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MARTIN OLAV SABO 1938-2016

State loses a legislative giant

Sabo was a “strong but civil” leader who led by example and built a legacy for his state.

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Martin Olav Sabo, the longtime member of Congress from Minneapolis who championed transportation projects and played a crucial role in one of the hardest-fought budget battles of the past quarter-century, died Sunday.

Sabo died at Abbott Northwestern Hospital in Minneapolis, two weeks after his 78th birthday, said Mike Erlandson, Sabo's former chief of staff in the House.

The son of Norwegian

immigrants who grew up in a family of modest means — and proudly included his middle name Olav at every opportunity — represented the state's largest city and nearby western suburbs from 1979 until he retired in January 2007 at the end of his 14th term.

Erlandson said Sabo, who had been ailing with chronic obstructive pulmonary disease, had a chance to say goodbye to family before he “died peacefully” around 9 a.m.

“He was a legislator's legislator,” said Erlandson, who knew

See **SABO** on A10 ▶



Star Tribune file

“I have no regrets. ... You have to take your job seriously, but not too seriously.”

Martin Sabo, reflecting on his career. Above, Sabo in his Washington office in 1983. More photos at startribune.com

Longtime legislator remembered as 'strong but civil' leader

◀ **SABO** from Al Sabo for roughly 30 years and came up short in his attempt to take the baton from his boss and assume the Fifth District congressional seat.

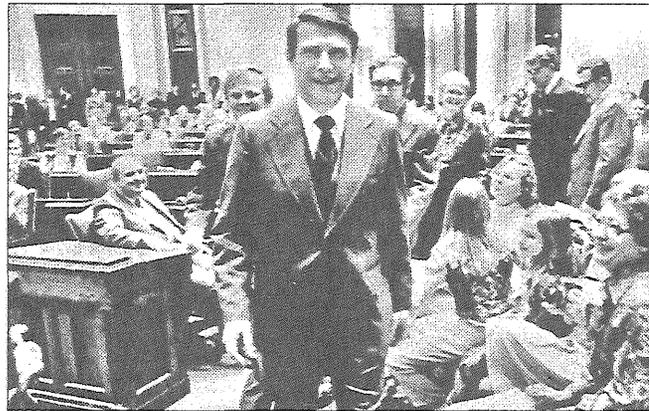
Sabo was just 22, freshly graduated from Augsburg College in Minneapolis, when he was elected to the Minnesota House in 1960, where he later served as minority leader (1969-72) and House speaker (1973-78).

"I have no regrets," Sabo said in a 2006 interview with the Star Tribune as the end of his time in Congress drew near. "You make decisions and go from there."

Asked what makes a good member of Congress, Sabo said, "There's no formula. You have to take your job seriously but not take yourself too seriously."

Sabo's legacy will be marked in fiscal terms. While on the House Appropriations Committee, he helped secure funding for hundreds of projects in transportation, environmental protection, crime prevention, housing, and cultural and economic development in his district and around the state.

Among the most notable was federal money for the Twin Cities' first light-rail line. He also brought home funding to make over the Stone Arch and Hen-



Star Tribune file

Martin Sabo was escorted to the rostrum after he was re-elected speaker of the Minnesota House on Jan. 5, 1977.

nepin Avenue bridges spanning the Mississippi River in Minneapolis as well as to clean up hazardous waste at the Twin Cities Army Ammunition Plant.

Historic budget fight

As chairman of the influential House Budget Committee, his leadership in 1993 helped the White House win passage of the largest deficit reduction package in U.S. history. Sabo was President Bill Clinton's chief advocate in the House for the contentious legislation, and it took all of the congressman's understated geniality to secure the needed votes.

"Martin and the president

continued to make their case and twist arms" until the last vote was cast, Erlandson said.

While Sabo was firmly in the liberal camp of national politics, he earned praise from the other side of the aisle.

John Kasich, a current candidate for the Republican presidential nomination and Sabo's successor as House budget chairman, said in 1995 that "Martin Sabo is as class an act as you can find in public life."

Betty McCollum, a DFL member of Congress from St. Paul, said, "It was my profound honor to serve with Martin Sabo as a colleague. ... Martin was a quiet Norwegian, but a



CRAIG LASSIG • Associated Press file
Martin Sabo served 28 years in Congress, from 1979 until he retired in January 2007.

giant as a legislator and public servant in both the Minnesota Legislature and Congress. He was liberal, smart, and his values reflected the very best of Minnesota's traditions and heritage."

Sabo had clout like few others in the U.S. House, but the powerful congressman did not use his stature to his advantage, Erlandson said.

He always insisted on driving himself, as one example. On their way to an appointment one time in a downpour, Sabo behind the wheel, Erlandson recalled being dropped at the door while the congressman searched for a parking spot.

"By the time he got in," Erlandson said, "he was soaking wet and shaking hands with the CEO of the company

we were visiting."

Sabo, who succeeded Don Fraser in Congress, turned over the reliably DFL congressional seat to Keith Ellison, who has been elected and re-elected by comfortable margins since he won the seat in November 2006.

"For more than 40 years of public service, Martin Sabo stood up for every Minnesotan, no matter their age, race or economic standing," Ellison said Sunday. "He was a man of substance who worked tirelessly to preserve Social Security, take care of our veterans, improve our public infrastructure, and pass budgets that were fair to working Americans."

Sabo also gained notoriety as a fixture at the annual Congressional Baseball Game. Year after year, he presided over the Democrats' creaky practices as manager, usually in a Twins uniform, sometimes amid a cloud of his own cigarette smoke.

Many of Minnesota's leading politicians on Sunday morning sent condolences to Sabo's family, along with tributes.

Sen. Amy Klobuchar said Sabo "was my friend and mentor, as he was to so many who

learned their politics the Martin Sabo way: Do what is best for your district, stand up for the people you represent, and don't forget to have some fun while you're at it. At a time when our politics has become increasingly coarse, Martin knew how to be strong but civil, effective but kind."

Gov. Mark Dayton called Sabo "a great political leader and an outstanding public servant."

Sabo was born on Feb. 28, 1938, in Crosby, N.D., of Norwegian immigrant parents. Their home in nearby Alkabo, just south of Canada and east of Montana, did not have electricity until he was 10 years old.

As testament to his devotion to transportation projects, a bicycle and pedestrian span over Hiawatha Avenue S. in Minneapolis is named the Martin Olav Sabo Bridge.

After retiring, Sabo made his home in the Loring Park area of Minneapolis. Sabo is survived by his wife of 52 years, Sylvia, daughters Karin Mantor and Julie Sabo, a former DFL state senator; and sister Anna Marie Huesers. Funeral arrangements are pending.