



POLITICS

James Oberstar, 79, Congressman Ousted in Tea Party Tide, Dies

By ASHLEY SOUTHALL MAY 4, 2014

James L. Oberstar, an iron miner's son from Minnesota who spent 36 years in Congress before losing to a political newcomer aligned with the Tea Party in 2010, died on Saturday at his home in Potomac, Md. He was 79.

His wife, Jean, said the cause was not known.

A Democrat, Mr. Oberstar was the longest-serving House member in Minnesota history, representing the northeastern part of the state. He was first elected to the House in 1974, and became an expert on public works and transportation issues.

He was chairman of the House Transportation Committee from 2007 until 2011, having been narrowly defeated for re-election in 2010 by Chip Cravaack, a retired Navy captain with support from the Tea Party. Mr. Cravaack lost the 2012 election to Rick Nolan, a Democrat.

Mr. Oberstar was a reliable vote for Democrats on fiscal issues and played a pivotal role as the Transportation Committee chairman in passing the 2009 stimulus act, which increased demand for steel from his district. He also helped enact a long-stalled water resources bill in 2007 over President George W. Bush's veto. After the 2007 collapse of the Interstate 35 bridge in Minneapolis, he wrote legislation authorizing \$255 million to rebuild the bridge; it was quickly passed and signed into law.

He opposed stricter gun control laws and abortion, and in 2010 threatened to oppose President Obama's health care overhaul if it did not include language barring the use of federal funds to pay for insurance plans that cover abortion drugs and procedures. He ultimately voted for the bill without such language, a decision that he said might have cost him re-election.

In his concession speech, however, he said he “wouldn’t change any of the votes I cast this year — to bring us out of this worst recession” and to lay a foundation for “a better quality of health care.”

James Louis Oberstar was born Sept. 10, 1934, in Chisholm, Minn., to Louis Oberstar, an iron miner, and the former Mary Grillo, who worked in a shirt factory. He often said he was inspired by the activism of his father, who organized miners to form a union to fight for fair wages and a safe workplace.

After graduating from Chisholm High School in 1952, he worked in the mines to pay for his education at the College of St. Thomas in St. Paul, where he majored in French and political science. He received a master’s degree in European studies in 1957 from the College of Europe in Belgium.

His first wife, the former Jo Garlick, died in 1991.

Survivors include his wife; four children from his first marriage; two stepchildren; eight grandchildren; and two brothers.

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