

■ CAPITOL HILL

Republican From Michigan

Dave Camp is a quiet but effective congressman

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A coat rack stands in the corner of Rep. Dave Camp's office on Capitol Hill. It looks like a weeping-willow tree, drooping with ties instead of branches and leaves. Dozens of them hang from it, and the Michigan Republican probably won't ever put them away. "When I was first elected to Congress in 1990, a newspaper writer learned that I only owned two suits and three ties -- so he wrote a column and told people to send me their ties," says Camp. They did, and for a while every day was Father's Day in Camp's office, with guests bearing ties for the new congressman. Recalling this experience, which has more or less ceased due to new congressional rules on gifts, Camp jumps up from his seat and digs into the heap, showing off some of his favorites. Down deep, he finds one featuring Iron Man, the comic-book hero. Others display the logos of colleges and universities. He looks for his Adam Smith tie but can't locate it. "Maybe it's somewhere else," he says.

Today, Camp owns a full wardrobe of suits and ties. He not only fits into Washington, he positively blends in, to the point of near obscurity. "He's one of our hardest-working members, but a little below the radar," says a Republican aide. "He's not a publicity hound."

Yet this quiet conservative now finds himself on the brink of public prominence. He's one of the top Republicans on the Committee on Ways & Means, which is perhaps the most powerful body in the House, because it has jurisdiction over taxes, trade, and entitlements. If Congress flips back to GOP control within the next few election cycles, Camp is well positioned to become its chairman. For the moment, though, he's the ranking member on its subcommittee on health, a position that makes him a point man among House Republicans on the domestic issue that may concern voters above all others. Any conservative plan to reform health care -- or perhaps to defeat HillaryCare -- is sure to show Camp's imprint.

The 54-year-old Camp comes from one of the larger congressional districts east of the Mississippi: It takes up a rural chunk of Michigan's Lower Peninsula, stretching from the outskirts of Saginaw to Traverse City. This is Republican country, where GOP presidential candidates finish 10 points ahead of Democrats and Camp earns support from about two-thirds of voters. The district includes the tiny town of Mecosta, where the conservative intellectual Russell Kirk once lived. When Camp first ran for Congress, he faced a difficult GOP primary against a candidate whom many Republicans viewed as the more rightward choice. Yet Camp met with Kirk and won his endorsement. "He's an instinctive conservative and a straight arrow," says Kirk's widow, Annette, who remains a constituent. Camp will probably keep his seat for as long as he wants it.

During the 1990s, Camp's district didn't even have a local television station in it, which may be one reason the congressman doesn't appear on the tube much -- he never got into the habit of chasing cameras. Today, he's on a bit more, but he tends to let other Republicans have the face time. "My press secretary might say that I avoid television, but I don't really dislike it or anything," says Camp. "I just don't really worry about who gets credit as long as we end up with good policy." His low-key approach makes him inconspicuous to the general public but endears him to many colleagues, who often find themselves surrounded by grandstanders who can spot microphones at a distance the way hawks see mice from above.

These qualities have made Camp an effective organizer who speaks softly and carries a big whip -- he's a deputy whip in the House GOP's party structure, responsible for corralling votes on legislation. "We always gave him a tough card," says a former leadership aide, referring to the list of members Camp was responsible for contacting. "He's a good listener and he's able to engage members on the details of policy." Most recently, Camp

helped round up the votes to sustain President Bush's veto of a proposed expansion to the State Children's Health Insurance Program.

Although Camp's voting record is conservative -- his lifetime score with the American Conservative Union is almost 89 percent -- he can perform balancing acts and steers clear of factionalism. He's a rarity, a congressman who is a member of both the Main Street Partnership and the Republican Study Committee -- associations within the House GOP that organize liberals and conservatives, respectively. He isn't especially active in either group, though he says he's "more at home in the RSC." This is certainly reflected in his positions on stem-cell research (as a pro-lifer, he's against the kind that results in human-embryo destruction) and a marriage amendment to the Constitution (which he supports). Nor is he averse to bending conservative principles. On November 6, he decided to go with the flow and vote to override Bush's veto of a water-projects spending bill. This put him on the side of most House Republicans, though not of most conservatives.

Camp isn't squarely in anybody's camp, and the ability to work with different kinds of Republicans is the kind of trait that can propel House members to top leadership positions, though Camp insists that he's content to stay put on Ways & Means. Such versatility also helped Camp three years ago when Electrolux, a refrigerator company, announced a plan to shutter a factory in Greenville, Mich., and move to Mexico. Given the Wolverine State's crummy economy, Camp's longstanding support for free trade probably wasn't what a lot of locals were hoping to find in their congressman. Camp rushed to the town anyway, armed with five-page handouts full of charts and graphs. The main one displayed unemployment rates in Michigan and Montcalm County over the last three decades -- and revealed that joblessness in both places has dropped since the enactment of NAFTA.

It's an effective presentation not only because the data are compelling but also because Camp is at least as much an earnest wonk as he is a baby-kissing politician. Asked about pending free-trade agreements, including one with Panama, he mentions that he's reading the Ed-

mund Morris biography of Theodore Roosevelt and discusses the history of canal construction. He also pores over the proposals of the Mackinac Center for Public Policy, a free-market think tank that focuses on Michigan. "When I see him at the airport in Saginaw, he often pulls one of our reports out of his bag to show me that he's reading it," says Larry Reed of the center.

Camp says he preferred it when Republicans were in the majority, but he also finds the minority experience invigorating. "It's a more challenging place intellectually, and a time to focus on the power of ideas," he says. "If Republicans are ever going to come back, we're going to need more than a feeling of buyer's remorse among voters -- we'll need a strong alternative agenda."

It will have to include health care, of course, and Camp is currently drafting legislation that he believes will offer a comprehensive, conservative approach to the issue. He won't introduce it before February, but he has high hopes: "My bill will be like an anthology of the best ideas offered by other members plus a few of my own." He describes its major parts: tax changes that will loosen the link between jobs and health care, medical savings accounts, the ability to purchase insurance across state lines, preventive care through information technology, and tort reform. He supports Mitt Romney for president -- he even recalls attending GOP events in Michigan with George Romney, the former governor who was Mitt's father -- but he's cautious about the mandates in Romney's health plan for Massachusetts. "That might have been the correct approach for his state, which doesn't have a large sector of small businesses. It wouldn't work nationally."

From a federal level, Camp prefers a metaphor: "The government built the interstate highways and it polices them, but drivers can pick which cars they want to drive and where they want to go. That's how our health-care system should work, too."

It remains to be seen whether Camp can sell this concept to his colleagues, let alone the nation. But at least he can try it wearing his Adam Smith tie: "I found it in my closet, at home."