

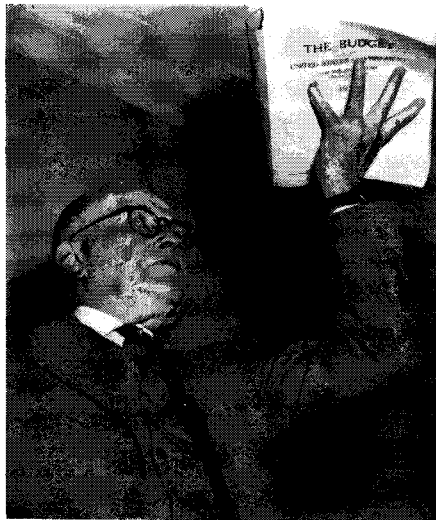
Crustiest Crusader: John Taber, Knight of the Shining Meat Ax

H. H. HARRIS

IT is an irony of politics that John Taber, the seventy-three-year-old Congressional strong man, owes his position as Chairman of the powerful House Appropriations Committee to such diverse personalities as Franklin D. Roosevelt and Dwight D. Eisenhower. Taber, by his own jocular admission "the worst Republican in Congress," is a cantankerous banker from the Finger Lakes section of New York. He is now in a position to remake the Federal budget to the pattern of his pinchpenny, isolationist desires. Until the government's major spending bills clear his committee—probably not before late summer—there will be anxiety in London, Paris, Tokyo, and most other capitals of the free world.

"Generous John" (the epithet was applied gently by House Majority Leader Charles A. Halleck; it produced one of Taber's infrequent smiles) has the purse strings tightly clutched. The Administration will be slowed down to a hobble until Taber decides just how much money its contemplated policies is going to cost New York's 36th Congressional District. For when the terrible-tempered Mr. Taber roars, "I won't give you another red cent," he means "I"—not "We, the committee."

F.D.R. unwittingly conferred on Representative Taber a great political boon. As a freshman Congressman in 1923, Taber had grasped the bottom rung of the House Appropriations Committee ladder and was pulling himself slowly upward, chiefly through attrition in the Republican ranks. Roosevelt's 1932 landslide swept out of office twelve Republican committee members with superior seniority, and Taber awoke, like Lord Byron, to find himself



Wide World

famous. In one lucky surge, Taber had become the ranking minority member of the House's purse-strings committee.

Once again fortune smiled, and Taber ascended to committee control in 1947 when the Republicans captured the House. Taber had retained his seat with a wafer-thin plurality of 3,029 votes in the Republican primary, which in New York's 36th District is the only contest.

The Third Chamber

Taber's six-foot-three-inch hulk is somberly garbed and carefully preserved. Although his opponents claim that his heart is much harder than his arteries, Taber's larynx is in fine condition. When so disposed, and he usually is, Taber can summon up more raspy decibels than any Congressional colleague.

On his record, John Taber is neither Republican nor Democratic, although the former party both claims and disclaims him. The fifty-

man House Appropriations Committee—largest in either House—which he dominates, is so power-laden that it has been called "the Third Chamber of Congress."

The Constitution requires that money bills originate in the House of Representatives. These bills are dispatched for approval, overhaul, or mutilation to the House Appropriations Committee. The tortures Taber applies in his Third Chamber are exquisite.

WHEN the Aid to Greece and Turkey bill came under Taber's suspicious scrutiny in 1947, he whipped out a three-inch pencil stub, performed what he calls "fifth-grade arithmetic," and announced his conclusion: The job of containing Communism could be done handily for three million dollars less than the Administration had asked.

While Truman writhed, Taber called the Army on the carpet, and in a third-degree session won the admission that the funds request was excessive in the precise amount of three million dollars. So once again it appeared that the best friend a taxpayer ever had was victorious over the idiot spenders.

But there was a backfire—one of the few in Taber's career. Republican and Democratic colleagues who were able to see beyond the boundaries of their Congressional districts pleaded with Taber that announcement of a cutback in funds would comfort the enemy. When Taber finally agreed, there were audible sighs of relief.

Then there transpired one of the most fascinating fiscal arrangements on record. After a quiet conference with the White House, Taber agreed



to restore the full funds if the government would promise, honor bright, not to spend the three million dollars, but merely announce the sum for propaganda purposes.

The promise was kept.

'Taberizing'

John Taber's official biography in the *Congressional Directory* is a model of parsimonious prose in a wind-blown field. In fifty-seven words he admits to birth in Auburn, New York, in 1880, a Yale degree, admission to the bar, marriage in 1929, election to the Sixty-eighth Congress, and continuous re-election. That is all.

In contrast, the index to the New York *Times* for 1947—the first year Taber became big political news—devoted about ten times as much space to listing in greatly abbreviated form the matters on which he had expressed himself during the year. The subjects ranged from Federally subsidized school lunches (he was against them) to civil-service workers (he was also against them).

Taber's views on Federal workers are well known: He believes there are too many of them, that they are overpaid, underworked, and probably subversive, and that they spend too much time drinking coffee in government cafeterias. But there is an indication that time may be mellowing Taber. In 1947, he called for a fifty per cent reduction in Federal jobs. He is currently asking for only a twenty per cent cut, and many of those affected are overseas and consequently not in anyone's Congressional district.

When the Eightieth Congress gave Taber control of the purse strings, he launched an attack on peddlers of government publicity on the

grounds that they (1) were on the public payroll and (2) "threatened American liberty and the Freedom of the Press."

There was considerable justification for applying a pruning knife, but not Taber's ax. In the keen competition for public esteem (and appropriations dollars) one government agency was pitted against the next, and rival mimeographs seemingly operated around the clock, grinding out "news" releases redolent with self-praise.

Congressman Taber dislodged hundreds of government press agents and lent his name to a coined word. Publicity persons who suddenly found themselves jobless lamented that they had been "taberized."

But how well Taber succeeded will never be known. His withering fire leveled the front rank, but the press agents fell back, regrouped, and went underground. Directors of press information transformed themselves into such things as chiefs of morale media, copyreaders became co-ordinators of distribution, and writers soon were opinion analysts. Thus camouflaged, many escaped detection. As a result, no one, including the United States government, now knows how many press agents are on the Federal payroll.

Whether the classic battle between Taber and the government press agents will be resumed interests many persons who are not government press agents, although this time the conflict may be waged on more equal terms.

Total (and Item) Recall

John Taber's voting record in Congress qualifies him to be chief editorial writer for the *Chicago Tribune*, except for the fact that he neither writes nor speaks effectively. He places greater store in his ability to analyze complicated budgets speedily. It is said that Taber can recall specific money items in a fifty-page budget two years old, and his memory for keeping tabs on peregrinating bureaucrats is phenomenal. Since there is a constant flow of bureaucrats from dying agencies to newborn ones, this is a remarkable attribute.

Taber's batting average with organized labor is .000. The AFL and CIO

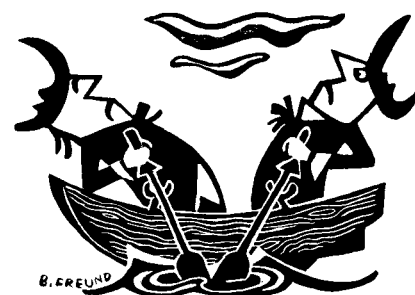
both compile score cards of Congressional voting on major issues, and Taber has not, within modern times, cast a vote that met labor's approval. Last session he voted against a five-dollar monthly increase in Social Security, for excluding 750,000 workers from Social Security benefits, against public housing, and for the lifting of rent controls. Earlier, Taber had voted against excess-profits taxes, against military aid for Korea, against the Point Four program, and in favor of protection for commodity speculators.

Once the money bills are passed, Taber's influence is nearly nil. He is one veteran Republican whose advice on grand strategy seldom is sought. Yet he remains the No. 1 strong man of the House.

This year Taber has given himself additional duties as chairman of the foreign aid subcommittee. Since his opinions on foreign aid are well known, the recommendations of this subcommittee can be forecast: They will be *against*. Taber, in fact, never saw eye to eye with the Marshall Plan; after a junket abroad he qualified himself as an ambassador of ill will by reporting that foreigners appeared to be almost as lazy and inefficient as civil-service workers.

As a minority member of the House Appropriations Committee, John Taber doubtless earned his salt by constantly reminding government spenders that the U. S. Treasury is not inexhaustible. But now that he has again quaffed the heady wine of authority and is committee chairman, his pinchpenny, mule-stubborn tactics may well mark the beginning of the first major schism in the Republican Administration.

For President Eisenhower's charm will never thaw the terrible-tempered Mr. Taber.



The Joys Of Defeat

DOUGLASS CATER

TO THOSE who look for signs of change in the nation's capital, a visit to the Senate is not very helpful. Aside from the offshore oil dispute, recent events there might almost convince observers that the election had changed nothing. The attitudes of the two party leaders as they sit side by side are revealing: Robert Taft is still distraught and irritable, while Lyndon Johnson seems relaxed and placid. In trying to restrain his own party's recalcitrants, Taft has good reason for worry, whereas Johnson, in a spirit of good fun and political smugness, was recently able to assure President Eisenhower at a private gathering, "It's really been tough, Mr. President. We would like to be the loyal Opposition. We've had no trouble being loyal, but you have made it almost impossible to be Opposition."

Johnson and his colleagues have good reason for smugness, though their attainment of such euphoric heights in so short a time is rather surprising. But, as one estimable Democratic Senator said recently, "Now I can answer complaining constituents with three sweet little words, 'Blame the Republicans.'" To those who suffered the humiliations of the years when few Democratic Members of Congress dared stand up and defend the Truman Administration, such escape from responsibility must seem blessed indeed.

Contributing to the Democrats' sense of well-being is an increased spirit of party unity. In defeat the Democratic Senators have seemed to find that their differences are not as basic as their agreements. "It's a happy day when you can see Walter George and Mike Mansfield working

hand in hand," party leader Johnson remarked the other day. "I don't know who has taken over whom, but I like it."

To make things even better, they have found this unity in being *for* rather than *against*. Already they can point to a steady procession of issues—the Reorganization Act, the anti-enslavement resolution, the Bohlen nomination, extension of the Reciprocal Trade Act, appropriations for public housing—which found them lined up solidly behind the President while the Republicans were split into warring factions. Except for occasional items such as the Hawaiian Statehood bill, which will probably rouse opposition from the Southerners, the prospects are that the Democrats may continue to offer a solid core of support for Presidential programs, especially in foreign policies. In a fit of braggadocio, one Democratic leader sent word to Eisenhower that if the President could muster at least five Republican Senators behind him, there were enough Democratic votes to assure a bipartisan foreign policy.

The Party Powerhouse Hums

On another front, relations between the staff of the Democratic National Committee and Members of Congress have reached a degree of friendliness unknown for some years. Chairman Stephen Mitchell, despite rumors of expected departure, appears to be firmly established for the remainder of this year at least, at which time he may leave office of his own accord. He and Deputy Chairman Clayton Fritchey, both recent comers to professional politics, have earned respect on the Hill by their manful efforts to make the party

financially solvent and to furnish needed assistance to Congressmen. The research division, headed by Philip Stern, has performed amazingly well so far in providing Members with speech fodder and pertinent questions to be directed at the President's appointees.

THERE have been rumblings within the party, of course. Senator Richard Russell, who remains the pivotal member of the Southern wing, delivered a speech in Raleigh, North Carolina, late in February in which he spoke with considerable feeling against such political groups as Americans for Democratic Action which "stand with one foot in and one foot out of the Democratic Party and constantly threaten to pull out the foot they have in the party unless the entire party accedes to their demands." Intimates of Russell are inclined to minimize the seriousness of his disagreement; they point out that he subsequently sent word to the National Committee that it would be better if his speech were not broadcast.

Russell confided to a fellow Senator the other day that Hubert Humphrey, a member of the aforementioned A.D.A., is "one of the smartest men in the Senate." Reciprocally, Humphrey has proudly admitted that he has been working intimately and successfully with his party leaders in the Senate. If he or any of the other liberal Northern Democrats have thought of heeding Senator Wayne Morse's appeals to join him as Independents, they have given no sign by word or deed.

It is still early to forecast much about Democratic strategy for 1956, but already certain steps are being

