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## Representative John P. Murtha Dies at 77; Ex-Marine Was Iraq War Critic

By [DAVID STOUT](#)

WASHINGTON — Representative [John P. Murtha](#) of Pennsylvania, a gruff ex-Marine who used his immense power in military spending to funnel hundreds of millions of dollars to his hard-luck district and who became an outspoken critic of the Iraq war, died on Monday. He was 77.

He died at the Virginia Hospital Center in Arlington, where he was being treated for complications of gallbladder surgery, his office said. Mr. Murtha's death came two days after he became the longest-serving congressman in Pennsylvania history, his office said, surpassing the record of Joseph M. McDade, a Scranton Republican who served from 1963 to 1999.

Elected in 1974 and the first Vietnam combat veteran to serve in Congress, Mr. Murtha voted in 2002 to authorize use of military force in Iraq. But he evolved into a leading foe of the war as it was conducted under the administration of President [George W. Bush](#).

"The war in Iraq is not going as advertised," Mr. Murtha said in November 2005 as he demanded an immediate withdrawal of American troops. He called the Iraq campaign "a flawed policy wrapped in illusion."

Mr. Murtha's long involvement in Pentagon issues and his history of hawkishness made the criticism all the more influential.

In a statement Monday, Defense Secretary [Robert M. Gates](#) called Mr. Murtha "a true patriot" and said that while they did not always agree, "I always respected his candor, and knew that he cared deeply about the men and women of America's military and intelligence community."

Before speaking out on the war, Mr. Murtha was not much known outside Washington or his district in southwestern Pennsylvania.

But he was alternately respected and feared by his colleagues on Capitol Hill as he used his influence to funnel hundreds of millions of federal dollars into his hard-luck district, where prosperity had vanished with the decline of the coal and steel industries.

Mr. Murtha used his position as the ranking Democrat on the Appropriation Committee's military subcommittee to reward or punish colleagues in both parties, depending on whether they went along with the special items, or earmarks, that he tucked into bills for the benefit of his 12th Congressional District.

More often than not, they did.

The chairman of the Appropriations Committee, Representative [David R. Obey](#), Democrat of Wisconsin, once described Mr. Murtha as someone “who likes to get things done with virtually no spoken words.”

Though Mr. Murtha, who was known as Jack, did not go out of his way to win friends among journalists, he understood the power of words. “Let me tell you the facts of life,” he often told balky legislators, as he recalled in an interview in 2006. “If you vote against this bill, you won’t have any input at all the next time.”

Nor did he apologize for the political horse-trading in which he was so adept. “Deal making is what Congress is all about,” he said.

As an ally of Representative [Nancy Pelosi](#), Mr. Murtha helped navigate her rise to speaker of the House. Ms. Pelosi, in turn, backed him in his unsuccessful contest against Representative [Steny H. Hoyer](#) of Maryland to become House Democratic leader.

While Mr. Murtha steered huge sums to his district and was able to rake in plenty of money for his campaigns, he lived modestly in Johnstown, Pa., where he owned a carwash.

Mr. Murtha, who served five years in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives before going to Washington, was a protégé of Speaker Thomas P. O’Neill Jr. of Massachusetts, who may not have coined the phrase that “all politics is local” but surely embraced it. So did John P. Murtha, who once boasted on a campaign billboard that “The ‘P’ stands for power.” (It actually stood for Patrick.)

When he drew fire from the political right for his shift on Iraq, Mr. Murtha said his criticism of the war in no way lessened his support for the Americans fighting in it.

“I don’t take a back seat to anybody for my service to my country,” Mr. Murtha said in a recent, profanity-spiced interview with his local newspaper, The Tribune-Democrat. But he said the killing of Iraqi civilians, even if accidental, and the abuse of Iraqi prisoners had undermined American efforts.

Mr. Murtha told The Tribune-Democrat that he had trusted people in the Bush administration too much when it came to Iraq. “I gave them the benefit of the doubt,” he said. “That was a bad mistake.”

A slogan in his first campaign for Congress was “One Honest Man Is Enough.” Yet he barely survived the Abscam affair that ruined several other politicians in the early 1980s. Mr. Murtha was shown on videotape turning down money from an undercover agent for the [Federal Bureau of Investigation](#) posing as a “sheikh” but he expressed a willingness to talk about money later.

Despite that awkward moment, he was never charged, and he eventually testified against two other Abscam defendants.

Early in 2009, he came under scrutiny again, when it came to light that federal agents had raided the offices of the PMA Group, a major Washington lobbying firm, in November 2008 as part of an investigation into potentially improper campaign contributions.

Mr. Murtha was among the lawmakers lobbied by the firm (its founder, [Paul Magliocchetti](#), had worked for

the Defense subcommittee long dominated by him), and PMA's executives and clients were major sources of contributions to Mr. Murtha's campaigns. The firm's specialty was helping clients obtain multimillion-dollar earmarks, Mr. Murtha's stock in trade.

The PMA Group closed its doors after the investigation, and a Congressional ethics office declined to recommend formal investigations into the actions of Mr. Murtha and the other legislators. But the affair did nothing to dispel the impression that Mr. Murtha ran a busy political trading post.

The plainspoken Mr. Murtha's statements sometimes got him in trouble. In October 2008, for example, he was criticized for saying that some of his own constituents were "redneck" and "racist" and might have trouble voting for [Barack Obama](#) for president.

Trying to explain away his remarks, Mr. Murtha told reporters that change was difficult for some people, "particularly older people" — this in a state that had at the time the second-highest population of elderly people in the country, after Florida.

But Mr. Murtha won handily anyhow, defeating a political unknown. On Election Night, he told his supporters, "You keep sending me back regardless of what I say."

John Patrick Murtha was born in New Martinsville, W.Va., on June 17, 1932, and grew up in Mount Pleasant, Pa., about 45 miles southeast of Pittsburgh. He left Washington & Jefferson College in 1952 to enlist in the Marine Corps and go to Korea.

After graduating with a degree in economics from the [University of Pittsburgh](#) in 1962, he rejoined the [Marines](#), serving as an officer in Vietnam in 1966 and 1967 and receiving a Bronze Star, two Purple Hearts for wounds suffered in combat in the spring of 1967 and the Vietnam Cross of Gallantry.

His survivors include his wife of 55 years, Joyce; a daughter, Donna; twin sons, John and Patrick, and three grandchildren.

As for his constituents, their support largely never flagged. The only close call at the polls for Mr. Murtha was his first run for Congress, a special election in February 1974 to fill the seat of Representative John P. Saylor, a Republican, who had died. Mr. Murtha won by fewer than 200 votes, out of some 120,000 cast.

Mr. Murtha left a legacy visible across southwestern Pennsylvania: roads, airports and hospitals there are named after him. Indeed, though he became a fixture in Washington, he remained, in his own eyes, one with the people back home.

"I know better than those damn people in the White House what needs to be done in my district," he said.

*Correction: February 8, 2010*

*An earlier version of this obituary incorrectly said that Representative John P. Murtha went to William and Mary College.*

