

A Call from Mark

By R. GREGORY NOKES

The call from Mark Hatfield was entirely unexpected. I still remember the exact words of his request:

“I don’t know if someone can choose whom they want to write their obituary, but, if I can, I’d like you to write it.”

He was speaking, of course, about the obituary that he knew someone, someday, would write for *The Oregonian*. The call came in late 2002, just a few months before I was to retire. It was nearly nine years before Hatfield died, on August 7 at age 89, although he must have felt then as if it would happen much sooner.

I had known Hatfield for years, first through my late parents, Dick and Evelyn Nokes, and then later as a student at Willamette University where Hatfield did double duty as a professor and administrator, who also serving in the state Legislature.

I took my first course in political science, my major, from Hatfield in my freshman year. In my sophomore year, he was dean of men. He was then a state senator, but soon to be elected secretary of state on the next step of what can only be described as a meteoric rise in Oregon politics. I might also mention that he was the campus heart-throb among coeds: handsome, immaculately dressed, personable to a fault—he also seemed never to forget a name.

There were some awkward moments in my relationship with Hatfield during my sophomore year while he was dean of men. I had been caught, with another student, in possession of a half-case of empty beer bottles—a probable non-offense now, but a serious no-no at the time, so serious, in fact, that we were threatened with expulsion.

The other student and I were summoned into Hatfield’s office, fearing the worst. The other student, a good friend of mine then—and still today—could not escape expulsion, in part because of the story we concocted. This would have been my first offense, and I was on the bubble, so to speak.

By prearrangement, the other student took the rap for the beer bottles. He was expelled; I was placed on disciplinary probation. I had been less than truthful in my explanation to Hatfield, and he of course knew this, but let it go.

Hatfield went on to his distinguished career as governor and U.S. senator. As it happened, while Hatfield was still in the Senate, I moved to Washington, D.C., where I worked as a reporter for *The Associated Press*. I

can't now recall which one of us initiated the contact, but soon after I arrived, Hatfield invited me to lunch and a tour of the Capitol. From that time on, until I left Washington to join *The Oregonian* in 1986, we would occasionally have lunch together. I would also see Hatfield—and another Willamette alum, Senator Bob Packwood, at alumni functions held in Washington.

Nevertheless, even though we had this long history, I was still surprised he would single me out to write his obituary. I was deeply honored.

We arranged two interviews in his office in downtown Portland, the first to focus on his Oregon experience, the second on his national experience. The ground rules were that none of it would appear until after his death.

As it turned out, not a lot of it did appear in the excellent *Oregonian* obituary written by Jeff Mapes. Too much time had passed, and too many events had intervened, in the nine years since our interviews. But the overriding sentiments of his remarks reflected his deep love for his state and country, and his satisfaction at helping bring so much federal assistance to Oregon, and especially OHSU Hospital. He also spoke at length of his abhorrence of war—although he did, at the time, voice support for the war in Iraq.

One very awkward moment occurred in our second interview when I asked him about the incident in 1991 when it was revealed he failed to report receiving gifts from the president of the University of South Carolina, a failure that caused him to be rebuked by the Senate Ethics Committee. I knew he would be displeased that I would ask him about this, and I worded the question as tactfully as I could.

Nevertheless, I wasn't prepared for the outburst that followed. He became visibly angry, refused to answer the question, and abruptly terminated the interview, well before I had finished my questions. As I remember it, he wouldn't take my calls for a day or two, but then did agree to a third interview.

This last interview went very smoothly. Hatfield had cooled down. I explained that as a journalist, I couldn't ignore the unfortunate events as in his life, as well as his many successes and accomplishments. I assured him the issue of the gifts would not become a major component of the obituary. And it wasn't.

Maybe with only one other exception—that would be former Secretary of State George P. Shultz—I never in my long career as a journalist met a politician who I admired more than Mark Hatfield. He was also a friend, who paid me a great honor.

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