



## How the Mighty Can Fall

Jim Alexander

In 1974, few people outside the Washington Beltway knew who Wilbur Mills was. But inside the Capitol, he was regarded as the second most powerful politician in town. Having been elected from Arkansas to the House of Representatives in 1939, Mills rose to be chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. Unlike other committees, Ways and Means had far-reaching power over the other committees, acting as gatekeeper of pending legislation involving taxation, and being at the time the assigner of chairmanships of all other committees. All taxation legislation had to originate there.

In his sixties and regarded as a Bible Belt model of decorum, Mills was said to have gone home quietly each evening to study the IRS code. He is credited with crafting early Medicare and Medicaid legislation, and forced his friend Lyndon Johnson to make reductions in other programs to keep the budget in balance while fighting the Vietnam War. Later, President Bill Clinton bragged "It takes an Arkansan to balance the federal budget and to pay down the federal debt."

Mills and Clinton shared something else, involving a bit of scandal. Mills' approach was a bit different: as has been known to happen in the halls of power, he had quietly "taken to the bottle." On the evening of October 9, 1974, US Park Police pulled over a car driving erratically near the Jefferson Memorial without its lights. As they approached, a young lady fled the car and jumped into the icy waters of the nearby Tidal Basin. Mills had scratches on his face and bulbous nose that he told police resulted from his effort to prevent the young lady from jumping out of

the car. He could not explain the two black eyes that the young lady, Annabelle Battistella, wore when police pulled her out of the water. The Park Police drove Mills home, and took her for a mental evaluation. The incident might have been brushed under the Washington rug were it not for a TV cameraman who happened by.

Soon the *Washington Post* and other news organizations dug the story out, and it was front page news. Battistella was a stripper known as Fanne Foxe who Mills had been seen spending time with in clubs of less-than-savory reputation. There were stories of three weeks they spent in Antigua, an abortion, and their frequently arguing.

Notwithstanding the incident, Mills was re-elected by his loyal Arkansan constituents the following month, but days later was involved in an inebriated onstage appearance with Battistella, whose stage name was "The Argentine Firecracker," which she later changed to "The Tidal Basin Bombshell."

Mills joined Alcoholics Anonymous, and sought rehabilitation from his condition, joined by his wife of many years, Polly. As he stepped back from his committee duties, his staff found that they were able to perform its functions without the benefit of his purported insights. and did not run for office again.

Battistella remarried and again divorced, wrote a book, performed in several movies, and then settled into a quiet life in Florida, where she earned three college degrees, was a scuba-diving master, and tended her garden. She died this past February at 84.

There must be a moral somewhere in this tale.