

Include Flood among the last of the best

By WILLIAM C. KASHATUS

When Dan Flood died last month, he took a part of the Eleventh Congressional District with him. He always understood what the voters expected from the political process, namely that local — not national or international — issues mattered most to them.

Flood's exceptional success in the art of pork-barrel politics allowed him to channel billions of health, education, and welfare dollars into Northeastern Pennsylvania.

That is why the voters accepted him as "one of their own" and elected him to the United States House of Representatives for 16 terms. Today, it is difficult to find any member of Congress with Flood's dedication or political clout not only because of a popular distrust of politics, but also because the legislative process itself has been reduced to imagery rather than substantive change.



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Effective legislative leadership is directed by the understanding that the House chamber typically functions as a trading arena in which members' individual interests and goals are harmonized through age-old techniques of bargaining, reciprocity, and payoff. The most successful players exercise the ability to initiate, monitor, and complete transactions, settle disputes, and store up political credits and debts for later settlement.

Theoretically, the members of Congress function on a plane of equality, enjoying a certain degree of formal influence over lawmaking and their power base in the electorate "back home."

In reality, only those who enjoy the greatest security exercise the most clout. They are the ones who have built up goodwill and influence with congressional colleagues and constituents so that they will have a reservoir of power to draw on as needed. But these legislators are the exception. The majority operate on the instinct of sneer political survival in the hope of being re-elected.

Dan Flood was a "congressman's congressman" who understood the complexities of power politics and

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played the legislative game with sheer genius and a highly entertaining flair. As a master of the quid pro quo, he worked his will through patronage, horse-trading, influence-peddling and a grandiloquent oratory rarely matched by his congressional colleagues.

With the exception of two 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 at the local level. He was among the last of the movers and shakers on Capitol Hill.

As a group, today's representatives are less effective legislators and less dedicated to their constituencies. It is not entirely their fault. The post-Watergate era has left voters with a highly cynical view of their public servants.

Few people trust that their congressman will act in their best interests rather than his own. Additionally, congressmen are handcuffed by an unrelenting press which scrutinizes their political activities as well as their personal lives. Under these circumstances, most representatives try to play it safe.

Their first term or two in Congress is spent learning the legislative process and planning for re-election. To wield any significant influence, a congressman must be re-elected continually. Even then, few will ever enjoy the seniority of a Dan Flood simply because their constituencies demand more from them than they are capable of delivering.

Not surprisingly, image has become more important than substance. Although most representatives might have gone to Washington to make laws, they try to remain in office by producing quotes that will capture a headline in the Washington Post or The New York Times. The more ambitious representa-

tives clamor for air-time: a televised committee hearing, a floor speech carried by C-Span, a one-on-one interview with national media, and, if they're lucky, a spot on "Nightline."

They are much less productive on the House floor where one-third of all the bills proposed each year are legally meaningless commemorative resolutions designed merely to make constituents feel good without addressing their needs. Almost all the rest of the bills have little chance of passage because they lack bipartisan support.

When the more controversial bills are proposed, many representatives exercise the "junk vote," an avoidance tactic which allows them to take a stand on both sides of a major issue. Depending upon the audience, they can later tell the voters that they voted for the bill or against it. Even the speeches delivered on the House floor are routinely re-written by staff before being published in the Congressional Record, yet another way to avoid any political cost.

Ironically, our congressmen have become almost totally preoccupied with achieving high visibility but they refuse to take the risks or invest the energy it takes to achieve that exposure. None, for example, would even challenge the legal authority of a state or local government to take control of a disaster relief mission as Flood did 22 years ago during tropical storm Agnes.

Most would prefer to remain in seclusion on Capitol Hill. Essentially, most congressmen want to be "showhorses," but few are willing to become a "work horses." Dan Flood wore both labels with pride and he did it in an effort to improve the welfare of the working person.

History will probably record that Dan Flood was a pugnacious wheeler-dealer whose vision of the national interest never seemed to extend beyond the borders of his own constituency.

But the Eleventh Congressional District should remember him as the best congressman they've ever had. Whatever the case may be, one thing is certain: sometimes we don't fully appreciate what we have until it's gone.

In Dan Flood, we all had something very special.

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