

ROLL CALL

How to Stay the Course

Oct. 27, 2009
By Tricia Miller
Roll Call Staff

Among the many words of advice that Members of Congress give in the new book "Political Rules of the Road: Representatives, Senators, and Presidents Share Their Rules for Success in Congress, Politics, and Life" is former Rep. Al Cederberg's (R-Mich.) simple poem, "Remember the Congressman's Lament."

Among life's dying embers

These are my regrets

When I'm right

No one remembers

When I'm wrong

No one forgets

Regrets are not the only subject that Members cover in this practical guide. Since 1988, former Rep. Lou Frey (R-Fla.), with the help of co-author Aubrey Jewett, has been asking his colleagues to submit their previously unwritten "rules" for success in Congress. Frey was inspired by his own abrupt arrival in Washington in 1969. The Republican won a campaign for an open seat in a heavily Democratic district.

"I was a political accident, and when I got elected, I went up to Washington and there was no Kennedy Institute," he said, referring to today's Edward M. Kennedy Institute for the United States Senate, which serves in part to educate Senators and the public about the role of Congress.

A fellow Floridian took Frey under his wing, but not all Members are so lucky. Frey hopes this book will give incoming Members and the general public a better idea of how business gets done on Capitol Hill.

Frey and Jewett ultimately collected more than 500 pieces of advice from about 200 current and former Members of Congress, including a few who went on to serve as president (such as George H.W. Bush and Gerald Ford) or vice president (Dick Cheney).

Their words of wisdom are divided into six categories. For example, in the Campaigns, Elections, Voters and Constituents chapter, former Rep. Jim Martin (R-N.C.) gives this useful advice: "When opponents attack you for having been born in another state, smile and reply (after the late Lewis Grizzard): 'Well, I had to be near my mother at the time.'" Martin, who was born in Georgia, served North Carolina in the House from 1973 to 1985 and then served a term as governor of North Carolina. In the same chapter, former Texas Rep. Kent Hance (D) gave similarly pointed advice: "Never use a live animal in a TV advertisement."

The most popular rule submitted, for obvious reasons, was a variation of this suggestion from former Rep. William Henson Moore (R-La.): "Never say or write something you don't want to see on the front page of the Washington Post."

In another rule from the Media, Ethics, Speeches and Public Relations chapter, former Rep. Bill Whitehurst (R-Va.) advised, "When there's good news, stand close to it." He recounted stories of bases in his district getting military contracts and constituents being accepted to service academies.

Frey submitted two rules of his own to the collection, and both appear in the media chapter as well. The two rules are related: "Don't get in a fight with someone who buys their ink by the truckload (i.e. the press)," and "If you have to explain, you're in trouble."

This is the former Congressman's second book. The first, "Inside the House: Former Members Reveal How Congress Really Works," was published in 2001 and followed a similar premise. Proceeds from the sales of "Political Rules of the Road" will benefit the U.S. Association of Former Members of Congress and the Lou Frey Institute of Politics and Government at the University of Central Florida.