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# Crabgrass-Roots Politics: Race, Rights, and the Reaction against Liberalism in the Urban North, 1940–1964

Thomas J. Sugrue

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The dominant narratives of twentieth-century United States history depict the rise of a triumphant liberal state, shaped by the hopeful marriage of government and expertise and validated by a “liberal consensus” of workers, corporations, southerners and northerners, whites and Blacks, Catholics and Jews. Conservative critics of the state have remained on the fringes of historiography, as Alan Brinkley has recently argued, a “largely neglected part of the story of twentieth-century America.” One of the unexamined ironies of recent American history is that the most influential critics of the liberal state came neither from the ranks of the Republicans nor from such radical rightist organizations as the Liberty League, the Black Legion, and the John Birch Society, nor from the ranks of Communists and socialists. The most vocal—and ultimately the farthest-reaching challenge to liberalism—came from within the New Deal coalition itself. Southern whites, whether die-hard Democrats or disaffected Dixiecrats, constrained New Deal liberalism from its inception. Corporate leaders and business unionists limited the possibilities for social democratic reform in the workplace. Their stories are well known. But crucial to the fate of liberalism and antiliberalism in the mid-twentieth-century United States were northern, urban whites. They were the backbone of the New Deal coalition; their political views and their votes limited the possibilities of liberal reform in the mid-twentieth century and constrained the leading liberal social movement, the extension of civil rights and liberties to African Americans.<sup>1</sup>

Thomas J. Sugrue is assistant professor of history at the University of Pennsylvania. Earlier versions of this paper were presented to the American Political Science Association annual meeting (1992); the “Toward a History of the 1960s” conference, Madison, Wisconsin (1993); the American Historical Association annual meeting (1994); as the Charles Colver Lecture in Urban Studies at Brown University (1994); and to the German Historical Institute, Washington, D.C. (1994). For comments, criticism, support, and collegial debate, thanks to Dana Barron, Jo Ann Argersinger, Kevin Boyle, Alan Brinkley, Paul Buhle, Lizabeth Cohen, Gerald Gamm, Daniel Gitterman, James Grossman, Arnold R. Hirsch, Alison Isenberg, Michael Katz, Michael Kazin, Philip Klinkner, Nelson Lichtenstein, James Morone, Bruce Nelson, Alice O'Connor, Adolph Reed, Fred Siegel, and Marshall Stevenson. Funds for research were provided by the Social Science Research Council Committee for Research on the Urban Underclass, through support from the Rockefeller Foundation; the Bordin-Gillette Research Travel Grant, Bentley Library, University of Michigan; the University of Pennsylvania Research Foundation; and the Kaiser Family Foundation Research Grant from the Walter P. Reuther Library.

<sup>1</sup> Alan Brinkley, “The Problem of American Conservatism,” *American Historical Review*, 99 (April 1994), 410. See also the important review essay, Michael Kazin, “The Grass-Roots Right: New Histories of U.S. Conservatism in the Twentieth Century,” *ibid.*, 97 (Feb. 1992), 136–55. On southern whites and the role of southern Democrats

The New Deal may have been, as Lizabeth Cohen and others have argued, a unifying moment in American political history, at least in the urban North. Industrial workers discovered common political goals in the Democratic party, built class solidarity through the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO), and expressed their grievances through an inclusive language of Americanism. Yet beneath the seeming unity of the New Deal order were unresolved questions of racial identity and racial politics. Eating away at the "liberal consensus," just as it reached its postwar apotheosis, was a newly assertive working-class whiteness.<sup>2</sup> As early as the 1940s, white politicians in the urban North began to identify the hot-button issues that motivated urban working-class and middle-class white voters. In the crucible of postwar northern cities undergoing profound racial and economic transformation, they fashioned a new politics that combined racial antipathy with a growing skepticism about liberalism. The white rebellion against the New Deal had its origins in the urban politics of the 1940s and 1950s. The local politics of race and housing in the aftermath of World War II fostered a grass-roots rebellion against liberalism and seriously limited the social democratic and egalitarian possibilities of the New Deal order.

### Postwar Detroit

The history of politics in the post-New Deal era has been told primarily at the national level. The values, ideals, and social movements that formed the political world of the mid-twentieth century can be seen most clearly, however, at the local level, where political and social history intersected in the day-to-day lives of ordinary Americans. An examination of post-World War II Detroit, Michigan, offers insights into the travails of liberalism at the grass-roots level. Dominated by a blue-collar work force, heavily unionized, and predominantly Catholic, Detroit was a stronghold of the Democratic party, a bastion of support for New Deal liberalism. Detroit workers—both white and Black—benefited tremendously from New Deal programs. By providing temporary work during the Great Depression, the Works Progress

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in limiting New Deal social programs, see James C. Cobb and Michael Namorato, eds., *The New Deal and the South* (Jackson, 1984). On the post-World War II South, see Numan V. Bartley, *From Thurmond to Wallace: Political Tendencies in Georgia, 1948-1968* (Baltimore, 1970); Jill Quadagno, "From Old Age Assistance to Supplemental Security Income: The Political Economy of Relief in the South, 1935-1972," in *The Politics of Social Policy in the United States*, ed. Margaret Weir, Ann Shola Orloff, and Theda Skocpol (Princeton, 1988), 235-64; and Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York, 1991). On the limits on reform in the workplace, see Nelson Lichtenstein, "From Corporatism to Collective Bargaining: Organized Labor and the Eclipse of Social Democracy in the Postwar Era," in *The Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order, 1930-1980*, ed. Steve Fraser and Gary Gerstle (Princeton, 1989), 122-52; and Elizabeth A. Fones-Wolf, *Selling Free Enterprise: The Business Assault on Labor and Liberalism, 1945-60* (Urbana, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Lizabeth Cohen, *Making a New Deal: Industrial Workers in Chicago, 1919-1939* (New York, 1990); Gary Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism: The Politics of Labor in a Textile City, 1920-1960* (New York, 1989); Gary Gerstle, "Working-Class Racism: Broaden the Focus," *International Labor and Working-Class History*, 44 (Fall 1993), 33-40; Bruce Nelson, "Class, Race, and Democracy in the CIO: The 'New' Labor History Meets the 'Wages of Whiteness,'" *International Review of Social History* (forthcoming); David Roediger, *Towards the Abolition of Whiteness: Essays on Race, Politics, and Working Class History* (London, 1994).

Administration cemented the loyalty of the unemployed of all races to the New Deal. The National Labor Relations Act of 1935 facilitated unionization, which brought tangible gains to Detroit's blue-collar population. By the 1940s Detroit's heavily unionized work force commanded high wages and generous benefits. In addition, federal housing subsidies, under the aegis of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation, the Federal Housing Administration, and the Veterans Administration, protected homeowners from foreclosure and made home ownership possible for much of the city's working class.

Detroit's voters turned out in droves for Democratic presidential candidates in every election after 1932, most prominently supporting Franklin D. Roosevelt, whose portrait graced working-class clubs, bars, and homes throughout the city. Detroiters provided the crucial margin of votes in gubernatorial elections for the New Dealer Frank Murphy (later appointed to the United States Supreme Court by FDR) and for liberals such as G. Mennen "Soapy" Williams. Only once after 1932 did Detroiters fail to rally behind the Democratic candidate for governor. But just as support for the New Deal reached its zenith at the state and national levels, social and demographic changes began to erode support for the liberal agenda in Detroit.<sup>3</sup>

The Second Great Migration of southern Blacks to the city set into motion political tremors. Detroit was a magnet for African American migrants during and after World War II. The city's Black population increased by over five hundred thousand between 1940 and 1970, growing from 9 percent of the city's population in 1940 to 45 percent in 1970. Aspiring Black workers, many of whom found stable and relatively high-paying employment in the city's defense and automobile industries, began to look for housing outside Detroit's small and crowded inner-city area, which had held most of the city's African American population in 1940. In the postwar decades, the city's racial geography changed dramatically. Upwardly mobile Blacks sought better housing in predominantly white sections of the city. Poorer Blacks also put pressure on the real estate market. Between 1940 and 1960, the first African Americans moved into 110 previously white census tracts.<sup>4</sup>

In the wake of this influx of Blacks, racial tensions mounted. World War II brought a wave of hate strikes against Black defense workers, a riot at the site of the Sojourner Truth Homes, a public housing project for Blacks, and the 1943 race riot, the bloodiest civil disorder in the United States since the draft uprisings of the Civil War. Although Detroit did not experience another major race riot until

<sup>3</sup> For a distillation of election returns, see Melvin G. Holli, ed., *Detroit* (New York, 1976), 274.

<sup>4</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1940, Census Tract Statistics for Detroit, Michigan and Adjacent Area* (Washington, 1942), table 1; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population, 1950, Census Tract Statistics, Detroit, Michigan and Adjacent Area* (Washington, 1952), table 1; U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Censuses of Population and Housing, 1960, Census Tracts, Detroit, Michigan Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area*, Final Report PHC(1)-40 (Washington, 1962), table P-1.

1967, race relations in the period after World War II were not tranquil. One city race relations official called the postwar period "the dark ages of Detroit."<sup>5</sup>

Postwar Detroit was not unique in its history of racial tension. The post-World War II decades witnessed a profound transformation in the politics, urban geography, and economies of dozens of northern industrial cities. Urban whites responded to the influx of millions of Black migrants to their cities in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s by redefining urban geography and urban politics in starkly racial terms. In Chicago and Cicero, Illinois, working-class whites rioted in the 1940s and 1950s to oppose the construction of public housing in their neighborhoods. White Chicagoans fashioned a brand of Democratic party politics, especially under mayors Martin H. Kennelly and Richard J. Daley, that had a sharp racial edge. In Newark, New Jersey, in the 1950s, blue-collar Italian and Polish Americans harassed African American newcomers to their neighborhoods. And in the postwar period, white Philadelphians and Cincinnatians attacked Blacks who moved into previously all-white enclaves and resisted efforts to integrate the housing market. Countless whites retreated to suburbs or neighborhoods on the periphery of cities where they excluded Blacks by federally sanctioned redlining, real estate steering, and restrictive zoning laws.<sup>6</sup>

While the racial demography of Detroit was changing, the economy of the Motor City and other older industrial centers began to decline. On the surface, Detroit seemed an embodiment of the postwar affluent society. Detroit's workers, especially in the automobile and auto parts industries, were among the best paid in the country. They used their relatively high wages, along with federal mortgage subsidies, to purchase or build modest single-family houses on Detroit's sprawling northeast and northwest sides. The proportion of homes in the city that were occupied by their owners rose from 39.2 percent in 1940 to 54.1 percent in 1960. Yet the working-class

<sup>5</sup> Dominic J. Capeci Jr., *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit: The Sojourner Truth Housing Controversy of 1942* (Philadelphia, 1984); August Meier and Elliott Rudwick, *Black Detroit and the Rise of the UAW* (New York, 1979), 192–97; Nelson Lichtenstein, *Labor's War at Home: The CIO in World War II* (New York, 1982); Martin Glaberman, *Wartime Strikes: The Struggle against the Nonstrike Pledge in the UAW during World War II* (Detroit, 1980); Harvard Sitkoff, "The Detroit Race Riot of 1943," *Michigan History*, 53 (Fall 1969), 183–206; Alan Clive, *State of War: Michigan in World War II* (Ann Arbor, 1979), 157–62; Alfred McClung Lee and Norman Daymond Humphrey, *Race Riot* (New York, 1943); Robert Shogan and Tom Craig, *The Detroit Race Riot: A Study in Violence* (Philadelphia, 1964); B. J. Widick, *Detroit: City of Race and Class Violence* (Chicago, 1972), 99–112; Dominic J. Capeci Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943* (Jackson, 1991). For the official's statement, see Joseph Coles interview by Jim Keeney and Roberta McBride, July 8, 1970, transcript, p. 17, Blacks in the Labor Movement Collection (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Mich.).

<sup>6</sup> There is a voluminous literature on the Great Migration of African Americans to the North between 1914 and 1929, but no comparable historiography for the post-World War II period. Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940–1960* (New York, 1983), 40–99; Arnold R. Hirsch, "Massive Resistance in the Urban North: Trumbull Park, Chicago, 1953–1966," *Journal of American History*, 82 (Sept. 1995), 522–50; John T. Cumbler, *A Social History of Economic Decline: Business, Politics, and Work in Trenton* (New Brunswick, 1989), 153; John F. Bauman, *Public Housing, Race, and Renewal: Urban Planning in Philadelphia, 1920–1974* (Philadelphia, 1987), 160–64; Kenneth S. Baer, "Whitman: A Study of Race, Class, and Postwar Public Housing Opposition" (senior honors thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1994); Charles F. Casey-Leininger, "Making the Second Ghetto in Cincinnati: Avondale, 1925–1970," in *Race and the City: Work, Community, and Protest in Cincinnati, 1820–1970*, ed. Henry Louis Taylor Jr. (Urbana, 1993), 239–40, 247–48; Kenneth T. Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States* (New York, 1985), esp. 190–218; Patricia Burgess Stach, "Deed Restrictions and Subdivision Development in Columbus, Ohio, 1900–1970," *Journal of Urban History*, 15 (Nov. 1988), 42–68.

hold on affluence was tenuous. The postwar boom was punctuated by periodic layoffs and four recessions, which painfully evoked memories of the Great Depression. Beginning in the early 1950s, the industrial bases of almost every major city in the North began to atrophy, and Detroit was no exception. Large and small companies relocated outside cities to suburban and rural areas, reduced the number of workers in newly automated plants, and closed dozens of central city factories altogether. Between 1954 and 1960, Detroit lost more than eighty thousand manufacturing jobs. The vagaries of the economy jeopardized workers' most significant asset, usually their only substantial investment — their homes.<sup>7</sup>

The simultaneous Black migration and economic dislocation in postwar Detroit created a sense of crisis among the city's white homeowners. As they endured layoffs, plant closings, and downsizing, some working-class homeowners feared that they would lose their homes to foreclosure. Auto worker Bill Collett, reacting to news of layoffs at the Ford Motor Company's River Rouge plant in 1951, worried about the effect of unemployment on his homeownership fellow workers: "What will happen to the thousands who will be let out? What is going to happen to the thousands who are buying homes?" Even those who held steady employment found that mortgage or land contract payments stretched family budgets to the breaking point. In a comprehensive survey of Detroit residents conducted in 1951, the Wayne University sociologist Arthur Kornhauser found that white Detroiters ranked housing needs as the most pressing problem in the city. Home ownership required a significant financial sacrifice for Detroit residents: the most frequent complaint (voiced by 32 percent of respondents) was that the cost of housing was too high.<sup>8</sup>

The issues of race and housing were inseparable in the minds of many white Detroiters. Homeowners feared, above all, that an influx of Blacks would imperil their precarious economic security. A self-described "average American housewife" wrote: "What about us, who cannot afford to move to a better location and are surrounded by colored? . . . Most of us invested our life's savings in property and now we are in constant fear that the neighbor will sell its property to people of different race." Kornhauser found that race relations followed a close second in Detroiters' ranking of the city's most pressing problems. Only 18 percent of white respondents from all over the city expressed "favorable" views toward the "full acceptance of Negroes," and 54 percent expressed "unfavorable" attitudes toward

<sup>7</sup> U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Census of Population and Housing, 1940, Population and Housing Statistics for Census Tracts: Detroit, Michigan and Adjacent Area* (Washington, 1942), table 4; Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Censuses of Population and Housing, 1960, Census Tracts, Detroit, Michigan Standard Metropolitan Statistical Area*, table H-1. On the economy of postwar Detroit, see Thomas J. Sugrue, "The Structures of Urban Poverty: The Reorganization of Space and Work in Three Periods of American History," in *The "Underclass" Debate: Views from History*, ed. Michael B. Katz (Princeton, 1993), 100–117. Detroit's loss of manufacturing jobs in the postwar period was not atypical of older northeastern and midwestern cities. See John Kasarda, "Urban Change and Minority Opportunities," in *The New Urban Reality*, ed. Paul E. Peterson (Washington, 1985), 43–47, esp. tables 1 and 2.

<sup>8</sup> "Open Letter to Henry Ford II," *Ford Facts*, Sept. 15, 1951; Arthur Kornhauser, *Detroit as the People See It: A Survey of Attitudes in an Industrial City* (Detroit, 1952), 68–69, 75, 77–82. Kornhauser's team interviewed 593 adult men and women randomly selected from all sections of the city. On the survey's methodology, see *ibid.*, 189–96.

integration. When asked to discuss ways in which race relations “were not as good as they should be,” 27 percent of white respondents mentioned “Negroes moving into white neighborhoods.” Among white respondents 22 percent answered that the “Negro has too many rights and privileges; too much power; too much intermingling.” Another 14 percent mentioned “Negroes’ undesirable characteristics.” Only 14 percent mentioned discrimination as a problem in race relations.<sup>9</sup>

Whites in Kornhauser’s sample regularly spoke of the “colored problem” or the “Negro problem.” In their responses to open-ended questions, Kornhauser’s informants made clear what they meant by the “colored problem.” “Eighty percent of [Blacks] are animals,” stated one white respondent. “If they keep them all in the right place there wouldn’t be any trouble,” responded another. “Colored treat the whites in an insolent way,” added a third white. “They think they own the city.” A majority of whites looked to increased segregation as the solution to Detroit’s “colored problem.” When asked “What do you feel ought to be done about relations between Negroes and whites in Detroit?” a remarkable 68 percent of white respondents called for some form of racial segregation—56 percent of whites surveyed advocated residential segregation. Many cited the Jim Crow South as a model for successful race relations.<sup>10</sup>

Class, union membership, and religion all affected whites’ attitudes toward Blacks. Working-class and poor whites expressed negative views toward Blacks more frequently than other respondents to Kornhauser’s survey. Among poor and working-class whites, 85 percent supported racial segregation, in contrast to 56 percent among middle-income and 42 percent among upper-income whites. Union members were slightly “less favorable than others towards accepting Negroes.” CIO members were even more likely than other white Detroiters to express negative views of African Americans—65 percent—although more CIO members were also likely to support full racial equality (18 percent) than ordinary white Detroiters. And finally Catholics were significantly more likely than Protestants to express unfavorable feelings toward Blacks.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>9</sup> “Integration Statement,” anonymous letter, [c. mid-1950s], box 9, part I, Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches Collection (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); Kornhauser, *Detroit as the People See It*, 95.

<sup>10</sup> The term “colored problem” was used most frequently by whites to describe Black movement into their neighborhoods. See, for example, Property Owners Association, flyer, 1945, box 66, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); and the newsletter of the Courville District Improvement Association, *Action!*, Feb. 15, 1948, attached to Mayor’s Interracial Committee, Minutes, April 5, 1948, box 10, part I, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection, *ibid.* Kornhauser, *Detroit as the People See It*, 85, 185, 100. There was virtually complete residential segregation in Detroit when Kornhauser conducted his survey. In 1950, the index of dissimilarity between Blacks and whites (a measure of segregation calculated on the percentage of whites who would have to move to achieve complete racial integration) was 88.8; the index of dissimilarity in 1940 had been 89.9. Respondents to the survey supported even stricter racial segregation than already existed. For the figures, see Karl E. Taeuber and Alma F. Taeuber, *Negroes in Cities: Residential Segregation and Neighborhood Change* (Chicago, 1965), 39.

<sup>11</sup> Kornhauser, *Detroit as the People See It*, 87, 90, 91. On the importance of Catholic parish boundaries in preserving the racial homogeneity of neighborhoods and in shaping Catholic attitudes toward Blacks, see John T. McGreevy, “American Catholics and African-American Migration, 1919–1970” (Ph.D. diss., Stanford University, 1992); and Gerald Gamm, “Neighborhood Roots: Institutions and Neighborhood Change in Boston, 1870–1994” (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1994).

In reaction to the postwar transformation of the city, Detroit's whites began fashioning a politics of defensive localism that focused on threats to property and neighborhood. They directed their political energy toward the two groups they believed were the agents of change: Blacks and their liberal allies. Acting on their perception of the threat of the Black newcomers to their stability, economic status, and political power, many of Detroit's working- and middle-class whites banded together in exclusive neighborhood organizations, in what became one of the largest grass-roots movements in the city's history. By moving the politics of race, home ownership, and neighborhood to center stage, they reshaped urban politics in the 1940s and 1950s and set in motion the forces that would eventually reconfigure national politics.<sup>12</sup>

Between 1943 and 1965, whites throughout Detroit founded at least 192 neighborhood organizations, variously called "civic associations," "protective associations," "improvement associations," and "homeowners' associations." Their titles reveal their place in the ideology of white Detroiters. As civic associations, they saw their purpose as upholding the values of self-government and participatory democracy. They offered members a unified voice in city politics. As protective associations, they fiercely guarded the investments their members had made in their homes. They also paternalistically defended neighborhood, home, family, women, and children against the forces of social disorder that they saw arrayed against them in the city. As improvement associations, they emphasized the ideology of self-help and individual achievement that lay at the very heart of the American notion of home ownership. Above all, as home- and property-owners' associations, these groups represented the interests of those who perceived themselves as independent and rooted rather than dependent and transient.

The surviving records of homeowners' associations do not, unfortunately, permit a close analysis of their membership. From the hundreds of letters that groups sent to city officials and civil rights groups, from neighborhood newsletters, and from improvement association letterheads, it is clear that no single ethnic group dominated most neighborhood associations. Names as diverse as Fadanelli, Csanyi, Berge, and Watson appeared on the same petitions. Groups met in public school buildings, Catholic and Protestant churches, union halls, Veterans of Foreign Wars clubhouses, and parks. Letters, even from residents with discernibly "ethnic" names, seldom referred to national heritage or religious background. Organizational newsletters and neighborhood newspapers never used ethnic modifiers or monikers to describe neighborhood association members—they reserved ethnic nomenclature for "the colored" and Asians (and occasionally Jews). The diversity of ethnic membership in neighborhood groups is not surprising, since by the 1940s, Detroit had few ethnically homogeneous neighborhoods. But the heterogeneity of Detroit's neighborhoods only partially explains the absence of ethnic affiliation in remaining rec-

<sup>12</sup> I borrow the term *defensive localism* from Margaret Weir, "Urban Poverty and Defensive Localism," *Dissent*, 41 (Summer 1994), 337–42. She uses it in a context of city-suburban relations.

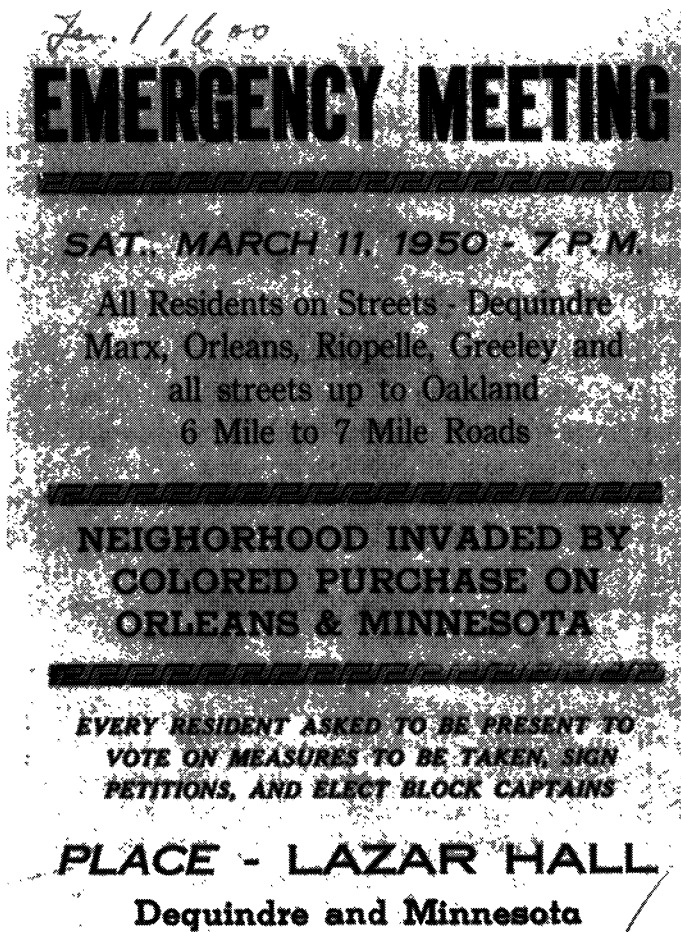


ords. Members of homeowners' and neighborhood groups shared a common bond of whiteness and Americanness—a bond that they asserted forcefully at public meetings and in correspondence with public officials.<sup>13</sup>

Neighborhood associations had a long history in cities such as Detroit. Real estate developers had originally created them to enforce restrictive covenants and, later, zoning laws. Frequently, they sponsored community social activities and advocated better public services, such as street lighting, stop signs, and traffic lights. During and after World War II, these organizations grew rapidly in number and influence. Increasingly, they existed solely to wage battles against proposed public housing sites and against Blacks moving into their neighborhoods.

Beginning in the 1940s, the threat of a Black influx became the *raison d'être* of community groups. One new group, the Northwest Civic Association, called its founding meeting "So YOU will have first hand information on the colored situation in this area," and it invited "ALL interested in maintaining Property Values in the NORTHWEST section of Detroit." The Courville District Improvement Association gathered residents of a northeast Detroit neighborhood to combat the "influx of colored people" into the area and rallied supporters with its provocatively entitled newsletter, *Action!* The founders of the Connor-East Homeowners' Association promised to "protect the Area from undesirable elements." Members of the San Benardo Improvement Association pledged to keep their neighborhood free of "undesirables"—or "Niggers"—as several who eschewed euphemism shouted at the group's first meeting. Existing organizations took on a new emphasis with the threat of Black mobility. In 1950 Orville Tenaglia, president of the Southwest Detroit Improvement League, recounted his group's history: "Originally we organized in

<sup>13</sup> On the ethnic heterogeneity of Detroit neighborhoods, see Olivier Zunz, *The Changing Face of Inequality: Urbanization, Industrial Development, and Immigrants in Detroit, 1880–1920* (Chicago, 1982), 340–51. In arrest records of whites involved in anti-public housing riots in Chicago, Arnold Hirsch found great diversity in ethnic affiliations. See Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 81–84. For examples of ethnic diversity in Detroit, see letters to Mayor Edward Jeffries, regarding the Algonquin Street and Oakwood defense housing projects, Housing Commission Folder, box 3, Detroit Archives—Mayor's Papers, 1945 (Burton Historical Collection, Detroit Public Library, Detroit, Mich.). See also Exhibit A, Oct. 22, 1948, pp. 1–2, attached to Charles H. Houston to Charles S. Johnson et al., memorandum, Michigan: *Swanson v. Hayden* Folder, box B133, group II, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers (Manuscript Division, Library of Congress, Washington, D.C.); newsletter of the Greater Detroit Neighbors Association—Unit No. 2, *Neighborhood Informer* (Dec. 1949), 2, folder 4-19, box 4, United Automobile Workers, Community Action Program Collection (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs). For derogatory references to Jews, see "Demonstrations Protesting Negro Occupancy of Homes, September 1, 1945–September 1, 1946: Memorandum J," p. 31, box 3, part I, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection. For a reference to "niggers, chinamen, and russians," see William K. Anderson to Herbert Schultz, Oct. 17, 1958, South Lakewood Area Association Papers, 1955–1960 (Burton Historical Collection). For incidents involving an Indian family, a Chinese family, and a Filipino family who moved into white neighborhoods, see Chronological Index of Cases, 1951 (51–31) and (51–58), box 13, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection; Detroit Police Department Special Investigation Bureau, Summary of Racial Activities, April 30, 1956–May 17, 1956, folder A2-26, box 38, Detroit Urban League Papers (Michigan Historical Collections, Bentley Library, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor). Detroit was a magnet for southern white migrants, but I have found little evidence of an extensive southern white presence in neighborhood organizations. Although southern whites were frequently blamed for racial tension in the city, their role was greatly exaggerated. In the postwar years, many southern whites continued to live in racially mixed neighborhoods and did not actively resist Black residential mobility. See Capeci and Wilkerson, *Layered Violence*; and John M. Hartigan Jr., "Cultural Constructions of Whiteness: Racial and Class Formations in Detroit" (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Santa Cruz, 1995).



Flyer announcing neighborhood association meeting to prevent African Americans from moving into a predominantly white neighborhood on Detroit's east side, March 1950.

Folder 25-107, box 25, part III, Detroit Commission on Community

Relations Collection, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs.

*Courtesy Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Walter P. Reuther Library, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan.*

1941 to promote better civic affairs, but now we are banded together just to protect our homes." The league was engaged in a "war of nerves" over the movement of Blacks into the community.<sup>14</sup>

<sup>14</sup> "OPEN MEETING . . . for Owners and Tenants," poster, [c. 1945], Property Owners Association Folder, box 66, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection; *Action!*, Feb. 15, 1948, p. 2; Guyton Home Owners' Association and Connor-East Home Owners' Association, leaflets, 1957-1960 Folder, South Lakewood Area Association Papers; Richard J. Peck, Community Services Department, Detroit Urban League, "Summary of Known Improvement Association Activity in Past Two Years, 1955-1957," box 2, Pre-1960, Community Organization 1950s Vertical File (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); *Southwest Detroiter*, May 11, 1950, Housing Commission Folder, box 5, Detroit Archives—Mayors' Papers, 1950.

As the racial demography of Detroit changed, neighborhood groups demarcated racial boundaries with great precision and, abetted by federal agencies and private real estate agents, divided cities into strictly enforced racial territories. From the 1940s through the 1960s, white urban dwellers fiercely defended their turf. They referred to the Black migration in military terms: they spoke of "invasions" and "penetration" and plotted strategies of "resistance." White neighborhoods became "battlegrounds" where residents struggled to preserve segregated housing. Homeowners' associations helped whites to "defend" their homes and "protect" their property.<sup>15</sup>

Their militancy was more than rhetorical. As a former Detroit race relations official remarked of the postwar period, the city "did a lot of firefighting in those days." White Detroiters instigated over two hundred incidents against Blacks attempting to move into formerly all-white neighborhoods, including mass demonstrations, picketing, effigy burning, window breaking, arson, vandalism, and physical attacks. Most incidents followed improvement association meetings. A potent mixture of fear and anger animated whites who violently defended their neighborhoods. All but the most liberal whites who lived along the city's racial frontier believed that they had only two choices. They could flee, as vast numbers of white urbanites did, or they could hold their ground and fight.<sup>16</sup>

Neighborhood groups responded to the threat of "invasion" with such urgency because of the extraordinary speed of racial change. Most blocks in changing neighborhoods went from all-white to predominantly Black in three or four years. The movement of a single Black family to a white block fueled panic. Real estate brokers canvassed door to door in areas bordering Black neighborhoods warning fearful white homeowners that if they did not sell quickly, the value of their houses would plummet. Realtors created a climate of fear by ostentatiously showing houses to Black families, waiting a day or two for rumors to spread throughout the neighborhood, and then inundating residents with leaflets and phone calls urging them to sell. One broker paid a Black woman to walk her baby down an all-white block, to spark fears that "Negroes [were] 'taking over' this block or area" and that the residents "had best sell now while there was still a chance of obtaining a good price." Such sales tactics, while often despised by white homeowners, were remarkably effective. Whites living just beyond "racially transitional" neighborhoods witnessed

<sup>15</sup> *Neighborhood Informer* (Dec. 1949), 1, 3, folder 4-19, box 4, United Automobile Workers, Community Action Program Collection; "Emergency Meeting, March 11, 1950," handbill, folder 25-107, box 25, part III, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection; Ruritan Park Civic Association, "Dear Neighbor," folder 25-101, *ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> John G. Feild interview by Katherine Shannon, Dec. 28, 1967, transcript, p. 11, Civil Rights Documentation Project (Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University Library, Washington, D.C.). The finding guide and interview transcript mistakenly spell Feild as Fields. I calculated the number of racial incidents by surveying records in the Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection; the Detroit Branch, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Collection (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); the Detroit Urban League Papers; and Detroit's three Black newspapers: *Michigan Chronicle*, *Detroit Tribune*, and *Pittsburgh Courier* (Detroit edition). On racial violence in postwar Detroit, see Thomas J. Sugrue, "The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race, Industrial Decline, and Housing in Detroit, 1940-1960" (Ph.D. diss., Harvard University, 1992), 208-78.

rapid Black movement into nearby areas. They feared that without concerted action, their neighborhoods would turn over just as quickly.<sup>17</sup>

White Detroiters also looked beyond transitional neighborhoods to the “slum,” a place that confirmed their greatest fears. Whites saw in the neighborhoods to which Blacks had been confined in the center city area a grim prophecy of their neighborhoods’ futures. They focused on places like Paradise Valley, Detroit’s first major ghetto, which housed two-thirds of the city’s Black population during World War II. Housing in Paradise Valley consisted mainly of run-down rental units, most built in the 1860s and 1870s, owned by absentee white landlords. White Detroiters also noticed the striking class difference between Blacks and whites. Through 1960 the median family income of Blacks in Detroit was, at best, two-thirds that of whites there. Although the poorest Blacks were seldom the first to move into formerly white neighborhoods (in fact, Black “pioneers” were often better off than their white neighbors), whites feared the incursion of a “lower-class element” into their neighborhoods.<sup>18</sup>

To white Detroiters, the wretched conditions in Paradise Valley and other poor African American neighborhoods were the fault of irresponsible Blacks, not of greedy landlords or neglectful city officials. Wherever Blacks lived, whites believed, neighborhoods inevitably deteriorated. “Let us keep out the slums,” admonished one east-side homeowners’ group. If Blacks moved into white neighborhoods, they would bring with them “noisy roomers, loud parties, auto horns, and in general riotous living,” thus depreciating real estate values and destroying the moral fiber of the community. A northwest-side neighborhood association poster played on white residents’ fears of the crime that, they believed, would accompany racial change: “Home Owners Can You Afford to . . . Have your children exposed to gangster operated skid row saloons? Phornographic pictures and literature? Gamblers and prostitution? You Face These Issues Now!”<sup>19</sup>

The most commonly expressed fear was not of “riotous living” or crime, but of racial intermingling. Black “penetration” of white neighborhoods posed a fundamental challenge to white racial identity. Again and again, neighborhood groups and letter writers referred to the perils of rapacious Black sexuality and race mixing. The politics of family, home, and neighborhood were inseparable from the containment of uncontrolled sexuality and the imminent danger of interracial liaisons.

<sup>17</sup> Mel Ravitz, “Preparing Neighborhoods for Change,” July 13, 1956, folder A8-1, box 44, Detroit Urban League Papers; William Price, “Scare Selling in a Bi-Racial Housing Market,” June 11, 1957, *ibid.*; “Incident Report,” July 6, 1950, folder 50-23, box 6, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection; Mary Czechowski to Mayor Albert Cobo, Oct. 8, 1950, folder 50-57, box 7, *ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Detroit Housing Commission and Work Projects Administration, *Real Property Survey of Detroit, Michigan* (Detroit, 1939), II, III, maps and data for Area K. See Sugrue, “Origins of the Urban Crisis,” 316–17. Gloster Current, “Paradise Valley: A Famous and Colorful Part of Detroit as Seen through the Eyes of an Insider,” *Detroit* (June 1946), 32, 34.

<sup>19</sup> Outer-Van Dyke Home Owners’ Association, “Dear Neighbor,” [1948], folder 25-94, box 25, part III, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection; interview with Six Mile Road–Riopelle area neighbors in Incident Report, Aug. 30, 1954, folder A7-13, box 43, Detroit Urban League Papers; Longview Home Owners Association, poster, n.d., Housing—Homeowners Ordinance—Friendly Folder, box 10, part I, Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches Collection. Ellipsis in original.

Proximity to Blacks risked intimacy. As one opponent of a proposed Negro housing project stated: "We firmly believe in the God-given equality of man. He did not give us the right to choose our brothers . . . but he did give us the right to choose the people we sleep with." Newspaper accounts ominously warned of the threat of miscegenation. One northwest-side newspaper praised a city council candidate in a banner headline: "Kronk Bucks Mixing Races." Neighborhood defense became more than a struggle for turf. It was a battle for the preservation of white womanhood. Men had a duty, as the Courville District Improvement Association admonished, to "pitch for your civic rights and the protection of your women."<sup>20</sup>

The prevention of interracial residential and sexual contact was not just a masculine responsibility. Women also policed the boundaries of race and sex. The overlapping concerns of neighborhood integrity, racial purity, and domestic tranquility gave particular urgency to demonstrations led by women against Edward Brock. Brock, the white owner of two houses on Detroit's lower west side, had sold them to Black families in 1948. Groups of ten to twenty-five women, many pushing baby strollers, gathered at Brock's workplace every day for a week, carrying hand-painted signs that read: "My home is my castle, I will die defending it"; "The Lord separated the races, why should Constable Brock mix them"; "We don't want to mix"; and "Ed Brock sold to colored in white neighborhood." Passersby were taken aback by a picket line of white mothers and babies, an uncommon sight at a time when most demonstrations in Detroit were labor-oriented and male-led. Replete with the symbols of motherhood and family, these protests touched a deep, sympathetic nerve among onlookers, many of whom saw Black movement into a neighborhood as a threat to virtuous womanhood, innocent childhood, and the sanctity of the home.<sup>21</sup>

### "Rights," Housing, and Politics

Neighborhood associations resorted to pickets, harassment, and violence in the days and weeks of desperation that followed Black "invasions" of their neighborhoods.

<sup>20</sup> Alex Csanyi and family to Jeffries, Feb. 20, 1945, Housing Commission 1945 Folder, box 3, Detroit Archives—Mayors' Papers 1945. Ellipsis in original. *Home Gazette*, Oct. 25, 1945, Charles Hill Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs); Gloster Current, "The Detroit Elections: A Problem in Reconversion," *Crisis*, 52 (Nov. 1945), 319–21; *Action!*, Feb. 15, 1948, p. 2. On the politics of sexual containment, see Elaine Tyler May, "Cold War, Warm Hearth: Politics and the Family in Postwar America," in *Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, ed. Fraser and Gerstle, 153–81.

<sup>21</sup> Attachment to letter, Miss James, Detroit Branch NAACP, to George Schermer, Aug. 23, 1948, folder 48-125A, box 5, part I, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection. See photographs and description in "Constable Sells Home to Negro—Picketed," *Michigan Chronicle*, Aug. 21, 1948; "Three Families Move into Homes on Harrison As Police Stand By to Prevent Violence," *ibid.*, Aug. 28, 1948; and "Mayor Guarantees Protection for Negro Home-Owner," *Detroit Tribune*, Aug. 28, 1948. For other female-led protests, see "Memorandum J," p. 31, attached to "Demonstrations, 1945–1946," folder 47-54, box 4, part I, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection; "Case Report: Case No. 54," *ibid.*; George Schermer, "Report of Incident, Subject: Neighborhood Protest to Sale of House on 13933 Maine Street," June 23, 1947, *ibid.*; Schermer to John F. Ballenger, commissioner, Department of Police, June 23, 1947, *ibid.*; John Feild to Director, "Neighborhood Protest to Sale of House on 13933 Maine Street," memo, June 1947, *ibid.*; "Police Action Averts Riot," *Pittsburgh Courier* (Detroit edition), June 28, 1947; and "White Neighbors Threaten Negroes Moving into Home," *Michigan Chronicle*, June 28, 1947. For a case of female-initiated vandalism, see *Pittsburgh Courier* (Detroit edition), June 18, 1955. On the role of women in neighborhood protests and local politics in the postwar period, see Sylvie Murray, "Suburban Citizens: Domesticity and Community Politics in Queens, New York, 1945–1960" (Ph.D.

More commonly, however, they relied on traditional political means—the ballot box, constituent letters, and testimony at city hearings—to stem racial change. Neighborhood associations became the most powerful force in postwar Detroit politics. They backed conservative politicians who opposed public housing, tax increases, and racial integration. Their members turned out in huge numbers on election day. In moments of crisis, they sent an extraordinary volume of mail to city officials and packed city plan commission and common council hearings on public housing and zoning. Issues of race and home ownership dominated local politics in postwar Detroit. White homeowners forged an extraordinarily well-organized grass-roots conservative coalition in local politics, constrained public housing policy, and thwarted attempts to integrate the private housing market.

Perhaps the issue that most visibly galvanized neighborhood groups was the threat of “socialized housing,” especially government-sponsored developments for low-income Blacks. Public housing became the first significant wedge between white voters and New Deal liberalism in Detroit. Federal officials made public housing a centerpiece of New Deal social policy, beginning with the Federal Public Housing Act in 1937 and culminating in the Taft-Ellender-Wagner Housing Act of 1949. New Deal and Fair Deal legislation allocated over a billion dollars in federal resources to provide shelter for the poorest Americans.<sup>22</sup> Black migrants, entrapped in crowded center-city neighborhoods, suffered the brunt of the postwar urban housing shortage. As Detroit’s relatively small center-city ghetto grew overcrowded and as Black inner-city residents were displaced by highway and urban renewal construction, the proportion of Blacks seeking public housing increased dramatically. To alleviate the shortage, city officials, social welfare advocates, and civil rights organizations proposed the construction of public housing projects on open land throughout the city. White Detroiters, however, vehemently opposed public housing during and after World War II, largely on racial grounds. Between 1942 and 1950 neighborhood associations resisted public housing proposed for outlying white sections of the city, and they succeeded in preventing the building of almost all the projects.

In 1942 whites in northeast Detroit tried unsuccessfully to prevent Black occupancy of the Sojourner Truth defense housing project, and whites and Blacks battled on the streets when the first Black families arrived at the site. In 1944 whites living near the site of a proposed temporary wartime project for Blacks, on Algonquin Street, flooded city officials with angry petitions. In 1944 and 1945, residents of suburban Dearborn and Ecorse, cooperating with the Ford Motor Company, had prevented the construction of public housing in their communities, and white Detroiters in the Oakwood district in southwest Detroit blocked the construction of a public housing project for Blacks in their neighborhood. In 1948 and 1949, neighborhood group members packed city plan commission and common council

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diss., Yale University, 1994). On white fears of Black sexuality in Chicago, see Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto*, 195–96.

<sup>22</sup> Robert Moore Fisher, *Twenty Years of Public Housing: Economic Aspects of the Federal Program* (New York, 1959); Richard O. Davies, *Housing Reform during the Truman Administration* (Columbia, Mo., 1966).

hearings on proposals to locate twelve public housing projects on sites on Detroit's periphery. They won a mayoral veto of all outlying public housing projects in 1950. Through intensive lobbying efforts, they succeeded in restricting Detroit's public housing to neighborhoods with sizable African American populations.<sup>23</sup>

In the battles over public housing in the 1940s, neighborhood groups fashioned a potent political language of rights, a language that they refined and extended in the 1950s and 1960s. As one observer noted, "the white population has come to believe that it has a vested, exclusive, and permanent 'right' to certain districts." Civic associations cast their demands for racially segregated neighborhoods in terms of entitlement and victimization. Homeowners' groups were by no means alone in couching their political demands in the language of rights. They were part of a New Deal-inspired rights revolution that empowered other groups, including African Americans, trade union members, and military veterans, to use rights talk to express their political discontent and their political vision.<sup>24</sup>

The notion of the white entitlement to a home in a racially homogeneous neighborhood was firmly rooted in New Deal housing policy. Supporters of the Home Owners' Loan Corporation (HOLC) and the Federal Housing Administration (FHA) argued that national security and self-preservation required the stability of private home ownership. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt frequently alluded to the ideal of a nation of free homeowners in his speeches, and he included the right to a decent home in his 1944 "Second Bill of Rights." This New Deal rhetoric touched a deep nerve among white Detroiters who had struggled, usually without the benefit of loans or mortgages, to build meager homes of their own in the city. With government-backed mortgages and loans, they were able to attain the dream of property ownership with relative ease. They welcomed government assistance; in fact, by World War II, they began to view home ownership as a perquisite of citizenship. The FHA and HOLC's insistence that mortgages and loans be restricted to racially homogeneous neighborhoods also resonated strongly with Detroit's homeowners. They came to expect a vigilant government to protect their segregated neighborhoods.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>23</sup> On Dearborn and Ecorse, see *Dearborn Press*, Nov. 22, 1944; *Detroit Times*, May 24, 1945; *Detroit News*, May 15, 1945; and David L. Good, *Orvie: The Dictator of Dearborn: The Rise and Reign of Orville L. Hubbard* (Detroit, 1989), 142. On Oakwood, see *Detroit News*, Feb. 16, 28, March 20, 1945.

<sup>24</sup> On the expansion of rights language in the New Deal, see Sidney M. Milkis, *The President and the Parties: The Transformation of the American Party System since the New Deal* (New York, 1993), esp. 41–43, 48–50; and Alan Brinkley, *The End of Reform: New Deal Liberalism in Recession and War* (New York, 1995), 10–11, 164–70. More generally, see Rogers M. Smith, "Rights," in *A Companion to American Thought*, ed. Richard Wightman Fox and James Kloppenberg (Oxford, Eng., 1995); and Mary Ann Glendon, *Rights Talk: The Impoverishment of Political Discourse* (New York, 1991).

<sup>25</sup> Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "Message to Congress on the State of the Union," Jan. 11, 1944, in *The Public Papers and Addresses of Franklin D. Roosevelt*, vol. XIII: *Victory and the Threshold of Peace, 1944–45* (New York, 1950), 41; Henry Lee Moon, "Danger in Detroit," *Crisis*, 53 (Jan. 1946), 28; Seven Mile-Fenelon Improvement Association, "WE DEMAND OUR RIGHTS," poster, Property Owners Association Folder, box 66, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection. On the New Deal and home ownership, see Ronald Tobey, Charles Wetherell, and Jay Brigham, "Moving Out and Settling In: Residential Mobility, Home Owning, and the Public Enframing of Citizenship, 1921–1950," *American Historical Review*, 95 (Dec. 1990), 1395–1422, esp. 1415–20; and Cohen, *Making a New Deal*, 272–77. On immigrants and home ownership in Detroit, see Zunz, *Changing Face of Inequality*, 129–76. On the discriminatory nature of federal housing programs, see Kenneth T. Jackson, "Race,

The rhetoric linking home ownership and citizenship echoed in the newsletters and petitions of neighborhood associations. The Federated Property Owners of Detroit, for example, was founded in 1948 to “promote, uphold and defend the rights of home and property ownership and small business as the cornerstone of American opportunity and prosperity.” The promise of government-sanctioned racial homogeneity also resounded in neighborhood association rhetoric. In 1949, the Greater Detroit Neighbors Association, Unit No. 2, rallied its members around “the right to live in the type of neighborhood that you choose.” Homeowners’ rights were precarious and needed to be defended vigorously from grasping Blacks and acquiescent federal officials who threatened to usurp them. The slogan “Help Stamp Out Oppression—Fight for Our Rights” inspired organizers of a “Vigilantes Organizational Meeting” in 1945; they appealed to “the oppressed Homeowners” of Detroit.<sup>26</sup>

The experience of World War II solidified white Detroiters’ belief in their right to racially homogeneous neighborhoods. Flyers produced by neighborhood improvement associations couched the grievances of whites struggling against public housing in the language of Americanism and wartime patriotism. In the immediate aftermath of World War II, petitioners highlighted the theme of wartime sacrifice, appealing to the sentiments that undergirded federal entitlements for returning veterans. In 1945 Michael J. Harbulak, who opposed the construction of a public housing project in his neighborhood, Oakwood, wrote: “Our boys are fighting in Europe, Asia, and Africa to keep those people off our soil. If when these boys return they should become refugees who have to give up their homes because their own neighborhood with the help of our city fathers had been invade[d] and occupied by the Africans, it would be a shame which our city fathers could not outlive.” Testifying against public housing, Louis J. Borolo, president of the Oakwood Blue Jackets Athletic Club, appealed to the city council using the patriotic language that many of his neighbors had used in their petition letters. “There are 1,500 blue stars in the windows of homes of that neighborhood,” he testified. “Those stars represent soldiers waiting to come back to the same neighborhood they left.” Acknowledging the “moral and legal right” of Blacks to adequate housing, he nonetheless contended that “we have established a prior right to a neighborhood which we have built up through the years—a neighborhood which is entirely white and which we want kept white.”<sup>27</sup>

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Ethnicity, and Real Estate Appraisal: The Home Owners Loan Corporation and the Federal Housing Administration,” *Journal of Urban History*, 6 (Aug. 1980), 419–52.

<sup>26</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, Dec. 4, 1948; *Neighborhood Informer* (Dec. 1949), 1; “Join the Fight,” flyer, Nov. 1945, folder 20-37, box 20, part III, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection.

<sup>27</sup> Michael J. Harbulak to Jeffries, Feb. 21, 1945, Housing Commission 1945 Folder, box 3, Detroit Archives—Mayors’ Papers 1945; “Negro Homes Vote Delayed,” *Detroit News*, March 9, 1945; Current, “Detroit Elections,” 325. See also *Action!*, March 15, 1948. On popular patriotism and Americanism, see, especially, Gerstle, *Working-Class Americanism*; Gary Gerstle, “The Working Class Goes to War,” *Mid-America*, 75 (Oct. 1993), 303–22; Michael Kazin and Steven J. Ross, “America’s Labor Day: The Dilemma of a Workers’ Celebration,” *Journal of American History*, 78 (March 1992), 1294–1323; and James R. Barrett, “Americanization from the Bottom Up: Immigration and the Remaking of the Working Class in the United States, 1880–1930,” *ibid.*, 79 (Dec. 1992), 996–1020.





Sign protesting plans to open the Sojourner Truth Homes, a public housing project on Detroit's northeast side, to African Americans, February 1942.

*Photograph by Arthur Siegel, Office of War Information. Courtesy Library of Congress.*

“Homeowners’ rights” was a malleable concept that derived its power from its imprecision. Some whites described their rights in humble “bootstraps” terms. They had acquired property and earned their rights through hard work and responsible citizenship. Homeowners’ rights were, in this view, a reward for sacrifice and duty. Others drew from an idiosyncratic reading of the Declaration of Independence and Bill of Rights to justify their neighborhood defensiveness. Public housing for Blacks in a white neighborhood was a violation of white “rights” to “peace and happiness.” Some defined homeowners’ rights as an extension of their constitutional right of freedom of assembly. They had a right to choose their associates. That right would be infringed if their neighborhoods were racially mixed.<sup>28</sup>

In an era of growing civil rights consciousness, many white letter writers and petitioners made grudging acknowledgements of racial equality. Many petitions in opposition to the Oakwood housing project included the formula “I have nothing against the colored” or “I believe in the God-given equality of man.” The writers

<sup>28</sup> Harbulak to Jeffries, Feb. 21, 1945, Housing Commission 1945 Folder, box 3, Detroit Archives—Mayors’ Papers 1945.

qualified these shibboleths with such statements as “But I wouldn’t want them for a neighbor nor growing up with my children.” Rights for Blacks were acceptable in the abstract, as long as Blacks remained in their own neighborhoods and kept to themselves. But many whites believed that civil rights for Blacks were won only at the expense of white rights. One opponent of a public housing project slated for Black occupancy stated succinctly, “It looks as if, we the white people are being discriminated against. Let the colored people make their own district, as we had to.”<sup>29</sup>

In the crucible of Detroit’s racial and economic transformation, not all rights were equal. Neighborhood groups criticized public housing as a handout to the undeserving poor, who demanded rights without bearing the burden of responsibilities. Politicians on the right (Democrat and Republican alike) were quick to pick up that theme. Mayor Edward Jeffries staunchly opposed public housing on the grounds that “good government is the kind of government that takes unusual steps to give people opportunities, not to give them hand-outs.” Jeffries’s rhetoric found a sympathetic hearing in white Detroit neighborhoods. An opponent of public housing noted in 1949 that “taxpayers and home-owning groups are rising in wrath against subsidizing homes.” Why should government compel hardworking whites to pay for housing for the poor? And why should it “force” white neighborhoods to accept housing for poor Blacks?<sup>30</sup>

In the wake of public housing disputes, white Detroiters grew increasingly critical of what they perceived as the growing disjuncture between federal social policy and their own interests, and the apparent acquiescence of an activist government in the demands of those who sought racial and economic leveling. Detroit’s whites began to view public housing as “Negro housing,” and they grew increasingly skeptical of the federal agenda that called for the provision of shelter for America’s poor. Erosion of support for public housing on grounds of race also eroded support for New Deal programs more generally. One astute observer noted in 1946:

In the field of housing, there has tended to develop a tie-up in our thinking between Negroes and government. Public housing and housing for Negroes is synonymous or nearly so in the minds of many people. This is bad for public housing and bad for Negroes. Many people are concerned about government interference of all kinds. This tends to create a separation in their minds between themselves and “the government.”<sup>31</sup>

<sup>29</sup> Mr. and Mrs. Fred Pressato to Jeffries, March 6, 1945, *ibid.*; William Leuffen to Jeffries, March 6, 1945, Housing / Bi-Racial Letters Folder, *ibid.*; John Watson to Jeffries, March 6, 1945, *ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> The remarks appear in an editorial, *Brightmoor Journal*, Oct. 27, 1949. (I wish to express my gratitude to the staff of Bentley Historical Library, University of Michigan, who allowed me to consult their yet uncataloged and unprocessed collection of northwest-side neighborhood newspapers, including the *Brightmoor Journal*.) See also *Action!*, March 15, 1948, p. 2.

<sup>31</sup> “Fourth Meeting of the Speaker’s Study Group of Intercultural Affairs,” Feb. 4, 1946, p. 2, Interracial Resolutions / Intercultural Council Folder, box 74, Citizens Housing and Planning Council Papers (Burton Historical Collection).

Alienated Detroit whites increasingly directed their animus against local public officials, whom they saw as active agents in the transformation of their neighborhoods. "We must stop the wasting of the taxpayers money on public housing, or any other wasteful planning," warned a west-side chapter of the National Association of Community Councils in 1945. In the same year, a "Group of Taxpayers" complained to the city of the "insurmountable tax, housing, hospitalization and social problems facing taxpayers" because of the influx of "colored" moving to the city to collect welfare benefits denied them in the South. Equally blameworthy were the Black poor who depended on government assistance and the bureaucrats who fostered that dependence through social welfare programs. In an ambiguously worded letter (its pejorative references could refer either to Black welfare recipients or to welfare administrators), the "Group of Taxpayers" argued that in city welfare offices "stink has reached to high heaven for years" and railed against the "polysyllabic patter" that they heard there. Speaking for the neighborhood associations that he advocated, Karl H. Smith, a local realtor, praised groups who fought "unjust tax levies for the benefit of shiftless drifters who have not the guts to want to own a home of their own."<sup>32</sup>

As domestic anticommunism rose to political prominence, neighborhood groups began to articulate their concerns in McCarthyite terms. A growing number of white Detroiters believed in a conspiracy of government bureaucrats, many influenced by communism or socialism (terms used interchangeably), who misused tax dollars to fund experiments in social engineering for the benefit of pressure groups. In so doing, the government repudiated property rights and democratic principles. Behind the scenes was a cabal of public housing officials, city planning committees, civil rights groups, labor activists, and socialist agitators who worked to defraud honest taxpayers and destroy the city.

Homeowners' groups and sympathetic politicians used McCarthyite rhetoric against liberal politicians and advocates of public housing and open housing. Red-baiting was a crass smear tactic, but in the perfervid atmosphere of the anticommunist crusade, many whites believed that a sinister conspiracy was afoot. In their minds, the issues of race, left-wing politics, and government action became inextricably linked. Public housing projects were part of the conspiratorial effort of well-placed Communists and Communist sympathizers in the government to destroy traditional American values through a carefully calculated policy of racial and class struggle. Floyd McGriff, the editor of a chain of northwest-side neighborhood newspapers, warned that multiple-family homes would "threaten local areas with additional blight." He blamed the "fringe disruptionists, the political crack-pots, and the socialist double-domes" who "injected racial issues" into housing debates. Reds in the city government planned to "move the slum-area residents into city-built housing

<sup>32</sup> "Join the Fight," flyer, Nov. 1945, folder 20-37, box 20, part III, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection; "A Group of Taxpayers" to the councilmen of the City of Detroit, April 12, 1945, Common Council Folder, box 23, Citizens Housing and Planning Council Papers; "Survey of Racial and Religious Conflict Forces in Detroit," Sept. 30, 1943, box 71, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Collection.

projects in Northwest Detroit” and “to force pioneering families to move out.” Open housing was the product of a “leftist political brigade” that had as its mission “political activity to provide colored persons with homes they cannot afford to live in.” Small neighborhood struggles against the “Black invasion” and against public housing were really skirmishes in a larger battle against communism itself.<sup>33</sup>

The pro-homeowner and anti-integrationist sentiments unleashed by public housing debates had a profound impact on local mayoral elections. The political career of Detroit mayor Edward Jeffries (1941–1947) revealed the power of crabgrass-roots politics and the fragility of liberalism in Detroit. Jeffries was first elected mayor in 1941 as a New Dealer, prolabor and racially liberal. He garnered the endorsements of labor unions and civil rights groups and swept both Black and white working-class precincts. After the wartime riots and hate strikes and the emergence of a powerful homeowners’ movement, Jeffries refashioned his racial politics. He combined red-baiting and race-baiting in his successful reelection bid in 1945 against the liberal candidate backed by the United Automobile Workers (UAW), Richard Frankenstein. In the wake of the Algonquin Street and Oakwood debates, Jeffries turned his opponent’s support of federal public housing policy into a political liability. In a campaign laden with racial innuendo, he flooded neighborhoods on the northwest and northeast sides with literature highlighting Frankenstein’s ties to Black organizations. Handbills reading “Increase Negro Housing” and “Negroes Can Live Anywhere With Frankenstein Mayor. Negroes—Do Your Duty Nov. 6” were widely distributed in white neighborhoods during the election. Jeffries supporters sounded the ominous warning that Frankenstein was a “red” who, if elected, would encourage “racial invasions” of white neighborhoods.<sup>34</sup>

The electoral choice was stark. Jeffries would uphold white community interests. An editorial in the *Home Gazette*, a newspaper in the virtually all-white, predominantly homeowning northwest side, stated, “There is no question where Edward J. Jeffries’ administration stands on mixed housing.” It praised the Detroit Housing Commission’s policy of segregation in public housing for “declaring that a majority of the people of the city of Detroit do not want the racial character of their neighborhoods changed” and for reiterating “its previous stand against attempts of Communist-inspired Negroes to penetrate white residential sections.” Black observers of the election and union supporters of Frankenstein were appalled by the blatant racial claims of the Jeffries campaign, and they attempted to use economic populist and anti-Nazi rhetoric to deflate Jeffries’s charges. The Black journalist Henry Lee Moon, writing in the National Association for the Advancement of

<sup>33</sup> *Brightmoor Journal*, Feb. 3, May 12, Jan. 12, 1950, April 21, 1966. See also *Action!*, March 15, 1948. On Floyd McGriff and his anticommunist activity in the 1940s, see Floyd McGriff Papers (Michigan Historical Collections).

<sup>34</sup> On Edward Jeffries, see Capeci, *Race Relations in Wartime Detroit*, 17–27. Handbills, folder 3-8, box 3, Donald Marsh Papers (University Archives, Wayne State University, Detroit, Mich.). See also “The 1945 Mayoral Campaign—National Lawyers Guild,” Jan. 10, 1946, attached to Gloster Current to Thurgood Marshall, memo, Racial Tension Detroit, Mich., 1944–46 Folder, box A505, group II, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers; “Mayor Jeffries is Against Mixed Housing,” flyer, Politics, Michigan, 1945–1953 Folder, box A475, *ibid.*

Colored People (NAACP) monthly *Crisis*, accused Jeffries of appealing “to our more refined fascists, the big money interests and the precarious middle class whose sole inalienable possession is a white skin.” Racial appeals bolstered the flagging Jeffries campaign and gave him a comfortable margin in November against a UAW-backed candidate in a solidly union city. On the local level, the link between Black and red was a clever strategy for attracting white Democrats, suspicious of liberalism and its capacity for equalitarian political and social rhetoric.<sup>35</sup>

The political tensions over race and housing came to a head in the mayoral election of 1949. The liberal common council member George Edwards faced the conservative city treasurer, Albert Cobo. Edwards, a one-time UAW activist, former public housing administrator, and New Deal Democrat, was the political antithesis of Cobo, a corporate executive, real estate investor, and Republican. Cobo focused his campaign on the issues of race and public housing. Armed with the endorsement of most white neighborhood improvement associations, Cobo swept the largely white precincts on the northeast and northwest sides, where voters were especially concerned about the threat of public housing. The distinction between Cobo and Edwards was crystal clear. Cobo adamantly opposed “Negro invasions” and public housing, whereas Councilman Edwards had consistently championed the right of Blacks to decent housing anywhere in the city and had regularly voted for proposals to locate public housing in outlying areas.<sup>36</sup>

Liberal leaders were baffled that the conservative Cobo had beaten the prolabor Edwards in a heavily Democratic city and that Cobo did particularly well among union voters. The Edwards campaign was coordinated by the UAW and other CIO unions, which provided him with nearly \$30,000 in funding, printed and distributed over 1.3 million pro-Edwards pamphlets, and sent union members canvassing door to door throughout the city. Pamphlets in English, Polish, and Hungarian lambasted Cobo for his connections with bankers and slumlords who “live in Grosse Pointe, Birmingham, and Bloomfield Hills.” Radio spots featured a “snotty woman’s voice” urging voters to “vote Republican in the Detroit election for mayor,” and UAW sound trucks blasted pro-Edwards messages at local unemployment offices. Yet despite the massive and well-organized union effort, Edwards lost to Cobo even in heavily blue-collar precincts.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>35</sup> “White Neighborhoods Again in Peril: Frankenstein Policy Up On Housing Negroes Here,” *Home Gazette*, Oct. 11, 1945, clipping, Clippings File, Hill Papers; Moon, “Danger in Detroit,” 12.

<sup>36</sup> On Albert Cobo, see Melvin G. Holli and Peter d’A. Jones, *Biographical Dictionary of American Mayors, 1820–1980: Big City Mayors* (Westport, 1981), 69–70. On George Edwards, see *Detroit News*, Oct. 31, 1947, clipping, folder 10-4, box 10, United Automobile Workers, Research Department Collection (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs). See also “Biographical Data, George Edwards,” Vertical File—Biography, *ibid.* *Brightmoor Journal*, Sept. 22, 1949; newsletter of the Outer-Van Dyke Home Owners Association, “*Hi*” *Neighbor*, 1 (Nov. 1949), copy, folder 5-5, box 5, United Automobile Workers, Community Action Program Department Collection; *Detroit News*, Nov. 8, 1949; Coles interview, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Labor’s Municipal Campaign Committee, “Schedule 1: Liabilities,” folder 62-10, box 62, United Automobile Workers, Political Action Committee—Roy Reuther Collection (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs). Labor spent \$28,455.51 on George Edwards’s campaign; see Al Barbour to Roy Reuther, Nov. 17, 1949, folder 62-19, *ibid.* “East Side Meeting, Thursday November 17, 9:00 a.m.,” notes, folder 62-13, *ibid.*; “Material for Sound Trucks and Leaflets at MUCC Offices,” folder 62-7, *ibid.*; “Suggested Slot Announcements,” folder 62-16, *ibid.*; “Housewives—Don’t Stay Home Nov. 8th,” poster, folder 62-10, *ibid.*; “750,000 Detroiters *Did Not Vote* in the Primary Election,” flyer, *ibid.* According to analysis of returns from selected precincts by the United Automobile Workers, Edwards

Stunned by the overwhelming defeat of Edwards, UAW political activists met to discuss the election. On the east side, one organizer reported, many union members refused to place Edwards placards in their windows. In one heavily Democratic ward on the west side, blue-collar voters told a UAW canvasser that they supported Edwards, yet on election day, they turned out for Cobo two to one. A west-side coordinator explained the seeming paradox of union support for Cobo: "I think in these municipal elections we are dealing with people who have a middle class mentality. Even in our own UAW, the member is either buying a home, owns a home, or is going to buy one. I don't know whether we can ever make up this difficulty." The problem was that "George was beaten by the housing program."<sup>38</sup>

The 1949 election revealed the conflict between the politics of home and the politics of workplace, a conflict exacerbated by racial tensions in rapidly changing neighborhoods. Blue-collar workers, one activist lamented, failed to "see the relationship between their life in the plant and their life in the community." Racial fears and neighborhood defensiveness made the political unity of home and workplace impossible. East-side UAW shop stewards, many of whom were open Cobo supporters, told one UAW Political Action Committee organizer that "the Union is okay in the shop but when they buy a home they forget about it. You can tell them anything they want to but as long as they think their property is going down, it is different." The Edwards defeat marked the beginning of a UAW retreat from labor politics in the city; the disillusioned UAW Political Action Committee continued to endorse liberal candidates, but it offered only half-hearted support to Cobo's opponents in Detroit's biennial mayoral races in the 1950s. The combination of racial resentment and homeowners' politics that defeated Edwards dimmed future hopes for the triumph of labor liberalism on the local level in Detroit.<sup>39</sup>

The new Cobo administration was sympathetic to neighborhood associations. Cobo offered prominent housing and city plan commission appointments to movement leaders. He established an advisory council of civic groups and regularly addressed neighborhood improvement association meetings. In his first weeks of

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did better in blue-collar areas than in "middle class" white districts, although he lost in both. Edwards won only among Black voters (82%) and white public housing project residents (59%). The only other group that came close to majority support (49%) for Edwards was "hillbillies," presumably recent southern white migrants to the city. Untitled tables, folder 63-2, box 63, *ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> "West Side Coordinators Meeting, Wednesday, November 16, 1949," notes, folder 62-11, box 62, United Automobile Workers, Political Action Committee—Roy Reuther Collection.

<sup>39</sup> "East Side Meeting, Thursday November 17, 9:00 a.m.," notes, p. 6, folder 62-13, box 62, *ibid.* On Detroit politics in the 1950s, see J. David Greenstone, "A Report on the Politics of Detroit," unpublished paper, Harvard University, 1961 (Purdy-Kresge Library, Wayne State University). On the 1949 election and its legacy, see Kevin G. Boyle, "Politics and Principle: The United Automobile Workers and American Labor-Liberalism, 1948-1968" (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, 1991), 94-100. On the separation of home and work as an important constraint on American radical politics, see Ira Katznelson, *City Trenches: Urban Politics and the Patterning of Class in the United States* (New York, 1981). It is important not to overstate the contrast between neighborhood and union politics; research on Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO) unions in the North shows that shop floor conflicts over racial issues such as upgrading and seniority lists continued well into the 1950s. See, especially, Kevin G. Boyle, "'There Are No Union Sorrows That the Union Can't Heal': The Struggle for Racial Equality in the United Automobile Workers, 1940-1960," *Labor History*, 36 (Winter 1995), 5-23; Bruce Nelson, "Race Relations in the Mill: Steelworkers and Civil Rights, 1950-1965," paper delivered at the conference "Toward a History of the 1960s," Madison, Wisconsin, April 1993 (in Thomas J. Sugrue's possession).

office, he vetoed eight proposed public housing sites in outlying, predominantly white sections of the city. By putting brakes on all public housing development outside heavily Black inner-city neighborhoods, Cobo single-handedly killed public housing as a controversial political issue. Orville Tenaglia, the southwest Detroit community leader who had fought public housing throughout the 1940s, wrote Cobo that "we who have come to look upon this community as 'our home,' living with people of our 'own kind,' do most humbly . . . thank you for the courageous stand you have taken" on the housing issue. With the support of grateful homeowners' groups, Republican Cobo won reelection easily in 1951, 1953, and 1955. By advocating and defending "homeowners' rights," he brought the majority of Detroit's whites into a powerful, bipartisan antiliberal coalition.<sup>40</sup>

### Civil Rights and "Civil Wrongs"

The neighborhood movement's monopoly on Detroit politics was short-lived. Huge numbers of white Detroiters fled the city for the booming suburbs in the 1950s. Detroit's white population fell by more than 23 percent in the 1950s, while its African American population rose by more than 180,000, to nearly one-third of the city's population. By the mid-1950s, Blacks had become an increasingly large bloc of voters in Detroit, electing Black candidates to citywide offices for the first time and providing a crucial swing vote in many local elections. As Black electoral power grew, homeowners' associations lost their stranglehold on the city government and struggled for power against an emerging alliance uniting Blacks and a small but vocal population of liberal white activists. Cobo's successor, Louis Miriani—sympathetic to the homeowners' movement when elected in 1957—recognized the changing balance of power in the city and tried, unsuccessfully, to accommodate both white neighborhood groups and Blacks. His successor, Jerome Cavanagh, a little-known insurgent, won an upset victory in 1961 over Miriani with the support of an unlikely alliance of African Americans and white neighborhood groups, both alienated (for different reasons) by Miriani's equivocal, middle-of-the-road position on race, civil rights, and housing.<sup>41</sup>

<sup>40</sup> On Albert Cobo's appointments, see box 2, Detroit Archives—Mayors' Papers 1951. Detroit Housing Commission, "Monthly Report," Dec. 1949, 1–2, Detroit Housing Commission Folder, box 2, Detroit Archives—Mayors' Papers 1950; Detroit City Plan Commission, Minutes, vol. 16 (1950–1951), 44, Detroit City Plan Commission Collection (Burton Historical Collection); *Detroit Free Press*, March 14, 1950; Orville Tenaglia to Cobo, March 28, 1950, Civic Associations Folder, box 2, Detroit Archives—Mayors' Papers 1950; "Degree of Voting in Detroit Primary," Sept. 11, 1951, folder 62-25, box 62, United Automobile Workers, Political Action Committee—Roy Reuther Collection.

<sup>41</sup> On the changing balance of power in Detroit politics, see Greenstone, "Report on the Politics of Detroit," 68; Dudley W. Buffa, *Union Power and American Democracy: The UAW and the Democratic Party, 1935–1972* (Ann Arbor, 1984), 140–41; James Q. Wilson, *Negro Politics: The Search for Leadership* (New York, 1960), 28–30; and Sidney Fine, *Violence in the Model City: The Cavanagh Administration, Race Relations, and the Detroit Riot of 1967* (Ann Arbor, 1988), 3, 6, 16. Louis Miriani had enjoyed neighborhood association support as a city council member. See, for example, *Small Property Owner* (Nov. 1949), folder 5-2, box 5, United Automobile Workers, Community Action Program Collection.

As the racial balance of power in Detroit began to change, civil rights organizations found a new voice and began to challenge the conservative politics of neighborhood associations. Initially stunned by the Cobo victory and weakened by organizational infighting, advocates of racial equality slowly began to regroup in the early and mid-1950s. A coalition of labor activists, religious groups, and African American organizations directed their energies toward racial integration and open housing. They found a powerful ally in the Detroit Mayor's Interracial Committee (MIC), which had been founded after the race riot of 1943 to monitor racial tension in the city and to advocate civil rights reform. Dominated by liberal whites and Blacks close to civil rights organizations, the MIC consistently opposed segregation in public housing and other facilities, worked to abolish restrictive covenants, and investigated incidents of racial conflict in the city. The MIC, despite its name, was a largely independent city agency whose members were protected by civil service laws. Under Jeffries and Cobo it became a refuge for a small, dedicated band of integrationists, who maintained close ties with civil rights groups throughout the country. When the MIC became an increasingly vocal supporter of open housing in the early 1950s, the neighborhood movement counterattacked, railing against what its members saw as an unholy alliance between government and Blacks. Homeowners' groups began an attack on "pressure groups, be they labor, government, or other impractical idealists," who supported the civil rights agenda.<sup>42</sup>

Empowered by the conservative climate of the Cobo administration, neighborhood improvement associations targeted the city's race relations agency. In 1951, a neighborhood association-backed group, which called itself the Legislative Research Committee, issued a report calling for the abolition of the MIC. It attempted to taint MIC director George Schermer with charges of leftism by noting his membership in the liberal Americans for Democratic Action. The report argued that under his leadership, the race relations agency fostered racial animosity in the city: "instead of lessening and assuaging interracial tensions, Schermer's outfit, by devious means has accentuated them, stirring up racial strife." Joining the cry against the MIC, Ralph Smith, president of the Michigan Council of Civic Associations, warned Cobo of the danger of "minority pressure groups."<sup>43</sup>

The anti-MIC campaign combined an anti-civil rights stance with antibureaucratic and antitax sentiments. Neighborhood group representatives charged that the MIC wrongfully used public funds to assist civil rights organizations. C. Katherine Rentschler, a member of the Warrendale Improvement Association and chair of Home-Owner Civic and Improvement Associations, accused the "watch-dog commission" of "using our TAX MONEY to create agitation." According to Rentschler, "a review of the work of the Mayor's Interracial Committee indicates that it has continually

<sup>42</sup> On the weakness of the civil rights movement in Detroit in the late 1940s and early 1950s, see Robert Korstad and Nelson Lichtenstein, "Opportunities Found and Lost: Labor, Radicals, and the Early Civil Rights Movement," *Journal of American History*, 75 (Dec. 1988), 786-811. *Brightmoor Journal*, April 20, 1950.

<sup>43</sup> *Brightmoor Journal*, April 5, 1951; Ralph Smith to Cobo, March 23, 1950, Civic Associations Folder, box 2, Detroit Archives—Mayors' Papers 1950.



functioned solely for the Negro race." As an alternative to the MIC, she called for a "Home Owner Participation Ordinance" that would give neighborhood associations "a voice in planning and regulating the activities" of city agencies. The campaign against the Mayor's Interracial Committee met with success: in 1953, Mayor Cobo restructured the MIC, purged its most liberal members, and appointed two prominent white neighborhood association members to the board. The neighborhood associations did not win a "homeowners' participation ordinance," but they opened a new chapter in the struggle for homeowners' rights that would culminate in the early and mid-1960s.<sup>44</sup>

Even with the temporary defeat of their ally in city government, civil rights groups continued to battle for open housing in Detroit throughout the 1950s. Inspired by the United States Supreme Court's 1948 ruling in *Shelley v. Kraemer* that racially restrictive covenants were legally unenforceable, they launched a campaign to integrate Detroit's neighborhoods. At first their attempts were primarily educational. Civil rights groups, including the Urban League, the Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches, and the Catholic Interracial Committee, led seminars on open housing in churches throughout the city, wrote articles and letters for local newspapers on the benefits of racial integration, and published materials attempting to assuage homeowners' fears that property depreciation and crime would follow Black movement. By the late 1950s, open housing groups moved beyond advocacy to political action. In the mid-1950s, they lobbied the Federal Housing Administration and Home Owners' Loan Corporation to allow Blacks to purchase foreclosed houses in white neighborhoods. In 1959, they persuaded the Michigan Department of State to revoke the licenses of real estate brokers who refused to support open housing.<sup>45</sup>

As civil rights groups began to agitate for open housing, neighborhood groups began a counterattack. The Federated Property Owners of Detroit, an umbrella organization of neighborhood protective associations, lambasted those who breached the now unenforceable racial covenants. "Property owners violating these principles have larceny in their hearts. They are worse than outlaw hoodlums who hold you up and steal your money. They have blood on their hands for having cut deep into

<sup>44</sup> Home-Owner Civic and Improvement Associations, "Memorandum to Home-Owner Presidents," March 13, 1953, Civic Associations Folder, box 1, Detroit Archives—Mayors' Papers 1953; C. Katherine Rentschler, "Request to Abolish the Present Mayor's Interracial Committee and to Refrain from Authorizing the Proposed Commission on Community Relations," April 7, 1953, *ibid.*; C. Katherine Rentschler to Detroit Common Council, Aug. 17, 1953, *ibid.*; *Detroit Focus* (March–April 1954), folder 8-1, box 8, Detroit Urban League Papers; "Statement of the Detroit Branch NAACP Board of Directors Regarding the City of Detroit Commission on Community Relations," Feb. 22, 1954, *ibid.*; Detroit Urban League, Board of Directors, Minutes of Special Meeting, Jan. 27, 1954, folder 11-18, box 11, *ibid.*; Cobo to Father John E. Coogan, Jan. 18, 1954, Freedom Agenda Folder, box 71, Citizens Housing and Planning Council Papers.

<sup>45</sup> *Shelley v. Kraemer*, 334 U.S. 1 (1948); William H. Boone, "Major Unmet Goals that Suggest Continuing Attention," March 9, 1956, folder A2-16, box 38, Detroit Urban League Papers; United Automobile Workers Legal Department to Thomas Kavanagh, Michigan Attorney General, Draft of letter, July 18, 1956, folder A2-17, *ibid.* On Michigan House and Senate bills to prevent real estate discrimination, see Housing Folder, box 10, part I, Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches Collection. On open housing efforts in the 1950s and early 1960s, see Rose Kleinman Papers (Michigan Historical Collections); and Rose Kleinman Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs).

their hearts and homelife." The East Side Civic Council, like many whites in the city, blamed the Supreme Court decision on a conspiracy led by the NAACP and noted with disdain "the organization and cooperation of the Colored groups" on the covenant issue. Throughout the 1950s, neighborhood groups pressured "block-busting" real estate agents who sold homes to Blacks in predominantly white neighborhoods, petitioned the city government to preserve racially segregated areas, and harassed Black newcomers to formerly all-white blocks.<sup>46</sup>

In the early 1960s, the struggle between civil rights and homeowners' rights culminated at the ballot box. At the urging of civil rights groups, the city council drafted and passed a mild Fair Housing Practices Ordinance that restricted the display of For Sale signs to deter blockbusting real estate agents and prohibited references to race in real estate ads. Open housing groups, however, drafted a stronger ordinance that would outlaw all discrimination in real estate transactions.<sup>47</sup> In response, neighborhood groups proposed a "Homeowners' Rights Ordinance" that would preserve their "rights" to segregated neighborhoods. The competing ordinances pitted Blacks, white racial liberals, and civil rights groups against a solidly white, bipartisan, antiliberal coalition.

Leading the anti-open housing movement was Thomas Poindexter, a founder of the Greater Detroit Homeowners' Council. Poindexter, an unsuccessful labor-liberal candidate for the city council in the 1950s, abandoned liberalism in the early 1960s and adopted crabgrass-roots politics with all the fervor of a convert. In August 1963, he testified on behalf of "99 percent of Detroit white residents" to the United States Senate Committee on Commerce (invited by Dixiecrat senator Strom Thurmond) against Kennedy administration civil rights legislation. Poindexter warned that "when integration strikes a previously all-white neighborhood . . . there will be an immediate rise in crime and violence . . . of vice, of prostitution, of gambling and dope." With a "general lowering of the moral standards," racially mixed neighborhoods "will succumb to blight and decay, and the residents will suffer the loss of their homes and savings."<sup>48</sup>

Advocates of the Homeowners' Rights Ordinance linked class resentments with an indictment of civil rights groups and government. Organizers of the Butzel-Guest Property Owners' Association railed against "the 'Civil Wrongs' that are being forced on us more and more every day" and pledged to "put out of office those who are working just for the minority and put in someone who will work for all the people."

<sup>46</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, Dec. 4, 1948; Eastside Civic Council, Meeting announcement, May 24, 1948, Restrictive Covenants Folder, box 66, Civil Rights Congress of Michigan Papers. On activities of neighborhood groups, see, for example, "Report on Ruritan Park Civic Association Meetings, September 20, 1956 and November 29, 1956," folder A7-13, box 43, Detroit Urban League Papers; Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Minutes, March 17, 1958, pp. 4-6, Minutes—Jan.—March 1958 Folder, box 2, part IV, Detroit Commission on Community Relations Collection; "Racial Appeals in Primary Election," Aug. 18, 1958, folder 13-28, box 13, part III, *ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> *Detroit News*, July 14, 1963; Mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh, Statement, Sept. 26, 1963, folder A18-11, box 54, Detroit Urban League Papers; Detroit Commission on Community Relations, Annual Report, 1963, box 2, Kleinman Papers (Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs).

<sup>48</sup> *Ford Facts*, July 10, 1954; *Detroit Free Press*, Nov. 3, 1963, Nov. 27, 1964; U.S. Congress, Senate, Committee on Commerce, *Civil Rights—Public Accommodations Hearings*, 88 Cong., 1 sess., Aug. 1, 1963, part 2, esp. pp. 1085, 1088.

Many whites directed a populist rage against both civil rights organizations and their allegedly well-off white supporters. "The hypocrites who scream about the homeowners' refusal to be dictated to by pressure groups and who advocate open housing," wrote one angry woman, "are the very ones who live in ultraexclusive neighborhoods." Another chastised the hypocrisy of "Bishops, ministers, and union leaders [who] lecture about brotherhood . . . confident that their means of income will never force them to live among their black brothers." The open housing movement, in their view, elevated minority rights over the rights of the majority. "You can't ram people down people's throats," argued another angry white Detroiters who opposed open housing.<sup>49</sup>

Drawing from the rights rhetoric of the neighborhood movement, the Homeowners' Rights Ordinance pledged to protect the individual's "right to privacy," the "right to choose his own friends and associates," "the right to freedom from interference with his property by public authorities attempting to give special privileges to any group," the "right to maintain what in his opinion are congenial surroundings for himself, his family, and his tenants," and the "right" to choose a real estate broker and tenants and home buyers "for his own reasons." More was at stake than the preservation of rights, for, Poindexter contended, the ordinance would stop "the spread of crime, disease, and neighborhood blight" and the takeover of the city by "persons living on public assistance."<sup>50</sup>

Supporters of the Homeowners' Rights Ordinance quickly collected over forty-four thousand signatures to put it on the 1964 primary ballot, more than twice the number required for ballot initiatives. On Detroit's northeast side, more than two thousand volunteers assisted the campaign. The campaign was remarkably successful. Voter turnout, over 50 percent, was especially high for a local primary election. The ordinance passed by a 55-to-45 margin. In the city's two largest, predominantly white wards, the ordinance passed by a 2-to-1 margin; it lost by nearly 4-to-1 in predominantly African American wards in the inner city.<sup>51</sup> Poindexter capped his efforts by winning a seat on the Common Council, the top vote getter in a thirty-six-candidate field. Although he called himself a "moderate liberal,"

<sup>49</sup> Annual Meeting of the Butzel-Guest Property Owners' Association, Housing—Michigan, Detroit, 1956–1964 Folder, box A160, group III, National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers; Glenna Stalcup to *Detroit News*, Jan. 11, 1965. On class resentment in other cities, see Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill, 1991); and James R. Ralph Jr., *Northern Protest: Martin Luther King, Jr., Chicago, and the Civil Rights Movement* (Cambridge, Mass., 1993), 114–30. Anonymous letter, n.d., Civil Rights Activity Folder, box 9, part I, Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches Collection; Albert Nahat to *Detroit News*, May 28, 1964.

<sup>50</sup> "Exhibit of Petition, Ordinance, and Ballot Proposed By Greater Detroit Homeowner's Council," Housing—Homeowners' Ordinance—Friendly Statements Folder, box 10, Metropolitan Detroit Council of Churches Collection; *Detroit News*, July 1, July 14, 1963; "Home Owners Ordinance," transcript of WBTM discussion with Thomas Poindexter and Leonard Gordon, [c. summer 1964], *NAACP v. Detroit*—Background Material Folder, box 59, group III (Legal Department Cases), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers.

<sup>51</sup> *Michigan Chronicle*, Sept. 12, 1964; *East Side Shopper*, Sept. 12, 1964; *Detroit Daily Press*, Sept. 3, 1964. "Primary Election Results, City of Detroit," Sept. 1, 1964, *NAACP v. Detroit*—Background Material Folder, box 59, group III (Legal Department Cases), National Association for the Advancement of Colored People Papers. Similar ordinances passed in other parts of the country.

Poindexter built a base of support among working-class Democrats and middle-class Republicans alike.<sup>52</sup>

The Homeowners' Rights Ordinance was declared unconstitutional by the Wayne County District Court in 1965 and never implemented. But the language of homeowners' rights remained potent long after the campaign. In the mid-1960s, stalwart northern Democratic voters turned out in cheering crowds of thousands at rallies for Gov. George C. Wallace of Alabama, who derided civil rights, open housing, welfare spending, urban crime, and big government. A UAW local in Flint, Michigan, endorsed Wallace, and Ford workers at the company's flagship River Rouge plant supported Wallace in a straw poll. The politician whose most famous declaration was "Segregation now, segregation forever" found a receptive audience among supposedly liberal northern urban voters. He won the 1972 Michigan Democratic primary, sweeping every predominantly white ward in Detroit. Wallace found some of his most fervent support on Detroit's northwest and northeast sides, the remaining bastions of homeowners' association activity in a city that was 45 percent African American. Following the lead of Wallace, Richard M. Nixon and Spiro Agnew repudiated their party's moderate position on civil rights and wooed disaffected urban and southern white Democrats. They swept predominantly white precincts in Detroit in 1968 and 1972.<sup>53</sup>

The timing of the New Right insurgency gives credence to the thesis of many recent commentators that the Democratic party made a grievous political error in the 1960s by ignoring the needs of white working-class and middle-class voters, in favor of the demands of the civil rights movement, Black militants, the counterculture, and the "undeserving" poor. "The close identification of the Democratic party with the cause of racial justice," argues Allen J. Matusow, "did it special injury." Jonathan Rieder contends that the 1960s rebellion of the "silent majority" was in part a response to "certain structural limitations of liberal reform," especially "black demands" that "ran up against the limits of liberalism." Wallace's meteoric rise seems to sustain the argument of Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall that the Alabama independent "captured the central political dilemma of racial liberalism and the Democratic party: the inability of Democrats to provide a political home for those whites who felt they were paying—unwillingly—the largest 'costs' in the struggle to achieve an integrated society."<sup>54</sup>

<sup>52</sup> *Detroit Daily Press*, Sept. 3, 1964. Some of Thomas Poindexter's votes undoubtedly went to an unknown candidate, Charley Poindexter, who did not campaign and picked up 8,082 votes in the primary election. See also *ibid.*, Nov. 11, 1964.

<sup>53</sup> *New York Times*, Oct. 6, 1968, p. 75; *ibid.*, May 18, 1972, p. 36; Election Returns, Wayne County, Michigan, Primary Election 1972, microfilm (Office of the Wayne County Clerk, City-County Building, Detroit, Mich.).

<sup>54</sup> Allen J. Matusow, *The Unraveling of America: A History of Liberalism in the 1960s* (New York, 1984), 438; Jonathan Rieder, "The Rise of the 'Silent Majority,'" in *Rise and Fall of the New Deal Order*, ed. Fraser and Gerstle, 254; Thomas Byrne Edsall and Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York, 1991), 77. Similar views pervade the scholarly and popular literature on the 1960s. See also Frederick F. Siegel, *The Troubled Journey: From Pearl Harbor to Ronald Reagan* (New York, 1983), esp. 152–215; Jim Sleeper, *The Closest of Strangers: Liberalism and the Politics of Race in New York City* (New York, 1990); Jonathan Rieder, *Canarsie: The Jews and Italians of Brooklyn against Liberalism* (Cambridge, Mass., 1985); and Edward G. Carmines and James A. Stimson, *Issue Evolution: Race and the Transformation of American Politics* (Princeton, 1989). Important critical reviews of this literature include James R. Grossman,

The Edsalls, Rieder, and Matusow, although they correctly emphasize the importance of white discontent as a national political force, err in their overemphasis on the role of the Great Society and the sixties rebellions in the rise of the "silent majority." To view the defection of whites from Democratic ranks simply as a reaction to the War on Poverty and the civil rights and Black Power movements ignores racial cleavages that shaped the local politics of the North well before the tumult of the 1960s. Urban antiliberalism had deep roots in a simmering politics of race and neighborhood defensiveness that divided northern cities well before Wallace began his first speaking tours in the snowbelt, well before Lyndon B. Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964, well before the long, hot summers of Watts, Harlem, Chicago, Newark, and Detroit, and well before affirmative action and busing began to dominate the civil rights agenda.

The view of postwar urban politics from Detroit (and from other cities) shows the importance of the politics of race and neighborhood in constraining liberal social reform. From the 1940s through the 1960s, Detroit whites fashioned a language of discontent directed toward public officials, Blacks, and liberal reformers who supported public housing and open housing. The rhetoric of George Wallace, Richard M. Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and Ronald Reagan was familiar to the whites who supported candidates such as Edward Jeffries, Albert Cobo, and Thomas Poindexter.<sup>55</sup>

The "silent majority" did not emerge *de novo* from the alleged failures of liberalism in the 1960s; it was not the unique product of the white rejection of the Great Society. Instead it was the culmination of more than two decades of simmering white discontent and extensive antiliberal political organization. The problem of white backlash in the urban North is longer-lived and far more intractable than recent analyses would suggest. Until we have a greater understanding of the deeply entrenched politics of race in the urban North, our understanding of politics in the contemporary United States will be truncated, and our solutions to the problems of the nation's divided metropolises inadequate.

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"Traditional Politics or the Politics of Tradition?," *Reviews in American History*, 21 (Sept. 1993), 533-38; Adolph Reed and Julian Bond, "Equality: Why We Can't Wait," *Nation*, Dec. 9, 1991, pp. 723-37; and Adolph Reed, "Review: Race and the Disruption of the New Deal Coalition," *Urban Affairs Quarterly*, 27 (Dec. 1991), 326-33.

<sup>55</sup> See Arnold R. Hirsch, "Chicago: The Cook County Democratic Organization and the Dilemma of Race, 1931-1987," in *Snowbelt Cities: Metropolitan Politics in the Northeast and Midwest since World War II*, ed. Richard M. Bernard (Bloomington, 1988), 63-90; Richard M. Bernard, "Milwaukee: The Death and Life of a Midwestern Metropolis," *ibid.*, esp. 173-75. Especially perceptive on the rhetoric of George Wallace, Richard M. Nixon, Spiro Agnew, and Ronald Reagan is Michael Kazin, *The Populist Persuasion: An American History* (New York, 1995), 221-66.