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Editorials/Opinion

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As We See It:

Bob Dole's Our Choice in 1988; He Could Be a Great President

ON an awful April day in 1945, three weeks before the war in Europe ended, Lt. Bob Dole lay in a shell hole in the mud and muck of Hill 913 in the Po Valley of Italy. His right shoulder was shattered and all four limbs were hanging useless. A long, painful process of recovery followed — a time of trial from which almost no one thought he would emerge victorious. But he did, due to the love of God and to his own determination and persistence, encouraged and helped by those around him.

Bob Dole has come a long, long way since then. And now, 41 years after he was given up for dead, we are ready to state our belief, before the people of Kansas and before the country, that Bob Dole should be the next President of the United States.

We say this not out of sympathy for Bob Dole, for many people have suffered disabilities and have overcome them. We say it not because he is a fellow Kansan, for the leader of these United States must address the needs of people far beyond the borders of his or her home state. We say it not because we owe Mr. Dole any "favors," for we do not. We have been as critical as anyone of Mr. Dole's missteps and mistakes (and he has made them; the man is not a saint).

We say it because we are convinced, after watching him grow and develop over the years, that Bob Dole not only is the most qualified person either party has to offer as president. He is superbly qualified to be one of the nation's genuinely great presidents.

Some might say this is far too early to be making a presidential endorsement. We normally would agree, and customarily we make our endorsements just before an election. But these are extraordinary times, and they require an extraordinary leader. We have followed the life and career of Bob Dole more closely than any other newspaper, perhaps, and we have seen him develop into one of the most powerful political figures in the country. We have suffered with him, and argued with him — and, when the occasion called for it, rejoiced with him.



Bob Dole: An extraordinary leader for extraordinary times

through the good times and the bad. We feel now a responsibility to share our observations and feelings about him at a time, early on, when they might make a greater difference in the election process.

Bob Dole has given an indication of the leadership he would provide during his tenure as Senate majority leader, confronting the tough issues head on and crafting legislative compromises where most would have thought none was possible. He has brought a pragmatism to the conduct of the Senate's affairs that has not always been present; his Kansas heritage of common sense and incorruptible moral and personal values has served him well. He believes in hard work and fair play, and because of that, he is universally respected in the United States Senate — which is an incredible statement, given the partisan divisions and strong personalities of that body.

The Wichita Eagle-Beacon is an editorially independent and politically nonaligned newspaper. We have not always been a warm supporter of Mr. Dole. His reputation as a "slasher" in political debate, which reached its peak in his 1974 Senate campaign against Democratic challenger Bill Roy and his 1976 Republican vice-presidential campaign, was deserved at the time.

But something happened to change Bob Dole. Some say it began with his marriage to Elizabeth Hanford in December 1975. Whatever the catalyst, we believe the change to be genuine, as reflected in the tremendous body of work he has produced since, much of it requiring the closest cooperation with players on both sides of the political aisle. Former Sen. George McGovern, D-S.D., calls him "the most human man I know in the Senate," and adds, "I don't know of anyone who has grown more, in all phases, politically or spiritually, than he has."

We don't either.

Bob Dole has an innate sense of what the country needs, and he knows how to go about getting it. From the time the federal deficit started to balloon out of control, he knew the country could not survive if the situation were left unattended. Both as chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and later as majority leader, he made deficit reduction his first priority, supporting the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings effort when it appeared nothing more would be possible.

Better than almost anyone, however, he knows that it alone will not suffice, and that the need for getting the deficit under control is more crucial than ever. Left to another president, it's doubtful it would be brought under control anytime soon. In the hands of Mr. Dole, drawing on his great strength as a consensus builder, the task still would be hard — but it would not be unachievable. On this critical issue as on perhaps no other, the country needs the leadership of Bob Dole.

It also needs his courage. While other politicians ran for cover when it became evident a series of unpopular changes would have to be made in Social Security in order to save the system, Bob Dole led the charge. Congress reluctantly went along. When the American Bankers Association tried to force repeal of President Reagan's plan to withhold taxes on interest and dividend income, Sen. Dole resisted. He became the target of a postcard campaign instigated by the bankers — with each postcard, he knew, representing a potential vote for president.

Bob Dole is a compassionate man. When it became popular to deride the food stamp program, he defended it — not because it was good for agriculture in the farm states, but because it was good for low-income Americans in every state. That feeling was intensified during field hearings he conducted with Mr. McGovern, then ranking Democrat on the Senate Agriculture Committee. "When we got out there and saw the real world . . .," he later said, "it was a real eye-opener. You see the need."



Haunted and driven, Dole was the despair of his staff

Bob Dole's Furies

There was a dark undercurrent of anger and resentment playing just under the surface of the senator's campaign, and all too often it burst into the open

Russell High Versus Andover

ON a crisp fall morning in New Hampshire, in the third year of his still unannounced quest for the presidency, it came to Robert Joseph Dole that he might actually wake up one day in the White House. In time, his glimpse into the future would be seen less as revelation than as mirage; Dole had the ill fortune to be running against Ronald Reagan's vice president, and his campaign from the beginning had been a mirror of his own gnawing insecurities about himself, his support troops and his chances. But as he settled into a seat in a roped-off section of the dining room at the Sheraton Tara Wayfarer Inn in Bedford, he permitted himself the fleeting fancy that it could happen after all. Iowa was looking good, the polls were narrowing in New Hampshire, and a new top-management team was moving into Dole headquarters in Washington—the third and, the senator dared hope, the strongest.

"I think things are happening," he told his breakfast companions, the core group of his New Hampshire operation. Glances flickered around the table; people who knew Bob Dole were not accustomed to hearing optimism from him, not anyway, about himself or his prospects. Dole at 64 was a man of the last

generation in our politics, not the next, and he carried more than his share of its scar tissue. His life had been formed in the want of the dust bowl and had nearly ended on a battlefield in Italy in World War II, when his arm, his shoulder and his dreams were shredded by enemy fire. The fact that he was alive at all was a triumph of his will and his furies over the ruin of his body, and his rise to the Republican leadership in the U.S. Senate had been the product of 40 years of struggle. In a season of false hope, one source of Dole's optimism was the failure of Jack French Kemp to emerge as the rightful heir of Ronald Reagan. George Bush, who felt he answered that description, dismissed Kemp privately as a lightweight, and Dole had at one time considered him a mere irritant on the Hill, a smarter-than-thou complainer who had sat around picking nits while the real leadership wrote the president's program into law. But in the early betting on 1988, a fair-size stack of smart money said that Kemp would give Bush a serious fight for rights to the Reagan estate. Kemp, it was said, was suited from his coif to his monogram for the role of JFK in a remake of the Nixon-Kennedy campaign of 1960; he would be the man of vigor, optimism and young ideas—Republican ideas, this time—vying with an incumbent vice president to succeed a revered but spent old man. He started well, running a solid second to Bush in a newspaper poll of delegates at the eve of the 1984 party convention. Dole finished in single digits, behind his own wife.

The poll, as it developed, was Kemp's last moment in the sun. The wish scenarios written around him had figured everything except the odds; everything had to go right for him, his campaign chairman, Ed Rollins, mused early on, at a point when everything was already going wrong. Kemp's candidacy had been born with a stature gap between him and his two main rivals, one the vice president, the other a pillar of the Senate; he was running from the House, which hadn't directly produced a president since Garfield,

and a major fraction of the electorate knew him best, if at all, as some guy with blow-dried hair who used to play pro football. His organization had more stress fractures than an orthopedic ward. His money managers were spending him into debt, profitlessly. His own performance art was victim to his zeal; his speeches, on bad days, were as long as Hubert Humphrey's and as hard to comprehend as quantum physics. His handlers, long before the end, had given up on him. The election was still a year and a month away when Rollins looked around, shook his head and told himself: it's over.

If Pat Robertson's campaign ran on faith and Jack Kemp's on hope, Dole's was marked from the first by its uncharity—a vein of resentment whose prime target was the vice president of the United States. It was too much to say that Dole hated Bush, his people gamely insisted. But disdain was not too strong a word for his feelings; he considered the vice president a soft, untested man who had coasted through life on his family's wealth, his lied pedigree and his establishment connections. There had been nothing privileged about Dole's mean beginnings in the little prairie town of Russell, Kans. His father, he liked to say, went to work in overalls every day of his life while Bush's was commuting from the suburbs to Wall Street and Washington, and nothing since had come easily for him, not money, not position, not life itself. His way up had been steep and, in part by his own choice, lonely, and his campaign became the lengthened shadow of a haunted and driven public man.

His packagers presented him as a retrofitted if not quite a new Bob Dole, a far cry from the hit man blamed by some for having blown the 1976 election with one bitter aside about the dead in "Democrat wars" from Verdun to Vietnam. It was said that time, success and a good second marriage had mellowed him, and his quest for the presidency, his friend and adviser Tom Rath thought, was one more rung on the ladder, a kind of final validation of who he was and what he had made of himself. But the rigors of his passage had left their mark on the man, and it showed in his candidacy—in his fear of losing all he had won at such great cost over 40 years, in his brooding reluctance to trust anyone else with anything affecting his life and political fortunes, and most of all in the dark undercurrent of anger playing just under the surface of his campaign.

His chances were diminished from the start by his inability to let go of his position as leader of the Republicans in the Senate. The job was more than power and perks to him; it was where he had vindicated himself after two humiliating experiences in presidential politics, and it had become his card of identity in Washington, his claim to size and somebodyness. Dole's legislative mindset not only fractured his time and attention but colored his candidacy as well. He was at least as tongue-tied as Bush trying to frame a word-picture of the American future under his stewardship, though he was rather better-humored about his prognosis; once, passing a Pearl Vision Center in an Iowa shopping mall, he joked aloud about going in and buying one. He thought it quite enough to offer himself as he was, the consummate Washington insider, absorbed less with the poetry of politics—the Vision Game, he called it—than with the art of getting things done.

Jack F. Kemp was not another JFK

His speeches could be as long as Humphrey's and as dense as quantum physics

would listen to. They took him to see Richard Nixon.

Nixon liked Dole, a self-made man with a history and an outlook not unlike his own, and was quietly advising the Dole campaign; his channeler was its sometime chairman, Robert Ellsworth, who had served him in happier times in high-level government and diplomatic jobs.

He received Dole and his party in the library at his home in Saddle River, N.J., a handsome room of bare brick walls and shelving heavy with works of history, biography and politics. His guests made themselves comfortable, Dole lounging in a patterned navy cardigan, Ellsworth and the new campaign chairman Bill Brock loosening their neckties and draping their suit coats over the backs of their chairs. Nixon, by contrast, wore his formality like armor; he kept his houndstooth jacket on and buttoned, and his dark tie stayed tightly knotted in his white shirt. For the next two hours he sat in his overstuffed chair, talking attack politics and scribbling notes to himself on the remnants of a four-inch-thick legal pad as he spoke.

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His concern for the handicapped is perhaps understandable, but he has gone beyond what might be expected of him in establishing the Dole Foundation to help people with disabilities become economically independent. A large portion of his outside income is channeled into that foundation.

Black Americans and other minorities have a friend in Bob Dole. It was he who engineered the extension of the Voting Rights Act in 1982 over the objections of the administration. He has been a steady supporter of the District of Columbia Voting Rights Amendment, extending voting representation in Congress to residents of the nation's capital. Many of the ideas and ideals of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. are embodied in the life and aspirations of the senior senator from Kansas.

In the important area of human rights, Mr. Dole properly sees the United States as taking a leadership role, speaking out against abuses wherever they may occur. His work on the Helsinki Review Commission has been marked by his determination to hold the Soviet Union to account for the violation of its human-rights agreements under the Helsinki Final Act.

Experience has shown that Soviet officials respond most positively to someone who stands up to them, yet gives them their due as leaders of a major world power. This was one of the secrets of Richard Nixon's success with the Soviets, and Bob Dole shows the same mixture of firmness and realism.

Bob Dole has the potential to be not only one of the country's great presidents, but one of its most popular presidents. There hasn't been a platform performer like him since John F. Kennedy, nor one with such a keen wit and sense of humor.

For all these reasons, we do not flinch from recommending Bob Dole to the nation as its next president. He would be a leader for these critical times, a pragmatic, courageous, informed, sensitive president of whom every American could be proud, and to whom the rest of the world would look with admiration and respect.

The Dole platform, reduced to basics, was the ethic of the deal; his agenda was to address problems ad hoc as they landed on his desk, and his program was to put together real-world solutions to them—the best solutions Congress would buy. It was action people wanted, he felt, not fancy words, and when his speechwriters tried to slip some into his scripts, he regularly scratched them out or skipped them. People didn't ask him many questions about vision in Iowa, he grumbled one day. They asked him what he was going to do about the farm program.

On the record, his outriders defended his want of any message more inspiring than his knowledge of the foldings of the cloakroom. Dole did have a vision, his Kansas friend and counselor Kim Wells said impatiently, addressing the question for maybe the thousandth time; his vision was that he was going to be president. But the pious gap was a matter of intense private concern to his command. Donald Devine and David Keene, both passionate conservatives and both senior advisers to the campaign, pushed earliest and hardest for a rationale for a Dole candidacy, a set of identifiable goals and—yes—the V word. "We are not saying anything very important," Devine warned the senator in a memo in August 1987, and the campaign was stagnating as a result. He had to find a clear, sharp "cutting-edge theme" and keep repeating and repeating it until he caught the vagrant attention of the voters. "They will remember one thing—or perhaps two," Devine wrote. "They think, 'Oh yeah, that's Dole, the guy who wants to —.' [They need] something memorable but simple to fit in the blank space."

The vision quest converged naturally, in the minds of the staff, with the issue search, the need to show where their man differed from Bush and why the voters should choose him over the man first in line for the job. He needed to get out front on something, an agenda identifiably his own. But finding solutions in the Dole campaign was always easier than selling them to the candidate. He had never taken direction easily from his own people; he seemed, in his self-doubt, to wonder how smart they could be if they were working for him. So, as they sometimes did on sensitive questions, they found someone they knew Dole would listen to. They took him to see Richard Nixon.

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