

Distinguished Alumnus

Jack Hightower

The U.S. Congressman from Vernon, Texas, finds that a lot of time has to be spent 'greasing the squeaky wheel.'

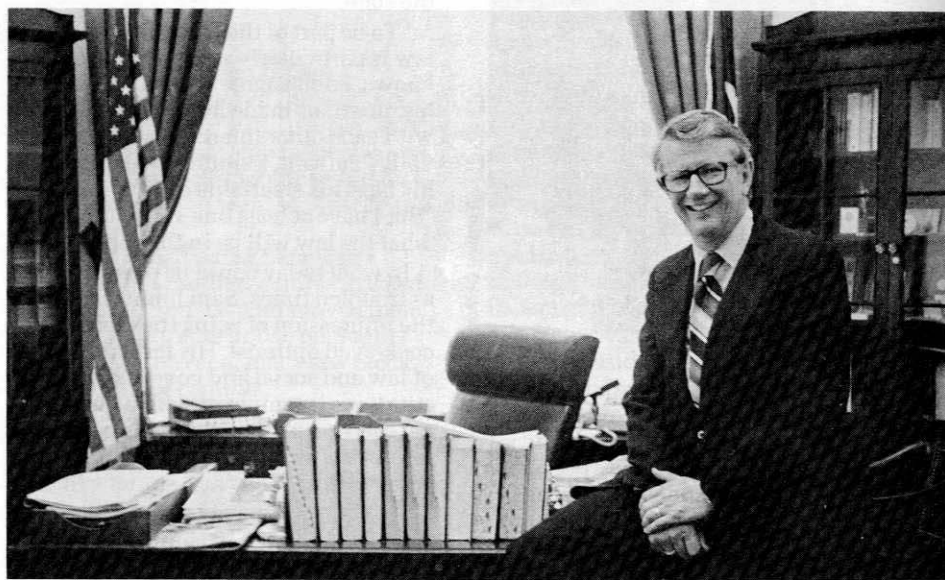
by Mary Wheat

Jack Hightower began the interview protesting. "I don't know why the Line wants to do this article—they know all about me already. I can't figure out who submitted my name for this award, and if I had to say why I was getting it, I certainly couldn't." He paused, and then added shyly, "It is a great honor, though." Impeccably dressed in a three-piece herringbone suit, Hightower spoke slowly and quietly. His Texas accent was a welcome change from the Northeastern and Georgia accents which currently prevail in Washington.

Congressman Jack Hightower, 51, represents the 13th District of Texas in the United States House of Representatives. First elected to the House in 1974, Hightower was reelected in 1976, and serves on the Agriculture and Government Operations committees.

Respectfully addressed as "Congressman" by his staff (rather than by his first name, as many new legislators are known to their staffs), Jack Hightower embraces his legislative responsibilities with obvious concern. He admits that his biggest surprise since coming to Congress was learning that the pressure never lessens—there is always work to produce. The session starts full and ends heavy.

Hightower himself does much to disprove the myth about the "easy life" Congressmen are supposed to enjoy. In his three years in the House, Hightower has had one and one-half days of vaca-



tion. Even when he returns to Texas, it is not to relax, but to visit his three district offices in Wichita Falls, Vernon, and Amarillo. He also meets with constituents and attends political functions.

Before coming to Washington, Hightower held office for one term in the Texas House of Representatives in the fifties, and was in the state Senate from 1965-74. He served in the navy during World War II.

His biggest disappointment in Congress has been the discovery that there is so little time to work on

creative legislation, as most of his hours are spent "greasing the squeaky wheel." Hightower receives 1400 letters a week, and answers them all. "Sometimes people expect too much from their Congressman when they request help to solve personal problems." Hightower shook his head as in disbelief, "They think I can just pick up the phone and their problem will be solved. It doesn't work that way."

Hightower rents a small apartment in nearby Virginia. He says that before moving to Washington, he dreaded the traffic snarls but has learned to use his

time in the car constructively by listening to the news and thinking out his day's activities. His workday lasts until the work is finished, which may mean he stays at the office until 11:00 p.m. (When asked if he required his staff to work such late hours, he quickly replied with a grin, "Oh heavens, no!")

Although some Congressmen meet themselves coming and going at evening cocktail parties, Hightower refuses to become trapped in that circuit. He considers it an unnecessary burden. "I'm sure the people who give the receptions are well-intentioned, but Congressmen don't need to be entertained like that."

Almost every weekend finds Jack Hightower en route to Texas. By the time he flies to Dallas, transfers to a commuter flight to Wichita Falls, and drives fifty miles into Vernon, the trip has consumed six hours. Not one to waste time, Hightower reserves these hours of flying for his recreational reading, which he says helps minimize the negative aspects of traveling.

Jack Hightower is home when he gets to Vernon, Texas. He is quick to acknowledge that it has been a strain living in Washington, for the rest of his family, with the exception of one daughter, live in Texas.

After Hightower was elected to Congress, his family decided to remain in Vernon so that the children would not have to transfer to new schools. Once the youngest of his three daughters graduates from high school in May, his wife, Colleen, will join him in Washington. It is clearly a move Hightower is looking forward to.

Baylor University is an integral part of the Hightower family. The Congressman received his B.A. in 1949 and his LL.B. in 1951. Before graduating from law school, he married Colleen Ward, a Baylor music student. Their oldest child, Ann, graduated from Baylor in 1975. She is now married and lives in Washington, where she works on Capitol Hill as secretary to the Doorkeeper in the House of Representatives. The second child, Amy, is a junior at Baylor, and Alison will be a Baylor freshman in the fall. Hightower also serves on the Baylor Board of Trustees.

Without a doubt, Hightower says, there's something unique in the Baylor character which is impossible to define. "I don't know how you could define it to a non-Baylorite, because it's not fully rational, but it's real. Through the years, Baylor has had an influence in my life that's been invaluable.

There are some drawbacks to a Congressman's job. Hightower believes

that although many persons aspire to a political career, few are willing to pay the price. "It means that you spend lots of evenings going to meetings in remote towns. It means missing out on school plays and recitals. You forfeit a lot of experiences with your children that you don't want to lose. Yet, it's part of the job."

Hightower said he thinks a politician's job is hardest on the wife. She has to attend civic and social events alone. She makes an appearance when she might well prefer staying at home. After stopping to reflect a moment, Hightower continued, "Colleen is a loving wife and mother. She doesn't like my job, but she understands it. What's the quote? 'They also serve who only stand and wait.' That applies to the political wife."

When Hightower was asked what is the accomplishment of which he is most proud, he replied that he has close friends throughout Texas, and particularly in his district. He is proudest of the fact that he can honestly represent them in Congress.

He then explained that that type of question is similar to asking a housekeeper about her accomplishments. Her pride in making beds, washing dishes, and dusting furniture is similar to taking pride in attending hundreds of hearings, casting votes, and amending bills. "I'm proud to have had the opportunity to do it, but to say one particular thing is an accomplishment is rather difficult for me."

To illustrate his point, Hightower laughed and recalled a time when he was in the Texas Senate. His daughters

were still young, and one of them asked if he'd always wanted to be a senator. He replied yes, to which she responded, "But first, Daddy, you had to learn how to drive a car, didn't you?"

To her, my job consisted of getting in a car and driving off. So you see, it's just a matter of how one views a politician's job!" he summarized.

When Congressman Hightower talks, his dedication to constituents in the 13th District quickly becomes apparent. Although he does not complain of the long hours or of the responsibilities which he carries, he speaks with some disdain of fellow Congressmen who relax and lean too heavily on staff support. "A member of Congress should resign if this happens," he stated matter of factly.

He spoke briefly of the frustration a junior Congressman experiences after discovering that the reports of all-powerful committee chairmen are not exaggerated. "You know, all the decisions are made in committee, where the real battles take place. The things said on the floor are just for the [Congressional] Record. You sometimes wonder if you'll ever have too much influence."

The interview ended shortly before the bells sounded to call the House of Representatives into session. The Congressman still had his mail and other routine matters to tend to. Before departing, Jack Hightower stopped and looked back. Speaking slowly and reflectively, he said, "You can leave out any of that other stuff I've said, but be sure you tell about Colleen." ❧

