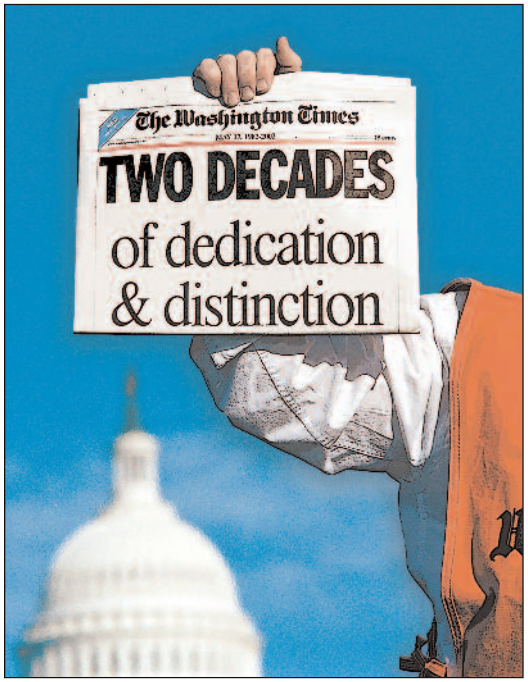

Capturing the Barry years

'Mayor for life' wasn't, but he's still around

Ross D. Franklin

Once again, Mayor Marion Barry faces the harsh lights of the media.

Marion Barry dominated the politics of the nation's capital for a generation as the District of Columbia's most admired and reviled local politician, winning election as mayor for an unprecedented four terms in the relatively short history of home rule. The "mayor for life" both defined and disgraced the office.

Barry made promises he couldn't keep, charmed and alienated supporters and enemies alike, and pursued a personal lifestyle that not only betrayed his marriage and body but landed him in prison. It was Barry, of course, who, of his celebrated arrest for smoking crack with a woman not his wife, spoke that famous line: "The bitch set me up."

And through the years, he both loved and hated the newspapers and other media — particularly The Washington Times. (The newspapers, as always, loved a good running story.)

"You guys are going to pay for that story," the mayor once told two reporters for The Times, Michael Hedges and Jerry Seper, laughing heartily as he jousted with them outside his downtown office. "And pay dearly. You just watch."

Ten days later, The Times was slapped with a libel suit by a key Barry supporter. A federal judge tossed out the suit. "Hey, I got more friends," the mayor shouted to Seper during a later hallway confrontation.

Barry, a civil rights marcher from Memphis, a street activist with a degree in chemical engineering, was elected in the 1970s first to the D.C. school board and then the D.C. Council, where he chaired the finance committee before winning re-election in 1976. He was shot in the chest the next year during a takeover of the District Building by Hanafi Muslim militants. The bullet barely missed his heart, but he was back at work a week later in a bit of political gamesmanship that helped propel his upset victory in the 1978 Democratic primary for mayor. He beat incumbent Mayor Walter Washington and Council Chairman Sterling Tucker with 35 percent of the vote, and went on to win the general election.

The District's budget deficit mushroomed in Barry's first term, forcing him to cut jobs and services and press for more federal aid. He weathered a major snowstorm and a drawn-out teachers strike and, confounding critics, was re-elected in 1982 — six months after The Times burst onto the scene.

In his second term, Barry improved the city's fiscal health, pushed downtown renewal and presided over a decline in unemployment and crime. His achievements and outsize pronouncements were front-page fodder for both The Times and The Post.

But within a year, he was stricken with chest pains while attending a meeting in a downtown hotel. Hospital officials blamed the episode on a hiatal hernia, but a physician there told police the mayor suffered a drug overdose — a report that would not be revealed for six years.

About this time, as The Times reported, Barry's former wife, Mary Treadwell, and other officials of the self-help group Pride Inc. were convicted of fraudulent use of government funds. City employee Karen Johnson, a Barry campaign worker identified as his girlfriend, pleaded guilty to drug conspiracy. Two months later, The Times reported that she was cited for contempt of court for refusing to testify before a grand jury investigating cocaine use by high-ranking D.C. officials, including the mayor.

Despite such accusations and a growing crime rate that soon would make Washington "the murder capital of the world," Barry won election in 1986 to a third term with 61 percent of the vote.

The Times assigned a team of reporters to uncover corruption in city government. Headed by Ted Agres, then an assistant managing editor, the team included reporters Michael Hedges, Rupert Welch, Elaine Rivera, Amy Stromberg and Jerry Seper.

Ivanhoe Donaldson, deputy mayor for economic development and Barry's campaign manager, would get six years in prison after pleading guilty to theft and cover-up in a plot that netted him more than $190,000 in D.C. government funds. Deputy Mayor for Finance Alphonse Hill resigned in March 1987, following reports in The Times, after acknowledging he took kickbacks from the head of an accounting firm that was awarded hundreds of thousands of dollars in city contracts.

Two months later, The Times team reported that an FBI search of Miss Johnson's home uncovered financial records showing she was paid for her grand jury silence by friends of the mayor's. She told police investigators the payoffs amounted to as much as $25,000 over two years.

Most significantly, as it turned out, The Times next dug into Barry's relationship with Charles Lewis, a friend and former D.C. employee who in September 1987 was awarded a contract to improve the U.S. Virgin Islands' personnel merit system. Six months later, after Barry visited the Virgin Islands for a "protocol meeting" with the governor, The Times disclosed records showing the island government paid $1,133 for the mayor to stay at the Frenchman's Reef and Morning Star Beach Club for four days. Lewis told Hedges, who traveled to the Virgin Islands to pursue the story, that Barry's bodyguards stayed at a St. Thomas condo owned by D.C. businessman John W. Hechinger.

The Times late in 1988 reported that the Metropolitan Police Department aborted an attempt to make an undercover drug purchase from Lewis after the mayor showed up at his friend's room at Ramada Inn Central. The incident sparked investigations by the FBI, D.C. Council and the city auditor. Tests by police revealed traces of cocaine in the hotel room. Barry called a press conference to deny using drugs and to denounce his accusers.

A grand jury subpoenaed police records of the Ramada Inn incident and the Virgin Islands contract. Records of the mayor's visits to the islands were subpoenaed by the U.S. attorney there. On Jan. 19 and 25, 1989, The Times reported, the mayor testified to the grand jury under subpoena for six hours and was served a subpoena for telephone logs.

Two months later, Lewis was arrested on charges of selling cocaine to an undercover FBI agent at Frenchman's Reef, where the mayor had stayed. The grand jury in Washington indicted Lewis on 10 felony counts — three for cocaine possession, seven for making false statements. The Times reported that the grand jury learned Lewis had cocaine in his possession when Barry visited him Dec. 22 at the Ramada Inn.

In April 1989, Lewis was convicted in the Virgin Islands of cocaine possession with intent to distribute. A month later, the grand jury indicted him on six new drug counts.

The mayor next denied seeing or using drugs with Lewis, after his friend told federal investigators that the two bought and smoked crack in December 1988. The Times reported that authorities were weighing indictments of Barry for perjury and obstruction of justice. Barry insisted to reporter Vincent McCraw, who covered the mayor's office, that he never used drugs and challenged prosecutors to produce evidence or plug the leaks.

Then, in November 1989, Lewis pleaded guilty to drug charges and said in open court that he sold crack to the mayor. Two months later, in January 1990, Barry was arrested in an FBI sting at the Vista International Hotel after being videotaped smoking crack in the company of girlfriend Rasheeda Moore. Agents sought to disguise Barry as they escorted him out of the hotel. "Mr. Mayor, is that you under that hat?" reporter Jerry Seper shouted. Replied Barry: "No, it's not me."

Barry was charged the next day in U.S. District Court with one count of possessing a narcotic. By May, he had been indicted on 14 more counts — three counts of lying to a grand jury, 10 counts of cocaine possession and one of conspiracy to possess cocaine.

The Washington Times

Now it's Mundy vs. Rasheeda

Farrakhan 'persona non grata'

VISTA VIDEO STINGS CITY

U.S., Japan trade promises to realign their economies

Doleful Germans find cheer in dole

Pilot didn't know he was loaded

THE NEW GERMANY

The front page of The Washington Times features a photograph of the mayor smoking crack cocaine.

San Francisco quake
An earthquake of 7.1 magnitude strikes San Francisco minutes before a World Series game at Candlestick Park, killing 67 persons and injuring 3,000.

Berlin Wall falls
Soviet leader Mikhail Gorbachev permits the East German government to open crossing points in the Berlin Wall, allowing tens of thousands of East Germans to walk freely into West Berlin. The government soon begins to dismantle the hated wall.

The Washington Times

Rescuers toil amid the chaos as quake deaths exceed 275

Ruth Fremson

1989 October — November — December

Keating Five
The House banking committee opens hearings on the failure of Charles Keating's Lincoln Savings and Loan of Irvine, Calif. The watchdog lobby Common Cause asks the Senate ethics committee to probe whether five senators improperly intervened on behalf of Lincoln: Republican John McCain of Arizona and Democrats Alan Cranston of California, John Glenn of Ohio, Donald Riegle of Michigan and Dennis DeConcini of Arizona.

Spence commits suicide
Once-powerful Washington lobbyist and socialite Craig J. Spence commits suicide in a Boston hotel. Cause of death: acute drug and alcohol poisoning.

Ethics reform
Congress responds to a host of scandals by passing the Ethics Reform Act, giving House members, but not senators, a $24,000 raise while also prohibiting representatives from receiving fees for speeches.

Alexander Hunter

Malta summit
Bush meets Gorbachev for the first time since his election as president, aboard a ship off the republic of Malta. The leaders do not sign new arms control pacts.

Panama invasion
The United States invades Panama to remove military strongman Gen. Manuel Noriega from power and install Guillermo Endara as president, arguing that he fairly won a May election that Noriega refused to recognize.

Winds of change
The Marxist governments of Eastern Europe begin to unravel with amazing speed. In Poland, elected non-Communist leaders form a government. In Czechoslovakia, the communist government is forced to resign and a more democratic coalition replaces it. In Romania, brutal dictator Nicolae Ceausescu and his wife are overthrown and executed.

EXTRA!

The Washington Times

BUSTED

FBI's bait was an ex-lover

Scandal called tragedy for city

Barry vows to fight charges, run city

SPECIAL REPORT:

Barry drug bust
D.C. Mayor Marion Barry is arrested on drug charges when he purchases cocaine from an undercover officer in a joint FBI and police sting operation at the Vista International Hotel.

1990 January

Noriega gives up
Former Panamanian dictator Manuel Noriega gives up his refuge in the Vatican diplomatic mission in Panama City and surrenders to U.S. authorities who want him for aiding drug traffickers.