FROM #BLACKLIVESMATTER TO BLACK LIBERATION

Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor

Foreword by Angela Y. Davis

Haymarket Books
Chicago, Illinois

© 2016 Keeanga-Yamahtta Taylor
Foreword © 2021 Angela Y. Davis
Chapter 8, "Where Is the Black Lives Matter Movement Headed," originally published as "Five Years Later, Do Black Lives Matter?" *Jacobin*, September 30, 2019.

Published by
Haymarket Books
P.O. Box 180165
Chicago, IL 60618
773-583-7884
info@haymarketbooks.org
www.haymarketbooks.org

ISBN: 978-1-64259-455-3

Trade distribution:
In the US through Consortium Book Sales and Distribution, www.cbsd.com
In the UK, Turnaround Publisher Services, www.turnaround-uk.com
In Canada, Publishers Group Canada, www.pgcbooks.ca
All other countries, Publishers Group Worldwide, www.pgw.com

This book was published with the generous support of the Wallace Action Fund and Lannan Foundation.

Printed in Canada by union labor.

Cover image © 2021 Devin Allen.
Cover and text design by Eric Kerl.

Library of Congress CIP Data is available.

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

To the parents, brothers, sisters, partners, and friends of those who have been killed by police and other forms of state-sanctioned violence and yet remain committed to the struggle for a just world

CHAPTER THREE

Black Faces in High Places

Black American history's central axis is the tension between accommodation and struggle.

—**Manning Marable,** *How Capitalism Underdeveloped Black America*, 1983

And what we got here in this town? Niggers in high places, black faces in high places, but the same rats and roaches, the same slums and garbage, the same police whippin' your heads, the same unemployment and junkies in the hallways mugging your old lady.

—**Amiri Baraka,** *Tales of the Out and the Gone*, 1972

Eight months after Black people in Ferguson, Missouri, took to the streets to demand justice for Michael Brown, Baltimore exploded in rage at the brutal beating and then death of twenty-five-year-old Freddie Gray. Gray, from the poorest area of Baltimore, was Black and unarmed—and when the police attempted to stop him for no reason, he ran. He did not run inexplicably; he ran because Baltimore police are notorious for the physical abuse they enact against people, particularly Black people, in their custody, as the *Atlantic* documents:

> Victims include a 15-year-old boy riding a dirt bike, a 26-year-old pregnant accountant who had witnessed a beating, a 50-year-old woman

> selling church raffle tickets, a 65-year-old church deacon rolling a cigarette and an 87-year-old grandmother aiding her wounded grandson. Those cases detail a frightful human toll. Officers have battered dozens of residents who suffered broken bones—jaws, noses, arms, legs, ankles—head trauma, organ failure, and even death, coming during questionable arrests. Some residents were beaten while handcuffed; others were thrown to the pavement.[1]

Though it fit into a frightening pattern, Gray's death almost went unnoticed until cell-phone video emerged to show him being "disappeared" into the back of a police van, only to emerge much later with his spinal cord cut almost in half. Freddie Gray was killed almost two weeks after video footage from North Charleston, South Carolina, showed a Black man named Walter Scott shot eight times in the back as he ran helplessly from a white police officer. The reluctance of Baltimore officials to act stood in contrast to the quick action of officials in South Carolina, who fired the cop, Michael Slager, almost instantly and charged him with murder. In Baltimore, the six officers were placed on "paid administrative leave" as questions mounted during a slow-moving investigation. From the time of Gray's death there were daily protests demanding the arrest of the six police involved; investigators preached patience. In the hours after Gray's funeral on Monday, April 27, patience ran out when police attacked high school students and the students fought back, touching off the Baltimore rebellion. A federal survey estimated that the riots in Baltimore caused $9 million worth of damage including the destruction of 144 cars and the incineration of fifteen buildings.[2] More than two hundred people were arrested, including forty-nine children, half of whom were never charged with a crime. One five-year-old boy was "brought to court in chains—hands and feet shackled—before finally being released to his parents."[3]

The police violence that killed Freddie Gray was now on display for the world to see. But this was no Ferguson. Nor was it North Charleston. What distinguishes Baltimore from Ferguson and North Charleston is that the Black political establishment runs the city: African Americans control virtually the entire political apparatus. Mayor Stephanie Rawlings-Blake and police commissioner Anthony Batts were the most prominent faces of political power in Baltimore during the rebellion, but Black power runs deep in the city: Baltimore's city

council has fifteen members, eight of whom are African American, including its president. The superintendent of the public schools and the entire board of the city's housing commission are African American. In Ferguson, where Blacks are 67 percent of the population, the city is run almost exclusively by whites. North Charleston has similar dynamics: African Americans compose 47 percent of the population but are governed by a white mayor and police chief and a white-majority city council (eight of eleven members). In Ferguson, the lack of Black political power and representation became a narrative thread in popular explanations for what went wrong. Electing African Americans into political office in Ferguson thus became a focal point for many local and national activists. Conversely, in North Charleston, the quickness with which the white political apparatus acted only drew attention to the sclerotic response of Baltimore's Black leadership.

If the murder of Mike Brown and the rebellion in Ferguson were reminiscent of the old Jim Crow, then the murder of Freddie Gray and the Baltimore uprising symbolize the new Black political elite. The dynamics of a Black rebellion in a Black-governed city highlight one of the most dramatic transformations in Black politics—and Black life in general. In fact, Baltimore is a scant forty miles from the White House, where the nation's first African American president resides. There are forty-six Black members of the House of Representatives and two Black senators—giving the 114th Congress the highest number of Black members in American history. Just as the West Side of Baltimore was erupting against the police killing of Freddie Gray, Loretta Lynch became the first Black woman appointed as attorney general—replacing the first Black man to have held the position. Across the United States, thousands of Black elected officials are governing many of the nation's cities and suburbs. Yet, despite this unprecedented access to political power, little has changed for the vast majority of African Americans. For example, three of the six police officers involved in the alleged death of Gray are African American. Judge Barry G. Williams, who is also African American, presided over the trial of Black police officer William G. Porter, which ended in a mistrial eight months after the death of Gray. Even though Porter confirmed that he did not buckle Gray into his seat or call an ambulance when Gray's injuries were apparent, the jury did not find that Porter had played a significant role

Gray's death. Even with the involvement of a Black cop, a Black prosecutor, and a Black judge, justice remained elusive for Freddie Gray.[4] The main difference is that today, when poor or working-class Black people experience hardship, that hardship is likely being overseen by an African American in some position of authority. The development of the Black political establishment has not been a benign process. Many of these officials use their perches to articulate the worst stereotypes of Blacks in order to shift blame away from their own incompetence.

Despite the lawlessness of the Baltimore Police Department, Mayor Rawlings-Blake reserved her harshest comments for those involved in the uprising, describing them as "criminals" and "thugs." A few days later, President Obama took the mayor's lead when he referred to "criminals and thugs who tore up the place." When Obama's spokesperson, Josh Earnest, was asked if the president wanted to clarify what he meant by "thugs," he doubled down: "When you're looting up a convenience store or you're throwing a cinder block at a police officer, you're engaging in thuggish behavior and that's why the president used that word."[5] Rawlings-Blake's outburst was hardly surprising: a month before the unrest in Baltimore, she had ranted that Black men were responsible for violence in the city. She claimed, "Too many of us in the black community have become complacent about black-on-black crime. . . . While many of us are willing to march and protest and become active in the face of police misconduct, many of us turn a blind eye when it's us killing us."[6] But Baltimore's Black mayor had "turned a blind eye" to the intense poverty in Freddie Gray's West Baltimore neighborhood, Sandtown, where residents experience 24 percent unemployment and have a median income of $25,000—less than half the median income in the rest of Baltimore. Surely there could be some connection made between the desperate levels of poverty in Baltimore and the crime that exists in those communities. In a context, however, where no programs and no money were on offer to transform those conditions, a mayoral press conference singling out Black men for crime in the city of Baltimore was deemed sufficient.

From the president to the mayor of Baltimore and beyond, Black elected officials use their "insider" positions as African Americans to project to the Black and white public that they have unique capabilities in the event of Black unrest. The utility of Black elected officials

lies in their ability, as members of the community, to scold ordinary Black people in ways that white politicians could never get away with. Black elected officials' role as interlocutors between the broader Black population and the general American public makes them indispensible in American politics. Moreover, it gives them authority as people with particular insight into the "Black community," which they often use to do more harm than good while deftly escaping the label of "racist." For example, in Chicago in the spring of 2014, the African American commissioner of Cook County, Richard Boykin, called a press conference to lobby for legislation that would classify gang members as "domestic terrorists." Such a change in designation would increase the punishment for various crimes to twenty-year-to-life sentences. Boykin said of his proposal, "These dedicated groups of individuals—some black, some Hispanic—are destabilizing our community, and we must put an end to it, or else this violence will put an end to us."[7]

Black elected officials obscure their actions under a cloak of imagined racial solidarity, while ignoring their role as arbiters of political power who willingly operate in a political terrain designed to exploit and oppress African Americans and other working-class people. Consider the case of Marilyn Mosby, the state's attorney for Baltimore, and her decision to charge the six officers implicated in Gray's death with murder. Mosby endured barbs from the Baltimore police union as well as the media for "rushing to judgment" in charging the police, but the combined pressures of three days of rioting in Baltimore, escalating Black anger, and the growing Black Lives Matter movement shining a spotlight on police practices emboldened Mosby to act. She exemplifies the complicated role Black elected officials play. On the one hand, she was, perhaps, more susceptible to pressure from the Black electorate, but on the other hand, Mosby also bore responsibility for helping to create the conditions that led to Gray's death. Three weeks before police captured and killed Gray, Mosby had personally directed the police department to target the intersection where they first encountered Gray with "enhanced drug enforcement efforts."[8] Mosby told police assigned to that area that their supervisors would monitor their progress with "daily measurables." Baltimore police officer Kenneth Butler explained, "They want increased productivity, whether it be car stops, field interviews, arrests—that's what they mean by measurables."[9]

Mosby did not direct the police to nearly sever Gray's spinal cord, but the pressure to crack down on crime through the use of the police, prisons, and jails has predictable outcomes.

The dynamic propelling African Americans into political confrontations with each other has been in the making since African Americans became legitimate political contenders in urban contests toward the end of the 1960s. The pursuit of Black electoral power became one of the principal strategies that emerged from the Black Power era. Clearly it has been successful for some. But the continuing crises for Black people, from under-resourced schools to police murder, expose the extreme limitations of that strategy. The ascendance of Black electoral politics also dramatizes how class differences can lead to different political strategies in the fight for Black liberation. There have always been class differences among African Americans, but this is the first time those class differences have been expressed in the form of a minority of Blacks wielding significant political power and authority over the majority of Black lives. This raises critical questions about the role of the Black elite in the continuing freedom struggle—and about what side are they on. This is not an overstatement. When a Black mayor, governing a largely Black city, aids in the mobilization of a military unit led by a Black woman to suppress a Black rebellion, we are in a new period of the Black freedom struggle. This chapter explores the rise of Black political power and its consequences for the Black poor and working class.

A Class for Itself

The integration of Black politics into the political mainstream coincided with an aggressive effort to cultivate a small but stable Black middle class. One route to this was government employment. Although Johnson's War on Poverty and Great Society programs never included a strong jobs component, between 1965 and 1972 federal spending on social welfare increased from $75 billion to $185 billion.[10] This massive expansion of the federal government, combined with antidiscrimination mandates in federal hiring practices, created vast job opportunities for Black workers. By 1970, half of Black male college graduates and more than 60 percent of college-educated Black women were public employees, compared with 35 percent of white men and 55 percent of white women. And although only 18 percent of the labor force in 1970 consisted of government employees, 26 percent of African American adults worked for the government.[11] According to historian Thomas Sugrue, "No institution played a greater role than government in breaking the grip of poverty and creating a Black middle class."[12]

In 1974, 64 percent of all new federal employees came from minority groups.[13] These changes in Black employment overlapped with a more general rise in income and a more firm class differentiation under way. Between 1969 and 1974 the earnings of the top 5 percent of nonwhite families increased from $17,000 to $24,000. By 1977, 21 percent of all Black families had incomes between $15,000 and $24,000; another 9 percent earned above $25,000.[14] For Blacks in management and other professional positions, the rate of unemployment remained in the single digits over the course of the 1970s, while Black and white workers in manufacturing experienced double-digit unemployment.[15]

Although this relatively small section of Blacks continued to have racially discriminatory encounters with whites, there were also important new aspects of their experience that differed from that of the majority of African Americans. The overall unemployment rate for professional and technical Black workers was about half that of the wider Black civilian workforce. The unemployment rate for Black salaried employees was even lower. The number of Black-owned banks also doubled during this time, to twenty-four.[16] Only a small number of African Americans were employed in the fields of banking, commerce, law, education, and medicine, but "they were set apart from the vast majority of working class and impoverished blacks by their relative income parity with whites, their educational training and professional advancement; their political moderation and social conformity; their advocacy of the economics of capitalism and corporate owned mobility."[17] In four decades, Black households earning more than $75,000 grew from 3.4 percent to 15.7 percent. Between 1970 and 2006 the number of Black households making more than $100,000 annually increased from 1 percent to 9 percent.[18] In real numbers, six million African Americans had become wealthy enough to "live in spacious homes, buy luxury goods, travel abroad on vacation, spoil their children—to live, in other words, just like well-to-do white folks."[19]

The size of this group was less important than the fact that their existence would vindicate American capitalism. Politically, they gave the emerging Black political class a group to orient toward as well as collaborate with on the basis of shared values and goals. The experiences of this relatively small group of African Americans was in no way representative of the majority or even common Black experience, but they were heralded as examples of how hard work could enable Blacks to overcome institutional challenges. The moderate success of some African Americans also allowed for other, less "successful" Blacks to be chastised for not taking advantage of the bounty of "opportunities" in the United States. The more time passed, the more the radical Black movement's momentum ebbed. Personal stories of achievement and accomplishment began to replace the narrative of collective struggle.

From the ranks of the newly developing Black middle class came hundreds, then thousands, of Black elected officials, who began to officiate for and politically represent the communities from which they rose. The Black elite and political class have now grown beyond simple aspirations of inclusion into American capitalism; they hold real political power and authority, which distinguishes them from most ordinary Blacks. From the presidency to the halls of Congress to city halls across the country, they have the capacity to shape public policies and to amplify public debates that disproportionately affect Black life. They wield more political, social, and (potentially) economic authority than average people. Their position remains tenuous and potentially compromised as compared to white political power, but they can hardly be described as toothless or powerless.

The Black Man's City

By the late 1960s, calls for "community control" over the cities in which Black people lived became louder. It made sense. The Black migration of the previous generation had brought millions of African Americans into the cities and helped to elevate Black concerns at least into the realm of being discussed politically, even if rarely acted upon. It was also transforming the metropolitan demographics, as the migration of Blacks prompted an outmigration of whites. White political control of increasingly Black-populated cities exacerbated existing tensions over Black

unemployment and poverty, underfunded schools, and substandard housing, among many other hardships, and gave rise to urban rebellions. In cities like Chicago, where Blacks were a third of the population, the wheels of patronage drew in some Black participation but without real Black political or economic control of the city's infrastructure. The destruction and instability rebellions had caused over the course of the decade softened the political elite to the idea that more Black control and ownership within the cities might help to calm the rebellious Black population. Given the conservative starting point of many Black elected officials today, it is hard to see how this turn to electoral politics could be considered radical or even relevant. But by the late 1960s, the potential for Black political and economic development was a welcome alternative to decades of neglect and disinvestment. The possibility of Black mayors running cities with large Black populations was called the "most amazing political revolution since the end of slavery."[20]

With no clear sense of where the Black movement was headed, the turn to electoral politics and "community control" appeared as a logical and pragmatic alternative. The unrelenting pressure that the federal government's counterinsurgency program, COINTELPRO, exerted on the left made that political direction seem risky. The assassinations of Malcolm X and Martin Luther King Jr., amid an atmosphere of intense surveillance and harassment, were intended to chill political opposition. One woman, speaking in the documentary film *The Black Power Mixtape: 1967–1975*, said, "I don't think there is much of a future at this point. Not much at all. They're just killing people."[21] Bobby Seale, former chairman of the Black Panther Party, said as much in an interview with *Ebony* about his run for mayor of Oakland in 1973. In an article titled "Shift to the Middle," Seale describes how, in the Panthers' relatively short existence, 50 members had been killed, 200 injured, and another 300 arrested; as a result, the Panthers had to shift strategies.[22] Included in that shift was a more collaborative approach with the Black middle class, utilizing their skills to fill the void created by the lack of public and private investment. Seale said, "We had to build a framework in which the Black middle class could work." The relentless assault on the Panthers and the Black left in general was isolating and exhausting. An alliance with the Black middle class meant tempering the Panthers' message to gain new allies. Seale rationalized the shift as allowing the

Panthers to expand their forces and carry through a program to provide services the state could not or would not provide.

This "pragmatic turn" away from revolution by sections of the Black revolutionary left created the conditions for civil rights organizations and Black militants to find some common ground. Carmichael and Hamilton described what Black urban governance could look like: "The power must be in the community, and emanate from there. . . . Black politicians must stop being representatives of 'downtown' machines, whatever the cost might be in terms of lost patronage and holiday handouts."[23] Black moderates may not have cared for the emphasis on Black control or power, but contrasted to the unpredictability of urban rebellion, Black political power seemed like a favorable alternative. As civil rights organizer Bayard Rustin counseled in an essay titled "From Protest to Politics,"

> If there is anything positive in the spread of the ghetto, it is the potential political power base thus created, and to realize this potential is one of the most challenging and urgent tasks before the civil rights movement. If the movement can wrest leadership of the ghetto vote from the machines, it will have acquired an organized constituency such as other major groups in our society now have.[24]

The revolutionaries Grace Lee Boggs and James Boggs wrote in the influential essay "The City Is the Black Man's Land" that the struggle for Black control of American cities was a "civil war between black power and white power, the first major battle of which was fought last August in Southern California between 18,000 soldiers and the black people of Watts."[25] The Boggses continued, "Negroes are the major source of the pay that goes to the police, judges, mayors, common councilmen, and all city government employees taxed through traffic tickets, assessments, etc. Yet in every major city Negroes have little or no representation in city government. WE PAY FOR THESE OFFICIALS. WE SHOULD RUN THEM."[26] Even King suggested that Black political power in the cities could stem the tide of rebellion by "more aggressive political involvement on the part of . . . Negroes." He anticipated the electoral turn of Black politics in the cities when he wrote: "The election of Negro mayors . . . has shown [Blacks] that [they have] the potential to participate in the determination of [their] own destiny—and that of society. We will see more Negro mayors in major cities in the next ten years."[27]

Promoting more Black political participation on a local level was a project of the Black movement, but the broader political establishment approved. The government and politicians widely promoted greater Black control of urban space as a preventive measure against urban uprisings, from including Black businesses in the Small Business Administration to Richard Nixon's fomenting Black capitalism to bipartisan support for greater homeownership in the inner city. Black people needed to have what Nixon liked to describe as a "piece of the action." Nixon said in a 1968 speech that "what most of the militants are asking is not separation, but to be included in—not as supplicants, but as owners, as entrepreneurs—to have a share of the wealth and a piece of the action."[28] Federal government programs, he said, should "be oriented toward more Black ownership, for from this can flow the rest—Black pride, Black jobs, Black opportunity and, yes, Black Power."[29]

"Keep It Cool for Carl"

In 1967, Carl Stokes of Cleveland, Ohio, became the first Black man to be elected mayor of a major American city. His election foreshadowed many of the dynamics that would come to characterize the Black mayoralties of the 1970 and 1980s. Stokes was a career politician who had served in the Ohio state assembly for two terms. He first ran for mayor in 1965 as an independent, and lost the race when the Cleveland Democratic Party machine helped to shut down his campaign. Shortly after Stokes's failed bid, the Hough area of Cleveland exploded in rebellion in response to the usual mix of police violence, poverty, and substandard housing. Stokes used this opportunity to launch a new campaign for mayor the following year, and suddenly became the popular candidate of various political interests. Stokes entertained the idea of running as an independent because of the deep animosity between him and the Cleveland Democratic machine, but Lyndon Johnson and the Democratic National Convention directly intervened and told him that if he ran as a Democrat, the national party would provide the necessary resources. The Stokes campaign became a focal point of the civil rights establishment, whose leaders were worried about the political drift of their organizations after the end of legal discrimination in the South and the urban uprisings in the North. Even King was drawn

to the potential of Stokes's rejuvenated campaign. In 1966 he and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) were wrapping up a bruising and ultimately unsuccessful campaign against housing discrimination in Chicago. For the stewards of the Democratic Party, the mayoral race in Cleveland offered an opportunity to create a viable alternative to the rebellion in the streets. Civil rights organizations and their supporters concentrated their efforts there. However, the campaign was also seen as insurgent because of the opposition of the local Democratic Party, including many ranking Black Democrats, who denounced Stokes as "destroying Negro unity."[30] The Cleveland Democratic Party warned of a pending "Black government" and suggested that if Stokes won, King would soon be running city hall. Stokes was also concerned that King's presence in Cleveland might alienate white voters. He asked King to leave. King refused but promised not to engage in any direct action that might antagonize white voters.

To the concern of Stokes, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), Student Non-Violent Coordinating Committee, and SCLC, the Urban League, and the National Council of Negro Women arrived in Cleveland to register thousands of new Black voters in anticipation of the coming election. The Ford Foundation gave the Cleveland chapter of CORE an astonishing $175,000 grant ($1.2 million in 2015 dollars) to assist with the voter registration drive.[31] Civil rights organizations in Cleveland promoted the slogan "Keep It Cool for Carl" to hem in the campaign politically and ensure there were no confrontations between activists and the public. To this end, Stokes's growing list of admirers included local industrialists and capitalists, who contributed $40,000 to local Black nationalist organizations to help keep the city quiet through the election period, worried that the sitting mayor, Ralph Lochner, was no longer capable of running the city. As a result, by 1967 Stokes had raised an eye-popping $250,000.

Stokes proclaimed that, while he loved his "Negro heritage," he was running for mayor of *all* of Cleveland, regardless of race. In one typical campaign speech, he pledged to be mayor to "all people without favor or unfair special consideration . . . rich and poor, whites and Negroes, bankers and busboys are all equally entitled to the best possible . . . services."[32] Stokes was promising everything to everyone. He promised to deliver services and improve social conditions in Black neighborhoods. He promised whites that, as a Black man, he could be expected to keep the peace in Black neighborhoods and would not "tolerate violence in the streets."[33] He promised business a climate conducive to investment. Stokes beat Lochner in the Democratic primary, then went on to handily defeat the Republican challenger in the general election by more than 18,000 votes, including 15 percent of the white vote.[34]

In 1967 Stokes became mayor of the eighth-largest city in the United States. His success, heralded as a victory for all of Black America, came just months after Richard Hatcher took office as mayor in Gary, Indiana. Together these victories seemed to indicate a new direction for Black politics. But in Cleveland, Stokes's initial moves as mayor raised more questions than his victory settled. Among his first acts was the appointment of Michael Blackwell as chief of police. Police brutality had been a catalyst for the 1966 Cleveland uprising; appointing a white veteran with a forty-three-year tenure in the same force was a bizarre choice. Stokes also gave business a disproportionate role in the plans to redevelop the local economy. He appointed several business leaders who had supported his candidacy to his Urban Renewal Task Force. He said, "Business and industry built these cities. If they are going to be rebuilt it will take that same investment and ingenuity that was originally employed."[35] This was the backdrop to Stokes's decision to back a $4 million public-private venture called Cleveland Now. Like many of the public-private redevelopment projects of the period, Cleveland Now was championed by business and presented to the public as a project that would redevelop the local economy. But Stokes's real value to business interests came in 1968, when a riot almost broke out after an episode of police violence. A gun battle with local Black nationalists from an organization called New Libya led to a five-day rebellion in which three cops were killed. Stokes promised to crack down on the violence and rallied white support with the appointment of another white veteran police chief, who promised to restore order. He also spent tens of thousands of dollars on upgrading the weaponry of the police force. As the next election came closer, he played on fear of crime in Black neighborhoods to rally support, writing in internal campaign materials, "Fear is the one weapon that will effectively increase the turnout of Black voters in this election."[36]

The turn from "protest to politics" has been regarded as a sign of the Black movement's maturity. As historian Peniel Joseph has written, "Embracing protest *and* politics, Gary illustrated the new political understanding that revolution, far from being the hundred-yard dash that many predicted during the late 1960s, was in fact a marathon that required a community of long-distance runners."[37] Joseph was referring to a Black political gathering in Gary, Indiana, in 1972 that brought together Black revolutionaries and Black elected officials, with all of the inherent problems one might expect to arise in such a gathering. I discuss the Gary convention below, but Joseph's point was that the conference signaled an important transition in the Black political movement. The move into formal politics would raise many questions, but it also signaled the rise of a stultifying "pragmatism" and "realism" in place of aspirations to change the world. As this turn was happening, however, there were still critiques of the growing popularity of Black capitalism and its electoral outgrowth. For example, Huey P. Newton wrote in protest,

> Black capitalism is a hoax. Black capitalism is represented as a great step toward Black liberation. It isn't. It is a giant stride away from liberation. No Black capitalist can function unless he plays the white man's game. Worse still, while the Black capitalist wants to think he functions on his own terms, he doesn't. He is always subject to the whims of the white capitalist. The rules of Black capitalism and the limits of Black capitalism are set by the white power structure.[38]

Taking control of city hall or the local city council could not resolve the looming questions of how to fully attend to housing, jobs, public education, and healthcare needs amid shrinking tax revenue, cuts to federal spending, and growing hostility to welfare as an entitlement to the poor. The daily tinkering with the fiscal constraints and municipal minutiae was certainly time-consuming and distracted from the bigger picture of total social transformation. King, in a 1967 essay, also recognized that elections alone were not "the ultimate answer." He explained, "Mayors are relatively impotent figures in the scheme of national politics. Even a white mayor . . . simply does not have the money and resources to deal with the problems of his city."[39] The struggle for everyday reforms to better people's lives did not contradict revolutionary optimism about creating a different world, but entering the Democratic Party dramatically reduced the potential and possibility of both.

The Conscience of the Congress

By the early 1970s, the electoral turn was no longer a debate. It was already under way in all wings of the movement. From traditional Democratic Party liberals to the Black Panther Party, running for political office was part of the arsenal of available political weapons. There were earnest attempts to build independent political organizations outside of the Democratic Party. Local Democratic Party machines used their political weight to crush opposition outside of their control, as in Cleveland. But the national Democratic Party recognized reality: as whites continued to leave and Blacks emerged as the predominant group in cities, Blacks could no longer be disregarded. Moreover, as cities continued to go up in flames, the belief that a Black political machine could calm urban tensions and also more capably manage urban fiscal crises made Black political power look more attractive. Its ascendance was not confined to local machines and "community control"; more Blacks also began to contend in national political races.

The clearest evidence of the new Black political power nationally was the debut of the Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) in 1970. It formed with thirteen members and declared its mission to unite and address the legislative concerns of Black and minority citizens. The CBC's members intended to amplify Black interests by "speaking with a single voice that would provide political influence and visibility far beyond their numbers."[40] Riding the wave of new Black political power in their districts, they claimed to arrive in Congress with a clear sense of their constituency and their objectives as Black elected officials. John Conyers, a Democratic representative from Detroit, made this clear in an essay titled "Politics and the Black Revolution," contrasting electoral work and revolution. He claimed that "the one thing that characterizes almost all these new Black officials is that their allegiance is to Black people who elected them and not, as in the past, to white political manipulators, Northern and Southern variety, who have always been behind the scenes."[41] Conyers elaborated on the continuity between the Black revolution and the electoral turn:

> I am talking about politics from our point of view—from the Black point of view. Our own intelligence about the oppressiveness of the kind of society which would like to forget us along with other historical "mistakes" should give Black people a unique force in effecting

> change in America. An infusion of Blacks into the political arena might provide the moral force of "soul" which America either lost or never had. No longer will we be content to stand on the sidelines and rail against the powerful forces that shape our lives. Instead, we propose to enter the political arena and wrest for ourselves a share of the decision making power. . . . Some see the Black American's choice as between withdrawing from this "hopeless" government or overthrowing the entire system. I see our choices as between political involvement or political apathy. America is the Black man's battleground. It is here where it will be decided whether or not we will make America what it says it is. For me, at least, the choice is clear.[42]

One writer described the opportunities that would be opened up by Black representatives claiming Congressional power: "With their $42,000 annual salaries, $170,000-plus for staffers and office equipment, unlimited access to House hearings, a Congressional Library for research, and a widely read *Congressional Record* to publish their views, Congress members are in command of resources heretofore unavailable to Blacks."[43] The cohesion with which the caucus functioned in its early days made it appear almost as if it were a political organization acting on behalf of all of Black America. CBC members were, by far, the farthest to the left in all of Congress in their opposition to the war in Vietnam and to Nixon's plan to dismantle Johnson's Great Society programs. They reinforced this perception when Nixon refused to meet with them and they, in turn, threatened to boycott his 1971 State of the Union address. Nixon aides reached out to the caucus to avoid an embarrassing snub, but they boycotted anyway. When Nixon did finally meet with them several months later, he insisted that his administration was doing all that it could and would continue to keep the lines of communication open.

The growing threat to the welfare state kept the CBC in an oppositional stance, heightening perceptions that it was an important or even radical political force. Often, however, Black members of Congress saw the inside maneuvering of the caucus as more critical, pragmatic, and purposeful than the old protests of the 1960s. At a fundraiser for the CBC in 1971, actor and activist Ossie Davis gave a speech complimenting the CBC for taking action as opposed to rhetoric. He said, "It's not the man, it's the plan. It's not the rap, it's the map."[44] Such statements recast the activism of the 1960s as "angry rhetoric" that produced little actual change in the cities. The ability to "get things done"

was the new measure of political acumen. Yet when it came to getting things done, the CBC had a weak record. Most of its activity seemed to involve endless hearings and studies quantifying Black oppression. By the early 1970s, the plight of Black neighborhoods was old news; many other organizations had performed similar studies for years. The limitations of the CBC kept options for the Black left very much alive.

In 1972, Black political players converged on the city of Gary, Indiana, home of Richard Hatcher, one of the first Black mayors of the era. The National Black Political Convention was unprecedented in bringing together the entire spectrum of Black politics—from radicals and revolutionaries to more than 2,000 elected officials. More than 8,000 delegates attended. Charles Diggs, a congressman from Detroit and a member of the CBC, was one of the organizers of the event, signaling the existing ties between the Black left and Black elected officials. The debates at the gathering were representative of the political tensions between various wings of the Black liberation movement and the resulting difficulties of forging a direction forward for the movement.

The convention's preamble reflected the radical politics of one section of the movement, as well as the deep connection between the insurgent past and current debates over the direction of the movement. It read, in part,

> A Black political convention, indeed all truly Black politics, must begin from this truth: The American system does not work for the masses of people, and it cannot be made to work without radical fundamental change. . . . The profound crises of Black people and the disaster of America are not simply caused by men, nor will they be solved by men alone. These crises are the crises of basically flawed economics and politics, and of cultural degradation. None of the Democratic candidates and none of the Republican candidates—regardless of their vague promises to us or to their white constituencies—can solve our problems or the problems of this country without radically changing the system by which it operates.[45]

The tone of the statement did not quite reflect the developing fissures evident in the gathering itself. While the radicals and the nationalists may have been insisting that it was "nation time," the growing implantation of Black politicians in mainstream electoral politics presented a dilemma. In fact, though a CBC member was one of the conveners

of the convention, the CBC as an organization refused to endorse the event or any of the statements it produced. Those who attended were there as individuals, not as representatives of the CBC. The Gary convention eventually came undone under the weight of its own contradictions, which could not be papered over in the name of racial solidarity. Denouncing capitalism and calling to overthrow the system while simultaneously supporting candidates within the Democratic Party was unwieldy at best. Meanwhile, the more that CBC members were drawn into the norms of congressional life, including committee work, fundraising, and simply navigating the world of compromise and negotiation that defines the legislative process, the less enamored they were with "community politics" and a narrowly defined, race-based agenda.

As the vibrancy of the Black insurgency faded, less pressure was exerted on Black elected officials. The retreat of the movement also signaled to Black workers and the poor that Black elected officials and whatever assistance they could offer would have to be enough, because help was not coming from anywhere else. Both realizations, over time, had a conservatizing effect, as Black politics moved to the right in accord with the general conservative pall overtaking mainstream American politics. The Democratic Party had opened itself up to Blacks, women, and youth for fear that these constituencies would pull voters away from mainstream politics and, in doing so, leach support from the party. In search of resources, support, and perhaps legitimacy in the face of a cloudy future for the Black movement, activists entered the party believing they could use it for their own purposes. But instead of the left turning the party, many activists found themselves having to conform to Democratic Party objectives.[46] In some cases, radicals and revolutionaries not only stayed in step with the narrow and conservative agenda of the Democratic Party but jumped ship on liberalism altogether and defected to the right wing.

From Protest to Peril

Over the course of twenty years, American cities had changed from being dominated by white political machines to being the site of actual Black political power. It was, of course, an unfortunate time to take over American cities. Tax dollars were drying up as millions of

individuals and businesses left the cities. Although the process of "deindustrialization" had begun in the 1950s, the term became popular in the 1970s "when a wave of plant closings changed the employment landscape."[47] According to one analyst, from 1966 to 1973, corporations moved more than a million American jobs to other countries:

> Even more jobs moved from the Northeast and Midwest to the South, where unions were scarce and wages lower. New York City alone lost 600,000 manufacturing jobs in the 1960s. . . . The workers laid off in the 1960s and '70s were disproportionately Black. The U.S. Commission on Civil Rights found that during the recession of 1973 to 1974, 60 percent to 70 percent of laid-off workers were African American in areas where they were only 10 percent to 12 percent of the workforce. In five cities in the Great Lakes region, the majority of Black men employed in manufacturing lost their jobs between 1979 and 1984. A major reason was seniority; white workers had been in their jobs longer, and so were more likely to keep them during cutbacks.[48]

In the 1980s, Ronald Reagan put his ideological zealotry against the social welfare state into practice and led Republican efforts to curtail social spending dramatically. His budget cuts, which shredded the already frayed American welfare state, included:

- a 17 percent cut in unemployment insurance (during a recession);
- a 13 percent reduction in food stamps, making a million people ineligible;
- a 14 percent reduction in cash benefits through Aid to Dependent Families with Children, resulting in 410,000 being dropped from the rolls and 259,000 families' benefits being reduced;
- increasing Medicare deductibles while cutting Medicaid by 3 percent and tightening eligibility standards;
- simply eliminating 300,000 jobs financed through a federal jobs program—overwhelmingly affecting Black workers; and
- raising rent by 5 percent in federally subsidized housing units,

Perhaps the most draconian cuts were aimed at children. In 1982, $560 million was cut from the federal school lunch program, which subsidized meals for public schoolchildren. As a result, 590,000 children were dropped from the program. When Reagan could not get away with eliminating food for children altogether, he eliminated as much as he could from their plates by authorizing reduced portions, allowing

the use of meat substitutes, and—infamously—classifying ketchup as a vegetable—all while raising the price of lunch by 20 cents.[49]

The impact on African Americans was swift and severe. In Reagan's first year in office, Black family income declined by 5 percent. The proportion of Black families living in poverty increased from 32 percent to 34 percent, while the overall number of poor families increased by more than two million. By 1983, Black unemployment across the country had soared to 21 percent.[50] The relentless attacks on the poor and working class of all races and ethnicities continued throughout the decade, but its apex was when Reagan summarily fired 11,000 air traffic controllers who had been on strike over salary and working conditions. He also imposed a million-dollar fine on the union and a lifetime airline-industry ban on rehiring the striking workers. It was barely a decade removed from the postal workers' strike, but the dramatic difference in outcomes underlined that a new era was upon the nation.

This was the backdrop against which the drama of Black urban political power was to unfold in the 1980s. African Americans were handed the keys to some of the largest and most important cities in the country: Los Angeles, Detroit, Atlanta, Chicago, Philadelphia, and New York, just to name a few, but they had few resources to financially manage these cities, which had a growing number of Black poor and unemployed.

It was also a time of deep political polarization, not only in the country as a whole but also within the Black establishment. A month after Ronald Reagan's election in 1980, 125 Black academics and businesspeople met in San Francisco for a conference to discuss the meaning of Black conservatism. Economist Thomas Sowell organized the conference, which was sponsored by the Institute for Contemporary Studies, and invited conservative luminaries such as Edwin Meese and Milton Friedman to participate. Historian Manning Marable described the meeting's significance as "dramatiz[ing] . . . the severe contradictions on major political, economic and educational issues which divided the members of the Black elite."[51] Reagan's victory created space for Black conservatives to operate openly and freely. Charles Hamilton, who had coauthored *Black Power* with Stokely Carmichael in 1968, now called for Black politicians to "deracialize" their political message to avoid alienating potential white voters.[52] For some, the political degeneration of Black liberals was stunning. Martin Luther

King's former lieutenants, Ralph David Abernathy and Hosea Williams, endorsed Reagan's candidacy in 1980 and even made the incredible suggestion that segregationist stalwart Strom Thurmond serve as a "liaison officer between Republicans and on behalf of minorities."[53] Black Democrats also sensed the changing tide and looked to realign their political message. At a CBC gathering in 1981, an NAACP official described the new challenge for Black leadership: developing "cadres of Black professionals." Another official agreed, "We've got to develop technical militants out of these middle class affluent Blacks who have received training, acquired good educations and have worked themselves into the mainstream of economic life."[54] Even Jesse Jackson Sr. urged Black businessmen to "move from civil rights to Silver Rights and from aid to trade," meaning that business development and the economy were the new terrain of struggle.[55]

It is impossible to understand the defection of Black liberals into the conservative camp without understanding the degeneration of the Democratic Party's relationship to Black America. Jimmy Carter became president in 1976 by a narrow margin only made possible by the Black vote. Yet, once in office, Carter was hostile to Black demands to commit to the welfare state after six years of the Ford and Nixon administrations. Instead, his officials "declared that no new social welfare, health care, or educational programs would be initiated."[56] Meanwhile, Black unemployment continued to rise. Black liberal organizations denounced Carter's inattention to Black poverty as "callous neglect" and complained that their cause had been "betrayed."[57] Carter did, however, increase the military budget, at that point, to its highest level in American history—$111 billion—and his capital-gains tax cut led to growth in corporate profits. While lining the pockets of the rich, he pushed "to increase the prices of dairy products, grain, meat, and other products, and to 'deregulate' transportation industries, fostering monopolization and unrestricted price increases."[58]

It was not surprising, then, that when Reagan challenged Carter in the 1980 election, only 33 percent of Democrats said they wanted Carter as their nominee.[59] The state of Black progress under Carter was evident from the trial in Miami, Florida, of four white cops implicated in the murder of an unarmed Black military veteran. Even though two police who were at the scene testified against them, an all-white,

all-male jury acquitted the defendants. For three days, Miami's Black Overtown neighborhood coursed with anger. In the end, the tally of the riots included $100 million in property damage, eighteen people killed, and a thousand injured. The National Guard finally put the rebellion down. Carter traveled to Miami and told locals that federal aid would be on the way—once tensions were quelled.[60] This was not a revival of the 1960s, however; this time, the Black establishment mobilized to calm Black Miami. The era of protest was over. Electoral politics and the promotion of Black elected officials were presented as the only alternative.

By the late 1980s the Democrats, reeling under the weight of the Reagan Revolution, had adapted to the rightward shifting political agenda—from supporting various aspects of the War on Drugs to promoting an agenda that prioritized private investment over rebuilding the public infrastructure. The political choices of Black elected officials were not aligned with the politics of mainstream Black America, especially as ordinary African Americans continued to suffer through unemployment and the vicious slashing of social welfare programs.

After the passage of the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the number of Black elected officials had grown to 1,400 in 1970 and to nearly 5,000 by 1980, but changing metropolitan demographics pressured those who had previously run as "Black" candidates to transform into "electable" candidates. Such transformations, however, did not prevent Black politicians from bumping up against what political scientist Fred Harris described as a "glass ceiling" in politics.[61] In 1983, a Washington-based Black think tank brought together a range of Black political operatives to determine how to break this "glass ceiling"—meaning how to overcome the racism within the electorate. The key questions at the gathering were: "How does one transcend race? How do you raise issues to a level of rare and profound sophistication? How do you downplay race? How do you modify or how do you lessen the impact of race?"[62]

Not all Black politicians wanted to transcend race. In fact, they more often invoked their Blackness and racial solidarity to garner support for their electoral programs. In 1982, the recently formed National Black Leadership Round Table (NBLRT) produced a booklet titled *The Black Leadership Family Plan for the Unity, Survival, and Progress of Black People*, which it claimed was a new blueprint "to secure for ourselves

and our posterity full freedom and an equitable share of the blessings of this nation."[63] The NBLRT was composed of more than 150 Black civic, business, and fraternal organizations intended to represent the broad leadership of Black America. Unlike the National Black Political Convention in Gary a decade before, no left or revolutionary organizations were included in the NBLRT. The group was initially funded and directed by the CBC and reflected its political objectives of harnessing Black voting potential to develop and consolidate electoral power.

Walter Fauntroy, a leading figure in the NBLRT, had been a stalwart figure of the civil rights movement, a personal friend of Dr. King, and the District of Columbia's first nonvoting Congressional representative. By 1982, Fauntroy was also chairman of the CBC.[64]

The focus of the pamphlet demonstrated the tremendous transformation in Black politics even in the small span of ten years. The 1972 public preamble introducing the Gary convention had been outwardly focused, identifying the flaws of American capitalism as the source of crisis in Black communities and declaring that only by changing the system could Black liberation be won. While these observations were true, the framework of electoral politics the preamble also advanced was incapable of delivering such change. The focus of the 1982 *Black Leadership Family Plan* was decidedly internal. Instead of calling for systemic change, this was a plan of

> daily living commitment to ourselves and families, to our people, and ultimately to a better America. For we must make a historical covenant with ourselves that the freedom and dignity of our people, while recognizing the responsibilities of other institutions, rest essentially upon what we do ourselves, and how seriously we take the mantle of leadership and self-determination.[65]

The NBLRT was attempting to consolidate resources in Black communities to "be an investment pool contributed by Blacks and other minorities for minority businesses; tap the public capital; and multiply . . . resources."[66] The actual architect of the pamphlet was a Black businessman named Theodore Adams; the pamphlet's objectives reflected the concerns of business, from economic development to general calls for a crackdown on crime in Black communities. The plan went so far as to suggest that youth organizations should "stop Black crime and support fair law enforcement . . . condemn the illegal use and sale of

drugs . . . [and] inform on drug dealers to law enforcement officials and Black defense organizations."[67] Even as the organizers of the NBLRT embraced Black citizens in their organizing efforts, as opposed to the "deracialization" perspective, they envisioned Black politics much more narrowly than just a few years earlier during the Gary convention.

Moreover, the call for law and order in Black communities indicated a more conservative political current, even among Black liberal politicians. In some ways it reflected the difference between being in power and being outside power in a given locality. Historically high Black unemployment, the developing drug trade, and the cumulative effects of urban disinvestment made Black cities seem ungovernable and chaotic. Black elected officials governed conservatively in a political climate that did not allow for many alternatives for those acting within the parameters of electoral politics.

The conditions of urban governance in the 1980s were harsh, but many Black elected officials also embraced policies that, while promoted as economic development, in reality transferred public resources over to private control. As Adolph Reed has observed, they pursued "programs centered around making local governments the handmaiden to private development interests . . . with little regard to the disadvantageous impact of their constituencies."[68] By the mid-1980s, Black-led and -dominated administrations backed by solid council majorities governed thirteen US cities with populations over 100,000.[69] Not only were Black municipal officials without resources, but they accepted the premise of "pro-growth" government. Almost universally, they embraced tax cuts for private business, in combination with costly public-private partnerships that purported to redevelop commercial districts but often turned into expensive boondoggles. Mayor Coleman Young in Detroit granted tax relief to a $500 million private development project to renovate the city's waterfront area even while he was "reducing the workforce, department budgets and debt."[70]

The first African American mayor of Camden, New Jersey, Randy Primas, fought for six years against women-led community opposition to place an incinerator in the town. Of course, the suburban residents whose trash would be incinerated did not have to endure the resulting rising rates of asthma and other predictable health problems.[71] Primas sealed his legacy by allowing the New Jersey Department of Corrections to build a $55 million prison, capable of holding between five hundred and eight hundred inmates, in North Camden, saying, "I wouldn't fight it. I view the prison as an economic development project. In addition, I think the surveillance from the two prison towers might stop some of the overt drug dealing in North Camden." When community members protested, Primas lectured, "I need revenue to run a city. I don't think a prison is as negative as people make it out to be. It would create jobs, create revenue, and have a positive impact on the drug problem here. It's not the solution to Camden's problems, but it's realistic."[72]

Black Philadelphia mobilized to elect African American Wilson Goode to the mayor's office in 1983, but "from the outset, Goode was the obedient representative of corporate and financial interests."[73] In 1985 Goode orchestrated an assault on the Black countercultural organization MOVE. Police pumped more than seven thousand rounds of ammunition into MOVE's row house. The attack culminated with police dropping a bomb on the house, killing eleven people, including five children, and destroying sixty-one homes in the fires that consumed the block, leaving 240 people homeless.[74] The attack prompted little outcry from Black civil rights organizations or Black elected officials in the CBC.

Sharon Pratt, a former corporate lawyer and treasurer for the Democratic National Committee, was elected mayor of Washington, DC, in the early 1990s. She lobbied for the National Guard to occupy the streets of Black neighborhoods in the nation's capital as a crime-fighting measure.

In Chicago in 1983, a citywide movement of ordinary Black people organized to topple the white, racist Democratic Party machine that had been led by Richard J. Daley. To everyone's shock, Black Chicago delivered Harold Washington to City Hall, but he was unable to undo the decades of segregation and discriminatory practices that had resulted in a two-tiered Chicago. Of course, no one would expect the election of a Black mayor to reverse the economic and social damage done by years of discriminatory treatment, but the emphasis on local campaigns and elections did show how much the goals of the Black movement had shifted. Its horizons had narrowed from Black liberation to winning electoral majorities in American cities where African Americans lived, as a defensive stance against the conservative trajectory in national politics and ultimately as a more "realistic" and "pragmatic" path.

Perhaps nothing embodied the conservative direction of formal Black politics more than the CBC's cosponsorship of Ronald Reagan's Anti-Drug Abuse Act in 1986. Liberal congressman Ron Dellums from California, along with seventeen of the CBC's twenty-one members, supported the legislation. The act was considered an important tool in the mounting War on Drugs and would be instrumental in the explosion of Black incarceration. It codified more severe sentencing for possession and use of crack cocaine than for powder cocaine. It also allocated $1.7 billion toward the drug war, even as the nation's already fragile welfare state suffered relentless budget cuts. The 1986 act made "crack cocaine" the *only* drug that carried a mandatory minimum five-year sentence for a first-time offense.[75]

The CBC's robust support for law and order in Black communities reflected the deepening crisis of crime in urban centers, the foreclosure of other viable alternatives in an increasingly politically conservative environment, and the political maturation of Black elected officials. By the mid- to late 1980s, Black elected officials were no longer political neophytes: they were experienced executives and operatives in the American political system of constant compromise and negotiation. By 1985, in the midst of the 99th Congress, Blacks had gone from being passed over for coveted chairmanships to chairing five standing committees, two select committees, and fourteen subcommittees in the House of Representatives. Though Blacks composed only 4.6 percent of Congress, they held 22 percent of chairmanships in standing committees and 40 percent in select committees. The CBC cosponsored conservative law-and-order politics out of not political weakness but entrenchment in Beltway politics.

Post-Black Politics

By the 1990s, the retreat from the heady days when John Conyers described the difference between white politicians and Black politicians as the latter's "allegiance . . . to Black people" was complete. During the Clinton administration, Black elected officials lined up to sign off on legislation that was literally intended to kill Black people. In 1993, President Bill Clinton unveiled a new "crime-fighting" bill, the Violent Crime Control and Law Enforcement Act of 1994, that included

expanded use of the death penalty, life sentences for nonviolent criminal offenses, 100,000 more police on the streets, and a gratuitously punitive elimination of federal funding for inmate education. Logically, it stood to reason that if legislation increased the number of people to be punished, there must be somewhere to place them—so the bill also included $10 billion in allocations to build more prisons. Clinton lobbied for the legislation in the same Memphis church where King had given his last speech the day before he was assassinated. Clinton's pulpit speech demonstrated the tremendous shift in racial politics. King had used that pulpit to support poor Black maintenance workers as they attempted to unionize; Clinton used it to ask Black people to support expanding the death penalty. Clinton claimed to be using the words he assumed King would say if he were alive to deliver the speech himself: "I fought to stop white people from being so filled with hate that they would wreak violence on black people. I did not fight for the right of black people to murder other black people with reckless abandonment."[76] It was an awful statement, devoid of any facts or historical context of how public policy had nurtured urban divestment for the better part of the twentieth century and by doing so had actually encouraged crime, violence, and drug use. This was the prevailing logic of the time. Even civil rights activist Jesse Jackson Sr., who had run presidential campaigns in 1984 and 1988 on a broad left platform, contributed to the "tough on crime" recriminations. He did not support the crime bill, but he made a comment that contributed to the political climate that legitimized it: "There is nothing more painful to me at this stage in my life than to walk down the street and hear footsteps and start thinking about robbery—then look around and see somebody white and feel relieved."[77]

Black people living in drug-ravaged communities were desperate for help, but billions for imprisonment and streets filled with police would not address the very real issues of crime in poor and working-class Black communities. Having supported Reagan's War on Drugs, congressional Black Democrats were now reluctant to endorse the crime bill. The growing prison population and its impact on Black communities were already coming into focus. Many in the caucus suggested focusing on crime-prevention measures and even introduced legislation that would allow nonwhite death-row inmates to use statistics demonstrating racial bias as a defense. Black Democrats had leverage; Republicans had

threatened to block the bill because it included gun-control measures. But Black mayors, including the mayors of Detroit, Atlanta, and Cleveland, pressured the CBC to vote for the legislation. They wrote the chair of the caucus, Kweisi Mfume, urging him to support the legislation with or without the "racial justice" provision.[78] John Lewis, who had been a leader in the civil rights movement, did not vote for the legislation, but participated in a procedural motion that allowed the bill to advance to the House of Representatives.[79] In the end, the majority of the CBC voted for the bill, including liberal luminaries like John Conyers and former Black Panther Bobby Rush. By the end of Clinton's term, Black incarceration rates had tripled and the United States was locking up a larger proportion of its population than any other country on earth. Black communities continue to suffer from these policies—even as the rate of Black imprisonment slowly recedes. In 2015, Bill Clinton admitted the horrible damage created by his crime legislation—damage widely predicted by the bill's progressive opponents: "We have too many people in prison. And we wound up . . . putting so many people in prison that there wasn't enough money left to educate them, train them for new jobs and increase the chances when they came out that they could live productive lives."[80]

The point here is not to simply assign blame to Black elected officials for the catastrophic conditions in Black communities, but to note that these examples are the fruition of a strategy that centered electoral politics as the "realistic" alternative to the grassroots freedom struggle. As money and power exerted greater influence on the outcome of elections, the capacity to raise funds and attract lucrative suitors distorted the political objectives of infusing "soul" into the political process. By the turn of the twenty-first century the CBC could make no claims on being the "conscience" of the Congress; its members, like every politician in Washington, line up at the trough for corporate money. They have accepted donations from a "who's-who" of corporate interests, including BP, Chevron, ExxonMobil, Shell, Texaco, General Motors, Ford, Nissan, DaimlerChrysler, Anheuser-Busch, Heineken USA, Philip Morris, R. J. Reynolds, and Coca-Cola. The *New York Times* said the CBC "stood alone" in its fundraising "prowess" while documenting how it doubled its donations between 2001 and 2008.[81] As the economy soured and its most deleterious effects took hold, the CBC continued

to rake in donations from corporate America. The largest donations to the CBC Foundation, its nonprofit wing, have come from the likes of Walmart and McDonald's.[82] The foundation has also accepted up to $2 million from the American Legislative Exchange Council (ALEC), even while ALEC was spearheading voter-identification laws aimed at suppressing the Black vote.[83] Individual CBC members have collected money from an array of insurance, pharmaceutical, and defense corporations. These corporate donations have ensured that the CBC is no more than a marginal player in campaigns against foreclosures and evictions and for fair wages in the low-wage worker movement.

It also at least partially explains CBC members' reluctance to participate in responding to the murders of Mike Brown, Eric Garner, and the many other victims of police brutality. CBC members are usually good for allowing working-class and poor Black people to come and vent about racist police or unjust housing policies, but rarely do those toothless hearings turn into policies that curb the activity being protested. In the midst of the rebellion in Ferguson, Elijah Cummings, a Democratic representative from Maryland and a leader in the CBC, argued that the coming midterm elections were the next step for the movement: "People need to be reminded that the 2014 elections are very, very, very important. One election could be the determining factor to what kind of legislation we're able to get through."[84] Even as a movement against police brutality unfolded, Black elected officials' gazes were so trained on electoral politics that they could only articulate political gains through the calculus of elections.

After forty years of this electoral strategy, Black elected officials' inability to alter the poverty, unemployment, and housing and food insecurity their Black constituents face casts significant doubt on the existing electoral system as a viable vehicle for Black liberation. Moreover, their complete complicity with and absorption into the worst, most corrupt aspects of American politics, including accepting donations from the most notorious corporations in the country, is not just a simple case of "selling out" for the sake of money and access. It isn't that if they knew better, they would perform differently. This complicity is the price of admission into the ranks of the political establishment. The Black political elite has no *fundamental* political differences with the status quo in the United States insofar as it does not directly impede their

ability to participate freely in the nation's governing and business institutions. There are also the "new,"[85] "post-Black," or "third wave"[86] Black elected officials who brandish their distance from the freedom struggle. President Barack Obama is the most visible of this cohort, who are described as having "equal fluency in black and white settings; broad, multiracial fundraising networks; and tenuous ties to black protest politics—[which] might also serve as liabilities as they seek higher office."[87] *Washington Post* columnist Eugene Robinson refers to these adherents of "postracial politics" as the "Transcendents": a new crop of Black political operatives who represent "a small but growing cohort with the kind of power, wealth, and influence that previous generations of African Americans could never have imagined."[88] Robinson describes them as "generally in their forties . . . indeed too young to have lived through Jim Crow. They are not too young to know what it was, and certainly not too young to believe as passionately as their elders in the need to keep fighting in advance the unfinished project of Black uplift."[89]

The difficulties of managing cities today have only drawn even more attention to the distance between ordinary Blacks and the politicians—of the old or new variety—who claim to represent them. In Chicago, during the winter and spring of 2015, a hotly contested mayoral runoff election had candidates Rahm Emanuel and Jesús "Chuy" García, both Democrats, scrambling for the support of Black voters. Emanuel was the incumbent whose first four-year term as mayor had been nothing short of catastrophic for Black people. In total defiance of community pleas and protests, Emanuel closed more than fifty public schools, almost exclusively in Black and Latino neighborhoods, not only harming Black students but displacing hundreds of Black teachers. (In 2000, 40 percent of Chicago Public School teachers were African American; in 2015 they make up only 23 percent.[90]) Since coming into office, Emanuel has championed privatization schemes that undermine public institutions while redistributing tax money to businesses connected to him. In an attempt to recoup the revenue lost from corporate tax relief, Emanuel has inundated city residents with fines and fees at every turn, squeezing money out of the poor and working class.

These policies have directly contributed to the city having the highest rate of Black unemployment among the five most populous cities (the others being New York, Los Angeles, Houston, and

Philadelphia).[91] Despite his dismal record, Emanuel had the support of the Chicago City Council Black Caucus. Alderman Howard Brookins rationalized the caucus's support for one of Emanuel's most dreaded programs, which places "red-light cameras" at intersections throughout the city: "How do we make up that $300 million in revenue and won't that hurt people we're being unfair to? People who can slow down or stop will now be asked to pay higher sales, property or gas taxes or we'll have to cut programs that help those people out."[92] Perhaps Brookins never considered that the $100 citations for running red lights were "hurting people." More likely, he was thinking of the financial support he and several other aldermen received from Emanuel's $2 million "super PAC" (political action committee).[93]

Black politicians embrace programs that fleece and harm working-class African Americans because of the pressures of governing in the era of austerity budgets. Today's Black elected officials are beholden to the same logic as their predecessors. As cities are thrust into competition with each other to attract capital, there is a race to the bottom to cut taxes and shove out those in need of social services. Census data from 2010 showed that more than 181,000 Blacks had left Chicago over the course of a decade.[94] It is not possible to separate that stunning figure from the relentless attack on the public infrastructure, which began under the regime of Richard M. Daley but has continued under Emanuel. When elected officials like Alderwoman Lona Lane refer to "young African-American men walking around with their pants hanging down" as being "like a lost generation,"[95] it excuses the racist justifications that are often used for cutting budgets of programs that disproportionately impact Black people. Focusing on individual failure and lapsed morality—instead of structural inequities—justifies the budget cuts and the shrinking of the public sphere that Black political elites help facilitate. What African Americans in cities around the country need, according to this narrative, is personal transformation, not expanded social services—and the converse is that the poor behavior and attitude of young Blacks explains why their neighborhoods lack resources. These elites' vision for Black liberation seems to be limited to "increasing black business subcontracts and . . . expanding the percentages of blacks in management . . . and cultural integration into the mainstream of white America"[96]—which, of course, is no vision at all.

Black people's progress has always been propelled by the strength of the movements of the mass of ordinary Black people. Not only did the Black struggle of the 1960s transform the lives of African Americans, it was the pivot upon which all progressive movements in that era turned. It was the Black insurgency that created the conditions that allowed Black elected officials to become viable politically. But the more the movement on the streets waned, the greater the distance between ordinary Black people and the elected officials claiming to represent them. Added to that dilemma were the constraints of governing in a time of budget cuts and austerity that compelled Black officials to act in fiscally conservative ways—just as their base was in desperate need of robust spending and resources. The conflict between the Black political establishment and ordinary Blacks, however, has been driven not only by budget constraints but also by contempt for the Black poor and a dramatically narrowed vision for what constitutes Black liberation. Complaining about sagging pants or characterizing low-income Black people as "thugs and criminals" during an uprising legitimizes the racialization and criminalization of Black people. It explains the hardships of African Americans in such a way as to rationalize the poor conditions and lack of resources that pervade working-class communities of color. It is difficult for white conservatives to get away with such blanket stereotypes, but for Black politicians they have become a default position, a way to deflect attention from their incompetence—and sometimes malfeasance. Arriving in the heat of a Ferguson summer only to bellow on about the criticality of midterm elections demonstrated that Black members of Congress did not understand the watershed nature of the uprising. Perhaps this should not be surprising: not only did the Ferguson rebellion expose the racism and brutality of American policing, it also exposed Black elected officials' inability to intervene effectively on behalf of poor and working-class African Americans.

CHAPTER FOUR

The Double Standard of Justice

The white cop in the ghetto is as ignorant as he is frightened, and his entire concept of police work is to cow the natives. He is not compelled to answer to these natives for anything he does; whatever he does, he knows that he will be protected by his brothers, who will allow nothing to stain the honor of the force. When his working day is over, he goes home and sleeps soundly in a bed miles away—miles away from the niggers, for that is the way he really thinks of black people.

—**James Baldwin,** *No Name in the Street*, 1972

I want to live until I'm 18. . . . You want to get older. You want to experience life. You don't want to die in a matter of seconds because of cops.

—**Aniya,** age thirteen, marching in Staten Island, New York, 2015

At the turn of the twentieth century, African Americans began their long transition from living largely in rural areas to living predominantly in urban ones. In that time, there have been many changes in Black life, politics, and culture, but the threat and reality of police surveillance, scrutiny, violence, and even murder has remained remarkably consistent. The daily harm caused by the mere presence of police in Black communities has been a consistent feature of Black