

T.E.A.
Segment of Budget by Frank Mayfield
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It was like an out-of-body experience. Hovering over Fountain Square, I could look down on the gathering below. People were exercising that most basic of political activity, protesting an action of government. This right of assembly, freedom of speech and articulation of grievance has roots in the English Magna Carta of 1215, the French Declaration of the Rights of Man of 1788, and our own Bill of Rights, which went into effect on December 15, 1791, and which importantly included in the First Amendment to the United States Constitution, freedom of speech and peaceable assembly. And indeed, this assembly on Fountain Square was peaceable. In fact, as demonstrations go, it was pretty contained. While including some enthusiastic participants, the couple dozen attendees were, as Cincinnatians usually are, cordial and not much "in your face." They did carry some placards with such political messages as "no taxes for stadiums," "Let the voters vote," and one, sort of in the background, had large letters "TEA" and in smaller script, "taxed enough already."

So, was this a Tea Party event? In some participants minds, yes. And was I participating? Indeed there I was on the fringes of that amoeba shaped group, as though not fully committed. Indeed I was annoyed by the Hamilton County Board of Commissioners' action to support the construction of two new stadiums with a

one cent increase in the sales tax, but public demonstrations are typically not my cup of tea.

Tea Party supporters like to harken back to the Boston Tea Party of December 16, 1773 (Beethoven's third birthday) as the inspiration for their activity. Such actions can have unanticipated outcomes. Instead of removing the tax on tea, the British closed the port of Boston, stifling commerce and adding to the alienation that led to the Declaration of Independence two and one half years later.

There has always been an undercurrent in American life about the fairness of taxes. It periodically bubbles to the surface as in the very early days of the Republic, when farmers in Western Pennsylvania staged the Whiskey Rebellion. It was more economical for frontier farmers to ship their produce east as distilled spirits instead of bushels of grain. But, distilled spirits were taxed by the U.S. government. Alas, the farmers had no lobbyists. One can imagine them shouting, "What does Washington know about our local issues," and paraphrasing Patrick Henry by saying, "If this be tax evasion, let's make the most of it," as they tarred and feathered revenue agents, even killing one. President Washington called out state militias, under the second amendment to the Constitution, which quickly quelled the insurrection and established the fact that indeed the national government can collect taxes. After things quieted down, the president exonerated most of the protesters.

In 1904 United States Supreme Court Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr. wrote, in a case involving taxes on tobacco, "Taxes are what we pay for civilized society." A retort could be "How much civilization do we wish to purchase?" And in the protest at hand, "Are stadiums part of civilized society?"

I had real cognitive dissonance about the stadium issue. The designer/constructor in me said let's build these stadiums, develop the riverfront, create jobs, etc. etc. The fiscal conservative said it makes no economic sense to tear down the adequate thirty year old multi-purpose Riverfront Stadium and spend well over a billion dollars of taxpayer money, including debt service, to buy land, create infrastructure, float long term bonds and build stadiums, one of which, for the Bengals, would be used just one percent of the time.

Some background: After the Cincinnati Reds marked the 1990s by going wire-to-wire to win the National League, they faced the favored Oakland Athletics in the World Series. A personal memory is attending game one of that series and watching the green and gold clad A's prance around with such players as Jose Conseco and Mark McGuire, flexing their muscles. In the bottom of the first, Eric Davis blasted a prodigious home run and nearly 60,000 fans jumped to their feet to watch the ball rocket over the center field stands – and watched the air go out of the A's. They never recovered as the Reds swept. In the final game in Oakland, Eric Davis was injured diving for a line drive. A private jet back to Cincinnati seemed in order, but Marge Schott refused. The question of her tight-

fisted control of the Reds, plus her propensity for maladroit statements, accumulated to the point where the lords of baseball pushed for a change in ownership. Also, there was growing evidence that indeed playing on artificial turf as at Riverfront Stadium shortened careers. Added to the mix was the Bengals ownership making not so subtle utterances about a possible move of the team.

A couple thoughts about Marge. Not long after the World Series, I attended a meeting in Florida, and was walking along the beach in the gloaming, when I encountered another stroller and a conversation ensued. He was from Oakland and upon learning my home, asked "How is Marge?" No last name was needed. She was the one person this Californian associated with Cincinnati.

Thought number two. Though never having met Marge, I was in her company a few times and witnessed some of her less than endearing qualities. Fortunately I never got close to Shotzie. Nonetheless, behind that gruff exterior was a genuinely generous person whom the all male owners of baseball treated quite unfairly.

Through a series of backroom meetings and public posturing, Carl Lindner later emerged as owner of the Reds, and Mike Brown pleaded for a new stadium with a grass field on which football was "meant to be played." The issue of two new stadiums dominated the local news in the mid-1990s with lots of voices pitching in, for, against, and in any case, let the voters vote. I personally sent a letter to the county commissioners to have a referendum on the matter – as did

many other people on various sides of the issue. And, of course, lots of behind the scenes pressure was applied. Finally, the commissioners passed a resolution two-to-one (the late John Dowlin dissenting) to raise the state sales tax from 5.5% to 6.5% while rebating funds for all real estate holders in the county, plus setting aside money for Cincinnati public schools. The Ohio legislature approved an additional one-half cent tax increase.

Those of us opposed immediately began a petition drive to gain enough signatures to force a referendum. So, there I was on Fountain Square, one of the foot soldiers, with petitions in hand, gathering signatures – and I approached many other citizens in various settings as did a small army of volunteers. While the demonstration on Fountain Square was not very impressive, the petition drive was quite successful. More than enough signatures were submitted and the issue was placed on the 1996 primary ballot. Then the campaign really heated up. Both sides generated funds for advertising, with the proponents gathering lots more money, much of it from corporate backers. A slogan was “Let’s keep Cincinnati a major league city.” Another “carrot” to a lot of voters was that the property tax rebate would offset their increased sales taxes. I was quite skeptical of this tactic, questioning whether the county’s sales tax projections were valid since the county was already losing population. Of course, as it turns out, the projections were bogus, and the county commissioners continue to struggle to provide rebates to property holders.

In the face of the referendum, the commissioners scaled back their request to one-half cent, which, plus the state sponsored half-cent would become the one cent sales tax increase.

Came election day, and the stadium proponents won big, about 60 percent of the vote. Later, when the package of entitlements granted to the Bengals became known, and as their stadium experienced 50 million dollars in cost overruns, some buyers' remorse set in, which cost one of the county commissioners his job at the next election. He now works for the Bengals. Public disdain for the Bengals' deal caused the Reds to build a more modest play yard, which stayed within budget.

But now memories fade. Paul Brown stadium displays real landmark quality as it sits in splendid isolation 350 days per year. The Great American Ball Park next to the newly developed Banks is thriving. The land around Paul Brown Stadium, controlled by the Bengals is underutilized as parking. Of course, the Reds were never a threat to leave. In the glory days of the Big Red Machine, the team was second in the majors in attendance, behind only the Dodgers. When rearing three boys, trips to Crosley Field and Riverfront Stadium were golden, though too few. Now with that trio off with families of their own, I rarely indulge major league sports; have been to The Great American Ball Park twice, and to Paul Brown twice, never to see the Bengals, once for Billy Graham and once for a U.C. football game. Sour grapes, possibly, changing interests, definitely. I still

believe in the democratic process, warts and all, and have some residual interest in the success of "our teams." Life goes on and other issues replace the "stadium wars," except for the ongoing conundrum of paying the tax rebates out of limited county resources.

A few ironies remain. In the much maligned Riverfront Stadium, then Cinergy Field, the Reds went to five World Series winning three. The Bengals advanced to two Super Bowls with players who went to law school, medical school, and broadcasting and became admirable public figures. In a decade of new stadiums, we have yet to see similar success.

So what does being major league mean? The term, quality of life crept into the language in the mid-Twentieth Century and sociologists have been attempting to quantify it since. Near the top are interpersonal relationships. Who you are with is more important than where you are. Then comes economic opportunity, climate, health care, responsiveness of government, public safety, education, recreation, institutions such as museums, orchestras, libraries, literary clubs. Professional sports teams do not make the cut. However, teams do embellish a city's and region's identity. Witness Green Bay. The Reds will continue to be much loved and the Bengals will make a lot of money in their tax supported homes.

One last thought. The Bengals are very reluctant to allow other teams to use the premises. In some venues, such as Pittsburgh and New England, college

teams routinely use the stadiums. In Denver, Mile High Stadium, where the Broncos play, was the scene of the state high school playoff game this past December, where the Monarch Coyotes, with Andrew Dorsey at tight end won the Colorado State Championship--his teenage words, "an awesome experience."