

THE FEDERAL PAGE

AuCoin: Ready to 'Kick Ankles' for Abortion Rights

Oregon Democrat Says Legal Restrictions Have Made Women 'Victims of Tyranny'

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Last summer, Rep. Les AuCoin (D-Ore.) gave what has become known as the "take names and kick ankles" speech, proclaiming that House members could no longer escape political retribution by simply voting automatically with anti-abortion forces.

Although he did not know it at that time, his speech became a signpost on the road to a new political landscape on abortion. The debate on Aug. 2 also propelled AuCoin into a public role that he already held behind the scenes: leader of House forces favoring abortion rights.

"And so, a new political era begins right now, friends," he intoned during debate on a motion by Rep. Robert K. Dornan (R-Calif.) to again deny the District of Columbia the right to spend money on abortions for poor victims of rape and incest. "Those of us who defend a woman's freedom of choice are drawing a line in the sand today, a line of decency, a line of fair play—and a line of serious politics . . .

"If you vote for those amendments, you will be held accountable in ways you have never dreamed possible at ballot boxes all over this country. The pro-choice movement is mobilized. And from this day forward, it is going to take names and kick [pause] ankles."

An hour and a half later, no one appeared more surprised than AuCoin and his allies that the House for the first time in 10 years voted down an antiabortion amendment, 219 to 206. Confirming that vote, the House on Oct. 11 voted 216 to 206 not to restrict Medicaid funding of abortion in cases of rape and incest.

"I was astounded," AuCoin said this week. "I don't think anyone dreamed we were going to win."

Abortion-rights activists and anti-abortion forces apparently all underestimated the effect of the July 3 Supreme Court ruling in a Missouri case giving states greater powers to regulate abortions.

AuCoin, 47, is often described as "boyish" by those who like him and "slick" by those who don't. But everyone can agree on one word to describe the congressman from Oregon's 1st District: "liberal."

"Liberal Democrat" is an odd fit for a district that is traditionally Republican and conservative, stretching from the affluent West Hills suburbs of Portland to coastal logging and fishing areas. In 1974, AuCoin became the first Democrat ever elected from the district. After the 1980 census added even more Republicans to his district, he barely survived two well-financed Republican challengers, but has since increased his victory margin.

AuCoin's pragmatism goes back to the Oregon Legislature, where he championed the first state land-use planning law, a concept considered anathema to most Westerners. More recently, as a member of the Appropriations subcommittee that handles the Forest Service, he dealt with an issue vital to his timber-growing district: whether the endangered spotted owl would halt timber harvesting in the north woods.

AuCoin fashioned a compromise that satisfied no one, but left almost no one angry with him, providing protection for the owl but also allowing timber-cutting to continue.

"So you handle it gingerly, and you



AuCoin, shown in his living room, was "astounded" by House switch on abortion.

honest-to-god believe as someone who had a 100 percent voting record in the last Congress with the League of Conservation Voters that the spotted owl is important . . . Having said that, it is also possible to make sure that an important industrial sector isn't obliterated."

Once President Bush vetoed the bills containing the liberalized abortion language, AuCoin championed the plan not to stage override votes and to keep the fight on hold until next year. That produced "screaming matches" with allies in the abor-

tion-rights movement, according to a Democratic leadership aide.

A main-line abortion-rights lobbyist said that most AuCoin allies now realize he was right, and "it didn't serve us well to have another vote."

AuCoin also was one of the leaders in battles against the MX missile, and led the fight that almost ousted Rep. Les Aspin (D-Wis.) as chairman of the Armed Services Committee when he failed to follow through on promises to fight the MX.

"I love to fight the vigorous fight, I really do," he said.

His role in the abortion fight has earned some enemies in his district, and he has been verbally pummeled at town meetings by protesters with such signs as crosses with dismembered dolls streaked with red paint. But AuCoin said that he has gained support in the Republican suburbs of Portland where many young GOP voters are upset with Bush's veto.

AuCoin, who marched against the Vietnam War and was an organizer for the 1968 presidential campaign of then-Sen. Eugene McCarthy (D-Minn.), traces his liberal roots to an impoverished upbringing in the desert town of Redmond, Ore.

"My dad walked out of the family when I was 5, so my mother was the sole support of my family," he said. "It was a combination of her hard work as a waitress in a non-union shop at something I think like 35 bucks a week plus tips, and certain farsighted federal government programs like Social Security survivor benefits and the GI Bill that enabled me to succeed."

"It was that combination of thoughtful government help and hard work that enabled me to become the first male in my entire family to have not only graduated from college, but to have ever completed high school as a kid. And I want to tell you something, that leaves a lasting impression on you."

His upbringing also led to his abortion-rights advocacy, he said.

"I think a lot of where I come from as an adult and also as a politician comes from that kid who was raised in Redmond," he said. "I lived in a one-bedroom, wood-frame house with no foundation behind a Piggly Wiggly grocery store. And I always felt that I was from the wrong side of the tracks. You leave that experience and you identify, I think, with people who you perceive to be victims of the exercise of influence or power."

"Having seen a woman, my mother, struggle through those years, I guess there's some subliminal identification with that whole feminine thing. But I do identify with victims. And women in this country today have been victims of tyranny for 10 years."