The D.C. Home Rule Movement
1966 - 1973

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Washington D.C. is an enigma. It is a large city, home to over five-hundred thousand people, and center of a metropolitan population nearing three-million people. In many ways, though, it is a company town. Other than government, the District has no significant industries; it is neither a port nor a railway hub, there are almost no factories within the District, and the city boasts few natural resources.

For many who live there, work defines the city. They come from elsewhere to work in or around politics. And though they may raise children and grow old within the city’s limits, they rarely classify themselves as “Washingtonians.” Instead they are Texans or Californians or New Yorkers living in a strange, hybrid city that is their home but not their heritage.

There is, however, another less transient Washington. Populated largely by blacks and increasingly by the poor, its roots lie in District soil. These Washingtonians or their parents came to the city not for politics, but for jobs, family, and big city opportunities in a town with a southern pulse. Though this Washington is larger and more stable than the other, it is nevertheless a “Secret City,” hidden by the neo-classical facades and global significance of the national capital.

This paper was born of a desire to understand the District’s divisions beyond the overly simplistic classifications of race. As a District native, and the child of a New Yorker and a Louisianian who have lived in the District for thirty years, I wanted to
explore what it means to be a Washingtonian. Or, perhaps more accurately, I wanted to
discover why the term “Washingtonian” means so little. I did not understand why the city
in which I found so much beauty and took so much pride struck others as an eminently
livable, completely soulless metropolitan.

Assuming this lack of civic identity was somehow unique to the District, I looked
to the city’s abhorrent governmental structure as its root cause. Congress did not grant
the city home rule until 1973, and even then self-government was limited by continued
Congressional oversight of the city’s budget and laws. One scholar, Charles Wesley
Harris, had studied the history of Congress’ relations with the District; his work depicted
the city’s path to home rule as paved solely by Congressional will and committee
assignments. This thesis did not sit well with me. I had taken too many history courses
emphasizing the influence of ordinary people to accept the proposition that
Washingtonians themselves were unimportant to the outcome of home rule.

Expecting to prove the existence of a grassroots movement for home rule as I
began my study, I found considerably more complexity. Indeed, some citizens did agitate
for home rule; two organizations – the Free D.C. Movement and the Coalition for Self-
Determination for the District of Columbia – were founded expressly for the cause.
However it was unclear that those agitators or those organizers truly spoke for the city.
In the District, there were neither elections to sanction leaders, nor parties to reflect the
political inclination of the city’s residents. Occasional polls hinted at public opinion, but
surveys failed to distinguish issues which might motivate citizens to act from mere
complaints.
Public support was ultimately non-essential. More than citizen backing, media attention, political connections, and well-conceived strategy were assets for District reformers operating in a city without elected officials. As a result, District leaders led blindly, unsure where public support was strong or even necessary. The problem of placing Washingtonians within the home rule movement is the subject of the pages that follow.
Chapter One

Beginnings

In August 1997, Congress passed and President Bill Clinton signed the National Capital Revitalization and Self-Government Improvement Act, an appropriations bill designed in part to rescue the District of Columbia's nearly bankrupt pension fund. The package, which non-voting D.C. delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton helped design, arranged for the federal government to take control of Lorton prison and the city's court systems; increased the federal Medicaid contribution from fifty percent to seventy percent; transferred liability for the District's massive unfunded pension liability to the federal government; and proposed $300 million in federal tax reductions and incentives. Even though the proposed legislation eliminated an annual $660 million federal payment – offered in lieu of taxes on the Federal government's considerable land holdings in the city – the District's foes demanded greater restrictions upon the locally-elected government in return for the bailout. The Congress had created a federally-appointed control board to oversee the District's finances two years earlier; now they demanded even more power over the District government.

Fearing the appointment of a city manager, Norton sent a memorandum to Senator Launch Faircloth, chairman of the Senate Subcommittee on District affairs, offering a compromise: a series of reform committees comprised of the mayor, a city council member, the control board, the head of each of the District's nine most troubled government agencies, and expert management consultants. Faircloth liked the proposal,
but, according to Jonetta Rose Barras, “in the dead of night, his staff tacked on clauses that gave the control board complete authority over those nine agencies.” Allegedly preoccupied with the financial portions of the bill, Norton did not see the language that effectively ended self-government in the District until the next day—after the Senate vote.

Public reaction was divided along lines of race and class. Most viewed the shift in authority as a response to Mayor Marion Barry’s controversial leadership. As Barras put it, Barry had always been considered “a pariah on Capitol Hill, more tolerated than welcome.” More important, the four-term mayor, who in 1990 was convicted of misdemeanor possession of crack cocaine, had long since ignored the public good in favor of personal gain. A self-described “situationist,” Barry built a variety of coalitions that brought him victory over the course of his political career. However, his greatest support had always come from the underprivileged blacks for whom he had worked as a young civil rights activist and who stuck by him during his humiliating trial and incarceration. In 1994, Barry rode their support back to the mayor’s office, and though he never implemented the types of reforms that would have redeemed their faith, he was more than willing to offer the bone of racial antagonism and blame.

As Barry made it clear that he disdained whites and did not trust the black middle-class, a division emerged. Unable to beat Barry at the polls and without a political agenda of their own, many whites became willing to forgo democracy in favor of efficiency. Barras observes, “The Washington Post could publish the results of a District poll in which black and white views were antithetical: Whites thought the control board was doing a good job, blacks didn’t. Whites didn’t trust Barry; blacks did.” Consequently,
while the legislation incensed Barry supporters and a smattering of D.C. Statehood party activists, many District residents were overcome by ambivalence. The overwhelmingly Democratic city, once a hotbed of radical thought and black achievement, accepted the end of the District's twenty-three year home rule experiment without protest.

For his part, Barry rightly warned against putting too much blame on his shoulders: "The people who want to make this a Marion Barry problem need to look at all of this a bit closer. Marion Barry had nothing to do with Eleanor Holmes Norton losing her right to vote. Marion Barry had nothing to do with the elected D.C. Council being stripped of their power." Indeed, the events of Summer 1997 were much larger than Marion Barry. Home rule's end can be traced to its beginnings.

**THE CITY THAT WAS**

Prior to the Civil War, the District of Columbia was little more than an arbitrary boundary drawn by Congress. Within the District's sixty-four square miles there were two counties and two cities, each independently governed by its inhabitants. The War, however, increased the pressure for a single government. Between 1860 and 1870, the city's population increased an astounding seventy-five percent, from 75,080 to 131,700. The rapid growth illustrated the disarray of the District's governments and infrastructure: "The city was a mess. Its streets were mudpaths and its parks were weedpatches. There was talk in Congress about moving the capital elsewhere, perhaps St. Louis." The first steps toward a unified government began in 1861, when Congress established the Metropolitan Police District of D.C., the first government body responsible for the entire city. Ten years later, Congress responded to increasing community pressure by replacing
the existing governments with a single territorial one. The reorganization represented a compromise between the Congress and local officials pushing for greater control. In the new government, the President would appoint a governor for a term of four years, and eleven members of an upper legislative chamber, each for a term of two years. In addition, the reorganization made provisions for a non-voting delegate to the House of Representatives and created a popularly elected House of Delegates within the District, composed of twenty-two annually elected members.

Unification, however, was not motivated by a simple desire for efficiency and order; it was a deliberate effort to reduce black influence on city politics. Determined to make the District an example to the South, the Radical Republican Congress had extended the franchise to the District’s black voters in 1867 – a move which concerned white residents. As Martha Derthick points out, the “controversy centered over suffrage and secondarily over the division of authority between Congress and local officials.” Black people were indisputably central to the make up and identity of the District – by 1870 there were 43,404 living in the District, roughly one-third of the overall population. Derthick points out, “Negro suffrage did not revolutionize District government.” Yet black influence did not go unnoticed; in 1868 the black vote helped replace a conservative Democrat with a Republican mayor, Sayles J. Bowen.5 The unpopularity of Bowen’s government, even in the Republican Congress, assured change.

The announcement of President Ulysses Grant’s nominees for the governor’s council placated those who feared the new government would eliminate black influence. In addition to eight “undistinguished” white men, Grant’s nominees included three
respected black leaders: Frederick Douglass; John Gray, a caterer safely entrenched among Washington’s black aristocracy; and Adolphus Hall, “a miller deeply respected in the Negro community.” Grant also appointed John Mercer Langston, a veteran of the Freedmen’s Bureau and head of the Howard University Law School, legal counsel for the Board of Health. Indeed, the black appointees were generally far more qualified than their white counterparts, many of whom had only recently moved to the District. Confidence in black leaders may have increased as a result; at the peak of the territorial government five blacks were elected to the lower chamber of the District’s House of Delegates.

Although a significant number of blacks held prestigious positions, Douglass’ prediction that the plan would be “a step backward” for blacks proved correct. Their numbers were simply not large enough to carry much weight. Under the new government, blacks were forced to succumb to the machine-style leadership of Alexander “Boss” Shepard. The war and the resulting population explosion had ravaged the District’s infrastructure. Many shared Horace Greeley’s stinging assessment of Washington: “The rents are high, the food is bad, the dust is disgusting, the mud is deep and the morals deplorable.” As part of the February 1871 reorganization to facilitate – at the very least – improvements of the dust and mud, Congress granted broad powers to the Board of Public Works. Shepard seized the opportunity; Green writes, “In the three years that Shepard directed the Board of Public Works, modern Washington was created. Sewers and water mains were laid, the city was graded, the streets were extended and paved, parks were planted and fountains flowed.” Because his massive projects sharply reduced unemployment among the unskilled laborers who comprised the majority of the District’s
black population, Shepard demanded political allegiance in return. Workers were coerced into voting for a $4 million bond issue, and the high wage rates Shepard announced soon went to outside contractors who brought gang labor with them.

Shepard's reign was predictably short lived. In three years, he spent $20 million — more than three times the amount budgeted for the improvements. Shepard "successfully evaded specifics about how he spent the millions of tax dollars and borrowings allotted to the board for its 'comprehensive plan of improvements,'" leading many to conclude that the ambitious bureaucrat had kept much of the money for himself. Though three congressional inquiries (and subsequent research by historians) failed to show that Shepard ever profited from his enterprise, in 1874 Congress ended the territorial government that had made the District, as one scholar described it, "habitable but bankrupt." In its stead they created a three-man Board of Commissioners, appointed by the President, responsible for executing Congress' laws for the District. In 1878 the commissioner form of government was made permanent. It lasted until 1967.

After 1878, home rule found only ephemeral support both in the District and on Capitol Hill. In 1916, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) launched a brief campaign for "Negro manhood rights at the capital of the nation." However, the effort was derailed by poor timing. Surprisingly, President Woodrow Wilson's three commissioners exhibited no signs of racial prejudice, which was more than could be expected of a majority white electorate. Asked to risk a benevolent government for an elected one chosen by the two-thirds white majority, most blacks avoided the question. The consensus was that blacks would seek local political power
when whites convinced Congress to restore the franchise to the city. The willingness to
wait was buoyed by the hope that black heroism in the World War would lessen the racial
antagonism which seemed to be growing under Wilson’s administration. The black First
Separate Battalion had performed so well in France that even the District’s white
newspapers took note. The Washington Star remarked that the city would “surely” want
to stage a homecoming for the troops, since “every citizen of Washington – in fact the
United States – should feel proud of them.” The parade of soldiers, however, took place
before the First Separate Battalion returned home, and when whites revived the issue of
home rule after World War I, they did not seek black support. Alienated by their lack of
recognition in post-War celebrations – which the black press termed a “conspiracy of
silence” – blacks were not eager for home rule, which increasingly seemed like a white
cause.9

By the middle of the twentieth century it was clear that race and home rule were
inextricably intertwined. Twenty-eight percent of the District’s inhabitants were black;
self-government for the city would give blacks significant influence. Concern over the
prospect of the powerful black constituency home rule would entail became central to a
December 1943 Senate hearing on a bill for “Reorganization of the Government of the
District of Columbia.” Senator Patrick McCarran began the hearing by asking for open
discussion of black suffrage, a subject “people say you can’t talk about.” Ironically, the
racist assumptions of those who considered themselves friends of both races created
objections to home rule. Most notably, Clifton Howard, great-nephew of the founder of
Howard University, warned that extending suffrage to blacks would exacerbate racial
antagonism within the city by creating a potential majority from "the under-privileged, illiterate, proletarian class who would at once possess the balance of power and, in the near future, a majority of the voting citizenry." Despite the well reasoned responses of the home rule advocates, fear of a black electorate prevailed. More important, supporters of self-determination for the District were never able to draw upon a strong base of local support; even in the ideologically self-righteous atmosphere of war, home rule sparked sparse local attention. Self-government was ultimately an issue that interested those who wanted to change the status quo more than those content to renew it.

In the post-World War II era, home rule spasms occurred more frequently. In 1945, the Washington Post, a traditional home rule supporter, conducted an informal poll of its readers. Though too small to be statistically accurate, the poll found eighty percent of Washingtonians in support of District voting rights. A year later, the D.C. Board of Trade sponsored a plebiscite on the same issue. The poll suggested an emerging racial divide: sixty percent of white high school students, compared to a meager three percent of blacks overall, opposed self-government. In response "a group of well-informed citizens dedicated to combating local apathy organized a biracial Washington Home Rule Committee [in 1952]." The HRC’s membership was drawn exclusively from the city’s elite. By 1961, the Committee’s Board of Sponsors included four judges, two reverends, a rabbi, the wife of the Chief Justice, and Philip Graham, owner and publisher of the Washington Post. The group met monthly and organized occasional dinners and parties in support of home rule, but made no effort to recruit new members or spark community activism. Rooted in the comfort of the upper middle-class, the HRC was never willing to
push the debate. Relying upon influence alone, they lobbied the commissioners, president, and media for greater attention to home rule.

In addition to the HRC, the District of Columbia League of Women Voters was an active supporter of home rule. Enfranchising the District had officially been part of the League's national program since 1924; however, activism on the issue was sporadic even within Washington. A 1949 pamphlet titled, *Washington is Your City: Local Government in the District of Columbia*, exemplifies the interest and modesty of the D.C. League. The pamphlet explains the history and governmental structure of the District, demonstrates the city's deservedness by invoking statistical evidence such as population and World War II service figures. The suggested responses were uninspiring: one could “study the present structure of the District government,” “accept an assignment to jury duty as a privilege and a trust,” or encourage the media to focus on District affairs. There is no evidence that this early effort was either effective or continued.

The League was hardly alone in its lack of resolve – its periodic interest matched that of the city generally. The efforts of both the HRC and the D.C. League tended to mimic the waves of interest in the Congress. Ben Gilbert, *Washington Post* City Editor from 1945 to 1971 observed, “There would be some interest [in home rule], there would be some enthusiasm, it would go nowhere, it would be moribund for a while and then it would be picked up again.” Indeed, early District home rule efforts were pulled by federal initiative more than they were pushed by local concern. Fueled by the growth of the Federal government and the northward migration of southern blacks, Washington’s population surpassed 800,000 in the 1950 census. No longer a small government town,
Congress remained burdened with the responsibility of its oversight. As Senator Mike Monroney complained to Reader’s Digest, “Once when we were considering the British loan, we had to quit to decide whether rockfish ten inches long could be sold in Washington.” Most likely sharing Monroney’s sentiments, the Senate passed home rule measures six times from 1949 to 1965 only to watch them die in the House.

Only once, in 1965, did the Senate’s home rule bills pass the House, and the 1965 measure was so weak that no accord could be reached in conference. More often, the Senate’s work withered in the House District Committee, which had come under the control of southern Democrats determined to impose their conservative, segregationist policies on the District. From 1949 to 1973, the Committee was dominated by eight southern members, most notably chairman John McMillan, a corrupt South Carolina racist and savvy political operator. McMillan viewed the city as his personal plantation. Despite repeated documentation of the District’s relative lack of funds, McMillan asserted with patronizing magnanimity, “No other city in the nation is treated so generously with federal grants, federal payment or federal projects, paid for by taxpayers of all the states. Congress has provided liberally for the requirements of the District...” McMillan’s authority over the city was total; he held ultimate control “over almost every aspect of life in the city, from parking space assignments to public employee payrolls.” In addition to an autocratic desire for power over the voiceless District, McMillan and others on the House District Committee realized what home rulers would only reluctantly admit: home rule was a civil rights issue.

Fearful that anti-black prejudice would preclude reform, home rule supporters
adopted an ideologically driven approach. Gilbert explained, “There was an effort by home rule advocates to keep it separate [from civil rights] for a long time because of the feeling if this gets identified as a racial issue it will die still born.” Home rule supporters simply asserted that self-determination was a basic right. In response to concerns over the potential for black power, they suggested that while blacks, as citizens, were entitled to a vote, the likelihood of a black government was small. A 1950 pamphlet titled “United States Citizens Without Votes,” illustrates this ambivalence:

The right to vote is the right of all good citizens, regardless of race. Citizens of other cities with large groups of Negroes are not deprived of suffrage. In none of these cities do the Negroes control the city government. The sample census of 1947 shows that Negroes comprise 28 percent of the population of Washington.\textsuperscript{15}

The pamphlet clearly targeted an audience not familiar with the District; in addition to the cautions above, it argued against the common misconception that most District residents could vote in other states and claimed that Washingtonians were not transient but settled. Because the pamphlet had a political aim, it is difficult to know if home rule supporters were as fearful of black control as they assumed their audience to be. The ivory tower absurdity of their argument, however, is obvious: District suffrage could not be pushed without comment on the black “situation.” Racial prejudices and fears simply ran too deep to be ignored.

In 1957, blacks became a majority in Washington. The 1960 census revealed that the black majority had grown to 53.9% of the overall population, and by 1965 blacks outnumbered whites in the District by ten percent. All these figures were historic firsts for a major American city; the disenfranchised capital, the ninth largest city in the country,
was by an increasing margin majority black. Derthick correctly observes, "This is the
central fact of demography in the nation's capital, and the central fact of politics as well."
Certainly the House District Committee was aware of the District's racial makeup.
Generally an undesirable committee assignment which most Congressmen avoided, old
school southern Democrats found a center of contained power in the Committee. As
Derthick notes,

Those Congressmen most interested in the District are interested for what
must be considered – from the District's point of view – the wrong
reasons. The Congressmen from the Washington suburbs and from the
Deep South who form the stable core of committee membership are there
fundamentally to serve the purposes of their own constituents.

Unable to stop the slow decay of racial barriers nationally, the committee members used their
authority "to exclude the Negro from participation in local government and to limit the
benefits that Negroes derive from government." For the segregationist block of the
House District Committee home rule was neither an ideological issue nor a constitutional
mandate: it was a point of pride, a last stand for the crumbling white supremacist
hierarchy.

Congressional racism was complicated by the fact that many viewed the District as
a model of black success and citizenship. Howard University had created a large
intellectual class, government employment provided a steady source of income, and the
demands of a large black community nourished a strong middle-class. The District's non-
white median income in 1959 was $4,800, which, although significantly less than the
median white income of $7,692, was more than double the national average of $2,242,
making Washington blacks among the wealthiest in the nation. Furthermore, many black
families were downright rich; nearly ten percent of non-white families boasted an income exceeding ten-thousand dollars. According to Green, "While the center for Negro writers and artists still lay elsewhere, Washington contained a larger proportion of colored intellectuals and doers than any other place in the country." Perhaps most important, the District's black population was the city's anchor; while whites moved in with the change of political administrations or out in search of suburban bliss, blacks remained generation after generation. More than whites, District blacks were part of a mature community with proud traditions and respected citizens. Institutions like Dunbar High School and Howard, and people like Archibald Grimké, Mary Church Terrell, Carter G. Woodson, and Charles Drew were nationally recognized examples of black excellence. To deny the District self-determination, then, required racism of the boldest sort: traditional arguments that blacks were too ignorant, too poor, or lacked a leadership class simply did not work.

THE SYMBOLIC CITY

By the 1960's, the District had become a lightning rod for those with racial, social, and political agendas. The southern Congressmen who controlled the House District Committee manipulated the city to illustrate the dangers of black political power and maintain white supremacy. Similarly, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) was drawn to Washington by a nationally oriented agenda: the District was to be SNCC's springboard into urban politics. In 1970 the League of Women Voters made enfranchising the District the focus of their Fiftieth Anniversary Convention, in the hopes that the campaign would both reaffirm the League's commitment to participatory democracy and demonstrate its muscle. And white liberals living in the District found in
the city’s unbalanced power structures a narcissistic outlet for their guilt. Indeed, self-determination for the District, as a fundamentally democratic cause, was a part of both the Democratic and Republican party platforms by 1950 and was specifically supported by Eisenhower, Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon. Nonetheless home rule languished.

One could, conceivably, lay blame for the home rule movement’s numerous false starts on the House District Committee. Harris offers this interpretation in his study of the District’s relationship with Congress, Congress and the Governance of the Nation’s Capital. He writes, “The turning point in this struggle to bring self-government to the nation’s capital came in 1972 with the defeat of Representative John L. McMillan (D-SC), Chairman of the House Committee on the District of Columbia, in his bid for reelection to Congress.” Not without some justification, Harris’ understanding gives enormous agency to individual congressmen. As mentioned earlier, the House District Committee killed many Senate home rule measures that were likely to receive the approval of the full House. However, Harris overlooks the impact of activism within the District, the importance of the 1968 riot in reshaping the home rule debate, and the effect of the District’s dynamic political climate in the late sixties. Chairman McMillan’s demise was the product of the same ideological forces that pushed home rule. The District contained in microcosm themes crucial to American politics in the late sixties and early seventies: racial conflict, class tension, and community control versus centralized policy, all of which challenged American democracy.

The District’s symbolism was directly related to the demographic simplicity of its population. Most notably, the District was a city colored almost exclusively in black and
white. The 1960 population of nonwhites other than blacks was only 6,956. In addition, as Derthick observes, “There [were] no important nationality groups in Washington.” A meager 5.1% of Washingtonians (38,971 people) were foreign born, and 55,557 were of foreign stock or mixed parentage. Derthick maintains, “None of these groups constitute[d] a discrete community.” Washington had relatively few immigrants and even fewer Latin and Asian-Americans complicating the cultural landscape of the city. Racially, Washington was a simple city: blacks were permanent residents and a growing majority, whites were transient and increasingly suburban. Moreover, years of discriminatory real estate practices separated the races not only by neighborhoods but by quadrants. By the late sixties, whites had confined themselves almost exclusively to the part of Northwest Washington west of Rock Creek Park (with the dwindling exception of the integrated Capitol Hill neighborhood). In a very real sense, the District was two cities. Though they often worked together, black and white Washingtonians rarely shared neighborhoods or free time. This separation spurred black resentment of white influence, and white fear that black resentment would turn to riot. As Green observed in 1965,

> Earnest citizens of both races striving to wipe out the Other Washington were only beginning to comprehend the frightening proportions of the problem. Whites who not very long ago believed that, because they were now ready to act, they could quickly bring a new order into being were awakening to a realization that they did not speak the same language as the people they wanted to help.  

The lack of home rule was, perhaps, the only problem shared by both communities.

Middle-class apathy accompanied racial antagonism; Washington was a white-collar, middle-class city with a bureaucratic mentality. The low rate of home ownership,
large number of unmarried people, the concentration of frequently reassigned military and diplomatic personnel, the quota system of federal employment (in which employees were recruited from around the country), and the lack of voting rights made civic pride difficult. Derthick notes, “To many people who live in Washington, the lack of a sense of community seems to be the outstanding characteristic of the place. I was told repeatedly that residents of Washington form little attachment to the city as a whole or to subcommunities within it.” Even Barry, who became the first to tap into the anger of the District’s ignored underclass, admitted, “People were kind of complacent here. A lot of people would think they were well off — you know, everything is all right, the federal government’s here, I got a good job, I’m not getting kicked in the butt everyday, and things are alright.” For decades Washingtonians lived comfortably enough to ignore the nuisances of congressional rule. Accustomed to the neglect and indifference of their governors, District citizens could absorb the consequences of delinquent rule. However, in the years after World War II, the District became, like most American cities, less middle-class. Poorer, blacker citizens, more dependent upon governmental policy, became a larger percentage of the city’s inhabitants. When these citizens made themselves heard the tenor of District politics changed.

Indeed, any study of home rule as a movement must address the series of dualities which define the District’s character. Under the historical microscope, the Washington of the late sixties and early seventies becomes eerily divisible; whether the lines be drawn between black and white, or middle-class and poor, the image is of a city without an identity. The District had no history as a self-governing community, and there were no
founding myths or larger-than-life leaders whose shared story symbolically conveyed what it meant to be a Washingtonian. Even the use of the term “the District” detaches the city’s inhabitant from the larger community. It indicates a place defined by boundaries alone. Caryl Rivers suggests, “In some ways, Washington is like a 35-year-old man who is dressed in knickers each day by his mother and taken to the sandbox in the park. So many of the facets of a mature personality have failed to develop. . . The sense of identity that seems so firmly clamped to other cities is missing.” Much of the immaturity Rivers describes can be attributed to national reluctance to allow the District to exist as a city independent of its role as capital. Washington bore the unique burden of having to reflect – somehow – the nation’s image and values. Because the need to maintain a showpiece for tourists and a home for ambassadors consumed the demands of the District’s residents, the sense of ownership which creates community was constantly undercut by the needs of a national capital.

By the mid-sixties the District had arrived at a crossroads. The passage of the Twenty-third Amendment on March 29, 1961, which granted the District three votes in the electoral college, had given groups like the HRC and the D.C. League hope that home rule could be achieved quietly. However, their aspirations were soon consumed by a larger struggle for civil rights nationally; the rhetoric and action of the civil rights movement had made the obvious injustice of the District’s situation too much to endure in quiet dignity. The District had become too black and too troubled – by crime, affordable housing shortages, and a failing school system – to present home rule in simple ideological terms. As they had to be, race and home rule were linked by the civil rights activists who
sought to free Washington. Though this approach was presented as pragmatic, it rested on a strict doctrine of black control and power. For many of the activists, success was measured by the number of black faces on television and in the boardroom. Elusive and immeasurable, community was taken for granted, and ultimately forgotten.
Chapter Two

In Fear of Riot

During the summer of 1962, at a luncheon between White House officials and District leaders, Attorney General Robert Kennedy turned to Washington Post owner and publisher Philip Graham and, according to a reliable source, said, "My people tell me this city is going to explode." Kennedy then relayed to Graham reports he had received from his Youth Division, and told Graham that he wanted to put together a one-time meeting of community leaders to discuss the problem and advise the executive of a course for the District. Among others, the group included Democratic Central Committee members Joe Rauh and Jim Reilly, D.C. League of Women Voters’ representative Joy Simonson, and Sterling Tucker, head of the Washington Urban League. Himself somewhat detached from the sources of news in the city, Graham expressed Kennedy’s concern to J.R. (Russ) Wiggins, the Post’s editor-in-chief, and city editor Ben Gilbert. Graham requested that the editors compile a report on the state of the District that would serve as background for the discussion.

The resultant report gave a broad overview of the District’s status and potential problems. Though it did not endorse the immediacy of the whisperings Kennedy had heard, it suggested that the city’s social, economic, and racial problems were grave. Administrative inattentiveness, Congressional under-funding, and general contempt for the city’s black majority threatened to undermine the stabilizing influence of the District’s prominent black middle-class. The report suggested that the District was decaying from
The editors had numerous recommendations and followed what has since become the central reasoning of the American left: more money for prevention of the ailments of poverty. The claims, however, held a particular validity and urgency in the District. Chronically under-funded by the Congress, Washington’s problems were more extreme than most. In 1962 more than eight-thousand families were on the waiting list for public housing, six-hundred children were turned away from kindergarten classes, 2,100 “slow and retarded” students were awaiting special class assignments, and low salaries prevented the employment of top-notch administrators. Though the report suggested possible solutions, each was the governmental equivalent of sticking one’s finger in a leaking dam. Home rule, which the report regarded as inevitable, was the implicit foundation of any long-term solution.

After reading the report, group members asked Graham what short-term steps could be taken to facilitate the report’s long-term goals. Graham turned to Gilbert, who recommended that the White House appoint a special assistant for District affairs, an idea originated by Nevada Senator Alan Bible, a long-time District ally. Graham nominated Charles Horsky for the position, a prominent attorney whom Graham knew from work.
Horsky had done for the *Post* during its merger with the *Times Herald.* Essentially, Horsky was to be an in-house lobbyist for the District, responsible for reminding executive policy makers to include the District in their plans. Within the year, Horsky was added to the Administration, where he remained until President Lyndon Johnson reorganized District government in 1967.

The modesty of the meeting's result belies the significance of its occurrence. In the absence of home rule, executive responsibility for the District ultimately resided with the President. Most of the time, however, the District was not newsworthy enough to merit presidential attention. To the national media there was nothing unique in the increase in the District's crime, the deterioration of its schools, or the desperation of its poor. Those who examined the city's problems with care could plainly see that Congress' unwillingness to appropriate needed funds was far more significant to the District's condition than any possible shortcomings on the part of the President or his commissioners.

Robert Kennedy recognized that riot would be a different story. As Gilbert's report observed, "[Washington] is the Nation's Capital, watched by the whole world, and watched first-hand by the diplomatic corps." For reasons other than its populace, the District was an intensely monitored city indeed. According to one internal *Post* memorandum, 110 foreign newspapers, radio and television stations had representatives in the District. More important, Washington was a symbolic city, not only because of its status as the nation's capital, but by virtue of the American public's familiarity with its historic edifices. The Lincoln Memorial, the White House, and the Capitol were all easily
identifiable icons that reflected core national values such as freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. A D.C. riot would be more than an interlude of lawlessness and an exercise of underclass frustration; it would be the material of Pulitzer Prize winning photographs. It did not take much to imagine television cameras spreading images of black rioters battling white police in front of national landmarks across the country. Understandably, no President would want the District to riot on his watch. Though in 1962 Kennedy was precocious in his concern, fear of riot became widespread as the civil rights movement failed to cure the ills of the black urban poor. By 1966 riot prevention was the most important duty of those responsible for the District.

"THE MOVEMENT IS LIKE A WAR"

Atop this fear of urban insurrection, District politics began to change. A new wave of activists, younger and more militant than their well-connected predecessors, entered the city and demanded change with an immediacy that alarmed administrators trying to cool the heat of black resentment. Recognizing the symbolic importance of the capital city, the Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) "chose the District as its first major experiment in urban – as opposed to rural – reform." To lead the D.C. effort, SNCC executive field secretary James Forman selected Marion Barry, an early SNCC president who had already been sent north to raise funds in New York. Though SNCC’s goals were not limited to home rule, Forman and Barry both saw the fact that D.C. residents “still don’t have the right to vote,” as the city’s foremost problem. Moreover, as the Washington Afro-American (by far the most persistent supporter of home rule among Washington’s printed news) observed, “The prospect of home rule for
Washington brings with it the prospect of a colored mayor. Barry and SNCC arrived in the city with hopes not only of creating positive change for black people, but creating a forum for black power.

Barry’s entrance into the District was both dramatic and aggressive. Within six months of his arrival in the politically moribund city, Barry organized a one-day boycott of the District’s public transportation system in response to a proposed raise in the bus fare. Though his estimation that seventy-five-thousand regular riders supported the January 24, 1966 boycott, depriving the Metropolitan Area Transit Commission (MATC) of roughly eighteen-thousand dollars, was undoubtedly high, MATC refused the privately-owned bus company’s request for a fare hike. More important, the boycott’s effect extended beyond the price of public transportation; it suggested that average Washingtonians could be moved to make demands upon their government. Sam Smith, author of a retrospective on the District, Captive Capital, wrote, “Never had so many Washingtonians done anything so irregular and contrary to official wishes. The assumption that D.C. residents would passively accept the injustices of their city was shattered.” Moreover, the victory was an affirmation for the naturally cocksure Barry. Although he never exhibited doubt, there were no assurances that SNCC’s tactics would resonate with the murkier frustrations of urban blacks. The boycott indicated that Barry and SNCC would be leaders in the District’s struggle.

Barry brought a new style of black leadership to the District. Washington’s famed black elite were wealthy and patient, interested in progress, but also concerned with their public image; they earned status through time. Barry represented a different demographic.
Born poor in the tiny farm town of Itta Benna, Mississippi, his speech reflected his roots and his rhetoric contained the frustrations of one who knew poverty. And he was unwilling to wait for the majority to come around to his view. "We tried to lead by example," he explained, "If you want to picket, I'd go picket first. If you want to sit-in, I sit-in first." Having demonstrated that Washingtonians could become politically active, Barry warned that boycott would be used as a weapon for home rule. He told the Post, "We don't intend to stop at this point. The people have power... they know what they can do, they believe in themselves." Barry's words reflect a conceptual transition.

Groups such as the Washington Home Rule Committee, the D.C. League of Women Voters, and the D.C. Democratic Central Committee, had identified Congress as the source of power with respect to home rule. Accordingly, they focused on lobbying sympathetic Congressmen, media attention, and backroom politics. Barry's emphasis on citizen participation made him a unique entity in the District. To citizens accustomed to powerlessness, his energy and confidence were invigorating.

Barry followed his rhetoric with action. Four weeks after organizing the bus boycott, he formed the Free D.C. Movement and announced plans to boycott businesses that refused to support home rule. At issue was the Washington Board of Trade's active opposition to self-determination for the District. According to John W. Diggs, owner of a barber shop and beauty salon and a Free D.C. leader, the Board of Trade planned to raise $100,000 to fight home rule in 1966. Even more disturbing were letters Board President F. Elwood Davis had sent in November to newspapers across the country which claimed, "The fact is that a great many Washingtonians - including the overwhelming majority of
local civic, professional, and business leaders – are opposed to pending home rule legislation.” Though the statements had drawn criticism from the D.C. Coalition of Conscience (a group of leading District clergy members), and the Board could offer no evidence to bolster its claim, it refused to back off its assertion. Barry viewed the Board’s obstinacy as a slap in the face of District citizens. As he later recalled, “Here they were making money off of us, the District, [and] opposing what the majority of us wanted to do in terms of self-determination.” In response, he planned a boycott that would target those merchants who contested home rule. As it was first announced, each store owner would be asked to sign a petition in support of home rule; to send telegrams to President Johnson and certain members of Congress expressing their support; to display a “Free D.C.” sticker in his store window; and to make a contribution supporting Free D.C.’s home rule drive. The goal, said Diggs, was to equal the $100,000 the Board of Trade planned to raise to fight home rule.9

Understandably, the plan was attacked as extortion by home rule sympathizers and supporters alike. In response to Free D.C.’s announcement, House District committee chairman John McMillan called a special, closed door hearing at which a U.S. Attorney informed the committee that any attempt to demand money in return for patronage would violate anti-racketeering statutes. The Afro also found Free D.C.’s tactics too extreme. With a note of regret it observed, “The movement has every right, and indeed an obligation to demonstrate against those who would block home rule. However, we can not agree with the proposal to force merchants to contribute money as the price of avoiding boycott.” Indeed, Free D.C. quickly found itself completely isolated by its
misstep. Aware that his plan needed community support to entertain any hopes of success, Barry softened his stance. At a press conference on February 24 – three days after Free D.C. had revealed its intentions – movement leaders announced that contributions would be voluntary. On the stage with Barry were Coalition of Conscience members Walter Fauntroy, Reverend at the New Bethel Baptist Church, the Right Reverend Paul Moore Jr., and Suffragan Episcopal of Washington, Edward Hailes, who also served as executive director of the Washington National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). All three squirmed under reporters’ questions as they tried to distance themselves from the movement’s extremism. Moore claimed he was “shocked and distressed” by the original plan, and Fauntroy explained, “This was never the intention of the movement.”

By contrast, Barry was unrepentant. He asserted that the Free D.C. Movement had been victimized by “distortions and outright lies,” and emphasized that the Movement was committed for the long haul, implying that it would not be scared by negative publicity. More important, Barry plainly exhibited a distrust of the media and an anger with the establishment that Washingtonians recognized from national news but had never witnessed in their own leaders. In a city where thousands lived off compromise, Barry was unwilling to deal. He would change course when he made a mistake, but he would not be humbled by his errors. Barry’s demeanor personified the explosion Kennedy feared in 1962; the same impatience which could accept extortionist tactics might rationalize riot.

The Free D.C. boycott became the first in a series of arguments which polarized the political climate of the District. Free D.C. made home rule front-page news. Whereas
past efforts had sought the allegiance of Congressmen, and were therefore ignored by District residents, Free D.C. lobbied Washingtonians for their support. The questions posed to District residents were clear: Do you support home rule for the District, and if so, is boycott an appropriate means of working towards this end? Although Barry's unveiled radicalism was a difficult pill for many to swallow, the Coalition of Conscience was a respected organization and the participation of its leaders gave Free D.C. a stamp of legitimacy among Washington's black elite.

Once the movement backed off its demand for financial contributions, the boycott gained more widespread approval. The *Afro* claimed, "Now that the threat to boycott merchants if they do not contribute to a campaign in support of Home Rule has been removed, the selective buying campaign of the Free D.C. Movement has become completely acceptable." In addition, the boycott garnered the support of Tucker and the Washington Urban League. In his public statement, Tucker noted that a boycott "should be accepted as a legitimate means of expression." The Urban League's endorsement was a significant gain for Barry's group; the Urban League represented the elites of Washington black society and was accepted by whites as its principal voice. Unexpectedly, while the conservative Urban League added its support, the more progressive NAACP retracted its backing of the movement.12 NAACP leader Hailes indicated that the NAACP's discomfort with the idea of an economic boycott led to the group's change of mind — a strange hypothesis in light of the fact that Free D.C. had defined itself by its planned use of economic pressure.

Likewise, Free D.C.'s plans sparked similar uncertainty among the District's major
newspapers. Both the *Post* and the more conservative *Star* refused editorial comment on the boycott, although the tenor of their coverage suggested both considered the proposed action extreme. In response to what he deemed unduly critical treatment from the press, Fauntroy pointed out, “We in the leadership have presented time and time again impassioned pleas for relief in hearings; we have lobbied with Congressmen and met with the businessmen who should be giving leadership to our struggle; we have picketed and marched and still we are no closer to the right to vote.” His frustration was echoed by others. In response to the frightened complaints of District store-owners one Washingtonian suggested, “If the District of Columbia merchants checked their wrath briefly, and considered the current boycott in the context of American history, they would recall that American independence was launched with a boycott – against tea and tea merchants.”13 Despite their difference in perspective, both letters reflected Free D.C.’s unspoken obstacle: home rule was too obviously right. The only honest arguments against home rule involved racist fears; there was little legitimacy to assertions that the city must be protected as a home to the federal government or that the founders intended to deny District citizens democratic rights. The simplicity of the issue ideologically, however, rendered it passionless. No one would argue against home rule in a way that would force supporters to strengthen their beliefs. With the exception of the mostly nameless Board of Trade, Free D.C. had no enemy greater that general apathy.

The expectation of apathy made Free D.C.’s initial success all the more startling. The group focused first on a thirteen block corridor of stores along H Street in between 2nd and 15th Streets in Near Northeast. Barry recalled, “We were very strategic; we started
with the smaller \{stores\} in the community – the ones that get hurt by boycotting.” By March 4, the day before picketing was scheduled to begin, approximately 150 of the area’s 300 stores displayed the orange and black Free D.C. stickers. According to a Post report, stores with the sticker appeared to outnumber those without. The success was the result of two days of canvassing by neighborhood workers, and, in compliance with the movement’s new directives, cooperating stores received a form suggesting they support the movement by sending telegrams to the White House, wearing Free D.C. buttons, or picketing the Board of Trade.  

Protest began the next day. Barry and his allies cruised up and down H Street in a car with two loudspeakers mounted on top, encouraging shoppers to patronize only those stores which displayed the Free D.C. sticker. The decision was presented to shoppers in stark terms, “Shop only at stores where you see the ‘Free D.C.’ sticker. Anyone with no sticker is your enemy,” Barry declared. Shoppers entering stores that did not support the boycott were met by Free D.C. activists handing out pamphlets explaining why non-compliant stores should be avoided. According to the Post, however, “only a few decided to shop elsewhere,” and managers of several stores without stickers reported no loss of business. What businesses did not lose in their bottom line they may have risked in perception. The boycott received front page coverage from the city’s newspapers, and on the eve of Free D.C.’s first citizen picket Barry reported that 208 of the 235 contacted merchants had signed the home rule petitions.  

Despite press coverage that frequently described the Free D.C. Movement as “militant” and “controversial,” Barry was able to frame the terms of the public debate.
While opposing businesses complained that the boycott compromised their right to free political expression, Barry maintained that the freedom of District citizens was the true issue. The stickers merchants displayed were indicative of Free D.C.'s perspective: one circumscribed the words “Free D.C.: Right to Vote” around breaking chains, another with the same slogan depicted a black face behind prison bars. In addition, after a community meeting the night before picketing was to begin, thirty people walked down H Street chanting, “Freedom, freedom,” and singing adapted civil rights staples: “Ain’t gonna let no merchants turn me ’round,” “This little light of mine, I’m gonna let it shine all up and down H Street,” and “We shall overcome the Board of Trade.” Though there is no statistical evidence indicating citizen support or disapproval of Free D.C.'s methods, in the context of the time white store owners confronting black activists employing civil rights rhetoric could not be unaware of the precariousness of their position.

Indeed, Barry soon was able to declare the H Street operation a success. Of the 260 merchants Free D.C. ultimately contacted, 225 agreed to sign the petitions and display the stickers. At a rally in celebration of Free D.C.'s success, Barry announced that the group would shift its focus to an 11-block section of 14th Street Northwest, between U Street and Park Road. The new location was a natural target for the group; the area was predominantly black, had a high rate of crime, and was a hotbed of racial tension. Most important, the small businessmen in the area were heavily dependent upon black patronage. Fully cognizant of the area’s significance, Barry manipulated the tension his activities were sure to add. In characteristic fashion, he warned 14th Street businesses that he would not soften his methods in order to ease the neighborhood’s brewing discontent,
"The Movement," he argued, "is like a war." 17

Yet what makes Barry such an intriguing figure is that he could speak hot anger to the media and also charm store owners into supporting his cause. The Post recounted an exchange Barry had with the white female manager of a woman’s dress shop. The shop manager, who was married to a policeman, was unsympathetic to Barry’s message. She told Barry that his campaign was glorified blackmail and that he ought to devote his efforts to helping children and fighting crime, rather than criticizing white people all the time. She concluded her tirade by exclaiming, “You know, I’m so sick of this I could drop dead . . . Are you afraid to go to your car at night?” Unruffled, Barry responded with a smile, “I’m going to make it a project of mine to come back and convince you,” and quietly left the store. 18 There is no way of knowing if Barry kept his word, or if in keeping his word he managed to convince the shop manager; however, the incident speaks to the character of the Free D.C. Movement and the dichotomy between its impact and its practice. Because of Barry’s often vituperative public statements, Free D.C. was understandably depicted as an organization of militants who adhered to black power ideology and hated white people. Yet Barry was more pragmatic than dogmatic; he sought workable change over revolution. While the media anointed Barry spokesman for the poor blacks most likely to riot, his political roots lay in a student movement which had created an expectation of success – and thus faith in the system – the urban poor simply could not share.

Indeed, as the boycott effort became an extended battle and media attention was drawn elsewhere, Barry worked to involve students in the Free D.C. struggle. On May 6,
he announced plans to hold a series of rallies, debates, and publicity campaigns to raise support for home rule in the District's colleges. Students from each of the city's major institutions – Georgetown, George Washington, Howard, American, Catholic, and Trinity – volunteered to make home rule an issue on their campuses. In addition to injecting the enthusiasm of a new wave of activists, Barry hoped that the students could make self-determination a national cause. He urged the students to “actively campaign for a Free D.C.” in their home states and make the matter an issue in Congressional elections. The college campaign, however, could not win back the momentum Free D.C. had lost since its opening success.

Barry recognized that Free D.C. needed community support in order to be effective, “I think all movements have to, as a philosophy, have the people. You’ll never have all the people active, and you may not have all the people out doing what I’m doing, out picketing, but you have to be seen as a people’s movement, a mass movement. Otherwise you won’t get very far.” Though Free D.C. was conceived as a people’s movement, it never was able to generate support that made merchants fear for their economic lives. Nor was it able to make Washingtonians passionate about home rule. An October 1966 Post poll revealed that though sixty-nine percent of Washingtonians favored home rule, it ranked a lowly sixth on the list of community priorities. As one black woman put it, “Can you eat and sleep home rule? Can they make jobs with home rule? What are they going to do when they get it?” Free D.C. never overcame that type of apathy. While Barry made home rule into an economic issue for its opponents, he never illustrated that it could be a boon to District citizens. As a result, Barry could rally
enough supporters to picket a specific store, but he could not generate the support needed to scare the big capital firms which dominated the Board of Trade into changing their position. Corporations like Washington Gas and Light, the Potomac Energy and Power Company, and the Board itself proved immune to thirty-person lunch-time pickets. For these companies perception mattered little, and Free D.C. was unable to affect them economically.

Three months after its ambitious beginnings, the Free D.C. Movement was coming unraveled. The Coalition of Conscience, which had stuck with Free D.C. despite its distaste for Barry's sensationalism, became frustrated with the movement's stagnation. While Barry continued to picket large utilities, Coalition leaders announced that they would target parking lot, real estate, and insurance interests within the city, which they claimed received "special privileges" from city administrators. One month later, the Washington Young Republican and Young Democratic Clubs joined with youths from the Americans for Democratic Action and the NAACP to form Youth Organizations United (YOU) for home rule. Denounced by Barry as a needless arrangement that would "only confuse people in the community," YOU leader Lonnie King countered that the newly formed group would approach home rule differently from Free D.C. "We are not saying that the Free D.C. Movement is irresponsible, but we feel we are a responsible group," King told the Post. Although Free D.C. continued for some months longer, even Barry recognized that the organization had failed to attract the support it needed. During the early days of the H Street campaign, Fauntroy had promised the media that boycotting would be conducted not by Free D.C., but by community residents who would themselves
spread the boycott. That kind of community-based initiative never developed; District activists claimed to involve “the people,” but like civil rights leaders across the country, they “never fully repudiated the leadership ideology which reinforced the movement’s character as an elite brokerage relation with powerful whites outside the South.” Free D.C. needed citizen participation, but was not defined by it. The group’s decisions were made by professional activists who viewed District residents as too fickle to maintain a campaign. In what marked the beginning of a long trend, District residents never outgrew the training wheels Free D.C.’s leadership provided.

Free D.C. opened the door to political activism in the District without identifying a lasting target for complaint. Rather than alleviate the frustration of the previously silenced, activism only made them more conscious of their disadvantaged state. As more and more voices were added to the bureaucratic entanglement of District government reform, patience and civility became increasingly rare. The community leaders best able to express frustration and least afraid of negative media attention had the greatest impact. Vituperation, however, is generally not an effective tool of reform. In the same way that Barry made the Free D.C. boycott a question of “freedom,” others like him reduced equally complicated issues to black and white terms. School reform discussions were condensed into an angry debate over the tenure of the superintendent. Likewise, discussion of the District’s growing crime problem devolved into to a series of protests and confrontations over police methods. Though in each case the concerns raised were important, the divisive measures employed only aggravated the fears of blacks and whites, rich and poor.
Yet blaming District leaders for their lack of statesmanship is like blaming an unwanted child for being born: both reflect a problem not of their own making. District activists were not responsible for years of Congressional neglect, nor could they be held accountable for the Commissioner system of government, which seemed inefficient by design. Rather, they served as mouthpieces for citizens who had grown to expect more from government than was offered. Impatience stemmed from years of headlines boasting progress for blacks that could not be felt within the District's boundaries. The civil rights movement had created an expectation of change that was unfulfilled for Washingtonians.

**D.C. SCHOOLS: ISSUES IN MICROCOSM**

No conflict reflected the incongruence between government policy and citizen desires more clearly than the battle which emerged between D.C. School Superintendent Carl Hansen and Action Community Team (ACT) spokesman Julius Hobson over Hansen's controversial track system. By 1966, District schools were perhaps the most egregious example of Congressional misrule. Cutting the Commissioners' school budget (which itself was reduced from the School Board request) had become a tradition on Capitol Hill. The *Post* observed,

> District school requests, by the time they get to Capitol Hill, never–literally, *never*–represent what the District schools really need to do a good job for their pupils: they represent a distillation of what the Superintendent and the Board of Education and the Commissioners and the Bureau of the Budget figure they can ask for without offending the prejudices of Congress.

Moreover, the few funds that were offered were unfairly administered. In neighborhoods where average family income exceeded eleven-thousand dollars per year, elementary
schools spent more than four-hundred dollars per student. By comparison, in neighborhoods where family income was below five-thousand dollars, elementary schools averaged roughly three-hundred dollars per student. Schools in privileged neighborhoods operated under capacity, while in many other neighborhoods the same schools were over-filled with students. Along those same lines, the number of temporary teachers in low-income schools was more than twice that in prosperous ones.\textsuperscript{22}

The results were devastating. In neighborhoods where families were most dependent upon the public school system, teachers were ill-equipped to teach and students were unprepared to learn. In response, Hobson, along with four other black parents, filed suit against Hansen and the School Board; it was the first attempt to end \textit{de facto} segregation in a major urban school system. Specifically, the case attacked the track system Hansen had created. Tracks separated “slow” learners from more advanced students, ostensibly freeing each group to learn at a comfortable speed. In practice the system was a means of maintaining the pre-integration structure of D.C. schools. Hobson, an economist by training, testified that during the 1963 - 1964 school year eighty-two to eighty-five percent of all school children were classified in basic or general tracks (the two lowest levels, both non-college bound). Eighty-five percent of the District’s pupils were black. In addition, Hobson pointed out that in areas with median incomes above ten-thousand dollars more than ninety-two percent of the students were enrolled in regular or honors tracks.\textsuperscript{23}

The trial received consistent coverage from District newspapers and had impact long before Judge J. Skelly Wright handed down his decision. The Board of Education
voted to end the track system on August 9, 1966, less than three weeks after Hobson’s damned testimony. Although the Board offered neither a replacement system nor a timetable for the reform, it stated that it would seek to implement such “innovative methods of classroom organization as team teaching and ungraded primaries.”

Significantly, the vote came while Hansen was on vacation. Normally, Hansen was able to dominate the School Board and protect the integrity of the track system he designed. Now, however, he had no choice but to respond to the Board’s wishes. Though the vote had not replaced the track system, Board member Benjamin Alexander made the point clear, “The track system is on its way out. That’s what we’re saying.” Hansen acquiesced. In what the Post termed “a major departure from his past policies,” Hansen moved in January to abandon the track system as an experiment in 21 schools.24

The shift in policy reflects more than mere surrender to the inevitable. The track system had been the centerpiece of Hansen’s tenure as superintendent; its rejection could only be viewed as a rejection of his educational philosophy. Moreover, Hansen was an obstinately proud administrator who did not go along with orders that contradicted his will easily. Indeed, unwilling to admit that the educational model he implemented unfairly discriminated against poor black children, Hansen ultimately resigned as superintendent when the Board refused to let him appeal Wright’s decision in the Hobson case.25

Consequently, it seems as though it would have been in character for Hansen to maintain educational tracks until the Board offered a replacement system. It is impossible to know with certainty why Hansen conceded, however, when considered in the context of the District’s boisterous school debate, it is likely that Hansen sensed the impatience and fury
of public opposition to his system.

Leading the charge against Hansen was Hobson, the District’s most entrenched radical. An unabashed Marxist and atheist who once labeled himself the city’s “gadfly,” between 1960 and 1964 Hobson led roughly eighty picket lines on approximately 120 retail stores, leading to the creation of more than five-thousand jobs for District blacks. In addition, he had distinguished himself with blunt speech that awed some and alienated most. A letter Hobson sent to the Post, in response to Martin Luther King’s attempts to end housing discrimination in Chicago through non-violent protest, illustrates the nature of his rhetoric and the quality of his thought:

Psychiatrists tell us that everybody wants to be loved by someone, and if Martin Luther King wants to be loved by Chicago’s racist realtors, that is his problem . . . To be blunt about it, there is no crueler trick to play than to go to a community, raise false hopes without creating a structure to sustain them, organize the opposition, and then cut out to strut on another stage.

Though he was a willing spokesman for many causes and thrust himself into the center of District politics through opinions-be-damned persistence, Hobson was not, himself, a leader. Impatient and frustratingly independent, Hobson had been ousted from his job as head of the D.C. branch of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) and was forced to form his own group –ACT. ACT, however, gave Hobson a leadership role in name only. More accurately, he was the District’s ultimate barometer: an indicator of where frustrations lay and where protest thought was headed. And many of those who watched Hobson noticed that by 1967 he was “talking tougher.”

On March 15, 1967, backed by a group of angry citizens, Hobson interrupted a
School Board meeting to protest the reappointment of Hansen. With characteristic obstinacy, Hobson forced administrators to listen to a series of witnesses depicting the backward state of District schools. One teacher recounted how school officials at Hine Junior High School had told her to "just bring the students along as far as you can and don't expect too much." She told the Board she was not allowed to include Lorraine Hansberry's play, *A Raisin in the Sun*, in her curriculum because it had a "racial theme," and added that a newspaper written by her eighth-grade students was banned because it accused teachers of using corporal punishment. The Board also heard from a student who told of being hit with a paddle by a substitute teacher. "When I told her it was against the rules to hit a student, she said they didn't mean her because she was a substitute." Another student wielded a three-quarter inch thick wooden paddle and testified, "I have been hit with a paddle like this," and plead with heart-rending eloquence, "Books are more needed for children to learn than weapons. Would you please destroy these weapons, sir?" These testimonials only scratch the surface of discontent with the educational system. The very circumstances of the meeting – an appointed School Board and unpopular Superintendent meeting with angry students and teachers – suggests both the problems of non-representative rule and its potential for sowing resentment.

Frustrations were confirmed by fact when standardized test scores released in April revealed that District schools were, indeed, failing to teach their students. Reading scores indicated that fully one-third of public school pupils – forty-thousand students – were two years or more behind their proper grade level. The tests proved that the track system was a miserable failure: the average basic-track ninth grader read at a third grade level. In an
uncharacteristically feisty editorial, the *Post* dismissed the common excuse that little more could be expected from the children of poor, uneducated families, "The reading scores in Washington’s schools are an indictment of the school system and the city that tolerates it."

Basic track students, it claimed, were being prepared for "careers in illiteracy." Normally patient, the *Post's* less tolerant tone was indicative of a city-wide sense that the school system was in crisis.

Eager to demonstrate Washingtonians' contempt for the administration of their schools, Hobson attempted to organize a May-day boycott. He proposed that students attend one-day freedom assemblies, rather than support the District schools which enslaved them with the shackles of a poor education. Enthusiasm for the boycott, however, proved sparse. School officials reported "heavier-than-normal" absences, but Hobson fell well short of his goal of five-thousand students. While Hansen praised students for their "rejection" of "hysterical incitement to disorder," the boycott's failure was neither a victory for the superintendent nor a loss for Hobson. Indeed, as one college-bound student pointed out in a letter to The *Post*, those who left school May 1 "risked their grades, college recommendations, and good records." Presumably the boycott was poisoned by school officials unwilling to endure the embarrassment of visible student protest. The *Washington Free Press*, an "alternative" newspaper, attributed the lack of activism to the absence of an effective, elected leadership: "Such a breakdown in communications is almost inevitable in a city without a single means of expressing its desires through the ballot box." Indeed, more than likely, boycott simply did not seem relevant to District parents and students. Years of frustrating experience had shown that
no one listened when Washingtonians complained politely.

In the context of 1967, when disagreement over civil rights, the Vietnam War, and concern over America's inner cities had increased the volume and breadth of political demands, the silence of District parents was deafening. Previously, lack of activism among District citizens had been interpreted as a reflection of middle-class contentment. Now, however, it was simply impossible to conclude that anyone could be satisfied with the state of District schools. Even mainstream Post columnists had come to the realization that, "The schools in the ghetto, almost wholly black, are inferior in virtually every respect to the white schools. They are older, more rundown, more crowded." If any further confirmation was needed, the much-anticipated Passow Report on the status of District schools bluntly remarked, "Education in the District is in deep, and probably worsening trouble." It had become plain that the city's schools, initially designed to accommodate white middle-class children, had to be reconceived. The different needs of the black students, who comprised ninety-one percent of the city's overall enrollment and were increasingly incongruent with the middle-class model, had to be met.

The problem was complex and laden with resentment. As the school year began in 1967, it was clear that the District would have to rebuild the very foundations of its educational system. Furthermore, there was no easy path of reform; even decisions made with progressive aims came under fire from parents concerned for their children and reluctant to trust a School Board which had proven itself incapable. While patience was wearing thin, the Board carried out a frantic search for a new superintendent. The man they found, William Manning, was hardly inspiring. In what they later confessed was a
tactical error, Board members hired Manning only after publicly conceding that other educators had turned down the position. As the Board met for a formal vote on Manning’s appointment (the outcome was a forgone conclusion) hecklers led by Hobson interrupted the meeting. The protestors complained that parents should have been involved in the selection process: “We want to help pick the superintendent,” explained Hobson, “We don’t want to meet him after he’s been appointed.”31 The fact that Manning was white did not help matters either. Many regarded it as imperative that a black superintendent be hired to confront the problems of black education.

District citizens found unexpected support for school reform on Capitol Hill. The Manning fiasco had demonstrated that citizen dissatisfaction went deeper than Hansen’s track program, and illustrated the need to involve Washingtonians in choosing their school administrators. Indeed, by focusing on a specific problem – school administration – Washingtonians inadvertently exposed the problem of non-representative rule. Schools needed a level of community support difficult to gain when citizens had no control over how their children were being taught. On September 25 the House voted 324 to 3 to give Washington an elected School Board. The Senate, which had passed home rule measure almost annually since the end of World War II, was sure to approve the measure. Even more peculiar, two of the District’s steadfast enemies, House District committee Chairman John McMillan and Virginia Republican Joel Broyhill, were instrumental to the bill’s passage.32 Both men had blocked home rule measures in the past, and though Broyhill made it clear that the “Federal interest” in the city was still protected, the vote represented a significant change for both men.
ATTITUDES TOWARDS THE DISTRICT WERE CHANGING QUICKLY BY 1967. WASHINGTON WAS NO LONGER DOCILE AND MIDDLE-CLASS — A 1966 POST POLL REVEALED THAT EIGHTY PERCENT OF THE DISTRICT'S RESIDENTS BELIEVED RIOT WAS POSSIBLE. AS ONE MIDDLE-CLASS BLACK OBSERVED, THERE WAS NO LONGER ANY REASON TO THINK THAT WASHINGTON WAS DIFFERENT FROM OTHER MAJOR URBAN CENTERS: "YOU HAVE THE SAME FRUSTRATION HERE AS IN ANY METROPOLITAN AREA. THE HAVE-NOTS ARE EXPOSED TO WHAT THE HAVE-HAVES HAVE AND THEIR OWN INABILITY TO GET THESE THINGS. SOME PEOPLE HAVE NOTHING TO LOSE — NO JOB, NO HOME, NO FUTURE, NOTHING." MOREOVER, THE POLL REVEALED THAT MANY IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY DID NOT VIEW RIOT AS NECESSARILY EVIL. NEARLY ONE-THIRD OF THE BLACKS POLLED FELT THAT GHETTO UPRISINGS HAD "HELPED THE PUSH FOR EQUAL RIGHTS," A STATISTIC WHICH SUGGESTED DISTURBING AMBIVALENCE TO THE PROSPECT OF RIOT IN D.C. IN MANY WAYS, THIS KNOWLEDGE — THAT MANY IN THE BLACK COMMUNITY MIGHT ACCEPT RIOT — LEFT AN EVER DARKENING SHADOW OVER DISTRICT POLITICS. FROM THE COMMISSIONERS, TO CONGRESSMEN, TO COMMUNITY ACTIVISTS LIKE BARRY AND HOBSON, DISTRICT LEADERS WORKED WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT THE CITY HAD THE POTENTIAL TO EXPLODE. AND AS BARRY USED THIS FEAR TO MAKE HIMSELF HEARD AND CONGRESS TACITLY ACKNOWLEDGED THE DANGER BY GRANTING A LOCALLY ELECTED SCHOOL BOARD, EVENTS CONFIRMED THAT TENSIONS WERE GROWING. TWICE BEFORE RIOT BROKE OUT IN APRIL 1968, THE DISTRICT WITNESSED VIOLENT FLAShes THAT SERVED AS SHOTS ACROSS THE BOW FOR THOSE CONCERNED WITH THE POSSIBILITY OF RIOT IN THE NATION'S CAPITAL.

ON AUGUST 15, 1966, THE DISTRICT RECEIVED ITS FIRST WARNING WHEN POLICE CAME INTO CONFLICT WITH BLACK YOUTHS IN ANACOSTIA, SOUTHEAST. AS IS OFTEN THE CASE WHEN LONG TERM TRENDS EXPLAIN WHAT HAPPENED MORE THAN IMMEDIATE EVENTS, IT IS UNCLEAR EXACTLY WHAT
started the incident. Reportedly, the conflict began with the arrest of two assault suspects during a meeting at the Southeast Neighborhood House. Those present were upset by the disrespectful manner of the arrest; according to witnesses, there was no reason to believe the suspects were going to flee after the meeting, and police could easily have chosen another time and place to apprehend the men. Furthermore, several witnesses reported that the police needlessly beat other men they arrested. One teenage girl recalled that the police jumped over one Southeast House gate to capture a teenage suspect and beat him despite his submission: “He said, ‘Okay, man, you got me.’ but they kept beating him.” In response, Southeast Neighborhood House workers and supporters decided to picket the eleventh precinct station, where the suspects were taken.34

Because of “inflammatory incidents during previous days,” the police interpreted the picketing as a prelude to riot, and used trained German shepherds to keep the rioters at bay. Predictably, the use of attack dogs did not help matters; the dogs evoked a violent response from the previously orderly crowd. Teenagers threw rocks at the dogs and the policemen, and older picketers grew angry with the police’s antagonistic position. In response to what they perceived as “storms” of rocks hailing in upon them, police became determined to end the protest. Rather than ask the crowd to disperse, they emerged from the station in riot gear, armed with billy clubs to break-up the growing mass of people.

The citizen committee appointed afterward to investigate the incident termed the decision, “the most serious mistake by the police.” Indeed, the blatantly excessive use of force only spurred the crowd’s anger. Providence, however, may have been on the District’s side that night. A brief thundershower struck an hour and a half after the Southeast House
meeting ended, and according to the *Afro*, “might have been the chief ally of Far Southeast neighborhood workers, civil rights leaders, and the Human Relations Council in their effort to ease tensions.”

The Anacostia incident exemplified two larger problems in the District. First, as the investigative committee observed, there was "a leadership vacuum on August 15 which no one was prepared to fill." The District did not have a transcendent leader, either by election or acclamation, who could quell a riotous crowd. Barry, whom many viewed as the only District leader truly in touch with the city’s angry youth, had been rebuffed in his efforts to calm the crowd. Clergymen and poverty workers proved equally incapable of deterring violence. Second, the incident illustrated the distance between the mostly white police force and the overwhelmingly black neighborhoods they patrolled. The police, by overreacting at each crucial point of the evening, clearly demonstrated their distrust of black Washingtonians — a sentiment which only exacerbated the District’s crime problem.

According to the *Post’s* polling, by October 1966, both whites and blacks agreed that crime was the District’s greatest problem. Indeed, when asked to name the biggest problems that “something should be done about,” more than half of those questioned mentioned crime. However, they differed on how the objective of “wiping out crime” should be reached: Both called for stricter law enforcement, but blacks remained deeply suspicious of the District’s police force: more than a third of the *Post’s* black respondents thought the city had done a poor job of curbing police brutality. More than two-thirds thought the city did not do a good job of administering justice. This was not news; in May
the *Post* observed in an editorial, "The plain, harsh fact is that the police of the District are distrusted by the Negro citizens of the District." However, while the *Post* recognized the police problem, it distrusted black protest as sensationalistic. The same is probably true of the white community at large—statistics and editorial comments, valuable as they are, often do not generate understanding. Although white Washingtonians might have acknowledged problems in police behavior, most viewed the blacks who committed crime as a far greater source of worry. The Anacostia incident was significant because it demonstrated that police brutality and abuses of power were not only a reaction to crime, but generated the kind of anger and irreverence that caused crime as well.

Moreover, problems in police-community relations had been the spark for riot in other cities. Both the Watts and Detroit riots were responses to incidents like Anacostia: during an arrest, white officers overreacted to black discontentment. The potential for explosion was noticed by city leaders. Many recognized that the police had grown dangerously distant from the people they were hired to protect. In part, the police department was handicapped by its finances. In 1966, the force offered a beginning salary of only $6,010; by comparison, D.C. Transit paid new bus drivers $6,600 to do a job that promised better hours and far fewer safety hazards. The low wages forced the department to recruit all over the East Coast, and they had the greatest success in depressed coal-mining areas of Pennsylvania and poor southern farming towns. As a result, rather than bring in officers best able to handle the pressures of enforcing the law in a black city, the police department filled its ranks with the traditional keepers of racist sentiment: poor white men. In 1967, Commissioner Walter Tobriner ordered an end to southern
recruitment. The policy change, however, could not undo years of racist law enforcement, nor could it generate trust between officer and citizen.

Many police problems had easy remedies. For example, blacks frequently complained that policemen called them by their first names without the benefit of a personal relationship. In response Police Chief John Layton reminded officers of a “courtesy order” issued in 1959 which stated “everybody will be treated with dignity.” And when civil rights leaders pointed out the paucity of black policemen, Tobriner and Layton moved to recruit black officers. Other issues, however, proved difficult to address. Most notably, discussions of police brutality evoked resentment from both sides. Blacks felt that police regularly used excessive force in their arrests, and pointed to the Anacostia incident as an illustration of the potential consequences of police brutality. This concern found resistance among whites worried about crime and inclined to respect police-work as difficult and thankless. Police brutality, however, was less an indication of the pressures of police work than it was a reflection of police isolation. As the Post adduced in an editorial critical of the eleventh precinct commander’s handling of the Anacostia incident, “a police commander who knew his community throughly” would have been better equipped to avoid trouble.

Even if white opinion changed quickly in response to the Anacostia incident, police behavior did not. The arrest of Barry around 12:30 a.m. on the morning of March 31 again brought the District close to riot and served as a second warning to those in power. Although the specifics of the arrest were contested, the absurdity of the initial charge of jaywalking was obvious. The Afro observed, “Irregardless of the merit of the allegations
on either side, common sense should be applied by police when maintaining an arrest. At
that hour in the morning, when traffic is not heavy, Mr. Barry, by jaywalking, could hardly
have been creating a hazard either to himself or motorists.” Angered by the arrest, many of
Barry’s followers believed the time had come for riot in the District. Both Fauntroy and
Hobson tried to persuade the would-be rioters that violence was not the answer, yet
neither man had any effect. Only Barry, upon his release, was able to dissuade the “hot
heads” from taking action. However, Barry was hardly reliable. Though he practiced
non-violence, unlike more famous leaders of the time, non-violence was not a part of
Barry’s creed. He took pains to make it clear that he opposed violence only because he
believed it would not be advantageous at that time. Barry did not think violence was
wrong, just unproductive.

Talk of riot in response to Barry’s arrest alarmed city leaders. The District
Commissioners held an “unprecedented secret meeting” the Saturday following the
Thursday arrest to understand the roots of the possible violence. In conjunction with
Barry, Fauntroy, Lonnie King, and Reverend David Eaton formed a Citizens’ Committee
for Equal Justice that warned of “immediate action” if the arresting officers were not
suspended from the police force. Though it was unclear what actions the group would
have taken (Layton ultimately suspended the officers) the coalition wielded the obvious
power of citizen discontent. Unlike home rule, around which the same leaders had sought
to organize a year earlier, police conduct was of immediate concern to black
Washingtonians. Specific action or protest was not needed to prove the importance of the
issue; the Anacostia incident and the rumors of riot surrounding Barry’s arrest provided
more than ample incentive for the District’s riot wary administrators.

**CHANGE AT THE TOP**

Riot false starts had made the state of the District a pressing concern to the Johnson administration. Johnson’s displeasure with the Congress’ refusal to pass home rule legislation was well documented, and rumors spread early in the year that he was considering using his executive authority to restructure the city’s bureaucracy. It was not by coincidence that Johnson moved to change the District’s government as spring moved into what was expected to be another “long, hot summer” in 1967. District administration was no longer a simple administrative burden upon the executive; it had become an important presidential responsibility. The White House noted in June that Johnson had spent more time devising his District policy than on any other piece of legislation he had sent to Congress that year.42

Gilbert speculated that Johnson saw riot as a possibility in the District, and believed riot would give his “presidency an historic black-eye.” Moreover, the administration could not help but notice that the District, once the model of black middle-class achievement, had become a bastion of black militancy. The Post’s polling suggested that while only a third of Washington’s blacks were willing to march in demonstrations, more than half would sit-in or picket a store and more than four in ten expressed a willingness to go to jail. While the 1966 survey indicated some satisfaction with the pace of change, pollsters noted, “There is a strong sentiment to switch to bolder tactics of protest to make things happen if they don’t come fast enough.” At the very least, Washington was not the “living expression of the highest ideals of democratic
government” Johnson hoped it to be. Although he was not responsible for the Congress’ refusal to grant D.C. self-determination, administration of the city was ultimately Johnson’s responsibility. As White House assistant Joseph Califano recalled, “Even before the disturbance in Watts in the summer of 1965, LBJ was worried about racial violence in the nation’s capital.” Johnson recognized that, in many ways, a failure to maintain order in Washington would be an indictment of his entire domestic program.

In response, Johnson set forth a plan to consolidate the authority of the Board of Commissioners’ into one executive and establish an eleven-member City Council. The purpose, as Johnson stated it, was to create a government “able to respond promptly and effectively to new demands and new conditions.” Implicit was the hope that a government so organized would be able to respond – to militancy, volatility, and impatience – with the sensitivity of an elected body. By 1967, it was too late to make a “model city” of the District. Years of inadequate funds and inefficient administration, coupled with the endemic urban problem of the vanishing middle-class were simply too great to be addressed before impatience reached its boiling point. Reorganization was the only practicable chance the city had of defraying discontent.

Support for home rule had existed in both houses of Congress for some time, however, home rule legislation had never been able to escape the House District committee. In proposing a reorganization of the District’s government, Johnson had the legislative advantage of only needing Congress to not say no. In accordance with a series of executive powers granted to the President over the District in 1949, Congress had sixty days to veto Johnson’s reorganization, but they could neither amend nor delay the
proposed change. Although House District committee leaders McMillan and Broyhill did
their best to defeat the reorganization, their arguments that the District was primarily a
home to Congress and needed to be protected from a volatile citizenry did not turn a
majority of Congressmen against Johnson’s plan. The reorganization passed the House by
what the Post termed the “surprisingly strong” margin of 244 to 160.45

Indeed, with the exception of the Board of Trade, and some home rule idealists
who feared reorganization would replace or forestall self-determination, Johnson’s plan
won widespread approval. Even the Commissioners who would lose their jobs to the
reorganization supported Johnson’s plan. Tobriner stated that although he believed city
administration was growing more difficult nationally, “I believe the Commissioners of the
District of Columbia have been handicapped to an extra degree by an archaic and
cumbersome form of government . . .” The Post’s support for the plan reflected common
sentiment among home rule advocates: “This new regime . . . is no substitute for home
rule. But it can be made a preparation for it and an avenue to it and a vindication of its
principles if the administrative officials and the Council act so as to deserve and elicit the
broadest popular participation permitted by the statute.”46

It was imperative, however, that the new Mayor-commissioner be a
Washingtonian. Idealistic statements about creating a democratic model would ring
hollow if an outsider was brought in to administer the District; it would send the message
that Washingtonians were incapable and undeserving of the responsibility of running their
own city. In addition, it was important to many that the new Mayor–Commissioner be
black. As Rauh observed in a letter to the Post, “If the reorganization plan is to be
meaningful, it must now have a local resident in the top position. And it would seem most
highly appropriate that he or she be a Negro as are nearly two-thirds of our residents."
Through civil protest and the threat of riot, the District’s growing black majority had for
the first time begun to claim the city as its own.

Moreover, the tenor of District politics was militant; it embraced not only pro-
black policy, but Black Power as well. Demand for a black Mayor had become part of a
larger “call for indigenous control of economic and political institutions in the black
community.” Many of the District’s most outspoken leaders – including Barry, Hobson,
and the newly arrived Stokely Carmichael – recognized that if reorganization was to be a
step towards home rule it had to empower black people. Appointment of a black mayor-
commissioner for the nation’s capital, who would be the first black to head a major
American city, was a necessary first step.

Johnson’s choice of long-time District Housing Director Walter Washington
seemed to fit everyone’s prescription. Washington had served in the District’s housing
office for over twenty years and was considered an effective leader and a man of integrity.
Moreover, he was the rare sort of politician who did not have enemies, an essential
attribute in a city that seemed to be disintegrating. NAACP President Moultrie observed,
“Mr. Washington brings to the job expertise in housing and public relations. He has been
exposed to the city of Washington for many years and knows its problems.” The Post was
even more effusive in its praise of Washington:

Walter Washington has the kind of experience, the general credentials and
the sort of personality that any community might look for in a chief
executive. He has political gifts and facilities of a high order. He has had
much experience in dealing with the most difficult problems of the city. He has had a long Washington residence that has brought him into contact with people of all races and classes in the city.

Even the normally recalcitrant Barry had praise for the new Mayor-commissioner. He noted, “Of all the names of black people for the position, Walter Washington is the best. I hope he continues to be innovative and creative and can get the city really moving.”

Washington tried to maintain his apparent momentum upon entering office; he promised to be a “walking mayor” who would be accessible to the people. Once approved Washington spent time visiting the public housing projects he had frequented as Housing Director and assured residents that his government would help. In his first full day in office (which, due to the lengthy approval process for the City Council, did not come until November 4, 1967) Washington demonstrated the diplomatic grace mixed and political savvy he brought to the office. Met by a group of three-hundred Pride, Incorporated workers angry with White House budget cuts, Washington handled the crowd adroitly. He ordered police to treat the demonstration sympathetically and instructed aids to arrange a meeting between him and the protest leaders. Washington met with Pride leaders Barry and Rufus Mayfield; Mayfield called on the new Mayor to lead a march on the Capitol to demand the restoration of anti-poverty funds. Washington informed the marchers that he was sympathetic to their cause, but he could neither march with them nor make promises he could not keep: “My heart is with you. My concern is with you. But everything can’t be put into specifics yet.”

Johnson could hardly have hoped for better;

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* Pride, Incorporated was an economic self-help project started by Rufus (Catfish) Mayfield and eventually led by Barry. The program received federal funds to employ at-risk youths for projects such as neighborhood clean-up efforts. When Washington took office, Pride was at the apex of its power and effectiveness.
Washington was able to soothe radicals without giving in to them.

Washington also moved quickly to restructure the District’s bureaucracy. Upon formally taking office, Washington asserted mayoral control over key government agencies which had previously acted semi-autonomously. Offices of budgeting, management, personnel, and “program coordination” were placed directly under the Mayor’s control. The moves resonated with Washington’s larger theme for his administration: effective, responsive government. Washington, however, was not an alchemist; he could not transform the major faults in the District’s government through attentiveness and goodwill. As Post columnist William Raspberry observed, “Reorganization is a valuable step toward governmental efficiency, and Washingtonians can be grateful to Mr. Johnson for using his power and prestige to bring it about. . . But reorganization is not democracy; it is not home rule; it is not transfer of power.” Indeed, while reorganization offered the District an effective spokesman in Walter Washington, it did not address the city’s desperate needs for better schools, better funding, and citizens who felt included in their government. When Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated on April 4, 1968, neither Washington, nor any of the city’s leaders, could hold back the rage of powerlessness.
1. A "Monday Mourner" silently protests the District's lack of self-government at a congressional hearing. (D.C. Public Library, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. Community Archives)
2. Hobson (far left) attempts to block appointment of Manning (seated right) as new District school superintendent. (D.C. Public Library, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. Community Archives)

3. Walter Washington (left) meets with Johnson and advisors during the riot. (Califano, *The Triumph and Tragedy of Lyndon Johnson*)
4. The first night of riot: looters carry clothing yanked off ranks. (Gilbert, *Ten Blocks from the White House*)
5. Pride, Inc. spokesmen Barry (left) and Rufus Mayfield speak to reporters. (Barras, *Last of the Black Emporers*)
6. Racial distribution in the District by neighborhood. Whites increasingly concentrated in the area west of Rock Creek Park (top of the page). (Derthick, *City Politics*)
The riot that exploded led to more than $27 million in damages, 7,600 arrests,  
1,190 injuries, and twelve deaths. The violence that began at 14th and U Streets  
Northwest, sparked twelve distinct riot areas in the District’s poorest, blackest  
neighborhoods, requiring 11,600 National Guardsmen to restore order. Accompanied by  
similar uprisings in Boston, Detroit, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Toledo, and  
Pittsburgh, the riot generated immediate national concern for the sources of discontent in  
American cities. In the District, the issue was clear: government was not responsive to the  
city’s poor blacks. The civil rights movement had created expectations of change that  
got unmet – a phenomenon that was not unique to the District. Indeed, as Robert Allen  
observed in 1969 of the civil rights movement in general, “Perhaps the most significant  
indication of the middle-class nature of the civil rights movement was the fact that it did  
absolutely nothing to alleviate the grim plight of the poorest segments of the black  
population.”¹  

The riot generated not a massive reassessment of urban policy, but a new  
dedication to old ideas. For those who feared riot before King’s assassination, the  
District’s four-days of smoke-covered anarchy validated their apprehensions, and  
indicated that potential rioters ought to be included in the formulation of city policy. As  
Barry observed, “I wasn’t for the disorders, but I think, on the other hand, that once it  
happened the establishment listened to some of us . . . Now you’re coming to a meeting
and they want you there because they don’t know what’s going to happen next.” Similarly, opponents of home rule viewed the riot as a confirmation of their stance. Riot, they argued, had occurred under a locally led government and illustrated the threat the city posed to Congress. At the same time, the Washington riot became the subject of national conversation. Because the Federal government controlled the city, the riot was seen by Johnson’s opponents as an indictment of his national urban policy. Then candidate Richard Nixon argued, “In the capital of the world’s greatest democracy, freedom from fear must be re-established, and the current Administration has not been equal to the task.” Despite the very real expression of frustration by thousands of Washingtonians, the District remained a city of symbolic issues.

As the city attempted to rebuild, discussion of home rule quietly fell from view. It became contained in microcosm in issues of community control; riot rebuilding, police reform, and school board elections became hotly contested centers of citizen participation. Yet the immediacy of the problems obscured the long term cause. The lack of home rule, which ultimately touched every source of citizen complaint, was too passionless and intangible an issue to command continued focus. Washingtonians did not have the political confidence necessary to make home rule a grassroots issue, a fact illustrated by the failure of the Free D.C. Movement. Instead of seeking support that was not there, home rule supporters returned to more traditional tactics, like national consensus building and lobbying for Congressional support. In the process they lost the support of black militants who could lend authenticity to the effort. Perhaps understandably, real empowerment, which had to begin with home rule, seemed remote to those who most
needed power, and was left to a later date.

**CONCEIVING RECONSTRUCTION**

Rebuilding the riot-torn areas provided real opportunity for District reformers to voice citizen complaints. Federal Communications commissioner Nicholas Johnson remarked, "A riot is somebody talking. A riot is a man crying out, 'Listen to me, mister. There's something I've been trying to tell you and you're not listening.'" The truth of Johnson's statement was obvious to District administrators; they had been trying to anticipate the rioters' message for the better part of three years. The problem, however, remained the same: Who spoke for the rioters? And how could change be implemented within the limiting strictures of Congressional rule? Congress was no more generous to the District after the riot than before. To the contrary, many on Capitol Hill viewed improvement of the riot areas as an endorsement of riot. As the *Afro* noted, "To their prejudiced minds, any attempt to repair the damage and make the ghettos more livable looks like rewarding the rioters who destroyed them." The District had to find a way to rebuild despite the skepticism of those who held the city's pursestrings.

Method became more important than means. The still nascent city council recognized that any rebuilding effort must somehow incorporate the rioters' demands. In the council's extensive post-riot recommendations, the first step was to include those who would live with the rebuilding in its planning: "Residents of the affected areas and persons with all points of view must be given a major role in planning for recovery. Those who plan and expect to benefit from programs should also help to execute plans which are developed." The goal of inclusion, however, was more easily stated than achieved, since
there was no single, recognized voice for the riot area communities. The Black United Front, the Model Inner City Community Organization, the People’s Involvement Corporation, the Inner City Planning Associates, and Change Incorporated all claimed to speak for the poor and attempted to direct the reconstruction. None, however, could demonstrate firm backing within the community they wanted to improve. At the same time, black control of the rebuilding process was opposed by the white businessmen whose stores had been destroyed. The National Capital Planning Commission, the Small Business Administration, the Board of Trade, and scores of insurance companies and savings and loan institutions also had a stake in planning the rebuilding process. Moreover, Mayor Washington, who had to arbitrate between the groups, was himself torn between compassion for the rioters and fear of Congressional disapproval.

At the very least, it was clear that restoring the neighborhoods was not enough. The Post commented, “The idea of merely rebuilding the three riot-torn areas as they were before April is not good enough . . . the chance to impose changes in terms of the location of business districts, the interrelation of businesses with housing, and the architecture must not be lost.” It was commonly recognized that if neighborhoods were returned to their pre-riot state, they would be burnt down in short order. The riot was only loud statement of the continuing problem of powerlessness. As Eugene Miller, administrator of the Women’ Detention Center observed in a conference held by the National Capital Area Health and Welfare Council, “Washington was pretty damned angry before April 4, and I fail to see myself that this anger has gone back under the surface.” Unlike anger directed at racism, there were no established ways to effectively direct the anger poverty caused.
However, the District’s political structures did not demand effectiveness. Anger was a proven means of gaining attention, and in a city without elected officials, press coverage and notoriety became power.

Consequently, when these spokesmen were offered the opportunity to act, they were unwilling to make the compromises necessary to enter coalitions that could generate true community support. In the case of riot reconstruction, black community organizations seeking power could not find a common ground with white businessmen out to protect their interests. As Post District columnist William Raspberry noted, their differences were not irreconcilable, but because of the uncompromising rhetoric on both sides, each became too entrenched to concede anything: “The obvious remedy is a sharing of the control, but this becomes possible only when the two sides will talk. It has been hard to get to that point, and it is getting even more difficult.” The mayor, who had initially urged businesses to plan and commence rebuilding within one-hundred days of the riot, soon found that confidence had to be fostered first. He observed, “As long as the city was covered in an umbrella of apprehension and fear, we could not get businessmen to talk about planning for rehabilitation.” In response, Washington attempted to coordinate the rebuilding efforts through two ostensibly neutral organizations: the Ad-Hoc Community Reconstruction and Development Corporation – which operated on a non-profit basis and received a $600,000 grant from the Ford Foundation – and an Economic Development Committee, which was added to the city’s offices to find venture capital for blacks. Neither of these organizations, however, were able to rise above the stagnating vituperation of the District’s public politics. They could rebuild physically, but they could
not heal the by now festering wounds the riot had opened.

A year after the riot, the rebuilding effort was closer to a patchwork assembly of competing interests than a coherent whole. The Post posited that there were at least three distinct voices in the planning and reconstruction: the businessmen, the planning and citizens organizations, and the Nixon Administration. Though there was some progress—shopping centers were built and burnt-down stores were repaired and made available for black ownership when possible—there was no master plan for the repairs. To the extent that any ideology directed the effort, Black Power was central to conceptions of what the riot-torn neighborhoods should become. Yet the reconstruction effort could not escape the bounds of capitalism. It could not give blacks sufficient capital for store ownership, nor could it force blacks who had capital to invest in risky, riotous neighborhoods. What was begun with a sense of urgency was perhaps undone by the same excitement that led to a brief feeling of possibility. Because participants were slow to compromise and critical of the city’s every step, the rebuilding process took years to complete. Rather than symbolize the potential for change, the riot neighborhoods remained visible reminders of the frustration that destroyed them for decades.

Moreover, riot brought old issues to a head. Most notably, it increased the divide between white and black on the issue of police conduct. Although most conceded that the police had responded to the disturbances as well as could be expected, the dramatic recapturing of the city by National Guardsmen made poor blacks acutely aware of the power law enforcement agencies held over them. Reformers and administrators alike recognized the importance of repairing police-community relations; in order to avoid
future riots, rioters had to feel a sense of ownership over their communities—an impossibility when control was imposed by white officers like a strict teacher in a rowdy classroom. Moreover, police behavior still had the potential to spark another riot. As a Post editorial somewhat unfairly commented, "... black radicals can twist any police-citizen confrontation into an anti-police, anti-government demonstration that threatens to boil over into violence."  

The District government moved quickly to transform the police force into an organization that worked with, rather than against, the community. Granted additional funds by Congress after the riot to better pay its officers, in 1968 the police department was able to fill its ranks for the first time in years, the Post reported. The recruitment drive made a deliberate effort to increase the black presence on the force—of the 441 new officers hired, 147 were black, and many of them were District natives. In addition, the higher wage allowed the Police Department to recruit men from local military bases for police work. The Post pointed out that such efforts were more likely to yield men who "have some knowledge of cities and their problems than the old practice of recruiting in small towns." Though the effect of the new recruitment policy would take years to alter the character of the police force, impression was important. For the first time the Police Department attempted to be responsive to Washingtonian’s demands.  

Centralized responsiveness, however, was not enough for those who sought real progress. Years of institutionalized racism within the Police Department had created a wariness of reform efforts promised by white leadership; edicts on police conduct and promises of sensitivity were not new and had been insufficient in the past. In response,
black leaders, backed by liberal whites, sought community control of the police department. Reconceiving an old complaint, they asserted two things: that police had become too detached from the communities they served, and that one centralized policy could not work for blacks and whites. The argument was similar to those made by home rule advocates. As the Democratic Central Committee chairman pointed out in a letter responding to the Post's concerns that community control could lead to corruption and confusion over differing police policies, "These are real problems which must be guarded against. But they are inherent in democratic local government. They are not reasons for keeping local government insulated from control of the people."

More than any other department of the city's appointed government, the police force's direction and behavior reinforced the idea that the District was ultimately a federal colony, a home to the national government above all. The fact that police leaders were not, even indirectly, beholden to the citizenry exacerbated black distrust of the police common to so many cities in 1968. Most of the men who patrolled the District's streets did not even live within its boundaries. As of October 1968, 2,069 of the city's 2,199 white police officers (ninety-five percent) lived in the Maryland or Virginia suburbs. (By contrast only twenty-three percent – 191 out of 830 – of black officers lived outside the District.) Not only were police officers not accountable to District citizens, the vast majority were not District citizens themselves, a reality which reminded Washingtonians that they were too irresponsible for self-government.

The most vociferous supporter of community control was the Black United Front. A black power organization which recognized that the riot had presented a rare
opportunity, BUF was founded by Stokely Carmichael only a few months before the riot. Carmichael conceived the organization as a coalition that would unite the District's black leaders into one politically broad and powerful body. Although he established the Front, Carmichael envisioned his role not as leader but as a mediator dedicated to finding common ground for the organization's membership.

Indeed, the Front's claims were respectable, if somewhat impractical when separated from the angry rhetoric that accompanied them. The group proposed a five-point legislative program that consisted of the elimination of centralized advisory council; the establishment of elected citizen review boards with the power to "determine the criteria for policemen in their respective precincts;" selection of the precinct captain by the review board for that neighborhood; the establishment of a citywide personnel board that would recruit, hire, and fire officers; and a prohibition of all white patrols in colored neighborhoods.\(^{12}\) The call for community control was not unique. Mainstream liberals had pointed to the need for such a shift well before it was incorporated into Black Power. Although the Front's demands came wrapped in revolutionary rhetoric, the group essentially sought little more than the type of democratic influence over the Police Department that home rule would provide.

In practice, however, the BUF proved too aggressive to maintain the image of an umbrella organization. In the District, coalitions were ineffective and difficult to maintain. They simply could not hold power without the backing of an electorate or elected officials. Recognizing this fact, the Front pushed its agenda, with Carmichael working behind the scenes, in the hopes that membership would follow. Rather than pursue unity quietly, the
BUFF chose to criticize loudly. At base, the BUF's own methods exemplified faults embedded in the District's political system.

In the months following the disorders, District administrators appeared to be uniquely open to new ideas and unfrightened by discussions of Black Power. Since the Front sought autonomy for the black community above all, it was most aggressive in its pursuit of community control of the police – the enforcers of colonial authority. Though the Front was abrasive in its critique, the frustration it Front expressed was real. Contrary to the Post's claim, the group did not simply turn small events into large issues. For example, the BUF's claim that there could be "justifiable homicide" of policemen following the exoneration of multiple officers for seven citizen deaths in six months found defenders in the mainstream. Few, of course, were willing to accept the prospect of guerilla warfare between black militants and police officers; however, many could justify the rhetoric as the by-product of unresponsive government. The chairman of the Center for Emergency Support, in a letter to the Post, defended the Front's statement as an example of "how deaf established Washington is to anything but a full-throated explosion. People from BUF have been raising these question [sic] less explosively for months, but no one would listen." Other Front members also supported the organization's rationale. Most notably, Channing Phillips, the District's Democratic party chairman and a man who had "the respect of many in the city as a responsible leader," publicly supported the group's complaints. He and others helped the BUF gain credibility.

But police conduct proved a continuing problem. In response to a call reporting that people were "carrying groceries out from a Safeway Supermarket," a young black
man was shot to death by two white police officers only ten weeks after the riot. The incident made the BUF’s “justifiable homicide” statement seem prophetic. As the normally cautious Afro observed, “If there is anything redemptive about the Black United Front’s controversial resolution two weeks ago, it is that no matter how much cruelty exists in the black community, it has roots in wrongs inflicted by the white community in the past and present and those which we may expect in the future.” The tragic killing conferred temporary legitimacy on the BUF, which was still considered extreme by most. The Post, which refused to print statements it considered intended solely for the media’s benefit, began to report the Front’s activities more consistently. And in October, the BUF was given the opportunity to present its five-point plan to the City Council.  

Predictably, the BUF’s community control plan died in the Council. Congress had been hesitant to grant a black mayor control over the police force in the first place; there was no chance it would cede that power to a citizenry that had just rioted. It is significant, however, that the plan got as far as it did. In the majority black District, Black Power had a resonance rooted in the city’s lack of self-determination. While in other American cities blacks were implicitly denied power by a system that quietly discriminated against those without money and influence, black Washingtonians were explicitly refused control over the laws and practices that ruled them. Moreover, the white middle-class exodus to the suburbs had left the District starkly segregated. Formerly integrated neighborhoods, like Anacostia, were by 1968 almost entirely black. Black Washington was indeed a “Secret City” that existed almost entirely independent of the urban suburbs whites inhabited. It seemed perfectly logical that blacks ought to own the businesses they frequented and
control the houses they rented. Consequently, Black Power could absorb as if by osmosis the legitimacy home rule had enjoyed for decades.

The greatest obstacle Black Power faced — other than unconsidered opposition — was the gap between the rhetoric of its spokesmen and the actions of the black community. Much of what the BUF advocated could be employed without government intervention. The organization’s primary goal of “total black control of the black economic institutions” might have been at least partially achieved if blacks could have agreed, for example, to patronize only black-owned stores.\(^{15}\) However Free D.C.’s difficulties maintaining its boycott suggested that District blacks rooted their interest more in themselves as individuals than in the much mythologized “black community.” Black Washington, like the city at-large, lacked the sense of community necessary to sharpen the knife of economic solidarity.

**THE FIRST ELECTION**

The District’s lack of identity was most clearly illustrated by the city’s deeply divided School Board elections. As hope for immediate home rule faded, the School Board elections — the first local elections since 1874 — became a focus of attention. Little had progressed since Manning’s November 1967 appointment; indeed, the new superintendent seemed incapable of managing the District’s educational maze. At the least, it was obvious that Manning lacked the creativity and experimental zeal necessary to reverse the system’s downward trend — a fact Manning himself practically admitted. After standardized test scores for the 1967-1968 school year revealed improvement in only six of the District’s one-hundred seventy-six schools, Manning dully observed: “This trend
shows that the materials and methods we have been using have not been effective in
teaching children to read.” Yet he suggested no improvements. Even the usually
supportive Post noted that Manning was probably in over his head, “It cannot be said on
Dr. Manning’s behalf that he has contributed much in the way of initiative, leadership, or
even fresh ideas to the school system.” Forecasting what was to come, four members of
the School Board that hired him – Anita Allen, John Sessions, Benjamin Alexander, and
Ann Stultz – publicly called for Manning to step down. 16 All four incumbents hoped to
maintain their position in the coming election and it was painfully clear that Manning
would be a liability.

Indeed, the very next day, Julius Hobson announced his intention to run for School
Board election with an eleven-member slate pledged to oust Manning. For Hobson,
however, Manning was only a symbol of larger problems in the District’s educational
system. As Hobson v. Hansen had demonstrated, the schools did not respond to the needs
of its poor black students. To correct the wrong, Hobson sought the election of an
activist Board that would move quickly and fearlessly to resurrect the failing system. In so
doing, Hobson sought to make himself a spokesman for the District’s poor blacks. He
pointed to Allen and Alexander, both black, as “two people on the Board of Education to
which black people are unalterably opposed.” Of course, Hobson had no way of knowing
what black people thought; there were no approval ratings for incumbent School Board
members. His comments, though, reflected central problems in the District’s political
culture. There were no true spokesmen for the city’s blacks, in part because there was not
one black community. Without consideration for income, the racial classification in the
city became so sloppy it was almost meaningless.

In a city unaccustomed to forming its own policies, the School Board debate was predictably free of specifics. Hobson ran for the Board simply by defining what he was against, namely Manning and certain incumbent Board members. Others followed his lead, and the election quickly degenerated into a series of personal attacks loaded with racial overtones. A debate between eight of the nine at-large candidates at a District high school exemplified the divisiveness of the campaign. Candidates James Jackson and the Reverend Douglas Moore criticized incumbent Board member and AFL-CIO employee Sessions as “a union flunky . . . who doesn’t see that your father gets into the union.” Apparently their comments were retaliation for Sessions’ statement two nights earlier that Moore and Jackson had “nothing in their previous lives that shows the faintest trace of concerns for the problems of the school system.”17 These attacks are notable more for their content than their tone. Union allegiance and lack of past experience are legitimate sources of criticism in a School Board campaign; however in each case they were used as a means of criticizing not the candidate but the man. Lacking a model of positive political leadership, candidates allowed the campaign to become a contest of personal politics when confronted with the real problems of the school system and the need for reform.

The need to include black culture in the school curriculum was the only substantive issue the candidates addressed, and that, too, fell into the easy snare of vituperation. With a note of resentment clearly directed at the meeting’s two white candidates, Sessions and Ellis Haworth, Moore noted that “every people has its own dog – Irish setters, Scotch terriers and so forth. But you’d never know that black people have a dog too – the
basenji, a dog native to the Congo. You never see a picture of the basenji in your school books.” Others, including Sessions, had voiced their support for a less-Eurocentric approach before, but Moore’s comments added a palpable antagonism to the air of the assembly room. In response to Moore’s observations students “jumped to their feet” and raised their arms in the Black Power salute—a gesture which, though affirmative in meaning, could only be divisive in the context of a School Board debate.18

The meeting indicated the rancor of District democracy. Even among candidates who agreed with one another, like Moore and Sessions on the need for incorporating black culture into the District’s curriculum, back-biting and self-promotion became the rule. This was due to two causes: first, the Board of Elections had prohibited parties from endorsing specific School Board candidates. As a result, candidates faced a greater threat from opponents with similar ideas than from ones with different views because similar candidates were competing for the same voters. This encouraged aspiring politicians to stand for themselves above principle. Second, there was little variation in the political thought of the candidates: nearly all recognized that the school system did not adequately serve poor black children, and most were unafraid to experiment with change. Few, however, had clearly described what change would mean. Without ideas to debate, candidates could distinguish themselves only by criticizing their opponents.

There were more than enough candidates to attack. Sixty-four men and women were running for eleven School Board seats, a dizzying sum in an election without clear favorites. Of those sixty-four, nine were candidates for the Board’s three at-large seats and fifty-five were divided among the District’s eight newly drawn voting wards. A
cartoon in the *Afro* captured the absurdity of the race; it depicted a herd of would-be-politicians rushing through a door marked, “64 in Race for School Board,” with a father explaining the event to his son in the foreground: “No, son, there is not a board member for each pupil, but the candidates don’t know that.” Even the normally studious *Post* seemed overwhelmed by the prospect of endorsing specific candidates in such a large field:

> So far as the ward elections are concerned, we have concluded that it would not be prudent or altogether equitable to attempt [to endorse]. These are choices properly to be made by their neighbors who have had opportunity to see them... By now, they should have made themselves well enough known in their separate neighborhoods to make discerning selections feasible.

Not surprisingly, voters, too, were perplexed by the prospect of picking leaders from such a large field. Low voter registration suggested that Washingtonians were uninspired by the prospects: 18,220 fewer voters than 1964 registered for the 1968 election. Though the numbers could have reflected lack of interest in the Presidential election, Raspberry observed that many who saw little difference between Nixon and Hubert Humphrey expected “an elected School Board to be just as powerless and irrelevant as the old judge-appointed one.” The rhetoric of the campaign had done little to change that view.

Only Hobson emerged from the November 5 election an outright winner. The recipient of 60,482 votes city wide, he was the lone at-large candidate to garner the one-sixth of the total vote required to avoid a run-off. Hobson interpreted the victory as a vindication of his relentless tactics; he told the *Post*, “I think this shows the black community agrees with my method of operation and wants more of it.” However, Hobson also had the advantage of being the only candidate known throughout the District who
was not an appointed School Board member, a fact not lost on the Post: “In part, no
doubt, Mr. Hobson’s victory came about simply because he was better known than any of
his rivals.” The question was an important one. It was unclear if Hobson was capable of
being a responsible fighter. If the election vindicated his “roustabout” tactics, it might also
undermine his willingness to work within the system. Moreover, Hobson’s transition
held symbolic importance, because he was the flag-bearer of District protest. His
transition to official, elected power had the potential to serve as a model – or warning – to
others.

A November 26 runoff election determined the other School Board members.
Included were incumbents Allen and Sessions, both of whom, like Hobson, were elected
at-large. Perhaps more important than the at-large results was the very existence of ward
representatives; as the Post observed, “With eight of its eleven members selected from
wards, the Board more accurately reflects the geographical subdivisions in Washington.”
The election also added a diversity of income and social status that the appointed panel
had never known. Many hoped that diversity would be a source of strength for the Board
and assumed that geographical representation would ensure that poor black children’s
needs were met. A class rift, however, immediately divided the Board between supporters
of Allen, whom the Star described as “the opitome [sic] of solid, middle-class Washington
black citizenry,” and Hobson’s more radical backers. At the new Board’s first meeting,
which the Post described as “angry, confused and raucous,” neither Allen nor Hobson
could muster more than five of the necessary six votes needed to become President.
Clearly deadlocked, the Rev. James Coates was elected as a compromise. Hobson seemed
more relieved than disappointed, “It puts me back in the old Hobson position of raising hell without being responsible. The rabbit’s back in the brier patch.”21

Despite the fact that most expected him to be a Board leader, Hobson attempted to reclaim his familiar role as outsider. Only three days after Coates was elected president, Hobson announced that he was unwilling to compromise: “I will not cooperate with this Board in the name of Jesus Christ and the Constitution. In terms of education I am sure the Board will stand between the children and education. I don’t intend to fool with this board and its compromise candidate.” Stranger still, Hobson indicated that he planned to organize a community protest against the Board. Since the Board’s only action had been to elect Coates, it was unclear what the focus of such a protest would be. The Post adduced, “Julius Hobson appears to be undergoing some sort of identity crisis.” Indeed, Hobson seemed genuinely unable to adjust to his new role. He was no longer an advocate, but an elected School Board member who was responsible for creating educational policy. Accordingly, he could not remain “forever charging, lance leveled, like a contemporary Don Quixote, at the windmills of School Board complacency.” To be effective he had to find common ground with a group of people who ultimately shared his goal of improving District’s schools.22

Hobson remained a recalcitrant metaphor for District politics. Despite holding elective office he could not shed his activist skin. The tactics which had brought Hobson power were incompatible with the power he was given, and rather than smooth his abrasive rhetoric, Hobson became more frustrated and aggressive. He continued to organize against the School Board, forming the D.C. Coalition for Education Now to push
for teaching Swahili and Black Studies in District classrooms. As part of a dispute over motions which passed easily when voted upon, Hobson accused Allen of acting on "behalf of those crackers west of Rock Creek Park." Indeed, in the face of city-wide acceptance, Hobson struggled to become more radical. Normally a pragmatic Marxist, Hobson began to predict violence if social changes were not made; in one speech to Georgetown students he compared the struggles of Cuba and China with events in the United States, startling comparisons even for him.23 Given enough power to effect the changes he had advocated for years, Hobson instead sought to reclaim a radicalism which gave him authenticity as a reformer, but suggested that he was trapped in a past time.

Hobson's conflicted actions illuminate a paradox of District government; in order to participate, one had to accept a fundamentally flawed system. Even though Congress had granted Washingtonians the right to elect their School Board representatives, it retained control over the system's budget, undermining the possibilities for needed experimentation. Nevertheless, School Board membership or a city council position offered real power that could be used to create meaningful change. Consequently, the most effective District reformer would at once work within the city's government and against its legitimacy. Working for long term solutions would leave immediate and important short term problems unattended, while involving one's self in the city's administration entailed sacrificing idealism.

Accordingly, a subtle division emerged in the aftermath of riot. Activists and organizations that sought to represent Washington's voiceless citizens, like the BUF and Hobson, focused on problems immediately responsible for the riot. Groups that
represented the interests of Washington’s once-dominant middle-class, on the other hand, began to shift their focus to changing the underlying injustice that plagued the city: the lack of home rule. Often these leaders shared ideology but had different priorities, indeed many black middle-class spokesmen accepted Black Power as a framework for reform. However, while District radicals sought, at least in theory, to build power from the bottom up, middle-class black liberals measured their community’s progress by the prestige of its leaders. Rather than pursue direct improvement, they focused upon attaining political power.

HOME RULE RECONSIDERED

Before the riot, traditional methods of promoting home rule were superseded by the activism of the Free D.C. Movement and the potential of the reorganized government. Riot had redirected the focus of advocates like Barry and removed the luster from Mayor Washington’s government, thereby opening the door to gradualist efforts based upon influence and moderation. Men like Channing Phillips and Walter Fauntroy, who were involved in the civil rights movement but marginalized by District radicalism, claimed home rule leadership as their cause. They offered themselves as compromise candidates, in touch with the black community and respected by District whites.

The change was signaled at the 1968 Democratic Convention. Phillips, the Democratic National committeeman elect for the District, urged the party to support home rule in its platform in a manner that combined middle-class ideological indignation with the frustration of a Black Power advocate. He invoked the Declaration of Independence, reminding delegates that “governments are instituted among men, deriving their just
powers from the consent of the governed." At the same time, he noted that the Declaration was a revolutionary document, implying that a similar discontent was brewing in the nation's capital: "For we believe and hope that the legislative process of the 1960s is to be preferred to the revolution process of the 1770s." Yet Phillips' appeal was more pragmatic than threatening. He proposed that the platform call for a charter commission to draft a new, elected, local government structure in addition to requesting that the party support a constitutional amendment guaranteeing the city voting Congressional representation. The commission proposal had flaws: a similar commission had been used to "torpedo" home rule in 1965 according to Washington Home Rule Committee (HRC) president David Carliner. Phillips argued for the idea, explaining, "Congress had shown support for this method, and we wish to avoid congressional divisiveness."24 Unlike many District leaders, however, he was willing to compromise. In response to the concerns of groups like the HRC, Phillips agreed that the commission ought be citizen controlled.

And though the Platform Committee was likely to adopt Phillips' proposals all along (home rule had been a part of the Democratic platform since World War II), compromise allowed District conventioneers to present the rare image of a united front. As a result, not only were the home rule planks added to the platform, but, at one of the most divisive Democratic conventions ever held, District leaders demonstrated an understanding that the shared end of their goals was more important than their divergent means.

Moreover, the manner of Phillips' convention advocacy of home rule opened the door to long-time home rule supporters like the HRC and the D.C. League of Women Voters. Both groups had maintained interest in home rule for years, but were unable to
adjust to the obvious rancor and tepid pace of civil rights era politics. Indeed, the D.C. League even went so far as to ask members if writing letters to congressmen and informing the community, its traditional methods of building consensus, had become obsolete.

But are these activities (in which we take justifiable pride) extensions of the average middle class oriented approach to advising and influencing the ‘Establishment?’ If so, is that good? Are they a giant step in the right direction. [sic] that of transmitting the strength of democracy to those who for too long have been denied a ‘piece of the action’ as one militant resident of the ghetto has phrased it? Are the tools we are using the right ones, just dull from inadequate use?25

The self-consciousness of the letter is startling. Although the D.C. League had always been a middle class organization, it had never identified itself as such. More important, the implication that a middle class approach could be inherently “wrong” represented a revolution of sorts. Implicit in the questioning was the comprehension that home rule was ultimately about empowering the District’s poor black citizens.

More important, in post-riot Washington, middle-class support for home rule no longer seemed to undermine community based efforts to gain self-determination. The city needed advocates. Accordingly, the HRC, which had been silent for years prior to the Democratic Convention, suggested that the newly elected Nixon Administration back legislation allowing Washingtonians to elect the mayor-commissioner without changing the powers of the office. Like reorganization, the plan was viewed as a step toward citizen participation that would not undercut the authority of the White House or Congress. The Post assessed the proposal as, “a very modest, and, we think, a thoroughly realistic goal for its immediate efforts.” Furthering the same idea, Carliner and six other
petitioners filed suit in federal court claiming the Washingtonians had a constitutional right to elect their government. Though the suit (which the American Civil Liberties Union prosecuted) was refused by the U.S. Court of Appeals, it demonstrated a new aggressiveness in the WHRC’s effort.

Similarly, the D.C. League began to campaign in new ways for home rule. In June 1969 the group founded the “Monday Mourning Club.” On the second and fourth Monday of each month D.C. League women dressed in black, or wore black armbands, and watched Congress in silent mourning for the District. The bi-monthly visits to Capitol Hill produced few tangible results (the Post said that the mourners “vainly . . . listen for any reference to the District of Columbia or any sign that it may be joining the rest of the nation in the privileges of self-government and seats in the Congress,”) however they did represent a deliberate – if modest – effort to enter the realm of activism. In addition, the white, middle-class D.C. League worked to broaden home rule’s appeal. To attract young black women, the DCLWV added the slogan “Congressional Representation – Right On” in 1969 to their staple “D.C. – Last Colony,” and the timeless “Taxation Without Representation is Tyranny.” The effort reflected an organization’s consciousness of the limitations of a white middle-class constituency in a city that by 1969 was seventy-one percent non-white.

The comparatively gentle rhetoric of both groups gave the impression that the District had begun to cool. In comparison to the hot anger of men like Hobson and Barry, the WHRC and the D.C. League seemed like saintly organizations. As a result, the Nixon Administration, which had promised to restore order to the city, could not argue that
Washingtonians were too irresponsible to govern themselves; home rule, though revamped, was once again a middle-class issue. Not coincidentally, conservatives on Capitol Hill began to propose moderate measures that would bring the city closer to self-government. Representative Archer Nelsen, the top Republican on the House District Committee, predicted that the Ninety-First Congress would grant the District the right to elect a Congressman. He also announced plans to introduce both a constitutional amendment to give Washington a voting representative in the House, and a bill to provide for a non-voting delegate in the meantime. More important, the proposal for a non-voting delegate already had the support of important House District Committee Republicans, ensuring that, unlike so many other home rule measures, Nelsen’s bill would not become trapped in committee.

The measure, when it was finally passed in September 1970, was a reorganization of sorts for the home rule movement. Although many Washingtonians wondered if there was a point to voting for a delegate to the House who could not vote when he got there, many insiders recognized the impact the delegate could have. As one lobbyist observed, contrary to popular belief, “most congressmen are open to logical argument.” Moreover, few could deny that the new delegate brought the District closer to both home rule and full Congressional representation. The only question was how much influence the delegate would wield. As the Afro observed, “If the right candidate is elected and he operates with skill and dedication, the District Delegate could bring about the means by which Washington gains the additional power – the power of the vote – the city had been crying for down through the years.” The man elected, former city council vice-president
Walter Fauntroy, was mercurial and self-aggrandizing. At the same time, he was respected by many in the polarized city and understood the meaning of compromise. Perhaps most significant, Fauntroy occupied an office which gave the District a consistent voice on Capitol Hill and offered home rule reformers an organizational focus. With Representative Fauntroy at the center, a collection of local and national groups formed a coalition for home rule. That organization, the Coalition for Self-Determination for the District of Columbia, ran a controlled and unified campaign which ultimately brought limited home rule to Washington.
The civil rights movement changed the politics of dissent. For the first time Americans had an effective model of protest that created real faith in social progress among the middle-class. More important, it whetted liberals' appetite for reforming American institutions. As sixties historian David Burner observed, “The proliferation in ensuing times of political groups and ideologies as diverse as feminism, gay rights, and deep ecology was a logical expression of energies grown and burst from the movements that had generated them.” Home rule for the District became one such outlet. It was a means for the District’s middle-class, and especially whites, to redeem themselves to the rioters. As District activist Sam Smith suggested, “The sort of injustice perpetrated against the city of Washington, closely tied as it is to racial misconceptions and prejudices, is largely the responsibility of white America. We made this mess and we should, if we can summon up the decency, attempt to resolve it.” These sentiments, though held with the best of intentions, were rooted in paternalism: implicit is the view that white assistance in the black District’s struggle for home rule was not only helpful, but necessary.

The model for white middle-class involvement in home rule was established by the League of Women Voters (LWV). In 1970, the LWV celebrated its fiftieth anniversary, and the organization’s leadership wanted to mark the occasion by reasserting the League’s effectiveness. The most obvious national issues – racial tension and student protest – were too divisive for a campaign intended to reaffirm the ideal of a national organization
centered on grassroots consensus. Instead, at the urging of its D.C. chapter, the LWV made enfranchising the District the focus of its anniversary effort. The District’s lack of democratic rights was an ideally symbolic, seemingly vanilla issue. Rather than focus on home rule, which had some threatening racial implications, the League worked for passage of a constitutional amendment to give the District full voting representation in the House and Senate. Using strategies that at once reflected their grassroots tradition and the influence of sixties politics, the group worked to make their campaign visible. Within the District, the League held symbolic protests. League women, for example, left their tax returns in front of the District Building to underline the injustice of taxation without representation. Nationally, the LWV organized a petition drive in support of Congressional representation for the city. The 1.2 million signatures the League collected were presented to Congressional delegations from the members’ states at the Fiftieth Anniversary Convention.

It was the first time a national organization had made a concerted effort on behalf of the city. Once a debate reserved for the city and the unlucky Congressmen given a District Committee assignment, self-determination for the District rose to the level of something more than a national footnote. In an editorial praising the organization generally, the Arizona Daily Star recognized the League’s support for representation in the District. In response to League efforts The Milwaukee Journal commented, “Residents of the District of Columbia have gone too long without the representation other Americans enjoy.” And the New York Times published a letter from D.C. League president Connie Fortune which argued, “The situation is fundamentally abhorrent to the
integrity of our democratic form of government. That it has lasted so many years is unconscionable. Prompt legislation giving D.C. residents full, voting representation should be supported.” The informational campaign was designed to create not public outrage but Congressional action. It was a new incarnation of a decades old middle-class approach.

If the League’s campaign did not inspire Washingtonians to support its effort, it may have led some to conclude they could improve upon the lumbering organization’s tactics. A group of roughly twenty political professionals – activists and federal and city employees – formed an Ad-Hoc Home Rule Committee presumably in response to the inadequacy of the LWV’s advocacy. Unlike previous District-based efforts to generate support for home rule, the loosely structured Committee did not seek media coverage. Indeed, the Post observed that group members were “reluctant to discuss details [of the organization] and shy away from publicity.” Popular support was at best a secondary goal for the newly formed organization. Instead the Home Rule group favored influence over pressure and sought change through lobbying efforts modeled on the LWV’s anniversary campaign. The group’s first action exemplified its philosophy: the Ad-Hoc Committee sent a letter to organizations in areas represented by members of the House District Committee asking that they urge their Congressmen to release home rule from the Committee’s doldrums. Sent under the header, “Will You Help the 800,000 Citizens of D.C. to Achieve a Small Step Toward Self-Government,” the letter was polite in tone and suggested little of the dogmatic rancor that had come to dominate the home rule debate. And it was sent with sensitivity to the timetables of national politics. Dated February 28,
1970, the letter offered the targeted organizations more than ample time to make the
District an issue in both party primaries and the general election.4

In addition, the Ad-Hoc group published an informative two-page pamphlet
targeted at non-District residents who knew little of the city’s condition. Entitled,
“What’s Wrong with the Nation’s Capital,” the document dispelled common
misconceptions about the city. In response to the Congressional worry that Washington
would be lawless without some oversight, the pamphlet argued that lack of democracy
was the city’s most important problem. Congress, it claimed, exercised suffocating
authority over the city, “All statutes, no matter how local in nature (one statute prohibits
kite-flying) must be adopted by Congress; taxes are levied by Congress; all expenditures of
moneys paid by District taxpayers are imposed by Congress.” More important, the
pamphlet urged readers to make their concerns known: “Only you who live in other States
can influence your Congressman.”5

Like the League’s campaign, both the letter and the pamphlet reflected a
willingness to work within existing political structures that was new to 1960’s home rule
advocacy. Indeed, the Ad-Hoc Home Rule Committee’s strength was their familiarity and
comfort with the workings of Congress. In response to rumors that the Administration’s
District reform bills might not escape the House District Committee, the group worked to
build support for the measures. In a memorandum addressed to “Home Rule Supporters,”
the organization called a meeting to ensure that the Administration’s bills were reported
out of Committee: “We need assistance in lobbying, particularly if a discharge petition is
introduced. Help is needed in typing, addressing envelopes, etc. The purpose of this
meeting is to organize these efforts and much assistance is needed.” In addition to solving secretarial problems, the meeting yielded a set of instructions for lobbying which exemplified the organization’s methods as a whole. Lobbyists were to remind Congressmen that “The League of Women Voters recently secured hundreds of thousands of signatures all across the country on petitions supporting voting representation in the Congress for D.C.,” and ask a series of specific questions designed to make representatives voice explicit support for measures.  Little room was left for improvisation or chance. Moreover, it was the first time the home rule movement had made distinctions beyond supporters and “enemies.”

The Ad-Hoc Home Rule Committee’s efforts, which helped ensure the passage of the non-voting delegate bill, suggested not only the effectiveness a lobby for the District could have, but demonstrated the need for a centralized and sustained effort. Jan Eichhorn, who had become the de facto head of the Ad-Hoc group, told the Greater Washington Chapter of the American Democratic Association that a permanent Home Rule organization ought to be created, “I believe it is imperative that a national lobbying office be established,” said Eichhorn, “to work toward voting representation in the Congress and full Home Rule in D.C.” She suggested that the organization be composed of groups already in support of home rule and representation, like the LWV. Indeed, Eichhorn indicated that an alliance with the League could form the foundation of a pro-District coalition, though she expressed concern that the LWV might be a difficult partner. “The League is interested in continuing their effort. However, in the past they have acted without consulting D.C. organizations and it is important that they be steered in the right
direction,” Eichhorn declared. Such wariness suggests an understanding that in a coalition unity is more important than sheer bulk. Unlike past efforts to unify the District’s proponents, the new coalition would be willing to sacrifice individual agendas for the good of the whole.

Eichhorn’s plan, however, did not gain momentum until Fauntroy was elected D.C. delegate. In his campaign, Fauntroy made home rule his top priority, and he had announced plans to organize a community lobby on Capitol Hill. The organization he envisioned was hardly novel; Fauntroy wanted to form a quick-response group that could protest and lobby with equal effectiveness. He warned, “A lot of congressmen are influenced by testimony and personal meetings, and I’m sure if these traditional measures failed, those alternatives sanctioned by the government might be necessary.” However, the threat of protest inherently undermined attempts to lobby in good faith; essentially it encouraged organization members to refuse compromise.

The campaign for the Congressional seat changed Fauntroy’s vision of home rule activism. The City Council vice-chairman had found himself outflanked on the left by Hobson and his newly founded D.C. Statehood Party, which hoped to steal the seat from the favored Fauntroy. In the two years since his School Board election in 1968, Hobson had lost none of his passion for truth at any cost. He attacked Fauntroy as “an already co-opted candidate who will serve the interests of Congress,” and criticized him for holding a fifty-dollar a plate fund-raising dinner which featured the names of eighteen Democratic Senators and Congressmen on the invitation. Noting that few of the featured guests attended the event, Hobson dryly remarked, “Most of the District residents were obviously
not there either since fifty-dollars for many is a week's pay.” Yet, Hobson's campaign was not solely antagonistic. He identified the election as an opportunity for Washingtonians to bind together in pursuit of a shared goal: “Even with the non-voting delegate we can begin now — rich and poor, young and old, black and white, minority groups and majority groups — to work toward full and equal status for District citizens...” The iconoclast’s optimism, though, was not enough to overcome the weaknesses of a third party candidacy. Washington was overwhelmingly Democratic, and Fauntroy, as the Democratic candidate, enjoyed funding and party allegiance that were too great for a man as disagreeable as Hobson to overcome.

Hobson’s argument that statehood was the quickest and best solution to the city’s problems, though, shifted the center of the home rule debate. Statehood, he claimed, was the only answer to the District’s educational, housing, and transportation crises. The argument was not without merit: statehood required only a Congressional majority, whereas voting representation by any other means would require a constitutional amendment. Statehood, however, did not address the question of how to ensure a more equitable federal payment. Even with the full rights of a state, the District would be unable to make up the revenue lost to tax-exempt federal land holdings. Fauntroy pointed out, “The question is how do we get access to the money. I'd rather have ninety percent of something than ten percent of nothing.” Yet Fauntroy could not simply decry statehood. As an elected official charged with the responsibility of bringing both more money and greater democracy to the District, he had to deliver more than rhetoric.

THE COALITION

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Fauntroy recognized he could not take the high road of protest and non-participation; he had been elected with a mandate for home rule of any kind. Consequently, when the Americans for Democratic Action approached him about founding a national coalition for self-government in the District, Fauntroy seized the opportunity. On July 29, 1971, Fauntroy announced that he and Senator Edward Brooke, a Republican from Massachusetts, would serve as national co-chairmen of the Coalition for Self-Determination for the District of Columbia. In the three days preceding the formal announcement, the Coalition incorporated the support of over twenty national organizations including the LWV, Common Cause, the Association of Student Governments, the U.S. Conference of Mayors, the United Auto Workers, and the National Education Association. The coalition was national and bi-partisan. As Fauntroy hyperbolically observed, “We can demonstrate to the Congress the enormous passion for self-government that exists among our people – black and white, rich and poor.” More important, the new organization planned to open a permanent office with full-time staff, giving the District a voice that was not only widely endorsed, but persistent.

The formation of the Coalition added to the apparent momentum of home rule. As the Star observed, “The pace of District home rule advocacy has been quickening. Without a dissent the Senate District Committee has approved a bill that would give the Nation’s Capital elected self-government, and Senate passage is foreseen.” In addition, President Nixon reaffirmed his commitment to District reform. In a statement to the press, he expressly supported a Constitutional amendment giving the District voting representation and promised that his administration would work “receptively and
cooperatively . . . with the Congress and with all interested groups in the District of Columbia" to extend the scope of local government. The House, however, remained unlikely to consent to further democratic rights for the District. The Coalition recognized that home rule would have to overcome the prejudice—most deeply embedded in the House District Committee—that had held it back for decades: "A principal reason for House opposition to home rule is that the District’s population is three-quarters black while the key Congressmen on the House D.C. Committee are unsympathetic Southerners."12 Indeed, the House District Committee remained a refuge for segregationists and overt racists who, during the twenty-four year tenure of chairman John McMillan, had not once consented to increase the District’s autonomy.

Normally, McMillan refused District reform measures even the opportunity for debate. As chairman, he was responsible for the Committee’s schedule, and it had become his practice to simply deny home rule legislation the hearings required for a vote. By 1972, however, the District’s cause had become more difficult to ignore; the Coalition for Self-Determination, which had grown to include forty-five organizations, gave the city a constant and “respectable” advocate, and the addition of Fauntroy to the House Committee meant McMillan had to personally refuse an elected colleague. Ultimately the South Carolina Democrat relented. In response to a January 3 letter sent by Fauntroy on Coalition stationary, McMillan agreed to hold hearings on self-government proposals for the District. Not easily beaten McMillan allowed noted racist John Rarick, a Democrat from Louisiana, to begin the debate. Rarick opened the hearing with the suggestion that mass relocation of the District’s populace to sparsely populated states like Montana and
the Dakotas might solve the city’s problems. Washingtonians, he claimed, had “no more entitlement in logic or morality to home rule... than the Navajo reservation located in Arizona...” Rarick also warned that home rule might allow Black Muslims to run the city. Earl Landgrebe, a Republican from Indiana, concurred: “This community, with the make up of its population, I don’t know who these people would elect, Jane Fonda? Or what’s his name – Stokely Carmichael?”

Unlike years past, however, the District had defenders in the House Committee. Both Fauntroy and Charles Diggs, a first term black Democrat from Michigan, challenged the factual and moral validity of Rarick’s and Landgrebe’s statements. As the Star reported, “Fauntroy termed Rarick’s testimony ‘twisted logic.’ And Diggs said it was ‘a stretch of the First Amendment even to permit’ Rarick to deliver such testimony.”

Fauntroy’s and Diggs’ vociferous indignation made men like Rarick and Landgrebe directly accountable for their rhetoric for the first time. The House District Committee had long served as a pulpit for those who wished to preach racist doctrine safely. For less hateful Congressmen, service to the Committee was considered a burden best endured quickly and quietly; few had the energy or will to contest the practices of a group of segregationists that had amassed years of seniority in a seemingly insignificant Committee. Fauntroy and Diggs, on the other hand, had sought the usually dreaded assignment. Both were determined, at the very least, to expose the Committee’s bigotry.

Their defense of the District was supplemented by the Coalition’s activities. In anticipation of the House District Committee’s recalcitrance, the Coalition tried to increase the political value of home rule for Congressmen inclined to support, but not fight
for, the city. Through press conferences, newspaper editorials, and direct mailings Self-Determination for D.C. worked to create a demand for home rule legislation among uninvolved Congressmen in the hope that they would, themselves, pressure Committee members for action. As one Self-Determination memorandum observed, “An issue must become fairly visible, politically sensitive or a real bother for a Member to communicate directly with that committee, either through its chairmen or through members of that committee.”15 Though ultimately a failure (the 1972 home rule measures never did pass the District Committee), the effort established the organization as a legitimate political force. By using proven lobbying techniques and exhibiting middle-class patience and civility, the Coalition earned the confidence of the media and the trust of Congressmen.

Self-Determination for D.C, however, distinctly lacked the type of local involvement that for years had been held as the *sine qua non* of home rule. Few Washingtonians counted themselves Coalition members, and an even smaller number participated in the organization’s numerous letter writing and lobbying campaigns. Coalition leaders recognized the risk inherent in ignoring local support – it was, after all, important that an organization promoting democracy for the District be representative itself of the city’s wishes. To address the shortcoming, the group laid out plans for a “Metropolitan Component” to their home rule effort. As the organization’s leaders observed in an internal memorandum, “Members of the metropolitan component will participate, to the extent possible, in a number of activities including education, lobbying, fund-raising, publicity and research.”16 The Coalition for Self-Determination was not a grassroots organization; Washingtonians were needed as tokens of local support more
than contributors. In the context of the times, Coalition leaders must have felt compelled to include District residents in what was ultimately their struggle. It is clear from the cautious phrasing of the memorandum, though, that they did not want to involve Washingtonians at the expense of the Coalition's effectiveness: note the qualifier, "to the extent possible." Ironically, the Coalition deemed the same District citizens who many on Capitol Hill judged too irresponsible to govern themselves, not ready for meaningful involvement in the campaign for self-determination. Paternalism framed both sides of the District debate.

The Coalition's reluctance to include potentially volatile Washingtonians stemmed largely from its belief that home rule was close at hand. The group hoped that the 1972 election would yield a Congress, and a House District Committee, willing to pass home rule legislation. Accordingly, the group sought national party support. Like Channing Phillips four years earlier, Coalition leaders pled the District's case to the Democratic Platform Committee. Richard Clark, chairman of Self-Determination for D.C.'s board of directors, and Sterling Tucker, now chair of the Metropolitan Coalition for Self-Determination, argued that home rule ought to be included, again, in the platform with the hope that this time the District's status would become a national issue. Clark argued that the District paid higher taxes than all but three states, noted the broad support Self-Determination for D.C. had gathered (by the time of the Convention the organization boasted forty-eight national and thirty-five Washington-area member organizations), and suggested that home rule would reaffirm American democracy for the coming bicentennial. Tucker, a veteran of District politics, was less gentle in his appeal. He
observed that platform support had done little for the District in the past and asked
delegates to consider the position of a District resident: “There are no legal, moral or
philosophical grounds for the denial of self-government to the residents of Washington.
We live and pay taxes here. We raise and educate our children here. We are citizens of
the Country; we are citizens of this City. We are not transients; this is our home.”
Tucker’s rhetoric, however, stands out as an anachronism. Home rule was no longer
about those who suffered without democracy, but about the guilt of those who did not.

Although home rule for the District had been a staple of the Democratic party
platform since World War II, the 1972 Convention was uniquely receptive to the idea.
Burner observed that in 1972 the Democratic party invited “a public image of itself as the
champion of complainants demanding a right to outrage and privilege for their indelibly
distinctive selves.” Accordingly, the District’s advocates became the party’s mascots of
democracy. In response to arguments that they had abandoned democratic idealism by
supporting peace in Vietnam, Democrats pointed to their support of home rule for the
District as evidence of their faith in participatory government. As a necessary result,
though, the Coalition for Self-Determination’s campaign now appeared abstracted from
the District’s black reality. Ultimately, home rule would grant a measure of power to
District blacks, but the organization identified these Washingtonians as citizens first and
black second. Though such an interpretation of the city could be attributed to idealism, in
the Coalition’s case it came from the pragmatic understanding that even liberals would be
hesitant to support “Black Power” legislation. The organization advocated self-
determination for the District with vague and carefully manipulated appeals to American
democratic idealism, not pro-black rhetoric. As one petition submitted to the House declared, “Citizens of the District of Columbia are entitled, as American citizens, to the same rights as all Americans.” And affirmation of idealism appealed to a country still licking the wounds of the sixties.

Furthermore, by making home rule legislation something House members could boast of to their constituents, Self-Determination for D.C. expanded its base of support within that body. For the first time home rule advocates had access to the Congressmen who would decide the District’s fate. According to Eichhorn, after the Convention “a ‘blue ribbon’ delegation of Coalition national organizations met with the House Speaker and organized other lobby efforts.” As a result, when the 1972 election left two vacancies in the District Committee – including the defeated McMillan’s seat, which Coalition members had made a focus of their efforts – House leadership consulted the organization before assigning new members. Based on Self-Determination’s recommendation, the seats were filled by Representatives Tom Rees and Brock Adam, both home rule supporters. More important, the Committee chairmanship fell to Diggs, who had proved himself a staunch District supporter in his first term.

Still, the District Committee lacked the majority needed to ensure passage of home rule. In response, the Coalition organized yet another targeted campaign to convince “key” Congressmen to support the District’s cause. Though the Coalition’s methods changed little, the pace of its drive quickened. Whereas Self-Determination’s past efforts had simply tried to bring attention to the city’s condition on the assumption that indignation would yield a legislative response, the 1973 campaign was more assertive.

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The Coalition "called upon the leaders of local chapters of national organizations, asking them to personally contact their Congressional representatives." District volunteers, mostly from the D.C. League of Women Voters, coordinated the efforts by telephone. Each volunteer was assigned a specific Congressional district, and called their contacts "weekly with information and requests for action." At the same time, Eichhorn observed, "'National constituents' were asked to organize letter-writing campaigns, solicit editorial support from local newspapers, write letters to the editor supporting D.C. home rule, and publish articles on home rule, calling for action, in the newsletters of local organizations." For years home rule had been an issue without national consequences; few voters, if any, cast their ballots based upon a representative's stand on self-government for the District. The Coalition, though its extensive use of national contacts, worked to create at least the impression of grassroots support for the District. As a result, home rule became easier for Congressmen to support than ignore.

Despite the campaign's intensity, District residents remained largely uninvolved. The organization attracted only seventy-four Washington volunteers to assist in the building of a national constituency for home rule. The Coalition sensed that few in the District, aside from those who had always been concerned with home rule, were even aware of the organization's activities. The need for publicizing the Coalition's efforts was noted in its Washington newsletter: "In an effort to inform the community and involve residents in self-determination efforts, this committee is asking residents to hold a party in their home, inviting their friends and neighbors to come and learn about the issue and the effort." There was little follow up on this suggestion. The Coalition was not structured
to accommodate District citizens; its goal was to persuade Congressmen to support self-government for the District, an end more efficiently achieved by complaint outside the city and model behavior within it.

The one protest-type activity the Coalition did organize was conceived more as a media event than a demonstration of citizen support. Like the D.C. League's march to the District building three years earlier, "The Washington Tea Party" was designed to exploit the injustice of taxation without representation. As the Coalition's advance press release explained, the tax-day rally was rooted more in symbols than frustration: "The April 15 program will include skits based on the American Revolution, revolutionary songs and a symbolic dumping of tea into the water . . . D.C. residents are also being urged to wear black clothes on April 16 to mourn their plight and to enclose tea bags in their tax returns." It hardly appealed to the urban poor. Indeed, the protest proved largely ineffective. Rather than point out the hypocrisy of Congressional rule of the District, the Tea Party only illustrated how little popular support Self-Determination for D.C. possessed. A mere three-hundred people attended the well-publicized protest, the majority of them white, middle-class liberals.22

The rally's disappointing turnout demonstrated how incidental District support had become to the home rule movement. As Harris observed, "With Chairman McMillan gone, it was literally a new day in the House, and home rule sponsors and supporters made good on it."23 Indeed, even the infrastructure of the House Committee was more favorable to the District without McMillan. Diggs reorganized the House District Committee to include a Subcommittee on Government Operations. The Subcommittee
allowed District Committee members to prepare and debate home rule measures free from the destructive venom of men like Rarick and Landgrebe. Moreover, it afforded District groups the heretofore rare opportunity to offer statements on home rule. As a result the Coalition was able to define the grounds of debate, since, with the exception of Hobson’s Statehood Party, nearly all of the District’s remaining home rule advocates had been incorporated into Self-Determination.

There were four essential provisions to District self-government as Tucker testified to the Subcommittee: the city needed a locally-elected Mayor and City Council; local legislative authority over local affairs; full local budgetary authority including the right to determine local priorities and raise and allocate revenues; and an automatic federal payment to the city. Together, these provisions represented the “ninety-percent of something,” Fauntroy alluded to in his refutation of the statehood approach. More important, all were included in the bill the Subcommittee produced, and despite initial opposition to a “strong” home rule bill, the same measure was adopted by the House District Committee unchanged. As Archer Nelsen, the Committee’s ranking Republican and a critic of a strong home rule package, observed, the bill’s success was due to the relentless efforts of the Self-Determination lobby: “First, may I say to the lobby that is working, congratulations on a thorough job, and I’m sure the telephone company was very, very thankful also . . .” Indeed, the Coalition had worked arduously to keep the bill intact as it was first presented to the Subcommittee. Self-Determination members had monitored subcommittee and full committee meetings closely in order to prevent any “mark-up” of the draft bill. When it seemed like the bill might be weakened, volunteers
called constituents of subcommittee members, who in turn called their representatives. Eichhorn noted, “On occasion these constituents knew the agenda for the next day’s mark-up session before their Congressman did.”

Attentiveness, however, could not overcome the lingering influence of racism. Congressional Quarterly reported that the home rule bill would face “an uphill fight on the House floor.” House District Appropriations Chair William Natcher, a powerful Congressman and a long-standing District foe, had stated that he would not support the District Committee’s bill and hinted that he had enough votes behind him to ensure the measure’s failure. According to Eichhorn, “Diggs and other Committee supporters felt it was necessary to agree to amendments which weakened the measure.” To ensure passage, Diggs reached a compromise with Natcher that made home rule more palatable to the District’s opponents. The Diggs Compromise offered the Congress line-item control over the city’s budget, prohibited the City Council from making changes to the criminal code, required Senate confirmation of mayoral appointed judges, granted the President authority to control the local police in case of an emergency, and included a provision stating that no council action would take effect until thirty days after enactment so that Congress could have time to review (and possibly) veto the measure. The compromise bill was passed by the House on October 10, 1973 by a vote of 343 to 74, and, after molding the stronger Senate version to dovetail with the House’s demands in Conference Committee, was signed into law by President Nixon on December 24, 1973.

The measure was not the Christmas present for which Coalition leaders had hoped; the Diggs Compromise had stripped much of the meaning from home rule. The city
gained the right to elect its mayor and city council and both mayor and council gained significant legislative and taxing authority, but every action they took would be subject to Congressional oversight. And what the Congress did not revoke explicitly could be done implicitly by reducing the Federal payment to the city. The legislation discouraged the kind of experimentation and independence the city would need to address its problems.

More important, reserving the President's right to control the police in an emergency and refusing the counsel the power to alter the criminal code maintained the attitude of Congressional rule, if not the structure. Before and after riot, with and without middle-class civility, District citizens were treated like children; they were refused responsibility for themselves.
Epilogue

In his study of the civil rights movement in Greensboro, North Carolina, *Civilities and Civil Rights*, William Chafe argues that the white establishment used political moderation and civility as a weapon of social control. "By promoting the appearance of enlightenment and tolerance, [Greensboro’s progressive] mystique obstructed efforts to mobilize sustained protest. The enemy was elusive and flexible, not immediate and brutal." Chafe’s analysis is instructive. Though the home rule movement encountered the unique problem of Congressional rule, Washington’s middle-class shared white Greensboro’s inclination toward political politeness and patience. For them, self-determination did not carry the urgency it had for the District’s radicals. Congressional rule had not altered the mortgage on their home, nor had it done anything to undermine the security of a government job. Perhaps middle-class Washingtonians felt the need to send their children to private schools, but many urban centers had troubled school systems – inferior public education was simply the price one paid for eschewing the suburbs.

That is not to say that the District’s middle-class did not worry about problems outside the confines of their largely segregated neighborhoods. To the contrary, many middle-class Washingtonians shared the concerns radicals enunciated; they wanted better schools, supported calls for more affordable housing, and sympathized with Black Power demands. Likewise, they recognized that self-government was a necessary first step. That recognition manifested itself in the form of the Coalition for Self-Determination for the
District of Columbia, which transformed the radical identification of need into a more
detached, middle-class expression of ideological indignation. These claims were not
immediate; rather, they were founded on a faith in progress that the District’s poor simply
could not share.

In the years since home rule was actively sought and partially gained, events have
not redeemed that faith. Congress never did relinquish its ultimate authority over District
affairs, despite the limited effectiveness of the city’s first two home rule governments
under Washington and Barry. A constitutional amendment which would have given the
District Congressional representation “as though it were a state” passed Congress in 1979,
but failed to receive the votes needed for ratification by the states. Although some had
hoped that the 1973 home rule bill would open the door to District government reform,
the Diggs Compromise proved the first in a series of quiet defeats for optimistic middle-
class reformers. As Mayor Washington, who embodied the civility many District citizens
valued, conceded when asked if he was surprised by the lack of progress on home rule, “I
thought we’d be way down the road . . . we got limited home rule. I thought by now we’d
have control of the budget, control of revenue.” Such expectations reflect an
understanding of the District and its local politics that had become obsolete.

The sixties transformed the District. Once defined by the traditions of a
distinguished black middle-class, the city became poorer, blacker, and angrier in the years
surrounding the riot. The Free D.C. Movement, School Board conflicts, and police
reform efforts reflected this growing constituency like light refracted through a prism.
Though none of these efforts stemmed from “the people” themselves, they illustrated a
real and growing frustration. To these Washingtonians and their leaders, the decorum the middle-class longed for seemed artificial and ineffective. Rage, for them, was not a cause for embarrassment, but a source of power and spirit.

Emblematic of this transition is Hobson. Like Washingtonians in general, Hobson recognized the city's ills, and was willing to experiment with change, but at the same time, he was paralyzed by the magnitude of its problems. He could analyze the District's status with razor-like precision and envision an urban utopia, but could not plot a path between the two. More than any other District leader, Hobson was impatient and uncivil. For Hobson, truth and justice could not wait. As one friend observed when Hobson argued with white parents concerned that integration would ruin their schools, "He wasn't asking to be 'accepted.' Integration was their problem, not his. They could stay or leave. In that school he had only one objective, quality education for all children, and he wasn't going to waste any time or energy worrying about how to get on with whites." Perhaps most important, Hobson's pride and self-confidence were palpable. He exemplified black power naturally, and his strength—which the District ultimately sought for itself—earned him respect.

In 1972, as Self-Determination for D.C. was beginning its home rule campaign in earnest, Hobson was diagnosed with multiple myeloma—cancer of the bone marrow. Incurable, the illness had left the once vivacious rabble-rouser wheelchair bound and in constant pain. Though he remained an advocate for the District, the disease killed Hobson the activist years before it killed Hobson the man. Recognizing Hobson's fate, friends and sympathizers organized "An Evening to Honor Julius Hobson," for November 12, 1972.
Speakers came from across the nation; they included Ralph Temple, Legal Director of the ACLU, Charles Cassell, Co-Chair Statehood Party, Hilda Mason, member of the D.C. Board of Education, Herbert Reid, Dean of Howard School of Law, Stokley Carmichael, Willie J. Hardy, 1972 Afro-American Woman of the Year, Jerry Gordon, Co-coordinator of National Peace Action Coalition, and Congressman Ron Dellums. Joan Baez and the Gold Drum Players provided entertainment. There was a certain irony to the event. While many of those present knew Hobson personally – they had worked with him, picketed with him, and fought with him – a far greater number honored him as symbol of radicalism. However, Hobson’s lionized characteristics – his stubbornness, independence, and utopian idealism – had been his downfall. He was unable to curb his radicalism in favor of achievement.

Though he died in 1977, the District has yet to truly bury Julius Hobson. Aging sixties radicals refer to him as though he were alive; City Council members still hang his portrait in their office. A loner and iconoclast in his own lifetime, Hobson has become the patron saint of District politicians. The implications of this adoption of the Hobson legacy are troubling; for all his virtues, Hobson was himself an intolerant man. Hobson never learned to listen or compromise or work for the greater good. More important, he cared little for public opinion and refused to build consensus. Much like both Free D.C. and the Coalition for Self-Determination, Julius Hobson neither trusted Washingtonians to see things his way nor was he willing to take the time to convince them.

The aftermath of the 1968 riot was tainted by a rededication to symbolic notions. For radicals, home rule was not a practical tool, but a vehicle for Black Power. The
middle-class worked for self-determination to confirm their commitment to democratic ideals. Likewise, interested Congressmen used the issue to assert a broader racial agenda, one usually rooted in white supremacy. Each abstracted Washingtonians, dividing them into categories of race, class, and ideology like playing cards dealt according to the rules of the argumentative game. Though the classifications of the home rule debate were artificial, the District was, indeed, divisible. Its populace was more a collection of individuals, than a community.
Notes for Chapter One:


2. Ibid., 251-252.

3. Ibid., 249.


5. Ibid.; Ibid.


7. Ibid., 104-105; Ibid., 92; Derthick, City Politics, 39.

8. Green, The Secret City, 106; Derthick, City Politics, 39.


10. Ibid., 266; Ibid.

11. Ibid., 280; D.C. Public Library, Washingtoniana Division, D.C. Community Archives, Collection 37, Home Rule Committee.

12. D.C. Public Library, Collection 33, League of Women Voters, Series 1, Box 12.


15. Gilbert, interview; D.C. Public Library, Home Rule Committee.

16. Derthick, City Politics, 1; Ibid., 56; Ibid., 48.

17. Green, The Secret City, 5; Derthick, City Politics, 5.


Notes for Chapter Two:
1. Ben Gilbert, Takoma, Washington, electronic mail to author, Amherst, 16 February 1999; Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Gilbert, email.
11. Ibid.
16. Ibid.


33. “Riots Can Happen Here, 80% of Residents Believe,” *Post*, 5 October 1966, A1; Ibid.

34. “Why in SE?” *Afro*, 20 August 1966, 1; Ibid.


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47. Letter to the Editor, Post, 16 August 1967, A24

48. Reed, Race, Culture, and Politics, 72.


Notes for Chapter Three:


18. Ibid.


25. D.C. Public Library, Collection 33, League of Women Voters, Series 1, Box 12.


Notes for Chapter Four:


2. D.C. Public Library, Collection 33, League of Women Voters Collection, Series 2; Ibid.

3. Ibid.; Ibid.; Ibid.


5. Ibid.

6. Ibid.; Ibid.

7. Ibid.


9. D.C. Public Library, Collection 1, Julius Hobson, Series 8, Box 2; Ibid.


11. Ibid.

12. Ibid.; Press Release, Office of the White House Press Secretary, to the Congress of the United States, from President Richard Nixon, 7 April 1971, courtesy of Ben Gilbert; D.C. Public Library, Collection 37, Self-Determination for D.C., Box 12.


15. D.C. Public Library, Collection 37, Self-Determination for D.C., Box 8.

16. Ibid.

17. Ibid., Box 12, Ibid.


19. Ibid., (no box); Ibid.

20. Ibid.

21. Ibid., Box 12.

22. Ibid.


24. D.C. Public Library, Collection 37, Self-Determination for D.C., Box 12; Ibid., (no box); Ibid.

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