



# LESSONS LEARNED

The longtime Fifth District congressman says he has no regrets about leaving office.

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**T**he words "public life" take on special meaning when applied to Martin Olav Sabo. His entire adult life — beginning with his election to the state House in 1960, at the ripe age of 22 — has been spent serving the Minneapolis area in elective office. • Until now, DFLer Sabo has had only one big career transition. In 1979, he moved from speaker of the Minnesota House to representative of the Fifth District in the U.S. House. In a few weeks, he'll make another major move — from Congress to his condominium near Loring Park in Minneapolis. Sabo is becoming an elder statesman. • The Star Tribune invited him to prepare for that role by sharing some of the lessons he has learned about policy, politics and public life. Here are excerpts of a conversation he had with editorial writer Lori Sturdevant.

**Q** It must be a little bittersweet for you to be leaving the Congress just as the Democrats have retaken the majority.

**A** Not really. Some. I have no regrets. You make decisions, and go from there. I made one four years ago, to give up the ranking position on transportation [the Appropriations Transportation Subcommittee] and take the ranking position on homeland security. If I were still there, I'd be the chair of the Homeland Security Subcommittee. It would be challenging, and I'm not sure fun.

**Q** What do you think this nation has learned about homeland security since 9/11?

**A** This was an example of something happening, and Congress reacting very quickly. We consolidated 22 agencies into one, with very little planning. All kinds of incredible problems arose. Personnel, money, contracting, terrible oversight. You want to get angry with the folks who are in charge, but I think they were given an impossible task.

We would have been much better off with a little calmer response, maybe some consolidation, some coordination, and not trying to do a massive reshuffling in the middle of what is a serious problem.

**Q** Is the nation safer as a result?

**A** In some ways. We've spent billions, so it should be some. It's less likely that someone can hijack an airplane and fly it into a big building. But there are major vulnerabilities in other areas.

Sabo continues: Advice to state and U.S. lawmakers. AA9 ▶

## THE MARTIN SABO STORY

- **Raised** in Alkabo, N.D.
- **Graduate** of Augsburg College.
- **Elected to the Minnesota House** in 1960, at 22. Became DFL minority leader in 1969 and House speaker in 1973.
- **Elected to Congress** from the Fifth District in 1978.
- **As a member** of the House Appropriations Committee, secured funding for literally hundreds of transportation, environmental protection, crime prevention, housing, cultural and economic development projects in his district and around the state.
- **As chairman** of the House Budget Committee, provided leadership to pass largest deficit reduction package in U.S. history.
- **Announced his retirement** on March 18.

« Martin Sabo is as class an act as you can find in public life. »

— Rep. John Kasich, R-Ohio, 1995.



# LESSONS LEARNED

◀ SABO FROM AA1

**Q** On what matters should your successors on that committee concentrate?

**A** Securing chemical plants should be very high on their list. Part of that involves work by the chemical plants themselves. And the possibility of the importing of nuclear materials remains very troublesome.

**Q** You must be watching with interest as the DFL takes control of the Minnesota House again. You were House minority leader before you became speaker in 1973. What would you say to the legislators who are making that change now?

**A** What the Democrats in the Legislature will have next year is the reverse of what we had in 1971. We were in the minority in both houses of the Legislature that year, but (DFLer) Wendell Anderson was governor.

In the end, the whole Minnesota Miracle was negotiated that year. [It raised income and sales taxes in order to cut property taxes and increase school funding.] That shows, having the governor is a big asset when you're in the minority. You've got to work closely with him. The governor commands public attention in a fashion that the legislative branch can't.

**Q** What's it like to become a speaker after a long time in the minority in the Legislature? Do you have to resist the temptation to overreach — or is being too cautious a greater worry?

**A** You have to push the system, but you also have to be realistic. Margaret [Anderson Kelliher, the speaker-designate] is in a different position than I was. She doesn't have a Democratic governor. She has to make some careful political judgments.

They should want to be cautious on the fiscal side. They have a surplus. You don't want to spend that on ongoing programs. You want to keep some in reserve.

**Q** You've also watched your parties' majorities crumble in both the Minnesota House and the U.S. House. What is it going to take for the Democrats to stay in control of Congress this time?

**A** Do a good job.

**Q** Say a little more.

**A** They are in a real fiscal mess [in Congress]. I'm not sure anybody knows how to get out of it, but they have to start by not digging the hole any deeper. The pay-as-you-go rules worked pretty well in the 1990s, and they need to go back to them. That means that a lot of their agenda items are going to have difficulty.

**Q** Do you expect a tit-for-tat mentality to take hold among the Democrats, wanting to treat the minority Republicans as badly as they were themselves treated?

**A** I hope not. A majority needs a good, competent minority. A majority strengthens its ability to govern if it takes advantage of the knowledge and skills of the members of the minority.

**Q** What makes a good congressman?



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Martin Sabo greeted passersby at the IDS Crystal Court in downtown Minneapolis during his successful campaign to move from the Legislature to Congress. Until now, that move was his only big career transition in 46 years of public service.

**A** There's no formula. You have to take your job seriously, but not take yourself too seriously. ... You have a fair number of options to get into a variety of things when you're first in Congress. But the longer you stay, the more responsibility you acquire, the less freedom you have to freelance on topics that might sound interesting.

**Q** Knowing you, I don't suppose you were itching to speak out on a whole lot of issues.

**A** [laughter] No. ... I've never discovered the House to be impressed particularly by the speechmakers. It's rare that speeches make any great difference on any matter of substance. I always say to someone [in the House] who wants to make a lot of speeches, 'Go over to the Senate.' The Senate is a speechmaker's delight.

**Q** The Fifth District has just been through a difficult election to succeed you. Do you have any second thoughts about how you passed the torch to your successor, Keith Ellison?

**A** No, not really.

**Q** What about the criticism of the timing of your announcement, as an attempt to control the outcome of the contest to succeed you?

**A** I've never figured out what could have been different. There were three of us [in the U.S. House] who announced [retirements] that week. I can't believe there would have been a more massive turnout at precinct caucuses, when there was already a governor's race and a U.S. Senate race going on.

The logical conclusion of that argument is that if I came to the decision to retire at the point that I did, I should have run again, even if I didn't want to. That would not have served this district.

**Q** Are you satisfied with Minnesota's system of choosing candidates for Congress?

**A** I've thought for some time that, while a party has every right to endorse a candidate, the electorate has the full right to make another judgment, as they do regularly. The sense in the [DFL] party that they want to drive people out who don't support their endorsed candidates is just ridiculous. They're trying to see how small they can make the Democratic Party. ...

Endorsements play a role, but they are an optional thing for a party. They are not something they have to do. There are times when no endorsement makes sense.

**Q** In the case of choosing your successor, should there have been no endorsement by the party?

**A** It wouldn't have hurt.

**Q** Some young legislators this year are embarking on what they hope will be careers in public life similar to yours. What can you tell them about how to make public life sustainable over the long haul?

**A** You've got to keep, to a degree, a normal life going. You've got to keep control of your own schedule. There are lots of people in office who let their schedules utterly take over their lives. That's a mistake.