

The Last Word

Proxmire: Best Senator Ever?

By Russell Mokhiber

In the early 1970s, as a 17-year old undergraduate student in Washington, D.C., I would walk or jog every morning the mile from my apartment north of DuPont Circle to attend classes at George Washington University and then back again after classes in the evening.

Periodically, I would run into a fit, middle aged man running with determination up or down Massachusetts and Connecticut Avenues. I was later to learn that this man was a U.S. Senator – William Proxmire (D-Wisconsin.)

After a little bit of asking around, I found out that Senator Proxmire lived in the Cleveland Park neighborhood of the city, and every morning at about 7 am, he would do his daily 100 sit ups at home and then run five miles to work – down Connecticut Avenue and then down Massachusetts Avenue to the Capitol.

At 7 pm, he would do 100 sit ups in his office at the Capitol and run the five miles back home. Neither wind, nor rain, nor snow would stop Senator Proxmire from running his route.

He would carry his lunch to work – first peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and then, when he got on more of a health kick, he transitioned to cottage cheese and canned fish. (He was the author of two books on healthy living – *You Can Do It* (1973) and *Your Joyride to Health* (1993).)

At the office, Proxmire, while generous with staff salaries, was notoriously frugal. By one estimate he returned to taxpayers over \$1 million from his office payroll and expenses.

Proxmire was equally frugal in running his campaigns, spending less than \$200 on his last two Senate campaigns – for filing fees and postage to return campaign contributions. He won his last two Senate campaigns by wide margins – with 73 percent of the vote in 1976 and 65 percent in 1982.

He didn't want or need campaign contributions. He literally ran around the state during his campaigns. In addition to campaigning at fairs, stadiums and shopping centers, Proxmire spent entire days actually working with laborers – with garbagemen, auto workers, with the Salvation Army, with construction workers, cheesemakers and store clerks.

His frugality in his personal life and campaigns spilled over into public policy. Throughout his Senate career, he exposed wasteful military spending on programs big and small. His big hits were on the C-5A aircraft, the F-16 fighter, and supersonic transport airplane (SST).

He was perhaps best known for his Golden Fleece Award, where every month he would poke fun at a ridiculous military industrial complex and other government programs. In 1988, the *Washington Post* called the Golden Fleece Award “the most successful public relations device in politics today.”

On March 11, 1975, Proxmire issued his first Golden Fleece Award that would set the tone for the monthly awards for the next thirteen years. The award was given to the National Science Founda-



Senator William Proxmire greets three elderly women seated on a bench at the Capitol Square, Madison, Wisconsin, July 1969

(Wisconsin Historical Society)

tion for spending \$84,000 on a University of Minnesota study on why people fall in love.

“I object to this not only because no one – not even the National Science Foundation – can argue that falling in love is a science,” he wrote in the press release. “Even if they spend \$84 million or \$84 billion they wouldn’t get an answer that anyone would believe. I’m also against it because I don’t want the answer. I believe that 200 million other Americans want to leave some things in life a mystery, and right on top of the things we don’t want to know is why a man falls in love with a woman and vice versa.”

In July 1981, Proxmire gave the Golden Fleece award to the United States Army, which spent \$6,000 to prepare a 17-page document that tells the federal government how to buy a bottle of Worcestershire sauce.

“I can see having complex federal specifications if the military is buying a weapons system. But Worcestershire sauce?”

Proxmire was a true blue populist, unlike the fake populists of today, unlike the Trump Musk chainsaw crew, slashing corporate crime enforcement budgets and social safety net programs while seeking to pass the first ever \$1 trillion Pentagon budget. Proxmire supported corporate crime enforcement, consumer protection programs, sought to strengthen the social safety net and at the same

time cut the fat out of military and other government programs.

Proxmire had successful campaigns against government cost overruns with Lockheed’s C5-A military cargo plane and the F-16 fighter and government subsidies for the wasteful supersonic transport vehicle, saving the taxpayers billions of dollars.

Proxmire emerged politically in a Wisconsin that was dominated by the hard right politics of Senate Joseph McCarthy.

During McCarthy’s heyday, Proxmire ran for Governor of Wisconsin and lost three times – in 1952, 1954 and 1956.

Senator McCarthy died in May 1957, and in August 1957 Proxmire ran in a special election and won. After being sworn into the Senate, Proxmire had the usual kind words for his predecessor.

Proxmire said McCarthy was a “disgrace to Wisconsin, to the Senate, and to America.”

Proxmire was fit for office – with his biographer, Jonathan Kasperek (*Proxmire: Bulldog of the Senate*, Wisconsin Historical Society Press, 2019) concluding that “he was one of the few politicians who voted his conscience and never forgot about the people he represented.”

Proxmire’s conscience came into play in perhaps one of his most remarkable and little known accomplishments – pushing the Senate to ratify the Genocide Convention. The history of this campaign is recounted in detail in Kasperek’s biography. The treaty, created in 1948, was promoted by Raphael Lemkin, a Polish Jew who had escaped the Nazis and coined the term “genocide.”

By 1967, sixty-six other nations, including the Soviet Union, had ratified the treaty. President Harry Truman presented the treaty to the Senate in 1949, but hard right conservative groups – like the Liberty Lobby and the John Birch Society – pressured conservative Senators to block passage. There was the legitimate fear the United States and complicit Americans would at some future date be dragged before a foreign court and charged with being complicit in genocide.

On January 11, 1967, Proxmire stood on the Senate floor and vowed to speak

every day in the Senate on the genocide convention until the Senate passed it. The Sixties came and went. And every day, Proxmire gave a different speech on genocide and the need for the Senate to ratify the convention.

Then the 1970s came and went. Over nineteen years, Proxmire gave 3,211 short speeches on the need to ratify the convention. “Staff members were responsible for producing a new speech daily while the Senate was in session,” Proxmire’s biographer Kasperek writes. “Mark Shields wrote many of them in the late 1960s, and they were later given to summer interns to write before being edited and filed for later use. Because every speech was different, no one dared test Proxmire’s memory by slipping one he had already delivered.”

Ronald Reagan opposed it for three years, before he endorsed ratification in 1984. Finally, by a vote of 83 to 11, the Senate ratified the convention on February 19, 1986.

Proxmire launched a similar campaign against nuclear war, taking to the floor of the Senate every morning to warn of its consequences. In 1984, he brought the scientist Carl Sagan before a Senate committee to raise alarm bells about a potential “nuclear winter.” After two years of Proxmire’s daily speeches on nuclear war, Congress passed a resolution urging the United States and the Soviet Union to jointly study the effects of nuclear winter.

It’s a testament to Proxmire’s economic populism that the mini controversies that cropped up throughout his career – mostly driven by his vanity – didn’t hurt him politically.

Kasperek recalls that in February 1972, Proxmire showed up at a hearing wearing sunglasses, barely concealing two black eyes. “The truth came out a few days later,” Kasperek writes. “The champion of thrift and healthy living had gotten a facelift, though he refused to talk about it publicly.”

A few weeks later, his head was wrapped in bandages. Proxmire was one of the first public figures to get a hair transplant.

“I will still be semi baldy, but a little more semi and a little less baldy,” Proxmire explained to the inquiring reporters. “I expect humorous, critical, amused, outraged or even ridiculing reactions. But I will acknowledge none of them. This statement is it. I consider my hair transplant to have no public significance.”

After years suffering from Alzheimer’s disease, Proxmire passed away on December 15, 2005.

“With his untiring dedication to serving his constituents, his record of consumer protection, his stewardship of federal funds, and his determined effort to prevent nuclear war and genocide, he was the quintessential senator,” Kasperek wrote.

Definition of quintessential – the most perfect, typical, or essential representation of a quality or class.

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