







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Wrong Track	53.5
Spread -12.2	

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RCP Average	
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Spread -60.0	

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Democrats	47.3
Republicans +0.2	

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February 9, 2010

Murtha: the Virtue and Vice of Congress

By **David Paul Kuhn**

Jack Murtha was the virtue and vice of Congress. He was an old-school pol, the archetypal and often derided backroom Washington dealmaker. But here was also the disappearing representative many long for: the lawmaker who crossed party lines and got his work done; the politician not easily classified as left or right; the everyman who fiercely served his country in war and in office.

In this era of paper-thin politicians, this was a substantial and complicated character. Murtha was a political grunt in an age of flyboys. He was known for the ugly and the good. And it's why his death, Monday at age 77, tells a story of not only his life but also a fading era of American politics.

Murtha was the first of the "Watergate babies." He was elected in a special election in 1974, by some 200 votes. And with him came a new generation of Democrats, a wave rising with Richard Nixon's downfall.

But Murtha too became tainted by corruption. He was connected to the Abscam bribery sting, though never indicted. He went on to become a don of pork-barrel politics — mastering the provincial vice of what Mark Twain called the only "distinctly American criminal class."

Yet in "the Murtha Corner" of the House, his command of appropriations also made him highly effective. Whatever party was in power, Murtha was powerful. He funneled hundreds of millions to his district. He created a subsidized defense industry in his hometown of Johnstown, Pennsylvania. This meant jobs. And Murtha's people needed jobs more than most.

Murtha grew up in his western Pennsylvania district. It was once prosperous steel and coal country. It became an economic ground zero, decimated by the deindustrialization of America.

Murtha's region saw the prosperity of their fathers fade as much as any in modern American life. Yet they also held tightly to an ideal of America. And that too suited Murtha.

This was the Eagle Scout who left college at 19 to fight in Korea. He recalled his upset mother, though he never knew if it was because he was leaving college or going off to war. He became a Marine like three of his brothers, following generations of his family who had served their country.

At age 34, now a husband and father, Murtha decided to re-enlist for the Vietnam War. He earned two Purple Hearts, a Bronze Star and the Vietnamese Cross of Gallantry. He later became the first Vietnam veteran elected to Congress.

Murtha was perhaps the last Henry Jackson Democrat. After Vietnam, he was one of the rare hawks remaining in an increasingly dovish Democratic Party. Then in a turn of fate, in his last years, Murtha became a champion of the antiwar movement.

There was the Abu Ghraib prison scandal, involving units from his region. There were the regular visits to Bethesda and Walter Reed hospital. In 2005, he decided to call for an end to the war he had once supported.

"I saw early on that the reason we went to war was a mistake but like many people, at first I thought well we are there, we ought to try to make the best of it. Then they made so many mistakes," he told me in a 2006 interview. "I go to the hospitals every week and I see these troops that were blown apart. I see these troops that at first said, 'Get me back, I wanna be back with my buddies.' Then, the morale started to change, the families started to change." And in



David Paul Kuhn
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time – after years of visiting Iraq, speaking to military commanders and families – Murtha changed.

"Since I was having no impact quietly behind the scenes, as I normally do, I felt that I had to do something publicly," he recalled. It brought Murtha, red-eyed and guttural, before the flashes that he had long avoided.

This was Murtha's most significant public moment. The hawk decided the war was no longer worth its costs. "It's time to bring the troops home," he said. And his stature meant no one in Washington could turn away.

In the backdrop were relationships, like that between Murtha and then Vice President Dick Cheney. The two had worked closely together during the Gulf War. Now Cheney accused Democratic war critics of losing their "backbone."

"I like guys who got five deferments and never been there and send people to war," Murtha told reporters, "and then don't like to hear suggestions."

Suddenly, the antiwar movement had a strongman. Murtha's biography made him unassailable on the politics of war. Then he said U.S. troops had "killed innocent civilians in cold blood" in Haditha, Iraq, before a trial had taken place.

Once Murtha was the private ally of House Democratic leader Nancy Pelosi. Now he was an outspoken pugilist. The moderate became a divisive figure.

Once Murtha was close to the GOP. Republicans even consulted him when his district was redrawn. Now Republicans were investing millions into unseating him.

Murtha did not help matters by October 2008. He said Barack Obama might fail to win his constituents because some were "racist." It made for the toughest reelection campaign of his 36 years in Congress. Still, Murtha won.

Despite all the controversy, Murtha never did lose. It was his onetime colleague, Tip O'Neill, who famously declared, "All politics is local." This adage is less true today. But when it was so true, it was true for no politician more than Murtha. Regional airports, hospitals and roads now bear Murtha's name. And that too betrays the old pol and what he meant back home.

David Paul Kuhn is the Chief Political Correspondent for RealClearPolitics and the author of [The Neglected Voter: White Men and the Democratic Dilemma](#). He can be reached at david@realclearpolitics.com and his writing followed via [RSS](#).

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