Hollings Plans to End Half-Century in Politics

By DAVID M. HALBFINGER with CARL HULSE

COLUMBIA, S.C., Aug. 4 — Senator Ernest F. Hollings, the 81-year-old legend of South Carolina politics and a hawk on Washington deficits, announced today that he would not seek re-election next year, ending more than a half-century in politics and leaving Democrats with a gaping vacancy in a solidly Republican state.

"I am frustrated with Washington," Mr. Hollings said after a news conference here at a building named for him at the University of South Carolina. "It has gotten totally partisan. We are not serious about anything except the next election."

The decision by the former governor and presidential candidate was no surprise. He told state Democratic officials this year that they should try to line up a substitute and said he was bowing to the wishes of his wife, Peatsie, who made clear her desire to leave Washington.

Democrats said today that they expected Inez Tenenbaum, the state superintendent of education, to run, and others including Mayor Bob Coble of Columbia may, as well. Four Republicans are already in the race.

Known as Fritz, Mr. Hollings speaks in a rich Low Country drawl that he deftly employs for his frequent barbs. In a typically pungent valedictory, he scathingly attacked the Republican chief executives here and in Washington, saying they mismanaged government finances and watched jobs disappear overseas.

"We've got the weakest president and weakest governor in the history of my 50 years of public service," he said. "I say weak president, in that the poor boy campaigns all the time and pays no attention to what's going on in the Congress. Karl Rove tells him to do this or do that or whatever it is. But he's out campaigning."
"He's a nice fellow," Mr. Hollings said of President Bush. "You can't find a better fraternity brother."

The senator also saved a barb or two for apathetic voters in his home state, one that has grown increasingly inhospitable to Democrats.

"Riding up here," he said, "I saw this state could care less. I just saw Carolina license plates, tiger paw license plates. They just can't wait for the kickoffs here at the end of the month. They just don't worry about the 60,100 textile jobs alone we have lost since Nafta."

The senior Democrat on the Commerce Committee, Mr. Hollings has been behind the effort to reverse proposed rules on media consolidation while clamoring to improve security at ports against terrorists. He also held the distinction of being the longest-serving junior senator from a state, 36 years, because he was outranked for decades by Strom Thurmond. With Mr. Thurmond's retirement last year, Mr. Hollings became the senior senator from South Carolina. "Now I've got no room for promotion," he said today. "I might as well look for something else."

Mr. Hollings is the second Southern Democratic senator to retire this year, after Zell Miller of Georgia. Those openings and the possibility of others in a region where Mr. Bush ran well in 2000 and remains popular will complicate Democratic efforts to recapture the Senate.

"It brings into a little bit of focus the challenge Senate Democrats face this cycle," said Jennifer Duffy, who follows Senate races for The Cook Political Report. She called South Carolina "arguably the most Republican of the Southern states" and said it would have been difficult for Mr. Hollings to win, let alone for another Democrat seeking his seat.

Republicans agreed. "Today's announcement by Senator Hollings is a big loss for Democrats," said Senator George Allen of Virginia, chairman of the National Republican Senatorial Committee. "They are now left in the unenviable position of having to defend two open seats in the South, fertile territory for Senate Republicans."

There could be more. The terms of Senators John Edwards of North Carolina and Bob Graham of Florida end next year, and both seek the Democratic presidential nomination. Senator John B. Breaux of Louisiana has also said he has not decided whether to run for another term.

Republicans hold a 51-to-48 edge in the Senate, with one independent, James M. Jeffords of Vermont, who often sides with Democrats. Of the 34 seats up next year, Democrats are defending 19 and Republicans 15.

The four Republicans here running without waiting for Mr. Hollings's decision are former Attorney General Charlie Condon, Representative Jim DeMint of Greenville, Mayor Mark McBride of Myrtle Beach and Thomas Ravenel, a Charleston developer whose father is a state senator and former congressman.

Mr. DeMint is popular across the upstate region, while Mr. Condon's standing among Republicans has ebbed. He placed third in the primary for governor last year.

Democrats, meanwhile, point out that Ms. Tenenbaum won more votes than the winning candidates for governor in her last two elections. A former schoolteacher and lawyer, she is said to have a strong base of support among women and teachers.
South Carolina has not elected a woman to a top post like senator or governor, and it is unclear whether the state is ready for one, let alone a woman who once lobbied for abortion rights and has a Jewish surname, said Brad Gomez, a political scientist at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Ms. Tenenbaum is Methodist. Her husband is Jewish.

In the Senate, Mr. Hollings was celebrated by his colleagues today as a larger-than-life figure with a sharp wit and a grasp of the issues. "The Senate is losing one of its giants," said Tom Daschle of South Dakota, the Democratic leader.

Mr. Hollings was an author of the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings law that required spending cuts to lower the deficit. Over the years, his more caustic remarks have drawn much criticism. He once called Senator Howard Metzenbaum the "senator from B'nai B'rith." And he told a group of workers that they "should draw a mushroom cloud and put underneath it, 'Made in America by lazy and illiterate workers and tested in Japan.'"

Yet as governor here from 1959 to 1963, Mr. Hollings oversaw the orderly desegregation of schools, in stark contrast to other Southern Democratic governors.

A fellow Democrat said Mr. Hollings wanted to make a different exit from Mr. Thurmond's.

"He felt that probably the last years of Thurmond's service were not great years for the state or for Thurmond," said Dick Harpootlian, who left in May as state Democratic chairman. "I think Fritz wanted to go out the way he came in, tough as nails and sharp as a tack."