

"The future lies ahead of us, not behind, and others will now be entrusted to lead us there," said a teary-eyed Symington, his voice trembling. "I have never been one to linger, and I don't intend to start now."

With his wife, Ann, at his side, he spoke of his accomplishments during six years in office, of growing closer to his family and of "salvation in surrender."

"I am returning to private life with my head up, spirits high and my heart full of gratitude," he explained. "The war of words is over; an era has now passed."

Ten years ago this month, Symington resigned his office in the face of an uncertain future. But the conservative Republican saw his conviction tossed out by an appeals court two years later, and Democratic President Bill Clinton pardoned him in 2001.

His record wiped clean, the 62-year-old maintains a busy life in the business world, with a well-stocked portfolio of interests. He also has The Symington Group, a political and public affairs firm. And then there's his growing family.

A longtime pilot, he is back in the air these days, flying his twin-engine Beechcraft Baron plane to the family's other home in Santa Barbara, California, and back again. He's also board chairman of the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden.

"Life marches on relentlessly, and the key is not to be stuck in the past," says Symington at a coffee shop in the Esplanade, his signature office and retail project as a developer. "I try to embrace each day as it comes - that's always been my attitude."

But in his first interview about the anniversary, Symington needs little coaxing to lash out against what he claims is a justice system tilted against public figures. He charges that prosecutors are out of control and that politics too often come into play.

He alleges that's what happened to him, and what continues to happen today.

"We live in what I call an envy society," says Symington, a Harvard-educated great-grandson of industrialist Henry Clay Frick. "There's something inside of people that makes them want to tear down people in power. It happens all the time. Look at what happened to President Clinton."

He reveals that Clinton drove home that point during a chance lunch with Symington, and Symington's father and sister, in New York about a year ago. Symington and Clinton knew each other in college, and Symington reportedly saved him from drowning.

"Clinton was wonderful," says Symington, whose father thanked Clinton for the pardon. "He [Clinton] told him, 'I just want



Former governor Fife Symington is flying high these days in his twin-engine Beechcraft Baron plane.

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to tell you I was happy to do it, and what the government did to Fife was wrong. I wanted to set it right. And that was it."

The pardon, made possible through a mutual friend, came in the waning hours of the Clinton administration. A Clinton spokesperson in New York could not be reached for comment.

Close friends say Symington was able to move on after resigning, and the pardon only accelerated the process. Friends say he is a warmer man and that the rough edges have softened a bit. But he will always remember.

"He'll never forget the more than a decade he spent as the hunted quarry of the federal government," says Jay Heiler, a friend and former top Symington aide. "His mind will always return to what that felt like and the violence it did to his life."

That hasn't stopped Symington from living his life. Friends say he embodies the concept of lifelong learning. He went to the Scottsdale Culinary Institute for 18 months and worked in the kitchens at Franco's Trattoria and Franco's Italian Caffe. He also helped start the Arizona Culinary Institute in Scottsdale and remains chairman of its executive committee and an occasional lecturer on desserts. He also owns a slice of several restaurants, including steak houses and Italian eateries in Hawaii, and Thai food places in Phoenix and Salt Lake City.

He started Symington Equity Partners, a venture capital fund that has invested money in high-technology start-up companies.

And his political consulting group has been involved in several high-profile issues over the years, including a recent battle on behalf of the company Covance to build a controversial drug-testing facility in Chandler.

"I have a little brushfire going on that I have to deal with," Symington says as he handles a Covance issue on his BlackBerry Pearl. He pauses to answer a call from Arizona House Speaker Jim Weiers, updating him on the latest news.

Symington says officials still seek out his advice and that he puts on occasional political fundraisers. But he says he has no plans to seek elected office, despite his name surfacing in 2005 as a possible gubernatorial candidate.

"I think that politics is an addiction... and when you've held a high political office it's hard to break the addiction," he says. "But I've succeeded. That's what cooking school was all about."

Attorney Michael Manning, who represented union pension funds during Symington's bankruptcy case, says he can't imagine going through life marked, as the former governor is.

"The humiliation of the man was pretty complete," Manning says. "I think he would trade in a heartbeat his current comfort... to have a reputation of integrity and honest public service."

Symington casts aside such criticism, insisting there is no reason for shame. His slate is clean, he says, and his success as a governor and a businessman are intact.

"So many wonderful things have happened to me since I left office... that I half-kiddingly say to friends that I was saved," he says. "There's a pivotal thing that happens in a crisis like that. It either destroys you or changes you for the better, and I think - well, I know - the latter is the case with me."

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