Politicians and Our Health

As generations have come and gone San Antonio has been continuously infested with more rapacious politicians than any city of comparable size. It matters not whether they bear the brand of Quin or Maverick or some new political boss, the result has been the same: inefficiency, ineptitude, gross corruption and extravagance.

The story is told of an enterprising native of Mexico City who made a comfortable living by selling the skeleton of Juarez to American tourists eager to take home something with Mexican atmosphere. One day he sold the skeleton of El Presidente to an American. A few days later this American met the skeleton salesman and he had another skeleton which he was offering as having belonged to the president, this time a small one. The American remonstrated, saying, "I thought I bought Juarez' skeleton last week."
"Very true, my friend," was the reply. "But this is the skeleton of El Presidente when he was a boy." The American accepted the explanation, bought the small skeleton and went home ignorantly happy. In some such fashion as this, with the passing years, the politicians have sold their political skeletons to the citizens of San Antonio and too many of us have been made to believe that we have been getting a bargain.

A recent example of politics at its ludicrous worst is this: one of our ring politicians was speaking on the purchase of voting machines. Of course he, like all politicians, was against it. Voting machines are too fair and too free of manipulation. With characteristic bombast and unconvincing logic, but with a delightful mixing of metaphors and anatomy, he reached his climax when he said, "we must take the bull by the tail and look him right in the eye!" Now, however difficult such a gymnastic feat should appear, it would be far easier than to reconcile the pre-election promises and the post-election performances of the average office-holder in San Antonio.

Must the citizens of San Antonio continue to accept this political situation with supine complacence and indifferent disgust? The answer is emphatically no. On December 17 there will be given to us an opportunity to make good, business-like government in San Antonio, a permanent and progressive reality. On that day we will be given an opportunity to give to San Antonio a council-manager form of government. You have heard much of the merits of this form of government for American cities. Tonight,
briefly, my desire is to present some of the advantages that will accrue to the health of our people.

That the need for health improvement in San Antonio is great, no one will deny. Year after year, decade after decade, San Antonio has stood out on the health map of the United States as a black spot. In the minds of public health authorities, San Antonio with its prevalence of disease and crime—the two usually go together—has become a reproach and a byword. As far back as the records go, this city has had the unenviable reputation of having the highest death rate from tuberculosis of all the cities in the country—three, four, five, sometimes ten times as high. And a comparable situation has existed with intestinal diseases of infants.

In Dallas, Fort Worth, Austin and other Texas cities with council-manager governments, conditions of health have greatly improved. Qualified personnel has been assured by the presence of real civil service. The health departments of these cities have been permitted to perform their legitimate function of promoting the public health and are not maintained as disgusting departments of corrupt political machines.

If San Antonio is to make progress in health matters, it must come from the establishment of a program which is progressive and continuous—not disrupted and changed every two years. The politicians have made a few forward steps, not of their own volition, but under compulsion. Mayor Quin made certain microscopic pretensions toward better health, but these were lost in an overweening desire to stay in office. Mayor Maverick began his administration more hopefully but it wasn’t long before he was kicking the health department around like a political football. That has been the difficulty all along: it is so easy to put on as inspectors in the health department all the ignorant, broken-down politicians who wouldn’t know a germ from a cockroach. Recently one of them thought that Oliver Twist was a new kind of chewing tobacco. So the health department of today is not greatly different from what it has been.

New living quarters built by the government are important, but this is not a drop in the bucket. After all, to what better use could a denizen of Chihuahua Street be expected to put a modern bathtub than to store his frijoles? Likewise the erection of a tuberculosis hospital will be important. But had it occurred to you that the hospital will care for only 150 or 200 patients and that these few will stay six months, a
year or longer? So there will be a very slow turnover. What about the several thousand
who infect their families at home or who walk the streets and infect outsiders? Here
is the real problem: a case of tuberculosis west of San Pedro Creek is an everpresent
menace to the citizens north of Dewey Place and the citizens south of Highland Boulevard
and the citizens in between. Whatever we may think of the health situation on the West
Side, these people are very distinctly our responsibility. They are here to stay and in
the future they will be here in ever-increasing numbers. For our own protection this
problem must be faced sanely and wisely. Politically-ridden health departments in the
past have made no impression on it and for the future hold out no promise. We need a
change. The council-manager form of government offers much hope. Those who are in doubt
should realize that we have nothing to lose, that things could hardly become worse; a
city that is down can't go lower.

What San Antonio needs is a progressive, permanent plan for attacking the
serious health menaces that beset her. A council-manager form of government, with the
health department divorced from politics and in active cooperation with the State Health
Department and the United States Public Health Service, will provide such a plan. It
has worked elsewhere, it will work in San Antonio.

Historically, climatically, culturally and educationally, San Antonio is one
of the most outstanding cities of America. From the standpoint of health, it stands at
the very bottom. This is a disgrace. It should be corrected. San Antonio can achieve
the enviable distinction of being the most healthful city in America instead of being
the most diseased. But such a result cannot be accomplished by wishing or talking. It
must be accomplished by direct action and hard work. The opportunity is presented to us
on December 17. Without exception the politicians are against the change to the council-
manager form of government. You and I would be against it too if we were unfortunate
enough to be politicians. Under this form of city government the politicians find them-
selves locked out of the lush pasture in which they have had free grazing so long. In
Sir Thomas More's Utopia, the ideal state and the ideal city became accomplished facts.
This accomplishment came by getting rid of those parasites who waste "the things that come
by other men's labour,"—to use Sir Thomas' words. Four hundred years later, we must
profit by the same procedure. So the politicians are all against it. Than this, no better
argument could be advanced in favor of it. Apathy and indifference on the part of the
training people have done San Antonio untold harm in the past. We should arouse our-
selves and see to it that these besetting sins do not come to the rescue of the politicians
on December 17. Vote for the council-manager form of government and see that your
neighbors vote.

If you were a stockholder in a corporation which takes in and expends millions
of dollars a year, Mr. Quin and Mr. Maverick or any other politician would be the last
persons on earth you would seek as president or manager of that corporation. And yet that
is exactly what we have done year after year. We have permitted ourselves to be lulled
into a state of apathy and unconcern. Some of us are near to believing that even Mayor
Maverick has done a good job. Indeed he has done something with the police department.
But the idol of his heart and the smokescreen of his many failures is La Villita. Now
La Villita is important but not nearly so important as the mayor thinks. The situation
is very similar to that of parents with a turbulent son. They are perfectly willing for
him to emphasize the importance of his toy blocks so that he will have less time for saw-
ing off the piano legs.

When you go to the polls on Tuesday, December 17, remember this final fact.
It is most consoling. The establishment of council-manager form of government will sound
the death-knell of all city politicians. It means that they must seek some real work
in a field where they can employ their exceptional capabilities about which we have heard
so much and of which we have seen so little. Heaven hasten the coming of that happy day!