

# Bleeding Heart Conservative

The Passion, Commitment, and Ideas of an Optimist

BY RICHARD NORTON SMITH

**THE YEAR WAS 1965.** Leontyne Price sang for over a million people packed onto Washington's Mall for the inauguration of Lyndon Johnson. In Selma, Alabama, the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., launched a voter registration drive that would culminate in that year's landmark Voting Rights Act. The struggle for racial equality played out on street corners and in church pews, in legislative chambers and even professional sports locker rooms. Among its champions: a 29-year-old quarterback for the Buffalo Bills named Jack Kemp. Two years earlier, the San Diego Chargers had placed their injured star on waivers, and Jack was claimed by the Bills for \$100 in a transaction that might have tested even his unwavering belief in the marketplace.

For the personable, intellectually curious jock turned policy wonk, it was a familiar story. Judged too small at five foot ten and 175 pounds to play Division I football, Jack had enrolled at Occidental College, where he led the nation's smaller schools in passing—and, far more important, met Joanne Main, the love of his life and the mother of his four children. He would make a habit out of beating the odds, with a cheerful determination that was to prove contagious. As a pro quarterback, for example, he was anything but an overnight sensation. Drafted by the Detroit Lions in 1957, Jack warmed the bench for four teams before playing, briefly, for the Calgary Stampeders of the Canadian Football League. Others would have thrown in the towel. Not Jack. His tenacity was rewarded in 1960 upon formation of the upstart American Football League. That year, Jack led the Chargers to a Western Division Championship, a feat he repeated in 1961. Three years later in Buffalo, he sparked

the Bills to the first of two AFL championships. Along the way, he set league records in regular season passing attempts, completions, and yards gained.

The experience reinforced his belief in the potential of seemingly ordinary people—whether entrepreneurs like his dad, who built a trucking delivery company from scratch, or tenants of public housing seeking control of their immediate surroundings—to achieve extraordinary things if free to apply their talents. Pursuing ideas as avidly as touchdowns, Jack immersed himself in the writings of Ayn Rand and Friedrich von Hayek. He campaigned for Barry Goldwater and Ronald Reagan. At the same time, faithful to his working-class roots, Jack founded and led the AFL Players Association. When the league selected New Orleans to host the 1965 all-star game, black players, denied entrance to segregated taxicabs and nightclubs, called for a boycott of the Big Easy. Jack agreed with them. Due in no small part to his efforts, the game was moved to Houston.

"The huddle is color-blind," explained one of his African American teammates. It was a sentiment Jack demonstrated every day, not just on Sundays when he put his trust in linemen of various races to protect him from opposing pass rushers. His body hadn't gotten much bigger since his playing days at Occidental, but his intellectual appetites had. So had his disdain for labels and the limits they imposed on individual possibility. In his second career, the one that began with his election to the U.S. House of Representatives in 1970, Jack would defy all attempts to pigeonhole him. Both a team player and an independent thinker, he was at once an evangelist of the free market and a self-professed "bleeding-heart conservative" whom the *New York Times* called the most proactive combatant in the war on poverty since Robert F. Kennedy.



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It was no secret where he came by his values. A devout Christian, Jack first applied his faith in the gritty blue-collar neighborhoods of his Buffalo district, and later in the South Bronx, Miami's Overtown, and East St. Louis, places rarely visited by more traditional conservatives. Yet Jack insisted they were ripe for renewal. Inspired by his great hero, he reminded anyone who would listen, "Mr. Lincoln said you can't have a country half slave, half free. And we can't have a country . . . three-quarters prosperous and one-quarter in grinding poverty."

Here was the genesis of Secretary Kemp's passionate commitment to Enterprise Zones—urban laboratories in which the poor would not be experimented upon, but instead would control the experiment, and their destinies with it. He rejected the fatalistic view that "the poor would always be with us"; he didn't want it on his conscience that any of his countrymen languished in poverty because their government failed to think outside the box, which often meant thinking outside the Beltway. The original compassionate conservative, he wanted to empower the powerless by offering incentives in place of increasingly hollow guarantees. Life had

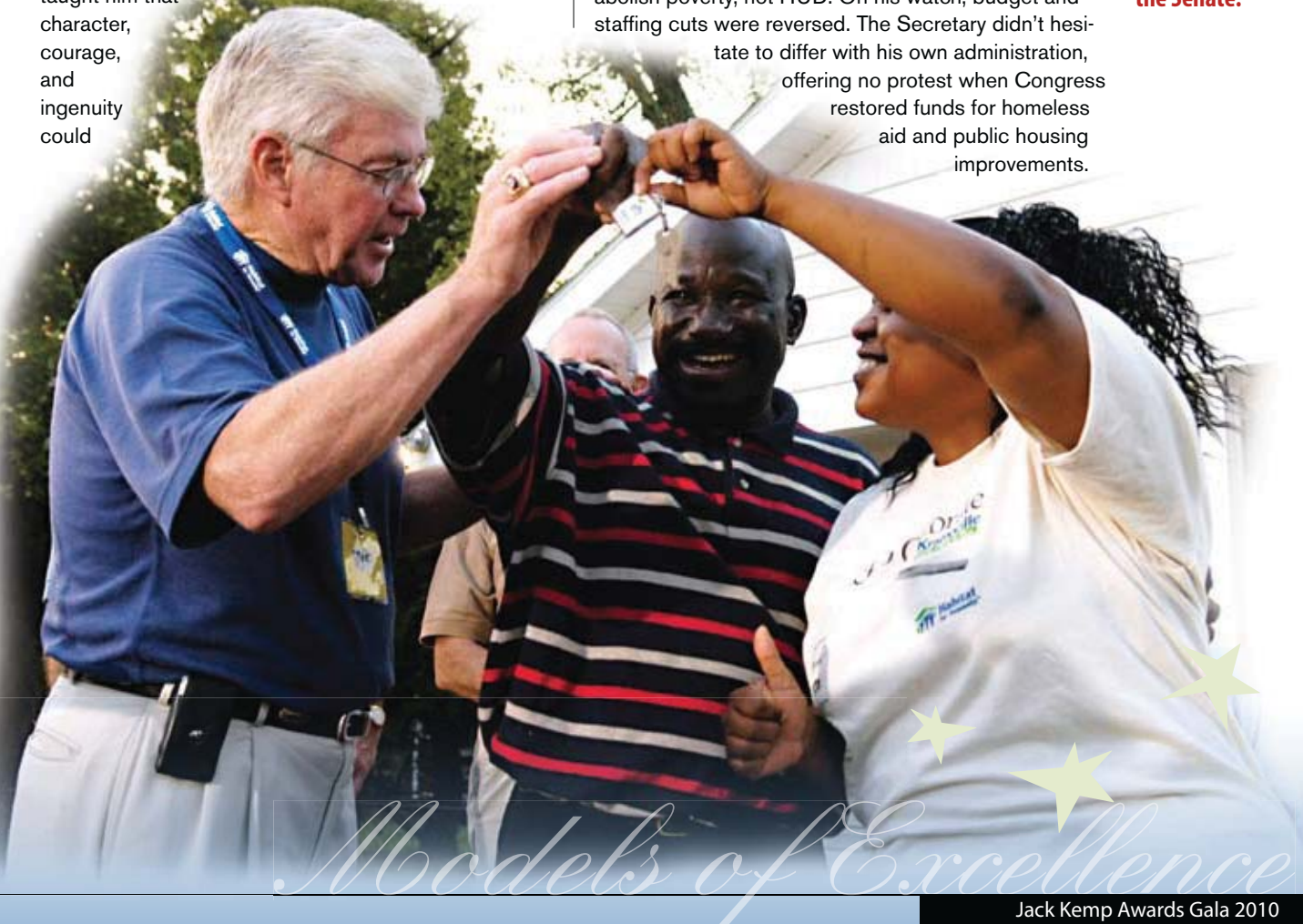
taught him that character, courage, and ingenuity could

prevail against long odds, and in the least likely of places. Only Jack Kemp could stand in Moscow's Red Square in 1990 and point out that the line to get into a new McDonald's restaurant was longer than the line outside Lenin's Tomb.

More than an optimist, Jack was a futurist. Convinced that the tides of history flowed toward greater freedom, he couldn't wait to share his upbeat message with the HUD family. No sooner had he moved into the tenth-floor secretarial suite than the new secretary was out in the streets, visiting homeless shelters, listening to public housing residents, reaching out to mayors and others too long excluded from the conversation. He invited HUD employees of all ranks—mailroom clerks as well as undersecretaries—to monthly brown-bag lunches that turned into brainstorming sessions, with Jack quarterbacking lively policy debates. It is no exaggeration to say that Jack took a demoralized department and restored its self-respect. It wasn't just Secretary Kemp's door that was always open; so was his mind. To critics of the department, he replied: abolish poverty, not HUD. On his watch, budget and staffing cuts were reversed. The Secretary didn't hesitate to differ with his own administration, offering no protest when Congress restored funds for homeless aid and public housing improvements.



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*Models of Excellence*

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Teaming up with his cabinet colleague, Secretary of Veterans Affairs Ed Dewinski, he created a housing voucher program for homeless vets and their families. Kemp's HUD championed tenant management even as its leader presided over the demolition of such monuments to past failure as Chicago's Cabrini-Green project. He made it easier to evict drug dealers from public housing. And when South Central Los Angeles boiled over in 1992, Jack was on the scene, employing his charisma and street cred to help calm an explosive situation.

Preferring solutions to scapegoats, Jack went into politics for the best of reasons—to advance ideas rather than to gratify personal ambition. And in a town cursed by self-importance, he had the blessed gift of being able to laugh at himself. *Politico's* Roger Simon recalls the time Jack, one of several presidential candidates appearing before an audience of Iowa Republicans in 1987, was told to limit his remarks to 15 minutes. Out of the question, said Jack. "It takes me an

hour and a half to watch *60 Minutes*."

Jack never confused civility with weakness, any more than he, a leader of profound conviction, questioned the sincerity or motives of those whose convictions differed from his own. He said as much in a May 2007 conversation, part of an oral history project commissioned by the

Dole Institute of Politics at the University of Kansas. "People don't care how much you know until they know you care,"

Jack told me that day. "Liberals show they care by spending your money. Conservatives show that they care by balancing your budget. What's more popular," he asked with a smile, "Santa Claus or Scrooge?"

Of course, he had discovered a Santa of the right—a benign old gentleman who promised lower taxes, robust growth, additional jobs, freer trade, and more widely dispersed prosperity. Senator Bob Dole, a traditional

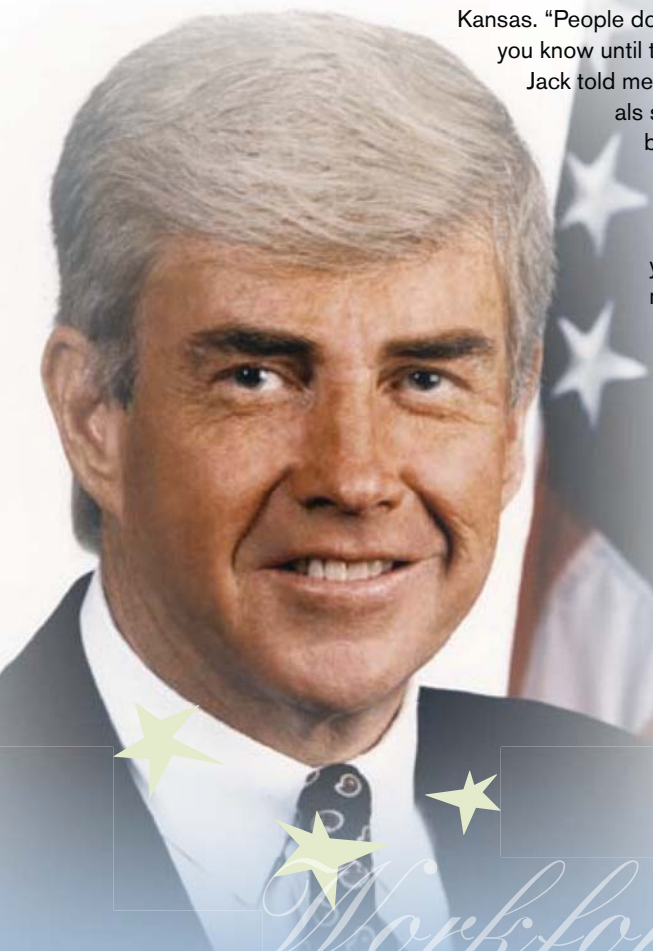
budget balancer, and Jack, the apostle of supply-side economics, had more in common than supposed.

A shared desire to broaden and diversify their party bonded the two men. So did memories of childhood privation, a highly competitive streak, a love of football, and, not least of all, their remarkable wives. One of Jack's proudest boasts was his sponsorship in the House of the bill to establish a federal holiday marking the birthday of Martin Luther King, Jr.—the same legislation that Dole spearheaded in the Senate. When members of the White House staff raised objections about the bill's cost, Jack pointedly asked one of them if he really wanted the ghost of Abraham Lincoln hovering over his bed "like Ebenezer Scrooge?"

When Dole asked Jack to join the ticket in 1996, he was reluctant to play the pit bull—the slashing role often assigned to modern vice presidential candidate. Dole assured him that he had no intention of running such a campaign. Bill Clinton was their adversary, he said, not their enemy. Jack signed up on the spot. To the end of his life he remained the Happy Warrior of American politics, his enthusiasms intact, his decency and integrity universally acknowledged in a town that agreed on little else. To be sure, his economic ideas will be debated for decades to come—which is exactly how Jack would have it. Truth be told, there could be no greater tribute to this fervent free marketer who wanted everyone to succeed in a world that is free, prosperous, and democratic.

Jack never lost his passion for racial justice. A true visionary, his faith instilled in him the conviction that every life is precious and that no first-class democracy could tolerate second-class citizens. In a letter to his 17 grandchildren, he said his first thought on Barack Obama's election was, "Is this a great country or not?" Of course, he regretted the loss by his friend and political ally John McCain. "But there's a difference between disappointment over a lost election," he concluded, "and the historical perspective of a monumental event in the life of our nation." He recognized what was special about the moment—even if he took exception to many of the ensuing policies—because he had so much invested in seeing promises as old as the republic fulfilled at last. His generosity of spirit was to be reciprocated in August 2009 when President Obama awarded Jack, posthumously, the Presidential Medal of Freedom. It was the least America could give back to one who had given her so much.

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