Pennsylvania's Long-Running One-Act Play

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by G. Terry Madonna & Michael L. Young

All sorts run for governor of Pennsylvania. There have been mayors, prosecutors, congressmen, judges, state legislators, businessmen, statewide elected officials, and even a lieutenant governor or two. Most have been qualified; a few perhaps have not. Most have been men; a very few have been women. Most have been career politicians, but occasionally private citizens have been candidates.

But there is one sort that never seeks the governorship of Pennsylvania—a sort that arguably is among the best qualified to do so. And that is former governors. In fact, since 1873 only two of Pennsylvania’s former governors have ever run for the office again. And the last was 80 years ago.

That fact of political life has become so expected, indeed counted on, that it seems unremarkable—merely a normal feature of modern state politics.

But it is anything but normal in many other states. This year, for example, of 37 gubernatorial contests nationally, at least five former governors will be on the November ballot running for their old job: Roy Barnes in Georgia, Jerry Brown in California, Terry Branstad in Iowa, Robert Ehrlich in Maryland, and John Kitzhaber in Oregon. Nor is that unusual. Former governors often run in other states.

Several reasons explain why former Pennsylvania governors don’t seek the office again. But one of those reasons isn’t any legal prohibition on doing so. Some confusion exists on this point because all governors since 1873 have been “term limited” under the state constitution.

But term limited is itself a limited term. It doesn’t mean a governor can never run for that office again. It only means another consecutive term is prohibited. Since the post-Civil War period, two different state constitutional provisions have been in place, both allowing governors to run again after a period out of office.

The first period ran from 1873 until 1970. Then governors were limited to a single four-year term, but could serve another term if they sat out at least one term before doing so. As noted, two governors during this period actually did just that—Democrat Robert Pattison in the 19th century (1891) and Republican Gifford Pinchot in the 20th (1931). But they are rare birds in state history.

The second period began in 1970 and continues today. Now governors can serve two consecutive terms before being term limited. But then after four years they can run again. None have, however, although several have run for U.S. Senate seats.

Why the dearth of gubernatorial second acts? Current governor Ed Rendell has provided one answer, lately acknowledging that he is “ready to go” when his term expires in early 2011. It’s a tough, often frustrating, sometimes thankless job. Eight years seems about enough for many.

But there are probably other reasons that Pennsylvania’s ex-governors stay away. One surely is that some could never have been reelected. In the modern era, both Republican Ray Shafer and Democrat Milton Shapp
are examples. Both were very unpopular by term’s end, and their political careers were over. For others, illness and age explains the end of their political career—former Governors Bob Casey and David Lawrence died within a few years of their terms.

Still others met political adversity after leaving office. Former Governor Arthur James ran for and lost a race for state Superior Court. Former Governor John Fine failed to return to his old office as a court of common pleas judge.

Yet another factor has been not adversity, but success. Two former governors, Edward Martin and James Duff, became U.S. Senators. Two others, Dick Thornburgh and Tom Ridge, went on to become cabinet officers in presidential administrations, while Bill Scranton turned down an offer to become Secretary of State and later accepted an assignment as Ambassador to the United Nations.

Beyond these singular explanations, there may be more systemic factors at work. Some might point to the GOP’s methodical “wait-your-turn” successions that tend to render the governorship a career step in a well-ordered trajectory. Certainly, since Bill Scranton in 1962, the governorship has tended to be entrée to national politics for Republicans.

Democratic governors show no similar pattern. On the contrary, the governorship has been a career ender for most. Former Governor David Lawrence did serve as chair of the Kennedy-Johnson Equal Opportunity Commission in the 1960’s. But since then, no former Democratic Governor has received a federal appointment after leaving office.

So there are plausible, even compelling, explanations for why Pennsylvania’s gubernatorial office has been a one-act play. Still, the question lingers as yet another governor prepares to wind down his tenure. Will it always be that way?

The celebrated novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald once famously remarked, “There are no second acts in American lives.” Fitzgerald was talking about individuals, but he might also have been talking about Pennsylvania’s former governors.

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