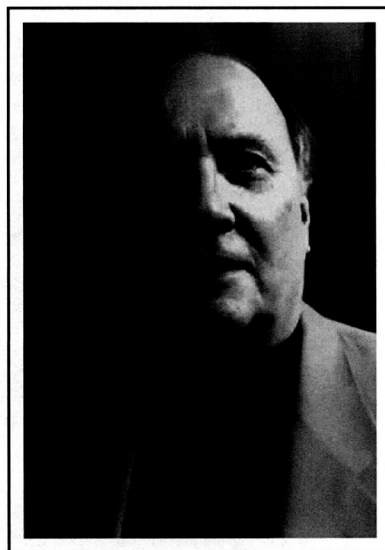


"What is this World of Washington Anyway?"

By Robert Healy

After more than 30 years in Washington, I should be used to what business executives think about my town. I am still amazed, however, at the disdain they hold towards Washington while at the same time maintaining a sheer fascination about its political life. No one is neutral about the World of Washington.

What does that world look like anyway? I tried to answer part of that question for the course I teach on business politics. Academically speaking, corporations and corporate executives "live" in a number of environments, usually simultaneously. There is the *corporate world* of hierarchies, careers, bosses, and the corporate institution. Then, there is the *market world* of products, contracts, risks, and deals. Finally, there is the *non-market or polity world* of governments, norms, rules, regulations, Presidents and Prime Ministers, and of course politics.



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While almost all corporate executives easily understand the first two environments, not the same can be said about the third. Washington politics in particular remains almost a foreign territory, a baffling array of misdirection, puzzling verbiage, confusing signals, and at times punishing outcomes.

Is it really so impenetrable? Perhaps not, if a few key Washington World characteristics are understood:

- ***Politics Never Takes A Holiday.*** When President Bush or any other public figure says that "politics is not involved" or "politics can wait," forget it. That is just mass feel good pandering, believed by no one especially those who say it. Politics does not take a day off, even in our best or our gravest national moments. There may be a little less or a little more of it given the circumstances. It is a seldom acknowledged but always made calculation. Remember that Senators and Mayors don't walk in Columbus Day or Labor Day parades because they like the exercise.
- ***The Business of Washington is Politics... Policy is merely a Byproduct.*** Sad but true. Nonpolitical policy decisions are an illusion. Never, never, never forget that policy is generally secondary — whether in war or peace, in someway, somehow, with some calculation — to politics. Corporate Executives need to understand that just as GM produces cars and Microsoft produces software, Washington manufactures politics. It may be trite to say it but politics is to Washington what gambling is to Vegas. It is the only game in town.

- **Constant Turbulence.** The Washington World is a great swirl with rough air pockets, never-ending speculations, and intrigues worthy of a Ludlum novel. Turbulence produces unsettledness. Decisions are made that 'just don't seem rationale' and are usually unexplainable. Defeat is often snatched from victory and victory is often a close call defeated. Get used to it. The political world is not neat and tidy. There will always be filibusters and points of order and Byrd rules and countless other nooks that frustrate or protect the policy process and cause confusion to those who prefer their whiskey straight up. Where you stand on these 'inside plays' really does depend on where you sit.

Partisanship contributes to the turbulence. If your side wins it is statesmanship; if your side loses, it is partisanship. Republican and Democrat lawmakers don't mix very well, ex-

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cept when they retire and are in the same law firms or consulting firms. Then, it really is 'show me the money.' When the same players were still in Congress, speaking to one another required a get out of jail pass. Too bad. Because that is not the way it was in the past...and blind partisanship creates too much turbulence while not boding well for republic stability.

- **Multiple Actors with Multiple Political Goals.** Politics and policymaking in the Washington World are not conducive to linear thinking. No straight lines here. In any given policy setup, there are many political actors, many individual goals, many objectives that are often contrary, usually in conflict, seldom transparent with all the cards almost never on the table. What you see is not always what you get. Hidden meanings. Hidden benefits. Indirection is a highly practiced political art form. Add a huge dose of the politician's personality quirks, and the stage is set for all the kinds of things that orderly minds don't like. To succeed in the

Washington world, thinking outside the box is not enough. You need to create your own box.

- **Few Barriers to Entry.** Every businessperson knows about commercial entry barriers. The political world has barriers also. Often these political barriers seem high, but in reality they are not. Individuals, corporations, and countries — all can get into the political action just because they want too and take steps to do it. The resources and sophistication brought to bear on the system will probably differ; yet, because the American political system is so permeable, a hearing can usually be had for any cause. More than one corporation has been hauled before Congress because of the single-mindedness of one persistent individual whose cause is adopted by an equally single-minded Representative or Senator. Thinking your corporation is usually safe is a bad idea.

- **Zero-Sum Environment.** The primacy that ideology (of any variety) has over process — notions of conflict reduction and policy compromise has made the Washington World a little meaner and a little uglier than in the past. It has always been a tough town, but now it is a mean, ugly, tough town. There has been little positive change in tone in this city, Presidential promises to the contrary. Everyday is OK-Coral. Winning is everything. Coming in second means you are Al Gore. The zero-sum enemy combatants are camped out on the Mall, at Memorials, in the White House, in the Congress, in the courts, not to mention most of the states. In the zero-sum environment, Washington's traditional operating norms of comity, get along, don't push too far, keep within bounds, are being replaced by damn the torpedoes — who cares about norms. Keep the roll call open for 3 hours because passing "our" version of Medicare is more important than silly procedures and rules that have helped tone down political conflicts in our nation for decades. The zero-sum world works for corporations as long as they are part of the sum. Getting there is only half the struggle. Staying there is the other part. Politicians might be able to ignore the "zero", but corporations are at risk if they do.

- **Political Capital.** Washington may be the only city in the world that has its own currency — political capital. Hard to define what it is. The more experienced and sophisticated players in town know when they have it and when they

don't. If political capital were just about campaign contributions, then understanding the Washington World might be less murky. Contrary to conventional thought, however, it is not always about the money. The notion of political capital suggests trust, obligations, mutual exchanges, political intelligence, policy advice...and much of everything else — all within a time frame that none can specify exactly and filled with similar oblique contingencies. Makes things difficult when "cashing in." Especially if one of the parties to the cash in doesn't think you have any political capital. Corporate types need to think about how to build, store, and use political capital...and what kind of mutual obligations are created when they do so.

- ***It's About the Money.*** If the US election system were not a private undertaking, then perhaps it might not be about the money. Elections are expensive; politicians need money to run, to 'get their message out,' to get elected. The abil-

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ity to fund a campaign is a threshold electability test. And, for many politicians, a corporation's willingness to contribute through political action committees and personal funds is also a threshold test. Much remains to be argued as to whether or not campaign contributions pervert democracy. Contributions are related to access; lots of questions, however, whether there is a direct translation into policy influence. A corporation without the ability to participate financially in politics starts behind its competition as politicians evaluate who is and who is not part of their own political constituency.

- ***Fluctuating Power and Political Clout.*** Power in any of the three worlds is hardly distributed evenly. In the political world, power and clout can change shape overnight. Every day is Survivor Series, Washington. One moment you are Trent Lott, Majority Leader; the next, a backbencher. Another moment you are Newt Gingrich, Speaker of the House (Universe); the next moment...well the picture is evident.

What it means for corporations is not so clear. At a minimum, it suggests that corporations and executives need to diversify their 'power holdings.' Betting the ranch on current House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, for example, while presently attractive, might not be a great idea or serve the corporate interest well tomorrow. Too much can change too fast. A power hedge fund strategy is more than appropriate for Corporations (and maybe others) in today's volatile Washington World.

- ***Keys to the Kingdom.*** Relationships are the keys to the kingdom in DC, except that relationships are never static and not always known. So the keys do not always work. Washington is a big small town. Interlocking directorates are everywhere. Corporate executives are familiar with the adage that "in Washington, it is not what you know but who you know that is important." True. But the *who* changes almost instantly. Long-term loyalties are few, with exceptions being intense and enduring. And, even though Washington is an intensely competitive town in which the bright and brightest engage in combat, all sides understand that relationships exist to be used — and all sides understand that ground rule. Because there is another rule: Relationships are seldom discarded, as Washington is a circular town. 'Outs' today maybe 'Ins' tomorrow. Relationships need to endure.
- ***Depends on what the definition of is, is.*** Perception. There probably is not a more imposing word in the world of Washington. What seems to be often becomes to be. Not original. Just fact. Decisions are routinely impacted by the perception of political clout, corporate reputation, resource ability, or trust. What perception is generally about, however, is defining the policy or political problem. Control the definition of the problem and you go a long way towards controlling the outcome of the decision. In Washington speak, it is called 'defining the message' and then 'getting the message out.' For corporate executives, figuring out what problem definition works for them and then being relentless about vocalizing it is critical to Washington World success. And, heavens, don't let anyone get 'off message,' committing the cardinal sin of Washington speak.
- ***Amplification.*** Even small gaffes or small slights or minor miscues tend to get blown out of proportion in the Washington World — es-

pecially when adversaries believe they can gain from the mistake. There is always a highly visible outlet for other people's troubles — and the media can generally be counted on to be part of the amplified chorus, even if they only think they are reporting the story. Additionally, divided partisan politics tends to raise the stakes of every issue — as if the fate of House or Senate or White House or the whole empire rested on a single outcome. For corporations, amplification is not good news. In the amplified world, compromise is difficult, if not impossible. In the amplified world, few pay attention to facts, only to interpretation of them. Discretion and caution are lost values. Living with amplification is high risk without any good alternatives.

- **The Buzz.** There is always a buzz in the Washington World. Most buzzes are associated with the notion of who has political clout or whack or political stroke or influence with whom. The buzz is ubiquitous in the Washington World. The buzz is crucial because it provides benchmarks for Washington conversations and a short cut to Washington conventional wisdom. It can have an impact on policy because it can frame the parameters of problem definition. It does not take long for any corporate executive or other nontourist visitor to pick up the tingling or be exposed to the buzz once arriving in the city, as any number of dinner parties, lunch meetings, consultant conferences, or sessions with political officials will inevitably touch on some aspect of the buzz. Be alert. You will look out of it, if you don't recognize it. And, look oh so smart when you can add to the 'buzz.'
- **Reputation Matters.** In Washington, reputations only come in two sizes — insignificant or larger than life. A White House that "takes no prisoners" makes those who might want to cross the President think twice. And, woe be those who plot Senate legislative strategy without considering Senator Robert C. Byrd, even in the minority. Corporations have political reputations also. "A Democratic leaning group..." "In the Republican pocket..." "Can't count on them..." "Leadership of that company is a Neanderthal..." "Never give a penny, always want something...". If there is no reputation chatter about your company, don't necessarily count yourself lucky. Your company simply may not count. Period. Strong political reputations, either corporate or personal, can enhance

political standing. Solid reputations send powerful signals about respect, access, influence, power and clout to the Washington community.

- **Uncertainty as Gospel.** The Washington World is filled with certainties that are really camouflaged uncertainties. Pundits, talk show hosts and political practitioners speak with great authority about what party might win the election, who will be the next Senator from Florida, and who the candidates might be in 2008 — as if the upcoming election were really completely clear. Educated guess? Hardly. Mostly garbage. Because there is even greater uncertainty about how much uncertainty can be reduced. Corporate execs are familiar with elaborate scenario driven processes constructed by corporate staffs to identify and limit uncertainty elements. In the political world, there is some effort at rigorous uncertainty reduction, but at heart, that process is simply judgement. The quality of the judgement, the authority making the judgement and whether the judge-

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ment passes the common sense tests are all part of the evaluation. As the visiting executive comes to realize, the Washington World is awash in judgements offered with profound certitude. Not enough courts to take them up on appeal.

- **It ain't over 'til it's over.** To quote Yogi. Or as once said in Washington, 'it ain't over till the fat lady sings.' The problem is that the fat lady sings many tunes and many choruses and many reprises. In the world of Washington Clausewitz¹ is supreme: nothing is ever really over — just another chance to fight again in different venues. A Clinton impeachment or a Bush 5-4 presidency is but a prelude to political combat. So, if this Washington characteristic seems the antithesis of the zero-sum environment, well it is. Policy denied is seldom denied forever. There are few final curtain calls. And, remember above all that no one ever said that the

World of Washington needs to be consistent.

What do all these characteristics of Washington suggest for corporations?

Washington functions not simply on luck and serendipity but on actively managing where one wants to be when political lightning strikes. The right policy studies, the right political connections, the right grassroots operation, the right issues, the right reputation, the right amount of capital — it is all about positioning. Just as corporate executives endeavor to manage product market share, political positioning must also be aggressively managed: keeping tabs on the corporate political reputation, being part of politicians' political constituencies, participating in political fundraising events, advocating public policy that reaches beyond self-interest, having a political culture that supports political/governmental involvement and a corporate leadership that is politic friendly. Seeking competitive political advantage is all about political positioning.

And, something else is suggested also: To survive in this Washington World takes a lot of things, but mostly keeping perspective. There are wonderful notions of personal credibility and character that stand out among the rabble. Rep. Henry Hyde (R. Ill.) reportedly said that one of his goals, as a politician, was simply to escape from Washington with his integrity intact. Knowing a little about the Washington World and keeping your sense of perspective might mean you can arrive and get out with not only your integrity intact but leave a little bit for the rest of us more permanent residents. Not that we need it, of course.

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Endnote

¹ Editor's Note: Carl von Clausewitz, a 19th century Prussian, revolutionized military strategy.

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writing skills is key to the beginning of their public relations journey.

Limitations and future research

This study explored the opinions of practitioners working for public relations firms. Obviously, the results of focus group research cannot be generalized to a larger population. Future investigators may wish to address similar issues through quantitative research. It would also be valuable if researchers conducted similar investigations involving professionals working in government, corporate, and non-profit settings. The findings of such research may lead academics to design specialized writing courses designed to meet the needs of a particular field. Qualitative and quantitative research involving non-profit public relations practitioners, for example, may give educators insights regarding the development of a specialized course focusing on public relations writing in the non-profit sector.

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Appendix: Focus Group Questions

How would you assess the writing abilities of entry-level practitioners?

How would you assess the objective writing abilities of entry-level practitioners?

How would you assess the persuasive writing abilities of entry-level practitioners?

Does writing for the Web require different skills? If so, how?

If you could design a public relations writing course that would equip entry-level practitioners with the skills needed for successful agency work, what would the course involve?

In agency work, what sets a good writer apart from an average writer?

You may have friends or colleagues who work in corporate, non-profit, or government public relations. You may have worked in corporate, non-profit, or government public relations. Would you say agencies have different writing needs than other types of organizations? If so, how are the needs different?

If you took public relations writing courses in college, how would you rate the usefulness of such courses for success in agency public relations?

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