

# Off Center

Sol Plafkin

1967

Let's have a few more words about Mel Ravitz (then, I hope to close this subject for a while).

Councilman Ravitz personifies, on a local level, the true "devil" to the Black community and to striving and alienated whites.

There is no question that Ravitz, a professor of sociology at Wayne State University, has made a substantial contribution to the community. In 1961, a lot of good people worked very hard to put him on the Common Council and his close election, with the simultaneous elevation of Jerry Cavanaugh to the Mayors' chair, gave many hope for a "new day" in Detroit.

Ravitz fought for "open occupancy" when the issue was quite unpopular. Actually, though he was probably sincere in his efforts, he knew that his approach was politically intelligent in a community where a Black minority was steadily increasing and moving relentlessly towards eventual majority control SOME time in the 1970s.

Black community leadership was pretty well united in those days of the early '60s—which, now in turbulent 1967, seem part of a former political generation.

Ravitz has fought hard and well for increased community services, the elimination of discrimination in city and county government, and the erasure of many personal indignities that the average powerless person suffers at the hands of a growing, impersonal governmental bureaucracy.

He even helped maintain the color and quaintness of the city's Cultural Center by revising arbitrary laws to allow for a peanut vendor to charm young children at the 'corner of Woodward and Kirby. The peak of his career was his futile fight in 1963, with then Councilman William Patrick, Jr., for the passage of an open occupancy ordinance. 1963 was the year of the great Freedom March down Woodward Ave. and the equally successful March on Washington.

But, after 1963, and the passage of Federal legislation in 1964 and 1965 of Civil Rights Acts which mainly affected the South, attention began to be turned to the North—to the urban centers where most of America's Black masses had congregated.

The great middle—class which had so benevolently and generously given of its money, and even lives, to help the Southern Black, was flinching and turning emotional cartwheels when it came to rectifying the daily genocide of Blacks in the North.

Ravitz now found the Black leadership in Detroit dividing, with an increasingly significant part of the Black community clamoring for an immediate unshackling of its economic, social, and political chains.

He then made his ultimate choice—to cast his lot with the "white liberals" (rushing out to the suburbs and extremities of the city) and a few Black "Toms."

Obviously effective and representative Black leaders like Rev. Albert Cleage, Jr., Atty. Milton Henry, and Rep. Jackie Vaughn III, were considered "irresponsible" by the scholarly councilman.

Thus, it was only logical for Ravitz to become the most articulate opponent of Rep. Vaughn's plan to secure more democratic representation of the Common Council by division of the city into "districts."

Ravitz himself, who fled from Russell Woods years ago and now lives in an all—white west side neighborhood, could never get elected from his own “district.” He has to rely on the Black “sucker” vote to continue in office on a city—wide basis.

His strategy appears to be to stave off the “district plan” and his certain political extinction until after the next general municipal election in 1969.

Then, with the assistance of certain “Toms,” high in city and county government, he hopes to sell the citizens of Detroit on the beneficent advantages of “county home rule.”

Under this new regime (he is now incidentally Chairman of the Wayne County Board of Supervisors), he will have obliterated the political viability of the city’s Blacks, who will be a majority here by 1973, and diffuse their strength through county government which will find the Blacks again in an impotent minority.

# fifth Estate

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