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Never Surrender

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Never Surrender

With an intense work ethic and a commitment to fiscal responsibility,
Baron Hill serves Indiana's 9th District in the U.S. House.

Struggling in the wake of a bitter political defeat, he was trudging toward his apartment near Capitol Hill. His head was down and his feet were dragging along the sidewalk in front of the giant marble steps of the U.S. Supreme Court.

On this damp, chilly evening in November of 2004, Baron Hill was a beaten man — a three-term U.S. Congressman who'd recently been knocked out of office by the agonizingly narrow margin of 1,425 votes. A conservative, "Blue Dog" Democrat from Indiana's mostly rural and small-town 9th District, the former Furman basketball player had been upset by Republican Mike Sodrel, a tough-talking trucking company operator.

Hill figured his political career was over. Feeling angry and depressed, he had vowed that he would never again run for public office. But as he hiked slowly along, he was startled to find a congressional colleague falling into step beside him.

The colleague's name was David Price. A Democrat from North Carolina, Price had enjoyed four successful terms in the House, starting in the mid-1980s, before being bounced from office during the Republican Revolution of 1994. Like Hill, Price had sunk into the depths of political despair for a while — until he pulled out of the doldrums and mounted a furious, and ultimately successful, campaign to regain his seat in 1996.

He understood the misery that Hill was now experiencing, and as the two men walked, Price offered his friend some valuable advice: "Don't assume that you can't come back and win again."

In recalling that moment, Hill doesn't mince words. "A lot of people in Washington would like to pretend that losing an election doesn't hurt,"

he says with a wince. "But it does. It hurts a lot. And that's what I told David Price on the night we talked. I told him I'd had the wind knocked out of me, and that I didn't want to run again. That campaign in Indiana had been ugly and negative, and I just didn't want to put myself through it again.

"So I told him: 'David, I've had it in politics.'"

Price was supportive and empathetic. But then he surprised Hill by describing how he'd managed to rebuild his own shattered political psyche and reclaim his congressional seat.

"I told Baron that I knew how difficult losing was," says Price, who is still in office. "But then I also urged him not to close the door on a re-election bid. I explained that we needed him in Congress because he's a terrific legislator, especially on issues related to fiscal reform in government and fiscal responsibility.

"I knew Baron was a fierce competitor, given his athletic background. And so I really urged him to think it over. I reminded him that he was a member that others [in the House] looked to for leadership, and I pointed out that we didn't want to lose him."

Hill listened. By the time he reached his one-bedroom apartment, located a few blocks from the Capitol, the spring had returned to his step. He realized that he shouldn't let a single defeat completely derail his political career.

A few days later he sat down with the legendary Lee Hamilton — a veteran Democrat who'd held the 9th District seat for 34 years until retiring in 1998, when Hill first won the post — and asked him for advice. "Hamilton was very positive, very upbeat," says Hill. "But he made it clear



AP/WIDE WORLD PHOTOS

By Tom Nugent

that I had to move quickly. He told me, 'If you're thinking about running again, it has to happen the next time around.'"

As he weighed Hamilton's words, Hill thought back to his days as a tenacious point guard at Furman. From 1972 through 1975, Hill played under Joe Williams on teams that compiled a 64-25 record and won three Southern Conference championships.

Hill was known for his fiercely competitive nature. As former teammate Russ Hunt '73 says, "He was always the smallest guy on the court, but also the most aggressive." His leadership style was based on a crucial concept: No matter how tough things get, you never quit.

Within a few weeks of his late-night stroll past the Supreme Court, Hill had reached a decision: He wouldn't quit politics. He was going to fight.

But first he had to come to terms with the emotional fallout from his devastating defeat.

For Hill, now 55, the healing process began at the family dinner table. "I went home one night," he says with a quiet smile, "and I told [his wife] Betty, 'I've made a decision. I'm not going to be angry about this loss any longer. I need to get over it. I need to become the Baron Hill I used to be.'"

Having decided to get his act together, Hill set out on a monthlong tour of his congressional district, located in southeastern Indiana near the Kentucky border. "For a while I kept wondering if I had the word 'loser' written all over me," he remembers. "But people kept saying, 'Baron, we think that was a fluke the last time. We want you to run again.'"

So he did. On November 7, 2006, he won re-election, defeating Sodrel, the man who'd knocked him out of office two years earlier.

Hill was going back to Congress — and back to the fiscally conservative "Blue Dog" coalition of House Democrats.

He was now a "double freshman" — one of the few House members who are defeated and then re-elected to their seat. The Democratic leadership quickly honored his legislative expertise by handing him a coveted assignment on the House Energy and Commerce Committee.

Make no mistake: Baron Hill was back.

Born and raised in the small Indiana town of Seymour (population 18,000), Baron Paul Hill was the youngest of seven highly competitive brothers — all of whom did their best to outshine each other on the playing fields.

The Hill boys were jocks, but none of them could match Baron, a three-sport standout at Seymour High School. He was all-state in football and a star sprinter on the track team, but he really made his mark on the hardwood in basketball-crazed Indiana, where bitter high school rivalries are the stuff of enduring legend — and Hollywood blockbusters. (The classic 1986 film *Hoosiers* was based on the exploits of an Indiana high school team located only a few miles up the road from Seymour.)

Standing only 5-10, Hill set the Seymour High career scoring record. His exploits earned him election, in 2000, to the Indiana Basketball Hall of Fame, where he was inducted alongside another noted hoops star, Larry Bird.

Hill's athletic prowess brought him local fame and a scholarship to Furman, where he played on three NCAA tournament teams. The 1973-74 squad, which included such legendary Paladin big men as Clyde Mayes and Fessor Leonard, upset the University of South Carolina in



LESLEY STEDMAN WEIDENBEN/LOUISVILLE COURIER-JOURNAL



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the first round of the East Regional and advanced to the Sweet 16 before losing to Pittsburgh.

“The thing about Baron was that he would just never give up,” says Hunt, his former teammate. “He was a little guy but really gutty, and he told everybody on the team what to do. Baron gave 110 percent of himself to everything he did.”

A history major at Furman, Hill says he wasn’t a particularly good student — although he did become passionately interested in the French Revolution while studying under professor William Lavery, a “terrific teacher who cared deeply about his subject and also about his students.” Hill says he also “got lots of inspiration and motivation” from then Furman president Gordon Blackwell, who took a special interest in him and “became a father figure to me and a lot of young guys who were attending college far from home.”

After obtaining his degree in 1975, Hill returned to Seymour to work in his family’s real estate and insurance business. In 1982 he won election to the Indiana House of Representatives. During eight years in the House, he chaired the Democratic Caucus and built a solid statewide reputation. In 1990 he made a run for the U.S. Senate but lost to Dan Coats — whose daughter, Laura, was a 1990 Furman graduate.

Above, from left: Back home in Indiana, Hill shares a laugh with Harrison County auditor Pat Wolfe; the Hill family greets voters at the polls on election day; the scrappy point guard in his college days; with wife Betty, basking in the glow of support from a crowd in Sellersburg, Ind.

Still, Hill earned a respectable 46 percent of the vote in his Senate run. As he told the Louisville *Courier-Journal*, “I got myself established within the party with that race. It was one of the better things that happened to me.”

He went on to work in state government for a while, then became a private investment broker before his 1998 election to Congress.

After winning Hamilton’s vacant seat, Hill hit the ground running. During his first three terms in Congress, he earned a reputation as a fiscal and social conservative. He worked to craft legislative initiatives aimed at reforming the lobbying system, implementing new ethical standards for House members, achieving American energy independence, protecting Social Security from privatization and creating “pay as you go” budgeting regulations designed to reduce the burgeoning federal deficit.

Although he says he’s “extremely proud” of having co-introduced recent measures that would establish an independent ethics commission to review potential conflict-of-interest issues in the House, plus bills that would increase fuel-efficiency standards for U.S. automobiles and require Congress to make the process of shaping the federal budget more transparent, Hill says that the issue he cares about most in 2008 is the “dangerously out of control federal deficit.”

Along with the other 46 members of the Blue Dog Coalition, a group of conservative and moderate Democrats that formed in 1994 to fight for fiscal responsibility, Hill worries that the greatest threat to American freedom today may not come from marauding terrorists, but from runaway borrowing.



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Spend an hour or two in his office on Capitol Hill and you'll probably hear a fiery sermon about the perils of "putting all of America's bills on the charge card." As he noted in a recent speech on the House floor: "We're now facing a \$9 trillion deficit, and the second-largest expenditure in our nation's budget is the interest we pay on the national debt. That's gotta stop! It's crazy, when you end up with the Chinese government buying our debt and loaning us the money, which affects our foreign policy.

"We have to get our fiscal house in order."

According to Hill's colleagues, few in Congress can match his efforts to straighten out the deficit mess. "After years of reckless fiscal policies, it takes leaders like Baron Hill who are willing to make the tough decisions necessary to ensure the future economic stability of our country," says Arkansas Democrat Mike Ross, the Blue Dogs' co-chair for communications. "Baron brings a pro-business, bipartisan approach to his work on important issues that affect the long-term economic health of our country, and he's long been a staunch advocate of fiscally responsible policies that will benefit generations to come."

Adds House majority leader Steny Hoyer of Maryland, "Baron is one of the hardest-working members of Congress. He's certainly made his mark as an effective leader, particularly on fiscal responsibility. On that issue, I believe he's one of the strongest advocates in Congress."

Another of Hill's pet peeves is the assumption by many Americans that members of Congress enjoy soft, cushy lives full of ease and glamour. Describing his typical workday — and pointing out that he usually sees his wife, Betty Schepman Hill '74, and their three adult daughters only on weekends, when he flies home to Indiana from Washington — Hill says the cushy image is far from the truth.

"I do think people have a false conception of congressmen as having a real glamorous life," he says. "A lot of people think that lobbyists are wining and dining us, and we're riding around in limousines, and we're not connected to the common man and woman. But it's not like that at all.

"Believe me, I wouldn't be doing this if I didn't believe in the importance of conducting the nation's business and getting it right. It's too hard — the 16-hour days, the constant struggle to raise money for re-election, traveling back home every weekend, and being away from the wife and kids," says Hill, who will likely be pitted against Sodrel for the fourth time in this fall's elections. "I wouldn't want any part of it if I didn't think we were going to accomplish something important for America."

But does he ever feel disillusioned about the many flaws and bottlenecks in the legislative system? Does he ever feel like quitting and going home to small-town Indiana to enjoy a less stressful lifestyle?

He responds by pointing to a jumbo-sized cartoon that hangs on his office wall. The cartoon features a frantic pelican who's struggling to swallow a frog twice his size, even as the angry frog chokes the bird for all he's worth.

"That's my motto, right there in that cartoon," says Hill, with a sudden boom of laughter. "That poor pelican can't possibly swallow that huge frog, but he's certainly giving it his best.

"No matter what happens, never give up!" ¹F1

The author is a free-lance writer from Hastings, Mich.