Capitol View

By Ed Howard

Bob Kerrey has an inordinate fear of boredom.

You could say he's just a guy who needs to keep busy.

But Kerrey, who at 68 might be the only hope for revitalizing the state's torpid Democratic Party, needs more than that.

It's a danger thing. A particular type of danger.

 Review the guy's 30-something years in public life.

He captured Nebraska's imagination at the age of 40 as a brash political newcomer — a good looking entrepreneur who came home from Vietnam with a Medal of Honor and without part of one leg.

He made a million bucks in the restaurant business and, with that accomplished, began looking around.

Kerrey was elected governor in 1983 on the strength of a personality that seemed to overwhelm and please the public. He talked about Nebraskans' "hopes and dreams." So the electorate threw out dull Republican Charlie Thone amid the Reagan recession.

Four years later he said he didn't have the "fire in the belly" for a second term. More telling, he said "I need to find a little danger."

He did the private enterprise thing until a U.S. Senate seat opened with the death of Democrat Ed Zorinsky.

Kerrey was remindful of legendary Democrat Jim Exon, who, after two terms as governor, made a career in the U.S. Senate. Both were legitimate Democrats, but of the conservative stripe. "Authoritarian" would be an appropriate description for either man. Hardnosed and plainspoken when it came to policy and politics.

As governor and in the senate Kerrey generally went his own way, seemingly unaware and unconcerned about consequences and critics.

He drove Democrats crazy as often as he bedeviled Republicans.

Now, Democrats are wondering if Kerrey still has his political touch for Nebraskans. Democrat Ben Nelson isn't seeking re-election, and if the party has any chance to hold onto his seat, Kerry will have to carry the banner.

A Kerrey bid would make the contest a contest.

And the GOP knows it.

“In lieu of an official candidate from the Democrats, we’re going to treat (Kerrey) like a candidate. His positions and previous statements are fair game,” Nebraska GOP Executive Director Jordan McGrain said recently.

After years of living in New York and heading a famous liberal arts college, there are questions about whether Kerrey will really want to do home-state politics again.

His decision will have much to do with whether he senses Nebraskans are still moved by his quirky approach to public office.

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