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Robert Byrd

Byrd Unleashes Oratorical Fury, Wins Fans by Goading Colleagues

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WASHINGTON -- Something big is happening with Sen. Robert Byrd that no one, including the West Virginia Democrat, has fully figured out. Melding his Roman hero Cato with an old man's sheer cussedness, Mr. Byrd has thrown himself into a personal crusade chiding fellow lawmakers to stand up against what he sees as an increasingly arrogant, wartime White House. Conservatives lampoon him; "Byrd of Prey" reads a Fox News logo.

But this former ship welder has honed his oratory to a level the Senate hasn't seen in years -- and is resonating with a younger audience that is listening through the Internet, a forum that didn't even exist when he came to Washington a half century ago. Mr. Byrd's Senate Web site (www.senate.gov/~byrd/¹) recorded more than 3.7 million hits in March alone. While the numbers have dropped off with the end of hostilities in Iraq, there continued to be almost 800,000 visitors in the first two weeks of May. His speeches travel in mass e-mails around the nation, and even the globe. Moveon.org², a liberal Internet-based group, reprinted one Byrd address in a full-page ad in the New York Times. And this coal miner's son from Wolf Creek Hollow is read aloud at theater groups by Hollywood political activists. In the 1960s, Bob Dylan was a young man protesting for a young generation. Mr. Byrd turns the tables, resembling some grandfather type whose frankness appeals across generations to a younger audience reared on political sound bites. "It's exciting to feel like there's someone who's not pulling their punches and at the same time projecting a very reasonable, moderate image," says Eli Pariser, a 22-year-old campaign director for Moveon.org. Young people who see his speeches on the Internet are asking, "Who is the Byrd guy?" Mr. Pariser says. A former Senate majority leader and longtime fixture in the powerful Appropriations Committee, Mr. Byrd is part of the Washington woodwork, in truth. But now, in the twilight of his career, there is a renewed passion to keep alive for another generation his dream of what the Senate should be.

The steady drumbeat of his floor speeches betrays a deep frustration with President Bush, whom he once praised but now fears is using America's wars overseas to gain power at home. "They've used the backdrop of the military and the tragedies that occurred on 9/11, the war on terrorism ... to ride a wave for partisan purposes," he says of the White House. "I have never in my political career been so concerned about my country as I have been for the last two years." "We stand passively mute in the Senate today, paralyzed by our own uncertainty," he scolded colleagues in the weeks leading up to the Iraq war. "I can imagine hearing the walls of this chamber ring just before the war between the states ... but today we hear nothing. ... We are truly sleepwalking through history."