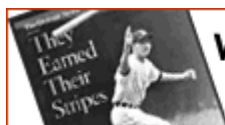


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The Cost of Segregation || Part I: Racial Attitudes

Politics

Young, riots cast shadow on Detroit

By Gordon Trowbridge / The Detroit News

It is an article of faith for many Metro Detroiters that the city's decline can be traced to two events: the riot of 1967 and the election of Coleman A. Young in 1973.

"The No. 1 culprit was the outrageous racism of Coleman Young," is the assessment of L. Brooks Patterson, a native Detroit and now Oakland County executive. "And the race riot punctuated everything."

Certainly the violence of 1967 and the confrontational style of Detroit's first black mayor played roles in the exodus of whites from the city. But claims that they sparked the city's decline don't really stand up to reality.

"To see Detroit as a rosy place until 1967, and everything collapsing after that, is a myth," said historian Thomas Sugrue.

"The declines were already under way in the 1950s."

Detroit's population peaked in the 1940s, and stood at nearly 1.9 million in 1950. The next decade nearly 180,000 Detroiters left, starting a pattern that continued through the 1990s. In all, about 340,000 Detroiters, nearly all white, left the city before Coleman Young ever appeared on a ballot.

Still, to Patterson -- himself a polarizing figure to many blacks -- a discussion of the city's decline must begin with Young. If the mayor and the riot can't be blamed for all of the city's decline, they still taint white perceptions of the city.

Wilbur C. Rich, a Wellesley College professor who wrote a 1999 biography of Young, says Young didn't much mind that whites saw him as hostile.

"There was a perception that he was not going to protect white



Mayor Coleman A. Young's confrontational style played a role in the exodus of whites from the city.

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interests, and he didn't do very much to disabuse them of that notion," Rich said.

Of course, Young meant something entirely different to many blacks: He symbolized African-American political power in a city long seen as hostile.

"Blacks began to challenge the power structure, and eventually they won with the election of Coleman Young," said Joseph Adams, an African-American insurance agency owner born and raised in Detroit. That gave blacks a feeling of power, Adams said, even as it frightened whites.

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