

Off Center

Sol Plafkin

1966

Drums are rolling early and heavy in the Michigan Democratic Party's forthcoming internal civil war with Detroit's 37-year-old Mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh pitted against just-retired Asst. Sec. of State for African Affairs and former governor, 55-year-old G. Mennen Williams.

Unfortunately, the campaign promises to avoid discussion of pressing current issues (e.g. the war in Vietnam) and seems likely to center on a silly and meaningless battle of the "young" vs. the "old."

Ironically, this is not the first time that Cavanagh has been in direct conflict with Williams (who served 12 frustrating years—1959–60—hogtied by a malepportioned Republican legislature—as Michigan's chief executive). In 1950, Jerry Cavanagh, then a student at the Jesuit University of Detroit, was allied as a precinct delegate with the Teamsters in an unsuccessful attempt to take over control of the 15th Congressional District Democratic Organization in the near west side of Detroit from the Williams-CIO-ADA alliance. (Cavanagh's first term in office more than a decade later was marked by exceedingly good relations with his old Teamster friends.)

Cavanagh faded from the political scene until 1961, when, at the brash young age of 32—in a Detroit non-partisan election—he upset stodgy, over-confident (and labor-backed) incumbent Mayor Louis Miriani, who was suffering from the effects of a just-completed recession and the results of a poorly-mishandled "police crackdown" against the Negro Community.

Blessed by the boom years of the early '60s, Cavanagh roared to a smashing 2 to 1 re-election victory in November 1965 over a local nonentity who had received major support from local reactionary "homeowner" groups.

But the impetuous mayor was not happy with his lack of overwhelming majorities in the city's white precincts in 1965 and within two weeks after his re-election, he proposed an infamous "stop and frisk" statute, which promised to protect them as an attempt to give the police force (with its typical urban mutual antagonism towards Negroes) carte blanche for another "crackdown."

So, Cavanagh with his eye on the white voter in Detroit, its suburbs, and outstate, seemingly cast aside his Negro support which elected him in 1961 and assured him of re-election in 1965. (The suburban vote poses a special problem to Cavanagh as one of his most effective measures to erase his predecessor's 35 million dollar debt was to get the Common Council to enact a city income tax on all residents and, also, on non-residents working inside the City of Detroit.)

Williams, who assiduously cultivated the Negro and other minority groups' ethnic vote in the '50s has many built-in advantages. (Cavanagh, accused by many of instituting an "Irish Mafia" of cronies in City Hall, had amazingly alienated nationality groups, like the Poles and Italians, during his first term of office.)

Despite blockage of significant statutory reforms by the GOP, Williams succeeded in making many significant appointments of liberals and representatives of all minority groups to state commissions and judicial posts. (The Michigan Supreme Court, thanks to Williams' appointments, has become one of the more "activist" judicial bodies in the nation.) It took the coincidence of a moderate Republican governor, George Romney, and a reapportioned heavily Democratic legislature in 1965 to enact a broad range of "social welfare" laws, and what was, in effect, the original "Williams" program.

Detroit's two GOP-oriented newspapers, the *News* and *Free Press* have jumped with glee with the prospect of Cavanagh stopping "labor-bossed" Williams from entering the U.S. Senate. The *News* especially had dug into its old sludge-piles of tired phrases to castigate the former governor for daring to bring back his quaint form of "grass-roots liberalism" into Michigan. "Run, Jerry, Run!" has been the cry of both papers.

Hidden in all of this background is the not-so-subtle hand of LBJ, who would like nothing better than to have an effective Catholic counter-weight against the increasing popularity of the Kennedy brothers. the president cannot forget Williams' strong opposition when he received the vice-presidential nomination of 1960.

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