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"Our Politicians: What Are They Really Like?"

In our business, when you invite someone to come to your place to give a talk, you agree to take them as they are and to listen to what they have in mind at the time. So here I am, and the first thing I have to tell you is I’m retired! So, I feel a little like I used to in 5th or 6th grade when I had to tell the class "what I did last summer." Maybe the answer is nothing! So the question is: What have you been doing in retirement? One way to go about answering it is to ask yourself: "What did you retire from? In my case, I retired from 30 years of traveling around the country, chasing and talking with elective politicians.

All told, I traveled with 30 U.S. Representatives and 16 U.S. Senators in 27 different states. I wrote about what I had learned in my travels and I suggested some conceptualization that might help others to think about the general subject of representation. In the process, I made 127 trips from Rochester to someplace else. Eleven of those trips, incidentally, were to Indiana to travel with five politicians, three in the 70's, one in the 80's and one in the 90's. As my wife would say--a guy who spent that much time away

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from home ought to have something to say for himself. So, having
done all that, I asked myself, “What did it all add up to?” And,
“Do you have anything else to say?” The prudent answers may be
“nothing” and “no.” But, once a political scientist, always a
political scientist. You can’t stop thinking. And if you’ve been
testing about representation for 30 years, it’s hardly possible to
stop.

So, the question is: what, if anything, did all that traveling,
research and writing add up to? As best I can generalize, it all
adds up to this: That traveling with these people, talking with
them and watching them in their home constituencies provides a
perspective on our elected politicians that cannot be learned as
well or appreciated as much in any other way. From the
constituency perspective, they are small “r” representatives; they
work to develop and to protect their connections with their
constituents; and they do this in a variety of constituency
contexts across America. If I boil down all the questions I have
asked about all these people I have studied in all those places
into one single question, a prime candidate is this one: “What are
they like?” In any case, that’s the one I want to look at.

It’s a widely asked question. For example, in the introduction to
his prize-winning study of six 1988 presidential candidates,

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Richard Ben Cramer writes that his purpose was to answer “the only question that I (and I think, most voters) ever wanted to ask: “Who are these guys?” “What are they like?” In Newsweek editor Benjamin Bradlee’s book Conversations With Kennedy, the President says to him, “That’s what makes journalism so fascinating, and biography so interesting... the struggle to answer that single question, ‘What’s he like?’ Veteran Washington Post journalist, Meg Greenfield, writes in her memoir that “the hardest part of a Washington journalist’s job is to discover and comprehend what these men and women are doing and why.” And the Washington Post’s media watchdog, Howard Kurtz, in an analysis of presidential candidate profiles writes, “the question that all profile writers seek to answer (is) ‘Who is this guy?’”

From the origin of those comments, it seems that my “what are they like” question has been less a political science question than a journalists question. And even more than that--it is a Washington journalists question. If that is so, it is to be expected that the answers we get to that question will be primarily Washington-centered answers. And we certainly get a lot of those. Washington journalists write a lot about our Senators and Representatives. Indeed, almost all of what we know about what our national politicians “are like” comes from Washington journalists. Perhaps we political scientists should be “ok with that”--simply assume
they’ve got it right and let their writings answer the “what are they like” question for us. But since I’ve spent so much time watching and talking with some national politicians outside of Washington—in a very different place—namely their home constituencies—I’m not content to leave it in their hands. We can certainly learn from Washington observers. But, just as surely, I would argue, they can learn from us. Different political scientists will have different skills and insights in that respect. But any contribution I might make would be centered on the relevance of place. And on the idea that Washington is not the only crucial political place.

My curiosity about Washington’s journalists got piqued back in 1981-1982. That year, after tracking them in their home states, I lived in Washington so I could follow a half-dozen Senators around on Capitol Hill. I often found myself in the company of Washington journalists who were covering the same legislative activities I was. And it seemed to me that the depth of their knowledge of the issues was a good deal greater than the depth of their knowledge of the Senators. And my explanation was that they didn’t know the Senators as politicians very well, and that they didn’t know them very well because they never saw and talked with them outside of Washington in their home constituencies.
At a conference on "The Media and Politics" that year, I presented a formulation of "media score keeping in the U.S. Senate" that distinguished between the strong "institutional score keeping" and the weak "individual score keeping" of the journalists I had watched. And I argued then that Washington journalists could redress the imbalance if they paid more attention to the Senators in their home constituencies and got to know them in that context. Well, the conference proceedings were collected in an obscure book; and I left Washington and never followed up. Not until my retirement. So today, I want to think out loud about our politicians and about the people who ask "what are they like?"

Since it is the Washington journalists who most commonly ask that question, let some of them answer it. As a benchmark, take the perspective of a consummate Washingtonian--Meg Greenfield--the long-time editorial page editor of the Washington Post, and Newsweek columnist. In her valedictory book entitled Washington, she answers her own "what are they like" question, by invoking the uniqueness of that place and its overwhelming effect on the people who work there. "The professional value system of political Washington," she writes, "entices those who came to it from elsewhere; (and) most adopt Washington-centered behavior patterns."

"The inhabitants of Washington become wrapped up in the peculiar life of this place, and can no longer imagine caring so much about..."
any other." And finally, "It is as if everyone who came to the place were put into a witness protection program, furnished with a complete new public identity... a fake persona."

The Post's veteran media critic, Howard Kurtz, in one of his own "who is this guy" profiles of a United States Senator echoes the same theme. "In political Washington, " he writes,

where past lives are shed like so much excess skin, anything is possible... Washington is a city built upon the politics of expediency. Yesterday’s campaign promise is today’s lily-livered compromise. Positions shift with the ebb and flow of pundits and polls... intellectual consistency means nothing... The capital is, in short, a landscape perfectly suited for public figures... who are constantly reinventing themselves... Yes, anything is possible in this city of chameleons.

Atlantic editor, Michael Kelly, writes similarly in the New York Times Magazine,

In the culture of Washington, what sort of person a politician actually is and what he actually does are not important. What is important is the perceived image of

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what he is and what he does. Politics is not about objective reality, but virtual reality. What happens in the political world is divorced from the real world... Washington has become a strange and debased place, the true heart of a national culture in which the distinction between reality and fantasy has been lost.

And two other reporters echo that, “Washington, after all, is a city that turns on reputation... (where) to be seen as bright or powerful is, to a degree, to be bright and powerful.”

From the journalists who ask the “what are they like” question, we get two answers. One is about a place. They tell us that Washington is a world unto itself and that the people who come from other places to work there adapt to Washington pretty much by forgetting where they came from. They become, above all, Washington people and Washington players. And they play according to Washington rules and expectations. The second answer we get is about their behavior in that place. They behave, we are told, like “chameleons;” they adopt “fake personas;” they “reinvent themselves,” and they manipulate their “images” and their “reputations.” It follows that those of us outside of that place will be hard put to answer the question “what are they like.” It’s a pretty self-centered and self-contained view of Washington.
politics. And it puts the answers to “what are they like” out of the reach of the rest of us. We haven’t “been there” and we haven’t “done that.”

The “Washington centeredness” of the journalistic view—as I have presented it—may be exaggerated, but only slightly. Surely Washington observers know there is a world beyond Washington, and that our politicians live and work there, too. Even so, they give that other world short shrift. My favorite Washington journalist, David Broder, writes about that other world that, “The Washington journalists, politicians and bureaucrats with whom I spend my time... look with suspicion, if not contempt, on lesser breeds outside the beltway.” Greenfield writes of Washington politicians that, “Their daily lives and personal dealings (in Washington) seem more real and important than the distant abstraction they have taken to calling ‘the American people’ which is spread throughout the great shapeless wilderness (which) has been designated as ‘out there.’” Every year or so, she writes “the traveling Washington-based press corps goes lyrical about... good old ‘out there’ as they fly together over the country.” It’s a “feel good” thing to fly over once in a while, but you wouldn’t want to land there.

“Out there,” she writes, members of Congress can be found “gassing off in podunk.” “Podunk” is defined by Webster as “a place of
placid dullness and lack of contact with the progress of the world.” It is popular Washington shorthand for the world beyond the beltway. Thus, we find the editor of the Capitol Hill newspaper Roll Call describing one Senator’s yearly driving tour of his home state this way: “He motors himself around without staff and drops in on constituents in various podunks.”

That world of “podunks,” “out there” beyond Washington and outside the beltway is, of course, the very world from which all our House and Senate members have come, in which all of them spend a good part of their working lives and to which all of them must return for citizen judgment. Those facts are easily forgotten when Washington journalists talk only to each other. Newsweek columnist Jonathan Alter writes of “today’s congressmen,” for example, that “their world—Congress world—is a fortress of unreality, its drawbridges only barely connected to life beyond the moat.” His idea that a recognizable, describable “Congress world” exists is, of course, accurate. But his companion idea—that members of Congress are “barely connected” to their constituents beyond “the moat” is pure Capitol Hill conceit.

Some Washington media people do, of course, venture “out there,” to write about members of the House and Senate. But only occasionally, and when they do, they carry their Washington-centric
perspective with them. Mostly, they leave Washington every two or four years, to write about a few nationally interesting election campaigns. And mostly they produce one-shot, in-and-out, on-the-run articles that focus on a single election contest and its likely outcome. They want to know “who will win” and they write about winning—because winners will soon become legislators. And a winning legislator may become relevant in Washington where the journalist’s interest is focused.

Washington journalists, in other words, do not spend a lot of time probing the relationship of politicians to their constituencies. Their short-term interest in the business of winning tends to drive out any long-term interest they might have in the constituency-centered phenomenon of representation. Journalists will ask “what are they like as candidates,” not “what will they be like as representatives.” The veteran political editor of the Des Moines Register describes the Washington journalists he has watched who suddenly and briefly descend on Iowa every four years. “They do know quite a lot about the positions of a specific candidate, about the tensions and jealousies of his staff, about the logistics of getting a candidate’s entourage from one place to another. But they know nothing and care less about the place the candidate is campaigning in or the people he is trying to win.” “Place” and “people,” of course, are precisely what constituency and
representation are all about!

It is hard to put numbers on these ideas. For many years, I had a packrat’s habit. When I read an article about an individual House member or Senator that looked interesting, I cut it out and threw it in a big file drawer. It was a totally random, intermittent, almost mindless process except that I deliberately excluded articles that focused on a contemporary election campaign or articles featuring politicians I was writing about. Recently, when I started thinking more about the media coverage of our politicians, I dug out my pile of clippings. After further excluding articles done by local reporters, I was left with 248 articles—91 articles about individual House members and 157 articles about individual Senators, all written—as far as I could tell—by Washington journalists. I read each one; asking the following question: Is there any evidence in this article that the author (or anyone else) journeyed personally to the constituency to do research for this article. The percentages of personal visits were almost identical for House and Senate articles. In 45 out of 248 articles, or in 18% or in about one of five articles about a member of Congress—there was evidence of a personal visit to the district. I then reread each of these 45 articles (and only these) to ask how many of them used the word “representation” or words that might invoke the concept or the idea of representation are all about!

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“representation.” And by the most generous of interpretations, only seven out of the 45—or 2% of the entire group of articles—qualify.

This very casual compilation suggests that the combination of a constituency visit and a motivating interest in representation as an activity is uncommon among Washington journalists. Now you certainly cannot take these numbers or these generalizations “to the bank.” But you can use them to maintain a discussion. (And if anyone here has a suggestion about a more systematic way of locating this kind of journalistic material, I would love to hear it.)

Now, I recognize the obstacles and disincentives that operate to keep Washington reporters in Washington. There is the sheer amount of time it takes to find out what someone is like. As Ben Cramer writes, “Campaign reporters (may) think they’re in the character business; but they have no purchase on real character.” As newspapers consolidate, fewer reporters are available. And surveys show that editors prefer the “day to day,” “on the spot” coverage to all other reportage. Some reporters see no percentage in it anyway. As journalist Richard Reeves puts it, “Why do you have to go out and talk to people, including Senators and Presidential candidates, when it’s all on the internet.” And some easy to get

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and manipulate material is on the internet—campaign finance data, for example. And we get articles about campaign money ad nauseum. Finally, there is the siren song of Washington life.

As Kurtz writes, “Washington is an incredibly inbred and incestuous community in which everybody talks to the same seventeen people and arrives at the same conventional wisdom. We were once society’s outsiders, but today (we) would rather be going to a Georgetown party with senator so and so and business leader so and so... We now, many of us, are part of the game. Rather than identifying more with the plumbers out there, we identify with the policy-makers and the politicians.” And the reward for staying inside the beltway, he says, is “celebrityhood.” Hard to get, I suppose, and hard to resist once you’ve got it.

Journalism guru, Tom Rosenstiel, once the media critic for the LA Times is less satisfied. He says,

The (national) press is now disconnected from the communities it serves... we don’t know nearly as much about the neighborhoods... as the people that we are writing for do. There are a lot of people in the Washington bureau of the LA Times who have never really spent any time in Los Angeles, including the two people

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who run the Washington Bureau of the LA Times.

Similarly, when Adam Clymer retired after twenty years covering national politics for the New York Times, he offered "some simple advice for Washington reporters: 'get out into the country as much as you can.'"

Not surprisingly, that is my bottom line prescription, too. But there is more to it than just leaving Washington. There has to be some serious interest in the idea and the practice of representation. In that vein, I’d like to talk about a couple of my own experiences with Washington journalists who indeed did "get out into the country," but whose interests and judgments remained Washington-driven and sharply at variance with my own. Even when they went to the world "out there," they remained interested in the central political activity of Washington, i.e., legislation. And, by contrast, they were not much interested in the main political activity out in the country, i.e., representation. Again, it’s a matter of place. Their place, Washington, controlled their interest; and their interest, in turn, controlled their answers to the "what are they like" question. That "other place"--the world "out there" beyond Washington and its political practices--remained strange to them.
Looking back, now, an early indication came in the late 1970's when I was traveling in Iowa with Senator John Culver. In the year before I went there, one of Washington's topmost journalists, Elizabeth Drew--Washington correspondent for the New Yorker, Washington editor of Atlantic Magazine, Washington talk show regular and a first-rate interviewer of Washington's politicians--had written an excellent book about Culver. It was entitled Senator, and it was about his legislative prowess, "getting in there doing the hard work and making the thing go" and about "his reputation as one of the most effective members of the Senate." She was a Washington journalist interested in the main political activity of Capitol Hill--legislation. To her great credit, she went with Culver to Iowa and she watched while he met with his constituents. What was most striking to me, however, was that while she watched and reported on these home relationships, she showed absolutely no interest in the central political activity of that place--representation.

She was totally interested in his message to them, and she was not at all interested in their message to him. "He is teaching these people," she explains, "as well as trying to help them." "He wants to demonstrate to each group he meets that he is knowledgeable about what he is doing and is interested in their problems." When constituents are quoted, they, too, speak of his "passion about the
issues and his intellect.” She simply assumes away any connection problem he might have.

When I traveled with him the following year, I had little interest in his legislative prowess in Washington or his reputation there. I was interested in his connection patterns and his connection problems in Iowa—that is to say, in the business of representation. The content of my key conversations with the Senator could not be imagined in Drew’s study. Consider these comments of his during our travels. “One thing I have not done since I have been in the Senate is to become well known in Iowa.” Or, “In five years, I haven’t become much of an established personality in the state. There isn’t much warmth of identification with me.” Or, “I know I have a long way to go (here) in the state. I have no illusions about that.” There was not a whiff of these constituency connection problems in Drew’s book.

One small comparison is illustrative. During Drew’s visit to Iowa, Culver held a meeting with some cattlemen. In three pages of commentary, she emphasizes the Senator’s preparation for the meeting; and she reports parts of their conversation back and forth, on the effect of beef imports on prices. “Culver reasons with them,” she writes (and) “shows them he understands their problem and is trying to help them.” She concludes by quoting one

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of the cattlemen: “I think it’s good for you to come out. There’s problems out here, except when we have an election.” It is a vague comment about Culver’s representational relationships. And it hints at a possible connection problem. But it draws zero interest or comment from the author. In her very next sentence, she is riding on the plane with Culver, listening to him discourse—for several pages in the book—about single-issue politics, John Gardner’s recent book, and leadership in Washington. Not a syllable from either one about the cattlemen or any other constituents.

When I traveled with Senator Culver a year later, we also had contact with some of Iowa’s cattlemen. He participated in the 1979 National Cattle Congress Parade, and we toured the agricultural exhibits at the fairgrounds afterwards. Because I was then a visitor at the University of Iowa, I picked him up early and drove him all day in my car. In my notes, I wrote,

It struck me as odd that he would let himself be taken to the National Cattle Congress parade in my car with its New York license plates. As we left the Waterloo fairgrounds, having parked prominently near the entrance gate and having said goodbye to the parade organizers, he parodied their likely reaction. “He’s not from Iowa,
they say.” Where’d they ever get that idea? “He’s arrogant, insensitive, out of touch.” What makes them think that? Huh? “He votes more with the East than the Midwest.” Where’d that idea come from? Huh? “All I’m doing is riding around with New York plates on my car!”

“He was sensitive to his weakness,” I noted, “but was not treating it seriously.” He was not connecting; he knew it; he knew it was a problem, and he mockingly chose to make light of it. It was no surprise to me when he was defeated for reelection with only 46% of the vote. I do not know what Drew’s reaction was. But the Senator promptly left Iowa and settled in Washington, DC, where he could take advantage of his policy-making strengths (which had interested Drew) and could ignore his representational weaknesses (which had interested me).

There was no wrong or right of our two analyses. We each had half an answer to the “what is he like” question—hers was a legislative answer, mine was a representational answer. She was interested in the judgment of his colleagues and others in Washington. “Was he an effective legislator?” I was most interested in the judgment of his constituents in Iowa. “Was he an effective representative?” I cite the case because, for me, it was an important eye-opening contrast—between a Washington-centered and a constituency-centered...
answer to the “what are they like” question.

A more recent lesson contrasting Washington-centered and constituency-centered pictures of a politician came during my constituency travels with South Carolina Representative Lindsey Graham. Graham (now a U.S. Senator), you may recall, was one of the House managers of their indictment of President Clinton in the Senate impeachment trial. In that role, he gained considerable Washington media attention. Two weeks after Clinton’s acquittal in the Senate, I made my fifth visit to South Carolina. I accompanied Graham to two town meetings—in Greenwood and in Laurens—two counties which had supported him at quite modest levels. I can best convey my impressions, and their very unusual impact on me, by reading from my notebook.

About the Greenwood and Laurens town meetings, it’s hard to describe them. I had never (italics in original) seen anything like it in all my years of traveling. There were 325 people at Greenwood (275 in chairs—not one empty one) and another 50 standing or sitting on tables around the room (I sat on the stage and taped it). It reminded me of a gymnasium at (high school) graduation time. When he walked in the back door, they got up and started clapping, which they did as he walked down the
aisle and got up on the stage. Then they kept clapping. It was a two minute standing ovation, hard clapping for the most part, warm, appreciative, a salute, a thank you—all of that. He called it a “welcome home.” But it was a phenomenon—in a country of presumed cynics, skeptics, anti-politics people. Here, on a week night, not in his home town, on a raw evening, this huge crowd had come out to see him, hear him, thank him for something he had done as a politician.

It was a working people, small business crowd, more than any elite kind of crowd—lots of couples, very few if any suit-and-tie people. Elderly to middle age with a sprinkling of young people (in each meeting, at least one teenager asked a question). When we drove up, there were hundreds, a sea of cars in front of the building and all around it. LG was stunned. “I can’t believe it.” (To the crowd, he said, “This is unbelievable! I thought they were giving away a truck or something.”)

I’ve seen major political rallies with that many people, but never a town meeting or any other kind of (constituency) meeting like it. And no political rally could have the emotional wallop that this one did. It
wasn’t about politics. It wasn’t about promises. It was about someone who had stood up for something--something these people wanted very much to have said on their behalf--however “popular” it might have been. In a sense, too, they were thanking a loser. He had lost! So it wasn’t a victory celebration. It was as if they had discovered a champion. And in their midst--“one of them”--they never knew they had. In a time of apathy, here was emotional commitment. It was an American Legion Hall, and when we came in the door, a friend said to Lindsey, “There’s a lot of emotion in there.” There were lots of good policy questions of the normal town meeting sort, but the ambience was very different.

The same thing happened in Laurens. Reflecting afterwards on the two town meetings, Graham talked naturally about his constituency connections and about constituent trust. “They see that I’m consistent in what I say at home and in Congress. People saw a side of me during impeachment--a tough prosecutor with serious views--that was not unknown to them when they sent me to Washington. They know me as aggressive (and) engaging, that I tell jokes and talk plain; and they got reenforcement when they saw those positive traits during impeachment. They have pride that I’m not just ‘one of 435,’ that I’m carrying the ball in a major event.

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They know I’m credible and they trust me. I told them I was going to vote against Article Two (of the impeachment charges) and I did.

“My politics is defined by what I do in Washington, but the trust I have is defined by what I do at home,” he explained. “My activity in Washington is dominant because of the media. What I do there gets home in twenty minutes... But home is still the underfooting, the floor. When I talk about ‘my district’ in Washington... I’m talking about people I was talking to at home the day before.” “People think of me as the home town boy. I’m just Lindsey. I’ve been adopted in all ten counties. I’ve grown into being their home town boy.” He was talking about a long-term process of connecting at home--to which his Washington activity contributes, but which is an autonomous home-centered process all its own. And these home-centered comments are helpful in answering the question: “what is Lindsey Graham like?”

Four days before I had arrived in the district, a top level New York Times Washington reporter, Katherine Seelye, had come to Graham’s district to cover his town meeting in the town of Anderson. Her curiosity and her visit were admirable and unusual; and it provided added testimony to Graham’s new found visibility. She saw the same activity I saw--another overflow crowd “out the door and down the hall to the back of the building,” according to

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a staffer. But her write-up of that town meeting was hugely different from my own; and it again exemplifies the gulf between a constituency-oriented and a Washington-oriented view of members of Congress.

Seelye begins her account with a Washington-generated question: “Didn’t Lindsey Graham see the memo?” The “memo,” she explains, was the plan of the Republicans in Washington “to shuck the scandal and delve into the real issues that affect real people.” And she found that “the folksy southerner is not inclined to do that just yet.” Even though, she writes, Republican party orthodoxy in Washington “holds that no good can come of reliving impeachment wars.”

She had come, therefore, from Washington, posing a legislative question formulated in Washington. To which she gets a South Carolina answer. Her question has no relation to what is going on there. Graham tells her that he wants “to tell them what I did and why” during impeachment. He is, quite simply, doing his job as their Representative. She calls it a “kind of victory lap for the hometown boy, even though Republicans lost the case and the Senate acquitted Mr. Clinton.” But the win/lose outcome of the Washington saga had no relevance for what she was observing. Representation is not a win/lose legislative idea.
She observes further than “an overflow audience cheered and yelled and gave him a standing ovation.” Then she remarks that his rhetoric was designed “to prompt the collective memory of his audience.” If she had any idea how rare that size of audience and that kind of audience reception was, she would have put a different interpretation on what she was seeing. And she would know that this audience surely needed no “prompting.” They knew what they came for. As Graham put it, “they came to say thanks.” When Graham says, “My God, I can’t believe this,” she treats it as nothing extraordinary. She has nothing to compare it with—does not know that his year-in/year-out normal town meetings attract “25 or 30” people. It’s all new to her.

She describes Graham’s presentational skills in familiar language. But she does so by invoking standards established in Washington, not in Anderson. The town meeting, she writes, “was a chance to demonstrate a down-home folksiness that stood in sharp contrast to the dour scowls and legal mumbo jumbo of many of his fellow managers.” This comparison to the “other Republican managers” has no relation to what she is witnessing or what the audience is thinking. In short, she sees Lindsey as Washington sees Lindsey; she compares him to other Washington players; and she judges him by Washington standards.
She has no interest in—and no perspective on—how or why the people of Anderson perceive, or judge, their Representative. She even deems it worth reporting when a Graham supporter assures her, “it was entirely appropriate that Mr. Graham devote so much time to impeachment.” As if it were a serious question; and as if she needed confirmation.

In sum, a fine Washington reporter has come to report on a representational activity without any interest in representational relationships or connective questions. She has, to her credit, come to the district to observe. But she has come with a Washington perspective. The connections between politician and constituency—and the town meeting as a common connecting medium—are of no interest to her. As with the Liz Drew example, a Washington mind-set and a constituency mind-set are very different. No better or worse, just different. And one is no substitute for the other in answering the “what are they like” question.

The day after Seelye’s visit, another Washington public affairs analyst, CNN’s Jeff Greenfield, brought his Washington mind-set to a Graham constituency setting—when he caught Graham live during his constituency visit to the small town of Walhalla. Again, the fact of a Washington journalist’s interest is a result of Graham’s raised Washington profile. I had not arrived yet, but I read the

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transcript. And, again, the journalist has no interest in the phenomenon of representation. As he connects with Graham, Greenfield acknowledges the constituency context. “People talk all the time of going beyond the beltway,” he preps his audience. (So) “We’ll try Walhalla, South Carolina, a town in the western part of the state, population about 4,000.” “Glad to be here in Walhalla,” says Graham. “I have a hunch that’s right,” parries Greenfield. And then, “You’ve been out talking to some of your constituents earlier this evening. And I assume they’re as anxious to talk about the future as we are and as you are. What, specifically, are they telling you about how politics is to be conducted in the future or where they want Congress to go?”

It is question from Washington about legislative activity in Washington. And it draws a South Carolina answer about a representational activity in South Carolina. “Well,” says the Representative, “the first reaction was (that) about 700 people stood and clapped for about 20 minutes. So it was a very good welcome home for me and I’ll remember it for the rest of my life. I told them why I voted the way I did. They wanted to talk about the case... Then we got into where we’re going to go as a nation. We talked about social security, surpluses, control over some of your money, health care, taxes. But we still, at the end of the evening, came back to this case. And I think (for) people in my

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district, the take home message is...” Greenfield stops him: “Well, congressman, I’m sure you were delighted to find that the people you talked to were pleased with the job you did. Our challenge tonight is to try look beyond the case... In your own sense, do you look forward to a political atmosphere when you go back to Washington, assuming you look forward to going back to Washington and leaving Walhalla...”

There is throughout this interview, the tone of a Washingtonian’s impatience with the local story along with a patronizing attitude toward the locality itself, Walhallah—otherwise known as Podunk. As Greenfield sees it, Washington is finished with impeachment. And that, of course, settles that for everyone else. The implication is that representatives who are touching base with, talking with, reporting to and connecting with—and thereby establishing or reenforcing a representational relationship of some trust with their constituents at home—are not sufficiently engaged in the nation’s business. The tone is “get over it” or, forget these representational connections and get back to your real job. For Greenfield in a Washington studio imagining the home scene, as for Seelye the Washington reporter at the home scene, the politician’s representational activity at home is neither intrinsically interesting nor much appreciated. And these two reporters, I should add, are among the very best.

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So we have a question: “What are they like,” and we have two different places and two different activities on which to focus in answering it. In the title to this talk, I deliberately raised the acceptability bar for the answer by adding the word “really.” “What are they really like?” It is a common question asked of all our politicians. As one national reporter assigned to John Kerry’s presidential campaign wrote, “The questions asked of a political reporter go something like this: “Ok, what’s the real story? What is he really like?” As Kerry himself said, “I believe you have to be real, and people know it if you’re not.” In Iowa, he advertised himself as “the real deal” and in New Hampshire, he campaigned in “the real deal express.” The “really” question may be the basic question asked of every politician by every constituent. By adding “really” to my inquiry, I mean to underline the insufficiency of Washington-centered answers--answers which emphasize “chameleons,” “fake personas,” manipulated “images” and “reputations,” answers describing people who are losing their sense of where they came from, people more interested in Georgetown parties than constituents “out there.” “What are they really like” is, I think, the gold standard question. Which brings me to a final point.

From my experience, the conditions in the constituency--in that place--are more conducive to answering the “really like” question than Washington, DC. In that home place among old friends, family

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and familiar locals--an observer gets a more casual, more relaxed, more spontaneous, more varied, more informal, more detailed, more repetitive and altogether more rewarding and definitive look at a politician. There is a level of exchange and a variety of observation in that place--the home place--that cannot be duplicated in Washington. “Out there,” I have found, there is more spontaneity, more contextual variety, more time, more informality, more stories that illuminate. That is my experience and the angle from which I speak.

As some of you probably know, I spent many of my pre-retirement years suggesting that political scientists could profitably venture into the constituency world to study the phenomenon of representation. And as you can see, my retirement preferences have come to look very much like my pre-retirement preferences. No surprise! It is all about studying representation first-hand in the constituency--the same old song, by old Johnny one-note. But instead of coming at it as a conceptual political science problem, I’m coming at it as a broadly political problem. Which is this: The people whom we depend upon to tell us what our politicians “are really like”--Washington journalists--could do a much better job of it than they are now doing. They haven’t given us particularly reliable standards of judgment about the behavior of our national politicians. And they pay too little attention to the home

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constituency, and to the representational half of the politician’s performance picture.

My argument, therefore, is that they, too, should go more regularly to the constituency: first to learn about representational activity, and second to tell us what our politicians are really like by incorporating that wider, richer context. My experience tells me that if more Washington journalists went more often to the constituency, they would get—and my main point, the rest of us would get—better answers—more complete, more reliable, more nuanced, more usable answers—to the “what are they really like” question than we are now getting from them. Washington journalists have not yet met the gold standard.