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U.S. Rep. Joe Pitts 'defied the typical rules of politics' for 44 years



SAM JANESCH | Staff Writer Dec 11, 2016



RICHARD HERTZLER | Staff Photographer

Congressman Joe Pitts final sit-down interview with LNP in his Kennett Square office.

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On a mid-September morning three months before his retirement, U.S. Rep. Joe Pitts sits behind his desk in his cozy Capitol Hill office and reads from a Washington newspaper with his face on the front page.

Nearing the end of a 44-year career in state and national politics, it's the first time he's appeared in print in quite this way.

His headshot is on the bottom of the page, looking almost like the 77-year-old Republican is gazing upward at the one massive photo showing the subject of the day's main story: the Lancaster County Democrat hoping to capitalize on his decision not to seek reelection.



In his office lined with densely blue carpet and walls decorated partly by his own paintings, Pitts doesn't seem to pay the story much mind at all — he's confident.

Joe Pitts — with 24 years legislating in the state House and 20 years in the U.S. House, adept at communicating with everyone from world leaders to high school students, with artistic gifts and politician skills — is widely regarded as something of a Renaissance man.

His colleagues both Republican and Democrat respect him. His former staffers run out of compliments.

What makes him such a rare political breed, they say, is his humble nature — eschewing media attention and credit for his work in an age when politicians are addicted to the spotlight.

“He just sort of defied the typical rules of politics,” said Gabe Neville, Pitts’ first congressional campaign manager who then served as one of his closest aides for almost 20 years. “He got to the very top of America’s political system without being a self promoter, without working the political networks, without schmoozing and telling people what they wanted to hear.”



The new class of politicians may be soaking up the headlines these days, but that’s fine with Joe Pitts.

He never wanted them anyway.

Photos: Joe Pitts, the congressman



K. SCOTT KREIDER

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Congressman Joe Pitts holds up an award at the Republican Party of Pennsylvania congressional delegation dinner at the Lancaster Convention Center, Friday, May 20, 2016.

A veteran congressman

It’s a sunny summer day in D.C., and Pitts is walking briskly down the windowless corridor in the catacombs of Capitol Hill.

He’s in a dark blue suit with a white shirt, black-and-blue-striped tie and laceless brown shoes. His full head of hair, snow-white and combed over to perfection is just as it was the day he first showed up in Washington as a 57-year-old freshman in 1997.

His brow just barely begins to sweat, but the septuagenarian keeps his composure as he hustles through the underground tunnel from his office building to where he's scheduled to lead a 10 a.m. hearing on the Affordable Care Act.

"I wanted to get as far away from the Capitol as possible, to walk back and forth. It's the only exercise I get every day," said Pitts, who chose his current office for its high ceilings, an old chandelier and its location on the expansive capitol complex.

RELATED: 5 things you didn't know about 44-year political veteran Congressman Joe Pitts

It's a particularly contentious hearing, one held by the Energy and Commerce Committee's Health Subcommittee, which he's chaired since 2011 after eight years as a member.

The room is full with about 20 congressmen and women and their many staffers. Republicans on Pitts' right side argue against President Obama's signature health care reform while Democrats on his left argue for it. A Colorado Democrat pulls out a newspaper more than two-thirds into the three-hour hearing while she waits for her turn to speak.

"No, I'm used to it," Pitts said when asked whether it's frustrating to continue to preside over these hearings after years of litigating the healthcare law. "It's a process designed to be slow ... you persevere."

Pitts has spent six years fighting Obamacare, which President-elect Donald Trump has promised to repeal.

But Pitts won't be in Washington to see that legislative watershed, if and when it happens.

A few months after this September hearing, just weeks before his last days in Congress, Pitts sits for an interview in his Kennett Square district office. He's leaving at an interesting time — when the White House and both chambers of Congress will be Republican-held, and his longtime friend Mike Pence is assuming the vice presidency.

The pair spent 12 years together in the House, and they've spoken a few times since Election Day.

"I don't know if he's going to want me to be involved in any way or not," Pitts said of his now open prospects. "I would not want a job, but if I can help in advice, counsel, that's what I would be interested in."

For now, he's at peace with his decision to hang up his boots after a long and adventurous career.

A congressman in the making

Pitts, who raised more than \$1 million for each of his final re-election campaigns in Congress, started his first state House campaign in 1971 with a mere \$8.

That bought him two 2-by-4s. He painted signs on each and bolted them down alongside a road in his Chester County state House district. On one, he painted, "Elect Pitts April 25" with an elephant. The other, about 100 yards down the road, read, "Stop here, meet Pitts," where he would stand and wave to drivers before and after school.

"They would even see me in the rain and I guess they concluded, you know, 'Dumb guy wants it that bad, I'll vote for him,'" Pitts laughed.

The only political experience the then-schoolteacher had on his resume was some volunteer time on a few local campaigns. But his diverse background at age 33 likely appealed to voters.

Born in Lexington, Kentucky, Pitts' father shipped his mother, himself and his two sisters, to live in the Philippines when Pitts was 8 years old.

Dad was a chaplain in the Army under General Douglas MacArthur in World War II. After the war, he moved the family to the war-torn southeast Asian island so both he and Pitts' mother could work as missionaries, which they would continue to do into the 1970's.

Pitts graduated from high school there, moving back to attend Asbury



College in Kentucky. That's where he met his wife Virginia, both of whom went on to teach in Kentucky public schools.

But after starting a family, Ginny focussing on being a mother and one meager \$3,2

50 teacher's salary, Pitts made a decision: enlist.

He became an Air Force officer, flying B-52s, spending half the year on alert with nuclear weapons at a Massachusetts military base. Three tours of Vietnam, 116 combat missions and five and a half years later, he had three kids now — including a 14-month

old son.

Ginny met Pitts on the airfield “and he smiled and turned away. He was afraid of me,” Pitts said of his young son. “So I said, ‘That’s it. Three kids who don’t know their dad. I’m getting out.’”

The Pitts family moved to Kennett Square, where Ginny had grown up, and where he went to work building the home they still live in today.

After a stint in teaching math and science at Great Valley High School in Malvern, Chester County, he was recruited for the 158th Legislative District seat based in the Kennett Square area.

When he won by a mere 16 votes, he said it energized his volunteer base and there was no looking back after that.

In Harrisburg

In the state House, Pitts admits he had no idea what he was about to experience.

“I drove my little Volkswagen up to Harrisburg and there’s this whole parking lot full of Cadillacs and I thought, ‘What am I getting into here,’” he recalled with a laugh.

Soon, Pitts grew accustomed to Harrisburg’s ways, eventually rising to one of the most powerful positions in the Legislature: majority chairman of the Appropriations Committee.

“I tell people in Washington that is like being the Budget Committee chairman, the Ways and Means Committee chairman and the Appropriations Committee chairman all at the same time,” said Neville, his longtime top aide. “Joe Pitts controlled the money.”

In Harrisburg, Pitts also began a trend that would continue throughout his career — one of taking up projects outside his job description.

In 1980, he started the Keystone State Games — Pennsylvania’s largest annual multi-sport competitions.

A committed history buff, he chaired a legislative committee in 1981 to celebrate the commonwealth’s 300th birthday and the 75th anniversary of the current Capitol building. In 1987, he similarly initiated and led a bicentennial celebration of the ratification of the U.S. Constitution.

Keeping up with the theme, he wrote and passed legislation to form the Capitol Preservation Committee, which he oversaw for its first 15 years. It’s mission is to restore and protect everything from the iconic building’s dome and embellishments, to the paintings and ornamental clocks that fill its nearly 500,000 square-footage space.

While his name remains out of the history books for many of these efforts, Pitts was also instrumental in reforming Pennsylvania’s home schooling laws in the 1980’s.



“I probably learned a masters degree in government within two months working for Joe Pitts because he understood the role of a legislator and a committee chairman and he knew how to get things done.” - Kevin Harley

Pitts gave homeschoolers “recognition, gave them credibility and was their legislative champion,” said Kevin Harley, whose first job out of college in 1987 was working as a research analyst in Pitts’ office when he was chairman of the state’s Labor Relations Committee.

Harley, now managing director of Harrisburg-based Quantum Communications, said Pitts was one of the most principled and genuine members of the House — and a fantastic boss.

“I probably learned a masters degree in government within two months working for Joe Pitts because he understood the role of a legislator and a committee chairman and he knew how to get things done,” Harley said.

Running for Congress

Watching Congress from afar, Pitts always had his eyes set on his next state House run.

He never expected the U.S. House to become majority Republican in his lifetime. But then came 1994, when a swing of seats left the GOP with its first majority in 40 years, and Pitts thought to himself, “man, it would be fun.”

He jumped at the opportunity when 20-year veteran Republican Bob Walker unexpectedly announced his retirement from the 16th district seat at age 53. Newspaper records show a flurry of 20 interested candidates — Pitts was the very last name in one story, a footnote.

Still, he was the first to declare his candidacy, and went on to defeat five Republicans in the primary and win the general election by a 22-point margin. He promised not to hike taxes, to help balance the federal budget and to bring in funding for the district’s dated highways.



Joining U.S. Rep. Joe Pitts in the Rayburn House Office Building before he was sworn in to his first congressional term, the 105th Congress, are, from left, his wife, Virginia, and daughters Carol Pitts and Karen Starkey.

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Wenger

He also vowed to stay only for a maximum of five terms — something he regrets now, because of the rift it caused when he decided to break the promise.

Nearly two decades exactly before Smucker would bring current House Speaker Paul Ryan to fundraise for him in the district, it was Pitts who got visits from then-House Whip Tom DeLay and then-House Majority Leader Dick Armey.

Neville, who started as his campaign manager, said the “secret strategy” was Pitts’ reputation and longtime relationships with both Chester and Lancaster county folks.

Franklin & Marshall College political observer G. Terry Madonna sees some of Pitts’ continued success like this: “Even though he's a Chester County guy, he's kind of a low-key Lancaster County guy ... His demeanor is less strident. I always thought that was historically the low-key approach that played well in Lancaster.”

Incoming congressman

Striving to go from the state Appropriations Committee to the congressional Appropriations Committee, Pitts instead was placed for his first few terms on the Budget Committee.

Then-U.S. Rep. John Kasich, the current governor of Ohio who Pitts originally supported for president this year, was leading the budget process at the time, and Pitts is still proud to have worked with him, and President Bill Clinton, to balance it.

He would never make it onto Appropriations — one of the most frustrating moments of his career — but would make it on another top-tier committee, Energy and Commerce.

Also appointed to the International Relations Committee in his third term, Pitts began traveling the world in efforts to build diplomatic relations on behalf of the country, and to advocate for human rights.

This brought him face to face with leaders like Egypt’s former President Hosni Mubarak and former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

In conversations with the Egyptian leader, Pitts says he would ask him to stop the unjust killings and political propaganda in the country’s press. When Mubarak would then visit the U.S., “every time I’d go see him. Finally, he’d go like this,” Pitts says as he raises his forearm to cover his face. “He knew I was going to bring up an instance when they murdered several Coptic Christians.”

In India, Pitts talks of how Prime Minister Narendra Modi knows him from when they went “head to head” over human rights abuses, especially a 2002 religious riot that left 2,000 Muslims dead.

Tony Hall, a former Democratic congressman from Ohio and ambassador who has traveled with Pitts, described his methods as diplomatic.

“He is not bullish or over aggressive. He’s just very straightforward,” said Hall, a pro-life liberal who had a weekly prayer group with Pitts when they served together. “He lets people know what he's thinking and what our country's all about and what he's all about.”



Unlikely diplomat

Pitts wasn’t placed on the International Relations Committee until 2001, but took on the guise of a diplomat long before that.

One month before he was first inaugurated in January 1997, he began organizing monthly luncheons with other country’s ambassadors living in D.C.

Why would someone brand new to a 435-member body with no foreign relations experience do that?

Pitts said it was to foster good relationships with countries — partly to initiate a healthy foundation for free and fair trade — and help them navigate the bloated bureaucracy of the federal government.

He'd also begun semi-regular roundtables to talk about bigger issues, like a final one he held last week with Indonesian authorities to discuss how they — the largest Muslim nation on the planet — can combat religious extremism, Pitts said.

Pitts has also worked with leaders of Mongolia, Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, China, Vietnam, Laos, Cambodia, and Philippines.

He even organized an “Ambassador Visit” program that annually brought ambassadors and their families to the district to spend time with American families and businesses.

By raising \$8,000 to \$10,000, he said he could rent a few Greyhound busses and pay for their meals as they would stay with host families — while ethics rule changes would eventually prevent him from raising the money for it.

“I’ll never forget one year the ambassador from Chad, in Africa, was the dean (of the ambassador delegation),” Pitts recalled. “He stood up and said, ‘You know, my wife and I have lived here in America for four years but we’ve never been outside the beltway in Washington or New York City. This is the first time we ever met a real American family, been in a real American home ...’It’s changed our view of America.”

Sometimes, these visits led to opportunities for local businesses.

“It is unusual,” Hall, the former U.S. ambassador who has been nominated three times for a Nobel Peace Prize, said of Pitts’ work with the ambassadors. “Because a lot of congressmen are thinking about themselves and thinking about getting reelected... He doesn’t get any votes from these ambassadors.”



“When I was in Pakistan, (I saw) all these crippled people walking on their hands and knees on the ground so I got 2,000 wheelchairs, padded wheelchairs, donated ... and you should see the light in their eyes when they get a wheelchair.” - Pitts

However, Pitts’ extensive ties overseas didn’t come without questions over the years.

In 2011, a political donation from seven years earlier raised some eyebrows when the FBI uncovered that Pitts and other House members had received campaign contributions from two men at the heart of an alleged cover plot by the Pakistani government to influence American policy on Kashmir.

Pitts’ office at the time denied a relationship between him and one of the men arrested (Syed Ghulam Nabi Fai, who pleaded guilty for illegally funnelling money from Pakistan), despite public comments both had previously made praising each-other’s work.

According to news reports then, Pitts gave away the \$4,000 campaign donation to a Lancaster County charity.

And as far as Pitt’s humanitarian work reaching beyond the pale of his official diplomatic duties, no country in need was off the table.

On his own effort through fundraising with friends, he has gotten boxes of school supplies to children in Kashmir, wheelchairs to the disabled in Pakistan and Afghanistan, medical equipment all across the Middle East and Asia, and even a donated fire truck that cost \$19,000 and years-worth of work to ship it to Mongolia.

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5 things you didn't know about 44-year political veteran Congressman Joe Pitts

“When I was in Pakistan, (I saw) all these crippled people walking on their hands and knees on the ground so I got 2,000 wheelchairs, padded wheelchairs, donated ... and you should see the light in their eyes when they get a wheelchair,” Pitts described.

Staunchly pro-life

Pitts may be best known on the national stage for his staunch pro-life, anti-abortion rights stances.

A devout Evangelical Christian, Pitts was a key player behind the scenes of Pennsylvania’s 1990 Abortion Control Act, which added restrictions to women’s abortion rights and eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Twenty years later, he found himself at the center of a national debate over whether Obamacare should allow federal funding for health care costs covering abortions.

Former U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, a pro-life Democrat and close friend who co-sponsored the amendment to outlaw such funding with Pitts, remembers the Pennsylvania congressman working tirelessly behind the scenes.

Stupak eventually voted to approve the health care law without the provision, leading to blowback for his role in the narrow passage of the law. He said he felt bad when, after a year of working together, he had to tell Pitts how he would cast his vote.

But their cordial relationship never changed.

“I know Joe Pitts as an individual, not just as a legislator,” Stupak said. “When you know a person’s heart it’s easy to understand where they’re coming from.”

In fact, Pitts strict belief system — something he and those who have worked closely with him say hasn’t wavered a bit in his entire career — could be confused as a result of today’s highly polarized factions in government, said F&M’s Madonna.

“I know people think he’s an ideologue,” Madonna said. “It seems to me, he comes to this out of his culture, out of his heritage, out of his upbringing... Before this big ideologue divide developed, he was more of a traditional conservative.”

Others have put it a little differently.

Jeff Sharlet, an investigative journalist, has written two books about a secretive evangelical group of lawmakers called “The Fellowship” that guides religious virtues in Congress.

In one of his books, “The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power,” Sharlet calls Pitts “an avuncular would-be theocrat who chairs the House” Values Action Team — a group Pitts has chaired for his entire 20 years.

The team, Pitts said, “helps equip their constituencies with up-to-date information on things like life and family and values ... traditional values.”

When Sharlet visited the county for a book signing in 2010, Pitt’s office rejected the idea of the more nefarious accusations.

Pitts’ Republican colleagues have largely celebrated his more traditional values.

In May, when honouring the retiring congressman, state party leaders described him as an inspiration for conservatives, and in some ways, a visionary.

“There will come a day when the causes for which Joe has fought will be realized,” U.S. Rep. Keith Rothfus said as U.S. Rep. Tom Marino and others painted him as a steady warrior fighting for a day in which the country will understand his pro-life views.

Life after Congress

Back in his Kennett Square district office, boxes piled high around him, Pitts seems relaxed as he talks of retirement.

He is prohibited from lobbying foreign governments or ambassadors in any way for a year. After that, he said he’d enjoy working as a special envoy to somewhere abroad.



"I have engaged in central and south Asia so much, I know a lot of the ambassadors," he said. "I could help the administration in hot spots, develop some policies. Maybe that would cool down some areas in that region of the world."

In the meantime, he'll be doing some guest lecturing at his alma mater, which is opening an academic center in his name next year.

He's also looking forward to seeing more of his teenage grandchildren in Tennessee.

As for how he'll be remembered for his representation, he'll leave that up to his colleagues and constituents — some of whom can call themselves both.

"Joe Pitts is so broadly respected in Congress and Washington. I don't think the people in the district have any idea of the impact that he's had," said former U.S. Rep. Bob Walker, a Manheim Township Republican whom Pitts succeeded. "I couldn't be prouder that he was my representative."



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'Renaissance man'

U.S. Rep. Joe Pitts has touched thousands of lives in his 44-year political career and beyond. Here's what a few who knew him best had to say about him:

"Most congressmen don't make a difference. They just kind of fill in. They're just filling in. He made a difference." - **former Democratic U.S. Rep. Tony Hall**, who had a weekly prayer group with Pitts.

"He was a great man in an atmosphere that breeds the rough and tumble." - **Dave Dumeyer**, longtime chairman of the Republican Committee of Lancaster County who knew Pitts as a staffer in the state House.

"He's kind of a Renaissance man. He's so well read on all kinds of different topics... He understood the importance of work but he also understood the importance of having a balanced and full life." - **Kevin Harley**, who was hired out of college to work on Pitts' state House Labor and Relations Committee in 1987.

"He's just a genuinely good man in the best sense of that word. What you'd want in a father, in a boss, in a husband. He's genuine. I think he reflects Lancaster very well too." - **Bill Wichterman**, Pitts' chief of staff for his first six years in Congress.

"He went to (Democratic) Sen. Ted Kennedy at one point... He said that he had been speaking ill of Kennedy and came to ask his forgiveness... That's the kind of the guy he was." - **Bill Wichterman**, Pitts' chief of staff for his first six years in Congress.

"In 2000 or 2001, CNN called and wanted him to go on one of their talk shows and debate a Democratic colleague about some controversial issue and I got all excited.... I went running into his office and ... He just gave me this funny look and said, 'What would I want to do that for?' What he meant by that is he had no desire to be on TV just for the sake of being on TV and he couldn't figure out how it would advance the cause ... He never saw the value in that." - **Gabe Neville**, Pitts' first congressional race campaign manager and staffer for 20 years.

"In the 20 years I worked for him I never saw him yell at anybody or raise his voice or look like he was stressed out or anything. The man's got an incredibly serene demeanor." - **Gabe Neville**, Pitts' first congressional race campaign manager and staffer for 20 years.

"He's been a friend to the Amish community through leading protests against reality TV shows involving Amish to trying to get child labor laws changed in a way that would allow their sons and daughters to work in family business and shops and maintain their way of life... not many members of congress can tout that." - **Kyle Kopko**, political science professor at Elizabethtown College

"Joe finally looked at me and said, 'You have to put your name on it. I know my name's on it but you have to cross it out and put your name on it,' he said, 'because it will be better for you introduce it as opposed to me. That's the kind of guy Joe is.' - **former Democratic U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak**, speaking about their co-sponsored amendment to the Affordable Care Act in 2010.

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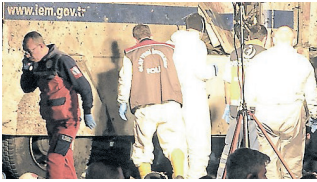
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December is peak season for model railroad displays in Lancaster County.

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High school basketball kicks off with the Penn Manor Girls Tip-off Classic.

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GOVERNMENT

END OF AN ERA

Longtime U.S. Congressman Joe Pitts reflects on a career in public service



RICHARD HERTZLER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

Congressman Joe Pitts discusses his career during an LNP interview in his Kennett Square office.

SAM JANESCH
SJANESCH@LNPNEWS.COM

On a mid-September morning, three months before his retirement, U.S. Rep. Joe Pitts sits behind his desk in his cozy Capitol Hill office and reads from a Washington newspaper with his face on the front page. Nearing the end of a 44-year career in state and national politics, it's the first time he's appeared in print in quite this way.

His headshot is on the bottom of the page, looking almost like the 77-year-old Republican is gazing upward at the photo showing the subject of the day's main story: the Lancaster County Democrat hoping to capitalize on his decision not to seek re-election.

In his office lined with densely blue carpet and walls decorated partly by his own paintings, Pitts doesn't seem to pay the story much mind at all — he's confident.

Pitts — with 24 years of legislating in the state House and 20 years in the U.S. House, adept at communicating with everyone from world leaders to high school students, with artistic gifts and politician skills — is widely regarded as something of a Renaissance man.

Both his Republican and Democratic colleagues respect him. His former staffers run out of compliments.

What makes him such a rare political breed, **PITTS**, page A10

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TRUMP'S CABINET

Oil exec eyed as secretary of state

Advisers worried by Rex Tillerson's ties to Russia

JULIE PACE AND JULIE BYKOWICZ
ASSOCIATED PRESS

WASHINGTON — President-elect Donald Trump moved closer to nominating Exxon Mobil CEO Rex Tillerson as his secretary of state Saturday, a decision that would bring a business leader with close ties to Russia into the Cabinet.

Trump has privately signaled that he plans to tap Tillerson for the powerful Cabinet post, but had not formally offered him the job as of Saturday evening, according to people who have spoken with Trump and his transition team. Some advisers worry that Tillerson's Russia connections would lead to a contentious Senate confirmation hearing and keep alive questions about Trump's own relationship with Moscow.

Trump and Tillerson met privately in New York on Saturday, their second meeting in a week. The president- **CABINET**, page A14

ECONOMY

Poverty rates rise in 2015

Census data precede report on solutions for city

TIM BUCKWALTER
TBUCKWALTER@LNPNEWS.COM

Just days before a special commission unveils a new poverty-fighting strategy for Lancaster, the latest numbers from the U.S. Census Bureau underscore the challenge:

Poverty here worsened in 2015. Lancaster County's poverty rate increased slightly, from 10.6 percent to 10.7 percent, even as the national rate slipped and the statewide rate held stable, the bureau announced.

In Lancaster city, meanwhile, the poverty rate climbed from 28.5 to 29 percent, according to the bureau, which released data from its five-year estimates in the American Community Survey.

Countywide, an estimated 55,372 people were living in poverty — an increase of 1,221 from a year earlier.

To put that in perspective, the num- **POVERTY**, page A14

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Pitts: Looking back on the veteran lawmaker's career

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they say, is his humble nature — eschewing media attention and credit for his work in an age when politicians are addicted to the spotlight.

“He just sort of defied the typical rules of politics,” said Gabe Neville, Pitts’ first congressional campaign manager, who then served as one of his closest aides for almost 20 years. “He got to the very top of America’s political system without being a self-promoter, without working the political networks, without schmoozing and telling people what they wanted to hear.”

The new class of politicians may be soaking up the headlines these days, but that’s fine with Pitts. He never wanted them anyway.

A veteran congressman

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He’s in a dark blue suit with a white shirt, black-and-blue striped tie and laceless brown shoes. His full head of hair, snow white and combed over to perfection, is just as it was the day he first showed up in Washington as a 57-year-old freshman in 1997.

His brow just barely begins to sweat, but the septuagenarian keeps his composure as he hustles through the underground tunnel from his office building to where he’s scheduled to lead a 10 a.m. hearing on the Affordable Care Act.

“I wanted to get as far away from the Capitol as possible, to walk back and forth. It’s the only exercise I get every day,” says Pitts, who chose his current office for its high ceilings, an old chandelier and its location on the expansive Capitol complex.

It’s a particularly contentious hearing Pitts is heading to, one held by the Energy and Commerce Committee’s Subcommittee on Health, which he’s chaired since 2010 after eight years as a member.

Pitts has spent six years fighting “Obamacare,” which President-elect Donald Trump has vowed to repeal.

But Pitts won’t be in Washington to see that legislative watershed, if and when it happens.

He’s leaving at an interesting time — when his party will have a hold on the White House and both chambers of Congress, and his longtime friend Mike Pence is assuming the vice presidency.

The pair spent 12 years together in the House, and they’ve spoken a few times since Election Day.

“I would not want a job,” Pitts says of his prospects. “But if I can help in advice, counsel, that’s what I would be interested in.”

For now, he’s at peace with his decision to hang up his boots after a long and adventurous career.

A congressman in the making

Pitts, who raised more than \$1 million for each of his final re-election campaigns in Congress, started his state House campaign with a mere \$8.

That bought him two 2-by-4s and materials for a few roadside campaign signs he would stand next to while waving to traffic.

“They would even see me in the rain and I guess they concluded, you know, ‘Dumb guy wants it that bad, I’ll vote for him,’” Pitts says with a laugh.

The only political experience the then-schoolteacher had on his resume was volunteering for a few local campaigns. But his diverse background at age 33 likely appealed to voters.

Born in Lexington, Kentucky, Pitts’ father shipped his moth-



RICHARD HERTZLER | STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER

er, himself and his two sisters to live in the Philippines when Pitts was 8 years old.

After World War II, the family moved to the war-torn southeast Asian island so his parents could work as missionaries, which they would continue to do into the 1970s.

Pitts graduated from high school there, moving back to attend Asbury College in Kentucky. That’s where he met his wife, Virginia (“Ginny”), both of whom went on to teach in Kentucky public schools.

But after starting a family, Ginny focusing on being a mother and one meager \$3,250 teacher’s salary, Pitts made a decision to enlist.

He became an Air Force officer, flying B-52s, spending half the year on alert with nuclear weapons at a Massachusetts military base. Three tours of Vietnam, 116 combat missions and 5 1/2 years later, he had three kids, one a 14-month-old son.

The Pitts family moved to Kennett Square, where Ginny had grown up, and where Pitts went to work building the home they still live in today.

After a stint in teaching math and science at Great Valley High School in Malvern, Chester County, he was recruited for the 158th Legislative District seat based in the Kennett Square area.

When he won by a mere 16 votes, there was no looking back.

In Harrisburg

In the state House, Pitts admits he had no idea what he was about to experience.

“I drove my little Volkswagen up to Harrisburg, and there’s this whole parking lot full of Cadillacs, and I thought, ‘What am I getting into here,’” he recalls with a laugh.

Soon, Pitts grew accustomed to Harrisburg’s ways, eventually rising to one of the most powerful positions in the Legislature: majority chairman of the Appropriations Committee.

“I tell people in Washington that is like being the Budget Committee chairman, the Ways and Means Committee chairman and the Appropriations Committee chairman all at the same time,” said Neville, his longtime top aide. “Joe Pitts controlled the money.”

Legislatively, Pitts worked behind the scenes to give homeschoolers their first recognition of credibility, said Kevin Harley, whose first job out of college in 1987 was working as a research analyst in Pitts’ office when he was chairman of the House Labor Relations Committee.



FILE PHOTO

From top: Pitts in his Kennett Square office during an LNP interview in late November; the outgoing congressman is leaving at an interesting time — when his party will have a hold on the White House and both chambers of Congress, and his longtime friend Mike Pence is assuming the vice presidency. Pitts speaks with congressman-elect Lloyd Smucker, who will be taking over the 16th District seat, at the PA Republican Party congressional delegation dinner at the Lancaster Convention Center on May 20. Pitts in the Rayburn House Office Building in Washington, D.C., before he was sworn in to the 105th Congress in 1997 with, from left, his wife, Virginia, and daughters Carol Pitts and Karen Starkey.



FILE PHOTO

Harley, now managing director of Harrisburg-based Quantum Communications, said Pitts was one of the most principled and genuine members of the state House — and a fantastic boss.

“I probably learned a master’s degree in government within two months working for Joe Pitts because he understood the role of a legislator and a committee chairman and he knew how to get things done,” Harley said.

Running for Congress

Watching Congress from afar, Pitts always had his eyes set on his next state House run.

In 1994, when a swing of seats left the GOP with its first majority in 40 years, Pitts thought to himself, “Man, it would be fun.”

Pitts jumped in when 20-year veteran Republican Bob Walker unexpectedly retired from the 16th District seat at age 53. Newspaper records show a flurry of 20 interested candidates — Pitts was the very last name in one story, a footnote.

Still, he was the first to declare his candidacy and went on to

defeat five Republicans in the primary and win the general election by a 22-point margin. He promised not to hike taxes, to help balance the federal budget and to bring in funding for the district’s dated highways.

Pitts also promised to stay only for a maximum of five terms — something he regrets now, because of the rift it caused when he broke the promise.

Neville, then his campaign manager, said the “secret strategy” was Pitts’ reputation and longtime relationships with both Chester and Lancaster County folks.

Franklin & Marshall College political observer G. Terry Madonna attributes some of Pitts’ continued success to his “low-key, Lancaster County-guy” demeanor.

“I always thought that was historically the low-key approach that played well in Lancaster.”

Incoming congressman

Pitts’ first big break in D.C. was his placement on the Budget Committee.

Then-U.S. Rep. John Kasich,

the current governor of Ohio who ran for president this year, was leading the budget process at the time, and Pitts is still proud to have worked with him and President Bill Clinton to balance it.

He would never make it onto the Appropriations Committee — one of the most frustrating moments of his career — but would make it on another top-tier committee, Energy and Commerce.

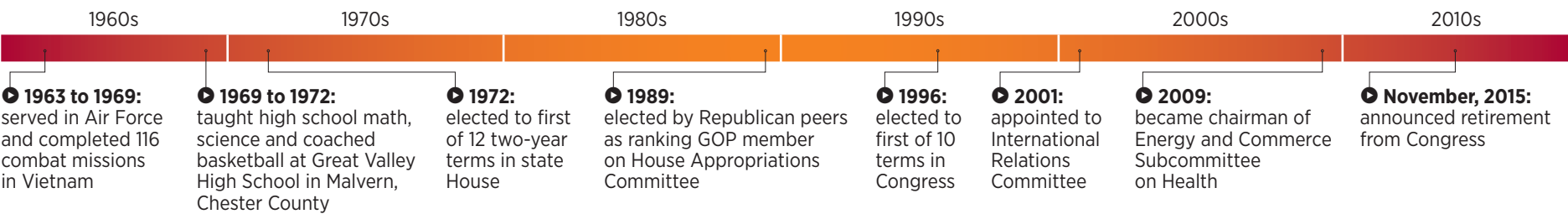
Appointed to the International Relations Committee in his third term, Pitts began traveling the world in efforts to build diplomatic relations on behalf of the country and to advocate for human rights.

This brought him face to face with Egypt’s former President Hosni Mubarak and former Pakistani President Pervez Musharraf.

In conversations with the Egyptian leader, Pitts says he would ask him to stop the unjust killings and political propaganda in the country’s press. When Mubarak would visit the U.S., “every time I’d go see him. Finally, he’d go like

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JOE PITTS: A CAREER SPANNING FIVE DECADES



Pitts: Outgoing congressman leaves lasting impact

Continued from A10

"This," Pitts says as he raises his forearm to cover his face.

"He knew I was going to bring up an instance when they murdered several Coptic Christians."

Tony Hall, a former Democratic congressman from Ohio and ambassador who has traveled with Pitts, described his methods as diplomatic.

"He is not bullish or overaggressive. He's just very straightforward," said Hall, a pro-life liberal who had a weekly prayer group with Pitts when they served together. "He lets people know what he's thinking and what our country's all about and what he's all about."

Unlikely diplomat

Pitts wasn't placed on the International Relations Committee until 2001, but he took on the guise of a diplomat long before that.

On his own initiative, he organized monthly luncheons with other country's ambassadors and had regular roundtables to foster good relationships with other countries, solve issues and help them navigate the bloated bureaucracy of the federal government.

"It is unusual," Hall, the former U.S. ambassador who has been nominated three times for a Nobel Peace Prize, said of Pitts' work with the ambassadors. "Because a lot of congressmen are thinking about themselves and thinking about getting re-elected. ... He doesn't get any votes from these ambassadors."

However, Pitts' extensive ties overseas didn't come without questions over the years.

In 2011, a political donation from seven years earlier raised some eyebrows when the FBI uncovered that Pitts and other House members had received campaign contributions from two men at the heart of an alleged cover plot by the Pakistani government to influence American policy on Kashmir.

At the time, Pitts' office denied a relationship between him and one of the men arrested (Syed Ghulam Nabi Fai, who pleaded guilty for illegally funneling money from Pakistan), despite public comments both had previously made praising each other's work.

And as far as Pitts' humanitarian work reaching beyond the pale of his official diplomatic duties, no country in need was off the table.

On his own effort through fundraising with friends, he has gotten boxes of school supplies to children in Kashmir, wheelchairs to the disabled in Pakistan and Afghanistan, medical equipment all across the Middle East and Asia, and even a donated firetruck that cost \$19,000 and years' worth of work to ship it to Mongolia.

Staunchly pro-life

Pitts may be best known on the national stage for his staunch pro-life, anti-abortion rights stances.

A devout evangelical Christian, Pitts was a key

player behind the scenes of Pennsylvania's 1990 Abortion Control Act, which restricted women's abortion rights and eventually went to the U.S. Supreme Court.

Twenty years later, he found himself at the center of a national debate over whether "Obamacare" should allow federal funding for health care costs covering abortions.

Former U.S. Rep. Bart Stupak, a pro-life Democrat and close friend who co-sponsored the amendment to outlaw such funding with Pitts, remembers the Pennsylvania congressman working tirelessly behind the scenes.

Stupak eventually voted to approve the health care law without the provision and received blowback for helping narrow-

ly pass the law. He said he felt bad when, after a year of working together, he had to tell Pitts how he would cast his vote.

But their cordial relationship never changed.

"When you know a person's heart, it's easy to understand where they're coming from," Stupak told LNP.

In fact, Pitts' strict belief system — something he and those who have worked closely with him say hasn't wavered a bit in his entire career — could be confused as a result of today's highly polarized factions in government, said F&M's Madonna.

"I know people think he's an ideologue," Madonna said. "It seems to me, he comes to this out of his culture, out of his heritage, out of his upbringing. ... Before this big ideologue divide de-

veloped, he was more of a traditional conservative."

Others have put it a little differently.

Jeff Sharlet, an investigative journalist, has written two books about a secretive evangelical group of lawmakers called "The Fellowship" that guides religious virtues in Congress.

In one of his books, "The Family: The Secret Fundamentalism at the Heart of American Power," Sharlet calls Pitts "an avuncular would-be theocrat" who chairs the House Values Action Team — a group Pitts has chaired for his entire 20 years.

The team, Pitts said, "helps equip their constituencies with up-to-date information on things like life and family and values ... traditional values."

In 2010, Pitts' office rejected Sharlet's nefarious

depiction of "The Fellowship."

After Congress

Back in his Kennett Square district office, boxes piled high around him, Pitts seems relaxed as he talks of retirement.

As a retired congressman, Pitts is prohibited from lobbying foreign governments or ambassadors in any way for a year. After that, he says he'd enjoy working as a special envoy to somewhere abroad.

In the meantime, he'll do some teaching at his alma mater, which is opening a new academic center in his name next year.

As for how he'll be remembered for his representation, he'll leave that up to his colleagues and constituents — some of whom are both.

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