In November of 1986 Henry Bellmon won the election for Governor of Oklahoma returning him to a position he had held over twenty years before as Oklahoma’s first Republican governor. At the same time the Reagan administration in Washington had put out a request for proposals for the siting of the so-called Super Collider, a massive project which would have a dramatic impact on the economy of the chosen site. Bellmon did not take office until January, but he put together a team to prepare a proposal for the state of Oklahoma. In doing so, they bypassed the proper procedures for such activities and were roundly criticized for it. This effort entailed over 1.5 million dollars for the work of the companies and professionals involved in the effort, and they just happened to be the newly elected governor’s friends and supporters. Bellmon naturally wanted the state to cover the costs and his whole effort brought a lot of criticism. As a result, the leaders of the Oklahoma House requested my committee (Economic Development) to investigate the whole process. After weeks of sworn testimony, we began meeting to decide what our actions or recommendations would be. As I sat in my inner office reviewing a number of reports, my secretary came in and said that three members of my committee wanted to speak with me. I invited them in. “Obviously you have something pretty important to share with me to make this effort, what is it?” I asked.

“Mr. Chairman, we think he should be impeached.”

“Who?” I asked.

“Governor Bellmon.”

“Why?”

“Look at all the violations of rules and misconduct involved in this whole deal. We should impeach him for this.”

“We did not have any testimony that he personally was responsible for any of those screw-ups. So what is the basis for an impeachment resolution?” I asked.

The conversation went back and forth for several minutes. My visitors were visibly irritated by my resistance.”
“Mr. Chairman, Incompetence is grounds for impeachment in the constitution. At the very least, the Governor was not competent in the way he handled this.”

“Guys, listen to me very carefully.” I took a deep breath. “I know he didn’t follow the letter of the law. I know his aides screwed up but, if we start impeaching people for incompetence, this is (I waved both hands around pointing in every direction). . . This is going to be an empty building.” That put an end to the first little push to impeach the Governor.

A couple of years later in his term, Governor Bellmon, who was far from a rich man, decided to sell some of his farm property to a group that supposedly planned a service station for the location. The purchase was put together by some folks who had always been his supporters. I was called into the Speaker’s office. The Speaker and the top leaders of the House wanted me to chair a special investigative committee to dig into this transaction and see if it was an impeachable offense. “Mr. Speaker, why don’t we dig into it a little bit and determine if there is anything at all before we form a special committee. It would be a real hit on us if we dug into this and found out there was nothing there. It would be an embarrassment for the House.” The matter was dropped.

All of this, of course, happened back in a time when politics was not quite as bloody and vicious as it is today. From Ken Starr on, millions of dollars every year are spent on fruitless investigations. In the U.S. Congress we have standing committees that investigate everything, and not only are actions investigated, but “motives” are a focus of endless and exhausting questioning. Politics has always been “war without the bullets” but it is now more bloody than ever.

In the meantime, back in the Bellmon administration, I was able to work closely with the Governor on a number of initiatives ranging from economic development to environmental protection and education reform. It was Bellmon who initially proposed the creation of a department of environmental affairs. That proposal was met with overwhelming opposition from the oil industry and others. I led an interim study on the issue and found that not only environmentalists, but also the state’s manufacturers wanted a new department. The regulatory tasks were split out through eight different agencies and manufacturers were totally frustrated by the regulatory mess. This was at the end of the Bellmon administration. I filed a bill to create the new department of environmental quality the next session and fought a ferocious battle to create it only to have the bill defeated in committee. But the battle was not over. The next day Representative Hudson came to me from the meeting of the House Leadership. “Well Don,” he said, “You should have been there. Several guys were bragging about how they beat you and Speaker Johnson interrupted and asked, “Do you really think McCorkell is going to quit. He isn’t. You need to work this out.” I asked Sid what we were going to do. “Well, you are not
going to like this Don, but they have agreed to pass a bill creating the new agency on one condition.” “What is that?” “The condition is that the bill cannot be authored by you or have your name on it as a co-author. They don’t think you’ll do it.” “They are wrong. Tell them. A done deal.” And the Oklahoma Department of Environmental Quality was formed, all be it in Governor Walters administration.

In politics friends come and go, but enemies accumulate. Bellmon was that rare politician who knew this and still took them on to make a lasting difference. It was Henry Bellmon who pushed for a comprehensive education reform package. Bellmon had asked business leaders and others what the most important and dramatic action that could be taken that would improve the state economy in the long term. The consensus was education reform. If we wanted to make a lasting difference, we had to turn the state’s public education system around, and it would not be easy or cheap. Bellmon called for the action. It was like Nixon going to China. Now a Republican governor was calling for a tax increase to fund major education improvements.

I remember meeting with Steve Lewis, the newly elected Speaker, along with other house leaders in Tulsa for a conference. Steve said, “Guys, we’re the Democrats. We are the ones who claim to be the advocates for public education. We are the ones who are going to have to deliver on this. We are the majority in the House and the Senate and most of the Republican members are not going to support him anyway.”

Lewis was right. We worked for months on a historic education reform package which we finally passed with mostly Democratic votes. In fact, it was the Democrats who put together all the details and reforms, but the Governor signed off on all of them. A handful of Republicans joined us. By the end of his term Bellmon was more popular with the Democratic members than the Republican ones. It was a damn good thing that we didn’t impeach him.