

# Congress

## ■ ON A COLLISION COURSE WITH A CHAIRMAN

BY DAVID BAUMANN

**I**t used to be that freshman members of Congress faded into the woodwork. They respected their elders and voted with their party leaders, and their first floor speech was planned far in advance and it only delved into motherhood and apple-pie issues. Even the late Rep. Morris Udall, D-Ariz., a respected orator, was self-conscious when he spoke on the House floor in June 1961, two months after his election. "By ancient tradition, freshman congressmen are counseled to be seen and not heard," Udall said in his speech. "My strong inclination to heed this advice is overcome by a stronger concern about present financial procedures of our federal government."

That tradition has since gone the way of spittoons on the House floor. The raucous conservatives in the 73-member House Republican freshman Class of 1994 certainly proved that point. But this year, another conservative newcomer, Rep. Marilyn Musgrave, R-Colo., is taking freshman feistiness to a new level.

In just five months in the House, Musgrave has organized a protest that could have derailed passage of the budget. Even more boldly, she has started a feud over the highway bill with House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee Chairman Don Young, R-Alaska, a former steamboat captain known for kicking butts and taking names.

If those sound like unwise political moves, Musgrave is unapologetic and, in fact, is bragging about it all. "Life in Congress is too short to wait around to express what you truly believe," she said in an interview. "I'm just acting on what I believe."

Musgrave, a 54-year-old former teacher and hay-stacking company owner, is an eight-year veteran of the Colorado House and Senate. In the state Legislature, she developed a reputation as an uncompromising conservative on such issues as tax relief, gun owners' rights, abortion, and same-sex marriage. Musgrave says her con-

stituents in her eastern Colorado district "shouldn't be surprised at all" that she is already making waves in Washington.

In last fall's election, Musgrave defeated Democrat Stan Matsunaka, the Colorado Senate president, 55 percent to 42 percent. Matsunaka attempted to paint her as a conservative extremist, but Musgrave and fellow Republicans cast him as too liberal, calling him "Stan the Tax Man" and "Stan Taxsunaka."

Upon coming to Washington, Musgrave quickly assumed a leadership role at the House Republican Study Committee. That bomb-throwing group of 90 GOP conservatives often causes fits for Republican leaders seeking agreement among their divergent rank and file. Musgrave has become a prolific letter writer and has sent out a series of "Dear Colleagues" urging her fellow House members to support various conservative positions.

In April, Musgrave authored and circulated a hard-hitting letter that gained widespread attention because it drew a line in the sand on tax cuts. The House had endorsed a \$726 billion tax cut—the same size as President Bush's—while the Senate could back one no larger than \$350 billion. Musgrave's letter, sent during a crucial point in House-Senate negotiations over the fiscal 2004 budget resolution, left little wiggle room.

"It is our duty to make the tough decisions today and not put them off for another day," Musgrave wrote in the letter, which more than 20 House conservatives endorsed. "Therefore, it is our intention to oppose any conference report on the budget that fails to fully enact the tax cuts supported by President Bush."

Because of such conservative pressure, House Republicans continued to push for a tax cut larger than \$350 billion. Eventually, the two chambers agreed to disagree and passed a budget resolution in mid-April allowing the House's tax cut to total \$550 billion, but limiting the Senate's to \$350



**MARILYN MUSGRAVE:** "Life in Congress is too short to wait around to express what you truly believe," says the freshman House member.

billion. (But, when Congress ultimately approved a tax-cut package in May, the Senate's price tag prevailed.)

Musgrave's latest target is the gas tax increase that Young and his Transportation and Infrastructure Committee are proposing as a way to partly finance their mammoth \$375 billion highway bill. They want to hike the 18.4-cent-per-gallon federal gas tax by 5 cents for fiscal 2004. They also want to permanently tie the gas tax to the Consumer Price Index, so that by fiscal 2009, the tax would be about 26 cents per gallon. The White House and House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, R-Texas, oppose the proposal, and congressional action on the highway bill, which is due to be reauthorized by September 30, has stalled.

Ironically, Musgrave chaired the Transportation Committee in the Colorado Senate. But she's not mincing words when it comes to Young's plans. In a letter to House Speaker Dennis Hastert, R-Ill., Musgrave wrote, "Current proposals to raise the gas tax are ill-timed, and are not helpful to the efforts by you and others to pass the president's economic growth proposal and institute much-needed tax relief for the American people." She went on to say that the more than 20 members who signed the letter would oppose any effort to increase the gas tax.

In the interview, Musgrave explained, "I told people when I was elected I that I would oppose a gas tax increase." She contended that "the faint of heart are not willing" to sign her letter because of Young's reputation for having a temper and holding grudges.

Musgrave said she recently experienced that temper firsthand. While speaking with another member on the House floor, she said Young walked across an aisle toward her. "He proceeded to browbeat me," Musgrave said, adding that when she tried to reach across and shake his hand, he withdrew his. "He was furious," she added.

According to Musgrave, Young told her that it was hypocritical for her to submit funding requests to the T&I Committee for transportation projects back home while opposing a gas tax increase. She said she had simply passed on the Colorado Transportation Department's requests to Young's panel.

A Young spokesman said that Musgrave seemed to be "greatly overstating" the exchange his boss had with her. According to Steve Hansen, the committee's communications director, Young approached Musgrave with a list of \$1.6 billion worth of projects that she had requested. (All told, House members have bombarded the T&I



**DON YOUNG:** Musgrave's stance on the highway bill has put her at odds with the powerful chairman of the House Transportation and Infrastructure Committee.

Committee with requests for nearly 5,200 earmarked projects in the highway bill—averaging out to 12 projects per member.) Hansen said that the chairman thought it was "quite a hypocrisy" for Musgrave to be asking for projects.

"She may have taken this as an affront, but he took it as an affront [for her] to come in the back door asking for funding for projects, and come in the front door and hold press conferences" calling for no new funding for the highway bill, Hansen said.

Transportation advocates are attempting to counter conservative opposition to a gas tax increase by running ads with excerpts from a 1982 speech in which President Reagan lauded his agreement to boost the gas tax. Reagan first scoffed at raising the gas tax, but after his party lost seats in the 1982 midterm elections and his advisers persuaded him of the need to create more jobs, he reversed course. He signed the 1982 highway bill and portrayed its 5-cent-per-gallon gas tax hike as a user fee.

Stephen Sandherr, chief executive officer of the Associated General Contractors of America, declared: "Republicans from President Eisenhower to President Reagan have exhibited their leadership for building, expanding, and maintaining the nation's highway system."

Musgrave said that many longtime House members have responded favorably to her challenge to Young. "I've had veteran members come up to me and give me a high five and a wink," she said. Of course, some members may wink but won't sign her letter. Still, some fellow conservatives have publicly praised Musgrave for taking on Young, even though they realize they

too are risking his wrath. "I want to commend the gentle lady for stepping out and bucking the leadership on this," Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla., said at a news conference last month. "It takes a lot of courage."

Members of the Republican Study Committee see a great future for Musgrave within their group. "I did not anticipate that she would be such a stand-up leader, just because I didn't know her," said Rep. John Shadegg, R-Ariz., a former RSC chairman. "I knew she was coming to us as a solid conservative."

Back home, Democrats are simply shrugging their shoulders and saying that Musgrave's behavior isn't all that surprising. "I think she's been quite consistent in her extreme conservative political stance," said Christopher Gates, chairman of the Colorado Democratic Party. "What they're discovering in Washington is what we've known in Colorado for a long time—that she doesn't play well with others."

Musgrave's inability to get along with Young apparently has the *Rocky Mountain News* in Denver worried. In an editorial, the newspaper said that the fight between Musgrave and Young shows that it is time for states to keep all of the proceeds from the gasoline tax. But the newspaper added, "Was she politically smart to cross Young by circulating the letter? Probably not. Her colleagues privately shake their heads. After all, they note the White House has already expressed its opposition to a gas tax increase. Why not let that dead horse go unwhipped? Since she's not on the Transportation or Ways and Means Committees, circulating amounts to 'showboating.'"

Musgrave said she is simply following her own convictions, even if she alienates some colleagues in the process. "I am a Republican because of what Republicans stand for," she said. And Musgrave added that even though she is just a freshman, she is somewhat impatient. "There's frustration because very often, liberals in our party are in the driver's seat," she said. "I want conservatives in the driver's seat."

Colorado Democrats would like to put one of their own in the driver's seat in Musgrave's district in 2004, but right now, the state's redistricting map is tied up in the courts, making it difficult to plan for the next election. "We would hope to give her a stiff race," Gates said. "But we're in the process of trying to figure out who lives in that district." ■

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