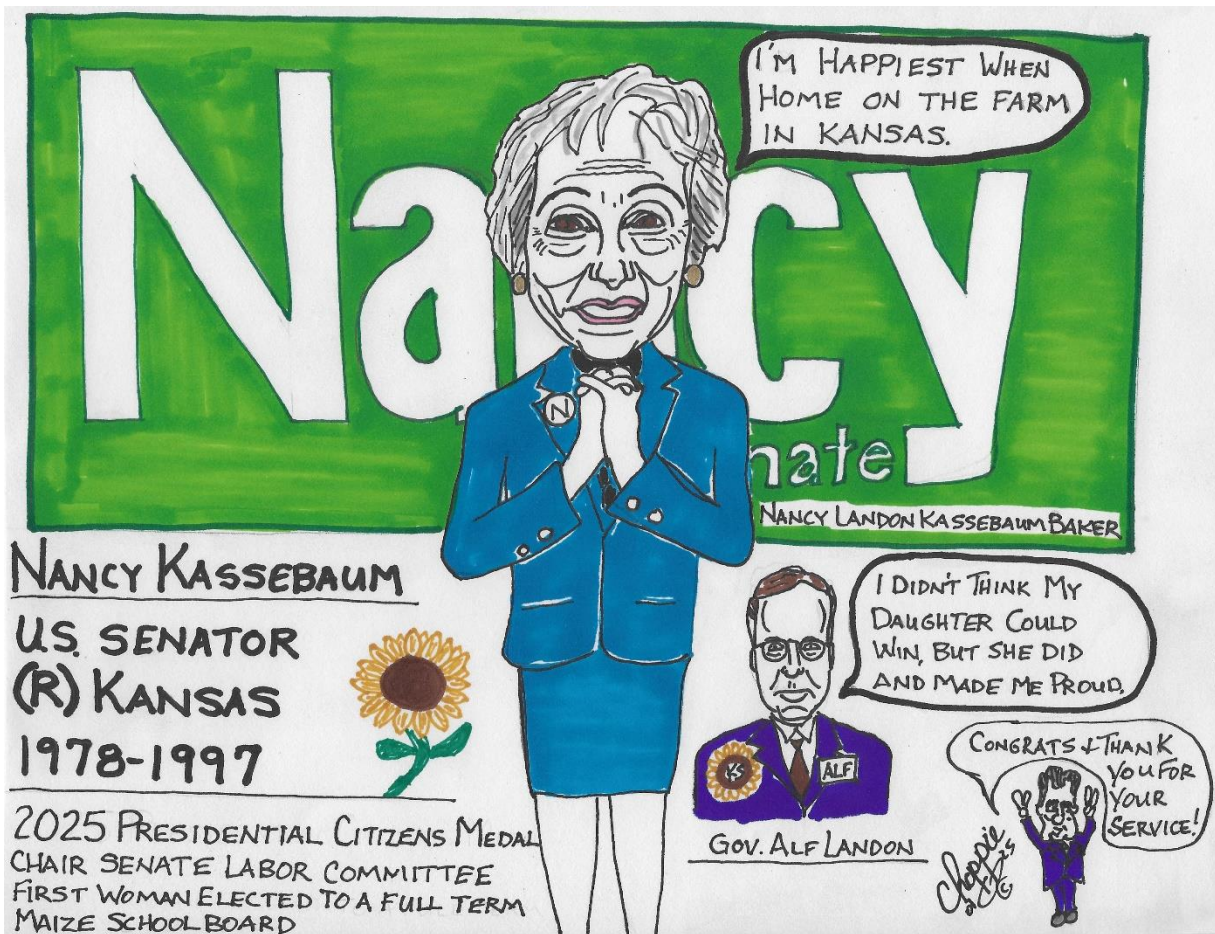


A tribute to Sen. Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker

By Jeff Chapman Contributing writer

Aug 24, 2026 Updated Aug 24, 2026



Chappie Cartoon from January 2025.

Sen. Nancy Landon Kassebaum Baker leaves a legacy rooted in Kansas values: independence, humility, civility, and a steady commitment to public service. As the first woman to represent Kansas in the United States Senate, she carried the voices of her state to Washington with quiet confidence and uncommon integrity.

Born in Topeka in 1932, Nancy Kassebaum was shaped by a family tradition of public life and by her own deep connection to Kansas. After graduating from the University of Kansas and earning a graduate degree from the University of Michigan, she built a life of service through business, education, civic work, and ultimately elected office.

Elected to the U.S. Senate in 1978, she served Kansas for 18 years across three terms. At a time when women were still rare in the Senate, she became a national symbol of possibility — not because she sought the spotlight, but because she proved that principled leadership could be thoughtful, practical, and independent.

Senator Kassebaum was respected across party lines for her willingness to listen, deliberate, and work with colleagues of different views. She chaired the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources and helped advance health insurance reforms that protected Americans changing jobs or facing pre-existing conditions.

She also brought attention to international human rights concerns, including the effort to end apartheid in South Africa.

Her life reminds us that leadership need not be loud to be strong. It can be measured, decent, courageous, and deeply rooted in service to others. Kansas and the nation remember Senator Nancy Kassebaum Baker with gratitude for her example, her character, and her enduring belief that public office is a trust to be honored.

It was during the summer of 1984 when I first met Senator Kassebaum. In my hometown, Salina, Kansas, there was a family matriarch that was related to her somehow I think cousins, and always hosted fundraisers and campaign volunteer activities for the Senator in their home. It was easy to find; the front yard had a single green sign reading only “Nancy!” in white letters.

Her campaign volunteers at this venue were mainly local prominent females and their daughters including a friend of mine since elementary school, Susie.

It was Susie who had invited me to attend and I couldn’t wait, as I had always had a special relationship with Senator Bob Dole, but had yet to make the Kassebaum acquaintance.

She was a little lady in stature, only standing about five feet, yet was commanding the room. Everyone listened to every word she said with complete focus. The smiles were big and the energy her first re-election campaign was all-a buzz.

When she spoke to me, she was extremely kind and thankful for my help, that she was happy to have young people involved in her campaign and that she hoped to see me out on the trail. It was easy to get captured by her complete direct engagement, which was so genuine that you forgot she was a politician.

From that moment on, I did see her “out on the trail” many times and always had a few green Nancy bumper stickers and buttons nearby to give to my friends until she chose to retire in 1996.

You will read many of her legislative and leadership accolades from other sources, but per usual, I would like to give you some more personal stories.

While I was leading Leadership Kansas a few years ago, I interviewed Senator Kassebaum on a virtual call as part of one of our programs. She lived at the time on her farm near Burdick in Morris County and had no internet. In fact, she didn't email at all. You could write her and send communications through the US Post office, or you could call her. While this seemed archaic, it was also brilliant. "People have to really want to communicate with me to find me and that keeps a lot of people away."

She would drive into Council Grove and go to the local bank to do Zoom calls using their system, which they were happy to do, but it just took a little extra effort to make it happen.

Her political history was both long and short. Long as in her exposure to politics started at birth when her father, Alf Landon, was Governor of Kansas.

"I was born into politics and I loved it. I had the good fortune to get to meet so many leaders, and I studied it and knew someday I would want to get more involved she told us."

Her start in politics was a localized situation with the school in Maize where her children attended. "There was an issue with safety for the children, crosswalks, and so I decided to run for the school board. That's how I started. Just like many, there is usually an issue or a moment that inspires people to get involved and that was mine."

When I asked her about going from the school board to the US Senate, as a "big leap." She laughed and said that I wasn't the only person to think so. Her own father thought she was thinking too big too fast. "My father didn't think I could win. He didn't actively campaign for me or against me, but that wasn't the public endorsement I was hoping for, so I just had to work a little harder at it."

Nancy did have a great mentor though, US Senator James Pearson. She had worked for him on staff in Washington DC and he was extremely helpful to her as she navigated a very crowded primary. There were 9 including Kassebaum and she won the Republican Primary with just over 30%. "Not exactly a mandate," said Kassebaum, "but it was a win and as a Republican in Kansas your chances were fairly good in the general after that."

Her opponent was Bill Roy, who if you remember almost ousted Senator Bob Dole in the 1974 election following Watergate, when Republicans everywhere were in trouble for re-election.

Nancy was the most down to earth, even asking me to please just call her Nancy instead of Senator, as it was a long time ago. I asked her about working with Dole during her time in DC and she explained "Bob was in leadership and was always counting votes and trying to

get things passed. We worked together well representing Kansas. There were a few times when we disagreed on issues and he may have been temporarily upset, but there were too many things going on to get caught up in a single issue or disagreement.”

Kassebaum also explained that because she worked on both sides of the aisle, she was able to help Senator Dole get some votes on the Democratic side to come through.

Senator Kassebaum was known in the Senate as a true women’s rights advocate and one who supported conservative financial and budgeting policy and more liberal social policies. “I did what I thought was good for Kansans and Americans and I didn’t follow the party line, like most do these days.”

She was an advocate of civil discourse, governing from the center and finding common ground. She found current politics distasteful and was particularly opposed to Donald Trump and his style of communication. She spoke publicly about this and even endorsed candidates for various offices that were not in support of the “Trump agenda” as she called it.

She had a profound sense of humor, which was also dry. When I asked her about her first days in the Senate, she quipped that since she was the only woman, she had “a private bathroom in the Capitol, so there was that perk” as she smiled.

She ended every conversation with me thanking me for everything I do, which I always appreciated, but thought to myself, I have done very little and she has impacted the world in such positive ways.

I personally wish that current leaders and candidates for office could have a little bit more humble, a little bit more teamwork, a little bit more compromise and a lot more civil discourse. A little bit like Senator Kassebaum... Thank you, Nancy!

In January of 2025 she was awarded the Presidential Citizens award for her bipartisan leadership by President Joe Biden. I drew the cartoon here as a tribute to her, which is included again.



Nancy and I on Kansas Day 2015.