

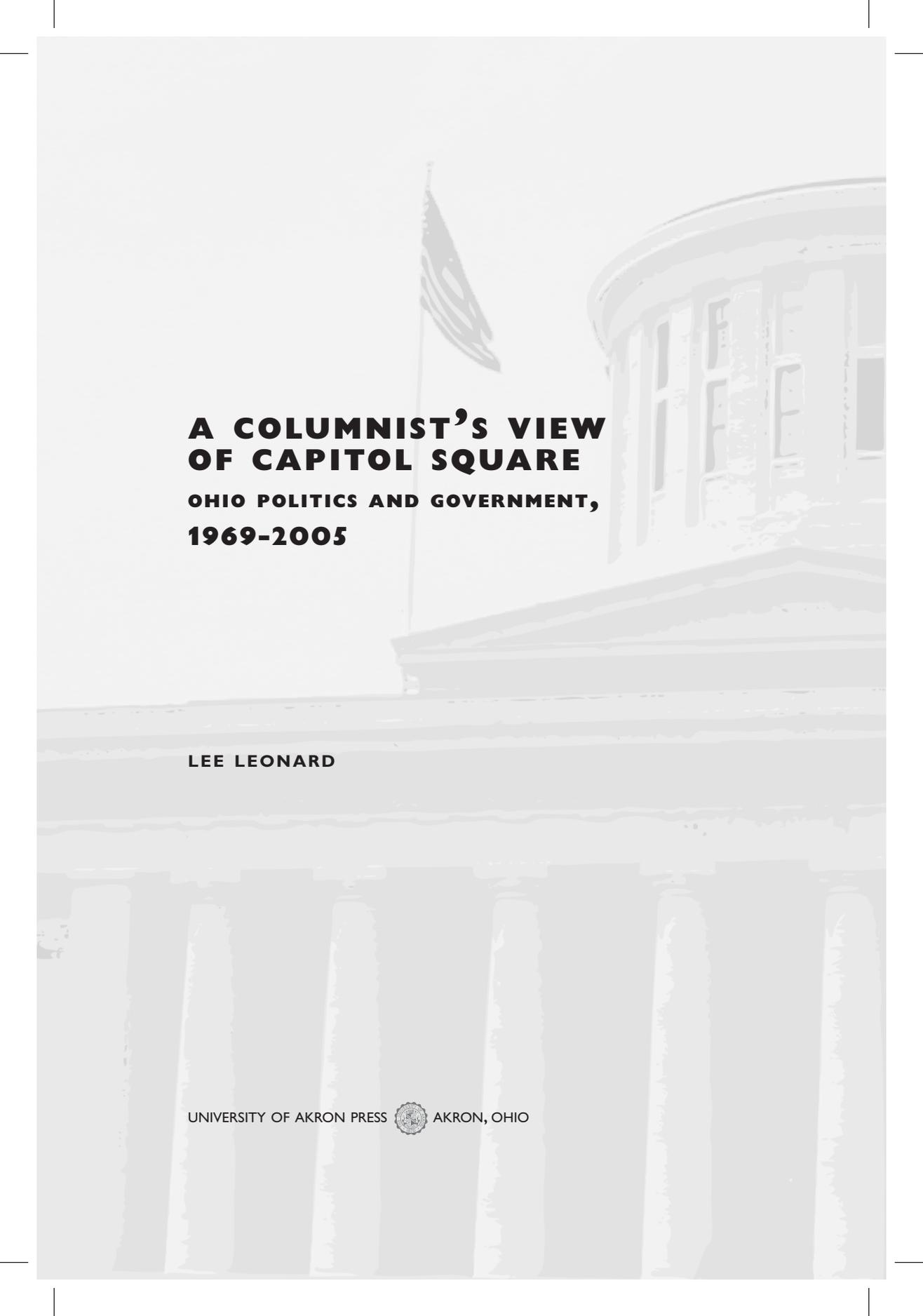
A COLUMNIST'S VIEW OF CAPITOL SQUARE

Series on Ohio Politics

John Green, Editor

Abe Zaidan, with John C. Green, *Portraits of Power: Ohio and National Politics, 1964–2004*

Lee Leonard, *A Columnist's View of Capitol Square: Ohio Politics and Government, 1969–2005*



**A COLUMNIST'S VIEW
OF CAPITOL SQUARE**

**OHIO POLITICS AND GOVERNMENT,
1969-2005**

LEE LEONARD

UNIVERSITY OF AKRON PRESS  AKRON, OHIO

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For Ruth Lindlaw Leonard, my wonderful wife of 45 years, who kept dinner warm and the family together on many nights when the events described in these columns were taking place.

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PREFACE

For 36 years, Lee Leonard wrote a weekly column about the Ohio Statehouse, first for *United Press International* and then for the *Columbus Dispatch*. During that time, he became one of the most respected and admired journalists in Ohio.

I am honored that this collection of Lee's columns is the second book in the Bliss Institute's Series on Ohio Politics with the University of Akron Press. Lee approached me about this project shortly after the release of the first book in the series, a collection of columns and articles by Abe Zaidan, entitled *Portraits of Power: Ohio and National Politics, 1964–2004* (2007). Abe and Lee were friends and colleagues for most of their careers, and their books complement each other well. Together they provide an insightful picture of Ohio politics in the last third of the Twentieth Century.

I knew of Lee's work before I moved to Ohio in 1987, and I made his acquaintance shortly thereafter. Since then I have talked with him on numerous occasions, usually for one of his columns. Thus it has been a special treat to work with him assembling this book of columns, along with his commentary about them.

Perhaps the most fitting praise of Lee's work comes from the people he covered for nearly four decades. In 2004, Lee spoke at the Bliss Institute conference on term limits, and drew an unusually large crowd of respectful politicians, all eager to hear what he had to say. One of the attendees summed up the prevailing admiration this way: "Leonard is a special guy, humble and smart."

Lee was respected by politicians because he respected them. He had high regard for politicians as people—despite their flaws and foibles. But he also appreciated the difficulty of their jobs and valued the public institutions in which they worked. And sometimes he revered the goals of Ohio politics and government more than the practitioners did themselves—as he reminded them, firmly but fairly, when the occasion demanded. Such respectfulness arises from a humble heart.

Lee was admired by politicians because he knew what he was talking about. He never set himself apart from the people and events he covered at the Statehouse. His goal was to understand what was going on and then share his understanding with others. His primary audience was the reading public, of course, but many politicians were enlightened by his columns as well. Lee has the mind of a scholar and the temperament of a teacher.

All these qualities are abundantly evident in the columns in this book. But in addition, these columns are fun to read. It is indeed a special writer who inspires, instructs, and entertains—all at the same time.

John C. Green

Director, Ray C. Bliss Institute of Applied Politics

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The author also is grateful to *United Press International* and the *Columbus Dispatch* and its publisher, John F. Wolfe, for the opportunity to write the columns herein. Thanks to the staff of the Archives Library at the Ohio Historical Center for help in researching the project; to *Dispatch* Librarian Linda Deitch for retrieving selected columns and photographs from the newspaper's files; to Debbie Turpening for transcribing the many columns that were not electronically stored; and to Amy Freels of the University of Akron Press, who supervised the book's production.

Finally, the author acknowledges former state Rep. Madeline Cain of Lakewood, who was the first of several people to suggest that a collection of past columns would be a good vehicle for chronicling what went on at the Ohio Statehouse over 36 years.

ABOUT LEE LEONARD

Lee Leonard, a native of Summit, N.J., was raised in Ithaca, N.Y., attended Middlebury (Vt.) College and graduated from Cornell University. He began his career with *United Press International* in Boise, Idaho, in 1962 and covered the Pennsylvania Capitol in Harrisburg from 1963–69. He became Statehouse bureau manager in Columbus in 1969 and in the 1970s was voted one of the 20 most-respected *UPI* bylines in a nationwide survey of the wire service's subscribers.

Leonard joined the *Columbus Dispatch* as a Statehouse reporter in 1990. He covered 11 national political conventions and a wide variety of campaigns. Among those he interviewed were former President Dwight Eisenhower and presidential candidate Jimmy Carter.

Leonard lives in retirement in Reynoldsburg, Ohio, with his wife Ruth. They have two grown children—Douglas, of Columbus, and Valerie, of West Chester, Ohio.

INTRODUCTION

Through the 1960s and well into the 1970s, Ohio government was dominated by rural interests known especially in the legislature as the “Cornstalk Brigade.” This was in the “dead ball” era of politics when government operated on the farmer’s calendar and officials liked to “set a spell” before making any decisions. Building relationships and trust was key. Political correctness wasn’t even a gleam in the eye of an idealist.

Now, it’s all business. Officeholders are focused on advancing or extending their political careers. Election, swearing-in, budget, campaign . . . all fly by at warp speed and then the cycle repeats. There’s a laptop on the desk of every legislator, and lobbyists keep pace moment-by-moment on cell phones and other electronic devices. Lots of the calls are about money.

A Columnist’s View of Capitol Square: Ohio Politics and Government, 1969–2005 bridges the two eras. It’s a collection of columns meant to convey a sense of what it was like at the Statehouse during that span of AP time. The columns were written on a weekly basis for *United Press International* and the *Columbus Dispatch*.

The reader will be treated to colorful profiles of some of the most entertaining characters inhabiting the Statehouse, and to contemporaneous analysis of some of the most momentous events of those decades.

With some exceptions, the collection is organized under the two major headings that comprise state government—politics and governing. The two are very different, and many an aspiring officeholder, having conducted a masterful campaign has arrived in office only to flounder because of a lack of understanding of how to govern. A key column under the division headed *Campaign = Compete; Govern = Cooperate* describes the hazards of failing to recognize the difference between campaigning and governing.

Five sections of the book are about special phenomena characterizing Ohio politics and government over the 36-year period. One is the intensity with which Buckeye citizens guard their right to vote, and their propensity to vote “no” if at all in doubt about an issue. Another is their extreme sensitivity to

taxation. The other sections deal with seemingly constant warfare between rural and urban constituencies, state and local governments, labor and business, and environmentalists and energy producers.

The absurd side of lawmaking is spotlighted and the author has reserved space for some opinions and four humor columns. With regret, not all events or characters are chronicled; space limitations prevented that. The columns were chosen according to how they fit the premise of the collection and how well-written they were. “Well-written” sometimes was a function of how much time was allowed to produce the column. Most were written under deadline, as explained here shortly. Readers will note that some of the columns of the 1960s and ’70s seem quaint. Some contain terms now viewed as politically incorrect. That was the language of the day, and those were the issues of the day.

Many columns that you read opposite the editorial page are flat-out opinions, and many columnists have a predictable point of view. In a way, this is good; you have a stable measuring stick because the columnist is always coming from the same direction.

I preferred to use my column to educate—to expand on the stories of the week and tell readers some things that wouldn’t fit into a daily news story. My measuring stick was not predictability. It was enlightenment. I wasn’t consistent and sometimes I left readers wondering where I was coming from. I wanted to expose them to what went on behind the scenes, to different points of view, to what caused particular government decisions and political posturing.

I much preferred analysis and interpretation of the news to giving my opinion, although occasionally certain politicians or their actions were so blatant that they cried out for a written punch in the gut. That, I enjoyed delivering and felt it was justified. Because I usually spared the heavy hand, I established credibility with readers—a rare and valuable commodity.

As expressed earlier, most of these columns were written on deadline. Many of my acquaintances outside the business thought all I did was write the weekly column. In fact, I was responsible for daily news coverage at the Statehouse and would often have two, three or even four stories a day—more when I was with the “deadline-every-minute” wire service.

During the week, I would “gather string” for the column I knew would come due on Friday. One editor thought I was holding back material from the daily menu to use in my column. He was right; I was always thinking ahead. But it was never at the expense of the daily story. You could have a good daily story and still leave enough quotes and other information to produce your column.

You had to give yourself a head start because when Friday came, you might have to cover a breaking news story *and* write the column. The deadline was unforgiving. The column was due in the early afternoon. I could write a decent column in two hours, less than that if I was under the gun, especially if I had all my information on hand and didn't have to make a lot of phone calls.

I certainly didn't hold the record for speed. When I was a summer intern for *United Press International* in Boise, Idaho, in 1962, I learned at the feet of the bureau chief, R. Richard Charnock. To me, he was a crusty old veteran of the Capitol wars. I was a 22-year old greenhorn who typed with two fingers. Years later I calculated that he was only 31 or so at the time, but he seemed ancient. His fingers could fly and he could wrap his mind around the political events of the day. Here's how adept he was at writing columns:

In the Boise bureau, there were no Teletype operators. You had to "punch" your own copy. Most of the time, you typed up your story on the typewriter. Then, while looking at it, you re-typed it on the Teletype keyboard, cutting coded holes into a yellow paper tape that unwound from a roll. When you finished cutting the tape, you would start running it through the transmitter and send the story out on the wire to client newspapers and broadcast stations. That's what made the clattering noise that is now fondly recalled by old-timers in newsrooms.

Invariably, Dick Charnock would find the deadline approaching for his weekly column. He wouldn't bother with the typewriter. He'd sit down at the Teletype machine and start cutting his tape, composing his column right out of his head. He'd put the front end of the tape in the transmitter, and when the loop reached the floor, signifying three minutes worth of copy, he'd hit the "send" switch. "No time to get fancy now," he'd mutter as the tape started flying through the transmitter. Charnock would continue to pound away at 60 words a minute, and the loop would seldom come off the floor. Sometimes he'd even gain slack tape! And when he finished his column, he'd rip off the end of the tape and wait three minutes for the rest of it to go through. On paper would be a sparkling political column for Idaho readers.

Some editors (and readers) think reporters shouldn't be allowed to write columns; that there should be a firewall between the news page and the editorial page. I was fortunate to be allowed to have a column for 36 years, and I tried not to abuse it. Certainly it looks bad for a reporter to express his or her opinion in print. Reporters should report the news and allow editorial writers and paid columnists to comment, the thinking goes. But who better to columnize on an

issue, event or politician than the person who lives and breathes the stuff every day? They know things, by intuition and instinct from virtually living with their subjects, that no editorial writer or columnist in a windowless upstairs room could ever detect. Now, there are “columnists” on the Internet who work on laptops from home, even from their beds, without ever interviewing their subjects, much less living with them for much of the day and night. The work of such writers should be viewed with extreme skepticism.

A true reporter with a column should write it carefully and with respect. I think I was allowed to write the column for so many years because editors and readers saw that I was using it to inform rather than to advance a personal agenda. Sometimes I even wrote the opposite of what I thought simply to bring that viewpoint out on the table. The columns included here were aimed at giving the reader not my opinion, but depth and background about Statehouse events and newsmakers of the times.

Sometimes it appears that I “picked on” certain politicians. I can assure you it was on an equal opportunity basis. Republicans who complained near the end of my career that we reporters unfairly bashed Gov. Bob Taft and GOP legislative leaders, were not around in the 1980s when we were savaging Democrats Dick Celeste and Vern Riffe week after week, month after month. Some examples follow. Any harsh treatment was not an attempt at personal vilification. Mainly it was to unmask the politicians who tried to fool the public with what came to be known in recent years as “spin.” When you’re writing news stories, you combat the spin by giving both sides. Unfortunately, no matter what they tell you, the politicians in power have the upper hand 90 percent of the time. At the White House, Statehouse or courthouse, they manage the news. News stories pit the entrenched officeholders against their political adversaries. Columns—whether they are analysis, interpretation or commentary—should attempt to put the reader behind the scenes as if he or she were there on a daily basis while all the machinations are going on. And the columns in this book are largely attempts to give fresh insight, to present a different viewpoint and to entertain while educating the reader about how and why the world of state government and politics works the way it does.

Lee Leonard