



Late NH Gov. Steve Merrill: Gentleman Who Got Out Early

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For those who knew Steve Merrill and especially for national reporters who covered the former Republican governor of New Hampshire, the big question upon learning of his death Sunday was: Where was he for the last quarter-century?

Merrill, who was 74, left the governorship in 1996 after two 2-year terms and at the height of his popularity. He had coined the phrase "the New Hampshire advantage" to describe his state's commitment to low taxes and small government — and that is the kind of governance he practiced.

Many who reported on Merrill and others who worked with him found it strange he would leave politics at age 50 never to return.

As veteran Republican political operative Rob Varsalone told Newsmax, "He was one of the most naturally gifted politicians I have ever met. Some people are born with 'it' and some aren't. He was just very likable, and he lit up every room he walked into."

He could have easily won re-election to the governorship and had at least one opportunity to take a U.S. Senate seat from the Granite State.

But Merrill was happy where he was as chairman of the Boston-based Bingham Consulting firm. Instead of seeking office himself, he chose to back young up-and-comers. He was one of the first Republicans to endorse former State Attorney General Kelly Ayotte for the Senate in 2010 and his blessing was key to her winning a tight nomination battle.

The last time I spoke to Merrill was in 1997. He was in the middle of his "last hurrah" as one of six candidates for the Republican National Committee chairmanship. Flanked by wife Heather, the former governor conceded conservative stalwarts on the committee were committed to the candidacy of [Texas GOP Chairman and long-time conservative activist] Tom Pauken.

"But, look, he won't be able to go the distance," Merrill told me. "And if conservatives are looking for someone who can win and lead the party by uniting all factions, they'll turn to me."

It was not to be. Colorado's GOP National Committeeman Jim Nicholson was the eventual winner. Merrill left politics for good.

Many who saw Merrill as a New Hampshire man down to his toes were surprised to learn he was actually born in Norwich, Connecticut. But his family moved to Hampton, New Hampshire, when he was young. Merrill graduated Phi Beta Kappa from the University of New Hampshire and earned a law degree from Georgetown.

After a stint in the U.S. Air Force, he served as legal counsel to the U.S. Secretary of the Air Force in 1975-76. He then settled into private practice in Manchester, New Hampshire, but public service soon beckoned him again. Republican Gov. John Sununu tapped him to be state attorney general and he held the post for nearly four years.

When Republican Gov. Judd Gregg decided in 1992 to run for the Senate, Merrill declared for governor and won the Republican nomination in his maiden political voyage. In November, running on a "no-tax" platform, he rolled up 70% of the vote against Democrat and "broad-based tax" supporter Arnie Arneson.

Faced with a \$40 million shortfall in state revenues, he called for changing Workmen's Compensation for state employees and revising taxes already on the books. Within months, the New Hampshire economy rebounded and Merrill went on to be twice selected as the "most fiscally responsible governor in America" by The Wall Street Journal/Cato Institute.

What many New Hampshire politicians remembered about Merrill was his good nature, his sense of humor, and ability to make friends with just about anyone.

Shortly after becoming governor, Merrill scandalized conservatives by naming former law partner and liberal Democrat John Broderick to the state Supreme Court.

"It wasn't about what issue he felt strongly about or what issue I felt strongly about — I admired his character," Broderick, who became chief justice in 2004, told WMUR-TV after Merrill's death.

Robert Varsalone recalled what he called Merrill's "wicked sense of humor."

"When my first son was born, he sent me a very personal and very heartfelt note," Varsalone said. "And he ended with a P.S. — 'Hopefully, your new baby looks like his mother.'"

Former Republican State Rep. Mark Brady told how, when his mother (former State Rep. Carolyn Brady) was dying of cancer in 1993, "our next-door neighbor and new governor would occasionally cook something for us and walk it over. Steve was a truly decent and caring human being who did not let political ambition and politics get in the way of personal relationships."