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HISTORY

FRANK RIZZO

The Last Big Man in Big City America

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For my mother and father

colorblind. Even at this early stage of the development of his political personality, he did not want to wear the racist nametag. It didn't fit.

But he could not ignore the militancy of some black groups. They were gunning for the cops. He was a cop. They wanted to use violence to assault white America. He was a white American.

His first big target was the Revolutionary Action Movement (RAM). In July 1967 Rizzo ordered a raid of a RAM house in North Philadelphia. The police were looking for weapons but did not find them. Instead, they confiscated pamphlets and brochures of a group calling itself the Black Guard—RAM's paramilitary wing. For a year, the CD squad infiltrated RAM then moved on them when they began stockpiling weapons in a North Philadelphia row house. In November 1968, a CD raid found two rifles, two shotguns, hundreds of rounds of ammunition, Maoist literature by the boxful, and a mimeograph machine. The prosecution of one of the RAM members was dropped, but the group died. Rizzo got credit for snuffing out a potentially violent group—civil liberties be damned.

On the last Sunday night in March 1968, Lyndon Johnson, his presidency battered by crises at home and abroad, announced in a nationwide television and radio address from Washington that he would not seek reelection. In New York, Richard M. Nixon, pronouncing it the "year of the dropouts," predicted that Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey, "or someone espousing the Johnson philosophy," would likely be the Democratic nominee against him. Nixon could not resist kicking the Democrats while they were down.

Five days later, the Democratic Party's predicament, and that of the nation, got much worse. On April 4, 1968, Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. was assassinated in Memphis, Tennessee, igniting riots in cities across the nation. In Chicago, the day after King was killed, Mayor Richard J. Daley gave police the order to shoot-to-kill any arsonists or looters. Baltimore and Washington, D.C. were hit hard. In Wilmington, Delaware, which is just a few miles south of Philadelphia, rioters protesting King's assassination burned buildings and looted businesses. The mayor called in national guard units, which occupied the city for nine months.

In Philadelphia, Rizzo's presence inspired fear. But Tate ordered him to keep his cool. The mayor put a state of emergency in force. He closed bars and liquor stores and he outlawed large gatherings.

Thousands of blacks, angry and sullen about the loss of King, congregated on the long, rectangular lawn in front of Independence Hall in Philadelphia the day after King was shot. Rizzo was ready. He had seventeen busloads of police officers hidden among the 18th and 19th century buildings in Philadelphia's historic section. Black leaders kept a lid on emotions. Block captains from North and West Philadelphia moved

through the crowd. No one wanted a repeat of the bloodshed at the Board of Education building in November. And Rizzo was eager to avoid the public outrage over the police behavior at that demonstration.

And again, Philadelphia did not burn.

The Republican candidate for president was impressed by the performance of the Philadelphia Police Department. When Richard Nixon traveled through the city on a campaign swing on July 16, 1968, naturally, he avoided meeting with the Democratic mayor, James Tate. Instead, through J. Edgar Hoover, Nixon sought an audience with Frank Rizzo.

Rizzo drove Car One out to the airport. Nixon later told reporters that the two men talked about law enforcement, about the crisis confronting America's cities. What Nixon didn't say was that he approached Rizzo about running for mayor of Philadelphia—as a Republican. By then it was no secret, in or out of the city, that Rizzo had his sights on a political career. Nixon thought that the police commissioner's approach and ideals were perfectly suited for the new Republican majority which the former California governor wanted to forge, a majority built with two constituencies that could be pried loose from the Democratic Party—southern whites and northeastern ethnics in the cities and suburbs.

"Rizzo's record has met with the approval of law enforcement officers all across the country," Nixon announced. Tate could not ignore this praise. On September 10, 1968, he approved Rizzo's request for 700 new policemen, bolstering the force to 7,700, an all-time high.

Nixon came back to Philadelphia ten days later. Across the country, Nixon was hammering Humphrey with the law and order theme. He singled Rizzo out again. "I think you guys are the ones who are setting the right standard in this country. You think of law and justice...and that's what we need." Rizzo beamed. The president also greeted the Republican district attorney, Arlen Specter. "As I told you before, Arlen, you're going to make it the next time," the president said, referring to the 1971 mayoral campaign. Nixon knew a thing or two about political renewal. But his real designs were for Rizzo to run as a Republican.

The presidential election of 1968 completed Richard Nixon's long climb back from political oblivion. It also signaled the beginning of the Republican Party's domination of presidential politics. With George C. Wallace of Alabama running as the nominee of the American Independent Party, Nixon ignited the fissure in the Democratic coalition. Wallace embodied the populist anger based on race. Nixon exploited the disintegration of social order. Together, they collected 57 percent of the popular vote, "the silent majority."

To corral that majority into the Republican column permanently, Nixon would need to add Wallace's populist rage, especially in the north-

eastern cities. He would need to align himself with political personalities who intuitively understood how race influenced segments of the electorate, who could deliver votes, guys like Frank Rizzo.

On the other side of Nixon's silent majority were groups like the Students for a Democratic Society, which in many cities had been viewed as a loud and destructive force, but not in Philadelphia. Rizzo was jealous. He wanted in on the action. So, he went after the National Caucus of Labor Committees (NCLC), an offshoot of the militant SDS.

In February 1969, Rizzo had eight NCLC members arrested for distributing leaflets in front of two public schools in West Philadelphia. The leaflets concerned a harmless campus protest at the University of Pennsylvania. But Rizzo charged that NCLC was plotting to blow up public schools. For evidence, he showed the press a copy of *Your Manual*, a how-to on homemade explosives produced by the SDS.

Compared to the SDS, the NCLC was a meek organization, but Rizzo wanted to pin anything he could on this group. He wanted to claim himself as a protector, as the man who was on top of everything everywhere. His desire to get the NCLC reached absurd proportions, however, on April 9, 1969. Fencil led a raid on the apartment of two of the group's leaders, Steven Fraser and Richard Borgman. The police, armed with a search warrant granted on the basis of a tip from an anonymous source, claimed to find explosives, including C-4 that looked very much like a batch stored at the Roundhouse. At a court hearing, the police could not explain why they did not protect potentially incriminating fingerprints on the explosives. Bail was reduced. Four years later, the case was dropped when the informant did not materialize.

Rizzo's use of the press was exposed the following summer. In July, 1970, Rizzo fed CD files to his favorite *Bulletin* reporter, Al Gaudiosi, who openly talked about Rizzo's political ambitions, and how he intended to work on Rizzo's campaign.

Based on Rizzo's files, Gaudiosi wrote a series that ran in the *Bulletin* for three days. The series was called "The New Revolutionaries." It was nothing more than an advertising campaign for Rizzo in his longstanding battle with Bill Biggin and the *Philadelphia Free Press*.

In one of its pamphlets on Rizzo, the *Free Press* published a damaging account of how the police savagely beat Arthur Davis, a black man in Powelton Village who refused to show a police officer his driver's license after the cop called him "a black motherfucker." The pamphlet also alleged that Rizzo had ties to the Mafia.

Biggin reported in one of his pamphlets that after the Gaudiosi series, the *Free Press* lost its printer and Temple University withdrew its academic scholarship for the activist. Biggin finally had to seek court protection against police harassment of him and his newspaper. The *Free Press* did not

go out of business, but the *Bulletin* series again had made Rizzo a one man show, at least temporarily.

Next, however, it would be the Black Panthers who wandered onto Rizzo's turf.

IV

Before dawn on December 4, 1969, Edward Hanrahan, State's Attorney of Cook County ordered a raid of the Black Panthers headquarters at 2337 West Monroe Street in Chicago. There was an exchange of gunfire. Several police were injured. Two members of the Black Panthers were killed.

The Panthers declared war on police officers nationwide. The following summer, the party's leader, Huey P. Newton, called for a "revolutionary people's constitutional convention" to be held September 5, 1970. The place: Philadelphia.

The last week in August 1970, Rizzo began preparations to defend his police force. A month earlier, at a moment's notice, Rizzo and about 600 of his police officers had quelled a race riot at Holmesburg Prison in Northeast Philadelphia on the Fourth of July. So, Rizzo had already had his department in a high state of readiness. He just tuned it up a notch.

Thomas J. Gibbons Jr. was a member of the elite 150-man Highway Patrol. "We practiced for six weeks at Kennedy Stadium for the annual hero scholarship fund show," said Gibbons. "It meant certain perks. Day work. Weekends off." On Friday afternoon August 28, 1970, one of the commanders came down to John F. Kennedy Stadium in South Philadelphia. "He said all days off are cancelled," said Gibbons. "My girlfriend's family had a place in Wildwood, and we were all set to go down there for that weekend. The weekend was cancelled."

Gibbons was the fourth child, only son, of former Police Commissioner Thomas J. Gibbons, who retired to Florida after divorcing his wife, Miriam. Tommy Gibbons was born a year after Franny Rizzo, and the two sons of police commissioners traveled among the same Catholic schoolboy friends. Tommy Gibbons joined the police force in 1965 at age 20. Despite his father's battles with Rizzo, Tommy Gibbons was treated like a prince by the Big Man. Gibbons was the son Rizzo never had on the force. He gave him every break, including a coveted spot on the highway patrol.

"You're escorting vice presidents, presidents," said Gibbons. "I'm only a 22-year-old guy. Meeting Nixon, meeting Humphrey. I'm on a motorcycle. I'm single. The world is great. I loved Harley-Davidsons—spitshine and polish. It was the Marine Corps of the police department."

And when Gibbons's father retired to Florida, Rizzo took care of Gibbons's mother. "If she was afraid, she called Frank directly, and he

Sources for the reform movement and Charter change are Pennsylvania Economy League report, Feb. 1973; Clark, *The Urban Ordeal*; and Weigley.

Sources for Ellis suicide and Rosenberg appointment are *Inquirer*, Oct. 18, 1950, p. 1; interview with Mr. Rizzo, Jan. 1991; interview with Thomas J. Gibbons Jr.; Daughen; and Hamilton.

Source for scene at 6th and Fitzwater Streets: *Inquirer*, July 12, 1951, and interview with Mr. Rizzo. Source for Ralph Rizzo's reprimand of his son: interview with Mr. Rizzo; and Daughen, p. 67.

A source for references to the American crime problem in the 1940s and 1950s was Kefauver, *Crime in America*.

Sources for Rizzo's days in West Philadelphia were an interview with Mr. Rizzo, Jan. 1991; interview with Harvey N. Schmidt, April 1992; various articles in the *Pittsburgh Courier*, 1951-1954; *Inquirer*, April 3, 1953; and Daughen, pp. 69-70.

The sources for the mob history are a 1988 confidential FBI report, the 1980 Pennsylvania Crime Commission report, and interviews with law enforcement officials who asked not to be identified.

Chapter Four

Sources for Rizzo's Senate testimony include the Permanent Subcommittee on Investigations; the U.S. Senate Committee on Government Operations, June 12-15, 1962; American Guild of Variety Artists; Mr. Rizzo's notes in the Philadelphia City Archives; and an interview with Mr. Rizzo, Feb. 1991.

Sources for Rizzo's days at 12th and Pine are interviews with Mr. Rizzo, Oct. 1990; Joseph Yannone, April 1992; Jesse W. Strange, April 1992; James W. Turner, May 1992; other police officers who asked not to be identified; court records; and the FBI mob report cited above.

Source for Dilworth's suspicions of Rizzo are two assistant district attorneys who worked for Dilworth and asked not to be identified.

The Gibbons quotation is from Daughen, p. 79.

Rizzo's shouting match with Judge Freed is cited in Hamilton, pp. 51-52; and the *Daily News*, April 24, 1958; and the *Inquirer*, April 26, 1958.

Source for statistics on black municipal employment is Ershkowitz and Zikmund, p. 58.

Source for Gibbons's comments on *Humoresque* is *Inquirer*, Feb. 20, 1959.

Source for Rizzo threats on Haifetz is *Evening Bulletin*, Feb. 26, 1959.

Sources for description of the coffeehouses in Philadelphia include "A Visit to the Coffeehouses," by James Smart in *Evening Bulletin*, Feb. 22, 1959; interview with Mr. Rizzo, Oct. 1990; Strange; Yannone; and other veterans of 12th and Pine who asked not to be identified.

Population statistics are from U.S. Census, 1960.

Sources for the 1964 Columbia Avenue riot are Lenora Berson, "Case Study," *Inquirer*, August 29, 1989; and interviews with Frank Rizzo, former *Bulletin* photographer Jack Tinney, Joe Yannone, John Shaw and more than a dozen other police officers assigned to the riot.

Sources for Girard College demonstration are interview with Frank Rizzo, Oct. 1990; *Inquirer*, July 13, 1965; and Daughen pp. 97-99.

In a brief interview in May 1992, Leary, retired and living in Doylestown, Pa., again refused to talk publicly about the topic of Frank Rizzo.

Chapter Five

The Rizzo family's days at Provident Street are based on interviews with Joanna Rizzo, May 1992; Frank Rizzo Jr., Jan., Feb., and May 1992; Eva Colella, April 1992; several residents of Provident Street; and "Assignment Carmella Rizzo" by Marci Shatzman, *Bulletin*, May 13, 1973.

The scene at Rizzo's swearing in comes from interviews with several former police officers, including Robert J. Selfridge in May 1992, and Rizzo family members.

Quotations from Corleto and Sloane are from *Inquirer*, May 23, 1967.

Quotations from Rizzo on Sunday before he became police commissioner are from WCAU-TV interview, May 22, 1967.

Figures on arrests in summer of 1967 are from Philadelphia Police Department, published in the *Daily News*, Aug. 4, 1967.

The GOP victories of 1953 are often forgotten in the history of post-Charter change elections. Foster Dunlap was elected controller. Francis Pastorius was elected treasurer; he was the last person to hold the office before it was abolished. Robert C. Duffy was elected register of wills. Specter's win in 1965 was the first big GOP victory since 1953, not 1951 as is frequently cited.

Sources for election of 1967 are interviews with several Specter and Tate campaign aides and W. Wilson Goode, May 1992; Mayor Tate's memoirs; and Daughen, pp. 104-105.

Sources for the student demonstration at Board of Education Building are interviews with Deborah W. Sawyer, Charles Bowser, W. Wilson Goode, Mr. Rizzo, two other police officers on the scene who asked not to be identified, one organizer of the protest who is a former member of RAM and asked not to be identified; *Inquirer*, Nov. 18, 1967; Daughen, pp. 114-115; and Hamilton, p. 80.

Sources for the history of CD squad are Donner, pp. 200-207; interviews with one former CD squad member who asked not to be identified; and Mr. Rizzo, Oct. 1990. The quotation from Rizzo to Fencl is from Donner, p. 207.

Sources for RAM and NCLC raids are Donner, pp. 210-213; and *Inquirer*, Nov. 13, 1968 and May 10, 1969; interview with Mr. Rizzo; and Biggin, *Rizzo and the Police State*.

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