Cole learned politics early and well

enate victory in 1954 great political upset

By C. Fraser Smith

BOSS POLLACK tipped his hat to Harry A. Cole even before the young Republican lawyer ulled one of the great upsets f Maryland political history.

James H. "Jack" Pollack — ne of Baltimore's wiliest polit- al overlords — recruited another guy named Cole to run r a General Assembly seat in 954, knowing many voters ould be fooled into giving him votes intended for the Cole named Harry.

Pollack was acknowledging in the clearest possible way his respect for Harry Cole, a popular, well-organized and energetic newcomer who, the boss could see, had figured out how to win. "Names the same" was a tactic used to weaken, to draw away strength by confusing the voter.

Pollack's control of politics in those days ran from the governor's mansion to City Hall and deeply into the courts. White Democrats ran poorly when they challenged Pollack's machine in primaries, so few political observers thought Cole, a black Republican, had any chance to win.

"Pollack voted dead people, people who didn't live in the district — whoever was still on the voter rolls," says former Circuit Judge Edgar P. Silver, once a member of the Pollack team. "He would stack that money up on a table and give $5 to every family in the precinct."

So Harry Cole's ultimate victory had many facets: He became the first African-American state senator in Maryland history. He was one of only two Republicans from Baltimore to win a seat in the General Assembly during the latter half of this century. And his victory signaled the arrival of black voting power in the city.

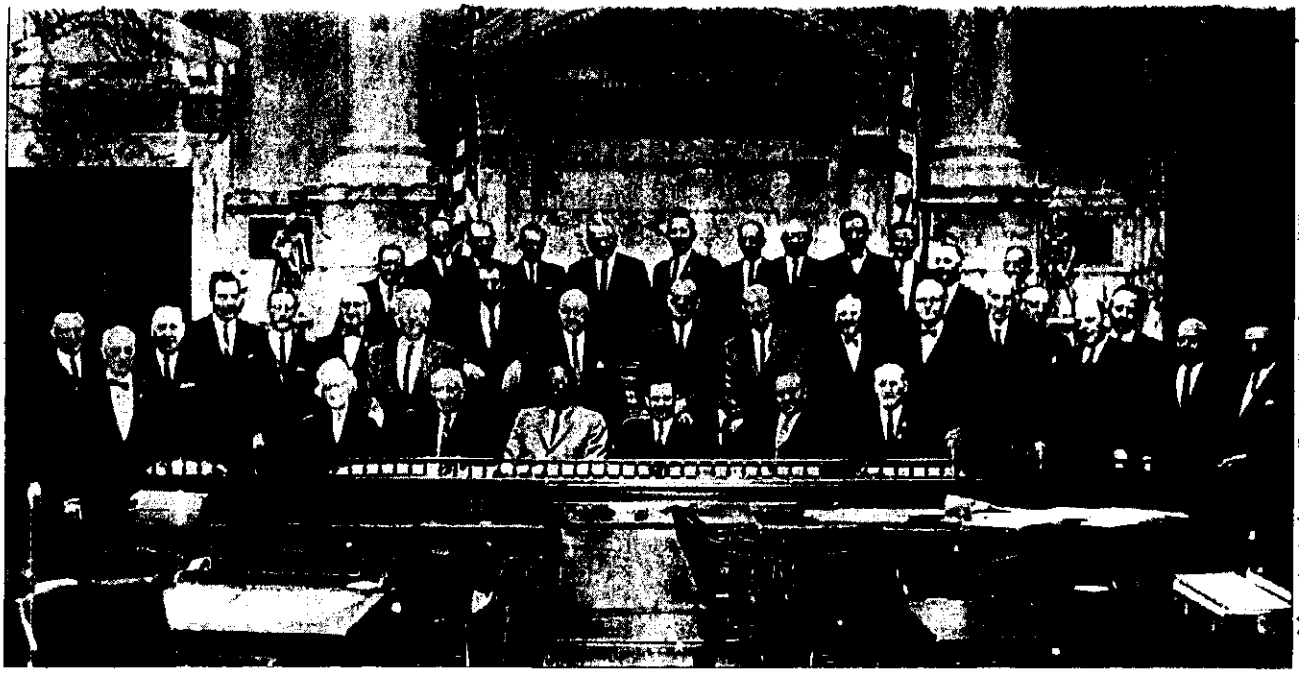
Nevertheless, Cole, who died at 78 a week ago from complications arising from pneumonia, conceded in a 1997 interview with *The Sun* that Pollack's tactics were unsettling.

"It befuddled me. I haven't been able to get my mind clear yet," he said, as if Pollack's trickery had taken him out of his game.

But Cole was too mature — too worldly wise — to allow the likes of Pollack to distract him. As a 33-year-old lawyer in search of clients — and a political career — he was too focused on winning to care if Pollack's actions were personal or racial, though Pollack never "took" black candidates in those days. Cole said he respected Pollack's savvy and ruthless determination — although he loathed machine politics.

Cole's early years prepared him to fight adversity and racism. He'd been raised by a strict mother. He'd served in both theaters during World War [See Politician, 4c]

C. Fraser Smith is a political reporter for The Sun.



MARYLAND STATE SENATE

Year one: Harry A. Cole is seated in the front center of the official portrait of the 1955 state Senate. A Republican, he represented the old 4th District in Northwest Baltimore, and served one four-year term.

Cole learned politics early, well

[Politician, from Page 1c]

II, encountering the forces of discrimination in its usual and unusual forms. He quickly realized that whatever Army training class he might seek would suddenly be full to capacity. He was assigned to a laundry unit, but learned that his outfit probably would have served as cannon fodder for an invasion of Japan.

At the same time, he met whites who were interested in him as a human being — as a card-playing buddy, for example. During a monthlong ship's voyage to the Japanese island of Okinawa, Cole met a white kid from Mississippi who helped him sharpen his passion for bridge.

The son of a tailor and one of five children, Cole was born in Washington on New Year's Day 1921. His father died when he was an infant, and his mother moved the family to Baltimore, where she had grown up.

All of his schooling — from elementary grades through law school — was done in the city. He graduated from Douglass High School in 1939 and from then-Morgan State College in 1943 with highest honors.

After the war, he returned to Baltimore to attend the University of Maryland School of Law, graduating in 1949.

While running unsuccessfully for the House of Delegates in 1950

knew what was or should have been available to the winners on the rare occasions when there were black winners.

"The Democrats wouldn't support a black," Cole said. "You couldn't get supported, I mean seriously supported — get your name on a ticket."

Cole knew winning was only the start of the challenge that confronted him.

"You'd be surprised at some of the problems I had with a good governor," he said of McKeldin, one of the most progressive of Maryland politicians in a period where equal opportunity was not always a political position.

The McKeldin years

The second-term GOP governor also had his limits.

"McKeldin had the disposition to do," Cole said, but the governor's pace was not what the new senator wanted. "It was all a question of whether you were moving too quickly which I resented. The one thing I had to do was prove that my election was meaningful."

He gave McKeldin 18 requests, including an insistence that the race classification be removed from applications for state jobs. He worked to have magistrates removed from the political process — a major blow to Pollack who controlled many of those positions.

He also learned how to maneuver McKeldin.

"To get a black parole officer," he said, "I nominated George Hubbard as parole commissioner. He's white as snow. Excellent man. He had the disposition to do. I couldn't ask McKeldin to make a black parole commissioner. He'd say, 'You're moving too fast.'"

So, Cole got Hubbard appointed and Hubbard, by prior agreement, named a black parole officer.

Later, he persuaded the GOP's J. Glenn Beall, a U.S. senator, to name a black as a U.S. marshal. Cole said Beall made the deal in exchange for being carried on Cole's ticket.

Before Cole arrived in Annapolis, the boss called Frederick C. Malkus, the Eastern Shore senator whose views on race were not regarded as enlightened.

"He wanted me to be hard on him," Malkus said last week. "He wanted me to make Harry's life a living hell. But I was very impressed with how reasonable and fair Harry Cole was. He seemed to know right away how things worked."

Cole was assigned to the Senate Judicial Proceedings Committee, then chaired by Malkus. A committee chairman needs someone to make difficult motions as if they were his own.

"Who in the hell would ever think that Harry Cole was making my motions?" Malkus asked.

The arrangement worked well for both men: Although he voted against Cole's civil rights bills, Malkus worked with the Baltimore senator to implement some of the bill's provisions.

Pollack remained a resolute opponent. In 1958, Cole lost his Senate seat to another Pollack man, a 69-year-old retiree who had never run for public office. Without the draw of McKeldin and without the element of surprise, Cole could not resist the comeback of the boss.

Victory from a loss

But he won in the long run.

The new Democratic senator who defeated him was black, one of the first Democrats to be picked up by a city organization.

McKeldin later named Cole a municipal court judge.

On the day he was sworn in, Cole remembered his mother sitting in the courtroom "with a church go-to-meeting hat on. She was so proud: her baby boy. I said to her, 'Momma, you know if you whipped me today the way you whipped me years ago, they'd put you in jail.'"

She said, "'You turned out all right, didn't you?'"

and in 1951 for the City Council, he saw leverage in the growing black voting presence in Pollack's home turf, then the 4th District of Northwest Baltimore.

Cole abandoned his "shotgun" approach to voter registration to concentrate in areas where he knew his support was strong and growing. If he could turn out blacks — as Pollack had done with Jewish voters — he might have a chance.

He knew as a lawyer that residence mattered in voting. And he had learned that many 4th District voters were not 4th District residents.

He was on a ticket that year with another Republican, the popular Theodore Roosevelt McKeldin, who was running for his second term as governor.

Two Coles

However, the House of Delegates candidacy of Emory R. Cole was something to be reckoned with, and he knew it. They were not opponents, but he knew two Coles on the same ballot meant trouble.

"You can believe the electorate is intelligent if you want to," he said, "but they get mixed up and they don't know who they're voting for. I wanted to quit."

But only for a moment. By the end of the campaign, Harry and Emory Cole were campaigning together — and both won. Harry Cole by 37 votes over Bernard Melnicove, an incumbent Democrat from the unbeatable Pollack stable. At first, Melnicove seemed to be the winner by more than 100 votes.

But Cole prevailed by deploying members of his Ballot League who compiled a list of questionable voters, all of whom were investigated by the authorities and disqualified.

"Harry Cole stimulated the black community to realize it could win against a powerful pol like Pollack," Judge Silver said. "It was a victory nobody dreamed would happen."

Silver put his finger on Cole's objective: to prove that a sincere, well-organized and motivated black candidate could win. Blacks were "lethargic," Cole said. Even when a black candidate won, the usual rewards of political victory were not forthcoming.

"You'd work so hard for these folks and then get nothing," Cole said. And it was worse than that: Never having won, few blacks then