

The lion in winter

Tommy Thompson reflects on his successes, how hard Washington was and a distant political era when enemies sometimes cooperated

In Wisconsin, summers are hot and humid, winters are long and cold, and politics is a contact sport.

Tommy Thompson doesn't mind. Win or lose, Wisconsin's longest-serving former governor loves everything about the Badger State.

"I live in Wisconsin. In Madison," says Wisconsin's longest-serving governor in a call from Florida. "In the house on the east side where Sue Ann lived when I went to Washington, D.C."

Not that Thompson stays in one place very long, even when he's home.

A speech in Milwaukee, a speech in Madison, then he's in the air again, traveling to five board meetings in three different states. "I've flown 3.5 million miles since I was governor," he says, his voice containing just a hint of wonder that the self-described "boy from Elroy" would ever see so much of the world.

"I'm headed back to Madison tonight," he says. "You know, Sue Ann likes to escape winter once in a while, so we come down here for a couple of weeks in January. But, frankly, I can't wait to get back."

"Wisconsin is home. It's a good life."

If his loss to ultra-liberal Democrat Tammy Baldwin in the 2012 U.S. Senate race still stings, you'd never know it from a casual conversation. Tommy Thompson is the same as he ever was: praising



Republicans, nipping at Democrats, optimistic about the future.

But he's also just a bit nostalgic for the good old days of politics, when Democrats and Republicans were, at times, two sides of the same coin, working together to get things done.

"I really worked at it," he says. "I went out and cultivated all sectors. Marty Beil [executive director of the Wisconsin State Employees Union] was always an archenemy, but I would bring him into

the office and we'd talk things out.

"We sat down, communicated and talked. He knew when Tommy Thompson gave his word, it was bank."

You need look no further than the UW-Madison campus to see (literally) concrete examples of what Thompson helped accomplish when Republicans and Democrats still worked together.

Back in the mid-1980s, the state's flagship campus was looking a bit down at the heels. Some buildings were crumbling, new buildings were needed, and the looming technology revolution called for massive renovations of existing facilities.

But money was, as always, short.

"Back then, there was an antipathy toward any private money being used on campus," says Thompson. "The Board of Regents and the faculty didn't want any private money involved."

The chancellor at the time was Donna Shalala, a good Democrat who would leave UW in 1993 to become President Bill Clinton's Secretary of Health and Human Services — the same job Thompson would hold eight years later during the administration of President George W. Bush.

"We had a common goal: to improve the UW campus," Thompson says. "She may have been a Democrat and I was a Republican, but that didn't matter. We both wanted the same thing, and we sat down and figured out a way to make it work."

The plan they came up with allowed Shalala to solicit private donations, to be matched by state dollars. It worked: Successful alumni were more than willing to give generously, especially if they could get their names attached to the UW's new gems.

The resulting \$1.2 billion building boom on campus continues today. It has included construction of the School of Business' Fluno Center, the Institutes for Discovery, the new engineering school, the School of Pharmacy's Rennebohm Hall, the Kohl Center, and a host of improvements to Camp Randall Stadium and nearby athletic training facilities.

Thompson cared about the UW because it was, after all, his alma mater. He was born in Elroy in Juneau County in 1941. His mother was a schoolteacher while his father ran a gas station and country store.

Thompson earned his bachelor's degree in 1963 and his law degree in 1966. He promptly moved back to Elroy and ran for the state Assembly. By 1973, he was assistant minority leader. In 1981, he was elected Assembly GOP leader. His nickname, lifted from a James Bond novel, was "Dr. No," because he so adroitly used parliamentary procedure to block the majority Democrats.

In 1986, he challenged Gov. Tony Earl, shocking the Madison establishment when the "hick from

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the sticks" beat the Democratic incumbent, 53 to 46 percent.

Stunning though it seemed at the time, that 7-percent margin of victory was the smallest Thompson would ever get. In subsequent elections, he beat Tom Loftus by 16 percent (1990); Chuck Chvala by 36 percent (1994); and Ed Garvey by 21 percent (1998).

The three most significant achievements of Thompson's 14-year tenure were welfare reform, school vouchers and Badgercare.

His "Wisconsin Works" program, known as W2, reduced welfare rolls by 90 percent while offering increased opportunities and subsidies for schooling and child care for former welfare recipients.

Thompson's school voucher program, touted as helping poor children escape from Milwaukee's ever-troubled public schools, arguably had a mixed

record of success. Subsequent Republican leaders have enlarged its scope and eligibility requirements, much to the chagrin of Democrats and the state's teacher unions.

Perhaps the most noteworthy of Thompson's major initiatives was Badgercare, which offered subsidized health care to low-income residents who weren't eligible for Medicaid. Its success prompted President Bush to ask Thompson in 2000 to leave Wisconsin and become HHS secretary.

The first nine months on the job in Washington were rough.

"I hated it. Every single day, I walked into my office

Welfare reform, school vouchers and Badgercare were the three great successes of Thompson's 14-year tenure.

and said to myself, 'Why am I here? I should be back in Wisconsin being governor.'"

And then, Sept. 11 happened.

"I was in New York City within 24 hours. All the health fears.... I was really, really involved. I got the same CIA briefing every day as the president.

"After that, there was no looking back, it was all looking forward. Everything changed. It made me a stronger, better leader."

Although praised by some for his role in helping Bush to reform Medicare, Thompson had no intention of staying in Bush's cabinet long-term.

"Frankly, I was broke. How's that for honesty?" he says with a bark of laughter.

"But it's true. I was 63 years old and had spent 38 years as a public servant. I owed money on our house in Wisconsin. I owed money on my house in D.C. I wanted to make some money, and if I'd waited four more years, I would have been 67 and who would hire me?"

Thompson resigned shortly after Bush won

re-election in 2004. He took a job at a Washington, D.C., law firm and at the Deloitte consulting company, focusing on health care.

And he does have a successful business career, although it came back to bite him during his 2012 Senate run. His opponents — first fellow Republican Eric Hovde in the bitterly fought primary and then Baldwin — managed to paint Thompson as a money-grubbing D.C. lobbyist who was out of touch with Wisconsin.

"It was amazing to me that people bought the notion that I was a lobbyist. I never made one thin dime lobbying," Thompson says.

"I have made a lot of money, but through business dealings. Tammy Baldwin spent \$45 million convincing people to vote against me. She never ran one positive ad telling people why they should vote for her," he says heatedly.

"I thought if I could get elected to the Senate, I could play a valuable role in international health issues. But it was not my year. I should have realized that in 2012, with Obama carrying the state by 7 percentage points, a Republican in Wisconsin had very little chance. There was just no way, given the partisan nature of Wisconsin politics. Vince Lombardi couldn't have won as a Republican." He laughs again, then pauses.

"But that was yesterday. I've moved on."

These days, that means looking after a healthy

portfolio of "about 30" health care businesses from coast to coast.

He also practices the gospel of exercise and healthy eating that he began preaching during his Washington tenure. He tries to swim most days and seldom misses his regimen of 50 push-ups and 100 sit-ups.

He is also in demand as a political speaker, particularly to groups who oppose the Affordable Care Act.

"Obamacare is an abomination," he says flatly. "People don't realize how bad this is gonna be. It's a

financial disaster waiting to happen.”

What about dumping the ACA’s insurance mandates and going straight to a single-payer universal coverage plan like Canada or Great Britain?

“Ha!” says Thompson. “Tammy Baldwin wants single-payer. The problem is that so many people are so opposed to government-run health care, single-payer will just not pass.”

Other countries are losing their enthusiasm for single-payer health care, he says. “Spain, for example, is trying to privatize their government hospitals, and Spain is not alone.

“And if you like Obamacare, you’re going to love government-run health care. Already, the Democrats in



Congress are shedding their uniforms and heading for the hills, trying to get away from Obamacare. It’s just going to leave such a bad taste in people’s mouths.”

Not that Thompson is an across-the-board critic of “big government.”

“I believe government has gotta be there, to solve problems. You can’t get so ideologically rigid so as to see no role for government whatsoever,” he says.

“We did some good things when I was governor.

We conserved more land than ever before. We enacted 90-some tax reductions. We started school choice in Milwaukee and W2.

“That’s what I was involved in government for. Every morning I woke up and thought ‘What’s the problem?

‘Every morning I woke up and thought “What’s the problem? And what’s the solution?” We made government work,’ he says of his gubernatorial years.

And what’s the solution?’ We made government work.”

When Thompson’s not on the road checking on his companies or making speeches denouncing Obamacare, he enjoys spending weekends back in Elroy, on a farm that’s been in his mother’s family for more than 100 years.

“We farm 800 acres,” he says. “We’ve got a hundred head of cattle, plus corn, soybeans and hay. I partner with this guy whose dad went to school with me in Elroy.”

And he still enjoys Wisconsin politics, albeit from the sidelines. He still preaches the GOP gospel and refuses to criticize today’s standard-bearers — not U.S. Sen. Ron Johnson and certainly not Gov. Scott Walker.

“I think Scott is doing a good job,” he says. When asked if he thinks that he might have been able to accomplish the same things without throwing the state into a bitter, partisan divide, he shrugs it off.

“There’s no consensus-building anymore. You’ve got Facebook, Twitter... everybody’s taking shots, nobody’s talking face-to-face.”

“I think my way of politics was much better, but that’s not the way it’s being handled these days.”

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