



*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 LAUSCHE

By Brent Larkin



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 1969, 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.

Even those not considered Lausche's close allies, like former U.S. Rep. Charles A. Vanik (1955-1981) still speak of him with a reverence reserved for a select few. To Vanik, Lausche's unparalleled success was a matter of style.

"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 opportunity.

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Brent Larkin is politics writer for The Plain Dealer.

LAUSCHE

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nity 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 Republican, said simply, "Frank Lausche was the George Washington of the nationalities 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 forget how Lausche — a Democrat — defied and regularly defeated the Democratic Party machine; how he amassed winning vote totals of unprecedented proportions; how he was once regarded as a serious prospect for the presidency, and how, in later years, he regularly expressed his fiercely-independent political nature by endorsing a slew of Republicans 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 abundant curly white hair and that powerfully resonant and eloquent voice also are 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.



Lausche as mayor of Cleveland in 1943.

PD LIBRARY PHOTO

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 newspaper Szabadsag. In 1981, Lausche's wife and companion 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 politician who at once could be charismatic, cantankerous, caring and cunning; of a boy growing up at E. 61st St. and St. Clair Ave. when Americans of Slovenian ancestry at times were regarded as second-class citizens.

Louis and Frances Lausche made the long trek from Slovenia (Yugoslavia) to St. Clair Ave. in the 1890s. To support his wife and seven children, Louis Lausche sold roasted chestnuts, and was a steelworker before entering the tavern and wine-making business. 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 62.

Schooled at the Central Institute, which once occupied 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 Stinchcomb 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 classroom 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 former 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.

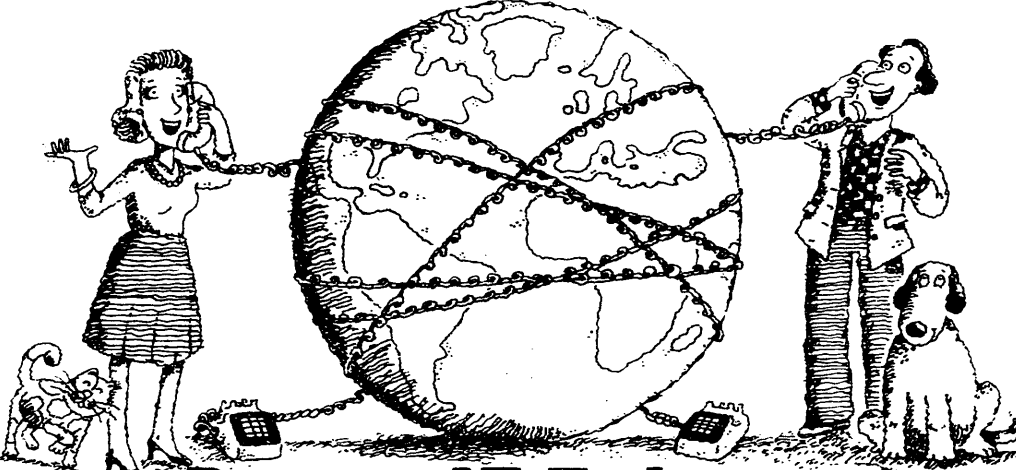
He soon befriended the legendary Ray T. Miller, then an Irish outsider fighting a Democratic Party he would later rule for nearly two decades. In 1931, Lausche helped deliver the 23rd Ward in Miller's campaign for mayor. He declined Miller's offer of a cabinet job but, when a Municipal Court vacancy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

In the next year's election, Lausche retained the judgeship, 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 rendezvous with political greatness. Newspaper accounts from the time confirm Lausche's recall of his notorious 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 delinquency of the community," Lausche said. "The real robbers and perpetrators of these crimes were the operators. I decided to do something 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 Crèmes"
A love story
Next week in the Magazine

LAUSCHE

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he picked up a staunch ally in Safety Director Eliot Ness, who would later be lionized in the popular television series "The Untouchables." With the Lausche-Ness team as enemies, the gamblers were anything but untouchable. Raids, arrests and convictions quickly resulted in connection with gambling houses in Cleveland, Newburgh Heights, Richmond Heights and Maple Heights.

Enter Louis B. Seltzer, the late, loved, loathed and all-powerful editor of the Cleveland Press.

In a 1939 front-page editorial, Seltzer urged Lausche to run for mayor. "He made me by his original request for me to run for mayor," Lausche would say later, even though he declined Seltzer's invitation. Seltzer, who literally could make or break any local politician of his choosing, was a bit miffed at Lausche's decision, but nevertheless endorsed Lausche in the mayoral race two years later. At a testimonial for Lausche in the early 1970s, Seltzer said, "He was the most honest man I've met in politics. He could have been president."

The 1941 mayoral race produced a permanent parting of the ways between Lausche and Ray T. Miller, by then a heavy-handed, yet gifted, party boss. After defeating Republican Edward Blythin by 50,700 votes, Lausche was summoned to a meeting with Miller and other party leaders and told to sack Ness as safety director.

"I had a close relationship with Ness," Lausche said. "Ness was deeply in my consciousness as the best man to fill that post. So I kept him and that's when the split (with Miller) took place."

It was as mayor that Lausche's notorious frugality surfaced. City services came before grandiose building projects. Also surfacing in those early days was the start of a career-long antagonism with labor. The falling out began in Lausche's first term, as the new mayor repeatedly opposed pay raises for city workers. Then in 1943, in the midst of a nationwide coal workers strike, Lausche denounced the "lawlessness" of legendary labor leader John L. Lewis. At an early date, Lausche had dashed any hope of a future peace pact with union bosses.

Denounced in union halls, Lausche soon became loved in the neighborhoods. In 1943 he became the first Democratic mayor in 30 years to repeat, capturing 71% of the overall vote and 32 of the city's 33 wards. The victory also earned Lausche a story in Time magazine entitled, "Man to Watch."

But by 1944, with the world again at war, Columbus called and Lausche answered affirmatively. For Lausche, his religion and the qualifications of his opponent seemed to dictate certain defeat.

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.

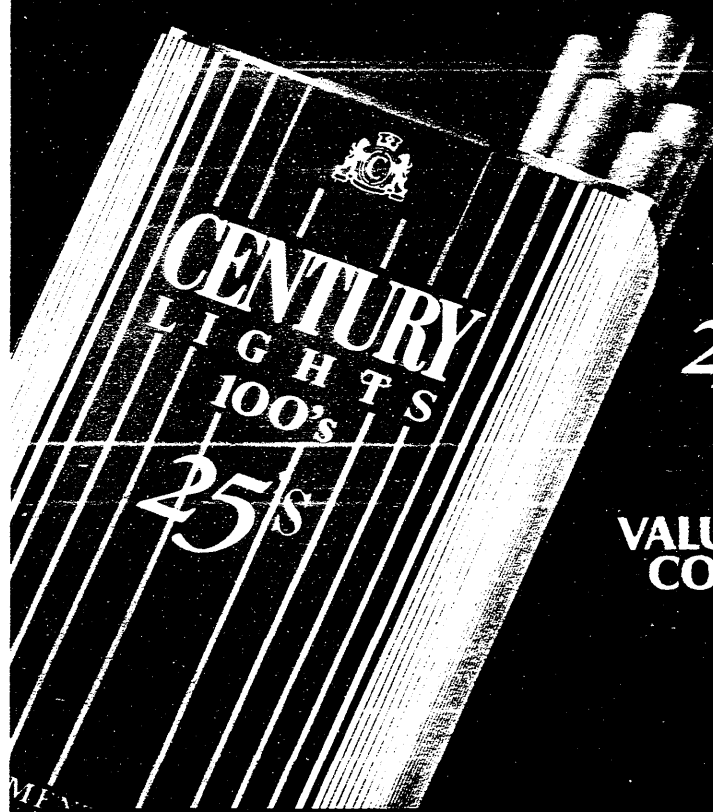
In the general election, Lausche campaigned extensively in the state with President Harry Truman, who was viewed as a sure loser in Ohio and nationally. Lausche was one of those who thought Truman was destined for defeat.

"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

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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 1953 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 stranglehold 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.

"Some senators prefer working through committees and others prefer working on the Senate floor. Frank was a floor senator. He was in everybody's business as a floor senator. While he wasn't always very successful, he had nothing to lose in openly criticizing others because he wouldn't participate in the pork barrel politics."

Repeatedly, Lausche took to the floor to denounce federal spending. He opposed pay raises and loudly decried 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 "thugs," 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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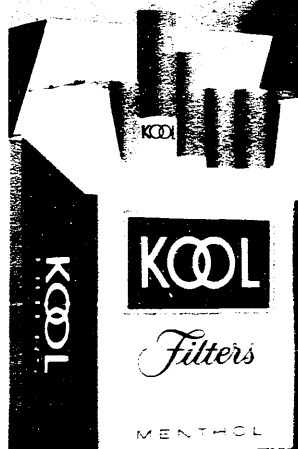
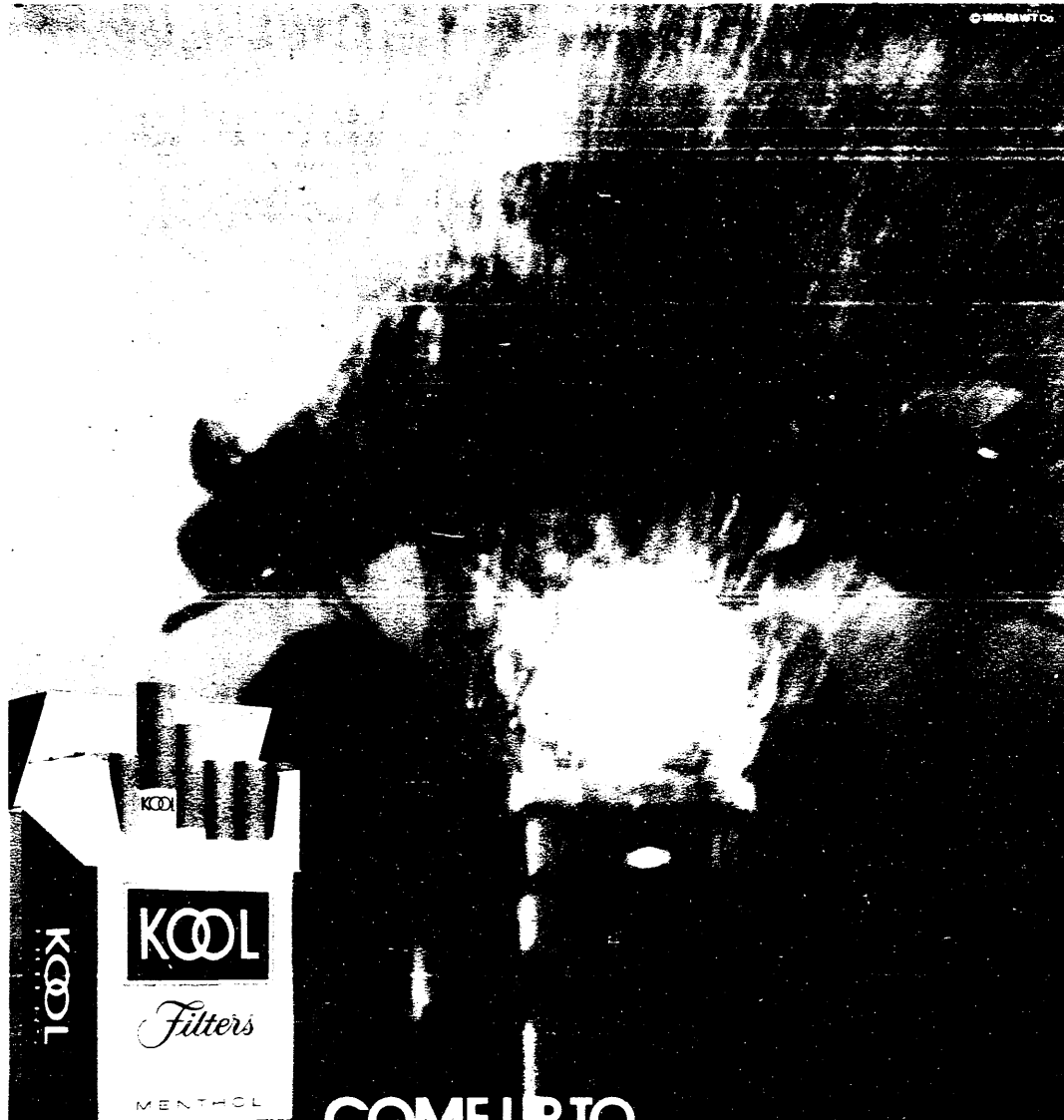
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LAUSCHE

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convinced by advisors that it would be a mistake to select a Democrat as a running mate.

In 1960, 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 deadlocked 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 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 esteemable 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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