

Until the Bitter End

October 22, 2009

by Dr. G. Terry Madonna and Dr. Michael Young

Call it gubernatorial chic!

Since 1970 Pennsylvania has had an unbroken string of two term governors - Milton Shapp, Dick Thornburgh, Bob Casey, Tom Ridge, and now Ed Rendell. Most of them have behaved in a familiar pattern. They fashioned modest second term agendas, exhibited little stomach for long nasty political fights, and were largely content to let the legislature have its way. Each, by the waning years of his second term, had lost interest, influence, or both in state policy and politics. Consequently, they, like the proverbial "old soldier," were content to just "fade away" as their terms ended.

Until now!

Now it's Ed Rendell's turn to play the old soldier - a role that so far he's not playing very well. Rendell has had a second gubernatorial term like no other governor in modern Pennsylvania. He has pursued an aggressive policy agenda, pushed for an increase in the state income tax, and expanded education, economic development, and health care programs. He has been content neither to bide his time nor to wile the months away until his term ends. Rendell not only won't go away mad - he won't go away at all.

And that distinction between Rendell and every other modern governor may be the single most important factor influencing the upcoming 2010 gubernatorial election.

His continuing presence in state politics has been palpable. Whether it was his celebrated campaign on behalf of Hillary Clinton's presidential candidacy, his omnipresence on cable TV, or his now history making budget standoff with the legislature - Rendell has refused to move off stage.

And it's not that other folks have been reluctant to conjecture about his future prospects after leaving Harrisburg. The speculation has included a job in the Obama administration, baseball commissioner, and even a stint as a sports or talk show host. But Rendell, publicly at least, is having none of it. He has shown no inclination to be distracted from playing out his aggressive governorship.

To be sure, many things will matter before the 2010 governor's race is settled. There's no doubt the prolonged state budget battle and growing anti-Harrisburg sentiment that permeates voter sentiment will provide much grist for the campaign. Add to that Pennsylvania's complex political geography, the recession, and the personalities and backgrounds of the candidates. But the 2010 election will have something no other modern open-seat gubernatorial race has had - an incumbent governor, live and in color, front and center, in your face, until the bitter end.

Rendell will not only be deeply involved in the race, but the race itself will be about him and his policies. Rendell will be the first governor since Milton Shapp to have his leadership and his policies the centerpiece of a governor's contest.

Republicans are likely to see this as an opportunity, while Democrats may perceive it to be a problem. Both may be wrong.

Certainly Republican candidates will have a ready-made target. They can openly and perhaps gleefully attack Rendell and his agenda without much anxiety about dividing either their party or their party's voters. The governor's job performance is the lowest since he assumed office. Hence Republicans will have less fear that Rendell could use his popularity, fundraising ability, and considerable campaign prowess to damage them. But having less fear is not the same as having no fear. Few Republicans who have confronted Rendell the past seven years will relish yet another battle with him. A wounded bear is still a dangerous bear.

For Democrats, the Rendell factor poses a dilemma: whether to run towards him or away from him. To run toward him is to embrace his ambitious policy and tax agenda during harrowing economic times. On the other hand, to run away from him means to embrace a more conservative, budget-cutting, no-tax agenda - something many fellow Democrats will oppose.

Either path is fraught with potential peril. The electorate seems in no mood to extend Rendell's ambitious agenda, but neither does it seem inclined to roll back the last seven years of program growth. Moreover, there is little doubt that the state will be roiled in another tough budget debate during 2010. Neither party will be able to duck the always divisive issues of taxation and spending in an election year.

Modern state history offers a single example of a political party caught in an intra-party conflict like this one. In 1978, term-limited Democratic incumbent Milton Shapp was retiring after a controversial eight years - years that revealed widespread corruption within his administration while recording successive budget-battle fiascos in 1977 and 1978.

Populist Pittsburgh Mayor Pete Flaherty won the Democratic primary and faced the GOP nominee, first-time political candidate U.S Attorney for Western Pennsylvania Dick Thornburgh.

Flaherty lost little time deciding on a strategy. Running against the politically untested Thornburgh and personally disliking Shapp, he embarked on a stridently anti-Shapp, anti- administration campaign. Flaherty, it was said with some reason, ran harder against his own party than against his GOP opponent.

This strategy initially put him ahead of Thornburgh by as much as 30 points in mid-summer. Ultimately, however, running against his own party split Democrats badly, giving Thornburgh an opening he boldly exploited. In the end, despite a voter registration deficit of one million and having never held an elective office, Thornburgh went on to beat Democrat Flaherty by six points.

Back to the present: 2010 will not be 1978. And certainly corruption in the executive branch is not at issue this time - it's taxes and spending that are at center stage.

Indeed, history never exactly repeats itself. State Democrats can keep that reassuring thought in mind. But as Mark Twain once remarked, while history doesn't repeat itself, "it sure does rhyme" sometimes. Democrats will want to remember that one too.

*Politically Uncorrected*TM is published twice monthly. Dr. G. Terry Madonna is a Professor of Public Affairs at Franklin & Marshall College, and Dr. Michael Young is a former Professor of Politics and Public Affairs at Penn State University and Managing Partner at Michael Young Strategic Research. The opinions expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of any institution or organization with which they are affiliated. This article may be used in whole or part only with appropriate attribution. Copyright © 2009 Terry Madonna and Michael Young.