

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

**CHAPTER 3: A NEW MAYOR FOR A NEW DAY**

Richard Klein, Ph. D

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## CHAPTER THREE

### A NEW MAYOR FOR A NEW DAY

Public reaction to the Stokes announcement was mixed. Some were shocked by the news, many were not. The mayor's staunchest supporters thought he was an excellent leader who had been brutally attacked by the local media for attempting to institute much needed reforms. Many of his opponents believed that Mayor Stokes may have done his very best; however, it was not nearly enough given the terrible economic straits facing Cleveland during his administration.

Whatever the views expressed, nearly everyone agreed that the City of Cleveland was about to enter a period of unparalleled economic and social changes and that the next mayor, whoever that might be, must be an experienced leader ready to meet those challenges. (1) Several candidates battled it out for Cleveland's top-post in 1971. Many assumed that Cleveland City Council President Anthony Garofoli would win the election. However, Mayor Stokes did not support him. He claimed that Garofoli had all but sabotaged his Equal Employment Opportunity Ordinance of 1969. On the weekend prior to the mayoral primaries, a number of major leaders loyal to Stokes contacted black voters throughout the city. They asked them not to vote for Garofoli, but rather, throw their support behind the candidacy of Cleveland millionaire and former state representative James H. Carney. Over 50,000 blacks voted for Carney the following Tuesday.

Three candidates remained after the mayoral primaries. James Carney and Arnold Pinkney led the pack with Ralph Perk trailing a distance third. Perk was not discouraged by his poor showing at the beginning of the campaign. Following

the advice of his trusted Campaign Manager Robert Bennett he continued to attack his opponents. Perk's run for mayor represented a true Horatio Alger story. With a campaign budget of about \$600, Ralph J. Perk fought an uphill battle throughout much of the summer of 1971. However, he gained significant political strength with the electorate during the two months just prior to the election. His political platform that called for completing the Cuyahoga County Justice Center, reducing crime and ending the sale of pornography appealed to a great many undecided voters. He also proposed establishing an emergency ambulance service, erecting a new flight terminal at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport and eliminating air pollution.

What turned the political tide in his favor was his assurance to the voters that if elected he would continue to provide good municipal services without raising taxes. (2) Ralph Perk won the election with 39% of the popular vote. He received a total of 88,664 votes, while Pinkney and Carney got 74,085 and 65,725 votes respectively. (3)

The first Republican mayor in Cleveland in thirty years, Perk's inauguration on November 11, 1971 drew more than 1,500. The new mayor set the tone for his administration when he said that "I ask not so much that you have faith in me, but that you have faith in yourself and in your city, together we will make a difference." Perk's remarks reflected his faith in the people. He also made it quite clear that any major programs initiated during his administration would reflect the will of the people. He successfully mobilized the ethnic population.

Over the years, the mayor had developed a practical approach to politics. He thought of it as a blend of conservative and liberal thinking fine-tuned to the needs of the individual voters and the community at large. Perk believed that a successful politician knew how to maintain a proper balance between the specific demands of his constituents, on the one hand, and the general concerns of the community on the other. Never allowing one group to dominate the political scene especially when important issues were being discussed represented the key to effective leadership. This kind of straight-forward thinking enabled him to promote frugality, enterprise and morality among the city's working class voters, while at the same time, extol the virtues of business expansion, civic commitment and self-reliance among the city's powerbrokers.

The mayor further expanded his power base by cultivating colleagues and friends from all walks of life. His political appointments reflected his pragmatic thinking. Initial administrative appointments included Richard Hollington Jr. as Law Director, Andrew Putka as Finance Director, Vincent C. Campanella as Budget Director, George Voinovich as Cuyahoga County Auditor, Harry Volks as Press Secretary, Howard B. Klein as Personal Aid, Philip S. Hamilton as Personnel Director and Gerald Rademaker as Police Chief.

Other influential appointees included Vaclav Hyvnar as Executive Assistant Nationality Affairs, Ralph Tyler Sr. as Service Director, and Warren D. Hinchee as Commissioner of Light and Power. Salvatore Calandra as Chief Council, Malcolm Douglas as Chief Council, Nicholas Bucur as Cleveland Transit System Board

**Member, John Nagy as Recreational Commissioner and William Seawright as Advisor for Black Affairs.**

**Mayor Perk also relied heavily on Dr. Michael Pap, Dr. Vladimir Rus, Patrick Henry, Common Pleas Judge Herbert Whiting, Warren D. Riebe, Neil McGuinness and Irene Morrow. Other important city administrators included Richard Boylan, Norman Krumholz, J. William Petro, James C. Davis, Robert Hart, Raymond Kudukis, Ina Keegan, Mark Driscoll, Bruce Akers, James Stewart, Robert Michalski and Hal Morgan.**

**Robert Beasley, James Zingale, Dr. Jack Robertson, George A. Chuplis, Michael Rini, Olive K. Banister, Henry Kondrat, Dr. Ruth Miller, Rowena Gordon, and Herman Kammerman also played key roles in the Perk Administration. Nicholas DeVito, Bohdan Futey, Joyce Whitley, Robert Hansen and John R. Climaco worked closely with the mayor as did Charles Russo, Samuel Miller and Caesar Moss. Other instrumental decision-makers included Clyde Kirsch, Almeta Johnson, James Wilburn, Gunther Katzmar, Dr. Frederick Robbins, Thomas Stallworth, Michael T. Scanlon, Robert Weisman, Rosemary Lewis, Luke Owens and George J. Wrost.**

**Mayor Perk also recognized the importance of the city maintaining strong ties with other outside public agencies. One group to receive his attention was the Northeast Ohio Area-Wide Coordinating Agency (NOACA). Founded by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) in 1968, NOACA served as the regional transportation and environmental planning agency for Cuyahoga, Geauga, Lake, Lorain and Medina counties. (4)**

One of its primary functions involved reviewing local project applications for federal funds to insure that they were in accordance with both federal and state mandates. (5) In 1970, Mayor Stokes stopped sending representatives to NOACA board meetings. He claimed that the agency purposely neglected the needs of the City of Cleveland. He wanted nothing to do with it. (6)

Ralph Perk viewed NOACA from a different perspective. Recognizing the many benefits the city might receive from working closely with NOACA, he paid the \$43,000 in back dues owed and began to send city officials to its meetings. Perk also resolved the city's \$22m urban renewal debt, recouped \$27.9m in Model Cities funding, collected more than \$700,000 in delinquent taxes and reduced the city's property taxes by 10%.

Under the direction of the city's new Law Director Richard R. Hollington Jr., officials also negotiated a successful state bailout package. This was an amazing achievement given the precarious financial situation Cleveland found itself in at the beginning of the 1970s. (7) The problem began when the Stokes Administration tried to increase the city's income taxes while dropping the 5.8 mil school renewal tax.

In all probability, Cleveland taxpayers would have continued to pay the renewal levy with few questions asked. However, this sudden reversal in strategy forced the Cleveland Board of Education to take its case directly to the people. The Board of Education won out and the city's income tax levy failed. In essence, the Stokes Administration transferred \$18m from the city coffer to the school board. This resulted in a more impoverished city. (8)

Cleveland's deficit exceeded \$13m by 1971. (9) City officials might have paid little attention to it except that state officials required all municipalities in Ohio to balance their budgets annually. In response to this crisis, Mayor Perk ordered an immediate 10% across-the-board cut on all salaries. This action saved the city an estimated \$8m to \$9m. (10)

The unions representing the safety forces and sanitation workers challenged the legality of Perk's decision in court. A lower court upheld their challenge. However, the Ohio Court of Appeals overturned that decision. (11) It said that the mayor was well within his legal rights to order these cuts. Perk requested dissenting unions to meet with their members to see if they would voluntarily comply with the reductions. The mayor warned that failure to abide by the recent court ruling would result in extensive layoffs. After some consideration, these unions decided not to challenge the ruling. (12)

Over the next several months, Mayor Perk reduced city employees by 30%. At the same time, Richard Hollington Jr. convinced the Ohio State Assembly to approve enabling legislation that led to the city's bailout package. Under this agreement, state officials allowed Cleveland to borrow \$9.6m in advance at an interest rate of 3%. (13) They also permitted the city to reinstate the earlier pay cuts and increase the salaries of police officers and firefighters.

This groundbreaking legislation saved Cleveland from bankruptcy. (14) The city paid off its debt less than a year later. Moody's Investors assigned the City of Cleveland its highest bond rating in 1975. During his six-year tenure as mayor,

**Perk always balanced the budget. He also reduced the city's short-term debt from \$148m to \$38m.**

**Ralph Perk's reliance on qualified local leaders to assist in the development and implementation of major programs did not end with the city's bailout. Prominent business and civic leaders aided the Perk Administration in procuring significant federal grants for a wide variety of new economic and social programs. The \$35m compensation package received by the city with the establishment of the new county sewer district and the \$8m loan granted to the Cleveland Transit System (CTS) reflected their diligent efforts. Community leaders also helped Perk to obtain a \$175,000 from Washington to hire 58 additional police cadets. (15) Their hard work resulted in the city receiving another \$33m five-year federal grant aimed at fighting crime and promoting public service. Mayor Perk's reliance on competent outside leaders at every crossroad saved the taxpayers millions of dollars during his six-year tenure.**

**The mayor's commitment to the City of Cleveland extended far beyond his daily administrative duties. He truly believed that the community's best years lay ahead. Therefore, he encouraged his administrators to seek out large federal grants whenever and wherever possible. Emergency Medical Services (EMS) and the Cleveland Police Department's Community Response Unit represented two important federally sponsored programs initiated by this mayor. The Perk administration also issued \$91m in revenue bonds to expand the concourse, baggage areas and parking lots at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport.**



Perk received nearly \$5m from Washington to renovate Public Hall. Improvements ranged from a new lighting system and modern rest rooms to an airtight roof and special in-house TV system. The mayor also negotiated a new 25-year lease for Cleveland Municipal Stadium with the Cleveland Stadium Corporation (CSC). Led by Browns owner Art Modell, CSC agreed to fully refurbish this forty year old city landmark. (16) Ralph Perk also introduced a new rehabilitation program for inner-city housing. Called the 3% Loan Program, this conservation measure significantly lowered energy costs for many homeowners.

The mayor's ability to secure large government grants was remarkable. His optimistic outlook, sound business practices and dedication to city, family and friends inspired admiration and respect among many of his colleagues. No economic, social or political challenge seemed too great for him. Perk considered himself the "People's Mayor." He treated everyone with dignity and respect. The mayor never forgot his obligation to them. Therefore, it is not surprising that many Clevelanders fondly remember him. He knew how workingmen and women thought because he was one of them.

Ralph Perk also understood the growing alienation between the city's well-established working class and the newly emerging elite class. Once considered the backbone of the region's economy, hardworking Clevelanders were being repeatedly ignored by a new group of highly sophisticated, well-educated professionals. What were they to do? How were working class men and women going to survive within this new, highly competitive economic climate? Who would represent their needs?

**This is where Ralph Perk came into the picture. Many in the working class considered him to be their champion and friend. He never forgot his humble origins and most especially the people who had supported him from the beginning. The mayor honored his pledge to them. Perk not only aided Cleveland's working class in making the transition from the industrial world of the past to the new high tech age of tomorrow; but also, encouraged them to feel good about themselves during that transition.**

**To the casual observer, Mayor Perk's actions may have appeared to be little more than effective partisan politics at work. And perhaps to a certain extent it was that. After all, much of Perk's time involved finding jobs for the chronic unemployed, engaging in charitable work and socializing with his constituents. Yet, somehow his action meant much more than that. It was the motivating factors behind his actions rather than the actions themselves that set him apart from other mid-century politicians.**

**Ralph J. Perk truly loved his community and respected his constituents. He wanted to do what was right by them and not what was politically expedient. In the early 1950s, he took a vow of poverty with Msgr. Robert Nevins. He did not take these religious vows lightly. This good-natured eager to please politician chose to walk the straight and narrow. No one forced him to take these vows.**

**The good that resonated from Perk's deeds far outweighed any direct political benefits he might have gained from such actions. Benjamin Franklin once said that "God is very good to us...let us show our sense of His goodness to us by continuing to do good to our fellow creatures." (17) Perk's nearly fifty years of un-**

blemished public service was a testimony to his honesty and integrity. He was in every sense of the word a man of the people. No other Cleveland mayor in recent memory was a better friend to the working class.

In many ways, Perk fulfilled the role of the politician as first envisioned by the nation's founding fathers over two centuries ago. They believed that a local leader should be a self-sacrificing, trusted guardian of the public good. He should defend the principles of the average citizen against ruthlessness individuals who might place their own self-interest above their responsibilities to their neighbors.

Mayor Perk may not have articulated his political role in quite that fashion. Few modern leaders expound such clichés. Yet, he firmly believed that every Clevelander had the right to pursue his or her dreams in a safe and healthy environment and that it was the responsibility of political leaders, like him, to insure that nothing prevented them from attaining their goals. His overriding concern for the well-being of his constituents may appear old fashion in today's fast-paced world. But, it distinguished him from other, less enlightened politicians of that era.

Ralph Perk became mayor during one of the bleakest periods in Cleveland's history. Significant population losses worsened by a stumbling economy, massive job layoffs, major factory closings and increased crime undermined this vibrant city. The mayor's straight-forward policies offered hope to thousands of Clevelanders. Other economic incentives such as tax abatements, land banking and low interest business loans also played crucial roles in revitalizing this aging community.

**As stated earlier, Perk introduced many worthwhile initiatives during his six-year tenure as mayor. Some represented major breakthroughs, while many dealt with more routine concerns. Of all these programs, three stand out as exceptional examples of administrative adroitness. The first one offered practical solutions to mounting inner-city crime; the second addressed chronic unemployment while the third transformed a nearly bankrupt transit system into a profitable regional carrier. Well-defined initiatives with measurable results, they epitomized the best in administrative ingenuity during a crucial time in Cleveland's history. They are well worth re-examining today.**

## ENDNOTES

1. Joseph Eszterhas, "Study Sees Grind for Democrats," The Cleveland Plain Dealer, August 31, 1971.
2. Both Cleveland dailies endorsed Perk for mayor. The Cleveland Plain Dealer, September 9, 1971 and The Cleveland Press, September 23, 1971. Hal Lebovitz, "Perk Who," The Cleveland Plain Dealer, November 4, 1971.
3. A message sent by Cleveland City Councilperson Dennis Kucinich to his constituents in November 1971 helped to elect Ralph Perk see Perk is Democratic Hope in November.
4. U.S. Dept. of Housing and Urban Development, U.S. Dept. of Transportation and U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, NOACA: Serving The People of Today and Tomorrow, 1978.
5. For more detail on the functions of NOACA see "NOACA, Northeast Ohio Areawide Coordinating Agency," Ohio Planning Conference Newsletter 18, no. 2 (April-September 1969): 15-16.
6. Paul W. Porter, Cleveland Confused City on a Seesaw, (Columbus: Ohio State University, 1976), 257. Don Silver, "Perk, NOACA Make Up Feud Started by Stokes," The Cleveland Press, December 8, 1971.
7. Problems resulting from high unemployment, business migration to the suburbs and the closing of major manufacturing companies placed Cleveland at a decisive disadvantage in the early 1970s. Mayor Perk believed that strong leadership was essential to resolve these economic and social issues. Robert Daniels, "Cleveland Jobless Rate Seen as Highest in Nation," The Cleveland Plain Dealer, January 24, 1972.
8. Estelle Zannes, "The Revolving Door of the Mayor's Office," Cleveland Magazine, April 1972. <http://www.clevelandmagazine.com>.
9. City of Cleveland, City of Cleveland Annual Report, 1972, 20.
10. Vexler, Cleveland A Chronological and Documentary History, 1760-1976: 77-78.
11. Ibid., 78.

12. **Ibid.**
13. **City of Cleveland, City of Cleveland Annual Report, 1972, 20.**
14. **For a more detailed account of the steps taken by Mayor Perk to save his community see Ray Crane, “Here’s How Perk Put The City In The Black,” The Cleveland Press, January 1, 1973.**
15. **Jerry Kvet, “Straight-Shooter Perk OK’s 58 Police Cadets,” The Cleveland Press, January 1, 1972.**
16. **Gries Sports Enterprises vs. Cleveland Browns Supreme Court of Ohio, 26 Ohio St., 3d 15; 496 N.E. 2<sup>nd</sup> 959 (1986).**
17. **Philip Smith, ed. The Autobiography of Benjamin Franklin (Mineola, N.Y: Dover Press, 1966): 159.**