Richard G. Hatcher, Ex-Mayor of Gary, Ind., and Champion of Urban and Black Issues, Dies at 86

The New York Times

December 14, 2019 Saturday 23:09 EST

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Richard G. ***Hatcher***, one of the nation's first big-city black mayors who in two decades leading Gary, Ind., sought vainly to stem its poverty and blight while championing cities and blacks generally, died on Friday night in Chicago. He was 86.

His death, at Mercy Hospital and Medical Center, was confirmed by his daughter Renee ***Hatcher***. The cause was not given.

Mr. ***Hatcher*** was elected mayor of Gary on Nov. 7, 1967, the same day that Carl B. Stokes, another black Democrat, was elected mayor of Cleveland. Mr. ***Hatcher*** served until losing a 1987 bid for a sixth four-year term; Mr. Stokes did not seek re-election after serving two two-year terms.

Mr. ***Hatcher*** was a 34-year-old city councilman and civil rights activist when he ousted the white incumbent in the Democratic mayoral primary and narrowly won a racially bitter general election. He took over a sharply segregated city of 175,000 that had become half black amid white flight, which would accelerate after his election.

He also took over a city whose economy was dependent on a single industry — steel — whose boom-and-bust history and automation were key factors in Gary's decline despite the efforts of Mr. ***Hatcher*** and subsequent mayors.

When Mr. ***Hatcher*** was elected, Gary's poverty rate was approaching 15 percent, black unemployment was twice the rate of white joblessness and, the new mayor said, more than 40 percent of housing in the city was unsound or needed major renovation. Crime levels were high and municipal corruption — a major issue in his reform campaign — was rife.

During his 20-year tenure, Gary garnered several hundred million dollars in federal aid for subsidized housing and job-training programs. A hotel was built, the local airport was expanded to handle commercial traffic and, in Mr. ***Hatcher***'s first term, the police force was enlarged by 40 percent.

Despite these efforts, when Mr. ***Hatcher*** left office in 1987, 25 percent of residents were living below the poverty level, unemployment exceeded 20 percent and violent crime was still a big concern. Substandard housing abounded, vacant storefronts lined business-district streets and the population had plummeted toward 117,000, according to the 1990 census, 85 percent of it black.

Mr. ***Hatcher*** repeatedly predicted that the city was about to turn the corner. "I think we're on the verge of a great new surge forward," he said in a 1978 interview in The New York Times, and he sounded similar refrains in his re-election campaigns.

He and his supporters argued that racism was a major force in Gary's continuing slide.

Citing a "tremendous" departure of existing businesses and private investment money in the 1978 interview, he charged, "There's almost a vested interest among a lot of powerful business people, the tax assessors and other county officials who keep business taxes low here, in proving that a city run by a black will fail." He also maintained that the federal government had provided too little aid.

Urban affairs experts have pointed to the volatile economic history of the steel industry and its automation of recent decades. The United States Steel Corporation founded the city in 1906 to house workers in the huge mill it was building in the area, and the mill was long Gary's largest employer. Its cycle of layoffs and recoveries impeded lasting economic stability in the city, and the automation later reduced jobs permanently.

When Mr. ***Hatcher*** left office, there were fewer than 10,000 people working at the mill, less than half the number when he was elected 20 years earlier. (Gary's decline continued after his mayoral tenure: The 2010 census recorded a 37 percent poverty rate in a population of 80,000.)

The mayor's critics accused him of contributing to the city's Rust Belt descent by squandering the federal money and, as one put it, by "chasing a national image and neglecting Gary."

Mr. ***Hatcher***'s explanations and promises of better times prevailed in his first four re-election campaigns, in which all his major opponents were also black. But the criticisms won out in the fifth when another black Democrat, Thomas V. Barnes, soundly beat him in the 1987 Democratic primary — and again when Mr. ***Hatcher*** tried to oust Mr. Barnes four years later.

From the time he had first been elected, Mr. ***Hatcher*** was regarded by the national news media as a spokesman for the needs of urban America and blacks.

His persuasive manner and political pursuits beyond Gary kept him in that role even after black mayors were elected in the 1970s in Detroit, Los Angeles, Atlanta and Washington. (A black mayor had taken office in Washington shortly before Mr. ***Hatcher*** and Mr. Stokes were elected, but that official, Walter E. Washington, had been appointed by the federal government before residents there gained the right to elect their mayor in the '70s, when they voted to retain Mr. Washington.)

Mr. ***Hatcher*** was active in national Democratic politics, serving as a vice chairman of the party's national committee and as a leader of the Rev. Jesse Jackson's two presidential campaigns in the 1980s.

He led associations of city officials, and often testified before congressional committees on federal domestic policy, as when he contended that a budget proposal that included reduced federal aid for programs helping poor children and impoverished older people showed that cities "are increasingly viewed as repositories for the poor, the black, the Latin, the elderly — those who are relatively powerless against the interests of stronger and more affluent elements of our society."

A decade later, he asserted that another Republican president, Ronald Reagan, was trying to "wash his hands" of such people with his efforts to transfer responsibility for numerous domestic programs to the states under the banner of a "new federalism." It was neglect by the states, Mr. ***Hatcher*** asserted, that produced most of the federal programs in the first place.

But Mr. ***Hatcher*** also found fault with liberals, black and white, telling a gathering of them that liberalism was "condescending" for conceiving leadership as coming "only from those who have made it in society." He called for a coalition of liberals, black power supporters and white radicals.

Richard Gordon Hatcher was born on July 10, 1933, one of 13 children of Carlton and Catherine ***Hatcher***, in Michigan City, Ind., where his father worked for the railcar maker Pullman-Standard.

Richard Hatcher graduated from Indiana University and, in 1959, Valparaiso University Law School. Settling in Gary, he served as a deputy county prosecutor and worked in private practice, helping to represent plaintiffs in a

lawsuit charging the Gary school system with segregation. He joined in picketing a local hospital because of its segregated room polices, and was elected to the City Council in 1963 and ran for mayor four years later.

Winning the Democratic primary was normally tantamount to winning the office in the overwhelmingly Democratic city, but the influential county Democratic organization supported the white Republican candidate in the general election, which Mr. ***Hatcher*** narrowly won. The organization said Mr. ***Hatcher*** had refused to cooperate with it; Mr. ***Hatcher*** called the accusation a “cover-up for the racial issue.”

After leaving office, Mr. ***Hatcher*** opened a consulting firm and taught at Valparaiso and Indiana Universities.

He is survived by his wife, Ruthellyn Rowles; his daughters Ragen ***Hatcher***, Rachelle ***Hatcher***-Swan and Renee ***Hatcher***; his sister, Margie Davis; and six grandchildren.

Mariel Padilla contributed reporting.