

Sarbanes prefers to work the details backstage

Senate colleagues see him as a one-man brain trust

SARBANES THE INSIDER

Second of three parts

By Doug Birch

Washington Post of The Sun

Feb. 1, 1988

WASHINGTON — Back when the GOP still controlled the Senate and President Reagan was riding high, Democrats would sometimes file glumly into their Tuesday lunch in the Capitol sharply divided over how to respond to a White House initiative.

Thomas F. Eagleton recalls how then-Minority Leader Robert C. Byrd would stand up in the chandelier-lit Lyndon B. Johnson Room, describe the problem and then "sort of glare" at Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes of Md., "as if to say, 'Get up and lead us out of this wilderness.'" And Mr. Sarbanes would then offer the options: A, B, C.

"By the time he finished, you knew that A was superb and B and C were disastrous," said Mr. Eagleton, former senator from Missouri and now

a St. Louis lawyer. "He did it in a marvelously compelling way."

In an institution of flamboyant mavericks, Maryland's Senator Sarbanes is a scholarly party yallist, a gray flannel partisan, the organization man.

Mr. Sarbanes has done most of his legislating through amendments, through lobbying his colleagues and through his committee work. He prefers to focus on the details rather than broad issues. He likes to tinker with and shepherd bills written by others rather than propose any himself. Since his re-election in 1982, for example, Mr. Sarbanes has submitted only 17 bills, and only one of those passed, renaming the Baltimore-Washington Parkway after former Representative Gladys Noon Spellman.

But in the Senate, a lot of important work is done outside committees. "More often, senators are able to get their positions into legislation by talking with other senators," said David Falk, Baltimore's former Washington lobbyist. And a senator's personal interest in an issue is not always as important as the quality of the staff person handling it. Mr. Sarbanes has an unusually stable and experienced staff.

Mr. Sarbanes is popular among other Democrats in the Senate, against whom he rarely competes for publicity. His meager output of bills is almost universally praised among his colleagues — most of whom introduce far more themselves. "He certainly doesn't waste his time with bills," said Sen. William Proxmire, D-Wis. "As you know, the majority of bills go nowhere."

Some believe his preference for a supporting role on Capitol Hill limits his scope. But it is the role for which Mr. Sarbanes' friends say he is best suited. And in his own unorthodox way, Mr. Sarbanes has parlayed party loyalty, a low profile

See SARBANES, 8A, Col. 1

Reagan mon but Meese st

From Wire Reports

WASHINGTON — President Reagan will keep close tabs on the investigation into Attorney General Edwin W. Meese III's role in an Iraqi oil pipeline project, but seeking Mr. Meese's resignation now would be tantamount to "pitching people to the lions without proof," White House Chief of Staff Howard H. Baker Jr. said yesterday.

"The president ... has said he continues to have full confidence in his attorney general," Mr. Baker said. "I see no reason on Earth for the president to take any action unless and until it's made to appear that Mr. Meese has done something wrong."

Mr. Meese's attorney, James Ro-

Sarbanes builds his influence in Senate while shunning publicity

SARBANES, from 1A

and sharp intellect into a measure of power.

"Paul is a real inside player," said Robert Liberatore, Mr. Byrd's chief of staff between 1979 and 1984 and now a lobbyist for the Chrysler Corp. He said Mr. Sarbanes is a kind of one-man Democratic brain trust, one of a few people Mr. Byrd calls on for tactical and strategic advice on a whole range of issues.

"He has been a major factor in a lot of behind-the-scenes decisions of the party," Mr. Liberatore said, helping shape Democratic policy, strategy and tactics on Social Security, tax reform, aid to the Nicaraguan contras and the Middle East.

Yet, Baltimore and Maryland officials say, Mr. Sarbanes and his staff also work effectively on pork-barrel issues.

He has quietly pushed the state's beach restoration project in Ocean City, helped preserve the tax-exempt status of bonds to finance Baltimore's planned twin-stadium complex and helped pass Chesapeake Bay legislation.

William K. Hellmann, former state transportation secretary and now partner with RK&K, a Baltimore engineering firm, said Mr. Sarbanes carefully planned 1986 filibuster of a federal effort to turn National and Dulles airports over to a regional authority eventually won \$75 million to finance improvements at Baltimore-Washington International Airport.

"His strong position was the key to our being able to conclude our negotiations with [then-Transportation Secretary Elizabeth] Dole," Mr. Hellmann said. "Before that, we got \$3.5 million per year in airport funding from the feds. We wound up getting \$75 million over a period of years for an ambitious expansion program."

Mr. Sarbanes ensured Washington's permission for Maryland to continue charging a toll on the Fort McHenry Tunnel after the state had paid its share of the original cost of the project. The provision, inserted in the 1987 Federal Highway Act, will permit the state to use tolls from the tunnel to pay maintenance costs there and, potentially, for other projects.

Baltimore has traditionally won a big share of Urban Development Action Grant construction financing dollars. Every year for the past seven years, the White House has proposed scrapping the program. Every year, Mr. Sarbanes and a handful of Democrats on the Senate Banking Committee have led the so-far successful efforts to save it.

"He's been very critical in keeping that program alive," Mr. Liberatore said.

"On national and international issues, Mr. Sarbanes' career looks from the outside like a flat plain marked by tall peaks."

In 1974, during his second term in Congress, he was a cipher on the House Judiciary Committee, revealing little about how he felt about President Richard M. Nixon's alleged crimes during the proceedings and, as a result, being asked to draft the first article of impeachment. During his first term in the Senate, he withheld judgment on the Panama Canal treaties until he was chosen as one of the floor managers for the agreements.

He has led the charge on a small number of issues. In 1983, Mr. Sarbanes and others pushed to invoke the War Powers Act after the White House committed troops in Lebanon.



Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes confers with Sen. Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, the majority leader.

He was one of the "Gang of Four" who sought to cut off military aid to Turkey in the wake of its 1974 invasion of Cyprus. On the national political scene, Mr. Sarbanes, the first person of Greek heritage elected to the Senate, keeps in close contact with Greek-American groups, which are major contributors to his campaigns.

Among Greek-Americans, few issues stir greater passions than the conflict between Greece and Turkey over Cyprus.

But for the most part, he prefers the grunt work of committee and caucus to the bully pulpit of the televised press conference. "Paul hates to simplify things," said Robert C. Embry Jr., a longtime political ally. "... Most issues are complicated, or they wouldn't be issues. And to take a strong position on something implies that you don't see the other side of the argument. I don't think he's comfortable in that role."

When Mr. Sarbanes, whom interest groups rate among the most liberal members of the Senate, briefly questioned Lt. Col. Oliver L. North, instant celebrity of the right, at last summer's Iran-contra hearings, television viewers might have expected fireworks.

They got none. Mr. Sarbanes was gearing up his re-election campaign when "Ollie-mania" struck Washington like a summer thundershower. After some gently probing questions, Mr. Sarbanes, in his closing comments on the most-watched portion of the hearings, bestowed his coup de grace.

"The greatest dangers to liberty lurk in insidious encroachments by men of zeal, well-meaning but without understanding," he said, quoting Supreme Court Justice Louis D. Brandeis.

James A. Miller, who wrote speeches for Howard H. Baker Jr. when Mr. Baker was the Senate's Republican majority leader, generally praised Mr. Sarbanes for his behind-the-scenes style. But when questioned about his image among GOP colleagues, he remarked: "He kind of blends into the liberal fabric of the Senate."

Perhaps because of his popular-

ty, a number of prominent state Republicans declined to give their opinion of Mr. Sarbanes. One member of the state GOP who asked not to be named said that Mr. Sarbanes is far less active on behalf of the state than his junior colleague, Sen. Barbara A. Mikulski, D-Md.

A GOP Capitol Hill staffer said that Mr. Sarbanes is "not very evident" on the Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs panel. "He, really, doesn't participate much in the committee," the staffer said. "He has an interest in international issues."

Mr. Sarbanes' choice of committee assignments reflects a national or global focus. As chairman of the Joint Economic Committee and chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee's subcommittee on Near Eastern and South Asian affairs, he is concerned with the international balance of power and broad economic issues. In the Banking Committee, his most important role is as chairman of the International Finance and Monetary Policy subcommittee.

He doesn't brag. He doesn't volunteer anything about his relationship with Democratic leadership. And he prefers to keep his mouth shut about tactics — even when to do so might put his actions in a bet-

ter light.

Why? Mr. Sarbanes smiled. "If you talk about [tactics], you can't use them again, can you?" he said.

But his caution has given some ammunition to his enemies. Then-Prince George's County Executive Lawrence J. Hogan, a former congressman and the Republican who challenged Mr. Sarbanes in 1982, said he would be "a fighter for Maryland," implying that Mr. Sarbanes wasn't.

Constituents don't always appreciate Mr. Sarbanes' agonizing over decisions.

Roger Horn, the father of Ceres Horn, a 16-year-old Princeton student killed in last year's Amtrak wreck in Chase, helped organize a lobbying group, Safe Travel America, to demand drug tests for private transportation workers. Mr. Horn said Senator Mikulski pledged her help immediately. Mr. Sarbanes hesitated.

Both senators enjoy strong backing from unions opposed to drug tests.

Finally, in October, after months of refusing to commit himself, Mr. Sarbanes supported the legislation. Mr. Horn said he was pleased, but

Mr. Sarbanes' prior reluctance had hampered Safe Travel's lobbying.

"I don't understand it," Mr. Horn said. "If he intended to support these measures, why didn't he say so?"

But Mr. Sarbanes probably couldn't do things any differently.

"If he tried to be something else, he'd fail," Mr. Eagleton said. "Any politician who strays too far away from his gut style is bound to have problems."

"In an age when senators vie to be first into the Senate media center to comment on an issue and stand before the most-photographed bookshelf in America, I think Senator Sarbanes uses his time more effectively," said Ross Baker, an expert on the Senate and a professor of political science at Rutgers University in New Brunswick, N.J.

Mr. Baker has studied the relationships among members of what sometimes is called the world's most exclusive club. "I found that there isn't much in the way of personal friendship in the U.S. Senate," he said.

"There is a kind of business relationship that's based on trust. And I think that Sarbanes is trusted. He's not considered treacherous. He's not going to give advice based on personal advantage. ... He's got a reputation as someone who's honest. And all those things, I think, can translate into personal influence."

Tomorrow in The Sun: Dignity and determination mark the senator's personality.

THE SUN/PHOTOPRESS

FREE LEAF BAG
WITH PURCHASE

TA

Fine Quality

SALE THIS WEEK

FREE SHOP AT HOME SERVICE

SAMPLES DISPLAYED IN YOUR HOME

CALL NOW

LEAVES FROM \$14.95

No Mail or Telephone Measurement, Prices

WASHINGTON TAB

Serving Baltimore & A Many Other Fine Quality At Low

Retire 6 Miles From Hilton Head

Beautiful Rose Hill Plantation. A private, residential community 6 miles from the Hilton Head bridge. Spectacular 1/2 acre wooded home sites on a

27 hole golf course. Equity membership country club. Southern living at its finest! Send for our 20-page color brochure or call toll free today. 1-800-331-7023.

Name _____

Address _____

City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Telephone _____

ROSE HILL
Plantation

P.O. Box 2077, Hilton Head Island, S.C. 29926

Obtain the Property Report required by Federal Law and read it before signing anything. No Federal agency has judged the merit or value, if any, of this property. (IL-87-279)

OPEN ENROLLMENT

Individuals or families may enroll in a Health Plan during this Open Enrollment Period. No medical underwriting required.

Open Enrollment Period

Call 444-5400 for information and premium rates.

The Johns Hopkins

A Johns Hopkins Health Plan