

# So What <sup>8-22-99</sup> Did He Do?

## *The legacy of a 'practical idealist.'*

**N**ear the end of his remarkable political career, Theodore Roosevelt McKeldin, twice-elected mayor of Baltimore and two-term governor of Maryland, said to his aide Hirsh Goldberg, "People won't remember me because I kept the tax rate up or down. People don't remember that a mayor kept the tax rate at \$4.52. They'll ask, 'What did he do?'"

The answer is: He made Baltimore and Maryland what they are today. And the accomplishments of this remarkable man, who died 25 years ago this month at age 73, should not be allowed to fade into obscurity.

McKeldin served as mayor of Baltimore during two crucial periods in 20th century American urban history: World War II and the '60s.

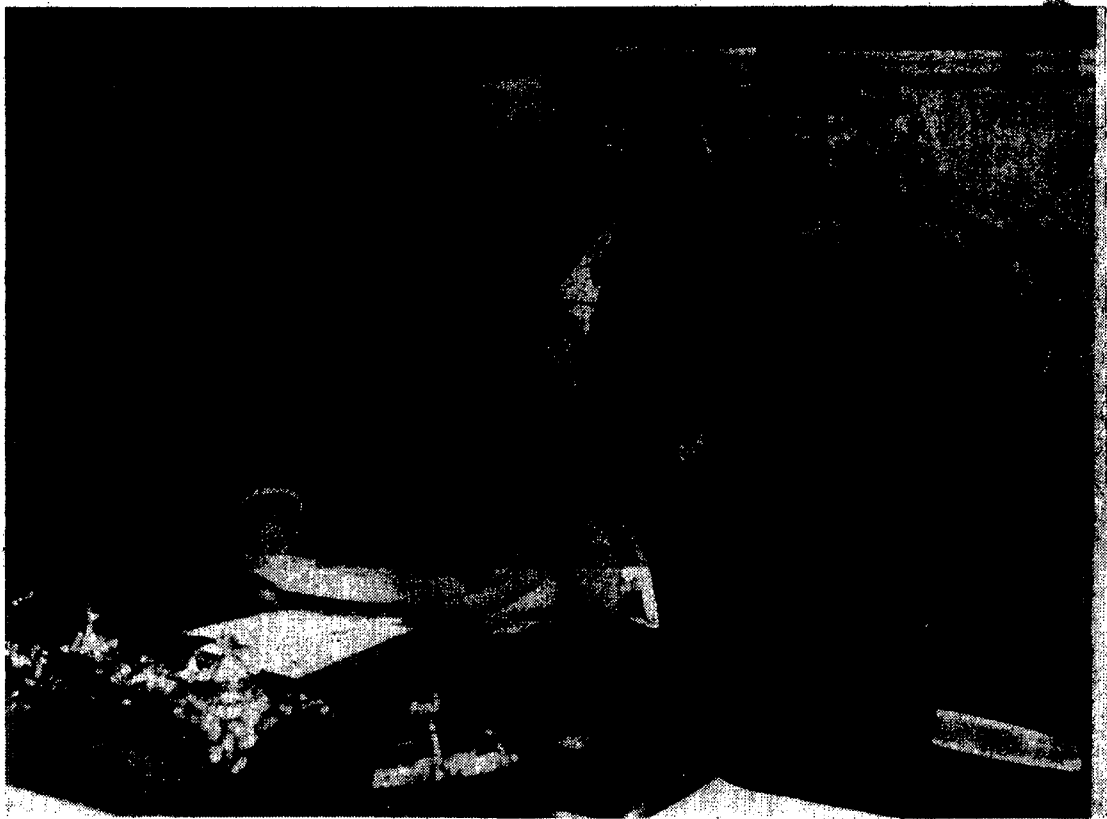
His first term was concerned with wartime priorities such as industrial mobilization and consumer goods shortages, although even then he found time to initiate plans for an international airport—now BWI—and for an expressway system and downtown renewal.

When McKeldin returned to City Hall after an absence of 16 years, he found a Baltimore in decline—increasingly nonwhite and poor, and beset by crime, racial tensions and economic stagnation. Although he could do little to stem the tide of white flight, McKeldin did prevent an atmosphere of fear and resentment from permeating the city.

The mayor pushed for civil rights legislation in public accommodations and open housing, worked with CORE during its "target city" campaign and called for nondiscrimination in employment. Most important, his moral persuasion defused potential unrest, preventing in Baltimore the devastating riots that tore apart other U.S. cities in that era.

In his 1963 inaugural address, McKeldin envisioned an Inner Harbor rebirth as part of Baltimore's downtown renaissance, and he laid the groundwork for this revitalization. McKeldin, a prominent Republican who had become estranged from his own party, developed a friendship with the Johnson White House, which led to a major loan for Inner Harbor development and an offer from the president to become the first mayor of the District—an offer McKeldin declined.

McKeldin's eight years as governor during the '50s



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and '60s coincided with a period of national prosperity. Budget increases financed his programs for highway construction, aid to higher education and hospitals as well as the creation of parks and recreational facilities. His Commission on Administrative Organization of the State made sweeping governmental reforms.

McKeldin often spoke out forcefully for civil rights, bluntly criticizing Arkansas Gov. Orval Faubus's actions at Little Rock. He appointed blacks long before most other Maryland politicians did, not only as clerks, but as executive aides and magistrates and to school boards and commissions. His civil rights advocacy resulted in death threats, and on one occasion, a cross burned on the grounds of the governor's mansion. McKeldin also was an unwavering supporter of Jewish causes, especially the State of Israel.

McKeldin opposed capital punishment on moral grounds—citing race, economic hardship and mental impairment as reasons not to execute—but refused to commute several death sentences while governor, decisions he later regretted.

But it was McKeldin the campaigner and speechmaker who shone brightest. The man loved to campaign—in crowds, at formal dinners, one-on-one. He could persuade the undecided and cool the anger of opponents. As a speechmaker, McKeldin had few peers, using lofty rhetoric at one event, homey language at the next. His favorite audiences were religious groups, and he spent many weekends speaking in churches and synagogues. McKeldin's personal magnetism made a lasting impression on everyone.

Baltimore journalist Gerald W. Johnson, who wrote speeches for McKeldin, described his boss as a "practical idealist." McKeldin, a son of South Baltimore who is buried with the elite in Greenmount Cemetery overlooking his beloved Baltimore, would have savored that description. It paid tribute to his rare combination of expediency and vision and explained why he could supply so many good answers to the question: "What did he do?"

—William J. Thompson