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AT A TIME WHEN WASHINGTON POLITICS ARE MORE POISONOUS AND PARTISAN THAN EVER, **MARTIN HEINRICH**, NEW MEXICO'S JUNIOR SENATOR, MANAGED TO PASS THE LARGEST PUBLIC LANDS BILL IN DECADES. AND HE'S ONLY JUST BEGUN.

by **KYLE DICKMAN** photographs by **GRAYSON SCHAFFER**



IN THE LIFE of a politician, few things are more humbling than defending yourself to a roomful of upset constituents. This is especially true when those peeved citizens are precocious 12-year-olds. That was the scenario Martin Heinrich, New Mexico's junior senator, faced this past April while speaking to a group of 30 sixth- to eighth-grade students at Santa Fe's School for Arts and Sciences. While evoking the importance of addressing climate change, Heinrich, who is often talked about in conservation circles as the second coming of Teddy Roosevelt, had bragged to the class that he'd recently helped secure a pledge from New Mexico's utility companies that they be fully renewable by 2050, making his state a national leader in curbing greenhouse gas emissions. The kids were having none of it.

"The United Nations says that we have 11 years left to limit carbon emissions and prevent irreversible damage from climate change," one boy responded. "How will zero emissions by 2050 help us?"

The senator, wearing jeans, cowboy

boots, and a suit jacket, sat rigid on a stool. Behind him was a pie chart of emission percentages—transportation, buildings, energy—that he'd drawn in an attempt to explain an earlier point. He hesitated slightly, then realized it was time to go off-script. "Well, a lot of bad things are going to happen no matter what we do," Heinrich said frankly. "But we still need to stay focused on the long-term decarbonization of our economy."

"What is causing the immigration crisis?" a fifth-grade girl asked.

Changing rainfall patterns have depleted the corn crop, Heinrich explained, and sent hungry refugees north. That's only going to get worse. A seventh-grade girl wanted to know if he'd vote for the Green New Deal? "Yes," he said, but as a starting point. It's a messaging device, he explained, not a plan with the bold solutions that we need.

Heinrich, 48, is a data-driven introvert in a profession full of applause junkies and power addicts. As a former engineer, he is calculated, pragmatic, and technical. Before becoming a U.S. senator in 2012, Heinrich served two terms in the House of

Representatives. Having won reelection to the Senate in 2018, he's now serving his second term in a body that's made repeated history for its inability to pass legislation. But in a moment where Americans seem to unanimously agree that we're falling off a cliff but can't agree on which one, he's picked pragmatism over tribalism. Heinrich is an enthusiastic hunter and gun owner but not a member of the National Rifle Association. He supports a carbon tax but drives an F-350 because heavy-duty electric trucks aren't yet available. He's a Democrat who defied his colleagues and voted to confirm two Republicans as secretaries of the interior. And though he is color-blind—literally—he somehow manages to regularly wear purple shirts, like he is today.

Heinrich's interrogation at the hands of the students took place during a down day in the senator's schedule. Congress was in recess, and he'd just come off a week of vacation, one of his first since a short break after his reelection in 2018, where he'd taken his two teenage sons backpacking in New Mexico's Gila Wilderness,

Many politicians like to claim they're built in the mold of Teddy Roosevelt, but few do as much for conservation as Martin Heinrich.



Senator Heinrich fishing the Valles Caldera, a place he helped preserve in 2014.



3.3 million acres of rugged mountains and rangeland in the southern portion of the state. After speaking to the classroom, Heinrich gave an interview to a local newspaper, then attended a memorial service for a former Pueblo governor who'd recently passed away. After that, he was squeezing in some fly-fishing in the Valles Caldera, a national preserve he'd helped protect in 2014. The fishing would double as an opportunity to meet with conservation nonprofits in the state.

Over his career, Heinrich has expanded six and added 13 new areas to New Mexico's wilderness, totaling 334,000 acres. He also helped the state designate two national monuments. He's done it largely by championing the idea of forming broad coalitions. But unlike many politicians who pay lip service to this idea, he does the hard work of taking face-to-face meetings to win over opposing senators.

"Martin is in many ways a throwback to an earlier era," says Jeff Flake, the retired Arizona Republican senator. "He knows that developing relationships and ensuring that everyone has a stake in the legislation is key to passage. If we had more Martin Heinrichs in the Senate, we'd not only have a kinder, gentler place, we'd have a body that functioned again."

✓ **"I GOT MY** first bull elk right over there, on Redondo's flanks." Heinrich shared this fact while pointing toward an 11,000-foot peak that rises above the

meadows of the Valles Caldera. He field dressed the elk, then packed it out on his own. It was shortly after noon, and Heinrich was gearing up to fish a small trout stream that runs through the preserve. En route to the river, he stopped in view of several hundred elk to ogle a coyote. He pressed his fingers into a footprint in the mud. "That's a big bull," he said.

Heinrich grew up on a small cattle farm in rural Missouri. His father was a lineman for utility companies and his mother worked in a blue jeans factory. In college, he studied mechanical engineering at Mizzou. "It's a long way from what I do now," he says. In 1995, Heinrich took a job as an engineer at what is now the Air Force Research Lab in Albuquerque, New Mexico's largest city. A couple of years later, he quit in search of something "more civic."

He chose AmeriCorps. At the time, the Fish and Wildlife Service was considering reintroducing the Mexican gray wolf into the Gila Wilderness. But to get approval, the agency needed to demonstrate that wolves had been trapped or shot out of the Southwest completely. They sent Heinrich and other volunteers into the mountains to find out. For nine months, he lived out of his truck. His job was simple. Keep moving. Stop every mile. Howl once to the north, east, south, and west. Then listen for a wolf to respond, an easy way of telling if one is present.

"We never heard one—just lots of owls

and coyotes," Heinrich says. It was this experience that galvanized his love for public lands and eventually spurred his public-service patriotism. After a stint as the executive director of Cottonwood Gulch, an outdoor school in New Mexico where he scooped rattlesnakes out of kids' cabins and cleaned toilets, he decided to get into politics.

In 2004, at 33 years old, he was elected to Albuquerque's city council. He was made the council's president soon after, flipped a longtime Republican-held seat in the House of Representatives in 2008, and took a close Senate race four years later. He won his second term with 54 percent of the vote in 2018.

It was this canny ability to seize opportunities that allowed him to help push through S-47, the public-lands bill that added 1.3 million acres to America's wilderness system last winter. At the time, the government had just returned from its longest shutdown in the nation's history, over President Trump's demand that Congress fund his border wall. But whereas most politicians saw this as a single-issue moment, Heinrich saw an opening. During the month D.C. sat shuttered, a bill to renew the Land and Water Conservation Fund—a program that uses royalties from offshore drilling to fund land-based conservation—languished. The fund, which pays for everything from buying a portion of Grand Teton National Park to purchasing soccer fields in Richmond, Virginia, is massively popular, and largely bipartisan. So to have it languish upset many politicians' constituents.

"People were super pissed," says Land Tawney, CEO of the public-lands-focused nonprofit Backcountry Hunters & Anglers. "Congressmen were receiving tons of calls from the general public. They wanted to know, why did you let the number one access tool in America sunset?"

Heinrich and a few others saw opportunity in the anger. He and the other members of the Energy and Natural Resources Committee recycled a legislative technique pioneered in the gridlocked Sixties. "Throw everybody a carrot. Make the constituencies broad and impossible to ignore, and don't give anybody reason to vote no," explains Kai Anderson, the former chief of staff for Nevada senator and former Democratic majority leader Harry Reid. "Everybody thought that was impossible in this Congress."

Heinrich's staff started sifting through a backlog of neglected bills that had been growing since 2014, the last time Congress passed any conservation measures. The trick was identifying those that one senator cared about and the rest were indifferent toward.

In the end, the behemoth omnibus bill Heinrich helped put together included more than 100 pieces of land-focused legislation from 34 different states. It was also a congressional unicorn: bipartisan because everyone got something. In November 2018, Heinrich started whipping votes. He met with senators on the floor, in backroom meetings, at offices, all to talk conservation.

"Martin was relentless," says Flake. "I always knew that when he was deep in conversation with a senator, he was reminding them what priorities both of

them had in the bill and why it had to pass."

He visited the House floor, an unusual privilege granted only to former House members, and whipped votes there. He even took the extraordinary measure of calling hunting and fishing organizations in Utah to ask them to lean hard on Sen. Mike Lee, the conservative who was public lands' most vocal opponent.

On Feb. 9, Mitch McConnell let S-47 go to the floor. After Lee, who had attempted to scuttle the bill several times, delivered a 30-minute speech, 92 of 100 senators passed the bill. It was the biggest conservation bill in a decade. It was also the largest conservation win for New Mexico since the 1980s. Two weeks later, the House voted for it 363–62, and Trump signed it into law in March. The night after the Senate vote, Heinrich went home and cracked a beer that he paired with an elk stew. He'd harvested the bull from the Valles Caldera.

✓ **"IT'S FRUSTRATING,"** Heinrich lamented. "I feel like I've presented my fly perfectly to a lot of good water, but nothing. Not even a strike."

It was evening and nighthawks were snatching moths from the blue dusk as Heinrich hiked back to his truck through knee-high meltwater. Hours earlier, a thunderstorm had rolled through the Valles. As lightning split the air, the senator had sprinted from the meadow to his truck with his graphite rod whipping behind him. "I don't want to die out here!" he yelled. As soon as the storm passed, Heinrich returned and spent the afternoon fishing the stream alone. After a few comments about how days like these fix his soul, Heinrich wanted to talk about

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Heinrich talks with Maine senator Angus King during a 2017 Senate Intelligence Committee hearing.



cooking—specifically cooking game meat.

"Every culture has its way of dealing with the bad cuts," he says. "In New Mexico, it's *carne adovada*." It's a heavily—painfully, for some—spiced red-chili dish. Heinrich likes to make an elk version for visiting dignitaries. If he'd had the time, it's what he would have made for David Bernhardt, Trump's pick to replace Ryan Zinke as secretary of the interior, when he came to Chaco Culture National Park at Heinrich's urging in May.

Weeks earlier, Heinrich had boiled many conservationists' blood by voting to confirm Bernhardt. The Western Values Project, a lands-focused nonprofit, spent six figures on an ad campaign that blasted Heinrich for voting to confirm a man they equated to an environmental criminal. Heinrich shrugged. His political reasoning rang from a bygone era.

"The Republicans had the votes to confirm him anyway, and a gesture of goodwill could have earned me his help when I needed it," he says. At the time, he needed it. Oil and gas drilling was set to begin on the Bureau of Land Management property surrounding Chaco, and Heinrich, representing the interests of the Navajo Nation and other tribes that surround the park, wanted the leases pulled to protect the treasures within. When he asked Bernhardt to do that in D.C., the secretary balked. So Heinrich let the land talk. He invited Bernhardt to New Mexico to walk together with Navajo and Pueblo leaders through Chaco's centerpiece, Pueblo Bonito's 1,100-year-old stone passages. Soon after visiting the area, Bernhardt announced that he'd delay oil and gas development.

It was another big win for Heinrich, but with the current administration, a short-lived one. Soon after, Trump appointed William Perry Pendley, a zealot of selling off public lands, to lead the BLM. In other words, Heinrich is going to be busy cooking a lot of elk carne adovada.

Back at his truck in the caldera, Heinrich shows off pictures of his son cradling the first buck he'd shot. Somebody sets up a grill and starts cooking antelope tenderloin for fajitas. I ask the senator if he can still call wolves, and he shrugs. In his many thousands of attempts, Heinrich never actually heard a reply. But he throws back his head anyway to give it another go.

"Aaaaooooo-o-o-o-o," he howls. For a few long moments, the senator waits for a response. And then it comes from the middle of the caldera. It's not wolves, but Heinrich has the coyotes yipping. 🐾