

Donnald K. Anderson

Memories of Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas

Personal memories of Speaker Sam Rayburn of Texas.

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I remember when I got here I expected Sam Rayburn would be a rather giant looming fellow. Of course we didn't have the mass media that we have now. You saw people mainly in photos in newspapers. Where it's kind of hard to make a judgment as to how big they are unless you have some solid reference point. And I thought Sam Rayburn would probably be over six feet tall and a giant of a man. And when I first laid eyes on him he was scarcely five-six, a rather smallish man, but very broad in the shoulders. Of course with his absolutely bald head he was very intimidating. And he was fairly old at that point and in declining health. So he was kind of a solemn figure, very intimidating. We looked at him with almost a religious awe. The Speaker had such a huge persona and dominated any setting in which he was to be found. In fact whenever he would come to the cloakroom for a cup of coffee or a sandwich or just to sit in the back and smoke a cigarette the Sergeant at Arms would usually come to the cloakroom first to announce that the Speaker is coming so that we were all prepared and braced up at attention. Nowadays of course Speakers come and go and nobody pays much more attention to them when they go to the cloakroom than they would to any other Member of the House. But the appearance of the Speaker in the cloakroom was an occasion that required some preparation and so his messenger was sent in advance to announce that he intended to come to the cloakroom. Which meant that if the snack bar was busy, room was made in case that's where he wanted to go. So that he would have room at the counter. Or if all the chairs in the back were taken some Member, usually a more junior one, would get up to be sure that there was an armchair for the Speaker in case he decided to sit. And when he would come in we would all very politely, "Good morning Mr. Speaker" or "Good afternoon Mr. Speaker." And if we were very lucky he might acknowledge us with a glance and a "harrumph." But he was never one to stop and visit with the employees. In fact he didn't visit that much with his own colleagues except some of his more senior pals.