

# THE LADY AND HER LEGACY

*Kentuckian Martha Layne Collins knows  
that some governors' work is never done*

**G**overnor Martha Layne Collins is down on her hands and knees in the state helicopter. She is on her way back from Richmond, Kentucky, where she announced that Kokoku Rubber, Inc. would build a plant. Kokoku is the 17th Japanese company to build in the state during the Collins administration, thanks to some hard selling by the Governor and her staff, and the mood is upbeat. As Collins flies back to the Capitol building in Frankfort, she kneels to help visitors dig soft drinks out of a small refrigerator. The Governor's impulse to serve is so swift and natural that the visitors seem a little surprised. She is, of course, elected to serve. But isn't this going a bit too far?

Collins is Kentucky's first female governor and the only woman in the South to be elected to a state's highest office without following her husband there. It may be an overstatement—and it is most certainly retrograde—to say that the political futures of other Southern women are written between the lines of Martha Layne Collins' achievements and failures. Nevertheless, it is undoubtedly true in Kentucky, where many voters—especially those disappointed by her performance in office—will remember one thing first and foremost:



**It may be retrograde to say the political future of other women depends on Martha Collins, but in Kentucky that is undoubtedly true.**

Martha Layne Collins is a *woman*.

Not that the Governor hasn't done everything possible to downplay her gender. Both her critics and admirers praise her for that. But Collins can't change the fact that she's not only a woman but a *Southern* woman, one with a strong desire to please others. And now, in these final and most lame-duck months of her administration (Kentucky governors cannot succeed themselves), that desire to please seems to have taken on a life of its own, propelling Collins

**By Anne Cassidy**

from one corner of the state to another, spreading her gospel of education reform and economic development. The Governor says she's trying to assure that the programs she put in place will grow and thrive; others suggest that, four years after she was elected, Kentucky's first female governor is *still* stumping for approval.

WHEN MARTHA Layne Collins was growing up, she wanted to be a nurse. But she majored in home economics and became a teacher when her father suggested that she choose a profession in which she didn't have to spend so much time on her feet. Before she married, Collins, 50, was the Burley Tobacco queen of 1954 and the Kentucky

Derby Festival Queen of 1959. She was also the president of her dormitory at the University of Kentucky. She helped put her husband through dentistry school, taking off only enough time from teaching to have two children. She is, many political observers say, the only kind of woman Kentuckians would have ever elected governor—a traditional woman in a non-traditional role.

But Collins was no political neophyte when she took office. She was a seasoned politician who had worked her way up from volunteer positions to become clerk of the State Court of Appeals and then

# AMELIA THE BEAUTIFUL.

Lieutenant Governor. Along the way, she made the right friends and garnered strong grassroots support. The major criticisms leveled against her in her first year in office was that she became governor by catering to old state pols and that she paid off too many political favors with appointments.

Now, though, most political observers think that, after that less-than-stellar start, Collins has hit her stride. She has survived everything from a fiscal crisis and a critical case of swallowed glass to the shenanigans of her husband, Bill, a dentist-turned-entrepreneur who once announced that he planned to run for governor—a statement he now says was “just a joke.” What wasn’t a joke was that last year, almost half of Bill Collins’ investors were found to have been awarded political appointments or state contracts. The Governor—who was out of the country when the story broke—later denied that there was any wrongdoing. She also said it wouldn’t happen again.

Collins has had better luck controlling the state Legislature. For one thing, she bounced back from an embarrassing legislative defeat that came only months after she had taken office. For the first time in the history of the state, the Legislature declined to enact a governor’s budget—in this case, because of the way Collins proposed to fund an educational reform package—and for a while it looked as if the Governor was beaten before she had even begun. But in 1985, she called a special legislative session and pushed her education package through with a new funding plan.

The same hard-won reversal seems to have happened with her staffing decisions. “Mrs. Collins got off to a rocky start, in part due to her initial appointments,” says Larry Forgy, a onetime gubernatorial candidate and one of Kentucky’s most respected Republicans. “They were members of her campaign team and should not have been part of her governing team. But she gradually gathered a nucleus of close advisors and got hold of her cabinet. She began to take control of government, to assert herself.” After some firings and resignations, Collins pulled together a staff that one longtime government employee and former member of her finance cabinet, Cattie Lou Miller, finds remarkable for its lack of “internecine squabbling.”

But despite Collins’ many accomplishments, there is still something

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not quite settled about this Governor and her administration. That something is an image problem, and, no matter how many political victories Collins chalks up, the problem won't seem to go away. One member of several state commissions and an avowed fan of the Governor—a person who believes she can hold her own with anyone—nevertheless cuts to the heart of the matter: "People perceive the Governor as a lightweight."

COLLINS CERTAINLY LOOKS the part of a no-nonsense, in-charge chief executive—her frosted blond hair is styled for easy mornings, and she has a penchant for serious suits. She is also earnest and driven. Only a day after returning from her sixth economic development trip to the Orient, Collins delivered a sparkling speech to the Southern Governor's Conference (which she chairs) on the need for a Southerner

on the 1988 Democratic Presidential ticket. Two days later, and back in Kentucky, she immediately began hopping around the state in the Sikorsky helicopter. "I have so many things I'd like to do these next few months," Collins says.

Perhaps at no time were the Governor's "heavyweight" skills called more into question than when she worked to convince the Toyota Motor Company to build a manufacturing facility in the state. How beneficial the new Toyota plant ultimately is to Kentucky may well determine how the Collins administration fares in the history books. The Georgetown plant—which is finally being built despite labor disputes and on-site accidents—will generate approximately 3,000 jobs and \$9.5 million a year in state taxes. But as details emerged about the costly incentives the state promised the Japanese, many citizens criticized the Governor for giving away too much to get the plant. Even those who see Toyota as good—even a necessity—for the state question the price at which it was bought. "The question," says state representative Pat Freibert, a Republican from the 78th District, "is, 'Could we have gotten the Toyota plant for less?' I think we could have. You don't necessarily get a better deal when the other side knows that the sky is the limit."

Collins has had practice in countering such criticism: "Our incentive package was not the biggest package Toyota was offered," she says. "I get criticism over roads, for example. All I'm doing is widening ours. Some states are putting in four-lane highways to their automotive plants when there were no roads to begin with." On the way to the Kokoku announcement, Collins said that she's been successful in winning Japanese industries because they have a natural affinity for Kentucky. "They like our warmth and hospitality. They like a state with four seasons, and I think they like us because they truly appreciate our traditions and heritage." The Governor's deputy press secretary, who was sitting in on the interview, added that the Japanese also admire Kentucky's work ethic. Oh yes, Collins remembered, our work ethic, too. And they also know about us from Kentucky Fried Chicken and "My Old Kentucky Home." But later, when the Governor shared the stage with a number of local officials and Japanese businessmen to announce the new Kokoku plant, she was the only one who

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appeared to be singing along to the state song.

Being tough hasn't been easy for Martha Layne Collins: Early in her administration, the press got hold of a confidential memo that said the Governor's trip to a prison had been planned to show her as a "tough administrator." Displeasing those who helped her early in her career can't have been easy, either. One former governor, who claims he cam-

paigned "like a tiger" for Collins, says he is so disappointed with her performance that he can't even talk about her.

Most recently, some of the state's leading newspapers have taken the Governor to task for her failure to come out and say she wouldn't accept the position of University of Kentucky president if it were offered her. Collins claims she repeatedly said she wasn't seeking the position, "and when I say I'm not a can-

didate, I'm *not* a candidate." But editorials chided the Governor for being "coy." The issue was all the more volatile because a judge found that the six-year terms of some university trustees were unconstitutional and that the Governor could appoint new trustees to take their place, thus theoretically stacking the deck in her favor. Collins was never officially considered for the UK presidency (which has now been filled), but several supporters wrote letters to the newspapers nominating her, and many feel that she did want the position, but backed down when she realized she wouldn't get it. (Among other things, the job required a Ph.D.; Collins has only a bachelor's degree.)

What *will* the Governor do when she leaves office? Speculation ranges from her holding out for an appointed post if a Democrat becomes President in 1988 to running for a Senate seat. Collins' future is, indeed, an interesting question, precisely because of her gender and her previous profession. Most ex-governors simply return to a lucrative law practice, but Collins was a home economics and math teacher. Many insiders expect her to seek a position in business. "Most of the big corporations that have directorships are looking for females to add stature to their boards," says Forgy. With three or four of those directorships at \$25,000 per year, the Governor would have a pretty good career. "But," says Forgy, "I don't foresee that she would ever run again."

AS THE HELICOPTER lands on the Capitol lawn, Collins waves off questions about her next job, saying that there are so many things to do *now* that she isn't even thinking about the future. "I've been asked to give lectures, write a book, travel," she says. "And there's always the political arena. I've been asked to get involved in some campaigns. It just goes to show you that if you do a good job at whatever you're doing, then the future takes care of itself."

The members of the Governor's entourage stuff reports and notepads into briefcases and begin shuffling toward the door. As we reach the steps, a voice calls out above the noise of the slowing rotor blades. "Take care now!" says Martha Layne Collins. "Watch your heads." □

*Native Kentuckian Anne Cassidy is a free-lance writer and editor.*



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