

# Washington: A city not of promise but of cynicism

NEW ORLEANS STAYES-IT-EM

FILED APR 72

24 APR 72

WASHINGTON—The beauty of spring in Washington is even more intense than remembered. The sudden heat, the blossoms, the parks set out with flowers, the acres of marble and granite gleaming in the sun: It all suggests, as it was intended to, the freshness and promise of a new country.

But the physical setting seems so incongruous now, the symbolism so awry. For this is a city not of promise but of cynicism. Its politicians offer no faith to arouse their country or the world. They appeal to a mean self-interest; their narrow aim is to defend their own position. In the week of this sudden, life-giving



Secretary Rogers Attempts at banter

spring an American secretary of State testified for hours about the war in Vietnam without the slightest sign of awareness that American bombs kill Vietnamese when they are dropped: kill people. Like a junior lawyer sent out to argue a hopeless case in whose framing he had no part, he fell back on pathetic attempts at banter or changed the subject when the hard questions were asked.

The Secretary of Defense whose planes have dropped more than one ton of bombs on Indochina for every minute of the Nixon Administration accused the North Vietnamese of "marauding all over the countryside of Southeast Asia."\*

### Sense of loss

In this same week of spring there was an event, little noted except by those intimately concerned with it, that sharpened the sense of loss in Washington. It was a memorial ceremony at the Supreme Court for Justice Black.

Distinguished lawyers spoke of Black's passion for the Constitution, his commitment to the American ideal of an open society, his dedication to the court. But the afternoon somehow became most meaningful when it dwelt on Hugo Black's humanity.

A former law clerk to the justice, Louis F. Oberdorfer, read out to the assembled members of the Supreme Court bar a tribute that they adopted as a memorial resolution. He spoke at one point of "The Greening of America," the book by Prof. Charles Reich of Yale, another one-time law clerk of Black.

### In the margin

Black had read the book, Oberdorfer

said. In one passage Reich said dismissively that "Consciousness I," his term for the original American view of society, "believes that the American dream is still possible and that success is determined by character, morality, hard work

### Anthony Lewis

and self-denial." Black wrote in the margin: "I still do."

Then Oberdorfer spoke of Black's relationship with his late colleague John Marshall Harlan, whom he loved despite a totally different constitutional outlook. Part of their disagreement was over Black's search for absolutes in the Constitution — Formulas that would limit judges' power of interpretation. But Black often remarked, Oberdorfer said, that he would not worry about giving power to judges if they were all like John Harlan.

### Beings of depth

What Hugo Black and John Harlan had in common — and earlier Felix Frankfurter, who fought so many battles with Black — was character.

On the day of the memorial to Black, the Supreme Court by the narrowest of majorities upheld the constitutionality of a loyalty oath that he would have abhorred, as he did all such forced expressions of belief. The dissenters quoted from a 1958 opinion of his:

"Loyalty," Black said, "must arise spontaneously from the hearts of people who love their country and respect their government."

### Those intangibles

It is those intangibles of love and respect that really matter in the relationship between a democratic government and its public. If they seem frayed now, it is not because the men who hold power are consciously evil or conspiratorial. It is because they are men without depth or commitment: hollow men, stuffed men.

Not so many years ahead, we are likely to look back at this time as we do now at the arid years of Harding and Coolidge. If we can. The trouble is that in the world of 1972 the hollow men are so much more destructive and dangerous.

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The late Justice Black Depth and commitment

\*From NYTimes' version: And he denounced the Soviet Union for lack of "restraint" in aiding North Vietnam - aid that amounts to perhaps one-seventh of what the United States' is to South Vietnam.