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ARTICLE

A #1 Draft Choice: How Jack Kemp Learned Politics

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Abstract

Jack Kemp's ascent from cast-off professional football player to conservative national figure requires understanding how the phases of his athletic career, which he filtered through his on-field experiences, shaped his unorthodox hybridity. He was in many ways a standard small-government conservative advocating the tenets of the technocratic Sunbelt New Right, but one who took surprisingly progressive stands on issues of labor and race very much at odds with developing Republican orthodoxy.

Keywords: football; NFL; free market; San Diego; Buffalo; public policy; Sunbelt; Jack Kemp

In 1960, nobody wanted to pay Jack Kemp to play quarterback, much less cared how he voted. Too small to get recruited out of Los Angeles's Fairfax High by local football powerhouses like the University of Southern California or the University of California, Los Angeles despite making second-team all-city, Kemp starred at Occidental College in Pasadena before being drafted in the seventeenth round in 1957 by the Detroit Lions, who traded him to the Pittsburgh Steelers before the season began. Mired in mediocrity that saw them finish between third and sixth every season from 1950 to 1960, the Steelers nonetheless provided Kemp only scattered mop-up opportunities. He hardly seized his chance, completing eight of 18 passes for no touchdowns and two interceptions across four games.

Suitably unimpressed, the Steelers let Kemp go one game into the 1958 season. The New York Giants picked him up, but in a familiar pattern, he did not throw a single pass for them, although over the summer he had campaigned for Nelson Rockefeller for governor, his first involvement in politics. The Giants passed him to the Canadian Football League's Calgary Stampeders, who found no use for Kemp's talents. The San Francisco 49ers tried to give him a shot, but the National Football League (NFL) ruled that he could not suit up because Calgary had paid him in the regular season. When he seized his last opportunity with the Los

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Angeles Chargers of the upstart American Football League (AFL) in the spring of 1960, influential *San Diego Union* sports editor Jack Murphy dismissed him as one of many "rookies, castoffs and retreads ... an Occidental athlete was who was tried and found lacking," who would do nothing to make the ramshackle franchise respectable. Kemp was not a forgotten man, because that would have required that someone remember him.[1]

Two and a half years later, with the Chargers having relocated to San Diego, he had to move east. Chargers coach Sid Gillman left Kemp unprotected after a thumb injury, and the Buffalo Bills claimed him on waivers for a mere $100. The *Union* ran Kemp's "open letter to the people" on the front page of the sports section on September 29, 1962. He expressed "sincere appreciation for the many evidences of loyal support and friendship" since the announcement of his departure, thanked the Chargers "for the wonderful opportunity," and looked forward to returning home to San Diego, "this wonderful city," after the season ended. In that brief span, Jack Kemp and his family had stitched themselves into local athletic, social, and political fabrics.[2]

Kemp blossomed in Buffalo. He was named AFL player of the year by the Associated Press in 1965, made five Pro Bowls on top of the two he had made in San Diego, and led the Bills to three consecutive title games, the first two of which he won and was named Most Valuable Player. He retired in 1970 as the AFL's all-time leader in passing yards. His political ambitions had been such an open secret for years that teammates nicknamed him "the Senator." In March 1970, after months of speculation and weeks of consultation with influential Republican organizers in Washington, Kemp formally announced his candidacy for New York's Thirty-ninth Congressional District: "I expect next year to be serving as a U.S. congressman and not playing football." Kemp perfectly summarized what the head of a broadcast advertising firm described as the ideal candidate for mass-media promotion: "attractive, dynamic, have the look of a winner... . [A]ll of those preconceived traits that we expect our leaders to possess." In what must have been a particularly satisfying turn for a player drafted in the seventeenth round, another observer lionized him as a "No. 1 draft choice."[3]

The first-time candidate boasted powerful friends.[4] In January 1969, Kemp and his wife attended the inaugural morning coffee in the new Nixon White House. Even before Kemp officially announced his candidacy, presidential advisor Herb Klein remarked that President Nixon regarded Kemp as "an outstanding prospect," and both he and RNC chair Rogers Morton promised national party assistance. A week after Kemp's announcement, the Erie County Republican Party executive committee unanimously endorsed him, spurring other contenders for the nomination to drop out immediately.

Later that summer, Klein added that the president "has taken a personal interest" in the campaign of "a Congressman made to Richard Nixon's order." The first page of an article following Kemp's run showed him conversing amiably with Nixon in the Oval Office. As election day neared, the *Buffalo Evening News*' editorial cartoonist drew his opponent asleep in a pup tent on a football field as Kemp, running behind blockers labeled Nixon, Finch, and Klein, threatened to trample him. He took a congratulatory call from the president on election night at a headquarters festooned with envelopes reading, "From the White

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House"—yet another Nixon phone call to a winning locker room. Kemp's fairly narrow win, with 52% of the vote, a margin of 6,000, was his closest call in a House election.[5]

A 1978 *Esquire* feature called him "the hottest young property in the Grand Old Party," noting that he had given 150 speeches in 32 states in the first nine months of the year and highlighting predictions of a Kemp win in the 1980 presidential election. Although he never scaled that mountaintop, during his 35 years in Washington Kemp served nine terms in Congress, considered a run for president in 1988, became Secretary of HUD during the George H. W. Bush administration, and ran for vice president in 1996 alongside Bob Dole.[6]

How Kemp ascended from football castoff to national political figure, and what he stood for when he got there, requires understanding how these various phases of his athletic career shaped his political sensibility. He was in many ways a standard small-government conservative advocating the tenets popular with the technocratic Sunbelt New Right, but he also took surprisingly progressive stands on issues of race (and less so, labor) pointedly at odds with developing Republican orthodoxy. In San Diego, Kemp learned that quarterbacking a team that in many ways incarnated the rise of the city and articulating libertarian positions in general terms gained him entry to political circles. In Buffalo, he was elected by clarifying those vague articulations and blending them with strategic advocacy for workers and civil rights. Kemp spent the decades from 1970 through his death in 2009 synthesizing the lessons both cities had taught him.

Often Kemp's specific policy proposals devolved from what he had learned from football and less often were focused on managing or redirecting his reputation. As one of the most successful athletes turned politician in American history, his career testifies to the strengths and weaknesses of a media complex that accommodated Kemp every bit as much as Kemp accommodated himself to voters, converting athletic celebrity into political currency and a penchant for vague sloganeering and speechifying into strength at the polls and in Republican intellectual circles.

San Diego's GOP establishment channeled Kemp's budding political instincts and helped him cultivate the first of the powerful friends who would steward his career. The San Diego *Union*, very consciously the voice of that establishment, gave Kemp a platform to hone his public voice, and he became an avatar of the city's rise to cultural prominence. Grasping how central the Chargers were to the *Union*, and how central the *Union* was to the city's sense of itself, is crucial to understanding the ideological and cultural origins of Kemp's career.

Chargers coach Sid Gillman, who like most of his players had been handed his walking papers by the NFL, approached the 1960 season in Los Angeles with a realistic sense of his team's limitations that Jack Murphy said, "would probably be interpreted as pessimism in a lot of other public figures." Gillman acknowledged that "our football will [not] be of the same caliber as the National Football League." He furthered this impression by encouraging "any boy with football experience" to walk into the Chargers' office on Sunset Boulevard and obtain an invitation to try out. Murphy dismissed Kemp and several "Ram discards" that Gillman had brought in as "not much of an attraction."

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Much early-season commentary echoed this line; one wire-service story in August referred to Kemp as "a quarterback who never got much of anywhere in the NFL" and another mentioned his "several years in a football deep freeze." The latter article also highlighted sparse attendance at the Chargers' second exhibition game in cavernous Los Angeles Coliseum. (The team drew just under 11,500 fans in a stadium that seated more than 103,000 for football.) Gillman remembered counting the house from the sidelines later that year and wondering if more fans than players were at the game. At times, local high school teams outdrew the Chargers. All of this, crowned by the less than 10,000 who came out to watch the Chargers overcome the Denver Broncos to win the first AFL West title, led the AFL to relocate its championship game against the Oilers to Houston's Jeppesen Stadium, a high school field. Gillman dryly recalled that ABC might not have renewed its contract "if they panned around the Coliseum in the first quarter and could only find 97 spectators." The Chargers kept the game close for three quarters before losing 24-16.[7]

"We've got to get out" of what the *Union* called "apathetic Los Angeles," owner Barron Hilton admitted in December. In January 1961, the San Diego city council debated for 10 minutes before voting 7-0 to approve more than $420,000 in improvements to Balboa Stadium, which had opened in 1915. Chargers attorney J. Stacey Sullivan challenged the council to "prove San Diego was a big league city" by granting the team additional benefits, including free rent, full benefit of concession revenue at the stadium, new turf and locker rooms, and control of parking revenue. In return, the Chargers would pay the city "five percent of the profits if any," although Hilton predicted a loss of $100,000 for the 1961 season—itself a huge improvement on the reported $800,000 the Chargers had lost in Los Angeles.

The news spurred a rush of civic pride in "eager, enthusiastic San Diego." The *Union* ran four stories on the move, in addition to Murphy's column, on the front page of the January 25, 1961, sports section. "In the wink of an eye," Murphy exulted, "they became the San Diego Chargers and the city was projected squarely into big league professional football." "I felt like leaping over the Civic Center out of sheer exuberance," he added. "We believe they will make a major contribution to the future of the city," mayor Charles Dail joyfully proclaimed.[8]

Kemp became a star even before the move to San Diego. He led the Chargers to a 10-4 record, throwing for more than 3,000 yards and 20 touchdowns in 12 games, leading the league with four fourth-quarter comebacks, and being named first-team All-Pro. He finished second in voting for player of the year. By mid-fall of 1961, public and press were noting his crossover appeal. The *Los Angeles Times* called him "the player the bobby-soxers single out first for an autograph" and a "ringer for the original All-American boy." Gillman boasted that the Chargers "already have a dozen players who could compete in the other league," likening Kemp to Johnny Unitas, cut by his hometown Steelers before becoming a legend with the Colts. "All this boy needed was an opportunity," Gillman said.[9]

Off the field, Kemp installed himself as a civic fixture who promoted himself and the team at once. Even before the move, owner Hilton had predicted that "someday, Kemp would be the Republicans' Kennedy." In February, Jack Murphy wrote that the Chargers were devoting their offseason to a "'crash' program

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designed to populate Balboa Stadium with paying customers." "As available as a politician in an election year," Gillman got players jobs throughout the community, talked up the team to businesses and restaurants, and accepted "practically all speaking invitations." "If nothing else," Murphy concluded, "this means San Diego probably will have the outstanding debating team in the American Football league" because of the coach's abundant speaking engagements. The Chargers sold tickets at department stores and offered 25% off for servicemen. Kemp, one of two players in "this oratorical task force," learned the rudiments of political campaigning by stumping for his team. In two weeks of March alone, he commemorated Sigma Alpha Epsilon's Founders Day, spoke to the Chamber of Commerce, and joined backfield coach Al Davis in an appearance at the Downtown Optimists' Club and Gillman at the La Jolla Kiwanis' Club. That summer, he gave a passing demonstration at the Boy Scout Fair.[10]

Kemp was building an image as a stalwart civic booster. Jack Kemp's Day Camp, for children aged six to twelve, opened in the summer of 1962, promising "valuable sports skills and developing good citizenship" under the guidance of "highly qualified men and women—all teachers in the San Diego school system" assisted by "a hand-picked group of college students." He co-chaired the Sports Committee for San Diego Prosperity to promote four municipal-improvement propositions on the June ballot, all of which passed. His wife Joanne endorsed the mayor of Coronado's run for Congress. The president of the Chamber of Commerce valued Kemp as a literal civic asset: "Every time Jack Kemp completes a pass may mean a new job." (One estimate of the benefits of the Chargers' move to San Diego pegged the city's overall gain as "less than 200 jobs." Considering that Kemp completed 178 passes for San Diego, that boast was literally true.) In the fall, just before the Bills grabbed him off the waiver wire. Kemp attended the kickoff for Richard Nixon's famously unsuccessful 1962 run for governor. Throughout the early stages of his career, Kemp the brand stood for nonpartisan engagement, clean living, and big-time sports as a source of civic enrichment.[11]

Kemp would complete only thirteen passes in a Chargers uniform after 1961. He hit less than 30% of his throws in the team's first two games of 1962 before a broken right middle finger, already dislocated more than twenty times, made it impossible to grip the football. A comedy of errors ensued: the team put him on waivers for only one weekend in late September, intending to recall him immediately, but that method could be used only twice per season. When Kemp became available to any franchise that put in a claim, three AFL teams did, and the Bills won. Kemp threatened to go into teaching: "My feelings are hurt although I realize this is all part of pro football." The quarterback, as was his wont, deemed himself simply "an interested spectator with a lot of friends playing" as he watched the Chargers lose to the Patriots in December. He refused to take shots at Gillman, and Murphy called him "neither bitter nor vindictive," "grateful for the new identity and prestige he has achieved in Buffalo." Four years later, Murphy recognized that Kemp's "freckles and ... strong right arm" had bestowed an identity on both the Chargers and the city "when the team was peopled with unknowns." Gillman, for his part, later lamented the sloppiness through which he "g[a]ve away a future President." He continued to hope that, if and when Kemp won that job, he would name his former coach ambassador to Israel.[12]

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Between 1960 and 1962, Kemp built an identity as a quarterback worth paying and a voice worth hearing. The *San Diego Union* played a central role in both developments. Like many regional news organizations, it served as "both chronicler and cheerleader" in the city's development. Led by Murphy, the paper had lured the Chargers to San Diego, as memorialized when the city changed San Diego Stadium to Jack Murphy Stadium after the columnist's death in 1980. More than the mayor or the city council, Murphy was the driving force in bringing major-league sports to the city. "If San Diego city and civic officials will display interest and enthusiasm," he implored in December of 1960, "the champions of the AFL's Western Division will have a new home." Rival claimants Seattle and Atlanta would have no chance if the city "seized its opportunity," Murphy continued, vowing to pass owner Hilton and coach Gillman's phone numbers to the city council and predicting an AFL-NFL merger "within five years," thereby furnishing "the kind of advertising the Convention and Tourist Bureau could never buy."[13]

San Diego had only recently begun to register nationally. The city had relied on its military base and government funding—the Pacific Fleet and the Eleventh Naval District were headquartered there—since the 1920s, with what popular magazines celebrated as a "blitz-boom" during World War II culminating its growth into a metropolis. "More than any other Golden State city," writes historian Roger Lotchin, "the Port of the Palms has linked its fate to that of military development. It has been ... the quintessential martial metropolis." The metropolitan area doubled in size between 1950 and 1960, swelled by a birthrate that exceeded the national average and the largest community of military retirees in the nation. A study in 1967 found that a full quarter of the city's 672,000 residents were in some way connected with the Navy, and almost half the population was white collar, a proportion exceeded only by Seattle, Dallas, and Los Angeles among cities of comparable size.

Another historian notes that "no city in America focused as single-mindedly on the Navy as did San Diego nor became as dependent on the vagaries of the federal government to augment its local economy." Its largest factory in 1960 turned out Atlas missiles for General Dynamics. In a familiar pattern in the Sunbelt, heavy dependence on federal dollars translated into a libertarian adoration of small government—aside, of course, from the millions the Navy poured into the city, particularly by dredging the harbor and ensuring a stable water supply, which enabled it to "remain the city beautiful it envisioned itself as being and, at the same time, to grow seamlessly." The result, wrote Neil Morgan in 1961, was a disorienting clash of opposites—"nuclear submarines and water skiers in the foreground and towering mountains behind the city ... lavish resort hotels against a backdrop of missile gantries."[14]

The city and its dominant newspaper offered Kemp an environment well suited to an ambitious newcomer nourishing Republican ambitions and conspicuous love of country. The *Union*'s prestige in GOP politics was such that when publisher Jim Copley died in 1973, he was eulogized by Vice-President Spiro Agnew, an implacable enemy of the press, as "a credit to his profession." California Governor Ronald Reagan lamented a loss "to all freedom-loving people throughout the world," and Richard Nixon officially lionized Copley as "a noble

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American whose distinguished career in journalism and public affairs placed him in a direct line of descent from this country's great printer-patriots of the past." While declining to provide even background biographical information to *Time*, *Newsweek*, and the *New York Times*, FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover treated all Copley papers as favored outlets for pro-Agency propaganda.

Others were markedly less enthusiastic. The *Los Angeles Times* dismissed the *Union* as "a journalistic lightweight ... thin on news and conservative to the point of being stodgy." Longtime *New York Times* columnist R. W. Apple mocked San Diego as "urban vanilla pudding" with a flavorless paper that "uncritically boosted the city and backed conservative politicians." Farther left, Ben Bagdikian sneered that it was "edited by retired military men for other retired military men." Kirkpatrick Sale simply labeled it "antediluvian."[15]

Stodginess and lack of critical distance were, to the conservatives who published and read the paper, the point. For them, the *Union* merited celebration for consistently pursuing an editorial policy that, in the words of a former Copley editor, "traditionally adheres strongly to Republican lines... . [It] is the paper of business and professional people, farmers and other independent operators, of army and naval officers."[16]

The paper led cheers for the Republican party with enthusiasm. In 1960, the editorial page disdained Democratic presidential candidate John F. Kennedy's promises as "empty." Columnists noted that senior foreign-policy doyens like George Kennan and Dean Acheson had declined to support the callow Democrat, whereas the "GOP 'First Team'" was "wildly acclaimed."[17]

Although it lacked the clout of the *Los Angeles Times*, until the 1960s California's standard bearer for conservative civic boosterism, the *Union* consistently sought to exert comparable leverage in its corner of the state. One student of the *Times* calls it "a tool to market L.A. as a subtropical paradise, bludgeon unions and extend the family's reach as the real-estate barons of Southern California." The *Union* similarly linked itself to the small cadre of local businessmen who controlled the city's development by consistently defending their interests. "A business-friendly environment," writes Elizabeth Tandy Shermer, "included, generally, low taxes, minimal regulation of business activity, and the enactment of legislation that weakened or discouraged trade unionism. Boosters perfected a language of hypergrowth that enticed a majority of enfranchised voters to grant business carte blanche in the name of economic progress."[18]

In addition to celebrating these values, the *Union* played a central role in constructing the conservative political network that dominated national politics over the last third of the twentieth century. In the late 50s it helped underwrite Pepperdine University's influential Freedom Forum, begun in Los Angeles in 1946 and institutionalized during the next decade in Arkansas. Freedom Forum brought together businessmen, educators, and politicians to network and cement their faith in Christian perspectives on limited government and free enterprise. As Pepperdine president Norvel Young's invitation to the 1959 forum argued, "the recorded history of mankind has proved beyond question that faith in God, Constitutional government, and respect for the rights of the individual are cornerstones of a free society." The attendees heard talks celebrating "West Germany—Island of Enterprise" and wondering, "Can American Freedom

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Survive?" After the first Forum, Edward Gilbert of the *Los Angeles Times* raved that "never, in all the years I have been attending meetings ... have I been so inspired." By 1961, the event "had become a must for local citizens and candidates aspiring to political leadership," and the *Union*'s Paul Terry delivered a speech on "penetrating the enemy."[19]

These remarks underscore the *Union*'s organizational centrality in the rising California bloc of the national Republican party. In his eulogy, Nixon remembered Copley as "a close friend and advisor to me for more than a quarter century." That significantly understated the case. Copley had backed Nixon editorially, in the news pages of his papers, and with ample cash contributions since his first run for Congress in 1946, even allowing *Alhambra Post-Advocate* news editor Herb Klein to moonlight for the campaign as a press agent. An independent who voted for FDR before being impressed by Nixon's debate performances, Klein began to meet with the candidate to mull their futures and gave him "complete and sympathetic coverage." By 1948, Klein was already "one of [Nixon's] key advisers" and had his expenses covered by the party, even as the *Post-Advocate* continued to pay his salary, and he rose to the position of press secretary by 1960. "On occasion, critics maintained that this arrangement blurred the line between objective newspaperman and political operative," as Klein's obituary in the *Union-Tribune* delicately put it.[20]

Soft-spoken and "coolly cordial," Klein's more genteel, less partisan version of politics made him a much better mentor for the ebullient Kemp than the dour, combative Nixon ever could have been. Klein prided himself on doing justice to both sides. "A middle ground ... is all-important," his autobiography concluded. Although a confirmed Nixon man writing for and then editing a Republican paper, Klein fought hard for a free press. He told his staff not to favor Nixon in its coverage while he was off working for the candidate and later declared himself "glad I had no part in" the candidate's worst "smearing distortions" during Nixon's red-baiting 1950 Senate victory over Helen Gahagan Douglas. Kemp's family had cultivated his interest in current events—growing up, his mother insisted on substantive dinner-table conversation. (Kemp's younger brother Dick called it "a family where ideas mattered.") So when Barron Hilton relocated the Chargers to San Diego in early 1961, Klein, newly installed as the *Union*'s editor, saw in Kemp exactly the kind of figure he wanted to cultivate—young, ambitious, charismatic, conservative in disposition yet not deeply committed, and nowhere near as dark as Nixon. Kemp's energetic self-promotion over the next two years bore out Klein's vision of what he could become.[21]

Kemp was always eager to broaden himself. Paul Maguire, a teammate in San Diego and Buffalo, remembered him practicing a new word every day and using it in a sentence. "I didn't know how to take him," Maguire said. At this time, he was devouring the reading list (Ayn Rand, Friedrich Hayek, Ludwig von Mises, Milton Friedman) percolating through the conservative intellectual sphere. Fifteen years before the meeting with Arthur Laffer that would make Kemp's reputation as an apostle of supply-side economics, he was memorizing mantras of small government and deregulation. Kemp read hungrily, his papers containing files on Christianity, communism, Vietnam, numerous annotated articles by J. Edgar Hoover, even a thank-you note from the Director appreciating a 1964 column in

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which Kemp celebrated the "selfless devotion" of "one of the most articulate spokesmen for the American way of life." He brought boxes of books to training camp, annotating studies of the student revolt (communist-led?), position papers from Occidental College on current events, and statements on civil rights from everything from mainstream news outlets to *Workers' World.* John Hadl, his roommate and eventual replacement as quarterback, recalled that when he first walked into their training-camp room, he discovered Kemp on the bed, reading about Barry Goldwater. Ever after, faith in freedom and the eventual triumph of diligence formed cornerstones of Kemp's ideology: he repeatedly extolled the greatness that both individuals and nations could achieve through devotion to "hard work, determination, and much sacrifice."[22]

It is worth pausing here to note how perfectly circumstances lined up for all concerned. A new team in a new city that was hungry to make its mark nationally, with a local power elite and a newspaper that stood culturally and ideologically at the center of burgeoning Southern-California conservatism, was quarterbacked by a photogenic and articulate figure of generally conservative disposition who was equally eager to rise to the top and not overly burdened by precise political notions.

Klein, a rabid sports fan, had edited the *Daily Trojan*'s sports section while a USC undergraduate. He hired the young quarterback as a columnist and enrolled him in the *Union*'s editorial training program, with bylines variously describing Kemp as the paper's "athletic representative" or "youth correspondent." Much as General Electric had for Ronald Reagan two decades before as he pivoted from actor to activist, the *Union* enabled Kemp to expand his audience by celebrating free enterprise and the Constitution in general terms. Kemp continued to write these columns for nearly two years after being traded to Buffalo, his work appearing in the *Union* through the summer of 1964. He linked Lincoln and Adam Smith as tribunes of capitalism, extolled the opportunities America offered to one and all, and enlisted Grantland Rice in the Cold War. Rice's "Alumnus Football," with its "one great scorer" who cares not whether you won or lost but "how you played the Game," conveyed "a moral code upon which our country was founded... . Playing the game is all important, and only as we are faithful in smaller things do we prepare for the greater."

Kemp wrote as a committed conservative, not just a celebrity athlete, earnestly lecturing readers on politics and economics and occasionally drawing lessons from his day job. In one column, he described the success of teammate Ron Mix as proof of the power of individual effort: Mix "was not born an all-pro lineman, he made himself one." In his last published piece in 2009, Kemp extolled "our greatest president," Lincoln, whose "American idea" that freedom is universal remained the nation's fundamental truth. Although the columns do not reveal Kemp as a compelling stylist, they document how broadly he was reading, how seriously he took ideas, and how eagerly he strived to reach young people. These columns stemmed directly from the fundamentally optimistic, pro-business, pro-growth ideology that defined San Diego's early-60s business and professional class and was extolled daily in the *Union.*[23]

Klein introduced Kemp around local and national political circles, eased his way into the corridors of power, and taught him the practical aspects of politics.

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"He brought some of my ideas down into the real world," Kemp recalled, although philosophical inquiry remained his lifelong preoccupation. (A 1996 profile began by noting that "his devotion to ideas, some of them unconventional, is what has set him apart all his adult life.") Klein wanted Kemp to temper his inquisitiveness with "a feel for pragmatic politics." And he continued to steer Kemp's career from Washington, continually emphasizing the president's support for and interest in Kemp's prospects and helping strategize his first run for office. Their correspondence continued when both ended up in Washington a decade later.[24]

The opportunity to cover the 1964 Republican convention truly set Kemp on his path. The *Union* boasted that it sent fifteen staffers, "one of the largest" delegations from any paper, to San Francisco, including Kemp, editor Klein, its society columnist, and lead sports columnist Murphy. (That blend testifies to how political sports already were in San Diego and how important a public figure Murphy was.) The experience convinced Kemp that the youth of America were hearing his message. Outsiders found the gathered Goldwater forces terrifying: "The stench of fascism is in the air," Governor Pat Brown mourned.

But Kemp was enchanted. He wrote rapturously of Young Republicans making their way west to defend limited government and America's founding ideals, very much like his own family's journey West and his career-saving signing by the Chargers. He found a reservoir of deep feeling among the young people he interviewed, taking care to emphasize serious engagement with the candidate's ideas rather than uncritical adolescent infatuation: "They are in support of Barry Goldwater because he is the modern voice of their philosophy." He left San Francisco convinced that "there is a great re-awakening among young Americans" to the founding principles of "individualism, patriotism, and conservatism." Kemp so devoted himself to advancing the candidate's prospects, sportswriter Murray Olderman joked, that Goldwater's defeat made him a better quarterback by forcing him to return to his day job.[25]

In important ways, Kemp moved well beyond the *Union*'s politics. Though not pro-segregation, the *Union* held the civil rights movement at arm's length, consistently fretting about the prospect of disorder. It preferred that protests remain peaceful, unchallenging, and most of all, far away. The National Urban League actually denied Black San Diegans' first request to establish an affiliate in 1945, reasoning that the community was too small and its problems "not dire enough." When Chattanooga's mayor ordered fire hoses turned on participants in sit-ins across the city's downtown lunch counters, the *Union*'s front-page headlines described a "racial battle" and emphasized that "order was restored after two hours" while omitting any mention of the hoses. Three years later, the paper's extremely grudging commemoration of the March on Washington repeatedly emphasized the marchers' surprising ability to remain "orderly" and act "with a commendable degree of dignity" despite being, as the wire service story had it, "highly emotional." Dignity, in the *Union*'s estimation, lay primarily in avoiding "overdoing," which meant "a lack of incidents that might have erupted into volcanic proportions." Some Copley photographers recalled being sent to student protests at UC San Diego in the late 60s and taking "thousands of pictures" that were rarely published; they believed that their editors passed on the rest to the FBI.[26]

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Kemp repeatedly bucked the emerging Republican orthodoxy on race, whether it was the *Union*'s old-line opposition to protests, masked as concern for propriety, or the emergent dog-whistle racism augured by Nixon's Southern strategy after 1968. Shocked when the Chargers played in Houston's segregated Jeppesen Stadium in 1960, Kemp forced the team to find lodgings where *every* player could stay when they visited Dallas in 1961. He integrated the Bills' rooming plan and strongly supported the Black players' walkout to protest segregation in New Orleans at the 1965 AFL All-Star Game: "'We can't just accept this. What do you think we should do?' I wanted the black guys to decide."

As a politician, Kemp maintained this commitment, blasting the Southern strategy as "a disgrace," repelled by the prospect of "not even asking Blacks to vote for you for fear of losing white votes" and "not happy" with the president's 1970 nomination of segregationist judge Harrold Carswell to the Supreme Court. Throughout his career, Kemp prided himself on being a proud "Lincoln Republican" who had "showered with more African-Americans than most Republicans had ever met." He took the party's civil-rights traditions to heart.

These beliefs that the party must diversify, as a matter of moral obligation more than political calculation, carried through Kemp's political career. In 1979, with typical enthusiasm, he relished the prospect that "it will not be long before the Democrats are forced to preach hellfire and damnation against a tidal wave of blacks voting for the GOP." Although that prophecy never came anywhere near true, a mid-80s newspaper profile described Kemp as the most popular Republican with the Congressional Black Caucus. "He is very sensitive to the concerns of black members," said the Caucus's former chairman. At the *National Review*'s Conservative Summit in 1994, Kemp blasted supporters of California's anti-immigrant Proposition 187 as racists and demanded that the party embrace diversity and accept the reality of discrimination. He supported both the Equal Rights Amendment and the failed District of Columbia House Voting Rights Act, which would have given majority-Black Washington, DC full representation in the electoral college.

Offered a chance to speak his mind in the official program for Super Bowl XXXII in 1998, Kemp contrasted life off and on the field: "The American Dream was only a distant hope for many of my African-American teammates and friends." In a familiar rhetorical move, he then celebrated how "differences of race, creed, and class were dissolved in the common struggle for the end zone"; he rejoiced that the NFL, "in particular" had been "a vanguard of racial equality." But he repeated that "the soul of America is at stake in how we handle racial justice and reconciliation." Kemp's last published article rooted his admiration of Lincoln's fight for racial justice in their shared classical liberalism: "It is impossible to support equality of economic opportunity without also upholding equal civil, human and voting rights for all." "No American politician was better at making allies across political lines or at making friends across racial lines," DC Congresswoman Eleanor Holmes Norton said in a statement released after Kemp's death.[27]

Kemp's best years as a quarterback were in Buffalo, leading the Bills to AFL titles in 1964 and 1965 (beating the Chargers both times, ironically) and winning league MVP in 1965. In Buffalo, he continued the local politics he had learned in

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San Diego and built on the connections he made. A 1966 newspaper article counted more than 1,200 speaking engagements in the previous four years at universities, law schools, and the Jaycee National Convention. In one such speech, to the Niagara Falls Rotary Club in 1965, he contrasted "Football and the Free Speech Movement," which Kemp termed "an absurdity ... a complete prostitution of free speech." After boosting Nixon at the start of his 1962 California gubernatorial campaign, Kemp interned in Governor Ronald Reagan's office in the spring of 1967 (arranged by Herb Klein), worked on Nixon's staff in 1968 and campaigned for him as a member of Athletes for Nixon, and toured Vietnam for the USO that same year.

Two weeks after providing color commentary on Super Bowl II, he was holed up in a Saigon hotel during the Tet Offensive, next to President Thieu's palace. He and a number of other Nixon supporters were photographed walking up Fifth Avenue with the candidate that summer. In 1969, Kemp served as a special assistant to RNC chair Rogers Morton, continuing the messenger-to-youth work he'd begun at the *Union* by visiting college campuses to "close the gap in communications." In 1970 he went to Congress for the first of his nine terms. Mulling the prospect that Kemp would succeed Reagan in 1988, Michael Barone of the *Washington Post* connected all of these strands to explain how Kemp's first career forecast his second: "Jack Kemp's positions—for the Bills, in Congress—have been the gifts of someone else, but he had worked doggedly in each case to make a 'marginal player' into a leader."[28]

Buffalo posed cultural and ideological challenges that forced Kemp to back away somewhat from the free-market, pro-business Sunbelt tenets and WASP culture in which he had been schooled. His support for Goldwater was an anomaly in a city where 100,000 turned out to welcome Lyndon Johnson in late October of 1964; Johnson won 73% of the vote in Erie County in November, well above his national vote share. The team's declining fortunes did not help. After back-to-back titles and a loss in the AFL championship game in 1966, the Bills did not post a winning record until 1973. A sympathetic Jack Murphy noted that the crowd was "on him so hard" in an early-season loss to the Oilers in 1967: Buffalo was "absolutely hostile to Kemp... . And it's not so much they object to his football as his politics."

Booing from the "most vociferous" audience in pro football made Kemp perform worse at home than he did on the road. These tensions came to a head in a 1967 matchup between the Bills and the Oakland Raiders. Oakland quarterback Daryle Lamonica, a former Bill who shared the starting job with Kemp for several years, had connected much more intimately with the team's white ethnic working-class Catholic fan base, which chanted his name so loudly that at times Kemp could not be heard calling signals at the line.[29]

In part, Kemp responded by improving his pro-worker bona fides. He made a name for himself by organizing and leading the AFL Players' Union, a "mature" yet "tough" negotiator who took a positive attitude toward cooperation with management. Kemp was quick to clarify that "this is not a class struggle" and squirmed away from anything smacking of liberalism, describing the group as "a voluntary association of employees collectively banded together to better our working conditions" rather than a "union." Jack Murphy lionized him as "no

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Eugene V. Debs in cleats." Kemp accepted a no-strike pledge that the team owners desired and supported merging the two leagues in 1966 despite its cost to players' leverage, arguing that the resulting stability would help everyone. "I am not for a free market in sports franchises," he subsequently explained.[30]

Two years later, as NFL players requested a declaration of support from their AFL counterparts for a threatened walkout, Kemp demurred, reiterating that "we all have a responsibility to make sure that our demands are based on economics, not emotion" and then winning the AFL union a more generous pension agreement than NFL players enjoyed. He joked that he would write a book called *Can a Republican Find Happiness in the Labor Movement?* From Kemp's perspective, absolutely. "I don't want to see the golden goose scuttled," he said. The *Buffalo Evening News*' labor writer celebrated him as "as shrewd and effective at the bargaining table as on the football field," in tune with modern patterns of flexible collaboration and common purpose in the workplace rather than the "collision of implacable enemies" beloved of those stuck in "the dinosaur age of bargaining." This was so appealing an image that upstate New York Democratic Representative Thaddeus Dulski quickly had the article read into the *Congressional Record.* Nearly a decade later, Kemp reiterated that he understood collective bargaining as "a basic human right."[31]

Kemp also moved to solidify his commitment to the white ethnic Democratic voters whom Nixon addressed as the Silent Majority. He supported funding for studies of ethnic heritage and fought for Polish American historical recognition and freedom from Soviet domination for Poland. He argued against court-ordered busing in an explicit defense of the integrity of white-ethnic neighborhoods and even proposed amending the Constitution to protect parents' rights. Although these moves adapted to a political environment in which catering to white ethnics was smart Republican politics, they also fit with Kemp's larger vision of truly egalitarian equality of opportunity, which he had been articulating since the 1960s.[32]

Kemp's football celebrity as well as his policies made him immensely appealing to the new president, always keen to use the sport to enhance his appeal. A flurry of communications in fall 1970 between the Kemp campaign and the Nixon administration reveal just how willing the administration was to help Kemp out in a classic bit of pork-barrel legislating that highlighted the military-industrial principles he supported and protected local jobs. Defense Department directives threatened the Cornell Aeronautical Laboratory with permanent closure by directing that all wind-tunnel testing be conducted in government facilities. Cornell's aerospace facility, located in Kemp's district but affiliated with the university in Ithaca, was under fire for the nature of its research (which included "anti-insurgency programs" in Thailand), leading the school to sell it to a private company and break all ties in 1972. In response, the lab's PR manager, also a Kemp speechwriter, requested presidential counselor (and previous Kemp employer in California) Robert Finch's help in "rectify[ing] the situation."

Administration officials quickly arranged a meeting between a representative of the lab and NASA and spoke to the Secretaries of Defense and the Air Force, strongly suggesting "prompt reconsideration" of these directives and "more specifically requesting that every attempt be made to channel some of this work

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immediately to CAL's Transonic Tunnel." If not, the ramifications would be dangerous: "This thing could turn into a real red herring... . Some 120 of 155 unhappy members of the wind tunnel staff have been cut to date ... and it's just a matter of time before of these angry individuals drops this information" in the hands of a Nixon opponent. Any leaks "would make for the worst kind of anti-defense/anti-Nixon headlines." The lab survived and remains in business under different ownership.[33]

It's fair to say that Kemp did not have to moderate his views particularly far in the pro-worker directions that Buffalo might have pushed him. With political prognosticators forecasting that the wave of 18-year-olds suddenly eligible to vote would swamp him in 1972 (as many as 54,000 new voters in his district), the powers that be in Albany looked out for him. Redistricting early that year specifically targeted his needs and moved him to the 38th, which had not elected a Democrat since 1937, cutting out most Black and Polish voters and freeing Kemp to appeal to a primarily suburban constituency, among whom he pulled down more than 70% of the vote against what a local paper mocked as "a string of obscure, subservient stiffs" in every one of the next seven elections. Even as his appeal to labor increased, a 1974 profile tartly noted that Kemp relied on football to bridge the gap with working-class voters "with whom he has little else in common": His "idea of labor experience is his role as cofounder of the AFL Players Association, which some feel is a long way from knowing about picket lines and the 40-hour work week."[34]

Football remained ideologically and rhetorically important in Kemp's political career. His 1979 policy statement/campaign announcement, *An American Renaissance*, opened with a celebration of American opportunity: "If you were a first-rate carpenter or mezzo soprano or football quarterback, and you gave it your best—here, if anywhere, you'd make it." Kemp repeatedly drew on football metaphors to underscore his principles. Just as "there aren't a fixed number of touchdowns to go around," the economy could grow if free-market policies were enacted. Coalition politics could not work for long because "when you are quarterbacking a football team, you learn the hard way that if you don't have the other ten players working with you, you'll be driven back every time." The president needed "to advance the national interest as a way of helping all the special interests." And how to do that? By cutting taxes. As an "expert in incentive ... you have three seconds to get the ball, get back, and choose a receiver," he knew firsthand that too many of the wrong kinds of taxes stifled investment—a lesson he drove home by working through the horrific results of a perverse policy that incentivized parents to raise their children to play quarterback but did not similarly reward team ownership, which would ultimately produce no football at all. "If I have a fault," he admitted of his fixation on lower taxes, "it is probably my zealousness." Rhetorically, little had changed by 1996: "Football and taxes are the only two certainties of life on the Kemp plane," one journalist reported.[35]

Jack Kemp looked exactly like San Diego's ideal picture of itself—a married, white, church-going Christian; an eager apostle of free enterprise; an enthusiastic civic booster; and an underdog spat out by Los Angeles who just needed a shot. He was already enunciating positions on race that were to the left of the

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preferred opinions. When he left for Buffalo, he moved beyond doctrinaire free-market ideas to embrace more pro-worker, and to some degree pro-white ethnic policies. The friends and mentors he had accumulated pushed him onto the national stage; what kept him there was a willingness to moderate some of those ideas to fit the lessons he learned both on and off the field. But at his core he remained someone with more passion for ideas than for specifics, in a way that he surely could not have managed without the athletic celebrity that made him so appealing in the first place.

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