

OPINION



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GUEST COLUMN

Hatfield — a cautionary tale

The centennial celebration of Republican U.S. Sen. Mark O. Hatfield's birth provides a cautionary tale for Oregonians.

Hatfield, who also served Oregon as a state legislator, secretary of state and governor, was born July 12, 1922, in the mill town of Dallas. He died Aug. 7, 2011.



DICK HUGHES

He remains one of the most revered and influential politicians in modern Oregon history. Discussing Hatfield's 100th birthday, a commentator on the social media site Reddit said, "If you have a Mount Rushmore of Oregon Politicians, it

would be Tom McCall, Mark Hatfield, Wayne Morse, and then probably someone much earlier like Oswald West."

Hatfield's public service amounted to an argument against stereotypes. His Los Angeles Times obituary read:

"Mark O. Hatfield, whose (30) years as Oregon's U.S. senator illuminated his conviction that Republicans could be God-fearing conservatives and also passionate advocates for ending wars and racial discrimination, has died. He was 89.

"Hatfield, the bedrock of Oregon's once-robust tradition of moderate Republicanism, was a devout evangelical Christian who opposed prayer in the public schools and for years managed to negotiate common ground among the contentious environmentalists, loggers, anti-abortion activists, death penalty opponents, business owners, farmers and anti-war protesters who were his constituents in a state famous for its rollicking political diversity."

So why is his centennial celebration a cautionary tale?

When great men and women pass on, we subsequently tend to oversimplify their strengths, ignore the nuances of their decisions and sidestep their flaws. We interpret, or misinterpret, their words and deeds to back our own beliefs and desires.

Photographer Charles "Visko" Hatfield made headlines at the centennial celebration, hosted by the Oregon Historical Society, when he doubted that his father would recognize today's Portland, with its physical and social deteriora-



Associated Press

The late U.S. Sen. Mark Hatfield was fully pro-life — he was anti-abortion, anti-capital punishment and anti-war.

tion, and Oregon, with its political and social polarization that has supplanted rollicking diversity.

Conservatives pounced on Visko Hatfield's words as an indictment of the governing Democratic structure. True. At least in part. Yet in doing so, they illustrated the problem. Visko Hatfield was talking about politicians and government leaders across the board, not just Democrats.

"Stop fighting each other and start working with each other," he said.

Citing his father's example, he called for operating from the political middle ground: "That is where discourse can be shared, compromise can be celebrated. It is what the average Oregonian expects."

Visko Hatfield said later in a radio interview that his critique, which included that politicians have abdicated responsibility in favor of their own self-interests, extends to cities and towns across the nation. He emphasized that his father believed in attacking bad policies, not the politicians themselves.

Hatfield developed effective rapport with such Democratic stalwarts as Robert Byrd, of West Virginia, and the unabashedly liberal Ted Kennedy, of Massachusetts. Within the Oregon delegation, he was closer to Democratic U.S. Rep. Les AuCoin than fellow Republican U.S. Sen. Bob Packwood.

Hatfield's official Senate biography says he "legislated to the beat of his

own drum during his three decades of Senate service. Senator Hatfield often placed conscience before partisanship and remained steadfast in his views, earning him both admiration and criticism from his colleagues."

That included standing up to his party by casting what became the deciding vote against the Balanced Budget Amendment.

It is difficult today to sustain a political career as a maverick, as evidenced by former Democratic state Sen. Betsy Johnson. Acclaimed for insightful, independent thinking while in the Legislature, she was pilloried by former colleagues the moment she launched an outsider campaign for governor, running as an unaffiliated candidate.

The Republican Party was changing even as Hatfield was exiting public office. It would be difficult for moderate Hatfield to exist in today's party, just as middle-of-the-road former Gov. John Kitzhaber no longer fits the progressive Democratic Party.

Hatfield strived for a consistency of values that seems quaint in contemporary times. Fully pro-life, he was anti-abortion, anti-capital punishment, anti-war.

He lived his faith, but not blindly. In a 1979 essay on Christian higher education, he praised the education provided at George Fox College, where he later taught.

"Too many of our churches and col-

leges have been 'cookie-cutter' institutions. They have turned out a young person with a predictable, orthodox set of ideas, but have not created an environment in which ideas are developed and tested, so that they can be defended," he wrote in the college alumni magazine.

Whereas at George Fox, he said, "There is the willingness to subject every concept and idea, even the existence of God, to discussion and honest doubt. The 'hot house' Christian young person who has never done this will flounder in the real world, which is filled with skeptics and practicing pagans. We do no favors to spoon feed to our youth the beliefs and ideas which we hold."

Yet for all his consistencies, Hatfield was inconsistent. Undoubtedly with an eye on becoming vice president, in 1968 he supported presidential candidate Richard Nixon, who plunged America deeper into the Vietnam War.

To win his final reelection in 1990, against Democrat Harry Lonsdale, he ultimately resorted to negative campaigning.

Most damning, Hatfield's certitude about his own virtuousness eventually clouded his ethical judgment, an affliction that besets many a politician. He had earned the nickname of "St. Mark" in both admiration and derision. Yet he fell into several political, personal and financial issues that created ethical concerns.

Alas, the problem with ever putting anyone on a pedestal is they tend to fall off. Still, today's public and today's politicians could learn from Hatfield while keeping the context and totality of his life in mind. As of his 100th birthday, his papers at Willamette University and oral histories at the Oregon Historical Society are open for research.

Former Hatfield aides Jim Fitzhenry, Sean O'Hollaren, Doug Pahl and Kerry Tymchuk, who heads the historical society, reflected on the senator's values in a July 6 commentary in the Portland Tribune. They cited three essential lessons worth heeding:

- Respect our system of government.
- Love thy neighbor.
- Your values are more important than your reelection.

Dick Hughes has been covering the Oregon political scene since 1976.

GUEST COLUMN

Prayer ruling raises questions

On first glance, the U.S. Supreme Court's decision in the case of a former Bremerton High School assistant football coach seems like a reasonable constitutional balancing act.

Yet it is raising questions and concerns about the court and the role of religion in public life.

The high court ruled late last month that Joseph Kennedy legally could offer a "short, private, personal prayer" on the field after games. It found that the school district, by ordering him to stop, unconstitutionally deprived him of his right to practice his faith.

At issue was whether the Kennedy's postgame prayer at midfield violated this First Amendment clause: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof."

This phrase has been interpreted to mean that public employees cannot engage in religious activity while on duty. This is why the Supreme Court ruled in 1962, for example, that it is unconstitutional for a teacher to lead a class in prayer at a public school.

Conservative critics complained that the clause has been applied so strictly that it's mandating freedom from religion, interfering with people's right to practice their faith. However, knowing that innumerable wars and atrocities have taken place in the name of faith, the nation's founders clearly wanted a wall to separate church and state.

The Kennedy case hinged on whether he prayed as a private citizen or whether his act could be construed as government endorsement of religion.

The justices found that the district had punished Kennedy in 2015 for "engaging in a personal religious observance, based on a mistaken view that it has a duty to suppress religious observances even as it allows comparable secular speech."

Fair enough. But what if Kennedy had been a Muslim instead of a Christian and

had spread a blanket on the grass and prayed toward Mecca? Would he have had much public backing — like when 500 people rushed the field in support when Kennedy announced in 2015 that he would pray in defiance of a school district order to stop? Would he have had the support of a conservative organization that assisted his fight all the way to the Supreme Court?"

The justices — and the public — need to understand that the ruling applies to people of all faiths.

And there's new fodder for debate here: When does a prominent public employee shed his or her official role? What else can be construed as "private" prayer if its OK for a coach to pray in the hubbub of a postgame football field?

More troubling, however, is an issue highlighted by Seattle Times columnist Danny Westneat. Kennedy's lawyers described Kennedy as "a lone and silent sentinel, joined only by his convictions" during his postgame prayer, according to Westneat.

Trouble is, Kennedy himself has said he prayed with students to help them. He took his inspiration from an evangelical Christian movie called "Facing the Giants," in which a losing team wins a state championship after finding God.

Kennedy "has held his postgame ritual at midfield after each game for a motivational talk and prayer ever since," a Times story recounted.

An appellate court judge — a President George W. Bush appointee — called out the whole case last year as built on a "deceitful narrative."

"The facts in the record utterly belie (Kennedy's) contention that the prayer was personal and private," according to Judge Milan Smith.

However, the Supreme Court bought the distorted narrative, prompting Westneat to write of the high court's "originalist" bent: "If they're going to parse 250-year-old histories, it's worrisome how much trouble they had getting a seven-year-old story straight."



Win McNamee/Getty Images

Some public high school coaches are cheering a recent U.S. Supreme Court ruling in favor of Joseph Kennedy, a former Bremerton High School assistant football coach who had been fired for participating in a prayer with his team on the field.

Unfortunately, facts don't seem to matter in politics these days, but it's especially frightening when the nation's highest court ignores them. Facts are the heart of justice. The Kennedy ruling suggests the court majority will dodge or skew them in order to fit an ideological bias.

Critics of the Kennedy decision say it indicates that a conservative majority on the high court is pushing a conservative Christian agenda. They make the same claim about the Dobbs ruling reversing the 1973 Roe v. Wade decision, which said women have a right to obtain abortions.

This all raises the questions of what role religion should play in politics and society. Certainly, it's clear that governments cannot endorse any specific faith or take marching orders from religious leaders. But, regarding Dobbs, how do you disentangle the abortion debate from religious and spiritual values?

The public overwhelmingly believes strongly in the separation of church and state. Nearly two-thirds of Americans in a 2019 Pew Research Center survey say houses of worship should keep out of political matters, while 36% say they

should express their views on day-to-day social and political questions. Three-quarters of the public said churches should not endorse candidates for elective office.

Certainly, faith should inform our decisions, serving as moral, spiritual and ethical guides. Many deeply regarded religious leaders have led heroic political causes. Martin Luther King Jr. fought segregation. Catholic priests opposed the Vietnam War. German theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer was martyred for opposing the Nazis.

Our ethics and values are shaped by many sources, including religion, and they inevitably influence our political decisions. This nation's founders viewed religion as key to forming enlightened, virtuous citizens that are essential to democracy. None, however, wanted political leaders subject to sectarian rule any more than they wanted to interfere with religious faith.

There is tension here, and deciding where and how to draw the line continues to be a challenge.

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