

The Pennsylvania Prince: Political Wisdom from Benjamin Franklin to Arlen Specter

I have not found among my belongings anything I prize so much or value so highly as my knowledge of the actions of great men, acquired through long experience of contemporary affairs and extended reading in antiquity.¹

—Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince* (1513)

THE *AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF BENJAMIN FRANKLIN* remains widely read for its wonderful anecdotes, wry tone, and the famous scheme of virtues, but few celebrate the work as a model political memoir. Yet, the final third of the *Autobiography*, written in Philadelphia during the period of constitutional ratification and covering the twenty-five years from the publication of Franklin's first *Almanac* (1732) to the crucial years of the French and Indian War (1754–63), offers a vivid dissection of colonial politics and some surprisingly feisty score settling from an eighty-two-year-old man on the eve of his death. The great American figure of the Enlightenment humbly declared that he would not “swell this narrative” with detailed accounts of his famous electricity experiments, but he did find space to devote several thousand words to a vigorous defense of his actions as a quartermaster during the French and Indian War. He provided an itemized list of supplies that he and his son delivered to ungrateful officers in British camps, including six pounds of “good ground coffee” and two “well-cured hams” within each wagon.² This represents a level of obsessive self-justification that any modern political memoirist might admire, but which few literary critics ever appreciate. Other pages, full of fleeting but still profound insights about power, also

¹ Niccolò Machiavelli, *The Prince: A Revised Translation, Backgrounds, Interpretations, Marginalia*, trans. and ed. Robert M. Adams, 2nd ed. (New York, 1992), 3.

² J. A. Leo Lemay and P. M. Zall, eds., *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography: An Authoritative Text, Backgrounds, Criticism* (New York, 1986), 133 and 118.

appear to have been lost in the translation to contemporary audiences. Franklin's *Autobiography* was not merely the opening salvo in the genre of self-made American literature, but also a pioneering example of political payback and punditry. More precisely, Franklin's combination of self-serving recollections and Machiavellian analysis has provided a template for more than two century's worth of Pennsylvania politicians who have produced some of the nation's more significant political memoirs.

The great tradition of the Pennsylvania dish has never received the acclaim it deserves, but few have cooked up recollected revenge more deftly than Benjamin Franklin. When prodded, the self-made man could demolish the reputation of political foes or rivals with ease. Franklin reduced William Keith, who, according to the *American National Biography*, was "among the most able of colonial governors," to a pitiful caricature of a blowhard politician.³ Governor Keith was the figure in the *Autobiography* who showed interest in the young refugee printer from Boston, but then sent him to London without a promised letter of introduction. Still mortified and annoyed, Franklin dismissed the politician sixty-five years later as a man who "wish'd to please everybody; and having little to give, he gave Expectations."⁴ Elsewhere, in his perpetual zeal to put the Penn family in its place, Franklin went so far as to mock the great colonial founder himself. To illustrate the Penns' arrogance, while also simultaneously poking fun at the hypocrisy of Quaker pacifists (a recurring theme in this combative third section), Franklin described a story he had heard from James Logan, William Penn's secretary. Logan recalled that during one of his early transatlantic journeys with Penn, in a period of intense naval hostilities, their ship had come under enemy pursuit. The captain ordered the pacifistic Quakers below deck, acknowledging that he did not expect their aid in the fight, but Logan remained to help regardless. Afterward, he claimed that Penn "rebu'd him severely for staying upon Deck and undertaking to assist in defending the Vessel, contrary to the Principles of Friends." But Logan was undaunted, as Franklin related with apparent relish, responding to the proprietor, "I being thy Servant, why did thee not order me to come down, but thee was willing enough that I should stay and help to fight the Ship when thee

³ Mary Rhinelander McCarl, "Keith, William," (Feb. 2000) *American National Biography Online* (New York, 2000–08), <http://www.anb.org/articles/01/01-00476.html>.

⁴ Lemay and Zall, eds., *Benjamin Franklin's Autobiography*, 33.

thought there was Danger.”⁵

Yet, even if the tone of the autobiography’s third section became noticeably darker and more self-serving, the bulk of Franklin’s political commentary was more profound than petty. Some of it came in the form of proverbs in the *Poor Richard’s* vein, such as his explanation for the need to accumulate wealth prior to entering public life because “it is hard for an empty Sack to stand upright.”⁶ But many more of the political observations were subtle, compelling, and, one might even suggest, Machiavellian. Contemplating the lessons of his own readings into antiquity, Franklin concluded that “few in Public Affairs act from a mere View of the Good of their Country, whatever they may pretend.”⁷ Then, in characteristically elusive fashion, he proposed to address this deficit by establishing a “Sect” or secret political party for “young and single Men” who would practice his scheme of virtues and would be called the “Society of the Free and Easy,” as in free from “the Dominion of Vice” and thus presumably easy in their regrets.⁸ It might occur to some experienced students of Pennsylvania history that a “Society of the Free and Easy” also describes several of the more notorious factions and figures from the state’s often sordid political past. With his penchant for tongue-in-cheek irony, this double entendre appears to have occurred to Franklin as well.

Franklin did seem earnest, however, about the bulk of his advice to rising political figures. In describing how he overcame the opposition of a General Assembly member who had supported someone else for a clerk’s position (a patronage post that the young printer clung to fiercely), Franklin explained how he eventually won the man’s favor by asking him for a favor—a seemingly counterintuitive bit of strategy that any modern politico, especially fundraiser, understands full well. “He that has once done you a Kindness,” wrote Franklin, “will be more ready to do you another, than he whom you yourself have obliged.”⁹ On questions of keeping and holding offices, Franklin was always astute. He amended a common maxim of the day with a bit of advice that most appointed officeholders have followed ever since. He wrote, “I shall never *ask*, never *refuse*, nor ever *resign* an Office.” With equally shrewd judgment,

⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁶ Ibid., 79.

⁷ Ibid., 77.

⁸ Ibid., 78.

⁹ Ibid., 85.

Franklin also noted for fellow polemicists that “controversial Writings,” “tho’ eagerly read at the time” are “soon out of Vogue.” He explained that “itinerant Preachers” had an “Advantage” over “those who are stationary” in that pre-videotape era, because they benefited from “so many Rehearsals.”¹⁰ With surprising specificity and much foresight, he also detailed the value of franchising, branding, and what some would later dub “plausible deniability.” He described with approval how the Dunkers, a religious sect, declined to place any of their “Doctrines” in print so that they would not necessarily feel “bound and confin’d by it.”¹¹ He even found the space to include specific instructions on how to raise money for good causes—first, by soliciting “all those whom you know will give something,” then by showing a list of those contributors to those whom you are “uncertain” about, and, finally, by asking “everybody” else, too, just in case.¹²

While depicting the *Autobiography* as a kind of manual for direct-mail solicitations might seem like a dramatic fall from the Franklin of American literary tradition, there is some real genius in these practical prescriptions about power and power seeking. Though the effort surely doesn’t displace Machiavelli, Franklin followed in several of the Florentine philosopher’s best traditions and deserves more credit for applying them to an American context. And whether or not his political advice was celebrated, others soon emulated the style of combining general political wisdom with recollected score settling.

Probably the first Pennsylvanians to imitate Franklin were other newspaper editors and publishers. Their facility with words and easy access to printing presses enabled them to skewer opponents with delightful ease while simultaneously offering their own insights about the nature of the American political system. John Binns is a good example of this second generation of political memoirists. A native of late eighteenth-century Ireland, Binns fled to Northumberland County following his political imprisonment in Britain. Along with Joseph Priestly and Thomas Cooper, Binns quickly became identified with other expatriate dissenters and so-called radicals who were based in central Pennsylvania. He eventually established himself as a leading Jeffersonian-era newspaper editor.¹³

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 97.

¹² *Ibid.*, 104.

¹³ For background on Binns, see Sanford W. Higginbotham, *The Keystone in the Democratic*

In his 1854 recollections, however, the now lonely and nearly bankrupt former editor of the Philadelphia *Democratic Press* bemoaned the “slippery paths of politics,” a career that brought “many companions and competitors yet but few friends.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, much of the memoir detailed with some gusto the Byzantine twists and turns of early nineteenth-century Pennsylvania politics and public life, a period dominated by colorful factions such as the Quids and Clodpoles. Binns was best known for his opposition to Andrew Jackson, especially during the bitter 1828 presidential election. His memoir includes a wonderfully self-serving account of his role in the production of the infamous “Coffin Handbill.” Binns was the author of this now much-studied anti-Jackson broadside which featured images of six darkened coffins to highlight the alleged “Bloody Deeds of GEN. JACKSON” during the War of 1812 and in the military conflicts with Spain over Florida. Yet, the author apologized for nothing, instead portraying himself as the true victim in the episode. “It may well be doubted,” Binns sniffed with full autobiographical vanity, “whether there ever was a publication which brought upon the publisher such active, general, and intense odium as those coffin handbills brought upon the writer of these recollections.”¹⁵

No nineteenth-century political memoirist, however, adopted the tone of the indignant victim more gloriously than James Buchanan. The Pennsylvania native may have been one of the worst presidents in American history, but he was also the first to publish a memoir about his administration—a combination that was probably no coincidence. Buchanan’s account of his presidency offers a model of self-serving rationalization. Written in the starchiest third-person, the book opens with the rather remarkable claim that “Mr. Buchanan never failed, upon suitable occasions, to warn his countrymen of the approaching danger, and to advise them of the proper means to avert it.”¹⁶ Consciously or not, Buchanan echoed Machiavelli himself, who had written in *The Prince* that “When you see the trouble in advance, it is easily remedied, but when you wait till it is on top of you, the antidote is useless, the disease has

Arch: *Pennsylvania Politics, 1800–1816* (Harrisburg, PA, 1952), 136–38. See also Michael Durey, “Binns, John,” (Feb. 2000) *American National Biography Online*.

¹⁴ John Binns, *Recollections of the Life of John Binns* (Philadelphia, 1854), 253.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 246.

¹⁶ James Buchanan, *Mr. Buchanan’s Administration on the Eve of the Rebellion* (New York, 1866), v.

become incurable.”¹⁷

After attempting to identify himself as a forgotten prophet, the former president proceeded to vilify abolitionists and other extremists for eschewing compromise and dragging the nation into war. He described himself in martyrlike terms. “No public man,” he wrote plaintively, “was ever placed in a more trying and responsible position.”¹⁸ With a flair for denial that is almost exhilarating to read, Buchanan then blamed Congress for its passivity. “It neither did the one thing nor the other,” he wrote, about the secession crisis. He added sternly, “All history proves that inaction in such an emergency is the worst possible policy.”¹⁹ Truly, Machiavelli would have been proud of his newfound acolyte.

Pennsylvania journalist John W. Forney was present with Buchanan at the near destruction of the Union, but his *Anecdotes of Public Men* (1873) offers a much livelier, though no less self-serving, account of the era. Forney was an intimate, and then an enemy, of nearly everybody who mattered in the halls of national power, as he moved opportunistically back and forth between the Democratic and Republican parties. He and Edwin Stanton were practically the only men who were important advisors to both James Buchanan and Abraham Lincoln. Forney admired Lincoln and was influential in the administration as both secretary of the Senate and wartime editor of the *Washington Chronicle*. He wrote with a sharp wit about nearly everyone, but on the subject of the Great Emancipator he proved maddeningly discreet. Forney admitted to seeing Lincoln “out of temper but once,” and he used his glowing descriptions of Lincoln’s character mainly as a way to illustrate the contrast with President Andrew Johnson, whom he despised.²⁰

The shame is that Forney had some other stories to tell but didn’t. John Hay’s diary revealed a more honest side to Forney’s experience with Lincoln that never quite made it into the editor’s memoir. Hay was a young presidential aide at that time who recorded in his journal how he and some others got drunk with Forney in Gettysburg on the night before Lincoln’s famous address. He then watched in horror as the editor stumbled outside to make his own speech to the local townspeople, “black-guarding the crowd for their apathy” while attempting to explain how he

¹⁷ *Prince*, chap. 3, p. 8.

¹⁸ Buchanan, *Mr. Buchanan’s Administration*, 109.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 134.

²⁰ John W. Forney, *Anecdotes of Public Men* (New York, 1873), 176.

had really “been for Lincoln in his heart in 1860” despite the fact that he had still been a Democrat in those days.²¹ More recollections of those boozy nights would have made for an even better, or at least more honest, memoir, but this account from a leading nineteenth-century journalist remains one of the key insider surveys of the era.

Philadelphia resident William Still never held an elected office, nor edited any partisan journals, but he was one of the state’s more influential nineteenth-century political figures. Still was a free black man who helped organize the Underground Railroad in Philadelphia before the war and emerged as a major community and civil rights leader afterwards. His 1872 account of the secret effort to help runaway slaves remains, perhaps, the single most important primary source on the elusive freedom network.²² It may also be the finest Pennsylvania memoir after Franklin’s. Though not necessarily the best written or best organized recollection, Still’s rambling, nearly eight hundred–page volume nevertheless provides in its accounts of real fugitive stories a powerful and searing indictment of slavery; it is as dramatic a first-hand depiction of the fight to destroy the peculiar institution as exists. Here one can read about Henry “Box” Brown, who escaped from slavery in a crate that traveled from Richmond to Philadelphia, and Thomas Garrett, a combative Quaker who defied court orders and risked bankruptcy to help runaways. Yet, despite the noble cause and poignant tales, Still also managed to settle a few scores himself in the finest of Franklin traditions. Almost always eclipsed in the movement by more articulate and charismatic figures such as Frederick Douglass, William Still fired back in a way that any political memoirist might appreciate. He simply erased his rivals from the story. The result left the great Douglass surprisingly bitter and complaining as late as 1893 to an interviewer that Still had shortchanged his contributions to the Underground Railroad out of sheer spite.²³

Another master of the calculated omission was Andrew Carnegie, the Pittsburgh steel magnate whose widely read autobiography was, according

²¹ Diary entry by John Hay, Nov. 18, 1863, in *Inside Lincoln’s White House: The Complete Civil War Diary of John Hay*, ed. Michael Burlingame and John R. Turner Ettliger (Carbondale, IL, 1997), 113. Another Pennsylvania journalist who was intimate with Lincoln and who produced an important memoir was Alexander K. McClure, *Recollections of Half a Century* (Salem, MA, 1902).

²² William Still, *The Underground Rail Road: A Record of Facts, Authentic Narratives, Letters, &c.* (Philadelphia, 1872).

²³ See Larry Gara, “William Still and the Underground Railroad,” *Pennsylvania History* 28 (1961): 40.

to historian David Nasaw, “resolutely upbeat, almost perversely so.”²⁴ It was also resolutely political despite the ostensible focus on business and the earnest rags-to-riches motif. For example, Carnegie tackled the tragic Homestead Steel Strike of 1892, which he labeled “the one really serious quarrel with our workmen,” in a dozen breezy, buck-passing pages that blamed the whole episode on miscommunication and his absence in Scotland.²⁵ One major political topic, however, on which Carnegie abandoned his relentless positive spin was American imperialism. In the autobiography, Carnegie described with cold disdain the tactics of Democratic presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan during the fight over the annexation of the Philippines in 1898–99. Bryan had convinced Senate Democrats to allow the measure to pass even though he opposed it, confident that he could turn his second presidential contest with Republican William McKinley in 1900 into a referendum on the controversy. Carnegie, who also opposed annexation and feared growing American militarism, never forgave Bryan. “One word from Mr. Bryan would have saved the country from the disaster,” he wrote bitterly, concluding that the politician “seemed to me a man who was willing to sacrifice his country and his personal convictions for party advantage.”²⁶

Carnegie was on friendlier terms with some Republican imperialists, notably President Theodore Roosevelt and Secretary of State John Hay, but he still rued what he considered their misguided belief that it was an American “duty” to “prepare the Islands for self-government.” He called this “the policy of ‘Don’t go into the water until you learn to swim,’” noting with sadness, “But the plunge has to be and will be taken some day.”²⁷ Machiavelli had expressed a similar sentiment in far blunter terms, reminding his prince that “there is no sure way to hold onto cities except to destroy them.”²⁸

Students not entirely familiar with the era might be surprised by the various Pennsylvania figures who spoke out against the birth of American imperialism. Carnegie was a notable leader of these anti-imperialists, but few made a bigger splash than the Quaker-born, former Marine major

²⁴ Andrew Carnegie, *Autobiography of Andrew Carnegie* (London, 1920). David Nasaw, *Andrew Carnegie* (New York, 2006), 22.

²⁵ Carnegie, *Autobiography*, 228–39.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 364.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 365.

²⁸ *Prince*, chap. 5, p. 15.

general and two-time Congressional Medal of Honor winner Smedley Darlington Butler, who attacked the corporatism of American foreign policy in various public speeches and through a searing 1935 polemic/memoir entitled *War Is a Racket*.²⁹ Invoking his experience as a soldier in several tours of occupational duty across the Pacific and the Caribbean, Butler threw roundhouse rhetorical punches in a way that makes contemporary antiwar protestors look almost tame. "WAR is a racket," his slim volume began, "It always has been. It is possibly the oldest, easily the most profitable, surely the most vicious." He added, "It is the only one in which the profits are reckoned in dollars and the losses in lives."³⁰

The intensity of early twentieth-century battles seemed to bring out some of the best in Pennsylvania political memoirists. Well-known muck-raking journalist Ida M. Tarbell produced an account of her childhood in Titusville and her various struggles as a female investigative reporter and popular biographer in an underappreciated autobiography, *All in the Day's Work* (1939). By the time Tarbell wrote her life's reckoning, she was eighty years old, somewhat a relic of another age and an easy mark for ridicule. She had been skeptical of woman's suffrage and had been too easily charmed by Mussolini and his dimple.³¹ Many did not take her seriously. Yet, Tarbell's sharp depictions of various men and women of the era, from magazine publisher S. S. McClure to "Dr. Anna" (suffragist Anna Howard Shaw), were priceless. Her description of Lincoln's former secretary and biographer John G. Nicolay attempting to discourage her from writing a new book on the great president alone makes this memoir worth reading. "You are invading my field," she reports the dour Nicolay saying. "You write a popular Life of Lincoln and you do just so much to decrease the value of my property."³²

²⁹ Butler was born in West Chester and later became director of public safety in Philadelphia during Prohibition. See Hans Schmidt, *Maverick Marine, General Smedley D. Butler and the Contradictions of American Military History* (1987; Lexington, KY, 1998). See also J. David Valaik, "Butler, Smedley Darlington," (Feb. 2000) *American National Biography Online*.

³⁰ Smedley D. Butler, *War Is a Racket* (New York, 1935), 1.

³¹ Tarbell had been charmed by the Italian fascist, and her naive reaction to him drew the ire of several commentators. She wrote in her memoir: "As I crossed the room towards the desk Mussolini came around to meet me. . . . As he did it I saw that he had a most extraordinary smile, and that when he smiled he had a dimple. Nothing could have been more natural, simple, and courteous than the way he put me at my ease." Ida M. Tarbell, *All in the Day's Work: An Autobiography* (New York, 1939), 383.

³² *Ibid.*, 163.

Noted environmentalist and Pennsylvania governor Gifford Pinchot, Philadelphia attorney and U.S. senator George Pepper, and FDR's secretary of the interior (and Altoona native) Harold Ickes each published competing and evocative accounts of one of the most notorious feuds of the period, the 1909–10 battle between then Forest Service chief Pinchot and Secretary of the Interior Richard A. Ballinger. The specific origins of the battle involved some charges of corruption leveled against Ballinger that Pinchot believed the Taft administration was trying to cover up, but the antecedents of the affair went much deeper, and the consequences were surprisingly long lasting. The conflict was about several things, including the future of conservationism, whether or not William Howard Taft was a legitimate successor to Theodore Roosevelt, factional politics of the Republican Party, and, ultimately, the sharp elbows of men with large egos. Pinchot went public with his concerns over Taft's handling of the accusations against Ballinger and promptly got fired. Ballinger survived, but the scandal over Pinchot's dismissal helped draw ex-president Roosevelt back into American politics and thus guaranteed the temporary break-up of the Republican Party and the election of Democrat Woodrow Wilson in 1912.³³

Harold Ickes was not directly involved in the original Ballinger-Pinchot affair, but he was the main instigator for bringing the episode back into the national headlines during the 1940s. As secretary of the interior in the Franklin D. Roosevelt administration, Ickes had clashed with Pinchot over questions involving the proposed reorganization of the Forest Service and Interior Department. Though Pinchot was not in the federal government at the time, his voice was still prominent, and Ickes, a self-proclaimed "curmudgeon," resented this interference greatly. He ordered an investigation into the old scandal, and it soon produced an exposé for the *Saturday Evening Post* that attempted to exonerate Ballinger and vilify Pinchot. The Interior secretary added fuel to the fire in his 1943 memoir when he accused Pinchot of having "smeared" Ballinger; he then dismissed the celebrated environmentalist as part of a "lunatic fringe."³⁴ It should be noted that Ickes had a notoriously tart

³³ For a good account of this fascinating episode, see James L. Penick, *Progressive Politics and Conservation: The Ballinger-Pinchot Affair* (Chicago, 1968).

³⁴ Harold L. Ickes, *The Autobiography of a Curmudgeon* (New York, 1943), 154. Ickes was born in Hollidaysburg and grew up in Altoona before he relocated to Illinois and became a journalist and political activist. See T. H. Watkins, *Righteous Pilgrim: The Life and Times of Harold L. Ickes, 1874–1952* (New York, 1990).

tongue that did not stop with his observations about Pinchot, which makes his autobiography one of the funniest and feistiest in American political history. In a classic opening salvo, he wrote, “people can believe virtually anything concerning a man in public life provided that it is sufficiently unbelievable.”³⁵

George Wharton Pepper was far more restrained than Ickes in his “life-story of a Philadelphia lawyer,” published one year later, but he proved to be nearly as witty and wrote with a graceful charm.³⁶ Pepper was a respected attorney and law professor who had served as a senator from Pennsylvania in the 1920s. He was also a leading Republican player who had been Pinchot’s chief counsel during the congressional hearings that convened shortly following the dust-up over Ballinger. The courtly Pepper, however, found his client’s hard-driving, attention-getting style to be distasteful and the case to be “a constant and grievous anxiety.” He complained that while he had been “struggling to determine what was fact as distinguished from rumor and fiction,” Pinchot and his cohorts had been “busy trying the case in the newspapers.”³⁷ Much of Pepper’s recollection conveyed similar observations documenting his fast-evolving education in the corridors of power. One of the book’s best passages involves aging Philadelphia GOP party boss Edwin Vare, who warned the newly appointed senator that his organization demanded loyalty. The old warhorse Vare told Pepper “somewhat ominously” that “this isn’t a personal matter,” adding “we can send anybody we want to the United States Senate—anybody.”³⁸ Pepper listened but did not obey, and Vare’s own brother subsequently defeated him in a three-way primary in 1926 that also included Gifford Pinchot.³⁹

Always known as a master of obtaining publicity for himself, Pinchot responded to this recollected onslaught against his reputation with a superbly self-absorbed memoir—even by the generous standards of political autobiography. In his introduction to the 1987 edition of *Breaking*

³⁵ Ickes, *Autobiography*, 1.

³⁶ George Wharton Pepper, *Philadelphia Lawyer: An Autobiography* (Philadelphia, 1944), foreword.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 86.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁹ Congressman William Vare won the 1926 general election, too, but never qualified for his Senate seat because of accusations of campaign finance irregularities and voter fraud. See Samuel J. Astorino, “The Contested Senate Election of William Scott Vare,” *Pennsylvania History* 28 (1961): 187–201. Vare also produced a memoir: *My Forty Years in Politics* (Philadelphia, 1933).

New Ground, George T. Frampton Jr. notes wryly, “If Pinchot was ever a man beset by internal doubts, there is no hint of it here.”⁴⁰ The aging environmentalist devoted about a third of his memoir to the Ballinger affair and never actually got past that scandal in order to cover his later career as governor. Pinchot’s fury was almost uncontrolled and, in purely political terms, a delight to read. Former counsel Pepper drew a memorable rebuke. “The trouble with George,” he wrote coldly, “was that he had lived too much with courts and lawyers, and not enough with the world of men.”⁴¹ Others in the episode, particularly Ballinger, whom Pinchot belittled as “Slippery Dick,” fared even worse.⁴² The miserable provocateur Ickes got nothing but the silent treatment.

Yet, amid this great explosion of wounded vanity, there was still plenty of wisdom. As he had worked to revolutionize the management of the nation’s forests, Pinchot had learned a great deal about the inner workings of government and about the power of publicity. He shared those lessons freely in his memoir. “Give a man his head,” he urged executives regarding their subordinates, “let him alone—so long as he stay[s] on the right track.”⁴³ To those about to testify before Congress, he counseled, “Conceal nothing, good or bad—better, have nothing to conceal. And if you don’t know, say so.” Then he added wisely for those actually employed in the executive branch, “And don’t ask for an increase in your own salary.”⁴⁴ For lobbyists and advocates, Pinchot suggested that “Action is the best advertisement.” He noted, “The most effective way to get your cause before the public is to do something the papers will have to tell about.”⁴⁵ Yet, years of frustrating experience with government inaction also sometimes made Pinchot the progressive sound more like a Machiavellian realist. He warned that “progress in Government work, and doubtless in other work also, commonly comes by fits and starts.”

Often for months, sometimes for years, hard work for sound objectives gets you exactly nowhere. The solid wall of obstacles is solid still. Then suddenly comes the break, the dam gives way, what you had hoped and

⁴⁰ Gifford Pinchot, *Breaking New Ground* (1947; Washington, DC, 1987), xiii.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 472.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 482.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 137.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 155.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 329.

striven for falls into your lap, and your cup is full and brimming over. However, mixed these metaphors may be, you have your reward.⁴⁶

Political columnist and television pundit Christopher Matthews had just been born in the city of Philadelphia as Pinchot was probably drafting these lines, but he would have recognized the metaphors for government by “fits and starts” easily from his experiences in Washington during the 1970s and 1980s. A presidential speechwriter for Jimmy Carter and top congressional aide for Speaker of the House Tip O’Neill, Matthews produced a widely read memoir/political manual called *Hardball* that openly aspired to follow the Machiavellian model. “This is not a civics book,” Matthews warned at the outset.⁴⁷ His book is also not an obvious example of a Pennsylvania memoir, but his connection to the state is more than just cursory. Matthews, son of a Democratic committeeman in Philadelphia, went away to college, joined the Peace Corps, and spent some time on Capitol Hill before returning to the city to run a losing race for Congress in the 1974 Democratic primary. The defeat helped propel his career, however, by bringing Matthews to the attention of the nascent Carter for President campaign.⁴⁸ In his book, and even more so later with his brash on-air personality, Matthews also openly embraces the rough-and-tumble idiom of Pennsylvania politics.

Hardball echoes many of the best insights of political memoirists since Franklin. One of the chapters is entitled “It’s Better to Receive Than to Give” and repeats Franklin’s observation about winning favor by asking for favors. Another chapter on the value of networking, “It’s Not Who You Know, It’s Who You Get to Know,” makes Forney’s *Anecdotes of Public Men* seem almost retiring by comparison. But where Matthews demonstrates his greatest talent, as a storyteller akin to someone like Ida Tarbell, is in his ability to use historical scenes to supplement points from his own experiences. In this book, there were not only vivid tales of then fellow Capitol Hill operative Tim Russert, but also some telling historical anecdotes about a young Lyndon Johnson brushing his teeth multiple times before meeting boardinghouse mates, or a canny Franklin D. Roosevelt swatting away Tom Dewey during the 1944 election. This

⁴⁶ Ibid., 256.

⁴⁷ Christopher Matthews, *Hardball: How Politics Is Played—Told by One Who Knows the Game* (New York, 1988), 11.

⁴⁸ Ibid., 59.

talent for employing bursts of sophisticated history in an understandable way still separates the popular *Hardball* from most other modern leadership guidebooks.

While *Hardball* stands out as the best recent illustration of the Machiavellian tradition in American political writing, no modern practitioner of the Pennsylvania memoir presents a more complete composite of the various historical trends in the genre than Senator Arlen Specter in his first autobiographical account, *Passion for Truth* (2000). Like Franklin, Specter is a self-made man born outside of the state. Like Forney, he has bounced around between the major parties. Specter also has more than a little of Ickes's curmudgeonly qualities and a healthy dose of self-regard in the true Pinchot fashion. Though not quite faced with the obstacles that figures such as William Still or Ida Tarbell encountered, Specter has overcome great barriers, both as a Jewish public official and simply as a man who has so far met and conquered a number of severe health problems. Yet, at his core, Specter remains first and foremost a "Philadelphia Lawyer" in the spirit, if not quite the style, of George Wharton Pepper.

Passion for Truth lacks the easy-going charm of Pepper's life story, but it comes alive as a memoir when it describes the same intersection of politics and law that fascinated Pepper. Specter provides sound advice on what it takes to root out urban corruption, investigate complicated conspiracy charges, question witnesses at congressional hearings, or wage high-stakes constitutional battles with the executive branch. Even those who cringe at nearly all of Specter's most controversial decisions—such as doggedly pursuing the "single bullet" theory, or berating Anita Hill for "flat-out perjury," or even voting "Not Proven" at the Clinton impeachment—still cannot deny that he has had an incredible career.

Though he reveals little about his inner self in this memoir, Specter and coauthor Charles Robbins certainly know how to paint vivid portraits of others. There are terrific scenes here depicting everyone from national figures, such as Robert Kennedy and Earl Warren, to colorful Philadelphia pols, such as Frank Rizzo and Jimmy Tayoun. Only occasionally do Specter/Robbins hit a false note in their character sketches, though when they do, it is a beaut. The pair has produced one of the most embarrassing such wrong notes in the history of political memoir. Here is Arlen Specter's description of his first encounter with Monica Lewinsky (at a Senate deposition in early February 1999):

There, at the other end of the conference table, was Monica Lewinsky—a celebrity, a star, a woman known the world over by just her first name. People who had never heard of Anthony and Cleopatra or Anita Hill and Clarence Thomas had all heard of Bill and Monica. She was exquisite. I had heard that Lewinsky had grown heavy and despondent, but she did not look that way to me. Her fair, pretty face and red lips were framed by a full, thick head of black hair. The world has since seen snippets of her testimony as it would be played at the Senate trial, but Monica Lewinsky was far more compelling live and up close.⁴⁹

This is the Clinton impeachment saga through the eyes of Jacqueline Susann or Harold Robbins. It would be hilarious if the stakes had not been so high. And yet there is also something revealing in this pseudo-steamy scene. Political memoirs are not merely trophy projects of the powerful, but rather badges of the enduring insecurities of man. Each memoirist sees himself as the grand and often wounded protagonist in his own story. No matter how great or accomplished, figures from Franklin to Specter have demonstrated, time and again, that they are fully human and just as prone to brood over slights, real and perceived, as anyone else. Even in old age, they worry about their careers and contemplate the meaning of how they won or lost various battles. They care too much about how they look—to themselves, to us, and, most of all, to history. It must be exhausting work for them, but when done with a little verve and some well-placed vitriol, it can be fascinating to read—fascinating, it should be noted, for those whose political interests outweigh, or at least equal, their appreciation for literary merit.

To put it gently, most political memoirs are not Shakespearean in their aspirations. But a quick study of these few notable life stories suggests that critics of the autobiographical genre have underplayed the degree to which they can be Machiavellian in their analysis. Scholars have long maintained that the principal American contribution to the autobiographical form has been, in the words of William L. Andrews, to create “a hybridization of confession and memoir, self-revelation and self-celebration.”⁵⁰ Yet, the example of Benjamin Franklin, the apostle of this new secular hybrid, demonstrates how some of the best American political

⁴⁹ Arlen Specter with Charles Robbins, *Passion for Truth: From Finding JFK's Single Bullet to Questioning Anita Hill to Impeaching Clinton* (New York, 2000), 494.

⁵⁰ William L. Andrews, ed., *Classic American Autobiographies* (New York, 1992), 10.

memoirists have also managed to combine their life writing with profound insights about power. Perhaps that is why Pennsylvania has been home to so many of the nation's most memorable political memoirists. Just as Machiavelli found wisdom in exile, it may be the frustrating limits of the state's impact on the national scene that helps explain why its key participants have often been so astute.

There have been literally hundreds of political memoirs written in Pennsylvania history, but this particular baker's dozen are among the most significant as historical testimony and the most insightful as political analysis. They represent one of the state's more enduring contributions to the national political culture. And they offer a reminder that while pursuing political power doesn't always bring happiness, it can at least provide the opportunity to get in the final word. Sometimes that has to be good enough.

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