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THE PRINCE AND THE PREPPY

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IT'S APRIL IN BERMUDA, and the Southampton Princess Hotel is filled with institutional investors, portfolio managers, executives from Chrysler, Martin Marietta, and a dozen other corporations. Each has paid \$2,500 for four days of sun, sand, and off-the-record sessions with economic policymakers from Washington. Representative Jack Kemp and Senator Bill Bradley are on hand, plus top officials from the Treasury Department and the Federal Reserve. And, in the thick of it all, are the organizers of this gala affair, Rowland Evans and Robert Novak.

Evans and Novak have been together for almost 23 years now, but never have they been so prominent. The Bermuda conference was but one of many political forums they have staged in the last few years, starring the likes of Treasury Secretary James Baker, White House Chief of Staff Donald Regan, Walter Mondale, and Senator Robert Dole. Every week they host a half-hour interview program on Cable News Network, with guests ranging from Jerry Falwell to Geraldine Ferraro. They also contribute two CNN commentaries a week. Novak is a regular on "The McLaughlin Group," the televised tag-team debating match, and he frequently fills the conservative slot on "Crossfire," the CNN discussion show. Somehow the pair also finds time to publish two newsletters and to write several articles a year for *Reader's Digest*.

Finally, of course, Evans and Novak continue to write four columns a week, spinning out breathless tales of bureaucratic intrigue. Here you can read about the aspirations of presidential advance men, the connivances of congressional aides, the interior world of deputy assistant secretaries. Since Ronald Reagan became president, it seems, hardly a critical memo gets drafted or a key telephone call placed that doesn't show up in Evans and Novak. They may well have better sources inside the administration than any other journalists, making their column one of the most closely read in Washington.

Curiously, though, while their star has soared in Washington, Evans and Novak have hit on hard times in the rest of the country. "Inside Report," as the column is called, has lost favor with editors from coast to coast. Anthony Day, editorial pages editor of the *Los Angeles Times*, says he dropped the column when he became concerned about its accuracy. "Inside Report," which appeared in more than 250 daily papers in the mid-1970s, is carried by only 150 today. Here are some reasons why:

December 16, 1981: Evans and Novak, quoting presidential advisers, predict that "Gen. Wojciech Jaruzelski will lose his martial law gamble, leading to direct Soviet intervention in Poland and perhaps costing the lives of hundreds of thousands of fighting Poles."

September 21, 1984: Evans and Novak, citing CIA intelligence estimates, report "suspicions of an imminent Soviet move from Afghanistan into the northern tip of Pakistan."

January 28, 1985: Evans and Novak, observing Konstantin Chernenko on his deathbed, write that "Surprisingly, the charismatic Mikhail Gorbachev, at 52 the Politburo's youngest member, is no longer considered the heir apparent."

A survey of more than 250 columns written since 1981 indicates that Evans and Novak, never known for their moderation, have grown increasingly strident. Long forced to sit on the political periphery, they have had the satisfaction of seeing America come around to their point of view. But as the nation has shifted to the right, so have Evans and Novak. Today they champion the gold standard and call Roberto d'Aubuisson a "democratic capitalist." Remarkably, the more outlandish Evans and Novak become, the more their renown inside the Beltway grows.

As a byline, Evans and Novak have been inseparable for years; in real life, they could hardly be more apart. Rowly Evans, 64, is a product of Philadelphia's Main Line. The son of a Quaker insurance broker, he attended the Kent School and enrolled at Yale. After a year mostly spent playing bridge, Evans dropped out of college to work in the Chicago freight yards. After the war he returned to Philadelphia and got a job with the *Bulletin*. He soon went to Washington and eventually took a job with the bureau of the *New York Herald Tribune*. The *Trib* encouraged Evans to write a column, but wanted it to appear six days a week.

To help out, Evans enlisted Robert Novak. Novak, now 54, grew up in a Jewish household in Joliet, Illinois, the son of a chemical engineer. He attended the University of Illinois, then went to work for two small Illinois newspapers. In 1958 he joined the Washington bureau of the *Wall Street Journal* and soon gained a reputation as one of the best reporters in town.

Today Evans's elegant suits and buffed oxfords give him the sleek look of a squire. The aristocratic air is heightened by a high, balding forehead and stylishly long complement of hair in back. Appearances aside, Evans has a relaxed, companionable manner that has made him popular with colleagues of all political persuasions. Three mornings a week he has breakfast with sources at the Metropolitan Club, Washington's stuffiest. He and his wife, Kay, editor of the *Washington Journalism Review*, are known for hosting dinner parties in their Georgetown town house, often with a senator or Supreme Court justice in attendance.

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One person rarely invited to Evans's house is Bob Novak. The two do not often socialize outside the office. At dinner parties Novak likes to goad guests, thumping the table to reinforce his case on supply-side economics and other self-styled heresies. Those who disagree are frequently branded "wimps." Novak also plays the heavy on "The McLaughlin Group," the show that lets grown men discuss big issues and act like little boys.

Such antics have earned Novak the nickname "Prince of Darkness." The term, coined by *Newsweek* years ago, has stuck, thanks to Novak's swarthy complexion and gruff disposition. Novak revels in the role—which is exactly what it is. In real life Novak is a schmoozer and rabid sports fan who reads the morning line before the front page. Appearances on "McLaughlin" to the contrary, Novak and rival columnist Jack Germond have been good friends for 25 years. Both belong to a generation of talented Washington reporters who came of age in the late 1950s and early 1960s.

When they began their column, in 1963, Evans and Novak were hardly conservative ideologues. Both men voted for John Kennedy in 1960. Though he had no discernible politics, Evans had become friendly with Kennedy and his circle while covering the Senate. As president, Kennedy once came to Evans's house for dinner. Novak was much more of a political animal. Then, however, his bile was reserved mostly for the right. During the 1964 campaign, Novak frequently attacked Barry Goldwater, and at the GOP convention he gained some notoriety by decking a recalcitrant Young Republican. Novak was close to Lyndon Johnson, and the first book he co-authored with Evans, a political biography of LBJ, was full of evident admiration as well as superb reporting. The column itself was relatively nonpartisan, mixing Evans's many connections and Novak's political instincts to produce a stream of scoops.

IN THE LATE 1960s, the column began to take on its current cast. Evans and Novak detected extremist elements inside the civil rights movement and attacked Lyndon Johnson for his failure of nerve on Vietnam. By 1972 the column was attacking George McGovern with such vehemence that Novak was thrown off the candidate's plane. As for Jimmy Carter, "Inside Report" could barely mention him without a sneer.

The columnists thus greeted the election of Ronald Reagan with joy. On the day after his inauguration, for instance, they confidently asserted that "never again will the United States allow itself to be held hostage by seizure of American citizens." Five months into the president's term they published *The Reagan Revolution*, a book that put Ronald Reagan's first 100 days on a par with Franklin Roosevelt's.

But before long, "Inside Report" was having second thoughts. At first, the column criticized "pragmatists" like Jim Baker and Michael Deaver for blunting the president's

true instincts. The following year, Evans and Novak openly blamed Ronald Reagan himself. In "Giving Up on the Reagan Revolution," they gloomily concluded: "There is no longer any hope that the septuagenarian president, while joined to the right in spirit, is in any way prepared to lead a crusade for change."

EVANS AND NOVAK found a new standard-bearer in Jack Kemp. Kemp embodied the ideologically pure vision that Reagan had relinquished. Most important, he was a strong advocate of supply-side economics. Novak had been converted in 1978, becoming one of the first journalists in the country to adopt the new creed. Now Evans and Novak took up Kemp's case as vigorously as they had Reagan's only months before. In June 1982 they wrote a Kemp profile for *Reader's Digest*. Headlined "Is He the GOP's Future?" the article gushed with references to Kemp's "gutsy confidence" and "his almost insatiable appetite for new ideas." Kemp's agenda, the *Digest* piece claimed, "could well define the dimensions of a future Presidential campaign." Today "Inside Report" regularly boosts Kemp's presidential prospects while running down those of his chief rivals, George Bush and Robert Dole.

Kemp is a regular Evans and Novak source. So, reportedly, are Edwin Meese, Richard Perle, and Pat Buchanan. They have provided a direct pipeline into the Reagan administration, enabling Evans and Novak to depict its internal skirmishes in technicolor. For instance, regular readers of "Inside Report" weren't surprised by Alexander Haig's resignation. The column had exhaustively chronicled his recurrent battles with the White House. "Who Hid Reagan's Memo?" asks one typical column.

Outside conservative Republican circles, Evans and Novak are often in the dark. Tom Oliphant, a *Boston Globe* reporter who calls himself "an unabashed fan" of the column, adds: "In the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were marvelous on the inside baseball of the Democratic Party. Nowadays I get the impression that if Bob Strauss has a cold and can't come to the phone, they're almost out of business."

The result is frequent improvisation. A fine example appeared on December 28, 1983, in a column headlined "Charles Wick Retreats." The lead urgently declared: "An attempted appeasement of Democratic critics in the Senate resulted in humiliating political retreat for the Reagan administration when USIA Director Charles Z. Wick signed secret terms of surrender." The column went on to describe how "hard-driving Charley Wick" had agreed to stop financing political seminars for foreign visitors "after liberal Senate Democrats complained about their right-wing orientation. . . ." The villain: Peter Galbraith, a staff member of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee whose views "are variously described as ranging from 'left-wing' to 'moderate,' " and who was said to be work-

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ing on behalf of liberal senator Claiborne Pell.

The column was classic Evans and Novak. It had a breathless lead, bureaucratic maneuvering, a scheming liberal staffer, and above all, evidence of conservative capitulation. Unfortunately, it was wrong on almost every detail. The senator most troubled by the USIA's activities was not Pell but Edward Zorinsky of Nebraska, who is probably the committee's most conservative Democrat. Furthermore, the charges against the agency were non-ideological in nature, concerning conflicts of interest and violations of the USIA charter. Once the irregularities became public, an embarrassed Wick rushed to put matters straight.

COME ALONG NOW for an Evans and Novak tour of the globe. Hold on tight, though—the ride may get a little choppy.

Southern Africa. Arriving here in September 1981, we see the bodies of two Soviet officers, killed during a South African raid against SWAPO military installations in southern Angola. These are not simply two more victims of an endlessly bloody war. Comrades Kireev and Lamonovich are evidence that "Moscow seeks to transform black Africa guerrilla actions into a conventional war capability against South Africa-controlled Namibia and eventually against South Africa itself." The Russian plan is to integrate SWAPO with the Angolan army in order to attack South Africa. The real stunner of the column, though, is its assertion that the Soviets "seek to divert" South Africa from its problems in Namibia by "opening up a second anti-South Africa front from Mozambique." The objective: "locking up the greatest mineral storage house in the world and controlling oil traffic around the Horn."

Four years later, SWAPO continues to struggle as a hit-and-run guerrilla force, and the only front in Mozambique consists of antigovernment Renamo rebels widely believed to enjoy South Africa's backing. In fact, Mozambique has moved progressively closer to the United States.

Argentina. It's April 1982, just before the Falklands war, and the Soviet Union, we are told, "cannot resist poking into fresh trouble when the opportunity arises."

Senior presidential advisers fear that if Argentina is forced to retreat precipitously, an anti-U.S. government more nationalistic than the present military regime may take over. With the Soviet Union then in the forefront as Argentina's new best friend and the United States cast in the villain's role, there arises the prospect of Soviet-Argentine friendship unimaginable before the Falklands crisis. As a bonus, the Soviets might acquire naval ports in the South Atlantic, valuable help for their growing fleet of submarines.

Of course, Argentina's precipitous retreat in the Falklands led to the abrupt collapse of the military junta, bringing to power a democratic government that has since worked to exorcise the scourge of nationalism. Needless to say, the Soviets are nowhere to be found.

China. "China's Chill," appearing in June 1983, describes the deteriorating relations between Beijing and

Washington. The column scornfully dismisses the "New China Hands" in the U.S. Embassy who counsel a policy of accommodation. The real cause for estrangement, we learn, has "less to do with policy in Washington than with the nature of the Chinese communist state." The column warns of growing rapprochement between China and the Soviet Union. Among the pieces of evidence: the sight of "a Russian and several important-looking Chinese cadres in protracted conversation, punctuated by periodic laughter, at Peking airport's waiting room." Such cordiality sends a clear message: "the intimate link envisaged by the New China hands is beyond reach." Seven months after the column appeared, Chinese Premier Zhao Ziyang visited the United States, and four months later Ronald Reagan visited China—initiating a love affair between the two countries that is still aflame.

Iran-Iraq. You may not have heard of Basra, but in April 1984 Evans and Novak wrote that an upcoming Iranian campaign aimed at the Iraqi town was "assuming the rare importance of a latter-day Battle of Thermopylae." The campaign, they asserted, "is now perceived as more chilling to American interests than any other single event in the Middle East since World War II." The scenario went like this: a successful Iranian offensive would lead to the setting up of an "Islamic republic" in southern Iraq. This would force neighboring Kuwait to capitulate, followed in turn by Saudi Arabia, "the impotent oil sheikdoms," and the two Yemens. "Brutal harassment of Americans, not excepting murder, would follow."

IN FACT, the Iranian offensive fizzled, and the flag of the "Islamic republic" never flew. And, at last check, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the sheikdoms, and the Yemens were still there.

Grenada. Three days after the U.S. invasion, Evans and Novak attributed the murder of Prime Minister Maurice Bishop—which had precipitated the invasion—to Bishop's meeting the previous summer with American National Security Adviser William Clark. They wrote that Bishop had been killed because of the "fear of fellow Grenadian Marxists, shared by Moscow and Havana, that he was deserting to the West." This was the boilerplate analysis offered by the Reagan administration. But later the line changed. In 1984 the State and Defense departments published a collection of documents seized in Grenada that, in the administration's analysis, showed no "strong divergence of views between Bishop and those who replaced him; rather, the struggle appears to have been almost exclusively personal." It said there was "no evidence" that Cuban or Soviet dissatisfaction—or the meeting with Clark—played any role in Bishop's removal. Evans and Novak were left high and dry.

Nicaragua. Their greatest scoop came in October 1981. "Bridge Over the River Lempa" began:

Between 500 and 600 troops of Cuba's "quick strike" special forces flew surreptitiously to Nicaragua last month—with Cu-

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ba's ambassador to Nicaragua aboard the last flight—in a move that may be aimed at setting up a revolutionary Marxist government in eastern El Salvador.

Fidel Castro's gall and self-confidence in transporting a concealed strike force . . . for combat in beleaguered El Salvador has shocked the highest officials in the Reagan administration.

The evidence for this "Cuban foreign intervention" was said to come from "unimpeachable Latin American sources." According to these sources, the strike force had arrived "exactly" 26 days before the recent destruction of a bridge over El Salvador's Lempa River, connecting the eastern third of El Salvador with the rest of the country. Castro was expected to direct his force in Nicaragua "to occupy, without possibility of military resistance, the eastern third of El Salvador, establish a Soviet-backed communist government and use it to rally world support for the so-called Democratic Revolutionary Front." The column added that the imminence of Cuban intervention posed a "critical choice" for the Reagan administration: "to tell the world the truth about the advanced stage of Castro's Soviet-backed plan to seize control of El Salvador and meet it head-on; or to continue fudging the issue in hope that some miracle will make it go away."

Such a miracle did occur: Evans and Novak stopped writing about the planned invasion, and it went away.

MY INTERVIEW with Rowland Evans took place at the Metropolitan Club, in a huge sitting room with wood paneling, ornate windows, and elegant chandeliers. We sat facing one another in leather armchairs—the only two people in the room. I asked Evans about the River Lempa piece. "This very rarely happens," he told me. "I got a call from a very high official at State, who said, 'I have an interesting intelligence report that we're convinced is true.' So I went over to the State Department, and the information was so sensitive that he would only read it to me. I found it very difficult to prove it or check it out. I asked at the Pentagon, the Agency, but nobody really knew." Nonetheless, Evans said, he decided to go ahead with the story. "In my defense," he added, "I'd say the thrust of the column was accurate. There was a force that arrived, disguised as teachers. But it was a less significant force than I'd been told. The intelligence information did not convey the full story. There were inaccuracies in it." Months after the column appeared, Evans says, his source apologized to him. No correction ever appeared, however.

I also asked Evans about the prediction that Gorbachev had been passed over as Chernenko's successor. This time, he said, the source wasn't at State but at another "clearly identifiable" government agency. Going with the story "was a very, very close decision," he said, and in the end, "it was wrong." As an afterthought, he added, "I don't care whether it's Gorbachev or Grishin [another contender]. They're all sons of bitches."

He went on: "I think a reporter who's got a reputation for decency and honesty has every right to print this as a probable thing. You might ask, 'Why didn't you check it

out at State, the CIA, DIA, people in Moscow, Britain, and France?' That's a valid question. The answer is, you can't—you don't have time. By the time you checked it all out, the idea would be dead and buried. A reporter in this town, especially one who writes on deadlines four times a week, always has a very, very difficult question of judgment. The only fair way to judge a reporter is by taking the body of his work. I challenge you to take the full body of our columns and see where they come out."

MY INTERVIEW with Robert Novak took place in the Evans and Novak office, a block from the White House. I was ushered into a small, functional room filled with torn vinyl furniture. On the walls were photos of Evans and Novak consulting with the leading political figures of our time—Johnson, Humphrey, Kissinger, Nixon. "Support Nicaraguan Freedom Fighters," declared a bumper sticker on the door; a poster bearing the CBS eye proclaimed, "Rather Biased."

I asked Novak about the falloff in the number of papers carrying "Inside Report." "We're the oldest major syndicated column in America," he replied. "We've been around for a long, long time. People get tired of it." He added that "the whole future of the syndicated column is clouded. You can see that by counting the number of new columnists who have come on the scene in recent years. It's a feat for us to have continued as long as we have." Besides, he said, "We're controversial and abrasive."

The Prince of Darkness sounded tired. He had arrived in town early that morning on the red-eye flight from California, then joined Evans to tape a TV interview with Gary Hart. He also had to write an extra column in anticipation of Thanksgiving. In fact, Novak was going to cancel our interview until I told him on the phone, in a voice thick with disappointment, that I had just traveled 200 miles to interview him. "All right, come on over," he said. "I can give you ten minutes." We ended up talking for half an hour. The phone rang constantly throughout our conversation. At the end, as he hurried back into his office, Novak apologized for being so rushed. As I left I heard him plaintively call out to his staff, "Would somebody get me my own bathroom key?"

Bermuda, CNN, "McLaughlin," Gary Hart—Evans and Novak have come a long way from the days when they covered Capitol Hill. Along the way something has gone out of their work, however, and that's the capacity to outrage. It's no fault of their own. At one time, columns about second fronts in Mozambique, Soviet incursions into northern Pakistan, and Cuban strike forces would cause people to protest, fume, and mutter about how those guys were at it again. Today nobody looks twice. After all, their columns don't seem much different from what comes out of the Reagan administration. In fact, that's where they get most of this stuff. □

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