PROFILE: NEBRASKA SENATOR LOU ANN LINEHAN

From rural Nebraska, to Washington, D.C., to Iraq — and now back to her home state, where she quickly emerged as a legislative leader on tax policy

by Tim Anderson (tanderson@csg.org)

She served her country around the world, as the chief of staff to a U.S. senator, as a legislative liaison for then-Secretary of State Colin Powell, and as part of a Provincial Reconstruction Team in Baghdad.

What do you do next after such a remarkable career in government?

For Lou Ann Linehan, the answer was to come home, run for office herself and join the Nebraska unicameral legislature.

“How do you do that?” she asks. “Stop thinking that you've been told you've got to do it one way, and then it keeps people from being able to negotiate.”

“There's not the kind of ‘gotcha’ press here. In D.C., it’s just so much more intense. Every word is scrutinized. Here, I'll hear things on the floor and think, 'Oh my goodness, if that was said on the floor of the U.S. House of Representatives, that would be national news.’ It's not a forgiveness really of the press here. It's more the press hears what you're trying to say rather than what you're saying. And here, there is more of an effort to tell the story of what's going on — the substance of the issues. What happens in D.C. is that when you put people under that kind of magnifying glass, it keeps people from thinking out loud and from being able to negotiate.”

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What are some of the similarities you've observed about legislating at the federal level vs. the state level?

One is that it’s all about relationships and about trust. What you say and what you do have to be the same. You're going to get in trouble [with colleagues] in a state legislature or the U.S. Congress if you say one thing and do something else.

Another similarity is being responsive to constituents. That's important in D.C., that's important here. You've got to show people that you care about them. That's been especially important recently with all of the unemployment claims [from earlier this year]. It was so new for so many people; I think we had 60 to 75 people we were able to help with unemployment claims. That's a really important part of the job. Because by the time constituents decide to call an elected official, they are likely in trouble.

What are some of the interesting or striking differences that you've observed?

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Speaking of negotiations, you were a central part of work this past summer in getting a bill on property tax relief passed by the Legislature and signed into law. What do you view as the key to successful legislative negotiations?

Everybody has to be able to walk away with a win. That has sometimes been a frustration of mine since becoming chair of the Revenue Committee — just convincing people that everybody has to get something. There were those who would say, ‘I hate incentives. They are a giveaway; they are corporate welfare.’ Well, but if you're not able to give on that, you're not going to get property tax relief. And there were people on the other side saying, ‘I don't care if the rich farmers have to pay property taxes.”

But nobody is going to get what they want unless everybody gets something.

“Views on leadership”

During your time working with people such as Chuck Hagel and Colin Powell, what did you take away from your experience that you would share with others?

“Everybody else was saying, ‘Shut up Lou Ann,’ ” she recalls. “But I would keep asking.”

As a young parent in Omaha, she fought City Hall over traffic patterns, speed bumps and children's safety in her neighborhood. That got her involved in local elections, congressional races and, most career- changing of all, the chance to successfully run the campaign of Chuck Hagel when he first won a seat in the U.S. Senate. “One thing he taught me was, Do the job you’re assigned really well, and the next job will appear.”

That philosophy helped lead to jobs in the State Department under Secretary of State Powell and as part of then-President George W. Bush's surge in Iraq.

But Nebraska always was and will be home for Linehan, and that love of her state dates back as far as she can remember. “I came back to Nebraska and thought ‘I came back to Nebraska and thought ’” She now lives with her husband, their three children and six grandchildren in Elkhorn, and has four adult children and two grandchildren.

What do you do next after such a career?

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A leadership development program, and then becoming a state legislator. Her interest in politics and government dates back as far as she can remember. “I came back to Nebraska and thought ‘I came back to Nebraska and thought ’”

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