

The Fantasies of Senators' Wives

by Joseph Nocera

“Have we won?” I asked, groggy.

“Yes, darlin’, you’ve won,” he said and took me in his arms.

“I looked up at him—he knew how much I wanted this—and said, ‘Daddy, do you know what this means? It means that someday I may get to go to Europe.’ Nobody in our family had ever been to Europe except for Uncle Orville, who had died there during World War I.”

It was election night, 1962, and this is how Marvella Bayh remembered the moment she learned her husband Birch was going to be a United States Senator. Victory had been especially sweet because it was so wholly unexpected; Birch Bayh was young and had never run for statewide office, and the pundits—and his Republican opponent—had predicted he would

lose badly. In the euphoria that followed, Marvella thought about what lay ahead. The Bayhs would be moving to Washington, of course, an exciting prospect if for no other reason than the level of achievement it symbolized.

Washington in 1962 also meant the Kennedys, and that too was exciting. Like liberal Democrats everywhere, the Bayhs had admired the President, and like the rest of the country, they were also a little in awe of him and his glamorous family. Now, it seemed certain, they would be spending time with the Kennedys, getting to know them. (Hadn’t everyone remarked how much Birch Bayh resembled John Kennedy in his style and vigor and good looks? Hadn’t the President himself come to Indiana for a day to campaign for the Democratic candidate?) For Marvella Bayh, it meant that the special world of the capital was about to open up to her; one far

Joseph Nocera is an editor of The Washington Monthly.

different than anything she had known in Oklahoma, where she was born and raised, or Indiana. This would be a world of high-level politics, to be sure, but it would also be a world that included White House receptions, and intimate dinners with Washington celebrities, fancy embassy parties, and weekends at Hickory Hill or Hyannis. And excursions to Europe from time to time, no doubt. It seemed to Marvella that becoming part of this world would make her life full and fun, and she thought at the time that there was nothing she wanted more.

This description of what went through Bayh's mind comes from Bayh herself, or more precisely, from her book, *Marvella: A Personal Journey* (Harcourt Brace Jovanovich), an autobiography written with Mary Lynn Kotz and scheduled for publication next month. If the idea of a ghost-written book about the life of a senator's wife sounds less than engrossing, guess again. This is a remarkably good book by any measure—engagingly written, at times quite touching, and told with a sense of honesty that puts it well above the standard fare of Washington memoirs.

Marvella Bayh died earlier this year after a long and public battle with cancer, and the last few chapters of her autobiography are a moving account of that battle. Much of the rest of the book is devoted to detailing another fight she had, this one with herself and her role as a senator's wife. Marvella Bayh had a classic case of "political wife's syndrome."

She had grown up fiercely ambitious and very smart. As a high school student, she had traveled the country, entering—and winning—oratory contests. But now, married to a senator, it seemed that all her ambitions, energies and talents were channeled into furthering his career, while she got very little in return. As a "career" for her, it was unfulfilling—clipping newspapers and making speeches was about the closest she ever got to her husband's work. Her family life was equally unsatisfying because Birch was away so often, and even when he was around

he was usually so busy he had to fit his family in around a dozen other things. Bayh sums up her difficulties when she describes an interview she and Birch did with Sally Quinn of *The Washington Post* in the summer of 1971. This came at a time when she was about as resentful as she would ever become—morbidity depressed, fighting with her husband and his staff, angry that the time he was spending to put together a presidential campaign was forcing them apart, feeling cut out of his life, taking shots and popping pills to keep herself going. Yet she still had a role to play: "I pasted on a smile, tried to act the part of an energetic candidate's wife," she writes. "I live, totally, through my husband, I told [Quinn]. The piece appeared on June 20, showing a surface relationship between typical candidate and wife, guardedly trying to say the Right Thing. She could not have known what lay seething below the surface."

It was a resentment that has, with considerable justification, overcome countless politician's wives, causing, in some cases, alcoholism (Joan Kennedy), divorce (Betty Talmadge, among the legions), and even outright hatred (Remiglia Brooke). Marvella was neither alcoholic nor hateful, and she stayed willingly married to her husband, but she was frustrated with her life much of the time and embittered some of the time. In this respect, Washington did not provide the full and fun life she had hoped for.

But if the problems of living out the life of the political spouse were ones that she confronted head on, in her life and her book, there is another, much more subtle theme in *Marvella* that she does not confront. Marvella Bayh got fed up with being a chord in the symphony of her husband's life, and, eventually, she did something to change that, getting a paid, visible job as spokesman for the American Cancer Society. But what she never got tired of was knowing that she was part of the Washington she had dreamed about back in 1962. In that sense, she was fulfilled. She writes about this quite openly, acknowledging her wonder-

ment, especially at first, that she was getting to do all these terrific things. Once, Lyndon Johnson held an anniversary party for the Bayhs aboard the *Sequoia*. She writes: "I was so excited. I kept wondering if this could really be happening." And she never lost her lust for travel. The Bayhs, by my count, took 15 trips abroad in a span of 13 years, usually to the the meetings of the Interparliamentary Union, held either in Paris or some other equally alluring city. Marvella loved the hobnobbing with senators and ambassadors, Cabinet secretaries and important columnists. It was, as she describes it, a heady, even a giddy experience those first few years to sit down to dinner surrounded by people whom she had known before only from watching the evening news, and join in their conversations about affairs of state. Later, it was a nice feeling knowing that these people were her friends and that she and Birch had been accepted as one of them. She says she never got over the thrill of being able to call her mother back in Oklahoma with the news that she and Birch were having cocktails with the President that night. On election night, 1962, this had been her fantasy of what Washington would be like, and she never got weary of living it.

The Best Case Scenario

Everyone who moves to Washington comes here with some preconceived notions of what it is going to be like for them—a sort of best case scenario. In this respect, Washington for people associated in some way with the business of government is a lot like New York used to be for people with big dreams or like Hollywood still is for anyone wanting to break into the movies. Unlike the Hollywood hopefuls, however, most of those who come to Washington do not fantasize about getting a chance to "break into the business." Usually moving here is a sign that they have already had some success in their work—an election victory in the case of a politician, a step

up for a lawyer joining a Washington firm, a promotion for a lobbyist or a journalist being assigned to the Washington office. But having "made it" in the hinterlands—as politicians, journalists, bureaucrats or businessmen—the victors abandon the scene of their triumphs, and arrive in town fearing they will not be automatically plugged into a respected, powerful group of friends. It's a situation calculated to breed insecurity among the successful—a desire for acceptance on the part of people, like senators and their wives, who would not ordinarily have to worry about such things at their stage and station in life. The Bayhs, for example, were from small towns in rural America, and they wanted to be able to fit into the sophisticated, glamorous world they imagined Washington to be. But they weren't sure if they would be able to do that. Would they be "good enough?" Or would they do the "wrong thing" and be unmasked as unworthies? These are basically silly fears (as Marvella herself decides after she has been accepted in Washington), but they are hardly unique to the Bayhs. It is the rare individual who comes to Washington without any insecurities at all. The Bayhs' fear of social rejection is probably the most common. Others may be beset by equally powerful anxieties. It may be a fear that they won't be able to cut the workload, or that their peers in Congress will think them foolish, or that they just aren't smart enough for Washington—but in any case, even instant VIPs like senators generally come to town having, in some sense, to prove themselves all over again. The way their fantasies are fulfilled and their insecurities are becalmed—and by whom—has more than a little to do with what these people actually accomplish while they are here.

Dinner at Lyndon's

"Washington," writes Marvella, "in the glamorous days of John and Jacqueline Kennedy, was like a smor-

gasbord with exquisite food from all over the world, and I could not get enough of it." The fulfillment of the Bayhs' Washington dream began right from the start, even before Birch was sworn in, when they came to town to find a house. At a dinner with the Vice-President and his wife, Lyndon Johnson took the newcomers aside and offered some sage advice: buy an expensive house, he said, because what they invest in a house is the only money they'll be able to save. "He couldn't have been more gracious to us," she writes, "making a call to a real-estate friend, even taking us out house-hunting himself, in his limousine, in neighborhoods near his own."

The next day it was lunch with Ethel and Robert Kennedy at Hickory Hill. "I was wearing a nondescript black dress, I remember, a campaign necessity. It made me feel out-of-place among those glamorous women." During lunch, Marvella felt "overawed by the Eastern finesse of the Kennedys. I remember sitting very straight, hoping I wouldn't say 'the wrong thing,' whatever that might be."

A little later, when the Bayhs had begun to settle in, the stream of invitations began to arrive. "In the first six weeks, I found myself at home for only two full days. . . . I accepted every invitation—I thought we were supposed to. Besides, I didn't want to miss anything."

The desire for acceptance in those early days meant being willing to learn how to do things the right way, the sophisticated way. "The right fork or spoon, the correct way to answer an invitation, the right dress to wear—all of these details seemed so important to me. . . ." To make sure of these details, Marvella enrolled in a protocol course given by Mrs. Gladstone Williams, a woman who had taught generations of congressional wives how to do the right thing in Washington. Another step she took to make herself more presentable was to go to a dress shop in Georgetown that had "sent a welcome-to-Washington note to all the new congressional wives. 'I have been in Washington a long time' [the note

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said]. Come around and let me advise you on your wardrobe.'" The advice was swift in coming: "[The owner] soon had my entire closetful of clothes spread around her shop: 'This is worn out, this is too dated, this can be livened by a scarf, this needs to be shortened, this can be remade, this can go to a luncheon at the White House, this to a five-to-seven reception. . . .'" A third step was to hire an interior decorator to make the house presentable. Both the decorator and the dress shop owner became Marvella Bayh's close friends.

New Kid On The Block

So did Lady Bird Johnson, who was full of sound advice about how to get along in this wonderful new world. In the meantime, Birch Bayh was becoming friends with both the Kennedys and Lyndon Johnson. They appointed him to his first few overseas conferences. Johnson, especially, took Bayh

under his wing, presiding in the Senate the day of Bayh's first floor speech, thus making it clear to everyone that he was looking out for the new kid on the block. Birch Bayh, according to Marvella, was grateful for that too.

At their most benign, these incidents are simply examples of people being nice to each other. Certainly that is how Marvella Bayh portrays them in the book. Her list of Washington friends would fill pages of this magazine. The favors they do for each other, the parties they hold, are the same sort of things friends do for each other no matter where they live. The parties may be more lavish, and the lifestyle more refined, but still there is a sincere element to it all, and friendships really do develop that are lasting and genuine.

On the other hand, people who are fulfilling Washington fantasies for the newcomers like the Bayhs undoubtedly get more out of it than friendship. The most obvious are the dressmaker and interior decorator who get hard cash because of their ability to cultivate the new folks in town. Less obvious, but just as real, is the power a lobbyist, or a Senate leader, or a president can have over his new-found "friends."

One of the friends Marvella mentions, for example, is the former Iranian ambassador, Ardeshir Zahedi. Zahedi is now a rather notorious fellow, since there are supposed to be lists floating around with names of politicians and journalists who had been recipients of his gifts (and a couple of photographs of a senator and a congressman in what are called "compromising positions"). But when the Shah ruled Iran, Zahedi ruled the Washington social circuit. His parties were legendary; his friends were in important positions all over town. What he got out of it was simple: a willingness on the part of journalists and top government officials to give Iran the benefit of any doubts. The Shah did awfully well for himself in the American press and the American government, and Zahedi helped to see to that by insuring that he had a lot of

friends, and by fulfilling a lot of Washington fantasies. The Bayhs were perfect fodder for his kind of friendship. In their never-ending thirst for new travel experiences, Marvella recounts breathlessly, they once went to Iran, "and I had a private meeting with the Empress. . . . On returning we were invited to a dinner at the Iranian Embassy by her ambassador, Ardeshir Zahedi, who had also become our friend."

(Indeed, the travel fantasy seems to be one that lasts long after some of the other luster of Washington has begun to wear off; one can't help suspecting that it is on the minds of politicians while they are running for office, that it plays an important, if unexpressed role in the image of post-election life that spurs them to run in the first place. The best, latest example of a politician with an insatiable travel fetish is Washington mayor Marion Barry, who seems to want to be out of town as often as possible. During the Washington blizzard last winter, he was sunning in the Caribbean; more recently, while the D.C. budget has been struggling to make its way through Capitol Hill, Barry has been traveling throughout Africa on a trip the purpose of which is, to be kind, obscure.)

Taken In

In Marvella Bayh's case, the blinders she wore in pursuit of her fantasy life did her considerable personal harm. "I tried to convince myself," she writes, "that the compensations were worth the expenditure of energy. Look 'how far I had come' in two years, I kept telling myself. I was hungry for experience. I had traveled to Europe, talked to ambassadors, danced with the President. I was even wearing dressmaker's copies of exclusive designer clothes that two years ago, I'd never even heard about. At formal dinners, I was entertaining people who'd been born to luxury, whom I'd held in awe, when two years ago I didn't know a fish fork from a finger bowl." For her, the desire to lead the

fish fork and finger bowl life was enough to allow her to continue in that other life she hated—that of the senator's wife. And that is sad enough.

But, more important, their friendships in and around the government, to some degree, inevitably influenced what the Bayhs thought. The Vice President who takes a freshman senator from Indiana under his wing is going to get the same thing Zahedi gets—the benefit of any doubts. There will be a greater willingness to see his side of the story, or to empathize with his position. If you must criticize him, it will be muted, “responsible”—nothing that would keep him from inviting you back to his dinner table.

Lyndon Johnson, of course, was the master at cultivating this kind of friendship—there was enough of the psychologist in him to know what every new senator's expectations of Washington were and how to fulfill them. With Robert Byrd, who didn't care much for dinner parties, it was letting Byrd know that he was a member of the Senate “club.” For Birch Bayh, it was letting him be the President's close friend and showing him how to get along socially in Washington.

And, unwittingly, *Marvella: A Personal Journey* gives us a look at how Bayh responded. When he was President, beleaguered by criticisms of the Vietnam war, Johnson's ability to play Bayh like a violin kept the Indiana senator from wavering in his support of Johnson's war policies. LBJ did it with quiet, friendly seduction. He had Bayh over for regular talks. He offered Marvella a job at the Democratic National Committee, something designed to make her an ally as well. He let both Bayhs in on “the agony” he was going through. Here's one sequence of events described in *Marvella*: “On February 13, we were invited to the White House with a group. . . and the President, Bob McNamara, Hubert Humphrey and Dean Rusk briefed the men on Vietnam. It began as a social evening. . . .” On March 13, the Bayhs were back at the White House again, this time for an unofficial dinner. A few

months later, the Bayhs and the Johnsons spent a weekend at Camp David. The men stayed up late, after the fun of the day had ended, to discuss the war. The next day, Johnson announced that an additional 50,000 men were being sent to Vietnam, and Birch Bayh stuck with him; even as his fellow liberals were turning against Johnson and the war. (Even Bayh's wife, by this time, was against the war; perhaps that was because she had not been privy to those high-level discussions the men were so fond of. Yet her friendship with Johnson was such that she wonders at one point whether she would have been able to tell Johnson about her opposition if she had taken the job he had offered. Since she never told him “unofficially,” it is hard to imagine that she would have.) Johnson's playing to the friendship of the Bayhs wasn't necessarily entirely cynical. He undoubtedly liked being able to have friends whom he could tell his troubles to and who would stick with him. But their empathy for him seemed to weigh heavily on them. They *knew* the President, so they sympathized with him.

In 1968, at the height of the anti-war movement, Birch Bayh was running for reelection, which meant that Marvella was by his side. After all this time in Washington, surrounded by her friends, but especially having spent so much time with the President, she recalls being stunned at the vehemence of people's feelings toward Johnson. “I was shocked at the depth of the anti-Johnson feeling I found, even among our own campaign workers,” she writes. “One of our best supporters walked out on the State of the Union speech telecast. . . . He said people all over Indiana believed that Johnson was lying to them. If the people only knew the agony Johnson was going through, I thought.”

In their first term in Washington, the Bayhs' fantasies had, in large part, been fulfilled. They had supped with the famous and seen the world. They had been the friends of two presidents. For us, and for them, maybe it would have been better if they hadn't been. ■

The 'Whip-His-Ass' Story, or The Gang That Couldn't Leak Straight

by Eleanor Randolph

For those advisers of Jimmy Carter who had been praying for a transmigrational miracle six months before the first presidential primaries, there was a special significance to the night of June 11. That was the pivotal evening in American history when big John Wayne closed his eyes in a California hospital and galloped into the final sunset, while at about the same time in Washington, President Carter suddenly drew himself up to his full five-foot seven-inch height at a White House dinner and announced to those around him: "If Kennedy runs, I'll whip his ass."

It was supposed to be the surfacing of the new spirit of Jimmy Carter, a carefully-planned sign that he was a tough, strong, mountain of a man, not the presidential pipsqueak a lot of people imagined. Nobody planned it that way, of course, but if big John was dead, then long live big Jimmy. Unfortunately, the way his staff dressed him up in a cowboy suit, he ended up reminding people of Gabby Hayes.

The early signal that this new Carter would be stepping all over his lasso was the difficulty he had leaking his message to the press, the public, and the Kennedys. In a city where a person in power can whisper confidences to his mate at night and read them in the paper the next morning, suddenly

Carter kept finding people who kept a secret.

His first try at telling the world he would whip Teddy in 1980, as *The New York Times* so demurely put it, had come the previous week when he told a group of Georgians, mostly from that state's congressional delegation, of his threat. Carter dropped the word and waited for the ground to shake on Capitol Hill. Instead, not a peep. The Georgians quietly tucked the information away and went back to work. As one person who was at the meeting said later, "Frankly, I just forgot about it."

By the beginning of the next week, Carter was determined to try his new maxim on the less forgetful and the more disloyal. So he sprung it, at the June 11 White House dinner, on Rep. Toby Moffett, Rep. William Brodhead, and Rep. Thomas Downey. But even these congressmen were prepared to be diplomatic about the matter and dismiss it.

As the congressmen recalled afterward, one asked the President what he planned to do about the groundswell of support for Senator Kennedy. Carter replied that he felt great and that "if Kennedy runs, I'll whip his ass."

"Excuse me, Mr. President, what did you say?" Rep. Brodhead asked a little incredulously.

"I don't think the President wants to repeat what he said," interjected Moffett, obviously trying to save Carter any embarrassment.

However, at that point, perhaps worried that even this group would not do his unspoken bidding, the President

Eleanor Randolph is a reporter for The Los Angeles Times.