

# Biography chronicles former Gov. Phil Hoff's impact

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On a cool November night in 1962, a delirious crowd poured into the streets of Winooski to whoop and holler over the election of a new governor. The crowd did not entirely understand it yet, but Vermont had just swung onto a dramatically new course — one the state would follow all the way into a new century.

Before that night, Vermont was a one-party, Republican state. No Democrat had been elected governor in 109 years.

The Statehouse was a small, sleepy place. Governors often served only a single term. Lawmakers had only recently begun to meet every year.

Political power still resided with the state's small towns. They controlled the legislature, where the state's largest city had the same number of representatives (one) as Victory (pop. 46) and Stratton (pop. 24). Many tiny towns still operated their own high schools. Indigent Vermonters had to rely on the good graces of local overseers of the poor.

All that would change in the coming six years, as Vermont became a two-party state with an activist government willing to adopt social, political and environmental reform.

The pivot point of this political revolution, the cause of the Winooski crowd's delirium, was a tall, sandy-haired man grinning and waving a victory sign from his perch atop the back seat of a convertible.

"A hundred years of bondage broken! A hundred years of bondage broken!" he shouted.

Philip Henderson Hoff of Burlington — lawyer, Democrat, politician in the mold of President John F. Kennedy — had just been elected governor by 1,300 votes. Winooski's returns had put him over the top.

Vermont would never be the same.

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In 2011, with Democrats dominant in Montpelier and an independent socialist representing the state in the U.S. Senate, it can be easy to forget — or for young people never to know — the transformation Vermont underwent in the 1960s.

Hoff himself is 87 now, his hair white, his voice full of gravel. He moves stiffly and his memories of his years as governor have been bleached of detail, like a watercolor left too long in the sun.

He has largely stepped away from public life and spends winter months in New Mexico. In an hour-long conversation at his Burlington office this fall, he recalled few specifics of that election night in 1962, but was clear about the legacy he believes he built in the following years.

“To this day, Vermont is a more progressive state than New Hampshire and Maine. Those years were the turning point,” he said.

Now, a University of Vermont historian and two former journalists have told the story of how the 38-year-old lawyer turned a pent-up desire for change in Vermont into an agenda for state government.

Their book, “Philip Hoff: How Red Turned Blue in the Green Mountain State,” combines political biography with social history to vividly portray Vermont and its government in the 1960s.

Two of the book’s authors, Stephen Terry and Anthony Marro, were reporters for the Rutland Herald who covered Hoff during his three terms as governor. The book is built around work they did nearly 50 years ago, fleshed out with recent interviews and with political history contributed by UVM emeritus professor Samuel Hand.

The authors chronicle Hoff’s rapid rise to the governorship, battles with Republicans to enact his reform agenda and his equally precipitous political fall — his loss of the 1970 U.S. Senate race. They outline the achievements of the Hoff years, from dramatic reapportionment of the state House of Representatives, to the transfer of responsibility for social welfare from towns to the state.

The biography is long overdue, politicians and political observers said last week.

“Phil was the first truly modern governor in Vermont,” said Sen. Patrick Leahy, D-Vt., whose first job out of law school was working for Hoff’s law firm in Burlington. “Everything every governor has done since has been built on the Hoff model.”

UVM Vermont political scientist Frank Bryan echoed, “It’s hard to exaggerate the significance of the Hoff years. ... He changed the nature of how we make decisions about ourselves.”

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In 1962, Hoff was a one-term member of the state House of Representatives, little-known outside Chittenden County. He had grown up in Massachusetts, graduated from Cornell Law School and chosen Burlington over Cleveland as a place to move with his wife and young daughter.

“I can remember driving into Burlington and saying, ‘This is where I want to raise my kids,’ “ he would recall a half-century later.

A Republican by birth, he was a Democrat by choice, convinced, he says, that his new party had better solutions to the challenges facing the United States after World War II.

He had moved to a state where Democrats had won just one statewide race in the previous 100 years.

Nevertheless, change was in the air. A Democrat had won 40 percent of the popular vote for governor in 1952, and in 1958, Vermonters elected a Democrat, William Meyer, to Congress (he lost his re-election bid two years later).

By 1962, the election of President Kennedy had energized youthful voters and generated new optimism about the ability of government to help improve the lives of its citizens.

“A handsome and energetic campaigner, Hoff found himself being compared to John Kennedy and did nothing to discourage the comparison,” the authors note. The candidate was full of ideas for how Vermont could do a better job at everything from educating its children to improving its highway system.

Many Vermonters found this refreshing in a state whose House chamber had a block of seats known as Sleepy Hollow for the elderly representatives dozing there, and whose incumbent governor, F. Ray Keyser, had been described by a fellow Republican as “the oldest young man I ever met in my life.”

Although much has been made of the connection between Hoff’s election and the influx of new voters to the state, political scientist Bryan rejects that analysis. He points out that Hoff ran more strongly than expected in places like the Northeast Kingdom.

“Vermonters did this,” he said in an interview. “This was Vermonters changing their minds.”

After the jubilation and energy of election night, lawmakers were taken aback when in his inaugural, Hoff told lawmakers he would spend the year studying Vermont’s challenges before laying out major proposals for change.

The new governor had discovered the state budget officer not only lacked five-year projections for state revenues, but could not tell him how much the state expected to take in the following year.

“We must plan for the future, but we don’t have the knowledge on which to base a plan,” his biographers quote him as telling a colleague. “I’m just trying to find out what in hell we’ve got so we can decide what to do about it.”

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While Hoff prepared to change state government, Vermont was changing at an accelerating pace, the new book reminds readers.

After a century of stagnation, the state’s population was growing — by 40,000 in the 1950s and by another 55,000 in the 1960s. Many of the new Vermonters were immigrants from urban areas,

come to work at the growing IBM plant in Essex Junction, or drawn to the state's rural character.

This steady influx (accompanied by the baby boom) created pressures Vermont was not prepared to meet, whether in educating a burgeoning number of children — 20,000 more school-age children since 1950 — or in guiding development through state laws or local zoning.

Hoff encountered stiff resistance in Montpelier in his first years. Most department heads worked for commissioners, not the governor, and most of them were Republicans. Hoff once told a supporter unhappy with the slow pace of change, "I'm the only Democrat in my administration."

The legislature, where each of Vermont's 246 communities had a single vote in the House, was also a barrier. In 1964, lawmakers rejected Hoff's "bold new approach," an agenda that called for the regionalization of schools, courts and highways districts in the name of improving the performance of all three.

Nevertheless, the young governor overwhelmingly won re-election that fall and, in 1965, the Vermont House voted to reapportion itself to meet the U.S. Supreme Court mandate of "one-man, one-vote."

The number of representatives dropped from 246 to 150, and power shifted from rural towns toward the population centers of Chittenden and Rutland counties. Reapportionment didn't sweep Democrats into control, but it brought in a new generation of lawmakers of both parties ready to act.

The 1966 session once again rejected Hoff's regional schools bill but repealed the poll tax — which legislators had refused to do for 20 years — pumped more funding into schools, passed a package of penal reforms, created an educational television channel and narrowly defeated a fair housing bill that was passed the following year.

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There would be more victories for Hoff before he left office in 1968, and some signal defeats. One of those failures was the narrow defeat of his proposal for Vermont to become a major importer of cheap Canadian power — ironic in light of Vermont's later dependence on Hydro-Quebec.

Even his losses laid the groundwork for future actions in Vermont. Hoff never achieved a regional school system, but many towns voluntarily joined into union school districts. Lawmakers rejected his proposal to reorganize and simplify the structure of state government — but quickly did so when Hoff was succeeded by Republican Deane Davis.

But Hoff did not initiate every one of these measures. Reapportionment, for example, was ordered by the courts. The authors argue, however, that it was Hoff's leadership — the vision he offered and the sense of excitement he generated — that made these sweeping changes possible.

“Hoff very much believed that government was and should be the primary force in bringing about social change,” Hand, Terry and Marro write.

“Hoff was an activist governor, pushing new ideas, concepts and programs, and challenging the idea that Vermont governors should be caretakers... In the four decades after Hoff left office, Vermont in fact had governors who were considered liberal, centrist and conservative, but none of whom tried to retreat into a caretaker role,” they wrote.

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Hoff took a brief break from politics when his third term as governor ended. In 1970, he ran for the U.S. Senate against incumbent Republican Winston Prouty and lost decisively.

The new biography lays out the complex reasons for Hoff’s rapid fall. Alcohol played a role. Although many of those who knew him said they never saw liquor impair his judgment, by 1968 he was showing up late for meetings and his drinking was well-known in political circles.

Then -House Republican Leader Walter “Peanut” Kennedy opened a big GOP fund-raising dinner by telling the crowd that Hoff was a popular governor, adding “You’ve seen him plastered — all over the landscape.”

Four days later, Hoff held a news conference and acknowledged a past drinking problem.

He had other political problems as well. He had broken with President Lyndon Johnson to oppose the escalating war in Vietnam. And he had embraced the cause of civil rights, creating the Vermont-New York Youth Project, which brought black teens from New York City to summer programs with white Vermont students.

The project was hugely controversial in Vermont, where many whites saw Hoff as importing inner-city problems to a rural state. Local reaction revealed a racist strain as well, the authors write.

During his Senate race, “Hoff was walking out of Barre’s Spaulding High School after making a speech when two football players passed him ... ‘There goes Hoff, the (racial epithet) lover,’ one of them said in a matter-of-fact way,” the book recounts.

Hoff himself later said he had gotten out ahead of his state, though he had no regrets about starting the youth program.

“Once you get beyond your constituents, you’re going to get out of there,” he said. “And that’s what happened to me.”

After his defeat, Hoff gave up drinking and resumed his legal career. He served three terms in the state Senate in the 1980s and remained one of Vermont’s strongest voices on civil rights issues.

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Hoff's voice creaks a bit as he talks about the past. He has regrets. His work as a lawyer has never excited him as politics did.

"I think I would have been a force in the U.S. Senate. I think I would have done well," he says.

But he also has placed those years in the 1960s in the perspective of a long life in which he and his wife, Joan, raised four daughters.

Asked if election night in 1962 was the high point of his life, he smiles. "I hope I've got a better perspective than that," he says. "The high point of my life was the day I got married."

His liberal convictions have only grown stronger over the years. During the hour long conversation, he several times spoke approvingly of the Occupy Wall Street movement.

"We do need radical change," he said, to diminish the political power of corporations and to give working people a larger voice in decisions that affect their lives.

"You can understand, too, the Tea Party, if suddenly working people find they are not enjoying the fruits of our society, why shouldn't they reject the forces that bring that about?" he said.

Asked what he hopes Vermonters will remember about his work, he said, "That I really cared. About people, what happens to them, how well-educated they are, the kind of jobs they can get, the kind of life they lead. I really did care."

He remains an icon for the Democratic politicians who came after him.

Leahy, now a seven-term senator, put it this way.

"He was the first one who brought excitement to state government. He changed what had been a sleepy, declining state in many ways. He made Vermont modern."

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