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HEADLINE: AN APPRECIATION OF KEN MADDY

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BODY:

There are many descriptions one can use to portray politicians: conservative or liberal, Democrat or Republican, honest or crooked, candid or slippery. But one category is rarely invoked: classy.

Ken Maddy was a classy politician who died too young, at age 65 a couple of weeks ago. His death came after a 14-month-long struggle with lung cancer in which he continued to exhibit the good humor and grace that had been his hallmark during three-plus decades of public life.

Maddy served in both houses of the Legislature and accumulated a commendable record, but there's a consensus among those who knew him that he should – and perhaps could -- have gone further. He had the intelligence, eloquence, good humor and striking good looks that should have carried him to the governor's office, the U.S. Senate and-or even the White House.

Maddy, however, lacked the fire in the belly that a politician needs to claw his way upward. He disliked rough-and-tumble politics, always sought compromise and could not bring himself to perform cheap publicity stunts.

Maddy's unwillingness to shade the truth cost him his one shot at statewide office, when he ran for the Republican nomination for governor in 1978. He opposed the popular, property tax-slashing Proposition 13, angering conservatives, and admitted something that he could have easily denied – that he twice smoked marijuana.

Maddy gave up his Assembly seat for the 1978 gubernatorial run but within a few months was running for a vacant state Senate seat in the San Joaquin Valley. As Maddy returned to the Legislature, however, he found himself increasingly alienated from GOP colleagues, particularly the "Proposition 13 babies."

Maddy was a double throwback, to the pre-professional era of the Legislature and to the period when Central Valley Republicans were marked by moderation and devotion to good government.

In the Senate, Maddy became known as the Republican go-to guy on complex policy matters, including the state budget. He became a master of negotiations and a favorite of reporters for his patience and candor.

But as Maddy became Mr. Inside, opportunities for moving beyond the Legislature faded. He occasionally toyed with running for one of the lesser statewide offices but seemingly was unwilling to perform the required indignities. He seriously sought an appointment as state treasurer from then-Gov. George Deukmejian when the office fell vacant, but Deukmejian opted instead for his protege, Dan Lungren, only to see Lungren's nomination rejected in the Legislature.

There's no doubt that had Deukmejian appointed Maddy, he would have been confirmed. And from the treasurer's office as a platform, Maddy would have had a good chance of vaulting into the governorship or a U.S. Senate seat. Maddy's moderation caught up with him a few years later when conservatives dumped him as the Senate's Republican leader.

Maddy was one of the Capitol's consummate deal-cutters who had the aura -- and reality -- of class that other California politicians, including those now issuing paeans to his memory, can only imagine.