



SOCIAL HISTORY

THE RUINS OF GEORGETOWN

For years, state policy was planned around its dinner tables—so why did it end?

BY SIDNEY BLUMENTHAL

IN the decades after the Second World War, Georgetown, the oldest part of the nation's capital, was the capital of the Cold War—a compact community whose members were at the epicenter of the foreign-policy establishment as well as of Washington society. The most famous story about Georgetown, and “the Georgetown set,” illustrates its intimacy. The incident, now legendary, is often told as if what happened at about two in the morning on January 21, 1961, had been carefully planned. But that is not how Susan Mary Alsop tells it.

The day after the election of John F. Kennedy, the columnist Joseph Alsop had sent him a personal letter. To say today that Alsop was a columnist does not begin to explain his presence in Washington, for he was influential not only in reporting and analyzing events but in creating them. Far from being an ink-stained wretch from the “Front Page,” he was to the manner born and had become a social arbiter of the town; he had also befriended Kennedy when the young Massachusetts senator was living in a town house on N Street. “Dear Mr. President,” Alsop’s letter began, and it went on to say that he wanted to be the first to address Kennedy as “Mr. President.” Then Alsop explained that Kennedy’s new role would transform their previous relationship. “I do feel that I’ve lost a friend while gaining a President,” he wrote. Susan Mary Alsop, the

columnist’s widow, says, “Jack was upset by it. Joe meant it to be helpful.”

After the swearing in and the flurry of Inaugural Balls, Mrs. Alsop recounts, Kennedy retired for the first time to the



Joseph Alsop at home in 1969. His career framed the natural life of the Georgetown set from its start to its real finish.

White House. Jacqueline Kennedy, exhausted, immediately went to sleep. “He wandered about the White House nervously,” Mrs. Alsop goes on. “The place had a foreboding, gloomy feel, and he didn’t know where the light switches were. He wanted a drink. He didn’t know how to order one, or where they kept the drinks. He stumbled about and had the bright idea of Joe. He just thought he’d walk over.” The Secret Service trailed him, and persuaded him to get into the

Presidential limousine. He knocked on the door at 2720 Dumbarton Avenue, and waited in falling snow for it to open. Alsop poured champagne and heated up some terrapin soup. (Other accounts state that Kennedy went straight to Alsop’s after an Inaugural Ball.) Kennedy didn’t return to the White House until after three in the morning.

Mrs. Alsop believes that Joe’s letter may have been the catalyst for the visit. “Maybe that’s why he burst in on Joe,” she says. Whether planned or not, Kennedy’s appearance on Alsop’s doorstep revealed not only the columnist’s extraordinary influence but the essence of Georgetown itself: Kennedy’s home town was no longer Brookline, Massachusetts,

where he had lived only during his boyhood. Nor was it any of the other places where his father had bought houses—Bronxville, Palm Beach, Hyanis Port. Kennedy’s true home town, if he had one, was Georgetown, and his late-night call on Alsop was no less than a homing instinct. The torch had indeed been passed. Camelot was Georgetown, and Camelot was only a garden party away.

THE Georgetown set, as it had become known by the nineteen-fifties, had its beginnings in the New Deal, when government began to grow exponentially. Georgetown was originally patented, in 1703, as the Rock of Dunbarton by Ninian Beall, a Scottish soldier who had fought against Cromwell and then, in exile, rose to be-

come commander-in-chief of the Provincial Forces of Maryland. By 1751, the Rock had grown into a tobacco port, and it was then incorporated as George, in honor of George II. After the Revolution, in a deal struck between Alexander Hamilton and Thomas Jefferson in 1790, the federal city was established at George Town and came to be called Washington. Yet Georgetown has retained a separate identity ever since, with a relatively small population, distinct geographical bound-

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aries, and rows of Federal-style town houses, some quite small and others, despite modest façades, mansions with elaborate grounds. Its peak was the New Frontier, when many of the decisions in the councils of state were made among neighbors. And its fall was the Vietnam War: the shattering of the foreign-policy establishment and the shattering of Washington society were one and the same thing.

Polly Fritchey, who is married to the former journalist Clayton Fritchey, and was previously married to Frank Wisner, the Central Intelligence Agency's chief of covert action, says of the era after the Second World War, "Most of us lived in Georgetown. Frank and I were close to Avis and Chip, and Kay and Phil." Avis was married to Charles (Chip) Bohlen, a State Department expert on the Soviet Union, who became the United States Ambassador there in 1953 and, nine years later, Ambassador to France. Kay and Phil were the Grahams, the owners of the *Washington Post*. "There were Tracy and Janet Barnes, Dick Bissell. I was fond of Desmond FitzGerald." Barnes, Bissell, and FitzGerald were senior C.I.A. officials. "We did go to dinner at Mrs. Longworth's, the formal dinners on S Street." Alice Roosevelt Longworth was the daughter of Theodore Roosevelt and the wife of Nicholas Longworth, who was the Speaker of the House from 1925 to 1931. "The Sunday-night suppers were started by the Bohlens, the Joyces, and ourselves." The reference is to Robert and Jane Joyce; Bob was a State Department official. "And there were Joe and Tish and Stew": the Alsops; Stewart was Joe's brother and column-writing partner. "Very informal. Each brought a pot of stew. No protocol. As Joe took over more and more, we expanded. There were the Harrimans"—W. Averell Harriman—"the McCloys"—John J. McCloy was head of the World Bank and later High Commissioner of Germany—"and the Achesons"—Dean Acheson was Truman's Secretary of State. "We didn't see Drew Pearson. Nobody trusted him." Pearson wrote the "Washington Merry-Go-Round" column from 1932 to 1969, when it was taken over by his assistant, Jack Anderson. "Everybody saw Lippmann"—the grand columnist Walter Lippmann—"but this sort of thing wasn't particularly him. And Scotty and Sally

didn't particularly like to go out." Scotty was James Reston, the bureau chief and columnist for the *Times*. Later, the columnist Joe Kraft, who was a speechwriter for J.F.K. in the 1960 campaign, and his wife, Polly, an artist, became regulars.

Ward Just, who was a reporter for the *Washington Post* and a chronicler of the interior life of Washington in his early short stories and novels, says, "There isn't any doubt that during the nineteen-fifties, and maybe up to 1968, Georgetown was the center of things in Washington. I lived on Thirty-fourth Street. There were people like me all over the place. It was still fairly cheap to live there. As Balzac said, the harlots high and low were in that city."

Joe Alsop was the imposing host of Georgetown, and his soirées featured ten or twelve guests around his dining-room table. There would be the important and sage, the middle-rank and up-and-coming, the young and brilliant. Alsop would peer through his round tortoiseshell-rimmed glasses at the assemblage and demand talk around his own Topic A. Ward Just, who "departed that wonderful city for good and all in 1973," recalls dinners where domestic politics were never mentioned but Soviet throw weights were a matter of heated dispute. When officials from the C.I.A. spoke, their words carried extra meaning: What were they *not* saying that could be inferred from their remarks? The women around the table would smile knowingly, their eyes would brighten, and they would rarely speak.

"There was never a dinner just to have a dinner," Susan Mary Alsop says. "It was a friend passing through, often an English friend. One dinner that comes to mind was just before the Cuban missile crisis." J.F.K. was there, and Chip Bohlen was about to leave for Paris as Ambassador. "Joe thought it'd be a good idea to have the French Ambassador. The Phil Grahams. Joe persuaded Isaiah Berlin, who was in Cambridge, to come down." Alsop had become close to the political philosopher while serving as an attaché at the British Embassy during the Second World War. "Joe went in for general conversation. He would say to someone, 'What do you think of this?'—some ghastly thing. Everyone would stop, and then everyone would enter in. That night, the President made general conversation. Joe and Isaiah didn't notice that the President asked, twice, 'What in his-



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tory did the Russians do when another country pushed their backs against the wall? It was days before the crisis."

The very name Georgetown, according to Ward Just, was "used as a code phrase, 'Georgetown thinks,'" and he explains, "You meant all these people—diplomats, journalists, making policy on an ad-hoc basis around the dinner tables, like courtiers to Louis XIV."

"Salonism, that's what Susan Mary used to call it," says Marie Ridder, of the family that owns the Knight-Ridder communications company, who lived in Georgetown on and off for decades and has now moved across the Potomac, to McLean, Virginia. "When I think of a Georgetown lunch," Mrs. Ridder goes on, recalling one afternoon during the Second World War, "I think of Sunday lunch at the Achesons'. Mr. Acheson went around the table and asked people their opinion of the Second Front. I was sixteen. General Marshall was on one side. 'Now, girls,' Mr. Acheson said, 'don't be shy. Whatever you say will be just as good as what anybody else says.'"

At the start, Washington struck observers as being more like a rustic village, a county seat, than like the nation's center; Georgetown was the only long-settled area. As the buildings and monuments of Washington rose, visitors were reminded of ruins. Henry Adams, in the "Education," recalled his boyhood impression of a city of "white Greek temples in the abandoned gravel-pits of a deserted Syrian city." The image might have represented just as well the fates of the Presidencies of his New England grandfather and great-grandfather in this Southern swamp.

In 1877, Adams left the confines of Harvard for Washington, where he would write his masterwork, "History of the United States During the Administrations of Thomas Jefferson and James Madison." In his large house at 1607 H Street, across Lafayette Park from the White House, he and his wife, Clover, established the headquarters of a long-lasting social set. When Henry James famously referred to Washington as "the city of conversation," what he meant was Adams and his friends.

Three years after the Adamses set up housekeeping, a novel about the Washington social scene, entitled "Democracy," by an author who was anonymous, was published, to much speculation about who had written it. Few guessed that it was Adams. In the book, he described the travails of Mrs.

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A more modern-day Lightfoot Lee—the social star and terror of Theodore Roosevelt's Washington—was his first daughter, Alice. Alice (or Princess Alice, as she was known) was endowed with a standing above all others, and she augmented it by marrying Speaker Longworth. Alice was loyal to "Father," with an emphatic capital "F." She felt that she had the liberty to say anything, and did. She hated President Wilson—she once stood outside the White House to cast a hex on him—and she regarded her cousins Eleanor and Franklin as interlopers from the moment they turned up in town, in 1913, when Franklin was appointed Assistant Secretary of the Navy and they became regulars at Henry Adams's. By the time of their advent in the White House, she considered them usurpers; she entertained at parties by giving wicked imitations of Eleanor. Soon another Roosevelt cousin showed up in her drawing room: Joseph Alsop V. He was the son of Theodore Roosevelt's niece Corinne Robinson and of Joseph Alsop IV, who was a member of an old Yankee family—a gentleman farmer and an insurance-company president. Joe Alsop's career framed the natural life of the Georgetown set from its start to its real finish.

ALMOST everyone who rises to power in Washington comes from somewhere else. Even the most entrenched were once newcomers—from Henry Adams to Alice Roosevelt Longworth, from Joseph Alsop to Benjamin Bradlee. The Georgetown set largely shared the background of what Alsop called "the Wasp Ascendancy," but even then there were glaring exceptions, not the least being Katharine Graham. Her father, Eugene Meyer, was Jewish, was raised in California, and lived in New York. He settled in Washington in the mid-twenties, and was eventually appointed by President Herbert Hoover to head the Reconstruction Finance Corporation and the Federal Reserve. In 1933, he bought the bankrupt *Post* at auction from the McLean family, feckless local aristocrats. By the time the Georgetown set had assembled, in the late forties and early fifties, Katharine Graham was Old Washington, her family a standard of tradition. Yet even this tale of new money alchemized into



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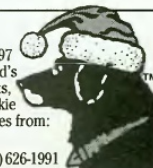
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old money is misleading. The Georgetown set was not shaped by the hydraulics of wealth.

As Robert W. Merry, in his recent biography "Taking On the World: Joseph and Stewart Alsop—Guardians of the American Century," recounts, Joe Alsop quickly became a central figure in the set's formation. Soon after his arrival in Washington, in 1935, as a twenty-five-year-old reporter for the New York *Herald Tribune*, Joe was invited by his mother's cousins Eleanor and Franklin to the White House to celebrate New Year's Eve. Cousin Alice invited him often. And Joe was sent invitations by the other grandes dames of local society.

At first, Alsop met the ancients—fellow-guests like the son of General George McClellan—who were known as the "cave dwellers," as if they had been there before anyone else arrived. Alsop, though, soon discovered—and vastly preferred—the energetic younger people who had been drawn to Washington as F.D.R.'s Brain Trust to create the modern American government. Many of them had settled in Georgetown, renting cheap houses in a section that respectable Washington thought of as a "Negro slum." The regulars of the new set included the President's assistants, the ebullient Tommy Corcoran and the ascetic Ben Cohen; the new chairman of the Securities and Exchange Commission, William O. Douglas, and his assistant, Abe Fortas; and a rangy congressman from Texas, Lyndon Baines Johnson. Alsop was now invited to the social occasions held by the mentor of the New Deal boys, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter.

As the Second World War approached, the bedrock of Alsop's world view—his internationalism, the essence of belief of what became the Georgetown set—was being hammered into him by events. In 1940, just before the fall of France to the Nazis, he published a book, "American White Paper," about the difficulties that the Roosevelt Administration had in forging an internationalist foreign policy in the face of isolationist public opinion. F.D.R. quietly helped provide him with sources.

Alsop had begun writing his nationally syndicated column in 1937, and intervention in the war became his crusade. He joined a newly formed organization, the Century Group (which, according to legend, was founded at the Century Club, in New York), with the intention of arousing the public to action. Among other members

whom Alsop became friendly with was Dean Acheson, a Washington lawyer and the son of an Episcopal bishop, who was born in Middletown, Connecticut.

Alsop had a splendid war: first, he was a prisoner of war in Hong Kong; then, after a prisoner exchange, he got F.D.R.'s closest aide, Harry Hopkins (who lived on N Street before he moved into a room in the White House), to have him assigned to the lend-lease mission in China, and there he became the confidant of the circle around Chiang Kai-shek. Stewart Alsop had a lovely war, too, participating in the secret Operation Jedburgh mission of the Office of Strategic Services. He parachuted into France and wound up leaving London with a young English bride, Tish Hankey. There was no greater glamour than that attached to the O.S.S., which after the war was transformed into the C.I.A.

In December of 1945, Joe and Stew began writing a syndicated column together, "Matter of Fact," and also longer political pieces, for the *Saturday Evening Post*, which was then the great mass magazine of Middle America. On the subject of the Cold War, Stew and Joe were of a single mind. They beat an incessant tocsin for toughness toward the Soviets. Their points of reference were the interventionist points that had been salient in the debate before the American entry into the war: preparedness and non-appeasement.

THE first inrush into Georgetown had been during the New Deal, and the second had come during the war. Then, after the war, the national-security structure that had been built up was expanded greatly to fight the Cold War, for which Georgetown became home base. The Washington branch of the establishment—the Georgetown set—was hardly an oligarchy or an aristocracy. Its social coherence did not derive from old-school ties, though there had been old schools. It did not come from inherited wealth, though for many there were trust funds. Its crucible was the Second World War. "The wartime associations just carried on," says William Bundy, who served as Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs during the Kennedy Administration. "There was a level of trust, from having shared in a highly successful national enterprise—the opposite of what you have now."

Those who led the newly created C.I.A. had all had good wars, and most had been bored with a return to civilian



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life and the humdrum of corporate law. Once they had settled in Georgetown, they lent the place an air of bravado. Tracy Barnes, who had worked with Frank Wisner at Carter Ledyard, on Wall Street, in the nineteen-thirties, "missed the war," according to his wife, Janet, as Evan Thomas reports in his engrossing 1995 chronicle *The Very Best Men—Four Who Dared: The Early Years of the CIA*. "When Frank was asked, he was bored with being in New York," his former wife, Polly Fritchey, says. "It all came out of the O.S.S. and what to do with intelligence. . . . We in the C.I.A. were very, very close. We were close to Allen"—Allen Dulles, the director of the C.I.A. "He'd come to Sunday-night suppers. . . . We all had connections to the British and worked with them in intelligence during the war. We all kept up with the old friends."

Alsop soon became the set's Cold War panjandrum. In 1949, he built a house according to his own design, using cinder block and sprayed-on stucco, and decorated the interior with Japanese prints and screens, Ming vases, and eighteenth-century French antiques. He adapted the old formalities to his own ends, hiring a Filipino couple to serve as butler and maid and as cooks, and holding regular dinner parties. It was at one Alsop party—held on June 24, 1950—that word came that the Republic of Korea had been invaded by the North.

The early postwar years may have been the dawn of the American century, but Korea was a grim, seemingly interminable war, which undermined the confidence formed in the Second World War. Senator Joseph McCarthy rose to prominence on reports of American forces being overwhelmed by Chinese hordes at the Yalu River and on investigations of Communist infiltration into the United States government. The conviction of Alger Hiss, a former State Department official, on perjury charges relating to accusations of espionage activities on behalf of the Soviet Union provided McCarthy with a model for what he wished to do to the members of the Georgetown set, a number of whom—most notably Acheson—refused to denounce Hiss.

From the start, both Alsops were champions against McCarthyism, which Joe called the "native fascist party." Twice, Joe was summoned before congressional subcommittees. The *Herald Tribune* started to buckle: it held up a column by Alsop, and even assailed him in an edito-

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rial. But Alsop's opposition to McCarthy, which remained steadfast throughout, helped to precipitate McCarthy's downfall.

Georgetown was a place of public power and of deep secrets—personal and state. The division between journalism and officialdom was far more blurred than it is now, even though the revolving door between the two worlds now spins faster. And Georgetown was a neighborhood where public personages managed to lead private lives that remained, by today's standards, astonishingly private. Alsop had perhaps the most striking double life—renowned columnist and informal adviser to Presidents by day and evening, and homosexual adventurer by night—which was an extreme but not altogether atypical example. (Alsop's homosexuality made him especially vulnerable to McCarthy's attempt to smear him, and thus made his courage all the greater.) Consider Philip Graham, who struggled with manic depression, or the private life of J.F.K. It was not just the more discreet and deferential culture of the time that made it possible for Georgetown to keep its secrets; what made possible the self-containment of this political society was, above all, the atmosphere of war and the elite consensus it bred.

McCarthyism was a thoroughgoing threat to Georgetown, not only as an effort to bring liberal anti-Communism into disrepute but also as an effort to crush the social life that was inextricable from the politics. Before 1941, the people whom Acheson called "primitives" had been isolationists; now they had assumed the garb of anti-Communist crusaders. As far as the Georgetowners were concerned, this was the old battle with the Republican right in a new key, and the siege bound the set more tightly together than ever. "The McCarthy period was the worst period of my life," Mrs. Fritchey says. "Frank and my friends were attacked, careers were ruined."

For the Georgetown set, the fifties were terrifying years, and its members desperately wanted to escape from what they collectively felt was a low, dishonest decade. Their means appeared in the shape of John F. Kennedy.

A MONTH after Kennedy's post-midnight visit to Alsop's Georgetown home, Alsop married Susan Mary; she was a descendant of John Jay, who was one of the Founding Fathers, and she was the widow of William Patten, who was an

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American diplomat and an integral member of the set. In Susan Mary, Alsop had a companion and an elegant hostess. Their dinners sparkled. Alsop, who had long been a Kennedy confidant, was probably closer to Jackie than to Jack. "Joe, unlike the Kennedys, could talk to her about eighteenth-century French furniture, architecture—you know, style," Susan Mary Alsop says.

As for J.F.K., Joe "liked him a lot, used to go to that ramshackle house on N Street," Mrs. Alsop says. "Joe always said there was a half-eaten sandwich on the mantelpiece." His greatest gift to Kennedy was his invention of the so-called "missile gap" with the Soviet Union, which Kennedy used to enormous effect in the 1960 campaign: it allowed him to attack Nixon for softness and lack of preparedness. Kennedy, to Alsop, was not only a source of social charm but someone who could uphold an Alsopian standard of Cold War militance. J.F.K.'s assassination plunged Alsop into profound mourning.

Alsop knew Lyndon Johnson, of course—he had known him since he was a New Deal congressman, and had even joined with Phil Graham in lobbying Kennedy at the 1960 Convention to name Johnson his running mate—and Stew Alsop also knew him. But it was not the same. Averell Harriman confided to Susan Mary Alsop a sentiment that she says "summed it up for many of us": "When Kennedy was alive was the last time I felt young." By then, American advisers had been sent to Vietnam.

In time, the Vietnam War became the nemesis of the Cold Warriors of the Georgetown set, and the confidence that had been ingrained in them by the Second World War and had been only muted by the fifties became the sign of their hubris. Joe Alsop, the Asia expert, led the charge. During the Eisenhower Administration, Alsop had translated the Munich analogy into the domino theory, which laid out with iron logic how one country after another would fall to Communism if there was appeasement in Vietnam. By 1965, Alsop was goading L.B.J. to escalate the war. He was among the first to use the terms "hawk" and "dove" to describe the division of public opinion; the words applied to what proved to be irrevocable splits within Georgetown.

In 1966, the Washington *Post's* correspondent in Vietnam, Ward Just, who had been wounded by a grenade, was back in town. "Joe arranged that I be invited

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to a dinner party at the Secretary of Defense's house," Just says. Robert S. McNamara had become a great favorite in Georgetown. (Nearly thirty years later, the party launching his memoir, "In retrospect," in which he called the war "wrong, terribly wrong," was given by Katharine Graham.) "The idea was I would talk to him a little bit about the way I saw the war. I was fading fast. I wasn't seeing any progress, God knows. I walk in, and there's McNamara and his nice wife, Joe Alsop, Bobby Kennedy and Ethel, two or three Defense people, a senator. . . . The talk was all quite general. At dessert, everybody talked about Vietnam. Afterward, at that time in Washington, in places of that sort, the men and the women separated, the British way of doing things. We gents all went into a study, where the talk about Vietnam continued. What is odd about it: I do not believe I uttered a single sentence that whole evening. . . . It was evident it was staged so I would get on the team. They were pulling documents, captured enemy documents, out of their wallets—the latest stats and figures. They were not interested in anyone who had actually spent time there. They were like tourists."

Not long after this period, Alsop began shouting at people at dinner parties, not in the boisterous fashion of the past but in an anger that sometimes frightened people. He even accused those who disagreed with him of being Russian spies. Coming from someone who had had nasty experiences with Russian spies himself (in 1957, the K.G.B. had tried to blackmail him into becoming an agent by photographing him in bed with a young man in a Moscow hotel) and with McCarthyism, this was a particularly tragic derangement. "I had to listen to Joe's tirades," Mrs. Fritchey says. "He was just cross with everyone because they wouldn't do what he said."

Late in 1967, with the war going badly and dissension growing at home, Alsop invited Harry McPherson, President Johnson's Special Counsel, to lunch at his home. McPherson recalls, "He would speak angrily of the 'doves' and of people within the Administration who were raising questions about what we were doing and the chances for success and the shortcomings of the South Vietnamese, and, when I stood up for people who had those doubts, Alsop really lectured me. Instead of my being able to vent my concerns in full, I simply found myself listening to this guy, who became almost apoplectic. . . .

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The last hour, I said almost nothing, and Alsop poured out his contempt for all the people I thought were raising some damned good questions." When McPherson left in his White House limousine, he says, "Alsop was standing outside the front door . . . shaking his finger at me."

By now, Alsop was widely seen as having become a self-parody. In 1970, Art Buchwald—who was a former columnist for the *International Herald Tribune* and a pal of Ben Bradlee's, and had moved to Georgetown in 1962 to become the Washington Post's resident humorist—wrote a play, "Sheep on the Runway," that ridiculed a columnist named Joe Mayflower, who creates a splendid little war in a remote land so he can write about it. Alsop threatened to sue, but his friends convinced him that he would only make matters worse.

In time, members of the Kennedy and Johnson Administrations who had belonged to the Georgetown set, like McGeorge Bundy and William Bundy, left town. So did Walter Lippmann, who had been as much a pillar as Alsop. Lippmann was neither an outsider by nature nor combative, like Alsop, but in his opposition to the war he became increasingly isolated in Washington, and disillusioned. In 1967, he moved to New York.

The Georgetown set had borne many burdens in the Cold War and had paid a high price. Frank Wisner retired from the C.I.A. in 1962, suffering from manic depression; he killed himself four years later. Phil Graham committed suicide in 1963. Richard Bissell became a scapegoat for the failed Bay of Pigs invasion, early in the New Frontier, and was forced out of the C.I.A. Tracy Barnes was fired in 1966. Desmond Fitzgerald, a quiet skeptic of the war in Vietnam, died suddenly on a tennis court in 1967. In 1970, Stewart Alsop wrote that "the old Wasp elite . . . is dying and it may be dead."

THE only person anyone in the Georgetown set knew who was really friendly with Richard Nixon was, perhaps not surprisingly, Alice Longworth. By the late sixties, most of its members had serious qualms about the war, and Averell Harriman funded and was a supporter of the protests of the Vietnam Moratorium Committee, which brought out millions of demonstrators across the country. But, true to form, Joe Alsop's favorite guest of honor at his dinners during the Nixon years was Henry Kissinger, his hope for Vietnam.

Nixon was suspicious of these invita-

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tions to Kissinger to join the epicenter of the despised establishment that had rejected him. But the President grasped how the last hawk could be used. H. R. Haldeman, the White House chief of staff, recorded in his diary for July 10, 1971, a conversation with "P" (the President) about Kissinger: "He has to quit seeing anyone from the *Times* or *Post* on any basis, including the columnists, except for Joe Alsop." According to Susan Mary Alsop, she and Joe found themselves at the Nixon White House once a year, for the annual birthday party that Nixon held for Mrs. Longworth. But under Nixon "the center"—Washington, the Georgetown set, even Alsop's personal life—could not hold. In 1973, Susan Mary, unable to bear Joe's insults and denigrations any longer, left him (though she remained the hostess for his dinners). By then, Nixon himself was being consumed by the Watergate scandal.

The year 1974 began with Chip Bohlen's death, on New Year's Day. In May, after a lingering bout with cancer, Stew died. "I really hate this city," Joe wrote in a letter to Isaiah Berlin.

Joe's last column, published in December of 1974, was an encomium to the past, a tribute to his friends and neighbors, who were in truth the community that had run the country's foreign policy. "The great Americans of the postwar period were the leaders I followed," he wrote. "Theirs were the ideas I shared (and still share). But all that is over now, for the postwar period is clearly at an end; and we have to find new bearings." He then retreated into a private, apolitical aestheticism. After writing a wonderful memoir, "I've Seen the Best of It," which simply stopped when it reached Vietnam, Alsop died, of cancer, in 1989.

Robert Merry's excellent "Taking On the World" wisely steers clear of pop psychology, but he does not manage to fully explain Alsop's cult of toughness. Joe Alsop was a fat, myopic, coddled boy, a closeted homosexual, who transformed himself into a Rough Rider. His perspective was that of an old-fashioned Rooseveltian, but his bully enthusiasms frequently had a serrated edge of hysteria, which was not shared by others of his political outlook or, in the case of his brother, genetic heritage. Another recent volume—"Joe Alsop's Cold War," by Edwin M. Yoder, Jr.—raises a larger question, which could be answered only at the Cold War's end. "Fortunately," he writes of the Alsop broth-

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ers, "their gloomier forebodings turned out to be not so much incorrect as inconsequential."

AFTER Watergate, the Washington whirl spun even faster than before, clustered around the *Post's* great editor, Ben Bradlee. But the Georgetown set was broken up. Bradlee, like many of its members, was to the manner born—he was a Crowninshield, an old New Englander, named for Madison's Secretary of the Navy—and he created himself as a cussing sailor and a roguish flouter of tradition. He was a bit in awe of his friend J.F.K., also from Massachusetts, for merging traits of Harp and Brahmin. Bradlee's period of precedence in Washington—from the mid-sixties through the eighties—was a time of Republican political dominance. The set that congregated around him and his wife, the journalist Sally Quinn—especially in their grand days, in the eighties, of holding court in a mansion that had belonged to Robert Todd Lincoln—was more a media pecking order than a new Georgetown set. With Bradlee's retirement as editor, five years ago, the last important power of the Second World War generation departed from the scene.

The succession of Presidents after Nixon served as markers of the slow decline of Georgetown in the sense of anyone's caring "what Georgetown thinks." When Jimmy Carter first arrived in town, the Fritchys gave him a party with the usual suspects, and, according to Mrs. Fritchey, "he never responded." Mrs. Graham, of course, in her castle on R Street, reigned and reigned, like good Queen Victoria, but it was not until Ronald Reagan was elected that she became personally close to an occupant of the White House: like no other First Lady, Nancy Reagan, who was Mrs. Graham's contemporary, was eager for her friendship. Feeling somewhat vulnerable and insecure, Mrs. Reagan sought the approval of Georgetown. "She had her social secretary, Muffy Brandon, call up, asking several of us to have small ladies' luncheons for Mrs. Reagan," Susan Mary Alsop says. "We all did it. It wasn't cozy. She was shrewd as a fox. She wasn't going to be a friend of mine in a million years. I'm not interested in clothes and Hollywood gossip." But Mrs. Graham and Meg Greenfield, Mrs. Graham's close friend and the editor of the *Post's* editorial page, developed and maintained a real friendship with Mrs. Reagan. "She

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had the foresight to make friends of people who could possibly be her enemies," Gahl Burt, who served as Mrs. Reagan's social secretary after Muffy Brandon, said of her employer.

The Bushes, however, had no interest in Georgetown. "They stuck with a close little group of people," Mrs. Fritchey says. "We had them here one Sunday night for dinner. They looked as if they were having a bad time." But, through its social stagnation, the long Republican era fostered the complacent notion, even in Georgetown, that everything was just as it had been. Almost all the Republicans lived across the Potomac, and the few officials who came to Georgetown parties—George Shultz, Colin Powell—were anything but ideologues, and lent precisely the impression that the old days were prolonged, if enervated.

The women, many of them widows by now, kept up the social forms, but without the substance of power. Evangeline Bruce, the widow of David K. E. Bruce, who had been Ambassador to Britain (they met when he worked for the O.S.S. in wartime London, and he hired her as his assistant), was, even in her seventies, a woman of exceptional beauty, with a deep sensibility to literature and art. She held occasional Sunday brunches and small dinners. Her affairs took place under the nimbus of her husband—a diplomat, confidant to Presidents, and benefactor of the arts—who was aptly described by his biographer, Nelson D. Lankford, in the title of his book, "The Last American Aristocrat." Ronald Steel, the biographer of Walter Lippmann, was a frequent guest. "Evangeline said that we can't have a salon in Washington," he said. "A salon is about exchanging ideas, but Washington is about power. . . . By the time I was invited to some of these places, it seemed like one of the things you do but you shouldn't have illusions about. It was interesting, amusing, but not about power. All it was was pleasant." (Evangeline Bruce died late last year, and testimonials to her life were delivered at a memorial at the residence of the British Ambassador which was organized by Susan Mary Alsop and Katharine Graham.)

The only new force on the scene was Pamela Digby Churchill Hayward Harriman. In 1971, at a dinner party at Katharine Graham's, she saw Averell Harriman, with whom she had had an affair in wartime London, thirty years earlier. They soon married. Many of the remaining members



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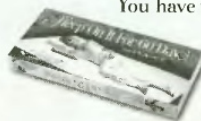
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of the Georgetown set regarded her as an adventuress. "Joe never liked her," Mrs. Alsop says. "I never liked her. I never trusted her. I liked her when she was down on her luck." But the aged Harriman beamed as his energetic wife set about making herself the *maitresse* of the out-of-power Democrats. She used his money to do what nobody else deigned to do. She created a social center for the lower orders—chairmen of subcommittees of the House and obscure governors of distant states. One of those she befriended was Bill Clinton. And she was particularly instrumental in promoting the career of the rising diplomat and political player Richard Holbrooke. When Clinton was elected, he appointed her Ambassador to France. She might have finally prevailed as social arbiter in Washington, but she chose Paris.

THROUGH Bill Clinton's first two years in office, the main idea that some in Georgetown had about his Presidency was that without their wisdom he was lost—and that if they were appreciated as counsellors the legendary Georgetown would be restored. Clinton's early difficulties only proved that they were the true Washington and he was the naïve interloper, another Carter, even though he had invited almost all of them to small dinners at the White House. The most antipathetic tended to be those only a bit older than the Clintons—people in their fifties, too young to be part of the original Georgetown set but resting at the top of the media-dominated status hierarchy that froze during the Republican interregnum of the eighties. Most of their elders tended to be supportive.

But the Clinton Administration is of yet another generation. It is meritocratic to its core, composed of the middle class risen through the professions, and not emanating from the "Wasp Ascendancy." The bad war, not the good one, was their formative experience. Most important, the majority of the key players have since 1980 engaged in the effort to finesse and overcome the Republican era and are united

by that enterprise. Whether this group constitutes the rudiments of a new establishment will take years to determine.

If it does, it will do so against the grain of the post-Alsop, and even the post-Bradlee, Washington press corps. Alsop operated on the postwar consensus in which assumptions were implicitly shared, including the idea that, whatever people's perspectives were on this or that event or issue, almost all those involved were basically on the same side. Bradlee was willing to challenge Nixon on the Pentagon Papers and on Watergate, but in doing so he always retained a firm sense of proportion between the significant and the trivial, between the true scandal, involving "a cancer on the Presidency," and a snark hunt. He had to take a sure measure because he assumed enormous risks. But the Washington media society of today is far more cloistered and rigid than the one of the past, even as it claims a greater worldliness and celebrity. The death of privacy and a ubiquitous wariness of unguarded talk in front of members of the press have further dampened the city of conversation. Skepticism has curdled into cynicism without substance; "attitude" substitutes for purpose; an antipolitical reflex parades as understanding; and commentators self-importantly preen on talk shows, though they're not important—the opposite of the Alsops, Lippmann, and Reston.

Washington has also been systematically riven by a well-funded conservative counter-establishment, which has come into being since the demise of Nixon with the aim of casting a deliberate shadow over what its members perceived as an overbearing "liberal establishment"—even as the Georgetown set crumbled. This elite has its institutes, think tanks, magazines, and columnists (from George Will, who arrived in Washington as a Republican Senate staffer, to William Safire, who came to write speeches for Nixon, and on down), and its regular social functions. The counter-establishment even has its own pantomime parody of the aristocratic hostess—Arianna Stassinopoulos Huf-



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ington, the New Age cultist, author of antifeminist and feminist works, and wife of the oil heir and failed United States Senate candidate Michael Huffington. The conservative crowd is intent on creating an alternative universe, with its own stars, solar systems, and constellations.

Bob Dole and his wife, Elizabeth, were among the most visible people in Washington, and yet also among the most isolated, even from these conservatives. For decades, Dole's life consisted of his apartment in the Watergate complex (where the couple only occasionally met) and the Senate. His identity lay almost completely within the confines of that institution, and his outside social life consisted of a few friends, such as Robert Strauss, a consummate Washington player, who, like the Doles, has a condominium in the Sea View complex in Bal Harbour, Florida—a complex whose lobby is decorated with pictures of Washington monuments.

The new, high-energy conservative social scene was supposed to have been organized around the Sun King of Newt Gingrich, but his collapse exposed the pretense of social authority before it was ever established. Now the new rightists' fervor is seen as mere factionalism, and has caused moderate Republicans to keep a distance from them. "I'm really fearful of the thirty-somethings," Gahl Burt says. "They're unbecoming and intolerant. I look at those older people—they're dignified, they have great perspective on world events, they're educated. I don't see who takes over from that."

"That's a kind of people that almost utterly doesn't exist anymore," Harry McPherson, L.B.J.'s Special Counsel, who is today a Washington attorney, reflects about the Georgetown set. "That class, that type, has vanished." He sees the set's members as being a part of their time, the long twilight struggle that has ended. "It's fragmented not only in terms of the people here but in terms of the enemy. That was a function of a long struggle against a giant enemy. How to address it—how to fight it and win it—was a matter of consuming interest, causing one to spend one's life on a daily basis. And it's over." Once again, Washington presents a vista of ruins, but ruins constantly under construction.

"We're all so old or dead," Susan Mary Alsop says. "There's almost no one left. Just the Fritcheys and Kay and me, if you like. You see, they've all died. You see, they're gone. So on, and so on." ♦

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