

point of view

ROLDO BARTIMOLE

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A decade to surpass Yesterday, tomorrow



THREE WHO MADE A DECADE.

What strikes me so dramatically in reviewing the past decade in Point of View was how quickly the Voinovich-Forbes era took solid formation in the very early days of the first term of the 10-year administration.

And it strikes me as crucial to watch for signs of direction from the new administration of Mayor Michael White and council president Jay Westbrook to discern for signs of direction of this new political leadership.

By Jan. 1980, the formula used for the last decade of local governing had been determined by the early decisions of the two men who ruled

throughout the decade - former mayor George Voinovich and former council boss George Forbes, with the ghost of Dennis Kucinich still lingering.

By Jan. 8, 1980, POV headlined: "Forbes: Voinovich tested." It set the tone and pattern that was to mark the era of so-called "cooperation" between the two politicians.

"Voinovich," it said, "apparently in an effort to maintain 'peace' with council president George Forbes, has acquiesced on a number of test issues, refusing to confront Forbes who has probed the mayor with a sharp knife."

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The issues in contention then were the naming of members to a financial control board (which led Voinovich to a policy of sharing of power by giving Forbes appointments to a number of boards, previously the mayor's prerogative); three questionable payments via the moral claims board to Forbes allies, and a Forbes maneuver to push Ed Nagorski out as possible police chief by labeling him, what else, "a racist."

Voinovich set the pattern of capitulation and parceling out to Forbes certain aspects of city government for the peace that was to mark their era.

By May of 1980, Forbes was using his famous tactics of anger and tantrum - calling the mayor a "son of a bitch" to signal his displeasure - to force capitulation of Voinovich over the hefty budget of the community development department. Forbes held up the determinations on the budget for some three months.

Then Forbes forced secret meetings of the CD committee to work out an agreement. Such meetings were to mark a policy of Forbes during the period, to avoid what little news media coverage there was.

His penchant for secrecy climaxed a year later when Forbes tossed Gary Clark of the Pee Dee and me out of a council meeting, at a hotel, ostensibly to discuss the details of the Soho building project.

(This public display of dictatorial power, plus the actions of the next PD city hall reporter (Steve Luttner) in reporting each time Forbes closed a meeting to the press led to the PD going to court and forcing open meetings. That caused Forbes to avoid caucus meetings with council. The result was increased council problems that might have been resolved by such meetings but caused Forbes to become further removed from those who elected him).

Despite the cooperation between Forbes and Voinovich and their domination of the political process, the memory of Dennis Kucinich wasn't totally removed from Voinovich's mind. After all, he still had to run in another two years, unlike the four-year term now.

On Muny Light, Kucinich still cast a shadow on the political mindset. Forbes wanted to deter the administration from fighting the anti-trust case against CEI but the specter of Dennis "encouraged" Voinovich to continue the fight and support Muny.

A few days before Voinovich left office he spoke glowingly of Muny

Light, now called Cleveland Public Power. Voinovich pointed out that the city's electric system saved each of its customers \$150 in electric costs last year.

He also pointed out that commercial clients had saved some \$8,500 a year each and a recent new customer lured to Cleveland would save \$136,000 annually in power costs by moving its manufacturing to the city.

It took great pressure on the pols during this period to get Forbes to finally bring a measure to expand the Muny system to the floor of council.

Clearly, for White and Westbrook and the new council, further expansion could provide a realistic economic development tool for luring small industry to the city with cheaper power offers, rather than tax giveaways.

Further, expansion of Muny Light capacity downtown could provide the economic advantages in an area where the city now cannot compete against CEI because it has no more capacity to serve downtown customers.

Few remember the threat of Kucinich for Voinovich but it was obviously still there.

It was evident in Muny and it was evident in the fact that the law for tax abatements, having run its three year course, was allowed to quietly die in this period.

That was in sharp contrast to the heavy tax abatements given by Forbes and Voinovich later in the decade.

In 1980, Kucinich was still a political factor. Today, Kucinich - because of the Voinovich era of cooperation, contrasting Dennis' years of confrontation and stalemate - has become a negative factor to White and Westbrook.

Business elements threaten White and Westbrook to continue Voinovich's policies of visible downtown development by suggesting that any other direction makes them Kucinich clones and invites confrontation. That, they aver, would destroy the "progress" made by the city.

The threat of Kucinich in 1980 led Voinovich to be cautious and more responsible toward business interests for at least a short time.

In addition to dumping tax abatements, Voinovich refused to be stampeded into a deal for a Hyatt hotel, which demanded heavy subsidization.

Voinovich personally nixed a large

Whatta guy!

You begin to wonder if anyone gets any respect at the Pee Dee.

Certainly, Newhouse chain overseer, the redoubtable Leo Ring leaves much to be desired.

At an arbitration session with union leader Steve Hatch and former PD reporter Gary Webb present, Ring made disparaging remarks about his top editorial boss.

This may have led to another spate of rumors that executive editor Thomas Greer was headed the route of so many top editors. Out the door.

At one point in the sessions, Greer had to leave the room. Ring, watching him, said to the group, according to one present, "Is he getting fatter or what?"

It's said that management had offered Greer a pay incentives to lose weight last year. He did.

At another point, Greer, looking as if he might have dozed off, a problem others have noted about the editor, Ring motioned to Hatch, "That guy does that all the time."

Greer heard and was quoted as saying that he wasn't asleep, just resting.

Seems appropriate. That's what most of the staff seems to do.



(VOINOVICH-FORBES ERA - From Page 2)

UDAG (urban development action grant) for Tower City because Forest City Enterprises didn't provide as much corporate equity as the UDAG should have leveraged.

But as Voinovich began to see he was comfortably supported by voters and as his need for more campaign funds arose as he shifted his political ambitions to state and national office, the mayor began to see the point of view of developers.

He shifted from a hard-nosed position to massive tax give-aways that marked the last four years of his term when hundreds of millions of dollars of future tax income will be denied to the schools, city and county.

Mike White will have to have strong political nerve to shift public attitudes if he is to survive the tightening economic times of the 1990s.

Voinovich survived the 10 years with little opposition but he lost badly to Sen. Howard Metzenbaum, a barometer of public disenchantment that will also cost him the governorship this year.

Forbes, in a year-ending, career-ending interview, said that he didn't dominate the city council but that he "understood" the council. That might once have been true but in the end it was just the opposite.

The fact that Forbes didn't recognize the slowly evolving changes in his council led to his demise as a public official.

Forbes fully signaled what kind of leader he would be in the 1980s when he tossed reporters out of what should have been a public meeting. He then forced Voinovich into other closed door meetings that ended up in court and silenced the council.

Early in the 1980s, and with almost no publicity and bare mention in the newspapers (remember there were two back then), Forbes, on a 30-3 vote, eliminated the "miscellaneous" portion of council meetings. That was the time set aside for members to gripe, question public officials or merely do some political posturing.

Forbes, by the decision, saved himself and Voinovich some embarrassment, but he also bottled up dissent.

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(VOINOVICH & FORBES - From Page 3)
 Forbes further refused to share any leadership with veteran council members and ignored new members who were become a notch better educated and ambitious - people like Ray Pianka, Gus Frangos, Jeff Johnson and Dan Brady.

Brady and Johnson particularly bridled at their inability to speak out; others did so more quietly but with all resentments grew.

Council members were actually becoming more interested in development and improvements in their wards and were pushing in that direction. One development problem in Glenville led to open fighting between Jeff Johnson and Forbes, a fight Forbes could win but a war he was destined to lose.

Angry with the pressure from the up-start councilman, Forbes went after Johnson with a chair at a private session called to quell the dissent.

Though he didn't know it, that was really the end of Forbes. He no longer had control.

Forbes was forced to leave council because he couldn't count on the 21-member body to re-elect him president again. He chose a last-ditch attempt to keep control of the city in his hands and for the business establishment.

We know how that ended.

Just as Voinovich in 1980 reacted to Kucinich, White and Westbrook are reacting to the Voinovich era, not recognizing that they are the bosses now and within limits they can set the pattern for the next four years.

Voters wanted a change.

The pair will face a time different locally and nationally, than the time faced by Voinovich and Forbes. Economic times, which improved in Cleveland during the 80s, are likely to be tighter in the next decade.

Local governments, unless there is a large "peace dividend," face the need for more revenue. And Voinovich and Forbes have diverted large chunks of future revenue for both the city and schools to the Jacobs Bros. and other developers.

Westbrook has moved cautiously but very effectively in the early stages or revamping council. He obviously will not have as much power as Forbes did, but he does have less built-in opposition as he assumes leadership. And his opposition remains in disarray, having allowed Forbes to lead them and tell them what to do for so long.

White has had a less impressive beginning. His moves on personnel reveal that he didn't expect to win. He has thus returned a number of Voinovich people to key positions, giving the perception of not having his own administration ready to take charge.

White's unwillingness to offer any strong direction in opposing the massive \$122-million tax abatement for Ameritrust Center and his failure to signal the business community that the days of wine and roses exclusively for downtown are over doesn't bode well.

His appointment of Ed Kovacic as police chief should give him protection against the always contentious police and Craig Miller as law director gives him a semblance of strong public interest direction in an important post.

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*"I shall continue to be impossible
 so long as those who are
 now possible remain possible.*

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