

Albert Van Petten maverick Democrat ran for president : Newspaper Obituary and Death Notice

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Deceased Name: Albert Van Petten maverick Democrat ran for president

Although he had lost his sight, Albert Van Petten's political vision remained as clear and crisp as the words in his self-published books.

A maverick Democrat and 1988 presidential candidate, Mr. Van Petten championed a decentralized form of government that would empower voters to overrule politicians.

And his idea of justice -- "accurate, cheap, efficient, fast " -- collided with a cumbersome judicial system that he felt was skewed in favor of the wealthy.

His eyesight began to deteriorate when he developed glaucoma more than 30 years ago. "It's not a requirement," he said. "Good judgment is a requirement. And that I've got."

What he didn't have -- in races for political office dating to 1954 -- was enough votes to win.

Yet through books such as "The Prosperity Plan of 1990" and "The Justice Plan," he was able to promote a philosophy with one consistent theme: Easing suffering is the noblest work of all.

Mr. Van Petten, a retired aerospace engineer and decorated Korean War veteran, died Jan. 16 at his home in Escondido. He was 79.

The cause was complications from a stroke, said daughter Tiffany Hardesty.

Mr. Van Patten paid a \$1,000 filing fee to enter the 1988 Democratic presidential primary in New Hampshire, but remained in Escondido during the campaign. As one of 37 candidates on the ballot, he received 10 votes.

"He felt the time and energy was worth it," Hardesty said. "He wanted his message to be heard and to stir the pot."

Mr. Van Petten's political activism caught a former West Point classmate, retired Maj. Gen. James Johnson, off guard.

"He was quiet in the Army and didn't get involved with a lot of stuff," Johnson said. "People growing up in the military tend to be apolitical. You salute the flag pole, go off and do what they tell you."

Mr. Van Petten, a 1947 graduate of the U.S. Military Academy at West Point, ended his military career in the early 1950s after the Korean War, where he received a Purple Heart and Silver Star. In 1954, he ran unsuccessfully for Congress in West Virginia. In 1968, he lost another bid for Congress in California. Two races for the state Legislature also resulted in defeats.

"It's like chipping away at a big, granite wall," he once said of his efforts to challenge the political establishment. Albert Archer Van Petten, a second generation Army officer, was born Jan. 26, 1925, in Prestonburg, Ky.

"He thought he could get the best education by going to West Point, and he thought he could bring about change through the military," Hardesty said.

Mr. Van Petten received his appointment to West Point in 1943 and graduated 96th in a class of 310. As an officer in the Army Corps of Engineers, he also attended an Army engineering school in Virginia.

During the early stages of the Korean War, he was among the first Army engineers to be deployed along the Pusan perimeter in June 1950.

"One day, Van was caught in an ambush below a hill," recalled Johnson, a fellow platoon leader at the time. "He lost some fingers, because of shrapnel or a grenade."

Despite his wounds, Mr. Van Petten was able to rescue a dozen men amid heavy fire, which led to his Silver Star.

"That experience made him realize the horrific tragedies of war," Hardesty said. "But he supported wars later on, including the removal of Saddam Hussein. He had incredible respect for the military, especially for the lower levels, which he called 'the cream of the crop.'"

Mr. Van Petten left the military as a captain and company commander in 1953. He worked for the next four years as a contractor, drilling oil and gas wells in West Virginia.

"I think he wanted to test his mettle on the outside," Johnson said. "As an engineer, he always liked to do a lot of experimenting."

While working in the aerospace industry for Aerojet, Rockwell and General Dynamics, Mr. Van Petten turned scientific experiments and inventions into a hobby. "His biggest project was an energy producer without electricity," Hardesty said. "He worked on it with his children and always got as much work as he could out of us."

In 1990, he published "Van Petten's Science," a 328-page book, to correct what he viewed as some of the errors of fundamental physics.

"He actually took on Einstein," Hardesty said.

Because of his blindness, Mr. Van Petten required computer software with voice feedback to conduct his scientific research and write his books.

"He was completely blind since about 1977," Hardesty said. "But a busier man you've never seen. He refused to let (his blindness) slow him down."

Mr. Van Petten bought a home in Escondido in the late 1970s. He lived for a year in a home he designed in Hilo, Hawaii, before returning to Escondido in the early 1980s.

Survivors include his wife, Billie Ann; daughters, Lani Van Petten of Amsterdam, Venus Allison of Puyallup, Wash., and Tiffany Hardesty of Carlsbad; son, Albert II of Valley Center; sister, Emilie Merritt of Albany, N.Y.; and six grandchildren.

Private services were scheduled.

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