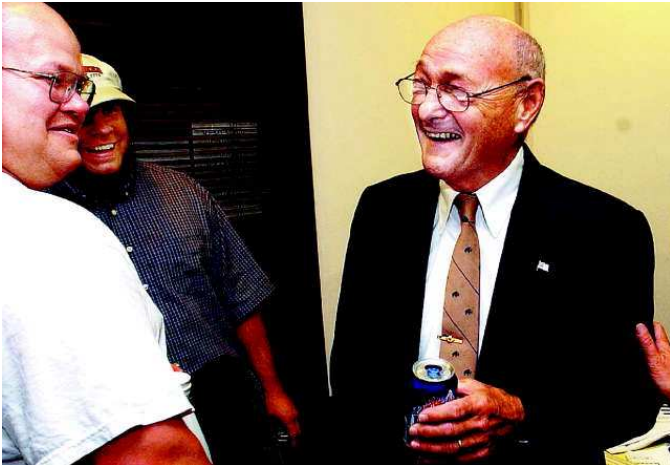


THE BUFFALO NEWS

FOCUS: PROFILE 'Where's the Mad Dog?'

A more mellow Griffin has surprised some and made others wonder if he has really lost his feistiness

By BRIAN MEYER
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8/6/2004



File photo Jimmy Griffin, celebrating his primary win in 2003, had a stormy reign as mayor in the 1980s and 1990s. Since his election to the Council, he has forged bonds with his eight colleagues.

One day after making a City Hall comeback, James D. Griffin challenged the Common Council to act like a baseball team - with all nine members working together.

The analogy surprised those who remembered Griffin's stormy reign as mayor in the '80s and '90s and viewed him more as a maverick wrestler.

After all, this is the same guy who used to call Council members "goofs;" homosexuals "fruits;" and The Buffalo News editorial board "Larry, Curly and Moe."

It's also the same guy who stormed into the office of Fillmore Council Member David A. Franczyk back in 1993, grabbed him by the necktie and challenged him to a fistfight for bad-mouthing him. When Franczyk declined to fight, Griffin branded him a "sissy."

"My wife and kids now call me "Mad Dog Griffin," " he quipped shortly after the incident. But the Mad Dog days appear to be over - or at least in hibernation.

Flash ahead 11 years. Seven months after becoming South Council member, he has forged working bonds with all eight other lawmakers, including Franczyk, whom Griffin voted for as Council president.

Griffin is friendly with most department heads, has publicly praised police officers in South Buffalo, complimented public works crews and even made unsolicited calls to some reporters whom he hasn't reached out to since Ronald Reagan was president.

Make no mistake, Griffin's feistiness has bubbled up on several occasions. He has lambasted the mayor's complaint line, blasted efforts to close senior centers and is pushing for a city manager form of government based on his belief that the current administration has taken the city down the wrong path.

There were even rumors late last year that he was working behind the scenes to rekindle a recall effort against Mayor Anthony M. Masiello. Griffin denied the rumor and promised Masiello he would try to work with him.

But in general, the people who work with Griffin and watch him from the sidelines are asking, "Where's the Mad Dog?"

"I definitely see a more mellow Jimmy Griffin," said West Side citizen activist Suzanne B. Toomey Spinks, a frequent visitor to City Hall. "I expected the feisty guy who was putting up his dukes all the time."

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Mellowing with age?

So what's going on?

Most discount the body-snatcher theory - that an amiable alien from a peace-loving planet has taken control of Griffin, making only veiled efforts to hide its influence by hurling sporadic zingers. Instead, some think it's a ploy by Griffin to rewrite his legacy.

Others believe a decade of boredom gave him time to ponder his tactics.

Still others think the change is the result of Griffin's altered role in City Hall.

But the most popular theory is that aging tends to mellow even the most feisty folks. And Griffin turned 75 this summer.

"It looks like Jimmy Griffin has gotten better with age," said Tony Farina, who covered Griffin for 16 years as an investigative reporter for two television stations and was a target of frequent barbs.

Farina is now the city comptroller's executive assistant and frequently sees Griffin at meetings. The former mayor is "cordial," although not exactly chatty, said Farina.

Merit seen in theory

How does Griffin explain his more low-key, conciliatory approach? At first, he laughed off the premise that a "kinder, gentler" Griffin has emerged.

"You know I always was (that way)," he chuckled.

But he added that whatever differences people might see in his demeanor reflect a less-confrontational City Hall environment.

"I've always treated people the way they've treated me," Griffin said.

When people would take "cheap shots" at him during his time as mayor, Griffin said, he felt obligated to defend himself.

City Finance Commissioner James B. Milroy thinks the theory has some merit, noting Griffin returned to a City Hall that is filled with far less acrimony and infighting than in the 1980s and early 1990s.

"It takes two people to argue, and there were certainly a lot of people to argue with back in those days," Milroy said.

He should know. Milroy used to work for one of Griffin's frequent sparring partners - former Council President George K. Arthur. During one memorable feud in 1988, Griffin said Arthur would "screw up a one-car funeral."

Sticking to the issues

But Milroy and others have seen Griffin change. Some credit him with doing his homework before meetings, listening to opposing views with apparent interest and trying to keep discussions on track.

For example, even though Griffin ended up voting against Buffalo's new budget, Milroy thinks he played a constructive role in the process. Griffin seemed intent on

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trying to resolve problems quickly by forcing people to stick to the issues, said Milroy.

"He was very good at cutting off most political arguments. He really nipped them in the bud," the finance commissioner said. Others say one can't forget that being a district Council member requires more of a "team-player" mentality to get things done. Translation: A mayor can pick up the phone and bark orders to a dotting department head. Council members are more reliant on the kindness of bureaucrats to produce results.

Spinks has a hunch that Griffin's time away from the limelight may have had a calming effect.

"Any of us who become sidelined for a time have the benefit of rear-view mirrors," she theorized. "At a distance, and with quietude offering the opportunity for reflection, could Jimmy see that his attack mode just looked foolish and didn't work very well?"

Rewriting history?

One University District citizen active in block clubs and the community center there thinks Griffin's less-confrontational approach might be an attempt to rewrite history.

"Maybe it's his way of trying to put a different shine on his legacy," said Fred E. Brace, who admits he was never a Griffin fan. "But we all know you can't change the spots on a leopard. And Griffin certainly is a political animal."

Not everyone has seen a kinder, gentler Griffin.

During budget deliberations, he gave a particularly tough time to two of his former appointees who now work for

the Masiello administration. Citizen Services Director Jay B. Duderwick and Inspections Commissioner Raymond K. McGurn both supported Mary M. Martino's unsuccessful campaign against Griffin to keep her South District Council seat.

"He may have mellowed with some people, but he seems to have a problem with me, and that's upsetting," Duderwick said. "I have a working relationship with the other eight Council members."

Duderwick wouldn't speculate on what caused the "animosity," but a letter he and 32 other city employees wrote two years ago that was published in The News may not have helped. It defended Masiello from criticism, claiming his record as mayor is far superior to Griffin's.

Friends and foes seem to agree that Griffin still has one trait that hasn't changed over the decades - you always know where he stands, they say.

"I enjoy working with him," said Majority Leader Marc A. Coppola. "I don't always agree with him, but we have a very cordial relationship. And at least I always know where he's coming from. I can't say the same for a couple of my colleagues."

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