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A Congressman Familiar With Joining the Fray, Fortunately for New York

By RAYMOND HERNANDEZ

WASHINGTON, Oct. 28 — Representative John E. Sweeney was at his desk recently when a call came in from the White House. He knew right away what it was about. Only a few days earlier, he had broken with his Republican colleagues, warning the Bush administration not to tie up money that New York needs to rebuild after the terror attacks.

Far from cringing at the call, Mr. Sweeney, a second-term congressman from upstate New York, seemed to be reveling in the fuss he had raised. "I don't want any unnecessary contention," he said coolly into the phone, with characteristic bravado. "But I am not afraid of it."

Since arriving in Congress nearly two years ago, Mr. Sweeney has emerged among the most flamboyant and irrepressible members of New York's delegation, alternating between street fighter and smooth political operator to get his way. A 46-year-old congressman who likes to point out that he grew up in an upstate housing project, Mr. Sweeney is known for his quick pace and mercurial temper. He can be engaging or disarming be like a street kid," said his friend State Senator Joseph L. Bruno, the Republican majority leader.

"We've never been at odds," Senator Bruno continued. "But I've seen that side of him. He's tough as nails."

These days, Mr. Sweeney's skills are suddenly in great demand as New York seeks to squeeze as much federal aid as possible from Washington in the aftermath of the trade center attack. New York is not only seeking money to clean up the destruction. It has also made several unusual requests that have been met with great skepticism here, including proposals to use federal aid to balance the state budget and pay for upstate transportation projects.



David Scull for The New York Times

Representative John E. Sweeney of New York, left, managed to persuade House Speaker Dennis J. Hastert to approve a $20 billion emergency aid package for New York despite the objections of some Republicans.

The job of championing New York's cause has fallen to members of the state's congressional delegation, particularly Mr. Sweeney, who is uniquely positioned to act as a go-between. He is a friend and ally of Republican chieftains in New York, particularly Gov. George E. Pataki, and maintains close ties with Republican leaders on Capitol Hill, where he is a deputy whip in the House.

Mr. Sweeney even has a few connections in the White House. His former chief of staff — and close friend — is Brad Card, the younger brother of Andrew H. Card Jr., the White House chief of staff. More important, though, Mr. Sweeney made allies in the Bush camp last year when he traveled to Florida to help monitor the recount in the election dispute between George W. Bush and Al Gore. There, he led a protest that forced one local election board to stop a recount that might have gone in Mr. Gore's direction. For that, he earned him the nickname "John Shut-It-Down Sweeney" among some New York Democrats.

Even his Democratic rivals say Mr. Sweeney is a formidable ally when he is not at odds with them. New York's senior senator, Charles E. Schumer, a Democrat, recalled how Mr. Sweeney recently buttonholed House Speaker Dennis J. Hastert and helped persuade him to approve $20 billion in emergency aid for New York over strong objections from some conservative lawmakers.

"I think he's really worked hard to make a good name for himself," Mr.

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Schumer said. "He's a real go-getter."

Mr. Sweeney, who grew up in Troy, just across the river from Albany, got his start in politics as a young man in Rensselaer County, a place that spawned the political careers of some of New York's most powerful Republicans, including Senator Bruno, William D. Powers, the former chairman of the state Republican Party, and Mary O. Donohue, the lieutenant governor.

"It was a competitive place," recalled Mr. Sweeney, a lawyer who lives in Clifton Park, north of Albany. "Politics is considered a sport in Rensselaer County."

As Mr. Power's executive director from 1992 to 1994, Mr. Sweeney was instrumental in helping transform the state Republican Party into a formidable political operation after years of decline. He also had a hand in Mr. Pataki's 1994 victory over Gov. Mario M. Cuomo. Eventually, he went to work for the Pataki administration, first as state labor commissioner and then as deputy secretary to the governor.

Then, in 1998, Mr. Sweeney got the support of party leaders to run for the 22nd District Congressional seat held by Gerald B.H. Solomon, New York's most influential House member, who announced he would retire. The district begins in the Adirondacks, north of Lake Placid, juts around Democratic-dominated Albany, and then stretches south along the Hudson River to Dutchess County.

Mr. Sweeney has come to be regarded a member of the delegation's A-Team, with influence among Republican leaders in New York and Washington.

He clearly enjoys the attention. When a visitor dropped by his office, Mr. Sweeney delighted in showing off a figure of a Roman gladiator on his desk. It was from Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, a kidding reminder of his performance as a Democrat-slaying gladiator last year during a night of political lampooning in Albany. To Mr. Sweeney's delight, Senator Clinton also called him "New York's gladiator" in a separate note.

Mr. Sweeney is also raising his profile considerably within Republican circles. Several leading New York Republicans are talking about him as a future candidate for state office, possibly even governor.

That said, Mr. Sweeney has also antagonized a few people during his political career. He outspoke[illegible] sition to the dredging of [illegible] the upper Hudson River has put him at odds with Mr. Pataki. [illegible] administration entered the [illegible] year by calling for dredging. But Mr. Sweeney, whose district includes most contaminated stretches of the river, warned that dredging would worsen the situation.

"They weren't happy [illegible] to say the least," one Republican official in Albany said of the Pataki administration's reaction.

Mr. Sweeney, a persuasive [illegible] will no doubt be [illegible] to the New York turns to Washington for help in recovering from the Sept. 11 attack. Congressional leaders are already balking at Mr. Pataki's $54 billion request for $54 billion in aid, and members of the New York delegation have criticized the plan, saying it is loaded with large spending items not directly related to the disaster, like transportation projects upstate.

Mr. Sweeney acknowledges that the governor's plan will be difficult to sell, particularly as the country's attention turns away from Sept. 11 to other pressing matters, like the war in Afghanistan. But he says the state has to be aggressive. "Passivity isn't going to get the job done," he says.

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