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Mourning King: The Civil Rights Movement and the Fight for Economic Justice

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Mourning King: The Civil Rights Movement and the Fight for Economic Justice

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It is impossible to contemplate the fiftieth anniversary of Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination without hearing a whispered "if only." King, after all, was murdered just as he sought to expand the Civil Rights Movement's agenda to include an explicit focus on promoting multiracial economic justice, a cause that has met with little success in the intervening years. If only he had survived, the whispered voice says, he would have transformed the Movement into a force that powerfully and effectively fought for economic egalitarianism with the same success that it had dismantling Jim Crow.

This voice, however, misleads us. King's death did not itself throw the Movement off this path. Instead, his assassination serves as a dispiriting marker for the moment when the Civil Rights Movement's internal divisions overcame its grand moral vision—a vision that King believed should encompass a commitment to multiracial economic egalitarianism. King's death did not mark the end of the black freedom struggle, but it surely marked a transition point. The Movement shifted from the streets into the legislatures, from political protest to partisan politics. While there were many gains from the shift, it profoundly limited the Movement's ability to be a force for economic justice. The consequences of these limitations have become more obvious as King's death has receded into the past.

A Fractious Movement

At the time of his death, the focus of King's activism had shifted from securing the social and political rights of African Americans to a more catholic emphasis on combating poverty.¹ He was in the midst of organizing the Poor

People's March. He hoped the March would replicate the success of 1963's March for Jobs and Freedom that brought a quarter million people to the nation's capital in advance of Congress' consideration of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. King was adamant about bringing a racially diverse group of impoverished Americans to Washington. They would be a second Bonus Army, camping on the National Mall and engaging in peaceful civil disobedience. Their goal was a dramatic refashioning of the welfare state: a guaranteed minimum income, a statutory commitment to full employment, a massive federal jobs program, and the elimination of urban slums through the building of half a million units of low-income housing per year.

Thus, by 1967, when King started planning the March, he had maneuvered one of the main institutional manifestations of the Civil Rights Movement, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC), into a fight explicitly aimed at promoting, first and foremost, economic justice. This process, however, revealed the problems with using the Movement to advocate for redistributive economic policy. King met substantial resistance to the March from within the Movement. Some of his colleagues had tactical objections: the logistics would be difficult; it was unreasonable to expect society's most vulnerable to drop everything and march to Washington; the public would not be sympathetic to their demands. More fundamental, however, was the fact that many rejected the

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March's purpose. They did not believe the Movement should use civil disobedience to convince the federal government to implement redistributive economic policies.

Indeed, even before the end of the 1960s, there was no single Civil Rights Movement.² There had always been multiple movements, with different goals, different strategies, and different institutional manifestations. For some, economic justice had always been at the center of what it meant to fight for civil rights. The 1963 March on Washington had been, after all, a march for *jobs* and freedom. Indeed, many of the early leaders of the Movement, such as A. Philip Randolph and W.E.B. Du Bois, believed racism was simply one manifestation of the economic injustice endemic to unrestrained capitalism. For this strand of the Movement, which over the years had allied itself with Communists, Socialists, social gospel Christians, and the leftward edge of the trade union movement, the fight for civil rights was a critique of economic inequality that would require a refashioning of capitalism in order to achieve justice for people of all races.³

... [W]hen King sought to focus the Movement on economic inequality, he was trying to revivify an aspect of the Movement that many thought to be too risky ...

Yet from the Movement's beginnings in the years after the end of Reconstruction, many advocates had pursued considerably less radical approaches to civil rights that divorced the black freedom struggle from issues of economic inequality. Since Booker T. Washington, the Movement had contained a powerful strand of social uplift philosophy that emphasized the importance of presenting an image of responsibility and self-reliance to the white majority. For many within the black bourgeoisie, this philosophy suggested that the correct approach to pursuing civil rights was a heartfelt embrace of capitalism, markets, and individual economic initiative.⁴

Others within the Movement rooted the fight for civil rights within a Christian moral paradigm that avoided a critique of capitalism, and instead emphasized the moral imperative of integration and colorblindness. This approach was frequently linked, by King and others, to

aspirational values of political and social (but not economic) equality that they rooted in a uniquely American constitutional tradition. In postwar America, this strand of civil rights thought sometimes manifested itself in a more secular, scientific mode. It portrayed racism as a psychological disorder of particular individuals who misunderstood America's bedrock principles, rather than a structural component of American political economy. Indeed, in the years after World War II, these various approaches to civil rights—uplift, a return to American values, racism as deviant behavior—were particularly potent. Anticommunist political culture suggested to civil rights leaders that grounding antiracism in religious teachings, the American civic tradition, and “scientific” understandings of racism as a psychological pathology were the best ways to convince the white majority of the justice of the cause. To link the Movement to structural critiques of capitalism and advocacy of progressive wealth redistribution, on the other hand, was suicide. Thus, when King sought to focus the Movement on economic inequality, he was trying to revivify an aspect of the Movement that many thought to be too risky to emphasize in the years immediately following World War II.⁵

Finally, the Civil Rights Movement had always contained a potent strand of separatist nationalism. By their very nature, nationalists clashed with those who wished to forge interracial alliances for economic justice. Nationalism also contained within it a significant vein of pro-capitalist ideology. To be sure, by the 1960s, some nationalist organizations invoked, with more or less sincerity, communist (or Maoist) ideas. Many nationalists, however, dreamed of an autonomous African-American economic order within independent black communities. While this economic order did not look like contemporary American industrial capitalism, it had more in common with romantic notions of early nineteenth-century, small-town capitalism than it had with the robust welfare state that King advocated.⁶

These divisions within the Civil Rights Movement suggest that reconstituting it as a force focused on eliminating poverty would have been difficult even had King lived. Indeed, one of the many tragedies of King's last days was the toll these divisions took on him. His

biographers uniformly describe him struggling with “bouts of near incapacitating depression”⁷ brought on by the increasingly bitter, interne-cine battles within the Movement. King attempted to shift the Movement to focus more directly on economic inequality while maintaining his commitment to both nonviolence and interracialism. But advocates of other goals and tactics plagued him. Some demanded that he endorse their priorities. Other derided him as out of touch and over the hill. Still others did both. The tragedy of the end of King’s life was that he had become too powerful a symbol of the Civil Rights Movement to be left alone to shape it according to his own priorities.⁸

From the Streets to the Voting Booth

The existence of these conflicts within the Civil Rights Movement did not mean that it ceased to concern itself with economic issues after King’s death. It did, but using different tactics. Historians of the Movement characterize the years following the assassination as ones in which it stopped acting as a national movement of mass protest and refocused its attention on electoral politics.⁹ This shift from the streets to the ballot box brought considerable successes, even in a political climate that grew increasingly hostile to civil rights. Yet while this move into conventional politics brought with it much power, it also had profound limitations.

It was only in the 1970s . . . that electoral politics became the primary strategy used to further the civil rights agenda.

Everyone within the Movement accepted the idea that political participation was fundamental to the black freedom struggle. Securing some form of federal protection for voting rights was one of its primary goals in the years following World War II. Similarly, voter registration drives in the South were the focus of both the SCLC and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC). As former SNCC chairman John Lewis said, “The bottom line was voting.”¹⁰ It was only in the 1970s, however, that electoral politics became the primary strategy used to further the

civil rights agenda. Those years saw two fractious but energizing National Black Political Conventions, as well as the founding of the Congressional Black Caucus. These same years saw a dramatic increase in the number of African-American elected officials in the United States. In 1965, just before the passage of the Voting Rights Act, there were 193 African Americans holding political office in the United States.¹¹ By 1976, that number had risen to 3,979. By 1980, there were 4,912.¹² Indeed, even this enormous increase in office-holding understates the influence of black voters. As the registration of African Americans surged—more than doubling in the South between 1965 and 1970¹³—white politicians courted their votes with increased intensity. This was most obvious in the presidential election of 1976 in which black votes made up Jimmy Carter’s margin of victory.¹⁴ This pattern of white politicians courting African-American voters was replicated throughout the country, at all levels of government.

In 1965, just before the passage of the Voting Rights Act, there were 193 African Americans holding political office in the United States. . . . By 1980, there were 4,912.

The results of this new emphasis on partisan politics were mixed. On the national level, it succeeded in promoting issues that were part of the traditional civil rights agenda. Jimmy Carter, for example, appointed more African-American federal judges (thirty-seven, or 14 percent of his judicial appointments) than every previous president combined.¹⁵ His executive branch appointees were similarly diverse, with 12 percent being African American, including high-profile appointments such as the Secretary of Health and Human Services, the Ambassador to the United Nations, the Solicitor General, the head of the Justice Department’s Civil Rights Division, the Secretary of the Army, and the Chair of the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission.¹⁶ Similarly, even after the Republicans regained control of the presidency and the Senate in 1981, the power of black voters and politicians ensured the enactment of a continuing stream of civil rights legislation; some passed over President Ronald Reagan’s veto: the

1982 Voting Rights Act Amendments, the Martin Luther King Jr. Holiday Act of 1983, the Comprehensive Anti-Apartheid Act of 1986, the Civil Rights Restoration Act of 1988, and the Fair Housing Act Amendments of 1988.¹⁷

At the federal level, however, the use of the political process was singularly unsuccessful in expanding the civil rights agenda to include legislation aimed at combating poverty more generally. African-American leaders expressed frustration and anger at Carter's unwillingness to embrace Keynesian economic policies designed to reduce unemployment and increase wages. Indeed, if there was a single piece of legislation that tested the theory that the Movement's turn to electoral politics could further King's economic agenda, it was the Humphrey-Hawkins Full Employment Bill. As originally proposed in 1974, this legislation would have required the federal government to keep the unemployment rate at or below 4 percent by acting as an employer of last resort during economic downturns. Coretta Scott King repeatedly emphasized that no legislation would be a better tribute to her husband's legacy. Leading a coalition of labor unions and civil rights organizations, she lobbied hard for the bill. In the increasingly conservative political climate of the 1970s, however, its progressive components were stripped away. Mandates became goals. The employment program was eliminated, portrayed as both budget-busting and inflationary. Indeed, the final version of the legislation passed in 1978 only after its goal of reducing unemployment had been pushed aside by provisions implementing distinctly unredistributive policies such as curbing inflation and balancing the federal budget. King and her allies claimed a victory, but detached observers saw the bill for what it was: toothless sop to African-American and white liberal legislators with no realistic chance of creating jobs. Without a mass movement behind them, these political forces had lost the capacity to pass truly progressive economic legislation.¹⁸

The story of the Movement's shift to partisan politics at the state and local level is rosier.¹⁹ This was most evident in the South where African-American political participation transformed the region. The number of local African-American

office holders increased dramatically throughout the South during the 1970s, as did the number of white politicians who depended on black votes for their success. The direct material benefits to African Americans brought about through political participation were obvious. Lily-white law enforcement agencies were integrated. Unpaved streets in black neighborhoods were paved, and parks sprung up in black communities heretofore ignored by local politicians. Public works programs were desegregated. Public sector jobs flowed into the African-American community. Changes in government contracting procedures, including set asides for minority businesses, resulted in increases in black private sector employment as well. Thus, as politicians came to count on African-American votes, the black community benefitted from the traditional spoils of the electoral process: "We Provided the Votes" editorialized an African American newspaper in Los Angeles, "Now We Want the Oats."²⁰ It may not have been the exact sentiment that King expressed as he sought to reorient the Movement to fight for economic justice, but for many African Americans, the effect was the same: access to public services and good jobs, and entry into the middle class.

White politicians may have become responsive to the African-American community, but black politicians needed to respond to white elite interests as well.

Even at the local level, however, the commitment to partisan politics as the primary method of advancing civil rights had significant limitations. Interest-group politics was a double-edged sword. White politicians may have become responsive to the African-American community, but black politicians needed to respond to white elite interests as well. This fact put significant restraints on their ability to address fundamental issues of economic inequality. The contrast between King's last campaign—to support striking sanitation workers in Memphis—and the outcome of a similar strike in Atlanta nine years later vividly illustrate the nature of these restraints.

A Tale of Two Strikes

The details of the Memphis strike are a familiar part of King's biography.²¹ He traveled to Memphis in April of 1968 to organize protests on behalf of African-American sanitation workers demanding higher pay and an end to dehumanizing, dangerous working conditions. (The strike began after two workers were crushed to death in a malfunctioning trash compactor.) Although Memphis' mayor, Henry Loeb, is not as well known in the annals of labor and civil rights suppression as other neolithic, southern politicians of the era, he played the part to a T: striking workers were met with stonewalling, red-baiting, strikebreakers, and brutal police violence.

King's assassination ended the strike in Memphis. Faced with violent protest throughout the country in the aftermath of the murder, federal officials pressured Loeb into a settlement favorable to the union. Although the cost was terrible, King seemed to have connected the tactics of nonviolence to the fight for economic justice in a manner that transcended race. He had linked the traditional institutions of the Civil Rights Movement to a labor union—the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees (AFSCME)—that itself was at the forefront of promoting interracial economic egalitarianism. With its progressive leadership and a genuinely integrated membership, AFSCME seemed like the perfect partner for a Movement that had focused its attention on combating both racial and economic inequality.

Compare the outcome of the Memphis sanitation strike with a similar strike, nine years later in Atlanta.²² As in Memphis, Atlanta's African-American sanitation workers were hideously underpaid, their wages insufficient to bring their families' income above the federal poverty line. Similarly, Atlanta's mayor took a hardline with the workers. While he avoided violence, he had no qualms about firing the striking workers and permanently replacing them with strikebreakers. When the workers offered to end the strike in exchange for getting their jobs back, the mayor bluntly refused them: Their jobs no longer existed. Those jobs belonged to the replacement workers. The strike and the union were broken.

The most remarkable difference between the Memphis strike and the Atlanta strike, however,

was not the outcome. It was the union's antagonist. While Loeb was one in a long line of southern politicians intent on maintaining white racial and economic hegemony, Atlanta's mayor was Maynard Jackson, the city's first African-American mayor. Furthermore, the city's civil rights establishment—the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Urban League, even the SCLC—actively supported Jackson's union-busting strategy. Indeed, Jackson's most outspoken supporter was the slain civil rights leader's father, Martin Luther King Sr., the longtime minister at Atlanta's Ebenezer Baptist Church. Most disturbingly, the elder King deployed rhetoric drawn from the playbook of the Civil Rights Movement's white supremacist opponents. Labor unrest, King told the *Atlanta Constitution*, was the result of outside agitators, particularly the leadership of AFSCME: "If any group comes in to try to destroy our town, we are against it, with all the power we have."²³

... [In the 1977 sanitation workers' strike] Atlanta's ... civil rights establishment ... actively supported [Mayor Maynard] Jackson's union-busting strategy.

Jackson was explicit about his reasons for breaking the strike. He felt intense pressure to be fiscally prudent, perhaps more than a white mayor might have. Accusing black politicians of fiscal irresponsibility had, after all, been the stock in trade of the white supremacist redeemers who put an end to Reconstruction and disfranchised African Americans in the late nineteenth century. Accordingly, the image of Atlanta's first African-American mayor plunging the city into debt was not one that Jackson was willing to countenance. "Before I take the city into a deficit . . . elephants will roost in trees."²⁴ Similarly, as he ran for reelection that year, Jackson needed to appeal not only to the African-American middle class but also to Atlanta's white middle class, and to the city's business elites. Indeed, Jackson's alliance with white business interests was replicated by black mayors in most cities where they were elected.²⁵

Politics was a double-edged sword. By the 1970s, white politicians courted African-American voters by furthering their interests. Black politicians, in turn, had to gain the support of powerful interests within the white business community if they wished to stay in power. The need for this sort of political pragmatism meant that as the Movement became primarily devoted to electoral politics, its ability to promote progressive economic policies was severely limited.

... [W]hat . . . progressive politicians, both black and white, had discovered by the 1980s was that “they were generals without armies.”

Not every African-American politician made the same compromises with elite business interests that Jackson and other African-American big city majors did. For these black progressives, however, the shift from protests to ballots caused a different problem: It was often hard to pursue progressive economic policies in the political realm without accompanying social protest. The failure of Humphrey-Hawkins was proof positive of this fact.²⁶ Similar problems emerged in states and localities. In his wonderful history of Civil Rights Movement in northern states, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, Thomas Sugrue describes Roxanne Jones, an African-American state senator from Philadelphia, fighting to realize King’s dream of economic egalitarian public policy.²⁷ In office from 1985 until her death in 1996, her legislative agenda included policies, small and large, designed to protect Pennsylvania’s poorest and most vulnerable citizens: rehabilitation programs for drug-addicted mothers, health care for AIDS patients, financial assistance for the elderly, heating aid and medical assistance for the poor. Most of these initiatives failed. Indeed, most of her career was spent in unsuccessful attempts to limit the pernicious effects of Ronald Reagan’s cuts to welfare (“human genocide,” she called it²⁸) and subsequent welfare “reform” legislation. Jones, who had cut her teeth in the National Welfare Rights Organization, and had been a

participant in the Poor People’s March, was, by nature, more of an activist than a politician. But what she and other progressive politicians, both black and white, had discovered by the 1980s was that “they were generals without armies.”²⁹ Too often, the Movement’s shift from the streets to the ballot box left the politicians who wished to further King’s dream of a racially and economically egalitarian society unable to mobilize the social protest that would have turned that dream into a reality.

Making the Whispered Dream Reality

The fifty years since King’s murder have not been good ones for progressives engaged in the fight for economic justice. Republican thirst for tax cuts, welfare reform, deregulation, and union busting have eviscerated the social safety net. Similarly, the Democratic Party has evidenced little stomach for expanding the welfare state, or otherwise slowing the dramatic increase in income inequality that has occurred since the early 1970s. None of this was caused by King’s assassination. Nor is it the fault of the Civil Rights Movement. An amorphous mass movement cannot make blameworthy choices. Historical circumstances dictated its fractious nature, which, in turn, made it a poor candidate to be the vanguard of a movement for combating economic inequality. Its turn to partisan politics was similarly unconscious. Indeed, after the remarkable success of the Voting Rights Act, it would have been shocking if the Movement had not gravitated toward the use of the political power that African Americans had previously been denied through violence, fraud, and legal disfranchisement.

Broad social movements are by their very nature chaotic, restless entities. They are difficult to focus on a unified goal, even by a leader as gifted as King. Yet advocates for social justice do not have the luxury of abandoning them, in all their messiness, for the well-worn channels of party politics. Indeed, what brought about the Civil Rights Movement’s successes—from Birmingham to Selma, from the Civil Rights Act of 1964 to the Voting Rights Act—was King’s ability to blend these two forms of

advocacy. The whispered dream—“imagine our society, if only King had lived”—can only be realized by doing so.

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Notes

1. For the details of King’s planning of the Poor People’s Movement, see Thomas E. Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Struggle for Economic Justice* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 329-58; Taylor Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge: America in the King Years, 1965-1968* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2006), 683-766; David J. Garrow, *Bearing the Cross: Martin Luther King, Jr., and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference* (New York: William Morrow, 1986), 527-624.
2. This description of the Civil Rights Movement leans heavily on Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008), but a discussion of the various schisms within the Black freedom struggle can be found in most histories of the Civil Rights Movement including Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*; Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*.
3. For histories of this strand of the Civil Rights Movement, see Jackson, *From Civil Rights to Human Rights*, 25-20; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 3-84; Patricia Sullivan, *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1996); Robin D. G. Kelley, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists during the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990).
4. This economically conservative strand of civil rights thought is nicely captured in Joshua D. Farrington, *Black Republicans and the Transformation of the GOP* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016).
5. For the deradicalizing effect of anticommunism on the Civil Rights Movement, see Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 102-11, and Risa L. Goluboff, *The Lost Promise of Civil Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007).
6. For black nationalism and the Black Power Movement, see Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 313-55; Jeffrey O. G. Ogbar, *Black Power: Radical Politics and American Identity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005); Timothy Tyson, *Radio Free Dixie: Robert F. Williams and the Roots of Black Power* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001).
7. Jackson, *From Human Rights to Civil Rights*, 24. Branch and Garrow also comment on King’s fragile mental state at the end of his life: Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 734; Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 577-78. Also David L. Chappell, *Waking from the Dream: The Struggle for Civil Rights in the Shadow of Martin Luther King, Jr.* (New York: Random House, 2014), 26.
8. For the internecine disputes over the Poor People’s Movement and the activities in Memphis, see Branch, *At Canaan’s Edge*, 682-766, and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 575-624.
9. For this section, I rely on several excellent studies of African-American voting and political power: Steven F. Lawson, *In Pursuit of Power: Southern Blacks and Electoral Politics, 1965-1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1985); Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in America since 1941* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1997); Gavin Wright, *Sharing the Prize: The Economics of the Civil Rights Revolution in the American South* (Cambridge: Belknap, 2013), 183-222; James W. Button, *Blacks and Social Change: Impact of the Civil Rights Movement in Southern Communities* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1989). African-American political power is also discussed in Chappell, *Waking from the Dream*, 28-123; and Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 494-505.
10. Lawson, *Running for Freedom*, 193.
11. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 501.
12. Lawson, *Running for Freedom*, 255.
13. Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, 188.
14. Chappell, *Waking from the Dream*, 74.
15. Jonathan K. Stubbs, “A Demographic History of Federal Judicial Appointments by Sex and Race, 1798-2016,” *Berkeley La Raza Law Journal* 26 (2016): 92, 106.

16. Lawson, *Running for Freedom*, 193-94.
17. Chappell, *Waking from the Dream*, 121.
18. *Ibid.*, 65-90; Laura Kalman, *Right Star Rising: A New Politics, 1974-1980* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2010), 219-21.
19. Wright, *Sharing the Prize*, 198-220; Button, *Blacks and Social Change*, 114-205.
20. Chappell, *Waking from the Dream*, 75.
21. This description of events in Memphis is taken from Branch, *At Canaan's Edge*, 683-766; Jackson, *From Human Rights to Civil Rights*, 349-53; and Garrow, *Bearing the Cross*, 609-24.
22. For the Atlanta strike, see Joseph A. McCartin, "'Fire the Hell Out of Them': Sanitation Workers' Struggles and the Normalization of the Striker Replacement Strategy in the 1970s," *Labor: Studies in Working-Class History of the Americas* 2 (2005): 67, 81-87 and Maurice J. Hobson, *Legend of the Black Mecca: Politics and Class in the Making of Modern Atlanta* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 85-89.
23. McCartin, "'Fire the Hell Out of Them,'" 86.
24. *Ibid.*, 84.
25. Lawson, *Running for Freedom*, 163-80; Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 502-505.
26. Gus Hawkins' legislative assistant believed that the bill was diluted because white politicians "haven't felt the pressure from enough of us. It's that simple." Chappell, *Waking from the Dream*, 87.
27. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty*, 516-31.
28. *Ibid.*, 525.
29. *Ibid.*, 526.

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