Why would a nonprofit environmental organization use its scarce resources to ensure that the historical record of a governor—now more than two decades into retirement—be brought to life in a frank and factual biography? The answer lies in our interest in discovering how the web of politics and cultural values determines the way societies choose to interact with their environments.

By reviewing Michigan’s past through a biography of Michigan’s longest-serving governor, we hope to find answers to questions that directly impact Michigan’s environmental future. For instance, is a rise in environmentalism mainly a willingness to invest in long-term public needs in contrast to letting short-term private interests dominate? If so, what drives the oscillations that sometimes make Michigan a progressive leader in everything from higher education to environmental protection and at other times reflect values commonly associated with penurious conservatism? How much of this is a reflection of differences among the governors who have led Michigan or the times in which they have governed?

These are some of the knotty issues author Dave Dempsey illuminates as he takes us through the life of William G. Milliken, a man who has come to be revered across the country and, in more recent times, ignored by his party. In *William G. Milliken, Michigan’s Passionate Moderate*, Dempsey has written an insightful biography that dives right
into the rough-and-tumble political world in which Milliken operated. Rich with anecdotes and insights into Milliken’s childhood, family, staff, and service under fire in World War II, as well as his campaigns and toughest legislative fights, Dempsey rises above the temptation to simply extol the nice-guy virtues for which Milliken is known.

Dempsey introduces us to a quiet man who does not easily give up his private thoughts even as he pursues a career that puts him under the white heat of politics. But, more than the personal story of a man born to privilege who sacrifices his yearning for privacy to his political impulses, this biography offers essential insights into the long-running battle for the soul of the Republican Party.

With a reminder of the party’s nineteenth-century roots in Jackson, Michigan, Dempsey leads his readers through a quick review of the GOP’s schizophrenic development. We learn it’s not inconsequential that Milliken, like his father before him, identified with the Republican reformists led by President Theodore Roosevelt and Wisconsin senator Robert M. La Follette. William Milliken believes that the benefits of free market capitalism must be balanced by investments in public institutions and natural resources and restrained by some regulatory controls. This philosophy and his unapologetic defense of well-delivered government services propelled him into a lifelong battle with the right wing of his party.

While Milliken never seems to drop his reserve completely, he’s not above disparaging his Republican opponents as “entrenched politicians practically married to lobbyists.” Milliken, it seems, never went looking for a fight, except when he broke into politics by beating a right-wing incumbent, redefined his party’s program as a freshman legislator, or defended a cherished government program or principle in countless battles against the conservative wing of his party. Readers who think the fight between Republican moderates and their party’s right wing is a recent phenomenon will come away with a new perspective on an old battleground.

During the Milliken years, Michigan enjoyed advantages since lost. As a progressive state with decades of exceptional investment in its extraordinary, independent, higher education system, Milliken could tap that excellence before other states had begun to compete or catch up. He rode the national wave of social reforms and environmentalism of the 1970s to boldly place Michigan in the forefront of everything
from open housing to a ban on the pesticide DDT. In addition, Milliken served before term limits precluded the building of trusting relationships across party lines, before highly funded conservative think tanks had more than three decades in which to erode public confidence in public services, and before the religious right and neoconservatives came to dominate his party.

But the good old days weren’t easy, and Milliken lost his share of battles. Detroit, Grand Rapids, and Flint were already bleeding their more affluent populations to the suburbs. Prescient enough to know that sprawl posed a growing threat to both urban and rural Michigan, Milliken recognized that his failure to pass land use reform legislation would cost the state dearly in decades to come. Today that loss means that older communities are fighting decay while productive farmland is being converted to big-box stores, suburban estates, and see-through commercial buildings. The fact that he’s still actively fighting these battles reflects Milliken’s love of Michigan’s landscape and his bulldog capacity to hang on to an issue for half a century.

We’re living today in a more competitive world. Michigan no longer controls the manufacturing capacity for the world’s cars and furniture. Its largest industry has been slow to embrace essential changes. But it’s not just economic loss that makes us yearn for Milliken-style leadership. Michigan needs a leader who has the ability to bring divergent sides together to work for the whole state. Since Milliken left office, Michigan has had no governor who’s had the political will to stand up and unapologetically call for adequate investments in public goods. To varying degrees, we’ve had a quarter century of an every man for himself model, in which the political outcomes mean that cutting taxes is deemed of higher value than educational excellence and profit margins for power companies trump the protection of children from mercury poisoning.

Bill Milliken believes in the power and importance of a government that doesn’t apologize for protecting the common good. That is the principal lesson of this biography and the reason why the Michigan Environmental Council is proud to be associated with this man and his story.

Lana Pollack
Michigan Environmental Council

Foreword