

**ROLL CALL:
ONE YEAR IN THE UNITED STATES SENATE**
Senator William S. Cohen / Simon and Schuster / \$14.95

Fred Barnes

The old saw in Washington has it that, Boy, if only reporters could write what they really know about senators and congressmen, you'd get hellacious stories about sexual hijinks and booze binges and heavy traffic in brown envelopes under the table.

Don't believe it. For an evening of unrelieved ennui, try eavesdropping on the barroom conversation of a half-dozen Capitol Hill reporters. You will hear few tales of Rita Jenrette and Paula Parkinson, even fewer of sinister lobbyists bending Congress to their will. But voiced in rich detail will be all you didn't need to know about some senator's off-the-record assessment of the Japanese auto import issue or a House member's snide comment about a colleague.

Which leads to William Cohen's diary of his rookie year, 1979, in the Senate. This is not a great book about the American system of government. Tocqueville can relax; *Democracy in America* hasn't been supplanted. Nor is it a luminous piece of literature. Cohen sometimes overwrites and his metaphors are occasionally jarring. But *Roll Call* has the saving grace of unsparing accuracy, and that is no small feat. Senators are rarely so publicly honest about the splendid tedium of their work.

If you are eager, then, to discover how that elitist crowd in Congress spends its time, turn to this book. It captures what are the salient but seldom cited characteristics of congressional life: the parade of small-bore legislative events, the mindless frenzy, the superficiality, the relentless pettiness, all of it made palatable by the chance of fame and a brush or two with something momentous. By the end, Cohen has destroyed that old myth about reporters brimming with racy stories. They can't know what isn't so, though they might be willing to report it anyway.

Cohen is a 40-year-old Republican from Maine. He is an interesting

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fellow aside from the peculiarity of having written a book. His father, a baker in Bangor, is Jewish, his mother an Irish Protestant. He is a Unitarian. He is also a poet, with a published volume of poems to his credit. Robert Frost he isn't, but some of his poems are graceful and moving. He was mayor of Bangor before winning the House seat from northern Maine in 1972.

Fame came quickly in Washington. He served on the House Judiciary Committee when it took up articles of impeachment against Richard M. Nixon in 1974. Cohen argued his position ably and voted to impeach. In 1978, he ran for the Senate against a truly lackluster incumbent, William Hathaway. Cohen played up his own support for the Kemp-Roth tax cut and criticized Hathaway as a liberal of the knee-jerk school. He ousted Hathaway by nearly a 2-to-1 margin.

Cohen hastily learned that while a senator's job is more exalted than a House member's, the work is the same. The issues involved, like saving Loring Air Force Base in northern Maine, are usually non-seismic. And there is always the obligation to appear before every group that might feel snubbed otherwise.

One April day, Cohen writes, "I flew from Boston to Augusta, Maine, where I addressed the Maine White House Conference on Libraries. I stayed on the platform to listen to the speaker who followed me—an articulate librarian from New Hampshire. I had not anticipated that he would talk for more than 30 minutes and started to squirm as each minute beyond the half-hour margin I had allowed myself ticked off. I arrived nearly 40 minutes late for a press conference that I had scheduled at the state capitol."

Seven months later, Cohen and Senator Gary Hart, the Colorado Democrat, appeared in St. Louis to discuss "Issues of the 80s" before a gathering of public relations men. "At 7 a.m., we were extracted from our rooms by several aggressive young executives so that we could have breakfast with the executive committee responsible for putting on

the program," Cohen writes. "At 7:30 a.m., before coffee or juice had been served, the president of the organization, an eager, hard-charging public relations expert, turned to me and said, 'Tell me all the positive things we can look forward to in the 1980s.'"

Cohen rolled his eyes at Hart. "Actually I didn't come here to tell you about all the positive things you can look forward to," he said. "I came to talk about the mess that we're in and hopefully suggest some ways to get out of it." But that wasn't good enough for the P.R. executive. "You mean you can't tell me one good thing that America has to look forward to?"

Senators don't get much respect from lobbyists, either, according to Cohen. "There is a brazenness that seems to have taken hold of the [lobbying] process, an arrogance and disdain that makes a pathetic mockery of the legislative process," he writes. But lobbyists are not the corrupting influence that Jack Anderson and Common Cause portray. Rather, they are an annoyance and an embarrassment.

"The halls of Congress have become so crowded with professional lobbyists that congressmen often are forced to push their way through the throng to reach the chamber to vote," he continues. Cohen eluded them by regularly taking the side stairs of the Capitol. "I don't know if any votes are ever changed by the pleas and importunings that reverberate and ricochet around our hallowed halls . . . But it does give the impression that an auction is going on for the highest bid and that the merits of the legislation and the welfare of the public are thrown out in the process."

Cohen's reasons for writing this book are not obvious. It may be that he just likes to write. *Roll Call* is clearly not the sort of boring manifesto that politicians often have ghostwritten for them prior to running for president. Nor is it ego-inflating. Cohen does not have a pre-Copernican view of American politics. The system does not revolve around him. Two months after coming to the Senate, he climbed on the subway to the Capitol, only to be told, "Hey, don't sit in the front." Why not? he asked. "Because a senator is coming, that's why." □

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The Village Voice

In another of his grand and gorgeous pratfalls, the ill-starred Alexander Cockburn lends evidence to one of Tom Bethell's more piquant observations, though Cockburn's intention is, alas, quite different:

It was Ita Ford, one of the murdered Maryknoll nuns who said just before her death, "The US is now going to train Salvadoran troops in Panama . . . it's reprehensible. I think that sometime the US has to realize that it does not own Central America or any other part of the world, that people have the right to shape their own destinies and choose the type of government they want and make their own choices. We don't lose anything . . . we don't lose Cuba, we don't lose Nicaragua, because they were never ours to lose . . ."

Poor woman. She did not live to see the Reagan entourage come to Washington or read Tom Bethell in the *American Spectator* writing about "radical nuns, one of the prime horrors of our time: They have stopped believing in God and in an afterlife. In the process they have transformed themselves into bulldike socialists who will spend the rest of their lives attempting to destroy in others the loyalties and beliefs that they destroyed in themselves."

Cute.

[February 4--February 10, 1981]

The Soho News

The eloquent Philip Nobile, *vivace con sniffles*, in an open letter to Billie Jean King, embattled symbol of the Wheaties woman:

Anti-homosexuality has become the anti-Semitism of sex. You could help cut the

comedy. Silence only adds to your shame.

This is a crucial moment for young lesbian athletes. You are their hero too. If you betray yourself, you betray them. The next kid who comes along and runs into homosexual blackmail will pay for your Uncle Tomism. If you admitted your sexual preference without tears and challenged all comers—the WTA, the sponsors, the players and the fans—you would win in straight sets. Go for it, Billie Jean.

Be a credit to your race.

[May 13, 1981]

democracy

Sheldon S. Wolin, professor of social science, slams down hard on the alarm to awaken snoozing Americans, even as he raises the curtain on a new swindle, namely, his idiotic new journal: *democracy*:

The reasons for beginning this journal now and calling it *democracy* come down to what, in our view, is the most significant political fact about contemporary American life: the steady transformation of America into an anti-democratic society. Every one of the country's primary institutions—the business corporation, the government bureaucracy, the trade union, the research and education industries, the mass propaganda and entertainment media, and the health and welfare system—is antidemocratic in spirit, design, and operation. Each is hierarchical in structure, authority oriented, opposed in principle to equal participation, unaccountable to the citizenry, elitist and managerial, and disposed to concentrate increasing power in the hands of the few and to reduce political life to administration.

[January, 1981]

An American House of Lords

Surely on an informal basis it does exist. We know that there is a breed of American men who bring everything they touch to ruin, yet continue to rise in the esteem of their fellows and in the preferment of an unaccountably grateful nation. *The American Spectator* says these fellows constitute an American peerage and urges that they be accorded all the rights and privileges of same. This month we salute a man whose skyrocketing career has taken him from the governorship of North Carolina to the presidency of Duke University to the Board of Directors of the Children's TV workshop to a campaign for the presidency. Early on this prescient politico perceived the threat embodied in Jimmy Carter's run for the presidency and without hesitating careened the single-prop airplane of his political career into the fuselage of the Georgian's juggernaut campaign, alas, causing not a dent. Although this effort at political obscurity may now be forgotten, our honoree eagerly persists in his lonely self-appointed cause of consigning himself to oblivion by publishing such notable tomes as *But What About the People?*, and, most recently, *A Danger to Democracy*. For these and many other accomplishments, *The American Spectator* hereby inducts Terry Sanford into the American House of Lords.

The San Francisco Chronicle

Concluding remarks on the life of Robert Byther, patriot and *philosophe*, whose demise came about on December 1, 1981 when he served the commonweal by hauling himself up San Francisco's Golden Gate Bridge and *allons y!*:

Byther, who joined the Coast Guard in June, was described by his family as an intense, meticulous idealist. He said in his letter he was jumping "because the guiding ideals of my life will not let me serve Ronald Reagan as president."

He chose December 1 to leap, he said, because it was the start of the Christmas season—a time when he said people think about peace and love. . . .

Byther's family believes he did what he planned to do—leap to his death to call the country's attention to the "real danger" presented by the nation's turn to the right.

"Reagan is a tool of the rich, of the secret power brokers that will have access to the machinery of government as never before, and is supported by many of the most anti-progressive elements of our society," Byther wrote in the neatly typed, mimeographed letter. He also lamented the defeat of several liberals in the U.S. Senate. . . .

Robert and Pat Byther both grew up in Southern California. They met three years ago at a Star Trek convention in Los Angeles, where Robert was wearing a Star Trek-style uniform. They joined a Star Trek club, had Star Trek posters on their walls and read a lot of science fiction. They had talked enough about death for Pat to know how Robert felt about it.

"He thought that when we die here we go on to a second level, a better way of being, where there aren't all the bad things and you're less inhibited," his wife recalled in a telephone interview from her apartment in Newport News, VA. . . .

"I believe he feels he has given his life for his country. In order to get our attention, he killed himself, just as the Buddhist monks did in Vietnam," his father said in a telephone interview from the family's Anaheim home.

[December 4, 1980]

The Great Books Series

Standing in the vestibule of this unusual tome, *Women Who Kill*, Miss Ann Jones, explains her purpose and insight to the generations: And this book is mostly about fear: the fears of men who, even as they shape society, are desperately afraid of women, and so have fashioned a world in which women come and go only in certain rooms; and about the fears of those women who, finding the rooms too narrow and the door still locked, lie in wait or set the place afire.

But are such women a fit subject for serious historical (or herstorical) study? Historians often assume that women have not significantly acted, but have been acted upon. Women are history's great blob of putty. So we have books—

accurate and valuable books—on how women have been defrauded and oppressed by capitalism, medicine, psychology, the law, the universities, and our own mothers. Other historians, believing that some women did act, and from enlightened self-interest at that, have given us women in the antislavery movement, in the suffrage movement, in the labor movement: women like the Grimkes, Anthony, Cady Stanton, Goldman, Eastman, Mother Jones, who have said and done great things on behalf of themselves and others. Yet our great women are few. This year more women will kill their children than will be appointed to the judicial bench. More women will kill their husbands than will sit in the halls of Congress. A baby girl born tomorrow stands a chance of growing up to stick a kitchen knife into an assaultive husband; but her chances of becoming President are too slim to be statistically significant. The story of women who kill is the story of women.

[Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1980]

The Los Angeles Times

High-grade oratory from the illustrious Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives—presumably after a three-martini lunch:

Red-faced and pounding the table, his voice booming, O'Neill described himself as "one of the big spenders of all time" and proudly listed millions of dollars he said he had added to past budgets to aid research on problems of disease and the handicapped.

He listed \$160 million in funds for breast cancer research and \$45 million to aid the growth of dwarfs, a research program that made it possible for dwarfs, who normally grow to an average size of 26 inches, to grow as tall as 52 inches.

He pointed out that there are 150,000 dwarfs in the United States and said another 6,000 are born every year.

[April 8, 1981]

The Washington Post

Law and order news from the great state of California, birthplace of Modern Presidents:

A leading member of the California Assembly says legislators should move to thwart potential criminals while they're still in the womb and suggests that "gentle" approaches to childbirth could curb violent tendencies from developing.

John Vasconcellos, chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, Wednesday released a report that offers an unconventional approach to dealing with this year's No. 1 political issue: crime.

The report says "neurological abnormalities in the infant . . . may result in a subsequent predisposition to violent behavior."

Such damage, it says, can be caused by pregnant woman's lack of good nutrition, ingestion of alcohol and drugs, stress or the use of anesthetics or forceps during delivery.

The report was prepared by the California commission on Crime Control and Violence Prevention, created this