

*'You gotta be tough' in Cleveland.  
But maybe it's not so bad*

# THE POLITICS of CONFRONTATION

BY BRENT LARKIN

**N**ot long ago, on an isolated island beach off the coast of Central America, a native was observed wearing a T-shirt which boasted, "Cleveland — You Gotta Be Tough."

The color of that once popular garment had faded badly. The message it conveys has not. Today, be it in Boston, Phoenix, San Diego or Santo Domingo, the reputation of Cleveland as an excessively tough political place haunts the city and tarnishes its image. This stigma, born in the late 1960s and solidified in the turbulent 1970s, persists despite the more placid 1980s, which have witnessed a drastic reduction in Cleveland's political blood pressure.

Because reputations don't die readily, one event in January led to another outbreak of national snickering and disgust with Cleveland's perceived passion for political hardball. In the suicidal "open letter" to the citizenry left behind by schools superintendent Frederick D. Holliday, the stench of city politics was singled out as a destructive force which was robbing Cleveland of progress and threatening its ability to survive.

Locally, it was no surprise that "good government types" seized the Holliday suicide to issue impassioned pleas for political reform, pleas which placed the blame for an area's multitude of problems at the doorstep of a select few who owe their salaries to the electorate. No one gripes more about the politics of Cleveland than those who live in or near Cleveland. When Clevelanders constantly deplore city politics, it perpetuates the national perception.

Greater Clevelanders have long been burdened by an inferiority complex which has its origin in the political system. Decades of lousy sports teams have contributed to the complex, but politics are what regularly give the city a bad name. Former Mayor Ralph J. Perk's burning hair and the default during the administration of former Mayor Dennis J. Kucinich are still targets of real and would-be jokesters looking for a laugh at the city's expense.

Political life in Cleveland was, indeed, tough during Kucinich's two-year tenure at City Hall,

but it has been more than five years since George V. Voinovich replaced Kucinich as mayor and instilled a brand of politics more conducive to sleep than to confrontation. If Kucinich can play a conciliatory role in council, as is the case today, then Cleveland's "gotta be tough" image might be nothing more than an outdated mirage.

As City Council President George Forbes, D-9, a master at the hardball variety of politics, told the City Club a few days after Holliday's suicide, "This is not Chicago. Voinovich is not Washington and I am not Vrdolyak." Forbes' half-mixed metaphor made its point. Chicago, Boston, New York, San Francisco, and Newark are just a few places where politics is often practiced on a plane at least as low as it is in Cleveland.

Nevertheless, politics in Cleveland are still unique; not because of the politicians, but because of those who elect them.

**F**or decades, Cleveland's populace has seemed to harbor a deep resentment for government in general. Add to that resentment a candidate or officeholder shrewd enough to exploit it, and the result can be instantaneous confrontation.

Above all, this dissatisfaction had its roots in economic conditions more than in racial resentment, which has become the often-perceived cause of Cleveland's political strife. Race became a factor later on, but the origins of Cleveland's politics date back to the industrial revolution, not the revolution for equality of the 1960s.

Cleveland's growth was a direct result of the immigration influx of Irish, Polish, Hungarian, Slovenian and other families of Eastern European heritage who took up residence in what was a job-rich area, especially for those willing to work long hours for little pay. As Cleveland grew, attitudes became deeply imbedded.

The working class remained in the city, separated from their bosses, who moved to the more fashionable suburbs. Eventually, the rise of unions and an oversupply of labor hardened the "us against them" attitudes. Blue-collar life was a

struggle. Workers and their families had to fight for what they got and fight even harder to keep it.

They were great patriots, these Clevelanders, but they were also skeptical about government. The mix was healthy, yet volatile. Elected officials who fought their fight were their heroes. The ones who didn't were their enemies. The legendary Tom L. Johnson (mayor from 1901 to 1909) is credited as the local founder of this "power to the people" political philosophy, but it did not become a bona fide reality until nearly two decades later when, in 1935, a Democratic electorate opted for the "independent" politics of Republican mayoral candidate Harold Burton.

By the end of World War II this mind-set had formed the foundation of Cleveland's political attitudes. An obscure state senator, Anthony J. Celebrezze, had a field day in the 1953 mayoral primary, running as much against Democratic Party boss Ray T. Miller as against his organization-endorsed opponent, Albert S. Porter. When, in 1962, Celebrezze was appointed to the cabinet of President John F. Kennedy, the mayor's office passed to another outsider, Ralph J. Locher.

But soon there would be another new breed of Clevelanders to flex a collective political muscle. The civil rights movement made blacks, who by the mid-1960s comprised upwards of 40% of Cleveland's population, aware of their greatest untapped resource — political power. In 1967, black voters in Cleveland taught a lesson to the nation with the election of Carl B. Stokes as the first, big-city black mayor.

Politics in Cleveland would never be the same.

The struggle of working class whites, when coupled with the demand for political recognition by newly-enlightened blacks, made an outbreak of confrontation politics inevitable. On the streets, the Stokes years witnessed rioting in Glenville. At City Hall, there were brutal political battles between the mayor and his white antagonists in council, battles which ripped the Democratic Party to shreds and divided it along racial lines. Meanwhile, at a local university, a young student named Dennis J. Kucinich watched the struggle in

*Brent Larkin covers politics for The Plain Dealer.*

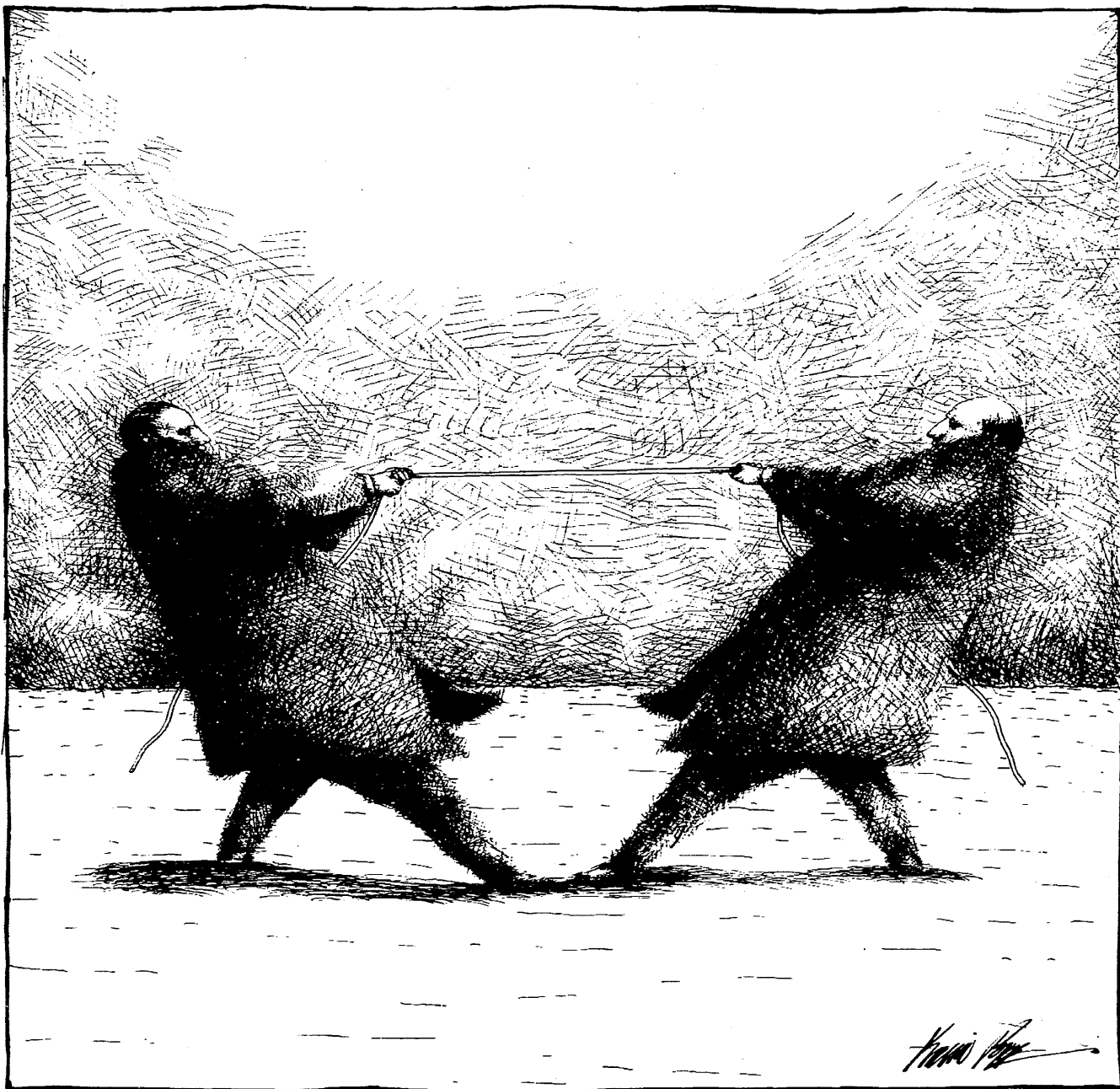


ILLUSTRATION BY KEVIN POPE

awe, all the while working on a thesis devoted to an analysis of the confrontationist style of city politics.

Today, the party still feels the effects of the divisiveness of the 1960s, as questions of race-related motives periodically rise up to haunt party leaders and pit Democrats against each other.

Negativism didn't leave with Stokes in 1971. In fact, it flourished. For the next eight years an

anti-business attitude led to the demise of a whole host of programs designed to "improve the quality of life" in Cleveland. Yet, in retrospect, this negativism produced at least a few worthwhile results. Constant clamoring by Kucinich and the likes killed, for example, an absurd idea to build a people mover and at least a couple of giveaway programs which would have turned over the Municipal Light system to the Illuminating Co. A

proposed jetport on the shores of Lake Erie and renewed talk of a subway also bit the dust, thanks in large part to the opposition of the naysayers.

In other areas, the politics of opposition proved short-sighted. Tax abatement became another target of elected officials prone to scream "give-away," enabling some Cleveland businesses to slip out of town and blame a hostile political climate. More accurately, the flight of business had more to

do with non-union wages in the Sun Belt and overseas. The politicians merely helped escort them across the city line.

Kucinich's ability to tap the electorate's resentment of business and "special interests" earned him a national reputation but, eventually, cost him a second term. Consider this example of Kucinich making corporate Cleveland the bad guy, excerpted from a Sept. 18, 1978 statement regarding the rapidly approaching default:

*"Unless the banks begin to respond to the needs of Cleveland residents, a tremendous uprising of anger and bitterness will be directed against them ... This administration will be in the forefront of a movement to severely hamper normal business operations of area banks if they do not begin to respond to the needs of city government and city residents. The banks leave us no choice but to fight back to save our city."*

With all the subtlety of a sledgehammer, Kucinich had sounded the call to arms of urban populism. This time, however, big business wasn't about to cower in the wake of his carefully-crafted political assault.

At 11:57 p.m. on Dec. 15, 1978, the city slipped into default. Politics had never been tougher and the political victims weren't the officeholders. The victims were those who elected them.

**A**s a prisoner of its own history, Cleveland politics today is just as much a blood relative of its ancestral origins. The pie is shrinking, but the city itself remains relatively poor; ringed by a suburban community which continues to enjoy substantial prosperity. This alone seems to preclude any long-term hope for a dramatic change in the nature of city politics. Long periods of tranquility, like the one being experienced now, eventually will give way to short-term bursts of dramatic conflict.

"Sure I think the politics of Cleveland are more acrimonious than in many other places," observes Norman Krumholz, who served as city planning director under three mayors and is now director for neighborhood development at Cleveland State University's College of Urban Affairs. "Cleveland's population is one which needs a great deal. In addition, its population includes vigorous black participation. It's well organized and it's a disciplined force which understands the benefits that can flow from political power. It's the same type of

*If former Mayor Dennis Kucinich can play a conciliatory role in council, as is the case today, then Cleveland's "gotta be tough" image might be nothing more than an outdated mirage.*

force used by other, white political groups earlier in the city's history."

Krumholz, who also has worked in Buffalo and Pittsburgh, says politics in those cities, both of which have populations similar to Cleveland's, are far more restrained. Those restraints, he adds, have deprived black residents of many of the advancements won by minorities in Cleveland who have fought for political recognition.

Another who has closely followed the political climate in Cleveland and other large cities is Gerald Austin, a Columbus-based political consultant who has worked in numerous campaigns throughout the Midwest.

"In terms of toughness, politics in Cuyahoga County is second only to Chicago," says Austin. "The fighting of Democrats among themselves is much more prevalent than the fighting between Democrats and Republicans. I came to Cleveland (in the late 1960s) from a tough neighborhood in the South Bronx and found that Cleveland was a microcosm of the Bronx. It's just a real tough political town."

Or, on the Republican front, consider the published remark of Mark Harroff, the Washington consultant who directed last year's losing congressional effort by former county auditor Matthew J. Hatchadorian.

"Republicans need to be prepared to use less than ethical tactics if they're going to compete on equal footing in Cuyahoga County," Harroff told a suburban newspaper.

While the opinions of Krumholz, Austin and Harroff seem to echo the national perception of Cleveland politics, there exists a large school of contrary thought.

"It's a figment of a lot of people's imagination," county Republican Party chairman Robert E.

Hughes says of the city's political image. "We've had some confrontations and some strong personalities over the years who have made it appear a lot tougher than it really is. George Voinovich has done a lot to dispel the image. The media says he's bland, but he's not bland. He's peaceful and he's made Cleveland a more peaceful town."

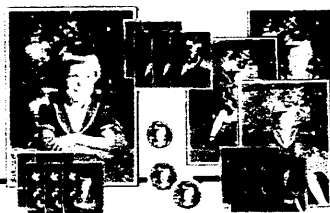
**T**he wild card in the history of Cleveland's political deck has been the news media, always a force in making or breaking both politicians and the city's image. On the newspaper side, both The Plain Dealer and the Press, especially the latter, tended to sensationalize both political confrontation and politically linked scandals. Even when the Press was at death's doorstep, competition between the two dailies was fierce and sometimes resulted in stories of exaggerated importance.

"We (the two papers) were so competitive that, if one paper supported something, the other paper would be inclined to come out against it," recalls former Press executive editor Bill Tanner, now editor of the Albuquerque (N.M.) Tribune. "If the politicians weren't knocking each other or some idea, then one of the daily papers was. It all accentuated the negative."

Beginning in the 1960s, the Press became notorious for sometimes taking petty City Hall scandals and reporting them in crime-of-the-century headlines. Find, for example, a meter reader sitting in a local saloon all afternoon and expect from the Press a two-day series on the criminal element at work in city government.

The Plain Dealer's approach to city politics was far less strident, but there is substantial evidence and a widely held opinion that The PD made a major contribution to the distortion of Cleveland's plight during the summer of 1978, when the newspaper conducted what had all the earmarks of a vendetta aimed at recalling Kucinich from office. Unfortunately, the anti-Kucinich campaign was not-so-cleverly disguised as "news."

Since the death of the Press, many have raised legitimate arguments that Cleveland has suffered from the absence of competition. Among the biggest losers have been the politicians shrewd enough to play off that competition and use it to utter a mean-spirited remark and grab a big headline. In that respect, at least, the absence of competition has served Cleveland's image and its



Money refunded if not satisfied • Second subject in portrait 95¢ • Full package orders only • No age limit • Choice of backgrounds • Poses our selection • Also available in addition to this offer: Black Background • White Background • Double Feature Portraits



OFFER GOOD FOR PORTRAITS TAKEN THRU APRIL 6

**Children's Photographers**  
ALSO PROPOSES COPIES • RESTORATION

RANDALL PARK MALL, 216-581-7086

**22 color portraits**  
**95¢ deposit**

**\$12.95 TOTAL**

1-8x10 • 3-5x7  
15 wallet size • 3 charms

8th ANNUAL  
**NATIONAL COMPUTER CAMPS**

Ursuline College  
Pepper Pike (Cleveland), Ohio  
Other locations: CT • MD • GA • MO

**AMERICA'S FIRST COMPUTER CAMPS™**

National Computer Camps®, Inc.  
P.O. Box 585 • Orange, CT 06477  
Telephone (203) 795-9667

Send for brochure

**Get Satisfied**  
**344-5555**  
**in PD Classified**

political climate, quite well.

While it may no longer be so easy for a politician to fool a newspaper, any officeholder worth a damn can have a field day with television. Long gone are the days where local television was dominated by veteran, streetwise reporters such as Hugh Danaceau, Paul Sciria or Mike Hrehocik who would take what a politician said with a grain of salt. In their place, television today prefers empty heads with pretty faces who don't know Lyndhurst from Lakewood, or Perk from Pinkney. In both television news and television advertising, today's politicians have found a medium they can exploit and a victim which revels in the ratings its own exploitation brings.

It is a match made in heaven. To the office-seekers, it brings votes. To the electronic media, it brings bucks. To the public, it breeds ignorance.

Radio also has contributed, especially through call-in shows which encourage hosts to rant and rave and incite audiences over the alleged sad state of Cleveland's affairs. Merle Pollis, Holliday's self-proclaimed "best friend," used the superintendent's suicide to launch a week-long tirade against the political types who he said had contributed to

Holliday's death. Ignored in that blame-placing was that Holliday himself pulled the trigger and that suicides are almost always brought about by the victims' own tormented minds.

**D**espite the present day symptoms and past proliferation of destabilizing confrontations, there is substantial evidence that Cleveland today is no longer victimized by a head-strong electorate and a political system top-heavy with contempt. Graft, cronyism, and political opportunism are no more prevalent today in Cleveland than in most any other municipality of its kind in the country. While this description hardly bears any resemblance to a corruption and confrontation-free model of political excellence, it is at least a welcome relief from the days of a not-too-distant past.

Cleveland, which suffered from a political nervous breakdown a mere half-decade ago, has matured somewhat. While other big cities were plagued by violence at the start of court-ordered school desegregation, Cleveland bit the busing bullet peacefully. As Chicago is torn apart by a city government divided exclusively along racial lines,

Voinovich and Forbes are locked in a political embrace; an often unhealthy one, but an embrace nevertheless.

Even Voinovich's critics have credited the mayor for leading the way in the lowering of the city's political decibel level. The non-confrontationist mayor strives for cooperation, even at times at the expense of vision. But, given the brutal nature of the politics which preceded him, Voinovich's prescription for political Valium may have saved the system from collapse.

"Cleveland was ahead of the country in facing trouble," says Kucinich, himself no stranger to political trouble. "Now, it seems Cleveland is also ahead of the country in resolving it."

But, in the deathly loneliness of a few minutes spent hunched over a typewriter, Holliday rekindled scores of those images of a city politics void of all decency. "Use this event to rid yourselves of petty politics, racial politics, greed, hate and corruption," wrote Holliday. "This city deserves better. The children deserve better."

It does deserve better. And it has gotten better. Maybe not much better and maybe not for long, but better. ■

# VALUE WITHOUT COMPROMISE

## FINALLY!

A great tasting cigarette  
that saves you money.

## 5 EXTRA PER PACK

# CENTURY 25's

Warning: The Surgeon General Has Determined  
That Cigarette Smoking Is Dangerous to Your Health.