

COPYRIGHT NOTICE:

Matthew D. Lassiter: The Silent Majority

is published by Princeton University Press and copyrighted, © 2007, by Princeton University Press. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher, except for reading and browsing via the World Wide Web. Users are not permitted to mount this file on any network servers.

Follow links for Class Use and other Permissions. For more information send email to: permissions@pupress.princeton.edu

Introduction

“AS A MEMBER of the silent majority,” a white father from an affluent suburb of Charlotte, North Carolina, declared in 1970, “I have never asked what anyone in government or this country could do for me, but rather have kept my mouth shut, paid my taxes, and basically asked to be left alone.” James McDavid, Jr., lived with his family in one of the new white-collar subdivisions developed outside Charlotte during the postwar growth boom that transformed the political culture and the physical landscape of the American South. Along with middle-class homeowners throughout the nation, the consumer lifestyle of the McDavids depended upon government programs that provided massive subsidies for suburban sprawl and efficient implementation of residential segregation. Federally funded highways crisscrossed the automobile-dependent metropolis, federally guaranteed low-interest mortgages and generous tax deductions made a racially exclusive version of the American Dream affordable for white suburban families, and federally bankrolled urban renewal policies systematically concentrated almost all of Charlotte’s black residents in a compact ghetto located on the other side of downtown. Along with thousands of other parents from Charlotte’s outer-ring suburbs, McDavid had written his congressman in outrage after a federal judge ordered a comprehensive busing plan to overcome the stark metropolitan patterns of state-sponsored housing segregation. From the perspective of his all-white subdivision, McDavid denounced busing as a form of reverse discrimination in violation of the color-blind philosophy of neighborhood schools and then issued a blunt threat to the politicians in Washington: “I think it is time the law abiding, tax paying white middle class started looking to the federal government for something besides oppression.”¹

During the civil rights showdowns of the late 1960s and early 1970s, white-collar families that claimed membership in the Silent Majority rallied around a “color-blind” discourse of suburban innocence that depicted residential segregation as the class-based outcome of meritocratic individualism rather than the unconstitutional product of structural racism. “I couldn’t believe such a thing could happen in America,” explained Don Roberson, a prosperous physician from the upper-middle-class suburbs who became a grassroots leader of the antibusing movement in Charlotte. “So many of us made the biggest investment of our lives—our homes—primarily on the

basis of their location with regard to schools. It seemed like an absurdity that anyone could tell us where to send our children.” “My first reaction was one of disbelief,” remembered insurance executive Thomas Harris, another officer in the Concerned Parents Association, the local manifestation of the Silent Majority during the Charlotte busing crisis. “I did not believe there was any possibility whatsoever that the government was going to dictate where my kids were going to public school. It was crazy; it was not going to happen.” From the other side of the metropolis, a black father who served as a plaintiff in the busing litigation acknowledged the potency of this class-driven interpretation of the city’s protracted desegregation saga. “People thought we were destroying the whole American dream for them,” James Polk observed. “To whites, that meant pull yourself up by your bootstraps, buy a nice home and two cars, live in a nice neighborhood and go to a nice church, send your kids to the appropriate school. . . . We understood that a lot of white people would raise holy hell.”²

Through the populist revolt of the Silent Majority, millions of white homeowners who had achieved a residentially segregated and federally subsidized version of the American Dream forcefully rejected race-conscious liberalism as an unconstitutional exercise in social engineering and an unprecedented violation of free-market meritocracy. In 1968, the Kerner Report issued by the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders asked the middle-class residents of the segregated suburbs to reconsider the meritocratic ethos of color-blind individualism and ponder an unpopular interpretation of their own history: “What white Americans have never fully understood—but what the Negro can never forget—is that white society is deeply implicated in the ghetto. White institutions created it, white institutions maintain it, and white society condones it.” The Kerner Commission also issued a dire warning: “To continue present policies is to make permanent the division of our country into two societies; one, largely Negro and poor, located in the central cities; the other, predominantly white and affluent, located in the suburbs and outlying areas.” During the decade after the civil rights movement defeated the acknowledged “American Dilemma” of racial segregation mandated by law in the Jim Crow South, the bitter busing and housing battles that spread throughout the nation confronted a New American Dilemma—the fusion of class segregation and racial discrimination embodied in the urban-suburban divide. In response to the civil rights offensive against the structural forces of residential segregation, a grassroots suburban backlash rippled upward into national politics and established powerful and lasting constraints on the integrationist agenda of racial liberalism. The political culture of suburban exclusion and middle-class entitlement forged a resilient bipartisan consensus that ultimately exempted most affluent neighborhoods throughout the nation from any collective responsi-

bility for the government programs that simultaneously developed the postwar metropolis and contained the inner-city ghettos.³

The stories told in this book stand at the intersection of the metropolitan struggles for racial integration, the political mobilization of middle-class neighborhoods, and the spatial policies of suburban sprawl in the modern South. The regionwide scope of my project begins with the triumph of racial moderation over massive resistance during the southern accommodation to the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 and then follows the trajectory of school integration and court-ordered busing in the Sunbelt metropolises of Atlanta and Charlotte. My account of the suburban strategies that reshaped southern politics investigates the postwar growth of the Republican party and the fabled Silent Majority of the Nixon years before culminating in the national retreat from integration remedies through key turning points stretching from Richmond to Detroit. Three fundamental transformations between the 1940s and the 1970s connect the local community studies in this book with broader regional and national trends. During the decades after World War II, the metropolitan Sunbelt replaced the rural Black Belt as the center of political power in the South, and a two-party system dominated by the interests of large corporations and the priorities of white-collar suburbs supplanted the traditional culture of white supremacy that governed the Jim Crow era. In a concurrent development, the considerable success of the civil rights movement in dismantling the legal caste system and discrediting overt racism, in combination with the rapid expansion of a suburban landscape organized around residential segregation and socioeconomic privilege, resulted in the evolution of a middle-class outlook expressed through the color-blind language of consumer rights and meritocratic individualism. And finally, the ascendance of the metropolitan Sunbelt played a crucial role in the fading of southern distinctiveness and the national collapse of the New Deal Order, a process of regional convergence marked by the parallel suburbanization of southern and American politics.

This book is about the grassroots politics produced by residential segregation and suburban sprawl and the interplay between the local and the national in the emergence of the center-right dynamic that has dominated American politics since the late 1960s. An investigation of the grassroots insurgency of the Silent Majority, and the broader story of middle-class political culture and suburban development across the postwar South, calls into question many of the conventional interpretations of electoral realignment in modern America. The widespread tendency to attribute the conservative shift in American politics to a top-down “Southern Strategy,” launched by the Republican party in order to exploit white backlash against the civil rights movement, misses the longer-term convergence of southern and national politics around the suburban ethos of middle-class entitlement. And

the enduring framework of southern racial exceptionalism, embodied in the artificial dichotomy between “de jure” and “de facto” segregation, has likewise distorted our understanding of the civil rights era by obscuring the ways in which state-financed suburbanization and state-sponsored residential segregation established a novel model of race relations, national in scope. During the postwar decades, the political economies of southern metropolises such as Atlanta and Charlotte and Richmond increasingly resembled their sprawling counterparts in the North and West, with pervasive structures of racial and class segregation imbedded in the built environment rather than enforced by Jim Crow legislation. The grassroots politics of suburban populism—from antibusing crusades and taxpayer revolts to homeowner movements in defense of racial and class exclusion—galvanized a bipartisan response marked by the persistent refusal of all three branches of the federal government to provide meaningful remedies for the historical legacies of metropolitan inequality and the contemporary processes of residential segregation.⁴

My exploration of the political culture of the metropolitan South attempts to accord equal weight to the analytical categories of class and race by examining their intersection in the grassroots contexts of suburban development and electoral realignment. I argue throughout the book that the overreliance on race-reductionist narratives to explain complex political transformations—such as the “rise of the Right” and “white backlash” and the “Southern Strategy” and the “Republican South”—downplays the centrality of class ideology in the outlook of suburban voters and ignores the consistent class divisions among white southerners evident throughout the civil rights era. The explanatory framework of color-blindness is not intended to accept at face value the claim that racial prejudice simply disappeared from middle-class attitudes, or to disregard the many ways that its proponents benefited from the “possessive investment in whiteness,” but instead to capture a coherent way of thinking about and speaking about neighborhood boundaries and political citizenship that had become a paramount feature of suburban discourse by the second half of the 1960s. Racial inequality is a constant theme in American history, but the manifestations of racism are evolving and multifaceted, refracted through frameworks such as economics and geography. The ascendance of color-blind ideology in the metropolitan South, as in the rest of the nation, depended upon the establishment of structural mechanisms of exclusion that did not require individual racism by suburban beneficiaries in order to sustain white class privilege and maintain barriers of disadvantage facing urban minority communities. The suburban politics of middle-class warfare charted a middle course between the open racism of the extreme right and the egalitarian agenda of the civil rights movement, based in an ethos of color-blind individualism that accepted the principle of equal opportunity under the law but refused to countenance

affirmative action policies designed to overcome metropolitan structures of inequality.⁵

Richard Nixon called suburban families the Forgotten Americans, and then the Silent Majority, and finally the New American Majority. As populist appeals to Middle America, these labels represented a suburban strategy designed to conceal class divisions among white voters while taking advantage of the convergence of southern and national politics. In a typical articulation of the color-blind platform, Nixon informed “the great silent majority of Americans” that “there is no reason to feel guilty about wanting to enjoy what you get and get what you earn, about wanting your children in good schools close to home, or about wanting to be judged fairly on your ability.” The president explained that liberals “believe that the only way to achieve what they consider social justice is to place power in the hands of a strong central government which will do what they think has to be done, no matter what the majority thinks.” The Republican party instead understood that the United States represented “the land of opportunity, not the land of quotas and restrictions.” Nixon conceded that “some people oppose income redistribution and busing for the wrong reasons, but they are by no means the majority of Americans, who oppose them for the right reasons.” He assured members of the Silent Majority that it was not selfish to want to see less of their hard-earned money “taken away by government taxation,” and it was not racist to object to having their children “taken away from a neighborhood school and transported miles away.” Nixon also consistently proclaimed, as he told a gathering of Republican activists in Atlanta, that the “so-called southern issues . . . are the same here as they are in America”—opposition to forced busing, desire for lower taxes, support for military strength abroad, demand for law and order at home, and color-blind justice for all citizens. Echoing from the grassroots to the White House, these narratives of white victimization and suburban heroism transformed the landscapes of southern and national politics and repudiated the history of metropolitan inequality highlighted in the Kerner Report.⁶

THE SPATIAL TURN IN POLITICAL HISTORY

The “Southern Strategy” explanation of the political transformation of the modern South is wrong. Following the lead of Kevin Phillips’s 1969 book *The Emerging Republican Majority*, many scholars and pundits have embraced a top-down thesis of electoral realignment that credits the regional base of the Republican party to a race-driven Southern Strategy allegedly perfected by Richard Nixon between 1968 and 1972. In this version of the origins of the New Right, presidential candidates Barry Goldwater and George Wallace emerge as the two most influential losers in American

political history, the progenitors of a racialized conservatism that shaped the GOP's coded appeals and united working-class and middle-class white voters in an alliance of reactionary populism. When required to explain the national disintegration of New Deal liberalism, and the setbacks for the civil rights movement on metropolitan landscapes across the United States, the Southern Strategy school offers a corollary called the "Southernization of American politics." In its most schematic formulation, this top-down narrative of conservative backlash wipes clean the slate of northern history before the mid-1960s and connects the dots between a wide-ranging series of episodes: Barry Goldwater's success in the Deep South, George Wallace's forays in the urban North, Richard Nixon's "law-and-order" and antibusing platforms, Ronald Reagan's "states' rights" speech in rural Mississippi, George Bush's "Willie Horton" television advertisements, and Newt Gingrich's invective against "welfare mothers." My emphasis on the suburbs and the Sunbelt challenges this refusal to abandon the trope of southern exceptionalism, which misses the broader story of the grassroots mobilization of the Silent Majority that reframed racial discourse and subsumed regional differences beneath a national politics of middle-class entitlement.⁷

In too many accounts of southern political realignment during the postwar era, the Deep South is the tail that wags the dog. I argue instead that the suburban strategies developed in the Sunbelt South, not a Southern Strategy inspired by the Deep South and orchestrated from the White House, provided the blueprint for the transformation of regional politics and the parallel reconfiguration of national politics. My perspective provides an alternative narrative, building on the demographic studies of political scientists and the new literature on the American West, that revolves around the class-stratified politics, economic conservatism, and color-blind racial ideology produced by the postwar suburbanization of southern society and the population shift to the metropolitan Sunbelt. At the grassroots level, the Southern Strategy conspicuously backfired in each of its four genuine incarnations: the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948, the Goldwater debacle in 1964, the third-party Wallace movement in 1968, and the Nixon administration's disastrous experiment with race-baiting politics in the pivotal 1970 midterm elections. Instead of accomplishing the mission of reassembling the Solid South through the manipulation of white backlash, all of these campaigns failed to carry the high-growth states of the Upper and Outer South and instead achieved pyrrhic victories in the Deep South strongholds that backed the losing candidate in all but one presidential election between 1948 and 1968. During the same period, the suburban residents of the metropolitan regions and the white-collar migrants to the Sunbelt South increasingly diverged from the racial politics of the Black Belt and converged with the class-based voting patterns in the rest of the nation. The South's central contribution to national political realignment came primarily from the suburban

ethos of Sunbelt metropolises such as Atlanta and Charlotte, not the exportation of the political culture of the Deep South and the Black Belt.⁸

The disciplinary framework of American political history has been reinvigorated by an ongoing spatial turn that highlights the centrality of the grassroots in struggles over representative democracy and connects the structural insights of urban studies to the racial and class ideologies of white voters during the modern era. Pathbreaking community studies of the urban North have explored the racial contradiction at the heart of postwar liberalism, as the promise of equal opportunity for black citizens clashed with a white working-class backlash that defined segregated housing in secure neighborhoods as an essential feature of the New Deal social contract. In the blue-collar neighborhoods of the North and Midwest, as Thomas Sugrue and Arnold Hirsch have convincingly demonstrated, the counterattack against racial liberalism began with the Great Migration and not the Great Society, overlapping with the rise of massive resistance to the civil rights movement in the South. In the extension of this narrative, the backlash ethos of reactionary populism exploded in white working-class precincts during the racial conflicts of the 1960s and 1970s, resulting in the defection of the Reagan Democrats that destroyed Great Society liberalism and empowered Republican conservatism. These urban community studies provide a persuasive refutation of the “Southernization of America” thesis, alongside a compelling argument that the forces of racial backlash imbedded in the policies of postwar growth liberalism predated the showdowns of the sixties and the conservative mobilization of the New Right. At the same time, most of the new urban history has been written from an inside-out perspective, largely confined to episodes of direct racial friction within the city limits of the North and lacking a consciously suburban approach to the political landscape and the postwar metropolis. The next step for social and political historians is to establish a metropolitan framework that treats cities and suburbs as integral parts of the same narrative and extends the grassroots methodology to the South and the Sunbelt.⁹

A grassroots approach to political history reveals that the partisan affiliations of voters as Republicans or Democrats has often mattered less than the populist identifications of suburban residents as homeowners, taxpayers, and schoolparents. Scholars have only begun to examine the political culture of white-collar neighborhoods and the social movements of middle-class families in the sprawling suburbs of postwar America. Although most of the scholarship on modern conservatism remains wedded to a top-down viewpoint, recent books about the “suburban warriors” of the Sunbelt West have significantly expanded the grassroots narrative, from the Goldwater troops in the 1960s, to the tax revolts of the 1970s, to the evangelical mobilization of the 1980s and 1990s. But the linear emphasis of much of the Sunbelt literature on the roots of the New Right fails to incorporate the vast majority

of suburban homeowners who were neither committed activists nor conservative ideologues. The political outlook of white families affiliated with the Silent Majority overlapped considerably with Republican conservatism but extended well beyond a right-wing base, reaching the national stage as a grassroots revolt of the center that demanded and received a bipartisan defense of suburban entitlement programs. Mike Davis's pioneering work on Los Angeles in *City of Quartz* provides the best model for interpreting the localist politics of property values and consumer rights practiced in the suburbs and the Sunbelt, resulting in an exclusionary brand of homeowner populism grounded in class privileges and racial barriers imbedded in the built environment. Postwar growth liberalism played as important a role as Sunbelt conservatism in establishing the three defining pillars of suburban ideology—homeowner, taxpayer, and schoolparent status. A deeper understanding of the political culture of middle-class entitlement and urban disinvestment requires analysis of the public policies and suburban strategies that simultaneously reshaped the metropolitan landscape and the electoral map.¹⁰

The populist revolt of the Silent Majority reveals the vitality and the volatility of the political center during an era of substantial turmoil. As Michael Kazin has demonstrated, the prevailing language of populism shifted substantially over the course of the twentieth century, from the traditional critique of big business to a gathering assault on big government, even as the localist defense of Middle America from enemies at the top and the bottom remained a consistent feature of mainstream political discourse. The broader trajectory of suburban decentralization and Sunbelt development destroyed the New Deal political order but ultimately produced an electoral climate in which neither the Democrats nor the Republicans could maintain a secure and ideological governing majority. The upward mobility subsidized by the entitlement programs of the federal government undermined the working-class base of New Deal liberalism and turned suburban swing voters into a crucial demographic that came to drive the electoral strategies of both parties. In the affluent white-collar neighborhoods that have commanded the attention of politicians and policymakers, the fusion of class-based individualism with color-blind innocence has effectively concealed the centrality of the state in forging metropolitan patterns of residential segregation. In popular culture, historical amnesia dominates the conventional wisdom of the suburbanization process, perhaps most notably in the frontier mythology advanced by conservative journalist David Brooks: "It's as if Zeus came down and started plopping vast towns in the middle of the farmland and the desert overnight. Boom! A master planned community! Boom! A big-box mall!" At the same time, the liberal tendency to explain southern political realignment through the narrow prism of civil rights legislation signed by Lyndon Johnson or rhetorical strategies adopted by Richard Nixon

revolves around a fundamental misunderstanding of the long-term economic and demographic transformations produced by metropolitan development in the Sunbelt South.¹¹

The interrelationship between suburban expansion and urban retrenchment represents the most important framework for investigating political realignment in postwar America, but the overemphasis on the metaphor of “white flight” reduces suburbanization to an appendage of urban history and provides an incomplete account of the development of metropolitan space. As a causal explanation, the white flight thesis obscures the constellation of government policies that drove postwar suburbanization, excising structural analysis in favor of a narrative that revolves around individual racism. In *Crabgrass Frontier*, the 1985 synthesis that legitimated the field of suburban history, Kenneth Jackson argued that “economic causes have been even more important than skin color in the suburbanization of the United States. . . . Because of public policies favoring the suburbs, only one possibility [for homeownership] was economically feasible. The result, if not the intent, of Washington programs has been to encourage decentralization.” In the metropolitan Sunbelt, a typical resident of an outer-ring suburb constructed during the postwar boom never lived within the central city but instead had migrated from elsewhere, often from another state. In the urban South, the racial transition of particular neighborhoods generally reflected the foreseeable impact of official planning policies combined with the unscrupulous practices of the real estate industry. The civil rights agenda of court-ordered busing, which has received disproportionate blame for triggering white flight from urban schools and neighborhoods, actually produced an ambivalent legacy contingent upon the metropolitan scope of the integration remedy. Class-sensitive policies that included the suburbs resulted in relatively stable levels of school desegregation in a number of southern metropolises, while inequitable formulas that concentrated the burdens on working-class neighborhoods inflamed reactionary populism and accelerated white flight.¹²

An approach that connects metropolitan history to electoral realignment requires sustained attention to the interplay between race and class at the level of grassroots politics, including the populist ideology of homeowners and schoolparents, the unequal impact of public policies, and the inconsistent application of constitutional law. In his study of the urban crisis in postwar Detroit, Thomas Sugrue observes that “blackness and whiteness assumed a spatial definition,” especially as the visibility of residential segregation reinforced prejudicial stereotypes about inner-city pathology and suburban meritocracy. My methodology builds on this theoretical insight with the argument that class identity also took on a powerful spatial orientation in the postwar metropolis. The physical location of homes and schools became the primary markers of a family’s socioeconomic status—a synthesis

of class indicators such as income, occupation, and education—resulting in a hierarchy of metropolitan power reflected in deep divisions among white neighborhoods ranging from voting behavior to integration exposure levels. In affluent suburbs marked by residential segregation and homeowner security, with whiteness not in jeopardy, color-blind ideology fused the naturalization of racial privilege with unapologetic enthusiasm for class exclusion. By the 1970s, the evolution of constitutional law enshrined class discrimination as a permissible outcome of public policy by redefining state-sponsored residential segregation as “de facto” socioeconomic segregation. In the intersection of electoral politics and metropolitan space, the protection of the class privileges of affluent suburbs consistently displaced the burdens of racial integration onto working-class white neighborhoods, a volatile process that severely undermined the moral authority of liberalism and simultaneously disproved the populist solidarity proclaimed by the champions of the Silent Majority.¹³

THE SUNBELT SYNTHESIS

The growth policies of New Deal liberalism and the emergence of the Cold War military-industrial complex shaped the spatial patterns of development in the postwar suburbs and transformed the South and the West into the Sunbelt, the booming region stretching from Virginia to California. The Federal Housing Administration and the GI Bill subsidized the American Dream of middle-class homeownership for millions of white families that left the countryside and the cities to move to the sprawling suburbs. By excluding racial minorities from new suburban housing and redlining non-white urban neighborhoods, federal mortgage policies during the initial postwar decades systematically enforced residential segregation and reinforced marketplace discrimination. The Interstate Highway Act of 1956 facilitated automobile-based commuting and corporate relocation to the metropolitan fringe and, in combination with federal urban renewal programs, enabled municipal governments to concentrate racial minorities within inner-city ghettos. Cold War spending policies propelled a power shift to the southern and western states of the Sunbelt, where the population expanded between 1950 and 1975 at nearly twice the rate of Rust Belt counterparts in the Midwest and Northeast. White-collar migrants settled in suburban neighborhoods clustered around military bases, defense industries, and regional branch offices that reflected the explosive expansion of the technology-driven and service-oriented sectors of corporate capitalism. After the long recession of the seventies, the industrial centers of the Rust Belt increasingly emulated the Sunbelt model of high-tech innovation, business deregulation, flexible labor markets, and low-density sprawl. During

the second half of the twentieth century, the single-family suburban neighborhood and the postindustrial Sunbelt economy emerged as the dominant methods of social organization, the primary focus of land-use planning, and the clear fulcrums of political power.¹⁴

In the dynamic metropolises of the postwar South, the corporate leaders who controlled municipal politics embraced a growth blueprint that could be called the Sunbelt Synthesis, a booster vision designed to transcend the burdens of the region's history through the twin pillars of rapid economic development and enforced racial harmony. By the 1940s, the pragmatic architects of the Sunbelt Synthesis recognized that the business agenda of industrial recruitment and regional modernization required a political culture of racial moderation. This conspicuous secession from the traditional values of the distinctive South found its most popular expression in the recurring celebrations of the arrival of a truly New South. In the region's fastest-growing cities, the futuristic New South ethos approached the status of a civic religion, a discourse of power that promised to synchronize the metropolitan landscape with the national standards of economic progress and suburban prosperity. In 1959, when metropolitan Atlanta surpassed the population landmark of one million residents, Mayor William Hartsfield proclaimed: "We roll out the red carpet for every damn Yankee who comes in here with two strong hands and some money." During the civil rights era, Atlanta's white leadership trumpeted a marketing slogan called the "City Too Busy to Hate," while corporate boosters in North Carolina's largest city championed an exceptionalist mythology known as the "Charlotte Way"—both of which embodied the mantra of a flourishing New South marked by moderate race relations in full alignment with national values. As in the nation at large, which operated under its own progressive mythology of racial harmony, the politics of moderation in the Sunbelt South attempted to move beyond the Jim Crow system of legal segregation through the spatial policies of suburban sprawl and urban containment.¹⁵

The practitioners of the Sunbelt Synthesis pursued a strategic commitment to racial peace through the planning policies of residential segregation. The corporate leaders of the New South, a group that has received excessive credit for guiding local communities into compliance with desegregation, also played the most significant role in constructing a metropolitan landscape of spatial apartheid that first reoriented and then outlasted the arrangements of Jim Crow. Between the 1940s and the mid-1970s, the local Chamber of Commerce served as a shadow government in almost every major city touted as part of the New South. Business interests dominated municipal politics through at-large voting systems that efficiently disfranchised working-class black and white neighborhoods. Levels of residential segregation in the metropolitan South increased substantially during the postwar decades, as municipal governments tapped federal funds to

accelerate white-collar expansion on the suburban fringe and expand the central business district by relocating minority families to a disfavored sector of the city. The phenomenon generally condensed to the metaphor of white flight represented instead the intentional outcome of these city-building processes, as racial turnover inevitably followed in the section of the metropolis designated as the minority ghetto, usually among working-class white families who lacked the political power to alter growth policies. The corporate leaders of Sunbelt metropolises such as Atlanta and Charlotte perceived residential segregation as the progressive antidote to the interracial violence that tarnished the rural southern countryside as well as industrial cities from Birmingham to Detroit. This moderate version of managed race relations implemented at the level of the built environment embodied the ambitious New South project to achieve full reintegration into the nation.¹⁶

Municipal politics is a critical frame of reference for understanding the trajectory of the urban civil rights movement, as numerous community studies have demonstrated. In the cities of the New South, the particular arrangements of municipal politics shaped and constrained the strategies of local civil rights activists, especially middle-class black leaders who pursued racial advancement through a combination of backroom negotiations, electoral leverage, and eventually litigation. During the 1950s and 1960s, the staying power of corporate regimes depended upon unequal but resilient electoral coalitions between white families who lived in affluent neighborhoods and black voters who resided on the other side of town. The racial moderation at the center of the Sunbelt Synthesis simultaneously attempted to prevent segregationist violence at all costs and to defuse civil rights demonstrations through a philosophy of gradualism and negotiated progress that emphasized access to public accommodations. But the biracial alliances in these New South cities revolved around a devil's bargain for the integrationist agenda of the civil rights movement, because municipal politics also served as the conduit for the structural inequality produced by corporate capitalism in the contests over control of metropolitan space. Urban regimes in the metropolitan Sunbelt represented concrete moneyed interests—primarily the banking, homebuilding, construction, retail, and real estate industries—a power dynamic that blurred and in many cases eviscerated the line between public policy and private capital. Generally labeled the “power structure” or the “downtown establishment,” these municipal coalitions stood at the nexus between the growth policies of the national state and the segregated development of metropolitan space, with principal leverage over the allocation of federal funds for transportation networks, urban renewal (castigated by opponents as “Negro removal”), and infrastructure for suburban subdivisions and shopping malls.¹⁷

The downtown leadership of New South cities adopted regional planning policies that segregated the metropolis by race and class while seeking to manage the centrifugal consequences of suburban sprawl set in motion by the public-private growth machine. Power and resources in the Sunbelt South flowed to a favored quadrant of the metropolis that I have designated the “island suburbs,” a cluster of upper-middle-class and wealthy white neighborhoods located inside the city limits and protected by exclusionary zoning policies from racial integration and socioeconomic diversity. Archetypes of these island suburbs include the Buckhead section of northside Atlanta, the Myers Park area of southeast Charlotte, the graceful neighborhoods of Richmond’s West End, the upscale subdivisions of east Memphis, and the prosperous enclaves of northwest Raleigh. Daily life in the island suburbs of the New South mirrored the consumer patterns and residential exclusivity of northern counterparts such as the Brookline section outside Boston or the Grosse Pointe neighborhoods adjacent to Detroit, with the crucial exception that city-friendly annexation laws in most southern states resulted in the incorporation of the Buckheads and Myers Parks inside the municipal boundaries. In the most critical element of the Sunbelt Synthesis, the downtown establishment championed the automatic annexation of new suburban developments and the consolidation of city and county school systems as the enlightened path of metropolitan cooperation that would ensure a healthy tax base and avoid the debilitating racial conflicts of the emerging urban crisis in the North. This Sunbelt version of regional planning aimed to minimize the impact of white out-migration from areas experiencing black residential expansion, and therefore maintain elite control of municipal politics, through steady annexation of middle-class voters who would enjoy the suburban lifestyle while remaining loyal to the New South synthesis of racial moderation in service of economic growth.¹⁸

At the grassroots level, white-collar families in the metropolitan South formulated their own variation of the politics of racial moderation, a neighborhood-based outlook that elevated the class priorities of quality education and national citizenship over the region’s traditionalist campaigns in defense of white supremacy and states’ rights. In the clashes over school desegregation during the decade after *Brown*, white moderation assumed a specific definition: open support for compliance with the law and preservation of public education rather than an absolutist defense of the racial caste line. After the Supreme Court invalidated the principle of “separate but equal,” segregationist leaders from the rural South championed a caste-based policy of massive resistance that included the closing of public schools to prevent any degree of integration. White liberals and moderates from the island suburbs countered with a class-based desegregation compromise that revolved around “freedom of choice” and “neighborhood schools,” ex-

plicitly marketed to metropolitan families as a “race-neutral” formula that would minimize integration through reliance upon residential segregation. This embryonic version of color-blind ideology accepted the one-way assimilation of meritocratic (meaning middle-class) black students into white schools, if often reluctantly, but also foreshadowed the fierce opposition to court-ordered busing of white children as an assault on the class achievements and consumer rights of upwardly mobile suburban families. In the 1970s, the antibusing movement based in the middle-class suburbs rallied around a color-blind defense anchored in the particular arrangements of the moderate-brokered accommodation to the *Brown* decision: that housing patterns in the metropolitan South corresponded to the (allegedly) de facto residential segregation of northern and western cities rather than historical forms of de jure segregation in violation of constitutional law.¹⁹

The Sunbelt Synthesis came under a multifaceted assault during the 1970s, as civil rights activists and urban working-class neighborhoods mobilized against the political monopoly exercised by the corporate leadership, and middle-class homeowners in outer-ring suburbs revolted against a broad range of metropolitan initiatives from annexation to busing. In a straightforward assessment of power and inequality across the New South, the *Raleigh News and Observer* acknowledged that “the present system is very responsive to the wishes of developers, businessmen, and similar groups but not to the average citizen, neighborhood associations and minorities.” The municipal coalitions that had governed throughout the postwar era collapsed in some cities after demographic transition provided an opening for the formal exercise of black power, and they underwent substantial reconstitution in others after the busing litigation initiated by the NAACP sought metropolitan remedies for school segregation through the inclusion of the suburbs. The shifting currents at the grassroots level revealed that for all the populist rhetoric about a unified Silent Majority, racial conflicts consistently divided white communities along the neighborhood lines of class and geography. While the annexed island suburbs wielded their political influence to impose integration burdens on blue-collar neighborhoods, interracial working-class movements emerged to demand municipal reforms such as district elections and busing equalization. The Sunbelt metropolises of Atlanta and Charlotte appeared to offer the prototypes of the regional future, the peaceful and prosperous models of the New South. But the trajectories of the two cities also represent the divergent paths available to counterparts throughout the region—hypersegregated urban schools that illustrate the devastating failure of the *Brown* decision in the fragmented capital of Georgia, and a successfully integrated school system through a metropolitan busing plan that overcame a protracted revolt of the Silent Majority in the white-collar suburbs of North Carolina.²⁰

BEYOND SOUTHERN EXCEPTIONALISM

The era of southern exceptionalism is over. The historical linchpins of regional distinctiveness—a public culture of white supremacy rooted in legally mandated segregation, an underdeveloped economy dominated by the agricultural sector, and a single-party political system symbolized by the Solid South—dissolved as a result of the sustained pressure of the civil rights movement, the federal spending and corporate investment that stimulated the Sunbelt boom, and the postwar demographic migration to the cities and suburbs. In 1949, political scientist V. O. Key famously observed: “The fundamental explanation of southern politics is that the black-belt whites succeeded in imposing their will on their states and thereby presented a solid regional front in national politics on the race issue.” The following decades decisively ruptured this phenomenon, as a steady stream of racial conflicts produced not regional unity but instead a divided white South, internally split along lines of class and geography. By the end of the 1970s, more than two-thirds of the electorate in the eleven southern states resided in metropolitan regions, where residential patterns of race and class mirrored the prevailing trends throughout the nation. Middle-class suburban voters became the driving force behind the steady postwar growth of the southern wing of the Republican party, including large numbers of white-collar migrants who relocated from the North and Midwest to work in the corporate economy. As the Sunbelt Synthesis of racial moderation and economic growth replaced the Black Belt politics of white supremacy, the regional distinctiveness forged by the culture of Jim Crow gave way to the nationalizing trends of residential segregation and suburban exclusion. In 1974, in an accurate assessment of the disappearance of the exceptional South, journalist John Egerton observed that the region’s “racial and economic and urban and political characteristics are very nearly the same as the dominant characteristics of the nation.”²¹

The civil rights movement and the Sunbelt boom jointly destroyed the political mythology of the Solid South. During the decade after the U.S. Congress passed the Civil Rights Act (1964) and the Voting Rights Act (1965), federal enforcement and court-ordered busing transformed the region’s public schools into the most racially integrated in the nation, while the African-American electorate rapidly emerged as a powerful force in southern politics. The arrival of a competitive two-party system also depended upon the series of Supreme Court reapportionment decisions that began with *Baker v. Carr* (1962), which turned out to be as significant as *Brown* in reshaping the political culture of the South. The newly established principle of “one person, one vote” invalidated the rampant malapportionment that had long distorted the region’s political climate, shifting power from the

rural countryside to the metropolitan areas where a majority of people actually lived. With the cautionary note that any geographic model highlights general trends rather than exact science, my approach in the following chapters will adopt the formula advanced by Earl and Merle Black in *Politics and Society in the South*. The Black Belt describes counties that contained an African-American population of approximately one-third or greater, and the Deep South/Lower South labels include the five adjoining states with the highest percentage of black residents: Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana, South Carolina, and Georgia. The Upper South/Outer South designations encompass the six-state subregion with large majorities of white citizens and high levels of metropolitan growth during the postwar era: Florida, Texas, Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Arkansas. My own emphasis on the Sunbelt/Black Belt divergence overlays this geographic formula, distinguishing metropolises such as Atlanta that are physically located in the Deep South but politically and demographically situated in the New South.²²

The fiction of “de facto” segregation provided perhaps the most enduring, but also the most problematic, contrast between the exceptional South and the rest of the nation during the civil rights era. According to the prevailing regional distinction, enshrined in constitutional law and national discourse, racial inequality in the South represented segregation in law (de jure), while residential and educational patterns outside the region represented segregation in fact but not enforced by law (de facto). In the early 1960s, the NAACP initiated constitutional challenges against school segregation in several northern cities, but federal courts consistently ruled that the *Brown* mandate did not encompass the de facto landscape beyond the South. In the fall of 1963, when New York City faced mass boycotts by minority families that demanded busing to desegregate “racially imbalanced schools,” the *New York Times* responded that the problem of “de facto segregation . . . is entirely different from that in the South. . . . The root is not in any systematic policy of racial exclusion fostered by law or administrative policy but in neighborhood population patterns.” Congress reinforced this conventional wisdom in the Civil Rights Act of 1964, specifically excluding from the scope of desegregation policy any effort to “achieve a racial balance in any school by requiring the transportation of pupils or students from one school to another.” That same year, white voters in the city of Detroit and the state of California approved referendums against open-housing legislation, grassroots campaigns driven by property-rights defenses of residential segregation in a nascent display of the color-blind revolt against “forced integration.” The powerful de facto mythology depended upon a fading regional contrast and a false narrative of national innocence, because public policies in the metropolitan South and North were still in the process of constructing a more intractable landscape of racial apartheid, an ultramodern version of de jure segregation.²³

In the era of the Silent Majority, Richard Nixon announced that “we finally have in this country what the South has wanted and what the South deserves, a one-nation policy—not a southern strategy and not a northern strategy, but a one-nation strategy.” The theme of regional convergence infused the president’s appeals to the suburban voters whom he targeted in the 1968 election, the residents of the white-collar precincts that formed the Republican base in the Sunbelt South. During the next two years, the neighborhood schools movement in the suburban South fashioned the de facto mythology into a coherent color-blind platform that denounced court-ordered busing as a violation of the Civil Rights Act and defended the metropolitan landscape as identical to the large cities of the North. The Nixon administration promptly announced a new school integration policy that expanded the boundaries of de facto segregation to encompass the residential patterns of the metropolitan South. In concert with the color-blind demands of the Silent Majority, the White House recast public policies that sought “racial balance” and “economic integration” in suburban schools and neighborhoods as parallel forms of reverse discrimination, lacking constitutional authority to challenge the alleged class boundaries that defined de facto segregation. During the spring of 1970, Vice President Spiro Agnew reinforced this message during a trip to Georgia, where he appeared in front of the Confederate Memorial carved onto Stone Mountain, a longtime symbol of Old South resistance to racial equality. With Robert E. Lee and Stonewall Jackson riding by overhead, the vice president delivered a color-blind celebration of the Sunbelt Synthesis: “Just as the South cannot afford to discriminate against any of its own people, the rest of the nation cannot afford to discriminate against the South. . . . The New South embraces the future and presses forward with a robust economy fueled by industrial development. . . . The South that will make its greatest contribution to the American Dream is the New South.”²⁴

This book ends as a national story set in the suburbs, but it begins as a southern story set in the nation. Part I, “The Triumph of Moderation,” starts by taking the reader on a tour of the varied geographic and political crossroads of the postwar South, revolving around the internal schisms that surfaced during the era of massive resistance to the *Brown* decision. The initial battles over school desegregation forced white southerners to take sides in a dramatic social and political showdown that pitted the survival of public education against an uncompromising defense of the racial caste system. At the center of this struggle stood a situationally silent majority of white moderates concentrated in the metropolitan regions, a group that sought to balance a general preference for the status quo with opposition to segregationist policies that preached defiance of the federal courts and abandonment of public schools. White liberals launched a comprehensive initiative to convince businessmen to lead their communities into compliance with

the law, but the turning point came from grassroots open-schools movements organized by ordinary middle-class parents from the island suburbs of the major cities. Seeking to revitalize the collapsed middle ground, white moderates in the metropolitan South devised a new class-based desegregation blueprint that discredited the reactionary politics of massive resistance by evading the civil rights vision of good-faith integration. While part I ranges broadly across the regional landscape, the bulk of this section explores the grassroots mobilization of the open-schools movement in Atlanta and the long-term fate of the politics of racial moderation in the metropolis acknowledged to be the headquarters of the New South. The saga of massive resistance marks a key turning point in the postwar narrative of southern transformation, the symbolic last stand for the caste politics of white supremacy and the collective debut for the suburban politics of color-blind populism and middle-class consciousness.

Part II, “The Revolt of the Center,” investigates the Silent Majority at the grassroots level through a community study of the suburban uprising of middle-class families during the five-year busing crisis in Charlotte. In 1969, the metropolitan school district in Charlotte became the first place in the United States to face a judicial mandate to overcome residential segregation through two-way busing between the white neighborhoods on the suburban fringe and the black schools of the urban core. Charlotte’s antibusing movement rallied around a color-blind defense of neighborhood schools and joined a national campaign to mobilize homeowners and schoolparents in the middle-class suburbs, but events on the local landscape revealed that the populist aura of the Silent Majority obscured substantial conflicts among white families divided by class and geography. An interracial movement for busing equalization eventually achieved a stable integration resolution in Charlotte, in stark contrast to the fate of most other large cities throughout the country, but not before the local revolt of the Silent Majority played a crucial role in the reshaping of southern and national politics. The “Suburban Strategies” recounted in part III offer a regionwide perspective on these developments, beginning with the postwar growth of the Republican party in the metropolitan South and the subsequent reinvention of the New Democrats as a moderate and interracial party of the center. The Nixon administration’s short-lived experiment with an authentic Southern Strategy backfired at the height of the busing controversy, but the alignment of federal desegregation policies with the grassroots demands of the Silent Majority established the spatial constraints on the scope of *Brown*. When the Supreme Court rejected metropolitan integration remedies in pivotal cases involving Richmond and Detroit, most suburban families throughout the nation escaped accountability for the structural inequality highlighted in the Kerner Report.

In the spring of 1970, after the NAACP secured a court-ordered busing

plan for the city of Richmond, a white father named Benjamin Braswell announced: "I do not care what race my son's classmates are but it will not better my son's education to bus him anywhere. I will not stand for it. I was in the good old U.S. Navy during World War II to fight for the freedom of myself and my family and I stand ready, willing, and able to do it again in my own country if I have to." Tapping into the color-blind rhetoric of the Silent Majority, he explained that the "NAACP wanted the freedom of choice plan to begin with and I think that they were right. So what is right for them is also right for the Braswell family under the Federal Civil Rights Act." Two years later, the Reverend Robert Hall, Jr., sent an equally passionate letter to his Republican congressman, just before a federal appeals court invalidated a metropolitan integration formula that would have consolidated the predominantly white suburbs of Richmond and the majority-black schools inside the city. A white father of two children, Hall admitted that the prospect of busing originally "threw us into a near panic. . . . After much soul-searching, however, we decided along with many neighbors and friends to take positive steps to come to grips with the situation." He initially had not understood the rationale behind the integration mandate, but now he realized that "the objective is to completely dismantle a dual school system in order to make available the opportunity for a quality education to all children." Hall warned that the inclusion or exclusion of the affluent suburbs would determine whether racial integration succeeded or failed, because "the power base has been and still is white middle-class America." In conclusion, the pastor conceded that he did not "hold out much hope for imaginative leadership of the American people in sorting out this difficult and emotionally explosive issue." The experiences of white southerners as they sorted out this New American Dilemma, some enlisting in the Silent Majority and others transformed by the civil rights movement, is the story that follows.²⁵

