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A West Point Grad and Go-To Senator

By George Cahlink
Roll Call

Sen. Jack Reed (D-R.I.) is a “ring knocker.”

Among the military, the term is slang for a service academy graduate, a play on the oversized class rings they wear as badges of honor.

Like nearly all members of the Long Gray Line, Reed wears his gold Class of 1971 West Point ring on his left hand with the school’s crest facing his heart to signify his closeness to the academy.

In the Senate, and as a member of the Armed Services panel, Reed hardly needs the ring to remind Members of his deep ties to the military. In recent years, the second-term Senator has drawn on his national security expertise and access to Army generals to earn bipartisan respect on military matters and become the Democratic point man on defense issues.

“As a West Point graduate and former Army Ranger, he has unique insight on the needs of our military,” Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-Nev.) said. “He has been and will continue to be a leading voice on defense matters.”

“If he hangs in there long enough, I expect someday he would be chairman” of the Senate Armed Services Committee, Chairman Carl Levin (D-Mich.) said of Reed, who has become a regular on the Sunday morning talk shows.

Not just yet, though. Levin, 71, is expected to win a sixth term this fall and keep his gavel.

Reed, the first West Point graduate to serve in the Senate in nearly seven decades, is fourth in seniority on the panel, so it’s no stretch to see him as its future chairman. While this year’s elections will not change the panel’s lineup, it may not matter.

The second-ranking Armed Services Democrat, Sen. Robert Byrd (W.Va.), already chairs the powerful Appropriations Committee. The next in line, Sen. Edward Kennedy (D-Mass.), relishes his role in crafting domestic policy as head of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee. And Sen. Joe Lieberman (ID-Conn.) would be a long shot given his support for GOP war policies.

Reed was touted for an even higher post this summer after being the only Democrat to join presidential candidate Sen. Barack Obama (D-Ill.) on an Iraq trip. His presence stoked rumors that he would be Obama’s running mate and more recent speculation that he could be his Defense secretary.

Reed said he’s not eyeing the Pentagon job and noted that he is interested in his work on the Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs and Appropriations committees, too. He’s expected to win a third Senate term this fall against an underfunded GOP opponent, Bob Tingle.

Senate colleagues, Capitol Hill aides and longtime Reed allies suggest the 58-year-old Senator, who recently

became a father, has the energy and intellect to run the Defense Department.

But they say Reed is content in the Senate and would be reluctant to give up a seat because Rhode Island's Republican governor would name a GOP successor.

Tad Devine, a Democratic operative who worked on Reed's first Senate campaign in 1996, said his former boss appears "really happy" in the Senate. "What happens in the Senate is that some people rise because their peers respect them — that has been Jack," Devine said.

First elected to the House in 1990 and to the Senate in 1996, Reed grew up in Cranston, the son of a school custodian. He spent six years in the state Senate until he won the House seat vacated by former Rep. Claudine Schneider (R), who left to make an unsuccessful bid for the Senate against former Sen. Claiborne Pell (D).

Since 2001, Reed has won respect by traveling to war zones as often as any Member — 12 trips to Iraq and six to Afghanistan — and filing comprehensive trip reports. A recent report from a two-day Iraq trip runs more than 20 pages, highlights meetings with both military and Iraqi government officials, and offers observations after visits to various provinces. Levin said the reports are "very helpful" and he always reads them.

Army Lt. Gen. Franklin Hagenbeck, superintendent of the United States Military Academy and a former top commander in Afghanistan after the 9/11 attacks, said Reed's trips were different from other Congressional visits because Reed asked to travel to forward operating bases, such as the Afghanistan-Pakistan border.

"He spends a lot of time with troops on the ground. He's not just going to the capital to get a briefing,"

Hagenbeck said.

Hagenbeck, who graduated in the same West Point class as Reed and has become close to him in recent years, said the Senator's decades-long ties to Army officers give him unique access. The past two top Army officers in Iraq, Gen. David Petraeus and Gen. John Abizaid, attended West Point in the early 1970s with Reed and met with him several times when he visited the region.

Despite the military ties, Reed has opposed the Iraq War from the start and was a leading critic of the Bush administration's troop surge. Senate colleagues and aides say his opposition has not hurt his Army links because his views are backed by detailed arguments.

In a recent interview, Reed used that approach to criticize Bush's Iraq policy. "The surge is one of the factors that contributed to a reduction in violence, which is tangible. I think the notion that it was the surge alone that did this is imprecise.

"As the days evolve, it's become clear that some of the political factors might have been as important or even more important — the Awakening in Anbar province, the Sunni renunciation of al-Qaida, the cease-fires declared by [Muqtada] al-Sadr."

Reed makes it clear, though, that his disagreements with Bush are over policy. "It's not about personalities to me. The president is the commander in chief and I respect that," said Reed, ever the loyal soldier who still wears the ring.