

Heard and Overheard: Words Wise (and Otherwise) with Politicians, Statesmen, and Real People

James W. Symington

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Evoking the charm of fellow Missourian Mark Twain, these short reminiscences of a national political life are funny, poignant, and enlightening.

Following in the footsteps of his famous father, the powerful Missouri senator Stuart Symington, could have been daunting for James “Jimmy” Symington, but in his engaging collection of stories about his political career and his family, the younger Symington (born 1927) reveals a meaningful and well-led life. The author served as President John F. Kennedy’s deputy director of the Food for Peace Program, Senator Robert Kennedy’s administrative assistant, President Lyndon Johnson’s Chief of Protocol, and he represented the people of Missouri in the US House of Representatives for four terms from 1969-77.

This is not a conventional memoir but rather a compilation of brisk one- or two- page reminiscences: some are downright funny, some are poignant and coax tears, some will evoke nostalgic pains, but all will hold your interest. Best-selling humorist Christopher Buckley writes in the foreword that Jim Symington compares with another Missouri tale spinner—Mark Twain. This is no small “Show Me State” potatoes!

Among the best stories are those about father-son relationships. When Jim lost the election for the senate seat held by his father, who retired in 1976, Stuart consoled, “Well, Jim, you’ve got a great future behind you.” Raising a glass to bipartisanship, the senator also reminded his son that “the greatest thrill in politics is making a friend out of an enemy.” Evidently, Jim had no problems making friends in and out of politics, sometimes with the help of his guitar and songs. These talents earned him steady gigs in New York nightclubs while completing law school at Columbia.

Buckley likely exaggerates in comparing Symington to Twain, but he can’t be blamed for his enthusiasm. Whether read quickly or leisurely, these remembrances captivate and entertain. Like Twain, Symington also writes about the nation’s conditions regarding race. The author tells of a rap discussion he had with some young black men in the 1960s who were angered over having been denied construction jobs in favor of whites in their hometown—Ferguson, Missouri.

KARL HELICHER (Fall 2015)

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