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Washington's big night out

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EVERY year, the White House Correspondents' Association hosts a dinner with the US President and Vice President. It's a big shindig in Washington, and possibly one of the capital's best known parties - it's probably the only party in town where the President - that's right, Dubya - stands across the same room as stars from the HBO hit series Sex and the City.

One way to get in would be to work for a news organisation that buys a table at the dinner. Another is to go as the guest of someone whose organisation buys a table. Alas, I did not work my limited connections hard enough. Next year, I tell myself, next year.

Of course if I could be there, there is the question of what I would actually do once I've got the cocktail of my choice in one hand, and my courage in the other. This is the kind of party where one must mingle. If one does not know a great number of people, yet one is not content to be a fly on the wall, one would have to do the rounds.

Naturally that is easier said than done. There is nothing harder than networking. When you are a known personality, it is one thing. People are always pleased to meet you, especially if you are polite and gracious. If you're entertaining to boot, there's nothing they want more than to be in your company.

But if you are a nobody, it is a real challenge indeed. For a start, it requires proficiency in the art of making small talk. You have to assume the right tone - "nice to meet you" but not "I want to be your best friend" or worse, "you must talk to me, I know no one here".

It means not imposing on your victim while allowing them to open up to you without thinking, "gosh, where did this cretin come from? Time to make a dash for the refreshments table".

A great many people are shy. Those who aren't become politicians. Journalists aren't necessarily shy but many don't pay sufficient mind to the acquisition of social skills, hence they end up feeling ill at ease at big parties.

I should know. I attended enough business luncheons to notice journalists skulking in the shadows, or eating their meal quietly at the Press table - waiting for everything to finish and the Press conference to start.

Very few journalists would stop and say hello and get to know the other folks attending the luncheon, despite the fact that it only requires an easy grin and to stick out your hand: "I'm so and so. What do you think of the talk/luncheon?"

No, most Malaysian journalists wait till they spy a comrade talking to someone famous and they swarm them like bees, putting an end to whatever chat that was going on. I put it down basically to a lack of confidence.

This year's dinner, the Association's 89th, was held on April 26 at the Washington Hilton. It was really quite an affair - 2,700 people decked out in their springtime finery sitting down to a three-course meal.

Salad was watercress, endive and romaine, followed by filet mignon and grilled corvine with wasabi mashed potatoes. Dessert a flourless chocolate souffl,.

But many of the guests would already have started on their revelry much earlier, at pre-dinner parties hosted by Bloomberg News and Newsweek.

Stars from the White House drama West Wing, Law and Order SVU, Frasier's

Kelsey Grammar, Sex and the City's John Corbett were in attendance. Some of the guests were even important - foreign dignitaries, the US Secretary of State Colin Powell and United Nations Weapons Inspector Hans Blix.

It wasn't always like this, though. Apparently, the Association's dinner was a nice "conservative" thing when it first started. Calvin Coolidge attended the first in 1924.

The dinners used to be an entertainment extravaganza with performances by big name stars between courses. But 1987 kicked off the age of celebrity when one newspaper editor brought Oliver North's secretary as his guest. The Iran contra hearings were in progress.

Since then, all manner of celebrities have attended. Bill Clinton even had to survive one in which Paula Jones had shown up.

Bush, in contrast, had only to contend with Black Sabbath's Ozzy Osbourne, who stood up on his chair and waved to wildly cheering crowds at one point.

Can you imagine Prime Minister Datuk Seri Dr Mahathir Mohamad hanging out with an ageing rocker-turned-reality TV star at a party? Or better still, with a Sex and the City star?

It would definitely be a talking point for people in Bangsar over teh tarik or a bowl of prawn mee.

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