

“Dapper Dan” Flood

PENNSYLVANIA'S LEGENDARY CONGRESSMAN

by William C. Kashatus III

How easy it is to think of history as something that happened in another place! Even for people like me—who have grown with the 20th century and seen much history made (and I like to think I made a little myself)—it is somehow hard to remember that our lives and our experiences in our own Valley are as much a part of history as events in Washington or Philadelphia or places halfway around the globe.

Daniel J. Flood, 1983



During the early morning hours of Friday, June 23, 1972, U. S. Representative Daniel J. Flood sat working in his Washington apartment when news of the devastation in his congressional district in northeastern Pennsylvania reached him. Rains of tropical storm Agnes had caused the Susquehanna River to rise forty feet. Water was pouring over the dikes protecting the twenty-two communities clustered around Wilkes-Barre and two hundred thousand people in the Wyoming Valley were homeless.

Within an hour, Flood had commandeered the helicopter of an old congressional friend, Secretary of Defense Melvin Laird, then flew to Wilkes-Barre, and personally took charge of the rescue and relief mission. Like a general arriving to save his troops from a terrible defeat, Flood, with his typical flair for the dramatic, declared: "Stand by! This is going to be one Flood against another!"

During the rescue operation, the flamboyant congressman worked twenty hours a day. He secured forty helicopters to hoist marooned residents from homes, tree tops, and cars. He fought both state and federal bureaucracies to obtain medical supplies and had fifteen hundred troops flown in to prevent civil unrest and looting. When Flood met resistance from one member of the military brass, all that he had to do was to remind the general that he, "Dapper Dan" Flood, *was* the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee. He received what he had asked for.

Two days later, on Sunday, June 25, Flood—wearing a vivid purple Edwardian-style suit and standing on a hill with a sea of muddy waters in the background—appeared on television and announced, "Today I have ordered the Army Corps of Engineers not to allow the Susquehanna River to rise one more inch." It never did. Nobody argued with Dan Flood. Neither Agnes, nor the Army, nor—at times, it seemed—the Almighty Himself.

Flood was a "congressman's congressman," who understood the complexities of power politics and played the political game with sheer genius and highly entertaining flair. With the exception of election defeats in 1946 and 1952 and his resignation from office on bribery charges in 1980, Flood's public career was one of unparalleled success in the accumulation of power at the national level and the use of that power to achieve practical results for his constituents. He was the consummate pork barrel politician. Not only did he understand what voters wanted, but he delivered time and again by the common practices that greased the wheels of the political process in the post-World War II era: persuasion, manipulation, arm-twisting, and grandiloquent oratory rarely matched by his congressional colleagues. Dan Flood was Pennsylvania's storied congressman, a legend among the mayors and shakers on Capitol Hill.

Born on November 26, 1903, in Hazleton, Luzerne County, Dan Flood was one of three children of Patrick and Sarah McCarthy Flood. Shortly after his birth, the Irish Catholic family moved to Wilkes-Barre where Patrick Flood found employment as a tavern keeper. When his mother died at an early age, young Dan moved to St. Augustine, Florida, to live with his maternal grandfather, Daniel J. McCarthy, for whom he was named. McCarthy, a retired lawyer for the United Mine Workers of America, exerted the greatest influence on his grandson. He cultivated a strong sense of discipline in the youngster by sending him to the Florida Military Academy, and imbued him with a fierce patriotism by spending countless hours quizzing him on people, places, and events in American history. "I can remember when I was five years old," Flood recalled years later, "and my grandfather asked me, 'Dan, what would you do if

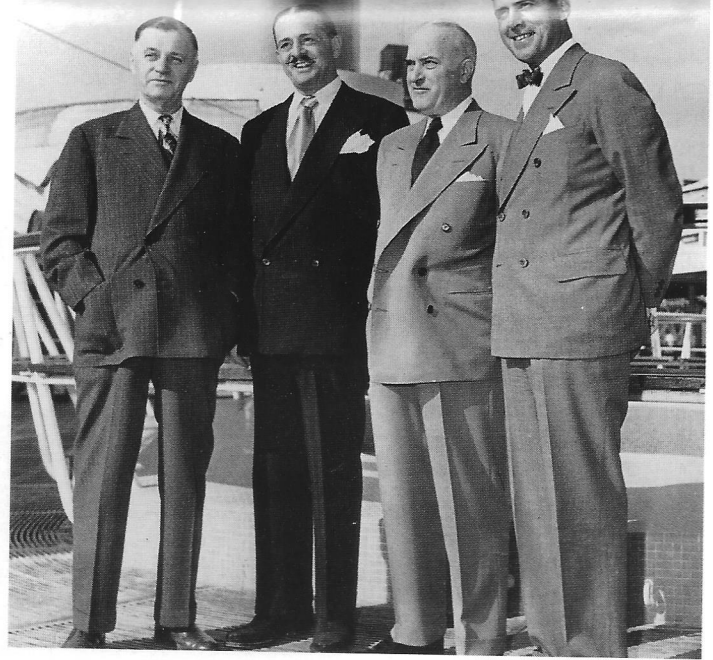
someone insulted the flag?' And I said, 'I'd stand tall in my sailor boy suit and say shoot him on the spot!'" Returning to Wilkes-Barre a confident, self-assured teenager, Flood attended Coughlin High School where he played football and was voted class president. In 1921, he entered Syracuse University and became active in a variety of extracurricular activities, including debate, theater, music, and athletics (particularly boxing). After graduation in 1925 he briefly attended Harvard Law School, withdrawing to fulfill his dream of becoming a professional actor. Acting was "Dapper Dan" Flood's true passion, and his success was immediate. By 1927 he had distinguished himself with the Manhattan Players Theater Company, one of New York City's professional acting troupes, and had captured leading roles in such popular plays as *White Cargo* and *The Witching Hour*. It was in the role of a southern plantation owner in *White Cargo* that Flood grew the handlebar mustache that would become



Daniel J. Flood (1903-1994), Pennsylvania's controversial congressman.

a trademark during his political career. He appeared in some fifty productions during a three-year span but decided to return to law school, this time at Dickinson School of Law in Carlisle, Cumberland County. Theater remained a true passion throughout his life. Even while busy establishing his political career, Flood continued to act, and on occasion, directed a production for the Little Theater, an amateur acting company in Wilkes-Barre.

During the thirties, Flood, practicing law in Wilkes-Barre, became active in local and state Democratic Party politics, and learned the practical public knowledge and legal skills he would later need to become an effective legislator on Capitol Hill. Among the many positions he held with the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were deputy attorney general, counsel for the Liquor Control Board, Bureau of Public Assistance disbursement director, and executive assistant to the state treasurer. It



For many of us . . . the Susquehanna is first and foremost the source of terrible disaster in 1972. But how many of us—hurrying across the Breslau Bridge or the Market Street Bridge or the Fort Jenkins Bridge—ever pause, however briefly and however infrequently, to think about the river and the Valley? How many of us recall that a mighty army once camped along our Susquehanna's banks? How many of us know that a ditch—a little canal four feet deep and forty feet wide and 18 miles long (built for \$234,070.17)—first brought prosperity to the Valley from Nanticoke to the mouth of the Lackawanna in Pittston?

Daniel J. Flood, 1983

was during this time he met Catherine Swank, a high school teacher and local actress who shared Flood's charismatic presence. To those who knew them both, it seemed only natural that they should marry. Catherine would prove to be the bedrock of personal support her husband needed to address the many needs of his constituents during the thirty-two years of his congressional career.

Daniel J. Flood was elected to the United States House of Representatives for the first time in 1944. He represented the Eleventh Congressional District of Pennsylvania which encompasses the city of Wilkes-Barre and five counties—Carbon, Columbia, Luzerne, Montour, and Sullivan—in northeastern Pennsylvania. Located in what was once the prosperous and influential anthracite region (where the terms "King Coal" and "Coal Barons" had been commonly used) and populated by large numbers of immigrant workers from Eastern Europe, the district had fallen on hard times. After World War II, the hard coal industry was sharply declining. Competition from bituminous (or soft) coal—which is cheaper, easier to mine, and more abundant—as well as gas and oil, resulted in massive unemployment. With an aging population, decaying towns, and few prospects of gainful employment for the young, Flood's district was designated as a "depressed area." The fact that no major roads led into the region, and that the closest fully-equipped hospital was as far away as Philadelphia, made his quest for success in the nation's capital seem even more insurmountable.

"When I came to Congress in 1944," Flood once recalled, "my district was exporting one thing—high school graduates. Coal mining was dead. People told me, 'Get us something big in here, like Lockheed or Boeing.' Well, nonsense! I didn't want any one-shot industry. I wanted diversity. I wanted companies that made shoes, brooms, whatever. But not any one-shot deal." His primary agenda was to reduce unemployment and to entice a host of new businesses to his district. He accomplished these goals by promoting a series of redevelopment projects that eventually transformed a depressed economy based on dwindling anthracite deposits to a more diverse economy relying heavily on manufacturing.

Although President Dwight D. Eisenhower's administration was reluctant to support such redevelopment programs, Flood



Representative Flood joins President John F. Kennedy and Vice President Lyndon B. Johnson for signing of the Area Redevelopment Act in 1961.

managed to co-sponsor successfully a bill with Democratic Senator Paul Douglas of Illinois which provided three hundred and ninety-four million dollars in federal grants and long-term, low interest, loans for businesses in depressed areas. Known as the Flood-Douglas Bill, it became the cornerstone of Flood's social welfare programs for his district. The act was later expanded to the Area Redevelopment Act, signed by President John F. Kennedy in 1961, which ultimately became the basis for the Economic Development Administration under President Lyndon B. Johnson four years later.

"You can imagine what kind of funds my district received through that original bill," Flood boasted. "But it was still too parochial. We couldn't get enough votes to keep it going so we expanded it into the Appalachian Bill. I got Robert Kennedy in on that one, and lo and behold, thirteen counties on the New York-Pennsylvania border turned up in Appalachia. And yet we still had to get more votes, so we gave birth to the Economic Development Act and everybody got included in that one!" Through Flood's efforts, Wilkes-Barre became the Economic Development Administration's regional headquarters for the eastern United States, the Virgin Islands, and Puerto Rico, ensuring the continuing flow of federal funds into his district. But the government subsidies did not stop there.

Flood was in the right place at the right time, and he knew it. His shrewd manipulation of the legislative process was particularly useful in an era when the federal government was strongly committed to economic growth and development. When the Model Cities program, which was to have been limited to inner city ghettos, encountered trouble in the House of Representatives, Flood co-sponsored a modified bill which passed. Wilkes-Barre became the first city to accept financial assistance in a program that ultimately provided one hundred and eighty-one million dollars to clear entire blocks of slums and replace them with new residential and commercial buildings.

After he became chairman of the Labor, Health, Education and Welfare Subcommittee in 1967, Flood's power and influence

veto power over much of the three hundred billion dollar federal budget throughout the 1970s. As one of thirteen appropriations committee subchairmen, he belonged to a select group so powerful that it was known collectively on Capitol Hill as the "College of Cardinals." Flood had his own perspective.

"Defense and HEW means two-thirds of the budget goes through my hands. That's a big role for an old actor. Luckily, I'm a nice fellow. I can help out a lot of nice people." His enviable position in the seniority system greatly enhanced his effectiveness at pork barrel politics. However, it was his genius as a legislator that earned him the respect and admiration of congressional colleagues and constituents alike.

"Dapper Dan" Flood understood that effective legislative leadership recognizes the House as a trading arena in which members' individual interests and goals are harmonized through the time-honored techniques of bargaining, reciprocity, and pay-off. The most successful players exercise the ability to initiate, monitor, and complete transactions, settle disputes, and store political credits and debts for future negotiations. Theoretically, members of Congress function on an equal footing, enjoying a certain degree of formal influence over law-making and over their power base in the electorate "back home." In reality, however, only those who enjoy the greatest security are able to exercise the most clout. They are true leaders who have built up a large amount of goodwill and acquired influence with congressional colleagues and constituents so that they have a reservoir of power to draw on as needed. Flood was one of those few.

As a master of the *quid pro quo* (an equal exchange or transaction), Flood worked his will through patronage, horse-trading, influence-peddling, and stentorian eloquence. One of his greatest victories, and a fine illustration of his legislative maneuvering, was the passage in 1969 of the Coal Mine Health and Safety Act. The act included a provision for compensation to victims of anthrasicosis or "black lung disease," many of whom lived in his district. On the day of the vote, Flood discovered that some swing votes were shifting. "Representatives from the steel and asbestos plant districts wanted to know why they shouldn't be included," he explained. "I knew I had to do something quick." He did. Taking to the floor of the House chamber, Flood, with all the sartorial splendor he could muster, delivered what was probably the most impassioned speech of his entire congressional career.

"Ordinarily, speeches don't change votes," said Speaker of the House Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, "but this one did. It was one of the two or three most impressive speeches I've ever heard. Most of us hadn't ever heard of black lung before that day. But that speech completely killed the opposition. Flood received a standing ovation for it." Representative Robert Casey of Texas agreed. "You won't find a similar piece of legislation on the books, not for the steel workers or the asbestos workers or the textile workers," Casey said. "Flood convinced the rest of us that he had more affected miners in his district than anywhere else. I can assure you that you won't find any black lung in Texas, yet the whole delegation voted for it."

The bill was a major coup for the gentleman from Pennsylvania. Nearly twenty-five thousand affected coal miners began receiving one hundred and sixty-five dollars a month. The federal expenditure totaled more than five hundred million dollars. "You can't get away with that kind of performance very often," Flood admitted afterwards. "I went pretty far—a very stylized performance in full costume. Oh yes, I pulled out all the stops."

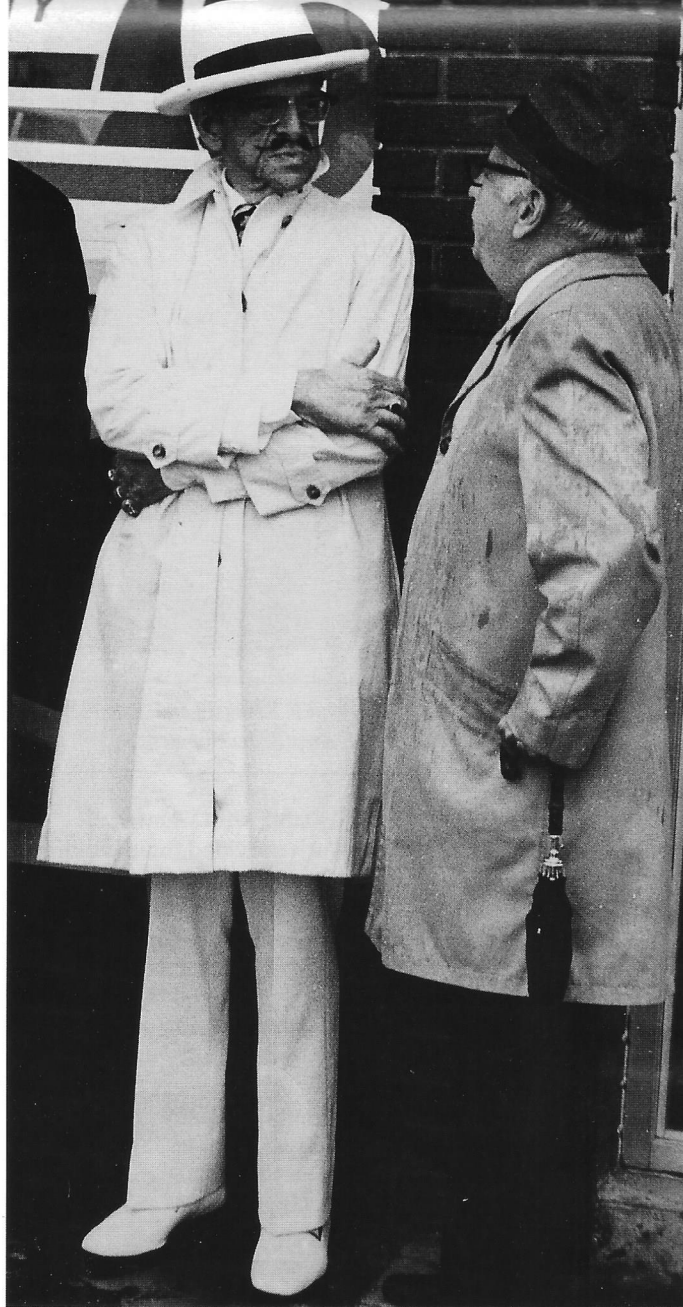
Indeed, Dan Flood became as good an actor on the floor of

the House of Representatives as he was on the stage. Known for his wardrobe of white linen suits, dark shirts, white ties, silk top hats, and dark, flowing capes, he became a flamboyant—if not unforgettable—sight. He presented his addresses and arguments with the overly precise and clipped accent of an old-fashioned stage actor, and he reveled in the attention he attracted for each and every performance—even if it went unappreciated at first. A case in point: One night, while attending a party in Wilkes-Barre, the freshman congressman was summoned to help subdue a wildcat miners' strike. On taking the union hall stage, dressed in a cerise-lined cape, white scarf, and opera hat, Flood was heckled by an intoxicated coal miner. "Who's the pansy?" bellowed the miner. Amidst catcalls and jeers, Flood, all the while maintaining a stage presence, carefully removed his top hat and cape, leaped from the stage, and knocked the heckler across four rows of chairs. "Then I proceeded to give my spiel," he recalled with a smile. "When you dress like I do, you better be able to fight."

Flood was never hesitant to use strong-arm tactics when the situation called for it, even if it involved the United States military. In 1960, for instance, Flood persuaded the Army to convert eight thousand coke-burning furnaces in barracks in West Germany to burn anthracite. When Army officials later attempted to renege on the deal in order to save twenty million dollars a year by converting to oil, Flood made certain that their appeals died each year in the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee, which, incidentally, he chaired. "Hell, yes I stopped it!" he declared. "I did it by twisting arms and hammering heads. I'd break a few arms if I had to." When asked why the Army allowed him to get away with the action, the ever-flamboyant Flood replied in his characteristic and colorful style. "They can't be blamed. After all, here's Flood, a nice fellow, and he's got a great reputation for promoting defense appropriations. Suppose you were one of those goddamn generals or secretaries or deputy secretaries. What are you going to do? Jeopardize the Army materiel command with a son of a bitch like me for a couple million dollars, for a couple tons of coal? Bullshit!"

Although widely considered a liberal on domestic issues, Flood endeared himself to conservatives with his hard-line stances on defense and foreign policy issues. He was especially known for his tough stand against communism. His appointments proliferated. In the 1940s, Flood was named to a special congressional committee charged with investigating the Katyn Forest Massacre—the mass murder of eleven thousand Polish Army officers by the Russians during World War II—and served, briefly, as ambassador to Peru. During the fifties, his activities grew even more prolific. Flood pushed for a resolution to require the Truman administration to explore ways to aid resistance movements behind the Iron Curtain, most notably in Hungary. He championed an amendment to the National Science Foundation Act to make an FBI security screening a prerequisite for the foundation's employment of a foreign national "in any capacity whatsoever." He constantly opposed the Eisenhower administration's efforts to control military spending in the interests of a balanced budget.

Throughout the sixties and seventies, Flood staunchly supported American involvement in the Vietnam conflict. He firmly believed that the nation's foreign policy must be exercised from a base of strength as is expected of a world leader,



and should not capitulate to less powerful Third-World nations. He also believed that the United States had a responsibility to protect democracy wherever it was threatened. "If you're going to be a leader, then lead," he insisted. "If not, then take two laps around the field and go to the shower. We're a two hundred-year-old democracy. We should know something about that form of government. Sure, we have to stop backing these dictators everywhere. But we must also be strong militarily in order to preserve freedom around the world."

Flood took his most controversial stand in the mid-1970s when he warned of the threat of a "Red Menace" in Panama. The jingoistic congressman had been given the dubious title of "Public Enemy Number One" by the Republic of Panama for his vehement opposition to a Canal Zone independent of U. S. control. In 1977, he underscored his position by attempting to defeat President Jimmy Carter's effort to amend the canal treaty. After approval of the treaty by the Senate, Flood, along with four like-minded legislators, filed a suit with the Supreme Court



challenging the right of the president to dispose of the Canal Zone without the consent of the House of Representatives. Flood's fierce opposition stemmed from the strategic importance to United States interests that he attached to an area that had come under communist influence. "Panama is our jugular vein," he told a CBS "60 Minutes" commentator. "If you have good kidneys, you can piss from there to Cuba. The Caribbean is our *Mare Nostrum*. We can't afford to lose it."

Whether it was in the realm of foreign or domestic affairs, one of Flood's greatest traits was persistence. While many legislators failed to see a project through to its completion, the Eleventh Congressional District's fiery congressman never seemed to back down. The more difficult the challenge, the more relentless he became. "When you want something, stay with it until they build it" was his motto. That is why he refused to vote for Interstate 81, linking Montreal and New Orleans until the highway was rerouted through his district. That's why he refused to allow the Pentagon to close the Tobyhanna Army



How I love to visit the annual folk festival each autumn. There, under the great roof of the vast Kingston Armory, I see the people of my Valley coming together to celebrate at once their different backgrounds and their common heritage. We have endured so much, we Valley folk, including the decline of our major industry and the devastation of a dreadful flood. But we have learned so much too—the troubles that hurt us have also brought us together. The ethnic and religious differences that once separated us have now become the wellspring of a diversity that paradoxically brings us together.

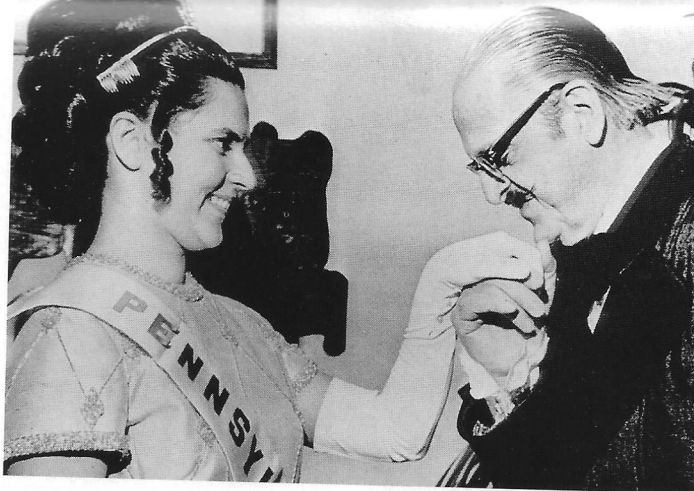
Daniel J. Flood, 1983

principal east coast headquarters for overhauling military communications equipment. And that's why he forced the Office of Economic Opportunity to readjust the funding for the entire Commonwealth of Pennsylvania when it attempted to slash his district's programs in keeping with nationwide reductions.

"Dapper Dan" Flood employed every tactic available to him to satisfy the needs of his constituents. Whether it be arm-twisting the military, doggedly pursuing congressional colleagues for favors, or attaching riders to legislation, Flood delivered. And deliver he did. He brought a large, state-of-the-art hospital, an airport, new businesses and industries, and a modern interstate highway to his beloved district. When once asked to explain his success at the art of pork barrel politics, Flood shrugged his shoulders and sarcastically replied, "It's all very technical. I simply use all of the opportunities and advantages of seniority for the purpose of whatever is left of the goddamn anthracite coal industry!"

Nevertheless, Representative Jim Wright of Texas, who forged a close relationship with Flood during the rescue and relief mission in Wilkes-Barre in 1972, couldn't help but be amazed at the flamboyant congressman's ability to secure federal dollars for his constituents. In 1972 alone, the Eleventh Congressional District's share of federal military-industrial funding amounted to a staggering \$378,030,209! "Dan Flood was one of the most colorful congressmen, yet he had the strength and forbearance of a boxer," Wright said. "He was viewed as someone who was diligent in promoting the needs of his district. He never apologized for being outspoken when it came to those issues." At times, though, Flood's diligence came at the expense of his health. During his early terms in Congress, he was portly, with a round face, but an exhausting schedule and a severe bout with cancer in 1962 left him stick thin, as he remained for the rest of his life.

Ultimately, the key to Dan Flood's success was his empathy for those who voted him into office. In an era when members of Congress turned increasingly to television, pollsters, and computer-generated letters to keep abreast of their constituents, Flood returned to Wilkes-Barre every weekend to meet with his. Dozens of constituents thronged his district office to seek favors or to personally thank him for his help. Because he attended so many local public engagements, Flood gave the impression that



Greeting constituent Susan McMahon of Edwardsville, Luzerne County, Pennsylvania's Cherry Blossom Princess of 1971 (top); emerging from a U. S. Air Force jet fighter after a high speed test (above).

Pennsylvania, even though he seldom missed a congressional roll call. He always understood what the voters expected from the political process, and that is only one reason why they accepted him as "one of their own" and elected him to the United States House of Representatives for sixteen terms.

Because of his commitment to a diverse meld of people, Flood's electoral success depended more on bipartisan support than on his relationship with the local Democratic Party, although the Eleventh Congressional District changed from a Republican to a Democratic domain during his congressional tenure. By 1960, Flood had established such a strong power base in the Eleventh Congressional District that his subsequent elections to office were a foregone conclusion—a fact of which Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy took special note when he campaigned in northeastern Pennsylvania. Traveling through the Wyoming Valley by car with Flood and Democratic State Senator Martin L. Murray, Kennedy spotted a campaign sign, "Vote Dan Flood." When Kennedy asked why his name did not appear on the placard, Flood—

ever the showman—shrewdly turned to Murray. "You better get Kennedy's name on that damn sign right away!" Flood spoke for all the people in the Eleventh Congressional District. By 1970, the Republicans did not even run a candidate, and Flood easily defeated a third party challenger by capturing ninety-seven percent of the vote.

"Dan Flood touched so many lives and made life better for so many people," recalled Raphael J. Musto, who succeeded Flood in the House of Representatives in 1980. "He simply improved our standard of living. He cared about everyone in this district." More telling is that Flood had the exceptional ability to rise above politics when it came to his constituents. "He wasn't a good 'politician,'" admitted Musto, "because he always put people above politics. That is why I've always viewed Dan Flood as an exceptional example of complete service to people." Former governor Robert P. Casey of Scranton (and resident of the adjacent congressional district) agreed, adding that the showy, charismatic congressman "never forgot his roots, never forgot where he came from, never forgot his people." But the nation's media were much less complimentary.

In 1970, syndicated columnist Jack Anderson began to accuse Flood of improprieties in arranging federal contracts, and the United States Attorney General's Office and the House

sweeping investigation of his activities, Flood was charged in September 1978 with taking sixty-five thousand dollars in bribes. The case ended in a mistrial when one juror claimed that he felt sorry for the aged congressman and couldn't bring himself to convict a seventy-four-year-old man. Constituents of the Eleventh Congressional District responded to the charges on Tuesday, November 7, by re-electing Flood—by a landslide!—to his sixteenth term in Congress. Flood's constituency remained fiercely loyal. "We don't care what outsiders say," cried one constituent. "They're just trying to hurt a member of the family. Dan Flood is the next closest thing to God."

Stripped of his congressional power, ravaged by illness, and facing a second bribery trial, "Dapper Dan" Flood resigned from Congress on Thursday, January 31, 1980, a dark day for his supporters in the Eleventh Congressional District. He subsequently pleaded guilty to federal charges that he accepted money from individuals seeking government contracts. However, Flood insisted that he considered himself innocent, entering the guilty plea only to spare himself the ordeal of a second trial. Although he could have been sentenced to one year in prison and fined twenty-five thousand dollars, Judge Oliver Gasch gave Flood one year of probation, calling a prison sentence "inappropriate" because of his age.

Dan Flood returned to Wilkes-Barre where he enjoyed the status of a folk hero. Frugal by nature, Flood refused the trappings of wealth, preferring instead to retire with his wife to their modest, two-story, white-frame house. He died at the age of ninety on Saturday, May 28, 1994. Two days later, his flag-draped coffin lay inside the Luzerne County Courthouse as grieving mourners solemnly filed past to bid a final farewell.

Daniel J. Flood was among the last of the movers and shakers of the old school on Capitol Hill. He worked hard to understand what his voters wanted, and he used that knowledge to channel billions of dollars for health, education, and welfare programs



... our Valley is a microcosm of American history—partly because its history exemplifies the whole American experience in so many ways and partly because so many events of national significance have happened here.

Daniel J. Flood, 1983

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probably record that Dan Flood was a pugnacious wheeler-dealer whose vision of the national interest never seemed to extend beyond the borders of Pennsylvania's Eleventh Congressional District. But for many who live and now (thanks to Flood) work in the coal region, "Dapper Dan" Flood will long be remembered as a shining diamond that emerged from the Kingdom of Coal. ❖

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