This essay on the legacy of Governor LeRoy Collins was written for the LeRoy Collins Institute by Rick Edmonds. Mr. Edmonds is a media business analyst at the Poynter Institute in St. Petersburg, Florida and a former editor of Florida Trend and the Florida Humanities Council’s Forum magazine. He wrote the 2005 executive summary of Tough Choices and serves on the board of the LeRoy Collins Institute.

The Institute celebrates its 25th anniversary in 2013 and with this essay reminds the citizens of Florida how the politics of constructive change and leadership exemplified by Governor LeRoy Collins can provide guidance to policymakers and those interested in affecting policy today, and the future.
Five score and four years ago, as Lincoln might have put it, LeRoy Collins was born in Tallahassee, Florida. During his boyhood, and as a young lawyer and legislator, he was closer to the Civil War than to our times. It has been more than 50 years now since his governorship, more than 20 since his death, but Collins’ legacy for his beloved state and those engaging its policy and political challenges remains as fresh as ever. One might even argue that during the economic and political doldrums of this decade his example is ripe for rediscovery.

This essay will highlight four (among many) elements of Collins’ legacy: political courage, visionary positions, mastery of the art of politics and inspiring leaders who followed. Key among them is his political courage and leadership, evidenced when the Supreme Court’s 1954 school desegregation ruling and the beginnings of the Civil Rights movement augured the demise of separate public institutions for blacks and whites. Collins kept the peace in Florida as his fellow white citizens gradually accepted what he had correctly concluded was both right and inevitable. He set an example of thoughtful moderation for other Southern states.

And he changed himself. “Born and raised here in Tallahassee, I was accustomed early to a segregated society…” Collins told a Florida A&M University audience in 1981 at the 25th anniversary commemoration of the Tallahassee bus boycott. During the 1950s, Collins continued, “I made some statements that tended to align me with the conditions and majority thinking of my time.” But by the end of his 1968 campaign for the U.S. Senate, he was telling voters “that any rational man who looked at the horizon and saw the south of the future segregated was simply seeing a mirage.”

Collins was boldly forward-thinking on a vast array of issues. The biggest fight of his six years in office was for legislative redistricting and a new constitution, although it didn’t happen as soon as he wanted. Similarly, Collins advocated transparent government, stricter ethics laws and a tough statewide building code after a major hurricane – all took years to achieve. He questioned, and later outright opposed, capital punishment; the death penalty occurs less frequently now in Florida, but persists. As Governor, Collins had a full agenda of things to get done every year, but was equally comfortable advocating some positions well ahead of public opinion or legislative support.

He also embraced being a politician while reserving a sharply critical voice on bad political practice. His gusto for politics included an appreciation of persuasive speech-making, love of Florida, cultivating a public persona and mastering the emerging medium of television – all with historical perspective and a degree of humility. After Collins gave a particularly eloquent speech, his mother expressed continued disappointment that he hadn’t become a Methodist bishop as she had hoped. No, Collins said, he chose to be a lawyer and politician.

Finally, Collins inspired the next generation of Florida’s leaders and some in the generation that followed. Reform legislators
in the Golden Era of the late 1960s and 1970s drew on his example. Governors Askew, Graham, Chiles and MacKay have all praised him as a model, but his inspiration wasn’t limited to Democrats. Governor Jeb Bush has acknowledged that despite being Republican and pursuing a different agenda, he considers Collins Florida’s greatest governor.

The LeRoy Collins Institute attempts, through forward-thinking research projects, to embody Governor Collins’ vision, but claims no exclusive ownership. LeRoy Collins’ example is available to anyone looking for an antidote to the politics of caution, partisanship and negativity.

Not to belabor Abraham Lincoln comparisons, but the 16th president and LeRoy Collins have several important characteristics in common.

Neither Lincoln nor Collins went to college. Both studied law, had lean years starting out, but eventually were in demand to handle big cases for wealthy corporate clients. Both gravitated to politics at an early age; Collins ran for prosecuting attorney when he was just 23. He later joked that the office paid twice what he was earning as a lawyer and he needed the added income to get married. He lost, but seven weeks later married Mary Call, great granddaughter of Florida territorial Governor Richard Keith Call.

What Lincoln and Collins most share is political eloquence – a mastery of rhetoric, a repertoire that included literary references, historical allusions and amusing country stories. “Daddy really worked on those speeches,” at home as well as at the office, his daughter Jane Aurell recalls, “and when he was finished, he would show the drafts to my mother.” It is hard to overstate, Aurell says, the influence on Collins of growing up in a big and devout Methodist family that read the Bible every day and attended church and Sunday school without fail. Collins’ best speeches have the echo of sermons.

With two decades in the legislature interrupted by military service, a statewide reputation as an up-and-comer and loads of political ambition, Collins still came to the governorship rather accidentally and earlier than he had planned. Governor Daniel McCarty died after nine months in office, and Collins won a grueling campaign in 1954 to serve out the two-year balance of the term. He won re-election more easily in 1956.

Collins took office within months of the Brown vs. Board of Education school desegregation decision. Southern political leaders reacted first with shock, then with anger, then a mode of denial in which they tried to undo what had been done. The era of so-called massive resistance lasted through Collins’ six years as governor and well beyond. It included the odd idea of interposition – a theory that states had a right to block or ignore a federal ruling they believed to be unconstitutional.

In hindsight, a handful of critics have contended that Collins’ own civil rights actions were halting and mixed in their messages. Collins did not support the Tallahassee bus boycott in 1956 and he criticized defiant protests, then and in his second inaugural the next year, as unhelpful, instead he urged patience.

However, as Collins told a Florida A&M University convocation, he grew up when Southern whites accepted racial distinctions and white control as a simple given. Only much later did he see that compassion and kindness, while better than racial meanness and bigotry, were not enough. African Americans were entitled to full participation in all aspects of public institutions, and at times, needed to demand it rather than ask politely and wait.

Another reason for Collins’ gradualism on race was likely strategic. To get too far ahead of his constituents and embrace a Northern perspective on this particular issue would be ill-timed and counter-productive. When the right opportunities for moving forward presented themselves, Collins weighed in decisively. He vetoed a law that would have allowed school districts to close schools rather than admit blacks.

The legislature passed an interposition resolution in 1957. While unable to veto it, Collins sent it to President Eisenhower and other federal officials with a scathing unpublicized cover note, saying “I decry it as an evil thing, whipped up by the demagogues and carried on the hot and erratic winds of passion, prejudice and hysteria.”

In March 1960, late in his term, lunch counter sit-ins had spread to Florida and violent clashes seemed a possibility. Collins stunned Floridians with a statewide television broadcast stating simply that African Americans admitted to a store to shop had a right to be served. To those who said colored people should “stay in their place,” he countered, “Now, friends, that’s not a Christian point of view. That’s not a democratic point of view. That’s not a realistic point of view. We can never stop Americans from struggling to be free.” The television crew that had bantered with him on the way in was stonily silent as he left.

Through his second term, Collins received growing regional and national recognition as a progressive on the race issue and a dynamic leader more broadly. Hard-liners like Governor Orville Faubus of Arkansas and Governor Marvin Griffin of Georgia
deplored him, but he became a star within the Southern Governors Conference, smuggling some blunt admonishments for moderation into a high-profile speech entitled “Can a Southerner be elected President?”

Collins himself did not care for the term moderate. When asked about this during a testy interview in 1958 on “Meet the Press,” he replied: “I never called myself a moderate...I try not to be immoderate. I want to be reasonable, and I want to be constructive.” Semantics aside, he provided an example and direct encouragement to the growing group of Southern governors who saw their role as guiding gradual transition rather than resisting.

The Civil Rights sequel, once Collins left office, was heroic but politically costly. In 1964, President Lyndon Johnson appointed him the first director of the Community Relations Service, a new entity to help localities resolve civil rights conflicts peacefully. In that capacity, he was present at the March on Selma in 1965, walking back and forth over the Edmund Pettis Bridge as a mediator between leaders of the protest and law enforcement. A photograph captured him talking with Andrew Young and with Martin Luther King Jr., Coretta Scott King and Ralph Abernathy by his side.

When Collins ran for U.S. Senate in 1968, the photo circulated with the implication he was walking arm-in-arm with the protesters rather than doing his job mediating. Collins lost the general election in a race that was anything but close. He won only four counties, losing even Leon County, his birthplace and home. He had become more outspoken on racial justice during those eight years out of office and was now well ahead of the typical Floridian. Not yet 60, his chances for elected office were finished.

While in no way diminishing Collins’ personal engagement and action on the toughest issue of his day, it is worth noting that the concept of political courage was at its peak during that time. John F. Kennedy had won the Pulitzer Prize for Profiles in Courage, the 1957 book he wrote with aide Ted Sorensen - Collins later entitled the book he wrote to pay off his 1968 campaign debt Forerunners Courageous. Kennedy used eight historical examples from the U.S. Senate. Collins fit the profile exactly; choosing to do the right thing on Civil Rights and accepting the consequence of being unelectable.

To the extent that Kennedy’s idea still has currency, it is often in the negative. “Not exactly a profile in courage,” commentators will say of an especially egregious act of political temporizing.

Attention is rightly paid to Collins’ pivotal role in racial matters, but that may overshadow awareness of the full range of issues he embraced while in office and after. In many instances, he planted a seed that did not fully bloom until much later.

A few examples:

- A lifelong advocate of all forms of education, Collins, as a state senator in 1947, was instrumental in the state’s first minimal foundational funding act. Collins promulgated the idea that every Floridian should have an institution of higher education within driving distance. The initiative, undertaken while Collins was governor, led to Florida’s system of 28 community colleges, one of the nation’s best. Collins was also the driving force behind the creation of the University of South Florida in 1960.

- Although he served in the legislature when its North Florida members made up the “Pork Chop Gang” of rural interests who had a stranglehold on legislative power, Collins never affiliated with them. Redistricting and constitutional revision to reflect the state’s growing urban population was a top priority for which he could muster little support in his six years of trying. Collins later served on the committee headed by Chesterfield Smith that drafted an entirely new Florida Constitution and broke, once and for all, from the Pork Chop past.

- Collins was forward-looking and pro-business development at a time best characterized by patronage. Time magazine’s 1955 cover story on Collins, one of the first framing him as a figure of national importance, included a photo of a nylon factory in Pensacola in its opening spread. Collins saw the eventual economic rise of Florida and the rest of the south when few others did.
· Despite his pro-development lean, Collins deplored the dredge-and-fill that spoiled both natural beauty and ecology. His focus on environmental matters grew in his retirement years.

· One of Collins’ first-term priorities was a bill requiring public meetings for all boards and agencies. The Florida House of Representatives killed it, but open meetings legislation passed in 1967.

· Late in his second-term, after a major hurricane, Collins advocated a tough statewide building code. That, too, happened years later and was strengthened a second time after another major hurricane.

This list may make Collins sound a quixotic crusader, but that was not the case. He entered each session with a long list of priorities and a reform agenda. Some passed, and others - like his resolve to end a 90-day residency for quick divorces – failed once and passed on a second try.

Nor was he only attentive to big picture issues. Sandy D’Alemberte tells the story of Collins returning from a visit to North Carolina, impressed that the state painted white lines on the sides of highways as a safety measure. The Governor called in his road chief and told him to do the same. If Collins returned from a trip to, say, Daytona Beach and saw no lines, he called in the roads director and asked why not. Eventually, the harried official developed a system of getting an advance copy of Collins’ travel schedule and dispatching the road painting crews accordingly.

But always, the agenda was spacious enough to accommodate some goals that would not be achieved right away. In that respect, Collins was a visionary or at least prescient many times over.

A particular illustration of ahead-of-his-time thinking, combined with a willingness to take on an unpopular cause, came during Collins’ three-year-plus tenure as President of the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB), just after his time as governor. The television industry, recovering from the quiz show scandals, needed a credible executive and turned to the telegenic Collins who welcomed a move to Washington, D.C., and a chance to earn a huge $75,000 annual salary.

He warned the NAB board they would not be getting a figurehead, and Collins delivered on that promise almost immediately. His first speech to the board urged self-policing and said that on matters from ratings to programming, the industry “simply cannot afford to be identified with what is cheap and degrading.” He frequently sided with Newton Minow, the aggressive young chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, who memorably denounced television as “a vast wasteland.”

The capper was a 1962 speech in Portland, Oregon, proposing that broadcasters block tobacco advertising that appealed to children. “A sense of moral responsibility demands it,” he said, alluding to “the mounting evidence that tobacco provides a serious hazard to health.”

This cluster of reform-from-within positions earned Collins negative coverage, even approaching a vendetta, from the influential trade magazine Broadcasting. In January 1964, after a forceful civil rights speech in South Carolina, Collins was offered and refused a buyout offer and narrowly survived a no-confidence vote. He confided to family and friends that he found the job enormously stressful.

But on the tobacco issue especially, Collins was right from the start and vindicated by time. Ultimately all tobacco advertising was removed from television, and prominent health warnings were required on every pack sold. Florida, under Lawton Chiles’ governorship, was the first of many states to win a large settlement from the tobacco industry, part of which underwrites anti-smoking ads on TV.

LeRoy Collins had a well thought-through idea of what it took for a politician to be successful. “The qualities that to me are of the most importance in judging a political leader,” Collins wrote, “are his integrity (faithfulness to the public interest in all actions he takes), his ability to make tough decisions, his administrative competence to get his decisions implemented and his style or charisma.”

As for style and charisma, Sandy D’Alemberte, in a memorial tribute he wrote with Frank Sanchez, noted that a former New York Times reporter praised Collins’ “cultured Southern voice...It wasn’t precious, mind you. It was just a beautiful rendition of language caressed with affection for the divine gift of the word.” Collins’ speeches were not showy performances, but they were artfully eloquent.

In the interests of achieving important goals, Collins was not above trading on his good looks. He was tall and lean, seeming even taller and leaner by virtue of a very erect posture. Handsome features and wavy hair set off a beaming, warm smile. He quickly recognized the rising importance of television to political communication and his aptitude for the medium.
Biographer Martin Dyckman writes that when Collins moved to Washington, D.C., he indulged in the vanity of a sun lamp. A Floridian on the national stage, he explained, ought to be deeply-tanned.

D’Alemberte and Sanchez offer a perspective on the easy charm that earned Collins the national reputation as a “super salesman” for Florida and other causes he might embrace:

“All politicians have, during the course of their political careers the equivalent of a political bank account, political capital if you will. During their careers, politicians make deposits...in the form of doing things that are popular, that people will like, so the people will reward the politicians with popularity. There is nothing wrong with this...But if politicians are truly leaders, they also will be willing to make withdrawals from their political bank accounts. Withdrawals of political capital are much more difficult, costly and sometimes politically fatal."

Using this metaphor, one could say Collins kept a sufficient balance of political capital as governor and later in his career to advocate unpopular, forward-thinking positions. But at the time of the 1968 U.S. Senate election, his account was overdrawn.

As a politician, Collins was also ambitious. Early on, he was a young man in a hurry elected to the legislature at just 25 years old. His governorship drew national recognition and he entertained a reasonable hope of being the vice-presidential nominee in 1960, but circumstances worked against him. Senator George Smathers ran as a favorite-son candidate and thus controlled the Florida delegation. Though not involved in the epic nomination in-fighting, Collins supported Adlai Stevenson, rather than John Kennedy. Kennedy ultimately picked Lyndon Johnson as his running mate.

But the convention did provide Collins his most memorable days as a national figure. Aiming for the honor of being keynote speaker at the Democratic National Convention in Los Angeles, he instead agreed to be Permanent Chairman where his fairness was especially valued. The convention is fondly remembered by political buffs as the last where the nomination result was in any doubt, though Kennedy did win on the first ballot. But Collins’ skill at on-the-fly compromise was put to the test in consequential procedural rulings, and he wore out several sounding blocks during assorted “spontaneous demonstrations” trying to gavel the meeting back to order.

Collins did get to give his speech, concluding with rhetorical flourish, “Ours is a generation in which great decisions can no longer be passed on to the next. The hour grows late, and you and I have work to do.” A noisy, distracted crowd milling in the aisles made Collins’ words nearly inaudible within the hall; however, it came through clearly on television.

Collins was followed by three governors – Bryant, Burns and Kirk – less interested in racial justice or other elements of his agenda. But a post-war generation of Florida legislators did coalesce around a reform agenda, conscious of his example and following through on ideas planted but not yet achieved. His vigorous but unsuccessful pursuit of redistricting had a sequel, too. Collins was told years later by a justice at a Washington, D.C., dinner party that the U.S. Supreme Court waded into the thicket of reapportionment in 1962, influenced by the consideration that even Collins could not get it done.

Reubin Askew, the hard-driving activist governor from 1971 through 1978, said flatly that Collins was his model. Askew’s
successor, Bob Graham, who pursued ambitious goals like aiming to build Florida's State University System to one of the best in the country, was like-minded as well.

Shortly before deciding to run for governor in 1990, Lawton Chiles said of Collins, “He simply represents the best in leadership and political courage. Whenever you cast a tough vote, you could think of LeRoy Collins and get inspiration from the way he bled, but stood tall.”

Buddy MacKay recalls in his memoir, *How Florida Happened*, that after Collins endorsed him in the primary for U.S. Senate he called to offer thanks and got this advice: “Buddy, you are like me. Sometimes you get so far out in front that your troops can no longer see the flag.”

Were example not enough, Collins remained active for more than 20 years as a senior statesman, advisor and writer, of both his book, *Forerunners Courageous*, and Sunday columns for the *St. Petersburg Times*. He served on the Constitutional Revision Commission and the first Florida Board of Ethics.

It surely did not hurt his influence that Collins lived across the street from the Governor's Mansion in the Call family's sprawling plantation home, The Grove. Confined to home as his cancer progressed, he nonetheless walked down the driveway one day in September 1990 to watch the arrival of President George H.W. Bush, who had come to call on Governor Bob Martinez. At Martinez's suggestion, the two turned back from the walk to the mansion to greet Collins and talk a bit. It was Collins' last public appearance before his death six months later.

On the 25th anniversary of the LeRoy Collins Institute, it would seem appropriate to cite chartering documents and the lofty goals they defined. That would be less than true, however, to the story of how the new policy center was actually founded.

Sandy D’Alemberte and Jim Apthorp, later executive director, were the prime movers. D’Alemberte, then Dean of the Florida State College of Law, had the idea of raising money for an endowed chair in Collins’ name and Apthorp signed on to assist in the fundraising.

The two quickly found that not only were potential donors receptive, but they didn’t think an endowed chair was enough. Think bigger, they said, like a policy research center. By the end, D’Alemberte said, $2 million was raised privately, matched by another $2 million from the legislature. The $4 million endowment, appreciating over time, continues to support the Institute’s work today.

While a policy center was not Collins’ idea, he was closely consulted and approved of its direction. He, along with notable Floridians like Chesterfield Smith and editor Eugene Patterson were on the board. Charles Zwick served as chairman and Republican Pete Dunbar as vice chairman.
As a result of its speedy launch path, the new policy center opened and began work with, D’Alemberte and Apthorp recall, many details to be filled in. “At first we were searching to find a role,” Apthorp said, trying to define how best “to pick up the torch from Collins.”

Collins, Apthorp added, “had demonstrated an ability to knit together research and policy. He talked a lot about it as we started. Not just academic studies but good reliable research that policy makers could use.”

Contemporary accounts of the LeRoy Collins center formation, just before Christmas in 1988, reflect that there were broad ambitions with plenty of specifics left undefined.

Governor Bob Martinez and other founders, the St. Petersburg Times reported, expressed hope that the center “could become a non-partisan wellspring of ideas to help business and government solve Florida’s problems and direct its future.”

Characteristically aphoristic, Collins commented, “This ought to be a means of proceeding to distinguish what’s right rather than who’s right.”

Lawton Chiles, re-energized after leaving the U.S. Senate and successfully recovering from severe depression, agreed to become the first executive director. Within a few months, however, he decided that retirement from office didn’t suit him and announced his candidacy for governor.

This resulted in a “near-death-experience” for the fledgling policy center, Apthorp recalls, because Martinez and Dunbar had been given repeated assurances that Chiles had no plans to run. But the center did survive. Under Rod Petrey’s direction, it undertook initiatives as diverse as training new legislators, civics education and seeding economic revitalization in Miami’s Overtown neighborhood.

In 2000, two entities were created: The Collins Center for Public Policy, under Petrey, moved its main office to Miami and continued policy reports and entrepreneurial non-profit work until it closed in January 2013 due to financial difficulties.

The LeRoy Collins Institute retained the endowment and the Florida State University (FSU) affiliation, with a focus on applying academic quality research to state and local issues.

Apthorp considers the Institute’s high-water mark its 2005 report, Tough Choices, on Florida’s future revenue and spending needs. Political scientist Carol Weissert, newly appointed to the FSU professorship in Collins’ name, and University of Florida economist David Denslow produced a book-length study that analyzed Medicaid, education and infrastructure needs, even digging into the state’s unique demographics.

A shorter executive summary highlighted the contrarian finding that Florida could soon face a revenue shortfall as the tax windfall from the housing boom cooled. Nearly concurrent with the report’s release, the state announced a $6 billion budget surplus, but an even worse revenue reversal than the report anticipated materialized a few years later.

In honor of the 25th anniversary of the Institute, Tough Choices is being updated after nearly 10 years, a deep recession and a halting recovery since the original publication.

The Institute’s most recent work has focused on ground-breaking research on the soundness of pension plans and health care benefits for retirees in municipal governments and the pervasiveness of special taxing districts. As that work concludes, the Institute’s board and Executive Director Carol Weissert...
are considering where next to bring research to bear.

The Institute has remained bipartisan with longtime Republican legislator Curt Kiser its board chairman at the time of the *Tough Choices* report and his successor Allison DeFoor, a former Republican candidate for Lieutenant Governor. Lester Abberger, a long-time Tallahassee lobbyist and consultant, is the current chair.

But if neither Democratic nor liberal, the Institute can fairly be characterized as pro-government – much like its namesake. The introduction to the shorter version of *Tough Choices* highlights Collins’ wisdom on the subject:

“Not favoring a strong government for the sake of strength alone,” Collins said, he believed that “government remains the one vehicle through which all the people can work together to accomplish goals which they, as individuals and through private enterprise and resource, are unable to achieve.”

At a Leadership Florida forum in 1989, future Collins biographer Martin Dyckman suggested that “the politics of constructive change and leadership” had all but vanished in Florida. Much more cautious leaders were captive to opinion polls and a money-raising arms race. Neither Collins nor Askew could have been successful candidates in that climate, Dyckman said.

Those factors have not turned around in the years since. The current political scene – on the state and national level – includes extreme partisanship, attack ads, non-stop cable commentary, congressional gridlock and the no-holds-barred anti-government stridency of the Tea Party faction. The public is highly distrustful of government and cynical of programs and services, particularly those emanating from Washington, D.C.

To borrow D’Alemberte’s formulation, it may be uphill work under these circumstances for anyone to accumulate the political capital Collins had in his heyday and deployed so boldly.

Nonetheless, ambitious contemporary political and policy leaders may examine the legacy and conclude that LeRoy Collins’ courage and integrity have not gone out-of-season. Of nearly equal importance, as Collins wrote in his assessment of political effectiveness, is the ability to make tough decisions and the administrative competence to get those decisions implemented – even if credit for those hard decisions isn’t forthcoming.

Or, as the Florida House of Representatives put it in the posthumous resolution naming Collins the Floridian of the Century, he was, and remains, “a moral beacon to us all.”

**Acknowledgements**

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Established in 1988, the LeRoy Collins Institute is a nonpartisan, statewide policy organization which studies and promotes creative solutions to key private and public issues facing the people of Florida and the nation. The mission of the LeRoy Collins Institute is to perpetuate the leadership of Governor LeRoy Collins by developing and promoting bold, visionary public policy that will empower and uplift Floridians for generations to come. The Institute works in affiliation and collaboration with the State University System of Florida and is located at Florida State University in Tallahassee.