

# DIARY

IRWIN STELZER

This is the best time of year here in Washington. The weather is wonderful, the temperature and humidity not yet in the high 90s to which both will be heading shortly. The 3,000 cherry blossom trees sent as a gift from the mayor of Tokyo in 1912 are in full bloom, and I am now rather glad that calls after Pearl Harbor to have them cut down went unheeded. I suspect that, at the time, I would have been the first to sharpen an axe.

But to a guy who left his heart in New York City there is a terrible price to pay for living amidst these gifts of nature. Sleep-inducing silence instead of vitality-inducing noise. No great soaring skyscrapers, buzzing with creative talent. No adrenalin shot when you step out of your door. No Sondheim performances, sharpened by an audience that understands his edginess. None of the menace of a Sinatra on the prowl. No guys & dolls.

I am rather enjoying the fact that at the time of writing, congressmen have not yet returned from what they call a 'district work period', in which they visit their constituencies. After the rancour surrounding the healthcare bill, I savour both the period of quiet and the fact that these supposed representatives of the people are finally facing the voters, a majority of whom detest the government takeover of healthcare and the resultant increase in spending by a government that seems intent on modelling itself after Greece.

School has been out across the country, so tourists are descending on the capital, the more serious ones to stand in awe before the monuments to Abraham Lincoln and Thomas Jefferson. Across from my office is the National Geographic Building, which until the end of last week was staging an exhibition of the terracotta warriors. Buses disgorged 280,000 tourists, who queued in a manner so orderly as to make our British friends envious. This amateur photographer can't help noticing one change from earlier years: the miniaturisation of cameras means that you can no longer distinguish a tourist by the large black camera hanging from his or her neck. Brightly coloured Bermuda shorts will have to do as identifiers.

Most who come here will not know they are visiting a town that came into existence at a dinner party. Founding father James Madison wanted the capital to be in, or close to, his native Virginia, but Congress preferred Pennsylvania. Alexander Hamilton wanted the federal government to assume the debts of the several states and create a strong, financially viable central government, even if that meant conferring huge profits on



speculators who had bought up depressed state debt at a few cents on the dollar. At a dinner party arranged in New York by Thomas Jefferson they cut a deal: Madison's south gets the capital, Hamilton gets a financial system capable of fuelling the expansion and industrialisation that enabled America to achieve its Manifest Destiny. The region in decline gets Washington as its capital, the region of the future gets New York as its financial hub.



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I've always had the impression that the Iguide books cannot come as close to describing the reality of this town as did Frank Sinatra, inadvertently, in 'This Town'. Ol' Blue Eyes crooned, 'This town is a quiet town; Or a riot town. This town is a love-you-town, and a shove-you-down and push-you-round town.'

As I write this, both Congress — and the hoards of lobbyists who encircle it in the manner of gulls circling a garbage scow — are gone. But by next week Washington's not-so-notables will return and be careening to their favourite watering holes behind screaming sirens, leaving 'the little people' — the description used by billionaire heiress Leona Helmsley to describe people who pay taxes — stuck in the traffic jams they create. One senator from New England is known for addressing head waiters coping with diners waiting for tables with, 'Don't you know who I am?'

But there is no question that Washington has become a more important place since Barack Obama resuscitated the age of big government that Bill Clinton had declared dead. Wealth creators troop here to be abused by congressmen seeking their 15 seconds of fame. A pay czar determines many of their salaries and bonuses; 16,500 more Internal Revenue agents are being hired to make sure that Americans take out health insurance or pay steep fines. Rising government payrolls have kept the unemployment rate below the national average and moderated the decline in house prices to only a few percentage points.

Washington plays two main roles in American life. Its political class determines who gets what slice of a national pie they have not baked. Right now the slices going to high earners and the middle class are being pared to increase the slices going to lower earners. The mistaken assumption is that the size of the pie is fixed, and that no matter how it is sliced its size won't change.

The second industry is ideas/policymaking/punditry, one of the worlds in which I move. Some of my friends populate the several think tanks here and are busily trying to figure out where the boundary between the public and private sectors should be drawn in what I have called the 'new capitalism'. Others scribble: my friend Charles Krauthammer produces such trenchant weekly columns that one magazine dubs him the 'leader of the opposition'. Given the president's leftward lurch, probably the most important job in town.