

*Seat of Democracy or Home of Hypocrisy?
The Role of Race and Racism in the
Struggle for Voting Rights in the District of Columbia*

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Senior Essay
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Suggested Library of Congress subject headings relevant to this work:

- Washington (D.C.) -- Politics and government.
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- African Americans Suffrage Washington (D.C.)
- Representative government and representation--Washington (D.C.)
- New Columbia

In July of 2005, Congressman Henry Bonilla introduced a bill in the United States House of Representatives proposing to rename 16th Street in Washington, DC. Representative Bonilla, a staunch Republican who hails from Texas, desired to rename the major city street “Ronald Reagan Boulevard.” In a written statement on the issue, Bonilla argued that “regardless of your political affiliation, most people agree that Ronald Reagan was an American icon. He was a president of national significance and for that reason he deserves an honor in the nation's capital.”¹ To a city that voted ninety percent Democrat in the 2004 presidential election, the idea of naming a major thoroughfare after a Republican president seems unreasonable.² But even more so, to a city whose population is sixty percent African American, the idea of naming a street that runs through many predominantly black neighborhoods after a president whose policies were notoriously harmful to urban African Americans and reflected of white nationalist sentiment, is offensive.³

The fact that Congressman Bonilla decided he had the right to impose his will on the residents of the District speaks to a deep sore spot among many Washington residents. Bonilla’s proposal comes in the wake of numerous recent efforts by Congress to force its views onto the city. As *Washington Times* columnist Adrienne Washington writes, “From tacking on appropriation riders to approving school vouchers, repealing the handgun ban and keeping the District's elected officials from spending city dollars on local measures to fight the HIV/AIDS epidemic, 535 representatives in the nation's legislature have a vote on what happens to DC taxpayers and residents -- Congressional meddling in DC is nothing new.”⁴ Deemed by many as the “last colony,”⁵ Washington, D.C., has struggled for centuries to attain full democratic rights in terms of both local political autonomy and national voting representation in Congress.

Despite the fact that Washingtonians pay federal taxes and fight in national wars, and that the city’s population of more than 500,000 is larger than that of the state of Wyoming, District residents are without voting representation in Congress. And though residents have been granted a limited form of self-government and local control since the 1970s, the city is still without full political, judicial, or financial autonomy as a result of

¹ Spencer S. Hsu, “A Roadblock for Reagan Proposal to Rename 16th St. Runs Into Objections,” *Washington Post*, 5 August 2005, sec. B, p. 1.

² CNN, “Election Results,” CNN.com, 2004, <http://www.cnn.com/ELECTION/2004/pages/results/states/DC/P/00/>.

³ U.S. Census Bureau, “State and County Quick Facts,” United States Census 2000, <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/11000.html>.

⁴ Adrienne Washington, “Street Renaming Plan Ignores DC Residents,” *Washington Times*, 9 August 2005, <http://www.dcvote.org/media/media.cfm?mediaID=1114&year=2005>.

⁵ The District of Columbia is often referred to as such because residents pay taxes to the United States government without being granted representation in the United States Congress. The political status of Washington, D.C. is quite similar to that of American Samoa, with the exception that American Samoans pay no income tax to the United States, while District residents pay federal income taxes. Edward M. Meyers, *Public Opinion and the Future of the Nation’s Capital* (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1996), 6.

Others deem it the last colony because it is “ultimately controlled by white lawmakers in Congress and the local white business elite.” Harry Jaffe and Tom Sherwood, *Dream City: Race, Power and the Decline of Washington, D.C.* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), 15.

congressional stipulations. Congress retains the right to pass laws for the District and to veto laws passed by locally elected officials. Ultimately it is the federal government, not the city's residents, that has the last word when it comes to governing Washington, D.C.

The struggle for democracy in the nation's capital has been long and rocky, dating back to the founding of the United States. Congress was granted the right to govern the nation's federal district from the moment the Constitution was written. Clause 17 of Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution, grants Congress the right "to exercise exclusive Legislation in all Cases whatsoever" over the federal district.⁶ However, from 1802 until 1874, District residents were governed by either home rule, where they elected their own governing officials, or by some form of combined congressional and home rule.⁷ In 1874, Congress abolished the combined elected and unelected government and the city lost complete control over its own affairs. This absolute federal control lasted for the next century.

During these hundred years, the District was governed primarily by presidential appointees and congressional committees led by some of the most racist members of congress. These leaders, such as Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi and Representative John McMillan of South Carolina, used their power over the city to create a federal center defined by grand buildings and monuments while at the same time denying funds to initiatives focused on African American residents and neglecting to dealing with social welfare issues.⁸

With the advent of the civil rights movement, though, democracy became more than a distant dream for the District. From 1960 until 1974, Washington experienced a number of victories in the fight for full democracy. In 1961, Congress ratified the 23rd Amendment thereby granting District residents the right to vote for president, though the amendment stipulated that the city be limited to the number of electoral votes of that of the smallest state. Six years later, President Johnson reorganized the city government in an effort to move the city towards home rule, and by 1968 Washingtonians could elect their own school board members. Victories were won in the fight for congressional representation as well, for in 1970, Congress granted the District the right to have one non-voting delegate in the House of Representatives. In perhaps the most meaningful victory of the period, District residents finally gained an elected government again in 1973 for the first time since Reconstruction. This home rule allowed for an elected mayor and city council, but still did not offer full autonomy. Congress put in a number of tax restrictions that would inhibit the city's ability to function in years to come and still retained the right to override any legislation passed by the city council.

The fight for democracy in the District continued through the next few decades but with much less success. In 1978, an amendment was proposed that would have granted Washington voting representation in Congress. However, in 1985, the amendment failed, having only been ratified by 16 states. Washington residents turned to statehood as a means by which to achieve democracy, but this initiative failed as well when statehood

⁶ U.S. Constitution, art. 1, sec. 8.

⁷ Mark David Richards, "Struggle for Democracy: A Local Sociopolitical History of Washington, District of Columbia," DC Vote.org, 1998, <http://www.dcvote.org/trellis/denial/historyofdcvotingrights-MDR.cfm>.

⁸ Howard Gillette, Jr. *Between Justice and Beauty: Race, Planning and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington, D.C.* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995).

was voted down overwhelmingly in Congress in 1993. For a brief moment in 1993, the District representative was granted the right to vote in the House, but this right was revoked as soon as the new Congress convened in 1994. Home rule did not fair so well, either. In 1997, due to the city's financial crisis, Congress passed an act that withdrew authority from all locally-elected representatives and transferred power to a Congressionally appointed Control Board. Finally, in 2001, after submitting four consecutive balanced budgets, the city elected officials were once again granted authority over District affairs, but the city still remains today without political, judicial, or financial autonomy and without national representation.

The purpose of this essay is to examine this history through the lens of racism. The idea that race has played a large role in District politics has been expressed in numerous works.⁹ Many have pointed out that racism has contributed significantly to Washington's current social, economic, and political state, including Harry Jaffe and Tom Sherwood in *Dream City: Race, Power and the Decline of Washington, DC* and Howard Gillette, Jr. in *Between Beauty and Justice: Race, Planning, and the Failure of Urban Policy in Washington*. Jaffe and Sherwood argue that "racism and racial insecurities made Washington what it is today,"¹⁰ citing the city's high crime rate, beleaguered public schools, and high infant mortality rate as outcomes of racial injustice. They argue that the city had the chance to become a national example of successful integration and black political power, but instead became mired in violence and poverty because of racial inequities and conflict. Howard Gillette, Jr. in *Between Justice and Beauty*, finds the historically white Congress largely responsible for the District's present day problems, tracing the urban federal policies in the city to show how Congress focused its efforts on creating a beautified federal center while neglecting the needs of the city's poor, predominantly black residents.

But while these studies do explore the racialized politics of Washington, neither focuses specifically on how racism has affected the struggle for political autonomy and national representation for District residents. While Jaffe and Sherwood inevitably include aspects of congressional representation and the struggle for home rule, they focus primarily on local politics, particularly the rise and decline of Mayor Marion Barry. Gillette, on the other hand, provides a detailed account of federal policies in the District, but concentrates on redevelopment initiatives and social policy rather than on federal policies regarding the city's political autonomy and congressional representation.

Most of those who have looked specifically at the issues of political autonomy and national representation acknowledge that racism has been an impediment in the fight for full democracy for District residents. Mark Richard's study, "Struggle for Democracy: A Local Sociopolitical History of Washington, District of Columbia," finds that the "District's precarious situation has always been tangled up in national socio-political fault lines, such as regional, class, race, gender, and ideological disputes," and argues that these social factors have "often carried more weight than the nation's agreed-upon principles

⁹ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*. Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*. Charles W. Harris, *Perspectives of Political Power in the District of Columbia* (Washington D.C.: National Institute of Public Management, 1981). Martha Derthick, *City Politics in Washington, D.C.* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1962).

¹⁰ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 14.

and core values.”¹¹ Michael Fauntroy, in his study of the decline in home rule from 1975 until 1998, also acknowledges the racial forces keeping the city from full democracy. However, neither of these studies concentrates specifically on racism. For both, it is but one of many factors in the way of the achievement of full political autonomy and Congressional representation. To Fauntroy, race has been merely a “secondary contextual factor” in causing the decline in Washington’s home rule.¹²

Many political scientists argue though, that race is a major driving force behind politics. Among others, Thomas and Mary Edsall and Ronald Walters have analyzed recent politics in light of race. Walters, in *White Nationalism, Black Interests*, explains how racism “continues to play a central role in the setting of public policy and governmental priorities” through his detailed description of what he deems the new White Nationalism.¹³ As Walters argues, policies that are often viewed by many (mostly white Americans) as reflecting national interest in fact are racially driven by white interests. Because explicit expressions of racism have become less accepted in society, it is more difficult to detect political racism today. A new language of coded words with racial connotations such as “welfare” or “special interests” has emerged throughout the late twentieth century.¹⁴ Walters argues that in order to discover racial interests, “Policy actions and outcomes must be examined in order to understand which group’s interest are advantaged or disadvantaged.”¹⁵ While many today might refrain from expressing racial opinions openly, Walters’ examination of white interests, policy preferences, and coded vocabulary details the fact that race still plays an active role in shaping American politics.

Walters and Edsall note a conservative political shift in recent decades associated with white backlash to the expansion of African American rights. Today’s conservative shift parallels the white backlash that occurred after Reconstruction, “when Whites fostered a political revolution that overthrew a liberal regime which they perceived as a threat to their national unity.”¹⁶ Thomas and Mary Edsall examine how racism led to the political realignment of Southern and Northern whites from the 1960s onward in which whites Democrats fled to the Republican Party due to resentment of the civil rights movement.¹⁷ In recent decades, the political climate has become increasingly conservative as whites have converged behind shared race-based interests. While the explicit racial motives of this convergence and the ensuing political policies often go unacknowledged, racism continues to dictate many American political policies.

Building upon the analysis of Jaffe, Sherwood, Richards and Fauntroy, this essay seeks to explore the role that racism has played in preventing the District of Columbia

¹¹ Richards, “Struggle for Democracy,” 2.

¹² Michael K. Fauntroy, *Home Rule or House Rule? Congress and the Erosion of Local Governance in the District of Columbia* (New York: University Press of America, Inc., 2003.), preface, 18.

¹³ Manning Marble, quoted on back cover of Ronald W. Walters, *White Nationalism, Black Interests: Conservative Public Policy and the Black Community*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2003).

¹⁴ Walters, *White Nationalism, Black Interests*, 9, 154. Thomas Byrne Edsall with Mary D. Edsall, *Chain Reaction: The Impact of Race, Rights, and Taxes on American Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1991) 6, 211.

¹⁵ Walters, *White Nationalism, Black Interests*, 2.

¹⁶ Walters, *White Nationalism, Black Interests*, 4.

¹⁷ Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 4.

from achieving full democracy. Using the political understandings of Ronald Walters and Mary and Thomas Edsall as a framework, I will examine the struggle to attain both local political autonomy and congressional representation for the nation's capital from Reconstruction through the end of the twentieth century. Section I examines political attitudes towards the District's local black population prior to the Civil War and the city's political status from Reconstruction until the mid-twentieth century, during a time defined by overtly racist Congressional and local sentiment. Section II focuses upon the civil rights period as a time of increasing democracy in the District in the face of white Congressional opposition. Section III explores the final two decades of the twentieth century during which Congress curtailed the democratic gains of the previous period.

Since the end of Reconstruction, race has played a dominant role in the struggle to attain voting rights for the District, and racism has been a driving force in preventing District residents from attaining democracy. In the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the racist beliefs and policies pertaining to District voting rights were quite overt. As racism became less acceptable throughout the course of the twentieth century, these sentiments grew increasingly disguised and harder to detect. However, while the tones may have changed over time, the presence of racism, whether explicit or not, is ever-present in the political struggle for democracy in the District.

PART I

Civil War through 1950: Struggles in the Face of Overt Racial Opposition

Throughout its history, race has played an important role in the politics of the District of Columbia. Prior to the Civil War, animosity towards African Americans ran high and political efforts were made to restrict the freedoms of both free and enslaved black residents. With the arrival of the civil war and the ensuing Reconstruction, blacks experienced a period of growing political power, much to the malign of the city's white population. This racial animosity held by both Congress members and white District residents largely enabled the federal government to enforce total federal rule over the District. For the next century, the city was to be ruled by a Congress under which the city's wealthier white population fared relatively well while blacks suffered under racist federal policies.

In 1800, the District of Columbia was picked to be the official home of the United States government. From the start, Washington had a substantial black population. At the turn of the nineteenth century, 10,066 whites, 3,244 free blacks and 783 black slaves lived in Washington. All total, both free and enslaved blacks accounted for roughly 30% of the city's population.¹⁸ Governmental policies towards African Americans labeled both free and enslaved significantly curtailed their power and mobility. In 1808, Congress passed the first of many black codes for the city's free black population, limiting their freedoms and exercising white dominance.¹⁹ As time went on, free blacks began to make up more of the city's African American population. By 1830, they accounted for up to

¹⁸ James Oliver Horton, "The Genesis of Washington's African American Community." In *Urban Odyssey*, ed. Francine Curro Cary (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 22.

¹⁹ James Oliver Horton, "The Genesis of Washington's African American Community," 22.

fifty percent of the total black population, although blacks only represented thirty percent of the total population.²⁰ By 1840, free blacks accounted for 20% of the city's total population making Washington the city with the highest proportion of free blacks relative to total population in the nation.²¹

As the free black population rose throughout the first forty years of the nineteenth century, white efforts to restrict the freedoms of this population increased. The city government developed and strengthened Black Codes in the years before the Civil War. In 1812, District law mandated that free blacks register with the government and carry freedom papers indicating their free status with them at all times.²² By the 1820s, blacks were required by law to "post a bond guaranteeing their solvency and good conduct and to secure white guarantors who would attest to their character."²³ By the 1830s, extensive codes were in place restricting blacks from numerous acts including carrying firearms, bathing in the river, attending disorderly meetings, and swearing in public. According to historian James Horton, "Such restrictive codes reflected common anxieties among whites, many of whom feared a flood of African American migrants from the slave states."²⁴

The animosity of Washington's whites towards the city's black population was reflected by both federal policies and popular sentiment at the time. In 1836, Congress passed a resolution stating that it would not interfere with slavery in the District and stipulated that all talk of emancipation for District slaves be tabled immediately. For if slavery were to be abolished, the resolution argued, "under such circumstances the district would constitute at once a neutral ground upon which hosts of free blacks, fugitive slaves, and incendiaries would be assembled in the work of abolitionism; and that, from such a magazine of evil, every conceivable mischief would be spread through the surrounding country."²⁵ In 1839, 200 Washington residents petitioned Congress to prevent emancipation, arguing that it would severely disrupt the presently peaceful and content white community.²⁶ Local sentiments against emancipation and black freedom grew as the Civil War began. The *Washington Star*, in Dec. 11, 1861, expressed worries associated with emancipation, stating:

If revolutionary changes be made in the local law of the District...instead of a free negro population of perhaps 14,000...the District of Columbia cannot fail to become at once the harbor for at least 50,000 negroes, practically freed as an incident of the war. With such a population, without especial restraining laws, Washington will be rendered almost uninhabitable to the white man.²⁷

²⁰ Ibid., 29.

²¹ Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 28.

²² James Oliver Horton, "The Genesis of Washington's African American Community," 29.

²³ Ibid., 29.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 32.

²⁶ Ibid., 33. 25 Cong. 1 session.S. Doc. 191, Feb. 7, 1839

²⁷ *Washington Star*, 11 December 1861, quoted in Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 27.

The paper also warned that if abolitionists were to gain control and force their experiments on the capital city, they would continue “until they make it nothing less than hell upon earth for the white man.”²⁸ That same year, the city’s Board of Alderman declared that majority of the District was against emancipation and warned that if abolition was to occur, Washington would be “an asylum for free negroes, a population undesirable in every American community.”²⁹

With the advent of the Civil War, whites’ fears were in many ways realized. The Civil War marked a significant change not only for the nation, but for its capital as well. Over the course of the war, Washington’s population grew to more than twice its original size.³⁰ With this increase in population came over 30,000 formerly enslaved people. In April of 1862, Congress passed the District Emancipation Act, freeing all enslaved people in the city.³¹ This guarantee of emancipation, as well as the city’s proximity to slave states, made Washington, D.C. a popular destination for refugees of the war in search of freedom. In the beginning it may have seemed to many that they had found what they were looking for. In the years after the Civil War, black residents of Washington gained mobility and power as more occupational opportunities became available and government initiatives such as the Freedman’s Bureau offered economic assistance. But as Lois Horton writes, “Of the civil and political rights debated during Reconstruction, none was more important than the right to vote.”³² Blacks in Washington mobilized quickly around the right to vote, and in 1864, 2,500 black men from the city petitioned Congress to grant them their rights.

But as black men were mobilizing around the fight for their right to vote, white men were mobilizing against it. In 1865, in response to a proposed bill in Congress that would allow black men to vote, local whites arranged for a city referendum on the issue. A City Council member urged that referendum be carried out as quickly as possible so that residents could get their word in before “the nigger bill” in Congress passed. Another likeminded councilmember argued that blacks “had no more qualification to vote than a brick bat.”³³ The outcome of the referendum indicated that most of the positions of Washington’s white residents reflected these sentiments as well. The white males of the city voted by an overwhelming margin against allowing their fellow black residents the right to vote, 6591-35 in Washington City and 721-1 Georgetown, which was still part of the District at the time. The *Washington Star* congratulated Washington’s whites for not wanting “to make a farce of the right of suffrage, by giving it to an ignorant mass of negroes, who know no more how to exercise it than the cattle of the field they so lately herded with.” Democrats in Congress took this view too, arguing in a minority House Judiciary Committee Report that it would be degrading to the District’s white citizens to allow “poor weak-minded negroes...the highest political privilege given to man upon

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ Alan Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City: Politics, Corruption, and Progress in Washington, DC, 1861-1902* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994), 40.

³⁰ Lois E. Horton, “The Days of Jubilee: Black Migration during the Civil War and Reconstruction.” In *Urban Odyssey*, ed. Francine Curro Cary (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1996), 65.

³¹ James Oliver Horton, “The Genesis of Washington’s African American Community,” 39.

³² Lois E. Horton, “The Days of Jubilee,” 72.

³³ Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 50.

earth.” The report warned that black suffrage in the capital would inevitably lead to the election of a black mayor and that “negroes would soon flood the District and give them a majority.”³⁴

However, Congress ratified the bill despite the referendum, granting black men the right to vote in Washington, D.C. in 1866. In 1867, black men took part in local elections for the first time, primarily as members of the Republican Party. Within less than a year of being granted voting rights, black men accounted for over 45% of the total registered voters in the District.³⁵ Despite the objections of many white residents, blacks quickly rose through the political process. By 1868 African American men were elected to positions in local government, signifying the start of Washington’s first round of black elected officials. Black residents such as John F. Cook and Stewart Carter were elected to positions on both the Board of Aldermen and the City Council, joined by Sayles Bowen, a white abolitionist, in the mayoral position. The election of these officials made a strong impact on residents, “fulfilling black hopes for political power and confirming the fears of many longtime white Washington residents.”³⁶ For the next few years, black political power increased, and by 1869, seven black men had been elected to city council. In 1869, the city council passed an anti-discrimination bill dictating that all public entertainment spaces be desegregated.³⁷ However, this period of advancement would quickly turn sour, leaving not only African Americans, but also all District residents with very little political power and under the control of a select few white men.

At the end of the Civil War, various federal politicians and white Washingtonians began pushing for a shift towards federal rule of the District. In 1865, Senator Lot Morrill of Maine introduced a bill in Congress proposing to place the District under the governance of presidentially appointed commissioners. Morrill’s plan for federal rule was supported by local white elites, including banker George Riggs who was of the belief that “the majority of the voters [in the city] are incapable of self-government.”³⁸ However, both black and white radical Republicans initially rejected the proposal that interfered with their efforts to expand voting rights to the city’s black male population.³⁹ The District City Council, no longer run by old-line Washingtonians, passed a resolution arguing against federal rule. As the city’s major black newspaper the *New National Era* saw the situation, “In plain Anglo-Saxon, the old fogies are opposed to negro suffrage; and as they cannot withdraw it, they seek to diminish, if not destroy, the opportunities for its exercise. Here is the whole secret of the recently inaugurated movement to take away our municipal government.”⁴⁰ The push for federal rule in the city continued throughout the next decade. Morrill’s bill resurfaced in 1870, only to be killed by Congressman Henry Davis of Kentucky who argued that recent Congressional actions indicated federal

³⁴ *Washington Star*, 22 December 1865, quoted in Gillette, 51.

³⁵ Lois E. Horton, “The Days of Jubilee,” 72.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 73.

³⁷ Sam Smith, *Captive Capital: Colonial Life in Modern Washington* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1974), 60.

³⁸ Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City*, 52.

³⁹ Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 59. Constance McLaughlin Green, *Secret City: A History of Race Relations in the Nation’s Capital* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1967), 103.

⁴⁰ *New National Era*, 27 January 1870, quoted in Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 60.

rule would cater to black needs at the expense of white interests.⁴¹ However, support for a closer connection between the local Washington government and federal rule was growing, particularly among Democrats and moderate Republicans such as Alexander Shepherd of the city's Board of Trade.

It was with the support of this contingent that Congress considered, and eventually passed, an 1871 bill dictating that the District be governed under territorial rule. Radical Republican Senators such as Charles Sumner, Oliver Morton, and Henry Wilson saw the bill as an appalling front to the recent fight for District residents' civil rights and attempted to fight the proposal in Congress. However, the push for a coordination of federal and home rule coupled with the strong animosity towards black suffrage felt by many of Washington local and federal elites eventually put the city on the path towards total federal control, destroying a fifty-nine year precedent of a popularly elected government.⁴² In 1871 Congress mandated that the city be run by a presidentially appointed governor, upper house and Board of Public Works, while still allowing District male residents to vote for a lower house and a non-voting delegate to the House of Representatives. The power under this territorial government was held primarily by Alexander "Boss" Shepherd, who fueled large amounts of the city's resources into public works in an attempt to beautify the city, foreshadowing the neglect of social issues that was to dominant in decades to come.

District reactions to the new form of government were mixed. Democrats found the government was not as effective as they hoped it would be in curbing black and radical Republican political power. In 1871, the *Georgetown Courier* lamented that on the new federally appointed upper council there was "not an old resident, nor a Democrat, nor a Catholic, nor an Irishman, and yet we have three darkies, Douglass, Gray and Hall, a German, two natives of Maine and one of Massachusetts."⁴³ However, the territorial government proved a disappointment for African Americans too. Whereas previously under local rule there had been as many as seven black representatives on the city council, only two blacks were elected to the lower council of the new territorial rule. And while at first Shepherd's extensive public works initiative provided jobs for black residents, gradually these positions went to whites, and high tax rates began to take a toll on local black property owners.⁴⁴

Within three years, Boss Shepherd's beautification initiatives propelled the city into deep debt prompting Congress to investigate possible alternatives to territorial rule. The answer, Congress decided, was to increase federal control. In 1874, Congress passed a law abolishing the territorial government and providing for an interim government of three presidentially appointed commissioners to run the city.⁴⁵ Thus, for the first time since 1802, District residents came under the rule of a completely unelected government. In 1878, local businessmen joined together to ensure that this unelected government would remain and with the passage of the Organic Act of 1878, federal rule of Washington was solidified.

⁴¹ Green, *Secret City*, 103.

⁴² Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City*, 52.

⁴³ Smith, *Captive Capital*, 51.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 60.

⁴⁵ DC Vote, "The DC Voting Rights Timeline," DC Vote, <http://www.devote.org>.

While Shepherd's financial failures prompted the shift to federal rule, many whites attributed the need for a federally run government to the failure of black suffrage. Those in favor of federal rule often saw black political power as responsible for the District's post-Civil War problems. The Washington newspaper the *Patriot* viewed Shepherd's government as "a combination of African legislators and venal adventurers" and believed that it sought to "establish negro supremacy and through it the rule of ignorance and vice at the capital of the nation."⁴⁶ The *Courier* remarked that the benefit of the failure of territorial government was that it "so fully convinced" Congress of what the paper deemed the "curse" of black suffrage, "that it abolished voting altogether."⁴⁷ Senator John Tyler Morgan of Alabama, a plantation-owning, former officer in the Confederate army would later explain why Washington lost home rule:

It was necessary to "burn down the barn to get rid of the rats...the rats being the negro population and the barn being the government of the District of Columbia. Now, the historical fact is simply this, that the negroes came into this District from Virginia and Maryland and from other places...they came in here and they took possession of a certain part of the political power of this District...and there was but one way to get out—so Congress thought, so this able committee thought—and that was to deny the right of suffrage entirely to every human being in the District and have every office here controlled by appointment instead of by election...in order to get rid of this load of negro suffrage that was flooded in upon them."⁴⁸

To Senator Morgan and others, it was more important to deny black men the right to vote than to continue to allow the residents of the District, black and white, the ability to participate in their government.

An incident that occurred immediately after the demise of the territorial government in 1874 helped guarantee the solidification of federal rule. Immediately after word spread that the territorial government was to be extinguished, representatives the biracial lower council were caught taking government items from council chambers. One councilmember was caught stealing a feather duster, which he had hidden in his pant-leg. Soon, conservative white Washingtonians were referring to the "Feather Duster" government full of "Murder Bay" politicians, using these labels to draw up images of local government corruption that they saw as the fault of black suffrage.⁴⁹ From then on, whites opposed to any efforts to return to a locally elected government would use these terms to call up negative images of the circumstances of black suffrage. This situation in the District was part of a larger movement waged by white opponents of black suffrage through the South. Claims of corrupt Reconstruction rule were made in an effort to oust

⁴⁶ *Patriot*, 10 April 1871, quoted in Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City*, 119. *Patriot*, 21 April 1871, quoted in Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City*, 119.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 119.

⁴⁸ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 24-25.

⁴⁹ Green, *Secret City*, 112. Murder Bay was a large black slum in the city at the time.

Republican biracial governments. In the District, these associations would be used to remove power from local hands completely and place the city under federal rule.

Ultimately, the end of home rule aligned with the end of Reconstruction. United by what Walters describes as white nationalism, Democrats, Old-line Washingtonians, and moderate Republicans voted to instate federal rule in Washington, thus silencing the black political voice of the nation's capital. As goals of Northern and Southern reunification took hold, the Republican Party began to abandon its initiatives aimed at increasing the liberties of black Americans. District politicians abandoned many social causes for physical improvement initiatives.⁵⁰ Radical Republicans remained the only strong source of support for local government. One such Republican Oliver Morton made the point that, "it was in this District that colored suffrage was first established" and asked, "shall it be that this District shall furnish the first example of its destruction?"⁵¹ The objections of the radical Republicans were no longer enough, and the Senate voted 40-9-27 to pass the bill, the only votes against federal rule cast by Republicans. As historian Mark Richards writes, "Local white elites and businessmen had linked with Congress and left no formal mechanism for local input, effectively cutting out newly enfranchised black men and putting 'experts' in power."⁵² As Reconstruction drew to a close and the United States political climate became marked by conservative backlash against black rights, both white and black citizens in Washington lost hope for democracy.

For the next ninety-nine years, Washington, D.C. was governed by an unelected government that was heavily influenced by racist Congress members. As Harry Jaffe and Tom Sherwood write, "The city was under direct control of committees that were the least prestigious in Congress. They were a proving ground for junior members or a dumping ground for embarrassing ones. Blacks in Washington had endured slavery, the restrictive Black Codes of the 1830s, and the riots of 1919, but Congress made the racism institutional."⁵³ Over these years, power over the city would rest in the hands of an elite group of white men, composed primarily of Southern segregationists, whose interests and policies were essentially that of white nationalism.

Throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, District political policies essentially ignored the city's black population and instead catered to the interests of wealthier white residents. The dialogue between blacks and whites that had been bolstered by Reconstruction essentially disappeared and the city's print media largely ignored the District's large black population. The government pursued policies that worked to beautify the District's federal buildings, and left the social needs of many black residents completely out of the picture. The District's black weekly, the *Washington Bee*, maintained in 1883 that African Americans in DC had "just as much chance to obtain recognition as a donkey would of going through the eye of the needle." As they put it, the government felt "as much for a negro as a rat terrier does for a mouse."⁵⁴ While money was funneled into federal buildings, the government allowed conditions for African

⁵⁰ Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 40.

⁵¹ Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City*, 122.

⁵² Richards, "Struggle for Democracy," 3.

⁵³ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 27.

Americans living in the city's cramped and unsanitary alleys to worsen. Disease rates grew as typhoid struck the city, but it primarily afflicted the poor black population, whose dwellings did not have the same sewage systems as affluent white neighborhoods.⁵⁵ When Congress was eventually pressured into dealing with the decrepit alleys in the 1920s and 1930s, they pursued policies that dislocated the poor residents to make way for housing for federal employees.⁵⁶

White supremacists and segregationists often dominated the congressional committees that governed the District. During the 1930s, the House Subcommittee on District Appropriations, in charge of allocating much needed federal money to Washington, was chaired by Ross Collins, a farmer from Mississippi. During his tenure Collins repeatedly prevented the District from receiving much needed monetary funding particularly for programs associated with helping the city's black residents. When the city came to Collins with a Community Chest report, *First City—Worst City*, on the horrific state of the city's primarily black slums, Collins was not very sympathetic. Asked by the city for \$3.2 million dollars for health care, housing and education to improve the state of its poor, Collins allocated only \$900,000. When city welfare official Elwood Street requested that funds be allocated to the National Training School for Girls, which served young black women who had come to the city with few resources, Collins responded indignantly, "If I went along with your ideas, Mr. Street, I'd never keep my seat in Congress. My constituents wouldn't stand for spending money on niggers."⁵⁷

The situation in the Senate was not much better. In 1944, white supremacist Senator Theodore Bilbo of Mississippi became the chairman of the District Committee. Senator Bilbo was a proud member of the Ku Klux Klan as well as the author of *Take Your Choice—Segregation or Mongrelization*. While in the Senate, he adamantly opposed anti-lynching laws. He also proposed an amendment to a 1938 work-relief bill that would have deported 12 million blacks to Liberia. He took these beliefs with him into the District Committee, working consistently to deny or divert funds from being directed towards Washington's black population. As chairman, he made a proposal that 22,000 black residents of DC be removed from the District's alleys and deported to farms, to Africa, or to a "self-liquidating" stadium. He is quoted as having said, "If you go through the government departments, there are so many niggers it's like a black cloud all around you."⁵⁸ Until 1947, Bilbo continued to work against the District's black population.

Throughout the 1940s the struggle for democracy was reawakened in the District, only to be pushed aside by Congress. In 1943, a bill on the "Reorganization of the Government of the District of Columbia," came before the Senate Judiciary Committee. However, the bill was shelved largely in response to the testimony of District resident Clinton Howard. Howard testified that given the current state of racial animosity in the city, it would not have been in the interest of white residents to give voting rights to "the under-privileged, illiterate, proletarian class who would at once possess the balance of power and in the near future, a majority of voting citizenry." Drawing on white fears, he described the children of the city's alleys, saying, "Now that is the Washington

⁵⁵ Lessoff, *The Nation and Its City*, 195.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 142.

⁵⁷ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 27.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 28.

tomorrow...the alley will dominate the avenue.” Howard argued that if democracy were to be granted to the District, which he described as having a largely stationary black community but a transient white community, trouble would certainly follow.⁵⁹

Washingtonians showed increasing interest in the issue during this time. A *Washington Post* poll taken in 1945 found that eighty-four percent of District residents supported the vote for the city. However, African Americans supported democracy for Washington in greater numbers than whites. While eighty percent of whites believed that District residents should be allowed to vote, ninety-five percent of blacks answered affirmatively. Convictions against the right to vote were more common among whites, thirteen percent of whom were opposed to self-government and Congressional representation, while only one percent of blacks said residents should not be enfranchised.⁶⁰

Despite increased local support for democracy, the District still remained under federal control in the mid-twentieth century. District residents, however, would not accept this state of subordination for long and a push for democracy would soon arise. But first, the District faced a major obstacle. In 1948, Southern segregationist John L. McMillan became the chairman of the House District Committee. In Representative McMillan, supporters of Democracy in the District would find their most formidable opponent in the growing fight for democracy in the District.

PART II

Civil Rights Period: Gains Made in the Face of Racist Minority

“Opponents raise many objections...But when all of them are analyzed and, found wanting, are cast aside, only one, born out of prejudice, stands ugly and naked. That objection, whispered in soft tones behind cupped hands: The Negroes outnumber the whites and therefore might vault to municipal power.”⁶¹

With the advent of the civil rights movement, the fight for democracy in the District gained support. Congress considered a number of District voting rights bills, more than one of which passed. In 1961, residents finally received the right to vote for president with the passage of the 23rd amendment. In 1967, thanks to pressure from President Johnson, the District’s government was reorganized in a step towards self-government. During this period residents also gained a non-voting delegate to the House of Representatives, and by 1973, Congress granted Washingtonian’s limited home rule allowing for an elected mayor and city council.

Though this period was more fruitful than most in terms of democracy for Washington, it was still marked by opposition and struggle. While the Senate passed a

⁵⁹ Green, *Secret City*, 112.

⁶⁰ “84 Per Cent of District Residents Favor Home Rule, Right to Vote in U.S. Elections,” *Washington Post*, 19 November 1945, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁶¹ “Editors Discuss District’s Needs,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 24 May 1959, <http://proquest.com>.

number of District voting rights bills, the House repeatedly killed these measures. The opposition in the House was concentrated primarily in the District Committee, chaired by Southern Democrat Representative John McMillan. This committee, comprised of primarily of Southern congressmen vehemently opposed to civil rights, continuously prevented voting rights bills from reaching the floor of the House where support for District home rule was much greater. Though those opposed to District voting rights did not always express their racist motives openly, their motives were often racially charged.

The decade of the 1960s opened with a victory for District voting rights. On March 7, 1961 the 23rd Amendment was ratified, granting residents the right to vote for president for the first time in the city's history. During this era, the United States was under increasing international pressure to ensure democratic rights of all of its citizens as Russia attacked the country's hypocritical policies towards its black citizens.⁶² Congress, under this increasing pressure and in the midst of the growing civil rights movement, proposed to grant Washingtonians the right to vote in presidential elections.⁶³ The proposal went through the legislature, with Southern opposition, and was sent to the states for the necessary two-thirds ratification. The amendment moved fairly quickly through the state legislatures, and Hawaii, which had recently been granted state status, was first to ratify the amendment, passing it unanimously in both of its houses.⁶⁴

However, Southern states proved a possible hindrance to this measure, for they strictly opposed granting presidential voting rights to the District. The legislatures of all of the states of the Deep South refused to ratify the amendment. Arkansas voted it down 59-26, and Georgia did not even discuss the proposal in its legislative sessions.⁶⁵ Few of the Border States passed the amendment, with the exception of Tennessee. The Congressional Quarterly Almanac of 1961 attributed this opposition to "the race issue."⁶⁶ In March of 1961, three weeks before the proposal would be ratified by the necessary states, the *Monroe World* of Monroe, Louisiana made a case for Southern opposition:

The South's purpose in blocking the Amendment would be to prevent the hords (sic) of Negroes which have flocked to the Nation's Capital from controlling election as far as the District of Columbia is concerned...Because of ruthless efforts to ram unwanted integration down the throats of the people of the South, these people are in no mood to hand over to a huge mass of uneducated Negroes a voting right.⁶⁷

⁶² Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000).

⁶³ Richards, "Struggle for Democracy," 4.

⁶⁴ "Constitutional Amendment on D.C. Suffrage," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1960*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1960), 287.

⁶⁵ "New Amendment Gives D.C. Presidential Electors," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1961* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1961), 399. "Sad Commentary," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 7 March 1961, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁶⁶ "New Amendment Gives D.C. Presidential Electors," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1961*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1961), 399.

⁶⁷ "Getting Back—A Southern View," *Monroe World*, 7 March 1961, quoted in *Washington Post*, 1 April 1961, <http://www.proquest.com>.

And while some opposition came from Republican states that worried that Washington's primarily Democrat population would harm their political power, this was not as powerful a basis of opposition. The Republican controlled state legislature of Kansas provided the 38th needed state ratification, finally granting the District residents a right to vote in their nation's presidential elections.⁶⁸

Southern opposition continued even after the amendment had been ratified. In a Senate roll call vote after state ratification, sixty-six Senators approved the Amendment while six opposed it. Republicans voted 23-1 for District suffrage, while Democrats voted 43-5. Unsurprisingly, the only opposing votes were cast by Senators from Arkansas, Georgia, Mississippi, South Carolina, and Texas.⁶⁹ Despite this opposition, the Southern minority lost the fight. Washingtonians remained hopeful that this was sign the times had turned. As the *Washington Post* wrote, "However significant the restoration of the ballot box to the Nation's capital may be, it is a beginning rather than an end."⁷⁰

The battle for home rule, on the other hand, was facing consistent resistance. McMillan's House District Committee formed the epicenter of this opposition. Between 1949 and 1959, the Senate passed five different home rule proposals, each of which was killed in the House District Committee before ever reaching the House floor.⁷¹ It was generally accepted during this time that the members of the committee were mainly opposed to District self-government on racist grounds. The *Congressional Quarterly Almanac*, in 1961 cited racism, stating, "the most common explanation given for the Southern dominated House District Committee's hostility towards home rule bills is its fear that Washington would eventually be controlled by the city's large Negro population."⁷² In 1957, the District of Columbia had become the first city in the United States to have a majority black population, and the segregationists of the District committee were in no mood to have the nation's capital run by a majority African American government.⁷³

The next few years would be marked by few gains on the home rule front, despite political pressure from both President Kennedy and the District Commissioners. In 1963, the three presidentially appointed commissioners asked Congress to approve a measure that would allow Washingtonians to elect a mayor, a city council and a non-voting delegate to Congress. On April 4 of the same year, President Kennedy expressed his support for such an action in a letter to Congress. Kennedy, in wording that seemed aimed towards pro-states rights Southerners, argued "It would place the responsibility for solving local problems where it belongs in the American scheme of government—in the people of the District of Columbia and their elected representatives."⁷⁴ The appeals of

⁶⁸ "New Amendment Gives D.C. Presidential Electors," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1961* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1961), 399.

⁶⁹ "CQ Senate Votes 193-198," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1961* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1961), 608.

⁷⁰ "The Vote at Last," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 30 March 1961, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁷¹ "New Amendment Gives D.C. Presidential Electors," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1961* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1961), 399.

⁷² *Ibid.*

⁷³ Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 154.

⁷⁴ "Kennedy Requests Home Rule," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1963* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1963), 995-996.

the President and the Commissioners were not effective, however. The Senate took no action regarding the request, and the House District Committee only held three days of hearings on the issue. The *Congressional Quarterly*, at the end of 1963 commented, “The chances of enactment in 1964 were considered unlikely because of the House District Committee’s traditional opposition to any home rule legislation for the nation’s capital.”⁷⁵ The predication proved true, and little was done over the next year.

However, the fight for District home rule intensified as the civil rights movement progressed. In 1965, pressure was once again placed on Congress to grant the District self-government. Johnson delivered a special message on home rule, urging Congress to “approve at the earliest possible date the legislation which will grant [District residents] the fundamental American right of self-government.”⁷⁶ Support also came from “national labor, liberal, civil rights and religious organizations, as well as citizens groups in the District itself.”⁷⁷ The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the integrated Washington Home Rule Committee, and local black organizations campaigned for democracy in the District.

Civil rights activists emerged as the leaders of the growing District voting rights movement. Throughout the decade, the District’s black population had been increasing at a quick rate. By 1965, the city had a black majority of 60 percent.⁷⁸ The District’s demographics, as well as its proximity to the federal government, attracted many prominent activists in the civil rights movement.⁷⁹ It was out of the cadre of civil rights activists that many of the DC voting rights supporters and leaders surfaced. Julius Hobson, who would later found the DC Statehood Party, ran the local Congress of Racial Equality chapter, Sterling Tucker, future city councilman, was from the Urban League, future mayor Marion Barry headed the local Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and Walter Fauntroy, who would later become DC’s non-voting delegate to the House, directed the Washington Bureau of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference.⁸⁰ Civil rights proponents, led by these men, became the most vocal and supportive activists in the fight for home rule.

Hope for home rule was heightened in 1965, the Senate passed a bill for home rule and sent it to the House for approval. Knowing that the Southern opposition in the House District Committee would prevent it from reaching the floor, President Johnson urged Congress members to sign a discharge petition to enable the bill to bypass the District Committee. Johnson called on Congress to pass the bill, stating, “It is an irony and disgrace that having extended self-government already to the Philippine Islands and to Puerto Rico...some people seem to be afraid to trust almost a million American citizens with the management of their own affairs here in the District of Columbia.” The next day

⁷⁵ “Review of the Session,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1963* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1963), 82/

⁷⁶ Lyndon B. Johnson, “Text of President’s Home Rule Message,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 3 February 1965, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁷⁷ “Home Rule for the District of Columbia Fails,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1965), 615.

⁷⁸ “Home Rule for the District of Columbia Fails,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1965*, 614.

⁷⁹ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 99.

⁸⁰ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 48-49.

he spoke of the need for home rule again while discussing the L.A. race riots, saying “I want to warn you (in the District of Columbia)...that the clock is ticking...remember when people feel mistreated, and they feel injustices, and...they have no vote...I asked myself last night what I can do to see we don’t have any more incidents as occurred in Los Angeles.”⁸¹

The House was responsive to Johnson’s request and obtained the 218 signatures needed to discharge the bill from the House District Committee. Finally able to consider a home rule bill, the House passed a proposal allowing for a restricted self-government. However, in 1966, the House bill died in the Senate, where the Southern opposition employed filibustering techniques associated with preventing civil rights initiatives from passing to block the passage of the bill. The *Washington Post* commented on the situation, remarking, “Once again the Nation is confronted with the spectacle of a triumphant minority, and a defeated majority.”⁸²

In the debates over the home rule proposals of 1965, Southern representatives backed by local white organizations once again formed the primary resistance. The original Senate home rule proposal of 1965 passed in a role call vote of 63-29. Republicans voted in favor of the bill 16-14, while Democrats approved it by a margin of 47-15. Democrats, however, were drastically split along regional lines, with Northern Democrats voting 41-1 for the bill, while Southern Democrats voted against the bill 5-14.⁸³ In the House vote on its proposed plan for home rule, the Deep South voted overwhelmingly against home rule, and Border State representatives comprised most of the rest of the opposition.⁸⁴

In arguing against self-government for the District, Congress members cited a number of different issues. Some held that granting Washington home rule would destroy the symbolic meaning of the capital as the “federal city.”⁸⁵ Others maintained home rule violated Section 1, Article 8 of the Constitution, which they interpreted as giving Congress ultimate power over the District. A final argument contended that the city would be subject to the domination of one political party and thus “graft and bossism” would reign.⁸⁶

Southern opposition to District self-government proved particularly ironic since the same Southern politicians were vehemently arguing on behalf of local control for their states at the time. When it came to local control for Washington, a predominantly black city, these Congressmen conveniently forgot the principle of local rule. While many of

⁸¹ “Home Rule for District of Columbia Fails,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1965), 617.

⁸² “Home Rule Defeated,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 11 October 1966, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁸³ Passes bill S1118 by role call 63-29 (R-16-14; D-47-15) **ND-42-1 SD 5-14**
 Votes against: AL (2); AZ (1); Arkan (2); Del (1); Flor (1); GA (2) ID (1) IA (2) LA (2) MI (2) NE (2) NC (2) ND (1) PA (1) SC (1) Thurmond SD (1) Texas (1) UT (1) VA (1)

WVA (1) Byrd WY (1) Republicans in italics. “CQ Senate Votes 167-172,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1965), 1061.

⁸⁴ “CQ House Votes 171-176,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1965), 1010-1011.

⁸⁵ “Home Rule for the District of Columbia Fails,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1965), 613.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*

the public arguments these Congressmen made against home rule were unrelated to race, in reality it seemed clear that racism was a motivating factor. *The Congressional Quarterly* explained in regards to the Congressional sentiments towards the proposals of 1965, “A fear of Negro domination of the city government, while unexpressed, continued to be a major reason for opposition to home rule,” and cited “the high proportion of Negroes in the District and the likelihood that they would control any elected District government” as the primary impediment to home rule.⁸⁷ And if Congressional interests at all reflected national sentiment, opposition to home rule stemmed primarily from racism. In a 1965 national poll on District voting rights, seventy percent of those opposed to home rule responded that, “There are too many Negroes, they would take over.”⁸⁸

Local white organizations united to fight home rule as well, led by the city’s Board of Trade. As District historian Sam Smith explains, the board had come to serve as a *de facto* government. An endorsement of an issue by the Board was essentially a mandate to Congress.⁸⁹ The organization had much at stake, then, in maintaining the current power structures in its own interest. An active opponent of home rule until 1972, the Board sent out letters to newspapers across the country in 1967 stating, “The fact is that a great many of Washingtonians—including an overwhelming majority of local professional and business leaders—are opposed to pending home rule legislation.”⁹⁰ Two other local organizations, the white local homeowners association, the Federation of Citizens Associations of the District of Columbia, and the General Federation of Women’s Clubs argued against self-government also.⁹¹ White elites dominated these organizations, and they found Congress to be serving their needs quite well. In a predominantly black city, each step towards home rule meant less power for them.

Though Congress did not pass the 1965 home rule proposal, District residents persisted to fight for democracy. In February of 1966, local civil rights activists Marion Barry and L.D. Pratt launched a voting rights movement targeted at local opponents of home rule. In an attempt to counter the Board of Trade, the Free D.C. movement asked local businesses to put signs supporting home rule in their windows. If the businesses refused, they faced a boycott by movement supporters. The Free D.C. movement was aimed at the white dominated business community viewed by Barry and Pratt as impediments to home rule. Fliers from the campaign featured a black man being held in a neck shackle by caricatures of Senator Robert Byrd, Representative McMillan and a fat white man representing the “D.C. Power Structure.”⁹² At the conference unveiling Free D.C., Barry made clear whom the movements opponents were, asking, “What is it that keeps DC in political slavery? Southern white segregationists have gotten together with the moneylord merchants of this city to oppose our right to vote.”⁹³

⁸⁷ “Home Rule for the District of Columbia Fails,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1965), 613, 614.

⁸⁸ Richards, “Struggle for Democracy,” 4.

⁸⁹ Smith, *Captive Capital*, 22-23. Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 44.

⁹⁰ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 44. “D.C. Home Rule,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1966* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1965), 580.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

⁹² Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 46.

⁹³ Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 192. Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 45.

Though the Free D.C. signified a shift in the balance of power in Washington and increased Barry's popularity, it was not well received in Congress. Many politicians did not appreciate the movement's tactics, which they characterized as blackmail and mob rule.⁹⁴ Both proponents and opponents of home rule were put off by the forceful actions and maintained it was more of a hindrance than a help to democracy's cause. Some even expressed the sentiment that the campaign might prevent Congress from granting the District self-government. Their fears proved to have some foundation, for Representative Sisk of California stated, "I am going to reassess my thinking as to whether there is the kind of responsible enough leadership in the District for home rule."⁹⁵ McMillan strongly opposed the Free D.C. movement, and he attempted to see if its tactics violated federal antiracketeering law in an effort to halt the boycott.⁹⁶

Thus, the District's next step towards home rule resulted from move by President Johnson rather than the Congress. Johnson viewed the struggle for District self-government as part of the larger fight for civil rights, and in 1967 attempted to guide the city towards home rule.⁹⁷ In February of that year, Johnson submitted a District government reorganization plan to Congress. His plan provided for a presidentially appointed mayor and city council in a half step towards home rule.⁹⁸ Key members of the House District Committee immediately opposed the proposal. However, because the proposal was a government reorganization plan, it bypassed the committee and went directly to the House Committee on Government Operations. The District Committee mobilized against the proposal and set up counter bill that would grant much less authority to the city, but their bill failed.⁹⁹ The Government Operations Committee passed Johnson's plan 26-4 with a surprising amount of Republican support. Because of the Republican support the party decided not to take an official stance against the reorganization plan, thus leaving the Southern conservative coalition of the House District Committee as the primary opponents to home rule once again.¹⁰⁰ President Johnson's plan eventually passed on the floor of the House, and in August of 1967, Washington officially came under the rule of a presidentially appointed mayor and city council.

This half step towards full self-government marked a shift towards a more representative government for Washington, but not without contestation. In the search for a new mayor and city council, many whites wanted these positions to be filled by white politicians. Johnson originally supported the appointment of white mayor to appease southerners in Congress, and locals such as *Washington Post* publisher Katharine Graham advocated for white candidates also.¹⁰¹ However, Johnson eventually came under the persuasion that it would be counter-productive to make an effort to move towards home

⁹⁴ Burke E. Dorworth, "Letters to the Editor-On the Boycott," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 7 March 1966, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁹⁵ "D.C. Home Rule," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1966* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1966), 581.

⁹⁶ Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 192.

⁹⁷ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 44.

⁹⁸ "Reorganization Gives D.C. a Mayor and Council." *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1967* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1967), 1025.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid.

¹⁰¹ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 60.

rule and then appoint a white mayor to the majority black city.¹⁰² Thus, Walter Washington, a District native and member of the city's local black elite through marriage, was chosen to become the city's first "mayor." Southerners such former Ku Klux Klan member Senator Byrd of West Virginia vehemently opposed Washington's appointment. Representative McMillan, for his part, showed his sentiments by sending watermelons to Mayor Washington when he submitted his first city budget.¹⁰³

The years of 1968 and 1969 were marked by both progress and struggle for the District. In 1968, Congress voted to allow Washingtonians to elect their own school board as another step forward. But that same year, the city was enveloped in riots after the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr. Many home rule opponents used these riots as fodder for their argument against granting the city self-government and argued for a tighter federal grip on the city. House District Committee member Joel Broyhill took the forefront of this movement. In April of 1978, the representative from Northern Virginia argued to Congress that the riots pointed to the need to "shoot to kill each and every rioter or looter henceforth."¹⁰⁴ Broyhill told his fellow Congress members, "we are going to restore law and order in this land...not by passing more civil rights bills...not by giving into demands of hoodlums with more spending programs...but by giving the American people what they are demanding...full protection under the law."¹⁰⁵ Broyhill consistently maintained that his opposition to District home rule was not born out of bigotry. However, his comments and his position against integration and civil rights legislation make it "hard to dismiss the suspicion that race had had something to do with [it]," as the Post wrote in 1968.

The year of 1968 was marked by strong North-South split in Congress, and this split was quite visible in Congressional voting on District matters. The *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* listed District Affairs as one of the largest issues inducing North-South split. House District Committee member, Thomas G. Abernethy of Mississippi was listed as one of the few most "Southern Southerners" for the amount of times he broke with Northern Democrats. The *Quarterly* cited other racial issues, such as civil rights and urban affairs, as other split inducing matters.¹⁰⁶

District residents continued to battle for home rule despite the setbacks of the riots, and this time they began to target specific Congressional opponents. It became increasingly apparent that home rule would not be achieved without drastic changes within the House District Committee. At a 1969 lecture at George Washington University, Representative Julian Bond, told the audience in response to a question about what could be done to address America's social and political problems, that they should "raise an army of people" to oust Representative Broyhill from his office in order to help bring democracy to the District.¹⁰⁷ District voting rights activists took this philosophy

¹⁰² Ibid., 61.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 62.

¹⁰⁴ "Race in Virginia," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 27 October 1968, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹⁰⁵ *Washington Star*, 21 April 1969, quoted in Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 180.

¹⁰⁶ "North-South Split," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1968* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc., 1968), 830.

¹⁰⁷ Vincent Paka, "Broyhill Ouster Urged," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 16 December 1969, <http://www.proquest.com>.

and applied it to McMillan. The overwhelming sentiment among black Washingtonians indicated McMillan's time was coming to an end. Local Bishop Smallwood Williams described him as "an ace obstructionist" who prevented "the progress of all black people in Washington for more than three decades" while the SCLC listed him as one of the "10 most unwanted politicians in the U.S.," and deemed him an "atrocious to black people in the District of Columbia."¹⁰⁸ A local coalition of civil rights and home rule activists, many associated with the city's black churches, organized a movement to defeat McMillan's 1970 reelection campaign. As Reverend Fauntroy said of the counter-campaign, "We are serving notice that we are learning the arithmetic of power politics."¹⁰⁹ While McMillan ultimately won the election despite the mobilization against him, the organizers against him had begun to loosen the keystone in the arch that was the federal government's rule over Washington and the pieces would soon start to crumble.¹¹⁰

When he returned to Congress in 1970, McMillan and his supporters still attempted to block the road to democracy for the District, but they were not as successful as they had once been. In 1970, Congress considered two bills that would each grant the District non-voting representation in Congress. One such bill proposed that the District be given representation in both the House and the Senate, while the other simply provided for representation in the House. McMillan and his supporters in the House District Committee supported the bill that would grant Washington representation in both chambers, knowing that the Senate would almost certainly block its passage. McMillan argued on behalf of it stating, "The majority of the members of the House District Committee thought that if the House must have a delegate, we should have one in the one in the other body. There the delegate would have more freedom to talk."¹¹¹ They voted to pass this bill and then moved to have the second, more practical bill, stricken on the grounds that there was already a bill forward on representation and this one only would add more confusion. However, many representatives saw through this, such as District Committee member, Brock Adams, (D-Wa), who argued that McMillan and his supporters were trying to "trap and trick the House" into passing a bill which would be rejected by the Senate.¹¹²

The House eventually voted on the more viable bill, passing it 307-57. Democrats accounted for forty-four of the opposing votes, while Republicans accounted for only thirteen, despite the fact that the city's delegate would almost inevitably be a Democrat. Southern Democrats made up the majority of the opposition once again, for they

¹⁰⁸ Carl Bernstein, "D.C. Organizations Charter Train to Aid Campaign of McMillan Rival," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 17 June 1970, <http://www.proquest.com>. "Rep. McMillan 2 1/2 -1 Winner in S.C. Runoff," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 24 June 1970, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹⁰⁹ Bernstein, "D.C. Organizations Charter Train," <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹¹⁰ The *Washington Post* also argued for the ousting of McMillan. The paper worried, though, that if the chairman position was awarded on seniority, it would go to Representative Abernethy of Mississippi, who "in background, sophistication, experience in municipal affairs and prejudice... rivals McMillan," "Antiquity and the District Committee," *Washington Post*, 30 December 1970, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹¹¹ "D.C. Representation," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1970* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1971), 315.

¹¹² Representative Brock would later resign from committee, waging an effort to oust McMillan from chairman position as he left. "Conservative, 2 Liberals Up for House D.C. Unit," *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 5 June 1971, <http://www.proquest.com>. "D.C. Representation," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1970*, 315.

accounted for 39 of the 44 Democrat opposing votes.¹¹³ The bill went to the Senate, where was passed with only one dissenter, James B. Allen of Alabama who maintained it was the intention of the framers of the Constitution that “the congress should be protected from local political pressures during its deliberations.”¹¹⁴ Having received majority approval in both the House and the Senate, the bill went into effect, granting DC a non-voting delegate in the House. In 1971, Walter Fauntroy was elected as the non-voting House representative for the District of Columbia.

Sights shifted once again to home rule, and congressional attitudes boded well for the struggle for self-government. In February of 1971, House Judiciary Committee Chairman, Emanuel Celler (D-NY) argued to Congress “we can no longer treat the people of the District as second-class citizens.”¹¹⁵ In a significant step, former chair of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on the District Senator Robert Byrd (D-W.VA) announced that he no longer opposed District self-government. Byrd acknowledged that racism had influenced congressional opposition to home rule, and argued that home rule would “go a long way toward showing the people of the nation and the world that even though this city is predominantly black, the governing of it is not being denied the people because they are black.” Explaining that he now backed self-government because it puts the responsibility on the city, he stated, “Let’s place the responsibility on the city, let it rise or fall on its own.”¹¹⁶ Endorsement of home rule was not just limited to the likes of Byrd and Celler. A *Washington Post* poll in 1971 found that according to responses to its survey, approximately 75% of House and Senate members supported home rule.¹¹⁷

The poll proved relatively accurate, for in October of 1971, the Senate voted with only eight dissenting votes to pass a bill granting Washington home rule. After the vote, Senate District Committee Chairman Thomas Eagleton (D-Mo.) explained the overwhelming margin saying, “Times have changed.”¹¹⁸ Though support for home rule had grown, times had not changed too drastically, for the eight opposing votes all came from southern Senators, six Democrats and two Republicans.¹¹⁹ Once again, the Senate had passed a home rule bill and the power to uphold or deny it was left to the House.

When the House District Committee began its hearings on the proposed home rule bill in February of 1972, it seemed McMillan and the committee would once again

¹¹³ “CQ House Votes 148-153” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1970* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1971), 54-H.

¹¹⁴ “D.C. Representation,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1970*, 315.

¹¹⁵ “Maybe This Time,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 9 February 1972, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹¹⁶ “Senator Robert C. Byrd on Home Rule,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 6 July 1971, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹¹⁷ David L. Boldt, “Survey Shows Strong Support for Home Rule,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 19 July 1971, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹¹⁸ Irna Moore, “Senate Approves D.C. Vote,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 13 October 1971, <http://www.proquest.com>

¹¹⁹ Eight opposition votes, (6 Democrat, 2 Republican): James B. Allen, AL (1) (other AL Sen. did not vote); John L. McClellan, Arkas. (1) (other AR Sen. did not vote); Herman E. Talmadge, GA (1) (other GA Sen. did not vote); Russell B. Long, LA (1), (other LA Sen. paired against); James O. Eastland, Miss. (1) (other Miss. Sen. did not vote); Sam J. Ervin, NC (1) (other NC Sen. did not vote); *Strom Thurmond SC* (1) (other SC Sen. did not vote); *Henry Bellmon OK* (1). *Republicans in Italics*. “CQ Senate Votes 231-235,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1971* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1972), 40.

provide the ultimate barrier the bill. At a hearing on February 8, committee member Rep. Gilbert Gude opened the issue stating, “The question is whether the white majority of this country and the Congress has the grace to grant basic rights to the capital city which has a black majority.” McMillan scheduled segregationist Representative John R. Rarick of Louisiana to offer the first testimony.

Rarick warned the committee that home rule would probably lead to a black Muslim takeover of the city, describing the District as a “sinkhole, rat-infested... laughing stock of the free and Communist world” that maintained “not even the proper racial balance.”

According to Rarick, Washington had “no more entitlement in logic or morality to home rule than... the Navajo reservation located in Arizona.”¹²⁰ Committee member and chairman of the Congressional Black Caucus, Charles Diggs (R-Mich), responded immediately after Rarick’s testimony, saying “This gentleman is pursuing a racist line... he is a leading racist in the Congress.” Audience members applauded Diggs’ rebuttal, to which Rarick replied, “That’s why I am opposed to home rule.”¹²¹ The remainder of the hearing was dominated by opposing arguments to home rule.

The February 8th and 9th hearings made prospects for home rule look dim, but the road was soon to turn. McMillan could not hold on to the House District Committee forever and his time as its chairman drew to a close. In 1972, McMillan lost his re-election campaign, largely because of voting rights activist’s organization against McMillan and the growing enfranchised black population in McMillan’s home district. The “local icon of Southern oppression,”¹²² was finally removed from Congress, clearing the way for District home rule.

It did not take long after McMillan’s defeat for a limited form of home rule to be realized. Representative Diggs replaced McMillan as the committee chairman in a shift that marked what the 1973 *Congressional Quarterly Almanac* described as the “turning point” in the fight for home rule.¹²³ Diggs called for a re-examination of home rule and substantially reorganized the structure of the Committee, adding a new government operations committee.¹²⁴ The committee held hearings on District government for thirty-eight days at the end of which it produced a bill proposing for home rule with Congressional oversight. By December 19, 1973, both chambers of Congress had passed the home rule bill granting the District the right to vote for a mayor and thirteen-member

¹²⁰ “D.C. Home Rule,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1971* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1972), 653-654. Rarick also desired “to remove all the people from the federal District who are not here on government business and resettle them in areas of the country that have sparse population and living room.” He commented that, “Certainly the people of these states would benefit from such close association with the people of the caliber of those in the District.”

¹²¹ Stephen Green, “Rep. Rarick Accused of Racism At Hearing on D.C. Home Rule,” *Washington Post and Times Herald*, 9 February 1972, <http://www.proquest.com>.

“D.C. Home Rule,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1971* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1972), 653-654.

¹²² Richards, “Struggle for Democracy,” 4.

¹²³ “Congress Grants Nation’s Capital Limited Home Rule,” *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1972), 735.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*

city council.¹²⁵ Within just over a year of McMillan's defeat, Washington finally received what it had been so consistently denied.¹²⁶

But while the home rule charter did grant District residents some local autonomy, it still restricted the city government in a number of ways. The bill gave Congress the ultimate authority over the city, allowing it the right to create legislation for the city at anytime. It also required that all acts passed by the city's government be submitted to Congress, which could choose to veto them if so desired. Additionally, though the city budget was to be determined by the mayor, it had to be approved by Congress. The bill also prohibited the city council from imposing any taxes on United States property or imposing a commuter tax, severely inhibiting the city's financial sources. Finally, the charter mandated that the city could not reform the current judicial system or have a locally elected district attorney.¹²⁷ Thus, while the bill did give the city some agency and was in many aspects a victory, it still left a great amount power in the hands of Congress. This power would be exercised, and sometimes exploited, in years to come.

PART III

Home Rule Era: Delusions of Democracy

In 1978, Congress passed an amendment seeking to grant the District of Columbia voting representation in both the House and the Senate. This measure provided District citizens with a false sense of hope about the future of democracy in the District. In order for District representation to be realized, two-thirds of state legislatures needed to ratify the amendment within seven years. In 1985, the measure died having only been ratified by 16 of the necessary 38 states. Unfortunately for advocates of District representation, the passage of the amendment by Congress would prove to be the pinnacle of voting rights success in Washington in the coming decades. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, democracy in the District faced a number of setbacks. Despite the enactment of the home rule charter in 1973, Washington was still very much under the control of Congress. This era was marked by federal intervention and the decline of hope for true home rule and representation.

Racial objections to District voting rights remained primarily unexpressed during this era as covert racism became increasingly unacceptable. Arguments against democracy for the District maintained that home rule and national representation for the city were unconstitutional and that residents of the District were incapable of self-

¹²⁵ Ibid, p. 734,

¹²⁶ The *Congressional Quarterly* wrote upon the passage of the home rule charter: "Supporters and opponents of home rule had wrangled for years over the problems of transferring to the local government routine legislative duties of Congress while still maintaining a federal interest in the city that is the nation's capital. Underlying those arguments at times were issues of race and politics. The predominantly black and heavily Democratic population of the District left many Republican and southern members of Congress lukewarm or opposed to a popularly elected government." "Congress Grants Nation's Capital Limited Home Rule," *Congressional Quarterly Almanac-1973* (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Inc. 1972), 734.

¹²⁷ Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 103.

government. During the late twentieth century, Republicans emerged as the primary opponents to District voting rights, and the struggle became increasingly partisan-oriented. However, as Michael Fauntroy and Ronald Walters argue, partisan politics were often related to racial conservatism.¹²⁸ After the civil rights movement, the country underwent a conservative shift, and many former Southern democrats realigned with the Republican Party.¹²⁹ During this time, Congressional support for District voting rights became increasingly split not only along partisan lines but also along racial lines. While it is hard to determine the covert racial motives of many opponents to District home rule during this period, their arguments contain many racist implications and the situation in the District remained an issue of clear racial inequity.

Though Congress granted Washington limited authority over its affairs, it proceeded to intervene in the city's government throughout the late 1970s and 1980s. Congress continuously overturned District laws and imposed regulations on the city proving the federal government was not yet ready to recognize the District's autonomy. Between 1975 and 1990, Congress used riders to force over seventy-five types of restrictions on the city.¹³⁰ In most cases, these Congressional measures went against the interests of those of in the District. In 1981, Congress vetoed major city reforms made to its sexual offense criminal laws and blocked the city from de-criminalizing sodomy.¹³¹ That same year, Congress overruled Mayor Marion Barry's initiative aimed at eliminating race and sex discrimination in the hiring processes of the police force and killed the possibility of a city-funded, resident-approved lottery game.¹³² This trend would continue throughout the decade. In 1989, Congress prevented the city from using local funds for abortion and blocked anti-discriminatory acts passed by the City Council written to protect gay residents and those with AIDS.¹³³ Other trivial measures were passed throughout the decade that enforced unwanted laws on the city, preventing the use of taxicab meters and prohibiting Washington residents from swimming in the pool at Woodrow Wilson High School after 9 p.m.¹³⁴ This Congressional meddling sent the message that in Congress's eyes, the District was not ready to fully govern itself.

Thus, power dynamics in the District continued to be defined by a predominantly white Congress exercising power over a majority black city. Charles Harris found in his 1981 study of the city's political elite that despite, "a black numerical majority in the District, the political power and many of the political roles of the black elected officials are still defined in a framework of minority status for non-whites." Harris attributed this to the fact Congress still had "final and ultimate power" over the city.¹³⁵ As a result, a

¹²⁸ Fauntroy, *Home Rule or House Rule*, 65. Walters, *White Nationalism, Black Interests*, 4.

¹²⁹ Edsall, *Chain Reaction*, 2.

¹³⁰ Philip G. Schrag, "District of Columbia: The 'State' of Controversy," *Catholic University Law Review* 30, no. 311 (1990): par. 3, <http://www.lexisnexis.com>.

¹²³ Charles W. Harris and R. Kent Weaver, "Who's In Charge Here? Congress and the Nation's Capital," *The Brookings Review* 7, no. 3 (1989): 42, <http://www.ovid.com>.

¹³² Eugene Robinson, "Has Home Rule Lost the Battle?" *Washington Post*, 1 October 1981, <http://www.proquest.com>.

⁴ Gloria Danziger, "Washington, DC: Our 51st State? Is Racism the Reason DC is Denied Statehood?" *Utne Reader* 33 (1989): 24.

¹³⁴ Schrag, "District of Columbia: The 'State' of Controversy," par. 3.

¹³⁵ Harris, *Perspectives of Political Power in the District of Columbia*, 209.

feeling of powerlessness developed among the city's elected officials. Mayor Marion Barry expressed this sentiment in response to congressional intervention, stating, "There is nothing we can do about it but complain."¹³⁶ Local leader, Reverend David Eaton, commented on the federal intervention calling it a "serious attack on the concept of home rule," and observing that, "under the veneer of decency and democratic process has always been the racism and possessiveness that many people in Congress have towards the District of Columbia."¹³⁷ To many of the District's residents and politicians, the inherent racism in the city's political situation seemed clear.

By 1989, many city leaders resigned themselves to fact that they did not ultimately have the power to govern their city. The city council refrained from passing a congressionally opposed gun law because they worried Congress would retaliate by vetoing the law and imposing more restrictions. The pressure on the District to conform to congressional attitudes is apparent in the statement of National Rifle Association board member Richard Atkinson, who commented, "At long last good sense prevailed. Congress really was about to pull home rule."¹³⁸ Though Congress may or may not have been about to pull home rule, the power dynamics of the decade remain clear.

With Congress repeatedly intervening in the city's affairs, proponents of democracy in the District set their sights on statehood. A statehood movement had been brewing since the early 1970s when civil rights activist Julius Hobson formed the D.C. Statehood Party. By 1982, city residents passed a state constitution and turned to Congress for approval. Congress, however, did not view District statehood as a priority and neglected to consider the throughout the 1980s. Intent on gaining Congressional attention, the District modified its constitution to align with congressional views, but the federal government pushed statehood aside.¹³⁹ In 1987, Walter Fauntroy organized the "Liberty Bell Express Train," a train that toured the Northeast publicizing the issue in the hopes that under such pressure Congress would consider the issue.¹⁴⁰ However, Congress once again neglected to deliberate the issue of statehood.

Scandals plaguing the District government came to light in the late 1980s, presenting an obstacle for statehood proponents. Mayor Marion Barry rallied behind statehood during his third term, attacking the "last vestiges of colonial mentality" in his inaugural address.¹⁴¹ But by the end of the decade Barry's government was increasingly associated with corruption, inefficiency and drugs. A number of District officials, including Ivanhoe Donaldson were indicted for government corruption, and a federal investigation turned to Barry.¹⁴² In January of 1990, the Federal Bureau of Investigations employed one of Barry's ex-girlfriends to lure him to a hotel room where they videotaped him inhaling crack.¹⁴³ The scandal propelled the District into the nation's spotlight and continued to plague the District's image for years. From then on, many opposed to

¹³⁶ Robinson, "Has Home Rule Lost the Battle?" <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹³⁷ Robinson, "Has Home Rule Lost the Battle?" <http://www.proquest.com>

¹³⁸ Michael Abramowitz and Eric Pianin, "D.C. Shelves Gun Law to Placate Hill," *Washington Post*, 12 July 1989, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹³⁹ Danziger, "Washington, D.C.: Our 51st State?" 24.

¹⁴⁰ "Whistle Stop Campaigning for D.C. Statehood Drive," *Jet*, 3 August 1987, 6.

¹⁴¹ *Washington Post*, 31 January 1987, quoted in Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 200.

¹⁴² Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 200.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 201.

District voting rights referred to Barry's corrupt government as evidence of that the District was incapable of self-government.

The battle for statehood was not over, however, and Washington's next mayor, Sharon Pratt Kelley, made the issue a top priority. In the early 1990s, Congress finally took the issue of District statehood into consideration, and the debates surrounding it flourished. Strong opinions were held on both sides. Proponents of statehood frequently cited racism as a factor preventing the city from achieving autonomy. Opponents, on the other hand, gathered behind two main arguments maintaining that statehood for the District was unconstitutional and that Washingtonians proved themselves unable of self-government.

For those arguing on behalf of statehood, the racial implications of denying the District democracy seemed clear. The city's leading politicians often likened the situation to slavery. In a speech arguing for statehood, Mayor Pratt-Kelley alluded to the racism surrounding the issue, saying, "Residents and people of the District are sick and tired of the slave plantation on which we live."¹⁴⁴ The *New York Times* drew such an analogy as well, stating that the "Federal government runs the city like a plantation."¹⁴⁵ The *Utne Reader* compared the situation of residents of the District to that of blacks in South Africa and Arabs in the West Bank, suggesting that Congress members opposed statehood because it would result in the first predominantly black state and two black Senators.¹⁴⁶ References to past racist actions by Congress were also cited in an effort to convince Congress to grant the District statehood. Representative Eleanor Holmes Norton who replaced Walter Fauntroy as the District's non-voting delegate cited the fact that the Congress had returned a portion of the District to Virginia in order to allow the region to maintain slavery, stating, "If Congress returned land to maintain slavery, Congress can liberate neighborhoods to establish democracy."¹⁴⁷

Arguments against statehood primarily asserted that it violated the Constitution and that the District proved itself unable to handle statehood. Those who outwardly opposed the measure on constitutional grounds, such as vocal statehood opponent, Thomas J. Bliley Jr, R-Va, maintained that granting the District full autonomy would violate the "District clause" of the Constitution located in Art. 1, sec. 8, clause 17.¹⁴⁸ Supporters of this argument held that the Constitution granted Congress ultimate control over the District and making it a state would defy this principle. While concerns about the Constitutional viability of the statehood may have been genuine, many responded that District statehood would be constitutional. *The New York Times* voiced the reasoning

¹⁴⁴ "Kelley Declares April D.C. Statehood Month," *The Washington Informer*, 7 April 1993, <http://www.proquest.com>

¹⁴⁵ *New York Times*, 23 November 1991, quoted in Edward M. Meyers, *Public Opinion*, 8.

¹⁴⁶ Danziger, "Washington, D.C.: Our 51st State?" 24.

¹⁴⁷ Thomas J. Bliley, Jr. and Eleanor Holmes Norton, "The District of Columbia: Should It Be Admitted to Statehood?" *American Bar Association Journal* 79, no.8 (1993): 46.

¹⁴⁸ Bliley and Norton, "The District of Columbia: Should It Be Admitted to Statehood?" 47. This article of the constitution states: "To exercise exclusive Legislation in all Cases whatsoever, over such District (not exceeding ten Miles square) as may, by Cession of particular States, and the Acceptance of Congress, become the Seat of the Government of the United States, and to exercise like Authority over all Places purchased by the Consent of the Legislature of the State in which the Same shall be, for the Erection of Forts, Magazines, Arsenals, dock-Yards, and other needful Buildings." US Constitution, art. 1, sec. 8, cl. 17.

behind this argument, explaining, “The Constitution says only that Congress will exercise control over a seat of Government that does not exceed 10 miles square. A state could be created that would reduce the size of the Federal enclave but not eliminate it.”¹⁴⁹

The most common case made against home rule asserted that the city was incapable of self-government. Opponents often blamed the District’s problems on home rule, mirroring similar sentiments towards the District government expressed at the end of Reconstruction. Representative Stan Parris, R-Va., perhaps the staunchest opponent of statehood at the time, argued that the city’s experiment with home rule indicated that Washingtonians were unable to handle democracy. He held the opinion that, “plagued by allegations of illegal activities such as fraud, kick-backs and conflicts of interests...the city [was] its own worst enemy on the question of statehood.”¹⁵⁰ Opponents in the Parris camp painted the District government as corrupt and debt-ridden, citing Barry’s government as proof that the District was not ready for statehood.¹⁵¹

In 1992, a federal initiative to enforce the death penalty in Washington highlighted congressional opinions of Washington’s self-governing capabilities. That year, Senator Richard Shelby of Alabama proposed to instate the death penalty after a group of African American teenagers murdered one of his white staff members. In their response to the murder, Senator Shelby and his supporters demonized the District. The hometown paper of the murdered staff member described him as a “good young man in a town that has gone bad.”¹⁵² In 1992 on the floor of Congress, Senator Shelby argued to instate the death penalty in the District using language that sounded suspiciously racially coded. He stated that he would be

Hard pressed to describe the criminal behavior in Washington as ‘civilized society.’ People are using guns to settle arguments about clothes and girlfriends. They are ‘smoking’ others because they feel like it. They will even ‘bust a cap in you’ if they don’t like the way you look at them.”¹⁵³

This intervention was seen by District residents, who voted against the death penalty in a referendum on November 3, 1992, as a “racially motivated attack on home rule.”¹⁵⁴ Senator Shelby’s portrayal of the District in his attempt to force the city to adopt the death penalty added fodder to arguments against statehood.

While many opponents of statehood blamed the city’s problems on its home rule government, the situation was more complex. For instance, while opponents pointed to the financial troubles of the District government, Congress was partially responsible for these problems.¹⁵⁵ When the District achieved home rule in 1973, it also took

¹⁴⁹ *The New York Times*, 5 October 1991, as quoted in Meyers, *Public Opinion*, 8.

¹⁵⁰ Walter Fauntroy and Stan Parris, “Should We Give Our Nation’s Capital Statehood?” *The American Legion* 120 (1986): 10.

¹⁵¹ Danziger, “Washington, D.C.: Our 51st State?” 24.

¹⁵² Jaffe and Sherwood, *Dream City*, 23.

¹⁵³ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵⁵ Fauntroy and Parris, “Should We Give Our Nation’s Capital Statehood?” 10.

responsibility for a \$284 million debt that had accrued under federal rule.¹⁵⁶ In addition, the federal government cut city funds by \$25 million as the city came under the home rule charter.¹⁵⁷ And while other U.S. cities have traditionally had the ability to gain income from commuter taxes, the District remained unable to impose a tax due to congressional opposition. Many argued that the problems associated with the District government did not result from too much local autonomy, but rather from too little control over local affairs. The *Harvard Review* would later assert that the inequalities between the federal and District governments were the major source of the city's problems, rather than an inability of city officials to govern.¹⁵⁸ Still others pointed out that democracy should not be denied because the city was corrupt. The *Utne Reader* observed that other states faced corruption at the time, such as Illinois and Louisiana, but were not denied democracy. As Walter Fauntroy put it, the District was looking for "statehood, not sainthood."¹⁵⁹

It was in the midst of such arguments that the House eventually considered statehood for the District as proposed by the 1993 New Columbia Admission Act. The bill failed by a vote of 153-277, and the results indicated a strong racial split in congressional opinions on District statehood. According a congressional index compiled by the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights (LCCR), statehood was the most racially divisive issue in Congress in 1993. The Congressional Black Caucus emerged as statehood's strongest proponent, with ninety-seven percent of its members voting in favor of the act. Only sixty-four percent of the next most liberal contingent, white non-Southern liberals, approved of statehood. District of Columbia statehood was the most racially divisive issue examined by the LCCR, dividing blacks and whites more than issues including gays in the military, a constitutional amendment to balance the budget, violence against women, and racial discrimination in capital offenses.¹⁶⁰

With the battle for statehood lost, the prospects for democracy in the District seemed bleak. The recession of the 1990s hit the District hard. By 1993, one in six families on the District was on Medicaid, and the city faced exploding AIDS and tuberculosis epidemics.¹⁶¹ The quality of the District's schools declined, its crime rates grew, and city services failed to deliver.¹⁶² Both black and white families were fleeing the city for the suburbs, and the tax base depleted. In the first half of the 1990s, the District lost more than ten percent of its total population.¹⁶³

Under these circumstances, the federal government began to strip authority from the District government. In 1995, Congress installed a financial control board to oversee

¹⁵⁶ H. Anthony Mapp, "D.C.'s Home Rule Decade," *Black Enterprise* 15 (1985): 22.

¹⁵⁷ Gillette, *Between Justice and Beauty*, 196.

¹⁵⁸ "Democracy or Distrust? Restoring Home Rule for the District of Columbia in the Post-Control Board Era," *Harvard Law Review* 111, no. 7 (1998): 2046, <http://www.jstor.com>.

¹⁵⁹ Danziger, "Washington, D.C.: Our 51st State?" 24.

¹⁶⁰ Kenny Whitby, *The Color of Representation: Congressional Behavior and Black Interests* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1997), 101.

¹⁶¹ "Many Miles to Go' Mayor Tells City in D.C. Address," *The Washington Informer*, 5 May 1991, <http://www.proquest.com>.

¹⁶² "Democracy or Distrust? Restoring Home Rule for the District of Columbia in the Post-Control Board Era," 2045.

¹⁶³ D'Vera Cohn, "D.C. Population Still Declining In Latest Count," *Washington Post*, 31 December 1996, <http://www.lexisnexis.com>.

the city's budget. Two years later, the federal government voted to pass the National Capital Revitalization and Self Government Improvement Act, withdrawing authority from locally elected officials and placing the city under the rule of a presidentially appointed control board. This act placed the District under federal rule once again.

Debates surrounding District politics in the mid-nineties echoed the statehood debates of earlier years. Columnist Richard Cohen described the District as a banana republic, while Mary McGrory wrote in the *Washington Post* that the city deserved to return to colonial status.¹⁶⁴ The *Economist* expressed similar sentiment, calling Washington voters "uniformly indolent."¹⁶⁵ George Will, in an editorial in the *Washington Post*, maintained that the District deserved to have its sovereignty repealed, accusing its voters of electing "charlatans and demagogues." Will deemed the removal of home rule an appropriate punishment to for Washington's residents who chose "to be corrupted by the culture of pandemic government, the debasement of living larcenously off wealth created by others." The bottom line, according to Will, was the city was "unfit for home rule."¹⁶⁶ These arguments portrayed District residents as both incapable and undeserving of the rights of democracy granted to other United States citizens.

Others, however, did not agree that revoking home rule provided the answer to the District's problems. A 1997 report on the District Government found that much of the city's problems were structural in that the District in many ways was required to function as a state, but was not given proper resources to do so successfully. The *Harvard Law Review* also found Washington's problems to be structural, stating, the "root cause of the District's problem is not the existence of democracy, but rather a flawed system of home rule."¹⁶⁷ The answer, the review argued, was to "enhance political autonomy and financial efficacy," not reduce it.¹⁶⁸

The debate over democracy for the District continued to thrive through the end of the decade. Residents began mobilizing once again behind democracy as local groups such as DC Vote took up the fight for voting rights. Nevertheless, as the twentieth century due to a close, the residents of the nation's capital remained under the control of Congress.

CONCLUSION:

Race has shaped politics in the District of Columbia throughout the city's history. Even before African American men could vote in the District, white residents mobilized to restrict the freedoms of the city's free black population and argued adamantly against black suffrage. During Reconstruction the federal government enfranchised black male residents of the District, but only for a short period. As the national political climate became more conservative and white resentment of black suffrage grew, Congress

¹⁶⁴ *Washington Post*, 6 April 1995, quoted in Meyers, *Public Opinion*, 99. *Washington Post*, 26 March 1995, quoted in Meyers, *Public Opinion*, 99.

¹⁶⁵ *The Economist*, 24 February 1995, quoted in Meyers, *Public Opinion*, 99.

¹⁶⁶ George F. Will, "Unfit for Home Rule," *Washington Post*, 14 August 1997, <http://www.lexisnexis.com>.

¹⁶⁷ "Democracy or Distrust? Restoring Home Rule for the District of Columbia in the Post-Control Board Era," 2060.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 2062

revoked voting rights for all District citizens. Over the next century, many racist white members in Congress often dominated the city's government, neglecting the needs of the city's growing black population.

Throughout the civil rights period, the District experienced expanding democracy. Though oppositionists led by Southern segregationists presented a large barrier against the voting rights for Washingtonians, by the end of the 1970s, District residents gained the right to elect a local government and a non-voting delegate to Congress. However, Congress still retained ultimate legislative power over the district, and it exercised its ability to control District affairs in the final decades of the twentieth century. As the century drew to a close, in a climate of conservative white backlash to increased black political power, the District came under federal rule.

While racist sentiments often guided the motives of those opposed to democracy for the District, these attitudes became less explicit over time. However, matters of race continued to define the struggle for democracy and DC voting rights proponents often discussed the issue in a racial light. Opponents generally ceased to voice blatantly racist objections, citing constitutional concerns and concerns about the District's ability to govern itself in a manner of which they approved. Yet in the face of these objections, certain questions arise: Who in particular do Congress's present policies towards the District affect? Which groups do and do not hold political and social power in our country? Why has Congress neglected, for so long, to address such a clear instance of a lack of democracy?

Upon the submission of three successfully balanced budgets, the home rule charter was restored in the District of Columbia in 2001. However, Congress still retains ultimate legislative power over the city, and District residents today lack full political, economic, or judicial autonomy. The city has no voting representatives in the House or the Senate and continues to fight for its democratic rights. This past year, Congress members introduced two bills addressing District democracy. The "District of Columbia Fairness in Representation Act" proposes to provide the District a vote in the House on the grounds that Utah, the state next in line to receive an extra representative according the United States Census, is granted an extra delegate as well. Representative Eleanor Holms Norton's "No Taxation Without Representation Act of 2005" calls for voting representation for Washingtonians in both the Senate and the House.

The presence of racism in the struggle for democracy in the District is reflective of larger national trends. Throughout United States history, racism has prevented the country from realizing its full potential for democracy. The case of District voting rights speaks to the heart of the hypocrisy of American democracy. While purporting to uphold ideals of democracy and freedom for all, the country has often let the destructive influence of racism dictate its policies.

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