



Oscar F. Holcombe in the latter stages of his career.

The Politics of Race and the 1957 Houston Mayoral Campaign: Oscar Holcombe's Last Hurrah

Kenneth Neal Parker

In the fall of 1957, Oscar F. Holcombe went down for a crushing final count in his bid to win an unprecedented twelfth term as mayor of Houston. While neither the sting of defeat nor its landslide dimensions were unique turns in a spectacular roller-coaster political ride which had spanned four decades and sixteen mayoral races, the manner of his final un-doing gave the historic Holcombe saga a sadly ironic, in a way almost inexplicable, concluding chapter. Sufficient irony resided in the melancholy fact that a long record of achievement by a progressive and building mayor should forever be blemished by a reactionary, almost desperate, departing appeal to racism. More perplexing was that such a seasoned professional could have so miscalculated the political weather as to have staked his final campaign on the shaky ground of what was, in fact, a non-issue.

When he vacated city hall on December 31, 1957, Holcombe had been mayor of Houston a total of twenty-two years out of the previous thirty-six, longer than any other mayor in any major American city. During Holcombe's tenure Houston had experienced its most dramatic growth in area — from 38.5 square miles in 1921 when he was first elected, to the 349 square miles of 1957. In population, "America's fastest growing city" had mushroomed from the 148,000 of Holcombe's earliest term to slightly less than one million at his career's end. No small measure of credit for this phenomenal expansion was due directly to Holcombe's future-oriented leadership: his vision of the "Houston-to-be." Holcombe's work was seen everywhere in modern Houston. Holcombe's name was vitally linked to all the city's major public buildings, parks, thoroughfares and bridges. The very form of Houston's city government bore his personal stamp. And it all came to naught in 1957.

The final campaign had been in traditional Holcombe style; summer-long denials that he was a candidate ("flushing out the field"), followed by an eleventh hour entry ("to save the city from the special interests"), a low-key campaign long on re-affirmation of the Holcombe record and ignoring the seasonal howl of corruption heard from the "elite crowd." Opposed by three

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relatively minor political figures, none of whom had held elected office higher than city council, endorsed by all three daily newspapers and the bulk of the business community, Holcombe, in September, looked something akin to unbeatable. As the campaign dragged into October, problems began to occur; accusations about a water district bond deal wouldn't go away despite the mayor's best explanations, and a personal bout with influenza seriously hampered his electioneering effort. Holcombe watched as his supposed invincibility evaporated. The November returns left the incumbent mayor in second place, ten thousand votes behind the leader and facing the first run-off of his political life. At this juncture Holcombe shifted ground, and in a move that would seal his fate, introduced the volatile issue of racism into what had been a placid campaign.

The appeal to racism was tempting in the fall of Little Rock. It had been barely two months since Governor Orval Faubus had written Central High School a permanent page in American history and inspired every piney woods demagogue south of St. Louis with renewed vigor to sail a racist tide into public office. But here was no opportunistic race-baiter. Holcombe, while never an outspoken champion of civil rights, had no record of hostility to blacks. In fact, he enjoyed some solid relationships in the black neighborhoods where, if he hadn't always won, he had at least been generally well supported. Still, this was a calculated political maneuver on Holcombe's part, though painful and difficult for some to comprehend.

Commenting on Holcombe's shift in strategy, the *Houston Informer*, Texas' leading black journalistic voice, called the first primary "refreshing and exhilarating because it was without bitterness and bias."¹ There were forty candidates on the ballot for various city offices and, observed the *Informer*, "not one stooped to muddying the waters with a public discussion of race." Yet the mayor, in what the *Informer* labeled "a brazen attempt to evade the real issues and ride in on the race question," gambled on building a winning majority based on his solid first primary support in the conservative southwest side of the city. Pandering to "fear and hysteria," accusing his opponent of a secret conspiracy with a "Negro voting bloc" plotting to integrate the city's public swimming pools, Holcombe warned of imminent horrors: NAACP control of city hall, blacks in all sorts of public jobs, an engraved invitation for the integration of the public schools.²

Hurt and bewildered, the *Informer* editorially pondered how so experienced and successful a figure as Holcombe couldn't have "enough confidence in his popularity and his record to avoid the demagoguery and cruelty" inherent in his move. Fewer than 7,000 blacks had voted in the first primary and, in a field of four, the mayor had pulled 20% of that total. "Why then," asked the *Informer*, "is a matter of four or five thousand votes out of 100,000 so important that he must center his fire on the small Negro vote?"³

¹Houston *Informer*, November 30, 1957.

²Houston *Post*, December 1, 1957.

³Houston *Informer*, November 30, 1957.

November figures showed Lewis Cutrer leading Holcombe by 34,506 to 24,752. Councilman and perennial candidate, W. Gail Reeves, trailed with 18,912. Dentist Ira Kohler scored 6,864. In the twenty-three black precincts the margin was somewhat more pronounced with a definite edge to the former city attorney, Cutrer. The blacks voted:

Cutrer	3,589	54%
Holcombe	1,254	20%
Reeves	1,094	17%
Kohler	630	9%

Holcombe's showing among black voters, while hardly outstanding, was certainly no organized disaster. With no concerted effort to win black votes, the mayor had relied, as he always did, on a friendly black leadership to deliver a reasonable turn-out.

Holcombe's tie to the black community was in the person of the Reverend Mr. L. H. Simpson, founder and president of the Negro Baptist Ministers' Association. Pastor of Houston's largest black congregation, the Pleasant Hill Baptist Church in the Fifth Ward, Simpson was the mayor's personal friend and long-term political ally. In his study of black politics in Houston, Chandler Davidson noted that while Simpson had been an official of the NAACP, he was clearly no militant. Rather, Simpson was perceived as "a friend of city hall, and as a preacher who could usually deliver votes."⁴ It was a workable accord in the style of the biracial politics of the day. While it served both parties, it tended to serve the blacks less well; Holcombe got black votes, "the Reverend Simpson got Lyons Avenue paved."⁵

Donald R. Matthews and James W. Prothro, in their study of *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, describe a pattern of black-white political participation not dissimilar to the convenient Holcombe-Simpson partnership. Forced to rely upon self-made organizations, not necessarily or explicitly political, in order to maximize the impact of their votes, Southern blacks frequently found the church as the "most likely 'nonpolitical' agency to organize and direct Negro political activity."⁶ Not coincidentally, Matthews and Prothro found that most Negro "leaders" in the South were, by occupation, ministers.

Consistent with both the Matthews and Prothro study and the Houston political scene, are the findings of a University of Florida examination of the "manipulated Negro vote." The study defined various relationships between blacks and whites including "independent bargaining" by which "black activists tend to be independent of the white political structure and bargain

⁴Chandler Davidson, *Biracial Politics: Conflict and Coalition in the Metropolitan South* (Baton Rouge, 1972), 38.

⁵*Ibid.*

⁶Donald R. Matthews and James W. Prothro, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics* (New York, 1966), 232.

OSCAR HOLCOMBE
HOUSTON, TEXAS

October 17, 1962

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

It is a pleasure for me to write a few words in behalf of my good friend Reverend L. H. Simpson.

Reverend Simpson is a fine, outstanding citizen, and not only has he been a great influence and help among his own people in a religious way, but he has been a help to the City as a whole.

I speak not from a short acquaintanceship with Reverend Simpson, but from a friendship that has existed since 1905, at which time we were both employed in a Planing Mill as laborers. My job was to keep the lumber from stacking up behind the planing machine, and his was to pick up the stacked lumber and move it to another location. Invariably, I had trouble keeping the lumber free of the machine (much to the delight of the planer operator, I might add) but Hayward always came to my rescue despite the fact that he had his own job to do and was a lot smaller in build than I. Needless to say, his assistance when I needed it so badly made a great impression on me. This occurred long before he was a minister; and, although he was a very fine man at that time, I did not have the slightest idea that he would become the great preacher that he is today. But then he probably did not expect me to become the Mayor of Houston either!

I am glad to have Reverend Simpson for a friend, and wish only the best for him.

Yours very truly,


OSCAR HOLCOMBE

OH:cfs

Testimonial letter from ex-Mayor Holcombe to his old friend and political ally, the Reverend Mr. L.H. Simpson. The friendship between the two continued for years after the 1957 election.

with white politicians for specific gains within the Negro community.⁷ In turn, the study shows that black voters tend to respond to the activists as representatives of the black community, though, as Matthews and Prothro found, the Negro vote "appears to operate at a considerable discount."⁸

Tidy though it was, this arrangement had certain drawbacks, not the least of which, in Houston's case, was a growing internal opposition within black ranks. In the 1950s, as black registration and voting increased sharply, a number of white politicians attempted to "buy" black votes, apparently with some success. In response, rival black leadership emerged in the form of the Harris County Council of Organizations, which summarily "accused the ministers of selling out black interests."⁹

By the fall of 1957, HCCO had sufficient clout to warrant courting, yet Holcombe made no move in that direction. Whether simply taking the blacks for granted, or just doubting their potential impact, the mayor proceeded in the first primary with politics as usual. As it happened, the HCCO made no public endorsement in the November primary. Cognizant of the stormy political climate, organization leaders took a more cautious approach. Wary of the possible boomerang effect of a highly publicized endorsement — which might lose two white votes for every black vote won — the group opted for a word-of-mouth campaign instead. Chairman M. W. Plummer explained, "because of the general temper of the country we were reluctant to publish a list of supported candidates, though a certain list has been suggested through the member organizations."¹⁰

Readily verified, Plummer's assessment of the national attitude in the wake of Little Rock was underscored in late November with publication of a lengthy report on the "Mood of the South." Conducted by the Institute of Public Opinion, the survey revealed a definite hardening of attitudes on both sides of the color line. On December 1, two days before the run-off election, the *Houston Post* carried the conclusions of the poll: "The white South, in the last twenty-two months, has stiffened its resistance to the idea of desegregation." Blacks, on the other hand, had "closed ranks tighter than ever."¹¹ In less than two years, white opposition had risen to a staggering 83%. As for the blacks, in February of 1956, over a year before Faubus would test the Brown decision, fully one-third (36%) shared white negativity to the idea of racial integration. By November 1957, however, only 13% of Southern blacks were opposed. More to the point, the study found that it was precisely those "stiffened" white reactions which worked to galvanize black attitudes.¹²

Whatever interpretation one might have given such realities, it seems

⁷Alfred Clubok, John Degrove and Charles Farris, "The Manipulated Negro Vote: Some Pre-Conditions and Consequences," *Journal of Politics* XXVI (February 1964): 112-129.

⁸Matthews, *Negroes and the New Southern Politics*, 236.

⁹Davidson, *Biracial Politics*, 85.

¹⁰*Houston Post*, November 15, 1957.

¹¹*Ibid.*, December 1, 1957.

¹²*Ibid.*

reasonable to suggest that a strategy which first ignored or manipulated and then castigated the black voters constituted something less than sagacious wisdom for an election campaign in a dynamic urban center. Perhaps in the older South, with its deeper white hostilities and shorter black voter rolls, Holcombe's attack would have made better political sense. But Texas wasn't Alabama, and Houston was no Montgomery. Jack Bass and Walter deVries, in their updating of V. O. Key's analysis of Texas politics, made the point that in Texas it was "still the politics of economics" that held sway. Politically, Texas remained the exception among the Southern states.¹³ The extremities of racial politics comprised neither a vital part of Houston's past, nor a desired definition of its future.

It is arguable that Holcombe had lost the first primary on the issues and would have failed in any case to reverse that result in the run-off. Certainly Cutrer had hammered relentlessly at the mayor on the issue of a highly questionable annexation move pushed through city council the previous summer. The area to be annexed contained water districts organized by Holcombe's son-in-law. Cutrer charged that the mayor stood to profit thousands of dollars from the deal and that only when the plot was uncovered did Holcombe move to delete the disputed section from the annexation ordinance. The mayor's limp denials of a conflict of interest never rang true, and his subsequent proposal that the charges be submitted for verification to a panel composed of the editors of Houston's daily newspapers was curtly dismissed by Cutrer as an obvious grandstand play since the entire city knew that all three editors were Holcombe supporters. The issue stuck and became a theme of the Cutrer campaign. Coupled with daily Houston *Press* headlines concerning the shady business dealings of Councilman Shirley Brakefield, and the impeachment/resignation machinations of fellow councilman and Holcombe confidant George Kessler, the combined effect suggested a general corruption of city hall from which the mayor, guilty or not, was unable to extricate himself.

Attempts to divert voter attention away from Cutrer's charges, while understandable, did present problems. First, Holcombe's efforts in that direction were clearly perceived as diversionary and consequently never succeeded. More telling was the fact that Holcombe, no practicing racist himself, had linked up with those who were. Primary among the experienced race-baiters brought actively into the run-off campaign was Houston Independent School District attorney Joe Reynolds. On huge retainer from the School Board for his legal expertise in fighting the U. S. Constitution in federal courts, Reynolds pulled all the stops in Holcombe's behalf. Some critics, however, detected a more self-serving tenor to Reynolds' contribution. In a televised appeal, the lawyer mischievously portrayed Holcombe's re-election as some magical guarantee of continued segregation in the public schools; "if Little Rock comes to Houston, and let's pray it never happens, we

¹³Jack Bass and Walter deVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequences since 1945* (New York, 1976), 305.

must have a man who will stand up and be counted . . . our city must have at its head a man who will not be pushed around or used by the NAACP."¹⁴ In an even greater flight from reality, Reynolds had the temerity to suggest that if Houston had the courage to elect "a strong man such as Oscar Holcombe the desegregation problem may never come to Houston." For many Houstonians it was a sad spectacle to see the greatest record of achievement of any mayor in the city's history brushed aside in favor of a nasty irrelevancy.

Still, it had been Holcombe's own decision to cast his fate in this direction. Perhaps it would have been otherwise had he operated a political machine capable of delivering a vote in more traditional big city fashion. But as David McComb asserts, "there is no evidence of a 'machine' in Houston's political history. Conditions were never favorable for development of a Richard Daley style organization." The mayor's office controlled only "limited material rewards, [and] only one public utility," an inadequate base for creating patronage jobs, the mandatory fuel for any effective big city machine.¹⁵

The Harris County Democrats owned the only viable political structure. Within their ranks the so-called liberal and conservative factions constituted the "parties" of Houston's partisan politics. Undisguised and keenly felt animosities between the two camps played a critical role in state and county elections, gave definition to the County Executive Committee and precinct organizations, dominated school board politics, but simply did not compute when it came to municipal government. Holcombe counted on conservative support. Cutrer appeared to be a liberal (by Houston standards, circa 1957, he probably was). The ideological gap between the two was sufficient for Kenneth Gray to observe that the Holcombe vs. Cutrer campaign came "as close to a liberal versus conservative battle as is likely to occur in Houston city campaigns."¹⁶ Yet the factions of the Democratic Party did not become involved. Party leaders gave no official endorsements, and neither Holcombe nor Cutrer was able to make use of faction mailing lists, funds, or precinct workers.

Holding rein on no organization to be whipped into line, saddled with an inappropriate, emotional issue which had the doubly disastrous effect of obscuring a record of accomplishment while solidifying the black and liberal vote, opposed by the dignified Cutrer who skillfully kept voter attention riveted on the damaging water bond deal, Holcombe's candidacy was doomed. Paced by a record black turn-out which gave the challenger all twenty-three black precincts by a combined margin of 22 to 1, Houston voters buried Oscar Holcombe in a 67,700 to 39,156 avalanche.

Significant as it was, the black vote did not elect the new mayor. Reflecting on that fact, Carter Wesley, editor of the *Informer*, offered his readers some sobering post-election considerations. "The truth is," wrote Wesley, "the

¹⁴Houston *Post*, December 1, 1957.

¹⁵David G. McComb, *Houston: A History* (Austin, 1981), 163.

¹⁶Kenneth Gray, *A Report on the Politics of Houston* (1960), 11-33.

racists drove the Negro vote solidly behind Cutrer." The Southern Negro has always been troubled in casting his vote, Wesley added. "He wants to support candidates who will help the entire community but must select among men conditioned by segregation."¹⁷ Indeed, Cutrer had never denied his acceptance of a segregated society; had openly told the Negro Business and Professional Men's Club, "I'll be honest with you, I have been satisfied with it." But, he had added, "I fully realize what the law of the land is and we must have a nation of laws."¹⁸ That qualifier alone had set him apart, defined him as a "liberal," and won him the Negro vote; though it was, in the *Informer's* view, "more a protest vote than it was a constructive vote."¹⁹

Whatever else the newly aroused black electorate might have achieved, it had hoisted a warning flag. No candidate could safely assume victory by seeking refuge in the politics of race. If the sly old professional of forty years couldn't successfully fan those flames, mightn't lesser lights be reluctant to try? "While the defeat of Mayor Holcombe was spectacular," said the *Informer*, "that defeat is only incidental to the great significance involved in the election."²⁰ Here was a message clear enough for all to read. If the black vote could not yet elect, it could, at least, be very dangerous for those who believed "all they had to do was raise the banner of racism and win."²¹ And if white Houston wasn't impressed, it soon would be. Building on the foundation laid in 1957, Houston blacks, less than one year later, spearheaded the election of the city's first black official, Mrs. Charles E. White, to the school board.

Houston, in 1957, had begun its metamorphosis from the Magnolia City into Space City. For one who had been instrumental in paving the road to that future, it was a pity he would be left behind. Maybe Holcombe's vision of Houston wasn't complete. Possibly the pluralistic nature of a great city escaped him. Whatever, Oscar Holcombe was at the end of his road. Looking very old on election night, all he could, or would, answer to queries from the press seeking second thoughts on the campaign, was "we just didn't get enough votes." He had tied himself to the past, a fatal error in the 'City of Tomorrow,' where there was no room for yesterday.

¹⁷Houston *Informer*, December 14, 1957.

¹⁸*Ibid.*, November 9, 1957.

¹⁹*Ibid.*, December 14, 1957.

²⁰*Ibid.*

²¹*Ibid.*

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