

## An Era Ends

BY JERRY CORNFIELD

**W**alter Holden Capps, who inspired a generation of college students,

earned the respect intellectuals, and awakened the hearts of federal lawmakers with his plea to cherish what they have in common rather than be consumed in conflict by their differences, died in Washington, D.C. Tuesday of an apparent heart attack. He was 63.

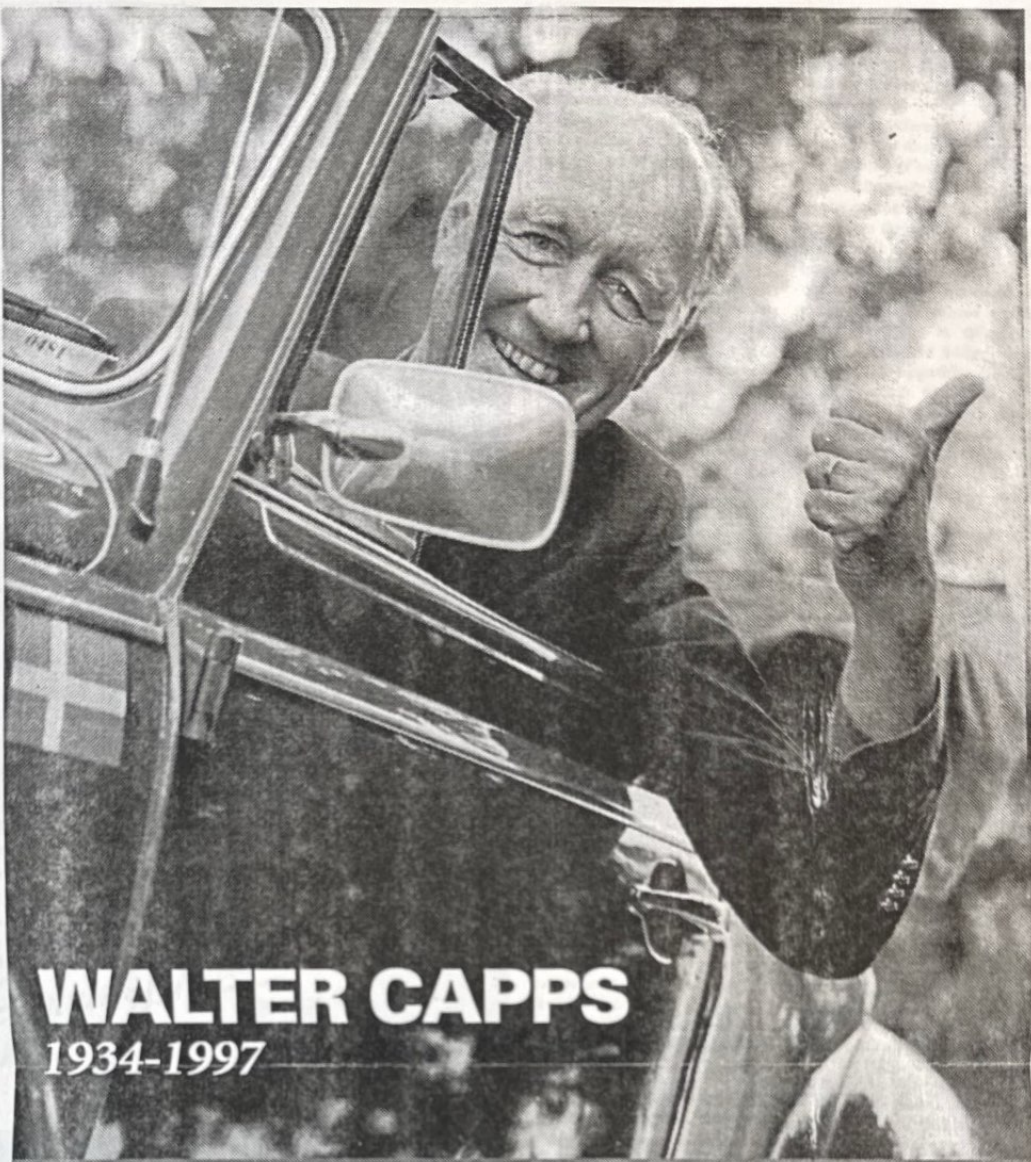
News of his death stunned those in the nation's capital, where the first-term congressman was expected to cast a vote that night on defense spending; at UCSB, where he had been a professor for 32 years; and throughout the Santa Barbara community, where he, his wife Lois, and their children Lisa, Todd, and Laura, have deep and extensive roots. "The sadness keeps coming," county Supervisor Naomi Schwartz said Wednesday. That day flags at UCSB were lowered to half mast as the initial shock ebbed into outpourings of grief and eulogies from friends, colleagues, and President Bill Clinton.

In Washington on Wednesday, Lois and Laura Capps sat in the gallery of the House of Representatives as congressmembers paid tribute to Walter Capps with whom they had served just 10 months. "It has been an incredible outpouring," said Jeremy Rabinovitz, Capps's chief of staff. "Last night the president of the United States grieved for Walter and the ladies in the cafeteria grieved for Walter because Walter treated them all the same. He didn't feel he was better than anyone else."

Capps had spent the long weekend in Santa Barbara, attending numerous events including presenting a Bronze Star to a Vietnam veteran and surfing the Internet with Hollister Elementary School fourth-graders. He and his wife flew east Tuesday, arriving at Dulles International Airport shortly after 4 p.m. He collapsed from an apparent heart attack while awaiting a taxi cab ride to the House chambers where he was to vote on a Department of Defense spending bill. Paramedics spent an hour trying to revive him before taking him by ambulance to Columbia Reston Hospital in Virginia. Capps was pronounced dead at 5:47 p.m. A military plane was to return the body of Capps to Point Mugu late Wednesday or early today. Lois and Laura Capps were also expected on that flight. Funeral services are tentatively scheduled for 11 a.m. Monday, November 3, at the Old Mission.

Capps was elected 10 months ago, following an expensive and grueling campaign against the incumbent Republican Andrea

ERA CONTINUED ▶



## WALTER CAPPS 1934-1997

### Honest Everyman

BY NICK WELSH

**W**alter Capps had held office in Congress just 10 months before he was killed by a massive heart attack. The first Democrat to represent the Central Coast in Congress since World War II, Capps seemed to personify the honest Everyman hero of *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. Perhaps the most well known and popular personality to emerge out of UCSB, where he taught for 33 years, Capps campaigned at length about saving "democracy from politics" and restoring the "bonds

of trust" between government and the governed.

Blessed with indefatigable optimism and an irresistible sense of humor, Capps denounced the bitter partisanship that marks most current political discourse, and advocated in its place a new civility. "There is a contrary spirit out there that threatens to do us all in. It is the spirit of suspicion, fear, cynicism, and suspicion," he said in a 1994 speech. "Those who work on behalf of bringing the people together, rather than espousing that which drives them apart are always on the right side," he added. Ironically, the 1996 Congressional campaign that gave Capps victory over Republican Andrea Seastrand ranks as the most rancorous and partisan in Santa Barbara's history.

Capps was born in Omaha, Nebraska in 1934, the oldest of four



On Saturday Capps awarded the Bronze Star to Army Special Forces Vietnam vet Rick Carter of Santa Barbara (center).

boys. Also sharing the home were two uncles, one of whom—his Uncle Carl—came back from World War II without the use of his legs. And it was with Uncle Carl that young Walter shared a room. Capps vividly described his uncle's nighttime groaning, ex-

plaining that this experience gave him sensitivity to what veterans have gone through.

While Capps was the first of his family to attend college, Portland State University, he was initially a mediocre and disinterested student.

EVERYMAN CONTINUED ▶



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## Era 4 CONTINUED

Seastrand, who had been part of the Newt Gingrich-led Republican revolution of 1994. Capps believed the abrasive style and extreme policies of Gingrich and the GOP troops he led in the 104th Congress angered and alienated a majority of citizens. He felt it severed what he termed the bond of trust between the elected and those they serve. He pledged to mend the tear.

Two near tragedies, however, threatened his 1996 bid. He collapsed in March in San Luis Obispo, the result of an irregular heart beat. He underwent a battery of tests over several days before rejoining the campaign trail. Then, May 23, he and Lois were injured in a head-on collision on Highway 154. Near death for the first 24

hours—that he rarely acknowledged—to victory. Then, one of his first acts in Congress, was to back tough reform of campaign finance laws.

Congress offered Capps a new lectern for his message that restoring the bond of trust with citizens requires lawmakers be more civil to one another, constructing solutions from their similarities rather than scratch at each other's scars from old battles.

Cast as a liberal Democrat in the campaign, Capps proved a pragmatic moderate in office. He backed a balanced budget agreement despite opposition from senior Democrats, supported "most favored nation" trading status with China, and pushed President Clinton to ban imports of assault weapons. Legislatively, his first bill increased funds for research into cures for Lou Gehrig's Disease, a move prompted by his closeness with Tom Rogers, the former Santa Barbara county supervisor afflicted with the terminal illness. In recent weeks, he proved his ability to punch his way out of legislative clinches, fending off a bid to buy former President Ronald Reagan's ranch with federal funds without public hearings.

Capps detested the partisan maneuvering in Congress, as when he voted for a constitutional ban on flag burning. When interviewed he said the Republicans had laid a political trap for Democrats like himself. Opposing it would surely return to haunt him on the campaign trail, he said. He revealed in the heavy conversations that sprouted in the halls and offices on Capitol Hill. In one interview, he moved swiftly past talk of budget battles to recount at length and in detail his meeting with Vaclav Havel, the Czech president and author whom Capps revered.

After some stumbles early on, political professionals from Washington to Santa Barbara noticed Capps had reached his stride. "This can be a real rough and tumble business," Gingrich said Wednesday. "He was fascinated by the process. He was just beginning to grow and gain an understanding of all this."



KIM REIBERSON

### Walter and Lois Capps campaigned shoulder to shoulder.

hours, he slowly recovered in a two-month hospital stay. In the wake of both incidents, he and campaign staff discussed, and rejected, withdrawing from the race.

The 1996 campaign was also one of unprecedented spending. Capps and Seastrand spent nearly \$2 million combined. The real force came from outsiders, a bevy of heavy-spending special interest groups—business associations, environmentalists, abortion and anti-abortion rights supporters, labor unions, gun controllers to name a few—that operated free of influence from the candidates. Capps rode a wave of this political mus-

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Democratic heavy-hitters came out for Walter Capps. President Clinton (top) came to Santa Barbara City College days before the 1996 election. Senator Bob Kerrey (above), a Vietnam veteran, joined Capps and his wife, Lois, at a UCSB rally.

### Everyman CONTINUED

Ultimately, the study of theology ignited his passion, as did an undergraduate named Lois Grimsrud, whom he married 36 years ago.

They moved to New Haven, Connecticut, where Capps attended the prestigious Yale Divinity School, from which he graduated in 1961. Capps wanted to teach, not preach, and in 1964 the Capps family moved to Santa Barbara, where Capps had gotten a job heading UCSB's then fledgling Religious Studies Department. Under his tutelage, that department thrived and garnered national recognition.

UCSB, like other campuses across the country, was about to explode in the '60s, due to the pressures and divisions caused by the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights movement. Capps had been a moderate Republican, voting for Richard Nixon, not John Kennedy, in 1960. But Capps, moved by the charisma of Camelot and stirred by the moral eloquence of Martin Luther King Jr., switched parties. As the anti-war movement picked up steam, Capps opposed the war and volunteered to counsel draft resisters. By the early '70s, he had become intrigued with a new strain of German theology that concerned itself with how best to inject moral values into public policy.

By the late '70s, Capps had gotten involved with the nationally prestigious Center for the Study of Democratic Institutions, then located on campus. In a former interview, Capps recalled attending one especially scholarly gathering there to

discuss the effect of the Vietnam War on American Society. Two Vietnam vets were present, but said nothing. "They said they didn't have the right words. I asked them to participate anyway. So one guy started banging the table with his prosthetic arm, hollering, 'Let's start talking about the war!'"

In 1979, Capps started teaching his now famous class on the Vietnam War, one of the first to address the national wounds festering from that historically unpopular war. By 1983, vets started showing up and speaking about their experiences and their psychic wounds. It was the beginning of something powerful and cathartic. Capps's former campaign manager, Kevin Looper, said, "That class wasn't Walter teaching. It was really a series of guest lecturers. But the genius was that he selected people who told very personal stories about their experiences—the conscientious objector and the Navy Seal—and he let the conflict unfold. In the process, they would both come to realize they both loved their country."

Capps's class attracted the interest of TV reporters and producers, who also began to show up. When Capps took students on field trips to Washington, D.C., to visit the Vietnam Memorial, the media often tagged along. In 1988, the TV news magazine *60 Minutes* featured the class. Capps gradually became a frequent visitor to the halls of Congress where he testified on issues important to Vietnam vets. Capps was able to get both grunts and draft dodgers to tell their stories; but he also was able to bring high-profile vets like Ne-

braska Senator Bob Kerrey, badly injured during the war, to talk before the young students. Kerrey was so impressed with Capps's class that he guest taught it one semester. And Kerrey helped spark in Capps an interest in politics. In fact, Capps worked on Kerrey's 1988 Senate race, as well as his 1992 presidential bid.

In the hardball world of faculty politics, Capps assiduously shied away from conflict points, managing to hover safely above the ongoing fray. Yet his career flourished. He published 14 books, won appointments to numerous state and national committees, and was elected vice-president of the Academic Senate.

He and Lois had not lived the stereotypical insulated academic life. From their warm comfortable home, a renovated one in the Garden Street district, the Capps family participated fully in Santa Barbara's civic life. Lois, who worked as a public school nurse, is almost as well known and respected as her husband. And their three children have also distinguished themselves. Laura works for President Clinton; Lisa just earned a Ph.D. in psychology and obtained a teaching position at UC Berkeley; and Todd is a talented musician.

In the '90s, Capps started a course called "Voice of the Stranger," in an effort to humanize the homeless, the poor, and the different, which was also popular with the students. But Capps, then in his late 50s, was growing restless. In 1994, when visiting Congress with a delegation of scholars, Capps came upon then Congressman Michael Huffington sitting on committee. "He didn't say anything. He didn't do anything," Capps said. "Disdain was the look on his face."

When Huffington announced he was running for the Senate, Capps expected Democratic Party heavy hitters like Gary Hart, Jack O'Connell, or Tom Rogers to run for the vacant office. When they did not, Capps very belatedly did.

The 1994 Congressional pitted him against Andrea Seastrand, an arch conservative State Senator at a time when arch-conservatives were winning. The Capps campaign was vintage *Mr. Smith Goes to Washington*. He spoke so often of "restoring the bonds of trust" that even now, the phrase is known to his staff as "B.O.T." He stumbled, he bumbled. He started late. He didn't do any of the things campaign experts said he had to, like, for example, raising money. At one point, chafing at the cookie-cutter approach of the national party, Capps wrote the DCCC a letter stating, "You should know that most of the materials you send out here have absolutely no relevance to anything anyone out here is talking about." California Congressman Vic Fazio, in charge of the DCCC at the time, read that letter during a congress-

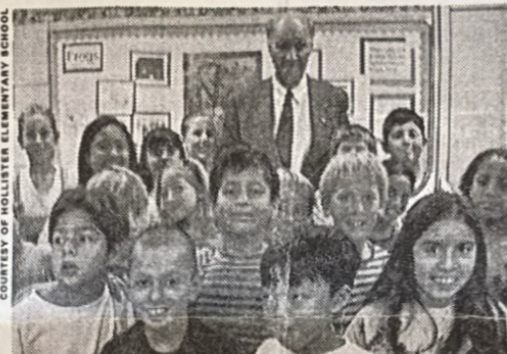
sional tribute to Capps this Wednesday.

But in spite of his best efforts to alienate the party hierarchy, Capps got big help from high places. For example, Hillary Clinton came to Santa Barbara for a fund-raising event at the Miramar for Capps. He also enjoyed tremendous grassroots support. Sometimes it seemed every car on State Street sported a Capps bumper sticker.

Capps lost that race by the astoundingly slim margin of 1,600 votes. Two years later he was back, running again against Seastrand. It was a very different campaign. Struck by a drunk driver on San Marcos Pass in the summer of 1996, Capps was severely injured. While he recovered, his campaign went on without him. Santa Barbara's congressional seat was one of the five most hotly contested races in the nation as the Democratic Party sought to take Congress back from the Republicans and Newt Gingrich. Rather than dicker with Capps, a host of progressive special interest groups with strong ties to the Democratic Party flooded the district with operatives and money, all blasting away at Seastrand with both barrels. They did not answer to Capps, and they ran their own campaign. This al-

lowed Capps to speak no evil of his opponent. Instead he preached the gospel of hope, optimism, and connection. At campaign fundraisers, he briefly outlined his four Es—the environment, economy, education, and equality—said a few words about the race, and then sat down at the piano, where he'd lead the assembled in a folksy sing-a-long. Throughout it all, Capps exasperated his political consultants. He wasn't what they wanted him to be; he didn't have well-formulated positions on all the issues. But that's not what Capps was about. "We had 1,300 volunteers out working election day," recalled Capps's former campaign official Cathy Duval. "And they weren't just out there because of what Walter believed. The guy connected in a way I rarely see."

Before taking office, Capps said he hoped one day to return to teaching. He imagined himself speaking to students, saying, "I've tried to convince you that you can't simply be idealists in a sort of hypothetical way. You have to find the ways to put your ideals into action. I've tested that and found you can do it. And now that I've found that's the case, I'd like to see you folks go out and try it, too." ■



Whenever possible, Capps spoke with students. On Monday before his death he visited with Hollister Elementary School fourth-graders.

### What's Next

Under state law, Governor Pete Wilson must, by November 12, declare the seat vacant and order an election. This will prompt a special primary election January 13, 1998. Voters will receive ballots with the names of all candidates, and can vote for anyone, regardless of their own party registration. If a candidate receives a majority of at least 50 percent plus one vote, they will assume office through December 1998, the remainder of Capps's term. If there is no majority winner, then a special general election will be held March 10. On that ballot will be names of each party's top vote getter from the primary. There will also still be regular elections—a June primary and November general—to elect a congressional representative for a two-year term starting in 1999.

Who will succeed Capps? Privately, Democrats say they hope it's Lois Capps. She was unavailable Wednesday, but a Washington source close to the family said, "No one should rule out the possibility of Lois Capps running and winning this seat." State Senator Jack O'Connell is another name mentioned by local Democrats. He said this is a time for grieving and not politics and said he will not ponder that question until next week. Republicans Mike Stoker and Rene Bravo, who previously announced they would challenge Walter Capps, are expected to compete in the special election. Candidates must file nomination papers by December 1.