

The Inside Edge

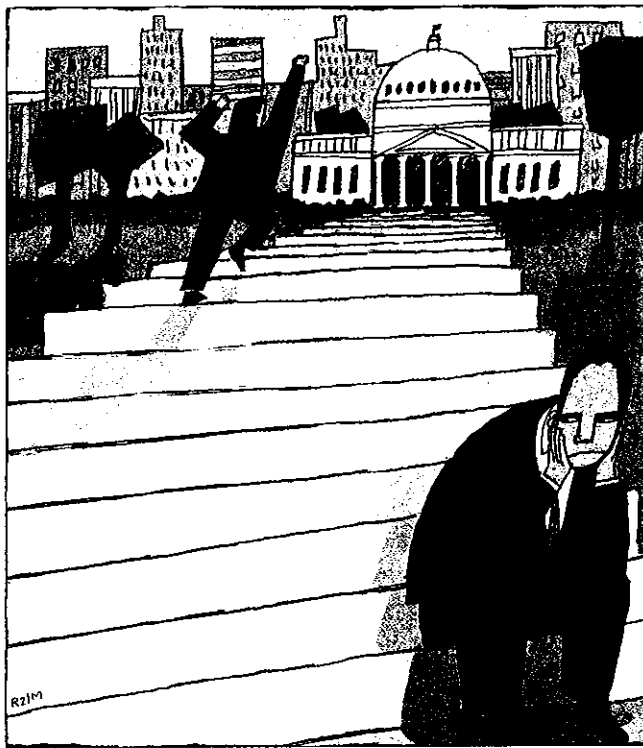
IN THE LATE 1980s AND early '90s, Ned McWherter of Tennessee was one of the more effective governors in the United States. He managed the state's budget skillfully, pushed through innovations in housing finance, and created a health care program that, while flawed, was years ahead of its time. If he wanted something, the legislature nearly always gave it to him.

When asked to analyze his methods, McWherter sometimes gave a simple answer: He just followed the lessons he learned as a young man from Fats Everett, the legendary Democratic boss in Gibson County, in the northwest corner of the state, near where he grew up. McWherter nearly always had a saying or a story from his mentor to use in difficult situations.

When aides or legislators balked at staying late into the night to put a bill together, he would remind them of Fats Everett's views on public employment: "If you don't want to work, don't hire yourself out." Then he would return to the task at hand.

I never got to know McWherter, but I've always felt that his career suggested a sound strategy for any ambitious politician aiming at a governorship: Early in your career, find a man named Fats, and listen carefully to what he tells you. Unfortunately, this tactic is difficult to pursue in the 21st century. The supply of politicians willing to call themselves Fats just isn't what it was a generation ago.

In fact, though, there were reasons for McWherter's success besides the homilies of an old political boss. McWherter came to the governorship after 18 years in the legislature, 14 of them as speaker of the House. By the time he reached the executive office, he very likely knew more about state politics than any human being in Tennessee. He understood the process, the players, the



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sacrifices he could demand from people, the favors he needed to offer in return, and the issues that were not worth the political risk. That was his real secret.

NED McWHERTER IS living peacefully in retirement these days in Paris Landing, Tennessee, but I've thought about him lately as I've followed the ups and downs of the 11 first-term governors who took office

at the beginning of this year. Some of them have done quite well at framing an agenda and seeing it through to enactment. Others have had an unexpectedly rocky start. Most, as you might expect, seem to fall somewhere in between.

Let's start with a few of the success stories. Mike Beebe in Arkansas campaigned last year on a commitment to cut the sales tax on groceries in half, and by March it was done. He worked out a deal with the legislature to put surplus funds into education, which will probably extricate the state from years of court scrutiny over school finance. He split up two agencies whose merger hadn't worked, essentially bypassing the legislature but avoiding any serious flak. He raced back home from a governors' meeting to deal

with the aftermath of a tornado, winning major symbolic points from the electorate. Not bad for the first few months.

Chet Culver in Iowa has done nearly as well. Legislators seemed ready to give him what he wanted almost as soon as he asked for it. Culver's agenda called for an increase in the minimum wage, higher salaries for teachers and more revenue from the tobacco tax. No problem. Afterward, Culver sat down quietly with the legislative leadership and worked out a budget agreement that sailed through just before adjournment.

Then there's Charlie Crist in Florida. It's always hard to know what to make of Crist: So much of what he does seems to be aimed at public relations and popularity. And yet even critics have to concede that his first six months have been a success. He charged into office vowing to do something about property insurance rates, and he got lawmakers to pass a comprehensive bill. Whether it will work remains to be seen, but the aura of competence and dispatch was

Assessments

impressive. Crist's personal priority was his "anti-murder" bill, aimed at cracking down on crimes committed by convicts on probation. That's now law. Meanwhile, Crist has assiduously promoted his crusade against secrecy in government, a tendency he said had gone too far. By late spring, his approval ratings were approaching 80 percent.

Admittedly, some of the success sto-

ernment, Massachusetts was under Republican gubernatorial control for 16 years until Patrick won the statehouse back for the Democrats last November. A honeymoon was not too much to expect.

But a honeymoon was the opposite of what happened. Patrick spent the first few months of his governorship cleaning up one mess after another. A series of public relations blunders hurt him among the voters,

None of these career details prove anything. But are they a coincidence? I don't think so. When Mike Beebe negotiates with legislators over the details of the state budget, he is talking to old friends (and a few old enemies, but that probably doesn't hurt). When Patrick negotiates in Massachusetts, it is with people who are essentially strangers. They were delighted to see a Democrat back in power on Beacon Hill but they have no common experiences and no foundation of trust to bring to the table.

There's nothing rigid or inevitable about this. Exceptions turn up every year. Judging by his résumé—six years in the legislature eight in the executive branch—Bob Taft should have been a highly effective governor of Ohio. But he turned out to be as inept at dealing with the legislature as he was in communicating with the public. By contrast, Dale Bumpers, Mike Beebe's mentor in Arkansas, came to the governorship from a small-town law practice, without a day of government experience, and quickly took command of the legislature and the entire state government. It can be done.

Still, I think it's fair to argue that something like a McWherter Rule does apply. It's the governors who know their way around the capitol who accomplish the most. During campaign season, the candidates usually act as if that weren't true. Every year dozens of them run for the office proclaiming the need for fresh blood and new ideas. Nobody ever runs on the slogan, "I know where the bodies are buried." That only seems to count after the inaugural ball is over. But it does count.

Preparing to be governor the old-fashioned way isn't the easiest task in the world. Years of rancorous argument in the legislature, maybe two or three terms as an underpaid attorney general or secretary of state. By the time you reach the governor's mansion you may be feeling a little fatigued. But the odds are you will know what to do.

And if, somewhere along the way, you encountered a politician named Fats and listened to everything he said, you will very likely have it made.

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ries have roots in party politics. Beebe, a Democrat taking over after a decade of Republican gubernatorial control, had good reason to expect friendly treatment from a House and Senate controlled overwhelmingly by his own party. And Culver is the first Democratic governor of Iowa in 40 years to enjoy Democratic majorities in both chambers. It's no surprise that the legislators wanted to help him.

But partisan majorities can carry a governor only so far. If they were a guarantee of success, Butch Otter would have had a blissful first six months as governor of Idaho. He is a Republican, and so are 28 of the 35 senators and 51 of the 70 representatives. The minority hardly even counts. All Otter had to do was work things out with his own party, and he could accomplish virtually anything he chose. But he was unable to do that. The Idaho session this year was one long quarrel between the governor and legislators, over everything from sales taxes and executive reorganization to renovation of the state capitol. When the legislature finally left town at the end of March, virtually all the players were in a sour mood—with many of them blaming it on the governor.

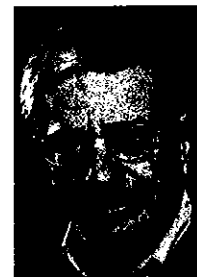
And if the key to gubernatorial success were partisan restoration—one party coming back into control after years out of power, as happened for Beebe in Arkansas and Culver in Iowa—then the most successful new governor of all in 2007 might have been Deval Patrick in Massachusetts. Heavily Democratic at virtually all levels of gov-

ernment, Massachusetts was under Republican gubernatorial control for 16 years until Patrick won the statehouse back for the Democrats last November. A honeymoon was not too much to expect. But a honeymoon was the opposite of what happened. Patrick spent the first few months of his governorship cleaning up one mess after another. A series of public relations blunders hurt him among the voters,

but more significant was the bickering between Patrick and legislators who had exulted at his election only a few months before. One of the governor's first substantive moves was a threat to veto the earmarked spending provisions that the legislature has come to consider routine. Whatever the merits of the case, Patrick has contributed to a climate of tension that is not helping him recover from the early missteps.

IS THERE A PATTERN to all of this, a plausible means of explaining why some new governors get their way and others stumble? Maybe. Political success is never simple, and I don't want to oversimplify it here. But in 2007, at least, one correlation is just too obvious to ignore. The governors who are making it are the ones whose career path looks something like Ned McWherter's: They paid their dues in state politics. Beebe served 20 years in the Arkansas legislature and one term as attorney general. Crist spent six years in the Florida Senate, then two as education commissioner and four as attorney general. Culver was Iowa's secretary of state for eight years.

Deval Patrick, by contrast, had never held any political office before this year, although he was deputy U.S. attorney general in the Clinton administration. Otter had a long career in Idaho politics, but it ended quite a while ago, in 2000, when he ran for Congress.



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