

'Pit Bull' of the House Latches On to Immigration

The New York Times

July 11, 2006 Tuesday, Late Edition - Final

Copyright 2006 The New York Times Company

Section: Section A; Column 2; National Desk; Pg. 1

Length: 1422 words

Byline: By MARK LEIBOVICH

Dateline: WASHINGTON, July 10

Body

Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. has no tolerance for illegal immigrants, either in his political life or personal life.

"My housekeeper in Wisconsin was born in Wisconsin," says Mr. Sensenbrenner, the Republican congressman and chairman of the House Judiciary Committee. "My housekeeper here is a naturalized U.S. citizen from Nicaragua."

Mr. Sensenbrenner is so loath to risk dealing with illegal immigrants that when his Cadillacs need cleaning, he prefers do-it-yourself car washes that require tokens. "They don't have Montezuma's picture on the front of them," Mr. Sensenbrenner says of the tokens.

He is sitting in his Capitol Hill office dominated by two life-size portraits of himself. He looms heavily here, as he does in the thick of the national debate over immigration in which he has defied President Bush's plans for reform and arguably holds more sway than anyone else in Congress. A bipartisan irritant from a state nowhere near the Mexican border, he has outsize influence on the fate of the country's estimated 11 million illegal immigrants.

In each portrait in his office, Mr. Sensenbrenner appears regal and contented -- in contrast to the rumpled and fed-up image he conveys in real life. He is commonly described as "prickly," "cantankerous" and "unpleasant." And this is by his friends.

"I would describe Jim as -- what's a nice word -- how about 'idiosyncratic'?" says Representative Dan Lungren, a California Republican on the Judiciary Committee.

Mr. Lungren equates Mr. Sensenbrenner's leadership to something the Green Bay Packer guard Jerry Kramer said about his coach Vince Lombardi. "He treats us all equally," Mr. Lungren says of Mr. Sensenbrenner. "He treats us all like dogs."

Mr. Sensenbrenner, 63, can be neutrally described as a Washington piece of work -- a big-bellied curmudgeon with a taste for old Caddies, pontoon boats and enormous cigars. He is equally at home discussing policy minutiae or the details of his Dalmatian's recent intestinal problems. His honking voice and Upper Midwestern enunciations make him one of the most mimicked politicians on Capitol Hill. ("Noooo interviews in the hallway" is a familiar refrain as he blows past reporters.)

One could dismiss him as something of a cartoon, except that Mr. Sensenbrenner has been a feared and vital character in some defining political dramas, like the Clinton impeachment, the passage of the USA Patriot Act and

'Pit Bull' of the House Latches On to Immigration

the current legislative donnybrook over immigration, an issue that he calls his toughest in nearly four decades of public life.

He has approached the matter with characteristic stubbornness, righteousness and, of course, brusqueness. He delights in placing himself above the chummy niceties of Washington. (On the subject of his crotchety nature, he smiles big and becomes almost giddy -- most unSensenbrenner-like.)

His conservative populism and maverick tendencies play well in a state that has elected political outliers including Senators Joseph R. McCarthy and William Proxmire. They also suit the solidly Republican district outside Milwaukee that first elected Mr. Sensenbrenner in 1978.

But he does not always suit the House Republican leadership, many Senate Republicans and the Bush White House. He has been the chief promoter of the House's "enforcement first" approach to immigration overhaul, emphasizing border security, criminal penalties for illegal immigrants and sanctions against employers who hire them. The president and the Senate have favored a package that offers illegal immigrants a path to citizenship.

In recent weeks, Mr. Sensenbrenner has refused to yield on anything, derided what he calls the "amnesty" of the Senate bill and warned that he is willing to walk away without a compromise. He says his views have been influenced by the flood of immigration-related cases coming through his office and what he sees as the failure of previous immigration reform efforts he has worked on.

He is known as one of the toughest negotiators in Congress, which invites another canine metaphor from a colleague. "Sensenbrenner is a pit bull," says Representative Ric Keller, a Florida Republican on the Judiciary Committee. "And the Senate negotiators he's up against are wearing Milk-Bone underwear."

During a 50-minute interview that feels, at times, like a lecture, Mr. Sensenbrenner says:

"You have to be prickly to prod people into accomplishing something."

"I've adopted a philosophy of telling it like it is."

"I've been referred to as a difficult child."

"If you go along to get along, you don't get anything accomplished."

For as much as Mr. Sensenbrenner decries the impulse to "go along to get along," he also pays close attention to what is said about him. This is underscored by how wary colleagues are of speaking on the record about him.

Representative Lamar Smith, a Texas Republican who has been mentioned as a possible successor as Judiciary Committee chairman, said he would gladly talk about Mr. Sensenbrenner. But later, a spokeswoman for Mr. Smith called to demur, saying, "It's not the right time for us to comment."

To a surprising degree, Democrats on the committee praise Mr. Sensenbrenner for his fairness, efficiency and willingness to heed the concerns of the minority party. He has also been lauded for spearheading an extension of the Voting Rights Act.

"The House leadership has relied on me to do some very difficult jobs over the years," says Mr. Sensenbrenner, who served as a House manager during President Bill Clinton's impeachment trial and whose six-year stint heading the Judiciary Committee will end in January.

He clearly enjoys being a high-profile committee chairman -- even his wife of 29 years, Cheryl, calls him Mr. Chairman ("but only when she's mad at me," he says).

He is easily annoyed when his authority is disregarded. Senator John McCain, Republican of Arizona, for instance, recently promoted a compromise immigration plan that would have focused on enforcement and border security

'Pit Bull' of the House Latches On to Immigration

first, then carry out the more contentious changes. Asked about the McCain proposal, Mr. Sensenbrenner stares blankly and flips his hand dismissively.

"McCain has not called me to propose that," he says, even though the notion had been widely discussed on Capitol Hill. It is as if no such possibility could exist until the House chairman was personally informed of it.

Mr. Sensenbrenner goes on to say that he has no relationship with Mr. McCain, with whom he served two terms in the House in the 1980's. "There's some senators who come back from whence they came, and McCain is not one of them," Mr. Sensenbrenner says. "When he left, we never saw him again."

"I deal with Specter," he adds, referring to Arlen Specter of Pennsylvania, chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee.

When asked what it is like to negotiate with Mr. Sensenbrenner, Mr. Specter pauses for several seconds. Then he says, "He is a lot more cordial in person than his reputation."

Mr. Sensenbrenner projects the self-assurance of a lucky man. He reaped a fortune from a great-grandfather who invented the Kotex sanitary napkin. He won \$250,000 in 1997 on a lottery ticket he purchased while buying beer. He lists assets of almost \$11 million, according to public filings.

Mr. Sensenbrenner was born in Chicago, graduated from Stanford University and, while at college, worked as an aide to a Republican congressman. After earning a law degree, he began an uninterrupted political career that started in the Wisconsin Assembly and landed him in the United States House of Representatives at age 35.

Not given to navel gazing, he prefers, he says, to spend time on his pontoon boat on a Wisconsin lake, smoking behemoth cigars imported from Honduras or the Dominican Republic. The family Dalmatian, Solomon -- also known as Stinky -- comes along, too.

Mr. Sensenbrenner concludes with an aside about Stinky -- specifically, the case of giardia that the dog picked up a few weeks ago, which requires Mr. Sensenbrenner to force-feed Stinky four pills a day. This is not easy.

But the chairman says he picked up a strategy from a guy he met in the beer tent of a church festival. He places the pills in the dog's throat, and blows in his face. Stinky then swallows them. "I'd never tried that before, blowing in a dog's face," Mr. Sensenbrenner marvels.

He has never tried it with a senator, either. "I have given them pills that don't taste very good," he says. "I've done that."

<http://www.nytimes.com>

Graphic

Photo: Representative F. James Sensenbrenner Jr. directing a House hearing. (Photo by Jamie Rose for The New York Times)

Classification

Language: ENGLISH

'Pit Bull' of the House Latches On to Immigration

Publication-Type: Newspaper

Subject: ***IMMIGRATION*** (91%); ILLEGAL IMMIGRANTS (91%); US REPUBLICAN PARTY (89%); POLITICS (89%); US CONGRESS (89%); INTERVIEWS (78%); LEGISLATIVE BODIES (78%); NATURALIZATION (78%); POLITICAL DEBATES (73%); US PATRIOT ACT (73%); CARTOONS & COMICS (70%)

Industry: CAR WASHES (56%)

Person: F JAMES SENSENBRENNER JR (79%); DANIEL E LUNGREN (78%); Mark Leibovich; F James Jr (Rep) Sensenbrenner; George W (Pres) Bush

Geographic: GREEN BAY, WI, USA (73%); WISCONSIN, USA (92%); CALIFORNIA, USA (79%); MIDWEST USA (79%); UNITED STATES (92%); MEXICO (79%); United States

Load-Date: July 11, 2006

End of Document