

WASHINGTON - Veteran U.S Rep. Frank Lucas should be one politician hard to miss.

Lucas, who has been in Oklahoma politics for more than two decades, launched his congressional career just as his Republican Party began its historic rise, both in Oklahoma and in Washington. None other than Newt Gingrich credited his victory in a 1994 special election as the first of two back-to-back bad omens for Democrats that helped inspire Republicans to march out of the political wilderness and win control of the U.S. House of Representatives for the first time in 40 years. And, by the way, Lucas tops out at 6 feet 4 inches tall. Despite his political resume and physical stature, Lucas has made a career of staying out of the spotlight.

Randy Swanson, a former Lucas press spokesman and top aide, humorously recalls how the "Marlboro Man" routinely hung behind when cameras showed up at an event. Those days could be numbered. With Republicans headed back to power in the House, Lucas is set to take over as the next chairman of the House Agriculture Committee. That will make him the first Oklahoman in more than two decades to lead a standing committee in the House, and his chairmanship is expected to coincide with the next reauthorization of the country's farm bill. When pressed about his penchant for not seeking attention in the political world, Lucas concedes that he takes a methodical approach to "take care of my folks." "I prefer to think of myself as the workhorse versus a racehorse. Steady, slow, consistent. Get the job done," he said. Others believe that approach has worked for him in the past and now will pay dividends. Fellow Oklahoma Rep. Tom Cole predicted that Lucas will become an influential lawmaker for the rest of his congressional career and that his chairmanship will be viewed as an initial step in leading the state's delegation back to the kind of clout it enjoyed 50 years ago. Cole described Lucas as an incredibly shrewd lawmaker with excellent judgment. He also conceded Lucas is an underrated member of Congress "because he is not flashy or flamboyant." "He has just played this very well, in

a very disciplined fashion," Cole said. Jim Reese, tapped by Gov.-elect Mary Fallin to become Oklahoma's next secretary of agriculture, served as an early mentor to Lucas when the two men shared an office at the state Capitol. Reese echoed Cole's assessment of Lucas' talents, describing him as very astute and unaffected by his years in Washington. "He is just steady," he said. A fifth-generation Oklahoman who lives on a farm that has been in his family for nearly a century, Lucas was born Jan. 6, 1960. He graduated from Cheyenne's public high school and received a degree in agricultural economics from Oklahoma State University in 1982. He married his wife, Lynda Lucas, in 1988, the year he was first elected to the state House of Representatives. She runs their 150-head cow/calf operation in Roger Mills County while he's away. Lucas remains involved enough in the family business to have ended up with a broken nose and a missing tooth from working with cattle. "She will tell you I'm a farmer and she's a rancher, if you ask her point blank," he said. They have three children and one grandchild. Lucas was in the middle of his third term in the state House in 1994 when he made his first successful run for Congress. That was the victory that earned Lucas a reference in the Gingrich book, "To Renew America." Ironically, it was a proposal, announced alongside Gingrich, to sell federal land in western Oklahoma and use the proceeds to help buy a tract of land in New York and New Jersey that produced a rare misstep by Lucas. Stung by opposition from his constituents, Lucas wasted no time in backing away from the proposal. Even though he had been in Congress only about a year when tragedy struck in the 1995 Oklahoma City bombing, his steady response to that historic event was much more characteristic. Lucas sponsored the legislation that established a national memorial on that site. His legislative history shows he stays close to his main focus on agriculture issues. "Remember, I define making sure that we have a sufficient supply of food for this country right along with defending the borders

and protecting the airspace," Lucas said about his support of farm subsidies. Because of an interest in coin collecting that began when he was 9, Lucas also has sponsored legislation that deals with numismatic issues. He describes his voting record as solidly conservative, adding that during his time in Congress, that means solidly Republican. He will break with his own party from time to time, however. One remarkable example was his decision not to support the renewal of the USA Patriot Act. "I voted for the initial bill because I believe that you have to, in times of war, provide the resources for the United States government to protect its citizens," Lucas said. The second version of the bill, however, made several temporary provisions permanent, he said. "I am not voting to permanently inhibit people's civil rights," Lucas said. Others credit him for staying close to his constituents in the sprawling 3rd Congressional District, which is geographically the largest in the state and one of the largest in the country. Lucas' cautious approach did not allow him to avoid briefly getting dragged into a recent ethics flap, a case that was recommended for dismissal by the Office of Congressional Ethics. Lucas took a somewhat uncharacteristic slap at the OCE process and said the real cost was to his personal political capital. He seems to have suffered no lasting damage, and others such as Cole and Reese continue to heap praise on him. Swanson does not even pretend to hold back when describing Lucas: "He's the Sara Lee of politics. Nobody doesn't like Frank Lucas." Lucas chuckles when he hears that quote. He credits his attitude to lessons about customers he learned from his father, who ran a small Cheyenne lumber yard in addition to farming. "That's the way I have conducted my politics," he said. "I have tried to win my constituents and my colleagues over, and I have tried to keep their faith and confidence." Reflecting on his record so far, Lucas, in a rare concession, admits he takes pride in being underestimated "from day one." "My general thought is to be underestimated and try to over-perform. So far, that has served me

well," he said. "It may not get me on national television every week. It

may not make me the darling of the campaign fundraising circuit in the United

States. But I think it serves me well. It serves my constituents well." Jim

Myers (202) 484-1424 jim.myers@tulsaworld.com SUBHEAD: Rep. Frank Lucas is rising in GOP influence with

a key committee chairmanship. avoiding the spotlight: taking care of his 'folks' Original Print

Headline: Getting the job done