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Herb Kohl, UW alum who became 'nobody's senator but yours,' dies at 88

by **Andrew Bahl**

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Herb Kohl, the department store magnate, Bucks co-owner and philanthropist who represented Wisconsin in the U.S. Senate for over two decades, died Wednesday at age 88 after a brief illness.

Kohl, whose foray into politics in 1988 was marked by the catchphrase “Nobody's Senator But Yours,” was viewed as both an unabashed liberal icon and a workhorse senator, who sponsored thousands of pieces of legislation.

The Herb Kohl Foundation, which funds scholarships for Wisconsin students, announced Kohl's death in a statement Wednesday.

Before running for the U.S. Senate, Kohl was well-known as the co-founder of the Kohl's department store chain alongside his father and brother. The family led the stores to a national profile.

He further rose to prominence in 1985, when he bought the Milwaukee Bucks in a bid to ensure the team stayed in Wisconsin at a time when the fate of the franchise was in grave doubt.

He later sold a majority stake in the team but remained a minority owner until his death and helped finance the team's new arena, Fiserv Forum. When the team won an NBA championship in 2021, Kohl termed the ensuing parade as “one of the big days of my life.”

Kohl's giving also touched his alma mater, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, where he roomed with future Major League Baseball Commissioner Bud Selig. Kohl's name graces the school's basketball and ice hockey arena after a \$25 million gift to the project and he gave extensively to the university's LaFollette School of Public Affairs.

“Throughout his life, Herb Kohl always put people first — from his employees and their families to his customers and countless charitable organizations and efforts,” said Joanne Anton, director of giving for Herb Kohl Philanthropies. “Herb Kohl Way isn't just the name of a street in front of the Fiserv Forum. The Herb Kohl Way perfectly sums up a legacy of humility, commitment, compromise, and kindness to countless people he worked with, served and helped along the way. Those values will live on through his Foundation.”

Kohl was regarded as a quiet leader, belying his status as one of the U.S. Senate's wealthiest members, often working behind the scenes on bills but eschewing public praise.

His work in the Senate included controversial votes but also an effort to forge bipartisan compromise. U.S. Sen. Chuck Grassley, R-Iowa, told Milwaukee Magazine in 2010 that he found it easy to work with Kohl on key issues, saying “I'll bet he

never has done anything to harm or hurt anybody behind their back."



Herb Kohl embraces Tammy Baldwin as she takes the stage on Bascom Hill during a 2012 campaign rally on the University of Wisconsin-Madison campus. Baldwin, a Madison Democrat, succeeded Kohl in the U.S. Senate.

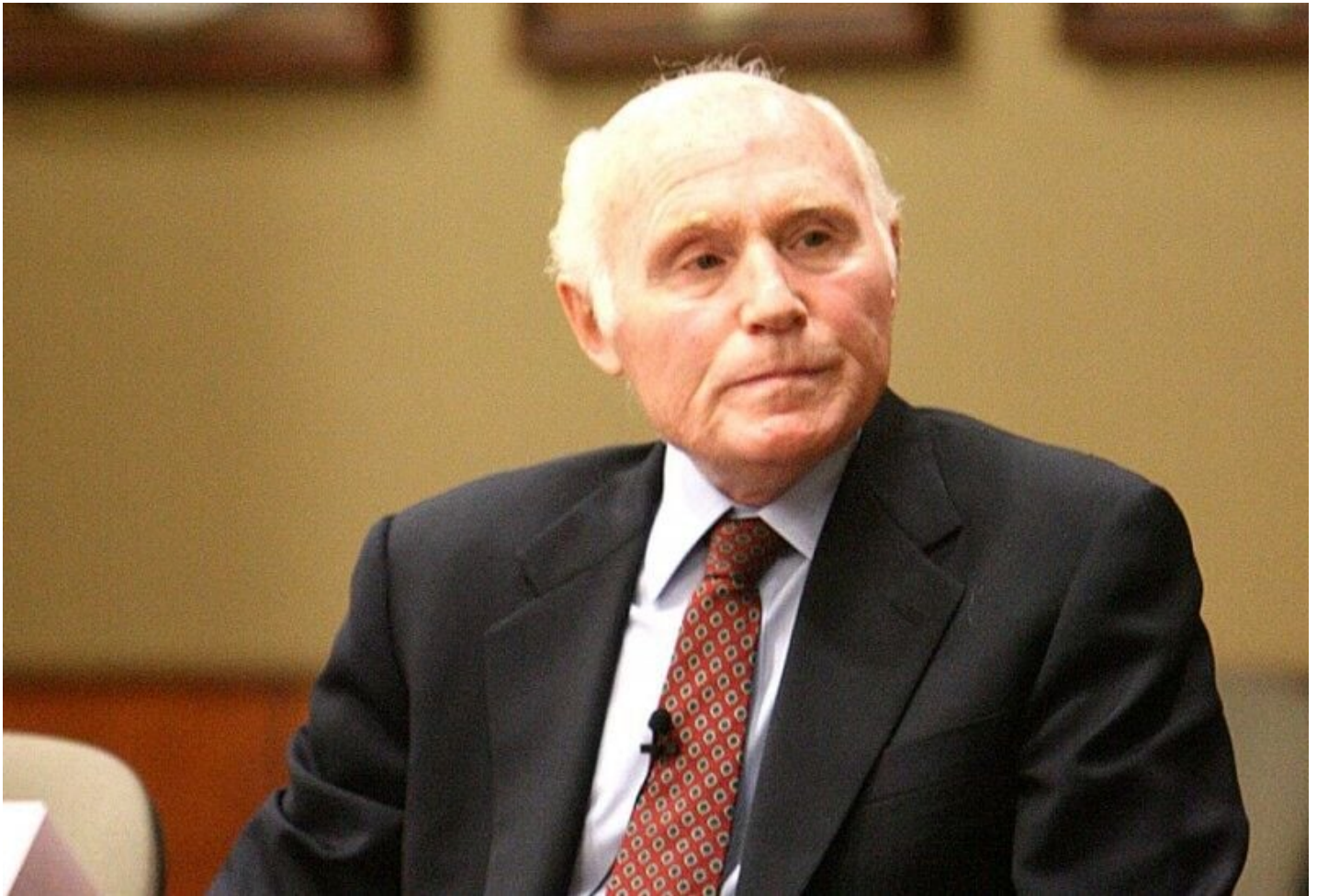
Grey Satterfield

Kohl was known for his legislative efforts to preserve education funding, act on agricultural policy and enact gun control. That included an effort to create a safety net for dairy farmers and expand meals for school children.

But, at the same time, Kohl became noted for his personal relationships with constituents.

When Wisconsinites visited D.C., they were routinely invited to a weekly breakfast where Kohl himself would make appearances to greet the visitors.

"Please know that we have listened to you carefully and fought for you always," Kohl said in his farewell address to the Senate in 2012. "Every Wisconsinite who wanted it — Democrat or Republican, rich or poor, farmer or city dweller — got full consideration in my office."



President Joe Biden praised former U.S. Sen. Herb Kohl, who died Wednesday, as "one of the finest people I've served with."

Dick Riniker

In a statement, U.S. Sen. Tammy Baldwin, D-Madison, who succeeded Kohl, called him her "role model," a "true public servant" and a "Wisconsin giant."

"Wisconsin is lucky to have had Herb Kohl in our corner and we are undoubtedly a better, more just place because of his service," Baldwin said. "He truly was nobody's senator but ours."

Gov. Tony Evers announced Thursday that flags would fly at half-staff in Kohl's honor across the state.

"Kathy and I join the people of Wisconsin, friends and colleagues of Sen. Kohl, and the many people whose lives he impacted — both near and far — in offering our sincerest condolences to the Kohl family and the Herb Kohl Foundation in mourning the loss of this Wisconsin giant," Evers said in a statement.

President Joe Biden recounted his time serving alongside Kohl on the Senate Judiciary Committee, including their work together on gun control and public safety measures, and hailed Kohl as a fierce advocate for public education.

But most of all, he said Kohl was a friend and "one of the finest people I've served with."

"In all our years of friendship and time spent serving his beloved Wisconsin, Herb's humility was always an immense source of strength — for him, and for all of us blessed to know him," Biden said in a statement Thursday. "He embodied the simple truth that we are a great nation because we are a good people."

Andrew Bahl joined the Cap Times in September 2023, covering Wisconsin politics and government. He is a University of Wisconsin-Madison alum and has covered state government in Pennsylvania and Kansas.

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