

Political Animals

The Graying of GOP Progressives

BY JOHN YEWELL

There was a time in Minnesota when abortion was not the political fault line it is today, when the words *progressive* and *Republican* were often linked, like *Minnesota* and *Nice*. Despite the party's decade-long descent into a right-wing sump, there are still a few Republicans around for whom government isn't a four-letter word.

Progressive politics were something of a Midwest Republican invention. Robert M. La Follette, Wisconsin congressman, senator, governor and candidate for president, was a lefty Republican insurgent for most of his 40 years in public office until his death in 1925. Fightin' Bob founded the National Progressive Republican League in 1911, and challenged another famous Republican progressive, Teddy Roosevelt, for president in 1912.

Minnesota's own Harold Stassen was a La Follette-style GOPer, a native of West St. Paul who ascended to the governor's mansion in 1938 at the tender age of 31 and who remains active at 89. Politicos from Walter Mondale to Rod Grams will help Stassen celebrate his 90th birthday April 13 at a party at the St. Paul Radisson.

Stassen's brand of progressive Republicanism is rooted in Midwestern values and Depression-era social problems. "In 1938 the Minnesota Republican Party's main view was that [President] Hoover had been too far to the left," says U of M history Professor Hy Berman, echoing the party's current right-wing inclinations. "Gov. Stassen was a progressive," he says, at a time when the Democratic Party was weak and the Farmer Labor Party occupied a position on the political spectrum considerably to the left of today's DFL. "He believed that government should play a role in redressing social ills that are structurally rooted in society," Berman says. Stassen was instrumental in passing legislation that guaranteed unions the right to bargain collectively. And he not only defended the income tax, Berman says, he expanded it.

"I'm basically liberal," Stassen says. When was the last time you heard a Republican call himself that?

Today, Stassen is best known for a bad rug and his quixotic quest for the presidency. But few political careers have been more remarkable. Stassen still holds the record as the youngest governor in Minnesota history. Berman says Stassen "brought the Republican party into the 20th century."

Stassen resigned the governorship in 1943 to serve in the Navy and was present on the *USS Missouri* for the Japanese surrender on September 2, 1945. In 1945, he helped create the United Nations and is the last living signer of the United Nations Charter.

In recent years, Stassen's relationship with his own party has deteriorated. In 1992, in what would be his last run



Former Gov. Harold Stassen, circa 1970.

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for president, he was humiliated by pro-life Republicans when state convention delegates rejected him for the lone Stassen-for-president delegate slot to that summer's Republican National Convention because of his pro-choice opinions. Stassen's views on privacy issues are old-fashioned Barry Goldwater-style GOP: Keep the government out of people's lives. "I'm opposed to factions like these right-wing religious groups," he says.

Another former Republican governor (1961-63) and contemporary of Stassen, Elmer L. Andersen, is, like Stassen, respected within party circles as an elder statesman but written off as irrelevant by the party's dominant right wing.

"I'm disheartened by the present trend in the party," says Andersen who, like Stassen, is a supporter of Gov. Arne Carlson. "On the environment and health care, for example, the Republican party is far away from the norm." Like Stassen, Andersen parts company with current Republican orthodoxy on the role of government. "There's too much complain-

ing about the size of government," he says. "Government can be a good partner to bring together the resources of the people in a fiscally responsible manner."

Such views have been rare for some time among Republicans. One state representative who shares them to a certain extent is Dave Bishop, an irascible eight-termer from Rochester. "I want government to be practical," says Bishop, who is pro-choice and has had his own run-ins with pro-lifers. "The party has been taken over by single-issue people who shouldn't call themselves Republicans," says Bishop, who notes that he has survived within the party "by being a mean sonofabitch."

Dan McElroy, a second term pro-choice Republican from Burnsville, believes the role of government, rather than abortion, is a better test of what part of the political spectrum one occupies. On this question, he leans toward the Stassen-Andersen model. "Government's role is to make the world a better place by solving problems and creating opportunities," McElroy says. "It's not inherently evil." As a student of history, McElroy feels that while current parlance makes the terms *progressive* and *liberal* seem too interchangeable, he is hopeful that the idea of a "progressive conservative" in the Stassen mold is an idea with a future as well as a past.

"If by that you mean fiscally conservative but socially conscious and ready to accept change, then I think that is a timely idea that we should embrace," McElroy says.

Judy Schotzko, a Republican and president of the non-partisan, pro-choice Minnesota Women's Political Caucus, senses change in the wind. She says that when she attended her precinct caucus last year she felt considerably less hostility toward her despite her views on abortion. "A true Republican is someone who respects the rights of individuals and tries to keep the government out of my life," she says. "Being pro-choice should be natural for Republicans." Schotzko hopes to attract more women to the party and change it from within.

Eventually, says Berman, the Republican party will adopt more progressive policies that are less hostile to the role of government, much like it did in 1938 in electing Stassen. "The pendulum will swing back," he says: "It's bound to." Andersen agrees. "It'll come back," he says, expressing considerable frustration with today's Republican party. "Eventually people will realize they're being misled." ♦

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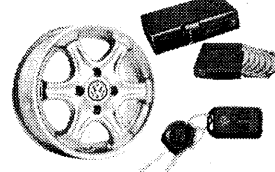
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