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of Political Science, a sweet first taste of political power. But when he confided his political aspirations to his parents and their friends, they told him that he was "too sensitive" to enter the public fray.

"You're not thick-skinned enough," they said. "That world will eat you up."

Their assessment did not slow him down. But it was, in many ways, accurate.

"I do get hurt," he says of criticism, an admission that comes as no surprise to members of the press corps who have been on the receiving end of a Taylor critique.

Above all, Taylor wants to be liked. Everything he does, everything he is, he says, is motivated by a desire for approval.

"I crave acceptance, and I crave appreciation," Taylor says bluntly. "I'm willing to go as far out of my way as possible to be accepted and commended."

Image belies the power

On opening day of the General Assembly, Taylor walks, shoulders hunched, head jutting forward, through the standing ovation to take the rostrum. He speaks slowly, almost monotonously, outlining his vision for the session and a new state tax system. Nothing in his plodding and professorial demeanor telegraphs the power he holds.

But his authority as the speaker of the House is vast. The speaker appoints the committee chairs, assigns legislation to committees and sets the agenda for the House, effectively determining whether Marylanders will have higher or lower taxes, new football stadiums or wider roads.

"The speaker," as Baltimore County Executive C. A. Dutch Ruppersberger notes, "is one of the most powerful people in the state if he plays his cards right."

As speaker, Taylor has engendered the respect of his peers. He cultivates alliances, does his homework and listens. He is, they say, a master at pushing projects over the goal line.

"There is not a major project or proposal in Annapolis that succeeds without Cas Taylor's consensus-building talents," says Del. Peter Franchot, a Montgomery County Democrat.

People may not always agree with him, but there is the sense that at the end of the day, all voices will have been heard.

"Is everybody in the boat?" Taylor said so many times during negotiations over health care reform in 1993 that the boat quote became a standing joke among legislators. In fact, the Economic Matters Committee room, where Taylor was chairman at the time, was a Noah's Ark of high-dollar lobbyists for the insurance and medical industries, all jockeying for advantage, all fearful that the flood waters of reform would wipe them out.

Implicit in Taylor's query was the understanding that those not in the boat could drown.

"In the end, most of these people decided to shut up and get in the boat for fear of being left out entirely," says Del. D. Bruce Poole, a Hagerstown Democrat who voted against the health care reform bill.

As Timothy F. Maloney, a former Prince George's County delegate, notes, "Cas Taylor had the strength and the determination to make it happen when a lot of people never thought it could."

Taylor, meanwhile, casts himself as a moderator, the "little dog" among the "big dogs" of the Baltimore and Washington suburban areas. But make no mistake: The little dog has teeth.

"I don't think people should be misled into thinking he's some kind of softy," says Baltimore Mayor Kurt L. Schmoke. "He's tough."

It is widely acknowledged that Taylor's "no go" is all it takes to kill a bill. Often, though, Taylor will suggest Plan B, as he did when Schmoke approached him with a proposal for a meal tax in Baltimore to fund promotion and debt service for the new convention center.

"I was met with a cool silence," says Schmoke. "Clearly, it was a signal to me that ... there were complications that I hadn't seen."

Taylor, who believed that the tax would "drive away tourists," returned to Schmoke with a suggestion to couple a more modest hotel tax increase with a one-year-only dip into state Motor Vehicle Administration user fees.

The approach was "typical Cas" — moderate, just enough to get the job done.

Not a headline-grabber

Moderation, though, does not grab headlines. In the free-wheeling political arena, witty one-liners and slam-dunk personal attacks get the 30-second sound bites. In that world, Taylor is often relegated to second billing, the straight man to the quotable Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller.

At a breakfast sponsored by the Baltimore lawyer-lobbyist firm of Rifkin, Livingston, Levitan & Silver in December, Miller spoke first and pounded on Glendening, grabbing front-page headlines the next morning. Taylor, plowing through a detailed explanation of his tax reform plan, joked that following Miller was like stepping up to the plate after the Orioles' Brady Anderson.

"The anecdote is that there are no anecdotes," says Franchot, asked to recall Taylor's most famous moments. "There are no tirades, no shoe-pounding bombast. None of that stuff that makes good stories."

Taylor is, for want of a better description, ordinary. He visits the grandchildren, putters in the garden and — on doctors' orders since quadruple heart bypass surgery in 1995 — walks with Speaker the dog. He lives modestly in Cumberland, the speaker's \$39,700 salary his sole income since selling his restaurant in 1992. Polly works part time as a fund-raiser for Allegheny College.

For Taylor, the components are simple: work and family.

He lives and breathes legislation. These days, it is impossible to have a conversation with Taylor that doesn't turn to the reality of Maryland's "broken" state income tax system and the possibilities for its repair. He tirelessly repeats: Cut the high income tax rate; broaden the narrow sales tax base.

It sounds simple, but in taking on tax reform, he is taking a political risk.

"Taylor is right," one politician said after Taylor's speech on the opening day of the session, "but he really should have waited to bring it up. Everything he does now looks like he's running for governor."

Responds Taylor: "I'm convinced in my heart that this tax reform is the right thing to do at this time. If I can pull it off, I'll feel good. If I can't pull it off, I'm not going to feel defeated."

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think it's a sign of weakness on his part to enter into a true partnership and show respect for the legislative branch," the speaker says. Then, considering his words, he adds, "I really do hope we're not starting down that path — Taylor vs. Glendening."

But the course has been set, and set by Taylor himself, who acknowledges that he has hired advisers and is seriously contemplating a run for governor.

He will make the decision, he says, after the General Assembly session.

Glendening, asked about his relationship with Taylor, cites differences with the speaker on the very issues that make Taylor most vulnerable in a statewide race — opposition to abortion, opposition to gun control, support for gambling.

For Taylor, undeterred by a small electoral base in Western Maryland, the "only question is whether the Democrats are ready to fire the current governor."

"Let's put it this way: If I get into it, I feel absolutely sure I have the ability to win." Then, in his typically cautious way, he adds, "I want to make sure I don't get mesmerized into it or that I don't get intoxicated by all the people wanting me to run."

Constructed his career

In fact, the question for Taylor may not be what Glendening does but whether he is willing to risk the speaker's job.

"The biggest thing for Cas is that he's a very thoughtful, skilled politician who has step by step constructed his career to be speaker of the House," says Poole. "He's a guy who ... has waited his time."

The time came in the dead of night in November 1993, and Taylor struck with coldblooded resolve.

Speaker R. Clayton Mitchell Jr. had suddenly announced his resignation. Taylor was not deterred that the House leadership wanted to name someone else as interim speaker: Speaker Pro Tem Gary R. Alexander, his close friend and vice chairman on Economic Matters.

As Taylor recalls, as soon as he learned that Mitchell was planning to resign, he and his allies began lining up the votes. By the time the House leadership convened to consider Mitchell's replacement, Taylor knew he had it.

"I knew it was now or never," Taylor says.

He told his friend Alexander, "I'm definitely running, and I've got the votes."

The next day Alexander bowed out. Now a lobbyist, he says that he never really wanted to be an interim speaker and that Taylor's selection was the right one.

"I knew instinctively that this was it," Taylor says, unintentionally summing up his whole career: "I either did it and stuck with it or life would pass me by."