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SEAT OF POWER AND WOE

By DANIEL GOLEMAN
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WASHINGTON— Consider the special psychological lure of Washington. What sets the capital apart from all other American cities, what gives it an appeal like no other is - let's face it - power.

Those people drawn by the heady scent of this great aphrodisiac include not just politicians, but also the lawyers, lobbyists, trade association officials and multitudes of others who traffic in influence. In the view of many psychotherapists in the capital, if there is a "Washington syndrome" - and many think there is - it revolves around the need for power.

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To be sure, there are other centers of power, most notably New York. But Washington has a power without parallel: it is where the rules are made. Washington psychotherapists say the people attracted to the capital for that reason - as opposed to those who come, say, for the security of a civil service position - are driven by motives that make them highly effective in some spheres of life and particularly vulnerable in others.

Most Therapists Per Capita

That vulnerability may account, in part, for the proliferation of therapists here. The Washington metropolitan area, according to Melvin Sabshin, medical director of the American Psychiatric Association, has more therapists per capita than any other major American city. And this in a city where, in many circles, being in need of therapy makes one suspect.

Of course there is the same gamut of problems here as elsewhere: loneliness, alcoholism, drugs. But, while having a strong drive for power may be the sine qua non of Washington success, the lust for power has its own psychological risks.

Although there is no single psychiatric label for the problems it can cause, there is the kind of person whom some call the "poweraholic," who takes the thrill of power so seriously he or she becomes lost in its pursuit.

"For some, the thirst for power takes on the character of an addiction," said Steve R. Pieczenik, a psychiatrist who has also been a Deputy Assistant Secretary of State. "Many of my patients have been power brokers of one kind or another: lobbyists, politicians, lawyers. These people are incessantly building a power base, forming alliances, typically with no specific goal in mind; they just enjoy the hurly-burly of power for its own sake."



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One source of trouble for such people, Dr. Pieczenik says, occurs when the power-lover manipulates his wife and children the way he does everyone else. "The sad part," he added, "is that they often realize they are doing this too late. By then the divorce is already in the works."

Said Isaiah Zimmerman, a clinical psychologist who has treated many power-seekers in 30 years of practice: "Sex drops by the wayside, their families fade into the background. They make the round of official functions, work hours so long they have to sleep over at the office, travel constantly. It's completely out of balance; the rest of their life withers."

"The need for power," said David McClelland, a psychologist at Harvard University who has done landmark research on the topic, "is marked by the desire for influence for its own sake. The person high in that need wants to make an impact. The specifics don't matter for him; the thrill is in the exercise of power itself."

"There are two sides to the lure of power," said Dr. Douglas LaBier, a psychoanalyst who has consulted to several Federal agencies. "On the positive side there's the desire for public service. On the other is the pull of power per se. At its best, power goes hand in hand with the sense of a mission. Either without the other is dangerous."

"If the power eludes people with ideals, they become cynical," Dr. LaBier added. "And power without a mission leads people to espouse ideals while really wanting self-aggrandizement."

While thwarted ideals can lead to frustration and depression, according to therapists interviewed, the lust for power has its own pitfalls.

"Power lovers can go off the deep end," Dr. LaBier said. "One came to me because he had thrived as the assistant to the head of a federal agency, for whom he was the hatchet man. His career was based on bullying those under him to get programs through. When a new boss came in who was a team player, he was out of step. Everyone suddenly saw him as troubled; that's when he came into therapy."

Another patient "had been working for a Senate subcommittee, where he was very up-and-coming," Dr. Labier said. "He was a superb put-down artist. Then, one day at a meeting, he blew up at a colleague who criticized him. He got so violent he had to be restrained and taken to a mental hospital."

The New Generation

Of course an effective political system requires people who are comfortable wielding power. But some observers say the younger people now flocking to Washington are more captivated by power than by ideals. While Washington service has always been a steppingstone to careers where accrued influence can be cashed in for position and money, these motives seem more common than ever among newcomers.

"Those whose power is devoid of meaning for them, or those who lose their ideals, become cynical deal-makers," said Michael Maccoby, a psychoanalyst.

"I've seen it in some of my patients," Dr. Maccoby added. "For example, several high-powered lawyers who devoted their abilities to, say, helping some oil company get a tax benefit. They're very bright and able; they've been clerks to Supreme Court justices and on law reviews - they know better. They end up full of self-contempt."

Then there are those cadres who flock to the lower echelons in Washington to be in the proximity of power - "the power groupies," as Dr. Maccoby calls them.



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Such people "operate on an illusory, derivative power that depends on some link to an official," Dr. LaBier, an associate of Dr. Maccoby, observed. "When he leaves, they deflate. These are the people who relish their titles, who love the intimacy with those close to the real centers of power. As John Dean put it, all they really want to do is ride in the black limousine."

"Some say that powerful people who enjoy exercising that power are, by definition, healthy," Dr. LaBier said. "But that's not always so; power can twist the spirit."

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