

Interview with Governor James J. Florio

by Michael Aron

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*This is the second of two retrospective interviews with **Governor Florio** conducted during August and September 2012. In this conversation, Florio begins in the fall of 1989 when it had become clear he was about to be elected Governor of New Jersey. Among the topics he discusses are the transition and his first 100 days as Governor, Auto Insurance Reform, Public Opposition to Tax Increases, Drumthwacket, Passage and Attempted Repeal of an Assault Weapons Ban, Environmental Protection, Health and Human Services, Education, Relationship with the Press, President Barack Obama, Abortion, Working with a Veto-Proof Republican Majority, President Bill Clinton, the 1993 Reelection Campaign, and the Florio Legacy.*

Michael Aron: It's the morning of September 26th, 2012. I'm Michael Aron of NJTV. We are at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University for the Center on the American Governor. This morning we're going to continue our conversation with former Governor Jim Florio. The Governor served as the Chief Executive of the State from 1990 to 1994. When we left off, he was cruising toward victory in the 1989 Governor's race. Governor, when we left off, we had talked about how you, as a Congressman, were running against Jim Courter, a Congressman, and certain things that occurred in the summertime of 1989 that had sort of thrown him off stride, the controversy about his remarks about homosexuality and teachers in the schools, something about some toxic waste on a piece of property he owned in Ocean County. By September, did you feel you had it wrapped up?

Governor Florio: We were fairly confident. We had tracking polls that were being conducted that indicated that we had a fairly substantial lead, and we were confident, hopefully not overconfident, but we were starting to even think about the transition.

Q: Already in September?

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: You had to debate him, I presume. I don't recall.

Governor Florio: We did. I think we had three debates.

Q: Anything stand out in your memory from those occasions?

Governor Florio: Yes. One of the things that I think got some attention was his attempt to try to present himself as an environmental candidate, and that was just not real. I mean, his record was not great on the environment, as measured by the various environmental groups, so I had sort of taken him on fairly dramatically, saying that, you know, "Give us a break." He was good on defense matters, but he was not good on environmental matters.

Q: You were Mister Environment at that time. Yes?

Governor Florio: Yes, Yes, yes.

Q: Fair to say?

Governor Florio: Well, and it was a topic that resonated. As you may recall, in the late '80s the Jersey Shore was closed as many times as it was open. I mean, there was medical waste occurring there. There were sewage sludge dumpings, and it was a tough summer. Actually it was a tough couple of summers, so my ability to present myself as somebody who could deal with those types of environmental problems resonated with people of the state.

Q: So election day comes. Do you recall the margin of victory?

Governor Florio: Fairly substantial, but, no, I don't recall, but it was a good double.

Q: Double digits?

Governor Florio: I think it was.

Q: Do you recall where you spent election night?

Governor Florio: I think we were in New Brunswick that evening.

Q: At the East Brunswick Hilton?

Governor Florio: I think it was The Ramada Inn at that point, whatever it was.

Q: Right, the East Brunswick Ramada.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: Yes.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: I know you were there four years later, because I remember the night four years later very vividly, in fact. But I don't remember.

Governor Florio: Yes. I think that's where we were.

Q: I was probably with you that night somewhere.

Governor Florio: I think, because I remember the next morning we got up very early and went to the train station in New Brunswick. In fact, voters were at the train station.

Q: Who were the key people around you at that point in time, right when you won that first election as governor?

Governor Florio: Well, Doug Berman became the treasurer, Greg Lawler, Angelo Genova, there were a whole host of people who were-- many of the people from South Jersey who had been friends for a long period of time were big supporters. Louis Katz was a large fundraiser for us. We had a lot of people that I'd known for a very long period of time.

Q: What does one do first once elected governor, in terms of creating a smooth transition?

Governor Florio: Well, by virtue of our confidence in the support, we'd actually almost started the transition team before the election. We had general outlines of it, so we actually started at a sprint. We didn't have to start thinking about the transition. We'd already had some people. Carl Van Horn was very helpful to us in thinking about that. Greg Lawler, as I mentioned, had really been thinking about the transition team and we had a system in place to go virtually into operation instantaneously.

Q: The State set you up in some office space in Trenton.

Governor Florio: In Trenton, yes.

Q: Do you recall any contact between your people and the outgoing Kean administration people?

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: And whether there were any bumps in the road there

Governor Florio: No. They were fairly good. The transition went relatively smoothly. I met with the governor, Governor Kean, one or two occasions there, but the handoff was smooth.

Q: Did you two governors talk about the condition of the State's finances during a meeting like that?

Governor Florio: We did, and that was a little bit contentious, because unbeknownst to us the representations that were being made that there was a three hundred million dollar surplus in the current year's budget anticipated turned out not to be there; turned out to be a six hundred million dollar shortfall, which obviously is somewhat substantial, and then we had almost a two billion dollar anticipated shortfall for the upcoming year. So coming into office in January, we had to narrow the six hundred billion dollar shortfall that was there, and anticipate how we were going to submit a budget in March, or so, to deal with the two billion dollar shortfall.

Q: And in those days, the size of the state budget was probably ten or twelve billion?

Governor Florio: I think it was, like, twelve, thirteen.

Q: Uh huh. Do you recall who was the chairman of your transition team?

Governor Florio: I don't even know if we had a chairman of the transition team. We had a group of people who were there working on it. Doug Berman, who was very, very smart on figures, since the budget was such a dominating issue, played a disproportionate role in that.

Q: I'm reminded that you actually won handily = 61.2% to 37.2%, a 24% margin.

Governor Florio: Yes. It was a good margin. I'd been involved in close elections and non-close elections. Non-close elections are much more preferable.

Q: One of the first things a Governor-Elect does is pick a chief of staff and fill other key positions. Your first chief of staff, was that Steve Perskie?

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: Why did you pick Steve Perskie?

Governor Florio: Well, Steve was a friend. Steve was very smart, very smart, very savvy, had obviously the experience of being in the state senate, so he knew how to deal with legislators, and is a good person.

Q: He was not a senator at the time that you sought him. I mean, he was out of the legislator.

Governor Florio: That's right.

Q: You brought him back to Trenton.

Governor Florio: That's right.

Q: And we'll get to your decision, or his decision, to leave after the first year. We'll get to that; your chief counsel, Brenda Bacon; or, no, she was policy?

Governor Florio: No, no. She was policy, chief policy person. The Chief Counsel, if I recall, Bob DeCotiis ultimately became it, but he was not the first one. I think it might have been Andy Weber, if I recall correctly.

Q: Right. Okay. Your Inaugural. Do you recall your Inaugural?

Governor Florio: Yes. It was a very good day, very nice day. It was a pleasant day.

Q: In January.

Governor Florio: Weather wise, and we had a children's event. First and foremost we had a religious event. Reverend [Howard] Woodson, his church in Trenton, we had a religious convocation of sorts. Then we had a children's event. We had a series of events with them through the course of the whole day, and they all ran very, very well. I was genuinely impressed how effective and efficient the whole system worked, until the last event, which was the Inaugural Dinner, which we had in, I guess, one of the big centers up on Route 287, and it was over-capacity. We didn't have enough room for all the people, so somebody messed up selling more tickets than there was space. We had a tent outside, and a lot of the people were a little unhappy who had to sit in the tent, as opposed to in the ballroom.

Q: I remember some of those events. The children's event was very unusual. It had not been done before.

Governor Florio: It was very nice. Lots of people I run into were there. We had a whole, I forget how many children, but there were a whole bunch of children, couple hundred children who came, and I've run into adults who were children at that point who were there, which is the nice thing.

Q: Oh, really. You run into people today.

Governor Florio: Who were there as children.

Q: Oh. I think some of them were your staff's children?

Governor Florio: They were, and were some of them were children from schools that my wife taught in. It was a very nice event.

Q: Now that it's coming back to me, I think I had my children there, too.

Governor Florio: It may well be.

Q: I think I have a photograph of you with my children.

Governor Florio: Okay.

Q: And I also remember that your evening event, the Inaugural Ball, as it were, was oversold.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: And a little chaotic.

Governor Florio: It was interesting.

Q: I guess, in part, because Democrats were taking back Trenton for the first time in years.

Governor Florio: Everybody was very enthusiastic. Yes.

Q: What was the first thing you tackled as governor?

Governor Florio: First thing I?

Q: Tackled as governor.

Governor Florio: Oh, you mean, in the transition period?

Q: No. Now we've got you inaugurated. Now you're governor.

Governor Florio: Okay, got me inaugurated, Yes. Well, actually, the budget was the thing we had to deal with, had to figure out some way of reconciling that. One of the things that was kind of an interesting aside was at one of the meetings we had with Governor Kean at Drumthwacket on this whole issue of the budget, when his people acknowledged the fact there was a shortfall, there was a suggestion they made that his administration, before they go out of office, should increase the sales tax by a small amount of money so as to bridge that gap. That was suggested and rejected, so that didn't happen, but it was something that might have been a little bit more-- would have made things a little easier if we could have closed that gap before we came into office, and had to close a gap of somewhere of, like, two point four billion dollars, between the old budget and the new budget.

Q: Am I correct in remembering that you, early on in your, like right that winter, right after becoming governor, that you called a special session on auto insurance?

Governor Florio: Auto insurance was something we talked about very forcefully early on, because auto insurance rates were sky rocketing. It had been something I had talked about in the campaign, and it was something I felt strongly about. So, yes, we did have an early session on auto insurance.

Q: And I think it was a special session that you called.

Governor Florio: I think we did. Yes.

Q: The other early policy area that jumps out in my memory is assault weapons.

Governor Florio: That's right.

Q: You very early on banned assault weapons. Tell me a little about that.

Governor Florio: Well, that was something that I had talked about a little bit in the campaign, but there were events happening around the country that highlighted the national interest in dealing with this. There was an assault in Stockton, California. You may recall that some crazy person with an assault weapon when in and started shooting children. I can recall going to Camden on a tour with the county prosecutor, and having him tell me that he would not send law enforcement people into North Camden, which is a tough section of Camden, because the bad guys had more fire power than the policemen did. That made an impression upon me dealing with this whole issue, so we did launch an initiative, which was ultimately successful banning the sale and possession of assault weapons in New Jersey, which stands to this day.

Q: Do you know if we were the first state to do so?

Governor Florio: We were. As a matter of fact, we were the model for the federal legislation that President Clinton got enacted into law, which subsequently has expired and not been renewed.

Q: You had a Democratic legislature to help you get that.

Governor Florio: The first two years for the Democrats.

Q: First two years.

Auto Insurance for Governor Florio vs. NJEA for Governor Christie

Governor Florio: In the same respect, on the auto insurance, we got a lot of good auto insurance reforms in that period of time. I mean, one of the reforms entailed authorizing the state to say that if someone wanted to take a particular line of insurance out of New Jersey, they could do that, but they would have to take all of their lines of insurance out. Allstate was one of the insurance companies that was unhappy with that, because they threatened to go out of the state because they didn't like our auto insurance reforms. And we said, "Fine, if you want to go." I mean, for good, I said, "Adios, but you have to take all your insurance." They make lots of money off their other insurance lines, so they regarded that as a hostile act.

Q: You said something very pungent at the time about they said they're the "good hands people." They don't tell you what part of your anatomy they have their good hands around.

Governor Florio: I was talking about the neck.

Q: It's something. It's interesting that I hadn't thought about that until just this moment.

Governor Florio: I understand.

Q: But that was pretty memorable, that line.

Governor Florio: It was memorable.

Q: Although given the current governor, he says things like that much more frequently.

Governor Florio: There are lots of similarities. I mean, the insurance industry was, for me, his NJEA.

First 100 Days:

Q: Uh huh. You had a very strong first hundred days. Would you say that?

Governor Florio: Yes. I think that's true. We got a lot done in large measure because of the preparation. I'll say again, this is somewhat self-serving, but I don't think there's ever been an administration that has come into office with as much preparation for state issues as we've had. As we talked in the last conversation, I had Carl Van Horn for about six months before I was even nominated setting up these sessions where we would go in debt into different issue areas, so we had a lot of good thought put into the problems we would be facing, so we hit the ground running when I came into office.

Q: You had such a good first hundred days, and I remember *The New York Times Sunday Magazine* featured you on the cover as "The New Kind of Democrat."

Governor Florio: Peter Kerr was the reporter.

Q: Peter Kerr, who was the Trenton reporter for *The Times*.

Governor Florio: See, one of the reasons why I take with a certain amount of skepticism whenever a new governor is bandied about as being a presidential candidate. I mean, I was bandied about as a presidential candidate, but it's interesting, topical, mostly irrelevant.

Q: You had to have appointed a cabinet by that point in time, clearly. You probably appointed most of it during the transition, or half of it during the

transition, and the rest of it early on in those hundred days. How did that process go?

Governor Florio: It went well, but there was a sanction. It was interesting. I mean, I got some insights as a result of that, that most of the cabinet people were local people, that is people from New Jersey. For a couple of areas that I thought were sufficiently important we should have a national search. We did. We had a national search for the Department of Health, had a national search for the Department of Education. We found people who were very impressive credential wise, but those were the people that didn't work out well, so we had to have some replacements before too long. And it was just an interesting insight to tell me that New Jersey is somewhat unique in policy areas. You'd better understand New Jersey educational politics if you want to be successful, so you can't take someone who has impressive credentials, knows nothing about educational politics, and put them in place in New Jersey. So that's something I've always retained and thought a lot about bring in outsiders. Unless they have good political skills to supplement their substantive knowledge about the issue area they're in charge of, they're going to have problems.

Q: I think we in the media came to the same conclusion. [John]Ellis was your Education Commissioner.

Governor Florio: Yes, fellow from Texas.

Q: Yes. He was from Texas, and he knew a lot about education, but he seemed lost somehow in the forest of New Jersey education politics.

Governor Florio: Yes, and same thing on the health side. The hospital industry is sometimes difficult to deal with.

Q: Do you recall who that first commissioner was?

Governor Florio: Yes. It was a woman from South Carolina.

Q: You had a good, strong cabinet, you say, and yet I believe after you presented your first budget in March, Doug Berman, the State Treasurer, was that the year that he testified for every department?

Governor Florio: Every department, right.

Q: How do you regard that today?

Governor Florio: Well, in terms of performance, it was excellent. I mean, we got the best. It was obviously harmonious, because you had one person speaking for the administration, so that there was no inconsistencies between presentations between the different departments. Legislature was not exactly enthusiastic about

that, but on the basis of getting things done, having a unified position, it worked out well. Would I do it a different way, probably so.

Q: It had never been done that way before. It's never been done that way since. It did seem to rub people the wrong way.

Governor Florio: Yes, that's true.

Q: And it was in that budget, which I guess you presented to the legislature in March of that year, that you proposed closing the two billion dollar shortfall that you had been left with two tax hikes, I believe, the sales and the income tax. Correct?

Governor Florio: Right.

Q: A lot, I mean, that became the pivot point for your career, at least from looking at it from the outside, fair to say?

Governor Florio: Yes, that's true. That's true.

Q: In a lot of the examination of how it all came about, the "Abbott versus Burke" Supreme Court decision that you were all anticipating plays a central role.

Governor Florio: Absolutely.

Q: And the Assembly speaker, Joe Doria, who is now teaching a course here at Eagleton. His name is prominently displayed right outside this door, is said to have said, "Well, look, Governor, if we're gonna hike taxes, let's do it all now, not in an election year. Let's not do it in phases, one this year, one next year." Tell us the story of how we got these simultaneous hikes in the sales tax and income tax proposal for you.

Governor Florio: Yes. Well, you put your finger on it. After eight years of mulling it over, the Supreme Court finally, a couple of months into my administration, came down with their decision on "Abbott versus Burke," saying that, in fact, the Constitution, the system in New Jersey of financing education at the local property tax level is unconstitutional, providing no thorough and efficient education to those people, those children in school districts that don't have property tax wealth. Therefore, there had to be a system whereby the state would make up the differences between the capability of the different towns to provide an education opportunity, and said we had to go fund it. The advice that I got from different areas is on the one hand, Congressman Doria, or rather Assemblyman Doria, suggested, others as well, suggested we do it in one fell swoop. Others, particularly on the Senate side, Senator [John] Lynch was one of the people that said, "Well, no, no, no. This might be too much at one bite. Let's do it down the road." And there were others who advised that I should really not do anything and let the court ultimately make a determination as to what the sanction was going to be. You may recall under Governor Byrne, when that issue was coming up, the court actually ordered the students to close, schools to close. I was not prepared to do that. I

was not prepared to really delay too terribly much, not only because of the political considerations that Assemblyman Doria talked about, but also, more importantly, the consideration of saying we're going to go another year allowing this system to impact upon these children in these hard pressed districts. That would be inappropriate. You're wasting a whole year full of children, so let's do it now so we can get the money to the school districts, and even up the opportunity for a quality education. And that's what we did.

Q: So I guess you wanted to hike the sales tax from five cents to six, I believe.

Governor Florio: I think so.

Q: And then there was another billion dollar hike in the income tax, the different rates.

Governor Florio: I think the whole thing came to about two point four.

Q: Okay. Two point eight is the number that jumps out in every.

Governor Florio: Maybe it will be.

Public Opposition to Tax Increases

Q: That unleashed a firestorm of opposition. Did it not?

Governor Florio: Everyone wasn't as widely enthusiastic as they could be. Yes, that's true.

Q: It created a tax revolt in the state, something we hadn't seen before.

Governor Florio: I'm not sure it created it as much as-- a tax revolt was created, as opposed to whether it was that that did it. I mean, I would say looking at things nowadays those numbers are relatively modest, compared to things that we're doing nowadays. But, yes, it did. It mobilized it, and, of course, it leads into talking about 101.5, the radio station, and the various groups that started to be formed very much comparable to the Tea Party, what we have right now.

Q: Hands Across New Jersey.

Governor Florio: Hands Across New Jersey.

Q: John Budzash, remember that name?

Governor Florio: Yes, I do, vividly.

Q: How did New Jersey 101.5 Radio, what were they like from your vantage point?

Governor Florio: Well, they were entrepreneurial. I mean, they were building a listenership, and here was a good issue for them to go talk to their listeners. It'd

be interesting to see the demographics of the listeners of 101.5, but they were talking to those people. And by the way, one of the things that's kind of interesting that probably is not noticed that much, the national economy was in a recession, very much comparable to what we're in now, and that came as a surprise, as well. You may recall that the economy was just starting to come out of a recession, so we were in a recession without even knowing it, and that the general thrust of peoples' concerns were compounded artfully by 101.5 saying, "Look, if your life is tough, if you've lost your job, if you don't have a good economic situation, here's the cause of it." And, of course, that couldn't be the cause of it because it hadn't even taken place. The tax increases wouldn't take place until the following year, but a lot of people were convinced by virtue of what was said; been written about in some of the tabloids, as well, that this was the cause of their concerns.

Q: *The Trentonian* was a big tabloid voice in that.

Governor Florio: Yes, Yes, Yes, yes.

Q: A paper that's kind of lost its voice 20 years later, although it still exists. Doesn't have the impact it did back then. I think your sales tax proposal also proposed extending the sales tax to paper products and a few other things.

Governor Florio: That's a whole story, as well. I mean, my initial thought was that we should expand the sales tax onto a number of products that are not covered, and that's good policy, because there were a number of things that weren't covered. And if I recall correctly, one of the things that I had suggested was cable TV, which was a growing industry, doing very well. I said, "Well, maybe we should have a sales tax for services out of cable." A number of the legislators, who I subsequently found out represented cable television, said, "No, no, no. We shouldn't be doing that. Let's do it on paper products." So I acquiesced and we did it on paper products. As you know, the paper product that was focused upon was toilet paper, which has a certain attractiveness saying, you know, "Why tax this?" And that became a symbol of the tax.

Q: I think 101.5 and Hands Across New Jersey got thousands and thousands of people out in front of the State House on a Sunday waving toilet paper.

Governor Florio: Yes. It was a very wonderful PR mechanism. So, I mean, it was very creative, very startling to a lot of people.

Q: It was good theater.

Governor Florio: Much, wonderful theater. I mean, and we had theater in a lot of different areas. One of the interesting things you may recall, Jerome Hines was an opera singer, and one of the things that I don't get particular credit for, I don't think, is that in addition to revenue increases, we had reductions in services, reductions in programs. So this budget gap was so huge you couldn't do it all on revenues. You had to make reductions, as well. So we had to make reductions in

farm products, farm revenues. So we had the farmers out with tractors lamenting reductions we had in those programs. We had the arts people out aggressively. One day we had Jerome Hines out in front of the State House with a crowd of people supportive of the arts with a coffin, and it was labeled, "New Jersey Arts," and he was singing "The Impossible Dream" there with it. It was very good theater. And, again, it was an interesting example of where the problem was so severe that you couldn't do it just on revenues. You had to do it with reductions. People don't recall the reduction protests as much as they recall the revenue protests.

Q: And there was a school of thought shortly after the tax revolt was created that the NRA was also instrumental in ginning up anti-tax fervor, because it was still smarting over the assault weapons ban.

Governor Florio: And they couldn't attack us on the assault weapon, because that was uniformly popular around the state. So, it's true. Subsequently it was revealed that the NRA provided funding, and the other gun groups provided funding and organizational skill, which is not surprising, because Hands Across New Jersey was not organizationally particularly efficient. I mean, the people who were there were very nice people, but they didn't have a whole lot of skills in organizing things, so the NRA people, the gun people, came in and surreptitiously funded and organized the Hands Across New Jersey initiative.

Q: So there's this rising storm, but the legislature, how difficult was it to get the tax package through the legislature? I guess it was part of the budget.

Governor Florio: Actually, that was all after the facts. I mean, we got these things done. They were done, and then we had the revolution, so to speak, that started the eruption.

Q: What was it like being at the center and having all of that negative energy coming your way?

Governor Florio: Not pleasant, but tolerable. I mean, it depends. I guess your personality just sort of tells you how you're going to handle those types of things. But, again, we had people out in front of Drumthwacket with SWAT stickers. We had people with pictures of me with a mustache a la Hitler, so that's not pleasant, but you deal with it, and it's part of the process.

Drumthwacket

Q: I forgot to point out that you became the first governor to move into Drumthwacket.

Governor Florio: That's true. That's true.

Q: Tell us about that, that decision.

Governor Florio: Well, it was easy.

Q: And then what you found when you got there.

Governor Florio: In 1981 the decision was made that Morven was too small. As you may recall, Governor Hughes, Governor Cahill and Governor Byrne all had large families, and Morven is much smaller than Drumthwacket, and therefore they maintained that something should be done about expanding the state home for the governor.

Drumthwacket is just down the road from Morven, and that was acquired by the state. The DEP was the manager of it, and it's a very nice house. It's a very nice house, and it's part museum, part house for the governor, if the governor wants to live there. And when Governor Kean and myself were contesting in 1981, the people who were in charge of it were anticipating that one of us would move in. I was prepared to do it. Governor Kean didn't say anything, but after he got elected, determined that he really didn't want to move there. His family wanted to stay where they were. So the place was vacant for the eight years that Governor Kean was in office.

When I got elected, they asked if I wanted to move in. I said, "Yes." I thought it was a new type of public housing, so we moved in. Lucinda and I moved in. And the place needed a lot of repairs, so for the first six months we lived in one, little section of the upper stairs, while they rehabilitated the whole place. Ultimately it got fixed up. Lucinda was very much involved in fixing it up, and actually in going, raising private moneys for the gardens. People, the house was used extensively during the four years that I was there for public events, ceremonies, children's events, and when we fixed the gardens up, the place was lovely. And we-- I run into people all the time now, because Lucinda became very much like a person who was a guide for the house. She would take tours of people there, and lots of people. We had ethnic groups who would come and have events there. There were local groups that would come there. A good portion of the people in the state during those four years had the opportunity to have a tour of Drumthwacket.

Q: Lucinda was a part of the reason you got elected, I believe.

Governor Florio: She keeps telling me that.

Q: How do you view her role in your reintroduction of yourself to the public in 1989?

Governor Florio: Well, people say, and again, I'm not the best judge of this, but I'll defer to their judgment. It sort of warmed me up a little bit. I'm not a schmoozing personality. I'm not sort of a natural politician in the classic sense of back slapping, and things of that sort. But Lucinda is a very nice person, and she is someone that exudes niceness, which is compatible with my exuding whatever I

exude. So she was very helpful. I mean, it was very helpful. And in her own right, I mean, she is an educational expert. She was regarded as Teacher of the Year one year when she was teaching at Pine Hill. So she has expertise in early childhood learning. She has expertise in educational matters, very much involved in community activities, and things of that sort. So we put in place, I think probably for the first time, the Office of the First Lady. She had two or three people working with her on staff. She visited schools around the state in the campaign, as well as during my four years in office. So she was a big asset.

Q: We, in the press, used to notice that the two of you held hands in public, which was unusual for a New Jersey politician.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: Everything turned that spring for you, from *The New York Times Magazine* cover, as a model for what the next Democratic presidential nominee might be like, to the guy who upset his state, or half his state, greatly. It's almost as if the rest of the term was spent trying to undo that damage.

Governor Florio: I think it's probably true. I mean, what did not help, of course, was the change in the legislature. What we did was have the legislative elections, the two years, after the first two years of having total Democratic control, we shifted to have total Republican control, with veto proof majorities. So it was a fairly dramatic shift. Interestingly enough, having the Republicans in control of the legislature turned out to be sort of a mixed blessing. In some respects, they were not cooperative. They were not helpful, but on the other hand, they also had to assume responsibility. We were in a position then to share responsibility with them, and I started to get a little bit more cooperation after they understood that just being against everything was not a viable position for them to take.

Assault Weapons Ban Attempted Repeal

Donnie DiFrancesco was the president of the Senate. Actually, my relationship with him turned out to be very good. Chuck Hayatian was a little more aggressive, and was not as collaborative as Donnie was. But I think the thoughtful people in the Republican Party started to understand that just being against everything was not something that was good. So in the last year or so, we started to work together. The assault weapon ban was a good example, when they tried to repeal the assault weapon ban. It was a classic case study of being able to go to the people and get the people to weigh in. And what happened was that they pledged. They ran on the campaign that they would undo the assault weapon ban, and that they then passed, both houses of the Legislature, passed bills repealing the assault weapon ban. I vetoed the repeals. The Assembly very quickly, in the dead of night, overrode the veto because they had the votes to override my veto. The Senate

took about a week or two to-- actually even more than that, like two or three weeks to get the vote scheduled.

During that two or three weeks, I and the people in my administration, ran a very visible campaign to say, "This makes no sense whatsoever." We went on the road, went to schools, went to hospitals, got the clergy involved, got the law enforcement people involved, and spent about a good three weeks going around the state saying, "Do we really want to repeal this bill?" And I made the argument, "How is it in the public interest that we're gonna have more access to UZIs and AK47s? The answer was, "It doesn't make any sense," and people were mobilized. I think the Eagleton Poll conducted a poll on this issue, and ended up with, like, eighty percent of the people said they didn't want it repealed.

When the vote came in the senate, not a single senator voted to repeal. A lot abstained. One [Republican] senator, Senator Gormley, commendably voted in favor of my position of vetoing the repeal. Someone should do a case study on that issue, because it tells you how you can change politics by going to people and, hopefully on the merits, be able to change opinions.

Q: Senator Gormley started a year's long feud with the NRA over that vote. They came after him in subsequent elections where he was trying to go into federal office. At the end of the first year, Steve Perskie resigned as your Chief of Staff. Perskie was known as a very smart guy who was instrumental. He came out of Atlantic City. He was instrumental in getting the casino bill written. I think he had been a judge, as well.

Governor Florio: He had been a judge before.

Q: Before he was Chief of Staff.

Governor Florio: And he went back to being a judge.

Q: Went back to being a judge after he left the Governor's Office. In hindsight, did he not have the right set of political skills to navigate the tax revolt? Was he a victim of the tax revolt?

Governor Florio: I think it was more that he enjoyed the judiciary. Different personalities enjoy deliberation versus decision making, and things of that sort. I think Steve is essentially a judicial person, very smart, very good. Judy Yaskin was another one of my cabinet people who had been a judge, came into the Department of Environmental Protection, and then subsequently decided that she wanted to go back and be a judge, so she left, as well. So I think it's personality proclivities that drive people to just-- for example, I would not want to be a judge. It's just not my personality to deliberate for long periods of time. I'm a different type of personality. So I think that's the real motivation in most of these situations.

Q: To replace Steve Perskie you turned to Joe Salema, a longtime political ally, friend, operative, on your behalf.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: Was that a no brainer? Was that?

Governor Florio: Yes, it was. For me it was, yes.

Q: Tell us why.

Governor Florio: Well, Joe and I have been associated since I was in Congress, early in Congress. When he was just a recent graduate from a Florida school, I met him. He was my driver for a while, and helped me in Gloucester County, when I was in congress, running down there, because I was in Camden County, the district was made up of Camden and Gloucester, so he knew a lot of people. His family is very active politically in parts of Gloucester County, as well. He became a friend and an advisor. He ran my Congressional office. After a while he ran my Chief of Staff Congressional office, so it was logical that he would be somebody I would turn to.

Q: When you turned to him, I remember it was a big story. We treated this as somehow a major development in the ever changing life of Trenton. Did we overdo it?

Governor Florio: I can't recall exactly what the thrust of the major development was.

Q: Florio's going home. He's turning to his most trusted confidant at this time of trouble and revolution.

Governor Florio: Probably legitimate. Yes.

Q: What was happening on some other fronts in your administration? Let's take transportation for a second. At some point in your term, was there a proposal to take a piece of I-95 up near the George Washington Bridge and turn it into some cash for the state? Can you?

Governor Florio: Well, what happened, at the end of the Turnpike, there's a piece of road, highway, that leads into, I think it's Route 80, if I recall correctly. And it's an access road to the Turnpike. There's no exit off of it or onto it until you get to Route 80. What we said is that why should the New Jersey taxpayers be paying for the maintenance of this road which is a Turnpike access road? Therefore, the Turnpike should own it, operate it, whatever, and that we were able to get them to acquire it, provided some cash as the value of that access road to the state, and they had the responsibility from that point forward to maintaining the road. Obviously critics said, "Oh, look, you're selling highways to the Turnpike." We said,

"Well, nobody else can use the highway except the Turnpike. Why shouldn't the Turnpike have responsibility for it?"

Q: Do you recall how much the state was going to get from the Turnpike Authority?

Governor Florio: No, I don't. I mean, it was something like a hundred million, or something, well, a good number, a good dollar when it was assessed at that value.

Q: I guess it looked to the critics like some kind of shell game.

Governor Florio: Yes. Obviously, I mean, it was argued as being one shot, which obviously it was, but it was a legitimate sale to the Turnpike, something that they were the exclusive users of.

Q: Do you recall what blocked it? Was it the Republican veto proof majority that blocked it?

Governor Florio: This was early on.

Q: Earlier on.

Governor Florio: This went through.

Q: Oh, it did go through.

Governor Florio: It did go through.

Q: Okay.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: So the Turnpike today owns that piece of property.

Governor Florio: Yes the property _____.

Q: Okay.

Governor Florio: One of the areas that we—

Q: Go ahead.

Environmental Protection

Governor Florio: -- focused on in this area was environmental concerns. I mentioned to you before that there were environmental problems in New Jersey at the Jersey shore; that what was happening was hypodermic needles were washing up on the beach, medical waste was washing up on the beach, garbage was flowing

in from Manhattan into Jersey beaches, sewage sludge was being disposed of and there were lots of serious problems. During the late '80s we passed something called the Clean Water Enforcement Act, took some actions to sort of stop that kind of pollution and it was very successful and as a matter of fact over the last 20 years the Jersey shore has not had those types of problems and that was something that I get a lot of credit for even today from people at the Jersey shore. So that was a good example and it was a strong law. It was a very strong law saying that corporate executives who knowingly do that sort of thing can go to jail and that had not been the case before. Corporations when they were fined were fined money if they violated the law and we put strong penalties into the Clean Water Enforcement Act.

Health and Human Services

Q: How about in the human services and health area? Anything jump out?

Governor Florio: Well yes. One of the things we tried to do was have a healthcare master plan for hospitals saying that the certificate of needness required to be able to expand your hospital should be used in accordance with the plan for New Jersey saying that you can't be doing these types of expansions and contractions in isolation. What we should have is a plan. We actually developed the plan, but then the new legislature came in and got rid of the plan.

One of the things that's a characteristic of my administration is planning. Well we actually put in place the state master plan. The state master plan had been talked about for a long period of time, but we were the ones who actually executed it, put it into having enforceable law. I philosophically just believe the government does entirely too much randomly. I mean I've been an advocate for a long period of time of a higher education master plan saying you can't have irrationality of resources being allocated without a sense of proportion to all different colleges or all the hospitals. We should be doing much more planning in this state than we do.

Education

Q: In terms of education, we talked about *Abbott v. Burke* and the court order to spend more in the special needs districts. There were fights subsequently in your administration, during your administration over the Quality Education Act. Can you enlighten us as to what that was all about? Senator Lynch was very much involved in that, I recall.

Governor Florio: Well I mean Senator Lynch was very much involved particularly in the allocation of monies; that he wanted to take some money out of the Quality Education Act proposal we had because he wanted to make sure that the money would go for property tax relief directly. We made the argument that in fact quality education was in fact property tax relief because in fact if the court was ordering you to increase monies for education, if you don't do it at the state level, you have to do it at the local level. That means property tax increases. Well we said a more equitable way of doing it was to raise money at the state level and distribute it back to the communities in accordance with the formula.

The difficulty of course in that whole issue at that time was the Supreme Court was very candid in saying for the years before me and even during my years they really don't know what a thorough and efficient education is in terms of any specificity and therefore they do know that quality education's achieved in the high affluence school districts and therefore that's a factor of money. Since they didn't know specifics as to what constitutes it, they're going to use money as a surrogate for quality education. Therefore the school districts that don't have the money should have the money supplemented by state money. Since that time of course the educational people have learned a lot more and the courts have learned a lot more so now they can dictate and specify what they should be doing in terms of preschool education, class sizes, quality of buildings. They can be more specific in ordering what should be done as opposed to just the bare assertion of money being the answer.

Q: Was the Quality Education Act the consequence of their order for equalized school funding?

Governor Florio: The answer's yes.

Q: Okay.

Governor Florio: That was our response to them trying to even up the thing. Subsequently after I left office the Supreme Court came and said in a subsequent decision that the Quality Education Act made a dramatic improvement, but was not good enough. There had to be more money provided to it, but by that time they had made the determination that it was either more money or more specific outcomes by virtue of preschool programs, quality education in classrooms, classroom improvements, school improvements and so on. So it gave more latitude to not necessarily have to raise money per se if you could figure out some other cost-effective way of achieving the specifics that lead to better outcomes.

Q: The chief justice of the Supreme Court when you were governor was Robert Wilentz who had been appointed by Brendan Byrne I guess—

Governor Florio: That's right.

Q: -- and then reappointed by Governor Kean and you told me recently in connection with another story I was working on that you did not get to appoint anyone to the Supreme Court.

Governor Florio: That's right.

Q: Were you comfortable with the court?

Governor Florio: Yes. Matter of fact I was enthusiastic about the court. Obviously I thought they took a little too much time. It should've been done on

Governor Kean's watch. Let him deal with the problem, but it's interesting, as I read through the transcripts from the attorney general's office out of Governor Kean's administration it almost became embarrassing to read their positions that everything is okay. There was nothing they contested on the Supreme Court case that there was a need for changing the system and I even made reference to this in the campaign. That was an indefensible position. The quality of education in some of the particular urban areas was nowhere up to snuff and nobody could in good faith argue that it was adequate and therefore it shouldn't be changed. So I was prepared and actually said in the campaign that I was going to be dealing with this problem; that I thought we had to change the educational system. I didn't anticipate it would come down so quickly, but I was not surprised when it came down the way it did.

Q: You were the titular leader of the Democratic Party during this point in time. The governor always names the party chief.

Governor Florio: Depends on who you talk to as to whether that's the case or not.

Q: Was it Jim Maloney who you named state party chairman?

Governor Florio: Jim Maloney was the chairman, but when I came in [State Senator] Ray Lesniak became head Phil Keegan was the chairman, a former fellow who's passed away from Essex County and then Ray Lesniak became the chairman.

Q: You named Ray Lesniak. Why Ray Lesniak?

Governor Florio: He was a good facilitator. I mean the role of the chairman as far as I was concerned and Phil Keegan was excellent at this is just harmonizing as much as possible the inevitable conflicts that occur within a party and Phil Keegan who was a classic Irish political person had the good way about him, a nice way about him and kept everybody on the same track. Ray Lesniak has the same political skills and that's why I subsequently named him when the vacancy occurred.

Q: Was there a lot of pressure on you to appoint people to positions up and down the government?

Governor Florio: Well there's always a whole lot of people that come in and tell me that they're infinitely qualified for whatever it is that they want and separating some from others <inaudible> a whole lot of people that may have an expanded view of their own capabilities. So yes, there's always pressure to try to appoint people.

Q: In hindsight are you happy with the appointments you made?

Governor Florio: Yes, I think for the most part. I mean I learned the technique of being able to nicely say no. Sometimes it didn't work, but the answer is you just couldn't-- I mean there'd be county chairmen that would send people in who clearly were not qualified for things that they thought they were qualified for and that becomes delicate sometimes, but you have to do it. I mean if you accept everybody who walks through the door tells you that they want an appointment, you're going to be full of not quite misfits, but a whole lot of people that may not be up to the job.

Q: You mentioned the name Louis Katz earlier. Did you also name him state party chairman toward the end of your—

Governor Florio: No.

Q: No?

Governor Florio: No.

Q: Okay. He was just a supporter of yours.

Governor Florio: A supporter and a very effective campaign fundraiser.

Q: Who were your best allies in the legislature? Do you recall?

Governor Florio: Well the first two years two of the leaders were very good—

Q: [Assembly Speaker] Joe Doria and [Senate President] John Lynch?

Governor Florio: Yes, John Lynch, I think he was much less comfortable with some of the things we were doing, but was a good, loyal person, and even though he was not enthusiastic about the assault weapon initiative because he had some relations with people who were very much involved with the gun groups, but he was very loyal and very good and carried through his responsibilities in those areas, so both of them were very, very good.

There were other people in different areas that were good. Welfare reform was something that we did in New Jersey and Wayne Bryant. Senator Bryant was the leader. He's an African American from south Jersey and he was very, very good in saying we have to reform welfare in a way that will provide more incentives for people to get off welfare and what's interesting, the contrast between our welfare reform proposal in New Jersey and the welfare proposals that were coming out of Washington.

I mean many of the Washington ones were punitive. We thought of ours as sort of empowering. We wanted to get particularly women off of welfare and to do that we expanded programs for childcare, expanded programs for healthcare so that if a woman went off of welfare, went to a job that didn't provide healthcare, what was

the incentive for her to do that? We provided the extra Medicaid help for women that went off of welfare and onto a job. So we had a rehabilitating initiative which got very good reviews around the nation and I think President Clinton combated some of the welfare initiatives that were punitive in Washington by adopting many of the things that we did in New Jersey.

Q: Wayne Bryant who unhappily later in his career would run afoul of the law got a lot of national attention for his New Jersey welfare reform proposal.

Governor Florio: Very, very important person who really provided a number of the legislators cover to be able to be supported.

Q: He was featured on "60 Minutes" for this proposal. Did it become law during your administration or subsequently during Whitman's administration?

Governor Florio: No, it became law during our administration.

Q: It did, okay. Is it still the law, do you know?

Governor Florio: It's still the law.

Q: It's still the law. Essentially you say it provided more services to people on welfare. It had a work requirement, did it not?

Governor Florio: Of course. That was the essence of it, but the problem was, you see, shrill people from the other perspective were saying these are all malingerers and therefore what you have to do is take them off of welfare, no benefits, get them jobs. Put them out in the workplace. We regarded that as not acceptable. We wanted to have inducements. We even provided opportunities for people to go to community colleges for job training and get paid for that in anticipation of getting off of welfare.

Q: New Jersey's US Senators when you were governor were Bill Bradley and Frank Lautenberg.

Governor Florio: Frank Lautenberg, right.

Q: How were your relations with them?

Governor Florio: Very good in both cases. Actually when I was in Congress I worked with both of them on environmental issues. Bill Bradley was very helpful to me in getting the Pinelands bill passed in Washington which authorized New Jersey to undertake a similar piece of legislation. He was very helpful as well in getting Superfund passed, the environmental law, which we were able to get through the Senate at the 11th hour before President Carter left office. Senator Lautenberg and I worked closely on transportation matters because I was the chairman of the transportation committee and he was chairman of the transportation appropriations

committee and he was very good on environmental matters as well, so I had an excellent relationship with him. Subsequently Bob Torricelli came into our office. I had a good relationship with him as well.

Q: He came into office after your governorship. Bill Bradley stepped down in '96. Bob Torricelli ran against Dick Zimmer in '96.

Governor Florio: That's correct. You're right.

Q: But he was a Congressman when you were Governor.

Governor Florio: Yes and we were close friends.

Q: Yes?

Governor Florio: Yes.

Relationship With The Press

Q: The press. How was your relationship with the press when you were governor?

Governor Florio: I thought good. I'm not sure everybody shared that view. Let me be very delicate, particularly being interviewed by you.

Q: Oh go. Let it out.

Governor Florio: I was always a little disdainful and hopefully didn't show it about sometimes press being superficial in their understanding of the substance of the things they were covering; that people would ask me what I regarded as a dumb question. I tried to facially not express the fact that I thought that was a dumb question. From time to time, particularly with obnoxious reporters, particularly from the tabloids, I would say that's a stupid question which was not diplomatic, but for the most part I got along very well with the press and the smarter the press people, the better the relationship was.

Q: Do you think you got fair coverage?

Governor Florio: Yes, except for the point of this false equivalency issue. The whole idea that when you'd have people in the audience and I had a town meeting at one point where I had an overwhelming majority of the people in the audience thought it was supportive of what I was talking about. This was after the controversy, by the way, but there'd be one vocal-- I would regard as obnoxious person. I had one person talk to me and say that I was the worst governor since Pontius Pilate which was very catchy, which caught the headlines. The next day in the paper it would be there was an argument on the one side and an argument on the other side. So 299 versus 1 becomes equivalent and I found that more and more happening. I recall going to when I signed the Clean Water Enforcement Act that I made reference to before, a very good environmental piece of legislation, we

signed it at the Jersey shore, beautiful setting on the boardwalk. The background was beautiful. Whatever and one of the reporters wrote, "In an effort to try to change the subject from taxes, Florio went out and did this thing," and then we talked about taxes for the rest of the article as opposed to what the substance was.

Q: You couldn't get a break in some respects.

Governor Florio: Well and again I think everyone feels the need to respond to what they think is on the public's mind and therefore that's the way the argument was tilted.

Q: What interest groups do you recall from your term as governor either friendly or unfriendly?

Governor Florio: Well the very senior groups were very supportive of most of what we did. The clergy groups and we actually worked very closely with different clergy organizations around the state, seemed to be enthusiastic about our welfare reform proposal. The gun proposal, the environmental groups. For the most part it was mostly the conservative groups, right-wing groups-- not even so much groups as individuals and organizations that were sort of ginned up, Hands Across New Jersey being the classic one, that were hostile.

For the most part the business groups, even the ones that didn't like all of what we were doing, I think respected the fact that we gave them access. We talked facts to them and even when they didn't like our interpretation of the facts, they respected the fact that we had quality people. I mean I had really very good staff on the governor's council group. As I mentioned Brenda Bacon was excellent on healthcare issues. Amy Mansue was excellent-- Greg Lawler was excellent at a host of things including insurance issues, so no one could say that we were being arbitrary and capricious in terms of the policy initiatives. We had good understanding of what we were doing and could justify what we were doing and again from a personal standpoint I always would be unwilling to try anything if I couldn't feel comfortable with what we were doing, if I couldn't feel comfortable and justify the substance of what we were doing, we wouldn't do it. So if someone could not say we were being arbitrary, but we were being pushed by other interest groups to do something they knew that there was a foundation of intellectually sustainable evidence to justify the things we were doing. You may not agree with that evidence, but it was not whimsical.

Q: How about in terms of business friendly? Do you feel your administration got along well enough with the Business and Industry Association, the State Chamber of Commerce and so on?

President Barack Obama

Governor Florio: Well enough. Well enough would be the way I would say. Now again it's interesting because I see President Obama going through something comparable to this. I mean President Obama, to get off the topic for a moment, saved our economy, saved Wall Street, saved the banking industry, and now can't

catch a break from any of those people and in some respects it is not because he didn't do the right thing by them. It's because he doesn't have the skill or the talent or the personality to go in and be adoring to those people when he talks to them. I have a limitation in the same respect that you can go even when you do something for somebody, but if you don't go in and tell them they're the most wonderful people in the world, somehow they're offended by that. I'm not someone that does that very well. I mean there are other people. I mean President Clinton is wonderful at that sort of thing. There are other people that are wonderful at that sort of thing going and tell people they're the most important people in the world. It's a wonderful political skill to have. For those who don't have it and you think that you're going to persuade people just on the merits or on the intellectual justification for doing something, that's not as effective with some groups.

Q: What do you think your strength was as a politician?

Governor Florio: Substance. I mean trying to be engaged in the substance, analytical, cost-benefit analysis of things, trying to say that "Here are the options. I've evaluated the options. There are pluses and minuses to each of them. On balance I think this is the approach we would have. Tell me where you disagree," and then trying to be listening to people and if in fact they have merit, modify your own views. So that's somewhat naïve to think that everything is done on that basis, but it's the thing that I have been successful with, though again it's my style of operating.

Q: Policy.

Governor Florio: Yes. I fully understand that the politics are an important part of the policy. My students, when I find students who tell me they want to get involved in policy but they don't like politics, I try to convey to them as best I can there's a nexus in there that is inseparable. You have to be involved in politics if you want to play a role in policy.

<break in recording>

Q: We were talking about interest groups. Governor Byrne says of environmental groups they're the only interest that can get 97 percent of what they want and all they want to talk to you about is the other 3 percent. How true is that?

Governor Florio: They're not the only interest group that has that problem. There are lots of people. Again I guess it's understandable in some respects, particularly for ideological groups, people that feel strongly as a matter of principle about their positions. Unless they get 100 percent, they're not happy, so that phenomena of 97 percent doesn't count. I mean I feel comfortable with that because my mother, when I went to school, I would come home with five A's and a B and we wouldn't talk about the five A's. We'd talk about the B.

Abortion

Q: The abortion issue. Did that come up? You were staunchly pro-choice as governor. Did it come up? I know it came up in campaigns, but did it come up during your governorship?

Governor Florio: Not with the same volume that it does now and frankly, I mean the start of my career when I was in the Assembly when I was first running, I was really pro life. It was only over a period of time that I really started to understand the opposite proposal and then ultimately gravitated to be fairly strongly committed to pro choice. I mean one of the issues, one of those types of human events that causes you to think through the positions on things, a friend of mine, a very macho guy, a veteran-- remember the Veterans of Foreign Wars? Very pro life. Had the experience of having his 16-year-old daughter become pregnant and she had an abortion. He became much less pro life. I mean he couldn't demonize his daughter and therefore change-- I mean it's the same situation with people who have gay relatives who have anti-gay feelings until they find out that their cousin or nephew is gay and they change their views.

Q: Do you recall what changed your view?

Governor Florio: On the abortion issue?

Q: Yes.

Governor Florio: Yes, it was this instance—

Q: The instance with the friend?

Governor Florio: -- with the friend and other things as well. I started to be a little bit more sophisticated because I didn't really think about the issue that much. I mean I was raised as a Catholic. I just assumed that there was merit to the position and didn't have an understanding of the other side of the issue.

Q: We talked about Joe Salemo a little bit. At some point toward the end of your term, he had to leave under a cloud of bad publicity.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: Can you refresh our memory as to what happened there?

Governor Florio: Well there was a problem that a business transaction he was involved with before he became my chief of staff ultimately and again the prosecution maintained there was some involvement of working with banks and banks provided money in return for services that were provided.

Q: Political services, governmental?

Governor Florio: Legal services.

Q: Legal.

Governor Florio: No, not legal. Not law services, but services that were legal—

Q: Governmental-- okay. Okay.

Governor Florio: Yes. And the court, the prosecution, the US Attorney charged there was a crime there and it was interesting because what Joe did was to say this is too much. He went in and took a plea and served some time. His codefendant was a little more vigorous in defense. Said I'm going to go to trial. Went to trial. Went in and conceded that everything they did, they did. That yes, this was a premium paid by the bank and the jury came in and said there's no crime here. So the really tragedy of the whole situation was there really was no crime that was there committed and yet the tragedy is that Joe had this penalty assessed. Of course he volunteered to cop a plea.

Q: In my memory of that episode, it was kind of tragic for you too to lose him.

Governor Florio: Well it was tragic for me as a friend to see him have to go through this trauma of overly aggressive prosecutorial discretion being exercised in a horrendous way.

Q: Was it a Republican US Attorney we were dealing with back then? I don't recall.

Governor Florio: I don't really recall, frankly, but again the experience over the years is it doesn't make any difference which party's in trial. Sometimes when you have overly aggressive prosecutors you get bad outcomes. We've had that example on a number of occasions.

Q: I can't recall who you replaced Joe Salemo with. Do you recall?

Governor Florio: I think it was Bob DeCottis.

Q: Bob DeCottis, okay.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: Who was solid and—

Governor Florio: Very, very good.

Q: -- mature and—

Governor Florio: Yes, politically astute.

Working With Veto-Proof Republican Legislature

Q: Uh-huh. So in the second two years of this four-year term you had to deal with this veto-proof Republican majority in each house which you have explained had some upside for you.

Governor Florio: Yes. In the first two years the Republican party could be totally I would say irresponsible. I mean we never got a vote. For anything that was particularly important, rarely did we get a vote at all. I mean it's something just as an aside that I find interesting to note that Republicans are much more disciplined than Democrats are and so that when you have as you have now a Republican governor and a Democratic legislature, the Democratic legislature is willing to work with the Republican. May not agree with him, but work with him from time to time.

When you have a Democratic president, as we have now, and a Republican House of Representatives and even a Republican majority in the Senate if you count 60 votes as constituting a majority and the legislature cannot operate unless you've got the 60 votes to stop filibusters, the Republican Congress doesn't work with the president at all. A major piece of legislation to go through without a single Republican vote and I attribute that to the idea that Democrats are interested in making government work. Republicans by definition as President Reagan once said that government's the problem, the Republican party philosophically is not that enthusiastic about government and so if it doesn't work that's not a big deal. That just proves their basic understanding that government is not something that's useful.

Q: Back to the Republican legislature of your experience, they tried to function almost as a co-governor with you. Did that diminish you in some respect?

Governor Florio: They tried to function that way, but it didn't work very well for them and they came to understand it doesn't work and therefore they became a little more collaborative in the last year or so in getting some things done. That was and again a lot of it is personality. Donnie DiFrancesco was a reasonable person, a moderate person, and so we were able to get things done with him that we couldn't get done in the first two years that we had to rely upon Republicans.

Q: At some point during this period of time you had to be thinking about standing for reelection in '93. Tell us about your thinking along those lines. Was it a certainty? Was it something you had to wrestle with?

Governor Florio: Certainty about running?

Q: Yes.

Governor Florio: Yes, it was a certainty about running. Yes, I was going to run. And I was cautiously optimistic because things were starting to improve. The economy was starting to improve nationally and New Jersey economy was starting to improve as well. The polls that we were conducting were indicating that people were starting to come back and I would just remind you that about four weeks out

from the election that we were ahead by about ten points or something of that sort. It was a good outcome. So I was comfortable that for the long haul things were going reasonably well. The margins were getting closer and so I was-- I never had any doubts that I was going to run again. Whether I was going to win or not obviously there was some doubt.

Q: At some point during the end of that term you were recognized by the Kennedy Library up in Boston. You were given the John F. Kennedy Profiles in Courage Award. What did that mean to you?

Governor Florio: Well it's very nice. I mean obviously the Kennedy Foundation gives this and of course President Kennedy wrote this book "Profiles in Courage" of people who did unpopular things that they regarded as right and the subsequent award that they've obviously given over the last number of years goes to somebody that they think did something that was right even though it may not be as popular as possible and what it is they gave me the award for, the QEA and for the assault weapon ban saying in both instances raising taxes for quality education may not be popular immediately, but it's the right thing to do and likewise on the assault weapon ban, they said it's the right thing to do.

Q: I remember going up to Boston to cover that ceremony. I think Caroline Kennedy gave you the award.

Governor Florio: Ted Kennedy was there, Senator Kennedy. Mrs. Kennedy, Jacqueline Kennedy was there, and it was a very nice thing. I had my family there. We have a whole bunch of pictures that we have when my sort of trophy of sorts. It was a very nice thing. I gave a speech that received nice reviews, so to speak, talking about how you can't determine the hand you've been dealt, but how you play the hand is up to you and a number of people have quoted that over the years.

President Bill Clinton

Q: Bill Clinton was elected president during this period of time.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: Did you have any involvement in that?

Governor Florio: Yes, very much so. New Jersey, as you may recall, was the kickoff spot. The convention was in New York and the kickoff spot the next morning was out of New Jersey and we were there down in Camden at the old RCA facility. I recall dramatically that the president came down and spoke and he started his bus tour. He and Al Gore had a bus tour through Pennsylvania, Ohio, I think ending in Chicago and they started in Camden, New Jersey. You may recall he ended his campaign at the Garden State Park. That night he was hoarse, he couldn't talk, but he played the saxophone. We had a big rally down at the Garden City Racetrack

which existed at that point. So New Jersey was very important and we delivered huge margins for him.

Q: Did you have a relationship with him?

Governor Florio: Excuse me?

Q: A relationship with him.

Governor Florio: Yes. I had a relationship with him from when he was governor as well. We went to the National Governors Association meeting in his last term as governor before he got elected president. I interacted with him at that.

Q: Did you have to take a position in a presidential primary in '92? He was one of several candidates.

Governor Florio: Yes, but I think by the time it got to New Jersey, it was over. We had primaries in June that year.

Q: Paul Tsongas was one of the candidates back then.

Governor Florio: Yes, who was a friend, by the way. I served and worked closely with Paul on a couple environmental issues as well, but I think the whole thing was over by then.

1993 Reelection Campaign

Q: I wonder if we want to get into the reelection campaign this morning.

Governor Florio: Sure.

Q: Okay. You mentioned that you had a good relationship with Bill Bradley and Frank Lautenberg, two US Senators. When Bradley was running for reelection in 1990, your first year, a few months after the tax revolt and the tax bills had passed, the tax hikes had passed, he nearly was upset by Christy Whitman in part according to the analysts because he wouldn't take a position on the Florio tax hikes. That was a state issue. He was running for a federal office. Did that upset you at the time?

Governor Florio: No.

Q: You saw that it was politically necessary?

Governor Florio: Yes. Yes.

Q: At what point did you start to focus on Christy Whitman as a possible competitor in the '93 race?

Governor Florio: If I recall, I mean there was a heated Republican primary that year.

Q: Right.

Governor Florio: So we didn't focus on anybody until the primary was over.

Q: Cary Edwards was running.

Governor Florio: Cary Edwards.

Q: Jim Wallwork was running.

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: And a couple of others.

Governor Florio: Yes and I didn't know that much about Mrs. Whitman at the time, so we didn't really focus on any of them until it was over.

Q: You had no primary challenge as a sitting governor.

Governor Florio: That's right. Which was another source of confidence on my part that the party was unified. The party was there. There was no opposition and I'd say <inaudible> level of enthusiasm.

Q: I remember that campaign really began right after the two primaries. Right after her primary and it kicked into high gear. I remember you shooting at watermelons or taking us out to see what an assault rifle would do to watermelons in early July. What do you remember about the early part of that campaign?

Governor Florio: Well what we tried to do is to highlight all the things that we regarded as positive that we had done, so we had events around the state dealing with the shore, cleaning up the ocean, which we got a lot of credit for. The assault weapon ban we said went to a number of schools that had been able to make some improvements.

We went to a number of schools that needed improvement. I remember going to Paterson and the school was built in 1890 or something of that sort, making the observation that there were no computers in the whole school at a time when we should be doing things and that this was why we were trying to provide for a quality education. So highlighting all those things actually was resulting in some good outcomes. The national economy was starting to pick up a bit, so that was another good thing. So we were reasonably confident that we would be competitive.

Q: And she had Ed Rollins, a national Republican figure come in to run her campaign. I think her brother, Dan Todd, ran her campaign for a while.

Governor Florio: Right.

Q: By September I think you were 20 points ahead.

Governor Florio: I don't think 20, but we were a good split margin.

Q: And then she came out with a tax cut. Right. And that turned the tide, did it not?

Governor Florio: What was interesting I guess people say do you have any regrets. I said the only thing I regret is the fact that I didn't take seriously the attractiveness of the tax proposal. I mean I just dismissed it as being so irresponsible that nobody would support this and I was reinforced by the editorials around the state. I mean the editorials, *The Star Ledger* editorial was aggressive saying this was insulting in certain terms of just the irresponsibility of this proposal. How are you going to pay for it? I forget what the percentage was, but a big tax—

Q: A 30 percent income tax cut.

Governor Florio: Yes, how the heck are you going to pay for this when we're already having budgetary problems? Tell us what you're going to cut and nobody said anything about that, so I just assumed that nobody would take this irresponsible proposal seriously because I didn't take it seriously and the newspapers didn't take it seriously. What I think what it ended up being is people who were in the marginal areas of not being sure one or the other, even if they didn't believe it said well at least she's talking about tax cuts, so that's something that's desirable. The election was determined by less than one percent of the vote, so it was a very close election and that was obviously the difference.

Q: It was just six weeks before election day that she came out with that plan and that turned the—

Governor Florio: Well it didn't turn it immediately. It started just over the period of time and again as all elections in New Jersey take place, people make up their mind in the last week. Now it's even more the last weekend. It might even be the last day nowadays. So towards the end, the polling that we were doing, we're seeing a noticeable decrease in our margin and towards the last couple of days it became neck and neck and then on election day it obviously was determined when people showed up.

Q: That must've been unnerving to see it going in the wrong direction as the days got closer and closer to election day. It's interesting that what happened there with the tax plan sort of mirrored what had to have happened in the '70s when Brendan Byrne and Ray Bateman ran against each other. Byrne was ahead in the poll-- no,

Bateman was ahead in the polls, but then Bateman came out with an economic plan that got panned in the press.

Governor Florio: The BS plan.

Q: The BS plan. The Bateman Simon plan and Byrne dubbed it the BS plan and it didn't fly with the public and it didn't turn the electorate, but this plan which from your vantage point was also a BS plan did turn things. I wonder what the difference was.

Governor Florio: Well I mean I think right on down to this time progressively people are becoming more and more engaged and involved in the process, for the good or for the bad, and I think over the period of time people are paying more and more attention to things and in some instances there's an element in the population that's willing to sign on to things that made no sense on the merits, but are superficially attractive in the short term.

I mean if you ask most people do you want a tax cut or not, they'll say of course I want a tax cut. Then when you try to engage people, are you willing to pay the price of the tax cut in terms of programmatic reductions and things of that sort, more thoughtful people think let me evaluate this a little bit and then at the end of the spectrum people say well no, if the tax cut means I'm going to have property tax increases or no schools or no policemen on the job or I'll have to close the library, then they may say no, I don't want it. So I think more and more we're having more people engaged and thinking less seriously about things. I mean about issues.

Q: You brought James Carville into your campaign apparatus as a consultant that year, correct?

Governor Florio: He was actually involved in the first election a little bit and in the second election, yes.

Q: I think Doug Berman was still day-to-day campaign manager, but Carville was overseeing or consulting?

Governor Florio: Well by that time Carville was a star and the real tangible benefits in the campaign were minimal.

Q: Uh-huh. How so? Why would his stardom and his success with Clinton reduce his value to an actual governor?

Governor Florio: Because you have other things to do and you don't have the same focus.

Q: We had you four years earlier at the Ramada Inn in East Brunswick. Four years later you're also in the hotel. Whether it's the Hilton today or it was still the

Ramada, I don't recall, but James Carville was there that night and after the numbers came in, he looked pretty miserable. I imagine you were feeling pretty miserable, wherever in that hotel you were.

Governor Florio: I don't allow myself to feel miserable or euphoric, so I sort of try to keep an even keel.

Q: He said to me about an hour after the concessions had been extended that as good as it feels to win in politics, it feels a thousand times worse to lose. You say you keep your feelings pretty contained.

Governor Florio: It's not even so much keeping them contained. It's trying to keep a sense of proportion. I mean somebody has to win, somebody has to lose. I've lost before. I lost in a congressional race that I was involved with a number of years ago, so it's just I don't take it as a full measure of my worth whether you win or lose. It's just at that particular time the things you're talking about appeal to one more person than the other side gets, so it's a sense of proportion.

Q: So you think you had it in perspective pretty quickly?

Governor Florio: I think so. I think so, Yes. I mean every election you go into you can't eliminate the possibility of losing, so in anticipation of that you hope for the best, but you're prepared for the other approach.

Q: And when you look back on the term now, roughly 20 years later, what do you think your legacy is?

The Florio Legacy

Governor Florio: I don't know about legacy. I mean the things issue-specific, good things on guns, good things on the environment. I happen to think in some respects my apprehensions about the income tax cut have been reinforced. I mean if you think about it, the income tax cut was not paid for by reductions. It was paid for by failure to pay into the pension system, which is the primary problem we have now 20 years later. The accumulated deficit for the pension, whatever it is, \$58 billion, is something that's a serious problem. So my apprehensions were correct and I think people who look at it now would appreciate that, but the fact of the matter is you can't change things, so it's just a matter of how things play out.

Q: But you're comfortable with how it all looks 20 years later?

Governor Florio: Yes.

Q: You'd have done it the same way?

Governor Florio: Well what's interesting-- well would I have done things differently? I guess I remember you mention James Carville. I guess I can say this, but James Carville told me-- he said, "Mr. Governor, you have one problem.

You don't know how to kiss ass well enough." I said, "Well what do you mean?" He says, "Political people if they're going to be good have to go in and kiss ass to a whole lot of people they may not like. They have to go in to interests and tell them how wonderful they are and you don't seem to have that skill. I can see that." I said, "Well it's not only I don't have that skill, it's a matter of pride that I don't do that sort of thing," and then he proceeded to name a whole bunch of political people whom I won't name who have that skill in abundance and that have been successful. So he may very well be right, but I wouldn't have changed that a whole lot.

The End