

John DeCamp effective legislator

By Alice Hrnicek

At a downtown Omaha television station in January, John DeCamp struck with the grace of an avalanche.

The Neligh state senator had joined two child care experts to tape a half-hour show on his bill to set up foster care review boards.

Sitting in a semicircle, politely awaiting KETV reporter Carol Schrader's questions, the panelists had been watched unsuspectingly by camera and set men. DeCamp's aide sat out of camera range, arms propped up lazily on a chair.

DeCamp claimed that a panelist's stack of studies would be useless unless his bill passed. Suddenly, with the finesse of a stage performer, he grabbed the studies from the panelist's lap and tossed them onto the floor.

After cameras caught DeCamp flailing his arms in excitement, they zoomed in on the scattered books.

In typical DeCamp style, he had enlivened a dull moment and focused attention on himself. Before he was a senator, he had displayed the same desire for the spotlight by composing a song that begins, "Johnny D., you're the one for me."

Now, as king on the legislative floor, DeCamp frequently jumps up from his front-row seat and pivots recklessly to argue for his bills in his crisp, western-accented voice that is full of "ain'ts" and masterful pauses.

Less popular

Hard working, intelligent and ambitious, he could be a strong candidate for the U.S. Senate or for governor. But a poll he had conducted in February revealed that he was less popular than Gov. Charles Thone or U.S. Sen. Edward Zorinsky, who are both running again this year, so DeCamp backed out of his plans to run for either office this year.

"I feel old because I haven't gotten to where I've been wanting to be by now, like the U.S. Senate," he said. "I have not anything of what I've wanted, only a fraction."

At age 40, he is trying to hold onto what he refers to as that "fraction." He is campaigning for his fourth four-year term as a legislator, and he says he thinks it will be a tough race.

Why does a man, who won his first state legislative race long distance while serving in Vietnam and who has sponsored more bills than other senators in the past few years, fear that his incumbency may not be an advantage in November's election?

"I'm controversial," he says.

His trickery, rudeness and ambition sometimes make him appear as a shorter J.R. Ewing, wielding power and drawing criticism.

But he earns his power by hard work. For the second year, DeCamp has introduced or co-sponsored more bills than any other senator. His 39 bills this year outdo his 29-bill effort last year.

Record limited

Only five of his bills were passed this year, and one of those was vetoed. However, his success record this year is limited compared to the past, and others still hail him as the most effective senator.

Even during his first session in 1971, DeCamp sponsored enough bills that he was able to get some controversial legislation passed, Bellwood Sen. Loran Schmit said. Schmit has been a legislator for 14 years.

"Most of his bills we were able to stop," Schmit said. "But it's like spraying lice on a steer. You can't get them all."

DeCamp was named "most effective senator" by seven of 18 senators who participated in a survey last year. The survey, conducted by a UNL journalism student, showed that in assessing effectiveness, senators gave the most weight to "works hard" and "gathers facts and presents them persuasively."

By working long hours, DeCamp collects the ammunition he needs to pass bills. Often in his Capitol office by 6:30 a.m., he rarely leaves until 8 or 9 at night. Even in the off-session, he maintains a seven-day-a-week pace.

His administrative aid, Barb Lococo says, "There's always 10,000 things on his mind and he can still keep going."

With such a schedule, he may appear

married to politics, but his human wife accepts this obsession.

Proud of him

"He likes his politics so I cannot stop him," said Nga, his Vietnamese wife of four years. "I want him to have his freedom, so I cannot say anything. I feel proud of him."

Admitting that he doesn't spend much time with Nga and their daughter, Jennifer Bao Chau, DeCamp says: "Tragically, I

In 1970, as an Army captain in Vietnam, he became the first American to run for public office while on duty in Vietnam. And the first to succeed.

Crediting his victory partly to the national publicity from the campaign's novelty, he said he sent 20,000 letters postage-free to people in his district.

"I won the first election without setting foot in the United States," he said.

Since then, he has refused to become entrenched in either political party, and

DeCamp's "unconventional" methods for passing legislation.

"John has the ability to kind of move around the rules to get things done," Fowler said. "But he will stand up and explain what he wants to do. He can't do it without the Legislature's support."

Sometimes, however, DeCamp is too tricky for his own good. In 1980, he said, he was trying to point out loopholes in the state's accountability law for public officials by spending almost \$19,000 of his own campaign funds for such items as South African gold coins, home mortgage payments, aquariums for his office, a medical bill and office equipment, including a microwave.

Although some senators still doubt the motive behind those purchases, DeCamp insists he told his colleagues beforehand that he would show the law's faults. Since then, he has sold some of the items.

"He doesn't think through things sometimes," Wesely said of the incident. "That's where he gets in trouble. His public image is tarnished. That's the problem he has, and he doesn't recognize that as a problem."

DeCamp's image was tarnished recently because newspapers reported he hasn't paid \$1,901.21 in personal taxes and \$12,000 to \$14,000 in property taxes.

A notice of his personal taxes were published, along with the unpaid taxes of others, in an Antelope County newspaper. DeCamp said the notice was printed for "malicious, vindictive purposes" by Sheriff Vernon Hixson, who DeCamp says is trying to damage his re-election campaign.

Feuded since 1978

Since 1978, the two have feuded because the senator was in charge of a legislative committee that studied the criminal investigations of law officials, DeCamp said.

"The sheriff just plain has his reasons for trying to hurt me," DeCamp said.

However, Hixson denied being upset about the studies. Unpaid taxes are published every year, he said, and DeCamp's debts date back to 1977.

DeCamp says that the property taxes, published in an Omaha newspaper story were "falsely attributed as owed by me" because his property is in litigation.

The taxes are owed on two apartment buildings, one in Neligh and one in O'Neill. Because he hasn't paid the taxes, a court has appointed a Neligh attorney to sell the buildings if DeCamp doesn't pay the taxes by June 4.

"Anyone in business, particularly agriculture, is hurting like hell, and I'm one of them," DeCamp said. He owns farm land around Neligh.

But Hixson says DeCamp's excuses won't pay his taxes.

"He just wants to toot his horn and get a little sympathy," Hixson said. "He'll try to do what's good for DeCamp. He's just digging himself deeper into a hole."

DeCamp dug himself into another hole once before he was a senator. As a *Lincoln Star* reporter in 1967, he lost \$416 and almost forfeited his job by winning a bet that the 4-H Grand Champion lamb would bring a record price at the Nebraska State Fair.

In attempting to win his bet with fellow reporters, he said, he bid on the lamb to put the price above the previous record.

He said he thought he was safe in bidding because reporters had told him the bidding was rigged. A certain businessman, he had been told, was to win the bid, and thus get front-page publicity.

But auctioneers mistook him as the buyer's representative, he said.

Spending the \$416 he barely had, gaining a lamb he didn't want and angering his boss for making the news rather than reporting it, DeCamp said the move hurt his later attempts at getting student aid for law school.

DeCamp has developed image problems from more than just an unsuccessful lamb scheme. To some, he appears rude.

Renee Wessels, his former legislative aide, said she respects DeCamp, but was offended when he called her "honey" and "sweetheart," and treated her in a sexist way.

"As a professional woman, I resented that and took every opportunity to tell him so," she said. "It's very intimidating and puts you on the spot."

Sometimes speaking in sexist terms, DeCamp was quoted in the senator effectiveness survey mentioned earlier, as saying:

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don't think I'm very family oriented. Maybe I'm career oriented, whatever that means. I don't get great excitement out of being with the family."

Instead, he says, politics is his "recreation." In the past, DeCamp has worked hard at other ventures.

While taking above-average class loads at UNL in the mid-1960s, he also worked full-time. He worked first for an animal hospital, then for the Lincoln Police Department and later for the *Lincoln Star*. At the *Star*, he was a night police reporter for 3½ years.

By maintaining a high grade average, completing certain degree requirements and scoring high on an admissions test, DeCamp was able to spend his fourth year of undergraduate study in his first year of law school. He received his bachelor's degree in philosophy and a law degree within six years, one year less than usual.

Before that, at age 18, without formal training, but having been raised by parents in the well-drilling business, he took over the job of a geologist in Bandar Shahpur, Iran, when he was traveling abroad.

He spent several years traveling around the world, earning his way by doing odd jobs on the trip.

Given promotion

Hired as the geologist's assistant, DeCamp was promoted when he rigged a coat hanger to recover an expensive electronic device that the geologist dropped down a well during a drinking bout. The geologist, who was fired, worked for a Greek water company that dug wells for American military bases.

DeCamp said he was responsible for running a crew that located water and dug wells. The company identified him as a geohydrologist, he said.

"I was kind of a quick learner," he explained.

DeCamp is more likely to blaze a new trail than follow a well-traveled road. Even his path to the Nebraska Legislature was a first.

prefers to be called a "free spirit."

Although he now is a registered Republican, he has changed party affiliation twice.

In 1971 he became a Democrat because, he said, people would listen more readily to a Democrat than a Republican about mistakes made in the Vietnam War.

Tough election year

But he reclaimed Republicanism in 1974 because, he said, his dying father told him the party was part of his heritage. He switched even though the time was "between the primary and general elections in an incredibly tough election" year for the state senator.

His party alternating didn't win him the nomination for the U.S. Senate in 1972 nor for the U.S. House of Representatives in 1976 during primaries. But he said his lack of experience was more to blame than his political party record.

Now more experienced, DeCamp has a way of spotting deception that makes him valuable in the Legislature, Sen. Schmit said. He also has developed his own connivery in dealing with bills.

Charging that DeCamp often steals other senators' ideas, Schmit said DeCamp "copies faster than anybody I know."

Not true, says DeCamp. He said he sponsors a wide variety of bills because he would "rather have them in decent form than on a yellow pad thought up on the legislative floor."

"Usually people approach me and ask me to sign their bills," he said.

However, after being asked by Lincoln Sen. Don Wesely for support on energy bills, DeCamp has "eclipsed Wesely in sponsoring energy legislation within the last few years," Schmit said.

But DeCamp insists that his approach to energy is different from Wesely's, even though Wesely has co-sponsored all of his energy bills.

Unconventional methods

Lincoln Sen. Steve Fowler praised