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The people put Harold Washington in City Hall

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Harold Washington campaigning with Muhammad Ali.

The long shadow of the Chicago race riot, Part 7

By 1970, people of color were already close to half of Chicago's population. The

Daley machine — which still had white ward bosses on the overwhelmingly Black West Side — was untenable. So was the apartheid government in South Africa.

In both cases, it took a long struggle to get rid of the regime. The Black masses responded to the murders of Fred Hampton and Mark Clark by voting for Bernard Carey — the Republican candidate for states attorney — at the next election. Helping elect Hanrahan's opponent seemed to be the only way to protest this atrocity.

Richard J. Daley was re-elected by wide margins in both 1971 and 1975. Despite these landslides, the ties that bound the Black masses to the Machine continued to disintegrate. Particularly significant was the defection of the African American congressman, Ralph M. Metcalfe.

Metcalfe had won a gold medal under the gaze of Adolf Hitler at the 1936 Olympics in Berlin. He was a member of the winning 400-meter relay team that included Jesse Owens. Incorporated into the Machine, the great athlete was elected alderman in 1955.

When Dr. King came to Chicago in 1966, it wasn't with Metcalfe's backing. Following the death of Congressman William L. Dawson in 1970, Ralph Metcalfe was elected to fill the same First District seat.

By inheriting Dawson's congressional seat, Metcalfe automatically became the most prominent African American leader in the Daley Machine. But this didn't translate to any real power or even influence.

The turning point for Ralph Metcalfe came when a close friend, a well-known African American physician, was dragged out of a car and beaten up by Chicago cops. To the police it was just another case of "driving while Black."

Behind Metcalfe's public break with Daley was the pent-up wrath of the Black

community. With the Black Panther Party decimated, this anger found its public expression within the Democratic Party itself. One African American politician after another came out in opposition to the Machine.

The racist circus that broke out after Richard J. Daley died on Dec. 20, 1976, helped along this process. By this time, the City Council's "President Pro Tempore" was usually a Black alderman. (Ralph Metcalfe had been chosen for the largely ceremonial post in 1969.)

This was pure tokenism. Yet it also meant that the African American Wilson Frost, who held this position, was supposed to succeed Daley.

Frost was chased out of City Hall during Christmas week. The racist aldermen couldn't tolerate a Black mayor even for a few months until a special election could be held.

The City Council rushed to select Michael Bilandic—another product of all-white Bridgeport—to be mayor. He was inaugurated on Dec. 28, 1976.

These thieves soon turned on each other. While Bilandic was able to win the special 1977 mayoral primary, he was defeated in 1979 by Jane Byrne. A string of fiascoes are the only things this pair of mayors are remembered for.

Fast Eddie, we are ready!

What finally smashed the Machine was the mass outpouring that elected Harold Washington as Chicago's first Black mayor in 1983. Washington was Ralph Metcalfe's successor as First District congressman.

With Jane Byrne and Richard M. Daley dividing the machine vote in the Democratic primary, Washington won it with 36 percent of the vote. In the general election, Harold Washington beat the Republican Bernard Epton by a 52 percent to 48

percent margin.

These were more than elections. They were mobilizations of both the Black and Latinx masses. Tens of thousands of whites voted for Washington as well.

Communist leader Sam Marcy recognized that this election was a referendum on racism, despite the Democratic Party labels. Workers World newspaper ran three consecutive front pages devoted to this struggle against racism.

Nearly as many people voted in Chicago as would cast ballots 14 years later in New York City. Around 1,290,000 people voted in Chicago's 1983 election compared to the 1,409,347 votes cast in New York's 1997 mayoral contest. This was despite Chicago having only 40 percent of New York City's population.

The capitalist media did everything they could to prevent Washington from being elected. Five days before the election, the Chicago Tribune reported that Washington was being accused of child molestation.

Washington's victory amounted to a limited but definite political revolution. The oppressed had thrown off the Daley machine that had throttled them for decades.

Because of the gerrymandering of aldermanic districts, 29 racists controlled the City Council. Under the leadership of Edward Vrdolyak — a vulgar legal mouthpiece who was later convicted twice on corruption charges — these 29 bigots declared war on Harold Washington. This struggle wasn't restricted to the race baiting antics of "Fast Eddie" Vrdolyak and his followers.

Rudy Lozano was the most dynamic supporter of Washington in mobilization of the Latinx community. An organizer for the International Ladies Garment Workers Union, Lozano nearly won a seat on the City Council.

Rudy Lozano was assassinated by unknown gunmen in his home on June 8, 1983.

Like the murder of Polish-American labor leader John Kikowski sixty-three years before, this crime remains “unsolved” by the cops.

Behind Vrdolyak was Chicago’s capitalist class. Big capital let Fast Eddie paralyze the City Council just like they allowed racist mobs to murder African Americans in 1919.

“Fast Eddie, we are ready!” became the rallying cry of the masses. A federal judge was forced to order special City Council elections in 1986. Vrdolyak was licked.

Harold Washington was re-elected mayor in 1987. On Nov. 25th of the same year, he died of a heart attack. His picture hangs in thousands of Chicago homes as a cherished memory.

Source: Roosevelt University, External Studies Program, History 307, Module III, Chapter V, “The Decline of the Democratic Machine, 1976-1983,” by Amy Reichler.

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