exertion. Wielding power seems to them the way to accomplish this purpose. In that way, they are relieved of the stress and strain of the competitive world; and there is the added ego compensation which the exercise of power yields. The effect of this ego pay can be detected in the manner of even the lowliest in government service, such as post office clerks and receptionists.

This last point, that government consists of people—just ordinary mortals—who have gotten hold of power, and nothing else, needs to be widely advertised. Apologists of power like to hide that fact in the fiction that government is a superentity quite independent of its component parts, and that it has a soul

of its own and a capacity for giving things which ordinary people do not have. It is a golden calf needing only worship. If people can be got to accept that paganism—that is what the annual trek to Washington is expected to do—then it is easy to put over on them any skulduggery that these mediocrities can think of.

Yes, mediocrities. There is nothing that more impresses the critical observer in Washington than the low mental level of those who presume to manage our destinies. This should not be a startling revelation; it stands to reason that a man of ability would hardly be content to bury himself in a dust-gathering pigeonhole of government. He is there simply because he is afraid of the marketplace; he is there because his nature inclines him to seek the comfort and security of his prenatal state. This should be brought out. A series of candid delineations of these personalities, sometimes called profiles, would go a long way toward cutting these self-styled demigods to size.

A debunking “movement” would be helpful. But, it needs hardly to be organized or fomented, for it would spring up automatically from a general realization that government consists of a lot of small-timers who have, by hook or crook, got hold of power and are intent on increasing their power. The development of a suspicious attitude toward all people in government would suggest the use of social ostracism as a means of keeping them in line, and that would be “movement” enough.

Suppose people were regularly to shut off their radios when a politician is on the air. Suppose they would assiduously stay away from meetings addressed by a “distinguished” personage, or, better still, would “sit on their hands” and titter at his inanities. The ego pay would be gone. Their balloons would

be deflated. And those who had any ability, and some self-respect, would get out of government and start making an honest living. That would be good for society.

There is no way of keeping government within bounds but by the whip of public opinion, not that expressed at the polls, but in the arena of private life. Social ostracism, or the fear of it, would go a long way toward restraining the yen for power. If the threat were held over the politician that transgression would be met with a lack of invitations to decent people's homes, government would be clean.

If the suggestion seems farfetched, consider the conduct of village or county government. These small-town officials are of the same breed as that which infests Washington—in fact, they are no different from the ordinary run of people, equally susceptible to temptation; but they do toe the line of decency more often than do their Washington brethren. This is so not because they do not have as much to do with, in the way of taxes and power, but because their neighbors' opinion breathes hot on their necks. If the Washington official were in similar fear of social ostracism, he too might be of some service to the country.

Yes, the affairs of state would be vastly improved if the people stopped worshipping Washington. The great need of the nation is the debunking of government.