After Half a Century of Winning Elections in Maryland, Louie Goldstein is "A Legend in His Own Time"

By Tom Nugent
He's the most successful politician in the history of Maryland—a folksy, look-'em-in-the-eye campaigner who racks up huge majorities every time he runs for re-election as Maryland Comptroller. But he's also a savvy, high-tech-oriented administrator whose far-sighted innovations have been studied by dozens of other state governments in recent years.
Make no mistake, ladies and gentlemen: Louis L. “Louie” Goldstein '38, the 83-year-old financial wizard who’s been managing Maryland’s money since 1959, hasn’t held his position as comptroller by accident.

So be careful: if you drop your guard for two seconds, the silver-tongued Louie will charm you right out of your shoes. He’ll pump your hand, drawl sweet nothings in your ear, and grin at you like some sweetly purring Calvert County version of the Cheshire Cat: “I enjoy politics, because I just plain enjoy meeting good people!”

Then he’ll train those sky-blue peepers on you, and pat your shoulder, and start crooning all that good stuff about how he loves to “wander the back roads of Maryland, and visit with the good ‘ole down-home folks. . . .”

And all at once, he’s got you. Utterly charmed by now, and helpless beneath Louie’s magic-spell, you’ve completely forgotten one important fact:

This guy has a mind like a glittering steel trap!

Welcome to the “Louie School of Politics”

If you want to know how sharp Louie Goldstein really is, go ask the dozens of candidates who made the mistake of challenging him during his ten elections as Maryland’s comptroller.

They’ll all tell you that going up against Louis Goldstein on the campaign trail is like stepping out in front of the Cannonball Express.

They’re not exaggerating, either. During 50 years in state politics (12 of them as a senator from Calvert County, before becoming comptroller in 1959), this University of Maryland School of Law graduate has routinely walked off with 70 percent—sometimes even 80 percent—of the November vote.

Once described by former Maryland Governor William Donald Schaefer as having “an amazing natural gift for politics,” Goldstein probably received his finest political compliment during an election a few years ago, when a Baltimore newspaper pundit defined the statewide comptroller’s race by pointing out: “Louie’s had a lock on the office since his Republican opponent was two!”

Indeed, Goldstein’s huge majorities have become so routine in recent years that 1994 Democratic gubernatorial hopeful Mary Boersg went around the state telling reporters: “I’ve gone to the Louie Goldstein school of politics—wherever two or three Democrats are gathered, I’ll be there!”

Driving Around in a $69 Ford

If you ask Louie Goldstein to tell you where he got his “amazing gift” for politics, he’ll quickly explain that it was born during his boyhood years—years spent working in his father’s “big old country store” in Prince Frederick, the county seat of Calvert County in Southern Maryland.

“I learned a lot working in that store—mainly how to meet people. I learned how to remember names, and remember where the people lived, how many children they had, and what size clothes they wore. I got to meet everybody in the county, and I got to know them well. "That was wonderful training for a politician.”

After graduating from Washington College in Chestertown and then the University of Maryland School of Law, Goldstein began practicing law in Southern Maryland. And when he decided to make a run for the Maryland House of Delegates in 1938, he discovered that his years at the country store had taught him a priceless lesson: “I knew how to talk to people!

“I was right out of law school,” chuckled the comptroller, remembering his first-ever campaign, “and I bought an old Ford for $69, had it fixed up, and I drove to practically every home in Calvert County.

What does the most successful politician in the history of Maryland think about politics? About his own legendary popularity? About retirement—now that he’s reached the tender age of 83? To find out, we met this past summer with Maryland Comptroller Louie L. Goldstein in the Annapolis office building that is named for him. With tape recorder at the ready, we asked Louie to reflect on the meaning of life—and on his ten straight terms (starting in 1959) as Maryland’s top financial officer. Here are a few of the glittering “Louie-isms” that emerged spontaneously during the discussion.

Louie on joining the U.S. marine corps (1942)

“I went to boot camp as a 29-year-old lawyer. The drill instructor was drilling us: ‘Right-face!’ And I did left-face. And he yells: ‘What did you do in civilian life, Private Goldstein?’ ‘I was a lawyer, sir.’ So he yells: ‘Look at this—a lawyer who doesn’t know his left foot from his right!’ After that, I just said I was a farmer. I never told anybody I was a lawyer again!”

Louie on public service

“People call me on the telephone every single day. Call me with their problems. Well, it’s a joyful thing when you can help them. Money can’t buy that!”
“The key to being a good politician is meeting people, enjoying people. Getting to know them. And I like it! I’ve spent my whole life traveling around Maryland, having a good time, meeting real down-home folks. I guess you’ve got to have the right genes for it. You need to be an extrovert and enjoy life.”

“I went to all these old houses way back in the county. And people said, ‘Louie, you’re the first guy to ever come back here to ask me to vote for you—and I’m going to do it!’

“And that was the key to my success. All those people remembered me on election day—remembered that I had taken the time to visit them personally. I won that election, and I’ve been using that same strategy ever since.”

An Unusual “Seat-Mate”

According to the fast-moving comptroller, who usually caps off a busy day in his Annapolis office by pressing the flesh at a political meeting or civic fundraiser until 10- or 11 p.m., another key influence on his career was the education he received from the University of Maryland School of Law.

“I had some great professors,” he says, his blue eyes gleaming with nostalgia. “Most of our professors were either judges or prosecuting attorneys. I remember Judge Frank, who taught torts—a brilliant thinker. And Judge Chestnut, who taught Constitutional law, and Professor Strayhorn, in criminal law. These professors were extremely knowledgeable because they’d been in the real world, themselves, for many years.

“But one of the most unforgettable things that happened to me in law school took place when Dean Howell called me to his office. He told me that the school had just admitted its first-ever African-American student, Donald Murray. And he asked me: ‘Do you mind sitting next to Donald Murray?’

“And I said, ‘No, my soul, I have no objection to that!’ And I went right out and told Murray that I wanted him to be my seat-mate—and that’s what he was, throughout all our years in law school.”

Remembering that long-ago meeting with the dean, Goldstein grows quite serious for a moment: “That experience helped to reinforce the lessons I’d been given at home—that we should respect and honor all people, regardless of their ethnic background.

“It hit home—especially for a student of Jewish descent, like myself, who’d had some trouble renting an apartment in Baltimore, where some of the landlords had told me: ‘Sorry, we don’t rent to Jews.’”

Proud of That “Triple A” Rating

As delighted as he is with his amazing track-record at election-time, Louie Goldstein seems even prouder of his 37-year performance in the comptroller’s office—a record of accomplishment that includes a continuing “Triple A” bond-rating for his beloved Old Line State, which he says has saved taxpayers more than $65 million in the past seven years, alone.

The endlessly inventive financial guru is quick to point out the fact that Maryland was one of the first states in the union to begin using computers to track tax returns. In addition, his agency’s new “tax form imaging system” is so far ahead of its time that it’s now being studied by the IRS as a model of efficiency.

Having lost his beloved wife, Hazel, last April—after 49 years of marriage—Louie Goldstein recently reversed an earlier announcement that he planned to retire at the end of his current term, in order to be with her during her illness. Now he says he’s eager to start beating the campaign drums for 1998: “I’m going stronger than ever, and I still work until 11 o’clock every night.

“I want to run again in ’98, and I want to help take Maryland into the next century. I know Hazel would have wanted me to remain active, and not sit around the house.

“I get a tremendous amount of satisfaction out of this job. It’s a joyful thing when you can help people a little bit—and I want to go on doing it as long as I can!”