

Jim Webb – the unlikely politician

WASHINGTON: The story of US senator Jim Webb's rise as a political star is an unfashionable one by today's standards.

Unlike the younger political upstarts of recent years, the 63-year-old Democrat is no self-styled renegade or maverick. Neither does he have strong links to the powerful political dynasties.

Instead, Mr Webb worked as a journalist, novelist, Hollywood screenwriter-producer, and even taught literature at one point before he made – and won – his first-ever run for political office, the 2006 senatorial race in the eastern state of Virginia.

Another feature that distinguishes him from the Young Turks is his solid military career. He joined the Marines, served with distinction in Vietnam, and became the Secretary of the Navy in 1987.

"I'm the only person in the history of Virginia elected to statewide office with a union card, two Purple Hearts and three tattoos," he observed wryly in his latest book, *A Time To Fight*.

As it turned out, his impeccable military credentials could well be a major reason he successfully secured meetings with Myanmar's top military rulers and opposition leader Aung San Suu Kyi last week.

"One of the most important things about engaging Myanmar is that you have to send people that they can at least have a conversation with," said Dr Bridget Welsh, a South-east Asian expert at the Singapore Management University.

"One of the reasons Senator Webb was able to get access (in Myanmar) has to do



Mr Webb meeting Ms Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest, in Yangon on Saturday. Earlier, he met Myanmar's top leader, Senior General Than Shwe, in Naypyidaw. PHOTO: ASSOCIATED PRESS

with the fact that his military background was something the regime at least understood."

Mr Webb travelled to Myanmar on Saturday to meet the country's top leader Senior General Than Shwe, marking the highest-level official contact between the two countries in decades.

Subsequently, Mr Webb met Ms Suu Kyi, who is under house arrest, for an hour.

The senator said he urged Myanmar's military leaders to release Ms Suu Kyi and lay a foundation of goodwill and confidence-building in the future. What was left unsaid, however, was whether he would continue to be personally involved in future talks with Myanmar.

The US Congress passed an Act last year requiring, among other things, that the President nominate a special envoy for Myanmar to "promote a comprehensive international effort... to restore civilian democratic rule... and address the urgent humanitarian needs" in the South-east Asian nation.

Professor David Steinberg, director of Asian studies at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, said as chairman of the US Senate's foreign relations subcommittee on East Asian and Pacific Affairs, Mr Webb already has a powerful role in shaping future US-Myanmar ties.

"He can't control everything... but (given the moderate voices) among the leadership of the (current) committee, there's a chance something good might happen," Prof Steinberg added.

Mr Webb certainly needs no persuasion that US policy on Myanmar needs changing.

"Our economic withdrawal from (Myanmar) has not hurt the regime so much as it has increased the position of China in that country militarily, diplomatically and economically," he wrote after his first visit to Myanmar in 2001.

Yesterday, he said at a press conference in Hanoi that China has failed to show leadership in solving the political stalemate in Myanmar.

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