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Remembering Pat Korten

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Pat Korten, who died after a stroke last week, was one of the unsung heroes of the early conservative movement. We were students together at the University of Wisconsin in Madison, which in the mid-Sixties was morphing into an ideological battleground much like Berkeley in the West and Columbia in New York. The campus left, often encouraged by the university's left-wing faculty, was on the march and growing increasingly intolerant.

Pat was active in conservative campus political activities. He helped pay his tuition as an on-the-air reporter for a local radio station and later founded a conservative daily campus paper to compete with the official student paper. The Badger Herald still exists after surviving the wrath of the campus left. Shortly after its founding, radicals firebombed the paper's offices with "Molotov cocktails" and Pat was the target of vituperative attacks that unfortunately presaged the intolerance of today's left.

Pat proved his mettle as a part time radio newsman. By 1968, the university was one of the centers of the anti-Vietnam protest movement; National Guardsmen, police, and tear gas were de rigueur in those days and two years later a student would be killed in a bombing carried out by radical leftists including a reporter for the official daily student paper. Madison was the first city to vote on a public referendum demanding the immediate and unconditional U.S. withdrawal from Vietnam. The question was on the primary ballot that spring; a primary dominated by Minnesota Sen. Eugene McCarthy's challenge of President Lyndon Baines Johnson.

Virtually everyone believed the left would win on the referendum question and when I was recruited by local veterans' organizations to run the opposition effort. I warned them that we were facing an uphill and perhaps impossible battle against a well-financed, organized opposition in a city dominated by the peacenik left. When Mr. McCarthy was slated to speak to a major rally in Madison the week before the vote, Pat and I began to plot.

Neither of us knew Mr. McCarthy, but I had been following his campaign and had read most of what he had to say about the war. I was convinced that he didn't share the pro-North Vietnamese views of many of his followers; his opposition to the war was based on constitutional concerns and a belief that we were fighting the wrong war, in the wrong place at the wrong time.

We also believed that Mr. McCarthy was, above all, an honest man who never minced words and did not favor surrender. In today's world everything is pre-scripted and candidates are isolated from those whose support they court by advance teams, personal aides and security forces, but they were still reachable in 1968. I asked Pat to don his reporter's hat, take his tape recorder and

do whatever it might take to get to the senator while he was in Madison. Pat worked his way through the crowd at what was described at the time as the largest political rally in Wisconsin history, and handed the senator the referendum question and once he'd read it, asked a simple question: "Senator, if you were a Madison voter would you vote for this question?" Mr. McCarthy didn't hesitate. He said "Not in a million years."

We had what we needed. With Mr. McCarthy's response, we were able to argue that even those who opposed the war should reject a call for abject surrender. It worked and, against all odds, we won. Pat Korten's vision, strategy and persistence made all the difference. A year or so later, I had a chance to tell Mr. McCarthy that Pat and I had conspired to get to him because we believed he would respond as he did. Mr. McCarthy said, "You wouldn't believe the [expletive] I caught for that!" and we became good friends.

Mr. Korten came to Washington to serve the conservative movement. He toiled on behalf of his beliefs at the American Conservative Union, the Cato Institute and at both the Office of Personnel Management and the Department of Justice during the Reagan administration, where he distinguished himself as a spokesman for Attorney General Ed Meese. When he went to the Justice Department in 1988, The Washington Post reported that Attorney General Ed Meese had appointed a "tiger" as his spokesman.

Many will remember him for what he accomplished here in Washington, but I'll never forget that night in Madison when he indeed pursued his target with the determination of a tiger. Pat will be missed and remembered fondly by all who knew and worked with him.