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Bart Stupak's decision to retire comes in wake of bruising health-care fight

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MARQUETTE, MICH. -- The former state trooper ran for Congress in 1992 with a pledge to fix the nation's health-care system. "Health care is a right," reads a slogan, in blue typeface, on [Bart Stupak's](#) first campaign pamphlet.

So it is fitting that after the Michigan Democrat's last-minute deal barring federal funding for abortions enabled a historic health-care overhaul to become law, he would decide to leave Congress. [Stupak's stand on health care](#) has brought him more vitriol this year than perhaps any other politician, and after a career spent in a beat-up Oldsmobile hopscothching a district so vast that commutes are measured in hours, not miles, he said he is simply exhausted.

"I'm at the crossroads in my own life," Stupak, 58, said in an interview here. "All those things I said in 1992, I've done. It's time to come home. It's been a hell of a ride for me, but I'm glad to step offstage now."

Stupak's announcement Friday that he would not seek reelection rippled across Washington, with Democrats expressing anxiety that his politically conservative district had become a ripe opportunity for Republicans in their bid to regain a majority in the House.

Throughout the health-care debate, the pressure on Stupak from activists on the right and left was extraordinary. Conservatives said he sold out to the Obama administration by voting for the final bill last month even though it did not contain his amendment to ban federal funding of abortions. But when he negotiated [President Obama's](#) executive order outlining prohibitions against such funding, women's groups pledged to defeat him and enlisted a Democratic primary challenger.

Stupak's stance pinched a collective nerve. His staff catalogued hundreds of calls, most from out of state, some of them from liberals and others from conservatives, but all of them angry. He received death threats by phone and fax, at home and at the office. His wife, Laurie, once unplugged the family's phone for respite.

When Rep. Randy Neugebauer (R-Texas) shouted "[Baby killer!](#)" while Stupak was on the House floor during the final health-care debate, it was especially painful. In 2000, Stupak's youngest son committed suicide using the congressman's pistol.

Elizabeth Nagelkirk, 56, an anti-abortion independent who owns a lakefront restaurant in Marquette, said she had supported Stupak until his late role in the health-care debate. "I was proud to say he was my representative," she said. "But he lost me. He was either bullied or bought, and his principles were compromised."

Now she's looking at Republican Dan Benishek, a doctor who is a favorite of the "tea party" movement. A group called the Tea Party Express made Stupak a top target in the November [midterms](#), second only to [Senate Majority Leader Harry M. Reid](#) (D-Nev.). The group's national bus tour reached Stupak's Upper Peninsula district Thursday night and is staging a half-dozen rallies here over three days.

Constituents' emissary

Asked whether he succumbed to the pressure, Stupak said: "That's not my nature. That's not who I am. I have town hall meetings that have more people than the tea party does."

If he were to seek a 10th term this fall, Stupak said, the outcome would never be in doubt. "Every time I vote, someone gets mad at me," he said. "But when it comes to November, they always vote for me."

When Obama called Stupak earlier this week, pleading with him to run for reelection and offering the full support of the White House, Stupak said he told the president: "I can win this election. I'm not worried about that. Look at my numbers. I'm fine. I'm in great shape."

"It's just this thing, Mr. President. I'm tired. It's 30-some years of public service. I haven't been home. I hate coming home, saying hello to Laurie, getting in at 1 in the morning, and I'm up and out the door at 9 o'clock, or I'm on the phone doing the radio at 6 a.m. I'm tired of that."

Stupak sees himself as an ambassador for the rural communities that make up his largely working-class district, which measures

about 490 miles from end to end and borders three of the five Great Lakes. More than 90 percent of his [constituents](#) know him by name, according to his campaign's internal polling, a rare feat for a House member.

"He's a person who understands the problems," said Tawni Ferrarini, 47, an economics professor at Northern Michigan University here. "He looks at the faces of the people behind the problems, not just statistics."

Stupak's close relationship with his fellow "Yoopers," as Upper Peninsula residents are known, explains why Obama and other Democratic leaders applied so much pressure on him to run again. [House Speaker Nancy Pelosi](#) (D-Calif.) called him several times this week, as did [Rep. Chris Van Hollen](#) (D-Md.), who runs the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee.

Stupak's anti-abortion stance is a product of his Roman Catholic upbringing. His father attended a seminary and sent him and his nine siblings to Catholic schools. For years, Stupak rented a room in the secretive Capitol Hill rowhouse known as C Street. The house has been a spiritual oasis for lawmakers living there, but it was the subject of scrutiny last year after three politicians connected to it became involved in sex scandals. Stupak was not tied to the scandals and moved out of the house several months ago, an aide said.

A family decision

[GOP](#) leaders see a golden opening in the district. Just minutes after news reports surfaced indicating that Stupak would retire, the National Republican Congressional Committee issued a statement: "After selling his soul to Nancy Pelosi, it appears that Bart Stupak finally found the courage to tell her no," NRCC spokesman [Ken Spain](#) said. "Unfortunately for Pelosi, she was unable to strong-arm Stupak one last time as she becomes increasingly aware of the fact that her hold on the Speaker's gavel is loosening by the day."

Stupak said he made his decision last weekend, while driving with his wife and their adult son, Ken, the 450 miles from their lakefront home in Menominee to Indianapolis to watch the Michigan State Spartans play in the Final Four.

The family has always made his career decisions together, and this time the Stupaks concluded that there was more to life than the Beltway grind.

Stupak said he sought counsel from Washington lawyer Bob Barnett about how to announce his decision. The congressman did not get word to his party's leaders until just hours before announcing Friday morning that he would hold a news conference later that day.

The Stupaks are a clan of three, but there used to be four. On Mother's Day in 2000, Bart and Laurie Stupak walked into their kitchen and found their 17-year-old son BJ -- a seemingly happy high school class president and football star -- dead next to the hot tub.

For months, Bart Stupak wondered where he had gone wrong as a father. He and his wife later discovered that Accutane, a prescription medication BJ had been taking to treat acne, had possible adverse psychological effects, and that there were suicides reportedly linked to the pill.

As Stupak announced his retirement at a U.S. Olympic training center here, his wife fought back tears. Nobody said BJ's name, but those who knew the story could understand. Just to the left of the podium, on a wall decorated with trophies and awards, hung a wooden plaque showing BJ in his yellow football uniform (No. 32).

"When Laurie mentioned the joys and the sorrows," Stupak said later, "BJ was right there, looking over her left shoulder. We felt his presence. That's why I had a little trouble, too. It's hard."

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