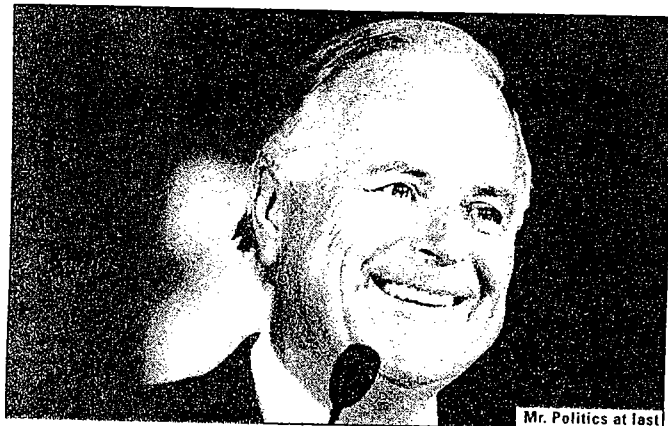


# POWERLINES

## Richard Riordan, Pol

How the mayor got his charter and his school board

BY HAROLD MEYERSON



Mr. Politics at last



Hayes: Gets winning hand from mayor

FOR THE PAST COUPLE OF YEARS, THE SPECTER HAUNTING Richard Riordan has been that of James Buchanan.

Buchanan, you may recall, was the president before Lincoln — the guy on whose watch the Union came unstuck. And for most of his second term, Riordan has had to contemplate the possibility that he would be remembered as the mayor of the only major city in American history ever to be sundered by secession — a distinction, clearly, Riordan would gladly forgo.

That presentiment, I think, explains what we might term the Riordan Renaissance of the past year. After a rather indifferent first five years in office, he has, over the past 12 months, dragged his millionaire buddies to fund a range of major projects in downtown — the Disney Concert Hall, NFL football, the forthcoming Democratic Convention. With their dough, and some of his own, he has also funded campaigns for a new city charter and an insurgent slate of candidates for the school board.

All three of these projects — the downtown re-centering of cultural L.A., the new charter, the school-board takeover — are, in ascending order of importance, devices to head off the Valley's threatened departure. The first reminds L.A.'s outlanders that they're actually a part of a major metropolis. The second regionalizes power to a modest degree by setting up area planning boards and advisory neighborhood councils. The third — remaking the school board and, mutatis mutandis, the school district — suggests that even the most unwieldy municipal bureaucracy can yet be subjected to the public will.

And this Tuesday, Dick Riordan brought all his projects home.

TUESDAY WAS, IN FACT, THE MOST SUCCESSFUL ELECTION Day the mayor has known. The new city charter passed with a smashing 60 percent support. Genethia Hayes, the Riordan-backed candidate for school board, narrowly unseated incumbent Barbara Boudreaux to join the three other Riordan-supported candidates, who were elected in the April primary. These four will make up a majority of the new board. And for good measure, all three council candidates whom Riordan in varying degrees endorsed — Alex Padilla, Nick Pacheco and Nate Holden — were elected, too. After six years in office, the mayor has finally placed his stamp upon the city.

The most surprising thing about our newly successful mayor is the flexibility and suppleness of his political touch. At the podium, Riordan remains a world-class stumblebum; but behind the scenes, he has transformed himself into an accomplished maneuverer. Remember, Riordan *lost* most of his battles on the charter. He persuaded the electorate to empower a commission two years ago, but that com-

mission had to labor alongside another commission largely appointed by the council. His own candidates for the elected commission went down in a heap; the majority of elected commissioners had been recruited by the council and the labor movement. The commissions weren't Riordan's people — and it showed.

Both commissions rejected outright many of the mayor's suggestions — for instance, to get rid of the elected city

attorney, who could be a thorn in a mayor's side. Both commissions declined to let the mayor fire department heads without recourse, though Riordan did persuade them to make it harder for the council to overturn a firing. Both commissions moved off in directions the mayor never would have charted: giving constitutional status to the city's living-wage ordinance (which he'd opposed) and strengthening the Police Department's inspector general (a major priority for ACLU types, which the mayor decidedly ain't).

And yet, working with the council's chosen commissioners, with ACLU-niks like Erwin Chemerinsky (the elected commission's chair), conceding a living wage here and an inspector general there in return for clearer mayoral control of the city's departments, Riordan met L.A.'s liberals halfway. It is not news that Richard Riordan outspent the council members in the charter wars. The news is that this aging novice politically outmaneuvered them. While the council remained aloof from the charter-writing process, the mayor made demands, backed off, and struck deals with commissioners over whom the council members wrongly assumed they held sway — ending up with a document that had a little something for nearly every group in town.

If the new charter had really codified a mayoral coup d'état, as the council claimed during the past month, it never would have been enacted. The charter for which Riordan now takes credit is actually — as any constitution must be — a consensus document.

AS WITH THE CHARTER, SO WITH THE SCHOOL BOARD. There, too, Riordan reached an accommodation with candidates considerably to his left.

One such candidate — the only incumbent Riordan backed — was David Tokofsky, the board pariah who had constantly challenged district bureaucrats during his first term in office. Tokofsky narrowly won re-election in April's primary.

A candidate with an even clearer progressive pedigree was Genethia Hayes, who'd announced her candidacy well before Riordan decided to support her. A longtime civil rights and education activist who headed up the L.A. office of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Hayes ran with the backing of two of black L.A.'s ablest and

## PowerLines

most liberal advocates — attorney Connie Rice (formerly of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund and currently representing the Bus Riders Union) and community organizer Anthony Thigpenn (whose Metro Alliance recently secured from DreamWorks SKG a landmark commitment for jobs and training for South-Central residents). All this was a bit much for some of Riordan's advisers, who never warmed to Hayes. Riordan may have had ideological misgivings himself, but he also saw in Hayes someone who shared his belief that standards for students, teachers and administrators had to be articulated and enforced. And so he funneled the money of L.A.'s business barons to a candidate to whom, at other times and in other races, they wouldn't have coughed up a dime.

This didn't sit very well with L.A.'s African-American elected officials. Normally, the political leadership of black L.A. — like the political leadership of Latino, Jewish, Asian and what-have-you L.A. — can't concur on the time of day. But Riordan's big-money intervention on behalf of Hayes, against incumbent Barbara Boudreaux, unified that leadership as never before. It was a touching expression of solidarity: An injury to one African-American incumbent, apparently, was an injury to all African-American incumbents.

Just in the past two weeks, black elected officials who have never been close to Boudreaux or particularly involved in school-board politics have written her some hefty checks: \$10,000 a pop from the PACs of Congressman Julian Dixon and state legislators Kevin Murray, Rod Wright and Ed Vincent; \$50,000 from a PAC of Congresswoman Maxine Waters. Boudreaux's campaign mailers invariably showed the candidate flanked by County Supervisor Yvonne Burke, Waters, Dixon, Wright and a gaggle of Murrays (father, daughter and son). Boudreaux ended up trying to recast the election as a referendum on L.A.'s black leadership — not a contest over who would better serve the city's schoolchildren.

African-American political leadership is understandably antsy these days: L.A.'s black population is declining, and long-safe districts are becoming less so. The notion that money from outside the community could fund an insurgency merely fueled a growing anxiety about waning political power. (Never mind that most of these incumbents get substantial contributions from many of these same outsider sources.) If this race is any indication, much of the black political class is increasingly succumbing to a "circle the wagons" mentality that has genuine — but genuinely limited — political appeal. By contrast, Hayes (and Rice and Thigpenn) points the way to a more sustainable political future for the African-American community, as part of a multiracial, class-based coalition. The oddity of this election is that a suddenly street-smart Dick Riordan cast his lot with these raffish visionaries.

THE OTHER ODDITY OF THIS ELECTION IS THAT, FOR THE FIRST time since Miguel Contreras took the helm at the County Federation of Labor in 1996, the unions lost a race they should have won. The 14th Council District, where long-time Councilman Richard Alatorre is stepping down, is the kind of working-class, heavily Latino terrain where labor usually runs wild. The Fed put on one of its customary mobilizations, with hundreds of union members walking precincts. But on this Tuesday, the Fed came up short: Its candidate, campaign consultant Victor Griego, narrowly lost to Assistant District Attorney Nick Pacheco.

The chief problem here was candidate recruitment; Griego, whom the Fed didn't endorse until after the primary, was probably the least impressive labor-backed candidate in years. A secondary problem was the Fed's own campaign, which bizarrely spent \$30,000 on T-shirts inscribed with union slogans rather than on more mailings or phone banks.

If the Fed is losing its touch, does that mean that the deftest political hand in town belongs to... *Richard Riordan*? Who'da thunk it? □

*Research assistance by Sara Dunn.*