

Press-Telegram (Long Beach, CA)

March 31, 1994

COMPTON'S CONTROVERSIAL MAYOR

Author: *Janet Wiscombe / Staff Writer*

Compton Mayor Omar Bradley is in one rotten, lousy mood. Yesterday he had a root canal and his mouth hurt so bad he missed a City Council meeting. Last night he couldn't sleep. By then his jaw was OK but he had too much work to finish and too many enemies to conquer to rest.

And that's just for starters.

From his command post at City Hall, he's been speaking passionately for an hour about his friends and foes and the peculiar nature of Compton politics. By now, he's overwrought. Arms flailing and voice rising, the strapping 35-year-old former football player and English teacher has made it clear that there are bad people nearby who are plotting his demise - AND HE'S NOT GOING TO LET THEM GET AWAY WITH IT.

"I came here to do what the community asked to be done," he has said, his voice roaring with thunder. "I'm the very thing they asked for. They prayed for a new black leader and the black leader shows up and they call him a Frankenstein.

"I'm the son of this community. Those who are friends of the community are my friends. Those who aren't are my enemies. I will save the kids of Compton. As long as there is breath in my body, I will not let my enemies defeat me!"

He stops abruptly.

"SSSSSSSSHHHHHHHHHHHH," he whispers, gesturing at the wall adjoining his office and that of City Manager Howard Caldwell. "They are listening. They are seeking my total demise."

A city abuzz

Compton is abuzz. Since last June when he was elected mayor of this rough and tough political town of 100,000, Bradley has steadily and swiftly become the most loved - and hated - politician to come along in years.

But by mid-March the uproar engulfing the mayor's office had become so loud, even Bradley - a man not given to admitting fatigue or failure - had to concede that he is temporarily running out of juice. Earlier this month, all hell broke loose when Bradley came up with a plan to have the community vote on having a full-time mayor and council, a proposal that would have increased his salary from \$32,000 to \$71,000 a year.

In a 2-2 vote, the council killed the measure. But the issue has become the talk of the town. The Compton Bulletin devoted most of its March 16 edition to Bradley, dubbing him "The Man Who Would Be King."

He was accused of being heavy-handed and iron-fisted, of botching city contracts and loans, of pouting and throwing temper tantrums.

After his plan for a full-time mayor was defeated, Bradley emotionally declared he could no longer continue his heavy work schedule, a schedule that includes working as a full-time English teacher at Lynwood High.

He entertained the startled audience with an account of civic problems. If the trees need trimming and the potholes repairing, he scolded angrily, "DON'T CALL ME!"

"I personally painted Tibby Elementary School," he says. "I've cleaned the canals, repaired the streets, fought for job programs. I do more in a day than other mayors have done in a lifetime."

Most of the other mayors Bradley refers to are members of the well-connected Tucker family, beginning with Walter Tucker II, who died of cancer in 1990, and continuing, most recently, with Bradley's predecessor, Walter R. Tucker III, who is now a congressman representing the 37th District, which includes Compton.

Tucker has been a target of a sweeping federal investigation into allegations that he and other top Compton city officials accepted bribes.

Bradley is "all people are talking about," insists Tucker, whose younger brother, Kenneth, ran unsuccessfully against Bradley last year in a mayoral race punctuated by high-speed car chases and accusations of physical threats and shootings.

In the past, Rep. Tucker has called Bradley many provocative names. "Gangster" was one. During a recent phone call, the congressman raged at his old rival's attempt to become a full-time mayor and variously referred to Bradley as a sulking child, a dictator, an egoist, presumptuous, reprehensible, brash, bullying, arrogant, power-hungry and dishonorable - all in less than 10 minutes.

"He taunts people if he doesn't get his way," Tucker declares. "There are rumors of threats and bullying."

Referring to the night Bradley's full-time mayor plan was turned down, Tucker says "he finally shot himself in the foot, and maybe the head. He's finished. He should resign. My advice: Step down."

Simple beginnings

To understand the charismatic, hard-driving, broad-chested mayor with a taste for Mercedes-Benzes and William Shakespeare, one has to go back to West 131st Street in Compton where he was reared, the last of seven children. His mother, Ovelmar, was a great reader of verse. A particular favorite was the Edward FitzGerald translation of Omar Khayyam's "The Rubaiyat." Bradley's father, Henry, served with Gen. Omar Bradley during World War II.

"My name was a compromise," Omar Bradley says.

When he was young, his father worked two jobs and eventually saved enough money to buy a gas station in Compton. Young Bradley cleaned the bathrooms and pumped gas from the time he was 9. When self-service became the name of the game, the business folded.

Had he not been a talented football player, Bradley says he might have been a better student. Then as now, it wasn't cool for jocks to be brains. "You did what the other

players did," he recalls. "You did enough schoolwork, but not so much people wouldn't believe you were vicious."

At California State University/Long Beach, Bradley majored in radio and TV communications. After that, he drifted into teaching. In the 12 years he's taught high school English, he says he's observed that in lecturing on writers, from the English metaphysical poets to George Bernard Shaw, that "even though they are white, people have the same life experiences no matter what color they are."

But of all the books he has assigned to his students, he says it is the "Autobiography of Malcolm X" that is the most satisfying to teach. "It's not about race; it's about how people treat you. I grew up in Compton, which was then 100 percent black. I never went to school with white children, so I never knew what to base my opinion of whites on. All I knew was that whites killed Martin Luther King Jr. and I grew up with resentment."

His first experience with white kids was at a football camp at USC. He was one of three black athletes among hundreds of whites. He had a roommate, Bruno, who was white. When a group of white kids came to pick a fight, Bruno interceded.

"If you want to jump on Omar, you're going to have to jump on me first," Omar relates. "It was the most amazing - the most amazing - thing to me."

Seated between portraits of King and Malcolm X, he says he talks to students about the great African-American leaders and their belief that people should be treated as individuals, and not judged by the color of their skin.

"Malcolm X became a gracious human being and was killed," Bradley notes. "By the end of the book, every kid in class is crying."

In Compton, Bradley is known for his close associations with members of the Nation of Islam and for using members of the organization as personal bodyguards. It's true he has close association with members of the organization, but the bodyguard stories aren't true, he says.

Chuck, the huge steel-bodied man who accompanies him everywhere - a beeper on his belt, a walkie-talkie at his ear - isn't really a bodyguard, Bradley insists. "I don't have bodyguards. Was Peter Jesus' bodyguard? No. He was his friend."

And, yes, Omar Bradley has a lot of friends, as he is the first to point out. Those who have run Compton for the past 20 years may not like him, he says, but the common people know he is very much on their side.

Too much violence

Even though he is a great admirer of Nation of Islam leader Louis Farrakhan, and has dined with the minister twice in the past year, he says he is not a Muslim. "I'm Christian and I'm Muslim," he says with a broad smile. "I'm what I have to be to communicate to my people."

He agrees with Farrakhan when the minister speaks about self-reliance and pulling oneself up by one's bootstraps. "I agree with that part of his message. I don't agree with any racist philosophy," he adds in a reference to Farrakhan's anti-Semitism. Still,

complaining of the violence available to the children of Compton on Video Juke Box, cable channel 25, which airs 24 hours a day seven days a week, he continues to blame the problem on Jewish producers.

“Many video producers are Jewish, just like the porters on the train in the old days were black,” he says, getting up to turn on his office TV. “I ask our Jewish brothers to exercise better judgment on these videos.”

He turns on the TV. “Take an AK-47 and kill someone!” comes the voice of a rapper from the set. “When it’s Compton, we pack it (a gun)!”

The rapper continues, inviting viewers to go out and kill. Then he commands: “MURDER! MURDER! MURDER! Shaking his head in disgust, Bradley says the videos are dangerous.

A friend to youth

Whether he’s in the classroom, at the Centennial High gym where he frequently works out, or making mayoral rounds, even his harshest critics credit Bradley with demonstrating deep concern for children. When not at Lynwood High, or giving a speech, or playing with his own son and daughter, who are 16 and 10, he is likely to be found organizing kids to help clean up graffiti, or smoothing a running track, or installing a sprinkler system at a public facility. Many of his community activities are conducted under the auspices of 100 Strong Men, a volunteer service organization he founded.

But there is perhaps nothing that warms the cockles of his flamboyant heart more than putting on rap and dance concerts to raise money for Compton City Hall or Centennial High, his alma mater, or some other pet project. Last week, his D.J. Quick and 2nd II None concert added \$13,000 to city coffers, he reports. Sometime this summer, he plans to box against George Foreman.

“He’ll donate \$5,000 every round I can stay in the ring,” says the muscular 6-foot-1, 240-pound mayor.

To newly elected Councilwomen Yvonne Arceneaux and Marcine Shaw, Bradley is a little green but able. “He is very opinionated,” Arceneaux says. “But he has good intentions. This is his first term. I predict he’ll mellow out.”

And from Marcine Shaw, “I’ve been in the political game a long time. The mayor is young. He’s a little forceful. He’s very smart. He wants to take chances. Once he gets a little seasoning, he’ll be fine.”

For too many years, the same old political faces have been doing the same old things, Bradley says. The voters were sick of them, sick of their inability to do something about jobs and crime and urban ugliness and squalor.

That’s why he was elected. He’s a man of action, a man of his word, he says.

Foes point to the controversies that have swirled around his office since he moved in and shake their heads. Last September, there was the brouhaha about city-run bingo operations and card clubs. In October, there was Bradley’s remark about how Jewish producers in Hollywood are exploiting black artists, a comment for which he apologized the following day - and then added that Jews owe African-Americans an apology for portraying them negatively in TV sitcoms.

After that came the question of council members' skimming bingo fees to pay themselves stipends as the city's Gaming Commission. Bradley argued that he and council members deserved the money because they would be the ones who would have to get out of bed at midnight to "find out why some woman had passed out in the middle of the bingo floor."

"Get off it, Mayor," one editorial writer suggested. "Haven't you ever heard of 911?"

Let people squawk, Bradley says. He knows he gives his all every day of the week. "Anyone who won't pick up a broom and clean up this town is not a friend of mine," he says. "They need to resign from the human race."

City Manager Howard Caldwell and other members of the Old Guard refuse to comment on the mayor. They won't even return phone calls when the subject is Omar Bradley.

Gazing down at the stacks of messages yet to be returned today, Bradley looks weary. There's so much to do. What, for example, is he going to say to a neighbor whose son recently committed suicide?

"What circumstances exist where the ultimate solution is to take a gun and blow your head off?" he asks reflectively. "There is a gang and dope house down the street from where I live. Up the street they're selling crack cocaine. There are no jobs. There are women half naked and so skinny and they're pregnant.

"What do I say to that mother whose son would rather die than live in this mess - where it's more dignified to die than to see your sister perform oral sex for a little crack? I am going to fight until the time Compton is OK. I came along and said 'Let's change things.' But the powers are righteous. They say 'Omar is a radical.' 'Omar is a revolutionary.'

"They just want to sit where I am sitting. But I'm not going until God is ready for me to go."

Bradley says he can't understand why the town gives all the power to the city manager and not the mayor.

"Why can he have it and I can't?" he asks. He waves a hand at the bureaucrats in the adjoining office.

"Because you are unsure of your own product?"

"YOU PRODUCED ME," he bellows. "I PLAYED FOOTBALL FOR COMPTON. I WON FOR COMPTON. I LOST FOR COMPTON."

"WHAT DO YOU FEAR?"

"I - AM - YOU."