

Following Murkowski a stroke of luck for Palin

Part 2 of 2

GREGG ERICKSON

COMMENT

(09/13/08 22:47:55)

How does Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin stack up against her predecessors? I've lived long enough and been lucky enough to have personally known each of the nine people who've served as governor of this state, but it's still a tough question.

Last Sunday I assessed the accomplishments of the first four governors -- Bill Egan, Walter Hickel, Keith Miller and Jay Hammond. I explained why Egan was my pick as the state's top governor. Today, in the second and concluding part of this essay, I address the remaining five governors, including Palin.

BILL SHEFFIELD (1982-1986)

Sheffield was unlucky. He took office just as oil prices and state revenue began their slide from the heady heights reached under Hammond. But Sheffield's troubled tenure as governor wasn't just bad luck. He was dogged by allegations of campaign finance violations, and in 1985 a grand jury recommended that he be impeached for an alleged effort to steer a \$9 million state contract to a group of political cronies.

Although Sheffield was never formally charged with a crime, the Alaska Senate called itself into special session that summer to consider his impeachment. After 30 relentless days of televised hearings the Senate voted 12 to 8 against forwarding the charges to the House for trial. But Sheffield, a Democrat, lost his bid for a second term anyway, becoming the first of two Alaska governors booted out by voters in his own party's primary.

STEVE COWPER (1986-1990)

Like Egan and Hammond, Cowper attracted remarkably talented people to serve in state government, but he never seemed quite comfortable in the job. As with Sheffield, declining oil revenue forced difficult choices. He pushed the idea of using Permanent Fund income to cover the costs of the state's education aid program for local school districts, but that plan never got off the ground.

In March 1989, Cowper surprised Alaskans by announcing that he wouldn't run for a second term. A day later the Exxon Valdez ran aground, spilling 11 million gallons of toxic crude oil into the waters of Prince William Sound, sullyng seas and beaches as far west as the Alaska Peninsula. Cowper's response to the environmental disaster was decisive, yet thoughtful and informed. It was the finest achievement of four years as governor. Moreover, he skillfully used public outrage over the spill to push a limited oil-tax reform bill through the industry-dominated Legislature.

TONY KNOWLES (1994-2002)

Cowper was followed by Walter Hickel's second term, discussed last week. Then came Tony Knowles, the best manager ever to occupy the Capitol's third-floor executive suite. Better than any other governor, Knowles knew what was going on in the state bureaucracy and made sure the bureaucrats knew what he expected of them. I never observed a public disagreement among Knowles' commissioners, a feat not

achieved before or since.

Knowles never met an oil industry idea he didn't like, a grave defect in my view. His administration kept its distance from Veco and the corruption that during his second term began to evince itself in the Legislature. That's too bad. An aggressive investigation at that time would have displeased Knowles' oil allies, but it might have forestalled the culture of corruption that soon came to dominate Alaska state politics.

FRANK MURKOWSKI (2002-2006)

Murkowski was Alaska's worst governor. Fortunately, he was also its most incompetent, so his ill-considered ideas on the Permanent Fund, oil taxes and the gas pipeline never went anywhere. Unfortunately, corruption flourished on Murkowski's watch. I also think that was due to his ineptitude. Others hold a less charitable view.

SARAH PALIN (2006-PRESENT)

Egan and Hammond were transformative governors: They forever changed political life in Alaska, leaving an indelible stamp on the state. Despite her short tenure, I believe history will rank Palin as a transformative governor, presiding as she has as the state emerges politically from 27 years of oil industry domination.

I say this notwithstanding the weaknesses Palin has displayed as governor. She is naive if not disinterested regarding the boring elements of state government such as the personnel system and the laws that govern it. She has demonstrated little skill in mentoring or allocating trust and authority to subordinates. And she has trouble distinguishing the difference between her public responsibilities and her personal and family desires, a problem that has her embroiled in a legislative investigation of the sort not seen since the Legislature considered impeaching Sheffield.

Finally, let's remember one other important thing: Palin is lucky. Following Murkowski is the biggest break any governor could hope for.

No matter what comes next -- impeachment for abuse of power, elevation as vice president or merely two or six more years of being governor -- Palin has secured a prominent and permanent place in Alaska history.

Juneau economic consultant Gregg Erickson is editor-at-large of the Alaska Budget Report. He can be contacted at gerickso@alaska.com.

Print Page

Close Window

Copyright © Mon Sep 15 2008 22:37:34 GMT-0800 (AKDT)1900 The Anchorage Daily News (www.adn.com)