



Richard F. Kneip

Dakota Images

The "people's governor," Richard F. Kneip was noted for his handshaking, person-to-person style of campaigning. Elected South Dakota's youngest governor at the age of thirty-seven, he used his substantial skills as a salesman to modernize state government and pursue tax reform.

Richard Francis Kneip was born 7 January 1933 at Tyler, Minnesota, to Frank and Bernice Pederson Kneip. Following graduation from Arlington High School, he attended college in South Dakota and Minnesota and served in the United States Air Force. After his 1957 marriage to Illinois native Nancy Pankey, he established a wholesale dairy equipment business in Salem.

He entered politics in 1964 when he won the first of three terms as a Democratic state senator representing McCook, Hanson, and, later, Sanborn counties. In 1970, he was elected the fourth Democratic and first Catholic governor of South Dakota. During his first term, he fought for a personal and corporate income tax and recommended changes in the structure of state government to the Constitutional Revision Commission on which he had served as a state senator.

In addition to returning Kneip to office in 1972, voters approved constitutional amendments authorizing executive reorganization and four-year terms for the governor and constitutional officers. In January 1973, Kneip presented the legislature with a detailed plan, implemented later that year, for increasing governmental efficiency by consolidating more than one hundred sixty state offices into sixteen departments headed by appointed secretaries.

After serving two two-year terms as governor, Kneip sought an unprecedented third term, prohibited by state primary law. The state supreme court upheld his challenge, and in 1974 he became the first governor elected to a four-year term. On 24 July 1978, he resigned to accept an appointment by President Jimmy Carter to serve as United States ambassador to Singapore. During his years as governor, Kneip had achieved the repeal of the state's personal property tax but lost his battles to streamline the higher education system and implement the Oahe Irrigation Project.

Upon leaving the post of ambassador in 1980, Kneip returned to private business in Sioux Falls. An attempt in 1986 to win another term as governor failed at the primary level. He died 9 March 1987 following surgery at Sioux Falls.

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