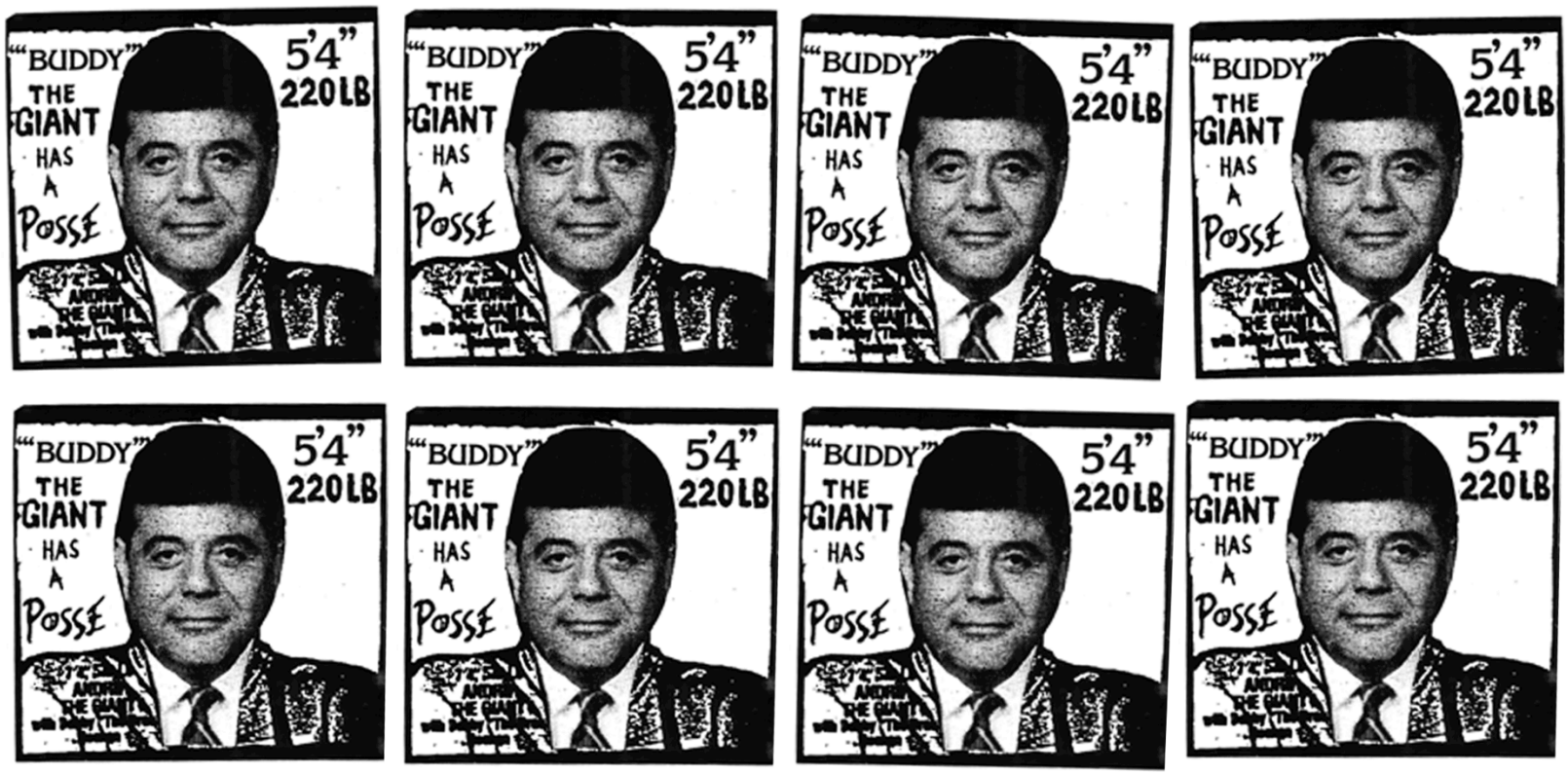
BUDDY CIANCI



"MARRY YOUR ENEMIES AND FUCK YOUR FRIENDS."

-BUDDY CIANCI

OVERVIEW

Vincent Albert “Buddy” Cianci, Jr., is Rhode Island’s longest-serving Mayor. First elected in 1975, he grew in popularity while building a network of loyal followers. He resigned in 1984 after being convicted of assault, but returned to run again in 1990 and held another eleven years in office. His administration was fraught with corruption--a good-old-boys network of bribery and intimidation. During his second administration, the FBI closed in on Buddy in an investigation known as Operation Plunder Dome. Buddy’s network toppled in conviction after conviction, finally leading to his own indictment, trial, and conviction of running a criminal organization out of city hall.

Buddy’s legacy is one of charisma warring with corruption. His career also includes time as a popular radio show host, political commentator, and pasta sauce purveyor. He maintains to this day that he did nothing wrong.

BUDDY'S STORY

From an early age, Buddy Cianci lusted for competition. In boarding school, he satisfied this desire through wresting. As a young adult, his completive nature made him a ferocious Rhode Island prosecutor who had a habit of grunting at witnesses. Cianci worked closely with state detective VINCENT J. VESPIA, a childhood friend. As Italian-American’s in WASP-dominated New England, it was a source of pride to Vespia and Cianci to lock up mobsters and show the public that not all Italians were gangsters. In 1973, he married Sheila Bentley McKenna. Together, they had one daughter.

Hearing rumors about cracks in the Democratic Party machine that had long-controlled Rhode Island and Providence, 33-year-old Cianci ran against incumbent Providence Mayor Joseph Doorley. He won by 351 votes, an incredibly small margin. As if by omen, in his first week in office, monkeys escaped the local zoo.

Cianci was known for attended as many public events as he could—ribbon cuttings, ceremonies, and charity events. His administration joked, “Buddy would jump for the opportunity to attend a letter opening!” At the time, Cianci seeming like a rising star for the Republican Party. He saw his future in Washington D.C. and traveled there often, sometimes meeting with President Ford, who’d hinted at Cianci having a future in his administration. Cianci jockeyed for the Republican nomination in the 1976 senatorial election, but ultimately stepped aside and let John Chafee take the nomination. Later, Cianci would regret the decision as the biggest mistake of his career. Any chance at national office was blown when President Ford lost to Carter in 1976.

Over the years, Cianci became increasingly difficult to work with, and more corrupt. His old friend Detective Vespia grew angry when he noticed mobster GERALD TILLINGHAST on Cianci’s city payroll. The mobster kept his city job for two years until Vespia finally caught him red-handed for a murder. Cianci’s first term was fraught with other controversy. The Providence Chief of Police committed suicide after Cianci appeared to have pressured him to give false testimony. Cianci had a cop who spoke against him arrested for a trumped up housing code violation, remarking “Nobody’s above the law.”

Redick took the lie detector test and passed; Cianci took it three times and failed each time

In the wake of the tragedy, The Providence Journal found twelve-year-old allegations that Cianci had raped a woman at gunpoint during his final year at Marquette Law School. At the time, the case had had substantial evidence against Cianci; in questioning, he failed three consecutive lie-detector tests, while the woman passed. Despite the evidence, and to the frustration of prosecutors at the time, Cianci had paid his alleged victim a $3,000 settlement to drop her charges. Cianci was lucky that she no longer wanted to speak about the issue and he successfully diffused the situation by spinning it as an empty politically motivated attack.

In 1978, despite all the controversy surrounding him, Cianci won a decisive re-election. He quickly hired RONNIE GLANTZ as a special adviser for legal affairs. Glantz soon became Cinaci's right hand man and helped Cianci rig bids and fix contracts so that the mayor's men would receive the business. As the dirty deals multiplied, Glantz found himself drawn further into the mayor's inner circle. According to Glantz, a lot of money found its way to a safe in Cianci's mother's house— $500,000 in cash.

By 1980, the mayor's popularity was at an all-time low. He had been crushed in the 1980 race for governor, losing every city and town in Rhode Island, and every ward in Providence. The city was reeling from a budget crisis and a highly unpopular mid-year tax hike. But In July 1981, Cianci regained his popularity by successfully battling a massive trash collectors strike. After Cianci faced down Local union president Joseph Virgilio. He made a show of bringing police armed with shotguns to protect replacement garbage truck drivers. The shotgun-toting cops had captured the public's imagination.

Buddy II

When the current mayor, Joseph Paolino, decided to step down in 1990, Buddy had a shot at redemption. His group of advisors urged him to challenge the court ruling and run, insisting he could win a three-way race. They presenting polling data that showed a die-hard 23% of voters would support Buddy "even if he raped a girl in Kennedy Plaza or robbed a bank at gunpoint."

Despite this confidence, and despite Wendy's support, Buddy hung back, the risk of failure looming over him right up until the deadline to announce candidacy. During that day's radio show, callers flooded the phone lines to urge Buddy to run. Swayed, he turned in his candidacy papers seventeen minutes before the deadline. He announced his choice on air, and the show somehow broadcasted beyond his station, even showing up on police radios. The message was clear: *Buddy was back*.

Buddy ran a mean campaign, throwing barbs at his two opponents onstage and behind the scenes. He amassed an immense support network, utilizing his characteristic charisma to charm up volunteers at the drop of a hat, while also garnering an inside network of loyal team members. His slogan was "He never stopped caring about Providence."

Cianci was critiqued by now-famous street artist Shepard Faire, who was then only a student. Faire vandalized Buddy's billboard with the version of his "Andre the Giant Has a Posse" art campaign.

On election night, even though the votes weren't officially counted, Buddy and his campaign celebrated—Buddy even proposed to Wendy, who enthusiastically accepted. They made no wedding plans, however, because Buddy soon focused his attention back on what truly mattered to him: his renewed position, reputation, and power. Buddy was truly back, and if he had his way, he'd never relinquish his power again.

Buddy approached his second run in office—nicknamed "Buddy II"—with zeal. His loyal network grew, and those who dissented were quickly dismissed. He was quick and harsh in dealing with anything or anyone who threatened his reign. His first year back, a new bouncer at Amsterdam's Rotisserie & Bar, a favorite of Buddy's, insisted Buddy and his crew pay the $2 cover fee. Enraged, Buddy left. Soon after, the fire department stormed the bar and shut it down for overcrowding. Days later, the bar's entertainment license was revoked. The owner paid a fine and made a well-advised donation to Buddy's campaign and restored his license, but operated with the knowledge of exactly what would happen should his staff question Buddy Cianci. As Buddy himself put it, "You don't want to get into a pissing match with me, because you're a cup of water and I'm Niagara Falls."

This was not an isolated incident—Buddy was infamous in the restaurant scene for never paying his bill. Local businesses gave discounts on pony rides for his granddaughter's birthday party. Wendy's dentist didn't charge her for checkups in the hopes of ingratiating himself with Buddy. Half the city was back in Buddy's pocket, and if they weren't in, they were trying their best to get there. His approval ratings soared.

There were a few who didn't drink the Kool-Aid, however. Buddy's spending was getting out of hand, and his tax hikes were becoming suspicious. There was an overabundance of fire stations and police stations, and pensions were being handed out like candy. The second year of Buddy II, eight of the fifteen city council members banded together and swore to enact a tax freeze, calling themselves the Zero Eight. Buddy, furious, held a meeting and tried to coerce the Zero Eight out of their position, threatening spouse's jobs and warning them that their constituents would quickly kick them out of office for opposing firefighters and policemen. The

Eight, rattled but determined, held fast, marking one of Buddy's only successful public defeats. Furious, Buddy kept his word, making life unpleasant for the eight councilmembers from that day forward.

Outside of the office, things looked great for Providence in the 1990s. Buddy's office worked on reforming the waterfront into a scenic area and turning the desolate, crime-ridden downtown into a vibrant arts district full of nightlife. Buddy bought a hockey team and called them the Providence Bruins, drawing sports fans and boosting excitement in the city. It was dubbed Providence's Renaissance.

However, the renaissance was "built on quicksand"—Buddy was spending too much and, now unable to raise taxes, he started reducing the pension fund, leaving it on a trajectory to be severely underfunded by the end of the decade. His personal spending also came into question—how was Buddy affording a yacht, a fancy home, a fancy car, and his exorbitant lifestyle on the $114k mayor's salary? People who asked that question never got far, not with Buddy's network surrounding him. His right-hand man, FRANK CORRENTE, operated as the background guy, the one who made things "run smoothly"—a mob puppet, muscleman, and "stand-up guy." He was also a man of his word, except when it comes to marriage, because he liked younger mistresses. He made sure some problems never crossed Buddy's doorstep.

Corrente couldn't waylay all problems, though. After 9 years of a relationship, multiple proposals with no marriage follow-through, arguments, and verbal abuse, Wendy had enough and finally left Buddy for a Florida salesman. Buddy tried to stop her, threatening to frame her new husband with drug charges and sending a hand-written note asking her to return, but she held strong. Buddy was crushed, lamenting his failure to keep her as his greatest mistake.

OPERATION PLUNDER DOME

Buddy may have spoken too soon on that front. DENNIS AIKEN, the junior FBI agent who poked around city hall during Buddy I, rolled back into town as a senior field agent in 1994. Now a big name in corruption investigation, Aiken had an idea of what—and who—to look into now that he was back. About a year after his return, Aiken ran into Buddy at a restaurant. Buddy was speechless—and terrified.

In 1995, Edward Voccola, owner of a Providence auto-body shop, was indicted for staging car accidents. Aiken pulled on that thread, and uncovered ties to a suspicious property lease involving the school board, insurance fraud, and bribery. He connected with TONY FREITAS, who owned JKL Engineering, a heating and air conditioning shop just down the street from Voccola's shop. Freitas despised the corruption and bribery that happened around him, and had repeatedly failed to comprehend, or refused to participate in, efforts to sweep him into the system. When Aiken tracked him down in 1998, Freitas was more than happy to help.

Freitas boldly donned a wire and hidden cameras and plunged into the corruption network as a double agent with the FBI code name "Mr. Freon" in the newly coined Operation Plunder Dome, named for the green dome of City Hall. Freitas reconnected with JOE PANNONE, a greedy, elderly man who was right in Buddy's back pocket. Pannone shared words of wisdom

from Buddy himself on the art of bribery: “Never talk on the phone, never get a check, but get cash when you're one-on-one.” With Pannone as his guide, Freitas worked his way right to Buddy’s office, giving him bribes in full view of a hidden camera. Freitas got the hang of undercover work and was in the thick of it by March 1999, when he was working with DAVID EAD, the vice chairman of the tax board, on a $10,000 payout. Then an anonymous woman called Ead, claiming that Freitas was connected to the FBI, and Operation Plunder Dome stopped undercover operations to protect Freitas.

By the next month, Aiken had enough to go after Ead, Pannone, and many others in city hall. On April 28th, Aiken arrested Ead and Pannone, and federal agents descended upon city hall and other government organizations, seizing documents. Buddy Cianci’s renaissance was shattered.

Over the next two years, Buddy’s network fell like dominos. Ead and Pannone pleaded guilty, Corrente was indicted, and multiple other city officials testified and confessed to bribery and corruption. On April 2, 2001, Buddy was indicted in a 30-count racketeering case. In 2002, as he ran for his seventh term, he was convicted by a federal jury of racketeering conspiracy by running a criminal enterprise from City Hall.

PRISON

Buddy was in shock following the conviction, telling anyone who would listen: “What was I convicted of?...I was convicted of being the mayor.” In September 2002, Buddy was sentenced to 64 months in federal prison, the judge likening him to Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. (After this, Buddy commented, “He didn’t give me my two paychecks.”) He entered the Fort Dix correctional facility in December. In prison he lost his toupee, received scores of letters, and shared a cell with a convicted drug trafficker named Oscar.

Buddy was not as well received in prison as he was in public. Many inmates resented that he was a former state prosecutor, and that he boasted about being friends with powerful people like Rudy Giuliani. While he made a few friends, Buddy never seemed to properly adjust, working nights in the prison library and talking about the radio show he would host when he left.

On May 30, 2007, Buddy was transferred to a halfway house in Boston.

2007-CURRENT

Buddy jumped back into the public eye right away, joining WPRO-AM as a talk show host in September of 2007 and WLNE Channel 6 as a political analyst a month later. He flirted with the idea of running for Governor in 2010, but ultimately didn’t run.

He became eligible to run for Mayor again in 2012, per a Rhode Island constitutional amendment stating that a candidate could run for office three years after completing parole or

probation. Before taking that leap, Buddy successfully underwent treatment for colon cancer, only missing about a week of his radio show.

On June 25, 2014, Buddy announced his candidacy for mayor on his radio show, reminiscent of his similar announcement in 1990. He ran as independent against Democrat Jorge Elzora and Republican Dan Harrop in, as Salon described it, “a campaign that feels like a classic rock reunion tour.” It wasn’t an altogether successful reunion—while Buddy managed to pull more votes than Harrop, Elzora won the popular vote, the first to ever beat Buddy Cianci in a mayoral election. He was endorsed by President Obama, and, interestingly, his opponent, Harrop, also voted for Elzora in an effort to keep Buddy out of office, saying: “While we have many policy differences, I do not fear that an Elorza mayoral administration will make Providence the laughing stock of the nation.”