

# west

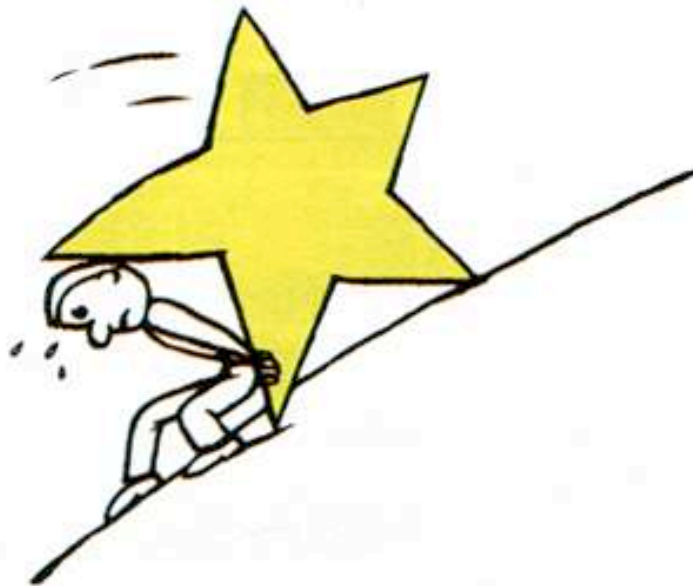
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## The Power Issue

A look at the 100 people who wield  
the most influence over  
Southern California. Who's No. 1?\*

\*Hint: He's not on the cover



# At Their Service

Well, somebody has to make the A-Lister a BLT at 2 a.m.

By Andy Meisler

**T**HE POOR AND HELPLESS will always have Big Government, nongovernmental agencies and Bill and Melinda Gates to look after them.

But what about the rich, powerful and/or instantly recognizable? Who's looking after their needs? Few people realize this, but your average chief executive, superagent or A-list actor or director is virtually *hors de combat* without an intelligent, infinitely flexible, utterly ego-free and usually career-capped gatekeeper by his or her side to make sure no important call goes unreturned, no important meeting missed, no personal checkbook unbalanced, no wayward son un-bailed from jail, no luncheon or airline reservation unmade.

Luckily for scores of L.A.-based big shots, Rachel Zaslansky is on the case. Zaslansky is cofounder and a principal partner of the Grapevine, a year-old employment agency—one of several like it in Los Angeles—that specializes in locating personal and executive assistants for the needy elite. She's constantly searching for intelligent and presentable people who are equal parts Jules Verne's fictional manservant Passepartout, "Silent" Calvin Coolidge, Tonto, the Invisible Man, MacGyver, Hudson the butler from "Upstairs, Downstairs" and—just for spice—Nanny McPhee or maybe a touch of Cardinal Richelieu.

Not a very common personality type these days. "I interview 10 or 15 individuals for every one I place," Zaslansky says.

That's why she works very hard, racing from one Coffee Bean & Tea Leaf, Starbucks and Peets outlet to another to interview as many as 10 referred candidates in a day. (Aspir-

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## At Their Service

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 47] ing actors, possessors of sloppy résumés or inappropriately dressed applicants probably will get no more than a chai latte out of the deal.) And the executive and personal assistants she chooses work even harder—albeit for salaries that can sometimes reach \$150,000 per year.

"A lot of these jobs are intense, 24/7," Zaslansky says. "Some have boundaries. But some have no boundaries."

She adds that it's not uncommon for an assistant—after a full day of answering phone calls, scheduling appointments, fending off sycophants, straightening the employer's tie and picking up his kids from preschool—to be summoned "up to the house" at 2 a.m. to whip up a wee-hours BLT.

There also are impromptu Big Challenges: A personal assistant, says Zaslansky, once boarded

a private jet with his employer and was told after takeoff that he wouldn't return to L.A. for months.

TO GET THE JOB CATEGORIES and requirements straight, an executive assistant usually works in an office, handling the phones and guarding the Big Cheese's inner sanctum. The personal assistant is generally office-less but elaborately PDA'd, sticking to the boss' side like white on risotto. Of course, in case of emergency—like a bad stain on the living room carpet or a First Family member's fender bender—the personal assistant must be able to adapt quickly and head to the site of the catastrophe like an anxiety-seeking missile.

He or she also must maintain a level of confidentiality that's rare in this town. "Oh, my God!" says a woman we'll call Ms. X, an executive assistant who's "chained to her desk" 10 or so hours a day for a Westside mogul. "He'll freak if he ever reads my name, or his name, or figures out it's me who talked about my job. I'll be fired immediately."

Likewise, most assistants, who almost always undergo background checks and frequently sign confidentiality agreements, are as reluctant to be quoted by name as they are to reveal the name of the person—celebrity or not—for whom they work. Which isn't to say the job doesn't have its psychic compensations.

"I love the fact that no one talks to him unless they talk to me first," says Ms. X of her anonymous chief. "He doesn't see his mail until I see it. I play dumb sometimes, but I know everything that's going on."

A slightly milder version of that is voiced by Andrea Dunlap, executive assistant to John Cochran, president and chief operating officer of Fiji Water. "John travels a lot, so I'm his eyes and ears in the office. I get a feel for the office politics and let him know if there's anything he needs to address. At the same time I can go home at night without having to worry about the problems."

"No," she adds, "I don't want to be an executive like him. I have a lot of influence—but it's peripheral influence. That's the way I like it."

WHICH BRINGS UP perhaps the most interesting part of the gatekeeper gestalt: In this era of ambition and ego, the most successful of them are fulfilled by being an unseen force, finding satisfaction in helping "their" man or woman succeed.

"They're happy to be the man behind the man," says Zaslansky. "They're the kind of person who's happy working as a concierge at a five-star hotel."

Indeed, Jimmy Cannon, a 20-year veteran assistant who's worked for Farrah Fawcett, Lily Tomlin and the CEO of Telemundo, among others, got his start behind the front desk at the Pierre Hotel in New York. "I get my satisfaction out of making life as uncomplicated for them as possible," says Cannon, who once defended Fawcett from a screwdriver-wielding gypsy-cab driver. "I see my job as getting them exactly the right piece of information they need at exactly the right time—not a second too early or too late."

Says Stacey Tesser, the personal assistant for a prominent L.A. philanthropist: "I tend to be open and friendly, but a bit of a perfectionist—too much of a perfectionist when I'm taking care of myself. But when I'm taking care of other people I have a better perspective. I don't obsess about it."

It's also a weirdly intimate kind of life, say most people in the profession. "You become, quote, a member of the family, unquote," says one personal assistant who asked not to be identified. "You know everything about them, and there's nothing too personal for them to ask you to do. An executive assistant friend of mine, a woman, once was asked by her boss to schedule his vasectomy for him."

The personal assistant adds, "At the same time, you realize they know virtually nothing about your personal life, on the off chance you have time for one. And then, of course, when you get burned out and want some time off or want to move on, you've 'betrayed' them."

The other confounding conundrum of the gatekeeper life is that, no matter how often you get to fly on a Gulfstream V, you aren't going anywhere. Except for a select few swimming-with-shark slots for, say, talent agency assistants for whom the

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job is a kind of boot camp, there is absolutely no room for advancement. The better you do your job the more certain it is that your employer will make sure you keep doing it. The best-case scenario involves salary increases.

"Everybody tells them that upfront," says Zaslansky, "but a lot of times people think: 'Oh, if they love me and I do a great job, then maybe I can get promoted.' A couple of years later, they discover that's not going to happen, and they leave. Which is hard—because when you leave you wonder, 'I've already been an assistant to the best, so what's next?'"

A FEW ASSISTANTS have it figured out and are making other long-term plans. Andrea Dunlap, who is of Sierra Leonean descent, plans to join her sister and mother, who are running a school in that country's capital, Freetown, in a few years. Stacey Tesser will soon start her own business devoted to what she loves to do best: organizing other people's closets.

And then there's Rachel Zaslansky. Raised in Chappaqua, N.Y., she spent time working in a Manhattan fashion showroom before moving to L.A. She eventually became assistant to Kevin Huvane, a CAA big cheese, before realizing that making job matches interested her more than making movie deals. She, Lori Zuker and Caroline Bassett founded the Grapevine, and now she gets her thrills sluicing through the L.A. talent pool for the rare individual born to be a secretary/psychologist/real estate agent/short-order cook/lightning rod/hanny.

"My biggest thrill," she says, "comes when I look into a person's eyes and realize I've discovered a brand-new star. I mean assistant star." ■

## The Men

[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 35] ment" advocates such as John Randolph Haynes, Clifford Clinton and the Rev. Dana Bartlett; Upton Sinclair and other radical reformers; and radical populist the Rev. Robert "Fighting Bob" Shuler. They wanted God or Marx or "the folks" to stand against the brute exercise of power. They wanted Los Angeles to be good.

A group portrait from the early 1960s is in tones of gray, the faces indistinct. It's of the Committee of 25—like-minded executives, not all of them particularly rich or individually powerful, who picked mayors and their platforms and helped raze the houses of Bunker Hill and stymie postwar public housing to the benefit of suburban subdividers. They kept Los Angeles unfriendly to union organizers, people of color, Jews and other forms of big-city disorder. They wanted good government, just like the reformers, but they wanted growth and efficiency more. The committee included Republican operative and businessman Asa Call of Pacific Mutual Insurance, USC President Norman Topping, UCLA Chancellor Franklin Murphy, Times Publisher Norman Chandler (Harry's

son), attorney James Beebe of the law firm O'Melveny & Myers and entrepreneur Justin Dart of Rexall Drugs.

The panoramas of Los Angeles behind them shows tract houses replacing farm and range land, restless factory workers and dazzled starlets arriving and lifted up on the piers of freeway overpasses, symbols of outright bigotry and forthright greed, of big dreams and lost opportunities. In the sky, merging with the smog, is smoke from the stacks of refineries and auto assembly plants, and then from the burning of Watts in 1965 and the burning of everything redefined as South-Central in 1992.

In the interval between those two fires, if you lived at the margin in Los Angeles, you were expected to understand force (personified by the Los Angeles Police Department); you weren't expected to understand power. Whole economies rose and fell between the burning of Watts and South-Central—steel, rubber, aerospace, electronics and commercial real estate. A new Los Angeles, new in numbers and ethnic diversity, arrived.

Then sometime around 1999, in the middle of Mayor Richard Riordan's second term, power no longer is pictured as businessmen meeting in a [CONTINUED ON PAGE 54]

# The Men

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[CONTINUED FROM PAGE 51] clubroom downtown where they name a slate of City Hall candidates or launch a campaign in *The Times* for something big.

The big things that such men do—persuade the NFL to bring a football team to the city, finish the Walt Disney Concert Hall, make the subway run to the sea—were now not getting done.

Riordan was better at leveraging a deal than leading a city. He had to be both stage manager and headliner, deal maker and front man. Banker, investor, real estate speculator, lawyer, civic cheerleader and philanthropist, he was nearly the whole show: a committee of one.

That was enough for a while. Riordan's assemblage of friends, contractors, lobbyists, academics and the really rich began the reform of the city's charter. They tried to change the school district. They saw to it that the Alameda Corridor and the Red Line subway were built. They didn't have the epic vision of William Mulholland (and a freight line from the port didn't have the mythic qualities of the Owens Valley aqueduct), yet they were able to achieve a few things that were publicly beneficial, and privately profitable to some.

But then the last of the city's Fortune 500 companies drifted away, and the growth machine that once filled empty square miles with suburban houses stopped. The enterprise of Los Angeles began to seem unnecessary. And at the end of the corridor, in the present, you wonder where all the traditionally powerful men of Los Angeles have gone.

If the axiom is true that Money+Testosterone=Power, there should be plenty left. According to the *Los Angeles Business Journal*, which annually estimates such things, nine of the 10 richest people in Los Angeles are men. They control about

\$50 billion. If you subtract Barbara Davis from the *Journal's* ranking (as the only woman named), the top 25 richest men have \$82.1 billion in assets. At the head of the list is Kirk Kerkorian, with an estimated \$9.3 billion. At the bottom, if that's the right word, are William Randolph Hearst's grandsons, David and George Hearst, each with a \$1.6-billion share of the family's wealth.

But the 25 richest men don't all live in Los Angeles; the very rich don't live anywhere specifically anymore. Even the men who are rich mostly because of their Los Angeles real estate don't make the mistake of identifying their wealth with their city. Eli Broad is the iconic "last tycoon" who does.

The parallel to Broad is Cardinal Roger Mahony. If Broad is our last tycoon, the cardinal is the last prince, with no need for Broad's deference to the egos of politicians or anyone else. The cardinal is a player in the Latino reconfiguration of Los Angeles, though he has only limited capacity to steer its evolution. His frustrations over the exercise of power are the same that Father Serra felt 225 years before.

Los Angeles willed itself into existence after 1887 with the mass marketing of the Southern California dream and all the longing it could inspire. To be desired by ordinary Americans was one kind of power. That should have made Hollywood, which manages desire on an industrial scale, the ultimate site of power in the city. But Hollywood power is only powerful in Hollywood, not in Los Angeles. And in any event, desire has gone virtual, as the machinery of celebrity has gone global.

Place doesn't matter anymore. Los Angeles (or Hollywood) might as well be Bangalore. Power is supposed to have moved to this paradigm—moved off world, so to speak—into the no-place of the Net. If true, the story of power in Los Angeles until now reads like a late 19th century romance of health and happiness in the sunshine of a particular place. The men who had once gained power in Los Angeles felt that places mattered, and that their place was at the edge of something—the continent, a new century of consumer desire, the Pacific—and that there was no place else to go.

No one with a blog believes that there are any edges now . . . or centers.

In one way, in politics, place does still matter, which is why Mayor Antonio Villaraigosa's whirlwind ce-

lebrity within an increasingly Latino electorate is only part of his power; the mayor benefits just as much from a half-finished revolution of popular desire to remake the city. The question is what that city will be.

Villaraigosa has said he intends to be the mayor of a denser city, a greener city, a transit-oriented city, a middle-class city, a working-class city, a politically progressive city, a business-oriented city, a city where the mayor is in control of the educational system. There's a refigured narrative of Los Angeles somewhere in there, but it's hard to discern how the story will turn out.

Power in Los Angeles initially came from an almost perfect vacuum. The equation was Empty Space+Desire=Power. Although that's still true downtown, through the lofting of so much empty vertical space, significant power can't be wrested anymore from the unresisting landscape of Los Angeles.

What's left is in-fill, the lesser power of Rick Caruso (retail centers) and Steve Soboroff (Playa Vista) to leverage development projects from NIMBY-ist homeowners, a touchy equity market and a balkanized City Council, where everything is divided by 15. Some spectators expect power to simply relocate permanently to places like Glendale, Burbank, Long Beach and other middling cities with more nimble local governments and more cranky individualists.

Might Los Angeles be that kind of city?

In the troubled Rampart Division around MacArthur Park and in K-town, entrepreneurial Koreans with a lot of education and some money have been reprocessing gang turf into profitable businesses since the late 1990s and, more recently, into booming residential neighborhoods that are drawing once-suburban Koreans back into the heart of the city. The next Huntington or Broad may be named Kim or Lee. But will they—or anyone—ever again make a whole life from tying their hopes and fortunes to Los Angeles?

Imaginations and loyalties are smaller now.

I don't know whom history will nominate next for the official, final portrait of power. It could be a downtown loft developer, a Spanish-language talk-show personality, the owner of a new-media network or members of Heal the Bay.

Or maybe it will be a group portrait of all of these—their power rising from the multitude's diversity. ■