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Republicans Giddy as Ehrlich's Inauguration Makes History

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BODY:

The desk in the governor's office was empty, save for a lone paper clip. On top lay a cream-colored envelope addressed to "Gov. Ehrlich." Inside, a short note from Maryland's 59th governor, Parris N. Glendening (D), to the man who took his place yesterday.

As Gov. Robert L. Ehrlich Jr. was sworn in as the first Republican governor in more than three decades, the signs of change were everywhere:

In the glum faces of Democrats out of power. In the tears of an African American woman delighted to see a black man sworn in as lieutenant governor. In the crowd of about 2,000 well-wishers stamping their heels in the blustery cold, shivering in fur coats and craning their necks for a glimpse of the man whose November victory ushered in an era of divided government.

"It takes a cold day for hell to freeze over," said Dana Bailey, who wore a smiley face button proclaiming "Happiness is a Republican Governor."

For Ehrlich and his family, the changes began with breakfast: pastries and fruit served by the staff at Government House. Elsewhere in the mansion, Glendening stopped by for a quick bite and a chance to bid farewell to the staff. He and his family moved out Friday to a rented townhouse.

The congratulatory letter he left in the governor's office wished Ehrlich well and reminded him to have fun and take time out for family, Glendening said. Eight years ago, Glendening was greeted to a similar note from his predecessor, William Donald Schaefer, a Democrat who is now the state's comptroller. It was, Glendening said, one of the last things he took out of his desk drawers.

But over the course of two terms, the two men's relationship disintegrated into a political grudge match. Yesterday,

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as Glendening quietly made his way out a side door of the State House, Schaefer settled into the front row on the dais, a few seats from Ehrlich.

A few rows back sat Kathleen Kennedy Townsend, Glendening's lieutenant governor and Ehrlich's Democratic opponent. Introduced as having represented "the integrity of the last eight years," she was greeted with wan applause and a few catcalls from the back of the plaza. A bigger cheer went up for the new first lady, Kendel Ehrlich.

"I knew that was going to happen," Ehrlich said during his inaugural speech. "She's pulled way ahead of me in the polls already."

For many, the most emotional moment was when Lt. Gov. Michael S. Steele was sworn in as the first African American elected to statewide office.

The Rev. Sam Conyers, pastor of Grace Pentecostal Worship Center in Frederick, was on Interstate 270 shortly after sunrise to be sure he didn't miss the moment. "I got here three hours ahead of time because this is history," he said.

Lena Adams, a Democratic special education teacher in Prince George's County, also made a special trip to see the man she crossed party lines to support at the polls. As Steele delivered his inaugural address, Adams's eyes watered up, and she said, "Hallelujah. We really need to pray for him now."

Not everyone at the ceremony welcomed the change that Ehrlich and Steele would bring.

The inauguration was interrupted by the shouts of a group of about 75 anti-death penalty protesters, angry that Ehrlich has vowed to lift an execution moratorium imposed by Glendening because of concerns about racial bias. Police tried to move the protesters farther away, but chants such as "Hey Ehrlich! Just face it! Death Row! Is Racist!" could still be heard. Inauguration guests shook their heads, and guest speaker Jack Kemp, a former HUD secretary and GOP vice presidential candidate, joked about the noise.

"Excellent," said John Coursey, the 28-year-old coordinator for the District-based Campaign to End the Death Penalty. "I'm going to be vocal about this issue as much as I can."

Democrats tried to put as brave a face on the day as they could. "I wish Bob Ehrlich well, and I told him so personally," said U.S. Rep. Benjamin L. Cardin. But a subdued Maryland House majority leader, Kumar P. Barve (Montgomery), could offer only this: "It's a free country, and I guess you can't be in power all the time. . . . They may as well enjoy the day because we're going to disagree."

State Sen. Ida G. Ruben (Montgomery), who didn't venture out of her office for the ceremony, was more blunt. "This is a letdown for Democrats."

Directly across the street from the dais, Eric Lund hung a large sign outside his downtown Annapolis photo gallery: "Inauguration Day Consolation Sale -- 20% off for the Democrats." An independent who voted for Ehrlich, Lund figured the sign might attract some business on a day when parade traffic was keeping customers away.

Around Annapolis, though, the day belonged to the Republicans and to longtime Ehrlich friends, such as the busload of about 60 Princeton University graduates who have known the governor since his days as the school's football captain.

White House Political Director Ken Mehlman brought greetings from President Bush. Ehrlich's Republican pals from the two terms he spent in Congress flew in for the ceremonies. Rep. Rob Portman (R-Ohio), who recently phoned Ehrlich from the U.S. House cloakroom just for old times' sake, noted with a sense of wonder that not so long ago, "I thought he was crazy to do this."

Former congressman Rick Lazio burst into a vestibule outside the Senate chamber with a big "Hey buddy!" for

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Portman. "There's an enormous sense of euphoria about this race," he said.

GOP members of the General Assembly, whose party affiliation has long relegated them to the periphery of state power politics, also rejoiced. Del. Joanne S. Parrot (Hartford) mused about the new level of respect she is being shown by lobbyists and colleagues. "They're paying more attention to me," she said.

At one point, five current or former governors were in one room: Marvin Mandel, Harry Hughes, Schaefer, Glendening and Ehrlich.

"Some digs, huh?" laughed Ehrlich, who stood for two hours in a receiving line with his wife and Steele and his wife, Andrea, to greet visitors in his first public open house.

As her red suit blended with the walls of the three-story entrance hall to Government House, Kendel Ehrlich told a guest that there would be renovations for the mansion.

"It needs some work upstairs," she said. "The colors will be different."

One day after the new governor moved in, there already was a different air about the place. A state trooper assigned to the executive guard admitted to never having warmed to Glendening and his family.

In the room next door, a trio of National Guardsmen in uniform played soft music and jazz. As the last visitors filed out of a side door into the gardens, the smooth sound of a familiar song echoed behind them.

It was "Spider-Man," the theme song for 3-year-old Drew Ehrlich's favorite superhero.

Staff writers Anita Huslin, Hamil R. Harris, Nelson Hernandez and Vikki Ortiz contributed to this report.

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