2017

[Introduction to] The Dream is Lost: Voting Rights and the Politics of Race in Richmond, Virginia

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THE
DREAM
IS LOST

Voting Rights and
the Politics of Race
in Richmond, Virginia

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Introduction

Richmond, Virginia, is seldom central to the narrative of the American civil rights movement or pointed out in studies of twentieth-century urban history. Yet in June 1980 *Ebony* magazine featured the Commonwealth of Virginia's capital in an article entitled "Richmond: Former Confederate Capital Finally Falls to Blacks." The column documented the arrival of black governance in what was once the industrial capital of slave-based tobacco production and the home of the Confederacy. Richmond activist Curtis Holt Sr. was at the center of the *Ebony* article. In 1971, Holt, armed with a tenth-grade education, walked into a federal office in Richmond and filed a suit against the city under the authority of the Voting Rights Act (VRA) of 1965. According to Holt, Richmond's white leaders had in 1969 purposefully diluted the collective power of the city's black voters by annexing portions of Chesterfield County, a primarily white and affluent suburb contiguous to Richmond. Vote dilution, Holt charged, cost him a seat on the city council during the election of 1970. Few knew it at the time, but Holt's contentions would transform municipal politics in Richmond. His lawsuit was part of a much larger voting rights revolution that changed the meaning of representative democracy in America.[1]

In 1972, Holt's suit led a federal district court to use the VRA's preclearance clause in section 5 to place a moratorium on Richmond City Council elections. This moratorium lasted until the U.S. Supreme Court and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) determined whether the annexation of Chesterfield County had indeed diluted—the process of diminishing a group's ability to elect candidates of their choice—blacks' votes by adding nearly 44,000 white suburban residents to the city. The suspension of the city council elections lasted for roughly seven years. Although the Court eventually upheld the annexation, it demanded in return that Richmonders abandon at-large elections and implement an electoral system that allowed African Americans, who represented more than 50 percent of Richmond's total population prior to the boundary expansion, to vote within almost exclusively black districts. Racial redis-

tricting led immediately to the election of a five-to-four black-majority council (BMC) in 1977 and the appointment of a nationally celebrated civil rights lawyer, Henry L. Marsh III, to the mayoralty.[2]

Roughly twelve years after Congress passed the VRA, the former capital of the Confederacy had fallen again. African Americans seemed to have political control over a city whose foremost tourist attraction, Monument Avenue, was and continues to be a street lined with statues honoring Confederate leaders. By the early 1980s, the commonwealth's capital was one of thirteen U.S. cities with populations greater than 100,000 to be controlled by a black city council, mayor, and administration. *Ebony* argued that Holt, a resident of Richmond's Creighton Court housing projects who was generally unkempt and "misplaced infinitives and mispronounced words," seemed an unlikely candidate to transform a city's political landscape—especially a city that had played such a pivotal role in perpetuating oppression of African Americans. But Holt, the historical record demonstrates, had not done it alone.[3]

Richmond, Virginia, founded in 1737 by William Byrd II on the James River fall line, was fundamental to the formation of both American liberty and American slavery. On one hand, Richmond is inextricably linked to the establishment of American independence. Patrick Henry delivered the celebrated "Liberty or Death" speech atop Church Hill at St. John's Church in 1775. Lawmakers signed Thomas Jefferson's *Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom* at Richmond's temporary state capital building in 1786. Some of the loudest cries for American liberty and home rule during the revolutionary era came not only from New England and Pennsylvania but from Virginia as well. Ambivalent political and economic traditions also characterize Richmond's history. English colonials eventually transformed Richmond and the Tidewater Region of Virginia into a tobacco-producing powerhouse during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As European demand for tobacco increased, local tobacco growers and manufacturers came to rely almost exclusively on the process of slavery, and slavery made a handful of Virginians extremely wealthy. These Virginians, historian Edmund Morgan contends, "bought their independence with slave labor" and tobacco production.[4]

Slavery and segregation shaped Richmond's development well into the twentieth century. During the antebellum period, industrial slavery in

Richmond gave rise to limited freedoms for blacks, and these freedoms had a profound influence on future generations of black Richmonders. Not only was Virginia central to domestic slave trading, but Richmond's tobacco factories, flour mills, pig iron production, railways, and canal systems also represented "the most advanced economic developments in the antebellum South." Many of these industries relied almost exclusively on slave labor by the mid–nineteenth century. A considerable number of the city's slaves worked in tobacco factories—a multi-million-dollar industry by 1860—on or near the James River's canal system. There were so many black tobacco workers, historians now know, that employers were often forced to provide "board money" for slaves' lodging. Slaves' accommodations, which were often near the point of production yet apart from slave owners, nurtured personal and communal autonomy. These areas eventually gave rise to strong church-based, economic, and family ties that survived both the Confederacy's impressment of slave labor during the Civil War and the incremental rise of Jim Crow segregation. In 1901–1902, white powerbrokers countered blacks' demands for independence by drafting a new state constitution that authorized the use of poll taxes and literacy tests. Poll taxes worked—wealthy whites were overrepresented in Virginia's governing bodies until the mid–twentieth century. Nearly a century after the Civil War, around 1956, an organization of well-heeled black professionals called the Richmond Crusade for Voters set out to secure black Richmonders' rights as American citizens by paying these levies. Curtis Holt may have been the centerpiece of the *Ebony* article in 1980, but the Crusade was the engine that drove racial politics in Richmond.[5]

No civic organization did more to democratize local politics in twentieth-century Richmond than the Crusade. The story told in this book describes more than thirty years of national and local politics. It explains how local suffragists pressed federal officials to strengthen the VRA and redistribute southern political authority along racial lines. The rights embodied in the VRA cannot be explained by separating the mobilization of black voters on one hand and federal policy directed toward race on the other. Richmond's African Americans, who watched segregationists use municipal government and New Deal programs to raise whites' standard of living (often at the expense of black communities), skipped

the protest portion of the freedom struggle and went straight to politics. They eventually seized political leadership from gradualist African American ministers in the late 1950s, registered thousands of black voters, and challenged white elites' ascendancy over local politics during the early 1960s. The Crusade, led by men and women alike, influenced local politics nearly a decade before the VRA and decades before the Supreme Court mandated the city's majority–minority district system. These types of pre-VRA suffrage crusades—not just civil disobedience and mass protests—raised political consciousness in black communities across America and eventually generated the momentum necessary for Congress to pass the VRA. The VRA may have given rise to dramatic changes in American political culture, but it also fell short of eliminating, according to Supreme Court justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, "all vestiges of discrimination against the exercise of the franchise by minority citizens." The Crusade ushered in a period of profound political promise, but it also witnessed the rise of an era characterized by new political restrictions.[6]

This book is not merely a triumph narrative about Richmond's contribution to the long struggle for black freedom but also a cautionary tale about a city coming to terms with the continuation of racist political trends in American life after 1965. The VRA had unintended consequences. As the members of groups such as the Crusade transitioned from protest to politics after 1965, their white counterparts embarked on a Machiavellian crusade of their own: vote dilution and political obstructionism. White leaders, who had grown accustomed to restricting and granting freedoms, remained convinced that African Americans lacked the intellectual capacity to manage municipal affairs. As black elected officials assumed control over America's city halls, they often had to resolve social problems left over from the racist policies of the mid–twentieth century. The Crusade, its representatives, and black communities across the United States had inherited what political scientist H. Paul Friesema in 1969 called a "hollow prize." If annexation led immediately to the district system in 1977, the very forces that made Richmond's majority–minority district system possible—an increase in African American populations in densely packed enclaves, unremitting residential segregation, white flight, and an unmistakable pattern of urban retrenchment—were the same forces that brought about deepening marginalization and

dispossession in black communities during the twilight of the twentieth century. Although African Americans maintained a city council majority throughout the 1980s, *Ebony* could not have written a triumph narrative about black governance in Richmond in 1985. White resistance to black governance crested at the very moment that black-majority cities in America were overcome by deepening demographic and economic crises. By 1985, preoccupation with poverty and public safety impinged upon the Crusade's strictly political approach to black equality. African Americans, who circled the race wagons in the 1960s, no longer agreed on how to solve their communities' problems.[7]

In telling the story of the civil rights movement in Richmond, this book connects three subjects: (1) how middle-class African Americans used politics as a means to empower their communities; (2) how local people helped influence national voting rights policy during the civil rights movement; and (3) how race and racism shaped policy and politics in Richmond well into the twentieth century. This account of Richmond's role in the civil rights movement is first and foremost about politics: it explains how people used civic organizations, electoral politics, litigation, media, and other tactics to influence public policy and reclaim black citizenship from the clutches of white supremacy. It also explains the unintended consequences of that reclamation. After decades of studying the ways everyday people shaped the quest for civil rights, experts now have a much firmer understanding, as historian Emilye Crosby contends, of "*what* and *who* we think" are important to the freedom struggle. In connecting local and national matters, this story's chronology demonstrates that pre–*Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) voter mobilization and national enthusiasm for integration gave rise not only to massive resistance but also to a specific type of civil rights activism in Richmond. Recent accounts of the American civil rights movement demonstrate that national and international events profoundly influenced not merely the movement, but public policy. These accounts also confirm that local people worked within the context of local circumstances to create the conditions necessary to challenge Jim Crow. Black Richmonders were ruthlessly committed to the political aspects of the freedom struggle. African American women, working poor, public-housing residents, and middle-class technocrats spent

the mid- to late twentieth century defining and redefining the meaning of American citizenship.[8]

The Richmond Crusade for Voters did not emerge from thin air: its members inherited a drawn-out struggle against Virginia's culture of racist civility. Three specific factors gave rise to the Crusade: Richmond's legacy of gradualist leadership, growing momentum for voting rights mandates before 1965, and Virginia's history of racist paternalism. John Brooks, Lola Hamilton, Dr. William Ferguson Reid, Ethel T. Overby, and Dr. William S. Thornton created the Crusade in 1956 to combat massive resistance to public-school integration. The Crusade had immediate roots in African American gradualism and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Before the mid-1950s, limited interracial cooperation characterized Richmond's color line—the story of how black leaders collaborated with a handful of moderate white elites to hammer out solutions to various grievances is now well known. Although whites often dictated the terms of racial improvements, they relied on a "better class of black leaders to counsel prudence and ensure that change" occurred within the context of white paternalism. Yet even within this context of racist civility, African American leaders continued to challenge the boundaries of racial segregation in Richmond. Richmond not only elected Oliver W. Hill to the city council in 1948 but also— roughly one hundred miles south of the nation's capital—became a "beehive" for the NAACP's desegregation lawsuits during the early 1950s. As whites manufactured massive resistance to public-school integration, the Crusade revolted against poll taxes and black ministers who supported only moderate racial reforms. The Crusade believed that the racial polarization brought on by the *Brown* decision called for more robust political organization. It not only had the financial resources to create a self-sustaining network of precinct-based groups but also mobilized to pay others' poll taxes, registered thousands of black voters, and raised political consciousness with the help of the area's black newspaper, the *Richmond Afro-American & Planet*. By 1964, the Crusade facilitated the election of an African American, B. A. "Sonny" Cephas, to the city council and was instrumental in shaping local policy.[9]

The maelstrom that followed the *Brown* decision and the rise of direct-action demonstrations often overshadows the story of African Americans'

"re-enfranchisement." The Crusade was part of—and essential to—the larger voting rights movement taking place below the Mason–Dixon line before 1965. The idea that African Americans were not voting at all in the South prior to 1965 is a popular misconception about the freedom struggle. This notion also belies the data. In 1956, one million of the South's roughly five million African Americans had registered to vote. In their search for the civil rights movement's origins, scholars have demonstrated that black Americans in cities such as Atlanta, Louisville, Wilmington, and as far south as Sunflower County, Mississippi, not only drew from organizing traditions that often predated the 1930s but also parlayed the urgency from World War II and *Brown* into voter mobilization movements. It is difficult to understand how local people and organizations such as the Crusade changed national voting rights policy without examining the voter mobilization campaigns that predated 1965. After Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, which was largely about voting rights, both the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and the NAACP committed themselves to voter registration.[10]

The Crusade's voter mobilization campaigns force us to reimagine the *Brown*-to-Selma narrative of the civil rights movement. Not only did national civil rights organizations such as the SCLC and NAACP capitalize on indigenous political movements, but the struggle between black mobilization and vested white political interests also provided the basis for what became the VRA. The NAACP's executive secretary, Roy Wilkins, made Crusade member John Brooks the national organization's voter registration director in 1958. Brooks and a handful of southern organizers single-handedly orchestrated the NAACP's "Miracle of 1960"—a campaign to register three million African Americans before 1960 that has received scant attention from historians. Martin Luther King Jr., the SCLC, and the events that culminated in Selma, Alabama, during the summer of 1965 certainly motivated President Lyndon B. Johnson to *sign* a voting rights bill. Yet Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach and federal policy makers in fact wrote the provisions of the VRA to preclude the types of disenfranchisement that Brooks, organizations such as the Crusade, and national civil rights organizations had encountered during the late 1950s and early 1960s. In telling the story of black Richmonders' pursuit of the ballot, this book demonstrates that

local people inspired national civil rights organizations to lobby for voting rights.[11]

The Crusade's struggle for political power would not have been possible without the organizational and political will of Richmond's black women. The historical record on women's involvement in the Crusade's founding is not commensurate with the historical reality: women and gender were fundamental to the organization's formation and preservation. "History of the Crusade: Report of the Historian"—in particular the section on the Crusade's founding—is guilty of the same "sin of omission" that too often characterizes what the late Julian Bond called "the master narrative" of the civil rights movement. Recent community studies of the freedom struggle have dismantled this master narrative by demonstrating the myriad contributions women made to the movement as both secondary figures *and* leaders. Women, we know now, were more than matrons of the movement. In their recent examinations of race in Richmond, scholars such as Lewis Randolph, Gayle Tate, and Caroline Emmons demonstrate that women played a critical yet unsung role during the fight for voting and civil rights. The Crusade's first meetings took place in Ethel T. Overby's home, and by the late 1950s Overby and the Crusade transformed people's homes into a type of cottage industry for voter mobilization activity. This story of racial politics in Richmond is not just about men's and women's roles but also about how expectations of manhood and womanhood shaped the struggle for civil rights in Richmond.[12]

Black women held positions of *actual* influence within the Crusade, helped transition from protest to politics, and led the way into elected office. The Ethel Overbys of the movement—Overby was the first black public-school principal in Richmond, led the fight against whites' massive resistance to integration and equal political rights, cofounded the Crusade, and was its finance chair—existed on a long continuum of black women in Richmond specifically and Virginia generally (i.e., Maggie Walker and Barbara Johns) who initiated the fight against segregated transportation and education well before the late 1950s. Much has been made of the ways patriarchy, masculine histrionics, and the politics of moral suasion informed civil rights leadership. We know now that the movement's men often relegated women to secondary work. Middle-

class civil rights organizations, historian Barbara Ransby argues, "emphasized the primacy of women's domestic roles." National stories of black voter mobilization often emphasized male leadership because men were often the movement's most visible representatives. Men were often political spokespersons and the first elected officials. But community studies of the civil rights movement shed light on a different story. Women struggled with patriarchy and secondary roles. While a great number of middle-class women in the Crusade were what the anthropologist Karen Sacks calls "center-women"—women of status who took on the roles of informal leadership—a handful floated between the all too familiar binary spaces of leadership and followership. These women—for instance, Richmond's first black councilwoman, Willie J. Dell—were the Crusade's "bridge leaders." As African Americans moved into electoral politics, women—who often worked directly with vulnerable communities as social workers and activists—bridged the divide between vulnerable communities, grassroots organizing, and official political power. As poverty deepened throughout Richmond's black communities, these women also led the charge against middle-class political leadership.[13]

The ways white southerners controlled race relations also influenced the types of civil rights movements that emerged in Richmond and postwar America. On one hand, Virginia's poll tax, not threats of mob violence, dictated who voted in the commonwealth. Richmond's African Americans used voter mobilization to challenge Jim Crow because Virginia's white powerbrokers, under the auspices of Senator Harry F. Byrd and his reputed "machine," allowed some blacks to vote well before 1965. Byrd's Democratic machine also maintained segregation through paternalistic elitism rather than through violent rigidity. It is difficult to understand how Virginia's African Americans organized civil rights strategies without recognizing how the commonwealth's white elites, who embraced segregation but rejected maintaining the color line by force, sustained their age-old skepticism of broad-based democracy by practicing a regionally specific brand of racist civility and genteel paternalism. Before *Brown*, Richmond's white elites maintained segregation by handing out piecemeal concessions to gradualist black leaders. Byrd engineered racial solidarity around the issue of massive resistance to public-school integration, and the racial polarization brought on by massive resistance undermined

both the commonwealth's "friendly" race relations and a significant number of gradualist black ministers (which is largely why professionals rather than ministers led the freedom struggle in Richmond). When it came to black voting, Byrd Democrats knew they could pay lip service to limited black political participation without conceding substantive political power. Yet even Byrd understood that if more blacks paid poll taxes, they might swing the balance of power in local elections because the levies also suppressed large white voter turnout. The Crusade eventually confirmed Byrd's fears.[14]

Massive resistance to public-school integration may have brought an end to the practice of maintaining segregation by promoting friendly race relations, but it did little, this book demonstrates, to extricate white elites from positions of entrenched power. Richmond's white establishment maintained its paternalistic proclivities well into the 1980s. The VRA and the abolition of state and local poll taxes in *Harper v. Virginia Board of Elections* (1966) not only reenergized the Crusade but also crystallized white resistance.[15] Crusade members and their allies on the city council spent the late 1960s fighting against police brutality, urban-renewal projects, and the construction of two expressways. In time, white officials came to associate the Crusade's demands with the Black Power movement. After 1965, white leaders advocated for interracial cooperation while secretly devising color-blind structural barriers (i.e., annexations) that prohibited blacks from assuming real political power. These barriers affirmed some Virginians' belief that good government was still synonymous with elite whiteness. Federal policy makers and the Supreme Court disagreed.

This book also examines the complex coalitions and litigation that emerged during the late 1960s as African Americans fought to preserve the VRA. American cities labored to negotiate the friction between their history of oppressing blacks and their openness to progressive political reforms. After 1965, Richmond was part of a much larger revolution in voting rights. Curtis Holt's claim that annexation diluted blacks' votes ran Richmond right into a national voting rights revolution. This so-called reapportionment revolution, which local litigants started, Earl Warren's Court accommodated, and Warren Burger's Court strengthened, went beyond safeguarding access to the suffrage. As whites devised structural barriers

to dilute the voting power of recently enfranchised African Americans, federal officials began to protect a minority group's right to elect preferred representatives in a manner that was commensurate with their total voting-age population. The Supreme Court, using an employment-based affirmative-action remedy known as "disparate-impact analysis," eventually recognized that the discriminatory *effect* of electoral laws mattered just as much as the discriminatory *intent*. Although the Court struggled to find a solution to vote dilution, it found that a "presence of factors," known as the "totality of circumstances" test, made it difficult for minority voters to elect more than a handful of public officials. White officials combined white and black districts, relocated polling places to white neighborhoods, threatened economic reprisals against black voters and candidates, switched to at-large election systems, and, in the Deep South, continued to intimidate voters with violence. National policy makers and the Supreme Court, which acknowledged that resistance to the VRA might be characterized as undemocratic, came to prefer majority–minority districts as a solution to vote dilution. Racial redistricting not only protected a minority group's right to elect candidates but also allowed minority voters to elect preferred candidates free of white interference.[16]

The political abuses of electoral reforms have been a continuous and unfortunate feature of U.S. political history, and politics following the VRA was no exception to this rule. The United States, experts contend, often sways back and forth between greater political access and more political restrictions. We know a great deal about the personal motives of high-ranking political figures who were integral to passing and strengthening the civil rights bills. Recent assaults on key provisions in the VRA and the reemergence of direct disenfranchisement have forced scholars to move beyond portraying voting rights mandates as a triumph narrative. If officials implemented majority–minority districts during the 1970s to counteract machinations such as Richmond's annexation of Chesterfield County, they also designed these districts to "redress present, institutionalized manifestations of historical injustices against blacks as a group." The story of how Washington preserved the spirit of the civil rights bills is outlined in the pages to come, but it has also been well documented by scholars and historians of voting rights.[17]

Institutional political stability between Congress, the Supreme

Court, and the federal executive branch became critical to the preservation of the Second Reconstruction. In many ways, white resistance to the VRA and the documentation of that opposition by the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights had an unintended consequence. As African Americans transformed the civil rights movement from "protest to politics," from right to reality, whites continued to design rules, such as annexations, that appeared on their face to deny no one the right to vote. Majority–minority districts—the crowning achievement of the so-called reapportionment revolution—gave rise to an unprecedented, albeit brief, period of explicitly defined racial politics in the United States. This racial democracy, by diversifying southern and American politics, seemed at that time to represent a durable shift in American governing authority.[18]

Washington's commitment to preserving the civil rights bills also had unintended consequences for the future of African American associationalism. The federal government's protection of Great Society legislation during the late 1960s and 1970s convinced men such as Curtis Holt, for better or worse, to hedge their bets against institutional bigotry with the liberal state. Black southerners knew that state and local governing bodies were, as historian Thomas Sugrue argues, "the key architects of racial inequality" and executors of Jim Crowism. In many ways, "the smaller the government, the more black support for it eroded." As President Johnson championed an "equality of results" standard—the belief that civil rights laws needed to engender a proportional share of results such as employment, office holding, resources, and so on—African Americans came to believe that the federal government was "a positive agent for social change." After 1965, many civil rights advocates defended the value of their hard-won right to vote not by protesting or demonstrating but by working quietly within the democratic system. As we shall see, sustained resistance to the VRA led the freedom struggle to revert to the legal and political strategies that helped define the movement before the Montgomery bus boycott. During the late 1960s and 1970s, a deluge of litigation (fifty cases or more) concerning vote dilution inundated state and federal court systems. Civil rights laws, according to leading scholars of Black Power, moderated the movement by convincing African Americans to lodge their grievances against racism in Washington. This transition away from extrainstitutional forms of community mobilization

toward a greater reliance on federal protections was evident not just in the War on Poverty, as experts have demonstrated, but also in the case of voting rights. For people such as Curtis Holt, the reapportionment revolution was evidence that federal officials had finally embraced the centrality of race in American politics.[19]

As black governance supplanted registration drives, contention over racial politics and redistricting was often most pronounced at the local level. Racial politics after 1965 was not a southern matter exclusively. As scholars expand the field of twentieth-century urban history, we know now that few cities with sizeable black populations were immune to rising anxiety over Black Power. The fear of a black takeover rose in cities that witnessed actual racial unrest in the late 1960s, and whites often accused blacks of extremism even in cities where African Americans had few connections to the Black Power movement. Black Richmonders, who elected three African Americans to city council in 1966, took an almost strictly political approach to the freedom struggle. By 1968, working-class and working-poor African Americans as well as the new generation of young activists (drawing from Richmond's sit-in movement of the early 1960s) were exhausted by the pace of racial reforms. The annexation of Chesterfield County confirmed their weariness. Not only was annexation a panic reaction to the possibility that blacks might assume control over city hall in 1970, but many white elites also came to believe that black governance was synonymous with government for blacks only. Racial redistricting and the BMC exacerbated these anxieties. White opposition to voter protections grew even more intense as districts guaranteed black representation at city hall, and black representatives struggled to negotiate the tension between rising expectations in their communities and managing municipal affairs. Richmonders soon found out something that policy makers and voting rights experts have known for some time—Washington often fixes one problem at the expense of creating another.[20]

Ultimately, this book describes how public policy shaped Richmond's development. If the first part of this story (chapters 1 and 2) focuses on municipal politics in Richmond prior to annexation within the context of the black freedom struggle, the second part (chapters 3, 4, and 5) follows the unintended consequences of majority–minority districts and ques-

tions more broadly what became of the civil rights movement. The latter chapters also trace how Jim Crow–era policies shaped life in Richmond well into the 1980s. The facts that mid-twentieth-century disinvestment characterized many of Richmond's black neighborhoods and that many of these areas still nurtured poverty even at the end of the twentieth century should surprise few experts. That so little has been written about this portion of Richmond's history—particularly given the city's key role in domestic slave trading, industrial slavery, the Confederate cause, and massive resistance—is disquieting.[21]

By the 1970s and 1980s, years of well-orchestrated disinvestment and social engineering had taken its toll on a significant number of predominantly African American cities. Richmond, like most American cities, in fact used federal and state tax money—from New Deal programs to the block grants of the 1970s—to underwrite resegregation after the 1930s. Prior to World War II, not only did private lenders use money from the Federal Housing Administration to reinforce existing patterns of residential segregation, but white elites also invested this money in their own communities at the expense of black neighborhoods. By the 1950s, Richmond's African American neighborhoods struggled to keep pace with their white counterparts. These neighborhoods were severely blighted, lacked sewage drains and indoor plumbing, and suffered from poor educational facilities. As Richmond tapped the wellspring of federal largess to clear its slums during the social engineering campaigns of the 1950s and 1960s, city officials compressed a large number of African Americans into a handful of public-housing divisions. These divisions incubated poverty, were in earshot of one another, and were in close proximity to downtown. As manufacturing jobs relocated to Richmond's outlying counties and the city transitioned toward semiprofessional, professional, and service employment, growing disparities in education and economic access were most apparent throughout black Richmond.[22] Much of the economic vulnerability that emerged during the 1980s was by design.

There was nothing exceptionally southern about mid-twentieth-century infrastructure building in Richmond. By the 1970s and 1980s, years of systemic neglect had given rise to glaring economic vulnerability, and this vulnerability characterized most American cities with sizeable black populations. Local policy makers relied on many of the same urban poli-

cies and planners that other cities employed. In fact, Richmond took the Robert Moses approach to urban redevelopment in the attempt to address automobile congestion, slum clearance, and public housing. Richmond's master plan eventually displaced tens of thousands of African Americans and compacted them—thanks to restrictive covenants—into smaller and smaller enclaves. Holt may have personified African Americans' triumph over the forces of disenfranchisement, but the public-housing resident was also emblematic of an intensifying economic crisis. In 1970, one year prior to Holt's suit, the poverty rate for Richmond's African American families stood at nearly 25 percent (roughly 15 percent higher than the national average), and only 16 percent of African Americans over twenty-five years old completed high school. Black neighborhoods in the capital city were more segregated by class and race in 1980 than they were in 1960. Although the grind of twentieth-century urban history was not inevitable, if you were poor and black in Richmond, it may have appeared so by the mid-1980s.[23]

Racial redistricting may have ensured that minorities could elect black candidates, but districts also intensified racial animosity at city hall. Shortly after 1977, black politicians in Richmond, led by Mayor Henry Marsh, sought to redirect service deliverables to communities that segregationists had purposefully neglected. They also tried to secure their positions on the city council by redrawing safer district boundaries and firing white administrators. As African American council members rejected their position as political cue takers, however, whites argued that mayors such as Marsh, Marion Barry, and Maynard Jackson were race leaders rather than city managers. Richmond's BMC found out about diplomacy the hard way—if black politicians were to implement substantive policy changes and bring material resources to struggling communities, they first had to fight their way through white skepticism. They also needed to work with colleagues from white-majority districts. These colleagues were the very white leaders who detested racial redistricting and were often unconvinced that blacks could do the job. African Americans may have taken control of city halls, but they often lacked the types of private–public relationships that, according to leading urban-regime theorists, cities need to thrive.[24]

By the 1980s, the era of possibility was in deep jeopardy. Districts were the price that African Americans initially paid to counter white

backlash against the voting rights revolution. When it came to accessing the full panoply of resources needed to govern metropolitan Richmond, this price undeniably proved to be high. By following black mobilization to its logical conclusion, electoral empowerment and governance, we see not only that white resistance to black governance continued to be a defining feature of black-led city halls but that the Reagan rollbacks exacerbated forces such as white flight and concentrated poverty. Historian Robert O. Self argues that the struggle over postwar economic growth and metropolitan expansion in predominantly black cities represented "more than a transition from an era of possibility to an era of limits." These struggles personified what was at stake for America's cities after World War II.[25]

Between 1978 and 1982, members of Richmond's city council white minority not only threatened to bring downtown revitalization to a standstill but also carried on the politics of paternalism and obstructionism by refusing to share power with members of the BMC. As the Reagan administration scaled back aid to cities in the early 1980s and middle-class residents relocated to outlying counties, a cascade of results-oriented economic pragmatism washed away black officials' civil rights–based optimism, and these elected officials had to come to terms with a stark political reality. City hall needed to deal with powerful business interests to address the sharp limitations on its own authority. Even more ominously, Virginia's rules governing city–county independence (i.e., Dillon's Rule) meant that Richmond had no official authority to work with its surrounding counties without an explicit mandate from Virginia's still largely white and increasingly Republican General Assembly. Richmond's BMC was no exception to the rule when it came to meeting the challenges of urban revitalization. Black mayors and their regimes attempted to lure investors back into their cities by emphasizing high-profile politics—they argued that shopping malls, convention centers, and hotels would resurrect the dying city center. Richmond's black politicians spent the better portion of the 1980s manufacturing their own silver-bullet strategies. Both Henry Marsh (in the form of Richmond Renaissance) and Richmond's second black mayor, Dr. Roy West (in the form of affirmative-action contracts), believed that revitalizing downtown would reinvigorate Richmond's tax base, create jobs, and alleviate poverty.[26]

As the BMC struggled to build its way to a better Richmond, the problem of class became more apparent within the black body politic. Although Richmond's intra-racial class struggle is not emblematic of the entire story of black governance, it contains essential qualities that enhance our understanding of race and American political development on the local level. If voting became a means to an end—a way to gain community control—by the early 1980s African Americans were no longer in agreement about how to solve their communities' problems. The story of late-twentieth-century urban history is replete with examples of technocratic black mayors who supplanted civil rights–era mayors. There was nothing particularly unique about the ways Richmond's black politicians met the challenges of urban retrenchment, declining tax bases, white flight, high crime, deepening poverty, and fledgling schools during the 1980s. Because cities are more limited in their ability to tax than state and federal governing bodies, public–private coalitions take special precedent in municipal politics. Mayors such as West, Tom Bradley, and Wilson Goode built private and public interracial coalitions by promoting efficient government and moderating appeals to racial favoritism. Once these middle-class black leaders, J. Phillip Thompson argues, "accepted the practical limitations on advocacy and policy change required by their new, often fragile, coalitions with business and white liberal reformers," they struggled to address the needs of vulnerable communities. Roy West may have become the cause célèbre for Richmond's growing black middle class when he secured 30 percent set-asides for minority contractors, but these contracts were evidence of a more ominous rift. West, who conspired with white council members to appoint himself mayor in 1982 and had no history of civil rights activism in Richmond, met the challenges of municipal politics in the 1980s by working exclusively from a white power base. The forces of intensifying black poverty and a growing black middle class, the sociologist Eric Brown argues, "meant that the experience of racism was not as common as it had been before" and during the civil rights era.[27]

Black women led the charge against pragmatic governance. During the 1970s, Curtis Holt and a Yale-educated lawyer named Jeroyd Greene had warned public officials that heightened residential segregation and deepening poverty were destroying Richmond. Women, who were con-

tinuous fixtures in Richmond politics, not only became the most vocal spokespersons against the black political establishment but also led the way in what Laurie Greene calls the "politics of protection." Richmond's murder rate per capita was second only to that of Detroit, Michigan, in 1985. Black women such as Willie Dell, who became the first female African American councilperson in Richmond in 1973, began to couch the struggle against economic vulnerability and residential isolation as civil rights violations. Dell and social activist Alma Marie Barlow spent the early 1980s intentionally politicizing the fight against crime and poverty and openly promoted the need for more pointed social welfare programs. As the black middle class raised its standard of living by securing affirmative-action-based set-asides, these women advocated for targeted policies that might move poor people into living-wage status. Women and their allies not only accused the Crusade of clandestinely supporting West but also contended that the middle-class leadership cared little about justice for *all* African Americans. Redistricting eventually did Dell in—Roy West defeated her in 1982 and 1984. And Dell's appeals to black unity drew fire from her district's middle-class residents, who were preoccupied with securing public deliverables. In mandating majority–minority districts, federal policy makers were victims of an ecological fallacy—they assumed that African American officials would inevitably represent their community's political interests most effectively.[28]

Disillusioned by a lack of economic progress and what appeared to be the return of control by white elites (despite the fact that blacks still held a five-to-four council majority), many black Richmonders came to believe that politics had failed to bring about the types of broad-based equality that African Americans had envisioned during the civil rights movement.