

Bill Hudnut is nearly 25 years removed from his last days as the mayor of Indianapolis. His legacy is impressive and was long ago secured. He's well into his eighties now, and he is living with a tube that pumps life-prolonging medicine into his heart 24 hours a day.

So if anyone has earned the right to take a pass on taking the type of public stands that will undoubtedly attract grief from some corners, it's him. Rather than sharing some hard truths about the state of his Republican Party, he could just take the easy way out and take that pass.

But that wouldn't be Bill Hudnut, now would it?

"I think its important for anyone who has been involved in politics to speak out," he said. "Leadership does not sit by and tolerate irrational bullies. Leadership does not ignore obstructions of progress."

So instead of taking the easier path, Hudnut reached out to me the other day to share his thoughts on three issues that are troubling him immensely about the Republican Party. About his Republican Party. Those issues would be Donald Trump's presidential campaign, the obsession with divisive social issues among some at the Indiana Statehouse, and the refusal by Republicans in the U.S. Senate to consider any Supreme Court nominee in this final year of President Barack Obama's administration.

"I'm very upset with Republicans in the Senate," the former mayor said of the Supreme Court impasse. "It's irresponsible. It's childish. It is very unfortunate. The Constitution is being violated."

His message to fellow Republicans supporting inaction: "It is absolutely unconscionable and a dereliction of duty to defer a hearing."

Bill Hudnut is the man who brought the Colts to Indianapolis against all odds, and who took many steps that led to the rebirth of Downtown. But he's also a leader who through the force of personality and will, and smart governance, got a city to believe a lot more in itself and its potential. He was elected four times to the city's highest office as a proud Republican; all these years later, he often doesn't recognize his own party.

He comes from a different era in politics, of course. His tenure in the mayor's office stretched from 1976 to 1991. Things were not perfect back then, not by any measure, but it was a more functional time in politics, and the mayoral job he held was one that by its very definition didn't tolerate gridlock and inaction.

So he looks at a Congress declining to do its most basic duties and he sees a political world he hardly recognizes. And then he looks at Donald Trump and sees — well, I'll just let him say it.

"He is what you might call a bloviating blunderbuss," Hudnut said. "All he does is talk, talk, talk. His policy proposals are very weak. It's just crazy. It's inane. But the worst part is pandering to the hidden authoritarian feelings of people. He is the exact opposite of what the founders wanted. He is the epitome of a king. He is such an egomaniac. He thinks he can do no wrong."

I don't know about you but I look at Hudnut's record — his city reached new heights during his time and began to think bigger — and I see value in listening to him. I see a politician who actually accomplished things, who helped rejuvenate his city through a mantra of optimism and hard work, and I wish voices like his got as much airtime as those of politicians who can masterfully exploit a wedge issue but can't point to much that they've actually done.

Hudnut labels himself a moderate Republican, which he also calls, "a member of a dying breed, or a dead breed. We weren't so ideological."

And, again, he was a mayor. A politician charged not only with looking at the big picture but also with getting the streets plowed and potholes repaired. Mayors don't have the luxury of being ideological warriors. They can't refuse to work with someone because of their party affiliation. "I always believed," he said, "in a strategy of: 'Let's don't talk about how it can't be done. Let's find a way to get it done.' You have to build coalitions. You have to reach across the aisle. But that's all changed."

From his home in Maryland, Hudnut spoke out last year about the Religious Freedom law Indiana Republicans enacted. This year, with the signing by Gov. Mike Pence of an abortion bill that has been labeled dangerous by many doctors, he finds himself once again bothered by the actions of his fellow Republicans.

"Legislation like that is so wrong," he said. "What we need is to focus on jobs and education and good highways. That's where we should start spending our time."

I asked Hudnut if he ever thought, given his health, about just ignoring the political world. That just wouldn't be right, he told me. That would just give more power to destructive forces and divisive voices that he believes have so damaged his party. That would further tilt the balance of power within the GOP.

At 83, the former mayor of Indianapolis is battling a cruel and ultimately terminal heart condition. But the throat cancer he was fighting a year ago appears to be gone and although life now has many limitations he is continuing to fight. He's refusing to just sit by and take a pass on things. He's enjoying a spring he wasn't sure he'd be around to see and looking forward to another summer.

"I've been told twice that I have six months left," he said. "And I've outlasted that both times. I'm still here."

Still here, indeed. Still sounding strong over the phone. Still sounding like that trailblazing mayor who did so much to launch Indianapolis into its modern era. Still more interested in results than party labels. And still insisting that politics should not be about dividing the people you serve, but about lifting them up.

*By Matthew Tully, Indianapolis Star – April 4, 2016*