

# The Academy of Political Science

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Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and his staff continued to insist on viewing the events in terms of the traditional strictures on peacekeeping in a civil war rather than as a genocide in need of a forceful, emergency intervention. Barnett says that present historical knowledge is consistent with two explanations for this: first, the UN misevaluated information about Rwanda through the prism of a bureaucratic mindset; second, top UN officials exploited factual ambiguities and traditional peacekeeping doctrines as political cover to evade their responsibility to press for an intervention that would be unpopular with the great powers and organizationally risky for the UN.

Barnett ends his narrative, in which Dallaire figures as the tragic hero, with a call for an ethic of personal responsibility in the face of pressures for bureaucratic self-protection and political expediency. Arguably, however, a strategy for forestalling the horrors of genocide is doomed to failure if it must depend on personal heroism in the face of the kind of widespread ignorance, great power apathy and opportunism, misconceived diplomatic strategies, logistical insufficiencies, and poorly trained and equipped peacekeepers that Barnett describes in the Rwanda case. No doubt Barnett would agree that what is really needed is not just last-minute heroism in the face of long odds, but the painstaking development of a working peace system that can be run by merely mortal bureaucrats.

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**Washington** by Meg Greenfield. New York, Public Affairs Books, 2001. 241 pp. Cloth, \$26.00; paper, \$14.00.

How can a celebrated journalist escape the “traitor” label while using an anthropologist’s tools to dissect Washington’s political culture and its impact on politicians’ lives? The answer is to write your story secretly and have it published posthumously. That is exactly what Meg Greenfield, the *Washington Post*’s fabled editorial page editor, did when she wrote *Washington*. Graced with a foreword by *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham and an afterword by historian Michael Beschloss, this insider’s view of the Washington, D.C. cosmos was published two years after Greenfield’s death.

The book chronicles the reality of life for Washington politicians during eight presidencies, starting with the John F. Kennedy administration and ending with Bill Clinton. Using the metaphor of the narcissistic, status-seeking social codes rampant at the high school level, Greenfield depicts a universe of image-conscious, extraordinarily ambitious and competitive men who pretend to be whatever is fashionable in the politics of the hour. That rarely includes displays of compassion and tolerance for their fellow actors on the Washington stage or even concern for maintaining a healthy family life for themselves. As

Greenfield puts it, Washington politicians “eagerly dehumanize themselves” (p. 7) to reach the pinnacle of whatever counts for success. With her typical sense of fairness, she also acknowledges that the image of being successful is a prerequisite for substantive achievements in governing the nation.

Greenfield brings her characterizations of Washington types to life by brief vignettes of representative Washington movers and shakers. When she talks about the importance of having powerful mentors, for example, names like Sam Nunn, who was mentored by John Stennis, or Walter Mondale, who was mentored by Hubert Humphrey, pop up briefly and sympathetically. Greenfield is not a tabloid mudslinger; she is a classy, perceptive, and utterly fair reporter who depicts reality as she sees it.

Greenfield also describes the changes in Beltway journalism that she witnessed during her four decades of covering the scene. Most notably, there was the withering from the 1960s onward of the mystique that incumbent administrations were honest and capable and that journalists could trust their word. Respect for politicians was replaced by unremitting cynicism that made journalists hunt routinely for hidden unsavory motifs in politicians’ pronouncements. The loss of trust, shared by the American public, has doomed presidents and their administrations to operating with less credibility, less privacy, and less power than their predecessors. Constant prying and carping has enhanced politicians’ efforts to hide actions, deny responsibility, and sugarcoat mistakes.

Beyond its insightful portrayal of political life at Washington’s pinnacle, the book also chronicles the development of a topnotch journalist whose youthful idealism grows into a mature realism concerning the dynamics of the rocky marriage between journalists and politicians. Greenfield knows the journalistic rules by which the game is played and admits to conforming to them even when it entails uncomfortable compromises with the desire to tell all. She also admits, with obvious lack of contrition, that she has often strayed from the commands of neutrality when it meant distancing herself from her story subjects. As demonstrated in her book, she believes that flesh and blood personalities should not be studied with clinical detachment, bereft of the context that shows their human settings and motivations. Acting on that insight makes the book a major contribution to understanding Washington politics. In conversational, colorful prose, Greenfield makes the denizens of the Beltway, politicians as well as journalists, come to life. She paints the nation’s capital in all its phoniness, all its pretense, all its stylized moves, while still retaining all its human nuances. To experience Washington through the eyes of one of its most discerning, empathetic, and articulate observers is a rare and unique treat, enjoyable as well as enlightening for students of American politics.

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