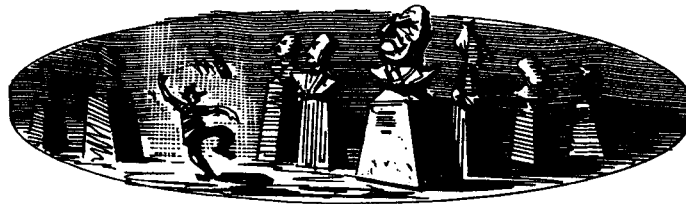


EMINENTOES



HOUSE PORKER

by David Brooks

Because God made only one Mississippi River, Jamie Whitten was forced to overrule Him. Though he doesn't make the papers, Whitten is one of the most important men in Washington. The senior member of the House of Representatives, he was first elected when Pearl Harbor was just a gleam in General Tojo's eye. Nicknamed the permanent secretary of agriculture, he has dominated the Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture for the past thirty-five years. Now chairman of the House Appropriations Committee, he leads the body that substantially determines where federal money goes and why. Prince of the pork barrelers, he helped build a second Mississippi River with federal funds.

It is called the Tennessee Tombigbee Waterway. It cuts a 234-mile trench in northeast Mississippi, through Jamie Whitten's district. Bigger than the Panama Canal, it cost \$1.8 billion, a sum which appalled other members of Congress, especially so because nobody knew why the canal was being built, except that Jamie Whitten and Mississippi Senator John Stennis wanted it.

The story goes around Capitol Hill that one congressman, Joel Pritchard of Seattle, launched a campaign against the Tenn-Tom. But as his effort was getting underway Mt. St. Helens erupted, spewing ash and destruction onto his state. Whitten decided that the incident would have to undergo thorough study before federal relief money could be sent in. His interest in geology proved to be short-lived, however, when Pritchard soon backed off on his challenge to Tenn-Tom. The federal aid was dispatched to Seattle, and in January 1985, the Tenn-Tom Waterway, one of the biggest boondoggles in federal history, was completed. "Tenn-Tom hasn't paid a whole lot of dividends in northeast Mississippi," says Gary Matland, editorial-page editor at a local paper, the *Daily Cor-*

inthian, but Mississippians remain "cautiously optimistic" that all those federal dollars will have an impact someday.

Whitten's signature is his mumble. Forty-five years in Washington haven't diluted that Mississippi drawl. His sentences burst forth like buckshot, but quickly fade into a series of semi-audible reverberations. Barney Frank, who has a speech impediment, once joked that he and Jamie Whitten would be the two biggest beneficiaries of bilingual education. Opposing legislators, fed up with Whitten's incoherence, complain that Whitten should come with his own translator.

A number of people who work around him insist that Whitten is a genuine idiot; nobody, they say, could affect stupidity so masterfully. But those who know him better insist Whitten manipulates his mumble to best advantage. When asked about his latest amendment to an appropriations bill, he shambles forth with a long series of half-chewed words that glaze the eyes of his listeners. If the subject is a chunk of especially self-serving agricultural

pork, he will drone on and on about the beauty of the land and the nobility of the farmer, sounding like some Jeffersonian gone delirious. His colleagues nod in confusion and vote yes. Only later, if at all, do they understand which one of Whitten's schemes they have just supported.

"It's just torture to sit there and understand what the man is saying," says somebody who has to work with him closely. Nevertheless, during the Carter presidency, Whitten delivered 1,811 projects to his district, totaling \$1.27 billion in direct aid and another \$50 million in loan guarantees.

He is also the master of the quick gavel. A year or so ago two Republicans found themselves confused about a key committee vote. It was clear that they had voted opposite the way they intended. Whitten noticed and gaveled the vote to a close. The two members protested but Whitten said it was too late to change. A few years earlier, one staffer remembers, he gave a quick gavel to George O'Brien, who was then battling a fatal illness, and doing his best to fulfill his duties. Some

observers found the episode extremely offensive.

Sneaky? Richard Bolling, the retired Democrat from Missouri, told Jonathon Rauch of the *National Journal*, "I think he's one big puddle of sneak." And here Whitten stands in telling contrast to the current stereotype of the media-hungry congressman. In forty-five years, he has never held a press conference. His press releases are as frequent as Halley's comet. Recently I asked his press secretary (who must be lonelier than a Maytag repair man) for some newsletters Whitten had sent home to the district. Finally, he produced a two-year-old sheet, mostly white space, that mentioned a few of Whitten's recent projects—a weather station, airport improvements, roads, federally funded tourist attractions—and not much else. "He's not a very high profile person," says Joe Rutherford, an editor at the *Northeast Mississippi Daily Journal*. "He won't campaign the way other people do. He'll attend a couple of fish fries if people throw them for him. He'll answer constituent letters. He's rather withdrawn." Last fall a survey revealed that only 34 percent of the people in Jamie Whitten's district recognize their Congressman's name—that after four decades of service.

Whitten is a workhorse, dedicated more to the well-being of congressional institutions than he is to any set of ideas. He is one of the most astute observers of the ever-changing and, it seems, ever-deteriorating federal budget process. He resembles more a lawyer, steering his way through the intricacies of the process, than a legislator. In fact, he opened that 1984 newsletter with this job description: "The real title of the position I hold is 'Representative in Congress.' This is somewhat like being a lawyer who tries a lawsuit. A lawyer who doesn't recognize when the conditions and jury have changed is not much of a lawyer." Whitten uses his expertise to manipulate the budget for the sake of his



David Brooks writes on politics for *National Review* and the *Washington Times*.

clients. "When somebody mentions Jamie Whitten in our district, you think of two things, Tenn-Tom and highway 72," says Gary Matland. Philosophic labels don't make sense on congressmen like Jamie Whitten.

In the mid-1970s it became clear that the Appropriations Committee chair was about to be vacated by George Mahon, who had brought honor to the position since 1964. Whitten realized how much he could help his district as chairman. But all committee chairmen must be elected by the Democratic Caucus, and Whitten's record—he voted against Medicare, food stamps, welfare programs, and in 1956 signed the segregationist Southern Manifesto—was offensive to the party's liberal majority. So he changed his mind on those issues. His Americans for Conservative Action rating declined from 91 in 1972 to 28 a decade later. His support from labor rose inversely. He became a reliable ally to Tip O'Neill, voting against aid to the contras and for the ERA. Though Ronald Reagan won his district easily in 1984, Whitten backs the President less than anybody else in the Mississippi delegation, only 33 percent of the time in 1985.

Whitten's Appropriations Committee is charged with allocating the broad spending targets set by the Budget Committees. The Appropriations bills are written very quickly (because the Budget Committees don't finish their work until late in the fiscal year). There is little press coverage (because few readers are interested, and fewer reporters understand the process), and the bills must always pass (if there are no appropriations, government closes down). In this mess, Whitten thrives.

For the past several years, the process has been even more muddled. Unable to complete its budget-making on time, Congress has had to rely on Continuing Resolutions, massive stopgap funding measures that keep the government in operation. This year's CR accounts for over \$500 billion, and it was written by a small group of appropriators led by Jamie Whitten. Last September, the halls outside the House Appropriations Committee were packed with agency representatives, lobbyists, and special interest arm-twisters as Whitten's committee divvied up fiscal year 1987. "There may be ten people in [Congress] who know what's in it," Rep. David Obey told *Congressional Quarterly*, "and that's the way we run the government for a year."

In that fast and furious atmosphere, spending programs pile on fast. Rep. Silvio Conte called the 1985 CR "753 pages of primal urge." Rep. William Dannemeyer vented his frustration on the floor: "This continuing resolution illustrates the maxim that runs through all of them. I do not think there is a

big enough trough in Christendom to accommodate the snouts that seek to feed at the public's expense." Even Whitten seemed a bit ashamed. He began his defense of the bill by saying, "I just work here."

Whitten is not the biggest spender in Congress—far from it. He boasts that his appropriations are often

below White House requests. But, as usual, Whitten isn't being completely candid. In the first place, his committee is most concerned with budget authority, paper spending allocations, and it sometimes acts as if outlays, actual spending, were somebody else's problem. This does not change the fact that outlays often exceed budget authority, no matter how much they are papered down. Second, Whitten

finagles with the mix of spending, shifting defense dollars into water projects, or energy-related pork. Then, of course, there are other tricks. Whitten brags that his annual agricultural spending bills cost less than presidential requests, but often he redirects money away from essential price supports towards pet spending programs. When the money for the essentials runs out midway through the next fiscal

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year, the Administration has to come back and ask for a supplemental appropriation.

Members in committee constantly joke about the level of pork in their bills. Whitten stares down at his desk and grins. Pork is one thing he is candid about. Aboveboard and shameless, he'll promise support for a colleague's pork in exchange for support for his own. How could something so routine be wrong?

In the corrosive pedantocracy that is the congressional budget process congressmen grow less conscious of dis-

tinctions between pork barrel spending and substantive spending. Is Strom Thurmond's Rural Electrification pork or community development? Is Orrin Hatch's Jobs Corps pork or workfare? To many congressmen, the question is irrelevant. They prefer Jamie Whitten's maxim, "Pork is what's in the other fellow's district." And when it comes to national programs they fall back on another of Whitten's maxims: "The whole country is in somebody's district," the obvious corollary being: Go ahead, spend.

Each cut of pork gets yelped through

Congress with assurances that it will create jobs and restore prosperity. But Jamie Whitten's own district illustrates the bankruptcy of these expectations. For all his efforts, it ranks 427th out of 436 congressional districts in per capita income. His home county, Tallahatchie, is among the poorest in the United States. Nevertheless, Whitten captured 66 percent of the vote in the 1986 election.

Tom Edsell, an academic and an associate editor at the *Southern Partisan*, has kept tabs on Whitten for a number of years. Last fall he migrated from his

home in South Carolina to manage the Republican effort to oust the congressman. "There is a kind of patient, Job-like despair down here," he says. "The thing that interests me is the failure of these people even to have any sense of hope or indignation about any of this. They just don't seem to think there is anything they can do about it. They go out and vote for the man. What they are doing is licking the spoon. It tastes pretty good and they know that's all there is. They don't bother to know who he is or to get mad at him." □

EUROPEAN DOCUMENT



MORE HISTORY

by Amity Shlaes

West German conservatives were thinking big as they moved through the last weeks before the general election on January 25. Their last large-scale campaign rally was so giant they had difficulty finding a structure in this narrow republic roomy enough to accommodate it. In the end, they settled for a multi-stadium complex in Dortmund known as the "Deutschland Halle." Fifty-five thousand citizens from Berlin to Aachen to Lake Constance rode 355 buses and fifteen chartered trains through Sunday-morning sleet to attend. The crowds mingled in a cheery fog of beer and pea soup and milled admiringly past baby-blue stands honoring the national economic achievement. They stamped their feet on wood floors when Helmut Kohl and other cabinet members from the ruling party, the Christian Democratic Union, arrived, and cheered their round-headed leader with low, solid rumbles of "Hel-Moot, Hel-Moot."

It was when powerhouse conservative Franz Josef Strauss, prime minister of Bavaria, wandered onto the subject of national pride and the years 1933-1945 that trouble came. "Germany is more than those times," he intoned. A young man shrieked something incomprehensible from the middle of the floor at the leader; he hurled what looked like a handkerchief in Mr. Strauss's direction. It took a pack of security guards and five minutes before

the overheated hall recovered its complacent mood.

Helmut Kohl's government has problems handling this country's history. In his last administration Kohl embarked on an interesting and somewhat undirected campaign to relieve this truncated nation's national consciousness. The campaign mostly focused on the series of 40-year anniversaries marking the end of World War II. The most successful of the projects was a mollifying, Santayana-ish speech about remembering the past by President Richard von Weizsäcker on May 8,

1985; the most egregious of them, in Western eyes at least, was Mr. Kohl's decision to take the reluctant Ronald Reagan to honor German war dead at Bitburg. Even before January's election, plans were under way to go beyond ceremony and make these policies concrete. The government will allocate funding towards a pair of national museums, and it hopes to develop prouder views of the German past throughout German cultural life, from grammar schools to history books.

At first glance the conservatives'

steps don't seem unduly controversial. In the early postwar years, the twelve-year "1000 Year Reich" was taboo. Then student protestors of the 1960s and 1970s used it to spice up their attacks on incumbent governments; the authority of the Federal Republic, they claimed, was "fascist." Today, as the number of Germans who can speak about the period from adult experience diminishes, establishing an acceptable official line becomes important. But lately the Christian Democrats' message about "getting over the past" has taken on an unattractively brassy tone. The result is growing resistance from a variety of fronts, among them the opposition Social Democrats, the flourishing ecologist Green party, and some historians, who charge that the government is irretrievably damaging national memory by trivializing the National Socialist crime for rightist political purposes. "If I were a German, I would scream," says the Israeli ambassador to Bonn, Yitzak Ben Ari, of the recent rightward rhetoric. The same ambassador had applauded the earlier speech by President von Weizsäcker.

The mission, in Strauss's words, is to end the period where Germans live "continually under the shadow of the Third Reich." Germans, he argues, need no longer feel guilty about the trains that rolled to the camps. They need to build a strong national identity to survive in Europe; a confident Germany is imperative for a strong Western Alliance. Much of the new



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