

# Coleman A. Young

Coleman A Young was the first African-American mayor of Detroit, elected first in 1973. Born in 1918, he moved with his family from Alabama to Detroit's east side Black Bottom neighborhood when he was six. As a youth, he participated in the Boy Scouts and graduated from Eastern High School.

Serving in the Army Air Corps during World War II, Young led the successful protest of an all-white officer's club. After the war, he became a leader in the industrial union movement. He and other union leaders were called in front of the U.S. House Un-American Activities Committee hearings in Detroit. Labeled a communist, Young was blacklisted in the labor movement.

Young re-emerging politically in 1964, winning a seat in the Michigan Senate. He eventually became Detroit's mayor after a close election, basing his platform on integrating city government and curbing police brutality. As the premier advocate for Detroit's black community, he was easily re-elected an unprecedented four times.

Young was offered a cabinet post during the administration of President Jimmy Carter, which he declined. He was married and divorced twice, and he fathered a son from another relationship. After finishing his fifth mayoral term in 1993, he retreated from public life. He died in 1997 of complications from emphysema.



# Coleman A. Young's Detroit

Detroit in the 1940s was a bustling place, where people from all over the world moved to get factory jobs. The city boomed in population, but Detroit was really two different cities, divided by race. Blacks and whites rarely went to school together, ate at the same restaurants or lived in the same neighborhoods. Public offices, city contracts and civil service jobs were almost exclusively held by whites.

Detroit began to decentralize and de-industrialize in the 1950s. Factories that employed thousands of people closed or moved to suburbs where blacks were not welcome. This process took jobs, tax revenue and families out of Detroit.

Urban renewal, in the form of new housing and highways attempted to combat blight, however, this often came at the expense of black neighborhoods. The strain of race relations exploded in 1967, and 43 people were killed in one of the worst riots in American history.

By 1980 the city's landscape was changed with the addition of Joe Louis Arena, an expanded Cobo Hall, the high-profile Renaissance Center and new General Motors and Chrysler assembly plants on the east side. Despite these efforts, Detroit's population, having peaked at 1.8 million in the 1950s, continued to decline.



# Hero?

Coleman A. Young, Detroit's first black mayor and its longest serving mayor, was a lifelong activist who is widely credited with breaking down racial barriers in the workplace, in the labor movement, in the armed forces, in the Democratic Party and in the city of Detroit.

As a Tuskegee Airman, he became the first black bombardier in history while fighting racial segregation in the Army. As executive director of the National Negro Labor Council, he was a defiant witness before the House Un-American Activities Committee during the peak of the McCarthy era. He became the first black member of the Democratic National Committee and Democratic floor leader in the Michigan Senate.

As mayor of Detroit, he was lionized by many residents for integrating City Hall's work force, the Detroit Police Department and the city's contractor base. His commitment to racial balance and equity was such that he maintained a 50-50 black/white ratio on his City Hall staff, his department directors and deputies and his security unit throughout his 20 years as mayor. He also appointed more women to executive positions than any mayor in history.

At the same time, he managed city government through very trying economic times, forging alliances with labor unions, the business community, religious leaders and political leaders from both parties. He started the rebuilding of the city's riverfront, started the revitalization of Detroit's theater district, doubled the size of Cobo Hall, convinced General Motors and Chrysler to build new plants in Detroit at a time when industry was leaving urban America and earned praise as "a good business manager" from Henry Ford II.



# Villain?

Coleman A. Young was one of the most controversial political leaders in the history of Detroit and Michigan. Few people are neutral in their feelings about him even though more than one decade has passed since his death.

Critics saw the mayor as an overly combative figure whose heated and occasionally profane exchanges with political opponents and members of the media served as a polarizing influence on the state's political scene, damaging the city's ability to generate support for its needs.

For example, in the 1980s he explained his opposition to gun control legislation by saying, "I'll be damned if I'm going to let them collect guns in the city of Detroit while we're surrounded by hostile suburbs and the whole rest of the state who have guns..."

White critics often accused him of being too quick to see race as a factor when his efforts or the City of Detroit was being criticized and of playing the "race card" to shore up his political base in Detroit. Other critics, particularly some members of the clergy, objected to the often-salty language for which he was known.

Young's fearless activism sometimes led him outside the political mainstream, such as his support in 1948 of the presidential campaign of the Progressive Party and Henry Wallace. Longtime friend Doug Fraser, who eventually became president of the United Auto Workers, said, "I told him that was a mistake. It took him a while to recover from that."

