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Bleak House: Frustration on Capitol Hill

Overshadowed by the Senate, overpowered by the executive branch, and embarrassed by its own misdeeds, the House of Representatives suffers from a loss of pride and prestige. A new wave of reform-minded Congressmen and its pugnacious new speaker are determined to restore some of House's former glory. But privately many members worry that they are destined to be the errand boys of government.

by Sanford J. Ungar

Jerry Ambro caught on early. He was elected to the House of Representatives from a traditionally Republican area on Long Island in 1974. He became a leader among the seventy-six brash new Democratic congressmen who arrived in Washington the Following January, determined to remodel and Lionize the institution. They deposed three committee chairmen, pushed through a number of significant procedural changes, and established themselves as a force to be reckoned with. It was a heady, exhilarating experience.

Before many months had passed, however, Ambro was confronted with a typical problem: the Army Corps of Engineers was planning to dump 250,000 cubic yards of dredged spoil containing heavy metals into Long Island Sound. Although the dumping area was technically in Connecticut waters, Ambro's constituents were alarmed that the polluted material would drift in their direction, and they thought their congressman should be able to do something about it. Ambro tried. He buttonholed his subcommittee chairman on the House Public Works Committee, contacted the regional administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency, denounced the Corps' plan as "sheer lunacy," issued press statements, wrote letters, and generally fulminated. But he got nowhere.

One morning in May 1975, Ambro was wandering down a corridor in the Rayburn House Office Building when he heard a deep southern voice boom out from behind him: "Jerome, come in here." It was Congressman Robert Jones, a fourteenth-termer from Alabama, then the chairman of Public Works, inviting Ambro into his office for a chat and a drink. (Ambro is no prude, but he remembers being surprised to find himself drinking sixteen-ounce cans of beer with his chairman before 10 A.M.) Jones wanted to reminisce about his days working on the Long Island Railroad during World War II, and Ambro was glad to listen.

The potentate from Alabama had taken a shine to the newcomer from New York on his committee. "What can we do for you up there, Jerome?" he asked. "Do you need a new highway?" Ambro, making every effort to be tactful, explained that the building or expansion of highways was not exactly the way to please his people these days. "Mr. Chairman," he said sheepishly, "I have another problem, one that I don't think you could do anything about." He explained the Corps' project. Jones reached for the phone and called Major General J. W. Morris, director of civil works for the Corps of Engineers. "General, I think you've made a terrible mistake," said the chairman, "and I've got a bright young congressman right here in my office who will explain why." Jones shoved the receiver at the dumbfounded Ambro, who sputtered out his objections. Returning to the phone, the chairman suggested that the next day would be an appropriate time for the Corps to deliver a letter of termination on the experiment to Ambro's office. Three men in uniform appeared there early the next morning to do exactly that. "Ambro defeating the Army on big dumping in Sound" read one of the headlines back in his district.

That unscheduled session in Jones's office became something of a watershed in Ambro's congressional career. "The ways you think of doing things when you come down here—raising multifaceted arguments, using rational logic—aren't always the best ways," he has realized. Now in his second term, he still talks like a rebel, but he knows better how to use his subcommittee assignments for maximum political advantage, how to protect the interests of Long Island, how to stage-manage just enough publicity on an issue to get public hearings launched, and where to go for help when he needs it. "My idealism has not eroded," Ambro insists with a grin; "I'm just learning how to get things done." And that, say the sages and the old-timers, is how it has always been.

Ambro may have made his peace with the House and its folkways, but not everyone is so lucky. In fact, beneath the rich

leather and the marble, beyond the House's ornate facade and its grandiloquent discourse, lies a troubled institution uncertain about its role. It is torn between respect for its stodgy traditions and the impulse to reform its way to public esteem. Some 58 percent of its members have arrived since 1970, during a period of great upheaval in the nation's political and social life, and the House has become the scene of intense generational conflict. The senior members love what they used to have, but they see both the fun and the glory slipping away. The newer congressmen got where they are by running against the House: now they must sustain themselves by continuing the attack from within. Virtually everyone in the House feels overworked and under-appreciated, albeit well-paid and handsomely maintained. Congressmen seem doomed to be caricatured as ignoble political animals condemned to a lower status than their brethren in the Senate, utterly unable to compete with the policy and image machines of the executive branch.

There is much talk in its corridors and committee rooms of a new House, a modern political body that is reformed and automated, participatory and democratic with a small "d." But the sad reality is a shadow the House's former self, a chaotic and self-conscious place where people who pretend to be statesmen actually spend most of their time running errands, doing little services, and making small adjustments to decisions rendered elsewhere. How well each member does those demeaning jobs generally determines how long he or she will be permitted to stay and pretend to do others.

The framers of the Constitution had something grand in mind when they designed the House. They wrote the legislative branch into the federal charter as the first branch of government, and they intended the House to be the first and more important part of that branch, the only unit in the new system that would be chosen from the very start by direct popular election. As George Mason of Virginia told the Constitutional Convention in 1787, the House would be "the grand depository of the democratic principles of the Government." Whereas members the Senate would be selected by the state legislatures (as they were until 1913), and would therefore protect the interests of the states, the representatives, according to Mason, "should sympathize with their constituents, should think as they think and feel as they feel, and...for these purposes should even be residents among them." To reinforce the point, the entire membership of the House would stand for election every two years (a compromise between those who favored a one-year term and those who favored three). No one would be—and no one ever has been appointed to the House.

In the early decades of the Republic, the Senate drifted, unsure of itself and its role. Some states in fact, used their Senate seats as consolation prizes for defeated candidates for the House. Little wonder. Most of the action was concentrated in the House: all revenue bills originated there; it had the sole power of impeachment; and when no presidential candidate had a clear majority in the Electoral College, the House would choose the winner. It picked Thomas Jefferson over Aaron Burr in 1801 and John Quincy Adams over Andrew Jackson in 1825. For that reason and others, Adams loved the House. Two years after his term as President ended, he was elected congressman by the people of Quincy, Massachusetts ("My election as President of the United States was not half so gratifying to my inmost soul," he said), and Adams stayed in that job for seventeen years, finally collapsing on the House floor and dying in the speaker's office in 1848. Another statesman who tried the Senate, but later moved on and up to the House, was Henry Clay of Kentucky.

But it was the Senate that grew more gracefully. Expanding neatly with two new members for each new state, it appeared the more stable of the two bodies of the national legislature; its power to approve treaties and confirm executive and judicial appointments became more significant. The House developed clumsily. The addition of new delegations and shifts of Population within the country meant abrupt changes in the distribution of power. (Whereas New England had 26 percent of the House seats in the First Congress and 13 percent of them in 1840, today it has barely 6 percent. California alone now has nearly 10 percent, 43 of the 435 seats in the House.) The frontier ethic seemed to prevail in what was increasingly known as the "lower body." House committee hearings were occasionally the scene of brawls, and members did not hesitate to wander into the House chamber when they were inebriated—a practice that is sometimes reenacted even now.

The House became notorious in this century as a gerontocracy, a place where nothing mattered so much as length of service and obedience to unwritten rules of behavior. "If you want to get along, go along" was the motto of Sam Rayburn, the crusty Texas Democrat who was speaker between 1940 and 1961 (except for four years when the Republicans controlled the House), a man who drank bourbon and branch water and smoked stogies and was married to the House. New members were expected to be quiet and respectful of their elders. As Rayburn often said, "Anyone could be elected once by accident. Beginning with the second term, it's worth paying attention." Only after being re-elected were the chosen representatives of the people permitted to start their long hard climb and to curry favor with the mean-minded committee chairmen.

Ask almost any member, and he will tell you that while glamour resides in the Senate, expertise still lives in the House. In the average House-Senate conference on legislation, the senators usually bring along aides who whisper advice into their ears, while the congressmen get by on their own wits. Yet, when the conferees emerge into the hall, the waiting newsmen and television cameras will probably converge on a senator for an explanation of the issues, while more knowledgeable members of the House wander off unrecognized. Such incidents help explain why, in contrast to the practice of 150 years ago, congressmen now want to graduate to the Senate. Senators, according to the public perception nursed along by the press with the help of the Senate, are the giants of the legislative branch; congressmen, by contrast, are seen as sleazy politicians who run home most weekends to give boring speeches and who never do anything without thinking about its impact on their next campaign. It is enough to make anyone bitter.

The House lost much of its old pride and found new cause for bitterness and embarrassment during the 1960s and early 1970s. It was a time of weak, ineffectual speakers, John McCormack and Carl Albert. They were no match—even less so than the leaders of the Senate—for an executive branch, led by Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon, that was hauling away legislative discretion by the carload. The old system had broken down, and for a time there was nothing new to substitute.

During the past few years the House has embarked on a feverish binge of reform and self-improvement. Together with the Senate, it passed a war powers act to curb presidential adventurism, and it launched a congressional budget process that could lead to recovery of an authority that has steadily ebbed since the 1930s. Yet the most dramatic changes on the House side of the Capitol are procedural ones; if Sam Rayburn could return today, he would scarcely recognize the place.

Gone are the old "teller votes," which permitted congressmen to walk down the aisles and be counted without having their names recorded, and thereby to be on opposite sides of the same issue in consecutive votes. On almost every matter, however minute, there is now an electronic roll call. When the yeas and nays are demanded and the bells signaling a roll call sounded, the lights are dimmed and a scoreboard appears above the press gallery with the names of all 435 members. The congressmen have fifteen minutes to get to the chamber, insert individually coded plastic cards into any of forty-four terminals, and vote by pushing a green, red, or amber (for "present") button. Each vote is immediately recorded on the scoreboard next to the member's name and added to a cumulative tally that is kept on two other electronic boards at either side of the room. Since March 15, these events and all other proceedings in the House chamber, have been picked up by fixed-position television cameras and beamed into certain House offices—an experiment that will probably lead to some form of routine broadcast of legislative deliberations.

(Automation, for all of its advantages, may have deprived the House of some of its soul. As one freshman Democratic congresswoman, Barbara Mikulski of Maryland, complains, "It makes you feel so abstractly removed from the impact of your decisions. You don't even have to answer to your name...You could just as easily vote to take food out of the mouth of starving people as anything else.")

Recent reforms have broken the back of the rigid seniority system. Under rules adopted by the Democratic Caucus in 1973, for example, committee chairmen no longer inherit their jobs and keep them indefinitely, but are generally required to submit to a secret ballot of the caucus every two years. And most chairmen now have less authority. The "Subcommittee Bill of Rights," also passed in 1973, stipulates that within each committee, all of the Democratic members negotiate and vote to assign subcommittee chairmanships and memberships. Every committee must have written rules and establish at least four legislative subcommittees. No congressman may chair more than one legislative subcommittee of the House, so there are many more smaller-time chairmen. Some arrive in their esteemed positions well ahead of the timetable. The chairmanship of the Cotton Subcommittee of the House Agriculture Committee, for example, used to be reserved for members with two years or more of service; David Bowen, Democrat of Mississippi, attained it in his second term.

Certain power centers have crumbled. Democratic members of the Ways and Means Committee no longer parcel out assignments of all other House Democrats. That falls instead to a Democratic Steering and Policy Committee, composed of the elected leadership, members chosen by regional caucuses, and others appointed by the speaker. (He must be careful to see that the committee includes a satisfactory quota of blacks, women, and newly elected congressmen.) The Rules Committee, a collective traffic cop that sets the ground rules for floor debate on every bill, is much weaker now, because it is named anew each Congress by the speaker. Wayne Hays of Ohio, who turned the House Administration Committee into his domain of personal, arbitrary power, is gone, the victim of a mistress who talked to the press. So is Wilbur Mills of Arkansas, the longtime king of Ways and Means, the victim of alcohol.

The congressional world is no longer so private and impenetrable, immune from outside inspection. "Our reputations are up there like dartboards, where everybody can spit tobacco juice at them," says Majority Leader Jim Wright of the unprecedented degree of scrutiny given Congress by the press and the public, and even by itself. Indeed, when congressmen go off on overseas junkets, submit inflated expense vouchers for travel home, or use their positions to advance their own private fortunes, they are far more likely than before to be noticed—and sometimes punished.

One of the first institutions to suffer in the era of reform has been the political party. Old-fashioned party discipline is almost nonexistent among the Democrats, although they hold more than two thirds of the seats in the House. Their elaborate whip system is used more to predict than to prevent losses for the majority. "When they call," says one young member, "they almost never suggest how I should vote, let alone apply any pressure. They just want to know what I'm planning to do." Old coalitions and traditional obligations are no longer reliable, as organized labor learned last spring, when many people it had helped elect voted against its number-one priority legislation, a bill to permit a single striking union to shut down an entire construction site.

In place of strong parties and committees new caucuses and subcaucuses sprout like desert flowers. There is a Rural Caucus, a Northwest-Midwest Economic Advancement Coalition, and a New England Caucus; a Black Caucus and a Hispanic one; a Congressional Clearinghouse on Women's Rights and One on "the Future." There is now even an Italian Caucus, whose chairman, Frank Annunzio of Chicago, has been heard to say, "We don't do anything very controversial; we just get together to eat." And a Blue Collar Caucus, organized by second-term Congressman Edward Beard of Rhode Island, a former house painter.

The oldest, and probably most influential, is the Democratic Study Group, which, since the late 1950s, has attempted to push Democratic leaders in a more liberal direction. The most successful bipartisan endeavor is the Environmental Study Conference, which publishes its own newsletter to keep congressmen and senators informed on environmental issues. Being in the House pays rather well now, $57,500 a year, and brings with it an array of perquisites. The average congressman's basic upkeep costs the tax-payer about $365,000 a year, and the annual bill for operation of the entire Congress, including the Senate and support facilities like the Library of Congress and the Government Printing Office, is over a billion dollars. At the same time, the House—dragging the Senate along behind it, kicking and screaming—has adopted a tough new code of ethics, limiting a member's outside earned income (as distinct from dividends and royalties) to 15 percent of his congressional salary, expanding the financial disclosure requirements, and banning office slush funds.

The congressman's control over his last private domain, his personal office staff, is now threatened, too. Some members urge that the same antidiscrimination rules written into most federal programs be applied to Congress.

The arrival in the House of such a large band of young rebels and doubters in 1975 accentuated the changes in the institution. For one thing, the freshmen elected after Nixon's resignation were "new politicians" who represented a cultural shock to their elders. They went home to their districts at least every other weekend, like most members, but when they got there, they tended to climb into vans they called "mobile district offices." As they toured the countryside, they took their constituents' blood pressure and asked their advice. At the same time, the "Class of '74" acted and talked as if they were themselves largely responsible for the spirit of reform in the House (although some of the changes had been urged years earlier by the Democratic Study Group and were well under way before the 1974 election). They seemed to feel as if they had an exclusive mandate to help the House find its new destiny. Listen to Timothy Wirth, a Democrat elected from a Republican district in Colorado, describing their role: "Our perceptions of what is going on in the country are different [from those of other generations in Congress]. JFK was our first vote, and we went through Vietnam. The others came of age during World War II and revered Ike. We are accustomed to television....We're part of the supermarket age, the quick fix [of social problems], and the fast shot. Our guys understand all that....In a way, we're like Jimmy Carter. We are improbable members of Congress, just as he's an improbable President."

These Democratic "sophomores," as they are now known (all but two were re-elected in 1976), do stand out like a cadre of provocateurs. Among them are an unusual number of young antipoliticians—people with doctorates instead of the usual law degrees, clergymen, and teachers. Most were profoundly affected by the American involvement in Vietnam and the dissent and cynicism surrounding it. Many come from marginal districts, and they owe much of their success to the denouement of the Watergate scandals and the disgrace of the Republican party. They wanted early notice and larger-than-customary pieces of the action. "It was clear from the start that we didn't just want to be backbenchers," says Norman Mineta of California, one of the organizers of the class, who is already being mentioned as a possible candidate, someday,

for speaker.

From the start, the Class of '74 established its own whip system to rival that of the leadership. Violating the old protocol, members of the class challenged their committee chairmen, sometimes pushing their own amendments into legislation. The class issued position papers and, when dissatisfied with what the established Democratic powers had to say on major issues, some new members drew up their own proposals; in the last months of the 1976 session, they even offered their own bold suggestions for revised House ethical standards. They became a great irritant—even a threat—both to traditionalists and to more senior reformers. "They act as if they invented social activism," mutters one older member.

The class's ideological unity withered in 1976 (Their ratings by the Americans for Democratic Action, the standard index of congressional liberalism, dropped during their second year in Washington, as they contemplated a return engagement before the voters in their marginal districts.) Nonetheless, they stayed together as a militant force on procedural and ethical issues, and this year they decided to keep their class unit intact as a formal organization, even to the point of hiring staff to work for them. When Carter met with the senior Democratic leaders of both houses in Georgia shortly after the election last November, a committee of the sophomores demanded and obtained their own simultaneous session with the President elect's political staff. They wanted to make clear to Carter, as one participant later said, that "you can't just pick up the phone anymore and call seven important people on the Hill to arrange things."

After still another forty-seven new Democrats were elected to the House for the first time last fall, the sophomores went out of their way to arrange seminars and orientation for the arriving freshmen. They urged the Class of '76 to follow their example by asserting themselves, though this year's freshmen resisted and went their own way. Their class had more veterans of state legislatures, local government, and the established political organizations; they needed less in the way of baptism. Ask anyone in the House leadership in an unguarded moment, and he will probably say that with all due respect to the dedicated sophomores, the new freshmen are "more mature."

The results of the ferment and reform are, by any definition, mixed. The majority leader, Jim Wright of Texas—a persuasive man who looks as if he were bred for his bushy, multicolored eyebrows—speaks with passion about the improvements. Today's House, insists Wright, as he gazes up at the enormous crystal chandelier in his office near the chamber, "is a far more responsive institution. It is addressing the big problems...biting the unpalatable bullets...screwing up its courage." Equally enthusiastic is David Obey, a scholarly, laconic congressman from Wisconsin, who, when he first came to Washington eight years ago, probably would not have agreed with Wright about much beyond the weather. Now thirty-eight, chairman of the Commission on Administrative Review, and a member of a new elite—the reform establishment—Obey says that recent changes have made the House "a more pleasant place to work, far more accountable....We are close now to an ideal balance between seniority, strong leadership, and a dispersion of the interesting things to do."

But what of the revamped committee system? Unaccountable tyrants have been replaced as committee chairmen with slightly less senior members who are well-intentioned but ineffective, and in some cases embarrassingly incompetent. On the whole, the lineup is not encouraging. Harold "Bizz" Johnson of California, now in charge of Public Works, has been known to read the same paragraph over and over again when giving public speeches. Robert N. C. Nix of Pennsylvania, who sleeps through many meetings of the Post Office and Civil Service Committee, was vulnerable to the reformers last time around, but his chairmanship was spared when his colleagues from the Black Caucus Intervened on his behalf. Clement Zablocki of Wisconsin, a strident but inarticulate anticommunist of the old school, has failed to make the International Relations Committee a meaningful force. Carl Perkins of Kentucky is readily manipulated by more forceful members of the Education and Labor Committee. Illness has prevented Melvin Price of Illinois, the latest chairman of the Armed Services Committee, from performing his duties. Harley Staggers of West Virginia, chairman of Interstate and Foreign Commerce, had his last hurrah when he tried unsuccessfully to have the CBS television network held in contempt for refusing to turn over unused film from a documentary about the Pentagon; he has since been stripped of control over his own investigations subcommittee.

John Flynt of Georgia has used the resources of the Committee on Standards of Official Conduct on trivial investigations rather than on such issues as conflicts of interest or illegal campaign contributions. James J. Delaney of New York, at seventy-six, is the youngest chairman of the Rules Committee in years. He does not whistle or hum his way through committee sessions as did his predecessor, Ray Madden of Indiana; but Delaney is out of touch with the current legislative agenda and most of his discretion has been surrendered to the speaker. Henry Gonzalez of Texas, in a recent orgy of public dispute with Chief Counsel Richard Sprague of the Select Committee to Investigate the Kennedy and King

Assassinations, made a spectacle of himself and the House. (Gonzalez called Sprague a "rattlesnake" and a "scoundrel." In the end, both Gonzalez and Sprague resigned.)

This is the heyday of the subcommittees, but they have been used more to promote the ambitions and inflate the egos of young and mid-career congressmen than to help the House organize its business in a rational manner. Often the chairmen are so fresh and inexperienced in their areas of alleged expertise that they fall easy prey to agency heads and sub-Cabinet chiefs in the executive branch. Certain committees juggle subcommittee jurisdictions and memberships so whimsically that the result is mass confusion. After this year's redistribution of tasks on the Public Works Committee, some members are still not clear which areas of energy policy are their concern. That is why, when Carter issued his energy program in April, a special ad hoc committee had to be created just to parcel out pieces of the package to the appropriate subcommittees.

Organizational reform collides with a constant fact of life: the average congressman is confronted with a staggering decision overload. On a single day last spring, the House had to decide whether to provide continuing appropriations for fiscal year 1977 for the federal revenue-sharing program; whether to fund a program to relieve youth unemployment for fiscal year 1978; whether to provide for inspection by the Department of Agriculture of domesticated rabbits slaughtered for human food; whether to restrict the leasing of farms with flue-cured tobacco marketing quotas; and whether to approve President Carter's government reorganization plan. Obviously, even with staff help, no member can be well-informed on all of these and the thousands of other matters that come before him every year.

In practical political terms, this may not make any difference anyway, because most congressmen are judged not on the basis of their stand on issues but on how well they perform as ombudsmen and interveners between the people and their complex government. David Stockman, an earnest thirty-year-old Republican from Benton Harbor, Michigan, who was elected to Congress from a safe district last November, has already made his adjustment to that elemental truth. During his first several months in office, he solved a number of problems for people at home—getting fuel oil allocation quotas revised so that a jobber would have enough to keep his customers happy and stay in business through the winter; having money restored for a senior citizens program; intervening with other agencies to correct petty injustices. Stockman does not happen to believe that he should be spending so much of his time and resources on such "tertiary problems." But that is the system, and he will participate as readily as the next congressman. "They [the people affected by his interventions with the executive branch] will probably be willing to vote for me forever, regardless of what my position is on the B-1 bomber or the Cruise missile," he says.

Presiding over the new House is a walking, talking symbol of the old, Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill, Jr. of Massachusetts.

Tip O'Neill came to Congress in 1952 as the successor to John F. Kennedy (who was then moving on to the Senate) in a district that covers working class neighborhoods in Boston, the adjoining city of Cambridge, and wealthy suburbs. Although his district includes Harvard University, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, and Boston University, O'Neill wouldn't be mistaken for an academic. He is a classic Boston Irish politician, a large, lumbering man who is more at home and considerably more effective with storytelling and political horse trading than with position papers and policy debate. He was early to oppose the Vietnam War, early to recognize—and encourage—the strong sentiment for Nixon's impeachment, and early to support procedural reform; he is also a charter member of the House Democratic establishment, which constitutes a shrinking percentage of the caucus.

He acquired real power for the first time in 1971, when he was named majority whip in return for influential support of the candidacy of another old-timer, Hale Boggs of Louisiana, for majority leader. He might never have moved up the leadership escalator to become speaker (as he did this year on Albert's retirement), were it not for the disappearance of Boggs in an Alaskan plane crash in 1972. There is irony in O'Neill's current position. He took over in January at a moment when the speakership was being infused with new power and authority by the reform movement, as an alternative to the committee chairmen. Yet since he is already sixty-four, he will probably be speaker for a maximum of two terms, four years, hardly long enough to become one of titans in the history of the House.

O'Neill basks in the frequent characterizations him as a tough, firm speaker, the toughest since Rayburn, but one who is more concerned about and responsive to his constituency within the House, knows how to read the trends and adapt to them. "I'm a progressive liberal and a tough partisan," he says confidently "The fellas know that....They know I've done my homework, and they know I know the votes." The members also know that they can count on O'Neill for help in rough situations, but that he may extract a price in return. This year, for example, the speaker ran interference on the

congressional pay raise of $12,900. Recommended by a federal advisory commission, the raise would automatically take effect unless it was voted down. O'Neill realized that many members wanted to take the money and thought they deserved it, but that they would feel compelled for political reasons to vote against it. He simply kept it off the House calendar, thus winning praise behind the scenes for his exemplary "leadership." When pressed by some members who really did want a vote on the pay raise, he would shake his head and reply with mock sincerity, "You know, the power of the speaker isn't what it used to be." But then came O'Neill's price: adoption of a stringent ethics code proposed by Obey's commission, including provisions that some congressmen considered to be draconian limitations on outside income. When a few members of the Rules Committee began to balk publicly, he invited the entire group to a private breakfast in his office. They talked of their plans to give the ethics measure an "open rule," which would permit amendments and revision—and certain weakening—on the House floor. O'Neill gave them time to let off steam, one by one, and then he returned the favor, twitting each member in turn. "I carried the ball on the pay raise," he said, and you're not going to double-cross me now." They didn't. He threatened, in fact, that any member who did resist would find himself in the next Congress on the District of Columbia Committee, a low-prestige assignment. So the Rules Committee decided, as one member put it, to "swallow the whole watermelon," unanimously approving the ethics package and sending it to the floor without provision for amendment.

The Speaker is also one of the House's most inveterate junketeers, known for leading annual bipartisan swings around the world when Congress is out of session, trips with not even an ostensible purpose. On one trip, O'Neill's group traveled by Air Force jet to Israel, Greece, Spain, and Egypt, where it spent $1500 for a banquet at the Cairo Sheraton and another $4000 of taxpayers' money for a tour of the pyramids, lunch in Luxor, and a grand dinner on a barge in the Nile. The Speaker embarrassed the younger Democrats when he spoke up this year for the right of Robert L. F. Sikes of Florida to retain his chairmanship of the Appropriations Subcommittee on Military Construction even though Sikes has been reprimanded by the House for conflict of interest and inadequate disclosure in his annual financial statement. (The caucus disagreed with O'Neill and voted overwhelmingly to strip Sikes of the job.)

A good sport, O'Neill knows how to exchange jokes with the reporters who cover his daily briefing in the speaker's office before the House goes into session. But at those meetings and in other public appearances, O'Neill's age and his slowing pace are painfully obvious. His white-going-yellow hair droops forward, and his ample chin separates from the bones in his face. When the House and Senate convene in the House chamber for a presidential or other address to a joint session of Congress, O'Neill has been seen to doze off under the hot television lights and slump before the cameras, while Vice President Walter Mondale sits alert at his side.

O'Neill's clashes with the aggressive sophomores are the stuff of growing legends. He has welcomed delegations from that class, converging on his office to confront him on some issue, with the question, "What do you sons-of-bitches want now?" As Thomas Foley of Washington, the new chairman of the Democratic Caucus, puts it, both sides in the struggle must recognize their differences as more of a cultural clash than a genuine policy dispute. "These people have to realize," says Foley, "that Tip's not going to grow a beard, come to work on a bicycle, or go backpacking with them in the Adirondacks. He's going to smoke cigars, not pot."

Because no other member of the Democratic leadership is an alternative or a challenger to his authority O'Neill is in a strong position. Jim Wright is one of the last great spellbinding orators in the House and cuts a much more stylish, modern figure than O'Neill. But Wright grew up in the conservative bloc of House Democrats and is still identified with the old pork barrel tradition of the Public Works Committee. Furthermore, he won his job by only one vote over Philip Burton of California, an abrasive power-broker who has stepped on every one of O'Neill's toes at some point in the last few years. Wright did not help his prospects by keeping his wife on the Public Works Committee payroll for years and by his careless (though not illegal) intermingling of leftover campaign money with his personal finances. John Brademas of Indiana, the new majority whip, is a compelling speaker and a hail-fellow-well-met, yet he is perceived as the darling of the ADA, the liberal's liberal, an articulate spokesman for Great Society spending programs that are increasingly coming into question. Foley is a protege of O'Neill's, and could be taken for a younger, trimmer version of the Speaker. But he does not seem eager to build his stewardship of the Democratic Caucus into a policy-making position.

The Republicans do not offer much of an alternative in the House. Their number has dwindled to 144. Their leader is John Rhodes of Arizona, a stocky stolid, colorless figure who initiates few policy proposals. Rhodes and O'Neill enjoy a notable disdain for each other. Last year the minority leader published a book, The Futile System, in which he lambasted O'Neill for unrelenting partisanship and gave vent to the minority's frustrations over its inability to influence legislation in the House in any but a nay-saying way. With the more than twenty scandals that have hit House Democrats—specially the

ongoing investigation of influence-peddling by South Korea—the Republicans should be in a strong position to portray themselves as a clean-government option. But they have other problems to worry over, including bitter dissent within their own sparse ranks. Their right wing is growing in size and influence, thereby crippling the prospects of moderates like John Anderson of Illinois, chairman of the House Republican Conference. (There is even talk by some Republicans of switching to the Democratic party before the next Section.) Anderson is regarded as one of the most able and articulate members of Congress, but he has a voting record that is anathema to most other congressmen in his party. Some colleagues interpret his having gone along on some of O'Neill's aimless junkets as evidence that he has given up trying to be an effective force, and there are rumors that he will retire. Rhodes, a conservative himself, is content to sit back and let the contending forces within the GOP contingent battle it out. More liberal Republicans do not challenge him, for fear they will end up with a leader who is further to the right.

Beyond all of its own internal problems, the House—and for that matter, the Senate—must cope anew with the executive branch, in this case the Carter White House, which is highly skilled at public relations. To be sure, the new President and his assistant for legislative liaison, Frank Moore, made a number of serious mistakes in their initial dealings with Capitol Hill, but in the long run they are bound to prevail over a more amorphous and ill-organized institution like Congress.

If congressmen are disappointed by the lack of deference paid them from the other end of Pennsylvania Avenue, they should know that the worst is yet to come. Carter does not happen to believe the mythology, still so popular on the House side of the Capitol, that because they are never more than two years away from the last or the next election, congressmen are closer to the people than anyone else in the American political system. Having waged a successful anti-Washington campaign, the President feels that the designation of people's spokesman belongs more justifiably to him than to Congress. He thinks that he has a better sense than congressmen or senators of the current attitudes and desires of the average citizen. "Jimmy probably has less regard for the opinions of the speaker of the House than those of the chairman of the National Governors Conference," says one political aide to the President. "This may come as a blow to them on the Hill; but remember, having been a governor, he relates to them much better than to congressmen who have spent all this time in Washington." On several early occasions, including a fight last spring over the defense budget, the Carter Administration showed its disregard for the established Democratic congressional leadership by dealing directly with other congressmen with whom the White House agreed on budget questions. Such tactics infuriated O'Neill and other House leaders, who were purporting to speak for the President on the same issues. If Carter identifies with any element on Capitol Hill, it is probably the persistently bothersome House sophomores, who share his distrust for the way things have been.

To keep the President's advantage clear when the standoff with Congress becomes tough, Carter's political operatives are building his own rival power base. Without fanfare, the Democratic National Committee is planning to use local Carter supporters across the country to create support for such controversial programs as the energy-conservation tax plan. Senators with statewide constituencies, may be able to weather the storm, but House members, with an average 460,000 constituents concentrated in a small geographic area, may prove to be particularly vulnerable to such a strategy, especially during the election year of 1978. They may have even worse problems of image and organization ahead of them.

Today the House is not the grand depository of the democratic principles of the nation. It not a calm, deliberate council of wise men and women, nor even a forum where the passions and needs of the people are reliably dealt with. It is at best a collection of well-intentioned people who have fallen back on a service role while making a great deal of noise about larger issues. Most federal programs originate in the executive branch, are developed and revised there or in the independent agencies, and then are interpreted and adapted by the courts. The House is fortunate when it has a chance to make a few changes and suggestions along the way.

Except for the pay and the perquisites, the role of the congressman is simply not as important as the Constitution and some congressmen would have the public believe. As John Anderson says, "The psychic income of the job is far less than it once was."

Some, including Anderson, insist that the House is not even trying anymore—that if it ever did, it is no longer speaking with a clear voice on matters of national policy. As he says, "The House less and less addresses itself to the great issues of policy. Everybody's got a little subcommittee, and everything is terribly fragmented. We've become a body of tinkerers."

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