Cheap Sex Gets Costly
Articles by
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Senators and Their Pages

Why do senators write books? They have plenty of other things to be doing: constituent service, legislation, presiding over committees, delivering speeches, and raising money, for starters. Yet the impulse to scribble remains. According to official records, authors comprise more than a third of the current Senate, from Kirsten Gillibrand (Off the Sidelines: Raise Your Voice, Change the World) and Angus King (Governor’s Travels: How I Left Politics, Learned to Back Up a Bus, and Found America) to Claire McCaskill (Plenty Ladylike) and James Inhofe (The Greatest Hoax: How the Global Warming Conspiracy Threatens Your Future). Doesn’t matter if your senator is on the left or on the right, male or female, from a big state or a small state, famous or invisible. He is probably an author. The liberal Democrat Sheldon Whitehouse of Rhode Island, for example, has written two books. If this is news to you, don’t worry. He probably hasn’t read them either.

There have been literary senators, of course, legislators whose book-writing predated their election and for whom writing was a large part of their being. I think of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, the last Senate intellectual, and of James Webb, and even of Barack Obama. For the most part, though, senatorial books are instrumental. They are ways of elevating a senator’s profile, of guaranteeing him television appearances, of having his name floated for president. They might also be a way of laying down a marker, of identifying the senator with a particular agenda or ideological movement. The authors of this sort of book do not necessarily intend for you to read it. What they want is for you to notice it.

Jeff Flake, Ben Sasse, Mike Lee, Al Franken, and Elizabeth Warren do have something to say, however, and the uneven quality of their prose suggests that, in some cases, they eschewed ghostwriters to say it themselves. Their books want to be taken seriously—even, if you can believe it, ex-Senator Franken’s. The sober intention is evident in the volumes’ design. Only the two Democrats chose to feature their portraits on the covers, for instance. And with the partial exception of Jeff Flake’s Conscience of a Conservative, each one of these books is thick, hefty, inflated by the capacious margins and line spacing commonly found in high-school term papers.

The Libertarian

I say Flake’s work is a partial exception because even its paltry 138 pages are too long. His effort is more of an essay, or a collection of diary entries, than a book. “I will start by saying that I regret having to write this book,” he writes, and I believe him, because I regretted having to read it. No one can doubt Flake’s sincerity, his commitment to free market principle, or his love of Arizona, the American West, and his role model Barry Goldwater. It’s clear that he, like many people, was disturbed by the rise of Donald Trump, and surprised by Trump’s election. He’s concerned about the future of his movement, his party, and his country.

My problem with Conscience of a Conservative is that it doesn’t go beyond these feelings of revulsion, shock, and anxiety. It doesn’t offer persuasive answers to the countless rhetorical questions that fill its pages.

Here is one of those questions. Take a deep breath: “How is it,” Flake asks, that the Republican Party, the political movement that has long been animated by the simple, strong ideas of limited government and economic freedom, has been swept up in a populist fever and has fallen for ideas that are the opposite of what so many of us have believed for so long—from ardent belief in free trade to realpolitik federal budgeting to responsible immigration policy to making the Republican Party as big a tent as possible—all united by a belief that, as George Will once wrote, “limited government by its limitations nurtures
in men and women the responsibilities that make them competent for, and worthy of, freedom?"

Flake remains befuddled. He says the conservative movement and Republican Party embraced Donald Trump out of a desire to win at any cost. But there is a problem with his assertion: no one really expected Trump to win. Republicans backed Trump not because they expected him to defeat Hillary Clinton but because he voiced their wishes and fears over the howls of the mainstream media and the financial and political establishment. The logic of the Trump voter was that, if America had to go down into the pit of statist and political correctness, it might as well go down fighting. Calculations of victory had little to do with it.

“We have given in to the politics of anger—the belief that riling up the base can make up for failed attempts to broaden the electorate,” Flake writes. “These are the spasms of a dying party.” But if the GOP of 2017 is a dying party, what does a living one look like? Republican strength at the local, state, and federal levels is higher than the party has experienced in decades. The congressional majority might not be able to reach consensus on health care, but is that the fault of a president whom few congressmen like anyway?

Many of Flake’s arguments are restatements of the conventional wisdom one encounters in the swamp. “The demographic picture of America is rapidly changing,” he writes, “and we have to change with it.” For evidence, Flake cites the fact that George W. Bush got 56% of the white vote and won, and Romney got 59% and lost. But Trump got the same percentage as Romney and won, and did better than Romney among black and Hispanic voters besides. It’s unclear what Flake is trying to prove. Nor does he explain why Republicans should tailor their message to the ethnic categories of the census form rather than make broad appeals to American solidarity and pride.

Flake repeats two mistakes that conservatives, myself included, made during the 2016 primaries. The first is to assume a consensus where none exists. The conservative movement, it turns out, contains widely divergent views on immigration, trade, entitlements, and foreign policy. It is wrong, as well as self-defeating, to pretend that these differences do not exist, much less that there is a universally recognized arbiter of what counts as conservative.

The second mistake is to commit the fallacy of composition. As multifarious as they are, conservatives are but one part of the Republican coalition. It is folly to presume that the influence they have exercised over the party will continue indefinitely. This is not to say conservatives should abandon efforts to strengthen the forces of freedom within the GOP. But they shouldn’t be shocked or offended when other factions win the day.

“The issues that increase freedom and broaden opportunity for the most people are the issues that I wanted to devote my energies to,” writes Flake. For that I am grateful. But I would be more grateful still if Flake had engaged in a closer examination of the positions and reasoning of his nationalist populist opponents. An accommodation between the two camps may be the only way to satisfy the consciences of all.

Books discussed in this essay:

Conscience of a Conservative: A Rejection of Destructive Politics and a Return to Principle, by Jeff Flake.
Random House, 160 pages, $27

The Vanishing American Adult: Our Coming-of-Age Crisis—and How to Rebuild a Culture of Self-Reliance, by Ben Sasse.
St. Martin’s Press, 320 pages, $27.99

Sentinel, 256 pages, $27

Al Franken, Giant of the Senate, by Al Franken.
Twelve, 416 pages, $28

This Fight Is Our Fight: The Battle to Save America’s Middle Class, by Elizabeth Warren.
Metropolitan Books, 352 pages, $28

The Over-Achiever

Nebraska’s Ben Sasse is another critic of the president, but The Vanishing American Adult is about neither personalities nor policy. Its subject is our failure to educate the next generation of Americans in the beliefs, attitudes, and habits of self-government. “Our kids are not ready for the world they are soon going to inherit,” Sasse writes. “We don’t even know how to talk about the daunting tasks of becoming resilient enough to navigate a world with much shorter job durations.”

Sasse, though, is resilient enough to hold degrees from Harvard, St. John’s College, and Yale, study at Oxford, work as a management consultant, serve as a university president, win election to the Senate at age 42, and write a hugely ambitious examination of the history of American education and parenthood, ranging from Aristotle and Augustine to Rousseau, Calvin, and Dewey. David Brooks would call him a “Résumé God.” And as I made my way through his book, I kept having the nagging suspicion that Sasse was judging me. Poorly.

“My wife and I frame many questions in our parenting in terms of our children’s souls,” he says. That is splendid. My wife and I, on the other hand, frame many questions in our parenting in terms of keeping the kids dressed, fed, bathed, and occupied before we put them to bed and collapse into a heap on the couch. My fear is that following Sasse’s advice would add to our fatigue or, worse, kill us.

What does Dr. Sasse (Ph.D.) recommend? “If you are feeding your baby broccoli and apple sauce, sequence the sweets as a reward for the vegetables.” “See a birth.” “Send your two-year-old to get your socks every morning.” “Write down every single bit of junk you eat every single day for a month (or whatever time period you choose).” “Let your six-year-old order the pizza, let her pay the delivery person, and make her ask how he or she got to your house.” “Assign your kids the task of planning family vacations.” “Become obsessed with lean packing—truly obsessed.” “Buy a good backpack that can hold no more than 18 or 20 pounds, and for some of your trips, take only what you can easily carry on your back.” “If you’re from the city, take your family and go live (not vacation) in the country for weeks. If you’re from the country, go live in a city. This won’t work for some jobs with set schedules and set geographies, but fewer and fewer of us will be working in such jobs without interruption for our whole lives going forward.”

That final recommendation is emblematic of the audacious and impractical Sasse program. Who but a member of the very rich has the financial and professional means to transplant his family, including a spouse who in all probability works as well, “for weeks”? Nor do I take comfort in the assurance that we will have more opportunities for this type of adventure after our jobs have been outsourced or automated. Then again, our obsession with lean packing will be made easier. We will no longer have money to buy anything.

According to Sasse, our habits will improve if we jot down every Cheeto we snack on or, conversely, every morning we wake up at 6:00. “There is no magic technique for to log
The powers of Congress have become so vitiating that senators can only sit back and watch.

The Constitutionalist

The decline of civics is also Mike Lee’s subject. Americans, Utah’s junior senator says, may be infatuated with the founders, but we have lost our understanding of the ideas behind their constitutionalism. He wants to help us recover that wisdom.

Lee’s first book, The Freedom Agenda (2011), was a call to limit government through a balanced budget amendment. His second, Our Lost Constitution (2015), was a persuasive and accessible primer in constitutional law, and a history of the ways in which the three branches of government have ignored the language of our founding charter. “We will re-

claim our Constitution,” he wrote in the latter, “only when litigants, judges, elected officials, and (most important) voters decide that the Lost Constitution must not remain lost forever.” Hear, hear.

But now Lee has gone in another direction. He’s written a tribute to the men and women who wanted the Constitution to be lost from the get-go. “In my nearly lifelong study of the Constitution and the era of our nation’s founding,” he says in Written Out of History, “I have discovered many stories that challenge what we take to be conventional wisdom about America’s birth—the ‘origin story’ of our country.”

These profiles of the Iroquois chief Canasatego, Mercy Otis Warren, George Mason, and Luther Martin, among others, are certainly readable and contain fascinating details, and Lee’s judgments are lively, and his revisionism is unpredictable. If you are an admirer of Hamilton and Jefferson, however—and really, who isn’t?—you will be shocked when Lee writes that Aaron Burr “should also be remembered as one of the first victims of a chief executive...

The Satirist

I found it noteworthy that all three of the books by Republican senators are about principle, history, morals, and decorum, while the two books by Democrats are filled with personal anecdotes and legislative prescriptions. The Republican books are more intellectual, the Democratic ones more experiential. That gives the Democrats an advantage, for one assumes that the intended audience of these books—i.e., voters—will be more interested in the here and now than the what-might-have-been.

“Let me tell you a little secret about United States senators,” writes Minnesota’s Al Franken. “We all love being United States senators. We all like having a staff of brilliant young people whose work we can take credit for. We all like having reporters ask us for our insightful takes on critical issues.” Franken also must have enjoyed writing Al Franken, Giant of the Senate, a fast-paced and entertaining memoir of how this most unlikely of senators went from activist funnyman and radio host to winning a second term with 53% of the vote. He will need an even faster-paced sequel to describe his downfall from office.

I was surprised by how much I enjoyed Giant of the Senate. For a while now, Frank-
en’s shtick has turned me off as partisan and condescending. He’s the sort of comic who insists on being called a “satirist,” and whose jibes at conservatives are often nothing more than name-calling and pedantry. Yet I found myself chuckling throughout this book, and was absorbed in its first 70 pages, which cover Franken’s years in the entertainment industry—though without mentioning any groping or French kissing.

He is a disarming author. When a friend warns him that entering politics will subject him to public opprobrium, Franken has to look up “opprobrium” in the dictionary. He isn’t bothered by what he learns. “I could handle that!” he writes. “After all, I had written Stuart Saves His Family and produced SNL during the Anthony Michael Hall season. I had nothing to fear from public scorn.” Little did he know what was coming.

The theme of Giant of the Senate is Frank-

en’s difficulty separating himself from his comic past. He and his staff build a (meta-

phorical) “deHumorizer” to suppress his tendency to mock, quip, and lampoon. The ma-
machinery is glitch-prone, but readers at least are unlikely to mind.

“You cannot be a candidate for public office and have a radio show on the air,” he writes.

At least not according to the Federal Election Commission and the Federal Communications Commission. And so in a nod to my commitment to adhere to federal law, I announced that I was running for the United States Senate on February 14, 2007—Valentine’s Day—as I signed off the air for the last time. Then Franni and I went home and spent a romantic evening calling friends for money.

The book also contains a political lesson. Before one can pull oneself up by the bootstraps, Franken says, one must be wearing boots. He cites his wife’s family, who rose from poverty to the middle class “because of Social Security, Pell Grants, the GI Bill, and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.” He cleverly reformulates the Democratic agenda in the language of Paul Ryan: “Democrats aren’t just the party of poverty to the middle class “because of Social Security, Pell Grants, the GI Bill, and Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.” He cleverly reformulates the Democratic agenda in the language of Paul Ryan: “Democrats aren’t just the party of equality for all—we’re the party of opportunity for all. We’re the ones who want to give people the boots.” But beware of Democrats bearing gifts, including a “comic” past.

The Schoolmarm

Franken’s emphasis on government action to improve the circumstances of middle-class Americans could be a lifeline for a Democratic Party at sea. So depleted is the national leadership of his party that he was likely to play a significant role in its attempted recovery, until he wasn’t. Which brings us to another Democratic senator mentioned often in his pages: Elizabeth Warren.

The day after Donald Trump was elected president, Warren says she got a message from the New York Times. Would she care to revise an op-ed she had written in expectation of Hillary Clinton’s victory to account for the unexpected result? “Revisions?” Warren writes. “Yeah, this draft needed some revisions. I thought maybe I would just make it a two-word op-ed: Oh s-t.” Warren is surprisingly belligerent for a foreign-policy dove. Violence is never far from her mind. This Fight Is Our Fight is a sequel to A Fighting Chance, published in 2013, and dedicated “to the people of Massachusetts, who sent me into this fight.” Her recent speeches to adulatory crowds at the Women’s March, the AFL-CIO, and Netroots Nation have been filled with pugilistic barbs and trash-talk. “We’re not going to go back to the days when universal health care was something Democrats talked about on the campaign trail but were too chicken to fight for after they got elected,” she said last August. Bam!

Warren is barely able to contain her anger. “When I hear my colleagues in Congress express their deep concern for those who have already made it even as they cheerfully dismiss everyone who is busting their rear to get by, the fury rises in me like a physical force,” she writes. She is continually on edge, forever ready to burst: “I want to scream,” “I clenched my jaw,” “My hands were shaking,” “Grind my teeth,” “My voice started to rise,” “I wanted to climb to the top of the Capitol, hang off its side like King Kong, and shout at the top of my lungs.” There were moments when I couldn’t tell if This Fight Is Our Fight was the launch of her 2020 campaign or a cry for help.

Who is Warren fighting? None other than the ghost of Ronald Reagan, and the bankers, ideologues, global corporations, and malevolent Republicans who helped him steal the American dream:

Over several generations, our country built the greatest middle class the world had ever known. . . . We used it all—tax policy, investments in public education, new infrastructure, support for research, rules that protected consumers and investors, antitrust laws—to promote and expand our middle class. . . . But now, in a new century and a different time, that great middle class is on the ropes.

Warren’s just-so story is a partisan caricature, needless to say. There is no mention of inflation or bracket creep or the Soviet Union in her discussion of Reagan, who “smiled and waved his way into the White House” before unraveling the regulatory net.” She breezily concedes that it was a Democratic president, Bill Clinton, who signed the repeal of her beloved Glass-Steagall bank regulation, and then returns to castigating the GOP. Her catalogue of Republican malfeasance is as original as it is boring. At least Franken had a ready quip and the occasional kind word for some of his Republican colleagues. Warren seems ready to pummel the whole lot of them into oblivion.

Yet it would be a mistake to dismiss her as a hack. Born in Oklahoma City, the youngest of four and the only girl, this former Harvard professor has not forgotten her middle-American roots. All three of her brothers served in the armed forces. Her prose, laced with colloquialisms like “good grief,” “shoot,” “yeah,” “walloped,” “ooh,” “boy,” “wow,” and “holy cow,” sounds like dialogue from an episode of Leave It to Beaver. What bothers her is what bothers most Americans: the high price of housing, health care, day care, and college. Unsurprisingly, she never mentions that these are precisely the sectors of the economy in which government is most involved.

“Government is not our enemy,” Warren writes. “Government for the people is our ally.” A lovely thought, but what about the other elements of Lincoln’s quotation: government of and by the people? Wasn’t it the feeling that government was acting without any democratic accountability that helped make Donald Trump president? Warren does not answer these questions. Instead, she ascribes Trump’s success to racism and bigotry and Democrats unwilling to—you guessed it—fight.

Warren’s bellicosity obscures feelings of panic and despair. She is telling an unhappy story, one of unrelenting predestination and failure. Powerful forces are arrayed against her and the middle class, forces she has been unable to stop.

In her impotence, however, she is not alone. The theme of powerlessness courses like a dark river through these books. Flake announced his retirement from the Senate last October, Sasse says politics is inadequate to the task at hand, Lee suggests the Constitution may have been flawed from the beginning, Franken couldn’t conform to the rules and norms of Washington (or did he conform all too well?), and good manners and the criminal justice system prevent Warren from beating the adherents of supply-side economics into a bloody pulp. The powers of Congress have become so vitiated, the apparatus of the administrative state so complex, and American society and culture so fragmented that all they can do is sit back and watch.

Why do senators write books? Perhaps it’s because they have no other choice.

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