Former supervisor and judge â?? and unstoppable voice of conservatives â?? Quentin Kopp retains his signature querulousness

Description

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The welcome sign at Quentin Koppâ??s office is hardly welcoming. â??Attentionâ?• it says. â??You are being watched.â?• Beyond the sign is a path that flanks the side of a nondescript, one-story professional building on West Portal Avenue. Koppâ??s office suite, which he shares with several other attorneys, is in the back of the building. Thereâ??s no lobby to speak of, the furniture looks worn, and the computer monitor on his desk is a massive CRT that wouldnâ??t have been out of place in a late 1990s office.

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The entryway to Quentin Koppâ??s office, in the back of the building. (Photo by Bill Snyder)

Given his age â?? Kopp recently turned 93 â?? you might expect to find a retired man using an office as a way to get out of the house, maybe seated at a clean desk reading the papers or dipping into a novel.

But take a look at his desk. Itâ??s covered with legal briefs and folders stuffed with documents. Kopp, who almost became mayor, served multiple terms on the San Francisco Board of Supervisors and the State Senate before becoming a Superior Court judge, is hardly retired.

Why hasnâ??t he? â??Because If you retire, youâ??ll go to hell â?? intellectually. Youâ??re more apt to suffer from dementia,â?• he said during a recent interview.

Kopp represents and lobbies for developers, sits on five boards of directors, is president of the Korean War Memorial Foundation, and swims laps for 25 minutes every morning. And heâ??s still writing dozens of letters a month to city officials and reporters he deems in need of correcting. Those letters

are written by hand and then typed by an assistant. Kopp dictates his email â?? he doesnâ??t like to type â?? and has no interest in social media or digital gadgets.

5,000 letters of correction

Over the years, he figures, heâ??s probably written 5,000 letters.

In his prime, he was a leading voice of the cityâ??s conservatives, back when they were not a vanishing breed. Kopp, who is affable and welcoming despite his reputation as a curmudgeon, has not mellowed a bit when it comes to politics. Heâ??s a conservative adrift in a sea of wokeness.

He left the Democratic Party decades ago after it censured him for his attempt to require the city to make jail inmates pay for their room and board and opposing a federal regulation requiring that ballots be printed in multiple languages. These days, heâ??d like to abolish district elections, preserve single-family zoning, and run progressive San Francisco District Attorney Chesa Boudin out of office.

â??Crime seems to be the only San Francisco big business that escapes city government meddling, which is why District Attorney Chesa Boudin must be recalled,â?• he wrote in a column for The Richmond Review.

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Kopp is comfortable being out of step with mainstream politics in San Francisco. â??Do I want to roll back the clock? I do,â?• he said. But heâ??s not a culture warrior; heâ??s more of an old-fashioned fiscal conservative. â??Disciplineâ?• is a word he uses frequently.

He rails against prolific government spending and bureaucracy, and the culture of corruption in city government. The Board of Supervisors, he said, is entirely lacking in fiscal discipline. â??And thatâ??s why the budget is $13.8 billion,â?• as large Philadelphiaâ??s, he said, a much bigger city.

(Photo by Kevin Hume of the SFWeekly, 3/5/2019)

Kopp has a long memory and hasnâ??t forgotten old slights. When he was first elected to the Board of Supervisors in 1971, it was customary for the candidate with the largest vote total to be named president of the board. But his fellow supervisors outmaneuvered him and he didnâ??t get the powerful post, a defeat that still rankles.

He grew up in Syracuse, N.Y., and attended Dartmouth and Harvard Law School. He moved to San Francisco in 1955 after a stint as a lawyer in the Air Force. It was a low-rise city in those days, and the old boysâ?? network held sway over politics and government. â??It was a simpler time,â?• Kopp said.

Coulda been da mayor

Back then, the mayor appointed members of the school board. â??There were three Catholics, two Protestants and two Jews; I think it was an unwritten law,â?• Kopp recalled, sounding a bit nostalgic. Indeed, he would like to put an end to the election of the board and restore that power to the mayor.

Kopp is proud of his long years of civic service and thinks politicians should follow the rules. But when asked what he regrets, he mentions a time when he wishes he had bent the rules. It was 1979, and he was in a tight race to unseat Mayor Dianne Feinstein. The election came down to a runoff, and David Scott, who had been eliminated in the first round, offered to back him.

But the endorsement carried a price tag: Scott, who had significant support in the gay community, wanted Kopp to promise him a seat on the cityâ??s airport commission. Kopp refused, citing a city policy forbidding that sort of horse-trading. Disappointed, Scott endorsed Feinstein, who went on to narrowly defeat Kopp.

â??I could have finessed it. I could have said something like when Iâ??m elected Iâ??ll be appointing friends who are qualified,â?• Kopp said with a slightly abashed grin. The wink and nod might have allowed him to skirt the rule and quite possibly made him mayor.

Kopp and his wife live in Lakeshore Acres, a neighborhood with a suburban feel in the cityâ??s southwest corner. He wants to keep it â?? and the rest of the cityâ??s west side â?? that way. â??San Francisco is known for its neighborhoods. The changes (like ending single-family zoning) will make it more like Manhattan. It wonâ??t be a welcoming place,â?• he said.

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Kopp in his office. (Photo by Bill Snyder)

His life in semi-retirement is a pleasant, if quiet, one. â??A swim in the morning, and then I have a piece of fruit and a half a muffin and coffee and read the Chronicle, and if itâ??s published that day, the Examiner.â?• Heâ??s in the office by about 10.30 a.m. Dinner is often at the Olympic Club or the St. Francis Yacht Club, where he has membership privileges, even though he doesnâ??t sail or own a boat.

After 50 years in politics, what is he most proud of? â??My three children.â?• He has two sons, a daughter, and, four grandchildren. â??Iâ??ve tried to teach my children honesty and integrity. And I think Iâ??ve succeeded.â?•

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