

Washington Erased



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Ellen Grayson's Great Aunt declared at supper that she hated the federal government. She would like to just erase Washington completely.

So after supper on Tuesday, February 17, 2012, ten year old Ellen took out the family atlas and looked up Washington DC in the index. Washington was part of a map of Maryland with a big brown dot that said "Washington D.C.". Ellen had a piece of sharp flint that she had found in the woods. Her Dad said it might be a stone that Native Americans used to chip arrowheads. Ellen used the sharp edge to scrape off just the brown color where it marked the city. She was quite careful.

She finished late so went straight to bed. Her Dad and Mom were in their bed reading. She kissed them goodnight but didn't say she had erased Washington. Her mother took good care of books.

At midnight between February 17 and 18, the City of Washington D.C. disappeared.

In Union Station the midnight express had pulled in exactly at 11:59, a precision of which the engineer was proud. As the train slowed, people began folding newspapers and stowing books. A few woke from naps as the rhythm of movement changed. When the cars slid to a halt, several men already were by the doors, briefcases in hand. Others gathered belongings quickly. In the one minute before midnight almost a third of the passengers disgorged onto the platform and were hurrying toward the exits. Lights inside the station did not go off; coffee kiosks were still open and two news stands displayed the latest headlines. At midnight exactly, however, the world outside disappeared into darkness. —no street lights, no sound of tires on pavement or sirens marking the city night with alarm. A security guard near an exit spread his arms wide to stop anyone from walking into the dark.. Most hesitated at the thick, silent space before them; but Morgan Taylor, CEO of FUWP Corporation, was on his way to a woman awaiting him in a nice hotel suite so he was having no delays. He swung past the guard and into the dark shouting, "Tax--!" The guard later testified at numerous Congressional investigations that he heard only the first syllable of Taylor's call. Light

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from the station did not extend to the sidewalk. Taylor disappeared from sight and sound. The guard touched his phone alarm signal and the security plan of the station went into immediate operation. Guards strung yellow tape across exits. No one else departed into the night. Most passengers frantically punched at their cell phones, receiving no response. At first there was confusion and anger. Two pushing incidents and one fist fight broke out in the first five minutes of near panic, but bystanders quickly intervened. A true fear overtook the crowd and they fell surprisingly silent. Station guards, who later would be commended for their calm under extraordinary circumstances, encouraged everyone to settle as best they could into the wide public parts of the station while the night staff tried to contact the outside world. A few maintenance men were sent to reopen the lunch counter and two cleaning persons were assigned to each restroom to keep any solitary person from panic. By three in the morning, all the supplies from the coffee kiosks and lunch counter had been sold. The last few muffins went for exorbitant prices, but no one would investigate such a small detail.

From Dulles and Reagan International airports outside the city limits, shuttle buses and taxis left after midnight with passengers who never arrived at their hotels. At the city limits, a thick fog blocked the roads so that the shuttles and taxis returned to their airports and gradually during the very early hours of the 18th, the ticketing and baggage areas of airports filled with bewildered passengers. Airport restaurants and stores were already closed and remained so as no personnel arrived to open them.

Telephone calls into the city went unanswered. Taxi drivers could not radio in to their dispatchers. E-mails bounced back to the senders. Once the earliest rush hour drivers found themselves halted on the freeways in long jammed lines with no explanation, they began calling home on their cells. Others began calling TV and radio stations to find out what was wrong. When they couldn't get a Washington station, they called Baltimore, Philadelphia, New York. The first few of these calls were considered hoaxes, but soon the volume was convincing. Rumors began to fly. News staff for the stations alerted out-of-city newspapers as well as stations. The professional information purveyors began investigating seriously. Some soon realized that this strange inability to enter or to contact Washington was mysterious and alarming. They began broadcasting reassurances, telling people not to panic. This increased public panic considerably.

In various government offices in Langley, Virginia, communication failure with DC was confirmed by 12:30 a.m., and all immediate projects were put on emergency hold. Nothing could be approved before the President gave the word, but he was in the silent White House. Attempts began on various means of contacting the capital; and for more than an hour, until about two in the morning local time; the computer whizzes of the CIA tested every possible channel into the city. Then they called Houston. While both NASA and the intelligence services had superior satellite access, NASA's research team might try some new, even untested, ideas

By 5 a.m. Eastern Time which was 2 a.m. Pacific Time, two brilliant post-graduate fellows of the Lawrence Livermore Lab in California were sleepily arriving at the side door of their building, each wondering why he had been summoned at this strange hour and by the Lab director himself with a warning to speak to no one but to hurry. Some thirty other research

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laboratories, some in quite obscure places, over the continental United States were similarly turning on a few lights and opening private doors to admit their two or three most brilliant workers. Within the next hour, even the most patient lab directors were angry and frustrated at the CIA: “Why can’t they say more than ‘There is no contact’ ‘There is no contact?’”

Satellite photos showed nothing of Washington. Military cameras able to differentiate individuals on the ground yielded only plain blackish grey or beige screens. Sound probes bounced back from whatever heights the air force tried. Experimental probes from ground level returned from exactly the city limits, positions confirmed through the US Geologic survey data. No images, no sounds of any kind could be picked up inside those limits.

A drone sent out by the Air Force veered upward suddenly to 5000 feet to scoot across the city and droop suddenly on the other side. Helicopter pilots nodded grimly—they had been tossed up the same way since their missions began at 3 a.m. that morning. No pilot expected a medal for this day’s failures, but all knew they had attempted and survived the most momentous flight of their lives.

Bloggers and people on Facebook and Twitter hit the Internet with every conceivable theory and claim. Thus the news spread internationally to ordinary people in obscure corners of the globe as well as to the major information centers. Some believed; some didn’t. Many began to pursue the rumors intently so that soon business offices worldwide had slowed work while clerks and executives alike followed the trails of their favorite ideas.

Satirists and pranksters on the Internet took until late morning to realize that the “rumor” was not a joke. Gradually undergraduates and hobbyists shut down their web sources, often with a sincere although belated apology to all contacts for the terrible mistake of treating national security lightly. Bloggers, radio hosts, dj’s, professional and freelance reporters in all kinds of media began to fear lawsuits, possibly even arrest for remarks they had considered humor or simple hyperbole. Most professional communications were silent by 4 p.m., Eastern Standard Time. CNN stayed on with the familiar senior anchormen sitting quietly behind desks and repeating endlessly, “We don’t know what to tell you. All communication with Washington DC is cut off. We have no details for now, but will let you know when we get any confirmed information.”

From Alma, Ohio, all of the eighth grade Alma Middle schoolers had left the day before for a class trip to Washington except Alice Perkins who had the mumps and Carl Easterly who seemed to have flu symptoms. As the strange news spread of trouble with Washington and the school secretary could not get any of the chaperones on their cell phones, the Perkins and Easterly parents, while taking part in the general anxiety, also quietly thanked God that their children were safe at home.

The Vice-President of the United States had been in New York City for a foreign policy discussion with several Asian UN ambassadors. The Secret Service was of course at his side, but by five that morning they had doubled their immediate guards and were discussing with him the wisdom of flying straight to bunkers in Idaho. The Vice President was not convinced. He called and got through to offices in Langley, Virginia, then assembled a quick staff in his hotel suite to call every state governor with instructions to set up a public program of

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reassurance and not to attempt contact Washington on any issue on the state level.

Probably farm subsidy checks would not go out until further notice, or the funds for federal building projects. Contractors on those projects were ready to meet this week's payroll but no more. They idled their machines.

By 5 a.m. the Secretary General of the United Nations had offered to the Vice-President the considerable translation services the United Nation maintained. Unable to call upon the State Department's usual cadre of language experts, the Vice-President accepted quickly and set up a satellite office in the UN building itself through which he channeled all communications with foreign countries. He was not at all sure what he wanted to say to the people of the world; but if he could think out a statement, he would want it heard in the native tongue of the listeners.

Headquarters for international banking were in New York, certainly, but with Washington mysteriously silent, they too slowed their activity, trying to keep just enough going that no one would think they had collapsed. By noon on the 18th, that ruse had failed, and the banks simply closed their doors while employees frantically worked inside to affirm a safe status with international contacts.

In the immediate suburbs around the city, people felt the day to be increasingly surreal. Electricity worked, trucks delivered supplies, and telephones rang. The morning news had alerted the nation, but outside kitchen windows the sun was shining, cars were traveling side streets. Mothers sent their children on to school where teachers gave spelling tests and math quizzes as usual. Principals became increasingly anxious during the day and gave permission for parents entering the school offices to take their own children home. Otherwise, the school day advanced routinely until around noon when the principals informed coaches learned that various scheduled matches and play-offs with schools from the DC district were canceled.

"Well, is it a forfeit? What do I tell my players?"

"Tell them to go home and not panic."

The coaches heard fear in the principals' voices and thus felt fear themselves

About 8 that evening local time, Ellen's mother thought her daughter should soon go to bed. As reassurance for a disturbing day, unexplained in Ellen's grade school, her mother pulled out the atlas to show Ellen that Washington, no matter how disturbing, was two states away, nothing there could hurt them. The map of Maryland was a surprise. What was this white fuzzy area where Washington D.C. had been? Mrs. Grayson had firm ideas about mutilating books. The damage could be rectified. With a brown art marker, she filled in carefully the space denoting the city, then without comment, closed and put away the book. She tucked Ellen in gently, kissed her without comment on the national emergency, and turned out the light.

In the dark late hours of February 18, no plane landed near the city, no Amtrak train slowed for Union Station, all national defense systems were fully manned on high alert, when a weary vice-president, staring disheartened at his laptop screen at midnight, saw a sudden blip, then a message from his most secure Washington source.