

Speaker's post is Taylor-made

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You aren't supposed to have two victories this big in the same year.

Last winter Del. Cas Taylor did the unthinkable: He got major health care reform legislation through the State House despite the best efforts of the medical, insurance and lawyer lobbies.

Cas Taylor's philosophy toward politics is the same as John Madden's is toward football. A down-in-the-trenches, mud-on-the-helmet style. Reward your friends, punish your enemies.

Everyone said that would never happen.

And who would have thought that by year's end he would be standing behind the rostrum as the first Speaker of the House west of Carroll County in at least a century?

In these days of young coiffed-haired, touchy-feely, Al Gore-clone politicians, Taylor is a wonderful throw-back. Those of us who relish the days of vote brokers, cigar

smokers, chip collectors and players of hardball politics can't help but have a bit of a warm feeling.

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His classic quote on the subject came a year ago, after Del. Nancy Kopp failed to oust Speaker Clay Mitchell in a coup attempt. "If you wound the king, you better make sure you kill him," Taylor said, promising the leadership would render key Kopp supporters powerless. He was right.

Mitchell's resignation this week was startling, but not surprising. Everyone knew he was becoming increasingly tired of the job.

After Mitchell announced his retirement, Speaker Pro Tem Gary Alexander stepped forward, saying in the spirit of compromise and continuity he would agree to fill out the final year of the speaker's term then step aside to allow someone else to run following the 1994 elections.

Taylor thrives on compromise. As long as it's the other guy who's doing most of the compromising.

So anyone who remotely knows Taylor knew he wasn't about to sit around for a year, allowing potential opponents the chance to line up support.

Other candidates had rhetoric about peace and harmony and avoiding an embarrassing

bloodbath. But Taylor had the votes.

Taylor, a member of the house for the last 18 years, has certainly paid his dues. His base of support is headed by the State House veterans and from the members of his Economic Matters Committee who would gladly follow him off a cliff.

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His strength is bringing everyone to the bargaining table, so even if they don't get their way, they at least felt part of the process. That's what allowed him to build enough consensus to pass the health care bill.

These are some of my favorite Taylor stories:

■ A couple years ago, on the House floor, Taylor called his committee to an urgent noon-time meeting to deal with "a Southern Maryland problem." The next day he did the same thing, saying the committee had still not completely dealt with "that Southern Maryland problem."

As it turned out, the Southern Maryland problem was a gargantuan country smoked ham.

■ This is how you know your legislation is in trouble: One group of witnesses appeared before Taylor's Economic Matters Committee last winter, pushing a bill that Taylor obviously had little patience with.

Halfway through their testimony he got up and began straightening the paintings on the walls of the committee chamber.

■ Once a witness before Taylor's committee was making little sense and taking a long time doing it. Taylor, his own microphone still on, reached for a pack of cigarettes, unwrapped the cellophane and crinkled it loudly for some time in front of the mike. When he struck the match in front of the mike it sounded like a rifle shot. The committee got the message.

Taylor still has to pass a couple of Democratic caucus elections before his speakership becomes final, but anyone foolish enough to believe he or she can outmaneuver Taylor in the meantime is probably not dealing with reality.

Taylor will only be a member of the Washington County Delegation for one more year. Then redistricting will end his district at the Allegany-Washington County line. But that won't matter. It's nice to have friends in high places and Taylor will certainly be willing to solve a goodly number of Western Maryland problems.

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