

Michael A. Bilandic  
1990-2000

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A first-generation American who became Mayor of Chicago, Michael Anthony Bilandic was born in the city on February 13, 1923. Both his father and mother, Mate and



Lebedina “Minnie” Bilandzic (later changed to Bilandic) immigrated to the United States from Croatia. Michael’s family, including three siblings, resided in the southwest Chicago neighborhood of Bridgeport. “We were both poor young boys who grew up looking to make it in a rough, tough world,” said Michael’s longtime friend Joseph N. Du Canto, “and we did it.” Bilandic graduated from St. Jerome

Grammar School and De LaSalle High School in Chicago, then St. Mary’s College in Winona, Minnesota.<sup>1</sup>

In World War II, Bilandic served as a U.S. Marine Corps First Lieutenant in the Pacific theater. “We both served on Iwo Jima,” Du Canto remembered, “and both of us lived our lives thereafter knowing every day was a gift.” Attending DePaul University College of Law on the GI Bill, Bilandic graduated in 1949, then began his legal career as a \$25-a-week clerk at the firm where he would later become a senior partner, Anixter,

Delaney, Bilandic & Piggott.<sup>2</sup> He served as a master in chancery from 1964 to 1967 and a special assistant Illinois Attorney General from 1965 to 1968. On the advice of his Bridgeport 11<sup>th</sup> Ward Alderman, Richard J. Daley, Bilandic became involved in Democratic Party politics and in 1955, campaigned for Daley in his first mayoral race. Fourteen years later, in 1969, Bilandic gave up his lucrative law practice to run for Daley's former aldermanic seat, overwhelmingly defeating the Republican candidate.

Quickly gaining the reputation of an effective Council alderman, Bilandic became chairman of the Environmental Committee, pushing legislation that banned phosphates from detergents and controlled asbestos in construction and demolition. In 1974, he became chairman of the powerful Finance Committee and Council floor leader for his mentor, Mayor Daley. After Daley's death in December 1976, Council leaders fought to determine a successor before agreeing on Bilandic, with support from the Daley family. "As a first-generation Croatian American," Bilandic later wrote, "this was an unexpected honor. I had worked with Daley for many years, and my life has been enriched for having known him."<sup>3</sup>

The bachelor Bilandic, who resided with his elderly mother in Bridgeport, became a candidate in the special election to fill the remaining two years of Daley's sixth mayoral term. He won the April 1977 primary and the June general election. The next month at Holy Name Cathedral, Chicago Cardinal John Cody officiated at Bilandic's marriage to socialite Heather Morgan, director of the Chicago Council on Fine Arts. They would become the parents of one son.

As Mayor, Bilandic ended a fifteen-year impasse on building a cross-town expressway, oversaw creation of the food and music ChicagoFest on Navy Pier, and helped organize and participated in the first Chicago Marathon. He also faced serious labor issues, however, including a gravediggers' strike and threatened strikes by butchers and the Lyric Opera orchestra.<sup>4</sup> In January 1979, Chicago became virtually immobilized by a series of devastating snowstorms. Bilandic attempted to reassure concerned residents of improving conditions, even as buried cars blocked streets, garbage remained uncollected, and service on Chicago Transit Authority lines and at O'Hare International Airport came to a near-standstill. Bilandic lost the Democratic primary to his disgruntled former commissioner of consumer affairs, Jane M. Byrne. Winning the general election, Byrne became the first female mayor of Chicago.

Following his defeat, Bilandic joined the law firm of Bilandic, Neistein, Richman, Hauslinger & Young, specializing in corporate law. In 1984, he won election to the First District Illinois Appellate Court, and six years later, at age sixty-seven, became the Democratic candidate to succeed Daniel P. Ward on the Illinois Supreme Court. Declining campaign contributions, Bilandic spent \$32,000 of his own funds. "This is my last hurrah," he explained. "I don't want to go there encumbered in any manner."<sup>5</sup> He won election to a ten-year Supreme Court term, serving as Chief Justice from 1994 to 1997.

During his Court tenure, Bilandic would review thousands of cases and write more than two hundred opinions, including a high-profile death penalty case. In the 1995 *People v. Jimerson* case, Bilandic delivered the opinion ordering a new trial for death-row

inmate Verneal Jimerson, who was convicted in the Cook County Circuit Court for the 1978 murder of two Chicago-area residents. Another defendant, the prosecution's key witness, stated that she had not been offered leniency for testifying against Jimerson, but after the trial, murder charges against her were dropped. The Supreme Court unanimously reversed Jimerson's conviction, achieved, as Bilandic wrote, with "knowing use of perjured testimony," and remanded the case for a new trial.<sup>6</sup> Found guilty again, Jimerson spent nine years on death row before being exonerated of the crimes.<sup>7</sup>

The 1997 *Johnson v. Edgar* case concerned action by the Illinois General Assembly. Donald Johnson, president of the Illinois State Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (Illinois AFL-CIO), filed suit in Cook County Circuit Court against Governor Jim Edgar and Attorney General Jim Ryan, challenging an article in the new Public Act 89-428 that permitted employers to monitor employee conversations. Introduced in 1995 as an eight-page bill regarding reimbursement to the state for prisoner incarceration expenses, Public Act 89-428 passed as a document that exceeded two hundred pages. The law included provisions for not only employer eavesdropping, but also such diverse subjects as environmental impact fees for the sale of fuel, child molestation, cannabis, and parole hearings.

The Supreme Court upheld the circuit court determination that Public Act 89-428 violated Article IV of the Illinois Constitution, prohibiting unrelated measures within a single bill. "One reason for the single subject rule is to prevent legislation from being passed which, standing alone, could not muster the necessary votes for passage," Bilandic wrote. "The single subject rule ensures that the legislature addresses the difficult

decisions it faces directly and subject to public scrutiny, rather than passing unpopular measures on the backs of popular ones.”<sup>8</sup>

In 1999, Bilandic delivered the majority opinion in a landmark case regarding the liability of a health maintenance organization (HMO) for institutional negligence. In *Jones v. Chicago HMO Ltd.*, Sheila Jones sought medical malpractice action against Chicago HMO Ltd. of Illinois and one of its contract physicians. Jones charged in the Cook County Circuit Court that the HMO and the physician failed to adequately treat her three-month-old daughter, resulting in permanent disability. Bilandic wrote the opinion reversing a portion of the circuit court’s summary judgment for Chicago HMO. “The law imposes a duty upon HMOs to conform to the legal standard of reasonable conduct in light of the apparent risk,” he wrote. “It could be inferred that the doctor’s failure to see the infant soon enough resulted from an inability to serve an overloaded patient population.” The decision led to numerous HMO lawsuits in succeeding years.<sup>9</sup>

As his Supreme Court term ended in 2000, Bilandic noted that his legal career had spanned half a century: three decades in practice and in government, then twenty years in the judiciary.<sup>10</sup> Fellow justices praised his leadership as Chief Justice in the mid-1990s, which included rewriting rules of discovery, encouraging mandatory arbitration, and streamlining the Administrative Office of Illinois Courts. “Relocating and consolidating our administrative offices in Chicago and Springfield has provided a better working environment for our people and increased productivity,” Bilandic said at the time. “Summary dispositions and page limitations on appellate opinions improved operations of our appellate courts and broke the logjam in the reporter’s office.”<sup>11</sup>

After his Supreme Court tenure, Bilandic practiced law with the Chicago firm of Bilandic, Neistein, Richman, Hauslinger & Young and served on the Chicago Bar Association's Board of Managers. He maintained a longstanding exercise regimen as a runner and jogger, found enjoyment in art classes, photography, and visits to Croatia with his wife and son, exploring his family roots.<sup>12</sup> On January 15, 2002, at age seventy-eight, Bilandic died unexpectedly from a heart rupture, a day before scheduled coronary bypass surgery at Northwestern Memorial Hospital in Evanston.<sup>13</sup> Following a private funeral, he was interred beside his parents in St. Mary Catholic Cemetery in Evergreen Park. "He was a quiet and gracious and intelligent man," eulogized the *Chicago Tribune*, "who lost the best job in Chicago before he found the best job for him."<sup>14</sup>

"If a person is ever granted immortality, it is perhaps the judiciary that comes closest to allowing that," said Supreme Court Justice Charles E. Freeman of Bilandic. "His words and opinions, his decisions will be quoted and followed by lawyers and judges for many years to come. He had a great impact on many important groundbreaking decisions."<sup>15</sup>

In March 2003, Illinois and Chicago officials renamed the 21-story State of Illinois Building at 160 North LaSalle Street the Michael A. Bilandic Building.

Michael A. Bilandic Papers: University of Illinois at Chicago

<sup>1</sup> [www.stjeromecroatian/org./eng/biladic.html](http://www.stjeromecroatian/org./eng/biladic.html); *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*, 16 January 2002, Bilandic file, Illinois Supreme Court Library, Springfield, IL.

<sup>2</sup> *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*, 16 January 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Bilandic, “The Marathon Mayor,” Adrienne Drell, ed., *20<sup>th</sup> Century Chicago; 100 Years, 100 Voices* (Chicago: Chicago Sun-Times, Bannon Multimedia Group, 2000), p. 166.

<sup>4</sup> Drell, ed., pp. 166-67.

<sup>5</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 17 January 2002, p. 1.

<sup>6</sup> 166 Ill. 2d. 211-31.

<sup>7</sup> *Chicago Sun-Times*, 9 February 1999, p. 8.

<sup>8</sup> 176 Ill. 2d. 499-523.

<sup>9</sup> 191 Ill. 2d. 278-314; *Chicago Tribune*, 17 January 2002, p. 1.

<sup>10</sup> *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*, 17 August 2000, p. 25.

<sup>11</sup> *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*, 1 November 1996, Bilandic file, Illinois Supreme Court Library.

<sup>12</sup> *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*, 16 January 2002.

<sup>13</sup> *Chicago Sun-Times*, 16 January 2002, p. 2.

<sup>14</sup> *Chicago Tribune*, 17 January 2002, Sec. 1, p. 22.

<sup>15</sup> Illinois Supreme Court press release, 17 January 2002, *Chicago Daily Law Bulletin*, 16 January 2002, both in Bilandic file, Illinois Supreme Court Library.