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Mark Stanley

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THE DEATH OF WRIGHT PATMAN: MOURNING THE END OF AN ERA

by Mark Stanley

The people of Texas' First Congressional District elected Wright Patman as their congressman in 1928. It was the first of twenty-four consecutive elections to the office. When Patman went to Washington in 1929, the First Congressional District was mostly rural, encompassing only the three small cities of Marshall, Paris, and Texarkana. When Patman died in office in 1976, he was the Dean of the House of Representatives and the entire Congress, and one of the longest serving members in history. His funeral in Texarkana was one of the largest, most important occurrences in the town's history.

Over the course of Patman's career, four factors made him unbeatable in his district. First, Patman brought federal projects and jobs to his district. These included Red River Army Depot, Lone Star Army Ammunition Plant, and Lake Wright Patman, all in the Texarkana area; Long Horn Army Ammunition Plant in Karnac; and Lone Star Steel in Daingerfield. Patman also helped bring private-sector jobs to the district, including the Campbell's Soup canning plant in Paris. Projects such as these provided jobs in a district whose economy had earlier consisted chiefly of agriculture, often in the form of subsistence or tenant farming. By the 1970s, even conservative businessmen supported the liberal Patman because they appreciated his seniority, influence, and above all, his ability to provide for his district.

Second, in the rural First Congressional District, poor constituents appreciated Patman for being a champion of those whom he called "the little people." Patman's populist philosophy appeared in his first congressional campaign in 1928. While criticizing the concentration of wealth in the United States, something he did often over the next forty-eight years, he stated that "the plain hard-working people of our nation should not be compelled to pay tribute to a gang of dishonest scoundrels for the privilege of living upon and enjoying the earth that the great God above has given us." Then, while criticizing his incumbent opponent, Eugene Black, for inattentiveness to legislation, Patman said that "the door of hope should not be closed in the face of the young manhood of our country by letting our congressmen inherit their offices. Any Congressman who has been in office so long should either try to go higher or get down and give somebody else a chance." In 1954, Patman rethought the latter, and while running for his fourteenth term in office his slogan was, "how WELL a congressman serves is more important than how LONG he serves." Apparently his constituents agreed, since Patman was then barely halfway through his congressional career.

A third factor influencing Patman's political longevity was constituent service. Having a liberal voting record despite representing a conservative area, Patman nonetheless had the support of his constituents because of his

Mark Stanley is a recent graduate of Texas A&M University-Texarkana and is now a graduate student and teaching assistant at the University of North Texas in Denton.
willingness to work on individuals’ problems doggedly and effectively. By one account, Patman was like a “god-father in a white hat.” Throughout his career Patman had a firm rule that all letters had to be answered the same day they arrived. Often he answered the letters personally. When constituents wrote to Patman or came by his office, he made no distinction between rich and poor. One of Patman’s secretaries said that “he never turned anybody away. The poor and the needy were always welcome.” Patman’s attentiveness to his constituents, along with his power and influence, ensured that he would stay in office.

A final factor contributing to Patman’s political longevity was his ability to maintain the support of black voters during the 1960s and 1970s. He did this through deeds, not words. The racial attitudes of the majority of Patman’s constituents meant that vocal support of civil rights would have been political suicide. Like most southern politicians of the era, the Congressman had to perform a balancing act to avoid offending either his black or white constituents. Patman’s public stances on many social issues were inconsistent with his liberal voting record but were in accordance with the views of the majority of his constituents. For example, Patman opposed school desegregation, an issue typically supported by liberals and opposed by conservatives. Liberals within his own party criticized Patman for these conservative policies. Privately, Patman never distinguished between black and white constituents in providing services. Many black constituents no doubt remembered Patman’s crusade against the Ku Klux Klan during the 1920s while serving in the Texas legislature. Patman believed that the Klan’s growing power and influence, along with lynchings, threatened the legitimate power of the state and justice itself. He received death threats from the Klan and was later challenged by a Klan-backed opponent, whom he defeated. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the subsequent support of black voters, Patman never faced another serious challenge at the polls.

By 1976, Patman was virtually a local institution. The public assumed that he would always be around, and despite his advanced age, his death came as a surprise to his constituents. Patman had been suffering from influenza for two weeks in February 1976, and doctors at Bethesda Naval Hospital admitted him on the twenty-fourth. On the twenty-seventh, the Texarkana Gazette first reported Patman’s illness. In addition to the particulars of the illness, the paper mentioned that the hospital listed Patman’s condition as “serious” and quoted his doctors as saying that he was “responding well to treatment.” The paper also mentioned that Patman’s oldest son, Connor, had left Texarkana for Washington to be with his father.

Over the next several days, newspaper reports about Patman’s condition continued to be ambiguous. On March 3, the Gazette reported that Patman’s condition was “very grave” and divulged that he was “dependent on a respirator and an oxygen tent.” Although this sounded bad, the paper also reported that Connor Patman had returned to Texarkana. The following day, the Gazette reported that Patman was “a little better” and “the congestion in his
lungs had cleared somewhat.” The paper offered hope for Patman’s recovery when it quoted his doctors as saying that they “didn’t feel his age was a handicap in overcoming his illness.” The doctors added “Patman is in extremely good condition for a man of his age because this is the first serious illness he has had since 1929.” On March 7, the Gazette Sunday edition reported Patman’s condition as still serious though “somewhat improved” on the previous Friday and “virtually the same on Saturday.” Constituents soon learned, however, that instead of recovering Patman had died early that Sunday, March 7, 1976. On March 8, the Gazette carried a banner headline that read “Wright Patman dead at 82.”

Patman returned home to Texarkana for the last time aboard a United States Air Force transport plane. The flag-draped casket arrived at seven-twenty on the evening of March 7 in a driving rainstorm. A small crowd watched as the casket was transferred to a waiting hearse. From the airport, the hearse carried Patman’s body to Texarkana Funeral Home. Along the way, it made a special detour through the African-American section of town, passing a catfish restaurant that Patman frequented when home visiting constituents. As the hearse passed people paid their respects, lining the streets several deep.

Reaction to the news of Patman’s death came from many quarters. The United States House of Representatives met at noon on March 8 and Representative George H. Mahon of Texas officially announced Patman’s death in Congress. The House resolved to send a delegation of eighty of its members to the funeral in Texarkana. The House also sent a message to the Senate informing that body of Patman’s death and requesting the appointment of a Senate funeral delegation. Finally, as a show of respect, the House adjourned early, just thirty-six minutes later. On March 9, members met for memorial services to Patman. One hundred twenty-three members of the House, as well as people and organizations from all across country, recorded tributes to the late congressman. That same day, the Senate appointed John Tower and Lloyd Bentsen of Texas to represent the upper chamber at the funeral. Nine senators recorded tributes, including liberal leaders Hubert Humphrey, Edward M. Kennedy, and George McGovern. President Gerald Ford, who had also served in the House, released a statement expressing “deep regret and sadness upon learning of the death of his friend of many years.” He also praised Patman’s “decades of outstanding service to the House of Representatives and to our nation.” Ford appointed White House counselor John Marsh to represent him at the funeral.

Reaction to news of Patman’s death from within the district was wide ranging. Despite Patman’s announcement the previous January that he would not stand for re-election in 1976, constituents were unprepared for his death. Patman had been in office so long that it was difficult to imagine him not being there. Robert Maxwell, chairman of the Texarkana Industrial Foundation, stated that Patman’s death was “a tremendous loss to the entire First (Congressional) District. He worked hard on each problem. The impact he has
had on the entire district will be felt a long, long time. He worked on many projects even on the Arkansas side." Maurice Wooley of Clarksville added, "His influence in Washington will certainly be a loss to [Red River] county." Red River County Judge Gavin Watson expressed the sentiments of many, saying "We are terribly shocked and disturbed. Mr. Patman did more for Clarksville than any other man in history, for industry and for the people. The people experienced a real loss, like one of the family. He is going to be missed by all of us. We counted on him so long." Long-time editor of the Texarkana Gazette, J.Q. Mahaffey, said "He was always for the little people of his district. He was consistently a liberal thinker and one who was interested in the plight of poor people. I was very disappointed that he was not going to run again because he was such a good man for the district and had done so much for it. I think his death is a terrible loss, for the district and the nation."

On March 10, 1976, the day of the funeral, citizens of Texarkana arose to cool temperatures and a light fog, which burned off by eight o'clock and left clear, sunny skies. At Texarkana Airport, controllers dealt with the influx of aircraft carrying guests. Officials there recorded two-hundred-fifty takeoffs and landings for the day. Visiting aircraft included numerous small private planes, business jets, four small military jet transports, and two large Boeing 707 jets belonging to the Air Force. People began arriving at Texarkana's First Baptist Church, located downtown at the corner of West Fourth and Pine Streets, before eight o'clock. Local attorney Hayes McClerkin arrived at his office between eight and eight-thirty. Parking, usually not a problem in downtown Texarkana, was already difficult within two or three blocks of the church. McClerkin's office overlooked the First Baptist Church, where many people had gathered in the street. McClerkin characterized the scene at the church as a "mob-scene," complete with crowds, dignitaries, and law enforcement. By ten o'clock, mourners had taken most of the unreserved seats, including those in the balcony, filling the church to its capacity of one thousand. Two large urns filled with flowers greeted mourners in the church's alcove, and wreaths flanked both the pulpit and the casket before it. Flower arrangements filled the choir area to a height of about eight feet along the walls. An immense Lone Star arrangement was positioned high above the altar. Flowers also lined both sides of the sanctuary.

Pallbearers brought Patman's flag-draped casket to the church shortly before nine o'clock. A steady stream of people viewed the body from nine until ten-thirty, when two Army sergeants closed the casket and then stood at attention on either side of it. By then, an overflow crowd of more than five hundred people had gathered in front of the church. Hayes McClerkin, like many others, arrived at the church just before the service was to begin. At first he was not able to get into the church but eventually worked his way to the rear of the balcony where there was some standing room. Those left outside the church could hear the services through loudspeakers set up on the exterior of the building. Two columns of cars, which later made up the funeral procession, occupied much of the street in front of the church. Police closed
Pine Street to traffic within two blocks of the church and remained on hand to insure the safety of the dignitaries.12

The two Air Force 707 jets carrying the congressmen, senators, and other dignitaries landed shortly after ten o’clock. Speaker of the House Carl Albert of Oklahoma, whose district bordered Patman’s at the Red River, led the funeral delegation. Two green army busses borrowed from Red River Army Depot carried the dignitaries from the airport to the church. Motorcycle police officers escorted the busses while others blocked traffic at every major intersection along the way. The busses arrived at the church at ten-fifty. Lady Bird Johnson, widow of President Lyndon Johnson and long-time friend of Patman, arrived at Texarkana Airport on a private plane at ten-twenty. A blue Ford sedan met Mrs. Johnson and her Secret Service bodyguards on the runway and took them directly to the church. After arriving at First Baptist, the dignitaries filed past the closed casket and took their seats shortly before eleven o’clock. Dr. Lory Hildreth, pastor of First Baptist Church, then asked the congregation to stand as the Patman family entered and took seats at the front of the church.13

Hildreth began the services with brief readings from the Ninety-third and Ninety-fifth Psalms. Congressman George Mahon of Lubbock, Texas, the new dean of the House of Representatives, then took the pulpit and introduced himself. He said, “When our plane landed from Washington, I observed the bright day and I thought to myself that today’s shining sun must undoubtedly be a blessing and a benediction from Heaven upon the services to humanity of one Wright Patman.” Mahon continued: “The body of this fearless man was flown last Sunday night to his beloved Texarkana and the First Congressional District of Texas. We of the Congress, and other friends, headed by Speaker Albert, have come to Texarkana today on the wings of the morning to join in honoring the memory of a great legislator and a great personal friend.” Mahon then introduced Congressman Jim Wright of Fort Worth for the eulogy. Wright, who later became Speaker of the House and was a well-known orator, began by acknowledging that those gathered had come not to mourn the death of Patman, but to celebrate his life and achievements. Wright said of Patman:

Few if any of our time or of our memory have followed our conventions so undeviatingly as Wright Patman. Few so unflinchingly have fought their fight and kept their faith. Few if any have served the humblest of their fellow creatures so untiringly. Few have given of themselves so unsparingly. Few have dreamed the impossible dream so determinably, resisted invincible foes so joyously, handled life’s disappointments so gracefully and preserved their basic ideals so uncompromisingly throughout a lifetime.” He added that, “Patman was determined to be a people’s man...the plain and simple unpretentious average man...who sensed he was a man they could trust.

He talked about Patman’s many achievements and many foes, including the Federal Reserve Board, big banks and big business, and the Ku Klux Klan. He also spoke of Patman’s character, how he never let failures turn to bitterness, and of how he countered vicious attacks with soft words and a smile. Wright
captured the essence of the man, saying “He often comforted the afflicted and afflicted the comfortable,” and finished by offering his condolences to the Patman family and speaking the words, “Well done.”

Dr. William E. Shields then sang “The Battle Hymn of the Republic,” after which Pastor Hildreth returned to the pulpit. He said the mourners had gathered to “pay our tribute and affection for one who has walked among us with dignity and integrity for these many years,” and added that he wished to recognize Patman’s “faith and its meaning for his life as well as for others.” He said that Patman “had made a gentlemen’s agreement with life, because he worked diligently to give back more than he received.” After Hildreth completed his remarks, Shields sang “The Lord’s Prayer,” bringing the services to a close. The honor guard, which had positioned itself on each side of the church, returned to the casket. The pallbearers carried the coffin down the main aisle of the church and out to the hearse as the congregation respectfully stood.

Patman began his last journey, the three-and-one-half miles to Hillcrest Cemetery located on West Seventh Street, shortly after noon. The funeral procession left the church via West Fourth Street. Though scheduled to turn right on Main Street, immediately behind the church, the procession traveled an additional block to Texas Boulevard, which was wider and easier to negotiate. The procession next turned left onto West Seventh Street and continued on to the cemetery. All along the route, people stood watching as the procession passed by. Police officers stood at attention, stopping traffic at every major intersection between the church and cemetery. Although the vehicles carrying the Patman family and dignitaries numbered only about a dozen, private cars stretched for miles behind the hearse. When the procession arrived at the cemetery, police blocked West Seventh Street, a major highway, from Wake Village Road to Kings Highway, a distance of about one mile. Mourners parked their cars along either side of the highway for a half mile past the cemetery. Patman likely would have been amused that the busses carrying the dignitaries had to park along the highway, forcing important guests to walk to the grave site like most everyone else.

As mourners gathered for the graveside services, a cool breeze blew from the Southwest. The sky was clear and the temperature was fifty-nine degrees. Many expressed thanks that the weather was not as cold and rainy as it had been a few days earlier. Six florist’s trucks preceded the funeral procession to the cemetery with the flowers from the church. The florists placed seventy-seven wreaths on stands in a semi-circle from the grave to the fence by the highway. The funeral home had set up a tent by the grave under which were arranged rows of chairs. Members of the congressional delegation lined themselves up in an L-shaped corridor leading to the grave, then Patman’s family entered the tent and sat in the front row of chairs. Lady Bird Johnson and Speaker Carl Albert stood next to each other by the monument. The graveside services began with the army color guard removing the flag from the casket and folding it. The sergeant in charge of the color guard handed the folded flag to Kenneth Harding,
sergeant-at-arms of the House of Representatives, who presented it to the widowed Pauline Tucker Patman. The graveside service itself lasted just five minutes, with Dr. Hildreth saying a few consoling words and offering a prayer. Afterward, some mourners reminisced about Patman while others offered their condolences to the Patman family. Many just left quietly.\footnote{17}

There were many memorable aspects of the funeral. To many, especially those who stood, the church services seemed lengthy. In fact, the ceremonies lasted about an hour. Many were especially touched by Wright's eulogy. The \textit{Texarkana Gazette} printed the entire text of the eulogy and praised its eloquence. The number of people, famous and ordinary, was impressive. Many came not just to express their sadness and loss but also to express their gratitude for Patman's long, distinguished service. National political figures attended to demonstrate appreciation for the many laws he had supported that benefited all Americans.\footnote{18}

Patman's death and funeral were widely reported at the time in newspapers. Obituaries appeared in the \textit{Washington Post} and on the front page of the \textit{New York Times}. The \textit{Texarkana Gazette} used at least three reporters and three photographers to cover the funeral. Patman's memory has been honored in several ways. Shortly after his death, officials re-named Texarkana Lake Lake Wright Patman. Also, the members of the Congressional Employees Federal Credit Union changed the name to Wright Patman Congressional Federal Credit Union.\footnote{19}

Over the years, interest in Patman has continued. The \textit{Texarkana Gazette} printed articles commemorating Patman on the occasions of the tenth anniversary of his death in 1986 and the hundredth anniversary of his birth in 1993. Patman biographer Nancy Beck Young, whose book \textit{Wright Patman: Populism, Liberalism, and the American Dream} appeared in 2002, argued that “Patman ranks right up there with Sam Rayburn and Lyndon Johnson as one of the leading figures in Texas politics” and suggested that he merited equal billing with them. Patman helped bring about legislation that provided rural electrification, that founded the Federal Credit Union System and the Small Business Administration, and that paid early bonuses to World War I veterans. Patman's Employment Act of 1946 created the Council of Economic Advisors and the Congressional Joint Economic Committee. Even twenty-five years after his death, many people are affected daily by laws that Patman helped pass. He was widely known for being kind, soft-spoken, and genteel.\footnote{20}

In the years since Patman's death, Democrats have continued to represent the First Congressional District despite its conservatism and despite the transformation of Texas into a Republican stronghold. Sam B. Hall, Jr. of Marshall represented the district from 1976 to 1985. Jim Chapman succeeded him and served until 1991. Max Sandlin of New Boston has served since that time. When Sandlin went to Washington in 1991, he took a seat on the House Financial Services Committee, which replaced the House Banking and Currency Committee that Patman chaired from 1963 to 1976. In February of 2002, the House Democratic Caucus elected Sandlin as the party's chief
deputy whip, making him one of the most influential men in Washington. Wright Patman would probably be pleased.21

NOTES


2Young, Wright Patman, pp. 23, 129-130, 166-167, 272-273.

3Young, Wright Patman, pp. 25, 27; Linda Uytterlinde “Man from Patman Switch,” Houston Chronicle Sunday Magazine, March 24, 1968; campaign card from Patman’s 1954 campaign, file “People and Politics,” Texarkana Museum of Regional History, Texarkana, Texas.


5Young, Wright Patman, pp. 155-156, 271-273.

6“Patman condition listed as serious,” Texarkana Gazette, February 27, 1976, p. 1a.


8Young, Wright Patman, p. 301; Texarkana Gazette, March 8, 1976, p. 1a.


10Kindrick interview; Downs, “Reaction.” pp. 1a, 2a.


12Funderburke, “Colleagues eulogize Patman,” p. 1a; McClerkin interview.


14Memorial Addresses, pp. 141-143.


17Downs, “No one noticed the cool breeze,” pp. 1a, 8a.

18Downs, “No one noticed the cool breeze,” p. 1a; McClerkin interview; Kindrick interview; “Eulogy on Wright Patman,” Texarkana Gazette, March 11, 1976, p. 4a.

