

THE BRIEF LIFE OF INNER-CITY PROGRAMS

The problems of racial segregation and discrimination, poverty, and inner-city decline burst onto the nation's political agenda in the 1960s. For a brief time, urban problems became the main focus of national policy. The National Commission on Urban Problems (1958), the National Commission on Civil Disorders (1967), the President's Task Force on Suburban Problems (1967), President Nixon's Commission on Population Growth and the American Future (1972), and a host of state and city task forces decried the segregation of blacks and the poor in ghetto areas of the central cities. A great deal of hope was invested in the social and urban policies of the 1960s, but many of these programs became embroiled in political controversy and proved to be short-lived.

In the 1964 presidential race, the Democratic candidate, Lyndon Johnson, promised to build a Great Society by launching an aggressive effort to solve the pressing social problems of the time. The Democratic landslide that year gave him the legislative majority needed to implement literally hundreds of programs in only the two-year period from 1965 to 1967. By the 1968 election, spending for the Vietnam War had already begun to undermine support for the Democratic agenda, but racial divisions proved to be even more decisive. The landslide win by the Democrats in 1964 masked a development that would soon compromise the party's ability to win presidential elections. The issue of race was tearing apart the coalition the Democrats had fashioned in the 1930s. Although President Johnson won by historic margins elsewhere, he lost in the one part of the country where Democrats had never been challenged, the Deep South. The Republican standard-bearer, Barry Goldwater, received 87 percent of the popular vote in Mississippi, close to 70 percent in Alabama, and substantially more than 50 percent in Louisiana, Georgia, and South Carolina. After 1964 Republican candidates regularly carried the South for the first time since the carpetbagger governments imposed on southern states in the years after the Civil War.

Richard Nixon's victory in the 1968 election made it clear that it was impossible to divorce the issue of race from social welfare and urban programs. This had become obvious as early as the 1930s, when southern Democrats in Congress often expressed their concern that New Deal programs might be used to upset traditional racial relationships. In the postwar years, they successfully fought to ensure that public housing would not be used to promote racial integration. As long as the programs advanced by Democratic liberals did not challenge race relations in the South, southern Democrats were willing to go along. But this tacit bargain ended with the civil rights legislation and the social programs of the 1960s.

In the public's imagination, the Great Society became identified as a constellation of programs that primarily benefited inner-city blacks. The truth is that no significant programs were aimed so narrowly. Funds for Head Start and the War on Poverty, for example, were spread broadly across the country, to urban and rural areas alike, and social programs such as Medicare and Medicaid benefited people regardless of where they lived. But impressions mattered. From 1969 to 1976, when Republican presidents Richard Nixon and Gerald Ford occupied the White House, many of the Democratic-sponsored programs came under attack, and Ronald Reagan's victory in the 1980 presidential election quickly brought an end to most urban programs. Urban programs vanished along with the alliance the Democrats had inherited from the New Deal years. Most of the Great Society programs lasted for 20 years or less, and they never received enough resources to plausibly remedy the problems they were meant to address.

OUTTAKE

Racial Divisions Eventually Doomed Urban Programs

The federal urban programs of the 1960s were adopted in response to civil disorders in the cities and the serious social problems highlighted by the racial turmoil. The federal response fractured the Democratic Party, which relied upon urban voters from the North and reliable support in the southern and border states. The urban vote had been essential to the Democrats for decades. Time after time, overwhelming Democratic majorities in the big cities balanced out Republican pluralities in the suburbs and small towns, providing the margin of victory in key states holding large blocs of electoral votes. The Democrats would have lost the presidency in 1940, 1944, and 1948 without the big turnout in 12 big cities in the nation. The urban electorate was essential to John F. Kennedy's victory in the close election of 1960. Kennedy beat Nixon by a razor-thin 112,000 votes, a margin of less than one-tenth of 1 percent, but he carried 27 out of the 39 largest cities. In 1964 Lyndon Johnson won by an unprecedented

landslide, with the cities delivering lopsided results that exceeded the national average by 10 percent or more.

The attempt to address the long-standing grievances of African Americans alienated white Southerners and white working-class voters almost everywhere. In 1968 the Republicans capitalized on resentment provoked by the successes of the civil rights movement. The Democratic presidential candidate, Hubert Humphrey, carried only one southern state, Texas. Across the South, he won just 31 percent of the vote, running behind both Republican Richard Nixon (34.5 percent) and Alabama governor and third-party candidate George Wallace (34.6 percent), who ran as an avowed segregationist. In 1968 the Nixon campaign adopted law and order as its main theme. This had also been the campaign slogan of the Republican nominee in 1964, Barry Goldwater, but he had handled it crudely and ineptly. Goldwater's television ads tried to convey an impression that America's cities were in ruins by showing scenes of blacks rioting. In the scenes meant to portray Goldwater's vision of the American past he would like to restore, blacks were shown picking cotton. The spot ads that Nixon aired four years later were less blatant, although they were not subtle either. One of his television spots showed scenes of urban riots, with a Nixon voice-over calling for "some honest talk about the problem of order." At least this time blacks were not shown in a rendition of a bucolic agricultural past.

Richard Nixon won 32 percent of the African American vote in 1960, when he lost to Kennedy, but even though his share fell to 12 percent in the 1968 election, he still beat Hubert Humphrey. One of the president's closest advisers, John Erlichman, told civil rights administrators that "blacks are not where the votes are, so why antagonize the people who can be helpful to us politically?" After the 1960s the Republican Party mostly wrote off the African American vote. The Republican base became increasingly conservative, embracing working-class whites, a (now) solid Republican South, suburban and Sunbelt Republican voters, and the religious right. The results of the 2000 presidential election, which George W. Bush lost by 500,000 popular votes, suggested that the Republican coalition was losing some of its energy. Bush entered the White House only because the Electoral College favors small and less populated states. Nevertheless, it is clear that cities did not figure much in the overall tally. Democrats have drawn the logical conclusion that programs meant for the cities cannot get them much political mileage.

Sources: Statistics and quotations from Theodore H. White, *The Making of the President, 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), p. 1201; John Mollenkopf, *The Contested City* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1983), p. 83; Kathleen Hall Jamieson, *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), pp. 202–203; Joseph McGinniss, *Selling the President, 1968* (New York: Trident Press, 1969); Numan V. Barley and Hugh D. Graham, *Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), pp. 126–127; Everett Carl Ladd Jr., "The Shifting Party Coalitions, 1932–1976," in *Emerging Coalitions in American Politics*, ed. Seymour Martin Lipset (San Francisco: Institute for Contemporary Studies, 1978), p. 98; A. James Reichley, *Conservatives in an Age of Change: The Nixon and Ford Administrations* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 1981), pp. 145, 186.