

## Lawmaker With A Soul Purpose

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By John E. Yang

Washington Post Staff Writer

As Walter H. Capps sat through the orientation sessions for new lawmakers, listening to explanations of how to file a bill or manage an office, another thought kept nagging at him.

"The question I always wanted to ask is: Do we know why we're here? What are we doing here?" the former religious studies professor says as he sits in his small Capitol Hill office. "In the world I came from, the world of religion, people don't worry about procedure. They just give you the high ideals."

Most House freshmen hit Capitol Hill preoccupied with scoring juicy committee assignments, deciphering Byzantine rules of order and locating hearing rooms and restrooms. Capps, however, isn't like most House freshmen.

For 33 years, he taught and wrote at the University of California, Santa Barbara, contemplating the nourishment of

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BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

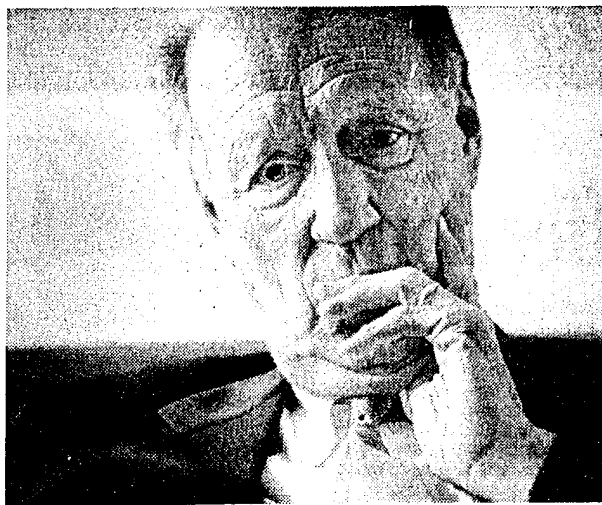
Can Capps mesh his political and spiritual lives? "It's a big experiment," says the religion professor.

## THE NEW CONGRESS

REP. WALTER H.  
CAPPS  
(D-Calif.)

# Outsider In the House

CAPPS, From C1



BY BILL O'LEARY—THE WASHINGTON POST

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the soul, not the building of electoral blocs. He counts among his influences the late U.N. secretary general Dag Hammarskjöld, psychoanalyst Erik Erikson and the Dalai Lama.

"One of the challenges is to see if someone with the training and experience I have can work in a world like this," the Democratic congressman says with characteristic low-key candor. "It's a big experiment to see if it works."

Many lawmakers have, in fact, struggled to mesh pedestrian politics with a spiritual life. The Rev. Robert F. Drinan, a liberal Massachusetts Democrat, perhaps confronted the dilemma most directly. After 10 years in office, he left the House in 1980 on direct orders from Pope John Paul II, who barred Jesuits from public office. Currently, there are two ministers in Congress, Rep. Floyd H. Flake (D-N.Y.) and Sen. Tim Hutchinson (R-Ark.). Meanwhile, the strong religious faith of former senator Mark O. Hatfield (R-Ore.) animated his opposition to both abortion and the death penalty, just as the ardent anti-abortion efforts of Reps. Henry J. Hyde (R-Ill.) and Christopher H. Smith (R-N.J.) have roots in their Catholicism.

"At some level, I hope [Capps] doesn't fit in too much," says former Clinton adviser George Stephanopoulos. The onetime House aide is the son of a Greek Orthodox priest and is himself a former theology student. Capps's daughter, Laura, worked for Stephanopoulos at the White House, and he campaigned for Capps last year. "His strength is to bring that outsider's perspective to the House," Stephanopoulos says.

It's a perspective, as Capps describes it, that puts a greater emphasis on principles than on issues or party loyalty. Those principles, Capps explains, are: Does an initiative build up the community? Is it fair? Does it promote social and cultural diversity? Does it honor civility? "This is all about the human spirit."

Capps, 62, says he is not likely to be in Congress for a long time and has not given up his academic appointment. "This for me is not the beginning of my life," the lanky, balding Capps says. "The real struggle is to integrate this with the kind of man I've become until now. I need to be sure I'm in balance."

Sen. Bob Kerrey (D-Neb.), who has

says. "That doesn't mean he hasn't gotten anything done. Some of the most important things in this place are how we touch other people's lives. It's not the words in legislation."

Whether Capps's constituents agree is another question—a fact that Capps is not unaware of. His legislative goals are decidedly earthly—a community college for Paso Robles, cleaning up Morro Bay. "You do have to be good at politics or you can't win and you can't be effective here," he concedes.

Indeed, Capps learned that getting elected isn't simply a matter of philosophical query. When Stephanopoulos campaigned for him last year, Capps honored him with a quotation from Saint John Chrysostom, author of the main Greek Orthodox liturgy. Stephanopoulos then delighted Capps by responding with a quotation from Czech playwright and president Vaclav Havel, about whom Capps had just finished writing a book.

Afterward, Capps told Stephanopoulos what a wonderful moment it had been.

"But you forgot to mention Medicare," Stephanopoulos replied.

"I wanted him to win, goddammit," he now adds with a laugh.

Capps also got a tutorial in Electioneering 101 from the consummate campaigner, President Clinton, during a stop in Santa Barbara. After his speech, Clinton called Capps to the lectern. "Stick with me," Capps recalled the president coaching him. "Look straight into the cameras, smile and wave like crazy."

That day, and the election the following week, capped a painful journey that had begun nearly six months earlier. On May 23, Capps was nearly killed in a head-on collision with a drunk driver who swerved into the path of his car on a rural highway as he and his wife, Lois, returned home from a news conference. Capps, who was driving, had to be cut from the wreckage and suffered a badly broken arm and leg, as well as head and internal injuries. Lois Capps escaped with only cuts and bruises.

He spent three weeks in the hospital and did not return to the campaign trail until Aug. 8. Even then, he could not walk without assistance. He still does not have full use of his right arm and is to have additional surgery on it this spring.

"That was really life-defining because I nearly lost it," he said. "I wake up every morning and give thanks for that one day."

Now Capps considers the more philosophical challenges, when he will face the choice between doing what is politically expedient and standing on principle.

"Then the question is, What will I do?" he says. "Am I being true to who I am? If I go this way, have I violated anything that is essentially human?"

Capps says he is confident he will know the answer, if not in himself then in the voices of his friends and family.

"The Bible tells us we are surrounded by a cloud of witnesses," he says, quoting from Hebrews. "There are so many people with such strong testimony to the truth. If I start down the wrong path they would be so disappointed—and I would be so shameful."

## FOR MORE INFORMATION

For a bio of Capps and a summary of his policy positions, click on the above symbol on the front page of The Post's site on the World Wide Web at <http://www.washingtonpost.com>