



On June 12, 2010, Governor Parkinson gave a speech at the Symphony in the Flint Hills that brought raucous cheers from the crowd and some uncomfortable grins from some musicians behind him who hailed from Kansas City when he described what being from Kansas was all about: "It's about the fact that one hundred and fifty years ago Quantrill really did invade Lawrence and he really did kill one hundred and eighty-three innocent men, women, and children, because Missouri wanted to make this a slave state. And it's about the fact that the free-staters pushed them back and made this state what it is today! And despite the fact that it happened over one hundred and fifty years ago no one here is ever going to forget those raids! And most of us do everything we can to avoid Missouri because we might accidentally spend some money in that state that one time raided us." Courtesy of Dave Heinemann.

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“You Can Get a Hell of a Lot Done as a Governor”: A Conversation with Former Governor Mark Parkinson

edited by Grant Armstrong, Bob Beatty, and Amber Dickinson

Mark Vincent Parkinson, born in Wichita, Kansas, on June 24, 1957, served as the state’s forty-fifth chief executive from April 28, 2009, to January 10, 2011, taking over after Governor Kathleen Sebelius resigned to join President Barack Obama’s cabinet as secretary of health and human services. Parkinson’s 623 days as governor were the most served by any of the five lieutenant governors in Kansas history who replaced a departing governor.¹ Parkinson likes to joke that he “Forrest Gumped” his way into the state’s top job, but he actually had a wealth of prior political experience, serving in the Kansas legislature from 1991 to 1997 and as the state chair of the Kansas Republican Party from 1999 to 2003. In 2006, he famously—and controversially—switched political parties to be the lieutenant governor running mate of Sebelius in an election that the pair won in a landslide.²

Parkinson’s relatively brief tenure in office featured a surprising number of accomplishments since, as a former Republican legislator and party chair, he had developed relationships with moderate Republicans that allowed him to work with elements of both political parties. As Parkinson notes, “Every initiative that we felt was important, we achieved. Everything.” During his tenure, a statewide smoking ban was passed, a new state highway plan was developed, the minimum wage was increased, new renewable energy standards and policies were enacted, a compromise was reached on the Sunflower coal-fired energy plant impasse that had stymied the Sebelius administration, and a tax increase was passed to offset the pain of the massive budget cuts that were required following the recession of 2009. Parkinson attributes this success partly to having a clear strategic plan—“I’m the kind of person who if we want a policy initiative, we figure what the policy initiative is, then we figure out if it’s possible. There is not enough time to waste time on things that aren’t possible”—and partly to deciding not to run for election in 2010—“I also was able to see the strategic advantage of not running again as an opportunity to maybe bring people together who otherwise would have been sniping against me.”

Grant Armstrong is a lecturer in political science at Washburn University and holds a PhD from the University of Mississippi. Bob Beatty is a professor of political science at Washburn University and holds a PhD from Arizona State University. Amber Dickinson is an assistant professor of political science at Washburn University and holds a PhD from the University of Kansas.

1. The four other lieutenant governors who became governor were Nehemiah Green, 1868–1869, 69 days; Frank Hagaman, 1950–1951, 42 days; John McCuish, 1957, 11 days; and Jeff Colyer, 2018–2019, 349 days. See Bob Beatty, “Sebelius Situation a First,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, March 2, 2009.

2. Sebelius/Parkinson defeated Jim Barnett and his running mate, State Senator Susan Wagle, 491,993 votes to 343,586. All election statistics in this article are from the Kansas Office of the Secretary of State unless otherwise noted.

Parkinson says he does not believe he will leave behind any real political legacy in Kansas. However, his life story and his political trials and triumphs are evidence of a record of self-effacement, tenacity, and a strong work ethic marked by wisdom and wit that has resulted in many successful political choices designed to address problems with pragmatic solutions. Parkinson maintained a sharp focus on the issues in which he fundamentally believed, even when that meant making a shocking political change. His move to the Democratic Party brought scrutiny from former Republican colleagues but also brought with it the chance to work on issues such as energy, education, and health care. A review of his life's work reveals a legacy of not only serving the public but also solving problems.

This article is excerpted from two interviews conducted with Mark Parkinson in 2010 and 2021. Interviewer questions have been omitted, and footnotes have been added. The overall project that gave rise to the interviews was an initiative by Bob Beatty and Mark Peterson of the Political Science Department at Washburn University to capture the histories of Kansas governors John Anderson, William Avery, John Carlin, Mike Hayden, Bill Graves, Kathleen Sebelius, and Mark Parkinson. "A Conversation with Former Governor Mark Parkinson" is the seventh in a series based on those interviews.³

3. For this published version, the interviews have been merged and passages omitted and reordered in some instances for clarity and narrative effect. The words are the governor's, however, and the editors have not altered the meaning or original intent in any way. See also the other interviews: Bob Beatty, ed., "'For the Benefit of the People': A Conversation with Former Governor John Anderson, Jr.," *Kansas History* 30, no. 4 (Winter 2007–2008): 252–69; Bob Beatty, ed., "'You Have to Like People': A Conversation with Former Governor William H. Avery," *Kansas History* 31, no. 1 (Spring 2008): 48–67; Bob Beatty, ed., "'Be Willing to Take Some Risks to Make Things Happen': A Conversation with Former Governor John Carlin," *Kansas History* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 114–40; Bob Beatty, ed., "'Being Close to the People': A Conversation with Former Governor Mike Hayden," *Kansas History* 32, no. 1 (Spring 2009): 46–74; Bob Beatty and Virgil W. Dean, eds., "'Doing What Needed to Get Done, When It Needed to Get Done': A Conversation with Former Governor Bill Graves," *Kansas History* 36, no. 3 (Autumn 2013): 172–97; Bob Beatty and Linsey Moddelmog, eds., "'Find a Way to Find Common Ground': A Conversation with Former Governor Kathleen Sebelius," *Kansas History* 40, no. 4 (Winter 2017–18): 262–89.

Background and School Days

I was born in Wichita, at Wesley Hospital, and really spent pretty much the next twenty-three years in Wichita. My dad had grown up in Scott City, and his parents lived out there. I was the second of five kids, and we lived on a block where there were lots and lots of other kids. We ran around and got in trouble but managed to almost never get caught and just really had a good time. I was extremely interested in sports, but I am just a horrible athlete and went to schools that were big enough that you had to be at least decent to make it on the team. So I am probably the least accomplished very, very tall person in Kansas. To this day, everywhere I go, people ask me, "Where did you play basketball?" and the answer is "In my backyard." But I was very knowledgeable about sports. I was a huge Kansas City Royals fan in the '60s and '70s and knew all of their players and knew all the people on their farm teams and listened to every game on the radio.⁴

My boyhood memories are all very good. I'm not just saying that; they really are. Wichita and Kansas were kind of a magical place at that time. To explain that, you kind of have to think about what life was like in the 1960s. We just came off of a time where there had been a president, Dwight Eisenhower, who was from Kansas. Miss Kansas kept winning Miss America. At school, we would study William Allen White. General Aviation was just starting. Jim Ryun was running around setting world records. So you grew up in Wichita thinking that Wichita and Kansas were really very special.

My father never ran for office but developed a public relations firm in Wichita, and a branch of what they did was to consult in political campaigns. Political involvement was just a given in our family.

4. The Kansas City Royals began as an expansion major league baseball franchise in 1969. Parkinson said his favorite player was five-foot-five shortstop Freddie Patek, who played for the Royals from 1971 to 1979. "He just looked like a normal person. I [also] loved Al Cowens. He could hit like crazy, and not a lot of people knew about him or remember him." Al Cowens played for the Royals from 1974 to 1979. His 1977 season was especially memorable, as he batted .312 with 23 home runs and 112 RBI, earned a Gold Glove, and finished second in voting for the American League MVP.

One of the very first memories I have of political involvement was when I was ten or eleven years old and I was the little kid that was on the brochure for the school bond issue. When that passed, they decided that I was good luck, so then I was the little kid that was on the brochure for the zoo bond issue in Wichita. I remember it was me standing there, and the caption said, “Boo-hoo, we need a new zoo.”⁵

I got involved in debate at Wichita Heights High School, and that really became the encompassing part of my life. I would go to class, but all that I would really think about and work on after school was debate. It was a tremendous experience for me. It was something that I was relatively good at and really created a focus for my life. When I was a senior in high school, Catholic University decided that they were going to create this dream team of national debaters, and they identified six or eight debaters from around the country that they brought to Catholic U. to debate, and I was one of them. So my freshman year I spent at Catholic University and had a great experience there.

I came back that summer fully intending to go back to Catholic University that next year, and my parents put on a soft sell for me to stick around Wichita. I decided that I would run for precinct committee person—and the election was of course the first Tuesday in August—and that if I won the race, I would stay in Wichita. It was not a hard race to run because I was unopposed. But I had to run as a write-in, and back then you actually had to get ten votes. I got excited about the idea of being a precinct committee person and sticking around Wichita. Wichita State has a history of having a great debate team, so I was able to keep that part of my life and debate at a very high level.

The Water Fluoridation Campaign of 1978

At the time—believe it or not—whether or not

5. The Sedgwick County Zoo bond referendum passed in 1966. The zoo opened in 1971 with only two exhibits but now is the largest zoo in Kansas, currently housing over three thousand animals.

you should fluoridate your water was actually an issue. It wasn't an issue in most of the world, but it was an issue in Wichita, Kansas. There was an element of people that were convinced that the government was poisoning us with fluoride. There was this specific researcher named John Yiamouyiannis who made a living running around the country convincing people that fluoride would destroy them, and that effort had succeeded in Wichita.⁶ I was one of the hundreds of thousands of kids that grew up in Wichita that was at the dentist all the time with cavities because we didn't have fluoride.

I happened to hear that there was a hearing at the Wichita City Council on whether to fluoridate the water or not and that John Yiamouyiannis was going to come. I thought, Oh, my god, this is the guy that I've been following in research and debate, and at least in my opinion, he was a quack job. So I went down and testified, and I said, “Look, here's what you need to know about John Yiamouyiannis,” and told them all the things that I learned in debate. Then somebody from the local dental society said, “This is pretty cool, some young kid up here talking.” One thing led to another, and I ended up cochairing [the fluoridation campaign] with a respected dentist in Wichita.

The City Council said, OK, we will do it, but only if the voters want to do it. So they put it on the ballot, and just getting it on the ballot was a pretty big deal. There was a campaign, but campaigning in general was very unsophisticated back then, and so it was nothing like the campaigns now. I'd be surprised if we raised more than twenty-five or thirty thousand bucks. We had some radio ads and a brochure and stuff like that. The effort came pretty damn close, but I think we lost by 1

6. Dr. John Yiamouyiannis (1945–2000) was a biochemist and author of the 1983 book *Fluoride the Aging Factor: How to Recognize and Avoid the Devastating Effects of Fluoride*. His decades of research bolstered the claims of fluoridation opponents but were refuted by medical groups such as the National Cancer Institute. See David Grimes, “Anti-Fluoride Lobby Can't Get Its Teeth into the Truth,” (Dublin) *Irish Times*, September 9, 2013.

or 2 percent. I assume that they fixed that now; I assume that Wichita has fluoridated water. I hope so; maybe that could be my next cause.⁷

Running for the State Legislature at Age Twenty in 1978

When I was a junior in college at Wichita State, I ran for the state legislature. I was a moderate Republican and active in the party. There had been several very successful extremely young candidates around that time. There had been a guy named Paul Hess—now, there’s an interesting political character—who ran for the legislature when he was like twenty.⁸ The power of door-to-door [campaigning] was not known at the time, and [he] basically figured out that if you go to every door, it doesn’t really matter if you’re qualified or

7. In 1964, Wichita voters rejected water fluoridation 63 percent to 37 percent. The 1978 vote was not quite as close as Parkinson remembers: Fluoridation was rejected 54 percent to 46 percent. And Parkinson might have his “next cause,” as the most recent vote in 2012 saw fluoridation again rejected, 59 percent to 41 percent. See “Kansas’ Largest City and Fluoride Debate Have Long History,” Kansas Health Institute, accessed January 11, 2022, www.khi.org/news/article/kansas-largest-city-and-fluoride-debate-have-long.

8. The Paul Hess story is certainly unique. In 1970, Hess was elected to the Kansas House of Representatives at age twenty-two, at that time the youngest member ever. In 1972, he was elected to the Kansas Senate at age twenty-four. He was reelected in 1976 and 1980, but after some controversy regarding his Sedgwick County residency, he ran for state senate in Johnson County, losing to Jack Walker in a 1984 GOP primary. In 1974, Hess ran for state treasurer, losing to State Auditor Clay Hedrick in the GOP primary, 56 percent to 44 percent. Hess was the centerpiece of a notorious Kansas controversy: Amidst theft charges and a custody battle with his then wife, Anne Schroer, on November 12, 1985, Hess took his three sons and fled the country. Schroer hired a private detective who tracked Hess down in Cairo, Egypt, after stops in Chicago, London, and Jordan. On December 9, 1985, Schroer returned to the United States with her three sons, while Hess was arrested by the FBI upon landing in Chicago. It may have been fortuitous that Hess was not elected state treasurer, as he was convicted of securities fraud and embezzlement and served time at the Kansas State Penitentiary in Lansing. In 1987, he moved to Washington state and has entered politics there, attending the 2012 and 2016 Republican National Conventions as a delegate and currently serving as the Forth-Sixth District Republican chair. For more on Hess, see Maurice Possley, “Ex-Kansas Official Held on Theft Charges,” *Chicago Tribune*, December 11, 1985; Andy Marso, “Ex-wife: Former Legislator Owes Child Support,” *Topeka Capital-Journal*, January 14, 2013; and David Gutman, “Trump’s Seattle-Area Supporters Say He’s Just Doing What He Promised,” *Seattle Times*, February 3, 2017. In 2014, the *Topeka Capital-Journal* ranked the Hess saga as one of the top fifty scandals in Kansas political history.



Parkinson started his political activities at a young age. He is pictured here going door-to-door in the legislative campaign. He says that he “campaign[ed] twelve hours a day, seven days a week,” and wore his one and only three-piece suit every day for four months, even in the 100-degree summer heat. Courtesy of Mark Parkinson.

not. If you go to every door and can make a good impression, you have a pretty good chance to get elected. I met [Hess] and was really intrigued by what he had done. So I had it in mind that this was possible and ran against a twelve-year incumbent named Ben Foster. Ben Foster was also being challenged in that primary by a prior incumbent named Frank McMaster.⁹

My decision to run was not ideologically based; it was stupidity based. It was nuts because first of all, it was probably unwinnable. But the other

9. Ben Foster (1926–1998) served twenty-five years in the Kansas state legislature: as a state representative from 1965 to 1968 and 1974 to 1990 and as a state senator from 1969 to 1972. While state senator, Foster also held the position of municipal court judge. See the finding aid for his papers, www.kshs.org/p/benjamin-foster-papers-1890-1990/14023.

thing was there was no ideological basis for it. In hindsight, Ben Foster probably would have been described as a moderate Republican. He supported [then Kansas Governor] Bob Bennett, for example, who was clearly a moderate Republican.¹⁰ But like many incumbents, [Foster] was not around; he was probably getting a little tired of [the legislature].

I went door-to-door from roughly May to August and had a real organized campaign. What I learned is you can cover a state house district in a primary in just two months. I was extremely young and in much better shape than I am now. I only had one suit, and it was a three-piece suit. I wore that same three-piece suit every day for four months, and there were days where it would be over 100 degrees, but that would actually help me, as people would say, "Wow, you're this committed!" I campaigned twelve hours a day, seven days a week, and to do it in a very smart and efficient way, that was a really good experience. It was an exhilarating and really important part of my background because I attacked it in a way that I never had attacked anything before. I learned the value of what I've done since then, which is hopefully never dialing it in, never conceding anything, and just trying to give it your all. I not only went to every door in the district, I went to every door twice. I was a maniac.

My candidacy wasn't taken very seriously initially, and Ben Foster didn't do that much. We probably made a tactical mistake, which was that we wanted to show that we were making real inroads, so shortly after the Fourth of July, four weeks before the primary itself, we put out all the yard signs where people had agreed that we could put up yard signs. Well, it was an incredibly high number, a house district with probably four hundred signs, which is a shocking number. That appears to have really gotten Ben Foster concerned.

10. Robert Frederick "Bob" Bennett, a Republican from Prairie Village, was governor from 1975 to 1979, losing his bid for reelection to Democrat John Carlin in 1978. For more on Bennett, see Virgil W. Dean, ed., "Seeking 'Realism and a Little Rationality' in Government: The Observations of Former Governor Robert F. Bennett," *Kansas History* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2008): 104-13.

Bennett actually came down into the district and campaigned for Foster. So, somehow, we got them concerned, and in hindsight, that was a mistake. It probably would have been a better strategy to just take the whole thing by surprise.

On election night, we thought we had won the race. One of the TV stations that was covering the local races declared me the winner. I was getting ready to go down there and do the interview, and then we got a call back saying, "Hey, Mark, we are down here at the election office, and we think you've lost." We found out the next day that I lost by thirty-six votes.¹¹

I realized deeply into it that it was OK if I lost. I was trying to win, but I realized almost that it was a mistake. The day after the results came in, I felt an exhilaration. I did not feel the disappointment that you would normally feel. Exhilaration not that I had lost, but at that point I had a fuller understanding of what my life would have been like if I had won and that I really probably wasn't in the right position in my life to do it. Not only was I not really ready, it would have changed my life so dramatically that it would have been difficult for me to graduate from Wichita State. It would have probably been impossible for me to go to KU Law School. I never would have met Stacy, my wife. You know, there are just multiple things about it where I'm extremely grateful that the voters were smart enough to not elect me to that position.

I actually felt like the voters made the right decision, you know? I lost, but I just lost by a little bit. So that's like, OK, a little affirming. If I had gotten crushed, I don't think that would have been right. If I won, that probably wouldn't have been right. I decided then that I may or may not ever run for office again, but if I did run for office, it would only be after I was fully established as an adult with hopefully my family and then with my profession. I was not going to be a professional politician.

11. Parkinson was defeated by Ben Foster in the 1978 Republican primary by only 40 votes, 1,190 to 1,150, with Francis C. McMaster receiving 768 votes.



Of his 1978 state legislative race (pictured left), Parkinson says, "I'm extremely grateful that the voters were smart enough to not elect me to that position," because winning would have dramatically changed his life and he probably wouldn't have met his wife. However, his experience in that first campaign was invaluable when he successfully ran for state representative in 1990 and then a more difficult state senate contest in 1992 (pictured right). Courtesy of Mark Parkinson.

And then another sort of interesting twist to my career is that when I got elected to the legislature in 1990, the desk that I had had a little sticker on it that said, *Former desk of Ben Foster*. He had just left the legislature; that was his last term. I was like, wow, amazing.

Washington, D.C.

I had always wanted to work on Capitol Hill, and so after I graduated from Wichita State, I packed up my vehicle, and I drove out to Washington, D.C. Jobs were really hard to get on the Hill. It was hard to just even find a damn job

opening, I mean just a sniff of a job. I had identified about 150 Republican House members that I would feel comfortable working for. I didn't really want to work for any of the extreme conservatives. So I went to those 150 members, left my résumé, and was quite discouraged. I got lucky, [but] there was a fair amount of tenacity to it. When I was about to give up, somehow I found out about a job [with] Congressman Bill Green. Being a moderate Republican was really important to them. Bill Green was rated the fifth most liberal member of Congress, even though he was a Republican, because he represented the Upper East Side of New



Parkinson (third from left) with New York Republican Congressman Bill Green (seated) and his staff, when he worked for Green from 1979–1980 as a legislative assistant. Parkinson went to Washington, D.C. with no connections and no real prospects of finding a job. Parkinson’s first assignment was to write an editorial for Green for The New York Times on foreign policy, a subject on which he had no background. He successfully wrote the editorial with the help of his uncle, who had worked for the CIA. Courtesy of Mark Parkinson.

York, the Silk Stocking District.¹² I was a legislative assistant with my emphasis being foreign affairs, which is hilarious because I knew nothing about foreign affairs at the time.

My time in D.C., where I was very much alone, was a great time for me because I made the decision that I was going to find another gear, that I had done some things that were good, but that I really hadn’t recognized my full potential, I hadn’t worked as hard as I needed to and hadn’t focused as much as I needed to to really reach my potential. I made the conscious decision when I was twenty-one or twenty-two that I was going to try to live the best life that I could, at the maximum level that

I could, for every single day. I try to never waste any time, and I really just look at results in every aspect of my life.

Running for the Legislature Again, and Winning

My wife and I clerked in D.C. after our second year in law school. We came back, and Stacy worked as a prosecutor for Dennis Moore.¹³ Then we formed our own law firm, and we were really having a good time. The master plan was to not get into politics. But I kept being kind of drawn back in. [In 1989,] Paul Morrison called me out of the blue and said, “I understand you’ve been involved in politics before; would you be my

12. Sedgwick William “Bill” Green (1929–2002) was the last Republican to represent Manhattan in the U.S. House, serving from 1978 to 1993.

13. Democrat Dennis Moore served as district attorney of Johnson County from 1977 to 1989 and represented the Third District of Kansas in the U.S. House from 1999 to 2011.

volunteer manager for my [Johnson County District Attorney] campaign?"¹⁴ Then in 1990, when Olathe got a new state representative seat because of reapportionment, I actually got recruited to run, and I was an easy sell because at that point, I was reengaged in the whole thing. We had one child at that point, but we felt like we were stable, our law firm was doing well, I felt I could commute. I ran for the state house and was a huge beneficiary of the fact that Johnson County was growing dramatically. As a result of redistricting, I lived in a district where there was no incumbent and that really made it quite easy. I reinstated the campaign that I had back in 1978 where I literally went to every single door and just crushed the opposition because they didn't understand how to do that.¹⁵

I served for two years in the state house; I loved it. It is an amazing experience, and everything authentic about Kansas is in that state house. I made the decision that I would only serve one term in the house and was prepared to leave. What happened then, though, was that the state senate was also reapportioned. [Kansas Senate President] Bud Burke and others came to me and said, "Mark, would you run for the state senate?" I decided I would devote four years to doing that. I had a more difficult primary than you might think. I ran against a social conservative named Al Heger, and by that time, the moderate/conservative Republican division had become very clarified, and living in Olathe as a moderate Republican was quite challenging. I was, and am, prochoice, and that's a minority view in Olathe. That caused me a lot of difficulties in the campaign. I'm convinced that I would not have gotten elected to the state senate in Olathe if I had not gone to every door. The conventional wisdom at the time was that you could not hit every door in a state senate seat

14. Republican Paul Morrison served as the district attorney of Johnson County from 1990 to 2007 and changed his party affiliation to Democrat in 2006 to run against incumbent Republican Attorney General Phill Kline, winning the general election 491,422 votes to Kline's 348,509.

15. Mark Parkinson defeated Democrat Michael R. Norlen by a vote tally of 2,880 to 1,135.

[campaign], but I knew that I could. I did not fit my state senate district, and I didn't hide that, and I didn't lie about my positions; they were very much out there. But I'm convinced that I won the race because the voters were just like, well, OK, we don't really agree with this guy on everything, but he's willing to come around, and what the hell, let's give him a chance.¹⁶

When I was in the legislature, I commuted every day. I was able to get home every night and hang out with the kids and Stacy. It was a really good fit, and it made sense.

Chief Sponsor of 1994 Kansas Death Penalty Law

The death penalty debate is really a tough one, so I'll now tell you what the critics were saying is true: I wrote a death penalty law that in my opinion would never be utilized to actually execute someone. At the time, we had a "hard-twenty" [sentencing law], and it ultimately became a hard-forty. For the most egregious criminals, we didn't have a serious enough penalty. You could go out and commit multiple murders, premeditated, and people were serving a hard-twenty years. Well, hell, you know, that ain't enough. And so because we didn't have anything that was a serious enough hammer, most of these defendants were just taking these cases to trial because their worst-case scenario was a twenty-year sentence.

I became convinced that we needed a stronger hammer than that. I didn't want to institute a death penalty that would ensnare too many people, which some states have done. In a number of states, they had the death penalty even for things like felony murder. I liked the idea of having a death penalty for really, really serious crimes—premeditated stuff, aggravated circumstances, multiple crimes involved—that would mainly be a negotiating tool to get people to then plead to a hard-forty. There were some people that figured that out and were

16. Parkinson defeated Al Heger in the 1992 primary by a vote count of 3,822 to 3,051. In the general election, Parkinson ran unopposed and accumulated 22,212 votes.

saying, Mark's just proposing something that he knows will never be used. And of course there were all the people that were to the left of me on the topic that just think that it's inherently bad.

It's a really difficult subject, and if I had to do it over again, I would not have pursued it. It isn't so much the way that it's being utilized in Kansas now, but I now know more about the history of the death penalty and its unfair utilization against people of color. I think that probably alone is enough that it shouldn't ever be used again. I probably do wish that I hadn't done it in the first place.¹⁷

Governors Bill Graves and Kathleen Sebelius

Bill Graves used to get criticized for not being involved enough in the early parts of the [legislative] session, and I remember him saying, "Well, the right time to go fishing is when there's fish out there." So I learned from watching him that there's a real value in being patient the first sixty, seventy, almost eighty days of the session. Let the legislators do their deal, let them try to work things out, hope that the reasonable ones come to the conclusion that you come to in terms of how we're going to solve this.¹⁸

Bill Graves is a great leader and, sadly, probably the last moderate Republican governor that will ever exist in Kansas. That's just a unique combination to have a moderate Republican that loves the state like he does, that has the business background that he does. Those were a magical eight years that the state was really fortunate to have him as governor. When I think about the governors of Kansas that



Democrat Kathleen Sebelius and Republican David Miller (pictured here when they served in the Kansas House in the late 1980s) were polar opposites ideologically, yet both played important roles in Mark Parkinson's path to the governorship. It was Miller who led a conservative takeover of the Kansas Republican Party in 1995, and it was Governor Sebelius who asked Parkinson to switch parties and be her running mate in 2006. Courtesy of Dave Heinemann.

I've served with or had kind of known, the two that really are head and shoulders above me and others are Bill Graves and Kathleen Sebelius.

[Kathleen Sebelius] has a star quality that just attracts people. The first time that I met Kathleen, she was the chair of the Federal and State Committee in the house, and I was a freshman legislator. I wanted my time in the legislature to matter, so I adopted an issue and decided I was going to do everything I could to get it through, which was to raise the driver's age. At the time, you could get a license and drive in Kansas City when you were fourteen, which was nuts. I took that issue on, and it got assigned to her committee, so I had to go meet with her to hopefully get her to support the bill and have a hearing. I think that's the first time that I met her, going over to do that. Even when she was in the state house, she had an entourage. She had like four or five people that were just kind of always around as she walked down the hall, sort of like you see an important member of Congress right now. Everybody just kind of knew then that someday, she was going to be governor or senator or something incredible.

What is shocking is not just that she got elected as governor as a Democrat, but she came from

17. Kansas reestablished the death penalty in July 1994 after the U.S. Supreme Court deemed capital punishment unconstitutional in 1972. The Kansas law permits executions via lethal injection for adults convicted of capital murder. The Kansas State Supreme Court ruled this law unconstitutional only to have the ruling overturned in 2006 by the U.S. Supreme Court. Although Parkinson regrets sponsoring the bill reinstating the death penalty, Kansas has not executed an inmate on death row since 1965. See Kansas Legislative Research Department, "Death Penalty in Kansas," January 27, 2021, www.kslegresearch.org/KLRD-web/Publications/JudiciaryCorrectionsJuvJustice/memo_genl_deboer_death_penalty.pdf.

18. Bill Graves served as the forty-third governor of Kansas from 1995 to 2003.

out of state and was the executive director of the Kansas Trial Lawyers Association. I mean, if you were saying to somebody, “OK, let’s put together a blueprint for what would be a great path to become a governor of Kansas, so let’s get an out-of-state Democrat that runs the Trial Lawyers”—that wouldn’t be it! But she’s just so incredibly talented and effective. She just outclassed the whole field.

[In 2008 and 2009,] I was perceptive enough to figure it out—as was almost everybody else in America—that she was a rising star and everybody wanted her. I don’t think Governor Sebelius would have gone to Washington for any job other than the one she did, health and human services. She was not willing to just take any old cabinet post that came by. She only wanted to take one where she thought she could make a major impact.¹⁹

Kansas Republican Party Chair during the Moderate vs. Conservative Battles

One of the biggest decisions I ever made was in 1996, which is not just leaving the state senate but not running for Congress, because the congressional seat was open. I had just had passed some very successful legislation that unified the former government in Wyandotte County. Everyone was saying, “Mark, you’ve got to run; you’ve got to do this.” I decided instead that I wanted to go into business, and [Stacy and I] built our first elder-care facility. That really has been our work since then, and my thought was that I would just spend the rest of my life building elder-care facilities.

What happened two years later was that the social conservatives had taken control of the Republican Party and were causing then Governor Bill Graves all kinds of fits. You know, you would think that your own party would be supportive! The conservatives were issuing press releases attacking their own governor, and it was causing him all sorts of problems. The party chair [David

Miller] ran against Graves in the primary, which is unheard-of, and Graves decided he needed to put a stop to it. So he got very involved in the precinct races and created the possibility and the ultimate solution of moderates winning back the party. So once moderates won back the party, the question then became, who should head the party? People came to me and said, “Mark, kind of as a favor to the governor, as a favor to the state, would you run the party for a while and help us get back on track?” It seemed like a really good fit for me, and so I did it.

Until the mid-1980s, the Republican Party was always controlled by moderate Republicans. It wasn’t until really David Miller came along and sort of took over that conservatives were running the party.²⁰ I subscribed to a belief—that I later realized was wrong—that the conservatives were a small part of the party and when they had control of the party with David Miller, they had hijacked the party, that in fact the general view of Republicans in the state was much more moderate and much more progressive. And so when we were able to win back the majority of the precincts, which would have been in 1998, we thought, OK, this thing that is temporary is over; we’ll get in there; we will bring the party back to what it was. In my view, my job as state party chair was to not pick between people that are Republicans running against each other; in fact, it was just to help everybody and legitimately treat everybody the same. I was comfortable in that belief because I thought that most other Republicans in the state were moderate.

20. David G. Miller, a Republican from Eudora, served in the Kansas House from 1981 to 1990. He ran for lieutenant governor with gubernatorial contender Nestor Weigand in 1990, losing in the GOP primary to Mike Hayden. Miller, an antiabortion conservative activist, was chair of the Christian Coalition of Kansas from 1994 to 1996 and was elected chair of the Kansas Republican Party in 1995. In 1998, he made the unusual move of challenging his own party’s governor in the Republican primary, saying that Graves “has displayed clear hostility to the conservative Republican agenda.” Graves became determined to crush Miller in the primary and did so, winning 72.8 percent of the vote. For extensive discussion of the bitter Graves/Miller clash and the shift to the right in the Kansas Republican Party, see Beatty and Dean, “Doing What Needed to Get Done,” 192–95.

19. Kathleen Sebelius served as a Kansas state representative from 1987 to 1994, Kansas insurance commissioner from 1995 to 2003, Kansas governor from 2003 to 2009, and U.S. secretary of health and human services in the Barack Obama administration from 2009 to 2014.

I made a commitment to visit all 105 counties and not just drive through but go to the county, make a speech, and get to know the people. What I learned was these people hadn't hijacked the party; they *were* the party. They were a clear majority. And this notion that, oh, this is some temporary aberration, that most of the Republicans in the state are prochoice and don't hate gay people and love public education—that ain't it. So it was extremely depressing because what I realized was the party that I had grown up with wasn't there anymore. And it's not like it got hijacked; we lost fair and square. There's just more of them.

It harkened me back to when I was running for the state senate in 1992. I'd go door-to-door every night, and about once a night, somebody at the door would say, "What's your position on abortion?" And as soon as they asked that question, I knew I was in trouble, and so I would say, "I understand both sides, but I believe a woman should have a right to choose." Sometimes they'd be kind, and that would be the end of it, and sometimes I'd get yelled at. I remember one night I came back and said, "Stacy, if these people ever figured out who the other ones of them are, we would have a real problem, because there's a hell of a lot of them, and if they would figure out a way to pull together [they'd take over]." Well, they figured out a way; the Internet came along, and communication got more efficient.

I managed to, I think, get everyone's respect but at the same time not make anybody happy! The state party should not exist in favor of the moderates or the conservatives; it should exist to work with everybody. So I raised funds, and we used those funds to help everyone, and I think some of the moderates were upset with that. I ran the party very much in a transparent, I think, fair way for four years, hoping that by doing that, people would see that the divisions weren't helping anybody and it was better to go forward in a united way. It ended up that I was completely unsuccessful with that. Despite running the party in a fair way that included everybody, the divisions



Republican Susan Wagle and Mark Parkinson entered the Kansas House in 1991 as new legislators and seatmates. Wagle served from 1991 to 2021 in the legislature, including ten years as Senate President. In 2006, Wagle was the running mate for GOP gubernatorial nominee State Senator Jim Barnett, while Parkinson was Democrat Kathleen Sebelius's running mate. The two debated each other—"believe it or not there actually is a lieutenant governor debate!" quips Parkinson—on October 24, 2006, in Emporia. Sebelius/Parkinson defeated Barnett/Wagle 57.8 percent to 40.5 percent. Courtesy of Dave Heinemann.

probably just got worse.

The hardest time of being chair was my final three or four months because that was after the primary in 2002, where we had an open governor seat, and I was hoping that [State Senator] Dave Kerr would win the primary and that I could then enthusiastically campaign with him and for him for four months. But lo and behold, David did not win the primary, Tim Shallenberger won the primary, and because I really do believe that you should do things in a right and fair way, I did my job as state party chair.²¹ I didn't dial it in for Tim Shallenberger; I really campaigned. I've seen quotes from him where he said that I didn't do that, that we did the least amount possible. Completely untrue. We raised more money for Republican candidates in the four years that I was there than had ever been done before. We gave more money to all the Republican candidates than ever before.

21. Results of the 2002 gubernatorial Republican primary were Shallenberger/Lindstrom, 122,713; Kerr/Birch, 87,494; Knight/Glasscock, 78,118; and Bloom/Bloom, 7,769. In the general election, Sebelius/Moore defeated Shallenberger/Lindstrom by a vote count of 441,858 to 376,830.

So that was a tough time. Running around the state campaigning for Tim Shallenberger, which I did because it was my job, was not fun. I ran in 1998, and it was fun because we just won the precincts and we were going to take the party back and had the governor and all that—that was great. In hindsight, I really wish I hadn't run again in 2000 because I just wasn't thinking through that: Hey, what am I going to do if some right-wing person gets the [governor] nomination? So the toughest time was those four months. When I didn't run again for party chair in 2002, I was convinced that I was completely out of politics. I wasn't disgusted with that, I was OK with it; it had run its course. My viewpoint just didn't exist in my party anymore, so I thought it was time.

Switching Parties in 2006

I have never changed my view on any political position over the last thirty years. I have always been pro-public education, pro-the regents, pro-choice, against gun ideas like conceal and carry; I have always been a moderate. As time went on, it became increasingly difficult to work within the Republican Party because the Republican Party got more conservative. I will say that, personally, changing parties, I had more trouble with it than I think I let on. I had spent thirty years as a Republican and touting Republican principles and ideas and recruiting candidates, and to switch on a dime was a very significant change for me. It took a while for me to convince myself that it was really OK. It wasn't just that I was a Republican; I was the GOP state party chair, and so everything happened very quickly. But after we got past the announcement, I felt disloyal; I felt some level of guilt. And it was more than I let on. I was acting like I was handling it very smoothly and switching was quite easy, but it was a little bit disorienting. To be honest, I've never felt completely comfortable with it.

The thing that has made it challenging for me is that I was the state party chair. Does that involve some sort of lifetime commitment? I don't really know. But it did impact the way I

was thinking about it. Some Republican stalwarts were saying some very negative things, and I was understanding where they were coming from. None of the statements I took personally. I'm not critical of those people. It's really weird when a former state party chair switches parties—I get it. I invited the criticism, and I absorbed some of it, and some of it hurt and it may have been justified.²²

I don't regret that I've done it. I feel liberated as a Democrat and talk to other Democrats that have switched that have held office, and they feel very free and open and liberated.

Political Shocker: Becoming Kathleen Sebelius's Running Mate

After I left being state party chair, there were a number of issues that I ended up working on with Governor Sebelius. I began working closely with her after [Kansas Democratic Chair] Larry Gates and Governor Sebelius recruited Paul Morrison to run for attorney general. Paul Morrison was a friend of mine, and I was very supportive of that idea, and when he agreed to switch parties and run as a Democrat, I agreed to come out and publicly support him, even though I was a Republican. She did not know that I had been close to Paul and managed his campaigns and all of that. So when he went to the first meeting, he called me and said, "This has to be supersecret, but Kathleen's trying to recruit me to run for AG as a Democrat. I'll only do it if you'll be with me. Would you come to this meeting?" I think Kathleen was surprised because she knew me as past GOP chair. I don't think she knew the Paul connection.

After we had the third meeting or so, Paul

22. House Speaker Doug Mays called Parkinson a "discredited Republican" who was "opportunistic" and said that he was personally "disgusted" with Parkinson's party switch. GOP Chairman Tim Shallenburger wished Parkinson "good riddance" and said he believed people like Parkinson had "designs on infiltrating the party" and that he was not sad to see him go. Kansas Senator Sam Brownback said he felt "personally betrayed" by Parkinson. See Steve Painter, "Ex-GOP Chairman Likely to Join Sebelius Ticket," *Wichita Eagle*, May 31, 2006; David Klepper, "Sebelius-Parkinson Ticket Is Talk of Two Parties," *Kansas City Star*, June 1, 2006.

said, “OK, I’m going to do this,” and I said, “Paul, the great thing is I’ll never have to think about running for office again, because I’m going to be completely persona non grata after this.” So that was my mindset, and that’s where I was at. Believe me, I never thought anyone would ever come to me and say, “Mark, you ought to run with Governor Sebelius,” or you ought to run for any other office ever. I mean, I thought I was done.

I think they really thought someone else was going to do this lieutenant governor job. [Former Kansas State football coach] Bill Snyder had either said yes or had come very close to saying yes. Apparently, he then talked to Tom Osborne, who had been in Congress and then ran for governor [in 2006], and somehow somebody got to the right of him on gun control, which is pretty hard to do, and he was fed up with it. He said to Bill Snyder, “You’re nuts if you get into politics.”²³ So within a very short time frame, like maybe ten days before the filing deadline, I received a call from [Sebelius’s chief of staff Joyce Allegrucci] saying, “I have a very interesting idea, and I wonder, would you mind if I approached Governor Sebelius about this?” I said, “This doesn’t make any sense at all.” The reason I thought it was crazy was because of the 2002 campaign when I was state party chair and the things that I had said [against Sebelius]. [But] the things that I had said were relatively mild. She called me back and said, “I think it does make some sense; let’s talk it about some more.” After having a little while to think about it, I came to the obvious conclusion that it really elevated her ability to work across party lines.

A number of events had occurred that made it make a lot of sense. The largest provider in our space came along and made an unsolicited offer for our business, and we did that and we closed

23. Tom Osborne was the head football coach of the University of Nebraska Cornhuskers from 1973 to 1997. He was elected to Congress as a Republican from Nebraska’s Third District in 2000 and served three terms. Following a surprisingly unsuccessful bid for governor in 2006, Osborne became the University of Nebraska’s athletic director from 2007 until his retirement in 2013.

on April 1 of 2006. I was forty-eight at that point, trying to figure out what are we going to do next, so the timing worked out great on a personal level. Then on a professional political level, it was part of the effort that I was undertaking to get rid of [then Attorney General] Phill Kline. I felt like Phill Kline was a uniquely dangerous person to Kansas and possibly the country. So getting involved with Paul [Morrison] to do that and running for lieutenant governor, it all made sense to me.²⁴

Because of the compressed time frame that was involved in this whole process, immediately after I said I would at least think about it, I started to get vetted. There was a vetting team that tries to figure out everything about your life and see if there are any problems in your background. So I told them everything about my life, and that happened over the next couple of days. After that vetting process was complete, Stacy and I came up to Cedar Crest and met with Kathleen and her inner staff. The job hadn’t been offered, I hadn’t accepted it, it was just kind of a general discussion. Then by the next day or so, I had been offered the position and agreed to do it. It became a national story, and I think it helped her.

The Paul Morrison Scandal

I was completely shocked because Stacy and I weren’t just close to Paul, we were and are close to Joyce, Paul’s wife. Joyce gave me a call late one night and said, “I need to come over and talk.” I’m like—Oh, my god, what’s the deal?—thinking health or something like that. So she comes over to our home, and she tells me about this stuff, and we just couldn’t believe it. We were then able to piece together things that were really tough to think

24. Republican Phill Kline served as attorney general of Kansas from 2003 to 2007, losing his reelection bid in 2006 to newly minted Democrat Paul Morrison. Controversies surrounding Kline’s investigation of abortion clinics during his time as attorney general resulted in the indefinite suspension of his law license in 2013. Ironically, in 2006, he was chosen by Johnson County Republicans to replace the outgoing Morrison as county prosecutor. He lost the 2008 GOP primary for Johnson County DA to Steve Howe and is now an associate professor of law at Liberty University.

about.²⁵

When I was running for the state senate and going to every single door, there was about a two-week period of time where I was trying a case in federal court defending Paul against the sexual harassment claim brought by a woman named Kelly Summerlin. I was completely convinced that we were in the right in that case, and it was hard for me not to immediately think about that case and wonder and to not think about Joyce and their kids and what the impact would be on all of them. So it was really bad.

My belief was the thought that Paul was going to be the next candidate for governor. He was just perfect, and I think if this hadn't happened, [he would have been] the one: a tough-on-crime, really earthy person that says hilarious things; he was everything [as a candidate], and it just turned out that this was going on and it was devastating. I've heard people say, could Paul have survived this? The new playbook among politicians appears to be to not resign and just kind of ride stuff out. So I wonder about that.

Lieutenant Governor of Kansas

One of the great things about being lieutenant governor was you had an unlimited source of humor because you could always make fun of how irrelevant you were. My speeches for those two years were the best that I ever gave because I had so many great openings on how irrelevant I was. A standard story was "In many states, the lieutenant governor has some official responsibilities—in Kansas, the lieutenant governor has no responsibilities. [My wife] Stacy said to me, 'What are your constitutional responsibilities?' and I said, 'Stacy, I have none.' She looked me in the eye and

25. In 2007, Attorney General Morrison admitted to an extramarital affair with Linda Carter, a staffer in the Johnson County district attorney's office. Carter accused Morrison of sexual harassment and claimed that Morrison was using his sexual relationship with her to obtain information about Morrison's political foe, Phill Kline. While Morrison did confess to the affair, he denied all other allegations brought forth by Carter and was never charged with any crimes. Morrison resigned on January 31, 2008.

said, 'Mark, you are uniquely qualified.'" I still use that story.

I brought all the former lieutenant governors into the office after I got elected just to ask for advice, and it was fun—there's a ton of former lieutenant governors alive. Nobody probably keeps track. Gary Sherrer—who is brilliant and hilarious; he was Bill Graves's lieutenant governor—we were talking about how irrelevant lieutenant governors are, and I asked, "What's it like to be a former lieutenant governor?" And he said, "There is nothing quite so former as a former lieutenant governor." I love that one. [Another] story is that I was at Washington Days, the big Kansas Democratic event, and as lieutenant governor, I wanted to be on time and do everything right. So I get to my table early, and there's a young man at the table. I said, "Normally when I come to these events, it is people my age; what are you doing here?" He looked at me and he said, "Well, you're not going to believe this, but the Democratic Party called my dad, and they said if we gave \$10,000 for this event, we could have dinner with the lieutenant governor." Then he says, "What are you doing here?" I said, "I'm the lieutenant governor!"²⁶

I went to the national lieutenant governor orientation—believe it or not, they have that—they bring all the lieutenant governors in, and they tell you how to be a lieutenant governor. I got great advice. One of the lieutenant governors—he went on to be governor of Utah for a long time, Gary Herbert—he said to make sure you meet with your governor all the time. So I came back from that, and I said, "Governor, can we meet once a week?" And so we did that, and thank god, that turned out to be invaluable advice. That allowed me to sort of know what was going on. What I later learned when I became governor was I thought I was in the inner

26. In February 2009, SurveyUSA polled Kansas adults to ask whether they knew who would become governor if Kathleen Sebelius left office, and 65 percent of the respondents said no. In the same poll, only 19 percent of the respondents had an opinion of Parkinson, with the remainder saying "neutral" or "no opinion." In contrast, the average of fourteen 2006 polls on Sebelius showed that only 3 percent of Kansas adults did not know her or had no opinion about her.

circle. I was not in the inner circle. Most lieutenant governors are not in the inner circle.

I needed something to do. I did not work full time as lieutenant governor. I did not take a salary because I knew if somebody realizes that I'm still doing the stuff that I really love to do, there's going to be a big story. So I worked four days a week as lieutenant governor, and I worked three days a week developing our elder-care buildings. But I still needed a portfolio. Kathleen gave me energy, which was great. I spent two years really, really studying, and I developed way more than a normal politician's understanding would be of energy. That turned out to be fantastic because it's such an important issue moving forward. I was in charge of running around cutting ribbons and doing all of that, but the substantive stuff to work on was energy policy.

I think that the lieutenant governor job, if you're like me, is really a good job. If you have the right relationship with the governor, and you have an interest in policy and get a portfolio, it's doing all the policy stuff without all of the stuff that a governor has to do on the nonpolicy side. I didn't really ever like the royalty stuff, I liked the policy stuff, so lieutenant governor was a really good position for me. And I was really good at doing nothing. I was great at it!

Against All Odds, Becoming Governor

I didn't take very seriously the possibility of Governor Sebelius going to D.C. until Barack Obama started doing very well in the primaries. She made it clear to me that she was a Barack Obama supporter. Conventional wisdom was that Hillary Clinton would be the nominee. Well, Obama started surprising people, obviously in Iowa and then on down the road. Once that happened, I became aware that there was a very distinct possibility that she was going to go to D.C., and I really changed my focus as lieutenant governor from just working on energy policy to really studying the budget. I spent the three months of the summer in 2008 really learning as much I could about the budget, and that



Parkinson served one term, 1991–1992, in the Kansas House of Representatives. He is pictured here in the House chamber in 1992 with Representative Robin Jennison, Republican, from Healy. Jennison was first elected to the house in 1991 and capped off his nine-year career with a two-year term as Speaker of the House from 1999–2000. Courtesy of Dave Heineman.

ended up being very helpful because shortly after, she did leave.

I've just been very lucky. The number of things that had to have occurred for me to have become lieutenant governor and governor is just astonishing; it's literally like winning the lottery two days in a row, the odds of all that coming together. If you work really hard, and you are working in a directed way, then you have a better chance to get lucky than if you're not working hard. But it's still luck! I mean, what are the odds? At the end of the day, if we hadn't sold our business on April 1, 2006, running would have been a nonstarter. If I hadn't been the state party chair, if John Moore had continued as lieutenant governor, if Bill Snyder had said, "Yeah, I'd like to be lieutenant governor," if Kathleen Sebelius hadn't recruited Paul Morrison—it is literally a millions-to-one type thing. Yeah, the fact that I had worked hard and built a successful business that sold and been state party chair, that all kind of created the scenario, but I still believe at the end of the day that I Forrest Gumped my way into being governor.

The job of governor is a tremendous job, but it's really what you make of it. It is certainly possible to be elected governor and just be careful and just kind

of monitor things and make sure that nothing flares up or gets too far out of control and then move on. My style was very proactive, very strategic, very businesslike, developing specific policy initiatives, strategies to achieve them, implementing the strategies. The ability to listen, the ability to be patient, and the ability to strategically plan and implement the plan are, I think, the three most important things to being governor.

Because I knew that I had such a limited time, that I would only be governor for twenty months, I made the decision that we were really going to try to do something with the time that we had. So the first thing that we did when I became governor is that we held a strategic planning session where I pulled the staff in and we talked about what our goals were for the next twenty months and how we would achieve them. We really viewed the whole twenty months as a springboard because we had such a limited amount of time.

My philosophy is that organizations need to be driven by missions, and they need to hold themselves accountable to metrics, so everything that we do is about mission and metrics. We brought that same approach to the governor's office. We ran the state as a business. We weren't just responding to stories day-to-day. We set all of these policy objectives as goals that had specific work plans that were objectively verifiable and connected to them.

The Challenge of Picking a Lieutenant Governor

I really wanted to try to find somebody that would have been a viable candidate in 2010; I just couldn't do it. There wasn't anybody that was willing to be lieutenant governor, and because I'm not at the major-league level of politics, I'm happy to disclose that. I asked some people to be lieutenant governor that decided it wasn't a good fit for them. The obvious choice was Laura Kelly. She was a state senator from a pretty tough district to get elected from. I knew she was supersmart. Believe it or not, there actually is a lieutenant governor debate, so when we did the mock debate for that [in 2006], she was the stand-in for Susan Wagle, so I knew that

she was superbly talented, and if everything fell together in the right way at some point, she could be governor of Kansas.²⁷

We made overtures to her. I don't think she ever wanted to have to say that she turned down being lieutenant governor, but she made it clear that she thought that where she was was the right place, and that proved to be true. I strongly suspect that anybody that would have been lieutenant governor that would have run for governor in 2010 would have lost. I think that Laura made the right decision. She was the only person that I could think of at the time that I thought would have been like a super credible candidate in 2010.

Once it became clear that that option wasn't out there, then it was like, oh, my god, this is going to look pretty bad if we can't find a lieutenant governor! I loved Troy Findley. Troy and I served in the legislature together back in the 1990s. I think he was as surprised as anyone when I just kind of sat there and thought about it and said, "Troy, you ought to be lieutenant governor!"²⁸ It was a really weird time because we were just appointing Democrats to every office in the state. People were retiring or moving on, and it was like, hey, you wanna be this; you there, you wanna be this? Everybody gets to be something!²⁹

27. Parkinson was right about Laura Kelly. Kelly, from Topeka, was first elected to the Kansas Senate in 2004 and was reelected in 2008, 2012, and 2016. In 2018, she won the Democratic primary for governor with 51.5 percent of the vote and then went on to defeat Republican Kris Kobach and Independent Greg Orman in the general election, 47.8 percent to 43.3 percent to 6.5 percent. She was sworn in as the forty-eighth governor of Kansas on January 14, 2019.

28. Troy Findley served in the Kansas House from 1995 to 2003, as chief of staff to the Kansas governor from 2005 to 2009, and as Kansas lieutenant governor from 2009 to 2011.

29. Parkinson is being facetious, but due to resignations, by March 2010, five of the six statewide elected offices were filled by Democrats who had not been elected to their positions: Governor Sebelius appointed Steve Six as attorney general after Paul Morrison resigned in 2008 and appointed Dennis McKinney Kansas treasurer in 2009 after Lynn Jenkins won her race for Second District Congress; Parkinson became governor when Sebelius resigned, and then he appointed Troy Findley as lieutenant governor in 2009; and Parkinson appointed Chris Biggs secretary of state after Ron Thornburgh resigned in 2010. Six, McKinney, and Biggs all lost their 2010 bids to retain their offices.

Ending the Sunflower Coal-Fired Power Plant Controversy

I spent 2007 and 2008 working on energy policy, and a big part of that was the Sunflower coal plant and whether or not it should be approved. But the more important part was my effort on wind energy. When Kathleen and I got elected in 2006, Kansas had approximately 2 percent of its energy from wind energy, and we internally set the goal of raising that to 10 percent, which makes complete sense because we're the second-windiest state in the country, and we just had not taken advantage of that asset at all.

I always want to have a project. When I was in the state house, my project was the driver's age; when I was in the state senate, it became the death penalty; and when I was lieutenant governor, it became to get 10 percent of our energy through wind. I remember going to an editorial board in Wichita, and they asked me what our goal was, and I said, "If we don't have 10 percent of our energy as wind by when I'm finished with being lieutenant governor in 2010, I will have failed." Our staff said, "You're not supposed to say that kind of thing to an editorial board," and I said, "No, it's the opposite; you have to lay down a marker and a goal and then go out there and get it."

We had the whole Sunflower issue, and tied into that was wind. I learned a heck of a lot about it, and what I learned about the Sunflower plant was that in the time between 2002 and 2006, they had approved their Sunflower permit for three very large coal plants with very little mitigation. Sunflower let the time run out, and so they refiled. I was taking a close look at it and just thinking that this does not make any sense. Climate change is real; the world is headed in a whole other direction; we've got all this wind; we need to not approve these plans.

I went with that recommendation to Kathleen, and Kathleen took the bold position that she took, and the permit was denied. We had enormous furor from western Kansas in particular, the business community a little bit, about the decision, and it

ended up being kind of a huge stumbling block to getting anything done in the legislature. People were saying, "I'm not going to vote for anything unless we get the plant," or "If we get the plant, I'm not going to vote for anything"; I mean, it was enormously controversial.³⁰

I had been developing an idea, which was what if we went to Sunflower and instead of them suing us over this or bringing bills to reverse the decision—which is what they had done—we reach a compromise where we let them refile but with a very heavily mitigated proposal—much smaller, much more wind energy? When I became governor, I was in a unique position to try it out, and so shortly after I became governor, I contacted the folks at Sunflower, and I said, "Let's sit down and figure out if there's a way that we can reach an agreement on this." At the time that I entered into this agreement—which was not to approve the plan but to give them the ability to apply under some pretty significant mitigation and agreements to do various things with wind—I didn't think they would ever build a plant. I knew enough about the energy world at that time that there were like five different ways that Sunflower was not going to get built.³¹

In my view, we were giving them nothing, and the agreement they gave us in return was that they would back off the legislative stuff and let us write energy law any way that we wanted to. So we got a bill written that did two important things: It required a certain percentage of energy to be wind in Kansas, and it allowed for net metering so that people could have their own wind towers and get paid off of their own stuff. Those are two things

30. On October 18, 2007, the permits to build two coal-fired power plants were denied by the Sebelius administration. From March 18, 2008, to April 13, 2009, the Kansas legislature passed five bills overturning the decision, each of which was vetoed by Governor Sebelius. Furious lobbying by the legislature to overturn her vetoes was unsuccessful.

31. Parkinson was right: Sunflower never built the coal plant and never will. On January 15, 2020, the company announced that it was abandoning its plans to build the \$2.2 billion plant near Holcomb. Its permit expired March 27, 2020, nearly thirteen years from the day the first permit was denied by Governor Sebelius. See Chance Swaim, "Kansas Energy Company Abandons Plans for \$2.2 Billion Coal Power Plant," *Wichita Eagle*, January 15, 2020.

that people said would never happen in Kansas. When I came in as a lieutenant governor in 2007, they said we're never going to get an RES—renewal energy standard—and we're never going to get net metering, but we got it as a result of the agreement.

I thought the agreement was really smart, and as soon as we entered into the agreement, I arranged that right after the press conference, I would have the environmentalists who had been working on this to meet me in my office so that I could debrief them. There were three of them, so they came into the office, and I'm explaining to them what I think is this brilliant approach, and they are clearly upset. As upset as you're going to get under a new governor. I realized at the time that this was going to be widely hated by the environmentalists, and that proved to be the case. I think that the vast majority of house Democrats were actually quite relieved. We were really having to strongly encourage a bunch of them to stick with us on the Sunflower votes, and it was starting to create some real problems. Hopefully, it won't get undone from here on, and Kansas will be a major producer of wind energy for a long period of time.

Budget Crises, Massive Budget Cuts, and Tax Increases

I get sworn in in April of 2009, and the budget is in horrible shape. It's not Kathleen's fault; we're in the deepest recession that we've ever been in. We have a brilliant budget director in Duane Goossen, and I had already been leading the budget efforts behind the scenes with Duane and meeting with all the cabinet secretaries. I'm pretty good with numbers, so I understood the budget. I knew where we were spending money, where cuts could be made, where we had reserved funds, etc., and we created multiple scenarios for what might or might not occur.

The national stimulus act passed, so we got a bunch of money at the state level, like every state did, but it wasn't enough. We get into April, and we realized that we don't have enough money, and so I called in the legislative leadership. I had

extremely close relationships with Steve Morris, the Republican leader of the senate; with Anthony Hensley, the Democratic leader of the senate; and with Paul Davis, the Democratic leader in the house. I did not have a close relationship with Mike O'Neill, the Republican speaker of the house, the conservative. I say to the four of them, but especially to the three of them that I'm close to, "Look, if you guys will leave town, I will balance this budget, and trust me, I'll do it in a fair way and you'll be OK with it. I understand you're going to have to criticize me because I'm going to make some nasty cuts, but just try to keep the criticism at a level where you're satisfied you've criticized me but that I can still function as governor and I don't have all these editorials being written that I'm heartless and all of that." They do that; they agree.

So they leave town, and I use the rescission power, and it's easy. I go to our cabinet secretaries, and I say, "Look, tell me where you think there might be 3 or 4 percent that we can cut in the budget, and if you don't tell me where it is, I'm going to find it myself." The things that we had to cut from the get-go were not that difficult; they were not the kind of things where you are like, oh, my god, this is bad. So we get the budget balanced, and we're able to end that session.

As the summer and fall of 2009 progressed, the budget numbers kept getting worse. I mean, are we going to make payroll for the state? That's how crazy it was. We made another round of rescissions, and then we got to the fall, and we had to do it again, and the cuts were really bad. I think we might have had to cut Medicaid 10 percent, which is an astonishing number. It's at that point that I said, this has gone too far. The only way that we can feel good about ourselves as policymakers is we're going to have to have a temporary tax increase to fill this hole.

In the meantime, I went ahead and made the cuts so that we were constitutionally balanced and all of that, but I called the Hospital Association, I called the doctors, I called the nurses and nursing homes and all of that and said, "Look, I'm



Parkinson served one term, 1993–1996, in the Kansas State Senate. He is talking here with Sen. Sandy Praeger, Republican, from Lawrence. Praeger served from 1991–2002 in the Kansas legislature and then was elected as Kansas Insurance Commissioner in 2002, winning reelection in 2006 and 2010. Courtesy of Dave Heineman.

cutting the hell out of you,” and then there were tears and we hugged and they all knew it in advance. I said, “We can get the money back, but I need you and your people in the capitol every day in 2010 because we’re going to go for a temporary increase in the sales tax and fill this hole.”

When you start to think about what taxes you can raise (laughs)—it’s hard. If you decide you want to raise the income tax, you’re going to get crushed by Republicans and by Johnson County, etc., etc. Historically, when you decide you’re going to raise the sales tax, you get crushed by Democrats because the sales tax disproportionately impacts poorer people. But the benefits of this were probably disproportionately beneficial to poorer people.

I felt like the only taxes we had any chance to increase and we could get to work would be the sales tax. I needed Democratic support to do it, so of course I talked to Paul Davis and Anthony Hensley about it and consulted with Troy Findley and others. Everybody agreed that it really was horrible as a Democrat to raise the sales tax, but given the options that were out there—which would be laying off thousands of state employees, not restoring the Medicaid cuts, and maybe even having to have more Medicaid cuts—that it was better than the

alternatives.

The only other tax out there is the property tax, but you can’t raise the property tax; that’s just impossible. We weren’t 100 percent sure that we could get it done because we had a really small number of people in the legislature. In the house, maybe we had forty-five Democrats, and in the senate, we had like nine or ten, and one of them was never with us. We knew we had to get a bunch of Republicans. I remember a reporter wrote a piece two days after the State of the State speech saying that Parkinson’s already failed because people were saying that the tax proposal was dead on arrival. But there was just no other alternative if you believed in the programs that we believed in and didn’t want to lay off thousands of state employees. We always thought we had a shot, [but] I never knew if we could get it done. We ended up with a three-year sales tax increase.³²

So I became a governor who had instituted the most budget cuts of any governor in the state and then subsequently had the largest tax increase of any governor in the state, which is not a really great

32. Parkinson made six rounds of budget cuts overall, totaling over \$1 billion. On May 27, 2010, he signed into law Kansas’s \$13.7 billion budget, which included a temporary one-cent increase in the state sales tax. See Scott Rothschild, “Parkinson Signs Budget, Tax Increase, and Applies Vetoes,” *Lawrence Journal World*, May 27, 2010.

combination for a politician. It was very unlikely that I was going to run again, but when we decided in the fall of 2009 that the only way to make this work was with a tax increase, that's when it became absolutely in my mind completely impossible. The goal just became, let's try to get the state in a really good position and do everything we can with this very limited amount of time that we have. And we were able to do it.

I naively thought that maybe Governor [Sam] Brownback would come in and look at the budget projections and see how healthy the state would be and then run for president, saying, "Look, I came in and there was no money in the bank, and now there's like a zillion dollars in the bank." If he had just done nothing, he would have had a really great résumé to run for president, if he'd just done nothing. But he didn't do nothing. He took the gift away of all of that work that had been done to put the state in a good position, and he reversed it. So at that point, I thought, My god. I felt really bad for the people that had given up their political careers. They knew [it would hurt them]. It wasn't just the moderate Democrats or moderate Republicans. There were a bunch of Democrats from swing districts that voted for it and lost in 2010. They all knew that if you vote for a tax increase, you got a really good chance to lose, and that's why it was just so disheartening to see all of that work undone through the subsequent tax cuts.³³

33. Republican Sam Brownback served as U.S. senator from 1996 to 2011 and won the governorship in 2010 and reelection in 2014. He ran for president in 2007. In 2012, Governor Brownback pushed through the state legislature the largest tax cuts in Kansas history, lowering state income tax rates and eliminating some business taxes entirely. The negative impact on the Kansas budget was almost immediate. In 2014, the state took in \$700 million less in state taxes than it had the previous year. In 2017, the state was facing a \$900 million deficit and further rounds of massive budget cuts. On June 6, 2017, the Republican dominated legislature overrode a Brownback veto and rolled back the 2012 tax cuts. See Julie Bosman, Mitch Smith, and Monica Davey, "Brownback Tax Cuts Set Off a Revolt by Kansas Republicans," *New York Times*, June 7, 2017. Brownback left office early to become ambassador for religious freedom, an office he held from January 2018 until January 2021.

Accomplishments and Legacy

I had no political capital because I wasn't running again, and on top of that, the Republican Party was upset at me for switching. What I said to our team was, Look, we have nothing going for us. We don't have any of the advantages that people typically have, except what we have going for us is the power of ideas. And if you look at the course of human history, it is true that for temporary periods of time people can succeed with brute force, but over time the most powerful force is the power of ideas. And so, although we go into these battles with no political capital, we're going to win because of the power of our ideas. And we did. Every initiative that we felt was important, we achieved. Everything.

There was so much we accomplished in 2010. We got the budget balanced with the temporary sales tax increase that would have put the state in an incredible financial position if it hadn't been undone in 2012. We developed a multi-million-dollar highway project in the middle of a deep recession. We got public smoking banned. And most important, we instituted an energy policy and got it deep enough into the structure of the state that even though they tried to undo it after we left, they weren't able to. Along the way, we negotiated some agreements with some major employers in the state to not leave. That was all accomplished without any political capital. It was all in my view accomplished by the power of ideas and just some really great people to work with. We had a fantastic coalition of Democrats and moderate Republicans that got it through, many of whom sacrificed their political careers to get the state in a good financial shape. I feel very content with what we achieved.

Probably the most important opportunity I've ever had in my life was to be the governor of the state when we were in the deepest recession that we've been in since the Great Depression because it really allowed me to use every skill that I may or may not have developed and be surrounded by a group of incredible people. The fact that we were able to put the state that we all loved back on good

solid footing, that's the most important thing that I've ever done.

I don't think I was governor long enough to have a legacy. I think you'd have to be a real nerd to know me. I would be like the worst Double Jeopardy answer ever because no one would know me. But I do think that hopefully what Kathleen has shown and what Bill Graves showed and I followed up on is that if people work in a bipartisan way and they're willing to listen to other folks, you can get a hell of a lot done as a governor.

Immediately upon leaving the governor's office, Parkinson began his new job as president

and CEO of the American Healthcare Association and the National Center for Assisted Living, based in Washington, D.C., which represents over fourteen thousand skilled nursing facilities and assisted living centers. He says that he hopes to be remembered as a "true Kansan who really loves the state" and as a person who "helped us get through a difficult time so that the state could then go on to bigger and better things." Based on his experience and actions, and despite his protestations to the contrary, Parkinson has cemented his legacy in Kansas.^[KH]