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Defined by principles, paradox

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If Grant Woods appeared on the old TV game show *What's My Line?* his introduction might go something like this: lawyer, businessman, politician, philanthropist, broadcaster, author, songwriter and father.

It turns out the former Arizona attorney general is something of a renaissance man. He is also a paradox. Woods, 52, is a Republican who endorses Democrats, a defense lawyer who works as a special prosecutor, a good ol' boy who loves Italian art.

He is among the state's most ubiquitous public figures, popping up just about everywhere:

- He is prosecuting the "Baseline Killer" case, defending Paradise Valley socialite Sonia Falcone, giving legal advice to U.S. Rep. Rick Renzi, working as a judge pro tem and investigating corruption in Apache County.
- He helped campaign for Gov. Janet Napolitano and Congressman-elect Harry Mitchell, both Democrats, and Republican Maricopa County Attorney Andrew Thomas.
- He supported the Boy Scouts' ban on gays. He lobbied for development projects on behalf of Donald Trump and Wal-Mart. He developed Project for Arizona's Future, a campaign to promote political moderation, and helped found a Mesa Boys and Girls Club that is named for him.
- He just finished a novel. His screenplay is being revised for production, and he writes for newspapers and a law magazine.

A complex personality

Joel Grant Woods leans back in his leather chair and grins easily as his activities are reeled off. "I have a lot of different interests, and I just decided to do 'em all," he says.

Dressed in old jeans and a T-shirt, he comes off as an aw-shucks kind of guy. His idol is country singer Kris Kristofferson. His idea of fun is a pickup basketball game with other men his age.

But beneath the down-home shtick is a complex personality.

A wall at his office displays pictures of polar political heroes - Barry Goldwater and Bobby Kennedy - along with an autographed photo of late comic actor Don Knotts.

Woods talks about standing up for principle, then acknowledges being a hired-gun lawyer who understands the art of compromise and persuasion.

While working as a public defender years ago, he condemned capital punishment as murder by the state. Yet as Arizona's youngest attorney general, he fought so hard for the death penalty that a convicted killer in the gas chamber glared at Woods, then flipped him off in a final act of contempt.

Woods seems perpetually relaxed. Yet his mind is constantly churning, and even foes pay tribute to his shrewdness and style.

Dick Foreman, a community activist and guest columnist for *The Republic*, once captured the ambiguity with a critique that seemed both fawning and critical: "Woods is smart, articulate and cunning. Add in to that that he is ruggedly good looking, takes a great picture, has a world-class tan, smiles like a movie star, has a beautiful family and absorbs and attracts publicity like a male Paris Hilton. Don't forget cunning."

Maverick style

Part of the mystique stems from Woods' maverick political style.

In elections, he unabashedly crosses party lines. Woods says those who brand him as disloyal are either blinded by partisanship or don't understand that a person can embrace liberal social views with conservative notions of government.

What matters most, he adds, is electing the right person.

He ascribes to Goldwater's platform of small government, local control, fiscal conservatism, protection of privacy and a strong national defense. On the other hand, Woods embraces Kennedy's notion of civil rights and liberties.

Even close friends aren't sure how to label him. Chuck Wahlheim, former newspaper publisher and co-founder of Kids Voting, once described Woods as "a Democrat masquerading as a Republican."

Rick Romley, former Republican Maricopa County Attorney, sees it differently. "He views politics as a game. . . . The Republican Party is so divided right now. He just makes that division permanent almost. He doesn't try to bring everybody together."

A natural lawyer

Woods spent his childhood in the East Valley, where his mom, Nina, taught school. Father Joe's construction company, which became a multimillion-dollar enterprise, was only a dream. Woods says his upbringing was strictly blue-collar.

At Westwood High, Woods played tennis, nearly making the state doubles championships. He became an Eagle Scout. He was class president his junior and senior years.

He doesn't remember how he wound up at Occidental College, a liberal arts school in Los Angeles. But it turned out to be serendipitous. Three other Arizona prodigies enrolled the same year:

Robert Robb, a close high school friend, became a conservative activist and *Republic* columnist. Fred Duval became a liberal activist and aide to Bruce Babbitt, the former governor and former secretary of the Interior. Chris Hamel worked for Gov. Babbitt.

In the summer of 1974, Woods was an intern for U.S. Rep. John Rhodes in Washington, D.C., during the throes of Watergate, an experience that shaped his beliefs. Woods recalls when Rhodes and Sen. Barry Goldwater, two Arizona Republicans, were called to a meeting with Richard Nixon and advised their president to resign. "They put principles over party," Woods says.

After graduating from Occidental, Woods was torn between law and literature.

At the time, he was a Rhodes Scholar finalist, leaning toward a writing career. But a bullheaded answer during an interview - he said poetry was dead because no one cared about it anymore - cost him his scholarship. So he enrolled at Arizona State University's law school.

Woods got an internship with the Maricopa County Public Defender's Office and won a series of cases. He says lawyering came naturally. "I loved everything about it."

Hired out of college as a public defender, Woods immediately became a litigation specialist. While other attorneys arranged plea deals and wrote tangled motions, he handled trials, winning 16 of 20. "A couple of them I even thought the defendants were innocent," he says, beaming.

A path to politics

After two years in the Public Defender's Office, Woods was introduced to a former prisoner of war named John McCain who had moved to Arizona to run for Congress. Woods says he fully intended to dislike the carpetbagger: "I walked in with a chip on my shoulder, and I walked out thinking, 'I'm going to do everything I can to get this guy elected.'"

McCain won and invited Woods to be his chief of staff.

For two whirlwind years, Woods dedicated himself to politics. Then, following a self-defined plan, he quit and started a law firm in Mesa. Woods quickly emerged as a specialist who let others do the research, then took over when it was time for negotiations or trial.

He doesn't recall how the idea of running for attorney general came up, but he gets a rush thinking about it.

"I really was a nobody," he says. "It was a pretty bold move."

Longtime incumbent Bob Corbin withdrew before the primary, and Woods wound up as an odd candidate in the Republican primary. He harped on civil rights. He opposed a GOP-backed English-only ballot measure. He supported a Martin Luther

King holiday.

Yet, with backing from McCain and others, he won.

Pundits tagged Woods a political climber. He says his only ambition was to serve as attorney general, which he did from 1991 to 1999.

Most of his high-profile efforts were for seemingly liberal causes. He led a consumer-protection campaign, pressured businesses into abiding by civil rights laws and prosecuted environmental violators.

Woods says his biggest victory was a multibillion-dollar settlement against major tobacco companies, accomplished with attorneys general from other states. "It was a huge achievement, and the more time goes on, the better it looks," Woods says. "It's saving literally hundreds of thousands of lives."

Woods, like many politicians, faced scandal. One erupted over an undocumented immigrant working as a nanny for his children. Woods paid a fine, and the clamor died.

Perhaps the most dangerous involved two funds within Woods' office. One was set up to pay for internal employee retreats. The other was established to finance a Martin Luther King celebration. Those monies allegedly wound up getting mingled and used to pay for questionable office frills. Then-Maricopa County Attorney Rick Romley investigated and secured an agreement: Woods would repay \$25,000, and his chief of staff would resign. One day after that settlement, Woods rehired the chief and denied wrongdoing. Romley called him a liar. The controversy forced the chief to quit.

To this day, Woods insists there was no misuse of funds. But he concedes the gamesmanship was a mistake.

Making sacrifices

While in office, Woods was offered a weekly talk-radio show on KTAR. His staff and advisers feared a catastrophe: How could Woods - blunt, sarcastic and politically incorrect - spend hours on the air without self-destructing?

Woods ignored the warnings and ate up the microphone. His shows dealt with music, politics, movies, scandals and whatever was hot in the news. He spent four years doing KTAR, plus a year as a daily host on KFYI. He claims it enhanced his popularity because listeners got to know him personally. He still subs at KTAR.

In 1988, before Woods entered the attorney general's race, he started dating Marlene Galan, a Valley television news anchor. They married two years later. He says she made a sacrifice for their relationship, turning down a job as correspondent and fill-in anchor at *Good Morning America*.

As attorney general, Woods earned a government salary. Marlene was the main breadwinner while looking after his kids from a previous marriage and giving birth to two more. When it came time to leave office, Woods says, he toyed with running for governor or Congress. But he chose his family.

The couple has since adopted a Guatemalan baby named Ava.

Fighting for the people

Woods leaves the typical caveat when he says he has no plans to run for office: "I certainly wouldn't rule anything out, but I don't see it for myself. I don't have to be an office-holder."

In fact, Woods has found other ways to be influential: He has used his stature as a lawyer and public personality to push social causes and political candidates.

Some would describe him as a publicity hound. Woods says it's not like that. Big-name clients seek him out, and he represents them. Political movers request his help, and he gives it. Reporters come to him for honest comment, and he obliges.

Meanwhile, several of Woods' songs are being promoted by an agent who also represents Eric Clapton. His recently finished novel, *Pop Bottle Charlie*, about a transient who witnesses an Arizona murder, is being shopped to publishers. His screenplay, *American-Mexican Girl*, about the plight of an immigrant, is in the hands of a producer.

Woods says his politics, legal work and writing all point to an ideal: Empowering the typical American worker, defending civil rights and liberties. "That's what I've spent my whole life doing," he says. "I'm trying to, as a rule, fight for the average people."

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