The Rendell Legacy
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Dictionaries define legacy as something someone has handed down or is remembered for. By its nature a legacy is important, lasting and often unique.

This definition seems important in drawing the legacy of Ed Rendell as he departs office after almost 25 years in public life--as district attorney of Philadelphia, mayor of Philadelphia, and governor of Pennsylvania.

Rendell was a larger than life personality; by turns personable and irascible, candid but sometimes cryptic, ideological while also pragmatic, and predictably unpredictable in personal settings. He was great copy for journalists that found his frankness refreshing. And he always and everywhere was on stage, a consummate performer in the guise of a consummate politician.

These attributes of the Rendell personality alternately fascinated and appalled his constituents for a quarter of a century. But they comprise but a small part of his legacy. Rendell will be remembered far more for what he accomplished publically than what he said privately--far more for the particular changes he brought than for his sometimes peculiar personality.

What then is the Rendell legacy? What will be remembered ten years, 25 years, even a century from now?

Arguably seven major factors will define the Rendell era and matter long after he has exited the public scene.

• **A Big Spender.** "Spendell" some called him, a charge that Rendell refuted by pointing to federal mandates and increased costs in correction. But Rendell acknowledged he spent on new programs too. During his first term alone the state budget increased between 5 and 6 percent annually. His tenure was accompanied by tax increases, and proposed tax increases, along with record spending and borrowing. His spending and borrowing in part was responsible for producing an unprecedented eight straight late budget adoptions. Rendell’s economic development and community projects alone cost a stunning eight billion--adding some one billion in interest payments to state budgets in coming years.

• **A Colorful Character.** Elected in a state famous for producing bland politicians, Rendell possessed an extraordinary personality; he was dynamic, accessible, and undisciplined--noted for spontaneity, and celebrated for his patented outré outbursts. Rendell believed that everyone was entitled to his opinion, and he was only too happy to deliver the goods. The recent 60 minutes dust-up exemplifies his style: unbuttoned, often volatile, frequently controversial, and usually not contrite. Rendell was the most visible governor in state history, often holding daily press conferences. And no governor in the country was more a national fixture clocking in excess of 100 national appearances on network and cable news programs in 2010 alone.

• **A Pragmatic Liberal.** Ideologically, Rendell was liberal to his core. But neither compromise nor consensus was dirty words to him. Rendell pragmatically traded favors to the legislature to achieve other policy goals. In fact, Rendell claims he made one of his biggest mistakes by signing the notorious 2005 legislative pay increase so Republicans wouldn’t block his agenda. But as a
pragmatic liberal, he eschewed pursuit of most hot button cultural matters. Neither did struggles over abortion nor gay rights occur during his tenure. His support for greater hand gun controls marks his single departure from avoidance of cultural controversies.

- **An Aggressive Agenda.** By any standards, Rendell was an activist governor with an aggressive agenda. And, he accomplished much of it. New or expanded programs in economic development, education, energy, health insurance, prescription drug programs, and gaming highlight that record. Rendell did not get everything he wanted, but he got more than any governor in modern times. Education funding—especially for basic and pre-kindergarten, modernized classrooms, and reduced class sizes—was probably his capstone achievement. Remarkably, much of this agenda was accomplished with opposition Republicans in control of the state legislature.

- **An Extraordinary Politician.** Rendell was politically gifted, probably the most talented politician of his generation. His terms as mayor of Philadelphia were so successful he was actually as popular in the Republican suburbs as Philadelphia itself. His statewide success was similarly dazzling. He was the only Philadelphian elected governor for almost 100 years. To even win the nomination he had to defeat, Bob Casey, the scion of one of Pennsylvania’s most celebrated political families. Once in office, he faced a Republican House and Senate his entire first term. Despite these obstacles, he won two terms as governor (with the largest popular vote given to any governor) and achieved a record of accomplishments in office that equaled or exceeded any of his predecessors.

- **A Political Gambler.** Rendell claims he won’t be remembered for bringing gaming to Pennsylvania. He’s wrong about that. Under him, gaming grew from a modest proposal to put slots in five race tracks to a huge industry that now numbers 10 casinos with more to come. Only time and experience will determine if that remembrance is a fond one. Rendell defends gaming for the “tens of thousands” of jobs it created, the resurgence of the horse racing business, and the millions of dollars produced for property tax relief. Nevertheless gaming remains controversial in the state. Objections range from moral arguments against gaming to health arguments concerning addiction. It will be decades before these issues are fully worked out but win, lose or draw, gaming is inextricably part of the Rendell legacy.

- **A Serious Second Term.** Rendell had a second term like no other governor in modern Pennsylvania. Past governors have had modest second term agendas, mostly lost any desire for long and nasty fights, and were largely content to let the legislature have its way. Not so Rendell who pursued an aggressive policy agenda throughout his second term. He compromised sometimes but never buckled and unlike earlier governors did not simply go away as his term expired. His second term may inspire future governors, but it may also give them pause. Rendell ends it as unpopular as any governor since Milton Shapp in the 1970’s, a consequence not unrelated to his activist second term.

Ultimately Rendell’s legacy must be a work in progress. Future historians will have the last word. The number of “successful” politicians that later came to be remembered as failures probably equals the number of “failed” politicians that came to be remembered successes. Meanwhile, Ed Rendell exits the scene to make way for a new governor, new challenges, new successes, and new legacies.

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