

# Democratic icon gets ready to wrap it up after 48 years

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BALTIMORE — Attorney General J. Joseph Curran Jr. walked out of his Baltimore office Dec. 8 for a trip to Annapolis where he would certify the election that put his son-in-law, Baltimore Mayor Martin O'Malley, into the governor's mansion.

"I want to get the hell back, so I can go to church at 5," said Curran, 75.

Down-to-earth and spiritual, Curran, a devout Roman Catholic who attends daily services at the Cathedral of Mary Our Queen on Charles Street, has loomed large in Maryland politics for the past 48 years as a state delegate, senator, lieutenant governor and, for the past 20 years, as Maryland's attorney general.

"He's been a symbol of integrity in Maryland politics," said Stephen H. Sachs, Curran's predecessor as attorney general (1979-86). "He's the kind of guy — and there aren't a whole lot — who make you proud to be a politician. When I was attorney general, I used to say I'd be a tough act to follow. Joe Curran not only followed, he improved on it."

Curran's political career began in 1958 when the 26-year-old Korean War veteran ran for state delegate while attending law school and working as an insurance adjuster.

"Whenever I had to go into a neighborhood for a claim, I'd go knock on every door after I finished to introduce myself and let them know I was running," Curran said.

With his silvery hair, ruddy cheeks and hardy build, Curran is an old-style politician who misses the days when the Baltimore Democratic clubs provided the social and political center for the city's neighborhoods.

Curran was inspired to run for office by watching U.S. Sen.

John F. Kennedy (D). "He seemed like the kind of person I wanted to be," he said.

Curran met his wife, Barbara, when they were both members of the Young Democrats Club at the University of Baltimore, where he attended law school.

"She was in the Young Democrats, so I wanted to be in the Young Democrats," he said.

Long a champion of liberal causes, Curran said his views were shaped listening to his father, a longtime Baltimore city councilman who worked to help Baltimore residents and end segregationist practices. Their home was picketed in the early 1960s when Curran's father supported an initiative of Cardinal Lawrence Sheehan to open the city's accommodations to everyone, regardless of race.

"In those days you didn't have an office in City Hall," Curran recalled. "His office was in a corner of my mother's kitchen. I learned early on the importance of public service."

Like his father, Curran also drew the ire of conservatives while in the State House by sponsoring a bill in 1967 to end segregation at movie theaters and other businesses.

"They picketed my home with my wife and children inside," said Curran, a father of four.

He keeps a framed copy of The Independent American newspaper in his office: "Conservative thinking party leader exposes...[sic] Senator Curran's ultra-liberal record!"

The newspaper noted Curran's successful efforts to end a 1950s-era loyalty oath requirement for schoolteachers.

"If someone wants to call me a liberal, that's fine with me," Curran said. "When I was

in the legislature, we did deal with the great social changes. All of that has changed in my lifetime."

He also became an outspoken critic of the Vietnam War, running for Congress in 1968 on an anti-war platform.

Several months earlier, Curran received a letter from the Baltimore parents of a Marine in Vietnam, requesting a state flag that had flown over the State House. Other Marines had their state flags flying at their base camp, and the Baltimore Marine wanted a Maryland flag. Curran sent one to the Marine. A few months later, he received a call from the parents that their son had been killed.

Curran went to the funeral in Little Italy and saw the Marine in his dress blue uniform inside a glass coffin.

"He was a young, handsome guy," he recalled. "I thought what a waste of that family's son. I thought this is just crazy. And that's why I ran for Congress."

He failed to win the seat by a narrow 51 percent to 49 percent margin.

"If not for a rainy day, I would have been elected to Congress," he said, adding an all-day rainstorm had suppressed the youth vote.

In the legislature, he made a name for himself as someone unafraid of tackling controversial issues.

He called for ending a state law prohibiting interracial marriage and supported abortion rights despite criticism from the Catholic Church.

"He demonstrated courage in several areas, which is not in overabundance in politics," said Sachs, who was attorney general when Curran was chairman of the Senate Judicial

Cont

ry Committee. "He did it with choice on the abortion issue. He did it on the Vietnam War. He did it on the death penalty. He's been a progressive voice when that's not always been the majority sentiment, but it often became the majority sentiment because of Joe's leadership."

Sachs said Curran managed to be a leader without developing an ego.

"He's a genuinely humble man," Sachs said. "In the legislature they used to call him 'St. Joe.' He's a moral leader without being sanctimonious at all."

In 1982, Gov. Harry Hughes (D) selected Curran as his running mate as lieutenant governor, and Curran served there until 1986 when he won election as attorney general.

As attorney general, Curran took on the big tobacco companies and gun manufacturers.

In 1976, Curran's father was nearly shot when a man with a handgun went on a shooting rampage in Baltimore's City Hall. One councilman was killed; Curran's father had a heart attack that resulted in his death several months later.

Curran counts his efforts to curb handgun ownership in the state as one of his failures.

In 1999, he issued a report, "A Farewell to Arms," calling for a re-examination of private handgun ownership. The effort failed to draw the support he had hoped for.

"I tried very hard to articulate a position limiting the number of guns getting into urban life," Curran said. "That seemed to be perceived as changing a constitutional right. Some believe that the Founding Fathers wanted everyone to walk around with a gun. It's very upsetting when you see young children, young boys, whose lives have been cut short by gun violence."

At times, Curran argued his office's cases before the Maryland Court of Appeals. In Maryland vs. Wilson, the court agreed with Curran that police officers have the right to order

passengers out of a lawfully stopped vehicle for the officers' own protection. In Maryland vs. Craig, he successfully argued that child abuse victims could testify by one-way television so that they would not have to see their abusers.

U.S. Attorney for Maryland Rod Rosenstein (R) said Curran is "widely regarded for his integrity."

"He sets the right tone for law enforcement across the state," Rosenstein said. "He's been particularly strong in fighting violent crimes and child exploitation."

Curran was among those who attended Rosenstein's swearing-in as U.S. attorney in 2005.

"I was really touched that he would come, because it showed how important he saw the solidarity between the state and federal law enforcement," Rosenstein said.

But Curran is not without his critics.

Maryland Republican Party Chairman James Pelura III pointed out three recent cases where he said Curran allowed partisan politics to influence his legal judgment: the so-called Wal-Mart bill, early voting and the dismissal of the Public Service Commission.

"His stellar tenure to the people of Maryland is going to be forgotten because he allowed himself and his office to become totally partisan," Pelura said. "He was for those things, and all three of those things were found to violate federal law or state law or the state constitution."

Curran tried to legislate as attorney general in his last term, Pelura said.

"He was more concerned with dissing the Republican governor and helping the Democratic legislature. It's a black mark on his part to have three laws overturned," Pelura said.

Curran disagreed with Pelura's assessment. Instead, he said he has been concerned

about the increased partisanship from both ends of the political spectrum, although he saved his sharpest criticism for the right-wing talk show hosts.

Talk radio had buzzed with rumors of O'Malley's alleged infidelity.

"Martin's a big boy. He's a very bright man who knows how to take it and fight back," Curran said. "The upsetting thing is when you're dealing with a grandson or granddaughter who doesn't know how to handle it. I'm glad Martin won to repudiate all this, to put it to bed. It was absolutely false to start with."

He blames talk radio hosts such as Rush Limbaugh, who called the Iraq Study Group the Iraq Surrender Group, for poisoning the atmosphere because local talk show hosts simply try to imitate him.

"I'd say to Mr. Limbaugh, 'Where were you in Vietnam?'" Curran said of Limbaugh's support for the war in Iraq. "I don't remember seeing you there."

Curran said he plans to remain active in politics. He is considering two teaching offers, from Loyola College and the University of Baltimore.

He's also preparing the way for his successor, Montgomery County State's Attorney Douglas F. Gansler (D).

"Joe Curran has been wonderful in terms of advice," said Gansler, who counts Curran as one of his role models.

He will also have more time now for his family.

During a recent interview, grandson William O'Malley sat nearby because his Catholic school was closed for a holy day and his parents were busy at work.

"Today I'm the official baby sitter," Curran joked.

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## J. Joseph Curran Jr.

**Born:** July 7, 1931

**Birthplace:** West Palm Beach, Fla.

**Education:** University of Baltimore, bachelor's degree, 1956; University of Baltimore School of Law, law degree, 1959.

**Military service:** Air Force, 1951-55. Stationed at an air base in Japan during the Korean War.

**Political offices:** House of Delegates, 1959-62; State Senate, 1963-82; lieutenant governor, 1983-86; attorney general, 1987-2006.