

CONGRESSIONAL LETTERS

BY HILTON BUTLER

I AM a man of letters. My letters, however, are all purely congressional. As private secretary to a member of Congress I have taken thousands of them in dictation, written other thousands myself, and read an unknown number from constituents, cranks, Otto Kahn and the countless American societies whose chief purpose it is to write letters to anybody who will read them.

Congressional letters are the most carefully written documents in the American language. Unfortunately, the care lavished on them is not æsthetic, nor even grammatical, but only political. When the words of a congressman are intended for his colleagues and the *Congressional Record* only, he may speak with an abandon as reckless as the raising of his hands to high Heaven, but when they are intended for home consumption, he ponders every word carefully, and speaks to his secretary slowly, thoughtfully, and with a hand to his ear to receive the echo from the open spaces. The sole purpose of congressional letters is to please those who receive them, and so their chief constituent is what is called, in the New York dialect, schmoos. Of course, there are a few congressmen who boast of their frankness to their constituents and believe that saying that two and two make four is a virtue, but such daring spirits do not commonly retain their seats as long as their more diplomatic and saponaceous colleagues.

A heavy correspondence is the delight of a congressman's heart, and to him a proof of his strength with the people of his district. He not only answers the mail that pours in upon him spontaneously, but en-

courages all literate voters in his fold to write to him. He sends out farmers' bulletin lists and form letters inviting replies. He reads the district newspapers carefully for deaths, births and accidents. When a constituent dies, a letter of consolation, full of Christian solace, goes to the widow. If it is an accident, a letter of "deep sympathy for your tragic misfortune" is franked to the victim. If the family disaster is the birth of a child, the congressman dispatches some government bulletins on infant care, together with a form letter of congratulations and oftentimes of advice to the parents. One of the most chaste examples of this last letter is that used by the Hon. Clifton A. Woodrum, LL.B., of the sixth Virginia district:

CONGRESS OF THE UNITED STATES
House of Representatives
Washington, D. C.

My dear Sir and Madam: Having learned of the birth of your baby, and naturally knowing the anxious days before you during its infancy, it has occurred to me that you may find some guidance and valuable suggestions in the two government publications which I am enclosing herewith.

The very slight trouble I have been to in this matter is but a practical expression of my congratulations upon the happy event in your home.

With all good wishes, I am

Sincerely yours,
[Signed] Clifton A. Woodrum.

The Hon. Ross A. Collins, A.B., LL.B., of the fifth Mississippi district, is apparently somewhat more exultant over the birth of a child in his bailiwick than is Congressman Woodrum, for he writes a much longer letter and says that "only by a general improvement in the upbuilding of the young can our country wax righteously strong." Mr. Collins is the congressman who, in a campaign for reelection

in 1922, accused a woman opponent of being wedded to a man with Negro blood in his veins. In Mississippi that's a serious charge. He was reëlected, but his hardest fight was to win a \$100,000 damage suit for slander a few months later. He is, however, a tender, loving congressman at bottom, for he includes this paragraph in his form letter:

I learn with much pleasure that you have a little baby in your home and I congratulate you upon this good fortune. I hope that the health and general condition of the baby is and will continue good. I have always believed that child care and conservation is more to be looked after than any other activity affecting national progress.

In Oklahoma's sixth congressional district the parents of the baby are congratulated by the Hon. Elmer Thomas, A.B., of Medicine Park, who says in the opening paragraph of his letter that he has been informed by the Department of Health of Oklahoma that "the stork recently visited your home and I hasten to extend congratulations." Just what arrangement Congressman Thomas has with the Oklahoma Department of Health whereby he receives the addresses of the new-born in his district is not revealed. Other congressmen have to depend upon the vigilant reporters of their local newspapers for their information.

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When the biennial time for renomination comes round the mail of congressmen increases several hundred per cent and the scores of law students on the Senate and House post-office pay-rolls have to put aside their books for a while and earn at least a part of their salaries. The majority and minority party service-rooms are kept busy day and night turning out thousands of form letters to be franked to the various congressional districts. Pre-primary letters usually recount in detail the activities in Congress of the member seeking renomination. They often contain an indorsement of his services from the party leader, who invariably "views with alarm" even the

thought that the highly valuable services of so virtuous and valuable a member may be "lost to the party, to Congress and to the country."

Reading any of these pre-primary congressional letters, one must inevitably conclude that the writer is the most important figure in Congress and one of the mighty men of the nation. Occasionally a congressman may discuss briefly and modestly the legislation in which he has had active part, but the majority of the letters sent out are made up wholly of lofty boasting. Last Spring, the Hon. John N. Tillman, LL.D., of the third Arkansas district, who will also have a seat in the coming Sixty-ninth Congress, sent out thousands of form letters to his constituents in which he recounted his whole personal history and achievements, defended himself against "words as foul as a sewer," and finished by declaring that "I love to listen to the music of our song birds and to look on the crystal flow of our rippling streams." This letter, unfortunately, caused snickers even on Capitol Hill, and particularly the sentence: "I have brought many honors and no dishonor to Washington county, my home." Dr. Tillman said that he began his career as a country school-teacher in Benton county, Arkansas, and that he "never wronged her." Later he besought God to bless the mothers of Arkansas and suggested that everybody "strike once more with a pure white ballot the liquor curse, the mortal enemy of peace and order, the despoiler that shadows the face of children, the demon that has dug more graves and sent more souls unshriven to Judgment than all the pestilences that have wasted life since the morning stars first sang together." I quote some more strophes from this eloquent letter:

My neighbors and friends for months have been compelled to listen to words about me as foul as a sewer, to blackguardism, to petty peanut stuff reflecting the littleness of the opposition, to stale slanders thirty years of age, until they are sick of such aspersions and will resent it all by an increased majority for me.

Our farms and orchards and homes are good to look upon. I love to listen to the music of our

song birds. I love to look on the crystal flow of our rippling streams, but above all I respect the manly men and womanly women of this favored land. I am depending on these manly men, who think as I think, who love the things I love. I appeal to the women, who believe that untiring, faithful and honest service should have its reward. And lastly I appeal to the mothers. God bless them! God could not be everywhere, so He made mothers.

One thousand dollars reward, "legally collectible under the law," is offered by the Hon. Thomas D. Schall, A.B., LL.B., the learned representative of Minnesota's tenth district, to anyone who can point out where he has failed to champion "the side of the ordinary folks." His thousand-dollar offer is written on the backs of farmers' bulletin lists, which he broadcasts to his constituents. His excuse for not using the regular congressional letter-head, which he can also get for nothing, is that "my economic sense protests this good blank paper going to waste." The Hon. Mr. Schall says he believes "the consensus of opinion is the best guide a public man can have." Here is his letter in full:

My dear Neighbor: I wish you to have the benefit of these bulletins. Check any dozen. Return to me with your full name and address signed at the bottom of this page.

My economic sense protests this good blank paper going to waste and I'm taking the opportunity of sending you a hello and a wish that I might hear from my friends. I want to know how and what you're thinking on the public questions in which I represent you. The consensus of opinion is the best guide a public man can have. In the conflict of such opinion lies the true secret of American success, endurance and strength. I have served you ten years in the lower house of Congress, giving you the best I have with the light God gives me to see it. I came to Congress free from any entangling alliances, as the representative of the plain people, and by them I have been kept here, with an ever increasing majority. So long as I am here, I shall continue to be free.

I have not space to state my record in detail, but I am still offering \$1,000 reward, sufficient amount to warrant looking it up, for anyone who can point out in my ten years' service where I have once voted against the interests of the farmer, the soldier, or the cause of labor, or have failed to champion the side of the ordinary folks. The above offer is legally collectible under the law and should be sufficient answer to the agents of the great selfish interests who irk at my occupancy of high office.

Let me hear from you, whether it's kicks, commendation or advice.

Two full pages, single-spaced, are required by Senator William J. Harris, of Georgia, a son-in-law of Fighting Joe Wheeler, "to call attention to some of the things I have done in spite of the fact that the Republicans have majorities in Congress." He goes on:

I am next to the ranking Democrat on the Committee on Appropriations, the most important. No Senator has worked harder or accomplished more for the farmers. No Senator has taken a deeper interest in the matter of immigration.

"I believe in economy," avers the Senator, but in the same paragraph is his boast that "the government spends more money in Georgia than in any other southern State." Then he says that he was "the chief factor" in legislation

appropriating \$125,000 for market news service so that the farmers of our section could find, without expense, markets for their products; appropriating \$90,000 additional for boll-weevil work; \$50,000 in developing cheaper processes for the manufacture of calcium arsenate and other poisons; \$15,000 for the United States Geological Survey to determine the various sources of arsenate ores for making calcium arsenate; \$25,000 for experiments in poison gases to kill the boll-weevil; appropriating \$5,000 additional for tobacco investigations by the Georgia Coastal Plain Experiment Station at Tifton; \$10,000 for study of storing pecans and canning syrup in bonded Federal warehouses under my amendment broadening the warehouse law; \$50,000 for study of more effective and profitable utilization of the rapidly increasing production of peaches in Georgia through packing and canning; appropriating \$10,000 for branch office of the United States Foreign and Domestic Commerce Bureau in Atlanta to find foreign markets for merchandise and agricultural products.

Terms suggestive of poker are used in a letter of the Hon. Bill Green Lowrey, A.M., LL.D., to his Mississippi constituents. "What I want from you is facts to call with," says he. He writes chiefly of the boll-weevil and taxes:

We all know that times are unusually hard. The weather has been ruinous; taxes are worse. Our European markets are cut off; and the boll-weevil is the concentrated fury of it all. The government can not control the weather, but it certainly has something to do with the other three. It is time for us to call on it mightily to be up and doing. What I want from you is facts to call with. How much has the weevil hurt you? Have you and your neighbors made enough to pay taxes? Can

you buy farm and life necessities at reasonable prices? Have you anything to suggest as to what the government might do to help the situation? I should like to have a letter from every citizen in the district. I might not have time to answer them all, but every one of them would be helpful in my efforts to represent you here.

Even widows of Civil War veterans are not immune from congressional letters. The Hon. John C. Box, of the second Texas district, has a special and very affable form for Confederate widows that goes as follows:

My dear Madam: I write you as the honored widow of an ex-Confederate soldier. I greet you as my honored constituent and wish for you health, comfort and peace of mind. We of the generation of your sons and daughters will continue to honor you while our lives shall last. As your servant I am trying to sustain the best standards of patriotic service to the people and the nation. I crave your approval and the opportunity to serve you. Please write me freely. With assurances of reverence and esteem, I remain

Your servant,
John C. Box.

False reports regarding the bonus, current in rural Kentucky, are dispelled in the Hon. J. M. Robsion's letter to his fellow Kentuckians. He rushes to its defense as follows:

Dear Veteran and Friend: In going over the district I find that my opposition is putting out many false reports in regard to the bonus. The bonus does not in any way, shape and manner affect the pension or compensation of disabled veterans and it has nothing to do with the war risk insurance. The adjusted compensation law means that the soldiers did not get enough pay per day during the war and this simply gives them more pay for their service during the war.

You are being told that the bonus law is a gold brick. This propaganda is being put out by those who are now and have always been against the soldier's bonus. The American Legion and other soldier organizations are backing the present bonus law to the limit. They urged all of us who were friends to the soldiers and favored the soldier's bonus to vote for it. It was the very best bill that we could get through and I know that every veteran and his friends will resent the attack that is being made on me by my enemies. They are fighting me because I voted for you veterans and your dependents. I know you will appreciate what we have done for you. I am sorry that it could not be more.

Something for the children is offered by the adroit and Hon. W. A. Ayres, of the eighth Kansas district. Look what the

kiddies may get from this congressional Santa Claus:

When I was in Congress before, I wrote a letter to the various teachers that if they had any boys or girls in the school who would write me, I would send them garden and flower seeds. I received a number of requests from all over the district, but I cannot do that this year as there are no more garden and flower seeds, the last Congress having cut out the appropriation for all seeds. However, I can procure some bulletins that I think would be of interest to both boys and girls. For instance:

Bird Houses and How to Build Them.
Some Common Birds Useful to the Farmer.
School Lunches.
Removal of Stains from Clothing.
Illustrated Poultry Primer.
Rabbit Raising.
Poison Ivy and Poison Sumac.
Growing Annual Flowering Plants.
Diseases of Watermelons.

Now, if anyone of your students are interested in any of these booklets and will write to me themselves, I certainly will be very glad to send them such as they may desire, and also will be very glad to hear from any of them as I am very much interested in school children and their work; and let me say further, if their teacher desires any particular government publication, I hope they will not hesitate to write me also.

III

Whenever he accomplishes anything or can get credit for some accomplishment, the congressman immediately corners the newspaper correspondents on Capitol Hill. But the gentlemen of the press frequently differ with him as to what constitutes news, and when the decision is unfavorable to him he resorts to the form letter. The advantages of the form letter over the interview are numerous. It is not subject to space limitations, to a copy reader's eliminations, or to the tricks of the make-up man. Its circulation is limited only by the number of people in the district. It is delivered by the post-office direct to the constituent at no cost to the congressman. And if the job of multigraphing it is a good one it has the appearance of a genuine personal letter to the untrained rustic eye.

Here is a form letter sent out by the Hon. George W. Johnson, of the fourth West Virginia district, to tobacco growers in his district. The letter was written after an

effort was made in Congress to increase the tax on certain manufactured forms of tobacco. Tobacco growers from many States hurried to Washington to protest, and in the course of their efforts saw and enlisted the aid of many members. Here is Congressman Johnson's version of the matter:

Last Winter when the tax bill was before Congress an effort was made to increase the tax 25 per centum on certain finished tobacco articles. A committee of gentlemen, headed by Hon. Elliot Northcutt of Huntington, West Virginia, along with others from West Virginia, Virginia, North Carolina and Kentucky, came to Washington and got in touch with me and other representatives in Congress for the purpose of defeating this additional tax from being levied upon our growers, as above indicated. In this connection Mr. Northcutt, who knew of our activities, wrote me as follows:

"I did not have an opportunity to thank you personally for your work for the tobacco people on my recent visit to Washington, but they are loud in their praise of what you did for them, and I want to add my thanks. It was great work."

If the form letter does not appeal to the congressman, he may establish a private news bureau and be his own reporter. In a weekly "news letter" sent out from Washington, a portion of which is printed below, there are five items and four of them concern the Hon. E. B. Howard, of the first Oklahoma district. This weekly letter is sent out by what is known as "The Congressional News Bureau, House Office Building, Washington, D. C.," but the entire personnel of this bureau is the secretary to an Oklahoma member. Here is a part of one of the weekly releases containing Washington "news":

WASHINGTON WEEKLY NEWS LETTER
[From Congressional News Bureau.]

Washington, D. C.—Congressman E. B. Howard this week appeared before the U. S. Veterans Bureau. The Central Office Board of Appeals of the Bureau rejected Congressman Howard's appeal for relief for Everette H. Washburn, of Wetumka, whereupon the Oklahoma solon appealed the case to Director Frank T. Hines.

The so-called "Howard amendment" to the Good Roads Act has received favorable action in the committee.

Vocational training students have voiced their approval of the policy of providing placement

training for them during the Summer vacation months. This policy was suggested to Director Hines by Congressman Howard.

Frequently included in the form letter sent out by a congressman is a speech he has made on one of the subjects about which he is at liberty to talk in Congress. The congressional franking privilege is as good for a pound as it is for an ounce and the congressman rarely misses an opportunity to include a speech with his letter. When voting time nears, many congressmen avail themselves of the convenient "extension of remarks" method to incorporate in a never delivered but faithfully printed speech something about their records in Congress. Such matter from the *Congressional Record* is reprinted by the Government Printing Office in convenient mailable form at a small cost to the member. An example is the following excerpt from the *Congressional Record* entitled: "Six Months and Three Days in Congress: Extension of Remarks of Hon. Elton Watkins of Oregon in the House of Representatives":

MR. WATKINS: Mr. Speaker, there is an unwritten rule of Congress to the effect that new members should be seen and not heard. From the manner in which congressmen absent themselves one would conclude that another rule obtains to the effect that old members should be neither seen nor heard. Both are wrong, and that member who subscribes to them is false to his constituency and unfit to be a congressman. During my campaign for Congress my enemies stated that I would not be able to accomplish anything, that I would be unknown and unheard of in Congress; and that I would not get a single committee assignment of any value; whereas I promised results and advocated, among other things, selective and restrictive immigration, adjusted compensation, tax reduction, child-labor prohibition, hospitalization for all veterans, increase and readjustment of pay for postal employes, and adequate pensions for veterans of the Civil War, Indian wars and the Spanish-American War. I have labored night and day in the interests of the people of my district, my State, and my country and without question have fulfilled my promises and kept the trust given me. I challenge anyone to show wherein I voted contrary to the interests of the people of my district; not only that, but I challenge anyone to show wherein I voted wrong.

Loyalty to party is a congressional virtue, if there be any congressional virtue. The unwritten law is that a member of either of the two major parties must stand

by his organization at all costs. Senator Pat Harrison of Mississippi is a model of such extreme partisanship. But where will the Democratic congressman, the Hon. J. Earl Major, stand when his Democratic colleagues read the form letter he sent out from his Illinois home at Hillsboro, begging for "a half dozen Republican votes in each precinct"? Here it is:

My dear Friend: Your name has been furnished me as one who might be willing to take some active interest in my campaign as a candidate for reelection to Congress from this twenty-first district.

I earnestly endeavored to so serve you during the first session of which I was a member as to merit a continuation of the confidence placed in me at the last election.

A half dozen Republican votes in each precinct in the district, in addition to the normal Democratic vote, would make my reelection certain. I know you have some Republican relatives, neighbors or friends whom you could no doubt interest in my candidacy, and may I not depend upon you to at least take this much interest in my behalf?

"I have succeeded in getting a few extra bulletins from the Department of Agriculture and will send them to farmers on the rural routes as long as they last," writes the Hon. Clarence Cannon, once the parliamentarian of the House, to his Missouri constituents. No doubt the picture Mr. Cannon wishes to convey is that he struggled valiantly day and night with the department and finally brought back in his bloody hands enough bulletins to supply the farmers on the rural routes. But the truth is that farmers' bulletins are provided by the thousands for congressional distribution. The Division of Publications of the Department of Agriculture allots 20,000 bulletins yearly to each congressman, and the public demand for them is so small that bulletin letters are necessary in order to dispose of the allotments, which are cumulative. Among the thousands of publications a congressman has at his disposal are two thick, well-bound and profusely illustrated books: "Diseases of Cattle" and "Diseases of the Horse." A New York city congressman has but little use for them, and so he asks his southern and western

colleagues to take them in exchange for something more in demand in his district. When there is a stock of these books available, a form "disease book" letter goes out from the southern and western members, offering copies as a part of their service to their constituents.

For five years the principal subject of congressional letters has been the compensation claims of ex-service men. These claims have poured into the offices of congressmen by the thousands, and are only now beginning to slacken. The claimants seem to think that a congressman can be of material assistance to them in getting compensation. The truth is that he can do little more than write a placatory letter to the claimant and request the Veterans Bureau to expedite action in his case. Almost all the claimants—and they number more than a million—have at one time or another written to some congressman or senator about their claims, according to the records of the Veterans Bureau. The bureau cannot discourage this practice for political reasons; the congressman himself encourages it, for it means contact with the ex-service men of his district. In the Veterans Bureau hospitals there are thousands of claimants who have considerable time on their hands and too much Y. M. C. A. stationery nearby. They write to their congressmen about everything, from hospital conditions to national legislation, but they are chiefly concerned with their own needs and desires. These boys must be answered promptly, for if they are not given the best of attention, it is the congressional fear that they will write home to tell their relatives and friends that Congressman So-and-So pays little or no attention to them in their "hour of need."

The work of hundreds of government bureaus is designed to aid a congressman in building up his correspondence. For instance, all applications for government fish, to plant in streams, must bear the indorsement of a member of Congress. This means a letter from the constituent asking his congressman's endorsement of the ap-

plication. It gives the congressman an opportunity to write his constituent that he "will personally present the application to the Commissioner of Fisheries" and "see that action thereon is expedited." If there has ever been an instance wherein the endorsement of a congressman was refused, it is not recorded.

Letters from the congressman's constituents naturally receive preferred attention. Letters from outside often outnumber the district letters, but they frequently go unanswered. The labor unions, Wayne B. Wheeler, Otto Kahn, the Methodist Board of Morals and the *Literary Digest* lead in the number of letters sent to congressmen. The labor unions write about matters affecting their interest and warn the congressman

that his votes are being watched and that local unions in his district are being advised of his activities for or against union labor. Wayne B. Wheeler writes frequently on fine stationery. Otto Kahn never fails to send congressmen nicely bound, autographed copies of his innumerable public addresses. The Methodist Board of Morals addresses a letter to Congress on almost every subject that arises in which there is the slightest possibility of danger to the morals of "generations yet unborn." The *Literary Digest* polls congressmen regularly on various questions and always incloses a stamped envelope for reply. So frequent have been the polls of late that the *Digest* nearly came in for a congressional investigation last Spring.

HIGH DIGNITARIES OF STATE

BY JAMES M. CAIN

ONE is struck by a curious blowziness in American public men. I have no reference to their usefulness; for all I know, they are wise and competent, and add to human happiness. I am speaking of the cut of their jibs, the way they look and sound, their effectiveness as dramatic figures. It may be that to the student of government they are models, and offer material for thick books; but to the connoisseur of a show there is undoubtedly something lacking about them.

Set down the great figures of American history beside the great figures of other scenes and times, and the former always appear at a disadvantage, despite the fact they were probably more useful men. Washington, Jefferson, Lincoln, Lee, Wilson,—these names surely do not carry the glamor that goes with Alexander, Caesar, Constantine, Charlemagne, William, Cromwell, Louis, Peter, Frederick, Napoleon, and Bismarck. About that old-world galaxy, granted, there is a smell of the sordid: these men were in habitual contact with greeds, lusts, and hatreds from which fine natures recoil. They were adventurers. There was not one of them who did not, at one time or another, shoot the bones for the whole pile. There was more than a suggestion of the sinister about them: they were in unusually close touch with brute reality: they faced the fact of a cruel, senseless world without being oppressed, without needing balm in Gilead: they were unfettered by the timidity, the "morals" that give ordinary men pause. It was not so much that they were unscrupulous as that they were cynics, magnificent cynics, cynics on a heroic and shocking scale.

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When, to boot, their evil ventures prospered, there was a flavor of black blasphemy about them, of unholy alliance with Satan, so that some of them were hailed as children of the gods, and one at least as the Man of Destiny. . . . A fine set of bozos surely, a pirate's guard, the ermine never quite concealing dirk and dice-box. Yet what a glitter, what a hypnotic lure!

Now turn to our Americans. Unquestionably, they accomplished much: it is agreed the world is better for their having lived in it. In the popular picture of any of them the brow is always drawn with care, with sorrow, with pain; they all travelled the Valley of the Shadow and stalked through Gethsemane. Yet as actors in the play they cannot stand comparison with the least of those I have named from across the water. Ask the average man whether he had rather be Lincoln or Napoleon. If he tells the truth he will say Napoleon. Lincoln stands for all his national *mores* stand for: a cheer for him in some vague way is also a cheer for God, Moses, and the Eighteenth Amendment. Napoleon stands for all *his* national *mores* stand *against*: a cheer for him is a cheer for the devil and the Masque of the Red Death. Yet—the average man can no more resist the appeal of that dizzy career than he can resist spitting off the end of a dock. Lincoln, the man his acquired philosophy tells him he *ought* to be like, remains a prosaic figure in rusty black and a half-gallon hat. Napoleon, the man his deeper self tells him he would *like* to be like, is a figure of fabulous romance.

If the greatest of American statesmen are thus dramatically weak, the general