

Middle Man

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Tom Ridge cannot be pigeonholed into any one stereotype. The prototypical Pennsylvania moderate did not so much sit on the fence as a congressman, governor and homeland security secretary, as much as he developed it into a dynamic place to get things done.

SSA's Fall Conference & Trade Show keynote speaker put himself through Harvard via a combination of scholarships and construction work. When many in his generation were protesting, he left law school for combat. Upon returning, he became a respected prosecutor and would become the first member of Congress to have served in Vietnam. The Republican's ability to win in the typically Democratic-leaning state exemplified his hometown allure and moderate approach. Conventional wisdom says that to win in Pennsylvania, a Republican must come across more liberal and a Democrat must appear to be more conservative. Carrying a fiscally pragmatic approach, the ambitious veteran found his place in the Reagan revolution. It was 1983 and he was only 37 years old.

The young Congressman was anything but star-struck with the Great Communicator. He voted against Reagan's famed MX missile and strategic defense (Star Wars) initiatives even as many Democrats voted in favor, believing the benefit simply did not justify the expense. He defied the Gipper more often than joining him.

By the time 9/11 occurred, Ridge had firmly established himself as a right-leaning centrist, having served seven years as governor where he was hailed for modernizing government technology and taking a tough stand on crime. He signed 224 execution warrants—five times the number of the two previous governors—yet he remained firm on his pro-choice position. When President Bush initiated the Homeland Security Department (DHS) he'd already enjoyed a trusting relationship with Ridge and had seen the man effectively improve Pennsylvania's government. Not just anyone could create the third largest Department in the U.S. government from scratch.

Politics aside, self storage operators should appreciate that in creating DHS, Ridge avoided burdensome regulations upon sensitive parts of the private sector. Instead he fashioned response plans, worked with immigration authorities to keep those with suspicious profiles out of the country and was applauded for opening broader communications between the CIA and FBI. He did a lot, but he didn't overdo it.

Today Ridge, who will address the SSA on September 1 in Las Vegas, remains in the public eye as a television commentator, speaker and author. Last month when the debate about appropriate ways to adjudicate captured terrorists was widely considered, he again demonstrated his distinctive flair for seeking common ground. Traditionalists are aghast at the notion that terrorists should be afforded the same rights as U.S. citizens. Progressives are concerned about the use of military tribunals for an act of terror, which some consider an ill-defined gray area, not necessarily war.

"A solution does exist if Congress were to blend the inherent right and traditional value of due process with the need to advance our national security interests by creating a (new) court that embraces both notions," wrote Ridge confidently... from his fence. ❖