Most of us have good days and bad days. But can entire years be good or bad?

Englishman John Dryden believed so as far back as 1666. His famous poem, “Annus Mirabilis,” described the memorable events of that year. Queen Elizabeth II supplied the bad year example more than 300 years later when she dubbed 1992 an *annus horribilis* for the misfortunes it had brought her.

But whether a year has been *mirabilis* or *horribilis* depends on your point of view. Dryden’s original *annus mirabilis* of 1666 was also an *annus horribilis* if one happened to die from the plague ravaging London or burn to death in the city’s infamous fire.

Perhaps more important is that certain years seem to stand out as pivotal turning points, critical junctures crowded with consequential events that mark eras and even define generations. Entire nations experience these years. So do states.

In Pennsylvania, 1991 was one of those years—a crucial crossroads in commonwealth history that continues to resonate in state politics twenty years later. Five key episodes stand out:

- Bob Casey had just won reelection to his second term as governor by more than one million votes. He immediately faced a huge state deficit caused by one of the worst recessions up to that point in time. Amid considerable furor and recrimination, he and the legislature eventually agreed in August to raise the state’s income tax to cover that deficit for the first time in a decade. That same summer, Casey startled Pennsylvanians by announcing that he suffered from a rare life threatening disease—familial amyloidosis. The governor would undergo an extraordinary heart-liver transplant in 1993, serve out his term, and courageously fight the disease that would take his life in 2000.
- Earlier in June, powerhouse Congressman Bill Gray, a Philadelphia Democrat, who was House majority whip, announced that he would not seek reelection. He resigned to become head of the United Negro College Fund. Gray had been elected to Congress in 1978 and, like his father and grandfather before, was pastor of the Bright Hope Baptist Church. At the time of his departure, he had become the highest-ranking African American member of Congress and one of its most powerful members.
- The following month, Frank L. Rizzo, legendary two-term mayor of Philadelphia, died of a heart attack. Rizzo, a charismatic though polarizing figure, had switched parties and won the Republican nomination for mayor of Philadelphia in May. Rizzo’s primary opponent was Ron Castille, who ultimately became chief justice of the state Supreme Court. His Democratic opponent was Ed Rendell, a former two-term district attorney. Rizzo’s death made Rendell’s victory a cakewalk, jump starting Rendell’s political career after he had lost both a gubernatorial primary to Bob Casey in 1986 and a mayoral primary to incumbent Mayor Wilson Goode in 1987. Rendell went on to serve two terms as mayor of Philadelphia, followed by two terms as governor of Pennsylvania.
- Also in July, U.S. Senator Arlen Specter was rushed to the hospital with chest pains, initially thought to be a heart attack. Fortunately the medical diagnosis turned out to be a case of indigestion. Specter would later beat back far more serious health problems and win reelection three more times.
before losing in 2010 after switching parties. Specter would become the longest serving and most influential senator in the history of the state.

- But the most enduring event of 1991 did not come until the year was almost over. On April 4, Pennsylvanians were shocked when popular U.S. Senator John Heinz died in an airplane/helicopter crash. This tragic event set off a cascade of political actions and reactions that arguably presaged the 1992 presidential election. First, Governor Casey appointed his Secretary of Labor and Industry, Harris Wofford, to Heinz’s vacant Senate seat. It was a surprising choice. Wofford had considerable national experience as an advisor to President John F. Kennedy and was one of the founders of the Peace Corp. But he was not considered a strong statewide candidate to hold the seat in the upcoming special election in November. In fact, Wofford’s perceived vulnerability prompted nationally prominent former Governor Dick Thornburgh to resign as Bush’s attorney general to seek the Senate seat. Many believed Thornburgh’s election a certainty. But in an upset that stunned the nation, Wofford defeated Thornburgh decisively after having trailed him by as much as 40 points. Thornburgh came to be seen as a proxy for the increasingly unpopular President George H. W. Bush, and many analysts saw the election as precursor to the upcoming presidential election. Indeed, Wofford’s campaign, brilliantly run by James Carville and Paul Begala, used the same economic and healthcare arguments that would elect Bill Clinton in 1992.

Now, twenty years later, these transcendent moments of 1991 continue to reverberate across state and national politics. Rarely has so much, happening so fast, had a more profound influence on subsequent state history.

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