

DIARY

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Washington, DC

It's good to be back in Barack Obama's Washington. My family and I lived in DC in 2008-2009 while I analysed the last presidential race from a perch at the Brookings Institution. Upon pulling in at Union Station for this return visit, my first thought is that I am pleased to find the city where I left it. After all the Republicans' talk of the coming 'armageddon' should Obama's healthcare reforms pass, I half-expected to find nothing but a great smoking crater next to the Potomac, with only the occasional pillar of salt left standing. But it seems that Washington, and the US, has survived the shocking heresy of extending basic healthcare to some of its poorest citizens.

Most of my Washington friends, of both political colours, think that re-election is there for the President's taking. Karl Rove and his ilk no longer even pretend (as they did before the healthcare vote) that its passage will hurt Obama politically. One measure of Obama's momentum is the violent U-turn staged by his critics. Until recently, Obama was 'all talk, no action'; now he is an 'over-reaching liberal menace'. What a difference a vote makes.

The Democrats may well lose some skin in the mid-term elections in November. But Obama will likely be unchallenged for the Democratic presidential nomination, and he will go into the 2012 general election as the seasoned incumbent, with healthcare reform in his back pocket and the world's best soundstages — the White House and Air Force One — on which to perform. He also has the finest skills of any of today's politicians, which explains how he got from the Illinois State Senate to the Oval Office in four years. Meanwhile, half a dozen unimpressive Republican candidates will spend the next two years racing each other to the right. No wonder grown-up Republicans are dismayed.

It's astonishing how many bloviators and ideologues make their home in Washington, and I'm not talking about Congress. Turn on the TV at your hotel and you'll find the usual pantomime cast of characters — Hannity, O'Reilly, Beck, Olbermann, Maddow and so on — having their say on the issue of the day, whether it be Iran's nuclear program or Kate Gosselin's turn on *Dancing with the Stars*. They flick between editorialising, interviewing their fellow travelers and



engaging in witless repartee with their opponents. Although often wrong, they are never in doubt. Naturally, they are never held accountable for their analyses and predictions.

It is easy to get discombobulated in this city. On the one hand, all the imperial paraphernalia of a great power are on display: long, snaking motorcades with outriders flash past; helicopters bearing the presidential seal buzz overhead. A few years ago, a construction crew working in the suburbs near the CIA's headquarters hit a fibre optic cable by mistake. Within minutes, dark SUVs containing men in suits rolled up: it seems the crew had hit a 'black' cable used by the intelligence community.

On the other hand, away from the A-type personalities of its leafy north-west quadrant, Washington is a black city, and a poor one. The inauguration of a black man on the gleaming white steps of the US Capitol has not yet changed the day-to-day circumstances of many African-Americans within the District. These economic disparities push Washingtonians apart from each other. A few years back, I witnessed a mugging and intervened to chase off the perpetrator. I didn't expect the keys to the city for my efforts, which were only half-successful in any case. Neither did I expect, however, a talking-to from a DC police officer, whose first words to me were: 'Are you insane?'

And yet, this other Washington has wonderful experiences to offer. If your spirit ever needs a lift, and you've already offered your secular worship at the Lincoln Memorial, I suggest you attend Mass at St Augustine's, the mother church of black Catholics in DC. Even a Grinch like Christopher Hitchens would be invigorated by a couple of hours of African-American spirituals and contemporary gospel music at St Augustine's.

I am writing a book about Franklin D. Roosevelt, so I take the opportunity to catch up with the dean of presidential biographers, Robert Dallek. Dallek is rigorous in his research, elegant in his writing and generous with his colleagues. One of the points we discuss is Roosevelt's legendary inscrutability. When flying over Egypt in 1943, the story goes, he looked down and said in recognition: 'Ah, my friend the Sphinx.'

There are many jokes to this effect, such as the time Roosevelt's advisor Harry Hopkins supposedly told him that the United States must ramp up military support to the British. 'Harry, you're absolutely right,' replied FDR. Then Hopkins's rival, Secretary of the Interior Harold Ickes, entered the Oval Office and told the president the country couldn't afford to take such a step. 'Harold, you're absolutely right,' replied FDR. Finally, Eleanor Roosevelt emerged from an anteroom. 'Franklin, I'm appalled,' she said. 'I heard everything. First Harry said one thing, and you told him he's absolutely right. Then Harold voiced the opposite opinion, and you told him he's absolutely right. What have you got to say for yourself?' 'Eleanor,' replied Roosevelt, 'you're absolutely right.'

Ambassador Kim Beazley and his accomplished wife Susie Annus invite me for dinner at their residence. (Other guests include Australian-born Martin Indyk, the Middle East expert who is now head of foreign policy at Brookings.) After a nasty fall that put him in a wheelchair for months, Beazley is now back on his feet and in his element.

Beazley is well cast as our man in Washington. He has a wide network of contacts in both capitals. As a former long-serving defence minister, he can deal authoritatively with the Americans on military issues, in particular Afghanistan; as a former opposition leader, he has the policy breadth to cover all the points of congruence between the Obama administration and the Rudd government, including healthcare, climate change and the rise of China. And in a city built on self-promotion, Beazley's self-deprecation is like a gust of air conditioning on a humid Washington day.

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