



## *A Pryor Commitment: The Autobiography of David Pryor*

by David Pryor with Don Harrell (Little Rock, Ark.: Butler Center for Arkansas Studies, 2009), 388 pages.

### Book Review by Phillip H. McMath

David Pryor's autobiography, "A Pryor Commitment" (how could there be a better title?), is essential reading for anyone interested in politics. His story is sustained by an aw-shucks charm, laugh-out-loud humor (my goodness, the Dallas County beauty pageant!), but most of all by the fascinating drama of Pryor's long march from small town South Arkansas obscurity to the very epicenter of American power.

To be great at politics, and really anything, it seems one has to be assigned the task at birth. Pryor relates the local joke that on his first day (8/29/34) he asked the doctor and nurse for their votes. No doubt he got them! He ran for president of the third grade and in a close race promised God that if he won, which he did, he'd never run for anything else! But David doesn't say how he worked things out with the Almighty thereafter.

He comments, "When people ask me, 'How did you get into politics?' I have to answer that I was born with that instinct - an irresistible pull."

Precisely. And no one did it better - getting votes, that is. David Pryor from beginning to end (1960-1997) racked up an incredible 11-1 win-loss number — three terms in the legislature, three in Congress, two as governor, and three as a U.S. Senator. He was in the wilderness all of two years, and his one defeat was to a powerhouse incumbent named John McClellan who eked out a saved-by-the-bell runoff victory. No major Arkansas political figure can beat Pryor's record.

Early in his book, one is reminded of the intellectually fashionable Hedgehog and Fox comparison. Here Pryor's '66 congressional race with Richard Arnold comes to

mind. Arnold was definitely a Fox: Phillips Exeter, Yale, first at Harvard Law, Supreme Court clerk, a polyglot fluent in Hebrew, Latin, Greek, and French. Richard was more than merely brilliant; he was a genius who had money, prestige, oodles of friends, and impressive connections. Astoundingly gifted, the Arnolds are as close to meritorious aristocracy as America ever gets.

Then there was the Hedgehog. Oh heck, just for fun let's make it down home, let's say a Coon Hound. David's family was well established, comfortable, and prominent, and his father was a successful businessman who had enjoyed one term as sheriff, but the Pryors exerted no real influence beyond the county line. After Camden High, Pryor was a Fayetteville frat-rat before he returned to start a newspaper, *The Ouachita Citizen*, then went to the legislature till the *Citizen's* red ink ran him back to the University for law school. Home again, he hung up a dual shingle with the very capable Harry Barnes, and their most famous case involved a stolen Coon Dog (a critter that George Fisher later unleashed to be David's inseparable companion). Of course, any Arkansas lawyer knows that a Coon Dog is a Coon Dog; he can't become a bird dog or lap poodle. In other words David Pryor was not an academic, nor really a journalist; a monoglot, he speaks a delightfully mellifluous South Arkansas patois that oozes off his tongue like sorghum knifed out of a silver bucket; and he was much too accommodating to be a sue-the-bastards trial lawyer. In short, David Pryor was/is, will always be, a politician.

To be sure, the Fox is clever and knows many things, but the Hound knows one big thing. He knew how to tree voters in his neck

of the woods. See, in Arkansas, politics is personal — eye-to-eye, mano a mano, so, after consuming a couple of pickup truckloads of fried catfish, fried chicken, fried hushpuppies, fried potatoes, fried onions, cold slaw, and several hindquarters of barbecued coon, he went on to Washington in a full-bellied, tail-wagging trot.

Pryor sums up his strategy succinctly:

Many modern professionals dismiss this one-on-one approach, but I not only believed in it, I loved doing it. When political historians write the definitive story of Arkansas politics, they are bound to agree that Clinton, Bumpers, and Pryor all had one thing in common - the belief that politics is more than local; it's exceedingly personal.

Right!

Always honest about his obstacles and those who helped him, David relates that one moment he was eating crow in an El Dorado parking lot trying to raise \$1,069 for a TV lift to his D.C. destination, and almost by magic it seemed, "Miss Bertie" Murphy limoed up with her checkbook. In a trice Congressman Pryor was riding around with LBJ eating ice cream. Most assuredly the latter was lots sweeter than crow.

Yet, we must ask, "Who is David Pryor, after all?" And "What does he stand for?" He is, to be sure, a committed liberal, yet an idealist tempered by the realism of limits. Still, there comes a time when one must take risks. Pryor's gift was to know when.

Pryor's risk-taking is perhaps underappreciated. Let's tick them off: his little shoe-string newspaper took on both the Hussman

publishing monolith and the Faubus machine all at once; his first race against an incumbent legislator was a gamble he could've easily lost; elected, he became a leader of the "Young Turks" that had the guts to buck Faubus when few dared; at the tumultuous '68 Democratic Convention in Chicago, Pryor voted to seat the racially-integrated delegation from Mississippi; he lost his courageous roll-of-the dice chance to unseat that ole stone-faced defender of special interests, John McClellan; and as governor he used the National Guard to break the Pine Bluff firemen's strike, thus forever forfeiting the support of his old friend, organized labor.

Yet he confesses to being troubled about his caution on Civil Rights and Vietnam. Realistically, on the former, he could have done little more than he did; and, on the latter, his description of his '68 Convention Vietnam speech as "tortured" is accurate, but everything ever said or done about that war is that way.

Another underestimated aspect of his career is his defeat of Faubus in the '74 governor's race. In a word, he was a brave reformer when it was not easy. And his Congressional work on aging was prescient; if nothing else,

it defined the problem, which is always half the battle.

More profoundly, he is deeply appreciated by almost everyone because, in his low-key, self-effacing way, one senses the powerful surge of a subterranean passion for a better world and the commitment to build it. Yet we hardly need reminding that moral passions sometimes are more imperious, intolerant, and willful than the more mundane ones, and that people in their grip, especially those who know the intoxication of power, can frequently evince an unearned superiority spawning arrogance, intolerance, or even tyranny. But it's equally clear that David Pryor, while remaining a committed power-seeker and reformer, never manifested any of these noxious qualities. Indeed, as a supremely successful politician, he is almost unique in that he possessed ambition without egotism, self-regard without vanity, and hope without illusions. He is one of our greatest figures. Don't miss his book.

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