

# Bob Dole, 1923-2021: Democrats mourn death of right-wing Republican

Patrick Martin  
10 December 2021

The death of former senator and Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole Sunday, at the age of 98, touched off a week of tributes from Democrats and the media, culminating in the ceremony of official mourning Thursday where Dole lay in state in the Rotunda of the US Capitol—the same location where fascist rioters summoned by President Donald Trump stormed through on January 6, 11 months ago.

Three of the four speakers at the ceremony were Democrats: Senate Majority Leader Chuck Schumer, House Speaker Nancy Pelosi and President Joe Biden. Only Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell represented the Republican Party, where Dole's political views, once considered arch-conservative, would now be regarded as suspect.

Trump issued a statement praising Dole, but that is only because Dole, unlike many other members of the Republican establishment, endorsed him as the Republican presidential candidate in both 2016 and 2020. He was the only previous Republican presidential nominee to make an appearance at the 2016 convention which nominated Trump. In the view of the would-be dictator, personal support for him outweighs all other considerations.

In his congressional career, which extended from 1961 to 1996, Dole, a pro-corporate fiscal conservative, opposed nearly all social welfare spending. He was a fervent Cold War anti-communist, a warmonger in Vietnam, Central America and the Persian Gulf, and later, while out of office, a supporter of the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

In his early years in the Senate, he was such a harsh defender of the Nixon administration that a fellow Republican senator criticized him as a “hatchet man.” Nixon named him chairman of the Republican National Committee in 1971, only replacing him after the

Watergate scandal exploded, and he needed a party operative who could function as a full-time apologist.

Dole rose through the ranks of Senate Republicans, heading the Senate Finance Committee in 1981, where he spearheaded the Reagan tax cut, the model for subsequent efforts by Congress to enact fiscal policies that openly and deliberately set out to enrich the wealthy at the expense of working people. In 1985, he was elected to head the Senate Republican caucus, holding that position, either as Minority Leader or Majority Leader, until 1996.

He moved steadily to the right, if perhaps slightly more slowly than the center of gravity in the Republican Party. This process is demonstrated by his role in two presidential elections. In 1976, President Gerald Ford chose him as his running mate, dumping Vice President Nelson Rockefeller, who was anathema to the Republican right. The selection of Dole was seen as an olive branch to those who had supported Ronald Reagan in his unsuccessful challenge to Ford for the Republican nomination.

Twenty years later, Dole carried out the same maneuver, although this time he was the Republican nominee for president reaching out to his party's right wing. Seeking to appease the fanatically anti-tax “supply-side” faction in the party—dubbed advocates of “voodoo economics” by George H. W. Bush—Dole picked arch-tax-cutter Jack Kemp as his vice presidential running mate.

In neither case was the maneuver successful. Ford lost narrowly to Democrat Jimmy Carter in 1976, an election where Dole is remembered only for the occasion when his genuine personal bitterness over war—he nearly died in 1945 in a German attack in Italy that left his right arm useless and put him in the hospital for three years—erupted in his debate remark

condemning “Democrat wars” for their colossal human cost.

In 1996, Dole lost by a landslide, with incumbent Democrat Bill Clinton capitalizing on the popular backlash against efforts by the Republican-controlled Congress to cut spending on Medicare and Medicaid. Clinton combined phony claims to defend social programs with a bipartisan agreement to eliminate Aid to Families with Dependent Children, long a target of Republican demagoguery over supposed “welfare cheats.”

A quarter century after Dole ended his active political role, it is the Democrats rather than the Republicans who celebrate his career as a political model.

Schumer hailed Dole as “a remarkable leader ... whose essential goodness leaves us with hope.” He praised the Republican for supporting food stamps, aid to disabled veterans and the 1983 bailout of Social Security (which reduced benefits in the long term).

Pelosi called Dole “an extraordinary patriot” whose legislative record was characterized by “working in a bipartisan way” and who “taught us over time and all the time to respect people for what they can do and not judge them for what they cannot.”

Biden, who spent 25 years in the Senate alongside Dole, was the most effusive in his praise, calling him “a hero of ... democracy” and “a giant of our history.” He quoted at length from a last statement by Dole calling for “unity,” adding, “We may follow his wisdom, I hope; and the truth of the matter is, divided as we are, the only way forward for democracy is unity, consensus. The only way.”

This is not just the usual blather based on the principle of “speak no evil” in commemorating the dead. Biden and the Democrats have responded to the transformation of the Republican Party, its subordination to the fascistic tendency personified by ex-President Trump, by increasingly abject and desperate appeals for the Republicans to reconsider.

The two-party system has been a machine for the defense of corporate America for more than a century. The Democrats fear that the embrace of fascistic methods, expressed most clearly in the January 6 attack on the Capitol, means the breakup of that system and risks opening the door for an intervention from below. This raises the danger, from the standpoint of the capitalists, that the working class, not the fascists, will play the most powerful role.

Biden said, in his remarks Thursday, “Bob and I, like many of us here, we disagreed on a number of things, but not on the fundamental things.” This would be truth-telling and not mere boilerplate, if Biden had gone on to enumerate those “fundamental things”: the defense of the capitalist system, the assertion of the global interests of American imperialism, the suppression of the class struggle and the exclusion of the working class from any role in political life.

There has been a series of such funeral ceremonies in recent years in which aged Republican poobahs, long bypassed by their own party’s shift to the right, have been saluted primarily by Democrats, still seeking to find bipartisan “common ground” with “colleagues” in the Republican Party. John McCain, Colin Powell and George H. W. Bush all come to mind. Dole follows that pattern.

In the arc of Dole’s very long life, he went from nearly being killed in a battle against German troops directed by Adolf Hitler, to seeing a fervent admirer of Hitler take the leadership of his own party and attempt a fascist coup against the very building where Dole spent his political career.



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