

Dorchester Conference

By Barbara Mahoney

The Dorchester Conference, launched in 1965 at the Dorchester House in Lincoln City, is the oldest annual political conference in the United States. Its founder was Robert Packwood, then a thirty-three-year-old state legislator. Packwood was unhappy with the conservative direction of the Republican Party, which had nominated Arizona Senator Barry Goldwater for the presidency in 1964.

After Goldwater's crushing defeat by Lyndon B. Johnson, Packwood invited like-minded Republicans, including the new state legislators for whom he had campaigned, to a statewide conference. The invitation vowed that "Far right-wingers will be deliberately excluded." Although some Republican officeholders, including Governor Mark O. Hatfield, were uneasy about his efforts, the conference attracted more than two hundred attendees in its first year. The Dorchester Conference, as it came to be known, provided a forum for the discussion of the future of Oregon and the Oregon Republican Party.

The conference grew in subsequent years, in 1968 drawing a thousand participants. That year also saw the recognition of Dorchester's importance to national politics when Nelson Rockefeller attended to seek support for his presidential campaign. Its prestige was further enhanced by Packwood's successful effort to win the Senate seat occupied by Wayne Morse.

Over the years, key Oregon officeholders have participated in the conference, including Tom McCall, Mark Hatfield, Vic Atiyeh, Norma Paulus, Gordon Smith, Clay Meyers, Dave Frohnmeier, and Greg Walden. Dorchester has served as a forum for spirited debates on a wide range of issues, including tax policy, abortion rights, education funding, and international policies and has attracted such prominent Republicans as Ronald Reagan, George Romney, George H.W. Bush, Jack Kemp, Elizabeth Dole, and William Kristol.

In recent years, the Dorchester Conference meetings have reflected the more conservative political tone of the state's Republican Party. Past Dorchester Conference locations include Seaside and Salem. Since 2019, the Conference has been held in Welches, Oregon.

Sources

Kirchmeier, Mark. *Packwood: The Public and Private Life from Acclaim to Outrage*. New York: HarperCollins, 1995.

The Oregon Encyclopedia

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