Interview with Kenneth P. Merin

Michael Aron: It’s the afternoon of February 23, 2009. We’re at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University in New Brunswick. We’re here for the Thomas H. Kean Archive of the Rutgers Program on the Governor. This afternoon, we’re gonna talk to Ken Merin. Ken was a deputy chief counsel, a chief of policy and planning and a cabinet member, a commissioner of insurance during the two Kean terms. He first got involved with Tom Kean during the 1981 gubernatorial primary and we’re going to get his perspective on the Kean years. Ken, let’s jump in with your first awareness of Tom Kean. What was your first awareness of Tom Kean?

Kenneth P. Merin: Well, when I was 13, 14 years old, I was living in Livingston at that point and the Kean family was synonymous with anything good about the town. Livingston in those days was still somewhat rural. There was still a pretty big farm, the Becker Farm, where they grew corn and they had cows and it was just a very nice area. But the Kean family had lived there for a long time, had donated a lot of land to the town and of course Governor Kean’s father was well-known because of his days in congress. So it was growing up with the knowledge that there was this family called the Kean family that had a great history of doing things for the State of New Jersey.

Q: Becker Farm Road is where all the law firms are now, right?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah. I’d rather have the corn than the law firms, but it’s a political stand I guess.

Q: Were you born in Livingston? Were you raised in Livingston?

Kenneth P. Merin: Born in Newark, raised in Newark until I was about 13 and then we moved to Livingston.

Q: Where did you go to high school?

Kenneth P. Merin: Livingston High School.

Q: Where did you go to college?

Kenneth P. Merin: George Washington University in DC.

Q: What did you study there?

Kenneth P. Merin: Political science.

Q: What did you do after college?

Kenneth P. Merin: Went into the army. I had taken ROTC and spent three years in the military.

Q: Where?

Kenneth P. Merin: Fort Benning, Georgia, Vietnam, and then when I got back from Vietnam, a couple of months at Fort Dix.

Q: What did your parents do?

Kenneth P. Merin: My dad worked for a photography company. He didn’t take pictures, but they had a division that worked with schools signing them up for yearbook photos and he was on that end. And my mom for most of my life was a homemaker, started working part-time when my brother reached high school age.

Q: How many kids in your family?
Kenneth P. Merin: I have one brother who’s about four years younger.

Q: So you went into the military and what did you do after the military?

Kenneth P. Merin: Went to law school.

Q: Where?

Kenneth P. Merin: Seton Hall.

Q: And then what?

Kenneth P. Merin: Went down to Washington. I knew I wanted to be in DC so I looked for a job down in DC and wound up working for the Congressional Research Service, which is part of the Library of Congress.

Q: Was the Vietnam War on when you were in the military?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes.

Q: Did you go to Vietnam?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes, I did.

Q: Are you a Vietnam vet?

Kenneth P. Merin: I am.

Q: What did you do in Vietnam?

Kenneth P. Merin: I got there on Thanksgiving Day of 1970 and had a variety of assignments including a platoon commander for a while, but primarily, I was working in a staff job. This was just after the My Lai Incident came to light anyway. As a matter of fact, as I was leaving Fort Benning processing out to go on leave before I went to Vietnam, I was sitting in the officer’s club one day and it was late and this guy walked in who looked kind of familiar and it was Lieutenant Calley with his two lawyers and they were sitting about 20 feet away having lunch and talking about the case, which was then just beginning. But when I got to Vietnam, they were forming a unit to help try to ameliorate and resolve the types of incidents that were occurring on a much smaller scale, similar to My Lai and I did a lot of that for most of the time that I was there.

Q: Did you see any combat while you were there?

Kenneth P. Merin: Not really.

Q: Did you win any medals while you were there?

Kenneth P. Merin: I got a couple of medals. I’m not sure whether winning is the correct word, but the army decided to give me a couple of ribbons.

Q: For what?

Kenneth P. Merin: For surviving, for being there, for being a good guy. I got a bronze star and a joint service commendation medal.

Q: So you came back from the military and you went to Seton Hall Law School and then you went down to
Washington and worked in the research arm of the Library of Congress?

Kenneth P. Merin: Right. And I worked very closely with and was assigned to a couple of committees. The House Merchant Marine and Fisheries Committee in particular had jurisdiction over the Panama Canal zone and that was the time when the Panama Canal Treaties had just been signed by Jimmy Carter.

President Carter shakes hands with Panama's President Omar Torrijos after singing Canal Treaties Image source: Jimmy Carter Library

And I also worked with the Senate Judiciary Committee. So I spent about a year and half working on the Panama Canal Treaties and the implementing legislation.

Q: But you weren’t working for the Congress; you were working for the research arm of the Library of Congress?

Kenneth P. Merin: I had been assigned to the committees by the Congressional Research Service to provide support to both committees.

Panama Canal ca. 1978 Image source: National Archives

Q: I see. So I guess the Library of Congress is part of Congress.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes, it is.

Q: What drew you to public affairs?

Kenneth P. Merin: I was always fascinated by it. I loved history when I was growing up and I still love history and the idea of public service is just something I felt strongly about. I felt strongly about being in the military. I felt strongly about serving in Vietnam, forgetting the rightness or wrongness or the war, I just felt was something that I ought to do. And so I’ve always enjoyed anything having to do with government service.

Q: What do you think oriented you in that way?

Kenneth P. Merin: I don’t know. I think when little boys grow up they want to be, you know, cops or cowboys. I just wanted to be a soldier and never changed. And I also felt fascinated by the idea of working for the public good and that grew on me. And after I was in the military for a while, I decided I didn’t want to be a soldier, but the idea of working for the public good stayed with me.

Q: So you worked on these several committees in the Congress and you were working for the Congress itself as an institution.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes.

Q: Doing research for the committee staffs or for the members?

Kenneth P. Merin: For members, for the staff. I eventually wound up working for a member, for a congressman, for about a year.
Q: Who?

Kenneth P. Merin: A guy named Bill Carney. He was a Republican from Suffolk County, New York.

Q: What year was that? Do you remember?


Q: Then what happened?

Kenneth P. Merin: While I was working for the congressman, I met a fellow named Tony Cicatiello and we got to talking and he found out I was from Livingston and he said, “Well, I know this guy in Livingston. Did you ever hear of Tom Kean?” So that closes the circle. Of course I’ve heard of Tom Kean and the Kean family. And he arranged for me to meet Tom and we had a nice chat and lo and behold, I went back and worked on the governor’s campaign starting in February of ’81.

Q: February of ’81. What did you do in the campaign?

Kenneth P. Merin: The title was director of issues or research, whatever. I forget the exact title.

Q: It was a crowded field of Republicans running for governor.

Kenneth P. Merin: It was.

Q: What distinguished Tom Kean?

Kenneth P. Merin: Everything I knew about Tom, I just didn’t see how he could possibly lose given who he was, given the quality of the family, given everything I knew about him. And this is not speaking ill of any of the other Republican candidates or the candidate in the general election; I just really believed that here is a guy who stood for good stuff.

Q: And so you didn’t think he could lose. Are you speaking of the Republican primary or of the election itself?

Kenneth P. Merin: Of anything. I didn’t know him, I’d never met him, but again, it’s that little boy growing up in Livingston who had heard about the Kean family and the couple of centuries of service to the state. This is something that I could identify with and I said, “Wow, what an opportunity.”

Q: What did you think of Tom Kean when you met him?

Kenneth P. Merin: Just incredible. I’ve often said that for people that only know him from TV, what you see is what you get. He’s just a very, very nice man, very down to earth, very earnest.

Q: So you were his issues director in the primary. And who did you report to?

Kenneth P. Merin: Tom Kean or Roger Bodman, who was the campaign manager.

Q: Do you recall any instances where you and Kean disagreed on an issue?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: No?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.
Q: Well, is that ‘cause you submerged your opinions or because you and he think identically?

Kenneth P. Merin: It was because first of all, it was a learning experience for me. Most of my issues and background had been with the Congress. And with the Library of Congress Congressional Research Service, they teach you to look at both sides of an issue because you work for Congress, not for Republicans or Democrats, but you’re trying to give advice on an issue mindful of the fact that there are different groups that you’re talking with. So in doing the issues work for Tom, I’d look at both sides of an issue, I’d analyze it, I’d make recommendations, but Tom Kean in many ways was his own issues manager. I mean he clearly had had a long history in the legislature. His service in the Assembly meant that he knew a lot more about the issues than I did. I was a pretty recent interloper from Washington, DC.

Q: Different set of issues.

Kenneth P. Merin: Different set of issues than I had been used to experiencing. I think what I brought to the table was more a knowledge of how to assemble different views and put them into a cohesive format for him to make a decision on.

Q: What were the issues in 1981?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think they were a lot different than what we think about right now. I think the primary issue was crime. The economic times were not great and when that happens, crime, violent crime I think was the number one issue. If there was another number one issue, it was taxes. People were fed up with the tax situation. If there was another number one issue, it was the environment. People were very, very concerned about environmental degradation. Superfund sites were becoming more plentiful as they were identified. So I think probably crime, taxes, education was in there, but I think all the other issues took second place to crime and taxes.

Q: Was it hard for Tom Kean to run as a tough crime fighter or did that come easily to him?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think it came easily to him. I don’t think there was anything tough about it. I remember one of the things that we fought for was a death penalty, longer prison terms, and I think that that was in the tenor of the times a good commonsense position to take.

Q: And on taxes, what was his stance?

Kenneth P. Merin: He wanted to lower taxes and he campaigned on making New Jersey a better place to live and a better place to work. I think when you look at the tax issue a lot of it was hooked to keeping business in New Jersey. Again, if you look at the tenor of the times, we had the rust belt in the Midwest, the manufacturing jobs which in 2009 are long gone, but in 1981 were just a couple of years removed from a lot of the factory jobs in the Northeast and Midwest beginning to move down South or offshore. In the 1970s, the issue was why is the Northeast and Midwest losing all the jobs to the south; now it’s why is the United States losing all the jobs to India or wherever. But I think Tom felt in order to keep business here, you needed to keep that business in a friendly business climate.

Q: And what was he saying about the environment in ’81?

Kenneth P. Merin: In the area of the environment, as I recall, the positions were more open space. We ought to have more green acres. I’m gonna forget the names of some of the specific programs, but clearly more green acres, clearly cleaning up the superfund sites, clearly making polluters act or be responsible for sites that had been degraded.

Q: Do you recall any significant differences within the Republican primary field on issues? You say Tom Kean was pro death penalty; was somebody running, unlikely, but on a non death penalty platform in the Republican primary or on taxes or on anything? Do you recall where any of the others stood?
Kenneth P. Merin: I don’t think that there was major disagreement. It was the Republican primary so it was gonna be tougher on crime and it was going to be more keep the tax climate friendly, keep people here rather than going to New York or make it more accessible for New Yorkers to come here. I think that was the basic stance that most Republicans took. I think Tom was probably more moderate on environmental issues during the primary, but I think in the primary it really came down to regional alliances and regional leadership.

Q: How about personality? Was personality a part of the primary or do you think it was mostly political heft and geography?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think personality was clearly an issue. People that I think saw Tom, the more people saw Tom Kean, the more that they liked Tom Kean. As a civilian, when you read about a political candidate in the newspaper, it’s just someone, something. There are many candidates. But when you meet a candidate and that candidate can make an impression on you, I think Tom’s openness and sincerity and warmth came across so I think that was clearly helpful.

Q: Pat Kramer was one of the major opponents of Kean, if not the most significant. How do you view him in hindsight?

Kenneth P. Merin: He was the mayor of Paterson, if I recall correctly, and he had a strong base of political support. He was a mayor; he said he could do things for the cities, he understood the cities, he had been a successful mayor and I think that was his main selling point, if you will, but I don’t recall very much other than that.

Q: Do you recall any of the other Republican candidates that year?

Kenneth P. Merin: Oh sure. They ran from Bo Sullivan, who was a businessman who came in and spent a lot of his own money to become very well known. He had a lot of very nice parties that we missed. We always heard about the shrimp that he would have at his fundraisers. And I know that Tom Kean loves shrimp and maybe he was a little bit jealous of that, but all the way to some very minor candidates that really didn’t achieve a significant amount of the voting in any of the primaries. Barry Parker was also a significant player down in south Jersey. And I have a lot of memories of the campaign, but one of my enduring memories would be Barry Parker pulled up into a parking lot at a campaign function and we pulled in next to him, so it was Barry Parker, Tom Kean and myself. And Barry Parker had a lot of material with him so we were carrying our stuff and he gave us so Tom and I walked in helping Barry carry his campaign stuff into the place. It was a very friendly relationship between the two.

Q: Did you get at all involved in politics, interacting with county chairs?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: No?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: You just described being in a parking lot. You did go out and campaign with Kean a little bit?

Kenneth P. Merin: I did mostly to debates, forums, that type of function, went out to different events and certainly met the county chairman, John Renna, the chairman of Essex County who had supported Tom from the beginning is someone I’d spend time with. But my role was not to be out there discussing politics because I did not have a New Jersey political background and my background as a whole was always more on the issues side than it was on the political side.

Q: Who were the key people in the campaign?

Kenneth P. Merin: In the primary campaign, and I presume we’re still talking about the primary.
Q: Yes.

Kenneth P. Merin: It was Roger Bodman, who was the campaign manager, a fellow named Dave Murray, who was the political strategist, and I think, you know, they were the major players. There was a guy named Al Fasola, who was the finance chairman and he was also involved in the political discussions. So I think on a day-to-day basis, that was the core group.

Roger Bodman (left), Al Fasola and Ken Merin

Q: Who were you personally closest to in that group?

Kenneth P. Merin: On a day-to-day basis, probably Dave Murray, but it was a very small group so our headquarters was tiny.

Q: Where was it?

Kenneth P. Merin: It was in Maplewood. And there couldn’t have been more than one or two small offices carved out in a very tiny space so we were all working with each other on a very, you know, regular basis.

Michael Aron: Were there any surprises during the primary that you recall?

Kenneth P. Merin: Political surprises, no. It was an education for me to see how things operated because again, I had never been on the political side of things. But no, I’d say that there was no shock or surprise.

Q: You’re smiling though. There’s something about that question.

Kenneth P. Merin: Little things that happened. We had one event in Jersey City where a Democrat from Jersey City was going to endorse Kean, Governor Kean, and we went to an event at I think it was called Casino in the Park, and they had said they were going to pack the room with whatever number of Democrats. And we got there, another fellow and I went there early on just to make sure that there were really gonna be people there before Tom showed up. And I remember that two buses pulled up at one point and somebody was standing at the bottom of the bus counting people as they got off the bus to go into the room. And the people that came in clearly had some mental disability. They were from a home for whatever the proper terminology is. But these folks just kind of walked in, they sat in the back of the room and they were there. But whoever it was had promised a crowd of whatever number of hundred of people and these were part of the hundred, so I did learn something about New Jersey politics and methods.

Q: Kean won the primary. Was it tight or a runaway?

Kenneth P. Merin: It was not a runaway. I think we had 30 some odd percent. I forget the numbers, but I think Mayor Kramer and Bo Sullivan finished two and three if I’m not mistaken. And clearly it was a landslide compared to the general election, but we didn’t know it at the time.

Q: What changed after the primary?

Kenneth P. Merin: When we started out, Tom would have difficulty getting a crowd together. We’d go to Republican teas and Republican this, Republican that, and a few people would show up. And in areas of strength, more people would show up; in counties of less strength, fewer people would show up. But after the primary when he was legitimatized as the candidate, we began to get bigger crowds. More people would show up; there would be more support. I think that’s the major difference. Clearly there was more support in terms of money. Again, that was Al Fasola’s area. But just on a day-to-day basis, more people came in and were willing to commit to work for and with Tom.
Q: How about in the issues area? The Republican primary is over. Do you have to tack to the center now for the general election?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think that we had to deal with the general election with a very formidable candidate, but when you say tack to the center, I’m not sure that we changed any of the thoughts or ideas that Tom had spoken about during the primary. As a matter of fact, I kept pretty close track of that and I’m sure that he did not change positions during the eight or nine months between February first and election day.

Q: Coming out of the primary which on the Democratic side Jim Florio, the congressman, won, did you think that it was a tossup or that you had the clear winner? I think the conventional wisdom said that Florio might have had an edge going into the general election campaign. What was your sense?

Kenneth P. Merin: Well, I think that’s right. I think if there was a newspaper poll, and I’m sure there was, maybe there was even a poll taken here by the Eagleton Institute, it showed that Florio led for most of the campaign so we knew it was gonna be a very tightly-contested election.

Q: What was Florio like as an opponent?

Kenneth P. Merin: He was very clear and crisp in his presentation of the issues. Clearly he was very, very well known. He was probably better known than Tom Kean was because of his position as chairman of the subcommittee in congress. He could dwell on environmental issues. I think Tom and Jim Florio were both highly regarded by the environmental groups, but that was an area of battle, who was gonna do more for the environment when in fact both were very well pedigreed in that area.

Q: Was there a key issue difference that you recall between Tom Kean and Jim Florio?

Kenneth P. Merin: I cannot remember all of the issues, but I can remember I think that we were more on the lowering tax side. Again, if you think about a classic Republican stance, it would be more lower this tax and lower that tax. And I don’t actually recall what now ex-Governor Florio’s campaign position was then, but I seem to recall that we were more on the reduction side.

Q: In terms of personality, how would you compare and contrast Tom Kean and Jim Florio?

Kenneth P. Merin: At the time, I did not know Governor Florio. I had not met him. I have subsequently met him and like him very much. But at the time, I think the common perception was that Tom was much more affable and friendly and engaging on a one-to-one basis and that Governor Florio was more driven. He had a schedule to keep and he kept the schedule and wouldn’t just hang out and talk. Again, we were talking about recollections before. I remember during the summer of ’81, we had an event in a hotel. Tom was going to talk to a number of funders, potential funders. And we were walking through the hotel and there was a maid that was cleaning the floor, vacuuming the floor. And he stopped and he said hello and she said hello to him and he just stopped and talked to her. And we must have spent two or three minutes with the governor talking to this woman. And as a staff aide, it’s like okay, we’ve got a schedule, but Tom Kean was gonna talk to her just ‘cause he wanted to talk to her. Now I don’t know whether she voted, I don’t know whether she knew who he was, but he just had a nice conversation with her. And so I think people told us that was the sort of thing that as a candidate Jim Florio would not do, but that’s I think perception again, I didn’t know Governor Florio at that point, but that was the perception, Tom was more affable and was more open.

Q: Does that mean that he was an ideal candidate? What was he like as a candidate?

Kenneth P. Merin: The only thing I can say is that he was who we all know. He had his own mindset. He knew what he wanted to do on the issues. He really was his own issues director; I was more supporting him. He knew the state, he knew the issues. He had been in the legislature for a long time. He knew the players. He knew what he wanted to do. So as a candidate, he was ideal because it was not a matter of my educating him; in some ways, it was
the reverse. He was extraordinarily good that way. He was good with people. I think the only problem that we had was keeping him on schedule. Another story, I cannot recall what the date was, but his daughter’s birthday was coming up and she was six or seven at the time. And again, I was in the car with Tom and we had a bunch of stops to make and he said, “Okay, pull in here,” to go into a Toys R Us and he was looking for something for his daughter. And I specifically recall that he wanted to get her a makeup kit for little girls and so he pulled out these two boxes and they looked like the size of like a Monopoly box, Monopoly game, that kind of thing. And he was reading the boxes and one said safe and the other one said safe, nontoxic and he was trying to get someone to explain the difference between safe and nontoxic. And the other fellow that was with us, Andy Consovoy, who you may remember, were saying, “We’ve got all these people waiting,” but he was gonna get his daughter’s birthday present and he wasn’t just gonna get something; he was gonna read the box and be a good parent and know what was in the materials that he was gonna give to his daughter. So if there was any issue, I think the issue was trying to keep him on schedule.

Q: Were you concerned at all about his patrician background and how it would play with the electorate?

Kenneth P. Merin: No, because I loved him. I thought it was Tom Kean being who Tom Kean was. And clearly different people have different views about different personalities, but from my point of view, it was who he was, he was natural.

Q: How about that accent that nobody else in New Jersey spoke with? It didn’t concern you?

Kenneth P. Merin: It didn’t concern me and I think at the end of the campaign, most people found it to be sort of charming. But no, it was not an issue.

Q: Do you recall debates between Kean and Florio? What was your role?

Kenneth P. Merin: Helping prep the governor for the debates, putting together issue books, putting together briefings on different things.

Q: You were still the issues director of the campaign.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes, during the general election as well.

Q: Had any of the personnel changed?

Kenneth P. Merin: The major change was that Carl Golden came in to be the press director. Carl had worked for Barry Parker and as I indicated, Senator Parker and Tom Kean were good friends and when Senator Parker lost, then Carl came over.

Q: Carl had worked with Kean in the legislature before?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes. Yeah. And I’m sorry, as we’re talking, different things are kind of flashing back, but you asked about the primary campaign. I remember there was a concern that Mayor Kramer, Pat Kramer, might jump out in the lead in terms of delegates and there was an Ocean County convention at which Pat Kramer had the lead in delegates and there was a concern that if he won Ocean County then it might snowball. So I remember Roger Bodman had worked with whomever and at the convention in Ocean County, Tom Kean threw his support to Barry Parker and Barry Parker won Ocean County, which was his home district, and that helped prevent a Pat Kramer snowball effect from occurring.

Q: Good story. How did Kean do in debates with Florio?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think he did pretty well. I think there were as I recall three debates. There was one of them where I think Tom Kean we felt clearly had done very well and there was another one we had thought he had not
done as well. But I think the debate that left the biggest presence on my mind and probably everybody on the Kean staff was the third debate which was down in south Jersey. And I think all of us were shocked by the fervor, let’s say, of the Florio partisans. There were a lot of very ugly things that were being screamed at the governor, at his wife, and in the history of partisanship in the United States, it was probably like nothing, but at the time it seemed like it was the mob run amok.

Q: Things like what? Do you recall?

Kenneth P. Merin: I don’t recall, but I do remember it was a very nasty situation and I think the governor’s wife was very concerned about that and Tom was concerned, if not for her safety, then just the whole experience.

Q: Was Brendan Byrne an issue in the ’81 campaign?

Kenneth P. Merin: Oh sure, sure. As much as Barack Obama was running against George Bush rather than John McCain, I think we were running against Brendan Byrne even though I think Tom Kean and Brendan Byrne were, had been and still are very good friends. But it was like Tom must have said to Brendan at some point, “Hey, you’re it,” and so we ran against Brendan Byrne as well as Jim Florio.

Q: What about Brendan Byrne would you have run against?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think the issues were the taxes at that point, crime.

Q: Do you recall any television commercials from that campaign?

Kenneth P. Merin: No. I know we had ‘em, but I can’t recall any specifically.

Q: Who did the commercials? Do you recall?

Kenneth P. Merin: I should. There was a guy named Bob Teeter that was our pollster and I cannot remember the name of the man who did the..

Q: Roger Stone?

Kenneth P. Merin: No. No. Roger played a small role, a very small role in the primary and was not very involved in the election campaign at all after I’d say May.

Q: Heading towards election day what were you thinking about the outcome?

Kenneth P. Merin: Wow, this is gonna be close.

Q: Were you?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah.

Q: Were polls registering then?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think our polls I can distinctly remember Bob Teeter sitting down with us and saying, “Well, here’s this line and here’s that line,” and we felt that if the election was held a week earlier, we probably would have lost; if it was held a week later, we probably would have won by maybe twice as many votes as we were won by.

Q: There was a little Kean surge at the end?
Kenneth P. Merin: What we saw was the more Tom got out, the more he spoke to people, the more groups heard about him and knew about him, the more they liked him. So we felt that the more time there was, the greater chance he had.

Q: Did he have a beer with the labor guys sometime during the campaign?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think Bo Sullivan during the primary campaign said something like, you know, “Tom Kean is not the kind of guy you want to have a beer with in Hoboken,” trying to show that Beau Sullivan could attract labor votes in the general election. So shortly after the primary, Tom and Bo had a beer in Hoboken.

Q: Ah, I see. This was Bo’s way of….

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah. As a matter of fact, I seem to recall that the night of the primary, Bo actually came over to our headquarters to endorse Tom.

Q: Do you recall where you were on election night?

Kenneth P. Merin: For the general election, I distinctly recall where I was.

Q: Where?

Kenneth P. Merin: In Tom Kean’s room at the Holiday Inn on the circle in Livingston off Route 10.

Q: The circle in Livingston?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes.

Q: Off Route 10. Okay.

Kenneth P. Merin: Or the hotel was off Route 10.

Q: What was the mood there that night?

Kenneth P. Merin: It was tense. I had gone out to dinner with Andy Consovoy and his wife, Linda. I want to come back and tell you a story about that in a minute, but we had gone out to dinner and it was an early dinner. And we walked out of the restaurant and somebody was walking into the restaurant. We had left the restaurant at 6:30 or something, 6, 6:30, and somebody was walking into the restaurant and they said- it was CBS Radio. One of the radio stations had called the election for Florio. And we looked at each other and had the sinking feeling like we haven’t even gotten to the headquarters yet. How could they have called the election? And clearly it was a premature call. But it was tight, it was tense. Another memory of that night was being up in the hotel room and it was later at night, maybe nine, ten o’clock, and Tom was lying in bed wearing his suit. I think his jacket was off. Debbie was there, a bunch of folks were in the room. And he was lying flat on bed watching TV. And Bo Sullivan was being interviewed on TV and the reporter was saying, “Well, you know, tell us, you know, have you seen the Governor tonight?” And Bo said, “Yeah, I just left the room.” “Well, how was the Governor?” Bo was not in the room all evening. He was never there, but he was adlibbing, “The Governor’s pacing back and forth and blah, blah.” Tom was lying there, I think his tie was down, just listening to Bo talk about what was going on in a room that Bo had not been in all evening. It was funny. Let me just go back ‘cause it’s jogged another memory. Andy Consovoy did a lot of driving for the governor and this goes back to the primary. We had time between two events-actually no, it was during the summer, so it was before the general, but we had time between two events and we were going somewhere near where Andy lived so he said, “Why don’t we just stay at my place and you can freshen up or whatever?” and Tom said, “Fine.” So I remember pulling into Andy’s driveway.

Q: What town are we in?
Kenneth P. Merin: Oh, it was in Middlesex County. I forget the town. But we pulled into the driveway and Linda, his wife, was there and she’s got two little kids and mobs of kids running around on the front lawn. And so she sees us pull into the driveway and she sees Tom get out. I see this look of abject total terror, stark terror on her face and it’s just like, oh my God, and starts, you know, “The house is a mess, blah, blah, blah,” and this and that. And she said, “Do you want to use the bathroom?” and she runs to the bathroom and starts taking all of the dirty towels and whatever. And then she said, “Would you like something to eat?” and Tom loved to eat and so she had a piece of carrot cake in the freezer and she cut a hunk off. It’s like he came down a minute or two later and she said, “Here.” The cake was absolutely frozen. Tom bites into it and he’s, “That’s very good,” you know? It was just amazing. I felt badly for Linda, but, you know, she was a housewife with kids and it was a typical house and it was just the combination of events.

Q: Were there a lot of little human absurdities along the campaign trail?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah, that’s the thing that registers the most that I guess I’ll remember the most.

Q: So Kean is lying on the bed in his suit with the jacket off and other people are around and the television is on and it’s what, too close to call at this point?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah, it was probably nine, ten o’clock at night and that was it.

Q: And then what happens?

Kenneth P. Merin: Well, we all eventually went home and went to bed and said let’s get together the next morning again.

Q: Do you recall anything Kean said that night?

Kenneth P. Merin: No, he was just kind of watching TV. There wasn't much that you could say, because it was more of the same thing; it's just wow, this is really close.

Q: Apparently the returns came in very, very late from Camden County that night. Do you recall being worried about any monkey-business, so to speak?

Kenneth P. Merin: In the great American tradition, yes, I think we were all concerned about that. I know that we'd agreed we'd get together at seven a.m. the next morning, thinking that 7:00 a.m., we'd have some result. Tom was not there, but the rest of the staff was there. And it was at the Holiday Inn in Livingston where we had that breakfast. And we thought we'd have something at seven a.m., but we clearly did not. I think one of the issues of concern running up to the election was, quote/unquote, funny business that might occur. Again I was not the political guy, but I do remember that there was a concern that there might be votes that showed up late from Camden County.

Q: So tell us the story of the recount, which I guess it became clear that next day that there was going to need to be a recount. Did somebody call for a recount, or was it the state that just said, "We declare a recount"? Do you know?

Kenneth P. Merin: Again Mike, I can't recall the specific events in any kind of chronological order. But clearly there was a recount. Clearly we brought in lawyers to help us. The other side had lawyers to help them, and it just got caught up in a-- it wasn't as bad as the hanging chad thing from 2000. But people were looking at the votes and--

Q: What was your role during that period?

Kenneth P. Merin: Keep my fingers crossed. No, I think we went ahead and started planning saying, "He may wind up the winner; we expect he'll wind up the winner, and we're going to prepare for the administration as if he were
going to be the governor."

Q: We've gotten a sense from some of the other interviews we've done that the Kean camp, from a strategic point of view, handled the recount period better than the Florio camp. Does any of that--

Kenneth P. Merin: I can't recall. Again, I was not involved in that on a day-to-day basis. So. I actually think Irwin Kimmelman became the lead lawyer for us, on the recount, and he later became the first attorney general.

Q: I think what we were told was that the Kean campaign would hold a press conference every day to update the press, and that the Florio campaign didn't match that, and therefore the press was more susceptible to Kean's spin than Florio's spin, and it created a sense that things were looking stronger for Kean. I'm not-- does that ring any bell?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: No. What does this do your personal life, this--

Kenneth P. Merin: Turmoil. The one good thing-- I've heard this from so many people who've worked in political campaigns, both before and since-- was that the best thing about a political campaign is you know it's going to end on a certain day. And it didn't, it just kind of continued, and we didn't know how long that was going to go on.

Q: Where were you living at the time?

Kenneth P. Merin: I was living in Livingston. I was actually-- for that part of the campaign I was living with my parents, who still had a place in Livingston, and going back and forth between Washington on weekends; which I'm still doing, so nothing's changed.

Q: Were you getting paid after the campaign, do you recall?

Kenneth P. Merin: I do not recall. I know whatever the pay was during the campaign was campaign salary; was not very much. So--

Q: It didn't really matter.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes, it was not-- I didn't come up for the salary on the primary campaign or the general campaign.

Q: How old are you in 1981?

Kenneth P. Merin: 34.

Q: 34. So your future is hanging in the balance here, during this recount. You're either going to go to Trenton with a new governor, or be looking for a job.


Q: Or back to Washington. So you had a lot riding on the outcome.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes.

Q: You had a lot emotionally also riding on the outcome.

Kenneth P. Merin: Sure.
Q: You had invested nine months of your life in this. What did you think of Tom Kean by the end of that campaign? You told us you liked him instantly when you met him.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes. I thought more-- whatever I had thought at the beginning, I felt more. Just he was very honorable, very decent. What he said was what he meant. I never, ever heard him say, "Well we can do this", and then-- just whatever he said he meant. And he handled people properly. I can tell you other stories about the one, similar to the one I told you about the maid, where he just-- he treated everybody with respect, whether they were voting for him or not, or even whether they knew there as an election going on.

Q: Would you say he was a natural politician?

Kenneth P. Merin: I don't know what that is. I think if you look around the country you'll see different people that are politicians that have different styles. What sells in New Jersey might not sell in Texas. What sells in Florida might not sell in California. But I think that he appealed to the better part of what people saw about what New Jersey could be. I think one of the things about the Kean administration, we might talk about later on, is the perception of New Jersey. And I'd like to think that people saw the inherent good in Tom, and translate that into what he might bring to the governorship.

Q: What was the perception of New Jersey within New Jersey in 1981?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think we were reeling. I think the economy was hurting. Again, go back to the Northeast/Midwest Rust Belt kind of thing. We'd lost a lot of jobs. There were a lot of environmental problems. There were issues involving corruption; there are still issues involving corruption. There was concern that New Jersey was not the place that it once was. Again, if you go back and look at the tenure of the times-- I remember growing up in New Jersey in the 1950s when it was still an agrarian state, and we went through a lot in the period between say 1960 and 1980. So if you're voting in 1981, and that's your voting history, you say, "Okay, this state has changed a lot." And I think people had a yearning for maybe a more simplistic time when government was doing more for people, or perceived as doing more for people.

Michael Aron: Do you recall the end of the recount? Do you recall the victory?

Kenneth P. Merin: I don't. It's just one-- and at that point I'd been assigned to go down to Trenton, and I was traveling down there on a daily basis. I think that's where I first met Don Linky and some other people from the Byrne administration.

Q: Who was telling you to do that?

Kenneth P. Merin: Tom.

Q: Tom Kean?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes. I don't remember whether Tom said it himself to me, or someone else said, "Okay, go down and start analyzing things, see what's there." I think that began the day that we were designated as the winner.

Q: Did the recount affect the transition?

Kenneth P. Merin: Clearly it threw it back. I know that we had-- Tom had asked his people, not me but other folks, for a list of possible candidates for commissionerships for jobs. And I think the amount of personal time it took him and his staff to deal with the recount-- the issues, the press-- I think it all delayed that for awhile. So yes, it definitely delayed that process.

Q: Was there a specific conversation where you were asked to take a particular job in the administration?
Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: No?

Kenneth P. Merin: No. It was just go down and kind of sort out what's going on; in terms of what space is available, what issues are pending, what bills are pending that the governor, Governor Kean, might have to deal with in the new legislature; in other words, things that Governor Byrne might not sign while he was still there. So it was sort of the see what the staff is like. I wound up working in the Counsel's Office. But I remember interviewing some of the secretaries.

Q: So you interfaced with Don Linky, who was chief of policy and planning at the time?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes. And can you remember who the counsel was? You were counsel at the time.

Don Linky: Both.

Q: Counsel.

Don Linky: and policy and planning.

Q: Did anybody else do that job, that liaison job, or was that you solely?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think it was primarily me. I think there were other people going down for other reasons, but that's what I was- that's how I was spending my time, between let's say late November and January.

Q: And what was your first position in the administration?

Kenneth P. Merin: Deputy Chief Counsel. Cary Edwards was the General Counsel- Chief Counsel.

Q: Cary Edwards.

Kenneth P. Merin: Right. And then I worked as his number two.

Q: This is the first mention of his name. When did he come into the picture?

Kenneth P. Merin: Sometime late in the primary; I'm saying late, April or May.

Q: And what role did he play during the general election?

Kenneth P. Merin: He had endorsed Tom again in April or May of the primary season, and then he was an issues advisor or surrogate speaker.

Q: And so he was named Chief Counsel, and did he choose you or did Kean assign you to him? Do you know?

Kenneth P. Merin: I can't remember.

Q: What was your job in the early days of the Kean administration?

Kenneth P. Merin: We had to assemble a legal staff. As I recall, we kept about half the lawyers that had worked for Don; Amy Piro, Jack Trope, a couple of others. I'm forgetting some of the names, but we had to hire some new folks to work in the Counsel's Office. So we did a lot of interviews. We had to set up a process and procedure that worked for us. We kind of tweaked a little bit what Don had used. I think our passed bill memos probably looked pretty much like your passed bill memos.
Q: What are passed bill memos?

Kenneth P. Merin: A passed bill memo basically would be, "Here's the attached bill. This is what it says. This is what it does. Here are the concerns." Frequently there are technical concerns about bills, like they want to do this but they didn't word it properly. So we've got to conditionally veto the bill, just to correct the language. Or in some cases there are substantive issues about the legislation.

Q: I think Cary Edwards told us that he downsized the staff.

Don Linky: No.

Q: No?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: He upsized did he?

Kenneth P. Merin: Dramatically.

Nancy Becker: Cole downsized.

Q: Oh Cole.

Nancy Becker: That's it.

Q: Cole downsized. Okay, Cary's--

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah.

Nancy Becker: Cary downsized, quite a bit.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah, it was a large number by the time-- because I remember we just kept eating up space in the State House.

Nancy Becker: From 5 to 25.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah, it was just huge by the time-- I left by '84, and it kept growing. I left in March of '84, and we had at least doubled what you had, and it just kept growing and growing by leaps and bounds.

Q: Were you the deputy chief counsel?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: You were the number two.

Kenneth P. Merin: Right.

Q: Did you have a portfolio, a certain department, certain issues?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah, I was-- my job, number one, was over the quality control, but I was basically the person whom all the technical stuff had to go through to get to the governor. So all the assistant counsels had to review different bills. I'd look at their reviews, their analyses, and then it would go up to Cary and then to the governor. So from a legal perspective everything was filed through me. And then I had three issue areas, as I recall. One was the
urban enterprise zone, which was a priority of the governor's. The other one was auto insurance. And I was thinking on the way down here, what was the third one? I know I had three, and for the life of me I can't remember what the third one was.

Q: Had urban enterprise zones come into existence by that point in time?

Kenneth P. Merin: Jack Kemp had been pushing them. I think they existed in a couple of areas. But if they did, they were relatively new at that point.

Q: But in New Jersey?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: This was an initiative of the--

Kenneth P. Merin: My job was to help get an urban enterprise zone bill through a legislature that was in Democratic hands, and was not very responsive to the governor's initiatives; with the exception of the anti-crime stuff.

Q: Who were the other key members of the governor's staff, besides Cary Edwards?

Kenneth P. Merin: Initially it was a troika. Lew Thurston was the chief-of-staff, and Gary Stein was head of policy and planning. And Carl Golden was running the press office. So I'd say that was the core group.

Q: Well let me come in that direction. Kean ran on lower taxes, but he was forced to raise taxes in his first year in office. Tell us that story from your perspective.

Kenneth P. Merin: Well I think during the campaign-- the income tax was initiated under the Byrne administration. There's still a great deal of anger about that, particularly in the Republican Party, and I think, from what I can recall, no one was real happy about it. So there was some concern about that. But there's also a concern about making New Jersey a better place for business, getting businesses to stay here. So there are corporate tax issues. There were all the issues. The same discussions about taxes that are occurring in Washington right now were occurring here back then; only here it was more direct in the sense of jobs. If business taxes are lower, companies will move here from New York; the same issue. I think Jersey City is trying to pull businesses out of New York City right now, and taxes are fueling all of it. So it was the same argument. When we were running, everyone said there was going to be a deficit; you can't lower taxes when there is this big deficit. And based on the analysis that we had during the primary in general, we felt we could. As a matter of fact, there was-- one of the-- I'm flashing back now-- one of the part of the impetus for the Kean campaign during the primary was there was an article in Newsweek Magazine, in the old Periscope section of Newsweek, which kind of focused on the Kean tax plan. But when the governor was elected, came into office, looked at the budget, saw that it couldn't be done, and so initially did raise taxes.

Q: Do you recall whether he raised the tax that he proposed raising, or whether the Democratic control of the legislature forced him to raise a different tax?

Kenneth P. Merin: I honestly cannot remember. I do remember that there was an effort to raise taxes to a much higher level than Tom wanted. I think on the income tax in particular, Alan Karcher, who was the speaker of the Assembly at that point, wanted to have a tax at a higher level than what Governor Kean ultimately wound up signing.

Q: Do you recall anything about the governor holding his nose when he signed that tax bill?

Kenneth P. Merin: There were a couple of bills that the governor signed, that I particularly remember him holding his nose on and--
Q: Literally? Oh literally?

Kenneth P. Merin: Well no not literally. But there were a couple of bills that were signed. That was one. And again, as other people will tell you, as you look at the history of the Kean administration, he did repeal some of the taxes, or rescind some of the taxes, as the administration went forward and the economic situation permitted tax reduction.

Q: I believe the death penalty was reinstated in 1982, his first year in office. Was that a high point of the first year in office?

Kenneth P. Merin: Right. The first year the economy was still terrible and there was very little-- there was still this battle. The Democratic legislature was trying to figure out how to deal with a Republican governor, and the Republican governor was looking for allies in a Democratic legislature. And I think this is one area that-- again going back to how important an issue crime was during the campaign-- it was an issue that we-- I don't recall we had a lot of trouble getting through the legislature. I think we had a lot of Democratic support for that. Again my-- flashing back to these recollections, there were two bills. One was the Death Penalty, and then the second bill was the type of- or the matter of execution. And there was this senator from Hudson County, named Chris Jackman, Chrissy Jackman, at the time, and they were debating different options, and I remember him voting against lethal injection because, in Chrissy's words, it wasn't tough enough; from the floor of the Senate. So, but the death penalty itself went through fairly quickly.

Q: The Counsel's Office took on a stronger budget role when Cary Edwards was chief counsel. Do you recall any conflicts with the Treasury Department or OMB over budget?

Kenneth P. Merin: Responsibilities?

Q: Yes.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes. Definitely. I can remember-- again, it's a new administration. In any administration people will jockey for a position. And that's not necessarily a negative term, it's just who's responsible for what, who's going to take on what, who's going to be listening to who? The treasurer was Ken Biederman. And as I recall Ken did not have a strong background. I think he's out of Delaware, as I recall. But there was an issue about who was going to be responsible for putting the budget together. And again this was in a year in which the economy was really bad. So people were looking at cutbacks, and it was difficult formulating that budget. Cary Edwards was an extremely bright, articulate, young, former legislator who had been enmeshed in these issues during his years in the legislature. And I think he, in putting the budget together and working through the legislature, probably stepped on some toes. I don't know whether that's good or bad but--

Q: Toes within the administration…

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes.

Q: …or legislative toes?

Kenneth P. Merin: Probably both. But right now I'm talking about within the administration.

Q: Well he would have known more about New Jersey budgets than Biederman, from another state, right?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah. Again, from Biederman's position, he's the treasurer. The budget, I think it was Ed Hofgesang who was working for him at the time, and then Dick Standiford later took over it. It traditionally came out of there. Now I'm not sure under Governor Byrne who put it together or how it was done then. But I think Ken's position was hey, it's my responsibility, I'm going to do it.

Q: How long did you stay in the Counsel's Office?
Kenneth P. Merin: Two years.

Q: What do you recall as your major issue or bill or accomplishment during those two years?

Kenneth P. Merin: The Urban Enterprise Zone Bill, working with a very bright senator from Middlesex County named John Lynch, who was very, very knowledgeable. In my discussions with him-- they were all public policy, public interest-- it was clear he wanted New Brunswick included as one of the urban enterprise zone cities. But it was great working with him, because again his focus was public policy, public interest. And then auto insurance dominated the two years that I spent in the Counsel's Office.

Q: How?

Kenneth P. Merin: Auto insurance had been a mess in New Jersey for many years, going back to the 1960s. We enacted- the State enacted no-fault auto insurance. There were some problems with the bill that was signed; problems in a sense. There were a lot of changes made at the last minute. The system never really made any sense. The whole way it was done was out of whack. Rates had been going up for the- during- throughout the Byrne administration. I think that was-- if there was a-- beyond taxes and crime and environment, auto insurance was out there; you got to do something about auto insurance rates. So again the idea is to get something for the legislature. Governor Kean's position during the primary, and during the general election, was enactment of a verbal threshold; which would restrict the right to sue, which would help lower costs. And that was one thing that was not going to pass the Democratic legislature. So we explored many different options, and in I think February of '83 the governor finally signed a bill into law. And it was another one of those things that he had to, if not literally, hold his nose on and say, "I'm signing this because it's the only thing I've got, but I've been told if I sign this then I will get a verbal threshold bill; or get a higher threshold bill, monetary threshold. And I'm signing this for that reason." And indeed, in a few months, he did get a different monetary threshold.

Q: Do you remember what this bill did?

Kenneth P. Merin: The bill created a new residual market, called a Joint Underwriting Association, which replaced the old plan.

Q: It too would become famous.

Kenneth P. Merin: Oh it would.

Q: The J.U.A.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes. One of Governor Florio's best campaign lines in 1989, when he was running for the governorship, that he did win, was J.U.A. D.O.A.; which I kind of liked. But I wasn't in a position to say so. I don’t think he would have wanted me to but--

Q: Do you recall any legislators you worked with when you were in the Counsel's Office? To get either the-- oh you talked about John Lynch.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes.

Q: Anybody else you worked with in auto insurance or anything--

Kenneth P. Merin: Auto insurance, the key one was Mike Adubato. Before you get to Mike, the other legislator I had frequent dealings with was a fellow from Hudson County named Bobby Janiszewski; who also was a pleasure to work with. He was one of the brightest legislators that I met down there, and had a great command of the budget, and a great command of other issues.
Q: The sense of irony in your voice is because Janiszewski and Lynch would, many years later, get convicted of corruption charges.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes.

Q: But your experience with them was wholly positive.

Kenneth P. Merin: Totally positive. And they're both gentlemen; both very, very bright and very, very concerned about the public good. But Mike Adubato was unique. Mike was from Newark and he was an insurance agent, a life insurance agent, and he took auto insurance on as an issue, because his district, Newark, was an urban area and the rates were ridiculously high. So he locked horns with Governor Byrne and his staff for a number of years. And he had total power over auto insurance in the Assembly.

Q: He was chairman of the Assembly Insurance Committee?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes, and he, through the political organization in Essex County, and Hudson County, controlled five votes. And if you look at the majority that Alan Karcher had when he got elected as speaker, it was essentially Mike's votes. So if Mike were to withdraw his support, then Karcher would no longer be speaker. So the deal Mike had was, "You're speaker, you do what you want, but leave me alone on car insurance and support what I--"; so that was the deal.

Q: And Mike was the brother of Steve Senior.

Kenneth P. Merin: Steve Adubato, right, who runs the North Ward Center and does a great job up there.

Michael Aron: Alan Karcher was their leader. What was he like?

Kenneth P. Merin: I didn't deal with Alan directly on too many issues. But I think he saw himself as the Democratic leader of the state, after Governor Byrne's departure from Trenton. And he felt that his role was to say no to anything that Governor Kean wanted, either because he really didn't believe in it, on public policy grounds, or political reasons; if you deny the Republicans a victory, then it's hard to re-elect the Republicans. So choose one or the other.

Q: What did you do after two years? What was your next assignment?

Kenneth P. Merin: The insurance commissioner at the time, Joe Murphy, had locked horns with Mike Adubato, and did not come out on top. There were some issues involving the way he administered the law that had recently been passed, and he resigned under fire in March or April; I think April of 1984. And I had been sent over there as deputy commissioner about 30 days before he left.

Q: So you became commissioner.

Kenneth P. Merin: Acting commissioner.

Q: Acting commissioner.

Kenneth P. Merin: And then a few months later, I think in June, I became commissioner, and stayed as commissioner until December of that year. So I was commissioner for about-- acting or commissioner-- for about seven months.

Q: And which did you prefer, being deputy chief counsel or acting commissioner of insurance?

Kenneth P. Merin: I loved working in the statehouse, I loved all the action in the statehouse, but there's so much
wrong at the Insurance Department that-- for six or seven months I really enjoyed what I was doing there. But I ultimately came back to the statehouse, which is what I wanted to do.

Q: Did you have much effect on correcting what was wrong at the department?

Kenneth P. Merin: I tried to. I think I did then, and when I went back the second time. The biggest problem with the Insurance Department was it was in a time warp. We'd had something called the Governor's Management Improvement Commission, when Governor Kean came in, which analyzed issues with various departments. They didn't look at the smaller departments, including insurance. So when I went over, I had them come in and look at it. And what they found was that everything that was wrong in any other department was wrong at the Insurance Department; plus they found a whole bunch of things that were unique to the Insurance Department. The biggest thing is that from an equipment standpoint we didn't have anything. We had a few electric typewriters. There's something called a mag card typewriter, and I forget what they actually do, but we had one or two of those. But we literally had people working with fountain pens, trying to record and analyze what the insurance companies were doing. The people were, for the most part, elderly. They'd been there for a long time. There were laws that were enacted by the State of New Jersey in 1920 and '30 and '40 and '50 and '60 that had never been updated. The National Association of Insurance Commissioners had put out model laws. These were not partisan types of things, just sovereignty, just-- they'd been through two or three iterations in the decade since our laws were enacted, and they just weren't touched. So the laws were antiquated. The department had never implemented any of the rules that would support those departments, or support those laws. They didn't have the equipment to do what they were supposed to do. They didn't know what they were supposed to do. They were obeying laws that didn't exist; in other words, there were just rooms that had papers piled in them. I said, "What are you keeping these for?" And they said, "Well the law requires us to." And I said, "Which law?" It turns out there was no law. There's one room where these women that were responsible for doing license renewals were working, and there was a machine that was making this infernal racket; I cannot tell you how loud it was, just pounding noise. These six or eight women were working there day after day. There had to be hearing loss. I can still not understand how the State Workers' Union permitted that to go on for years, for decades. I got in and there was a flag behind the commissioner's desk, and after a couple of weeks it didn't look right and I just unfurled it; it had 48 stars. Alaska and Hawaii had been admitted in 1959, and this is 1984. It was-- what's the movie where you wake up in Scotland in that town that comes alive every 100 years?

Nancy Becker: Brigadoon.

Kenneth P. Merin: Brigadoon. It was like landing in Brigadoon. It was this time warp. And so when you think about all these laws on the books, passed by legislatures, signed by governors, over decades and decades; not partisan laws, not-- just never enforced, nothing was done. So I think what I did the first year was to bring that to the attention of the legislature. The press wrote a lot of really interesting articles about it. And so we really began ramping up the budget, getting more equipment, getting more qualified people doing things that had to be done, to get it to-- get the department off of life support. And again, that kept going throughout the 1980s.

Q: What do you think the key difference is between being a member of the governor's staff and being a high-level manager in one of the government departments?

Kenneth P. Merin: Governor's staff, at least in the position that I was in, you're involved in just about everything, and you could be involved in everything, and you knew everything that was going on. You were with the legislators, you saw all the action, and so it was a hands on approach where you're-- it was sort of like a buffet table; it's just you could jump into everything. With any department your issues were clearly delineated. You are still involved in the buffet style, but it's limited; it's just dessert or just entrees, but it's not the entire buffet. And it's a lot of hands on management issues. You have to be involved in not just saying, "Here's something that would be good, a cleaner environment", but how do we actually do- how do we achieve the goal that everybody has said that we should achieve?

<Crew talk>
Q: How was Tom Kean doing by this point? We're now into the second, third year of his administration. There was a sense that the first year was rocky, and the economy was not good that first year and he had to raise taxes. How is he doing towards the end of the first term?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think-- and again I went over halfway through the first term-- but I think at that point there was already a turnaround. A lot of it has to do with Greg Stevens, of the troika of Lew Thurston, Cary Edwards and Gary Stein. The first to leave was Lew Thurston. And Greg Stevens-- I'm sure other people will talk about his background-- but Greg had known Tom for a number of years at that point. Tom had a great deal of confidence in Greg. I think Greg pushed for a lot more action, a lot more aggressive and say, "We're gonna get at--"; whatever it is we're going to do. Greg didn't make policy but rather than sit and think, get out and do it. And he also got Tom Kean out more, out in the public view, got him out talking to people. Because Tom Kean was Tom Kean's best asset; it wasn't the staff, it wasn't the cabinet, Tom Kean's best asset was Tom Kean. And the more Tom got out and spoke and explained what he was trying to do-- the economy was coming back, we had some victories in the legislature. By the time 1984 ended, which was going into the fourth and final year, I think there was a sense that the ship had been righted and we had some wind behind the sails.

Q: And you think the fundamental change was that Greg Stevens got the governor out of the Governor's Office more?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think that's one of them. But I think also there were internal battles, within the administration, and rather than let them go on and on, he'd just say, "All right, let's make a decision and go with it." And again I had-- when he came on board, it was basically a month or so before I went back to the Insurance Department. So I wasn't there for a lot of this. But this is my perception as an outsider sitting in a department.

Q: What was Kean's approach to his cabinet? Was it laisser faire, as opposed to management from the Governor's Office?

Kenneth P. Merin: One of the things I've often thought about is the fact that in his hiring process he went out and he got good people. It wasn't good buddies. I don't think he ever knew Ken Biederman. The environmental DEP, he got Bob Hughey, who was from South Jersey; I don't think he had ever met Bob Hughey. He went out and got a lot of people that he had confidence in, and he got people that he thought he could trust, and he let them come back with plans. He didn't micromanage, he didn’t say, "You will do this." Clearly the plans were reviewed by the front office, but he gave a lot of leeway to the department heads. And that was very good. I've heard about other governors, or presidents, that essentially micromanage. I've heard about governors who went off to become cabinet secretaries in different administrations in Washington, and they'd talk about how they were reporting to some 25-year-old kid in the White House, who was running everything. And that's not the way Tom handled his cabinet.

Q: So you stayed at the Insurance Department until December of ‘84?

Kenneth P. Merin: 84.

Q: And then what was your next assignment?

Kenneth P. Merin: Gary Stein had been appointed to the Supreme Court.

Q: By the governor.

Kenneth P. Merin: By the governor. And I came back to run Policy and Planning.

Q: Was that a natural fit for you, somewhat?

Kenneth P. Merin: I liked it because my background really was public policy. And I remember hiring a planner-- it was Policy and Planning-- and a lot of the issues having to do with urban growth. Look at what's happened on
Route 1, or was happening at the time with different people putting together, or giving permission to build ratables on property and causing other problems. So I thought it'd be a good idea to have a planner there. I think the major issue-- I stopped doing policy and planning. I became an issue manager for one issue the first summer that I was there, and that was asbestos in the schools. The first year, or the year before that, it had become an issue. Parents were terrified that their kids were going to come down with asbestosis. In March or-- I came back in December-- in March or April I realized that there was this issue out there, that Gary Stein had begun working on, and I knew that if we did not control this really tightly, then we'd be in September with a lot of schools closed. So starting sometime in the spring, March or April, I became an issue manager running the asbestos removal program in the public schools in New Jersey.

Q: Out of the Governor's Office.

Kenneth P. Merin: Out of the Governor's Office. We had representatives of the Cabinet come in to I think it was weekly meetings. Originally it was twice a month, and then it became once a week, and we were on top of what was going on in every school. If there were any issues we would blast through and get to a contractor, if there were contractor problems. We wanted to make sure that by the end of August, if there were going to be any delays, we would know about it and we could convey it to the parents; we could explain what was going on. I think there were three schools that opened late that year. One was a week or two late, and the others were opened the end of September. But I think that the bulk of my time at Policy and Planning was really spent managing that one issue so that the schools would open on time in September; and they did.

Q: Were you worried about Kean's re-election at all?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: Were you involved in the re-election campaign?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: You just were involved in the government.

Kenneth P. Merin: Right.

Q: Was it clear to you that he would be re-elected?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes.

Q: Why?

Kenneth P. Merin: Well in order not to be re-elected, you needed to do something that would aggravate people, and I think more and more Tom was liked by the people. All the polls showed that he was very well liked. The economy was on an upswing, and Tom had accomplished most of what he had said he was going to do. He put together a-- I put together a list for him, when I went to the Insurance Department, of-- part of my job, I was keeping a record of all the promises he had made during the campaign. So we had a list of what he had promised and what he had actually done. And he was, on a percentage basis, extremely consistent. So I think that people had no reason to reject him.

Q: And the Democrats nominated Peter Shapiro that year. How did you regard him?

Kenneth P. Merin: I'd met him a couple of times. He was a nice young bright guy.

Q: He was the Essex County Executive.
Kenneth P. Merin: Yes. But I think Governor Florio had decided not to run, which is sort of the handwriting on the wall that he didn't think he could win. And there was just a general perception that whoever the candidate was, was going to be a sacrificial lamb. And I think that's the way it turned out to be. I think he had the-- after going from the closest election in the history of the state, we had the biggest win in the history of the state.

Q: All right, let's stop there, at the end of the first term.

Kenneth P. Merin: Great.

Michael Aron: While we were changing tapes, you recalled a story about the legislative veto. Tell us that story.

Kenneth P. Merin: The legislature decided to object to a regulation that was implemented by the Kean administration. And earlier under Governor Byrne’s term, the legislature had passed legislative veto, which gave- I think it was over Governor Byrne’s’ veto; which gave the legislature the right to reject regulations promulgated by the Executive Branch. So it was an issue between branches of government. It wasn’t partisan.

Q: It was by majority that they could undo a regulation?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think it was a majority or two-thirds majority or whatever; not a partisan issue but just an institutional issue, Executive Branch versus Legislative Branch. And the Governor went to respond to that lawsuit and because the Office of Administrative Law was technically responsible for the regulation, the Attorney General had to represent the Office of Administrative Law. So, the Governor of New Jersey wanted to be represented individually as an officer and Governor Byrne went to Governor Kean and said, “You know, I believe in this so strongly, let me represent you.” So, the Governor of New Jersey in this case was defended by co-counsel including Governor Byrne and myself.

Q: Do you remember what year this was?

Kenneth P. Merin: Eighty-three, maybe late ’82, early ’83. And I do remember that we met with Governor Byrne and we agreed that Governor Byrne would handle one portion of the argument and I would handle another part of the argument. And there was a third counsel, Jack Trope would handle the last part of the argument. And when Govern Byrne stood up to speak to the Court, he reminded the members of the Supreme Court that he had appointed each and every one of them and would take it as a personal affront if they did not agree with him on this matter. And I remember sitting there shaking saying, “Oh my God, what do I do? They have to take it from him but they don’t have to take it from me. Are they going to tear me to pieces?” But they were very nice and treated me with probably much more courtesy than I deserved.

Q: How did they rule?

Kenneth P. Merin: They ruled in Governor Byrne’s favor.

Q: So, we don’t have a legislative veto in New Jersey anymore?

Kenneth P. Merin: Actually I think they redid it or redrafted it. And I think it does stand.

Q: Kean trounced Peter Shapiro in the election of 1985. During your time at Policy and Planning, the office took up prison overcrowding. Do you remember the issue?

Kenneth P. Merin: No.

Q: Healthcare, D.R.G. System, Certificate of Need Regulations, Uncompensated Care, U.M.D.N.J. do you remember any of the handling of that?
Kenneth P. Merin: I remember generally and I remember that along with Molly Coye, who was the new Commissioner of Health at that point, there was an effort to try to stem the rise in medical costs. Clearly, there are people that needed to be helped. Clearly, the medical system was becoming very, very expensive, even in those days. The question was, what do we do about it? We knew at the time that we had too many hospitals, too many hospital beds that even in the 1980s, medical care was improving to the point that for a procedure that would require a hospital stay of two weeks or three weeks previous, you were in and out of the hospital in a matter of a day or two. The big issue that I recall was the Certificate of Need Process. What do you need to do to show that you should be designated as a Heart Surgery Center? What we learned is that in order to be a good hospital, technically competent in a particular type of surgery, you needed to perform a number of surgeries per year, whether it was 500 or 100. You needed to have a staff that was fully staffed 24 hours a day. So, you needed three teams of nurses; beyond the doctors, the skilled nurses that participate in the surgery were very important to the quality of care rendered. Every hospital in the State could not be the excellent center of care for everything that ailed the people of New Jersey. And yet, hospitals are job centers, employment centers. They’re a matter of local pride. Local hospitals always sound good in case you do get sick, you’re close by. We’re trying to figure out a way that we could try to stop people from giving money to hospitals. In other words, put up a plaque that said, “John Doe refused to give money to put up a building here.” To make it more honorable to not fund a hospital because that was in the State’s interest. I’m carrying that to an extreme. But the fact is, we recognized those issues. They were very early on in the process and I do remember working on them. But I can’t recall the details of what we did.

Q: Insurance reform? Auto insurance reform? Were those initial reforms successful?

Kenneth P. Merin: Some of them were very successful; the reforms that led to the modernization to the department I think were incredibly successful. We started a national mode towards computerized financial solvency, which was picked up by the National Association of Insurance Commissioners within a matter of a year or two. So the Insurance Regulatory Apparatus now nationally is in much better shape than it was. I’ve spoken with a number of people that had aid if the S.E.C. had done for the mortgage business what we did for the Insurance Solvency business, the stuff that happened over the last couple years would never have happened. But they didn’t have the type of system that we implemented over 20 years ago. There was a new process for regulating agents and brokers; for licensing them that worked very, very well. There were some things that we did in Health Insurance area and Life Insurance area. Again, in terms of solvency, in terms of regulation, that worked very well. And there are a lot of things that worked very well outside of the residual market that J.U.A.. We did implement the higher monetary threshold. We did implement a number of other reforms. We put together a Fraud Bureau, which is really doing an excellent job by the end of the 1980s. But the big failure was the residual market, the residual auto market, which had been a problem in the 70s; became a bigger problem in the early 80s and was the biggest problem as we left office.

Q: The J.U.A.?

Kenneth P. Merin: The J.U.A.

Q: What was the problem?

Kenneth P. Merin: The generic problem was that there was a large residual market in New Jersey; that means people that could not get insurance from anybody. And there was another system, the Assigned Risk Plan, in which different insurance companies were told they had to write a particular list. The J.U.A. took essential a certain number of insurance companies that were carriers that were basically managers for a certain number of vehicles in the new residual market. It allowed those carriers to run the insurance operation for a certain number of citizens in the State of New Jersey. A couple problems. Number one, the residual market continued to grow. I think when Governor Kean came in, it was in the mid 30% of the population of the state was in the residual market. By the time we left office, it was roughly 50% of the state was in the residual market. Second thing was the law that was enacted did not anticipate some of the problems that the department would have in terms of regulating what was going on. In other words, we just had no capacity internally; no computers, no nothing. We had to rely on outside advisors and we didn’t get accurate information for a couple of years. By the time we got that information, and I
remember at my nomination hearing the second time around before Senate Judiciary Committee, we were talking about whether there was a problem there. And I remember talking about how concerned I was about the deficit. But it takes years to figure out exactly what it was. The system that was set up to compensate the J.U.A. for losses basically amounted to surcharges on individual drivers who had done certain things. The legislature found that the citizens of the state didn’t like that. So they started trimming back on the money flow but clearly it was a disaster waiting to happen. We did a lot of good things in terms of the rate making process for the voluntary market. There was something called I.S.O., Insurance Services Office, which filed for rates for 95% of the drivers at one time. We broke that up so that not everybody had the same rate. The rate was based on experience. There was an excess profits law that plowed excess profits when there were some, back to the policyholders. But I think one of the greatest failures of the Kean years was the auto residual market.

Q: When did you go back to the Department of Insurance?

Kenneth P. Merin: That was in the spring of 1986.

Q: To be commissioner?

Kenneth P. Merin: Right.

Q: Environmental issues, water supply, low level radioactive waste, resource recovery and solid waste management, pinelands implementation; do any of those kick up any memories?

Kenneth P. Merin: Not really. No, I think again, the time that I spent at Policy and Planning, which was roughly 14 months, most of that time was spent on- my own individual time was managing process. The issues that I do recall in particular ones regarding planning, it was the Office of Policy and Planning. I admittedly didn’t know a darn thing about planning; urban planning, regional planning. So we hired someone who did.

Q: Who was that?

Kenneth P. Merin: A guy by the name of Chuck Newcomb, who as I recall, came out of Burlington County. At least he gave us- what he gave us was access into the planning community. Andover that year, we were able to put together a process for allowing the state to start grappling formally with issues that we all knew existed.

Q: Were you involved in the State Planning Commission issue?

Kenneth P. Merin: We helped I believe during that year set up what became that process. But by the time they actively started meeting, I was back at the Insurance Department.

Q: Were you involved in the creation of the Council on Affordable Housing? The Fair Housing Act responding to the Mount Laurel decision?

Kenneth P. Merin: Not that I can recall.

Q: What was Governor Kean like as a boss?

Kenneth P. Merin: He was great. Again, a lot of flexibility. He wanted new ideas. He did not want you to come back and tell him what you thought he wanted to hear. He wanted the truth and he wanted what was going to work in the best interest of the state.

Q: How much interaction did you have with him on a typical week when you were in Policy and Planning?

Kenneth P. Merin: On a daily basis? I can’t- there were days when he was not in Trenton. There were days that he was in Trenton that I did not need to see him but as needed I would see him as often as need be.
Q: Did you enjoy his company?

Kenneth P. Merin: Very much.

Q: Did you discern any difference in how he governed in the second term as compared to the first term?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think there was a lot more confidence. And again, I think that started in ’84. Again, things began turning around. There was more of a recognition that he was going to succeed as a leader. Success breeds success. I think that what we haven't discussed at all was the persona of Tom Kean, which I think resonated really well with the people of the state.

Q: Let's talk about that.

Kenneth P. Merin: He wanted the state to be better than I think the state perceived itself as being in those years. And I think that Kean was sort of derided in both the primary and the general election of 1981 as being a patrician. But I think ultimately that worked in his favor because I think everybody in the state that was paying attention, knew that Tom Kean had no ulterior motive. So he could do something, for example, in travel and tourism and stand up there with his hokey New Jersey and you perfect- I can’t even do it; perfect together commercials. And the state responded really well to that. They liked the guy and they knew that he was saying, “We are number two in blueberries.” And it meant something to him that we did have an agricultural base or we have the shore or we have the sky lands. We have all those things that made us a great state. Tom used to quote Ben Franklin who said that New Jersey was a keg that was tapped at both ends. And he really believed in the identity of New Jersey. So I think that’s something that he knew the people were responding to.

Q: Were there changes in relationships among his staff second term as opposed to first term? Were the players the same?

Kenneth P. Merin: Carey moved over to the Attorney General’s office. Mike Hall came in as Chief Counsel. Greg was there I think until just about the end.

Q: Ed McGlynn came in at some point in time.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah, ’88 or ’89; towards the end. Towards the real end, there was a lot of shuffling but I think Brenda Davis came over from DEP to take over for me at Policy and Planning. So clearly, there were all sorts of changes in the second term.

Q: Did you feel the Democrats in Trenton felt chastened by the landslide that they had experienced against him?

Kenneth P. Merin: No, and I say that because they knew it was Tom Kean. I don’t think the Democrats seriously believed that New Jersey had become a Republican state. It was like, okay, now we’ll start preparing for 1989.

Q: Kean did bring a change in the Assembly majority with him.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yup.

Q: Did you get a sense Alan Karcher overplayed his hand in challenging Kean?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think the feeling was that Alan liked partisan politics and he was there to represent his party or what he perceived as the best interests of his party; not necessarily always best for the people of New Jersey. So, whenever there was an issue, urban enterprise zones, this issue, that issue; there was very little support to be found from Alan Karcher. It was a blood sport and Alan played it that way.

Q: Do you think it was a mistake on Alan’s part?
Kenneth P. Merin: I think that Tom Kean would have won reelection in ’85 anyway, again, because of the reasons that I’ve discussed. But I think from our perspective, it was always no, no, no. And there was never any common ground.

Michael Aron: The eighties were generally a time of prosperity in the country. To what extent do you think Tom Kean was successful in getting the people New Jersey to feel good about themselves by the end of his two terms?

Kenneth P. Merin: I think by the end of his two terms, he was very successful. I think there was a pride that people felt about New Jersey. I didn’t mention that early on, New Jersey was impacted by the Abscam issues down in Washington. Senator Williams was forced to resign. We lost one or two Congressman in that process. A number of political bosses went down. And again, that was another slam at New Jersey, while there were other people involved in Abscam from other states, there were several people from New Jersey. Again, it was a blow to the state’s self image. I think by appointing someone like Nick Brady as the senator to replace Harrison Williams; this is not a guy who came out of the political process. This is a fellow who had no ulterior motive who was clearly bright and educated. I think through his appointments, Tom led a tone of dignity. I don’t remember any scandals that came out of the Kean Administration by the way he handled himself, by positions he took. He made us feel good about ourselves. The other thing that I’d say at this point, is I don’t go to Trenton all that often. But in the years that I do run into someone from Trenton, a former state worker, current state worker, former reporter; what they all seem to say is that Tom’s people treated folks with dignity. That people were not berated. State workers anyway, were not berated, were not looked down upon. The reporters that I know or former reporters, would say that as a group, they felt that we were more open. So I think that everybody felt good about what was going on for a lot of different reasons. There’s a period of American history called the Year of Good Feelings. I forget what period it was but it just kind of felt like that’s the way it was in the 80s.

Q: You spent the remainder of the administration as Insurance Commissioner?

Kenneth P. Merin: Yes. To the bitter end.

Q: When you think back on the eight years of Kean, is there a single accomplishment or a highlight of the Kean administration?

Kenneth P. Merin: This is 20 years later and I think the most lasting accomplishment of a vision of what government can be when it operates properly. A lot of people don’t like government. A lot of people don’t believe in government or want to rip it down. I think Tom Kean always wanted to use government to do the right thing, to help people. And I think that through a number of the initiatives that the Kean administration had, that worked out on the environmental side, on the law enforcement side. I can’t quote them chapter and verse right now, but what I can say is there’s a feeling among even his partisan opponents that Tom was trying to do the right thing for the right reasons. They may have disagreed with the ways. Alan Karcher may have had a different view as to how to resolve car insurance. But no one ever said that Tom Kean was doing things because he was motivated by the wrong reasons.

Q: What do you think about the path Kean chose for himself after the governorship?

Kenneth P. Merin: I’m not sure I’m the best person to evaluate it. I think that Tom Kean would tell you that he’s extremely happy with the way it’s played out. I do know that when he was President of Drew University, he relished the opportunity to be with the young students on that campus. I know from several people including Tom, he had taught a class up there, a seminar class and he really enjoyed just sitting down and talking with these young kids about whatever the issues were. He enjoyed being in the academic environment and helping improve the financial base as well as the visibility of Drew University. I think that’s an incredibly great thing for Tom Kean as an individual to have done.

Q: What did you do after leaving the administration?
Kenneth P. Merin: Practiced law with a firm in New York. I had so many conflicts of interests in New Jersey because of the-- I think everybody in the world was suing the old insurance company so it kind of knocked out any law firm in New Jersey. But I went to a New York firm; did international insurance law for a while and then practiced law in New Jersey for a while. And then for the last eight years, I’ve been running a nonprofit foundation in New York City.

Q: What does it do?

Kenneth P. Merin: It works with children in New York City, Boston and to a lesser extent, Newark, New Jersey; primarily on education issues, primarily minority underserved kids.

Q: What is the name of the foundation?


Q: What does it do with the kids?

Kenneth P. Merin: We support after school education programs, weekend programs. We do a little bit of scholarship work. We do summer camps. We do a lot of programs that impact kids directly and most of it is oriented towards education, getting them into college.

Q: Who was, is Charles Hadyen?

Kenneth P. Merin: Charles Hayden was born and raised and educated in Boston public schools. Went to M.I.T., came down to Wall Street and made a ton of money. While he was alive, he helped build the Hayden Planetarium at the American Museum of Natural History. When he died in the 1930s, he left his entire estate to be used for children in New York and Boston.

Q: How large is the foundation?

Kenneth P. Merin: The foundation in terms of size of the employees is very small; myself included there are five employees. It currently has about two hundred sixty million dollars, which is down considerably from what it had about a year ago. But we’ve given out close to four hundred million and I think his bequest was in the thirty-two to thirty-four million dollar range.

Q: Do you have any contact with Tom Kean anymore?

Kenneth P. Merin: I speak to him on rare occasions. I last saw Tom I guess I think we had lunch a year or two ago in New York City.

Q: Do you like him as much as you did in 1981?

Kenneth P. Merin: Absolutely, absolutely.

Q: You spent eight years in Trenton. Looking back, what’s gone right and what’s gone wrong in New Jersey politics, government?

Kenneth P. Merin: People go into government for different reasons. And looking at it from the standpoint of legislators, they want to do things for people in their district. That stuff frequently entails spending money. And all legislators, Republicans and Democrats are generally loathed to raise taxes but they all want to do stuff. And when you do stuff that costs money and you don’t have the money to pay for it, bad things happen. I think there have been a succession of legislators and governors; Republicans and Democrats, who have refused to grapple with the tough issues. As we sit here today, the governor of New York State, Governor Paterson, who had been a state
senator and was in favor of spending tons of money, has come out and said we can’t do it. We don’t have the money. We have to shut down programs, good programs. Programs that are working but we just don’t have the money to run them. I’ve really admired and respected what he’s doing; kind of running against Democrats and Republicans who are willing to go as far as he is to say we’re going to bring this budget back into balance. So, I think a number of folks in both parties have just not had the guts to deal with the tough issues.

Q: Now they have to have the guts because revenues are drying up.

Kenneth P. Merin: Well, we’ll see if they have the guts. I think unfortunately for the people of the state, we’re going to see more budget gains, more playing around with budget projections, with revenue projections. I’m not sure what’s going to happen.

Q: What are your current interests?

Kenneth P. Merin: Well, I think the most important thing from life experience perspective is through the foundation, I’ve met a number of children that I’ve gotten to know pretty well. I’ve adopted two young women that I’ve gotten to know. One is a senior in college and one is a junior in college. One of the best things that has happened to me in my life is getting to meet those two girls.

Q: Are you a single parent or married?

Kenneth P. Merin: I am a single parent.

Q: How long have you had these adopted children?

Kenneth P. Merin: I met them when they were in high school and it’s sort of an unofficial adoption that we agreed to make formal when they graduate from college.

Q: What do they want to do with their lives?

Kenneth P. Merin: That’s a good question. One is interested in technology; management information systems. The other one is studying Chinese and wants to become an international lawyer and live in Beijing.

Q: How often do you see them?

Kenneth P. Merin: As often as I can. They’re back in New York occasionally from school.

Q: Where do they go?

Kenneth P. Merin: The senior is at George Washington University and the junior is at Brown.

Q: Interesting and unusual.

Kenneth P. Merin: Yeah, but it’s great.

Q: You’re not legally their father?

Kenneth P. Merin: Right. In New Jersey, you can adopt an adult and we agreed that I would do that after they graduate. I think 30 some odd states permit that.

Q: And you have a relationship that takes you to Washington, DC?

Kenneth P. Merin: I get down there on occasion.
Q: Any final thoughts on Kean?

Kenneth P. Merin: He is who he is. He is unique. I think he represents the best of what a political leader, a statesman can and should be. I came into this with an enormous respect for him based upon the common knowledge about the Kean family in Livingston, New Jersey, where I grew up. I leave with a knowledge that everything I heard when I was a kid was absolutely true. He’s a fine man. He’s a gentleman. He cares about people. He is very, very genuine and knowing him has been one of the best experiences of my life.

Q: He has spawned another generation of Kean’s in public service.

Kenneth P. Merin: He has.

Q: Do you know Ton Kean Jr.?

Kenneth P. Merin: I do. My first recollection of Tom Kean Jr. was when he and his twin brother were running around in army uniforms. They were about eight or ten years old at the time and they were playing war or something. They happened to find out that I had been in a war and so we had a nice conversation like you’d have with an eight or a ten year old. Low and behold, they’ve gone on to become real adults.

Q: And one of them is in politics.

Kenneth P. Merin: One of them is.

Q: One is not. Maybe those are the two sides of Tom Kean Sr. Thanks for talking to us.

Kenneth P. Merin: Thank you, Michael.

### End of Merin interview 2-23-2009 ###