In a late March 2017 op ed in the New York Times, Ross Douthat advocated breaking up liberal cities and dispersing their institutions, including elite universities, around the country. “Imagine,” he said, “Stanford-Buffalo or Harvard-on-the-Mississippi.” Been there. Done that. We called it Harvard of the Midwest. It was a fine school then and a spectacular one today. I of course refer to our alma mater, Washington University in St. Louis.

Growing up in New Orleans, where my parents and grandparents had generational roots, my college education was carefully planned. I was to attend Tulane undergraduate, then Tulane Law School and then become a “pillar of the community.” As I refused to hear of it, we struck a deal. I could go North 800 miles up the Mississippi River to St Louis, where my sister, a WU alum, was living with her WU alum husband in U City — but only for the first two years. It was the best deal I could strike at the time, so I did.

I fell in love from the beginning with Washington U. It was beautiful; just the way I imagined a university to be. With some initial trepidation, I met my roommate. I knew in advance only that he was from Great Neck, so I imagined him to be a stuck-up, suburban New York snob. He knew only that I was from New Orleans — the deep South, so he imagined I was a redneck. Wrong and wrong. Chuck Ortner and I had a lot of laughs over that as we hung his salami in the window and slowly consumed what his parents had Katz’s deli send their boy in St Louis. Chuck and I have been good friends ever since, and he, through his amazing career, has been my window on the world of A-list entertainers and politicians, including Barack Obama.
It wasn’t long before I had settled into being a freshman at WU. History, Poli Sci, Math, etc., etc. I was an excellent student my entire first semester. Then I figured out I didn’t have to spend so much time studying — so I didn’t. I remember early on, my young English professor had us write an essay on why we chose to pursue a college degree. I was confused by the question, so I expounded on the theme of “that’s what upper middle class Jewish kids do after 12th grade.” Perhaps others had more profound thoughts, but my teacher seemed to like mine just fine.

I joined a fraternity — Sigma Alpha Mu. I met a lot of interesting people including one of my future roommates, Richard Laitman. Chuck says the three of us were like Seinfeld, George and Kramer, but I’m not sure who was who. And I’m not entirely sure how I felt about fraternities, but it must have been fairly positive, because I became the president of ours. One thing is for sure, Bearskin Follies and Thurtene were alone worth the price of admission.

Bearskin was best my sophomore year. My dance partner was the widely renowned Bunny Rosen (AB ’68), who is now Bunny Polmer. I invited her out for a Coke after a rehearsal, and I could say, “that was that,” but it wouldn’t be true. I asked her out to see the just released movie, My Fair Lady, playing somewhere in Clayton I believe. Later I discovered she had written home, “I had a wonderful date this evening, but I suppose you could have a great time seeing My Fair Lady with Dracula.” We pretty much had a rocky relationship for most of the rest of our time at WU. Lots of fights and making up. Years later Bunny and I met up with one of her SDT sorority sisters, who said, “You married him?!” It will be 50 years next year.

You may remember my two-year deal with my parents. It came due when school ended in 1965, and I embarked on my Junior Semester at Home program. First semester junior year I lived at home. It was a nightmare. Truly, you can’t go home again, but I couldn’t afford to send myself back to WU (not even in those days), so I threatened to join the Merchant Marine, and my parents said, “You seemed to be having such a nice time with that Rosen girl at WU. Maybe you should return.” So I did.

After WU, I spent one year at Tulane Law. Again I had excellent grades — first semester. Mostly I remember being part of a small group of law students who went to Memphis to try to get sanitation workers out of jail during their civil rights strike. I was staying at a motel near Martin Luther King, Jr. the day he was murdered. We had a meeting scheduled with him the next day.

In 1968, Bunny and I got married at her parents’ home in Syosset, New York. A month or so later we were living in Turkey as Peace Corps Volunteers. To my great surprise, I was informed I would be the new astronomy teacher for a high school class of “gifted” students. After the Peace Corps, I finished law school at George Washington University in DC, where we still live. Then I clerked for a US District Court judge and stayed to practice law with private firms based in DC and Chicago. I briefly served as deputy general counsel to a government commission studying electronic banking and could probably claim a supporting role in the development of that industry. In the late 90s and early 2000s, we sojourned in San Francisco and New York City, where I was general counsel to two separate companies in those cities. After the World Trade Center towers collapsed six blocks from my office, I returned to DC, where I again engaged in private practice until I retired in 2015. Now I tutor, dabble in political activities, landscape and plant our gardens, improve my photography and strive toward becoming a B+ endurance bicyclist before I reach 75.

Bunny has had a public relations practice in the food and restaurant industry for over 40 years. She and I have two married children. Our daughter Alexa, an actor and director in Silver Spring, MD, has a business coaching attorneys in need of better presentation skills. Her husband, Jason, is a video editor and producer. Their children, Ruby and Asher, are 7 and 5. Our son, David, lives in Chicago with his wife Sheila. He provides strategic communications services for large companies. She is an account executive at a title insurance company. Their daughter Audrey is 3. They are expecting another child around the time of our reunion. If Bunny and I leave early, you’ll know why.
My most vivid memory of my college days at Washington University began as an 11 to 12:30 class ended on a Friday in November. As I walked out of class heading for the Wohl Center’s cafeteria, I thought the campus looked a little bit less busy -- with fewer students moving about. When I reached Wohl, there were many fewer people eating than normal and none of my suite mates who were usually there from an earlier class dismissal were nowhere to be found. I ate in solitude and walked over to my dorm, “H”, where a large crowd had gathered around the TV in the basement lounge.

I asked someone at the back of the crowd what was going on since I could not see or hear the TV. I was then told the awful news. “President Kennedy has been shot. He’s been taken to a hospital in Dallas. We don’t yet know his condition.” Someone else offered that she thought afternoon classes had been cancelled, but no one was really certain.

I thought my chances of watching events unfold on TV we better at my fraternity, Theta Xi, and learning if classes had been cancelled were better there too. I was right on both scores and spent most of that weekend glued to the coverage of the assassination and its aftermath, unable to concentrate on any school work whatsoever.

There was a consensus at Theta Xi for CBS coverage because of the very knowledgeable, thorough and fatherly presentation of Walter Cronkite. He seemed to be able to deliver bad news, horrible news in a manner which seemed to be a bit less shocking. He and Eric Sevareid would follow-up bad news, and there was a lot that weekend, with information about all the uncertainties and likely outcomes that presented themselves in ways to make viewers a bit less unsettled.

Theta Xi also had a member who relished American history and political science. Because he wore a suitcoat and tie to classes and was kiddingly referred to as the “Senator from Nowhere.” His name was Steve Vossmeyer and this was a weekend for him to shine. As Brothers and girlfriends watched TV coverage of the assassination events, they would have questions, which Steve was always able to answer thoroughly before CBS news got around to an answer. And, he was never wrong, often giving more historical examples in his explanation.

While watching TV, a good deal of hostility was expressed toward Lyndon Johnson and Texas – Johnson was from Texas, the assassination occurred in Texas and everything seemed bungled to cover-up who might really be involved. There must be some form of conspiracy some believed. Those discussions, some quite heated, went on for hours.

There was also grave concern for President Kennedy’s progressive legislation which had been stalled by powerful southern committee chairmen in the Senate. These were bills guarantying African-American voting rights in the South and rights to public accommodations. The South took a lot of verbal punches from those gathered round until a Pledge Brother of mine from Benton, Arkansas spoke up forcefully in defense of the folks back home. John Dains, who now serves as a University Trustee, decried the view that Southerner were simply a unified block of nothing but rednecks. He declared that there have always been many Southern moderates and that that number was growing as more northern jobs were moving Northerners to the South. In short, the depiction some in the room and some on television presented of the South was unfair and in accurate.

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Sandy Rothschild (continued)

Vossmeyer added that Lyndon Johnson had been highly effective at moving legislation through the Senate when he was majority floor leader and had good relationships with the committee chairmen whose assistance would now be needed. And, he added, it was not uncommon to use the death of a President as justification to pass legislation he had advocated before his death. TV made that same point the next day. History has proven this analysis to be correct.

During everyone’s freshman year, I think there are times when we wonder if we have come to the right school for us. That assassination weekend sold me on Washington University, not because of the caliber of the classroom professors – who were very good, but because of everything I learned during the very high level, thoughtful and highly informed discussions of events among fellow students. They didn’t use an afternoon of no classes as a reason to start drinking earlier, but to follow important public events and to try to comprehend them in the most thorough manner possible. The discussions we had were everything one could hope for and probably would be worth course credits today. Many of those Fraternity Brothers and female friends taking part went on to earn advanced degrees in many diverse fields.

Post Script: Steve Vossmeyer, a January 1967 graduate, followed his political passion. He volunteered in Tom Eagleton’s successful 1968 campaign to unseat incumbent U.S. Senator Ed Long, a Vietnam War hawk, and served as Eagleton’s Legislation Assistant, one of the top posts in the Senate Office, for three and a half years. He then returned to St. Louis where he ran successfully for the Missouri House of Representatives, where he served for 10 years. Among his achievements, he co-sponsored the bill which restricted defense attorney’s interrogation of a rape victim’s past sexual history to matters relevant to the defendant. He also helped lead a major revision in campaign reporting requirements and contribution limitations. He earned a law degree from Wash. U. while serving in the House.
Peggy Schwartz MacKnight

Life Since Graduation

After graduation in 1967, half a century ago (ouch), I went on to Columbia University in New York to earn an MBA in marketing. Out in the real world, I started in the apparel industry, beginning with Maidenform in New York, Carter’s Infant Clothes in Boston, and then the Textile area of the U.S. International Trade Commission in Washington, DC. In addition, I am honored that two interactive websites I helped to develop; one on the Harmonized Tariff System and one on US import and export data, the Dataweb, continue to draw large numbers of users worldwide.

Fate led me to the Office of the U.S. Trade Representative and the negotiating team on international trade in Iron and Steel. I am proud of our team’s part in the multilateral Uruguay Round of trade negotiations and the NAFTA agreement as well as a host of bilateral agreements.

I was married to the late Tom MacKnight for 32 years. Our daughter Eve is in New York teaching digital project management. Our daughter Rachel and her husband John Jones, are prepping Washington DC and Maryland students for the SATs, LSATs, etc. Their little Zachary, now 18 months old, is a sheer delight—and the cutest baby on the planet.

I am excited to see old friends at reunion! This should be a fun weekend.