The King is dead. Long live the King!

That's the way it was handled in the good old days. An ex-leader was a deceased leader. No muss, no fuss -- and certainly no need to plan the exit strategy. That problem, you might say, was a dead issue.

There was certain efficiency to this system. No awkward transitions between past leader and present leader. No great opportunities for past leaders to make mischief. And you couldn't beat the price.

But, alas, things are more complicated today. Our presidents and governors regularly fill their terms and go on to live long after they have left office. For example, Pennsylvania now has a total of six living former Governors, going back to George Leader, who left office in 1959, and William Scranton, who left office in 1967.

We do pay some attention to our ex-governors when they first leave office. There has been considerable coverage of former Gov. Schweiker's transition to CEO of the Greater Philadelphia Chamber of Commerce and Industry. Of course, former Gov. Tom Ridge's new job has compelled national attention.

However, by and large, we lose track of former governors. Some of this is actually healthy. In a democracy, elected leaders must come and go. And when they do go, quickly and quietly is probably best.

Still we probably need to redress the balance some -- between the enormous attention we pay to incoming governors and the piddling attention we give them on the way out. And there is no better place to start than to review some of what we do know about ex-governors exit strategies.

Nationally, the number of governors leaving office fluctuates considerably from election cycle to election cycle. According to the National Governors Association, over the last nine election cycles an average of 14 governors have left office.

This year, some 24 governors are leaving office, the majority of them (14) because of term limitations. A few governors (four) were defeated at the polls and the rest (six) voluntarily chose to leave office.

So, most governors who leave office do so either because they are term limited or defeated for re-election. Only a small minority choose voluntary retirement. But regardless of why they leave office, what do they do when they do leave?

Based on the few studies reported, a substantial number of former governors -- perhaps half -- seek federal office of some type. These include the presidency, the Cabinet, the Senate and House, and the federal judiciary.
Not all of them, however, achieve their goal. All together, about one third of all ex-governors actually end up in the federal government in some capacity, with the majority either in Congress or a federal judgeship. In the last Congress, there were 13 ex-governors serving in the U.S. Senate, while three more were serving in the Bush cabinet.

Pursuit of the presidency is the most glamorous goal of those ex-governors who stay in politics. It is rare in modern times to go through a presidential election cycle without one or more former governors emerging as a major candidate. And they win their fair share.

Eight presidents elected in the 20th century had been governors and four of the last five presidents (Carter, Reagan, Clinton and Bush) came from the ranks of the governors.

Those ex-governors who don't move on to the federal government actually make up the largest group of former governors. At least 60 percent of all governors are in this group that pursues private life. Some of them actually do retire, but most resume or begin careers in business or law.

Sometimes they choose unusual occupations. Celebrity governor Jesse Ventura may become a talk show host. Other former governors have become writers. Several each cycle usually try their hand at lobbying or other Washington jobs. And many pursue public service of some type.

Pennsylvania's ex-governors seem fairly typical. Since the mid-1950's, some nine men have served and left office. Of them, George Leader (1955), in retirement since 1959, is probably the purest example of a businessman.

His successor, David Lawrence (1959), a former Pittsburgh mayor, returned to Pittsburgh in retirement. William Scranton (1963) returned to the family business, but also came back to public service for brief intervals to serve Republican presidents, including a stint as U.N. ambassador, and later pursued graduate studies in history. Ray Shafer (1967) returned to private life to practice law and chaired a national drug task force under Nixon.

Milton Shapp (1971), unorthodox in office, had one of Pennsylvania's more prosaic retirements. He briefly ran for president in 1976 while finishing his final term, then retired quietly to Montgomery County, where he tried his hand as a playwright.

Shapp's successor, Dick Thornburgh (1979), has had one of the more active retirements. Now in private law practice in Pittsburgh and Washington, Thornburgh served in both the Reagan and George Bush Senior administrations, the latter as U.S. Attorney General.

Thornburgh's successor Bob Casey (1987), not completely recovered from his dramatic double-organ transplant, retired home to Scranton. Casey seriously entertained a run for the White House, but his health precluded those plans.

It is probably too early to characterize the retirements of Pennsylvania's two most recent ex-governors. Tom Ridge (1995) was twice seriously considered for his party's vice presidential nomination while still in office.
Recently confirmed as the nation's first Secretary of Homeland Security, Ridge certainly has not retired from public life. He is so far easily the most publicly prominent of the state's former governors.

Mark Schweiker (2001), eschewing politics for now at least, has begun his career in business as the head of a pro-business lobby. Many believe his public life is not yet over.

The sample of former governors is small, but a couple of provocative observations seem appropriate. Gov. Rendell, widely viewed as a potential future presidential or vice presidential candidate, might want to take some notes.

The first observation is that only one of the nine former governors ever ran for office again after leaving the governorship -- and he lost. That was Republican Dick Thornburgh, who ran for the Senate in 1991.

Two others did enter presidential contests (Scranton and Shapp), but both did so while still in office. For all practical purposes, Pennsylvania's former governors end their careers in electoral politics when they leave office.

A second observation is the marked public service difference between the Republican ex-governors and their Democratic counterparts. Excluding the just retired Schweiker, all four of the Republican ex-governors played significant post gubernatorial roles in Washington. Three of them served in the cabinet and took on other significant responsibilities at the national level.

In sharp contrast, none of the four Democratic ex-governors played any significant role in national politics after leaving office. One might look to several plausible explanations for this. And indeed there are some, including Republican dominance of the White House that coincided with the retirement of some of the Republican governors.

Still, the difference between the two parties seems striking. Republican ex-governors have gotten all the best of it in terms of public service, but even they have shared their Democratic colleagues' fate in the electoral arena. For Pennsylvania governors, leaving office has been their last hurrah.

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