

# THE HILL

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## TUESDAY PROFILE

# Ex-Rep. waxes nostalgic, admires Dems' successes from atop his K Street perch

By Jeffrey Young

Marty Russo wants to spend more time with his family.

Things have been so hectic lately that no one seems to have time to sit down, have a nice meal, share some memories and muse about life.

Russo isn't talking about his blood relatives. He sees plenty of them, including his two grown sons and his grandchildren, all of whom live in the D.C. area. He pays frequent visits to his mother, brother, sisters and the rest of his extended family in his native Chicago. He talks to his mom two or three times a day.

No, Russo's been missing his other family, the one that includes his former brothers- and sisters-in-arms in the U.S. Congress.

Russo, chief executive and vice chairman of Cassidy & Associates, boasts many friends from both political parties, including former President George H.W. Bush, but he remains at heart a true-blue Democrat.

His erstwhile clan has been doing pretty well for itself lately and counts among its members people such as House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), Rep. George Miller (D-Calif.), Senate Majority Whip Dick Durbin (D-Ill.) and Sen. Charles Schumer (D-N.Y.).

Those folks have been busy indeed.

"When I was in Congress, I met with them every day. Obviously, that's changed," Russo said. "We periodically still go out to dinners like we did way-back-when."

Russo doesn't mind so much that his friends don't have as much time for get-togethers. He's excited to see them focusing their time and energy on going after the Bush administration.

"I don't get to see them as much as I used to. Mainly, now, because they're actually running the government. They're holding hearings, they're doing all the oversight, so they're not as free at night as they used to be," Russo said.

Russo served in the House from 1975 to 1993. Redistricting in Illinois forced him to wage an unsuccessful primary campaign against then-Democratic Rep. William Lipinski. He joined Cassidy a few months after losing the election.

There are plenty of Democrats both inside and outside the Beltway who are thrilled about the results of the November elections, but it's different for Russo. "The nice thing about who's in power today [is they] are people who, when I was in Congress, were all personal friends of mine, starting with the Speaker, [and] the majority leader both in the House and the Senate," he said.

"The Speaker has known Marty Russo for many years going back to their service in the House together. She values his friendship and respects his counsel," Pelosi spokesman Drew Hammill wrote in an e-mail.



Cassidy & Associates CEO Marty Russo

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Russo insists that he's careful not to foist his counsel on these friends. "I never offer advice; I have to be asked. My dad taught me that a long time ago. Don't give your opinion unless somebody asks for it. Don't presume so much that you're so smart that you can just walk around telling people what you think ought to happen."

Besides being a staunch Democrat, Russo is a strong believer in an aggressive Congress keeping in check what he sees as the creeping reach of the executive branch.

"Our democracy is based on a system of checks and balances. If you don't have the checks and balances, democracy doesn't work as well," Russo said.

The Republican leadership in Congress went after President Clinton, Russo said, though he added, "It's up for the public to decide whether it was political or not political."

Congressional Republicans, however, failed to live up to their responsibilities under the current administration, in Russo's estimation.

Russo emphasizes that Bush's father is a close friend but his affection doesn't extend to Bush 43 or to his allies in Congress. "They just went along with whatever the president wanted," Russo said.

That's not the way he remembers things when he was in Congress. "We didn't do that with President Carter. We didn't go along with everything President Carter wanted. He had some of his toughest fights with Democrats, obviously, in those days, and I was one of them..."

"President Carter didn't have an easy time, nor should any president have an easy time. They need to be accountable for what their actions are," Russo said.

"I think part of the problems you have dealing with the failed policies in Iraq or the torture issue or the attorney general issue — all that comes from arrogance because they don't feel like they owe anything to Congress, they don't have to talk to Congress, Congress is insignificant to them, and I think that's the result of not having oversight over six years."

All this oversight can be good for business at Cassidy, too: "More oversight means there are more areas of our country and our communities that are being looked at. To the extent that we can help and make that fair and unbiased is what we want to do with our clients," Russo said.

Russo views lobbying as a vital part of the democratic process and bristles at the notion that lobbyists somehow subvert the will of the people.

"The idea like 'lobbyist' is a bad word is to say that you don't agree with the First Amendment, with the Bill of Rights," Russo said.

"Listen, everybody's a lobbyist. My constituent that comes to my town hall meeting to lobby me about Medicare, they're going what the Constitution tells them they have a right to do," just as paid lobbyists have the right to petition the government, Russo said.

Russo also likes that lobbying affords him opportunities to influence national policy. "You get to be part of it in [the sense] that you try to affect policies that affect your client," he said.

But lobbying is a far cry from legislating, Russo laments.

"There's nothing better than the job I had as a member of Congress. Even the money in this job can't replace what being a member of Congress is like," he said.

"I always say this is the second greatest job I ever had, but the greatest job I ever had is so far above in terms of what I can do, the effect I can have and the benefit to society."

Russo fails to see the point of new ethics rules and laws governing lobbyists' contact with lawmakers. "It's almost hard for me to believe that you think that you can bribe somebody for a \$50 meal. ... The biggest reform they can make is to do away with campaign contributions at the level that they're at today."

New lobbying and ethics reform standards not only fail to address the real problem, he says, but they also fail to improve voters' opinion of Congress.

"I mean, you can do all of that but that's not going to, in the public's eye, change one impression of them because the moment you say someone gave somebody a \$500 campaign contribution, they way the papers write it, you'd think they just bribed somebody," Russo said.

In fact, Russo insists, recent scandals that sent people such as former lobbyist Jack Abramoff and ex-Reps. Randy "Duke" Cunningham (R-Calif.) and Bob Ney (R-Ohio) to prison prove that the current rules are working as they should. "When they break the law, they get punished," he said.

"You explain to me what law isn't working. Financial disclosure works. They found out through financial disclosure that the problems were going on, and people went to jail. The system works."

One of his two sons also is in the new family business. Thirty-eight-year-old Tony Russo is the director of federal legislative affairs for T-Mobile USA. His younger son, 29-year-old Dan, is an Arlington County, Va., police officer.