

Despite recent legislative defeats, veteran Baker insists he's staying

By Peter Jensen
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One of the General Assembly's most formidable legislative roadblocks is getting bypassed regularly these days, and he's none too happy about it.

During his nine years as chairman of the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, Sen. Walter M. Baker has wielded enormous clout, mostly by killing bills. The 67-year-old Cecil County native's desk drawer frequently has served as a final resting place for legislation from gun control to mandatory sentencing.

His politics run along conservative to libertarian lines, and he can be one of the legislature's most independent and cantankerous members.

He says he runs his hearings in a "militaristic" fashion, discouraging prolonged testimony. They even begin on time, a rarity.

But one thing to which the fifth-term senator is unaccustomed is disrespect. And at least twice this session, he's been slapped in the face, his committee's actions thwarted on the Senate floor.

He has stormed out of the chamber, lectured fellow senators on the committee system, cursed at reporters. He has been so visibly upset by recent events that a fellow Eastern Shore senator asked him yesterday whether he planned to quit before the end of his term.

"I told him the Eastern Shore couldn't afford that," said Sen. Richard F. Colburn, a Dorchester County Republican. "There have been a few votes that have disappointed him. They've disappointed me, too."

Mr. Baker denies even thinking about leaving the Senate but will admit he has lost some of the "fire in the belly" of years past.

"I'm staying as long as I am healthy," Senator Baker said yesterday. "I have no plans to leave,

none at all."

Perhaps Mr. Baker's worst moment came Tuesday, when the Senate stripped committee amendments from a bill to strengthen Maryland's drunken driving law. The bill would make a blood-alcohol level of 0.10 percent or greater absolute proof of driving while intoxicated.

In committee, Mr. Baker had added an amendment to require that Breathalyzer maintenance records be provided for 90 days before and 30 days after a driver failed a blood-alcohol test. But on the floor, he was deserted by three senators who had supported the amendment in committee.

In Annapolis, that is a rare departure from tradition. A committee's decisions must be honored by its members lest the clout of the panel be greatly diminished.

Last month, Senator Baker was badly embarrassed when a proposal to enforce child support payments by suspending driver's licenses was tacked on to a welfare reform bill. Mr. Baker had killed that proposal when it appeared as a separate bill before his committee but found himself the lone voice against the amendment on the floor.

Last year, the senator was circumvented altogether. An unusual legislative maneuver put a proposed ban on semiautomatic pistols in the hands of another committee when, under traditional Senate procedure, it should have gone to Mr. Baker's.

"I get a lot of controversial issues," Senator Baker said when asked about the repudiations. "Even though some bills may have public support, they may not be all that great."

Fellow senators have wondered privately what toll all this has taken on Mr. Baker, a diabetic who was hospitalized two years ago after a serious automobile accident.

"Walter's tired," said Sen. F. Vernon Boozer, a Baltimore County Republican who formerly was assigned to Mr. Baker's committee. "I've felt bad for him this session."

Others blame the other 10 members of his committee, five of whom

are freshmen. Just a few years ago, a member's failure to support his or her chairman was unconscionable, but legislators today are less likely to feel obligated.

"We're not the House of Delegates [where committee support is strictly enforced]," said Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr., a Prince George's Democrat and Mr. Baker's predecessor as committee chairman. "That's the way the Senate works."

Fellow legislators also believe that Senator Baker could have helped himself by lobbying fellow senators on these issues. But that would have been out of character for him. He rarely socializes, preferring to spend his time working on bills and with his wife, Jean, who stays with him at an Annapolis hotel.

"It's been my fault," the senator said yesterday. "I have not taken the time to get to know my committee members."

A one-time prosecutor, Mr. Baker is the product of a hardscrabble background. The fourth of 12 children, he worked all his adult life — on a small family farm, as an Army sergeant during the Korean War and as a private attorney.

He no longer practices law, but since he was first elected to the Senate in 1979, he has practiced politics with a vengeance. Colleagues predict he will find a way to pay back those who crossed him, if not before the session adjourns Monday, then next year.

"To say he's had a tough year is like writing that a running back was tackled five times in a season," said a lobbyist who asked not to be identified. "It ignores how many times he has not been stopped."

Eastern Shore residents have long felt disenfranchised in Annapolis, badly outnumbered by their more liberal counterparts from Baltimore and the suburbs. No one doubts that Mr. Baker faithfully represents the views of the five rural Upper Shore counties he represents.

Senator Miller said yesterday that losing a strongly opinionated and experienced legislator like Mr. Baker would be a blow for the Senate as well. "You have to admire him in many ways," Mr. Miller said.