

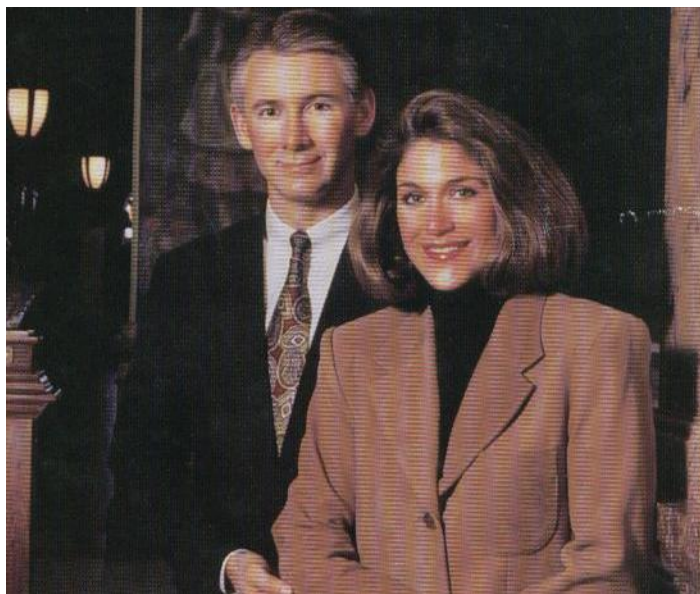
**INTERVIEW WITH
GOVERNOR BILL GRAVES
FEBRUARY 13, 2004
ALEXANDRIA, VIRGINIA
GOVERNOR OF KANSAS: JANUARY 9, 1995 - JANUARY 13, 2003**

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Dr. Bob Beatty, Producer, Kansas Governors Recorded History and Documentary Project, Kansas Institute of Politics at Washburn University



Governor Bill Graves and Linda Graves, 1995

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Q. Could you tell us where you were born and where you grew up and a little bit about your background?

A. I was born January 9th, 1953 in Salina, Kansas and that's where I grew up, went to high school, went to college and where my parents have resided all of their lives, and probably where I thought I would reside all of my life. But I think it will obviously be what I consider home.

Q. What was your life like as a boy? Were you involved in sports, were you involved with your family business or what activities?

A. I think I had a fairly normal childhood. My father, who was involved from the time I was born until even this day in the trucking industry, was gone quite a bit, he traveled. I grew up in Salina right across the street from the elementary school that I attended. It was called Whittier. I thought that was just terrific because it always gave me access to the school yard and to friends and fun things to do. I did enjoy athletics and participated in all of them to some extent. I can't say I was very good at any of them, but I enjoyed playing.

I stayed in Salina and went to Kansas Wesleyan University, having graduated from what was then Salina Central High School in 1971. I had a chance at Kansas Wesleyan to play both football and a little bit of baseball, so that kind of stuck with me throughout my school years. I had one sister, Martha, who after graduating also from Kansas Wesleyan made her home in Denver, Colorado, so we never got too far away from Salina.

Q. Was your family interested in politics or were you sort of the first one to go that route?

A. We had members of my family who had an interest in politics but no one in my immediate family I would say had much interest in politics. My father was in the trucking business and if anything he sort of always had the notion that government was sort of the enemy, or at least they were something that made it more difficult to operate and be successful. In fact, I had always anticipated I would fall in my father's footsteps. We had a family business that involved my dad and his three brothers and several of my father's sisters, my aunts, and even to some extent their husbands were involved. My grandfather had started this business in 1935. Most of my cousins had grown up and moved into the family business in one capacity or the other, so there was every reason to expect that I would be in the family business.

My father certainly got involved in politics to the extent he was a business man who started to understand he needed to have relationships with people who were making public policy decisions. I know early on, for instance, he supported Senator Dole. I think coming from Russell, not far from Salina, they became acquainted. I wouldn't call him anyone who was actively involved in politics but he was probably active to the extent we like people involved. He was making contributions and was helping people like Senator Dole get elected early in their career.

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Q. You expected to work for your family's firm but that didn't work out. Can you tell us what happened and how that led to you going a different direction?

A. My father, who I considered to be my mentor and my hero, he was a very bright, astute business man. He watched the motor carrier industry sort of transform itself in the 1960's and 1970's. While he would tell you that he succeeded by simply outworking his competition, he began to believe that there was coming a time in the industry where you simply couldn't work hard and succeed, that you had to be smart to succeed. It was a more complicated business. So he encouraged me, after I graduated from Kansas Wesleyan and I laid off work at the family business for about two years, to return to graduate school, which I did, working on an MBA degree in Masters and Business Administration at the University of Kansas. The notion being that it would help me be better prepared to come back and be involved in the business side of this industry.

Unfortunately, while I was away, he had an offer from a large company to buy out our family business. I think at that moment he was looking at concerns about how expensive it was to buy fuel. And back in the early 1970s we were a unionized carrier and relationships with unions can be difficult at times. I think we had a good relationship with our union members. And then there was something called deregulation basically opening up the industry to more competition, easier access to being in the trucking industry and he just felt like given the offer that was on the table he shouldn't pass up that opportunity to, you might say, cash in the chips. So Dad sold the business.

He called me and I remember very distinctly, being at my apartment down at KU and the phone ringing and my father saying, "I have news for you, we're selling the family business," which was really, a devastating blow to me because it's really what I thought I would do. It was sort of my safety net that was there for me. And I made a bad decision at that point. I concluded that my reason for being in graduate school was to achieve this higher level of education that would position me to be in my family business, and since the family business no longer existed that there wasn't any value in that graduate degree. And so after I had 43 graduate hours completed in a 60-hour program I pretty well walked away from graduate school, which in hindsight was not a very wise thing to do.

Luckily for me, that was 1980. There was a gentleman by the name of George Bush who was running for president in 1980 along with Ronald Reagan, John Anderson and Bob Dole. Even though my father had been a big supporter of Senator Dole's, I didn't really think a whole lot about that. Bush was sounding more interesting and Senator Dole had all the help he needed in Kansas. George Bush was a new face on the national political scene and someone who I thought had qualities and abilities that would be well served in the nation. So I signed on as a very underpaid staff person on the George Bush presidential campaign in 1980. That lasted about four months during that primary season, January, February, March and maybe into April. Then the ultimate nominee, President Reagan took over and got the nomination.

But we felt good about the fact that George Bush was asked to be his running mate and that just sort of opened a few doors and got me interested in the political process. My job was in Topeka and that gave me an opportunity to meet and sort of interact with people that worked in state government. It wasn't long after that that I got a call from then Secretary of State Jack Brier, who asked if I had any interest in pursuing a permanent position at the Secretary of State's Office. I went over and interviewed with Jack, took the job, and started work about the first of August of 1980 and ran most of the administrative functions of the Secretary of State's Office.

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The great thing about the job was it was in the Capitol. So I like to tell the story that my first day on the job I worked on at the State Capitol and my last day on the job 22 years later I was still at the State Capitol. I don't know that there are many people that have that kind of opportunity. The Secretary of State's Office was in the north wing of the State Capitol on the second floor. I was there as the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for about three years and then promoted to Assistant Secretary of State for roughly two years. Jack Brier decided to run for Governor in 1986 so I then ran for Secretary of State. Jack unfortunately wasn't elected Governor but I was successful in my race for Secretary of State.

I spent two terms, eight years, as Secretary of State, from 1986 to 1994 and then ran for Governor in 1994 and was fortunate to be elected twice in eight years, served from 1994 to 2003. So I went from the north wing of the second floor to the south wing of the second floor and then left office on January the 13th of 2003.

Q. I read a story and you can tell me if it is true. In 1982 you were all fired up to go to Washington D.C. And then you were talked into staying in the Secretary of State's office by Jack Breier. Is that true? And if so, could you tell us about that and what, what convinced you to stay?

A. I discovered after a couple of years in the Secretary of State's office that I really did enjoy public service and politics. And Senator Dole at that point had become or was about to become the majority leader in the United States Senate. With that happening there would be opportunities for additional staff and staff responsibilities to support the senator. So I went around the state and I found what I thought were probably the three or four most influential Kansans who supported Senator Dole and I asked them to write letters of recommendation for me so that I could potentially come to Washington and join Senator Dole's staff. I got my whole packet put together and I walked into my boss's office, Secretary of State Jack Brier and announced that I was intending to resign my position and pursue work in Washington. I think Jack knew that that was a moment where he needed to sort of fess up to the fact that he was entertaining the notion of running for Governor in 1986. He knew it was down the road. You kind of have to think ahead to a certain extent in the political world. And so Jack strongly suggested that I should stay, that there was likely going to be a promotion in the near future, which was when I moved from the Deputy Assistant Secretary of State to Assistant Secretary of State. And I thought about it and concluded that that was probably something that I could always come back and still try to come to Washington later. So I tore everything up and stayed and it all worked out pretty well.

Q. We've asked all the Governors if they can recall or talk about the point when they you sat down and thought, "I'm going to run for Governor, I think I can do that job." Do you remember any one time or was it more a process?

A. I think I can remember probably the moment when I knew I would run for Governor in 1994, and it came as somewhat of a surprise to me. It was general election night in 1990. I was running for re-election as Secretary of State and I won handily. Then Attorney General Bob Stephen barely won his re-election that year and trailed throughout a good portion of the night. The Republicans almost lost the Insurance Commissioner's position post that night and Governor Hayden was upset by Governor Joan Finney in that election.

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And I remember standing in the back of the ballroom at the Ramada Inn as the results came in and the picture sort of became clear that every one of the major constitutional office holders, the state-wide office holders, was either defeated that night or you might say politically wounded, except for me. And I can say it with a smile on my face, but I remember at the time a little bit overcome with the notion that I'm looking at a four-year window or path where at the end of those four years I just could tell already where I'm going to be and I'm going to be running for Governor. Now I must tell you I expected that I would be running as a challenger to an incumbent Democratic Governor. That's the one twist that really changed the lay of the political land four years later when Governor Finney decided not to seek reelection.

Q. When you ran the first time for Governor, especially the primary. What was your message in the primary and why do you think you won? Why do you think you won the primary?

A. I certainly felt all along from the first day I ran, from my first campaign for Secretary of State, that the family name was a fairly well known name in Kansas. Not necessarily because of any sort of spectacular accomplishment or thing we had done, but Graves Truck Line is like a subliminal piece of advertising that people had seen every day on every highway in every city street for years and years and years. I believe to this day that there was a certain amount of good will tied to that name that helped people develop some level of comfort with me that a lot of politicians have to spend a lot of time and money otherwise trying to develop.

I didn't come out of a legislative background. Sometimes I think the legislative background can be very helpful because you have a better sense of the intricacies of the policy issues, but it also means you've got recorded votes on issues that can be used against you to a great extent. No Secretary of State had ever been elected to higher office in the history of Kansas - to Congress or to any higher statewide office. There were many people who said when I ran in 1994 that the Secretary of State is just not a substantive enough post, that you don't grapple with the significant policy issues, and there is some truth to that.

On the other hand, I thought it was a perfect springboard because it's a small microcosm of state government. You have people to manage, you have budgets to prepare and present and to live by. You do have some policy issues that you have to work through the legislative process. You have responsibility to represent a statewide constituency. So you sort of learn how to move politically around the state. And I found it to be an excellent springboard for me.

I ran against Fred Kerr, who was a state senator, a very fine, fine person. In fact, I appointed him to the Board of Regents during my tenure as Governor and his brother, Dave Kerr, was an outstanding President of the Kansas Senate. And I ran against Gene Bicknell, who was a very successful business man from Pittsburg, Kansas - the largest franchiser of Pizza Huts in the world. Gene had great business sense and I think a great desire to be Governor, but he probably stepped into that world of politics that, until you sort of understand it, a newcomer has a hard time really adjusting to. So we had a spirited primary. There were two or three other candidates. If I recall it might have been a six-way Republican primary. I felt very fortunate to beat both Senator Kerr and Gene Bicknell, my two principle opponents. Then I was left facing a pretty formidable opponent in the general election.

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Q. In your primary your television advertisements were quite effective some people said. Were you involved in crafting that message or how does that work where you work on what you want people to see on TV?

A. The process of picking media consultants and pollsters was interesting and I developed great relationships with the people that worked for me. My media consultant was Paul Wilson, who had ties and roots in the Kansas City area although he was based out of Washington D.C. Paul worked with my family, my friends and tried to get, as quick as he could, a sense of who I was and what was going on in the race.

I'm not sure we ever figured out whom to attribute the most successful part of the campaign, the tag line that we adopted, but it tied back to my father in the trucking business. At the time I ran there was a real sense in Kansas that we needed to be very business-like and we needed to be very responsible in our actions and our fiscal approach to government. In the trucking business the way you would refer to being as efficient and effective as you could be was you would load "high and tight." In other words you would make sure you maximized all the space within the trailer that you were pulling. It would be loaded to the ceiling and compacted as tight as it could be so you would maximize the revenue you derive from the freight you haul. Paul Wilson came up with a fairly straightforward 30-second commercial of me dressed in sort of work like clothes, jeans and a work shirt on a freight dock and the back end of the trailer talking about that my father taught me that you had to load "high and tight," and that's what I intended to do as a governor was to insist upon efficiency and effectiveness in our performance.

And it was almost embarrassing how the phrase caught on and took off. From that point forward as I traveled through the state I would go to a parade and people along the parade route would yell, "Hey, Bill, high and tight, load 'em high and tight!" You know, I kind of laugh about it now, I almost get a little tear in my eye, but it was just wonderful. I never would have imagined it.

In fact, the day I knew we had really struck a chord was when my opponent tried to sort of attack the theme. There was a very brief effort at a rebuttal sort of along the lines of "low and loose." And when that happened I knew we were on to something. Because I knew that their polling was telling them that this is really resonating and we've got to do something. And "low and loose" didn't work very well. So the campaign theme was "loading high and tight," and that stayed with me through my eight years as Governor, although in the re-election we didn't use it very often. I still have people say it. To this day I'll meet people who will still mention that to me, and it's been ten years ago now.

Q. The general election, of course you're against the Democrat. Did you do anything differently from the primary or did you just sort of continue the same theme to win the general election? Why do you think you won the general election?

A. Well, we continued the same themes. I should mention that I felt very fortunate. I had a wonderful running mate. You run as a team. The Governor selects who they would have as their running mate and you run together and my running mate was State Senator Sheila Frahm from Colby. She was well respected and had been very involved in educational issues and a member of the State Board of Education. She gave me sort of that policy piece that some thought was missing in my job as Secretary of State. She also really solidified the rural areas - western Kansas and all of those areas to many viewed as west. As we know, it's really not, it's sort of central Kansas. And she was a big part, I think, of our success.

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We ran an extensive campaign against Congressman Jim Slattery. I think a couple things worked against Congressman Slattery's campaign. One was, just the timing was not good. 1994 was just a very Republican year and it was a very Republican year in terms of Congress. It was Newt Gingrich and the Contract with America. So for a Democrat to come home from Washington and say, "I'm the solution to your problems," just didn't resonate. It was a tough sell given the public's general perception of what had been going on in Washington. And so Jim picked a tough year to be the Democratic nominee against what I hope was a fairly well managed, focused Republican campaign that we ran.

Q. Can you recall at what point on election day you knew or someone told you you had won the election and how you felt?

A. The polling data had been telling us for quite some time that we were going to win. The numbers trended the right direction and they stayed there. But you don't ever want to rest on the word of a pollster, there's been a lot of people that have been surprised. We worked right up to the last minute.

One of the interesting little stories to this is I was the Secretary of State and the Secretary of State's job is to run the election. In fact, the Secretary of State signs the certificates certifying who has been elected. I've always enjoyed my certificate because basically it says I certify that I won. You know, I sign it, which just seems somewhat humorous to me.

I had business to attend to as the Secretary of State leading up to and on election day so I was in my office down in the second floor, north wing of the Capitol kind of keeping an eye on election returns while at the same time being a candidate for Governor that night. There was an outstanding, very well respected journalist (in fact, someone that I held in such high esteem I appointed him to the Board of Regents), Lew Ferguson, who was sort of a Dean of the Statehouse Press Corps. The polls closed at 7 o'clock and within minutes of the polls closing Lew Ferguson came to my office, the Secretary of State's office and I remember I was eating pizza - I love pizza and I knew it was going to be a long night so I had sent out and had some pizza brought over so I would have something to eat - so I'm sitting at my office at my desk having some pizza, just sort of keeping an eye on things, and Lew came in and he handed me a wire service story that just basically said, "Bill Graves is the Governor of Kansas." And you can tell it still chokes me up today because you work, work, you work and then all of sudden, boom! you get an affirmation. It's not exactly the environment that I thought it would happen in. I'm sitting alone in my office eating pizza and I figured if Lew said it was so it must be. So that was the beginning of a great eight years.

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Q. Once you realized you were Governor, did you say “Now I'm going to do these three things, these two things, or now I'm going to get to work on this”? Did you have a moment like that or is it just a more general moment of we're going to get working on what we want to do?

A. I've watched a lot of politicians, a lot of people campaign for office. I'm one of those ones that believes anybody that tells you they are absolutely prepared and ready – saying “I'm going to hit the ground running and we've got this clear idea and plan of what we're going to do” - they are not telling you the exact truth.

There is a moment where in the back of your mind you say “Oh my God, I won.” I mean, this is for real now, we have to go and figure out how to do all of these things that we know need to be done or that we have said need to be done. I remember quite frankly the first thing we did was begin the process of building the transition team with the focus being on the larger team we were going to assemble to work on behalf of the state. I believe to this day that nothing else matters as much as the quality of the people that you surround yourself with. In fact, I think I was pretty fortunate for having found just a great team of people that served me so very well.

Q. What do you think your style of leadership was and how would you characterize how you approached the job?

A. I think I tried to always try to remain calm because I've always felt like even when things aren't going well that you need to sort of keep your wits about you because people are looking to you to make decisions and to lead. If you're sort of letting it get away from you you're wasting your time and also not setting the example that I think people expect from a Governor. My style was one of - as I have mentioned, I surrounded myself with a great team and I empowered those people. You know the old adage about “I gave them enough rope to hang both themselves and me.”

When you run an organization that has 42 or 43 thousand people who directly or indirectly sort of work for you, and there are thousands of issues occurring every day, you can't micromanage that kind of operation. You've got to let people go. You've got to give them room and put faith in them. We announced our entire cabinet at one time as opposed to one person at a time every week or so. We had the entire cabinet come in on the same day and just say boom! this is our new team.

To give you a quick example, I was fortunate that the former head of the Federal Highway Administration, Dean Carlson, had just retired after an illustrious federal career. I managed to get Dean to come back to be Secretary of Transportation in Kansas. You can't do better than that. This guy knew all the ins and outs of federal highways and was with me all eight years. I ended up with a young man by the name of Steve Williams who came in as Secretary of Wildlife and Parks. He went on to be Director of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service under Bush II. And the list goes on and on. But my style was to assemble a good team. And I liked to take in lots of advice and counsel. I'm a pretty good listener. But then, you know, I get to make the decision. And once we make it we move on down the road. But I like sort of full, healthy discussion and debate. I'm known for telling people I don't mind if we disagree, I just don't like disagreeable people.

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Q. You were quoted when you were Governor as saying "I'm not a game show host personality." Did you find that some wanted you to be, some people expected the Governor should, you know, have that sort of personality?

A. I felt that from time to time and probably was something that came out of the campaigning, I think there are were some times where people wanted me to do things that I thought were too theatrical. They were too staged. I just think Kansans and most people see through those kinds of kind of staged events. So I sort of shied away from that and just kind of took it one day at a time.

I've always felt like the reelection in 1998 was kind of an affirmation that they liked the style. I must tell you though, everyone's style is a little different. I'm not suggesting mine is right and a person who happens to do well with a more theatrical, outgoing kind of personality is wrong. Whatever works is okay. For me I was probably maybe a little more low key than some would have liked.

Q. I was wondering if you could explain a bit of what the job entails and possibly take us through an idea you had and literally from the steps that may have taken to signing it into, the bill into a law, especially, of course, dealing with the legislature.

A. Well, I could probably give you multiple examples but each one would be slightly different and so I'll generalize to a certain extent. We had some great ideas that were the ideas of a cabinet secretary, who would come to me. Rochelle Chronister was Secretary of Social and Rehabilitation Services, SRS. Rochelle came to me and said, "Governor, I have discovered that we're just not getting the job done on our foster care system. These kids are not getting the care they kind of need and we believe that there are not-for-profit groups that we think are better suited and more engaged in and committed to kids then perhaps a state-run system. We want to partner with them and create a whole new model where we partner with not for profits." It was a cabinet secretary sort of idea and motivation. I agreed, supported her, we launched a program.

We got into all kinds of difficulties with this transition because the not for profits were outstanding child advocates but all of sudden when they were now businesses delivering services their model and their focus changed and many of them struggled and we had financial issues and we took a lot of criticism. But I stuck with Rochelle because I believed at the end of the day the issue was the care of the kids. I said if our biggest problem is that we're arguing, the adults are arguing over the money, I would rather have that problem than have kids not getting adequate care.

So that's an example of where I could directly point to a cabinet secretary. There were joint issues with the legislature where I would meet with key members of the legislature. Probably the one that jumps out is the number of state hospitals we had in Kansas. We had a number of people in state institutions with both developmental disabilities and with mental retardation issues and there was a sense that those people could be better served by being in more community-type services. So we met, the legislature and Governor, and we talked about it and we decided that it was such a tough issue with lots of challenges that we would create sort of the blue ribbon panel approach.

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So we had a group get together and we empowered them, which I thought was most unusual. We virtually gave them the power of the law to recommend which state hospitals would be closed and the only way that those recommendations would not take effect is if they were overridden by a legislative vote. They did their work and we supported them. They recommended not one, but two state hospitals be closed. Again, traumatic for families, traumatic for the patients, traumatic for state employees that were working at those institutions, but we went forward. I supported the recommendations, we implemented the plan, we closed the hospitals. We created more community-based services for them and I think it worked pretty well.

In any of these issues you will have someone say it wasn't a good idea and didn't work very well. But you know, that was an example of a legislative/gubernatorial kind of thing. I'm trying to quickly try to think of one I could take credit for myself.

Q. How about the highway program and investment in rebuilding Kansas highways?

A. The highway program would be one example of where I clearly had a passion for the project. I give former Governor Mike Hayden great credit for having launched the first of what was a comprehensive plan during his tenure as Governor. When I arrived the program was basically ending and we had to make a decision as Kansans whether we wanted to continue along the same lines. I thought we did, although I thought we needed to expand our approach beyond just building roads and repairing bridges. We needed to look at airports, we needed to look at rail infrastructure, we needed to look at all the different modes.

I knew to get the legislature to agree to any kind of revenue package, tax increases, any kind of money that we would need broad public support and encouragement. So I created another blue ribbon panel and I had them tour the state. They basically met and said, "Tell us your needs." As we expected the response was overwhelming. We were told that we needed let's say, \$30 billion in total needs. And we couldn't come anywhere near affording that. But we did come up with a program that was about \$13 billion over ten years and launched successfully the downturn in the economy, took a bite out of it. When you talk about \$13 billion over ten years, even if the program gets scaled back for economic reasons in terms of a change in priorities by a future administration, you're still going to put a tremendous amount of investment into the state infrastructure, and I feel very good about that.

Q. I read when you were beginning your second term you said, "I'm going to go more a little bit on offense than my first term." Is that part of being Governor? The Governor says "I'm Governor, I'm not going to let the legislature do this or this, I'm not going to let them go too far on this."

A. Well, I think years from now if anyone cares and there's a look back historically, I think my eight years is characterized by a very interesting and challenging time within the Republican party. I had great friends and colleagues on the Democratic side of the aisle, but during my eight years the number of Democrats in the legislature was so small. For the most part it was a Republican dominated time and within that large Republican caucus, within that large Republican house and senate, we disagreed daily on just about everything.

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So a large part perhaps of my second term was as a more conservative element of the Republican Party asserted itself I felt like I had to push back on occasion because I represented all Kansans. You know, I represented Republicans, conservative Republicans and moderate Republicans. I represented independents that had no affiliation, Democrats and liberal Democrats. Once the election is over you somehow have to put the politicking aside and recognize the total responsibility of the governing. And so, I shoved on conservatives a little bit and they shoved on me a little bit. And it wasn't always the most enjoyable part of the job, but it was just the way things were.

Q. Was that a frustrating aspect of the job to have the members of your own party be the most critical? We were going back on some of the articles and one fairly prominent Republican said you were being advised by sinister politicians and your primary opponent said you were morally indifferent, fairly strong attacks from your own party. Is that a frustration of the job or as you said something you just "I'm Governor and I have to deal with this."

A. During those eight years I think there was clearly an emergence of - and it started in 1994 with the Gingrich revolution in Congress - the social agenda and many of the items that the conservatives passionately believed in. Again, I don't fault folks at all for strongly held beliefs. But I clearly represented a more centrist part of our party and what I thought was a more accurate representation of what Kansans in total were looking for.

One of the really classic moments in my tenure as Governor was when the two chambers passed the concealed carry of weapons bill, strongly pushed by the NRA, National Rifle Association, which basically said that any citizen is entitled to carry a concealed weapon. I just was never convinced that was good public policy and never convinced it was public policy that most Kansans supported. I thought it was public policy that a fairly narrow group of Kansans, but a loud and insistent group of Kansans promoted. And so when the bill got to my desk - and it was not an easy decision because you knew there was going to be political fallout and repercussions - I vetoed the concealed carry bill. That I believe was in the year just prior to my reelection and there were people that said this is going to come back to haunt you politically. You know, I won reelection with 73 percent, so it didn't seem to have a whole lot of impact.

But I can tell you at the moment we were dealing with the issue, it was stressful. Lots of people within my administration had different opinions on what to do. That was only one example. We had several like that where we just had different opinions. That's what's great about the process. Everybody gets to have their say. And I did say this quite often, "You know, if you don't like the way I'm doing the job, then just run for Governor and you can be Governor and you can make those decisions."

Q. Did it energize you in a way to have this opposition, because in the primary for reelection you made sure you had enough money and ran a vigorous campaign, debated the opponent. Were you thinking months earlier I'm going to show who I am and defeat this?

A. We were extremely energized in the reelection year and very focused, more so than the first time in 1994. I mean, I was frustrated by the fact that I thought reasonable people again could agree to disagree without being disagreeable but that just didn't work in the political system. To have your state party chairman step down to and in turn challenge you as a sitting incumbent didn't set well with me.

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So we went about the business of probably developing what I think was one of the better run political efforts that I've seen or been aware of in my lifetime in Kansas. We pulled out all the stops. We organized right down to the person making sure we turned out our vote. We had the resources it took to get our message out and to energize the grass roots, the base. And again, the numbers were pretty rewarding.

Q. What would you say was the most rewarding aspect of the job?

A. Well, I couldn't talk about my eight years as Governor if I didn't talk about the day we brought my daughter home. My wife Linda and I had both been very busy in our professional lives. We were married in 1990 and reached a conclusion, you know, came to the decision at some point in 1993, 1994 that we would start a family and never bothered to think that might just not be possible. But it turned out that we weren't able to have a family in the traditional way, so we started thinking about adoption. It was a fascinating experience for us, very educational and motivated us to support and promote adoption services. And, you know, we were blessed. We were able to bring home a beautiful little girl and surprise everyone, because as I like to say, the first lady certainly hadn't looked like she was expecting a child before we pounded that "It's a Girl" sign in the front yard of the Governor's residence.

It was just fun, absolutely fun for about a week in that there was a media frenzy over pictures of the first baby. Anyway, Katie was terrific. She grew up in the residence and as a daughter of the Governor and I just enjoyed sharing that experience with her. That's certainly one of the high points of my tenure. I have to tell you, I'm also thrilled that both my parents and my wife's parents were living to be part of this experience.

It's pretty special to have the opportunity to be the Governor of your state. I think the first time I was sworn in I remember my second grade teacher was in the crowd and I thought, "She's probably the most shocked person in the crowd today that Billy Graves has become the Governor of Kansas." Because I bet when I was in her second grade class she would have hardly imagined.

Q. Well that leads to a question. You've talked about it in various articles while you were Governor, which was especially after you started your family finding the balance between work and family very difficult because of the demands of the job. And did you find that to be a frustration, that you were on a trip and you really wanted to be home? Is that something that you may not have anticipated until you adopted Katie?

A. Well certainly prior to Katie coming into our lives, my ability to be gone and travel and devote the time was much easier. I said daily from the moment she came into our lives that it changed my perspective in a variety of ways.

First of all it changed my perspective about children's issues. I discovered that you can give children's issues all the sort of lip service you want, but until you have a child, until you understand the nourishment requirements, the healthcare needs, the safety, child safety seats, how you child proof a room, how you keep a child from falling down a staircase - there's a whole new world that you discover when you take on the responsibility of raising a child and that helped me a lot think about budgetary priorities.

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We put a lot more emphasis on Head Start programs and Parents as Teachers programs on the policy side. And it made it harder for me to be away from home because I was always missing my daughter and my wife. As soon as we could, as she got old enough, we tried to include her in things. I remember very clearly taking her to Hutchinson to the State Fair for the first time. And there's actually a great photograph of her. It was 1998 and she came into our lives in 1995, so she would have been three years old. There was a huge poster, a "Reelect Bill Graves" poster at the little Republican booth at the State Fair, and there's a great photograph that I have of Katie - she looks like she's about two feet tall pointing at this picture of her Daddy. There was always a traditional Governor's day at the State Fair and we kind of changed that. We started having a family day at the State Fair. That was the day I would go down with Katie and Linda. And then I would always come back a few days later and do all the official stuff. But I always like to go down one day just to ride rides and you know, eat corn dogs and have the kind of fun that families have at the State Fair.

Q. When we were looking at the articles from the past few years, going back even farther, of course, you probably remember it, there was a famous time where you were at the 1996 convention and were frustrated with what was going on and said you might not run again. Were you really feeling like this is maybe not something I'm liking right now? What was going on at that time?

A. The 1996 presidential convention was a moment that probably should have been a political high point in my life because a Kansan, a person I respected and admired, Bob Dole, was the nominee. We had gone to Russell, that's when he announced Jack Kemp was going to be his running mate, and we had all traveled back to Hays. The Russell airport was not large enough for the Dole plane to land and take off from so the whole entourage had to land at Hays, go to Russell and do this announcement of Jack Kemp and back to the Hays airport. We all flew and I rode with Senator Dole on the plane to San Diego. You know, everything was aligned to make it a very special moment. But simmering under the surface was this developing sort of situation with myself and my wing of the Republican Party and the more conservative wing of the party and because of our differences of opinion, I ended up going to San Diego but I didn't go as a delegate of the party at that time.

Control of the party was such that I wasn't even a delegate at the very convention that was going to nominate Bob Dole to be President. There's a whole lot more to that story, but maybe the most important piece might be that there was an attempt or a suggestion that I wouldn't be down on the convention floor and wouldn't be involved in that very special moment when Kansas is afforded the honor of casting those votes that make Senator Dole the Republican nominee. And while I can't tell you who specifically was involved, I do know that the Dole campaign had to contact the chairman of the state party and basically say we want Governor Graves on the floor at the microphone delivering on behalf of Kansas the votes to nominate Senator Dole. And I tell that story as just a way to sort of set the stage for how contentious our situation was.

So probably in my response to a reporter's question there was a bit of that sort of frustration with what I thought when I was elected in 1994, that we would all come together, pull together, unify as a party, work together, work through differences in a very orderly, civil way as opposed to a sort of civil war that broke out over our differences. And you know, that was one of those moments that you say something you wish you hadn't. But my actions spoke louder than my words a couple of years later.

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Q. Given all of this history it's interesting that in as you were leaving the office, that wing of the Republican Party that had been after you for a long time could come to you and said, "Now we would like your endorsement." Did you struggle with that? Was that personally hard to basically forgive or was that just something you had to say this is something that the Governor as party leader should do, even though I haven't been treated well on numerous occasions?

A. When I sat down with Tim Shallenburger, who was the Republican nominee, what I said to Tim was that he needed to be careful about seeking out my endorsement because people are not stupid. I mean, people can read and understand the history and relationships and if I just run right out and say, "Oh, never mind, forget all that that you've heard and read for the last two or three or four or however many years, we really do like one another!", they are going to see through that in a heartbeat. They will know it's not a sincere endorsement and that it's fake.

What I suggested was that rather than rush right out and do that, we try to spend more time discussing some issues, building some relationships with other key people in the party and that we make sure people understand that it was a genuine endorsement. But there's a catch 22. Because if you delay, people focus on the fact that you've delayed and they think that you come into that kicking and screaming, that you're drug into it. But I think if you do it too quickly it looks perfunctory and there is no benefit to it. So maybe it was a lose-lose situation. We were going to take flak one way or the other.

Obviously I knew that Tim was going to have a very difficult time with Kathleen Sebelius because she was well established in Kansas politics, had a great deal of support not only amongst Democrats but independents and probably more moderate Republicans and came out of a background with a father who was Governor of Ohio. I mean, she was a formidable candidate. So Tim had his work cut out with him irrespective of my endorsement or not.

Q. If you read somebody is elected Governor of Kansas in the future, what would you think this person is going to need, the skills? What would you think in that situation? What sort of skills?

A. Well, in terms of skills that an individual needs to be successful to be Governor I think you have to have the ability to recognize when to put politics aside and focus on service and policy, because I think Kansans are able to do that in their lives. I think they can see the difference between politics and the quality of service they receive, whether it is renewing a driver's license or interacting with a government agency. If there's a sense that you're always in one mode or the other, I think that can be extremely detrimental, especially if you're always in a political mode.

One of the things I prided myself on was I appointed people to the highest positions available in state government who were not members of my own party. I had cabinet members who were not Republicans - I kept the same budget director as my predecessor, Governor Finney - because they were good people. They knew their business and I knew they would serve Kansans well. So I would clearly recommend you work hard at checking political agendas at the door or at least try to have a nice balance of when politics is appropriate and when it is not. I always think that finding those good people is critically important.

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To a certain extent I think a Governor has to be able to check their own personal ego at the door and let other people shine. Let other people have their moment in the sun. You don't have to be at the forefront of everything. You don't have to get the credit for everything. You know, it's okay to say, "That's an idea that a legislator came up with and I think it's fabulous," and commend them and say "I'll work with them to help them be successful." You don't always have to go out and try to figure out how to steal away from them and repackage it and call it your own. There's enough credit to go around that you can share a little bit of it. There's certainly enough blame to go around that everybody will get a little bit of it.

I would advise them to personally pace themselves. You need to be rested and healthy every day. Because when you're not, you'll make mistakes, you'll say the things you shouldn't say, you won't look and act gubernatorial in front of an audience where you've got to be "on" every moment you're in the public. And if you allow yourself to sort of get run down or get stretched too thin it will take its toll on you both physically and in terms of people's perception of you and your performance. It's a four-year term, you don't have to solve all the state's problems in the first 60 days. You will have plenty of time and problems won't go away. I can assure you, they will wait for you.

Q. Was there anything that surprised you took the job? Or did you have a sort of good sense of what you had to do for the job?

A. If there was one thing that surprised me as Governor that I didn't perhaps expect, I had maybe a little sense of it, but is how proud, how proud Kansans are to have an opportunity to meet you, to see you. How if you take the time to go to their community for their event it's a really special, important moment to them. I think if you're not careful you can have a tendency to just fall into this sort of notion of "it's just me, I mean, what's the big deal?" I know I'm Governor, but to shake hands with a graduating senior at a commencement and for a photo to get snapped quickly, that may be one second in your mind, but that's a memory that lasts a lifetime perhaps for that individual.

And so, again, it's all about how you carry yourself. You need to always remember that people value and find the interaction with the Governor to be a very special moment. So you need to keep reminding yourself that that's part of your job. I really found that to be quite enjoyable too. In fact, if anything, it's sometimes difficult to tear yourself away from stuff. They want to tell you about their lives and what's important to them.

Q. You're here in Washington and meet a lot of other elected officials and other Governors. Is there something unique about Kansas and the Governorship job that maybe other states don't necessarily have that you might say to someone well, that's an interesting problem but in Kansas we have to-- what's unique about Kansas in the national sense that you've found?

A. Well if there was something I could say that was unique about Kansas relative to maybe the Governors I know from other states - there probably might be some other Midwestern states that would be the same profile, Nebraska let's say, some of the Dakotas - there's a certain calmness. There's a certain demeanor that I think people have, especially again as it relates to politics. There's a civility that I enjoyed.

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From what I've seen in other places - not that our politics can't be tough and not that I didn't experience some of that myself - there are some states where it's just an every day, almost hour by hour occurrence. Some of it is because we're fortunate, or I thought I was fortunate, that I had kind of a one dominant party situation. Some of the states are in a situation where they just squabble constantly and because they spend so much time trying to resolve their political differences I don't think they get a lot done in terms of good policy.

I think Kansas is a place where for the most part you can do your political business, the election is over, okay, now let's go to work and you kind of create a window of opportunity to do good things before you refocus on politics. Some states' political piece never goes away. It dogs you every day. And I just quite frankly feel fortunate I didn't operate in that environment.

Q. Were there any misconceptions that you would like to clear up? Did people have misconceptions about what the Governor can or cannot do?

A. I don't think that I ever had a concern about the public's perception or misperception about what the Governor does. I think I was always flattered by the fact that they always thought that you were the person that ultimately could help them irrespective of what issues. Often times they would ask you for help on things that you couldn't.

I left office on the 13th of January of 2003 and really had no regrets whatsoever. I Haven't looked back to any great extent in part because of how busy I am and how committed I am to a new job and relocating my family. I think it is critically important as a Governor, as a new Governor, you have to keep that service in perspective. You're given that moment, whether it's four years or eight years, and you're going to walk in as I did, January 9th, 1995, noon, and either four years later or eight years later you're going to walk out. And you need to give it your very best while you're there. But you need to keep in mind that there is an end, this is not an entitlement. This is not something that you're going to have forever. And we try to keep that. It's a citizen legislature and it's a citizen government. I was happy to serve, I loved my 22 years. But that chapter is closed and now a new chapter opened and I was excited about that.

Q. What would you like Kansans to remember about Bill Graves and Bill Graves' two terms as Governor?

A. I hope they remember that we were all fortunate that we lived through some incredibly prosperous times and during that time we had the opportunity to do some wonderful things. I mean, I'm very proud of the list of accomplishments. As I said, we wrestled with tough issues, issues involving the welfare of children, how we care for people with mental health and mental retardation and developmental disabilities. We restructured the governance of higher education. We launched a new highway program. We cut taxes, six years in a row I think.

I've often wondered if maybe sometimes it is not harder to govern in good times than it is in tough times. Because in good times you always have opportunities and therefore everybody has got an idea. You're tugged in so many different directions about what to do. Whereas when things get tough, while it is tough, you kind of have limited options to deal with the tough times. You know, we had some of our most contentious discussions over how large or small tax cuts should be, because people have different ideas about whether the money really should stay in the treasury and be spent. We had arguments about whether we ought to not have any indebtedness.

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And you sit back and you think that's just amazing that during prosperous, great times we had so much difficulty making a public policy decision. But I hope they remember six really good years. I hope they remember one year that kind of got a little tough as the economy turned south. And of course the last year, I hope they remember that when we needed to take steps as a state to address the new fiscal reality problem that we had, that I was willing to acknowledge that we had a problem and we needed to raise some taxes and we needed to sort of reorder our priorities in order to deal with it. And while I didn't get everything I asked for, I got a pretty big piece of it. And I think it helped somewhat set the stage for a smoother transition for Governor Sebelius and the legislature.

Q. Earlier this year we had a senator from Oklahoma come out and talk to the students at Washburn. He made the observation that it was his perspective that there's a fundamental difference between Governors, presidents and legislators/members of Congress. That they actually develop entirely different views of the world and they don't do a very good job crossing over. Do you think there's a fundamental mind set of an executive versus those citizen legislators?

A. Executive Branch officials and legislators have a different view of the world. I always considered myself to be a business man who took those skills and abilities to state government, managed people, managed resources and made programs work.

I was almost as much interested in the policy at the point of execution as I was the policy at the point of creation. Legislators on the other hand are obsessed about the point of creation of the policy and, you know, how that whole process works. Usually in terms of the execution or the delivery of the service, I always found them to be too engaged in a game of "gotcha." More often than not, when they got enamored with something it was because they want to have a committee hearing and drag somebody in front of the committee and just tell them what a lousy job they were doing and in some program that was of critical importance to them. The irony in that is that, you know, we probably already knew that. We are our own worst critics.

We were trying to do our best. And to the extent there was a program not performing, we felt as bad about it as anybody. We were as committed as anybody to getting it fixed. I always sort of had this notion. Again this whole legislative thing simply distracted us. Instead of a senior management person being over at their place of business trying to fix something, they were over there jumping through the hoops for the legislature, to talk about why it wasn't working and what we were going to do. And I always felt like we were prepared to be accountable for our own actions.

But I think there's a very clear difference. I always enjoyed the Executive Branch. People asked me about an interest in running say for Congress after I left the office. I just was not and am not interested at all because I don't view myself as a legislator, a person that would simply enjoy casting votes on policy issues. I enjoy the administrative side, making things work.

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Q. The other question I wanted to ask you, which was maybe a little more nuts and bolts than what we've talked about this morning. But in looking back on the tax cuts, in political science I've always thought it would have been wise policy to refund when money was flowing, refund for taxpayers but leave the tax system alone. When the hard times returned you've got the elasticity and flexibility and you don't have to go back and ask people if they are willing to accept tax increases at a time when their perception is they have less. Do you think in retrospective if the policy had been, opportunity had been there, might have been approached, it would have been preferred instead of cutting rates, instead of cutting taxes away?

A. Absolutely. Again, the interesting dynamic that was happening at the moment though, was the conservative legislators weren't interested in that kind of approach and the approach of just one-time refunds of cash or whatever because they wanted permanency. They wanted fundamental change in the various rates of taxation. And what I think will get lost in the history is I was making decisions about tax cuts in an attempt to build a large enough coalition of the willing that we could overcome even more aggressive proposals that the conservatives were making. They were making them in such a way that some of our coalition were sort of spooked almost into joining them. They were saying, "Governor, we can't go home and not have been for this proposal. It's really going to look attractive to our folks." So I would work with groups and say, "If we could go this much further, is that enough that you'll stick with us?" and avoid this catastrophic approach that more conservative members were taking.

So there are some people, I think, that look back at my tenure and said, "He went too far." Well, hindsight is pretty easy in that game because you weren't there when we were looking right down the barrel of proposals that really went too far. And often times we were coming up with the most politically doable scenario that we could latch onto that would keep us from making those dramatic steps. There isn't any doubt that we went too far. But the dilemma was at the moment that logic didn't work, saying, "Well I'm sorry, we aren't going to go there." That didn't work. We had legislators that saw these huge influxes of new revenue into the state coffers and they were going to figure out ways to go home and give the money back. And while I certainly always supported that, I guess my operative word was moderation. Let's move cautiously toward it.

Dirk Kempthorne, the Governor of Idaho, called me shortly after he was elected - a former United States Senator who went home and became Governor of Idaho. He had the same huge surplus issue and said, "Bill, give me some advice on what to do." I said, "Dirk to the extent you can you need to reign in the rush to aggressively cut taxes. You can always adjust going forward if you want to go a little more but you can't pull it back once you give it back."

And, you know, if I didn't have to worry about the legislature I would have done things differently. But given the dynamic of the moment, I thought we did pretty well.