The Race

By b.p. Flanigan

It's the top cop against the State Senator in November.

Tuesday, September 11, Detroiters turned over a quarter of a million of those "magic levers of democracy," dictating that between now and November 6, Police Commissioner John Nichols and State Senator Coleman Young will knock heads over who's going to be the next mayor.

Young and Nichols both polled ahead of 17 other candidates including cops, a beauty shop owner, and a priest-beating right winger. They also defeated three major contenders: Mel "The Other" Ravitz, Ed "I've Got A Plan" Bell, and "Walking" John Mogk.

In this Year of the Watergate, the 1973 primary campaign was a good piece of choreography. It was Ravitz, pipe in hand, walking the tightrope and hoping his dangling liberal tongue wouldn't trip him up. It was Bell, with his mink-clad Fisher Theater fund-raisers, talking about "a more visible police presence in the community." He was sweating as he hoped nobody would ask him why he ducked out on the STRESS trial when hearing it in Circuit Court. It was Mogk, wearing out his shoe leather, as he tried to become the Jerry Cavanaugh of the '70s.

Young Used A Different Approach

Coleman Young however, took a different approach. Young went to Detroiters with his "if you wanna know where somebody's going, look at where they've been."

Young repeatedly stated, "I have waged a lifetime of struggle for the people." He also placed emphasis on his decades of work within the trade union movement, "And the one thing union executives have learned is that Coleman Young cannot be dictated to."

A critic of the present Detroit Police administration and its policies, Young continually denounced the "blackjack rule of the Detroit Police Department." Very often, in the midst of a speech, he would lean forward and say, "My first order of business when I'm elected will be to fire John Nichols."

In the early stages of the campaign it was rare for Nichols to even respond to a statement of this type because, of the five so-called major candidates (a classification set up by the media), John Nichols had been established as the "man to beat." An immediate distinction had been set up. It was "General" John in the advantageous position (he'd probably call it "the high ground"), and the other four were sent into the pits to fight it out. So, while Young went out to the people and Ravitz played Karl Wallenda and Bell played with his "game plan" and Mogk was walking around trying to find the other three, John Nichols laid back and waited. Then as September approached, things began to heat up.

The Endorsement Fight

The major trade union endorsements have historically been considered the elements that make or break a candidate. September 1973 proved that this had begun to change. At the UAW-CAP meeting (the so-called political arm of the UAW), Mel Ravitz was endorsed despite disapproval by many Detroit Local representatives who maintained that suburban Wayne County Locals should not have the right to determine who should be endorsed for a Detroit election.

Horace Sheffield, a Solidarity House administrative assistant to the Executive Board, stated that Ravitz had been endorsed because he was the "most electable."

Young attacked the UAW and stated bluntly that the CAP endorsement didn't mean "a damn thing because I have the support of the rank-and-file and they will determine who will be elected."

> **"Some people say that if I'm elected we will have a police state. But I say that if a police state exists, it's caused by the politicians..."**
>
> --John Nichols (cop turned politician).

The response was a little more than the UAW boys down on East Jefferson had bargained for. At a September 6 press conference, 25 UAW officials, led by Buddy Battle of Local 600, stated that the rank-and-file "would ignore the Ravitz endorsement and vote for Young."

While this was going on, Nichols (who knew he would not get the endorsements others were marshalling forces for), was continuing to do groundwork. John Nichols was not really "the new guy in politics" that he wanted the people to believe.

With Watergate still hanging overhead, and national politicians being criticized for their incompetence and corruption, Detroiters' major concerns were fear of crime and drugs. Nichols realized that folks are no longer interested in slick politicians or pseudo-intellectuals like Mel Ravitz. What the people wanted was strong leadership that did something instead of talking about it.

So Nichols, who has carefully cultivated his public image for the last three years, adopted a campaign line of "Be a doer. Be a Detroiter, not a detractor." Nichols also took on the stature of the home boy turned tough cop who would clean up "the city that I was born in, the city I've lived in all my life."

Nichols has carefully nurtured a paramilitary image that allowed him to establish police techniques of straight terror and urban assasination squads while tempering that image with the "it's necessary to be tough if you're gonna clean up this city."

In a very tidy packaging job by the media (the "influence makers in the community" as he calls them), in numerous articles, interviews, television and radio programs (most notably "Buzz The Fuzz"), John Nichols has emerged as a cross between Harry Truman and George Patton—the tough talking ex-soldier outside who was really an All-American guy.

This image was furthered by Nichols' use of his wife Jean during the campaign. To help balance the tough cop image, she travelled the city to let folks know that hard shell Johnny was really jelly inside.

After winning the annual husband-calling contest at the Michigan State Fair, Jean Nichols was asked if her husband was as crusty at home as he seemed to be in public. "Oh, he's never that way with me," she said as she smiled demurely. The inference was clear.

Often Nichols would wait until one of the other candidates made a criticism of him or his beloved Department, and then when the media showed up to get his response, he'd give them a couple of salty one liners that added to the carefully constructed image.

Nichols Uses His "Home Boy" Approach

As September 1 approached, he moved his campaign into higher gear. Nichols' posters began sprouting up from the crab grass. Bumper stickers appeared more frequently (even on several unmarked cars used by STRESS crews). His speaking engagements increased and while he occasionally slammed a candidate (particularly Ravitz), his basic rap to audiences was the "I have lived here all my life and I won't let this city go down the drain" line.

The rest is history.

Now John Nichols, getting ready for November, has a new line. On September 13 and 14 Nichols said, "I would rather lose this election than contribute to the heightening of racial tension in Detroit." Yet this is the man who was responsible for setting up STRESS, the well-known killer squad responsible for the killings of 22 Detroiters.

This is the same John Nichols, who less than a year ago publicly stated to the city the now infamous "mad dog killers" statement about three black men. He then started the largest (and perhaps most vicious), block by block manhunt in Detroit history.

John Nichols: The Racist Running For Mayor

This is the same John Nichols who, in an attempt to soften the discovery of heroin pushers in his Department, tried to take credit for exposing civilian and police involvement by saying it was his internal investigation headed by George Bennet that brought in the indictments. In reality it was the Wayne County Citizens Grand Jury, in spite of Nichols and his buddy Billy Cahalan's interference, that led to the indictments. (See **Groundwork**, Vol. 1, No. 2 for details.)

This is the same John Nichols who allows and indeed condones the tactics of murderers like Raymond Peterson and Richard Worobec, two DPD police officers.

This is the same John Nichols who wants to be mayor.

The media has already begun their campaign on the campaign. They say it will be the tough cop against Coleman Young, the cop criticizer and liberal civil rights activist.

But John Nichols, who would have us believe he will serve the people of Detroit, told us more on September 9 than he planned when he said, "Some people say that if I'm elected we will have a police state. But I say that if a police state exists, it's caused by the politicians. . ."

John Nichols is a cop turned politician.

"My first order of business when elected, is to fire John Nichols."

—Coleman Young

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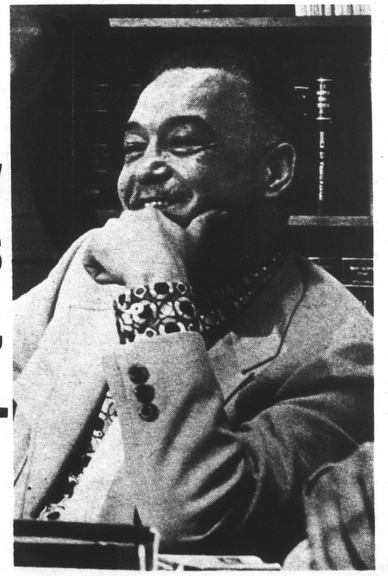
—Coleman Young