

**CLEVELAND MAYOR RALPH J. PERK:
STRONG LEADERSHIP
DURING TROUBLED TIMES**

CHAPTER 1: PRESSING NEW URBAN CHALLENGES

Richard Klein, Ph. D

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CHAPTER ONE

PRESSING NEW URBAN CHALLENGES

In today's fast-paced world, where spontaneous political decision-making often supersedes thoughtful planning, it is not surprising to find that many leaders depend on less-than-reliable information sources when making important policy decisions. Tightly regimented personal agendas and fear of voter retaliation may help to explain such actions. Amazingly, such cavalier actions seldom tarnish their careers. Perhaps the short retention span of many voters enables these politicians to distance themselves successfully from unpopular decisions. More often than not, these leaders justify their practices by claiming that they are first and foremost servants of the people, and, as such, are fulfilling the many demands made by their constituents for speedy problem resolution even when the economic, political or social benefits derived from such quick decision-making may prove nebulous.

Many of these same leaders argue that today's urban problems are unique to their generation. Few acknowledge any direct connection between their-own decision-making capabilities and past political achievements. In their minds, the contemporary world is all that matters. This is unfortunate. In dismissing the past they overlook one indisputable fact that events and people may change over time, but not deep-rooted economic, political or social problems. Thoughtful leaders of any era never lose sight of effective past policies and the competent leaders who introduced them. In fact, they may refer to these policies repeatedly when developing their-own initiatives.

This reliance on the past for guidance held true in the 1970s as politicians came to terms with challenging issues. Extraordinary breakthroughs in science and technology occurring on the heels of the Civil Rights Movement and Viet Nam War led many city leaders to re-examine age-old political strategies and initiate new often sweeping reforms. Such far-reaching changes did not just happen. Astute politicians of that age looked at successful past policies for direction. They quickly discovered that the public traditionally played a major role in developing effective policies. Without public input, few policies had any long-term impact on the electorate. This simple realization on their part changed the course of urban politics forever.

Increasingly, the media attacked political leaders for not including the public more directly in the decision-making process. They claimed that the days of back room deals were over and that politicians were now more than ever accountable to the voters for their actions. This kind of sharp criticism led many shrewd leaders to abandon their out-of-date political agendas and to turn to the public directly for advice. Much of the feedback came from special advocacy and watchdog groups.

These highly vocal grassroots organizations promoted greater efficiency in government by closely monitoring activities at city hall. They determined that over burden bureaucracies often fell far short of their intended goals and that this frustrated many dedicated employees. In response, grassroots leaders called for municipalities to adopt a new government culture, a culture that would not only achieve its goals; but also, encourage innovation and reward efficiency among workers. Doing more with less became the watchword. Many of these political

activists later became the outspoken champions for other broad-based municipal reforms.

Comprehensive urban reforms ranged from groundbreaking performance benchmarks and austere budget cuts to revolutionary communication networks and new information retention systems. Insightful politicians acknowledged the significance of being on the cutting edge of these changes. However, implementing these changes posed a formidable challenge. The quandary they faced was how to introduce these needed reforms without alienating the voting public. Their concerns regarding potential voter backlash were well-founded. A persistent struggle between majority and minority groups over political empowerment beginning in the mid-1960s prompted widespread discontent and protests throughout U.S. cities. Many traditional leaders were unnerved by it. There were no precedents for such actions.

In the immediate post-war years, the majority of municipal policies represented political compromises carefully orchestrated by local business leaders and elected officials. Public input played a minuscule role in this process. (1) As a result, few policies addressed the deep-rooted economic and social issues affecting these communities. Many municipal leaders naively believed that these problems would miraculously disappear over time. Of course, this hardly ever happened. Yet, the public rarely protested. In their minds, the business leaders were experienced powerbrokers, well-versed on the needs and wants of their respective communities. (2) Inevitably, they would do what was best for society.

Ultimately, the success or failure of a particular public policy did not rest with the city's elite leadership; but rather, those politicians forced to enact it. This strategy worked well as long as local business profits soared and employment remained high. However, any sustained downturn in the economy might spell disaster.

The adverse economic and social changes affecting urban America in the late 1960s fueled massive protest. They were the sparks that lit the fire. Disgusted by corrupt business and political leaders and their increasingly inane policies, Americans took to the streets. (3) What began as simple, non-violent demonstrations soon exploded into full-scale riots. Arson, plunder and killing dominated the daily news. This kind of mass violence shocked many Americans. They sought reassurance from their elected officials that such rebellious behavior would soon end. Unfortunately, few leaders could offer such assurance. All these politicians could say was that major changes in municipal government were in the offing once the dust had settled.

Most federal officials agreed that major steps must be taken to help the poor living in decaying urban ghettos. However, philosophical and procedural differences slowed the entire process down. In 1968, the U.S. Commission on Civil Disorders also known as the Kerner Commission recommended massive federal spending to eradicate economic and social inequities in urban America. (4) Congress disagreed and proceeded to cut spending. Many Congressional leaders believed that the War on Poverty Program was sufficient. (5)

Discerning municipal leaders in the late 1960s knew that the present social unrest occurring within many of their communities represented much more than just poverty. That was only the tip of the iceberg. The widening gap in incomes and job prospects, the dramatic exodus of affluent whites to the suburbs, the rise of black power and increased opposition to the Viet Nam War divided the nation. (6) Insightful politicians knew that any worthwhile economic and social reforms would not emanate from Capitol Hill. They would begin on the grassroots level where enlightened leaders would courageously put the interests of their community first.

Pressing local concerns rather than federal mandates led to major changes in municipal government. In particular, the feverous pace of technological advancement and the inability of the public to fully comprehend the enormity of these changes altered municipal decision-making forever. Leaders expressed growing concerns regarding the best course of action to follow. Their concerns boiled down to two fundamental questions. First, given the seriousness of the current situation what kind of political strategy might best suit the needs of their constituents? Second, should they develop new public policies based on the latest political rhetoric or simply rely on traditional ideology? Ultimately, most followed the course of least resistance and developed policies that utilized ideologies of the past and present.

Evaluating the contributions made by urban leaders some forty years ago may offer valuable insight into what constitutes effective democracy on the municipal level and how quality political leadership transcends time. The

innovative ways effective politicians of the 1970s used federal funding to insure the success of their programs is of special interest.

The 52nd Mayor of Cleveland, Ohio, Ralph J. Perk played the political game extremely well. However, his success represented much more than exceptional role-playing. His strong moral code, unbending religious convictions and obsession to do the right thing, even when it proved unpopular with the voters, gave him a decided edge over other, less enlightened leaders.

Perk believed that municipal government existed to serve the people and not the other way around. His support of regional government as a way of providing affordable, quality municipal services placed him years ahead of others. A lofty idealist, on the one hand, and a pragmatic politician, on the other, Perk possessed an uncanny knack of addressing the many concerns of his constituents in an effective and thoughtful way.

His popularity among the voters was a testimony to his exceptional leadership. Hundreds of his constituents visited his office daily. They sought jobs, personal advice and political favors. He rarely disappointed them. The Cleveland business community respected Perk's no nonsense approach to public service and his unflinching commitment to the voters. A strong Republican leader in a city controlled by Democrats he remained true to his political convictions throughout his long and illustrious career.

What is equally astounding is that Mayor Perk accomplished so much between election years. Prior to 1980, Cleveland mayors and councilpersons served two-year terms. Mounting financial burdens and limited free time between elections

prevented many mayors from instituting meaningful reforms. This was not the case with Ralph J. Perk. An energetic administrator, he accomplished much during his six-year tenure as mayor. Part of his success rested in the fact that he loved to campaign. Perk claimed that frequent campaigning kept him in touch with the voters. Most Clevelanders responded enthusiastically to his low-key campaigning style. Few things seemed to bother him. Furthermore, he knew that significant economic and social changes were fast approaching and that the city's leadership must prepare for these challenges now.

The unexpected closing of several major Cleveland steel mills in the 1970s led to high unemployment and decreased property values. It also cut into the city's tax base. Many leaders in Washington including President Nixon empathized with poverty-ridden cities such as Cleveland. Regrettably, growing economic competition overseas; sustained military losses in Southeast Asia and mounting civil unrest consumed much of their time.

Instead of expanding poverty programs to help those cities with the greatest need, Nixon ordered them cut. (7) He closed Job Corps training centers and reduced funding for key agencies including the National Institute of Health. The president also disbanded the Office of Economic Opportunity. Nixon intended to move social services from the federal to the state and local level. He believed that ample federal funding would expedite it.

His strategy might have worked had it not been for the Watergate Scandal. (8) This constitutional crisis shook the very foundations of American democracy. Some critics predicted that the nation would not survive. But, survive it did, due in

large measure to dedicated, hardworking political leaders in the late 1970s such as Ralph J. Perk. The Watergate Scandal enraged many voters. Accountability and honesty replaced cronyism and partisan politics. The scandal impacted Mayor Perk. A long-time supporter of President Nixon, he was sickened by what happened to him. (9) Ralph Perk was an honest politician and he could not understand why others were not like him.

Perk's six-year tenure represented a period of efficient municipal governance. This was remarkable given the economic, political and social upheavals affecting Cleveland at that time. Perk's administration was like no other. He not only gave the working class a powerful friend at city hall; but also, championed the city's elite. Few Cleveland mayors before or since could boast of so many successes. Turbulent times needed strong leadership and Mayor Ralph J. Perk met the challenge admirably.

ENDNOTES

1. Marc A. Weiss, "The Origins and Legacy of Urban Renewal," in Federal Housing Policy and Programs Past and Present ed. J. Paul Mitchell (New Brunswick N.J.: Rutgers University Center for Urban Policy Research, 1985), 253-276.
2. Political activists in the 1960s attacked this idea. One of its harshest critics was a radical reformer of that era named Michael Harrington. Harrington gained prominence in 1962 when he wrote The Other America: Poverty in the United States. He debunked myths regarding the plight of America's poor. Harrington attacked the notion that through hard work the poor could eventually overcome poverty. He said the idea was preposterous in that poverty was a permanent part of American society and that the underclass would always exist. He concluded that the poor lacked the where-for-all to escape poverty. Michael Harrington, The Other America: Poverty in the United States (New York: MacMillan Publishers, 1962).
3. The growing youth movement also challenged traditional American values. Erik Erikson a well-known developmental psychologist and psychoanalyst believed that their rebellious actions represented their search for identity. America's adolescence found it increasingly difficult to leave the security of childhood for the long-term commitments of adulthood. Erik Erikson, Identity, Youth and Crisis (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1968), 155.
4. Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, Summary of Report <http://www.eisenhowerfoundation.org/docs/kerner.pdf>.
5. First proposed by President Lyndon B. Johnson in his State of the Union address in January 1964, the War on Poverty Program impacted the nation and led to the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 which authorized the use of federal funds to eliminate poverty.
6. The oil embargo along with an aging industrial core, a changing job scene, increase foreign competition in manufacturing and the stock market crash of 1974 all but ended the post-war boom. From 1971 to 1979 the rate of inflation jumped from 4.30% to 13.3% while the rate of unemployment increased from 6.6% to 7.9%. This resulted in stagflation. Stagflation occurred when both the nation's inflation rate and unemployment rate increased while economic growth remained stagnate. Not being a typical recession, economists in the

1970s remained in a quandary as to how best to remedy it. It took many years before the U.S. economy recovered.

7. Leon Friedman and William F. Levantrosser, eds. Richard M. Nixon: Politician, President, Administrator (New York: Greenwood Publishing Group, 1991), 342.
8. For a detailed account of President Nixon's plan see Remarks by Bryce N. Harlow Counsellor to the President, National League of Cities. Congressional City Conference, Washington Hilton Hotel, March 9, 1970. "President Nixon's New Federalism."1-12.
<http://www.ou.edu/special.albertctr/archivesHarlowInvento/H>.
9. Joseph Wagner, "Perk Earns National Attention with Defense of Nixon," The Cleveland Plain Dealer, June 26, 1974.