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For a Freshman, Lessons About Limelights

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BEAUMONT, Tex.—For a politician who has staked his career on the protection of firearms, and intentionally or not, become a champion for the militia movement, Rep. Steve Stockman (R-Tex.) is a curious case. Until recently, he had never owned a gun.

At a time when the nation seemed bound in its grief over the Oklahoma City bombing, and when a new and sharper scrutiny was being aimed at vocal critics of the government, the 38-year-old freshman lawmaker has emerged as a focal point for controversy.

In short order, he has been forced to explain why he received a cryptic, militia-linked fax on the morning of the tragedy; why he sent Attorney General Janet Reno an earlier letter demanding the halt of a raid he seemed certain the government was about to launch against the citizen militias, and why he wrote an article for *Guns & Ammo* magazine suggesting the Branch Davidians near Waco were slaughtered to further President Clinton's ban on assault-style weapons.

As Stockman's reputation has grown, so have the number of revelations: Among other things, details about the homeless period of his youth and the prayer sessions that already have divided his Capitol Hill office.

To his critics, Stockman is a bought-and-paid-for politician so eager to succeed that he



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Rep. Steve Stockman (R-Tex.), who defeated veteran Rep. Jack Brooks (D-Tex.), is called a "tool of the gun lobby" by critics who also have questioned his ties to citizen militias.

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and Lightning Rods

was willing to seize an expedient issue and ride it, unconcerned with the turmoil he might stir up in the process.

"I think he's a tool of the gun lobby," said Oliver "Buck" Revell of Dallas, the FBI's former No. 3 official. ". . . It's his conduct that's the issue with me. He starts off with a statement of fact, essentially accusing FBI agents of killing people in Waco. He obviously doesn't know anything about what he's talking about. Then he alleges that military forces were trying to carry out raids similar to Waco against the militias. He circulates that around among all these fringe groups, giving legitimacy to their paranoia, reinforcing their beliefs. It's the height of irresponsibility."

But to his supporters, who spring from the churches and gun shops along Texas's Gulf Coast, the turmoil Stockman has induced is unwarranted. They see a man dedicated to his beliefs in a way that transcends Washington opinion.

"He's not a weirdo," said Kent Adams of Beaumont, chairman of the Jefferson County Republican Party. "He's not a skinhead. He's a normal American person, Mr. Smith goes to Washington, and he's learning the ropes one day at a time. He's made mistakes, but his heart is in the right place."

Stockman himself manages to remain surprised at the attention he has suddenly attracted. "I knew I would get beat up for being conservative, but I didn't expect the maliciousness," he said in an interview. "I really am hurt that I've been called a racist, an extremist. I am really hurt that people think I'm against the FBI or the BATF [Bureau of Alco-

hol, Tobacco and Firearms]. I am always critical of the administration; I would never criticize the grunts on the ground."

Stockman denies any connection to the citizen militias, aside from sharing a belief in

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the inviolability of the Second Amendment. But there also is no doubt that he owes much of his political success to his embrace of gun-related issues.

"We don't think we have him in our hip pockets," said Neil Watt of Austin, who heads a citizen militia called the Texas Light Infantry. "But we do feel like he'll listen to us."

Stockman's amazing victory last November

over 42-year House veteran Jack Brooks (D), a lion of a lawmaker who chewed up his cigars and his political opponents with equal gusto, happened in large part because of Brooks's backing of the Clinton crime bill with its ban of 19 assault weapons. Stockman vowed to do everything to get the ban repealed. In southeastern Texas, where there are more licensed gun dealers than in the state of New York, this was a case of the right issue at precisely the right time.

The 9th Congressional District, which Stockman wrested from Brooks on his third try, is a working-class, church-going region that stretches from the southeast suburbs of Houston to Galveston, Port Arthur and Beaumont. Democrats usually outnumber Republicans 4 to 1. But party affiliations did not seem to matter as much last November as opinions about guns, abortion and term limits. The fact that Brooks would have been hailed as the most senior member of Congress had he won a 22nd term became as much a liability as a point of pride.

So it was that Stockman, who had variously held jobs as an accountant, a computer salesman, and a house painter, finally made it to his dream job in Washington.

While there are not many guns in Stockman's past—"Steve would hardly know one end of a gun from the other," according to his uncle, Marc Stockman—there are some colorful stories. The self-described black sheep of his family grew up in suburban Royal Oak, Mich. His parents believed in conservative values, Stockman recalled, but for years as a

young man he did not much heed the message. The same kid who had manned the Nixon booth at the Michigan State Fair in 1972 was arrested several times for speeding and not having his car up to code. In 1977, during one of these arrests, police found three Valium tablets tucked inside his pants. Stockman was charged with "possession of a controlled substance, nonnarcotic"; the charges were later reduced, then dropped.

In 1980, Stockman headed to Texas, seeking a warmer climate and a warmer reception at the employment line. But nothing jelled. Too embarrassed to contact his Texas relatives, Stockman staked out a temporary spot among the fountains in the Water Gardens of downtown Fort Worth. He scrounged aluminum soft drink cans for change and slept fitfully under the hot night sky, wondering why other homeless people were so brutal to each other. He was often scared, and, according to his uncle, half-starved. His weight, now a robust 200 pounds, hovered around 120.

His turnaround began in a sorrowful way with the funeral of his grandmother in De Leon, Tex., when he confessed to his uncle that he had no place to stay and no prospects for a job.

"I realized he needed help," said Marc Stockman, 70, a retired farmer and long-distance trucker who lives in De Leon. "I took him over to Stephenville to one of these oil field pipe plants. He was thrilled when he got a job application. . . . It was a hot, dirty job, but he didn't complain."

After that, Stockman buckled down to the business of sorting out his life. He worked at a nuclear power station, and then in 1983 moved to the Houston area. There he met his future wife, Patti, and together they joined the 20,000-member First Baptist Church of Houston. Three years later, enrolled in accounting classes at the University of Houston-Clear Lake, he became a leader in a chapter of the Young Conservatives of Texas, and before long, Steve Stockman was running for Congress.

The presence of prayer has factored into Stockman's staff problems, as first revealed in Roll Call, the Capitol Hill publication. Stockman said it was informal office policy for his staff to pray together each morning before the daily staff meeting, a practice he admitted had drawn complaints from at least one employee. Five staff members, including that worker, have since departed, fueling the perception that Stockman's Washington office is in a state of chaos.

Guns and religion unite the remaining members: Jeff Fisher, Stockman's chief of staff, was formerly affiliated with a Texas chapter of the American Family Association, a traditional values group based in Tupelo, Miss. His legislative correspondent is Anamarie Pratt, the 22-year-old daughter of Larry Pratt, executive director of Gun Owners of America. The group contributed about \$7,000 toward Stockman's election, Larry Pratt said.

Even some of Stockman's harshest critics agree that he got a raw deal on the matter of

the fax. It was sent to him by Libby Molley, a former Republican leader in southeast Texas who now works for Wolverine, the Michigan production company headed by militia guru Mark Koernke. Because of confusion about the timing, it initially appeared that Stockman had been alerted to the bombing moments before it occurred; further muddying the waters were reports that a Stockman staffer had sent a copy to the National Rifle Association.

Lost in the resulting media circus, Stockman said, were the facts: that Molley's notes had also been sent to about 200 other people and that he was the only recipient who immediately turned it over to the FBI, where officials ultimately confirmed his story and discounted any link to the bombing. "I got beat up for doing the right thing," he complained.

Stockman's explanations for the letter he sent the attorney general and for the Guns & Ammo article he penned are not so tidy. The letter, dated March 22, spoke matter-of-factly about "an impending raid, by several federal agencies, against the 'citizen's militia' groups." Citing "a number of reliable sources," Stockman wrote that the raid was planned for March 25 or 26 at 4 a.m., and that "it is known" that "Joint Federal Task Force Six" was training at Fort Bliss near El Paso.

Stockman describes the letter as a request for information on the behalf of certain constituents; Justice Department officials denied that such a raid was ever planned.

Stockman apologized for the timing of the Guns & Ammo article, which appeared in the June issue, but also blamed the editors for poor judgment. In it, he said the Branch Davidians "were burned to death because they owned guns that the government did not wish them to have." A White House spokeswoman called his contentions absurd.

"When you look at the context of when it ran, sure it's bad," Stockman says now. "But if you look at it in terms of normal political rhetoric, it's not. Everybody from The Washington Post on through has criticized Waco."

Stockman said he has tried to put those controversies behind him, having learned a valuable lesson: "I'm not going to speak out as often. I was trying to be the antithesis of Brooks—he was so nonaccessible. Now I feel like my candidness has caused me political problems. I've been joking that it used to be I couldn't get my garage sale in the weekly, and now I can't get my name off the front page of the London Times."

CORRECTION

A pending appropriations bill would save \$3.4 million in fiscal 1996 by abolishing the Council of Economic Advisers. An incorrect time frame for the savings was contained in a story yesterday.