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U.S.

Marvin Mandel, Former Maryland Governor, Dies at 95

By ADAM CLYMER AUG. 30, 2015

Former Gov. Marvin Mandel, whose record of modernizing Maryland's state government was overshadowed by a messy divorce and a fraud conviction for helping associates profit from a racetrack deal, died on Sunday in St. Mary's County, Md. He was 95.

The death was confirmed in a statement by Gov. Larry Hogan, who ordered all flags throughout the state to be flown at half-staff. A cause was not released.

"The state of Maryland lost not only a former governor but also a truly great leader," Mr. Hogan said in the statement.

Mr. Mandel was first elected governor by the state legislature, where he was speaker of the House of Delegates, when Spiro T. Agnew resigned to become vice president in 1969. Voters elected him in 1970 and again in 1974.

Before he was indicted in 1975, Mr. Mandel, a Democrat, had compiled a substantial record that included placing strict limits on carrying handguns, protecting the environment, streamlining the court system, helping Washington and Baltimore build subways and having the state assume school construction costs that were burdening localities.

In a brief interview for this obituary in 2011, he said he was proudest of

reorganizing state government, consolidating 248 independent agencies into 12 cabinet-level departments. “We reduced the government to a sizable figure of agencies where we could adequately work with them,” he said. “You have no idea how difficult it was to get them to surrender their ‘freedom,’ as they called it.” He added, “I had legislators crawling out of my pocket.”

In his first two legislative sessions, 93 of the 95 measures he proposed were enacted. But it was a later legislative episode that brought him down and sent him to prison for 19 months before President Ronald Reagan commuted his sentence in 1981.

In 1971 the owners of Marlboro, a decrepit half-mile track, won approval from the legislature to double its allotment of racing days from 18 to 36.

Mr. Mandel vetoed the bill. That move depressed Marlboro’s value, and several of Mr. Mandel’s close friends began buying stock in the track. In December, one of them, W. Dale Hess, a onetime roommate of Mr. Mandel and a former state House majority leader, gave the governor a \$320,000 share of a profitable investment company that owned land leased by the federal government for the Social Security Administration.

Prosecutors said Mr. Mandel also received real estate, jewelry and vacation trips. Then, in January 1972, Mr. Mandel’s veto was overridden, with most of his close legislative allies surprisingly voting to override. Marlboro, with more racing days, suddenly became more valuable. Mr. Mandel insisted as late as 1975 that he did not know his friends were investors.

His conviction, by the same team of federal prosecutors who had forced Mr. Agnew’s 1973 resignation as vice president on bribe-taking charges, was not universally popular in Maryland, where some defenders saw only traditional state political practice, not crime, in his actions.

His conviction and three-year prison sentence were ultimately set aside

by a federal court in 1987. That decision did not bear on what the jury had found he had done, but turned on a Supreme Court decision that denying Marylanders the “intangible” benefit of honest government — as the charges read — did not constitute a crime under the federal fraud statute.

Congress promptly amended the statute to cover such an offense, but Mr. Mandel’s conviction had been wiped away and he got his law license back. He practiced business law in Baltimore and Annapolis, did some lobbying, served on the board of the University of Maryland and advised Robert Ehrlich, a Republican who served as governor from 2003 to 2007.

Mr. Mandel insisted all his life he had done nothing wrong. In a 2010 memoir, “I’ll Never Forget It: Memoirs of a Political Accident from East Baltimore,” he wrote, “I said then, and I say now, that I never did anything illegal as governor of Maryland.”

A balanced appraisal of his record came in 1984 from Bradford Jacobs, an editor of *The Baltimore Evening Sun*, in his book, “Thimblerriggers” (a word describing operators of a shell game played with thimbles).

“He played legislators as one would keys on a piano,” wrote Mr. Jacobs, after praising him for keeping “the state budget commendably tight” while enacting a progressive, modernizing agenda. “He was excellent at legislating, competent at administering, and an embarrassment at acknowledging the difference, publicly perceived, between right and wrong.”

Mr. Mandel was born in Baltimore on April 19, 1920, and grew up in the city. He served in the United States Army after graduating from the University of Maryland Law School in 1942. He was elected to the House of Delegates in 1952, and rose quickly, becoming chairman of the city’s delegation and the Ways and Means committee before becoming speaker in 1963.

The complex criminal case against him attracted special attention because it was intertwined with Mr. Mandel’s divorce — an event he and his

wife both later called a “soap opera.”

In July 1973 he issued a news release announcing that he was going to divorce Barbara Mandel, his wife of 32 years, and marry Jeanne Blackistone Dorsey. His statement implied that he had discussed the matter with his wife.

Mrs. Mandel, known as Bootsie, responded by saying “Marvin has not discussed this with me” and “the governor crawled out of my bed this morning.” She added, “He should see a psychiatrist.”

Of her successor in the governor’s heart, she said, “How can she be a first lady when she isn’t a lady first?”

Mrs. Mandel refused to move out of the governor’s mansion, causing the governor to stay first in a hotel and then in an apartment. She agreed to leave in December after a divorce settlement of over \$500,000 had been negotiated.

But the governor, who married Mrs. Dorsey on the day his divorce became final in 1974, did not have that kind of money. As his trial and a civil lawsuit filed by Mrs. Mandel showed, much of the money was put up by Irvin Kovens, one of the others convicted in the mail fraud case.

Mr. Mandel is survived by a son and daughter from his first marriage, Ellen M. Maltz and Gary S. Mandel, and by a son from his second marriage, Paul Dorsey of Gaithersburg, Md.; a stepdaughter, Helen Dorsey of Leonardtown, Md.; two stepsons, Philip H. Dorsey and John Michael Dorsey; and by four grandchildren. His second wife died in 2001. His first wife lives in Baltimore.

Kenneth Rosen contributed reporting.

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