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MAKING THE CASE FOR CITIES

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Most urban experts view the recent Republican take-over of Congress as the death knell for urban policy. After all, Speaker Newt Gingrich--like most other Republican leaders in the House--represents a conservative suburban district. Indeed, the Republicans won, at least in part, by running against "urban" issues--welfare, subsidized housing, social programs, crime, and government spending in general.

But a fresh debate among urbanists--economists, sociologists, political scientists, planners, and others--is challenging the taken-for-granted "cities vs. suburbs" paradigm. According to several new books and research studies, the fate of cities and their suburbs is inextricably intertwined. They argue that, just as healthy cities and robust suburbs go hand in hand, urban decay contributes to suburban decline. In other words, the rationale for federal efforts to revitalize cities should not depend on charity, compassion, or even "riot insurance." Instead, it should be recognized that metropolitan regions (cities and suburbs) are critical players in the global economy. Almost like "simultaneous discovery," social scientists and policy-makers have begun looking at cities as potent players in national life--not as social and economic orphans that need coddling and compassion.

Compared with a generation ago, fewer people now live, work, or shop in our cities. But the researchers argue that cities still play a major role in our metropolitan areas--one that cannot be replaced by suburbs. In fact, cities perform at least three critical economic functions in metropolitan economies.

First, they provide most metropolitan area jobs--including the best-paying ones. And they are the nuclei of key industries--which, economists have determined, offer the advantages of "agglomeration." Second, these city-based firms and industries spin off jobs that are located in the suburbs. But they depend on the central city for their sustenance. Third, cities remain the hub of the metropolitan region's civic life, where the major cultural, educational, medical, sports, governmental, and other institutions are located.

THE URBAN RESEARCH AGENDA

During the 1960s, the field of urban studies expanded dramatically. Daniel Moynihan--then an academician and a government adviser--even made the cover of Time magazine for his influential writings on cities. It was a time of economic growth and political optimism. After President Johnson declared a war on poverty, the federal government and private foundations funded a generation of research on urban problems and policies. When the cities erupted in riots in the late 1960s, they sponsored studies on the underlying causes of ghetto rebellions, on the effectiveness of social programs, and on the politics of urban governance.

In the 1980s, research about cities waned. The Reagan and Bush Administrations slashed federal funds for social research, along with dramatic cuts in urban aid. In 1980, federal dollars accounted for 14.3 percent of city budgets; by 1992, it was less than 5 percent. The public's skepticism about government aid to urban areas was reinforced by news media coverage of cities. It emphasized social pathology, crime, neighborhood decay, and municipal mismanagement.

By the late 1980s, however, a few social scientists and policy analysts began to challenge the conservative view that public policy could do little to address urban poverty and inner city decay. University of Chicago sociologist William Julius Wilson helped to reignite interest in the problems of the "underclass," ghettos and barrios, and urban policy (see The Truly Disadvantaged in For Further Reading).

This work, along with studies by other social scientists, focused on the social problems of the poor and low-income neighborhoods. The Ford and MacArthur foundations and other supporters of urban research hoped that an enlightened public would recognize that a wealthy nation like the United States should not tolerate so much human misery and suffering.

A TICKING TIME BOMB

These and other urban experts warned that our cities were ticking time bombs, waiting to explode. When the worst civil disorder in American history--the Los Angeles riots--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 help solve America's economic and social problems. Many Americans heralded the Cold War's end as an unprecedented opportunity to reorder national priorities and to address long unmet domestic needs.

Moreover, the riots occurred in the midst of a national election for the presidency and congressional seats. Indeed, for a few weeks following the riots, America's urban crisis became a hot topic. It was the subject of congressional debate. It was discussed on television talk shows. And it was featured in news magazine cover stories. Sociologists and other urban experts expounded their views about underlying causes and remedies. In the midst of a heated race for the White House. President Bush and his Democratic rivals visited Los Angeles and other cities to demonstrate their concern.

THE POLITICAL REALITY

But even after the election of liberal Democrat Bill Clinton to the White House, there emerged no national commitment to the rebuilding of our cities. Political analyst William Schneider, writing in *The Atlantic* in July 1992, explained part of the reason by saying that 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.

The number of members of Congress who represent suburbs is now larger than the number who represent urban districts. And the gap is widening. 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 plays a part in the declining political clout of cities. Political demographics and congressional redistricting alone don't explain the reluctance of our 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 which helped enfranchise several generations of immigrants. During the Depression, candidate FDR was 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 JFK 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 fundraising. Their financial backing increasingly influenced the priorities and votes of our elected officials in Washington. While big business has no single policy agenda, powerful sectors within the business community influence tax, spending, and regulatory policies that undermine the health of cities. Thus, marshaling a congressional majority for an urban agenda has become increasingly difficult.

Similarly, candidates for the presidency (even within the Democratic Party) can no longer rely primarily on the urban vote to carry an election in a two-party race. They not only have to hold onto the urban vote, they must also capture key components of the "swing" vote in the suburbs, to win a majority of both the popular and the electoral-college vote and earn the key to the White House door. Indeed, the key to Bill Clinton's victory was his success in capturing the suburban vote. He was particularly successful in gaining the support of the inner-ring suburbs, where many of the "forgotten middle class" ' 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. They viewed his victory as a mandate for a more activist government. But Clinton was elected without a majority mandate. He received only 43 percent of the total vote. Even more important, his own party was deeply divided, even though it captured a majority of the seats in Congress. Many of its members were closely linked to big-business interests who oppose progressive taxation, Keynesian pump-priming, and social spending. They quickly rejected his economic stimulus plan, which was based on a major federal investment in urban infrastructure.

During the past four decades, cities have become increasingly isolated in the national political scene. As political scientists Todd Swanstrom and Richard Sauerzopf of SUNY at Albany found (in a paper presented at the 1993 Urban Affairs Association meeting) the late 1940s represented the peak of urban electoral dominance. In the 1948 Presidential election, New York City had 50 percent of the total votes cast in New York state. Chicago had 46.5 percent of Illinois' turnout. Baltimore had 42.3 percent of

Maryland's vote, and Detroit had 31.8 percent of Michigan's. Los Angeles and San Francisco combined for 51.3 percent of the California vote, while Philadelphia and Pittsburgh had 30.7 percent of Pennsylvania's electorate. Adding other cities to the electoral mix strengthened the urban vote even more.

But by 1992, New York City represented only 30.9 percent of the votes cast for the presidency. The share of statewide voters in Chicago (22.3 percent), Baltimore (13 percent), Detroit (7.9 percent), Los Angeles and San Francisco (12.9 percent), and Philadelphia and Pittsburgh (16.1 percent) also showed dramatic declines.

Along with the cities' declining political clout, some journalists and academics have focused on the declining economic fortunes of America's cities. New York University economist Thomas Stanback described the accelerating shift of jobs to suburbs and the "wrenching transformation" of cities, as they lose their employment, population, and tax base (see *The New Suburbanization: Challenge to the Central City* in *For Further Reading*). Washington Post reporter Joel Garreau echoed Stanback's ideas in a popular book (see *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier* in *For Further Reading*). He argued that suburban office/retail/residential complexes--like Tyson's Corner, Virginia--are the wave of the future. Stanback and Garreau each argued that cities and central business districts increasingly were becoming passe in a service-oriented economy. People and commerce were becoming linked by computers and FAX machines. The "agglomeration" advantages of dense cities as economic engines were no longer as compelling.

Some even argued that cities are no longer necessary. In September 1991, a Newsweek story asked: "Are Cities Obsolete?" It quoted Washington University law professor Daniel Mandelker, who pronounced the conventional wisdom: "We don't need [cities] anymore." In late 1991, the New York Times conducted a survey to analyze the changing role of New York City in the metropolitan area. Two headlines reflect its findings: "Region Around New York Sees Ties to City Faltering"; and "For Many in the New York Region, The City is Ignored and Irrelevant."

Given these political realities, any success at forging a federal urban policy will necessitate appealing to some segment of the suburban electorate and their representatives in Congress--especially in light of the new political climate in Washington. A New York Times/CBS nationwide poll that was conducted the week after the Los Angeles riots found that 60 percent of Americans thought the nation was spending "too little" on cities--up from 46 percent in 1988. But this sentiment will not prevail, unless many suburbanites believe that they too have a stake in revitalizing our cities, and are willing to invest in more than short-term "riot insurance."

FIGHTING BACK

The dramatic decline in federal aid to cities during the Reagan/Bush years forced mayors and their urban allies to rethink their approach to putting the cities back on the nation's agenda. "We're tired of coming to Washington with a tin cup in our hands," said Boston Mayor Ray Flynn, when he assumed the presidency of the U.S. Conference of Mayors (USCM) in 1991. But they recognized that moral appeals to social justice and human suffering are difficult to sustain--particularly during periods of economic distress among the middle class.

In the past few years, academic urban specialists, working closely with urban policymakers, have begun to challenge the view that cities are economic dinosaurs--irrelevant to the lives of people who live and even work in the suburbs. Political reality and academic research have been conjoined in an attempt to examine whether (and which) arguments can be made to help convince suburbanites that they have a stake in the revitalization of the cities. It began in the fall of 1990, when New York Mayor David Dinkins, recognizing the growing political impotence of cities and the federal government's indifference to urban problems, invited the mayors of the nation's major cities to an urban summit to discuss their common concerns. At this meeting, a number of the mayors agreed to enlist the help of academicians in their cities to develop an action plan for urban America--a policy agenda.

But rather than simply to emphasize their cities' pathologies and distress, they decided to focus as well on the important contributions urban America makes to the nation and its metropolitan areas. By affecting this optimistic view, they didn't mean to ignore the cities' plight. Nor did they simply portray the cities as the cradles of civilization and culture. Rather, they wanted a hard-headed analysis of the cities' role in our nation's economic life and their "value-added" contribution to making America competitive in the fast-changing global economy. Their goal was to change the way Americans view cities.

At the urban summit, the mayors and academicians established the Urban University Research Network--an unusual partnership between public universities and city halls. The Network asked researchers to write reports on a variety of topics, including the changing demographics of urban regions, the way the media cover government, and the flight of industry from American cities. A year later, in November 1991, the Twentieth Century Fund published these reports.

INTERDEPENDENCE OF CITY AND SUBURB

Probably the most significant study--by H.V. Savitch and his colleagues at the University of Louisville's College of Urban Affairs--

looked at income, job, and population characteristics for cities and suburbs in twenty-two metropolitan areas. They discovered that regions with narrow income disparities between cities and suburbs are the most prosperous, while regions with the widest gaps in city-suburb income have the weakest economic and population growth. This study, revised and then published in *Economic Development Quarterly* in 1993, concluded that "[t]he blight of the inner city casts a long shadow. Companies will not grow or thrive in, or move to, a declining environment."

About the same time that Mayor Dinkins convened the urban summit, two other groups--the USCM and the National League of Cities (NLC)--were thinking along parallel lines. The NLC sponsored a series of studies by Larry Ledebur--an Ohio University economist--and William Barnes--NLC research director. They examined the economic ties between the cities and the suburbs, on the one hand, and between the cities and the national economy, on the other. Their first report (published in 1992) looked at population and economic trends in seventy-eight metropolitan areas. Like Savitch, they found that those regions that had the widest gap between central-city income and suburban income had the most sluggish job growth. When central-city income was closer to the income of its surrounding suburbs, job growth was significantly better. Ledebur and Barnes also found that, in the twenty-five regions where the suburbs experienced the most income growth, their central cities experienced income growth too. When the incomes of central-city residents increased, the incomes of people living in that city's suburbs increased by an even higher percentage. In fact, for every dollar increase in central-city household incomes, suburban household incomes increased by \$1.12. Conversely, where central-city incomes declined, so did suburban incomes. Their most recent report (released last August) reconceptualized the nation's economy as a "common market of local economic regions." It emphasized the key connections between the cities and the suburbs. In that report, the authors argue that each metropolitan area is really one economy and one labor market--one that competes with other regions in the global economy.

The USCM (in collaboration with the Economic Policy Institute) asked economist Joseph Persky and sociologist Wim Wievel--both at the University of Illinois in Chicago--and Eliot Sklar--a Columbia University economist and urban planner--to examine the impact of cities on economic growth. Their report (published in 1991) refuted the notion that a majority of Americans can live in suburban and rural prosperity, while the centers of our metropolitan areas decay (see *Does America Need Cities?: An Urban Investment Strategy for National Prosperity in For Further Reading*). The United States no longer dominates the global economy and currently is engaged in fierce global competition. The report found that the nation as a whole cannot afford the burden of large numbers of unemployed and underemployed people in the inner cities. Furthermore, urban decay will spread from inner cities to inner ring suburbs and to outlying areas. Moreover, the study found, investment in cities yields the greatest return for improving the nation's economy. The authors argued that a federal plan to help rebuild the nation's crumbling urban infrastructure would be the most efficient way to jump-start a national economic recovery. (During his campaign, Clinton proposed a \$30 billion economic stimulus plan based on the USCM's report.)

In September 1992, economist Richard Voith (of the Federal Reserve Bank of Philadelphia) published an article that looked at employment and population trends in major metropolitan areas (see "City and Suburban Growth: Substitutes or Complements?" in *For Further Reading*). He found that the economic bond between cities and their suburbs might not appear overnight. Some cities might be undergoing severe decay, while their suburbs experience some growth. Suburbanites might not recognize the connection, because, relative to the central-city residents, they and their communities are still better off. What they fail to recognize is that "suburbs in metropolitan areas with declining cities are likely to be performing poorly, when compared with other metropolitan areas with healthy cities." For example, even though suburban house values may be higher than house values in the city, suburban house values are still adversely affected by city decline. Eventually, the cities' troubles drag down the suburbs. As Voith reported, "central-city decline is likely to be a long-run, slow drain on the economic and social vitality of the region."

In making an argument for the continued importance of cities, some social scientists focus on America's "global cities" which function as corporate and administrative headquarters in the global economy. The vitality of these cities--New York, Los Angeles, Chicago, San Francisco, Boston, Seattle, Atlanta--is typically identified with the economic activities of their central business districts. But within blocks of their downtown areas, we find poverty and declining neighborhoods. As MIT's Bernard Frieden and Lynne Sagalyn demonstrate, there is little evidence that the prosperity of the central business district "trickles down" to poor and working-class neighborhoods, unless it is steered in that direction by policy (see *Downtown, Inc.: How America Rebuilds Cities in For Further Reading*). At the other end of the spectrum are those cities--Detroit, Camden, Gary, Youngstown, Bridgeport, and others like them--where both the central business districts and the neighborhoods are declining. Bridgeport represents the most extreme case. It is one of the nation's poorest cities within one of the nation's wealthiest counties.

The reputation and viability of the entire metropolitan area is shaped by impressions of the central city. Allowing the central city to decay affects the entire metropolitan area. Businesses are reluctant to move to, invest in, or remain in a metropolitan area where the central city has a high crime rate, an inferior school system, inadequate services, and the potential for civil disorder. Troubled cities induce "ripple effects" that damage the entire region. But the business climate of metropolitan regions depends, in large part, on the labor supply, housing stock, and other factors in these neighborhoods. Few researchers, so far, have linked the health of urban communities to the social and economic fabric of residential neighborhoods and their local business districts. One exception is a recent report by the Committee for Economic Development--a business-sponsored think tank. The report specifically links the fate of the nation's prosperity to the health of its inner-city neighborhoods. It also notes the success of many neighborhood revitalization efforts that have been undertaken by partnerships of community organizations, local governments, and major employers (see *Rebuilding Inner-City Communities: A New Approach to the Nation's Urban Crisis in For Further*

Reading).

Unfortunately, the news media pay little attention to the many urban success stories. Examples are the work of the growing sector of nonprofit community development corporations in rebuilding inner-city neighborhoods or the efforts of low-income community groups like ACORN, which protests "redlining" by banks and promotes community reinvestment. Most urban advocates have almost given up trying to persuade the media and others that there's more to our inner cities than crime and hopelessness. But the persistent drumbeat of negative news coverage leads many Americans to believe that the nation has tried to save its cities, but that the cities have resisted being saved.

THE CHANGING SUBURBS

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 businesses. These included highway-construction 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 homeowners (but not for renters), and bulldozer urban renewal policies that destroyed working-class neighborhoods to make way for downtown business development (thereby scattering their residents to blue-collar suburbs).

Federal aid to cities--whether to revitalize downtown sections, 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 amounted to a drop in the bucket, compared with those that fostered 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. As a result, we are now a suburban country.

But 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. Suburbs today no longer reflect the homogeneous affluent bedroom community that was depicted in the TV shows of the 1950s and 1960s--such as "Ozzie and Harriet" and "Leave it to Beaver." Today, the suburbs are much more diverse in terms of their income, employment, and racial composition--as well as the mix of residential, commercial, industrial, and other land uses. Moreover, as economist Anthony Downs reports, while most suburbanites now commute to work in other suburbs (not to central cities), they still "use" the city in many ways--for work, culture, entertainment, sporting events, health care, universities, and other functions (see *New Visions for Metropolitan America*). And as Alex Schwartz of the New School for Social Research found, many suburban jobs--especially professional and financial services employment--are functionally tied to the central city's economy (see "Subservient Suburbia: Suburban Dependence on the Central City for Financial and Professional Services" in *For Further Reading*).

Many localities that the Census and the media call "suburbs"--such as Somerville, Massachusetts; Pomona, California; Parma, Ohio; and Harvey, Illinois--are actually small or medium-sized cities. They experience 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 percent of central cities' population and 8.7 percent of the suburban population lived below the poverty line. Overall, 42.4 percent of America's poverty population lived in the central cities, 30.5 percent lived in the suburbs, and 27 percent lived in nonmetropolitan areas. Studies by demographer William Frey of the University of Michigan found that an increasing number of African Americans, Latinos, and Asians live in suburbia, but that African Americans tend to live in racially segregated areas.

THE TIDE MAY BE TURNING

Some of these studies may appear to be somewhat self-serving, as urban lobby groups attempt to improve their public standing by claiming a "common ground" between beleaguered cities and more affluent suburbs. After years of frustration in trying to get the federal government to pay attention to cities, the mayors may have simply adopted an "if-you-can't-beat'em, join-em" strategy. But their crusade to link the fate of suburban America to the rebuilding of its cities (especially its troubled areas) appears to be paying off. A growing number of opinion leaders seem to be getting the message. Although it has not yet had a significant impact on public policy, this research has played an important role, not only in shifting the public debate, but also in re-energizing the academic analysis of cities, and in reshaping the research agenda.

In April 1993, the American Assembly, Arden House, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD), brought several dozen social scientists, government officials, and foundation and business executives together for a four-day discussion of the role of cities in our national life. HUD Secretary Henry Cisneros collected the major reports discussed at that gathering in a book (see *Interwoven Destinies: Cities and the Nation* in *For Further Reading*). In the volume's introduction, Cisneros (former mayor of San Antonio) wrote: "The strength of the nation's economy, the contact points for international economics, the health of our democracy, and the vitality of our humanistic endeavors all are dependent on whether America's cities work."

In May 1994, the American Sociological Association sponsored a three-day conference of twenty urban specialists and policy practitioners on the theme "Rethinking the Urban Agenda." It focused on the changing demographics, politics, and economic of urban regions. Theodore Hershberg--a University of Pennsylvania urban historian and director of its Center for Greater Philadelphia--described his efforts to bring city and suburban business, community, and political leaders together to forge a common legislative agenda in both Harrisburg and Washington. Political scientist Margaret Weir of the Brookings Institution summarized her research on the changing lobbying strategies of cities in state legislatures. Sociologist John Logan of SUNY at Albany explained that the federal policies with the most damaging impact on cities are not "urban" programs. Rather, they are the siting of Pentagon facilities and contracts, the mortgage interest deduction for homeowners, highways that bypass urban neighborhoods, and the costs of Medicare to strained municipal budgets. John Mollenkopf of the CUNY Graduate Center described the evolution of federal urban policy and discussed the impact of congressional reapportionment and redistricting on urban/suburban and Democratic/ Republican realignments.

In the past two years, HUD (along with the Social Science Research Council) held several roundtable meetings on regional issues at which the attending social scientists and policymakers debated the political and economic relations among cities and suburbs, efforts at regional cooperation, and ways that federal policy can improve regions by encouraging more collaborative planning. At the December 1994 meeting, former Albuquerque Mayor David Rusk described his theory of successful "elastic" cities that incorporate outlying suburban areas along with their middle-class population and tax base. Recognizing that few cities and suburbs will agree to formal "metropolitan government" arrangements, Rusk described the efforts of business and civic leaders to forge cooperative projects among cities and suburbs in a growing number of regions. Myron Orfield (a Minnesota state legislator) described his successful strategy as one of convincing older blue-collar suburbs to join forces with Minneapolis and St. Paul around tax, housing, transportation, and infrastructure policies. Building on the theories of urbanist Jane Jacobs, economists Bennett Harrison of Harvard, Maryellen Kelley of MIT, and Jon Gant of Carnegie-Mellon explained why the most innovative firms (including global corporations) tend to "cluster" in urban areas to reap the benefits of shared infrastructure, technology, and research.

Journalist Neal Peirce has drawn on many of these new studies in his syndicated column and in his recent book (see *Citistates: How Urban America Can Prosper in a Competitive World* in For Further Reading). He notes that global businesses look at entire regions when they are deciding whether and where to expand, move, or invest. A successful region is one that can "market" its strengths to firms, in terms of the skills of the labor force, the capacity of its airport, roads, and other infrastructure, the quality of its cultural and recreational amenities, the quality and cost of its housing stock, and in terms of such issues as public safety and the environment. In a recent interview with the *New York Times*, Richard C. Levin (Yale's new president) echoed these ideas: "It is very important to recognize that metropolitan areas, in the long run, can only be as strong as their sources of employment--their economic hubs--are. If New Haven declines, eventually there will be a ripple effect into the surrounding suburbs." "There are no moats around Hartford," Dennis Mullane (president of Connecticut Mutual Life) recently told the *Hartford Courant*. "The urban problems of today are the suburban problems of tomorrow. As the city's economy goes down, so will the suburbs'."

Not all urban experts agree with this "common-ground" approach. In one study commissioned by HUD, Keith Ihlandfeldt of Georgia State University College of Business Administration questioned research that views cities as the "engines" of national economic prosperity. At both the ASA and HUD meetings, economist Edward Hill of Cleveland State University (together with political scientists Harold Wolman and Coit Ford of Wayne State University) challenged the notion that suburban affluence depends on the strength of the central city. Some experts point to places like Bridgeport--one of the nation's poorest cities (so distressed it declared bankruptcy several years ago) within one of the nation's wealthiest (Fairfield) counties--as counterevidence to the "all-in-it-together" claim. These disputes are healthy, because academicians and policymakers are engaged in a lively debate over the future of our cities for the first time in a generation. No other major industrial nation has allowed the level of sheer destitution and decay that can be found in America's cities. We see the consequences of this inattention every day: growing poverty; homelessness; violent crime; infant mortality; widening racial and economic segregation; crumbling infrastructure; and deepening fiscal traumas.

WILL THE WALLS COME DOWN?

The research that represents the "new regionalism" argues that suburbanites (as well as city dwellers) have a stake in rebuilding our troubled inner cities. The social scientists who are engaged in this dialogue don't all agree on which specific programs are needed to rebuild our metropolitan areas or on the political strategies needed to develop a congressional majority for urban policy. But they all agree that Washington must play a stronger role in improving the economic and social fabric of our troubled cities and suburbs.

Since World War II, cities have only had a major voice in national politics, either when business leaders wanted to improve the commercial climate of downtown areas or when the disenfranchised 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 reason that cities have 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. They are fundamentally political. Any effort to put American cities back on the national agenda must therefore address two interrelated questions.

First, we must level the political playing field, in order to develop an electoral majority to help America's cities. This includes expanding the urban electorate. Cities generally have much lower voter participation than do suburban counterparts. In the 1994 mid-term election., for example, low voter registration and turnout in cities played a key role in the Republican sweep in Congress. Republicans won twenty-five seats by margins of less than 10,000 votes.

Reforms must also include a reevaluation of the liberal approach to congressional redistricting. The main thrust of these efforts has been to reshape congressional districts in ways that give African-American, Asian, and Latino voters a stronger voice. They increase the odds of electing persons of color to legislative bodies. In doing so, however, African-American and Latino legislators and their caucuses have become increasingly isolated. By carving out assured minority districts, this approach also carves out a large number of sure-fire all-suburban districts that are more likely to elect conservatives in general and Republicans in particular who have no urban constituencies and little concern for urban problems. Some observers believe this approach undermines potential coalition-building between urban and working-class suburban constituencies in Congress.

Other reforms, such as campaign finance reform, would help eliminate a major obstacle to urban-oriented federal policies--the legalized system of bribery that ties many members of Congress to narrow corporate interests that oppose progressive taxation, Keynesian pump-priming, and social programs.

Another key challenge is how to forge a national electoral and governing coalition that incorporates city dwellers and some segment of the suburban population. Current urban policies provide little incentive for suburbanites (including blue-collar suburbanites) to have a stake in the condition of the cities. In contrast, policies such as Clinton's expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit, his unsuccessful universal health insurance proposal, and his original investment plan, which would have helped rebuild the nation's infrastructure (primarily in cities and inner-ring suburbs, with substantial multiplier effects for regional economies) help in the construction of political bridges between cities and suburbs. So too would a policy to increase the nation's minimum wage. Cities and inner-ring suburbs have increasingly become the repository of low-wage service-sector employment--the vast majority of which is not unionized. A key goal of federal policy to help cities should be to increase the incomes of the growing sector of the "working poor" who are concentrated in central cities and inner suburbs. Labor law reform would also help level the playing field between America's working people and business. It would expand the political influence, and improve the standard of living, of working-class and poor people who crowd into cities and nearby suburbs.

The problems that face America's metropolitan areas beget many scapegoats. Some urban dwellers and city leaders blame suburbanites for "abandoning" the city and leaving it to deal with its myriad problems without adequate resources. Some suburban residents and their leaders claim that the rising rates of crime, economic stagnation, and fiscal trauma that suburbs are now experiencing are caused by the cities. They feel that the cities' problems "spill over" into both the nearby suburbs and the outer suburbs. This kind of finger-pointing makes for interesting politics, good theater, and sensational news headlines, but it doesn't help either the cities or the suburbs to address their critical problems. The more serious and responsible city and suburban leaders--from the business, government, labor, community and religious sectors--recognize that cities and suburbs are in the same boat. If one end of the boat springs a leak and starts filling up with water, pretty soon the other end will too. Sooner or later, the whole vessel and its passengers will drown.

Around the world--in South Africa, in Germany, and in the Middle East--walls that have long separated people are coming down. The invisible walls which separate cities and suburbs in the United States also need to come down. America's future depends on how well, and how soon, it tears down these walls and replaces them with bridges of cooperation.

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