MARTA AND THE MAKING OF SUBURBAN CONSERVATISM

by

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(Under the Direction of James C. Cobb)

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the debate surrounding the creation of the Metropolitan Atlanta Rail Transit Authority (MARTA) between 1960 and 1972. When it appeared on area ballots in November of 1968, MARTA was to be the crowning achievement of a decade long push for growth development. However, the measure failed, largely as a result of opposition from the city’s black voters. Over the course of the next three years, the city’s black leadership and white business community renegotiated their relationship and reinvented the system as a genuine public service. However, when it appeared on area ballots a second time, in 1971, suburban voters erected a populist defense of local autonomy and defeated the system by a four to one margin. Using a combination of newspaper accounts, archival sources, and oral interviews, I argue that the system’s suburban critics created a suburban identity that fused racial anxieties, fierce individualism, and hostility to the federal government. In mounting their opposition, Atlanta’s suburban conservatives experimented with themes that have continued to resonate in American politics and foreshadowed the coming dominance of the Republican Party in the formerly “Solid South.”

INDEX WORDS: Atlanta, MARTA, Conservatism, Suburban, Race, Identity
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B.A., Centre College, 2001

A Thesis Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of The University of Georgia in Partial
Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree

MASTER OF ARTS

ATHENS, GEORGIA

2006
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August 2006
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am deeply indebted to my Major Professor, Dr. Jim Cobb, whose comments and support have made this a much better thesis. I am also grateful to my committee members, Dr. John Inscoe and Dr. Robert Pratt, for their encouragement and patience and to Dr. Laura Mason for her helpful suggestions. A portion of my thesis appeared in a paper given at the Georgia Association of Historians 2006 Annual Conference, where it benefited from Dr. Tom Scott’s thoughtful analysis. I also wish to thank Stan May and Truett Cathy, both of whom graciously agreed to interviews and were generous with their time and recollections. Thanks also to the staffs at the Atlanta History Center, the Georgia State Archives, and the Atlanta Regional Commission for their assistance. Finally, I owe a large debt of gratitude to my parents, for their support in this, and in all my previous endeavors. Every son should be so fortunate.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TABLE OF CONTENTS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS                                                                                     iv</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>CHAPTER</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 INTRODUCTION                                                                                       1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 THE MAKING OF A NATIONAL CITY                                                                     13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 BLACK POWER, WHITE NOISE                                                                          39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 SUBURBAN RESISTANCE, SUBURBAN IDENTITY                                                            69</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 EPILOGUE                                                                                           115</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BIBLIOGRAPHY</strong>                                                                                     127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
“If getting into all of the racial woes is a part of the MARTA deal let’s vote it down one hundred percent,” advised *Clayton News Daily* editor Jim Wood in November of 1972. Neither did the editor’s qualms end there. There were the “school problems, the downtown crime on the streets problems, the racketeers battling for control of the city problems, the Sam Massell problems, etc.” At issue was suburban participation in the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, MARTA, a seventy-mile network of rail lines and feeder buses that would be the most costly public works undertaking in the city’s history. To its supporters, MARTA was a transportation cure-all that would ease the city’s congestion, enhance the mobility of the urban poor, shore up the declining central business district and provide unmistakable evidence of Atlanta’s status as a “national city.” To its suburban opponents, however, MARTA seemed a boondoggle for Atlanta’s business establishment, a welfare provision for the inner city poor and an invitation to help bear Atlanta’s burdens. Like Wood, most suburbanites believed that Atlanta was not merely proposing an extension of its rails, but also an extension of its “problems.” Their calculus was simple. “If we have rails and buses connecting us directly with Atlanta, we become a part of Atlanta and its problems. The poor and slums
and ghettos follow the buses. Isn’t that what most of us moved to Clayton County to get
away from?”

With his racialized portrayal of Atlanta as a city teeming with crime and poverty, Wood betrayed the marked fears of besiegement that animated suburban resistance to MARTA. As the nation underwent desegregation during the 1960s, tensions flared along the racial fault lines of transition neighborhoods and civil unrest erupted in American cities. Popular descriptions of tumult and urban decay such as Barry Goldwater’s campaign rallying cry “crime in the streets” and later more suggestive slogans such as “Support Your Local Police” and “Law and Order” reinforced the familiar pathologies of urban decline, and middle class whites beat hasty retreats from American cities. Atlanta was no exception. Some 60,000 whites abandoned the city during the sixties and another 100,000 followed their lead over the course of the next decade. By 1970, white flight had produced a bare black majority and black control of City Hall was eminent. However, because it crossed county borders, the rail transit proposal threatened the security and racial integrity of suburban communities. In this way, the MARTA debates functioned as a proxy battle over the future of metropolitan relationships. When casting their votes, suburban residents were forced to choose between suburban separatism and a region linked by rails and mutual responsibility. By a four to one margin, they chose the former.  

To be sure, Atlanta’s prevailing racial dynamic—a newly assertive black majority inside the city limits and a retreating white middle class along the suburban periphery—provided the context for the MARTA debates. However, a simple bifocal lens that sees

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the region’s politics only in black and white would fail to bring the matter into proper focus. No less important to understanding suburban resistance are the class antagonisms that divided the region’s white residents. As historian Kevin Kruse has demonstrated, the breakdown of massive resistance and the failure of universal white solidarity revealed class cleavages that had lurked just beneath the surface of the city’s politics for more than a generation. Over the course of the sixties, Atlanta had amassed an impressive record of “progressive” reforms. By pursuing a course of racial moderation and business pragmatism, the city avoided the ugliness and strife experienced by its regional peers and distinguished itself nationally as “The City Too Busy to Hate.” As lower and middle class whites had come to understand, however, measures hailed as “progressive” ultimately resulted in their bearing the burdens of desegregation while affluent northside whites retreated to the security afforded them by the city’s private institutions. Because the system was designed and promoted by members of Atlanta’s elite downtown establishment, most middle class suburbanites believed that MARTA threatened the application of this double standard on a metro-wide scale. Despite the term’s negative connotations among middle and working class whites, MARTA’s salesmen nonetheless touted the system as a “progressive” solution to the congestion that threatened to stymie Atlanta’s development. Suburban voters were unimpressed. “If that’s progress,” observed Jim Wood in his weekly column, “let’s not ask for more back-stabbing progress.”

Their ambivalence towards certain aspects of “progress” suggests that suburban Atlantans shared much in common with their counterparts throughout the country. In

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Suburban Warriors, historian Lisa McGirr discovered a similarly selective embrace of modernism amongst Orange County conservatives during the same period. Whereas a generation of American scholars including Richard Hofstadter, Daniel Bell, and Seymour Martin Lipset had dismissed conservatism as an anachronistic vestige of anti-modern ideology, McGirr found a vital conservatism flourishing in the most modern of American environments. Even as her subjects found employment in high-tech industries and partook of the postwar consumer bounty, they nonetheless bridled at the “collectivism” of liberal reform and defended the primacy of the church, family, and local institutions in community life. According to McGirr, this dichotomy, which Hofstadter and his peers would have found inexplicable, demonstrated the “dual nature of modern American conservatism: its strange mixture of traditionalism and modernity, a combination that suggests the adaptability, resilience, and thus perhaps, the intractability of the Right in American life.”

Like Southern California, suburban Atlanta shared in the dynamic Sunbelt growth boom that brought high-tech industries, government contractors, and corporate newcomers south of the thirty-seventh parallel. Moreover, the city’s middle class suburbanites likewise worshipped at the altar of individualism and espoused a political philosophy devoted to low taxes and limited governmental intrusion in local affairs. For this reason, MARTA’s federal financing and proposed fifteen-cent fare aroused considerable alarm in the city’s suburbs. Adopted as a concession to the city’s black political leadership, the subsidized fare made MARTA the least expensive public transportation system in the nation. However, rather than welcome the reduced fares, the

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tax-conscious homeowners of suburbia lambasted the proposed fare as a “socialistic” handout to the city’s poor and dismissed the system as a tool for metro wide wealth redistribution.

The ideological kinship shared by McGirr’s Western suburban warriors and Atlanta’s suburban conservatives found perhaps its most refined expression in their mutual hostility to big government and federal reform. As Michael Kazin has argued, the federal government had, by 1971, eclipsed big business as the chief target of populist critiques. Federal remedies for structural inequalities were unpopular with the majority of moderate, middle class whites and Uncle Sam thus emerged as an unwelcome figure in most American suburbs. Because it received two-thirds of its funding from the federal government, MARTA seemed a fearsome Trojan Horse for metro wide busing schemes and the dispersal of public housing. The system’s suburban opponents predicted that Atlanta’s public housing would be distributed throughout the metro region and situated along rail lines in suburban communities where property values would subsequently decline and crime would prevail. Worse still, suburban voters fretted that area students would be bused to and from Atlanta to achieve court-ordered desegregation mandates, thereby diminishing the quality of local schools and the value of suburban residential investments. By highlighting middle class dissatisfaction with intrusive federal social policies, the MARTA referendum illustrated the anxieties that undermined the national liberal agenda and suggested the coming dominance of the Republican Party in the suburban South.⁵

Because they feared it would expedite the integration of racially homogenous suburban communities, because it suggested the hegemony of Atlanta’s ruling class, because it seemed a “socialistic” scheme for metro wide wealth redistribution, and because they worried that it would make their communities vulnerable to the whims of a capricious federal government, the middle class residents of Atlanta’s suburbs erected a populist defense of local autonomy and dealt MARTA an impressive defeat at the polls. In so doing, they created, sometimes consciously, a viable suburban identity that was separate from and in opposition to the city center. Rather than contribute to metropolitan accord, the MARTA referendum revealed the vast gulf that separated Atlanta from its suburbs and reinforced the fragmentation that characterized the metropolitan landscape.

Thereafter, the suburban identity that coalesced amid the MARTA debates proved remarkably compatible with the conservative politics of the GOP. Suburban communities outside of Atlanta and throughout the nation provided a stronghold for the emerging Republican majority that Kevin Phillips first predicted in 1968. In mounting their opposition, MARTA’s suburban opponents experimented with themes and rhetorical devices that have since demonstrated an enduring resonance in national politics. The often racialized rhetoric employed by the system’s suburban critics struck a middle ground between George Wallace’s seething defiance and Richard Nixon’s more palatable political pitch. While the rough edges of conservative rhetoric have been polished clean in the decades since suburban Atlantans defeated MARTA, conservative politicians have nonetheless returned time and again to the same touchstones that mapped the geography of Atlanta’s rail transit debate. As historian Dan Carter has argued, a common thread linked Wallace’s fiery race bating, Nixon’s Southern Strategy, Reagan’s coded overtures
to states rights, and Bush’s Willie Horton fear mongering. In each case, Carter observed, “the Wallace music played on.” Taken alongside the continued expansion of the nation’s suburbs and lingering suspicions regarding the efficacy and desirability of federal reform, the persistence of race as a divisive and compelling issue helped to engineer the creation of a conservative majority in national and southern politics.\(^6\)

That MARTA provoked a conservative backlash amongst suburban residents and foreshadowed the coming of a conservative counterrevolution in local and national politics may well be the system’s most important legacy. MARTA’s story, however, actually begins a decade earlier in the vaunted halls of the Commerce Club, home to Atlanta’s influential Chamber of Commerce. It was there, in 1960, that then Chamber vice president Ivan Allen unveiled an ambitious six-point program for reform and redevelopment that included stadium construction, slum removal, and the development of a rail transit system that would ease the city’s congestion and distinguish Atlanta as the southern capital of the Sunbelt. As a second-generation member of the city’s business elite, Allen possessed the position and pedigree necessary to unify the city’s business interests behind his bold proposal. After winning the mayoralty the following year, Allen undertook to fulfill his vision of Atlanta as a “national city.” Under his leadership, the city lured the major league Braves to town, swept vast slums away from the city center, and reshaped downtown as a national convention destination. By the time he left office in 1969, the mayor could confidently boast that “Atlanta was the city of the sixties in America.”\(^7\)


Although planning for the system began in earnest shortly after Allen took office in 1961, a series of legislative hurdles slowed MARTA’s initial progress. By January of 1966, however, MARTA was a fully constituted legal entity. The blue ribbon board established later that year to guide the system’s development read like a roster of the city’s rich and famous. Among others, Atlanta’s delegation included establishment fixtures like department store mogul Richard Rich, furniture retailer Rawson Haverty, C&S Bank President Mills Lane, and the board’s lone black member, L.D. Milton, an elderly and cautious representative of the city’s old guard of black leadership.8

Over the course of the next two years, the MARTA board conducted their affairs largely in secret, ostensibly in an effort to remain “above politics.” It should come as little surprise then that when they were unveiled two years later, the system’s plans reflected the desires and interests of their authors. Based on the premise that what was good for downtown was good for Atlanta, the 1968 proposal consisted of two radial lines, one running North-South, the other East-West, intersecting at Five Points, the very heart of downtown. While they were sure to inflate downtown property values and protect the primacy of the central business district from suburban competition, the plans offered little to black commuters who would be underserved by the East-West line. Moreover, because the system was designed in large part to ferry white middle class suburbanites downtown for shopping and entertainment, board members scheduled the North-South line to be completed first, despite the fact that the need was greatest in the city’s westside neighborhoods. When they appeared on ballots in the city of Atlanta and in Fulton and DeKalb Counties in November of 1968, the system’s plans reflected the confidence and

8 Dick Hebert, Highways to Nowhere: The Politics of City Transportation (Indianapolis: Bobby-Merrill, 1972), 111-112.
insularity of Atlanta’s business community. As Allen recalled in his memoirs, the public-private partnership forged between City Hall and the Atlanta’s business elites had enabled a decade of phenomenal growth. Having already fulfilled in short order the other objectives outlined in Allen’s six-point program, the city’s business elites expected that momentum alone would ensure MARTA’s success at the polls.

They were mistaken. The measure failed in all three jurisdictions, largely as a result of opposition from the city’s black community. Since 1949, when John Wesley Dobbs and A.T. Walden established the Atlanta Negro Voters League, the city’s black political leadership had worked closely with their counterparts in the white business community to forge a powerful electoral coalition. Under the League’s direction, black voters supported racially moderate white candidates with pro-business agendas in exchange for the incremental desegregation of public spaces. The arrangement barred more rabid, race-baiting candidates from City Hall and earned Atlanta its progressive reputation as “The City Too Busy to Hate.” That MARTA suffered its 1968 defeat at the hands of black voters, however, suggests that the biracial coalition that had controlled the city’s politics for more than a generation was on the verge of collapse. As middle class whites had begun to resettle in the suburbs, the city’s black population claimed an increasingly larger share of Atlanta’s population. At the same time, a new generation of black political activists emerged to challenge not only the city’s white establishment, but also the League’s accommodationist leadership. Their opposition to the 1968 MARTA proposal thus signaled that Atlanta’s younger generation of black political leaders were
unwilling to remain a junior partner in the city’s affairs and marked a turning point in the Atlanta’s biracial politics.\(^9\)

If the system’s business-friendly 1968 plans represented MARTA’s first stage of significance, its defeat by a newly assertive black political community marked its second. Over the next three years, the erstwhile members of the city’s biracial electoral coalition underwent a period of compromise and renegotiated their relationship. Chastened by their defeat, the MARTA board welcomed its critics to the table and actively solicited input from the city’s diverse constituencies. When the revised plans were published in 1971, the system resembled a genuine public service rather than a businessman’s boondoggle. The board agreed to honor minority employment guarantees, routes were modified to better serve minority communities, and perhaps most significantly, the system would charge a remarkably low fare of fifteen cents.

As a result of the board’s changes, voters approved the system in the city of Atlanta and in Fulton and DeKalb counties. However, its defeat by suburban voters in Clayton and Gwinnett meant that MARTA would not adequately address the metro region’s transportation problems and ensured that the suburban employment bounty would remain outside the reach of the city’s lower income job seekers. Moreover, suburban resistance to MARTA reinforced the lines separating Atlanta from its suburbs and foreshadowed metropolitan relationships that would be characterized by discord rather than cooperation. Thus, in the little more than a decade between its proposal in Ivan Allen’s six-point program and its defeat by suburban voters in 1971, MARTA’s progress highlights three critical developments in Atlanta’s history: the heady bluster of

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the city’s homegrown business establishment during its 1960s heyday, the political
ascendancy of Atlanta’s black majority, and the secession of the city’s suburbs from the
old urban order and the consequent fragmentation of metropolitan politics.

In chapter one, I discuss MARTA’s evolution from its proposal in 1960 to its first
appearance on metro ballots in 1968, placing its development in the context of the city’s
phenomenal decade of growth. Dating back to Henry Grady’s late nineteenth century
salesmanship, Atlanta boasts a long history of boosters and bluster. The city’s 1960s
campaign for growth and development was merely the latest, albeit the most successful,
chapter of its generations-long quest for economic expansion. As the centerpiece of
Atlanta’s ambitious development program during the sixties, MARTA affords a valuable
point of entry to consider the intersection of business and politics in the city’s history.

In the second chapter, I discuss the reasons for the system’s 1968 defeat and the
period of negotiations and revisions that followed. Dissatisfied with their limited voice in
the city’s politics and invigorated by the national Civil Rights Movement, Atlanta’s black
community seized the MARTA referendum as an opportunity to flex its newfound
political muscle. During the three years of deliberations that followed, representatives of
the city’s biracial coalition renegotiated their relationship and reinvented MARTA as a
genuine public service. The confidence and combativeness demonstrated by the city’s
black political leadership heralded a new day in the city’s politics and foreshadowed the
election of Maynard Jackson as the South’s first big city mayor in 1973.

In the third chapter, I analyze suburban resistance to MARTA. Having in some
cases doubled their population during the previous decade, Atlanta’s suburbs were
fundamentally new communities. MARTA thus initiated a public conversation regarding
local autonomy and forced suburban voters to reconsider their relationship with Atlanta. In so doing, suburban residents articulated a suburban identity that fused racial anxieties with a marked hostility to the federal government and a fierce defense of individualism.

In the Epilogue, I offer some observations regarding the suburban identity that coalesced amid the MARTA debates and the Republican rise in the Sunbelt South. Since the 1971 MARTA referendum, the suburbs outside Atlanta and throughout the nation have provided a strong base of support for GOP politics, while the nation’s cities have remained Democratic strongholds. Nowhere has this been more evident than in the formerly “Solid South,” where the region’s high rates of suburbanization have created safe havens for a number of influential conservative politicians. The region’s residential and demographic shift was instrumental in the engineering of a Republican majority and in the creation of a novel order of conservatism in the nation’s politics.
In the early 1960s Atlanta was a thriving center of growth and development. With its economy buoyed by an influx of postwar defense dollars and its service sector expanding by leaps and bounds, the city had begun to welcome refugees from the declining industrial cities of the North with open arms. By the end of the decade Atlanta would be christened the southern capital of the Sunbelt, a region distinguished by its freewheeling, deregulated economy and spectacular economic growth. As Mayor Ivan Allen recalled after leaving office, Atlanta was “the city of the sixties in America.”

In 1960, while still Chamber of Commerce vice president, Allen unveiled his “Six Point Program” for the city’s expansion. Allen proposed reform and redevelopment that included stadium construction, slum removal, and the development of a rapid rail transit system to ease traffic congestion and enhance the city’s prestige. A pamphlet produced that same year elaborated on Allen’s proposal, describing a transit system that “would consist of moving belts carrying specially built cars seating six passengers, moving at speeds of up to fifteen mph in plastic air-conditioned tubes on an arcade-like structure above sidewalks.” The plans were futuristic and modern, if not a little delusional.

However far-fetched they may seem to us, Atlanta’s transit plans were in keeping with a tradition of hyperbole and bluster as old as the city itself. Since its founding as a

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2 Rapid...Atlanta (Atlanta: Atlanta Transit System, 1960).
rail terminus in 1837, enterprising city boosters have lauded Atlanta’s virtues, real and imagined, before national and international audiences. Whether noting the city’s investment opportunities, cultural outlets, or social movements, boosters have adamantly and sometimes shamelessly promoted the city.

Henry Grady, “the spokesman for the New South,” set the standard for municipal promotion by touting the city’s cheap and willing labor supply to Northern investors in the 1880s. Grady’s ambitious platform for development called for reconciliation with the capital-rich North, diversification of southern agriculture, industrialization and urbanization, and maintenance of the social status quo. As the editor of the Atlanta Constitution and a regular on the national lecture circuit, Grady spread what historian Paul Gaston would later call the “New South Creed.” Preaching both industrialization and segregation, the New South Creed paired the reconciliation of sectional differences with Jim Crow social policies. Though the emphasis on industry marked a departure for the notoriously tradition-bound region devoted to agriculture and the Lost Cause, the commitment to segregation proved that much of the Old South remained in the New. Whether they signaled a fundamental regional change or merely a variation on an old formula, Grady’s prescriptions succeeded in improving the city’s economic fortunes. While the economies of older southern cities stagnated during this period, Atlanta flourished. By the time of Grady’s death in 1889, Atlanta boasted nearly two hundred manufacturing firms, eleven railroad lines, and a population just shy of 100,000 people.³

The crowning achievement of the city’s late-nineteenth century push for development came six years after Grady’s death when Atlanta staged the Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895. Part advertisement and part debutante ball, the exposition established Atlanta as a “New South” city that had shed its provincial past in favor of an industrialized future. This combination of boosterism and bluster, railroads, and a willingness to court northern investment distinguished Atlanta among her southern peers as the “right” place to do business. What, according to historian Franklin Garrett, had been a “small town with more saloons than churches” only half a century earlier, had become a regional capital of transportation, industry, and finance by the close of the century.

Atlanta’s economic expansion and relentless self-promotion continued unabated in the new century. As the first skyscrapers began to dot the Atlanta skyline, a unique business culture known as the “Atlanta Spirit” began to take root in the city’s boardrooms. Coined by Louie Newton, editor of City Builder, the “Atlanta Spirit” described the belief that “what was good for business was good for Atlanta and what was good for Atlanta was good for all of its citizens.” Though simple in form, this quasi-communal, zen-like philosophy of business determinism would guide the city’s commerce, politics, and governance over the course of the next century. Soon, Henry

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4 Roth, Metropolitan Frontiers, 59-62, 94. In addition to establishing Atlanta as a regional capital, the Cotton States and International Exposition is famous as the site of Booker T. Washington’s “Atlanta Compromise” speech. “In all things purely social,” the educator said, “we can be as separate as the fingers, yet one as the hand in all things essential to mutual progress.” By advocating racial separation in the social sphere, but unity for the economic development of the black community, critics charged that Washington had exchanged civil rights for economic progress and granted his imprimatur on Jim Crow legislation that was before state houses across the region.

5 Allen, Mayor, 20.
Grady’s one-man show of municipal promotion would be succeeded by a chorus of media savvy boosters determined to make Atlanta the “New York of the South.”

Faced with competition from the Florida land boom, the Atlanta business community launched a marketing campaign to recruit new industry and advertise the city’s business-friendly climate to a national audience. Co-chaired by Ivan Allen Sr. and W.R.C. Smith and financed by the Chamber of Commerce, “Forward Atlanta” employed state-of-the-art advertising techniques to promote the city and raised boosterism from an eccentric oratorical art form to a veritable laboratory science. Between 1925 and 1929, the promoters embarked on a media blitz, placing advertisements in leading publications of the day including Forbes, New York Times, Harper’s, and the Saturday Evening Post among others. During that time more than seven hundred businesses were established in the city and Atlanta reached an annual payroll of $30 million.

Like Grady had a generation earlier, the “Forward Atlanta” sales pitch touted the city’s low wages, low taxes, and centrality of transportation. However, Grady hoped to lure industrial firms, whereas the “Forward Atlanta” campaign welcomed warehousing outfits, distribution firms, and branch office space. By emphasizing office work and distribution networks rather than industry, Atlanta’s growth in the 1920s prefigured the service-oriented development patterns of the postwar economy. Geographically, too, Atlanta was prepared for the coming postwar realignment. Situated a thousand feet above sea level, without natural borders of any kind, and graced with a temperate climate, Atlanta was well suited to the horizontal patterns of growth that characterized the latter half of the twentieth century. Coupled together, the city’s geography and service sector

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6 Roth, Metropolitan Frontiers, 96.
7 Rutheiser, Imagineering Atlanta, 31; Allen, Mayor, 148-9; Roth, Metropolitan Frontiers, 97.
8 Rutheiser, Imagineering Atlanta, 31.
development meant that Atlanta was poised for unparalleled growth in the postwar period.

Before enjoying postwar riches, however, the city endured lean years during the Great Depression. Atlanta’s economy faltered, shops folded, and by the summer of 1933, the city had a welfare roll of 60,000. Though keenly felt, however, the Depression’s toll was reduced by generous federal subsidies. In 1938 President Roosevelt declared the South the “nation’s number one economic problem” and thereafter devoted much of the New Deal’s spending to ameliorating conditions in the region. Atlanta in particular benefited immensely from federal largesse, receiving $3.3 billion from the Federal Economic Relief Agency (FERA) in 1933, funds for school construction and repair, sewage system construction, and two of the first federal housing projects in the country, Techwood Homes for low-income whites, and University Homes for African Americans. Federal spending in the city increased when the nation entered the war. Between 1940 and 1950, the federal government poured no less than $10 billion into Atlanta’s economy. The federal government would continue to play a large role in the city’s future development, contracting Atlanta-based firms for government projects and financing expressway construction, public works and urban renewal projects over the next three decades. ⁹

Though critical, federal subsidization was not the key to Atlanta’s advancement during the Depression years. During that time the city government forged a close

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⁹ Roth, *Metropolitan Frontiers*, 154-159. Initial federal relief to the city was delayed due to intervention by Georgia Governor Gene Talmadge. The Governor opposed the New Deal generally and was particularly disturbed by the interest shown in Atlanta by the federal government. Because he believed that the city was receiving assistance that should have benefited rural areas, Talmadge delayed federal funds by refusing to help City Hall meet its financial obligation to the federal government. As a result, Harry Hopkins, director of FERA, wrested the state’s relief commission from the Governor’s hands and replaced him with Gay B. Shepparson. Thereafter, the city received direct and significant help from the federal government.
relationship with the business community that would characterize its governance for the
remainder of the century. When Mayor William B. Hartsfield took office in 1937, he
inherited a cash strapped city government that was paying its employees in scrip. In
order to manage the financial crisis, Hartsfield slashed the payroll and secured the
support of banks and business leaders who pledged to guarantee the scrip and refinance
the city’s debt. The support of Coca-Cola magnate Robert Woodruff was particularly
important to the success of Hartsfield’s reforms. As possessor of the largest personal
fortune in the South and the single most influential voice in the Atlanta business
community, Woodruff’s personal endorsement was critical in moving the city’s business
interests toward a closer relationship with City Hall. Over the course of Hartsfield’s
twenty-four year tenure in office, Woodruff was active behind the scenes, advising the
Mayor’s decisions and guiding city policy. ¹⁰

While similar civic-commercial relationships existed elsewhere, few were as close
and none were as well documented as the one that developed in Atlanta. Atlanta’s civic-
commercial coalition first received significant interest in 1953 as the subject of Floyd
Hunter’s seminal study of municipal decision-making, *Community Power Structure: A
Study of Decision Makers*. By Hunter’s count, Atlanta’s power structure consisted of
exactly forty people, only a small handful of whom were elected officials. As historian
Numan V. Bartley observed, Hunter’s list of the city’s power elite was largely compatible
with one compiled by Mayor Allen a full generation later. The business-government
relationship that first developed under Mayor Hartsfield dealt a death blow to the ward-
based, patronage politics that had previously prevailed in the city, while at the same time

Policy (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1989), 17; Rutheiser, 147.
anticipating the public-private partnerships that would dominate urban redevelopment in the latter half of the twentieth century.\textsuperscript{11}

The civic-commercial alliance that developed under Hartsfield’s leadership was the first of two fundamental political realignments that would determine the shape and direction of Atlanta’s politics for decades to come. The second realignment, no less significant than the first, was the creation of an electoral coalition between the city’s upper middle class business establishment and its black community. In 1944 the Supreme Court issued the \textit{Smith v. Allwright} decision abolishing the white primary, which had effectively disfranchised African Americans in southern states.\textsuperscript{12} Although Georgia resisted the decision, it had become clear to Hartsfield and other astute observers that African Americans would soon have a larger role to play in the political process. Following the Court’s decision, the Mayor confided to police chief Herbert Jenkins that, “what the courts have done is give the black man in Atlanta the ballot. And for your information, the ballot is a front ticket to any-damn-wheres he wants to sit, if he knows how to use it. And Atlanta Negroes know how to use it.” Two years later the Georgia Supreme Court followed suit, opening the door to significant black political participation in the state for the first time since Reconstruction.\textsuperscript{13}

With an established and organized middle class composed of educators and professionals, Atlanta’s black community was uniquely prepared to exercise its newfound political voice. Following the court’s decision, black leaders undertook a voting registration drive that tripled the number of registered black voters in only two months.

\textsuperscript{12} David Goldfield, \textit{Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South} (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Press, 1997), 16.
\textsuperscript{13} Bayor, \textit{Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta}, 21-3.
By year’s end there were 21,244 registered African Americans on Atlanta’s voting rolls, accounting for more than a quarter of the city’s electorate. Three years later those votes were consolidated into a powerful voting bloc, when John Wesley Dobbs and Austin Walden founded the Atlanta Negro Voters League (ANVL) in 1949. In the mayoral contest later that same year, both candidates openly courted black votes, promising public works and extended services to black neighborhoods. Hartsfield successfully defended his incumbency, but only by a bare majority of 50.1 percent. He owed his victory to the ANVL endorsement, signaling a new era in Atlanta politics. More a pragmatist than a progressive, Hartsfield later recalled, “I knew Negroes were going to vote and I figured they might as well vote for me.” Whether by virtue or calculation, however, the 1949 mayoral race marked a definitive sea change in the city’s politics. For the next two decades, the coalition of moderate, business-oriented whites and an organized black voting bloc would dominate Atlanta’s politics.\(^\text{14}\)

The changes in Atlanta in the decades leading up to the 1960s--its chamber of commerce-directed development, service oriented economy, federally subsidized growth, public-private partnerships, and biracial electoral coalition--reflect, or perhaps more accurately, magnify trends found elsewhere in the South. No longer “the nation’s number one economic problem,” per capita income increased more rapidly in the South than in other parts of the country during this period, raising the material standard of living and enabling greater participation in the market economy. As in Atlanta, federal defense dollars played a large role in the region’s growth. In 1940, the South accounted for 13 percent of the nation’s personal income, paid roughly 17 percent of the nation’s taxes and

received a little more than 16 percent of federal expenditures. Twenty years later it earned 16 percent of the nation’s personal income and paid 12 percent of the nation’s taxes, but absorbed 25 percent of federal payouts. No less important to the region’s growth was the development of new industries such as chemicals, transportation, paper, machinery, and fabricated metals. As Gavin Wright argued in *Old South, New South*, new industries meant a new economy.¹⁵

Because these new industries were bound to metropolitan areas with sufficient pools of employment and proximity to transportation routes, it was inevitable that the region urbanized. For this reason, port cities such as New Orleans and Savannah, traditionally the region’s largest urban centers, enjoyed less growth than cities such as Atlanta, which sits at the nexus of three interstates. Although a step behind the region’s economic trends, southern politics modernized during this period as well. As the region’s metropolitan economies flourished, their populations expanded and by 1960 metropolitan populations accounted for almost half of the region’s total. Because this growth was managed and directed by a civic-commercial establishment, metropolitan elites became the architects of the region’s postwar development. As Matthew Lassiter has observed, the success of the Open Schools Movement in Atlanta illustrated the triumph of business pragmatism over county seat-inspired massive resistance. This political transformation became law in 1961 with the *Baker v. Carr* ruling invalidating the county unit system that

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¹⁵ Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 143-145; Gavin Wright, *Old South, New South: Revolutions in the Southern Economy Since the Civil War* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development and the Transformation of the South, 1938-1980* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990). While new industries did make for a new economy, it is significant that the majority of new industries were branch factories of Northern firms. Thus, while occupations changed and wages increased, corporate profits still left the region. For this reason, scholars have argued that the economic transformations of the period merely marked another chapter in the region’s economic colonization.
had enabled rural dominance of state legislatures. The *Baker* decision’s impact was swift and significant. In Georgia, it was felt in the gubernatorial contest the following year when Carl Sanders, a pragmatic and racially moderate lawyer from Augusta trumped Marvin Griffin, a sudden relic of the state’s old guard, rural-dominated politics. Their great strides notwithstanding, on the eve of the 1960s, southern cities were still on average smaller and less wealthy than their northern counterparts. As Mayor Allen later recalled, even Atlanta was only a regional distribution center in 1959, “known for Coca-Cola, Georgia Tech, dogwoods, the Atlanta Crackers, and easy Southern living.” By the end of the 1960s, however, Atlanta had become, in all senses of the term, “a national city.”

Atlanta’s growth during the 1960s was nothing short of phenomenal. With generous help from the federal government, low taxes, and few regulatory impediments to stymie development, the city grew more over the course of the decade than it had in all of its previous history. Atlanta’s metro population grew by 31 percent, and the city ranked among the nation’s top ten cities in downtown construction, bank clearings, and air traffic, while unemployment decreased dramatically, reaching at its lowest mark an unprecedented rate of 1.9 percent. “You could use ‘tremendous’ or ‘fantastic’ or ‘incredible,’” recalled Mayor Allen of the city’s growth, “but you would still be understating the situation.” However, while Atlanta’s growth figures speak for themselves, they do not tell the whole story. Though profitable, this redevelopment frenzy came at the expense of the city’s history, its poor, and some would argue, its quality of life.

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Already “The City Too Busy to Hate,” Atlanta entered the sixties with a record of racial moderation and business accomplishment - at least relative to its southern peers. Its civic-business alliance had solidified over the course of Hartsfield’s two decades in office, evolving into a near-formal relationship by the end of the 1950s that was prepared to undertake the most ambitious redevelopment campaign in the city’s history. Likewise, Atlanta’s biracial coalition had endured, acting in unison, if not harmony, and keeping Hartsfield in the mayor’s office. Beneath the veneer of the city’s carefully cultivated appearance, however, all was not so placid. Robert Woodruff and other pillars of the city’s business establishment were aging and Mayor Hartsfield announced that he would not seek a seventh term. At the same time, the 1961 school desegregation deadline loomed over the city like a black cloud, threatening civic unrest and endangering the city’s national reputation. Whereas other southern politicians prepared for doomed showdowns with the federal government, Mayor Hartsfield worked behind the scenes with business leaders and “citizen-boosters” culled from the ranks of the moderate, upper-middle class PTA set to ensure the city’s peaceful compliance with federal mandates. In typical fashion, Atlanta turned a potential national embarrassment into a public relations coup. As the nation watched, the first African Americans to attend the city’s integrated public school system, all nine of them, stepped through the schoolhouse doors. Ralph McGill, the “conscience of the South,” explained to those on hand that Atlanta “has always tried to look forward, not backward,” and despite the decidedly modest scope of the city’s desegregation policy, the national media agreed. The *New York Times* described Atlanta as “an island of moderation in a sea of militantly
segregationist sentiment,” while the American Broadcasting Network called the city’s activism a “light of inspiration,” in an otherwise dim region.\(^\text{18}\)

While school integration was now a matter of settled policy, the mayoral contest later that year revealed that desegregation was still politically viable. Undeterred by the failure of massive resistance in Atlanta, Lester Maddox took up the segregationist mantle in his campaign against the “Peachtree Peacock,” Ivan Allen. As a second-generation member of the city’s commercial elite and sitting president of the Chamber of Commerce, Allen was the obvious favorite of the business establishment. However, despite having a sizable reservoir of campaign funds, enjoying the support of local newspapers and receiving endorsements from the presidents of five major banks and Hartsfield himself, Allen’s victory was not a forgone conclusion. As a vocal opponent of desegregation and founder of GUTS, or Georgians Unwilling to Surrender, Maddox had won the support of working class and lower middle class Atlantans during the school integration crisis. His campaign pandered to this marginalized base, arguing that the civic elites who favored integration did not send their children to integrated schools or patronize desegregated public facilities.

Though Maddox’s populist posture had wide blue-collar appeal, Allen’s message of racial moderation and economic progress was ultimately more compelling. In the runoff between the two candidates, Allen ceded the city’s working class constituency to Maddox, who won a majority of white votes, but captured the support of affluent, northside whites and blacks of all backgrounds. Allen’s election affirmed the durability

of Atlanta’s biracial electoral coalition and paved the way for his ambitious program of metropolitan growth and urban redevelopment.\textsuperscript{19}

It is quite possible that a more fitting successor to Hartsfield did not exist in all of Atlanta. Aged fifty, with a trim head of white hair, president of the company that carried his name, and former president of the Chamber of Commerce, Allen did not represent the interests of the city’s boosters and business elite so much as he embodied them. With the right combination of position and pedigree, Allen was practically groomed to stay Hartsfield’s course of economic development, boosterism, and incremental racial change. To many, Allen’s victory was as much ascension as it was election. With Hartsfield’s retirement and the concurrent aging of traditional leaders of the business community, Allen represented a generational passing of the torch. As he recalled in his memoirs, Allen and his peers were bred for the task before them:

> When I looked around to see who was with me in this new group of leaders, I found my lifelong friends. Almost all of us had been born and raised within a mile or two of each other in Atlanta. We had gone to the same schools, to the same churches, to the same golf courses, to the same summer camps. We had dated the same girls. We had played within our group, married within our group… We were white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant, Atlantan, business-oriented, pragmatic, and dedicated to the betterment of Atlanta as much as a Boy Scout group is dedicated to fresh milk and clean air… We were concerned with executive problems: managing a firm, handling personnel, financing large projects, and handling taxes. This gave us a further common large bond, and it should not be surprising that we also constituted a separate social set - common backgrounds, common spirit, common interests, common goals – that was destined to evolve eventually into the business-civic leadership of the city: The “power structure.”

The task before them was as clear as their blood was blue. As Allen remembered with perhaps a touch too much sentiment years later, his generation of leaders was raised “to love Atlanta, to cherish her, to guide her, to make her a better place than she was when\textsuperscript{19}

we ‘inherited’ her.” Because Allen’s peer group was imbued with the “Atlanta Spirit,”
keeping this charge meant pursuing a course of rapid and unparalleled economic growth
and urban redevelopment.20

Allen himself had authored the blueprint for the city’s 1960s development two
years before winning the mayoralty, while vice president of the Chamber of Commerce.
The plan called for business support of peaceful school desegregation, expressway,
stadium and civic center construction, extensive urban renewal, a second “Forward
Atlanta” booster campaign, and the program’s center-piece, a state-of-the-art rapid transit
system that would be the biggest and most costly public works undertaking in the city’s
history.

With a budget exceeding more than $1.5 million of privately raised capital, the
“Forward Atlanta” campaign hired a team of advertising consultants to advertise the city
to national investors, placing advertisements in national publications and launching its
own growth organ, the glossy Atlanta magazine. “What we were doing,” said Allen,
“was selling our city like a product.” On paper, his program was an unqualified success.
Unemployment plummeted, businesses flocked to the city, office parks proliferated, and
the city even answered charges of provincialism by building the $13 million Memorial
Arts Center, though some naysayers still insisted that “culture” could not be bought.
Convention business doubled due to the construction of a $10 million civic center and
Atlanta became a “major league” city when it lured the Braves franchise from
Milwaukee.

By the decade’s end, the city was a skyscraper-studded jewel at the center of a
bucolic five county metropolitan area whose population of 1.5 million people was

20 Allen, Mayor, 29-31.
interconnected by a network of expressways and interstates. Though Atlanta’s growth in the 1960s marked a new chapter in its development history, it still relied on the familiar formula of private financing and decision-making and federal urban renewal monies. By the end of his two terms in office, Allen’s vision of Atlanta as a “national city” was fulfilled, but it had come at no small cost.21

From a civic-commercial standpoint, the city’s 1960s redevelopment was a model of moxie and efficiency. Here, the construction of Atlanta Stadium is illustrative. Convinced that seducing a major league ball club to the city would be indisputable proof of its “national” status, Allen committed the full resources of Atlanta’s private-public coalition to accomplish the task. In 1965, the Mayor convinced Mills Lane, president of C&S Bank, to extend the city a full line of credit to finance the stadium’s construction on recently razed land just south of the central business district. The banker agreed, on the condition that Allen appoint a select group of corporate insiders, including himself, to the Stadium Authority. Because the Atlanta Housing Authority controlled the land, Allen had to arrange a land swap with the agency to secure the property. The stadium was constructed at a cost of $18 million, $600,000 of which was paid to the construction firm to ensure its completion in under a year and the Braves agreed to move the franchise to Atlanta the following season. As Mayor Allen later recalled, the city accomplished what few others would have dared; “we built a stadium on land we didn’t own, with money we didn’t have, for teams that didn’t exist.”22

21 Allen, Mayor, 32-34, 145-147. Interestingly, Allen did not attempt to reconcile his responsibility to “guide” and “cherish” his city-as-feminine beauty, with his decision to commodify and sell her on the open market.
22 Stone, Regime Politics, 63; Allen, Mayor, 147, 152-164; Norman Shavin and Bruce Galphin, Atlanta: Triumph of a People (Atlanta: Capricorn Corp., 1982), 282-83.
While the stadium was built on land previously cleared, the parking lots paved for ticket holders was not. As a result, 10,000 of the Summerhill neighborhood’s population of 12,500 residents were forced to abandon their homes to make way for parking. Rioting ensued in the poor and predominantly black neighborhood the following summer, proving to the national media that even Atlanta, its southern darling of racial moderation, would not be spared the civil unrest that gripped the nation’s cities during the 1960s. Though Mayor Allen failed to make the connection in his memoirs, the riot was due in large part to displacement resulting from the stadium’s construction. As scholar Charles Rutheiser correctly observed, “the city’s poor ended up paying the steepest cost for the stadium.”23

The displacement that attended the stadium’s construction, however, was more the rule than the exception during the city’s redevelopment frenzy. Between 1956 and 1966 more than 21,000 housing units were bulldozed for urban renewal and stadium construction, resulting in the displacement of 67,000 people, most of them poor and African American. Though federal law required that the number of housing units created equal the number demolished, replacement housing failed to keep pace with displacement and “Negro removal” came to be synonymous with urban renewal in the city’s black community. Moreover, what replacement housing was built was constructed further away from the central business district (CBD) due to a gentleman’s agreement stipulating that public housing not be built on urban renewal land. In this way, the city’s business-

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civic alliance reshaped downtown, making it safe for conventioneers, suburban shoppers and business people, while edging its poor to the municipal fringe.  

Whereas Atlanta’s poor were pushed out of older, centrally located neighborhoods and forced to resettle in overcrowded corners on the city’s westside, thousands of middle and working class whites chose to abandon the city altogether. The suburban population outnumbered that of the city proper as early as 1961 and the centrifugal development patterns of the 1960s and 1970s only intensified the disparity. Whether motivated by fears of integration or hopes of sylvan neighborhoods and good schools, 60,000 whites left the city during the 1960s, migrating to suburbs emerging on the metropolitan frontier. The exodus continued in the 1970s as another 100,000 whites followed the already well-trod paths to suburbia. The majority of suburban newcomers hailed from outside the region, however, as 1.25 million people migrated to the metropolitan area between 1950 and 1980. Ironically, residential segregation in the region actually increased as public institutions were integrated. Seventy thousand African Americans moved to Atlanta between 1960 and 1970 alone, resulting in a black majority inside the city by 1970 and an overwhelming white majority in the surrounding suburbs. 

Though the city’s low income and minority residents often bore the greatest burden of progress, its suburban population was not entirely spared Atlanta’s growing pains. The 1970 census revealed that while the metropolitan population had increased by a robust 37 percent, its automobile population had exploded by an astounding 91 percent.

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Moreover, most of the automobile growth was located in suburban counties where daily commutes were longest -- 120 percent in DeKalb, 145 percent in Cobb, 155 percent in Gwinnett, and 194 percent in Clayton. Because the region’s population growth exceeded projections, its infrastructure was unprepared to accommodate the increased volume of traffic and the city earned a reputation for congestion that remains one its most distinctive features. Despite the completion of the downtown “connector” linking three interstates in 1966, the opening of the I-285 “perimeter” three years later, and the addition of several other metropolitan expressways, road construction could not keep pace with the city’s expansion. The evening rush hour that lasted only forty minutes in 1958, spanned a full four hours by 1970, while the northeast expressway carried no less than 23,000 automobiles each day. It was in this setting--as the city prospered and redeveloped, as tensions flared in transition neighborhoods, as middle class whites moved to the suburbs and bought second cars, as traffic increased and public pressure for a solution mounted--that Mayor Allen’s proposal for a rapid transit system began to gather steam.26

Though Mayor Allen’s six-point program provided the political impetus for rapid transit, the idea itself was not new. By mid-century Atlanta’s planning community had recognized a need for rapid transit to solve the city’s growing congestion problems, to facilitate orderly growth, and to defend the central business district’s role as the center of the region’s economy. In 1952, the city’s Regional Planning guide highlighted the importance of mass transit to the region’s growth. The following year, the Georgia State Senate passed a resolution directing the Senate Transit Study Committee to survey Atlanta’s existing transit service and recommend what changes might be made to ensure

the region’s future economic vitality. Uncharacteristically progressive by the legislature’s standards, the study identified mass transportation as both an indispensable element in the region’s transportation scheme and a “public responsibility.” “Transit is an idea,” the study mused, “and it is a vital part of the solution to the problem of moving people which now plagues Atlanta and many other Georgia cities.” The authors encouraged Atlanta’s city government to give rapid transit priority in future plans and warned that failure to adequately support public transportation risked “a drastic decline in downtown business activity, rapid decentralization and collapse of the community tax base.” As if on cue, the next year the Metropolitan Planning Commission (MPC) predicted that the city would require a rapid transit system “within a few years.”

In reports published over the next five years, the MPC continued to despair over the city’s impending transportation crisis, while touting rapid transit as a necessary and desirable solution. Plans for a rapid transit system were under study by the end of the decade, but the commission’s proposal was not completed until June of 1961. By that time the city’s current public transportation contractor, the Atlanta Transit System (ATS), had published an alternative plan, *Rapid...Atlanta*. The ATS plan proposed a sixteen-mile rail system at a cost of $59 million that included moving sidewalks suspended above downtown. Whether because it failed to capture the public’s imagination, or because it failed to inspire its confidence, the ATS plan enjoyed little support. The following year, the MPC, now called the Atlanta Region Metropolitan Planning Commission (ARMPC), unveiled its plan for rapid transit. The ARMPC plan called for a sixty-mile radial

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27 Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority / Chronology, ARC Archives (Atlanta: Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, 1975); *A Plan For Transit Improvement in the Metropolitan Area of Atlanta, Georgia*, ARC Archives (Georgia State Senate Transit Study Committee, 1953), v-ix.
network of rail spanning the five county metropolitan region that was estimated to cost $200 million. 28

Unlike Rapid…Atlanta, the ARMPC plan was well received by the city’s business community and City Hall. Because the six proposed radial lines converged at Five Points in the heart of the CBD, downtown business owners stood to benefit from enhanced property values and consequently supported the plan. Likewise, city officials understood that a rapid rail system would be further evidence of Atlanta’s status as a “national” city and willingly tendered their endorsement. With the support of the city’s decision-makers, the 1961 plan became the working model from which future plans would be developed. Though some alterations would be made in the coming years, it established a number of precedents that would survive the planning and political process ahead.

First, rail lines would be constructed along existing rail beds. Planners considered this decision to be a practical necessity because the rights of way were continuous and could be more easily secured. While the decision kept costs down, it also meant that predominantly black neighborhoods would receive less service than white communities because the city’s black population was confined to a smaller area. In total, there would be three lines serving white areas, one serving a black area, and two lines serving both black and white neighborhoods. 29

Second, the 1961 plan established a firm commitment to rail at the expense of alternative methods that might be more flexible and less expensive. Buses in particular were considered to be lacking in “social status” by the city’s image-conscious planners

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and dismissed as a “second rate” means of transportation. Critics would later charge that by pledging themselves to rail, planners had sacrificed practicality for prestige. As future studies revealed, Atlanta lacked the requisite density to make rail a cost effective means of transportation. Nonetheless, the city’s planning community remained devoted to the design of a “modern” rail system.30

Finally, the ARMPC report determined that the system’s chief objective was to enable easy access to the CBD, thus protecting its role as the center of the region’s economy. Downtown business interests were growing increasingly alarmed at the rapid expansion of the city’s suburbs. A rapid rail system focused on downtown would increase property values in the CBD, while at the same time enabling the businesses community to retain a larger share of the city’s office and commercial markets. The combination of these decisions—building along existing rail lines, establishing a commitment to rail, and supporting the CBD—meant that the final rapid transit plan would be politically and economically viable, but consequently less effective as a solution to the region’s traffic woes.31

Before drafting a final plan, however, rail proponents had to first clear a significant constitutional hurdle. The Georgia constitution barred municipalities from creating transportation authorities that were not governed by the state legislature. A statewide vote to amend the law failed in 1962 due to rural opposition, despite passing by a large margin in the Atlanta metropolitan area. Local legislators tried again two years later, this time drafting an amendment that would apply only to the Atlanta region and

31 Atlanta Region Comprehensive Plan: Rapid Transit, ARC Archives (Atlanta: The Atlanta Region Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1961); Hamer, The Selling of Rail Rapid Transit, 147.
would consequently require only local approval. The amendment passed in all five metropolitan counties. Voter approval, however, did not indicate unconditional support for mass transit. Legislators framed the amendment in broad terms to ensure a wide base of support; it proposed neither financing methods nor route structures and did not constitute a binding agreement between participating jurisdictions.  

Area legislators understood that their broadly framed amendment had delayed more problems than it had actually solved. Issues such as financing, route structure, and participation remained unresolved and political challenges had yet to even be seriously considered. Thus, when legislators met the following year to create the Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority (MARTA), they knew the road ahead would be mined with difficulty. At that juncture, apportionment of voting power on the board was the legislators’ main obstacle. The original draft called for an eleven-member board, with six seats for Atlanta (one each to be named by Fulton and DeKalb County governments from their populations within city limits), and one seat for each of the five metropolitan counties (Fulton, DeKalb, Clayton, Gwinnett, and Cobb).

Atlanta was determined to retain majority control, Cobb maneuvered to acquire a second seat, DeKalb demanded greater representation, and a single legislator from Fulton County threatened to derail the entire process if delegates did not accept a five-page list of proposed changes. Late nights of debate yielded as much acrimony as agreement and it appeared that MARTA might not survive its inception. According to journalist Richard Herbert, who covered the board’s development for the *Atlanta Constitution*, legislators reached an eleventh hour compromise only after an impassioned plea from DeKalb County Senator Ben Johnson, the dean of Emory University’s Law School. “Nobody

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wants to go it alone,” he said, “We’ve just got to have something to go with. If we can’t
walk, we’ll crawl, and if we can’t crawl--we’ll just sit and think about crawling. There
are problems in the metropolitan area that have got to be solved. I had hoped that the
composition of this board for rapid transit would serve as a prototype for solving other
problems that are metropolitan-wide.” Heeding Johnson’s call for compromise and
leadership, legislators agreed to an eleven-member board, with four seats for Atlanta, two
apiece for DeKalb and Fulton counties, and one seat each for Clayton, Gwinnett, and
Cobb counties.33

Despite having reached an agreement regarding the apportionment of voting
power, the MARTA board was not yet a fully constituted entity. Suburban legislators
had insisted that the state’s constitutional amendment include a provision requiring each
jurisdiction to hold a referendum to determine participation. With the exception of Cobb
County, where opponents waged an effective “Stop Atlanta” campaign, the referenda
passed throughout the metro area. Thus, in January of 1966, MARTA received its charter
and became a fully constituted entity. Because Cobb County had declined membership,
the board was reduced to ten seats. Elected representatives were barred from the board in
order to ensure an “above politics” approach. Atlanta’s representatives included
department store mogul Richard Rich, Rawson Haverty, owner of a successful furniture
retailing firm, C&S Bank president Mills B. Lane, and the board’s sole black member,
L.D. Milton, an elderly banker and cautious representative of the traditional black middle

33 Herbert, Highways to Nowhere, 111-112.
class. As Dick Hebert recalled in *Highways to Nowhere*, the board’s composition ensured that “MARTA’s work was to be the work of the power structure.”

The MARTA board began its work, planning in secret, without public oversight or apparent public interest. Parsons Brinckerhoff-Tudor-Bechtel, the consulting firm responsible for the recent planning of the Bay Area Rapid Transit (BART) system in San Francisco, was retained to amend the 1962 plan and prepare a final proposal for voter approval. However, before their work was complete, the privately owned Atlanta Transit System issued an alternative rapid transit plan that caught the MARTA board off guard. Published in June of 1967, *Rapid Busways* proposed a 32.3-mile radial bus system that would serve the region during MARTA’s planning and construction, or constitute a possible alternative to the board’s rail plans. Unlike MARTA, which would require years of construction, the ATS system could be completed in a matter of months. Moreover, with a price tag of only $52 million, it promised to exceed peak carrying forecasts at a fraction of MARTA’s cost.

MARTA planners wasted little time in dismissing the ATS challenge as profligate and unsound. Less than five weeks later, the MARTA board published its rebuttal, *Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Authority’s Review of Atlanta Transit Systems ‘Rapid Busway’ Proposal*. The report countered that the ATS system could not be developed as quickly or as cheaply as promised. It estimated that construction costs would exceed

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$150 million and questioned altogether the value of an intermediate system. Besides, the report concluded, the commitment to rail had already been made.\footnote{37 Metropolitan Atlanta Transit Authority’s Review of Atlanta Transit Systems ‘Rapid Busway’ Proposal, (Atlanta: Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, 1967), 3, as cited in Hamer, The Selling of Rail Rapid Transit, 155.}

In fact, this was not the case. Final plans had not yet been submitted and voter approval had yet to be sought, much less tendered; MARTA was not a done deal. MARTA’s criticisms were sweeping, but not substantive. While the board dismissed rapid busways as an intermediate solution, it declined to engage the concept more generally. The merits of buses traveling on private rights-of-way, whether as a supplement to rail, or as an alternative to it, were not considered. As in the 1962 plans, a comparison of relative costs, carrying capacity, and flexibility was not offered; buses were still just “second rate.”\footnote{38 Coogan, et. al., Transportation Politics in Atlanta, 17.}

Of course, the possibility remains that the MARTA board did consider the relative merits of rapid busways, only to wisely keep their findings to themselves. Subsequent studies later revealed that busways would have been a more cost-effective solution to the region’s traffic congestion. At the time, Atlanta’s population density fell below the threshold at which rail became a wise investment. Moreover, population and employment forecasts mustered by the board in rail’s defense were formulated on questionable models and later confirmed as inaccurate. Neither could rail be justified on equity grounds. In fact, those that stood to reap the greatest reward from a rail transit system were downtown business owners--people like MARTA board members Richard Rich, Rawson Haverty, and Mills B. Lane.\footnote{39 Malcom Minnick Getz, “The Incidence of Rapid Transit in Atlanta” Ph.D. diss. (New Haven: Yale University, 1973), 261, 265; and John F. Kain, “Cost-Effective Alternatives to Atlanta’s Rail Rapid Transit System,” Journal of Transport Economics and Policy 31, no 1: 25-49.}
In September of 1967, after more than $2 million had been spent in planning, the MARTA board announced the completion of its plan. It called for a sixty-five mile system of rail with forty stations. In most respects, the system closely resembled the original plan proposed by the ARMPC in 1961. However, in response to criticism from leaders of the city’s black community, the board agreed to begin construction of the East-West line at the same time that construction began on the North-South line. As in previous plans, a cost-benefit analysis was forgone on the basis that the system’s many intangible benefits were simply immeasurable.\textsuperscript{40}

In November of 1968, after eight years of planning, a pared down version of the 1967 plan appeared on area ballots. The plan called for a forty-mile system of rail, limited to Fulton and DeKalb counties. Federal aid was expected to cover at least 40 percent of the system’s $750 million cost, which had more than doubled since the first estimates were made six years earlier. The remainder of the cost would be financed by property tax. Apportioning responsibility for local financing between participating jurisdictions proved to be a time consuming affair, and a final agreement was not reached until September of 1968, leaving only three weeks to campaign for the system before the November referendum. Still, the plan enjoyed the support of the city’s influential business community, the \emph{Atlanta Journal} and \emph{Atlanta Constitution}, the League of Women Voters, and scores of prominent civic leaders. Two days before the referendum, a gracious Mayor Allen remarked, “Thank God we have always had enough responsible, concerned people who care about Atlanta. I say let’s get started.”\textsuperscript{41}

\textsuperscript{40}Rapid Transit for Metropolitan Atlanta, ARC Archives (Atlanta: Parson's Brinckerhoff-Tudor-Bechtel, 1967); Hebert, \emph{Highways to Nowhere}, 120.
\textsuperscript{41}“For Rapid Reading,” \emph{The Atlanta Journal}, 2 November 1968; Hebert, 120-121.
CHAPTER 3

BLACK POWER, WHITE NOISE

Having recently lured a major league franchise to the city and redeveloped downtown as a national convention destination, Atlanta’s business community expected rail transit to be the crowning achievement of a decade-long push for growth and development. Surely, they figured, momentum alone would ensure MARTA’s success at the polls. They were mistaken; the 1968 bond referendum failed in all three jurisdictions. Middle class whites objected to a property tax financed transit system that offered them few direct benefits, while black voters opposed a plan that served the interests of the white business community at their expense. Only in the city’s affluent northside neighborhoods did MARTA enjoy substantial support. All totaled, less than 42 percent of voters approved the 1968 plan.¹

While the system’s rejection by voters was difficult for the downtown establishment, its implications were far worse. Opposition from the city’s black community revealed a breach in the biracial coalition that had enabled an agenda of growth and development and earned Atlanta its “progressive” reputation. Thus, the

¹ Report to Urban Mass Transportation Department, Atlanta History Center, Mule to MARTA collection, (Atlanta: Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, 1970), MSS 619, Box 50, Folder 2; Hamer, Highways to Nowhere, 156; Coogan, Transportation Politics in Atlanta, 121-22; The 1968 referendum conformed to traditional voting patterns on public transportation for middle and upper income groups. Typically, upper income voters support systems that are perceived as being in the public interest, while middle income voters, who have less financial margin, suffer a disproportionate property tax burden, and foresee little in the way of direct benefits, more often oppose such plans. Lower income voters ordinarily support such measures in large numbers, however, because they anticipate direct benefits. It is for this reason that the opposition of black voters, who predominated amongst the city’s lower income group, was so critical in MARTA’s defeat; Coogan, 154-55.
referendum not only put the brakes on rapid transit, it also imperiled the city’s future development. Nonetheless, MARTA’s supporters vowed to amend the plan as necessary to win public approval. As Chamber of Commerce board member Alexander Smith explained in a letter to MARTA board chairman Richard Rich, “none of us should be ashamed of losing…our only problem is we are simply used to winning.”

In the weeks leading up to the November referendum, MARTA’s critics argued that the rail-intensive system was inflexible and would be unable to cope with changes in the city’s development patterns. Even as they recognized the need for immediate relief from the city’s congestion, opponents cautioned voters to consider alternatives. Why commit the city to an expensive and inflexible technology when new breakthroughs could be just beyond the horizon? Outspoken MARTA foe and Georgia Governor Lester Maddox even predicted that the system would be obsolete by the year 2000, when men would fly around “with wings on their back.” While charges of technological obsolescence and inflexibility were not entirely without merit, it is unlikely that they had a significant impact on voter’s decisions. A study conducted by the Harvard Law School two years following the referendum concluded that technological squabbles were only of indirect importance, and at most, may have helped create an atmosphere of uncertainty regarding technological conclusions.

More important than technological disputes was MARTA’s lack of political support. The MARTA board was composed entirely of local businessmen, all of whom were wealthy, and all but one of whom were white. The board’s composition reflected

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2 Almy, Assessing Electoral Defeat, 2; and letter from Alexander Smith to Richard Rich, November 14, Atlanta History Center, Mule to MARTA Collection (Atlanta: 1968), MSS 619, Box 50, Folder 3.
3 Dick Herbert, “These Answers May Dispel Rumors about Vast Project,” The Atlanta Constitution, 28 October 1968, cited in Coogan et. al., Transportation Politics in Atlanta, 31.
4 Coogan et. al., Transportation Politics in Atlanta, 11.
both the project’s origins as a business-inspired venture and also its intention to remain “above politics.” However well intentioned, the decision alienated local politicians who were excluded from the planning process and felt little ownership in the final plan.

“MARTA had developed its own plan,” commented one government official, “and then tried to cram it down their [local politicians] throats.” As a result, most elected officials were unwilling to publicly endorse the system.5

MARTA’s lack of political support was most critical in the black community where almost three out of four voters opposed the plan. The Summit Leadership Conference, formerly named the Citizens Committee for Better City Planning (CCBCP), approached the MARTA board as early as 1966 with concerns over employment guarantees and service inequality. However, the board waited until only a few months before the November vote, well after plans had been finalized, to hold even a single public hearing in a black neighborhood. By contrast, dozens of hearings were held with white civic and neighborhood groups during the year before the vote. Already woefully underrepresented on the MARTA board, Summit hoped to ensure that African Americans would receive proportional representation on the system’s payroll. However, MARTA refused to honor even this “modest request” and waited until a week before the referendum to hire its first black employees, a community relations director and a secretary. The community relations director could hardly have been expected to repair the damage already done; the gesture was simply too little too late.6

5 Almy et. al., Assessing Electoral Defeat, 6; Coogan et. al., Transportation Politics in Atlanta, 61.
6 Hebert, Highways to Nowhere, 122. Both black employees hired in the final week of the campaign were promptly dismissed following the referendum’s defeat. Their dismissal elicited protest from black community leaders. In a remark that was picked up by television and radio, Board member Roy Blount replied that, “If you had supported us, maybe we could keep them on the job.”
No less significant than fair employment was the system’s pronounced service inequality between black and white neighborhoods. From the very beginning, MARTA was intended as a boon to the ailing central business district rather than a social service and the route structure reflected this reality. Black neighborhoods were poorly served by MARTA’s rail lines, meaning that commuters would have to settle for bus service, which the board had earlier denigrated as “second rate.” The bus feeder system was poorly publicized, however, and many voters were unaware that it existed at all. An eleventh hour effort to correct this perception resulted in a political embarrassment, when it was revealed that bus lines featured on a hastily prepared brochure were scheduled to travel on roads that did not even exist.  

Improved service to the predominantly black Model Cities Project was of particular concern to African American leaders. The board’s refusal to extend a spur line to the largest of these developments, the 3,000 person Perry Homes, was interpreted as a telling indication of MARTA’s priorities. Because the Model Cities Project had previously been criticized as an effort to ‘contain’ the city’s black population, the board’s decision confirmed the worst fears of many black voters. While such ulterior motives appear to have been unlikely, they would not have been without precedent. Throughout Atlanta’s history, roads were constructed as buffers between black and white communities. As recently as 1962, streets were closed to protect the racial integrity of exclusively white neighborhoods.

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7 Coogan et. al., Transportation Politics in Atlanta, 7.
8 Coogan et. al., Transportation Politics in Atlanta, 9.
Throughout the planning process and campaign, MARTA’s dealings with the black community were as impractical as they were insensitive. By 1968, African Americans accounted for roughly half of the city’s population and support from the black community was essential to the success of any citywide election. Thus, the plan’s defeat in all black precincts effectively sealed MARTA’s fate. The 1968 referendum is particularly significant because it marks the first time the city’s black leadership broke ranks with their traditional political allies in the white power structure. No longer willing to remain a junior partner in the city’s governance, members of the Summit Leadership Conference and other black political figures were keenly aware that change was afoot and were prepared to wield their political power. Ironically, this decision resulted in the unlikely wedding of black voters and white Maddox supporters in the lower middle class, odd bedfellows if ever a pair existed. Following the defeat, MARTA board members admitted that more should have been done to satisfy black requests, and the board made reconciliation with the black community its number one priority for the next campaign. In addition to courting African American support, the board resolved to foster better relations with local politicians, reconsider the system’s financing, and devote more attention to voter education.

MARTA’s defeat came as a big surprise to a downtown establishment that was “used to winning.” Board chairman and downtown fixture Richard Rich expressed the prevailing mood, saying that he was “shocked and confused” by the election results.\(^\text{10}\) Even in hindsight, the business community’s surprise was understandable. MARTA’s development followed a path similar to other more successful projects in recent years--it

\(^{10}\text{Dick Hebert and Alex Coffin, “Board to Meet Today on the Future of MARTA,” The Atlanta Constitution, 7 November 1968, sec A, p. 1.}\)
was born in the city’s boardrooms, developed by a business elite that presumed their own interests to be identical to those of the city, and enjoyed substantial support in the mayor’s office. Unlike Atlanta’s past successes, however, MARTA encountered determined and unified opposition from the city’s black community. While black resistance was motivated by the specific concerns of service inequality and employment parity, it also reflected dissatisfaction with municipal decision-making more generally. In this way, the 1968 referendum heralded a new day in the city’s black electoral activism. Despite vocal protest from African American leaders and repeated overtures at reconciliation from black civic organizations, the MARTA board proved fatally tone deaf to discord in the city’s biracial politics. As one observer concluded, “MARTA failed to listen to the new drumbeat of minorities.”

Of course, where acute perception failed board members, simple arithmetic might have sufficed. Atlanta’s black population increased by 70,000 people between 1960 and 1970, while its white population declined by 60,000. Although differences in age allowed for a slender white electoral majority at the decade’s end, African Americans constituted a majority of the city’s population as early as 1970, by which time a black electoral majority was imminent. Demographic changes assume increased significance when considered in conjunction with critical developments in local and national contexts. Atlanta’s African American leadership was no doubt emboldened by the passage of civil rights legislation during the 1960s. When coupled with the end of rural domination in the state’s politics during the same period, federal legislation amounted to a green light for an incipient black majority to pursue a more assertive posture in municipal politics. 

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11 Coogan et. al., *Transportation Politics in Atlanta*, 66.
The 1968 MARTA referendum marked a definitive shift in the balance of power between Atlanta’s black and white political communities. As such, it represented the culmination of a maturation process of black political power begun a full generation earlier. In 1949, only five years after the court-ordered demise of the white primary, attorney A.T. Walden and Republican John Wesley Dobbs formed the Atlanta Negro Voters League to create a powerful black voting bloc that positioned the city’s African American community to win concessions from City Hall. That same year, the League’s endorsement of Mayor Hartsfield proved decisive in his campaign for reelection. Over the course of the next two decades, the League’s middle class leadership continued to support racially moderate candidates with pro-business agendas in exchange for a gradual integration of city facilities and public spaces. The arrangement barred more rabid, race-baiting politicians from City Hall and earned Atlanta a reputation for racial moderation.13

Throughout the decade following the League’s creation, this combination of black votes and white influence elected Hartsfield to successive terms as mayor and allowed the city to pursue an ambitious agenda of growth and development. By the end of the 1950s, however, tougher tests loomed for the coalition. When Atlanta was forced to desegregate its public schools in 1961, for instance, members of the business elite worried that the city’s progressive reputation was in jeopardy. However, Mayor Harstfield orchestrated a peaceful desegregation process and Atlanta passed with flying colors in the eyes of public opinion makers. President Kennedy recognized Atlanta’s

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effort in a press conference and *Life, Newsweek, the New York Times, Look,* and *Good Housekeeping* ran stories applauding the city’s moderate racial climate.\(^\text{14}\)

Though not inaccurate, the pieces that appeared in national magazines did not tell the entire story. Even as the city prepared to integrate its public schools, college students were staging sit-ins at public facilities throughout the South to protest the region’s legally sanctioned segregation. With six black colleges inside the city’s limits, Atlanta was no exception. In Atlanta, however, the stakes were particularly high. Student demonstrations not only threatened violent exchanges with lawmen and locals, they also jeopardized the city’s biracial political partnership and risked the election of a racial demagogue in the 1961 mayoral contest. Representatives from City Hall, the black power structure and the white business community met secretly to discuss how to avoid such an outcome. After much consultation, the city’s black leadership agreed to postpone restaurant and lunch counter desegregation until after school integration had been achieved and after municipal elections were held the following year. Although they protested the decision on campus, students ultimately deferred to the wishes of their elders in order to preserve the city’s vaunted climate of race relations.\(^\text{15}\)

The secret negotiations and biracial cooperation that facilitated the city’s school integration illustrate the delicate decision-making process that enabled Atlanta to succeed where other southern cities failed. By negotiating in private, away from the public eye, representatives from both races were able to make the concessions necessary to satisfy

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\(^\text{15}\) Alton Hornsby, Jr. “The Negro in Atlanta Politics, 1961-1973” *The Bulletin of the Atlanta Historical Society* Spring 1977 (21), 9. At the end of 1961, three years prior to the federal public accommodations act, an agreement was reached between leaders of the black community and a collection of Atlanta’s larger downtown retailers to desegregate public stores and restaurants. However, the arrangement was informal and only applied to those retailers party to the agreement.
their constituencies and speak with a single voice. At the same time, however, the increasing militancy of student activists revealed a generational divide that would not be so easily bridged in the future.

In 1961, after presiding over the media circus surrounding the integration of Atlanta’s public schools, “Old Bill” Hartsfield declined to seek an eighth term in office. In the wake of his announcement, a crowded field of hopefuls emerged that included manufacturer Charlie Brown, a veteran of two unsuccessful mayoral campaigns, restraunteur Lester Maddox, establishment favorite Ivan Allen, and M.M. “Muggsy” Smith, a state legislator with political ties in the black community. Both Smith and Allen actively courted the black vote, but the Negro Voters League ultimately supported Allen, who enjoyed support among the white business elite and stood the best chance of defeating Maddox, an arch segregationist. Black students, however, broke ranks with community leaders by supporting Smith, who accused the League of self-interest and conservatism. Aware that a split vote imperiled the city’s progressive coalition and benefited Maddox’s candidacy, the League enlisted influential black ministers who campaigned on Allen’s behalf from the pulpit. Likewise, the Atlanta Daily World urged black voters to support “the strongest and best qualified candidate who is opposing this race baiter [Maddox] and give that strongest anti-race baiting candidate our support.”

Although Smith fared well with the city’s disenchanted African American students, the League’s message of unity struck a chord throughout the black community where Allen received more than two-thirds of the vote. In the runoff that ensued, Allen defeated Maddox decisively, earning as much as 99 percent of the vote in some black precincts. While Allen’s victory affirmed the coalition’s durability, it also suggested its

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weakness. Key members of the city’s black leadership were aging and their successors saw little value in maintaining the biracial cooperation that had distinguished Atlanta’s politics for more than a decade. While the Negro Voters League remained the most influential political organization in the black community, its future prominence was uncertain.  

Although he was eager to begin his program for reform and redevelopment upon entering office the following year, Mayor Allen understood that much of his time would be consumed by impending racial conflicts. Most urgent was the pronounced housing shortage in the black community where more than thirty percent of the city’s population was confined to less than ten percent of available land. The issue reached a boiling point at the end of 1962 when middle class African American professionals began moving into the leafy community of Cascade Heights in southwest Atlanta. Under pressure from white homeowners, Mayor Allen and the Board of Alderman approved the construction of a barricade at Peyton and Harlan roads to deter the future encroachment of black residents. Dubbed the “Peyton Wall” by the national press, the barricade aroused the ire of Atlanta’s black community and quickly became a public relations embarrassment for “The City Too Busy to Hate.”

As had been done countless times in the past, Mayor Allen invited the Negro Voters League and the black Empire Real Estate Board to the negotiating table to broker a compromise. However, both groups declined the Mayor’s invitation. In their stead would be the recently formed Citizens Committee for Better City Planning (CCBCP), an umbrella group representing veteran organizations like the NAACP as well as newcomers

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18 Stone, Regime Politics, 57-8; Kruse, White Flight, 3-4.
such as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Committee on Appeal for Human Rights (COAHR). Unlike their predecessors, CCBCP was not interested in compromise and refused to discuss the matter further until the barricade was removed. The organization’s co-chairman and president of the Atlanta NAACP, Dr. C. Miles Smith, told local reporters that they were witnessing a changing of the guard. “It’s a matter of a new team coming into the game,” he announced. “We’re saying ‘your team’s done fine, but it’s getting tired. New blood is coming in. We’re going to take the ball from here.’ We haven’t ruled out the older element,” he continued, “but we have placed them in an advisory status.”

The Peyton Wall controversy was ultimately settled when a Fulton County Superior Court judge ruled the barricade unconstitutional the following March. For Allen, the ruling was a welcome reprieve from a political thicket that could have harmed his chances for reelection. However, by endorsing the Civil Rights Act, sponsoring a minority employment program, and appointing African Americans to judgeships, the mayor was able to mend fences with supporters in the black community. Much worse was the political fallout suffered by the League of Negro Voters. A kingmaker only a few years prior, the League never recovered from its surrender of leadership in the Peyton Wall affair. Instead, it allowed a younger, more broadly based group to usurp its title as the black community’s mouthpiece. Members of the old black vanguard still defended their relevance and the League refused to cede authority, but the erosion of their influence had become apparent to all but the most stubborn observers. The transfer of power that began quietly during the desegregation crisis a few years earlier was complete.

by 1965 when League founder A.T. Walden died at the age of 78. During his long career, Colonel A.T. “Boss” Walden worked tirelessly on behalf of Atlanta’s black community. But by the mid-sixties, the man that had defended countless black citizens in court, labored to admit African Americans to the University of Georgia, won equal pay for black educators, and engineered the city’s biracial electoral coalition was labeled an “Uncle Tom” by younger, more militant integrationists.\(^\text{20}\)

Though of great symbolic significance, Walden’s death did not answer all of the questions posed in the black political community. Judicial intervention in the Peyton Wall affair meant that CCBCP could not claim credit for a clear political victory. Would they successfully fill the League’s large shoes as consensus builders, or would black electoral support splinter under pressure from an even more militant and aggressive student movement? Because Mayor Allen faced no serious competition from political opponents on either the right or left, the 1965 mayoral contest left the question unanswered. Instead, CCBCP, now renamed the Summit Leadership Conference, would have to wait until the 1968 MARTA referendum to prove itself as the black community’s premier political organization.

Perhaps because members were aware that the MARTA referendum would be an important test of their leadership, Summit attacked the plan early and often. As early as December of 1966, Summit criticized a transit system that did not provide adequate service to black communities. The organization voted to “oppose the development of the city’s proposed rapid transit system unless plans are changed to provide better access by a large segment of the Negro community.” Speaking separately, State Senator Leroy Johnson added that limited service was not the only problem. No less important was the

absence of African Americans in the planning process. The city’s transit system “must be effected for the benefit of Negro citizens too,” the Senator said. “This committee recommended going so far as seeking funds-cutoff if Negroes are not included in on the groundwork.”

Throughout their correspondence with the MARTA board, Summit was careful to recognize the city’s need for rapid transit as part of a balanced solution to the region’s congestion problems. The organization understood that a rail transit system could significantly benefit black commuters who were dependent on the city’s current bus system. Because car ownership was less common in the black community and because no black neighborhoods were in close proximity to a major employment area, an expanded public transportation system should have enjoyed considerable support from African American voters. As proposed, however, MARTA offered few advantages to the black community. In a 1967 letter to board chairman Richard Rich, Summit leaders Jesse Hill and Reverend Samuel Williams observed that “of the 36 miles of transit system to be opened by 1975 only 4.3 miles have been earmarked to serve the large Negro Westside population, and this short transit leg…is totally unacceptable, inadequate, and unrealistic as a westward limit.”

Despite sustained and vocal criticism of the MARTA plan over a two-year period, the board took few steps to address Summit’s concerns. In addition to service inequality and the board’s refusal to adopt employment guarantees, the organization also worried that black neighborhoods would be unduly disturbed by the system’s construction.

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Thousands of black residents had already been displaced by development projects earlier in the decade and many critics predicted that MARTA would be no different. “It will be just like urban renewal,” warned a Summit press release a month before the vote, “it will be black removal.”

On November 2, 1968, three days before the referendum, Summit announced its opposition to the plan and urged voters to defeat the proposal at the polls. According to its statement, Summit’s endorsement would be tendered only “when its provisions are modified to give the inner city better service, when black employment is assured through a job training program to begin as soon as construction of the system begins, and when they are certain that the best possible program for paying for the system is developed.”

Summit’s vocal criticism and MARTA’s defeat only three days later confirmed that the organization had succeeded the League of Negro Voters as the black community’s most influential voice in municipal politics. More important, however, were the larger implications of Summit’s opposition. The 1968 MARTA referendum revealed that Atlanta’s biracial coalition was on the verge of collapse. While business elites on the city’s northside supported the measure in large numbers, their political allies in the black community were the system’s staunchest opponents. However, black voters were not simply opposing a transit system they deemed inadequate; they were also protesting business-as-usual in the city’s politics. Privately, several black leaders later admitted that MARTA might have even benefited black commuters. Community spokesmen nonetheless opposed the measure, they believed, because it marked the first time that the black community had sufficient strength to defeat a proposal of “the white

23 Atlanta Summit Leadership Conference, press release, October 10, 1968, Box 45 Mule to MARTA papers, AHS as cited in Bayor, Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta, 192.
establishment.” MARTA thus brought to the surface conflicts and resentments that many government officials had preferred not to acknowledge but could no longer deny. Thus, the rift between the city’s erstwhile allies not only derailed rapid transit, it also cast a shadow of doubt across the city’s future governance. If MARTA were to receive a second chance on area ballots, representatives from the city’s business community, black leadership and City Hall would first have to reconcile their differences and repair their relationships. Though it would be difficult, rail advocates in each camp remained hopeful that all sides could find common ground. As board chairman Richard Rich reminded former governor and fellow rail proponent Carl Sanders in a post-election letter, “In politics, neither defeat nor victory is permanent.”

MARTA’s failure in 1968 indicated that the scales of political power in Atlanta had tipped. No longer content to settle for the least objectionable policy or candidate, the city’s black community projected strength in both number and organization. By contrast, the business community learned that planning for future development projects would have to include unfamiliar voices; their decade of unchecked development had come to an end. However, it remained unclear where the scales would settle. Negotiations between both communities and City Hall over the next three years would help map a new landscape of power in Atlanta’s politics.

As the shock of defeat subsided, board members and rail advocates found themselves at a crossroads. Though some spoke openly of the need for “hibernation,” most members remained undeterred. Mayor Allen, who had first endorsed rail transit eight years earlier, announced a three-point program for resuscitating the board’s plans.

25 Report to Urban Mass Transit Authority, Mule to MARTA papers, Atlanta History Center (Atlanta: Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority, 1970), MSS 619, Box 50.
26 Almy et. al., Assessing Electoral Defeat, 2.
The mayor vowed to restructure plans to make them more representative of citywide interests, to lobby for increased federal funding, and “to restudy the route structure to make it more acceptable to all Atlantans, particularly Negro Atlantans.”

However, Allen would not be present to help shepherd the board’s rebuilding process. In January of the following year, the mayor announced that he would not seek a third term. Though he declined to endorse a candidate, Allen agreed to act as a liaison between the city’s erstwhile allies—the black community and white business community—in order to find a successor suitable to both parties. “This was perfectly proper,” the mayor later recalled, “the logical, traditional way to go about it.” As the previous year’s MARTA referendum had indicated, however, the city’s political traditions were in jeopardy.

Shortly after the mayor’s announcement, Alderman and State Representative Rodney Cook entered the race with the full support of the business elite. His candidacy came despite unequivocal opposition from black leaders who objected to his voting record on zoning issues and also what Mayor Allen suspected were “personal reasons.” The Chamber’s decision to endorse a candidate that their former allies could not support indicated that they were not yet serious about equitably sharing power and that MARTA’s lessons had not yet been learned.

At the same time as potential mayoral candidates were testing the waters in Atlanta, a black ex-policeman named Tom Bradley was waging a strong campaign for mayor across the country in Los Angeles. Emboldened by Bradley’s success, Dr. Horace Tate of the all-black Georgia Teacher’s Association announced that he would run for the

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office. Despite a strong showing in the general election, however, Bradley was defeated handily in the Los Angeles runoff. Chastened by Bradley’s defeat, many black voters in Atlanta concluded that the educator’s candidacy had come too soon. As a result, the city’s black vote split between Tate and sitting vice mayor Sam Massell. Massell received enough support from black voters to reach the runoff, where he defeated the businessman’s choice, Rodney Cook.

A Jewish liberal with close ties to organized labor, Sam Massell was an unlikely choice for mayor. As a candidate who hailed from outside the white power structure with little political experience apart from his largely ceremonial responsibilities as vice mayor, Massell’s victory was due to the unusual circumstances that prevailed in Atlanta’s politics at the time. While the business community lacked the influence to send their candidate to office as they had in the past, the black community did not yet possess the electoral strength to elect a member of their own race as they would in the future. Massell then emerged as a transitional figure capable of winning office without the support of the city’s traditional biracial coalition. As Mayor Allen later recalled, by 1969 “the Negro leadership of Atlanta had finally broken away from the white power structure.” Black voters supported Massell, Allen continued, “because they saw him as a candidate they could elect in a coalition with the Jewish people and the labor element and other minorities.”

Clearly, the rift revealed by the previous year’s MARTA referendum had not yet been repaired.

MARTA, however, remained a viable issue and provided an opportunity for the city’s competing factions to mend fences and find common ground. As mayor, Massell recognized rail transit as potentially landmark achievement and set about fashioning a

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29 Allen, Mayor, 225.
transit plan that all Atlantans could support. The new mayor’s proposals included a busway to the isolated Perry Homes development and income tax financing that would reduce the burden borne by property owners under the previous plan. Moreover, in order to win support from low-income voters, Massell proposed that all Atlantans ride the system for free. Though politically and financially infeasible, the mayor’s initial proposals signaled that City Hall was serious about redressing black grievances.30

The MARTA board also took steps to become more representative of citywide interests. Following the system’s defeat at the polls, board members welcomed community leaders and dissenting voices to the table in order to combat the perception that MARTA was merely a thinly veiled business subsidy to benefit the city’s rich and powerful. In the wake of the 1968 referendum, one board member admitted that the black community was “unfortunately ignored in the last referendum, and [was] a population without any representatives in MARTA.” In an effort to increase black representation, Summit co-chair and vocal MARTA critic Jesse Hill was appointed to the board where he lobbied successfully for minority employment guarantees and the appointment of a black public relations director to communicate with the city’s African American community. In addition, Mayor Massell appointed the president of the Atlanta Labor Council to the board, marking the rare occurrence that a labor representative has occupied a seat of influence in the city’s politics. No longer an exclusive and remote club of businessmen, the reconstituted MARTA board represented a broad collection of interests and actively sought community participation.31

30 Keating, Atlanta, 125.
31 Almy, et. al., Assessing Electoral Defeat, 3-11.
Members of both Atlanta’s black leadership and business elite supported the board’s changes and took steps of their own to rescue the city’s biracial coalition. Shortly after MARTA’s defeat, banker Mills Lane and realtor W.L. Calloway founded Action Forum to ensure that black and white businessmen would maintain amicable relations and continue to exert influence over City Hall while the city’s politics underwent a period of racial transition. During the next three years the organization played an important role as an auxiliary to the MARTA board, where tense issues could be broached with both candor and comfort.

Action Forum demonstrated its effectiveness as a consensus builder by successfully negotiating a compromise on the contentious issue of financing. Aware that the income tax financed system proposed by Mayor Massell would cost MARTA votes from white suburbanites, members of Action Forum sought a compromise that would satisfy black and lower-income voters without alienating suburban taxpayers. Black representatives on the Forum agreed to a regressive sales tax in exchange for a commitment that MARTA’s fares not exceed fifteen cents for a period of seven years. The compromise was met with approval from the MARTA board, which had been unable to devise a suitable financing method, and was included in the system’s final plan.  

Whereas the Action Forum sought reconciliation between the city’s black and white business leaders, another new organization took a less conciliatory approach. By applying public pressure on the MARTA board, the Atlanta Coalition on Current Community Affairs helped promote a planning process that would be more transparent than the one that preceded the 1968 referendum. The Coalition warned board members that without its help, MARTA would suffer “a very certain and demoralizing defeat at the

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32 Keating, *Atlanta*, 126.
hands of the electorate.” “We are determined,” stated Coalition representatives Vice Mayor Maynard Jackson and State Senator Leroy Johnson, “that the specific welfare of the black community, so often and so callously neglected in the past, will receive equal or compensatory consideration and treatment in the MARTA plan and program if such a program is to exist.” Their demands included minority employment and contracting guarantees, an increase in black voting membership on the MARTA board, a fifteen-cent fare for ten years, and rapid rail service to Perry Homes. Eager not to repeat its own mistakes, the MARTA board met all demands pertaining to employment, service provision, and route structure, and adopted the Action Forum-brokered compromise for financing and fare schedules. As a result of the board’s amendments, the Coalition announced its formal endorsement the following September.33

The events between the 1968 and 1971 referendums indicate both change and continuity in Atlanta’s politics. On the one hand, the rise of the Summit Leadership Conference heralded the maturation of black electoral activism into a more assertive and public role in municipal affairs. On the other, the final plans were still the product of negotiated settlements, which had long been a hallmark of Atlanta’s politics. Moreover, while significant, the settlements represented modifications rather than a wholesale change of course for the MARTA board. The negotiated settlements and cross-institutional alliances that facilitated compromise in the years between referendums are examples of what Clarence Stone called “regime politics.” In *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1948*, Stone proposed a regime model for Atlanta’s politics that has been

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internalized by virtually all scholars writing thereafter. Stone’s model focused on the informal arrangements and cross-institutional alliances that allowed power in Atlanta to be wielded effectively and efficiently, enabling a tradition of ambitious growth and development, while still maintaining a “progressive” image.

Stone argued that previous studies of urban politics, particularly those of Atlanta, have been mired in a social control context where scholars have been compelled to take an elitist or pluralist position to explain the presence or absence of hegemonic beliefs. Such a debate, however, offered too small a middle ground for understanding the exercise of power at the community level. In its place he offered the social production model, which attempts to answer, “how in a world of limited and dispersed authority, actors work together across institutional lines to produce a capacity to govern and to bring about publicly significant results.” He suggested that business interests do not seek to control policy decisions, but rather to influence them. In a setting such as Atlanta, where City Hall is relatively weak and neighborhood and constituent groups are even more so, a unified business elite represents the only locus of power strong enough to marshal the necessary resources to achieve significant results. This means that while Atlanta’s business community has the strength to undertake large scale redevelopment projects such as MARTA, its constituent groups, advocacy groups, and even City Hall are only able to modify, rather than direct the city’s redevelopment. 34

In the case of MARTA’s planning, Stone’s thesis appears to hold true. From its beginning stages, MARTA was sponsored and supported by the city’s business community as a means to restore the prominence of the central business district. Following its defeat at the polls in 1968, the MARTA board welcomed its most vocal

34 Stone, Regime Politics, 9.
critics into their ranks and made concessions to gain broader support. While the black community’s vocal opposition and electoral clout indicate important steps towards municipal power sharing, it is important that these negotiations took place in the traditional realm of quasi-governmental action groups. The MARTA board and Action Forum enjoyed a greater diversity of voices after the 1968 referendum, but planning still took place in a business-dominated setting with little real public participation.

Considered in this light, MARTA planning between 1968 and 1971 appears to take a shape similar to earlier chapters of Atlanta’s political history, where business friendly candidates and projects were forwarded and concessions were made as necessary to ensure their success at the polls.

After three years of planning and negotiations, MARTA planners were determined not to repeat the same mistakes that were made in 1968. Believing that its low-key “above politics” approach in 1968 had cost it valuable votes, MARTA promoters undertook an extensive promotional campaign months before the November vote. Full-page advertisements in metro papers touted a transit system that was “new and improved” and “so superior” to the 1968 proposals. In the three years between referendums, MARTA’s proposed rail system had almost doubled in size, spanning a full seventy miles and extending to suburban Clayton and Gwinnett counties. The board secured generous pledges for financing from the federal government, expanded the system’s bus service, made arrangements to purchase the fledging Atlanta Transit System, and financed the local share of the total cost with a one percent sales tax rather than the ad valorem tax proposed three years earlier. Although it would now appear on ballots in suburban Clayton and Gwinnett counties, MARTA needed only to be affirmed by voters in urban
Fulton and DeKalb counties to become an operational public utility. To be sure, the stakes were high. With the Atlanta Transit System teetering on the brink of insolvency, Atlanta faced the prospect of being the largest city in the country without public transportation. “Circumstances are such at this time in history,” warned Mayor Massell, “that we will either end up with the best transportation system in the country or with no transportation system at all.”

MARTA was approved by narrow margins in DeKalb and Fulton, where it passed by only 461 votes. In suburban Gwinnett and Clayton, however, MARTA failed to win the support of even a quarter of either county’s voters. Overall, metropolitan voters cast more “no” votes than “yes” votes. After more than a decade of planning, Atlanta would now have a rail rapid transit system, albeit one that did not extend very far into the city’s burgeoning suburbs. Even while the vast majority of proposed construction would take place as scheduled, suburban dismissal of MARTA posed several real problems. Since 1961, the majority of metropolitan Atlanta residents had lived outside the city proper. City population totals were in marked decline by 1971, while predominantly white suburbs continued to expand. Thus, from day one, MARTA stood to serve less than half of the metropolitan population. Such limited patronage undermined the system as a viable solution to the region’s traffic problems. Moreover, suburban refusal struck a significant blow to the downtown business community. Since its conception as part of Ivan Allen’s “Six Point Program” for downtown renewal in 1960, rapid rail transit was envisioned as a means of ferrying white, middle class suburbanites to the central business district for shopping and leisure activities. Election results indicate, however, that the

business community overlooked one critical fact: suburban shoppers did not want to return to downtown any more than they wanted downtown to come to them.  

Because it passed in Fulton and DeKalb as a result of the negotiated settlements that were the hallmarks of Stone’s governing coalition, MARTA is generally regarded as a confirmation of his thesis. However, because it did not extend deep into the suburbs where a majority of the metropolitan area has resided since 1961, it could not be and has not been a solution to the region’s traffic woes. Moreover, rather than bring suburbanites back downtown, MARTA had the opposite effect. Its failure in Clayton and Gwinnett redefined the lines that separated the suburbs from downtown and reinforced suburban suspicions that the city was a reserve for lower-income minorities and inner city ills such as crime and poverty.

Viewed in this light, MARTA does not confirm Stone’s thesis so much as it illuminates its inadequacy in solving metropolitan problems. The 1968 and 1971 referendums mark the emergence of the suburbs as a third locus of power in metro Atlantan politics. Previously, Atlanta’s politics had two power centers: its white business community and black electoral bloc. Stone’s governing coalition proved durable enough to deal with these two poles. Concessions made by the white business community helped to win black electoral support and the measure passed in Fulton and DeKalb.

Transportation issues are metropolitan in scope, however, and require full metro participation to be successful. MARTA’s failure in the suburbs not only undermined its efficacy as a congestion cure-all, but also, and perhaps more importantly, marked the first assertion of a suburban identity that was not only separate from, but also in opposition to, the city center.

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36 Keating, Atlanta, 127.
In insisting on local autonomy and community control and by asserting an identity separate from the city center, suburban Atlantans shared common ideological ground with their counterparts in other parts of the country. In *Suburban Warriors*, Lisa McGirr located the rise of the modern conservatism in suburban Orange County between 1960 and 1980. It was in the suburbs of Southern California, she contends, that the “New Right” coalesced around a defense of property rights, opposition to busing, an insistence on private development, and vigorous grass roots organization. The movement was the product of an indigenous conservatism, the immigration of Midwestern and Bible Belt conservatives, and an influx of federal defense dollars in the postwar period - conditions that can be found in abundance in suburban Atlanta. Likewise, Matthew Lassiter’s analysis of “color-blind conservatism” in Charlotte emphasizes the role played by a defense of property rights, opposition to busing, and social conservatism in enabling Charlotte suburbanites to articulate a “race-neutral” philosophy of conservatism that has been compelling if not contagious. Subject to the same pressures and values, suburban Atlantans were cut from much the same cloth as McGirr’s “suburban warriors” and Lassiter’s “color-blind conservatives.”

Congress, the county had earned a national reputation for conservative politics and suburban residential privilege by the start of the 1990s. Whether because it offered a rare expression of suburban conservatism in its purest form or because it effectively dramatized the disparities separating urban decay and suburban wealth, “Cobservatism” became a point of departure for journalists covering what political analyst William Schneider called the “Suburban Century.” Such pieces, however, have likely obscured as much as they have illuminated. It bears remembering that Cobb County and McGirr’s Orange County remain exceptional cases better suited to polemicists than to scholars hoping to uncover suburban norms.

More typical of national norms were Clayton and Gwinnett counties. While both welcomed urban transplants in the decades that followed court-ordered desegregation and experienced rates of growth similar to Cobb, they retained a more solidly middle class character than could be found across the Chattahooche in Cobb County. Upon closer examination, Clayton emerges as a particularly understudied locale that is ripe for scholarly scrutiny. The county’s population was composed of primarily working class and lower middle class residents, many of whom belonged to the first wave of white flight from inside Atlanta’s borders. Still chafing at the “loss” of their neighborhoods to black homeowners in South Atlanta and not yet fluent in the “race neutral” language of modern, “color blind conservatives,” Clayton residents opposed urban incursions into their suburban retreat with both vehemence and candor and their resistance to MARTA offers a glimpse into the formation of a nascent suburban identity.  

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38 In fact, Clayton’s growth rates actually exceeded those of both Cobb and Gwinnett counties. Between 1960 and 1970, Cobb and Gwinnett grew by 72 percent and 66 percent respectively, while Clayton’s population expanded by an astounding 112 percent. Research Atlanta, 8.
Here, Kevin Kruse’s *White Flight* may be most instructive. Kruse argues that massive resistance campaigns were not the unmitigated failures that previous scholars had suggested. Segregation was more fluid than such a proposition would allow. Instead, urban segregationists successfully avoided integration mandates by defecting to overwhelmingly white suburbs, where they were absolved of metropolitan burdens and responsibilities by subsequent court rulings that defended de facto residential segregation. From this premise, Kruse undertook a study of racial transition in working class South Atlanta neighborhoods. Because they stood outside the city’s moderate coalition and resided in areas most vulnerable to integration, working class whites felt compelled to evade desegregation by abandoning the city altogether and pioneering a path to the suburbs that others would later follow. Detailed and incisive, Kruse’s account provides valuable insights into the motivations, anxieties, and values of a population that felt betrayed and abandoned by urban white elites.39

However, Kruse falters in the book’s later chapters, where he attempts to follow his subjects to their new suburban communities. In those sections, Kruse devotes his discussion almost exclusively to the elite suburbs of the northern rim—a unlikely place to find ostensibly powerless, working class whites. While the juxtaposition of racial transition in working class neighborhoods on the one hand and the political and cultural ascendency of suburban-style meretricious individualism on the other may make for a dramatic narrative, it is likely that Kruse strayed from the path trod by his original

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39 By insisting on a grassroots approach that stresses segregation’s historic fluidity, Kruse makes a valuable contribution to a debate that has traditionally privileged top-down sources. Likewise, his observation that suburbanization amounted to the most successful response to desegregation mandates is similarly prescient. However, he is mistaken to conclude on that basis that “the politics of massive resistance continued to thrive for decades after its supposed death.” It is not that massive resistance did not fail—it did; rather it is that integration failed as well, in large part because suburbanization allowed segregationists a backdoor reprieve from judicial mandates.
subjects. Rather than relocate to the rarefied realms of the northern rim, most working class whites moved instead to the working class suburb of Clayton County. However, Kruse passed on the opportunity to break new ground examining life in suburbs characterized by statistical mediocrity, opting instead for the already well-tilled soil of the city’s posh northside. Meanwhile his working class subjects remained on record, but lost amidst metropolitan aggregates and outside the focus of greater scrutiny.

The debates surrounding MARTA’s creation offer a valuable point of entry into a critical juncture in Atlanta’s history. Appearing on area ballots in 1968 and again in 1971, MARTA’s referendums serve as bookends, framing the twilight of the city’s elite white political leadership and the dawn of black power in City Hall--events that resonated nationwide with significance. While white flight had been underway for more than a decade before the 1970 census confirmed the city’s black majority, the significance of that pronouncement should not be underestimated. In the decade prior to 1970, 60,000 whites left Atlanta to resettle on the suburban periphery. During the next ten years, no fewer than 100,000 more followed their lead. However, while 1970 marks a clear tipping point in Atlanta’s demographics, the effects of that year’s census revelations were probably most keenly felt in the public’s perception. Just as the city’s electoral realignment emboldened black leaders to demand a more equitable transit system, so too were suburban whites moved to identify MARTA with black power and racial integration--the very conditions they had hoped to avoid by moving to the suburbs. Cast in stark relief by news of the Atlanta’s black majority, this dynamic no doubt stiffened the resolve of MARTA’s suburban opponents.
That anxieties over racial integration motivated suburban resistance to MARTA should come as little surprise. Less than a decade after the passage of landmark civil rights legislation, race remained the most divisive and emotionally-charged issue in regional and national politics. Of perhaps greater interest than race’s persistent relevance is the creation of a viable suburban identity that satisfied the imperative of de facto segregation while accommodating new environmental realities. The failure of massive resistance and the attendant breakdown of universal white solidarity required that a new suburban identity be predicated on notions of individual merit. With a national mythology that extolled rugged individualism and a pioneering spirit, settlers on the suburban frontier drew from a deep well of inspiration in crafting their new identities. As this first generation of suburban myth-makers appropriated individualism as its ideological bedrock, property rights and local autonomy were soon brandished as the twin cudgels of “suburban warriors” who were prepared to defend their new communities against incursions from a broad array of potential foes.

Not surprisingly, this suburban ideology found its most refined expression in hostility to the federal government. As the supposed source of limitations on personal freedoms, infringements on local autonomy, and nefarious schemes to redistribute wealth throughout society, Uncle Sam became the primary object of suburban scorn. Despite the abiding irony that suburbs owed their very existence to federal largesse, suburban activists nonetheless initiated an ideological movement that was determined to limit federal power. Over the course of the next three decades, suburban conservatives transformed a disparate collection of grievances into a finely tuned message that dominated American politics by the close of last century. Because it derived most of its
funding from the federal government, appeared as a “super-government” to suburban voters, and seemed a fearsome Trojan horse for metro-wide busing schemes and the dispersal of public housing, MARTA emerged as an early test case for the viability of suburban conservatism and a formative and empowering experience for Atlanta’s suburban conservatives.
“We are literally in a fight for our life,” insisted *Clayton News Daily* editor Jim Wood in November of 1971, “as a community with an entity all its own, a community that is not totally dependant on ‘Mother Atlanta’ for its very existence.” There was already a movement afoot he explained, to make the county as “self-supporting” and “independent” as possible. Although large segments of the population were already “enlisted in this rank,” others failed to recognize the gravity of their situation. Those who remained on the sidelines would have to choose whether they wanted “to ride Atlanta’s coattails” or establish Clayton as a “more independent county and community.” The stakes were not small, the editor cautioned, and MARTA was but one front in a wider battle. Whether purchasing groceries, investing their savings, or voting on rapid transit, Clayton citizens would have to determine whether their loyalty was due to the “Atlanta concept” or the “Clayton view.”

Perhaps more than any of MARTA’s other suburban critics, Clayton County’s Jim Wood understood that the MARTA referendum was a contest between two competing identities. The MARTA board was not merely proposing an extension of Atlanta’s rails or its problems as many claimed, but was in fact proposing a closer relationship with Atlanta, a common stake in the region’s health and responsibilities, and a recognition of the central city’s role as the heart of a vital metropolitan economy. To be sure, most

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suburbanites shared Wood’s many qualms with the proposed system. It would expedite the racial integration of suburban counties, make suburban communities more vulnerable to intrusive federal social policies such as busing and the dispersal of public housing, and require submitting to the wishes of not only the Atlanta power brokers who designed the system, but also the city’s recently aggressive black leadership that would soon occupy City Hall. In their opposition, Wood and his fellow suburban conservatives mounted a populist defense of local autonomy and articulated, sometimes consciously, a suburban identity that subsumed those aforementioned anxieties and one that was at odds with and in opposition to the city center.

However, before examining suburban identity construction and the finer points of MARTA’s suburban resistance, it might be instructive to consider first the setting that allowed these notions to flourish. Having experienced phenomenal growth in the decade before MARTA appeared on area ballots, suburban counties were in many ways new communities with new concerns, new values, and new outlooks. To understand suburban resistance then, it is critical to consider the developments, experiences and policies that contributed to the suburbs’ creation and subsequent political mobilization.

Although he could confidently boast after leaving office that “Atlanta was the city of the sixties in America,” Mayor Ivan Allen and his cronies at the Commerce Club were nonetheless anxious about the city’s future. The metro region’s population swelled by 37 percent during the decade, while its workforce ballooned by an astounding 68 percent; only Dallas, Atlanta’s Sunbelt sister, posted more impressive gains. Likewise, the city ranked second nationwide in new housing starts and eighth in downtown construction. However, while metropolitan aggregates painted a picture of progress, Atlanta itself
seemed to be tottering on the verge of steep decline. Although the metro population exploded during the sixties, the city proper grew by only a meager 1.9 percent. While the city’s “progressive” reforms helped to lure northern investment, they also alienated local whites who felt betrayed by the governing class of business elites. As a result, 60,000 whites abandoned the city altogether in the sixties. Another 100,000 followed their lead during the next decade, migrating to suburbs flourishing outside the city limits where the majority of the region’s future development would occur. “If you look at the statistics on a five-county metropolitan basis, Atlanta looks like the booming Sunbelt,” observed the city’s planning director after two decades of white flight. “But based on the city limits, we look like Newark, it’s that simple.”

Whereas Atlanta’s population plateaued during the sixties, the city’s suburbs welcomed more than 360,000 new residents, expanding by an impressive 68 percent. With an average median family income of more than $11,279, residents of suburban Atlanta belonged to a burgeoning middle class of professionals and tradesmen who were appearing in large numbers on metropolitan tax registers across the country. By contrast, Atlanta posted a more modest median family income of $8,399, a figure well below the $10,196 national average for urban areas. Housing figures tell a similar story. While Atlanta did rank second nationwide in new housing starts, a closer examination reveals that 75 percent of the region’s new houses were constructed in the city’s leafy suburbs where a full two-thirds of all dwellings were owner-occupied, single family homes. The inverse was true of Atlanta, where two-thirds of the city’s residents lived in multi-family rental units. Making matters worse, the amount of deteriorated, but repairable housing in

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the city of Atlanta actually increased during the sixties, while only 20 percent of substandard housing in the city’s urban redevelopment areas was repaired by the decade’s end. Put simply, as suburban subdivisions proliferated, Atlanta’s aging housing stock went unrepaired.  

Of course, the disparity between urban and suburban housing was not entirely a product of local forces. It also reflected the influence of federal policies that encouraged suburban development while contributing to urban decay. Between 1950 and 1970 more than 85 million Americans relocated to suburban communities fanning out from the metropolitan core. Whether they moved in search of affordable housing, gracious lots, or better schools, suburban migrants throughout the country shared much in common with their counterparts in Atlanta: they were predominantly middle class and overwhelmingly white. Their path to the metropolitan frontier was cleared by federal policies and initiatives that subsidized suburban development and brought the trappings and the prerogatives of the middle class within reach of millions of Americans.

Prior to the 1930s, the federal government had abstained from meddling in the housing market. However, with the onset of the Great Depression the nation’s housing shortage soon became a crisis. As foreclosures multiplied, the disparate voices that had previously called for federal intervention in the housing market became a chorus that demanded reform. Building trades suffered crippling blows as home construction and

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3 Which Way Atlanta?, 6, 42, 46, 72; Between 1960 and 1970, Cobb, Gwinnett, and Clayton counties grew by 72.4 percent, 66.2 percent, and 111.5 percent respectively.

repair ground to a halt and banks nationwide tottered precariously on the brink of insolvency. Housing had become a national problem.\textsuperscript{5}

During his first year in office, President Franklin D. Roosevelt urged both houses of Congress to draft legislation that would protect individual homeowners from the threat of foreclosure and insulate them from the vagaries of an erratic market. The resulting Home Owners Loan Corporation (HOLC) introduced long-term, self-amortizing mortgages that enabled tens of thousands of homeowners to refinance their debt. Although the legislation would soon be superceded by more expansive measures, its significance should not be underestimated. Large down payments, short financing schedules and unpredictable market forces had previously discouraged even middle class Americans from investing in their own home. However, HOLC effectively eliminated the stigma attached to debt, stabilized the housing market and established homeownership as a national priority.\textsuperscript{6}

In 1934, only one year after the passage of HOLC, a second New Deal program further expanded governmental influence in the housing market. The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) insured mortgage payments by pledging to reimburse banks in the event that a homeowner should default. By putting the full weight of the United States Treasury behind homeowner loans, the FHA made them safe and desirable business for lenders, while encouraging investment and stimulating the woefully depressed construction trades. The program’s impact was as swift as it was significant; in the


FHA’s first five years of existence, sales of new homes leapt from only 93,000 in 1933 to more than 458,000 in 1939.⁷

The federal government’s hand in housing was strengthened yet again when Congress passed the Serviceman’s Readjustment Act of 1944. More commonly known as the G.I. Bill, the act created a Veteran’s Administration (VA) that aided soldiers in purchasing a house upon returning from the war. Like the FHA, the VA granted extended twenty-five or thirty year mortgages and fully amortized loans, but the terms established under the VA program were so generous that cash down payments were reduced even further and sometimes voided altogether. Because of their similarities, the two programs are commonly considered as a single effort. Instituted on the eve of a period of prolonged postwar prosperity, the FHA-VA dramatically increased rates of homeownership. As a result of their influence, the percentage of Americans living in owner-occupied dwellings jumped from 44 percent in 1934 to 63 percent in 1972.⁸

However, while the FHA-VA expanded upon the success enjoyed by HOLC, they also shared the earlier program’s most significant shortcomings. Because the programs reflected the prejudiced customs that prevailed in the real-estate industry and discouraged investment in older housing stock, the FHA-VA contributed to urban decline and exacerbated social inequities. Essentially, the FHA-VA operated like a private business. Judgments were based upon calculated risk and loans were tendered only when applicants met certain financial criteria. As a result, inner city and economically depressed neighborhoods were deemed to be of too great a risk and were “red-lined” by government

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⁸ Hanchett, 20-1; Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 205.
officials. Not surprisingly, these neighborhoods fell victim to disinvestment and typically experienced periods of steep decline.⁹

By contrast, new suburban developments flourished under the programs. Lending practices were based upon the premise that homes in interior locations would experience a gradual decline over time. For this reason, the programs favored new developments on the suburban fringe. Because federal insurance made home loans desirable business, lenders actually pursued firms to build vast developments in suburban communities. In order to meet increased demand, builders such as William Levitt pioneered new construction methods that enabled them to erect hundreds of houses in a matter of weeks. Increased federal assistance for highway construction and the passage of the Interstate Highway Act of 1956 only hastened what had become a national exodus to the suburbs.

According to historian Thomas W. Hanchett, federal assistance to suburbanization was so great that the suburbs themselves amounted to “federally subsidized housing.”¹⁰

When combined with widespread white dissatisfaction over the dismantling of Atlanta’s segregated public institutions, federal inducements to suburban development whittled away at the city’s white middle class and resulted in a black majority by the decade’s end. Only three years later, Atlanta’s new black electoral majority elected Maynard Jackson, a charismatic young lawyer and sitting vice mayor, as the South’s first big-city, African American mayor. White flight continued unabated throughout the seventies and Atlanta, which had been two-thirds white a generation earlier, had a two-thirds black majority by 1980. Equally momentous political and economic changes accompanied the city’s seismic demographic shift. Area businesses soon followed their

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¹⁰ Hanchett, “The Other Subsidized Housing,” 19, 21, 42-3.
patrons and employees to the city’s suburbs and central Atlanta, which had boasted a robust 90 percent of the region’s office space in 1960, could claim only 42 percent by 1980 and a scant 13 percent by the close of last century. Changes in the city’s politics were no less dramatic. Racial fragmentation resulted in a marked discord in the region’s metropolitan politics and Atlanta itself became but an island of liberalism in a wide sea of suburban conservatism. As Kevin Kruse has argued, “White flight was more than a physical relocation. It was a political revolution.”

Of course, this “revolution” came despite the best efforts of the white establishment. In 1966, with white flight well under way, Atlanta’s political leadership unveiled a proposal to annex the affluent Sandy Springs community just north of the city limits. One of the plan’s chief spokesmen was former Mayor William B. Hartsfield, who insisted that annexation was necessary, to “preserve the proper white balance which is necessary to maintain amicable relations between both races.” In more simple terms, supporters of the plan aimed to dilute black voting strength and stave off the coming black majority. However, residents of Sandy Springs wanted no more part of Atlanta than did the thousands of whites who were already beating the path to the city’s suburbs. Opponents mounted a “Save Sandy Springs” campaign and community spokesmen vowed that, “We will NEVER agree to coming into Atlanta.” To no one’s surprise, the measure failed.

In the annals of municipal development, similar efforts have been anything but rare. In Crabgrass Frontier, Kenneth Jackson wrote that annexation was the preferred means for municipal expansion in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Motivated by

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11 Kruse, White Flight, 234, 243-244, 6.
12 Bayor, Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta, 87; Kruse, White Flight, 247-8.
urban imperialism, booster spirit, and presumed efficiency of service provision, American cities incorporated their provincial neighbors and expanded well beyond their original borders. However, this trend slowed during the interwar period and came to a virtual halt after 1950, when suburban identities began to diverge from the city center. “Resistance to annexation,” Jackson concluded, “is symptomatic of the view that metropolitan problems are unsolvable and that the only sensible solution is isolation.” Atlanta last expanded its borders in 1952 when it annexed the wealthy suburb of Buckhead in an effort to dilute growing black voting strength. The Plan of Improvement, as the measure was called, tripled the city’s size and added roughly 100,000 people to the city’s population. However, by 1966, annexation was a much tougher sell. Civil rights reforms had significantly changed the city’s political and social economy and suburban communities were determined to keep a safe distance. Thus, with formal incorporation no longer a viable option, the city’s political establishment was forced to search for alternatives. It was in this context--with the city’s white middle class waning and its black population waxing--that Atlanta’s business elites submitted MARTA to the public. As originally proposed in 1968, MARTA was less a transportation system than a de facto annexation scheme that would restore the metropolitan fabric and ensure the prominence of the central business district for years to come.\(^\text{13}\)

However, the board’s initial plans were foiled by stiff opposition from their erstwhile coalition partners in the black community. According to its opponents, the MARTA plan reflected the desires of a downtown establishment that was determined to protect its own interests. Because the system was intended to ferry white suburbanites to shopping and employment centers downtown, the MARTA board scheduled the North-

\(^{13}\) Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier*, 155; Stone, *Regime Politics*, 30-1.
South line—which would serve Sandy Springs and other affluent northside suburbs—to be completed first. By contrast, black neighborhoods would be underserved by the East-West line, despite their being a greater need for public transportation in those areas. Moreover, black community leaders charged that they had been excluded from the system’s planning process despite making numerous attempts to participate. No longer willing to remain a junior partner in the city’s governance, Atlanta’s black leadership seized the 1968 MARTA referendum as an opportunity to flex their newfound political muscle. Community leaders urged their constituents to oppose the system at the polls and black opposition dealt the proposal a deadly blow.

Chastened by their defeat, board members welcomed their critics to the table and acclimated themselves to the city’s new political realities. Over the next three years, the board agreed to honor requests for minority employment guarantees, to expand service provision to black neighborhoods, and perhaps most importantly, the board agreed that fares would not exceed 15 cents for a period of seven years. When it next appeared on ballots in 1971, MARTA resembled a genuine public service as much as it did an unabashed subsidy for the downtown establishment. However, by consenting to the demands of an assertive black majority, the board inadvertently alienated the very constituency the system was designed to serve—middle class, suburban whites.

Just as the city’s changing demographics empowered Atlanta’s black community to demand a more equitable transit system, so too were suburban whites moved to identify MARTA with black power and racial integration. Because the majority of the region’s low income minorities lived inside Atlanta and because City Hall would retain a controlling interest in the system after its impending period of racial transition, suburban
voters feared that MARTA would expedite the racial integration of their communities. The system’s opponents charged that MARTA’s subsidized fare would bring lower income minorities into suburban neighborhoods where property values would subsequently decline, low-income housing would proliferate, and tax bases would erode. Moreover, because it derived most of its funding from the federal government, MARTA seemed a fearsome Trojan horse for metro-wide busing schemes and the dispersal of public housing. As historian Michael Kazin has demonstrated, the federal government had by this time supplanted big business as the primary target of populist critiques. Federal remedies for structural inequalities were unpopular with the majority of moderate, middle class whites and Uncle Sam thus emerged as an unpopular figure in most American suburbs. By highlighting middle class dissatisfaction with intrusive federal social policies, the MARTA debates dramatized the tensions that splintered the New Deal coalition and suggested the coming dominance of the Republican Party in the suburban South.¹⁴

To be sure, the city’s prevailing racial dynamic--a newly aggressive black majority in Atlanta and a retreating white middle class outside the city limits--provided the context for MARTA’s suburban debate. However, a simple bifocal lens that sees the region only in black and white would be an inadequate instrument for examining metropolitan conflicts. While a majority of both the region’s total population and middle class population had lived outside the city for more than a decade, Atlanta retained a full two-thirds of the region’s most affluent residents. By 1971, Atlanta was a top and bottom

heavy population with relatively high numbers of both upper and lower income residents, but without a solid middle class foundation. Understanding the values and identities of those whites who remained is no less important to interpreting metropolitan squabbles than a focus on those that abandoned the city. Those who remained belonged to the governing class of political and business elites that had ruled Atlanta since the 1940s with the support of the city’s black voting bloc; they were the self-ordained “decent folks,” that elected members of their own circle to office by defeating populist race-baiters who enjoyed broad support in the city’s white, middle and working classes; they were the “progressives” who desegregated the city’s public spaces from atop a private perch; they were the boosters who endeavored to build a transit system to save their downtown; they were the “Barons of Peachtree,” and according to MARTA’s suburban opponents, they could not be trusted any more than the city’s aggressive and ascendant black majority.\(^\text{15}\)

By virtue of its origins as an instrument of the downtown establishment, its modification by a newly assertive black electoral bloc, and its suggestion of big government’s forays into social engineering, MARTA managed to combine three of Middle America’s greatest resentments in a single high speed rail car. As the sleeping giant of American politics whose slumber was disturbed by George Wallace’s thundering stump speeches and Richard Nixon’s more palatable political pitch, “Middle America” emerged in the 1968 presidential contest as a compelling political identity that subsumed both white working class resentment and the prerogatives of middle class attainment. The MARTA referendums of 1968 and 1971 reflect the political idiom’s pervasive appeal and populist tenor.\(^\text{16}\)

\(^{15}\) *Which Way Atlanta*, 42.
Over the course of the past decade, Atlanta’s “progressive” ruling class of business elites had parted ways with the majority of white voters to support the desegregation of public spaces that they themselves did not patronize. According to its suburban opponents, MARTA threatened the application of this double standard on a metro-wide scale. At the same time, however, the MARTA board had agreed to a number of demands made by black community groups in order to secure the system’s approval in the city of Atlanta. When combined with the already dubious role of federal financing, these concessions stiffened the resolve of suburban opponents who feared that their tax dollars would subsidize a metro-wide scheme of wealth redistribution. The middle class residents of suburbia could thus logically denounce MARTA as both a tool designed to benefit the city’s downtown establishment and at the same time, a welfare provision for the inner city poor. Confronted with the threat of Atlanta’s imperial business elite and menacing black majority, suburban residents erected a populist defense of local autonomy. In the process, they constructed a suburban identity that was predicated on community integrity and spatial separatism and one that defined themselves largely in opposition to their predominantly black, urban neighbors.

“First, can we trust Atlanta?” That question, posed by Jim Wood, editor of the Clayton News Daily and a future state senator, was of course rhetorical. According to Wood, Clayton had been “burned” countless times in the past by Atlanta’s “broken promises,” and MARTA would be no different. The editor and his fellow suburban critics predicted that their welfare would always be of secondary concern and cited as evidence the paucity of rail stations scheduled for suburban counties during the first
phase of construction. Although the MARTA plan called for a full seventy miles of rapid rail lines and busways, only two of the forty-five stations proposed for metro Atlanta would be located in suburban counties. According to the system’s suburban opponents, the equation was quite simple; they were being asked to foot Atlanta’s bill and getting very little in return. “MARTA’s offering to our community is the crumbs of the entire rapid transit system,” stated the News Daily editor. “Don’t we deserve more than Atlanta’s leavings?”

Similar sentiments surfaced in Gwinnett, where MARTA would complete only a single rail terminus in Norcross during the first phase of construction. Despite receiving limited rail service during the system’s first decade of existence, suburban taxpayers would still have to pay the full one-cent sales tax. Underwhelmed by their share of rail service, many Gwinnett residents cried foul. “I don’t think they are giving us a fair shake on this thing, no matter what MARTA officials would have you think,” insisted state Representative Jimmy Mason of Gwinnett, “and I frankly don’t think Gwinnett will be getting a very good bargain.”

MARTA representatives hastened to reassure suburban voters that they would receive their fair share of rail lines during the second phase of construction; practicality merely necessitated constructing rails in the urban core first. In the meantime, a fleet of new, air-conditioned buses would serve suburban communities, traveling more than one hundred miles of routes throughout suburban counties each day. MARTA, they insisted,

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was not a square deal so much as a “Christmas package.” With the federal government
shouldering two-thirds of the financial burden, the entire metro area would enjoy a first-
rate transit system at little relative cost. Moreover, because urban Fulton and DeKalb
counties were far more populous than their suburban neighbors, their contribution would
be much greater. The tax contributions of Clayton and Gwinnett counties would amount
to little more than 10 percent of the system’s total cost, “just peanuts” as one suburban
rail proponent later recalled. With suburban populations expected to triple over the next
decade, MARTA officials argued that suburban residents could hardly afford not to
invest in rapid transit. As one MARTA representative predicted at a public hearing in
Norcross, “the future of Gwinnett absolutely hangs on this thing.”

However, suburban voters remained unconvinced. Because they would be forced
to make do with buses, which the MARTA board had earlier denigrated as “second-rate,”
many of the system’s suburban critics charged that they were being treated as “second
class citizens.” Others claimed that the offer was “condescending,” even “an insult to our
intelligence as a community.” The News Daily editor retold the events thusly: “Look
here, says MARTA. ‘We’re going to buy the Atlanta Transit Co. buses (which Clayton
Countians don’t ride now) and you ride those, you folks out there in Clayton County.’
How’s that for another laugh?” Most suburban voters felt that buses were an inadequate
substitution, even in the interim, for rails and that Atlanta could not be trusted to give
suburban communities a “fair deal.” Moreover, the apparent asymmetry between rail

as Big Loser Without Organized Growth” Gwinnett Daily News, 13 October 1971, p. 2; Interview – Stan
May, August, 2005.
service and financing was but further evidence that MARTA would serve downtown interests at the expense of suburban communities. 20

These sentiments were most marked in Clayton County, where rail transit negotiations seemed to be the second act of a familiar story. Only a few years earlier, Atlanta officials had asked their Clayton counterparts to cede land on the county’s northern border to allow for the airport’s expansion. In exchange for their sacrifice, a new southern entrance would be built, bringing in a bevy of new jobs and tourists. According to the News Daily editor, Clayton’s leaders “bought it hook, line and sinker.” The airport’s expansion uprooted businesses, families, and churches, but the entrance was never built. “All of the economic benefits from the airport always ended up on the other side,” observed a longtime resident, “and all we ever got was the airplanes and noise down here.” 21

Even before the November vote, MARTA seemed to be following a similar script. The system’s early plans showed rail lines extending as far south as Jonesboro, Clayton’s county seat. However, under MARTA’s formal proposal, the Jonesboro terminus was tabled in favor of an urban spur line to the predominantly black Perry Homes development on the city’s Westside. Atlanta’s black leaders hailed the decision as a victory for inclusiveness and cited it as evidence that the city’s white leadership was finally willing to deal fairly with the black community. However, Clayton County residents were unimpressed. “The black leadership in Atlanta was feeling its oats,” the News Daily explained, “and demanded that rail lines be extended to the Perry Homes area

as another price for its support of votes—block votes. And so the MARTA board tuned out the requests from Clayton and Gwinnett counties for rail lines and tuned in the extension of rail lines to Perry Homes area.” White, middle class suburbanites, often aggrieved and seldom rewarded, were again playing second fiddle to the city’s tune.\(^{22}\)

In the minds of many suburbanites, the system’s route structure mapped out in plain terms the lines separating the beneficiaries and the benefactors. In the case of Clayton, the editor at the *News Daily* concluded that the substitution of Perry Homes for Jonesboro accounted for the system’s lack of popularity in the county. He found wide agreement that the substitution “just took the heart out of people’s favorable feelings about rapid transit.” Moreover, the preference shown to Perry Homes evidenced that MARTA was “designed to aid the inner city and the business of downtown Atlanta. Nobody else gets in on the deal.” The paper even went so far as to suggest that the cancellation of rail service to Jonesboro was the deal-breaker in the MARTA negotiations. In an editorial entitled “Why Not a Third Try Then?,” the paper implied that a future proposal including rail service to Jonesboro would be welcomed by the county’s voters. “If MARTA was forced to try a third time then,” the paper mused, “it might just come up with something really spectacular and workable which might, by coincidence, also have a twist or two in the plans for service to Clayton County. Seems worth a ‘No’ vote to wait and see.”\(^{23}\)

\(^{22}\) “The laughs of MARTA,” *Clayton News Daily*, 27 October 1971, p. 2; Despite repeated pledges, the Proctor Creek spur line, of which Perry Homes was the terminus, would not be built until the 1990s. The line that was ultimately constructed did not extend the full length to Perry Homes. A bus line would connect Perry Homes to the rail system, Bayor, *Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta*, 195.

As it happens, the MARTA board was listening more closely than many had suspected. The following year, MARTA offered Clayton and Gwinnett a second chance to get on board with rapid transit. Gwinnett passed on the opportunity, but Clayton accepted and the referendum was held the following November. When it first became clear that the proposal was being considered, the paper held its line. “We believe that if the matter is put back on the ballot it will be defeated more soundly than the first time,” warned the editor, “unless Atlanta’s MARTA ‘comes across’ with stations all the way to Jonesboro. Anything less would be rejected.” Eager to enjoy some measure of suburban participation, the MARTA board did just that. When the plans appeared on ballots in November, they included a firm, legally binding proposal for four rail stations extending all the way to Jonesboro.24

Internal memos circulating between board members during the campaign suggest increased sensitivity to the county’s needs and sensibilities; they instructed the system’s representatives never to “lecture” the county’s voters, lest they risk alienating valuable support and named a handful of local “non-controversial” supporters who could “speak to and be understood by voters in that area.” Likewise, the Authority resolved to introduce its campaign theme, “MARTA HAS SEEN THE LIGHT – MARTA HAS COME AROUND TO OUR WAY OF THINKING,” immediately following the passage of the resolution providing for the line to Jonesboro. The Authority’s concession satisfied Truett Cathy, Clayton’s representative on the MARTA board and an immensely popular local businessman who had earlier threatened to veto the proposal if it did not include significant changes. “I am glad MARTA has ‘come across’ for Clayton County,” said Cathy. “MARTA has committed itself substantially to all I had asked. We can now

enthusiastically support the MARTA program and look forward to receiving the benefits.”

However, rather than welcome the revised plans, the system’s critics dug in their heels and stepped up their opposition. The News Daily, the local organ of homegrown populism, argued that Clayton could not risk playing the role of “sacrificial lamb” once more to Atlanta’s “political maneuvers,”—despite the existence of a binding contract that would bar that possibility. According to the paper, the real question was not whether voters should approve the system at the polls, but why they should be offered a second helping of the same warmed-over proposal at all. “Why should the MARTA referendum be placed on the ballot again?” the editor asked. “Must the citizens rush down to the committee meetings every time to be up in arms for or against every proposal, particularly when they have voted MARTA down four to one just one year previously? This is ridiculous reasoning.” For MARTA’s dyed-in-the-wool opponents, even allowing the measure to appear on area ballots betrayed a political weakness and lack of character. “Doesn’t it make you a little bit sick,” the editor asked his readers, “to see so many of our leaders going ‘hat in hand’ and ‘Uncle-Toming’ to see what Atlanta wants us to do next?”

25 Memorandum: From Terrell W. Hill to Alan F. Kiepper, October 2, 1972 Mule to MARTA papers, Atlanta History Center (Atlanta: 1972) MSS 619, Box 45, Folder 6; Memorandum: From Terrell W. Hill to Alan F. Keipper, October 9, 1972 Mule to MARTA papers, Atlanta History Center (Atlanta: 1972) MSS 619, Box 45, Folder 6; News Release: October 16, 1972, by Truett Cathy MARTA Director, Clayton County, Mule to MARTA papers, Atlanta History Center, MSS 619, Box 45, Folder 6.

26 “Jim Wood Says…:” Clayton News Daily, 9 October 1972, p. 2; “Jim Wood Says…” Clayton News Daily, 3 November 1972, sec. B, p. 1; Like his counterparts in Clayton County, Gwinnett County State Representative Jimmy Mason also came under fire for supporting the bill that authorized the rapid transit referendum. Despite being an outspoken opponent of MARTA, Mason received “poison pen letters” from the I-285 Taxpayer’s Alliance for even allowing the measure to appear on Gwinnett County ballots. The organization distributed leaflets predicting that MARTA would “wreck good residential areas and schools in Gwinnett County.” Steve McMullan, “Mason Opposes Rapid Transit, But Says Voters Should Decide” Gwinnett Daily News, 20 October 1971, p. 1; Because both debates centered on the same issues and conflicts, editorials and newspaper coverage from both the 1971 and 1972 referendums in Clayton County
Despite intensive campaigning and generous inducements, Clayton voters defeated the revised MARTA proposal by roughly the same margin as the previous year. That the measure failed despite the extension of rails to Jonesboro suggests that increased service provision was not the key to approval after all; in fact, it might have been part of the problem. Like Atlanta’s previous “progressive” undertakings, MARTA threatened the racial integrity of metropolitan spaces occupied almost exclusively by middle class whites. As the editor’s comments suggest, suburban opponents feared that participation would require surrendering local autonomy to an imperial Atlanta and submitting to racial integration. However, by 1971, the city’s demographic shifts had raised the stakes. By invoking the language of racial subordination, the editor gave voice to anxieties that weighed heavily on the minds of many suburbanites: participating in MARTA did not merely mean taking the community’s “hat in hand” to call on the city, it meant “Uncle Toming” to Black Atlanta.

Of course, it should come as little surprise that race would play a role in transportation debates. Little more than a decade earlier, the Montgomery Bus Boycott ignited the Civil Rights Movement, awakening the nation to its moral crisis and elevating to the national stage a charismatic young Dr. Martin Luther King. Although Atlanta avoided the strife and ugliness that attended the demonstrations in Montgomery when it desegregated its city buses a few years later, its experience nonetheless illustrated the problems that awaited MARTA. In 1957, twenty black ministers led by the Reverend William Holmes Borders boarded a bus and took their seats at the front of the vehicle. White passengers then deboarded and the bus returned to the barn. Their arrest the

will be used to describe suburban opposition to MARTA throughout the rest of this chapter. Footnotes will indicate the source and date of each cited publication.
following afternoon was a carefully scripted affair that transpired without bloodshed or violence. However, as a result of the ensuing legal battle, white ridership declined by fifteen percent within a matter of months. By 1959, when the Supreme Court issued its decision, the city’s whites had largely abandoned public transportation. Though blacks represented only a third of the city’s population at that time, they accounted for almost two-thirds of the bus patronage during the rush period by the end of the decade.27

The precipitous decline in white ridership that followed the desegregation of city buses only continued over the next decade as tens of thousands Atlanta’s whites abandoned the city for greener pastures on the suburban periphery. With rigid delineations separating residential areas from commercial districts and no local forms of public transportation whatsoever, suburban communities virtually required automobile ownership as a matter of practical necessity if not as a social imperative. As a consequence, suburban automobile ownership increased exponentially during the sixties—growing by 145 percent, 155 percent, and a phenomenal 194 percent in Cobb, Gwinnett, and Clayton respectively. With an average of more than one car per family, few suburbanites relied on public transportation for daily commutes. In fact, by 1970, just over 1 percent of employed suburbanites rode public transportation to work, despite the fact that more than two-thirds of them worked outside their county of residence. By contrast, more than a fifth of Atlantans were dependent on public transportation and a majority of those who were belonged to lower income and minority groups.28

27 Bayor, Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta, 190; Kruse, White Flight, 113-117.
The combination of demographic and residential transformations, white flight, and the marked increase in the availability of automobiles conspired to stigmatize public transportation in Atlanta and elsewhere as an option of last resort. Consequently, public transportation came to be associated with life in the “inner city,” which by 1971, had emerged in the popular imagination as a dangerous locale where crime and poverty prevailed. To be sure, the familiar pathologies of urban decline were stumbling blocks to MARTA’s success in the suburbs. As the News Daily editor observed, “the poor and slums and ghettos follow the buses. Isn’t that what most of us moved to Clayton County to get away from?”

In this separatist climate, many suburbanites believed that MARTA was not simply proposing an extension of Atlanta’s rails, but also an extension of Atlanta’s problems. Suburban letter-writers and columnists predicted time and again that crime, poverty, and minorities would follow the rails to suburban communities, lowering property values, disturbing tranquility, and undermining the quality of life along the way. “Rapid transit lines serve as arteries,” explained one suburban columnist, “to channel central city problems out into the suburbs.” Gwinnett County resident F. H. Porter agreed. “I’m not in favor of it, period,” stated Porter. “It’ll just bring the city’s crime out here.”

To be sure, Atlanta had not been spared the civil unrest that gripped the nation’s cities during the sixties. Rioting erupted in the poor, black Summerhill neighborhood in the summer of 1966, proving to many that Atlanta’s problems were no less severe than those that plagued Watts and Detroit. Popular descriptions of urban decay such as Barry

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Goldwater’s 1964 campaign rallying cry “Crime in the Streets” and later more suggestive slogans such as “Law and Order” and “Support Your Local Police” only reinforced the notion that the nation’s once great cities had become dangerous slums teeming with crime and poverty. For most suburbanites, the potential benefits afforded by rail transit were simply not worth the risk. As Clayton resident Martha H. Jones put it in a letter to the *News Daily*, why should any voter support a system that was only “designed to take care of Atlanta’s ghetto problems.”

However coarse it may have been, Mrs. Jones’ analysis of Atlanta’s intentions for MARTA was not entirely off the mark. Though it was originally envisioned as a tool to protect the city’s downtown interests, Atlanta Mayor Sam Massell reinvented MARTA as an empowering service for the city’s lower income and black population after taking office in 1969. Because he understood that the system’s failure in 1968 was due to a lack of support in the black community, Massell appointed black political leaders and labor representatives to the MARTA board where they secured expanded service provision for black neighborhoods, minority employment guarantees and perhaps most importantly, a remarkably low fifteen cent fare. Thereafter, Massell touted MARTA to local and national audiences as an important source of uplift for the urban poor rather than a businessman’s boondoggle. Speaking before a congressional subcommittee, Massell charged that suburban prosperity and inner city decay amounted to a “white suburban noose” encircling Atlanta’s minority population. Rail transit was necessary he insisted, “to unlock the central city’s ghetto” and provide access to employment in the city’s suburban frontiers. With 82 percent of the metro area’s black population residing inside the city limits and 77 percent of the region’s white population settled in the suburbs, the

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mayor’s testimony highlighted the severe racial fragmentation that characterized Atlanta’s residential reality. Moreover, it addressed the chronic lack of mobility that stifled the efforts of inner city job-seekers. According to the Voorhees Report, a comprehensive survey of Atlanta’s transportation networks published in 1971, only 8 percent of the region’s jobs were accessible in 30 minutes from public housing areas by traveling on existing bus routes. Nonetheless, however astute Massell’s observations may have been, the imagery of economic lynching did little to quell suburban anxieties. Instead, such rhetoric only stiffened suburban resistance and exacerbated the widely held fear that MARTA “would simply open the flood gates for African Americans” to relocate in suburban communities.32

For those suburbanites who were “forced” to resettle after their former neighborhoods underwent racial transition, the threat of black migration was no small matter. As Kevin Kruse has argued, white flight was not simply a “physical relocation,” but also a “political revolution.” The suburbs where Atlanta’s middle class whites relocated, however, were not so much revolutionary societies as social experiments. Having more than doubled in size since the mid-fifties, Atlanta’s suburban counties were not simply larger versions of their former selves; they were fundamentally different communities. Whether they came from Atlanta, elsewhere in the state, or from outside the region, suburban newcomers shared much in common. They were overwhelmingly white, cognizant of the novelty of their circumstance, aware of their economic

dependence on Atlanta, predominantly middle class and in full possession of the values and station anxieties that such a designation suggests.  

Suburban residents thus not only sought to preserve their gains, but also to augment them. To this end, suburban boosters promulgated a gospel of growth that employed economic indices as barometers of community health. In Clayton County, the News Daily editor boasted that all three of Atlanta’s suburban counties ranked among the top five wealthiest counties in the state based on median incomes. He speculated that by adopting restrictive zoning ordinances and resisting urban incursions such as MARTA, Clayton would become a “real garden spot of a community.” Because the county’s residents were wise to Atlanta’s ruse, he expressed little doubt that they would continue to prosper and attract “the best kind of people” in the future. Such rhetoric suggests an awareness of the fact that Atlanta’s suburbs were at the crest of a demographic and social transformation of historic proportions. However, coupled with this awareness was a certain vigilance—the understanding that to safeguard the community’s racial and class homogeny it would have to ward off MARTA and other similarly “progressive” undertakings that threatened their newfound suburban splendor. According to the News Daily editor, if Clayton and other suburban counties could keep Atlanta at bay, their future would be bright indeed. “Here is one South,” he predicted, “which may actually rise again—and in the pocketbook belt where it counts.”

Of course, if rail transit was a bad thing, inexpensive rail transit was surely worse. For this reason, the proposed fifteen cent fare emerged as a major sticking point for suburban voters. When MARTA was first put to a vote in 1968, the system was to be

33 Kruse, White Flight, 6.
financed by an increase in property taxes. Not surprisingly, the proposal alienated middle class homeowners who believed they would be financing a system that benefited the inner city poor. Following its defeat at the polls, the MARTA board concluded that a successful second-try would require finding an alternative method of financing. At the same time, however, Mayor Sam Massell was determined to recast MARTA as a genuine public service that would benefit the city’s lower income and minority population. To this end, board members hammered out a compromise that called for a regressive sales tax in exchange for a fifteen-cent fare, making MARTA the cheapest mass transit system in the country.\footnote{Bayor, Race and the Shaping of Twentieth Century Atlanta, 194.}

However, rather than welcome the reprieve from a steep property tax, suburban voters erupted in a chorus of opposition to the proposed fifteen-cent fare. At a Gwinnett County homeowner’s meeting a few weeks before the vote, critics cited the subsidized fare as a chief objection. MARTA was a “quasi welfare agency” said one homeowner; another called the plan “socialistic;” “It’s cancerous, too” cried a third. Some opponents predicted that the fare would invite undesirable, lower-income minorities to the city’s suburbs and most considered it indisputable evidence that MARTA would serve city interests at their expense. “MARTA had to have the black leadership behind things,” opined one suburban columnist, “so as the price of support the black leadership had Sam Massell, their mouthpiece, come out with the fifteen-cent fares. In that way, they’ll be able to ride the rails for practically nothing and pass the cost on to somebody else as a means of subsidizing the whole project.”\footnote{“Rapid Transit Hit at Taxpayer Meet,” Gwinnett Daily News, 26 October 1971, p. 3; “The Laughs of MARTA,” The Clayton News Daily, 27 October 1971, sec. A, p. 2.}
For their part, MARTA officials dismissed the criticism as “scare tactics” and “innuendo.” “The fifteen-cent fare is good business,” insisted one MARTA representative, “You don’t have to be black or poor to appreciate a good bargain and the fifteen-cent fare is a good bargain for everybody.” However, suburban voters maintained that the fare amounted to a handout for the city’s black community. Beholden to the cult of individualism that was the focal point of suburban conservatism, suburban voters remained convinced that the fifteen cent fares amounted to a “socialistic” subsidy. At the same time, black and lower income voters insisted that reduced fares would best serve those communities where the need was greatest. Because voter approval was essential in Fulton and Gwinnett counties for MARTA to become a reality, the board naturally sided with its urban supporters. In this way, the conflict over reduced fares illustrates the fundamental divide separating MARTA’s urban and suburban constituencies. MARTA could not be an instrument for social uplift and still enjoy suburban support. However, without suburban participation, the city’s poor would still lack access to the burgeoning employment centers on the suburban periphery. By 1971, metropolitan Atlanta was just too unwieldy, too racially and socially polarized, to forge a satisfactory compromise on rail transit.

Despite the difficulty of selling the fifteen cent fare to suburban voters, MARTA nonetheless persisted in their efforts. When the measure appeared for a second time on Clayton ballots in the fall of 1972, the Board trotted out hometown favorite Truett Cathy to defend the subsidized fare as a boon to suburban riders. “With a one fare structure of MARTA – 15 cents,” said Cathy, “Clayton County will again be a principal beneficiary--a longer ride, yet no increase in fare.” However, even Cathy’s endorsement could not

convince suburban voters that the fare was in their best interest. Most were more likely to agree with the unnamed Gwinnett County woman who told the *Lawrenceville News*, “It’s only going to help one kind of people and you know who I’m talking about.” Or worse still, the suburban letter writer who warned neighbors, “If you want the drug pushers, muggers, rapists, and other degenerates who are now stalking the streets of Atlanta to invade your community, then vote for rapid transit…A speedy fifteen-cent ride will drop them off near your front door and your neighbor’s front door.”

However, while such dire and prejudiced warnings were no doubt expressed privately with some frequency, they were increasingly rare in public discourse. Like Matthew Lassiter’s “color-blind conservatives” in Charlotte, suburban Atlantans learned to discuss race in more neutral, though sometimes coded, language. While MARTA in no way marks the dawn of political correctness, the system’s opponents did find it useful to protest the means of racial integration rather than the end itself. Because federal transportation dollars and urban renewal monies were often wedded to perceived social engineering, the federal government’s contribution to MARTA raised red flags for suburban conservatives. As one suburban columnist warned his readers, “If the agreement is to grant federal funds, you also have to take the strings that go with it.”

The “strings” in this case referred to the dispersal of public housing and busing to expedite racial integration. Despite the abiding irony that the suburbs owed their very existence to federal largesse, Uncle Sam had, by 1971, become one of the primary objects

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of suburban scorn. This irony is particularly rich in the Sunbelt South, where defense expenditures contributed to the region’s growth at the same time federal housing programs were encouraging the settlement of suburban frontiers. Coined by journalist Kevin Phillips in 1969, the term “Sunbelt” captured the dynamism of economies lying south of the 37th parallel, where the expansion of service sector employment, the relocation of high tech industries, and the absence of regulatory restrictions sparked explosive economic growth. As historian Bruce Schulman demonstrated, federal spending was also critical in the region’s transformation. In 1950, the South received only 7 percent of the nation’s defense contracts. Only two decades later, however, “fortress Dixie” claimed nearly 25 percent of federal defense dollars and seven of the country’s top ten defense contractors called southern states home. Uncle Sam’s contribution to southern coffers seems particularly generous when considered in light of the region’s relatively modest tithes to the federal purse. Despite paying only 12 percent of the nation’s taxes in 1960, the region received more than a quarter of total federal outlays.40

Like the generous New Deal spending that buoyed the region’s economy decades earlier, southern congressmen openly welcomed the defense dollars that flooded the region during the postwar period. Because they came without strings attached, federal defense spending provided valuable economic assistance without disturbing the region’s distinctive racial caste system. However, the relationship between white southerners and the Uncle Sam soured when the federal government enforced the desegregation of the

Beginning with the Brown decision invalidating the principle of “separate but equal” in 1954 and culminating with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the federal government established a commitment to protecting the civil rights of the region’s minorities and imposing national norms on aberrant state governments. Moreover, President Lyndon Johnson’s willingness to send federal agents and troops to monitor the region’s compliance indicated that the federal government would supplant local authority when necessary and that recalcitrance would not be tolerated.41

Although they engendered resentment and hostility in the South, Johnson’s civil rights reforms were applauded by the vast majority of Americans outside the region. However, federal welfare and busing programs soon transformed what was merely a localized antipathy and exported it throughout the nation, provoking a conservative backlash in national politics. When campaigning for the presidency in 1964, Republican Barry Goldwater ran under the slogan, “Government is not your master, it must be your servant.” However, his message found few supporters outside the South, where voters cheered his opposition to the Civil Rights Act and his devotion to states’ rights. Only four years later though, Goldwater’s conservatism was reinvigorated by Alabamian George Wallace, who was the leading vote-getter in suburban Atlanta, and redeemed by Richard Nixon, whose landslide victory in the 1968 presidential contest represented the triumph of a conservatism that had only recently been pronounced moribund by a generation of American scholars. The resounding defeat suffered by the nation’s liberal agenda was penance for a federal behemoth that most Americans believed had

overstepped its bounds. Or, as then Nixon aide Kevin Phillips correctly observed, Democrats unwisely proceeded “beyond programs taxing the few for the benefit of the many (the New Deal)” to supporting “programs taxing the many on behalf of the few (the Great Society).” As a result, the nation’s politics underwent a conservative shift and hostility to federal reforms, or to big government as the catch-all shorthand goes, became a compelling cause for politicians with national aspirations and an enduring aspect of the American political landscape.42

In this climate, it was perhaps inevitable that Uncle Sam’s role as MARTA’s chief financier would emerge as a point of controversy. Because Atlanta’s suburbs represented the very vanguard of the conservative counterrevolution and because the Swann decision, which approved busing as a permissible solution to achieve compliance with court-ordered desegregation mandates, was delivered by the Supreme Court the same year MARTA appeared on metro ballots, the federal government’s contribution disturbed many suburban conservatives who feared that their communities might become laboratories for the experiments in social engineering. Moreover, it was the stated policy of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to link public transportation to low-income housing programs. For these reasons, many suburban voters feared that participation in MARTA would make their communities vulnerable to a capricious federal government that was, in the words of one suburban journalist, “very interested in dispersing public housing and mixture of the population anyway.” An editorial published in the Clayton News Daily a week before the vote suggests that such ideas enjoyed wide currency. “Will they be able to relocate displaced families as they

wish in places like Clayton County no matter what our own government may say?” wondered the paper’s editor. “Most Clayton Countians think that they will.”

The notion that MARTA was a Trojan Horse for federal social engineering schemes was likely reinforced by other local controversies. At the same time voters were debating rapid transit, suburban communities were resisting the efforts of the Atlanta Housing Authority (AHA) to build low-income housing in unincorporated suburban areas. As Kevin Kruse recounted in White Flight, suburban governments even went so far as to create separate housing agencies—“not to address the housing shortages themselves but to claim authority over unincorporated lands and thereby prevent the Atlanta Housing Authority from creating its own housing there.” However, none of the resulting housing agencies ever developed “workable programs” and were consequently ineligible for federal urban renewal monies. According to journalist Reese Cleghorn, the absence of such programs was not an oversight, but instead a “calculated policy” designed to evade assumption of responsibility for urban problems.

That local anxieties over public housing disposal coincided with a pervasive bias against big government did not augur well for MARTA’s suburban salesmen. Instead, the combination of local and national concerns over housing dispersal stiffened the resolve of suburban opponents. According to one suburban letter writer, the possibility that Atlanta’s “low rent public housing” could “be built in our own backyard,” was more “frightening” than MARTA’s history of deception or even its hiring of unqualified “racist blacks.” Such fears were no doubt exacerbated by recent court rulings that sought to

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establish regional responsibility for public housing. Earlier that same year, U.S. District Court Judge Newell Edenfield issued a decision in *Crow v. Brown* that required Fulton County to accommodate a portion of Atlanta’s public housing. With over three quarters of the region’s public housing population inside Atlanta’s borders and some 8,000 families awaiting the construction of new projects, voters in suburban counties worried that they might be asked to help bear Atlanta’s burden as well. However, neither did suburban fears of federal influence end there. Perhaps more vexing than public housing dispersal was the prospect of compulsory busing. In an interview with the *Atlanta Constitution*, former Atlanta Alderman and full time MARTA critic G. Everett Millican cited busing as one of MARTA’s unanticipated consequences. “MARTA could definitely be used for the busing of school children from one end of Atlanta to the other or one end of the county to another,” stated Millican. “The city of Atlanta does not own a single school bus and the children now being bused or who will be bused in the future would have to be done by MARTA.”

MARTA representatives dismissed such claims outright. When asked by an *Atlanta Constitution* reporter if MARTA could be used for social engineering or integration, MARTA Chairman Roy Blount replied without hesitation: “No. There is no way for MARTA to get involved in any social change.” He explained that the state had not invested in MARTA such powers and that the board had neither the intention nor the authority to promote social change of any kind. Though it was not inaccurate, Blount’s response did overlook the fact that the Atlanta Region Metropolitan Planning

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Commission’s (ARMPC) publications had touted MARTA on numerous occasions as a tool for social uplift and urged the Authority to work closely with the AHA and other agencies to help meet the city’s housing needs. Even under the businessman-friendly 1968 proposal, planners identified rail transit as an essential part of the solution to the problems affecting Atlanta’s urban poor. In “The Impact of Rapid Transit on Metropolitan Atlanta,” a study dating from March of 1968 that was one of a number of publications that would be sent to Washington to solicit federal funds, the ARMPC described MARTA as “one of the few public enterprises which can penetrate the social, physical and psychological isolation, and open up the total community – its schools, hospitals, jobs, housing, cultural and recreational elements – to those now separated from it.” Furthermore, the report cited multiple federal studies detailing the nation’s urban crisis and concluded that “Atlanta has the very situation that characterizes the national picture.” Not surprisingly, it also found that MARTA was “perhaps the most direct means for overcoming Atlanta’s problems.”

Specifically, the city’s planners argued that MARTA should be employed to help solve the city’s housing crisis. The authors admitted that Atlanta’s housing shortage was particularly acute in the black community where generations of discrimination had confined Atlanta’s black population to a small fraction of the city’s total available land and where overcrowding and substandard housing were consequently most common. In order to rectify the problem, MARTA would need to work closely with the housing authorities of various jurisdictions and “keep them abreast of the opportunities offered by

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the proposed rapid transit system in locating new low-income housing projects…in the vicinity of the new stations.” Moreover, it recommended that MARTA “seek the assistance of Atlanta’s Housing Resources Committee for the task of undertaking a special program to study ways to utilize fully rapid transit as a tool for dispersing low- and moderate-income housing.” Of course, if MARTA was to be fully effective, the planners concluded, the system would need generous grants from the federal government.47

Discussion of MARTA’s possibilities as a tool for social justice only increased after its initial defeat, as Mayor Massell endeavored to recreate the system as a service for the city’s lower income and minority residents. Under intense pressure to encourage broad public participation, the same MARTA board that had previously sought to remain “above politics,” decided instead to welcome the input of numerous political groups. In this new climate of transparency and scrutiny, organizations such as the Atlanta Coalition on Community Affairs, which was represented by future Mayor Maynard Jackson, and the Metropolitan Atlanta Citizens Transportation Advisory Committee lobbied the MARTA board to help alleviate the city’s public housing shortage and to allow its vehicles to bus Atlanta Public School students to area schools. At the same time, interest groups were lobbying the system’s board, Mayor Sam Massell took his show to Washington, where he testified before a congressional subcommittee that with adequate federal funding, MARTA could “unlock the central city’s ghetto” and ameliorate the abysmal conditions of Atlanta’s poor. MARTA’s revamped proposal not only satisfied Congress, which made the system a priority in the federal transportation budget, but also

47 The Impact of Rapid Transit on Metropolitan Atlanta ARC Archives (Atlanta: Atlanta Regional Metropolitan Planning Commission, 1968), 11-12.
Atlanta’s black voters, who supported the measure and ensured its success. Less satisfied, however, were suburban conservatives, who responded virtually in unison, with that time honored refrain: “Not in My Backyard.”

While suburban fears of intrusive federal social programs and their unwitting surrender of local authority were thus not without reason, they were likely inflamed and overblown by the actions of MARTA’s high profile opponents. Lieutenant Governor Lester Maddox, for instance, spent $2,000 of his own money placing advertisements in local papers so that he could “tell the good people of Georgia the truth about this corrupt, inefficient and immoral idea.” The truth according to Maddox was that “this rapid transit’s main motive isn’t transportation. It’s racial integration of the suburbs first and transportation second. It’s just like the school-integration issue, where the motive is integration first and education second.” First as governor and then as lieutenant governor, Maddox leveraged his political influence to slow MARTA’s legislative progress before resorting to a public smear campaign. In his role as the system’s principal public opponent, he predicted that MARTA would attempt to relocate displaced black residents in the city’s uniformly white suburbs. “This rapid transit idea is a scheme to accelerate the integration of our fine suburbs,” said Maddox. “It’s a terrible crying shame. People ought to have a right to invest in their own communities without having them destroyed.”

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48 Maynard Jackson, Senator Leroy Johnson. Letter to Members of the Board of Directors, July 1, 1971 Mule to MARTA papers, Atlanta History Center (Atlanta: 1971), MSS 619, Box 68, Folder 10; “Statement By Metropolitan Atlanta Citizens Transportation Committee” July 7, 1971 Mule to MARTA papers, Atlanta History Center (Atlanta: 1971), MSS 619, Box 50, Folder 2.
To be sure, Maddox’s harangues did not fall on deaf ears. As a former governor and a veteran of the state’s massive resistance campaigns, Maddox maintained a strong base of support in Atlanta’s suburbs. MARTA’s other chief public opponent, former Atlanta city alderman Everett Millican, enjoyed a similar appeal. As a law and order mayoral candidate a decade earlier, Millican polled well with blue-collar workers in south Atlanta, who sought to defend their neighborhoods from impending racial transition. Following the failure of the state’s massive resistance campaign, many of those same south Atlanta residents participated in the first wave of suburbanization, moving a few miles south to Clayton County. Still chafing at the “loss” of their neighborhoods to black homeowners, most recent transplants from the city were dissatisfied with Atlanta’s “progressive” leadership and were loathe to enter a formal relationship with the city. After his departure from the Atlanta Board of Alderman, Millican made MARTA his personal crusade. In speeches before homeowner groups, civic clubs and at public hearings, the former Alderman lambasted the system as a “super government” that would usurp local autonomy and impose Atlanta’s will on suburban governments. As MARTA’s chief public opponents, Millican and Maddox articulated a populist critique of rail transit specifically and Atlanta’s “progressive” culture more generally. In this way their public opposition points toward a larger reevaluation of suburban relationships with Atlanta and a recognition of the need for a separate suburban identity.

Few suburbanites recognized this need more clearly than Jim Wood. Whether lambasting the system as a businessman’s boondoggle, protesting proposed service disparity or warning against ghetto relocation and racial integration, Wood enumerated
and animated suburban anxieties throughout the course of the MARTA debates. Perhaps more importantly, though, he distilled the issue down to its most essential elements. As the editor explained to his readers, MARTA was hardly about rail transit at all. Instead, the referendum merely functioned as a proxy battle over the future of suburban and urban relationships. A week before the 1972 referendum, for instance, Wood reminded his readers that MARTA was one of the “biggest decisions” facing the county’s voters. But, he added, it was also much “more than that.” “It is a basic decision as to whether we wish to lock arms with Atlanta and surrender to her wishes,” the editor explained, “or keep her at arms length away from us in independence.”

Of course for most suburbanites, the reasons for keeping Atlanta at “arm’s length” were as numerous as they were self evident. In addition to the city’s “racial woes,” there were “the school problems. the downtown crime on the streets problems. the racketeers battling for control of the city problems,” and “the Sam Massell problems,” not to mention the prospect of unwanted federal meddling. With such a laundry list of “problems” and ailments, Atlanta must have surely seemed more like an infectious disease than a friendly neighbor. In this environment, it is not unlikely that security fences would have garnered more support than rail lines. As state representative Jimmy Mason of Gwinnett County observed before casting his “no” vote, “Atlanta is sinking like the Titanic.”

By portraying Atlanta as a declining society, one that was in fact sick with urban “problems,” suburban commentators were engaging, sometimes consciously, in the

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creation of a separate suburban identity. However, rather than identify positively their shared traits or values, suburbanites more often undertook the far easier task of describing themselves in contrast to their urban counterparts; that is, they identified themselves not in terms of what they were, but instead, by describing what they were not. It is important to understand, however, that the MARTA debates did not so much reflect the existence of a separate suburban identity as they provided the catalyst for the formation of one.

Having more than doubled in population in little more than a decade, Atlanta’s suburban counties were fundamentally new communities. While suburban newcomers no doubt shared similar experiences, they nonetheless lacked a specific, common past. In the absence of unifying local histories, they turned instead to mutual class and race anxieties to forge their new identities. What better a vehicle than MARTA then—with its suggestion of black power, racial integration, white business hegemony, federal social engineering, and metropolitan burdens such as public housing—to enlist an inchoate suburban identity in the defense of local autonomy.

These local efforts at identity construction were reinforced by prevailing national currents. In his presidential campaign three years earlier, Richard Nixon delivered a finely tuned message designed to appeal to the nation’s expanding demographic of suburban voters, particularly in the South. While he avoided the more obvious racial overtones expressed by George Wallace, Nixon nonetheless denounced urban crime and the federal programs that presumably coddled its perpetrators. As Michael Kazin has argued, Nixon’s message enjoyed wide appeal amongst “Middle America,” that broad swath of middle class Americans who felt “squeezed between penthouse and ghetto—between a condescending elite above and scruffy demonstrators and welfare recipients
below.” To be sure, MARTA’s suburban opponents fit Kazin’s description. Moreover, as the product of Atlanta’s own “condescending elite” and as an allegedly federally subsidized handout for the city’s poor, MARTA itself represented the very qualities suburban middle class populists were determined to defeat.52

While race and class anxieties provided the structural basis for the suburban identity then taking shape in Atlanta and elsewhere, other cultural values were nonetheless instrumental in its formation as well. In Suburban Warriors, Lisa McGirr argued that modern conservatism offered a compelling alternative to postwar liberalism because it embraced modernity without forsaking traditional cultural values. Even as her well-educated subjects enjoyed high-tech employment and partook of the pleasures of postwar consumer culture, they nonetheless retained a firm faith in individual responsibility, religiosity, and the primacy of local institutions such as the church and family. The result was a flexible ideology that fused the traditional and the modern and undermined the notion that the two were necessarily at odds. That MARTA provoked a debate over the nature and desirability of “progress” in an affluent, middle class, and typically modern setting suggests that Atlanta’s suburban conservatives maintained a similar ambivalence regarding modernity, at least in some of its forms. 

Since its inception in the early sixties as part of Ivan Allen’s six point program for growth and development, MARTA was touted as a thoroughly modern solution to the congestion that threatened to slow the city’s growth. The system was to be a physical embodiment of Atlanta’s status as a “national city” and the crowning achievement of a decade of unparalleled development. Because they projected modernity and progress, the city’s boosters even remained devoted to rails after studies demonstrated that expanded

bus service would provide a more efficient alternative. However, like many of Atlanta’s previous progressive reforms that were designed to burnish the city’s national reputation and distinguish it from its regional peers, MARTA proved to be unpopular with the majority of middle class whites. As Kevin Kruse observed in *White Flight*, most of the city’s “progressive” measures ultimately resulted in the desegregation of public spaces and the term “progress” itself even came to be associated with “a litany of white losses.”

Despite the negative associations, MARTA nonetheless staked its success on its “progressive” character. Full page advertisements placed in area newspapers described a modern transit system that would reduce pollution, improve air quality and protect the city’s green space from becoming a patchwork of blacktop and concrete. Moreover, MARTA’s salesmen even suggested that the city’s “progressive” residents deserved nothing less than an equally “progressive” rail system. An advertisement placed in the *Clayton News Daily* engaged the notion directly. “We have every reason to be proud of Clayton County’s progress,” read the emboldened headline. “Let’s keep it that way.” In smaller script below, the advertisement attempted to appeal to the growth-obsessed sensibilities of suburban voters. “Clayton County is progressive,” it insisted, “But how far can we progress without rapid transit?” Clearly, the advertisement attempted to equate MARTA itself with “progress.” If suburbanites hoped to be “progressive” themselves, they needed only to get onboard with rapid transit.

To an extent, the county’s residents agreed. In his regular column, *News Daily* editor Jim Wood stated that “Clayton County wants to be progressive.” In fact, he

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continued, the county’s voters had supported the “idea” of rapid transit in a 1964 referendum for that very reason. Since that time, however, the Authority had made a “notorious decision;” it had submitted to the will of the city’s black leadership, extending rail lines to black communities and canceling those stations scheduled for Clayton County. “If that’s progress,” Wood inveighed, “let’s not ask for more back-stabbing progress.” Like Kruse’s white subjects a decade earlier--many of whom had relocated to Clayton County--most suburban conservatives still believed that “progress” was a zero sum game. In order to avoid future “losses,” suburban communities would have to keep a safe distance from Atlanta, beginning with MARTA. In his final analysis, Wood concluded that “some people’s ideas of ‘progress’ are downright funny.” As evidenced by the final vote, the vast majority of his readers agreed.\(^{55}\)

Suburban conservatives’ persistent resistance to “progress” and its social implications highlights an important and often overlooked feature of suburban identity. While most contemporary accounts portray a self-satisfied society of Haves steadfastly protecting their privilege from urban Have-Nots, it is important to remember that suburban conservatism was actually a profoundly reactionary movement. As a formative experience in the creation of Atlanta’s suburbs, white flight informed the sensibilities of even those suburban newcomers who did not participate in it themselves. Because it represented a retreat from the defeat of massive resistance and universal white solidarity, white flight reflected the powerlessness of middle and working class whites to determine their own destiny and defend their communities from unwanted “progress.” Abandoned by their “progressive” upper class white allies who supported racial moderation and

desegregation from the security of the city’s private institutions, ordinary middle and working class whites were left to suffer the indignities of desegregation themselves and ultimately fled the city as a measure of last resort. However, their hostile reception of MARTA demonstrated that most suburbanites did not feel safe from Atlanta’s “progress” even from such great a distance. Rather, most suburbanites would have agreed with Gwinnett County pharmacist Joe Snell, who believed that MARTA merely evidenced Atlanta’s desire to “take us over.”

Pharmacist Snell would have surely found agreement with the News Daily’s Jim Wood, who alleged that Clayton’s officials had abdicated their leadership by even allowing the measure to appear on the county’s ballots. “Why are so many of our ‘leaders’ led around like cow’s with a ring in their noses?” the editor wondered. The Cobb County residents who campaigned against MARTA in 1964 under the banner “Stop Atlanta” would have concurred as well. As the slogan suggests, Cobb’s MARTA opponents understood that the referendum had more to do with defending local autonomy than with rail transit. Considered as a whole, suburban opposition to MARTA reflects a marked feeling of besiegement. Having been “forced” from their old communities, the middle income residents of suburbia remained ever fearful of the fact that Atlanta’s “progress” lay only a few miles away and moreover, betrayed an almost palpable anxiety that they might be powerless to stop its advance. As Jim Wood desperately demanded of his readers, “Why must we always be forced to swallow what Atlanta wants?”

The suburban identity that emerged amid the MARTA debates then was composed of equal parts privilege and insecurity. However, to simply defeat MARTA at

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the polls would not effectively diminish the latter half of the equation. Instead, some suburban commentators suggested looking within their own communities to lessen suburban dependence on Atlanta. This was certainly the contention of Jim Wood. Among the most popular arguments marshaled by suburban rail proponents in MARTA’s defense was the fact that suburban residents already spent over half of their incomes outside their county of residence. Because they would already be paying the sales tax to support MARTA on goods bought in Atlanta, the argument went, why not support the measure at the polls and at least have some rail stations to show for their sacrifice. Not surprisingly, Wood found this to be “negative reasoning.” Rather than accept their economic dependence on Atlanta, Wood implored residents to rebel against it by “trading at home.” In his columns, the editor turned time and again to the “trade at home” theme as an antidote to the county’s economic dependence, applauding those individuals who shopped locally and lamenting the fact that many local builders employed labor from outside the county. Given the county’s population influx, Wood argued that shopping locally was an important way to help create a sense of community. “If support of the local county is ‘provincialism’ we’ll just have to plead guilty,” he admitted. “We just believe in ‘trading at home.’ Don’t you?”

To be sure, Wood’s “trade at home” campaign was provincial. As residents of metropolitan Atlanta, Clayton’s suburbanites were, by 1971, participants in a national and to some degree, international economy. Wood’s homespun advice was thus an anachronistic solution to a modern dilemma that reflected the author’s populist impulse rather than the county’s economic reality. However, even as it evoked a bygone era, Wood’s resolution nonetheless anticipated the future of suburban development.

In his 1991 book by the same name, *Washington Post* columnist Joel Garreau introduced to the American lexicon the term “edge city.” According to Garreau, edge cities were those newly minted urban centers appearing on the peripheries of metropolitan areas that performed all of the same functions as a traditional city but were characterized by detached single family homes and generously spaced corporate campuses all linked by interstates and curvilinear boulevards rather than dense downtown blocks. Garreau argued that edge cities marked the third stage of urban development in the last half century. In the first phase, urban dwellers moved from the traditional city to residential suburbs, particularly in the years following the Second World War. In the second, malls and shopping centers appeared amidst these new residential locales. In the third--the edge city stage--employment centers followed suit. As a result, historic downtowns became less essential to the American economy and represented increasingly smaller portions of metropolitan populations and economic activity—precisely what Jim Wood prescribed in his opposition to MARTA. “Do we want a county with, insofar as is possible, a balance between employment and residential housing or nothing more than a bedroom for the urban center?” the editor asked his readers. “We cannot see how the second would be to our advantage, and it is what a rapid transit system would promote.” Thus, while he may have looked to the past for his cues, Wood nonetheless offered insightful predictions for the suburban future. Ironically, however, Clayton County was overlooked in the edge city bonanza that was to come. Of the seven edge cities Garreau identified in the Atlanta area, only one, the Hartsfield-Jackson-Atlanta International Airport, was located on the city’s southside, and according to the author, even that location did not constitute a “mature” edge city.59

In opposing MARTA, Atlanta’s suburban conservatives were thus looking warily over their shoulder at a troublesome past even as they eyed a bright future. In their new settings, suburbanites hoped to recreate splendid cities on the hill, with all the cohesion of community and uniformity of value and vision that the expression suggests. Because it represented the very intrusions they hoped to avoid—rational integration, downtown establishment hegemony, and federal social engineering—MARTA provided both a challenge to their suburban vision and an opportunity to demonstrate its durability. In defeating the measure by an impressive four to one margin, Atlanta’s suburbanites confirmed that their communities would remain secure, separate, and largely segregated, at least for the time being. As Jim Wood predicted before the final vote, MARTA was the suburban “Declaration of Independence.”

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Because they felt besieged by Atlanta’s “progress,” threatened by its black majority, were resentful of its business elites and suspicious of Washington’s generosity, suburban voters defeated MARTA and declared their “independence” from Atlanta. The system’s defeat not only reinforced the notion that Atlanta’s suburbs existed in a world apart from the city, but also, and perhaps more importantly, suggested that this was unlikely to change anytime soon. Over the course of the next decade, another 100,000 whites followed the already well beaten path to the suburbs and Atlanta’s population declined by some 70,000 people. The city’s population continued to decline during the eighties and by the end of that decade, suburban Cobb, Clayton and Gwinnett counties boasted a combined population that was more than twice as large as Atlanta. Six years later when Atlanta hosted the Olympic Games, the city retained only 11 percent of the metropolitan population.¹

Economic indicators paint a similarly dim portrait. As late as 1970, the city of Atlanta could still claim more than 50 percent of the region’s employment. A generation later, however, that figure had dropped to only 29 percent. The once vaunted central business district fared even worse; between 1970 and 1990, its share of metropolitan employment fell from 15 percent to 7.5 percent. Were it not for the loyalty shown by

downtown stalwarts such as Coca-Cola and Georgia Power, the city’s fallout would have surely been more severe. Rather than suggesting a regional economy gone bust, however, Atlanta’s economic decline reflected the preferences of corporate newcomers for leafy, campus-like settings on the suburban periphery, far removed from the city and its discontents. As these edge cities proliferated along Atlanta’s northern rim, downtown businesses followed their patrons and employees to the suburbs and the central business district suffered a steep and steady decline. In its early-sixties heyday, central Atlanta boasted a full 90 percent of the region’s office space; a generation later, that figure plummeted to 42 percent and by the end of last century, it bottomed out at 13 percent. For locals, however, the 1991 closing of the Rich’s flagship location downtown confirmed what mere statistics could only suggest. For generations Rich’s had anchored the downtown retail economy and its closing symbolized the very development that its namesake and MARTA board chairman Richard Rich had hoped rail transit would prevent: the demise of downtown.\(^2\)

With its business stature diminished and its population in decline, Atlanta nonetheless retained the vast majority of the region’s poor. Even as the region’s mean real family income grew by a phenomenal 20.6 percent between 1969 and 1989, Atlanta’s income levels declined both absolutely and relative to the suburbs. The ever increasing disparity between suburban and urban economic fortunes reflected both Atlanta’s pockets of concentrated poverty and persistent patterns of residential segregation. As middle class citizens of both races relocated to suburban communities and elite enclaves inside the city limits, the city’s poor, particularly its black poor, became increasingly concentrated in high poverty neighborhoods. Suburban

governments meanwhile resisted nearly all efforts at intergovernmental cooperation, and without a viable metropolitan transportation system the suburban employment bounty remained outside the reach of most lower income Atlantans. As a consequence, the “white suburban noose” described by Sam Massell grew increasingly tight.  

While the fragmentation that characterized Atlanta’s development was more pronounced than most, its situation was not unique. As middle class residents fled the nation’s cities, suburban development outpaced urban growth rates and nearly half of all Americans called the suburbs home by 1990. Because suburban governments often bore little responsibility and even less regard for their urban neighbors, the nation’s cities suffered from high rates of unemployment and poverty and frequently fell victim to disinvestment and neglect. Suburbanization, however, was not merely a residential or social transformation, but a political one as well. Secure in their new abodes, the tax-sensitive homeowners of suburbia bridled at the expensive and expansive Democratic proposals for social reform and turned instead to the conservative, small-government politics of the Republican Party. As Kevin Phillips predicted over three decades ago, this emerging GOP stronghold delivered the party a Congressional majority and Republican Presidential candidates often overlooked urban areas altogether. As a result, national politics became a “race between Democratic cities and Republican suburbs to see who can produce bigger margins.” As political observer William Schneider concluded in 1991, “The suburbs are winning.”

Nowhere has this transformation been more evident than in the South, where the Sunbelt-inspired development of sprawling metropolitan marketplaces from sleepy

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regional cities created a large foothold for the GOP. During the first six decades of last century, white southerners voted a uniformly Democratic ticket in order to consolidate their electoral advantage and maintain the region’s distinctive racial caste system.

Republicans meanwhile remained a marginal presence in the region’s affairs, confined to the shadows of southern politics. “It scarcely deserves the name of party,” observed political scientist V.O. Key in 1949. “It wavers somewhat between an esoteric cult on the order of a lodge and a conspiracy for plunder in accord with the accepted customs of our politics.” However, beginning in the late forties and culminating with the passage of the Voting Rights Act in 1965, the national Democratic Party embraced the mantle of civil rights reform and consequently alienated large segments of its southern faithful. In his 1968 campaign for the Presidency, Richard Nixon pursued a “Southern Strategy” designed to appeal to both the region’s fiscally and socially conservative suburban voters and those former Democrats who felt “betrayed” by the national party. According to political scientist Alexander P. Lamis, Nixon’s sweep of the southern states and the rising popularity of the GOP among southern voters demonstrated the “logical compatibility of conservative economic-class Republicanism and the anti-civil rights protest.” Thereafter, the GOP’s combination of economic and social conservatism provided a compelling political identity for southern suburbanites and the Republican Party was increasingly competitive in the region’s politics. After the historic 1994 midterm elections, the Republican Party claimed a majority of the region’s U.S. House and Senate seats and governorships for the first time since Reconstruction.5

Here too, suburban Atlanta was at the fore. Leading the conservative counterrevolutionary charge was House Speaker Newt Gingrich and a suburban Atlanta delegation that included Republican National Congressional Committee chair John Linder and Congressman Bob Barr, the conservative provocateur that first called for President Bill Clinton’s impeachment. After taking over the reigns as Speaker, Gingrich and his Congressional allies wasted little time in pushing an ambitiously conservative agenda. House Republicans soon took to the road to promote the “Contract With America,” a legislative package that promised to privatize government services, pare down the federal bureaucracy and dismantle all but the most sacrosanct vestiges of New Deal liberalism.\footnote{Pascoe, Karen Trahan Leathem and Andy Ambrose, eds. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2005), 225-230.}

When crusading in support of the “Contract With America,” Gingrich routinely railed against inner city “welfare Americans,” and vowed to the rid the country of the culture of dependency that flourished in its cities. In so doing, he invoked a conservative rhetorical tradition that had proved politically expedient since George Wallace’s surprise showing in the 1968 presidential contest. As Dan T. Carter has argued, conservative politicians have successfully appealed, however subtly, to deep-seated racial fears that continue to loom large in American politics even as they often go unspoken. “In Barry Goldwater’s vote against the Civil Rights Bill of 1964, in Richard Nixon’s subtle manipulation of the busing issue, in Ronald Reagan’s genial demolition of affirmative action, in George Bush’s use of the Willie Horton ads, and in Newt Gingrich’s demonization of welfare mothers,” observed Carter, “the Wallace music played on.”

While they may have lacked Wallace’s coarse bravado, the rhetorical appeals of new

\footnote{Kruse, \textit{White Flight}, 260-261.}
conservatives nonetheless reflected “the same callous political exploitation of the raw wounds of racial division in our country.”

While the racialized fear mongering of conservative politicians may have changed little over the past three decades, the suburbs that embraced these overtures often have. Despite their efforts to remain apart from Atlanta’s black majority and increasingly multiethnic milieu, suburban counties have nonetheless become increasingly diverse locales. Even in the posh northside suburbs of Cobb and Gwinnett counties, shifting residential patterns have significantly altered the suburban racial composition. When MARTA appeared on area ballots in 1971, for instance, Cobb and Gwinnett were 96 and 95 percent white. Only three decades later, however, both counties’ white majority had declined to 72 percent. While some observers speculated that greater diversity would alter the conservative suburban political orientation, others, such as University of Georgia demographer Douglas Bachtel, disagreed. Because suburban newcomers were typically better educated and financially secure, Bachtel argued, they would likely conform to the prevailing political norms—“and that spells Republican.” He may be right. Thus far, Cobb and Gwinnett have yet to support Democratic candidates and both counties have retained their exclusive character. In his profile of Atlanta, Edge Cities author Joel Garreau also found ample evidence of middle class black families which were thriving in the city’s northside suburbs and who had discovered both a cultural and ideological kinship with their largely white, conservative neighbors. As a result, Garreau concluded

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that in Atlanta and presumably elsewhere, the time had finally come when class was more significant than race.\(^8\)

However, while in some instances this may be true, the weight of evidence would seem to suggest otherwise. As minorities have relocated to suburbs immediately outside Atlanta’s city limits, locals have more often than not reacted by moving further out themselves, much as Atlanta’s middle class white residents had a generation earlier. That suburban whites retreated even further afield as minority residents encroached into suburban communities suggests that race remained a powerful force in Atlanta’s political and social economy.

Consider, for instance, the case of Clayton County. Between 1990 and 2000, the portion of housing occupied by black residents increased by 27 percent, while that occupied by whites declined by 34 percent. As a result, Clayton, which was 95 percent white a generation earlier, had a strong black majority of 61 percent by 2004. The county’s shifting residential demographics were reflected all the more dramatically in the racial composition of its schools. According to a report published by the Civil Rights Project at Harvard University, Clayton had the single highest rates of resegregation in the entire country, both in terms of black exposure to whites and Latino exposure to whites. Just south of Clayton, Henry County welcomed a large influx of Clayton’s former residents and consequently experienced a housing explosion of more than 100 percent over the course of the decade, making it the fourth fastest growing county nationwide during the nineties. Like the middle class residents who fled Atlanta for the suburbs a generation earlier, the exurban pioneers who settled in Henry and Atlanta’s other far-

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flung developments were predominantly white. Thus, while class may on occasion trump race as has been suggested, it remains more likely to reinforce it.\(^9\)

Such has been the case with MARTA. Even as residents of metropolitan Atlanta have moved increasingly further afield, MARTA has remained confined within Fulton and DeKalb counties. Rather than embody the dynamism of Atlanta’s booming Sunbelt economy as the city’s boosters had initially hoped, the stunted system instead redefined the lines separating prosperous suburbs from a decaying central city. Whereas its visionaries had imagined an ultra-modern system ferrying middle class suburbanites to a healthy downtown, MARTA has instead become a transportation option of last resort for the city’s poor. Moreover, because more than three-quarters of its ridership is black, suburban observers have frequently attached the system’s class stigma to its predominantly black passengers, thereby exacerbating the perceived cultural gulf separating the city and its suburbs. As the all-too-common sobriquet “Moving Africans Rapidly Through Atlanta” suggests, MARTA has only become more saddled with racial baggage since it was defeated by suburban voters in 1971.

Its poor reputation notwithstanding, MARTA has sought time and again to expand into suburban counties. However, its success has been thwarted each time by the same suburban anxieties that sealed its defeat in 1971. When traffic congestion began to seriously jeopardize suburban economies in the 1980s, for instance, MARTA’s potential expansion was once again front page news. Just as the transportation debate was

rekindled, however, so too were suburban fears. In Cobb County, for example, bumper
stickers that read “Share Atlanta Crime – Support MARTA” appeared on suburban
automobiles. Rather than merely extol the system’s virtues to a disinterested audience as
they had in the past, however, MARTA’s spokesmen adopted a more adversarial posture
that confronted the system’s racialized reputation. “The people you hear opposing
MARTA in Cobb and Gwinnett, they’ve been pretty open about it,” said Civil Rights
veteran and MARTA board member Joseph Lowery. “They don’t want black people
coming into their areas. It’s blind prejudice and fear.” MARTA’s white chairman J.
David Chestnut agreed. “The development of a regional transportation system in the
Atlanta area is being held hostage to race,” the chairman declared, “and, I think it’s high
time we admitted it and talked about it.”

As in 1971, Atlanta’s rail proponents touted MARTA as a solution to the chronic
mobility problems of the inner city poor. While the suburban share of regional
employment opportunities had increased dramatically since the system’s initial
referendum, the transportation options available to Atlanta’s lower income population
had not. “For an Atlantan without a car,” the New York Times observed in 1988, “jobs in
Cobb and Gwinnett County might as well be in China.” In the sixties and early seventies,
Atlanta’s leadership had supported MARTA in order to buoy a declining downtown
economy. By the late eighties and early nineties, however, their suburban counterparts
had come to the conclusion that some form of public transportation would be necessary to
secure their own economic futures as well. In 1991, for instance, The Clayton Sun
reported that the county’s Chamber of Commerce had “anecdotal knowledge” of three

nationally recognized companies that passed Clayton over due to its lack of public transportation. At the same time, Stan May, a former office holder in the county’s chamber and a longtime observer of the county’s politics, argued in the *News Daily* that the county’s failure to participate in MARTA had cost the community untold sums of potential revenue. Back in the early seventies, he recalled, voters had rejected MARTA for a familiar reason. “The real issue, privately discussed among some whites, (then as now) was race,” May claimed. But, he added, it would be better to rectify past mistakes sooner rather than later. “What we need today is a Transportation Department that can develop an overall plan that will make maximum use of all possible means of moving people and vehicles in the most efficient ways possible,” he concluded, “and that includes MARTA.”

However, few suburbanites shared May’s assessment. Rather than bury the hatchet and join MARTA to solve their impending transportation crisis, suburban counties elected to create their own systems instead. In July of 1989, Cobb County debuted its bus service, a five-route system offering free MARTA transfers to all passengers. Within a few years, Gwinnett and Clayton had followed suit. While they helped alleviate suburban congestion and provided a transportation alternative to the increasing numbers of suburbanites without access to automobiles, the suburban bus systems nonetheless did little to seriously alter the auto-dependence that had been a defining feature of life in metropolitan Atlanta since mid century. Moreover, because they were not fully integrated with MARTA’s bus or rail lines, the suburban systems have failed to adequately address the region’s need for mobility between metropolitan

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communities. Suburban employment still remained inaccessible for large numbers of the inner city poor, particularly as exurban counties experienced the highest rates of economic growth, and were beyond the reach of even the recent suburban bus systems. Because state law required that all gas tax revenues be devoted to road construction and because the state legislature refused to finance public transportation, the modest investment made by suburban governments still paled in comparison to the vast sums of money lavished on asphalt and tar. Even as suburban governments began debating the merits of public transportation in the late eighties, regional developers were promoting the construction of a second perimeter road, much to the dismay of the city’s small, but growing number of smart growth advocates. “Will we be willing to invest in more mass transit so we can be a well-planned city around a central core,” asked former chairman of the Fulton County Board of Commissioners Michael Lomax at that time. “Unlikely.”

However, in the decade since Lomax uttered his pessimistic pronouncement, subsequent developments have given rail and smart growth advocates some measure of hope. Since the nineties, Atlanta has reversed its decade long trend of population decline and an influx of young professionals and middle class gentrifiers has enlarged the city’s tax base. As the city has prospered, public transportation has received a warmer welcome from residents who desire urban amenities and enhanced mobility. Two current proposals, the first a beltway rail line encircling the city and the second, a rail line extending south through Clayton County, attest to the city’s renewed interest in urbanism and the reversal of its economic fortunes. More important than public transportation, however, are the larger implications of Atlanta’s renaissance. Since the postwar period,

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suburbanization has been a zero sum game. Suburban prosperity came at the expense of urban stability and as suburbs prospered, cities declined. Over the past decade, however, suburban development has continued apace even as Atlanta has increased its middle class population, suggesting that while suburbanization may continue unabated, its progress may no longer preclude the existence of a prosperous central city. Urban renewal notwithstanding, however, the political and cultural dichotomy between Democratic cities and Republican suburbs that William Schneider observed in 1991 is unlikely to change anytime soon. The economic resurgence experienced by Atlanta and other American cities has done little to alter the prevailing political and cultural orientations separating metropolitan regions, and cities and their suburbs are likely to remain a world apart.
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