

April 27, 2008

A Humble Path to Power

By G. Wayne Miller
The Providence Journal

Dawn is yet to break when Senator Jack Reed awakens on this morning not so long ago. He goes into the kitchen of his small townhouse near Washington, D.C., makes tea, reads the newspapers, and puts away dishes left to dry after last night's dinner. His wife, Julia, and baby daughter, Emily, are still asleep.

At 7:07 a.m., Reed telephones a Rhode Island radio talk show and speaks on air for a few minutes about the economy and the presidential primaries. Then he gets into his car, a 1991 Ford Escort that shows its age, and drives through heavy traffic to the Hart Senate Office Building, in the shadow of the U.S. Capitol. He will not have time this morning for his customary workout in the Senate gym, or for a run along the National Mall, another way he keeps in shape.

Reed rides the elevator from the garage to his office on the seventh floor, checks his BlackBerry, which he carries in a holster, and prepares comments he will make at two hearings today. Then he meets with senior policy adviser Elizabeth King, 1 of the 23 members of Reed's Washington staff. The senator has recently returned from his 11th trip to Iraq, and King, who has traveled there with him nine times, is prodding her boss to complete his report, which he began writing, by hand, on the long flight home. Reed promises he will finish in a day or two.

It's a few minutes past 9 a.m.

The Iraq discussion concludes and Reed, 58, heads for a hearing room in the nearby Dirksen Senate Office Building. He walks fast and purposefully — always fast and purposefully — the gait of a man who found the discipline for his life's work, though he did not yet know what it would be, at Providence's La Salle Academy. He was a young teenager then, the second son of a housewife and a janitor from Cranston. Reed wanted to attend the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, no place else. His father, a World War II veteran who rarely talked war, and President Kennedy were men the boy admired. His mother and her sister, Reed's godmother, who lived in and owned the small house where he grew up, were among the women he admired.

Two of the nation's top intelligence officers await Reed and fellow senators on the Senate Armed Services Committee in the hearing room, where wood-paneled walls and a lofty ceiling evoke gravity, if not grandeur. Mike McConnell, director of National Intelligence, and Lt. Gen. Michael D. Maples, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, are briefing the senators on worldwide threats to U.S. security. (A classified session will follow in a sound- and bug-proof chamber.) Maples was Reed's West Point classmate. They've been friends for more than 40 years.

The intelligence officers finish their opening statements and Reed leaves for another hearing, of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor & Pensions, chaired by Sen. Edward

Kennedy, of Massachusetts. Reed speaks in favor of a bill that would broaden breast cancer research and then he returns to Armed Services.

“Senator Reed?” says Chairman Sen. Carl Levin, Democrat of Michigan.

Reed thanks the intelligence officers for coming to the Hill and asks the first of his 13 questions, all that time will allow.

“There are many fault lines in Iraq,” Reed says. “One of them is the legislation that is passed but is somewhat nebulous and depends upon implementation, so I wonder: Do you have a sense of whether the legislation that was passed with respect to reconciliation and oil distribution, etcetera, will have any real effect going down the road?”

Maples and McConnell answer. Reed, a prominent critic of President Bush’s Iraq strategy, continues with questions and observations. Senators pay attention. Reed, Washington leaders agree, speaks with authority.

“Everyone listens to Jack,” says Kennedy, second-ranking Democrat on Armed Services.

Says Sen. Chuck Hagel, Republican from Nebraska: “He is one of the most dedicated, committed, thorough, thoughtful members of the United States Senate. He studies the issues, he knows what he’s talking about, he always makes a contribution. He’s always very respectful, very civil. He handles himself very well. And everybody likes him.”

In his 12th year in the U.S. Senate and 16th year in Congress, Rhode Island’s senior senator has established himself as a leading voice on military and national-defense issues. With seats on the Appropriations Committee, the Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee and Kennedy’s health committee, Reed has also emerged as an authority on economic and working-class issues. Reed is 50th in Senate seniority, but Knowlegis, a nonpartisan Congressional analysis group, ranks him the 17th most powerful senator overall — ahead of Joseph Biden and Christopher Dodd, former presidential candidates.

In this election year, Reed’s name has surfaced as a possible running mate for two fellow senators, Hillary Clinton and Barack Obama — and, more credibly, as a contender for Secretary of Defense, and not just if a Democrat wins the White House.

Says Hagel: “There’s an awful lot that would suggest that Jack Reed would be a very effective Secretary of Defense.”

But this is not the future Reed envisions.

MACHINIST JOSEPH A. Reed carried a photo of Mary Louise Monahan, the office worker with whom he would spend the rest of his life, when he joined the Navy in 1943 and shipped off aboard the Cebu, a repair vessel. The Cebu readied ships for the critical assault on Iwo Jima, among other missions, and when the war ended, participated in the occupation of surrendered Japan.

Joseph Reed wanted only to serve his country in war, not continue in a military career, and he returned home to Rhode Island in 1946 and married Mary, who was of Irish-Catholic ancestry. Joseph's family, originally from England, had converted to Roman Catholicism. Joseph found work as a laborer for a construction company and later as a janitor at St. Matthew School in Cranston. The Reeds had their first child, Paul, in 1947. John F., their second, was born on Nov. 12, 1949. Helen, their last, was born in 1954. They lived in a house on Pontiac Avenue in Cranston with Mary's father and Mary's sister Helen Monahan.

By the 1950s, Joseph had become a custodian in the Cranston public school system, a job that offered security and a decent wage. But it was not necessarily what he wanted for the next generation, and he and his wife, Mary, who had been denied a higher education by the hardships of the Great Depression, encouraged their children to develop their minds.

Jack, as he would be called, was just 5 when his parents enrolled him in weekly art classes at the Rhode Island School of Design. Guitar lessons followed. Reading was valued, and, despite a limited income, the Reeds bought the Encyclopedia Britannica. They believed in family dinners. They taught the core values by example. They were the quintessential parents of the new generation, the Baby Boom.

"They were a warm, enduring example of good people who worked hard, asked for very little and gave so much," Reed says.

Jack attended St. Matthew, where he was studious and well-behaved except for a period in sixth grade when, as he recalls it, he was a "wise guy," a bit fresh with the nuns. His first ambition was to be an architect, but by ninth grade, when he enrolled in La Salle, he was focused elsewhere. His love of reading had brought him to history, and history had brought him to stories of war. The heroes of his father's generation, including JFK, whose command of PT 109 was legendary, fascinated him.

They won the war, they saved the world, and now they're standing guard on the watchtowers of freedom, the boy would think.

But this was the boy's impression, not the dinner-table talk, and so his parents were surprised, though supportive, when he said he wanted to attend West Point. Reed today can remember only one occasion when his father discussed his time in the Navy. And the discussion was more about discipline than heroics.

Reed was about 12, and Joseph for some reason brought up the Cebu, where the newest hands were assigned duty in the ammunition hold, the most dangerous place on board. Reed remembers his father saying: Everybody who went down there the first couple of times was crying almost, they were so concerned. But you know what? After awhile you stopped because it didn't do any good. You just had to keep doing your job. The other thing was: nobody ever looked down on anybody because we had all done it ourselves.

"It was a very good insight into behavior and how you treat people," Reed says. "I've never forgotten it."

At La Salle, Reed played football and ran track, was on the yearbook and newspaper staffs, served two years on the student council, and played drums in the band and guitar in the orchestra his freshman year. He was a Diocesan honor roll student. The Reed house was small, no room for a desk, so Jack sat at the top of the stairs, his books and notebooks spread around him. His schedule rarely varied.

“I would get home around 6 o’clock or so,” he says. “My mother would always have supper on the table for us. I would watch The Huntley-Brinkley Report — it was 15 minutes back then. Then I would study ’till 11 o’clock. I would do that Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. Then Friday night, I’d go out with my buddies.” Saturday nights found Reed at the La Salle Canteen. Sundays held Mass and a roast dinner.

One day in the spring of 1967, as graduation from La Salle neared, the phone rang. It was an aide to Sen. John O. Pastore with word that Reed had been appointed to West Point. A short while later, Maj. Gen. Kenneth G. Wickham, the Army’s adjutant general, wrote to Reed confirming the appointment.

“This letter is your authorization to report to the United States Military Academy, West Point, New York, on Monday, 3 July 1967, between the hours of 7:30 and 10:00 a.m., Eastern Daylight Saving Time, to begin cadet training,” the general wrote.

“Appointment to the Military Academy is difficult to attain and admission is reserved for only a select few of America’s youth. All areas of cadet performance will demand your best effort. You should therefore give serious thought to your desire for a military career, for without proper motivation, a good attitude, and a spirit of dedication to the challenge, you will find it difficult to conform to what may be an altogether different way of life.”

WHEN SENATOR Reed returns to his office from his Armed Services Committee hearing, North Providence Mayor Charles Lombardi and G. Richard Fossa, Lombardi’s chief of staff, are waiting. They are the first of nearly 10 constituents and lobbyists with whom the senator will meet today. Lombardi wants Reed’s support for federal financing for road improvements in North Providence.

Reed welcomes the men into the conference room that adjoins his private office. Photos of the senator with President Clinton, Chuck Hagel, former Sen. Claiborne Pell, former Cuban President Fidel Castro and other political notables share space on a wall with photos of Rhode Island schoolchildren and West Point cadets. The largest display is a flag that flew over Camp Cavallaro in Baghdad from July 4 to Aug. 28, in 2003. Soldiers from the Rhode Island National Guard’s 119th Military Police Company signed and presented it to Reed, who values his connections to troops, not just generals.

Lombardi and Fossa mention that they’ve read some of the stories speculating that Reed could become defense secretary under the next president.

“I’m on the short list!” Reed jokes, a reference to being, as he likes to say, “five-foot-seven on a good day.”

The men laugh.

“How’s the baby?” Lombardi says.

“The baby’s great,” Reed says.

“Ah, thank God!”

Reed pulls out his BlackBerry. The senator is intensely private with his personal life and will not allow outsiders to photograph his daughter, but he likes to show off a picture that he took.

“This was at Thanksgiving but that was her Christmas outfit,” Reed says. Emily is teaching her father a new appreciation of how time unfolds, and the senator turns momentarily wistful. “It doesn’t seem she’s 13, almost 14 months old,” he says.

“Before you know it,” Lombardi says, “this kid’ll be in college.”

“I know, I know. So I’ve got to stay in good shape.”

“Senator, before we go any further — come and visit us once in a while.”

“Charlie, actually I was up, what — last year? And I’m going to come again this year. I mean, I try to get around to every city and town or most cities and towns.”

“We don’t only want to visit with you when we need to,” Lombardi says.

“We’re going to get up there very quickly. Last week I was in Rhode Island — I’m up there every week — but I was up last week in Pawtucket at a textile operation, which was very nice.”

Reed talks more about the company, North East Knitting, which is manufacturing high-tech combat apparel. Rosalie DaRosa is the firm’s president.

“That a mother and a son?” Lombardi asks.

“A mother, three sons. Wonderful family. Just a nice, nice group of people. And this is ‘only in Rhode Island.’ So we’re doing the tour, we finish the tour of the factory, they say, ‘You’ve got to come in.’ So we go in the lunch room. She had made this incredibly good chicken soup.”

“You gotta try the chicken soup!”

“You had to! I came back and told my wife. I said, ‘This is the best chicken soup I’ve had in Rhode Island.’ ” Reed pauses. “But we’ve got a couple of projects you want to talk about.”

After Lombardi and Fossa leave, Rob Streicker, a young staff assistant, drives Reed (in Streicker’s 11-year-old Volvo) from the Hart Building to the Rayburn House Office Building, a short distance away. A long line has formed to the screening machines: Federal Reserve Chairman Ben Bernanke is testifying before a House committee today and security is tight. But the Capitol Police recognize Reed, who served three terms in the House, and they wave him and the people with him past the line.

Reed finds the room where West Point's Board of Visitors, which oversees the academy, is meeting over lunch. Reed has been chairman and remains a member of the board, which comprises four senators, five U.S. representatives and six presidential appointees.

Two Army officers greet Reed with smiles when he walks into the room: two-star Brig. Gen. Patrick Finnegan, West Point's academic dean, and three-star Lt. Gen. Franklin L. Hagenbeck, the school's superintendent, or president. The senator and the generals are classmates who became close friends as their careers advanced. The men get caught up on their families, but Reed's schedule does not allow him more than a few minutes' chat. It's almost 12:30 p.m., and he has a closed-door meeting with Democratic senators to discuss the federal budget.

EARLY ONE morning not long after this day, Jack Reed leaves his Jamestown home and rides with aide Jack Casey nearly four hours to West Point.

Reed returns regularly to keep abreast of academy developments, and on those occasions when he drives from Washington to Rhode Island with his wife and daughter, the family often spends the night at Finnegan's house. On this Sunday, the senator is giving a reporter and a photographer a day-long tour of his alma mater, the place he and Julia chose for their wedding and reception, in April 2005.

Reed grows animated as the van carrying him, his guests, and Col. Bryan Hilferty, West Point's director of communications, enters the campus, which offers splendid views of the Hudson River from its perch high above the western shore. Memories of cadet life spill out, including one that impresses the movie lover in Reed: parts of *Hello Dolly*, he says, were filmed here in 1970, the year before he graduated.

Cadets standing at full attention greet the senator when he reaches Eisenhower barracks, where he lived when he was a student.

"Relax!" Reed says to a cadet. "I couldn't stand that way even when I was your age."

Cadet Cole Moses, a senior from Jenks, Oklahoma, who is bound for the infantry, leads the senator into the barracks. More memories spill out of Reed. He was four months shy of his 18th birthday when he reported to West Point, on July 3, 1967. The Vietnam War consumed America, and the boy assumed, as did most of his classmates, that he would be sent there. But the war was winding down when he graduated, and the Class of 1971 was assigned elsewhere.

Reed's first weeks at West Point, known infamously in Point lore as the "Beast Barracks" experience, were physically and psychologically punishing, long days of upperclassmen taunting and screaming — an intentionally shocking transition from the civilian world to the military, where the ability to win at war is prized over all. "It was a whole system designed if not to break you down, at least to radically and dramatically change your whole view of the world," Reed says.

Reed sought no sympathy in the first letter he wrote home, to his mother, that July. He was, typically, demanding of himself:

Dear Mom,

I'm working hard and doing fair but not as good as I want to. I hope to improve a little every day. ... On Wednesday night, we had Sounds and Lights, a pageant depicting the history of West Point. It had everything from a musket corps to a helicopter landing. ... I hope everybody at home is well. Say hello to them for me.

Love,

Jack.

The tour continues into the room of senior Jennaw M. Mantie, from Exeter, Rhode Island, whom Reed nominated to West Point. Stuffed animals decorate her desk, where she studies the skills of war. Reed reminisces about his own days as a platoon leader, company commander and battalion staff officer in the 82nd Airborne Division. "It was fun — the most fun you'll have," he tells Mantie and Moses, "although I had a benign environment. There's a little more stress on you ladies and gentlemen."

Unlike Reed, these soon-to-be-officers have a good chance of seeing combat as the Iraq War continues interminably into its sixth year.

"Well, congratulations," Reed says. "You're making us all proud serving your country so well here and carrying on a great tradition. Thank you. Thank you very much. Now relax — take the rest of the day off!"

REED LEAVES the Eisenhower barracks for Washington Hall, a Gothic-style building with towering windows. He enters the mess hall, a cavernous space decorated with flags of the 50 states and a nearly 2,500-square-foot mural depicting weapons of war, that can accommodate all of West Point's approximately 4,400 cadets at one sitting at tables of 10 set on white linen. Containers of strawberry and chocolate Nesquik powder share space with condiments — signs, along with the Starbucks store included in a new library now nearing completion, that the senator came of age in a different era.

"When I was here as a plebe," Reed says, "you had to eat at attention, which means you had to sit on the front four or five inches of your chair with your back perfectly straight, looking straight ahead. You had to take small, small bites, so you really didn't get a lot of food. You literally ate the whole meal at attention — and if you did something wrong and some upperclassman was annoyed, he'd say, 'sit up Reed!' And you'd sit there until he told you you could eat again."

Pleasanter memories await Reed as he crosses a windswept bridge to Thayer Hall, one of West Point's principal classroom buildings. Reed took classes here when he was a student. He taught here in the late 1970s as an associate professor of social studies.

The senator enters Roscoe Auditorium, named for the late Roscoe Robinson Jr., the first African-American to reach four-star general. Cadet Reed spent many Saturday nights here, indulging his longtime passion for Hollywood movies. Cadets paid 35 cents for a ticket, stood for the "Star Spangled Banner," and when the big screen descended, sat to watch the feature. "Then we'd leave and go get something to eat," Reed recalls. "Big night here at West Point!"

The senator heads back outside and down a road to Trophy Point, on high ground above the Hudson. The river flows through a perilous S curve here and the strategic advantage it gave the Continental Army over the British fleet during the Revolutionary War prompted Gen. George Washington to build a fort here. Trophy Point offers the academy's most spectacular panorama, and generations of cadets have posed here after graduations and weddings. Reed and his wife did, too, after marrying in 2005.

The group is back in the van when Reed's BlackBerry rings. It's Julia.

"Hi honey, how are you?" Reed says.

Julia is at their townhouse near Washington, D.C.

"How's Emily?" Reed says. "So what are you guys doing today?"

His wife and daughter have bought flowers at a garden shop. Julia says that Emily napped in the car, a good thing.

"Good, good, excellent," Reed says. The couple chat some more about the day and Julia puts Emily on the line. She is starting to say her first words.

"Hi, Emily, hi!" her father says. "Emily, I bought you a special shirt! I bought you a West Point sweatshirt!"

THE SUN IS heading down as General Hagenbeck welcomes Reed and guests into the superintendent's residence, built in 1820, 18 years after the academy was established, and expanded over the years to 16,000 square feet and 11 bedrooms.

After a walk through the historic first floor, the group settles in the front parlor known as the Lee Room, near a desk that once belonged to Robert E. Lee, 1829 West Point graduate and Confederate Army general. Hagenbeck was dressed in full uniform for his Washington lunch, but today he wears a sports jacket without a tie. He offers his guests a drink. Reed has a beer, the general a glass of Merlot. A fire in the old fireplace takes the chill off and casts the room in gold, creating a mood more Ivy League than Army.

The two classmates knew each other as students "only in passing," Reed says, but became better acquainted after graduation through reunions and West Point's loyal alumni network. In the 1980s, Hagenbeck learned of Reed's election as a Rhode Island state senator in his first try for office. The La Salle Academy teen who wanted to serve his country had a broader vision of public service by then.

"You were one of the first to get into politics," says Hagenbeck, whom Reed calls by his nickname, Buster.

"I was about 34 when I ran," Reed says. "A lot of other people had tried to run for Congress, which I thought probably was a bridge too far. And so I started lower and worked up and learned a lot in the process."

Hagenbeck and Reed became close in the late 1990s, when Jack was serving his first term as U.S. senator and Buster had been assigned to the nation's capital. "Really, 1997 began what's become a pretty robust relationship," the superintendent says. "I became a general officer stationed in Washington in a variety of jobs at the Pentagon: the joint staff, strategy plans and policy. He'd been around the block and knew the inner workings, obviously, and I called on him on more than one occasion."

Says Reed: "If I had questions, I'd call Buster, and if he had questions, he'd call me. It got more and more that we had many things in common, not the least West Point."

Hagenbeck was not destined to remain a desk officer. He commanded coalition ground forces during the invasion and occupation of Afghanistan in the months following the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, and won praise for his leadership.

"I took the initial soldiers, the conventional troops, into Afghanistan in 2001," Hagenbeck says.

Reed and three other senators were visiting the region at that time, and the general, stationed at an old Soviet airbase in Uzbekistan, wanted to see his classmate.

"I was in Karshi-Khanabad," Hagenbeck says.

"K-2."

"You were up with — was it Warner?"

Sen. John W. Warner serves with Reed on the Armed Services Committee, together with Senators John McCain and Joseph I. Lieberman.

"No," says Reed, "McCain and Lieberman. That's when I met my wife!"

"You didn't know it at the time!"

Julia Hart, an Iowa native who is 16 years younger than Reed, was traveling with the senator in her job as a coordinator in the Interparliamentary Services office of the Senate, which arranges overseas trips, among other duties. The encounter was all business. More than a year would pass before they began dating.

"We were going to link up with Buster down in Kabul," Reed says. "He was the only guy I knew on the ground to talk to kind of face-to-face."

"Afghanistan remains primitive but it was truly, truly primitive at that time when we were over initially," Hagenbeck says. "I like to tease our other classmate, Tommy Metz, who was one of the first three-stars into Baghdad, and say, 'You know, Tommy, they didn't criticize me after the country fell that there was no running water, no communications, no heat, no electricity in Afghanistan.' Because they didn't exist before."

"We actually had gone into Tashkent — Uzbekistan, the capital — and we thought we might link up," Reed says. "Our aircraft got in and yours just couldn't work."

“Then you came back with Hillary in 2003,” the general says. He means Senator Clinton, now a presidential candidate. She sits on Armed Services, but is junior to Reed.

The war talk continues, then the conversation turns to a larger dimension of their West Point heritage.

“Because of his experience here and his involvement — a bipartisan view, if you will — of how America impacts and plays out on the world stage, Jack is recognized by everyone in uniform,” Hagenbeck says. “People show up when he comes to town. He understands the acronyms, the terminology. We can talk in a common language about the way we see things. And so we’re pretty candid with each other.”

Says Reed: “Maybe it’s because they assume I’m serious about what we’re doing. I don’t know how you can make informed judgments in my world without relying upon the common sense and the good advice of the uniformed officers.”

REED EMERGES from his closed-door budget discussion with fellow senators on this day not so long ago. He has a few free minutes, a rarity.

Police with machine-guns man outdoor posts on this side of the U.S. Capitol and more police stand watch inside, but no one seems uncomfortable with their presence. Reed walks past the Senate chamber, where he is assigned Desk 69, two rows back from the rostrum. Reed’s predecessor, the retired Sen. Claiborne Pell, and the late Senator Pastore, who appointed Reed to West Point in 1967, once sat at Desk 69.

Reed continues down a hallway outside the Democratic cloakroom, where party members can discuss matters privately. Busts of vice presidents, who by the Constitution are also Senate president, line the walls between marble columns. Chandelier light reflects off the polished floor tiles, which date to the mid-19th century. It’s impossible to be in the Capitol, whose first wing was completed in 1800, and not feel its history. Reed thinks often of Jefferson and Adams and the other men who more than two centuries ago designed a government that has endured into the Internet age.

“They had a deep understanding of human nature — but also the kind of predictability and scientific logic of a watch,” Reed says.

“Every day I think about it: the extraordinary genius of the Founding Fathers, of the system they created, the adaptability of that system. The fact that it had very powerful institutional forces — but not immutable, you could change them, the notion of the Constitution that could change by amendment. It was extraordinary.”

Reed thinks often, too, of the constitutional provisions that gave only Congress the power to declare war, and which made an elected official, the president — not an admiral or a general — the commander-in-chief. He especially admires Washington, the general who left the Army to become the nation’s first president, for not seizing absolute power after leading America to victory against great odds in the Revolutionary War.

“George Washington could have been king if he wanted to,” Reed says. “He was the preeminent figure of his age in the United States, the preeminent military leader. We were just extraordinarily fortunate that we had a man with wisdom and the temperament not to seize that but to actually quietly go back and leave his troops. In fact, his last headquarters was up near West Point. That was where he formally left the Army.”

IN HIS FINAL year at West Point, Cadet Reed began to ponder his future. The Army had stopped sending graduates to Vietnam and Reed decided he wanted more academic study, after which he would continue his military training. He applied to be a Rhodes Scholar but was rejected. Denied that opportunity, he applied to Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government to pursue a master’s degree in public policy, a two-year program. He was accepted, and in September 1971, he enrolled. With its anti-war protests, tweedy intellectualism and liberal traditions, Cambridge was no West Point.

“It was a culture shock,” Reed says, “but, you know, I kind of adapted pretty quickly.”

The deeper adjustment was in how Reed perceived himself. His two years in Cambridge would provide another lesson he would bring to the larger stage.

“I discovered that I wasn’t the smartest guy in the room. And the other thing that I learned, which I think is useful, too, is that there are intellectual skills that are important but there are also temperamental skills: patience, listening to people, preparation, hard work, the ability to get along with people and to develop working relationships.”

Reed received his master’s degree, then resumed military training, eventually becoming a battalion staff officer in the 82nd Airborne Division. In 1977, he returned to West Point to teach economics, history and public policy. He was a professor now, not a leader of troops. Intellectually, he was growing.

A year or so passed, and again, he began to look ahead. It was 1978. He’d been an Army officer for almost eight years. He was almost 30 years old, unmarried and without children.

He liked the Army, but the notion of serving the public in another way began to appeal. Maybe he’d become a civil servant. Maybe he’d run for some office. He had no specific goal, no concrete plan, but he knew if he left the Army he’d need a good job.

He applied to Harvard Law School and was accepted.

REED RETURNS to the Hart Building for meetings with lobbyists from the health care, broadcast and defense industries. When they end, at 2:45 p.m., he leaves his conference room for his inner office.

Reed’s private space offers views of Washington’s Capitol Hill residential district, an upscale neighborhood with home prices that were too high for the senator and his wife when they were ready to buy. Inside, military memorabilia and photographs predominate. Reed has the photo of his mother that his father carried with him through World War II, still in the plastic frame Joseph built, and photos of his wife and daughter. He has a chunk of marble from one of Saddam Hussein’s palaces that Rhode Island National Guard troops serving in Baghdad gave him, and

toys and books for Emily when she visits. A quote from Irish poet W.B. Yeats lies under the glass on his desk: Being Irish, he had an abiding sense of tragedy which sustained him during temporary periods of joy.

Reed talks on the phone with Floyd Norris, The New York Times' chief financial columnist, who is writing a story about the subprime mortgage crisis. Reed's work as a member of the Banking, Housing and Urban Affairs Committee and as chairman of the Securities Subcommittee have established him as a national voice on economic issues. The senator talks about the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002, a law passed in the wake of the Enron scandal. Reed supported the bill from his seat on the Banking Committee.

"After Enron, with Sarbanes-Oxley, we tried legislatively to make it clear that there was to be some transparency with regard to off-balance entities," Reed tells Norris. "We thought that was already corrected and the rules were clear and we would not be discovering new things every day."

Reed has asked several agencies, including the Securities and Exchange Commission, for answers to where the system failed and how it can be corrected. It may not be headline-grabbing, but in the financial world, it is an issue of vital concern.

During this week, Reed will be mentioned or quoted at least 10 times in Rhode Island newspapers and news blogs. In addition to The New York Times (which will also include the senator in a story about the Iraq war), he will also appear in stories published by The Wall Street Journal (the subprime debacle), The Washington Post (subprime), Newsday (federal home-heating relief), The Associated Press (the submarine-building industry), Reuters (subprime), The Navy Times (defense spending), The Huffington Post (gun control), Congressional Quarterly (the Iraq war), and other publications. A photo of Reed after this morning's Armed Services Committee hearing hamming it up with West Point classmate Lt. Gen. Michael D. Maples, director of the Defense Intelligence Agency, will appear on the front page of Roll Call, Capitol Hill's daily newspaper.

Reed is a regular on national TV, and this week, he will appear live on Bloomberg Television. The broadcast will originate from a balcony in the Russell Senate Office Building Rotunda, the white dome of the U.S. Capitol in the background.

REED HAD graduated with honors from Harvard Law School and was working in Washington for an Atlanta-based firm when his father died. It was July 1982. Joseph's death would prove decisive in his son's decision to return to Rhode Island.

"It was one of those things that really stops you to think about your life and what are you doing and what do you want to do really," Reed says.

He wanted to get into elective politics. It was no longer a notion; his father's death brought a developing sense of urgency, the realization that "you don't have all that time."

Reed stayed in Washington for a few months, and in 1983, he passed the Rhode Island bar and joined the Providence law firm of Edwards and Angell.

Early the next year, Reed talked to his brother, Paul, a deputy fire chief in Cranston, about running for office. He had nothing particular in mind. Paul suggested a state Senate seat from their hometown. Reed was a voter, although he did not belong to a party. But philosophically, he considered himself a Democrat. "I felt strongly that this was a party that offered opportunity to people, that it had created opportunities not only for my family, but for generations of Americans," he says. He declared himself a Democrat.

The campaign was low-budget and grass-roots. "A typical Rhode Island story," Reed says. "I had no idea about how to run for it, how to do it, what it amounted to or anything else. My basement became my campaign headquarters."

In his first attempt, Reed won. He was reelected twice and in 1990, he decided to run for the congressional seat that Rep. Claudine Schneider was leaving. He won, in a competitive race against Republican Trudy Coxe. Once again, he was twice reelected. On Sept. 27, 1995, in a Cranston School Department room named for his late father, Reed announced he was seeking the Senate seat being vacated by the retiring Pell. The next November, he beat Republican Nancy Mayer with 63 percent of the vote. Six years later, he won election to a second term, by an even bigger margin, 244,523 votes to 67,396 for Robert G. Tingle, a worker at Foxwoods Resort Casino. Reed took every city and town in Rhode Island.

Senator Kennedy took notice of Reed in the early 1990s, when Reed served on the House Education Committee and attended conferences with Senate counterparts. "He was always the first person to show up at a conference," Kennedy says, "always the best-prepared and the last one to leave. He was enormously diligent and incredibly knowledgeable about education policies."

Says Republican Senator Warner, a war veteran who served as Secretary of the Navy: "I've gotten to know him quite well here in the Senate, and I have a very high regard for him. He's a very hard-working, hard-charging, knowledgeable senator. He's viewed as a strong advocate for his state interests, a strong advocate for national security."

THE AFTERNOON wears on.

The World champion Boston Red Sox are visiting President Bush in the White House and Reed has been invited but he cannot spare the time: he has meetings with an admiral, a colonel and two Rhode Islanders seeking his support for financing space research. Shortly after 5 p.m., Reed ducks out of the Hart Building and heads to the nearby daycare center where Emily spends the day. Julia is still at work, and it's Jack's turn today to pick up their daughter. He brings her back to the office. Julia will take her home later, while her husband attends evening events.

Reed cradles Emily in his arms as she studies the photographs on the wall of his conference room. She has a kind face and an intent gaze, not unlike her father. She seems to be analyzing everything she takes in. That's what Reed makes of it, anyway.

"That's daddy in the Humvee!" the senator says.

Emily laughs in delight.

“Honest and goodness, that’s me!”

Emily shakes her toy.

“Dad,” she says.

Reed smiles.

“She had two naps today,” the senator says. “She was in good shape.”

Reed sits and yawns. He’s asked if he’s tired.

“Not really,” he says. “This is about par for the course.”

After Julia has come for their daughter, Reed leaves his office and rides in staff assistant Rob Streicker’s old Volvo to a meeting of the Water Systems Council, a nonprofit group that promotes protection of groundwater. On the way, Reed’s BlackBerry rings. It’s childhood friend Steve Lepre, a physical therapist — who, like retired special-education teacher and soccer coach John Kelly, another friend from youth — lives in Jamestown near the small house Reed bought with his wife. Lepre asks if Reed wants to see the latest Will Ferrell movie this weekend. The senator is a big Ferrell fan, but this weekend does not look good. He will have time on Saturday morning for coffee with his friends at a Jamestown shop.

After accepting an award from the Water Systems Council, Reed heads back to the Capitol, where the Senate is voting on a bill to require the president to report to Congress on its strategy for defeating al-Qaida. Streicker drops off his boss and Reed, alone now, heads across a stretch of lawn to the building. Night is descending.

“Are you a member?” a Capitol policeman says. Police are supposed to recognize members of Congress, but the light is poor and perhaps this man is new.

“Yes,” Reed says, “Do you want to see my ID?”

“No, show it at the door.”

ALTHOUGH A search would surely find detractors in Washington, none surface during several days spent with Reed in the capital. Even senators who disagree politically with his liberal social politics and his stand on Iraq acknowledge respect for him. That stand is incorporated in legislation, the June 2006 Levin-Reed amendment. The amendment would require the Secretary of Defense to begin reducing the number of American forces in Iraq within 90 days of adoption. The amendment does not yet have the support needed to overcome a Republican filibuster.

“I’ve served in the Senate with great Rhode Island senators,” Majority Leader Harry Reid says. “John Chafee was my pal, my friend. I liked him so very much. And then, of course, Senator Pell was a wonderful man — totally different than Chafee but somebody I got along with. Jack fits the mold of how I see senators from Rhode Island, even though those two were much more patrician and came from families with lots of money. Jack didn’t but he’s still as good as those two great senators. If you asked me to say something bad about Jack, I’d have trouble finding it,”

What of the talk of Reed for secretary of defense or vice presidential candidate?

“Do you have a Democratic governor in Rhode Island?” Reid asks.

The governor would appoint a successor to Reed, assuming he won reelection this year. Reid learns that the governor is Republican.

“Not a chance then!” Reid laughs. “I’m very aware of having the majority that I have in the Senate. I’m going to watch very closely if the state has a Democratic governor. If not, I’m going to be weighing in that none of my senators be appointed to anything. Wish I could be else wise but that’s just how I do things.”

It seems a moot point. Reed is flattered by vice-president and defense-secretary talk, but he intends to stay where he is.

“I have an extraordinarily challenging job — a privilege, really — it’s more than a job, it’s a privilege. And I’m beginning to appreciate the fact that to make our system function not only do you need very talented people in the Cabinet and elsewhere but you need senators who’ve been there awhile.” Senators, he says, with expertise.

No opposition has surfaced to Reed, who will seek a third term in November. Voters willing, he intends to continue a life of public service that began on a July day in 1967, when he was not yet 18.

“I say this, and I believe it intensely, that the most distinguished title that any American bears is citizen. And that involves not just enjoying the life of this great country but also shouldering some responsibilities, which is pitching in and helping out. I learned that not just from watching my parents but a generation that went off to war.”

REED VOTES, returns to his office for a staff briefing on Federal Reserve chairman Bernanke’s Senate appearance tomorrow, and drives his 1991 Escort to a restaurant meeting of the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee. Then he heads home.

Private though he is, Reed offers a few details about his wife. When he met Julia on the Afghanistan trip, Reed says he found her to be “a very attractive young lady.” But he was dating someone else, and he assumed she was dating someone, too. In any event, a war zone was not the place to kindle a relationship.

Months passed, and one day Reed saw her again.

“I just bumped into her in the Hart Building,” he says. Julia said she was planning to visit Rhode Island. Reed said if he happened to be there, too, at the time of her visit, he’d like to see her.

They met at a restaurant. “Later, we got together for a drink and moved on from there.”

Reed proposed to Julia on a trip to New York City during the Thanksgiving holiday, in 2004. Five months later, they married at West Point.

It's nearing 8 p.m. when Reed gets home. Emily is in bed. The senator changes into jeans. He and his wife dine on microwaved lasagna left over from the night before, talk about their days, read the papers and turn in.