

Gov. Richard Riley: Still changing the world, quietly

by Phil Noble

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It has been 27 years since he left the South Carolina Governor's office and 13 years since he was U.S. Secretary of Education. But Gov. Richard W. Riley is still having a huge impact on our state, our country and the future.

Recently he led a project to structure the whole future of online learning at colleges and universities in this country. The positive impact of his hugely important work will still be felt fifty years from now.

And he has done it all in his own unique way — doing great things quietly. Always shunning the spotlight, giving credit to others, maintaining the highest standards of

honor and integrity — and having a huge and lasting impact with the work he does.

I am sure he would actively discourage me from writing this column.

Full disclosure: it's obvious that I am a huge, unabashed admirer of Gov. Riley. I have known him since 1976 and though we are by no measure "close," he has inspired me and countless others. As founder of the SC New Democrats, he continues to inspire our work for big change and real reform in our state.

I first met Gov. Riley in 1976 in an old dilapidated warehouse on East Bay Street in Charleston. I was a campaign volunteer; he was a relatively obscure state senator from Greenville who gave up his seat to manage the South Carolina campaign of an even more obscure former state senator from Georgia that was now running for President — Jimmy Carter.

Though none of the so-called experts gave either of them much of a chance — or even took them very seriously — both Carter and Riley went on to win their next elections. In fact, Carter won South Carolina — the last Democratic presidential candidate to do so.

Carter became President and Riley became Governor. Though Carter's political fortunes faded in one term and Riley's soared in two, they shared a common bond of both being good and decent men who always tried to do the right thing — the moral thing — even when it was unpopular and hard.

Gov. Riley's greatest achievement as Governor was the reform of public education with the Education Improvement Act and the Education Finance Act — and he had to break the hold of the old barons and insider power brokers of our state to do it.

At a time when we are accustomed to South Carolina's being the subject of almost endless political ridicule, the idea of our state leading the nation in education reform seems almost laughable. Yet that is precisely what we did under Gov. Riley. People came from all over the country, indeed the world, to study the great things we were doing in education reform and innovation.

In 1992, Riley supported another progressive Southern governor, Bill Clinton, in his quest for the White House. Clinton had such respect for Riley that he asked him to lead the Transition Team to put together the new government, and Clinton then asked Riley to be his White House Chief of Staff. Riley said no — he wanted to focus on education. Thus began an eight year term as the US Secretary of Education.

One historian described his tenure as helping “launch historic initiatives to raise academic standards; to improve instruction for the poor and disadvantaged; to expand grants and loan programs to help more Americans go to college; to prepare young people for the world of work; and to improve teaching.”

His devotion to improving education was such that Riley, not once but twice, turned down Clinton's offer of a nomination to the US Supreme Court so that he could continue his work for education.

He was named by *Time Magazine* as one of the 10 Best Cabinet Members of the entire 20th Century.

Since leaving Washington, Riley has continued to change the world — again, in his own quiet way. He's Chairman of the Board of his beloved alma mater, Furman University, where he started the Riley Institute of Government, Politics and Public Leadership. They work on a wide variety of difficult but important issues such as education reform, racial diversity and developing emerging leaders. Their work is having a real impact in South Carolina, nationally and worldwide.

Recently, I asked Riley Institute Director Don Gordon why he or someone else hasn't written a biography of Riley. The answer was vintage Riley; Gordon said Riley doesn't want anyone to spend time focused on him and, besides, this eighty-year-old grandfather says he is nowhere near finished yet, so there's just no time for a book.

And what of his latest project with online education? Again, a typical Riley project — deeply substantive, innovative ideas with huge long term impact, and no public fanfare.

Riley led the Commission on the Regulation of Postsecondary Distance Learning. This dull-sounding commission created a radical new framework for how online learning in all the colleges and universities in the US would be structured for the future. His work will make online courses at one college available to potentially millions of other students in other states — both today and for years to come.

It was hugely important work and it will have massive impact for generations to come. It's like he was the guy who in the early 1800's figured out the potential for this new thing

called the railroads and then devised a unified operating system so the railroads could run effectively despite the laws and barriers of many state and national borders.

And you did not even know Gov. Riley did this.

Most of all, Gov. Riley has achieved what he has with absolute honor, integrity and devotion to principle. He flourished politically in the corrupt and racist political environment of South Carolina in the '60s, '70s and '80s. And after eight years in the scandal-scarred world of Washington politics, he emerged with his already-stellar reputation enhanced.

At a time when the brassy State House statues of politicians past are looking increasingly tarnished, it should make all South Carolinas proud that one man, Gov. Richard W. Riley, remains the epitome of honorable public service.

And his brilliant work continues — quietly.

— Phil Noble is a businessman in Charleston and president of the SC New Democrats, an independent reform group founded by Gov. Richard Riley to bring change and reform in government and politics. He can be reached at phil@scnewdemocrats.org www.SCNewDemocrats.org.