



tions (which, if anything, were slightly diminished after he became controversial). The problem in the House this year was not that Messer was too powerful but that almost everyone else was too docile. Instead of fighting back, they just grumbled. Messer didn't have to run over anyone, he dominated by default. What the House could use is more people with his ability and appreciation of power. He needs the competition.

### STEVE WOLENS

*Democrat, Dallas*

**T**alented, independent, and fearless—a combination as hard to find this session as a ground swell to declare quiche the state dish. Craves a good fight for its own sake; the kind of legislator who would rather hurdle a high fence than walk through an open gate. More often than not, landed on his

House to follow the team blindly when faced with a soporific subject. In the best debate of the session, a duel in the Appropriations Committee with Jim Turner of Crockett, destroyed a team scheme to let members vote for a teacher pay raise without actually setting aside any money. Even the Speaker was not immune: Wolens induced committee colleagues to submerge their sense of self-preservation and strike \$14 million for a new osteopathic library in Fort Worth that was coveted by Lewis.

At his best in debate; not even Messer is his peer. In their one confrontation, left his adversary no room to maneuver, offering to withdraw his amendment if Messer could find a single precedent “in Texas law, in federal law, in the law of any state or country” for the provision Wolens found objectionable. Messer couldn't. Won his appropriations duel



**Wolens: an unbeatable debater whose mind stores facts like a camel stores water.**

feet rather than his derriere.

A carnivore who tore into the meat of the House rather than its plenteous vegetables. Invariably, when Wolens got up to speak both the subject and the opposition were weighty.

Revels in taking on complicated issues; his mind stores facts like a camel stores water—they're there when he needs them. Within one week, handled controversial bills on three of the most difficult issues of the session—securities, antitrust, and credit insurance.

Mounted the session's only successful challenge to House titan Bill Messer, amputating a gangrenous section of an otherwise worthy Messer bill—over the loud objections of the victim. Took on a close ally of the Speaker's in a battle over securities regulation, something no one except the two of them understood, and came within seven votes of winning—an amazing achievement, considering the herdlike proclivity of the

over teacher salaries with a crisp attack on the team plan—“I have three objections. One is procedural, one is technical, one is substantive”—that even the most obtuse member could follow.

He was the House's consummate lawyer: his arguments were sharp and even brilliant, his analysis keen, his research first-rate. But as with any good lawyer, you sometimes felt that Wolens would have argued just as brilliantly for the other side had the mood so struck him. He simultaneously led fights *against* regulation of securities and *for* regulation of air conditioning contractors.

For all Wolens' unquestioned skills, the nagging question that won't go away is this: to what end? To reach the very top rank, a legislator must have a consistency of philosophy and purpose to give meaning to all those skills. Otherwise he is a mere air plant, nice to look at but never rooted. In Wolens' case, the roots are still lacking.

# Texas Monthly

OCTOBER 1991

Best  
And Worst  
Legislators

## The Best Legislators

STEVE WOLENS

### LISTENING TO REASON

DEMOCRAT, DALLAS, 41 – A one-man loyal opposition – to whatever he thinks needs opposing. In the speak-no-evil House, where confrontation is out of style and floor debate almost a lost art, Wolens serves the essential function of reminding his peers that there are other roads to success than going along to get along. But Wolens is no gadfly; more often than not he wins.

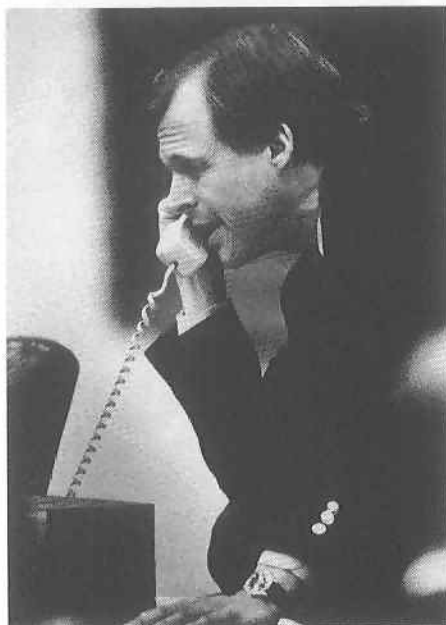
Who else but Wolens would have fought a bill backed by Ann Richards, Ross Perot, Tom Luce, and Speaker Gib Lewis? They were pushing a proposal to lure aircraft builder McDonnell Douglas to Texas with bonds that could have left the state holding a \$500 million tab if the financially troubled company later went belly-up. As chairman of the Business and Commerce Committee, Wolens boned up on the company's financial reports, consulted bond lawyers, went public with tales of high pressure tactics, and insisted on bonds that don't obligate the state.

Not the good ol' boy type that prospers in the House, Wolens thrives nonetheless because his motives are good, and so are his arguments. His opposition is pure – based solely on reason, never on partisanship, personality, horse trading, or self-interest. In debate he's fun to listen to; during a battle over regulating the legal profession, he answered a jocular question about the bar with "I take the Fifth." (Wolens forced the arrogant State Bar to follow state purchasing and disclosure requirements.) During one debate, a colleague claimed that an amendment Wolens supported would cause a rash of lawsuits; Wolens went to the microphone and dared him to come back and explain why. The silence was deafening.

Wolens has learned how to offset his fierce intellectual rigor by poking fun at himself. Sponsoring a simple bill before a

House committee, he asked if there were any questions and, when there were none, said, "Please ask me some questions." He has also learned how to operate like an insider; he persuaded the sponsors of a bill combining environmental agencies to include his proposal strengthening criminal penalties for environmental misdeeds.

He is such a good i-dotter and t-crosser



*Wolens: Calling on the House to beat bad bills.*

that the House leadership put him on the team that wrote and defended the House ethics bill. The position, alas, proved his undoing. Wolens' greatest flaw is an inability to hide his contempt for the contemptible – in this case, senators posturing that their weak ethics bill was far stronger than the House's weak ethics bill. Wolens' haughty lectures to Senate negotiators ("This is important stuff") and concern for due process even at the expense of a strong ethics commission earned him a spot on the *Dallas Morning News* regular-session list of "bottom of the class" legislators. Preposterous! What the House needs is more independent members like Steve Wolens.

# Texas Monthly

JULY 1993

## STEVE WOLENS

### GOING NUCLEAR

DEMOCRAT, DALLAS, 43. A loose cannon who shoots straight and true at the mark of good public policy. Fiercely independent, Wolens will inject himself into any issue and take on any adversary.



Wolens had a leg up on other members as the best floor debater in the House

Mesmerizing in debate, indefatigable in preparation, incisive in analysis, he is the House's most dreaded foe and most welcome ally. When he agreed to sponsor an

oft-defeated bill that made it easier to suspend the license of a drunk driver, a lobbyist for the bill said, "I feel like a Third World country that's just gone nuclear." *Kaboom!* Wolens passed the bill.

After backing David Cain's unsuccessful bid for speaker, Wolens found himself on the outside when major committee chair-

agenda gave him leverage over the entire membership. Score: Wolens 2, Stiles 0.

The son of a clothing merchant who is married to the daughter of the Saks Fifth Avenue chairman, Wolens likes to wander around the House floor examining his colleagues' clothing whenever he is not debating or reading files. In his seventh term, he finally became one of the gang, not because he changed but because the House did: In a session when entertainment came from debate, not partying or golf, no one served up more goodies than Wolens. When opponents of his ethics proposal to make county commissioners file financial disclosure statements argued that there are no problems going on now, Wolens fired back, "Of course there aren't any problems going on now. How would you know? How do you know if your commissioner is running up to New York with the bond lawyer for Salomon Brothers?" No member benefited more from Pete Laney's reforms and work ethic.

manships were handed out. Rather than accept the lesser posts that Pete Laney offered, he became a roving committee of one on any issue that intrigued him – new House rules, telephone deregulation, expansion of DFW airport, insurance regulation, ethics, obligations of fast-food chains toward their franchise holders. He researched the telephone issue until, in the words of one anti-deregulation lobbyist, "he knew more about the companies than their own chairmen."

When Wolens came down against deregulation, it was dead; his intellectual purity – he cares about the principle, not the politics – gives him near-absolute credibility on complex issues. On consecutive days in late April he went head-to-head in floor debate with Calendars Committee chairman Mark Stiles, whose control of daily House

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T H E ★ B E S T

## Steve Wolens

DEMOCRAT, DALLAS, 47. Two veteran warriors are facing off, and the House is enjoying it immensely. Kim Brimer of Arlington, a former University of Houston football player and one of Speaker Laney's chief lieutenants, is trying to pass his sports arena bill, which will let local governments use tax dollars to build stadiums for professional sports teams. Steve Wolens of Dallas, the chairman of the powerful State Affairs Committee, is fighting him every step of



*Wolens: A former college debater, he ranks as the most feared opponent in the House.*

the way. Wolens tries to delay the bill with a parliamentary device. It fails, Brimer is getting red in the face. Then Wolens calls for a vote to kill the bill outright. Brimer explodes: "I did not spend two years studying this issue to have some guy that's never played a contact sport in his life to come here to try to kill the bill!" He storms away. Wolens loses, but he is ready with his comeback. "I was a cheerleader in high school," he says with mock seriousness. "I was on the debate team in college, and being here on the House floor, this is my idea of a true contact sport."

When Wolens is involved, debate is a contact sport. He is the most feared opponent in the House. Colleagues and lobbyists will do almost anything to keep him from raining on their parade; even the pugnacious Brimer accepted some of Wolens' amendments to the stadium bill. Backers of home-equity lending caved in to his demands for consumer protections rather than run the risk of having him defeat their proposal. He is so intensely competitive that when he suffers a rare loss, he is likely to glare at the first person he encounters, whether friend, foe, or noncombatant.

Usually, though, he wins. His grasp of economic issues is unequalled in either chamber. (His favorite toy is a hand-held electronic stock ticker.) A courtroom lawyer, he exults in the give and take of negotiations, once, seeking information that he didn't want to share with everyone

in the room, he conversed with a public utility commissioner in fluent French. Never is he caught unprepared. Asked by an opponent of home-equity lending if the constitutional amendment wasn't a deviation from the normal way of doing things, Wolens ticked off ten precedents from the past three sessions.

Sometimes, though, Wolens is almost too good. In committee he can't wait for slower members to ask the right questions; he has to ask them himself, and in excruciating detail. ("He's like a kid who's always asking, 'Why? Why? Why?'" said one lobbyist.) He devotes himself to the search for the best possible solution and wants everyone to agree when he thinks he has found it - but when the issue is abortion or electric deregulation, emotions and interests are more powerful than reason. As a result, he was unable to close a deal on either issue. He has less tolerance for imperfection than any other member, maybe he would be even more effective if he had a little more.

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Best  
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## T H E ★ B E S T

### Steve Wolens

DEMOCRAT, DALLAS, 49. If Steve Wolens were the sort of person who keeps a motivational sign on his desk – which he is not, an encouragement to action being the last thing he needs – it would read, “The difficult we do at once. The impossible takes a little longer.” Indeed, the chairman of the House State Affairs Committee did things this session that were previously thought to be beyond the grasp of mortals. He made the Religious Right compromise on an abortion bill! He produced an electricity-deregulation bill that won the support of consumers, environmentalists, and utilities! He negotiated with the CEOs of two Fortune 500 companies over dinner and picked up the tab! “I keep thinking he can’t get any better,” says Plano Republican Brian McCall, a member of Wolens’ committee, “and then he grows exponentially.”

He has done it the right way too, making an eighteen-year journey from gadfly to role model on nothing but the strength of his intellect – never twisting an arm, never playing a dirty trick, never carrying the lobby’s water. (“This is not a bill that belongs to utilities. It belongs to us,” he told the House at the start of the electricity-deregulation debate. “This is our bill.”) He asks for nothing more than the opportunity to engage in gladiatorial combat, one against one, with the arena full and wits as the only weapon.

Such a contest occurred when Attorney General John Cornyn came to Wolens’ commit-

tee to explain the constitutional issues involved in the parental-notification bill, which the Religious Right wanted to pass unchanged. “I’ve been dying to talk to someone about this bill,” said Wolens, who had been frustrated by the pro-life side’s refusal to discuss his lawyerly concerns. When Cornyn, a former state

Supreme Court justice, cited a 1997 U.S. Supreme Court case from Montana to support his position, Wolens asked if he was familiar with a 1999 Montana state court case that had reached the opposite conclusion. The duel was on. By the time it ended, Wolens had gotten him to

agree that several propose changes would not

adversely affect the constitutionality of the bill. The Religious Right soon came to the bargaining table.

If there has been a complaint about Wolens in the past, it is that he is prone to let the perfect be the enemy of the good, with the consequence that important but imperfect bills sometimes die on his watch. Not this time. The bills on abortion, electricity deregulation, and telephone competition all passed in the closing days. He guided the once-controversial deregulation bill through the House with just four votes against, and the standing ovation from his colleagues that followed its passage – joined by applause that floated down from the packed gallery to the House floor – was confirmation that the perfect was possible after all.



*Wolens: A former college debater, he ranks as the most feared opponent in the House.*



**Arlene  
Wohlgemuth**

## Choose Ice

**REPUBLICAN, BURLESON, 55**

Dear Arlene, ★ Another session, another letter. Two years ago we wrote to warn you that we were about to ruin your standing with your conservative pals by naming you to the Best list. But you can't blame us this year. It's your own fault. Your Republican colleagues were having the time of their lives—gleefully anticipating closing that \$9.9 billion budget shortfall by tossing 25,000 people out of nursing homes and by zapping home health aides for 80,000 elderly and disabled folks who can't bathe or groom themselves—when you ended the party by announcing that you had arranged for \$2.75 billion more in human services spending. That was one of the turning points of the session, the kind of stand-up-and-be-counted action that will get you on the Best list every time. There's even a rumor that you asked Governor Perry to raise the cigarette [expletive deleted] for even more relief. ★ Not that anyone ought to doubt your conservative credentials: The giant human-services reorganization bill you passed will go a long way toward achieving your goal of changing the culture of government aid to the poor by making recipients demonstrate personal responsibility (such as getting a job). The feds say Texas has to make this change or lose federal funds. Your bill does make it harder to get some services, but it also tries to save money through efficiency. Making drug companies pay rebates to the state for having their medicines put on a preferred list is a great idea. ★ You've come so far from the days when your critics referred to you as Woolly Mammoth, playing on your name and what they considered to be your prehistoric politics. Now a group of female colleagues call you Ice because of the way you keep your cool in debate. Your wardrobe buttresses your image: only solid colors, always a jacket for a shield, everything underscoring the solidity of your arguments—especially that formidable helmet of hair. ★ Please permit us one suggestion: Since your bill providing for "Choose Life" license plates went down, you might reconsider whether a lawmaker of your stature should politicize something so trivial. It's bad enough to have to share Interstate 35 with UT and Aggie cars chasing each other down the road; do we have to fight *Roe v. Wade* at 75 miles per hour?

## The Player

**DEMOCRAT, DALLAS, 53**

Steve Wolens isn't much of a sports fan, so he isn't likely to appreciate a baseball metaphor, but he opened this session like a Hall of Fame-bound pitcher who has lost a little of his zest for the game. He still throws his fastball as hard as ever, but the new crop of umpires don't give him the corner, like the old ones did. He doesn't get along so well with the skipper either, although for many years they were teammates. Nor does he enjoy the road trip, especially now that his wife is in a league of her own. Plug in Republicans, Speaker Craddick, and Dallas mayor Laura Miller at the appropriate places in this scenario, and you have to wonder how long Wolens will stay on the mound. ★ Make no mistake about it, though: He's still got good stuff. At the end of the session, he passed the best ethics bill in the history of the Texas Legislature. It bars lawmakers from representing clients before state agencies; it requires the disclosure of referral fees and legislative continuances to delay trials; it sheds light on lobbyists who are related to lawmakers (does the name Christi Craddick ring a bell?); it calls for electronic filing of campaign and officeholder funds and, for the first time ever, disclosure by county and city officials; and it even implants a bicuspid or two in the previously toothless Texas Ethics Commission. ★ Along the way, however, Wolens had to deal with Craddick weakening his bill, the Senate trying to kill it, and fellow House members complaining publicly that he was negotiating

solo, as is his wont. Wolens fought back with a press conference in which he assailed everybody, the theory being that the only way you can pass a good ethics bill is to make it too visible for opponents to kill it. In the end, the bill passed 133-8, and Craddick graciously let Wolens' young son Max bring down the gavel.

One of the great legislators of the modern era logged another big win.

Now let's all hope he continues to be a player. And if he doesn't, he can always manage... Laura's campaigns.



**Steve  
Wolens**

## Best Additions to the Legislative Lexicon

**CHEMICAL COUNCIL** A group of Republican women lawmakers close to Tom Craddick, so named because all dye their hair. **WD-40'S** Middle-aged, white Democratic lawmakers—once the backbone of Texas politics but now an endangered species. **LOBBY CRACK** Altoids, which are consumed by lobbyists in great quantities during boring committee meetings to ward off involuntary slumber. **OWNERS' BOX** The section of the House gallery where tort-reform advocates, who had made large campaign contributions to Republicans, watched the bill pass.