

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

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Klein, Richard. *Cleveland Mayor Ralph J. Perk: Strong Leadership During Troubled Times*.  
Cleveland, Ohio: MSL Academic Endeavors, 2013.

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**EISBN-13:** 978-1-936323-02-9

**EISBN-10:** 1-936323-02-8

This digital edition was prepared by MSL Academic Endeavors, the imprint of the Michael  
Schwartz Library at Cleveland State University, 2013

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## SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

All three programs described in the previous chapters illustrated Mayor Perk's political mastery. A man of the people, he knew firsthand the value of hard work and honesty. He also understood that political success did not just happen. It resulted from thoughtful planning and careful decision-making at every level. Modern politicians in their zeal to resolve issues quickly may downplay the many economic and political advantages one might gain from well-scripted public policies.

Perhaps today's world no longer affords leaders the opportunity of engaging in meaningful dialogue with colleagues and friends. If this is indeed the case then modern politicians need to turn to other reliable sources for assistance. This is where records by past leaders may help. In many ways, the issues facing municipal leaders today are very similar to the ones that confronted politicians a generation ago. Like today, the 1970s represented a time of great change and political uncertainty. In both eras, a volatile economy, protracted overseas military conflict and public misgivings regarding the honesty of local politicians served to undermine traditional beliefs and moral values.

Also like today, the 1970s was a time of voter cynicism. No one could be trusted on face value alone. Municipal leaders found themselves caught in the middle. Should they break away from past traditions and create their own unique new identities based on previously untested more radical reforms or should they follow the crowd and support the status quo? Municipal leaders in the 1970s like today were very unsure as to which path to follow. In the final analysis, most chose to revise traditional political agendas with the hope of meeting the challenges and

expectations of the electorate. Where these leaders differed from modern-day politicians was not in their approach, but rather, the society in which they lived.

Prior to the Watergate Scandal, the media rarely probed into the personal life of local leaders or debated the merits of specific policies based on alleged hidden political agendas. Instead, the media discussed the ramifications of such policies. They were particularly interested as to how these policies might affect the re-election chances for incumbents. There was nothing personal in this kind of free flowing dialog no hints of wrongdoing here. Only in times of political scandal would the media deviate from their-own self-imposed moral code. The professional attitude displayed by most media representatives enabled most hardworking politicians to be highly creative especially when it came to dealing with difficult problems.

If particular policies did not gain public support then the politicians would try something else. Through trial and error, often with the help of the loyal opposition, municipal leaders would eventually come up with acceptable policies. The public more often than not would accept these initiatives believing that their elected officials were morally bound to do the right thing for all of them. If the public became disillusioned with those politicians then they would vote them out of office. It was as simple as that.

The innovative public policies introduced by veteran politicians like Ralph Perk set the stage for modern decision-making whether today's leaders acknowledge it or not. Modern politicians enjoy a decided advantage over their predecessors in

that they have the wherewithal to evaluate the public's reaction to controversial past issues.

Institutional memory as displayed through such things as city archival records provides modern politicians with valuable insight into how past leaders handled sensitive issues. It also enables them to gauge potential public reaction if similar pieces of legislation were introduced today. Possessing this kind of insight upfront may help to speed up the legislative process while appreciably improving the quality of policies enacted. Access to these records may also prevent today's politicians from falling into some of the same economic and political traps that ensnared their predecessors.

Increasingly, today's politicians rely on computer-generated information to enhance policies. These policies may include snippets of local history. These bits and pieces of a community's past may serve to reinforce their goals and objectives. Those snippets taken from dependable historic resources may indeed lend additional credibility to specific policies; however, those derived from unreliable records may hurt their cause.

Institutional memory derived from reliable historic records may increase the chances of success in two important ways. First, it may strengthen a community's awareness of its history lending credibility to the politician and the policies presented. Second, it may predict the success or failure of public policies based on similar past experiences. Mayor Perk seeing the value of institutional memory used it often in decision-making.

Ralph Perk's approach to governance served the City of Cleveland well. The Impact Cities Crime Fighting Program, CETA and RTA demonstrated his commitment to the people. Occurring in a time of multiple plant closings, high unemployment and significant population losses, his initiatives offered hope. It behooves modern-day leaders to re-examine the contributions made by Cleveland's 52<sup>nd</sup> Mayor. Outstanding politicians of any era demand excellence from their colleagues, friends, co-workers and most especially themselves. Mayor Perk was no exception. A selfless politician wanting to improve the quality of life for all Clevelanders, he was a credit to his family, friends and his community.

The 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of his election as mayor occurred in 2011. Many things have changed in this city over the past four decades. However, Clevelanders still belief in worthwhile cultural and religious values. Mayor Perk cherished these values as well. He dedicated his life to helping others. However, his contribution to the City of Cleveland far exceeds that. He inspired his colleagues, family and friends to achieve remarkable things. Perk brought the best out in people by helping them develop their own special skills and talents. He was the hope and spirit of the city that he loved so much.

Seeing the past through his eyes may provide us with some valuable clues concerning what constitutes effective leadership and builds strong character. These positive character traits have withstood the test of time. They never lose their luster or fade from view. All of us have much to learn from Cleveland's own Ralph J. Perk. Let us begin the learning process today.