

BILL FRITSCHE

Kraus with Governor Dreyfus and Milwaukee Journal Reporter Eugene Harrington.

Bill Kraus: The man behind the governor

Some of his best friends are Republicans.

"I keep on winning political campaigns for them," Bill Kraus says of the Republican Party, "but the Republicans don't consider me to be a pure Republican."

That could be because William Kraus insists on saying un-Party-like things not in the privacy of the smoke-filled room, but right out in public where the whole world can hear and see and read them.

Things that led Frank Ryan, chief Wis-

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consin political writer for United Press International, to tag Kraus early-on as "Dreyfus' outspoken communications coordinator and resident political analyst."

Things like:

- "I never had my snout in the trough until November of 1978."
- "I have worked for Democratic candidates on occasion. I worked for Marty Bablitch and Roland Day."
- "I supported Tom Harnisch against the group trying to recall him and the

Republicans said: 'You can't support Harnisch.' I said I can support anyone I want. I also asked them what they were going to do when Jerry Falwell gets control? That was too tendentious an argument . . ."

There is no question that Bill Kraus is a free spirit, a maverick who regards the herd with suspicion and thus is suspected by the herd, marching — gamboling, even — to a different drummer.

As an old professional in a tough ball-
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game, Kraus displays many of the particular skills and general demeanor of New York Yankee third baseman Graig Nettles.

When Nettles discusses his business affiliation, it could be Kraus speaking.

"When I was a child," Graig Nettles said in his most memorable statement, "I always wanted to either join the circus or play baseball. With the Yankees, I've done both."

As a kid, born in Marshfield and growing up in Stevens Point, Bill Kraus didn't dream of playing ball with the Yankees, let alone the Republicans.

After getting a Bachelor's from the University of Minnesota in 1946, he got his law degree from the University of Wisconsin-Madison in 1949 and headed back to Stevens Point.

In 1949, he recalls, he had a wife and child, the country was in "a mild recession," and lawyers weren't making any money to speak of. So he took a job with Sentry Insurance. It paid \$200 a month.

"I was hired as a *writer*," he said. "I stayed with Sentry for 29 years. In general management."

He wound up as vice-president in charge of the domestic insurance operation.

It was at Sentry that he first waded out into the waters of political activism.

"Sentry was always very permissive about political avocations," he says. "If you had the inclination to take part, it was okay with them. Sentry didn't do a lot of the bullshit public relations stuff that a lot of the companies do."

Kraus got his feet wet in the first Mel Laird campaign back in 1952 and participated in all the subsequent Laird campaigns.

In 1964, he ran the Seventh District campaign for Warren Knowles.

Pausing to reflect, not unlike an old soldier looking back on the battles, he says that what drew him into the Republican Party initially was that "it was a loose confederation of people."

It would eventually introduce him to another political freewheeler and change both of their lives forever after.

"Lee Sherman and I were 'medium' friends," Kraus says of the governor, "while he was chancellor at Stevens Point. In the summer of 1977, Lee was getting restless. He felt he had 'worn out' the chancellor's job. He wanted to get into politics and I discouraged him. 'You're suspect,' I told him. 'All aca-

demics are regarded as latent communists."

In the summer of 1978, Kraus left Sentry. The company was being reorganized and while he doesn't say so, perhaps he too, had 'worn out' a job. Within a couple of weeks, on June 23, he joined the Dreyfus campaign.

"What the hell," Kraus says of his decision. I figured I'll spend 10 weeks helping him lose an election and that will be that. Shows how serendipity runs our lives."

But by 1978, he says, political parties had become a joke. They were unorganized, they were economically bankrupt. It seemed that an 'anti-party' campaign was feasible.

"This was a whole new ballgame," he said.

Kraus insists that the most important single thing a political candidate can have, *must* have, is credibility. He is equally insistent that only the press — the reporters — can give a candidate credibility.

Painfully, he recalls the Johnny Erickson campaign for the United States

Senate and the disastrous time the former basketball coach had just bringing the ball upcourt.

"We never achieved credibility," Kraus admits. "The *Milwaukee Journal* put us on the front page exactly twice in the whole campaign. The first time, when we announced. The second time, when we lost."

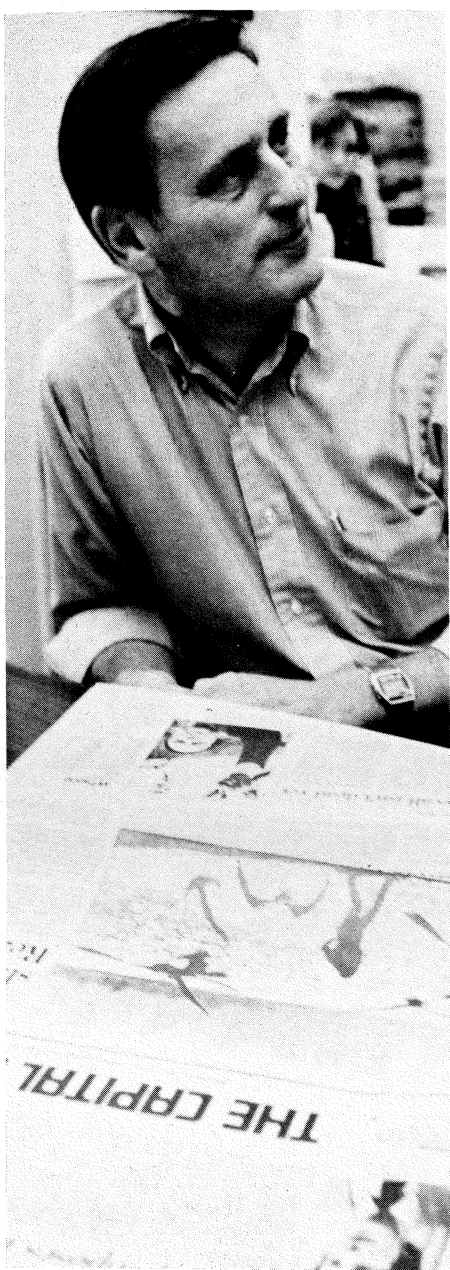
After that debacle, Kraus 'went away' from politics for eight years.

By contrast, the Dreyfus campaign was a gem. A perfect game. A winner. And it was done on a relative shoestring of \$100,000 for a nine-month campaign.

"There's nothing more fun than having a sure loser," Kraus laughs. "You can do *anything*. I love being the underdog."

As the underdog, Lee Sherman Dreyfus debated David Carley on nine different occasions.

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"I figured I'll spend 10 weeks helping him lose an election..."

"Carley's a formidable politician," Kraus said. "We didn't win the debates, but Lee Sherman handled them well. The press, the reporters, watched and reported what they saw and they gave him credibility to all the readers who didn't see him."

One of the dangerous things Kraus did with Dreyfus was to put him "live" in a parking lot up in Rhineland and invite every special interest group around to confront him. *Okay, here he is. Take your best shot at him.*

"He handled it."

In October, Kraus even permitted the press and TV to cover one of the "smoke-filled room" strategy sessions. *Live.*

"It's unheard of in politics," he says. "It's like inviting the whole world — including your opponent — into your football huddle."

Politics lacks daring, Kraus maintains, and daring is his style. He thinks it's on the rise, though. He thinks he's the first

of a new breed.

"We have a new strategy in politics today," he says. "I call it the "enemy" strategy because all the special interest groups around today are really "enemies" of the democratic process. I think this strategy will continue through the '80s."


The traditional political parties, he argues, "as bad as they are," are simply trying to get elected so they can govern.

The special interest groups don't want to govern — they just want their way."

"The true believer bugs me," he says, "and that goes from my mother to the president. True believers are dangerous."

The extreme answer that they offer, he feels, is not the answer because this country and this government is not set up to provide a "tyranny of minorities."

On the one hand, it's the Springbok situation — Hugh Carey saying: "You



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can't play in New York." On the other end of the spectrum, it's the group trying to recall Tom Harnisch.

"The test of your system," Kraus emphasizes, "is how you protect 'the bad.' I supported the Springboks' right to play and the Republicans loved me for that. I supported Tom Harnisch against the group trying to recall him and the Republicans said you can't It's the 'enemies' strategy versus the 'coalition' strategy. The Renaissance people are getting eaten alive."

What the country and the various governments within it are doing reflects Ronald Reagan, he says, and what Reagan is doing is "short-term."

"You have periodic rebellions," Kraus said, "against waste, bureaucratization, repression, et cetera. Four or five years ago, we began to get complaints redressed. It may last another four or five years. The Democrats are screwed as long as this goes on. They're gonna get beat like gongs."

Big business is indulging itself, he says, and the career bureaucrats, as they do under siege, are hunkered down and try-

ing to ride out the storm.

Right now, HHS is hunkered down, the Department of Defense is up and running. Ronald Reagan as president, in Kraus' judgment, is being manipulated by Defense in the same way that Warren Knowles, as governor, was manipulated by Education.

"The special interests," he reiterates, "view the world differently."

All of us get manipulated in the process because the special interests also know how we view the world.

"People will spend any amount of money," Kraus says, "to alleviate pain and to postpone death. People today say: 'I'm scared to death of Russia. And I want to live as long as possible. And I don't want to get hurt . . .'"

Just when you think it's beginning to look pretty hopeless for the home team, Kraus is right there with a charge and a rally.

"Of course," he said, "one of the geniuses of the American political system is that it offers a platform for discussing the problem without requiring that the problem be resolved."

It reminded him of what he told Dick Leonard of *The Milwaukee Journal*: "As I have aged, two things have happened to me. One: I have become more radical. Two: I have become much more uncertain about things."

"People are not as certain as they pretend to be," he said. "They also are not as righteous as they pretend to be."

There are "righteous" folk in both major parties and he is not reluctant to point them out.

"I regard myself as a true Republican," he says, "in the same school with Ody Fish and Melvin Laird. The John Shabaz philosophy is basically anarchistic and I don't think the country is anarchistic."

"On the other end of the spectrum, in the Democratic Party, I find a lot of elitist totalitarians — the Madison West Side Liberals. As a group, they want 'Abortion on Demand,' 'legalization of marijuana,' and 'no smoking in public buildings.' They're Jeffersonian Republicans."

Kraus defines elitism as "Don't let the people make a stupid decision."

"I want the freedom to find out the truth," he said, "knowing in my own mind that I never will."

"Jeffersonian Democracy is still a pretty good concept. Where it gets screwed

up is in diffusion. It gets screwed up when the feds tell you: 'We'll give you the money. We'll also give you the rules.'"

After watching the Democrats and the Republicans living together under the same system, under the same Capitol roof, Kraus thinks he has the basic distinction between the two parties.

"Republicans tend to over-represent their constituents," he has concluded.

They *never* take their constituents for granted. Democrats tend to under-represent their constituents. They *do* take constituents for granted."

His considered, impartial judgment is that Democrats "always seem to have an eye on their next higher political office."

"So, when I have a vote coming up," Kraus said, "I remind the Senate Democratic leader, Bill Bablitch, how his vote will look in his brochure for governor."

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Like most communications specialists, Kraus is a news "junkie," reading six newspapers regularly — both Madison papers, both Milwaukee papers, plus *The New York Times* and *The Wall Street Journal*. His chief electronic news source is *All Things Considered* on National Public Radio, but he watches TV news, too.

"We clip all the state dailies," he adds. "We pay special attention to the *Green Bay Press-Gazette*."

He is reading fewer news magazines because *The New York Times* "is getting to be a news magazine."

The press, from his reading, is a "mixed bag" in the state:

- *The Capital Times* — "... way too strident. They have their clientele, but the paper, like most p.m. papers, is declining, is unimportant politically ..."

- *The Wisconsin State Journal* — "Has the franchise in town. The quality has lessened. I think their coverage is indifferent. The pressure seems to be to milk the profits ..."

- *The Milwaukee Journal* — "They've

pulled back, I think, from their past coverage of state government. I think, politically, they've become more of a Milwaukee paper than they used to be."

• *The Milwaukee Sentinel* — "Politically, here's the paper with the opportunity. They're on a starvation diet, financially. If the corporation gave them some of the dough *The Milwaukee Journal* gets, I think the *Sentinel* has the potential to be *The New York Times* of Wisconsin."

Because he is an "events-driven person" who loves the hustle of power and the public platform of politics, he views the future the way most ballplayers view it.

"All this will stop one day," he acknowledges, "I don't know if I can survive without the traffic."

What he calls "the traffic" is admittedly a problem. He can't live without it. And if it wasn't for "healing time," he couldn't live with it.

"Once, when I was talking to a school class," he remembers, "somebody asked me: 'What's the greatest joy in your job?' And I told them honestly: 'Doing the dishes.'"

In the private sector — at Sentry Insurance — he never really *needed* a vacation. In the public sector, he has found that he does need vacations.

"I need healing time," he says. "So, Saturdays, typically, I don't do a damn thing. I don't move. I need a day of rest."

The rest of his time is tight as a bus schedule. He reads a book a week. Gives two speeches a week. Plays golf "once a year." And he writes.

He has written one book and is waiting for "the right time" to publish it. And he has drafted a second book on *Business*

and Balkanization.

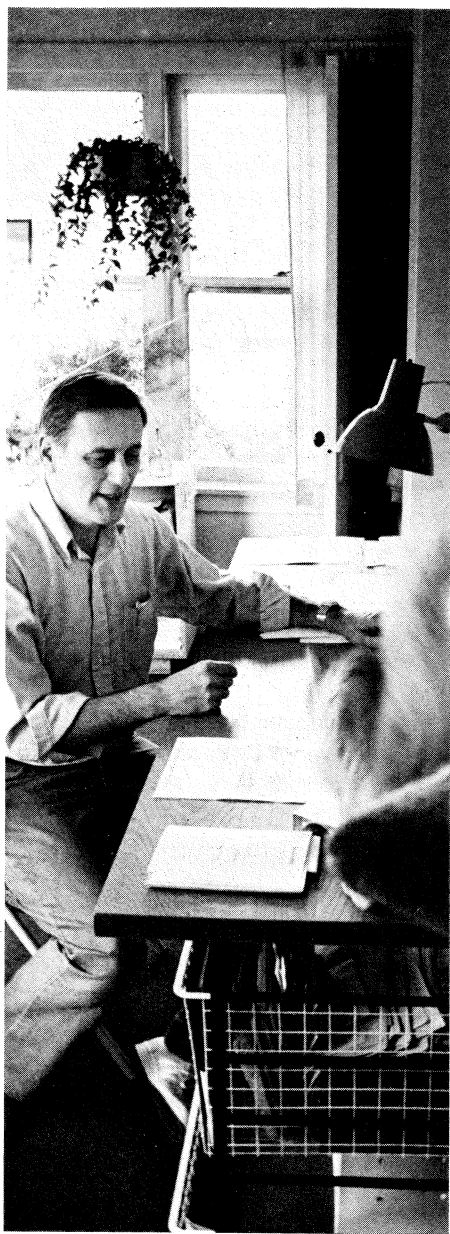
The second book came about because he spent most of this year going through a list of 100 items on The agenda and asking himself always: "What are the killer problems?"

When he boiled it all down, he found that there are really two problems, two major dangers, facing our form of government.

"The first," he said, "is Bigness. That's an endemic problem of our society. We could fall of our own weight. The second is Balkanization. That's the 'special interest,' 'one-issue' syndrome. We could fall to the tyranny of the minorities."

But then Kraus' true gift emerges, that honest way with words, that has earned him the respect of reporters who don't just give respect to everybody they

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“On Saturdays, I don’t do a damn thing.”

cover.

“Of course,” Kraus said, “I’ve never encountered a problem that wasn’t totally unsolveable . . . ”

His first book came about because he spent most of his time in the year 1978 running the campaign that got Dreyfus elected governor.

“It’s on the campaign of ’78,” Kraus said. “What happened and how it happened. The book names names. Who got the asshole-of-the-campaign award. Who was runner-up . . . ”

The Democrats probably can’t wait.
The Republicans probably can. ■