The Georgetown Set

By Glenn C. Altschuler/Special to The Oregonian

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Gregg Herken

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Shortly after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. in April of 1968, Lyndon Johnson was told that a mob was headed to Georgetown, with the intention of burning it down. The president reportedly smiled and said, "(Bad word), I've waited thirty-five years for this day."

Georgetown had, indeed, been an enclave of the Eastern Establishment since World War II. In "The Georgetown Set: Friends and Rivals in Cold War Washington," Gregg Herken, a professor emeritus of history at the University of California, draws on recently declassified materials to tell the story of the affluent and influential elites -- syndicated columnists Joseph and Stewart Alsop; foreign service officers George Kennan and Paul Nitze; Phil and Katharine Graham, the publishers of The Washington Post; and Frank Wisner, the director of covert operations at the CIA - who lived there and influenced American foreign policy from the Cold War to the War in Vietnam.

"The Georgetown Set" may give its subjects a bit too much credit for inspiring, promoting, and in some cases executing "America's winning Cold War strategy." The book does, however, illuminate their personalities and the differences they had over policy that threatened but did not end the friendships they maintained with one another.

Most important, Herken provides fascinating details, some of them little known, about Cold War foreign policies. He reveals, for example, that Wisner oversaw "Project Fiend," a covert operation designed to overthrow Enver Hoxha, the Stalinist dictator of Albania. Terminated when some of the insurgents parachuted into the country were captured, convicted and executed, "Fiend" actually solidified Hoxha's control over Albania.

Herken points out as well that Joseph Alsop, who is best known as a staunch defender of the Vietnam war and for coining the phrase "light at the end of the tunnel," was an early and outspoken critic of Senator Joseph McCarthy. His stance was especially risky because Alsop himself was a closeted homosexual, who had been set up and subsequently blackmailed by KGB agents.

Herken does not lament the end of the ascendency of Anglo Saxon Protestant males in Washington, D.C. and dinner
parties that sent the women trooping upstairs after dessert so that the men could talk politics over brandy and cigars. And he acknowledges that his protagonists could be petty and venomous. But Herken prefers the civility, the camaraderie (that brought Phil Graham and Wisner to the same dancing class), and the faith that democratic institutions could address injustice throughout the world, that characterized the Georgetown set, most of the time, to the poisonous, hyper-partisan environment now in evidence in the nation’s capital, where, as Joe Alsop wrote, "the hyenas laugh, the jackals whine, the vultures circle, and everyone waits for the lions and tigers that don't exist in our human zoo."

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