

Interview

Daley's Legacy



The Hon. Richard M. Daley

An Interview with The Honorable Richard M. Daley, Former Mayor of Chicago

EDITORS' NOTE Mayor Richard Daley has earned a reputation for improving Chicago's quality of life, acting to improve public schools, strengthening its economy, and helping Chicago become among the most environmentally friendly cities in the world. Daley was elected Mayor on April 4, 1989, to complete the term of the late Harold Washington, and was reelected in 1991, 1995, 1999, 2003, and 2007. In 1995, Daley asked for and received responsibility from the state for the Chicago Public Schools. As a result, what were once called the worst schools in the country have been turned into a national model for reform. Through World Business Chicago – a public/private partnership he established in 2000 to bring new businesses to Chicago – Mayor Daley is helping transform Chicago's economy by focusing on the jobs and businesses of the future. In 2004, Daley opened Millennium Park, the most ambitious public/private undertaking in Chicago's history. In 1996, Daley headed the U.S. Conference of Mayors. He has received the National Jefferson Award for Greatest Public Service by an Elected or Appointed Official from the American Institute for Public Service; the Public Service Leadership Award from the National Council for Urban Economic Development; and the Martin Luther King/Robert F. Kennedy Award from the Coalition to Stop Gun Violence/Education Fund To End Handgun Violence. Daley earned undergraduate and law degrees from DePaul University and began his public service career in 1969 when he was elected to the Illinois Constitutional Convention. From 1972 to 1980, he served in the Illinois Senate. Daley was elected State's Attorney of Cook County in 1980 and reelected in 1984 and 1988.

How is Chicago positioned coming out of the economic downturn?

Chicago has always been willing to change – that is its strength. That is a great commitment with so many young people coming from around the country and the world to Chicago.

We have had to market more than other cities because we're in the middle of the country.

We offer great universities, like the University of Chicago, University of Illinois, Depaul, Loyola, Northwestern, and medical institutions, like Northwestern.

The Groupon Tech Center in Chicago is another great business strength.

As the Administration, we recognized that improving education was key as well as developing a collaboration between business and government.

Everyone talks about the U.S. being a leader in university education, but for K through 12, the system remains broken. How much does that concern you and as Mayor, how much were you able to do to reform the system?

We did a lot. Previously, no one took responsibility for the system and that was the issue.

Our graduation rates are getting better, our attendance is getting better, and reading and math are getting better. But we didn't get there overnight. We had to be committed to making education our highest priority.

We spent \$5 billion in building schools, and renovating and remodeling the whole atmosphere of schools.

It's a continued problem for the nation, but I also don't think higher education in the U.S. is necessarily as good as it is in other parts of the world.

Overall, what are we educating people for and what is the value of a diploma? It gets back to how well prepared you are for what you want to do as a job in America or, increasingly today, throughout the world. That's why we're teaching Chinese, Arabic, and Russian in our schools and we're one of the few cities doing that. You have to be a global city to survive.

You have been outspoken on gun control. Is the right dialogue taking place regarding that issue?

No. People around the world ask me why Americans kill each other and why everyone seems to have guns. I try to tell them we're a civilized society. With all the money we spend at the justice department and the federal judiciary, as well as on law enforcement at both the state and local levels, America still seems to think that guns are the answer to problems that arise in the family or community.

We should all be concerned. There has to be a dialogue about the type of weapons and ammunition, and the damage they're doing to people in America.

In leading Chicago, you have been very engaged with business leaders. How critical is that relationship to success and how important is the public/private partnership?

Business has been the backbone of everything I do: education, public housing, jobs, economic development, charities, and foundations.

I don't care who they support politically, business leaders have been, and need to continue to be, in the forefront.

I need business here; I want business here. The biggest fight we had was in getting Walmart in the city and we finally won that because people realized that if you can build Walmart in every suburban area, you can build it in a city like ours. Now they're putting people to work and paying taxes here. That is an example that America has to start focusing on in terms of getting jobs for people.

Is top talent still going to enter public office with all the demands on privacy and things of that nature?

No. Kids graduating from the business schools are not going into government. We have to get the best and brightest back into government, not just as elected officials, but also in the departments and agencies.

As you reflect on your service to Chicago, what are you most proud of?

In 1995, the school system was terrible; it was bankrupt and falling apart, and no one cared.

When I took responsibility, all my political consultants told me it was the worst thing to do and that it could not be improved. But I knew if we didn't, we were going to fail as a society.

Chicago committed \$5 billion of local taxpayers' money to build and renovate schools, and to do everything possible to make the school environment better.

We also tackled the high-rise public housing in America that isolated people and that wasn't good for the city. Outside of the money we dedicated to rebuilding from the city of Chicago, I have to thank Presidents Clinton and Bush for giving us the federal support to help solve this.

Is it bittersweet to move on?

I look forward to it. And when you leave office, you want the next person to do a better job, because it's important for our city and for another generation. I want every President to succeed because it's good for the country. We get too partisan and personal on these issues, which is really unfair. ●