

# *from The New Yorker*

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TALK OF THE TOWN

## **Road Hog Dept.**

**by Malcolm Gladwell**

The President came to Manhattan last Tuesday to speak at the United Nations, and, for the sake of his motorcade, the police closed down First Avenue between Thirty-fourth and Fifty-first Streets, and almost all the eastbound streets off Second Avenue in the Thirties and Forties--bringing life aboveground on the East Side of midtown to a halt.

In traffic terms, this was not as bad as the gridlock that occurred in June, when the President came to Times Square to see a special performance of "The Iceman Cometh" and the police barricaded the area around Forty-second Street and Eighth Avenue for most of the afternoon, and parts of Forty-seventh Street for the whole day. That particular trip immobilized the busiest and most crowded section of the nation's busiest and most crowded city at one of the busiest and most crowded times of the year, and created a truly historic traffic jam that rippled uptown, downtown, and

crosstown, and was still untangling itself long after the President flew home. But a gridlock purist would probably argue that the Times Square visit was *sui generis*, a once-in-a-Presidency kind of thing. And, besides, one imagines that most New Yorkers didn't mind giving up a few hours of their day in the cause of a beleaguered President's R. and R. (particularly given the parlous state of Washington, D.C., theatre).

Last week's U.N. visit is more typical and a bit more problematic. It seems that, once a month now, Mr. Clinton descends on the East Side, like a Chinese emperor, commanding all life surrounding him to cease. New Yorkers are famous for their impatience with the slightest inconvenience. Why on earth do they put up with this?

The conventional answer is that the President is the President and his safety is paramount. But there is nothing particularly safe

about the current system. Any terrorist with a missile launcher or a bomb can tell what route the President is taking by reading about the street closings in the morning papers, and can tell exactly when the President is coming by watching for the enormous parade of police motorcycles, limousines, and black Chevy Suburbans that make up his motorcade. If the President really wanted to be safe, he'd take advantage of the anonymity and spontaneity offered by the city; he'd slip into town by some circuitous route, in a hired black Lincoln with tinted windows. Then he'd be invisible. But that's just it: when the President drags his motorcade into Manhattan, he's not using an urban model of safety; he's using a suburban model. In the suburbs, you cannot lose yourself in a crowd of black Lincolns or disappear in a maze of side streets. In the suburbs, safety lies in surrounding yourself with police escorts and

bulletproof S.U.V.s for the dash down the freeway.

The tension between things urban and things suburban is a fixture of the race debate, of arguments over taxes and schools and transportation policy. But in some ways it matters most on this very practical and prosaic level, because when suburban ideas (about safety or, for that matter, about anything) are imported into the city they have the capacity to make the everyday lives of lots of people acutely miserable.

On the same day last week that the President visited the U.N., for example, it rained in New York, and on the sidewalks of the city, here and there, were people carrying what are known in the accessories business as golf umbrellas: those huge umbrellas that range anywhere from three to almost five feet in diameter. A golf umbrella is, like the Presidential motorcade, a quintessentially suburban notion: it is supposed to be large enough to cover you and your clubs on the golf course, or to keep you and your children dry as you run across the mall parking lot to your station wagon. It is not meant for crowded city streets, and if you had followed all those people with golf umbrellas through midtown last Tuesday you

would have seen their umbrellas getting tangled up with other people's umbrellas. You would have seen annoyed pedestrians stepping sharply out of the way to avoid being impaled by giant umbrella ribs, and, as a result, bumping into other people with umbrellas, until whole stretches of sidewalk--like the East Side in the grip of a White House visit--had turned into a sorry, congealed mess.

Mr. Clinton, as both a golfer and a soon-to-be suburbanite, presumably has a few golf umbrellas of his own. One only hopes that when he comes into Manhattan as a private citizen he remembers where he is and, this time, at least, leaves that bit of the suburbs at home.

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