

Midterm Memory Lane

Written by Jack King, BT Contributor
April 2018

The governor's race makes midterms important



h, yes. Here we are in another midterm election year, which in Florida -- unlike most states -- really does mean something. That's because many years ago, we decided we didn't want to have a presidential election overshadowing the even more important (in Florida at least) governor's race.

So yes, our midterm elections are important. They've given us some of the finest governors we've ever had, and also some of the worst. Oh, where to start? How about with the best ones?

My call for the four best governors in state history, in alphabetical order: Reubin Askew, Lawton Chiles, LeRoy Collins, and Bob Graham. Yes, I know these four are fairly recent, but it's hard to judge the ones who go way back in time, especially when you consider that 120 years ago, Florida actually stopped at Tampa and started again in Key West.

On this list I pick Collins as the very best because he was governor at the worst possible time, during desegregation in the 1950s. It was a tough era, and for the most part, he kept order better than other places in the South. Being governor is no easy task, and all four of these men did yeoman's work in difficult times with few people noticing. That was also the way they liked it.

Askew, Chiles, and Graham were all Democrats who were modestly conservative, but they were very driven to make the state a better place for their constituents. They all served at times in which Florida's population was growing rapidly, sometimes too rapidly, and yet people still came in. Somehow each man succeeded in the job.

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Somewhere along the line, Floridians thought it'd be nice to have a Republican or two in the governor's mansion. After all, the Northerners were coming to sunny Florida in droves, plus them thar Democrats were turning way too much to the left. So why not elect a GOP candidate once in a while?

Their first choice was, to say the least, not good. That was Claude Kirk, a brash Democrat turned Republican who called himself a tree-shakin' son of a bitch. At the time, the Democrats were in disarray and the Republicans took full advantage of it. Kirk defeated former Miami Mayor Robert King High and the Republican rout was on -- sort of.

Kirk showed up at the inauguration with a mystery woman introduced as Madam X, which kicked off the party. He didn't like Tallahassee (who does?), so he spent much of his time out of the capital. Only Palm Beach was good enough for him. He had a buddy with a Lear jet and the state paid for his gas. Just to show how really bad he was just about everything, he ran his 37-foot sailboat aground in calm seas in Miami.

He was referred to by a former business partner as a "complete political huckster, a phony, and a very dangerous man." Four years later, Reubin Askew crushed him at the polls and "Claudius Maximus" was gone from Tallahassee.

Reubin Askew was followed by Lawton Chiles and we were able to enjoy 16 years of quality government brought to us by home-grown leaders.

Alas, the state has a short memory and elected a schoolteacher cum businessman. It was a short life. Bob Martinez started out badly and then got worse. He pushed through a huge tax increase, and the Republicans who'd put him in office reacted nastily and repealed it. He then signed more than 90 death warrants (everyone who was on death row). The courts had a legal field day for the next three years. He was gone in one term.

And then we got lucky again. Along came former U.S. Sen. Lawton Chiles, a central Florida icon who ran for governor. Martinez was gone in a rout. And again, for the next eight years, there was some order in Florida government. I remember thinking at the time: "How long can this go on, and when it stops, where will we be?" I should never have asked the question.

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The question was answered soon enough: We inherited Jeb Bush, who did virtually nothing except jump into a legal fight with the family of Terri Schiavo, a woman who was left brain dead from a heart attack. Her family wanted to pull the plug and let her die peacefully, but in came “Captain America” Bush. He had no legal standing and nothing in the Florida statutes that said he could do anything. But it sure as hell made for a wonderful grandstand event.

I don't doubt he was sincere, but I doubt his motives.

That leaves us with Governor Rick Scott, who wants to get rid of U.S Senator Bill Nelson. Before you think about this, ask yourself just what has Scott actually done for us in Florida?

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