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The First Campaign

I like to say that I knew I would go into politics on the day I was born. It's in my blood, dating back to the nineteenth century when my great grandfather, Clement E. Warner, served in the Wisconsin legislature, the first of four generations to represent the Madison area. His son, Ernest N. Warner, my grandfather, authored a landmark civil service bill while in the Wisconsin State Assembly. My father, Fred E. Risser, served three consecutive terms in the state senate and before that was Dane County district attorney. As a boy, I helped him hand out literature and put campaign posters on trees and telephone poles.

I was destined for politics, though I didn't make my first run until 1956, at age twenty-nine. The state assembly seat in the downtown Madison district where I lived had opened. I was excited and didn't hesitate. The exhilaration of that first race—at one point, I campaigned for twenty-five hours straight—and my ultimate victory changed my life forever. I entered the Wisconsin legislature and stayed for sixty-four years.

When I retired from the state senate in 2021, I had served longer than any lawmaker in US history. A big deal was made of it, which I understand. I'm proud of that record of service. But more than the longevity, it is the people—constituents and colleagues—I met along the way, and what we were able to accomplish across nearly seven decades, that has stayed with me. I authored more than 240 bills that became law. Many dealt with health issues like restricting smoking and promoting women's reproductive rights. I spent half a century on the State Building Commission and oversaw a major restoration of the State Capitol and ambitious

construction projects in Madison's downtown and on University of Wisconsin System campuses statewide.

I made mistakes, too, some perhaps linked to the demands of politics and public life. I've known heartache. Yet overall, I feel lucky. To be healthy at ninety-seven—as I write this—to have seen the world (all seven continents), to have had rewarding work and a loving family—yes, that's great good fortune.

Thinking of it takes me back to that first campaign. Luck had a role there, too. I needed an office to run for, and thanks to an unusual chain of events, in the spring of 1956 I had one.

By then, as I noted, I had long known I wanted to enter politics. It wasn't just that my forebears had held elective office. When I was growing up on my grandparents' old farm in what was then the Town of Madison, west of the city, my father and mother talked politics and current events at the dinner table. It stirred something in me.

At Madison West High, I worked on the school newspaper, and in 1944, when other students were selected to speak at an assembly on behalf of the Republican and Democratic presidential candidates, I spoke for the Socialist candidate, Norman Thomas. It was the only choice left if I wanted to be on stage giving a political speech—and I wanted to be on that stage.

Truth is, I wasn't fired up about any of the presidential candidates that year. I hadn't wanted Franklin D. Roosevelt to seek a third term, let alone a fourth, and I didn't care for Thomas Dewey, the Republican nominee. Yet, I retained a keen interest in the political process. In June, I attended the Republican National Convention in Chicago, which nominated Dewey. Arthur May, who had run as a Republican against my father for the state senate in 1940—but who remained a family friend—got me the convention tickets.

Then in late October, I hitchhiked back to Chicago to see President Roosevelt speak at Soldier Field. I was seventeen and stayed with my uncle. Roosevelt was thought to be in a tight race with Dewey, the governor of New York, and I was happy to get a ticket to see him. When I arrived at the stadium, it was bedlam. I proudly showed my ticket to an usher, who said, "Sit anywhere." Seat numbers were irrelevant. Mayor Ed Kelly of Chicago had ordered tens of thousands of tickets printed—several for each available seat!—to assure a big turnout. He got it. There were 110,000 people inside

the stadium and more than that outside. A Chicago manufacturer and top Democratic fundraiser named F. J. Lewis introduced Roosevelt. FDR was looking for business support and promised tax incentives to help private industry create sixty million jobs should he be reelected, which he was.

Some years later—after my US Navy service—I got another taste of politics and government at the University of Oregon, where I participated on the forensics team and argued on subjects such as federal aid to education. At one tournament, we formed a student congress that divided into committees, drafted bills, and gave floor presentations.

My early twenties were a peripatetic time—I'd been hitchhiking since high school and now traveled cross-country more than once—but politics was never out of my mind altogether. When I returned to Madison in 1953, having passed the Oregon bar exam, it was to join my father in the practice of law. I knew then that I wanted to run for office, but I realized I needed to reestablish myself in the city. I'd been gone eight years—first to the navy, then college—and I suspected people might not remember me. Consequently, I became a joiner: the local Democratic Party, the YMCA, the Junior Chamber of Commerce, First Congregational Church, all sorts of organizations. I needed to meet people.

There was, in any case, no readily apparent elected office available for me to seek. I was living in downtown Madison. I didn't want to stay with my parents when I came back, and I was able to buy a small, distressed building on Butler Street, just off the Capitol Square. I divided it into a few apartments. I lived in one and brought in tenants who, for a break on rent, helped me fix the place up.

For several years after my return to Madison, Democrats held my central Madison assembly seat. I thought about the state senate, but there again, Gaylord Nelson, a well-respected Democrat, was ensconced. He'd defeated my dad for the seat in 1948. As things stood I had to bide my time.

I stayed active politically—and got my name in the newspapers—by taking a leading role in a petition drive to recall Wisconsin's US senator Joseph McCarthy. The campaign—called "Joe Must Go"—was started by a Sauk City newspaper editor named LeRoy Gore in the spring of 1954. McCarthy's reckless and mostly baseless accusations of a widespread communist infiltration of the United States had ruined lives and sullied our state's progressive reputation. To my mind, any effort to oppose him was