At the start of 1983, Jane Byrne was Chicago’s first woman mayor. By its end, Harold Washington, the city’s first black mayor, occupied the chair. Between, it was decidedly not politics as usual in Chicago.

Helped by a bungled snow removal operation, Byrne had swept Michael Bilandic, mayor Richard J. Daley’s successor, out of office in 1979. Her election presaged the rising discontent of many of the city’s voters. Washington’s candidacy activated the black community long neglected by and estranged from the regular Democratic organization to generate the excitement of a crusade among the city’s reform groups.

On February 22, Washington narrowly beat Byrne and Richard M. Daley in the Democratic primary. For years, a Democratic primary victory had ensured victory in Chicago’s general election, but not in 1983. Long-time Democratic stalwarts, many who feared Washington’s promise to disassemble the political machine, threw their support to Republican Bernard Epton. Although Epton had a strong record on civil rights as a state legislator, his campaign slogan, “Epton . . . Before It’s Too Late,” was widely perceived as playing on racial fears. Prejudices erupted openly during the campaign. Washington narrowly won the April 12 election with 51.8 percent of the vote.

The existing Democratic organization, however, refused to let Mayor Washington run the city. A bitter division in City Council pitted 29 white aldermen...

Political stalemate and continuing budget deficits led Standard & Poors to downgrade the city’s bond rating. This was a blow to Chicago, still struggling to emerge from the national recession. The city experienced a steady loss of both middle-class residents and jobs. A June 12, 1983, Chicago Tribune article noted that the city had lost 123,500 jobs in the preceding decade. Polls showed that unemployment was the single greatest concern in all neighborhoods.

Although some suburban areas saw increases in corporate offices, population, and jobs in the early 1980s, in the city, political and economic realities stalled major projects. Elements of the business community were apprehensive about the Washington administration’s commitment to balance downtown growth with neighborhood development. Yet measures such as a fee imposed on Loop construction to assist with neighborhood infrastructure improvements excited community and civic groups. They were delighted to be invited to the table and to have their ideas taken as seriously as those of business leaders.

Kathleen McCourt

“"We have a clear vision of what our people can become, and that vision goes beyond mere economic wealth, although that is a part of our hopes and expectations. "In our ethnic and racial diversity, we are all brothers and sisters in a quest for greatness. Our creativity and energy are unequaled by any city anywhere in the world. We will not rest until the renewal of our city is done.”
—Harold Washington
inaugural address, April 28, 1983

September: KAL 007 shot down by Soviets
October: Bomb kills 241 U.S. soldiers in Beirut; U.S. invades Grenada; Chicago teachers go on 15-day strike
November: Jesse Jackson announces presidential candidacy
December: Lech Walesa awarded Nobel Peace Prize

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