

George Tames
Washington Photographer for the *New York Times*

PREFACE

In 1846, an unknown cameraman took the first photograph of the United States Capitol, a view of the East Front. Thereafter the Capitol, from all angles, became the subject of countless amateur and professional photographers. During the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth most photography took place outside the building, due both to its dimly lit interior and to the antipathy many committee chairmen felt about the distractions of flash powder and bulbs. Eventually, photographers moved into the building, shooting everywhere at will, except within the Senate and House chambers. By the 1980s, television cameras penetrated even this haven.

Nearly a century after that first photo, George Tames began photographing the people and events of Capitol Hill, first for *Time-Life* and later for the *New York Times*. During the course of a long career that ranged from the 1940s through the 1980s, Tames developed access to, and captured the likenesses of more significant members of Congress, and had his work reproduced more widely in influential publications than any other photographer in American political history. He developed a style contrary to the "herd instinct" that led other photographers to group together outside a closed door waiting for a standard shot. Instead, his pictures demonstrate an artistic eye, an intense sense of place, and a special intimacy with his subjects.

George Tames was born in the shadow of the Capitol Dome, in a Washington alley house on January 21, 1919, into a Greek-Albanian immigrant family, and "born into the Democratic party" as well. The son of a pushcart peddler, he dropped out of high school during the Depression to help his family, and took a job as an officeboy in the Washington bureau of *Time-Life*. Carrying equipment for the magazines' photographers, Tames became both a self-taught photographer and writer. When World War II drew senior photographers to distant battlefields, it opened opportunities for young Tames in Washington. During the war he took pictures of the Truman committee investigation into the national defense program, and of other major events at the Capitol. At the White House, he had the opportunity to photograph his family's idol, Franklin D. Roosevelt, as he did every president from Roosevelt to Ronald Reagan.

After the war, in 1945, Tames joined the staff of the *New York Times*, where he remained until his retirement in 1985. He defined his own daily assignments, following bits of information and inside tips to decide who and what to photograph. As the *Times'* Washington bureau chief James Reston observed, Tames' camera got him into places closed to other reporters. He observed prominent senators close-hand, engaged them in informal conversation and banter, and overheard their deliberations. He became particularly close to John Kennedy, Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey, trading jokes and gossip with them as he recorded their activities on film.

George Tames' photos in the *New York Times*, especially those that appeared in its Sunday Magazine, created a visual record of Washington's more celebrated inhabitants, in moments of triumph

and tragedy, and in casual, candid moments of reflection and relaxation. He offered his viewers a chance to see the Senate as he saw it on a regular basis--for he used the congressional press galleries as the center of his operations, ate lunch daily at the press table in the Senate restaurant, and prowled the corridors of the Capitol as purposefully as any lobbyist or staff member. In this oral history he recalls some of the stories behind his more celebrated photographs, and presents another dimension to his perspective of the Senate through the camera's lens.