

His Honor the Mayor

FIRE ON THE PRAIRIE Chicago's Harold Washington And the Politics of Race

By Gary Rivlin
Holt, 442 pp. \$24.95

By Jim Sleeper

IN SPACIOUS, frank, unadorned midwestern prose, Gary Rivlin has penned a sprawling tribute to an epically tormented city and its late, larger-than-life black mayor. The story's rumbling subtext—unwelcome, irrefutable and, in the end, irresistible—is the neanderthal ignorance and selfishness of whites: Rivlin catches the city's

elites, liberal reformers and blue collar ethnics scurrying like dwarfs in the shadow of a giant who understands them better than they do him, who brushes aside their racism with magisterial disdain, and who sometimes even loves them, despite themselves. The Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. may have been stalemated in Chicago, but he gained ground posthumously in Harold Washington, arguably his true legatee in urban America.

Chicago gained, too. In Washington, the City of Big Shoulders stumbled upon a leader worthy of its own large parts. The former ward heeler taught at least a few lifelong lakefront reformers how to implement reform; at least a few thoughtful journalists



UPI PHOTO

Mayor Harold Washington

how to recognize, if not defeat, the almost invincible media mindlessness that helped drive a young black editorial writer to suicide; more than a few blacks how to endure, fight and transcend racism; and white ethnics . . . well, there is the tragedy.

Running the city killed him, of course. Now Chicago must struggle to understand him, and Rivlin's rich saga offers footholds aplenty. Colorfully, intimately, *Fire on the Prairie* shames and instructs as it entertains, weaving a skein of anecdotes and vignettes into a civic conversation about race and power. One cannot say that it uplifts; that, Chicagoans will have to do for

—Continued on page 10

Jim Sleeper, an editorial writer for New York Newsday, is the author of "The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York."

Fire on the Prairie

Continued from page 3

themselves. And they will find it hard to avert their gaze from the mirror Rivlin holds up to them.

Hardly anyone in white Chicago saw Washington coming. In the 1983 Democratic mayoral primary, Walter Mondale endorsed "Richie" J. Daley, son of the legendary Richard M., while Edward Kennedy backed incumbent Mayor Jane Byrne. The city's press and pollsters, armored in willful denial of the obvious—that a divided white machine couldn't contain the mobilized anger of nearly 40 percent of the electorate—were thunderstruck and sullen in the wake of Washington's win. Local Republicans trafficked shamelessly in hatred, inciting the defection of half the local Democratic leaders to Bernard Epton, Washington's obscure, Jewish opponent in the general election. Throngs of Catholic, white-ethnic laborers chanted "Ber-nie! Ber-nie!"—in retrospect a carnival whose cause was doomed.

And yet the black surge hadn't seemed so

unstoppable during the primary campaign, as black nationalists struggled with black integrationists and with Washington's small "honky caucus" of Loop and Lakefront whites for a claim on the candidate's body and soul. In retrospect, Washington was able to unite blacks and defeat the white Democrats and Epton, with a small margin of white liberal and Hispanic votes, only because his intellect and heart were large enough to comprehend both the "streets" and the "suites."

Rivlin shows that Washington was equally at home debating the writings of the African revolutionary Frantz Fanon, bantering in the corner taverns he frequented even as mayor, addressing white good-government groups, and poring over city budget and patronage lines, the secular scriptures of the white ethnic wards. Stymied for much of his first term by an intransigent white City Council majority led by the alternately impish and vicious Ed Vrdolyak, Washington struggled to devise and ultimately implement a formula for genuine racial fairness in municipal contracting and hiring that en-

raged not only white aldermen but also black pols who thought it their turn to reap the spoils.

Washington understood one of American politics' blessed mysteries: However loud the alarms of black parochialists and white racists, black voters consistently give stronger support to black candidates who are reaching out credibly to whites than they do blacks running on appeals to racial solidarity alone. That Washington refused to seize the reins of patronage to exact the racial revenge whites were sure was coming—that he somehow internalized trans-racial standards of fairness in a city so racially divided—puzzled even his admirers. But Rivlin shows that it helped win him reelection in 1987 with more than 99 percent of the black vote and a Hispanic vote much larger than four years before.

Alas, white voters, like slow pupils, had nothing to show at the polls for their four years under his tutelage; in fairness, some Washington followers did little to reassure them, and the mayor himself could do little to stem the black crime and social disintegration whites hoped he'd curb.

He died later that year, of a massive heart attack prompted by the characteristic overweight and hypertension that make

black men's life expectancy in America eight years shorter than whites'. With no one to take his place, blacks reverted to their own infighting; whites coalesced around "Richie" Daley, who lacks Washington's intellect but seems nevertheless to have learned something about the wisdom of conciliation.

WELL HE might. Rivlin reports that when Daley was a brash young state senator in the late 1970s, a colleague took the floor to rebuke him for strutting around Springfield as his father's heir apparent. "Those of you who didn't even have to work to get here . . . just looked across a dinner table and said, 'Daddy, I want to be a senator,' had better think twice before they start criticizing someone who had to fight like hell for everything he got."

How characteristic of that fellow senator, a black man, that he posed his challenge not in racial but in class terms. And how sadly characteristic of white Chicago that it couldn't hear its own truest accents then in Harold Washington's voice. Rivlin's lively and perceptive account gives us all a chance to hear it again now.