

essay by  
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# Daley's legacy

History may remember him for the transformation  
of Chicago into a global city

*Editor's note: Author Keith Koeneman's First Son: The Biography of Richard M. Daley is expected to be published in April by the University of Chicago Press.*

According to the political strategist Larry Sabato, Clare Boothe Luce — the diplomat, author and politician — used to advise American presidents “that, at most, they only got one line each in history.” According to this theory, Abraham Lincoln would be remembered for emancipating slaves, George Washington for founding the United States, Richard Nixon for the Watergate scandal, and Barack Obama for becoming the country's first African-American president. Everything else would be forgotten with the passage of time.

With regard to recent Chicago mayors, this “one line of history” notion appears to have some validity. Mayor Richard J. Daley was the autocratic, big-city political Boss. Michael Bilandic mishandled the snowstorm of 1979. Jane Byrne was the feisty first female mayor. Harold Washington the charismatic first black mayor.

What will future generations record as Richard M. Daley's one line in the history books? To answer that question, it is important to make judgments about his 22-year mayoral career.

When Rich Daley announced his candidacy for mayor of Chicago in December 1988, the city had just suffered through 13 years of political and economic instability that verged at times on chaos.

This period included five mayors, five superintendents of the Chicago Public Schools,

and the black-versus-white political civil war known as the Council Wars. During this era of decline, some members of the national media had called Chicago “Beirut on the Lake,” even as the relentless deindustrialization of the Midwest had continued to drain the city of high-paying manufacturing jobs. Some believed that the once-great city of Chicago would never recover.

During Daley's press conference to announce his candidacy for mayor, his short speech acknowledged the city's needs for racial healing and revitalization of the basic services provided by municipal government.

“Today, I proudly announce my candidacy for the Democratic nomination for mayor of Chicago. I do so aware of both the great challenge and the great opportunity the next mayor will find. Let's face it: We have a problem in Chicago. The name-calling and politics at City Hall are keeping us from tackling the real issues. It's time we stop fighting each other and start working together. I'm not interested in running as ‘the white candidate,’ or in serving as mayor of half the people. Fighting crime is not a white issue or a black issue. Good schools are not a white issue or a black issue. Protecting taxpayers against waste is not a white issue or a black issue. Working to build Chicago's economy is not a white issue or a black issue. Competent government is not a white issue or a black issue. It's time to say, ‘Enough is enough.’ But let's begin by recognizing how much more we can do by lowering our voices and raising our sights. It's time for a new beginning in Chicago.”

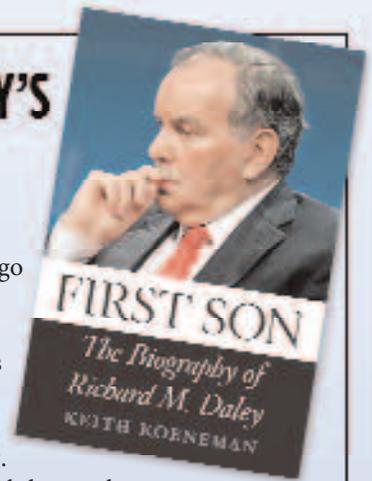
Over the next two decades, Daley consistently attempted to address and solve the challenges highlighted in that speech. During this same period, race relations in Chicago stabilized and then strengthened. Daley's share of the black vote rose from 8 percent in 1989 to 61 percent in 2003. Even though the rest of his tenure as mayor would largely lack the accomplishments of his first 14 years, Daley would still go on to provide more than two decades of stability to the political and business communities. This steadiness of leadership was a stark contrast to the chaos of the 13 years that preceded his taking office.

Daley was not just a steady leader. He also took big risks to try to achieve his vision for Chicago, which included educational opportunity and a high quality of life for its citizens. In 1995, Daley agreed to take over the Chicago Public Schools, an institution whose students were 90 percent minority and lived in poverty at a rate of 85 percent. Arne Duncan, who served under Daley as CEO of Chicago Public Schools and is now President Obama's U.S. Secretary of Education, was amazed by the political courage reflected in Daley's decision. "I think his greatest accomplishment as mayor is that he had the courage to take on school reform in Chicago," Duncan says. "Politically, it was not a smart thing to do. All of his experts were telling Daley that it was going to end his career. But Daley intuitively believed that he had to do this if he wanted to help Chicago to grow and prosper and be successful, whether it was the politically astute thing to do. Daley's initial courage has now basically changed the landscape of urban education in the United States. Now, mayors all around the country are also fighting for the opportunity to reform their schools."

Whether one agrees with Duncan about the larger impact of Daley's decision to embrace school reform, it is true that Daley's position on this issue distinguished him as a leader and set the right tone for parents, educators and businesspeople in Chicago. Though today some may criticize the mixed results of Chicago's school reform efforts under Daley, these critics are missing the more important truth: Chicago's public education challenges are largely socioeconomic in nature, and therefore essentially beyond the control of one person, even the mayor. With regard to education reform in Chicago, however, Daley performed an essential task of leadership by lifting the city's vision to loftier sights and harnessing the energy of Chicagoans to focus on an important aspiration.

The story is similar with respect to public housing. An intractable problem existed that affected not only young, poor minorities but also the very social fabric of the city. By announcing his

## RICHARD M. DALEY'S LEGACY



### Accomplishments

- Helped to transform Chicago into a global city.
- Created Millennium Park.
- Strengthened race relations in Chicago.
- Took big risks to improve schools and public housing.
- Provided two decades of stability to the political and business communities.
- Expanded O'Hare and Midway airports.
- Supported culture and the arts.
- Beautified Chicago.
- Supported gay rights consistently since 1989.

### Mistakes

- Contributed to Chicago's pension crisis.
- Mismanaged Chicago's finances during his last years in office.
- Ordered midnight destruction of Meigs Field.
- Failed to take on entrenched unions.
- Supported inept political candidates for important public offices.
- Tolerated political corruption.
- Allowed high levels of crime to persist.

*Keith Koenehan*

support for a Plan for Transformation in September 1999, Daley took on a big political risk to try to bring a higher quality of life to Chicagoans living in public high-rises and nearby neighborhoods. The end result was largely positive (yet not perfect). More importantly, Daley had performed a fundamental act of leadership by focusing his city on a worthy goal.

But Daley's most important accomplishment may well be his role in the transformation of Chicago into a global city. When Daley took office in 1989, the city was a mess. Chicago's population had declined by more than 837,000, or 23 percent, since 1950. More than one-third of manufacturing jobs had been lost during the

same period. Race relations were poor, and the city had suffered through more than a decade of political instability. Public schools and public housing offered little hope to children.

During his decades in office, Daley physically renewed the city center and Chicago's lakefront. Out went the capital of the Rust Belt. In came an attractive and cultured global center that would become the model for many cities. Both business and culture thrived during Daley's time in power. In 2001, Boeing Corp. — a global aerospace and defense company with \$51 billion in revenue — announced that it was moving its headquarters to Chicago. In 2005, *Time* magazine named Daley as one of the best big-city mayors in the United States and said he had "presided over the city's transition from graying hub to vibrant boomtown." For many, Millennium Park became known as the physical manifestation of Chicago's transformation.

In *First Son: The Biography of Richard M. Daley*, I write: "By the first decade of the 21st century, Chicago would be accepted as one of the most important global cities in the world, an urban center that combined a powerful economy with cultural sophistication. This recognition put Chicago in elite company, along with other metropolises: New York, London, Tokyo, Paris, Hong Kong and Singapore. Chicago had a \$460 billion economy, some of the best universities anywhere, and world-class dining, performing arts, cultural attractions and entertainment. Global cities such as Chicago required diverse business activity, global information exchanges, rich cultural experiences and the ability to attract talented people. Daley knew this intuitively, and the pro-business, pro-culture mayor had worked to craft policies that facilitated these goals."

Though he had important accomplishments, I write in *First Son*: "Daley was not a perfect mayor. Rather, the arc of his career was consistent with what a study of human nature would predict: a steep learning curve; a decade of disciplined work leading to mastery; the accumulation of power; and, finally, hubris and mistakes. Unfortunately, Daley's legacy would also include a pension crisis, the midnight destruction of Meigs Field, persistent corruption within city government, high levels of crime and the mayor's financial mismanagement during his last years in office."

Two significant problems that Daley left behind for his successor are a pension crisis and a large structural budget deficit. Both were the result of a lack of discipline and represent significant leadership mistakes for Daley. Not only did Daley's final budget show a \$655 million deficit, but it was the 11th consecutive deficit racked up under his leadership. Even worse, *First Son* notes, "Unfunded pension liabilities had risen to more than \$20 billion, which was equal to nearly \$7,500 for every man, woman

and child living in the city." Neither of these mistakes can be explained away by economic stress, since they were largely the result of decisions made long before the September 2008 bankruptcy of Lehman Brothers catapulted the U.S. economy into a financial crisis.

Another big mistake was the midnight destruction of Meigs Field airport in 2003. Though popular with some Chicagoans, this decision resembled an action by a Third World dictator rather than a step consistent with long-standing American democratic processes. "Primarily, I am appalled at the arrogant disregard of due process by whoever ordered the destruction," said Jane Byrne, the retired mayor of Chicago, in her assessment of the event. "Due process of law, the most fundamental, precious constitutional right of all citizens, even Chicagoans, was purposely ignored. I say purposely because a few hours after the destruction, the administration stated that its irrational actions had 'prevented the issue from being tied up in the courts.' We are a nation governed by laws, not individuals, and no public servant has the right to place personal opinion or convenience before the laws."

Another legitimate criticism of Daley is that he failed to directly confront entrenched public sector unions in Chicago. This mistake was obviously a contributing factor in the city's pension crisis and sizable structural budget deficit, since pensions and health care benefits for city employees have become a huge expense, and labor outlays account for approximately three-fourths of the city's corporate budget. Daley supporters may object to this criticism, saying that the mayor outsourced more municipal jobs and was less pro-union than his predecessors. This statement completely misses the more important point, however. In the competitive global economy of the 21st century, cities cannot act as if the U.S. economy is shut off from the rest of the world. The city of Chicago cannot afford to pay union workers salaries and benefits that significantly exceed those of private companies. The only way to achieve the necessary reforms of the city's cost structure is by more directly challenging public sector unions. Daley failed to do this.

Serving as mayor of a large city such as Chicago is as challenging as competing in Major League Baseball or commanding an army as a military general. It requires a high degree of skill, as well as persistence, wisdom, toughness and shrewdness. Many of the issues that cross a mayor's desk — such as crime and public education — are deeply problematical. Even a very skilled leader may have as many errors as hits. With that in mind, it is likely that history's judgment will be that Daley's achievements outweighed his mistakes. It is also a reasonable bet that the "one line of history" for Rich Daley is that he was the leader who helped transform Chicago into a global city. ■

Chicagoan Keith Koeneman writes about the city's politics, history and culture for the Huffington Post.