



Friendship in Washington

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Washington must be the only place in the world where “friend” is a bad word. Friendship is thought of as something that can compromise you, make you less trustworthy, blind you to your larger institutional interests. And so, finally, it is seen as something that can ruin your otherwise promising career . . . sort of like being a kleptomaniac or a drunk.

I don't intend to tackle here all the many ethical questions great and tiny that have been raised in Washington in the spring and summer of 1983 concerning everyone from EPA managers to journalists to presidential campaign workers. What interests me this week is only Washington's half-articulated but deeply embedded assumption that *any* friendship between two people who could each stand to profit from it professionally is likely to be both a source and symptom of corruption.

Under this reading of the Potomac moral law, journalists should not ever be friends with politicians and officeholders, administrators should not ever be friends with businessmen and businesswomen whose affairs their agencies affect, and so forth. You want to know something? Usually they aren't. Genuine friendship is lamentably rare and most often the suspects in our conflict-of-interest scandals are not perpetrating acts of friendship at all. By and large theirs are relationships without depth or affection or history. At best they tend to represent merely shared political or ideological positions. Less beautifully they represent mutual convenience verging on mutual opportunism.

The Other Kind: All this is embodied in a series of frequent minor encounters and transactions that are generally only marginally venal. Washington abounds in such fool's gold friendships. We even buy and sell them: surely the small PAC contributor is frequently purchasing only a guarantee of “Hello, Harry”—not without its practical value to him—from some congressional subcommittee chairman. When Allard Lowenstein, the much beloved former congressman, was killed a while back, the violent outpouring of true grief from so many people was startling for its very rarity. I remember thinking: my God, this is real—no one is faking this time.

It is the other kind of “friendship,” how-

ever, the disposable paper kind, that tends to be struck up among participants in high-stakes political Washington. Does anyone think that Rita Lavelle's lunch bunch from the chemical industry were acting out of the friendly, “social” impulses they professed? Many people who come to Washington in a given Congress or administration are astonished at the dumping they get when their glory day is over. For we promiscuously start to call each other “friends” here in the course of establishing nothing more heartwarming or firmly based than professional and social access to one another. People who live here through all the political changes don't do this deliberately. Your resident Washingtonian's capacity to be-

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lieve—and, not incidentally, of course, reveal—himself to be a close friend of some new administration bigwig he has known for three weeks is remarkable. So is his capacity, when things change, to forget everything about said close friend. Sometimes, actually often, we get the guilties on this account, but generally, I have noticed, not so acutely that we do anything much about it, such as getting in touch with the phantom intimate.

Believe it or not, there are two slightly worse meanings of the word “friend” in the Washington lexicon. One is the hostile congressional usage, which, as is true of so many other things on Capitol Hill, means the exact opposite of what it says. When a senator or representative declaims, “And I would like to remind *my good friend* from the great state of Nowhere . . .” you may be sure he is about to zap him something terrible. Members of Congress sometimes call their real friends “friends,” but they *always* call their enemies “friends.” We also employ the greasy friend here, an Abscam-type locution as in “Tell your friends that we

have gone about as far as we can” or “Tell your friend we will try to help and that we appreciate this.” It is a sinister designation for those who need to remain anonymous probably because they are doing something they shouldn't.

Relationships: I notice that I have mentioned “real friends” in the paragraph above. Yes, we have them. And these real friendships, too, often cross institutional lines in Washington, so that they come with their built-in potential for embarrassment and harm. It is an unhappy distinction of the place that in our various individual institutional roles we are frequently called on to say, do or support things that run counter to what a friend is trying to do—or to deny that friend some help we could provide. This can be awkward, but I do not think it is anywhere near so big and painful a deal as it is often made out to be. You just do it, that's all. Friendship, if it is real and if there is anything to it, survives. The most poignant and instructive example of this for me came some years ago when a much admired high public figure turned out to have done something truly foolish and unacceptable—and his dearest old friend at the paper, having satisfied himself that the facts were so, wrote the editorial calling for his resignation.

So I conclude that friendship, both the real kind and the other, gets a bum rap in Washington so far as its capacity to tempt one into evil is concerned. Real friendship doesn't do that very often; the false friendships are actually shallow, opportunistic relationships to begin with, not comradely ones that can make you susceptible to professional misuse.

And yet when I have said all that, something in me is vaguely repelled by the premium we put—I put—on maintaining the purity of our careers and our interests at the expense, if need be, of a friend. I wish that, at a minimum, we didn't all feel the need to issue so many ringing pronouncements of the primacy of one value (institutional) over the other (personal). I wish the value of true friendship and of a willingness to expend something in its behalf had more standing here. Perhaps our most awful secret in human terms is this: for most people in Washington it in fact doesn't seem all that hard to choose professional interests when they are in conflict with loyalty to a friend.