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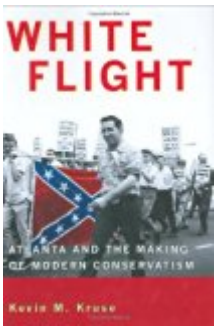

Kevin M. Kruse. *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. 352 pp. $35.00, cloth, ISBN 978-0-691-09260-7.

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Atlanta: The City Too Busy Moving to Hate

In 1955, the tumultuous year between the U.S. Supreme Court's first *Brown v. Board of Education* decision and the release of the Southern Manifesto, Mayor William Hartsfield of Atlanta sought to distinguish his city from the recalcitrant Deep South by highlighting its reputation for civic order, economic growth, and racial moderation. Atlanta, Hartsfield bragged, was the "city too busy to hate." As the key figure in a powerful postwar coalition of local business progressives, moderate politicians, and African-American leaders, Hartsfield confidently defended Atlanta's progressive mystique--both in 1955 and throughout the period of massive resistance--by pointing to the carefully orchestrated desegregation of its schools, parks, and other public facilities.[1] For Hartsfield and Atlanta's governing bloc of racial moderates, civic order in Atlanta signaled the failures of massive resistance in the newest New South. As Kevin Kruse demonstrates in *White Flight*, however, segregationist politics in Atlanta and other American cities, north and south, were more adaptive, widespread, and persistent than the city's boosters ever imagined. Indeed, in this impressive reappraisal of twentieth-century racial politics, Kruse recasts Atlanta, quite literally, as "a city too busy moving to hate."

An adaptation of Kruse's doctoral dissertation, *White Flight* presents, at long last, the first full-length scholarly monograph on one of the most significant spatial migrations in American history. Through an exploration of the causes, processes, and implications of white flight, Kruse finds that whites in Atlanta responded to even limited forms of racial integration by first fighting and then fleeing desegregated spaces. But white flight, in Kruse's account, was much more than a spatial movement from cities to suburbs. It was, in fact, a "political revolution" that brought refashioned forms of segregationist ideology into the mainstream of an ascendant conservative political discourse. In the end, according to Kruse's revisionist case study, grassroots segregationists, safely ensconced in racially homogenous, privatized suburbs, actually triumphed in their quest for racial exclusivity.

White Flight begins with an exploration of Atlanta's black and white power structures that together brokered the postwar pace of racial progress in the city. Because Black Atlanta represented a large and growing portion of the city's electorate, African Americans exercised a surprising degree of political power at mid-century, forcing Hartsfield and other white officials to hire additional black police officers, allocate more park space for black citizens, and improve the city's services in African-American neighborhoods. Under the auspices of the Atlanta Negro Voters League, formed in 1949 with the backing of powerful black financial interests, black leaders such as John Wesley Dobbs and Austin Walden gained a level of political power that would have been unthinkable in more rural sections of the Deep South. Recognizing the economic benefits of racial harmony, the challenges of the growing student movement, and the power of the burgeoning black electorate, Hartsfield, Coca-Cola executive Robert Woodruff, and other prominent white businessmen from the Chamber of Commerce accepted limited, carefully circumscribed civil rights reforms in exchange for black votes, economic growth, and civic harmony. As Kruse writes of Atlanta's white power structure, "Forced to choose between the social customs of segregation and the economic creed of progress, they readily chose the latter" (p. 37). By negotiating with black leaders over the relaxation of racial segregation, however, the moderate coalition helped to spawn grassroots rebellions within Atlanta's white working-class neighborhoods and other spaces on the margins of Atlanta's expanding black community.

In chapters 2 and 3, Kruse documents the battles over race and residence, particularly on the city's West Side, which sparked a segregationist revolt in defense of residential Jim Crow. Following in the traditions of historians Thomas Sugrue and Arnold Hirsch, Kruse focuses on the battles that erupted in transitional neighborhoods.[2] With a remarkable level of detail and precision, Kruse pinpoints the exact locations and moments at which whites fought to "defend" their neighborhoods, arguing that the battles over residential desegregation stood at the forefront of the city's political culture. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, Ashby Street emerged as a citywide flashpoint, one of the first in a series of rapidly shifting racial frontier zones that moved as the African-American community grew and shifted westward. Exploiting the animosity of white residents, small cells of extremist groups, such as the Columbians (a neo-Nazi gang) and the Ku Klux Klan, terrorized prospective black buyers through threats, intimidation, and open violence. But Atlanta's moderate establishment loathed and ultimately repressed the white supremacist groups through a series of judicial and legislative proscriptions.

For opponents of neighborhood integration, the demise of the Klan and the Columbians proved that extremism and violence were less successful than neighborhood defense strategies that emphasized property rights and whites' rights to "freedom of association." For Kruse, the rhetorical and ideological transformations of segregationist politics represented a clear nexus between the fall of the Old South and the ascendance of the New Right. As the battle over neighborhood space raged on Atlanta's West Side, groups such as the Southwest Citizens Organization (SCO) emerged to defend segregated white neighborhoods. Although some homeowner's organizations had obvious ties to the Klan and racial extremism, homeowner segregationists eventually learned to tone down their rhetoric and violence, choosing instead more subtle, rights-based neighborhood defense strategies. One of the most common responses to residential integration, as Kruse demonstrates, entailed white fundraising schemes for the collective purchase of black-owned properties. Such strategies ultimately failed to halt black home buyers from crossing the color line, however.

As greater numbers of African Americans moved into previously all-white blocks, white soli-

darity quickly eroded as homeowners rushed to place their homes for sale on the black real estate market. In order to prevent massive panic selling and racial violence on Atlanta's West Side, Hartsfield formed the West Side Mutual Development Committee (WSMDC). Composed of three whites from the SCO and three prominent African Americans, the WSMDC either blocked or managed racial transitions in Atlanta neighborhoods depending upon the community's "integrity." When white neighborhoods could demonstrate the community ties that bound residents together, the WSMDC brokered gentlemen's agreements or proposed zoning changes, physical barriers, and other planning measures to preserve the homogeneity of white neighborhoods. But, in neighborhoods across the city threatened with racial transitions, the WSMDC found few white communities that exhibited cohesiveness in the face of desegregation. Unveiling the familiar patterns that emerged in Adair Park, Kirkwood, and other areas, Kruse demonstrates how whites nearest to black neighbors tended to favor flight, while those farthest from transition zones chose to fight, at least until their blocks became integrated. In reference to the failures of the WSMDC and other top-down initiatives to manage neighborhood boundaries, Kruse writes, "city planners sought to impose the boundaries of a community from above, when in reality a community could only be created in the minds of local residents" (p. 104).

In 1961, following the token desegregation of Atlanta's public schools, civil rights forces moved against the privatized forms of segregation that sheltered Atlanta's moderate elites. Though they had been protected by the spatial buffers of class from the desegregation of public facilities, elite whites ultimately joined the backlash against desegregation when African Americans sought to integrate private facilities such as country clubs, restaurants, hotels, and private schools. With the support of the Civil Rights Act, the black protest movement successfully desegregated a number of privately owned establishments within the city, "even breaking down the color line at Lester Maddox's Pickrick Restaurant," but white flight to Atlanta's suburbs proved to be a successful means of resisting the moral and political demands of the civil rights movement. Politically, the sit-in demonstrations and boycott actions of the 1960s tore apart the moderate interracial coalition that had governed postwar Atlanta, in the process creating space for the political ascendance of extremists such as Maddox, who won the governorship in 1966. Over time, resistance to the desegregation of private facilities and to the mandates of the 1964 Civil Rights Act fueled the growth of a new breed of conservative Republicans in the Atlanta metropolitan region. Though white flight to the suburbs may have marked the last gasp of massive resistance, it proved to be a successful strategy for maintaining racial separation and, moreover, an ideological bridge between the segregationists of old and the Sunbelt conservatives of the future.

Moving from the city to the suburbs was a transformative experience for the whites who fled Atlanta. For leaving the city, as Kruse suggests, was in the end a secessionist strategy that anticipated the suburban hostility to annexation, metropolitan mass transit, fair share housing, and other prospective relations with the city of Atlanta and its black majority. In contrast to Lisa McGirr and other scholars of the postwar political culture of suburbia, Kruse argues that the racial politics of the New Right emerged within a specifically urban context: "The decision to leave the city had changed their outlook, and their arrival in the suburbs did nothing to change it back" (p. 234).[3] Kruse is also careful to remind readers that there was nothing peculiarly southern about the white response to desegregation in Atlanta. The rise of the New Right in Sunbelt cities such as Atlanta mirrored spatial and political transformations that reshaped metropolitan landscapes across the country. Indeed, *White Flight* severely undermines the notion that the South's postwar race relations were exceptional vis-a-vis the North

and the nation. Though this book is likely to be misread by some as a confirmation of the top-down Southern Strategy thesis that credits George Wallace, the political maestro, and working-class white supporters with generating the backlash that created the New Right, Kruse's version of white flight signaled a national spatial and ideological movement to the suburbs that rippled upward from grassroots protests among white Atlantans of all class backgrounds.[4]

In comparing this account to other "rise of the right" narratives, readers will surely note that Kruse's spatial orientation plays a decisive role in the story that unfolds. By choosing to highlight the conflicts and politics that sprung from Atlanta's central city racial frontiers, and by looking specifically at working- and middle-class segregationists, who always experienced desegregation first (though, in truth, the author does critique Atlanta's Northside elites as well), Kruse tends to reduce suburban politics and the rise of the right to a single causal narrative: white secession from the central city. Since the majority of Atlanta's suburbanites never even lived in the city of Atlanta (arriving from cities and suburbs across the country and, indeed, the world), it seems less obvious, without more analysis of Atlanta's diverse suburbs, that white flight alone can explain the economic, demographic, spatial, and political transformations that birthed the New Right. Federal housing and transportation subsidies, and Cold War defense policies that allowed Sunbelt suburbs to boom surely played significant roles. And, to be sure, the white flight model simply cannot adequately explain African-American suburbanization, particularly the post-1960s growth of black suburbanization in Clayton, Fulton, and DeKalb Counties.[5] Nor can Kruse's model of white flight fully explain the zoning and planning strategies that kept elite neighborhoods and suburbs segregated by race and class. But all of this may be asking too much of a book which purports to tell the urban exodus and rightward politicization narratives of a smaller group of neo-segregationist whites.

While white flight may not, in fact, explain all of the demographic and political transformations that have reshaped and resegregated metropolitan regions across the country, *White Flight* certainly explains the clear ideological connections between grassroots forms of massive resistance and the secessionist politics that have grown out of huge swaths of white suburbia. And though Kruse has neglected non-white suburban migrations, intersuburban migrations, and even key issues, some real and others imagined, that fueled white flight (fear of crime, for instance) his book reminds readers that race, and racial avoidance, were central to the growth of white suburbia (and its political conservatism). Carefully researched, elegantly written, and boldly argued, *White Flight* is sure to become a classic in the field of urban political history, one that readers from a variety of disciplines will need to consult. For, in the end, Atlanta's story of white flight played out on a national scale.

Notes

[1]. For more on the "progressive mystique," see William H. Chafe, *Civilities and Civil Rights: Greensboro, North Carolina, and the Black Struggle for Freedom* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980).

[2]. Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1996); and Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).

[3]. Lisa McGirr, *Suburban Warriors: The Origins of the New American Right* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

[4]. On George Wallace and GOP "Southern Strategies," see Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conser-*

vatism, and the Transformation of American Politics (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1995).

[5]. On black suburbanization in Atlanta and elsewhere, see Andrew Wiese, *Places of Their Own: African American Suburbanization in the Twentieth Century* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).