DEMOCRATIZING CLEVELAND
CHAPTER 1: CLEVELAND: YOU GOTTA BE TOUGH

Randy Cunningham

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Cleveland, Ohio, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was an industrial boom town with a reputation as one of the most progressive, well run cities in the nation. Its character was established by its civic and business leaders and by an ethnically and racially diverse population that had been drawn to the city by employment opportunities in its industries.

Cleveland had all the assets and all the liabilities common to the industrial cities of the Gilded Age. Its liabilities included great inequalities of wealth and power, the inequities of the shop floor, poverty, poor housing, racial strife, and breathtaking environmental destruction.

The period after World War II brought a new list of burdens and problems for the city. Few cities were more ravaged by urban renewal than Cleveland was. The interstate highway system became a death warrant for America's older cities, and it slashed through urban neighborhoods and gave birth to a suburban regime of endless sprawl that drained both population and wealth from cities like Cleveland. These burdens were exacerbated by one of the greatest body blows ever delivered to a city built on industry: the deindustrialization of America.

Cleveland industries were based on transportation, the iron and steel industries, petroleum and chemicals, garments, electrical products, and automobiles. In 1930, at the zenith of its growth, Cleveland was second only to Detroit in the percentage of its workforce employed in industry. The Cleveland metropolitan region was rated eighth in the country in the number of industrial employees and seventh in value of its products in 1931. The 1930s saw the stagnation of Cleveland industry. The U.S. census of 1954 showed no essential change in its industrial makeup from the past. That stagnation continued into the 1970s and 1980s. The industrial job loss between 1979 and 1986 was devastating. By 1986, only twenty nine per cent of the total employment in the Cleveland metropolitan area was industrial. Cleveland had lost thirty per cent of its manufacturing employment.[1]

The industrial decline of Cleveland was matched by a decline in the population of the city. In 1950, the city reached its highest population: 914,808. In 1960, the population was 876,050. Losses reported by the U.S. Census Bureau between 1970 and 1980 show in dramatic detail the decline of the city. In 1970, the population was 750,879. By 1980, it was 573,822, a loss of 177,057 residents. No ten-year period before or since has witnessed a freefall in population comparable to that of the 1970s.[2]

The 1960s were dominated by the politics of racial conflict. Cleveland had been a hotbed of abolitionist sentiment in the period before and during the Civil War. It continued to have an enlightened racial atmosphere, even as the rest of the nation buried the hatchet of the Civil War in the backs of former slaves. African-Americans in Cleveland enjoyed progress and employment in a wide range of occupations.

This reputation, along with Cleveland's burgeoning industries, made it a major destination for the northern migration of African-Americans from the south known as The Great Migration. At the time of World War I, 10,000 African-Americans made their homes in Cleveland. By 1930, that population had increased to 72,000.[3]

While conditions in Cleveland were much better than in the south, what the new African-American residents found was far from the promised land that the propaganda about Cleveland portrayed. As Cleveland became an industrial boom town the city assembled an industrial workforce of immigrants from Europe who soon learned racism along with English. This new population competed with the established African-American population for jobs, housing, status, and political power. Discrimination that had heretofore been rare became more common.[4] This collision between myth and reality laid the foundations for civil rights activism after World War II, and the political rise of a true son of the Great Migration, Carl Stokes.

It also led to a collision between the white ethnic population of Cleveland that had a vested interest in maintaining the racial status quo and an African-American population determined to destroy that status quo. The conflict was fought in all the arenas where the promise of Cleveland had been denied to those who had come to the city with so much hope. It also resulted in one of two riots in Cleveland in the 1960s.

The Hough riot, that stretched from July 18 to 24, 1966 began when a white tavern in Hough put up a sign, "No Water for Niggers". A crowd gathered outside the club, the police were called, and the riot was on. By the time it was over, four African-Americans were dead, hundreds were injured, and in jail, and property damage ranged from $1 million to $2 million. The city establishment was in shock, dumbfounded at the reasons for the riot. The African-American community answered because it had been ignored.[5] They responded to being ignored not only by rioting, but by sparking the drive to elect Carl Stokes as the first African-American mayor of a major U.S. city. That dream came true in 1967.

At first, Stokes enjoyed the support of the business community, but this did not

last once they realized that he was serious about helping his community and was not just a provider of riot insurance. He ran afoul of class divisions in the African-American community. He had to deal with the twin curses of all Cleveland mayors: a police department that does not recognize civilian authority and a city council that had no use for mayoral power, especially a mayor who was the sworn enemy of the racial status quo.

The beginning of the end for Stokes was the 1968 Glenville shootout, when black militant Fred Ahmed Evans staged a showdown with the Cleveland police. The result was a riot that lasted from July 23 to 28 in which seven people were killed and more than $2 million in property was damaged. The National Guard was called in. In one of his most controversial moves, Stokes withdrew all white police from the area and replaced them with African-American police officers and community leaders. Most damaging of all was the discovery that the guns Evans used for his confrontation had been purchased with money from one of the administration's community programs. Stokes's corporate backers ran for cover and abandoned him.[6]

The remainder of Stokes's tenure in office was a running battle with the African-American elite, the Cleveland police department, and a hostile city council. It was also marred by blunders by the mayor, such as the disastrous appointment of General Benjamin O. Davis to head the police department. Stokes did not run again for office in 1972. It was not until 1989, with the election of Michael R. White, that another African-American occupied the mayor's office. In spite of what appeared to have been a failed administration, Carl Stokes changed Cleveland for the better. He opened the doors of city hall to Cleveland's marginalized African-American community. Inner city concerns, such as housing, jobs and public services, occupied front and center on the public agenda. Stokes also inspired people to join in reforming society.

Carl Stokes recruited and brought to Cleveland urban planner Norm Krumholz and future Gund Foundation administrator Hank Doll to join his staff. After Stokes left office, they stayed in Cleveland and continued to contribute to various efforts for reform and progressive social change. The example and hope that Stokes brought to city hall inspired activists in other institutions, such as the Catholic church and the early Catholic Commission. Most important of all, Stokes inspired a generation of young African-Americans to become active in politics, civic affairs, and activism.

Republican Ralph Perk replaced Stokes as mayor in 1972 and remained in office until 1977. His was not a happy administration. Perk was hounded by financial problems throughout his administration. One public asset after another – the transit system, the water and sewer systems, and Edgewater Park on the lakefront – were sold off by the strapped city.

Perk seemed to stumble from one embarrassment to another. His wife refused an invitation to the Nixon White House because it conflicted with her bowling night. The nation laughed, but the ethnic community Perk came from understood

perfectly. While at an industrial fair, a welding demonstration caught Perk's hair on fire. Again, the nation laughed. Perk tried to use public funds to take the old civic arena off the hands of sports promoter Nick Mileti. The investment and service-starved neighborhoods hit the roof, and the proposal went nowhere. His use of the new community development block grant program flirted with conflicts of interest and violations of both the letter and spirit of the law. His development plans bordered on the bizarre, such as the proposed jetport in Lake Erie. Perk's ill-fated administration became synonymous with a city that appeared to be falling apart at the seams.[7]

Dennis Kucinich was elected in reaction to the mismanagement and blunders of the Perk administration. His election swept aside a number of council members and went down in Cleveland political lore as the "Tuesday Night Massacre." Kucinich centered his administration on his opposition to economic development based on tax abatements and his vow to preserve Cleveland's beleaguered public power company, the Municipal Light and Power Company (Muny Light). Muny Light was a thorn in the side of the privately owned Cleveland Electric Illuminating Co., which was determined to be rid of its historic competitor.

Kucinich inspired progressive urban activists and reformers around the country, who flocked to Cleveland to work in his administration, just as an earlier generation had done for Carl Stokes. Kucinich championed an urban populism that was inspired not only by the civil rights and anti-war movements of the 1960s, but by the legacy of Cleveland's legendary Progressive Era mayor, Tom L. Johnson (1901-1909), who had done battle with the tycoons of his day, just as Kucinich would.

Whereas Stokes enjoyed a brief honeymoon with the corporate and civic establishment, war between Kucinich and the elite began the moment he was sworn in. What followed were two of the most contentious years in the history of Cleveland politics.

Kucinich repeatedly got into trouble because of the behavior of his appointees and aides, who were labeled as young, inexperienced, arrogant, abrasive, and intolerant. Relations with the police department were the same scourge for Kucinich as they had been for previous mayors. Kucinich had brought from San Francisco Richard Hongisto, whom he appointed chief of police. Hongisto had been the darling of the progressive and liberal communities in San Francisco, but he soon ran into trouble with the mayor, who fired him for insubordination in March 1978. It was reminiscent of Carl Stokes's battles with General Davis. Hongisto's firing led to a recall campaign, which Kucinich narrowly survived in August 1978.[8]

The next trial for Kucinich came when the city tried to renegotiate its debt with local banks. M. Brock Weir, CEO of Cleveland Trust, led the corporate coalition against Kucinich. The banks made sale of Muny Light to Cleveland Electric Illuminating Company a condition for rolling over the loans. Kucinich flatly refused, and on the night of December 15, 1978, the City of Cleveland went into default.

Throughout his administration, Kucinich faced the same hostility from city

council as Stokes had. While Stokes faced the wrath of white council members led by Council President Jim Staunton, Kucinich confronted Council President George Forbes and a newly empowered African-American block in council, a direct legacy of Stokes. He also was on the receiving end of a blowback from sectors that should have been his allies, such as Cleveland's community organizations, who had become alienated by Kucinich's confrontational politics.

A crisis-weary electorate finally voted Kucinich out of office in 1979 for a candidate who promised to be as conciliatory as Kucinich had been confrontational, republican George Voinovich. Ironically, in the same election that defeated Kucinich, the people of Cleveland soundly defeated a proposal to sell Muny Light. Voinovich was able to make peace with both council and the business elite and take the city out of default. In so doing, his administration was looked upon as boring, but effective and successful.

Kucinich left office a pariah, who nevertheless managed one of the most stunning political comebacks in local history when he returned to Cleveland City Council, then to the state legislature, and finally to the U.S. House of Representatives. What his administration did accomplish was to save Cleveland's public utility. It was an accomplishment that even his past foes were forced to credit to him. Kucinich also revived Cleveland's progressive political tradition so that it could continue to bedevil Cleveland's "great and good" into the future.

Cleveland politics in the 1970s cannot be explained by simply describing the administrations of the mayors who served in that era. It also must take into account Cleveland City Council President George Forbes. Forbes, like Stokes, was a child of the Great Migration. Forbes took advantage of the opportunities opened for African-American politicians by the administration of Carl Stokes, but the manner in which he wielded power was more from the old bare knuckles school of ethnic politics than from the movement ethos of the Stokes years.

Tough, ruthless, abrasive, arrogant, and smarter than everyone around him in council, George Forbes was formidable. He was skilled in the use of rhetoric, patronage, and political fear and intimidation to retain the loyalty of the African-American residents of Cleveland and their elected representatives. His true strength was his alliance with downtown business interests, who valued his ability to deliver support from both the African-American community and city council for their prized projects. It was an arrangement that worked flawlessly from 1973 until 1989, when Forbes was politically retired by one of his former protégés, Michael R. White, who beat him in the 1989 mayoral election. Mayors came and mayors went during Forbes's council presidency, but everyone knew where true political power resided in Cleveland: with George Forbes.

Among the greatest problems that the city faced in the 1970s was the ever-present issue of the Cleveland public schools. The top issue of the decade was desegregation. In 1973 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) brought suit against the Cleveland public schools for de facto and

de jure racial segregation that prevented quality education from reaching all of the system's children. The case finally resulted in a decision on February 6, 1978, by Federal Judge Frank J. Battisti that the Cleveland school system, through decisions on staffing, construction of schools, busing, and assignment of students, had deliberately segregated students. The board responded that it was not the board's fault that housing was segregated. The court was unmoved, and several oversight boards were appointed to supervise the desegregation of Cleveland's schools.

During its subsequent control of the schools, the court issued almost 4,000 separate orders mandating the operation of the schools. Concurrent with this, were two teacher strikes and a semi-permanent financial crisis for the district. The result was a revolving door of one school administrator after another, and an elected board of education whose political antics destroyed its credibility with the citizens of Cleveland, culminating in the mayoral takeover of the board of education by Michael R. White in the 1990s.

Behind all the economic and political events in Cleveland during this period was a power that was never willing to admit to its power: the foundations of Cleveland, especially the Cleveland Foundation and the George Gund Foundation. They have been portrayed as representing everything from disinterested civic good to the cynical manipulation of the public agenda for the benefit of elite interests. Their power has either been overestimated or underestimated.

There are hundreds of foundations in Cleveland, but the undisputed heavy dancers are the Cleveland and Gund Foundations. Both trace their origins to founders of Cleveland Trust.

The Cleveland Foundation was founded in 1914, and is a collection of various bequests, some that are quite specific in their use, and some not. The Cleveland Foundation has funded studies and reform efforts in criminal justice and education, but has generally been the more traditional and conservative of the two. One reason for this is that its decisions are made by a board of trustees who represent a broad range of the moneyed and business leaders of the community.

The Gund Foundation, on the other hand, since its founding in 1952, has reflected the values and interests of Gund family members. The Gund Foundation is far more nimble than its older peer, and far more willing to invest in new policy ventures. The Gund Foundation was very active in the 1970s, helping establish the community organizing movement in Cleveland via its close relationship with the Commission on Catholic Community Action.[9]

This foundation activity would have meant little without the rise of non-profit organizations. Starting in the 1970s and exploding into the 1980s non-profit organizations made the initiatives and priorities of the foundations realities in the communities of Cleveland. They have become virtually equal to local government and corporations in their impact on the lives of Clevelanders. The importance of the Gund and Cleveland Foundations in financing the non-profits has given rise to the

accusation that the non-profits are little more than the stalking horses of the foundations, and do not truly reflect the wishes of their alleged constituencies. This position is both understandable and verges upon conspiracy theory. The foundations may not pull all the strings, but they do lay out the concert hall of public policy and vet the orchestra that plays that hall.

The 1970s set the stage and assembled the players who would shape Cleveland's history for the next generation. It was the period when all the problems that had accumulated since the end of the boom times in the 1930s, finally broke over the city.

It seemed that the very environment was turning against Cleveland, starting with the Cuyahoga River catching on fire on June 22, 1969, to declarations by biologists that Lake Erie was dead, to the fierce blizzard of January 26 and 27th, 1978.

With toxic race relations, declining industries, a decrepit educational system, politics as blood sport, housing stock that was literally falling down, and a national reputation as the "mistake on the lake," Cleveland was flat on its back with nowhere to go but up.

In the midst of all this woe, there appeared a popular tee shirt that both recognized the city's plight, and celebrated its tenacious hold on life and the future. The shirt showed the Cleveland skyline buried in snow with a logo declaring, "Cleveland: You Gotta Be Tough." No scholarly study or databank of statistics could better sum up the reality and spirit of Cleveland as it struggled through one of its roughest periods since the Great Depression.