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Reflections on Dick Lugar, Bob Dole and friendship forged in principle

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We live in mean political times. Elected officials in both parties treat one another with disdain.

That's why I've found myself thinking about two great members of the U.S. Senate, Kansan Bob Dole and Hoosier Dick Lugar. They took on tough public policy issues with a principled statesmanship that's absent today.

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Dole assisted Lugar in his successful 1976 effort to defeat Democratic incumbent Vance Hartke and win a seat in the Senate. Dole and Lugar were allies for the next 20 years.

As chair of the Senate Agriculture Committee, Dole helped Lugar win appointment to the committee. In a July 14, 1977, letter to Dole, Lugar said, "Just a note to express my appreciation for your recent statement on the Senate Farm Bill." Lugar added a personal message: "Your help and leadership has been of inestimable value to me in learning my duties on the Agriculture Committee."

It wasn't long before Lugar invited Dole to Indiana. On Nov. 14, 1981, Dole was the featured speaker at "Dick Lugar Family Night" at the Indiana Convention Center.

Dole could never resist making jokes and that evening was no exception. He praised Lugar's intellect and said, "Dick can tear through the national budget in the amount of time it takes some congressmen to understand Doonesbury."

Lugar won reelection in 1982. He wrote to Dole on Nov. 12 and told him that he was "grateful for your friendship." In December, Dole supported Lugar in his successful effort to unseat Oregon Senator Bob Packwood as chair of the Republican Senatorial Campaign Committee.

Lugar and Dole weren't afraid to tackle the toughest issues, sometimes at great political risk.

On March 24, 1985, Lugar, as chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, announced that he, Dole, Maryland Sen. Charles Mathias and Kansas Sen. Nancy Kassebaum were introducing the Anti-Apartheid Action. In the news release the Committee issued, Lugar said, "This bill seeks to provide direct, tangible assistance to the black majority in South Africa in its efforts to gain full political, economic and social rights in South Africa, and to provide that in the absence of progress in eliminating apartheid, it shall be the American policy to consider economic sanctions against the government of South Africa."

Congress passed the legislation in 1986, but President Reagan vetoed it. In October, Lugar led the successful effort to override the veto. The vote was 78-21 to override. Dole provided one of the votes in support.

I look back now and feel privileged that I had an opportunity to get to know and support both men.

My family lived in Indianapolis in the early 1960s when I was a boy. I remember my dad pointing out Lugar to me at church and saying, "That guy's going places."

We moved to Kansas, and in the 1980s I was active in Kansas Republican Party politics. I was honored to assist Dole on a number of occasions.

In January 1986, Dole brought Lugar to Topeka for Kansas Day, the Republican Party's annual shindig. I introduced myself to Lugar and we had a good conversation about our shared affection for the Hoosier state. I knew that he was a strong leader, and it became apparent as we talked that he was also a great guy.

Both men ran for President in 1996. Lugar dropped out early and endorsed Dole. Dole won the nomination, but then lost to President Clinton.

But Dole wasn't the kind of guy who would just fade away after a defeat. He continued to work on important public policy issues.

Lugar was defeated in the 2012 Indiana Republican primary by Richard Mourdock, a tea party-type candidate who later lost in the general election to Democrat Joe Donnelly. But Lugar also wasn't the kind of guy who would just fade away after a defeat. The two old political warriors would have one final opportunity to collaborate.

In an Aug. 22, 2012, letter Lugar advised Dole that he intended to support the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. Dole had been a strong supporter of that treaty.

On Dec. 4, the Senate was scheduled to vote. Before the vote, Dole arrived on the Senate floor in a wheelchair. It was the first time a former majority leader had made such an appearance. In remarks,

Lugar said that disabled veterans had told him “their lives would be advanced in the event that we are able to pass this treaty because their treatment in other countries would improve.”

It wasn't enough. The Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities didn't receive the two-thirds vote necessary to win ratification.

With Dole and Lugar, good public policy came first; politics second. It's difficult to imagine in today's political environment that elected officials will again take that approach. But I believe Dole and Lugar would be the first to say, “Oh, yeah, that will happen.”

On Sept. 3, a monument of Lugar will be unveiled at the Bicentennial Unity Plaza in Indianapolis. This Kansan will be there to honor a great public servant.

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