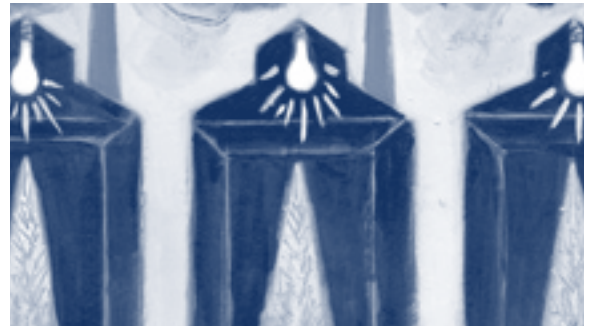


Maine Gov. James B. Longley *Don Quixote and Sir Thomas More, with a Dash of Machiavelli— An Appropriate Political DNA for the Day?*

by Jim McGregor



Jim McGregor, Governor James B. Longley's executive assistant during his term of office from 1975 to 1979, provides his reflections about Longley the man and the era in which he won election against all political odds to become Maine's first independent governor. While many historians and state-house observers concentrate on the "confrontational Longley," McGregor sheds new and hitherto private light on the multifaceted Governor Longley and suggests he may have been a man ideal for the time during which he served. 🐉

During the 30-plus years I have wandered the halls of the Maine State House in Augusta—as a journalist, as chief-of-staff to a governor, and as a lobbyist—I have had several opportunities to pause and examine the portraits of the individuals who have served Maine as governor since 1820.

Just who were these stern-faced people? Were they as tough, straight-laced, and decisive as the artists portrayed them? History has rightly remembered the likes of Joshua Chamberlain and William King; modern models such as Muskie, Curtis, McKernan, and Angus King continue to be fresh on the minds of anyone with more than passing interests in politics.

What did these governors and their staffs do on a given day? One could assume that Israel Washburn Jr., who served from 1861 to 1863, might have been preoccupied with the outbreak of the bloody war with the Southern states, and with the painful thought that young Maine men were marching off to strange places to fight and die. How did he feel about the conflict that split the nation only a hundred years after it was formed, and that would inflect wounds that would take decades to heal? Joshua Chamberlain—a proven thinker who occupied the office from 1867 to 1871 after having fought nobly in the awful war—no doubt was preoccupied with healing and reunification.

But what about Alonzo Garcelon (1879–1880), Sebastian Streeter Marble (1887–1889), William George Crosby (1853–1855), and the like? What commanded their attention on cold, dark February days, and why are historians the only Mainers who instantly recognize their names?

They were all passing units in the parade of Maine governors. Most made a contribution, be it small or large, and all played a part in moving Maine forward to where it is today. I am sometimes asked to place James B. Longley Jr. in that passing throng. Longley served from 1975 to 1979 and was the state's and the nation's first independent governor. I was privileged to work in his campaign and to serve as his chief-of-staff for the four years he was in office.

Where does Jim Longley from Lewiston, Maine, fit into the parade? First and foremost, I don't think he necessarily fits into to any pure political equation. His election perhaps reflected voter dissatisfaction with

politics as usual and directions the country was taking. In the final analysis, however, it did not signal a permanent sway from party rule, or an earthshaking move from one political philosophy to another—although I do think his success made it easier for legitimate independent candidates to be considered in the future. Since then in Maine, we have elected another independent governor and several non-party candidates to the legislature. Independent political candidates, in Maine and elsewhere, have made it out of the last paragraph of media political round-ups.

I have been asked on numerous occasions during the past 25 years to identify the single most significant accomplishment of the Longley governorship. I have generally repeated the words I used in his funeral eulogy in 1980. "He demonstrated that the average citizen can still have an impact on government. He proved—for the entire nation to see—that one person can make a difference." That he won election against tremendous political odds and that he kept his promise to serve only one term constitute a significant portion his political legacy. In the eulogy that I was honored to write, I also described him as a rare combination of Don Quixote and Sir Thomas More, idealistic and moralistic to a fault. Some Longley detractors were prone to add Machiavelli to that political DNA cocktail. In any case, he proved to be a good fit for the times, the post-Watergate era when Maine came of age.

The *Bangor Daily News* went out on a long political limb in 1974 and endorsed Longley's candidacy, bypassing well-known contenders such as Democrat George Mitchell and Republican Jim Erwin. In doing so, however, it conceded that the feisty, Irish independent did not strike the paper as a patient man and that he would, no doubt, create division and counterproductive conflict. He ultimately did the newspaper proud in that category.

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Recently, the *Bangor Daily News* commemorated the 25th anniversary of Longley's death with these words:

There was plenty of that [the conflict] but looking back on a time of rapid expansion of government locally and of Watergate nationally, two attributes were striking about Maine's first independent governor. He anticipated the tax protests that hit and have struck Maine so that now both political parties understand the public outrage; and he showed that a person speaking his mind forthrightly could be trusted to run government. At the end of what he promised would be his only term, it was widely felt [and polls showed] that he could have won reelection.

Longley initiated peer review of judicial appointments...providing Maine with a judiciary that is the envy of many other states.

Longley's election and service as governor were considerably more than symbolic. He served during a difficult, transitional period in Maine's history, and the *Bangor Daily News* was proven correct when it predicted in its endorsement that the insurance executive and political novice from Lewiston was a person who could be trusted to run government.

For example, the state was facing demands from Native Americans that they be ceded a good two-thirds of the state. The claim initially caused some to scoff, but because of it real estate sales in northern Maine began to slow. Politicians skirted the issue in droves, not wanting to be seen as anti-minority. Longley proclaimed, however, that any mistreatment of Native Americans in the past was at the hands of the federal government, not the state of Maine, and he set about to orchestrate a settlement that involved federal involvement and funding. The Indian Land Claims settlement was later embraced by the state's next governor and

political establishment, and remains in effect today.

During the same period, Maine was confronted with right-to-treatment lawsuits that led to the closing of Pineland, and he made several personal trips to the Maine State Prison in Thomaston to head off trouble at a time of considerable inmate unrest. When a patient at a state mental institute decided to exercise her right to die, and chose starvation as the method, Governor Longley visited her on a Sunday afternoon with an ice cream cone that he persuaded her to eat. Longley initiated peer review of judicial appointments, a process succeeding governors adopted, providing Maine with a judiciary that is the envy of many other states.

He served at a time when federal "Great Society" programs that had funneled millions of dollars into state coffers were ending, and states were faced with the choice of raising taxes to continue them or curbing the programs. I once witnessed Longley rejecting a Head Start start-up grant because it would have served more staff than students. Promoters of government spending found themselves attempting to answer questions they had never been asked previously. In Longley's mind there were no such things as "federal funds." "It all comes from the same place," he preached constantly.

Still, many legislators and private citizens did not share Longley's concept of federal funds. Much of the nation's innocence had been lost in the great civil rights struggle of the 1960s and 1970s, the Vietnam War, and the Watergate scandal that had led to the impeachment of a president. Suddenly, a more kind and benevolent federal government had considerable public appeal, and many embraced child care and affirmative action-style programs for the under-privileged.

While Longley recognized the need for states to take realistic approaches to the popular federal programs, the single event that had the greatest influence on his decision to seek the governorship was the Maine Legislature's summary rejection of the recommendations of the Maine Management and Cost Survey, a task force he had chaired at the behest of Governor Kenneth Curtis. States across the country were experimenting with a model where business leaders explored ways to bring cost-saving business practices to state governments.

Longley, unlike citizen chairs in other states, took the assignment seriously and worked fellow business executives day and night to develop a package designed to save the state millions of dollars. However, the single item that would produce a bulk of the savings dealt with the reconfiguration of the state university. The system was just getting recognized as a “super” university, but Longley and his band of business brothers envisioned a collection of two-year community colleges feeding the main campus in Orono. The proposal did not make it out of the starting gate after it was introduced in Augusta.

Longley was not the first state official from Augusta to find it impossible to resist the temptation to assume a lead role in administering the university, nor would he be the last. Fortunately he and the university would ultimately survive each other.

Many state house observers and historians concentrate on the confrontational Longley when explaining his tenure and impact. He was confrontational because he did not hesitate to take on political sacred cows, a constant source of staff jitters. For example, he made no bones of the fact that he felt there were too many state employees. Many party politicians felt the same way, but would not dare say it because they might offend a significant voting bloc. Longley could because he was not seeking reelection.

In its recent recollection, the *Bangor Daily News* wondered what Longley would have said about a 2005 news story concerning 25 Maine legislators who planned to spend up to \$2,000 each to attend a conference in Seattle. The newspaper surmised that the late governor would say something like: “Can’t just five or six of you go and take notes to share with the others.” I think he would have been far less diplomatic, and questioned why anyone should attend. What are you expecting to learn in Seattle that you couldn’t find in the state library? After all, he had implemented a strict out-of-state travel moratorium for his own cabinet members and other state officials, one of several unpopular policies that I was expected to help enforce.

Although Jim Longley was the only governor I ever worked for, I did have opportunities during my career to observe chief executives—from the South and the North—from close range. Most loved the

campaign—the chase, if you will—and confronting the big, showy issues of the day, but Longley was the only one I got to know who absolutely loved the day-to-day administration of the office. If there was not an issue when he arrived at 6 A.M. or earlier, he was likely to scare one up by the time the remainder of state government arrived for work. He loved to call meetings early on Monday and late on Friday and accepted few excuses for tardiness, and fewer still for no-shows.

He worked long hours and expected those around him to do the same. He insisted on personally signing every piece of mail that left the office, and usually personalized each letter.

He often called the writer and became personally involved in trying to find a solution to a particular problem. Although it was not his intent, his personal attention to constituent communications was building him a political base akin to that enjoyed by political parties.

Citizens driving by the State House late at night or on weekends were apt to see the lights on in the governor’s suite of offices. Was there always some crisis that demanded that after-hours attention? Not always, but he felt everyone in state government should put forth an extra effort and that he should set the example. My wife planned Sunday lunch around his calls. They would always come. After attending mass, he would have read the weekend newspapers and found some issue that desperately needed to be addressed immediately—one that could not possibly wait until Monday.

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He vetoed more legislative acts than any governor before or since, and had his vetoes overridden more than anyone in the history of the state. I kept tabs, but Longley didn't. He felt that if he did not totally agree with a piece of legislation, it would be dishonest for him to sign it to simply gain legislative favor or to have a good scorecard. In four years, we had only one veto sustained—an extension of a ban on moose hunting. The staff often joked that after our first full legislative session, we had succeeded in getting only one administration initiative passed—right-turn-on-red, a law being rubber-stamped by every state because of gasoline shortages.

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As Longley neared the end of his term, it became clear that his perceived unpopularity did not extend more than 10 miles from the State House and that he would win reelection should he decide to break his campaign promise to seek only one term. Newspapers that not been particularly friendly even editorialized that he had a right to change his mind.

Longley frustrated and baffled friends and foes alike because he was sometimes difficult to understand and even harder to categorize. He was a fiscal conservative, but a social liberal on some issues. He pledged the first African American to a fraternity at Bowdoin College and once delivered a fiery chapel oration admonishing the school to mend its ways and make itself more friendly to minorities. This, mind you, was the late 1940s, not the 1960s or 1970s. He angered some of his business supporters by proposing Maine's then-unique anti-billboard law.

In fairness, being an independent had political benefits that allowed him to speak his mind and to not be dictated to by a party. Being an independent also had its drawbacks when it came time to find a bloc to support a specific program. However, Longley was fortunate in that respect because his goal was not to create new government programs, but to eliminate many already on the book. If right-turn-on-red was to be his crowning legislative achievement, so be it.

However, traffic-flow legislation was not to be his only accomplishment. When he left office, editorials of the day applauded him for slowing the excessive growth of state government, for dropping the unemployment rate significantly, for providing two major tax rebates in a year, for being the only state to boast a net decrease in per capita state tax burden, and for leaving the next governor a sound transitional budget proposal.

While the out-of-the-chute pledge to serve only one term may have caught the attention of voters on the campaign trail, once in office we soon discovered that it also had a downside. After a year or so, Longley had managed to convince traditional political parties that we had fought constantly that he was indeed going to keep his campaign pledge and serve only one term. Things quieted immediately. The parties decided to stop trying to prove that an independent could not govern effectively and wisely chose to wait him out. Clearly, with almost half the term to go, Longley had effectively become a lame duck. Yet, he simply would not entertain changing his mind even though he had grown to love the job. I finally persuaded him to crack the door a bit. The next time reporters asked if he had changed his mind about seeking reelection—which they often did—he should simply say, “No! I haven’t changed my mind, but I have a right to do so down the road if I see fit.” Suddenly, he was no longer a lame duck, and, I believe, governed effectively for the remainder of his term.

Had he chosen to serve a second term, he would likely have left an even greater, more proactive legacy because he had learned to partially curb his Irish temper and had started to skirt some political landmines. Even more important was his love of the day-to-day administrative and problem-solving aspects of

the job, at which he was quite good. I believe he had discovered that his vision of bringing business practices to government could be achieved at the administrative level, even if the philosophy was not embraced politically by a particular legislature.

Just before he died after a battle with cancer, he told me that “leave the door cracked” was the best advice I had given him. I later imparted the same advice to Angus King, who became the state’s second independent governor and served the two full terms allowed by law.

In the final analysis, I believe Longley—more than anything else—was a man ideal for the times, for that section of the gubernatorial parade that began in 1820 and continues to this day. He veered of the mapped route a bit at times and occasionally produced loud, off-key music, but he managed to command the judges’ attention during his brief moment before the public reviewing stand. The parade eventually moved on—generally uninterrupted—and, I feel, somewhat enhanced by the tenure of that particular conductor.

After Governor James B. Longley’s official portrait is finally rotated to some seldom-visited niche on the fourth floor of the State House, his chief legacy will be that he kept his word. It seems such a small thing, but the *Congressional Record* devoted almost two full pages September 6, 1978, to Longley’s decision to honor his campaign pledge and not to seek re-election. That decision again received prominent mention on August 28, 1980, when the *Congressional Record* reprinted his eulogy. 🐟



Jim McGregor was a reporter for the Montgomery (AL) Advertiser and United Press International in the mid-1960s to early-1970s, assigned to bureaus in Montgomery, Alabama, and staffing major events in the civil rights movement. Transferred by UPI to Maine in 1973, he later resigned to work in the gubernatorial campaign of Independent James B. Longley, and then served as the governor’s executive assistant from 1975 to 1979. He presently is executive vice president of the Maine Merchants Association.

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