Robert Torricelli Interview
February 18, 2015

Selected Interview Excerpts

... on Jim Florio’s legacy as Governor
I think Jim Florio... was an opportunity that was missed by the state of New Jersey. Had he been reelected, had he succeeded politically, the state would be a different place today and many of the debates we’re now having about our abysmal fiscal health, the continuing failure to address our educational difficulties; we wouldn’t be having all those debates, at least not to the same degree. (page 14)

... on assessing Jim Florio
Florio clearly had the courage of convictions more than anyone who has served as governor of New Jersey. He had the political determination and courage of Brendan Byrne but probably without the same level of political skills. But he had determination to achieve and to do so in a short order that most of the other governors, even good governors who stood for the right things, were probably more patient or more willing to compromise. Which of those is the most virtuous I’ll leave to others to decide but I admire his courage. (page 14)

... on lessons from Jim Florio’s term as Governor
If Jim Florio were a candidate or a governor today, given his courage, uncompromising courage on policy to do the right thing, what would he do? And I think the greatest contribution Jim Florio could make to those who now aspire to be governor would be simply this. Running for public office is not fun. Being in public office is not fun. I’m an expert on both of them. Just do the right thing. Whether it is about taxation or spending or dealing with the pension problems, dealing with our endemic transportation and educational problems; do the right thing. And if it doesn’t work out politically, life goes on. Public life is a stage of life. You get some power. Do the best you can. Make the greatest contribution you can. If it works politically it works. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t. But you walk away from it saying “I tried to bring everybody in the right direction.” (page 18)

... on public opposition to Governor Florio’s policies
And, you know, in fairness to Hands Across New Jersey and a lot of that which people were talking about being a vote on taxes, really was about the assault weapon ban. It was funded by the gun lobby. They didn’t have the courage to come out and fight on their own issue so they just spent money
believing they cared about taxes and spending. In fact, they were trying to hurt anyone who was for banning guns. (page 11)

... on Governors Tom Kean and Jim Florio
They could not be more different individuals. Tom Kean led...incrementally. He saw where he was. He knew where he wanted the state to go and he was going to get there step-by-step. That’s not Jim Florio. He saw where he was. He knew where he wanted to go and he wanted to get there in a hurry. And if it wasn’t revolutionary, it certainly wasn’t incremental. They had different outcomes. You can argue which is better... (page 10)

... on Governor Whitman
I also was very supportive of Governor Whitman as governor because she also shared my passion for open space, which in addition to the environmental issues that Jim Florio pursued was the other thing I felt so strongly about, and she was very good on open space. (page 12)

...on the office of governor
And in the federal government, in the Congress generally, you can touch policy, you can impact policy but you can’t grab it by the throat and drag it forward. There is no position in the United States like the governorship of any major state. The governorship allows you to wrestle an issue to the ground, pin it, and pull it into a different time. Whether it’s education or the environment or economic development, it is an entirely different ability to impact people’s lives and change the future. And I regret not having done that at some point in my life. I wish that I had because when you see people who have done it and done it well, they change lives not by the handful but by the millions. (page 15)

COMPLETE INTERVIEW

Rick Sinding: Hello, I’m Rick Sinding. It’s Wednesday, February 18, 2015 here at the Eagleton Institute of Politics on the campus of Rutgers University. With me today for the Center on the American Governor is former Congressman and US Senator, Bob Torricelli who can offer us a unique perspective on the personality, the politics and the policies of Jim Florio from at least three different perspectives: First, as a colleague of former Congressman Florio in the US House of Representatives from 1982 to 1989; then as an interested Washington observer of the goings on in the administration of Governor Jim Florio in Trenton from 1990 through 1994; and still later as a prominent supporter of candidate Jim Florio’s opponent, Jon Corzine, in the US Senate primary in 2000. Bob Torricelli, welcome to Eagleton.
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Robert Torricelli: Thank you for having me.

Rick Sinding: Before we get into a robust discussion of your relationship with Jim Florio let’s talk a little bit about your own background and upbringing. What was it that inspired you to get involved in politics and government?

Robert Torricelli: Actually there was never a time when I didn’t want to be in politics or government. It is in my first memories and I think part of that is the times in which we lived: the Cold War, the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement, the beginning of the environmental movement. It was a time in which if you wanted to make a difference in life there really was no similar avenue. It was the one way to be the most effective. And… my family valued public service more than any other endeavor in life and the combination made it inevitable.

Rick Sinding: Yes, you grew up in Republican Bergen County.

Robert Torricelli: I did and in Republican Franklin Lake, which never elected a Democrat and, to my knowledge, never has; 19th century, 20th century or 21st century. It’s quite a streak; not one to be proud of but it’s the town in which I grew up.

Rick Sinding: Although it did elect some moderate to even liberal Republicans; Dick DeKorte comes to minds to mind as an example.

Robert Torricelli: Yes, that’s not enough.

Rick Sinding: How did you get involved in politics? When did you get involved in politics?

Robert Torricelli: Actually here at Rutgers. I was president of my class in Rutgers College and there was a gubernatorial election coming and I thought the students in my class should see the candidates. I hosted a forum and one of those candidates was Brendan Byrne and the rest, as they say, is history.

Rick Sinding: The rest is history. How did you get involved with candidate Byrne and then Governor Byrne?

Robert Torricelli: I took a course at Rutgers while I was hosting this forum and the teacher of the class was Dick Leone [later Treasurer in the Byrne administration]. And after class I went up to him and said that during spring break I was looking for something to do and didn’t have anything to do when the semester was over, and I had to been a county committee man in Bergen County and wanted to get involved. My intention was to go lick envelopes. I ended up as the campaign manager in Bergen County not because I was good, not because I had been interviewed, not because I had special skills, because I was the only one who offered and I took the job.
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**Rick Sinding:** And what did you do during the Byrne administration?

**Robert Torricelli:** In the summer of ’74, after I left college, was the Watergate year when the effort was on to take the federal government and the Byrne administration made me a temporary executive director of the Democratic Party. So I did the research and the early planning and preparation for the Congressional campaigns in the fall of 1974 which was the Watergate landslide.

**Rick Sinding:** Which interestingly enough was the election in which Jim Florio entered Congress.

**Robert Torricelli:** Correct, and a good number of other people. That class in Congress, some of them still remain and I served in the House of Representatives with many of them because they were the biggest class of Democrats, I think, in the history of Congress.

**Rick Sinding:** Did you have occasion to come into contact with Florio during the ’74 campaign?

**Robert Torricelli:** I did. When I graduated from college and ran the party that summer, I ran the research project and we did basic research on all the Democrats running for Congress and on their Republican opponents. I remember meeting with Jim Florio and Andy Maguire and a host of other people and presenting them with everything we had found on their opponents.

**Rick Sinding:** And that was Congressman Hunt?

**Robert Torricelli:** It was Congressman Hunt. Jim had run against him two years before unsuccessfully and was wise enough to see that the atmosphere had changed and Jim had learned to be a better candidate. He had developed a stronger reputation and he had the wind to his back, as they say.

**Rick Sinding:** So, I know that we could go into great detail about your work with Vice President Mondale, running the Carter/Mondale campaign in Illinois and a variety of other activities but let’s get up to 1982 when you decided to throw your own hat in the ring. How did you decide that that particular district at that particular time was right for your taking?

**Robert Torricelli:** Well, having lived in Bergen County all my life, I watched the county and I knew the towns. I had seen Andy Maguire succeed in ’74 in the northern district of Bergen County and watched Henry Helstoski as a Congressman in the southern district in Bergen County. I was not surprised that Andy Maguire could not hold the seat in the north. He was a product of the Watergate landslide and at some point he was going to return to a Republican district. I wanted a stronger base. If was going to be elected to Congress I wanted to be more progressive, certainly more challenging on issues, and I wanted a stronger base and I wanted to run for statewide office.
Richard Sinding: And that was the southern part of Bergen County, which is more...

Robert Torricelli: That was the southern, which is the center of the southern and, of course, Helstoski then left the Congress; he was defeated and left the Congress and I established a residence in New Milford in the center of the county.

Richard Sinding: And the Republican incumbent at that point was Hollenbeck.

Robert Torricelli: Hollenbeck.

Richard Sinding: Had he come in on Reagan’s coattails in ’80?

Robert Torricelli: No, he had won in ’76. He had been in for six years and when he won in ’80 he had had a very high vote, I thought artificially high, because of the Reagan landslide. So other people were not looking at the nomination. I thought those numbers weren’t real and I started running for the nomination.

Richard Sinding: And was there a primary or were you the only Democrat who was...

Robert Torricelli: There was a minor primary. For all practical purposes I had the nomination. I think people-- it wasn’t about my being strong. I think other people weren’t paying enough attention. First, Hollenbeck’s numbers as I said were inflated and second, there had been redistricting. And so Hollenbeck was looked upon as a strong incumbent. In fact, 60 percent of the district was new to him. In most of the district he was not an incumbent but fortunately, for me, I think nobody else seemed to notice.

Richard Sinding: How much involvement did you have in the redistricting activity?

Robert Torricelli: I did through Byron Baer. Byron Baer tended to be doing the redistricting in the state of New Jersey simply because he was the smartest; he knew the process the best and he was the most computer savvy which, in those days, was not common; and it was getting very hard to draw these districts with the Supreme Court standards on one man, one vote.

Richard Sinding: I should point out that Byron Baer was a Democratic Assemblyman for Bergen County.

Robert Torricelli: He was, and a very bright fellow and he had almost a monopoly on the wisdom of how to do this in compliance with the court. And Byron and I had been friends for years and he wanted to see me in the Congress for ideological reasons and personal, and he drew the district and improved it considerably to my advantage.

Richard Sinding: So you get to Washington in 1983 as a freshman Congressman. Jim Florio has now been there for four terms, I guess. It’s no secret that Congressmen from the same state often are rivals, often don’t get along, and perhaps even more
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so if they’re of the same party; and that certainly is the case with the United States senators and we may get to that later. But you and Jim Florio seemed to hit it off from day one. Why?

Robert Torricelli: We did and you’re right. Congressmen of the same state don’t usually get along well and in my case with Jim it might not have been a good relationship because I had been part of Brendan Byrne’s gubernatorial administration; I was the chief of staff for his reelection campaign; and Jim Florio was our rival.

Rick Sinding: One of many.

Robert Torricelli: One of many. So we very well might not have gotten along but we became friends. I admired his work on the environment. Environmental issues were the most important to me and that was also an important part of his career; that was part of our relationship. Second, although we were both Italian American Democrats from New Jersey with ambitions and might have been rivals, there was a bit of a generational difference. He had already run for governor... Again, I was somewhat younger. So, some of the rivalry was taken away from that and he was from south Jersey and I was from north Jersey and our personalities were very different. Jim never aspired to be a player within the House of Representatives. His future was New Jersey. He kept to his committee. He was very serious about his substantive work and I was much more involved in Washington and congressional politics. So while we have things in common the things that were different about us, I think, avoided rivalry.

Rick Sinding: Well you, particularly in your early career, specialized primarily in foreign affairs as I recall.

Robert Torricelli: I did. I was very involved in foreign policy and I was very involved in House politics and Washington politics and those were never things of interest to Jim.

Rick Sinding: So were there particular areas, you mentioned the environment, but were there specific bills, specific initiatives that the two of you worked on together?

Robert Torricelli: Well, I was dependent upon him because my district of southern New Jersey included the Meadowlands and some of the worst toxic sites not only in New Jersey but in the country and I was very involved in getting some of them fixed. We had a terrible thorium problem in Maywood and Rochelle Park. We had mercury problems in Rutherford and Lyndhurst; these were very important to me and Jim was writing the legislation.

Rick Sinding: The Superfund legislation.
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Robert Torricelli: Superfund legislation and Jim gave me a lot of advice about getting it fixed. He and Bob Roe really shepherded my career in being effective and getting things done for Bergen County.

Rick Sinding: As you progressed through those first two or three terms in Congress and it was clear that Jim Florio was going to run for governor in 1989, did you support him? Did you work with him? Did you work on his campaign?

Robert Torricelli: Well before that it actually appeared that Jim Florio was going to run for governor in 1985 because you remember, he lost extremely narrowly to Tom Kean and while we now all think of Tom Kean as being invincible and this enormous political force; in fact, the first couple of years when Tom came to the administration he wasn’t doing so well. There was a bad national recession. His polling was not strong and I - later proven wrong - had urged Jim to run in ‘85. Jim thought...

Rick Sinding: He wisely did not take your advice.

Robert Torricelli: He wisely did not take my advice. He thought Kean would recover. I did not. He was right. I was wrong. Jim thought I was also encouraging him to run for governor so I’d get him out of the way. That may have been in the back of my head but was not in the forefront. I actually wanted him to run because I thought at the time he would be effective and the better governor. I do think he’d be the better governor but I was wrong. He would not have won.

Rick Sinding: You have often spoken-- I’ve read some of the interviews that you’ve done, about your own fiscal conservatism. Socially liberal but fiscally conservative; that would seem to put you somewhat at odds with Jim Florio’s fiscal philosophy. Did you ever have occasion to have disagreements on this subject?

Robert Torricelli: I don’t remember arguing with him but our voting records were different. You know, we are who we are and Jim was a product of Camden and he proudly hails from a family where his father was a worker in a shipyard and he grew up in modest circumstances. I proudly came from Franklin Lakes, New Jersey in very different socioeconomic circumstances. I think we’re both proud of our backgrounds but we are who we are and I grew up being conscious of taxation and what it did to communities and approached public life that way.

Rick Sinding: But you never had conflicts that you would speak of in that regard?

Robert Torricelli: No, you know, and it may not have been the right-- in fact, I think about what votes in life in many years in Congress I cast that were wrong. And I actually voted against the Social Security compromise that President Reagan and Tip O’Neill supported because it increased taxes precipitously. In retrospect, that probably was the wrong vote. I did vote for the balanced budget initiative of Bill Clinton that balanced the federal budget, which was a tax increase; I think that

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was the only significant tax increase I ever voted for in my life but it was about balancing the federal budget and I think it was the right thing to do.

Rick Sinding: Boy, we can go back to that answer later when we talk about the changing nature of politics in America but for now let’s go back to 1989 and now Florio is running. He’s running against another of your colleagues although on the opposite political spectrum, Jim Courter.

Robert Torricelli: A fellow I admired a lot and still do and is a close personal friend.

Rick Sinding: Really? Had you worked with him even across the aisle when you were in Congress?

Robert Torricelli: Jim Courter and I worked very closely together because I was the Democrat on the Foreign Relations Committee and he was the Republican on the Armed Services Committee. The overlap of jurisdictions was considerable and I had developed a philosophy of being effective in foreign policy by also knowing military matters. Jim was effective in military matters because he also knew something about foreign policy. So we spent a lot of time together and I had been very supportive of some of the rearmament programs in the 1980s for the United States as we were rebuilding the American military and that had us work together considerably and I admire Jim.

Rick Sinding: Do you think that in some respects you were more politically close to Courter than you were to Florio?

Robert Torricelli: I think I was personally probably closer to Jim Courter and I was closer to him certainly on foreign policy and military matters but, again, what I had admired so much about Jim Florio is his commitment on environmental issues which was my other passion and remains so.

Rick Sinding: So, the ‘89 election, I mean, obviously you’d have been personally pleased with either outcome from the standpoint of what your relationship with the incoming governor would be.

Robert Torricelli: I was but since New Jersey was unlikely to have a foreign policy or a strong military but environmental issues were central as were education issues; Jim Florio was the right choice and I threw myself heart and soul into it.

Rick Sinding: And you were unlikely to wish a Republican governor on the state.

Robert Torricelli: That too.

Rick Sinding: So, were you actively involved in the ‘89 campaign?
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Robert Torricelli: I encouraged Jim from the outset and I thought he would win it and I thought he would be a good governor. I thought it was the right moment for him to be governor. And, if memory serves me correctly, I actually put together the first money. I remember when he had to put together the first polling and the first budget, I could be wrong, but I think it all came from my operations.

Rick Sinding: Really? So you were still a political operative at heart?

Robert Torricelli: Was and am.

Rick Sinding: As that campaign progressed and it became fairly clear that Florio was going to win did you and he or you and any of his people have conversations about what the government initiatives were going to be when he was elected?

Robert Torricelli: You know, we didn’t and Jim and I have remained close friends but I probably had unrealistic expectations. My sense was that Jim and I were very close friends and his election was very important and I thought I had played a larger role than anybody in the delegation, in fact than everybody in the delegation, and I really wanted to stay involved and I was very frustrated that I was not, after he became governor, but I think was extremely unrealistic. You can’t be in Washington, be serving in Congress and be an element in the running of the state of New Jersey’s government. It was immature and naïve of me but my feelings were hurt. I wanted to be involved in the administration; it just wasn’t possible. I had other responsibilities and I just wasn’t there day-to-day and running the government of the state of New Jersey is a minute-by-minute affair.

Rick Sinding: It certainly is. And it certainly was for the first six months of that administration which you watched from the discrete distance of Washington. But you certainly must have had some opinions about the assault weapons ban, about the auto insurance reform, about the changing of the school funding formula and ultimately, about the substantial tax increases that came along all within the first six months.

Robert Torricelli: I did and, you know, there’s no one closer to the people and the public sentiment than a member of the House of Representatives because you run every two years. You’re on the streets all the time. If the wind blows you feel it; and I felt it. On many of those issues I was very sympathetic with Jim. The assault weapon ban was the right thing to do. I think the country painfully, through these years, has learned that lesson. The school funding formula; it was a moral and a legal obligation in this state to assure the quality of education of every child. In my mind it was not a legitimately debatable issue; it simply had to be done. The state had fiscal challenges. Jim met them the way he thought was best to do. I don’t think with Jim it was as much a substantive issue as that the sale of the program, the explanation for it, was obviously not done well. I think history supports that conclusion. Politics is a complex piece of business. It’s a set of beliefs. It’s a deep knowledge. It’s a conviction to achieve but it’s also a set of skills to prepare the public. As I think Lincoln said “You need to lead the public but not by too much.”
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You can just be so far out front of the public. You need to bring them along sometimes kicking and screaming but always with a base of knowledge.

Rick Sinding: A lot of people whom we have interviewed have talked about Tom Kean’s approach where he did, in fact, sign tax increases kicking and screaming and Jim Florio’s approach which was full speed ahead. One of the distinctions here is that Florio evidently acted on the belief that he had political capital, spend it in those first six months and then spend the next three and a half years building it back up again knowing that there would be this kind of reaction but perhaps not anticipating the extent of the reaction. Do you think that’s an accurate assessment?

Robert Torricelli: Here’s how I look at this and in fairness because I admire Tom Kean and I admire Jim Florio; they could not be more different individuals. Tom Kean led, and perhaps appropriately, incrementally. He saw where he was. He knew where he wanted the state to go and he was going to get there step-by-step. That’s not Jim Florio. He saw where he was. He knew where he wanted to go and he wanted to get there in a hurry. And if it wasn’t revolutionary, it certainly wasn’t incremental. They had different outcomes. You can argue which is better. Tom Kean did what he did, succeeded politically and substantively. Jim Florio succeeded substantively. He did not succeed politically but I don’t fault him for trying. In politics there’s a moral imperative to do as much as you can possibly do in the short time you are given. And he tried and I admire that.

Rick Sinding: There are a number of people also whom we’ve interviewed who have basically described Jim Florio as a policy wonk; much, much more interested than most elected politicians in the substance and detail of the policies that he’s working on. Was that your impression as well?

Robert Torricelli: Yes, I think that’s true and the things that Jim worked on in the Congress - there were some healthcare issues, there was the environmental issues; the asbestos issues, the insurance issues - I think he knew them as well as anyone in the Congress and I think that was important for him when he became governor, so I think that’s true. He was certainly policy-driven much more than he was politically-driven and his policy skills were greater than his political skills, I’ll say gently.

Rick Sinding: You had mentioned earlier that a US Congressman being so close to the people gets that blowback, gets that feedback. What kind of blowback and feedback were you getting in 1991, early ’92, heading into your upcoming election?

Robert Torricelli: Well, the best way to answer that is I ran for the House of Representatives seven times and there was only one of them where I was really concerned about the outcome and it was that one.

Rick Sinding: And that was 1992.
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Robert Torricelli: I didn’t have anything to do with state policy. I didn’t vote on the tax increase. I didn’t spend any time in Trenton.

Rick Sinding: Yes, but you’d seen what happened to Bill Bradley in 1990.

Robert Torricelli: But what happened to Bill Bradley didn’t just happen to Bill Bradley; it happened to the rest of us. The public was mad and the only people on the ballot were members of Congress and we may not have had any involvement but it was the only way to express yourself.

Rick Sinding: So it was the ‘90 election that would have been the toughest one for you, not ‘92 or perhaps both of them.

Robert Torricelli: It was ‘90. Yes, ‘90.

Rick Sinding: Did the Hands Across New Jersey movement that sprouted up during this time and made life so difficult for Jim Florio and his administration, did that show up in your reelection campaign as well?

Robert Torricelli: Oh definitely because the only people on the ballot were federal and the only way to be heard was to be heard against us so I did hear about it. And, you know, in fairness to Hands Across New Jersey and a lot of that which people were talking about being a vote on taxes really was about the assault weapon ban. It was funded by the gun lobby. They didn’t have the courage to come out and fight on their own issue so they just spent money believing they cared about taxes and spending. In fact, they were trying to hurt anyone who was for banning guns.

Rick Sinding: Did you know that at the time?

Robert Torricelli: Oh yes, Yes.

Rick Sinding: Okay because a lot of the people that we’ve talked to said they didn’t understand that that was what was happening at the time but much later...

Robert Torricelli: It was-- Jim Florio was coming from and if you were paying strong attention you knew that’s where the money was coming from.

Rick Sinding: So, during the time that Florio was governor, you said that your feelings were kind of hurt because you weren’t asked for your opinion and advice as often as you might have liked to be, but you did have some close friends and some people who had-- Jamie Fox comes to mind as someone who had worked for you who was now Deputy Chief of Staff in the Florio administration.

Robert Torricelli: Yes, we had a lot of common staff actually and, you know, I felt included in the administration. It’s just the idea that because Jim and I were close and we cared about the same issues that I’d have an impact on day-to-day policy was unrealistic. You can’t govern the state of New Jersey that way and I had my
responsibilities but we certainly shared a lot of staff and shared beliefs and tried to be as helpful as I could because Jim was doing good things for the state of New Jersey. I mean, I would argue today - it would be a good thesis for someone to write - the issues that face New Jersey today: the fact we’ve never squarely dealt with our educational problems; the environmental agenda has never really been finished; and our fiscal problems are now legendary. What if Jim had a second term?

Rick Sinding: Or what if the activities that he did during his first term hadn’t been repealed?

Robert Torricelli: Both. One could argue the state of New Jersey would be a very different place today economically and politically.

Rick Sinding: Yes. When he lost in ’93-- do I have my years right? Yes, I do.

Robert Torricelli: Ninety-three.

Rick Sinding: And Christie Whitman came in, what kind of relationship did you then have with the state government apparatus? Did it change dramatically because you were of different parties?

Robert Torricelli: You know, it really didn’t. I think by the time we were into 93 and 94, I was the only member of the House, Democrat, of my generation. The other Democrats had been around a long time. They were committee chairmen. They were getting older. And I was the only one really deeply involved in the House leadership day-to-day - in the agenda of the Congress, and the Governor Whitman administration relied upon me a fair amount to carry the agenda as a Democrat, to the extent it was required on my side of the aisle. So we actually had a very close relationship. I also was very supportive of Governor Whitman as governor because she also shared my passion for open space, which in addition to the environmental issues that Jim Florio pursued was the other thing I felt so strongly about, and she was very good on open space.

Rick Sinding: Fast-forward to 2000 where I guess for the second time you’re going to come into some conflict with Jim Florio. It hadn’t occurred to me that that midterm or the second Byrne election would have been a source of some tension or conflict with Jim but clearly 2000 was because you were a prominent supporter of Jon Corzine in the Democratic primary for US Senate.

Robert Torricelli: Well, the decision in 2000 to nominate to the United States a candidate who could win was complex. I was chairman of the campaign committee for the Senate, responsible for raising the money and doing the recruitment, and we were six seats away from getting a Democratic majority. And getting a Democratic majority was essential. We did not know whether Al Gore was going to win the presidency; it would be George Bush. If it was going to be George Bush, we had to have a Democratic Senate. If it was going to be Al Gore, we certainly
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wanted him to be as effective as Bill Clinton and have that majority. It was my job to find six seats. The problem with 2000 is that there were seats open in California, Moynihan did not run for reelection, Hillary was running. We had New York. We had Florida and we had Michigan and Pennsylvania. You couldn’t have a worse lineup for open seats. They were all multimillion dollar campaigns.

Rick Sinding: Yes, open Democratic seats.

Robert Torricelli: Open Democratic seats.

Rick Sinding: Right.

Robert Torricelli: And very expensive. So, one of the reasons that we recruited Hillary is that she was a self-funder. In fact, she’s a profit center. She would raise more than she could spend. But then, lo and behold, Lautenberg does not run for election and we have New Jersey. We just didn’t have the money. Flat out, we didn’t have the money.

Rick Sinding: But you had a state where for the United States Senate there had not been a Republican win since 1972.

Robert Torricelli: You still need to spend $15 - $20 million for the candidate and that $15 - $20 million was better spent elsewhere in the country getting people elected. Jon Corzine came forward and was interested in running for the Senate. I had known Jon for years. I knew him as Chairman at Goldman Sachs. He’d been a very good supporter of mine through the years. I knew he was smart. He was very, very focused. He was prepared to fund his own race. His polling was very positive based on his profile. I thought he could hold the seat. I thought he could hold the seat and allow us to spend the resources to get Hillary elected; Debbie Stabenow in Michigan; Bill Nelson in Florida; reelect Diane Feinstein in California and I was right; they all worked, except we lost Pennsylvania. Otherwise we won every one of those seats and we got a majority by one seat. So, it may have been the right decision, it may have been wrong, but it got us the Democratic majority in the United States Senate which with George Bush winning the presidency became critical.

Rick Sinding: So you’re thinking now of the whole question of the New Jersey seat as one of many nationally?

Robert Torricelli: That was my job.

Rick Sinding: You’re not thinking specifically as your own state.

Robert Torricelli: That was my job.

Rick Sinding: Did you and Florio ever have occasion to talk about this? Did you ever discuss...?
Robert Torricelli: We did but always civilly. Jim came to me early and said that he had wanted to run. I had told him that Jon Corzine had an interest and I told him of my financial concern; what it mean for the party and control of the Senate. He was determined to run. I did suggest to him I did not think it was a very good idea. I told them I would not endorse either and I never did though it was clear that for my responsibilities getting control of the Senate were better served by Corzine being the candidate.

Rick Sinding: So am I incorrect as referring to you as a prominent supporter of Corzine?

Robert Torricelli: Yes, I clearly helped him but I did not endorse him.

Rick Sinding: Let’s talk about how you view Jim Florio’s governorship from the perspective of all the different governors that you’ve seen. You started working for Brendan Byrne. You were involved in national office throughout Tom Kean’s administration. You knew Florio well. You just said that you worked closely with the Whitman administration. Then you had McGreevey. You’ve had Corzine, whom you’ve known for a long time. How would you compare and contrast them, their leadership styles, their talents, their shortcomings for each of those governors?

Robert Torricelli: Well, Jim Florio clearly had the courage of convictions more than anyone who has served as governor of New Jersey. He had the political determination and courage of Brendan Byrne but probably without the same level of political skills. But he had determination to achieve and to do so in a short order that most of the other governors, even good governors who stood for the right things, were probably more patient or more willing to compromise. Which of those is the most virtuous I’ll leave to others to decide but I admire his courage.

Rick Sinding: What do you think his legacy will be?

Robert Torricelli: You know, you ask an honest question, I’ll give you an honest answer: missed opportunity. I think Jim presented an agenda. He was an opportunity that was missed by the state of New Jersey. Had he been reelected, had he succeeded politically the state would be a different place today and many of the debates we’re now having about our abysmal fiscal health, the continuing failure to address our educational difficulties; we wouldn’t be having all those debates, at least not to the same degree.

Rick Sinding: You briefly toyed with the idea of being governor.

Robert Torricelli: Very briefly.

Rick Sinding: Twelve days I think was the...

Robert Torricelli: Yes, very briefly.
Rick Sinding: Why? Not why did you toy with the idea? Why didn’t you pursue it?

Robert Torricelli: It was very complex. One, I was Chairman of the Campaign Committee of the Senate and when various political leaders in New Jersey suggested to me that Jim McGreevey might have some vulnerabilities and might not be the strongest nominee, I went to the Senate leadership - Senator Daschle - and suggested that I had an interest in it, but he reminded me I was also Chairman of the Campaign Committee, responsible for getting control of the Senate back. I suggested I thought it was something that might be able to be done in rather short order. The election wasn’t for another year. If I could secure the nomination early, it wouldn’t necessarily be a conflict with my duties. And I pursued it with that in mind. That did not afford me the opportunity to run in the primary. I could have just simply run in a primary the next year. It was not practical with my responsibilities in the Senate. And I know to this day friends and supporters, people say to me “Why didn’t you pursue it? Why didn’t you go ahead and just run in the primary?” I would love to have. I couldn’t. It was not responsible with my duties in the Senate.

Rick Sinding: It also sounds to me, based upon your activities when you were in Congress, in the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and dealing with an awful lot of national and international issues and big picture federal stuff, that it lent itself more to your moving onto the Senate than it would for you coming back to the...

Robert Torricelli: You know, Rick, there’s some truth in that and that my passion had been foreign policy. I knew my greatest impact in the Congress policy issues and military issues because I had spent so many years traveling the globe meeting foreign leaders, studying, reading and being a part of the formation of American foreign policy. I pursued it with passion and I hope I made a difference for our country. I certainly wanted to. But I also lived here and I had come of age in New Jersey politics and in the state house. And in the federal government, in the Congress generally, you can touch policy, you can impact policy but you can’t grab it by the throat and drag it forward. There is no position in the United States like the governorship of any major state. The governorship allows you to wrestle an issue to the ground, pin it, and pull it into a different time. Whether it’s education or the environment or economic development, it is an entirely different ability to impact people’s lives and change the future. And I regret not having done that at some point in my life. I wish that I had because when you see people who have done it and done it well, they change lives not by the handful but by the millions.

Rick Sinding: Did you ultimately get frustrated being one of 435 and is that what caused you want to become one of a hundred?

Robert Torricelli: You know, my decision to want to be a Senator and my decision ultimately to leave public life are related in that I never wanted to be in Congress all my life. There are people I loved and admired like Peter Rodino who came out of the service as a young man and spent his entire life there; I really respect that.
And there are many people who do it today. That wasn’t me. I wanted to have many lives. And I wanted a life as a Congressman. I wanted a life as a Senator. But then I wanted a life as a businessman. I wanted a life as a citizen. I didn’t want to be defined by a job and I spent 20 years. So after 14 in the House of Representatives I thought that was enough and I’ll go to the Senate. And my plan probably was to spend two terms in the Senate but then, you know, I wasn’t enjoying it anymore. It was time to go to private life. And 20 years was just enough. So the decision to become a Senator was like the decision to retire; it was just enough.

Rick Sinding: Okay. And tell us what you’ve been doing since you’ve been out of public life.

Robert Torricelli: You know, I’ve actually had that rare bit of good fortune in life to have every stage of life exactly the way I wanted it. As a young man, I wanted to work for the governor. I wanted to be a White House staffer. I enjoyed the experience and I did it and I left it at the right time. I wanted to be a young Congressman and be involved in American foreign policy in the Cold War and to learn the world and to learn the country and I did that 14 years and I enjoyed it and I’m glad I did it. I did the same with the Senate and I enjoyed being involved in national politics. And then I always wanted to retire and make some money and have a farm and have horses and I wanted to live a little more comfortable life, a private life, away from the spotlight and media and politics. And I started building a real estate portfolio and I renovate properties and build residential multifamily housing. And I have a consulting practice that takes me around the globe occasionally to stay involved in foreign policy and business issues and I’ve really enjoyed it.

Rick Sinding: Tell us about that consulting. What kind of consulting takes you around the world?

Robert Torricelli: Well, I’ve been giving advice for several foreign governments during the last 10 years and I’m very involved now with the expatriate community that is in opposition to the Iranian government which takes me to the Middle East a good deal and I do that but we also represents some Fortune 500 companies and some real estate developers in New Jersey. So what I loved about public life is every day was different. You got up in the morning and you could be dealing with a situation in Kuwait or I could be dealing with a bridge that was down in Paramus and I loved the uncertainty of every day and the mix of issues and I feel like I’ve done that in my private life. One day I get up and the heat is out in one of my buildings or I need to renegotiate a lease but that afternoon I could be getting a call and there’s an issue about the expatriate Iranian community in Iraq and they’re being attacked by the Iranians and we need to do something about it or I could have a problem for a New Jersey real estate developer who’s got a problem with a town or the DOT and needs to get it developed and is trying to build something important. I love the mix that every hour is different.
Rick Sinding: Are you skeptical of President Obama’s overtures toward Iran?

Robert Torricelli: Enormously. I think one of the great charms of America, one of the most endearing qualities is that it is young and vibrant and naïve. And one of the things that scares me about America and discourages me is that it is young, vibrant and naïve. You’re seeing both with regard to Iran. I think the idea we’re going to reach a nuclear accord with the Iranians is fanciful and I think not taking a position against their encroachment in Iraq, their dominance of Iraq, there’s enormous long-term dangers aligning with them now in the fight against ISIS. I think is extremely dangerous.

Rick Sinding: You also had some very harsh words to say about Cuba over the years. Do you feel that the initiative toward Cuba is similarly naïve?

Robert Torricelli: Well, you know, I don’t regret having been the author of the second round after the Kennedy round of the Cuban embargo, I’m very proud of what I did; it is now summarily written, every paper in America that it was a failure because the President says so and so we have to abandon the policy. Was it a failure? When we enacted it, the Cubans were involved in armed struggle in Angola and Mozambique. They were involved in Salvador, Columbia, Nicaragua and a host of other places; that didn’t go away by chance. The Cuban embargo and American isolation of the Cuban government weakened them, contained them, allowed the revolution to mature, clearly became less offensive. Is it time now for a change in policy toward Cuba? Probably. It is a more complex situation. I think we defanged them in at least what they were attempting to do in our hemisphere in revolution militarily. It’s probably a different time for a different approach but that doesn’t mean we don’t retain our principles. I do not believe that the United States should have identical policy for Democratic nations that respect human rights, respect the will of the governed and those that are totalitarian and abuse human rights. We can have some economic intercourse and political intercourse with both but the policy should not be identical. Cuba should remain in a different relationship with the United States as long as Cuba chooses to be different in how it treats its people.

Rick Sinding: And I assume you feel the same applies to Saudi Arabia and other countries that are in America’s sphere of influence but not necessarily as supportive of human rights?

Robert Torricelli: I do. I think we have a level of relationship with the great democracies. NATO is not only the most successful political military alliance in history; it is the most admirable. You must be a Democratic nation to be a member. No matter how powerful you are, no matter how rich you are, no matter how much you serve our interests you must be Democratic to be a member. We should weigh them differently. Other states can be helpful to us. You know, the Middle East or in Latin America, they can have aligned interests, they can serve our purposes but I think to get in the inner sanctum of trust with the United States where you get our most advanced weapons, our best intelligence, our complete
best wishes, our commitment to defend each other, you need to be in that circle of democracy.

Rick Sinding: We’ve come quite a ways away from our discussion of Jim Florio and let me just get back to it for a second and ask you to pretty much wrap this up. What didn’t I ask you that I should have or what observations would you have to make about Jim Florio that we haven’t discussed?

Robert Torricelli: You know, if you wanted to segue Jim Florio into a discussion we’re all going to have for the next couple of years in New Jersey would be if Jim Florio were a candidate or a governor today, given his courage, uncompromising courage on policy to do the right thing, what would he do? And I think the greatest contribution Jim Florio could make to those who now aspire to be governor would be simply this. Running for public office is not fun. Being in public office is not fun. I’m an expert on both of them. Just do the right thing. Whether it is about taxation or spending or dealing with the pension problems, dealing with our endemic transportation educational problems; do the right thing. And if it doesn’t work out politically, life goes on. Public life is a stage of life. You get range [ph?] of power. Do the best you can. Make the greatest contribution you can. If it works politically it works. If it doesn’t, it doesn’t. But you walk away from it saying “I tried to bring everybody in the right direction.”

Rick Sinding: I think you pretty much described the Florio administration.

Robert Torricelli: I’d like to describe the next administration.

Rick Sinding: Well, on that note thanks very much.

Robert Torricelli: Thanks for having me. I enjoyed it.