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Learning From a Football Star

John LaPlante

As Republicans in Minnesota and across the nation debate about what their party should look like and do, they need only look for inspiration to Jack Kemp, who died last week at the age of 73.

Kemp excelled at quarterback in the old AFL and then the NFL; he was elected to Congress, served as a federal cabinet member and ran as a vice presidential nominee. But those were simply various jobs he held; his character and the ideas he worked for were much more important -and worthy of our attention.

Kemp was known for a variety of policy ideas: a tight monetary policy, free trade and enterprise zones, in particular. His most notable proposal was to cut marginal tax rates in the federal income tax code (topping out at 70 percent in the late 1970s). Ronald Reagan adopted the idea and rode it to the White House. Eventually, Reagan signed legislation popularly known as Kemp-Roth, putting the cuts into place.

Pundits can debate the economic effects of those tax cuts, but they did not stand on their own. Instead, they were part of a broader theme of changing the focus of the Republican Party, and of government. Kemp thought that public policy should help all people, especially the poor, achieve and maintain prosperity. As he wrote in an op-ed published by the Wall Street Journal just last year, "In my opinion, people of all colors and income levels don't hate the rich. They want to get rich."

That led him to become, in his words, a "bleeding heart conservative" who tried to take the Republican Party (and with it, free-market ideas) to peoples and places where Republicans seldom tread - notably, to blacks and the poor.

To promote wealth creation among the poor, as head of the federal department of Housing and Urban Development, Kemp touted home ownership for people living in public housing and vouchers for school children, especially those in urban schools. More recently, his support for immigration reform put him at odds with many people in his party. But it was consistent with his passion for "wealth for everyone."

Wealth creation is a good foundation for a political message, but is it enough to cure what ails us? Mitch Pearlstein, president of the Minneapolis-based Center of the American Experiment, told me that "[Kemp] was more confident than I was that the cure for

cultural problems, particularly in urban America, was economic success at the grass roots.”

I’d agree with Pearlstein that cultural expectations are important. Perhaps Kemp thought it best, as a politician, to avoid making statements on culture; he would have been justified in coming to that conclusion.

In some ways, it’s possible to say that Kemp practiced a form of “Minnesota Nice” — he was widely applauded for his demeanor. Sean Kershaw, executive director of the St. Paul-based Citizens League, said that Kemp “was hard not to like. He had a civility and a strength of purpose” that people respected. “In today’s political environment, there’s a lot to be said for that.”

Does anyone in Minnesota politics resemble Kemp today? At least in passing, Gov. Tim Pawlenty reminds me of him. By reaching out to urban residents, Kemp tried to broaden the party’s appeal. Pawlenty, for his part, has said that the Republican Party should not be the party of the country club but of Sam’s Club. Two different audiences, to be sure, but the message is the same: broaden the base, get out of your comfort zone, and believe that your message has wide appeal.

Pawlenty has said “the era of small government is over.” Kemp, for his part, sought to transform rather than abolish government agencies.

According to Craig Westover, senior policy fellow at the Minnesota Free Market Institute, members of the Minnesota Legislature could benefit from Kemp’s approach to making choices as they wrestle with the budget deficit. Kemp’s economic principles led to his policy positions, and, Westover said, “ideology did not bastardize principle.”

Unfortunately, Westover added, “you don’t see that trait much from either Republicans or Democrats today.” Discussions of the state budget in Minnesota, he said, are “framed as a choice between spending cuts and tax increases with no thought or comment on criteria for determining spending cuts or no thought to tax reform that raises necessary revenue in the most efficient and effective manner.”

What lessons should Minnesota conservatives draw from Jack Kemp’s life? I posed that question to King Banaian, free-market blogger and chairman of the economics department at Saint Cloud State University.

He told me that Minnesota conservatives should learn, “You do not have to cede the issue of poverty to the left. The message of individual liberty, enterprise and entrepreneurship is one for the poor. Rich people survive with statist governments by making deals with them; there the poor have no power unless the state gives it to them. Individual liberty lets power remain with all individuals, rich or poor.”

St. Paul-based blogger Mitch Berg, for his part, emphasizes the political importance of reaching an urban audience. As he wrote on his blog, "The Minnesota GOP will never really contest control of Minnesota until we make a play of it in the [Twin] Cities."

Kershaw says that approaching politics from the center enabled Kemp to have "an interesting mix of idealism and pragmatism" and adds that Kemp "applied conservative ideas to liberal issues. We need to combine the best of various ideological perspectives. This whole notion of taking a classically conservative set of ideas and applying them to urban issues and education ... I don't think we've made enough progress in those areas."

Indeed, we haven't. Actually, it would be a great tribute to Jack Kemp if we could make progress in even one of those areas.