Rostenkowski's legacy: pinnacle of power, dramatic downfall
August 11, 2010

(Crain's) — Dan Rostenkowski will be remembered as he wished — a political giant, a powerhouse in Congress for Chicago and Illinois, and, yes, a patriot — as well as the way he feared he'd be: the ultimate insider brought low by corruption charges.

Mr. Rostenkowski passed away at his Wisconsin home Wednesday at age 82. He died of lung cancer, which was diagnosed last August, the Associated Press reports.

The Chicago Democrat rose from his roots in the Chicago political machine to spend nearly four decades in the U.S. House, becoming chairman of the powerful Ways and Means Committee, in line to be speaker someday.

“He was a giant, no question about that,” said former U.S. Rep. Bill Lipinski, D-Chicago. “I don't know of any congressman who did as much for Illinois or Chicago as he did.”

But he was defeated when he sought re-election in 1994 after his indictment on 17 felony charges, part of a wide federal investigation into misuse of congressional postage accounts. He later pleaded guilty to two counts of mail fraud and served 15 months in prison.

“He had to leave the House of Representatives in disgrace and that will always be a footnote,” says Alan Gitelson, professor of political science at Chicago's Loyola University.

“He fought for Chicago for six different mayors,” said William Daley, whose father, Mayor Richard J. Daley, had the foresight to back Mr. Rostenkowski for Congress at age 31, allowing him time to build the seniority that would eventually translate into clout for Chicago.

“He believed he represented urban interests,” said Mr. Daley. "He'd say, 'Southerners fight for military bases, and I'm there for urban America.' Governing was tough in his mind, and he was good at it.”

“Rosty,” as he was known by friends and headline writers, conferred regularly with presidents from Lyndon Johnson to Bill Clinton, and he relished talking about it. But his landmark legislative achievement was the 1986 Tax Reform Act he hammered out with a conservative Republican president, Ronald Reagan.

“When I first came to Congress in 1986, Rostenkowski was at the pinnacle of his power,” said former Speaker of the House Dennis Hastert, R-Plano. “If you wanted to do anything for Illinois or about Illinois or anything to do with taxes, you had to go through him. He made himself as powerful as a lot of speakers.”

“His legacy is basically that of an individual who knew how the House functioned and how to get a bill through,” Mr. Gitelson said.
It was also far more than that.

During his 36 years in Congress, Mr. Rostenkowski seldom issued a press release, a rarity even back then. But he was largely responsible for megadeals that built the Kennedy Expressway and the Deep Tunnel project, and few legislative matters affecting Illinois escaped his attention.

"Dan Rostenkowski devoted his life to his community, Chicago and the state," said Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan in a statement.

As the de facto leader of the Illinois congressional delegation, he united the state's Republicans and Democrats more than anyone before or since.

“He didn't have to do much persuading,” Mr. Lipinski said. “He would say what he wanted to have happen. If Dan wanted things a certain way, that's the way it went.”

Marty Russo, now a top lobbyist in Washington, was a Democratic congressman from Chicago from 1975 to 1993. One day in 1979 Mr. Rostenkowski called and told Congressman Russo to pursue a seat on the Ways and Means Committee. “He said, ‘This is not a request.’ ”

As he rose in seniority and later became chairman of the tax-writing panel, Mr. Rostenkowski was known for recruiting those who could pass the “sweaty palms” test, by dint of loyalty or a safe seat back home, which meant they'd cast a tough vote when he told them to. “He was a guy who believed in getting the ball across the goal line,” said Mr. Russo.

Mr. Russo, whose son Dan is a godson of Mr. Rostenkowski, said he's lost both a “great friend and mentor.”

“I don't think anyone has done more for Chicago,” he said. “We used to affectionately call him Mr. Chicago.”

“He was a Chicagoan 100%,” said Mr. Gitelson of Loyola, where the congressional papers of Mr. Rostenkowski, an alum, are housed. “He loved the city and represented it well.”

Former Chicago Alderman Dick Simpson said Mr. Rostenkowski will be remembered for his political strength: "He was the last of what we call the 'Old Bulls.' "

Mr. Simpson, now head of the political science department at the University of Illinois at Chicago, lost twice to Mr. Rostenkowski when he ran to represent the 5th District.

Senior constituents might remember Mr. Rostenkowski differently: as a man who tinkered with their benefits when he helped overhaul the Social Security system in 1983.

Still, his felony record will always taint his political legacy, Mr. Simpson said. "The fact that one is convicted of betraying public trust will always undermine one's stature in history."
U.S. Rep. Mike Quigley, who now holds the 5th District seat that Mr. Rostenkowski inhabited from 1959 to 1995, said that it will be tough for many people to overlook the "horrible mistakes" that have become part of Mr. Rostenkowski's political legacy. "But he paid for it," Mr. Quigley said. "History will judge on overall merit. He did a lot of good things for this district" and the state of Illinois.

In many ways, Mr. Rostenkowski's departure from Congress marked the end of an era.

A few twists of fate, and he could have been Speaker of the House. But had be been serving today, he'd have little patience for the hyper-partisan brinksmanship and blog-fueled, 24-hour news cycle posturing that have become so common in Washington.

“I think he would have found Congress a rather puzzling place to be,” Mr. Gitelson said. The former lawmaker frequently served as a guest lecturer at Loyola in recent years. “It was clear from conversations with students, and me, that he loved Congress as a body and never stopped missing it and the engagement it gave him. It was part and parcel of his life and he missed it tremendously.”

“He understood partisanship but he truly understood the need to work with others,” he added. “He represented a generation of leadership we're not going to see again in a lot of ways. More than anyone else, he understood that politics is the art of compromise.”