For the better part of 40 years, Frank J. Lausche dominated politics in Ohio. No one before or since has come close to his record.

PHOTO BY GORDON FISCHER
FRANK LAUSCHEN

A legend in Ohio politics

Party bosses hated him. Some politicians loathed his very presence. Big business, especially the oil business, thought him a threat to profit margins. Sometimes it seemed as if no one liked Frank J. Lausche.

No one, that is, except the people.

It has been more than 17 years since time, age and organized labor threw a retirement party for Lausche, driving him from office with a defeat in the Democratic Party primary election for the U.S. Senate.

To most persons under 40, the mention of his name draws a blank stare. To today’s new political leaders, Lausche, who will be 90 years old on Thursday, represents little more than a reminder of an earlier era. But to the few left who felt his political presence he is a living legend.

For the better part of 40 years, Frank J. Lausche dominated politics in Ohio. No one before him, no one since, and possibly no one in the future, will come close to matching the Lausche record. From 1932 to 1968, he held elected office for all but two years. He served three terms as a judge, two terms as mayor, a record-setting five terms as governor and another two terms in the U.S. Senate before the 1968 defeat at the hands of John J. Gilligan.

Along the way, Lausche blazed new trails and altered Ohio’s political landscape. As the first Cleveland mayor of Eastern European descent and the state’s first Catholic governor, Lausche opened impenetrable political doors to a long line of Clevelanders with names like Celebrezze, Locher, Perk, Kucinich and Voinovich.


“Frank had a people-to-people charisma that is the sort of thing you see in Ronald Reagan. It’s not very often in political history that we witness a speaker who can transfer himself to the group. Frank had that uncanny capacity. Some of us in politics pick up little bits of it. Frank had it all. It was very difficult to share any podium with him, because when Frank got through with a crowd, there wasn’t much left.

“In a sense, Frank Lausche paved the way for ethnic political leaders in this country. He opened a window of opportu-

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Brent Larkin is politics writer for The Plain Dealer.
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city for many other people by breaking through a very
important ethnic and class barrier. Frank Lausche was
truly a political pioneer.”

Former Mayor Ralph J. Perk (1971-1977), a Repub-
lican, said simply, “Frank Lausche was the George
Washington of the nationali-
ties movement.”

Despite having grown
accustomed to such praise,
Lausche sees fame as fleeting
and insists that he wants to
be remembered only as “a
good citizen” not a political
hero. To drive home the point,
he told of sitting at a table
recently in the cafeteria of
the Cleveland Clinic.

“There must have been 400
people that paid for their food
and saw me sitting there.
And there wasn’t a damn one
that recognized me. The
moral of the story is this:
Famous for the day, soon
forgotten with the passing of
that day.”

Protests notwithstanding,
there are many who will
never forget. They won’t for-
ger how Lausche — a Demo-
ocrat — defied and regularly
defeated the Democratic
Party machine; how he
amassed winning vote totals
of unprecedented propor-
tions; how he was once
regarded as a serious pros-
ppect for the presidency, and
how, in later years, he regu-
larly expressed his fiercely
independent political nature
by endorsing a slew of Repub-
licans for national, state and
local offices.

Even at 90 Lausche is
hardly forgettable. True, the
physical signs of age are
there — a hearing aid, a slow
walk and an occasional pause
to jog the memory. But the
bushy eyebrows, the abun-
dant curly white hair and
that powerfully resonant and
elegant voice are also there.

When he’s not in Cleveland
for a monthly visit, his usual
routine includes driving from
his Bethesda, Md., home to
the famous Burning Tree
Country Club four days a
week to play golf.

He once excelled at the
game that now serves as the
most frustrating reminder
of his 90 years. “I play golf, to
my great sorrow. I once had
a handicap of eight and now
I’ve got a handicap of 30.
That’s a dismal state to be in
as a human being.”

Like other senior citizens,
Lausche also has found
that the passing of friends
and loved ones sometimes
makes for a lonely life. Recently,
Lausche lost the two men
who were perhaps his dearest
friends: Cleveland lawyer
John E. Elder, and Zoltan
Gombos, publisher of the
Hungarian language news-
paper Szabadsg. In 1981,
Lausche’s wife and com-
paion of 53 years, Jane Sheal
Lausche, died in her sleep.
They had no children.

“I’m retired, I’m alone and
time gets heavy on my
hands,” he said, with a trace
of sadness. “I live in a lonely
house all by myself, doing my
own cooking, my own
depressive contemplation
and meditation.”

But, when the talk turned
to politics past and present,
any hint of sorrow quickly
dissipated. In its place came
vibrant flashbacks of a politici-
ian who at once could be
charismatic, cantankerous,
caring and cunning; of a boy
growing up at E. 61st St. and
St. Clair Ave. when Ameri-
cans of Slovenian ancestry
at times were regarded as
second-class citizens.

L ouis and Frances
Lausche made the long
trek from Slovenia
(Yugoslavia) to St. Clair Ave.
in the 1930s. To support his
wife and seven children,
Louis Lausche sold roasted
chestnuts, and was a steel-
worker before entering the
tavern and wine-making busi-
ness. He became a leader
among the early Slovenian
settlers and a mentor to his
sons, especially young Frank.

In 1908 an operation for
gallstones, today a relatively
simple procedure, took Louis’
life. Thirteen-year-old Frank
walked to a nearby woods and
pondered his future, unaware
at the time that his strong-
willed mother would carry on
the business until her death
26 years later at age 82.

Schooled at the Central
Institute, which once occu-
pied a corner at E. 55th St.
and Woodland Ave., Lausche
spent most of his leisure time
on a baseball diamond, where
word of his exploits soon
spread far beyond what came
to be known as the 23rd
Ward. He signed on as the
third basemen with a local
sandlot team, the Stinch-
comb Engineers. Professional
baseball scouts soon took
notice of Lausche’s athletic
skills and by 1916 Lausche
was terrorizing opponents for
the Duluth, Minn., team in
the Northern League.

The next year Lausche
graduated to the Eastern League,
where he played for a
Lawrence, Mass., team. He
had a fair year at the plate
but the nation was having an
awful year. World War I was
at hand.

During the war Lausche
rose from the rank of private
to sergeant, not because of
any military skill, but
because he made the Camp
Gordon baseball team in
Augusta, Ga. A high batting
average spared Lausche from
being shipped off to battle.
When the war ended, he was
confronted with what he now
calls, “the first important
decision, and maybe the most
important decision, of my
life.”

The choice between a
career in baseball and a class-
room seat at Cleveland’s John
Marshall School of Law was
decided when Lausche heard
stories of ex-baseball players
who were sweeping streets
and digging ditches. To this
day, Lausche believes he
would have played major
league baseball had it not
been for the stories he heard
about the players who had
fallen upon hard times.

In 1921, the young lawyer
joined a firm headed by
Cyrus Locher, uncle of for-
mer mayor and now Ohio
Supreme Court Justice Ralph
S. Locher. “The Locher firm
was political, so I became
seized with the political bug
very early,” Lausche said.

He soon befriended the
legendary Ray T. Miller, then
an Irish outsider fighting a
Democratic Party he would
later rule for nearly two de-
decades. In 1931, Lausche
helped deliver the 23rd Ward in
Miller’s campaign for mayor.
He declined Miller’s offer of a
judgeship but, when a
Municipal Court vacancy
occurred in 1932, Lausche
used his friendship with the
mayor to win the gubernato-
rial appointment.

In the next year’s election,
Lausche retained the judge-
ship, but soon ran for and
won a seat on the county’s
Common Pleas Court. It was
there, in the late 1930s, that
Lausche reached his rendez-
vous with political greatness.
Newspaper accounts from the
time confirm Lausche’s recall
of his memorable confrontation
with Cleveland’s underworld.

“The county of Cuyahoga
was rife with gambling
houses that were exploiting
the monies of the families
and contributing to the delin-
quency of the community,”
Lausche said. “The real rob-
bers and perpetrators of
these crimes were the opera-
tors. I decided to do some-
thing about it.”

Employing all his judicial
powers — and, at times,
exceeding them — Lausche
went to work. Along the way

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**Fiction: “Nit Picking and Butter Cremes”**

A love story

Next week in the Magazine
Republican James Garfield Stuart was, in Lausche's own words, "a brilliant scholar and a tremendous debater." South of Cleveland, where Ohio remained almost exclusively rural and largely Republican, many voters believed Lausche's election would result in the pope running the state.

In the election, which saw President Franklin D. Roosevelt lose the state by 11,500 votes, Lausche won only 10 of 88 counties, but prevailed overall by 108,000 votes. Lausche said he would have lost had it not been for the enthusiastic support he received from The Plain Dealer and Seltzer's Press.

"I was surprised I won. I still shudder when I think of the confrontations I had with that brilliant man (Stuart)."

As governor, Lausche was beholden to no one. Ralph Locher, who served as Lausche's administrative assistant and later would become one of a long line of mayors fashioned in Lausche's image, remembers his mentor as tight-fisted and fiercely independent.

"He was free as a bird. There were tough problems. He was more careful with the state's dollar than with his own. But he was also extremely compassionate. He spent hours reading the record on all clemency matters. I learned many things from him because he was such a remarkable public servant."

Near the end of his first two-year term, Lausche wanted to use a surplus that had accumulated during World War II for public welfare projects, but the Republicans urged him to call a special session of the legislature to pass a bill awarding bonuses to all returning veterans. Lausche balked, saying a special session would enable the GOP-controlled General Assembly to pass needless laws. Instead Lausche said he would sign such a bonus bill when the legislature returned to regular session the following year.

In the 1946 election, Lausche's stubborn refusal cost him the governorship, as Republican Thomas J. Herbert upset him by 41,000 votes. Herbert proved ineffective and, by 1948, Lausche was prepared to reclaim his lost prize. Challenged by nemesis Miller in the Democratic primary, Lausche carried 87 of Ohio's 88 counties, including Cuyahoga.

In the general election, Lausche campaigned extensively in the state with President Harry Truman, who was viewed as a sure loser in Ohio and nationally. Lausche was one of those who thought Truman was destined for defeat.

"I didn't think he had a chance," says Lausche. "We took a train through the state near the end of the campaign and no one on the train thought he had a chance. Only Truman thought he had a chance."

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Lausche places Truman, along with Ronald Reagan, at the head of the class as a person and a president. “He was a remarkable individual. He is the outstanding president of our time, along with Reagan. Truman and Reagan were the only ones with the guts to take on the spendthrifts.”

Truman won Ohio and the White House, while Lausche earned revenge against Herbert with a 221,261-vote landslide. Easy wins followed in 1950, 1952, 1954 and 1956, with the 1954 victory coming at the expense of one James A. Rhodes. For Lausche, the race against Rhodes was so routine he remembers very little of it.

For Rhodes, it was the campaign where he earned a Ph.D. in politics. “I was on vacation and when I returned the Republican Party told me I was their candidate. Nobody else would run against Frank. I really never thought I could win because Frank was and is a great American and a great humanitarian. He had more of a command of the English language on a platform than anyone in history. He was a straight-arrow who would never violate his own principles.”

In 1963 the death of Ohio Sen. Robert A. Taft had created a vacancy, which Lausche filled by appointing Cleveland Mayor Tom A. Burke. But Burke couldn’t hold the job, losing it to Republican George H. Bender in the same election in which Lausche defeated Rhodes.

Meanwhile, in Columbus the Republican legislature had decided that if it couldn’t beat Lausche at the ballot box, it would beat him by changing the state constitution and limiting a governor to two 4-year terms instead of an unlimited number of two-year terms. So Lausche relinquished his stronghold on the governor’s office to challenge Bender, who as a result lost the U.S. Senate seat he had occupied for only two years.

In the Senate, Lausche became more of a maverick. He intensely disliked Ohio’s other senator, Democrat Stephen M. Young, and engaged in protracted battles on the Senate floor with senators who were viewed as puppets for the oil lobby. To no avail, Lausche regularly raged over federal tax breaks provided by Congress to large oil companies. Quickly, Lausche developed the reputation as a senator who tried to block passage of bills.

“There are floor senators and there are committee senators,” said Vanik, who was a committee congressman.

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R

peatedly, Lausche took to the floor to denounce federal spending. He opposed pay raises and loudly decry the billions spent on the race to the moon. In 1966, Lausche’s frugal ways evoked the wrath of another labor legend: I. W. Abel, president of the United Steelworkers of America. Speaking before an Ohio AFL-CIO convention in Cleveland, Abel vehemently criticized Lausche’s anti-labor votes and suggested organized labor work to rid the Senate of a man who had “forgotten the people of Cleveland and the people of Ohio.”

That same year, Lausche’s longtime antagonism with Young spilled on the Senate floor during an exchange prompted by the Hough race riots. When Young referred to “trigger-happy” national guardsmen rushed to Cleveland’s East Side, Lausche, voice trembling, denounced the rioting “hugs,” implied the riots were Communist-inspired and linked the violence to civil rights leader Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. When Young rose to respond, Lausche walked out of the Senate chambers.

In retrospect, Lausche has come to view his Senate tenure with a sense of regret. “Among the most miserable and painful days of my entire political life were those spent in the U.S. Senate. I was surrounded by 70 extravagant spendthrifts of the Democratic Party. Day after day I had to keep fighting against their spending, foretelling that the day would come when an atonement would be demanded for their misdeeds. Day after day I was beaten, dreadfully. I was left totally unable to devote time to constructive new projects.”

Frustration aside, Lausche’s effort earned him a national constituency and an occasional mention as possible presidential material. In a book published last year about President Dwight D. Eisenhower’s White House years, it was reported that, during the 1952 campaign when there was talk of dumping Richard M. Nixon as a running mate, Eisenhower suggested Lausche as a replacement. However, the Republican nominee was quickly-

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<tr>
<td>3-pc. buffet set</td>
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<td>Double tier tray</td>
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<td>Low candlestick</td>
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Higbee's
LAUSCHE
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In 1968, Lausche's name again was floated as a possible presidential contender and draft-Lausche groups sprang up in eight states. Lausche admits he went to the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that year thinking he might be the choice of a deadlock convention, but insists he never seriously considered making such a race.

Back in Ohio, Democratic leaders and labor bosses were thinking quite a bit — thinking about ways to get rid of Lausche. In 1968, when Lausche sought a third Senate term, they decided to make his defeat their top priority.

The instrument of their obsession was Gilligan, a liberal Cincinnati congressman, who traveled the state declaring of Lausche:

"He talks like a Republican, votes like a Dixiecrat and never misses an opportunity to undercut the Democratic Party, its candidates and its philosophy."

Labor flooded Ohio mailboxes with literature depicting Lausche as a threat to working men and women. Lausche only stiffened in his anti-labor stances.

"That labor has decided my concept of government does not fit into its ideas of how government should be run leaves me with no sorrow or distress," he said during a campaign speech.

The increasing clout of black voters also worked against Lausche's candidacy. A year earlier, Carl B. Stokes had brought an end to the 26-year period of Cleveland mayors fashioned in Lausche's image and, during Stokes' 1967 campaign against Republican Seth C. Taft, the senator refused repeated requests that he endorse Stokes' candidacy. In the 1968 campaign, black voters were reminded of the senator's snub.

Despite these ominous signs, Lausche didn't take Gilligan seriously, doing little until the campaign's final days. After 36 years of frustration and humiliation, Lausche's enemies prevailed. At 73, Frank J. Lausche was finished as an elected official.

"For 25 years labor leaders fought me," Lausche said. "In 1968 they beat me. They flooded Ohio with money from the unions throughout the country. I wasn't conscious of what was going on. I was late in recognizing it and the turn against me occurred in the very last part of the campaign. By then, it was too late."

Already a senior citizen, Lausche slipped into private life, but he did not go quietly.

In his last day in the Senate, Lausche admitted he had voted for Nixon in the 1968 presidential election. In the years that followed, Lausche regularly...
endorsed many Republican officeholders, a practice that caused many Democrats to brand him unworthy of carrying his party’s label. Although a key to Lausche’s political success always was his ability to attract Republican votes, never before had he so openly courted GOP candidates.

In 1970 and 1971 reports surfaced that Lausche might run for governor or mayor. Again, Lausche was criticized by other Democrats and, for the first time, was ripped by the news media for being a bitter man who was unaware of that time had passed him by. Although newspaper clippings from the time indicate otherwise, Lausche insisted he never considered a comeback.

Lausche reveals no hint of regret over his record of endorsing Republicans, going so far as to say that, if he were a young man starting out in politics today, he probably would join the Republican Party.

“On the basis of past experience, the Republican Party has shown a greater purpose to be conservative and frugal with the taxpayers’ money. Parties change and times change. The Democratic Party is far from dead. In fact, it is beginning to realize it needs a more conservative approach.”

Still, Lausche at 90 is troubled over the nation’s future. He says “the world has been turned upside down” and angrily deplores what he views as a deterioration of the nation’s moral fabric. Lausche also worries about the prospect of a mechanical mistake causing “nuclear destruction.”

On the day of this interview, Lausche was at his brother Harold’s home in Gates Mills. But most of his time is spent at the place Lausche calls that “lonely house” in Maryland. There Lausche, an avid student of Shakespeare and Keats and Shelley, sometimes wonders if he chose the right profession.

“In these later, dear days of my life, I find great comfort in reading matters that are not of a political nature, but basically related to a truly decent and good life. I find comfort in reading poetry. I am awakened now with the longing that I could have studied literature or languages, or other sophisticated subjects which would have been, in the end, highly more estimable than the political profession which I followed.”

Such longings aside, Lausche seems at peace with his record in public service.

“I’m thoroughly comfortable in the realization that I gave to the people of Ohio the best that was in me. My deepest contentment lies in the fact that, while I was governor and senator and mayor, government was managed, not by any separate and selfish clique, but always by the will of the people as a whole. Democracy in its true form is what I believed in. I hated every group that tried to become an active manager of state affairs, in opposition to the responsibility of the duly elected officials.”

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*Tips for a successful holiday party*

Plus ethnic celebrations — Food ideas

Dec. 8 in the Magazine*