

Congressman Steve Rothman's Statement on the Passing of Congressman John P. Murtha

Today, my Chairman, John P. Murtha, of Johnstown, Pennsylvania died. He had served in the Congress longer than any other Pennsylvanian in U.S. history and was completing his 33rd year on the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, 9th as its Chairman. This Subcommittee is one of the most important in Congress: responsible for appropriating every dollar for every one of our nation's military expenditures -- 55% of the discretionary budget of our country.

As a seven term Congressman, who had only risen to be a member of his 16 person Subcommittee for the past 3 years, I nonetheless had the unique and everlasting privilege of having gotten to know and spend time with one of the truly remarkable people to ever serve this country. A decorated Vietnam War veteran -- the first to ever serve in Congress -- elected in 1974, Jack Murtha was the real deal: a tough Marine, a brilliant military analyst, a grass roots pol (in the best sense of that term) and one of the most gracious, yet extraordinarily powerful leaders and individuals I have ever known.

As a Northeasterner, the first Democrat from Northern New Jersey ever to serve on the Defense Appropriations Subcommittee; and the first and so far only Jewish-American ever to serve on his Subcommittee, I wasn't sure how Mr. Murtha would accept me. But from the start, Chairman Murtha welcomed me with great cheer and the kind of grace and humility that is striking, yet one I have come to anticipate from the truly great human beings I have ever known -- rich or poor, powerful or powerless.

In addition, Chairman Murtha always encouraged my questions and contributions. He signed and wrote beautiful words in my copy of his brilliant and useful autobiography (that I had fully underlined and annotated). He used his enormous Irish charm to joke about, yet support my efforts to be the most knowledgeable and productive committee member I could be. He was generous with praise at my contributions to the Subcommittee, though he would let me know when my time limit for questions had been liberally exceeded. But then, privately, he'd let me ask him the most sophisticated and secret of national defense and military strategy questions, responding as if with a peer. No one in Congress had his nearly encyclopedic knowledge of U.S. history and military affairs. Yet, he'd occasionally ask me questions; even borrowing some of the nonfiction books I'd read on subjects that interested him.

Also, as a member of the "Murtha Corner" on the House Floor, I can say that some of the most thoughtful, constructive, productive, touching and often hysterical moments in my 13 plus years in the House, occurred at his side -- with the dozen or so other acolytes (long-serving members and rookies) who took so much joy in congregating and kibbutzing at this great man's side.

I will never, ever forget his generosity to me, my District and the causes I feel strongly about. Jack Murtha was not only a great leader to me, he was a leader for all on our Subcommittee, Democrat and Republican. He really did personify the best in a "leader," as close to any person I've ever had the privilege of knowing.

His like does not come around often. Our nation and I, personally, will always remember this giant of a man. He died too young. I will miss him very much.

I pray for his memory and for the family, loved ones and friends he leaves behind. But most of all, I pray that our beloved country, lives up to his expectations: for strength, integrity, generosity, justice and true greatness.