

George Deukmejian, 2-Term California Governor in the '80s, Dies at 89

By Katie Hafner

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George Deukmejian, a two-term California governor who was admired by Republicans and Democrats alike for his willingness to cross party boundaries, and who quietly shepherded the state through a period of rapid growth and sustained prosperity, died on Tuesday at his home in Long Beach, Calif. He was 89.

His death was confirmed by Steve Merksamer, Mr. Deukmejian's former chief of staff.

"He didn't have Arnold Schwarzenegger's bravado, Jerry Brown's dialectical fireworks, or Pete Wilson's Marine Corps willingness to take the hill," Kevin Starr, the eminent historian of California, said in an interview in 2012. "He had such an understated manner, you almost missed how pervasive and effective he was in his governorship." (Professor Starr, of the University of Southern California, died last year.)

When Jerry Brown left office in 1983 in his first go-round as governor, Mr. Deukmejian, then California's attorney general, ran for the higher office with an eye toward reforming a state judiciary that he considered too lenient.

"Attorneys general don't appoint judges, but governors do," he said in an interview for this obituary in 2012. "And we were very troubled in those days by a lot of the appointments Jerry Brown had made."

As governor, Mr. Deukmejian appointed more than 1,000 judges, many of whom are still serving in California's courts.



Mr. Deukmejian with Willie Mays in declaring a day in his honor on April 14, 1986.
Walt Zeboski/Associated Press

In the 1982 race for governor, he defeated the mayor of Los Angeles, Tom Bradley, by about 90,000 votes out of nearly eight million cast, a victory so narrow that some news reports prematurely pronounced Mr. Bradley the winner.

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When Mr. Deukmejian took office in 1983, a recession had caused unemployment in California to jump to 11.2 percent and eaten away at the state's coffers. Billions of dollars had been used to shore up local governments after the adoption of Proposition 13, the 1978 voter initiative that radically cut property taxes.

Instead of raising taxes, Mr. Deukmejian pared spending and balanced the budget. "Our fiscal policy was to do everything we could to live within our means," he said in 2012.

In 1986, Mr. Deukmejian, the son of Armenian immigrants, surprised some conservative colleagues when he took a public stand against the University of California's investments in South Africa during apartheid.

In a 2005 memoir, David Gardner, who was president of California's university system in the 1980s, wrote of the governor's stand on apartheid, "All of this killing and violence, directed mostly against blacks, reminded Deukmejian of the Turkish massacres of Armenians in World War I."

Recalling the episode in 2012, Mr. Deukmejian said, "My feeling was, there but for the grace of God go I."

Mr. Deukmejian, right, in 1987 with legislators in his office at the Capitol in Sacramento.
Walt Zeboski/Associated Press

Mr. Gardner had strongly opposed divestment, but at the governor's urging, the state pulled some \$3 billion in stock holdings out of South Africa. During a visit to California after his release from prison, Nelson Mandela said the action by the University of California — the first large public institution to take a stand — played a critical role in ending white minority rule in South Africa.

Mr. Deukmejian won a second term in 1986, again defeating Mr. Bradley, this time with 60 percent of the vote.

In 1988, Mr. Deukmejian was approached by an official for Vice President George Bush's presidential campaign, telling him he was being considered as a potential running mate.

"I was apparently on a so-called short list," he said in 2012. But he declined to be considered any further.

"I said, 'Well, I have a lieutenant governor in the other party, and if I were to join the ticket, the whole executive branch of the California government would go over to the Democrats,'" he said. "They already had control of the legislature. I couldn't do something like that for my own benefit. So I took myself out of contention."

A staunch fiscal conservative, Mr. Deukmejian was a consistent opponent of new taxes and government spending increases, to the point where his Republican colleagues in the legislature nicknamed him "The Iron Duke" for repeated vows to veto spending bills.

He later took credit for eliminating a \$1.5 billion deficit, telling lawmakers in a State of the State address that he had “taken California from I-O-U to A-O.K.” But by the time he left office, having chosen not to seek a third term in 1990, tax receipts had slumped under the weight of a national economic slowdown, and his successor, Pete Wilson, a fellow Republican, entered the governor’s mansion facing a deep budget deficit.

Courken George Deukmejian Jr. was born on June 6, 1928, in Menands, N.Y., north of Albany. His parents had emigrated from eastern Turkey in the early 1900s. His father worked in a series of jobs — as a photographer, Oriental rug dealer and paper wholesaler. His mother worked in a necktie factory.

Mr. Deukmejian attended Siena College in Albany County, graduating in 1949 with a bachelor of arts in sociology. He received a law degree in 1952 from St. John’s University School of Law in Queens.

He entered the Army in 1953, and after infantry basic training was assigned to the Judge Advocate General’s Corps based in Paris, where he assisted in the settlement of claims made by French nationals against the Army.

In 1955, at the urging of his sister, who had moved to California, he drove across the country and put down roots in Los Angeles, where he was appointed a deputy counsel for Los Angeles County.

In 1957, he married Gloria Saatjian, a bank secretary, and the couple moved to Long Beach, where Mr. Deukmejian opened a small law practice on the second floor of a bank building, specializing in “anything that walked in the door,” he once told an interviewer.

Former Gov. George Deukmejian of California in 2006. David McNew/Getty Images

Mr. Deukmejian entered politics in 1962, when he won a seat in the California Assembly; four years later he was elected to the State Senate. While in the state legislature, and later as attorney general, he pushed hard for the death penalty.

Mr. Deukmejian was known to be especially tough on crime. While governor, he presided over the building of more than a dozen prisons.

After leaving office in 1991, he became a partner in the Los Angeles office of Sidley & Austin, commuting from his house in Long Beach, which he and his wife had lived in since 1960.

He is survived by his wife, Gloria; their children, Leslie, George and Andrea; and six grandchildren.

One of the signal moments in Mr. Deukmejian's governorship came in 1989, after a gunman killed five elementary school children in Stockton, Calif., using an AK-47. Bucking his party, Mr. Deukmejian supported a Democratic-sponsored bill outlawing semiautomatic rifles, one of the first such bans in the nation.

Willie Brown, the former mayor of San Francisco, who was speaker of the State Assembly when Mr. Deukmejian was in office, said of the governor's support for the ban, "It was the right thing to do, not the politically right thing to do."

"Deukmejian was a registered Republican, but he elevated the level of governorship above his party choice," Mr. Brown said in an interview for this obituary. "I think his time in office will be seen as the last the State of California actually had a bipartisan, working relationship between the governor's office and the legislature."

Matt Stevens contributed reporting.

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