

# Opinion

## Remember Pepper and his liberal legacy

Claude Pepper is dead.

The 88-year-old Florida congressman known best as a stalwart supporter of the elderly died May 30 after a losing battle with stomach cancer. His death called forth bipartisan praise and somber eulogies on Capitol Hill, and the passing of a true statesman always does. Pepper's body lay in state in the Capitol rotunda. Outgoing House Speaker Jim Wright took time out from his last, beleaguered days to speak at a service for Pepper. President Bush joined in the praise, calling Pepper "a gentleman, a noble human being."

These somber scenes are appropriate to the memory of such a man. Still, in a broader sense, they do the man and his legacy a disservice. Along with the scenes of bipartisan sorrow, most news commentators offered today's politically illiterate audience only the information that Pepper was a champion of the poor and a fighter for the rights of the elderly, as indeed he was. But Claude Pepper was also much more. He was, first and foremost, a Democrat, a liberal unashamed to carry that label in a day when demagoguery and selfishness have made it anathema. On the day of Pepper's death, all the networks showed basically the same set of clips to encapsulate Pepper's career. Keep in mind that one clip which popped up again and again was of Pepper dishing out the fiery Democratic oratory at a Mondale rally in 1984. Then already well into his 80s,

**Kyle Hudson**

**Staff Columnist**

Pepper radiated the energy of a man half his age in denouncing the policies of another elderly politician.

So, honest bipartisan sorrow aside, the most important epitaph for Pepper is one of fierce partisanship, an enduring faith in liberal principles. Pepper's political biography is, in more ways than one, a metaphor for liberalism in this century; it offers a portrait of the Democratic past and sound first principles for the future. Preserving the lessons of Claude Pepper's life for those generations just now coming of age, those Pepper never touched during his life, is the greatest legacy any statesman could desire.

Pepper first went to Washington in 1936 as a U.S. Senator. He tried for a Senate seat in 1934 but came up short. In 1936 he was appointed by the governor of Florida to fill a vacancy created by the death of Senator Duncan Thomas. In 1938, Pepper's battle to secure a senate seat in his own right became a litmus test for national approval of Franklin Roosevelt's New Deal policies, specifically for Roosevelt's wages and hours bill. That year had been a year of setbacks for the New Dealers, who decided to take the risk of announc-

ing the administration's support of Pepper during his primary battle against conservative, anti-New Deal candidates. It was FDR's son Jimmy who made the announcement in Palm Beach. Pepper won easily, taking 58 percent of the vote. Roosevelt and his supporters took heart from this symbolic gesture of faith in the New Deal, and in less than two months the Fair Labor Standards Act was signed into law.

Still, the 1938 elections were marked by losses for the New Dealers. Roosevelt learned the painful lesson that not all of his attempts to influence congressional elections would succeed; indeed, his attempt to purge Congress of the conservative Democrats — who had banded together with Republicans to frustrate Roosevelt — would backfire badly. Pepper's election marked a victory for the thinking of the progressive South over unreconstructed Southern conservatism, but it was the exception rather than the rule. But Pepper's win was important. He was, from the very beginning, a symbol, a catalyst for what turned out to be the last major piece of New Deal legislation.

In the years between 1938 and 1950, Pepper continued to stand out as a strong liberal. After his 1938 victory, he supported Roosevelt's desire to intervene against Hitler in Europe, and Pepper was a participant in the crafting of Roosevelt's lend-

lease program, which granted crucial military aid to a war-weary Britain. He was also one of the few Southerners to support anti-lynching laws.

But, then as now, strong liberal credentials created fodder for negative conservative campaigning. Pepper gained the moniker "Red Pepper" for his politics as much as for his shock of red hair. His record of support for legislation popular in the South, his relatively liberal attitude towards the Soviet Union and his political friendliness with men like Henry Wallace cost him his Senate seat. In what has become a classic in the history of demagoguery, his opponent, George Smathers, took advantage of the Southerners' tendencies towards big paranoia and a small vocabulary. He called Pepper a "shameless extrovert," accused him of "practicing celibacy before marriage" and claimed that Pepper's sister was a "thespian" in the wicked Big City. To this day, Smathers denies that he actually said these things; regardless, he did use Pepper's liberal record as a weapon and won by more than 60,000 votes.

The politics of resentment and fear, of capitalizing on people's worst instincts, have always been a favorite tool of conservatives, nowhere more than in the South. Smathers' word salads are not all that far from Jesse Helms' scare tactics, nor, lest we forget, from the sort of mentality that sent a scowling Willie Horton into

millions of American homes.

Pepper returned to Congress in 1962, this time as a representative from Miami. Already in his 60s, Pepper continued to fight the liberal fight by adopting a new issue, the rights of the elderly. He served as chairman of the House Select Committee on Aging, then as chairman of the Rules Committee, where he used the position as a bastion against cuts in Social Security. Up to the end, Pepper remained one of the most liberal Southerners in Congress, always gaining high approval ratings from organizations like the ACLU and the Americans for Democratic Action (ADA). One notable exception to Pepper's liberal record was his support for the Nicaraguan contras, a view not terribly surprising when one considers the large, staunchly anti-communist Cuban-American population in Pepper's district.

Claude Pepper represented the best of Democratic liberalism, a commitment to help the helpless and to assert a positive role for government in a world that for many is, like Hobbes' state of nature, nasty, brutish and short. In this, Pepper was a resounding success, and his strong liberal principles should not be forgotten in the non-partisan sorrow over his passing. Hats off to the shameless extrovert, and may the liberalism he represented never die.

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## China offers sobering thoughts on apathy

Saturday morning I woke up early as usual, about the crack of noon. Don Mattingly was having batting practice in my head and the thing that had crawled inside my mouth and died was not decomposing nearly as fast as I would have liked. Basically, I felt like a piece of American cheese that had been left on the counter for three weeks.

In situations like this there's only one sure cure: a bottle of Yoo-hoo and Bugs Bunny. Few people know this, but these two ingredients, combined, can make a hangover-decrepit 21-year-old into a hangover-decrepit six-year-old. You still feel like dirt, but at least you don't have to worry about your auto insurance or the exam you skipped Friday.

I turned on the television, and then had to whack at it to get the color right, and then had to mess with the antenna so Bugs didn't look like he'd just been given a perm, and then had to sweep fourteen back issues of Cosmopolitan (damn former occupants must have had a ten-year subscription) off the couch so I could sit down.

I let my eyes adjust, took a big swig of Yoo-hoo and waited to laugh at whatever cartoon I had seen 14,000 times before (they get funnier every time. But I'll talk about that in a later column.)

But Bugs wasn't on. Neither was Daffy or Tweety or Sylvester or Pepe or Foghorn or Porky or that little kangaroo that everybody thinks is a mouse. None of them. I checked the

**John Bland**

**Less Filling**

clock. 11:34. Bugs Bunny comes on Saturday mornings from 11 to noon. Everything seemed right.

It wasn't. Instead of seeing Bugs I was seeing a map of downtown Beijing, and instead of hearing the background music of Winston Sharples or Carl Stallings, I was hearing the distant sound of gunfire.

Now, normally in this situation I would have reacted the same as any other red-blooded American. I would have called the President and ordered him to put Bugs Bunny back on.

This was different. Here I was, disheveled, dirty and hungover, living in the freest nation on earth, Yoo-hoo dripping off my chin, not a problem in the world outside the Yoo-hoo dripping off my chin, seeing young men and women, the same age as me, fighting against impossible odds for ideals in which they believed.

What could I say? Having never been placed in such a situation, I could never imagine what it would be like to one day have to fervently back up my beliefs. Against an army like that.

I tried to imagine if suddenly all the Boston Red Sox fans in the country took over (horrifying prospect, huh?). Took over everything, the government, the armed forces, local Sav-A-Centers, banks, Las Vegas.

Then they gave a directive: become Red Sox fans or die. I'm a loyal Yankees fan. Do I fight, or do I sit back and yell, "Knock that ball outta here, Wade!"

It made me wonder what Chapel Hill was like in the late '60s, when students, maybe some of our parents (except mine; they're too old), protested the Vietnam War, the Nixon administration and Lawrence Welk. How willing were they to lay down their lives and become martyrs in an idealistic yet ultimately unsuccessful battle?

Kent State was as far as our government went to try and stop what was already a runaway locomotive, and that was four lives too far. The Chinese government has crossed a line from which it can never return in

the eyes of the world.

I sat there and stared at the screen. Peter Jennings was alternating between correspondents, who told of soldiers marching into crowds with bayonets fixed, private citizens hurling rocks at armored personnel carriers. And the everpresent crackling of automatic weapons.

Then it was suddenly over and Bugs was back to shoving a stick of dynamite in Daffy's mouth.

The irony of the moment was quite shocking, this collision of two worlds, reality and cartoon, so far removed from each other, and yet bound together by sheer absurdity. The real violence in Beijing, where a man could take the life of a fellow countryman and have to live with the blood on his hands; and the cartoon violence

of Bugs Bunny, where Daffy would only end up black-faced and mad, with his beak around his neck.

This isn't meant to offend, because I'm not trying to make a joke out of what has happened, nor am I trying to trivialize an event to which I can neither relate nor fully understand. It is simply what happened last Saturday afternoon, as I watched, deeply disturbed, the action on TV switch between real and cartoon violence, my own emotions drifting from anger to pride to wonder to confusion, but all the while thinking about what was going on half a globe away.

What were you thinking about it? Or were you thinking about it?

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# The Tar Heel

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