

THE SUN

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EDITORIALS

Pete

HE'D THUNDER and preach, he'd deplore and beseech, he'd count pennies and votes and usually come out on the money.

With the death Friday of Del. Howard P. "Pete" Rawlings, Maryland lost an extraordinarily gifted leader and one of the most accomplished politicians of his era — known for both a tight fist and a caring heart.

Mr. Rawlings' intellectual grasp of policy detail and instinct for mastering the levers of power propelled him to a top post in the General Assembly. His greatest contributions arose, however, from his willingness to take on the unpopular yet critical tasks of fiscal management.

He never forgot his West Baltimore constituents, yet he had the rare courage to sometimes tell them no.

Such was the force of his conviction that he managed not only to survive such battles but to prosper. His remarkable legacy includes a new generation of political leaders he mentored along the way.

As a freshman delegate, part of a tiny minority of black lawmakers, Mr. Rawlings claimed his seat on the House Appropriations Committee in 1979 and immediately started breaking the rules. He publicly questioned every spending item, including those dear to the hearts of his committee mates, wanting to know what good the money would do for "his people."

Colleagues rolled their eyes. Who was this guy? They were used to machine-backed black legislators who were reliable votes,

and to the "screamers" who would grandstand in protest of the system but never get anything done. In Mr. Rawlings, they found the passion of a civil rights activist and the analytical mind of a mathematician combined with the savvy of a backroom pol.

He was quickly tagged as a "comer," was named to a subcommittee chairmanship and by 1992 was awarded the gavel of Appropriations Committee chairman.

Running Appropriations in Annapolis isn't like in Congress, where the bounty flows seemingly without limit. In Maryland, the budget has to balance. Mr. Rawlings made it his business to try to ensure the taxpayers' money was being spent wisely.

He battled with Baltimore mayors and officials of Morgan State University. He authored reforms in education, housing and health care. He brought home the bacon as he saw fit.

The strongest testimony to his style may be his endorsement of Martin O'Malley in the 1999 mayoral race against black competitors, thus awarding the job of running a majority-black city to a white politician Mr. Rawlings thought better qualified.

Much of Mr. Rawlings' success stemmed from the sense that he was not interested in power for its own sake, but for what he could accomplish. That, and a deep bass voice that boomed with such moral authority it seemed to come from the heavens.

His passing robs Baltimore of its most effective and empathetic advocate. All of Maryland, though, is poorer for his loss.