What makes Gov. Branstad tick?

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It all started in an eighth-grade classroom in Forest City.

The teacher asked students what they wanted to become when they grew up. Most of the students had common responses, like firemen and policemen.

One student, however, gave a response that is still remembered by others in the class.

“I want to become the governor of the state of Iowa!” said a young man.

The other students in class had a good laugh over this. Little did they know that the young man would become the longest-serving governor in U.S. history.

This event, as recalled by one of Gov. Terry Branstad’s classmates, tells us a lot about the goal-driven governor, said author Mike Chapman, who has written a biography on Branstad titled “Iowa’s Record Setting Governor.”

For his research, Chapman talked to more than 40 people Branstad grew up and worked with, including his classmates, high-school coach and staffers.

“Gov. Branstad’s 8th grade teacher Lura Sewick taught US History in Forest City and she sparked his interest in government and public service. She also taught him to participate in the public process by voting and attending city council meetings to be informed,” Ben Hammes, communications director for the governor, wrote in an email.

Chapman said Branstad played basketball and football in school. He became interested in politics when he was in school.

He served a record four-terms as governor from 1983 until 1999.

The next step in his career was a position as president of Des Moines University, a position he held for six years. He made a successful bid for the statehouse again in 2010 and is in his sixth-term as of 2014.

BACKGROUND

Chapman said Branstad played basketball and football in school. He became interested in politics when he was in school.

“What I was interested in was how this young lad came in from a farm community of about 300 people and became the youngest governor in Iowa history,” Chapman said.

Branstad, a native of Leland, Iowa, was first elected to the Iowa House of Representatives in 1972. He made his first run for the state legislature when he was 26-years-old. He was then elected as lieutenant governor in 1978.

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He once happened to read “The Conscience of a Conservative,” by Sen. Barry Goldwater, who was also a Republican presidential candidate in 1964.

Chapman said a key message from the book that influenced Branstad was, “Don’t spend money you don’t have.”

Thereafter, he described himself as a conservative Republican.

**WHAT WORKS FOR HIM?**

Chapman said a common observation he heard from those around him was regarding the governor’s strong work ethic and drive to succeed.

“He is one of the most driven people I have met in my life,” Chapman said.

He added that those around him also see him as very sincere in his convictions and as a likable man.

“He’s just a really nice guy, kind of guy you want to go out and have a beer with,” Chapman said.
Iowa Gov. Terry Branstad gave brief remarks at the beginning of the Growth and Opportunity Party in Des Moines on Saturday, Oct. 31 before 10 presidential candidates took the stage.

*Photo by: Jessica Darland*
For a state with a divided state legislature, Branstad has managed to get a majority of votes for several election cycles.

When it comes to the issues, Chapman said Branstad holds on to the issues that made him a conservative in the first place: fiscal and economic issues.

His state goals in the manifesto are mostly reducing government spending and increasing economic opportunity. As a devout Catholic, he tends to be socially conservative on issues like abortion and same-sex marriage.

Iowa currently has the state legislature controlled by Democrats and Republicans. This means that Branstad often goes for bipartisan legislation.

“In order for anything to come out of the legislature, it has to be bipartisan. And because it going to come out as a bipartisan bill, he has little incentive to veto… He is not going to win any points vetoing Democratic legislation that Republicans have supported,” said David Andersen, assistant professor of political science at Iowa State.

Even in the cases where he has vetoed legislation, Andersen said the legislation involved institutional tension between the governor and the legislature rather than partisanship.

“I think Gov. Branstad has been good at not being confrontational...Where there are conflicts, he compromises. I think that helps him remain popular,” Andersen said.

He added that Branstad has also been good at avoiding conflict, as he doesn’t come across as someone unwilling to listen or to change positions on a partisan issue.

“Iowa tends to be a very pragmatic state...We have a long history of being a bipartisan state. So, you have to compromise, you have to get along. There’s no value in getting into these ideological arguments,” Andersen said.

**TENURE AT DES MOINES UNIVERSITY**

After four terms as governor from 1983 to 1999, Branstad set his sights on the private sector.

Des Moines University hired the former governor as president in 2003.

Chapman said the appointment gathered some attention as some cited Branstad’s inexperience in academia as a concern.

His appointment, however, brought name recognition and visibility to the university. This is something at least one member of the Board of Regents had thought about, Hammes said.

“Gov. Branstad is proud to say that during his time, DMU increased enrollment in all three of the colleges, increased the endowment from $59 million to $80 million, built the student education center which included the large wellness center, became the first college or university in the entire United States to reach the platinum recognition from the Wellness Council of America and became a completely tobacco free campus,” Hammes wrote.

He worked as president for more than six years until 2009.

**PERSONALITY**

Branstad does not come off as a real dynamic speaker, Chapman said.

However, he is very different in one-on-one meetings when he is an extremely good listener.

“He has an almost photographic memory. I would say something almost in passing and six months later, he could cite it back to me,” Chapman said.

Chapman said another aspect that sets Branstad apart is his willingness to change. For a while, Branstad was opposed to having a lottery in the state.
“In a lot of ways, he defines the Republican Party in Iowa. He is the most successful politician Iowa has ever seen...He is where the power resides,” Anderson said.

The practice of gambling was inconsistent with his personal beliefs, and he did not see much value. However, this changed, Chapman said, when polling data showed a majority of the people in Iowa were in support of having a state lottery.

“That’s not a flip-flop. That’s what intelligent people do. You are willing to look at the evidence and say, ‘Well, I am willing to revisit my opinion and change my opinion.’ He is willing to do that,” Chapman said.

Throughout the course of his career, Branstad has had experiences which have revealed aspects of his personality to those around him. Chapman mentioned one such experience as recalled by a staffer. Because the governor does not own an official airplane like the Air Force One, he often relies on private individuals to fly him wherever he needs to go.

During one such flight, the pilot realized that the landing wheels wouldn’t operate as they got close to landing. The nervous staffer who thought they were done for was holding the flight steering as the pilot was going through the flight manual. Meanwhile, the governor was sitting in the back reading over his notes. The pilot was eventually able to safely land the flight. After that, Branstad just walked away and gave a speech as if nothing had happened.

CRITICISM

Over the course of his political career, Branstad has also received criticism directed at his style of functioning. In July 2015, he vetoed a plan to offer mental health services at two locations in the state. He also vetoed one-time K-12 school funding worth more than $55.7 million that was previously approved by the legislature.

“Iowans expect that their Governor will work with the legislature in order to solve problems and move Iowa forward. Instead, Governor Branstad has long governed with a my-way-or-the-highway, autocratic approach. Nowhere has this been more clear than in 2015, where Branstad has consistently circumvented the legislature in order to advance his backward agenda that is good for those at the top and bad for Iowa families,” wrote Josh Levitt, press secretary for the Iowa Democratic Party.

ELECTIONS AND INFLUENCE

Referring to the most recent gubernatorial election cycle, Andersen said the Democratic nominee, Jack Hatch, did not present a suitable opponent for Branstad.

“One of the contributing factors is that the Democratic Party doesn’t really have an heir apparent. If you are going to challenge the longest-serving governor in Iowa history, you can’t come out of nowhere. You have to have some name recognition in the state,” Andersen said.

“In a lot of ways, he defines the Republican Party in Iowa. He is the most successful politician Iowa has ever seen...He is where the power resides.”

Sometime this power extends itself beyond state border in a state like Iowa during the presidential caucus season.

For example, Andersen said New Jersey Gov. Chris Christie’s friendship with Branstad is not just a result of their similar personalities. Branstad’s friendship could help Christie in the presidential caucus.