

ROSTENKOWSKI:
*The Pursuit of Power and
the End of the Old Politics.*
By Richard E. Cohen.
Ivan R. Dee. 311 pp. \$27.50

MR. CHAIRMAN:
Power in Dan Rostenkowski's America.
By James L. Merriner.
Southern Illinois Univ. Press. 333 pp.
\$29.95

On May 28, 1985, Dan Rostenkowski, chairman of the House Ways and Means Committee, delivered a nationally televised address on tax reform. It was an unlikely excursion into media politics by one of America's last big-time machine politicians. Invoking his boyhood in a Polish working-class neighborhood



on Chicago's northwest side, he urged viewers to "write Rosty." The appeal produced an avalanche of mail in Congress, paving the way for the greatest legislative triumph of Rostenkowski's congressional

career, the 1986 tax reform act.

Nine years and three days after his "write Rosty" speech, a federal grand jury indicted the Illinois congressman on 17 counts of corruption. While the charges were pending, Rostenkowski lost his House seat and the Democratic Party lost control of Congress. He later pleaded guilty to two of the counts and served 17 months in prison.

Though they make their exploratory incisions from different angles, two new biographies largely succeed in getting to the heart of Rostenkowski's political life. Cohen, *National Journal's* congressional correspondent, writes from a Capitol Hill vantage point, whereas Merriner, formerly the political editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, brings a hometown perspective. As their subtitles reflect, both books concentrate on Rostenkowski's power, how he got it, how he used and abused it, and how he lost it.

Like his father, a long-time alderman and ward boss, Rostenkowski thrived in the Chicago Democratic machine. He won elec-

tion to the Illinois legislature at 24. A few years later, he persuaded Mayor Richard J. Daley to send him to Congress. He was young enough to serve for decades, Rostenkowski said; he could rise in seniority, maybe even become Speaker, and dispense plenty of federal largesse to Chicago.

At 30, he won election to the House of Representatives. While always bringing home plenty of bacon, he proved a formidable fighter in the legislative arena. As Ways and Means chairman—a position he assumed in 1981—he championed the committee's reputation and its bills while enhancing his own prestige and power. He never sought the speakership, which both books ascribe to his machine-conditioned expectation of rising by reward, not competition.

While paying tribute to Rostenkowski as a superb legislator, both books use his story to illuminate larger themes. Cohen concentrates on the passing of the old politics, both in Chicago and on the Hill. Rostenkowski was particularly vocal in opposition to the "reformers" and their ethics restrictions, which made it more difficult for him to support his family and lifestyle. He ignored the rules he didn't like, and eventually he paid a high price. Merriner provides a harder-edged depiction, with tales of backroom bribes, curbside shootings, and sweetheart stock deals. He uses Rostenkowski's rise and fall to argue that big government and big media create titanic figures and then destroy them, a weaker thesis than Cohen's. The two books should be read together for the most accurate measure of this fascinating yet imperfect politician.

—Don Wolfensberger

"THIS IS BERLIN":
Radio Broadcasts from Nazi Germany.
By William L. Shirer. Introduction by
John Keegan. Overlook Press. 450 pp.
\$37.95

If journalism is the first draft of history, William Shirer (1904–93) lived long enough to produce a second and third version as well. A CBS correspondent in Europe in the 1930s, he published his *Berlin Diary* in 1941, achieved international fame in 1960 with *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, and revisited the Nazi period in *The Nightmare Years* (1984), the second volume of his wide-ranging memoirs.