

Arizona's Statesman: Congressman John J. Rhodes

John J. Rhodes: Eulogy and Tributes

On August 14, 2003, Speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives Dennis Hastert came to Mesa to personally present the Congressional Distinguished Service Medal to John Rhodes in a private ceremony. Sadly, by this time, Rhodes's health had deteriorated sharply under the onslaught of a particularly virulent form of cancer. Less than two weeks later, on August 24, 2003, John J. Rhodes died peacefully at his home with Betty at his side. He was 86 years old.

The outpouring of tributes following John Rhodes's death was astonishing. From the President of the United States to childhood friends, people mourned the loss of John Rhodes not only as a statesman and leader, but also as a friend, colleague, and mentor. Here you will find press coverage of John Rhodes's passing and memorial service, including commentary on his career and achievements, as well as his eulogy.

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[JAY SMITH'S EULOGY](#)

[PRESS COVERAGE AND COMMENTARY](#)

Eulogy of John J. Rhodes
First United Methodist Church
Mesa, Arizona
August 28, 2003
by Jay Smith

Betty, the Rhodes family, Governors Napolitano, Hull, Symington and Goddard, Senators McCain and Kyl, Congressmen Kolbe, Hayworth, Shadegg, Franks and Renzi, distinguished guests, and friends of John Rhodes. John would be so touched and honored by your presence today. He was an extraordinary man who lived an extraordinary life. Today we celebrate it.

I want to thank Reverend Bussey for saying half of what I had intended to say.

John's life was remarkable, in part, because he set an exceptionally high standard of public service during thirty years as a Member of the United States Congress.

John Rhodes was a rare breed of politician.

George Will wrote: "his name will never be a household word. To his credit, he probably doesn't mind a bit."

For his first twenty years in Congress, John saw no need to have a press secretary. What was said about Franklin Roosevelt was also true of John: "Long before there were image-makers, he knew how to do it himself."

John handled media requests personally. Of course, this became impractical after he became House Republican Leader.

Most press secretaries will tell you that their job is to generate press for their employer. This was not necessarily how it worked in John's office. After weeks of badgering Sunday talk programs to have John on as a guest, an invitation came from Meet the Press. When John was told this "good news" (on a Friday afternoon when he was about to head for the golf course), he paused briefly and said: "I don't have anything I want to say right now. Tell them, thanks but no."

He never sought publicity for the sake of it—only when he had something important to say.

How many politicians are like that today?

As a Congressman he was honest, straightforward and true to his word. John said that one should be able to disagree without being disagreeable. John and Tip O'Neill disagreed on most issues. Yet they were good friends. "We would fight on the House Floor if we had to and then go play golf together," John said, adding, "I've got to believe that the country was better off because we didn't hate each other."

David Broder of the Washington Post—one of the most respected political reporters of our time—recently cited John Rhodes as the best example of "a large-minded spirit" lacking in today's Congress.

The late, great Arizona journalist John Kolbe said of him: "Every bill he wrote, issue he debated or task he undertook, he touched with a consummate sense of decency. John Rhodes, to use a word sadly

cheapened by overuse, has class.”

John loved people. People inspired him...challenged him...gave him energy...provided him occasions to laugh and enjoy life. People loved John Rhodes because they could tell instinctively he cared.

In earlier days John wore his hair in a short crew cut. This prompted occasional comparisons to entertainer George Gobel (some of us are old enough to remember George). To some of his friends John was known affectionately as “Curley.”

He was humble, gentle and kind. But he was no shrinking violet. He could be tough as nails when he had to be. A number of his House colleagues can recall being taken “to the woodshed” by the Minority Leader when they fell out of line. And he had this steely look when he was especially displeased or angry. It was a look that could make you cower if you were on the receiving end.

It was this unusual combination of qualities—of gentleness and strength—that made John so remarkable.

Although he was generally good-natured, on occasion (I know you’ll find this hard to believe), John could become irritable. The use of a split infinitive would, to use his phrase, “drive me up the wall.” There were countless occasions when he would thunder: “that’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard!”

Once, when asked to explain the secret to their long and successful marriage and whether the subject of divorce had ever been discussed, Betty Rhodes said: “Divorce was not an option. Murder was.”

John was in his best natural element on the House Floor, mixing with fellow Members, congenial and serious, conducting business in a manner that commanded respect. John loved the House—its history, traditions and rules—and was proud to serve in that institution. In turn, serving in the House had a profound impact on the kind of man he turned out to be. George Will’s classic observation: “One glance tells you: God had a congressman in mind when He made John Rhodes. And he is just what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they designed the House of Representatives, the body intended to be closest to the common man.”

Few have had greater impact on their state than John Rhodes. Along with Barry Goldwater and Howard Pyle, he started the Republican Party of Arizona. In 1952, he was the first Republican elected to the U.S. House of Representatives in Arizona history. To do so he had to defeat a powerful incumbent who was chairman of the House Interior Committee. It was no minor feat. Of course, John would say that having Dwight D. Eisenhower at the top of the ticket didn’t hurt.

History has recorded the career accomplishments of John Rhodes—from obtaining federal support for Scottsdale’s Indian Bend Wash to the Central Arizona Project.

John was a visionary. He made the CAP his top legislative priority because he believed that having sufficient water was the key to Arizona’s future growth and prosperity. When Congress authorized the Central Arizona Project in 1968, it was a crowning achievement in John Rhodes’ illustrious public service career.

Barry Goldwater said, “If John Rhodes had not been here, there would be no Central Arizona Project.”

On the national stage, John helped preserve the Constitution of the United States at a time when it was imperiled.

A patriot is defined as “a person who loves, supports and defends his country and its interests with devotion.”

John Rhodes was an American patriot.

He became House Republican Leader at the start of the historic effort to impeach President Nixon for his alleged role in the Watergate scandal.

It is important to know that the leading Democrats of that era all agreed that impeachment required bipartisan support. If the American people perceived the debate as politics as usual—Democrats versus Republicans—impeachment would fail.

John did not want the President of his party forced from office. He defended President Nixon whenever he felt he could. But his support was not blind. For he also believed that the facts needed to come out and the process of discovering the facts had to be allowed to work.

John agonized over impeachment. He once confided, “I feel so bad when I criticize the President,” adding, “But I’ve got to keep an anchor in the Constitution if I can.”

In the end, John announced he would vote to impeach. He based his decision on the principle of “equal justice under the law”—that, in America, “no person, be he rich or poor, black or white, ordinary citizen or President, is above the law.”

The next day (“the worst day of my life,” he called it), accompanied by Barry Goldwater and Senate Republican Leader Hugh Scott, John was asked to come to the White House to give President Nixon the grim news that it was over. This was an act of supreme patriotism. He put his country ahead of his party. The President resigned two days later.

As a husband, father, grandfather and friend, John Rhodes was loyal, generous and kind.

John once described his idea of “the perfect Sunday.” Church with family, a few chores at home, golf with friends, and making dinner.

“The things you remember are the things you do with people you love,” he said.

Incidentally, I never knew anyone who loved golf more than John Rhodes and who, by his own admission, was so bad at it. “I feel that I have no place to go but up,” he once joked. What he really loved was the camaraderie of being with friends.

“I have a wonderful family,” John wrote in a book proposal. He described his four children: Jay, Tom, Elizabeth (“Buffy” as we know her) and Scott. Your Dad was so proud that each one of you grew up to be responsible, productive citizens and good people.

John wrote: “The most interesting things are: first, none of them seem to have suffered from having a part-time father; second, all settled in Arizona though they were mainly raised in Washington and went to college and law schools in various places. The ‘why’ of all this is important.”

The “why” was a reference to Betty Harvey Rhodes. John was devoted to Betty. Their partnership was based on shared values and roots that began in the small town of Council Grove, Kansas. A journey of over sixty years that took them from Kansas to Mesa to Washington, back to Mesa, and countless

interesting places throughout the world.

John and Betty proved there's life after Congress. They traveled extensively. They both served on corporate Boards. John practiced law, wrote a book (his second) and numerous articles and essays. Last night, in this church, after paying respects to the Rhodes family, the Editor of the Tribune commented, "I feel like I've lost a columnist." He held strong views on a range of issues—energy independence for the nation and the need to issue general obligation bonds for the state (to cite just two examples)—and he wasn't shy about expressing them.

In 1988, he was drafted to run for Governor in a special election because Arizona was in a crisis. He would have been Governor had not the state Supreme Court cancelled the election.

His vast knowledge sprang from endless curiosity. Even the loss of an arm did not deter John a few weeks ago from spending a day touring a fuel cell facility in Mesa. Disease ravaged his body. But it did not diminish the fabulous mind and indomitable spirit of John Rhodes.

Exactly two weeks ago, John was presented the first Congressional Distinguished Service Award. Frail though he was, he insisted on greeting House Speaker Dennis Hastert at a private reception. In a show of courage and Herculean strength indicative of the man, John got up from his wheelchair and spoke for several minutes. He was gracious, wise and witty. He ended with a typical John Rhodes flourish: "Mr. Speaker, you have the only job I ever really wanted." His powerful mind had willed his body to pull it off, when it counted, one last time.

He was a proud grandfather of twelve and great-grandfather of three. The grandchildren know that "Dee" was genuinely interested in their lives and spent much time helping them recognize their full potential. He was always there for them, especially if one were to hit a rough patch in life. What a glorious legacy and beautiful memories Dee leaves you.

John believed that he and Betty were blessed by the Lord. He gave Betty enormous credit for the richness of their lives, such as forcing him to study hard to pass the Arizona bar exam (Harvard Law School, he noted, was not big on mining law). He credited Betty for doing a marvelous job of parenting, which included loading the children into a station wagon and driving them all the way from Washington to Arizona every summer so they would know where home really was.

Last September, John visited Washington for the final time. He was dinner speaker at Burning Tree Club, which held a special place in his heart. John told his "Burning Tree buddies:"

"The good Lord took care of me in many ways but one of them was to give me Betty." He reminisced about how, early in his political career, he would know whether he had made an effective speech by Betty's reaction in the car ride home. As an English teacher, he explained, she could be counted on to bring to his attention any errors in grammar he may have committed. "If any of you ever get engaged to an English teacher, think several times," he said.

"I owe a lot to that lady and still do," John said. "Thank heaven I still have her."

He recalled advice Betty sometimes gave prior to a speech. And here he attempted to imitate her. "John, please remember, there aren't very many souls saved after twenty minutes."

Thinking about how John might like us to conclude this service brought to mind an occasion in 1975 when he led an American delegation to China—before our countries had formal relations. At dinner with

our Chinese hosts on the final evening of the trip, John asked the Americans to stand. He explained our tradition of singing the Scottish ballad “Auld Lang Syne” on New Year’s Eve. The song, he said, is about friendship, fellowship and hope. John led us in song, as he did years later at a gala dinner in Washington to celebrate his retirement from Congress. We think John would like it very much if we all rose and sang “Auld Lang Syne” in his memory.

Godspeed, John Rhodes. You will live in our hearts forever.

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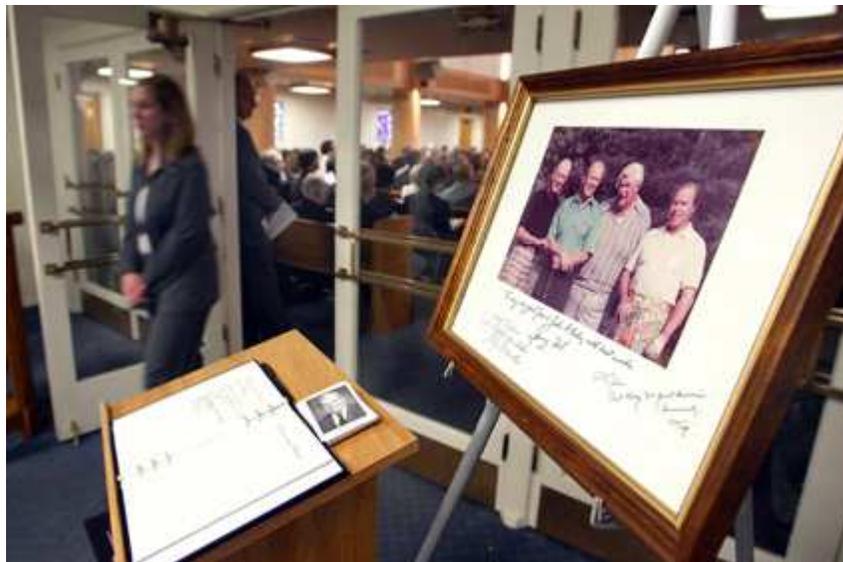


Tributes to John J. Rhodes

Please Select from the Following Collections of Tributes and Commentary to the late John Rhodes:

Press Coverage

Commentary



As I approve of a youth that has something of the old man in him, so I am no less pleased with an old man that has something of youth. He that follows this rule may be old in body, but can never be so in mind.

Marcus Tullius Cicero, de Senectute (An Essay on Old Age)

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Rhodes dead at 86

Cancer claims longtime congressman Rhodes

By Mark Flatten, Tribune

John J. Rhodes Jr., the last member of an elite class of Arizona politicians who shaped the state and nation in Congress, died Sunday night at his home with his wife at his side. He was 86.

The Mesa resident who represented the East Valley in Congress for 30 years had battled cancer since October. He died about 9:30 p.m., said Jay Smith, a Virginia political consultant who once served as Rhodes' press secretary.

In his career, Rhodes went from being a small-town lawyer who bucked the odds to become the first Arizona Republican elected to Congress to minority leader of the U.S. House of Representatives. In August 1974, Rhodes joined Sen. Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz., and another Republican senator to confront President Richard Nixon, whose administration was collapsing in the Watergate scandal. The three convinced Nixon that he could not survive an impeachment vote. He resigned the presidency two days later.

Elected in 1952, Rhodes served in Congress until retiring in 1982. When his successor, John McCain, opted to run for the Senate in 1986, Rhodes' son, Jay, ran for the seat and ultimately won three terms. During his years in Congress, Rhodes worked closely with Goldwater, R-Ariz., and Rep. Morris Udall, D-Ariz., to give Arizona clout not normally afforded a state with a small population.

Among his greatest achievements was helping to secure funding for the Central Arizona Project, which brings water from the Colorado River to central Arizona. "His legacy is he probably did more for the state than anybody," Smith said. "He was in a critically important place during the Watergate impeachment episode, and proved he was a true American patriot. He was the House Republican leader and expected to defend the Republican president.

But he held a higher regard for the Constitution and wanted the impeachment to go forward." Rhodes would weep when he read praise about his work in Congress, Smith said. "His life is a remarkable life," Smith said. "This man had such an impact. His legacy for Arizona, for America, is so strong, it will never go away. He was the real thing."

Though Rhodes attained one of the most powerful positions in Congress, spending nine years as minority leader, his ascent came during one of the nation's most tumultuous times. The Watergate scandal that led to Nixon's downfall also decimated the Republican Party, which lost 48 House seats in 1974. Rhodes ascended to the leadership post after Gerald Ford resigned his House seat to become vice president, replacing Spiro Agnew, who stepped down after pleading no contest to tax evasion charges.

Rhodes also was chairman of the 1976 and 1980 Republican national conventions. After his retirement, Rhodes made a brief return to the political arena. In 1987, when it seemed a petition drive would force a recall election against Gov. Evan Mecham, Rhodes became a candidate, hoping to unite the Republican Party and bring calm to a state in turmoil. The election was called off after Mecham was ousted through impeachment. In October, Rhodes began having pain in his right arm and shoulder, which doctors determined to be linked to cancer. After three unsuccessful operations, Rhodes' right arm was amputated in June. Yet he kept in good spirits, telling the Tribune last month that he was doing well and was

optimistic.

“I had to make a decision, either I died of cancer, a bad death, or I was able to survive it and maybe get three or four more years,” Rhodes told the Tribune in July. “At my age, that’s worth having.” Rhodes said then that he was staying active, and at that time there was no sign the cancer had returned.

“I’m not going to play golf or anything like that, but I’m able to do almost anything that you can do,” Rhodes said. Rhodes was born on Sept. 18, 1916, in Council Grove, Kan. After graduating from Kansas State University in 1938 and Harvard Law School in 1941, he married his wife, Elizabeth, and the couple moved to Arizona in 1942.

Rhodes also served in the U.S Army Air Corps during World War II, and as staff judge advocate of the Arizona National Guard from 1947 until 1952, according to his congressional biography. One of Rhodes’ favorite stories was how he was drafted into politics. Rhodes was a young lawyer interested in Republican Party politics in 1950 when he got a call from Goldwater, who at the time was managing the gubernatorial campaign of Howard Pyle and trying to build a Republican ticket for other state offices.

“Mr. Rhodes, I’m drafting you to run for attorney general,” Goldwater told Rhodes. “Well, Mr. Goldwater,” Rhodes replied, “there’s something you should know. I don’t want to be attorney general.” “Mr. Rhodes,” Goldwater shot back, “there’s something you should know if you don’t, Arizona is such a Democrat state that Republican people don’t get elected very often. So I think I can promise you won’t be attorney general.” Goldwater was right that time.

Though Pyle did win, other Republicans did not fare well in the 1950 election. But two years later, with Dwight Eisenhower running on the Republican ticket for president, Rhodes was elected to one of the state’s two congressional seats.

And Goldwater won his first term in the U.S. Senate. During the 1952 campaign, Democrats outnumbered Republicans in Arizona 8 to 1. Rhodes is survived by his wife, four children and 18 grandchildren, Smith said.

East Valley Tribune, August 25, 2003. Reprinted with the kind permission of the publisher.

Rhodes wasn't a flashy statesman

By Gary Nelson, Tribune

Any show-biz has-beens get bigger national press when they die than John Rhodes got on Monday.

The Associated Press packaged his obituary with that of Amina Rizk, an Egyptian actress, and The Washington Post put a decent obit on the wire.

Beyond that, nothing. Rhodes got less national ink than that pedophile ex-priest who was killed over the weekend in a Massachusetts prison.

In a way, Rhodes designed things that way. The U.S. House of Representatives seldom incubates flashy personae, and Rhodes spent 30 years there. And for many Arizonans, Rhodes was a historic footnote, if even that. Why, he was 20-plus years removed from his service in Congress, which ended long before many of us even got here.

But 29 summers ago, Rhodes stood at the vortex of one of the most intense political dramas in U.S. history. Nationally, that's what he's being remembered for, though many will say his work on the Central Arizona Project was his greatest gift to Arizona.

That political drama, of course, was Watergate. President Richard Nixon was up to his armpits in evidence he had tried to impede the investigation of a break-in at Democratic National Headquarters in the summer of 1972, and by August 1974 the scandal had become a genuine crisis.

For the longest time, Rhodes had held his fire. He was a Republican, as was Nixon. But rather than rushing to Nixon's immediate defense, Rhodes watched and waited as the evidence accumulated. As early as May 1974 he had suggested Nixon might consider resigning.

This judiciousness required no small measure of courage. According to an Associated Press article that ran Aug. 7, 1974, it "had earned Rhodes the enmity of the conservative (House) members who form the core of his support, some of whom had lashed out at him recently in a bitter and emotional behind-the-scenes display of frustration."

Rhodes stayed the course, however. He finally announced he would vote to impeach Nixon because "covering of criminal activity and misuse of federal agencies cannot be tolerated."

Convinced that Nixon's presidency was doomed, Rhodes accompanied Sen. Barry Goldwater, R-Ariz., and Sen. Hugh Scott, R-Pa., to the White House. There they told Nixon that his impeachment and conviction by the House and Senate, respectively, were certain.

It was the last straw, and Nixon resigned on Aug. 9.

During the ordeal, the AP said, Rhodes turned down three invitations to dine with Nixon on the presidential yacht Sequoia. He did not want to be influenced by such trappings of splendor. He wanted, instead, to be influenced by the facts.

The demeanor of Rhodes, Goldwater and other Republicans during the Watergate ordeal seems to stand in stark contrast to the knee-jerk partisanship that has torn the fabric of governance in succeeding

decades.

Watergate was an awful time, but Rhodes was one of the statesmen whose hands steadied the helm.

***East Valley Tribune*, August 26, 2003. Reprinted with the kind permission of the publisher.**

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