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Reid Set to Lead Senate Democrats

Nevadan Has Won Praise From Both Sides of Aisle

By Charles Babington

Still recovering from their crushing losses on Nov. 2, Senate Democrats today will turn to Harry M. Reid (Nev.), a quiet insider and consensus-builder, to succeed Thomas A. Daschle (S.D.) as their minority leader.

As badly as Democrats need a strong public voice after Daschle's and John F. Kerry's defeats and the net loss of congressional seats, the senators have signaled that it is more important to have a consummate legislative technician and vote counter at their helm in the 109th Congress, where the GOP's majority will grow from 51 to 55 Senate seats and the Bush administration will largely dictate the agenda.

Reid, a Mormon from tiny Searchlight, Nev., lacks Daschle's flair as a speaker and public figure and rarely goes on TV outside his home state. Moreover, he gets along well with Republican leaders and has parted company with most Democratic lawmakers on some prominent issues, such as his support for a constitutional ban on flag burning and his opposition to abortion in most cases.

But in his five years as Democratic whip, Reid, 64, has put the party's interests ahead of personal politics, all the while spending countless hours learning parliamentary strategies and the art of divining who can be swayed on a given vote and who cannot. Colleagues laud Reid for his 2001 agreement to surrender his right to chair the Senate Environment and Public Works Committee to help persuade Sen. Jim Jeffords (Vt.) to leave the GOP. The decision carried greater meaning in the Senate than out -- just the sort of role that Reid seems likely to embrace in the party's top Senate post.

It is hard to find a senator from either party who thinks his colleagues have made a bad choice in replacing Daschle.

"He's going to be a great leader," Sen. Charles E. Schumer (D-N.Y.) said of the former Capitol police officer and amateur boxer. "Beneath that soft-spoken exterior is a very tough guy. He's still got some of the boxer in him."

Republicans offered similar praise. "I have found Harry one of the Democratic leaders you could work with and talk to," said Sen. Trent Lott (Miss.), a former minority and majority leader. "He's got a very tough job."

Where Daschle became a media-savvy lawmaker and frequent guest on Sunday morning talk shows, Reid might delegate some of those duties to his more telegenic colleagues, several senators and aides said. For example, his replacement as party whip will be Sen. Richard J. Durbin (Ill.), who, like Schumer, is hardly afraid to go before a bank of cameras.

"The Democrats never lack for bully-pulpiteers," said Sen. Paul S. Sarbanes (D-Md.). "I think Reid will be quite skillful at the job, both the inside and the outside [components]. He's certainly skillful

at the inside dimension." Reid probably will do fine as a public spokesman as well, Sarbanes said, adding: "Of course, that hasn't been asked of him up to now."

Sen. John Ensign (R-Nev.), who narrowly lost a bitter Senate race to Reid in 1998 but later became a friend and frequent admirer, said: "Working inside the Senate is his strength." He added, "We'll have to wait and see how he does as far as television" and other public appearances go.

None of this is to suggest that Reid shrinks from battles -- either with Republicans or with fellow Democrats balking at casting a tough party-line vote, lawmakers and staff members said. "He has absolutely no fear," said Jimmy Ryan, a former Reid aide who now lobbies for Citigroup. "He knows when to call a vote, and when to let your members know it's time to walk the plank. . . . He's probably the best reader of human beings I've ever met."

Reid's first challenge is to help his fellow Democrats assess the election results and decide whether to soften their opposition to GOP initiatives such as putting conservatives on the federal bench or drilling for oil in Alaskan wilderness. Daschle's loss is credited largely to Republican John Thune's portrayal of him as "the chief obstructionist" to President Bush's agenda, a worrisome thought for Democrats seeking reelection in 2006.

"His immediate challenge is to preside over an internal soul-searching debate" on "just how much to obstruct," said Sen. Mitch McConnell (Ky.), the GOP whip. McConnell said he hoped the new Democratic caucus would be less confrontational than the last but added: "The duty of the opposition is to oppose."

Reid is unlikely to soften his stance on one issue: his strong opposition to the administration's plan to build a huge nuclear waste repository beneath Nevada's Yucca Mountain.

Reid declined to grant interviews on his new leadership position until this morning's caucus vote makes it official. But shortly after the election, he hinted to Nevada reporters that Senate Democrats will make few, if any, concessions despite their setbacks.

Reforming Social Security to permit creation of private investment accounts? "I'm not going to do that," Reid told Las Vegas One, a cable news channel. He called Bush's No Child Left Behind program "a disaster." As for the Republican goal of limiting liability for doctors, corporations and others that might be sued for wrongful deaths or injuries, he said, "I know this may not be politically correct, but I believe that people who are injured deserve some [way] of being made whole."

Friends say Reid developed his Democratic values in Searchlight, a desert mining community so tiny he had to hitchhike to another town to attend high school. His mother was a high school dropout, his father a hard-drinking miner who committed suicide when his son was an adult. Reid graduated from Utah State University and George Washington University Law School, working part-time as a Capitol police officer.

Nevada voters elected him to the legislature when he was 28 and, 12 years later, as lieutenant governor. He lost a 1974 U.S. Senate race to Paul Laxalt (R) by 624 votes but was elected to the House in 1982. He won the Senate seat that Laxalt vacated in 1986 and was reelected in 1992 and 1998 with less than 52 percent of the vote.

The Los Angeles Times last year chronicled cases in which Reid's sons lobbied for groups that benefited from congressional actions in which the senator played a role. Reid said he was trying to

help Nevada interests, not his family, and the issue faded after he banned relatives from lobbying his office. He easily won a fourth term Nov. 2, a relief after the 1998 nail-biter.

"I'm the face of the Democratic Party today," he told Las Vegas One after the election. "I'm not too sure that we need a show horse at this stage. I think maybe a workhorse may be what the country needs."