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Matthew D. Lassiter. *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South.* Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006. xiii + 390 pp. $35.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-09255-3.

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Southern Unexceptionalism

The idea of the Solid South evokes a region once reliably Democratic, which in recent years has become nearly as reliably Republican. A dominant explanation for this shift, which was popularized almost as soon as it was perceived, is the "southern strategy" in which national elites consciously catered to the racist backlash against Great Society liberalism and the civil rights movement by southern whites.[1] In this engaging and important book, Matthew Lassiter recasts the history of the postwar sunbelt South. By focusing on the complex interactions of race, class, consumerism, and the politics of metropolitan space, he supplants the familiar "southern strategy" interpretation with one of a "suburban strategy" driven by color-blind arguments, individualism, and free-market consumerism at the grassroots. Lassiter explores the expectations and demands of the mostly white, middle-class southern suburban elites, and the arguments they used in struggles over school desegregation–arguments in which they defended themselves as middle-class workers, parents, consumers, and property-holders rather than explicitly as whites. In this color-blind approach to race, Lassiter finds a national convergence that helps explain the success of a center-right political coalition at the turn of the twenty-first century.

The Silent Majority includes in-depth case studies of school desegregation in Atlanta and Charlotte, a reconsideration of the politics of region, class, and race during the Nixon administration, and a survey across the southern metropolitan landscape to consider the convergence of regional and national suburban politics. As such, it joins a growing number of studies that examine the intersection of the history of metropolitan areas and the political history of growth liberalism.[2] It begins by arguing that the well-known stories of massive resistance to *Brown v. Board of Education*, as at Central High School in Little Rock, tend to smooth over divisions within the white South. State apportionment practices left rural and working-class whites–those most supportive of massive resistance–with a preponderance of political influence at the state level. In metropolitan areas, however, neither the business elite nor white-collar whites in the elite neighborhoods (and, of course, the downtown businessmen generally lived in the affluent neighborhoods) had much interest in the disruptions and potential violence that would result from the segregationist hard-line, as both groups saw racial conflict as a threat to prosperity and growth. Proposals to accomplish massive resistance, such as closing the public school systems, threatened the quality-of-life that white-collar whites took for granted. When municipal political and business leaders shied away from involvement, the elite neighborhoods organized grassroots "open school" movements to oppose the massive-resistance agenda, but with a mixed legacy. By rejecting overt appeals to racism and legal segregation, and instead arguing in favor of open schools and freedom of choice within residential areas, whites in these wealthy metropolitan neighborhoods ameliorated the worst elements of the southern racist legacy without confronting its discriminatory foundation. These opponents of massive resistance generally did not make moral claims about equality and justice as much as they focused on practical arguments about the costs and inevitable failure of massive resistance.

Liberal whites accepted such arguments as a way to mobilize support for eventual racial integration. But while massive resistance provided one threat to suburban whites, full-fledged system-wide integration posed another. Both seemed to threaten the quality of schools, neighborhoods, and middle-class lifestyle that residents viewed as theirs by virtue of hard work and individual choice. Ensconced in "island suburbs"–metropolitan neighborhoods whose homogeneity was abetted by decades of official policies and semi-official practices–these middle-class whites employed the language of color-blind policies, neighborhood schools, and residen-

tial prerogatives over that of white supremacy. Class privilege won out over racial caste, and *de facto* segregation replaced *de jure* segregation as the explanation for inequality.

This general pattern brought different results across the South, depending on local variables. Parts 1 and 2 of *Silent Majority* compare the experiences of Atlanta and Charlotte, respectively, and offer contrasting models of suburban politics. While Atlanta enjoyed a relatively moderate racial environment with the downtown business elite and middle-class black leaders cooperating to keep the racial peace, the state followed the general southern pattern: Georgia's county unit system gave rural areas disproportionate influence over metropolitan areas, thus dominating statewide issues. When massive resistance threatened the public school system in the late 1950s, opposition came most aggressively from the elite white neighborhoods north of downtown Atlanta. Mobilizing to defend public education as well as their neighborhoods, men and especially women created a grassroots organization to fight the state-wide battle. As Lassiter makes clear, Help Our Public Education (HOPE) contained a diverse array of white opinion, including liberals committed to racial equality and pragmatic moderates focused on more narrow self-interest. As a tactical measure for maximum white unity, HOPE ultimately focused on a plan for "controlled desegregation," which it advocated as an alternative to the extremes of massive resistance on the one hand, and radical full integration on the other. Without denying their retreat from the moral questions of racial segregation, Lassiter concludes that the people of HOPE represented the only courageous leadership in Atlanta opposing massive resistance.

Unfortunately, the short-term focus on political success undermined the long-term prospects for meaningful desegregation. The resulting integration plan provided for one-way integration for a few high-achieving black students, while preserving the neighborhood schools of the island suburbs and changing little for students remaining in the predominantly black schools. When this system came under fire from the federal courts, Atlanta instituted a system of neighborhood schools; however, by this time white flight and residential segregation, already under way before the school issue came to the fore, meant that neighborhood schools were as heavily segregated as the Jim Crow system. Now, however, segregation was seen as a result of class privilege and individual choice rather than policy.

Lassiter finds that school desegregation in Charlotte, North Carolina provides a more hopeful model. Charlotte differed from Atlanta in a few key respects: North Carolina law provided for automatic annexation of outlying areas, allowing the city to recapture those residents leaving the city neighborhoods; the city and county schools systems consolidated after 1960, prior to the segregation conflicts; and metropolitan areas had far more political clout in North Carolina. When a district judge insisted that the school system desegregate in 1969, white middle-class parents insisted that they opposed not integration, but forced busing of their children to other, less desirable schools. The school board proposed token busing similar to that in Atlanta, but the decision evoked unanticipated outrage within the black community and vocal opposition from working-class whites from outside the "island suburbs." They eventually formed an alliance to demand a county-wide desegregation plan that eliminated the protections afforded to affluent suburbs, and the district court judge approved a county-wide two-way busing plan. A call for boycotts divided white opinion, with some parents refusing to endorse the lawlessness of non-compliance. The Solid South, even the Solid White Middle-Class South, was not as solid as is sometimes thought. The system-wide desegregation effort resulted in substantial integration and also limited white flight, offering a reasonably successful model for metropolitan desegregation.

Atlanta and Charlotte offer divergent models of school desegregation–one resulting in substantial resegregation and massive white flight from the city, the other holding onto school integration and maintaining its racial balance over time. Had he stopped here, Lassiter would have made a substantial contribution to our understanding of the desegregation struggles, grassroots activism, and racial and class identities in the postwar South. But his goals are more ambitious. Despite the differences in long-term results, the general pattern of an emerging color-blind middle-class approach to desegregation leads Lassiter to connect these southern developments to regional and national political developments in part 3. The dominant trend that for Lassiter best explains the emergence of a center-right coalition through the 1970s and 1980s is not the southernization, but rather the suburbanization, of American politics; not the "southern strategy" of racial backlash, but the "suburban strategy" of class privilege, consumer rights, and individual choice. From the case studies of Atlanta and Charlotte, Lassiter moves to the politics of the Nixon administration. This can be a bit of a jarring transition–from detailed case studies of the sociopolitical context of school desegregation to a broad survey of postwar southern politics and a study of Nixon administration strategies. But

Lassiter remains focused on his argument, and his careful readings of the language and strategies employed by the Nixon team are insightful. Here he relies on the papers of Harry Dent, certainly a key figure in Nixon's efforts in the South; there remains plenty to be examined in the full range of the Nixon presidential papers to continue exploring the argument introduced here. Oversimplified, that argument is as follows: Richard Nixon's original "silent majority" of the 1968 campaign was much closer to the heart of the new conservatism than was the race-based "southern strategy" advocated by Kevin Phillips and others for the 1970 midterm elections. In an effort to steal the thunder of George Wallace, the Nixon team tapped into a racist backlash that offered no long-term benefits. In fact, Lassiter argues for the failure of racial backlash–in the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948, the presidential campaigns of Barry Goldwater and George Wallace, and the 1970 congressional midterm elections–and points to the moderate racial positions of the new southern Democratic governors of the early 1970s as evidence. Had Republicans in the 1970s focused on Nixon's "silent majority" of the 1968 campaign, Lassiter suggests, they might have closed off the space afforded to moderate Democrats by the race-baiting "southern strategy."

Having suggested the links between national politics and the suburban grassroots of places such as Atlanta and Charlotte, Lassiter moves on to survey the broader metropolitan South. His case studies suggested that structural realities are significant for explaining the divergent results in Charlotte and Atlanta: more successful Charlotte had a consolidated county-wide school system; required a substantial white majority in the overall school enrollment; and included class as well as racial integration in its desegregation plan. This conclusion is reinforced through much shorter examinations of developments in Richmond, Raleigh, and Memphis. Lassiter finds that only Raleigh exhibited all three characteristics, and it alone approached the relative success of Charlotte in integrating its schools. Furthermore, he suggests that most school desegregation efforts nationwide since the early 1970s have followed Atlanta and Richmond more than Charlotte and Raleigh.

The Silent Majority concludes that the common thread of suburbanization, with its focus on *de facto* rather than *de jure* segregation, consumer choice, and individualism, best explains the Republican ascendance in the South and the nation at large. On the way to that conclusion, it contributes to southern, urban, and political history in a number of ways. This deeply researched and elegantly written study draws needed attention to complexity within the Solid South, even among middle-class whites. Easy references to the Solid South become difficult to employ after reading Lassiter's careful case studies. The book also brings into sharp relief the influence that local politics and geography can have on our ideas of race and class. Indeed, Lassiter argues that residents of the island suburbs ignored the constructed nature of their neighborhoods, the conscious and unconscious efforts in metropolitan planning and practice to segregate neighborhoods by race and class; as a result, they were free of any responsibility for the plight of the disadvantaged, and could more easily believe their own rhetoric of free-choice and *de facto* segregation. Readers may desire more of the history of how these policies and practices unfolded to create the island suburbs–here Lassiter provides general summaries with a relatively thin reference base. The argument on this point would have been strengthened, for this reviewer, by greater attention to the intentional ways the built environment reinforced race and class lines, but it remains highly suggestive of the role of metropolitan space in our political and ideological battles.

Finally, as the title suggests, Lassiter argues that these developments in the metropolitan South are neither unique to the region nor short-term in significance. Ideas and commitments that emerged at the grassroots in suburban areas provided not just a regional but a national constituency for particular political arguments–the solid suburbs rather than the solid south. At a time when once solidly Republican enclaves (the western suburbs of Chicago, for example) are becoming more diverse and susceptible to incursion by Democrats, Lassiter's fine book offers provocative ways to examine the role of race, class, consumerism, and metropolitan space in our local and national politics.

Notes

[1]. For employment of this explanation at the time, see Kevin P. Phillips, *The Emerging Republican Majority* (New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, 1969). Recent histories using it include Dan T. Carter, *The Politics of Rage: George Wallace, the Origins of the New Conservatism, and the Transformation of American Politics* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1995); Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich: Race in the Conservative Counterrevolution, 1963-1994* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1996); and Joseph A. Aistrup, *The Southern Strategy Revisited: Republican Top-Down Advancement in the South* (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1996).

[2]. See, for example, Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit*

(Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) and Kevin M. Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005).

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