

*Mike Berman's*

# WASHINGTON POLITICAL WATCH

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## **Michael Berman, political strategist who revealed private struggles, dies at 84**

An eclectic Washington insider whose career included senior White House aide, lobbying firm founder and author of a book about his battles with his weight

By Brian Murphy

January 18, 2024 at 7:46 p.m. EST



Michael Berman, a political strategist who came to Washington as a top aide to Vice President Walter Mondale and built a career as an eclectic insider who helped organize Democratic conventions, lobbied lawmakers and wrote a heartfelt book about his struggles with obesity, died Jan. 12 at a Washington hospital. He was 84.

Mr. Berman was under medical care after a stroke, said his wife, Debbie Cowan. For decades after the Carter administration, Mr. Berman was a prominent member of two distinct Washington castes: the behind-the-scenes political operatives and the well-connected lobbyists whose respective powers come from their access to the powerful.

At the Clinton White House, Mr. Berman had what he called “roaming rights” that allowed him to pop into offices and meetings as part of his unofficial Mr. Fix It portfolio. That included helping prep nominees for Senate confirmation hearings, including future Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg. During President

Bill Clinton’s 1998 impeachment proceedings over issues including alleged perjury about his sexual relationship with White House intern Monica Lewinsky, Mr. Berman assisted with White House messaging.

At Democratic National Conventions since 1968, he was the “undercard” guru, setting the mood and tempo of speakers building up to the presidential candidate. In 2004 in Boston, the last convention Mr. Berman worked, he helped set up the keynote speech from an Illinois state senator who was little known outside his home state, Barack Obama. “Quite an orator,” Mr. Berman remembered thinking.

At the same time, Mr. Berman wore another hat as co-founder of the Duberstein Group, a lobbying firm where his network among Democrats was paired with the deep GOP alliances of Kenneth Duberstein, who served as President Ronald Reagan’s chief of staff. The group’s clients — which Mr. Berman called a roster of “overdogs” — included Time Warner, Anheuser-Busch, General Motors, and oil giants such as BP.

Mr. Berman became a walking Venn diagram. His political and lobbying worlds overlapped — and at times could seem at odds. Perhaps most striking was the 1993 Senate confirmation hearings for a Florida environmental official, Carol Browner, who was Clinton’s pick to run the Environmental Protection Agency. Mr. Berman helped coach Browner’s successful nomination process. The Duberstein Group, meanwhile, was pressing lawmakers for more oil-friendly regulations on behalf of its client, Shell.

Mr. Berman said it took “fine tuning” to keep a balance. Sometimes his choices were unexpected.

Beginning in the late 1980s, he threw support behind LGBTQ+ rights initiatives spearheaded by the Human Rights Campaign, an advocacy group that backed measures such as “Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell” in the military. Mr. Berman later became the first non-LGBT member of the group’s board.

Hilary Rosen, a Democratic lobbyist who served as interim director of the Human Rights Campaign in 2008, said in an interview that Mr. Berman made a

groundbreaking statement as a “privileged, straight, White man.” Rosen believed that Mr. Berman’s lifelong battles with obesity, and prejudices he perceived, “added to his empathy level.”

Mr. Berman had publicly chronicled his challenges with weight — once reaching 332 pounds on his 5-foot-9 frame — and the humiliation and frustration he felt every time a diet failed. His 2006 book, “Living Large: A Big Man’s Ideas on Weight, Success, and Acceptance,” was part raw testimonial and part meditation on human frailties.

“I could not control my appetite because something was driving me,” he wrote, “something that was beyond the reach of willpower, outside the realm of reason.”

Mr. Berman described, in searing detail, how he once found himself stuck in a rocking chair because of his girth, or how he spent \$2,100 on three bespoke suits in 1986 and had grown too big for them when they were finished 10 weeks later. Yet he also recounted how he learned to accept his size and find contentment. Some of his favorite restaurants in Washington knew to leave bread off his table and prepared him special plates of steamed vegetables.

“The most difficult thing about a food addiction,” he once told *The Washington Post*, “is that you can’t give up food.”

So, it seemed no surprise that Mr. Berman found a way to mix politics and his love of dining out. The newsletter he started in 2007, “Mike’s Washington Watch,” was a hodgepodge of news clips, musings, and statistics. He added tales of his meals at restaurants with friends. His posts might also be the most extensive source for information on eatery restrooms in Washington and beyond.

Mr. Berman gave exacting observations of every sink, commode, and soap dispenser. At Parlour Victoria, a seafood taverna, he told readers the restrooms were small, and the door is “particularly heavy.” (The lobster roll was excellent, he added.)

At Mr. Berman’s regular breakfast spot, the Four Seasons Hotel in Georgetown, the staff set up a table on Jan. 13 in his memory with one of his usual meals, including a waffle topped with a fried egg and slices turkey bacon, and a triple iced espresso.



### **Rose with Mondale**

Michael Stewart Berman was born on April 9, 1939, in Duluth, Minn. His father ran a dry cleaner; his mother was a homemaker. When Michael was young, his parents hosted a boy from Hibbing, Minn., named Robert Zimmerman while he went to Hebrew school in Duluth. The couple became the godparents of the boy, who became the future folk music superstar Bob Dylan.

Mr. Berman graduated in 1960 from the University of Minnesota in Duluth. He received his law degree from the University of Minnesota's law school in 1964. That summer, he took a job with Mondale, then Minnesota attorney general, who was leading the state's effort in President Lyndon B. Johnson's successful run to remain in the White House.

Mr. Berman was by Mondale's side after he was appointed to the U.S. Senate in 1964 (filling the seat recently vacated by Vice President Hubert Humphrey) and

then as President Jimmy Carter's vice president, serving as Mondale's deputy chief of staff and counsel. A photo Mr. Berman saved as a memory of his tight bonds with Mondale show him sewing a cuff button on Mondale's shirt as the vice president, on a deadline, looked over some papers and puffed a cigar.



After Carter's election loss to Reagan in 1980, Mr. Berman joined a Washington law firm before creating the lobbying firm with Duberstein in the late 1980s.

As American politics grew more divided and bitter, Mr. Berman said he increasingly felt like a relic who still believed in bipartisan compromise. He blamed the rapid-fire news cycles for some of the rifts. There was no longer time, he said, to try for common ground.

"I can go this far. You can go this far," he told NPR's "Morning Edition" in 2011. "These kinds of negotiations — which made legislation much better, I think — just don't exist anymore."

His wife of 42 years, Carol Podhoretz, died in 2007. He married Debbie Cowan in 2012. Survivors include two stepsons and a stepdaughter; and two sisters.

Mr. Berman was often credited being a mentor for dozens of people in politics and diplomacy, including Tom Nides, who served as U.S. ambassador to Israel from December 2021 to July 2023.

Nides was a senior in 1979 at Duluth East High School, the same school Mr. Berman attended. Nides reached out to Mr. Berman with an audacious request: Could Mondale speak at the high school commencement? Somehow, Mr. Berman made it happen.

Mr. Berman helped Nides get an internship in Washington in 1980 and played a helping hand in Nides's career for decades. "Every time I got a new job, I'd call Mike and tell him it wouldn't have happened without him," Nides said in an interview. "He was a real Washington institution."

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**Contributions in Mike's memory may be made to:**

NATIONAL Diaper Bank Network  
Attn: Rachel Segaloff  
470 James Street  
Suite 007  
New Haven CT 06513  
<https://www.nationaldiaperbanknetwork.org/donate>

Zero to Three  
2445 M Street, NW  
Suite 600  
Washington, DC 20037  
(202) 638-1144  
<https://www.zerotothree.org/get-involved/give/ways-to-give/>

The Children's Inn at NIH  
7 West Drive  
Bethesda, MD 20814-1509  
(301) 496-5672  
<https://childrensinn.org/ways-to-give/>

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Mike worked on the latest Washington Watch up until December 21<sup>st</sup>. In his words...

### **This and That**

The other day someone asked me about my involvement with the Children's Inn at NIH. I have decided to answer the question in the Washington Watch as well as to the person who asked me.

In 1988, Congressman John Dingell invited me to his House office to request that I join the Board of a new organization called the Children's Inn. His spouse (now Congresswoman Debbie Dingell) along with two other congressional spouses, had gotten involved with the creation of a new organization, a living facility for the families of children at the National Institute of Health.

He asked me to make sure they did not violate any rules or laws in their efforts. I of course agreed to help and before I knew it, I was on the board and then treasurer of Friends of the Children's Inn at NIH. The goal of the new organization was to become a "place like home".

I ended up on the Board of the Children's Inn at NIH in 1990. A position in which I served until 2007. In 2007, I became a Trustee, a position which I held until 2016.

By 2022, 730 families had stayed at the Inn. Three to five days was the average short-term stay. 1 in 10 were long-term stays. 82 days was the average long-term stay.

Since 1990 more than 16,000 families have stayed at The Inn free of charge. Patients staying at The Inn have come from 50 states and 106 countries.

Patients staying at The Inn represented 87 different medical conditions and participated in studies at 12 of the 27 institutes and centers at NIH.

168 volunteers provided support equal to 4 full-time employees. Volunteers worked 7386 hours at the Inn.

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Vice President Harris has now cast 32 tie breaking votes, the most tiebreakers ever, the previous record holder was John Calhoun.

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The American public overwhelmingly supports more reporting from the Supreme Court.

- 75% demand a binding ethics code for justices.
- 68% advocate for term limits.
- 67% want televised oral arguments.
- 66% see the need for an age limit for Justices.

[Takeitback.org 11/29/23]

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### **Odds and Ends**

“Rizz” – TikTok slang for “charisma” is the Oxford English Dictionary’s word of the year. [AxiosPM 12/4/23]

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Football is, by far, the most popular thing on TV. Last year, according to Nielsen, 83 of the 100 most viewed telecasts were N.F.L, games, including 19 of the top 20. [NYT 12/3/23]

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The average price of a 12-ounce can of Diet Coke in a package of 12 was 34 cents in 2018, a figure that rose to 56 cents per can in October 2023, a 65% increase. The price of a Diet Coke at a restaurant hopped up from \$2.05 to \$2.77. This trend includes non-diet options. [Numlock News 11/30/23]

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It now requires \$119.27 to buy the same goods and services a family could afford with \$100 before the pandemic. [WP 11/29/23]

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### **2024 Presidential Election**

The following people have indicated or been commonly named as someone thinking about or planning to run for president in 2024. This list is a result of the mining of a variety of lists published in the last few months.

Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. will run as an independent in 2024.

For the Republican nomination, the following have announced their candidacies and are still in the race.

Donald Trump – Former President of the United States  
Nikki Haley – Former governor of South Carolina

Republicans who have said they are not running in 2024:

Rick Scott – U.S. Senator  
Josh Hawley – U.S. Senator Missouri  
Tom Cotton – U.S. Senator Arkansas  
Larry Hogan – former Governor of Maryland  
Mike Pompeo – Former Secretary of State  
Chris Sununu – Governor of New Hampshire

Republicans who have started to campaign and then failed to catch on or changed their minds:

Francis Suarez – Mayor of Miami  
Will Hurd – Former member of Congress Texas/CIA  
Larry Elder – Talk Show host  
Mike Pence – Former Vice President  
Tim Scott – U.S. Senator South Carolina  
Doug Burgum – Governor of North Dakota  
Ron DeSantis – Governor of Florida  
Vivek Ramaswamy – Entrepreneur and author  
Chris Christie – Former Governor of New Jersey  
Asa Hutchison – Former Governor of Arkansas

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**WW Recommends Books  
& Other Things**

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The Kingdom, the Power and the Glory:  
American Evangelicals in an age of Extremism  
Tim Alberta

The award-winning journalist and staff writer for *The Atlantic* follows up his *New York Times* bestseller *American Carnage* with this timely, rigorously reported, and

deeply personal examination of the divisions that threaten to destroy the American evangelical movement.

Evangelical Christians are perhaps the most polarizing—and least understood—people living in America today. In his seminal new book, *The Kingdom, the Power, and the Glory*, journalist Tim Alberta, himself a practicing Christian and the son of an evangelical pastor, paints an expansive and profoundly troubling portrait of the American evangelical movement. Through the eyes of televangelists and small-town preachers, celebrity revivalists and everyday churchgoers, Alberta tells the story of a faith cheapened by ephemeral fear, a promise corrupted by partisan subterfuge, and a reputation stained by perpetual scandal.

For millions of conservative Christians, America is their kingdom—a land set apart, a nation uniquely blessed, a people in special covenant with God. This love of country, however, has given way to right-wing nationalist fervor, a reckless blood-and-soil idolatry that trivializes the kingdom of Jesus Christ. Alberta retraces the arc of the modern evangelical movement, placing political and cultural inflection points in the context of church teachings and traditions, explaining how Donald Trump's presidency and the COVID-19 pandemic only accelerated historical trends that long pointed toward disaster. Reporting from half-empty sanctuaries and standing-room-only convention halls across the country, the author documents a growing fracture inside American Christianity and journeys with readers through this strange new environment in which loving your enemies is "woke" and owning the libs is the answer to WWJD.

Accessing the highest echelons of the American evangelical movement, Alberta investigates the ways in which conservative Christians have pursued, exercised, and often abused power in the name of securing this earthly kingdom. He highlights the battles evangelicals are fighting—and the weapons of their warfare—to demonstrate the disconnect from scripture: Contra the dictates of the New Testament, today's believers are struggling mightily against flesh and blood, eyes fixed on the here and now, desperate for a power that is frivolous and fleeting. Lingering at the intersection of real cultural displacement and perceived religious persecution, Alberta portrays a rapidly secularizing America that has come to distrust the evangelical church, and weaves together present-day narratives of individual pastors and their churches as they confront the twin challenges of lost status and diminished standing.

Sifting through the wreckage—pastors broken, congregations battered, believers losing their religion because of sex scandals and political schemes—Alberta asks:

If the American evangelical movement has ceased to glorify God, what *is* its purpose?

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### **Restaurants**

Unconventional Diner  
1207 9<sup>th</sup> Street NW  
Washington, DC 20001  
202-847-0122  
[hello@unconventional.com](mailto:hello@unconventional.com)

Debbie and I went to Unconventional diner with Simma and Ron on a Sunday morning.

The restaurant opens at 9:00 a.m. the menu is described as Brunch until 3:45 p.m.

Simma ordered Avocado Toast --Rustic Bread, Deviled Egg Salad, Toasted Pepitas, Micro Greens.

Ron ordered S'Eggs Sandwich\_– Scrambled Egg, Bacon, Cheez, Scallion, Sexy Sauce, Sesame Seed Bun, Fries.

Debbie ordered Corned-Beef Hash – Potato, Roasted Onion, Celery, Black Pepper Gravy, Two Sunny Eggs.

Mike ordered French Toast – Roasted Apple, Granola, Vanilla Ice Cream, Bacon.

I requested an espresso but was told by our server that the restaurant does not offer espresso.

Service is quick. The whole operation is quite efficient but a little noisy.

When fully occupied the restaurant seats up to 320 people.

The gender-neutral restroom (there may be a second room) is about 8 feet square. The floor is of gray, rough cement. The walls to about shoulder height are

covered with a series of white ceramic rectangular tiles. Above the tiles the wall is painted white. On the white walls are a series of painted lines at various angles.

In one corner that is a white ceramic floor-based commode with metal handles within range of a person using the commode. Directly across from the commode is a baby changing table.

Directly across from the commode is also a white square hanging washbasin topped by a large mirror. To the right is a waste receptacle. The door to the space is bright blue.

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Equinox

900 19<sup>th</sup> St. NW

202-331-8118

info@equinoxrestaurant.com

Hours:

Tuesday – Saturday 5 p.m. – 10 p.m.

Sunday: Brunch 10:30 a.m. – 2 p.m.

In November, Equinox opened at its new location on 19<sup>th</sup> Street NW in Washington, DC. The Todd Gray restaurant originally opened in 1999 on 18<sup>th</sup> Street NW.

Washington Watch has had hundreds of meals at Equinox starting the week that it opened 24 years ago. We also tried a new restaurant also on 19<sup>th</sup> Street NW named Casa Teresa, one month after it opened. We enjoyed the meal and will go again.

For the table:

Federal Risotto Fritters

First Course:

Spiced Butternut & Coconut Cream Soup – Aaron

Arugula & Endive Salad with Chablis Poached Pears – Mike

Main Course:

Bouillabaisse – Debbie

Cauliflower & Sweet Potato Curry – Ryan

Venison – Aaron

48-Hour slow-cooked Beef Short Rib – Mike

Sweets:

Special – Apple fritters

A Special Dish – April 11, 2009 – Mike

Imagine my delight, when arriving at Equinox one day, to find the following item on the menu.

“Michael Berman’s Favorite Vegetable Arrangement.”

Braised Mustard Greens-Fingerling Potatoes-Caramelized Cauliflower-Spaghetti Squash – (the vegetables may vary)

On a number of occasions, I had asked Todd Gray to fix me a vegetable plate as an entrée. This was the result. Try it.

*Mike*