

WILLIAM G. MILLIKEN

AUTHOR'S NOTE

William and Helen Milliken cooperated in the research and writing of this biography, and have generously supplied photographs from their personal collection. They reviewed drafts of the text for factual errors. The observations and conclusions drawn about the lives and work of the Millikens are the author's own. No approval by the Millikens was sought or given for the text.

WILLIAM G. MILLIKEN

Michigan's Passionate Moderate

DAVE DEMPSEY

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TO JENNIFER

An unparalleled teacher

FOREWORD

WHY WOULD A nonprofit environmental organization use its scarce resources to ensure that the historical record of a governor—now more than two decades into retirement—be brought to life in a frank and factual biography? The answer lies in our interest in discovering how the web of politics and cultural values determines the way societies choose to interact with their environments.

By reviewing Michigan's past through a biography of Michigan's longest-serving governor, we hope to find answers to questions that directly impact Michigan's environmental future. For instance, is a rise in environmentalism mainly a willingness to invest in long-term public needs in contrast to letting short-term private interests dominate? If so, what drives the oscillations that sometimes make Michigan a progressive leader in everything from higher education to environmental protection and at other times reflect values commonly associated with penurious conservatism? How much of this is a reflection of differences among the governors who have led Michigan or the times in which they have governed?

These are some of the knotty issues author Dave Dempsey illuminates as he takes us through the life of William G. Milliken, a man who has come to be revered across the country and, in more recent times, ignored by his party. In *William G. Milliken, Michigan's Passionate Moderate*, Dempsey has written an insightful biography that dives right

into the rough-and-tumble political world in which Milliken operated. Rich with anecdotes and insights into Milliken's childhood, family, staff, and service under fire in World War II, as well as his campaigns and toughest legislative fights, Dempsey rises above the temptation to simply extol the nice-guy virtues for which Milliken is known.

Dempsey introduces us to a quiet man who does not easily give up his private thoughts even as he pursues a career that puts him under the white heat of politics. But, more than the personal story of a man born to privilege who sacrifices his yearning for privacy to his political impulses, this biography offers essential insights into the long-running battle for the soul of the Republican Party.

With a reminder of the party's nineteenth-century roots in Jackson, Michigan, Dempsey leads his readers through a quick review of the GOP's schizophrenic development. We learn it's not inconsequential that Milliken, like his father before him, identified with the Republican reformists led by President Theodore Roosevelt and Wisconsin senator Robert M. La Follette. William Milliken believes that the benefits of free market capitalism must be balanced by investments in public institutions and natural resources and restrained by some regulatory controls. This philosophy and his unapologetic defense of well-delivered government services propelled him into a lifelong battle with the right wing of his party.

While Milliken never seems to drop his reserve completely, he's not above disparaging his Republican opponents as "entrenched politicians practically married to lobbyists." Milliken, it seems, never went looking for a fight, except when he broke into politics by beating a right-wing incumbent, redefined his party's program as a freshman legislator, or defended a cherished government program or principle in countless battles against the conservative wing of his party. Readers who think the fight between Republican moderates and their party's right wing is a recent phenomenon will come away with a new perspective on an old battleground.

During the Milliken years, Michigan enjoyed advantages since lost. As a progressive state with decades of exceptional investment in its extraordinary, independent, higher education system, Milliken could tap that excellence before other states had begun to compete or catch up. He rode the national wave of social reforms and environmentalism of the 1970s to boldly place Michigan in the forefront of everything

from open housing to a ban on the pesticide DDT. In addition, Milliken served before term limits precluded the building of trusting relationships across party lines, before highly funded conservative think tanks had more than three decades in which to erode public confidence in public services, and before the religious right and neoconservatives came to dominate his party.

But the good old days weren't easy, and Milliken lost his share of battles. Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Flint were already bleeding their more affluent populations to the suburbs. Prescient enough to know that sprawl posed a growing threat to both urban and rural Michigan, Milliken recognized that his failure to pass land use reform legislation would cost the state dearly in decades to come. Today that loss means that older communities are fighting decay while productive farmland is being converted to big-box stores, suburban estates, and see-through commercial buildings. The fact that he's still actively fighting these battles reflects Milliken's love of Michigan's landscape and his bulldog capacity to hang on to an issue for half a century.

We're living today in a more competitive world. Michigan no longer controls the manufacturing capacity for the world's cars and furniture. Its largest industry has been slow to embrace essential changes. But it's not just economic loss that makes us yearn for Milliken-style leadership. Michigan needs a leader who has the ability to bring divergent sides together to work for the whole state. Since Milliken left office, Michigan has had no governor who's had the political will to stand up and unapologetically call for adequate investments in public goods. To varying degrees, we've had a quarter century of an every man for himself model, in which the political outcomes mean that cutting taxes is deemed of higher value than educational excellence and profit margins for power companies trump the protection of children from mercury poisoning.

Bill Milliken believes in the power and importance of a government that doesn't apologize for protecting the common good. That is the principal lesson of this biography and the reason why the Michigan Environmental Council is proud to be associated with this man and his story.

Lana Pollack
Michigan Environmental Council

PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I WANT TO MAKE it clear at the outset that this work is not and does not attempt to be the complete story of the lives of William and Helen Milliken. It concentrates on their impact on the public life of Michigan and the reasons for that impact, ranging from the natural and human history of the Traverse City region to their temperaments, upbringing, and self-discovery and self-expression. In an epoch of vicious, personalized politics, it is particularly important to recognize how and why Bill and Helen Milliken articulated a different approach to public life and governance.

It is critical not to idealize the Millikens. Doing so puts them behind glass and could prevent future public servants from believing they can approach public life in a similarly constructive way.

On the other hand, as I came to know the Millikens better in the course of writing this book, I also came to realize that many of their most fervent admirers and longtime associates saw in them the expression of their own finest qualities and ideals. To some extent, this means the Millikens were symbols as well as human beings. That does not diminish their characters or contributions, but it underscores the ways in which their natural civility and love of privacy helped them reflect back the best that many had to offer. In a time when we reflexively suspect the worst of many politicians, it is useful to remember an age in which the Millikens inspired many to believe the best of them.

No one, including the Millikens, can survive the expectation of perfection, and I have tried in the course of this book to pinpoint mistakes of judgment, character flaws, and other blemishes on the public records of two Michigan leaders. But I did not attempt to probe deeply into their private lives except to the extent that events in those lives influenced the public people the Millikens became.

Every author owes thanks to hundreds of helpful friends and sources. In this case, the thanks are especially abundant in light of the subject matter—for Bill and Helen Milliken have accumulated scores of thoughtful and helpful friends through the years—and the process by which the book came to be.

I want to begin by thanking Lana Pollack, president of the Michigan Environmental Council (MEC), for supporting this book from day one. While working tirelessly to make MEC a major-league environmental organization visible on the national landscape, she has also been an effective advocate for clean air and water policies, a skillful and supportive boss, a loyal and loving friend, and an invaluable critic. She keenly grasps the relationship between the story of the Millikens and the character of Michigan that MEC and so many others work to protect.

I also want to honor the memory of my late father, who worked for the former governor for 13 years. He instilled in my siblings and me an appreciation for the joys and sacrifices of public service and an understanding of the unique humaneness of the governor he served.

The Millikens are to be thanked not just for their contributions to the welfare of Michigan but also for cooperating with this project, literally throwing open their doors for the inspection of lives well lived. They were candid, reflective, wry, and willing to risk an independent judgment of their mistakes as well as their achievements in this book. They have not approved and did not attempt to censor a word of it.

Many family members, friends, and former aides responded quickly and repeatedly to requests for information and opinions about the Millikens' lives. Joyce Braithwaite-Brickley and George Weeks both provided the behind-the-scenes narrative that only two of the former governor's closest advisers and friends could and screened the manuscript for errors, exaggerations, and misinterpretations. They were unflagging in their patience with my questions and scrupulous in their honesty about the good and bad of the Milliken years. I appreciate the courtesy of William Milliken's brother and sister, John and Ruth, in meeting

with me to discuss memories of a childhood spent in Traverse City. William Milliken Jr. was also forthcoming in an interview about the blessings and burdens of being a prominent politician's son.

Other Milliken associates who generously answered every question put to them—and went far beyond in explaining their work—include Charlie Greenleaf, Billie Harrison, Richard Helmbrecht, and James Phelps. Governor Jennifer M. Granholm graciously took time from her punishing schedule to offer thoughts on how the Milliken style and values affect her work. I also want to thank Jack Bails, Dennis Cawthorne, Nancy Dockter, Phyllis Dell, Peter Ellsworth, Don Gordon, Fred Grasman, Gus Harrison, Paul Hillegonds, Christine Hollister, Noble Kheder, Richard McLellan, Keith Molin, Frank Ochberg, Maurice Reizen, Bill Rustem, Craig Ruff, Tim Skubick, and Howard Tanner for taking the time to meet with me and answer numerous questions.

A number of people stepped forward to pick up the research slack for this book. Stephanie Burns was unselfish and helpful in tracking down information about the work of the Millikens. Margie Cooke provided an astonishing collection of newspaper articles and other information about the role of Helen Milliken and women's issues in the 1982 gubernatorial campaign. Special thanks to Dennis Cawthorne for reviewing the manuscript and correcting a number of factual and typographical errors.

Critical support for the book came from the Lloyd and Mabel Johnson Foundation. My wholehearted thanks to Gordon Kummer and the foundation for assuring that the story of the Millikens and their legacy could be told.

Many friends have encouraged and tolerated me over the years, and they deserve recognition, too, for birthing the book. These include Kathleen Aterno, Tom Baldini, Doug Bauer, Sharon Bothwell, Leslie Brogan, Lois Debacker, Sandy DiCesare, Patrick Diehl, Tracy Dobson, Marlene Fluharty, Libby Harris, Carol Misseldine, Lisa Reed, Derwin Rushing, Margaret Schulte, Tom Vance, Lisa Wyatt Knowlton, Louise Wirbel, and Joe VanderMeulen.

As years pass, the importance of family ties becomes more apparent to me. My mother, Barbara, brothers Jack and Tom, sister-in-law Suzanne, niece Anna, and nephew Michael are remarkably kind and generous people, and I appreciate them deeply.

Several of the environmental organizations for which I've worked

deserve note; they have enabled me to find a home and do meaningful work while exercising remarkable restraint about my frailties and providing generous support for the job of recording environmental and political history. Besides the Michigan Environmental Council, I want to acknowledge Clean Water Action, one of the nation's oldest and best environmental advocacy organizations with a strong record of mobilizing people to support clean water, and the Ecology Center, a group based in Ann Arbor that has scored enormous environmental health victories even during the hard times of the 1990s and the early twenty-first century. Those who follow us will benefit greatly from the pollution these groups have prevented and the places they have protected for all time.

During the writing of this book, one of Michigan's most formidable and unforgettable advocates and spirits, Mary Beth Doyle, tragically lost her life. In her absence, many have come to appreciate even more than before her role as a source of inspiration, insight, and strategic thinking and as a conscience for Michigan's environmental movement. Her work and great love of life continue to send ripples outward. Like many, I miss her. The spirit of public service illustrated by the lives of the Millikens is consistent with Mary Beth's belief in a more compassionate, humane, and sustainable society. In a small way, this book is a tribute to her.

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