



## Challenging the Daley Machine: A Chicago Alderman's Memoir

By Leon M. Despres



**Challenging the Daley Machine: A Chicago Alderman's Memoir** By Leon M. Despres

*Winner, 2006 Illinois State Historical Society Book Award*

*Winner, 2007 The Hyde Park Historical Society Paul Cornell Award*

Political war stories from a thorn in the side of Chicago's famous Boss

In 1955, south-sider Leon Despres was elected to the Chicago City Council—the same year that Paddy Bauler famously uttered that "Chicago ain't ready for reform." Ready or not, Chicago got twenty years of reform efforts from Despres, one of the few independents in the council and the most liberal alderman in the city. His demand to cut out the corrupt sale of city driveway permits made him enemies from the very beginning. Over the years his crusades to ban discrimination, preserve Chicago landmark buildings, and gain equality for African-Americans—when Daley-beholden African-American council members refused to help—threw wrench after wrench into the Machine. And, not incidentally, changed the city.

But *Challenging the Daley Machine* is more than a memoir. It's a historical portrait of the way things were done under the Boss, when changing times and a changing city forced the Machine to confront the problems Despres championed. His battles against the seemingly monolithic Machine are also an inspiration to anyone who is facing long odds, but is convinced he/she is on the side of right.

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### Editorial Review

#### Review

"Throughout his career [Leon M. Despres] has been in the forefront of just about every decent, worthwhile effort made to improve life in this city." —Mike Royko, from the foreword

"Chicago's greatest alderman and one of Chicago's best journalists have produced a fabulous political autobiography. In one exciting book is the story of Leon Despres, the Chicago machine, civil rights and feminist revolutions, and independent reform efforts in Chicago for the last fifty years. It is a must-read for all who care about Chicago and America. Alderman Despres provides the judgment, inspiration, wisdom, and vision from which to fashion a better future. Martin Luther King Jr. had a dream, and Leon Despres had a vision and plan for Chicago that is still unfulfilled. It is a tale of courage, fortitude, and brilliance that inspires us to pick up the torch that Despres has carried so long and so well." —Dick Simpson, professor of political science, University of Illinois at Chicago, former Chicago alderman, and author of *Rogues, Rebels, and Rubber Stamps: The Politics of the Chicago City Council from 1863 to Present*

"If he did nothing else in his public career, Leon Despres would be justly memorialized for his city council fights against racial discrimination. As incredible as it may seem today . . . Leon Despres was the sole voice on the city council to take up this fight. . . . Despres was indeed a champion for civil rights, for ending political corruption, for opportunities for women, and other causes, and his fight should be remembered." —R. Craig Sautter, coauthor with Curt Johnson of *The Wicked City: Chicago from Kenna to Capone*

#### About the Author

Leon M. Despres was born in 1908 in Chicago. He graduated from the University of Chicago Law School in 1929. Since leaving the Chicago City Council in 1975 he has served as a parliamentarian for the Jane Byrne and Harold Washington administrations and worked as an attorney, teacher, and lecturer. Despres lives in the Hyde Park neighborhood of Chicago.

Kenan Heise spent seven years as a Franciscan monk before starting a thirty-year career at the *Chicago Tribune*. His many books include *Chicago the Beautiful* (Bonus, 2001) and *Resurrection Mary: A Ghost Story* (Chicago Historical Bookworks, 1990).

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