

# Penny's Thoughts

*A sharp-tongued former congressman tells why his former colleagues are liars and hypocrites*

**BY MATTHEW MILLER**

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**Common Cents: A Retiring Six-Term Congressman Reveals How Congress Really Works—and What We Must Do To Fix It**

*Tim Penny and Major Garrett, Little Brown and Company, \$21.95*

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In December 1993, I was among the staff that went with President Clinton to Representative Marjorie Margolies-Mezvinsky's district outside Philadelphia for her conference on the future of entitlements. A few months earlier, Margolies-Mezvinsky had bravely cast the deciding vote for the President's budget in the House, a vote she paid for with her seat in 1994 in a heavily Republican district. Most pols seek pork payoffs for votes like this, but Margolies-Mezvinsky was different. She asked the president to participate in this conference instead, with the refreshing attitude that if she educated her constituents on our long-term budget problems, they'd come to respect why she voted for the President's package as an important (though with its continued \$200 billion deficits, inadequate) first step toward solving them.

The prospect of Clinton talking Social Security, Medicare, or federal pensions had thrown the White House into convulsions of anxiety. The day was carefully scripted, to say the least. And by the usual standards, the conference was a success. That is, no administration official gave any indication that we'd consider doing anything that might be unpopular with anyone.

But the postmortem among staff members at the train station made clear just how thoroughly we had deceived ourselves on the subject of enti-

tlements. As Laura Tyson (now head of the White House's National Economic Council) and Treasury official Alicia Munnell complained that the Administration had taken unfair shots for having ducked the big entitlement choices, I thought, "Wait a minute. I know it's no fun to be on the receiving end of an all-day chorus of 'You didn't do enough.' But it's one thing to stick to our storyline publicly; we didn't really *believe* it, here among ourselves, did we?"

We *had* ducked the hardest choices. The criticisms were fair. I was overcome with a sinking feeling—that maybe I didn't belong on this team—when Minnesota Congressman Tim Penny, also a panelist that day, turned up on the platform for the ride back to Washington. At last, I thought, a kindred soul.

I sat with a pensive Penny on the Amtrak that night, and found myself admiring a politician with decency and commitment. An ardent deficit "hawk," he was still smarting from the defeat of a big spending-cut package he'd crafted with Republican John Kasich. (The White House had led the campaign against it.) Penny seemed almost naive when he asked me: Was the administration as cynical and manipulative as he thought? Were the future spending cuts it promised in order to clinch the budget votes in August 1993 just so much posturing?

Shame on us, I thought. While in office, Penny urged his colleagues and challenged his con-

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stituents to consider the kind of entitlement reforms the President and his handlers wouldn't touch. When he quit in frustration last year after six terms, he joined the growing roster of good guys who've decided they can make more of a difference from the outside. *Common Cents*, his first effort to do just that, confirms my impression of Penny as gutsy and honest.

*Common Cents* is a valuable addition to the roster I think of as "civics texts from hell." When they're good—and this one is—such books shatter our ideals about government, inspiring not cynicism, but a determination to make things better. (*Monthly* readers know that Charles Peters's *How Washington Really Works* is one of the classics.)

That searing fight over his cuts package included, Penny catalogues his lessons from Capitol Hill, displaying an intimate knowledge of the culture of Congress, and empathy for the frustration that grips today's voters and legislators.

After 12 years, Penny is haunted by a simple question: "Why are so many decent and honorable public servants so incapable of acting responsibly on the central issues of our day?" He organizes his answer into a taxonomy of six congressional "cultures" that he says afflict the institution and account for our lack of faith in it—the cultures of Spending, Hypocrisy, Fear, Power, Isolation, and Partisanship. The bulk of the book consists of chapters that explain and illustrate each culture in turn, in which Penny (with co-author Major Garrett, a journalist) draws on dozens of stories from his own experience to bring this analysis to life.

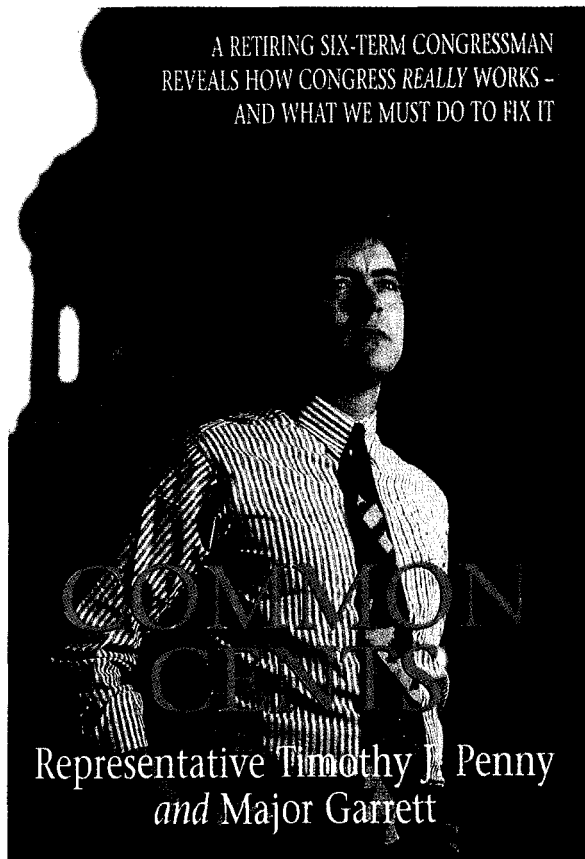
Though there's no neat line between these cultures and the themes are hardly new, Penny's fresh

examples can really get your back up. We see William Ford, the vocal "champion" of a 60-day notice before plant closings or layoffs, fire a 30-year veteran of his own committee staff with only two weeks' word. Sam Gedjenson earns the public label of "reformer" for his work on campaign finance, when he's really a PAC-dependent campaigner who used his "reform" assignment to co-opt and then kill any chance for real change. New Appropriations Committee Chairman Robert Liv-

ingston enjoys a reputation as a budget skinflint, while behind the scenes he rails at Penny for going after his lavish congressional pension. And so on and so forth. Even when the revelations aren't startling (it turns out John Dingell is turf-conscious, for example), just hearing the inside details makes for a good read.

Penny saves some of his harshest fire for the senior Democratic leadership, whose arrogance and insularity, he argues, spoiled his own party's chance to enact a reform agenda after 1992 that might have forestalled the 1994 debacle. He recounts one especially fascinating scene: After the 1992 election, Democratic leaders called an introductory meeting,

sandwiching freshmen between intimidating senior committee chairmen—a design that made it impossible for the freshmen to react honestly or even to kibbitz with each other as the old guard's marching orders came down. Penny, who has high hopes that the newer classes can become a power center that attacks the old ways, mourns the loss of the talented freshmen of 1992 who were ousted in 1994—Eric Fingerhut of Ohio, Karen Shephard of Florida, and Margolies-Mezvinsky, to name a few. And he lashes out at the eat-their-young mentality whereby Democratic leaders required such



**Penny: A man of common cents**

frosh to toe the party line on tough votes while letting members from safer districts off the hook.

As Penny notes, Washington officials carry out such carnage under a code of etiquette that forbids words like "liar" or "hypocrite." But he's now unbound. The 1994 crime bill, for example, "falsely ratif[ied] the fiction that the federal government can do something to stop crime in the streets." The cultures he describes cause his former colleagues to "engage in acts of hypocrisy that keep them in office while allowing serious problems to fester ... [and] abandon in abject fear a policy they know is right simply because pollsters tell them it's unpopular." On the budget: "Any politician who tells you Congress can balance the budget without a combination of these elements [higher taxes and controversial changes in entitlement programs] is lying. There is no other word for it." To his credit, Penny avoids any holier-than-thou preening; he admits he tacitly conspired in many of the shenanigans he decries—including his perennial defense of the infamous honeybee subsidy.

Penny's many budget stories prove that the culture of spending is truly bipartisan, not a Democratic disease, as Republicans like to pretend. He argues convincingly that constituents hate to see their benefits or subsidies cut even more than they hate tax increases, thus explaining why we get more of the latter. His history of the courageous Senate Republican effort to shave Social Security cost-of-living allowances in 1985 (and the lesson they learned when they lost the Senate in 1986 as a result) is essential for understanding why our leaders have let trillions more in debt pile up without serious efforts to stop it.

Penny does devote too much ink to amusing examples of pork spending (like subsidies for recreational gun clubs) that don't add up to much. He might have used the space instead to offer his take on the media's role in our current charades, a subject which is largely ignored in the book. And for the cynical—forgive me, I just left the White House—Penny's eagle-scout prose style can at first be a little off-putting (e.g. "Too many Americans have forgotten the first three words of our nation's Constitution: *We the People*.") But Penny is the real McCoy. He might sound overly earnest at first, but he is sincere.

As for Penny's plan for reforms, some items—downsizing committees and staff, apply-

ing all laws to Congress, and imposing term limits on committee chairmen—have a dated feel, since they're already being implemented. He urges us to send more women and minorities to Congress, and, when in doubt, to vote against lawyers. His best proposals are strict limits on campaign spending and a requirement that lawmakers raise more than 50 percent of their campaign contributions from home.

Most importantly, when it comes to fixes, Penny repeatedly reminds us that as voters we reward and sustain today's pernicious congressional cultures through our irrational demands. We want the feds to do something about crime, but then carp when "three strikes and you're out" is all we get. We want a balanced budget with no cuts or taxes that affect us, and then we complain about rising debt. Fed up with this cycle, retiring Congressman Fred Grandy of Iowa recently called for term limits—for constituents. Penny reproaches us similarly. "If you want a better government," he says, "you first have to become a better citizen."

This book is an excellent guide for citizens who want to catalyze the renewal our Congress needs. □

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# Political Booknotes

## **Joe Alsop's Cold War: A Study of Journalistic Influence and Intrigue**

*Edwin M. Yoder*

*University of North Carolina Press, \$24.95*

**By Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr.**

This intelligent and engaging book is more a sketch of a memorable personality than a full account of Joseph Alsop and the Cold War. Perhaps, given the short attention span of Americans today, it is necessary to recall who Joe Alsop was. In the age of the column, an era long since passed, Joe Alsop and his brother Stewart ranked in style and influence with Walter Lippmann and James Reston. Today, I fear, Joe is largely remembered, if at all, as a voice thundering on about captured-enemy documents in Vietnam. He was much more than that, as Edwin Yoder's book makes at least partially clear.

But by making Alsop and the Cold War his subject, Yoder cannot do full justice to Alsop's role as a young and decidedly liberal reporter in New Deal Washington. And by bringing the narrative to an end at around 1960, he omits Alsop's stentorian support of the Vietnam War and the more frenetic and apocalyptic—"doomed is what we are"—chapters in Alsop's war against communism. Still, Yoder evokes Joe and the Washington of Joe's day with skill and affection. He defines and explores the apparent paradox in Joe's Cold War journalism with fine judgment.

That paradox is the alleged contradiction between Joe's hatred of communism in the world and his hatred of McCarthyism at home, as shown by his brave and undaunted defense of

dissenters with many of whose policy recommendations he vigorously disagreed. But did not his passionate advocacy of the Cold War sow the seeds from which McCarthyism sprang? Were not the Alsops, Yoder asks, "fighting a fire that they themselves had helped to set"?

While Yoder agrees that the Alsops, and more especially Joe, much exaggerated the Soviet threat, he rightly calls the argument that Alsopian hyperbole contributed to McCarthyism "not persuasive." The Alsops regarded communism as a danger to America but not as a danger in America. There was no great inconsistency in being against both Joe Stalin and Joe McCarthy. And, of the Joes, Stalin was far more responsible for McCarthy than was Alsop.

Yoder also writes about the long-held secrecy of Joe's homosexuality and his entrapment by a KGB provocateur in Moscow. If this episode proves anything, it disproves the old canard that homosexuals are peculiarly susceptible to blackmail. The KGB photographs did not deter Joe in the slightest; indeed, he became thereafter even more hyperbolic in his denunciations of the Soviet Union. Nor, oddly, does the KGB appear to have tried to use the evidence against him, except for a puzzling and ineffectual dissemination of the photographs in Washington a dozen years later.

I regret that Yoder does not tell us more about Stewart Alsop, a notable writer and gentleman in his own right. And I would have wished that Yoder carried his account through the Vietnam recriminations, a time in which Joe, but not Stewart, severed relationships (temporarily) with old

friends like me. But one can be grateful for a thoughtful and appreciative memoir of a formidable, irascible, and curiously lovable man.

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## **Inside the Reinvention Machine: Appraising Governmental Reform**

*Donald F. Kettl and*

*John J. DiIulio, Jr., editors*

*Brookings Books, \$34.95*

**By Timothy Noah**

The Republican Congress's recent crusade to dismantle much of the federal government has caused the Clinton Administration considerable heartache, not least because it has obscured the White House's own ongoing efforts to "reinvent" government. By focusing its energies on defeating Republican bills such as a measure to require elaborate, peer-reviewed cost-benefit analyses before new regulations are issued, the White House has inevitably come off looking like a defender of the regulatory state. But the truth is this administration doesn't like much of the big-government machinery it inherited, and it hates creating the appearance that it does.

Still, the Republican assault on government does have the advantage of casting the rather ho-hum accomplishments of Vice President Al Gore's reinvention team, formally known as the National Performance Review (NPR), in a decidedly more favorable light. Okay, so the government hasn't become sleek and super-