

# THE REPUBLICAN WHO ROARED

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For some people he is still "the governor." You may speak of Governor Askew, Governor Bush, Governor Collins, Governor Chiles, but when you say "the governor," there is only one man you could be referring to: Claude Roy Kirk Jr., the first Republican governor of Florida since Reconstruction.

He will be 77 Jan. 7. He lives in Bear Island, a gated community in West Palm Beach, with his German-born wife, Erika Mattfeld Kirk, a stunning blonde he introduced as "Madame X" at his inaugural ball in 1966. He's still active, still lucid, still funny, still unpredictable. For instance, he thinks he'd make an excellent mayor, "better than that idiot (Joel) Daves who lets his wife run the city, anyway," he says. That's Kirk: still a pistol. You grapple for historical parallels and there really aren't any.

Kirk somewhat resembles Huey Long, the flamboyant "Kingfish" governor of Louisiana in the 1930s who told reporters: "Just say I'm sui generis." There's a bit of Minnesota Gov. Jesse Ventura in him, too, in his military background (Kirk was a Marine lieutenant; Ventura was in the Navy SEALs) and in his contempt for the media.

But Kirk is, first and last, Kirk: Combustible, combative, he treated Florida to four years of fireworks unwitnessed before or since.

"You and I, we may have one original idea a month, or every few weeks, if we're lucky," said Wade Hopping, a Tallahassee attorney who worked with Kirk as a go-between for the legislature in 1966-68. "Claude Kirk has two or three original ideas a day."

White-haired now, Kirk wears a stained white Stetson hat with a band of rattlesnake skin given to him by the late, legendary Florida herpetologist Ross Allen of Silver Springs. He has large, clear brown eyes and Mephistophelian eyebrows, subversive eyebrows, eyebrows that take off in black and silver whorls, fleeing the edges of his broad forehead.

He appeared like a comet in 1966, out of nowhere. He had never held elected office. He was an insurance executive in Jacksonville, and he came from a hardscrabble upbringing in Alabama, joining the Marines at age 17, serving at the tail end of World War II and in Korea. He was commissioned as a lieutenant at age 19, attended college at Emory University and went on to Alabama Law School, winning his law degree on the GI bill.

He was elected by an almost cosmic alignment of impossible chances, when the Democratic Party was suddenly split between north and south Florida. He served just four years, losing to Reubin Askew in 1970.

"I didn't lose," Kirk says staunchly today. "I just came in second."

For decades, the Kirk governorship was viewed as a fluke, and the man himself was ridiculed in the media.

Miami Herald editorial page editor Don Shoemaker called Kirk "Claudius Maximus," and as late as 1983 the paper's executive editor, John McMullan, labeled Kirk "the worst governor in the 20th

century." Historian David R. Colburn says, "Kirk . . . came across as a political buffoon," in his 1996 book *New History of Florida*.

But now that the Democrats are in total disarray, now that Florida has practically become a Republican fiefdom, with its Governor's Mansion, its state legislature and its Cabinet solidly controlled by Republicans - now is perhaps a good time to reexamine Claude Kirk.

He just may have been the first musket shot of a Republican revolution.

God knows Claude Kirk himself thinks so.

"They are all the children of my loins," the former governor said grandly, during a lunch at Toojay's, one of his three favorite restaurants in Palm Beach County. The other two are Duffy's and Pollo Tropical. "The elite dining spots," Kirk calls them.

Kirk has never suffered from low self-esteem. But with the passage of time, the judgment of history is gradually shifting in his favor.

In a thoughtful 1993 book, *Claude Kirk and the Politics of Confrontation*, University of Central Florida history Professor Edmund Kallina Jr. argued forcefully that Kirk's tenure as governor was pivotal, that he changed Florida in sweeping ways, modernizing a state that was lost in dreams of orange and magnolia blossoms, mired in racism and patronage, selling off its unique environment for pennies to despoiling, dredge-and-fill developers.

"Claude Kirk was a very, very important governor in Florida history. He hasn't gotten full credit for what he did," Kallina said. "If you look at his administration, he defined the three major issues in Florida for the 20th and 21st centuries: crime, education and the environment. Nobody can be elected today, to any position of importance, who does not address these issues."

"He had the fastest, sharpest mind you'd ever want to meet," said Nat Reed, a Hobe Sound environmentalist who later served as assistant secretary of the Interior in the Nixon administration.

"I was at a meeting when the owner of one of the largest dredging firms in Florida came up to him and shook his fist in Claude's face. He turned to me and yelled: 'This guy is putting me out of business!' And the governor looked at him and said: 'There's always the Bahamas.' Just like that, instantaneously. That was Claude Kirk."

"I still remember being with him when it was announced that the secretary of the U.S. Navy was mothballing some battleships," said Jim Apthorp, a former aide to Kirk and his successor, Reubin Askew, who now heads the LeRoy Collins Institute in Tallahassee.

"So Kirk shouts, 'Get me the secretary of the Navy on the phone!' And some flunky went and did it, and here's Kirk, on the line with the secretary of the U.S. Navy. It turned out he wanted to use the battleships as floating prisons, moored in the St. Johns River. Just an astounding idea. And obviously the secretary of the Navy wasn't going along with it. So Kirk slams down the phone and says: 'Damned unimaginative sonofabitch!' "

'Only the pretty ones . . .'

Here is the man himself, Kirk incarnate, flirting shamelessly with the waitress at Toojay's. He meets you for a luncheon interview, orders a fluffy omelette with peppers and mushrooms, and a dish of fruit on the side. He asks for mayonnaise and Tabasco sauce, as well as a bagel with butter on it. The bagels don't usually come with butter, but the waitress says she'll fix it for him specially, and does.

"Oh, my God, you're perfect," the former governor says when his buttered bagel arrives.

"You can't expect all the girls to do that for you," she smiles.

"Only the pretty ones," he answers gallantly. The waitress giggles. He's still got it.

He is strangely reticent about his early life. Kirk is a man who can talk extemporaneously for an hour and a half on any subject, but he falls curiously silent when asked to talk about his childhood. He brings a single-page "resume" to the lunch, blurrily printed on yellow paper.

"PERSONAL: Date of Birth: January 7, 1926. Married; Seven Children," is all it says. None of the people who worked with him, when interviewed, could add much more.

"I think he was a diamond in the rough," Reed said. "I think he came from a very hard background that he doesn't like to talk about."

"My parents both worked for the railroad. They met in California," Kirk says reluctantly. "That's where I was born. My father didn't finish the sixth grade. My mother's forebears came from South Carolina. They were Presbyterian missionaries in Brundidge, Alabama. One of my grandfathers ran a store, the other ran a restaurant in Mineral Wells, Texas. He kept my father in a basket underneath the counter. He was a single parent. I was an only child. When I was 10 my parents adopted a girl who is my adoptive sister. She is retired in California today.

"I grew up in Alabama. I was on scrub teams in high school in Montgomery. The team captain's girlfriend fell in love with me, so the team captain had it in for me the rest of the season. He kept running all over my face.

"Did I have the makings of a politician? No. I proved that. Getting elected doesn't make you a politician. People don't really want change. I got elected because I could read numbers. I was a businessman, an insurance man. The Democrats thought they owned the government, owned the Cabinet. And they didn't."

'My God, we won!'

Kirk stepped into a rare window of opportunity. The Democratic Party decided to run Robert King High, mayor of Miami, as its candidate in 1966. High was the unexpected victor in an off-season primary deliberately set up by then-governor and former Jacksonville mayor Haydon Burns, a representative of the party's North Florida power base. Burns expected to win. He lost. South Florida, showing unexpected muscle, put High over the top.

Furious, the North Florida Democrats turned against High and covertly helped Kirk, a candidate who had appeared out of nowhere, with no previous political credentials. "I'M A DEMOKIRK" signs proliferated on conservative North Florida lawns.

"It was the Burns people who got Claude elected," Hopping said. "Their thinking was: 'You ruined our election, now we'll ruin yours.' "

Reed still recalls the frenetic campaign, and its incredible outcome.

"We had a DC-3. We used to have six white shirts a day. We wore these round-collared T-shirts. Moment the gangplank closed, off came our shirts. Each of us had his own hanger. We would try to get each shirt through at least two occasions.

"Onboard the plane we played cards - hearts - as if the world depended on it. The game had to stop at about 30 seconds after landing. If a hand wasn't completed, it was thrown in. Kirk usually won. We would stand up, taxiing. On went the shirts."

Kirk won by 152,957 votes, carrying 56 of Florida's 67 counties. It was an astounding, shattering, upset victory. For the first time in 98 years, Florida had a Republican governor.

"On election night I looked at the TV and said: 'My God, we won! What do we do now?' " Reed remembered. "There hadn't been a Republican governor since Reconstruction! I called up Ray Bliss in Ohio, the former national GOP chairman and the most brilliant political adviser in the Republican Party. And he told me: 'Get rid of your campaign manager. Get rid of everybody associated with the campaign. They'll all want jobs.

They're completely untrained. Go out to the job market and find highly qualified people.'

"No truer words were ever spoken. Slowly but surely we began to attract a very dynamic staff, Wade Hopping; Ray Osborne; Lieutenant Governor Chuck Perry came from Ohio and became chief of education. William Safire became Kirk's media adviser."

The next four years were phantasmagoric.

"Reubin Askew once said: 'No man ever enjoyed being governor more than Claude Kirk.' He just had a great time. He enjoyed being confrontational. He was absolutely fearless in pursuing anything he cared about, and he took on anyone and everyone, often with great good humor," recalled Jim Apthorp.

Historians now divide Kirk's four-year term into two parts: the first two years, when everything went right and Kirk managed to transform Florida and its priorities dazzlingly; and the second two years, when everything soured and public opinion veered away from the almost-too-charismatic governor.

Halfway through his omelette at Toojay's, Kirk looked back on his political parabola.

"The first thing I had to fight was the Cabinet. When I took office, the governor was a lame duck and the Cabinet consisted of six guys who had been there forever. Very few of the 16 million people in Florida today know what Florida was like in 1966," the former governor said.

"He mocked the Cabinet," Hopping recalled. "He used to say he was Snow White and he was surrounded by the Six Dwarfs. He had a very troubled relations with the Cabinet."

Kirk decided that the Cabinet ought to meet biweekly, not weekly. The Cabinet continued to meet, defying the governor, who refused to sign their paychecks for meetings at which he was not present. Eventually Kirk consented to the weekly meetings, but he publicly ridiculed the Cabinet's credentials. Education Commissioner Floyd Christian was an ex-football player. Kirk said: "Floyd Christian can do anything with a football except sign it."

'Claude, are you funnin' me . . . ?'

Next Kirk tackled constitutional revision. Florida in 1966 was still living with an 1885 constitution, an amazing document that had accumulated amendments like dust-dingles under a bed.

The 1885 constitution outlawed interracial marriage, allowed a poll tax on black voters and made it illegal for white and black children to be educated in the same schools. It was so archaic that one provision forbade duellists to hold office.

Kirk's constitutional zeal was helped by a telegram that showed up in a silver bowl in Tallahassee in 1966. Wade Hopping recalls the moment:

"The governor had called a special session of the legislature. The first day there was a telegram sitting in a silver bowl, which normally was filled with candy, and it was addressed to the Governor of the State of Florida. So I opened it up. It said:

" 'The Supreme Court of the United States finds that the legislature of the state of Florida is malapportioned. The legislature shall meet for sole purpose of reapportioning itself.' "

It was a thunderbolt. The power of North Florida and its "Pork Chop Gang" was wiped out with a stroke. South Florida would have to be taken into account. The Republican membership of the Senate increased from four to 12, after hasty elections took place. That 12-member bloc was enough to support any veto Kirk might enter against any piece of legislation.

Once again, Claude Kirk had been astoundingly lucky.

"I have to give him credit. He used that power to hold the legislature's feet to the fire and pass the new constitution," Hopping said.

"If I had not done anything to change the constitution, nobody would know whether I'd done a good job or a bad job," Kirk remembers. "The only reason the new constitution passed, since there were a lot of people against it, was because of a contest between me and Ed Ball. Ed Ball wanted the status quo, and I didn't."

Nat Reed remembered Kirk's uproarious battles with Ball, a gnome-like Jacksonville-based financial wizard who controlled the DuPont fortune, the Seaboard Coast Line railroad and the St. Joe Paper Co.

"I have a sense of humor, but what Claude did to Ed Ball just laid me on the floor," Reed remembered. "He called Ed Ball up one morning with this preposterous practical joke, and put it on the speaker phone so I could listen. And Ed Ball came to the phone and said: 'Claude, I've still got my shaving soap on my chin, so I hope this is important!' "And Claude said: 'It is, Ed, it is. This is what we're going to do.' And he went on to lay out this tremendous, incredible scheme that would ruin Ed Ball or nearly, just play hell with everything Ed Ball stood for, financially, and here was Ed Ball on the other end of the line sputtering and fuming: 'Now Claude, you ain't funnin' me, are you? Claude, are you funnin' me?' And Claude just kept on . . . and you could hear Ed Ball practically choking to death on the other end of the line. I nearly died laughing, listening to it.

"And finally Claude told Ed Ball it was just a joke and they hung up, and three minutes later the phone rang and it was Ed Ball, cursing and yelling and screaming: 'Goddammit Claude! You hadn't ought to have done that to me!' "

Kirk then decided to fight a war on crime. He says he did it because he was fed up with organized crime in Miami and political corruption in Jacksonville that he'd eyewitnessed as a businessman during Haydon Burns' mayorship.

"I looked around like a general with no troops," Kirk remembered. "They told me: 'You've got 67 sheriffs to enforce the law.' Well, 65 of them were corrupt."

Kirk enlisted a crew-cut private security entrepreneur, George Wackenhut, as his commander-in-chief in the "War on Crime." The governor transferred Dade State Attorney Richard Gerstein out of the county. He called for a vigorous inquiry into the business activities of Meyer Lansky, then living in Miami.

He suspended all five Citrus County commissioners and saw to it that Citrus County Clerk of Court Francis "Cowboy" Williams was brought to justice for embezzling \$30,000 in county money. Sheriffs in Jefferson, Manatee and Gilchrist counties were suspended or resigned.

Today the Florida Department of Law Enforcement, Kirk's creation, is regarded as one of the best state law enforcement agencies in the country.

***CORRECTION: CORRECTION, PUBLISHED December 31, 2002: Because of a reporting error, The Post Sunday incorrectly said the late financier Ed Ball of Jacksonville controlled the Seaboard Coast Line railroad. Ball controlled the Florida East Coast Line railroad. The error appeared in a profile of former Florida Gov. Claude Kirk on the front page***

**Illustration:** PHOTO (C & 4 B&W)

1. (B&W) 1968 Miami News File Photo

Once, vice-presidential dreams

After luring the Republican national convention to Miami in 1968, Kirk (left) thought he had a shot as Richard Nixon's No. 2 pick. 'I tell you what,' Kirk says today. 'If Nixon had picked me, he wouldn't have had to resign.'

2. (C) DAVID SPENCER/Staff Photographer

'Getting elected doesn't make you a politician'

By singling out crime, education and the environment, some argue, Gov. Claude Kirk created issues that continue to resonate in the 21st century.

3. (B&W) 1968 Miami News file photo

1968: Pushing for his place

After two years of riding high as Florida's governor, Claude Kirk (center) believed he was a contender for vice president with Richard Nixon, and lured the Republican convention to Miami. But the event was met with riots, and the offer went to Spiro Agnew. Years later, Kirk is still bitter about the botched bid. 'Agnew was so damned dumb I had to teach him to make a speech.'

4. (B&W) 1977 UPI file photo

'Chicken government'

Years after leaving office, former Gov. Kirk complimented then-Gov. Reubin Askew for recommending that Florida's Cabinet system be abolished. Fighting with the Cabinet was the first battle Kirk took on in his term. 'When I took office the governor was a lame duck and the Cabinet consisted of six guys who had been there forever.' He often joked that he was Snow White surrounded by the Six Dwarfs.

5. (B&W) 1967 Palm Beach Post File Photo At the inaugural ball

Gov. Claude Kirk (from left) and Erika Mattfeld appear at the ball with Gov. Kirk's parents, Claude Kirk Sr. and Myrtle McLure Kirk. Gov. Kirk later married Mattfeld, but at the time he refused to introduce her, and the press called her 'Madame X.' 'She's still as attractive as ever,' he says.

Candid Kirk on today's politics

Q. What do you think of the Trent Lott debacle?

A. It was the stupid act of a man who was supposed to know how to control his mouth with his mind, and didn't. He wasn't even a Republican when he was originally supporting Strom Thurmond all those years ago. But the party has to reach out to blacks and especially to women of color. You've got to have an advocacy that is honest about blacks. You've got to reach out for them, campaign for them, and show them that you care.

Q. What do you think of your successor, Bob Graham's, chances as a presidential candidate?

A. I enjoy him. He credits me with helping him beat his opponent. I figured he would be governor someday, long before anyone else did. He's a nice candidate, but he'll never be president. He just can't get his words together fast enough. It is hard to believe, but Hillary Clinton is a better candidate than he is.

Q. What do you think of Bill Clinton, especially the Monica Lewinsky scandal?

A. If he had been a Republican, he wouldn't have had time to zip up before we got rid of him. As for his success as a politician, well, if you don't have to be intellectually honest, you can stay in office any amount of time.

Q. The Democratic Party in Florida appears to be in full retreat now. Do you think Florida will become more solidly Republican as time goes on?

A. The Republican Party can prosper if the growing minority of Republicans will stop acting like Democrats. What do I mean? I mean petty fraud, petty boondoggles, petty pork. You've got to have a philosophy. You can't just say: "Elect me because I'm not a Democrat."

Q. What advice would you give to the Democrats, to win back what they have lost?

A. Let them hire me and I'll tell them.

Q. What's the most important issue facing Florida today?

A. Education. We have defrauded our children systematically. If you don't have educated children, you can't attract industry. Sure, we can get plenty of tourists, because we've killed the mosquitoes, put in air conditioning and everybody has power steering in their automobiles, but without education, you've got no future. We need a state income tax to keep more people from coming down here and freeloading off us, and make the people who are here pay for all that they enjoy. The teachers union ought to be abolished. The muck and mire they've created is a disgrace. You can bring Walt Disney down, you can bring Universal Studios down. That's nice. God bless. But until you start bringing CEOs of big companies down here, Internet people, smart people, you haven't begun. Where are they? In San Jose. In Boston. Why aren't they in Florida? They've all got vacation homes here. Why won't they live here? Education.

- Michael Browning

**GRAPHIC:** PHOTO (2 B&W); DAVID SPENCER/Staff Photographer 1. 'Any time one party thinks they've got a lock on power, they're vulnerable' Claude Kirk's defeat began a run of Democratic power in the Governor's Mansion, broken only by the 1987 term of Robert Martinez. 'Before I came along, the Democrats thought they owned Florida. I forced them to straighten out and pick good candidates like Reuben Askew and Lawton Chiles. They learned from their mistakes.' 2. Claude Kirk

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