

Mark Sanford came to D.C. vowing change. He leaves with few wins

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Rep. Mark Sanford has made a career out of staking out unpopular positions — in his words, “planting flags.”

He’ll leave Congress at the end of the year having done little more than that.

The South Carolina Republican first entered politics with his election to the U.S. House in 1994, talking tough and vowing to be part of an aggressive group of young Republicans who would cut spending and shrink government.

Yet after two separate stints on Capitol Hill over a span of more than two decades — from 1995-2001 and then since 2013 — Sanford will exit Washington having proved unable to stop his party from passing bills that will send the federal deficit to levels inconceivable 20 years ago.

The deficit reached \$782 billion in the fiscal year that ended Sept. 30, \$116 billion more than the previous year, according to the nonpartisan Congressional Budget Office.

Sanford has made his fiscal crusade the driving force of his career.

“It gets me up in the morning,” he said in a recent interview with McClatchy.

He’s without apology that he hasn’t been able to stop the federal government’s spending spree.

“It matters that you plant flags,” Sanford said. “It’s always been my style of politics ... It’s leadership as opposed to followership. It will bear fruit over time.”

But until that day comes — if it ever does — Sanford is more likely to be remembered for an episode in 2009, when the second-term governor disappeared for days to “hike the Appalachian Trail.” He was actually in Argentina having an extramarital affair.

History books are also bound to paint him as a case study for what happens when a Republican incumbent crosses Donald Trump: The president gives enthusiastic, vocal support to the primary challenger and the incumbent loses.

That’s what happened to Sanford in June of this year.

Then and now

In the U.S. House, getting things done depends largely on rank. Party leaders decide what bills get debates and votes. Committee chairmen help shape the actual legislation.

That means a lawmaker has to be both a team player and someone willing to make concessions. Sanford is neither.

He's often praised for his resolve — or stubbornness, depending on one's point of view. In the mid-2000s, it was that consistency — combined with his charisma on the stump — that prompted whispers he could be an attractive potential candidate for president or vice president.

Yet Sanford's inflexibility also earned him political enemies. As governor from 2003-2011, Sanford vetoed countless bills, refused federal stimulus money on behalf of South Carolina and famously mocked his colleagues by bringing two piglets onto the State House floor to protest wasteful government spending, or "pork."

Tom Davis, a Republican state senator in South Carolina and a former Sanford aide, called Sanford's consistency "his great strength but also his great weakness."

It hurt him in Congress, where collegiality is a crucial quality.

"He hasn't been able to transform taking strong stances into a legislative role that requires collaboration and cooperation. He fell short when it came to actively legislating and making changes because it's a different skill set," Davis said.

Scott English, an on-again, off-again Sanford aide who is now executive director of the American Philatelic Society, rejected this premise. After all, he said, he watched Sanford try to get things done two decades ago.

During Sanford's first stint in Congress, he was poised to help make a difference on overhauling Social Security. He wasn't on the House Ways and Means Committee, which handles the issue. A newly-arrived lawmaker, he wasn't a member of leadership. He made it clear from the start he wouldn't be a reliable party vote.

But a combination of political savvy and sheer determination got Sanford noticed by party leaders. He was named an official surrogate to speak on behalf of House Republicans on the national stage about how to keep Social Security solvent.

Had Republicans not turned on President Bill Clinton with articles of impeachment, souring cross-party relationships, there were plans for the Congressional GOP and the Clinton administration to join forces on reforming entitlement programs. Sanford was to have a seat at the negotiating table.

If Sanford could do all that back then, why could he not have done anything similar upon his return to Capitol Hill?

English argued it was because the congressman lost his confidence in the stinging aftermath of his 2009 affair, when his friends and allies abandoned him and his greater political prospects evaporated.

"That guy I knew, that guy who recruited me, who brought me to the Hill, who took me to South Carolina to fight the revolution? He died in June of 2009," English said.

The Trump effect

Michael Tanner, a senior fellow at the Libertarian Cato Institute who worked with Sanford on Social Security efforts in the 1990s, didn't fault the congressman for not having succeeded in his mission to rein in the debt.

“You can’t always judge what’s right or wrong by the number of bills passed,” said Tanner.

Nodding to Sanford’s defense of the importance of symbolic gestures, Tanner added, “sometimes, planting a flag is enough.”

Sanford had several explanations for why, by his own admission, he has accomplished “very little” in regards to curbing spending.

In this current environment, Sanford argued, “show me anybody who’s making a difference on the issues.”

He blamed Trump for stunting political discourse and costing him his Congressional seat.

“I thrive in a policy-driven world. It is a personality-driven world right now, which doesn’t play to my strong suits,” Sanford said.

In 2015, he found a home in the House Freedom Caucus, a group of ideologically rigid, fiscal hardliners willing to vote against their party to stop big spending bills — in other words, some 40 lawmakers who think and act just like Sanford.

In the first months of 2017, Sanford seemed to be hitting his stride again. He introduced the House version of a Senate bill to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, which the Freedom Caucus embraced as the official conservative alternative to Obamacare.

He got a reminder of what it was like to be a spokesman for a political movement.

But the movement didn’t last long. The Freedom Caucus couldn’t get Republican leaders to back the proposal, which would have, among other things, eliminated the Obamacare “essential health benefits requirement” mandating that insurance companies cover services like mental health treatment, preventative services, hospitalizations and surgeries.

Most damaging to Sanford, Trump got his budget director, former South Carolina Republican Rep. Mick Mulvaney, to deliver a specific threat: If Sanford didn’t fall in line with the health care bill being pushed by the White House, Trump would support a primary challenger in the First Congressional District.

Sanford ended up voting for a Trump-backed health care bill some months later, but he never stopped criticizing the president on a host of issues. More than a year later, Trump made good on his promise: He endorsed South Carolina State Rep. Katie Arrington in the hours before the polls closed on primary night. Sanford lost, 51 percent to 47 percent.

While Sanford insists Trump was the sole reason he suffered the first defeat of his political life, there were other forces at play.

Sanford didn’t, for instance, run an aggressive campaign against Arrington. He spent just a fraction of his staggering \$1.5 million war chest on the race. In the weeks before the election, he placed a pair of television ads boasting his support for Trump’s border wall — an issue designed to appeal to red-meat conservatives that didn’t square with Arrington’s successful attempts to paint him as anti-Trump.

Davis said Sanford might have just been burned out.

“I saw my friend was tired in the last race and I think he needs a break,” said Davis, who predicted Sanford would make another political comeback. “I have seen what he can do.”

‘Never say never’

House Freedom Caucus Chairman Mark Meadows of North Carolina agreed that Sanford could run for office again.

“I don’t believe we’ve seen the last days of (Sanford),” said Meadows.

If the Democratic candidate for Sanford’s current seat, Joe Cunningham, wins the election in November, Sanford could try to unseat him in 2020.

If Arrington wins and then, two years from now, Trump falls out of favor, Sanford could launch a primary challenge against Arrington, who has campaigned on a pro-Trump platform.

Sanford said “Never say never,” but was inclined to believe he was done with elected office for the time being.

“You know, it’s been a full chapter of life on that front, and there’s some wear and tear that goes with it. I got circles under my eyes for a reason,” Sanford said. “I haven’t slept as much as I should have over the last 25 years of my life. I’ve missed a lot of events with my boys because of this, that or whatever.”

Sanford, 58, has four sons, the youngest of whom is in college. Two live in the Washington, D.C., area, and Sanford said he planned to move in temporarily with one of them at the end of November, when Congress is still in session but retiring members must vacate their offices in preparation for incoming lawmakers.

Sanford practices the frugality he preaches: He slept in his Congressional office in the 1990s and he has done the same since his return rather than rent an apartment in Washington.

“That will be fun,” Sanford said of being short-term roommates with one of his boys.

As for his long-term plans, Sanford said he was still imagining what his “perfect day will look like,” but could foresee a scenario where he spent his time “in the world of public advocacy,” perhaps through being a commentator on a cable TV news network, a route taken by some of his other, more outspoken former Congressional colleagues.

He might become “a sitting scholar with one of the think tank groups,” Sanford continued, or engage in “commercial activity back home and in other places.”

Another interest of Sanford’s is the environment. He’s one of a few Republicans in elected office willing to publicly oppose offshore drilling and say climate change is man-made. He has started talking about what it would take to build a giant, waterfront public park on Daniel Island. He recently sent an email to supporters to announce he would continue to raise money through his political action committee, which he could use to bolster this effort.

The passion has the makings of a possible legacy project for him, especially if he wants to move back to South Carolina full time.

“Home is home,” Sanford said of Charleston.

Back on the policy front, Sanford said he'd been asked to sit on the board of "some debt, deficit, you know, whatever, spending group," and fished through some clutter on his desk for a business card to recall the name.

He owed the group a call back to discuss.