

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

CHAPTER 2: THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RALPH J. PERK

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

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
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CHAPTER TWO

THE LIFE AND TIMES OF RALPH J. PERK

Ralph J. Perk was born on January 19, 1914 and died on April 21, 1999. (1) He was the third child of Mary (Smirt) and Joseph C. Perk. A lifelong resident of Cleveland's Fleet-Broadway neighborhood, the future mayor was also a lifetime member of Our Lady of Lourdes Roman Catholic Church. An important leader in city politics for nearly fifty years, Ralph Perk barely survived infancy. (2)

Shortly after his first birthday, he contracted bronchial pneumonia. Physicians in those days could do little to combat that dreaded disease. In fact, the majority of children contracting it died. Young Perk's future remained very much in doubt until a young surgeon from neighboring St. Alexis Hospital stepped in to help. George W. Crile visited the children of the poor regularly. He took particular interest in young Ralph Perk's case. Dr. Crile tried every medical procedure available at that time to save this child's life. At first, nothing appeared to help. But, over the next several months the toddler gradually regained his strength. George Crile, Frank Bunts, William Lower and John Phillips founded the Cleveland Clinic in 1921.

Ralph Perk never forgot that Dr. Crile had saved his life. The Cleveland Clinic Foundation Board of Trustees in 1971 threatened to move their main campus from Cleveland to the suburbs. The mayor promised the city's full cooperation if the board of trustees agreed to keep their main facility in the city. The foundation board voted to stay in the City of Cleveland and Mayor Perk wasted no time in fulfilling his promise. The City of Cleveland evoked the Writ of Eminent Domain in

1972. This gave officials the legal right to claim private property for the “good of the public.” The 5th amendment of the U.S. Constitution sanctioned it and the due process clause of the 14th amendment insured fair compensation for all confiscated land. (3) In 1973, city officials transferred this blighted area to the hospital. The Cleveland Clinic built the South Hospital Complex on that site. It included a spacious research building, a 200-car garage and an 18-story luxury hotel called the Park Plaza Inn.(4)

Health problems continued to plague Ralph Perk for the rest of his life. In 1925, he nearly lost his sight to a rare eye disease. The Perk family may not have had much money, but they did have many friends. One of their friends, a neighborhood butcher, paid for young Perk’s treatments. Those eye treatments saved his sight.

Ralph Perk graduated from Our Lady of Lourdes R.C. School in 1927. He entered East Technical High School that fall. Unfortunately, the Great Depression of the 1930s forced him to quit school at the age of 15. He later finished high school through correspondence courses. Perk also took courses at the Cleveland College of Western Reserve University and St. John College of Cleveland. (5) The future mayor attended a special leadership-training program at Bethany College and lectured at Indiana University, Princeton University and the University of Utah.

In the mid-1930s, Perk and his older brother George Perk opened the Perk Coal and Ice Company. The caring way they treated their customers insured success. In fact, they often gave away coal and ice to neighbors who were penniless. Ralph Perk was also a quality patternmaker and office manager for the Perk Realty

Company. On May 4, 1940, he married his former classmate Lucille Gagliardi. She was the daughter of Sam Gagliardi a highly respected barber and boxing promoter. The Perk family was to include seven children, nineteen grandchildren and four great grandchildren.

Perk tried to enlist in the armed forces at the outbreak of World War II. Unfortunately, reoccurring bouts with kidney stones exempted him from military service. Following the war, Ralph J. Perk became a residential real estate appraiser for First Federal Savings and Loan Company. He also purchased his one and only house, a large two-story grey-colored frame dwelling at 3421 East 49th Street.

His political career began in 1935 when he attended a political rally sponsored by the 13th Ward Republican Club. According to the future mayor, the club's chairman spotted him in the audience and asked him if he wanted to volunteer for the Republican Party. Without any hesitation he responded yes. The son of a Democratic labor organizer, Perk never explained why he joined the Republican Party. Perhaps he wanted to repay his debt to the neighborhood butcher who was a leader in that party. Perhaps he believed that he could rise faster within its ranks. Whatever the reason or reasons behind his decision, Ralph Perk remained a loyal party member for nearly 65 years. He was inducted into the Cuyahoga County Republican Party Hall of Fame in 2003. (6)

The 13th Ward Republican Club elected him its precinct captain in 1940. Wanting to gain additional experience as a political organizer, Perk joined the Presidential Campaign of U.S. Senator Robert A. Taft in 1948. He also served as

Campaign Manager of the National Young Republicans and ran unsuccessfully for the Ohio State Assembly in 1948 and again in 1950.

Undeterred by these campaign losses, Perk became an Assistant State Fire Marshall. In 1949, he served as Campaign Manager for Cleveland mayoral hopeful Franklin A. Polk. Perk also campaigned for the Republican Presidential nominee General Dwight David Eisenhower and his running mate Richard M. Nixon in 1952. A rising star within the Republican Party, Ralph Perk chaired the City Government Committee of the Citizens League of Greater Cleveland. He also served as Vice President and Regional Director of the National Young Republican Federation. The Ripon Club elected him president in 1952 and the following year he received the “Republican Man of the Year” award. The future mayor also chaired the Southeast Cleveland chapter of the Community Chest from 1953 to 1957. He worked in the Ohio Attorney General’s office and served as Executive Assistant to Ray Bliss, the Republican National Chairman.

Voters in the 13th Ward elected Perk to Cleveland City Council in 1953. His friend and political mentor Joseph F. Dolejs ran much of his campaign. It was an amazing victory in that the majority of his supporters were Democrats. This young politician proudly represented his ward for the next eight years. While in council, Perk fought to reduce air and water pollution. He also helped to balance the city’s budget and pushed for the establishment of regional government. Perk played a major role on the Executive Committee Cleveland Chapter of the American Society for Public Administrators.

As the 13th ward representative, he championed inexpensive bus tickets for Cleveland Public School students and served on the Urban Renewal, Planning, Aviation and Air Pollution committees. Perk also sponsored legislation that led to the construction of the Cuyahoga River Interceptor Sewer System. In 1955, the future mayor introduced legislation in council that led to the city's first urban renewal project. Garden Valley Estates at 3135 East 79th Street contained over 600 apartments. Perk also played a pivotal role in convincing Congress to adopt universal pollution controls. (7) Cleveland received its first federal air and water pollution grant in 1956.

Ralph Perk represented the latest in a breed of dedicated municipal politicians willing to tackle some of the community's worst problems. His pragmatic approach to problem solving served him well. Throughout his long and illustrious political career, Perk emphasized the importance of helping his constituents through what he called "targeted intervention." He prided himself on his ability to bring people together to resolve major issues. Perk believed that any problem could be broken down to its simplest component and solved.

His optimistic approach to life and politics gained Ralph Perk and his family much deserved recognition. Cleveland's Czech community named him the "Man of the Year" in 1954. The following year, he became the youngest recipient of the Knights of Columbus "Catholic Man of the Year" award. The Veterans of Foreign Wars in 1957 named him their "Outstanding Citizen" while his wife Lucille became the "Italian Mother of the Year" in 1965.

A son of immigrant parents with strong ethnic ties, Ralph Perk cherished his freedom as an American citizen. He also knew that freedom did not exist for millions of Eastern Europeans living under Communism. He realized that without help from ethnic groups in the United States, these “captive nations” might never be able to break that stranglehold. He believed that all Clevelanders and most especially those with Eastern European ancestry had a moral obligation to save these people.

Mayor Perk was not alone in his thinking. Many influential politicians of the 1950s and 1960s shared similar views. For example, U.S. Senator Frank J. Lausche and U.S. House Representative Michael Feighan repeatedly demanded that Congress take a stronger stance against Communism. In 1959, both leaders asked the future mayor to establish an organization in Cleveland dedicated to stamping out Communism.

This resulted in the American Nationalities Movement. Made up originally of 35 different ethnic groups, this very special non-profit organization raised public awareness of the dangers of Communism. On July 17, 1959, President Dwight D. Eisenhower signed the Captive Nations Proclamation. This proclamation reaffirmed the commitment of the United States to fight Communism. It also proclaimed the third week of July Captive Nations Week.

The efforts of the American Nationalities Movement eventually paid-off. The Soviet Union fell on December 31, 1991. Two thousand and eleven marked the organization’s fiftieth anniversary. To commemorate that milestone, the group honored its founder Ralph J. Perk. It also approved a resolution to fight oppressive

regimes throughout the world. Mayor Perk served as its president from 1959 until his death in 1999. Ms. Irene Morrow and the mayor's eldest son Cleveland Municipal Court Judge Ralph J. Perk Jr. have also served as president.

The voters elected Ralph Perk Cuyahoga County Auditor in 1962. (8) He defeated the incumbent John J. Carney by over 20,000 votes. Perk was the first Republican to serve in that office in nearly fifty years. He supervised 300 employees within 17 departments. An innovative administrator, the future mayor revolutionized procedures by introducing data processing and reducing his payroll by 25%. He also assisted other county auditors throughout Ohio in creating their own boards.

Perk easily won re-election in 1966 with 94,000 votes and again in 1970 with 140,000 votes. A highly energetic and respected leader, he chaired the International Association of Assessing Officers. Perk also played key roles in the Cuyahoga County Budget Commission and the Cuyahoga County Board of Revisions. However, his political ambitions extended far beyond the auditor's office. He wanted to be Mayor of Cleveland.

The outspoken editor of The Cleveland Press, Louis B. Seltzer, asked Ralph Perk to run for the city's highest office in 1965. At first, he hesitated. However, Louis Seltzer refused to take no for an answer and Perk eventually decided to run. Perk's innovative platform that called for Cleveland's municipal court to pay the city's police department \$5.00 per case to cover its expenses on court days gained media attention. (9) Perk also proposed moving welfare cases from the city to the county. He further called for transferring MUNY-Light costs from the city's

General Fund to its Utility Fund. His platform resonated well with a great many voters. However, his late entrance into the race prevented him from defeating the incumbent Ralph S. Locher.

Ralph Locher became mayor in 1963 after Anthony J. Celebreeze stepped down. President Kennedy named Celebreeze the new Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (HEW). (10) Mayor Locher barely won the 1965 election receiving only 37% of the popular vote. His closest rival an ambitious African American lawyer and member of the Ohio State Assembly Carl B. Stokes received 36.1% of the vote. Ralph Perk ran a distant third with only 17.3%. (11)

Ralph Locher's popularity plummeted following his firing of James M. Lister in January 1966. (12) Lister had served as the city's Planning Director for nearly two decades. A nationally respected planner and protégé of New York City's legendary planner Robert Moses, Lister was not a favorite of the mayor. Locher replaced him with Barton Clausen a public relations consultant for KYW-Radio and TV. (13) Clausen lasted less than three months. Several other planners held that post over the next several years. Finally, Mayor Carl B. Stokes appointed Norman Krumholz in 1969. Krumholz served as Planning Director for nearly ten years.

The mayor's inept handling of the Hough Riots in the summer of 1966 antagonized many voters. Sensing growing dissatisfaction among the ranks of the electorate, Perk considered running for mayor in 1967. However, poor health prevented him from entering the race that year. In retrospect, his decision not to

run proved to be a stroke of good luck. Carl B. Stokes along with Frank Celeste, the former mayor of Lakewood, challenged Mayor Locher for the city's top spot. Their efforts led to the defeat of the incumbent in the mayoral primaries. Ralph Locher remained in public service and later distinguished himself as an Ohio Supreme Court Justice.

Mayor Locher's departure from city hall left the field wide open. Ultimately, Frank Celeste bowed out of the race leaving Carl Stokes and Seth Taft. A young articulate African American and a leading Democrat, Carl Stokes had fought his way out of poverty to become a highly respected lawyer and politician. His opponent the Republican candidate Seth Taft epitomized the well-bred corporate lawyer. The grandson of a U.S. President and son of Cincinnati Mayor Charles Phelps Taft II, Seth Taft already enjoyed a distinguished record of public service. Although very different in background and temperament, these two candidates continued to battle it out throughout the summer and fall. Stokes won the election by 1,644 votes and was inaugurated on November 13, 1967.

Carl B. Stokes enjoyed being the first black mayor of a major U.S. city. Apprehensive and excited about his new role, Stokes knew that everyone was watching him. If he succeeded it would lead to new political opportunities for African Americans throughout the nation. However, should he fail it might take many years before the voters would elect another African American to the city's highest office. This kind of pressure might have unnerved some but not Carl Stokes. He remained calm. His ambitious political agenda called for eliminating

slums, reorganizing the city's police department, building suburban public housing and promoting black middle class economic power.

His initial successes as mayor included unfreezing U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) funds for new urban renewal projects. (14) He also expanded the Model Cities Program and provided African Americans good job opportunities. By 1970, there were over 250 blacks employed at city hall. Mayor Stokes also initiated a new, high profile program dedicated to neighborhood rehabilitation through urban renewal.

Known as Cleveland Now, this \$150m program called for the creation of 16,000 jobs, construction of twenty new welfare and child care centers and introduction of new recreational activities geared specifically for central city youngsters. (15) Program supporters included Republic Steel Corporation, Pickands Mather and Company, the Stouffer Corporation, the May Company and the Cleveland AFL-CIO Federation of Labor. (16) Unfortunately, this highly touted initiative soon lost favor with the public. Allegations of corruption and fraud within its ranks brought the Cleveland Now program to a screeching halt. Its failure led many voters to question the mayor's ability to lead the city. They wanted to know how he could have allowed such illegal activities to occur under his watch.

Hoping to salvage his political reputation, Mayor Stokes in March 1970 issued his own response entitled Cleveland: Now! Report to the Citizens of Cleveland. This report claimed that the program had generated some tangible results. They included quality-built low-to-moderate income inner-city housing units and good paying jobs for the chronic unemployed. Stokes admitted that the

Cleveland Now program had not decreased juvenile delinquency or increased the quality of municipal services. However, he was certain that it would have achieved all these goals and much more if only the public had allowed it to continue. (17)

The mayor concluded that the program's greatest single weakness was not its unfulfilled promises; but rather, the lack of public support once allegations of corruption had surfaced. The mayor's explanation did not resonate well with the people. Many saw it as a whitewash. Some of his most ardent supporters questioned the rationale behind his arguments. This misstep by Mayor Stokes haunted him for the remainder of his tenure. The media certainly had a field day with it.

But as many already knew the honeymoon between Carl Stokes and the media had ended long before the Cleveland Now scandal. (18) A number of factors contributed to it. Such things as controversial appointees, decided laps-in-judgment during the Glenville Riots of 1968 and an ongoing feud between the mayor and the city's police department encouraged the local media to go on the offensive. A great many of his political backers thought that these attacks were unfounded. However, the local media disagreed. They remained vigilant in pursuing what they believed to be the corrupt underside of the Stokes Administration. Media spokespersons claimed it was their duty to protect the public from corrupt politicians regardless of the consequences. Their criticism of Mayor Stokes only intensified over time.

The irony in all of this was that the local media at the beginning of his first term supported the mayor. In fact, the Cleveland Plain Dealer believed that Mayor Stokes would not only serve Cleveland's minority population, but also, represent the

interests of the business community. An article published by The Plain Dealer on December 31, 1967 reflected this optimism. (19) It congratulated the mayor for re-establishing a favorable national image for the City of Cleveland and promoting local business expansion. This daily also commended him for supporting the new county port authority. (20)

Unfortunately, these halcyon days ended quickly. The inability of Mayor Stokes to control the Glenville Riots in the summer of 1968 sealed his fate. Both Cleveland newspapers turned against him. A federal study investigated the Glenville Riots through the eyes of the media. Entitled Report to the National Commission on the Causes and Prevention of Violence, investigators concluded that the attacks launched by the media against the mayor were both newsworthy and warranted. (21) It further stated that the public had the right to know what was happening even if that media coverage demonstrated the mayor's ineptness under pressure.

This feud between the mayor and the media might have subsided had it not been for newspaper accounts claiming that Fred (Ahmed) Evans, one of the instigators of the Glenville Riots, had received \$6,000 from Cleveland Now. Evans allegedly used these proceeds to purchase high-powered rifles and over 300 rounds of ammunition. (22) He was later convicted on seven counts of first-degree murder and received the death penalty. (23) Evans died of cancer several years later. This kind of embarrassing press coverage discouraged Mayor Stokes.

Growing voter dissatisfaction in the spring of 1969 convinced Ralph Perk to enter the mayoral contest. (24) Although he lost that race by 4,500 votes, political

leaders on both sides of the aisle took special notice. Republican Party stalwarts supported Perk's candidacy as the 20th District delegate to the Republican National Convention in 1968. He represented that same district at the next two conventions. Perk also served as the Chairman of the National Conference of Republican Mayors and Municipal Elected Officials and as a member of the Republican National Committee Advisory Council.

Carl Stokes' second term as mayor proved more disastrous than his first. Some questioned his wisdom in firing Cleveland Police Chiefs Richard Wagner and Patrick Gerity. Both chiefs appeared to be competent leaders. (25) However, the repercussions from these firings paled when compared to two other events affecting the city's police department. The first involved alleged cheating on promotion exams. Rumors had been circulating that several black police officers had illegally received the answers to these exams. Chief Gerity responded to these accusations by conducting his own probe. His findings led to a grand jury investigation that uncovered improprieties. These irregularities resulted in the prosecution and conviction of the Civil Service Commissioner President Jay White and his Secretary Charles Butts. (26)

The second problem concerned Stokes's appointment of the new city police chief. On January 26, 1970, Mayor Stokes announced the appointment of William P. Ellenburg as the city's latest police chief. Ellenburg succeeded Patrick Gerity. A former Detroit police officer with a distinctive record, Chief Ellenburg had the reputation of being very tough on crime. He seemed perfect for this job. However, within days of being named to this important post, The Detroit Free Press printed a

scathing indictment of the new police chief. The paper claimed that Chief Ellenburg and his assistant Frank Cochill had accepted bribes from a well-known mafia lawyer in Detroit named Lawrence Burns. Ellenburg immediately denied all charges. The two local dailies at first supported him. However, a subsequent investigation by the mayor's office produced incriminating evidence and William Ellenburg was forced to resign his post. (27) Critics within the Cleveland legal community wanted to know why Mayor Stokes had not conducted a more extensive background check on this candidate before offering him the job.

Calamities such as these undermined the mayor's power base. An antagonistic city council and a disgruntled media only served to weaken his case further. Stokes' popularity plunged in January 1971 when voters rejected a 0.8% increase in the city's income tax. He wanted to use the additional funds to pay off the city's growing budget deficit.

The mayor's reluctance to attend Monday night city council meetings proved to be another poor decision. Stokes claimed that he had not abandoned city council and that many of his administrators never missed a session. (28) However, this breach in political etiquette whereby his administrators argued their own cases in front of council without the presence of the mayor did not go over well with many in that chamber. It also led many voters to question his leadership abilities. The voting public possesses a very short memory especially when city officials do not fulfill their campaign promises. Erratic behavior predicated on a less-than-stellar performance in office usually spells disaster at the polls.

Carl B. Stokes increasingly fitted into this category following the 1969 election. He was a lame duck. The public's negative reaction to him only intensified with time. Ultimately, it destroyed his chances for higher political office. That political realization so apparent to many by the winter of 1971 was not evident in the fall of 1969. Mayor Stokes had to endure additional embarrassments before its full affect set in. By that time, there was very little he could do to stop it.

Nineteen Seventy proved to be a disastrous year for the Stokes Administration. The closing of several major stores in the Upper Euclid District and the threatened demolition of the Allen Theatre in Playhouse Square received national coverage. Many business and civic leaders placed full blame on the mayor.

Other negative developments gaining media attention that year included increased white flight to the suburbs, a hiring freeze on safety forces and the closing of several major factories. Additional sore points were an insolvent MUNY-Light, bankrupt public service retirement funds and further infrastructure decay. His subsequent closing of 26 recreational centers along with cuts in sanitation services and a deficit-ridden Cleveland municipal stadium made matters even worse. Local officials held out little hope for a speedy economic recovery. Subsequent spikes in energy prices, soaring labor costs, numerous additional shop closings and unprecedented inflation only served to reinforce these earlier fears and trepidations.

The final blow to the Stokes Administration occurred when rumors of funding misappropriations led the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to suspend all future renewal activities. Many of these rumors remained unsubstantiated, yet Washington refused to budge. This action lent

further credence to critics who argued that the Stokes Administration was engaged in illegal activities.

Many in the media portrayed Carl Stokes as a corrupt opportunist wishing to advance his own political career at the expense of the people. (29) Tired and dejected, the mayor announced on April 16, 1971 that he would not seek a third term. He left Cleveland to become a newscaster for WNBC-TV in New York City. The mayor later served as the U.S. Ambassador to the Republic of Seychelles and as a Cleveland Municipal Judge. Carl Stokes died of throat cancer on April 3, 1996. He was 68 years old.

ENDNOTES

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