McClure holds power in 'new right' causes

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Photo reverse side

By BEN J. PLASTINO
Post-Register political editor

Sen. James A. McClure, R-Idaho, is the formal chairman of the Republican Steering Committee which is rapidly becoming a force in espousing "New Right causes."

For all practical purposes, it is the conservative wing of the Republicans, generally made up of 16 to 18 of the 41 Republicans who contribute part of their office space and allowances to support a small staff. To this nucleus, however, is added a half dozen other conservative senators who sometimes join them on some issues.

McClure, a soft-spoken but articulate senator, hasn't exactly wanted publicity on this mysterious committee but he admits it won't hurt. Four years ago, he was even boosted as a vice presidential nominee, but the movement didn't get far.

The committee is not as effective as McClure would like, but he asserts it is becoming an organized force.

Marginal gains

"We are mainly promoting marginal gains," he said.

McClure is hopeful the Republicans will gain control of the Senate and an increase of 10 seats would do it, while nine might turn the trick if the new vice president is a Republican and the senate is tied at 50 each. There is also a possibility that the lone independent, Sen. Harry F. Byrd of Virginia, would vote with the Republicans if an offer in the way of political favors were too good for him to turn down.

If the Republicans did gain control, then McClure would replace the ebullient Sen. Henry Jackson, D-Wash., as chairman of the strategic Senate Energy and Natural Resources Committee. Right now, McClure ranks 31st and there aren't too many Republicans ahead of him.

"There appears generally a trend for more conservative viewpoint at the present time," observed McClure. "The public appears to have dissatisfaction with Carter, and many Democrats, in fact, find Carter's support for them is not an asset."

Other senators

While McClure is chairman of the committee, Sen. Jesse A. Helms of North Carolina is the vice-chairman, but there are other powerful spokesman. These include Utah Sens. Jake Garn and Orrin Hatch, S.I. Hayakawa, of California; Paul Laxalt, of Nevada; and Strom Thurmond, of South Carolina.

But the Steering Committee doesn't always follow a course of its own and sometimes it joins Democrats, especially those from the South, on individual issues. The Steering Committee is made up of all Republicans but Democrats are not barred.

McClure said the committee has scored successes, such as the cargo preference law, a proposed labor reform bill, anti-trust laws, and election law procedures.

Most members, including himself, oppose SALT II in its present form.

Regarding SALT II, McClure said "We don't buy the theory of mutual destruction if the treaty is turned down. I'm not sure the Russians believe it, either."

McClure said in case of rejection the two nations could still sit down and discuss compromises.

He said he believes the Russians are ahead of this nation overall in military weatons.

New Right

The Steering Committee represents the emergency of a New Right, an aggressive call for a return to tradition, packaged in the most contemporary style.

The committee members have helped block several bills favored by labor and consumer groups, and led the right against the Panama Canal treaties, in recent years. At weekly luncheons, members discuss pending business, set priorities and assign one of their number to take the lead on specific issues.

Liberal senators, and these include some Republicans, feel the Steering Committee is dominated by ideologues, right-wingers who favor confrontation with foreign enemies and ignore the problems of the need at home. Some charge the committee's real impact is negative, and in delaying tactics, add to its reputation for ineffectiveness and ineptitude.

Not so, said McClure, who with former Sen. Carl T. Curtis, of Nebraska, founded the committee five years ago. It's true they are bound together by many of the same issues as those of the Old Right — less government and lower taxes, more defense spending and reliance on the private sector.

They feel the New Right embodies a new effort to promote conservative principles; the Old Right has given up. McClure and Curtis said they were frustrated by the listlessness and disarray of their fellow conservatives after 15 years of liberal rule.

They are more activists and they feel they are in tune with a strong conservative trend.

McClure, much as he did as an Idaho state senator, has become the leading conservative expert on Senate rules and the man most likely to give the Democratic leadership trouble on the floor.

Often the committee members, rather than seek out-and-out victories, focus on trying to water down a bill they have no hope of stopping.

For example, one of its major victories was a successful filibuster against a proposed labor reform bill. It also backed the Kemp-Roth tax cut bill, which galvanized budget balancing sentiment in Congress.

Perhaps the pendulum has swung so far to the right, that the committee has reached an apex but if it hasn't it will increase in stature and strength in the 1980 congressional elections.

Only recently Sen. Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia, denounced the committee as "shadowy and mysterious," an observation which prompted McClure to say he was grateful.

Pulling away the cloak revealed the tight band of conservatives who meet regularly, trade notes, plan strategy and finance a four-person staff that looks after their interest. The committee door has no name, just a number, and it is not listed on the Capitol Hill register, but its impact, most agree, is considerable.