



Fred Barnes

## BLACK POWER IN CHICAGO

Racism's "positive" side.

The election of Harold Washington as Chicago's first black mayor was a significant political event, but not for the reasons that have circulated ostentatiously since his April 12 victory. Racism was not defeated in Chicago, which is 40 percent black, nor was the Rev. Jesse L. Jackson rebuked. Jackson actually stands to gain considerable political clout as a result of Washington's triumph. And black political leaders of less demagogic bent than Jackson are now far from likely to slip back to the semi-obscurity of the middle and rear ranks of the Democratic party, where they have spent so much time over the years—just the opposite. Nor was the party given a meaningful national boost by the victory of a black Democrat in a racially troubled and still predominantly white city. Instead, the Democratic coalition, already punchy after the bout with Ronald Reagan in 1980, took another damaging shot, once more with the whole world watching. Finally, forget about reports that the old Democratic machine in Chicago is lingering near death but may revive. In any meaningful political sense, the machine is dead.

It was not the demise of a political anachronism, though, that brought scores of reporters to Chicago. The lure was racial bigotry and discord, always a good story and easy to write. White bigots facilitated the coverage by sometimes displaying their prejudice publicly. This came in the form of plain white buttons and ones showing a watermelon with a black slash across it. During an Irish parade, as Washington's Republican opponent Bernard Epton marched by, one woman opened her jacket, exposing a T-shirt with the message, "Vote Right, Vote White." For sure, the press tended to exaggerate the degree to which undiluted racism was a factor in white hostility to Washington.

*Fred Barnes is National Political Reporter for the Baltimore Sun.*

There were plenty of nonracial reasons for rejecting Washington, but they drew less attention. And reporters underplayed Washington's exploitative use of the racial issue in his own behalf. But racial feelings were encouraged and mobilized in the Washington-Epton contest—by both sides.

White Democrats began worrying about Washington even before the February 22 primary in which he won the Democratic nomination by topping then-Mayor Jane Byrne and State's Attorney Richard M. Daley. Former Governor Richard Ogilvie, a Republican backing Byrne, signed a letter to white residents arguing that votes for Daley would tip the election to Washington. On the weekend before the primary, Edward (Fast Eddie) Vrdolyak, the chairman of the Cook County Democratic party, told white ward leaders that "the race

thing" was paramount and that Washington could be stopped only if whites got behind Byrne. The warnings by Ogilvie and Vrdolyak were not heeded, but their advice helped set the raw racial tone for the contest between Washington and Epton.

So did the conduct of Washington and his allies, including Jackson. Washington had run virtually a blacks-only campaign in the primary, trumpeting the slogan "It's Our Turn" and promising both to fire the white police chief and install a civilian review board. He got 86 percent of the black vote, winning with a mere 36.3 percent of the total primary vote (Chicago does not require run-off elections). Since Washington attracted few white votes, the obvious step for him was to attempt a reconciliation with white Democrats. That attempt never came, and some Democrats felt that Washington feared overtures to whites would jeopardize his appeal in the black community. Washington ignored phone calls from former Vice President Walter F. Mondale and local party leaders for days, insisting that Mondale had "some explaining to do" because of his primary endorsement of Daley. Though Washington had failed to endorse Daley in the 1980 race for state's attorney and was resolute in his vow to uproot the Democratic organization's influence at City Hall, he claimed that ward leaders were obligated to back him. Byrne, of course, had faced a similar situation in 1979, having beaten the organization's man, incumbent Michael Bilandic, in the primary. She wooed the ward leaders and got 82 percent of the vote against a no-name Republican. Washington didn't and got 52 percent.

How much did race have to do with the 30 percentage-point disparity? Something, but not everything. Chicago pols have never been fastidious about backing only



those candidates they find personally palatable. The organization supported George McGovern in the 1972 presidential race, even after the McGovern forces at the Democratic convention had ousted the Illinois delegation headed by Richard J. Daley, the Chicago mayor and political boss. McGovern carried the city. Washington was different for two reasons. He threatened to dismantle the organization's cherished patronage system. "Why should I give him [Washington] the guillotine to chop off my head?" said Alderman Roman Pucinski, one of eight ward leaders who endorsed Epton. Sixteen others (out of 50) and Vrdolyak were said to have worked privately to aid Epton. "Support for the Democratic nominee has been based on continuation of the existing [party] structure," explained Cecil Partee, the city's treasurer and a black supporter of Washington. "He's said he doesn't want to operate that way. . . . He sort of changed the rules."

The second reason was race. Some white ward leaders inclined to stick with the party's nominee found they were unable to sell their followers on Washington, especially in ethnic Catholic neighborhoods. In Bridgeport, the home turf of the Daleys and a reliable Democratic stronghold, Washington lost to Epton by 74 to 26 percent. In the predominantly Irish ward of Illinois House Speaker Michael Madigan, he lost by 94 to 6 percent. "The people in my area just don't want a black mayor," explained Alderman Anthony Laurino candidly. "It's as simple as that." John Geocariss, a ward committeeman, defended racial bloc voting. "I've been in this business a long time and I know people vote along racial lines and ethnic lines. What's wrong with that?"

Nothing, if one were to judge by Washington's effort in the black wards. Unanimous support for Washington was promoted, to say the least. "I know Bernie Epton and I kind of like him," said one black leader. "But if I said anything nice about him in public, that would be suicide for me. What ever happened to individual freedom?" A black dentist and friend of Partee encountered pro-Washington intolerance in the primary. As he was working on the teeth of a long-time patient, Partee said, the dentist mentioned idly that he didn't intend to vote for Washington. The patient leaped from the chair, her dental work unfinished, and announced peremptorily, "You'll never work on my mouth again." A similar experience befell a black barber, Partee said.

Epton's bid to capitalize on Democratic defectors by concluding his television commercials with "Vote for Epton, Before It's Too Late" actually backfired by galvanizing the black community. Blacks were outraged by what they viewed as an openly racist appeal; whites didn't need to be reminded of Washington's color. John Deardourff, the political consultant who came up with the slogan, claimed it was

injected in the TV spots only to punctuate the point that a man with Washington's record—36 days in jail for failing to file tax returns, temporary disbarment for cheating clients, a history of unpaid bills—should be kept from the mayor's office. This explanation was disingenuous, however, because the slogan was also used in ads that didn't mention Washington's record.

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A more plausible candidate might have overcome the media blunder. But all Epton had was his criticism of Washington, often expressed snidely, and this was partially offset by the disclosure that Epton had undergone psychiatric treatment. He also needlessly antagonized the press, once telling a TV correspondent, "you're a disgrace to your camera crew." Epton was persuasive only when denying that he was, as Washington alleged, "a Reagan clone." Washington was lucky to be wrong; a Reagan clone would have beaten him.

In the polarized racial environment, blacks dismissed any criticism of Washington as racist. Even when white Police Superintendent Richard Brzeczec announced, two days before the election, that he was resigning, blacks saw a racial motive. "This is an underhanded attempt to help Epton," asserted Alderman Danny

Davis, a Washington supporter. "Brzeczec is hoping to stir up whites even more by saying, 'Washington is about to win, therefore I'm going.'"

Any citation of Washington's legal troubles was deemed racially motivated. At a rally staged at the headquarters of Jesse Jackson's Operation PUSH, actress Esther Rolle (Florida in the TV series, "Good Times") declared it un-Christian and reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan to harp on Washington's background. In 1970, he was stripped of the right to practice law after numerous clients reported he had taken money from them, pathetically small amounts in all cases, and then refused to provide any legal service. While a state legislator in 1972, he was jailed for failing to file income-tax returns for four years, though the federal prosecutor said he hadn't filed for 19 years. He also had his salary garnisheed to cover unpaid bills, and he and his partners owed back taxes on a piece of slum property as recently as this year. Nonetheless, Rolle likened picketers who raised the tax issue to "the same forces that I saw as a child in Florida that were dressed in sheets." If they were Christians, where was their "sense of forgiveness? Did you ever hear the admonition, judge not that ye be not judged?" Besides, she said, Ronald Reagan didn't pay any tax one year (she neglected to say this was because of legitimate deductions) and he was elected President.

At a tense session with skeptical reporters on election eve, members of Washington's campaign staff took the tack that his legal problems were private matters and therefore had no bearing on his suitability for office. By this absurd





standard, Richard Speck could run for mayor, telling voters that his murder of Chicago nurses should be ignored because he committed the crimes on his private time. The hear-no-evil sentiment was put into poetry by a young PUSH volunteer, Doreen Charles. She wrote:

People of Chicago, we have got to unite  
Stand up for Harold Washington because he's  
right  
Let's save this city from its racist fear  
Say no to Epton, say no to Reaganomics here  
When Harold won, old Bernie did a song and  
dance  
Cause whites began to panic, he thought here's  
my chance  
Since it was clear that Jane and Richie missed  
the boat  
He said if nothing else, I'll get the racist vote  
To try to get attention, he distorts the facts  
By making fun of Harold and insulting blacks  
He'll try to win the white vote any way he can  
Don't wait, Push 8, and vote the people's  
man . . .  
Blacks, Hispanics, women and the working  
class  
Labor, youth, the unemployed said in one mass  
They said when they chose Harold over Mayor  
Byrne  
We've been excluded long enough. Now it's our  
turn.

Until the last week of the campaign, Washington campaigned sparingly in white neighborhoods; Epton ignored the black community completely. And Washington's rhetoric was not exactly reassuring to whites, either. Two weeks before election day, he denounced Epton for "playing with fire" by touching on racial matters. "There are people in this city who are on a tremendous high, a good positive thing," he said. "But if they get the feeling that this is going to turn into a race war, then it might turn bitter, evil, angry

and you've got a mess on your hands. Somewhere down the line, it is conceivable that if this thing gets out of hand some innocent person, a month from now, walking down the street, may wind up dead because someone triggered an irrational moment, a hate thing that got out of hand."

Rather than court whites, Washington sought to mau-mau them into voting for him out of guilt. And this strategy was enormously aided by the heckling that a crowd of placard-brandishing Epton supporters directed at him and Mondale when they visited a Catholic church in a white neighborhood on Palm Sunday. Washington piously blamed Epton for the incident, then went on to exploit it in television ads. One TV commercial showed photos of a Klan rally, the assassinations of John F. Kennedy and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Vietnam war, followed by shots of the jeering crowd at the church. "There are moments in our history of which we are thoroughly and profoundly ashamed," the announcer said. "One of those moments may be happening in Chicago right now."

**G**uilt worked. Washington was sliding toward defeat until the church incident, pollster Patrick Caddell said, but he managed to stabilize and even pick up a few percentage points in the closing days of the race. He got 18 percent of the white vote and an astounding 97 percent of the black vote. The liberal conceit is that the 97 percent was an expression of black pride—"positive racism," the *New Republic* called it—while the 18 percent was a result of white racism. The fact is, though, that

most black voters never for a moment considered casting their votes for Epton, solely because he was a white running against a black. Positive or not, that is racism.

But there was a conservative conceit in the Chicago campaign, too. It holds that any number of other blacks would have won the mayor's race by a comfortable margin and that Washington's past and his liberal agenda, not his race, forced white Democrats to defect. Certainly Partee, the city treasurer, or Illinois Comptroller Roland Burris or Alderman Wilson Frost would have been more acceptable to whites, notably because they are organization Democrats. But there is a catch here. Because they are organization Democrats, they never would have won the Democratic nomination. For a black, the only way to win the primary is to go outside the organization and try to pull together the burgeoning black vote, which is what Washington did. That, in turn, makes the black unpalatable to organization whites.

Blacks may no longer have to worry about appeasing whites in Chicago. The fear among white politicians is that blacks will become a majority there within a few years. If that happens, black political control would go unchallenged, as in Detroit. In any case, the lesson that blacks are likely to take from the Washington victory is that racial solidarity works. And the way to mobilize black voters and maximize their political influence is to run black candidates. Even if they lose, they will be in a strong bargaining position. Nobody understands this better than Jesse Jackson, who played a major role in the downfall of Jane Byrne. He organized both the successful black boycott of her Chicago-Fest celebration last summer and the registration drive that brought out 100,000 new black voters. They led directly to Washington's victory. White politicians and reporters are given to sneering at Jackson, particularly because he is a relentless and unabashed publicity hound, but he is tireless and influential. And not to be underestimated.

Jackson has little but disdain for white Democratic leaders, and this has become a safe stance to take in Chicago. What can the organization do to him? A snowstorm doomed its candidate (Bilandic) in the 1979 Democratic primary. A campaign cache of \$10 million wasn't enough to protect its incumbent (Byrne) this year. Blacks have parted company. With the organization disintegrated and blacks gaining at least temporary hegemony, the future does not seem bright for the Democratic party. Reagan got many ethnic Catholics to side with him in 1980; Epton got a far bigger percentage of their vote, signaling more loudly still the breakdown of the Democratic coalition in Chicago. That coalition depended on black votes, but not on black power. With a black Democrat as mayor, whites may find that voting Republican in Chicago is habit-forming. □



P.H. Terzian

## MICHAEL STRAIGHT'S LISTLESS AMBITION

It turns out he betrayed both country and friends.

Two lonely, rather pathetic old sodomites have died in their respective apartments in the past few months: Donald Maclean in Moscow, and Anthony Blunt in London. By the relative standards we must apply in such cases, Maclean had the more squalid end and Blunt the greater luck. Maclean was beginning the fourth decade of his Soviet exile, a down-at-the-heels diplomatic bureaucrat, a drunk on Moscow rations, still following the cricket scores in the newspaper and, perhaps, still thinking of the wife who had left him for the bed of his fellow traitor, Harold (Kim) Philby.

By contrast, Blunt's treachery was not uncovered until many years after Maclean had fled England, and it was not known to the public until he was an old man. The obloquy which he surely deserved was great but mercifully brief. He was not prosecuted, nor even made to reveal very much except what his interrogators undoubtedly knew. He was deprived of his knighthood, it is true; but with a traitor it is difficult to say whether such things as honor and self-esteem—as we understand them, anyway—are qualities to be earned and lost. Blunt died unrepentant and, it is safe to assume, comparatively self-satisfied.

Meanwhile, across the Atlantic, Michael Straight is settling into a troubled old age. He must know, even if he cannot bring himself to admit it, that the prosaic dreams he dreamed as an Anglo-American undergraduate at Cambridge will never come true. Whatever vision of the future he shared with Blunt, Maclean, Philby, Guy Burgess, and the whole odious brotherhood has not come to pass—and, if we are more fortunate than we deserve to be, will not come to pass so long as Straight is held in the sort of contempt his memoir\* must certainly bring.

His lifetime of earnest endeavor, of wheeling and dealing in the shadow land of

idle play and ideology, has brought him to the dead end from which he began. This is a journey along an intellectual cul-de-sac. In truth, Michael Straight has failed at every turn: as a Communist, an erstwhile revolutionary, journalist, diplomat, politician, novelist, and now autobiographer and clarifier of recent history. He has written more manifestos, initialed more memoranda, founded more emergency committees, and toured more cooperatives than he can ever hope to describe, or comprehend. Even Anthony Blunt knew that of all the boys in the Cambridge band it was Michael Straight who would turn them in. And turn them in he did—but for what? Ambition, of course; the prospect of a presidential appointment was dangled before his eyes, and the confessor's stall could scarcely contain him.

In one of those curious paradoxes that have dogged his career, it was the Nixon Administration in which he served his country to some respectable degree. He had become the thing he despised the most.



Of course, the details of Michael Straight's wayward path—to the extent that we know them all—are too well known to recount in much detail. Perhaps better known is his penchant for reading about himself and telephoning his solicitor. For example, he says that while he may have been a Communist in spirit he was never a spy in practice; and that while his patron Blunt may have dispatched him to America with espionage in mind, he, Straight, engaged in no such thing. Indeed, the information that he passed along to his Soviet agent friend in Washington may well have presented his personal view, may not have been classified, and may have been of no value as intelligence. Very well; and for the sake of argument, I am prepared to believe him.

However, along with this comes his rather offhand admission that he knew traitors, knew what they were doing, and may even have understood something of the consequences of their activities. (He talks at some length about his academic triumphs. Presumably they led to some small measure of understanding.) If that is not treachery it is at least misprision; and if there is no statutory foundation for condemning what he has done, there must be at least an ethical revulsion at his blindness. I say "blindness" to be charitable. Having chosen to follow E.M. Forster's famous dictum that it is better to betray one's country than one's friends, Straight cannot take that banality one logical step further: he cannot understand that, by sparing one's "friends," a great many strangers are made to suffer and die. That is obtuseness raised to the level of moral principle.

To which we might ask, how is it thus? And the answer, I fear, is the curse of wealth. Michael Straight was born into a world of half-educated privilege. His father, who founded the *New Republic*, died young—perhaps too late. His heiress mother, her blank mind fortified by an endless supply of blank checks, married again, repaired with her English husband to Britain, and established one of those cathedrals of the century of the common

\*After *Long Silence*. Norton, \$17.50.

P.H. Terzian is an editor at the Los Angeles Times.