

POLITICS

this lanky, 33-year-old, six-foot-five-inch former professional basketball player from Fresno. The fact that he is a conservative (he prefers "independent") Republican speaker following decades of liberal Democrats is the least of their differences.

"Isn't this just beautiful!" says Setencich, grinning widely and gesturing around the room, brightly lit by morning sun through the windows that he says used to be nailed shut. "Willie has a problem with his eyes, and I think the glare bothered him." And he closes the shutters to show how the office used to look, closed to natural light, a kind of gothic gloom settling over the ornate room with its heavy, carved furniture and dark green, floor-to-ceiling satin drapes. "I just feel so lucky to be here."

"I don't plan to do any decorating," he adds. "It's too beautiful."

"Well, maybe a poster from Cal State Bakersfield [Setencich's alma mater]," mildly suggests his less effusive press secretary, Emma Suarez.

An unlikely successor to the most powerful position in state government save the governorship, Setencich was elected speaker in September by the slimmest of margins, 41-39, to succeed the ill-fated speaker of three months, Doris Allen—who was, almost literally, run out of office on a rail by Republican colleagues infuriated by her deal with the Democrats to take control of the lower house. Setencich received only one Republican vote other than his own, and it was

from Doris Allen. She had been elected speaker with only one Republican vote (her own), and the deal she cut with the Democrats cost her dearly, resulting in her recall from office Nov. 28.

Setencich supported Allen after her election as speaker, and she rewarded him by naming him Speaker Pro Tem. He presided after a fashion for three months over a bitterly divided house paralyzed by internal bickering, where name calling was routine, the civility of statesmanship lost in the din.

Politically conservative but knowing that little is accomplished in government without some bipartisan cooperation, Setencich says he is weary of the "intolerant right" and believes his party needs to be more open to diverse viewpoints. "That's the only way I think the party can lead," he says.

Life of Brian

As we went to press, Brian Setencich's future as Speaker of the troubled California Assembly was hanging by a thread, despite an earlier showing of political support for him.—By Sigrid Bathen

THE HALLS OUTSIDE the ornate, high-ceilinged office of the Speaker of the California Assembly on the second floor of the State Capitol are unusually quiet on this spring-like mid-November day, and Brian Setencich has the windows open on a stunning, almost blinding view of Capitol Park.

The heavy drapes are pulled aside and the white shutters opened wide. There is something oddly out of place here in this stately office so long occupied—owned, really—by the legendary Capitol potentate, Willie Brown, who was speaker for 15 years. The pretense of legislative royalty is gone now, largely eliminated by term limits and the distinctly less imperial manner of the new speaker.

There could not be a more strikingly different successor to Brown—or, for that matter, to previous speakers like the late Jesse Unruh, who never could shake the "Big Daddy" sobriquet even after he lost a lot of weight—than

ILLUSTRATION BY CHARLIE POWELL

A virtual political unknown when he was elected to the Fresno City Council in 1991, the then-29-year-old Setencich won over a popular incumbent in a race he was widely predicted to lose. Born and raised in Fresno, the son of a grape grower who also worked as the superintendent of a Fresno cotton compress, a member of the Serbian Orthodox Church, Setencich's only previous foray into politics was when he ran unsuccessfully for student body president in elementary school, posting handmade signs with an inadvertent spelling error that urged classmates to vote for "Brain."

He quickly earned a reputation as an independent thinker on the city council, refusing to kowtow to the powerful Republican political establishment in Fresno. He was ridiculed for his homespun ways and boyish voice, and he took it all in stride, seemingly always smiling and blithely unintimidated, further enraging the powers-that-were by introducing an ethics package to rein in what he said was rampant, unethical, illegal cronyism in Fresno politics.

The package failed three times but is now widely recognized as prescient, to say the least. An FBI investigation eerily similar to the Capitol Sting probe that netted 14, in-

cluding five legislators, assorted staff and one powerful lobbyist, has been under way in Fresno since last year, radically changing the way politics are conducted there. In fact, Jim Wedick, the same agent who coordinated the Capitol investigations, is in charge of the Fresno operation, which started in the adjacent city of Clovis early last year. Dubbed Operation Rezone, it has focused on as many as 20 people with charges that include extortion and tax evasion involving money allegedly paid to politicians for favorable votes affecting housing density, sewer services and rezoning.

In August, former Clovis City Councilman Leif Sorenson and four others pleaded innocent to assorted charges, and two men, a lobbyist and a builder, have pleaded guilty and are cooperating with authorities. Setencich's ethics reform package, re-introduced by his successor on the council, Mike Briggs, has since been passed.

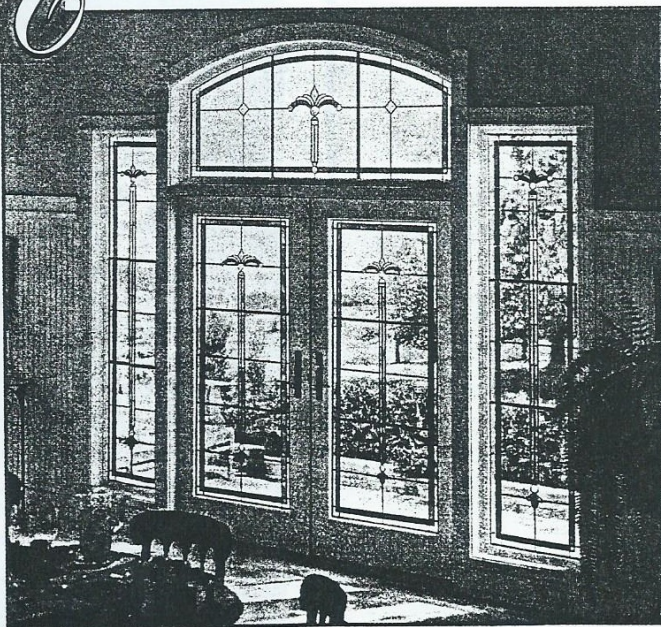
"He said when he was running for mayor (he lost in 1993 to Christian broadcaster Jim Patterson) that Fresno City Council votes were 'racked and stacked and wired and rigged'," recalls longtime Fresno political reporter Jim Boren, now editorial page editor of *The Fresno Bee*. Admitting that he

was among observers of Setencich's early days on the council who thought the young upstart was in over his head, Boren is now among many who believe appearances, and first impressions, can be deceiving. "Essentially," says Boren, "he grew into that job."

A willingness to work with all sides in a political dispute—and a complete, tireless devotion to his constituents, especially the elderly, for whom he would often go shopping—made Setencich a force to be reckoned with in Fresno. "He came in here, he didn't have any money, he didn't have any noticeable support," says Boren. "How could he beat a popular incumbent? Well, he did it by walking precincts and working hard. Then the same thing happened in his campaign for the state Assembly. People didn't think he could win. But he did."

On the council, Boren says, Setencich "got along well even with members he didn't vote with." Although the Republican "establishment" in Fresno didn't like him, they learned to respect him. "A few were pretty nasty at the start," says Boren, "but they backed off. The Republican political establishment doesn't like him taking the speakership, but they'll only go so far with him because of his tremendous popularity."

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And, while the more liberal *Bee*, like its Sacramento sister, frequently differs with Setencich on policy issues, it recently ran a complimentary editorial about his leadership, saying he brings "a sense of civility" to the increasingly combative political process. "You can disagree with him without being his enemy."

Anecdotes from his council days are instructive, illustrating the discipline and simple grit hidden behind Setencich's relentlessly cheerful, gee-whiz exterior. A basketball player but not a long-distance runner, Setencich once competed in a "fun run" with Fresno City Councilman Michael Erin Woody, who had been a competitive, long-distance runner in college. Setencich emerged a half-step ahead, winning the race. "Actually, I kind of brought Woody along so it looked like we tied," says the ever self-deprecating Setencich.

SETENCICH HAS SPENT his off-session time since he was elected speaker drumming up support, criss-crossing the state in visits to other legislators in their districts. He works 80-hour weeks and rises at 4:30 a.m. to lift weights and run. He hasn't had much time for basketball.

Widely believed at the start of his speakership to be as temporary as his immediate predecessor—"he'll be voted out in January" was the common wisdom—Capitol pundits, a plentiful commodity, are beginning to wonder if he might just pull this long shot off as well.

"I think Republicans and Democrats have sold him short," says Bob Forsyth, longtime Capitol reporter and former press secretary to Senate President Pro Tem David Roberti. Forsyth, who now handles media relations for statewide lawyers' groups, says, "I think he has a lot of strength of character and political smarts. I don't know that he's done it yet, but he's building a coalition, and he just might make it."

In the Capitol, Setencich attracted perplexed notice last year when he expressed concern about an otherwise innocuous bill because it carried the number 666, believed to be a "sign of the devil." There was no fire and brimstone, hallmarks of the so-called religious right, in his statement—it just made him uncomfortable, and he noted that Ronald Reagan once changed the number on his house from 666 for the same reason.

When Setencich couldn't get the bill number changed, he voted for it anyway.

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"The first time he came on our horizon was when he objected to Bill 666 in committee," recalls A.G. Block, editor of the respected political magazine, the *California Journal*. "He wasn't opposed to the bill. He just said it was a sign of the devil."

Block and others are withholding judgment on Setencich's chances for any longevity as speaker until the legislature reconvenes in January. A lot depends on the numbers. Allen's seat went in a special election to a political unknown who was recruited and supported by the Orange County Republican machine, Scott Baugh, a 33-year-old Union Pacific lawyer whose undergraduate degree is from Jerry Falwell's Liberty University. Also critical to Setencich's survival as speaker is the election of Willie Brown as mayor of San Francisco last month, leaving his seat vacant and up for a special election. Setencich still believes he is reasonably secure in the speakership, having slowly developed additional support among Republicans.

Setencich is not tied to any political machine or ideological bias and owes no particular debt to the right-wing Assembly Republicans who ran Allen out of office. In fact, when he ran for the Assembly, he fired

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party operatives who, he says, were running his campaign into the ground. They in turn did not support him for the Assembly until it looked like he might win. Clearly, this is a man who goes his own way. The simplicity, and toughness, of his approach are disarming as well as deceiving—much like the manner of the fictional Forrest Gump, to whom he is often compared.

Similarly, Setencich, who is privately opposed to abortion, “doesn’t wear his views on his sleeve,” says Suarez, who worked for a Fresno public relations firm before joining the Wilson administration as a communications specialist and who is now Setencich’s press secretary. Like other staff members, Suarez is intensely loyal, and Setencich always makes a point of introducing his staff and complimenting them before he makes a pitch or a speech.

“Brian was an outsider facing major obstacles,” says Suarez. “Everybody laughed at him. They didn’t count on his strength of personality, his character and commitment.”

THE DEFINING MOMENT in the life of Brian Setencich probably occurred in 1987, when he was 25 and his mother died at age 47 of breast cancer that suddenly and explosively metastasized throughout her body. The cheerful grin disappears, and there is a hard set to his jaw, when he talks about her death.

“She had a mastectomy about 15 years before she passed away, and then it just came. They did every soft tissue scan in the world, and the blood work, and everything came up negative. Finally, she went in for exploratory surgery at Stanford, and the surgeon came out and said, ‘I can’t believe it; it’s everywhere, little tumors everywhere.’ My dad fainted right there. It was tough on the family, but much more on my father, because they were so close. It was just devastating.”

Six weeks after the surgery, she was dead.

Later in the interview, when asked about how his political views were formed, he says his family was not political, except in the sense of “general concern about the quality of life—what’s going on with taxes, are things better than they were 10 or 15 years ago?”

And though none of it was political, he says his mother “did a lot of writing, had a few things published. She wrote a lot of short stories, some things about my family, my father. She was the kind of person who could make everything...” and he pauses, searching for the words, “No matter where she was, things were better because she was there.”

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Which, in the end, is pretty much how Setencich views his role in the legislature.

“There is a majority of people in this house who want a stable house, one that is conducive to getting something done,” he says carefully. “Unfortunately, I’ve never been to one place yet where they’ve said ‘you guys keep doing what you’re doing, you’re doing a great job.’ I hear, ‘you guys are crazy, it’s a circus over there.’ That is not what we were elected to do. If we don’t get our budget passed on time, if we don’t get some of the things accomplished that we say we’re gonna do when we’re elected, and deal with the economy in California, they should get us all out of office, because we’re not doing our job.”

Setencich says he developed his strong sense of independence from his family, and from sports. A high school and college basketball star in Fresno and Bakersfield (he graduated with honors from California State University, Bakersfield, with a business degree) who went on to play professionally in Europe, he is a team player with the independent streak of a long-distance runner. “I was brought up not to be intimidated by anybody, not to be scared to have my own thoughts.” He says he never really wanted to be anything but a basketball player, but had to quit because of back trouble.

Setencich’s father was born and raised in Fresno, his mother in San Francisco. They had two children, Brian and his sister Anna Marie Rush, a Fresno banker with two children to whom Brian is close. He was married, briefly, to a young Fresno woman, Kimberly, and he doesn’t talk much about the marriage except to say that it didn’t work out. Grandparents on both sides are Serbian, natives of the former Yugoslavia who emigrated in the early 1900s. One political wag suggested Setencich confronts a political situation in the Assembly not unlike “the current state of his ancestral home.” Setencich uses the quote, from Sacramento Assemblyman Larry Bowler, on the cover of a fat batch of news clippings dispatched efficiently to the many reporters who inquire.

Setencich is getting a lot of press around the state these days. Accustomed to negotiating the slippery slopes of Capitol politics with a wary eye on their targets, and their backs, reporters don’t quite know what to make of him. Those who have known him a while suggest the others stop looking for hidden agendas and political guile.

“With Brian,” says Suarez, “what you see is what you get.” ■