

Rage Against the Machine

August 17, 2023



A statue called A Monument to the Great Migration stands at the entrance to the historic Bronzeville neighborhood in Chicago. Created by African American artist Alison Saar, the statue depicts a Black man with a suitcase in his left hand, his right hand pointing north. This represents a testament to the millions of Black Americans who fled the Jim Crow South and risked everything for a new life in Chicago.

The parents of Harold Washington (who served as Chicago's mayor from 1983-1987) were two such people. Harold—as he is known almost universally in Chicago—was born in Cook County Hospital in 1922. He was practically born into the Democratic Party. The son of a Democratic Party precinct captain, he spent more than thirty years as an active cog in the Chicago Machine.

By contrast, newly elected Chicago Mayor Brandon Johnson's roots are in the Chicago Teachers Union (CTU). It was the 25,000-member CTU that largely delivered his mayoral campaign. The CTU spearheaded the “ground game” for Johnson that knocked on over half-a-million doors, made well-over a million phone calls, and sent over two million text messages.

The Multiracial Promise: Harold Washington's Chicago and the Democratic Struggle in Reagan's America is a fitting title for Gordon K. Mantler's 354-page book. The Reagan years of federal cut-backs and deindustrialization form an essential backdrop for understanding urban America in the 1980s. Drawing the lens back a little further, the story of Chicago and its rough-and-tumble politics between the early 1960s and the late 1980s can only be told through the constant interplay between race and class, and between independent politics and the Democratic Party.

Both World Wars accelerated the great migration north. The lure of jobs and the escape from Jim Crow segregation were powerful magnets. Added to that, in the post Second World War years, there developed new technologies in agriculture, especially improvements in the cotton-picking machine manufactured by Allis Chalmers, that reduced the need for Black labor in the South. This postwar wave of Black migration mostly affected Chicago's West Side, and less so the older Black settlement on the South Side.

White flight from the West Side was abetted by systematic block-busting, red lining, and the racist scare spread by greedy realtors looking to turn a quick profit. My family lived in the heart of the West Side, Monroe and Washtenaw, just four blocks from where Fred Hampton was murdered in 1968. (One of the last white families remaining, we moved out in 1956).

Many white-flight families took advantage of the GI Bill, which was designed to favor white veterans. The bill and its benefactors fueled the suburban exodus, building new homes in new subdivisions. My family only made it to a halfway stop: the Northwest Side. Our new neighborhood was blue collar, ethnic, and racist. Its other defining feature was The Machine, specifically the Mayor Richard J. Daley-run Democratic Party Machine.

The folk wisdom of the Northwest Side of my youth in the late 1950s and early 60s was that there were three professions you had to respect: parish priests, corner bartenders, and precinct captains. To this day I still respect bartenders.

Tip O'Neill famously popularized the saying, "all politics is local." Simplistic, yes, but there may be a grain of truth to it. Back in those years, your Precinct Captain functioned as a portal to the outside world. Parking tickets? Don't worry, your precinct captain will take care of it. Need a stop sign on your block? Your Precinct Captain will talk to the Ward's Alderman. Junior needs a job with Streets and Sanitation? Sometimes all it would take would be a short conversation with the Ward's Democratic Party Committeeman. There were two preconditions: be white, and be a registered Democrat. It took decades for this system to begin to unravel.

The story of Brandon Johnson's election as mayor of Chicago in April 2023 contains many differences from Harold Washington's forty years earlier, but there are also a few similarities. Both victories' origins are in the Chicago Public Schools and the fight there for quality education. Johnson's trajectory begins with the Chicago Teachers Union strike of 2012, and Washington's, more indirectly, with the game-changing school boycott that began in 1963. Here is how Mantler begins his analysis of the school boycott: "Increasingly, historians now point to the massive school boycotts of 1963 and 1964 as a key turning point in the city's civil rights history—a reminder that the quality of schools animated many movements in the north."

The Black population of Chicago had mushroomed in the early 1960s, but the number of school buildings in Black and Latino communities had not. As a result, Black and Latino students were forced into double-shift schedules: one shift in the morning with a second set of students in the afternoon. Another attempted solution was the infamous "Willis Wagons," named after School Superintendent Benjamin Willis. Essentially, Willis Wagons were trailers plunked down in playgrounds and parking lots of public schools. Improperly heated in winter and sweltering each summer, cramped all year-round, they served as a constant insult to students of color.

Attendance policies were carefully rigged to entrench segregation in Chicago schools. In 1962, the Chicago chapter of the Urban League found the class size in African American schools was 25 percent larger than in comparable white schools; at the same time expenditures per pupil in these schools were 33 percent less.

Although as many as 225,000 students walked out on designated "Freedom Days," the movement was—at least on the surface—a defeat. Benjamin Willis was retained as School Superintendent, despite having submitted his resignation, and Willis Wagons remained. But the will to organize and fight back was something new in Chicago politics. Grassroots organizations, such as The Woodlawn Organization and the Chicago Committee on Urban Opportunity, gained experience and respect in the community in the months-long fight over racist school policies.

One of the leaders of the struggle was Al Raby. Twenty years later Raby wound up being Harold Washington's campaign manager. And, just two years after the boycott, in 1966, Raby was instrumental in bringing Martin Luther King Jr. to Chicago, for what turned out to be a star-crossed attempt to bring the Civil Rights movement north. Dr. King's foray into the racist hotbed of Chicago was known as the Chicago Freedom Movement (CFM).

In Mantler's saga of how urban coalitions were built in the Reagan era, there are two important takeaways from the CFM experience: one, the extent of racist resistance to open housing, and two, the reluctance of local elected Black politicians to challenge the Daley Machine. Mantler writes, "King and the SCLC (Southern Christian Leadership Conference) misjudged many other dynamics at work in Chicago, from the intensity of white ethnic hostility to civil rights, to the influence of pre-existing Black resistance networks amid a waning Black submachine." The consummation of the marriage between independent community organizations and electoral politics was still a decade in the future.

As the 1960s advanced, a new, more militant, no compromise zeitgeist began to make itself known in left movements. Both nationally and in Chicago, nothing more captured this tone than the Black Panther Party for Self Defense. Starting in Oakland, California in 1966, by 1968 the Panthers were a presence on Chicago streets. What made the Chicago Panthers a threat to the powers-that-be was not so much their stance on self-defense—although that stance was never abandoned—but their emphasis on the importance of multiracial coalition building.

In the two years before his assassination by Chicago Police working with the Federal Bureau of Investigation in December 1969, Chicago Panther leader Fred Hampton seemed to be everywhere. Hardly a week went by when I didn't see him at a demonstration or a political meeting. By the time of his murder, Hampton was barely of legal drinking age. Even then Chairman Fred, as he was affectionately known, had a political sophistication beyond his years. Mantler writes: "As one of the founders of Chicago's original, multiracial Rainbow Coalition with other young activists, Hampton was in the words of one scholar, 'trying to reimagine the social contract.'" It should be noted that this Rainbow Coalition, unlike its later incarnation in the Jesse Jackson years, was envisioned as an independent, action-oriented formation, not a gimmick for elections.

In the decades following Hampton's execution, not every former member of the Black Panther Party retained their revolutionary politics. Another prominent Panther of the late 1960s was Bobby Rush. Rush identified as a Democrat in 1974, and later served thirty years as a U.S. Congressperson, announcing his retirement in 2022. (In the recent mayoral election, Rush endorsed corporate shill and school privatization maven, Paul Vallas).

In the 1960s, the Panthers' example inspired two Chicago youth gangs to politicize and think of themselves as revolutionaries: the Uptown-based, mostly Appalachian transplants, the Young Patriots; and the Puerto Rican-based Young Lords. Much of the Young Lords territory was centered around the now heavily gentrified DePaul University area. Both the Lords and the Patriots were targeted early on by the FBI's COINTELPRO (Counterintelligence Program) and both groups were infiltrated by Chicago Police's notorious Red Squad. (Coincidentally, without knowing it, I moved into the apartment that had previously belonged to Manuel Ramos, an unarmed Young Lord, killed by Chicago police. Manuel's crime? He was trying to break up a fight).

Police surveillance and repression, especially of the Panthers, intensified throughout 1969, and reached a climax on December 4 of that year with the assassination of Hampton and fellow Panther Mark Clark. The raids were ordered by Cook County State's Attorney and Democratic Machine stalwart, Edward Hanrahan, aided by the FBI. The murders signaled the end of the dream of a racially inclusive movement independent of the Democratic Party. At the same time, they planted the

seeds for an unprecedented challenge to that Machine.

Since the Democratic Party Machine took over Chicago politics in 1931, its endorsement meant automatic victory in the city and the rest of Cook County. But the cold-blooded killings of Hampton and Clark were a bridge too far for much of the Black community, and more importantly in Mantler's telling, for hand-raising politicians in the Black submachine.

Despite facing a Grand Jury indictment, Ed Hanrahan won the Democratic primary in 1972. Hanrahan's reelection was expected to be a sure thing in the general election, but that was not to be. Less than 20 percent of Black voters pulled the lever for Hanrahan. Bernard Carey, a little-known Republican, became the new Cook County State's Attorney. Lu Palmer, a Black journalist and activist, captured the shocking nature of Hanrahan's defeat, "The Black community came together in a way that I've never seen before." It would take eleven more years until these seeds bore fruit with Harold Washington's election, but they were planted here.

The chapter of *Multiracial Promise* that charts the expanding Latino role in Chicago politics is called, "We Were Invisible" and is exactly the way to describe the lack of Latino presence in Chicago politics up to that point. William Rodriguez, a Socialist Party member of Spanish descent, was elected Alderman in the 15th Ward in 1914, and that was pretty much it for the next seventy years.

The situation was no better downstate in Springfield, the Illinois' capitol. In 1977 there were 177 representatives in the State legislature; but not one of them was Latino. That same year, Jesus "Chuy" Garcia, Rudy Lozano, Linda Coronado, and other Mexican American community leaders made the trip to Springfield to lobby against discriminatory legislation. The experience transformed the activists, "We came back with a clear understanding of how voiceless and powerless and invisible we were.... And we began the conversation about how do we participate in electoral policies," is how Garcia summarized the lessons of their trip. Thus, the second leg of the Washington coalition began to take shape.

Up to this point, much of Chicago's burgeoning Mexican American community abstained from electoral politics. Mantler cites three causes of this tendency toward abstention: gerrymandering—no City Council district drawn after the 1970 census was more than one-third Latino; as many as half of Chicago's Mexican Americans were not U.S. citizens; and, the entrenched Daley Machine was, to many, simply another version of the stranglehold of the *Partido Revolucionario Institucional* party (PRI) in Mexico.

There was a parallel development in the Puerto Rican community. Former Young Lord's leader Cha Cha Jimenez, in 1974, ran for alderman in the 46th Ward against machine candidate Chris Cohen. Jimenez won a surprising 39 percent of the vote. That was enough to re-energize the concept of a Rainbow Coalition on the North Side, and set the stage for an alliance with the so-called Lake Front Liberals.

Mantler's thesis in *The Multiracial Promise* is that a three-part formula was needed to beat the Machine and elect Harold Washington. Absolutely essential was winning 80 percent of the Black vote. Next, inroads into the Latino community were required, in order to win half, or near half, of its vote. Finally, it was important to at least make a showing among white liberals. A series of unexpected events between 1976 and 1983 turned this into a reality.

On December 20, 1976, rumors to the contrary notwithstanding, Richard J. Daley proved to be mortal. His successor, Michael Bilandic (one of five Chicago mayors from the Bridgeport neighborhood) couldn't get the streets plowed after a snowstorm in 1979, and paid the price. This led to Jane Byrne, who spent her whole term seemingly inadvertently insulting the Black

Community, mainly due to a tin ear and ill-advised appointments.

In the 1983 mayoral election, Richard J.'s son, Richard M. Daley and Jane Byrne split the white ethnic vote in the primary, allowing Washington to squeak by with a plurality of 36.3 percent. But the Machine was not about to concede the general election six weeks later. Here Mantler deserves a long quote:

Jane Byrne's actions epitomized the duplicity and desperation Washington's opponents showed in the days and weeks after the primary. It was already too late for an independent to file for the general election. Ed Warren, the Socialist Workers Party candidate for mayor and an African American, reportedly rejected an offer of \$1 million and a city job to be replaced by a high profile white candidate on the SWP ticket. (156)

The other alternative was for the Machine to support the Republican candidate. This was equivalent to the College of Cardinals supporting the Archbishop of Canterbury for Pope. Nonetheless, that is exactly what happened. Bernard Epton, a nondescript Republican, made it a horse race, losing to Washington 668,176 to 619,926.

The thirty-five years since the Harold Washington era have seen a partial restoration of the Machine. However, the twenty-two years of Daley the Lesser, then eight years of Rahm Emanuel, and finally the single term of Lori Lightfoot, saw the emphasis shift from ward and committeeman patronage to corporate driven interests being mostly in charge. Given this reality, the campaign and election of Brandon Johnson was something few saw coming.

The results of the 1983 "ugly election" broke down to a Black Democratic progressive winning 52 percent of the vote and a white Republican winning 48 percent. Forty years later, the primary system has been replaced by an open, non-partisan election. None of the nine candidates received the required majority to win that primary, requiring a two-candidate run-off election. The April run-off was uncanny in its similarity to 1983: 52 percent for the Black progressive Johnson and 48 percent for the white right-winger Paul Vallas, both identifying as Democrats.

So maybe things haven't really changed much. Then again, maybe they have. The stadium where the White Sox play sits in the middle of the 11th Ward, in the neighborhood of Bridgeport. It is a neighborhood that for years was dangerous for outsiders after dark. Yet ten days following the Brandon Johnson victory, I was walking through its streets to the ballpark. I found myself walking behind another fan wearing a "Brandon is Better" t-shirt. Unremarkable in 2023, suicidal in 1983.

For a non-native Chicagoan, Gordon Mantler demonstrates a solid grasp of the city's neighborhoods and the ins-and-outs of Chicago Democratic Party politics. I start from different premises and come to different conclusions than Mr. Mantler, particularly in that I do not consider the Democratic Party a vehicle for transformative change. Nevertheless, I found his book a valuable contribution that describes how electoral coalitions are built, and how they degenerate. With forty-four pages of endnotes and an ample twenty-page bibliography, *Multiracial Promise* is a useful tool for scholars and activists alike.