

Conroy in Retrospect: Praise for a Fighter: Sen. Conroy in Retrospect: Colleagues Praise a Fighter

By John Feinstein Washington Post Staff Writer

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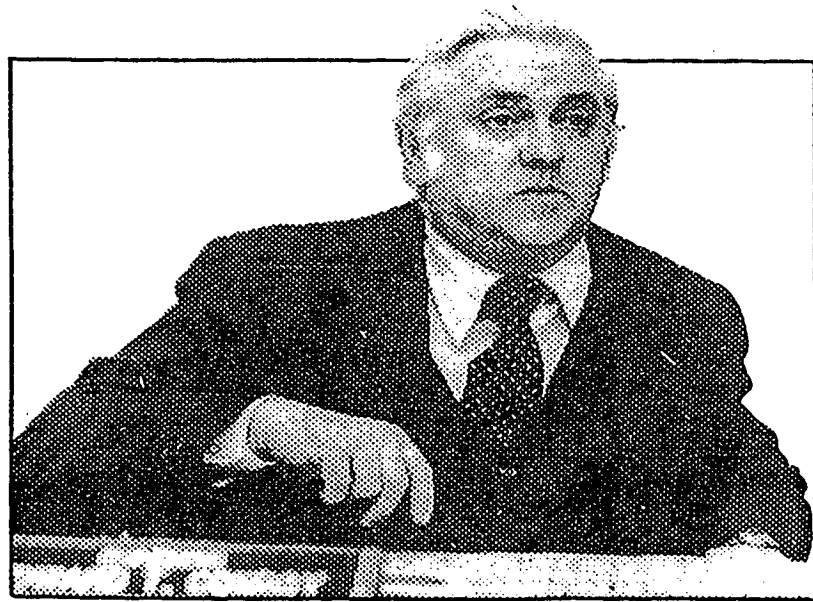
ANNAPOLIS, May 25—There were tears shed today over the death of Sen. Edward T. Conroy, but for most there was a deep sense of relief after the senator's weeks of agony.

The flag atop the State House flew at half-staff today for Conroy, 53, a member of the legislature for 20 years who died last night at Walter Reed Army Medical Center in Washington of cancer of the pancreas. His wife Mary, and their sons, Edward Jr., 27, and Kevin, 20, were with him.

Gov. Harry Hughes said Conroy's death "leaves a void in the state senate and in the hearts of all who were fortunate enough to work with him over the years. I know of no senator who took his job more seriously, or who was a better senator. Sen. Conroy epitomizes everything we think is good about American citizenry."

Sen. Charles McC. Mathias (R-Md.), who defeated Conroy for the U.S. Senate two years ago, said that "although Ed and I were opponents in 1980, I always respected his integrity and ability. He was a fine senator with a record of significant achievement in the Maryland General Assembly."

Conroy's seat must be filled within 45 days. The Demo-



By Larry Morris—The Washington Post

Sen. Edward T. Conroy: colleagues cite his record of achievement.

cratic Central Committee of Prince George's County will send a name to Hughes, who will appoint someone, probably Conroy's wife, to fill out the rest of the year. Mrs. Conroy is not expected to run for the seat. Former Del. Leo Green, who

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lost to Conroy by 521 votes in 1978, announced his intention to run before Conroy announced his retirement last week.

The once robust, white-haired Conroy missed 17 days of the recently ended 90-day legislative session, during which he constantly looked weak and gaunt. His colleagues shook their heads sadly when Conroy gamely insisted: "It's just shrapnel in the back. I'm fine."

"The last time he was down here he was hurting so much it was painful to look at him," said Sen. Edward J. Mason (R-Allegany). "I always knew he was a fighter, but I found out how gutty he was these last few months."

Conroy was decorated three times in the Korean War. He won the Silver Star for courage and two Purple Hearts for battle injuries that cost him his left hand and use of his left leg in the battle of Harper's Ridge. He spent almost two years in hospitals recovering from his wounds.

The last time that Conroy was on the senate floor, Monday, April 5, the session lasted past midnight.

Conroy was so weak he had to be helped out by a friend. Watching him, Sen. John J. Garrity (D-Prince George's) had to fight back tears.

"He's got more guts than all of us combined," Garrity said. "I just hate seeing him like this."

It was that feeling of helplessness that made the news of Conroy's death as much a relief as a shock.

More than for delivering eulogies, this was a day for telling "Conroy stories." Dels. Gerard F. Devlin and Charles J. (Buzz) Ryan, both from Conroy's district in Bowie, both running mates of his, remembered campaigning with him.

"You could always tell when it was getting close to election day because the morning calls would get earlier and earlier," Ryan said, remembering Conroy's penchant for predawn phone calls.

Sen. Edward P. Thomas (R-Frederick), who spent his days arguing issues with Conroy and his nights socializing with him, recalled watching a basketball game on television in Conroy's hotel room nine years ago when the phone rang.

"It was President Nixon, calling to ask Ed's support on some legislation

involving veteran's benefits," Thomas said. "Ed might not have agreed with Nixon on a lot of things but he loved telling the story about being interrupted watching a ball game to talk to the president."

(Two weeks ago, Conroy got a letter of cheer from President Reagan.)

Conroy got into politics in the early 1960s, when, as one of the first citizens of the new town of Bowie, he helped form and became the first president of its citizen's association. In 1962, he was elected to the House of Delegates as part of a reform ticket.

Conroy's dream was Congress. In 1964, he lost the Democratic primary to Herve Machen by less than 2,000 votes. "That was a turning point for him," Devlin said. "He could have won that election and if he had, he would have had a long career on the Hill."

Instead, Conroy was elected to the state senate in 1966, although he ran for Congress again in 1972 and for the U.S. Senate in 1980. He still has \$75,000 in campaign debts left from the last two races, which friends will try to offset with a testimonial dinner, on June 30.

It was a race Conroy didn't run, in 1974, that friends say haunted him. That year, Republican Lawrence J. Hogan, who had beaten Conroy for Congress in 1972, ran for governor. Conroy, thinking Hogan would change his mind and run for reelection, stayed out of the congressional race. Hogan stayed in the governor's race and Gladys Spellman ran for the seat and won easily.

Conroy will be remembered most for his combativeness, his refusal to never give up a fight. House Speaker Benjamin L. Cardin recalled that Conroy came to him a few years ago about 20 minutes before the legislature shut down for the year asking Cardin, then chairman of the Ways and Means Committee, to convene the committee to vote on one of his bills.

Cardin laughed at first, thinking Conroy was joking. Conroy wasn't joking.

That attitude prevailed until the end. Ten days ago, Hughes called Conroy in the hospital. "He was talking about the campaign and next year's session," Hughes said. "He never gave up."