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 election 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.

Shirer brought a sharp, journalistic eye to his work, and he was fond of quoting Thucydides on the paramount importance of firsthand testimony. Although many of the dispatches in *This Is Berlin* lack a distinctively personal element—he was working under intense censorship—they still provide insights into the period that preceded the onslaught of total war. The Berlin depicted in these pages is a city where much of daily life proceeds at a seemingly normal pace. A play—cowritten by Mussolini, no less—opens to full houses. In the bookstores, *Vom Winde Verweht* (otherwise known as *Gone with the Wind*) dominates the best-seller lists. Then, in November 1939, we learn that the Winter Olympics have been postponed.

Forced to rely on repetitive official dispatches, Shirer can only hint at events happening behind the façade. Unable to travel to conquered Poland, he describes newsreels showing Jews in forced labor units. His terse listing of the day's executions—for theft during the blackout or, as in the case of one Polish farmworker, for "immoral conduct"—must have given his listeners some inkling of the truth about the regime.

By mid-1940, Shirer had come to doubt that he had a worthwhile role to play in Berlin. Although he had tried to convey his skepticism about Nazi misinformation through changes of intonation and colloquialisms, he soon found that his every word was analyzed by a censor sitting at his elbow. With the Gestapo sniffing at his heels, the time had come to return home.

—*Clive Davis*

UNCOMMON GROUNDS:
The History of Coffee and How It Transformed Our World.
By Mark Pendergrast. Basic. 522 pp. $30

THE DEVIL'S CUP:
Coffee, the Driving Force in History.
By Stewart Lee Allen. Soho. 231 pp. $25

Thought to be the stuff of Satan and insurrection, coffee has been lambasted throughout history. In the 17th century, Turkish sultan Murad IV banned it for fear that it made subjects disloyal, while King Charles II complained that British coffeehouses were breeding "false, malicious, and scandalous reports." Two books—an encyclopedic volume by Pendergrast and a playful romp by Allen—suggest that Murad and Charles were right about coffee's potency. With only a little facetiousness, the authors assert that coffee brought about the French Revolution, the poverty of Latin America, and most everything in between. They muster a surprisingly compelling case for their overcaffeinated thesis.

Pendergrast, author of *For God, Country and Coca-Cola* (1994), recounts the story from the berry to the last drop. Folklore has it that an Ethiopian goatherd named Kaldi discovered coffee sometime before the sixth century A.D., when his animals "danced" after nibbling the red berries. By the 16th century, the bean had conquered Turkey, where "a lack of sufficient coffee provided grounds for a woman to seek divorce." In the succeeding two centuries, coffee replaced beer as the drink of choice in Europe. Wired Frenchmen started getting revolutionary ideas; contented beer drinkers, Pendergrast suggests, would never have stormed the Bastille.

The author is especially detailed in mapping coffee's role in the United States. Competition among coffee roasters, he shows, spurred innovations in advertising, shipping, and technology, from brand-name recognition to vacuum-packed bags, which then found applications in other industries. Developments in coffee also paralleled societal shifts. Coffeehouses spread during the 1920s, when Prohibition shut down bars and sent Americans searching for new places to socialize. Postwar consumerism fueled the rise of instant coffee, and the hedonistic 1970s spawned a new appreciation for exotic, gourmet coffees. *Uncommon Grounds* is exhaustive but not exhausting, with anecdotes easing the reader through its 522 pages.