

Senators cross party lines for collaboration

By JOSH KNAUB
Staff writer

When Republican Chuck Hagel introduced campaign finance reform legislation, he had an important ally from the outset: Democrat Bob Kerrey.

While many in the state may be surprised that Nebraska Sens. Kerrey and Hagel would collaborate on an national issue like campaign finance reform, sources close to them say cooperation defines the relationship between the two senators.

Jody Ryan, Kerrey's press secretary, said the two are natural allies on some issues.

"They work together on issues that affect the state," Ryan said.

The relationship between Kerrey and Hagel goes deeper than Nebraska issues, though.

Ryan said Hagel and Kerrey were friends before either was elected to the Senate.

Kerrey and Hagel first met and worked together in a setting where partisan politics meant little. Both were serving on a board appointed to help Vietnam veterans affected by Agent Orange, a hazardous chemical used to clear foliage during the Vietnam War.

Now colleagues in a body where partisan politics often overshadow action, Hagel and Kerrey are once again working together on an issue they say is more important than being in the party line.

In a telephone interview Wednesday, Kerrey said he hoped the

bill introduced by Hagel would be a step in the right direction.

"We are looking for the right solution," Kerrey said. "And the right solution now is one that will attract 60 votes."

It takes 60 votes to override a filibuster in the Senate. A recent campaign finance reform bill introduced by Sens. John McCain (R-Ariz.) and Russ Feingold (D-Wis.) failed because of a filibuster.

Kerrey was optimistic about the passage of Hagel's bill, which he signed as an initial co-sponsor.

"Chuck may have the vehicle for campaign finance reform to pass," Kerrey said.

In a statement introducing his campaign finance reform bill, Hagel said the bill was in the best interest of Americans.

"Changing the way federal campaigns are financed is inevitable. The American people will demand it," Hagel said.

He said he was disappointed the Senate had been prevented from debating campaign finance reform.

The reforms proposed in Hagel's campaign finance reform bill are more modest than those in the McCain-Feingold bill defeated this year.

Hagel's bill would require more reporting of campaign fund raising and campaign spending.

It also puts a \$60,000 cap on "soft money," the money given to political parties for party-building activities by individuals and organizations. "Soft money" donations are currently unlim-

ited. The bill raises the amount of money individuals and political action committees can give in "hard money," money given to candidates and political parties for election spending. The dollar limits now in place have not changed since they were instituted in 1974.

Although it is too early to tell if the bill will pass, Sen. Mitch McConnell (R-Ky.), the chief nemesis of the McCain-Feingold bill, has given the bill modest praise.

Kerrey said he and Hagel had worked together on issues such as crop insurance, trade sanctions and maintaining Omaha's Offutt Air Force Base.

"We are good friends," Kerrey said. "I like (Hagel). I admire him."

Although the two share a friendship and a mutual admiration, they are not afraid to disagree.

Deb Fiddelke, Hagel's press secretary, said the pair took a different approach to a number of issues.

"They have a philosophically different approach to the role of government," she said. "Bob Kerrey is a liberal Democrat, and Chuck Hagel is a Republican."

But for Kerrey, disagreement about issues does not impede friendship.

"Disagreement is not unpleasant," Kerrey said.

Ann Boyle, chairwoman of the Nebraska Democratic Party, said both Hagel and Kerrey were effective and prominent in their roles as senators.

She said both were also somewhat unconventional, sometimes taking a

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SEN. CHUCK HAGEL
R-Nebraska

different stand than leaders within their parties.

"Both have taken party leaders to task," Boyle said. "Hagel has criticized the Republican leadership, and Kerrey has taken stands against President Clinton."

Boyle said she had been impressed by the cooperation of Nebraska's senators and with how they handled their differences.

She said the two maintained a relationship while remaining loyal to their parties. Kerrey supported fellow Democrat Ben Nelson during Hagel's 1996 Senate campaign.

"It would be an incredible news story if Chuck Hagel endorsed Bob Kerrey for Senate," Boyle said.

UNL Political Science Professor John Hibbing said the relationship between Kerrey and Hagel, while impressive, was not unheard of.

He said many states elected a senator from each party. Nineteen states are represented in the Senate by one Democrat and one Republican.

He said both Hagel and Kerrey

would gain political standing by supporting Hagel's bill.

"It's good for them both," Hibbing said. "Both are trying to do something."

Hibbing said partial cooperation by same-state senators from opposing parties was often a reality but that bitter disagreements could also develop.

"Feuds are common, especially on judicial appointments," he said.

Kerrey said such a feud would not split himself and Hagel.

"It's like when you have a good friend you don't discuss politics with," Kerrey said. "That friendship will weather any political storm."

Omtvedt will leave a legacy after retirement

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and I suppose that is why I enjoy administration now."

Omtvedt's days as vice chancellor for the Institute of Agriculture and Natural Resources are numbered. After announcing his retirement last July, Omtvedt is preparing to give up his position in June 2000.

But even though he is leaving the campus he has been a fixture of for 25 years, Omtvedt knows he won't be able to leave for good.

"I plan to be very active," Omtvedt said. "I might pick up a few assignments here and there."

In his blood

It's no wonder Omtvedt's dedication to agriculture runs so deep.

When you ask his wife, Wanda, for an explanation, she tells it to you simply.

"He was raised on a farm," she said. "He knew from the beginning he wanted to work in agriculture."

Growing up in Rice Lake, Wis., Omtvedt used the earnings he gained from his flock of sheep and other livestock to pay his way through college.

"After four years I had more money in the bank than I started with because of the livestock operation," Omtvedt said.

Omtvedt brags about being the grand champion winner at the Eau Claire Livestock market show. He talks about how his livestock sold for \$1.30 a pound - which was good "back then."

Of course, Omtvedt remembers the bad times along with the good. He was born in 1935 during the Great Depression. The first house his parents bought cost \$2,000. It was repossessed from the original owners, stood vacant for a number of years and eventually sold to his family at a sheriff's sale.

Even after the family bought the house, there were no guarantees it would remain theirs, Omtvedt said.

"It was only \$2,000, but it was borrowed," he said. "My folks didn't talk about it much, but we could certainly sense there was always concern about where the next dollar would come from."

Omtvedt still remembers clearly walking into the house for the first time. Snow leaked from the roof inside

the house onto the wood floors causing them to buckle.

"I can still see that buckle through there," Omtvedt said.

Yet the financial uncertainty his family felt when he was young didn't discourage Omtvedt.

Instead, he enrolled at the University of Wisconsin at Madison as an animal science major and became the first in his family to get a college degree.

Spreading knowledge

Growing up during hard times for farm families has given Omtvedt the inspiration to do the job he has had at the University of Nebraska for the last 25 years.

He's seen other farmers suffer the same trials his family did. Omtvedt recalls the 1980s as a time when many students graduated from the university and immediately went home and expanded their farming operations.

"It was the wrong time to do that," Omtvedt said. "They ended up losing a great deal."

"We want to prevent that from happening."

Omtvedt set out to look for ways to help farmers stay afloat in an ever-changing industry - an industry that one in four families in Nebraska relies on for its main source of income.

One of the chief means of keeping farmers moving forward is having an extensive research base at the university level, Omtvedt said.

With research, it is possible for farmers to find ways to diversify their operations. With corporations rapidly becoming a presence in farming, diversification is essential, Omtvedt said.

"Our goal is to have a diverse economic base," he said. "But we can't move out of agriculture and into other areas without a high degree of probability that it is going to work."

In order to further research during his tenure, Omtvedt has relied on deans and people in departments to look for ways to bring in extensive amounts of funding.

So far, Omtvedt feels his team has been successful.

"I'm proud of the fact it's bringing in external dollars into programs that are important to Nebraska," he said. "And it has meaning - we're not just doing research for the sake of doing

research."

Darrell Nelson, the dean and director of the agricultural research division, said Omtvedt's dedication to research shows his dedication to Nebraskans.

"He's got a broad vision for doing what we need to do to provide new knowledge for Nebraskans," Nelson said. "He's very thoughtful about how we can enhance our resources to do a better job for Nebraskans."

Omtvedt and others have also recognized that skills students need to be successful in agriculture professions have changed. During his time at UNL, professors have started putting emphasis on the importance of business, management and communication skills.

"When students leave here today they are much more society-ready than they were when the institute was first formed," he said.

Lasting Legacies

Omtvedt knows you don't spend 25 years at a place without leaving some kind of legacy.

As for what he will be remembered for, Omtvedt hopes it is uniting the two campuses - a goal he has worked steadily for during his time at UNL.

To fulfill his vision, Omtvedt became a key player in the building of the George W. Beadle Center for Genetics and Biomaterials Research.

Then he convinced everyone it should be on the edge of City Campus.

The center required many faculty members and the biochemistry department to move from East Campus to City Campus.

Alan Moeller, assistant vice chancellor to Omtvedt, said the center was Omtvedt's biggest contribution to uniting the university.

"He insisted it be located on City Campus," Moeller said. "He wanted it to serve as a bridge between the two campuses."

Omtvedt took other steps to unite the campuses. UNL's nationally known agribusiness program is a result of the College of Business Administration and the College of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources working together.

The environmental studies major is a result of a partnership between the

College of Arts and Sciences and CASNR.

"There's a much smaller gap between the people in the institute and people in other components in the university," Omtvedt said. "But it is something we need to continue to put a lot of emphasis on."

Distance education is another area Omtvedt has influenced. His efforts led to the founding of a distance-education consortium of 57 universities that will celebrate its 10th anniversary this year.

Omtvedt also served as vice chancellor for extended education for two years.

Chancellor James Moeser said Omtvedt's other legacy was his work with distance education.

Moeser said his dedication to it shows where his commitment lies.

"He has a strong engagement with Nebraska and its community," he said.

Nearing the end

Omtvedt is spending his last months in his office in Agriculture Hall.

But if looming retirement is supposed to change how hard you work, Omtvedt doesn't know that.

"He sees it as a long way off," Moeller said. "He's not going to coast."

But come June 2000, the year he has been planning on retiring much of his working life, Omtvedt feels he will be ready to pass on the job.

After being in the position through five chancellors and long enough to hire every dean and director in the institute, Omtvedt knows he's leaving behind the best people.

"You get to a point where you feel you've made the best contribution you can in terms of people," Omtvedt said. "Now it's time to bring in some new people with new ideas and new blood."

Omtvedt plans on traveling, spending time with his children, who live in Kearney and Kansas City, volunteering and participating in civic activities.

Omtvedt will do all of that while being a university outsider for the first time since college.

It's something Omtvedt can feel at peace about.

"I have no regrets, and I'm very optimistic about the university and the direction we are headed."



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