



## Michigan COMMENTARY

### Dan Pero: A Profile

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The bust of Robert Kennedy and the "Rocky" movie poster in Dan Pero's Olds Plaza office convey an accurate sketch of their owner. The successful political consultant who masterminded John Engler's upset gubernatorial victory last fall has a fervent belief in public service and is an eloquent champion of the new governor's political philosophy. He is also a movie buff who hopes to see one of his own scripts filmed someday, and whose award-winning screenplay, "Cutthroat," describes the struggles of a political campaign manager.

Longtime ally, close friend, best man, and chief of staff for Governor Engler, Dan Pero at age 38 has fifteen years' experience with electoral politics. "Everything we do in life is political," he says. "I subscribe to the theory that politics is who gets what, when, where, and how. Every decision we make falls within these parameters, whether its deciding what to eat, where to go on vacation, or what kind of public policy to set."

Working as a Michigan state employee for the first time since 1979 is a shift of gears for Pero who has advised state and national political candidates for more than a decade "Coming out of the heat of the campaign where you have an adversary" and moving into the executive office "where you're forming coalitions to do what's in the best interests of the state is sometimes difficult for me to do—because I'm a very competitive person," Pero admits. "A campaign is about winning and losing, and public policy isn't—it's about doing what's right, what's best, and it involves a wholly different mindset. This is a tremendous experience for me, but it's also a very different experience."

Pero's journey from his hometown of Flint to one of the most influential positions in Michigan government has traced a circuitous route across the country that looped regularly back through Michigan and never strayed far from politics.

The youngest of three brothers, Dan Pero began writing fiction in the 6th grade—bloody war stories patterned after "Combat," his favorite television show. His father suffered from multiple sclerosis and died the year Pero entered high school. His mother worked to support the family "before working mothers were fashionable," and he looked to his oldest brother (12 years his senior) as a father figure. As a basketball player, he had a good shot and was the tallest player in his high school conference; as he sprawls out of a conference chair Pero's physique today retains some of that lanky athleticism.

Notwithstanding other interests, it was his writing that most distinguished him from fellow students. He was sports editor of his high school newspaper, and his English compositions were always the ones read in class as good examples.

At Western Michigan University, Pero merged his writing talent with his interest in politics, and majored in political science. "As a kid, I'd always been involved in politics," he recalls. "Don Riegle was my congressman, and during the '60s I was very attracted by him and by Bobby Kennedy; my admiration and respect for those two individuals was a great force in getting me involved in politics. I don't share the same philosophy with Don Riegle now," Pero says, alluding to Riegle's switch to the Democratic Party in 1974 and his recent involvement in the savings and loan scandal, "but we met recently at an event and I thanked him for giving me the opportunity back in the '70s to be involved in his campaigns as a volunteer, and for finding the time back then to talk to me personally."

After completing a graduate program in political science at Western in 1974, Pero managed his first political campaign for incumbent state Representative F. Robert Edwards—"my mentor in politics—someone who gave me a chance, someone I'll always and forever be grateful to." (Edwards, who left the legislature in 1976, was recently named director of the Michigan Employment Security Commission.)



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In 1976, Pero was working for the House Republican staff and married MSU senior Colleen Meeuwenberg. Immediately after their wedding, he landed a job at the Washington Republican consulting firm of Bailey, Deardourff & Associates, "at that time the Mercedes Benz of Washington consulting firms," Pero reminisces. "They had just finished the Gerald Ford campaign where they pulled off what was almost an 'Engler miracle!'" Colleen Pero joined her husband in Washington that summer when she accepted a position with the nation's largest high school student exchange program.

For the next fourteen years the Peros' careers took them leapfrogging across the country while one partner relocated and the other commuted. After returning to Michigan in 1979 for a ten-month stint as House director of constituent relations while Colleen commuted to her Washington, D.C., job, Dan returned to Washington to serve as account representative of the Howard Baker for President campaign. Colleen left her Washington job for graduate work in Phoenix; Dan followed her months later and undertook reapportionment research for the speaker of the Arizona House. The couple returned to Washington and Dan resumed his affiliation with Bailey, Deardourff. Colleen soon received and accepted a job offer from Gulf Oil in Texas. The Peros resumed a commuter marriage for much of that year (1981) before Dan moved to Houston to join a consulting firm and later to launch his own communications business.

The pitfalls of a two-career commuter marriage overtook the Peros and they divorced in 1985. Two years later they remarried, and in January 1989 they returned again to Michigan to become what the *Detroit News* called "linchpins in the Engler-for-Governor machine."

By coming back to Michigan, they were delivering on a decade-old promise to help a longtime friend and ally. "During John's first Senate term in 1979, we had reached a tentative agreement that I was going to be his administrative assistant," Pero recalls. "Bill Bryant, who was then the minority leader in the House, made me an offer I couldn't refuse [to direct the office of House constituent relations], and I ended up taking that job and reneging on my agreement with John Engler. I felt bad about that, although John was magnanimous and understanding. I told him that if he ever decided to think about running for statewide office—and Colleen made this same pledge—that we would leave whatever we were doing and we would come back and help. When we came back to Michigan, it felt good to make good on that promise."

Make good they did, with Dan directing a notably organized and methodical uphill campaign against a well-known incumbent, while Colleen oversaw liaison between the campaign and the Senate majority leader's office, making sure that candidate Engler's legislative duties were not slighted. She now fills the new position of Director of State Affairs.

Now that the race is won and the transfer of power accomplished, Pero's role has changed from being the outsider and the challenger to serving as the chief representative of the gubernatorial bureaucracy. What strikes him most about his new duties, he says, is the huge amount of work it requires. "It's a tremendous amount of work," he says, adding, "I think that has to do with the very aggressive agenda for Michigan that's been set. We're talking about reshaping government—what its role is to people, what functions it will serve. We're saying that it's going to be a smaller government; it's not going to do the kind of things it's done in the past."

"In many ways what we're doing here is like what Margaret Thatcher did in Great Britain," Pero suggests. "And that's difficult. It's not only difficult for us, it's difficult for all those affected by change, because change is tough."

Pero says he has talked with several of his predecessors in the chief of staff's office and has been helped by their insights, although the circumstances have varied so widely that parallels are difficult to draw, he says, and he is reluctant to speculate on the major hazards of the role. One that he does note, however, is that his role entails "being out front on point and articulating the position of the administration—one with which all people don't necessarily agree—and that opens me up personally for criticism, which doesn't bother me at all. I'm proud of the direction in which we're headed, and I make no apologies for what we're doing."

"I guess the biggest pitfall," he continues, "is the lack of personal time that comes with the job. The biggest negative is that you're up every morning at 6, and you don't get home at night until 9 or 10—in some ways it's good that we don't have children."

Is it easier for the peripatetic Peros to balance the demands of two careers now that they work in the same office? "Sometimes it's not," Pero interjects with a laugh. "We've had a very open relationship, we've always been able to communicate, and we have many of the same interests. The drawback is that you can lose the private time because when you're together after work you're talking about what you just left. When I leave this office, I try not to talk about work at all—and that's hard sometimes when you really want to talk to someone as a confidante. Knowing when you can change from boss or co-worker to spouse or friend or confidante seems much more difficult in roles like this than if one of us worked somewhere else."

If keeping professional and personal boundaries clear is sometimes difficult between the Peros, a similar potential for overlap exists with the couple's professional and personal relationship with John Engler. He is close friend as well as boss; the Peros were matron of honor and best man at the governor's December marriage to Michelle DeMunbrun. "We have some really great times," Pero says of the relationship between the two couples. "There is tremendous affection and respect for both the governor and Michelle. We've known John for 16 years—Colleen perhaps kept in touch with him more than I did when we weren't in Michigan—and Colleen and I both know Michelle very well. She is one of the brightest people I've met and brings a tremendous dimension to the first family. That combined with the governor's compassion and sense of humor gives us all strength."

Responding to the suggestion that "compassionate" is not the most common description of Governor Engler's political style or philosophy, Pero bristles slightly and speaks earnestly, leaning forward on his elbows for emphasis: "I see the governor from a very personal side, and I know him as a very caring individual. I've seen him in the hospitals, I've seen him with senior citizens and with people who don't have much, and I know the deep concern that he has for those individuals, and for children, and for his family. That's a side that people don't see; that's a side I've been fortunate to be close to."

"Because someone makes a tough decision doesn't mean they lack compassion," Pero continues. "One of the least compassionate things we could do is to let this state go in the direction it was headed, with tremendous deficits that were going to affect everyone. I like John Engler a lot as a friend. He's someone who cares—he asks about my mother, who is not going to live much longer. There's a caring there." [Pero's mother died shortly after this interview.]

Pero's deep loyalty to Engler bespeaks a broad and durable compatibility. Asked to name the way they are least alike, he quips without missing a beat, "I'm taller." They share a taste for classic rock and roll: "We both enjoy oldies, so during the campaign we'd be driving along and something would come on and we'd play 'Name That Tune.' Where we differ, I guess, is that I get tired quicker than he does; he keeps this incredible pace, and he is always thinking."

When Pero is invited to conjecture about life after the Engler administration, he hops ahead eight years to 1999: "I'll be 46 years old and who knows what we'll be doing, but I'm sure I'll be involved in public service in some capacity." He's equally certain it won't be elective office. "I thought about running once, back when I got out of college," he explains. "I have great respect for people who run for office because they're put into a fishbowl; much is asked of you as a public person. But it takes a lot away from family, and that's something I'd like to be moving toward rather than away from."

"I hope I'll be able to pursue my writing," he says. An aspiring screenwriter, Pero calls this pursuit the source of his greatest satisfaction. "In 1984," he muses, "I was one of 100 accepted to the University of Southern California's graduate film program, but I couldn't go—that was during our divorce, and I couldn't sell the house. I've been able to do a lot of things and to grow in other ways; on the other hand, I wonder about the course my life might have taken if I had attended film school and immersed myself in that as much as I have in politics. But I'll never know."

A framed poster commemorating the history of the motion picture industry's academy awards hangs on Pero's office wall behind him as he talks about screen writing. "The first screenplay I wrote got agents interested in me: They said, 'Boy that's a piece of crap you wrote'—and it was, but it got them interested. The second one I wrote got me a producer, and the third one I wrote got me an award and an agent—I hope the fourth one or the fifth one I write will get me an agent, win something, and sell. Then there's one more step, and that's selling something that actually gets made, so I think I've got about two more steps to go."

Pero's screenplay "Cutthroat" won a Bronze Award at the 1988 Houston International Film Festival for Best Original Dramatic Screenplay. Set in Arkansas in the late 1970s, the plot involves a young man managing the campaign of a woman who would be the first female governor of Arkansas and is running against his father. According to Pero, the plot has "all of the great components of movies today: It has blackmail, and the sexual overtones, and the drugs and all that. But basically, I felt it was the story about an individual trying to shut out his past and come to grips with personal relationships, with the political campaign as a backdrop. Unfortunately, Hollywood doesn't like political screenplays."

Pero laughs at the suggestion that there are points of comparison between mapping out a political campaign strategy and composing a movie screenplay. "I've never heard it put that way, and I don't know if I would agree. You're in a position to be very creative with a screenplay, and obviously you have influence on direction. In a campaign, you're the individual who's there with the charge to lead. My role [in the Engler campaign] was a very creative role—I really was a driving force in that effort. The chief of staff's role, as I've chosen it, is more of a collaborative role—and that's different, perhaps, from other chiefs of staff where they've made every decision, and everything flows from them. I don't work that way. We've got very capable people. It's my job to get them to work together and to do the best job we can as a unit to support the governor."

Supporting the governor is the task to which Dan Pero brings his award-winning verbal skills, creative imagination, and a broad range of electoral experience. Thus, he sounds never more confident than when articulating John Engler's political agenda: "I think the only way to improve the quality of life—not only for our generation but also for our children—is in the direction that John Engler is planning to take this state. That is toward smaller government, smaller budgets, tax cuts, and economic growth. I grew up in Flint, and Flint is not going to get back on its feet by increasing the size of welfare checks. Flint's going to get back on its feet through tax cuts that will make that city grow like it grew when I was growing up. That's the direction John Engler's moving in. And that's the train I'm glad I'm riding on."