



Introduction

BARACK OBAMA was a young man, only twenty-one at the time. But he must have known what was going on in Chicago. He had to. It was a major development in the scheme of things that would change his life forever. His buddy David Axelrod was there, right in the thick of it. He had the mustache too, and he was very young. He was a hotshot new reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, fresh out of the University of Chicago. He seemed to be everywhere in the campaign, his byline appearing almost every day in the *Trib*. The kid was learning about race and politics. He would become a premier political consultant and the maker of a president.

It was 1983, the time when the African American voter came alive in Chicago. Oh, the black man had a right to vote in America. The voting rights act of the Johnson Administration had settled that. And yes, some blacks had been elected mayor in big cities: Carl Stokes in Cleveland, Richard Hatcher in Gary, Indiana, Coleman Young in Detroit and others. But many of those cities were in decline, torn by rioting and unrest. Whites had fled those cities.

Chicago was different. Chicago was a booming place. There was some white flight, but a large portion of the white ethnic population had held its ground. So it was a city deeply divided by race. The geographical dividing lines were major streets. And you could drive along one of these thoroughfares and see it. The Polish, the Irish, the Italians are over there. The brothers are over that way.

Blacks were part of the Democratic Machine in Chicago. They had a slice of the pie. But for many, the feeling was, “The boss man

has given us some nice scraps from his table.” African Americans came out to vote, but it was a controlled Machine vote and a kind of apathy had settled over the rest of the population. Things were still the same and the “white man was still a bitch with his shit” in Chicago. So, while the Democratic Party got the vote it wanted, everybody else on the South Side and the West Side stayed home. Things were about to change.

I’m standing on the street on the near Northwest Side of Chicago when I see Bernie Epton approaching me. He has just finished a news conference about his plans to improve housing and schools. There must be close to a hundred photographers and reporters dispersing and now here’s Bernie coming toward me.

It was early April and still overcoat cold in Chicago. Bernie was running for mayor. Can you believe it? A Jewish Republican from the intellectual neighborhood around the University of Chicago and he’s a nose hair away from winning the election just a couple of weeks away. Now he’s walking my way and I’m a little nervous because there’s still a lot of media around and I’m trying to figure out what he wants with me.

The news media had come from all over the world to cover this wild campaign. Just that morning a reporter from Australia rushed up to me: “Is he really as big a racist as they make him out to be?” I told him I didn’t think so, but by this time I wasn’t sure what was going on. Bernie was being portrayed as a racist; there was no doubt about that. It didn’t help that his campaign had come up with that nasty slogan: EPTON, BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE. What the hell was that all about? Most African Americans and many others took it to mean: EPTON, BEFORE IT’S TOO LATE AND CHICAGO HAS A BLACK MAYOR. Now Bernie was in front of me.

“Pete, how much money do you make?”

“What?”

“I want to know how much you make. Are you under a contract to NBC?”

“Bernie, what the hell are you talking about? Why are you asking me this?”

“Peter, I’m going to win this election and I want to hire you as my press secretary. The city can’t afford to pay you what NBC is paying you but I’ll make up the difference from my own pocket. If I get elected I’ve got to have people around me I can trust and I think you’re that type of person.”

“Bernie, I’ve got six kids. Some of them are still in high school. I’d have to move into the city. There’s no way I could do this. And you shouldn’t be making an offer like this to me today. I’m a reporter covering your campaign. It’s a conflict of interest.”

I said that last part loud because several reporters were moving closer to us, all of them on the ear.

Actually, I was flattered by Bernie Epton’s offer. I had been in the news business for twenty years and I was becoming disillusioned. We were always trying to tear the politicians down, destroy them, really. It was a badge of honor if you could dig up some scandal on somebody, knock him out of a race, even better if you could get somebody indicted and then, the super bowl trophy, send a politician to jail.

My problem was I liked most of the politicians I covered. Does that sound crazy? I really did. Yeah, there were some bad ones. I’m not that goofy. And I covered enough cases in the federal court to know that on occasion one of them needed to go to jail. But I found most of them were like the rest of us, loaded with flaws, stumbling along, trying to get it halfway right.

Take the candidates for mayor in 1983. They weren’t all that bad.

Bernie Epton, for example, the guy who wanted me to be his press secretary. I really didn’t know much about him until he ran for mayor. He was in the legislature, and I knew him only as the guy frequently observed leaning back in his big leather chair on the House floor with a hot white towel covering his head. He had suffered from severe headaches for years. One time he passed out on the House floor. Worried colleagues rushed to his side. One of them was Bruce Douglas, a dentist from the North Side of Chicago. “Get that dentist out of here,” Bernie gasped as he came around. “I don’t need a dentist.” Bernie was OK then, just a fainting spell. Oh, yeah, he had a real dry sense of humor. But the headaches

continued. The headaches, I thought, may have had something to do with his service in World War II. Bernie had flown 25 bombing missions over Europe and been awarded two Distinguished Flying Crosses. There were many combat veterans serving in the Illinois House with Bernie in the 1970s, including a Congressional Medal of Honor winner, Clyde Choate from Anna, Illinois.

The incumbent in the race for mayor in 1983 was Jane Byrne. She was a real character. When Jane was in office, there were no slow news days in Chicago. In terms of smart and crafty, Jane probably had more raw talent than any of the other candidates. But she certainly had no adequate preparation for managing a city the size of Chicago. And she frequently made the mistake of taking advice from her husband, a former newspaperman, Jay McMullen. Byrne's chances of getting elected mayor in 1979 were close to zero, but a 100-year snow storm greeted Chicago in the new year. The snow didn't start to melt until Election Day in February, and Chicagoans went to the polls to vent their anger at the Democratic Machine and send that crazy little lady with the blonde wig to the fifth floor of City Hall.

I liked Jane. She was refreshing. In contrast to the tight-lipped organization Democrats, Byrne was famous for off-the-cuff proclamations as she walked down the hallway. Usually her remarks made front-page news. Jane Byrne had faced tragedy in her early life. Her first husband, a Marine pilot, was killed while attempting to land his plane at the Glenview, Illinois, Naval Air Station. Jane was left to make her way with a baby girl, all alone. She found some solace in politics, working on the campaign of John F. Kennedy. Eventually she worked her way up to Commissioner of Consumer Sales for the city of Chicago and Co-chair of the Cook County Democratic Party. And, while her critics privately called her bitchy and neurotic, the public seemed to like this feisty woman. Another storm was in her future, a storm brewing in Chicago's black community, as in: We're tired of handouts from the Democratic Party, how about giving us a crack at the big time, it's our turn, baby!

One of the leaders of this movement was Harold Washington, a congressman and former state senator from the South Side. If

anybody knew about plantation politics, it was Harold. He grew up with it. His father had been in it. The Democratic organization was his life blood. He even sided with Mayor Daley when Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., came to town in the mid-60s. But Harold had a mid-life course change and began to denounce machine politics, exhorting the African American community to rise up and become an independent force in Chicago politics. Harold Washington would be a candidate for mayor in 1983.

Harold came with a fabulous smile, quick wit and cool rhetorical style. He too was a World War II veteran who had served in the Army Air Corps in the South Pacific, helping to build air strips on the islands leading to Japan. But he also had some baggage. He had spent thirty-six days in jail for failing to file income tax returns. And the state had once suspended his law license for failing to show up in court for clients who had paid him fees. A friend said these events came at a down time in Harold's life. But he was back now. And newspaper columnist Mike Royko noted that Harold didn't owe the government much money. He hadn't made that much. He just didn't file the returns.

It seemed everybody in the 1983 race for mayor was trying to make a comeback of sorts. So was Richard M. Daley. He was the son of the late mayor, and so far had not distinguished himself. Yes, he had been elected State's Attorney of Cook County recently and had served in the Illinois Senate, but Chicagoans still thought of the late mayor's sons the way columnist Royko had referred to them: Curly, Larry and Moe. These early predictions about the Daley boys would not pan out in future years. They survived pretty well in Chicago following their father's death. One would become a member of President Clinton's cabinet, manage a presidential campaign, and later become chief of staff for President Barack Obama. Another would hold his own as a Cook County Commissioner. A third was a prominent attorney in private practice.

Richard M. Daley opened his political career as a state senator, his election being a mere formality as the son of the mayor in the home district on the South Side. His early years in the legislature were unremarkable. He hung out with slippery characters and pushed

some legislation that got his colleagues wondering if he was acting for his father. The *Tribune's* Ed McManus wrote a humorous story about the concern of Senate leaders, all of whom were afraid to call up the old man to ask if young Rich had his blessing on some of this stuff. I can remember approaching him in the capitol in those days. A nice enough fellow but very shy. Even small talk with a reporter made him very nervous.

Daley too would suffer a tragedy that would change his life. A son, Kevin, would be born with spina bifida. During the legislative sessions, Daley would frequently commute by plane every day between Springfield and Chicago so he could be at the hospital with his boy in the evenings. Kevin would survive for two years before the disease finally claimed his life. And Richard M. Daley would become a better senator. He sponsored legislation to improve the archaic mental health system in Illinois and would lead a fight to repeal the sales tax on food and medicine, a feat that would draw ire from then-mayor Jane Byrne.

So here they all were, ready to do battle in the election of 1983 for mayor of Chicago. The candidates would do and authorize things they might never have dreamed of doing. Epithets and nasty innuendoes would be thrown. The race card would fall many times. Medical records would be stolen. On occasion, rocks would crash through the windows of storefront campaign offices. Brothers would turn against brothers and mothers against sons. The political handling business had become a cottage industry by then, out of New York and Washington, D.C. Many of these bozos came to town, weaving their mischief and half-truths. And the news media was spinning out of control. CNN had begun twenty-four-hour news coverage. British-style journalism invaded the United States and the tabloid news shows were firing up. The networks followed with cheap documentaries. The “in your face” style was in vogue, not just in the media, but in politics and business. There was profit to be made in TV news. No longer would it be public service. The crafty political handlers knew what the media wanted: not campaign position papers, but confrontation.

The campaign and the election would shake the city to its foundation and test its citizens. When it was over the political wars continued, causing the *Wall Street Journal* to look out across the Hudson River toward the wasteland, shake its head, and call Chicago “Beirut by the lake.”

PART I



*After the
Mayor Died*

Richard J. Daley

WHEN I CAME TO CHICAGO in 1968, Mayor Richard J. Daley was in his mid-sixties. He was in the prime of his life and his political career. He presided with near absolute power over the politics and government of Chicago and surrounding Cook County, Illinois. Presidents sought his advice and support.

If anyone wanted to write a textbook on how to become a successful politician in America, they would do well to use Richard J. Daley as a model. It took him a long time to get to the top. He was almost fifty-five years old when first elected mayor of Chicago. He had spent the previous thirty years in preparation. Daley had held positions in the county comptroller's office, the clerk's office, the treasurer's office. He had been state revenue director and served in the state Senate. He was an expert in the financial affairs of local government. He knew where the money came from and how it was spent. He also knew politics. Daley had started out running errands for aldermen behind the City Council chambers, worked for a ward committeeman and became one himself. He once ran for sheriff and lost.

Having come up in the era of Mayor Anton Cermak and gangster Al Capone, he also knew about corruption and how it related to government. He knew how taverns got their licenses. But, in his early years as mayor, Daley was viewed as a reformer. He took many powers away from the City Council whose members were known as gray wolves because of their insatiable appetite for graft. Daley was also a builder. He presided over expressway construction projects and a building boom in the Loop unparalleled in any American city.