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Democracy Dies in Darkness

John Sears, who helped guide Nixon and Reagan to the White House, dies at 79

By **Matt Schudel**

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John P. Sears, a political strategist who helped guide Richard M. Nixon to the White House in 1968 and who was a key architect of Ronald Reagan's rising political fortunes a decade later, only to be fired by both men, died March 26 at a hospital in Miami, where he lived. He was 79.

The cause was a heart attack, said his son, James Sears.

Mr. Sears was a precocious political operative who joined Nixon's law firm in his 20s and helped engineer his boss's triumph in the Republican primary of 1968, ultimately leading to Nixon's victory over Democrat Hubert H. Humphrey in the general election.

Eight years later, Mr. Sears became known for leading Reagan's challenge to President Gerald R. Ford, which nearly resulted in a political coup that would have seized the GOP nomination from a sitting president. The daring maneuver, which fell short at the Republican National Convention, raised Reagan's national profile and led to his victory in the 1980 presidential election.

By then, however, Mr. Sears was watching from the sidelines, forced out of his job after clashes with other political advisers and Reagan himself — and for what many observers considered an icy disdain for his candidate’s intellect, conservatism and jovial manner on the campaign trail.

Once hailed by Washington Post political writer Lou Cannon as “the resident mastermind of Republican politics,” Mr. Sears had little ideological commitment to politics. Instead, he saw his role as a master of electoral gamesmanship.

After helping coordinate Nixon’s campaign in the Northeast in 1968, Mr. Sears worked in the White House. Friction between him and Nixon’s inner circle, including Attorney General John N. Mitchell and top advisers H.R. Haldeman and John Ehrlichman, led to his increasing isolation.

Mr. Sears’s openness to the media led to further suspicion, and it was later revealed that White House officials were tapping his phone. He left the Nixon administration in September 1969, as many of his antagonists stayed on and became caught up in the Watergate scandal.

“Nixon is the most complex person I ever ran into,” Mr. Sears told The Post in 1974. “Do I have to like the person I’m working for?”

One of Nixon’s advisers, Leonard Garment, suggested in a book that Mr. Sears may have been the secret source, known as Deep Throat, cultivated by Post reporters Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein in their Watergate coverage and the book “All the President’s Men.” Instead, Deep Throat was identified in 2005 as FBI official Mark Felt.

Mr. Sears practiced law for a few years before signing on in 1975 with Reagan, who was then ending his second term as California governor. The two were an odd match: Mr. Sears was three decades younger and born in New York, and was never a true conservative.

Reagan battled Ford through the Republican primaries, waging an insurgent campaign that stretched all the way to the party convention in Kansas City, Mo. In an effort to broaden Reagan's appeal beyond his conservative base, Mr. Sears persuaded Reagan to name Sen. Richard S. Schweiker, a liberal Republican from Pennsylvania, as his running mate.

Mr. Sears then sought to win more delegates for Reagan by demanding, in a procedural ploy, that Ford reveal his vice-presidential choice at the convention. The effort backfired, giving the nomination to Ford, who went on to lose the general election to Jimmy Carter. Still, the bold move made Reagan a major political force — and earned Mr. Sears plaudits for his strategic thinking.

Four years later, as Reagan's principal campaign manager, Mr. Sears sought to keep his candidate out of the rough-and-tumble of debates and flesh-pressing campaigning. Many complained that the tactic blunted one of Reagan's principal political assets: his folksy charm.

As Mr. Sears took control of the inner workings of the campaign, he pushed out other internal rivals, including Reagan's longtime California friend Michael Deaver. He reportedly had a low regard for Reagan's grasp of major issues, and Reagan's opinion of Mr. Sears was even lower. Reagan noted that Mr. Sears seldom smiled, didn't say "good morning" and often stayed up all night playing poker.

"He won't look me in the eye," Reagan reportedly told onetime aide Lyn Nofziger, who had been ousted by Mr. Sears. "He looks me in the tie."

When Mr. Sears demanded that Reagan's California friend Edwin Meese III be demoted in the campaign, it was the final straw. In a four-hour meeting in a motel room recounted in Newsweek magazine, Mr. Sears maintained his cool reserve as the mild-mannered Reagan lost his temper.

“You did in Mike Deaver,” he shouted, “but by God, you’re not going to get Ed Meese!”

In the meantime, Mr. Sears helped engineer a turnaround in the polls, as Reagan overtook his leading rival, George H.W. Bush, in the New Hampshire primary. But when the votes were being counted, Mr. Sears was not around to celebrate the victory.

On the afternoon of the New Hampshire primary, Reagan, his wife, Nancy, and former Securities and Exchange Commission chairman William J. Casey summoned Mr. Sears and his two top lieutenants to a meeting and handed them letters announcing that they had “resigned.” Casey, later named CIA director, took over as campaign manager.

Reagan went on to claim the nomination, win 44 states in the general election and serve two terms as president.

Mr. Sears, who was then 39, never managed another political campaign.

John Patrick Sears was born July 3, 1940, in Syracuse, N.Y., and spent his early years on a family dairy farm in Baldwinsville, N.Y. He was 10 when his father died in a barn fire. His mother was a teacher and high school guidance counselor.

Mr. Sears skipped two grades in school before going to the University of Notre Dame in South Bend, Ind., intending to become a psychiatrist. He changed course when he managed a friend’s successful campaign for class president. He received a bachelor’s degree in chemistry in 1960 and then attended law school at Georgetown University, graduating in 1963.

After serving as a clerk to a judge on New York's highest state court, Mr. Sears joined Nixon's law firm in New York in 1965. He began writing speeches for the former vice president and helped organize his appearances in the off-year elections of 1966.

Mr. Sears spent a year teaching at Harvard University's John F. Kennedy School of Government after leaving the Nixon White House and then joined the Washington law firm Gadsby Hannah. In 1981, he formed a law partnership with Democratic fundraiser Philip Baskin. One of their clients was the apartheid government of South Africa, which led other clients to break ties with the firm.

Ultimately, the Baskin & Sears firm dissolved, and Mr. Sears opened a solo practice, representing Japanese automakers. He also advised tobacco companies during the payout of billions of dollars to state authorities to resolve lawsuits.

He retired to Miami in the late 1990s.

In 1962, Mr. Sears married Carol Osborne. They separated in the late 1980s but did not divorce. She died in 2011.

Survivors include three children, James Sears of Easton, Pa., Ellen Rayhill of New Hartford, N.Y., and Amy Nichols of Philadelphia; two sisters; and nine grandchildren.

Mr. Sears, who never ran for elective office on his own, often pondered the character of people who sought the presidency. No one puzzled him more than Nixon.

"I helped get him elected," he once told The Post. "I felt if he ever actually made it, certain levels of his insecurity might disappear. That was an unrealistic expectation. None of us changes that much."