

34 of 100 DOCUMENTS

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FRESHMAN DIDN'T WAIT; TOUGH AUDIT BILL IS WHY

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BODY:

WASHINGTON - Freshman orientation in these parts is no trifling thing. All the factors that bring new senators to the chamber - ambition, an ease at a microphone, a sense of the political timbre, above all an abiding impatience - are ruthlessly repressed. The process is humorless, humbling, even humiliating. Mostly, new senators wait for their moment. Mostly that moment is six years or more in coming.

Then there is Jon Corzine, a New Jersey Democrat. Most new senators are experienced in government: governors, for example, or House members, or a former president's wife. Many new senators have difficulty articulating a coherent economic philosophy; Corzine, a bond trader by profession, has a crisp one at hand: Buy low, sell high. Most new senators, even one who once lived in the White House, stay in the background and try to fade into the wallpaper; Corzine is at the center of the debate over one of the year's most important pieces of business-related legislation.

As early as this week, the Senate Banking Committee is to take up a measure to respond to the Enron collapse, probably by embracing large parts of a proposal crafted by Corzine and Senator Christopher J. Dodd, Democrat of Connecticut. The legislation would create an independent regulator for auditing standards, ban accounting firms from providing other services to the companies they examine, and improve financial disclosure. The House passed substantially weaker legislation last week.

All of which makes Corzine - the lawmaker the lions of the Senate expected to humor, humble, and humiliate - one of the most influential Senate freshmen in decades. Indeed, his fellow Democrats no longer dis him by saying that "he bought his seat" (a quality they do not mind before an election but often resent afterward) or dismiss him by saying that "he's Wall Street" (a description that gives the party credibility in public forums but makes the party uneasy in private caucuses). Said one Democratic insider: "No one else in the room has any idea what these issues are all about."

In politics, as in batting and business, timing is everything. There was, for example, nothing wrong with Corzine's prospects as a candidate that an open

The Boston Globe, April 30, 2002

seat, plus \$60 million of his own money in campaign expenditures, couldn't cure. Similarly, there was nothing wrong with his prospects as a senator that the collapse of the world's sixth biggest energy company couldn't cure. The retirement of Senator Frank Lautenberg, Democrat of New Jersey, and the Enron debacle transformed Corzine from a political afterthought to a political afterburner.

"I didn't come down here looking to be the Democratic investment banker," Corzine said the other day. "But Enron created issues that needed addressing. They were important beforehand, but much more clear now."

So, too, is the classic irony of American politics, the presence of plutocrats at the ramparts of reform. Some of the greatest progressives came from the posh side of the class barrier; just last year James MacGregor Burns and Susan Dunn wrote a triple biography of Theodore, Franklin, and Eleanor Roosevelt, terming them "patrician leaders who transformed America." Two weeks from today, Kevin Phillips's new book, "Wealth and Democracy," will arrive in bookshops across the country. In this remarkable political history of the American rich, Phillips argues that "arousal against abuses of wealth and power have always transcended class lines." In the last century, three patrician conservatives (William Howard Taft and the two Bushes) have been counter balanced with three patrician progressives (the two Roosevelts and John F. Kennedy).

So now Corzine takes his place among the investment bankers in Democratic politics, alongside Averell Harriman and Robert Rubin. Like the others, he breaks the stereotypes. Before he joined the Senate, he was known as the wiz in the fixed-income division at Goldman Sachs, the part of the firm that owned billions in bonds, acquired in the simple but perilous hope that they could be sold for more than they cost. Now his horizon is a bit broader. He doesn't think of himself as a day trader anymore.

He also doesn't think of himself as a representative of a special interest anymore. Wall Street may never forgive him for supporting an amendment to regulate energy and metals derivatives. In response to the Enron collapse, Corzine came up with a proposal to cap at 20 percent the proportion of an employee's 401(k) account that could be held in company stock. Swiftly and efficiently, the notion was crushed by the US Chamber of Commerce, the National Association of Manufacturers, and the American Benefits Council. "Not only instant attack," Corzine recalled, "but instant death."

But his persona hasn't been altered completely. In his first year in office, Corzine distributed almost \$2.8 million to Democratic causes and candidates, including more than a half-million each in soft money to Democratic campaign committees and to New Jersey state candidates and party activities. Though no longer on Wall Street, Corzine is still making investments.

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