

POLITICS

Wayward Willie



hen San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown took office in January 1996, hopes ran high among the city's progressives. Brown's national stature and media visibility gave him a platform for implementing an urban agenda that could be held up as an alternative to those of such big-city mayors as Rudolph Giuliani, Richard Riordan and Richard Daley. While some were uncomfortable with Brown's reputation for backroom deals, others saw Brown as a politician who knew how to get things done. For all his corporate fundraising and reputation for putting style before substance, Brown's leadership, political skills and faith in activist government sharply contrasted with the mushy centrism of Bill Clinton's New Democrats.

Brown's 30-year political career prior to becoming mayor should have planted some doubts. Elected to the California State

Assembly from San Francisco in 1964, Brown became renowned for his fancy clothes and sports cars—as well as his liberalism on social issues such as gay and lesbian rights. Brown financed his expensive tastes by serving as an attorney for San Francisco developers, often appearing before city political bodies on his non-Assembly time. In 1980, Brown became assembly speaker after beating out then Assembly member and current U.S. Rep. Howard Berman in a bitter leadership fight. During his record 14-year tenure as speaker, Brown raked in massive corporate and special-interest donations, particularly from the tobacco lobby. Brown's statewide focus from 1980 to 1994 distanced him from San Francisco's emerging battles over homelessness, rent control, neighborhood preservation and downtown development. When Brown did get involved, he invariably sided with development and real estate interests.

Brown's corporate connections would seem to make him an unlikely ally for progressives. His supporters, however, argued that Brown used his fundraising to win elections and maintain Democratic control of the state legislature during a period—from 1983 to the present—of Republican governors. They asserted that the state Democratic Party's increasing reliance on corporate funds was part of a national trend that could not be blamed on Brown, and that, furthermore, Brown had to pursue a moderate course in order to preserve the support of his Assembly colleagues. Despite the obstacles, Brown strongly supported education, affirmative action, labor unions, and lesbian and gay rights throughout his time as speaker.

As mayor, Brown has had the power and capacity to carry out a bold policy agenda. San Francisco's mayoralty has control over virtually all city departments, and a majority of the 11-member Board of Supervisors endorsed Brown's candidacy.

Brown hit the ground running. During his January 1996 inaugural address, he surprised the crowd by appointing Robert Demmons, an African-American firefighter, as his new fire chief. Demmons was the leading force in a decade-long legal battle challenging racial and gender discrimination in the overwhelmingly white male fire department. His appointment as chief was a stirring symbol of racial progress that brought tears of joy to the eyes of many in the inauguration crowd.

Brown then named the city's first Asian-American police chief and two African-American deputy chiefs in a sharp break with the past. Although endorsed by the Police Officers Association, Brown had vowed during his campaign to improve relations between the predominantly straight, white police force and the city's large minority and gay and lesbian populations. Brown's installation of a young, diverse leadership team was an essential step toward this goal.

*San Francisco
mayor and
media darling
Willie Brown
has let his
progressive
constituency
down.*

By Randy Shaw

During his first six months in office, even skeptics conceded that Brown was reviving people's faith in government as a positive agent for change. He quickly announced that he would end former Mayor Frank Jordan's controversial Matrix program, which dealt with homelessness by issuing criminal citations to thousands of poor people for blocking the sidewalk or falling asleep on a public bench. The new mayor preemptorily fired the heads of many problem-plagued city departments, including public transportation, planning, public works, social services and juvenile justice. When these department heads could not be fired without evidence of incompetence, Brown quickly authorized independent audits to support his action.

During that honeymoon period, the mayor also proved surprisingly accessible, readily granting requests for meetings from children's advocates, tenants, juvenile-justice reformers, homeless and housing groups, and other constituencies excluded by Brown's conservative predecessor. Brown's approach at these meetings disarmed even the most seasoned activists. They were used to politicians responding to their requests either by directly denying them or, to accomplish the same goal, by agreeing to "study the issue." Brown, by contrast, would agree to their demands, professing astonishment that such common-sense ideas had not already been implemented.

But these amiable relations soon began to sour. Operating as a one-man government, without granting senior staff the authority to implement or even monitor his legislative or policy commitments, Brown seemed to gradually lose interest in fulfilling a progressive agenda. Treated more like a movie star than a mayor by the media, Brown preferred to bask in the spotlight at flashy public events.

His policy-oriented campaign had deflated charges that he was all image and no substance; Brown's emerging lackluster record and media spectacles, however, renewed these doubts. Candidate Brown stressed that homelessness was primarily a housing problem and vowed to actively address the issue. Mayor Brown instituted no significant new homeless initiatives during his first year in office and cancelled a long-planned mayoral homeless summit designed to launch new measures. In September, the mayor announced that homelessness was "unsolvable" and said

he could offer no answers.

Making matters worse, Brown fell back on conservative approaches to homelessness. In November, he announced that he was travelling to New York City to learn more about Mayor Giuliani's homeless policies. The San Francisco Coalition on Homelessness pointed out that the visit

was not necessary, since Brown had already mastered Giuliani's strategy for criminalizing homelessness. After repeatedly denouncing Matrix during his campaign, Brown continued the underlying policy while claiming credit for terminating the program. According to the Coalition on Homelessness, 15,588 police citations were issued to homeless people in the first 11 months of Brown's term—1,750 more than under the Matrix program for all of 1995.

Brown's unwillingness to seriously tackle increasing homelessness in San Francisco has shored up his support in the business community, which is opposed to programs that might attract poor people to the city.

Brown's record on housing issues also leaves much to be desired. Rents on vacant apartments in San

Francisco are skyrocketing, and tenant groups have pushed to strengthen the city's rent-control ordinance in order to keep long-term residents in their affordable homes. During his campaign, Brown promised to enact eviction-protection legislation, and he reaffirmed that commitment throughout the year. Then, in late September, he suddenly cancelled the Board of Supervisors' consideration of the issue. On September 25, angry tenants held the first major public protest against the mayor, a raucous event that resulted in nine arrests.

In a profile in the October 21, 1996, issue of the *New Yorker*, Brown explained the facts of political life. He said that he had delayed the tenant-protection measure in order to serve the needs of his allies on the Board of Supervisors, two of whom faced voters in November and needed campaign donations from real estate interests. Brown coined a term for such weak-kneed officials, derisively calling them "pantywaist politicians." "You know how I stayed as speaker?" he asked. "Because I understood the smallness of them. And I lived with the smallness of them. I fed the



San Francisco Mayor Willie Brown

smallness of them." Brown explained that the care and feeding of pantywaist politicians was no simple matter: "This is not Dick Morris dealing with a \$200 hooker. These are long-term relationships. These are mistresses that you have to service."

On December 9, the eviction-protection legislation finally reached the Board of Supervisors. The *San Francisco Bay Guardian* described the vote as a key test of Brown's progressive credentials. Led by Brown's own appointees, the Supervisors killed the legislation. Ted Gullicksen of the San Francisco Tenants Union told the *San Francisco Chronicle* that Brown had "led tenants down the road to slaughter."

Brown again showed a troubling tendency to sidetrack measures opposed by major campaign funders in November, when his Police Commission considered disciplinary charges in the case of Aaron Williams, who died in June 1995 while in police custody. The Williams case had galvanized the city's African-American community and was widely seen as a test case for the Brown administration's handling of police-misconduct issues. Van Jones, executive director of Bay Area Policewatch, described Marc Andaya, the officer charged with killing Williams, as "San Francisco's Mark Fuhrman." Looming behind the specific charge was the department's longstanding failure to discipline rogue officers, a tradition linked to the intractableness of the politically powerful Police Officers Association on the issue.

Despite a huge public outcry and vigorous prosecution

by the city's Office of Civilian Complaints, Brown's appointees on the Police Commission split 2-2, and the officer was cleared. Given that Brown makes no secret of his control over the votes of his commissions, it was clear his loyalty to the powerful Police Officers Association that had endorsed him outweighed justice for Aaron Williams' family. "For Willie Brown's Police Commission to side with a known racist cop against the city's African-American community will stand as a lasting blemish on the Brown administration," said Jones.

The media's fascination with him gave Willie Brown the opportunity to spark a national conversation about the problems plaguing urban America. Along with the *New Yorker* profile, Brown made the cover of *Newsweek* and was featured in *Esquire* and other national magazines. But he has never used these forums to urge greater federal attention to the needs of America's cities. Instead, as illustrated by a *Newsweek* photo of Brown sweeping trash in an inner-city park, Brown has chosen to spread the myth that all America needs are hands-on mayors willing to travel around their city 16 hours a day making government work.

Progressives can hold Brown accountable for his promises only by publicly opposing his betrayals and mobilizing grass-roots support. However, as with Bill Clinton, community advocates—many of whom work for nonprofit organizations dependent on city funds—fear they will lose their

access to political power and patronage if they criticize the mayor. As a result, many activists and elected officials who denounced former Mayor Jordan's pro-business agenda, criminalization of homelessness and tolerance of police misconduct have remained silent while Brown pursues similar policies.

Left-leaning supervisor Tom Ammi-ano, whose campaign-finance reform measure was vetoed by Brown, praises Brown's style, intelligence and commitment to diversity. But he, like most progressive observers, is disappointed that a mayoralty that began with such promise has delivered so little. "The influence of big-money lobbyists has become so pervasive in San Francisco," he says, "that even public debate on progressive issues, such as rent control or public power, has been killed." If progressives can't succeed in San Francisco, it shows how hard it will be to achieve social and economic justice in America's other big cities. ◀

Randy Shaw is author of *The Activist's Handbook: A Primer for the 1990s and Beyond* (University of California Press). See his "Ask the Activist" column at www.igc.org/activist.

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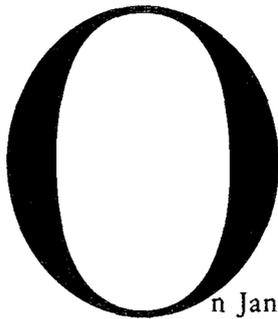
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L A C K A M E R I C A

Girl X and beyond



n January 9, Chicago police found a battered 9-year-old girl crumpled in a dark stairway at the infamous Cabrini-Green public housing project. The girl had been abducted, raped and poisoned; her skull smashed and gang symbols scrawled across her body, she was left for dead in a pool of blood. Astonishingly, the little victim's grim story passed through the media mill without much comment for more than two weeks, until *Chicago Sun-Times* columnist Lee Bey wrote an impassioned piece denouncing the public's blasé attitude toward the horrid crime.

"The act has been treated almost like a footnote in the local news media," Bey wrote, bemoaning the silence of the city fathers and prominent media commentators, as well as usually vocal black activists and feminists. Bey contrasted the media's paltry coverage of the Cabrini-

Green victim to the weeks of near-obsessive attention accorded 6-year-old Colorado beauty queen JonBenet Ramsey. "The cynic in me," he concluded, "says this crime has not shaken up this city because it happened on the wrong side of the tracks, so to speak; that this act has been tagged 'Senseless Ghetto Crime' and dismissed."

Bey's column triggered an outpouring of concern for the injured girl, who has since been dubbed "Girl X." It also sparked a flurry of activity among community groups that generally have little contact with each other. Leaders of civil rights groups such as the Urban League and the NAACP are openly joining forces with the Nation of Islam, assorted black feminist groups and dozens of black business groups to present a unified expression of outrage and support. They have raised more than \$200,000 to help the young victim's recovery, and vowed to work together more intently to confront violent crime and related problems.

Beyond the rhetoric of unity, however, African-Americans differ widely about how best to tackle crime in their communities. Traditional, civil rights-oriented black leaders, for example, are generally reluctant to discuss it at all. Cautious of lending credence to racist stereotypes, they tend to downplay the crime problem; when they do address the issue, they are careful to point out that blacks' high crime rates are the legacy of racist oppression. Some, however, are overcoming that reluctance. In a 1994 speech, the Rev. Jesse Jackson violated a longstanding taboo of civil rights orthodoxy when he admitted his own fears of black-on-black crime. "There is nothing more painful to me," he said, "than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery—then look around and see somebody white and feel relieved."

NAACP Executive Director Kweisi Mfume expressed a similar sentiment in a recent speech when he rejected the notion that crime is merely an outgrowth of racist oppression. The rate of black-on-black crime is much higher today than in the past when oppression was legal and much harsher, Mfume argued. "What has changed is that now some people assume that you have to be more tolerant of criminals if they are black," he added. "I disagree with that. You go to these funerals and you see the grief. ... At some point, we have to say, if you commit a violent crime, you do have to pay a price."

Jackson and Mfume are echoing a sense of frustration felt throughout black America, where a disproportionate number of crime victims live. Just as Chicago blacks have rallied to condemn the savage attack on Girl X, blacks in Miami's Liberty City gathered to mourn the death of 5-year-old Rickia Issac, who was hit by a stray bullet last month as she walked home from a Martin Luther King Day

*After another
horrific attack,
African-
Americans are
getting serious
about
confronting
black-on-black
crime.*

By Salim Muwakkil