GETTING WORK DONE

How the Trump Era Has Wreaked Havoc on Washington's Plastic Surgery Schedules

The Senate's delayed August recess has backlogged a lot of things—including plastic surgeon and dermatologist schedules.

by KENZIE BRYANT

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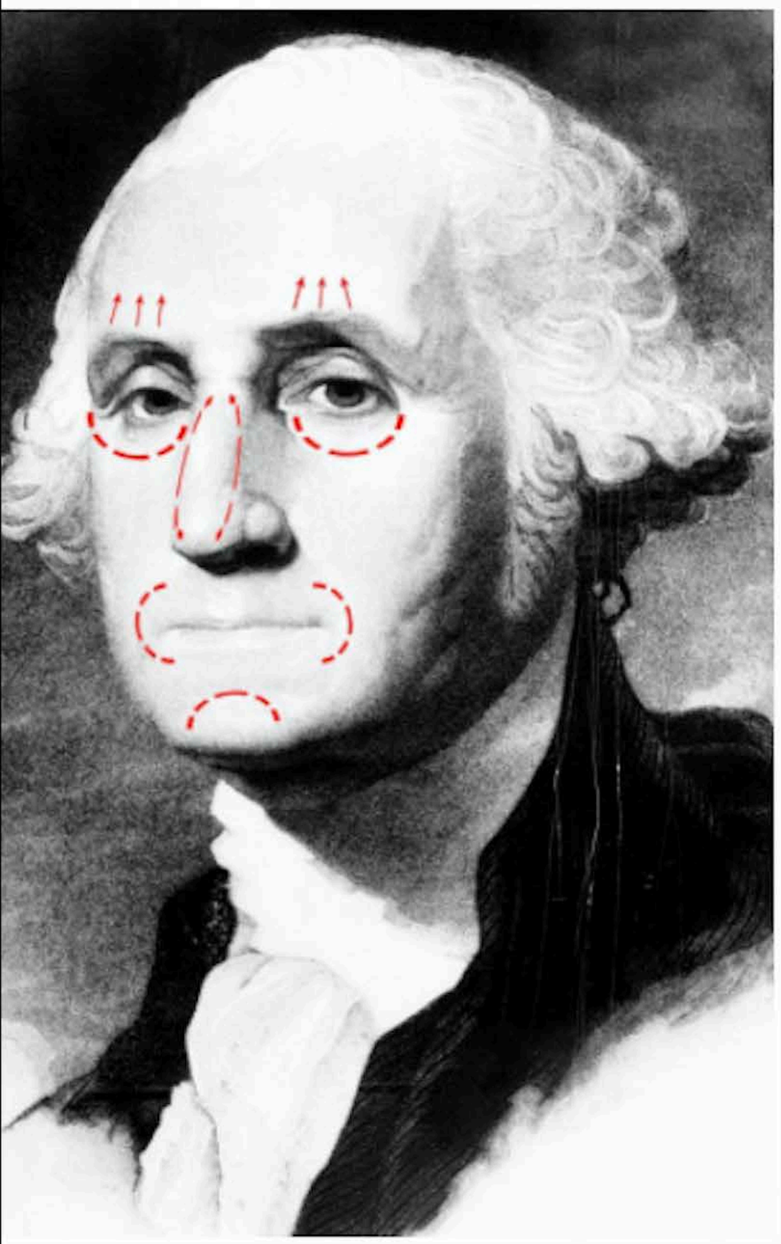

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August in D.C. is usually vacation season for Congress. It's also campaign season for some, and town hall season and fund-raising season, too. But less obviously (should all go according to plan), it's usually nip-and-tuck season for politicians looking to get a little surgical enhancement away from the 24-7 news cycle. D.C.-based plastic surgeon **Ariel Rad** told *Vanity Fair* on a recent phone call, "We try to be flexible with the political ebbs and flows in order to accommodate high-ranking officials and people who really don't have a lot of time to take off. This August is definitely one of those times."

The days ahead of the recess have long been a busy time for the plastic surgeons and dermatologists who help their congressional clients save face. Though not all aesthetic procedures require a ton of downtime, the heavy lifts, so to speak, can require an

extended recovery period. What better time to schedule the work than when you have a breather from the Hill's eyes? That's been the thinking of many high-profile officials over the years—until now, the year of our Lord two thousand and seventeen, when Senate Majority Leader **Mitch McConnell,** in the heat of fighting the ultimately losing battle to repeal the Affordable Care Act, announced that he's postponing the August recess to mid-month (the first time the political body has done so since 1994). And it's not just senators who've been affected. On Thursday, House Majority Leader **Kevin McCarthy** warned members to "remain flexible in their travel plans over the next few days."

So while senators took working lunches and whipped votes as the G.O.P. tried, unsuccessfully, to torpedo Obamacare, it was back to the appointment books for D.C.'s plastic surgeons and dermatologists. "Since the August recess has been delayed by this health-care bill in particular, I have a sort of a backlog of patients who have been waiting for the dates to become much more clear so that they can schedule," Dr. Rad explained. "Now the *end* of August is particularly busy with congresspeople."

Summer 2017 has not been a total wash for the city's cosmetic M.D.s, though. Each of the four doctors *V.F.* spoke to agreed the accelerated clip of the news cycle has been good for business. **Dr. Michael Somenek**, a facial plastic surgeon whose practice is split nearly evenly between invasive and non-invasive procedures, noticed that the new administration has given rise to expedited procedures.

"We've had to reschedule a few little things for people because they're obviously not getting their recess in the timely manner that they anticipated," Dr. Somenek noted. "That being said, over the past six to eight months, we've really seen a surge in the non-surgical skin-tightening realm."

A biggie procedure for him these days is tightening baggy skin with a minimally invasive device called FaceTite. The results aren't permanent (they have a three-to-six-month expiration date), but turnaround is quick, a boon for folks who are caught in a news cycle that just won't quit. The average price for the procedure is close to $4,000, according to RealSelf.

It stands to reason that minimally and non-invasive procedures—ones that may need upkeep but don't require a lot of time away from packed work agendas—have generally been the order of the day in the District. The pace of politics requires local surgeons to be nimble schedulers, recess delay or no recess delay.

Dr. Rad, along with his wife, dermatologist **Noëlle Sherber,** form Sherber + Rad, the D.M.V. area's one-stop shop for all your face- and body-sculpting needs. Their practice is convenient for policymakers (plus their partners, staffers, lobbyists, and other government employees whose schedules revolve around the Hill). It's located on 15th Street, a 15-minute drive from Congress, and it specializes in quick procedures with a light touch.

Among the operations Dr. Rad offers, popular ones include under-eye bag removal, called a blepharoplasty ("not a very elegant description," he conceded) and "targeted fat transfers," where he uses the patient's own fat as a filler in facial hollows. Dr. Rad has whittled recovery time down to

as little as 24 hours in some cases, depending on bruising that can result. Patients may add on procedures if they have more time to work with, such as necklifts and facelifts, which tend to require a little over a week to recoup. Mostly, though, elected leaders just want to avoid an obvious before-and-after transformation like the plague, and upgrade their faces one piece at a time.

"For surgery, they just want to be highly specific about how much downtime they can expect and when they can get back to work . . . then it's like we're figuring out what surgeries to provide based on those constraints," he said.

When patients aren't ready to go all in on permanent results, or don't have an extra-long weekend to sacrifice to Dr. Rad's scalpel, they stick with Dr. Sherber for lasers and injectables. The dawdling recess may be a rare example of a calendar in flux, but up-to-the-minute appointments are standard procedure in the city. One never knows when the Sunday-

morning shows are going to call or when CNN needs you on air at eight.

Dr. Sherber uses laser treatments and fillers for "maintenance" and to get her clients "H.D. camera-ready." The goal is to even skin tone and reduce the appearance of deep shadows, not a complete overhaul of the face. "In politics, everything hinges on being an effective communicator, and you never want to do something that could be distracting or garner unwanted attention. It would take them off message," she explained. D.C.'s policymakers are all conservatives when it comes to their nips and tucks, you could say. Dr. Sherber insists that the men and women of Congress just want to "look like they have better lighting than everyone else," both on television and in person.

Dr. Terrence Keaney, a Northern Virginia-based dermatologist, said that the handful of clients who waited for the recess to book procedures that require a longer recovery period had to reschedule. Many others, however, have actually taken this D.C. staycation as an opportunity to get in some

extra work. This, even before McCarthy put House members on notice.

"I've had more appointments than I realized when that delay was announced because the representatives and their people were still around. It's always a balance," Keaney said.

Dr. Keaney treats a higher-than-average number of men (Somenek, too, specializes in "the male aesthetic," and Sherber estimates that the percentage of men she treats is double the national average, nearly 20 percent compared to the estimated nine percent).

"If you can imagine, most elected officials tend to be older white men; that's just the state of our politics right now," Dr. Keaney said. Men may come in for rosacea or other skin disorders that keep them looking less than crisp on camera, and then explore other options. Some hear about procedures from friends on the private side who have retired from public service (or failed to get re-elected), became lobbyists, and dedicated parts of their new-and-improved paychecks to appearance tweaks.

Dr. Keaney specializes in hair loss and has both surgical and non-invasive solutions for it, but he also does plenty of work on the jawline and neck. “We’re in D.C. We have to wear a suit and tie, and that double chin just sort of hangs over your tie and is very obvious,” he said.

Those necks get a dose of CoolSculpting, which freezes the fat, or Kybella, a drug approved by the F.D.A. in 2015, which dissolves fat. The latter costs up to $1,500 per session and can require as many as six sessions, meaning it may cost more than liposuction, which can run between $2,000 and $5,000. Such is the price of a speedier, more private option.

Which brings us to a final pillar of D.C. cosmetic surgery: privacy. As Dr. Somenek said, “You don’t find many people here who are proudly screaming down the street that they just got a facelift.” (Though, if you play your cards right, the president of the United States will do that for you.)

He offers pre- and post-workday appointments and completes checkout

in the back entrance of his office so sensitive patients won't be spotted. Dr. Keaney, too, will arrange an escort and private checkout, but he says only bigger procedures and the most high-profile of high-profile clients warrant a fuss.

Dr. Sherber and Dr. Rad take privacy concessions leaps and bounds further, designing their 15th Street surgery oasis as a wall-to-wall fortress. Besides the requisite back entrance, which is always ready and willing to welcome security detail, they built out "private cabanas" that are soundproof. High-ranking officials can theoretically take calls before and after procedures. Appointments are staggered so there's no awkward or revealing run-ins. The office has no public waiting room, so there's no risk of the surreptitious camera-phone shot. A storefront that sells skin-care products and high-end makeup is in its place—useful for plausible deniability. "Often our high-profile clientele just walk right in and they just go directly to the back, and it could be because they're there to just get a facial (we bring facialists in from L.A., from all over), and it's not obvious why they are there to see us," Sherber said.

Privacy must be more important than ever, right? Health-care repeal is dead for now—or maybe it's something more like the living dead, always threatening to come back, like a vampire (which, incidentally, has great bone structure). For a moment, though, the optics of paying thousands for cosmetic procedures while debating whether 20 million Americans should have basic health care, could look ugly. And not only that, but Washington is rife with characters in a macabre political soap opera that all the world is hooked on. Its players are more recognizable than ever. But four out of four doctors agree that privacy is *always* important, regardless of which bills are on the table or even, really, whether they're treating a politician. "I think [health care and cosmetic surgery] are two separate entities because one's more of an elective fee-for-service situation. Their insurance isn't covering any of this," Dr. Somenek said.

Dr. Keaney added, "It's not like if **Brad Pitt** walked into my office, everyone would turn and be like, 'Holy sh*t, there's Brad Pitt.' There's

some anonymity with a lot of these officials, unless they're like **Paul Ryan,** or those people who are in the media every day."

It doesn't mean this particular patient population is worry-free, however. "For better or worse, [politicians] require a little more hand-holding because their presence in the public eye is so much more elevated," Dr. Somenek added. "And I get it. If I was in that situation I would need much more reassurance that I'm doing the right thing, that I'm going to still look like myself, that my peers are not going to think that I look crazy, and that I'm still going to be taken seriously."