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Senior Moment

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By Dana Milbank
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There, for a final time at his Senate desk, stood [Ted Stevens](#): longest-serving Republican senator in U.S. history, shepherd of Alaska statehood, convicted felon.

"I don't have any rearview mirror," the diminutive -- and much diminished -- figure told colleagues yesterday in his farewell address. "I look only forward. And I still see the day when I can remove the cloud that currently surrounds me."

In hours of tributes on the Senate floor, the exact nature of that cloud was never described: the penny-ante corruption, the gifts and free home renovations that brought the career of this legislative legend to an ignominious end. After his conviction last month, Stevens's electoral defeat became official on Tuesday, his 85th birthday.

By the time he finished, even a few of the Democratic lawmakers and staffers were dabbing their eyes.

Few will shed tears for the irritable Stevens himself. Nor are they likely to lament the end of his politics of greedily funneling federal money to his home state. But the scene had poignancy for another reason: As the old men on both sides of the aisle rose to bid adieu to Stevens, they seemed also to be saying farewell to their era, a time when the Senate was, for better or worse, a gentlemen's club.

"We all make mistakes," Sen. [Robert Byrd](#), celebrating his 91st birthday, said from his wheelchair. "I've made more of them than I have hair follicles." The West Virginia Democrat, in failing health, read his colleague of 40 years an old Irish blessing ("May the road rise up to meet you . . .") and, with faltering speech, said, "Bless your heart, Ted. I love you." Stevens crossed the aisle and held Byrd's hand.

In a soft voice, Sen. [Daniel Inouye](#), 84, a Hawaii Democrat whom Stevens called "my brother," told colleagues that "the events of recent weeks have been less than pleasant, and at times dismal and heartbreaking. But to my friend, I say: Stand tall, Ted, because you have every good reason to do so."

Stevens is the most visible of the Old Bulls to be slain, but other Congress elders are also in their twilight. Last week, Byrd was stripped of his Appropriations Committee chairmanship because of his declining faculties. As he sat listening to the tributes yesterday, he interrupted senators with shouts of "Yes!" and "That's right!" and "You bet!" until an aide wheeled him from the chamber. "Amen!" Byrd bellowed as he rolled toward the door. "Amen!"

Things were no better for the old guard on the other side of the Rotunda. House Democrats yesterday ousted as Energy and Commerce Committee chairman the longest-serving member of the chamber:

[John Dingell](#) (Mich.), 82, who uses a wheelchair because of knee replacement. The victor, Rep. [Henry Waxman](#) (Calif.), taunted the loser in a post-vote news conference. "Seniority is important," said Waxman, a relative pup of 69, "but it should not be a grant of property rights to be chairman for three decades or more."

By the Dingell standard, the felonious Stevens was treated royally in the other chamber. The senators dispensed with a bill extending unemployment insurance in just a few minutes; the Stevens tributes, all in all, took about three hours. Twenty-two Republicans and eight Democrats came to hear Stevens's farewell; his wife and daughter sat in the first row of the public gallery.

On the floor, there were war stories. "You and I have reminisced many times over the different types of planes that you flew, primarily the old C-47, if my recollection serves me," said [John Warner](#) (R-Va.), retiring at age 81.

There was celebration of the bacon he brought to Anchorage, everything from the Trans-Alaska Pipeline to the new VA outpatient clinic in Anchorage. "No senator in the history of this country has done more for his state than Senator Ted Stevens," said Minority Leader [Mitch McConnell](#) (R-Ky.).

And there were tributes for the heck of it. "I rise now because I look around and I don't think there's any senator left on the floor that's served longer than I with him," said 76-year-old [Pete Domenici](#) (R-N.M.), before reminiscing with his colleague of 36 years about "things we shared as men."

The Senate's oldest member offered the most poignant sendoff. "Some in this town would say we've both lived too long, but a long life is a blessing for many reasons," Byrd said, struggling to turn the pages of his speech. "One learns to appreciate small, special moments and the really good things in life, like a good laugh, a good cry, a good dog, and a good meal. Politics is a rough business with lots of highs and lots of lows."

Stevens, in his brief speech, reminded everybody of his various offices: seven chairmanships and Republican whip of the Senate. He spoke of his role in history as an Eisenhower administration official working on Alaska's statehood. And he described with pride the billions in taxpayer money he diverted to his state. "Where there was nothing but tundra and forest, today there are now airports, roads, ports, water and sewer systems, hospitals, clinics, communications networks, research labs and much, much more."

The recounting of his role in history made it all the more inexplicable that Stevens, a man who controlled billions of dollars, would chuck it all for a massage chair, some Christmas lights and a deck for his Alaska chalet. With just passing reference to this "cloud," he was done. "That's it, Mr. President: Forty years distilled into a few minutes," the chairman-turned-convict said. "I yield the floor for the last time."

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