



Senate MVPs: Beyond Quarterbacks

Republicans' "giant killer" shares limelight with Democrats' second-in-command.

By Alexis Simendinger

The difference between Washington insiders and average Americans shines like sun through fog when the cognoscenti are asked which senator they most admire. *National Journal's* Insiders skipped over far more famous names in settling upon two lieutenants from the Republican and Democratic leadership teams who may be poised to assume larger roles within their parties.

Republican Sen. John Thune, the lanky, 48-year-old "giant killer" who defeated Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle in 2004, is a household name back in South Dakota but is little known nationally. Although Thune holds the No. 4 post in the GOP leadership as chairman of the Senate Republican Policy Committee, he travels home most weekends and rarely appears on the major TV news programs. His anonymity frees him to jog through Washington virtually unnoticed most mornings.

Many Republican Insiders say they see in Thune the qualities that could one day shape a new era of GOP governance: charismatic conservatism grounded in core principles and sensible policies that don't come off as knee-jerk or obstructionist. Upon learning that he had topped the most-admired lists of his party's Congressional and Political Insiders, Thune said, "It's nice, obviously, but Republicans have a good [Senate] team."

He added, "Even though we are deep in the minority here, I think [being selected] really does reflect that we are functioning effectively as a team, and hopefully people are noticing."

On the Democratic side, Insiders most admire the No. 2 Democrat within the leadership, Senate Majority Whip Richard Durbin of Illinois, because of what they see as his effectiveness as Majority Leader Harry Reid's right hand. The Senate's importance to President Obama's policy agenda has showcased Durbin's communications skills and expanded appreciation for his fortitude in helping Reid corral 60 senators on key votes. With Reid facing a tough fight for re-election next year, Durbin is getting new scrutiny from Insiders as a potential majority leader in 2011.

Like Durbin, Reid earned the "most admired senator" thumbs-up from 11 percent of Democratic Political Insiders. Reid struck out among Democratic Congressional Insiders, all of whom are lawmakers. Durbin came in first by attracting 24 percent of their votes. "I demand a recount!" Durbin responded jovially when *National Journal* summarized the results for him during a quick inter-

view, steps from the Senate floor. "I'm humbled by [the outcome] because I serve with so many great people," he said. "This is the greatest job in America, and I'm honored to represent my state."

Insiders on both sides of the aisle commended senators whom they view as leading even when doing so is politically uncomfortable. Senate mavericks such as Joe Lieberman, ID-Conn., and Oklahoma Republican Tom Coburn, a physician nicknamed "Dr. No" for his unremitting opposition to federal spending and earmarks, definitely have some Insider fans.

Lieberman, who caucuses with the Democrats but votes with Republicans on many matters, ranked second to Thune as the senator most admired by GOP Insiders. In his own caucus, the 2000 Democratic vice presidential nominee came up empty, though. The Insider survey results made Lieberman laugh out loud when *National Journal* caught up with him in between a round of votes on health care amendments. "You've made my day," he said, chuckling. GOP Insiders revel in the Connecticut senator's pesky willingness to do what they described as "right," especially when he parts company with his liberal colleagues.

"I've always felt that to get something done you have to work with people in both parties," Lieberman said. "The fact that a number of senators would say that [about me] means a lot to me, and I hope will help me be a more effective senator."

A handful of senators gathered Insider applause from both sides of the aisle. They include Republicans Lindsey Graham of South Carolina, Judd Gregg of New Hampshire, and John McCain of Arizona. Robert Byrd, D-W.Va., a skillful exploiter of parliamentary rules, earned two votes from his party and one from a Republican. Democrat Ron Wyden of Oregon won kudos from both parties' Political Insiders, a feat that cheered him immensely. One Democratic political operative lauded

Wyden for crafting a bipartisan health care bill early in the process and for coming up with innovative approaches to problems. A GOP politico echoed the compliments in nearly the same words.

"When you hear something like that, it makes you want to work harder," Wyden said with a big grin. "I've come to feel that you should always try to find as much common ground as you can, knowing that lots of senators are trying to wrestle with their principles and still do what's right for the country. It's easier said than done." ■



John Thune



Richard Durbin

PHOTOS BY UZ LINCHE

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Which senator do you most admire?

Democrats

Congressional Insiders

- 1. **Richard Durbin** 24%
- 2. **Edward Kennedy** 12
- 3. **Carl Levin** 9
- 4. **Sherrod Brown** 6
- 4. **Russell Feingold** 6
- 4. **John Kerry** 6
- 4. **Barbara Mikulski** 6

Total votes: 33. Other top vote-getters: Robert Byrd, Tom Harkin, Daniel Inouye, Amy Klobuchar, Patrick Leahy, Bernie Sanders, Charles Schumer, Olympia Snowe, Mark Warner, Jim Webb, 3%.

Political Insiders

- 1. **Richard Durbin** 11%
- 1. **Harry Reid** 11
- 3. **Tom Harkin** 7
- 3. **John Kerry** 7
- 3. **Charles Schumer** 7

Total votes: 85. Other top vote-getters: Christopher Dodd, Carl Levin, no one, Mark Warner, Jim Webb, 4%; Thomas Carper, Russell Feingold, Dianne Feinstein, Edward Kennedy, Blanche Lincoln, John McCain, Claire McCaskill, Mark Udall, 2%.

Republicans

Congressional Insiders

- 1. **John Thune** 21%
- 1. **Tom Coburn** 21
- 3. **Jim DeMint** 8
- 3. **Joe Lieberman** 8
- 3. **Richard Lugar** 8

Total votes: 24. Other top vote-getters: Lamar Alexander, Richard Burr, Thad Cochran, Bob Corker, Lindsey Graham, Johnny Isakson, John McCain, Jeff Sessions, 4%.

Political Insiders

- 1. **John Thune** 15%
- 2. **Joe Lieberman** 13
- 3. **Tom Coburn** 8
- 3. **Richard Lugar** 8

Total votes: 88. Other top vote-getters: Lamar Alexander, Jon Kyl, Mitch McConnell, 7%; Bob Corker, John McCain, 6%; John Cornyn, Lindsey Graham, 5%; Jim DeMint, 3%; Charles Grassley, 2%.

Durbin. "Would that he becomes the leader."

Durbin. "Displaying quietly effective leadership in the shadow of a leader who has a difficult time leading."

Reid. "He has the hardest job in Washington, and never seeks credit or the limelight. His word is his honor. He outworks everyone and never lets his ego get in the way of trying to find consensus."

Reid. "There is no more difficult job in all of government or politics. And he has done much under the most-challenging circumstances. Never gets enough credit."

Kerry. "Already stepping into Kennedy's shoes back home while playing leadership roles on foreign policy and climate change."

Kerry. "He's bounced back from the biggest disappointment a politician can probably go through."

Harkin. "Although he ran for president in 1992 as a polarizing candidate stirring up the Democratic base, he returned to the Senate and has quietly worked with Republicans and Democrats on his interest in medical research, education, and disabilities policy."

Schumer. "He can work the system with the best of them. And he's more in touch with middle-class political concerns than anyone in the Senate."

Levin. "For his down-to-earthiness and steadiness in his leadership."

Kennedy. "He put country ahead of everything else, including his own health."

Feingold. "When he takes a stand I don't agree with, I can be certain that he is following his conscience, not some political calculation."

Webb. "I think he is the rightful heir of Daniel Patrick Moynihan's unusually thoughtful approach to public policy issues: New GI Bill, prison reform—issues that no one else even thinks about."

Brown. "He's a liberal who fights for what he believes in while coming from a tough swing state."

Thune. "Keeps his head down, but is clearly building a national profile."

Thune. "He is the centrist, libertarian-style Republican the party needs for the future."

Thune. "Pragmatic, down to earth. Still more South Dakota than D.C."

Lieberman. "Doesn't care about the political consequences for doing what is right on terrorism and health care."

Coburn. "The leader in blowing the whistle on business as usual. More-senior senators are starting to follow."

Lugar. "He calls them like he sees them, and he does his homework."

Alexander. "He wants to govern as opposed to score political points. Maybe every senator would be better off if they had been a governor. I truly regret my party did not nominate him for president."

Corker. "He exhibits a kind of commonsense conservatism that is refreshing. He is not an ideologue, and is willing to find common ground if you are too."

Kyl. "Consistently one of the best-prepared, serious-minded senators on either side of the aisle."

McCain. "He didn't do the big sulk after losing. He re-engaged immediately and has supported the president where he can (Iraq) and disagreed where he must: A model of the way to lose and still make a difference."

McConnell. "Gets more done with fewer voters than most leaders in either majority or minority in my lifetime."

DeMint. "For having the guts to tell it like it is to Republicans and Democrats alike with principle and brutal candor."

Cornyn. "He had huge success recruiting candidates even before the tires fell off the Obama wagon."