

She has made 'an extraordinary difference'

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 By CURT ANDERSON 11/21/95
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WASHINGTON — When Sen. Nancy Kassebaum heads home to Kansas, she will leave behind a legacy as an independent, thoughtful moderate whose personal integrity and gentility made her influential.

"I think what we saw was this truly decent person who took an interest in the state of Kansas," said University of Kansas political science professor Burdett Loomis. "People could feel connected to her as an individual."

Kassebaum, one of the dwindling Republican moderates in Congress, announced Monday she will depart at the height of her career as chairwoman of the Senate Labor and Human Resources Committee, with jurisdiction over job training, health, the arts and other issues.

She is the only woman who heads a Senate committee.

Sen. Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., quoted his brother, the late President John F. Kennedy, to describe Kassebaum.

"One person can make a difference and everyone should try," said Kennedy, senior Democrat on the Labor Committee. "As a senator, Kassebaum has made an extraordinary difference."

Although Kassebaum has long been overshadowed on the national stage by Kansas' senior senator, Majority Leader Bob Dole, she developed her own unique ability to influence the nation's agenda through strength of character.

"She is powerful in the Senate, but even more powerful by the way she lives — a humble servant of the people," said Rep. Sam Brownback, R-Kan.

Even though Dole is now running his third campaign for the White House, in Kansas his popularity never eclipsed that of Kassebaum, daughter of Kansas icon Alf Landon, a former governor and the 1936 Republican nominee for president.

She emerged from a crowded field to win her first Senate race in 1978 and then coasted to victory in both 1984 and 1990.

"Kassebaum sometimes deferred to Dole as a leader. But Dole knew, every day he went to



— Chris Ochsner/The Capital-Journal

Sen. Nancy Kassebaum, R-Kan., announced Monday at a Statehouse news conference she wouldn't seek a fourth term in the U.S. Senate.

work, that he was the second-most popular politician in Kansas. And that gave her some freedom," Loomis said.

Indeed, Kassebaum has remained resolutely pro-choice as the Republican Party increasingly embraced the anti-abortion position. She favors gun control. She frequently clashed with the Reagan administration, criticizing Reagan's 1981 tax cuts and leading a 1986 vote to impose sanctions on South Africa that helped end apartheid.

Until this year, she voted against most GOP colleagues by opposing a balanced budget amendment to the Constitution, and she sided with the Democrats in voting for the 1994 crime bill, much to Dole's dismay.

The two Kansans have always gotten along, however, and Dole had nothing but praise for

his colleague in a Senate floor speech Monday.

"Nancy Kassebaum's record of intelligence, integrity and independence have ensured she will always be remembered as one of the true giants in Kansas political history," Dole said.

As leader of the labor committee, Kassebaum bought into only part of the GOP revolution. For example, she pushed through job-training reforms that would turn about 90 programs back to the states, but she fought to restore some \$6 billion for college student loans that had been targeted for cuts.

Although she sometimes seems to straddle the fence on tough issues, Kassebaum is known for approaching decisions by listening to both sides and coming to a conclusion based on reasoned debate. She is no ideologue and has no preordained political agenda.

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She also has one additional quality that seems in increasingly short supply in politics and almost every other walk of life: she is nice. Whatever their political views, colleagues said everyone could learn from that legacy.

"All of us will miss her, especially her uncommon grace and civility she used so expertly to being competing interests to common solutions," said Agriculture Secretary Dan Glickman, a former Democratic congressman from Wichita.

"It's a tremendous loss to Kansas," said Rep. Jan Meyers, R-Kan. "She's made a tremendous difference. She's going to be very hard to replace."