

Casey Moving Into the Batting Circle

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Nature notoriously abhors a vacuum. Not surprisingly, so does politics. Indeed political power vacuums are filled just as certainly as they are in any state of nature. Sometimes the process is quick and decisive, other times gradual and obscure.

Recently our nation witnessed the first type, in which the transition of presidential power was swift and definitive - best evoked by Barack Obama escorting George Bush to his helicopter ride into history, leaving Obama instantly with all the powers of the presidency and Bush none. But other transitions of power are often less perceptible, but ultimately just as consequential. A case in point involves the slow but very real transition of political power now ongoing in Pennsylvania.

In the Keystone State the power vacuum is created not by an election, but for the lack of one. The term-limited uber Governor Ed Rendell cannot run again for governor, thus eroding the enormous power base he has built in Pennsylvania. Stepping into that vacuum is U.S. Senator Bob Casey, poised to become the state's next kingmaker and political powerhouse.

At first blush, the new role might seem strange for the modest, mild-mannered Casey. For much of Casey's adult life he has yearned to follow his father into the governor's mansion. The younger Casey devoted his earlier years to his dad's political career, becoming along the way an astute observer of the state's politics as well as its political history.

Casey's first foray into elective office in fact was to follow in his father's footsteps to become state auditor general in 1996. Reelected handily, but still bidding his time and constitutionally unable to succeed himself, he ran and won election as state treasurer. Casey's first opportunity to seek the governorship came in 2002, but Ed Rendell, using his enormous popularity in the southeastern part of the state and his prodigious fundraising ability, drubbed him in a primary campaign that even Casey admitted was not his finest moment.

Seemingly blocked until Rendell's tenure as governor ended, Casey's fortune took a different turn. Eager to take down Rick Santorum, the *bete noir* of both national and state Democrats, Casey was solicited by Senate Democratic leaders and Rendell to take on Santorum. Defeating Santorum in 2006 seemed a likely possibility, but few at the outset of the campaign expected Casey to win by a stunning 17 points against the incumbent, making him a politician to reckon with.

Casey's emerging role, however, is not based exclusively on Rendell's scheduled departure from office. Nor even to his relative youth (he is 48) or his solid prospects for a long tenure in the Senate and likely future role in the Senate leadership. Instead, Casey's new prominence is explained by the somewhat risky decision he took in March of last year to endorse Barack Obama - a decision he took when virtually the entire Democratic leadership of the state, headed by Rendell, was supporting Hillary Clinton.

Many questions arose as to why Casey made this decision; even six weeks before the state primary and following in the wake of the Jeremiah Wright controversy, it seemed probable that Clinton would romp Obama

in the Pennsylvania contest. Some argued that Casey endorsed Obama because of the enmity between his father and the Clintons. But far more likely Casey - who immediately upon entering the Senate had begun a close relationship with Obama - made the decision on other grounds.

In any case, it is almost a certainty that the special relationship between the two men, molded perhaps by generational affinities, and abortion aside, by remarkable ideological similarities, will make Casey the state's most powerful Democrat with the new administration. Obama will be able to count on Casey's support for his domestic and foreign policy agenda - undoubtedly making him one of the president's most loyal congressional supporters.

Casey's personal and political ties to Obama will translate into easy access to the White House, giving him special consideration for appointments and patronage, as well as the many other benefits that come from such access. This in fact is a view reinforced by the *New York Times* in its recent Sunday magazine's photo display that included Casey among the 52 power players inside and outside of the Obama administration.

Additionally, by virtue of his party's control of the presidency federal judicial appointments in the state will shift mostly from Senator Arlen Specter to Casey. And all of this plays out while the term-limited Rendell remains locked-down in Harrisburg, facing the state's most severe fiscal crisis in recent history, forced to watch the calendar mark out his final months in office and the struggle to succeed him.

For Bob Casey himself the transition to power broker could mean his life long dream to be governor will not be realized. Instead, he is likely now to concentrate on a long senate career - building on seniority and his relationship with Obama. This may not be a role that will come hard for him. As U.S. senator since 2006, Casey has been very loyal to his party, voting with them more than 90 percent of the time. Even his pro-life, pro-gun positions have not generally diminished his standing among party leaders and activists in the state.

But Casey's power and influence will not be limited to Washington. Unlike most other U.S. senators in the modern era Casey will have a large role back in Pennsylvania as well. His reach from the Senate will be long and will exert enormous influence over state politics as well. He will become the go-to guy for Washington matters as well as a power broker in the state. In doing so, Casey is likely to become Pennsylvania's most powerful U.S. senator in at least a hundred years.

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