Week 4: April 19

Washington as a Symbol in Literature and Film

Question of the week: Do movies typically portray Washington as better as or worse than it actually is?
More Dangerous than Moscow

WASHINGTON lies slightly south of Madrid and west of Maracaibo on a swamp littered with marble imitations of ancient Roman and Greek architecture.

Its tallest structure is an obelisk with which the United States honors its first President, who was not an Egyptian but an eighteenth-century colonial aristocrat and heir to a fortune built on slave labor.

The city was planned by a Frenchman. The majority of its inhabitants are of African descent. In one respect, all are in a class with conquered enemy aliens in occu-
pied territory: residence in Washington deprives them of the right of self-government.

Washingtonians come in all colors and nationalities, but no matter how disparate their origins, sooner or later all find a common bond in two things. In the summer it is the desperate contest between man and crab grass, a weed that flourishes with maddening virulence in the subtropical damp. The rest of the year it is politics, an occult art practiced by the city's famous, and incessantly discussed, though rarely understood, by everyone else.

Washington's chief industry is tourism, a degrading business that consists in being looked at, photographed, and rummaged by vaguely hostile aliens wearing ridiculous shirts and smoked glasses.

One of the city's most popular tourist attractions is the Federal Bureau of Investigation, one of several federal police headquarters, where the visitor may examine a large fingerprint file, inspect death masks of sundry hoodlums, and enjoy an exhibition of submachine-gun firing.

The city is also famous for Japanese cherry trees, which frame the view of a Roman pantheon memorializing Thomas Jefferson, a dangerous revolutionary who founded the Democratic party.

Physically, the city Washington most resembles is New Delhi. Both are artificial cities with broad shaded boulevards converging on traffic circles; both are characterized by massive stone piles in which the musty, sealing-wax business of government is conducted.

There is no conspicuous Mogul architecture in Washington, but there is a splendidly delicate Arabian mosque set at the top of an elm-covered hill. The Capitol dome, a local landmark, is a cast-iron imitation of Wren's on St. Paul's Cathedral in London. The White House, another landmark, is a copy of an eighteenth-century Irish mansion—Leinster House in Dublin. The Pentagon is an unabashed steal from Euclid, the Greek.

The memorial to Abraham Lincoln, a backwoodsman stigmatized by his contemporaries as a doltish rustic, is a Greek temple.

The Supreme Court is classic Greek with affidavit pomposity; the drabber federal office buildings, electronic-Roman; the private office buildings, cut-rate Le Corbusier.

Washington is bounded on the south by the Potomac River, which not only serves as the city's chief sewer and water-supply source but also provides a natural frontier with hot-tempered, underdeveloped Dixie. On the east, west, and north, artificial boundary lines mark its frontier with the United States.

Relations with both powers are usually strained, but like Switzerland, Washington is assured of safety from overpowering, testy neighbors by the mutual understanding that her neutral ground is more valuable as a
diplomatic, financial, and espionage center than as real estate.

Neither side has much use for Washington. North and South, it is generally despised as an unworthy place where men of mean talents but cunning proclivities conspire to inconvenience decent people beyond its frontiers.

According to custom, after the Americans have chosen a President he is required to come to Washington to work. Men campaigning for the presidency often find it helpful to exploit primitive American suspicions about the city and so travel through the country promising to work the American's vengeance on Washington.

In 1952 an astonishingly successful campaign was built on the slogan "Let's clean up the mess in Washington."

"Washington," Senator James O. Eastland declared in 1960, "is a literal cesspool of crime and violence."

"Yes," Senator Barry Goldwater said in 1959, "I fear Washington more than I do Moscow."

Few American politicians consider a campaign speech complete without a denunciation of "bureaucrats," a universally understood synonym for faceless Washington conspirators who are presumed responsible for whatever ails the electorate at any given time.

Considering the constant tension in relations with its powerful neighbors, it is not surprising that Washington minds its step. In deference to the official puritanism of the Yankees, it discourages all but the most desultory forms of local sin. Thus, it is unlawful to take liquor in a public place while standing erect, or in any position on Sunday. Night life is distinctly dispiriting for the casual visitor; anyone who has visited Bayeux after the tapestry has been locked up for the night may easily imagine the plight of the stranger roaming downtown Washington in search of diversion. Let him absently cross some deserted intersection when the traffic light is red, and he invites arrest for jaywalking.

Travelers may enter Washington without visa, passport, or customs inspection. (Maryland residents, however, are liable to criminal punishment if caught taking out more than one quart of Washington whiskey.) The easy passage into the city is a principal cause of the humiliation so many Americans suffer when they get to Washington, for it tempts them to assume that they are merely passing from one patch of friendly motherland to another. Such people are dangerously lulled, and Washington is no place for the lulled. Some of its most famous men have had knives placed so professionally in their backs that they have learned about it only by reading the next morning's newspapers.

These pages represent an effort to supply a little of the practical information essential for survival in Washington. There is no attempt to present the definitive work, or even to explore deeply the basic subject matter that should be understood before entering the city. For
example, there is no discussion of how to disconcert overconfident lawyers from the bench of the Supreme Court. While important to potential Supreme Court justices, such information is too specialized for a general survey of this kind.

Each reader may feel the need of additional study to prepare himself for the specific milieu he plans to enter. Thus, the man coming to Washington to be investigated will find advice on how to upstage a congressional committee, which may inspire him to make his own investigation into the techniques of successful perjury.

What other kind of information should go into a basic survey? It will vary with the individual. The newly elected senator may want to familiarize himself with the art of the laying on of hands, or as the master political masseur, Lyndon Johnson, calls it, "pressing the flesh." The young person planning a civil service career may require instruction in exhausting the citizen caller. The budding Washington correspondent should know that the White House may be the graveyard of his career if he lacks the vocal stamina of a hog caller.

Everyone planning to live awhile in Washington should be aware of the supreme importance of lunch in the city's social fabric, as well as the techniques of name dropping so essential to eminence in whichever circle he may yearn to conquer. He should grasp the importance of Obfuscation, an art he must master if he is to be considered wise when he knows nothing. He should

know of the inestimable value of the "inside story," that precious morsel of unprinted gossip which is the *sine qua non* of conversational brilliance in grand salons and over the water cooler.

Even people determined never to set foot in Washington will find a study of Crystal-Balling and Hindsighting helpful to their understanding of the political news and useful for building a reputation for sagacity in their own communities.

In fact, the person willing to examine the natives dispassionately, to glance at their curious institutions and mores and the odd things they do, may conclude in the end that while Washington and Washingtonians are even sillier than he had thought, they are not half so sinister.

This, then, is a book dedicated to easing tensions between the United States of America and the District of Columbia.
The Natives:  
Their Work and Curious Temperament

What are they like, these Washingtonians? Very much as you and I would be if we found ourselves in the curious jobs that Washingtonians perform. Which is to say, cocksure and uncertain, devious and naive, ebullient and melancholy, pompous and frivolous, bored, hard-working, shiftless, wide-eyed and tired of it all, full of dreams and schemes, and, without quite realizing it, a little absurd, for they are mostly common men distinguished largely by possession of uncommon jobs.

Let us try to catch the city in action and, through a montage of events, to capture the essence of the Washingtonian at his daily routine. Here, with all incidents based on fact or sound probability, is the chronology of a fairly representative Washington day out of the recent past:

Between 6 and 7 A.M.

Alarm clocks ring beside four senators running for the presidency. In the moment between rising and shaving, each yields to the dawn's awful intimation of mortality and asks himself: "Is it really worth it?"

At the White House the President of the United States rises, accidentally kicking to the floor the cowboy story with which he had read himself to sleep last night. Yawning at the dark silhouette of the Washington Monument visible from his bedroom window, he remembers that he must attend a "prayer breakfast" at the Mayflower Hotel with a prominent evangelist and twenty-three congressmen and then lunch with an asthmatic tyrant from the Middle East. Retrieving the cowboy story, he fleetingly recalls his boyhood dream of horseback living under prairie stars and asks himself: "What am I doing here?"

In a network television studio a television correspondent famous in eighty million living rooms edits the questions he will ask an equally famous labor leader who has been accusing the President of callousness to
Prologue

Nick Naylor had been called many things since becoming chief spokesman for the Academy of Tobacco Studies, but until now no one had actually compared him to Satan. The conference speaker, himself the recipient of munificent government grants for his unyielding holy war against the industry that supplied the coughing remnant of fifty-five million American smokers with their cherished guilty pleasure, was now pointing at the image projected onto the wall of the cavernous hotel ballroom. There were no horns or tail; he had a normal haircut, and looked like someone you might pass in the hallway, but his skin was bright red, as if he'd just gone swimming in nuclear reactor water; and the eyes—the eyes were bright, alive, vibrantly pimpy. The caption was done in the distinctive cigarette-pack typeface, "Hysterica Bold," they called it at the office. It said, WARNING: SOME PEOPLE WILL SAY ANYTHING TO SELL CIGARETTES.

The audience—consisting of 2,500 "health professionals," thought Nick, who leafing through the list of participants, counted few actual M.D.s—purred at the slide. Nick knew this purr well. He caught the whiff of catnip in the air, imagined them sharpening their claws on the sides of their chairs. "I'm certain that our next... panelist," the speaker hesitated, the word just too neutral to describe a man who earned his living by killing 1,200 human beings a day. Twelve hundred people—two jumbo jet planeloads a day of men, women, and children. Yes, innocent children, denied their bright futures, those happy moments of scoring the winning touchdowns, of high school and college graduations, marriage, parenthood, professional fulfill-
ment, breakthroughs in engineering, medicine, economics, who
knows how many Nobel Prize winners? Lambs, slaughtered by Nich-
olas Naylor and the tobacco industry, fitted and so slickly represented.
More than 400,000 a year. And approaching the half-million mark.
Genocide, that’s what it was, enough to make you weep, if you had a
heart, the thought of so many of these... victims, their lives stubbed
out upon the ashtray of corporate greed by this tall, trim, nicely tai-
lored forty-year-old yuppie executioner who, of course, “needs... no... no... introduction.”

Not much point in trying to soften up this crowd with the usual in-
sincere humor that In Washington passed for genuine self-deprecation.
Safer to try insincere earnestness. “Believe it or not,” he began, fiddling
with his silk tie now to show that he was nervous when in fact he
was not, “I’m delighted to be here at the Clean Lungs 2000 sym-
posium.” With the twentieth century fast whispering and banging its
way to a conclusion, every conference in sight was calling itself Blah
Blah 2000 so as to confer on itself a sense of millennial urgency that
would not be lost on the relevant congressional appropriations com-
mittees, or “tits” as they were privately called by the special interest
groups who made their livelihood by sucking at them. Nick won-
dered if this had been true of conferences back in the 1890s. Had
there been a federally subsidized Buggy Whips 1900 symposium?

The audience did not respond to Nick’s introductory outpouring
of earnestness. But they weren’t hissing at him. He glanced down at
the nearest table, a roundtable of dedicated haters. The haters usually
took the closest seats, scribbling furiously on their conference pads—
paid for by U.S. taxpayers—which they’d found inside their pseudo-
suede attachés, also paid for by amber waves of taxpayers, neatly
embossed with the conference’s logo, CLEAN LUNGS 2000. They
would take those home with them and give them to their kids, saving
the price of a giant T-shirt. My folks went to Washington and all I got was
this dippy attaché. The haters, whipped by the previous speakers into
ecstasies of Neo-Puritanical fervor, were by now in an advanced state
of butlock. They glowered up at him.

“Because,” Nick continued, already exhausted by the whole
dreary futility of it, “it is my closely held belief that what we need is
not more confrontation, but more consultation.” A direct steal from
the Jesse Jackson School of Meaningless but Rhymed Oratory, but it
worked. “And I’m especially grateful to the Clean Lungs 2000 leader-
ship for...” a note of wry amusement to let them know that he knew
that the Clean Lungs 2000 leadership had fought like marines on
Mount Suribachi to keep him out of the conference... finally
agreeing to make this a conference in the fullest sense of that word. It’s
always been my closely held belief that with an issue as complex as
ours, what we need is more talking about each other, but more
talking to each other.” He paused a beat to let their brains process his
subtle substituting of “issue” for “the cigarette industry’s right to
slaughter half a million Americans a year.”

So far so good. No one stood up and shouted, “Mass murderer!”
Difficult to get back on track after being compared to Hitler, Stalin, or
Pol Pot.

But then it happened, during the Q and A. Some woman about
halfway back got up, said that Nick “seemed like a nice young man,”
prompting guffaws; said he wanted “to share a recent experience”
with him. Nick braced. For him, no “shared experience” with any-
one in this crowd could possibly bode well. She launched into a
graphic account of a dear departed’s “courageous battle” with lung
cancer. Then, more in sadness than in anger, she asked Nick, “How
can you sleep at night?”

No stranger to these occasions, Nick nodded sympathetically as
Uncle Harry’s heroic last hours were luridly recounted. “I appreciate
your sharing that with us all, ma’am, and I think I speak for all of us in
this room when I say that we regret your tragic loss, but I think the
issue here before us today is whether we as Americans want to abide
by such documents as the Declaration of Independence, the Constitu-
tion, and the Bill of Rights. If the answer is yes, then I think our
course is clear. And I think your uncle, who was I’m sure a very fine
man, were he here today, might just agree that if we go tampering
with the bedrock principles that our Founding Fathers laid down,
many of whom, you’ll recall, were themselves tobacco farmers, just
for the sake of indulging a lot of frankly unscientific speculation, then
we’re placing at risk not only our own freedoms, but those of our
children, and our children’s children.” It was crucial not to pause here-
to let the stunning non sequitur embed itself in their neural proces-
sors. “Anti-tobacco hysteria is not exactly new. You remember, of
course, Murad the Fourth, the Turkish sultan.” Of course no one had
the faintest notion who on earth Murad the Fourth was, but people like a little intellectual flattery. “Murad, remember, got it into his head that people shouldn't smoke, so he outlawed it, and he would go out at night dressed up like a regular Turk and wander the streets of Istanbul pretending to have a nicotine fit and begging people to sell him some tobacco. And if someone took pity on him and gave him something to smoke—whammo!—Murad would behead him on the spot. And leave the body right there in the street to rot. WARNING: SELLING TOBACCO TO MURAD IV CAN BE DANGEROUS TO YOUR HEALTH.” Nick moved quickly to the kill: “Myself, I'd like to think that we as a nation have progressed beyond the days of summary executions for the crime of pursuing our own definition of happiness.” Thus, having compared the modern American anti-smoking movement to the depredations of a bloodthirsty seventeenth-century Ottoman, Nick could depart, satisfied that he had temporarily beaten back the horde a few inches. Not a lot of ground, but in this war, it was practically a major victory.

There was a thick stack of while you were outs when he got back to the Academy's office in one of the more interesting buildings on K Street, hollowed out in the middle with a ten-story atrium with balconies dripping with ivy. The overall effect was that of an inside-out corporate Hanging Gardens of Babylon. A huge neo-deco-classical fountain on the ground floor provided a continuous and soothing flow of splashing white noise. The Academy of Tobacco Studies occupied the top three floors. As a senior vice president for communications at ATS, or “the Academy” as BR liked to be called by staff, Nick was entitled to an outside corner office, but he chose an interior corner office because he liked the sound of running water. Also, he could leave his door open and the smoke would waft out into the atrium. Even smokers care about proper ventilation.

He flipped through the stack of pink slips waiting for him at the receptionist's stand. “CBS needs react to SG's call for ban on billboard ads.” ABC, NBC, CNN, etc., etc., they all wanted the same, except for USA Today, which needed a react to tomorrow's story in The New England Journal of Medicine announcing medical science's conclusion that smoking also leads to something called Buerger's disease, a circulatory ailment that requires having all your extremities amputated. Just once, Nick thought, it would be nice to get back to the office to something other than blame for ghastly new health problems.

“Your mother called,” said Maureen, the receptionist, handing him one last slip. “Good morning,” she said chirrply into her headset, exhaling a stream of smoke. She began to cough. No dainty little
throat-clearer, either, but a deep, pulmonary bulldozer. "Academy of"—"hagg"—"Tobacco"—"kuhth"—"Studies."

Nick wondered if having a receptionist who couldn’t get through "hello" without a bronchosperm was a plus.

He liked Maureen. He wondered if she should tell her not to cough if BR walked by. Enough heads had rolled in the last six months. Murad IV was in charge now.

Back in his office, Nick took off his new Paul Stuart sports jacket and hung it on the back of the door. One advantage to the change in Academy leadership was the new dress code. One of the first things BR had done had been to call in all the smokesmen—that is, the Academy’s PR people, the ones who went in front of the cameras—and told them he didn’t want them looking like a bunch of K Street dorks. Part of tobacco’s problem, he said, was that the sex had gone out of it. He wanted them, he said, to look like the people in the fashion ads, and not the ones for JC Penney’s Presidents’ Day sale. Then he gave them each a five-thousand-dollar clothing allowance. Everyone walked out of the meeting thinking, What a great boss! Half of them got back to their desks to find memos saying they’d been fired.

Nick looked at his desk and frowned. It was very annoying. He was not an anal person, he could cope with a certain amount of clutter, but he did not like being the depository for other people’s clutter. He had explained this to Jeannette, and she had said, in that earnest way of hers, that she completely understood, and yet she continued to use his desk as a compost heap. The problem was that though Jeannette was technically under Nick in communications, BR had brought her with him from Allied Vending and they obviously had had rapport. The odd thing was how she acted as if Nick were her real boss, with rights of high, middle, and low justice over her.

She had dumped five piles of EPA reports on secondhand smoke on his desk, all of them marked URGENT. Nick collected knives. She had carefully placed his leather-sheathed Masai pigsticker on top of one of the piles. Was this insolence masquerading as neatness?

Gazelle, his secretary, buzzed to say that BR had left word he wanted to see him as soon as he got back from Clean Lungs. Nick decided he would not report to BR immediately. He would make a few calls and then go and make his report to BR. There. He felt much better, indeed swollen with independence.

"BR said soon as you got back, Nick," Gazelle buzzed him a few moments later, as if reading his thoughts. Gazelle, a pretty black single mother in her early thirties, was very bossy with Nick, for Nick, having been largely raised in a household dominated by a black housekeeper of the old school, was powerless before the remonstrations of black women.

"Yes, Gazelle," he said tartly, even this stretching the limits of his ability to protest. Nick knew what was going on in Gazelle’s intuitive head: she knew that Jeannette had her beady eyes on his job title, and that her own job depended on Nick’s keeping his.

Still, he would not be ruled by his secretary. He had had a harrowing morning and he would take his time. The silver-framed picture of Joey, age twelve, looked up at him. It used to face the couch opposite his desk, until one day when a woman reporter from American Health magazine—now there was an interview likely to result in favorable publicity; yet you had to grant the bastards the interview or they’d just say that the tobacco lobby had refused to speak to them—spotted it and said pleasantly, "Oh, is that your son?" Nick beamed like any proud dad and said yes, whereupon she hit him with the follow-up, "And how does he feel about your efforts to promote smoking among underage children?" Ever since, Joey’s picture had faced in, away from the couch.

Nick had given some thought to the psy-decor of his office. Above his desk was a quote in large type that said, "Smoking is the nation’s leading cause of statistics." He’d heard it from one of the lawyers at Smoot, Hawking, the Omaha law firm that handled most of the tobacco liability cases brought by people who had chain-smoked all their lives and now that they were dying of lung cancer felt that they were entitled to compensation.

Above the couch were the originals of two old cigarette magazine ads from the forties and fifties. The first showed an old-fashioned doctor, the kind who used to make house calls and even drive through snowdrifts to deliver babies. He was smilingly offering up a pack of Luckies like it was a pack of lifesaving erythromycin. "20,679* Physicians say ‘Luckies are less irritating’" The asterisk indicated that an
actual accounting firm had actually counted them. How much easier it had been when medical science was on their side.

The second ad demonstrated how Camels helped you to digest your Thanksgiving dinner, course by course. "Off to a good start—
with your hot spiced tomato soup. And then—for digestion's sake—smoke a Camel right after the soup." You were then supposed to smoke another before your second helping of turkey. Why? Because "Camels ease tension. Speed up the flow of digestive fluids. Increase alkalinity." Then it was another before the Waldorf salad. Another after the Waldorf salad. "This double pause clears the palate—and sets the stage for dessert." Then one with the plum pudding—"for the final touch of comfort and good cheer." It amounted to five, and that was just during dinner. Once coffee was served, you were urged to take out that pack and really go to town. "For digestion's sake." 

BR., on his one slumming expedition to Nick's office so far, had stared at it as if trying to make up his mind whether it was the sort of thing his senior VP for communications should have in his office. His predecessor, J. J. Hollister, who had hired Nick after the unpleasantness—"now there was a tobacco man of the old school, a man who in his day would have put away ten Camels with the Thanksgiving turkey, a man born with tar in his blood. A lovely man, kind, thoughtful, loved to sit around in his office after work over highballs and tell stories about the early days of slugging it out with Luther Terry, who had issued the catastrophic Surgeon General's Report back in 1964. Nick's favorite JJ story was—

"Nick, he said right away."

Really, it was intolerable. And he would not put up with it. "I know, Gazelle." To hell with it, he thought, flipping through his pink message slips like an unruly hand of poker; let Gazelle and BR. wait. He would do his job.

He called the networks and issued his standard challenge to appear "anytime, anywhere" to debate with the surgeon general on the subject of cigarette billboard advertising or indeed on any topic. The surgeon general, for her part, had been refusing all Nick's invitations on the grounds that she would not debase her office by sharing a public platform with a spokesman for "the death industry." Nick went on issuing his invitations nonetheless. They made for better sound bites than explaining why the tobacco companies had the constitutional right to aim their billboard messages at little ghetto kids.

Now for Buerger's disease. This was trickier. Nick thought for a few minutes before calling Bill Albright at USA Today. He didn't like getting into disease specifics and he didn't particularly want his name attached to quotes containing the word "amputation."

"Well," he began, more in sadness than in anger, "why not blame us for Buerger's disease? We're taking the rap for everything these days. I read somewhere a week ago that cigarettes are widening the ozone hole, so why not Buerger's? What's next? Dolphins? The way things are going, we'll be reading next week that dolphins, arguably the most majestic of the smaller pelagic mammals, are choking on filters that people on cruise ships toss overboard."

Actually, Nick had not read that cigarettes were widening the ozone hole, but since Bill was a friend, he felt that he could in good conscience lie to him. He heard the soft clacking of the keyboard at the other end. Bill was taking it down. They were each playing their assigned roles.

"Nick," Bill said, "this report was in The New England Journal of Medicine."

"For which I have the highest respect. But can I just ask a question?"

"Yeah."

"Where are the data?"

"What do you mean, where are the data? It's The New England Journal of Medicine. It's all data, for Chrissake."

"This was a double-blind study?"

"Sure."

Fatal hesitation. Attack! "And how big was the control group?"

"Come on, Nick."

"Was this a prospective study?"

"You want to be in the story, or not?"

"Of course."

"You want me to go with 'Where's the data?'"

"Where are the data. Please, I don't mind your making me out to be a soulless, corporate lickspittle, but at least don't make me sound like an ignorant, soulless, corporate lickspittle."
"So your comment is The New England Journal of Medicine doesn’t know what it’s talking about?" 

"My comment is ... What was the comment? Nick looked up at the Luckies doctor for inspiration. "Buerger’s disease has only recently been diagnosed. It has a complex, indeed, extremely complex pathology. One of the more complex pathologies in the field of circulatory medicine." He hoped. "With all respect, I think further study is warranted before science goes looking, noose in hand, to Lynch the usual subjects."

From the other end came the soft clack of Bill’s keyboard. "Can I ask you something?" Bill was frisky today. Usually he just wrote it down and put it in and moved on to the next story.

"What?" Nick said suspiciously.

"It sounds like you actually believe this stuff."

"It pays the mortgage," Nick said. He had offered this rationalization so many times now that it was starting to take on the ring of a Nuremberg defense: I was only paying ze mortgage ...

"He just called, Nick. He wants to see you. Now."

Tempted as he was to make his other calls, there was the matter of the mortgage, and also, somewhere underneath Jeannette’s landfall of papers, the tuition bill for Joey’s next semester at Saint Euthanasius—$11,742 a year. How did they arrive at such sums? What was the forty-two dollars for? What did they teach twelve-year-olds that it cost $11,742? Subatomic physics?

Nick walked pensively down the corridor to BR’s office. It was lined with posters of opera and symphony and museum exhibitions that the Academy had underwritten. In JJJ’s day there had been glorious color posters of drying tobacco plants, the sun shining luminously through the bright leaf.

Sondra, BR’s secretary, looked up at him unsmilingly and nodded him in. Also into health. No ashtray on her desk.

It was a large, woody, masculine corner suite, richly paneled in Circassian walnut that reminded Nick of the inside of a cigar humidor. So far, BR had not ripped out all of JJJ’s lovely wood and replaced it with brushed steel.

Budd Rohlbacker raised his eyebrows in greeting. He was leaning back in his big chair reading Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report,
from smoking had died from smoking in their beds, causing their heirs and assigns to drop the suits; out of sheer embarrassment, as one lawyer at Smoot, Hawking had put it.

"Hey, Nick," BR said. Nick was tempted to say "Hey" back.

"How were the lungs?"

"Clean," Nick said.

"Get any face time?"

Nick replied that he had jumped in front of every TV camera in sight in order to emphasize the industry's concern for responsible advertising, health, and underage smoking, but that he doubted that his face would be prominently featured, if at all, in the newscasts. Face time for tobacco spokesmen was a disappearing electronic commodity, more dismal handwriting on the wall. Not so long ago, TV producers would routinely send a camera crew over to the Academy to get an official industry rebuttal, only a five- or ten-second bite casting the usual aspersions on the integrity of the medical research that showed that American cigarette companies were doing the work of four Hiroshima bombs a year. But recently there had been fewer and fewer of these dutiful little opposing-viewpoint cabooses. More likely, the reporter would just close with "Needless to say, the tobacco industry disputes the NIH's report and claims that there is no—and I quote—'scientific evidence that heavy smoking by pregnant mothers is harmful to unborn fetuses.'"

"Did you bring the Kraut along with you?" BR asked, his eyes going back to his MMWR, a slightly distracting habit—in truth, a maddeningly rude but managerially effective habit—that he had acquired at Stanford Biz. Keeps underlings on their toes. By "Kraut" he meant G—for Graf—Erhardt von Gruppen-Mundt, the Academy's "scientist-in-residence." Erhardt had a degree in Forensic Pathology from the University of Steingarten, perhaps not Germany's leading academic center, but it made him sound smart. JJ had brought him onboard back in the seventies and had built a "research facility" around him out in Reston, Virginia, called the Institute for Lifestyle Health, consisting mostly of thousands of pampered white rats who never developed F344 tumors no matter how much tar they were painted with. The mainstream media hadn't taken Erhardt seriously in years. Mainly he testified in the endless tobacco liability trials, trying to confuse juries with erudite, Kissingerian-accented, epidemiological

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\item juj about selection bias and multivariable regressions. The decision to have him appear in court during the Luminotti trial wearing his white lab coat had not been well received by the judge.
\item "Yes," Nick said. "NHK—Japanese TV—did an interview with him. He was very good on secondhand smoke. He's really got that down cold. He'll get face time in Tokyo. I'm certain."
\item "That won't do us a whole lot of good in Peoria."
\item "Well..." So Erhardt was next. Twenty years of devoted service to science and auf Wiedersehen, you're history, Fritz.
\item "I think we ought to get ourselves a black scientist," BR said.
\item "They'd have to cover a black scientist, wouldn't they?"
\item "That's got heavy backfire potential."
\item "I like it."
\item Well, in that case...
\item "Sit down, Nick." Nick sat, craving a cigarette, and yet here, in the office of the man in charge of the entire tobacco lobby, there were no ashtrays. "We need to talk."
\item "Okay," Nick said. Joey could always go to public school.
\item BR sighed. "Let's do a three-sixty. This guy"—he hooked a thumb in the direction of the White House, a few blocks away—"is calling for a four-buck-a-pack excise tax, his wife is calling for free nicotine patches for anyone who wants them, the SG is pushing through an outright advertising ban, Bob Smoot tells me we're going to lose the Heffernan case, and lose it big, which is going to mean hundreds, maybe thousands more liability cases a year, the EPA's slapped us with a Class A carcinogen classification, Pete Larue tells me NIH has some horror story about to come out about smoking and blindness, for Chrissake, Lou Willis tells me he's having problems with the Ag Committee with next year's crop insurance appropriations. There is zero good news on our horizon."
\item "Fun, ain't it, tobacco," Nick said companionably.
\item "I like a challenge as much as the next guy. More than the next guy, if you want the honest truth."
\item Yes, BR, I want the honest truth.
\item "Which is what I told the Captain when he begged me to take this on." BR stood up, perhaps to remind Nick that he was taller than him, and looked out his window onto K Street. "He gave me carte
“See what I mean,” BR shook his head, “defeatism.”
Nick sighed. “BR, I’m putting in the hours. This is the first time in six years that my dedication has been called into question.”
“Maybe you’re burned out. Happens.”
Jearnette walked in without knocking. “Whoops,” she said, “sorry to interrupt. Here’s that Nexis search you wanted on ‘sick building syndrome.’”
She was attractive, all right, though a tad severe-looking for Nick’s taste, business suit and clackety-clack heels, icy blond hair pulled back into a tight bun, plucked eyebrows, high cheekbones, eager-beaver black eyes, and dimples that managed to make her even more menacing, somehow, though dimples weren’t supposed to do that. She apparently went horseback riding in Virginia on weekends. This made perfect sense to Nick. Put a riding crop in her hand and she was the very picture of a yuppy dommatixx.
“Thanks,” BR said. Jearnette walked out, shutting the door behind her with a firm click.
“Since we’re talking ‘guy-to-guy,’” Nick said, picking up where they’d left off, “you want to just give it to me straight?”
“Okay,” said BR, tapping a pencil on his desk. “For one-oh-five a year, I think we could do better.”
“I don’t think I’m going to end up talking the surgeon general into deciding that smoking is good for you. I think we’re past that point, frankly, BR.”
“That’s your whole problem! Don’t think about what you can’t do. Think about what you can do. You’re spending your whole time stamping out wastebasket fires when you ought to be out setting forest fires.”
Forest fires?
“You’re stuck in a reactive mode. You need to think proactive. Don’t just sit behind your desk waiting for your phone to ring every time someone out there spits up some lung. You’re supposed to be our communications guy. Communicate. Come up with a plan. Today’s what?”
“Friday,” Nick said glumly.
“Okay, Monday. Let me see something Monday,” BR looked at his appointment book. “Whaddya know?” he grinned. It was the first time Nick had seen him do this. “My six-thirty a.m. slot is wide open.”
Here Nick could be himself. Here he was among his own.

The Mod Squad met for lunch at Bert’s every Wednesday, or Friday, or Tuesday, or whenever. In their line of work, things—disasters, generally—tended to come up at the last minute, so planning ahead presented a problem. But if they went much longer than a week without a lunch or dinner together, they would get nervous. They needed each other the way people in support groups do: between them there were no illusions. They could count on each other.

The name Mod Squad was not a reference to the 1960s TV show about a trio of hip, racially and sexually integrated undercover cops, but an acronym for “Merchants of Death.” Since they consisted of the chief spokespeople for the tobacco, alcohol, and firearms industries, it seemed to fit. Nick said that they might as well call themselves that, since it was surely the name the press would give them if they ever got wind of their little circle.

They were: Nick, Bobby Jay, and Polly. Besides having in common the fact that they all worked for despised organizations, they were also at that age in life—late thirties, early forties—where the thrill of having a high-profile job has worn off and the challenge of keeping it has set in.

Bobby Jay Bliss worked for SAFETY, the Society for the Advancement of Firearms and Effective Training of Youth, formerly NRARC, the National Right to Bear Arms Committee.

Bobby Jay was a soft-speaking, curly-headed 220-pounder from Loober, Mississippi, population 235, where his father had been sheriff, mayor, and the principal collector of tax revenue by virtue of arresting every third driver who went through Loober, regardless of how fast he was going. He kept a variety of speed-limit signs, which could be changed on the spot as required. Bobby Jay, whom he had first deputized at age eight, instilling in his son a lifelong regard for law enforcement (and handguns), would hide in the bushes and change the signs depending on how fast the person had been going while his father pulled him over and berated him for driving so recklessly through downtown, despite the fact that there really was no downtown, per se, in Loober, Mississippi.

Following the Kent State shootings, Bobby Jay, then seventeen, hitchhiked all the way into Meridian in order to sign up for the National Guard, in order that he too could shoot college students; but the National Guard recruiter was out to lunch and the Army recruiter next door, recognizing a good thing when he saw one, offered to pay for his college education. So Bobby Jay ended up shooting at Vietnameses instead, which was almost as good as college students except that they shot back. Still, he enjoyed his two tours in Southeast Asia and would have signed up for a third, only the tail-rotor of a helicopter blade got the better of his left arm up to the elbow during a hasty evacuation of a red-hot LZ. He was one of the few Vietnam-era soldiers to receive a welcoming parade on his return home, though the parade, attended by all the residents of Loober, could not truthfully be called a huge one. Still, parades being rare in those troubled times, it made the papers and caught the attention of Stockton Drum, the legendary head of SAFETY. Drum had taken a run-down gun-owners’ organization and turned it into the equivalent of the world’s largest standing army, thirty million strong and nothing if not vocal, as any senator and congressman could tell you. With his colorful Southerner’s way and steely left hook, Bobby Jay was a natural spokesman for the cause of gun ownership in America, and he prospered, rising to become SAFETY’s chief spokesman. Along the way he repented of his sinful ways and became a born-again Christian, and not at an easy time, either, what with all the television evangelists going to jail for unevangelical behavior. He carpooleled in from suburban Virginia with a group of fellow SAFETY born-agains, and on his way home to his
from his depression. "The Washington Monument, surrounded by Budweiser trucks."

"They're pissed off. Sixty-four cents on a six-pack? They're trying to erase the deficit on the backs of the beer industry, and they don't think that's exactly fair." The Mod Squad in ways resembled the gatherings of Hollywood comedy writers who met over coffee to bounce new jokes off one another. Only here it was sound bites de-emphasizing the lethality of their products.

Until now Bobby Jay had not joined in on the conversation, as his cellular telephone was pressed to his ear. He was in the midst of a "developing news story," which for people in their business tended to be a bad news story. Another "disgruntled postal worker," those Bad News Bears of the gun industry, had been up to the usual shenanigans again. This one had gone as usual to Sunday church in Carburetor City, Texas, and halfway through a sermon on the theme of "The Almighty's Far-Reaching Tentacles of Love" had stood up and blasted the minister clear out of the pulpit, and then trained withering fire on the choir. Here he had departed from the usual text, for he did not then, as the newspapers put it, "turn the gun on himself." He was disgruntled, but not so disgruntled as to part with his own life. He was now the object of the most massive manhunt in Texas history. Bobby Jay told them that SAFETY was logging over two thousand calls a day.

"Pro or con?" Nick said. Bobby Jay did not rise to the bait.

"Do you know how many 'disgruntled postal workers' have pulled this sort of stunt in the last twenty years?" Bobby Jay said through a large forkful of shrimp. "Seven. Do you know what I want to know? I want to know what are they so disgruntled about? We're the ones whose mail never comes."

"Assault rifle?" Polly asked professionally.

Bobby Jay ripped off a shrimp tail with his front teeth. "Under the circumstances I'm tempted to say, probably, yeah. 'Course, nine times out of ten what they call an 'assault rifle' isn't. But try explaining that to our friends"—he hooked a greasy thumb in the direction of the Washington Sun building—"over there. To them, my ten-year-old's BB gun is an 'assault rifle.' " He held up his fork. "To them, this could be an 'assault' weapon. What are we going to do, start outlawing forks?"

"Forks?" Nick said.

"Forks Don't Kill People, People Kill People," Polly said. "I don't know. Needs work."

"It was a Commando Mark forty-five. You could, technically, consider it a semiautomatic assault rifle."

"With a name like that, yeah," Polly said. "Maybe you should ask the manufacturers to give them less awful names? Like, 'Gentle Persuader,' or 'Housewife's Companion'?"

"What I don't get is, the son of a gun was using hollow-point Hydra-Shok loads."

"Ouch," Nick said.

"That's a military load. They use those on, on terrorists. They blow up inside you." Bobby demonstrated with his hand the action of a Hydra-Shok bullet inside the human body.

"Please," Polly said.

"What was he expecting?" asked Bobby Jay rhetorically. "That the minister and the choir were wearing Kevlar bulletproof vests underneath their robes? What gets into people?"

"Good question," Nick said.

"So, what are you doing?" Polly asked.

"And why is it every time some . . . nutcase postal worker shoots up a church, they come rope in hand, to hang us? Did we give him the piece and tell him, 'Go forth, massacre a whole congregation? Rendezvous'—a reporter for the Sun—'calls me up and I can hear him gloating. He loves massacres. Thrives on massacres, Godless swine. I said to him, 'When a plane crashes on account of pilot error do you blame the Boeing Corporation?' "

"That's good," Nick said.

"When some booze-besotted drunk goes and runs someone down, do you go banging on the door of General Motors and shout, 'Jacques!""

"You didn't tell him that?" Polly winced.

"Okay," Nick said, "but how are you handling the situation?"

Bobby Jay wiped a gob of tasso mayonnaise from his lips. A glint came into his eye. "The Lord is handling it."

Nick knew Bobby Jay to be an upright, car-prayer-pooling citizen, who occasionally salted his language with biblical phrases like so—and-so had 'sold himself for a mess of porridge, like Esau's brother," but
he was not a nut. You could have a normal, secular conversation with him. But this suggestion that the Lord himself was engaged in spin control made Nick wonder if Bobby Jay was crossing the line over into the Casualties column. He stared: "What?"

Bobby Jay looked over his shoulder and leaned in toward them. He said, "It had to be. Opportunities like this can only come from above. And they happen only to the righteous."

"Bobby Jay," Polly said, looking alarmed, "are you all right?"

"Listen, O ye of little faith, then tell me if you don’t think the Lord was looking out for old Bobby Jay. I’m in the car driving to work——"

"With Commuters for Christ?"

"No, Polly, and I don’t see the humor in that. It was just me. I’m listening to Gordon Liddy’s call-in show——"

"Figures," Polly said.

"Gordon happens to be a friend of mine. Anyway, he’s yakety-yakking about the shooting, his lines are lit up, and suddenly he says, ‘Carburetor City, you’re on the air,’ and there’s this woman’s voice saying, ‘I was in that church and I want to tell that last person you had on that he is just wrong.’ I practically drove right off the road. She was saying, ‘I own a pistol, but because the law in Texas says you cannot carry it on your person, you can only keep it in your car, I left it in the glove compartment. And if I had had that handgun with me there inside the church, that choir would still be singing ‘Walk with Me, Jesus.’”

Nick felt a pang of jealousy. No one had ever called while he was being flayed alive on a radio talk show to say, If I hadn’t smoked five packs of cigarettes every day for forty years, I’d be dead by now.

Bobby Jay, eyes bulging, went on. “Gordon was in seventh heaven. He kept her on the line for must have been fifteen minutes. She went on and on about how what a tragedy it was she didn’t have her little S & W .38 airweight with her in that pew, how the whole misery could have been avoided. She was this far away from him! She couldn’t have missed him! A clean head shot.” Bobby held out his arm in combat shooting stance and aimed at a person at the next table.

"Bam!"

“You’re scaring the other patrons.”

"So what did you do?" Nick asked.

"What did I do?" Bobby Jay bubbled. “What did I do? I’ll tell you what I did. I put the pedal to the metal and went straight to National Airport and got on the next plane to Carburetor City. There is no next plane to Carburetor City. You got to go through Dallas. But I was in that little lady’s living room before six o’clock that afternoon."

"Little lady’s?" Polly said. "You’re such a trog."

"Five-foot-four," Bobby Jay shot back. "In heels. And every inch a lady. A simple descriptive sentence, so may I continue, Ms. Sty-nem? I had our camera crew there by noon the next day. It is as we speak being edited into the sweetest little old video you ever saw."

He spread his hands apart like a director framing the scene. "We open with . . . ‘Carburetor City, Texas. A mentally unbalanced federal bureaucrat——’"

"Nice," Nick said.

"Gets better: ‘. . . attacks a church minister and choir . . . ‘Footage of ambulances, people on stretchers, people gnashing their teeth and reading their hair——’"

"How," Polly said, "do people rend their hair?"

"Everywhere a scene of carnage," Bobby Jay continued, "a scene of devastation. Red chaos!"

"Red chaos?" Polly said.

"Shut up, Polly," Nick said.

"Voice-over. And guess whose?" Bobby Jay asked coyly.

"Charlton Heston?"

"No sir," Bobby said, all tickly and beaming. "Guess again."

"David Duke," Polly said.

"Jack Taggardy," Bobby Jay said triumphantly.

"Nice," Nick said.

"Didn’t he have his hips replaced? I read that in People."

"What do his hips have to do with anything?" Bobby Jay said.

"Is he in a walker, or what?"

"No, he’s not in any damn walker!"

"Go on," Nick said.

Bobby reframed the scene. “So Taggardy’s voice-over: ‘Could this awful human tragedy have been avoided?’"

"Question," Nick said. "Why ‘human’?"

"Why not ‘human? They’re humans."

"I would have thought, ‘inhuman tragedy’?"

"He’s got a point," Polly said.
"Look, we can edit. Do you want to hear this?"

"Yes," Nick said, "very much."

"Now we cut to my little lady. She's sitting in a chair, all prim and pretty. Darling girl. I had her hairdresser come over. She wanted to do her makeup but I wouldn't hear of it. I wanted her eyes red from crying. We dabbed a little onion under the eyelids, nothing wrong with that, just to get her in the mood, get those ducts opened up."

"Onion?"

"Didn't even need it. Soon as she saw those color police photos I was holding up for her off camera she started bawlin' like a baby. She's going on about how awful it was, and then she gets to the part about how she had to leave her pistol in the glove compartment. Then she looks right into the camera, right in your face, and dabs the corner of her eye—and that was not in the script—and says, 'Why won't our elected lawmakers just let us protect ourselves? Is that too much to ask?' Fade to black. Then Taggard's voice comes back on and there's no mistaking that voice, like bourbon over sandpaper: 'The Second Amendment says the right of the people to keep and bear arms shall not be infringed. Does your elected lawmaker support the Bill of Rights? Or are they selling you a Bill of Goods?'" Bobby Jay leaned back in his chair. "What do you think?"


Bobby Jay grinned. "Sweeter than honeysuckle in moonlight."

"Congratulations," Polly said. "Really masterful."

"By this afternoon, every member of the Texas congressional delegation and the state legislature will have a copy. By tomorrow, every sinner in the Congress will have one. We may even air it nationally. Mr. Drum hasn't signed off on that yet, but I am most strongly recommending that we do."

Bobby Jay's boss was one of the few in Washington who insisted on the mister. It was part of his aura, and he did cast a large aura. When he had taken over the leadership of the troubled SAFETY years back, there had been only fifty million guns circulating in America. There were now over 200 million. He was a physically imposing man with a trademark bald head. Redekamp of the Sun had dug up the fact that at the age of sixteen he had shot to death a seventeen-year-old in a dispute over the ownership of a box turtle. The conviction was later overturned on the grounds that the box turtle, having subsequently died, probably of stress, had never been introduced as evidence. Ever since, the anti-SAFETY Washington press, comprising all of the press except for the conservative Washington Moon, included a reference to this unfortunate incident in every mention of him.

Coffee arrived. Nick asked Polly, "What's happening at Moderation?"

"We actually got some great news yesterday." This was a stunner. Nick could not recall such words ever having been spoken over one of their lunches. "The Michigan Supreme Court ruled that sobriety roadblocks were unconstitutional," she said.

"Party down," Nick said.

"The U.S. Supreme Court has ruled that they are constitutional, so for now they're constitutional everywhere except Michigan."

Bobby Jay said, "Don't you see?"

"See what?" Nick asked.

"The pattern. First they disarm us, then they start throwing up roadblocks. It's all happening on schedule."

"Whose schedule?"

"Do you know how to beat a Breathalyzer?" Bobby Jay said. "Activated charcoal tablets."

"Maybe we could use that in our new Designated Driver campaign," Polly said. "If You Must Drive Drunk, Please, Suck Charcoal."

"You get them in pet stores. They purify the air that goes through the little pump. I don't know why they bother, all my kids' fish went belly-up within a day. You keep it under your tongue. Breaks down the ethanol molecules."

"Don't the police wonder how come you've got a charcoal briquet in your mouth?"

"There's no law against charcoal," Bobby Jay said.

"Yet," they chimed in unison. It was understood among them that at any given moment, somewhere, someone in the "vast federal bureaucracy" was issuing regulations against them. They were the Cavaliers of Consumption aligned on the field of battle against the Roundheads of Neo-Puritanism.

Polly said, "My beer wholesalers convention next week. I'm worried."
"Why?" Nick asked.

"I'm scheduled to debate with Craighead in front of two thousand of them," Gordon R. Craighead was the chief "unelected bureaucrat" in charge of the Office of Substance Abuse Prevention at the Department of Health and Human Services, "Helpless, Hopeless, and Stupid" to those in the alcohol and tobacco industries. Craighead's office dispensed about $300 million a year to anti-smoking and anti-drunk-driving groups. Though it had been calculated that the tobacco industry spends $2.5 billion a year, or $4,000 per second, promoting smoking, Nick nonetheless railed against OSAP's "runaway budgets."

"Oh, you can handle Craighead."

"I'm not worried about that. I'm my beer wholesalers. These are not subtle people. Most of them started out driving their own trucks. I'm worried that if Craighead starts talking about their excise taxes again, or if he gets into the recycling depot, they'll start throwing things at him. They'll get abusive. That's not going to help anyone."

"Are you doing Q and A?" Polly said yes, there would be a question and answer after the debate.

"Make them write down the questions. We did a panel once with Mothers Against Smoking at a vending-machine owners' convention. We took spoken questions. A nightmare. The vendors were wrestling the microphone away from each other, shouting at the mothers. 'You're stealing bread outta my kid's mouth and you call yourself a mother!' I was a little surprised. I always thought the mafia was traditionally more respectful of mothers. Now I can't get Mothers Against Smoking even to return my calls. After that I made a policy, only written questions. Have you got a slogan for the meeting?"

"We're Part of the Solution," she said. "What do you think?"

Nick considered. "I like it."

"We had a hard time with it," Polly said. "They wanted something more aggressive. They're very feisty, the wholesalers."

"I've got a slogan for you," Bobby Jay said. "I saw it on a T-shirt. 'A Day Without a Buzz Is a Day That Never Wuz.'"

"Our first choice," Polly continued, ignoring him, "was 'In the Spirit of Cooperation,' but they said it sounded too much like 'spirits.' I spend half my time keeping my beer people from killing my spirits people, and my wine people from trying to kill the other two. The whole idea behind the Moderation Council was strength through unity at a time of volumetric decline, but it's like trying to unify Yugoslavia." She sipped her iced cappuccino. "It's tribal."

Polly lit a cigarette. Nick appreciated a woman who smoked sexily. She leaned back and tucked her arm under her breasts to support her right elbow, the arm going straight up, cigarette pointing at the ceiling. She took long, deep drags, tilted her head back, and let the smoke out in long, slow, elegant exhalations, with a little lung-clearing shot at the end. A beautiful smoker. Nick's own mother, in her day, had been a beautiful smoker. He remembered her by the pool, summers in the fifties, all long legs and short pants, pointy sunglasses and broad straw hats and lipstick that left bright, sticky smudges on the butts that he filched and coughingly relit behind the garage.

Nick was rousted from the reverie by the shrill cricketing of Bobby Jay's cellular phone. Bobby Jay flipped it open with practiced cool, like it was a switchblade. "Bliss. Yeah?" Bobby said. "Great." He said to Nick and Polly, "The postal worker. They got him. Uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . . Missouri . . . uh-huh . . . uh-huh . . . what?" His brow beetled. "Well how the hell does CNN know? It was on him? FBI . . . what did, you didn't say anything to them, did you? Look, did you check with Membership?" Nick watched Bobby's face sag and thought, This face is in freefall. "Sustaining? Was he paid up? Well, yes, check, right away, before you do anything. No, don't call CNN or the FBI back. I don't care. I'll be there in three minutes."

Bobby Jay folded up his phone. Nick and Polly stared, awaiting explication.

"I got to go," Bobby Jay said, tossing a twenty onto the table. It landed like a fall leaf in a little puddle of melting ice.

"Do we have to find out what happened from CNN?"

Bobby Jay looked like he was about to break a sweat. "Take deep breaths," Nick suggested.

"The son of a bitch was a member," Bobby Jay said. "Not just a member, but a sustaining life member."

"How did CNN find out?"

"He had his membership card with him. CNN got a shot of it lying with the rest of his wallet. In a pool of blood."

"Hm," Nick said, no longer jealous about Bobby Jay's incredible
good luck. At least with tobacco the casualties were tucked away in hospital wards.

"I'm on SAFETY!" Polly said, doing a take on the famous SAFETY ads showing macho, if slightly fading, actors standing on skeet ranges, holding expensive, engraved shotguns.

"Polly," Nick rebuked her. She was so cynical, Polly. Sometimes Nick wanted to spank her. She made a big-deal gesture. Bobby Jay was oblivious, staring at the center of the table. Polly waved a hand back and forth in front of his face and said to Nick, "I think he's going into shock."

"Oh my Lord," Bobby Jay said quietly, "the video."

"You probably want to recall it," Nick said, but Bobby Jay was already out the door, on his way, it appeared, to a long afternoon of certain buttlock.

WHILE YOU WERE OUT a producer for the Oprah Winfrey show had called to ask if Nick would go on the show in Chicago on Monday afternoon. The SG's call for an outright ad ban was getting a lot of play, and Oprah wanted a show on smoking right away. Nick called back immediately to say that, yes, he'd be available. This was face time, major face time. Millions and millions of women—tobacco's most important customers—watched Oprah. He was tempted to pick up the phone and tell BR, but decided to play it cool and conduct a little experiment. He called Jeanette and, in the course of asking her about some routine stuff, slipped it in. "Oh, I almost forgot, I have to do the Oprah show on Monday, so can you get me everything we have on the ineffectiveness of advertising?"

He set the timer on his watch. Four minutes later BR was on the line wanting to know what the deal with the Oprah show was. Nick laid it on a bit about how he'd been "cultivating" one of the producers for a long time and it had finally paid off.

"I was thinking maybe we should send Jeanette," BR said.

Nick ground his jaw muscles. "It's going to be a pretty splashy show. Top people. They made it pretty clear that they want the chief spokesman for the tobacco industry." Not your office squeeze.

BR said with an edge, "All right," and hung up.

His mother called to remind him that he and Joey had not been by for Sunday supper in over a month. Nick reminded her that the last time he had, his father had called him a "prostitute" at the table.

"I think it says how much he respects you that he feels he can speak
to you so frankly,” she said. “Oh, by the way, Betsy Edgeworth called
this morning to say she saw you on C-SPAN talking about some
Turkish sultan. She said, ‘Nick’s so attractive. It’s such a shame he
didn’t stay in journalism. He might have had his own show by
now.’”

“How are you,” Nick said, thrusting out his hand. He decided to
disperse with mendacious banter about the congestion of Friday af-
fternoon traffic in D.C. “Good to see you,” he said mendaciously. He
didn’t especially enjoy being singled out for silent contempt by the
headmaster of a school whose parents included Persian Gulf emirs
and members of Congress. For $11,742 a year, the Reverend Josiah
Griggs could park his attitude in his narthex.

“The traffic was awful,” Nick said.

“Yes.” Griggs nodded slowly and ponderously, as though Nick had
just proposed major changes in the Book of Common Prayer. “Fri-
days . . . of course.”

“We’re going fishing this weekend,” Nick said, changing the sub-
ject. “Are we, Joe?”

Joey said nothing.

“I wonder if you might stop by sometime next week,” Griggs said
in that assured, headmasterly way. Nick was seized with alarm. He
looked over at Joey, who provided no clue as to this summons.

“Oh, course,” Nick said. “I’m away on business the beginning of
the week.” It crossed Nick’s mind: did Griggs watch Oprah? Surely
not.

“End of the week, then? Friday? You could come by to pick up
Joseph & little . . . early?” A thin smile played over his narrow face.

“Fine,” Nick said.

“Splendid,” Griggs said, brightening. “What are you fishing for?”

“Catfish.”

“Ahh” Griggs nodded. “Ellie, our housekeeper, loves catfish. Of
course, I can’t get past their looks. Those fearsome whiskers.” He
walked off to the deanery with his hands clasped behind his back.

Safely inside the car, Nick said, “What did you do?”

“Nothing,” Joey said.

“How come he wants to see me?”

“I don’t know,” said Joey. Twelve was not the most communci-
tive age. Conversations consisted of games of Twenty Questions.

Great, Nick thought, I get to go into a principal conference totally
blind.

“I’m offering total and unconditional amnesty. Whatever you did,
it’s all right. Just tell me: why does Griggs want to see me?”

“I said I don’t know.”
"Okay." Nick drove. "How'd the game go?"
"Sucked."
"Well, you know what Yogi Berra said. 'Ninety percent of baseball is half-mental.'"

Joey thought about this. "That's forty-five percent."
"It's a joke." And, having nothing to do with revolting bodily functions, not likely to split the sides of a twelve-year-old. He extracted from Joey the score of the game: 9–1.
"The important thing is," he ventured consolingly, "is . . . What was the important thing? Having himself been brought up in the Vince Lombardi School of Child-Raising, where his father shoutingly questioned his manhood from the stands every time he missed a grounder, Nick had resolved on a more tolerant approach for his own son's education. "... is to feel tired at the end of the day." Aristotle might not have constructed an entire philosophy on it, but it would do. True, Hitler and Stalin had probably felt tired at the end of their days. But theirs would not have been a good tired.

Joey registered no opinion of this Grand Unified Theory of Being, except to point out that Nick had just driven past Blockbuster Video and would now have to try a U-turn in busy traffic.

They went through their usual ritual, Joey proposing one unsuitable video after another, usually ones with covers showing a half-naked blond actress with ice picks, or the various steroid-swollen European bodybuilders-turned-actors in the act of decapitating people with chainsaws. Nick countering with Doris Day and Cary Grant movies from the fifties, Joey sticking his finger down his throat to indicate where he stood on the Grant-Day oeuvre. Nick was generally able to reach a compromise with World War II movies. Violent, yes, but tasteful by modern standards, without the super-slow-mo exit wounds pioneered by Peckinpah. "Here's one we haven't seen," he enthused, "The Sands of Iwo Jima. John Wayne. Cool." Joey showed no great zeal for the exploits of the Duke, John Agar, and Forrest Tucker as they fought their way up Mount Suribachi, but said he'd go along if they could also rent Animal House for the seventeenth time.

Nick lived in a one-bedroom off Dupont Circle that looked out onto a street where there had been eight muggings so far this year, though only two of them had been fatal. Most of his one-oh-five went to servicing the mortgage on the house a few miles up Connect-icut Avenue in the leafy neighborhood of Cleveland Park, where Joey lived with his mother. On alternate weekends, Joey got to go get down and urban with Dad.

Together they ate a nourishing dinner of triple pepperoni pizza and cookie dough ice cream. Cookie dough ice cream. And society fretted about cigarettes?

The Sands of Iwo Jima was a little dated, but it was a good, big-hearted movie. And there was this . . . transfiguring moment where Wayne, having brought his men through hell to victory, exults, "I never felt so good in my life. How about a cigarette?" And just as he's offering the pack around to his men, a Jap sniper drills him, dead. Without realizing it, Nick took out a cigarette and lit up.

"Da-ad," Joey said.

Obediently, Nick went outside on the balcony.
Capitol Assets

By Peter Bowen | September 19, 2008

Presidents, Aliens, Crooks, and Satan are just a few of the characters who show up in films set in Washington DC.

Perhaps no American city is as recognizable as Washington DC. But, as George Pelecanos rightly points out, the cinematic Washington is in a different world than the real one. The fictional one is for the most part constrained to a few square miles of national monuments. Crystal Palmer, director of the D.C. Office of Motion Picture and TV Development, pointed out to the Washington Post that part of the problem with shooting the capital is that Washington symbols work so well that people rarely want anything else. "When you show them something off the beaten path, typically it ends up on the cutting room floor. They come in specifically to show what the moviegoer expects."

Even then, the real Washington is not necessarily in the film. In early films, most scenes set in Washington were actually shot on Hollywood sound stages with the city appearing via the magic of rear projection. More recently, a number of cities have stepped up to mimic Washington, especially after the tightened security that has affected the city after 9/11. Toronto, for example, has been so successful in being used in a number of films
(Breach, Talk to Me), that the city provides a website of films that have subbed the Canadian city for the US Capitol. In all, there have been about 185 features that occur in Washington (including the Coen Brothers' recent Burn After Reading.) Below is a select list of them:

**The $5,000,000 Counterfeiting Plot**
**Year:** 1914  
**Director:** Bertram Harrison  
While actually shot in Philadelphia, this silent thriller revolves around a Treasury Department Agent breaking up a counterfeiting ring.

**Gabriel Over The White House**
**Year:** 1933  
**Director:** Gregory La Cave  
Gregory La Cave directed this remarkably strange film whose politics are as confusing as its plot. A do-nothing President (Walter Huston) is commanded by the arch-angel Gabriel to do away with the constitution and become a benevolent dictator. The populist sentiments veer ominously close to endorsing European fascism.

![Mr. Smith Goes to Washington](image)

**Mr. Smith Goes to Washington**
**Year:** 1939  
**Director:** Frank Capra  
Frank Capra made this classic tale of a ordinary Joe (James Stewart) who, when suddenly thrust into the role of US Senator, ends up teaching a corrupt Washington establishment the real meaning of democracy. The film makes full use of DC monuments, especially as points of inspiration for the beleaguered novice politician. Now considered sentimental, the film ruffled quite a few feathers when it was released. Kentucky Senator Alben Barkley labeled it “grotesque” and “silly and stupid.” Conservatives condemned its negative image of Congress and the press corps for putting American in a bad light.

**The More the Merrier**
**Year:** 1943  
**Director:** George Stevens  
The housing shortage in Washington DC during World War II is the engine that runs this George Stevens’ comedy. When Joel McCrea and Charles Coburn split the patriotic Jean Arthur’s apartment, hilarity ensues. While the film’s humor attempted to soften the
very real shortages felt by Americans, another 1943 film, *Sherlock Holmes in Washington*, inspired others to join the fight. Never mind the impossible timeline, the film borrows the great English sleuth to help in the war effort. As Holmes and Watson drive by the heroic Washington monuments, they register their deep respect.

![The Day the Earth Stood Still](image)

**Born Yesterday**
**Year:** 1950  
**Director:** George Cukor  
Judy Holliday shines as the dumb girl friend of a corrupt tycoon (Broderick Crawford) who has hired a tutor (William Holden) to polish his diamond in the rough. But a little education is a dangerous thing as Holliday and Holden unveil the dirty politics and bribery taking place around them. The fictional film turned oddly real a year later when Holliday was dragged before the House Committee on Un-American Activities and answered their questions in the ditzy voice and logic of her character.

**The Day the Earth Stood Still**
**Year:** 1951  
**Director:** Robert Wise  
Robert Wise’s tale of aliens in Washington was perhaps the first and most famous of a tradition by which citizens from another galaxy feel obliged to visit the chief executive with either peaceful and destructive motives. While all Washington scenes were done by rear projection, the film includes a range of DC spots, from Arlington National Cemetery, the Lincoln Memorial, and the People’s Drug Store.

**Strangers on a Train**
**Year:** 1951  
**Director:** Alfred Hitchcock  
In Alfred Hitchcock’s creepy thriller about two men who supposedly swap murders on a train, Washington becomes a major figure. Hitchcock was often effective in putting iconic monuments to good use—*North by Northwest* (Mt. Rushmore), *Saboteur* (the Statue of Liberty) — and here Washington’s monuments serve an ironic backdrop for the film’s conspiracies.

**Advise and Consent**
**Year:** 1962  
**Director:** Otto Preminger
Based on Allen Drury’s novel, Otto Preminger’s film focuses on the human costs of political wrangling. When liberal Henry Fonda is nominated to be Secretary of State, the vicious flesh trading among senators over the nomination ruins careers and forces one man to commit suicide. While many Washington interiors (like the Senate Chamber) were recreated on LA stages, the film includes a number memorial sights, including Treasury Building, the (now) Reagan National airport, and Washington Monument.

The Exorcist

*The Exorcist*

**Year:** 1973  
**Director:** William Freidkin

Based on Georgetown alum William Peter Blatty’s novel, William Freidkin’s horror show was also set in Georgetown (although the case that inspired Blatty was supposedly in Maryland). *The Exorcist* is one of the few Washington films that had nothing to do with the Federal Government. Or did it?

All The President’s Men

*All The President’s Men*

**Year:** 1976  
**Director:** Alan J. Pakula

Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman play *Washington Post* reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein respectively in Alan J. Pakula’s story of the dynamic duo who broke the Watergate scandal. While the *Washington Post* pressroom was meticulously built on a sound stage, the film boasts many other Washington sites, including the Watergate apartment building, the Washington Memorial, the Library of Congress, the Washington Post parking lot and more.

St. Elmo’s Fire

*St. Elmo’s Fire*

**Year:** 1984  
**Director:** Joel Schumacher
The kids from *The Breakfast Club* are all grown up and apparently have just graduated from Georgetown—although the film had to sub University of Maryland in College Park because the Catholic university objected to several of the sex scenes.

**Good to Go**  
**Year:** 1985  
**Director:** Blaine Novak  
One of the few films to portray the other Washington DC, Blaine Novak’s thriller sets up a tale of a reporter (Art Garfunkel) on the trail of corruption mainly as a way to showcase DC’s indigenous go-go music.

**Mars Attacks!**  
**Year:** 1994  
**Director:** Tim Burton  
Tim Burton’s spoof of fifties sci-fi ends up, of course, with aliens invading the White House and annihilating the US Congress. This was the first in a string of of big budget films (*Independence Day, X2*) that delighted in blowing up the capital.

**Absolute Power**  
**Year:** 1996  
**Director:** Clint Eastwood  
Clint Eastwood directed and starred in this thriller of a cat burglar who witnesses a drunk president involved in the killing a woman he’s having an affair with. While most of the movie was actually shot in Baltimore, there are a few classic sites, including the Watergate, the site of another burglar story. The next year *Murder at 1600* again linked the executive office with murder.

**Dick**  
**Year:** 1998  
**Director:** Andrew Fleming  
Andrew Fleming (who also directed *Hamlet 2*) helmed this hilarious satire of two high school girls (Michelle Williams and Kirsten Dunst) who accidentally set Watergate into action. While the film was shot mostly in Toronto, the story conveys the feeling of growing up in that political town.
FILMS SET IN WASHINGTON DC (Wikipedia)

Absolute Power (film)
Advise & Consent (film)
All the President's Men (film)
Along Came a Spider (film)
The American President
Amistad (film)

Being There
Billy Jack Goes to Washington
Black Dynamite (Film)
Born Yesterday (1950 film)
The Bourne Identity (2002 film)
Breach (film)
Broadcast News (film)
Burn After Reading

Canadian Bacon
Charlie Wilson's War
Clear and Present Danger (film)
Collateral Damage (film)
The Color of Friendship (2000 film)
Contact (film)
The Contender (2000 film)

D.C. Cab
D.C. Sniper
Damn Yankees (film)
Dave (film)
The Day After Tomorrow
The Day the Earth Stood Still (1951 film)
The Day the Earth Stopped
Deep Impact (film)
The Distinguished Gentleman

Eagle Eye
Earth vs. the Flying Saucers
Election (1999 film)
The Emperor's Club
End Game (2006 film)
Enemy of the State (film)
The Exorcist (film)
The Exorcist series

A Few Good Men (film)
First Kid

G.I. Joe: The Rise of Cobra
Gabriel Over the White House
Good to Go (film)
The Greek Tycoon

The Happy Hooker Goes to Washington
Head of State (film)
Heartburn (film)
Hollow Man
The House of Yes
Houseboat (film)

I Think I Do
Ignition (2001 film)
In the Line of Fire
Independence Day (film)
The Invasion (film)

The Jackal (film)
Jesus Camp
JFK (film)

Legally Blonde 2: Red, White & Blonde
Live Free or Die Hard
Live Wire (film)
Logan's Run (film)

The Man with One Red Shoe
Mars Attacks!
The Meteor Man (film)
Minority Report (film)
The Missiles of October
The More the Merrier
Morgan Stewart's Coming Home
Mr. Smith Goes to Washington

National Treasure (film)
National Treasure: Book of Secrets
Night at the Museum: Battle of the Smithsonian
Nixon (film)
No Way Out (1987 film)
Nothing But the Truth (2008 film)

The Pelican Brief (film)
Primary Colors (film)
Private Parts (1997 film)
Protocol (film)

Quiz Show

Rise above the silver and gold
Salt (2010 film)
Scary Movie 3
Seven Days in May
Shadow Conspiracy
Shattered Glass
Sherlock Holmes in Washington
Slam (film)
The Solid Gold Cadillac
St. Elmo's Fire (film)
State of Play (film)
Suspect (film)

Talk to Me (2007 film)
Thank You for Smoking
Thirteen Days (film)
Timecop
Traffic (film)
Transformers (film)
Transformers: Revenge of the Fallen
True Lies

W. (film)
Wag the Dog
The Walker
Watch on the Rhine
Wedding Crashers
The Werewolf of Washington
When Worlds Collide (film)
Without Love

The X-Files (film)
X2 (film)

Yankee Doodle Dandy

Zombieland