

# What's Really Wrong with Fred Richmond?

By Jim Sleeper

Two years ago Fred Richmond leaned confidently across his office conference table and half mumbled, half growled an apologia which could be chiseled on his political tombstone.

"Look, out of 435 members of the House, maybe 80 represent poor districts. And most of them don't have a pot to piss in. Take Charlie Rangel. A prince of a man. *But he doesn't have a bean.* Now, look at me"—Freddie (as everyone who deals with him in the district calls him) brought his hands together and dropped them at three separate places on the table, like a croupier organizing his chips—"I have my Hasidim, my Brooklyn Heights, and my downtown business. Most of my district is poor, but I don't need the poor to get elected. They don't vote. But what do I do? I hire a district staff for them that's bigger than most members have in Washington and their districts combined. I have a full-time nutritionist here who takes on the food industry and helps improve people's diets and makes sure they get food stamps. I run this Greenmarket thing. I don't do it because I have to; I do it because *I want to.*"

In its own way, Freddie's epitaph is almost Shakespearean, commingling darkness and light. The darkness is the more ominous for its understatement: "I do it because *I want to;*" what can this mean, if not that some of our best efforts in the 14th Congressional District grow only at his pleasure, rather than through the life-giving flow of a balanced economy? People's resulting dependency allows Freddie to use the possessive: "my Hasidim, my Brooklyn Heights . . .," and, he might as well have added, "my black ministers, my neighborhood groups."

Possessiveness plus power is eleven-tenths of the law. It leads one to believe there's nothing money can't buy. Granted a probation by the public and his colleagues after soliciting a 16-year-old black youth in 1978, Freddie has rewarded that trust with contempt. The "isolated incident" appears now to be part of a practice

of prostituting young men, even harboring one of them as a fugitive from justice in another state, on the congressional payroll under an alias. And Freddie appears to have diverted stockholders' investments in his conglomerate Walco toward his own political gain and his \$2 million Sutton Place condominium (he has never lived in the district); traded federal contracts for campaign money and votes; and brazenly manipulated House ethics rules to collect a \$1 million private "pension" from Walco. (Richmond press secretary Michael Kahan has no comment, claiming these matters are "under legal review.")

Toward a tradition of honorable camaraderie in the Congress which has given him every benefit of the doubt, he has extended the hoary marketplace adage, "What they don't know won't hurt them." This, at a time when distinguished members like Otis Pike have resigned rather than violate House limits on outside income.

Freddie has stood above political principle as well as above the law. While he was running as an apparent antiwar reformer against the infamous John Rooney in 1968, Freddie was pumping money into key constituencies through his Richmond Foundation—\$4000 to the Satmar Hasidic United Talmudical Academy, \$5000 to the Italian Catholic Sacred Heart Day Care Center, \$500 to the Puerto Rican Trade Committee, all shortly before the primary. When he lost anyway, he discovered the art of political ingratiating, becoming Rooney's campaign treasurer against Allard Lowenstein, and was rewarded by the Brooklyn organization with a City Council seat, eventually replacing Rooney in a congressional district redrawn by the Justice Department for minority representation in 1974.

In the face of growing constituent restiveness, Freddie's district lines have been proposed this year to exclude those areas which have begun to turn against him—"his" Brooklyn Heights and parts of Bedford-Stuyvesant. He would retain the loyal Hasidim and would pick up a large number of low-income Hispanics, and will probably spend more than a million dollars on his reelection efforts—and continue to win—unless he's first convicted and expelled from the House. While it may be tedious to say so after Watergate and Abscam, if Freddie isn't brought to trial it's hard to see how we can face down the alleged mugger or small white collar criminal. People will be right to believe there are two systems of justice in this country. The already precarious reputation of Congress (whose crime rate, Jack Newfield notes, is higher than Brooklyn's) will merit our open contempt.

And yet perhaps the best way to understand Freddie's darkness is to begin with his light, with what's true in all that a self-made merger-mogul, the boy wonder of the American steel industry at 24, has to say about his good works. We as a political community will gain little if we miss what his bittersweet epitaph tells us about his colleagues' hesitation, his staff's continuing service, and his constituents' extraordinary patience.

What's true is that a lot of the best people fighting to save the bleeding, eerily beautiful waterfront neighborhoods of Freddie's district owe him a lot. Sooner or later all roads lead to him. Have people been desperate for jobs since the closing of the Navy Yard in 1966? Freddie gets navy contracts for the private shipbuilder there now, and how he gets them doesn't matter to those who have work because of them and who consider the navy's departure the overriding injustice for which he's extracting reparations from Washington.

Do brownstoners fighting the withdrawal of credit from North Brooklyn need technical help and a powerful advocate? Conglomerate-builder Richmond can afford to make enemies of the neanderthals at the Williamsburgh Savings Bank. Do local coalitions of poor and working people need support on federal legislation? Their congressman can afford to tally up one of the House's most liberal voting records, with sublime disregard for political action committees; as the wealthiest member of the House, Freddie is his own PAC. It is the theory of countervailing elites: your enemies can't buy him, and they can't scare him; often as not, he can

buy them. And it works. (Sometimes. In February 1981 *The Brooklyn Paper* reported that Freddie did vote for dairy price supports—in direct opposition to his constituents' interests—after receiving \$10,000 for a dairy industry PAC.)

Political savvy is as important as his money to those who come to him. Shirley Chisholm spurned a seat on the Agriculture Committee as an insult; Freddie understood where food stamps come from, and he chairs the appropriate subcommittee. Chisholm sat on her ass while Brooklyn Jewish Hospital hovered on the brink of bankruptcy in medically underserved Bedford-Stuyvesant; Freddie brokered the federal/state demonstration plan to save it. Could anyone in a poor district like his be so foolish as to vote against more of the same, against the man who wanted, as *Fortune* magazine put it in a profile of him in 1948, to "make money only in order to get out of business and into government service"?

I found myself asking that hard question when Freddie made me an offer I almost couldn't refuse, at a time when I, too, was struggling to build something good in the bad economy of a poor neighborhood. I'd been editing a small weekly paper, the *North Brooklyn News*, and was in love with my work and with the neighborhoods we served in Greenpoint, Williamsburg, and Bushwick. In such places a good paper bursts upon the scene like a magic mirror, giving an unexpected boost to people who've been working along in obscurity, helping them chart the territory and flush out the villains everyone has suspected but hasn't had time to expose.

Among those villains were bankers withdrawing credit for housing and job development from our area, accelerating the destruction of stable neighborhoods by terminal speculators—the milkers and torchers who included some of the local predatory establishment. For saying so, I was fired, an article of mine pulled abruptly from the paper by the publisher as we went to press.

Standing in the rain, my files in a plastic garbage bag, I couldn't accept that any guy with \$50,000 and a Compugraphic typesetter had the right to annul my love affair with North Brooklyn. The other four writers felt as I did and walked off their jobs; with the help of local community groups and sympathetic merchants, we had the *North Brooklyn Mercury* on the stands 10 days later.

But we quickly discovered that no neighborhood weekly survives without at



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least four full-page bank ads in each issue, ads which for obvious reasons weren't forthcoming, with a few honorable exceptions that allowed us to carry on for a while. Though we worked like hell and galvanized enough support to nearly ice our former publisher out of the community, it was clear after six months that our days were numbered.

Here is where the theory of countervailing elites came in. It was folded up or go to Freddie. I went. He was the only regnant alternative to the banks. He leaped through the paper, made some perfunctory compliments, observed that we were up against "insuperable odds," and told me I could do more for the district by working for him.

This seemed possible. But I declined, explaining I'd made a particular commitment to my colleagues and the community through the *Mercury*, expecting to leave the paper as a kind of legacy once it had gotten on its feet. Instead, of course, we staggered toward our demise. Freddie kept calling me. At a time when I was going to cover community meetings with nothing

but a return subway token in my pocket, he invited me to lunch at the Plaza Hotel, to the Hamptons, to Washington. He rode me around in his chauffeured car. And he delivered that memorable apologia at his conference table.

I consulted people I respected in the district—another editor, a bank president, friends from community organizations—most of whom praised Freddie's record, forgave him his trespasses, and said I should work for him. Many of them owed him, having struggled along just like me until their paths had led to his door.

Finally I thought I saw a way: I'd work for Freddie if he'd give me a substantial advance on my salary so I could help my friends keep the *Mercury* afloat long enough to get more advertisers on board through wider distribution. But Freddie wanted me working for him right away, without divided loyalties. Wanting capital support the *Mercury* died, and after some desultory discussions with Freddie about doing some writing for him on the district's problems, I went to work elsewhere.

I recount all this because it's typical of the delicate exchanges people have with wealthy warlords in urban battle zones. Those who are paid, however modestly, to hold progressive views are perhaps not the best judges of others who pay an enormous price to uphold such views by running real projects on these gray, decomposing streets and who turn to a "countervailing power" when their life's work is threatened.

"I have to laugh when people criticize Freddie for giving money to help his district," said Councilman Abe Gerges at a Hasidic breakfast honoring Richmond last month. "You know he could wake up tomorrow and live any life he chooses. There are a lot of phonies out there who talk a good game but can't deliver. Freddie delivers. What's wrong with being represented by someone who's successful?"

Everything's wrong with it. That would be so, even if Fred Richmond weren't accused of the specific serious misdeeds which Daniel Lehman of *The Brooklyn Paper* and Ralph Blumenthal of the *Times* have so expertly documented. His lawlessness, if that's what it is, springs from a deeper warping of perception about society and his rightful place in it, a warping engendered, I think, by the widening gulf between wealth and poverty in our society. It's important to understand this, lest, in removing Fred Richmond, we leave intact the institutionalized scarcities which keep most of us susceptible to others like him yet to come. To indict him without questioning the political economy which helped make him what he is—and North Brook-

lyn what it is—may satisfy the *Times* editorial board, but it won't begin to meet his constituents' needs, especially since removing Freddie, like kicking any dependency, will involve some pain and deprivation.

Given our political economy, even Freddie's largesse (and some will tell you that, on balance, he's bought his district cheap) can't solve North Brooklyn's problems. It can't reverse the negative cash flows or attract enough investment. A canny leveraging of his \$40 million personal fortune wouldn't hurt, mind you, but that's just the point: Freddie has no intention of giving himself to more than a pacification program, because any really serious effort to revitalize areas like his district would have to challenge the very system of investment and disinvestment which made him rich while making his constituents poor.

It would also have to challenge a set of complex, deeply entrenched emotional bonds which characterize his rule. "Any attempt to 'soften' the power of the oppressor . . . almost always manifests itself in the form of false generosity," writes the Brazilian educator Paolo Freire. "In order to express their 'generosity,' the oppressors must perpetuate injustice as well. That is why the dispensers of false generosity become desperate at the slightest threat to its source. An unjust order is the permanent fount of this 'generosity,' which constrains the fearful and subdued to extend their trembling hands."

While we like to think of ourselves as free men and women, one need not sojourn long in Freddie's district to observe the foot-shuffling deference which fear gives to power, or the desperate bitterness with which he treats staff members and others who have challenged his charmed circle of dependency. That full-time nutritionist is gone now, along with a third of his district staff, jettisoned, ex-staffers say, in a fit of pique (Richmond spokesman Kahan claims it was "a prudent cutting back") when it became clear he couldn't run for Senate because of "the incident."

Leadership to challenge such caprice can come only from those who've shared their neighbors' experience of dependency, yet who've shown some sign of transcending it, and who've therefore earned their neighbors' trust. A Cesar Perales, for example, or a Major Owens or an Al Vann. Freddie's permanent incumbency blocks such leadership, while his false generosity deflects the organizing that might bring it to power.

At some level, Freddie knows this. It is, I think, the source of his loneliness and his desperate misdeeds. His attempt to buy the respect given freely to genuine leaders

and the warmth given true companions only keeps those who sell themselves to him in a state of unequal dependency. That nourishes a contempt for them which he expresses openly, even as he clings to them to assuage his loneliness. Such is his love-hate relationship with his district and with the world; who doubts that his purchase of unequal ties to disadvantaged young men recapitulates an "unjust orders' " cycles of clinging and contempt?

In this, Freddie is part of a more general encroachment of patterns of decadence and domination in our lives. "Money," wrote Marx, "appears as a disruptive power for the individual and social bonds. . . . It changes vice into virtue, stupidity into intelligence. He who can purchase bravery is brave, though a coward. . . . But let us assume man to be man, and his relationship to the world a human one; then . . . if you are not able, by the manifestation of yourself as a loving person, to make yourself a beloved person, your love is impotent, and a misfortune."

Freddie amassed his \$40 million misfortune by masterminding fantastic paper deals far removed from integrity in human relationships. The severing of such accumulation from everyday human constraints is capitalism's triumph, the source of its dynamism and capacity for innovation; but in the traditional Protestant capitalist ethic this terrifying power is kept responsive to society through a rigorous moral code of personal honor and civic-mindedness, and a yearning to know God's will. As capitalism decays, the code has become a ruse, the stuff of banquet rhetoric and inaugurations; if Freddie has broken the code and lost the faith, he is exceptional only in his apparent desperation to make the ruse of civic-mindedness seem real anyway.

Abe Gerges wants us to believe that Freddie could choose tomorrow to lead an even more exploitative life, insulated by wealth and arrogance from public scrutiny and censure. But Gerges is wrong. Freddie is driven to seek public acclaim because he's haunted by yet another life he cannot seem to choose, the life of honest personal sharing Marx described. In a time of general contempt for government, there is something old-fashioned about a businessman seeking redemption through public service. In a time of frank decadence, there is also something infinitely sad about Freddie's futile attempt to expiate, through good works, a festering personal shame and loneliness, borne of exploiting economically and emotionally vulnerable youth, which some now call a "liberation."

Tethered thus between power and love, Freddie ironically has become dependent upon those he would possess. His kept

young men have him jumping through hoops that embarrass his career. Hasidim who "honor" him are really manipulating him. There is no other explanation for the pathetic turnout of Freddie and his whole staff at a Williamsburg catering joint at 10 o'clock on a rainy Sunday morning last month, there to settle in bewilderment and desperation for unctuous facsimiles of praise. It was no longer "my Hasidim"; it was "our congressman."

And it was a full complicity of the "oppressed" with the "oppressor." One of the speakers, the ashen-faced Bernard Weinberger, spiritual leader of Young Israel of Borough Park and a former Lindsay liaison to orthodox Jewry, plundered a noble and delicate homiletic tradition and abducted the parable of Moses and Miriam to justify the Hasidic community's deft handling of Freddie. Just as Moses halted the whole Jewish people on its journey to the Promised Land when Miriam took sick—because it was she who'd watched over Moses when he'd been a babe among the bullrushes—so now, the learned Weinberger preached, should the United Jewish Organizations of Williamsburg halt for the congressman who had watched over them and favored them before taking sick.

But Freddie's calculated generosity is unworthy of Miriam's love. His sickness, unlike hers, is a dehumanizing appropriation of persons, politics, and earth's bounty that savages the Mosaic law and prophetic tradition which Weinberger and the Hasidim claim as the very fundament of their existence. The Hasidim know this. Their response is to posit oppression as a given and therefore to treat democratic institutions with a manipulative contempt appropriate to survival in a feudal hierarchy, not in America. A September 1978 full-page ad in the Yiddish weekly *Der Yid* denounced Richmond's opponent Bernard Gifford (then on leave from the Russell Sage Foundation, now a vice-president at the University of Rochester) as a "PITCH BLACK NIGGER from the heart of Kenya who desires to destroy everything we have created" and then went on to dismiss their congressman's misdeeds as if he were a mere *shabbos goy*, an errand boy:

"The Jewish children in exile were always dependent upon intermediaries to represent their interests in the countries where they sojourned . . . . Such an intermediary is nothing more than a messenger. No one ever checked the morality of a messenger, or was interested in his private life, just as long as he gave the desired results—i.e., the proper representation of Jewish interests."

The Hasidic leaders' refusal to approach democratic institutions with the hopes and demands of free people is unique only for its brazenness and fear. Their embrace of the debased relationship Freddie has offered them ever since he bought them out from under John Rooney finds echoes in the behavior of black churches, Catholic parishes, and even progressive secular groups, many of which have been polluted, if more quietly, by his visionless largesse. Immediately following "the incident" in 1978, a Walco staff member's week was devoted entirely to finding, buying, delivering, and tuning three baby grand pianos to three community centers in Bedford-Stuyvesant. It paid off in endorsements that summer.

That is why the time for compassion is past. Freddie has used up his chips. His staff should leave him, his constituents retire him, the courts judge him. If we should also try to understand him, it is only in the hope that the political economy which created him and made him so irresistible to so many will not soon draw us into sordid intimacy with someone even worse.

As I watched Bernard Weinberger sell my people's heritage for a mess of badly needed federal favors, and recalled my own willingness to sell my skills to represent Freddie to the world out of desperation to save my newspaper, I saw how subtle an oppression is the capitalization of honor and faith. It leaves institutions and individuals standing—indeed, often adds brick and mortar or the apparent bloom of good health—yet it robs them of the passions of free men and women.

That, I fear, is Freddie's real epitaph in North Brooklyn. And we are all of us with him on that same slippery slope. ■