

Congressman John J Rhodes Jr. Remembered  
**Rhodes, A Powerful Leader, was a Regular Guy**  
Manhattan Mercury – August 2003  
By Jeff Chapman – Contributing Writer



Chapman with Betty and John Rhodes in Mesa, Arizona in 1999

John Jacob Rhodes Jr was a lifelong Republican and the elder statesman of Arizona, and some might say of the entire Southwest. Rep. Rhodes served in the house from 1953-1983 and was the Minority Leader of the US House of Representatives from 1973 – 1981, a time of political turmoil with Vietnam, Watergate and “The biggest crisis of all!” he would say with a big smile, “The Carter years.”

John Rhodes and his high School Sweetheart, Betty, grew up in Council Grove (KS) and went through Kansas State University on their way to Harvard, Arizona and Washington D.C.

“We love Kansas State Football, and Kansas will always be home to us” he would say, often turning to Betty for reassurance.

He was a powerful behind the scenes leader, but he was also a regular guy with a knack for understanding people. And he was an absolute pleasure to know. He would never admit that behind the scenes he would work political magic. The “magic” was a series of conversations had with John to work on a gift to Kansas State. I had arranged for him to return to Kansas State to speak at the College of Business Administration commencement and to meet with KSU President Jon Wefald. Mr. Rhodes purpose was to return to campus and make a contribution to the business school with “little fanfare,” but he wanted to be sure that when he arrived in Manhattan everything was smooth and scripted. I did quite a bit of homework on people he would meet and places he would visit. Suddenly it became

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the biggest little fanfare of any visit I had been involved with, but I enjoyed every minute of it. When he and Betty were leaving Manhattan to return to Mesa, I asked him if everything was, OK? “Everything was perfect. You work well behind the scenes, Jeff and you probably didn’t even realize you were doing it.” Then he winked to acknowledge that he had just worked me.

Columnist George Will said of Rhodes “One glance tells you God had a congressman in mind when he made John Rhodes. And he is just what the Founding Fathers had in mind when they designed the House of Representatives, the body intended to be closest to the common man.”

When George W. Bush was running for President in 1999 (for the year 2000), Rhodes told me that he was “excited about the young Texas Governor and what he had to offer.” The first person in Arizona that Bush would visit was John Rhodes, its elder statesman. The day my ex-wife and I had lunch with the Rhodes at the Mesa Country Club I mentioned to him that he was not wearing a tie. “I am retired now” he responded, and I wouldn’t even put one on if the next President came to visit.”

He was true to his word. When he met Bush in 1999, just a week before me, John was wearing a plain brown plaid shirt – and no tie. He was just another guy having lunch with “an old friend” as he would say. In phone conversations or in person as we kept in touch through the years, I would often call him “Mr. Rhodes” or “Congressman” and he would say, “Jeff, we are just John and Betty, or actually Betty and John.” With a smile as big as the Arizona sky.

John Rhodes served as Chairman for two of the Republican National Conventions, but Betty wanted the people of Arizona to remember him for campaigning door-to-door tirelessly in 105-degree heat.

In his book “I was There” a 1995 memoir of his 30 years in Congress, he responded to an inquiry about other congressional leaders, such as Newt Gingrich by saying, “My leadership brand was mundane and unexciting compared to Newt’s.”

Barry Goldwater, who talked Rhodes into running for Congress in 1952, said of him, “If you don’t care who gets the credit, you can get a lot of things done. Consequently, John just sits back, pushes with his strength and things happen.” Gerald Ford said, “He wasn’t flamboyant, but he got the job done.”

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On August 7, 1974, what he often described as the “toughest day of my life.” He, Sen. Goldwater, and Sen. Hough Scott of Pennsylvania met President Nixon as Watergate was imploding around Nixon. They quietly told him that he did not have the votes to save himself from being forced from office. Although they did not bluntly suggest that Nixon resign, they acknowledged he was on the brink of being impeached by the House and probably would be convicted in a Senate trial. The next day Nixon announced his resignation on national television.

John Rhodes, who died Sunday at age 86, will be missed by both Arizonans and Kansans. He is a great example of how one can be successful by not trying to be someone you are not. John Rhodes was a regular guy, with a heart of gold and a friend to thousands of regular guys like me. *-Jeff Chapman is the Director of Fund Development at Meadowlark Hills Retirement Community in Manhattan.*



*Photo from AZ Central Gazette,*

*Rhodes meeting Bush at Mesa CC wearing same brown shirt.*



*Rhodes Official Portrait*