

# FROM THE SPEAKER'S CHAIR

A look over the shoulder of House of Delegates leader Michael E. Busch during the season's most contentious political debate.

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**T**he year was 1987. Michael E. Busch, newly elected to the Maryland House of Delegates, looked around the room of freshmen for guys he had something in common with.

Immediately he fell in with a group of fun, bright, competitive jocks, many of them Ivy League, all of them single, and all but Busch, lawyers. When they sought seats on the judiciary committee, Busch took a leap and got assigned there, too.

It was a challenging group. They worked hard — they had to know what they were talking about or they'd be eaten alive. The issues they debated for two hours at a stretch were emotional: the death penalty, abortion, drunken driving. They also played hard, starting a Tuesday night basketball team, letting off steam by running through the streets together. Often they ended up at the Middleton Tavern for shrimp and beer.

Three of the guys — Democrats Busch and Bruce D. Poole and Republican Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. were closest, spending weekends together at the beach. Eventually each married, and ultimately, their paths diverged. Busch and Poole took leadership positions in the House, and Ehrlich entered Congress, becoming one of his party's stars.

For a decade they didn't see much of each other until last fall, when Ehrlich was elected the first Republican governor in 36 years. That same night, with the Democratic Speaker of the House, Casper R. Taylor Jr., effectively deposed by the Ehrlich campaign, Busch made the phone calls that would get him elected the next Speaker.

With two decent guys in high places, expectations ran high.

But then it happened, last week, something that Busch, 56, of Annapolis had not seen in his 16 years as a lawmaker: a personal attack, on him, by his old friend, the new governor.

When he arrived home that night, his wife, Cindy, thought he looked like he had been punched.

The problem, as Busch saw it, was that the governor wanted to make what could be the most important public policy change in Maryland in years, and nobody was "allowed" to discuss it.

But he was not going to be bullied.

It had been a long fall for Michael Busch. First his re-election: He won, but he had to work for it. On election night he was taking a first sip of beer when Taylor called to say he was down by 200 votes. The Speaker's job might be open. By 11:30 p.m. Busch was at the office, calling people and asking for their vote.

There was a break at Christmas, to be with his two young daughters, Erin, 7, and Megan, 4, but most of the time between the November election and the start of the General Assembly in January he was rearranging House committees. Some people were happy about their assignments, others were not.

And then, in the governor's opening act, Ehrlich sent down an all-or-nothing bill, the centerpiece of his legislative agenda. "Give me slots and I will fund education. That was it. Oh, and slots would be allowed only at four locations.

Boom.

To Busch's surprise, the president of the Maryland Senate, Thomas V. Mike Miller, a Democrat, signed on.

But the new Speaker was opposed to slots — he'd gambled more than he wanted to admit, but he didn't think it was good public policy to balance the budget with a licensing fee from slot-machine owners. Beyond that, he didn't think the governor's plan was well thought out. It was his job to get the members to think it through.

He had plenty of questions. And from the beginning, he asked them. Why, for example, were three of the four sites for slots in poor, mostly black neighborhoods? If the state wanted to raise money, why not also put slots at tracks in Timonium or Ocean Downs, a tourist destination?

He didn't have to worry at first, because the governor's bill floundered when the racing industry rebelled at its 25 percent share of the split.

Now it was Day 50 in the 90-day session, and it appeared to Busch from the morning's newspaper that the governor was getting nervous. He didn't have a new plan yet, and in a private talk to racing industry leaders, the governor had insulted Busch. "The Senate president is wonderful, you're horrible, and you're playing the race card," a delegate summarized for Busch at his morning leadership meeting. Some delegates guffawed. Many were surprised.

The Speaker was nonplussed. "I think they are frayed around the edges," he is said to have replied.

He returned to the questions he wanted delegates to ask. The governor's slots bill was having a hearing that day by the House Ways and Means Committee. The previous day, Busch had been shocked to learn there was still no revised bill. He had to pass a budget in two weeks.

The hearing promised to be great theater, Busch thought, and he wanted to see it. The governor had asked to speak about his bill. Busch had to give him credit. After all, there were no details. It amazed him that the governor had come out to take it on.

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"I'm headed for the show of shows," Busch told Republican Minority Leader Alfred W. Redmer Jr. of Baltimore County, on his way to the hearing.

The excitement in the Lowe House Office Building was evident. Lawmakers were skipping their own committee assignments to see the governor's rare appearance. All morning, anti-slots groups rallied in the mall outside the building, and the hearing room was packed with them. Busch walked into the hearing room expecting to see committee members. But he was early — and alone. Suddenly the room erupted in wild applause. As quickly as he could, he withdrew, red-faced.

Busch would give anything to be chairing that committee. He loved asking questions. Instead, he pumped delegates on their way in. "Got some good questions?" he asked.

In his years coaching lacrosse and football, Busch learned that every member of the team counted. It was his job to find people's strengths and play to them, to lift the group above its potential.

But Busch didn't plant the question Del. Adrienne A. Jones of Baltimore asked the governor after Ehrlich made an impassioned case to save the racing industry.

What did Ehrlich mean, she asked, when he accused the Speaker of "playing the race card?"

Busch expected the governor to say he was taken out of context. Instead the governor took his charge further. "No one has explained to me why black preachers have been targeted. Why not white preachers? To target one race with regard to this issue is to take the debate way off course. I resent it."

In his seat, the Speaker bit into his lips and shook his head.

On the slots issue, Busch had spoken to everybody — track owners, horsemen, business people and preachers. Early in January at St. Anne's Church in Annapolis, he had met with 40 ministers. One of the three or four black ministers present had invited Busch to speak to clergy in Baltimore, and Busch had gone.

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*Michael E. Busch, House Speaker on MPT*

To Busch, the issue was about fairness, not race. The governor's staff had met with the racing industry many times, Busch learned, but never with the communities that would be affected, and that bothered him.

He understood the governor had represented horse owners in Baltimore County and had long favored slots. But the idea that slots and racing have the same mission was wrong, Busch thought. Were racetracks the best place to put slots? He didn't know of any evidence that slots increased interest in horse racing. In Delaware, they only increased the size of the purse. What was the plan to market the racetracks? Why rescue an industry that had done little to help itself?

Other people had the same questions, Del. Ann Marie Doory of Baltimore noted, and when they heard Busch ask them, they were drawn to him.

Now though, the issue was no longer slots, but the governor's behavior.

"The governor is a good man," Busch told Maryland Public Television after the hearing. "A friend of mine for years. We have an honest disagreement." He was taken aback by the governor's comments, the Speaker said, but he would handle it. "I'm a pretty big guy."

Back at the office, his staff greeted him. How'd it go?

Aside from being called a racist by the governor, it was a good meeting, the Speaker said. He stood there for a moment, contemplating the scene. It was bizarre, he thought. They weren't in the back room of a bar. This was the chief executive of the state of Maryland, and he was the Speaker. He wished he hated the guy, then it would be easier.

He was angry.

In the old days, disagreements were never carried outside the committee room. In debates on the judiciary committee, Ehrlich sounded like a lawyer from a blue-chip law firm.

"You're the guy from the Princeton debate club," Busch kidded him. Of himself, Busch said, he was just a country boy.

In fact, Busch graduated from Temple University and taught high school history. His common-sense approach to issues could be successful, too.

But their outward differences, observed Bruce Poole, a friend of both men, meant that people were more likely to underestimate Busch than Ehrlich.

When Busch became chairman of the House Economic Matters Committee in 1994, Poole recalled, some people wondered if Busch was in over his head. Within a year, seeing Busch debate the minutiae of any health care or workers' compensation bill, the naysayers shut up. His reputation as a savvy coach was established.

It was Chairman Busch who began the debate last year over whether it was a good idea to turn the state's largest health insurer, CareFirst BlueCross BlueShield, into a for-profit company and sell it to a California conglomerate. What was the motivation?

It turned out that the company was worth much more, maybe \$1 billion more, than the selling price, and that executives stood to collect huge bonuses from the sale.

From their days as athletes, both Busch and Ehrlich knew the value of teamwork. Both were college football stars — Busch had been recruited by the NFL before a knee injury sidelined him — and they understood how a game is played.

And while the governor had demonstrated his ability to take his message to the people by his election, Busch, too, understood public relations. He worked his delegates. And every afternoon, he spent time in the basement of the State House, sitting in a swivel chair like he was back in class, answering questions from the press and raising new ones. "One of these days I'm gonna read your stuff," he teased.

Last week he pounded harder. "Look," he began, "The idea that you could have a gaming tax to pay for education is a huge fallacy." Even if slots passed, the state would remain \$900 million in the hole. Cutting the budget would only put the burden on local government. The governor would have to sign on to some-

thing, maybe a penny increase in the sales tax. That would bring in \$600 million.

To Busch, slots were different from lotteries. The lottery replaced an underground numbers racket that existed in a lot of convenience stores and neighborhood bars. The stores and bars would still be there if the lottery ended. But slots, slots were about giving monopolies to four racetrack owners and making them multi-millionaires. Plus, they were going to come back to the state for everything, every time they wanted to expand.

"That's when we're talking about the influence" of the group on politics, he said.

What irked him most was that the debate had degenerated into bar talk, waterfront talk.

"Gimme one more quarter or no money for the kids," the Speaker joked in his best Marlon Brando imitation.

He spent his time poring over documents and sitting in on hearings to find other ways to solve the state budget crisis. An Internet sales tax looked promising, but it wouldn't kick in for a few years.

He felt so strongly about slots, and he liked the governor so much that early on, after examining the long-term implications, Busch had asked his old friend to consider how he'd be viewed by history.

"This is your legacy," Busch told Ehrlich one morning during a private breakfast. "Is this what you really want to do?"

Regardless of how it came out, the Speaker hoped the debate would change the issue for the better. This was the biggest issue he would handle in his public career and it would affect the state for at least 20 years. And here was his old debating partner telling him, "Pass this bill and come on over for pizza."

The governor's attack on a guy known for his fairness resonated. Busch's office phone rang constantly last week. "I'm so sorry," offered an elderly lady from Laurel. "If I had known the governor would do this, I wouldn't have voted for him," said another. He found tulips on his podium. Most telling were the apologies from members of the governor's own staff.

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One delegate, a preacher, Gareth E. Murray, a Montgomery County Democrat, told Busch he'd heard somebody say that the defeat of former Speaker Taylor was divine intervention. Taylor had supported slots.

There were negative comments, too, from people who wanted to make race an issue. The Senate president threw a punch, calling Busch's style "followship," not leadership, because Busch thought a referendum on slots was a good idea. Four tracks could become eight, 10, 20, Busch feared, and then—who knows, casinos? At least with a referendum, people would know what they were getting.

Miller and Busch had breakfasted with the governor weekly until Miller chose to go alone. Now they alternated weeks, and it was Busch's turn. He canceled.

The newspaper on his desk the day of the slots-bill hearing told of another hit: To help push the ailing slots bill in the House, the governor had recruited none other than Busch's old mentor: Cas Taylor.

The Speaker didn't know what he would do if Taylor worked the delegates. Busch loved the guy. The day Busch learned he was coming back, he delighted in making final plans for a way to honor Taylor—a surprise he would reveal to his old mentor at a dinner tomorrow. Taylor, with his diplomatic skills, was surely welcome in this debate.

But the fact that the governor needed help with his centerpiece legislation from a Democrat whom Republicans had worked so aggressively to defeat was, to Busch, sweet irony.

The noose was tightening, but Busch wasn't backing down from his questions.

The worst that could happen was that Busch would find himself on the losing side of the issue and once again become the delegate from District 30. But at the end of the day, he had to feel good about himself.

"I'm a simple guy."