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Among the governors of Alaska, Egan was tops

Since John McCain announced Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate I've been besieged with calls from national and international news media.

I've talked about Palin in an online Q & A for the Washington Post, been interviewed twice on National Public Radio, done a live interview with the BBC, and participated in a live drive-time program on Irish national radio. In addition, I've tried to answer questions from dozens of other reporters trying frantically to find something new about our governor, or nail down a crucial fact.

I've been watching Alaska governors ever since statehood in 1959, the year I graduated from Anchorage (now West) High School. If reporters realize I've been around that long they usually ask me something like, "How do you think Palin stacks up as governor?"

It's a tough question. Counting Palin, nine people have served as governor since statehood. Let's consider them all.

Bill Egan (served 1959-66, and 1970-74).

Alaska had just more than 200,000 people when Egan became governor, and he knew most of them by their first name, even my kid-brother, Trygve.

Egan was an awful public speaker, but he presided successfully over the Alaska Constitutional Convention. By the time he was sworn in as governor three years later, Egan had proven himself a statesman, firm in principle yet a master of compromise.

During his first stint as governor he staffed a lean and efficient state government almost from scratch, managed emergency response and

rebuilding after the Great Alaska Earthquake, and created more state parks than any governor in any state, before or since. When Egan reclaimed the governor's seat in 1970 he didn't do as well, but he still remains number one in my book of Alaska's governors.

Walter Hickel (1966-69, 1990-94).

Hickel presided over construction of the Hickel Highway, one of the greatest man-made environmental disasters in Alaska history.

"I drove (the tractor) the first six or seven miles myself," Hickel crowed. "I got off, and I told Jim, I said, 'Don't you shut this thing off until you get to Prudhoe Bay.'" The road was built in the winter of 1967. In the spring it became a muddy ditch, leaving a huge scar on the landscape that remains visible to this day. That disaster birthed the modern environmental movement in Alaska.

But Hickel stood firm against those who were trying to pocket so-called "non-competitive" state oil leases for next to nothing, insisting that the leases should go to the highest bidder. During his second stint in Juneau, Hickel stood up to the oil industry but lost a key legislative fight that cost the state millions in back oil taxes.

At age 89, Wally remains an active and honored figure in Alaska for his independent spirit and for promoting the idea that Alaska should manage its resources like a private corporation whose objective is to maximize revenue for its stockholders, the citizens. It's not a bad rule.

Keith Miller (1969-70).

When President Nixon appointed Hickel secretary of the Interior, Miller, Alaska's little-known secretary of state, succeeded him.

My father told Miller he was a "reactionary," a term Miller recently admitted he relished. The big event of Miller's short tenure was the \$900 million in lease bonus money the state received in September 1969, seven times the state budget of that year.

In 1970, Miller was the first to suggest creation of a permanent fund, an idea

about seven years ahead of its time.

Jay Hammond (1974-82).

Hammond was a good governor, but his accomplishments don't quite match his lofty reputation. Hammond was the first governor to shape policies that reflected the changing attitude to the environment. He played a decisive role in establishing the Alaska Permanent Fund, and, over the objections of almost every other state political leader, the permanent fund dividend.

Every year Hammond's budget message to legislators warned about excessive growth in state government, yet each year he approved a budget that greatly exceeded the year before. While some of the oil money went to the permanent fund, vastly more rolled into new government programs and capital projects. Like the Delta Barley Project, some have since become icons of pork-barrel waste.

In 1981, near the end of Hammond's years as governor, the oil industry gained power to kill or modify to its liking any legislation adversely affecting its interests in Alaska. It's a power the industry would hold until Palin came on the scene 27 years later.

Next Sunday I'll cover the remaining former governors - Bill Sheffield, Steve Cowper, Tony Knowles and Frank Murkowski - and I'll assess where Palin stands in relation to her predecessors.

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