

The Lancaster County Democrat



February 2026

Making Government Work for You Dan Nolte, Lancaster County Assessor/Register of Deeds

When I was elected Lancaster County Assessor/Register of Deeds in 2023, I had campaigned on making more people aware of the Homestead Exemption Program. State law allows a property tax reduction—in some cases, a full exemption from property tax—based on income of homeowners 65 and older. The Homestead Exemption program is also available to certain veterans and some people with disabilities.

The only catch is that homeowners must apply for the exemption every year. It isn't entirely straightforward. There are annual deadlines and copies of documents must be filed along with an application. Some people can get confused and doubtful, even give up. So with the support of staff, we mailed information to all property owners 65 and older. The data are interesting:

Year	# of Apps
2022	5,766
2023	6,623
2024	6,827
2025	6,642

Staff also held outreach meetings at Aging Partners and in Waverly. We are pleased with the results of our efforts to help eligible homeowners and we want to continue in 2026.

But we spotted a problem. In February, 2026, the parking garage directly north of the County/City Building will be closed for a year for expansion. People will be directed to park in two garages downtown and to take a bus to and from the County/City Building to access services.

Staff in the Assessor/Register of Deeds' office were concerned that, especially some of those needing Homestead Exemption assistance, might have difficulty navigating the alternate parking and busing to our office. So we worked with the Public Building Commission to come up with a solution. As of the first

week in December 2025, we moved our Homestead Exemption team to the former Drivers License facility at 500 West O St.

We believe it will be much more convenient for those who want Homestead Exemption help to park adjacent to the service we offer in a location that may be familiar to them. We've worked to get the word out and so far the results are encouraging. We continue our outreach on this program and believe it is an example of government working for you.

Looking back on 2025. Looking forward to 2026.

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January 7, 2026

As your elected Lancaster County Public Defender, I've had the pleasure of preparing the yearly Annual report for the Office since 2023. Every year brings rewards and challenges to our busy Office, and 2025 was no different. As I am in the midst of finalizing the report which will be published in February, I share with you some of the data and refer you to www.Lancaster.ne.gov/556/Public-Defender. Click on "About Us", then "Annual Reports" for previous years' reports. You will find that we never *lack for cases*, and all of us—support staff and attorneys—are quite busy, but we work hard and are dedicated to make sure that we are providing high quality legal representation for each client while maintaining reasonable caseload levels. Everyone, no matter their income, deserves competent representation and the effective assistance of counsel.

In 2025, we celebrated with the County in recognizing 4 attorneys, 2 paralegals, and our Office Administrator for their sustained years of service to the Office. It is the practice of the County to recognize the years of service the year after the hiring date in 5-year increments, so a person who worked with us for 15 years, for example, actually has been with us for 16 years. Four attorneys were awarded for 25, 15, and two for 10 years of service. Two paralegals were

awarded for 25 and 15 years of service, and our Office Administrator has dedicated 25 years to our work. Congratulations all around! In addition, while speaking of longevity, one of our Investigators retired after 29 years of service to the Office, and we wish him a very happy and well-deserved retirement.

Four attorneys left the office in 2025 for other jobs—one to the Commission on Public Advocacy, two to the ACLU, and one took a job as a Deputy County Attorney outside of Lancaster County. We wish them well. In spite of a hiring freeze imposed by the County on all County agencies from mid-February to May 1, 2025, we had many applicants wanting to work in our well-respected Office, and we have replaced all but the one who left mid-December 2025. We hope to be fully staffed with another attorney and another investigator by February or March 2026.

Every year the Public Defender's Office represents thousands of clients, and 2025 was no exception. For example, we were appointed to 2,152 felonies in 2025 (not counting the 7 Major cases—those involving a loss of life, which we list separately), only 10 cases fewer than in 2024. However, drug felonies increased from 883 in 2024 to 994 in 2025. You've heard me complain before that the Lancaster County Attorney's Office files felony possession of controlled substance charges for drug residue in a baggie or straw or pipe, for example, and, unfortunately, they have continued that practice in 2025, plus some. Many people cannot afford to post even a \$100 bond and so are held in custody. Each client that has to sit in jail costs Lancaster County a minimum of \$150 per day. Infirmary and mental health beds cost the County even more due to increased staffing needs. The monetary expense to the County, although substantial, doesn't even begin to address the human costs of incarceration through the loss of housing, employment, benefits, access to children and family and support systems, access to certain medications, medical and mental health treatment and counseling, and more.

On a happier note: felony property charges decreased from 268 in 2024 to 233 in 2025; violent felony cases decreased from 489 in 2024 to 476 in 2025; and Major cases decreased from 12 in 2024 to 7 in 2025. Although growing in population, the number of crime categories are actually decreasing in Lancaster County.

As the elected Public Defender, I strongly believe in being a helper, an advocate, and personally maintaining my *own* caseload, because, as you can see, all of the staff work hard for our clients, and it would

be inequitable for the leader of the Office to take no cases. We all need to help out and help each other.

When I ran for election in 2022, that was a major focus for me, and it still is. In 2025, I closed 80 cases - some felonies, some misdemeanors, some not responsible by reason of insanity, and some mental health cases. And I currently have clients that I represent in the previously mentioned dockets. As you can see, when I am not in the Office or in meetings, I am in Court. Every case that I take and every client that I represent is one less that another attorney in the Office needs to handle, thus, decreasing our overloads (cases we need to withdraw from when we exceed our caseload standards). Attorneys can only handle so many cases (see my article/blog about caseload standards on my website, Kristiegger.org), and every case I take saves the County money that would otherwise have been paid to court-appointed private counsel. At \$125 per hour (or \$175 per hour for the more serious cases), that really adds up.

I am a strong advocate for diverting people from the criminal justice system whenever possible and appropriate. Because of this, I am a huge supporter of diversion programs, problem-solving courts, and treatment courts, through which people can work hard to turn their lives around and make a clean start in life. These programs are not only cost-effective for the County but help those who complete these programs to lead better lives...a win-win for our entire community!

In 2025, we closed approximately 176 cases where people participated in various diversion/problem-solving programs and treatment courts. Approximately 92 people successfully completed pretrial diversion, which is only for misdemeanors, and constituted the highest number of participants. The next highest graduating group was in the mental health problem-solving program, followed by drug court, DUI court, treatment problem-solving program, and Veteran's court.

These numbers do not include the clients who are still actively participating in the programs/courts. Programs last from 6 months to 1 year to up to about 3 years or so, so the cases can remain open for quite a while. I am grateful to Community Corrections, Probation, the Judges, the County Attorneys, and all the staff involved in helping to make these programs/courts so successful. As a participating member of the Mental Health problem-solving staffing meetings and the treatment problem-solving staffing meetings, I see first-hand how lives are changed for the

better when caring and helping hearts, not judgmental one prevail.

As you can see, 2025 was a good year. The level of service that my Office provides to the County and to all of us who live here is only possible because of the dedication of all of our staff—from the people who answer the phones and open files, to the paralegals and the investigators and mitigation specialist and the legal secretary and our office administrator, to the law clerks and the attorneys, to the management team and me. Each year the management team and I look at the constantly evolving process of structuring and assigning caseloads and fairly distribute duties. All our staff must be considered, not just the attorneys. Everyone plays an important part, and a good leader recognizes that.

2025 brought us a well-researched upgrade to our case management system and a reasonably priced discovery platform to help all the attorneys better manage and synthesize digital evidence while not overburdening our already busy support staff. I have continued to modernize the Office while keeping in mind our budget and my obligation to the taxpayers.

As we go into 2026, I will continue to lead the Office forward, paying close attention to our core philosophy and goals as set out in our Annual Reports. We will continue to provide client-centered representation of the highest quality, while maintaining political and professional independence for the Office, because our obligation belongs always, first and foremost, to our clients.

No One Has Done More To Incite Political Violence Than Trump

By Dennis Crawford



Trump uses threats of violence to control the GOP and intimidate the opposition.

No one in America has done more to incite political violence than Donald Trump.

A revelatory piece on the *Vox* website on January 2, 2024, brilliantly lays out how Trump and his most unhinged supporters have used threats of violence:

“The former president’s rhetoric has often directly encouraged violence. At a 2016 rally in Iowa, Trump instructed his supporters to “knock the crap out of” disruptive protesters. “I promise you I will pay for the legal fees,” he added. During the 2020 protests over George Floyd’s murder, Trump implied that any rioters should be shot by tweeting *an old white supremacist slogan*: “when the looting starts, the shooting starts.”

And, at the fateful rally on January 6, 2021, he *told his assembled supporters that* “if you don’t fight like hell, you’re not going to have a country anymore.” That day, and ones immediately to follow, dramatize just how profoundly threats of violence have come to shape Republican politics.

In 2016, the Capitol Police recorded *fewer than 900 threats* against members of Congress. In 2017, that figure more than quadrupled, per data provided by the Capitol Police.

The numbers continued to increase in every year of the Trump presidency, peaking at 9,700 in 2021. In 2022, the first full year of Biden’s term, the numbers went down to a still high 7,500.

Members of Congress are taking these threats seriously. In September, three journalists at the

Washington Post reviewed FEC filings to assess how much candidates for the House and Senate were spending on security. They found an *overall increase of 500 percent between 2020 and 2022.*

The death threats aren't just directed at politicians in Washington. Data has shown extraordinary levels of threats against *mayors, federal judges, election administrators, public health officials, and even school board members.*"

The consequences of these threats have been profound. Threats of violence significantly escalated after Joe Biden won the 2020 general election.

In late 2020, election agencies in five states, Arizona, Georgia, Michigan, Nevada and Pennsylvania received violent threats or "acute security risks" to officials tasked with counting ballots or certifying state election results.

Republican City Commissioner Al Schmidt told "60 Minutes" that Philadelphia election officials received death threats, including calls "reminding us that this is what the Second Amendment is for."

Georgia Republican Secretary of State Brad Raffensperger said, that he and his wife, received death threats, including a text to him that read: "You better not botch this recount. Your life depends on it."

Then Arizona Secretary of State (and now Governor) Katie Hobbs said she faced escalating threats of violence over the outcome of the presidential election, and blamed Trump for spreading misinformation to undermine trust in the results. Hobbs, called the threats directed toward her family and staff "utterly abhorrent."

Those threats probably saved Donald Trump from impeachment in early 2021.

More from the January 2, 2024, Vox article:

"But the fear of physical harm, of someone killing them or their families, held some of these Republicans back from voting to impeach him.

Senator Mitt Romney *recounted stories* to this effect to the Atlantic's McKay Coppins:

When one senator, a member of leadership, said he was leaning toward voting to convict, the others urged him to reconsider. You can't do that, Romney recalled someone saying. Think of your personal safety, said another. Think of your children. The senator eventually decided they were right.

Romney personally refused to bow to this intimidation and voted to impeach, just as he did during Trump's first impeachment. But not every Republican displayed this level of bravery in the face of serious threats to both their political and personal future.

Just before the House vote on impeachment, Rep. Jason Crow (D-CO) has said he heard firsthand from

Republicans that fear was holding at least two of them back.

"I had a lot of conversations with my Republican colleagues last night, and a couple of them broke down in tears — saying that they are afraid for their lives if they vote for this impeachment," he *said in an MSNBC appearance.*

And reporters confirmed these accounts.

"I know for a fact several members *want* to impeach but fear casting that vote could get them or their families murdered," journalist Tim Alberta *tweeted before the House impeachment vote.*"

Trump and his supporters continue to incite violence during his second term. It has not gotten any better.

"In private, Republicans talk about their fear that Trump might incite his MAGA followers to commit political violence against them if they don't rubber-stamp his actions.

"They're scared shitless about death threats and Gestapo-like stuff," a former member of Trump's first administration tells me." *Vanity Fair* on February 19, 2025.

Six Democratic members of Congress recently called on military officers to refuse to obey illegal orders from the Trump regime. This issue has become particularly relevant since the regime has been killing alleged drug traffickers off the coast of Venezuela. Two alleged drug dealers were killed after their boat was destroyed and they were desperately clinging to the wreckage.

On his social media site, Trump falsely accused his six Democratic opponents of treason and called for their execution. In response, these six Democrats were subjected to hundreds of death threats.

The six Democratic lawmakers said in a joint statement: "No threat, intimidation, or call for violence will deter us from that sacred obligation."

Senator Mark Kelly blasted Trump's threats at a recent press conference: "The President and Pete Hegseth aren't going to silence me. They aren't going to keep me from speaking out. And they aren't going to stop me from doing my job. Enough of the bullying. Enough of the intimidation. Enough of the threats. Enough of the nonsense. It doesn't help anyone in America afford their groceries or pay their medical bills. And it erodes the rights of every American. My job is to fight for them and to stand up for the Constitution. And nothing is going to stop me from doing my job."

Donald Trump has made political violence a feature of his politics," Senator Chuck Schumer, posted on X. "No president has encouraged violence the way this president has."

And that's not all. Eleven Republican members of the Indiana Senate were threatened after they refused to support Trump's hyper partisan gerrymandering scheme aimed at stealing the 2026 elections. In addition, Schumer's offices have recently been targeted with death threats.

The current threats from Trump and his supporters are not only aimed at Democrats. Republican Congresswoman Marjorie Taylor Greene has been inundated with threats since her recent, very public break up with Trump. Her son also received a death threat. All Greene did was call upon Trump to keep his promise to release the Epstein files and do something about the expiring ACA tax credits.

No elected Republicans have called on Trump and his most unhinged supporters to knock it off. They have remained silent in the face of this threat to freedom and democracy. These Republicans are cowards.

Democrats have been courageous in 2025. There has been a blue wave in the 2025 elections. Democrats have consistently out performed Kamala Harris by 10 to 20 points in the elections. We have experienced big wins in Wisconsin, Omaha, New Jersey, Virginia and California. We have the momentum.

Let us be remembered as the generation who saved America from fascism. If we do the work, we will win. On to victory in 2026!

Sources:

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The insidious way violence is changing American politics—and shaping the 2024 election. www.vox.com

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Helen Boosalis: Best mayor ever?

By Jim Schaffer

Helen Boosalis's political accomplishments would be unusual for anyone, but for a woman of her era, they're simply incredible: she was elected to four terms on Lincoln's city council and then mayor for two terms; chosen as the first woman president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors; and Democratic nominee for governor in a race that caught the attention of the country.

During Helen's last month as mayor, a six-year-old girl who was born during the early Boosalis years in office was surprised when she heard that two men were running to succeed her. "Oh!" she said. "You mean a man can be mayor?"

The best account of Helen's remarkable career is a book written by her daughter, Beth Boosalis Davis, in 2008 called "*Mayor Helen Boosalis: My Mother's Life in Politics*." Much of the information in this article is taken from her book.

First foray into politics: City charter battle

A complete unknown (outside her neighborhood), Helen unknowingly launched her political career when she became president of the Lincoln League of Women Voters in 1957. At the time, the League had mounted a major effort to change the form of Lincoln's city government.

Lincoln's city charter, adopted in 1917, featured a "weak-mayor" system in which the part-time mayor was not much more than a custodian. In the mid-1950s, however, a Charter Revision Committee recommended a new look. After months of study, the committee suggested switching to a "strong-mayor" system, creating a clear division of power between the mayor and city council. The full-time mayor would be the city's chief executive officer—responsible for administering and preparing the budget, appointing and removing department heads and potentially veto in city council action. There would be a new sheriff in town. The League of Women Voters was determined to support the change. "I didn't know if this sudden flurry of league meetings and typing speeches was about to change her life," Beth writes of her mother, "but then, neither did she."

Soon Lincoln's mayor Abe Martin called Helen and asked, "Isn't there someone in your group interested in running for the council? The primary's coming up soon so anybody interested would have to jump in quickly."

In the time it took Helen to make a quick stop at the grocery store for dinner, the energized Leaguers had arrived at a consensus—they wanted Helen Boosalis to run. They were ready to do whatever it

took to organize a last-minute, whirlwind campaign to elect one of their own to the Lincoln City Council.

The City Council race

“At age ten I knew for sure that my mom wasn’t just my mother,” Beth writes. “She was also a person of the people, a person of the world beyond my neighborhood—and most shocking, the person for whom I was suddenly asking strangers to vote.”

Helen grew up in Minneapolis where she worked at the Minnesota Department of Employment Security to help her parents. After marrying, she continued to work while her husband Mike finished his master’s and PhD, and soon motherhood came. “Her lack of a college degree sometimes made my exceptionally competent mother question her preparation for certain roles,” Beth wrote, “and this call to run for public office at age thirty-nine undoubtedly was one of those times.”

The race is on

The primary campaign, only three weeks long, went by in a doorbell ringing, sign-pounding flash. Still passing out leaflets on the day of the primary (April 6, 1959), both Boosalis and her supporters proved to be tireless campaigners.

Helen placed third out of nine—behind two city council incumbents, but ahead of a third. In just three weeks the “housewife ” (as the newspaper often identified her) had organized a campaign in a field of eight business candidates, and managed to place in the top three vote-getters. Boosalis and her volunteers were ecstatic.

Helen did even better in the general election: she received the second-highest vote count and thus was elected to the council. As she basked in the applause of the crowd at her election party, she looked much taller than her five-four height. Who could imagine the great adventure she had embarked upon or the changes she would inspire—both in herself and the city.

Accomplishments

Boosalis joined an activist city council. By the end of 1961, the council had approved two new swimming pools, one in northeast Lincoln and the other in southeast Lincoln, where Helen’s neighborhood supporters had organized their phone campaign. The city also added an Olympic-size pool in Woods Park, along with two new parks, a golf course, skating slabs, tennis and basketball courts, softball fields, two new recreation centers, and the Children’s Zoo—all rolled into a twenty-year bond issue. Parks and recreation were a top priority for the new council

woman, who devoted much of her first term to ensuring their adequate funding.

“The newest member of Lincoln’s City Council prefers hats to cigars,” reported the local paper. “She would rather refinish a piece of furniture than play golf, and she begins her day’s activities not by dictating to a secretary, but by ironing a shirt for her husband, preparing breakfast, and seeing their daughter off for classes while the telephone jangles incessantly.”

Running for a second, then third and fourth terms

As her first city council term ended, Helen decided to run for a second; she simply loved what she was doing. In the 1963 city election, she was one of two incumbents in a field of thirteen. Both won reelection handily. Also elected was the city’s first “strong” mayor under the new system—Dean Peterson, president of a milk transportation company.

By the time Helen ran for a third council term in 1967 and a fourth one in 1971, she had become a revered figure at city hall with a reputation for openness and integrity.

A first-generation child of Greek immigrants

Eleni Geankoplis, who would become Helen Boosalis, was born on August 28, 1919 to a Greek immigrant family in Minneapolis. Her dad encouraged her from a young age to stand up and fight for herself. “I came home crying in second grade,” she said, “because some kids were teasing me. ‘You cannot cry for that, Elenitsa,’ her father said. ‘You must be strong. Remember, you are a Spartan!’”

Helen’s dad was rarely home because he was in the restaurant business and often, because his restaurant was failing. He and his brother lost their first restaurant, the Minnehaha Café, and then bought a small grocery store where they also sold homemade chocolates. But the grocery store business failed, too. The family was forced to give up its house when Helen was ten, and move to a rented duplex where Helen, her three siblings, and her parents lived on the first floor; her grandparents lived on the second floor.

From this point on, Helen went to work, helping in her dad’s cafe on East Hennepin, typing the day’s menu and making copies on a “messy duplicating contraption.” Once she finished, she would run eight blocks to elementary school but was often late.

Helen’s father was typical of many Greek immigrants of the time who came to America to make their fortune and intended to return to Greece. They worked long hours for a relative in the restaurant business or tried to make a go of it themselves,

struggling to support their families. If they couldn't realize the dream that pulled them across the ocean, then by God, they thought, their children would.

"My mother would get a little nervous," Helen remembers, "when a family of hotheaded Greeks at Sunday dinner started shouting and carrying on. I loved it. Among Greeks I was proud of my family—especially my mother, who was so up to date—yet outside the world of Greek immigrants we just wanted to be Americans.

"As the oldest child, I felt my first obligation was to help support the family. By the end of my second year in college I'd grown impatient with classes and studying. I left college for a real job with a real salary. I got a full-time job, through Uncle Gus, at the unemployment compensation division of the Minnesota Department of Employment Security."

Mike Boosalis

Meanwhile, Mike Boosalis, Helen's future husband, was also growing up in Minneapolis. With America's entry into World War II, he joined the service for a one-year stint that turned into almost four. The night before the last of Mike's fifty combat missions he remembers praying, "This is my last mission in Europe. Please, Lord, make it a safe one." (Mike was a bombardier).

During a long furlough, Mike and Helen got married on February 14, 1945, in the Greek Orthodox Church in Minneapolis. Mike's first post after marriage was in Midland, Texas, where Helen found a place for them to live on a small farm about three miles outside town.

A few months later when Japan surrendered, Mike was honorably discharged as first lieutenant from the Air Force and the couple headed home to Minnesota. Not long after that, Mike took a job with the University of Minnesota Department of Plant Pathology. Later Mike took a job at UNL and moved the family to Lincoln where Helen quickly developed a wide circle of friends.

Becoming mayor

"What a shock," Beth Boosalis writes, "when I answered the phone one Sunday afternoon in late February 1975. My parents had important news to tell us—my mother was running for mayor!"

Prior to 1975, only one woman had been elected chief executive of a major U.S. city—Bertha Knight Landes, mayor of Seattle from 1926 to 1928. Regardless of the slow but positive effect of the women's movement, Helen was taking a gigantic step. She announced her decision to run for mayor of Lincoln only five weeks before the primary on April 8,

1975. When Beth asked why she waited so long, she responded simply, "I didn't decide until then."

"The specific circumstances of the 1975 mayoral race may also have played a role in Helen's hesitancy to throw her hat in the ring. Rather than running for a vacant office, she was taking on a popular two-term incumbent, Sam Schwartzkopf. He was an amiable fellow, a businessman and a former varsity football player. Schwartzkopf had easily won his first two terms in office and was expected to have another four years to complete a few remaining projects. The now full-time mayor had a salary of \$28,000, nearly as much as Helen's husband Mike was making, and a huge increase over her wages on the city council, which had started at ten dollars per meeting.

What's a leader?

Helen's notion of leadership was not some set of top-down skills, Beth wrote, where a visionary individual leads the pack, somehow persuading others to adopt their point of view. Instead, Helen instinctively understood that it was followers who make a leader. She believed the sole reason for her to run for public office was to give voice to the people.

In the April 8, 1975, primary results, Boosalis came in a strong first out of the three mayoral candidates, getting 53.4 percent of the vote and beating the incumbent by almost 13 percent. Just like her first city council primary election sixteen years earlier, news coverage used words like "surprise" and "unexpected" to describe her showing.

For many voters, the exciting element in the final months of the campaign came from Helen's effort to wrest control from the city's old-guard power brokers, the "O Street gang," who had influenced city affairs for decades. A newspaper ad raised the specter of handing over city government to "these liberally-oriented people, . . . a power bloc that could side-track Lincoln's growth plans, undermine the effectiveness of our police force and turn an acknowledged good city administration into a giveaway government."

"Helen's business opponents were reluctant to give up their long-standing power in the city," reflected Coleen Seng, who would become Lincoln's mayor in 2003. "They didn't think anyone who did not have a business or meet a payroll could understand their interests."

Yet victory came—"deliciously decisive," as Beth put it. When one radio station declared Helen the winner with 55 percent of the vote, her supporters demanded a victory speech. Helen stood on a platform above the crowd but had little voice left, having used

most of it that day, talking to any last prospective voters.

“People were staying out of the mayoral race because they felt the incumbent couldn’t be beaten,” she said, “but fortunately women don’t always believe what they’re told!”

A different kind of mayor

The first two full-time mayors, Dean Peterson and Sam Schwartzkopf, had rarely attended city council sessions. But Helen Boosalis was a different kind of politician: she claimed a front-row seat at the first post-election city council meeting and declared that she would attend every subsequent council meeting.

One reporter observed that “during those long and often boring sessions, she’s bobbing up and down, talking with department heads, chatting with citizens in the hall, jotting down a note to herself or hopping up to the Council microphone to tell lawmakers something or other about this or that program.

At times she seems to steal the show from the Council.” While her presence at council meetings signaled Helen’s vision of mayoral leadership, the first real test of her strong-mayor powers was a doozy: the appointment of a new police chief.

A tough challenge in the City Council

Several city council members formed a solid anti-Boosalis bloc to thwart the mayor. “If they could have knocked me off the top of the Empire State Building,” Helen said. “Nothing would have made them happier. If they voted for one of my positions, it was because the public was so vocally and overwhelmingly with me on the issue, they had to.”

Helen’s political acumen was never in doubt. As her administrative aide and later administrative director, Mike Merwick, recalled: “Helen made the city staff into overachievers. She inspired, she demanded, she led by example. She was always there working right along with staff and didn’t ask anyone to do what she was unwilling to do.” This talent would lead to her becoming a significant figure on the national scene.

(First of a two-part article)

George McGovern And The 1972 Nebraska Democratic Primary

By Dennis Crawford



George McGovern at UNL on October 2, 1971.

Nebraska had been crucial to the outcome of the two previous contested Democratic presidential nominations in 1960 and 1968. John F. Kennedy had won the 1960 primary and Robert F. Kennedy triumphed in 1968. That history convinced most of the serious candidates for the 1972 Democratic presidential nomination to make Nebraska a high priority. That’s why Nebraska mattered again in 1972.

Between 1970 and the May 9, 1972 election day, Nebraska received multiple campaign appearances from all of the leading Democratic candidates and some of the heavy underdogs. McGovern was making what looked like a quixotic bid for the presidency when he made his first foray into Nebraska in September 1970. Other more well-known Democrats who campaigned in Nebraska included the front runner Maine Senator Edmund Muskie, former Vice President and Minnesota Senator Hubert Humphrey, and Washington Senator Henry Jackson. Other longshot contenders who spent time in Nebraska were Indiana Senator Birch Bayh and Los Angeles Mayor Sam Yorty.

By the end of April 1972, an unpredictable and chaotic campaign had narrowed the field down to McGovern and Humphrey. The intense process had forced all of the other serious presidential hopefuls to drop out of the race. The central issue before the Nebraska primary was the Vietnam War. Both of the two finalists had similar positions on the issue and promised a quick withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from Vietnam. However, the Nebraska primary would largely be focused on more trivial issues.

The issues for the Nebraska primary were framed by a disingenuous attack from Jackson and a column by two influential Republican pundits in Washington. While he was campaigning in Omaha on April 11, 1972, Jackson falsely claimed that McGovern supported the legalization of marijuana. He also attacked McGovern for favoring amnesty for those who avoided the draft. The charge on the amnesty issue was

accurate but he omitted to mention that many previous presidents had done the same thing after the conclusion of wars.

Editorial columnists Rowland Evans and Robert Novak made the dishonest allegation that McGovern was the candidate of amnesty, legalized marijuana and abortion. Subsequently, some of McGovern's opponents labeled him the candidate of acid, amnesty and abortion. That allegation gained traction and began to erode support for the South Dakotan.

McGovern entered Nebraska as the favorite but his campaign team accurately perceived that their candidate had to aggressively rebut the false allegations. Former Nebraska Governor Frank Morrison had endorsed McGovern in 1971 and he agreed to campaign with him since he was a popular figure with Nebraska Democrats. Morrison would act as McGovern's validator and public defender.

The South Dakotan wrote in his memoir that Frank and his wife Maxine were the "two of the most effective people in the country campaigning on my behalf." At the rallies, Morrison would warm up the crowd and introduce his friend. "How many of you think Frank Morrison would be out here advocating the election of a dangerous left winger for President?" he liked to ask.

A rally was held before a capacity crowd at a large Catholic high school auditorium in Omaha in which Morrison was going to rebut the smears against McGovern. After that, he would introduce the candidate to address what they saw as the actual issues like the Vietnam War, tax reform, the farm recession, the economy and defense reform. Morrison took to the microphone and in his deep, loud voice, he passionately proclaimed: "We have in our state tonight one of the finest young men in America. He is a great patriot, a highly decorated war hero who loves his country and wants to serve us as president. But he has been subjected to a vicious campaign of smears and innuendo."

"They say that George McGovern is for the legalization of marijuana, but I say," Morrison began. Suddenly the youthful audience broke out into a loud applause that took the former governor by surprise. He then completed his initial statement: "I tell you that George McGovern does not advocate the legalization of marijuana." The crowd suddenly became quiet and there was no cheering.

Morrison next said, "They say George McGovern is for abortion on demand, but I tell you." He was again interrupted by loud applause from the crowd. Once again, Morrison was flummoxed by the audience's reaction and went on to say, "But I say to you that George McGovern is against tampering with

our state laws on abortion." Again, the crowd became quiet.

At this point, Morrison said that McGovern was not a radical and handed the floor over to the candidate for his remarks. After the rally, Morrison said to McGovern: "George, maybe I'm too old to understand this new generation. I'll get the oldsters for you, and you take care of the young ones as you think best. We're going to have a hard time beating Hubert in Nebraska."

On election day, McGovern defeated Humphrey 41 percent to 35 percent in the popular vote. The final figures for the other candidates were: Wallace 12.5 percent, Muskie 3.5 percent, Jackson 2.7 percent and Yorty 1.8 percent. The popular vote was non-binding and merely a beauty contest. In the all important delegate count, McGovern earned 15 delegates to Humphrey's 7 delegates. It was a clear-cut victory for the South Dakota senator.

McGovern campaign manager (and future U.S. Senator) Gary Hart was very optimistic after the results in Nebraska. He later wrote that the win in Nebraska was very important to McGovern's quest for the nomination since it was one of the states the campaign had originally targeted in 1970, they told the press that they thought they could carry Nebraska, and it was a farm state where McGovern would be expected to do well. After an upset loss in Ohio, the McGovern campaign had to prevent a Humphrey victory streak that could have made the former vice president the front runner.

However, Hart was mistaken in his belief that Nebraska proved that the strategy of portraying McGovern as an extremist could be thwarted by open campaigning. Political Scientist Bruce Miroff wrote in 2007 that Hart's conclusion was "premature" and that the Nebraska campaign demonstrated that there was a "receptive audience for the construction of George McGovern the radical."

McGovern's win in Nebraska was the high water mark of his campaign. A Harris poll conducted in May found that McGovern was at the peak of his popularity in the polls. This influential poll found that McGovern was within 5 points of Nixon — Nixon 40%, McGovern 35% and Wallace 17%. McGovern had already made several mistakes during his campaign. For example, his stands on amnesty and defense cuts were not popular. The reality was that McGovern's luck had run out in Nebraska on May 9. Up until this point, McGovern got every lucky break but afterwards, he got every bad break.

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This an excerpt from an upcoming book on the 1972 Nebraska Democratic presidential primary. It is a sequel to our book on Robert F. Kennedy and the 1968 Nebraska Democratic primary.

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