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Judge Frank M. Coffin

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JUDGE FRANK M. COFFIN

*Honorable Edmund S. Muskie**

My memories of Frank Coffin go back fifty years. Although he graduated from Bates College four years after I did, his achievements as an outstanding debater and scholar reverberated from Lewiston to Waterville, where I had already begun the practice of law. Moreover, like myself, he was a rarity on the Bates campus—a Democrat!

That shared interest brought us together for the first time, as political partners, in the early 1950s. The Maine Republican Party had stumbled into a perceived liquor scandal which seemed to us to offer a spark of hope for a moribund Democratic Party. Frank emerged as the chairman of the party, and I as its candidate for governor in 1954.

He brought to his role qualities which have always been his hallmark—common sense, political shrewdness, quiet persuasion, a sense of humor, and a sure instinct for shaping consensus.

He focussed his attention on the development of ideas—to improve state government and to build a better state—and he built support for our campaign by energizing people at the grass roots in that effort. He expanded our candidate base, attracted the attention of the media, established a healthy relationship with the national party, and awakened long slumbering elements of the party which had lost interest over the years.

Much to our surprise we won the governorship and faced the challenge of governing! The Democratic Party had been virtually excluded from state government since the early 1930s, with only small minorities in both houses of the Legislature. I faced the challenge of dealing with an overwhelming Republican Legislature and a state bureaucracy which had become a part of one-party government.

Together we undertook the work of assembling the experience, the people, the programs, the strategies to do the job. It was our objective to follow through on the ideas we had developed during the campaign, expand on them, and convert them into a legislative agenda. I think we successfully demonstrated, with political results that are visible today, that two-party competition is an invigorating resource.

Throughout this period, Frank continued the role of party building, not as an end in itself, but to make of it an instrument to serve the public interest.

In the process, he made himself an attractive and highly respected political figure. He was elected to Congress in 1956 and very quickly

* Former Secretary of State, United States Senator, and Governor of Maine.

caught the favorable attention of Speaker Sam Rayburn as a man with a future in the Congress.

I urged him to become a candidate for governor in 1958. He could easily have been elected, but he was not quite ready to leave the Congress.

In 1960, the first year that our state elections were held in November at the same time as the presidential election, Frank did run for governor, and became a casualty of Nixon's heavy majority in Maine.

He moved forward from that defeat to become a key figure in President Kennedy's reorganization of the foreign aid program. Shortly before his assassination, the President announced his intention to appoint Frank as Ambassador to Panama, a decision that was aborted by that tragic event.

Frank Coffin's career could have unfolded in any one of several predictably promising directions. I entertained for him political ambitions and expectations that would have given us more opportunities for political collaboration and personal associations.

Instead, his unique qualifications for the bench took him to the United States Court of Appeals where he has achieved a splendid fulfillment. I know of the great affection and esteem in which he is held by his peers in the federal judiciary across the country. If presidential politics had produced somewhat different results, he could have made it a step higher.

Public service has given us both fulfillment. What more could one ask of that shared adventure almost forty years ago.