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A Liberal Wit Builds Bridges to the G.O.P.

By **DAVID M. HERSZENHORN**

WASHINGTON — Representative Barney Frank, the ruffled, cantankerous chairman of the Financial Services Committee, plopped down on a leather bench off the House floor last week. After two months of trying to win Republican support for his bill to help homeowners at risk of foreclosure, he had come up short.

The White House had just threatened a veto.

But Mr. Frank, the [Massachusetts](#) Democrat and the most prominent gay member of Congress, who always seems on the verge of an outburst, was more philosophical than combustible as he explained the administration's opposition.

Between an economic [stimulus package](#) and the Federal Reserve's rescue of Wall Street, he said, "they have been pushed into accepting a lot of government help for the market."

"People aren't good at doing things they dislike," he added.

Then, in a flash of trademark wit, he said that asking the White House to support more government intervention was "like asking me to judge the Miss America contest — if your heart's not in it, you don't do a very good job."

With relations between the White House and the Democratic Congress growing more acidic as the presidential election approaches, Mr. Frank, 68 and in his 14th term, has emerged as a key deal-maker, an unlikely bridge between his party's left-wing base and the free-market conservatives in the administration, particularly Treasury Secretary [Henry M. Paulson Jr.](#)

In the process, Mr. Frank has won praise, even from some Republican colleagues in the House who generally disagree with his politics but say he has treated them with a fair hand and an eye toward compromise.

Mr. Frank has ascended to his powerful committee chairmanship at a critical time, with the economy in turmoil and housing, the issue he is most passionate about, on center stage. And it is with great glee, usually to emphasize a centrist position on an issue, that he quotes Republican warnings in a 2006 campaign advertisement that he would pursue a "radical homosexual agenda" were Democrats to win control of Congress.

It is a role he clearly relishes but also one that is testing his impatience, which even allies say can lead to impulsiveness, and his ability to control his sharp tongue, which can be amusing but also downright mean.

Longtime friends and colleagues say Mr. Frank is more self-assured than he was in 1989 when he admitted hiring a male prostitute as a personal aide; the man had run an escort service from Mr. Frank's apartment without his knowledge.

And yet, they say, while his hair is thinner and his paunch a bit flabbier, he has not mellowed much from a decade ago, when he emerged as one of President Clinton's fiercest defenders during impeachment proceedings.

Mr. Frank is as close a contemporary as Speaker [Nancy Pelosi](#) has in Congress, born just five days after her. He has been a point man for the Democratic leadership not just on housing, but on the economic stimulus package approved in February and on a bill outlawing workplace discrimination against gay men and lesbians approved last fall.

Many say they also respect his zest for cutting a deal and, indeed, Mr. Frank still hopes to reach one on the housing legislation. To appeal to the White House, he has made numerous revisions, including dropping a plan to have the government serve as a clearinghouse for auctioning bundles of refinanced mortgages.

Within the administration, where some high-level officials privately refer to him as “scary smart,” no one is underestimating him. After the House approved his bill on Thursday, though without enough votes to override a veto, Mr. Frank quickly went on the offensive, seeking to undercut the administration’s argument that homeowners in trouble should have known better.

“No dumb people got America into this problem,” he snapped. “You had to be really smart to understand collateralized debt obligation derivatives.”

Mr. Frank, who holds degrees from Harvard and Harvard Law School, understands collateralized debt obligations.

What vexes the administration, at times, is that he also holds strong liberal feelings about what he views as the government’s top obligations — to aid the poor and protect victims of discrimination, to police the markets and, in the case of as many as two million Americans at risk of losing their homes, to offer a helping hand if one is needed.

Some Republicans say it is a mistake to typecast Mr. Frank.

“I think that Barney is misunderstood in some quarters as just being a hard-bound ideological liberal,” said [Michael G. Oxley](#), the former congressman from Ohio who preceded Mr. Frank as chairman of the Financial Services Committee, “when in fact his legislative career has been really full of accomplishment and understanding of how markets work and how systems work.”

Mr. Oxley, a Republican, said that in the current Congress, Mr. Frank had “really stepped up and filled a void.”

“Just the fact that he was willing to step in and forge a relationship with Hank Paulson, to try to get things done, I think that’s always been Barney’s strength,” he said.

Mr. Paulson has said that when he arrived in Washington, he was surprised to discover Mr. Frank’s keen understanding of Wall Street, given his lack of work experience in the private sector. In an interview, Mr. Paulson said he had enjoyed Mr. Frank’s penchant for brokering deals.

“Because he is looking to get things done and make a difference, he focuses on areas of agreement and tries to build on those,” Mr. Paulson said. “He doesn’t waste anybody’s time, your time or his.”

And, he added, “It’s always more fun to work with someone who has got a sense of humor.”

A veteran of parliamentary battles, Mr. Frank is a master of procedural weaponry. When a tactic by Republicans backfired and stripped out provisions that they had wanted, Mr. Frank initially refused to let them fix it.

“If you want to look at this as one big circus, today is the day that the gentleman from Alabama gets to clean up after the

elephants,” he said, referring to Representative Spencer Bachus, the ranking Republican on his committee. “And I mean elephants.”

During debate on the bill, a measure to provide debt relief to impoverished countries, he won praise from Republicans.

“Barney has been very fair,” said Representative [Dana Rohrabacher](#) of California and one of the most conservative members of the House. “I think that I have been treated more fairly, and a number of my Republican colleagues have been treated more fairly, since the Democrats have become the majority than I was treated by my own leadership.”

Mr. Frank politely interjected, “I know the gentleman joins me in looking forward to continued years of such treatment.”

Such friendly banter was a far cry from the day in 1995 when Representative [Dick Arme](#)y of Texas, the Republican majority leader, referred to him as “Barney Fag” in a radio interview.

Mr. Frank, who was born and raised in New Jersey, where his father owned a truck stop, often speaks eloquently about the discrimination experienced by gay men and lesbians.

“I used to be someone subject to this prejudice, and, through luck, circumstance, I got to be a big shot,” he said during debate on the employment nondiscrimination bill in November. “I am now above that prejudice. But I feel an obligation to 15-year-olds dreading to go to school because of the torments, to people afraid that they will lose their job in a gas station if someone finds out who they love.”

Other times, though, Mr. Frank’s impatience and sharp tongue take over.

When Representative Shelley Moore Capito, Republican of West Virginia, criticized a component of the housing bill that would give money to local governments to buy and repair foreclosed properties, saying it would not protect homeowners from foreclosure, Mr. Frank fired back that preventing foreclosures was the goal of a different bill.

“The notion that this bill doesn’t keep people out of foreclosure is true,” he said. “It doesn’t combat [global warming](#). It doesn’t get troops out of Iraq. It won’t help me lose weight. There are a lot of things this bill won’t do that I very much want to do. None of them are a reason to vote against a bill that doesn’t do what it doesn’t say it’s going to do but does what it does. What it does is go to the aid of cities that have been victimized.”

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