

The peaceable senator: Mark O. Hatfield, 1922-2011

by [Wesley Granberg-Michaelson](#) in the [September 20, 2011](#) issue



A bust of Mark O. Hatfield from the Oregon capitol. Attribution [Some rights reserved](#) by [GlenBledsoe](#).

In the midst of today's rancorous politics and the trivialization of religion in the public square, the death of Mark O. Hatfield on August 7 called to mind a different kind of political style and a different kind of Christian political witness.

When Hatfield entered the U.S. Senate as a Republican from Oregon in 1967, the Vietnam War hung over the nation like a dark cloud. He had already registered his opposition to the war by casting the lone vote against Lyndon Johnson's policies at the national governors' conference. He joined Democratic Senator George McGovern in 1970 to introduce legislation to cut off funds for the war. Following President Nixon's invasion of Cambodia that year, that legislation became the political focus of the antiwar movement.

Hatfield's evangelical Christian convictions and his opposition to the war made him an unusual and controversial figure. At one point, he was prohibited by the president of evangelical Wheaton College from speaking at the school's chapel service. He made an indelible impression on an emerging generation of young evangelicals who were searching for models of faithful political action. Hatfield gave a powerful witness not only in opposing

the Vietnam War but in addressing issues of social justice and the global division between rich and poor. When he read the first issue of the *Post-American*, the precursor to *Sojourners*, he immediately sought out the editor, Jim Wallis. In 1973 he supported the Chicago Declaration of Social Concern, a watershed statement by 40 evangelical leaders declaring their Christian commitment to work for social justice.

A few years ago, I was in Kenya for a gathering of the Global Christian Forum. When we gathered in small groups to share our journeys of faith, I spoke of my work with Senator Hatfield. The face of a Kenyan university professor and Christian leader suddenly lit up. "Mark Hatfield! I have read his books and followed his story. He's the one who inspired me in my Christian life and political work!" That story could be repeated thousands of times by students, pastors, activists, professors and politicians.

Hatfield was described by some at his memorial service as a pacifist—a rather amazing label for a man who was a U.S. senator for 30 years. It's a description he didn't publicly claim for himself, but he did find the case for nonviolence in following Jesus compelling. I recall how he probed those ideas with John Howard Yoder, author of *The Politics of Jesus*, during a lunch in the Senate Dining Room.

Warning constantly of the dangers of uncontrolled military spending, Hatfield led a group of senators in challenging new weapons systems proposed by the Pentagon in the 1970s. In 1982 he joined with Ted Kennedy in proposing a nuclear arms freeze. Incredibly, he never voted in favor of a military authorization bill, consistently protesting the escalating expenditures for national defense—a voice all but lost in today's political debate. His personal conversations with Billy Graham were a factor in persuading the famous evangelist to take a public stand against the nuclear arms race.

Defying predictable categories, Hatfield was also a strong supporter of legislation to prohibit abortion. I remember Hatfield discussing with Harold Hughes, the antiwar Democrat from Iowa, how Christian witness should mean opposing all forms of violence against life. It's ironic that perhaps the most prominent politician in recent decades to support the "consistent ethic of life" advocated by Catholic social teaching was himself a

Baptist.

Committed to principles and his core convictions, he also understood the tradeoffs necessary to get things done. When looking for votes to cut off funds for the Vietnam War, he turned to Henry "Scoop" Jackson, a prominent hawk and influential Democrat. At the time, Jackson was seeking federal funding for the supersonic transport aircraft, which he thought could revive the sagging fortunes of the Boeing Company, based in his home state of Washington. Environmentalists and others were strongly opposed to the SST, but Hatfield (and McGovern) privately offered to support the program if Jackson would endorse the antiwar legislation. Jackson wouldn't agree. The McGovern-Hatfield measure fell a few votes short.

What other senators and colleagues remember most about Hatfield was his compassion and constant willingness to seek bipartisan approaches that served the common good. Bill Clinton once said, "Mark Hatfield loves his enemies, and so he has no enemies." In contrast to the adversarial, partisan attack mode that has become ingrained in political behavior, Hatfield always wanted to extend a hand rather than shake a fist. Without similar examples today, our politics will continue to degenerate into pugnacious rituals that paralyze possibilities to serve the common good.

Hatfield's civility was nurtured by faithful participation in a weekly Senate prayer breakfast group. He believed that personal relationships should transcend partisan and political divides, and he saw those relationships as a key dimension of his own Christian discipleship. The circles of that fellowship proved to be a key source of support in Hatfield's own times of political and personal crisis.

Yet Hatfield was wary of attempts to use religion to give a patina of righteousness to political power. Speaking at the National Prayer Breakfast in 1973, with President Nixon on one side and Billy Graham on the other, he said, "If we as leaders appeal to the god of civil religion, our faith is in a small and exclusive deity, a loyal spiritual Adviser to power and prestige, a Defender of only the American nation, the object of a folk religion devoid of moral content." Speaking against the backdrop of Vietnam, Hatfield said that "we must turn in repentance from the sin that scarred our national soul." Few of his speeches received such widespread attention as this one did.

His prophetic words touched many people—and solidified his position on President Nixon's "enemies list."

When the religious right emerged, Hatfield called it an "embarrassment." His sharply contrasting approach can be glimpsed in this passage in *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*: "Radical allegiance to Jesus Christ transforms one's entire perspective on political reality. Priorities become totally changed; a whole new understanding of what is truly important bursts forth. There is an uncompromised identification with the needs of the poor and oppressed. One is placed in fundamental opposition to structures of injustice and forms of national idolatry. Further, there is a commitment to the power of love as the only means to the end."

Hatfield worked hard to live up to those ideals. His way of joining faith and politics remains a powerful example, one needed these days more than ever.

Granberg-Michaelson served on Mark Hatfield's staff from 1968 to 1976.