

POLITICO

'This Town': A Washington takedown

By: [Mike Allen](#) and [Jim VandeHei](#)

April 25, 2013 08:58 PM EDT

A year after signing a book contract to chronicle the incestuous ecology of insider Washington, New York Times writer Mark Leibovich was schmoozing his way through a going-away party for Joe Lockhart atop the Glover Park Group headquarters. He stumbled upon an incredible gift.

Outgoing Pentagon flack Geoff Morrell was musing about his future now that his boss, Defense Secretary Robert Gates, was retired. Just then, Robert Barnett - Washington's super-lawyer and a chief target of Leibovich's upcoming book - popped over to brag about Morrell, his client: "He's drowning in offers."

Two months later, Morrell, with Barnett's help, landed a very lucrative gig with BP America. This news was featured exclusively atop POLITICO'S "[Playbook](#)" — Mike Allen's morning newsletter.

([PHOTOS: 'This Town': A Washington takedown](#))

Talk about incestuous: A top Obama official cashes in with a top corporation with the help of a top Washington fixer and gets top-shelf treatment from one of Washington's top journalists (who also happens to be the co-byline on this piece.)

And they're all personal friends, to boot.

This scene is virtually certain to make the final cut of Leibovich's upcoming book, titled "This Town," scheduled to be published in July. The book's subtitle, for reasons we cannot fathom, will soon be changed from "The Way It Works in Suck Up City" to "Two Parties and a Funeral — Plus, Plenty of Valet Parking! — in America's Gilded Capital."

But in the spirit of D.C.'s most incestuous weekend of the year, the White House Correspondents' Association dinner, we thought we'd have some fun and do some reporting on his reporting on our friends, sources and subjects to find out who else should worry most about his book.

([See also: Full coverage of the 2013 White House Correspondents' Dinner](#))

The targets are the worst-kept secrets in this town, an overused expression of D.C. insiders: Robert Barnett; Tammy Haddad; the people transacting or showboating at Tim Russert's funeral; the warring factions in Obama's campaign and White House; former Obama aides who try to cash in; and Kurt Bardella, the House aide who was fired when POLITICO reported that he had been forwarding reporters' emails to Leibovich. Oh, and POLITICO broadly and Mike Allen specifically.

Leibovich, at once a supremely confident and strangely self-conscious writer, made this easy by holding a series of unusual conversations with people around town about what he's writing. Some felt like therapy sessions — for himself and his targets. It assuages his guilt, while reassuring some subjects and rattling others.

He sat down with numerous people, us included, to walk through specific passages and general themes of the book. Our conversations with him were off the record; instead, this column is based on his chats with everyone else around town, where he dropped lots of hints about where he's going with this.

(Also on [POLITICO: Turbulence at The Times](#))

Admirably, Leibo – yes, we call him “Leibo” — doesn’t want anyone to be completely blindsided by what’s about to hit them. At the same time, in these conversations and other social settings, it seems clear that Leibovich is trying to work through his own conflicted feelings about ridiculing a culture he is very much part of – and wants to remain part of. He will address this conflict directly in the book, his friends say.

Leibovich refused comment, other than to say via email: “Speculation is free but is not a fact-based method. Folks are just going to have to wait till the book comes out.”

[Follow @politico](#)

“Everyone’s talking about it, because everyone thinks they’re in it,” said Susanna Quinn, wife of Democratic lawyer Jack Quinn and granddaughter of a U.S. senator. Leibovich met the Quinns when he sat with them at Tim Russert’s funeral, then made several reporting pilgrimages to their home. “Was it smart to cooperate?” said Jack Quinn. “Can you ask me again when the book comes out?”

So who will regret the book?

*Barnett might. The Democratic super-lawyer is portrayed as a quintessential operator who self-promotes and seems to have clients on every side: Democrats and Republicans, managers and employees, corporations and individuals. This is hardly shocking to Washington insiders – because most have had him on retainer. We are not sure he will much care, given that he jokingly boasts in speeches that he was once called “the doorman to Washington’s revolving door.”

Barnett once represented us for a brief period. Come to think of it, he represents almost everybody we know.

*Haddad may regret it, too. Leibovich asked a lot of questions about how the former TV producer courts the powerful. He focused on Haddad’s relentless promotion and fundraising for CURE (Citizens United for Research in Epilepsy), founded by Susan Axelrod, the wife of David Axelrod. Leibovich portrays this as a blatant effort to curry favor – a bald execution of the theory that you build connections to the powerful by finding out what interests the people around them.

David Axelrod is distressed by the expected portrayal and told us: “Tammy has been a great friend to Susan and me, and I think very sincere about it. She has never asked me for anything in return.”

Haddad did not give Leibovich a formal interview but the two recently had a clear-the-air lunch at The Jefferson hotel. Leibovich seemed suspicious of Haddad’s presence on Air Force One when Jon Meacham of Newsweek, then one of her clients, had an interview with President Obama. But Haddad has told friends it’s perfectly normal to accompany clients to interviews she has helped arrange. She declined to comment.

For what it's worth, Haddad is a friend who has thrown parties for us. Come to think of it, she has thrown parties for virtually every other person and cause we know.

*We won't love the book, either. It is clear that POLITICO and Playbook are portrayed as enablers of the culture Leibovich lampoons. (See: this column). He will write about how often Barnett appears in our publication, as both a source and subject, and how often POLITICO is setting the narrative on stories he argues are superficial or trivial. Mike is the subject of at least a chapter – drawn largely from the New York Times Magazine profile that helped win the “This Town” book contract — that paints him as suspiciously popular with people in power, oddly private and the middleman in many news transactions in town.

Leibovich also spends a big chunk on the embarrassing rise and fall of Kurt Bardella, whose shameless self-promotion cost him his job (until he got it back when things cooled down). Several POLITICOs were part of this story. Our reporters hit Bardella up for information and our editor-in-chief John F. Harris complained to Bardella's boss, Rep. Darrell Issa, that his flack had leaked POLITICO reporters' emails to Leibovich.

*Two people familiar with the book said it opens with a long, biting take on Russert's 2008 funeral, where Washington's self-obsession – and lack of self-awareness – was on full display. The book argues that all of Washington's worst virtues were exposed, with over-the-top coverage of his death, jockeying for good seats at a funeral and Washington insiders transacting business at the event.

“He's at every single party, and NOW he takes the knife out?” protested one of Leibovich's subjects. “And Russert's funeral? People are appalled.”

*Finally, two sources tell us that Leibovich made some post-election additions to the book that will prove embarrassing to the Obama White House, with a heavy focus on the hypocrisy of top advisers who talked a big game about change and then cashed in their connections. The New Republic – edited by Frank Foer, one of a few people in town to read a pre-publication draft of the book – beat Leibovich to the [general topic](#).

What's not clear is if a book that focuses so heavily on figures little known outside of here can actually sell. The inhabitants of this town might obsess about themselves — but does anyone in the real world give a hoot? We have a hunch they might, if the smaller characters help indict not just the culture but also the bigger names in national politics.

It's also not clear that the book will actually be as bad as many of the targets fear. One of the sad but true secrets is that operatives exposed as too compromised or too cozy or too crazy often profit from the attention. What strikes outsiders as slimy is often seen as savvy here.

Leibovich has been flooded with shameless pleas by hacks to be in the book and soulless encouragements by just as many to dump on others in exchange for keeping them out of it.

Such is life in this town.

© 2013 POLITICO LLC