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A Long Cab Ride to AU

By Christopher Snow Hopkins

Monday, November 29, 2010 | 10:12 p.m.



CHET SUSSLIN

Former Cabbie: Pat Griffin.

In Martin Scorsese's 1976 movie "Taxi Driver," insomniac Travis Bickle is intent on rescuing a 12-year-old prostitute from a pimp. Pat Griffin's experiences as a New York City cab driver may not be as lurid or shocking as those portrayed in the classic meditation on angst and paranoia, but on "one crazy night" in the early 1970s, Griffin had a role in a similar drama.

"It was about 3:00 in the morning, and this pimp was beating up a prostitute on Broadway and 46th Street," said Griffin, a former assistant for legislative affairs under then-President Clinton. "Everybody's in shock. ... He was a small guy with a high, squeaky voice and this fancy outfit on." The prostitute leapt into Griffin's cab, and the two of them hurtled south, pursued by several cars.

"Then she asks me for a light, even though she's all punched up and bloodied. And I said, 'I don't smoke—let me concentrate here!'" Griffin reached "8th Avenue in a panic, looking for a cop." Eventually, he and his ward arrived at a bus terminal, where several dozen cops had gathered.

"I pull over, and I say, 'Come on, get out; these guys will protect you.' ... I'm watching, not only the pimp's car, but three cars behind him, all zipping by. I drove home and went to my local bar down in [Greenwich] Village."

On why a future White House official should have been attracted to life as a cab driver, Griffin said, "Growing up with cabs all my life, there was something romantic about it. ... And I loved it. It was the best job I ever had—almost as good as the White House."

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FROM THE MAGAZINE

It's a long way from the gritty New York streets to the paneled rooms of Washington academia, but Griffin, 61, made a long, strange trip by way of New Jersey and Wisconsin to land this month at American University's Center for Congressional and Presidential Studies.

His new role as the center's associate director for public policy caps more than a decade as AU's congressional scholar in residence, and follows stints as a private consultant and a partner at Griffin/Williams Management in the years after his work in the Clinton administration.

Griffin grew up on the top floor of a walk-up in Brooklyn, where his father drove a delivery truck and later managed a company purveying whipped cream, coffee blends, and toppings for baked goods. As a teenager, Griffin delivered whipped cream to restaurants and diners across Long Island, "all the way out to the last diner that used to exist in Montauk Point."

In 1967 he enrolled at Saint Peter's College, a small Jesuit school in northern New Jersey. Students there manifested an irreverent attitude characteristic of the age. "We were really in the revolution. We were seizing the state," Griffin laughed. He took part in protests "between classes" and "instead of classes."

Fueling the unrest was a chronic dread of conscription in a controversial war. Griffin said he "was damned concerned" about being drafted to fight in Vietnam. "I was a chicken, and also I didn't believe the war was right."

At the same time, Griffin lusted for new experiences and adventures. Along with driving cabs, he worked as a psychiatric technician in a now-defunct mental hospital in Greenwich Village. After college, he headed to the Midwest to study questions of race and poverty at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, which had pioneered an interdisciplinary master's program on urban affairs. He went on to earn a doctorate there investigating psychological factors that may interfere with continuing education.

After teaching briefly at Wisconsin, Griffin moved to Washington in 1977 as a fellow in the old Department of Health, Education, and Welfare. From there he headed to Capitol Hill to staff positions on the Senate Democratic Policy Committee and the Senate Budget Committee, where he said he applied his "street training" to the scrum of lawmakers.

Griffin was then recruited for the legislative liaison role in the Clinton White House. He recalled somewhat wistfully that it was a very different world there in the 1990s, compared to the pressure cooker of today's relentless cacophony in the blogosphere.

"Back then, in 1994 and 1995, a couple of us would meet in [Chief of Staff Leon] Panetta's office around 6 o'clock," he said. "We'd watch the networks; we had three TVs, and you'd see whether your stories were moving up or down. ... And then you were done for the day in terms of worrying about the outside.

"And now, these poor bastards, it's 24/7 from every direction."

This article appeared in the Tuesday, November 30, 2010 edition of National Journal Daily.

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