

# The 'invisible senator' prevails quietly

By Doug Birch JAN. 31, 1988  
Washington Bureau of The Sun

At a recent public forum on U.S.-Soviet relations at the Johns Hopkins University, Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes, D-Md., was a guest on the stage while two of his opponents in the 1988 Senate race waited in the aisles for a few minutes at a microphone.

Patrick L. McDonough, a former member of the House of Delegates now vying for the GOP nomination, accused Mr. Sarbanes of voting against most new weapons systems.

## SARBANES THE CANDIDATE

First of three parts

He drew catcalls from the audience: "Go home, buddy!" and "Throw him out!"

A. Robert Kaufman, a socialist and one of the two challengers in the March 8 Democratic primary, was nearly drowned out by the restive audience as he chided Mr. Sarbanes for not debating him.

"Awwwwwww," one person called in mock sympathy with the challenger's plight.

As Mr. Sarbanes strolls toward his campaign for a third term in the U.S. Senate, he appears to be widely regarded by voters as a politician above politics, practically invulnerable to criticism from the left or right.

What baffles his foes, who have called him "the invisible senator," is how he has achieved that enviable



PHOTOPRESS

Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes shakes some hands during a Democratic reception in Montgomery County.

position.

He appears to dislike publicity, something many of his colleagues in the Senate spend most of their time courting. He doesn't call many news conferences. He issues relatively few press releases. He only infrequently

brags about things he's done — saying he leads by example rather than by proclamation but inevitably, sparking criticism that he doesn't do enough.

See SARBANES, 4A, Col. 1

# Sarbanes avoids the big gestures, but the little ones have served him well

SARBANES, from 1A

While he appears on television regularly, he seems to have the presence of a well-dressed Mr. Rogers, of children's television fame. He has learned how to give stirring speeches when the occasion demands it — but the former Rhodes scholar admits he finds it difficult to come up with pithy, quotable lines.

Instead, in an age of mass markets and mass media, Mr. Sarbanes is a "corner grocer" politician.

Even when it isn't an election year, Mr. Sarbanes and his wife, Christine, spend a lot of time at fund-raisers, bull roasts, union gatherings and other events that are the unglamorous retail outlets of politics.

Everywhere he goes, the dignified, salt-and-pepper-haired man in the blue suit and red tie asks people — in his deliberate and almost deferential way — about their homes, their jobs and their families. He seldom seems to feel too busy to talk. He never seems to feel too important to listen.

Voters appear to eat it up.

Told that some constituents look at Mr. Sarbanes like their successful big brother, Bruce Frame, Mr. Sarbanes' longtime press secretary, nodded and added: "Or their successful son."

Overall, it's an unusual style in Washington. Partly, that's because it depends on Mr. Sarbanes' resume, which reads like the script for a Frank Capra movie — a son of Greek immigrants, he grew up on the Eastern Shore and graduated with honors from Princeton, Oxford and Harvard Law School.

"The story of the achievements of young Sarbanes, not yet 21 years old," a 1954 article in *The Sun* about his Rhodes Scholarship said, "follows a pattern woven into the American tradition of opportunity."

Partly, Mr. Sarbanes' face-to-face style depends on geography. It can

work for a congressman in Maryland, several politicians said, because the state is small enough to travel around easily and close enough to Washington to commute home every evening.

Asked about the source of his political strength, Mr. Sarbanes replied: "I think Christine and I — and I think our kids as well — have stayed close to people. I think people can make an identification with us. We've tried to uphold high standards of conduct. And in a sense, provide a quiet example."

But that quiet can be deceptive.

Last March, he triggered rumors that he wouldn't run again when Washington lobbyists noted that he wasn't doing much fund-raising. By July, he had quietly raised some \$409,000, most of it in the previous month alone, from labor, fellow Greek-Americans and other traditional supporters.

"He's a quiet competitor," said Anthony Sarbanes, Paul's younger brother. "I think there are all kinds of competitors. Some yell and holler at their opponents. And then there's the guy who doesn't say anything. And the next thing you know, he's beating you."

"Paul doesn't necessarily generate excitement, so you may very well miss the first 500 appearances he's made," said Walter S. Orlinsky, the former Baltimore City Council president, a sometime friend and sometime foe of Mr. Sarbanes. "But the people he's met remember. They walk away saying, 'I'm voting for him. I like him. He's OK.'"

Mr. Sarbanes' easygoing manner also sometimes masks the fact he's a deft, cautious and pragmatic politician.

He has long been a civil rights advocate. But he once angered supporters when, in 1966, after what newspapers described as an "independent" campaign for a State House seat, he paid \$500 to Baltimore's Young Men's Bohemian Democratic Club to put him on its ticket.

During the late 1960s, the club came under fire for urging the election of its all-white slates against integrated tickets.

As Mr. Sarbanes sees it, he didn't sully himself by paying for the club endorsement. Rather, the club raised its standards by endorsing him. "My position wasn't and hasn't been compromised," he said. "Lots of people support me who don't agree with all the positions I take."

Especially early in his career, Mr. Sarbanes was often portrayed in the media as an independent "reform"

politician.

As a state legislator, Mr. Sarbanes had introduced a bill to ban the distribution of "walk-around" money. But in 1976 an opponent slammed Mr. Sarbanes for passing out tens of thousands of dollars to political clubs in every election campaign since 1970. He did it again in 1982.

Such payments, used to pay precinct workers to get out the vote and to pay printing expenses, are not illegal as long as they are not made on the day of the election. Because of the appearance that they are used to buy support, though, the practice is considered the mother's milk of Muldoon politics.

Mr. Sarbanes has long argued that as long as walk-around money is permitted, he isn't about to handicap himself by not paying it. In fact, he recently added, "I don't regard that as any different than paying high-priced media consultants."

"Sarbanes at heart is a regular," said Nick Schloeder, a longtime political aide. "He doesn't have any problem with political organizations or political clubs inherently. He was never really a member of the reform wing of the party."

Mr. Sarbanes' own core political organization is a tiny, informal group of dedicated supporters who sometimes refer to themselves, jokingly, as "The Council of Elders."

They include Mr. Frame, a big, bluff lawyer and public relations man who serves as the senator's press spokesman; Mr. Schloeder, a part-time congressional staff member and football coach at Gilman School; Peter N. Marudas, one of Mr. Sarbanes' top congressional aides for 17 years until he joined the staff of Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke in December; Richard O. Berndt, a Baltimore lawyer; and Jim Smith, a businessman and Democratic Party fund-raiser.

Mr. Schloeder and Mr. Marudas have long been the senator's two top political ambassadors and flack-catchers. They spend a lot of time attending political club meetings Mr. Sarbanes could not make.

While Mr. Sarbanes works with political clubs, he also keeps them at arm's length, relying on himself and his "elders" during his campaigns.

"I don't think Paul's ever endorsed anybody but himself," said state Sen. Julian L. Lapidus, D-Baltimore. "He's sort of a one-way street in politics. He had membership in clubs, always, just to meet people. And never to alienate. Always ingratiate. Ingratiate. Ingratiate. And then

Some say Mr. Sarbanes' noncommittal style grows out of a fear of angering anyone. One former aide noted that he is "reluctant to make enemies, even when elections are far off. I think, deep down, there is an insecurity there."

As a legislator, Mr. Sarbanes has rarely announced how he would vote on an issue before the last possible moment. He has always cultivated the image of someone who listens to all sides, weighs everything carefully and comes to an independent judgment.

But those who know him have little trouble predicting how he will vote on most big issues. According to *Congressional Quarterly*, in the 99th Congress, which ended in 1986, Mr. Sarbanes won the title "Most Liberal Voting Senator," based on his 100 percent ratings from the Americans for Democratic Action and the AFL-CIO, his 16 rating from the Chamber of Commerce of the United States and his zero rating from the American Conservative Union.

*Congressional Quarterly's* 1986 "Almanac," in a study of congressional partisanship, said Mr. Sarbanes in 1986 voted with Democratic majorities and against GOP majorities 96 percent of the time — more than all his Democratic colleagues but one. He voted against Democratic majorities only 3 percent of the time.

The same volume showed that, in 1986, Mr. Sarbanes voted with President Reagan's position on issues 18 percent of the time and against his position 81 percent of the time — making him one of Mr. Reagan's most consistent foes.

"You can have a sense that the Democratic Party stands for something very important, which I do, and still carry out your politics with a measure of respect for those who disagree with you," Mr. Sarbanes said.

What the Democratic Party stands for, he has often said, are the principles of Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal. He often talks of how the social movements that flourished or took root during the Roosevelt era — unions, consumerism and civil rights — are just as important as they ever were, and need to be protected, nurtured and expanded.

Judging by their support of Mr. Reagan in 1984, Marylanders may be far more conservative than Mr. Sarbanes.

But his views have never seriously hurt him. Many friends and foes think he has avoided antagonizing voters by keeping a low profile —

not leading the charge on Capitol Hill, for example, for any pet cause.

Mr. Sarbanes insists his cautious, deliberative manner is not a political tactic but part of his personality. "I mean, it's not as though you can say: 'Yeah, I understand that in your private life you make decisions just like that,'" he said, snapping his fingers. "That's just not the case."

Whatever the source, Mr. Sarbanes' style has disappointed some supporters.

Consumer advocate Ralph Nader, a friendly critic who has supported Mr. Sarbanes since the 1970 campaign, said the senator "has an excellent voting record," "but he does not have leadership tendencies in the sense of taking an issue and bringing the Senate around and forming coalitions and driving it through the Senate against powerful odds. That kind of leadership. He doesn't have that temperament. . . . He's a progressive senator without a progressive agenda that he's gotten through the Congress."

"Well, I think what Nader seeks from members of the Congress is people who will work his agenda," Mr. Sarbanes replied. "And while I may agree with some of the items on his agenda, I have never been willing to just kind of become an instrument. For him, or anyone else."

At the beginning of his political career, Mr. Sarbanes was widely admired as an outspoken progressive — a "shiny bright" with sterling credentials who boldly challenged the Democratic political establishment.

In 1966, after he was elected to the House of Delegates from Baltimore's old 2nd District, Mr. Sarbanes went to Annapolis having aroused great expectations. Almost immediately, he began skirmishing with both Republican Gov. Spiro T. Agnew and the Democratic political establishment. Ultimately, he committed the cardinal sin of voting against Marvin Mandel to replace Mr. Agnew, who left office in 1969 to become vice president.

Mr. Mandel struck back not long after the 1970 elections, in which Mr. Sarbanes beat Representative George Fallon.

Then-Governor Mandel engineered a redistricting plan that snatched Mr. Sarbanes' carefully cultivated Baltimore political base out from under him and threw him into a new district with Representative Edward A. Garmatz, the powerful chairman of the House Merchant Marine Committee, in the 1972 race.

Christine Sarbanes still recalls how she and her husband had to "start all over again" with door-to-

door visits to get their names known.

But Mr. Sarbanes survived. He subtly shifted his style to accommodate the more conservative, blue-collar character of the new district. And he called on his old friends among the environmentalists, the academics and the political clubs.

But labor had always been a key factor in Mr. Sarbanes' career — he had won the endorsement of the AFL-CIO in 1966 and 1970 — and its endorsement in the primary played a key role again.

Eventually, Mr. Garmatz withdrew from the field and wound up with a job with a maritime union. Mr. Sarbanes went on to win the seat.

In 1976, when Mr. Sarbanes ran for the Senate, he trailed badly in the polls months before the election. Once again, his face-to-face style, strong labor support, close ties with Baltimore political clubs and savvy "Council of Elders" came through — he handily beat incumbent J. Glenn Beall Jr., a Republican.

In 1982, the National Conservative Political Action Committee calculated that Mr. Sarbanes' liberal voting record and generally low media profile added up to political vulnerability. So it launched a 19-month, \$625,000 media campaign, asking voters to name one thing the incumbent had done for the state and attacking — Mr. Sarbanes said distorting — his legislative record.

In doing so, NCPAC managed to make the incumbent look like the underdog, draw attention from the Republican candidate and make itself the race's biggest issue. Mr. Sarbanes walked away with the contest.

Mr. Orlinsky, who calls Mr. Sarbanes "blessed among the virgins," summed up the secret of his political success this way:

"I think that you, me, we all have talked ourselves into thinking that the press and the media and the politicians as being so intertwined that none can exist without the other," he said.

"And so it is difficult for us to understand how this guy [Mr. Sarbanes] can flourish without us. And he does, doesn't he? Maybe man does not live by press clippings, film or ink alone. Maybe all the dull appearances, maybe all that shoe leather, maybe all that Marudas and Schloeder, hands on, 'How's it going?' is everything you need."

**TOMORROW MORNING in The Sun: Senator Sarbanes likes to tinker with details of legislation in the Senate.**

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