

Demise and Ascent

The career of Thomas Kuchel and the advent of the Reagan right

Thundering applause pierced the frigid Connecticut air on the evening of February 23, 1965, echoing from the brownstone gothic building that towered on the edge of Yale's central campus. Inside, Senator Thomas Kuchel addressed a sea of navy blue blazers otherwise known as the Yale Political Union, discussing the state of the Republican Party and the "suicidal tragedy" he deemed Barry Goldwater's 1964 presidential nomination. "Republicans lost because they did not keep faith with their basic principles," the senator declared, taking pointed aim at the rising influence of the GOP's far-right contingent. Characterizing the November election as a "repudiation of a party which . . . [had] forgotten its heritage," Kuchel warned that the rightward drift of the party must be stemmed at all costs. "If the grand old Republican Party were to become a shriveled, shrunken, impotent political haven for an anachronistic few, then vast changes, and not for the good, would enter our way of life."¹

Kuchel's statement presages the significant shifts in the Republican Party since 1965. Not long after his remarks, voices of critique and concern within the GOP became persecuted and then silenced. By the end of the 1960s, a liberal consensus was giving way to the conservative phenomenon known as Reaganism. At the forefront in fighting America's right turn were traditional Republicans like Kuchel.

In his thirty-two-year political career, Thomas Kuchel was a California Republican in the Hiram Johnson and Earl Warren mold—a progressive who championed reform, responsible government, and a bipartisan politics of moderation. In today's era of Reagan centennials, Fox News, and Tea Party marches, Republicans like Kuchel stand all too forgotten in the political consciousness of twenty-first century Americans. His 101st birthday this past August offers an opportunity to reflect on both the current Republican Party and the proud progressive tradition of California Republicanism that was fought for and lost amid the rise of Reaganism.

Born and raised in Anaheim, California, Thomas Kuchel began his Republican political career fresh out of University of Southern California law school at the young age of twenty-six. First elected to represent Orange County in the State Assembly in

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1936, Kuchel would continue to climb California's political ladder, serving as State Senator (1941–1945), State Controller (1946–1953), and finally United States Senator upon Governor Earl Warren's 1953 appointment. In the Senate, Kuchel wore the progressive stripes of California Republicanism proudly—a stark contrast to the suburban warriors who would later make his home region of Orange County identifiable with the Conservative Right. “Progressive Republicans,” he recalled, “brought to politics the philosophy of governing for the many.” Over the next fifteen years, Kuchel followed this principle by playing key roles in the passage of the Interstate Highway Act, the 1963 Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the 1964 Civil Rights Act, and the 1965 Voting Rights Act. Leading a “baker's dozen” of progressive Republicans in the Senate, Kuchel even helped provide the necessary margin for passage of Lyndon Johnson's Social Security and Medicare programs. As the ranking member of the Senate Interior Committee, he sponsored numerous laws to create and expand wildlife refuges and national parks, including Northern California's Redwood National Park. Indeed, Kuchel enjoyed strong support in both California and the US Senate. He was the last Senate nominee in California to win all fifty-eight counties and the only senator elected Assistant Minority Leader five consecutive times.²

Kuchel's brand of progressive Republicanism claimed deep roots in the political soils of California. Contrary to the liberal-Democrat persona often ascribed today, the Republican Party commanded an influential majority in the Golden State for most of the twentieth century, guiding much of California's development in the areas of industry, education, conservation, and social reform. At the forefront of the state's GOP stood Hiram Johnson, the two-term governor (1911–1917) and long-time US Senator (1917–1945) for California. Considered one of the founders of American Progressivism, Johnson crafted a type of Republicanism that balanced conservative and liberal ide-



California Congressional Delegation Breakfast, March 23, 1955.
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als, championing responsible economic development and fiscal policy on one hand, and an agenda of social-political reform, conservation, and state funded programs on the other. Just as Johnson created the foundation of California's Progressive Republicanism, Earl Warren (governor 1943–1953) helped guide it through the Democratic era of Franklin D. Roosevelt and the New Deal. Indeed, Warren continued to champion the balanced politics crafted by Johnson. Yet in the age of Roosevelt, he also pushed to have bipartisan cooperation brought into the fold of the state's GOP—a moderate political thrust Warren trumpeted as “independent,” “nonpartisan,” and placing “citizenship above partisanship.”³

It was upon this California landscape, and among these influential progressive Republicans, that Thomas Kuchel grew up and cut his political teeth. In his youth, he read both the Congressional and State Legislature records daily to his father, studying the politics of Hiram Johnson as well as adopting his strong independence and calculated style of debate—a style that on the high school debate team helped Kuchel defeat an opponent from Fullerton named Richard Nixon. Under the mentorship of Earl Warren as both state legislator and Controller, Kuchel also learned the art of balanced politics and bipartisan compromise that had long guided California's GOP majority. To be sure, it was this brand of Republicanism that Kuchel brought to the United States Senate, and others like Dwight Eisenhower sought to adopt on the national level. As Kuchel later defined it in



Thomas Kuchel with Dwight Eisenhower.

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a televised speech, Progressive Republicanism was a “combination of liberal and conservative . . . conservative in dealing with the people’s money, liberal in dealing with human problems.”⁴

By the early 1960s, however, Thomas Kuchel began to confront what he deemed as an “evil and offensive” danger to both America and the traditional principles of his beloved Republican Party. The menace he fought was neither communists nor the counterculture, but the conservative right and groups like the John Birch Society who threatened the balanced politics of Progressive Republicanism. Charging to the Senate floor in May 1963, Kuchel in his characteristic independence issued one of the first Republican denunciations of right-wing extremism, warning his colleagues to heed the rising “danger of hate and venom, of slander and abuse generated by . . . [a] handful of zealots, in the ranks of self-styled ‘I am a better American than you are’ organizations.” To Kuchel, these “fear peddlers” of the far right not only “degraded America . . . [but also] defiled the honorable philosophy of conservatism.” Undoubtedly, far-right corrosion of the GOP stood at the heart of Kuchel’s concern. In a July 1963 letter to Congress, the California senator stressed his intention to defend the traditional principles of the Republican Party from right-wing co-option. “I shall continue to speak out against those who call themselves ‘Republicans’ but who . . . would change our Grand Old Party from one of constructive reason . . . into a zany and dangerous voice espousing abolition of the income tax, white supremacy, preventative war, the break-up of NATO, or similar nonsense.”⁵

“I never coveted public office enough to become a wholesale hypocrite.”

Kuchel’s stance in 1963 was a heightened defense of the traditional Republican principles he had advanced since the late 1950s. He had publicly defended his mentor, California Governor-turned-US Chief Justice Earl Warren, against red-baiting slurs and right-wing threats of impeachment, and roundly condemned Birch Society founder Robert Welch for calling President Eisenhower a communist. In the 1962 California gubernatorial race, Kuchel even refused to endorse GOP candidate Richard Nixon due to his rightward stray from the party’s center. Such political abstention, however, reached new heights in 1964. After an unsuccessful attempt to deliver the GOP presidential nomination to fellow moderate Nelson Rockefeller, the California senator shunned conservative nominee Barry Goldwater. Labeling Goldwater’s nomination a “tragic interlude” of “intellectual sterility,” the independent Kuchel premised his silence on the continued defense of traditional Republicanism. “I consider myself the Republican,” he declared. “I consider what Barry Goldwater was saying hardly Republican doctrine.” Kuchel cited similar criteria for his refusal to endorse conservative George Murphy in his successful run for California’s other US Senate seat that same year, underscoring the chasm between party loyalty and Republican principles. In Kuchel’s words, “I never coveted public office enough to become a wholesale hypocrite.”⁶

By 1966, Kuchel’s fight to protect the Republican Party from far-right corrosion collided head-on with the gubernatorial aspirations of conservative candidate Ronald Reagan. Well financed and directed by a consortium of corporate conservatives, Reagan’s campaign trumpeted a new version of Republicanism—one that spurned the traditional ideal of progressives like Kuchel. It was a corporate conservatism whose tenets of pro-business, antilabor, antireform, and the racial status quo Reagan articulated on a range of issues, from Watts and Open Housing (Proposition 14) to Berkeley and César Chávez’s farmworker movement. Aghast at a Republican candidate he deemed extremist, unqualified, and well outside the



Thomas Kuchel on television, March 15, 1960.

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GOP mainstream, Kuchel threw his political weight behind San Francisco's moderate Republican Mayor George Christopher. Upon Reagan's primary victory, however, the progressive senator touted his Warren-like independence and settled back into the familiar posture of political silence. Kuchel's refusal to endorse Ronald Reagan's bid for the California governorship scored national headlines and further placed the thirty-year Republican veteran in the crosshairs of the New Right. Just two months before Reagan announced his candidacy, Kuchel had continued to publicly censure the "so-called Republican groups in California," characterizing right-wing demands like privatizing Social Security, abrogating the Nuclear Test Ban treaty, and repealing the federal income tax as "far more in keeping with Fascism than Americanism." Now refusing to support the New Right's favorite son saddled him with an ultimatum from conservatives and party loyalists alike: "support the party's nominee in 1966," one newspaper paraphrased, "or face political extinction in 1968." Such threats emanated particularly from California GOP chairman Gaylord Parkinson, causing an indignant Kuchel

to demand "who the hell is Parkinson" to attempt such "intimidation." Speaking to reporters two weeks before the election, Kuchel announced that he would take his chances in 1968, affirming he would not under any circumstances endorse Ronald Reagan.⁷

Kuchel offered no apologies for his lack of support in the wake of Reagan's victory. "I called my signals as I saw them," he told reporters after the election. "No one leads this senator around with a ring through his nose." Yet, as Kuchel pledged to continue advancing a "forward-looking Republicanism," the corporate conservatives amassing under the new Reagan Administration in Sacramento held other plans. Labeled the Kitchen Cabinet by the press, the consortium of conservative businessmen backing Ronald Reagan—Holmes Tuttle, Henry Salvatori, A.C. Rubel, Leonard Firestone, and Justin Dart—set out to eliminate, in Reagan's words, "that damn Tommy Kuchel." Within a year, Reagan's backers had propped up conservative Max Rafferty to challenge the incumbent senator, waging a primary campaign that some pundits deemed "vicious" and "far below minimum standards of decent political be-

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havior.” Red-baiting slurs and ferocious fabrications emanated from the Rafferty camp, all propelled by a war chest of over \$1 million—an insurmountable sum for Kuchel, who often remarked that his refusal to stomach the pageantry of campaign fundraising was his “Achilles’ heel.” In the face of the conservative onslaught, the senator continued to cling to his political roots. “There are certain elements of the Republican Party who have seen fit to denounce me,” Kuchel wrote one constituent, “but I have no intention of compromising the political principles I have followed for thirty years.” The primary election of June 5, 1968, proved one of California’s darkest days. While gunshots had taken the life of Democrat Robert F. Kennedy, the corporate conservatives had defeated Thomas Kuchel, sounding the death knell of California’s progressive Republicanism. In New York for Kennedy’s funeral days later, an aging Earl Warren embraced his younger protégé, telling Kuchel “I just feel so badly about your defeat. I can’t talk about it.”⁸

In assessing the impact of Kuchel’s primary loss, the *Los Angeles Times* observed that California “will suffer from the short-sightedness of those who voted against him.” Indeed, the *Times*’ words, like the many warnings of Kuchel, have proved prescient. In today’s GOP-fueled landscape, the “fear peddlers” still operate, the corporate interests still dominate, and the moderate, progressive stripe of California Republicanism now only emanates as a historical artifact from the political graveyard. In remembrance of Thomas Kuchel’s 101st birthday, let us pause and reflect on a tradition lost and an honorable public servant who stood as one of the most costly political casualties of Reaganism’s rise.⁹ **B**

Notes

¹ “Sen. Kuchel Asks Students to Help Build ‘Viable’ GOP,” *Yale Daily News*, 24 February 1965, 1; “Chafee, Kuchel, Scott Talk to Students on GOP,” *Yale Daily News*, 24 February 1965, 1; “The Choice is Yours,” Kuchel Speech at Yale University,

23 February 1965, Political Folder, Box 245, Thomas H. Kuchel Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

- ² Rep. Stephen Horn, “Honoring A True Public Servant: Senator Thomas Kuchel,” *Congressional Record*, 107 cong., 10 October 2002, E1856–59; “O.C. Politician and Ex-Senator Kuchel, 84, Dies,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 November 1994, 1; “Thomas H. Kuchel Dies at 84,” *New York Times*, 18; Thomas Henry Kuchel, *Biographical Directory of the United States Congress*, <<http://bioguide.congress.gov/scripts/biodisplay.pl?index=K000335>> [accessed May 2011]. For more on the far right in Orange County, see Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton, 2001). Kuchel is mentioned only three times in the book.
- ³ Democrats did not gain a majority in California politics until 1959. See Olin, Spencer. *California’s Prodigal Sons: Hiram Johnson and the Progressives, 1911–1917* (Berkeley, 1968); William Deverell and Tom Sitton, eds., *California Progressivism Revisited* (Berkeley, 1994), especially Jackson Putnam, “The Progressive Legacy in California,” 247–63. Warren for Governor Non-Partisan Committee memo, 20 July 1942; Warren Campaign Ad, 1942, 1942 Gubernatorial Campaign F3640:443; Warren Reelection Announcement, 15 March 1946, 1946 Gubernatorial Campaign Files F3640:572, Earl Warren Papers, California State Archives.
- ⁴ “Thomas Kuchel—Class of 1928” Anaheim High School Alumni Association, <http://www.anaheimcolonists.com/hall-of-fame/2009-inductees/thomas-kuchel> [accessed 22 July 2011]; “O.C. Politician and Ex-Senator Kuchel, 84, Dies,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 November 1994, 1; Stephen Cummings and Patrick Reddy, *California After Arnold* (New York, 2009), 64; Thomas Kuchel 1968 speech, NBC Television, http://www.nbcuniversalarchives.com/nbcuni/clip/5110206AA2082_035.do [accessed 22 July 2011].
- ⁵ Thomas Kuchel, “Fright Peddlers,” *Congressional Record*, 88 cong., 2 May 1963, 7636–42; Kuchel Letter to Congress, 29 July 1963, Political Folder, Box 245, Kuchel Papers.
- ⁶ “O.C. Politician and Ex-Senator Kuchel, 84, Dies,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 November 1994, 1; “Chafee, Kuchel, Scott Talk to Students on GOP,” *Yale Daily News*, 24 February 1965, 1; “Who’s the Republican Extremist?” *Riverside Press*, Goldwater File, Box 262, Kuchel Papers.
- ⁷ “Republicans Warn Kuchel to Support Reagan,” *Houston Tribune*, 23 June 1966, GOP 1966 Folder, Box 262; “Kuchel Letter to Republicans,” 6 October 1965, Political Folder, Box 242, Kuchel Papers; “Sen. Kuchel Out on Limb in California,” *Boston Globe*, 17 July 1966, A5; “Angry Kuchel Assails State GOP Chairman,” *Los Angeles Times*, 4 June 1966, 4; “Kuchel, Will Not Aid Reagan,” *New York Times*, 25 October 1966, 22; “UPI Release,” 25 October 1966, Reagan Folder, Box 263, Kuchel Papers.

⁸ “Reagan Non-Support Upheld by Kuchel,” *Baltimore Sun*, 2 December 1966, A7; “Kuchel Indicates He’ll Ignore Critics,” *Los Angeles Times*, 2 December 1966, 3; “Dump Kuchel Plan by Reaganites,” *Sacramento Bee*, 21 September 1966, Reagan Folder, Box 263, Kuchel Papers; “Reagan to Goldwater,” 11 November 1966, Folder 5-Reagan, Box 18, Barry Goldwater Papers, Arizona Historical Society, Tempe, AZ; “Tom Moore Political Analysis,” 21 August 1968, Kreps Folder, Box 515, Alan

Cranston Papers, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley; “Rafferty Lists Election Spending of \$1 Million,” *Los Angeles Times*, 10 July 1968, 27; “Kuchel to Rosenberg, 29 February 1968, Campaign ’68 “R”, Box 271, Kuchel Papers; “O.C. Politician and Ex-Senator Kuchel, 84, Dies,” *Los Angeles Times*, 23 November 1994, 1.

⁹ “Sen. Kuchel: A Loss for California,” *Los Angeles Times*, 7 October 1968, A4.