

Opinion

If Duckworth can dodge mistakes, she'll be a shoo-in for return

By DENNIS GRUBAUGH

My introduction to U.S. Sen. Tammy Duckworth was auspicious enough.

I was sitting in a Collinsville hotel banquet center in 2017 with a group of business executives and three federal elected officials. The group was discussing the legislative agenda of the time.



Grubaugh

Suddenly, a clattering noise arose just behind me.

"Hello, everybody!" the cheery Duckworth said, as she made her way into the conference room. She was the last legislator to arrive, but she was also the most noticeable. The only one in a wheelchair. She captured the attention of everyone in the room.

To say the Democratic senator from Illinois is a moving force would be an understatement. She is the true essence of heroics, having lost her legs when she was shot down while piloting a helicopter during the Iraq War in 2004. She went on to two key appointments with veterans' offices in state and federal government

before deciding to run for Congress in 2009. She won two terms in the House before winning her role in the Senate.

Along the way, she has been the subject of countless interviews and the center of many "firsts." She is the first person born in Thailand elected to Congress, the first woman with a disability elected to Congress, the first female double amputee in the Senate, and the first senator to give birth while in office.

I was impressed enough upon our inaugural meeting that I interviewed her for a Q&A that the IBJ ran in December 2017. She responded to every question, and while most of the answers were not of much consequence, I remember thinking: Here is a woman confident in her abilities. In the years since, she has reinforced that conclusion time and again.

Had the Senate majority not been at stake in 2020, I'm certain Joe Biden would have found a place for her in his presidential administration. Her name came up as a possibility for the Department of Veterans Affairs but vacating her Senate seat would have been a risk, Democrats figured. Right now, her seat is solid, so the Senate remains solid for the party as well.

And she's running again. She recently announced her candidacy for re-election in 2022. She'll be hard to beat, but

Republicans are going to try like crazy. Let's see if she can continue her remarkable run. I am always hopeful that politicians stay high minded when they hold office, but too often they go low, wallowing in the mire, when they try to maintain power. Duckworth simply doesn't need to do this to get re-elected. If she keeps up appearances, she's a shoo-in. Here are some reasons:

- She has spoken out when she needed to. She called out Donald Trump long before many of her colleagues. And last month, she had some choice, four-letter admonishment for Fox News' Tucker Carlson, who earlier had ridiculed the increasing feminization of the military.
- She has sponsored a legion of bills for a first-time senator. GovTrack's Report Card on Duckworth for the 115th Congress found that among Senate freshmen, she ranked first in favorably reporting bills out of committee.
- Her advocacy for those with disabilities, and for veterans and military causes, is unrelenting. The Veterans Service Organization and Paralyzed Veterans of America recognized Duckworth's leadership in defending the Americans with Disabilities Act.
- She has spoken fervently about the recent backlash against Asian people, and in support of having more Asians

in the president's administration.

- She has visited Southwestern Illinois multiple times in the past four years, and for people like me who don't like to play second fiddle to Chicago, that's appreciated.

I think about what other states are going through with their own elected senators. Josh Hawley in Missouri and Ted Cruz in Texas come to mind. They continue to be embarrassments not only for their constituents but to the whole democratic process. Starting with their challenge to the legitimate election of Biden (and continuing on with Cruz's decision to leave Texas at the height of its record snowstorm), the two men show their egos far outweigh their public service. I suspect that the electorate will justifiably boot both of them when next it has a chance.

And then we have Tammy Duckworth, a woman who fought most of her life to get what she's got, with a display of confidence unlike anybody I can think of in politics.

Barring no major mistakes, she's going to be with us a while.

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Quit throwing good money after bad: replace the Poplar Street Bridge

By ALAN J. ORTBALS

Here we go again. If you're around my age, you've probably had a car sometime in your past



Ortbals

that just kept breaking down. The fuel pump wouldn't pump, the starter shot craps, the radiator sprung a leak, the transmission started to slip — one thing after another. And each time, you hesitated and questioned whether you should make the repair or junk it and buy new. But you figured that this repair would be the last one for a while (after all, what's left to go wrong?) and you've already sunk so much money into it that you needed to drive it a while to get your money back. And so, you went ahead and made the repair and then something else happened.

Eventually, you came to the conclusion that what you really had was a

bottomless pit in your garage floor that you just kept throwing money into. You decided that enough was enough, that "getting your money back" was a nonsensical concept, and you pulled the trigger, traded it in, and bought a new car.

This is where we are with the Poplar Street Bridge.

The actual name of the bridge is the Congressman William L. Clay Bridge (nee, Bernard F. Dickmann) but it's never really been known as anything but the Poplar Street because that's how the local media referred to it before it was christened, and the name stuck. It was completed in 1967 and it's been nothing but trouble ever since.

The problem lies in its design. Because of the heavy barge traffic on the Mississippi River, it was necessary to maintain an open span of at least 580 feet. This is not a problem with a cable-stayed design like the new Stan Musial Veterans Memorial Bridge north of downtown or an arch design like the Jefferson Barracks Memorial Arch Bridge that carries the southern leg of Interstate 255 across the river, but the thinking at that time was that they wanted a sleek, low-profile bridge to compliment the Gateway Arch and not detract

from the Eads Bridge just to the north. The challenge was how to stretch nearly 600 feet without piers below or superstructure above. The solution was to use an orthotropic design that would lay down a steel deck over steel girders. But therein lies the problem. They've never been able to get asphalt or concrete to adhere to the steel and so the deck is constantly breaking up and needing to be repaired or replaced.

Just going back over the last 30 years you find reports of a cracked pier, cracked steel, an extensive shut down and repairs in 1993-94, more cracks in 2004, ramp closures from 2005 to 2007, a series of closures and repairs beginning in 2010 and continuing through 2015. Then in 2017 they began a two-year project meant to extend the life of the bridge complete with shifting the whole southern half of it 9 feet to add another lane. I don't think I was alone in thinking that that would finally be it for the old jalopy.

But now, just last month, IDOT began on yet another closure and repair that will take about six months to complete and cost approximately \$30 million — ironically, that was the total cost to build the PSB in the first place.

I've had it with this old junker and I don't even have to drive it to work every day like tens of thousands do. It's time to swallow our losses, quit throwing money into this bottomless pit and replace the Poplar Street Bridge. Biden's new infrastructure bill, The American Jobs Plan, presents a once in a lifetime opportunity. Rather than proceeding with another \$30 million patch job, IDOT and MODOT should begin immediately to craft a plan to replace the Poplar Street Bridge and do preliminary design so they can get the project funded in the bill.

Biden's full \$2 trillion plan is probably a long shot but 79 percent of Americans are in favor of overhauling roadways, railroads, bridges, and ports so I think it is likely that some form of an infrastructure bill will pass this year. We need to be ready to take advantage when it does.

NFL Hall of Fame coach Jimmy Johnson said, "Success happens when opportunity meets preparation." He was right. Let's get prepared.

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