

A POLITICIAN FOR ALL SEASONS

For a number of years during the 1980's and 90's I had the pleasure of knowing and working with one of Ohio's most interesting and electable political leaders, a man more well known to our generation, we Literarians, than to today's voters. He dominated the Ohio political scene for 35 years, was elected Ohio governor an astonishing record of five times, however, those were two year terms and before term limits. While he carried the Democrat Party label, he was in reality an independent.

Frank appealed to Ohioans of all stripes. Republicans of all types fell before him but in the end, it was the Dems that "done him in!"

Frank Lausche was born in Cleveland in 1895 and died there on April 21, 1990 at age 95. His world was Cleveland, Columbus, and Washington. He enjoyed telling stories, one of which I am particularly fond, as it speaks to him, his world, and his humor. Frank told it something like this:

"I was a handsome man, tall, strong, and a big hack of white hair, and I was a good speaker too; but that Ev Dirksen, there was a real speaker. I remember one day in the Senate, the galleries were full, practically all of the senators were there, and Ev was delivering one of his great speeches. He brought people to their feet cheering and five minutes later had them on their knees crying! Again and again he did this; and then, at the end of the speech, everyone, both sides of the isle, gave him a standing ovation.

As we left the senate chambers that day, a woman ran up to me, grabbed my hand, and said, 'Senator, Senator, what a great speech,' I, not wanting to disabuse her of the fact that I was not Ev Dirksen, just said 'Thank you, ma'am', thank you very much,' then, she looking me straight in the eye, and said, 'if only we had a senator like you from Ohio.' "

The Lausche's immigrated from Slovenia to the United States in the late 1800's and like so many Eastern Europeans, settled in Northeastern Ohio where jobs were plentiful and kinsman nearby. The Eastern Europeans along the lake in New York, Pennsylvania, Ohio, and Michigan were a tough lot. Hard working, somewhat clannish, and often times more than a little paranoid. Getting ahead in a new country where only the people in the neighborhood spoke your language, hardly opened many doors.

He was born in Cleveland, one of ten children. Frank, as was his family, was very much a Slovenian, with those tough and hardworking characteristics. His father died when he was but thirteen years of age. Frank attended the Cleveland public schools but while doing so worked

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as a lamplighter and newspaper boy to help the family and aid in the cost of an education. Indeed, the stuff legends are made of. He interrupted his education at John Marshall Law School to serve in World War I, entering as a private and leaving as a 2nd lieutenant. He returned to John Marshall and graduated with his law degree in 1920. Frank did not graduate from college; he went right into law school.

Frank was a “man of the people,” he was a judge, Mayor of Cleveland, Governor of Ohio, and a United States Senator. When Lausche was first elected Cleveland Mayor in 1941, one of the first issues he had to deal with was a personnel matter, the Cleveland Safety Director. The party bosses who thought Lausche to be naturally beholden to them wanted the Safety Director fired. Frank liked and respected the guy, thought he was doing a fine job and refused. The Safety Director was none other than Elliot Ness, yes of the Untouchables. Ness was not dismissed, and thus began Lausche’s independent political credentials.

The big names in both parties had a most difficult time challenging him in the general elections. In 1944, Lausche’s first run for Ohio Governor, he handily defeated one James Garfield Stewart, then Mayor of Cincinnati, who in part is remembered as the father of Potter Stewart, a Supreme Court Justice also a Cincinnati. And then in the 1952 gubernatorial race, Frank easily beat the son of a President, brother of Mr. Republican, and one who was part of the great Charter reform movement in Cincinnati, our own Charlie Taft. In many political respects Charlie Taft was much like Lausche as an independent sort. Taft going up against the Cox - Hynica Republican machine in Cincinnati in the 1920’s reform era and Lausche against all machines, organized labor in particular. However, Charles Phelps Taft was a political patrician; Frank Lausche was the son of an immigrant Cleveland steel worker. He was the first Roman Catholic to be elected to high office in the State of Ohio.

James Garfield Stewart was a member of the Literary Club, Charlie Taft and Potter Stewart were not.

Lausche easily defeated Jim Rhodes, a popular Columbus Republican, in the 1954 gubernatorial race and then went on to unseat Republican George Bender in the US Senate contest in 1956. On to Washington!

By the way Senator Lausche was a fine golfer. I lost my dollar to him several times. Many said he could have been President had he spent more time on Capitol Hill and less at Burning Tree.

Lausche was fiercely independent, but pretty much what we have known in the past as a “big city Democrat.” With his ethnic roots and the makeup of Cleveland, many languages and lots of Eastern European communities, Frank’s constituency became known as “Cosmopolitan

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Democrats.” He spent very little money campaigning, but instead travelled to County Fairs throughout the state and spoke the women’ clubs, PTA’s and at company picnics. In spite of the Everett Dirksen joke, Lausche was a fine, humorous, and motivating speaker. But he “told it straight” at all times.

In the 1968 election there were several polarizing political issues. Guns and butter, Vietnam, civil rights, Lyndon Johnson stepping down, and in Ohio a rollicking issue of unions and labor versus management, a real donnybrook. Frank Lausche could win any race in Ohio running on any ticket, but the primaries, sparsely participated in, were another story. Frank did not yield to the unions, they fiercely disliked him.

As unbelievable as it may have been to both Lausche and the majority of Ohioans, Frank was beaten in the March primary by Jack Gilligan, congressman and former Cincinnati councilman. Gilligan in turn was defeated in the general election by Bill Saxbe, the then Ohio Attorney General, who went on to some notoriety within the later days of the Nixon Administration and in the Justice Department after the “Saturday Night Massacre”. Incidentally, Saxbe was a real underdog to Lausche in the pre-primary polls there in 1968.

During his long political career representing Ohioans, Frank Lausche was quite unusual as either a Democrat, or Independent, when compared to office holders of today in either party. He did such things as crusade against gambling in Cleveland when running for Mayor, today it has been legalized and a big casino is right there in downtown. While Governor he believed in low taxes and budget surpluses and delivered such, certainly a puzzle today.

After being turned out in that 1968 primary, Frank remained in the DC area, living in Bethesda, Maryland and playing a lot of golf at Burning Tree. He was still around politics, occasionally saying something or backing someone, but consistently withdrawing from public life and comment. As mentioned earlier, it was in this period that I got to know Senator Lausche as he served as a trustee of a small charitable foundation which I managed. We became good friends and I had the pleasure of helping him for about 15 years.

In the winter of 1990 Frank Lausche decided it was time to return home. He moved from Bethesda to Cleveland into the Slovenian Retirement and Nursing home Downtown. Back to his roots, to his people. He died on April 21 1990. The New York Times obituary said, among other things, that “Nobody liked Frank Lausche, except for the people.”

A group of us from Cincinnati led by Bill Williams, the Chairman of Western & Southern, flew to Cleveland early on April 24th. By the way, Frank was a long time Director of Western & Southern, a Democrat no less!]

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Upon arriving in Cleveland early that day we went immediately to the Slovenian Hall, downtown. This was a community building, auditorium-like. At the front door stood four Slovenian guards, dressed in red tunics, tan trousers, tall hats, and a sword in the sash. We walked on down the main aisle in between the rows of folding chairs on the gymnasium floor. In the front, on the stage, was Senator Frank J. Lausche's casket, surrounded by flowers, the US flag, the Ohio flag, and more Slovenian guards.

Promptly at 9 AM the services began. The auditorium was packed and the head of the Slovenian community acted as the master of ceremonies, welcoming all. The first speaker was Mayor Michael White, the first African American Mayor of Cleveland, he was followed by Jim Rhodes who was both an occasional opponent and good friend, and former Governor of Ohio, and then Dick Celeste, the then sitting Governor of Ohio. These orations lasted a little over a half an hour and the theme or message from each was similar: Frank Lausche was a leader, an independent "son-of-a-gun", and a politician with ideals to which each of these three aspired. He was a teacher from whom they learned to communicate with the people of Ohio. He was stubborn and incorruptible, willing to listen, to talk, and to change. But not to change principles.

After these eulogies and remembrances, the guards lifted the casket from the stage and marched down the center aisle, dignitaries followed, and then the assembled crowd filed out of the hall.

Outside, immediately in front of the Hall stood a horse drawn caisson upon which the casket was placed. This in turn was led by seven members of the Cleveland Mounted Police in dress uniform. To my surprise, the crowd, all of us, just marched behind the caisson, led by the mounted guard, and travelled a few blocks to Saint Vitus Church in the neighborhood.

At the church the guards and pall bearers, of which Mr. Williams was one, carried the casket first to the services in the vestibule and then to the front altar. The church was packed, not just the crowd from the auditorium, but a much larger crowd. We out of town guests fortunately had seats up front.

The Most Reverend Anthony Pilla, Bishop of the Cleveland Diocese said the requiem mass and presided over the services. In his eulogy, Bishop Pilla surprised all of us by starting his oration with events of 1959 when he was a young deacon. On May 23, 1959 when Father Pilla was ordained as a catholic priest, the ordination address was given by a Clevelander who was the then a United States Senator, one Frank J. Lausche. And now he, the Bishop, had the chance to wish him, the Senator, the eternal peace he so richly deserves.

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When the Requiem Mass was ended, the casket was borne down the center aisle, led by the Slovenian guards, followed by the Bishop, the clergy, the pall bearers, dignitaries, and the people of Cleveland. The casket was placed in a hearse and it in turn was lead in parade or procession of motorcycles, limos, and a mile or so of autos to Calvary Cemetery for Frank to be laid to rest. The Ohio National Guard presented the twenty-one gun salute to its veteran and deceased friend.

To paraphrase the woman outside the Senate chambers mentioned earlier, If only we had politicians like Frank Lausche today!

William T. Sena

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