

The First Hundred Days

An Interview with Congressman Peter DeFazio

by Sonja Ungemach



"I think we will successfully offer an amendment on the Floor to stop funding for nuclear weapons testing."

Friday, April 17, 3 pm. Congressman Peter DeFazio's office is bustling. Two women are just leaving his private office and I can hear him on the phone with someone else. Two men sit across from me in the waiting area, one a DeFazio staffer, the other a citizen voicing concern about an environmental issue. Outside in the hallway, another aide finishes up an interview with an applicant for a staff position. At the front desk, a friendly, efficient receptionist rides herd on the whole scene, answering the phone, shuttling messages and people here and there.

I sense immediately that my time with our new Congressman will be brief. When I finally get my turn, I find a surprisingly relaxed and gracious person, ready and eager to talk. We establish our time frame—20 minutes.

WH: You've been in Washington about four months now?

PD: Yes, four long months!

WH: Do you like it?

PD: Well, the job is absolutely fascinating. I'm really enjoying it and I think I'm doing well at it. I don't much like living in Washington, and I definitely don't like the commuting—8 to 10 hours each way is a long commute.

WH: How often do you make the trip?

PD: I come back every other weekend for four days.

WH: You're not exhausted?

PD: No, I'm still working on my adrenalin. . . . The airplane time in one way is good. I don't very often get time for uninterrupted reading. My "to be done later" pile gets to be about six inches deep. I put it in my briefcase

and take it on the airplane. Usually in the five hours from Dulles to San Francisco I get through most of it, so it's not wasted time. But the flying is not very comfortable.

WH: I gather that you've learned your way around back there pretty well. You've landed some influential committee positions that have been helpful to the Northwest. What do you feel are your most significant accomplishments so far?

PD: I've been working in a wide range of areas, from the local kinds of issues like getting the funding for a study for the replacement of the Ferry Street Bridge, the first demonstration project money to come into the state of Oregon from federal highway trust funds, to the Bonneville Power Authority's proposals to raise the electric rates. I played a strong role in convincing them to reconsider their rate proposals; they brought it down from a 13.5% increase to 9.5%. Now I'm going around with them again and trying to get them to go to 0%, which I'm convinced they can do.

Then there's the threat from the California utilities wanting free access to our intertie so they can bump our power off the intertie and buy power from Canada instead of from us. That would drive up the rates again because we're selling our surplus power down there. So I've been meeting with California utilities and members of Congress from California.

So maybe part of what I've done so far is to prevent things from happening.

WH: So you're kind of a watchdog for the Northwest.

PD: Well, yeah, and the budget's another example. The President proposed to change the

forest service revenue formula which is vital for our county governments, our schools, our road systems in Oregon. And to change the BPA repayment schedule. [In an effort to balance the federal budget, the Reagan administration has proposed to refigure the formula by which the counties get reimbursed for federal timber cut from federal lands within those counties, using the net rather than the gross income to figure the counties' share. The administration has also proposed that the BPA repay its debt to the US Treasury for the Columbia River Power System bonds more quickly and at a higher interest rate, to the tune of a hefty 21-27% hike in electric rates for the Northwest.] I got very strong language from the House Interior and Budget Committees that these things should not be changed. On the Senate side, unfortunately, one of the four versions of the budget coming to the floor includes all those things—which would cost the people of Oregon several hundred million dollars a year in increased electricity costs and lost revenues. It would just be devastating to us.

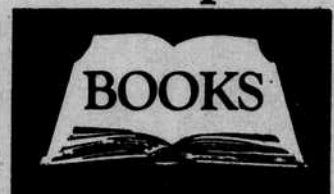
WH: What national issues have you worked on?

PD: It wasn't clear that the select committee [on the Iran-Contra affair] was going to investigate the private arms connection, possibly involving drug smuggling, from Central America. I was very concerned that those people should be investigated, Mr. Secord and the others. So I drafted a letter and got some 40 other members of Congress to sign it and have since been assured that they are going to investigate those things.

I've joined the arms control caucus. I think we will successfully offer an amendment on

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