

Orrin Hatch: A Senator Sui Generis

By Sam Lyman | Wednesday, April 27, 2022

When I first met Senator **Orrin Hatch** as a fresh-faced staffer, he was wearing an elegantly tailored suit with a red silk tie. On full display was the sartorial sense that had earned him the **title** “Best-Dressed Man in Washington” many times over. But far more noticeable than the suit-and-tie combo was his choice of footwear: **a pair** of custom-made Nike running shoes.

A pinstripe suit with black Nikes is no ordinary look, especially in the halls of Congress. But then again, Orrin Hatch was no ordinary senator. And I would soon discover why he chose function over form.

As chairman of the Finance Committee and president pro tempore of the Senate, Hatch had such a rigorous schedule that he would often have to run — yes, physically run — between meetings. At 82 years old.

I quickly realized that his Nikes were not an unusual style choice; they were a necessity for the demands of his job. These were the shoes of a legislative powerhouse. And in my memory, they stand as symbols of a work ethic without parallel in Washington.

Even before he wore Nikes to run between meetings, Senator Hatch was the key driver behind some of the most consequential reforms of modern times. His greatest accomplishments included: the Hatch-Waxman Act, which laid the groundwork for today’s generic-drug industry; the Children’s Health Insurance Program, which dramatically expanded health-care options for low-income families across the nation; and the Religious Freedom Restoration Act, which strengthened First Amendment protections for people of all faiths. And none of this is to mention his outsize role in shaping the federal judiciary.

Among the greatest privileges of my life was serving as the senator's chief speechwriter during his final years in office. A critical part of my job was striving to understand the mind of Orrin Hatch — what motivated him, what informed his thinking, and ultimately, what led to his success. Beyond his indomitable work ethic, I observed three characteristics that set him apart as one of the most effective lawmakers of all time.

First, the senator's faith.

Political power can act like a magnet underneath a moral compass. Yet Hatch managed to keep his spiritual bearings over more than four decades in the world's most powerful city. This is thanks to his deep-seated faith in God.

Hatch was a member of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, and he wore his faith on his sleeve just as boldly as he wore Nike running shoes on the Senate floor. He would talk openly about his religious beliefs with anyone who would listen. This included the most unlikely converts imaginable, such as the 45th president of the United States and the party-loving (and very Catholic) Ted Kennedy.

Hatch never succeeded in converting President Trump or the late Senator Kennedy to the LDS faith. But his heartfelt openness and authenticity on matters of religion sent a clear signal to his colleagues: Hatch put God over politics. He considered himself accountable to a higher power and prized honesty above all. So when it came time to make a deal with Hatch, his colleagues knew they could trust him. And they came to him in droves. When he retired, Hatch had sponsored or co-sponsored more than 750 bills that became law — more than anyone alive at the time.

Hatch's second-greatest strength was his fighting spirit, or what the Greeks called *thumos*.

Thanks to his gentlemanly nature and his penchant for working across the aisle, Hatch's name became synonymous with civility. But his brand of civility shouldn't be confused for milquetoast moderation — Hatch could be a committed partisan when he needed to be. Consider the **time** he dressed down Democrats for their underhanded dealings during the Clarence Thomas hearing, or when he **rebuked** Senator Sherrod Brown (D., Ohio) during the tax-reform battle of 2017.

Hatch's spiritedness traced back to his youth. Few know that before he entered politics, he was an accomplished boxer. But a formative experience as a young man led him to direct his energies elsewhere.

In his early twenties, Hatch injured an opponent in a boxing match when he landed a clean but powerful jab to the face. Hatch was so upset about the prospect of doing physical harm to another person that he decided to retire from boxing. He channeled his determination into politics instead.

In the Senate, he could (and often would) spar with the best of them. But he always carried with him the same ethos of restraint that he showed in boxing. He was never afraid to put on the gloves, but he also knew when to pull the punches — a rare trait in a politician and one of many that made Senator Hatch so exceptional.

The third key to Hatch’s success — he contained multitudes.

Hatch was a pro-business Republican and the architect behind comprehensive tax reform. But he was also the son of blue-collar parents and worked as a janitor to put himself through school. He was a devout Christian with impeccable conservative credentials. But he was also a renowned dealmaker who held the respect and admiration of his Democratic colleagues. He was “a fighter” who was “energetic [and] sharp-elbowed,” as President Biden **described** him. But he was also a “gentle soul” who loved music, art, and poetry.

Hatch was a bundle of seeming contradictions held together by decency. A man of his emotional depth and complexity could not be reduced to a simple political platform. He was so many things all at once — and genuinely so — that he couldn’t be pinned down by his opponents. They tried in countless campaigns against him. And they failed every time.

In the final count, Hatch was a Senator *sui generis*. There was no one quite like him before, and there will never be anyone quite like him again. Our nation was profoundly blessed by his service. And in today’s hyper-polarized world, we would do well to follow his example.

Farewell and Godspeed to the good senator from Utah.

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