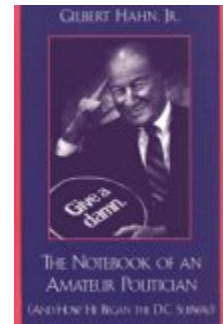


H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Gilbert Hahn, Jr. *The Notebook of an Amateur Politician (And How He Began the D.C. Subway)*. Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2002. xiv + 87 pp. \$14.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-0405-7.

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Rara Avis: A District of Columbia Republican

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Gilbert Hahn has been many things. A scion of the Hahn Shoe family, he served in France in World War II, built a legal career, occupied a variety of Republican party posts, chaired the D.C. City Council as well as the boards of the Washington Hospital Center and D.C. General, and found time along the way to purchase a few racehorses. Now in his eighties, he is a man with stories to tell.

In this slim book, Hahn tells his stories one at a time, mostly in vignettes of just one or two pages, grouped into five chapters. Chapter 1, "D.C. Matters," mostly covers Hahn's 1969-1972 term as the appointed chairman of the D.C. City Council as well as hospital politics before and since. Chapters 2 and 3 cover his long activism in the Republican Party (which he briefly abandoned in 1998 to support Tony Williams's primary bid) in a period when the term "liberal Republican" had meaning. Chapter 4, "People and Places," is the most personal, offering tribute to friends and family along with a few brief travel stories. The final chapter details Hahn's World War II service as an artillery lieutenant, including his serious wounding outside of Metz.

Some of the stories concern Hahn's own family, while others present brief encounters with major politicians and celebrities. We are dressed down by General Patton, glimpse Claire Boothe Luce in her negligee, meet John Wayne and John Huston on board the *Queen Mary*, attend a state funeral in Liberia, and catch Golda Meir in between receptions. No one of these anecdotes is terri-

bly illuminating on its own, for Hahn claims no intimacy with these luminaries. But when the stories are put together, one does get a feel for the routine of an American courtier on the outer fringe of real power, and for the often frictional meeting between federal and local Washington.

Hahn has a fine eye for detail, from the dirt floors of the 1952 Republican Convention to the naivete of a CEO he shepherds in to lobby Henry Kissinger. He best illustrates his friendly rivalry with Mayor Walter Washington not with a story of a policy dispute, but with his account of getting an official car, complete with driver and mobile phone, then a rarity and status symbol. Hahn placed his first call to the mayor's mobile phone, intending to level their ranks, only to be put in his place. "Exclude me, Gil," Mayor Washington replied. "My other phone is ringing" (p. 8). Nor does Hahn pull his punches. Former Mayor Marion Barry appears in this book as "a crass and calculating rabble-rouser" (p. 21), while Richard Nixon's Chief of Staff H. R. Haldeman shows up only to warn Hahn, tyrannically, if he is unwilling to obey orders in the 1972 election year, he will not be reappointed as council chairman. Hahn writes, "The answer popped out of my mouth before I could stop it: 'Then get yourself another boy.' And they did" (p. 45).

Readers must be warned, however, that many of these tales are based on memories three, four, or even five decades old, and with only a few exceptions, Hahn has chosen not to refresh his memory by consulting notes, clippings, or archives. As a result, while Hahn has cer-

tainly recorded his impression of events, those impressions do not always match the written record.

The clearest example of this shortcoming concerns the book's subtitle. Hahn suggests that all subway plans prior to 1969 were mere farces until he resolved that "during my term in office I would not complete the interstate freeway system through the District of Columbia. And I wouldn't build the Three Sisters Bridge," leaving a subway as the only alternative (p. 3). He then claims that he secured the first funds for Metro construction in 1969 by negotiating a \$200 million loan from the Department of Transportation. Based on these achievements, he claims that he "began the D.C. Subway." Even if all his facts were in line, Hahn's claim would be rather bold. The first serious proposal for a rapid transit system in Washington was published in 1959, a full ten years before Hahn joined the council, and Congress approved a starter system in 1965: the subway was begun well before Hahn arrived on the scene.

But it is not merely a matter of interpretation, for Hahn's book is factually inaccurate even when it comes to his own role as council chairman. For better or worse, Hahn's resolve was not as firm as he suggests here; while he certainly opposed the bridge, he eventually surrendered on that fight. On August 8, 1969, after joining a vote that everyone understood as opening the way for bridge construction, Hahn issued a press release stating that he had "come to the realistic, but reluctant, conclusion that my continued opposition to the building of the Three Sisters Bridge is no longer ... in the best interests of the City of Washington." Five days later, he announced, "I voted for the building of the Three Sisters Bridge to assure the people of Washington that they would get a subway." As for the Department of Transportation loan,

the amount was \$57 million, and it was negotiated in late 1970, several months after groundbreaking, rather than in 1969, as Hahn implies. It is not surprising that such details should blur after thirty years, only disappointing that Hahn did not hire a researcher to assemble relevant documents to bolster his own memory. (By contrast, Joseph Califano relied on not only his memory but also his personal papers, materials in the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, and the aid of a research assistant when composing his vivid memoir of the Johnson White House, which includes a chapter on the creation of the D.C. City Council in 1967.) As it stands, one must question the accuracy of other stories in Hahn's text, such as those concerning D.C. General.[1]

This is not to say that the book lacks interest to scholars. For if Hahn has not recorded the literal truth of particular events, he has described the emotion underlying District politics and society. One sees the chumminess of the local elite, national leadership, and the press, but also the occasional rifts between and within political parties and the persistence of patronage as a force in partisan contests. Combined with contemporary documentary evidence, Hahn's memoir can recall a time in Washington when unelected leaders with good political connections and a sincere desire to serve did their best to lead a city denied true self-government.

Note

[1]. Hahn, statements, August 8 and 13, 1969, D.C. City Council Records, Department of Special Collections, Gelman Library, George Washington University, box 20; Jack Eisen, "Volpe Gambles on Metro Loan," *Washington Post*, October 19, 1970; Joseph A. Califano, *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson: The White House Years* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1991), chapter 14.

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