

# A Washington Hostess

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The thing that makes the story of Joan Braden's State Department job Washington's favorite morsel is that it can be relished and deplored at the same time.

That is, all sorts of people who brood over Braden's successes as a political hostess and pet of the mighty are being catty while assuming a high moral position on economy and favoritism in government.

Analysis  
and  
Opinion

Joan Braden, wife of columnist Tom Braden, has been named consumer affairs coordinator. At her table she regularly hosts such delicacies as Secretary of State Kissinger, Vice President Rockefeller and Alice Roosevelt Longworth. Her beguiling smile and confiding manner reduce great men to pulp and have prompted several generations of both parties to give her places on public commissions.

She is no fair-weather friend either. At the height of the Christmas bombing in Vietnam, she showed up at the Sans Souci for lunch with Henry. When former CIA Director Richard Helms got in trouble over his contradictory testimony about this and that, the Bradens staged what would be called in political circles an "appreciation dinner," where the inner power circle pledged eternal fealty amid tears and toasts.

Despite her fortunate friendships, Braden insists she landed her \$37,800 federal plum strictly on her own. Henry denies any intervention, in his wonted reflex of denying the obvious.

Some locals unfairly leaped to the conclusion that the job of consumer affairs coordinator was created for Braden alone, especially since it has turned out to be indescribable. Others were cheered at the prospect of her marching down to the offending import gift shop or foreign used-car lot to demand justice for the State Department employee wronged in foreign trade.



Even though Tom and Joan Braden, above, are known for entertaining Washingtonians like Henry Kissinger and Vice President Rockefeller, below, Joan Braden insists it was not her fortunate friendships that won her a \$37,800-a-year federal job

But the job is not that. According to the November 27 Federal Register, Braden is being called upon to "review existing mechanisms of consumer input, thrupt and output, and seek ways of improving these linkages via the consumer communications channel."

A spokesperson for Virginia Knauer, the President's No. 1 consumer adviser, was unable to translate this passage into anything that sounded as if it could be done between 9 and 5. She suggested that possibly one area of operations for Braden could be the Passport Office.

Old hands will tell you that if Braden ever ventured into the parlor of Frances Knight, the durable director of the Passport Office, and suggested as much as a change in the position of a paper clip, it would be her last official act.

Knight is a survivor in the J. Edgar Hoover mold. She has defied five presidents, countless congresses, expeditors and hot-

shots. She would consume Braden.

Ralph Nader, the consumer expert, sees the Braden appointment as part of a much larger plot. It is Gerald Ford's "Revlon Strategy," he says, to cover up fierce resistance to the Consumer Protection Agency, which was voted by both Houses but is being holed up to spare it Ford's veto.

Seventeen Braden-type jobs will be scattered through federal agencies under the President's bypass "consumer representation program." Since staff in government is apportioned by the size of the salary earned rather than work required, Braden's office would command two assistants and a secretary and run to a budget of \$100,000, Nader esti-



# At State

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mates. Multiply that by 17 and you approach the cost of the Consumer Protection Agency.

Gerald Ford, the anti-bureaucrat, is creating a whole new bureaucracy, to create the impression that he cares about consumers. But, as Nader points out, the President's "consumer coordinators" will be captives, unable to take any offender to court.

Nader says the sad thing is that there is need for consumer protection in the State Department, for some informed adviser who would tell the Secretary, for instance, that the sale of grain to the Russians causes a ten-cent increase in the price of American bread.

Up to now, nobody has been more inhospitable to consumer input on foreign policy than Henry. Any time a member of Congress makes a suggestion, he cries to heaven that he is being undermined and that the country is engaging in "self-flagellation."

Maybe with Braden it will be different. Maybe he will ask her permission before venturing deeper into Angola. She could point out to him the linkage between escalation and the cost to the consumer of cleaning up the city after peace demonstrations.

Braden is already "in place" at the State Department. Virginia Knauer's office explained that the President did not wish to delay "implementation of the consumer representation program" while waiting for public — that is, consumer — comment on the scheme.

There has been a great deal of public comment, all of it bad, about Braden's appointment, but nobody denies there's a great deal of room for advice on product safety in American foreign policy output.