

Murtha's echoes of his mentor

The late congressman learned his politics from another Pa. titan.

By William C. Kashatus

John Murtha, who was laid to rest last week, left a controversial legacy. While noted for his public and military service, he had a vision of the national interest that often seemed confined to the borders of his 12th Congressional District.

Murtha was a consummate pork-barrel politician — just like his mentor and fellow Democrat, Rep. Daniel J. Flood of Luzerne County. When Murtha was first elected to Congress, in 1974, Flood was chairman of the House Appropriations subcommittee on labor, health, education, and welfare, and vice chairman of the defense appropriations subcommittee. As a result, he exercised virtual veto power over much of the \$300 billion federal budget.

With the exception of two electoral defeats, in 1946 and 1952, "Dapper Dan" 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 at the local level. His exceptional skill at the art of pork-barrel politics allowed him to channel billions of dollars into Northeastern Pennsylvania in the form of jobs, health care, defense contracts, and urban redevelopment.

In 1972 alone, Flood secured \$379 million in federal funds to assist in the recovery from Tropical Storm Agnes — an effort he personally directed by commandeering the resources of the U.S. military.

During his 32-year congressional career, Flood transformed the 11th Congressional District's wracked anthracite economy into a productive service one. His constituents, who elected him to Congress 16 times, revered him.

Murtha, who sat on the defense appropriations subcommittee with Flood, listened and learned from him. Murtha's steel-and-coal district was much like Flood's. Labor unions, along with religious and ethnic voters, held political sway, yielding a curious mix of economic liberalism and social conservatism.

Murtha became a champion of organized labor and the military, and a strong opponent of abortion. In 1977, when a flood struck his hometown of Johnstown, he commandeered a military helicopter and directed the recovery effort. He also channeled flood-recovery dollars into the district. In the process, he secured his congressional seat for life.

During the next three decades, Murtha rose to become the senior Democrat on defense appropriations. He steered billions in earmarks to his district and created a subsidized defense industry in Johnstown.



MATT WUERKER

Both Flood and Murtha understood the complexities of power politics and played the legislative game with sheer genius. They were masters of quid pro quo, working their wills through patronage, horse-trading, and influence-peddling.

Both enjoyed extraordinary access to presidents of both parties and were constantly courted by their colleagues for advice on securing money for their districts. They were also able to play influential roles in U.S. foreign policy — Flood in Latin American affairs, Murtha in opposing the war in Iraq.

Those were the privileges that came with seniority and attention to one's constituents. But there were drawbacks, including scandal.

In 1980, when he was 76, Flood was forced to resign from Congress after pleading guilty to a federal charge that he had taken bribes. He later insisted he was innocent and had pleaded guilty only to spare himself the rigors of a trial.

In fact, according to my research, Flood was the victim of an untrustworthy aide who accepted bribes in his name. In addition, his fierce opposition to surrendering U.S. control of the Panama Canal put him on a collision course with the Carter administration. And his case was among the first to come before the newly established House Ethics Committee, which may have been looking to make an example of him.

Murtha was more fortunate in this regard. In 1980, he was one of several congressmen targeted by a team of FBI agents conducting an elaborate sting operation. The agents, posing as representatives of a fictitious Arab sheikh, offered Murtha \$50,000 to introduce a bill that would allow the sheikh to remain in the United States. Murtha didn't bite.

Still, reform groups criticized Murtha's pork-barrel politics. He made no apologies. "If I'm corrupt," he said, echoing Dan Flood's claims of innocence, "it's because I take care of my district."

Perhaps we should all be so lucky as to have a congressman like that.