

Gridiron
Washington DC
March 8, 2003

Memo from Molly Sinclair McCartney

Now that my husband and I are both retired from our Washington jobs, we spend our winters in Florida and our summers in Delaware, lolling about in sneakers and casual wear on the beach, the golf course or the tennis court. But once a year, we put on our best clothes and fly back to Washington to attend the annual Gridiron Dinner.

This white tie extravaganza features a marvelous meal served amidst political speeches and skits that make fun of the Democrats and the Republicans (and the media covering them). The speeches are delivered by professional politicians, including the President of the United States, but the skits are written and performed by members of the Gridiron Club, a print media organization that has been putting on this show for more than 100 years.

It is the most elaborate political roast in Washington, and probably the world.

Media stars like **Bob Novak and Helen Thomas** go on stage in lavish costumes to sing and dance and say silly things aimed at entertaining the audience, which typically includes the highest ranking officials in the U.S. government as well as foreign ambassadors, business leaders and, of course, newspaper publishers and their friends from around the country. At right is Joseph diGenova in his Gridiron costume as a Confederate Army leader. More on that later.



Robert E. Lee? No, it's the Gridiron version of Trent Lott

President Bush and Vice President Cheney and their wives were all present for this year's dinner, which was held March 8 at the Capital Hilton Hotel, located a few blocks from the White House.

It was a memorable evening for us, as always

This year there was the added tension of the conflict with Iraq. Producers of the show weren't sure there would even be a Gridiron Dinner. And they were prepared to cancel everything if war had started prior to the dinner, just as Gridironers canceled the dinner during the years that the U.S. was involved in World War II and World War I.

As it turned out, the War with Iraq had not started by March 8. So the show did go on. And despite the obvious difficulties of trying to produce funny political skits at a time when the nation was on the brink of war, the producers managed to provide everyone with some laughs and then end the evening with a toast to America and its President.

Even **President Bush** managed to get off a good line: He said he had enjoyed the Gridiron Chorus, “some of who can sing.” President Bush then proposed a toast to the troops on the eve of battle. After the dinner, he thanked Gridiron Club president Ron Cohen (of Gannett News Service), said he had enjoyed the show and appreciated the work that had gone into it.



All Dolled Up for Gridiron

(Some years the Gridiron works it out for someone from the Administration to make a surprise appearance in one of the skits. Last year’s Gridiron featured a number, “Fernando’s Hideaway,” about Vice President Cheney and how he was hiding out in undisclosed bunkers. During that number, as the chorus sang and dancers whirled, one of the dancers wearing a big hat turned his face to the audience and it was - the real **Dick Cheney**. Dancing with the Vice President on stage, with a rose in her teeth, was – **Mrs. Cheney**. At a Gridiron Dinner back in the 1980s, **Nancy Reagan**, reacting to stories about her expensive clothes, turned up on stage in a number that she sang to the tune of “Second Hand Rose.” Both were big hits, as you would expect.)

There weren’t any surprises like that this year. But there was a very good presentation by **Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist** (R., Tennessee), who put on his white physician’s coat and delivered a hilarious “lecture” in which he likened the congressional process to the human digestive system. He said that legislation enters the Congress as food enters the human mouth and travels down a long road toward the stomach. Sometimes a bill gets stuck on that road, he said, because the Democrats can’t swallow it and the Republicans can’t cough it up.

The speaker for the Democrats was **Senator John Edwards**, a presidential wannabe, from North Carolina. Joked Edwards, who has been characterized by some in the media as not much more than a pretty face: "I know what you're thinking. He's even better looking in person."

Edwards continued that theme, noting that a New York Times columnist once called him a Ken doll. But, explained Edwards: "A Ken doll is plastic, lacking in substance and can be bought for about \$10. There's at least one difference right there."

But the best part of the evening by far were the political skits and songs, all written by members of the Gridiron Club and aimed at needling the assembled bigwigs.

How did we manage to get invited to the Gridiron Dinner?

We go to the dinner because my husband is a member of the Gridiron Club. He qualified for membership in 1972 when he was working as a Washington-based correspondent for Knight Ridder Newspapers, covering national security, arms control and the Middle East. His name is **James H. McCartney**, and you have probably seen his work at one time or another. In addition to daily news stories, he wrote a column for many years that was distributed to hundreds of newspapers across the U.S.

While he was still working and when we were still living in Washington (where I worked for the Washington Post), my husband participated in the Gridiron show each year. We have wonderful pictures of him dressed in some of the most ridiculous costumes. For one show in the 1980s, *he went onstage as a witch doctor*, as part of a number ridiculing President Reagan's health care proposal. The Witch Doctor number, sung by Washington journalist Cheryl Arvidson (that's her at right with my husband) just about brought down the house. The speaker for the Democrats for that show was *Ann Richards, then the Governor of Texas*. When Ann got to the podium for her speech, she began by saying, "I'll take the Witch Doctor." That got lots of laughs too.

In 1986, when my husband was vice president of the Gridiron Club, I was able to go to the Gridiron Dinner for the first time. The next year, when he was Gridiron president, I got to go again, and this time I was seated at the head table, between *Barbara Bush* and then *Secretary of State George Schultz*. Before the dinner began, my husband and I greeted President and Mrs. Reagan at a special hotel entrance and then we escorted them through a tunnel (created with pipe supports and draped with fabric) to a safe waiting area. The four of us then entered the room where the dinner is held and where the other 600 guests were already seated. It was a memorable experience.



1980s Gridiron: Witch Doctor Skit was a Hit

Since my husband retired from Knight Ridder in 1990, he has opted not to participate in the show. Instead, he goes to the dinner each year and takes me along. I love it, because it is *political theater at its best*. And since I worked in the media myself for 30 years plus – including 14 years in Washington – this is a chance for me to see many of my media buddies – those still living and working in Washington and those who fly into Washington for the show.

One more word about the nature of the Gridiron Club, which was founded in 1885 as a way for Washington-based reporters to share an informal evening with the people they covered in the federal government.

The Gridiron Club has 60 active members – these are men and women who are based in Washington and who are working print journalists. When an active member retires from journalism or moves away from Washington, that person can no longer be an active member of the club. But they can continue as associate members and today there are about 90 associate members, including my husband. His membership entitles him to the purchase of two tickets to the annual spring dinner, (each dinner ticket this year was \$250). He also has the option of participating in other club activities, which include a smaller winter dinner and a summer picnic (last year held at Mount Vernon in Alexandria, Virginia).

Important point: The club members try very hard to be even-handed in the way they poke fun at the politicians. Since the club members represent all parts of the political spectrum, they do a pretty good job, in my opinion, of skewering both political parties. But this doesn't mean that everyone looking at the show thinks it is fair. This year, ***some of our friends were outraged because they thought the jokes were too tough on the Bush Administration. Yet some other friends were furious because they thought the show wasn't tough enough*** on the Bush Administration. That reaction suggests that the club got it about right.

In addition to the active and associate members, the Gridiron has about a dozen limited members who have been invited to join because they have real singing and performing talent. These members – they are “ringers” - often play the lead roles in the show, with the Gridiron chorus as backup. One of the most important limited members is ***Colonel Timothy Foley, director of the U.S. Marine Band***. Colonel Foley works with the show producers to make the show as entertaining as possible. He also directs the orchestra for the show.

Another limited member is ***former U.S. Attorney Joseph diGenova***, who happens to be a gifted singer as well as a practicing lawyer. Then there is ***Randall Phillips***, who as a young girl played the role of “Annie” in the Broadway musical. Randall is still a young girl, by Gridiron standards, and she is one of its most talented limited members. ***Mike Ryan***, who was the soloist for the U.S. Marine Band until his recent retirement, is another Gridiron limited member.

The songs and the skits in the show are written by the club members, who begin work on the show in January and who hold rehearsals in February. One day in late February, the show producers go to Baltimore for the day to work with the costume company there that supplies the outfits for the show. The costume company then brings the outfits to Washington for the weekend of the Gridiron Dinner.

This makes it possible for the Gridiron Club to have a dress rehearsal on the Friday before the Saturday night show. The Club puts on the Saturday night dinner for the President. The Club repeats the show – in costume – on Sunday afternoon for club member family and friends who may not have been able to attend the Saturday night dinner.

As a result, when we go to the Gridiron, we get to see the show three times: the dress rehearsal, the dinner and the reception. And in between those events, there are cocktail parties, brunches, and special receptions. It is a whirlwind of fun.



Dan Thomasson
Scripps Howard News Service
in Confederate Army outfit

Now about this year's show.

We were seated at one of 12 tables set up in the room. Each table was set for about 42 people. My end of the table included several people we knew: ***Don Graham, owner of the Washington Post; Lee Bandy of The State in Columbia, SC; Rich Morin, former Miami Herald colleague now at the Washington Post*** and several other Post people including ***cartoonist Tom Toles, reporter Don Oberdorfer and ombudsman Mike Getler.*** As it turned out, Mike got invited to the dinner at the last minute, when the Ambassador from China canceled, apparently because of the controversy over Iraq.

In another twist that is typical of events like this, the guy seated on my right turned out to be ***John Agather***, a businessman from San Antonio, Texas. During the evening, he told me he was good friends with the ***Eccles family from Baytown*** and with ***Bill Hobby, the former Lt. Governor of Texas*** whose family once owned the Houston Post. Bill was once the managing editor at the Houston Post and he hired me in 1962 as a reporter for the Houston Post.

Seated at the head table, which dominated the room, was the President, the Vice President, their wives and a string of dignitaries, including Secretary of Homeland Security ***Tom Ridge***, the Secretary of Transportation, Secretary of Education, Secretary of Agriculture, Secretary of Interior, Secretary of Commerce, Secretary of the Treasury, Secretary of Health and Human Services, Secretary of the Army, Secretary of the Air Force and Secretary of the Air Force, and Secretary of the Interior. Many top military people also were on hand: the ***Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff***, General ***James Jones (USMC and Supreme Allied Commander Europe)*** and several others

Could we go up and talk to the folks at the head table? Absolutely, and we have done so on occasion. But this year we concentrated on talking to friends and acquaintances scattered around the room.

Seated at the various tables were other ink-stained wretches like us, as well as media moguls, governors of several states including New Mexico, Michigan and Wisconsin, some big-city mayors, including Mayor Michael Bloomberg of New York City and various members of Congress, including Senator John Warner of Virginia.

Note: The Gridiron Dinner itself is officially off the record, but it still gets reported. The Washington Post always writes a big story in its Style section about the dinner, and other publications also make reference to the dinner.

More background:

At the beginning of the evening, the U.S. Marine Band marches into the ballroom and plays several numbers, including a medley of service songs. Band members wearing dress uniform fill the room with a brass and drum medley of service songs and other works. You don't need a hearing aid for this. When the band finishes, the members march out of the room and people begin eating and drinking.

The show put on by the Gridiron Club typically has an Opening Number, a Democratic skit, a Republican skit and a Closing Number. Each of the two skits has 10 or 12 short numbers in which the costumed media characters sing a song that makes fun of something that has happened during the past year.

In the Opening Number this year, there were several characters in military outfits, including **Haynes Johnson, shown here at right in a backstage pose.** Haynes is a retired Washington Post reporter and the author of a number of books. You've probably seen him on television, since he is a frequent commentator on the News Hour.



**Haynes
Johnson**

Below are the words to one number sung by former Marine Band soloist Mike Ryan, wearing a sailor suit made of duct tape and plastic and intended to ridicule the idea that duct tape and plastic would protect Americans in the event of a biological or chemical attack:

***Over here, over here,
Keep the clerks and the perks over here
We are armed with duct tape
We're sealed, we're ship-shape
The axis of evil lives in fear.***

Homeland Security Secretary **Tom Ridge**, who was watching this from the head table, appeared to be amused, at least from what I could see.

The Democratic Skit:

The Democratic skit came next. One of my favorites in this part of the show was the song lampooning **Tom Daschle**, the senator who was Majority Leader last year when Democrats controlled the Senate, but who became the Minority Leader as soon as the Republicans regained the Senate. Here's what the Daschle character sang to the tune of "Mister Cellophane," one of the numbers in the Oscar-winning movie "Chicago." Note: Tom Daschle did not attend the dinner, so I don't know what he thought of the song.

***Last year when I was in my prime,
I'd just stand up and ask for time
To straighten out the party line,
They noticed me.***

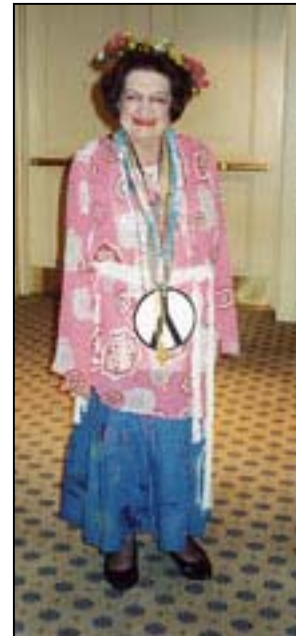
***When I pushed through that cloakroom door
And moved around the Senate floor
I'd grin and wink and feel real fine
They noticed me.***

*“Mister Leader” gets attention on demand,
I never even had to clap my hands.
And then we lost control and suddenly
I’m invisible ... unpresidential ... me*

*Cellophane, Mister Cellophane,
Should have been my name, Mr.
Cellophane
When you look right through me...walk right by me...
And never know I’m there!*

The Democratic skit also featured songs about:

- *Nancy Pelosi*, the Democratic House Leader from San Francisco. In this song, veteran White House correspondent Helen Thomas comes on stage dressed like a flower child and sings, “I’m not far left in San Francisco,” to the tune of “I left my heart in San Francisco.” Here’s a photo I shot backstage of *Helen Thomas, right*, just before she did her Pelosi number. Senator Pelosi was at the head table and appeared to enjoy the song and the gag.
- *John Edwards*, the North Carolina Senator, who has announced he is a candidate for the Democratic nomination for President. In this song, *Clarence Page of the Chicago Tribune*, bounds onto stage wearing a tight gold lame pantsuit (reminded me of Elvis) and a gold wig. Singing and dancing to the tune, “Pretty Woman,” the character belts out these lyrics:



*Helen Thomas
as Nancy Pelosi*

*Pretty lawyer in a Senate seat
Pretty lawyer, looks good enough to eat
Pretty lawyer, I got the hair-do, got money too
If you don’t vote for me, I’ll sue.*

Rowr-r-r-

*Pretty lawyer from a Southern state
Pretty lawyer, pretty moderate
Pretty lawyer
I’m getting nightmares on the trail
That I turn into Danny Quayle*

Whowa-oh, Pretty Lawyer.

Intermission

When the curtain went down on the Democratic skit, dozens of white-gloved waiters appeared in the ballroom to serve the next course of the dinner. This part of the dinner always reminds me of what happens at a baseball game – the aisles fill up with people struggling to get to another part of the room, out to restrooms, over to see someone they know or just milling around hoping to be noticed. In fact, a lot of lobbying and networking goes on at these dinners, as the great and the near great and the observers of all those folks try to figure out who is who, where they are, and what they're doing.

It helps that the Gridiron Club prints a seating chart showing where each person is seated, and an alphabetical listing of who is there, their position and where they are from. There is also a printed menu at each place, so that you know what you are being served during the evening. The menu for this year's sumptuous meal included:

- Marinated baby artichokes with fiddle head ferns, fried capers and arugula with sweet shallot mustard dressing
- Baby scallop pot pie served with a warm tomato relish
- Mustard-herb crusted domestic rack of lamb chops
- Oven roasted garlic mashed potato and market vegetable
- Chocolate profusions
- Gridiron petit fours
- Three different kinds of wine
- Demitasse of coffee



The Republican Skit and the Confederate Army

When it was time for the Republican skit, the curtain went up to reveal 8 to 10 characters dressed in Confederate war uniforms. The most impressive looking of these characters -- **Robert E. Lee?** -- then stepped forward and began to sing "Springtime for Thurmond" to the tune of "Springtime for Hitler" from the show, "The Producers."

The lyrics to "Springtime for Thurmond" were intended as a roast of former **Senate Majority Leader Trent Lott** for his remarks at the 100th birthday party for **Senator Strom Thurmond**. In those remarks, Lott had said, among other things, that Thurmond should have been elected president in 1948, when Thurmond ran as an advocate of segregation. Those remarks, of course, had caused such an uproar that Lott resigned his leadership job.

Below are the lyrics to "Springtime for Thurmond." Note: Trent Lott was not present at the dinner. It is also worth mentioning that the man in the Confederate uniform, who sang this song at the Gridiron, was Washington attorney Joseph diGenova, a conservative Republican who happens to have an exceptional singing voice.

Joe was especially effective in this number, and when I talked to him later about how it is that a conservative Republican like him can satirize another conservative Republican in a show like the Gridiron, he gave me a kind of “That’s show biz” grin and explained that when he is offered a good role, he takes it, regardless of its political slant.

And besides, all this is done in good fun, he suggested.

At right is *Joe diGenova in his Confederate uniform* in a backstage photo, just before he went out to sing “Springtime for Thurmond.”

*Southerners were having trouble, what a sad, sad story
Needed a new leader to restore our former glory
Where, oh where was he? Who could that man be?
We looked around and then we found
A guy as white as me,
And it was...
Springtime for Thurmond and Dixiecrats,
We sit in the front of the bus.
Springtime for Thurmond and Dixiecrats,
Those drinking fountains are just for us*

*Springtime for Thurmond and Dixiecrats
Lunch counters all to ourselves
Amos ‘n Andy is fun again
Quotas are now on the run again
Springtime for Thurmond and Dixiecrats
Confederate flag’s flying once more
Springtime for Thurmond and Dixiecrats
Means that soon we’ll be going
We’ve got to be going
We’ll be going backwards once more!*



*“Springtime for
Thurmond and
Dixiecrats”*

Another of my personal favorites in the Republican skit was this one, sung by a character in a military uniform, reminiscent of what the Chief of the Joint Chiefs of Staff might wear. The character sang this to the tune of “Yakety Yak.”

*Put all those missiles in plain sight
Don’t hide them in the dark of night
You’d better open every door
Or we’re gonna have to go to war
Yakety Yack, attack Iraq*

*It’s time to go attack Iraq
Hussein’s a total maniac
We’re sending troops and weapons in
See it all on CNN again
Yakety Yack, don’t shoot back!*

That was followed by the skit in which *Secretary of Defense Don Rumsfeld* is teaching *White House spokesman Ari Fleischer* to deal with the media. In fact, Don Rumsfeld and Ari Fleischer both were scheduled to attend the dinner, but Rumsfeld canceled at the last minute. Fleisher was seated at the head table.

The Rumsfeld character in this number sings to the tune of “Razzle-Dazzle” these words:

*Give ‘em the old razzle-dazzle
Razzle-dazzle ‘em.
Give ‘em an act with lots of grin in it
They’ll never guess how bad you’re spinin’ it
Give ‘em the old triple shuffle
Bluff and batter ‘em
When you’re in trouble, joke and laugh and smile
Make sure your tap dance is athletic
These sorry scribes are so pathetic
Razzle-dazzle ‘em, ‘cause it’s nuthin’ but style.*

*Feed ‘em some patriotic bluster
Wave the flag at ‘em
Back since the days of McNamara
Pentagon truths are rare – and rare-a
Give ‘em the old double whammy
Just bedazzle ‘em
How can they see with stardust in their eyes
Who cares about the men we drafted
Or if Old Europe says they’re shafted
Razzle-Dazzle ‘em
Reporters never get wise*

The Ari Fleischer character then responds with these words:

*Give ‘em some patronizing blather
Smile back at them
Not since the days of Henry Kissinger
Have you seen such an evil messenger
Give them some old double meanings
Just befuddle them
How can they write if they got no good quotes
Answers to questions, I can’t promise
I want to muzzle Helen Thomas
Fuddle-muddle ‘em
And they’ll never catch wise.*



*Anne Groer of the
Washington Post*

There is one other memorable song in the show. It was the Golf Song, and it was written as a satire on the controversy between *Hootie Johnson*, chairman of the August National Golf Club, who has been fighting against having women play there, and *Martha Burk*, the activist who has been fighting to get women onto the course.

Martha Burk was in attendance at the Gridiron Dinner, and she was introduced early in the evening, along with *Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor*, who has recently published a book about her golfing experience. The Gridiron noted that Martha is fighting to win Justice O'Connor the right to play golf at the Augusta National Golf Club.

In this song, the Martha Burk character was portrayed by *Randall Phillips*, who used to sing the role of "Annie" on Broadway.

I didn't have a chance to photograph Randall or the Hootie character, but I did get this picture of some characters in the golf skit. They are *Kathy Kiely of USA Today and Dick Ryan of the Detroit News, shown at right*. Below them is a photo of syndicated columnist *Georgie Anne Geyer*, standing backstage with former Marine Band soloist *Mike Ryan*, who was costumed for a number about corporate greed.

Here is the duet that Randall Phillips sang with the Hootie Johnson character, to the tune of "I Am Woman."

Hootie: I'm the Master, hear me roar.

Martha: You pathetic dinosaur
It's now death to all
Confederate cave men.
Then like Sherman to the sea
I'll march on to Burning Tree.

Hootie: Won't they ever let the South rise up again?

Hootie: Oh, yes, man to man,
I just love the Taliban.
Yes, this just might work –
A veil on Martha Burk

Martha: Now I warn you, I can stop anything.
I won't shop.
I will just boycott

Chorus: Just boycott.

Martha: I am woman
You won't bend,
I'll have to break you.
It will only serve to make you
One more trophy shot for
Thelma and Louise
Now I'll drive it so much stronger
And I'll putt it so much longer.



Hootie: 'Cause she's using the conventional ladies' tee.
Oh, yes, we've been good
Aren't we nice to Tiger Woods?

Martha: Hootie, let me guess
You've heard of P_M_S
When I have it, I might do anything
Chauv'nist pig
I'll cook some barbecue
You're the main course

Chorus: He's a pig!
Martha: Oink!
Hootie: I think I'm barbecue.
Martha: I'm the Master

One other number worth mentioning: Speaker of the House featuring a *Denny Hastert* character played by *Rick Smith, former New York Times correspondent and now a PBS producer*, and a *Tom DeLay* character played by *Tom Brazaitis, Cleveland Plain Dealer*. At right is Tom Brazaitis in his costume as Tom DeLay, Hammer of the House.



The show ended with a rousing closing number, "Do You Hear the People Sing?" that was sung to the tune of "Les Miserables." Here's one verse that will give you the idea:

*Do you hear the people sing?
America's song for all mankind
It is the music of our nation,
Once united we will find,
How to use unrivaled might,
To stop the beating of the drums
So that the world will live in peace
When tomorrow comes.*
