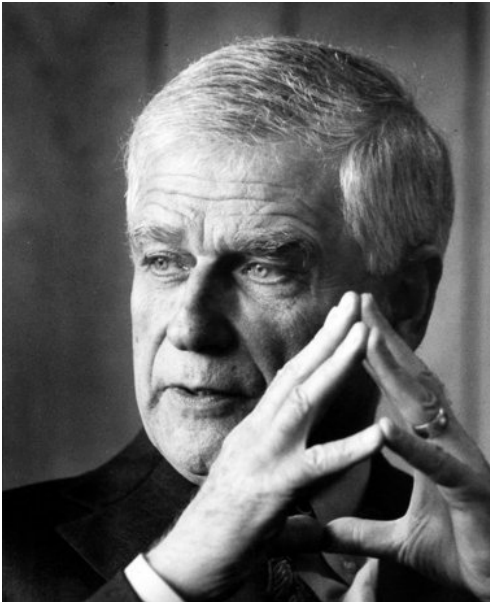


Sen. Mark O. Hatfield: An appreciation

By Thomas Aschenbrener / Sunday, August 14, 2011



For me, the first word that comes to mind is “statesman.” Senator Mark O. Hatfield, brought such a high standard of ethical leadership, dignity and respect to the public role with which he was entrusted. Unfortunately these qualities are too often missing in today's acrimonious political landscape.

I had the distinct privilege of working closely with Sen. Hatfield for nearly a decade, during which time he served as the founding chairman of the board of the Northwest Health Foundation. Mark insisted on that title over the currently acceptable title of chair. “I am a person, not a chair,” he told me firmly -
- but with a twinkle in his eye.

In the 1960s, the Senator was among just a few in Congress who took a strong stand against the Viet Nam war. His principled position was the natural expression of his steadfast commitment to the value of human life. For Hatfield, his opposition to that war, as well as to capital punishment and abortion, came from this principle.

But while he remained true to his core values, that did not mean he wouldn't work with those who had opposing views. In fact, this is one of the features that made his legacy great, and one largely missing in government today. For example, he was a strong advocate for, and close partner in, the work of Planned Parenthood. While he didn't agree with everything the organization stood for, he was always willing to work with them on their efforts to help prevent unwanted pregnancies.

He often complained to me about the decline of bipartisan civility in Washington, which he observed getting worse after he retired. He used to recall fondly how Congress members and their spouses were bussed to various political events. These rides were a chance to mix and mingle. “You just got on the bus and sat anywhere,” he said. “Democrat, Republican, Senator, Representative, or spouse -- we all got to know each other.”

In later years, though, “you only rode with your party – and your spouse never talked with spouses from the other party.”

That lost opportunity saddened him. “The Capitol became a different city,” he lamented, “and one that was not as much fun.”

For many years after leaving the Senate, he was as well-connected as he was respected by both sides of the aisle. Several times when I was in his office, long into his retirement, he took calls from a who's who of members of Congress. I was impressed that these calls came from people of both parties who sought his counsel on a wide range of issues.

Today, I wonder why there aren't more politicians like that.

As chairman of our board, Mark provided a steady and consistent hand in guiding the development of the Northwest Health Foundation. He took upon himself the responsibility of managing the board without intruding upon the daily affairs of the foundation. He was always willing to take my call, always supportive, responsive to my concerns, gentle in his suggestions -- and firm when necessary. He set the stage for the culture of openness, direct engagement and respect between our Foundation staff and board that continues to this day.

Mark Hatfield was a distinguished champion of the health sciences. He had a lifelong interest in health care, health research and health services for the vulnerable and underserved. In recognition of his countless contributions to the health of the people of Oregon, in 2005 we established the Mark O. Hatfield Research Fellowship to advance the intellectual resources of research-based institutions in our region. Currently the fellowship supports autism research, in honor of his interest in improving the lives of families coping with this disorder.

Northwest Health Foundation staff and board are among so many people in Oregon who owe a profound debt of gratitude to this generous man. Sometimes I wonder if every Oregon politician over a certain age either interned or worked for Sen. Hatfield at one time or another. The sheer number of lives he personally touched, by welcoming people new to their careers and encouraging their civic engagement – well, that's one of the most amazing aspects of the Hatfield legacy.

Those of us who had the opportunity to get close to Mark -- and there are a lot of us -- appreciated his remarkable gift for human connection. He was able to exclude all distractions and focus on the conversation he was having with you, and you alone, right here, right now. He engaged you with a disarming closeness and intensity. It was enormously affirming to feel that you were gaining the full benefit of his caring and attention.

Mark loved to tell stories, and he brought them alive with his impish sense of humor, and his storytelling was not the typical Western-culture method of communication. Rather than bluntly telling you something, he'd make his point indirectly -- and more powerfully -- by telling a story. His stories were apt because he was a great listener. He took the time to understand your problem and hear your ideas before proposing a better series of choices -- often through a story.

A former history professor, he was proud to have edited a biography of U.S. vice presidents. “Plenty of people write about the presidents,” he said, always recognizing where his specific contribution could be made.

Mark was an Oregonian through and through. He was absolutely passionate about our state and our people. He shared those gifts so generously with everyone who was lucky enough to enter his orbit. But even if you didn't know him personally, you have benefited, too. He devoted his life to improving life for all of us here in Oregon, and we continue to reap the rewards of his dedication.

Sen. Mark O. Hatfield was a statesman, author, mentor, leader, teacher and caring friend - mine, and yours.

We will deeply miss him.

Thomas Aschenbrener is president of Northwest Health Foundation. Sen. Hatfield served as the founding chairman of the foundation board from 1998 to 2005.