

Minnesota's Short-Term Senator Still Looking for the Gym

By Noella Kertes, CQ Staff Writer

Nov. 22, 2002 - As the stroke of midnight approaches on the Cinderella-like Senate career of Dean Barkley, he is not quite ready to pack up his courtyard office in the Russell Senate Office building.

During his brief tenure as the Independent senator from Minnesota in the Senate's 10-day lame duck session, Barkley found time to sample the famous Senate bean soup, eat in the private Senate dining room, and meet with President Bush in the Oval Office.

In the Senate tradition, Barkley also signed his name underneath Paul Wellstone's in the inside drawer of the desk both occupied during their tenure. He put the letters "IP" following his name, so historians would remember that he was a member of the Independence Party and not an independent.

Still on his to-do list: draft a letter to administration officials to remind them of assurances he negotiated for Minnesota to retain a waiver for its welfare program. Barkley also wants to exercise. "One of my biggest disappointments was never finding the Senate gym," he said.

Sworn in on Nov. 12 by Vice President Dick Cheney after being appointed by Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura to fill out the remaining term of Wellstone, who was killed in an Oct. 25 plane crash, "I really got dropped into the middle of a beehive, with no idea of what was coming and no time to prepare," Barkley said.

Though unprepared, he and his staff quickly got organized enough to move a bill (S 3156) through Congress on his third day as a senator.

The bill, authorizing \$10 million for a community center in Minnesota named after Wellstone, was drafted on the morning of Nov. 14, introduced and passed by the Senate later that day, and cleared by the House in the early morning hours of Nov. 15. "That might be a record in getting a piece of legislation passed around here," Barkley said.

He also presided over the Senate, a role typically reserved for the majority party. Like so many freshman senators before him, Barkley quickly learned the downside. He was trapped in the chair for five hours, unable to take even the smallest break. "Once you get up there you can't leave unless somebody relieves you," Barkley said. "I was a prisoner."

In addition to the authorization for the Wellstone community center, Barkley also will be taking back to Minnesota the very chair in which he presided over the Senate. Barkley's staff intends to purchase the \$150 chair and give it to him as a gift.

In his luggage will be a can of Vermont maple syrup, a gift from fellow independent Sen. James M. Jeffords of Vermont, who was the first senator to call after Barkley was sworn in. Barkley

said the best advice he got came from Jeffords, who told him, “Keep your powder dry and don’t make any decisions until you have to.”

He didn’t. After being wooed by Democratic leader Tom Daschle of South Dakota and Republican leader Trent Lott of Mississippi, Barkley kept the Senate leaders guessing as to how he would align himself politically. He chose to remain an Independent.

“Frankly, I’m luckier than most, I got plucked into this balance of power situation. They actually had to pay attention to me,” he said.

On Monday, Barkley will attend the White House signing of homeland security legislation (HR 5005). Barkley named as his major achievement that participation in the creation of a Department of Homeland Security. “I came to town bound and determined that I would do whatever I could to get that bill passed,” he said.

And now, “I know that my little brief moment of glory is about to end.”

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