

FROM THE MANSION TO THE HILL
WITH APOLOGIES TO HANK WILLIAMS AND HIS
"MANSION ON THE HILL"

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ATHENAEUM SOCIETY
MARCH 6, 1997

The battle rages on the hill; shots from the left, shots from the right; volleys are tossed back and forth. Two opposing forces doing what opposing forces are supposed to do—carry on the conflict.

The conflict? Nothing as devastating as a world war or what William Turner calls “The War of Northern Aggression”. No, the hill is Capitol Hill, and the battleground is that blood-stained, tobacco-tinctured arena of hot foul-smelling air we know as Congress. And the President too is not immune from this war, as he was in 1965 and Vietnam.

Remember when it was ‘Gennifer Flowers & Bill Clinton’? Now its ‘Paula Jones & Bill Clinton’. Poor Guy—trying to further harmonious relations between the sexes and what does he get for all his efforts? I’ll tell you what he gets—press coverage, lots of press coverage! “Why me”? I dare say he rightfully asks himself.

Perhaps because he is one of only 41 people who have held the office. Think of that for a moment—over two-hundred years and only 41 presidents. He is an easy target, one against many, so to speak.

But let us not forget our main force in this engagement, Congress. In the same two-hundred years, over 11,000 people have sat in **that** austere assemblage. Surely, some of them got some press occasionally. Yes, they did. The American people have been exposed to some, what my mother used to call ‘real humdingers’.

Consider the case of one unnamed senator, Mr. President, and take heart. Occupying a room at the Willard Hotel, the senator received a call around midnight from the hotel manager. “Senator,” he said, “you have a woman in that room with you and you are registered as a single occupant. I thought I should warn you that the house detective is quite disturbed.” To this the senator replied: “I’ll have you know that the lady is my secretary and I don’t appreciate being disturbed.” With that he banged down the receiver. A few minutes later the manager rang the room again. “Senator,” he said, “I apologize once more for disturbing you, but I think you ought to know that the woman in your room is really a most notorious prostitute known all down Pennsylvania Avenue as such. For the sake of your own career and reputation I tell you this.” “Notorious !” cried the senator. “Notorious you say! Why I had no idea! I shall discharge her in the morning!”

Then there is the case of Pennsylvania senator Boies Penrose. One fine afternoon, during a yachting party, the senator emerged from his cabin, quite drunk and stark naked, and approached the yacht's rail for a dive. There was a scream from one of the women aboard. Turning around and seeing her holding her hands in front of her eyes, he calmly stated: "Madam, I grant that mine is not the form of Apollo, but it is too late for either of us to do anything about that. But if I present what to you are strange and unfamiliar phenomena it is you who should be ashamed, not I." With that he leaped into the water.

Perhaps our President should take note of the retort given by a western state senator who had been receiving a great deal of criticism back home about his behavior in Washington. Hastening home and addressing an entourage of supporters, he stated flatly: "Fellow citizens, my heart is deeply touched as my eyes behold this splendid assemblage of my constituents. During my absence in Congress, my friends have spoken in my vindication. I am here now to speak for myself. Vile slanders have been put in circulation against me. I have been accused of being a defaulter, I have been accused of being a drunkard; I have been accused of being a gambler, but thank God, fellow citizens, no man has ever dared to assail my moral character!"

Yes, Mr. President, you must learn to "tell it like it is." Go ahead, speak out, plain and simple.

In 1973, when beef prices were soaring, Chicago Congressman Frank Annunzio, often known to "tell it like it is," introduced an amendment in the House Banking and Currency Committee that froze the price of beef, and succeeded in getting it adopted. Afterwards, *Wall Street Journal* reporter Al Hunt interviewed him. "This is a victory for the American people," Annunzio told him. But overnight, the beef lobby went into action and the next day the committee voted to reconsider and rejected the freeze on prices. Hunt at once sought another interview with Annunzio and asked him for his reaction. "The American people got fucked," Annunzio said tartly. "I can't quote that," Hunt protested, "this is a family newspaper." Pondering for a moment, Annunzio said, "Then tell them the American family got fucked!"

Yes, tell it like it is. Our Congress has been blessed with a number of fine speakers and a few eloquent orators; Henry Clay and Daniel Webster first come to mind. But occasionally attempts are made that were better left untried.

One evening Sen. Claude A. Swanson of Virginia made a particularly long and rambling speech at a banquet. Afterward an old lady came up to him to shake his hand. "How did you like the speech?" he asked her. "I liked it fine," she replied, "but it seems to me that you missed several excellent opportunities." Swanson looked puzzled. "Several opportunities for what?" he asked. "To quit," she snapped back.

Then there was Kentucky's own Alben Barkley. Reading a prepared speech to the Alumni Association of Marvin College, the senator thought he had done a pretty good job, but when he asked the chairman of the association about it afterward, he was told: "Well, I have three criticisms. In the first place, you read it. In the second place, you read it poorly. In the third place, it was not worth reading."

Former Speaker of the House Sam Rayburn was fond of saying: "I have sat in the Speaker's chair and watched many a Congressman talk himself right out of Congress." But as we said, fortunately some were very good at the podium.

Oregon Senator Wayne Morse, an independent Republican who turned Democrat in 1952, had a profound grasp of basic issues and just such a persuasive way of communicating his point of view. Oregon trade publication editor Carl Crow refused to attend a Republican rally where Morse was scheduled to speak. He explained: "That son of a bitch has changed my mind twice, and I'll be damned if I'll let him do it again!"

Sometimes the best speech is no speech at all. Senator Edmund Muskie liked to tell the story about the man who visited a small coastal town in Maine. He tried to start conversation with the townspeople, but, try as he may, he couldn't get anyone to respond. Finally, in exasperation, he asked one man if there was a law against talking in the town. "Not exactly a law," the man said after a lengthy pause, "but we have an understanding not to speak unless it improves on the silence."

But Congressmen are politicians, and politicians must speak, especially during campaigns. Often asked to define a stance on current concerns of the electorate, Congressmen sometimes leave no doubt about where they stand.

Asked by his constituents about his views on prohibition, Republican Congressman Fred Schegel of Iowa had a standard reply:

“Friends, I had not intended to discuss this controversial subject at this time. However, I want you to know that I do not run away from controversy.. You have asked me how I feel about whiskey. Here is how I stand on the issue. If when you say ‘whiskey’ you mean the devil’s brew, the poison scourge, the bloody monster that defiles innocence, dethrones reason, destroys the home, creates misery and poverty, YEA, literally takes the bread from the mouths of little children; if you mean the evil drink that topples Christian men and women from the pinnacles of righteous, gracious living into the bottomless pit of degradation and despair, shame, helplessness and hopelessness—then certainly I am against it with all of my power.

“But if, when you say ‘whiskey’ you mean the oil of conversation, the philosophic wine, the ale that is consumed when good fellows get together, that puts a song in their hearts and laughter on their lips and the warm glow of contentment in their eyes; if you mean the drink that enables a man to magnify his joy and happiness, and to forget, if only for a little while, life’s great tragedies, heartbreaks and sorrows; if you mean that drink the same of which pours into our treasuries untold millions of dollars to provide tender care for our little crippled children, our blind, our deaf, our dumb, our aged and infirm, and to build highways, hospitals and schools—then certainly I am in favor of it. This is my stand, and I will not compromise!”

Also adept at stating plainly what he thought, was the candidate who ‘turned the table,’ so to speak. When asked by a temperance advocate, “Do you take alcoholic drinks?” he responded: “Before I answer that question, I want to know whether it is put as an inquiry or as an invitation.”

Quick thinking and the ability to turn obvious disasters into welcome victories has saved many a campaigner. Consider the tale of New York Congressman Charles A. Towne, a quick-witted man known for his oratorical prowess.

Holding a big rally in Washington, the Democrats chose Towne as their keynote speaker. But to add zest to the meeting, they picked another NY congressman, Bourke Cockran, to **introduce** Towne, because he too was renowned for his speech-making. Well, there’s an old saw that goes something like ‘no two songbirds will sit on the same limb and sing at the same time.’ Sure enough, the adage proved correct.

Forgetting his role as ‘curtain-raiser’ only, Cockran proceeded to spend **two hours** on his introduction. By the time Towne got to speak, he was furious. But, containing his temper, he walked calmly to the podium when Cockran finished. “Ladies and gentlemen,” he began, “this **introduction** reminds me of an incident out in a little town in Minnesota. A man there owned a hog which he kept in a pasture in one corner of the town. Every morning and every evening he drove this hog entirely through the town, out to his home where he lived in another corner of the town, fed him, and then drove him back to the pasture. Finally exciting the curiosity of the people who noticed it one day someone asked him why he did such a thing as that. The man said that he was simply taking the hog to feed him. “Well,” asked the inquisitor, “it takes so much time to do that.” “Well,” responded the owner, “what the hell is time to a hog?” With that Towne sat down amid uproarious applause. He and Cockran never spoke to each other again.

Sometimes the ‘short and sweet’ route is the most direct. Sort of ‘get it down to the lowest common denominator’ approach. Thruston B. Morton liked to tell the story about the precinct captain, a woman, who in 1946, gave these instructions on voting for the correct party, using the then new-fangled voting machines.

“Now its really simple,” she started. “When you go into the booth, you’ll see an old rooster. He’ll be wiry, skinny, and scrawny. You’ll know you couldn’t even make soup out of him. Then you’ll see a nice little log cabin. It will be the kind of cozy place where you could find protection from the wildest winter storm or the worst of summer heat. You’ll feel right at home with that little log cabin. You just take the lever beside the cabin and pull and pull and pull. Why electing a congressman is just like flushing a toilet!”

Sometimes, no matter what candidates said, they just couldn’t get their point across. During Barkley’s first race for Congress in 1912, he took his son Bud along while campaigning outside of Paducah, which at the time was in an uproar because the local Baptist church was in the midst of some kind of doctrinal dispute that had everyone’s attention away from the campaign. Stopping at a service station, Barkley decided to do a little politicking. “My name is Barkley,” he told the attendant, who was filling the tank. “Barkus?” said the attendant. “No. Barkley. Alben Barkley.” “Glad to know you Mr. Allen,” said the attendant. “No,” cried Barkley. “The name is Barkley. Barkley of Paducah.” “Oh yea—Paducah,” said the attendant, his face lighting up. “That’s where the Baptists are having all that trouble, ain’t it?”

“Bud,” sighed Barkley as they drove away, “I don’t think that man knew me.”

More than one politician has come to realize that they are not on everybody’s list of important personages.

Seventy-five years after Barkley’s encounter, New Jersey Senator Bill Bradley got **his** ‘come-uppance.’ In 1987, Bradley was invited to make a speech at a banquet and was sitting at the head table waiting his turn to speak. When the waiter came over at one point and put a pat of butter on his plate, Bradley stopped him. “Excuse me,” he said, “can I have two pats of butter?” “Sorry,” said the waiter, “one pat per person.” “I don’t think you know who I am,” said Bradley. “I’m Bill Bradley, the Rhodes scholar, professional basketball player, world champion, United States Senator.” “Well, maybe you don’t know who I am,” retorted the waiter. “Well as a matter of fact, I don’t,” admitted Bradley. “Who are you?” “I’m the guy,” said the waiter, “who’s in charge of butter!”

Then there’s my all-time favorite story about putting people, especially politicians, in their place.

Shortly after Harry Truman Became President in April 1945, his good friend Sam Rayburn said to him: “Harry, this will be the last time that I will address you in such an informal manner, calling you by your first name. From here on out I will address you as ‘Mr. President’ because I think that’s the way our relationship ought to be. But I have just one other thing I want to say to you.. While you are President of the United States, you are going to have a staff around you that is going to tell you that you are the smartest person in the world, and that’s going to have a real effect on you. But the truth is, Mr. President, you and I both know its a damn lie!”

So, Mr. President Bill Clinton, Rhodes scholar, smart man surrounded by a loving staff, perhaps you could learn from your predecessors in the political arena. Maybe you need a few witty retorts in your repertoire. I, for one, think you need to inject a little humor. Take a lesson from Gerald ‘if Lincoln were alive today, he’d be turning over in his grave’ Ford, when he said that if you are asked to make a speech, the first thing you need to do is decide what you want to say. Or Richard Gephardt: “I don’t see why the Arabs and Jews couldn’t sit down and settle this thing like good Christians.”

You have sinned Mr. President, or so they say; mine is not to judge you, but you should at least learn from it and, who knows, maybe even turn it to your advantage. Hell, you might get lucky; lucky like former Speaker Tip O'Neill:

President Reagan, Bob Dole, and O'Neill all died and went to Heaven. They got to the pearly gates together, and stood there, somewhat nervously, until a voice boomed out: "President Reagan, go into the room on the right." Reagan went in and found himself in a room with a mad dog. "President Reagan, you have sinned. You must spend all eternity with this mad dog." Meanwhile Dole and O'Neill were still outside, waiting anxiously. "Mr. Dole, go into the room directly in front of you." Dole did so and found himself in a room with a gorilla. "Senator Dole, you have sinned. You must spend all eternity with this gorilla." By this time O'Neill was getting pretty worried. After a couple more minutes the voice spoke again. "Speaker O'Neill, go into the room on your left." He did as he was instructed. To his amazement he found himself alone in a room with Jane Mansfield. Suddenly the voice boomed out: "Jane Mansfield, you have sinned....."