

# *The K.F. Stone Weekly*

(Formerly "Beating the Bushes")



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## ALL 'BOUT BERNIE

In a recent online [essay](#), Esquire Magazine's Charles Pierce correctly noted that over the past generation or so, " . . . every time a Democratic senator runs for president, the *National Journal* . . . concocts [a survey](#) purporting to show that the senator in question is the 'most liberal' member of the Senate." At one time or another, their list has included such "raging leftists" as Al Gore, Evan Bayh, John Kerry, Hillary Clinton and of course, Barack Obama. At one time or another,



conservatives have accused all of them of, at best, of having socialist leanings or agendas; at worst, of being actual card-carrying, capital-S Socialists (whatever in the name of Fourier and Owen that means).

It will be interesting to see what the conservative media and their fans have to say about Vermont Senator Bernie Sanders now that he has officially declared his candidacy for POTUS. After all, he took the wind out of their rhetorical sails a long, long time ago; he's never been the least bit cagey about the fact that he's a "democratic socialist" -- again, whatever *that* means. Pouring over his voting record in both the House (where he served for 8 terms from 1992-2007) and the Senate (where he has served since 2007), researching his positions, getting to know what he'd do in an ideal political world is indeed, an eye-opening experience. For it turns out there is precious little in Bernie's record that could

not have been supported by FDR, JFK LBJ or even Theodore Roosevelt for crying out loud.

The things that stoke the fire in Bernie Sanders' political belly are:

- A desire to achieve a fairer economic system;
- The enactment of legitimately progressive taxation;
- An acknowledgement that bridges, roads and water systems are things we all need -- things which the federal government must repair and replace;
- Honest elections;
- A simple recognition that environmental crises are national crises;
- A total commitment to America's veterans.
- A single-payer national health care system.

Again, none of these positions or desires would cause Teddy R., FDR, JFK, LBJ or even Sam Rayburn to lose a single minute's sleep. And yet, in asking people at random what they know or think about Bernie Sanders I have pretty much gotten the same response: "Oh, he's a socialist." Period. For the third time, whatever in the hell that means. (By the way, not one person mentioned his advanced age -- he'll be 74 in September -- or the fact that's he's Jewish. Whatever *these* facts mean . . .)

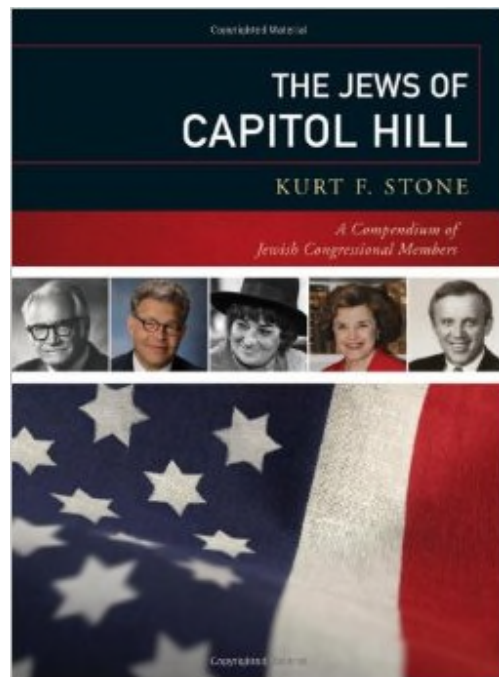
Does Senator Sanders have a snowball's chance in Hell of wresting the Democratic nomination away from Secretary Clinton? Of course not; the only person who can defeat Hillary Clinton is Hillary Clinton. Nonetheless, I applaud his entering the race. For Sec. Clinton to spend the next year or more without being challenged, without debating, would be as harmful to her chances as a ballplayer entering a new season without benefit of spring training -- of facing "live pitching," so to speak. Bernie Sanders is the guy who will help get her in shape, hone her native skills, get her to distinguish between a political fastball and a slider.

Let's face it: there are a lot of progressives out there who don't trust Hillary Clinton; who worry that she's not truly "one of us." The presence of Bernie Sanders in the primary race will likely force her to pivot left and reevaluate some of her positions and priorities; things she will have to do if she hopes to re-excite the Democratic base.

So just who is Bernie Sanders? As one who first started writing about him nearly a quarter century ago, I feel I know him pretty well. And so, what follows, is Bernie's entry in my most recent book, [\*The Jews of Capitol Hill\*](#):

In the 135 years from 1865 to 1990, Vermont was arguably the most Republican state in the Union. During that period, the Green Mountain State sent twenty-nine men to the House of Representatives; of these, twenty-seven were, not surprisingly, members of the GOP. The other two, Bradley Barlow (1814-1889) and William H. Meyer (1914-1983), were, respectively, a Greenbacker who served in the 46<sup>th</sup> Congress (1879-1880) and a Democrat who served in the 86<sup>th</sup> Congress (1959-1960). In November, 1990, Vermonters wrote a dramatic new page in their political history by electing as their Representative-at-Large an independent, self-styled Democratic Socialist: the then-forty-nine-year-old Bernie Sanders. At the time, *Roll Call*, the "newspaper of Capitol Hill," rated Sanders' 56%-40% victory over incumbent Representative Peter Smith "one of the twenty-five most significant elections in American history."

Sanders' election was more than a mere departure from Republican representation. Almost since its entry into the Union, Vermont had been represented by dyed-in-the-wool Yankees with such stereotypically New England-sounding names as Worthington Smith, Dudley Denison, and Kittridge Haskins. The man Sanders defeated was also named Smith – Peter Smith. Bernie Sanders did not look, sound, or act – at least politically – like anyone's image of a typical New Englander, and for good reason. He was and is a rumpled, tousle-headed New Yorker, who after having lived more than 40 years in Burlington still speaks like the Brooklyn native he is. In a lengthy 2007 *New York Times* piece on Sanders, writer Mark Liebovich noted, "Journalistic convention in Vermont mandates that every Sanders story remark on his unruly hair as early on as possible. It also stipulates that every piece of his clothing be described as 'rumpled.'" (n.b. In 2010, *Washingtonian Magazine* named Sanders the Senate's number one "fashion victim." His spokesman's response? "Thanks!")



The second of Eli and Dorothy [Glassburg] Sanders' two sons, the future Congressional Minyanair was born in Flatbush, Brooklyn on September 8, 1941. His father, a "struggling paint salesman," had emigrated from Poland at age seventeen after his family had been wiped out in the Holocaust. Economically,

the Sanders were lower-middle-class, a fact that seemingly helped shape Bernie's future political ideology: "It's not that we were poor, but [there was always] the constant pressure of never having enough money. . . . The money question to me has always been very deep and emotional." Dorothy Sanders always dreamed of living in a "private home," but they never made it beyond a three-and-a-half room apartment on East 26<sup>th</sup> and Kings Highway.

Bernie Sanders attended P.S. 197, the same elementary school that Bernie's future congressional colleague *Chuck Schumer* would attend nine years later. There, Sanders played basketball on the team that won the borough championship. As a child, he attended Boy Scout camp upstate, and "used to cry on the bus as it returned him to New York at summer's end." Bernie also attended afternoon Hebrew school, and became *bar mitzvah* in 1954 at the King's Highway Jewish Center. Speaking of his Hebrew skills, Sanders said: "I was able to read Hebrew in a true academic fashion: [I] could read it but not necessarily understand everything [I] was reading. I suppose I could brush up if pressed into duty."

Moving on to James Madison High School (the same high school attended by future United States Senators *Chuck Schumer* and *Norm Coleman* and Justice Ruth Bader Ginsberg), he got his first taste of political campaigning – and political loss. In his senior year, Bernie Sanders ran for student body president. His platform included a proposal that the school adopt a Korean orphan. Although he came in last in a three-way race (shades of things to come), he did have the satisfaction of seeing the winner embrace his proposal; James Madison High School did adopt a Korean orphan.

Dorothy Sanders passed away at age 46, shortly after Bernie graduated from James Madison.

Bernie followed in his older brother Larry's footsteps and entered Brooklyn College. (*Larry, who became a social worker, moved to England, where he served two decades as an Oxfordshire County Council Councillor. Unlike his younger brother, Larry sounds far more Britain than Brooklyn.*) By the beginning of his sophomore year Bernie had transferred to the University of Chicago, where he was "radicalized by the grinding poverty he saw for the first time in places such as the city's South Side." His college years coincided with the civil rights movement and the early days of the war in Vietnam. Sanders helped lead sit-in protests against segregated housing on campus and applied for conscientious-objector status with the Selective Service. By the time his case came up for review, he was twenty-six . . . to old to be drafted.

Bernie Sanders graduated from the University of Chicago in 1964 with a degree in political science. Following graduation, he traveled to Israel, where he worked on several *kibbutzim*. By 1968, he was a resident of Vermont -- a place that attracted a goodly number of hippies and members of what in those days was referred to as the "counter-culture." Legend has it that Sanders decided to move to the Green Mountain State after seeing a brochure in a tourist office in



Manhattan. According to Sanders, "When I was a kid, I always had a strong feeling for country life. I was not a great fan of big cities. After I was married . . . we bought some land in Vermont. We went up there for basically the same reason, I think, that many others have gone up there: it's a very beautiful state."

Sanders, his first wife and their son Levi, lived without electricity or running water in a converted sugar house. He earned a precarious living as a carpenter, freelance writer, researcher for the Vermont Tax Department, and director of the American People's History Society. In this latter position, Sanders produced and directed college-level filmstrips and documentaries, including a praiseworthy video on the life of Eugene V. Debs. To this day, a portrait of Debs -- who ran for President as a Socialist in 1904, 1908, 1912 and 1920 -- hangs on the wall of Sanders' Senate office.

In the early 1970s Sanders helped found the Liberty Union Party, "an offshoot of the antiwar movement in Vermont." Between 1972 and 1977, when he left the party, he ran for office four times -- always unsuccessfully. Examining Sanders' record during these years, one marvels at his tenacity:

**January 1972:** Sanders runs as the Liberty Union candidate in a special election for the U.S. Senate to fill the seat vacated when Senator Winston Prouty dies. Sanders comes in third in a three-way race won by Republican Robert J. Stafford (1913-2006). Sanders wins 2.1% percent of the vote -- 1,571 out of 71,301 cast.

**November 1972:** Sanders runs for Governor on the Liberty Union ticket. Once again he comes in third in a three-way race won by Democrat Thomas Salmon. This time, Sanders garners a mere 1.15% of the vote -- 2,175 out of 189,237 cast.

**November 1974:** Sanders runs again for the U.S. Senate as a member of the Liberty Union Party. Again he comes in last in a three-way race, this time won by Democrat Patrick J. Leahy. This time, Sanders' percentage inches up to 4.1% -- 5,901 out of 142,762 cast.



**November 1976:** Sanders stages a second run for Governor as a member of the Liberty Union. This time he wins 6.1% in a three-way race won by Republican Richard A. Snelling – 11,317 out of 185,929 cast.

In March, 1981, Bernie Sanders' record of electoral defeats came to an end – just barely – when he was elected mayor of Burlington by precisely twelve votes. In the four-way race, Sanders, who ran as an independent, received 43% of the vote, ousting five-term incumbent Gordon Paquette.

Mayor Paquette, a conservative Democrat, was known for running an office “marked by cronyism and neglect of city services.” When urged by friends and supporters to run for the office, Sanders at first demurred, stating that although certainly knowledgeable about state and national affairs, he “felt out of touch with local concerns.” About those days, Sanders was quoted as saying, “The God's honest truth is I knew very little about Burlington politics. I had attended two alderman meetings and feel asleep at one of them.”

Somehow he made up his mind to enter the race, and proceeded to denounce Mayor Paquette's proposed increase in property taxes as an undue burden on the middle class. Sanders' frenetic non-stop campaigning and disarming honesty struck resilient chords with the local voters. Aided by a surprise endorsement from the police union which had been stymied in its attempt to negotiate a raise with the current city administration, Sanders was elected, as mentioned above, by a virtual eyelash. As the only self-proclaimed socialist mayor in America, Bernie Sanders received instant attention in the national media. Vermont's largest city was suddenly dubbed “The People's Republic of Burlington.” Attending a victory party the night of his election, Bernie Sanders met the woman who nearly 7 years later would become his second wife: Jane O'Meara Driscoll



Confounding his many critics, Sanders turned out to be a successful and remarkably durable mayor. Reelected three times – with majorities of 52.1%, 55.8%, and 55.2% -- he got the voters of Burlington to accept a modest increase in property taxes and reached an amicable settlement with the police and firefighters' unions.

A “people's mayor,” in every sense of the term Bernie Sanders successfully established “*free health clinics for the poor and elderly, a community boat house and bike path at Lake Champlain . . . erected low-cost housing and shelters for the homeless,*

*expanded the city's youth program, and established a municipal day-care center."* And, in consonance with the spirit of a former *kibbutznik*, he planted thousands of trees. In order to finance all these public works projects, Sanders imposed special fees on utilities *"and others whose excavation projects had hastened the deterioration of the roads."* Unlike most mayors however, Sanders *"spoke out against poverty in the third world and made good-will visits to the Soviet Union and Cuba."*

Confounding his critics, Sanders also undertook ambitious downtown revitalization projects, courted businesses and balanced budgets. His administration sued the local cable franchise, thereby winning lower rates for customers, and drew a minor league baseball team to town: the "Vermont Reds," named not for the Communists, but for the team in Cincinnati. According to Sanders, his proudest achievement during his eight years as Burlington mayor was *"arousing public interest in government."* During his tenure, voter participation grew by nearly 50 percent. Not all of Mayor Sanders' initiatives met with success however, and not surprisingly, his fiery anti-capitalist rhetoric alienated a goodly portion of the business community.

In 1986, Mayor Sanders found time to make a second gubernatorial run, once again coming in third in a three-way race won by Governor Madeleine M. Kunin (1933- ), who thereby became the first Jewish woman to be elected governor of a U.S. State. *(The Swiss-born Kunin went on to serve three two-year terms as governor. In August 1996 she began a three-year stint as American ambassador to Switzerland and Liechtenstein. In 2015 she is the James Marsh Professor-at-Large at the Univ. of Vermont.)* In 1989, Sanders decided to call it quits as mayor, feeling that he had accomplished most of what he had originally set out to do. Speaking of his decision to retire from office, Sanders explained, *"Being mayor, at least the way I do it, is a very hard job, because I feel a responsibility to make certain that the streets get paved, that we stop the war against Nicaragua, and that we have a national health-care system."* During the Sanders administration, Burlington's municipal budget remained balanced and businesses thrived. For one month in 1989, Burlington had the lowest unemployment rate (1.8%) in the nation.

In 1988, former Mayor Sanders made an unsuccessful bid for the U.S. House of Representatives. Running as an Independent in a six-way race, he came in second with 37% of the vote. Most remarkably, the candidate finishing behind him, Democrat Paul Poirier, was held to just under 19%. Emboldened by his strong showing, Sanders decided to bide his time and challenge the winner in the race, two-term Republican Lieutenant Governor Peter Smith. From 1989 to 1990, Sanders taught political science at Hamilton College, lectured at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, and planned his strategy for the next campaign.

In his 1990 race against Smith, Sanders pilloried the incumbent for his support of the savings-and-loan bailout, which he called “probably the greatest single rip-off in the history of this country,” and for his vote to ban semiautomatic weapons. Of the former issue, Sanders opined, “How ironic that the Congress was able to find \$500 billion in order to bail out the real-estate speculators and junk-bond dealers, but the same Congress can find no money for our children, for the environment, for health care, or for the needs of our senior citizens.” Smith countered with ads suggesting that his opponent was pro-Communist – a charge that sunk his campaign when Sanders vociferously denied that he harbored even a scintilla of sympathy for Communists or Communism: “When I talk about democratic socialism, what I am not talking about is authoritarian communism – a system which, thank God, is now falling apart; a system which has been responsible for the deaths of millions of people; a system which has been a vicious dictatorship; a system which has run an extraordinary dictatorship in the Soviet Union.”

Bernie Sanders defeated Smith in the November, 1990 election, carrying 227 out of 251 towns and capturing a solid 56% of the vote. He thus became the third socialist elected to Congress – and the first Independent to serve in that body in nearly forty years. Sanders' first task upon taking his oath of office in the House was to join the Democratic caucus without joining the party itself. House Speaker Thomas Foley (1928-2013) averted a possible crisis among the party's conservative faction by reaching a compromise: Sanders would withdraw his application for membership in the party caucus in exchange for the right to committee assignments. Sanders was thus appointed to the House Committees on Banking and Government Operations. In later years, Sanders would trade in his position on Banking for a seat on House Financial Services. Early on, Sanders formed a Progressive Caucus with what at the time seemed a rather “quixotic” agenda: progressive tax-reform, a Canadian-style single-payer health care system, a 50% cut in military spending over five years, a national energy policy and “ – a touch of Vermont – support for family farms.”

Bernie Sanders was easily reelected seven more times to the House by margins ranging from a low of 50% in 1994 to 69% in 2000. Known as “somewhat of a pragmatic gadfly” in the House, Sanders became well-known for the amendments he would append to extant pieces of legislation, and his ability to draw attention to issues of importance to him; He was the first congressman to lead a bus trip to Canada to help seniors buy cheaper prescription drugs. His heated grillings of then-Federal Reserve Chair Alan Greenspan became the stuff of legend. In one “representative exchange,” Sanders asked the Federal Reserve chair “Do you give one whit of concern for the middle class and working families of this country?”



One of Sanders' singular legislative triumphs dealt with Section 215 of the U.S. Patriot Act. Teaming up with Texas Republican – and staunch Libertarian – Ron Paul, he was instrumental in striking a provision from the Act that would have required librarians to release data on what their patrons were reading. Not surprisingly, he called for the repeal of the North American Free Trade Act (NAFTA) as well as Permanent Normal Trade Relations (PNTR) and for a “moratorium on free trade agreements.”

Twice during his tenure in the House, Bernie Sanders gave serious consideration to running against then-Republican Senator Jim Jeffords. But when in May 2001 Jeffords left the GOP – thereby giving Democrats a majority in the Senate for the next 18 months – Sanders changed his mind. When Jeffords announced that he would not run for reelection in 2006, Sanders jumped into the race. He became the early frontrunner and began amassing endorsements from key Vermont Democrats – despite the fact that once again, he was running as an independent. Nonetheless, the Vermont Democratic Party ran his name on the primary ballot. In the September primary he took the nomination with 94% of the vote. He drew as his opponent Republican Richard Tarrant. Tarrant (1942- ), who along with two partners founded what eventually became ODX Systems Corporation (which they sold to G.E. for \$1.2 billion in 2005), was reputedly “Vermont’s richest guy.” Thus able to self-finance, Tarrant spent \$7.3 million, saturating television and radio with a “serial biography” and attack ads on Sanders which sought to portray him as “an ineffective radical” who was “soft on sexual predators and drug dealers.” These attack ads featured the tagline, “What’s happened to Bernie?” For his part, Sanders raised and spent an astounding \$6 million, thus making the race by far the most expensive in Vermont history.

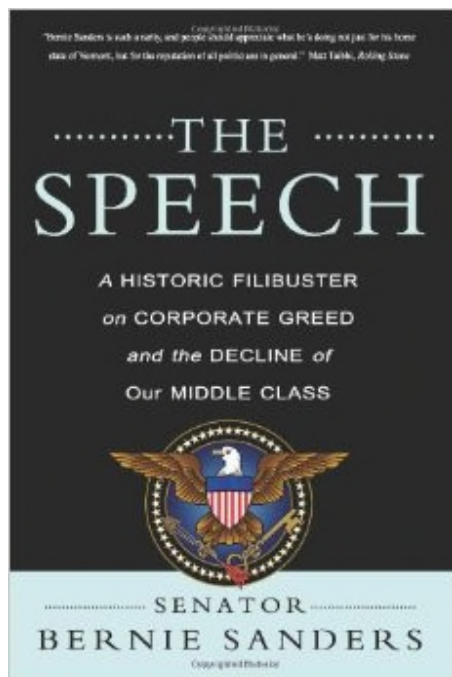
After having run 13 times statewide, Sanders was far better known and trusted by the people of Vermont than the political upstart Tarrant. Sanders overwhelmed his Republican opponent 65%-32%, thereby becoming the first Socialist to be seated in the United States Senate. Once again seated as an independent – although caucusing with the Democrats – Senator Sanders was given seats on Budget, Energy & Natural Resources, Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, and Veterans’ Affairs.

In November 2008 – shortly after Barack Obama’s victory over John McCain – Senator Sanders introduced the provocatively named “Stop the Greed on Wall Street Act,” a bill aimed at “limiting compensation at banks receiving government bailout funds.” The bill was largely ignored and consigned to die a quick death in committee. It was looked upon as exactly the kind of quixotic legislation the folks on Capitol Hill had come to expect out of their lone Socialist. But then, in early February 2009, President Barack Obama proposed nearly the same thing; he would cap pay at \$500,000; Sanders’ measure put the lid at

\$400,000. Suddenly, there was a deafening hand of applause. Even the conservative Cato Institute issued a supportive press release telling executives, "Sorry guys, you asked for it."

*Politics's* Lisa Lerer noted that "Sanders is often dismissed as a novelty act in two-party Washington . . . but the move toward heightened corporate regulation moves him a step closer to the political mainstream." Sanders likes to remind people that he was in favor of "heightened corporation regulation" years and years ago; that as far back as the 1990s he was opposing all measures meant to repeal Depression-era strictures on banking and corporations. "*This (the re-regulating of banks and corporations) is an issue that some of us have been onto for a number of years. You don't have to have a Ph.D. in economics to figure this out.*" Perhaps things are beginning to swing Bernie Sanders way.

As noted above, Bernie Sanders married his second wife, Dr. Jane O'Meara Driscoll in 1988. In 2004, Dr. Driscoll, who is a political scientist, was named President of Burlington College. (**n.b. *She would serve in that position for nearly a decade.***) Prior to that, she was interim president/provost of her *alma mater*, Goddard College. Between them the Sanders have two sons (Levi and David), two daughters (Heather and Coreen) and three grandchildren (Cole, Sunee and Ryleigh), all of whom live in the Burlington area.



Bernie Sanders was overwhelmingly reelected to a second six-year senate term in 2012, defeating former Massachusetts Representative James McGovern 71%-24.9%. On December 10, 2010, Sanders delivered an 8½-hour speech against the [Tax Relief, Unemployment Insurance Reauthorization, and Job Creation Act of 2010](#), the proposed extension of the [Bush-era tax rates](#) that eventually became law, saying "Enough is enough! [...] How many homes can you own?" A long speech such as this is traditionally a filibuster, but because it didn't block action, it was not technically a filibuster under Senate rules. In 2011, Senator Sander's speech was published as a book, entitled [The Speech: A](#)

[Historic Filibuster on Corporate Greed and the Decline of Our Middle Class.](#) All proceeds from the book's sales (to date approximately \$26,000) have been donated to Vermont non-profit charities. It is partly as a result of reading this

book that progressives across the country began urging Bernie Sanders to run for POTUS.

When asked about his proudest achievement in politics, Sanders replies: "I'm primarily proud of my own state. [They] made history by sending me down here as the first non-Democrat, non-Republican Independent in forty years. I'm more proud of my own state for having the courage to do that than I am for myself. I think that Vermont in many ways is leading this country into a new type of politics. . . . The idea of a 'third party' is now seen as not only feasible but something that the majority of people would like to see."

Hopefully, as time goes on, people will come to know far more about Bernie Sanders besides "Oh, he's a socialist." For the overwhelming majority of what Senator Sanders stands for -- and has long fought for -- is nothing more than common sense principles; the kind which put people ahead of Wall Street and recognizes, as Bernie has oft-stated " . . . *this country just does not belong to a handful of billionaires.*"

It's not that Bernie is so terribly far left; it's that the political fulcrum in this country has shifted terribly far to the right. I have to believe that his getting into the race is a very good thing -- if not as a possible victor, than as a positive goad . . . as that spring training pitcher who helps sharpen everyone in preparation for opening day.

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