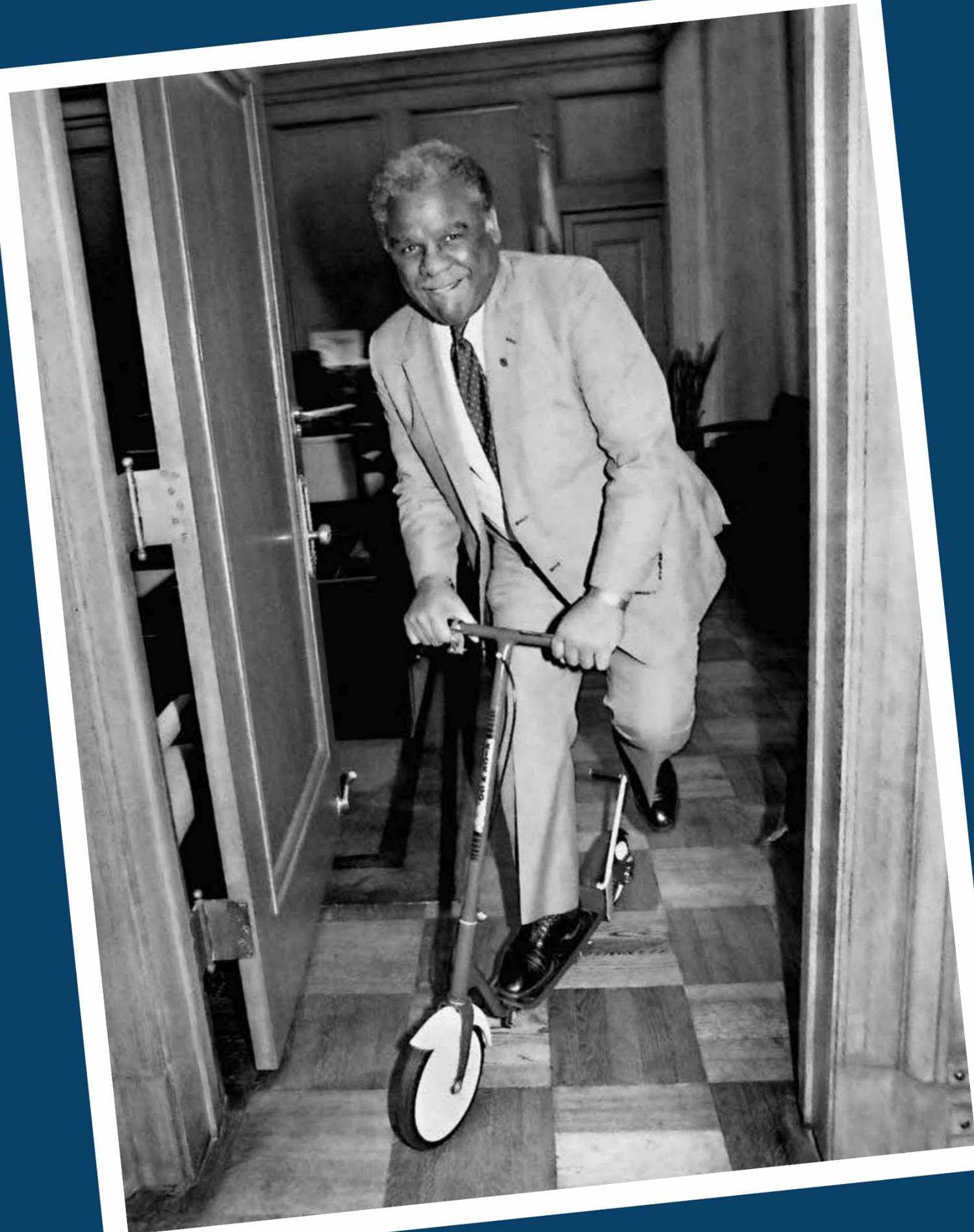


# Harold

## preface Washington

**Update:** Thanks to this grassroots movement, Harold Washington was elected in 1983 and again in 1987. Dr. Conrad Worrill is the chairman of the National Black United Front and the recently retired director of the Jacob Carruthers Center for Inner City Studies at Northeastern Illinois University, where he taught for 40 years. Robert T. Starks is a retired associate professor of political science at Northeastern Illinois University, and chairman of the Black United Fund of Illinois (BUFI).



# Harold Washington

By Dr. Conrad Worrill, Robert Starks, & Photography by Michelle Agins | Originally Published October 1991

The 1983 election of Harold Washington as mayor of Chicago was a triumph for the Black community, as the Harold Washington electoral coalition was led and dominated by grassroots organizations and neighborhood associations within the city's Black areas. For the first time in modern history, Chicago's entire African-American community unified and organized in a proactive political movement.

This rare display of unity was evident at every level, as Harold's candidacy was supported organizationally, institutionally and individually by every segment of the Black community. Such unity transformed the movement to elect the city's first Black mayor into a crusade that made participation and voting a moral obligation that bordered on becoming a civic religion.

It is important to understand that this movement was built on the back of grassroots organizational efforts refined in the Black community over a period of the nearly 25 previous years.

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During this time, with the existence of a well-entrenched and oppressive political machine, and in the absence of strong economic institutions and a formal independent political apparatus to advance its cause, the Black community in Chicago had little choice but to rely upon its own organizational and institutional network to promote social change.

It was the experience garnered at the grassroots level in organizing and translating political demands during this period that made possible the mass mobilization and organization that eventually elected Harold as mayor.

The idea of a Black person running for mayor in Chicago can be traced back to 1959, when a small group of African Americans led by former Congressman Gus Savage, promoted the candidacy of Lemuel Bentley for City Clerk. Then came the third election of Mayor Richard J. Daley in

1963, but it was an election in which the Black community began to display considerable anti-Machine political behavior.

In the late 1960s, Dick Gregory positioned himself to run for mayor, and in 1971, Rev. Jesse Jackson threw his hat into the ring. After Daley's death in 1976, several Black candidates attempted to run for mayor, including Harold himself, who in 1977 won five wards in his first mayoral bid. The idea was approaching reality.

## Education Becomes Political

A public schools crisis in Chicago was one of the major historical events that led to the eventual seating of a Black mayor.

In April of 1980, word leaked out that former Mayor Jane Byrne wanted Commonwealth Edison magnate Thomas Ayers to be appointed to and named president of the Chicago public schools board. Several community groups came together to oppose the move.

Research on the part of this group, spearheaded by veteran journalist Lu Palmer and community activist Jorja English Palmer with the assistance of Rev. Al Sampson, revealed that Thomas Ayers did not live in Chicago, which one has to do to serve on the school board. Several community groups came together to oppose Ayers' ascension.

Under the leadership of Lu Palmer, several community groups were called together to discuss strategy. Interestingly enough, this meeting at Bethel AME Church was chaired by Harold Washington, who was a state senator at the time.

The outcome led to two specific strategy formulations. The first was to identify African Americans whom community groups felt were qualified to serve on the Board of Education. It was agreed that African Americans ought to be the majority of the school board representatives because we represented a majority of the school population. Secondly, a strategy unfolded to file suit against Ayers' appointment to the board.

Mass mobilizing of the African-American community around this school board fight became a

major issue. There were mass rallies, demonstrations at the board, and letters in support of 35 African-Americans whose names were submitted to Jane Byrne for consideration.

As a result, five African Americans were appointed to the board and Ayers was forced to resign when he was unable to prove he lived in Chicago. This victory was the beginning of a Black unity movement that laid the foundation for the election of Harold Washington.

The mass mobilizing around the school board issue in the Spring of 1980 led to the formation of several new organizations: Chicago Black United Communities (CBUC), the Black United Front of Chicago (BUF-CHI), Citizens for Self Determination, the Political Action Conference of Illinois (PACI), and the Parent Equalizers.

During the summer of 1980, the Citizens for Self Determination mobilized for an African-American superintendent to head the Chicago Public Schools, with the consensus candidate being Dr. Manford Byrd. In the final decision, however, Ruth Love, former Superintendent of Schools in Oakland, California was selected.

So, then-Mayor Jayne Byrne and the Board of Education did concede on an African American running the schools, even though they selected one from outside of Chicago and created a School Finance Authority that took away the ability of the new superintendent to control the financial situation of the board.

## The Community Mobilized

That fight caused the movement for Black self-determination in Chicago to escalate. On April 4, 1980, the National Black United Front (NBUF) sponsored a conference on "Government Spying and White National Violence" at Quinn Chapel AME Church, which brought together key activists from the Chicago area. Then Congressman Harold Washington, the late Bobby Wright, Haki Madhubuti, and Minister Louis Farrakhan were keynote speakers. Over 2,000 African Americans attended.

Another important conference, held August 15, 1981, at Malcolm X College, was one of the most prophetic meetings of African-Americans seeking political empowerment. This gathering sought "to examine, to explain, and explore old and new strategies that would enable us to chart new paths toward full political representation and full political empowerment in Black precincts, Black wards, Black congressional districts, Black state legislative districts, in City Hall and throughout the country."



Harold Washington with Jayne Kennedy

In that meeting, "We Shall See in '83!" became the slogan. The keynoter was Rev. Jesse Jackson. One thousand people attended the full day's proceedings.

The Political Action Conference of Illinois (PACI) began to take up the fight in 1981 to preserve three Black Congressional districts. For the first time in Chicago's history, a redistricting map was drawn by African Americans, which became the document that all other groups had to react to. As a result, there are three African-American Congressional districts in Chicago.

In the summer of 1982, "We Shall See In '83!"—popularized by Lu Palmer in his writings and radio broadcasts—was becoming a household slogan in the Black community. The potentiality of electing Chicago's first African-American mayor was becoming more of a reality every day.

Segments of the African-American community fought for a Black Superintendent of Police and backed Sam Nolan, one of the top-ranking policemen in the department. Jane Byrne would have no part of it and instead appointed white Richard Brzeczek. That continued disrespect of the African-American community by Byrne was a focal point in the movement for African-American political empowerment. Byrne became the targeted enemy.

Alderwoman Dorothy Tillman and Marion Stamps kept the issue of the treatment of African-American children in the Chicago public schools a major organizing strategy through their Parent Equalizers group. Through the Chicago Tenant Rights Organization, Stamps led numerous protests in 1982 against the racist actions of the Chicago Housing Authority. An increased demand for greater

African-American representation in the decision-making process of all aspects of government had become the burning issue of the day.

### The South African Rugby Team

In the spring of 1982, the South African rugby team, the Springboks, was scheduled to play in Chicago. Immediately, NBUF formed the Black Coalition Against the Rugby Tour. Protests were held at City Hall to challenge the Byrne administration from allowing the Springboks to play on public property.

Alderman Danny Davis presented a resolution against the Springboks using public property. A watered-down version of this resolution was passed. Rev. Jesse Jackson played a key role through Operation PUSH in dramatizing the Springboks' presence in Chicago.

Jackson and Dr. Conrad Worrill, along with other key activists, picketed the Chicago Athletic Club every day the Springboks were in town. Finally, the pressure was so great the team decided to play in Racine, Wisconsin. Only a handful of spectators showed up and the game was met by protestors. The movement won this battle.

During this same period, Alderman Alan Streeter broke from the Machine by not supporting Byrne's school board nominees. CBUC launched its political education training classes in preparation for the fight against the Machine in Streeter's 17th ward.

CBUC mobilized a citywide effort to support the election of Streeter, who did win. The movement defeated the Machine and the excitement was growing to elect Chicago's first African-American mayor.

In early 1982, community organizations united to form a voter registration coalition. Lu Palmer, Tim Black, Zenobia Black, Connie Howard, Oscar Worrill, Nate Clay, Elliot Green and Ivy Montgomery provided the leadership for the People's Movement for Voter Registration.

This organization became the field component of Voter Registration and Vote Community, established by Soft Sheen's Ed Gardner, which led to the great voter registration drive of 1982.

In late June 1982, CHA Byrne was up to her old tricks again. It was time for appointments at the Chicago Housing Authority. Marion Stamps on the outside and Renault Robinson, a CHA board member, on the inside, had been fighting for over a year to break up the Democratic Party Machine's control of CHA. But Byrne did not want to concede to the community's wishes for fair representation on the CHA board.

Many Black community groups staged a major demonstration at a City Council meeting in late June of 1982 to protest the Byrne administration's

policies. Byrne ordered police to lock the Council door after supporters from white ethnic communities filled the Council chambers. This was the "straw that broke the camel's back."

### The Chicago Fest Boycott

While Rev. Jesse Jackson was giving his weekly radio report on WBMX (now WVAZ), a caller, who identified herself as a resident of Gary, Indiana, suggested that as a result of Byrne's actions, the African-American community should boycott Jane Byrne's pet project, Chicago Fest.

Rev. Jesse Jackson mobilized the African-American community to do so. On the following Saturday at Operation PUSH, over 2,000 people representing every major Black organization, leader and politician watched Rev. Jackson burn a Chicago Fest ticket.

The audience was highly aroused and left Operation P.U.S.H. that Saturday marching on Chicago Fest.

For eleven days, hundreds of African-Americans walked the picket lines at Navy Pier, the site of the Fest, chanting slogans and carrying signs, "We Shall See in '83!"

The Chicago Fest Boycott was a grand success. Less than one percent that attended was African American. Thus, the boycott became a major mobilizing tool in electing Chicago's first Black mayor.

Harold Washington's name began to emerge as a consensus candidate and Lu Palmer called a meeting with key activists and political leaders to discuss Washington's candidacy. But Harold was reluctant to run. He said he would strongly consider running, if at least 50,000 new African Americans registered to vote and if a substantial war chest would be raised.

Voter registration fever began to catch on in the Black community. Palmer and CBUC distributed a questionnaire for mayor and who would be the people's choice to run. The results were presented at the famous plebiscite meeting at Bethel AME Church.

Over 2,000 cheering and enthusiastic Black people attended the now famous meeting in late August of 1982. The crowd was anxious. Jorja Palmer reported that over 17,000 African-Americans overwhelmingly chose Harold Washington to be the candidate.

Between July 1982 and November 1982, over 150,000 Black people were registered to vote. It was becoming clearer every day that Harold could win. Finally, Harold Washington made his candidacy announcement on November 10, 1982, at the then Hyde Park Hilton Hotel. Thousands of Black people showed up at this historic press conference, showing clearly that we had a new political unity movement in Chicago and triumphantly dispelling the myth of community disorganization.



Left: Harold Washington with Ed Vrodolyak and Geraldine Ferraro  
Below: First Pitch Comiskey Park



Above: Harold Washington with Bishop Tutu

