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His legacy: Integrity

Longtime Congressman George Brown dead at 79

Brown was passionate about science and civil rights, and passionately against the Vietnam War.

PAMELA FITZSIMMONS

Rep. George E. Brown Jr., the oldest member of the House of Representatives, died after a lengthy hospitalization for treatment of an infection, his family said Friday. He was 79.

Brown had heart valve replacement surgery in May at the Bethesda Naval Hospital in Maryland and was back working part time about a week later.

But two subsequent infections landed him back in the hospital in mid-June.

The first infection was almost cured with antibiotics, said his wife, Marta Macias Brown. But in his final days, a second infection took hold and doctors could not save him.

Brown died about 3:45 p.m. PDT Thursday. Staff and family did not announce his death until Friday.

"His legacy of service and lifetime of contributions helped sustain American leadership across frontiers of scientific knowledge," President Clinton said. "George Brown's support for science was drawn from his deep belief that science and technology could help achieve a peaceful world and a just society. For almost 40 years, from his earliest days fighting racial inequality, George Brown challenged us to build a better world."

In a political world dominated by lawyers turned lawmakers, Brown stood out. His background was in physics.

"He was passionate about science, as he was passionate about making sure our children have the science, math and technical skills necessary for the 21st century," said Dan Goldin, administrator of the National Aeronautics and Space Administration. "I spent many hours with Congressman Brown talking to school children through his district, and I will truly miss him."

Brown even won a special Emmy in 1987 from the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences for his contributions to technology by initiating a series of broadcasts between Moscow and Washington, D.C. for a documentary series called "Capital to Capital."

Brown left his mark not only in science and technology but in civil rights and the Vietnam War. His staying power was legendary: In an increasingly conservative Congressional district, Brown held fast to his generally liberal ideals and continued to be re-elected. He was serving his 18th term.

He never voted for the death penalty "and never will," Brown liked to say.

He was an inspiration to young activists in the 1960s.

"There are a whole circle of us out here who loved him and got started in politics because of him," said Rick Tuttle, controller for the city of Los Angeles. "He was opposed to the (Vietnam) War at a time when it was a very lonely thing to do politically. I remember George Brown being the only member of the House to speak at a rally put on against the Vietnam War in November 1965."

The numbers show just how alone Brown was on the Vietnam War.

In 1965, when the House of Representatives voted to approve the 1966 military appropriations bill, the final tally was 407-1. Brown, who was a Army second lieutenant in World War II, cast the only no vote.

He did it again the following year, casting the single nay vote against 393 yeas. Eventually, other lawmakers would follow Brown's lead.

State Assemblyman John Longville, D-Rialto, who worked for Brown in the 1970s and remained a friend, called the congressman's death a loss not only for his district and nation but the world.

"George was literally decades ahead of the crowd. ... He worked on global warming and problems with the ozone layer issues that had an impact worldwide on so many," Longville said. "We will miss his vision, courage and integrity."

Brown began his political career in 1952 as a councilman in Monterey Park. He later became mayor and was elected to the state Assembly where he served four years before being elected to Congress.

He later gave up his seat in Congress to run for the U.S. Senate and lost the Democratic nomination to John V. Tunney, then a Riverside congressman. Brown later moved to Colton, and in 1972 won Tunney's old congressional seat.

Upland resident Maggie Stewart, one of the founding members of the county Republican Party and a former two-time chairwoman of the group, has been campaigning against Brown since he defeated Republican Harry Snyder in that 1972 election.

Stewart was confident Snyder would beat Brown, because Brown had just moved to the area after losing a bid for the Senate two years earlier. With frustration, she watched Brown beat Snyder and every Republican nominee since.

"We were so sure we were going to win, and then he came out here from Monterey Park, rented an apartment in Colton and he beat us. Then, he beat us every year after that," Stewart, 78, said. "We had a lot of good candidates, but he was the one the voters chose time and time again."

In recent elections, Republicans made him a perennial target for defeat. They came close numerous times Brown won with 51 percent of the vote in 1992, 1994 and 1996. But his opponents never were able to dislodge him.

Brown never lost touch with the folks he represented, friends said.

Irene Montano, owner of Mitla Cafe in San Bernardino where Brown dined regularly with family and friends praised Brown for his good work on behalf of people.

"Things are going to be really different without him," she said. "He was pretty much in tune with everything that went on around here. He watched out for us."

Brown supported some of the most landmark legislation of the 20th century, including the Civil Rights Act and the Voters Rights Act, which ended segregation

in the South and allowed all adults to cast a ballot in an election, no matter what their color.

He also was a strong believer in President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society legislation, which created such programs as Medicare.

Brown was a co-author of the pivotal Myer, Milius and Brown Act in about 1960, which allowed public-sector employees in California to establish unions and negotiate contracts with employers.

Fontana resident Ruby Wicker worked on that and many more labor issues with Brown since the 1960s. She also worked on every one of Brown's congressional campaigns, and was never surprised at his winning ways year after year, she said.

"I expected him to win every time because he was a beloved man. He was like a Teddy bear. Everybody loved him," Wicker, 79, said. "He had the best labor record in Congress for many years."

More recently, Brown crafted legislation to help credit unions expand their membership and ultimately survive.

"It didn't matter what the issue was. If he believed in it, he'd work until it was done. And if he had a problem with it, he'd tell you where he stood up front," said Maurice Calderon, senior vice president at Arrowhead Credit Union.

Brown didn't rely on media advisers, sound bites or polling to set his positions, said his wife, who also worked on his staff.

"George consulted his own knowledge of history, the details of the issue and his conscience in setting his own course," Marta Macias Brown said.

Brown was born in Holtville in the Imperial Valley and received his physics degree from UCLA. He and his second wife, Rowena, had four sons.

Funeral arrangements are pending.

Sun staff writer Frank Geary contributed to this report.

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