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HEADLINE: Curran Plays Support Role, Leaves Limelight for Hughes

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BODY:

It was an opportunity that any politician with a shred of ambition would have relished. Anne Arundel County's Stoney Creek Democratic Club, one of the largest and oldest political organizations in Maryland, was holding its 50th anniversary bull roast, and with most of the state's leading officeholders in another part of the state attending Maryland's 350th birthday party, Lt. Gov. J. Joseph Curran Jr. had the podium to himself.

Rising to address several hundred loyal Democratic regulars gathered at their cinder block clubhouse in Pasadena, Curran thanked them for inviting him, presented a citation from Gov. Harry Hughes, and promptly sat down.

The performance, or lack of it, was absolutely in character for a man whom Baltimore state Sen. John A. Pica Jr. calls "the perfect lieutenant governor."

Loyal, hard-working, unassuming and content to play second fiddle to a governor whose own notes are usually muted, Curran has turned out to be precisely what Hughes was looking for in the spring of 1982 as he sought a running mate for his reelection campaign.

"He's been doing just what I wanted him to do," said Hughes when asked to assess Curran's performance after 19 months in office.

In the Hughes administration, it wasn't always so. At this point in the governor's first term, his political marriage to Lt. Gov. Samuel W. Bogley was hopelessly on the rocks, having foundered over their differing views on abortion and Bogley's disarming candor about the estrangement.

It is a measure of Curran's success, at least by Hughes administration standards, that the lieutenant governor is approaching the halfway point of his term without making any waves, certainly not any that would splash over his boss.

Cast in a supporting role to a low-key and deliberative governor, Curran has quietly played his parts: serving as chairman of a number of commissions and task forces in his areas of expertise, acting as an in-house advocate for the mentally ill and retarded, filling in for the chief executive on numerous ceremonial occasions that Hughes either can't or doesn't wish to attend, and never, ever, stealing the spotlight.

"It's been an excellent marriage," observed House Speaker Benjamin L. Cardin, noting that Hughes has deftly employed Curran's strengths.

But there are others, speaking privately, who suggest that Hughes has not used Curran to his best advantage, that

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someone with the lieutenant governor's experience in the General Assembly (20 years in the state Senate, 16 of them as chairman of the Judicial Proceedings Committee) should be turned loose to work with a legislature where he enjoys enormous respect and where he could cash in many chits.

Even Curran's official biography in the Maryland Manual promises that he "will serve as legislative liaison for administration bills." In fact, though, he has been used only rarely in that capacity.

Curran, said one General Assembly leader, "could be an asset on major administration bills. If the lieutenant governor came down and appeared as the governor's right-hand man, he Hughes could get a lot of mileage out of it."

Curran says he is comfortable with his role, that he is happy performing those few legislative chores the governor assigns to him, and that he enjoys an "excellent rapport" with Hughes. "I ran as a team player, and I am a team player," he said.

That his low-profile performance has left even some close observers of state government only vaguely aware of what Curran does in his office on the second floor of the Statehouse is partly a function of a job that has no prescribed duties.

Except for a brief period in the 1860s, when a short-lived constitution established the office for three years, Maryland survived quite well for nearly two centuries without a governor-in-waiting -- as seven states still do. The post was revived by constitutional amendment in 1970, a year after Spiro Agnew resigned the governorship to become vice president, leaving the General Assembly to elect his replacement.

But the amendment re-establishing the office provided the sketchiest of job descriptions, mandating that the second in command "perform only the duties delegated to him by the governor."

In the brief modern history of the office, that constitutional prescription has been filled in a variety of ways. Blair Lee III, lieutenant governor to Marvin Mandel, concentrated on the budget and educational affairs, largely because of Mandel's lack of interest in those subjects. (Lee's experience with the budget proved useful during his 18 months as acting governor during Mandel's protracted trials on federal racketeering charges.) Bogley was left to wither on the vine, serving as Hughes' liaison to local governments, a modest task at best.

Curran has charted a course different from both Lee and Bogley, one that reflects the chemistry between him and Hughes, and their respective interests. Hughes has delivered on his promise to give Curran responsibility in areas where he feels comfortable, primarily criminal justice matters, but those assignments exist somewhat at the periphery of state government.

He has not been, for example, a key player in the budget process, the arena where state policy is really set, and a function that is tightly controlled by Hughes. Curran was not a factor in the administration's agonized waffling over a tax increase last winter, even though his feel for the legislature might have saved Hughes the embarrassment of floating an income tax plan only to withdraw it in the face of overwhelming opposition from the General Assembly.

Nonetheless, Hughes' staff director, Ejner J. Johnson, describes Curran as a full partner in the administration. "The office is what you make of it," said Johnson. "Joe Curran is not just the governor's alter ego. He is extremely knowledgeable and he participates. He is basically your nice, decent guy, but having said that, he makes a contribution."

Where Curran has made his mark is as chairman of a number of task forces and commissions relating to his longstanding interest in criminal justice, including the governor's drunk-driving task force.

Last year, he chaired a commission that reviewed the criminal insanity statute and recommended, among other things, changing the "not guilty by reason of insanity" plea to "guilty but not criminally responsible," which was enacted by the 1984 legislature.

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He also has taken command of the reconstituted Criminal Justice Coordinating Council, a panel he hopes will come up with innovative solutions to the problem of prison overcrowding, and a new task force exploring ways to make the courts more responsive to the needs of crime victims.

But there are signs that Curran is beginning to look beyond the confines of the lieutenant governorship.

At the urging of the governor, he is familiarizing himself with the workings of various cabinet departments, a sure sign, some say, that he would like to succeed Hughes in the Statehouse.

He has worked particularly closely with the Department of Economic and Community Development, serving as an administration emissary to businesses, and the Department of Health, where his interest in the mentally ill and retarded has taken him to all the state's mental hospitals.

If there is a common thread to all the activity that keeps him on the road at least three or four days each week, it is that Curran has evolved into an ambassador for a governor who prefers to stay in Annapolis.

Whether he is visiting the Kelly Springfield Tire Co. in Cumberland or spending the morning with a welfare family in Baltimore, the message is the same, said Curran: "We care . . . we are concerned about you."

"I didn't want to accept the position and simply be here for four years," he explained. "I wanted to get out and see what the state is doing and play a role. . . . Government is supposed to serve people."

The question remains, though, whether Curran can use exposure he is getting to turn his job into a steppingstone rather than the ticket to oblivion it was for Bogley and the route to early political retirement it was for Lee.

People who have watched Curran for many years say that the ambition that seemed to flicker out after unsuccessful congressional races in 1968 and 1976 is being rekindled.

Curran admits there's a personal agenda. "I will be running for another office in 1986, I'm pretty sure of that," he said, ticking off the possibilities: lieutenant governor again, Congress, attorney general, governor.

Though his younger brother, Baltimore City Council member Mike Curran, is privately touting his brother as a gubernatorial contender, many other Maryland politicians wonder whether a man who shies away from self-promotion can win the Statehouse -- or a House or U.S. Senate seat -- in a field crowded with supremely hungry people.

Said one political figure, who believes Curran's best opportunity is the attorney general's race in 1986: "He doesn't have that killer instinct; he's not a piranha."

GRAPHIC: Picture, J. Joseph Curran Jr. By Lucian Perkins -- The Washington Post