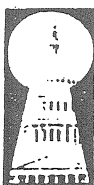


Capital capers in DC

In Washington, politics and corruption are permanent bedfellows. **Paul Mansfield** enjoys a satirical romp through the corridors of power



DO YOU remember Fawn Hall? She of the big hair, paper-shredding abilities and unwavering loyalty to her former boss, Colonel Oliver North? Fawn is now working as a tour guide in Washington DC. As we pass the Old Executive Office Building in downtown Washington, the site of Ollie's office during the Iran-Contra scandal, Fawn explains — in a breathless bimbo lilt — how her reputation has been maligned.

"When I was hired as Colonel North's secretary it was the Eighties and in the Eighties secretaries were supposed to just sit there and look good, right?" she says. "Now I don't know about you, but just sitting down and breathing at the same time is difficult enough for me. No one taught me about filing or paper-shredding. So, no way could I have done those things I was supposed to do..."

This, of course, is not the real Fawn Hall, but Christine Thompson, a virtuoso actress with the Washington comedy troupe Gross National Product, and we are halfway through GNP's weekly Scandal Tour of America's capital city.

Now some people — and especially some people in Washington

— might find this in bad taste. They will point to all DC's other attractions: its museums, architecture, shady parks and shiny new metro system. Fair enough; but also — as the locals say — get real.

No other city in the world has such a dense concentration of political power as Washington; and power, as we know, invariably breeds secrecy, intrigue and sexual excess. As the present, noisy affair (so to speak) of Monica Lewinsky and President Clinton gloriously demonstrates, scandal is in the very air.

I had my first whiff of this at Dulles airport, where, in the coffee bar, two men were talking at maximum volume about some flagrant double-dealing one had witnessed. "The STA was in bed with the PTC and they both screwed the GTO before the GTO even knew what was happening," said one. No one else paid any attention to this. It was clearly a routine capital conversation.

Likewise at my hotel, the Jefferson, an old-fashioned townhouse hotel near the White House and a favourite with DC's political set. In the dimly lit bar, grey-suited men and power-dressed women conversed in muted tones, and the bartender offered his own observations on the capital's political life (in Washington, everyone has an opinion about political life).

"Think of the number of politicians here, foreign and American. They move in the same circles. They know each other. They

work across the street from each other. If they want something done, then it gets done — and usually for a favour. People talk about Washington as the contemporary Rome. Well, remember how decadent Rome was."

Enter Gross National Product, armed with enough decadent raw material to sink a battleship. GNP was formed in 1980 by John Simmons, a tall, witty 42-year-old with a background in political journalism. It quickly became one of the capital's favourite comedy revues, playing to packed audiences. In 1988 it began the weekly Scandal Tour to give tourists an inside view of what John terms "the scandal capital of the world". GNP's policy is to satirise every one — although, Simmons says, "see

them, we don't do it kick people when they're down. We don't do Ronald Reagan now he has Alzheimer's. But then, hey, he had it all through his second term, so why the big deal now?"

From the moment you join the Scandal Tour bus, the tone is one of almost fanatical irreverence. For a start, "Nancy Reagan" is on the microphone, giving us some historical background. Did we know that George Washington was impotent and that the inescapably phallic-looking Washington Monument to our left is thus "George's finest erection"? And that Abraham Lincoln looks so solemn in his famous statue because his wife was a manic

depressive who went on uncontrollable spending sprees?

The audience — mainly Americans, ranging in age from early twenties to senior citizens — giggles nervously, then slowly gets into the spirit of things. By the time "Nancy" has popped into the bus's bathroom for a costume change, they are yelling with laughter at the driver's announcement that Senator Ted Kennedy has been given his own personalised Scandal Tour, on which no alcohol will be served and the bus won't drive across any bridges.

Some stops on the tour will be instantly familiar to Britons — the Watergate Complex, for

'For Bill's generation, 'harass' is two words'

example, where a bungled break-in in 1972 marked the beginning of the end of Richard Nixon's presidency. More recently, of course, the Watergate has been home to Monica Lewinsky.

Anyone with a passing knowledge of American politics over the past few years will recognise most locations, if only by reputation. There is a photo-stop at the Vista Hotel, where Mayor Marion Barry was secretly videoed smoking crack cocaine with a prostitute. "We are now following the very same white lines as Mayor Barry that fateful day," says the driver. There is Senator Gary Hart's townhouse, where

the model Donna Rice was photographed leaving by the back door, thus ending Hart's presidential campaign in 1988.

And finally, there is the White House, where "Hillary Clinton" emerges from the back of the bus to defend her husband's reputation. "You have to understand that Bill comes from a generation for whom 'harass' is actually two words," she announces, to cheers. Then the President himself puts in an appearance. "Yes I did promise a middle-class tax cut. But I made that promise back when I was middle class."

After nearly an hour and a half of one-liners, unexpected character appearances and inspired lunacy, the bus returns to base, depositing 40 satisfied — and grinning — customers. "It was great fun," says

Ken from Missouri. "And I'd say I learned a hell of a lot more about our history than I would on a normal tour."

Me, too. Not only did I see Washington's best-known sights, I also gained some understanding of how Americans view their politicians: somewhere between serious-minded legislators and game-show hosts. Public exposure of wrongdoing simply brings a new kind of celebrity and good-natured ridicule. None of the Americans on the bus seemed angry or outraged at the catalogue of misbehaviour. They were amused. "We know what kinds of things they get up to,"

said one woman from Kansas. "It's just kind of fun to see it brought out into the open."

For a visiting Briton, the strangest thing about Gross National Product is how its members get away with it without being sued — or executed. Simmons did consider setting up a Scandal Tour in London, but he abandoned the idea when he realised the strength of our libel laws. "But here you can say just about anything you want," he says. "Of course, we have the right to free speech enshrined in our constitution, but I think it's because our politicians are desperate for attention."

They must be, if the Clintons are anything to go by. Last year, GNP was invited to perform for the White House, although parts of the act had to be toned down. So was the President amused? "He pretended to be, when people were watching him," says Simmons. "Otherwise, he just sat there looking bored and sort of disgusted. Basically, he's a pretty humourless guy."

The scandal involving the President and Lewinsky has left the GNP team rubbing their hands. This year's Scandal Tour season kicks off in March with a "Bimbo Eruption Special". Additional stops include the west wing of the White House (the Oval Office), with a special visit from "the intern", and new presenters Jennifer Flowers, Paula Jones and the independent counsel Kenneth Starr.

If GNP's relentless ridicule of

Washington's great and good seems excessive, it is, says Simmons, no more than they deserve. And he has one last, telling story about the ironies of life in the capital of a nation "governed for the people, by the people".

On a recent Scandal Tour he found himself performing for a busload of senators on a day out. "Half of them were drunk, the other half were nuts," he says. "When we got to the White House, some of them got out and began chanting obscenities about Hillary. And I thought: 'These are the people we impersonate and we don't go nearly far enough.' That's one group of people I'll never play to again. The real thing was so repulsive I think we're going to stick to tourists."

© Paul Mansfield travelled with United Vacations (0181 313 0899), which until March 31 offers two-night breaks in Washington from £351 per person sharing (three nights from £375), including all taxes. Under the city's Winterfest promotion, travellers booking now will receive vouchers offering savings on dining, shopping and tours. The Jefferson Hotel is a member of Small Luxury Hotels (0800 964470; double rooms from £197 a night). Scandal Tours (00 1 202 783 7212) restart on March 15 and ran every Saturday until September; about £19 per person. Further information from the Washington DC Convention and Visitors Association (0181 382 9181) and Capital Region Tourism (01234 767924).