

Born to be Mild

He's influential, informed, and responsible. But do you really want Sam Nunn to be president?

by Timothy Noah

Dressed in Sunday-best pastels, the ladies of the Georgia Federation of Women's Clubs sit in a conference room of the Macon Hilton, hands folded in laps, waiting to hear from their senator, Sam Nunn. Nunn, in a beige suit and red tie, sits behind a dais decorated with daisies. His presence has created an electric sense of anticipation: One month earlier, he made headlines by engineering the rejection of John Tower, President George Bush's choice for secretary of defense. Introducing Nunn, Barbara Fallin, a longtime family friend, speaks of the growing national reputation of the senior senator from Georgia and chairman of the Armed Services Committee. "He knows more about NATO than any other member of Congress," she says proudly.

Nunn rises to a standing ovation and takes the podium. He jokes about a tongue-tied friend who introduced him on another occasion by saying Nunn had been "vitally involved in fraud, waste, and abuse." The women laugh warmly. Nunn discusses the role of women in the professions. He praises the Federation's commitment to volunteer service. "Without the willingness to serve others," he says, "a democratic society simply cannot flourish and compete in the world." The crowd is in the palm of his hand.

As he shifts to global issues, however, Nunn starts to display his usual weakness on the stump—a ten-

dency to get lost in a thicket of details. "We're spending about 5 1/2, 6 percent of our gross national product on national defense," says Nunn, while "the Soviets are spending about 20 percent—18 percent to 20 percent—as much as 18 to 20 percent." There are scattered coughs in the audience. "As recently as about 20, 25 years ago—don't hold me to the exact numbers and dates here—we had at that time in the United States, we controlled about 50 percent of the world's gross national product. . . . Today, that's down to about 25 percent." More coughs. "As recently as about 15 years ago, the United States had something like 70 percent—we produced about 70 percent of all the new technology coming out in the world. . . . Now it's down today to about 20, 25 percent."

By this time, the excitement has faded to respectful drowsiness more appropriate to a Sunday school sermon than to an oration by a rising political star.

No one has ever accused Sam Nunn of being charismatic. Yet the same quality that serves him so poorly before a crowd—a compulsion to dot every i and cross every t of quantifiable fact—has earned him the highest respect on Capitol Hill. "He is the most effective politician inside the Senate that I have seen," says Sen. Albert Gore Jr., who serves with Nunn on the Armed Services Committee. Nunn's military expertise is so highly regarded that his vote frequently determines whether a president gets what he wants on defense. The Tower defeat demonstrated one application of Nunn's power. Last summer's Senate vote on the administration's defense budget,

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which Nunn supported, showed another. In the House of Representatives, George Bush's defense priorities got scrambled. But in the Senate, Nunn managed to pass a defense bill that reflected the administration's wishes, as well as his own.

A Democrat who describes himself as a "moderate conservative," Nunn is that rare politician who commands respect in both parties. In 1980 Nunn's standing among Republicans was so high that Ronald Reagan is said to have fleetingly considered him for the vice-presidential slot. Nunn says Reagan campaign officials never approached him, but he did have "some conversations with some of the Bush people"—he won't say who—about whether he wanted to be secretary of defense. (He told them he wasn't interested.)

Nunn lost some of his bipartisan luster when he launched his campaign against Tower, which resulted in a Senate vote split almost entirely along party lines. Conservative columnist Paul Gigot of *The Wall Street Journal* mocked Nunn's reputation as "Statesman Sam"; Senate minority leader Bob Dole, who led the pro-Tower forces on the Senate floor, coined a new word to describe Tower's opponents: "Nunnpartisan." Overall, however, the Tower fight enhanced Nunn's reputation by demonstrating his clout in the defense arena. And it certainly improved his standing among his fellow Democrats, who occasionally worry that Nunn is too conservative and too cautious.

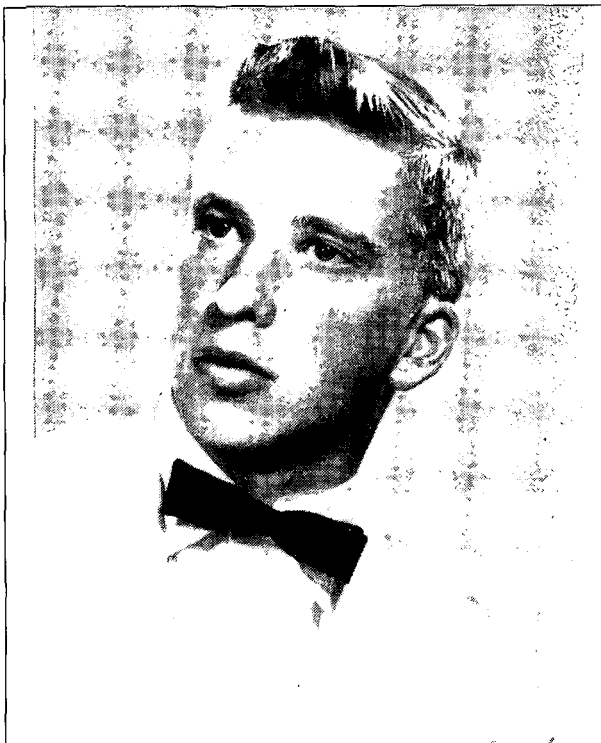
It's been widely speculated that one of Nunn's motives in opposing Tower was to position himself for a presidential bid in 1992. Nunn gave serious

thought to running for president in 1988. Today he says he has no plans to run, but he doesn't rule it out. Meanwhile, Democrats consistently rank him among their two or three strongest potential candidates. Nunn is regarded as one of the brightest and most responsible members of the Senate. He comes from the only region of the country—the South—that has produced any Democratic presidents during the last quarter-century. The editorial writers and the TV chat-show bookers love him. But does Sam Nunn have what it takes to be president?

Little Sam

Samuel Augustus Nunn was born 50 years ago in the town of Perry (pop. 11,000), in the heart of Middle Georgia's red dirt farm country. Today Perry is twice as populous as when Nunn was growing up; the march of progress can be measured by the fast-food joints that line the six-lane highway leading into town, named Sam Nunn Boulevard soon after Nunn was elected to the Senate. The Perry of Nunn's boyhood was a typical sleepy southern town of the pre-civil rights era, where businesses closed up for high school basketball games and townspeople could find out where a local fire was by ringing up Miss Hunt, the telephone operator.

The Nunn family was a prosperous Methodist family who lived in a white clapboard house. Perry friends say that Nunn took after his somewhat solemn father, Sam Nunn Sr., a lawyer and farmer. Sam Sr. was universally known as "Mister Sam"; Sam Jr. would be called "Little Sam" until he left Perry for Washington. "We had a very close relationship," recalls Nunn, "but it was not one of those where you go hunting together and you play basketball together." Mister Sam was too old for that;



SAM NUNN

Sincere in all he undertakes. Always a great success he makes.

Basketball 2, 3, 4, Captain 3, 4, All-State 3, 4; Class President 1, 2, 3, Vice President 4; Football 4; Golf 1, 2, 3, 4 Low Score 3; American History Award 3; Key Club 2, 3; Beta Club 3, 4; "P" Club 4; Speech Club 4, Treasurer 4; Senior Play.

(From the 1956 Perry High School yearbook.)

he was 50 when Sam Jr. was born. One consequence of this stretch between generations was to bring the Civil War closer to Nunn than it is to most of us. Although only 51 today, the senator is the grandson of a private in the Confederate army. Another consequence was that Sam Nunn Jr. would always seem older than he really was—a trait that can be described either as maturity or stuffiness.

Little Sam was exposed to politics at an early age, when his father, who had held a seat in the state legislature, served as Perry's mayor. There were also Thanksgiving visits from Nunn's great-uncle, Rep. Carl Vinson, a congressional baron who chaired the House Armed Services Committee. But Nunn's developing political skills were focused on matters closer to home. His sister, Betty Nunn Mori, recalls Little Sam's campaign to persuade his parents to buy Perry's first television set so that he could watch the World Series. They were reluctant, not only because a TV seemed "frivolous," but also because it would require an enormous antenna, since the nearest station was in faraway Atlanta. Eventually Little Sam won.

Perry High School's 1956 yearbook features a photograph of a surprisingly blond and beefy-looking Sam Nunn playing "Donny Miller, a young romeo" in a school play, and compliments Nunn's "leadership ability" (he was a three-time class president) and his "wry sense of humor which pops out at odd times." Nunn had to be talked into taking a class in public speaking. "He did not like to get up in public and talk," says his mother, Elizabeth Nunn. "He knew he had to conquer that." Nunn preferred sports to speechifying, captaining Perry High's basketball team to victory in the state championships. He was also a diligent student. "You never gave an assignment he did not prepare thoroughly for," says Nunn's former high school English teacher, Florence Harrison, sounding a theme that his Senate colleagues echo today.

The promise of a basketball scholarship and the chance to join the Navy Reserve Officer Training Corps lured Nunn to Georgia Tech. But the future Armed Services Committee chairman flunked the Navy eye test. Although Nunn switched to Army ROTC, he soon had another plan. "I wanted to go to Washington for awhile, I wanted to go to law school, I wanted to do my military," which was mandatory in that pre-Vietnam draft era. He also wanted to be near home, because his father's health was failing. So Nunn joined the Coast Guard.

It's no small irony that Congress's foremost expert on military matters opted to meet his draft requirement with a six-month stint in the Coast Guard (followed by two years on active reserve and six years

on standby reserve). Meeting an old Coast Guard buddy in the Capitol to pose for a photograph, Nunn quips, "We fought in the mosquito war in Cape May, New Jersey. A lot of blood flowed in that war." But in a subsequent interview, Nunn defends his Coast Guard service, which he spent teaching swimming and physical training. He says it exposed him to "people of every economic class."

Nunn is less enthusiastic about his active reserve duty, which required him to attend pointless weekend meetings in Atlanta. "Sitting in a downtown building, the only water we saw was a faucet," he says. Did the experience inform his views on national service? "It gives me some sense that you don't want to create jobs that don't have meaning."

His Coast Guard service completed, Nunn got his law degree at Atlanta's Emory University in the spring of 1962, then went to Washington, where Uncle Carl had a job waiting for him as a staff counsel to the House Armed Services Committee. Nunn's year in Washington convinced him to return to Georgia to pursue a political career of his own. It also introduced him to his future wife, Colleen O'Brien, who was working in the Paris embassy for the Central Intelligence Agency when Nunn passed through on a committee junket. The two were married in 1965.

Back in Perry with a fledgling law practice, Nunn threw himself into a variety of civic duties. Perry was a small enough town that a talented young man could quickly become a city father—especially if he was as prematurely solemn as Little Sam. Nunn chaired Perry's Chamber of Commerce and served on a biracial committee to address growing demands to abolish segregation. By 1968, he was representing Perry in the Georgia House of Representatives, where he joined the reapportionment committee in hopes of drawing up a Middle Georgia congressional district to run for. When the reapportionment plan failed to pass, Nunn told the representative who sat next to him that he planned to run for the Senate. "I thought he was talking about the State Senate," recalls Joe Frank Harris, now governor of Georgia. But Nunn meant the U.S. Senate, where he intended to succeed the recently deceased Richard Russell.

In a life marked by caution, Nunn's decision to run for the Senate stands out as singularly reckless. With only 2 percent name recognition statewide, Nunn challenged Gov. Jimmy Carter's choice to serve out Russell's term, an Atlanta lawyer named David Gambrell. "It was impulsive by Nunn standards," Nunn concedes. Perhaps Nunn's greatest liability was that he was only 34. Georgians were used to being represented in the Senate by old men—by patriarchs like Walter George, who as chairman of

the Foreign Relations Committee had received weekly breakfast visits from Secretary of State John Foster Dulles, and Russell, who had been chairman of the Armed Services Committee.

Both senators had been consummately "responsible" politicians. In George's case, "responsible" meant never making waves—or even ripples. Russell was almost as conservative, but in his case "responsible" also meant, at least some of the time, having the courage to do the right thing even if it didn't suit his ideology. Russell was "incomparably the most influential man on the inner life of the Senate," according to William S. White, a *New York Times* reporter of Russell's era. Russell's finest hour came during the Korean War, when he presided over hearings on Harry Truman's firing of Gen. Douglas MacArthur. The easy path for a conservative politician was to join in the outrage over the firing, capitalizing on the ticker-tape parades that greeted the returning general in order to bully a vulnerable president. The Senate hearings would have provided a perfect platform for this type of demagoguery. Instead, Russell did the responsible thing: he handled the hearings in a low-key manner that smothered the political firestorm. Adroitly, quietly, he defused the right-wing hysteria instead of succumbing to it.

Nunn hoped to step into this Georgia tradition. After taking out a yellow pad and listing all the reasons he shouldn't run and the few reasons he should, he told his wife he didn't want to spend the rest of his life wondering whether he would have won. Nunn beat Gambrell in the primary by painting him as a "fake conservative." In the general election Nunn faced Fletcher Thompson, a Republican representative from Atlanta who had made the mistake of ignoring his many black constituents. Black leaders threw their support behind Nunn, even though he was anti-busing. Assured of black votes, Nunn was free to court conservatives. He sought—and won—the endorsement of Alabama governor George Wallace, and put as much distance as possible between himself and the party standard-bearer, George McGovern. Set to martial-sounding music, Nunn's TV jingle emphasized a tough-guy image. In the end, he won 54 percent of the vote—by far the narrowest victory of his Senate career. With a little help from Vinson a seat on the Armed Services Committee was waiting in Washington for the freshman senator.

From the start, Nunn's performance suggested that he had paid close attention to the model of the statesmen who preceded him. Given that Mary McGrory called him "stately" in a recent column, it's clear that by Georgia standards, Sam Nunn has arrived.

In a narrow, chandeliered room of the Senate office building named for Richard Russell, Sam Nunn

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is presiding over a hearing of the Armed Services Committee, which he has chaired since 1987. Nunn has said that Congress is never able to influence more than 3 or 4 percent of all Pentagon decisions, but within the Senate, Armed Services is quite powerful. It has the largest jurisdiction of any committee, overseeing 30 percent of the total federal budget. Inside the committee room, the senators are arrayed around a large U-shaped table. Behind them, staff members sit against the wall in a larger U.

Although Nunn confers frequently with committee staff director Arnold Punaro, the chairman is known for his command of defense policy minutiae. Jeffrey Record, who worked on defense issues for Nunn during the 1970s, says people always want to know who Nunn's "guy" is—the indispensable aide whose wisdom Nunn parrots. "Nunn doesn't have a 'guy,'" says Record. "He's got a whole network of people, from Henry Kissinger down to Arnold Punaro." Indeed, it is sometimes Nunn who must set his staff straight on the facts. Walking to the hearing room earlier that morning, Nunn teased his administrative aide, Charlie Harman, about the day's schedule, which had Nunn meeting at 11 a.m. to discuss "deprester jectories" with a House member. "Depressed trajectories," corrected Nunn.

The purpose of the hearing is to examine NATO strategy before the committee considers the administration's proposed Pentagon budget. General Colin Powell, newly installed as commander-in-chief of the Army Forces Command (and subsequently promoted to chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff) describes the ability of U.S.-based forces to get to a hypothetical European front. Nunn interrupts to complain that many of the proposed target dates are unrealistic. "We all know that we have a lot of forces in this country that cannot get to a European theater or any other theater in the first—some of them in the first 30 days, some of them get there 60 days, some of them 90 days," says Nunn.

Sam Nunn is in love with the nuts and bolts of defense policy. His detail-oriented approach to such mundane details contrasts sharply with the more exuberantly cerebral style of Rep. Les Aspin, chairman of the House Armed Services Committee. "Their politics are in many respects very similar," observes Gordon Adams of the center-left Defense Budget Project, but "Nunn is more guided by his caution." The different paths to power taken by the two chairmen are revealing. Aspin lured the attention of the press as a Pentagon gadfly, cranking out press releases on every conceivable defense issue. Nunn, who to this day almost never issues press releases, worked his way up more quietly as head of the Manpower and Personnel subcommittee. Manpower and Person-

nel was "the dullest subcommittee," according to Jeffrey Record. But it was a time when "manpower issues were really, really important." Among other problems, the upper reaches of the post-Vietnam officer corps were seriously bloated, and the All-Volunteer Force was having trouble recruiting qualified servicemen. Nunn got Congress to reduce the number of generals and admirals, and endorsed the idea of a military draft—a position he has since abandoned in favor of a voluntary national service program tied to student aid.

Tower play

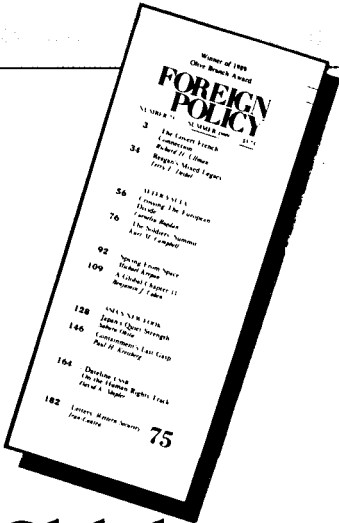
No legislator—from a city council member to a U.S. senator—has the time to immerse himself in the details of every issue. With votes on housing, education, health care, defense matters, foreign policy, development, and a thousand other subjects, the senator who tried to stay on top of all of them would be unable to lead on any. To be useful to anyone, a senator needs to lay claim to an issue and make himself the reigning expert. The good ones—the ones known for an honest approach to their issues, for carefully examining any new program and objectively reporting its merits—become invaluable to their peers. On a vote that falls outside their field of expertise, senators look to responsible members like these. They can vote with the expert and go back to their own work without fear of embarrassment.

It is his command of defense issues—a sprawling and vital field—that has won Nunn his colleagues' esteem. Rather than slog through Pentagon reports, many senators depend on Nunn to come up with a reasonable (if not always exciting) position. "You can't go too far wrong voting with Sam Nunn on a defense issue," is how one Democratic Senate aide puts it. The aide estimates that 20 to 30 percent of all Senate Democrats will cast their defense votes largely on the basis of what Nunn is doing.

Another key to Nunn's power is that Republicans can't accuse him of being soft on defense. Throughout the seventies, Nunn worked hard to tug his fellow Democrats to the right on SALT II and other military issues. Having established himself as tougher on defense than Jimmy Carter, Nunn had the credibility—unique among Democrats—to criticize Reagan's defense policies in the eighties. He used it sparingly until 1987, when he picked a fight with the Reagan administration over the interpretation of the 1972 Anti-Ballistic Missile treaty. The administration had dreamed up a "broad" interpretation of the treaty that gave the freest possible rein to testing space weapons for the Strategic Defense Initiative ("Star Wars"). In response, Nunn combed through the ABM

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Senate ratification hearing record and uncovered statements from former Defense Secretary Melvin Laird and others supporting the narrow interpretation. It was a classic Nunn maneuver: out-wonk the opposition.

By far the bloodiest battle Nunn has fought in the Senate was to reject the nomination of John Tower for defense secretary last March. Today, Nunn says that judged strictly on ability, Tower was “well qualified.” That’s too generous. As chairman of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Tower had been a mindless cheerleader for the defense buildup of the early 1980s—the very buildup that Bush’s defense secretary would have to dismantle. Some have argued that Tower’s hawkishness would have made him the ideal man to take on the procurement bureaucracy, but nothing in Tower’s background suggested he had the faintest idea how to distinguish fat from muscle. Not every Nixon can find his way to China.

In any case, Nunn was right to conclude that Tower’s personal conduct disqualified him for the job. Hard proof that Tower was an alcoholic may have been elusive, but the great volume of circumstantial evidence was enough to raise serious doubts. Just as valid, but less publicized, was Nunn’s argument that Tower had behaved sleazily in signing up as a consultant to defense contractors on arms control issues after he’d returned from a stint in Geneva as arms control negotiator—even if it couldn’t be proven that Tower had provided his clients with classified inside dope. This was Nunn at his best, abandoning for once his reliance on dry facts and pitching unashamedly to Americans’ common values. In the best Richard Russell tradition, Nunn picked a battle worthy of risking his long-accrued respectability.

Nunn’s efforts to rally fellow Senate Democrats against Tower brought bitter attacks from the Republicans, but he stuck to his guns with the same tenacity that had won him his TV set as a child. (The only notable lapse in Nunn’s performance occurred after Senator William Cohen, a Republican on the Armed Services Committee and a long-time Nunn ally, took to the floor to read excerpts from Arthur Miller’s *The Crucible*. Rather than attack Cohen’s speech as pretentious nonsense, Nunn answered ploddingly that “there are a number of very significant differences between the committee’s proceedings on the Tower nomination and the events in Salem,” and proceeded to enumerate them.) If the victory added to Nunn’s political luster, one hopes the damage to Nunn’s bipartisan respectability added to his political wisdom by teaching him something Walter George never learned: sometimes being responsible means pissing people off.

Sam Nunn is having breakfast in the Senate dining

room with six interns from his office, all from Georgia. Although Nunn speaks stiffly before a crowd, he has an easy manner in small groups like this. He offers the interns some practical advice about their time on Capitol Hill. Don’t be overly impressed with the activity on the Senate floor, he says; hearings and committee meetings are more important.

Maria Blanca, a pretty blond senior from the University of Georgia, says her friends back home want to know if Nunn is going to run for president. “It’s very unlikely,” answers Nunn. “I think that my best opportunity to run, if I was going to run, was last time.”

Just-the-facts Sam

During the past three years, Nunn has campaigned around the country for congressional candidates, helping to immunize them against the charge that Democrats are soft on defense. As the 1988 election approached, he twice announced he would not seek the presidency, and also removed himself from consideration for vice president. A cartoon from the *Augusta Chronicle* that now hangs on Nunn’s Senate office wall nicely illustrated “the presidential plunge position of Sam Nunn.” It showed Nunn stuck to a diving board, arms extended upward but unable to move.

Nunn tells the interns in the Senate dining room that he was 60 percent against running, 40 percent for. “I came to the conclusion that in order to run I would have to terminate my Senate activity—virtually terminate it—for about a year and a half to two years. The odds being against winning, I felt some of the things I was involved in I couldn’t drop. I felt keenly about the ABM treaty. I could not drop that. . . . I knew I’d have a real problem with my own conscience having just been made chairman of the Armed Services Committee, being out there on the campaign trail virtually abandoning that position which I’d aspired to for a long, long time. . . . It probably wouldn’t have been a political factor with the public, but it would have bothered me.”

There may have been another factor behind Nunn’s decision not to run: his conservative voting record on many nondefense issues. Nunn has supported a constitutional amendment to ban abortion, supported a balanced budget amendment, and opposed the Equal Rights Amendment. His civil rights record is spotty. Although he voted for the 1982 renewal of the Voting Rights Act, Nunn supported several weakening amendments.

Nunn is not too hot on economic fairness issues, either; he leans toward supporting the president’s capital gains tax cut, provided it can be accompanied

by other deficit-reducing measures. In other words, a tax cut for the very rich is fine as long as we make sure that other taxpayers pay for it. That's responsible, but it doesn't exactly foster social justice.

Some Democrats choose to forgive Nunn his conservative record on domestic issues because it's so obvious that his attention is focused elsewhere. The argument has some merit. Why should Nunn wage an uphill battle to persuade his constituents that a woman should have the right to choose abortion if the issue doesn't really engage him? Others think the party should be moving away from the old pat liberal answers—"liberal fundamentalism," to quote a recent paper issued by the evangelically centrist Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), of which Nunn is chairman. Again, this argument has some force: ideology shouldn't blind Democrats to the fact that many liberal solutions have proven ineffective (as regular readers of this magazine are well aware). But the answer isn't for politicians like Nunn to retreat to knee-jerk conservatism; it's to seek new solutions that discard what's bad about "liberal fundamentalism" while remaining faithful to the party's vision of a just society. Nunn has been too willing to support even mindless conservative causes like the constitutional amendment to ban flag desecration. Before making

any bid to become a Democratic president, he will need to demonstrate that he believes in tolerance and equal opportunity and the dignity of the common man and woman. In other words, he will need to show more reverence for Democratic values.

One encouraging sign is Nunn's longtime interest in bringing young people of different social classes together to perform national service. Earlier this year Nunn and Rep. Dave McCurdy proposed a gradual replacement of student loan programs with a national service program. The proposal, developed by the DLC, calls for students to perform either civilian or military service in exchange for educational benefits worth either \$10,000 a year (for civilian service) or \$12,000 a year (for military service). Nunn's proposal has lately been watered down and combined with elements of other schemes proposed by Senators Ted Kennedy and Barbara Mikulski, but it's worth considering the boldness of the original plan. Where the Kennedy and Mikulski proposals were entirely voluntary, Nunn's, because of the student-aid link, was openly coercive. It generated considerable controversy within the academic community, which has come to believe that students have a God-given right to federally subsidized student loans with no strings attached.

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Nunn should be applauded for doing something few Democrats since Robert Kennedy have been willing to do: demand that the middle class roll up its sleeves and get to work improving the lives of those who are less fortunate. Unfortunately, the spirit of Nunn's proposal was easier to cheer than its substance. Though perfectly defensible in theory, tying national service to student loans would create a problem in practice: the very rich, who do not need student loans, could exempt themselves from duty. This is probably a fatal flaw. As Arizona Senator John McCain puts it, "All of us owe an obligation to our society, or none of us do." The best way to institute national service—as proposed by McCain, *The Washington Monthly*, and regrettably few others—is to bite the bullet and make it compulsory for everyone.

Obviously Nunn has spent more time thinking about defense issues than he has about domestic ones. His most lasting mark on the Pentagon predates his chairmanship: In 1986, he helped then-chairman Barry Goldwater and Rep. Bill Nichols write the Defense Reorganization Act, a sweeping reform bill that, among other things, increased the power of the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, diminishing the problem of inter-service rivalry among the Joint Chiefs and, by extension, throughout the military. Even in the defense realm, however, Nunn is rarely daring. "A consummate centrist" who "thinks more technically than ideologically," is how defense analyst Gordon Adams describes him.

Nunn is clearly the master of countless technical problems related to the national defense. But they remain, well, technical problems. Nunn has advocated that the weapons used by member nations of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization have interchangeable ammunition. He has pushed for the creation of a Soviet-American nuclear risk reduction center. He has proposed a variety of incremental advances in arms control, for both nuclear and conventional forces. These are all worthy positions, but none of them seems as urgent as, say, the question of whether the U.S. should commit itself to building the Stealth bomber. Interestingly, the leading Stealth critic is not Nunn but Senator John Glenn. What is Nunn's position? Asked this recently in the Senate press gallery, Nunn rambled on about the need for some kind of penetrating bomber. But he prefers to avoid the question of whether to build *this* bomber. With responses like that, Nunn gives the distinct impression that he's waiting to see which way the wind will blow in the Senate.

Nunn has a Walter George-like, Washington insider's aversion to controversy. For example, although his argument against the Reagan administration's

broad interpretation of the ABM treaty has happily kept the U.S. in compliance, Nunn professes not to have any firm views about the ABM treaty itself. In fact, he has proposed an antimissile defense system that he concedes might be in conflict with ABM. "I'm not saying that the ABM Treaty should never be changed," Nunn explains. "I'm just saying if we change it, it ought to be done either by amendment or, if we terminate it, it ought to be done under the terms of the treaty—keep faith with the original commitment we made as a nation." Nunn is right to protect the Senate's constitutional powers, but arguing such matters of high principle can become a dodge from debating the immediate questions. Should we stick with ABM or shouldn't we? Respectable people prefer not to stir passions on this subject.

Nunn has lately proposed rewriting the War Powers Act, which, since its passage as a reaction against the Vietnam war, has proven more controversial than useful. (Its provision requiring congressional approval of military action has been invoked only once, when Marines were sent to Lebanon in 1982.) But Nunn doesn't want to strengthen the bill to make it easier for Congress to participate in decisions about whether to send U.S. troops into war zones. He wants to weaken it so that Congress's reluctance to get involved in such decisions doesn't make it look ridiculous.

The question of intervention came up most recently in Panama, when the Bush administration failed to assist a coup against General Manuel Noriega. In typical fashion, Nunn denounced the Bush administration's "lack of policy guidance," but shied away from the question of whether U.S. troops should have supported the coup. "The bottom line would depend on what they ask for and whether it was feasible," droned Nunn.

On issues like the Tower nomination, the draft, and defense reorganization, Sam Nunn has shown some glimmers of vision. More often, though, he has absorbed himself in uncontroversial issues that, even when important, somehow seem too arcane for a man who seeks to be president. Nunn needs to lift his nose from the fine print. He needs to show that he's ready to move beyond modifying the policies of others. He needs to continue placing his cherished respectability at risk.

At the big round table in the Senate dining room, Nunn tells his interns that if you want to run for president, you need to have a "real agenda for the country. . . . I would never run for president simply because I wanted to be president more than any other thing." If Nunn does plan to run, he'd better get started creating that agenda. He has more work to do than he thinks. □

NOTES FROM UNDERGROUND

Some surprising lessons about productivity and job satisfaction from the coal mines.

by Peter Gray

The stereotype of underground mining is that it is dirty, monotonous, brutal, exceedingly hazardous, low-paying work done by illiterate gnomes with no alternatives. Dirty and physically strenuous I'll concede, but the rest ranges from exaggerated to wildly inaccurate. I found mining interesting, aesthetically satisfying, fun, and financially rewarding. Who but a miner goes places daily that no one else has ever visited? And, these days, who but a miner gets to participate in a successful American heavy industry?

The first time I reported for work at a coal mine was in the middle of an icy night in the Utah mountains at the end of 1975. I had a brand-new belt (for carrying a self-rescuer, tools, and a lamp battery) and a hard hat, yellow to indicate I was a rookie. The mine was small and nonunion; its lamphouse was a battered semitrailer with a coal stove in one end, two benches, a lamp-charging rack, and a row of hooks for clothes.

There were three other young men on the graveyard shift, and when the boss arrived he immediately fired one of them for laziness and missed shifts. We got on an electric "ramcar," a low, flat vehicle used to scoop coal, and drove inside. I shoveled coal along the rib—the mine wall—for half the night; then we drove outside, changed the ramcar's eight tons of bat-

teries, and hand loaded it with several tons of rock-dust sacks. For the rest of the shift, we sprayed the inside of the mine with powdered limestone, to dilute the coal dust and make it nonexplosive. Because of this dusting, most of the surfaces of any modern coal mine are white, not black.

Here are a few other facts that might surprise you about mines: While membership in the United Mine Workers of America has dropped by 50 percent over the past decade, the average underground miner's productivity has doubled (by comparison, total nonagricultural business productivity has increased by about 10 percent). The mine-mouth price of coal has fallen by 30 percent in real terms, saving consumers \$3 to \$4 billion each year and eliminating one third of all mine jobs. Most miners still on the job haven't suffered financially for these gains, however. Real wages have increased slightly during this period.

One thing everyone agrees on is that mines are dangerous. And these changes in industry statistics suggest they may be getting more so. After all, there must be some downside to this success story besides the many displaced workers. Maybe miners have been trading their safety for cash.

One night in Utah, we were rock-dusting back in the "return," an exhaust airway leading out from the active section of the mine. Clint drove the ramcar; Dale rode in the machine's bucket and loaded the

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