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As the plot thickens: Kisses and kind words in the New Right camp

by Sean Piccoli; THE WASHINGTON TIMES

What better place for a subplot than a book party?

Beltway diva Arianna Huffington invited some of the capital's biggest wigs to her sprawling Northwest house-on-a-hill Thursday, ostensibly to help launch "Presidential Follies," a trove of campaign fables and foibles written by a pair of veteran pol-watchers.

The evening's main plot revolved around co-authors Ralph Z. Hallow, national political correspondent for The Washington Times, and Bradley S. O'Leary, publisher of the O'Leary Political Report, who busied themselves signing free copies that were served up, buffetlike, alongside silver trays of salmon and strawberries.

The characters in this conservative cast party arrived in force, greeted in a spacious foyer by co-hosts Mrs. Huffington, chairman of the Center for Effective Compassion, and Josette Shiner, managing editor of The Washington Times.

And for many the real draw - besides complimentary books, hors d'oeuvres and a chance to check out Chez Huffington - was the expected exchange of hellos between the host and one of her most distinguished guests, Senate Republican Leader Bob Dole.

Mr. Dole, the likely GOP presidential nominee, had been stung by Mrs. Huffington's razor plume. In a recent Wall Street Journal op-ed article, the feisty Greek-born activist scored the Dole campaign as a Grecian-formula disaster for the New Right. Nasty phone calls ensued between the Dole and Huffington camps, who looked to be scratching each other off their respective Christmas lists.

But Mr. Dole arrived on this chilly December night without a lump of coal and, looking cheerful, traded only kisses and kind words with his detractor.

"I think people often confuse the personal with the political," the serene, silk-wrapped hostess said later. "I have tremendous respect for the senator, and I think he is an extremely decent and admirable man. But the question of the party [presidential] nominee is a completely different issue."

Mr. Dole, for his part, simply looked pleased to be among friends, who crowded him in every room of the chalet-sized house, which is accommodating Pamela Harriman-sized parties these days.

"This is a gathering of the clan," said conservative direct-mail king Richard Viguerie.

Guests included Sen. Kay Bailey Hutchinson, Texas Republican; GOP insider Fred Malek; former Bush aide James Pinkerton; conservative activists David Keene and Grover Norquist; pundit Norman Ornstein; National Rifle Association executive Wayne LaPierre; and a few notable social folk, including Jayne Ikard, Ina Ginsburg, and Mandell and Mary Ourisman.

A tailored Michael Huffington held court by a fireplace large enough to dry all of Lamar Alexander's flannel shirts at once. His mother-in-law, Ellie Stassinopoulos, padded about comfortably in a gown, feeding guests her homemade specialty.

"Greek meatballs for Senator Dole," Mrs. Stassinopoulos said happily, tray in hand. "I told him when he gets into the White House, I want to cook for him."

In keeping with the evening's stated purpose, assorted scribblers, editors and bureau chiefs drank, talked and

noshed. Visiting media included the Chicago Tribune's Jim Warren, Susan Feeney of the Dallas Morning News, Jodie Allen (The Washington Post), Nina Burleigh (Time), David Gergen (U.S. News & World Report) and Ruth Shalit of the New Republic, who said she's working on a piece about former Sen. Bob Packwood for GQ.

"I'm here to see the house," one bureau chief joked.

Co-authors Mr. Hallow and Mr. O'Leary traded friendly jibes with Mr. Dole, who scowls in a caricature on the cover of "Presidential Follies," while a vaudevillian hook looms dangerously close to his head.

"Does this mean you're going to burn it?" Mr. Bradley asked the front-runner, about whom much is written.

"I'm not going to burn it until I read it," Mr. Dole replied.