

Menendez Moves Up

For Robert Menendez, the selection of Liberty State Park for the announcement of his elevation to the United States Senate was the perfect choice not only to emphasize his immigrant roots, but also the issues that he had faced as a congressman and would face when he succeeded Jon Corzine in the U.S. Senate.

"My own parents were immigrants who came to this country because they were fleeing tyranny and searching for freedom," Menendez, a 52-year-old Cuban-American, said in an interview a few days after he was sworn in as New Jersey's 64th U.S. senator.

"I played in that park with my children when they were growing up, and I helped preserve it as open space as a congressman," he said. "And on 9/11, Liberty State Park served as a staging ground for assistance and for people fleeing that terrible attack."

Menendez said his votes in Congress in the wake of the 9/11 tragedy "show what kind of United States Senator I'll be."

"I pledge to you that I will never send New Jerseyans into a war that I would be unwilling to send my own son or daughter to fight," Menendez said during his acceptance speech, as his son and daughter looked on. "So I voted for Afghanistan and bringing the killers of September 11 to justice, but faced with the prospect of supporting a war of choice in Iraq, I stood up to the president and voted no."

Menendez stressed his commitment to making college costs affordable, to stem cell research, to tax equity, and especially cutting the cost of health care.

"My mother, who made everything in my life possible, suffers from a debilitating disease, Alzheimer's," Menendez said. "My sister and I are fortunate enough to be able to afford to take care of her. But there are too many New Jerseyans who do not get the health care they need because they are uninsured or underinsured, and we need to fix that."

As is usually the case with mid-term replacements, Menendez assumed Corzine's Senate committee portfolio, which included choice assignments. The Housing and Urban Affairs Committee, he noted, not only gives him the chance to work on increasing housing opportunities, but also has jurisdiction over mass transit, one of the state's most critical interests in Washington. The Energy Committee gives him the opportunity to work on increased security at the state's chemical plants and to oppose drilling off the New Jersey coast. And as a former member of the budget committee in the New Jersey Legislature, he said he understands how critical his seat on the Senate Budget Committee is for the state.

CORZINE'S DECISION

For Corzine, the choice of Menendez was the first major decision he made in the wake of his election as governor, and both the selection and the process were closely watched by political insiders for insights into his decision-making.

To the surprise of many, who expected a quick announcement in the days following the election, Corzine's Senate choice, like the

selection of his Cabinet, was a slow, deliberative, and politically open process that took almost a full month.

On the surface, choosing a caretaker to fill the seat for a year, as GOP Governor Thomas Kean did when he named Nicholas Brady to fill the seat of Democrat Harrison Williams after his Abscam conviction, seemed the politically safe decision. While Menendez was reported widely to be the front-runner, six of the state's seven Democratic congressmen let Corzine know they would like to be considered for the post, and Congressmen Rob Andrews of Camden County and Frank Pallone of Monmouth County were both lobbying as hard as Menendez.

Andrews argued that his decision last January not to run against Corzine in a potential three-way race with Governor Codey had been critical to forcing Codey out of the race, and that South Jersey deserved representation.

Corzine used the Senate selection process to send signals about the kind of governor he wanted to be.

His aides let it be known that he was considering Congressman Rush Holt, the nuclear physicist from Princeton who was considered "non-political" and a reformer.

He publicly flirted with the idea of choosing state Senator Nia Gill of Essex County, a liberal who would have been both the first woman and the first African-American to represent New Jersey in the U.S. Senate.

In the end, he chose Menendez, who became the first



PHOTO COURTESY OF THE OFFICE OF SENATOR MENENDEZ

A DREAM REALIZED: Congressman Robert Menendez addressing supporters in the Central Railroad Terminal at Liberty State Park after being introduced by Governor-elect Corzine (behind Menendez) as his choice to succeed him in the United States Senate. Menendez is flanked by his son (left) and daughter (right), state Democratic chair Bonnie Watson-Coleman, and Albio Sires, who is stepping down as Assembly speaker to run for Menendez' congressional seat.

Hispanic U.S. senator to represent a northern state and only the sixth in the nation's history, underscoring Corzine's commitment to diversity, as his support for Loretta Weinberg's candidacy did in September.

It also underscored his commitment to ethics reform: Corzine noted that "Menendez had to wear a bulletproof vest" when he helped authorities make their case against his onetime

mentor, former state Senator William Musto.

But most important, Corzine knew Menendez would continue his progressive voting record.

Like Corzine, Menendez had voted against the resolution to unilaterally undertake the war in Iraq, and Corzine felt that was a critical point to make in the fall campaign that would be run against the Bush administration's policies and the presump-

tive Republican nominee, state Senator Thomas Kean Jr., who endorsed the war last year.

Menendez "stands for a foreign policy" built on international cooperation and consultation, and knows that such an approach "is not an anachronism of the 20th Century, but needs to be part of the 21st Century," Corzine said.

—Mark J. Magyar