

Council Wars

The Battle For City Hall

Key Players Reassess The Wrangling And Maneuvering That Divided The City 10 Years Ago

October 31, 1993 | By Jeff Lyon, a Magazine staff writer.

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Harold Washington used to josh-some people joke; Washington was a joshier-that he planned to remain mayor of Chicago for 20 years. Had he not died of a heart attack in 1987, seven months into his second term, Chicago's first black mayor would be halfway there this year-assuming, of course, that the political gods were willing.

More than 10 years have passed since Washington's stem-winding first inaugural address, in which he warned incoming aldermen that "business as usual" would no longer be accepted in City Hall. That declaration proved to be the opening shot of what Chicago comedian Aaron Freeman would christen "Council Wars." Over the next several years, a majority bloc of 29 white aldermen would dig their heels in and put city government on pause.



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Within moments of the inaugural address, Ald. Bernard Stone was telling the press portentously: "That was a unifying speech. I think we're all united now. Maybe not the way he wanted, though."

Stone's drift was apparent. The new mayor was in for trouble. Democratic regulars in the City Council, offended by Washington's refusal to reach out to them and upset by word that he intended to demote key council kingpins such as Ald. Edward Vrdolyak and Ald. Edward Burke by putting them in less influential posts, had girded themselves for battle.

At Washington's first council meeting on May 2, the opposition bloc, led by a defiant Vrdolyak and Burke, ignored the new mayor's attempt to adjourn the meeting. Upon Washington's exit from the chamber, they proceeded to ram

through a fundamental reorganization of the council and its rules, designed to strip much of the power from the mayor and his 21 aldermanic allies.

The "Vrdolyak 29," as it became known, voted itself every position of authority in the council. It raised the number of committees by half and assigned a third of the chairmanships to aldermen serving their first week in office.

Washington challenged the move in court, but after an eight-week legal battle the Illinois Supreme Court upheld two lower court rulings that the majority aldermen had acted within the law.

By midsummer, the stalemate was in full bloom. Each time Washington tried to get part of his legislative agenda through, the 29 would, with rare exception, block it or riddle it with amendments. Conversely, when the 29 passed legislation of its own, Washington could be counted on to veto it, knowing his foes were four votes shy of the two-thirds needed to override him. Meanwhile, the 29 tried to tie Washington's hands by refusing to approve his departmental appointments. The practical effect was nil, because the designees were able to serve anyway. But the symbolism was clear: Harold was being stymied.

Where you stood on the issue depended on your point of view. To some, the 29 were valiant defenders of stability and order, a bulwark against chaos. If that perception was fueled by racial fears among whites, the leaders of the 29 did not seem to mind. They were conspiring to make Washington look ineffectual, and among some segments in the city, they did.

To others, the 29 were a pack of greedy opportunists who, if not racists themselves, were pandering to racist sentiment in their drive to hang on to power and privilege. By these lights, Washington was a sympathetic figure who was being unfairly hampered by a mean-spirited bunch.

The truth was that vital matters, such as budgets, continued to get through the council. But the impression was that Chicago had ground to a halt. Other cities watched the struggle gleefully, lampooning Chicago as "Beirut on the Lake."



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The standoff continued until 1986, when Washington was able to eke out a razor-thin majority in the council in that year's special aldermanic elections. The mayor had prevailed in the test of wills. The next April, he won re-election, and he forged an energetic agenda in such areas as housing, education, jobs and health care. But death would intervene on Nov. 25, 1987, cutting short a career that was about to hit full stride.

"Council Wars" have since faded into memory. A few participants, notably Vrdolyak, never recaptured the political strength they enjoyed before the episode. Meanwhile, by resisting so tenaciously, the late mayor seems to have ensured that many of his goals, such as a more open government, greater minority representation and more diversity of opinion, would outlive him.

To assess the impact of "Council Wars" on the life of the city and to mark the passage of a stormy decade, The Magazine has spoken with an assortment of key actors from the period. Their comments follow:

EUGENE SAWYER

President pro tem of the City Council during "Council Wars," Eugene Sawyer later succeeded Harold Washington as mayor in a bitterly contested council vote that led some to accuse him of being a pawn of the white power structure. The move touched off a deep rift in the African-American political community. He lost his 1989 bid for election in his own right and is currently vice president of Crown Energy Inc.

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