WATCHING

By Thomas Fitzpatrick

Whether they're moving through governmental marble halls or listening to the electorate at the pancake breakfast at the VFW, Professor Fenno studies his politicians the way Jane Goodall studies her primates—up close and in their natural habitats.

"Tick...tick...tick."

Richard Fenno could almost hear the pulsating insistence of the completed manuscript sitting in his desk drawer in Harkness Hall. The Rochester political scientist didn't think that he had hold of the kind of political *plastique* which once hurled would radically alter the electoral landscape, but he sure had the answer to the hottest political question of the summer of 1988.

George Bush had just selected the obscure junior senator from Indiana to be his running mate. Dan Quayle was the man of the hour. And the journalistic pack was in full yelp. The question was, frankly and desperately, "Who he?"

Fenno knew.

Almost alone (as it proved) among the pundits, political scientists, and reporters who are drawn mothlike to the shimmer of the Second Greatest American Pastime, Fenno had studied Quayle. As part of his 10-year project—which analyzes how senators pursue legislative careers and which aims to relate their lawmaking to their campaigns in their home states—Fenno had picked Quayle as typical of a corps of young, ideologically right-wing, pre-Reagan Reaganauts who had achieved some electoral success by running against Washington, Congress, and government bureaucracy in the late 1970s.

Fenno had observed the underdog Quayle campaigning for the Senate in 1980, watched the upset victory over the nationally known Democratic incumbent Birch Bayh, and followed the upstart Hoosier back to D.C.

The Republicans, hooking on to Ronald Reagan's presidential coattails, had captured the role of majority party in the Senate, and Quayle had a clear choice: Hew to the role of perpetual outside-the-beltway kvetcher (see the career of Jesse Helms), or take on legislative responsibility—the nuts and bolts of governing. Fenno watched Quayle opting for the latter.

Spurred by the troublesome and persistent unemployment statistics in northern Indiana, Quayle turned pragmatist, asserted what Fenno calls an "instrumental independence," and showed a willingness to use government to accomplish something. The Comprehensive Employment and Training Act (as "CETA," it had long been a red flag to conservative Republicans) was about to expire in September of 1982, and a policy window opened before Quayle—as chairman of the Labor and Human Resources Subcommittee on Employment and Productivity. Windy and Claghornish though Quayle's title may seem (in Washington it is axiomatic that the significance of your job is in inverse proportion to the number of wowser nouns and adjectives tacked to it), it gave him a wonderful opportunity to show his stuff.

Fenno observed Quayle doing exactly that. He forged the Joint Training Partnership Act (JTPA) as a replacement for CETA, struck up an unlikely alliance with the ranking Democrat Edward Kennedy of Massachusetts, steered the legislation through the Labor and Human Resources Committee, encountered initial resistance from the prickly chairman, Utah's Orrin Hatch, but brought him aboard in the end, and held off the active hostility of the Administration's Labor Department.

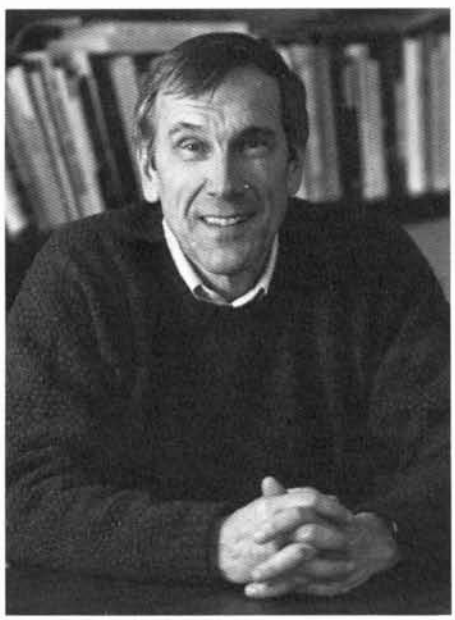
POLITICIANS

So successful was Quayle, and so attractive the final legislation, in fact, that the Reagan administration decided to co-opt JTPA completely, and failed to invite Quayle to the bill-signing ceremony. But it was "the most important new piece of social legislation in the 97th Congress," Fenno wrote later, and besides helping out thousands of laid-off workers like those around Gary, Indiana, it "gave definition to the career of an otherwise unknown U.S. senator."

That was the story ticking away in Fenno's desk drawer when the Quayle media frenzy erupted six years later. In *Watching Politicians*, a 1990 book of essays, Fenno went on to tell, entertainingly and wryly, what happened then. He was, of course, delighted that he had died and gone to political-science heaven (or, in his phrase "won the lottery"). The subject of his completed manuscript had been struck by national political lightning—but, what should he do with his special knowledge? Rush to print? Buy a pundit's cap and call up John McLaughlin? Hire an agent and try to get on "Good Morning, America"?

Fenno says that he resolved to maintain academic diffidence. Surely, with thousands of journalists on the Quayle trail, attention would be paid to his Senate career, to the legislative talents he developed in pushing through the job-training act. Fenno believed he could weigh in later with concrete data to support a balanced view of the vice-presidential candidate. As the world knows now, nothing of the sort happened.

Journalists badgered the registrar at DePauw University, and somehow found out that Quayle had been a mediocre student. His family connections were probed, and credited with getting him into law school and later into the National Guard during the Vietnam conflict. His two terms as congressman were characterized as "inconsequential," and Quayle himself characterized as not only an airhead but a "wethead"—more interested in the Congressional gym and showers afterwards than in legislation: Indiana voters had sent not Mr. Smith to Washington, but Bertie Wooster. With the exception of a column by Richard Cohen, and a surprising defense of Quayle by Ted Kennedy during the campaign, virtually nothing about Quayle's Senate life reached the electorate, and at least half of the Quayle story was missed.



Just plain Dick Fenno in Washington and out on the hustings, at home on the River Campus he holds the double designation of William R. Kenan, Jr. Professor of Political Science and Distinguished Professor of Arts and Science.

Fenno's manuscript had it, though, and briefly put the tale is dramatic and edifying: A callow, 29-year-old politician, taken seriously not even by the graybeards of his own party, demonstrates a gift for campaigning, wins election to Congress, is frustrated and bored by being in the seemingly permanent minority there, scores an upset win and moves to the Senate, there to achieve a cunning and significant legislative triumph. It is a tale of development and growth, in flexibility and smarts—in short, *The Making of a Senator*, the title of Fenno's Quayle manuscript when it appeared in book form in 1989 after the election.

Fenno is sensitive to the difference between journalism and political science. Perhaps by definition, the former inevitably concentrates on "the short-term, the personal, and so often on the negative," while the academic discipline focuses on "the long-term, the institutional, the positive." News covers how things fall apart, while political scientists are concerned with how things work. Understanding that, Fenno is yet critical of journalism, because, "somewhere along the line, the *public* life of public officials must be taken into account. Is the real key to an assessment of Dan Quayle to be found at DePauw's Office of the Registrar, or in the committee rooms and on the floor of the United States Senate?

Maybe Lloyd Bentsen was right, that Dan Quayle was "no John F. Kennedy" (who, by the way, was routinely characterized by the pre-1960 press as a playboy-senator whose rich daddy bought him the seat, and who was more interested in carousing in Washington nightspots than attending to Senate business), but can Quayle be summed up by this headline in the *Washington Post*: "From Polit-

ical Pretty Boy to Running Mate"? After a reading of Fenno's book, the answer is, clearly, no.

Fenno's scholarly method does resemble journalism, however, in that he is willing to put in the legendary "leg work" of the trade. Since the early 1970s, Fenno has studied senators and members of Congress, and not only from the vantage point of the give-and-take and the quid pro quos of the legislative life; he has also continued the examination by following them on the hustings back home.

"I began with a study of the power of the purse, how politics plays out as Congress goes about appropriating funds," Fenno recalls. "That led me to realize that the real work and real life of these politicians goes on not on the floor but in committees and subcommittees. A book followed from that realization, and then it gradually came to me that what they do in these committees is vitally connected to how they perceive their home districts and states. That's when I started hanging around with politicians in earnest."

Not only "hanging around," but also "soaking and poking" is how Fenno describes his method. For over a quarter of a century he has been both soaking up the details and atmospherics of governing and poking into the minutiae of campaigning, much in the manner, as one fellow academician put it, of what "Jane Goodall has done with her no less distinctive population of primates."

The result has been an impressive series of volumes, beginning with 1978's *Home Style: House Members in Their Districts*. For that book, Fenno formulated his method of "participant observation" and hit his stride at the same time. He picked a handful of congressmen and resolved to learn by looking over their shoulders as the politicians themselves drew thematic and concrete links between what voters were telling them and what they were expected to accomplish for them in D.C.

Members of the House of Representatives must go to the voters every two years, so those who do not have an effective "home style" soon find themselves like the parrot in the Monty Python sketch—"ex." That lent an immediacy to Fenno's study, but to get these congressmen to trust him enough not only to talk to him but to allow him to tag along on campaigns meant that this researcher had to be more than just an academic fly-on-the-wall. If there was an envelope to be stuffed, Fenno pitched in; if a phone had to be manned Fenno was willing to limber his index finger and spin a rotary dial. In every case he gradually won the confidence of advance men, staffers, "The Man Who. . ." his own self—and became privy to their frank estimations of the lay of the political landscape.

Home Style's observation of politicians in their own habitats won Fenno the Woodrow Wilson Foundation Award and the D. H. Hardeman Prize, and has become a classic text of political science at a time when the discipline is becoming more abstract, intent upon modeling and statistical evaluation. Fenno's way is qualitative, depending upon the sharp and savvy ability of the researcher in the field to take note of words and deeds, and the sometimes shaky relationship between the two.

And how these pols do talk! Like Warren G. Harding or Earl Long they can still bloviate (which Gore Vidal has defined as the ability "to

speak impromptu with incoherent passion"). In private moments with Fenno they can turn a jaundiced eye on their own constituents: "This is Wallace country," a congressman says about one corner of his district. "You can tell a Wallaceite because he has a pickup truck, a hound dog, and a gun. He'll give you his dog and his pickup truck, but he won't give up his gun."

They can even show an anarchic and zany streak. "Staffer: What are you going to say at the next meeting? Congressman: I'm going to ask somebody to give me a haircut. Or, I could walk in and hang from the chandelier. No, I guess I'll walk in, undress, and say, 'Any questions?'"

Fenno does not believe that political scientists should "leave the journalists in charge of anecdotes," particularly if they are linked, as they almost invariably are, to public-policy outcomes. That congressman who watches the "Wallaceites" in their pickups stream down a road in his district might wind up voting one way or another on gun control, but you know he is not going to be unmindful of back-home consequences whichever way he goes. For Fenno, as for fellow scholar Raymond Wolfinger, "The plural of anecdote is data."

Fenno manages to combine narrative skill with a lucid and diverting prose style to make his books absolutely accessible to the general reader: "Someone mentioned the morning hour of handshaking, howdying, and hijinks with 20 people in a small country store." Ron Shelton could have put that sentence into a character's mouth in the screenplay of *Blaze*. And it would be wise of the would-be politician, the party chairperson, and the political consultant to take Fenno's works as an ongoing political handbook for our times.

If you think of yourself as a candidate, or are casting about for one to encourage or hook onto, better pay heed to Fenno's three requirements for a successful politician. Before ideology, wisdom, or breadth of perspective, a politician needs: (1) "incredible stamina"—the energy to get up at 5:30 for the factory gate and keep going past the last evening confab for a peek at the 11 o'clock news; (2) "sheer competitiveness"—it's not enough to want to win, you must "*hate* to lose"; and (3) "the ability to keep from taking himself too seriously."

This last may be the most important of the three. As Fenno observes, on Capitol Hill "each House member seems to be a king or queen in his or her empire—isolated from everyday life, fawned over by a staff, pampered by Capitol Hill employees, sought after by all manner of supplicants." If public officials do not have a sense of humor to remind themselves of their own ordinariness, voters have a way of supplying the lack thereof at election time.

If one is to follow these extraordinary creatures around, it may be said, these three qualities are also required of the political scientist. After the campaigning politician dropped off in his Holiday Inn bed, after all, Fenno was still at it, transcribing his notes of the day, and preparing to keep pace with the entourage when the sun came up.

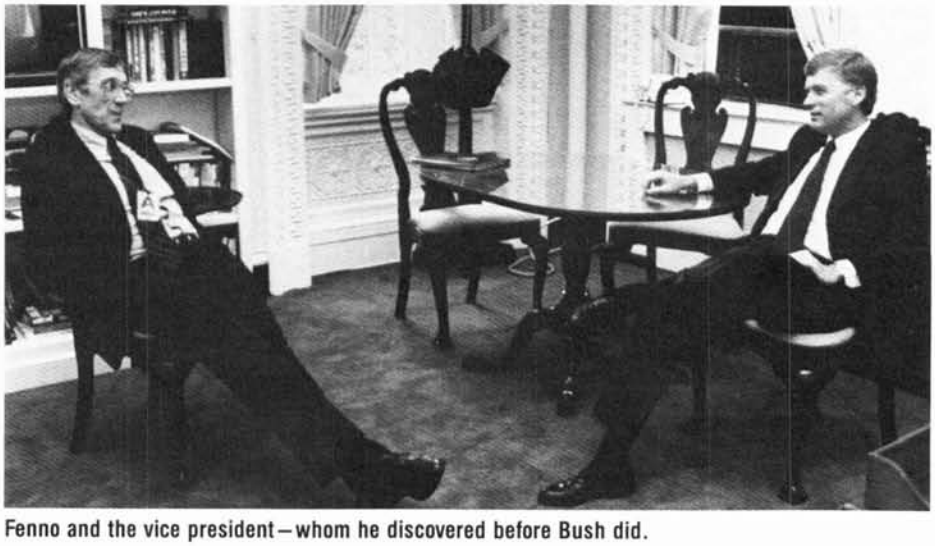
He will never see 60 again, but compact, rail-thin, Fenno crackles with the controlled intensity of a playmaking guard, and the metaphor is to the point. He has written that a "participant observer" on a campaign must be able to "move without the ball," and perhaps as a reminder to keep that faculty honed, he has a team picture of the 1984 Boston Celtics nailed to his office wall.

As for a sense of humor, well, during his undergraduate days at Amherst (Class of 1948) and graduate study at Harvard (doctorate, 1956), Fenno breathed the same Massachusetts air as did such legendary pols as Eddie Boland, Tip O'Neill, and Larry O'Brien, none of whom could ever be accused of long-faced solemnity. Across from the Celtics on Fenno's wall there's a reproduction of the famous Jamie Wyeth portrait of JFK, neck craned at a quizzical angle, that ironic smile starting to form on the lips—the one that hinted, "We 'statesmen,' we're all just a bit absurd around the edges, aren't we?"

Fenno himself has never been a candidate for public office, "nor will I ever be." He is registered with no political party, and how he himself votes is his own business. It is difficult enough to retain a scholarly neutrality in the "we-them" atmosphere of a campaign, and, just as a politician cannot afford to get too far out in front of his constituents, Fenno has to stay clear of the ideological vanguard and cast a cold eye on Republican and Democrat alike.

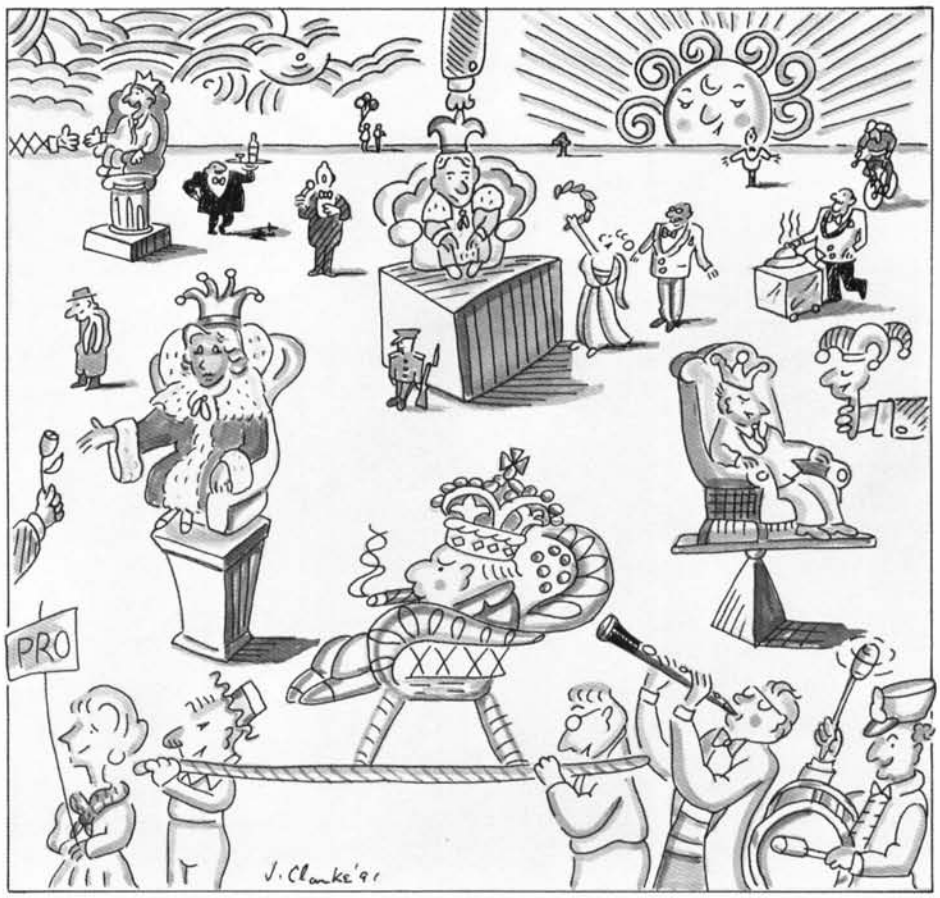
But neutrality is a neat trick in these conditions, and often it is neither possible nor desirable. "When I have invested time in politicians, *of course* I want them to win," he cheerfully admits. "It does my projects no good to have to keep scrapping research because I have chosen people fated to be one-termers."

Sometimes the academic participant-observer steps over the line. One of the House members (identified only as congressmen "A," "B," "C," and "D") chosen for *Home Style* was Barber Conable, now president of the World Bank, then the representative from



Fenno and the vice president—whom he discovered before Bush did.

Rochester's own 30th District (and in between, Fenno's colleague as a professor in the College of Arts and Science's Department of Political Science). His research on Conable complete, Fenno in 1974 sensed that the congressman was so deeply immersed in House business that he failed to appreciate the Democratic challenge to his seat by a popular vice mayor of Rochester. After a brief deliberation on scholarly detachment, Fenno telephoned Washington with this message: "Barber, you're in trouble. You get your tail up here and start campaigning now." Conable dropped everything, caught the shuttle, and took root in Rochester and environs for the rest of the campaign. He won, "in the fight of my life," with 57 percent of the vote.



I did it partly for the sake of the research," Fenno says, but equally so, one suspects, for his regard for the man. Conable is one of the two congressmen, the other being current Speaker of the House Tom Foley, whom Fenno regards as "the best of the breed." At any rate, Fenno's relationship with Conable deepened into friendship, and that meant the end of this congressman as a research subject.

Something of the same occurred with Dan Quayle. With the manuscript tucked away in 1988, Fenno unabashedly if privately rooted for the Bush-Quayle ticket. Research is a competitive game as much as politics, and Fenno was not at all reluctant to claim "timely credit" for having picked the right horse. And indeed, why should he not?

(After he published, in 1990, what many consider his masterwork, *The Presidential Odyssey of John Glenn*, he encountered some resistance from one of those organizations that buys books for public libraries, which doubted that readers "would be interested in a losing campaign." Since, as Fenno has written, "running for president is a fairly common senatorial activity," something could conceivably be learned from the story of a man, who in his own words, "wanted to run for president in the worst way, and that's how I went about it.")

After the election of the Bush-Quayle ticket, Fenno scouted out publishers, most of whom wanted him to tart up his book by including juicy details of the private, off-guard Quayle, and pontifications about how Fenno expected him to perform as vice president. But Fenno refuses to be either a political tout or a pundit—he knows what he knows by watching politicians in real life, either moving through marbled governmental halls or listening to the electorate at the pancake breakfast in the VFW hall. The Congressional Quarterly Press agreed to take *The Making of a Senator* just as it had been the night Bush startled Fenno and the nation by the choice of Quayle.

Fenno did not get interviewed by Joan Lunden, but David Broder ("the one columnist political scientists read") wrote a long and laudatory review in the *Washington Post*, and Fenno got in some appearances on C-Span and other media outlets. On one of these, a New York radio call-in show, Fenno showed the wit and competitiveness that makes him a natural for politics. The host put it to him: "Professor, isn't it opportunistic of you, coming out with this book on Quayle now?" Fenno grinned back a one-word answer: "Yep." The interviewer laughed, and was so bowled over by Fenno's honesty that he went on: "Did you hear that, audience? The professor admits he's opportunistic. That's great. I want everybody to go out and buy his book."

That's good advice for anyone who wants to understand our institutions, and the politicians who make them go. If we believe, with Thomas Jefferson, that democracy is impossible without educated citizens, we could do worse than clearing some shelf space for *The Federalist* on one end and the works of Richard Fenno on the other. It would be a start toward understanding these interesting political times. Like it or not, as John Kennedy suggested, we live in them.

Although he is an admirer of Richard Fenno, freelancer Thomas Fitzpatrick confesses that his favorite work of political science remains Plunkitt of Tammany Hall.