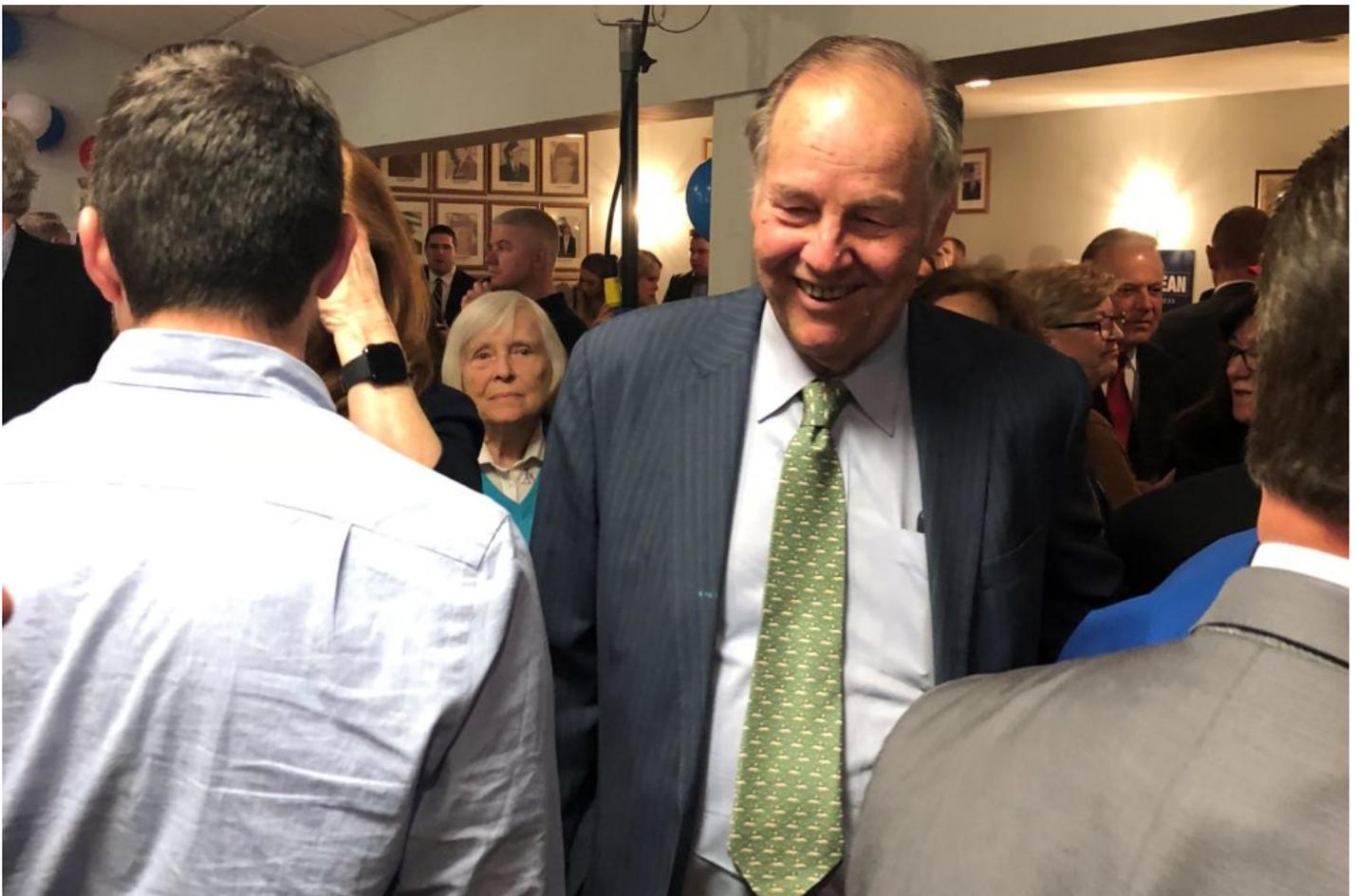




COLUMNIST

The Ghosts of Kean v. Florio

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In the 39 years since the 1981 gubernatorial election — the closest in state history and the only contest for governor ever subjected to a recount — a narrative has persisted that had it not been for efforts to intimidate voters and dampen turnout, the result would have been reversed.

In the absence of context and greater clarity, the contention that Republican Tom Kean would have lost to Democratic Congressman Jim Florio has been accepted in some quarters as genuine. In fact, it is highly problematic that the incident was the decisive factor in the outcome.

Those who are convinced of its validity and who periodically promote it are individuals who held a stake in the election — partisan or personal — and who, four decades later, cling to a belief that scores of voters in overwhelmingly Democratic urban areas were disenfranchised by a band of thugs dispatched on a mission to frighten them away from the polling place.

A review of turnout data as compiled by the State Division of Elections provides the necessary aforementioned context and clarity:

*In the 11 gubernatorial elections since 1977, the 2,290,221 turnout in 1981 exceeded 10 of them, often by substantial margins.

*Only the 1993 contest drew a greater turnout in a contest driven by a grassroots uprising against the enactment of Gov. Florio's 1990 \$2.6 billion tax increase.

A deeper dive into the data over the same time span reveals that in Newark-dominated Essex County where much of the attention was later focused, the 222,154 turnout in 1981 far exceeded that of the contests before and since.

This data is not offered as either justification for nor defense of a remarkably ill-advised Republican National Committee scheme to create an entity called the Ballot Security Task Force to station poll watchers in heavily Democratic urban communities, presumably to challenge voters on legitimate questions of residence, registration or valid identification.

Rather, it poses an effort -- even after all these years -- to focus objective scrutiny on a political event that has been misrepresented and often distorted in the re-telling.

With the passage of time, fading memories and a tendency of narrators to embellish the tale, controversial political events often cross over the line from stark reality to hazy mythology. So it has since 1981.

Make no mistake, though. Utilizing off duty law enforcement personnel and other volunteers and adorning them with arm bands despite the sordid and sinister historical connotations of repression and intimidation associated with such identification insignias was an act of monumental ignorance and stupidity.

The entire scheme was concocted by a group of amateurs sitting around a table in National Committee headquarters, wallowing in their self-importance and smugly convincing one another of their cleverness and brilliant insight.

It was inevitable the operation would blow up in their faces, sending shrapnel whizzing about and causing collateral damage. That none of the architects of the scheme saw it coming is testament to their living in an echo chamber and believing it was reality.

The entire enterprise and the group's mucking around in New Jersey's electoral process was an unmitigated disaster.

Democrats accused the Kean campaign of a deliberate attempt to suppress the urban vote and, in particular, minority participation, through the use of strongarm tactics while insisting the effort was a method of preventing electoral fraud.

State Democrats sought and received an injunction barring the Task Force volunteers from any presence at polling locations and the National Committee later entered into a consent order and agreed to abandon the program altogether.

While the initial blame was directed toward the Kean campaign, it quickly became clear that its top level staff was unaware of the security scheme and played no role in it. It was a National Committee effort and not coordinated with the campaign.

While there remain those who insist an asterisk be placed after Tom Kean's name in the election results to signify their belief in an illegitimate outcome, their claims are dubious and unsupported by the actual voter turnout data.

A later lawsuit included post-election complaints from voters who claimed they were turned away from the polls or prevented in some other way from casting a ballot, but those claims never reached litigation. The voter participation numbers, however, suggest clearly that, compared to other gubernatorial elections, the impact was minimal.

Anecdotal evidence lives on, though, still accepted as proof positive that the election was rigged and democracy tainted.

That creating and deploying the Ballot Security Task Force was a stunningly asinine and self-defeating political decision is indisputable. It was also an affront to the notion that the freedom to vote is sacrosanct and will only survive if exercised without fear of intimidation.

Kean went on to become perhaps the most popular and effective governor in modern state history, winning re-election in 1985 with a hair under 70 percent of the vote and a plurality of 795,000 – records which will likely never be eclipsed.

Florio won the governor's office in 1989, served four tumultuous years and, in 1993, became the first governor to fail in a general election bid for a second term.

In the interest of full disclosure, I should note here that I served as the 1981 Kean campaign press secretary, lived this nightmare and suffered a monumental political headache brought on by forces outside our control.

With President Trump's constant references to voter fraud and his suggestions that steps similar to the Task Force be taken, the ghosts of New Jersey elections past have re-emerged.

I've taken media inquiries and explained the 1981 experience, how it occurred and how it was resolved. I still cringe a bit inwardly at the recollection of sweeping up all the broken glass (figuratively, that is) in the aftermath of the uproar.

I'm well aware that there remains a body of opinion that the 1,797 voter plurality achieved by Kean after a month long recount in 1981 could be explained away as the impact of suppressive tactics.

I respect their view and admire their tenacity. But they're wrong.

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