

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

**CHAPTER 8: MAYOR PERK'S LEGACY**

Richard Klein, Ph. D

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 Schwartz Library at Cleveland State University, 2013

---

Permission for MSL Academic Endeavors and Cleveland Memory Project to reprint granted by the author.



## CHAPTER EIGHT

### MAYOR PERK'S LEGACY

With all his successes, Ralph Perk assumed that he would be re-elected mayor in November 1977. He was wrong. Two of his strongest political rivals Dennis Kucinich and Edward Feighan joined forces to defeat him in the mayoral primaries. (1) These results shocked many Clevelanders especially in light of the strong endorsement the mayor had received from The Cleveland Plain Dealer. (2) Ohio's largest newspaper considered Mayor Perk to be a man of integrity with a strong sense of civic pride. Its editorial staff congratulated him for providing good municipal services without raising taxes and encouraging new development downtown. The paper also praised his recent renovation efforts at Cleveland Hopkins International Airport and the fact that both Moody's Investors and Standard & Poor's had assigned the City of Cleveland an "A" Bond rating. (3)

With this kind of positive endorsement, how could he have lost in the primary? It was a very interesting question well worth investigating further. Some critics at that time insisted that Ralph Perk's political defeat stemmed from the fact that he represented the last in a long line of post-war municipal crusaders. (4) These crusaders included popular political figures of the 1960s and 1970s such as John Lindsey in New York; Kevin White in Boston and Andrew Young in Atlanta. Practical political leaders who came of age during the Great Depression of the 1930s and World War II, they saw unlimited possibilities for continued growth within their respective communities. They knew that forging close ties with the local business community was essential for success. The subsequent strong partnerships

they developed with prominent area-wide business leaders enabled these politicians to establish their own successful public policies often with the unanimous support of the loyal opposition.

Part of the reason for their success stemmed from the fact that the political differences between the majority of Republicans and Democrats were very small. This meant that politicians on both sides of the aisle could negotiate workable compromises on major issues without the daunting fear of voter reprisal or retaliation from their own party bosses for not adhering to strict party doctrines. It also permitted top municipal leaders to draw freely on the expertise and wisdom of outsiders regardless of their own particular political affiliations. A product of that political era Ralph Perk played by those rules.

This accommodating approach to politics begun in the immediate post-war years continued into the 1970s. It took the Watergate Scandal of the mid-1970s followed by the election of Ronald Reagan as President in 1980 to change it. In its wake, a new breed of municipal leader emerged. Unlike their predecessors, these officials felt no compulsion to compromise their political principles for the good of the majority. Instead, they used strong-armed tactics to push their own political agendas. Few expressed any concerns as to how their policies might affect the people they served. Good policies bad policies it made no difference. They knew they were correct and that was that. Ruthlessness like that knows no bounds. In their pursuit of their own self-serving goals and objectives they often left capable political reformers like Ralph Perk in the dust. No room for reason or justice in a world that has gone mad.

Critics closer to home suggest that the mayor inexorably contributed to his own defeat. They contend that Perk believed that his recent string of political successes would insure victory at the polls. Even when political polls indicated otherwise. Growing support for Dennis Kucinich and Edward Feighan during the spring of 1977 should have been a warning to Ralph Perk that trouble lay ahead. Unfortunately, the mayor overlooked these warnings preferring to belief that the voters would come to their senses in the voting booth and re-elect him. Unfortunately, he was wrong.

Some insist that Perk's appointment of Nicholas Bucur to head the new Cleveland International Trade Center may have prompted his loss. Bucur previously served as the mayor's campaign manager. Without his help, this incumbent relied mostly on volunteers from the Republican Party. These well-meaning workers lacked the commitment and enthusiasm of earlier campaigners.

Others see the nonpartisan primary as the culprit. Many of Perk's strongest backers assumed that the mayor would win and did not bother to vote for him in the primary. That enabled Kucinich and Feighan to squeak out a victory. Had the city held traditional partisan primaries, in all probability, the mayor would have won that contest and faced either Kucinich or Feighan in the general elections.

Other critics with a national perspective contend that the voting electorate wanted political change. Voters in Buffalo, New York, New Orleans, Pittsburgh and St. Louis unseated their incumbent mayors that year. The majority of these newly elected officials served their constituents with distinction for many years to come. Many argue that Perk's inability to stop white flight to the suburbs and resolve the

MUNY-Light controversy led to his defeat. Still others claim that his downfall resulted from his relentless attack on pornography and boycott of the musical revue “Oh! Calcutta!” (5)

Whatever the reason or reasons prompted his defeat, Mayor Perk took it graciously. Upon leaving office, he established Ralph Perk and Associates. This consulting firm assisted small businesses and municipal governments in securing federal grants. Perk’s successes in professionalizing the city’s police force, training the chronic unemployed for good jobs and establishing an award-winning mass transit system appear all but lost in time. Yet, they are some of the greatest accomplishments made by any mayor in the city’s history.

The question is how and why did this oversight occur? Perhaps the mayor’s modesty may account for some of it. Undoubtedly, Ralph J. Perk displayed the quintessential characteristics of a highly innovative and successful politician. He was clever, charming, and insightful, always ready to please his constituents. The mayor also represented the consummate networker. No one enjoyed mixing politics and social activities more than Perk. At the same time, he knew his bounds and he rarely overstepped them. He was not a glory seeker in the traditional sense.

This mayor loved a good time and he enjoyed public acclaim. However, he recognized the triteness of pomp and circumstance and refrained from it except when necessary. Being a self-effacing individual, Perk often minimized the role he played in developing his many successful programs. He preferred to praise a program director, commissioner or staff member rather than take the credit himself. Over time, the public appears to have forgotten the indispensable role this

mayor played in these initiatives. The fact that most of his administrators ran their agencies or departments in an efficient manner may further explain it.

Rumormongers at that time contended that some of his best programs were watered down versions of initiatives first introduced by his predecessors. Nothing could be further from the truth. Perk's unique approach to politics and public service distinguished him from others. With boundless energy and unbending determination, Mayor Perk pursued his political ambitions in a logical way. All three programs discussed in this writing represented well-articulated initiatives executed by an insightful leader with the help of highly competent administrators, commissioners and community leaders.

The two mayors preceding Ralph Perk may have been effective administrators; however, they never received the kind of extensive federal funds he did. Mayors Locher and Stokes may have enjoyed cordial relations with the White House; yet, neither could boast of an intimate relationship with the Presidents. Mayor Perk, on the other hand, enjoyed strong personal connections with both Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford.

This carefully forged network enabled him to tap into sizeable federal grants for a wide variety of programs. What is even more amazing is that Ralph Perk accomplished all of this with a minimum of grandstanding. His unprecedented successes during dire economic times demonstrated his competency. His low-key cooperative leadership style is well worth emulating in today's highly volatile world.

## ENDNOTES

1. **“Cleveland’s Mayor Perk Eliminated by Two Democrats in Primary Vote, Young Winners to Face Each Other on November 8,” The New York Times, October 5, 1977.**
2. **“Cleveland Plain Dealer Endorses Perk, Feighan for Mayor,” The Cleveland Plain Dealer, September 25, 1977.**
3. **City of Cleveland, Ohio Official Statement, \$60,000,000 Airport System Revenue Bonds, Series A, November 1, 1976.**
4. **Both local newspapers were quick in responding to Mayor Perk’s loss see “Postmortem Apathy Did Perk In,” The Cleveland Press, October 6, 1977 and David Abbott, “Little People’s Support for ‘Ice Peddler’ Melts After Six Years, Curtain Falls,” The Cleveland Plain Dealer, October 5, 1977.**
5. **U.S. Judge William K. Thomas on August 9, 1977 ordered the City of Cleveland to sign a contract with Mr. Dyke N. Spear, the producer of Oh! Calcutta! Judge Thomas said that the City of Cleveland had violated Mr. Spear’s constitutional rights of freedom of speech. Christine Jindra, “Nude Play in Again at Music Hall, City is Ordered to Allow ‘Oh! Calcutta!’” The Cleveland Plain Dealer, August 10, 1977.**