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Fiction, Facts, and Truth: The Personal Lives of Political Figures

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Fiction, Facts, and Truth: The Personal Lives of Political Figures

Burdett A. Loomis

Abstract

In the wealth of research on politics and politicians over the past fifty or so years, little attention has been accorded the relationships between the personal and the public sides of politicians' lives. Given the difficulties of collecting data, this absence is unsurprising. But that does not mean the personal-political linkage is unimportant, and one way to address this subject may be to draw upon political fiction, both to gain insights and to suggest avenues of inquiry. And within political fiction, the best source, at least for American politics, likely includes the works of veteran novelist Ward Just.

KEYWORDS: personal-political linkage, political fiction

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All students of politics are, perforce, students of politicians.
-- Richard F. Fenno, Jr., 1986

Representative Carroll Kearns (R-Pa.) was the first congressman I ever met. At the time, he was drunk. Our encounter took place around 1955 in a lakeside roadhouse in Western Pennsylvania. The Right Honorable Mr. Kearns was working the room, but not all that well, given his condition. Even at age ten, sitting there with my parents, I knew when someone was tanked, and it scarcely endeared him to me, his once and future constituent. To their ultimate credit, the Republican primary voters of Pennsylvania's 24th District retired Representative Kearns in 1962, perhaps a belated reaction to his growing inability to perform his duties. In the end, Representative Kearns's private behavior may have led to the end of his public career, although the evidence was there to see long before.

This little episode did not sour me on politicians or politics, but it did constitute an indelible example of how the personal and public lives of politicians can intersect, sometimes with unhappy consequences for both the legislator and his constituents. Over the years as a congressional scholar, I have often pondered the continuing relationship between the personal and the public in those who hold office, both elected and appointed. Indeed, in my first days as an APSA congressional fellow in 1975, I discovered how I wanted to spend the rest of my career – observing and trying to understand working politicians.

With the exception of the president, even in a media age the public lives of most politicians go largely unreported and unconsidered, save for a brief scandal or personal tragedy. On occasion, political scientists like Richard Fenno and Barry Burden touch on the personal, but rarely is the relationship between the two sides of a politician's life explored systematically.[1] Moreover, Fenno, Burden, and others focus mostly (with some notable exceptions in Fenno's work) on explaining how politicians navigate the public sphere and how their decisions affect their public policy decisions.

For the most part, political scientists eschew private explanations for public behavior, as well they might. Focusing on psychological characteristics,

[1] Richard Fenno has probably wrestled with this issue more than any other political scientist, most self-consciously in the appendix to *Home Style* (Boston: Little Brown, 1977), as well as in two lovely ruminations into his soaking and poking style of participant observation: "What's He Like? What's She Like? What Are They Like?" in Dennis Hale, ed., *The United States Congress: Proceedings of the Thomas P. O'Neill Symposium* (Claremont, CA.: Pfitzer College, 1982), pp 107-125, and "Observation, Context, and Sequence in the Study of Politics," *American Political Science Review* 80 (March, 1980), pp. 3-15. But his most eloquent exploration of the interaction between private and political lives may reside in *When Incumbency Fails: The Senate Career of Mark Andrews* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1992). See also Barry Burden, *The Personal Bases of Political Representation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007)

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such as the drive for power, has not proven fruitful, and much of the personal side of political life that is observable does not generate much in the way of generalization.[2] Even the numerous outcroppings of scandal and illegality are most often either bloated (Speaker Jim Wright's trumped up charges) or pathetically mundane, as with the bribery convictions of Representatives William Jefferson (D-La.) and Randy ("Duke") Cunningham (R-Cal.). At least with Jefferson stuffing $90,000 in the freezer or Cunningham providing a "bribery menu" for prospective clients, there were dollops of Carl Hiassen-like humor.[3]

Still, the junction of the personal and the political deserves more careful scrutiny, if only because some politicians and political actions call out for such examination. Although there are various approaches that could produce useful results, I will focus here on one means for generating insights: the role of political fiction, and in particular the singular work of novelist Ward Just, in both offering perspectives unavailable to scholars and suggesting some limited ways social scientists might better come to terms with the mixing of the personal and the pubic in political lives.

This approach may appear, at first glance, at least a bit superficial and indulgent. Fiction? Really? But bear with me. As a former Washington journalist and insider, and as a veteran, well-regarded writer of serious fiction, Ward Just can take us places that not even a Dick Fenno or a Robert Caro can penetrate. And Just's intricate landscapes, be they pencil-sketch short stories or fully realized novels, offer some modest payoffs in understanding both how the personal and the political intersect, as well as giving us some general sense of how scholars might use these insights.

Political Fiction: Interiors and the World of Ward Just

> A year after Gail and I were married it became clear that [my father-in-law, the congressman] had plans. Without any formal agreement between us it was understood that I would be his successor. The timetable would be of his own choosing. But increasingly I [as his staffer] would accompany him on trips back to the district, occasionally filling in for him at a Rotary Club lunch or Chamber of Commerce dinner….[H]e told me he would announce his retirement early in 1966. I would have to fight a tough primary, but if I were energetic, "we would win." I would win with his help. My father-in-law was a man of the old school, and I had not worked for him for ten years and lived with his daughter for eight

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[2] See Burdett Loomis, ""The Motivational Basis of Legislative Service," in *The Encyclopedia of the American Legislative System*, Joel Sibley, ed., (New York: Scribner's, 1993).

[3] Randle C. Archibold, "Ex-Congressman Gets 8-Year Term in Bribery Case," *New York Times,* March 4, 2006, accessed at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/04/politics/04cunningham.html, September 3, 2010.

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> without knowing how his mind worked. I knew there would be a condition and I waited for him to spell it out.
>
> "Give her up," he said…."And not tomorrow and not next week. Right now. Tonight."
>
> "She's just a friend," I said.
>
> He smiled, "Then it ought to be easy….You're going to make an excellent member of this House. You can go as far as you want to—"
>
> "With your help," I said.
>
> He nodded. "With my help."
>
> It was an entirely private transaction, and I could accept it or not, as I chose.
>
> -- Ward Just, "Honor, Power, Riches, Fame, and the Love of Women" (1976)

With this exchange, between congressman and staffer (simultaneously father-in-law and son-in-law), Ward Just lays out how Tom Lewis, raised in small-town Illinois, became a congressman from upstate New York.[4] No social scientist or historian could provide as incisive a conversation or interior monologue.[5] Fenno and Caro must respect the record, the evidence; Just has no such limitations. He simply must present the truth, as he constructs it. Those great listeners, Fenno and Caro (and throw in journalist Richard Ben Cramer, too)[6] also build their portraits, but are limited by what they can observe and collect. They cannot hear what is not said, or what is said in complete privacy, or conveyed with a wink or a nod as much as by spoken words. But there is Just, constructing private conversations mixed with internal monologues, so that we *know* what a character is thinking ("I knew there would be a condition…").

Skillful fiction writers have a great edge when addressing the politician's public-private juncture, of course. The operative words here are "skillful" and "politician", in that very few first-rate novelists or short-story stylists spend much time on politics, especially Washington politics. Just has explained in several wonderful interviews and public appearances (Google him on PBS's Charlie Rose show) that the serious Washington novel is in very short supply. Although there are plenty of D.C. mysteries and potboilers, the capital (or the capitol) does not attract the attention of authors who would rather write about academia, southern

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[4] Ward Just, "Honor, Power, Riches, Fame, and the Love of Women," in *The Congress Man Who Loved Flaubert: 21 Stories and Novellas* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), pp. 1-55.

[5] For Fenno, see any number of books, from his classic *Home Style* to the insightful longitudinal study, *Congress at the Grassroots: Representational Change in the South, 1970-1998* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 200), as well as ""Observation, Context, and Sequence in the Study of Politics" (1980). For Caro, see both his work on Robert Moses and his three (so far) biographies of Lyndon Johnson, but especially the first, *The Path to Power* (New York: Knopf, 1982).

[6] Richard Ben Cramer, *What It Takes* (New York: Vintage, 1993).

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Mississippi, Midwestern families, or a host of other, well-mined veins of American fiction.

And what of Washington novels? Just has argued that until he began writing serious fiction in this milieu, the last serious D.C. novel was Henry Adams' path-breaking *Democracy*, published in 1880. As political scientist Michael Nelson observed, "Washington novels were (and are) flawed…. Such novels tend to be rich in setting, which is equally available in nonfiction, but impoverished in characterization, which fiction is uniquely suited to reveal."[7] Just develops character admirably, whether in a sketch (e.g., the Senate staffer Gloria Noone, in *Noone*) or a full-blown portrait, as with Alex Behl, the lobbyist cum power broker in *Echo House*.

With his background as an award-winning *Washington Post* journalist, covering both D.C. politics and Viet Nam, Just writes from a deep well of knowledge and observation, yet that alone cannot sustain a forty-year career in fiction. For Just, however formidable his journalistic skills, the profession itself proved limiting, even at the dawn of the Woodward-Bernstein era. He notes, "Journalism is useful, but truth wears many masks and in Washington facts sometimes tend to mislead. All the facts sometimes mislead absolutely."[8] So, to tell the truth, the fiction writer sets facts aside, even if he draws upon them from time to time. This is where the real challenge begins: to construct a story that offers up some recognizable, yet ineffable version of the truth. The trick may be to provide what literary critic James Wood calls "lifeness."

> Realism, seen broadly as truthfulness to the way things are, cannot be mere verisimilitude, cannot be mere lifelikedness, or life sameness, but what I call *lifeness*: life on the page, life brought to a different life by the highest kind of artistry. And it cannot be a genre: instead, it makes other forms of fiction seem like genres.[9]

Whether Just consistently attains Wood's high standard of "lifeness" is certainly open to question. Like other realist novelists, and Just resides in that neighborhood,[10] he is a formalist, carefully constructing his plots and characters, choosing his language with purpose. At his best, as in the short story "The Architecture of Washington, D.C.," he does achieve "lifeness" in his telling of a private conversation between two insiders at the changing of administrations of the same party. In the few pages of "Architecture," Just helps us understand the

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[7] Michael Nelson, "Ward Just's Washington," in the *Virginia Quarterly Review* (Spring, 1998).
[8] Ward Just, "Introduction," *The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert and Other Washington Stories* (Boston: Little Brown, 1973).
[9] James Woods, *How Fiction Works* (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 2008), 247.
[10] His contemporary peers are Louis Auchincloss and Louis Begley, whose novels mine different veins of American life, to similar ends.

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pull of office, the stark question of one's present and future monetary value, the limits of mentorship, and the aching loss of a top-level position, with all its accoutrements, tangible and otherwise.

In reporting one career-oriented, personal conversation between a youngish White House advisor and a veteran Supreme Court Justice, Just offers a glimpse of all such conversations, between any numbers of members of Washington's elite, as one administration leaves and another rushes in. Although such exchanges are commonplace, they necessarily go unreported and unobserved. But they are no less real for being private. Just can "hear" this back and forth and present it in the arcane lingo of elites, where many things go unsaid. In "Architecture" Tom Billingsley, the Justice, tells Paul Candler, the White House staffer:

> "It's a good offer [to join a lobbying firm]."
> "Fair, not good….And I'm forty-one."
> "And I'm seventy," Billingsley paused. "What are your options?"
> "Christ I'd like to get back in the game, Tom. I'd give my left nut to get back into it. But there isn't any entry…. The guy that has my old job, Christ, he used to be the attorney general of Christ, *Idaho*, or some damn place."[11]

Only upon rereading "The Architecture of Washington, D.C." a couple of times does the truncated and obscure narrative truly unfold, with private seeking and public realities slowly coming into focus. That's Wood's "lifeness." As the story ends, the White House staffer meditates on his limited tenure in an internal monologue: "Oh, what a place Washington was when you were there on the inside. Right in, tight, near the Oval Office, where it happened. He'd been there for eight years, an assistant, a President's man. Now he was on the outs. He hated being on the outs more than he hated anything. For a President's man, habit dies hard, and suddenly he was afraid." *He was afraid*. Who knew? Just lures the reader into a sense of predictable calm – that one has heard this all before – and then there is the "lifeness" of the three words that conclude the story.

Moreover, in touching on fear, Just addresses an emotion that rarely crops up in Washington novels, to say nothing of academic studies. Not physical fear (for that, read George Pelecanos's spot-on D.C. crime novels), but the fear of losing one's spot at the table – and there are many such tables in D.C. Indeed, a good part of one Just novel, the appropriately named *In the City of Fear*, addresses such a notion. The idea of fear resonates again in Alec Behl's bleak

[11] Ward Just, "The Architecture of Washington, D.C." in *The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert and 21 Stories* (Boston: Little Brown, 1998), p. 146. Emphasis in the original. This passage harkens back to Adams's *Democracy* in which Ratcliffe, the distinguished, veteran senator from Illinois is defeated for the presidential nomination (and the presidency) by an obscure one-term governor from Indiana.

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look toward the future at the end of *Echo House's* three-generation tale, in his dread of the final twenty years of his life, which has been – and will continue to be – appallingly empty. How many ex-officials, ex-fixers, ex-insiders reside in Washington, hanging on to the setting and their suits, afraid to move beyond the familiar architecture that comforts them, even as they have long since ceased to sit at the table?

In one middling assessment of *In the City of Fear*, the reviewer opines that while Just is sometimes seen as a modern William James, his work pales in comparison. She writes, "In James's apparently tame world, souls in real torment appear at the heart of his complicated renderings of complicated subjects, whereas Ward Just's characters are mostly hollow men and men of straw." We might argue about the "straw man" notion, but the idea that many of Just's characters are hollow is exactly the point. When one confronts one's core, as his characters frequently must do, they often find a hollowness that has long been hidden by masks upon masks.

In the last pages of *Echo House*, Just offers up two generations of hollow men. The first, the Venerables, who came to power in the 1930s through the 1960s, are excoriated for having "bankrupted the nation fighting foolish unwinnable wars and encouraging dubious insurgencies."[12] But Alec Behl's late 20th Century generation comes off no better, as Michael Nelson observes, quoting from *Echo House*:

> During the Watergate crisis, "one day Alec act[ed] on behalf of the White House, the next on behalf of the congressional committees. Willy thought that Alec's natural role was to represent both at once, Alec a corporation counsel retained by Washington itself." He and his fellow operators work best in the sort of blue-smoke-and-mirrors setting "where they didn't have to use verbs in their sentences." But unlike his father's generation, they have no great cause. They play the Washington game for its (and their) own sake.[13]

Hollow men make ultimately for a hollow city. Just ended his 1989 novel *Jack Gance* with a curious *paean* to Washington: "It was a great city, always giving more than it received. It gave and gave and gave and gave and expected nothing in return except loyalty."[14] But writing less than a decade later, he created Alec Behl, who possessed no great sense of personal or political loyalty, as opposed to Gance, a political insider-turned-senator. Rather, Alec's loyalty was

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[12] *Echo House,* p. 285; my conclusions in this paragraph owe a great deal to Michael Nelson's "Ward Just's Washington."
[13] Nelson, "Ward Just's Washington."
[14] *Jack Gance, p. 279.*

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only to the overall system, which he needed and which needed him, even as any notion of the public good had become irrelevant.

Unlike political novelists such as Gore Vidal or Robert Penn Warren, Just offers his readers seemingly routine kinds of characters. There are no Aaron Burrs or Willy Starks looming. Rather, he gives us Representative Lou LaRuth, in "the Congressman Who Loved Flaubert," and in twenty pages provides a road map for the congressional life, circa 1970. Or Burns, a mid-career State Department officer, who is loaned to the CIA and must come to terms with a new career that has been totally defined by bureaucratic shuffling. To be sure, these characters have real talents and some spark: LaRuth earned a Ph.D. at the Sorbonne, writing a thesis on Flaubert, and the linguist-scholar Burns has an unexpected talent for gambling. But Just leaves them, at the end of their respective short stories, engaged in their continuing political lives, *within* their respective institutions:

> Even in his hour of maximum triumph [passage of a watered-down education bill], LaRuth resolved to stay inside the belly of the whale [the House]…Of the world outside, he was weary and finally unconvinced. He knew who he was. He'd stick with what he had and take comfort from a favorite line, …near the end of *Madame Bovary*. It was the description of a minor character,….Seductive and attractive in a pessimistic way. *He grew thin, his figure became taller, his face took on a saddened look that made it nearly interesting.*"[15]

Many of Just's characters do achieve some greater self-knowledge, but often in ways that define their limitations as much as their possibilities. Just is a realist, writing about men and women who learn from their encounters with the world, albeit reluctantly and in limited ways. As one reviewer of *Echo House*, Just's most fully realized Washington novel, put it, his characters are "indoor men," which is, after all, the nature of government work in the capital.[16] Indeed, the physical location for much of Just's fiction are private – often very private – settings, such as the Capitol hideaway office in *Noone*, where a Catholic senator and his top assistant, a woman, compose the predictable wording for the press release that will announce his separation from his wife.[17] Conspiring together, they work seamlessly (and ironically) as a couple to produce exactly the right press reactions, framing how a private failure will become public news.

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[15] Just, "The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert," 104. (1990 edition), emphasis in originnal.

[16] David Willis McCullough, "The Ruling Class," *New York Times,* accessed at www.nytimes.com/book, September 4, 2010.

[17] In his short stories, Just often uses names, of characters or places, to provide the reader with a tip-off to his intent. Thus "Noone" the staffer, is essentially "no one," even as she is highly talented and crucial to her boss's success. Likewise, in "Honor, Power,…" the town of Dement plays a major role in alienating Tom Lewis from the Midwest and moving him to D.C.

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In the end, the senator leaves Gloria Noone alone, to make her calls to key reporters with news that will knock him out of he running for a vice-presidential nomination. Along with the senator, Just takes his readers away from the office, as Noone begins her calls, by herself. But we can see her there, dialing, chatting with her favored journalists, and we, like the senator, can imagine the next day's stories: damaging, but not fatally so.

Fiction and Professional Political Science: Hints about the Private Side of Political Life

> Politics is a delusive trade. In his secret heart, a successful politician believes he is truly loved. Not merely supported or well liked, but loved. He is a father to a constituency of children, and while some of the children may be obstinate or disobedient, none is beyond salvation. When a politician loses an election, he cannot believe it's because he's disliked. No. He was denied full access to the electorate; he was not permitted to make himself fully understood.
>
> -- Ward Just, "Honor, Power, Riches, Fame, and the Love of Women"

As insightful as Ward Just may be as a novelist, what, if anything, does he have to say to congressional scholars in particular and political scientists in general? I would like to make a case that Just has at least a few lessons for political scientists, if not in creating directly testable hypotheses or parsimonious models, at least in suggesting the richness of nuanced interpretations of political life, even if they resist systematic analysis. Indeed, the above quotation leads one to wonder if Richard Fenno might have read Just's short story before writing *When Incumbency Fails: The Senate Career of Mark Andrews,* whose narrative strength approaches a novelist's capacity to understand the personal side of public life.

This was the last of Fenno's five books on individual senators, published between 1988 and 1992. As Byron Shafer captures in a 1994 review essay on "The Senate Quintet,"[18] these works make up a remarkable piece of Senate history. And he sees in *When Incumbency Fails,* as I do, the "richest single aggregation" of one senator's career, in that of the five, only Mark Andrews loses his bid for reelection and must thus deal with the rejection of the constituents whom he thought he had faithfully served. Fenno draws on the rich literature on incumbency to address the puzzle of Andrews's defeat, whose progression from House to Senate appeared a textbook example of a well-established political career.

"When he ran for reelection in 1986…Andrews could look back on ten consecutive election triumphs [in statewide campaigns] and twenty-three years of

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[18] Byron Shafer, "The Senate Quintet" *Journal of Politics* 56:1 (Feb. 1994): pp. 253-60.

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incumbency in Congress," along with "steadily increasing electoral margins." Moreover, Fenno notes, national trends were on his side, and "North Dakota is the fifth smallest state in the nation. Personal, local, and national trends combined, therefore, to forecast the continuation of a long, unbreakable incumbency. *Yet Mark Andrews failed to win reelection in 1986.*"[19] In talking to Fenno, two weeks after his unexpected defeat, the senator said, "You're the political scientist. Perhaps you, in your analysis, can tell me when the love affair with the people of North Dakota stopped."[20]

Andrews had long framed his relationship with North Dakotans as a "love affair," a notion that makes sense in a small-population state, where he had personally met, in all probability, a clear majority of its residents. But it also bespeaks the sense of intimacy that can lead to self-delusion, much like any affair of the heart. In the end, many of the explanations for his defeat were straightforward – a well-financed, attractive, well-known opponent (Kent Conrad), and a decline in the farm economy, for example. Still, as Fenno notes, other farm-state Republicans survived similar circumstances in the same year. There was something more, a loss of trust among North Dakota voters. In part, Andrews was seen as standoffish; as an aide put it, "He looks and acts like a senator. But he is not good at making small talk…You can know him as a senator; but to know him as Mark Andrews would be like breaking down the Kremlin wall."[21]

Fenno cites various other observers who make similar points, which reflect a serious disconnect in Andrews's notion of his "love affair" with the North Dakota people. And while there were many small matters that worked to break down this relationship of trust, if not love, one stood out in the 1986 campaign. At the risk of oversimplifying, the major cause of the loss of trust – this apparently strong bond between legislator and constituents – resulted from Senator Andrews's consistent and even emotional support of his wife's decision to sue Fargo doctors for medical malpractice and the ensuing nine-week trial in Fargo. The North Dakota media covered the trial extensively, and in the end Mary Andrews received no damages for negligence.

Subsequently, the family appealed the ruling, which kept the case in the public eye. The very fact of airing one's private issues in public proved problematic for the Andrews. Fenno reports: "When it was over, one of the defendants said, 'The personal attacks and the derogatory manner in which they treated the physicians were uncalled for.'" And Andrews observed, "What is tough to take is the celebration, joy, and frivolity on the other side….They are

[19] Fenno, *When Incumbency Fails*, p. 2.(emphasis added)
[20] Fenno, *When Incumbency Fails*, 265.
[21] Fenno, *When Incumbency Fails,* 206.

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laughing all the way to the bank."[22] The lawsuit became simultaneously personal and public, dividing many in North Dakota and especially Fargo, Andrews's home territory. In a small city, "nearly everybody...has a connection. We're all touched by it."[23]

So the personal became political as the trial dragged on, but Fenno speculates (his word), in an almost novelistic way, about the relationships between the private and the political in assessing the overall impact of the trial and its trappings:

> Difficulties in assessing public opinion did not mean there was none. It meant only that private opinions were being privately exchanged. In a fairly homogeneous state made up of small towns, private exchanges of opinion can be potent influences on public opinion. . . However much his public actions may confirm that he is one of us, in his private actions he will be viewed differently. His private actions are judged in terms of character traits they reveal.[24]

To be sure, Fenno follows up with polling data and other evidence, but the process of opinion change itself, especially with regard to trust, goes unobserved.

In the end, Fenno's examination of Andrews's single-term Senate career is longer than Just's novel about the career of fictional senator Jack Gance. Fenno builds his case with hundreds of separate observations, while Just constructs a more coherent – and perhaps more persuasive – narrative. Fenno can and does place Andrews's defeat within various contexts of political science literature, from incumbency, to negative advertising, to priming and framing notions of opinion formation, all examined over time. Yet Just, with a full life to work with, may offer an interpretation equally profound, as he moves forward from Gance's teenage introduction to politics.

Few scholars have the patience and skills to follow in Dick Fenno's footsteps, which most closely track with a novelist's story-telling skills. Nor do many novelists take the time and effort to imbue themselves with the culture of Washington, so that they can use this setting to full advantage. But Ward Just does, and in so doing he offers some implicit suggestions and even a couple of hand-drawn road maps for political scientists to consider.

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[22] Fenno, *When Incumbency Fails,* 155.
[23] Fenno, *When Incumbency Fails,* 155
[24] Fenno, *When Incumbency Fails,* 157.

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The Complexity of Political Life: Relationships, Private Settings, and Careers

In her review of *Jack Gance*, the wonderful Judith Martin (aka Miss Manners) states:

> The penalty for portraying complexity, as we have learned from political campaigns, is to be considered boring or cold. But surely it is the simplistic morality plays and analyses of so-called character flaws that fall flat, in literature if not in life.[25]

It takes little imagination to paraphrase Martin's observation in terms of the harsh simplicities of social science models that lead to broad findings but little appreciation for the nuance of political life. There is no question that we need the former. Yet unwillingness to address the complexity of political decisions and the intricacies of politicians' lives means that our knowledge will be less complete and shallower than it would otherwise be.

Almost thirty years ago, Fenno asked his "What are they like?" question in the context of the apparently growing independence of Members of Congress. Subsequently, we might want to know more about what Members "are like" when they vote in lockstep, despite their personal differences. Indeed, Barbara Sinclair concludes that senators have become increasingly partisan *and* individualistic.[26] OK. But what does that mean, say, for South Carolinians Lindsay Graham and Jim DeMint, who manifest two very different approaches to working within the U.S. Senate? Wendy Schilller's work can give us some hints, as can Ross Baker's, but we need to know more.[27] From Ward Just, we might usefully look for guidance in at least three areas: relationships, settings, and careers of politicians (as opposed to political careers).

Relationships, Settings, and Access

Politics is all about relationships, between leaders and followers, legislators and constituents, lobbyists and lawmakers, donors and solicitors, on and on. Just largely explores relationships within families, between friends, and among those who work together in institutional settings. On occasion, he writes of seemingly simple personal or institutional ties, but more often he constructs complicated

[25] Judith Martin, "No One Stays Clean in Washington," *New York Times,* January 1, 1989, accessed at *newyortimes.com,* September 5, 2010.

[26] Barbara Sinclair, "The New World of U.S. Senators," in Lawrence C. Dodd, and Bruce I. Oppenheimer, eds., *Congress Reconsidered,* 9th ed. (Washington: CQ Press, 2009)

[27] Wendy Schiller, *Partners and Rivals* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000); Ross Baker, *Friend and Foe in the U.S. Senate* (Boston: Copley Editions, 1999)

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relationships, where family or friendship is woven into an institutional fabric, which is always at risk of fraying, sometimes badly. Jack Gance's links to his father, sent to prison for tax evasion when Gance was young, or the friendly rivalry between the "young Southern liberals," Winston and LaRuth, in "The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert," suggest any number of questions about motive and career.

We simply may not know "what he's like" without more attention to career decisions and sequence (again from Fenno). And Fenno's return to Georgia in his *Congress at the Grassroots* conveys the power of returning to a setting, if not to the same politicians, to address questions of change and comparison.

In a related, if separate, vein, we could do better at understanding what happens in private settings. The assumption is often made that one "can't be in the room" when crucial decisions are being made. That is often true, but not always, especially when strong ties have developed between academics and politicians. Yet these latter require lots of investment, with uncertain payoffs. At least as promising are the assessments of those who have served and observed, of whom there are a lot, such as Representative David Price and lobbyist/White House staffers Gary Andres and Pat Griffin.

Finally, and in another related vein, we should seek to understand politicians by developing long-term (if episodic) access to career politicians of all stripes. Barbara Sinclair and Ross Baker have probably done more of this than any political scientists who have published widely. They can often place change in perspective because of their long-term personal relationships with legislators, and especially legislative leaders.

In the end, students of politics cannot completely reconcile their work with the nuances and complexities that Ward Just can manipulate in his novels and stories. But if we read him carefully, we may place more emphasis on the personal and the private, and seek to create our own narratives that cut closer to the bone of choice that makes up much of political life. Understanding the nature of choice and the implications of living with one's choices are at least some of the things that Just attends to, time and again. We might pay a bit more attention to them as well.[28]

[28] And this essay has only inferentially observed the utility of Just's works for teaching, with "The Congressman Who Loved Flaubert" standing at the head of the list, at least for legislative studies.

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