



Ken Hechler

Dr. Kenneth ("Ken") Hechler, 102, legendary West Virginia statesman, peacefully slipped the bonds of a life well lived and much loved, on Saturday, December 10, 2016 surrounded by his much beloved family at his home in Romney, West Virginia. In addition to a generous life of public service, he was a decorated war hero, a prolific writer of several historical books, and a tenacious activist who championed civil rights, miner's health and rights, and the environment. At the time of his death, Ken-as he preferred to be called-was the longest lived former United States Congressman in American history.

Born Kenneth William Hechler in Roslyn, New York, September 20, 1914, he was the youngest son of Charles H. and Catherine Hauhart Hechler. He had two older brothers, George and Charles, both of whom he survived. He graduated with a Bachelor of Arts from Swarthmore College, and earned his Master's degree and his Ph.D. in history and government from Columbia University. Ken's life of service started after graduating, when he entered academia as a teacher and professor on the faculties of Columbia University, Princeton University, and Barnard College.

As World War II loomed, Ken held a series of minor appointed positions in the federal civil service until he was drafted into the United States Army where he rose to the rank of Major. He was later promoted to Colonel while in the United States Army Reserves. He received five Bronze Battle Stars, The American Campaign Medal, and a Bronze Star Medal for meritorious service under fire.

During the war years, after graduation from Armored Force Officer Candidate School, he was assigned as a combat historian in the European Theater of Operations. Ken was attached to the 9th Armored Division when one of its infantry-tank task forces captured the key Ludendorff Bridge spanning the Rhine River at Remagen, Germany.

Following the war, taking advantage of his French and German fluency, as well as in his renown as combat historian, Ken was assigned to interview many Nazi defendants prior to the Nuremberg Trials.

These experiences and many others formed the bases of several books he would later write, including "The Bridge at Remagen" that would become turned into a major motion picture of the same title, in 1969. Another well received book, "Goering and His Gang" that was a chronicle of the interviews Ken conducted with former Nazi commanders-including Goering himself-prior to the Nuremberg trials, about their military strategies.

Immediately following the war, he worked in the United States Bureau of the Budget and helped to organize and summarize the "Personal Papers of Franklin Delano Roosevelt." Ken also worked as a White House Assistant and speechwriter for President Harry Truman, and later was a research director for presidential candidate, Adlai Stevenson. His book, "Working with Truman", chronicled his years as one of Truman's advisors.

Eventually academia would call out to him again and he accepted a position at Marshall College (now Marshall University) in Huntington, West Virginia teaching political science. Unbeknownst to him at the time he took the position, this would completely

change the course of his life.

As a very popular professor, Dr. Hechler was known as a dedicated advocate for responsible engagement in civil life. He passionately urged his students to take part in politics by voting, volunteering, activism, and even running for political office. His students turned this philosophy back at him, pressing him to run for office.

Thus it was, although he moved to West Virginia to teach and mentor young minds, he soon found himself running for, and winning, a seat in United States House of Representatives, representing West Virginia's Fourth Congressional District, that then included the city of Huntington and many unionized mill towns along the Ohio River north of that industrial city; this was in 1958. Though his first political victory was by a slim 3,500 votes, he proved himself to be a true and honorable representative to his constituents and was re-elected for eight more terms, successfully and dutifully serving his district for eighteen years.

In Congress, he earned a reputation as a liberal Democrat. He was the principal architect of the Coal Mine Safety and Health Act of 1969 that for the first time put a ceiling on the amount of respirable coal dust allowed in coal mines, and stipulated stringent safety regulations. Ken also served on the first Space and Technology Committee, promoting what would eventually become the National Air and Space Agency. One of his greatest personal moments came when he was the only sitting U.S. Congressman to march with Martin Luther King at Selma, Alabama, in that historic struggle for civil rights for African Americans.

His career in congress ended when he resigned his seat to run for Governor of West Virginia in 1974. Alas, the outcome of that heated race was not what he'd hoped for - he lost. Following the election he resumed his teaching career at Marshall University, the University of Charleston and West Virginia State University. During this time he wrote another book, this one the comprehensive history of the Space and Technology titled, "Endless Space Frontier: A History of the House Committee on Science and Astronautics."

Just two years later, in 1984 he ran for West Virginia Secretary of State and won. He was re-elected in 1988, 1992, and 1996. In 1990, he again ran, in the middle of his Secretarial term, for his old Congressional seat, but was defeated by Rahall in the primary.

His term as Secretary of State is most known for his successful prosecution of Johnie Owens, who sold his position as sheriff of Mingo County for \$100,000.

Owens was sentenced to fourteen years in federal prison. Ken eventually persuaded the West Virginia State Legislature to require that candidates publicly register loans, with specific terms of repayment.

As Secretary of State, in 1985 he moved his legal residence to Charleston, WV. Charleston is located in the 2nd District, which was vacated in 2000 by nine-term Democrat Bob Wise, who was running for governor. Ken again threw his hat in the political ring, but lost a three-way Democratic primary bid for that seat. Also in 2000, at the age of 85, he walked 530 miles in joining Doris Haddock ("Granny D") in her cross country walk on behalf of campaign finance reform, shortly before the passage of the McCain-Feingold Act.

In 2004 he ran yet again for his old post as Secretary of State. This time, he won the Democratic primary by a plurality, but lost the general election to Republican Betty Ireland. By this time there was a growing rift between him and union leaders over his support of tough environmental laws, thought by union leaders to be at the cost of jobs. Still, at a spry ninety-four he remained a self-declared

hell-raiser and fought tirelessly with his dear friend Larry Gibson against mountaintop removal. On June 23, 2009, Ken, then aged 94, participated in a protest near mountaintop removal mining sites in the West Virginia coalfields in the Coal River Valley along with others; he was one of 29 protesters arrested for trespassing.

In retirement, Ken turned to writing once again, penning several more books: "The Fight for Coal Mine Health and Safety," about his work to gain miners' health and safety benefits, "Super Marine," "Hero of the Rhine," about soldiers he met during WWII, and "Soldier of the Union," about his grandfather who fought for the Union in the Civil War. He has also written a book of his favorite parodies, for which he was famous, called "Faith, Hope and Parody," and "How to be a Great Teacher."

An Episcopalian by tradition, he was a member of Trinity Episcopal Church while he lived in Huntington, West Virginia.

Not one to be rushed into marriage, Ken remained a bachelor until he was a young 98 years old, when he married his longtime sweetheart, friend and companion of nearly thirty years, Carol Kitzmiller on August 12, 2013. In so doing, he fulfilled his long-postponed dream of having a wife and son. He mused at the time, "My Friend Arch Moore would be proud of me; I finally married a damn Republican!"

"The secret of longevity is to exercise," Hechler said. "I always exercised on the tennis court (he played a wicked game of tennis, often besting his younger opponents) until I had to give that up, but I've got a new hip."

Both his loving wife, Carol and his son Josh Kitzmiller survive to mourn their loss of a loving, devoted husband and father. Also surviving Ken are his favorite aunt, Jackie Queen, of Points, WV, sister-in-law, Alissa Charlton and brother-in-law, Philip Kitzmiller of Slanesville, WV; nieces, Anabelle Kitzmiller and Macenzie Charlton; two nephews, Thomas McCormick and Grant Kesler all of Slanesville, WV.

He is also survived by his father-in-law, Kemp (Buck) and mother-in-law, Nancy (Joan) Kitzmiller of Slanesville, WV and several cousins from various parts of the country. Befitting a great man of service, action and loyalty, Ken also leaves behind scores of friends, former staff members, loyal colleagues and supporters, all of whom raise their voices and say, "Bravo for a life well lived!" Ken very truly left the world a better place for his having lived in it.

Ken will lie in repose at the Culture Center at the Capital Complex, 1900 Kanawha Blvd. East, Charleston, WV on Monday, December 19, 2016 from 10-3 p.m. followed by a service at the Culture Center at 3 p.m.

The family will receive friends on Wednesday, December 21, 2016 from 4-8 p.m. at the Giffin Funeral Home & Crematory, 2807 Northwestern Pike, Capon Bridge, WV. A service in Hampshire County will be held at the Augusta Church of Christ, 15338 Northwestern Pike, Augusta, WV on Thursday, December 22, 2016 at 11 a.m. with Rev. Cecil Jividen and Rev. Stephon Reed officiating.

Burial will follow at Branch Mountain United Methodist Cemetery in Three Churches, WV.

The family asks that in lieu of flowers contributions may be made to either Hospice of the Panhandle, 330 Hospice Lane, Kearneysville, WV 25430 or the Ken Hechler Scholarship Fund, C/O The Bank of Romney, P.O. Box 876, Romney, WV 26757.

Arrangements are by the Giffin Funeral Home & Crematory in Capon Bridge, WV.

To sign an online guest book, please visit www.giffinfuneralhome.com