

duced fares and other issues—such as increased Social Security, more Federally aided housing for older people, homestead exemptions for retirees, and lower drug prices for everyone—take second place to the campaign for Medicare. Newburgher reports that President Johnson was warm and sincere when he saw him in Washington. “It’s not necessary to convince *him* of the need for Medicare,” he said. It is worth noting that Newburgher, like the other members of his union, is already covered by medical insurance. But the King-Anderson bill is in the hands of the House Ways and Means Committee; eleven of the fifteen Democrats are said to be for it, and all ten Republicans against.

Today there are eighteen million American people over sixty-five, and though they are generally considered to be conservative, some older Republicans are now voting Democratic when Medicare is the issue. Senators Homer Capehart of Indiana and Alexander Wiley of Wisconsin, it is claimed, lost their seats directly over this, as did Representative Walter Judd of Minnesota. Several newly elected representatives in California and Representative Claude Pepper of Florida attribute their victory at the polls to their support of Medicare. Eighteen million is a difficult figure for politicians to ignore, even if many people over sixty-five do not vote, join clubs, or regard themselves as “senior citizens.” Eighty per cent of them suffer chronic ailments of one kind or another, although only four per cent are institutionalized, and the “opportunities” they present have mostly been seized by the hucksters of mail-order eyeglasses, rejuvenation nostrums, and insurance gimmicks. The main problem, Jack Ossofsky said, is that they don’t have leadership. “There are not many around like Walter Newburgher,” he confessed.

If unions should take the lead in the politics of geriatrics, any number of intriguing possibilities may be discovered. The wonderful nonsense of the Townsend Plan of the 1930’s will not return, but the goals will be far more realistic and the techniques to achieve them far more substantial. “We want to show them their strengths,” Ossofsky said, “not their weaknesses.”



Prosciutto and Mrs. Mellon: Washington’s Society Pages

MEG GREENFIELD

ONE EVENING in 1961, the ambassador of Israel and his wife gave a small reception in Washington. It was not a major diplomatic event, but it did rate coverage by a reporter from the women’s section of the *Washington Post*. Having cast her eye over the buffet table, columnist Marie McNair reported to her readers that among the delicacies offered were chicken with almonds and grapes, a variety of cheeses, and a platter of prosciutto ham. By its own account, the Israeli embassy was swamped with telephone calls the following day. Mrs. McNair was obliged to run a retraction stating that the ham was really beef. And the ambassador’s wife was obliged to make a statement. “We observe all dietary rules,” she said.

Happily, the incident brought down no governments, but it did stand as evidence of two interrelated facts about life in the nation’s capital. One is that everything about the city’s social gatherings, down to the

last plate of cold cuts, can have official and political significance. The other is that the ladies who cover these events and relate their findings on the women’s pages of the major dailies are among the most widely and carefully read reporters in town. President Kennedy was a faithful if somewhat apprehensive reader of their columns. President Johnson is one of their greatest fans. “We read them every day,” *New York Times* bureau chief James Reston told me recently, citing leads, diplomatic news, and a sense of the way things are going as his reasons. Although the ladies who compose these columns are not universally loved, they are universally read. In their way they are the fourth and a half branch of government.

TO BE SURE, there is a school of strong objectors. Many people, especially some of their fellow reporters, find the ladies’ adherence to the conventions of society reporting

embarrassing to the trade. To connoisseurs of the style, however, the complaint appears churlish, particularly in view of the general decline of society reporting around the country. Even as such mighty papers as the *New York Times* seek daily to arouse interest in what looks to be the same woman in the same Balmain suit laying plans for the same benefit horse show, in the capital the *Post* and *Evening Star* continue to provide their readers with a wealth of detail about their betters which is no less fascinating for being trivial. "Mrs. Harriman wore a street-length muumuu," we learn, "and Averell a polo shirt and slacks." "Ambassador On Sein was a resplendent figure in a yellow wrap-around, skirt-like 'basoshay' with jacket ('yin bon-ingyi') and large white headdress or 'gaung baung.'" Only in the women's pages could Washington readers have learned that the blue satin ribbons used to tie off the pews at Joanne Goldwater's wedding were later made into a pair of shorts for her father, or that among the musical selections offered at the Eisenhowers' state dinner for the Khrushchevs were "Zip-pety Do Da" and "Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life!" The wholly agreeable sensation of familiarity with the great that comes from knowing so much about their tastes and little ways is enhanced by the reporters' habit of referring to their subjects by first names or even nicknames. Thus New York's Republican Senator Kenneth B. Keating—"humorous Ken with his dimples."

The Art of Nonreporting

It would be a grievous mistake to assume, though many do, that the ladies who produce this poetic copy are themselves as frivolous as their product. True, the world they depict is an unfailingly sunny one. Its congressmen all look "fit" and "handsome." Their wives are uniformly "gracious" and "young looking." Their daughters are "pretty" and, naturally, "popular." But those who object to this rosy view of things would probably do well to hold their peace. The imagination boggles at what would happen if Washington's thirty-five or so women's-page reporters ever revealed everything they know. "What do they want us to do?" as one of them put the problem to me

recently. "Do they want us to say that most diplomatic receptions are crowded and awful and that no one knows anyone else? Do they want us to say that guests at state dinners wrangle over the matches for souvenirs?" Indeed, feeling a little perverse one day, the women's department of the *Post* deliberately failed to touch up one of its subjects, and the resulting profile should stand as fair warning. Without benefit of editing, Mrs. Gwendolyn Cafritz was allowed to ramble on about her friends in France that summer ("all the titles from the area") and her new fall wardrobe ("That's spelled B-a-l-e-n-c-i-a-g-a, and Morris definitely picked them out himself"). Mrs. Cafritz may be a special case, but to hear it told, there are many figures high on Washington's social pyramid whose reputations would not be helped by a dose of realism on the women's page. Mrs. Carolyn Hagner Shaw, editor of the city's famed "Green Book" of social personages and a contributor to the *Star*, told me a while ago that hostesses often call upon her for help in seating a table not only on the basis of protocol but also on the basis of compatible personalities. For such occasions, Mrs. Shaw keeps on hand a set of index cards on just about everyone who matters in Washington. They are annotated with such



initials as O.D. ("overbearing drunk"), O.F. ("old fool"), and, for numerous of the ladies, V.B., or "vicious bitch." Critics of society-page style in Washington would be wise to let well enough alone.

How to Read a Story

Those who maintain that the women's news in Washington contains little more than fluff may have let their hostility to the conventions of social reporting get in the way of a proper reading of it. For there is a trick to getting the news out of women's news. Though the women's

sections of both the *Post* and the *Star* can boast some first-class features and straight reporting, when it comes to social notes the hard news often turns up in a subordinate clause or embedded in other data that could not conceivably be of interest to anyone but women. It is by way of commiserating with the senator's wife over the prospect of changing the children's schools that we learn of the senator's plan not to seek re-election. It is the regrettable cancellation of the party that is likely to inform us, in passing, that it was canceled because the ambassador's government seems about to fall.

All this may be hard going for the serious of purpose, and it may irritate the admiral who has other things to do, but there is no denying that the news is there—the sense of the way things are going. For instance, faithful readers might have picked up such items in the past few weeks as Army Chief of Staff Earle Wheeler's views on who should control NATO's nuclear weapons, Polish Ambassador Edward Drozniak's attitude toward the new travel restrictions on Communist diplomats, the drift of thinking on Embassy Row about Panama ("If the two Presidents will just keep quiet and stop making public pronouncements, everything may lie still for now"), and presumably the French ambassador's first public statement on the rumor that he was about to resign as the result of a disagreement with President de Gaulle.

This last item—a vigorous denial—answered a story that had been going the rounds for several weeks in the capital, and to the surprise of no one it turned up in the column of the *Star's* Betty Beale, acknowledged doyenne of Washington's women's-page reporters. It appeared between a story about how eleven-year-old Alice Ormsby Gore had been allowed to stay up and see the Beatles because she had taken a nap and a description of Countess Knuth-Winterfeldt's dress and hat. Pondering the fact that Miss Beale had once again beaten him to a story, the senior diplomatic correspondent of a well-known newspaper confessed that it simply "would not have occurred" to him to ask the French ambassador that

particular question. What he meant was that he wouldn't have had the nerve.

Nerve is in long supply with the ladies of the press, and many of them agree that they often come away with answers to their impertinent questions because a man who might say "no comment" at a press conference or in a private interview is too embarrassed to say it to another "guest" who also has a highball in her hand. This raises questions of ethics and/or courtesy. Are the society reporters who attend parties always identifiable as reporters to other guests? Do they make it clear when they intend to use a quotation? Do they report on conversations they were not meant to overhear? It is safe to say that most of the time the objects of their attention know what to expect. But not always. Readers of the *Post's* women's page, who by now can hardly be startled by anything, nonetheless were given something of a turn one day last year when they read the following little anecdote about President Kennedy at a party he attended at the Mayflower Hotel:

"To Edgar Ansel Mowrer, syndicated columnist, he said: 'We need a little help from your French friend.'

"Mowrer understood that President Kennedy was referring to President Charles de Gaulle of France who is a close personal acquaintance of Mowrer's. 'You may have to go after it a little different way,' said the columnist. 'He won't be pushed.'

"'And we won't be pushed either,' said the President . . ." As Presidential Press Secretary Pierre Salinger recalls it, far and away the most startled—not to say displeased—reader that morning was John F. Kennedy.

Although the incidence of such high-level beans being spilled on the women's pages is low, only chance prevents it from happening more often. For the status of society reporters at the parties they attend is, to say the least, ambiguous. Even the most ambitious hostess, to hear the press ladies tell it, cannot quite bear to believe that she is courting public notice, maintaining instead that the society reporter has been invited because they are "good friends." This fiction is as sturdy as it is graceful,

and apparently can even survive such awkward moments as when the hostess's friend the reporter arrives with two photographers bearing fifty pounds of equipment.

HOW SHOULD an editor meet the emergency of a women's-page writer coming back to the office with a front-page story in her evening bag? Often as not the *Star* solves this recurring problem simply by printing Betty Beale or her colleague, Isabelle Shelton, on page 1. The *Post*, on the other hand, tends to leave the ladies where they are. According to Alfred Friendly, managing editor of the *Post*, the paper has no fixed policy on the matter, which he concedes is a vexing one. By and large, however, the *Post* believes that it would be a dirty trick to deprive its women's section of such news as it turns up, so it has evolved a sort of separate-but-equal philosophy. This line of thought is in keeping with both papers' effort to make their women's pages more serious, a good intention not without its hazards. Political figures who go to bed happily believing that their remarks before a women's organization have made page 1 often are anguished to discover in the morning that they are keeping company with Mary Haworth again. Indeed, for several years now it has been a common saying in Washington that if the President were to declare war at the Women's National Democratic Club, the *Post* would run the story on the society page.

It simply wouldn't be editorially practical, however, to try to remove the political element from society news, because in Washington there is no such thing as a purely social event. The mere fact that two partygoers conversed, for example, may have its meaning: "The President had three separate chats with House Republican Leader Charles Halleck." The invitation list itself is a political document. "The Nixons," Betty Beale once wrote of the Eisenhower era, "were either never or almost never invited to the White House . . . time and again they were not on the list." She implied that she therefore found it somewhat strange that Washington's political pundits had taken so long to recognize what all society reporters well knew—that there was

a coolness between Nixon and Ike.

In more recent times, the ladies have been applying their talents to clocking the candidates for the Democratic Vice-Presidential nomination. However that particular struggle is being handled by city editors elsewhere in the country, in Washington it is being fought out among the pudding recipes and sewing patterns. Partly this is because when President Johnson recommends a candidate, as he frequently does, it tends to happen at a social gathering that is in the domain of the lady reporters. Thus, his recent high praise of Sargent Shriver was page 1 in the *New York Times* and women's page in both the *Star* and the *Post*. But there is more to it than the happenstance of Presidential recommendation. President Johnson's friendly words for Minnesota Senator Eugene McCarthy at a dinner in the senator's honor, for example, were only part of the story as the society reporter present saw it. The other part was the turnout for the senator. "Remarkable," she concluded. There were "seven Cabinet members, close to 20 senators, many House members, one Supreme Court Justice." What was more, Harry Byrd was there, and, as she pointed out, he rarely bothers to come to such events. At this sort of documentation the ladies are unsurpassed. In fact, it can be argued that their most important contribution to Washington's political knowledge of itself lies in their relentless appraisals of who was there and who was not.

The Return of Perle Mesta

"Everyone was there"—the phrase is a staple of women's-page reporting. But the Washington reader must pay close attention; for although the phrase remains the same, from time to time there is suddenly a completely new "everyone." That is more or less the situation in the capital right now. Bascom N. Timmons was there, readers learned of a certain party that was given not long ago. Bascom N. Timmons? they well may have wondered. Whatever happened to all those other people whose teen-aged children and triumphant desserts they had become addicted to reading about? Where were they? And why Bascom N. Timmons? "He has known President

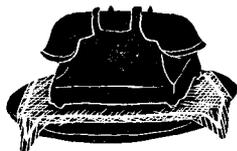
Johnson," came the somewhat curt explanation from the women's page, "since he arrived here thirty-two years ago. . . ." The transition may have been relatively smooth within government itself; on the women's pages it has been mercilessly abrupt.

In addition to compiling new lists of names for the reader, the ladies also make subtle distinctions among them. It is one thing to have been "also glimpsed" at a party and quite another to have been "drawn" to it. Take the report of a recent high-level gathering. "It drew Perle Mesta and such Congressional couples as the 'Tiger' Teagues, the Omar Burlesons, the Joe Kilgores, the Bob Caseys, the Paul Rogerses, and the Jake Pickleses. . . ." Notably, all the couples with the exception of the Rogerses come from Texas. Perle Mesta, in this instance, comes from what might as well have been three years at a power station in Uzbekistan. Whether Mrs. Mesta, in addition to campaigning for Richard Nixon, did or did not once refer to Mrs. Kennedy as a "beatnik," whether the Kennedys, in turn, did or did not debar the former minister to Luxembourg from attending a White House fete for Luxembourg's Grand Duchess Charlotte on her state visit, whether Mrs. Mesta did or did not thereupon refuse to attend a State Department function for the Grand Duchess (an innocent pawn in all this), are subjects of hot and inconclusive debate in society-reporting circles. What can be said with certainty is that Mrs. Mesta got the ax. And it is only recently that Washington readers have again been able to chart her movements, or more precisely her troop movements, in detail. For although one or two of the reporters remained relatively loyal to her during her ostracism by the Kennedy administration, on the whole she rarely was "drawn," and when she was "glimpsed," she was lucky to stay two places ahead of the "and others." She owes her rehabilitation to her friendship with President Johnson. "I called you to-night," he was quoted on the women's pages as having said to her at the dinner for Senator McCarthy. That, as Betty Beale has pointed out, did it.

There are plenty of people in Washington who don't consider any

of this the least bit funny. The society columnists have been charged with fickleness, sycophancy, and even some sort of sellout for their performance in the past few months. In a way, the charges are a tribute to the persuasiveness of their writing style: apparently all the intimacy and nicknaming led many otherwise sophisticated people to assume that the ladies were writing about cherished friends whom they have now abandoned without compunction. Their sudden shift, however, does raise at least one remotely serious question: have they the power to create social importance? Or do they merely reflect importance that is already there?

Certainly, to judge from the way the reporters are yoo-hoed at on their nightly party rounds and impertuned by anxious hostesses during the day, they have considerable power of their own. It is the power



of deciding what to cover and whom to glimpse. True, it is not advisable for a member of the administration to gain a reputation as one who has nothing to do at night but cha-cha his way around town, but occasional mention seems to have its advantages. Guests who are recorded as having been at one right party will likely be invited to others. And if the ladies of the press indicate that some of the right people can be met at a hostess's parties, she soon will be able to draw more. That much is known.

The trick is in deciding which are the right people. There are a couple of columnists, for instance, who devote most of their space to one particular set made up of retired generals and superannuated diplomats who go away, come back, break a hip, and go away again. For the dedicated fan of the pages, it is interesting but only in the way that Mary Worth can be interesting. And, as with Mary, it doesn't matter if you miss a week or two. To be a good society reporter in Washington means, on the contrary, to be able to focus on political power all the

time, no easy achievement given the city's ever-shifting and somewhat shifty scene. It takes all manner of vices and virtues—snobbery, snooping, brashness, and the good sense to ask the ambassador the right question if only to get him to confirm what his gardener has already told you. For, according to unimpeachable sources, it also takes informants. Waiters, servants, and hairdressers do nicely. So do weak-willed official wives who cannot resist the temptation to say, "As the President said when he was dancing with me. . . ."

Wood Notes

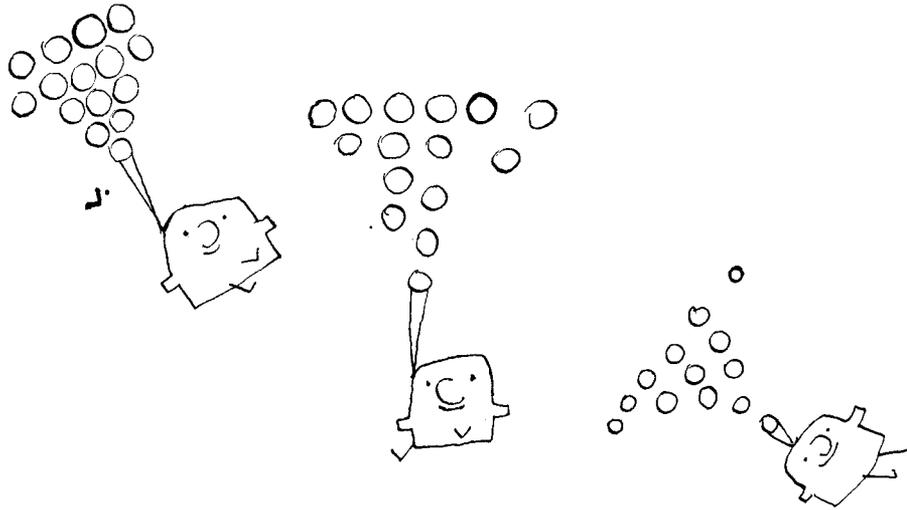
But above all, it takes work. The eagerness of people the ladies do not want to hear about to tell them all should not be construed as making their jobs any easier. Like all good reporters, they want what they can't have—Mamie Eisenhower's menus, for example. "We always got them, though," a *Post* lady said to me with justifiable pride. How had they got them? "I'd rather not say," she smiled. Those few known cases of detective work on the part of the ladies' press suggest, however, that they will stop at nothing. Mrs. Kennedy did not wish her plans for decorating Mount Vernon to be revealed. How could she have known that Isabelle Shelton would overhear them being made as she posed as an ordinary tourist? Or take the case of Mrs. Paul Mellon, who foolishly hoped that barbed wire, checkpoints, and security guards could keep the ladies away from a debutante party at her Virginia estate. "The Debutante wore a charming creation of silvery white satin with embroidered green leaves. . . ." the *Post* accurately reported. "Mrs. Kennedy did not dance." Among those glimpsed were the Bundys, the Schlesingers, the Nitzes, and the Alsops. To be sure, they were glimpsed from the woods where two ladies prowled for part of the night. The rest of it was spent observing from the best vantage point that could be found and interviewing workmen who came off the property. "Maxine," one of her colleagues told me, "took a gun."

UNDER a Johnson administration, there will be no need for firearms. "You're as good as the men reporters," the President told a few

of the ladies recently, "and I want your bosses to know it." He sent them away with a handful of news beats.

The President's determination to make life more pleasant for the women's-page reporters may make it a little more trying for some others.

Editors will have more headaches over where they should play what story, and the impatient may grow even more impatient as they continue to sift the news of Washington from among Ambassador On Sein's gaung baung and the doings of little Alice Ormsby Gore. «»



The Great Air-Fare Snare

MEL ELFIN

"**I**S ALL THIS talk about lower Jet fares to Europe just a lot of hot air?" blared a recent advertisement by Alitalia Airlines. "No!" answered Alitalia rhetorically. "The smart air traveler can really save a lot of money if he knows what he's doing."

Nothing should be simpler than finding out what it costs to get from here to there. In the jet age, however, it may take longer to figure out the fare than to make the trip itself. "If you think it's complicated, you're right!" declared Alitalia. "Taking an extra day or so in London, Paris, Rome, Tel Aviv or anywhere . . . can cost you an extra \$40 or \$45 in air fare alone—just because that extra day happens to fall into a 'Peak Season'."

Transatlantic air fares have in fact become so complicated that in order to explain which rates are applicable when, Swissair has designed a new travelers' aid: the blanked-out calendar. Swissair's eastbound Economy Class calendar, for example, has white spaces where June and July should be. Half of July, all of August, and most of September are missing from the westbound calendar.

The twenty-one-day Excursion Fare calendar has no weekends, while the emasculated Group Fare calendar omits a miscellaneous assortment of months and weeks.

All of the airlines, of course, are burdened by the same labyrinthine schedule of fares. ("We don't know how to tell you this, but all transatlantic jet fares are the same," El Al confessed in a full-page ad.) What is different is the ways in which the carriers try to explain away the complexities. Eschewing the Swissair calendars, Air India adopted a more academic approach. After the boast in a large ad that "You can fly there [to London] and back too for \$300,*" the Air India asterisk directed readers to a seven-column footnote: "*21-day economy jet fare from N.Y. effective for mid-week travel Apr. 1 thru Nov. 5, except June 12 thru July 12 and Aug. 7 thru Aug. 30. \$210 fare one-way economy class. All fares effective Apr. 1, subject to Gov't approval."

That any "Gov't" this side of Lewis Carroll would approve the jabberwocky of dates, definitions, limitations, and loopholes as a rate

schedule is additional evidence of the irrationality abroad in the world. Ludicrous as it may seem, this summer four men may find themselves seated next to each other aboard a jet liner speeding toward London, the man on the aisle having paid \$300 for his round-trip passage (the excursion rate), the man in the middle having paid \$325 (the group fare), the man at the window having paid \$399 (the off-season economy fare), and the man across the aisle having paid \$441.75 (one-way off-season economy, one-way peak season economy). Just ahead of them, beyond a small partition, a fifth man will be sitting in a slightly larger seat. His (first-class) fare: \$712.50.

Cartel and Chaos

While similar absurdities prevail on many domestic routes, the prime responsibility for the confusion over the North Atlantic lies with a cumbersome organization called the International Air Transport Association, which tries to standardize international airline procedures, documents, commercial operations, and, above all, fares. An unusual blend of trade association, cartel, and U.N. debating society, IATA numbers among its members almost all the world's more than one hundred international airlines. (The most prominent nonmember: the Soviet Union's Aeroflot.)

IATA follows many determinedly democratic if obviously inefficient procedures. Each agreement, whether about baggage tickets, bills of lading, or the fare from Accra to Ankara, must have the unanimous approval of the carriers involved. What's more, each airline, from Pan American, which carried almost five million passengers last year, to Air Mali, which carried fewer than twenty-five thousand, has one vote. Thus, the small state-owned or state-subsidized carriers that are in business primarily to "show the flag" can exercise a strong voice, if not a veto, in determining the rates charged by airlines that are in business primarily to show a profit. But with rare exceptions (such as when sas was fined \$20,000 for publicly disparaging the sandwiches served by other airlines) IATA has gone its way quietly since 1945, unobtrusively fixing