

# For Bentley, her age doesn't slow the pace

**Campaign:** Tenacious and forceful at 78, the former congresswoman is still a strong advocate of the port of Baltimore.

By ANDREW A. GREEN  
SUN STAFF

Helen Delich Bentley, who, at 78, would be the second-oldest member of the House of Representatives if she's elected, is daring people to call her old.

"For those of you who don't know me, I've been around Baltimore for two centuries," the former congresswoman said, eliciting laughter at a political forum in a Reisterstown synagogue. "I gave birth to the port, and I'm still plugging away at it."

She gave a quick speech, apologized to the crowd and left, off to a dinner for one of the main shipping lines in the port of Baltimore.

"I've got to run," Bentley



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**Republican Helen Delich Bentley has stated many reasons for returning to politics.**

said. "I can still run, you know."

Age is the stealth issue in the race for the 2nd Congressional District, which includes parts of Baltimore, Harford and Anne Arundel counties and Baltimore city. Bentley's Democratic opponent, C.A. Dutch Ruppersberger, who is 56, won't [See Bentley, 10A]

# In 2nd District, Bentley gives port priority

*Helen Delich Bentley*

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touch it, and the voters who bring it up in discussing the race usually do so apologetically, saying they like Bentley, always have, but think it's time for somebody new in Congress.

Bentley still drives herself, holds doors open for people, walked the entire length of the Dundalk and Towson Fourth of July parades and can remember

the details — down to what people were wearing — of conversations she had 35 years ago.

Those who know her say Bentley is not so much old as old-school.

In the era of free trade, she's a protectionist. As economists talk about the information age, she trumpets her unwavering support for manufacturing. While most politicians would launch their campaigns at a

place like the Inner Harbor, she did it at the port with tugboats chugging along behind her.

For Bentley, it's not that the world has changed since the Cold War as much as it is that people have lost focus on what's important in America.

"Great nations have fallen from a lack of clear-headed thinking," she said.

Bentley's top priority has always been clear: the port of Bal-

timore.

Raised in poverty in Nevada, Bentley earned a journalism degree from the University of Missouri and held a few newspaper jobs before landing at *The Sun* in 1946. Shortly thereafter, she started covering the port, a beat she held for 20 years, until President Nixon appointed her chairman of the Federal Maritime Commission.

Industry members who

worked with her in those years said her role in advocating for the port and the shipping industry generally cannot be overstated.

"In the history of the American flag merchant marine, I would call her the defender of the escutcheon," said Conrad Everhard, former president of several shipping lines who got his start on the docks in Baltimore. "She was an indefatigable juggernaut, always fighting."

It was the port that got Bentley to run for Congress in the first place. She was convinced that Baltimore needed a 50-foot channel to stay competitive, but the congressman from the 2nd District at the time, Democrat Clarence D. Long, objected to the dredging on environmental grounds.

Bentley beat him on her third try, in the election of 1984, and got the channel dredged in her first term. The story illustrates much of what would characterize her political career.

Her tendency to value the economic side of an issue over the ecological has made Bentley a major target of the Sierra Club and the League of Conservation Voters, which gives her one of the lowest ratings of anyone in Congress during the years she served. She shrugs off the criticism as coming from a bunch of "radical nuts" who would rob people of their jobs.

Her tenacity and forcefulness would also become famous. Never one for subtlety, Bentley once smashed a Toshiba radio with a sledgehammer on the steps of the Capitol after the Japanese sold technology to the Soviet Union.

When the 1990 redistricting plan put her in the same district as another incumbent Republican, she threatened to move to another district and pick off a Democratic seat. The plan was changed.

Bentley didn't toe the Republican Party line in Congress — she voted against the North American Free Trade Agreement, for example — but she gained admirers, some of them now in the upper echelons of Washington power, for her sharp-tongued feistiness.

"I figure when she's elected, she'll be telling me what to do," President Bush said when he was in Baltimore recently for a GOP fund-raiser. "And those of you who know Helen know I bet-

**Born:** Nov. 28, 1923, Ruth, Nev.

**Education:** Graduated White Pine High School, Ely, Nev., 1941; University of Missouri School of Journalism, 1944.

**Elective offices:** First elected to U.S. House of Representatives, 1984. Re-elected in 1986, 1988, 1990 and 1992.

**Employment history:**

Reporter and editor, *The Sun*, 1945-1969. Producer and host of television programs, *The Port that Built a City* and *The Port that Built a State*, 1950-1965. Chairman, Federal Maritime Commission, 1969-1975. President, HDB International Inc., an international business consulting firm, 1975-1984. President, Helen Bentley and Associates Inc., a business consulting and lobbying firm, 1995-present.

**Family:** Married to Bill Bentley, no children.

ter listen."

In those Congressional years, Bentley also became the undisputed queen of the state Republican Party. She was the party's National Committeewoman, highly unusual for an elected official of her stature, said Howard A. Denis, Bentley's running mate in her unsuccessful 1994 gubernatorial election.

Bentley was determined to build the party, and she fought to keep it from swaying too far to the right, which would have been disastrous in heavily Democratic Maryland, he said.

"She did not want to see her party go down the tubes in the state of Maryland, so she stood and fought and won, and I admire that tremendously in her," Denis said.

In 1993, with Bentley's old friend and ally Democratic Gov. William Donald Schaefer on his way out of office, she announced she would run for governor.

"I felt that the opportunity was there, and it would be a big help for the Republican Party to make it and make this a two-party state," Bentley said.

It wasn't that easy.

Bentley faced Ellen Sauerbrey, a delegate from Baltimore County. Where Bentley is something of a pragmatist, Sauerbrey is more of an ideological conservative, the sort of force Bentley had sought to combat in the party.

The pri- [See Bentley, 11A]

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[Bentley, from Page 10A]

mary turned nasty. Sauerbrey attacked Bentley's record, accusing her of being a "tax-and-spend" candidate who votes against the "Republican agenda." When Sauerbrey showed up outside Bentley's campaign headquarters for a rally, the congresswoman's staff circulated through the crowd with "mudslinging kits" — small plastic buckets filled with dirt, water, shovels and instructions.

Sauerbrey won, and things got uglier. Bentley never endorsed Sauerbrey. At a party "unity breakfast," she refused to shake Sauerbrey's hand. Her campaign manager showed up at a Republicans for Glendening rally.

In the general election, Parris N. Glendening beat Sauerbrey by a scant 6,000 votes, and some Sauerbrey supporters have never forgiven Bentley for what they see as the ultimate party disloyalty.

Sauerbrey, who is awaiting confirmation as an ambassador to the United Nations, said State Department rules prohibit her from engaging in partisan activity, including commenting for this article. Others from her inner circle weren't talking either, saying any intraparty discord this year could hurt the chances of Republican gubernatorial nominee Robert L. Ehrlich Jr.

Bentley said it didn't bother her that the party would choose the more conservative candidate, but she felt that the Sauerbrey camp was too rigid in its ideology and unwilling to accept moderates, herself included.

After the election, Bentley started a consulting and lobbying firm, landing a \$75,000 contract from the state to consult on port issues. She also helped her husband, Bill, run their antiques business in Cockeysville.

This year, when her successor, Ehrlich, announced he was running for governor and Glendening used the once-a-decade redistricting process to include Fort Meade, Aberdeen Proving Ground, Baltimore-Washington International Airport and, above all, Bentley's beloved port in the 2nd District, her political aspirations were resurrected.

She has offered various explanations for her decision to run again at age 78. Sometimes she says she's running to take care of those institutions she loves. Sometimes she says she was offended by Glendening's gerrymandering of the district to benefit Ruppertsberger. Sometimes she says she's running to show senior citizens that they're still valuable.

Regardless, the old hands at the port are glad to have her back.

The port of Baltimore, and the shipping industry in general, has never had an advocate who is Bentley's equal, and in an era when people tend to forget such an unglamorous institution, the port needs all the visibility it can get, said George F. "Bud" Nixon Jr., a member of the board of directors of Rukert Terminals Corp.

"I'm hearing about high-tech harbors and people selling out waterfront property to the quiche bars and condos and stuff, and that's fine as long as it doesn't threaten the working port of Baltimore," Nixon said. "But we need to keep a high profile of the port and let people know that yes, we're still here and alive and well."

# Ruppertsberger

[Democrat, from Page 1A]

A.C. Carroll, a former congressional staffer, shot back: "Not when you're a freshman, they don't."

Ruppertsberger, 58, is looking to make the biggest transition in his 17-year career as an elected official, going from being the man with almost total authority to run a county of 750,000 people to being one vote out of 435 in the U.S. House of Representatives, a freshman in a party that might well remain in the minority.

Those who have watched him during the past eight years say he has a personality ideally suited to the office of county executive — he's the guy who likes to get things done, to fix the problems and seal the deal. Those traits have sometimes gotten him into big political trouble, but many in county government said they have also made him one of the best executives the county has had.

They also might make him hate being a congressman, at least at first.

"He loves politics, and he'll acclimate himself to it, but it's difficult," said Theodore G. Venetoulis, the Democratic county executive from 1974 to 1978. "As executive, you do all the talking, and people listen and have to do something. In Congress, you do all the talking you want, and nobody has to pay attention."

Donald P. Hutchinson, a Democrat who was county executive from 1978 to 1986, has called the House of Representatives "a lateral move at best."

## What makes Dutch run?

So why is Ruppertsberger running?

The short answer is because he didn't think he could beat Lt. Gov. Kathleen Kennedy Townsend in the gubernatorial primary. Gov. Parris N. Glendening drew a favorable district for him, and party leaders convinced Ruppertsberger that he could help Democrats regain control of Congress by running for the seat representing Maryland's 2nd District, which contains parts of Baltimore, Harford and Anne Arundel counties as well as part of Baltimore City.

Ruppertsberger said his perspective as someone who knows what federal policy decisions look like from the local level would be valuable in Congress.

"I want to bring our communities to Congress and Congress to our communities," he said.

But what really keeps him from taking his \$89,000-a-year pension and retiring to his patch of Ocean City sand, those who know him said, is that he could just as easily give up politics as breathing.

"That's his oxygen line," said Robert J. Barrett, Ruppertsberger's longtime top aide. "He may act like there's life after politics. I don't buy it. He loves helping people, believe me."

Since his days as chief of the Leith Walk Elementary School safety patrol, Ruppertsberger has built the A.C. Carroll political story: started at City College high school, graduated to his prom date, law degree and became a practicing attorney.

To this day, Ruppertsberger compares political campaigning to athletic contests, and he approaches the job of county executive in the same physical way.

The hallmarks of his term were school renovation, an unparalleled scope, reconfiguring hundreds of miles of streets and putting more police on the streets and teachers in classrooms.

Barrett said Ruppertsberger's do-it-now spirit reminds him of William Donald Schaefer, his days as mayor and governor.

"He's very focused on one thing that is before him. When he gets a call, he's got a project, an issue, get it done. Have a meeting, get it done. He wants to see it accomplished by the end of the day," Barrett said.

## Deal maker

Ruppertsberger's gregarious personality is one of his strongest traits. He likes to bring people into his office and push a deal.

Legislators, even those who are ordinarily critical of him, said Ruppertsberger's ability to unite the county delegation behind a single agenda helped him win the Baltimore County job. "He got more money for schools and more projects than it would have been otherwise."

But all those tendencies made him successful. He has contributed to his two big wins: his black eyes: Senate race, his property condemnation, his community revitalization, and the decision to build the Towson jail.

In 2000, Ruppertsberger unveiled an ambitious plan to clean up the beleaguered side of the county, partly involved giving the government the right to condemn properties and hand them over to developers.

He put together the plan, pushed through the legislation, but, he said, he made a mistake in not involving the community in the input and support.

The community petitioned to take the plan to referendum.

Ever the competitor, Ruppertsberger set out to convince voters that they should support the plan. He even held seven debates with opponents, including unknown state delegate James F. Porters Hall, who had become an opponent.

Even as the issue moved from him, Ruppertsberger have turned a loss into a win.



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