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PUTTING CITIES ON THE  
NATIONAL AGENDA

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For years, community leaders, mayors, and other urban advocates warned that cities were ticking time bombs, waiting to explode. When the recent Los Angeles riots, the worst civil disorder in American history, erupted in April 1992, many hoped that it would catalyze a major national commitment to revitalize the cities—an urban Marshall Plan.

The timing seemed perfect. The Los Angeles riots coincided with the end of the Cold War. When the Berlin Wall fell and the Soviet Union collapsed, there was much public discussion about the prospects for a "peace dividend" to reorder national priorities and address long-unmet domestic needs. Moreover, the riots occurred in the midst of a national election for president and Congress. Indeed, for a few weeks following the riots, America's urban crisis became a hot topic. It was the subject of congressional debate, discussed on television talk shows, and featured in newsmagazine cover stories. President Bush and his Democratic rivals visited Los Angeles to demonstrate their concern. Soon, however, the journalists left Los Angeles, Congress passed a meager quick-fix emergency urban aid package, and the candidates for president turned their attention to other issues. The plight of America's cities returned to political obscurity. Why?

Political analyst William Schneider (1992), writing in *The Atlantic*, explained part of the reason: The 1992 elections, the first in which suburbanites were a majority of voters, marked the beginning of a "suburban century" in American politics. Politicians could ignore the cities with impunity.

This coincided with a strategic emphasis within the Democratic party on recapturing the "Reagan Democrats" and cooling out the "chain reaction" (as *Washington Post* reporter Thomas B. Edsall called it) (Edsall and Edsall 1991) of racial politics that had led many whites to abandon the Democratic party. Indeed, the key to Bill Clinton's victory, which distinguished him from Carter, Mondale, and Dukakis, was his success in capturing the vote (or making gains over earlier Democratic candidates) in the suburbs, particularly the inner-ring suburbs where many of the "forgotten middle class"—the

blue-collar families who worried about the nation's economic decline—lived.

Many Americans hoped that Clinton's victory in November 1992 would usher in a new era of hope for the nation's cities. His victory was viewed as a mandate for a more activist government. But Clinton was elected without a majority mandate. He received only 43% of the overall vote. Equally important, his own party, although capturing a majority of the seats in Congress, was deeply divided, with many members closely linked to big-business interests who opposed progressive taxation, Keynesian pump-priming, and social spending.

Although some scholars and journalists have focused on the cities' declining political clout, others have focused on the declining economic fortunes of America's cities. *Newsweek* asked, "Are Cities Obsolete?" (Morgenthau and McCormick 1991). The story quoted Washington University law professor Daniel Mandelker reflecting the new conventional wisdom that we don't need cities anymore. In a popular book, Joel Garreau (1991) argued that suburban office/retail/residential complexes, which he dubbed *edge cities*, were the wave of the future.

Proponents of progressive urban policy face two major obstacles. First, for the past three decades, social and economic conditions in our cities have deteriorated. As a result, many Americans believe that we have tried to save its cities but that the cities resist being saved. There is, at the very least, considerable public skepticism about the capacity of the federal government to solve urban social and economic problems. Second, during that same period, the political influence of cities has steadily waned.<sup>1</sup> It isn't simply that the 1992 election was the first with an absolute majority of suburban voters. The number of congressional members who represent cities is declining, while the number who represent suburbs is increasing. Members of Congress who represent suburban areas may have some personal sympathy, but less political motivation, to vote to spend their constituents' tax dollars to alleviate urban problems. Congressional redistricting (gerrymandering) and lower voter turnout among city voters also play a part in the declining political clout of cities. Thus marshaling a congressional majority for an urban agenda has become increasingly difficult.

It is time to rethink the urban agenda—specifically, to find ways to overcome the political and policy obstacles and to build an electoral and governing coalition at the national level that can address urban problems. Federal policy should have two key criteria: First, does it address the social and economic problems concentrated in cities—poverty, unemployment, infant mortality, crime, and so on? Second, can it gain the support of a

majority in Congress, including those who represent suburbs, especially working-class and lower-middle-class areas?

Is such a policy possible? What arguments can be made to convince suburbanites that they have a stake in revitalizing the cities? How do we make the case for a federal urban agenda when the perception of (and news reporting about) cities is dominated by economic decline, social pathology, and municipal mismanagement?<sup>2</sup>

America's postwar suburban migration was shaped (in fact, subsidized) by federal government policies that both pushed people out of cities and pulled them into suburbs. Most federal policies have promoted the *suburbanization* of residents and business. These included highway-building policies that opened up the hinterlands to speculation and development; housing policies that offered government-insured mortgages to whites in suburbia (but not in cities), and regressive mortgage and property tax deductions for home owners (but not for renters); and bulldozer urban-renewal policies that destroyed working-class neighborhoods to make way for downtown business development, scattering their residents to blue-collar suburbs.

As a result, America is now a suburban country. However, rethinking urban policy requires rethinking our old notions of *city* and *suburb*. The stereotype of the affluent lily-white bedroom suburb no longer fits, if it ever did. Although most suburbanites now commute to work in other suburbs, not central cities, they still "use" the city in many ways—work, culture, entertainment, sporting events, health care, universities, and so forth. The central business districts (CBDs) of many cities may offer the advantages of agglomeration, and many suburban jobs are functionally tied to the city's economy (Schwartz 1992, 1993), but this may not be a convincing argument to many suburbanites.

In the postwar era, the disparity of median incomes of cities and suburb has widened. This trend, however, masks the significant diversity found within suburbia. Many localities that the U.S. Census Bureau and media term *suburbs* are themselves small or medium-sized cities, with considerable unemployment, poverty, crime, fiscal trauma, and related symptoms of decay. Many cities and their inner-ring suburbs have much in common. For example, in 1990, 19% of central cities' population and 8.7% of the suburban population lived below the poverty line. Overall, 42.4% of the poverty population lived in central cities, 30.5% lived in suburbs, and 27% lived in nonmetropolitan areas. An increasing number of blacks, Latinos, and Asians live in suburbia, although African-Americans tend to live in racially segregated areas.

Arguments about the continued vitality of cities tend to focus on a few major areas—New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston,

Seattle, Atlanta. These *global cities* are integrated into the global economy. They serve a key function as corporate and administrative headquarters. The vitality of these cities is thus typically identified with the economic activities of their CBDs. But within blocks of their downtowns, we find poverty and declining neighborhoods. There is little evidence that the prosperity of the CBD trickles down to poor and working-class neighborhoods, unless steered in that direction by public policy.<sup>3</sup> At the other end of the spectrum are those cities—Detroit, Camden, Gary, Youngstown, Bridgeport, and others like them—where both the CBDs and neighborhoods are declining. Bridgeport represents the most extreme case—one of the nation's poorest cities within one of the nation's wealthiest counties (Fairfield).

Contrary to conventional wisdom, the war on urban poverty was never seriously fought.<sup>4</sup> In fact, the root causes of the current urban crisis are directly tied to federal policy. The flight of industry and the rise of a low-wage American economy, the suburbanization of housing, the siting of Pentagon facilities and contracts, and the redlining by banks and insurance companies can all be traced to federal policy choices, not simply market forces or consumer preferences. Urban programs have been swimming against the larger tide of federal policy that has promoted suburbanization and urban decline.

Federal aid to cities—whether to revitalize downtowns, attract private business and jobs to inner cities, stabilize and improve poor and working-class neighborhoods, or provide fiscal assistance to local governments—has served, in effect, to “clean up” the problems created by federally assisted disinvestment. During the past half century, federal subsidies to help America's cities were a drop in the bucket compared to those that promoted suburbanization. It was hardly a fair fight. Federal urban programs were overwhelmed by federal subsidies that undermined the economic, social, and political health of the nation's cities.

Since World War II, cities have had a major voice in national politics only when business leaders wanted to improve the commercial climate of downtowns or when disenfranchised people disrupted business as usual with protests or riots. When urban mayors and political machines helped “deliver the vote” for presidents and congressional candidates, they had greater access than they do now. The Reagan and Bush eras accelerated, but did not begin, this trend. For example, in 1980, federal dollars accounted for 14.3% of city budgets; by 1992, it was less than 5%.

Despite the election of a liberal Democrat to the White House in 1992, the legacy of the conservative agenda remains. Several factors—the federal deficit, the ideological attack on government activism, public perceptions about municipal mismanagement, the identification of cities with people of

color, and the relative weakness of urban constituencies—inhibit the Clinton administration from promoting a bold urban policy.

The electoral forces that led to Clinton's victory helped shape the policy agenda he has pursued. Clinton was elected in November 1992 with only 43% of the popular vote in a nation in which almost half of all eligible voters (disproportionately the poor and minorities) do not vote. Clinton owed his victory in part to attracting a large portion of middle-class suburban voters who had voted for Reagan and Bush in the previous three elections. During Clinton's first two years in office, the Democrats had majorities in both houses of Congress, but many moderate and conservative Democrats refused to support Clinton's major Keynesian initiatives, limiting his room to maneuver on domestic policy. Soon after taking office, Clinton proposed an economic recovery package that included a significant increase in federal assistance to cities, but Congress killed the proposal. Faced with a huge budget deficit, Clinton confronted major constraints in expanding resources for a domestic policy agenda. The Clinton administration's three major urban initiatives were relatively small-scale efforts: the enterprise/empowerment-zone program, the crime bill, and the Earned Income Tax Credit. The November 1994 elections exacerbate the political isolation of cities, as symbolized by Clinton's proposals a month later to cut the budget of the Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD).

Given these trends, any success at forging a federal urban policy will necessitate appealing to some segment of the suburban electorate. Appeals can be based on social conscience (helping the disadvantaged), fear (urban problems will “spill over” to suburbs), or common ground (cities and suburbs share a common fate). A *New York Times*/CBS nationwide poll conducted the week after the Los Angeles riots found that 60% of Americans thought the nation was spending too little on cities—up from 46% in 1988 (Toner 1992). But this sentiment is unlikely to prevail unless many suburbanites believe that they, too, have a stake in revitalizing cities beyond short-term “riot insurance.”

Any discussion of urban *policy* must recognize the realities of national *politics*. From the perspective of developing an electoral and governing coalition, rethinking urban policy involves evaluating which (or which combination of) policies can both address urban problems and buy in a significant portion of the suburban population. Public discussion about federal policies to address urban problems tends to focus on the following five general areas.

When policy makers talk about urban policy, most Americans think they're talking about *social welfare and human capital strategies*—that is income transfer programs, primarily AFDC, food stamps, and housing;

assistance—or a variety of human capital strategies to reduce the mismatch between people's skills and available jobs such as job training (CETA, JPTA) and education (Head Start) programs. These programs are not specifically *urban strategies*, although most of their recipients live in cities. *Macroeconomic policy*—which seeks to promote full employment, create a tight labor market, expand public investment in infrastructure, and keep interest rates low to stimulate home building and home ownership—can have a disproportionate impact on investment in cities, such as the recent federal ISTEA transportation program. *Urban redevelopment policy* seeks to encourage private capital and target public funds to cities and to troubled areas within cities. These include urban-renewal, revenue-sharing, community-development, subsidized-housing, and antiredlining policies. *Mobility strategies* seek to deconcentrate poverty and give individuals and households opportunities to become geographically and economically mobile. These involve residential mobility policies (like Chicago's Gautreaux program and HUD's new Moving to Opportunity program) and reverse-commuting transportation programs to help inner-city residents get to jobs outside the ghetto. In his recent book *Cities Without Suburbs*, David Rusk, the former mayor of Albuquerque, argues that only a fifth strategy, *metropolitan government or cooperation*, can save the cities (Rusk 1993). Most cities, he argues, are simply too poor and require a broader tax base. Federal policy has occasionally sought to encourage cities and suburbs to work together on the assumption that some problems (like environmental, transportation, and health planning problems) can best be solved at the *regional* level. Such federal efforts, however, typically meet considerable resistance. HUD, for example, has never tried to require affluent suburbs to eliminate "snob-zoning" laws that restrict high-density, low-income housing. Court decisions have required some metro areas and state governments to reduce inequities in school financing through tax-sharing or state local-aid formulas.<sup>5</sup>

From a political perspective, the key question is whether it is possible to forge a national electoral and governing coalition that incorporates city dwellers and some segment of the suburban population. In fact, most urban policies provide little incentive for suburbanites (including those in blue-collar suburbs) to have a stake in the condition of the cities.

Urban political strategy is still based on the outdated view that urban constituencies—mayors, African-Americans, Latinos, the poor, community-based organizations—can mobilize sufficient political resources (through voting, protest, generating public sympathy for their plight, and other strategies) to get Congress to address urban needs. In recent decades, however, officials of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the National League of Cities,

and other groups have learned that cities are increasingly relegated to the status of yet another "special interest" group.

The political dilemmas of American cities are also exacerbated by the fragmentation of urban constituencies and their organizations. On Capital Hill and in the news media, the U.S. Conference of Mayors and the National League of Cities are typically defined as the "urban" lobby. To bolster their clout, they typically form ad hoc alliances with other constituencies—typically recipients of federal "urban" grants such as community organizations, health care institutions, housing developers, civil rights groups, and others. These organizations have been losing influence over the past 30 years, reflecting demographic and fund-raising changes. Mayors can no longer "deliver the vote" as they could in the age of the urban political machine. Even if they could do so, the number of urban votes is shrinking.

The political equation is complicated by the reality that cities are not a monolithic interest in the same way that agribusiness or the aerospace industry is. Cities are quite diverse; the problems facing St. Paul may not be the problems facing St. Petersburg. Also, mayors, downtown business groups, community organizations, unions, and others do not always agree on public policy. In addition, the federal government is not organized to promote an urban agenda. In Congress, separate committees focus on banking and housing, health and welfare, transportation, and tax policy. In the executive branch, HUD is actually quite marginal to the overall well-being of cities, especially when compared with the impact on cities of Defense, Transportation, HHS, EPA, Justice, Commerce, and other agencies.

In light of these realities, existing political and policy strategies cannot be sustained if the goal is to create a congressional majority to address the problems of cities. What kind of political strategy and policy agenda will help build bridges between cities and suburbs and help create a congressional majority for helping cities?

The reason that cities have long been *off* the policy agenda is not because urban policy experts have lacked good ideas for programs and policies. It is because cities—where most poor, working-class, and minority people live—lack political power. Their interests are overwhelmed by those of special interests and business groups who oppose Keynesian and redistributive policies. Reforms that would put cities back on the political agenda have little to do with urban policy *per se*. They are fundamentally political. Here are some strategies to develop an electoral and governing majority to help America's cities:

*Military conversion.* The military-industrial complex had a powerful influence in shaping postwar America, undermining the economic and social

conditions within cities. The siting of Pentagon contracts and facilities served as America's de facto "industrial policy"—shaping the locations of businesses and jobs. Cities have long been "redlined" by the Pentagon. For example, in 1990, taxpayers in 19 of the 25 largest cities sent more money to the military than they took in from military contracts, salaries, and defense facilities.<sup>6</sup>

Even with the end of the Cold War, our reliance on defense spending has made it difficult for members of Congress—even those who favor cutting military spending—to vote for cutbacks if it means base closings and layoffs in their districts. Without a conversion plan to turn the war economy into a civilian economy—and to protect workers, communities, and firms that have relied on military spending—there will be few resources to address America's urban crisis and domestic problems in general.

*Expanding the urban electorate.* Cities generally have much lower voter participation than suburbs do. Urban interest groups were a key force in the successful campaign to pass the federal "motor-voter" law, which was designed to remove obstacles to voter registration and to expand the electorate, and was to be implemented by state governments starting in January 1995.<sup>7</sup> Because poor and minority (i.e., urban) citizens have low levels of voter registration and turnout, motor-voter advocates assumed that increasing registration will expand political participation among these groups, thereby helping tilt the political balance toward the poor and minorities and, thus, cities. The success of the motor-voter law for urban concerns will depend on whether the mayors, community and labor organizations, and the Democratic party seek to *mobilize* potential voters around issues. These groups have shown little will or capacity for doing so. In recent presidential elections, Republicans actually outspent Democrats in terms of registering new voters and mobilizing Republican registrants to get to the polls. In 1992, little effort was made to expand the urban electorate. In the 1994 midterm election, low voter registration and turnout in cities played a key role in the Republican sweep in Congress. Republicans won 25 seats with less than 10,000 votes.

*Congressional redistricting.* Civil rights groups have adopted a strategy based on congressional redistricting. The main thrust of these efforts has been to reshape congressional districts that will give African-American, Asian, and Latino voters a stronger voice—and will increase the odds of electing persons of color to legislative bodies. Given the concentration of minority groups in cities, this typically means that more urban districts will be represented by minorities. However, some critics argue that in doing so, these African-American and Latino legislators and their caucuses will find themselves increasingly isolated. By carving out sure-thing minority districts, this approach also carves out a larger number of sure-thing all-suburban districts

that are more likely to elect conservatives and Republicans—who have no urban constituency and little concern for urban problems. Some observers believe this approach undermines potential coalition building between urban and working-class suburban constituencies in Congress. Instead, the goal of "progressive gerrymandering" should be to create districts that straddle central cities and inner-ring suburbs, so that congressional members have a stake in building bridges among poor and working-class constituents.

*Campaign finance reform.* Political demographics and congressional redistricting alone don't explain the reluctance of national leaders to push an urban agenda. Even those members of Congress who represent cities have weaker ties to organized voters. The skyrocketing costs of elections have profoundly shaped the way elected officials behave. The demise of urban political machines is clearly linked to the emergence of big money in politics. During the first half of this century, urban political machines played an important role in national political life, particularly as the electoral foundation of the Democratic party. Big-city mayors traded jobs for votes, a formula that helped enfranchise several generations of immigrants. During the Depression, candidate Franklin D. Roosevelt catapulted to the White House on the urban vote. During the 1930s and 1940s, the urban vote was the backbone of the New Deal coalition. Many scholars believe that John F. Kennedy owed his narrow margin of victory in the 1960 election to Mayor Richard Daley, who "delivered" Chicago's vote—and Illinois' key electoral votes. Through the 1960s, even Democrats from suburban districts joined their urban colleagues in voting for many urban programs.

Starting in the 1970s, national corporate campaign contributors and national political action committees began to dominate campaign fund-raising. Their financial backing increasingly influenced the priorities and votes of elected officials in Washington. Although big business has no single policy agenda, powerful sectors within the business community influence tax, spending, and regulatory policies that undermine healthy cities. We need to remove the legalized bribery system that currently makes it impossible to deal constructively with urban problems.

*An urban presidential primary.* The way we elect our president undermines urban policy. The road to the White House begins in rural areas—Iowa, New Hampshire, and the "Super Tuesday" South. To be a contender in a presidential primary, candidates first have to appeal to voters in these early primaries, so they frame their messages and policy agendas accordingly. By the time the winter primary season is over, cities are left out in the cold.

The U.S. Conference of Mayors has proposed an intriguing way to address this imbalance: an urban presidential primary. Officially, party delegates are elected in *statewide* primaries, not by municipalities. However, nothing can

stop cities from adding presidential preferences to the ballots in municipal elections or—even better—a coalition of cities agreeing to hold a presidential preference ballot on the same day early in the campaign season to get a jump on candidates' attention. So far, the U.S. Conference of Mayors has lined up about 15 cities—including Minneapolis, St. Paul, Baltimore, Boston, Pasadena, Spokane, and Olympia (Washington)—to hold nonbinding (i.e., no conventional delegates will be selected) presidential preference ballots on November 7, 1995, simultaneously with municipal elections. The U.S. Conference of Mayors will also invite declared presidential candidates to participate in a series of televised debates prior to what it is calling the CityVote primary. An expanded version of CityVote every four years not only would pressure presidential candidates and the media to focus attention on cities but would also help energize and mobilize urban voters, who are often turned off by presidential campaigns because candidates can ignore their concerns early in the campaign.

*Labor law reform.* When she fought for public housing in the 1930s, Catherine Bauer recognized that public housing was as much a jobs program as a social program. The backbone of the Public Housing Act of 1937 was the American labor movement, which at the time included about 35% of American workers. Since then, and especially during the last 12 years, the working people of the United States have been disenfranchised by the federal government's cold war against labor unions. As a result, the United States has some of the most regressive labor laws among advanced democracies. Only 11% of the private-sector workforce (and 16% of all workers) are union members. Cities and inner-ring suburbs have increasingly become the location of low-wage service-sector employment, the vast majority of which is not unionized. A key goal of urban policy should be to increase the incomes of the growing sector of the "working poor" concentrated in central cities and inner suburbs. Labor law reform will help level the playing field between America's working people and business, and help improve the political influence, and standard of living, of working people.

Unless the political balance of power changes, all of those reforms that urban policy experts love to debate and recommend will be purely academic.

## NOTES

1. The late 1940s presented the peak year of city electoral dominance. In the 1948 presidential election, New York City had 50% of the total votes cast in the state of New York. Chicago had 46.5% of Illinois' turnout. Baltimore had 42.3% of Maryland's vote, and Detroit had 31.8% of Michigan's. Los Angeles and San Francisco combined for 51.3% of California's

vote, and Philadelphia and Pittsburgh had 30.7% of Pennsylvania's electorate. Adding other cities to the electoral mix strengthened the urban vote even more. By 1992, New York City represented only 30.9% of the votes cast for president. The share of statewide voters in Chicago (22.3%), Baltimore (13%), Detroit (7.9%), Los Angeles and San Francisco (12.9%), and Philadelphia and Pittsburgh (16.1%) also showed dramatic declines (see Saucerkopf and Swanstrom 1993).

2. The notion that cities are the "engine" of the nation's economy is increasingly subject to dispute (Garreau 1991; Stanback 1991). On the other hand, scholars have recently argued that cities and suburbs form interdependent regional economies and thus have a common stake in forging political coalitions (Cisneros 1993; Hill, Wolman, and Ford 1994; Ledebur and Barnes 1993; Peirce, Johnson, and Hall 1993; Downs 1994; Persky, Sclar, and Wiesel 1991; Savitch, Collins, Sanders et al. 1993; Voith 1992).

3. See Frieden and Sagalyn (1989). A few cities with strong downtown economies have sought to use public policy to direct some benefits to poor and working-class residents (see Dreier and Ehrlich 1991).

4. For an influential example of this conventional wisdom, see Lemann (1994).

5. A handful of metro areas—Jacksonville and Indianapolis, among them—have actually consolidated their government structures. More typically, suburban jurisdictions resist such "takeovers" as intrusions on local autonomy and as efforts to promote economic mixing and/or racial integration. In some areas, the urban poor and African-Americans resist metropolitan government for fear of being swallowed up in the larger polity and losing whatever clout they have gained in local government. More typical is voluntary cooperation between political jurisdictions in metro areas to address a variety of specific problem areas. Most metro areas have some level of *voluntary* regional cooperation to address environmental, transportation, and other issues (for examples of regional cooperation, see Peirce, Johnson, and Hall 1993).

6. See Dreier and Anderson (1993) and Markusen, Hall, Campbell et al. (1991).

7. A number of states are resisting implementation of this law on the grounds that it is an unfunded federal mandate (see Dreier 1994).

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