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Kevin M. Kruse: White Flight

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Introduction

IN THE STORIES spun by its supporters, Atlanta had accomplished the unthinkable. Their city was moving forward, they boasted, not just in its bank accounts and business ledgers, but in the ways the races were learning to live and even thrive together. While the rest of the South spent the postwar decades resisting desegregation with a defiant and often ugly program of “massive resistance,” Atlanta faced the challenges of the civil rights era with maturity and moderation. During these decades, the city had emerged as a shining example for the New South, a place where economic progress and racial progressivism went hand in hand. This was, to be sure, not an empty boast. By the end of the 1950s these supporters could point with pride to a litany of sites that the city had desegregated, from public spaces like the buses, airport, libraries, and golf courses to countless private neighborhoods in between. When Atlanta successfully desegregated its public schools in 1961, even national observers paused to marvel at all the city had accomplished. The city found countless admirers across the country, from the press to the president of the United States, but it was ultimately its own Mayor William Hartsfield who coined the lasting motto. “Atlanta,” he bragged to anyone in earshot, “is the City Too Busy to Hate.”¹

Just a year later, this image came crashing down. The trouble surfaced in an unlikely place, a quiet, middle-class subdivision of brick ranch houses and loblolly pines called Peyton Forest. And the trouble started in an unlikely way, as city construction crews built a pair of roadblocks on Peyton and Harlan Roads. The barriers seemed to have no significance. They were simply wooden beams which had been painted black and white, bolted to steel I-beams, and sunk into the pavement. But their significance lay in their location. As all Atlantans understood, the roadblocks stood at the precise fault line between black and white sections of the city. Over the previous two decades, black Atlantans had escaped the overcrowded inner city and purchased more and more homes in neighborhoods to the west; during the same period, white Atlantans to the south had grown increasingly alarmed as those areas “went colored.” The roadblocks were meant to keep these two communities apart and at peace, but they had the opposite effect. Indeed, the barricades immediately attracted intense national and even international attention. Civil rights activists surrounded the racial “buffer zone” with picket lines, while wire photos

carried the images across the globe, sparking an unprecedented public relations nightmare. “We Want No Warsaw Ghetto,” read one picket. Another denounced “Atlanta’s Image: A Berlin Wall.” Civil rights organizations announced they would launch a boycott against area merchants unless the barriers were removed, and two lawsuits were immediately filed in local courts. Mayor Ivan Allen Jr., who had recently replaced Hartsfield in office, had expected some backlash but was stunned by its intensity. From retirement, his predecessor offered a bit of belated advice: “Never make a mistake they can take a picture of.”²

As the national press denounced the “Atlanta Wall,” local whites embraced the roadblocks as their salvation. The day after the crews sealed off their streets, residents wrapped the barricades in Christmas paper and ribbon; beneath the words “Road Closed,” someone added, “Thank the Lord!” Meanwhile, a powerful organization of white homeowners, the Southwest Citizens Association, sought to explain white residents’ perspective. President Virgil Copeland, a Lockheed employee, told reporters that the barricades were simply a response to the “vicious, block-busting tactics being used by Negro realtors.” Carlton Owens, an engineer at Atlantic Steel and a member of Southwest Citizens’ board of directors, noted that several residents had said they were going to “sell and get out” if something concrete were not done “to stabilize the situation.” “The barricades were erected for that purpose,” Copeland added, “and we think they will do it. All we want to do is to keep our homes.” Barbara Ryckley, an officer with Southwest Citizens, pointed out that not just Peyton Forest but all of white Atlanta was “endangered” by black expansion. “If the whites could just win once,” she explained, “they would have some hope for holding out. I think the whole city of Atlanta is at stake. You realize that every time Negroes replace whites about eighty-five percent of the whites move out of the city?”³

As much as they embraced the “Peyton Wall,” these whites worried it would not be enough. Two weeks later, their fears came true. Sources reported that blacks were closing deals on three homes on Lynhurst Drive, immediately west of the Peyton Forest neighborhood. According to alarmist press coverage, the sales represented a deliberate attempt to break through the roadblocks—a “flank attack” on the all-white neighborhood. “If those barricades hadn’t been put up,” an unnamed “Negro leader” was quoted as saying, “I don’t think Lynhurst would have been bothered.” As white residents expressed outrage, black real-estate agents claimed the story had been concocted by Southwest Citizens. Soon, this war of words escalated into a pitched battle. Late one Friday night in February, “parties unknown” descended on the Harlan Road barricade, pulled the I-beams out of the ground, sawed the timbers in half, and tossed the scraps into a nearby creek. The next morning, stunned residents grabbed saws and hand tools, chopped down nearby brush and trees,

dragged the debris into the street and added a few dozen heavy stones for good measure. That night, the raiders returned and set fire to the new barricade. Once firefighters subdued the blaze, Mayor Allen announced that the city would rebuild the barricades, deploring the fact that “any group has seen fit to take the law into their own hands.” Early Monday morning, construction crews sunk new beams into the scorched asphalt, attaching steel rails this time to prevent further fires. Just to make sure, small groups of robed Klansmen stood guard at the barricades on Monday and Tuesday night. Patrolling the street, they held aloft signs: “Whites Have Rights, Too.”⁴

In spite of the movement to insure its permanence, the “Peyton Wall” was short-lived. Local courts quickly ruled against the roadblocks and the mayor, relieved to find a way out of the public relations nightmare, had them immediately removed. But as the barricades were destroyed, so was whites’ confidence in the neighborhood. In less than a month, most homes in Peyton Forest—including that of Virgil Copeland, the head of the homeowners’ resistance movement—were listed for sale with black real-estate agents. “When the barricades came down, everything collapsed,” he told a reporter. “It’s all over out there for us.” Indeed, by the end of July 1963 all but fifteen white families had sold their homes to black buyers and abandoned the neighborhood. They were not simply fleeing Peyton Forest, Copeland pointed out, but the city itself. “We are trying to find some area outside the city limits where we can buy homes and get away from the problem” of desegregation, he noted. “Everybody I know is definitely leaving the city of Atlanta.”⁵

The “Peyton Wall” incident, as famous as it was fleeting, was only the most public eruption of the much larger phenomenon of white flight. That year alone, the beleaguered mayor noted, City Hall had been confronted with 52 separate cases of “racial transition,” incidents in which whites fled from neighborhoods as blacks bought homes there. And although the information never appeared in Atlanta’s positive press coverage, a steady stream of white flight had in fact been underway for nearly a decade. During the five years before the 1962 Peyton Forest panic, for instance, nearly 30,000 whites had abandoned the city. Afterward, the numbers only grew larger. In 1960 the total white population of Atlanta stood at barely more than 300,000. Over the course of that decade, roughly 60,000 whites fled from Atlanta. During the 1970s, another 100,000 would leave as well. “The City Too Busy to Hate,” the skeptics noted, had become “The City Too Busy *Moving* to Hate.”⁶

This book explores the causes and course of white flight, with Atlanta serving as its vantage point. Although it represented one of the largest, most significant, and most transformative social movements in postwar America, white flight has never been studied in depth or detail. Indeed,

the scant attention it has received has only been as a causal factor for other concerns, such as the decline of central cities and the rise of suburbia. This study, however, seeks to explore not simply the effects of white flight, but the experience. While many have assumed that white flight was little more than a literal movement of the white population, this book argues that it represented a much more important transformation in the political ideology of those involved. Because of their confrontation with the civil rights movement, white southern conservatives were forced to abandon their traditional, populist, and often starkly racist demagoguery and instead craft a new conservatism predicated on a language of rights, freedoms, and individualism. This modern conservatism proved to be both subtler and stronger than the politics that preceded it and helped southern conservatives dominate the Republican Party and, through it, national politics as well. White flight, in the end, was more than a physical relocation. It was a political revolution.

In order to understand white flight with precision, we first need to understand the whites who were involved. As a starting point, therefore, this study seeks to reconstruct the world of segregationists, without relying on familiar stereotypes. In the traditional narrative, white resistance to desegregation has generally been framed as yet another southern lost cause. In the wake of the Supreme Court's ruling against desegregation in *Brown*, this story goes, southern politicians on the national scene denounced the decision in no uncertain terms, while their counterparts in state politics passed a wide array of legislation to prevent desegregation at home. This campaign of political resistance was reinforced on a second front, as segregationist organizations employed extralegal and illegal methods to enforce conformity among whites and inspire fear among blacks. At the forefront of this movement, the powerful White Citizens' Councils used economic reprisals to intimidate those who dared to challenge the racial status quo. Although the Councils did not advocate violence, their endorsement of resistance encouraged cruder acts of intimidation and terrorism. The Ku Klux Klan soon rode again in the South, and a wave of murder, assault, and arson followed in its wake. For a time, these assorted groups succeeded in their campaign against desegregation. But in the end, the determined activism of the civil rights movement and, in time, the intervention of the federal government overcame the resistance of these die-hard segregationists. By the mid-1960s, with black children enrolled in once-white schools across the South and major pieces of civil rights legislation passed at the national level, this narrative concludes, the forces of massive resistance had been soundly defeated.⁷ Recent revisions to this traditional narrative have only concluded that massive resistance was perhaps even more of a failure than originally thought. According to this argument, segregationist brutality and lawlessness only

elicited the nation's sympathies for the civil rights movement and inspired the intervention of the federal government. Massive resistance not only failed to save segregation, this theory holds, but actually helped speed its demise.⁸

As compelling as this traditional interpretation of massive resistance has been, it suffers from a focus that stresses the words and deeds of top-level politicians over the lived realities of everyday whites. This approach dates back more than three decades, when historian Numan Bartley firmly entrenched such a top-down political perspective in his seminal study of massive resistance.⁹ The studies that followed in his wake have largely fleshed out the original framework, detailing the different components of white political resistance. Some scholars have offered close studies of the careers of segregationist politicians,¹⁰ while others have chronicled the growth of the white supremacist organizations that acted as their unofficial allies.¹¹ Still others have conducted thorough studies of the southern communities that served as the central stages in this political drama.¹² Ironically, because of their reliance on this top-down political perspective, such studies have actually missed some of the most important political changes that occurred at the grass roots during these years. At the top levels of southern politics, massive resistance stood as a campaign that accepted no alteration in the racial status quo and allowed no room for accommodation with change. In the famous phrasing of Alabama governor George Wallace, this stance became cemented as a defiant promise: "Segregation now! Segregation tomorrow! Segregation forever!" Indeed, Wallace's career represents a repeated series of such stances, ranging from his promise never again to be "out-niggered" in politics to his defiant "stand in the schoolhouse door."¹³ Looking back on white opposition to desegregation, many historians have seized upon the promises and posings of such politicians and assumed that segregationist resistance was precisely the all-or-nothing proposition that its boldest defenders made it out to be. Rendering judgment on the movement's success, these observers have simply compared the promises to preserve the racial status quo of 1954 with the realities of desegregation a decade later. Judged by such standards, the conclusion was clear: massive resistance failed.

This study, however, argues that white resistance to desegregation was never as immobile or monolithic as its practitioners and chroniclers would have us believe. Indeed, segregationists could be incredibly innovative in the strategies and tactics they used to confront the civil rights movement. In recent work on the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century South, several historians have argued that the system of racial segregation was never a fixed entity, but rather a fluid relationship in which blacks and whites constantly adjusted to meet changing circumstances.¹⁴ If the southern system of racial subjugation is understood as responsive to change

during its era of dominance, it naturally follows that segregationist ideology and strategy did not remain inert when the system confronted, in the form of the civil rights movement, a threat to its very existence. And, as this story makes clear, the original goals of massive resistance were, in fact, frequently revisited and revised as the struggle to defend the “southern way of life” stretched on. While national politicians waged a reactionary struggle in the courts and Congress to preserve the old system of de jure segregation, those at the local level were discovering a number of ways in which they could preserve and, indeed, perfect the realities of racial segregation outside the realm of law and politics. Ultimately, the mass migration of whites from cities to the suburbs proved to be the most successful segregationist response to the moral demands of the civil rights movement and the legal authority of the courts. Although the suburbs were just as segregated as the city—and, truthfully, often more so—white residents succeeded in convincing the courts, the nation, and even themselves that this phenomenon represented de facto segregation, something that stemmed not from the race-conscious actions of residents but instead from less offensive issues like class stratification and postwar sprawl. To be sure, on the surface, the world of white suburbia looked little like the world of white supremacy. But these worlds did have much in common—from the remarkably similar levels of racial, social, and political homogeneity to their shared ideologies that stressed individual rights over communal responsibilities, privatization over public welfare, and “free enterprise” above everything else. By withdrawing to the suburbs and recreating its world there, the politics of massive resistance continued to thrive for decades after its supposed death.

If we shift our attention away from politicians and focus on the lives of ordinary segregationists, the flexibility and continuity of white resistance becomes clear. Exploring the ever-shifting terrain of race relations and conservative politics at the grass roots, this study finds inspiration in the work of many others. In recent years, for instance, a new generation of scholarship on the civil rights movement has moved beyond simply recounting the words and deeds of prominent civil rights leaders to delve instead into the hopes and beliefs of ordinary African Americans. As a result, our understanding of that movement has been enriched by a better appreciation of the social texture of the African American community.¹⁵ Building on such work, new studies in southern history have likewise sought to move beyond a superficial understanding of segregationists and instead root the actions of ordinary whites in a deeper social and cultural analysis.¹⁶ At the same time, other historians have chronicled the course of modern conservatism in areas outside the South, taking their subjects seriously and thereby reconstructing their world and worldview as they

themselves understood them.¹⁷ This book draws on the insights and interpretations of such works, seeking to treat its subjects with the same degree of seriousness.

If we truly seek to understand segregationists—not to excuse or absolve them, but to understand them—then we must first understand how they understood themselves. Until now, because of the tendency to focus on the reactionary leaders of massive resistance, segregationists have largely been understood simply as the opposition to the civil rights movement. They have been framed as a group focused solely on suppressing the rights of others, whether that be the larger cause of “civil rights” or any number of individual entitlements, such as the rights of blacks to vote, assemble, speak, protest, or own property. Segregationists, of course, did stand against those things, and often with bloody and brutal consequences. But, like all people, they did not think of themselves in terms of what they opposed but rather in terms of what they supported. The conventional wisdom has held that they were only fighting *against* the rights of others. But, in their own minds, segregationists were instead fighting *for* rights of their own—such as the “right” to select their neighbors, their employees, and their children’s classmates, the “right” to do as they pleased with their private property and personal businesses, and, perhaps most important, the “right” to remain free from what they saw as dangerous encroachments by the federal government. To be sure, all of these positive “rights” were grounded in a negative system of discrimination and racism. In the minds of segregationists, however, such rights existed all the same. Indeed, from their perspective, it was clearly they who defended individual freedom, while the “so-called civil rights activists” aligned themselves with a powerful central state, demanded increased governmental regulation of local affairs, and waged a sustained assault on the individual economic, social, and political prerogatives of others. The true goal of desegregation, these white southerners insisted, was not to end the system of racial oppression in the South, but to install a new system that oppressed them instead. As this study demonstrates, southern whites fundamentally understood their support of segregation as a defense of their own liberties, rather than a denial of others’.¹⁸

Understanding segregationists in such a light illuminates the links between massive resistance and modern conservatism. Those responsible for the rise of the New Right have long denied any connection between these two strands of American conservatism. In 1984, for instance, noted conservative activist Paul Weyrich asserted that the leadership of the New Right “bears no resemblance to the reactionary Southern icons of the past.”¹⁹ Despite such claims, several historians and journalists have repeatedly linked the New Right with the Old South. Much like the tradi-

tional narrative of massive resistance, their interpretation has generally relied on a top-down explanation of political transformation predicated on the presidential campaigns of Strom Thurmond, Barry Goldwater, George Wallace, Richard Nixon, and Ronald Reagan. Focusing largely on closed-door strategy sessions and stump speeches of such conservative politicians, these studies have paid particular attention to their use of the “racially coded language” first developed by segregationists like George Wallace to appeal to white voters in national campaigns. Some of the more famous instances, such as Ronald Reagan’s anecdote about the apocryphal Chicago “welfare queen” and George H. W. Bush’s notorious Willie Horton advertisement, seemed less-than-subtle appeals to racist assumptions about black criminality and shiftlessness. While this study does not discount the importance of such language and imagery, it argues that the connections between the Old South and New Right run much deeper than mere rhetorical appeals to racism.²⁰

This study advances a new perspective on the connections between southern segregationists and modern conservatives. Although it touches on the conventional political narrative that has contributed to our understanding of the origins of the New Right, it has a rather different dynamic. Instead of focusing on the ways in which national politicians sought to exploit the anger and alienation of white voters, this study focuses on those whites themselves. The conventional framework, with its attention on the highest levels of national campaigns, largely neglects the important transformations taking place at the grass roots. More problematic, because it focuses only on the more famous flashpoints in presidential politics, this narrative inexplicably skips past the years between the Dixiecrat rebellion of 1948 and the Goldwater campaign of 1964. Because racial conservatism was not a central issue in the intervening elections, the creation narrative of modern conservatism has overlooked that era entirely. But during the decade and a half between the collapse of the Dixiecrats and the rise of the Goldwater Republicans came one of the most turbulent and transformative eras in southern history. The vast bulk of the civil rights movement and the white resistance it inspired unfolded in the late 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s. During that period the entire southern landscape was reshaped. Southern politics was no exception.

In the end, this work demonstrates that the struggle over segregation thoroughly reshaped southern conservatism. Traditional conservative elements, such as hostility to the federal government and faith in free enterprise, underwent fundamental transformations. At the same time, segregationist resistance inspired the creation of new conservative causes, such as tuition vouchers, the tax revolt, and the privatization of public services. Until now, the origins of those phenomena have been located in the suburban areas of the South and Southwest, a region since christened the “Sun-

belt.”²¹ In recent years, scholars have explored that landscape to explain the rise of the “tax revolt” in the late 1970s,²² the trend toward isolation in exclusive “gated communities” in the 1980s,²³ and the attendant privatization of public services thereafter, ranging from the establishment of private security forces to the campaign for tuition vouchers for private education.²⁴ While this scholarship generally assumed that such conservative trends emerged from an established suburban Sunbelt in the late 1970s and 1980s, this book argues, to the contrary, that those trends were already apparent before the rise of the suburbs, inside cities such as Atlanta, as early as the 1950s.

In locating the origins of these phenomena in urban, and not suburban, politics, this book considers the origins of the conservative “counterrevolution” in their proper environment. Problematically, some accounts often start their stories only after the white suburbs had become an accomplished fact. And by solely examining the conservative political outlook in that overwhelmingly white and predominantly upper-middle-class environment, these observers have often failed to appreciate the importance of race and class in the formation of this new conservative ideology. Inside such a homogeneous setting, it is perhaps easy to understand how some have accepted without question the claims of some conservative activists that their movement was—and still is—“color-blind” and unassociated with class politics.²⁵ Indeed, in the suburbs, with no other colors in sight and no other classes in contention, such claims seem plausible. How could modern conservatism be shaped by forces that weren’t there? But, as this study shows, when the conservative politics of the Sunbelt is correctly situated in the crucible of urban politics, surrounded by different races, multiple classes, and competing social interests, it can be seen in a rather different light.

Indeed, a community-level approach helps illuminate the realities of white resistance to desegregation in a number of ways. First, such a perspective best brings into focus the complex relationships between people and places, which are always their clearest at the local level. Only by restricting the scope of a study to a specific setting and a finite time can otherwise unwieldy issues—racism, segregation, backlash, and “white flight”—be dissected and discussed in any meaningful detail. Second, this work employs a community-level approach to demonstrate the interconnected nature of different stages of white resistance. Too often, civil rights histories have focused on a single aspect of the story, such as school desegregation or the sit-ins, without acknowledging that all these struggles were closely intertwined in the minds of whites and blacks alike.²⁶ As this book demonstrates, white resistance to desegregation was much more complex than previously understood. Chronicling the course of segregationist activity, in a single city, in a single era, allows for patterns of indi-

vidual involvement, cycles of protest and politics, and an overall evolution of segregationist thought and conservative ideology to come into focus.

In examining these issues inside the urban environment, this study adopts an approach used by urban historians in recent years to explore postwar race relations in northern cities, particularly Chicago and Detroit. Like those histories, this work discovers an interconnected web of racial, social, and economic conflicts inside Atlanta's city limits that suggests that the "urban crisis" was a phenomenon that stretched far beyond the industrial Northeast. In the struggles over race and residence, for instance, Atlanta closely resembles those cities. The familiar language of homeowners' rights and community protection resurfaces in white neighborhoods here, as does the pattern of violence visited upon all those who challenged them. The common themes shared by the homeowners' movements of the urban North and the segregationist resistance of the urban South suggest that the white backlash that surfaced in later years was not, as many assumed at the time, a southern product imported to the North. Instead, white flight was a phenomenon that developed in cities throughout the nation, with the commonalities and cross-regional connections only becoming clear in retrospect.²⁷

While this study sees more similarities than differences in the urban struggles of the North and South, it does find such differences. Unlike northern studies, which uncovered large amounts of "hidden violence" sparked by residential conflicts and chronicled a successful white resistance to racial change, this study demonstrates, almost counterintuitively, that whites in this segregated city were generally less violent in their resistance and less successful than their counterparts in the urban North. The relative failure of racists in Atlanta was not due to their lack of commitment to the cause, but because the black population they challenged was both larger and stronger than those in the North. In terms of percentages, Atlanta's black population outpaced that of most northern cities: in 1940, for instance, blacks represented 35 percent of Atlanta's population, but just 8 and 9 percent in Chicago and Detroit, respectively. By the 1970s, as the disparities in racial percentages narrowed, these metropolitan areas looked more alike—with black political power rising in the cities and conservative white suburbs growing around them. But the paths taken by northern and southern cities to that common destination had decidedly different origins. In cities of the postwar South, the larger demographic presence of African Americans meant that both the pressure for racial residential transition and the political clout of the black community were much stronger than in the North. As a result, southern whites were confronted with a pace of residential racial change that came much earlier, faster, and stronger than their northern counterparts.²⁸

Readers familiar with the Rust Belt narrative will find other differences in the Sunbelt. For one, the relative lack of heavy industry in Atlanta and most other southern cities dictated a different pattern of postwar change, especially in regard to race. In northern cities, the predominance of heavy industry helped move race relations in both progressive and reactionary directions. At first, the rise of biracial unions served as an early impetus for desegregation not simply on the shop floor but throughout the city. But as hard times fell on northern cities, the consequences of economic decline and deindustrialization—massive layoffs, plant closings, and industrial relocation to the suburbs—not only fueled white flight, but also served to splinter the unions and, in the process, the entire liberal-labor political alliance. But in the South, with a few notable exceptions, the postwar urban struggle centered not on deindustrialization but desegregation.²⁹ Again, this represented a key difference. In most northern cities, court-ordered desegregation had no direct impact until the early 1970s, when the Supreme Court considered—albeit briefly—the implementation of metropolitan-wide remedies such as cross-district busing. When busing became an issue in nonsouthern cities like Denver, Detroit, and Boston, it had a tremendous impact on white flight and urban decay. But until then, school desegregation played virtually no role. In the South, however, desegregation, especially in the schools, had tremendous influence during the 1950s and 1960s in reshaping cities and the course of white resistance within them. Desegregation of neighborhood schools impacted surrounding neighborhoods, of course, convincing white residents to sell their homes and leading community institutions to pull up roots. The process worked in reverse as well, as racial residential change often prompted the transfer of public schools and other public spaces from white to black hands. The changes that deindustrialization made to the physical landscape of Rust Belt cities have been widely recognized, but this study argues that desegregation had just as significant an impact on the structures and spaces of the urban and suburban Sunbelt.

On the surface, Atlanta may seem an odd focal point for examining the ways in which white resistance reshaped the urban environment, social relations, and political ideology of the South. For contemporaries, Atlanta always seemed an exception to the segregationist rule, a city that presented a moderate image and contributed much to the civil rights movement. Central figures in the African American struggle for equality, such as W.E.B. Du Bois, James Weldon Johnson, Walter White, Martin Luther King Sr., Martin Luther King Jr., Ralph Abernathy, Whitney Young, Julian Bond, John Lewis, Andrew Young, and Vernon Jordan, all lived inside its limits at one time or another. Likewise, key civil rights agencies, such as the Commission on Interracial Cooperation, the Southern Regional Council (SRC), the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC),

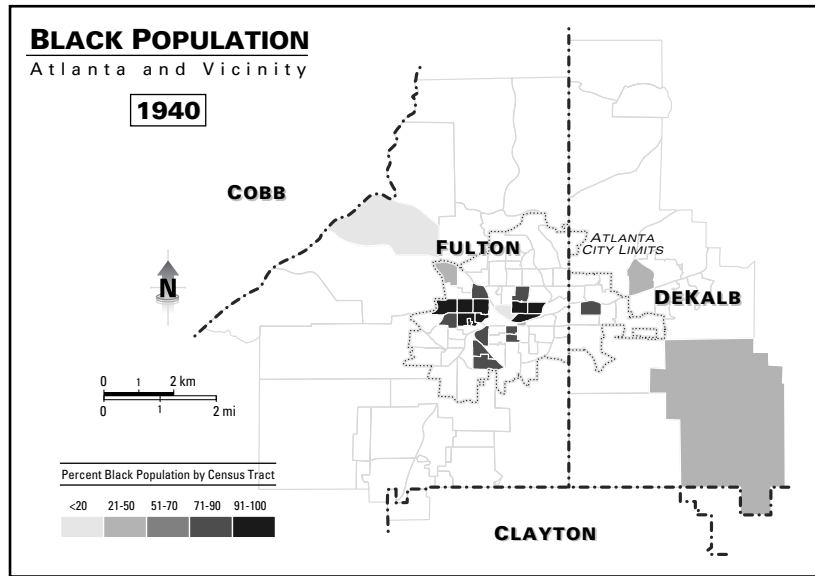
and the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), all called Atlanta home. So too did the South's premier cluster of black colleges, Atlanta University, and the region's best-known hub of black economic activity, Auburn Avenue. There was, perhaps, no clearer source of African American strength in the modern South than Atlanta.³⁰

This is all true. But as Atlanta emerged as the center of civil rights activity, it still remained the site of sustained segregationist resistance. Some of the most brutal incidents of Jim Crow violence occurred inside Atlanta, including a notoriously bloody race riot in 1906 and the infamous lynching of Leo Frank in 1913. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Ku Klux Klan located its national headquarters on prestigious Peachtree Street; after the Second World War, a revived version of the hooded order held its ceremonial rebirth just outside the city's limits. (One historian of the Klan has gone so far as to anoint Atlanta "its holy city.") Aside from the several incarnations of that organization, other white supremacist groups have anchored themselves in Atlanta as well, including the country's first neo-Nazi organization. During the civil rights era, a number of the South's leading segregationists called Atlanta their home, including Eugene and Herman Talmadge, Marvin Griffin, Calvin Craig, and Lester Maddox. Tellingly, when segregationists waged legal challenges against the 1964 Civil Rights Act, two of the three cases came from Atlanta.³¹

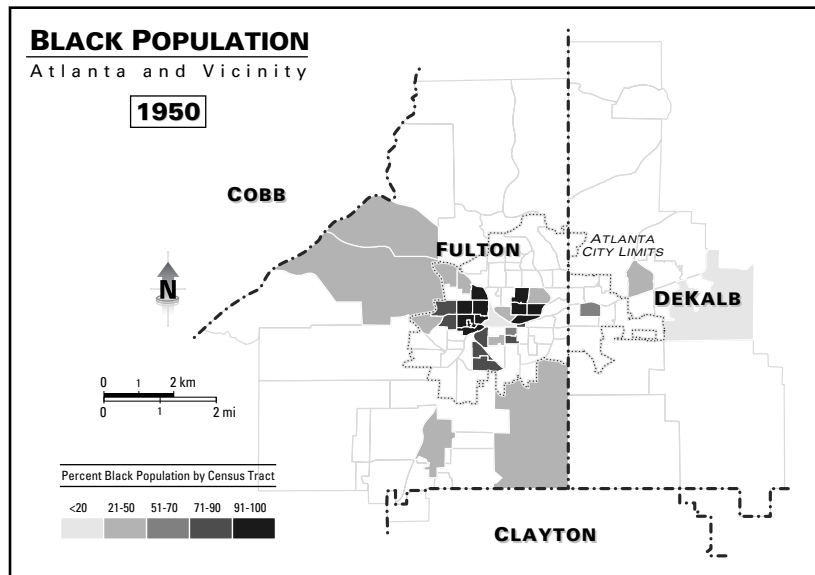
Given the central historical importance of Atlanta, for both civil rights activists and segregationists alike, the lack of scholarship on its changes during the civil rights era is surprising, to say the least. Recently, fine work has been done on race relations in the first half of the century,³² but the historiography on the postwar era remains thin. What scant scholarship does exist has been dominated by a paradigm stressing the centrality of the "community power structure" above all else. Now commonplace, the phrase was originally coined to describe Atlanta, a city long controlled by a moderate coalition of businessmen and boosterish politicians.³³ In studies centered on this power structure, the course of civil rights has usually been addressed, but only in relation to the main concern of mainstream politics. After World War II, African Americans emerged as a crucial part of the coalition that controlled the city, and, as such, these scholars have had to explain their rise to prominence and their role as the "junior partner" in a reformulated power structure.³⁴ But black Atlantans operating outside—or even against—the dominant political coalition have received little attention in these works.³⁵ In the past decade, additional works on the civil rights era have appeared,³⁶ but little change has been made to the "community power structure" approach created a half century ago. Black radicals are still marginalized. Meanwhile, the great numbers of white working-class and middle-class segregationists aligned on the other side of the racial divide have received no attention at all.³⁷

This book seeks to change that approach, shifting the focus to those whites who found themselves outside the mainstream of the moderate coalition and who, in time, moved themselves outside the city as well. A focus on the resistance of such whites, predominantly of the working and middle classes, should not be misinterpreted as a simplistic claim that they alone were racist while other whites were not. In the end, virtually all whites reacted to the course of civil rights change with some degree of opposition and distancing. For working-class whites, the confrontation came in the late 1940s and early 1950s, as their neighborhoods emerged as the focal point in the city's struggles over residential desegregation. With middle-class whites, however, the conflict only surfaced in the second half of the 1950s, as residential desegregation spread into their neighborhoods and, more important, as the public spaces they frequented—parks, bus lines, and the public schools in particular—came under the mandate of court-ordered desegregation. Upper-class whites, meanwhile, stuck by the moderate coalition until the early 1960s, when civil rights activists targeted both their public lives, as the sit-ins focused on the businesses they owned, and their private lives, as civil rights leaders questioned their commitment to integration in light of the segregated world in which they lived and played. *How* whites reacted to desegregation thus emerges as a constant. As this study shows, class differences merely determined *where* and *when* they did so.

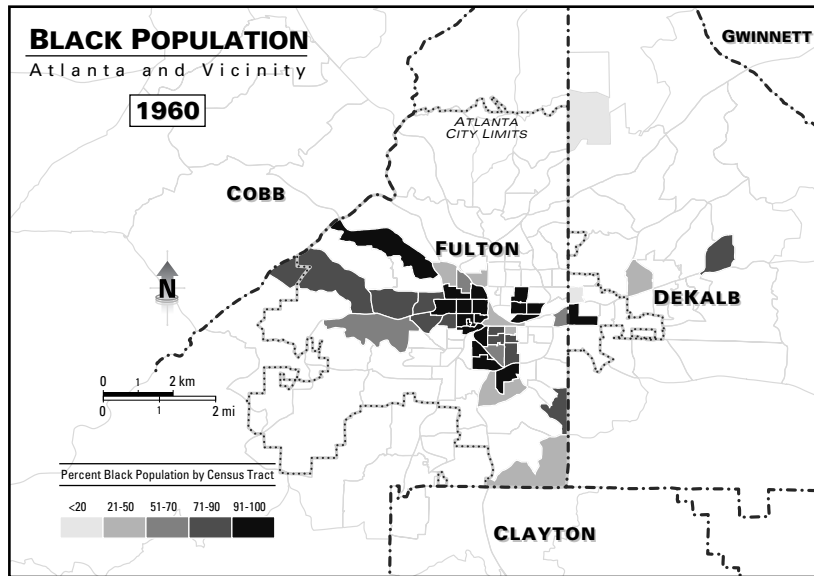
The story that follows takes place in the city and suburbs of Atlanta but has connections to the country as a whole. It has such connections not simply because the local struggle over segregation spread across the region and sought resolution in national politics, but because the issues that stood at the center of that struggle also stood at the center of the postwar national debate: the demise of white supremacy and the rise of white suburbia; the fragmentation of old liberal coalitions and the construction of new conservative ones; the contested relationship between the federal government and state and local entities; the debates over the public realm and the private; the struggle over the distribution of money and the sharing of power; the competing claims to basic rights and responsibilities of citizenship; and, of course, conflicts rooted in divisions of generation, class, and, above all, race. All these issues spread far beyond the city limits of Atlanta and into every corner of the country. In the end, then, this is not simply an Atlanta story or a southern story. It is, instead, an American story.



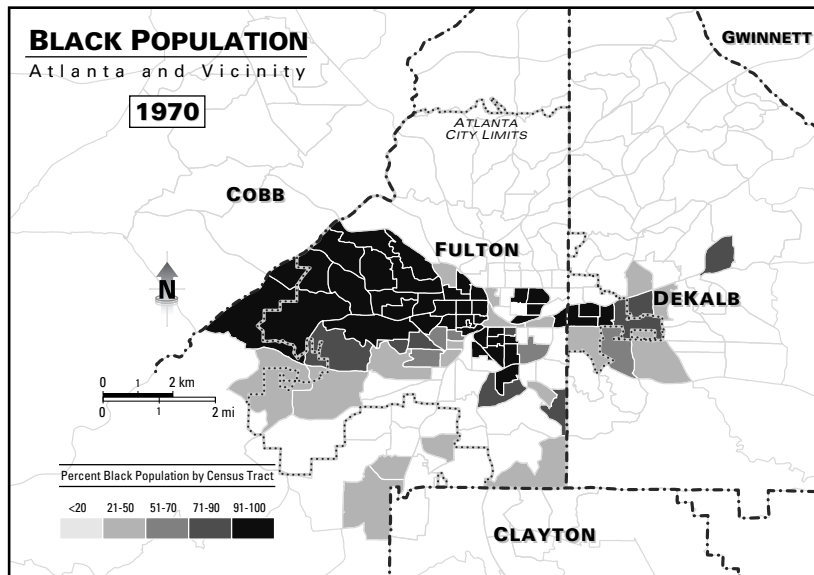
Map 1.2 Black population, Atlanta and vicinity, 1940



Map 1.3 Black population, Atlanta and vicinity, 1950



Map 1.4 Black population, Atlanta and vicinity, 1960



Map 1.5 Black population, Atlanta and vicinity, 1970