

Remembering 1968, when Jack Danforth upended GOP politics



BY TOM COLEMAN
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Multiple newspaper columns and television specials this year have commemorated the year of 1968. It was a trouble-filled 12 months that included the Vietnam War, assassinations and urban riots. It was also the year that a Republican would be elected to a Missouri statewide office for

the first time in 40 years.

As a second-year law student at Washington University in St. Louis, I was a participant and eyewitness to this political history. I spotted a small newspaper article announcing that New York Mayor John Lindsay was coming to St. Louis to campaign for a Republican candidate for Missouri attorney general. Several years earlier as a graduate student in New York, I had found Lindsay an attractive reform candidate and had done some neighborhood volunteer work for his campaign. He was a charismatic politician and now a leader in the Republican Party.

I called the campaign office to see if there were

any student tickets available for the Lindsay dinner. There were none, but if I were to come down to the office they might be able to come up with something. That was a fateful decision (at least for me) by Stuart Murphy, then the executive director of the campaign, who gave me two tickets.

It was the first political campaign dinner I had ever attended. I don't remember anything about Lindsay's speech but I was tremendously impressed with the young attorney general candidate, Jack Danforth.

I spent the next three months volunteering for him, while neglecting my legal studies. No task was too inconsequential for me.

Danforth attracted the attention of national leaders. I would ride on the bus with Nelson Rockefeller one week, and with Sen. Mark Hatfield of Oregon the next.

On election night, my wife Marilyn and I were invited to Jack and his wife Sally's home for a quick dinner while watching the early returns. It was a small group — only a handful of us not family members.

Calls with election results were coming in and they brought good news. Jack Danforth had pulled off what no other Republican had accomplished for 40 years: getting elected statewide in Missouri.

He ran as a reformer and was able to attract a new and younger breed of public-spirited individuals to his office. I may have been the youngest at 26. Like Danforth, most of his appointees were in their 30s. The Jefferson City media affectionately referred to us

as Danforth's "kiddie corps."

Looking back over the past 50 years, there is no question that Jack Danforth founded the modern-day Republican Party in Missouri. His office produced the first generation of that era's elected Republican leaders, including John Ashcroft and Kit Bond, both of whom served as state auditors, governors and U.S. senators. Hal Lowenstein and I were elected to the Missouri House of Representatives. Lowenstein went on to serve as a judge on the state's Western District appeals court, while I served 16 years as a member of Congress.

The night before Danforth was sworn in as attorney general for the first time, a dinner was held in his honor at the Ramada Inn in Jefferson City. One of the principal speakers was Bill McCalpin, a well-respected St.

Louis attorney, who predicted that Danforth would within a few years be on the national ticket as the vice presidential nominee. The crowd roared its approval.

Danforth and America should have kept that rendezvous with destiny. He would have been one of our best presidents. Instead another destiny was fulfilled, from 50 years ago on the night of Nov. 5, 1968 when a young man began the process of restoring faith in our state government and ignited a political reformation that was eventually embraced by members of both political parties. Jack Danforth will be forever remembered for bringing integrity and decency to our politics. May his legacy live on in these trying times.

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