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Reviews for O'Neill better in autumn of political career

WASHINGTON (AP) — Thomas Philip O'Neill Jr. remembers the night in Boston, decades ago, when he stumbled through a dull speech, returned to his seat, and the Honorable James Michael Curley, mayor and governor before he went to jail, whispered two words in his ear.

"You stank."

Now, in the twilight of his political life, the reviews are rosier for Tip O'Neill, for 34 years the congressman from the 8th District of Massachusetts, and, for the last decade — a tenure unmatched — the speaker of the House.

He's going home now, to a modest house two doors up from the one in which he was born, though many folks in the 8th, those in the barbershops and the shoeshine parlors and the veterans' halls, would argue that, at heart, he never really left.

"Oh, I guess I'll have to get an office someplace," he says, toying with the foot-long cigar he has just tamped out during a farewell session with congressional reporters. "Millie has already told me she still doesn't want me home for lunch."

O'Neill, 73, retires as the only speaker that most of his colleagues in Congress have ever known, and he leaves a legacy that looms larger than that of the fabled Sam Rayburn, in whose shadow he toiled virtually unnoticed for years. Indeed, partly by his own hand, partly by circumstance, O'Neill presided over profound changes in the character and role of the "peoples' chamber," including the elevation of the speakership, largely through courtship of the news media, to the second most visible — and powerful — job in government.

"Sam Rayburn could have walked down the streets of Spokane (Wash.) without anybody noticing him," says Democratic Rep. Thomas S. Foley of Washington, who will become House majority leader when Rep. Jim Wright of Texas moves up to O'Neill's job. "Tip O'Neill couldn't do that, and it is very unlikely that any future speaker will be anonymous to the country."

It is difficult to imagine that there was a time of relative obscurity for O'Neill, even as an equal among the 435 members of the House. Physically, he is the very model of the political boss, a cartoonist's dream: 6-foot-3, a hefty 280 pounds, with thatched, Olympian white hair, busted-plum nose, heavy lids drooping over warm, blue-gray eyes. And a friendly mug with something like a roadmap of County Cork etched from jowl to jowl.

American Express has asked him to sign on for one of those "do-you-know-me" commercials, but O'Neill,

one of the least affluent members of Congress, refused. "I thought it would possibly be cheapening the position of the speaker," he said. "I couldn't do that."

And yes, he confesses some second thoughts, regrets setting in, about his decision to leave. "Millie noticed it over the weekend," he said. "I normally talk with her about everything. And she said, 'You know, you've been awfully quiet.'"

But "Jim Wright's been behind me for 10 years," the speaker said. "A more faithful person you couldn't have. So finally, I said to myself, 'How long you gonna stay around here?' I figure it's time to get out. These fellows, Jim Wright and Tom Foley, I owe them an obligation."

O'Neill has commanded the only federal outpost of Democratic strength since the Republican capture of the White House and the Senate in 1980. He has been drawn into personal battles with President Reagan, and was targeted by the GOP as symbolizing the excesses of the past. Republicans tried especially to make him the villain of their 1982 campaign, ridiculing him with a television commercial showing a plodding fat man, wearing a Tip-alike wig, stranded aside a limousine that had run out of gas.

But just as O'Neill underestimated the president's strength and suffered major legislative defeats on Reagan's tax and spending cuts in 1981, the White House and GOP underestimated the speaker's durability. He has consistently commanded strong personal ratings in the national polls, and, to Reagan's consternation, Congress has been edging back to O'Neill's own priorities, increasing funds of health and education while trimming the Pentagon budget.

O'Neill remained in Congress for 34 years, moving up the ladder from backbencher to majority whip, to majority leader, and then to speaker in 1977.

"He held his finger in the dike and protected a whole lot of values that the country is glad now he protected," says Rep. David Obey, D-Wis. "He never forgets the whole purpose of policy is to have a positive impact on human beings. That's what he shames people into being mindful of time and again."

O'Neill isn't quite sure what he will be doing now that he's left Congress. There's a book in the works, and some speaking engagements, doubtless more golf, and likely a teaching post at Boston College. Most of all, he says, "I want a little time with Millie," his wife of 45 years.

Further investigation sought in deaths of 27 in mine fire

SALT LAKE CITY (AP) — A federal agency's conclusion that a faulty air compressor ignited the 1984 Wilberg Mine fire does not explain why 27 miners died, say union officials pressing for further investigation.

"The problem is this: The agency has focused its attention on a narrowly constructed aspect of what caused the fire," said Joe Main, director of health and safety for the United Mine Workers union.

"They are not going to address

the issue of what caused the death of 27 miners," he said.

Herschel Potter, chief investigator for the federal Mine Safety and Health Administration, led the 22-month probe. He announced preliminary findings three weeks ago, saying the fire began at a compressor that had been rigged to operate with its on-off switch and heat sensor shutoff disconnected.

Potter said from the outset that his mandate was to identify the cause of the fire, not factors that led to the miners' deaths.

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