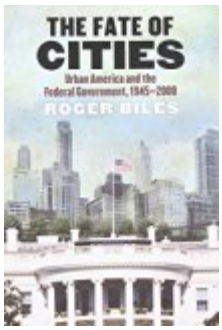
H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Roger Biles. *The Fate of Cities: Urban America and the Federal Government, 1945-2000.* Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2011. xiv + 445 pp. $39.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-7006-1768-5.



Reviewed by Kristin M. Szylvian

Published on H-Environment (September, 2011)

Commissioned by David T. Benac (Western Michigan University)

If President Barack Obama campaigned for reelection in 2012 with a proposal to make U.S. cities the centerpiece of an ambitious economic recovery program, he and his advisers could utilize historian Roger Biles's latest book for insight into what their recent predecessors have and have not done for U.S. cities since 1945. Continuing the line of inquiry set forth by Mark I. Gelfand in his 1975 *A Nation of Cities: The Federal Government and Urban America, 1933-1965*, Biles set forth to determine how every U.S. president from Harry S. Truman to William J. Clinton responded to the economic, political, and social needs of American cities. He visited each of their presidential libraries and the National Archives, and consulted office and legislative files, speeches, correspondence, oral history interview transcripts, and other sources. Biles found that the presidents under consideration, including Lyndon B. Johnson--father of the famed Great Society program--never seemed to realize the extent to which federal policies were responsible for the demise of cities. Each city was forced to respond to the postwar acceleration of the prewar pattern of residential, industrial, and commercial decentralization on its own; postwar mayors struggled to economically, politically, and culturally reinvent their cities without the certitude that the White House was solidly behind them.

Spared physical devastation during World War II, neither Truman nor Congress offered U.S. cities a domestic version of the Marshall Plan even though it was sorely needed after nearly two decades of depression and wartime shortages. The Housing Act of 1949 created a national housing goal, restored funding for public housing construction, and created the urban renewal program, but it did not halt the tide of urban disinvestment and decentralization. Unwittingly perhaps, President Dwight D. Eisenhower had the greatest federal policy influence on cities through his backing of the interstate highway construction program. The highways that "penetrated" downtowns in order to reduce congestion functioned as handy escape routes for suburbanites. When Congress created a highway fund supported with

gasoline taxes, it was placed off limits to mass transit projects. The national system of interstate highways expanded without any sustained, in-depth study of its economic, political, social, or environmental implications on both the city and the countryside.

During his short time in office, the urbane John F. Kennedy secured passage of a few bills that rewarded urban voters. Aware of his predecessor's concern with poverty and fair housing, President Johnson addressed these and other issues in his far-reaching, urban-oriented Great Society program. The golden era of federal aid to cities from1964 to 1966 lasted longer in American political memory than in reality. Signs of future trouble for cities were evident in the way Johnson handled the September 1965 creation of the Department of Housing and Urban Renewal (HUD) and the January 1966 announcement of Robert Weaver as his selection for the new department's first secretary.

The relationship between the federal government and cities reached a turning point with the election of President Richard M. Nixon in 1968. Nixon's policy goals, like those of President Ronald Reagan, were shaped by the knowledge that the Republican Party's base was stronger in the suburbs than aging city neighborhoods. The versions of New Federalism promoted by the two Californians and George Herbert Walker Bush shifted more and more fiscal responsibility to state and local governments. Great Society programs were presented as political boondoggles that made the city's problems worse instead of better. The Republican emphasis on fiscal restraint and deficient reduction was shared by two southern Democrats, former governors Jimmy Carter and Clinton. The latter sought a "third way" that was neither a return to the Great Society nor the draconian cuts of the "Reagan Revolution." In the end, the Enterprise Zones and Enterprise Communities promoted by Clinton did little to help U.S. cities. The scandals that rocked HUD during the Nixon and Reagan years and repeated budget and staff cuts under both Democratic and Republican administrations all but destroyed the department. Even after the appointment of the highly regarded Secretary Henry Cisneros by President Clinton, HUD's mission remained murky and conflicted.

Biles sees no silver lining in the dark clouds hovering above American cities. After "decades of policy making in the nation's capital that underwrote metropolitan decentralization and dismissing the Great Society as an expensive failure," there was no reason to think that anyone in Washington DC would stop "turning a blind eye to the fate of the cities" (p. 359). He notes with disgust that the promises of assistance made in the aftermath of the 1992 Los Angeles riot did not result in positive change in the area where the uprising occurred. Little of the affluence of the mid-1990s that brought a plethora of art museums, music halls, and sports stadiums to city entertainment districts trickled down to those residing in troubled neighborhoods. Perhaps Biles's account of the neglect of U.S. cities will incite readers to demand that the president and Congress back legislation that acknowledges that the United States is a nation of cities and its future rests upon them. Maybe it will inspire them to use their cell phones and computers to start a "City Spring."

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at https://networks.h-net.org/h-environment

Citation: Kristin M. Szylvian. Review of Biles, Roger. *The Fate of Cities: Urban America and the Federal Government, 1945-2000.* H-Environment, H-Net Reviews. September, 2011.

URL: https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=33210