

THE FALL OF MARVIN PRATT

IT WASN'T ABOUT RACE

IT WAS ABOUT TAKING THE HEAT

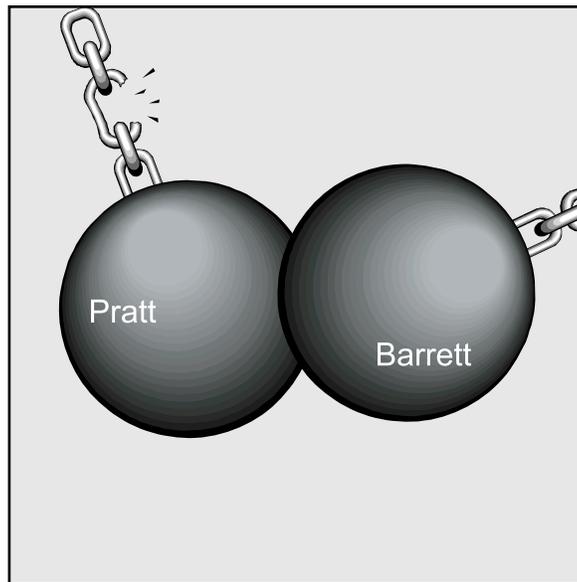
MARK KASS

Marvin Pratt was on top of the Milwaukee political world on the evening of February 16.

The acting mayor of the city of Milwaukee and long-time alderman had surprised almost everyone by coming in first in a ten person mayoral primary, beating the two front-runners — Milwaukee County Sheriff David Clarke and former Congressman Thomas Barrett.

As he sang “Ain’t no stopping us now” to a room full of supporters at his election night party at the Park East Hotel in downtown Milwaukee, Pratt had all the momentum of the frontrunner to become the first elected African American mayor of the city of Milwaukee.

He had surged to the front of the crowded mayoral field just six months after most political observers had written off his campaign, concluding the race for the first open seat in the mayor’s office in 16 years would be a battle between Barrett and Clarke. Pratt was in the second tier of candidates that included Alderman Thomas Nardelli, who lost a run for county executive in 2003, and Milwaukee Municipal Judge Vince Bobot.



Some Pratt supporters were even quietly urging him to drop out of the mayor’s race and run for re-election in his safe aldermanic district, which would likely have allowed him to hold on to the Common Council president’s position.

But as quickly as he surged to the front-runner status, Pratt fell and fell hard in the six weeks between the primary

and the general election on April 6. His quick descent has been compared to Howard Dean’s sudden national tumble after his rambling speech on the evening he lost the Iowa caucuses.

Pratt’s campaign stumbled time and time again as it was wracked by: allegations of a \$116,000 gap in his campaign account that led to a John Doe investigation by the Milwaukee County district attorney’s office; the filing of five civil charges regarding campaign finance errors; and comments from District Attorney Michael McCann that Pratt may have double-billed the city for six trips during the past decade.

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In the end, Barrett easily defeated Pratt 54 percent to 46 percent to capture the mayor's office, leaving Pratt supporters outraged — many claiming that the media, the district attorney's office and Barrett had treated the long-time and well-liked Milwaukee politician unfairly. They claimed that Milwaukee's racial divide had stopped Pratt from winning the mayor's office.

But most political observers dismiss the unfair treatment allegations, pointing out that most of Pratt's problems were caused by him or those around him. If there would have been no campaign financing problems to find, it would have never been issue.

And many said they were not surprised, given Pratt's reputation as an alderman of being what some called "an ineffective leader," and the fact that he was in charge of the Common Council during its recent scandal that sent three aldermen to federal prison.

"This was definitely a missed opportunity for Marvin," said Jeff Fleming, a Milwaukee public relations executive and former mayoral press secretary. "All of the controversies were a dream scenario for Barrett. The goal (of a campaign) is to raise negatives about your opponent, while setting out an agenda of your own. Barrett was able to concentrate on his own agenda because Pratt shot himself in the foot almost every day."

A Barrett campaign official said Pratt kept handing them issues to raise with the public.

"It was a different race because of everything that came out," the campaign official said. "It was nothing like what we expected the night of the primary."

Janet Boles, a Marquette University political science professor, had a simple explanation for Pratt's quick downfall — he was playing at a level that he had never played before, where the bright lights and scrutiny bring out any flaws.

In comparison, Barrett had run for Congress several times and had worked under the hot spotlights in Washington, D.C., even

serving on the U.S. House of Representative's Judiciary Committee during President Bill Clinton's impeachment hearings.

As an alderman and Common Council president, Pratt operated in a low-key manner, dealing with constituents and generally avoiding the media spotlight. His style was one of consensus, preferring to avoid controversy or conflict.

"Marvin Pratt is a nice and honorable guy," she said. "But he seemed out of his league in this race. It makes me sad to say that because he has been helpful to the city for many years."

Below the radar

Pratt entered the mayoral race in February 2003, hoping to use his position as council president as a stepping stone to the mayor's office, a short distance from his own office on the second floor of Milwaukee City Hall. He was elected Common Council president in 2000 and first elected to the council in 1987 when North Side Alderman Roy Nabors stepped down.

But his campaign floundered early on, with most political observers expecting the race to be between Barrett and Clarke, who were on opposite ends of the political spectrum.

Then two important things happened.

Pratt's campaign got a sudden jumpstart in June 2003 when Mayor John Norquist, who decided not to run for re-election because of a sexual harassment scandal, announced he would leave office three months early to become president of Congress of New Urbanism in Chicago.

That decision elevated Pratt to the mayor's office and gave him the power of incumbency that many political observers believe was one of the keys to his strong showing in the primary. When he took office in early January, he gave a rousing opening speech and then tried to move quickly to put some of his own supporters in place by firing popular Department of City Development Commissioner Julie

Penman in what was seen as a political move because Penman had given Barrett campaign contributions.

Pratt even showed up at Penman's east-side Milwaukee home on New Year's Eve to deliver the news in an attempt to show the public he was in charge.

"(Pratt) definitely took advantage of being in the office," said Mordecai Lee, a University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee political science professor and former state legislator. "The key things for Marvin were that the streets got plowed and the garbage got picked up on time. He acted with dignity and had no major missteps."

He was even able to overcome the hit his campaign took when he mis-handled the hiring of Marc Nedbeck, a campaign spokesperson, shortly after Norquist announced he would leave office early. Pratt ended up firing Nedbeck after less than a week on the job as one of the alderman's aides when it was discovered that Nedbeck had misstated his political experience. Pratt also admitted that he never checked Nedbeck's resume.

The second event was the tone of the mayor's race before the primary. The two heavyweights in the race — Barrett and Clarke, focused their attention almost exclusively on each other as they battled for what they thought would be the top spot.

Right before the primary one Pratt insider even compared the Barrett-Clarke battle to the election of Russ Feingold as a U.S. senator in 1988 when Feingold upset two stronger candidates, Jim Moody and Joe Checota, who engaged in a bitter, negative campaign.

"This is definitely getting a Feingold dynamic with two candidates punching each other and kicking each other in the head and the third sitting on the sidelines looking mayoral," the Pratt insider said. "It is a classic mistake that you would think people in the political world would remember and avoid."

Several political observers said Barrett focused his sights and attacks on Clarke in hopes of ensuring that he would face Pratt in the general election. Barrett's campaign staff believed he would have a better chance of beating Pratt than Clarke, who was the media darling of the area's conservative talk shows and the favorite of many high-ranking Republicans in the state.

"There is no doubt that Barrett will do better against Pratt than Clarke," a Milwaukee business executive who supported Barrett, said before the primary. "Clarke can run a campaign as an outsider, calling for change in the political establishment. That is something that Pratt can't do."

It worked, as Pratt won the primary, capturing 38 percent of the vote, compared to 33 percent for Barrett. Clarke finished a disappointing third with only 18 percent.

In the spotlight

After the primary, the spotlight quickly found Pratt. In a one-week time period, Pratt was on the front page of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* every day with a negative story related to his campaign finance reports, his misstatements on visiting a polling place during the February primary election and his spending at City Hall. All the stories were repeated on the radio all day and led the evening news on all four Milwaukee news channels.

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"I can't remember any one in local politics having as bad a week as Marvin had," Fleming said. "It was one bad story after another. That is hard to overcome."

Barrett's staff also did their own research. What they found stuck as Barrett criticized Pratt for spending \$600 to take out city staff after the council's approval of the 2000 budget, which included a tax levy and service fee increase. He also quickly produced and began running humorous radio ads that accused Pratt of liking "to spend the dough."

Word then leaked out that McCann had convened a grand jury to look into Pratt's campaign financing questions.

Pratt never recovered from the bad news barrage. His campaign frequently intensified the spotlight by refusing to comment or holding press conferences that offered little or no explanation. The oddest press conference during the campaign was one called to explain the financial discrepancies where Pratt did not even show up.

Instead, the campaign trotted out a former Internal Revenue Service auditor to try and answer the questions. The press conference got very tense when Greg Wesley, a Milwaukee attorney who acts as Pratt's campaign finance chairman, refused to answer repeated questions about whether the person who prepared the contested finance reports was still employed.

His supporters then began shooting questions at Wesley, asking if it really mattered if the mayor of a city knew how to balance a budget because he would surround himself with quality people.

The press conference was publicized all day on radio and was even carried live on WTMJ-AM and on several local television stations. However, most of the media quickly pulled the live plug on the press conference and some even mocked Pratt for not showing up.

The no-show by Pratt left the media, political observers and even some Pratt supporters scratching their heads.

"The goal of the news conference was to answer questions and then move forward," Fleming said. "Instead, the opposite occurred. More questions were raised and the story just kept going."

H. Carl Mueller, a Milwaukee public relations executive and Pratt campaign advisor, defended the press conference saying it was intended as an expert explanation of the financial discrepancies.

"We knew the media would then go find Marvin and ask him about the issue," he said. "This issue was a distraction, no doubt about it."

The story hit its peak when McCann issued the five civil charges against Pratt in a Monday morning news conference that was carried live on many Milwaukee-area television and radio stations. McCann, calling the financing records "sloppy," also detailed six cases where Pratt used his campaign fund to pay for trips, then submitted bills to the city for payments and cashed those checks himself.

Pratt responded by calling the investigation "politically motivated" and frequently criticized media coverage of that and a series of other political missteps. But he acknowledged mistakes and quickly agreed not to contest the accusations and to pay the maximum \$2,500 fine.

In his press conference following the McCann charges, Pratt even went out of his way to accuse Barrett of hiring the same firm that had recently trashed the African-American mayor of Philadelphia. In fact, the opposite was true. Barrett had hired the same firm that had helped the mayor get re-elected.

Several political observers criticized Pratt and his campaign for the way they responded to the campaign finance charges.

"The major factors in Pratt's narrow defeat were his senior campaign strategists — collectively and individually," Walter Farrell, a former UWM professor of educational psychology, wrote in an op-ed piece in the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* after the election. "They man-

aged to run the most ineffective political campaign in recent memory. Misreading and ignoring Milwaukee's voter history, attitudes and available data, they effectively snatched defeat from the jaws of a highly probable victory."

Farrell criticized the campaign for agreeing to a series of more than 40 forums or debates between Pratt and Barrett, which most agreed played to Barrett's public speaking strength.

"Debates were not his (Pratt's) strong suit," Farrell wrote. "And it provided Barrett with an almost daily forum in which he compared more favorably with Pratt in terms of command of the issues, vision and leadership. Moreover, white voters came to really know Pratt in a venue in which he did not excel, causing long-held racial stereotypes to come further into play."

Most political observers believed Pratt's missteps greatly hurt his efforts to reach beyond his base of African American voters. He needed to capture a good portion of the Hispanic vote and many of the south- and northwest-side Milwaukee voters, who in the primary had voted for Clarke.

And while Clarke had endorsed Pratt after the primary, he did not campaign for him or

lend him any financial support. Television exit polls showed that most Clarke voters ended up voting for Barrett.

"That is where Pratt really missed his opportunity," said a political strategist. "He had a chance to get some of the conservative vote, but with all the problems he had, there was no way they were going to vote for him. There was even a shot after the primary that he would get the support of talk radio because of their past dislike of Barrett."

In the days following the election, Pratt refused to congratulate Barrett. He continued to blame his loss on the media, even granting the *New York Times* an interview where his wife, Diane, blamed the media and called Milwaukee "a racist city," as evidenced she said, by the results of the mayoral race.

"His supporters want to play this off as media or a race issue," the political strategist said. "But if you look at this strictly from a political point of view, this was about a candidate who, when he got in the spotlight, he couldn't take the heat. If you look at the bottom line, that was what this race was all about."