As winter seized control of Michigan in December 1981, a season of cold and above-average snowfall was forecast. But more than the weather gave the season solemnity. Michigan was still struggling with its worst economic conditions since the Great Depression. The state’s employment agency announced in early December that the state had suffered a 12.5 percent unemployment rate the previous month, culminating the second straight year of double-digit unemployment. That was actually mildly good news; a year previously the state’s unemployment rate had hit 13.5 percent. About 200,000 workers were on indefinite layoffs from manufacturing jobs, 40 percent of them in the auto industry. “So many people have been out of work for so long that the numbers of those who exhaust their state and federal unemployment benefits are actually declining,” reported a Lansing newspaper. On December 5, the Detroit Free Press ran a front-page article headlined “Job Outlook Bleak.” It added that Michigan continued to lead the 10 most industrialized states in unemployment. As Democratic gubernatorial candidate James Blanchard would repeatedly point out in 1982, Michigan had more unemployed workers than some states had people.

Based in the fading manufacturing city of Lansing, 90 miles northwest of Detroit, the Michigan state government was coping with declining tax revenues and increased outlays resulting from recession and unemployment. State officials projected a deficit of over $1 billion,
a hefty proportion of its $4.4 billion general fund budget. Another round of steep budget cuts in everything from police patrols to welfare payments loomed. Michigan State University, located just east of the capital in East Lansing, announced that it would terminate almost 20 degree programs, among 45 being dismantled by the state’s colleges and universities as aid declined.4

To combat the image of Michigan as a state unfriendly to business, Governor William G. Milliken spent much of the month fighting for passage of legislation reforming the state’s workers’ compensation system. Hoping to reduce the system’s more than $1 billion annual cost to business, Milliken and Democratic legislators, who controlled the House and Senate, had an unusually bitter battle. But on December 15 and 16, lawmakers sent for the governor’s signature a dozen bills that reduced benefits to employees who sustained injuries or contracted illness in the workplace.5

The Capitol press corps covered these stories in depth, but as the month advanced reporters squirreled away in their Spartan press quarters in the Capitol obsessed about another topic. Would the 59-year-old Milliken, who had been the state’s chief executive for nearly 13 years, seek a fourth full term in 1982, run for the U.S. Senate, or retire? Many of the reporters had covered Milliken’s entire career as governor, and some had never covered anyone else who held the job. Having served longer as governor than Franklin Delano Roosevelt had served as president of the United States, Milliken had cast a similarly long shadow over Michigan politics, shaping the tone and content of the state’s political discourse in a way no other governor of the state had done.

Usually accessible to reporters and direct in his response to their questions, Milliken kept silent on the subject of his future, which only fueled reporters’ speculations.

“Milliken sure can keep a good secret,” ran the headline in an article in the governor’s hometown newspaper, the Traverse City Record-Eagle.6 “It’s really a very personal and closely held decision,” George Weeks, Milliken’s chief of staff, told the paper. “At this point, I can’t really say who knows what about anything.”

Milliken’s potential rivals in the 1982 gubernatorial race had their own thoughts. “I think 13 years in that job has to take its wear and tear on the man,” said Oakland County Prosecutor L. Brooks Patterson.7 “I think he senses what I sense . . . that it’s time for a change.”
The even more conservative Jack Welborn, a state senator, predicted that Milliken would try for another term. “I really think I’ll be running against him. And if it isn’t him it’s going to be [Lieutenant Governor James] Brickley and he’s Milliken’s clone.”

Early in the month, Milliken’s wife Helen told Detroit News reporter Joanna Firestone, “Basically, he’s made his decision.” She added that the decision was two-thirds his and one-third hers. She declined to say what the decision was. Firestone wrote, “Many of his potential opponents and confidants, although professing to have no inside information, cautiously wager there will be a campaign in Milliken’s future. The odds timidly favor a fourth bid for governor over a challenge to incumbent Democrat Donald W. Riegle Jr. for the U.S. Senate.”

Gannett Newspapers’ Lansing bureau chief, Jerry Moskal, reported on December 17 that “a source close to the governor said Milliken would ‘hang it up’” the next day. He didn’t. But he pledged to make and announce his decision before Christmas.

Milliken’s deliberations drew some national attention. The Washington Post observed, “Republican Gov. William G. Milliken of Michigan says he will announce his future plans this week and, as always, is keeping them to himself . . . For what it’s worth, the Lansing press corps polled itself on Milliken’s plans. The result: 11 predicted he’d run for reelection, 9 predicted retirement, 1 thought he’d run for the Senate.”

A local Republican official reflected the ambivalence of many in the increasingly conservative party who distrusted the longtime governor’s frequent alliances with Democrats. The opposition party had largely controlled the legislature during Milliken’s reign. In the eyes of the conservatives, Milliken was more liberal than Republican—though still the party’s most reliable vote getter. “I would be happier with another Republican, a more conservative Republican,” said Houghton County Republican chairperson Tony Pizzi. “But he is the strongest candidate we could have.”

When Milliken’s executive assistant, Bob Berg, announced that the chief executive would make a statement about his political future on December 22, the speculation reached a crescendo. At a time when state politics was front-page news around Michigan, the fate of the governor took on a dramatic tone.

So when Milliken entered the small, cluttered news media area just outside his personal office in the Capitol accompanied by his wife,
Helen, on the morning of December 22, TV cameras, photographers, and reporters packed the room. Some of them, taking note of Helen’s presence—and remembering that she had been said to yearn for a return to private life—thought they knew what was coming. “Milliken always made himself available, but I cannot recall any previous news conference that had such a feeling of electricity and anticipation,” said Tim Jones, a reporter for WJR Radio in Detroit.12

Milliken, dressed in a dark blue three-piece suit with a tie of thin red stripes on a blue background, slender in build, his still largely dark hair carefully combed back, strode to a podium covered with a dozen microphones. He spoke clearly, with the measured tones and reasoned words that contributed to what one Capitol reporter called his “quiet, yet warm manner.” Even as he delivered his verdict on another term or a Senate candidacy, reporter Chris Parks of United Press International “shuffled out quickly” to file the first story and TV reporter Tim Skubick used a phone on a desk nearby to call in the news to his station.

Milliken said:

Nineteen eighty-one has demonstrated just how vulnerable Michigan is to economic factors beyond its control, and how vulnerable it is to the partisan conflict and confrontation that all too often allow special interests to thwart the public interest.

Nineteen eighty-two can be a year of economic resurgence for Michigan. But Michigan will need two things above all else:

It will need an unprecedented degree of bipartisan cooperation and achievement between Republicans and Democrats—between the Legislature and the Governor.

And it will need a full-time Governor—a Governor who does his job and is not diverted by trying to keep his job.

He added:

I do not intend to campaign for Governor. I do not intend to campaign for the U.S. Senate. I intend to campaign for Michigan—to devote my final year in office to promoting the interests of the state I love—a state I am proud to have served longer than any other Governor.13
Coming from another politician of a different background—perhaps almost any other Michigan politician of the day—such words might have inspired skepticism for their high-mindedness, the cloaking of personal motives in the garb of public responsibility. But Milliken was different, as even the most hard-boiled of the reporters agreed. “I don’t think reporters necessarily agreed with him on everything, but there was sort of a universal respect and affection there,” said Malcolm “Kim” Johnson of the Associated Press.14

Skubick, a Capitol correspondent and host of the weekly public television show *Off the Record*, which had won a reputation for its cynical tone toward the adventures of state political figures, would later say, “I think [Milliken] tried to do the right thing and didn’t base his actions on reelection.” As he watched and heard Milliken’s announcement of his imminent retirement from politics, Skubick, who had covered the Capitol beat almost as long as Milliken had been governor, grew teary.

A few minutes after the press conference ended, Skubick got a call from Joyce Braithwaite, Milliken’s appointments director and chief liaison to the state Republican Party. Noted for her political smarts but also possessing a reputation as a fierce Milliken loyalist and stern protector of the governor’s interests, she told Skubick, “I want you to come down here.” Not sure whether he was to be chided, Skubick made his way to Braithwaite’s office on the second floor of the Capitol, which overlooked the lawn and Michigan Avenue to the east. Braithwaite closed the door.

“We both bawled, she and I,” said Skubick. “She said through her tears, ‘I didn’t know you had it in you.’”15 Their laughter concealed their melancholy over the end of the Milliken era in state politics.

The end of an era: that was the way the state’s newspapers reported it. The suspense leading up to the announcement—it turned out that only Helen Milliken, daughter Elaine, son William Jr., and a few others knew about his decision before that morning—intensified the reaction.

One reporter found out who had received a phone call from Milliken before he began reading his statement at the news conference: Democratic mayor Coleman A. Young of Detroit. Young’s friendship with Milliken spanned not just parties but personality types: an African American and outspoken civil rights and labor activist before becoming a state legislator and then Detroit mayor, Young was adored by his largely African American constituency but was the regular target of sub-
urban and outstate white politicians because of his sometimes coarse and invariably pro-Detroit rhetoric.

Asked what he thought of Milliken the day after the announcement, Young said that he would “probably go down as one of the great governors.”16 He cited Milliken’s leadership on state aid to Detroit, including a so-called equity package that shipped state grant money to the city in recognition and support of institutions that benefited the entire state such as the Detroit Institute of Arts. Young hailed Milliken’s recognition of “the importance of the city’s stability to the state’s stability.”

The Michigan Chronicle newspaper, which was Detroit based and African American owned, also offered unusual praise to the Republican politician. Beside a political cartoon and column condemning Republican president Ronald Reagan, the Chronicle called Milliken “one of the great political figures of our era,” citing his support of Detroit, his appointments of African Americans to his cabinet, his education reforms, and his commitment to civil rights. The paper added:

Although we have not been pleased with every one of his actions, as we judge his overall performance, there are many more positives than negatives—so much so that we consider him a “Grand Statesman” . . . His accomplishments over the past 13 years are many. They are actions which might be expected from a person raised in an urban environment like Detroit but certainly not expected from a middle class Republican born in the northern part of the state.17

Even newspapers that had often criticized Milliken found reasons to mark his departure with respect. The conservative Detroit News, while arguing that Milliken had “allowed himself to be identified more with the interests of the poor than with the aspirations of the middle class,” added that the governor “fought a thousand battles with uncommon integrity and grace. We wish him well.”18 The Marquette Mining Journal said, “We have not always agreed with the governor’s proposals and we have at times questioned motives behind his actions, but the sum of the past 12 years adds up to an individual who has served Michigan unselfishly and unfailingly during some very difficult periods.”19

Editorial reactions from newspapers across the state that had long admired Milliken signaled that a divide had been crossed in the state’s history. “The polltakers indicate that the luster has gone off the Mil-
liken charm,” said the Grand Rapids Press. “Possibly, but as time goes by, don’t be surprised if his successors are ultimately measured by Milliken honesty, decency and his unerring non-partisan sense of right and wrong.” The Detroit Free Press suggested that it was “difficult to imagine Lansing without William Milliken in the governor’s chair” and said that his decision to retire “surely marks a watershed in Michigan politics.” Then the newspaper put its finger on the pulse of the winning formula for the Republican Milliken.

The key to the success of the Milliken governorship lies almost equally in that unique political coalition—a union of moderate Republicans and progressive Democrats, of outstate and urban interests—and in the personality of the governor himself . . . His reputation for decency is reflected in the goodwill with which even his political enemies tend to regard him . . . a political balance that has endured for years is severely shaken, and perhaps upset forever.

It turned out that Milliken’s decision had come at a typical moment—while he was walking alone on December 12, dressed in corduroy slacks, a sweater, and a windbreaker on a beach trail near the Old Mission Lighthouse on the tip of the peninsula of the same name, a finger of land poking directly northward into and dividing Grand Traverse Bay. Milliken’s chief of staff, George Weeks, described it as “sort of a traditional walk he takes out on the Peninsula. It was the same place he walked in 1978 before deciding to run for a third term. The call of the north runs deep in the Milliken family. It always has. Grand Traverse Bay is a fountain of energy to him.”

Whoever would follow Milliken as governor, it was clear that for many things wouldn’t be the same. Interviewing him the summer following his departure from office, writer Deborah Wyatt observed, “I was 12 years old when William Milliken was first elected Governor. I voted for him in a mock seventh grade election, primarily because my parents were voting for him, and I saw his office in 10th grade on the standard government tour of the Capitol. I studied his policies toward labor relations as a college freshman and ranted over his education cuts in Sociology 403. And when I began to pay taxes, I complained along with everyone else. Until last November, Governor Milliken was the only Governor I’d ever known.”

Prologue
At the end of her interview with Milliken, Wyatt added, “In an era of seemingly endless political ego, it was heartening to spend time with one politician who truly seems to take his commitment to our state and our country as seriously as the originators meant it to be.”

The reaction of a western Michigan Republican to Milliken’s retirement announcement, however, suggested that the conservatives, who had chafed at the long-serving governor’s partnerships with urban and Democratic interests, would make a move to recapture the party. Calling Milliken’s departure “semi-sad,” Republican national committee-man Peter Secchia of Grand Rapids criticized the governor for paying insufficient attention to western Michigan needs and especially for his accommodation of the Democrats. “I was never anti-Milliken,” Secchia said, as would many who challenged the Milliken legacy within the Republican Party in the next two decades. “I just thought there was too much compromise . . . I think it probably bodes well for the party in the sense that he was a governor of all the people, and it was difficult for him to be a partisan leader. I happen to believe in partisan politics.”24

Milliken had struck a lot of observers, friends, and even many political enemies that way. Even when they disagreed with his positions, they rarely disliked him. But would likability be his chief legacy? Only the passage of time would answer that question—a passage even longer than the journey of a Traverse City boy from a small town to Yale University to a foreign war and finally to the top of office in Michigan government.

Meanwhile, as Michigan floundered in hard times, there was work to be done—one more year at the helm of a state battered by global and national economic gales. And Milliken prepared for it. The political climate, as much because of as in spite of his retirement, would also be stormy. Nine Democrats had already announced their candidacy for governor, and four Republicans, including three conservatives seeking to recapture their party from the Milliken wing represented by candidate and lieutenant governor James H. Brickley, would soon be publicly quarreling over the meaning of the Milliken legacy.

There would be more surprises—many more than Milliken expected—on the way to retirement in 1982. It would not be a typical year in Michigan politics. But then very few of Milliken’s years in office had been.