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Gun control, 'nitwits' and redistricting

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 by **Steven T. Dennis and Thomas Dennison**
 Staff Writers

Nov. 15, 2002

 House speaker cries foul over
 'carpetbaggers' and distortions

ANNAPOLIS -- House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. brought home the bacon to Western Maryland for 28 years, and thought mistakenly that he would coast to an easy victory over Republican businessman Leroy Myers Jr.

Myers' apparent 72-vote win over Taylor, pending a recount, has sent shock waves through Annapolis and left many wondering why the region's voters would give up its most powerful local legislator in 100 years for a newcomer who will be in the minority if his election is certified.

"It's obviously the shock of my life," Taylor said of the election results.

The veteran lawmaker blamed a campaign of distortions from Republicans and the gun lobby, "nitwit" voters and the Court of Appeals' redistricting map for his troubles.

"The Republicans from downstate took advantage of the target that the gun lobby created against me by singling me out as a trophy to defeat," said Taylor (D-Dist. 1C) of Cumberland. "They did it with a tremendous amount of carpetbagger distortions ... [They] distorted the issue so badly that people in Washington County were convinced that I was singlehandedly trying to confiscate their guns, which was an outrage."

Del. Donald E. Murphy (R-Dist. 12A) of Catonsville was one of those carpetbaggers. He makes no apologies. Murphy -- whose district was obliterated in redistricting -- is now the chairman of the Baltimore County Republican Party and is one of Myers' most effective supporters.

"If I had my own race to run, I wouldn't have been spending my time in Western Maryland, but my district was eliminated by the redistricting committee that Cas Taylor was a part of," Murphy said. "Gee, what else was I going to do with all my spare time?"

Murphy also dismissed the complaint about carpetbagging.

"Cas Taylor can't have it both ways," said Murphy. "He can't take money from interests from all around the state, and then turn around and say that it's wrong for people from other areas of the state to oppose him."

Murphy bought a billboard in Cumberland showing Taylor with former President Bill Clinton, Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend and Senate President Thomas V. Mike Miller Jr. (D-Dist. 27) of Chesapeake Beach signing Gov. Parris N. Glendening's gun control bill in 2000.

James Purtilo, author of gun-rights newsletter Tripwire, has lambasted the speaker ever since he voted in favor of the gun control bill.

The day after the election, Purtilo issued a statement, saying, "To the punditocracy trying to explain why Myers could defeat a 28-year incumbent and member of leadership, we have this tip: the word you're trying not to say is spelled 'g-u-n.'"

Taylor also complained of other distortions of his record. He was in church in Cumberland the Sunday before the election when a group calling itself the Cumberland Historical Cemetery Society distributed fliers claiming that he backs partial-birth abortions. Taylor, a Catholic, is pro-life.

"The facts are that I have for the last eight elections the strongest endorsements of right to life groups," he said. "This is what I had to put up with."



Richard T. Meagher/The Associated Press

LeRoy E. Myers Jr. (R) makes telephone calls in his Clear Spring office the day after apparently beating House Speaker Casper R. Taylor Jr. (D) in District 1C. Taylor blamed his possible loss -- the margin was only 72 votes -- on the Maryland Court of Appeals' redistricting map.

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Uninformed voters also played a part in his defeat, Taylor said. "The Cumberland newspaper is getting calls from nitwits saying LeRoy Myers will be just as good a speaker. These poor bastards actually believed that by voting for him they were voting for speaker."

Instead, if Taylor loses the recount battle, as appears likely, Western Maryland will have lost its ultimate sugar daddy, a legislator known for his "One Maryland" philosophy that no part of the state should be left behind or forgotten when it comes to economic development.

Taylor, ironically, had helped craft a redistricting map that would have left him unopposed. But the Court of Appeals put Myers, who lives in Clear Spring, into the district. Myers won 71 percent of the vote in the Washington County portion of the district, while Taylor won 61 percent in his home Allegany County portion. The men remain 71 votes apart with 11,000 votes cast.

Myers' rebuttal

Myers told The Gazette that it was good old-fashioned politicking -- going door to door and shaking hands -- that put him in the lead, but he acknowledged that anger from gun groups such as the National Rifle Association helped.

"They were very upset," Myers said.

But Myers noted that Taylor had strong support from teachers groups, and he said some of their tactics were "pretty wicked."

He also questioned Taylor's clout.

"Give me proof of the clout," he demanded. "Beyond Rocky Gap, Canal Place and the prisons, what is there?"

Myers said most residents of the district have to travel elsewhere to find work and his experience as a contractor and a developer won over voters looking for a change.

The bottom line, Myers said, is that Taylor may have grown too complacent.

"Having the speaker has its advantages," he said, "but make sure things are taken care of at home before you go out and play."

Myers disavowed some of the tactics used against Taylor, including the partial-birth abortion fliers passed out at his church.

"Some of my supporters did things that I was not aware of," he said. "That turned me off." But he argued that it could have hurt him more than helped.

One issue Myers said helped him significantly with some voters is his opposition to slot machines, which could include placing them at a new racetrack considered for Allegany County. Taylor supports slots.

Myers also invited Taylor to call off the recount (both sides have teams of lawyers negotiating the finer points).

"There comes some time when you have to say enough's enough," Myers said. "I wouldn't want him to be seen as a sore loser."

A judge ruled Thursday that Taylor would have to post \$10,000 bond for the recount. He told The Gazette Thursday night that he intends to post the bond.

Myers also commended Taylor for his years of service and said he hopes he continues to serve the public. "I think Cas Taylor has a lot to offer."

Should he lose the recount, Taylor said he would seek to stay in state government but does not want the job of treasurer held by Nancy K. Kopp of Bethesda. "I want to continue making a difference in state government," he said.

Taylor said speculation that he might find a top job with the Ehrlich administration was "flattering," and said he would like to work in one of the areas that he made his priorities -- health care, economic development or transportation.

Just two weeks ago, confident that he would be back in Annapolis next year, Taylor unveiled a comprehensive, business-backed approach to gradually extend health care coverage to the uninsured.