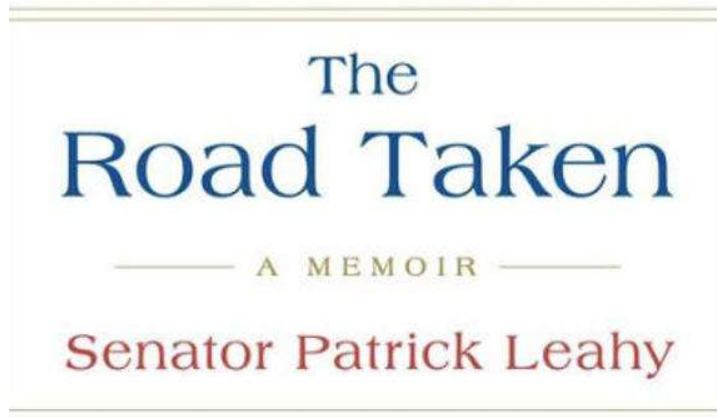
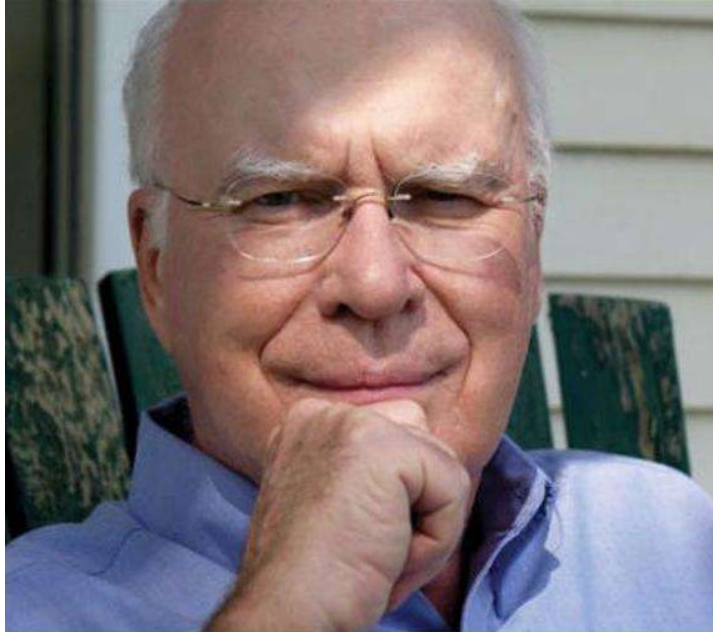


## America's political journey, through a public servant's eyes

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*The Road Taken: A Memoir*, by Senator Patrick Leahy. New York, NY: Simon & Schuster. 2022, 480 pages. \$30.00 (hardcover).



“This is the story not just of my political education, or even of the Senate’s journey, but of America’s journey – through the eyes of someone who entered public service in awe of what government can do and what the promise of America can mean, and can feel that awe still, even as it lives side by side, uncomfortably, with deep frustration,” Patrick Leahy explains near the beginning of “The Road Taken: A Memoir,” his comprehensive and fascinating reflection on the role he has played in our collective trajectory over the last half century.

“It’s the story of what I learned after I announced my candidacy for the Senate in 1974, before I returned to that very same room in the Vermont State House on November 15, 2021, and announced that I was not going to run for a ninth term in the institution that had done so much to build the America that I love,” he continues. “But I promise you, this isn’t a story that unfolds in one straight line downward from the pinnacle of 1975 to the hell of January 6, 2021. Few journeys are that way in real life, because life isn’t that way.”

“This is a story about the journey – America, its institutions, and the people, many heroic and all flawed, who make and

break them – most of whom do their best, all of whom matter to this precious and fragile experiment in democracy,” he poignantly adds.

Admittedly, I did not know much about Patrick Leahy before undertaking this latest assignment. Sure, I knew who he was – and probably like most Americans - I had a somewhat superficial understanding of the role he has played in government since I was in high school. But I finished “The Road Taken” with a completely different knowledge and a deep appreciation of his tremendous influence and achievements on multiple levels in both the public as well as the private sectors. The man was, and is, a force to be reckoned with.

“The Road Taken” consists of an introduction, sixty-one very succinct chapters arranged in three major sections, and an epilogue. As might be expected, the prose is conversational, fluid and infused with passion and enthusiasm for the immense responsibility Leahy has always felt as a public servant. Name anything significant that has happened in this country over the last fifty years and there is a good chance the author either played a key role as it unfolded or was contributing in a consequential

manner from the sidelines. The man has seen a lot during his life and career; he is the embodiment of institutional memory. Very few politicians can rival his longevity or wide-ranging perspective.

The memoir is literally filled with stories of his countless encounters with a cast of characters as diverse as it is long; Leahy seems to have crossed paths with anyone and everyone who played even a minor role in our slow yet inevitable march toward the present moment. What I found most intriguing is his superb and intuitive analysis of these individuals and how Washington inevitably changed them – and often not in a positive direction. Witness the following from “All We Have to Fear,” the forty-fifth chapter and one that explicitly illustrates this point:

“I remembered the Dick Cheney I’d first met. He stood out in my memory for many reasons, many seemingly innocuous coincidences... Something had changed in him over the years, something that none of us who had known him back then had seem coming. Cheney had served as President George H.W. Bush’s defense secretary. He’d been part of the successful military intervention to expel Iraqi president Saddam Hussein from Kuwait, and he had supported the smart decision not to invade Iraq and bring down the regime in Baghdad. Bush, James Baker, Joint Chiefs of Staff chairman Colin Powell, and National Security Advisor Brent Scowcroft had all shown a deft adroitness in deciding to punish and effectively contain Hussein rather than occupy Iraq. It reflected a maturity in their foreign policy. To those who said the United States should have toppled the regime in Baghdad, Cheney said, ‘It doesn’t work that way in the Middle East; it never has and isn’t likely to in my lifetime.’ But here he was a decade later, his famously inscrutable poker face was gone. Now, on one could doubt what Vice President Cheney was campaigning for: a hasty invasion of Iraq. Maybe it was the three heart attacks he’d suffered and the confrontation with his own mortality. A brush with death can change a person. Maybe it was the impact of 9/11. But the careful, calibrated, steady hand added to provide seasoning on the Republican ticket in 2000 was gone.”

Leahy was elected to the United States Senate from Vermont in 1974; he was just thirty-four at the time. A 1961 graduate of Saint Michael's College in Colchester, he received his Juris Doctor from Georgetown University Law Center in 1964. While serving as State's Attorney in Chittenden County for eight years, he gained a national reputation for his law enforcement efforts and was selected as one of three outstanding prosecutors in the United States in 1974. The last of the “Watergate Babies” in Congress, Leahy served eight terms in the Senate and retired in early 2023 as the body’s most senior member. He also served as President Pro Tempore, Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and as the senior-most member of the Judiciary Committee and the Agriculture Committee. He was also a member of the Appropriations Subcommittee on State Department, Foreign Operations and Related Programs.

Sprinkled throughout the narrative are Leahy’s insights – some dramatic, some more subtle - about how to be a good leader. It was these bits of wisdom that added significantly to the appeal of the book, at least for me. For example, reflect on the following from “A Cult of Personality,” the fifty-eighth chapter:

“Listening. It was the secret to governing. I’d seen colleagues struggle to really listen, struggle to hear what their colleagues were really saying, and end up disappointed, inserting hope where reality should’ve safely resided. I’d seen this movie before as well, but never as extreme.”

Oh, for extra credit, guess who this chapter was about.

If you want to know how Washington works – or more precisely how it could still work if our elected officials truly had our best interests at heart – then “The Road Taken” needs to be on your nightstand. Highly recommended.

*Reviewed by Aaron W. Hughey, University Distinguished Professor, Department of Counseling and Student Affairs, Western Kentucky University.*