

B.T. Collins, RIP

by Debra_J_Saunders

When he worked as a legislative liaison in 1982 for Democratic Gov. Jerry Brown, B.T. Collins â€” an unlikely Brown hire, as Collins was a Republican and double-amputee Vietnam War veteran who joked that he threw grenades "like a girl" â€” had choice words for the California Legislature. He used to call the Assembly "an adult day care center."

Collins' sister, Maureen Collins Baker, has written a book about her brother, "Outrageous Hero: The B.T. Collins Story." Collins also worked under GOP Gov. Pete Wilson as director of the California Youth Authority in 1991. Collins described the juvenile offenders under his charge as "8,600 of the most vicious people he'd ever seen outside of the state Legislature."

After he was elected to the Assembly in a 1991 special election, Collins view of the institution did not improve. Collins complained, according to his sister's account, that he could no longer talk about the Legislature: "It's downright awful. The rooms are full of ego-driven people who do nothing but talk. The problems are enormous, the phone calls nasty, and nobody is in charge of anything."

Nearly 20 years later, Sacramento seems even worse. There are too few politicians willing to say, as Collins did, "I don't believe in single-issue politics. I have to vote my conscience whether you agree with me or not. I will not tell you what you want to hear. I'm nobody's boy."

If voters tried to pressure him to change his mind, Collins told them, "Hey, I'm not your candidate. You need to sign up for the other guy."

Collins died of a heart attack at age 52 on March 19, 1993. During his memorial service, Brown and Wilson shared the stage as both fought back tears.

I don't think Sacramento will ever see the likes of Collins again.

I am writing this column and plugging Baker's book because B.T. Collins was the greatest man I ever knew.

Part of his genius is that he would give any person â€” no matter how exalted â€” hell. He had the gift of mixing irreverence with charm.

According to legend, when Brown interviewed Collins, who had gone to law school after losing an arm and a leg during combat, he asked Collins if he had voted for him. Collins responded, "I never vote for short ex-Jesuits." He got the job, moved up in the ranks and, eventually, became Brown's chief of staff.

Her brother, Baker wrote, kept giant-sized jars of Midol to be "deliberately sexist" as well as aspirin to discourage "whiners and complainers." He held himself to the same standards to which he held others.

After sending a letter of resignation to Brown because he wanted a pay raise, Collins followed it with another letter to "rescind the crybaby letter of resignation." His reasoning? "You and I both know you are impossible." And: "I am old-fashioned enough to still believe in respect for the office. So I cannot address you as 'Jerry' in our conversations or in those with others."

Collins closed, "My main problem in years to come will be erasing the taint of having worked for you. Perhaps you could supply me with a prison record for the time I spent here. If I don't get a raise, I will go into a sulk and will bad mouth you throughout the Capitol."

Most famously, when he was director of the California Conservation Corps and Brown was taking heat for ordering the spraying of the insecticide Malathion, Collins publicly drank a glass of water diluted with the chemical to show it was safe. Case closed.

After Wilson appointed Collins to head the California Youth Authority, Collins issued a controversial edict: He refused to read letters from the incarcerated with misspellings and grammatical errors. Editorial boards were aghast.

At the time, Collins told The Chronicle, "I dare the ACLU to sue me for depriving (the wards) of their right to be ignorant. I'm looking at these letters â€” they're all the standard kind that say, 'this guy hit me,' 'this guy is a snitch' â€” it's 15, 16 hours a day reading these, and I'm thinking, 'These little â€”â€”â€”' - better learn to use some proper grammar.'"

After Wilson asked him to run for a vacant Assembly seat, Collins did and won. Collins understood that not only was it important that a Republican win the Carmichael (Sacramento County) district, but more important, that Wilson needed a Republican in the Legislature who understood how to get things done.

Earlier this month, six Republicans â€” Assemblymen Anthony Adams, Roger Niello, Mike Villines and Sens. Dave Cogdill, Roy Ashburn and Abel Maldonado â€” voted for a painful budget package that raised \$12.5 billion in taxes and cut spending by \$14.9 billion. They did what they believed had to be done â€”

instead of what came easy. For their trouble, attendees at the state GOP convention held but days later voted to withhold support for their re-election campaigns. Alas, today's political environment mistakes wearing blinders (that prevent seeing how bad things have gotten) for principle.

Baker believes her brother was so successful in Sacramento because he put service first. "His theory is better to be a reluctant warrior than a desperate candidate. Desperate people will do and say anything."

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