




**I AM A  
VOLUNTEER  
FOR  
CAVANAGH**



Pandemonium reigns as Jerome P. Cavanagh (center) speaks to his supporters the night of his 1961 Detroit mayoral victory.

The day before the 1961 Detroit mayoral election, *Detroit Free Press* political columnist Judd Arnett wrote that it would be “some miracle” if Jerry Cavanagh “should happen to win. I doubt the town would go to you-know-where in a handbasket.” The following day, Jerry Cavanagh shocked Detroit when he bested incumbent Louis Miriani by more than forty thousand votes. *Detroit News* political writer Herb Levitt considered Cavanagh’s election “the biggest upset” in Detroit in thirty-two years.

campaign, Cavanagh benefited greatly from the political organization of Detroit African Americans. The growing political power demonstrated in 1961 by Detroit’s African American population emerged more fully in Detroit politics in the 1970s and beyond. It was this nascent force that made Jerry Cavanagh the unlikely mayor of Detroit.

Jerome P. “Jerry” Cavanagh, the son of an autoworker, had little political experience. He had been active in local Democratic Party politics while he earned undergraduate and law degrees at the University of Detroit in 1950 and 1954. But



# Phooie ON LOUIE

## African American Detroit and the Election of Jerry Cavanagh

by Joseph Turrini

Cavanagh’s election stunned Detroiters and gained national attention. When the 1961 mayoral campaign began, the thirty-three-year-old Cavanagh was unknown to most Detroiters. A young, charming, handsome, Irish-American Catholic, Cavanagh possessed striking similarities to the recently elected and quite popular President John F. Kennedy. Cavanagh, however, had little political experience or visibility prior to the campaign. Almost overnight, Cavanagh rose from political obscurity to the mayor’s office in one of the nation’s largest cities. The national media predicted a bright, unlimited political future for Detroit’s boy-wonder mayor.

Ironically, racial conflict also gave rise to his sudden and unexpected political success. During the 1961 mayoral

he had never run for public office prior to his 1961 mayoral campaign. His only experience in civic life was in anonymous appointed positions as an administrative assistant for the Michigan State Fair Authority and as a member of the Metropolitan Airport Board of Zoning Appeals.

Cavanagh’s anonymity was partially responsible for his lack of political endorsements. Few Detroit institutions backed the young challenger in the mayoral campaign. The most prominent Cavanagh backers included the Detroit Cotillion Club, the Detroit Fire Fighters Association and the Trade Union Leadership Council (TULC). Considering his dearth of institutional support, it is not surprising that Cavanagh also lacked resources. One



Louis Miriani

Cavanagh aide recalled that they ran the campaign on “nickels and novenas.”

Incumbent Mayor Louis Miriani, on the other hand, was well known in Detroit political circles. The son of an Italian farmer, he also graduated from the University of Detroit Law School and worked in a number of Detroit city agencies, including the Legal Aid Bureau, the welfare system, labor relations and, during the Depression, on Mayor Frank Murphy’s Unemployment Committee. Miriani served ten years on the Detroit Common Council, eight of those as council president. When Detroit mayor Albert Cobo, near the end of his third term in office, died on September 13, 1957, Miriani became mayor. Two months later, Detroit voters overwhelmingly elected him mayor.

Miriani possessed a great advantage over Cavanagh in institutional support. Miriani received virtually all of Detroit’s most important endorsements: both major newspapers, the Detroit Chamber of Commerce and local labor. As the 1961 mayoral campaign began, most social, business and political leaders agreed with political scientist Dudley Buffa that political neophyte Cavanagh “appeared to have as much chance of being elected mayor as he had being designated heir apparent to the Crown of England.”

While Detroit institutions rushed to support the mayor and political observers confidently called Miriani “unbeatable,” a

grass-roots movement emerged that opposed him. It began nearly a year before the election as a response to a crime crackdown in the African American community.

Throughout December 1960 and January 1961 both the *Detroit Free Press* and *The Detroit News* focused heavily on “black crime.” The *News* reported, for example, that although “blacks constituted 26 percent of the city’s population, they were responsible for almost 65 percent of serious crime.” The paper also blamed African American leaders and their communities for not doing enough to stop crime.

Both newspapers tirelessly covered the police investigations of the murders of Marilyn Donohue and Betty James, two white women killed in separate attacks in Detroit. Between December 11, 1960, and January 6, 1961, *The Detroit News* carried daily coverage of the December 7, 1960, Donohue murder. The December 28 James murder also generated a great deal of reporting by both newspapers. The *News* offered a \$5,000 reward for information leading to the arrest of either African American murder suspect. The heavy coverage of these two murders and other crimes generated a crime hysteria in Detroit.

The Detroit Police Department responded aggressively to the increased publicity and public outrage. Detroit Police Commissioner Herbert W. Hart blamed the crime spree on inadequate resources, specifically a lack of police officers on the street. During the last week of December 1960, Mayor Miriani approved an anticrime plan developed by Hart. The five-part plan included a dramatically increased police presence in high-crime areas and a return to the “old-fashioned police patrol.”

Hart’s anticrime plan had an immediate impact in high-crime areas, many located in African American communities. During the first forty-eight hours of the crackdown, Detroit police arrested more than six hundred people. Hart was “pleased with the progress,” despite his own admission that many who were “taken into custody after being stopped on the street as suspicious persons . . . were immediately released after investigations cleared them.” Within the first week, more than fifteen hundred people were “arrested and questioned” by Detroit police. Almost all of those arrested were African American males.

Although the crime crackdown had the support of some Detroiters, the African American community complained of random harassment. United Auto Workers (UAW) and TULCA leader Robert “Buddy” Battle remembered that “the situation was [that] any Negro standing on the corner, coming out of

the house to get in his car, going to the church, going into a store, coming out of a store, going into a nightclub or coming out of a nightclub” was likely to be harassed and arrested. The director of the Commission on Community Relations (CCR), Richard Marks, recalled that the Detroit Police Department’s method of defining criminals was “literally anybody that was black that wasn’t where they were supposed to be was subject to arrest.”

Even Detroit’s most prominent and well-respected African Americans were likely to be frisked, questioned and arrested. Arthur Johnson, executive director of the Detroit chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), had his car and person searched for concealed weapons on the flimsiest of grounds. The Detroit NAACP and others had complained about the actions of Detroit police prior to the crackdown. Now Detroit African Americans became downright furious with Hart and Miriani, who supported the police actions. The NAACP argued that Miriani should establish an independent police review board.

NAACP pressure had some impact on the mayor. By the middle of January, Miriani and Hart reduced the number of police on the street to pre-crackdown levels. Detroit police superintendent Louis Berg stressed, however, that the police would not abandon the “old-fashioned police methods” or the “heightened vigilance of all policemen.” Many, including the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU), claimed that Detroit Police Department tactics violated basic civil rights.

The NAACP’s attempts to lobby for an independent police review board gained allies quickly. By the middle of February the NAACP-headed coalition included Americans for Democratic Action, the Detroit Council of Churches, the Jewish Community Council, the Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance, the Wayne County American Federation of Labor-Congress of Industrial Organizations, the Wolverine Bar Association, the Detroit Cotillion Club, the ACLU and the Wayne State University Sociology and Anthropology Departments.

The size and diversity of the coalition moved Miriani to modest action. He met with civic group leaders and rejected their call for a new independent police review board. But the mayor promised a greatly strengthened CCR as a compromise. In 1953, the Detroit Common Council established the CCR to replace the Mayor’s Interracial Committee, which had been created after the 1943 riot to monitor racial problems. The CCR had no enforcement powers and could investigate only when asked. Moreover, the mayor appointed many of the city department heads who served on the CCR.

The NAACP remained skeptical of Miriani’s intentions to transform the CCR into an independent, activist body. The organization demanded that the CCR be given a much larger budget, enforcement provisions and more independent authority to investigate complaints. The NAACP also demanded that the mayor replace the CCR’s appointed city department heads with private citizens.

The NAACP’s skepticism was not without basis. Throughout spring 1961, Hart opposed an independent police review board. Miriani met some of the NAACP demands. The CCR’s budget almost doubled from \$81,000 to \$150,000, and the mayor agreed to replace department heads with private citizens. But the CCR did not gain the investigatory or enforcement powers that the NAACP desired. Most important, Miriani denied the CCR subpoena powers. In an effort to undermine the CCR’s authority, Hart established his own police review board, the Community Relations Board (CRB). Hart claimed that the CRB had the authority to investigate complaints against the police. The NAACP and others maintained that the CRB would never be an effective mechanism to address citizen complaints because the Detroit Police Department had long ago proved incapable of policing itself.

The reformed CCR and the new CRB left the NAACP dissatisfied. Although Miriani absented himself from much of the public struggle, the NAACP and others held the mayor responsible for not living up to his promise to strengthen the CCR.



Jerry Cavanagh

The NAACP-led coalition turned to William Patrick, the lone African American on the Detroit Common Council. Patrick introduced an amendment that would increase the power of the CCR. Initially, Patrick's amendment proposed that the CCR have authority to initiate investigations and issue subpoenas, and that the council have advise-and-consent power over the mayor's CCR appointments.

Debate raged over the amendment throughout the summer and into the early fall. To make his amendment more palatable to others on the council, Patrick removed the controversial subpoena and advise-and-consent clauses. When the Detroit Common Council finally voted on October 3, 1961, the watered-down amendment had little more than symbolic value. Regardless, the council voted five-to-four against it.

The NAACP-led coalition blamed the mayor and the police department for the amendment's defeat and the failure to create an independent police review board. Detroit's African American community detested Miriani and, teaming with white liberals, began to organize to defeat him in the November 1961 mayoral election.

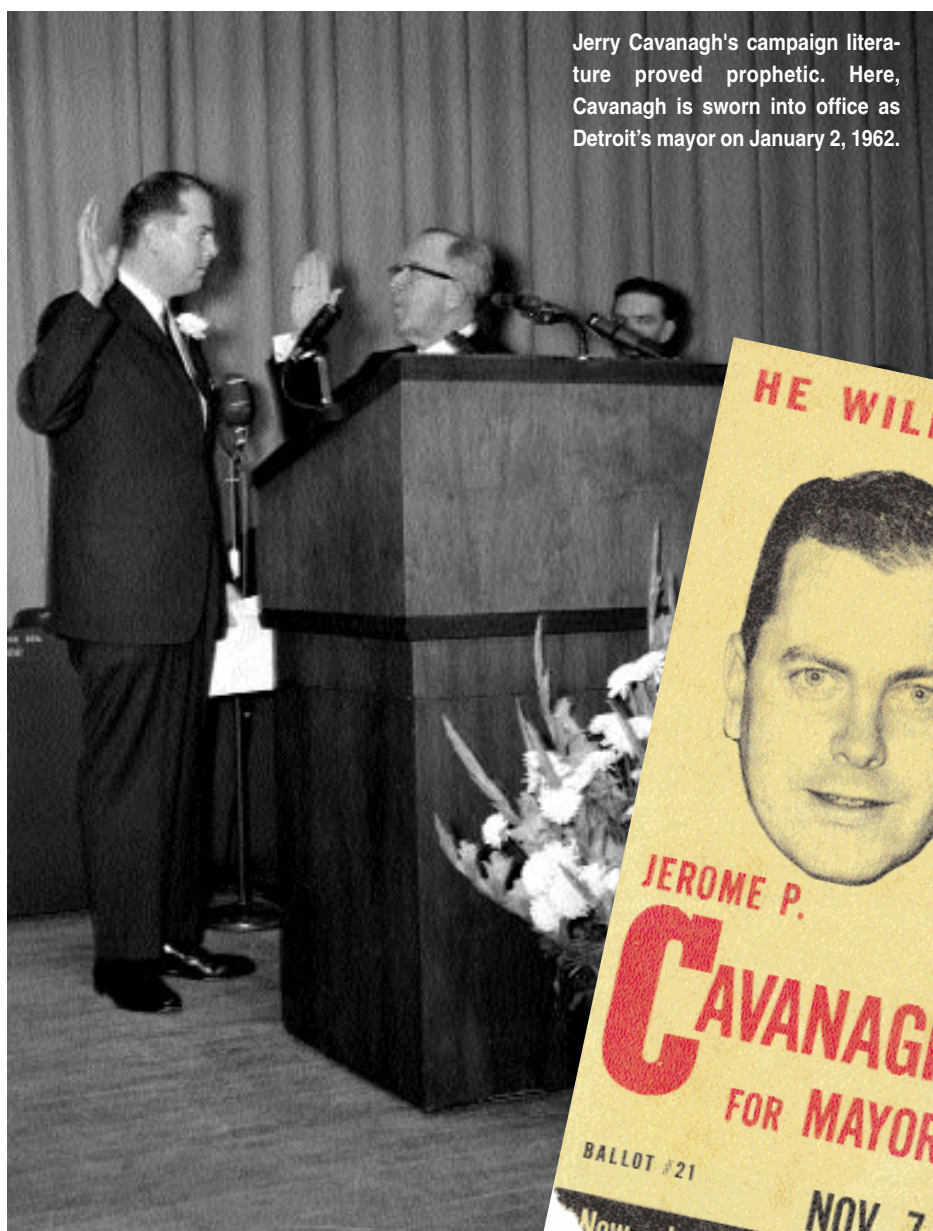
**N**one of the eleven candidates who entered the mayoral race was viewed as legitimate competition for the incumbent mayor. In the September primary, Miriani received more than twice as many votes as Cavanagh, his nearest challenger. Miriani's political experience, institutional support and financial resources seemed insurmountable.

Cavanagh ignored the negative assessments of his chances.

He campaigned confidently and aggressively against Miriani, hammering at the mayor on the city's \$15 million deficit, labor problems and mismanagement at Cobo Hall, Detroit's declining industrial base, Miriani's strong ties to suburban elites and his refusal to debate. Cavanagh stressed his own youth, promising "a fresh new approach" to Detroit politics compared to Miriani, whom he called an aged and "colorless man."

But most of all, the challenger emphasized Miriani's role in the problems that the African American community had encountered during the past year. Cavanagh charged that the mayor had "remained silent" during the discussion of the Patrick Amendment and that Miriani's appointees "lobbied fiercely" against it. "It was undoubtedly Miriani's devious thinking," Cavanagh accused, "that this tactic would shield him from any responsibility." And like the NAACP, the TULC and others, Cavanagh blamed Miriani for the conflict between the Detroit police force and the city's African American community.

Jerry Cavanagh's campaign literature proved prophetic. Here, Cavanagh is sworn into office as Detroit's mayor on January 2, 1962.



Photos Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, unless otherwise noted.



**Richard Marks (left), director of the Commission on Community Relations, recalled that the Detroit Police Department's method of defining criminals was "literally anybody that was black that wasn't where they were supposed to be." Labor leader Robert "Buddy" Battle (right) agreed, claiming that "any Negro standing on a corner, coming out of the house to get in his car, going to the church, going into a store, coming out of a store, going into a nightclub or coming out of a nightclub" was likely to be harassed and arrested.**



The TULC proved Cavanagh's most important institutional ally. African American leaders in the UAW formed the TULC in 1957 to encourage the advancement of African Americans within the union. With an estimated ten thousand members by 1961, the TULC's activities expanded rapidly and it became a social and political force for many African Americans.

During the 1961 mayoral election, the TULC provided a political organization for anti-Miriani liberals and labor supporters. Many of the people who came together in opposition to the crime crackdown and in support of an independent police review board and the Patrick Amendment used the TULC's political infrastructure to support Cavanagh.

The TULC linked its support of Cavanagh to the Detroit Common Council campaign. Its strategy and slogan, "Five Plus One," reflected the importance of the Patrick Amendment. The "one" was Cavanagh, and the "five" equaled the number of TULC-endorsed Detroit Common Council candidates. The TULC supported only the number of council candidates needed for a simple majority on the nine-member body—the four incumbents who voted for the Patrick Amendment (William Patrick, Ed Carey, Ed Conner and Mary Beck) and political newcomer Mel Ravitz, a sociology professor at Wayne State University.

Although "five plus one" was the official campaign slogan developed by the TULC, many Miriani opponents affectionately referred to the campaign as "Phooie on Louie."

Buttons sporting the informal but catchy slogan appeared throughout the African American community during the election.

The political mobilization of Detroit's African American population proved even more valuable because by 1960 African Americans constituted almost 30 percent of the city's population. In a post-election commentary, UAW and TULC leader Horace Sheffield explained that the TULC succeeded because it "overcame something that has been a problem for many years here in Detroit, that of communicating with the rank and file voter in the community." Remarkably, 85 percent of the African American voters ignored the advice of newspapers, business institutions and the local labor movement and cast their votes for Cavanagh in the 1961 election. Detroit's sizable African American population provided Cavanagh with his most solid and important base of support.

Following the euphoria of his surprising victory, Cavanagh sought to repay his supporters. Cavanagh used the advice of TULC leader Sheffield when making appointments. The new mayor brought African Americans into city hall like never before, including Harvard-educated Alfred Pelham as controller.

Cavanagh also promised that he would end the police excesses of the past year. The new mayor appointed George Edwards Jr. police commissioner. A union organizer in the late 1930s, Edwards was trusted by many in the African

American community. Since 1956, he had been a member of the Michigan Supreme Court. As the new Detroit police commissioner, Edwards, according to an article in *Harper's* magazine, sought to "build a bridge over the river of hate" between the police and the African American population.

Detroit became known as the "model city" because of Cavanagh's commitment and apparent progress in race relations. But long-term changes in race relations and in the Detroit Police Department proved much more difficult. Despite the positive press, the Detroit Police Department continued to have

a bad image in the African American community during Cavanagh's two terms as mayor. The 1967 Detroit riot stunned many outsiders who thought the city's racial problems had been solved. But African American Detroiters, who still faced a myriad of racially based inequities—including harassment by the police—were not surprised at all.

Although the Detroit riot exposed the media myth of Detroit as the model city, Cavanagh's election had other, perhaps more important, long-term implications for Detroit politics. His surprise election resulted, in large part, from the

# the meteoric mayor

by **Mike Smith**

he political career of Jerome P. Cavanagh was meteoric. During the early years of his administration as mayor of Detroit (1962-1970), a 1963 *LOOK* magazine article declared Cavanagh the "Mayor Who Woke Up a City." He became a national spokesman for cities, a shaper of federal urban policy, an advisor to U.S. presidents, and was called one of "urban America's most articulate spokesmen." But, Cavanagh was also mayor when civil disorder erupted on city streets in July 1967—a tragic event that haunted him until he left office in 1970.

Born on June 16, 1928, son of a boiler-maker for the Ford Motor Company, Cavanagh grew up in a working-class family on the west side of Detroit. He was a bright, energetic student, and by 1955, he had earned his bachelor of arts and law degrees from the University of Detroit and passed the state bar exam. Cavanagh practiced law in the city until 1961 when he decided to run for mayor.

This was Cavanagh's first campaign for political office. Prior to his election as mayor of Detroit, Cavanagh's most prestigious governmental position was being appointed to the Detroit Metropolitan Airport Board of Zoning Appeals. From the beginning of his college years, he was active in local Democratic Party organizations and conventions, but he had never held an elected office. Four years later, reflecting on his decision to run for mayor, Cavanagh stated: "I ran for mayor because

I believe in Detroit. It is my hometown. I love it . . . and I wanted a chance to make Detroit a better place."

The story of Cavanagh's 1961 mayoral campaign reads like a saga. As Cavanagh gave speeches and shook hands, a grass-roots following developed and, most important, a significant number of African American supported his candidacy. In the end, Cavanagh triumphed, soundly beating incumbent Louis Miriani by more than forty thousand votes and becoming the second youngest mayor in the history of Detroit.

His first executive order instituted a fair employment policy for the city. He appointed more African Americans to city positions than any previous mayor and he worked toward better police-community relations. The \$60 million city debt was retired and weekly garbage pickup began. Cavanagh also developed the nation's first municipal anti-poverty program.

Cavanagh's accomplishments earned him a national reputation as an innovator and as a politician who possessed a keen understanding of modern American cities. *LIFE* magazine called him one of the one hundred most important young men in the United States. Author

Theodore White declared that Cavanagh's "perspectives for the nation's fifth largest city are large and visionary." Presidents John F. Kennedy and Lyndon B. Johnson both appointed him to national commissions and advisory panels. In 1966, Cavanagh became the only mayor in history to

## The Jerome P. Cavanagh Exhibit

To mark the twentieth anniversary of Cavanagh's death, and the opening of his collection for research, the Walter P. Reuther Library at Wayne State University will open the *Jerome P. Cavanagh Exhibit* on November 30, 1999. The exhibit will display only a small portion of the thousands of papers relating to Cavanagh's political career, civil rights policies and Detroit's urban affairs. Admission is free and the display will remain open through summer 2000. Hours are Monday and Tuesday, 11:00 A.M. to 6:45 P.M. and Wednesday through Friday, 9:00 A.M. to 4:45 P.M.

African American community's growing political power, mobilized in opposition to Mayor Miriani who supported oppressive police tactics and failed to establish a viable mechanism to address police harassment in the streets of Detroit. The emergence of African American political power was the most important legacy of the 1961 mayoral campaign: it foreshadowed important changes in Detroit politics.

When Coleman Young ran successfully for mayor in 1973, he campaigned much like Cavanagh, railing against aggressive police tactics, this time embodied in Police

be elected president of the United States Conference of Mayors and the National League of Cities at the same time. Friends, colleagues and admirers found "Jerry" charming, witty, sensitive, intelligent and, above all, fiercely loyal. Cavanagh's only setback was his loss in the 1966 Democratic primary election for U.S. senator.

On July 23, 1967, however, Cavanagh's luck ran out. Rioting erupted on the city's streets and—as the city's chief executive—he faced the worst civil disorder in American history to date. Around 4:00 A.M. Detroit police raided a suspected African American-operated blind pig on 12th Street. A crowd formed outside and long-simmering racial tensions soon exploded into rioting. The authorities quickly lost control. Twelve hours later, with city blocks burning, Cavanagh asked Governor George Romney to activate the National Guard. But the rioting continued. Finally, on July 25, U.S. Army paratroopers arrived and restored peace. The results were devastating: forty-three dead and massive property destruction. The city's psyche was shattered.

Cavanagh endured severe criticism for his handling of the riot. Some considered his delay in requesting the National Guard a serious mistake. In stark contrast to his reputation as one who cared about people, some called him cold and insensitive. Every decision Cavanagh made was scrutinized and his policies were questioned. Could he have done more or was he a victim of underlying racial tensions in the city beyond his control? These are questions historians will grapple with for years. Perhaps Cavanagh did not heed his own observation in 1965 that "the biggest difficulty facing mayors is their failure to recognize the winds of change in the cities."

Cavanagh attempted to cope with the aftermath of the riot but his political star had fallen. Along with prominent civic leaders, he founded New Detroit, a still-active organization created to aid the social and physical renewal of the city: to increase the responsiveness of city government, he established the Mayor's Development Team. There were, however, no quick remedies for deep-seated racial problems based on a history of social and political inequalities. His

Commissioner and mayoral opponent John Nichols's STRESS (Stop Robberies, Enjoy Safe Streets) program. Indeed, the roots of Young's success can be found in Cavanagh's surprising election twelve years earlier when Detroit African Americans first began successfully to flex their political muscles. ■

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last two years as mayor were difficult and Cavanagh declined to run for a third term.

Cavanagh remained active for the rest of his short life. He practiced law and taught at the University of Michigan. In 1974, he ran for public office again, but lost the Democratic primary for the Michigan's gubernatorial race. On November 27, 1979, Cavanagh died of a heart attack. He was fifty-one years old.

Jerome P. Cavanagh's political career was short but full of adventure. As solicitor general of the United States Wade McCree, Jr. commented: "With the midday brilliance of a meteor, Jerome Patrick Cavanagh illuminated the political skies of Michigan. . . . What an incredible number of triumphs and disappointment marked his brief appearance on center stage!" ■

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