

Opinion: U.S. Senate lacks giants of yesteryear

Dana Milbank, Washington Post

Four years ago this week, Ted Kennedy changed history with the sheer force of his will.

Senate Democrats, battling with the Bush administration, were one vote short of the total they needed to maintain a key provision of Medicare. Harry Reid, the Democratic leader, then used a lifeline: He called Kennedy, who was in Boston receiving chemotherapy for brain cancer, and pleaded for the liberal giant to return to Washington to provide the clinching vote. When Kennedy walked onto the floor on July 9, 2008, senators on both sides erupted in cheers, and some wept. The Medicare bill passed – with nine Republican senators switching their previous votes to be on Kennedy's side.

Among those cheering the loudest that day was Utah Republican Orrin Hatch, Kennedy's longtime legislative partner, who wrote a song for Kennedy upon learning of his friend's illness and eulogized him at his memorial a year later.

I was reminded of this moment when talking in recent days with senators and veteran Capitol Hill correspondents about what has gone wrong in the Senate. A leading theory: There are no giants in the chamber today, no figure with the stature of a Kennedy who could carry 10 votes with his mere presence. There is no longer a revered figure – a Byrd, a Dole, a Moynihan, a Chafee, a Nunn, a John Warner – whose authority could transcend party and the usual arithmetic of vote counting. Some have died. Some have retired. Others, such as Hatch and John McCain, have been lost to the exigencies of survival in a hyperpartisan political system.

Read the whole story