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A Cry in the Wind

From off the prairie the man arrived, settling at the bend of the great lake. There along its swampy shores he built himself a cabin. There among the Indians he made his home.

His name was Jean Baptiste Point du Sable. It was only years later—the land no longer a field of wild flowers but a seething metropolis of three million—that historians salvaged his name and declared him Chicago's first permanent settler. Their discovery was heavy in irony. Du Sable was not an expatriate of European descent but a dark-skinned trapper from Haiti. In spite of all the protest and harsh words, the firebombs and the bricks and the pain because whites looked on blacks as intruders encroaching on their land, the fact was that the city's first non-Indian homesteader was a black man.

Chicago politics has long been the stuff of national legend, the benchmark by which the national media measure fixed elections. In Chicago, old-timers boast of the city's political machine fixing the 1960 presidential election for John F. Kennedy, its ward bosses waiting until the downstate precincts reported in before producing the required votes to swing Illinois and therefore the election.

Patronage is hardly unique to Chicago, but there it was practiced to its extreme. Bridge tenders worked year-round even during those months the Chicago River was frozen; wizened machine functionaries ran elevators that had been automated years earlier. Local folklore held that Richard J. Daley had a hundred relatives on the city payroll.

In Chicago, the politicians were bolder, their dealings crass and transparent. The city's diary was a tale of tainted deals and politicians made rich by playing the machine's way. Since 1970, Chicago aldermen have been hauled into

court on criminal indictments at a pace of one per year. “I wish to defend my city from people who keep saying it is crooked,” the writer Nelson Algren stated in his book, *Chicago: City on the Make*. “In what other city can you be so sure a judge will keep his word for 500 bucks?” Only in Chicago was a major league baseball team caught throwing a World Series.

The Cook County Democratic machine thrived long after its counterparts in other cities. Where famous urban cousins like New York’s Tammany Hall went the way of the icebox, the Chicago organization wouldn’t reach its zenith for another few decades. It seemed invincible, immune to scandal. In Daley’s last full term as mayor, seven machine aldermen, including Daley’s floor leader, were convicted of crimes committed while in office. So, too, was his press secretary of nineteen years (a conviction that would later be overturned). Yet Daley won the 1975 general election with three-quarters of the vote.

When Daley died, his political heirs no longer enjoyed an iron grip on city government, but still there was no doubting the machine’s power. Even machine defeats, such as Jane Byrne’s stunning upset in 1979, ended up victories: the same “cabal of evil men” Byrne had campaigned against as a candidate for mayor were, within six months, counted among her top aides.

Yet in 1983, when a challenger finally toppled the machine, no one seemed to notice. His victory made headlines across the country, but the machine was scarcely mentioned. The last great bastion of nineteenth-century urban politics had fallen, but what people reported on was the color of the man who kicked it over and the hatred on the faces of those opposing him. Such was the power of race in Chicago and everywhere.

Skirmishes along the uneasy border between black and white neighborhoods on the city’s south side were frequent and often bloody in the early part of the twentieth century. The worst incident occurred on a hot summer day in 1919 when Eugene Williams, a black child from the south side, went swimming in Lake Michigan and made the fatal mistake of drifting over the invisible barrier separating the black water from white. White bathers threw stones at the boy to prevent him from coming ashore and he drowned. Black gangs stormed white neighborhoods; white gangs retaliated. Several days later, thirty-eight were dead, more than five hundred were injured, and a thousand homes were damaged by fire. It wasn’t the country’s only race riot that summer but it was no doubt the worst.

The riot capped the first great wave of black immigration from the South. Between 1915 and 1920, fifty thousand blacks moved to Chicago. In one sense, it was a drop in the bucket; Chicago was in the midst of a growth spurt that saw its population swell by half a million people each decade. In 1920, the city was home to 109,000 black citizens; by 1930 nearly a quarter of a million blacks called Chicago home—7 percent of the population. World War II and the invention in 1944 of a mechanical cotton picker brought about a still greater migra-

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tion, but the city never accommodated its Negro residents as it did immigrants from foreign lands.

Perhaps there was no clearer example of this antipathy than the Airport Homes, built as temporary housing after World War II. The chosen site was an all-white community on the city's southwest side, where the idea of some black neighbors, even war veterans, did not sit well with the locals. Thousands showed up to protest. A white minister who helped a black family unload their belongings was pelted with rocks; later, he found his car tipped over. Bullets were fired into the apartment in the middle of the night; one shattered a window and a lamp, sending shards of glass into a baby's crib. Two months after they had arrived, the only black occupants of Airport Homes packed their belongings and left.

From 1945 on, the city's black population rose dramatically—by an average of 33,000 a year through the 1950s. By 1970, more than one-third of the city's population was black. At the same time the city was losing an average of 20,000 jobs per year. The postwar loss of jobs, coupled with the dramatic increase in their numbers, made life difficult for the city's blacks—not least because a great many whites blamed them for the city's ills.

The burgeoning black belt was soon bursting. At its peak, an estimated 375,000 blacks lived in an area that could house 110,000 adequately. Rats thrived on garbage not hauled away quickly enough. Rates of disease were routinely twice those of the white community. The cramped and infested apartments that slept five to a room were the inspiration for Bigger Thomas, protagonist of Richard Wright's novel *Native Son*, which is set in Chicago. Blacks needed room, and white neighborhoods were the logical place to look for it.

The story repeated itself in community after community. In one, it was a black judge whose purchase of a home was seen as the beginning of the end; in another, it was a teacher and a postal worker. Residents protested and picketed; when that did not work, bricks shattered windows and garages burned in the night. Gunshots were not a given nor were they the exception. Panic spread through white communities, fueled by real estate agents who understood that panic was good for business. Working-class whites who had scrimped for their modest homes sold low and found themselves in alien neighborhoods, far from friends and their parish. The old neighborhood, meanwhile, went all black, no longer the small patch of Chicago the former residents could call their own. Resentment seethed.

In the mid-1960s, the black comedian Dick Gregory, then living in Chicago, led a small group of about seventy-five protesters past Mayor Daley's home in Bridgeport. Nearly a thousand whites greeted them, chanting, "Two, four, six, eight, we don't want to integrate." Then, to the tune of the Oscar Meyer wiener jingle they sang, "I wish I was an Alabama trooper . . . Cuz if I was an Alabama trooper, I could kill the niggers le-gal-ly." It was not long afterward that

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the Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., his skull still smarting from the sting of a brick tossed at his head on the city's southwest side, said, "The people of Mississippi ought to come to Chicago to learn to hate."

The simplicity of the city's racial geography underscores the extent of Chicago's segregation. The northwest side is white, as is the southwest side. The west side is black. The Latino communities stretch westward like slices of a pie serving as an unofficial buffer between black and white. Along the lakefront, the largely white north side is home to all races, but the south is almost entirely black. The Loop sits between the north and south sides, but there is no buffer between the black south side and the white southwest side, where race relations are the worst.

Over the years countless studies have singled out Chicago as the country's single most segregated city.[1] A 1973 Johns Hopkins study found that the Chicago school system was the most segregated among eighty-one northern cities. Yet it wasn't until the bitter battle of 1983, when the city was on the verge of electing its first black mayor, that Chicago's racial problems revealed themselves so forcefully to the wider world. In a sense, the political battle that seemed fresh and raw when the city was dubbed "Beirut on the Lake" in the 1980s was actually an old story that dated back decades. It was only a question of when the battle between race and community would take center stage in the city's political theater.

Richard J. Daley was already chairman of the Cook County Democratic Party when he first ran for mayor in 1955. The party was the source of the real power in Chicago; its central committee ran city government just as the Communist Party's Politburo ran the Soviet Union. Daley derived more power as chairman of the Democratic Party than as mayor.

The same held true on the ward level. Each of the city's fifty wards was represented in the City Council by an alderman, but it was the Democratic Party official who represented each ward—a committeeman—who rationed out patronage jobs and delivered favors. If some committeemen doubled as aldermen, it was mainly to rid themselves of the threat of an ambitious number two. Daley pulled off that same trick but on a grand scale; as mayor, he controlled forty thousand city jobs; as party chairman, he decided who got what share of them. It was the same with the tens of millions in contracts the city parceled out each year and other spoils of victory.

Born at the turn of the century to Irish parents of modest means, Daley grew up at a time when the Irish were widely viewed as inferior. He put himself through college and then through law school at night while working as an office worker in the stockyards. He made the right connections and understood what

1. Chicago's 1980 "segregation index" was 91.9, where a score of 100 means that every city block is either 100 percent black or zero percent black, and zero indicates that each block is perfectly integrated according to the proportion of blacks to whites in a city.

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was expected of him. He was patient and had a talent for numbers and ledger sheets, which put him in good stead within the machine ranks. The incumbent state legislator died, and the party slated Daley in his place. As more people passed away or retired, Daley stepped up the machine hierarchy.

He was a squat man with a jowly face whose shoulders were rounded from years of weightlifting in his basement. A wooden speaker who lacked magnetism and charisma, he could get lost in his words. Though smart, he was neither brilliant nor quick on his feet, but he was tough and determined. He was at mass praying while his enemies were still in bed, one biographer wrote, and at his desk while they caroused the night away. No detail seemed unworthy of his attention. A trusted aide maintained a file box that spelled out the perks each committeeman received, but Daley often startled ward bosses by rattling off the positions their people held. “For God’s sake,” one said after a meeting with Daley, “you wonder how he can run the city, keeping all that shit about how many jobs you’ve got in his head.” Daley did not invent the Chicago political machine, but he perfected it.

There were the labor bosses and well-connected developers, but mostly Daley saw city politics in terms of the city’s fifty Democratic ward organizations. Each was its own fiefdom. Just as the ward committeeman was beholden to Daley, the precinct worker was beholden to the ward committeeman. A strong showing on election day could mean a promotion or a raise, a poor showing cause for dismissal. Promoting people based on their success at campaigning rather than their job performance might not have been a rational management system, but it created an impressive election force.

It was understood that a city contract meant repaying the favor in the form of a campaign contribution. You do for me, I do for you—that was a machine motto. Others showed their fealty in more personal ways. A powerful Democratic committeeman died with more than $100,000 in cash in a safe deposit box. Years later, an old-time ward boss named Paddy Bauler explained how his colleague might have come into all that cash on an alderman’s modest salary: “They got to have somethin’ done—raise the cab fare or get a city parkin’ lot lease or somethin’ like that—Holy Cry, you don’t think they expect to get it for nothin’, do ya?” Just as almost every city job was a means of strengthening the machine, most city functions were means of leveraging money. “Personally honest,” it was said of Daley: He did not enrich himself through politics. His crime was more a case of aiding and abetting. Frank Sullivan, who took over as press secretary when his predecessor landed in jail, confessed that at times he felt himself “a front man for thieves.”

The machine had enormous influence over the courts as well. Officially, judges were elected, but the Democratic slate—the slate Daley chose as party chairman—invariably swept every citywide election. Because of the party’s prowess, it could be said he, Daley, appointed virtually every elected official in Chicago, from congressmen to metropolitan sanitary district commissioner. Even the army of city workers could be used as a weapon to stifle dissent. Once,

a group of doctors at Michael Reese Hospital called a press conference to complain that building inspectors were not enforcing a ban on lead paint, a problem endemic in the city's ghettos. Building inspectors retaliated by citing the hospital for obscure violations that cost the institution more than $100,000 in remodeling costs. The shopkeeper who dared place a poster of a machine adversary in his window faced a similar fate.

To Daley, the word "machine" implied something cold and inhuman. He preferred "the organization." The regular Democratic organization, Daley would lecture, stands for God and family and the hardworking precinct captain who maintained a watchful eye over his small patch of the city.

In Chicago, government wasn't a nameless bureaucrat downtown; the government had a face and a name and lived on the next block over. Each of the city's three thousand precincts was assigned a captain to serve its three hundred to four hundred voters. A dead tree in your yard? Need to discard an old refrigerator? The captain would dispatch a crew, just as he'd help a frantic mother find her son picked up for joy riding. Around election time, the captain walked his neighborhood, asking after the family, reminding people of past favors, and asking what they might need done.

There was a cost attached to the precinct captain's favors, of course. His petitions had to be signed, his posters put up in the window. Let the pointy-headed do-gooders criticize. What was a vote worth on the open market in other big cities? Was it worth even a dime?

Daley's omnipotence was never plainer than when he protected his Bridgeport neighbors. Once, to prove a point, two black college students moved into an apartment a block from the mayor's home. Protesters gathered to express their horror, but in retrospect they needn't have bothered. While the two students were at school, policemen broke into their place and confiscated their belongings; by that evening, the apartment had been leased to two white men from the neighborhood.

During Daley's tenure, the Dan Ryan Expressway was built along Bridgeport's eastern border and the Stevenson Expressway along its northern boundary. Perhaps it was only coincidence that the highways reinforced the borders Bridgeport shared with neighboring black communities. In the 1960s, an iron gate was erected across Forty-Second Street, cutting Bridgeport off from the predominantly black Fuller Park neighborhood to the south. Long after Daley was dead, an official with the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights challenged the city to tear down this "iron curtain," and it was finally removed.

Daley fought integration with resolve. The Chicago Housing Authority might have advocated modest-sized walk-up apartments, but only by building towering high rises could the city confine public housing to areas of the

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city that were already unalterably black. Under Daley, Chicago became home to the country's largest housing project and several others ranking among the ten largest.[2] Even public housing complexes for the aged were seen as inappropriate for a white ward for fear that a federal judge would require the place to accept elderly blacks.

Yet no segment of the electorate fell under Daley's spell like the city's black populace. Never was that clearer than in 1963, when Daley lost the white vote but secured a third term thanks to the overwhelming support he received in the city's black wards. The black church was one source of Daley's power. Preachers loyal to Daley were blessed with large donations around election time. Those who stood up to the machine—those who refused to open up their church to any of the party's slate of candidates—would be punished. Poverty played a role as well. The city's poorest, least-educated voters could be bought for a modest price: a pint of drink, a canned ham, or a five-dollar bill wrapped around a punch card. The machine's captains were not above threats, either: vote against the machine's candidate, a public housing resident might be told, and you'll lose your apartment or your welfare check.

Daley boasted of all that the machine did for the city's blacks, and there was evidence to back up his claims. He slated blacks for office in the same way that he balanced a ticket with a Jew and an Italian. Blacks sat on the boards overseeing the CHA and the schools. To his mind, he fared well in comparison to big-city mayors. In New York City, Daley said, no black policemen served above the rank of lieutenant. Chicago could boast three black police commanders and no less than seven black police captains. "Where else," asked Congressman William Dawson, who dominated the city's black wards from the early 1950s until his death in 1970, "but in the Democratic organization could a black man, whose ancestors were slaves, rise so high?"

Blacks, however, were shortchanged even by the machine's own standards. Blacks accounted for nearly one-third of the city's population in the mid-1960s but only one-sixth of the city's work force; fewer than one in every thirty city managers was black. Daley's 1965 meeting with a talented young black man seeking a job is as instructive as it is ironic. The twenty-four-year-old came with credentials: a letter of introduction from the Democratic governor of North Carolina, where he had gone to college. There he had been a student-athlete and honor student in college. He was married with children, and he was connected to a powerful Democrat—the perfect machine protégé. Yet all Daley offered the young Jesse Jackson was a job collecting coins at a toll booth.

Blacks may have been represented in greater numbers in Chicago than in other cities, but the quality of that representation was something else. In

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2. Housing expert Oscar Newman would study high-rise projects in New York City and conclude that crime rates increased proportionally to the height of the buildings and the size of the project. Newman found that the lack of streets within most of these developments isolates the projects and makes routine police patrol difficult.

the 1960s, the half dozen black aldermen loyal to the machine were derisively dubbed the "Silent Six." One, Claude Holman, was renowned for standing up at council meetings and exhorting, "Thank God for Mayor Daley!" Another, Ralph Metcalfe, was the council's first black president pro tem but that seemed to say it all. The pro tem position was an honorary post long on symbolism but short on genuine power. Claude Holman held it after Metcalfe, and Wilson Frost, another black machine regular, would follow Holman. The post served as a perfect metaphor for the machine's treatment of black Chicago.

The Democratic machine's list of abuses of the black community is astonishing in both its length and breadth. The three great battlegrounds between black and white in Chicago have been housing, education, and police. In each area the Daley record is telling. There were the infamous Willis Wagons of the early 1960s: the trailers the school superintendent, Benjamin Willis, brought in to alleviate overcrowding in the black community while schools in bordering white neighborhoods sat half empty. It wasn't a question of busing, for many black schoolchildren actually lived closer to a school in a white community than to their own school. It was a matter of how the borders were drawn. Despite the Willis Wagons, some schools needed to adopt a double shift; lower grades met in the morning, while senior grades took over a classroom in the afternoon.

Daley, however, refused to acknowledge problems in his city. In the same year that Chicagoans were protesting the Willis Wagons, Daley famously said in a speech before the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), "There are no ghettoes in Chicago." Five years later, when a fiery riot broke out on the city's west side following the killing of Martin Luther King Jr., Daley expressed confusion as to how such a thing could happen in Chicago. He did not wonder why the rioters had taken to burning and looting their own neighborhood. He instead asked, "Why did they do this to me?" In the ensuing weeks, Daley spoke of his programs and the sizable share of patronage jobs enjoyed by black ward organizations. After all I've done for them, he seemed to say, this is the gratitude I'm shown. It was with this same sense of incredulity that Daley contemplated King when he was still alive and declared Chicago the new frontier of his civil rights movement.

Chicago's fledgling black empowerment movement could claim successes. When Daley tried speaking at a giant rally several days after denying there were slums in Chicago, the crowd lustily booed him. There are slums in Chicago, hecklers yelled out. Daley stepped from the microphone to let NAACP leaders quiet the crowd, but the jeering only grew louder. Daley left the stage, his face red with anger. That same year, an estimated 225,000 black children stayed home from school for a day to protest the Willis Wagons and the miserable state of the ghetto schools. In the summer of 1964, King was the featured speaker at a rally held at Soldier Field. King drew more than 75,000 to Soldier Field and

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more than 30,000 for a march downtown. The problems of overcrowding were as acute as ever, but Daley refused to budge.

King and his organization, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), responded by planning a full-scale assault on Chicago and its political machine. The SCLC had never organized outside the South, but the problems King saw firsthand in Chicago and other northern cities convinced him that blacks there were hardly better off than their southern brethren.

Acutely aware that his northern campaign would be viewed as a test of the movement's potential there, King chose Chicago after careful consideration. The tensions between the races in Chicago, King supposed, would work to his advantage. Chicago was a city of extremes that could be exploited. Daley seemed another advantage. The mayor's one-man rule meant there would be no need to negotiate around factional politics. He knew precisely whom he needed to see even before setting foot in town. On January 15, 1966, King's thirty-seventh birthday, he and his wife Coretta took up temporary residence in a tenement on the city's west side.

Daley was no Bull Connor; he wouldn't give King an easy target. A Daley representative greeted King at the airport. "All right-thinking people," Daley declared, should support King's stances against poverty and discrimination. Building inspectors combed the west side community that King chose for his temporary home, citing countless slum landlords for code violations. Daley would not have to criticize King because there was no shortage of others willing to perform that task on his behalf. Congressman Dawson denounced King as an "outside agent"; other black politicians dismissed him as a troublemaker with no business in Chicago. In the South, the church proved the birthplace of King's movement; in Chicago, preachers took turns denouncing him.[3]

Months passed before King and Daley finally met. Daley's public vow to promote integration was only one of many promises Daley made that were soon forgotten. Three years after King went back home, the federal courts ordered the city to build federally subsidized housing outside the black belt. Daley's answer was to stop taking federal subsidies. Better no new housing than a few six-flat apartment buildings in a white community.

The scattered-site housing promise represented but one betrayal, yet Daley still reigned over Chicago in no small part because of his rock-solid support among black Chicagoans. No less a figure than Martin Luther King Jr. showed

3. So fervid was the anti-King sentiment among black preachers in Chicago that one renowned King nemesis, the Reverend J. H. Jackson, changed his church's mailing address to a side street off South Parkway after it was renamed Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. Drive. South Parkway was the perfect choice for Daley's purposes—it ran the length of the black south side but conveniently ended on the edge of the south Loop.

up in Chicago to weigh in on the black community's behalf, but even the mighty King left Chicago empty-handed, defeated.

Daley was inflexible by nature, resistant to change. An old-time politician who had cut his political teeth in the thirties and forties, he already seemed an atavism by the late 1960s, yet he ruled Chicago until his death in 1976. The turbulence of the sixties seemed to make him only more rigid and intolerant in the face of black demands. After King's assassination in 1968 prompted rioting on the west side, Daley said in a press conference, "I was most disappointed to know that every policeman out on his beat was supposed to use his own discretion. . . . In my opinion, policemen should have instructions to shoot arsonists and looters—arsonists to kill and looters to maim and detain." A reporter mentioned that eight- and ten-year-old kids were among those rummaging for stolen items. Okay, Daley conceded, Mace the kids.

In December 1969, Edward Hanrahan, state's attorney for Cook County and a Daley protégé, oversaw an early-morning raid on an apartment building that housed several Black Panthers. Two Panther leaders, Fred Hampton and Mark Clark, were shot dead. Hanrahan claimed it was a miracle that none of his men were hurt, so ferocious was the hail of bullets and shotgun blasts from inside the safe house, but the evidence proved otherwise. FBI ballistic experts were able to trace only a single spent bullet to a Panther gun; the other ninety or so expended bullets were fired by the police using pistols, shotguns, and a machine gun. The killing of Fred Hampton, the leader of the Illinois Panthers, revealed the state's attorney's true intentions. A mattress soaked with blood and littered with bits of his flesh proved that Hampton was still in bed when he was killed.

The black vote turned Hanrahan out of office in 1972 in the first citywide antimachine insurrection, black or white. That same year, Ralph Metcalfe, who had become the top power broker in the black community after the death of William Dawson, spoke out publicly against police brutality. For years, black activists had pressed Metcalfe to use his considerable clout to confront the issue but he wasn't convinced until a friend, a south side dentist, was beaten during a routine traffic incident. He tried proper channels but after getting the brush-off, he went public with his criticisms. "It's never too late to be black," he declared before a cheering crowd of two thousand.[4] By 1972, the courts had stepped in to regulate the Chicago Housing Authority, the park district, and the police department, among other agencies, because of charges of race discrimination. Still, in the 1975 mayoral primary, when Daley faced both a black independent

4. Not surprisingly, Daley came down hard on Metcalfe. Following Metcalfe's speech, a squadron of city inspectors descended on his political headquarters and cited him for a myriad of building code violations. Daley stripped Metcalfe of his patronage and plucked someone from the ward organization to run against him for reelection.

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state senator and a white liberal from the lakefront, most blacks didn't bother to vote—and Daley took first among those who did.

After Daley's death in 1976, Michael Bilandic, who represented Bridgeport on the City Council, was chosen as his replacement. A special election was held in 1977 to complete the rest of Daley's term. A black state legislator named Harold Washington was among those who threw their hat into the ring. A maverick Democrat, Washington got his start with the machine, but he was a fiercely proud man who never really fit in. When Daley made it clear he wanted none of his people taking part in any King demonstrations, Washington, then a state representative, made it a point to march. "He had no intention of going," one longtime friend said, "until he was told not to go."

Bilandic was a bland machine soldier, yet he won the race handily, beating Washington everywhere except a few southside wards. Washington was bright and able, a state senator whose bold antimachine pronouncements should seemingly have stirred black Chicago, yet only 27 percent of the registered black voters participated in that election. No black bothered running for mayor in 1979. It was as if Chicago had not changed since King delivered a sermon from a west side pulpit entitled, "The Strange Negroes in Chicago."

In 1965, Hosea Williams, a member of King's advance team, had arrived in Chicago boasting that the SCLC would register a hundred thousand new black voters. When his group fell more than ninety thousand voters short, Williams wondered aloud whether blacks in Chicago wanted to be "freed." King, too, questioned black Chicago's hunger for freedom.

But where Hosea Williams left disgusted, King cast Chicago as a bellwether of wider possibilities. "If we crack Chicago," King said, "then we crack the world." Black empowerment in Chicago, he proclaimed, "would take off like a prairie fire across the land."