

Preface

Like its subject, this book has had a long history. Long before I began my research, I had thought that Thomas Howard Kean's journey from a shy and withdrawn child with a rebellious streak to an effective state legislator, a transformational governor, and, certainly, one of the most significant actors on the New Jersey political stage during the second half of the twentieth century would make for an interesting book. Yet I held off. When Tom Kean stepped down as New Jersey's forty-eighth governor in 1990 at the age of fifty-four, I, like so many who had observed his career, believed that his public career had not drawn to a close, but that he had merely ended a chapter. Subscribing to the prevailing conventional wisdom—readers will discover that the conventional wisdom was more often wrong than right when it concerned Tom Kean—I assumed that it was only a matter of time before he would return to elective politics. Barring that, I presumed he was certain to accept a high government post, before settling in as one of that rapidly disappearing breed of retired statesmen who frequent Washington, and are often referred to as “wise men.”¹ The time to write his biography, I reasoned, would be then.

Ten years later, with Kean still serving as president of Drew University, having passed up three opportunities to run for the U.S. Senate (he would decline two more) and having cast aside entreaties from two presidents that he join their Cabinet, I began to reconsider. One day, I received an e-mail from Marlie Wasserman of Rutgers University Press. Picking up on a prior conversation, she wanted to know whether I had any topics in mind for a book that might interest her readers. “What about a book about Tom Kean?” I asked. I thought that Kean's efforts to reform education and welfare policy, preserve

much of the state's natural environment, improve the quality of life in New Jersey, and instill pride among its residents deserved recognition. I also believed that his particular style of leadership would prove instructive to those interested in how public figures got things done. New Jerseyans like to say, or at least they once did, that theirs is the most powerful governorship in the nation. As students of the state's political system know, New Jersey's 1947 constitution grants more formal powers to the governor than any other state constitution does. Several strong personalities have served as New Jersey's governor. Yet, after they left office, most, save for Woodrow Wilson, who is remembered for other reasons, were quickly forgotten—at least by the general public. The dearth of literature about them pales by comparison to that about political figures of other states, even when one excludes national figures with presidential ambitions. I did not want this to happen to Tom Kean.

As a state legislator and as a governor, Kean displayed a style of leadership that has become all too rare in the modern era: that of the citizen politician marshaling resources at his command to resolve important and potentially divisive problems through persuasion, consensus, and bipartisanship. How he developed this method of leading, what he achieved through it, and what lessons other officeholders and those who study them might draw from Kean's example, I thought, merited exploration as well.

Marlie asked me to write a book proposal, which she could take to her editorial board. I prepared one, and we signed a contract several months later, in late June 2001. Weeks later came the attacks of September 11. Little did I know when I held my first interviews with Kean (our second took place September 10, 2001) and hit the shelves and microfilm reels at the Library of Congress and other libraries that Kean would play a major role in investigating those attacks and recommending ways to reduce the likelihood of their reoccurrence. That would be another fifteen months away. Kean's appointment as chairman of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States (9–11 Commission) in December 2002 proved the original conventional wisdom correct, but in ways neither he nor I had anticipated.

No, Kean was not going to Washington as a U.S. senator or a Cabinet secretary. Yet in heading the most extensive investigation of the U.S. government in its history, he would have an opportunity to shape national policy that few senators and Cabinet secretaries ever receive. I kept that thought in the back of my mind as I worked on the early sections of this book and as the commission conducted its investigation. By the time both the book and the commission's deliberations

neared completion, I realized that I was writing about a figure of national as well as of state significance.

Readers should find Tom Kean's public career of interest because of what it tells about how government performed in the turbulent times in which he served and how he used the three principal posts he occupied (legislator, governor, and commission chairman) to shape public policy. Given that political leaders reflect their times as much as they help shape them, Kean's public career, which spanned over four decades, can serve as a focal point for a better understanding of what transpired in New Jersey and in American society in the years in which he was politically active. Kean was elected to the New Jersey Assembly three months after the Newark riots of 1967, a cataclysmic event that lingered in the minds of New Jersey policymakers for decades. He took his seat in the first legislature to be elected after federal and state courts mandated that state legislatures be apportioned according to the "one man, one vote" principle. That change, coupled with the implementation of the state's first permanent, broad-based tax, two years before Kean first sought public office, forever changed the relationship between New Jersey residents and their state government.

During the time Kean served as a state legislator and as governor, state governments assumed responsibilities that had once been the exclusive preserve of counties and municipalities. It was then when they began to consume larger portions of the total amount of spending on goods and services in most states. The effects of such spending were seen in the emergence of state transit systems (New Jersey Transit), statewide systems of higher education (replete with community colleges, four-year state colleges, and an expanded state university), and increased state spending on public education, with a greater emphasis on equal spending per pupil (*Robinson v. Cahill*, *Abbott v. Burke*). Also during this time, the states played more of a role in reducing urban ills and reversing environmental degradation than ever before in U.S. history.

A generation after the New Jersey Constitution of 1947 strengthened the executive branch and streamlined the judicial branch of state government, the state legislature began to increase its capacity to meet growing public demands for services. As a member of the assembly's leadership for most of the time he spent in that chamber, Kean played a central role in making the legislature a full partner with the other branches as New Jersey's state government began to address problems that were becoming statewide in nature.

The nature of those problems, the state's demographic makeup, and the political equilibrium of the two parties often determined that

policymaking would be rooted more in pragmatism than in ideology. As a legislator, Kean often took a “third way” approach, occupying ground between liberal, urban-oriented Democrats and conservative, rural-based Republicans, with his fellow suburbanites tipping the balance. His successful employment of this strategy facilitated his rise through the ranks of the majority party’s leadership. Because he had been elected Speaker during a time when his party did not control a majority of seats in the chamber, Kean acted more as the spokesman for the assembly than as the principal spokesman for his party. Elected with the help of Democratic votes, Kean, the Republican Speaker, acted more as an executive than as a legislative leader. The manner in which he comported himself allowed for smooth passage of legislation he favored in a closely divided chamber. As minority leader, he kept his troops cohesive, exploited divisions within the majority party, and worked to increase substantially the number of seats his party held. With the two parties not that far apart ideologically, he put his party behind government reform. In advocating procedures that were ideologically neutral, such as ethics codes and financial disclosure by public officials, he entered into coalitions, sometimes simultaneously, with reform Democrats and conservative Republicans.

Kean became governor at a time when demands for state services remained strong, but when revenues were shrinking, owing to a national recession and federal cutbacks. Kean and his fellow governors had to decide whether and how to fund programs. Some, like Kean, who considered infrastructure, education, the arts, and the environment “investments,” acted to fill the gap, appropriating additional state funds and forging partnerships with other levels of government and the private sector, thereby expanding their administrations’ reach. In good times, as well as in bad, they also needed to decide how they would use the increased responsibilities the federal government had thrust upon them. For much of his time in office, Kean walked a delicate line between a national Republican administration, wanting to cut back on programs, and a state legislature, with one or both houses controlled by the Democrats, wanting to increase levels of taxes and spending.

Kean and other centrist governors also maneuvered between a Republican administration and a Democratic Congress to influence national welfare and education policies. Increasingly, they came to be regarded more as pragmatists and problem solvers than as partisans. By reaching across the aisle to each other and by working both party caucuses in both houses of Congress and the White House, they helped produce agreement between two mutually suspicious branches of government controlled by opposite parties.

Kean represented a “new breed” of state chief executives who were accomplishing things in state capitals when Washington seemed to be hopelessly “gridlocked.” Finding common ground with his fellow governors of both parties and seen at home as an exponent of the political consensus that he had helped build in New Jersey, Kean found himself increasingly at odds with the electoral base of his national party. Simply stated, he was perceived as too moderate and accommodating on the “social issues” (i.e., abortion, gun control, and school prayer) to land a place on a national Republican party ticket. Nevertheless, his style of campaigning and governing could serve as a blueprint for how Republicans can win elections in “blue states.”

From the outset of his service on the 9–11 Commission, Kean strove to ensure that its recommendations were enacted. He had witnessed several commissions make worthy recommendations, only to see them shelved after their mandates had expired. As the commission’s chairman, he drew heavily on his experiences as an assembly leader and governor. He achieved unanimity on a panel of five Democrats and five Republicans, all appointed by national spokesmen of their respective parties, by employing the “third way” approach that had served him well in the past, by forging close relationships with his peers, by safeguarding the commission’s independence, and by maintaining its integrity.

Kean succeeded in persuading an administration protective of its prerogatives to grant the commission access to more documents than had ever before been shared with anyone outside the executive branch. Then, after building public support for the commission’s recommendations through the “bully pulpit” he established and commanded as its chairman, he prodded Congress and the president to enact its most important recommendations. From the island of bipartisanship Kean established in a heavily contentious and divided Washington, he made possible passage of the most significant change in the nation’s intelligence-gathering apparatus in a half century.

In telling Tom Kean’s story, I drew not only on my research, but on the perspective I developed as a participant in and as an observer of some of the events I describe. I worked on most of Tom Kean’s campaigns. While he served in the assembly, I sometimes accompanied him to Trenton to observe proceedings in the legislature. When he held the posts of majority leader and as Speaker, I would, while working as an intern in the office of Governor William T. Cahill, listen to legislative debates on bills Kean had sponsored. During Kean’s two terms as governor, I served as New Jersey’s assistant secretary of state. My portfolio included overseeing cultural agencies housed within the Department of State and initiatives such as the establishment of the New Jersey Center for the Performing Arts in Newark.

Years later, when Kean became chairman of the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks upon the United States, I served as its principal spokesman, a task I continued to perform for its successor nonprofit organization, the 9–11 Public Discourse Project.

I make this disclaimer so that readers may take my activities and associations into account in assessing my analyses and conclusions. Obviously, I have opinions about episodes in which I participated and do not claim to have approached them with complete disinterest. I have, however, tried to be both authoritative and objective in my presentation of events and in my interpretation of them. On occasion, I have been able to supplement primary and secondary accounts of events I recount by offering my personal observations of them. As my major sources, I relied on interviews with well over one hundred people who interacted with Tom Kean, press accounts, and public records. I also relied on books and periodicals that, while they make no mention of Kean, cover eras in which he and his forebears were politically active. In addition, I consulted specialized publications devoted to areas of policy in which Kean worked (education, the environment, etc.). Where possible, so as not to disrupt the narrative, I included some of the most significant supplementary material in the endnotes.

Although he graciously consented to many hours of in-depth interviews, granted me access to personal and private papers, and encouraged his associates to share their candid reminiscences with me, this is not an authorized biography of Tom Kean. Nor is it an attempt to depict the major events of his public career from his point of view. The opinions it offers and the conclusions it reaches are mine alone. What follows is a political biography of Kean by someone who knows him well. While favorably disposed to my subject, I do not shy away from recounting his failures as well as his successes, his weaknesses as well as his strengths. For me, the researching and recording of Tom Kean's life and his contributions to his state and nation have been both exhilarating and revelatory. If those who read this book come away with an enhanced understanding of an extraordinary individual who rendered extraordinary public service in several arenas and of how he did it, I will have succeeded in my task.