

DEDICATION

NOBODY BUT HAROLD: PROFILE OF HAROLD WASHINGTON, (1922-1987) THE FIRST BLACK MAYOR OF CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

"The reason my face and my name are known all over is because of the history of the Chicago political machine and the movement that brought it down. I just happened to be there at the right time to capitalize on it."

—Harold Washington, on his historic victory over the Chicago political machine in 1983, which made him the first Black mayor of one of the largest cities in the United States.

I. ROOTS

This articulate statesman was born in 1922 in Chicago to middle class parents. His father, a Methodist minister, was also a lawyer and precinct captain in the Democratic political machine. The senior Washington was known to have been one of Chicago's first Black Democrats. It was fitting that Mayor Washington began his political career with the regular Chicago Democrat Organization as assistant precinct captain under his father. It was ironic that Washington's political astuteness summoned the demise of the infamous Chicago Democratic machine.

II. PERSONAL PROGRESS

Always a leader, Mayor Washington was president of the senior class at Roosevelt University where he graduated in 1949. He was one of 20 Black students in a class of 400. He was also elected president of the Student Senate at Roosevelt.

Mayor Washington was not only a leader, but a scholar as well. He graduated in 1952 from the prestigious Northwestern University Law School.

Mayor Washington combined his skills as an orator and organizer with his legal prowess to become one of Black America's premier legislators. He served as an Illinois state legislator from 1969 to 1977, as an Illinois State Senator from 1977 to 1981 and as a United States Representative from 1981 to 1983. The *coup de gras* was, of course, his election as Mayor of Chicago in 1983. It was at this post that his years of experience in the Democratic Party and of researching and writing legislation culminated.

III. MILESTONES IN CITY HALL

A. *Dismantling the Machine*

Washington was elected by a coalition of Black, Hispanic, Jewish and white liberals joined by thousands of newly registered voters who previously felt no need to participate in a political system in which they had no "stake."

When Mayor Washington took office in 1983 he experienced what the Chicago press termed the "Council Wars." The city council was replete with opponents of the Mayor who used their numerical advantage to interfere with Washington's management of Chicago. "The council wars took one-half of each working day. They interfered with the Mayor's ability to run the city," said Mayor Washington's corporate council James Montgomery. The Mayor made great strides to dismantle the machine during his first term which, though it had introduced him into politics, had locked so many out. His strategy was to dismantle the system of patronage that had excluded Blacks, Hispanics, and women.

Washington was often quoted as saying, "City government in Chicago needs structural reform; which means fair housing, an equal distribution of services and freedom of information. In my view, that's the way government is supposed to work."

Mayor Washington set about doing that by opening the once closed doors of the city to all. He appointed more Hispanics and women to public office than ever before. He made publicly available, information about the city's budget, contracts and appointments. This policy trickled down and as his door was open to all the people of Chicago; his subordinates also opened their doors and ears to the people of Chicago.

B. *Rebuilding a Chicago for All*

Washington attempted to create an inclusive city government. He reached out across the city with a policy that clearly provided the impetus to demolish the last vestiges of the "Old Democrat" political machine that had ruled Chicago for decades. Washington's skill as a legislator helped to make him an effective lobbyist for his hometown. After research and planning he and his staff of lawyers, social scientists, community leaders and political figures devised and implemented a plan of redistribution that would provide fair representation to those who had been disenfranchised by gerrymandering and other means of exclusion. A legal strategy was outlined and they took their case to court and won. There was a *court ordered* redrawing of the city's ward boundaries. Consequently, for the first time Hispanic Chicagoans were able to elect a Hispanic to represent them on the city council.

Washington also benefited by the more representative districting. At the end of his first term the council wars ended. The white coalition of 29 dwindled and the people of Chicago resoundingly re-elected Washington. After they observed Chicago's improving economy, growing prestige, and calm political tone, whites joined the rolls of Washington supporters.

Leon Dupres, a white former Chicago Councilman and political leader, spoke of Washington on election eve, "Harold Washington is the best mayor Chicago has had in my lifetime. He has a remarkable intellect and is deeply and truly interested in Chicago. No other mayor has been as interested in the city as he has."

Harold Washington's life profoundly affected the people at large, but those close to him, who knew him best reflect a Washington few knew, but many loved. Dr. Vincent Bateman is a social scientist and demographer whom Mayor Washington employed from 1973, in his first maverick campaign, through his reign as mayor. Dr. Bateman knew Mayor Washington as

one who “developed his own power base which exceeded anything the regular Democratic organization had. He was able to move beyond the Party as the ‘People’s candidate’ which turned out votes. Harold differed from other political leaders in that he believed that government ought to be fair; that everyone should have an opportunity to participate in government—it should hear from its constituents. He believed that government should take leadership in the welfare of the people it governs.

Dr. Bateman continued, “He was a mayor, a teacher and catalyst who allowed others to express their thoughts and debate issues. If an idea benefited his constituency, he was for it. This man was great because of all the right principles: leadership, caring, fairness and equity.”

James Montgomery, Corporate Counsel of the City of Chicago in Washington’s administration, remembered Mayor Washington as, “a consummate politician, wherever he was, he added to, never subtracted from. His appointments brought all of the spectrum of the communities, even those hostile sections of the city. His method of leading Chicago was second to none—it was revolutionary. Harold loved the Chicago community more than he loved himself. I for one will miss him.”

Harold Rogers, a historian of African-American History and Chairman of the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists reflected on Washington’s life and contributions: “Harold Washington did not want to run for Mayor of Chicago. He was comfortable, in his late fifties and a successful legislator. But the events that galvanized the Black community—the Hanrahan Revolt in 1972, the Daley, Bilandic, Byrne, Vrdolyak Mayoral disputes and the Metcalf concerns—as well as community groups like the Black trade unions, postal workers, dentists and doctors wanted a candidate who would honestly and fairly represent them, forced Washington to run.

“He was a reformer,” Rogers noted, “who was trying to make the process of government more accessible and open—particularly for Blacks because they were locked out. In the Chicago setting this was a very revolutionary approach.

“Personally, he did not accumulate wealth,” Rogers said. “His will reflected that he owned no buildings or homes, not even a car. His lifestyle reflected his politics. He used his resources and himself to get things done. He not only lived simply, but was noted for his accessibility. Until 1984 his telephone number was listed and until his death anyone was welcome in his home.

“Harold tried to solve folks problems. It will take another 5 to 6 years for folks to see the benefits that he brought to this city once the 1986 council wars were over. We have lost a real statesman.”

Mayor Washington died tragically on November 25, 1987, six months into his second term as Mayor of Chicago. This issue of the NATIONAL BLACK LAW JOURNAL is dedicated to the late Mayor Washington and his legacy because he strove to make the right to vote and democracy mean something for millions of Blacks, both inside and outside of Chicago.

—LULA BAILEY-BALLTON