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Robert J. Waste. *Independent Cities: Rethinking U.S. Urban Policy.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998. x + 214 pp. $34.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-19-510830-9; $56.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-510829-3.

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Solving the Urban Crisis

Independent Cities: Rethinking U.S. Urban Policy, by Robert Waste, Professor of Public Policy at California State University, Sacramento, is an attempt to document the urban crisis in the United States, examine its causes, and proffer solutions. Waste's book is concise and well organized, and he has put his analysis into a rational intellectual framework. His general argument is that cities in the United States in the 1990s are in a state of permanent crisis, which has been exacerbated by an overreaching federal government in its attempt to resolve the crisis. Federal programs which have forced cities to become dependent on Washington have stifled local solutions and not solved the problems they were enacted to solve (with two exceptions). Waste argues that for the urban crisis to be resolved, cities must evolve from "Washington's Cities," dependent on federal programs, to "Jefferson's Cities," independent of outside control.

Before offering solutions to the urban crisis, Waste first documents its extent. He builds his argument around David Rusk's identification of 34 cities which are "beyond the Point of No Return."[1] Rusk uses three criteria: population loss, isolation of racial minorities, and declining incomes compared to their suburbs. To Rusk's list, Waste adds three additional cities which have the nation's highest concentration of impoverished neighborhoods, and another seven cities that are responsible for a large percentage of the homicides in the nation. Waste then points out that 37 percent of the population of the country lives in these "adrenaline cities," which are violent and racially and economically segregated. Waste uses statistical evidence both for specific cities and at the national level, as well as anecdotal evidence to document the extent of the urban crisis in the 1990s. I have only two reservations about this part of the book. The first is that Waste exaggerates the extent of the problem by including the entire population of a metropolitan area in his list of adrenaline cities. For example, although Camden and Philadelphia (combined population of 1,673,069 in 1990) are included as two of the 44 cities, Waste includes the entire population (4,856,881) of the Philadelphia Primary Metropolitan Statistical Area (PMSA) in his calculation that "*nearly four of every ten Americans live in an adrenaline city–experiencing prolonged severe stress as a direct result of the permanent crisis in American cities*" (emphasis in the original, p. 19). Clearly, the people living in the war zones of North Philadelphia are not having the same experience as those living in the wealthy suburbs, like those on the Main Line. And as commerce, entertainment and industry have moved to the suburbs, suburbanites have become even less affected by the conditions of the central cities their communities surround. So while Waste is correct that the urban crisis has the potential to effect a majority of Americans, I would argue that many suburban areas have yet to feel threatened.

My second reservation is that Waste focuses on the "permanent crisis of American cities in the 1990s" (p. 10). His focus on the 1990s leaves the impression that the cities did not experience this state of crisis until then. Waste could strengthen his argument about the permanence of the urban crisis by going back to the 1950s, when the criteria he uses to define his adrenaline cities first became apparant. In many large cities, for example, population losses were the most dramatic in the 1950s and 1960s, but have since begun to slow. Violence (and the perception of violence) escalated during the 1960s with the riots, but has begun to decline dramatically in the last few years. Finally, fiscal crises plagued many cities (New York, Cleveland, etc.) in the inflationary 1970s. This element of the urban crisis has not been resolved by any means, but instead of it being the darkest of times, many urban areas in the 1990s have begun to experience signs of hope.

Waste accurately demonstrates why urban policy gets little political attention in Washington. He cites a study of the U.S. Senate by Robert Dahl, who showed that an absolute majority of Senators (51) can be drawn from

26 states with only 14 percent of the total U.S. population.[2] Waste also points out that under contemporary demographic conditions, the Presidency is largely won in the suburbs; George Bush was elected in 1988 without any urban support. The result of this political bias against urban areas is not surprising: "since the failed attempt by the Carter administration to construct an urban policy, urban problems and coherent national policies have largely been written-off by Washington, D.C. policymakers" (p. 23).

After establishing the scope of the problem, Waste chronicles Washington's attempts to resolve urban problems, from the Great Society programs of the Johnson administration to Clinton's more modest "refrigerator list." This is the strongest part of the book. It's the most concise, yet fairly comprehensive history of this period of federal urban policy that I have seen. But after describing how urban policy evolved over the years due to different philosophical approaches and in different political environments, Waste concludes that

in the long, fifty-year history of American national urban policy from 1946 to 1996, Washington, D.C. has constructed a number of urban aid and urban intervention programs...with the noteworthy exception of Head Start and Revenue Sharing, many–perhaps most–of the federal programs such as Urban Renewal, Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and Veteran's Administration (VHA) home-loan programs, highway funding, Community Action Program (CAP), Model Cities, Urban Development Action Grants, Urban Empowerment Zones and the Crime Bill–have tended to backfire on, and injure, the very metro populations they were meant to aid, often producing a disastrous set of unintended (sometimes *intended* [emphasis in the original]) consequences for American cities (p. 95).

This is a pretty harsh conclusion. Certainly, many of these programs have had serious negative consequences for cities, but instead of this being due to the failure of remote policy-makers in Washington to understand the needs of local communities, as Waste contends, many of the negative consequences were the result of political compromises made because of the anti-urban bias that Waste has outlined. The dilution of the funding for Model Cities, the concessions made throughout the history of public housing to realtors and builders, the dedication of the gasoline tax to the Highway Trust fund, and many other decisions with negative consequences for cities were not because of a structural flaw in making these decisions at the federal level, but rather were a result of the power relationships between the various constituencies, the most powerful of whom were usually quite pleased with the results.

Waste lists a number of local efforts that have made impressive strides towards resolving urban problems. He includes community policing, the regional government approaches of Minneapolis and Portland, city-county consolidations, and the rise of CDCs, to name a few. These admirable efforts he includes as Jefferson's cities, cities which have made progress independent of Washington. But the scale of their success is limited, especially when compared to the scope of the problem. Community Development Corporations (CDCs), for example, are ideally suited for improving neighborhoods, but their lack of size (which keeps them close to the neighborhoods in which they work) makes them unable to resolve larger problems like the lack of affordable housing. While many CDCs can work to alleviate the side effects of poverty, the root causes of poverty (structural unemployment, e.g.) are beyond their control. Additionally, while many are initiated with private and foundation money, problems that require serious annual subsidies must be funded by government sources; private sources do not have the funds or the patience to accomplish such tasks.

In the last two chapters, Waste outlines his proposals for progressive solutions to the urban crisis. Unfortunately, they seem (in many ways), unrelated to the structure of the rest of the book. Many of the proposals make sense, but not in light of the dichotomy between local and federal solutions outlined earlier in the book. Waste advocates increasing funding for Head Start, focusing additional police officers on the 25 metropolitan areas with the highest rates of violent crime and creating these police officers via a police corps program, and reinstituting a revenue sharing program based on size and poverty statistics. To these programs he adds funding Second Harvest (the largest private anti-hunger agency in the United States) and a teacher credential program. In light of his criticism of policy-makers in Washington micro-managing urban problems, these programs seem to be along the lines of those he is criticizing (with the exception of revenue sharing). His focusing of 500 additional police officers on the 25 metro areas with the highest crime rates is an intelligent way to place limited resources where they will do the most good, but it ignores his earlier points about the anti-urban nature of our national representative government. (In other words, why would the federal government, with its anti-urban bias, fund police that would only be used in large urban areas?) And tying this program to a police corps based on paying for potential recruits to go to college in return for a

limited amount of service makes sense only if one is concerned about the quality of people applying for positions in the police forces.

To fund these initiatives, Waste suggests a national lottery. Even if this were to raise the money necessary, Waste ignores the implications of such a system for the poor (many of whom gamble at higher rates than the wealthy, so that the money would be largely raised from the poor), and how such a lottery would cut into existing state lotteries (and the programs they fund). Such money is not "free" money (p. 115). Without the lottery, Waste suggests imposing a wealth tax on the upper classes, which (as he argues) makes sense given how much they benefited from the tax cuts from the 1980s. But he argues that such a tax would not be a new tax or a tax increase, but a "tax equity adjustment" (p. 129) (because it would be reinstating tax rates that had been reduced earlier). The reduction of corporate welfare through the elimination of tax breaks and a re-imposition of the corporate tax structure of the 1950s, value added taxes, and gasoline taxes are also suggested. While many of these are viable means of raising the additional $14 billion required by Waste's programs, and are progressive enough to implement as replacement for some existing taxes, he is stretching the point to argue that they are not tax increases.

The final chapter is a more radical prescription for change, but in this chapter, Waste primarily presents proposals suggested by others. Many of the proposals are interesting (a Marshall Plan for cities, New Deal style programs like the Works Progress Administration, et al.), and one–senators for cities with populations greater than the smallest state–directly addresses the anti-urban bias of the U.S. political system. But the proposals seem unrelated and are so briefly presented that Waste does not make a coherent case for radical change.

This book is thought-provoking and a good resource for urban policy since the 1960s. Waste also makes many useful and innovative policy proposals that would benefit urban areas, and he supports these ideas well by documenting places in which they have been implemented (voting by mail as a means of reducing cost and increasing participation seems especially promising). And Waste's focus on reducing crime in urban areas strikes at one of the major reasons cities are losing population. But in the end, Waste does not fully explore the local versus national approach to urban policy, which has so much promise. Had he done this, he could have presented a more coherent picture of federal funding for local initiatives that complement basic federal programs. Why not a national educational voucher, which would provide full funding for each student (on a per capita basis) at a school of the student's choosing as long as the school accepted the voucher as complete payment? Schools could be held to national standards but be allowed to meet them any way they chose. Breaking the nexus between real estate location and school attendance would dramatically alter the urban-suburban real estate market, and enhance the viability of cities. While Waste argues for eliminating the deduction for mortgage interest for second homes as a means of funding his urban programs in the absence of a national lottery, why not transform the entire mortgage interest deduction, which is a $40 billion annual tax subsidy to the upper classes (with the highest subsidies going to the wealthiest taxpayers who own the most expensive homes, which are overwhelmingly suburban) into a tax credit available equally to all homeowners?- While transforming this tax deduction (available only to those wealthy enough to itemize their deductions) into a tax credit, the federal government would support affordable housing in a progressive manner (since the same credit would have much more value to the poor than to the wealthy), which would benefit cities and their struggling base of affordable housing, without imposing the type of federal bureaucracy that Waste rightly criticizes as a drawback to many federal programs.

Waste has taken on a daunting task, and tried to walk the line between ideological and intellectual consistency, and political reality. Although I disagree with the course of the path he has laid out, there is much to be learned from his efforts and he has set out in the right direction.

Notes

[1]. David Rusk, *Cities Without Suburbs* (1993), *Baltimore Unbound* (1994) and "Bend or Die: Inflexible State Laws and Policies are Dooming some of the Country's Central Cities" (1994).

[2]. R.A. Dahl. *Democracy in the United States: Promise and Performance.* Chicago: Rand McNally, (1980).

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