

The Do-Something Politician

Looking back from his eighth decade, former Gov. John Spellman says he may have made some controversial moves in public office, but at least he never ran for cover

By Joe Follansbee • Photography by Michael J. Hipple

When John Spellman moved into the governor's mansion in 1981, he walked into one of the toughest economic times the state has ever experienced.

A decade earlier, he had taken the reins as King County's first executive just as the Boeing Company went into a tailspin, nearly destroying the county's economy.

Turning 80 in December was a piece of cake for John Spellman. But then, Washington state's last Republican governor is not one to flinch at a challenge.

"I never ducked an issue," Spellman says, looking back with satisfaction. "You should meet the problems head-on."

Spellman is all about doing the job and doing it well, whatever your political colors. The octogenarian still comes into his office at Carney Badley Spellman several days a week and works his caseload surrounded by memorabilia common to retired state politicians: photos with U.S. presidents and paperweights in the shape of the state of Washington.

Spellman lends his name and status to political causes now and then, such as the opposition in 2006 to Initiative 933, which would have rolled back state land-use laws. He avoids debate over the Alaskan Way Viaduct on Seattle's waterfront, noting that he's leery of the costs of a tunnel to replace the crumbling highway. He chairs the not-for-profit Evergreen

Safety Council, listens to jazz and enjoys fishing on Whidbey Island. He has slowed down, hobbled by a leg broken in a 2004 fall. He no longer smokes the trademark pipe.

FIRST IN CHARGE

After being elected King County executive in 1969, Spellman reinvented county government, transforming 20 independent agencies into a structure answerable to him. He played a leading role in building the region's first mega-stadium, the Kingdome, despite lawsuits, construction delays, and a controversy that continues to this day.

Throughout the good times and bad, Spellman chose his staff members carefully and relied on them heavily. He cared little for party affiliations or highly placed connections, which miffed some Republicans who preferred a clean sweep after an election. After he replaced Democratic Gov. Dixy Lee Ray in 1980, "Spellman interviewed everyone and kept everyone on who had experience," says Kathryn Hinsch, head of the Women's Bioethics Project in Seattle and once a policy analyst for Spellman. "Other governors since then, I'm sorry to say, wiped the slate clean."

Spellman followed his intuition on appointments. The new governor named Chuck Collins, who had been director of King County Metro Transit, to the Northwest Power Planning and Conservation Council, despite the fact that he

had no experience in that industry. "There was no political gain in naming me," says Collins. "There was something that gave him the belief that I could do the job."

Collins says Spellman made decisions deliberately. The soft-spoken, fatherly man with the open, round face would gather staff in a room, puff on his pipe and listen to their arguments—even those of junior assistants—like a "calm, reasoned mediator," as an official biography put it. Eventually, perhaps after several meetings, he'd make a decision, then stick to it. "He used to criticize me for making decisions too quickly," Collins remembers. "He wanted me to take time and accumulate information."

Politics, even the schoolyard kind, attracted Spellman from an early age. Born on December 29, 1926, the youngest of three children, he attended private and public schools, including a year at Kirkland Junior High School, where he was elected class president. Sent across Lake Washington to Seattle Preparatory School, he broke his nose in a boxing match, which toughened up the young man. "The guy had boxing gloves on, so it was legitimate," he says. "That was my short career in boxing, but it was good for me."

Spellman dropped out of high school to enroll in a maritime-education program in San Mateo, Calif., hoping to participate in World War II. He shipped out on a seagoing tug, taking a floating dry dock from Puget Sound to

the South Pacific. After the war, he attended Seattle University on the GI Bill, graduating as valedictorian, then enrolled at Georgetown University Law School.

In 1952, the war veteran hung an Ike (General Dwight D. Eisenhower) banner and listened to radio broadcasts of the national political conventions. Spellman says he was drawn to the GOP's people, rather than the party's ideology. "The Republicans were more fascinating," he says. "Ike was an admirable guy. He did a great job."

When Spellman returned to Seattle, he didn't mind taking some advice as he prepared for the state bar exam. "Somebody said if you just start reading the most recent Supreme Court case from the state of Washington and work your way back before the bar exam, you'll know a lot of Washington law," he says. The strategy worked, and he practiced for 13 years with partner Joseph Kane at Kane and Spellman.

POLITICS BECKONS

Many of his early clients were labor unions, which caught the eye of Seattle Mayor Gordon Clinton. When a seat normally reserved for labor opened up on the Civil Service Commission, Clinton did not want an active unionist. He recommended Spellman, whose union links made him acceptable to labor. It was his first public office. For his part, Spellman admired Clinton's support of gambling controls and curbs on housing discrimination. In 1964, Clinton decided not to run for a third term, and when Spellman saw no candidate emerge who was of like mind to the outgoing mayor, he filed for the position at the last minute, without consulting his wife, Lois. "She nearly shot me," he remembers.

Spellman lost in the primary, but he arrived on the political stage in the midst of a growing Republican wave in local and state politics. Republican Dan Evans, who led the pro-civil rights, pro-environment wing of the state Republican Party, was elected in 1964 to the first of three terms as governor.

But Spellman, a man who measures his value by what he accomplishes, found himself at odds with fellow commissioners when he was elected to the King County Commission in 1967. In those days, county government consisted of three commissioners who formed both the legislative and executive branch. Spellman says it was tough to accomplish anything. "I don't think I could've lasted there without get-



Spellman navigated the state through its harshest economic storm.

ting an ulcer," he says. He did have an ally: the governor. Evans agrees: "John was always the guy I could confide in."

In 1968, voters threw out the old inefficient commission, electing an executive and a nine-member council. The new model fit Spellman's take-responsibility-and-make-things-happen ethic. "It allowed for one person who had the power to get something done," he says. "I think that was good. I do not believe in committees."

As county executive, Spellman is best

remembered for an almost single-minded drive to build the now-infamous Kingdome. It was approved by voters in 1968, but finding a site and building it were tortuous. His staff was against the project. Protesters trashed his downtown office, threw mud on Spellman and other guests at the groundbreaking, and organized a failed recall. Construction fell nearly a year behind schedule, accidents marred the project, and Spellman terminated the contract with the builder, Donald Drake Construction, who ended up paying a \$12.8 million settlement.

All was forgiven at the grand opening on March 27, 1976, when Spellman was welcomed “as the guy who put the Kingdome together, and he got a standing ovation,” Evans remembers. “In many respects, he was the person who brought major sports teams to Seattle—the Mariners and the Seahawks—because now they had a place to play.” (The Kingdome was demolished in 2000 to make way for Qwest Stadium, the Seahawks’ home field. The Mariners play in Safeco Field next door.)

When Evans declined to run for a fourth term as governor, Spellman grabbed the 1976 Republican nomination, though he lost to Dixy Lee Ray in the general election. After initially deciding not to run again for King County executive, Spellman changed his mind and beat two opponents, a Democrat and an independent. He campaigned for a \$50 million bond measure to preserve farmland and open space in King County, a pioneering measure that allowed the county to buy development rights and limit the property uses to mostly agricultural.

TROUBLED TIMES

But Spellman’s sights were on Olympia. Voters picked him for the governor’s seat in 1980 over state Sen. (now U.S. Congressman)

Jim McDermott. But the chair was barely warm when he found himself entangled in the worst recession since the Great Depression. Unemployment hit double digits and revenue slowed to a trickle. The crisis would culminate in a financial meltdown.

Spellman had handled the effects of the Boeing layoffs in King County, but in Olympia, the partisanship of state politics caught him by surprise. After promising during his campaign not to raise taxes “unless there was a disaster,” he reversed course, proposing a tax increase, as well as spending cuts, to a GOP-controlled Legislature, weeks after taking office. “I choose compassion, not chaos,” he told the lawmakers.

Opponents put it a different way, labeling him a “waffler,” a term the media exploited in political cartoons and columns. “I did not admire the job he did and he did not admire the reporting I did [on the Washington Public Power Supply System],” says Joel Connelly, a *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* columnist who covered Spellman as governor. “He never got over the [cartoon-inspired] waffling image.” Connelly says Spellman grew on him over the years, however, and he now thinks of him as a “good-government type.”

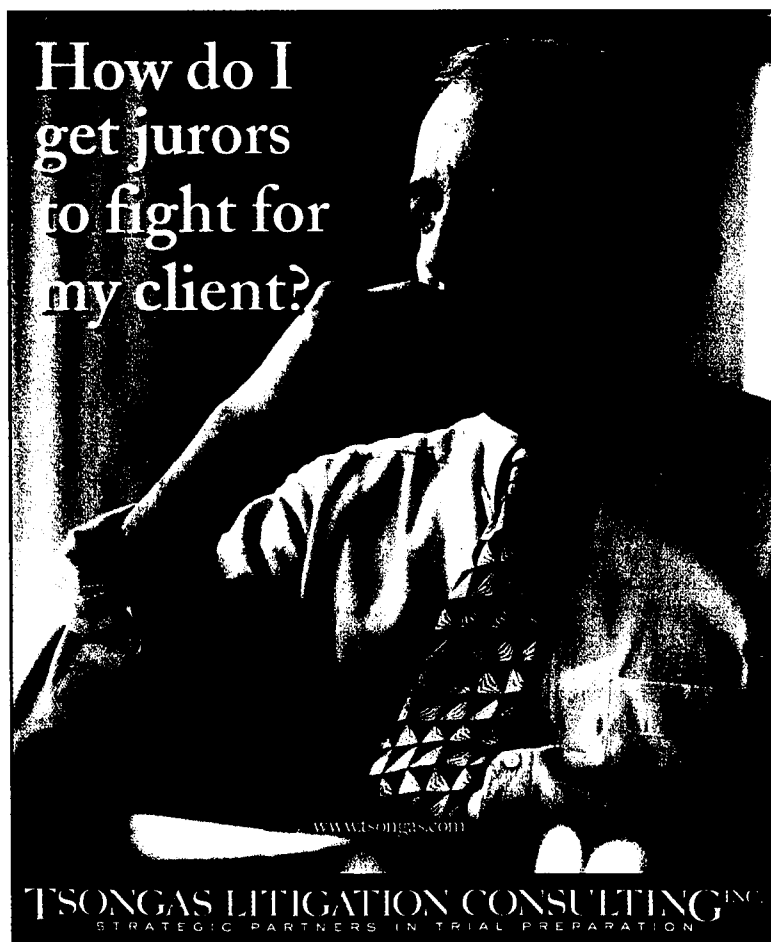
But at the time, in the state House and

Senate, Spellman’s GOP colleagues abandoned him. “There were Republicans whom I probably shouldn’t have called ‘troglodytes,’ but I did,” he remembers. “They said they were not going to vote for any tax. But you have to have money! So I had to work with the Democrats to get that done. They had to fill in the blanks.” Spellman championed a package that eventually turned a \$1.1 billion budget shortfall into a \$97 million surplus.

Despite the estrangement from his own party, Spellman managed to get things done. He promoted foreign trade and tourism. He stopped Montana-based Northern Tier from building a 42-inch crude oil pipeline across Puget Sound and the Cascade Mountains.

Spellman’s political career reached its climax in the summer of 1983. The WPPSS, set up by the state in the 1950s to build power plants, had halted the problem-plagued construction of two nuclear plants at Hanford and Satsop. Because the uncompleted plants weren’t earning a dime, default loomed. The state bore no legal responsibility for the plants, but Spellman feared that Wall Street might sour on other investments in Washington state as a result of such a disaster. Besides, he was used to tackling big problems. The potential bond default, trig-

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gered by poor planning and rising interest rates, "was too big and too important to stay away from," he told aides. Spellman created a blue-ribbon commission to recommend something, anything, to ease the situation.

But on Friday, July 22, 1983, WPPSS (smart alecks snickered "whoops") declared in court that it could not pay \$2.25 billion in debt, the largest municipal bond default to that date. Spellman told reporters, almost apologetically, that "good-faith people made poor decisions." *Time* magazine called the episode "bad judgment and bureaucratic bungling on an unprecedented, almost unimaginable scale." Twelve years passed before the last settlement was approved in 1995.

The financial meltdown was not Spellman's fault, but he paid for it. In 1984, Spellman lost his bid for reelection to Democrat Booth Gardner. Spellman's 16-year political career was over. "John was a very good governor who came in at a bad time," Evans says. Others weren't so impressed. Former state Sen. Ray Moore, a Democrat from Seattle who was once a Republican, described Spellman as "an average governor with a slightly above-average staff. He is a likeable fellow, particularly if you like people who use a pipe as a prop."

Spellman ran for office one more time: In 1990, he challenged state Supreme Court Justice Richard Guy's bid for reelection and lost. It was the last hurrah for a generation of moderate-conservative leaders who believed government had a constructive, if limited, role to play in people's lives. For them, party affiliation and ideology paled in importance to the ability to make things happen. Old-school GOP leaders shake their heads when they note that Spellman, a political realist and a "classic centrist," as Connelly describes him, was the last Republican elected governor of Washington. "In recent years, party leaders all too frequently seem to feud and then go off in opposite directions to reach a stalemate rather than a solution," Spellman wrote in a 2002 *Seattle Post-Intelligencer* opinion column.

Can the party take back the governor's mansion? Spellman thinks so, when the time is right. He singles out state Attorney General Rob McKenna as a potential future governor. "I would have high hopes for him," he says. "He has a very similar point of view [to mine]."

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—GOP Gov. John Spellman

As for Spellman's own political career, he remains philosophical. As he noted in the *P-I*, "It would've been nice to govern in better economic times. But politics is like life: You live and govern in a real world. So we made the most and the best of it." **L&P**

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