



*MND Guest Commentaries & News*

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## A Giant Has Left Us

by Timothy D. Naegele

Senator Bill is dead—may God rest his soul.

As 2005 came to a close, William Proxmire of Wisconsin was mourned and saluted as one of the finest lawmakers and public servants to ever grace Capitol Hill. Unlike the often mean-spirited and partisan hacks of today, he brought class to the word senator; and “polarization” was not in his vocabulary. While few Americans noted his passing or even know his name today, he was a role model for fairness and decency and intellectual curiosity and the best that resides in American politics.

Those of us who worked in his shadow and had the privilege and honor of knowing him will miss him greatly. The likes of Bill Proxmire seldom pass through Washington—bringing to mind the honesty and decency of Abe Lincoln. I came to Capitol Hill as a young lawyer in 1969, straight out of serving two years in the Army at the Pentagon during the Vietnam War. After pounding the pavement for almost a month, I landed a job as one of several counsel to the Senate Banking Committee, where I first met “Senator Bill.”

There were other prominent senators on the committee, chaired by John Sparkman of Alabama, who had been Adlai Stevenson’s running mate against Dwight Eisenhower and Richard Nixon in 1952. Two future presidential candidates were there, Fritz Mondale of Minnesota who was Jimmy Carter’s vice president and ran against Ronald Reagan for the presidency in 1984; and Ed Muskie, Hubert Humphrey’s running mate against Nixon in 1968, and later a presidential candidate in his own right in 1972.

California’s Alan Cranston was there too, as well as Ed Brooke of Massachusetts whom I staffed, but I probably learned more about the decency of American politics from Proxmire than anyone else. Even

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though he was a Democrat, he worked with legislators on both sides of the aisle, bringing civility and forging bipartisan alliances that got things done. He was at the opposite end of the spectrum from the partisan fire-eaters of today, who seem never to have met a member of the other party whom they truly like or respect.

Proxmire worked hard to craft fair and useful legislation, instead of simply putting laws on the books to complicate the lives of his fellow Americans because of the endless red tape that ensues, with few if any meaningful public policy objectives being achieved as a result of the effort. With respect to lobbyists and campaign financing reforms, he was beholden to no one; and he earned the name “Senator Bill” because of the regular personalized messages that he wrote to his constituents who first elected him to the senate in 1957, to fill the vacancy caused by the death of Joseph R. McCarthy.

He was reelected five times until he decided not to seek reelection in 1988, often spending a pittance on his campaigns, which consisted mostly of money for stamps and envelopes. In his last two campaigns of 1976 and 1982, it is reported that he refused to take any campaign contributions and spent less than \$200 on each, out of his own pocket, to cover the costs of filing for reelection. When he succeeded Sparkman as chairman of the Senate Banking Committee, both he and his chief of staff—Ken McLean—continued their bipartisan approach to politics, making things happen instead of earning the animosity of opponents on Capitol Hill.

He was a brilliant man and an extraordinary U.S. Senator, who left his mark with the “Golden Fleece Awards,” which identified wasteful spending of the taxpayers’ money by the Pentagon and elsewhere in government. He was a consumer advocate in the finest sense of that term, with few if any peers among his colleagues; and he pushed the “Truth In Lending Act” and other important pieces of legislation through the Congress. He championed the “little guy” on Capitol Hill, which is overrun by high-paid lobbyists representing every conceivable type of special interest.

Wisconsin Senator Russ Feingold has noted: "Senator Proxmire leaves behind an unparalleled legacy as a defender of the American taxpayer and one of the hardest working senators in U.S. history." Those of us who saw him work will attest to that fact, even though he seemed to do it effortlessly and with grace. He was surrounded by some of the best and brightest staff members on Capitol Hill, and it was reflected in the sheer volume of their work and what they accomplished.

He has been called a gadfly, a maverick, a loner, a workaholic and a penny-pinching populist. Perhaps his colleague from Wisconsin, Congressman David Obey, said it best: “He hated government waste, and he hated abuse of power.” Unfortunately, both are rampant today in too many sectors of government, from Cabinet departments to local bureaucrats. However, Proxmire fought courageously—and sometimes

alone, if that was necessary—to right the wrongs of government.

He was a disciplined athlete and fitness buff who jogged to work; and he had a twinkle in his eyes and a warm, genuine smile when he talked or presided over his many senate responsibilities, including his post as the ranking minority member on the Senate Appropriations Committee. There was nothing false or phony about him, which may be why his constituents seemed to love him. Also, there was nothing “packaged” about him; he was not the product of pollsters or teams of slick advisers; and he was not a demagogue like so many of today’s politicians.

I came to Capitol Hill as a Democrat, and later became a Republican and then an Independent. In many ways, Proxmire was the quintessential independent who marched to a different drummer. He was a man’s man; a kind and decent human being; a remarkable politician who got things done instead of simply pontificating or demagoging; and a role model for those of us who believe in good and honest bipartisan government, devoid of waste and abuse of power. Americans who knew him will truly miss him, and reflect on how they walked with a great man—a giant. Sadly, that will never be said of most politicians of both political parties today.

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