

Heller quietly steps out of Reid's shadow

By Amber Phillips, Las Vegas Sun

WASHINGTON – Standing on the royal blue carpet of the U.S. Senate chamber in cowboy boots, Republican Sen. Dean Heller looks every bit the Washington power broker as he swaps jokes and slaps backs with the most influential people in the city.

Across the chamber, in a scene that plays out daily, Nevada's senior Sen. Harry Reid hunches over a desk with fellow Democrats. The Senate majority leader, in a plain gray suit, mutters out the side of his mouth about the vote of the day.



Sen. Dean Heller, R-Nev., wants to be a bigger player on the national stage. Photo/LTN

Heller and Reid never make eye contact on the Senate floor. But they could soon be staring each other dead on. Heller, an ambitious yet relatively anonymous Washington lawmaker, is quietly putting together a campaign to make his own name in this town, dethrone Reid and become the state's leader on Capitol Hill.

This fall, Heller worked behind the scenes to raise money for key Republicans seeking to win or hold Senate seats. His goal

is to cash in on an unpopular Democratic president and, to a lesser extent, an unpopular Reid, to help his party take over the Senate.

Heller will find out Tuesday if he succeeded. "I told my staff there's a path I want to go down," said Heller, 54. "One of those steps is being in the majority."

Heller's political maneuvering comes after he spent two years on policy work to aid the unemployed, help veterans and reduce federal spending. That work has put Heller on Democrats' shortlist to co-sponsor bipartisan bills.

The real Nevada battle, though, will be born in 2016.

The Silver State will be a swing state in a wide open presidential election, and Reid, 74, is expected to run for his sixth term. With those races on the horizon, Heller is lobbying now to become Senate Republicans' top campaign operative. It would be an extraordinary feat for a rookie senator. If he wins the job, his No. 1 target will be none other than Harry Reid.

"He spent \$12 million against me in my last campaign," Heller said in a September interview, referring to Reid's behind-the-scenes meddling in Heller's 2012 Senate race. "And I'll probably return the favor."

The questions for Heller in the next two years: Can the unknown freshman senator climb the ranks of an increasingly conservative Republican party? And can he do it while maintaining a relationship with the still-influential Reid and with Nevadans who are becoming increasingly centrist?

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