# Mr. Platt Goes to Washington

BY LARRY PLATT

**It's 7:30 on a Sunday** morning when my phone rings.

"Guess what those bastards have done now?" my dad growls. As usual, he doesn't wait for a response. "They want to increase their committee budgets by 14 percent. Inflation wasn't even half that, for crying out loud. These sons-of-bitches talk about cutting costs when it comes to me, but not when it comes to them."

There's a pause. "Dad, it's the middle of the night," I mumble.

"I'm writing to Weldon right now," he says, oblivious. "Specter, too. But he'll probably send back a reply on a totally different issue. Did I ever tell you about the time I wrote to him about abortion and got a letter back about gun control?"

More than once. "Yeah," I say, sighing.

He goes on to tell me he's finishing David Brinkley's autobiography. "It's amazing how self-serving these guys inside the beltway become," he says. "Guys like Brinkley and Sam MacDonald—"

"You mean Sam Donaldson?"

"Whatever," he says. "You read their memoirs and it's a wonder anything's ever gotten done without them."

He wants to know if I'm coming over later. I say I am; Mom's cooking and I have a load of wash to do. "Good," he says. "We have a lot of issues to discuss, my boy." I hang up, put my pillow over my head and try to fall back asleep.

**How my father became the best-informed citizen in America and got to tell his congressman what he really thinks**

*Delaware County Republican Curt Weldon, right, listens (patiently) as the Super Citizen elucidates.*

**They are not** aberrations, these early-morning phone calls from my father. Ever since his retirement five years ago at 65, after a successful career as a corporate executive, he's become something of a Super Citizen, devoting the time to civic affairs that perhaps we all should—but seldom do. He spends his nights watching C-SPAN, his mornings combing the *Wall Street Journal* and the news weeklies, his afternoons tuned to NPR. And I have become one of his favorite sounding boards as he formulates positions. But I'm not alone on my father's de facto staff; there's also my mother, whose face these past five years seems to have locked into a permanent eye-roll. And there are the Bendits, my parents' close Main Line Republican friends, who—in restaurants, no less—my father never ceases to lambaste (despite my mother's insistent kicks under the table): "*You've forgotten*

*Photograph by Robert Trippett*

*where you came from!"*

All of us serve as fodder to help him sharpen the arguments he'll use in his true passion: writing letters to politicians. In the last three years, he has, in his view, spoken truth to power in more than 100 missives, including some 30 to his congressman, Delaware County Republican Curt Weldon. These letters run from borderline crackpot to predictable to truly inspired. There are, for instance, his angry words to Newt Gingrich in February 1995 that make you wonder why the secret service hasn't paid Dad a visit: "You speak with two sets of standards—one for you and one for everyone else. Be careful—that halo around your head may fall down and choke you!!" A year earlier, he compared the House speaker to Joe McCarthy before admonishing him: "Your statement that 'Liberals are the enemy of the American people' ... [is] a hateful, shameful statement made by someone who is supposed to be a *leader!*"

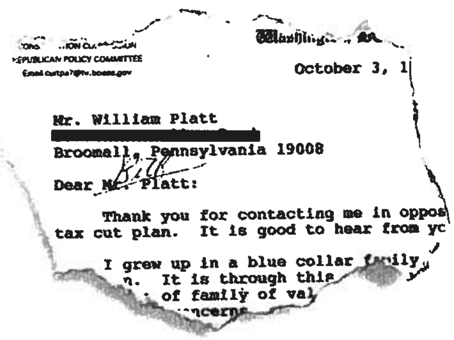
In early 1995, he targeted Texas Senator Phil Gramm. "Dear Phil," he wrote. "You don't mind that I call you *Phil*—since you do refer to our President as *Bill* ... I'm impressed with how you've pulled yourself up by your bootstraps, but wasn't your college paid for by the government—under the liberal programs of Javits, Humphrey and LBJ?"

But my dad is not an ideologue. He is driven by a deep sense of moral outrage—not an allegiance to orthodoxy; he is disgusted by political gamesmanship whether practiced by Bill Clinton or Rick Santorum. He saw the bipartisan welfare-reform bill as all show and no solution. "I suggest that the same time and energy that is expended going after the poor on welfare reform go into expense-account reform!" he wrote to Specter, Santorum and Weldon. "This will never happen because it would affect your political contributors."

He's a true populist. He believes in a reverse-franking privilege—"Why should I put postage on my mail to *my* congressman; he works for me!"—and is a passionate advocate of term limits as the first step toward comprehensive campaign-finance reform. "Over $1.6 billion will be spent on this year's federal election," he wrote to Specter, Santorum and Weldon last October. "[You] should be ashamed and embarrassed to allow this disgraceful waste to continue ... I doubt if I will live to see the day that elected officials are concerned with something other than getting reelected."

Yet, despite his disdain for politicians, Dad hasn't soured on politics. At 70, he's more engaged than ever and even exhibits an admiration for those who conduct themselves with honor. When Republican Kansas Senator Nancy Kassebaum announced her retirement, he wrote her a short note praising her years of service. She sent back a moving, partially handwritten response, closing with, "Your kind words are so appreciated."

But the longest-running and most in-depth correspondence has been between my father and his congressman, those 30 exclamation-mark-filled letters that have been answered the past three years. As time has passed, Weldon, who reads the responses his staffers draft before they're sent out, has taken to crossing out the typewritten DEAR MR. PLATT in favor of DEAR BILL from his own hand. At the bottom, he frequently scrawls notes.


October 3, 1

Mr. William Platt
[redacted]
Broomall, Pennsylvania 19008

Dear ~~Mr. Platt~~ Bill:

Thank you for contacting me in oppos
tax cut plan. It is good to hear from yc

I grew up in a blue collar family
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When my father wrote asking the congressman to explain Bob Dole's ten votes against increasing the minimum wage in light of his seven votes for increasing senators' salaries, he closed with, "Hope your eye, heart and weight are all in good shape"—a reference to Weldon's recent health problems, some of which my dad shares. Weldon's swift reply—emphasizing his support for the minimum-wage hike and his independence from the party line—closed with a handwritten postscript: "My health is great—thanks for asking."

But, as in any relationship, Dad and the congressman have had some tense moments. When Weldon went to Russia, Dad wrote: "I recently asked you about any results from your Russian trip—still no answer from you! Am I to assume that was just some more meaningless political 'smoke'?" I recognize that strident tone from stories my father's employees used to tell about his my-way-or-the-highway management style. Weldon wrote back detailing his background in Russian studies, and then included an angry handwritten final word: "I don't political smoke!"

Generally, though, the tenor of their letters is more in keeping with the exchange from March 1995, when my dad wrote: "I do believe you are a fair and honest legislator. You may be the second Republican I vote for. When I lived in Lower Merion, I supported Larry Coughlin." Weldon responded, again in hand: "I will always strive to keep your respect!"

They are an interesting pair, the congressman and his constituent. Both share a passionate support for the working man. In some ways, Weldon's stance on labor issues—even though he's a Republican—is easier to understand than my father's. Now 50, the six-term congressman is the youngest of nine children and grew up in the tough blue-collar town of Marcus Hook, where he eventually became mayor. His father never made it past the eighth grade and worked in a factory for 36 years. He has supported minimum-wage hikes, family and medical leave, and anti-strike-breaking legislation because, he says, "My votes up here reflect who I am—I vote my family. I'm not from the Main Line, and I'm not a silver-spoon Republican."

My father *is* from the Main Line, and his father was a Center City physician. He runs the risk of being labeled a limousine liberal. And yet he speaks out—ad nauseam—in favor of affirmative action, in favor of unions, in favor of helping those who need help. He even affixes an address label to his letters that reads TEACH TOLERANCE. Add to the mix that, as a boss, he was a bellicose dictator, and he becomes a walking incongruity: Where *did* this compassion come from? It's a mystery to me. Our talks run the very narrow gamut from Newt's latest blunder to how Pat Croce can save the Sixers. Like so many fathers and sons, we conveniently become ironic when the moment calls for genuine sentiment. We rarely reveal more than we have to.

As a result, there's a lot I don't know about my dad, but one anecdote from his youth has stuck with me. I probably heard it first from my mom, but I've questioned him about it lately. It was just after World War II (which he spent in the Coast Guard, stationed in Seattle, protecting our shores from Japanese invasion, he likes to say), and he was driving alone through the Jim Crow South. Somewhere in Alabama, he got into a fender bender; the other driver happened to be black. A cop showed up and began hassling the other man and then started to beat him. "Wait a minute," my dad said. "It wasn't his fault. That's why they call it an accident."

With one hand on his gun and the black motorist writhing on the ground, the officer got in my dad's face. "Boy, you ain't from here," he sneered. "This is how we do things in the South."

My father is a big man—6'4", about

250 pounds—and he stood there a moment, deciding whether to obey the cop's order to get back in his car and drive away. Grudgingly, he took off; to this day, he doesn't know if the man was beaten, arrested, lynched or simply let go. But it's as if my father made a conscious decision never to hold his tongue again.

Over the years, he's been called "opinionated" and "self-righteous"—by his friends and relatives. But he peppers his speech with true-believer aphorisms, always seeing the world in black and white, always preaching the importance of "doing the right thing." After so many years in corporate America, he rejoices in this latest incarnation: a mega-informed, cantankerous (senior) citizen willing to tell it like it is to anybody who will listen.

Tired of fielding those 7 a.m. phone calls, I decided to call Weldon's office to see if the congressman would meet with one of his more outspoken constituents. Within a couple of days (time enough for a background check?), the office called back with a lunch invitation, and I found myself harboring a secret hope: If Dad could get an audience with his longtime pen pal, maybe I could start sleeping in again and my mom wouldn't have to invent excuses to avoid dinner with Republicans.

When I first called Dad and broached this idea of "Mr. Platt Goes to Washington," he excitedly began going through his files, compiling a list of pet peeves and, according to my mother, stretching his C-SPAN watching into the wee hours. But then I took the metaphor one step too far, telling him, "You could be like a modern-day Jimmy Stewart." He frowned; I'd reminded him of yet another lament. "I never did think Jimmy Stewart could act worth a damn," he muttered.

**We need more** Mr. Platts to come to Washington," says Curt Weldon as we sit down for lunch in the House members' private dining room. "We need more people challenging the system, challenging their representatives."

On our walk over, my father recognized almost every face, gleefully pointing out John Conyers and Charlie Rangel while he and the congressman compared notes about their respective heart surgeries; both had bypass operations in late 1995, and both are doing well.

Now, as they scour the menu for heart-healthy options, Weldon, still praising my father's activism, beats him to at least one punch: "I mean, after all, we work for *you*."

"That was number one on my list of things to tell you," my dad says, smiling.

After 30 letters, Weldon is clearly familiar with my dad's agenda. He keeps computerized records of every position taken by every letter writer to his office; and, unlike most House members, Weldon actually signs every letter that goes out under his name—he refuses to use an autopen. Consequently, when the name Gingrich comes up, Weldon smiles slyly: "You know, your good friend, the speaker." He goes on to point out that he continues to support the embattled Gingrich because he is more moderate than anyone in the leadership who might replace him. "Newt's not a radical conservative," he says. "His problem was he shot his mouth off too much. And we told him that."

Until this point, the congressman has controlled the conversation. Though I've wondered just how long my father would remain deferential, I had little doubt he'd seize the first opening. Gingrich's mistakes, my father believes, were ethical—not cosmetic. "I watched every second of the special counsel's testimony before the Ethics Committee," my dad says, leaning forward, his index finger stabbing air for the first time. "And you know as well as I do, congressman, what he did wrong. He set up that Abraham Lincoln Fund, which was a 501C3, and then allowed that tax-exempt money to go over to GOPAC. The violation was in transferring that money from the fund to GOPAC, and he knew what the hell he was doing, because in some cases that money was transferred within 24 hours."

Weldon hesitates. "Well," he says, finally, "the only thing I can say is, you're probably more versed on this than I, because I'm not on the Ethics Committee." (Is my father?) "But the Ethics Committee," Weldon continues, "an equal number of Democrats and Republicans, said there was nothing wrong—"

"That's not true. The report dodges the issue of illegality by saying they've turned over the material to the proper authorities."

"Well, in any case, where we agree is that he's hurt the Congress."

As they move on to term limits and campaign-finance reform, the lunch degenerates into a high-energy version of *Crossfire*. Both men lean over their turkey-breast sandwiches, which go untouched, to jump on each other's arguments.

"I voted for term limits—" Weldon starts to say.

"Wait a minute, congressman, you *say* you voted for it, but there were 12 different bills to vote on, so that allowed every one of you guys to go back home and *say* you voted for term limits, knowing full well it was never going to happen."

"I voted for the most popular bill—a six-term limit," Weldon says. "But I did that because my constituents were convinced by the media that it would solve the problem. You don't need term limits, because if the citizens are involved in the process, they can turn out bad congressmen. Tom Foley, the speaker of the House, the most powerful man in Congress, was beaten by a freshman Republican with no power base—"

"But that's an exception. You know that 98 percent of incumbents are reelected," my dad says.

"Only where the people aren't involved in the process," replies Weldon, waving to Democrat Bill Coyne, whom he counts among his best friends on the Hill. (Most of his closest friends are Democrats.) "The downside to term limits is you'd lose some good people. Sam Nunn, a Democrat who I respect, would have had to leave office. That would hurt the country. Instead, we still have Strom Thurmond—"

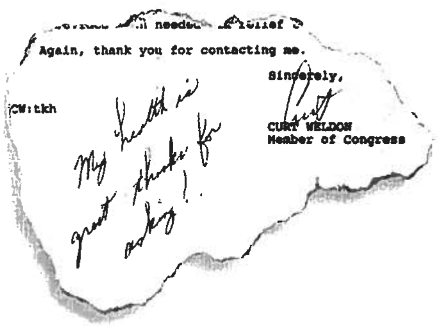
My father laughs: Thurmond's orange hair and incomprehensible babbling have been the butt of his jokes for years. "And [Democrat] Robert Byrd should go home already, too," he says.

"That's absolutely right," Weldon agrees. "But it should be up to the voters."

Our waiter comes over to tell Weldon he has a phone call. He leaves the table, and my dad seizes the opportunity to review the notes he has in a manila envelope under his chair. Minutes later, the congressman returns, and Dad produces his most compelling argument for term limits, that they're a necessary first step toward real campaign-finance reform. "The truth is that you incumbents will never reform the system, and that's why we need limits," he says. "You've been here 11 years, and I'm sure you've seen people whose only objective is to maintain being a congressman."

"I could name them," Weldon says, nodding. "They love the job and have safe districts. But we've always had that and always will."

"Except that, in X number of years, if a guy has to go, then at least we get another freeloader who comes in, and maybe eventually we get somebody who is going to work," my dad says. "The tragedy is that no one ever leaves Washington. This country is really two countries—inside the beltway and the rest of us."


Again, thank you for contacting me.

Sincerely,

CW:tkh

CURT WELDON
Member of Congress

My health is great thanks for asking!

Weldon agrees, and then spies Representative George Nethercutt across the room and calls him over. "Here's the man who beat Tom Foley," Weldon says. "George, say hello to Mr. Platt. Tell him how you beat the speaker of the House."

Before Nethercutt can speak, my father offers his own analysis: "Because Tom Foley was too busy looking at his pension to realize he had a campaign to run," he says, referring to the former speaker's $125,000 lifetime pension. Nethercutt and Weldon laugh heartily. "You're closer to right than you think," says Nethercutt, shaking my dad's hand.

"I know," he says. He chuckles, too, but to him, this is no laughing matter. "That pension is an absolute disgrace."

**Throughout lunch,** my dad and the congressman agree on many things. Occasionally, though, Weldon takes the offensive with a partisan shot at Clinton. But my dad won't take the bait, at least not at first.

My father criticizes Congress for unanimously passing a nonbinding resolution supporting the display of the Ten Commandments on federal property, an issue thrust into the news after an Alabama judge challenged a court order to remove them from his courtroom wall. This one Weldon doesn't even try to defend. He frankly concedes: "A lot of what we do here is perception rather than substance." But then he goes on to point the finger elsewhere: "Look at Clinton, he doesn't believe in anything. He's all perception. He's against the B2 one day, and then, to get votes in California, he's for it."

"I'm not here as an apologist for Clinton," my dad says. "But at the same time, I don't get so worked up because the president has a few contributors sleep over—"

"*A few contributors!?!*" Weldon booms, turning heads. "Try 950 at a minimum of $50,000. Man, that is outrageous—"

"Well, I don't get that carried away with it."

"Why? How could you not?"

"Because there's no difference between that and Trent Lott selling access to himself for thousands of dollars."

"But this is the White House, public property, the Lincoln bedroom," Weldon says.

"I understand that, but President Bush, who I think was a patriot from the word go, had over 200 people sleep over in the Lincoln bedroom."

"But he didn't solicit donations—"

"C'mon, do you mean to tell me they weren't contributors?" my dad asks, getting excited. If he was at all nervous earlier (and I don't think he was), it's gone now. In fact, he's feeling so much at home that he begins to filibuster. "Bush also had clubs, where for $25,000 you got to have coffee with the president. If it's wrong to have 900 people sleep over, it's wrong to have 200."

Weldon starts to respond, but my dad cuts him off. "My point is not that Clinton is right, it's that the damned money in the system is wrong," he says. "As long as it's there, whether it goes to Webb Hubbell or GOPAC or whether it's hard or soft money, this stuff is going to go on. But no one's interested in real reform. Instead, you piss all this money away on things like Al D'Amato's Whitewater hearings. I wrote to him, too—I said, 'Al, no one cares. No one's watching. It's just me and you, Al.'"

Weldon laughs as we get up to go. He puts his arm on my dad's shoulder. "Well, let me just assure you, you don't have to worry about me," he says. "I came into Congress poor and I'll be leaving poor."

"That's another thing," my dad says, reminded of yet another peeve. "Only two presidents in this century went back home in the same financial situation as when they came in: Harry Truman and Jimmy Carter. Gerald Ford was from Grand Rapids, where he used a one-room apartment as his address, and after his presidency he was suddenly a millionaire. I'm waiting for someone to explain that one to me."

Weldon pauses, then shakes his head: "There's a lot up here I can't explain."

**We are on the** House members' elevator; the congressman is seeing us out. "I bet your father was pretty tough when you were growing up," he says. I tell him not really, he was actually a pretty reasonable, laid-back parent. His management style in the workplace, I say, was another matter.

"Oh, I bet he was quite a taskmaster to work for," Weldon says, looking at my dad and pumping his hand. "But let me tell you, I need you to keep writing me. It forces me to look at the other side of issues. I need more people like you."

Their handshake continues. "It really is an important thing your father does," says Weldon. "And it's okay when we don't agree. Heck, if my father were alive, he wouldn't agree with every vote I make, either. Unfortunately, he's not here. He wasn't here to see me come down to Washington."

"That's a shame," says my dad.

"Yeah, that's been one of the biggest disappointments in my life," the congressman says in a suddenly thick voice. They're shaking hands again, and the moment fills with unexpressed emotion about fathers and sons. I half-expect one of them to say, Bogart-like, "I think this is the start of a beautiful friendship," but we don't acknowledge what's in the air. Instead, as we turn to go, my dad drapes his arm around my shoulder and cracks wise. "Son," he says, "our work here is done."

**On the train home,** I try to get some sleep. But some things never change: Each time I drift off, I am jolted awake by my father. In a few days, my mom will call to tell me what I can only guess: "You should feel very good," she says. "He was on the phone for days, telling his friends about the greatest day in his life. And he said it was so special because it was spent with one of his sons."

But on that train, all I know is that he's reliving—and will be retelling for days—every exchange of his debate with the congressman. He comments on just how much they agree—on affirmative action (both support mending it, not ending it), on gun control (both were for the Brady bill) and to some extent on abortion. "I'm in trouble with the pro-lifers," Weldon told him, "because I believe family planning is important." For the umpteenth time, my dad says, "You know, I think he's Republican just because that was the party that could get him elected." Then he puts his hand on my knee and gazes out the window. "Maybe I should have gone into politics when I was about 30."

I'm stunned. I've never known him to express regret. But before I can explore this, he delivers the punch line: "I'd just be getting out of jail right about now."

Of course, later I will ask my mom about it. "He wishes he were 20 years younger; he'd run for office," she says. "But he just never had the time. His whole life was about carving out a career and having a family. Now that he has the time, he loves what he's doing: reading and then mouthing off about it."

And he shows no signs of slowing down. In fact, the visit with Weldon may have had the opposite effect from what I intended. Even as our train pulls into 30th Street, I know for sure that the early-morning calls will not abate any time soon. In fact, I may have created a monster. "You know," he says, "I think I'm going to start writing to the president more often." Then he smiles and arches an eyebrow. "Maybe that can be our next lunch." ■■