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Coleman Young's Detroit: A Vision for a City  
1974-1994

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DePauw University  
Honor Scholar 400: Senior Thesis  
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In 1973, the people of Detroit elected their first African-American Mayor, Coleman Alexander Young. In electing him, the people charged him with a mission to save the once prosperous industrial capital from the forces tearing it down. Economically and socially, Detroit had reached a breaking point. Coming in at the tail end of the civil rights Movement and in the middle of deindustrialization in the Midwest, Coleman Young had to become not only a mayor, but also a businessman, a symbol for African-Americans, a national spokesman, but most importantly a visionary, someone who could imagine a better Detroit and to take his own words, someone who could *move Detroit forward* despite everything holding it down.

Detroit came into the spotlight once again in July 2013, becoming the first major US city to declare bankruptcy. In just 60 years, the city had gone from the world capital of industry to a mere skeleton, quite literally speaking, of its former self. Hollowed out buildings make up much of the downtown. The roads once occupied with cars like blood pulsing through veins now just have potholes and commuters who make their way in from the suburbs. The New York Times bluntly stated, “The City of Detroit is in shambles.”<sup>1</sup>

The media focused on the demise of the United States motor industry as the cause of the economic collapse. Scholars dig deeper saying the problems lie not only in economics but racial tension that has plagued the city since the 1930s. However, no one can agree on the exact cause because in reality, there is not just one. Scholars and the media alike anchor their arguments for Detroit’s decline by drawing conclusions from what they consider to be

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<sup>1</sup> Bill Vlasic, “Detroit is Now a Charity Case for Carmakers,” *The New York Times*, September 22, 2013.

the most important events. Yet, in writing one story, another is silenced. This is the case in Detroit where pivotal events such as the 1967 Race Riots to the 2008 General Motors Bailout continually define its history.

This essay offers a clearer picture of the history of Detroit that is not just civil rights and Motown. In order to do so, I have focused on one man who is a household name to Detroiters: Coleman A. Young. Coleman Young, elected Mayor in 1973, remained mayor for five terms until he retired in 1994. He was the first African American Mayor of Detroit, and his race would define him throughout his time as mayor. The FBI suspected him of being a communist due to his aggressive personality and leadership roles in unions. As a politician, he aligned with the progressive and democratic parties holding positions under all three labels. Coleman Young himself never went to college and spoke with an unrefined language that never ceased to shock. On his desk in the Manoogian Mansion, he had a nameplate inscribed with a self-assigned title: "M.F.I.C." which stood for Motherfucker In Charge, a title he took very seriously.

Coleman Young left his mark on Detroit and you cannot escape his influence when you visit the city. The Detroit skyline is defined by the Renaissance Center, which is one of Young's major projects. The Renaissance Center. Mayor Young managed the building of The Joe Louis Arena, home of the Detroit Redwings. The elevated "People Mover" that runs through downtown is the direct product of Coleman Young's vision for Detroit. However, his vision for the city did not stop at the physical appearance, but included reshaping many long-standing institutions. Young created a diverse police force and restructured the way the police department operated. He also focused heavily on bringing shopping malls and

boutiques back downtown from the suburbs. All in all, Coleman Young accomplished a great deal even for twenty years.

Despite all he accomplished, many Detroiters believe Coleman Young failed as Mayor and is to blame for its current condition. I know this because my family is from and many still live in Detroit. My grandfather worked in the Ford Motor's plants and watched the city go from prosperous to its current condition. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, and stepdad unanimously agree that Coleman Young singlehandedly caused "white flight," which led to the ultimate downfall of the city. I responded to these remarks by saying surely they weren't so naïve as to believe one man caused the collapse of Detroit. More interestingly, my suburban, white, middle class family shares this opinion with the majority of people from Detroit. In the New York Times Bestseller, *Detroit: An American Autopsy*, Charlie LeDuff recorded one African American woman saying, "Coleman Young...he ruined that city."<sup>2</sup> The national media replicated and redistributed the same message making Coleman Young a posthumous scapegoat.

In response, the *Detroit Free Press* published an article entitled, "How Detroit went broke: The Answers may surprise you – and don't blame Coleman Young."<sup>3</sup> The authors of the article compiled economic data and argued that every mayor, even some before Coleman Young are to blame for Detroit's bankruptcy: "When all the numbers are crunched, one fact is crystal clear: Yes, a disaster was looming for Detroit. But there were ample opportunities when decisive action by city leaders might have fended off

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<sup>2</sup> Charlie LeDuff, *Detroit: An American Autopsy* (New York: The Penguin Press, 2013),

<sup>3</sup> Nathan Bomey, John Gallagher and Detroit, Detroit Free Press Business Writers, "How Detroit went broke: The answers may surprise you - don't blame Coleman Young," *The Detroit Free Press*, September 15, 2013.

bankruptcy...Over five decades, there were many 'if only' moments."<sup>4</sup> The article used graphs where the reader can easily see that during Coleman Young's time in office, Detroit's debt dropped to \$1.4 billion and revenue reached \$2.1 billion. The article reads, "For critics who want to blame Mayor Coleman Young for starting this mess, think again. The mayor's sometimes fiery rhetoric may have contributed to metro Detroit's racial divide, but he was an astute money manager who recognized, early on, the challenges the city faced and began slashing staff and spending to address them."<sup>5</sup> The Detroit Free Press Article argued that the city had many chances to revive itself financially but the Mayor and city leadership missed opportunity after opportunity, Coleman Young being least to blame. In short, Detroit's downfall was not inevitable.

For historians, Coleman Young is not the cause of present day Detroit's problems. Many prominent scholars have contributed to the conversation on Detroit. Thomas Sugrue, a prominent historian on Detroit, published *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* in 1996 that covered Detroit from World War II right up to the election of Coleman Young. Sugrue concluded, "What has become of Detroit, however, is not the product of post-riot panic of the alleged misrule of Coleman Young. By the time Young was inaugurated, the forces of economic decay and racial animosity were far too powerful for a single elected official to stem."<sup>6</sup> The economic problems and more importantly race problems stem back to long before Coleman Young's time. Sugrue illustrated the importance of the decline of the automotive industry in Detroit but also pointed out that it was not the only thing contributing to the downfall of the city. The work addressed the

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<sup>4</sup> Bomey and Gallagher, "How Detroit went broke."

<sup>5</sup> Bomey and Gallagher, "How Detroit went broke."

<sup>6</sup> Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), 270.

racial issues in the city that largely manifested in the housing marketplace: “The process of housing segregation set into motion a chain reaction that reinforced patterns of racial inequality.”<sup>7</sup> Institutionalized racism in housing, employment, and public policies all lead to an Urban Crisis in Detroit in the 1960s.

June Manning Thomas, professor of Urban and Regional planning at University of Michigan, concurred with Sugrue in her work, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit*. However, Thomas labeled Young, “The single most influential person in Detroit’s modern history,”<sup>8</sup> whereas Sugrue viewed Coleman Young as practically powerless in the midst of an urban crisis set into motion decades before. For Thomas, Young single handedly redeveloped Detroit and stalled the city’s downfall. Thomas focused on Young’s attempt at redevelopment of Detroit through his building of city landmarks and how these affected the city. Thomas referred to Young as a “messiah mayor,” or, “specialists who found new ways to govern their distressed big cities.”<sup>9</sup> According to Thomas, Young governed through redevelopment projects that distracted individuals from greater problems that could not be seen. In simpler terms, Young gave Detroit a facelift to give off the appearance that the city was not doing poorly.

Historian Heather Ann Thompson added a political aspect to the argument in her article, “Rethinking the Collapse of Postwar Liberalism: The Rise of Mayor Coleman Young and the politics of Race in Detroit.” Thompson used Coleman Young as an example of many citizens dedication to the liberalist “Great Society” in electing an African American as mayor, a mid-twentieth century trend throughout America’s urban cities. Thompson

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<sup>7</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 34.

<sup>8</sup> June Manning Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race: Planning a Finer City in Postwar Detroit* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013), 149.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 151.



argued that Detroit voters hoped Coleman Young would maintain a strict liberalist agenda as mayor. Although Coleman Young campaigned with a liberal agenda, Thompson demonstrates that he did not maintain this ideology throughout his time in office. The article offered an excellent perspective on the motivations of voters in reelecting Young multiple times into office. However, the article does not focus on Mayor Young and his personal beliefs or even many of his policies. Thompson instead demonstrates how Detroit voters saw Young as a symbol for both civil rights and liberalism.

Sociologists situated Detroit within the changing economic and racial landscape of the United States in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. For these scholars, Detroit's problems were not unique and part of a national phenomenon amongst urban areas. Thus, sociologists support historians in that Coleman Young did not have the power to overcome the urban crisis. Deindustrialization in the Midwest caused unemployment to rise and the decay of many cities. Along with these issues come sociological problems, particularly for African Americans. Matthew Desmond and Mustafa Emirbayer placed Detroit in the larger context in their book, *Racial Domination, Racial Progress: The Sociology of Race in America*. Desmond and Emirbayer outlined many national trends in politics and economics that affected race relations.

Julius Wilson focused on the effects of these changes in urban areas in his book: *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor*. Wilson described the effects of unemployment on urban areas and emphasized that the resulting lower socio-economic class becomes isolated from the rest of society physically and ideologically. Wilson wrote, "The focus is mainly on the shortcomings of individuals and families and not on the structural and social changes in the society at large that have made life so miserable for

many inner-city ghetto residents or that have produced certain unique responses and behavior patterns over time.”<sup>10</sup> Wilson asserts that urban poverty cannot correct itself without government aid. Furthermore, urban poverty stems from unemployment, which is a result of the deindustrialization in urban areas. Wilson’s crucial analyses of national trends contextualize Coleman Young and reassign agency from just him or city governments to larger social and economic forces throughout the United States.

Coleman Young himself wrote an autobiography published shortly after he left office in 1994. The book, meant to be Young’s input in the making of his own story, focused heavily on the positive aspects of Young’s entire political career. Coleman Young and Lonnie Wheeler, his co-author emphasized race and pre-existing problems that Young faced in becoming mayor. Obviously, Young portrayed himself in a positive light, but he also did something else in his autobiography that was ubiquitous throughout his mayoral tenure. Coleman Young presented himself as a leader for the African American community and one who fought for their needs. In doing so, he contributed to the myth that his racial identity factored into all of his decisions, which is what his critics believe and use to say that he made Detroit a hostile environment for the white population. The book provided a colorful narrative that glaze over the negatives of Young’s time in office. Furthermore, Young portrayed himself as a racial leader in this book implying that majority of his time in office was spent bettering the African American condition in Detroit.

Coleman Young envisioned Detroit as equivalent to New York or Chicago. He consistently used such cities as models for Detroit. Mayor Young did not wish to restore the economically one dimensional, Motown. He also did not wish to make Detroit a “Black” city,

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<sup>10</sup> Julius Wilson, *When Work Disappears: The World of the New Urban Poor* (New York: Vintage Books, 1997), 53.

where African Americans defined the status quo. Coleman Young's utopic Detroit had a diverse economy, racial harmony, and most importantly national significance. From my research, I learned that the United States underwent massive changes economically and sociologically from 1974 to 1994. Coleman Young adapted to these changes and faced issues pragmatically. As a politician, he was an opportunist who did not adhere to any ideology. However, his vision remained consistent and affected his decisions as mayor. By trying to enact this vision, Coleman Young spent millions of dollars on the physical appearance of Detroit in hopes that the racial issues of Detroit would resolve themselves.

This essay compiles the vast amount of historical, sociological, and economic discourse on Detroit and uses it as a backdrop in which to write about Coleman Young and his vision for a city. Based on archival research and engagement with history, sociology, and economics, this paper argues that Coleman Young followed a consistent vision for Detroit as city with national significance. While scholars have portrayed Coleman Young as a significant leader for both the Democratic Party and civil rights, I argue that he did not follow the agendas for either of these ideologies. Consistency in Young's policies and especially revival projects revolve around his pursuit of a utopic Detroit defined by a multi-dimensional, nationally significant economy and a commercialized culture. In order to implement his vision, Young pragmatically approached economic and sociological situations and fit his imagined vision into reality.

## **Growing up in Detroit: A Biography**

Coleman Young's personal history and relationship with Detroit shaped his vision for the city. He considered himself a Detroit native and in his 1973 campaign for mayor, he ran on the platform that he was the only candidate who truly "understood" Detroit. Coleman Young did not experience an abnormal amount of racism, which he said might have been on account of his lighter skin.<sup>11</sup> Regardless of the extent, Coleman Young experienced racism and found ways to either use it to his advantage or combat it indirectly through employment. He believed races could live together harmoniously due to his own childhood experience. By looking at Young's life before he became a politician, we can see his values and what would later contribute to his vision for the city of Detroit.

Coleman Alexander Young grew up in Detroit and considered it his home. Born in Tuscaloosa, Alabama on May 24, 1918, Coleman's family moved to Detroit when he was just five years old as a part of the Great Migration. The Young family, including Coleman's maternal grandparents and aunts and uncles, resided in the Black Bottom neighborhood near the famous Paradise Valley, a hub for black music and art. Black Bottom would later become notorious as a low class, black neighborhood. However, when the Young family migrated to Black Bottom in 1922, the neighborhood was transitioning from integrated to predominantly African-American. Young recounted, "Our house was next door to an Italian family, whose daughter, Polly, I frequently played with. There was a Syrian family down the street, a German grocery on the intersection – I can still smell the sour rye bread – and a Jewish delicatessen around the corner."<sup>12</sup> Coleman Young experienced integration at a young age and saw races living harmoniously together. However, by the time Coleman

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<sup>11</sup> Coleman Young and Lonnie Wheeler, *Hard Stuff: The Autobiography of Mayor Coleman Young* (New York: Penguin Books, 1994), 30.

<sup>12</sup> Young and Wheeler, *Hard Stuff*, 16-17.

reached his teenage years, the entire neighborhood transformed to solely African-Americans. During the late 1920s, Coleman did not experience an abnormal amount of racial tension in Black Bottom. However, the Great Depression and economic strife would lead to heightened animosity as unemployment soared.

Prohibition and the Great Depression caused Black Bottom to suffer from perpetual bootleggers and hustlers. Furthermore, the transition from a diverse, blue-collar neighborhood to solely black caused isolation and deepened segregation. Wilson commented on how isolation leads to behavioral patterns such as crime: "In short, social isolation deprives inner-city residents not only of conventional role models, whose strong presence once buffered the effects of neighborhood joblessness, but also of the social resources (including social contracts) provided by mainstream social networks that facilitate social and economic advancement in a modern industrial society."<sup>13</sup> As Black Bottom became further isolated due to racism, its residents lost their ability to better their condition.

Black Bottom, as with many African American neighborhoods, had subpar public services and living conditions to their Caucasian counterparts. In Detroit, police officers rarely responded to calls in black neighborhoods allowing criminals to act unchecked. Unfortunately, the neighborhoods became symbols for African Americans and "evidence" for the white majority of racial inferiority claiming that crime and lawlessness stem from race rather than societal structures. Coleman Young lived through this transition, but left Black Bottom and Paradise Valley long before they would become the target of racial violence and police brutality.

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<sup>13</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 66.

Coleman Young described his childhood as difficult due to his father. William Coleman Young (who went by his middle name), frequently changed jobs due to employment instability, which especially affected black men. Despite having a college degree, William Coleman could not hold down a steady job to support his family. Coleman the Elder relied heavily on his income from gambling. He also suffered from alcoholism and was well known for his womanizing. Coleman the younger acted as his father's go-between during the years of prohibition, moving money and illegal booze. His mother eventually would open up a tailor shop that doubled as a home to the entire family, with a business in the front and Mr. Young's poker games in the back. Despite all the hardship, Coleman managed to graduate from high school with good marks.

To say that Mr. Young was worse than most men living in Black Bottom at this time would be a false accusation. In many ways, Coleman the elder did what he must to survive. Young stated, "Papa had worked hard all of his life...he did what he could. He and Mama picked up rags in the alley and found various odd jobs so that my aunt and her children would not have to eat in the soup kitchen; but I truly believe that the absence of steady work is what killed him."<sup>14</sup> Amidst racism and a declining economy, the unemployment rates soared for African-Americans. The society in which the Young's lived caused Coleman Young to learn the importance of employment and jobs in creating a successful city.

Coleman became politicized at a young age. In his autobiography, Coleman talked about the role of black barbershops where he learned about different party lines. Wilbur C. Rich wrote in his biography of Coleman Young, "In the early days, the black barber shop served as the center where political ideas were exchanged. Black nationalists, Marxists, and

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<sup>14</sup> Young and Wheeler, *Hard Stuff*, 38.

Christian fundamentalists were allowed to argue their case in this market place of ideas.”<sup>15</sup> Coleman regularly went to the barbershop as a version of unofficial schooling where he molded his own political ideas.

Coleman took a job at the Ford River Rouge Plant in and was part of its apprentice program. Young never had the opportunity to attend university but sought further education through the apprentice program. However, he still ended up on the assembly line with untrained workers because Ford gave the white apprentices jobs before African-Americans with equal or better qualifications. Due to these inequalities, Coleman began to attend workers’ unions meetings but never pledged membership.

Young sympathized with unions due to the inequalities he felt in the workplace. Such sentiments translated into political views centering on jobs and workers’ rights. Henry Ford despised the unions and had zero tolerance for them. Young recounted, “Like the rest of us, though, I thought it advisable not to go public with my political orientation. At Ford, job security was tenuous enough without personally insulting the old man, which is what he considered any talk about collective bargaining.”<sup>16</sup> Young was officially fired from the River Rouge Plant for fighting with another worker. However, he believed the true reason was his unionist sympathies. He soon found another job at an automotive plant and this time, joined a union.

Coleman Young prioritized workers’ rights over civil rights. After he left Ford, Coleman joined the United Auto Workers (UAW). The union did not work for civil rights. In fact, the UAW discriminated against its black members and rarely allowed them to hold

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<sup>15</sup> Wilbur C. Rich, *Coleman A. Young and Detroit Politics: From Social Activist to Power Broker* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1989), 41.

<sup>16</sup> Young and Wheeler, *Hard Stuff*, 41.

leadership roles within the union. Within the union, there were black members who fought internally for equal representation. However, Coleman Young did not actively fight for these internal changes. Young lost his membership with the UAW when he lost his job at the automotive plant. However, he stayed closely connected with the group.

Coleman Young used civil rights organizations to gain rights for workers. After the UAW, he joined a labor-oriented civil rights organization called the National Negro Congress. Coleman Young used the NNC to stay in touch with the UAW.<sup>17</sup> Through the NNC, Coleman Young met Reverend Charles Hill whom Young referred to as his “mentor and role model.”<sup>18</sup> Reverend Charles Hill attracted African American workers to the NNC.<sup>19</sup> The Reverend served as president of the organization and expanded its goals. Under his leadership, the NNC became politicized in the name of equal opportunity for black workers. The NNC aligned with the radical labor movement that consisted of socialists and communists. Neither Reverend Charles Hill nor Coleman Young were political radicals.

Coleman Young did not follow one political ideology. Instead, he joined up with politically affiliated organizations that fought for workers’ rights. During his time in the UAW and NNC, Young combined civil rights with workers’ rights. He believed that the two groups shared similar goals. However, Coleman Young did not fight for African Americans within the unions. At this point, Coleman Young the politician emerged but without a party. Young did not fight for African Americans within unions simply because he would alienate himself from the leadership in doing so. In short, Coleman weighed his options and pragmatically decided that prioritizing workers’ rights benefitted him more than fighting

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid, 44.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid, 42.

<sup>19</sup> Wilbur C. Rich, *Coleman Young*, 69.



for civil rights. Although he understood political factions, he never associated with one party until he ran for public office. World War II interrupted and changed labor rights and civil rights in the US. Young joined the army and left for overseas to fight. When he returned, the city had changed dramatically.

## **The End of the Golden Age: Racial Tension and Economic Shifts in Post-War Detroit**

The social and economic state of postwar Detroit contributed to the 1973 election of Coleman Young in changing race relations and restructuring the economy of the city.

Detroit as a capital of industry extends back to World War II. World War II allowed Detroit to take its place as the industrial capital of the US. Sugrue states that with the need for war supplies, Detroit industrialists, lead by Ford, “converted their assembly lines to the mass production of military hardware, airplanes, tanks, and other vehicles.”<sup>20</sup> Thus, industrial factories grew and pumped profit into the entire city, attracting workers from the entire nation.<sup>21</sup>

Industrialization in Detroit led major population growth during the 1930s and 1940s. In 1920, the population of Detroit was 993,678 people. By 1940, that number had almost doubled to 1,623,452.<sup>22</sup> The Great Migration, where many African-Americans left the south in search of new opportunities, contributed largely to the spike in Detroit’s population. Detroit is just one example of a larger national trend of increased African

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<sup>20</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Between 1940-1943, the number of unemployed workers in Detroit fell from 135,000 to 4,000. Found in Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 19.

<sup>22</sup> Carl Wells, “Proposals for Downtown Detroit” (Washington, D.C.: Urban Land Institute, 1942), p 15; U.S. Census of Population (1950 data) in Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*.

American populations through the north. However, Detroit did not have the infrastructure to adapt to such large population increases with no public housing and an economy completely dependent on industries that fluctuated based on consumer demand. Also coined the “most southern city in the north”, racism would forever plague Detroit and make the population growth unmanageable.

African Americans suffered heavily from racism during and after the Great Migration in Detroit. Just as the Young’s had done, many black families left the south searching for opportunities in the north. With the large addition of African-Americans in Detroit, many white people felt threatened and racism increased. In 1943, the Michigan KKK membership gained hundreds of new individuals making it the largest in the nation. The poor white class targeted successful African Americans and blamed them for many of the problems that accompany urbanization. This displaced anger showed in the geography of the city. Suddenly, there were exclusively black neighborhoods such as Black Bottom that did not receive the same quality of public services or any at all.

World War II provided great employment opportunities for African-Americans. Increased demand for wartime products lead to job availability for black workers. For example, by the 1940s, 12% of Henry Ford’s workers were black from just a few years before when the percentage was zero. As more blacks entered the work force, civil rights organizations pushed for Unions to become integrated. In 1941, President Franklin Roosevelt passed Executive Order 8802, which prohibited racial discrimination in employment practices. The Order mandated that, “it is the duty of employers and of labor organizations...to provide for the full and equitable participation of all workers in defense

industries, without discrimination because of race, creed, color, or national origin.”<sup>23</sup> The Order signaled that civil rights organizations became increasingly effective during World War II in gaining support from the government and a shift towards equality of races in the work place.

Despite the job opportunities presented, African-Americans continued to suffer from racism in the work place. While Henry Ford and many other factories opened their doors to African-Americans, black workers were not given preferential jobs. Bosses also used black employees as strike-protection. For example, in 1939, during the Dodge Main strike, Chrysler used black replacements proving to the white employees that their shoes could be filled. Thus, while the increase in African-American employment in many factories provided opportunities, racism persisted.

As more African Americans came to Detroit and entered the workforce during World War II, civil rights Activism increased. The Detroit chapter of the NAACP became the largest in the nation because African Americans needed representation in the public sphere. Before long, the NAACP and other groups began working with Workers’ Unions and local government to ensure fair treatment of African Americans. In turn, civil rights became a political issue. Sugrue stated, “the alliance between blacks and government – despite its fragility – raised expectations and spurred thousands more black and white to civil rights activism.”<sup>24</sup>

Detroit exemplified this newfound acquaintance between government and civil rights. In 1943, city officials created the Mayor’s Interracial Committee to address the

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<sup>23</sup> Executive Order 8802 dated June 25, 1941, General Records of the United States Government; Record Group 11; National Archives.

<sup>24</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 27.

grievances of black city residents and to cool racial tensions.<sup>25</sup> A sense of optimism towards civil rights rose amongst liberal leaders and civil rights groups as antidiscrimination policies were addressed and written into law. However, the optimism would be short lived due to conservatives and many white Detroiters taking the opposite stance towards civil rights.

Racism manifested in Detroit housing.<sup>26</sup> The racial climate of Detroit intensified as the black population increased. Furthermore, African Americans became more successful in the postwar years and began to seek better housing. As the black and white populations began to occupy the same space, white Detroiters tried to separate themselves from the “other” Detroit through housing. Acts of violence followed black homebuyers in “white neighborhoods.” In addition, homeowners’ associations and real estate agencies perpetuated the antagonism. As a result, the Detroit citizens drew imaginary borders to separate the two Detroit. Sugrue wrote,

The consequences of the creation of the divided metropolis were profound. The physical separation of blacks and whites in the city perpetuated inequality in housing and access to jobs, but no less significantly, it reinforced the ideology of race held by northern whites. The ‘ghetto’ was not simply a physical construct; it was also an ideological construct. Urban space became a metaphor for perceived racial difference. Whites created a cognitive map of

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<sup>25</sup> The City of Detroit Commission on Ceommunity Relations evolved from the City of Detroit Mayor’s Interracial Committee. The Interracial Committee was instituted by Mayor Edward Jeffries late in 1943 as a response to the Detroit race riot of June, 1943. The Committee was composed of the head of six city departments and five lay members. The direct successor to the Committee was the Commission on Community Relations, which was established by Detroit Common Council ordinance in 1953. The Commission was composed of seven department heads and eight lay members until 1961, when Common Council modified the Commission so that it became composed entirely of private citizens. Found in Coleman A. Young Collection Part II, Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>26</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 190.

the city based on racial classifications and made their decisions about residence and their community action in accordance with their vision of racial geography of the city.<sup>27</sup>

When Black citizens crossed these arbitrary boundaries, they were met with hostility. The manifestation of racism in the housing market caused along with growing racial tensions, the 1967 race riots. Whites refused to occupy the same space as African Americans and felt unsafe due to growing violence. This added to the federally financed suburbanization at the time and came to be known as “white flight.”

Deindustrialization and the decentralization of jobs in Detroit caused many citizens to leave Detroit for the surrounding suburbs. Although Detroit earned the name Motown, the automotive factories were actually mostly outside the city. Other nonautomotive industries existed within the city limits, but began to shut down due to a global economic restructuring. As blue-collar jobs became limited in the city, many workers left for jobs outside the city. As people left, businesses and consequently jobs followed. In almost all cases, the suburbs with available jobs did not allow African Americans into their neighborhoods. By 1973, the African-American population in Detroit grew to 40% of the entire population.<sup>28</sup> The population however had decreased from 1,849,568 people in 1950 to 1,500,000 by 1970.<sup>29</sup> In a vicious cycle, the white population felt overwhelmed by the shifting percentage of black citizens and fled to the suburbs.

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<sup>27</sup> Sugrue, *Origins of the Urban Crisis*, 228-229.

<sup>28</sup> Introduction to in *African-American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City*, ed. David R. Colburn et al. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 5.

<sup>29</sup> Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 14. And also African American Mayors 35

## **Demand for Change: The 1973 Election of Coleman Young**

The polarized political situation over racial issues in postwar Detroit led to the election of Coleman Young. Young was an excellent campaigner and successful politician in his own right. However, as an African American dedicated to the liberal agenda, he became the symbol of Detroiters commitment to a more radical approach to the city's problems. The 1974 election of Coleman Young meant different things for different groups in the city. For the white liberals, Coleman Young was the solution to appeasing their estranged black liberals in order to reunite a strong democratic party. African Americans no longer felt a white mayor could or would correctly represent them. Thus, Young's race played a large role for both black and white voters. However, Young had to mobilize the moderate liberals and conservatives in order to win office. The following section focuses on the political climate of the United States and Detroit to demonstrate how Coleman Young became mayor through a combination of existing conditions and his own political opportunism.

The changing social and economic landscape of postwar United States caused political parties to include racial aspects in regards to civil rights in their ideologies. The National Civil Rights Movement aligned with the Democratic Party, first under John F. Kennedy then Lyndon B. Johnson. The black population relied on these administrations to join the fight against racial inequality. President Johnson's Great Society wanted first and foremost to eliminate poverty. The "Great Society" also promised to racial integration and equality. President Johnson implemented social welfare programs and racial policies to aid the oppressed, which sparked the neoconservative movement. In a speech given in 1965, President Johnson justified his actions stating, "Freedom is not enough. You do not take a person who for years, has been hobbled by chains and liberate him, bring him up to the

starting line of a race and then say, 'you are free to compete with all the others,' and still justly believe that you have been completely fair."<sup>30</sup> President Johnson took up the black cause as a liberal cause. However, the black cause became a minor part of the liberal agenda.

White liberals did not prioritize racial rights out of fear of dividing the Democratic Party. Despite President Johnson's declaration that freedom was not enough, the Democratic Party shied away from any policies that were too radical leaving the African American population without a true political representation. Desmond and Emirbayer summarized: "They [white liberals] struck a devil's bargain with white supremacy, telling nonwhites that much progress had been made and that it was time to support a broader liberal agenda, one that focused not on the wounds inflicted by racial domination, but on general social uplift."<sup>31</sup> However, African Americans continued to fight for civil rights at the micro-level.

Both the Democratic and Republican parties in Detroit radicalized due to racial issues in the 1960s. Despite the national liberal party's moderate stance, chapters of the liberal party remained dedicated to civil rights in urban areas. In Detroit, Mayor Jerome Cavanagh appointed many African Americans to leadership positions within his administration. In response, the neoconservative ideology gained support as white republicans accused the city government of reverse racism. As tensions rose, many white liberals abandoned the civil rights cause in an attempt to reduce racial animosity. However, the neglect of their needs led to African Americans splintering from the liberal party and forming their own faction. Heather Ann Thompson, a history professor of 1960s and 70s

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<sup>30</sup> Racial Domination 123

<sup>31</sup> Racial Domination 123

radicalism concluded, "By 1967, with poor and working-class blacks growing disenchanted with liberal's strategies for effecting racial equality, with conservative white increasingly convinced that liberals were catering to black needs over white, and with white and black liberal leaders still fully committed to both the pace and parameters of their agenda for change, The Motor City was veering toward a severe political crisis."<sup>32</sup> All political parties had a racial component to their agenda and no parties felt satisfied with the governance of the city.

African Americans did not trust the government of white institutions such as the police force. By the late 1960s, the black population grew tired of the inability of Cavanagh's government to execute civil rights policies and took matters into their own hands. The 1967 race riots marked a climax of mounting anger by many different groups in Detroit. The riots erupted when the all-white police force raided an unlicensed bar and treated African Americans unfairly. The confrontation was merely the spark that lit the flame. The black reaction to police brutality, which was not out of the ordinary, demonstrated the extent of the ordinary African-American citizens' anger. In 1968, black workers led strikes without the authorization of the unions. These events signaled that city blacks no longer believed in the system. Thompson wrote, "These events demonstrated that many city blacks had lost faith in traditional means of redress, in the formal political process, and in the efficacy of strategies for achieving racial equality espoused by their liberal leaders from city hall to the union hall to the pulpit."<sup>33</sup> The black Detroiters quite

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<sup>32</sup> Heather Ann Thompson, "Rethinking the Collapse of Postwar Liberalism: The rise of Mayor Coleman young and the Politics of Race in Detroit," in *African-American Mayors: Race, Politics, and the American City*, ed. David R. Colburn et al. (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2001), 228.

<sup>33</sup> Thompson, "Rethinking the Collapse," 228.



simply were fed up with institutionalized racism in the public sphere and liberal leaders cautious approach to such issues. Thus, black Detroiters resorted to untraditional means to obtain their goals.

The 1970 Detroit mayoral elections demonstrated various opinions in how to solve the city's problems. Mayor Cavanagh (elected 1962) sympathized with the civil rights movement and integrated African American leaders into his own administration. However, in the midst of the race riots and police brutality towards African Americans, Cavanagh relied on conventional means to solve problems. As complaints from organizations such as the Cotillion Club and NAACP increased, Mayor Cavanagh responded with forming commissions to address African American grievances. However, these commissions did not produce many results. White conservatives on the other hand felt that Cavanagh put African American needs above their own and wished to restore the status quo. In the 1970 elections, all voters sought change, which reflected in the candidates: Black liberal, Richard Austin and White conservative, Roman Gribbs.

The liberal party could not mobilize the white voters around a black candidate in 1970. Richard Austin, a self-identified moderate liberal, echoed many ideals of Cavanagh in having a cautious approach to issues. White liberals supported him believing he would gain the black vote and ensure that liberals stayed in power. However, the white conservative backlash to Austin was so severe that many white moderate liberals voted for Gribbs out of fear that a black mayor would make matters worse. Many white Detroiters threatened to leave the city if a black man was elected. Another bout of white flight was postponed when Gribbs won the election 257,312 votes to Austin's 250,000.<sup>34</sup> The election results

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<sup>34</sup> Thompson, "Rethinking the Collapse," 229.

illustrated the polarization of Detroit voters by almost 50-50. The election also demonstrated that white voters, no matter their political affiliation, associated African American with radical liberalism. Thus, swing voters decided to vote based on race rather than ideology.

The two front-runners represented the polarization in Detroit politics at the time, as neither was moderate. Thus, the election depended on which candidate could best mobilize swing voters in their favor. Many candidates threw their names in the running for mayor, but after the nonpartisan primary in September 1973, John F. Nichols earned 96,767 votes while second place Coleman Young only earned 63,614 votes. Young campaigned based on a dedication to liberal ideas, civil rights and most importantly the reduction of crime in Detroit.

Detroit's crime problem became the main issue in the 1973 mayoral race. Detroit's police force did not protect the African American community and had many complaints of police brutality and corruption. Furthermore, as the economic situation in Detroit became worse, crime increased. Young's primary opponent was Detroit Police Commissioner, John F. Nichols. With crime a growing problem in Detroit and the man responsible for the police force as his opponent, Young attacked Nichols personally and blamed him for the failure of the Detroit police department. In a pamphlet released by the Detroit Economic Club supporting Young, members listed the three reasons to vote for Young: 1) To stop crime left unchecked by Nichols, 2) End drug trafficking in the city and stop police corruption in aiding traffickers, and 3) develop economic programs to give jobs and attract new

industry.<sup>35</sup> Young's campaign focused on the incompetency of the police department and made Nichols the man responsible. In this way, Young gained enough swing voters to barely win over Nichols.

Voters elected Young as a black liberal who could mend Detroit's economy. Although crime became the main debate during the election to win over swing voters, many individuals endorsed Young for his dedication to liberal policies as senator. In his campaign pamphlet titled "Elect Coleman Young Mayor – Your future depends on it," Young's campaign emphasized his dedication to urban revitalization in Detroit throughout his time in Lansing.<sup>36</sup> Thompson argued that although liberalism had died during the 1960s at the national level, voters signaled a loyalty and desire for liberal urban government in Detroit by voting Coleman Young based on his voting in the Michigan State Senate.<sup>37</sup>

The black population desired an African American mayor who would prioritize their needs. Young was part of the first generation of African American mayors throughout the United States and took a similar approach in ensuring a victory.<sup>38</sup> As an African American who grew up in Detroit, black voters identified with Young and believed he could understand their situation. David R. Colburn, a history professor at University of Florida concluded in his article, "African American Mayors, 1967-68," that African American mayors could count on black support if they came to vote. Thus, the challenge became black voter registration. Young successfully emphasized the importance of voter registration and made the process more accessible. According to Colburn, "The Young campaign added fifty-

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<sup>35</sup> Economic Club Pamphlet Oct 20, 1973 in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 106, Folder 13. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>36</sup> "Elect Coleman Young Mayor Pamphlet" in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 106, Folder 13. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>37</sup> Thompson, "Rethinking the Collapse," 228.

<sup>38</sup> Colburn, Introduction to *African-American Mayors*, 38.

eight thousand black voters to the rolls.”<sup>39</sup> It would be unfair to say that the black population only voted for Coleman Young because he too was African American. However, people vote for politicians based off who they believe will represent them best. African Americans greatly distrusted the police force and city government due to police brutality and lack of action taken by city leadership. Mayor Gribbs took a passive approach to civil rights and the black community had grown tired of his lack of strength in dealing with racial tension. In electing Coleman Young, black Detroiters expressed their need for a leader who prioritized civil rights.

Many white voters believed electing an African American would relieve racial tensions. Racism became institutionalized in Detroit and caused many black city-dwellers to go against the system that did not protect them or represent them. The race riots scared a great deal of white citizens who feared that if Nichols won the election, a similar scenario would occur. Animosity between races increased with higher unemployment and more competition for work. Many white liberals sought to reunite the Democratic Party in Detroit and believed the only way to regain the African Americans would be to elect one of their own. On top of that, Detroit had many white civil rights activists who actively campaigned for Young. In securing enough white voters and making sure black voters went to the polls, Young barely beat out Nichols 233,674 votes to 216,933.<sup>40</sup> Even though Young had won the election, he did not have the support of the city. He had to prove that voters made the right choice in electing him.

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<sup>39</sup> Colburn, *Introduction to African-American Mayors*, 38.

<sup>40</sup> Detroit Election Commission, “Official Canvas of Votes, 1953-1978,” Vertical Files, Sociology and Economics Department, Detroit Public Library, found in Thompson, “Rethinking the Collapse,” 237.

## **Developing a Public Image: Fulfilling Promises as a Black Liberal Leader**

Coleman Young used his first term to ensure he had a future in the Manoogian Mansion. In order to implement his long-term vision for the city, Young had to fix the basics: crime, debt, and racial tensions. He fulfilled his campaign promises quickly and efficiently, while limiting city spending. Young made friends with business leaders and powerful Detroiters including Henry Ford II and pressured them to invest in the city. Furthermore, Young created a public image through speeches and actions as a man dedicated to civil rights and liberal ideals. Throughout his first term, Young started many projects towards building the Detroit he envisioned. However, the first years as mayor were spent building a foundation and gaining the trust of Detroit citizens. Young expertly managed city finances and took on Detroit's crime problem head on. The mayor's first term solidified his place in office for the years to come so that by his second term, there was no doubt that Detroit had become Coleman Young's city.

### **The Detroit Police Department**

The newly elected Coleman Young quickly established himself as a strong Mayor. In his inauguration speech, Mayor Young famously stated, "I issue a forward warning now to all dope pushers, to all rip-off artists, to all muggers: It's time to leave Detroit; hit Eight Mile Road. And I don't give a damn if they are black or white, or if they wear Superfly suits or blue uniforms with silver badges: hit the road."<sup>41</sup> Although many white conservatives believed Coleman Young spoke directly to them with this quote, he actually intended to set

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<sup>41</sup> Inaugural Speech, 1974 in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 106, Folders 4-5. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

the tone that he would take on a strong, centralized role in cleaning up Detroit's crime. Young's first 100 days in office were extremely productive and once again gave both black and white Detroiters hope that things would change.

As promised in his campaign, Young tackled the crime issue first to legitimize his campaign against the former Police Commissioner. Obviously, he replaced his former opponent Nichols with a five-person commission, with Commissioner Tannian as the unofficial leader, who in reality restructured the police department. In his 100 Days Report, Young stated his administration and Tannian were "Investigating charges of drug related corruption in the police force," and then added, "You made the right choice picking me and not the former police commissioner who let these corruptions go on."<sup>42</sup> In these early days, Coleman Young sought to not only make good on his campaign promises, but also further legitimize himself as the correct choice. Thus, Coleman Young used the reworking of the police force as a symbol of his strong and efficient leadership.

The police force underwent radical changes under Coleman Young. On February 13<sup>th</sup>, just over a month into his first term, Mayor Young issued his first Executive Order. The Order provided (1) the implementation of police ministrations (2) the abolition of STRESS (3) a 50-50 ethnic composition in the police force by 1977.<sup>43</sup> Each of these parts aimed to fix identified problems with the Detroit Police Department. The police "mini-stations" were exactly as described: small versions of central departments complete with internal hierarchies and administrations. The mini-stations addressed the fact that police often

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<sup>42</sup> Mayor's 100 Day Report and 10-Point Plan in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 106, Folders 6. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>43</sup> Police Mini Stations, Proposed Operation Procedure for Detroit Police Mini-Stations submitted by James Bannon in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 107, Folders 10. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

refused to go into poor, black neighborhoods. The lack of presence by police caused crime to flourish because there quite literally was no one there to enforce the law. The mini-stations would reestablish police presence by placing physical structures in the city's most dangerous places. By April 10<sup>th</sup>, 1974, Young's new administration opened its first mini-station and by the end of the year, over a dozen had popped up throughout the city.

The abolition of STRESS (Stop the Robberies and Enjoy Safe Streets) targeted the former Commissioner Nichols who introduced the initiative. The STRESS initiative exemplified police brutality towards African Americans. Commissioner Nichols implemented STRESS to appease the white population, who claimed Detroit's crime was the direct product of increased African American populations. STRESS gave officers permission to arrest citizens who looked "suspicious". As expected, the suspicious figures were only African Americans. STRESS converted the police force into a symbol for institutionalized racism. During the 1973 electoral campaign, the Detroit Police Officer Association Board of Directors, a supposedly unbiased governing board, released a pamphlet endorsing John Nichols for Mayor demonstrating that racism in the police department extended to the highest level.<sup>44</sup> Thus, when Coleman Young disbanded STRESS, the African American community viewed him as someone who prioritized their needs.

The final step of diversifying the police force gained the trust of the African American community that had been lost, if such a confidence ever existed in the first place. In an anonymous poll by the Detroit News in 1973, 83% of African Americans did not want increased gun control (even though it was a liberal policy) because they did not believe the

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<sup>44</sup> Article II of the Associations Articles of Incorporation stated that the DPOA could not align with any political party. The pamphlets were quickly recalled but continued to circulate amongst conservatives.

police force could adequately protect them. Coleman Young wished to reestablish the credibility of the police force while reinforce his place as a racial leader. Commissioner Tannian conducted investigations of the Detroit policemen to find corruption amongst officers and the police administration. These inquiries lead to the resignation of Nichols' supporters as well as many individuals being let go. Mayor Young replaced the corrupt officers with black, latino, and female officers. Furthermore, he allotted more funds to the police department to commission more officers. By 1978, the Detroit Police Department consisted of 5,800 members with 40% belonging to minority groups.

Coupled with the physical insertion of the police throughout the city via mini-stations and the sweeping away of the former, discriminatory structure, Coleman Young created a police force that worked for all citizens rather than just a part. Studs Terkel, a famous author and oral historian, stated in after visiting Detroit in 1975, "There's a new attitude in the city. The police are no longer looked upon as a foreign army of occupation. But since '74 not a single Detroit police officer has been killed in the line of duty...It reflects a new respect between the people and the police."<sup>45</sup> The evidence of the changes lies in the numbers. In the first three months of 1976, murder rates dropped by 28% and robberies by 23%.<sup>46</sup> The FBI released data showing that Detroit led all the cities in the nation in crime reduction with Part I major crimes dropping 19.1% in 1977. Coleman Young succeeded in keeping his promises from his campaign. The citizens of Detroit, although not all of them may have voted for him, could not deny the positive effects of the made over police force and in turn, crime in Detroit.

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<sup>45</sup> Studs Terkel Quote added in 1974-1989 in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 59, Folders 2. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>46</sup> 1974-1989 in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 59, Folders 2. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.



## **Managing Financial Issues**

Coleman Young recognized the financial crisis looming due to suburbanization and deindustrialization. Mayor Cavanagh introduced the first income tax of 1% in 1962 to balance the budget with the loss of population and revenue. In 1968, the income tax doubled to 2% and in turn, the city became extremely reliant on taxes for revenue. The increase in revenue through income taxes did not negate the loss due to deindustrialization. Furthermore, many large industrial plants preferred the rural areas to build due to cheaper property and less taxes. Mayor Gribbs, Young's conservative predecessor, overspent the city's money on downtown revitalization projects increasing the work force. Even with increased income and property taxes, the revenue could not support the amount of workers employed by the city. Gribbs reacted by borrowing more money and putting the city farther into debt. When Coleman Young got to office, he quickly realized the city could not sustain its city paid workforce or upkeep city funded projects without drastic changes.

Coleman Young addressed the fiscal crisis out of public eye in order to gain the trust of Detroit voters while fulfilling his campaign promises. As a politician, Young understood that public opinion hinged on creating a public persona that people identified with. On the other hand, Young realized that in order to solve the financial problems of the city, he would upset the very people who put him in office: African Americans, the declining liberalists, and Democrats. Before making any major economic changes in the form of personal tax income increases and employee cuts, Young built up his approval using the improvement of the police force and addressing civil rights issues.

Young expertly managed Detroit's budget during his first term through pragmatic approaches. However, he began to implement his vision for the city despite costs. In 1974, Young allocated 4 million dollars to Belle Isle Improvements, the large city park in the middle of the Detroit River known for the 1943 race riots. The park also housed Detroit's yacht clubs that discriminated against black membership. The city attraction became a symbol for the cities failures in racial harmony. Thus, Belle Isle provided the perfect starting point for Young to implement part of his vision because he could symbolically signify improving racial relations through the literal rebuilding of the park. In improving the park, Young also hoped to draw more suburbanites back to the city for recreational activities. The Belle Isle project started Young's make over of the River Front, a crucial aspect of his vision for the city, which will be discussed later in this essay.

Young used his first term to build a coalition and centralize power in Detroit to himself. Robert Green, a Michigan State urbanologist stated in 1977, "I have observed his ability to work with business, labor, community leaders, and just ordinary citizens. He has forged a business/labor coalition like I have no observed elsewhere in the country."<sup>47</sup> Young stayed true to his roots labor union roots from his liberal youth as mayor

Coleman Young's first years in office cast the productive mayor as a champion of liberalism and civil rights. Coleman Young used the first years to ensure re-election and gain the trust of voters in order to pursue his own vision for the city. Young did so by fixing inherited problems and creating a public persona that revolved around his role as an African American Liberal leader. I argue not that Young took a passive role in civil rights or that he only fixed the police force in order to gain public trust rather than truly protect the

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<sup>47</sup> 100-Day Report in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 59, Folder 1. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

people of Detroit. However, it must be acknowledged that Young had other motives in these actions. In 1977, city revenue exceeded debt for the first time since the 1950s. Young easily won reelection due to not only the improved economy and reduced crime rates, but by creating a strong public image that people trusted. Going into his second term, Young completely controlled Detroit and had the freedom to not just fix Motown, but also build a new city.

### **Hope for the Future: Economic Improvement and Relieved Racial Tensions**

Coleman Young entered his second term with the trust of Detroit citizens having managed spending, reduced crime, and relieved racial tension. However, Detroit still had a delicate financial situation. In the 1980s, Coleman Young searched for new ways to produce jobs in Detroit. In his pursuit of increased business, we can see that Mayor Young strayed from many promises he made in being elected to office. Furthermore, the 1980s marked a decisive turn from many liberalist ideals that had been central to Young's political career. The transformation of the Mayor happened largely behind closed doors so-to-speak and Young continued to portray himself as a black liberalist leader. His actions contradicted his public persona begging the question of what motivated Young's choices. Economic interests could explain Mayor Young's decisions at the surface level. However, something deeper than just the economy motivated Young. In examining his pursuits and policies of his second through fourth terms in office, Coleman Young's vision for Detroit becomes evident and makes sense of his lack of political ideology.

### **The Moving Detroit Forward Plan: Envisioning a better Detroit**

On April 30<sup>th</sup>, 1975, President Gerald Ford received a letter from Coleman Young that explained the Mayor's tagline for the city: "Moving Detroit Forward." The Moving Detroit Forward Proposal explained Young's financial plan for the city. More importantly however, the proposal was one of the first instances where we see Young's vision for the city really emerge. The Moving Detroit Forward Plan started with President Ford but ended with Reagan. The letter would be the first of many correspondences between the Manoogian Mansion and the White House. Following the evolution of the carefully constructed plan, we too can see the evolution of Coleman Young's vision for the city of Detroit.

The Moving Detroit Forward plan encompassed all the issues in Detroit except race. Young organized the plan into six target areas in order of priority: Employment, Industrial, Commercial, Housing, Transportation, and Public Safety. The argument could be made that race was a part of all of these categories and thus, the plan did aim to fix racial tension. However, Young did not emphasize this aspect in the plan. For Coleman Young, Moving Detroit Forward quite literally meant moving past issues of race. In the public realm, black Detroiters assigned Coleman Young the role of a civil rights leader simply because he was mayor and African American. However, Moving Detroit Forward and the vision he had for the city extended past race and showed that Coleman Young did not truly embrace his given role as leader of black liberalism.

The Moving Detroit Forward plan grew out of Coleman Young's time in the state senate. Coleman Young believed that the national and state governments should be held responsible for the economic health of their cities. He constantly voted for welfare and

urban development during his time in the state senate.<sup>48</sup> In the 1970s, Coleman Young focused his senatorial office on the revitalization of Detroit. Young's time in senate reflected that as an African American, people assigned the role of leader of civil rights to him. However, if you look at his senate record he focused on the economic interests of Detroit rather than the social aspects. The Moving Detroit Forward proposal mimicked his efforts in senate.

Coleman Young sought federal aid with the Moving Detroit Forward proposal. Mayor Young wrote to President Ford, "Detroit's blueprint for action is before you. It is the beginning of an answer. Reach out a helping hand, and Detroiters will grasp it and begin to put to use the skills of a people who built an industrial giant, and who are ready to rebuild one of the nation's greatest cities. Let's do it now – together."<sup>49</sup> Young framed Detroit as a national responsibility. President Lyndon B. Johnson perpetuated the idea throughout his presidency that the national government should support its urban cities through his "Great Society" ideology. The Moving Detroit Forward initiative followed suit and asked Republican President Ford to financially support a liberalist agenda in Detroit.

The 1975 Moving Detroit Forward presentation at the White House demonstrated Young's political pragmatism. The 200-page plan focused on reducing poverty through employment in Detroit. Moving Detroit Forward advocated liberal policies such as funding for public housing and training for the unemployed. However, the support for the plan came largely from Republican Michigan Governor William Milliken, private conservative

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<sup>48</sup> Coleman A. Young Collection, Part I. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>49</sup> Coleman Young to President Gerald Ford April 1975, Moving Detroit Forward in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 103, Folder 6-7. Archives of Urban and Labor Affairs. Wayne State University.

investors, and the leaders in the auto industry.<sup>50</sup> The plan cost \$2.972 billion: \$2.570 billion in federal aid, \$327.7 million from the Michigan state government, and \$74 million local funding from mostly private investors. Coleman Young and his Moving Detroit Forward coalition estimated that the plan would generate 153,176 new jobs.<sup>51</sup> If all went according to plan, the Moving Detroit Forward initiative would reverse Detroit's economic situation. In order to gain federal funding and stimulate the economy, Young built a bipartisan coalition to convince the national republican administration to invest in Detroit.

The six categories of the Moving Detroit Forward Plan outline Coleman Young's vision for the city. First, he believed employment opportunities must be present for anyone who wants to work in order to create a sustainable economy. In 1975, the unemployment rate in Detroit was 23%. Throughout his lifetime, Coleman Young learned the importance of work and understood the negative side effects when work disappears. If Coleman Young's vision could be seen as a house, employment was the foundation, the walls, and the roof. Without these things, you do not have a house just as without job opportunities, you do not have a sustainable city. Everything was built upon employment and employment simultaneously protected everything within the city from external factors.

Coleman Young wished to recentralize industry in Detroit. The second category of the Moving Detroit Forward plan addressed industrialization, particularly the automotive industry. Coleman Young needed the support from the auto industry to accomplish

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<sup>50</sup> Role Call of the Moving Detroit Forward Meeting: Governor William Milliken, Mayor Coleman Young, Chairman of the Detroit Renaissance Project Max Fisher, President of the UAW Leonard Woodcock, Chairman of New Detroit Inc Richard Gerstenberg, Chairman of Ford Automotive Henry Ford II, Director of Delray United Action Council Gladys Woodard, and City Council President Carl Levin.

<sup>51</sup>The plan estimated there would be 97,821 short term/temporary jobs and 55,355 long term/permanent jobs. Within these jobs, 40,600 would be in public service and 30,000 would be for training.

anything in Detroit. Furthermore, Young saw industry as a huge employment opportunity for blue-collar workers that would also bring revenue to the city. In order to revive industry, the city of Detroit would develop industrial corridors and parks within or closer to the city rather than in rural areas. In order to do so, Young would give tax breaks to large corporations, which further reiterated his unclear political ideology. The second aspect of the plan for industry was to create incubator industries. Incubator industries focused on supporting new businesses in order to diversify the economy. An essential aspect of Young's vision was to not only revive old industries, but also more importantly introduce and nurture new industries.

For Young, the problems associated with suburbanization in Detroit could be solved with commercialization of the city. By 1975, not only had a large percentage of the white population left, but also successful African Americans began leaving the city in search of better housing. As the citizens with money left, so did consumer markets such as shopping malls, street boutiques, and other shops. Young believed the commercialization of Detroit would motivate people from the suburbs to go to Detroit for goods rather and in turn create a reliance on the city. Young used Chicago as a model where the city attracted suburbanites through the arts and shopping, which engendered a pedestrian culture.

The rehabilitation of housing was crucial to Mayor Young's vision of Detroit. The housing problem in Detroit not only posed a spatial problem, but an aesthetic one. Despite the vast amount of property in Detroit, 60% of all housing units were built prior to 1939 with 60,000 units considered "substandard." In the initial Moving Detroit Forward plan, the ultimate goal of the housing projects sought to attract middle class families back to the city. Economically, suburbanization posed a tax problem to the city where a smaller population

is forced to support the city. In bringing back affluent families to Detroit, Coleman Young hoped expand the amount of taxpayers in Detroit. However, the rehabilitation of housing held more than economic value for Mayor Young. The aesthetic of the houses motivated Young who used physical structures as symbols of prosperity, a topic that will be addressed later in this paper. Simply put, Coleman Young's vision for the city revolved on the attractiveness of the space itself.

The housing plan diminished civil rights efforts. Young spared no expense in his plan for new housing intended for "middle and upper income groups."<sup>52</sup> The plan rejuvenated the riverfront. The large homes and neighborhoods would not be affordable to enough African Americans in 1975 to make them successful. Thus, Coleman Young perpetuated the housing segregation with his plan to bring back the upper-middle class. To say that Coleman Young actively sought to oppress African Americans is completely incorrect. However, to say that civil rights motivated his decisions also is false as evidenced by his housing projects for the Moving Detroit Forward Plan.

Young mimicked the transportation systems of large, national cities in the Moving Detroit Forward plan. In reality, urban sprawl and unavailability of cars left many Detroiters immobile. Within the inner 12 square miles of Detroit, 50% of households did not have a car available. Furthermore, 30,000 people under the age of 20 years old relied on walking or buses for transportation. Improvements had to be made to existing public transportation to mobilize these dependents. Young envisioned a rapid transit system equivalent to the New York Metro or Chicago's elevated train. In the first draft, Young did

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<sup>52</sup> Moving Detroit Forward First Draft in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 103, Folder 5. Archives of Urban and Labor Affairs.



not define the logistics of his rapid transit system. However, he clearly felt that Detroit needed a train-like public transportation in order to acquire status as a national city.

The last part of the Moving Detroit Forward plan was the public safety section. In the presentation at the White House, Young did not prioritize public safety because at this point, he had resolved many of the issues as promised in his campaign. The Moving Detroit Forward plan asked for funds to reduce crime through Combined Agency Narcotics Enforcement (CANE) and the strengthening of police facilities. Again, Young emphasizes the importance of physical structures in building a city. The police facilities became symbols of power and success for Young who used this tactic in governing the people of Detroit.

The Moving Detroit Forward Plan provided the outline for all of Young's policies to follow. President Ford only granted \$800 million of the \$2.57 billion requested, an insulting amount in Young's eyes. Regardless, Young went on building his utopic city by constantly reorganizing city spending. Young stated in 19 Young continued to propose the plan to the federal government but received less federal aid when Ronald Reagan minimized federal spending in cities. In 1977, Young and his coalition presented the 6<sup>th</sup> proposal of the plan to President Carter. The 200 page plan of 1975 grew to 1000 pages filled with not only a more detailed plan of how Detroit would spend the money and exact hypotheses of results, but also examples of how Detroit had progressed in just a few short years.

The plan stayed consistent to the original indicating that Young's vision for the city stayed consistent just became more detailed in how he would go about making the plan a reality. In the 1977 presentation, Coleman Young accused the federal government of stunting Detroit's recovery:

“Our problems have not been caused by local mismanagement, but rather by national economic trends aggravated by Federal neglect and policies which have favored the suburbs at the expense of the city. For twenty years, suburban growth has been subsidized by the Federal government at the expense of the cities through policies, which gave the suburbs cheap roads, housing, water, and other developmental necessities. This allowed them to meet market demands for the replacement of aging central city housing and precluded its construction of the inner-city.”<sup>53</sup>

Young demanded more money from the government to continue with his plan and forced President Carter to accept responsibility for Detroit. Carter promised more federal aid to Detroit over a 5-year period, which allowed Young to move forward with his vision.

However, the reality of the plan did not match the estimated outcomes of economic success and an emergence as a great, national, city.

## **Building Detroit: The Vision versus Reality**

Coleman Young's vision for Detroit focused on three major objectives to which everything could be tied: 1) Employment for any citizen who wished to work. 2) National significance and 3) Physical appearance. As Young gained more revenue, he pumped it back into projects that complemented his vision. The projects start from his first term and follow all the way to the end. Going into the 1980s, the city seemed financially stable due to state and federal aid, private investments, and increases in income taxes. However, by his last term, Detroit could no longer support itself. While many individuals accused Young of squandering away money on his large projects, he actually took a pragmatic approach in

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<sup>53</sup> Moving Detroit Forward Draft 6 in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 103, Folder 6-7. Archives of Urban and Labor Affairs.

building his vision. The next section focuses on projects that Young considered monumental and crucial in building his vision. By examining these projects and the policies that accompanied them, we not only gain a clearer vision of Young's vision but how the mayor implemented his plan within the constraints of reality.

### **Signaling Detroit's Rebirth: The Renaissance Center**

The Renaissance Center became a symbol for Detroit's resilience in the midst of the urban crisis. Henry Ford II brought together CEOs of major Detroit businesses and leaders of the auto industry to create a 51-member partnership called Detroit Renaissance, Inc.<sup>54</sup> The construction for the massive building started before Young became mayor, however he immediately joined the project upon election. The city and Ford's investment group built the cluster of skyscrapers to be office buildings, residential apartments, a hotel, and shopping center. For Young, the RenCen (as it came to be nicknamed) filled all his requirements for his vision. For the people of Detroit, the building represented the enormous amount of changes Young implemented immediately in office. Governor William Milliken dedicated the building in 1977 when it opened saying, "Renaissance center stands as a symbol of what is possible when people live and work in a city combine their efforts toward a common goal."<sup>55</sup> Although Young inherited the project, the RenCen would forever be associated with him by the people of Detroit. As its name suggests, the Renaissance Center was the physical representation of Detroit's rebirth.

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<sup>54</sup> Detroit Renaissance, Inc. was the largest private investment group ever created for an American urban real estate venture. Thomas, *Redevelopment and Race*, 154.

<sup>55</sup> John Holusha, "Detroit embarks on the Greening of its Riverfront," *New York Times*, April 29, 1985. ProQuest.

Young believed the RenCen would be the anchor in his attempt to commercialize downtown. As mentioned in the Moving Detroit Forward Plan, the suburbs no longer relied on the city for commercial needs. Young sought to reverse that trend and create a strong pedestrian traffic in downtown with the Renaissance Center. The city assisted in making the area around the RenCen attractive to accompany the huge structure. The venture cost \$357 million and defined the Detroit skyline. At first, people showed a great deal of excitement over the building. Stores began to buy up space and risk-taking real estate companies bought residential units. In almost all public speeches addressing the finances or state of the city, Coleman Young discussed the Renaissance Center. In 1975, Young stated upon the completion of the first building, "The Renaissance Center is a catalyst. It symbolizes a dramatic flight of imagination and a quality of serious recommitments to Detroit."<sup>56</sup> Young saw the Renaissance Center as the beginning of a domino effect that would centralize commercial activity in downtown.

The RenCen could not sustain itself due to lack of interest from businesses and pedestrians. By 1983, the center had a mortgage debt of more than \$200 million and defaulted on payments. Expensive, designer stores occupied the retail space but quickly closed due to lack of customers. Most city dwellers could not afford the high price items and suburban shoppers preferred their own malls. Ford moved some of their own Dearborn offices to the RenCen to try and set an example for other businesses to follow. However, the RenCen simply never took off and became what the Detroit Free Press called, "the country's

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<sup>56</sup> 1974-1989 in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 59, Folders 2. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

largest white elephant.”<sup>57</sup> GM eventually bought the building but the RenCen remains today as a city embarrassment.

Young never gave up on the RenCen and believed if he built up the river front and found ways to make downtown more attractive, the building could make a come back. Before its failure, Young used the building to gain national significance. The building brought together Detroit’s richest leaders. Young used this coalition and the physical appearance to sell Detroit as a professional destination for businesses and conventions, the most significant being the Republican National Convention in 1980. Ronald Reagan stayed in the Renaissance Center Hotel, which highlighted the growth of Detroit. Mayor Young used the RenCen to present Detroit to the GOP and nation as a city with business opportunity. However, the building did not ever become the center of commercialization that Young had hoped.

### **Giving the People Something to Root for: Joe Louis Arena and the Sports Industry**

Mayor Young built up Detroit’s sports industry to provide jobs and diversify the economy. Detroit had three national sports teams: The Tigers, the Lions, and the Redwings. Although sports may seem like a superfluous expense, Young valued them because they gave Detroit national significance. Furthermore, the sports industry could provide jobs and commercialize the spaces around them. Thus, Young dedicated city funds to provide space for sports teams in Detroit. He started with the purchase of Tiger Baseball Stadium for \$1.00 in 1977 after a fire destroyed the press box. Young allocated \$18.5 million of

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<sup>57</sup> “Towering Debts,” *TIME* 121, no 3, January 24, 1983. *Academic Search Premier*, EBSCOhost.

taxpayers' dollars into sprucing up the over 50-year-old field. In doing so, Young wished to build up fan attendance and present Detroit sports industry as alive and healthy despite economic issues.

Young wanted to ensure that Detroit attracted national events. Similar to New York's Madison Square Garden, Young built Joe Louis Arena as a multi purpose venue to support large-scale events. The Joe Louis Arena opened in 1977 with 20,000 seats. Officially the home to the Red Wings, the arena also housed massive concerts, large conventions, and other events. Ronald Reagan spoke from the Joe Louis Arena at Republican National Convention. The Arena, located near the RenCen, would enclose the commercial district Young wished to create in the downtown. In creating and supporting the arena, which is city-owned, Young wished to not only produce revenue, but also provide Detroit with a space to entertain and build a culture. The arena also provided something the suburbs could not forcing those outside the city to make their way in.

The introduction of new sports venues and other new building projects distracted Detroiters from underlying sociological and economic issues. Thompson referred to city leaders with this style of governing as "messiah mayors." Young deviated from a liberal style of city management and transitioned to fiscally conservative approach as mayor. Despite his original emphasis on building the police and fire departments, Young cut the forces down by 2,000 and 500 people respectively. The city-paid employees decreased by 6,000 people from 1978 to 1984 under Young.<sup>58</sup> The Mayor severely cut government spending on public services and social programs. Due to an economic recession in the auto industry in 1980, Mayor Young had to increase revenue and quickly. Young convinced the

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<sup>58</sup> Bomey and Gallagher, "How Detroit went broke."

people of Detroit to vote an increase on their own income tax from 2% to 3% in an election year, which he still managed to win. The fact of the matter is that the people trusted Young to manage their money. He provided physical proof that he used city funds to improve the city. Young reinvested city money into projects that worked towards his vision for Detroit while pragmatically managing money.

### **Looking and Acting the Part: Reviving the River Front and the People Mover**

In order to be viewed as a national city, Young insisted that Detroit must look and act as if it was one. Young became fixated on two things he thought each major US city had: A centralized commercial district and a rapid transit system. The River Front provided a perfect location to develop property and had already been started with the Renaissance Center. Young quickly developed a plan to rehabilitate the space that went above and beyond functionality. Young's elaborate plan for the riverfront focused on aesthetic in order to provide a destination spot for city-dwellers, suburbanites, and tourists alike. The Renaissance Detroit, Inc. group also funded many projects on the riverfront giving Young further ability to play out his vision.

Young believed that cities developed from their bodies of water. In justifying the massive spending on the riverfront, Young stated, "Most cities in this country developed from their waterfront. So if we are going to rebuild this city, I thought it should be done from the river where it all began. It was to me that this was the most valuable real estate in

the state.”<sup>59</sup> After Carter granted federal funding through Moving Detroit Forward, Young bought three properties on the riverfront to be developed into accessible parks so that pedestrians can access the river for the first time in decades. Young constantly compared Detroit to other national cities and modeled the riverfront off of Boston. In order to build up the economy, Young encouraged businesses to buy up the riverfront real estate and offered tax breaks to buyers. Young imagined a riverfront of offices, homes, green space, restaurants, and walkways to facilitate pedestrian traffic between everything. For the mayor, the riverfront was the only location that could facilitate and support such commercialization.

Young mimicked national cities in building a transit system. As mentioned in the Moving Detroit Forward plan, many Detroiters relied on public transportation for mobility. Young recognized this reality, but something else motivated him to pursue a \$200.3 million dollar elevated train. Young envisioned his new rapid transit system, also known as the PeopleMover, as a symbol for Detroit’s technological progress and an official mark as a large, productive city. Despite facing huge criticism in building a train in the car capital of Detroit, Young opened the PeopleMover in 1983. The plan originally had a train system that extended to the suburbs. However, due to limited budget, the PeopleMover became a one tracked train that stopped at a few places within the inner five miles Detroit. One such stop was the RenGen. In reality, the People Mover had little to no functional value and did not help those who lived far away get to the city. In a 1987 poll by the Detroit Free Press, two out of three people said the People Mover was a bad idea. However, Young pursued the People Mover as a symbol rather than a solution.

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<sup>59</sup> John Holusha, “Detroit embarks on the Greening of its Riverfront,” *New York Times*, April 29, 1985. ProQuest.



Young had the vision but not the people, thus making his commercialization unsuccessful. A 1987 New York Times article stated, “The monorail [PeopleMover] shows off a postcard view of the Renaissance Center area, but mostly serves as a reminder of the downtown that once was...the monorail makes a trapezoidal loop past the bustling fringe along the Detroit River and then snakes through blocks of boarded-up hotels and beauty supply shops.”<sup>60</sup> Young created physical spaces and envisioned commercialization would follow. However, in his pursuit of the physical space, Young did not address the individuals who would fill them. Detroit still had underlying societal issues that inhibited commercial growth. Suburbanites preferred their safe, homogenous communities to the urban areas. While Young tried to provide incentive in the form of shopping, culture, sports, and beautiful space, he neglected to remedy underlying issues. Had the people of Detroit committed to these spaces, the city had all the makings of a typical large US city, just as Young envisioned.

### **Creative Solutions to Old Problems: Coleman Young’s Pursuit of the Gaming Industry**

The lack of federal funding and the decline of the automotive industry forced Coleman Young to find creative new solutions to old problems. In 1988, Mayor Young proposed casinos as a new industry. Although the city legislature voted down the proposal, Young’s pursuit of the gaming industry reflects the consistency of his vision, which extended until the end of his time in office.

Coleman Young sought to add new businesses to the city with casinos in 1988. During the 20<sup>th</sup> century, many cities throughout the United States introduced or increased

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<sup>60</sup> New York Times 1987 monorail

their casino presence. Atlantic City and Las Vegas provided the model for gambling dependent economies. Young did not want Detroit to become centered on the gambling industry as with the previous mentioned cities. Coleman A. Young proposed the legalization of casinos in saying, "My primary interest in the gaming industry is generated by my understanding of the job possibilities it brings to a community."<sup>61</sup> Mayor Young wished to stimulate employment with the addition of casinos despite the negative aspects of gambling.

Fear of crime laid at the base of opposition to the casino industry. The attorney General, Frank Kelley, and head of Michigan state police, Colonel Rich Davis concluded, "Las Vegas style gambling in Detroit would bring with it major increases in street crime, substantial involvement by organized crime, and the potential for public corruption."<sup>62</sup> These hypotheses stemmed from evidence provided by Las Vegas and Atlantic City police forces. Street and organized crime greatly increased in gambling towns and would likely affect Detroit much the same way and add on to existing issues of crime. During the 1980s, Detroit faced a serious crime problem as budget cuts caused the police forces to dramatically decrease their size and scope. Thus, the introduction of casinos would likely make the Detroit crime problem worse.

Many Detroit citizens believed casinos would fundamentally change the character of the city. Casinos, which are inherently "sinful", would contribute to the negative, national image of Detroit. Richard Van Dusen, a member of the Detroit Casino Gaming Study

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<sup>61</sup> Letter from Coleman Young Feb 11, 1988 to Commissioners Exploring Gaming Industry in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 100, Folders 5-6. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>62</sup> Letter by Richard C. Van Dusen concerning Gaming Industry In Detroit in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 100, Folders 1-4. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

committee commissioned by the mayor wrote, "Detroit already has a serious image problem...It is a problem which the Mayor and other civic leaders have worked diligently to address."<sup>63</sup> Thus, many individuals on the Detroit Casino Commission believed the national image problem outweighed the advantages that could be brought with jobs.

Coleman A. Young preferred the jobs and new business despite the change in image Detroit would receive. In order to pass the legalization of casinos, Young created a commission that varied in profession, political factions, and race. In his appointment letter to members of the Commission, Young wrote, "Throughout my administration I have worked to increase employment possibilities for Detroit's citizens...I consider the deliberations of this Commission to be among the most important occurring in Detroit."<sup>64</sup> Mayor Young constantly sought to introduce new jobs, despite changing the city's "image" or perpetuating a negative image.

Mayor Young hoped that casinos would reinvigorate neighborhoods. Detroit, despite many efforts made by the Young administration continued on the path of decay. The Bureau of Labor Statistics Population Survey released in 1987 that 87,000 Detroit residents were unemployed making the unemployment rate 18.2%.<sup>65</sup> With the loss of work came increased crime and other negative behaviors. William Julius Wilson, an American sociologist and Professor of Social Policy at Harvard University highlighted the trends that accompany unemployment in the urban poor:

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Letter from Coleman Young, February 11 in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 100, Folders 5-6. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

<sup>65</sup> Final Report on Gaming Industry in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 100, Folders 5-6. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

Neighborhoods that offer few legitimate employment opportunities, inadequate job information networks, and poor schools lead to the disappearance of work. That is, where jobs are scarce, where people rarely, if ever, have the opportunity to help their friends and neighbors find jobs, and where there is a disruptive or degraded school life purporting to prepare youngsters for eventual participation in the work force many people eventually lose their feeling of connectedness to work in the formal economy; they no longer expect work to be a regular, and regulating, force in their lives.<sup>66</sup>

Unemployment thus perpetuates unemployment. Without intervention from the government, unemployment will not fix itself. This pattern was seen primarily in “large industrial metropolises of the Northeast and Midwest, regions that experiences massive industrial restructuring and loss of blue color jobs.”<sup>67</sup> These syndromes manifested strongly in Detroit where the neighborhoods were clearly segregated.

The introduction of casinos undermined Coleman Young’s earlier policies, especially his focus on minimizing crime. His 1974 election had depended completely on his ability to control Detroit crime and his success in fulfilling his promises directly contributed to his reelection for a second term. Coleman Young understood the crime aspect of casinos, but prioritized the jobs and commercial traffic casinos would bring over the negatives. In the final report presented for a vote on the casino industry in June 1988, the Commission presented a four part gaming model:

- 1.) Provide jobs, economic development and social benefits
- 2.) Protect against casino industry crime and casino related street crime
- 3.) Prevent organized crime, neighborhood crime, casino youth problems, and other social problems

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<sup>66</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 52.

<sup>67</sup> Wilson, *When Work Disappears*, 34.

4.) Rehabilitate and Rejuvenate neighborhoods, the jobless, the poor, youth, senior citizens, minority and women-owned small businesses in Detroit.<sup>68</sup>

Although the commission dedicated two sections to casino industry crime, the report does not provide details on how to fight crime except the addition of police near casinos from the already shrinking Detroit Police Department. Parts one and four, however, are extremely well documented. The final report demonstrated that crime barely factored into Mayor Young's motivations in introducing the gaming industry to Detroit. Instead, he viewed the casinos as a way to provide jobs, increase tourism in Detroit, and pump life back into the commercial businesses of Detroit.

Coleman Young failed to bring casinos to Detroit but his pursuit of the gaming industry demonstrates the consistency of his vision for the city even until his last term. Employment lies at the center of Young's attempts to introduce casinos in Detroit. Again, Young mimics other national cities such as Las Vegas. Looking back on Young's Moving Detroit Forward Plan, the casinos fit into commercialization. The casinos provided an excellent example of Young's style as mayor, which approached real problems with creative solutions that contributed to Detroit's image as a national city. Interestingly, the city of Detroit later legalized the opening of three casinos in 1996.

## **The Beginning of the End: Coleman Young's Last Term and Conclusion**

The people of Detroit elected Coleman Young for the last time in 1990 despite decreases in his approval ratings. Only 29% of the voter population came out to vote, but

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<sup>68</sup> Final Report on Gaming Industry in Coleman A. Young Collection, Part II, Box 100, Folders 5-6. Archives of Labor and Urban Affairs, Wayne State University.

Young still won the election with a 2:1 ratio. In 1990, Young took a reactionary approach rather than initiative as he had done in his previous terms. Despite having a vision for the city, Young remained always realistic in his implementation and could no longer build the city without putting Detroit into crippling debt. Thus, the 71-year-old Mayor's last term in office focused on keeping the fragile economic situation of the city from collapsing and relying on previous accomplishments to boost morale.

Young carried out his vision through his last term within economic constraints. In 1985, Young contributed city funds to the building of the Chrysler Jefferson North Plant. Young believed the plant would provide employment opportunities for Detroit citizens while simultaneously boosting Detroit's national significance. Young stated in support of the plant, "We have to be able to compete internationally." In pursuit of his vision, Young began borrowing more than he ever had and from 1987 until he left office, the debt increased. The borrowed money went towards building job opportunities for Detroit citizens and downtown renovation projects. However, Young had lost much of the support from his earlier coalition of politicians and business leaders and met much more opposition in his final years. The mayor finally announced his retirement when he was diagnosed with emphysema during his last term and took a back seat approach to governing as his health deteriorated. In 1996, at the age of 79, Coleman Young died.

Young's successors in office pushed Detroit farther into debt until eventual bankruptcy in July 2013. When looking at the facts, Young remains the only mayor since the 1950s to have brought the city out of debt. Nathan Bomey and John Gallagher from the Detroit Free Press concluded, "Contrary to the typical portrait of him, Young may have been Detroit's most conservative modern mayor, attacking fiscal problems by shrinking

government and forging new relationships with corporate American to build new Detroit auto factories during his tenure.”<sup>69</sup> However, the majority of Detroiters continue to blame Young for squandering money on projects that did not last.

During his time in office, Coleman Young did not follow a political ideology or consistently fight for civil rights. His twenty years in office can be traced through the pursuit of a specific vision of a nationally significant city that had a multi-dimensional economy and diverse cultural sphere. Despite the dramatic changes happening around him, Young consistently let this vision guide him. In pursuing his vision for the city, Young neglected long lasting racial tensions. Young presented himself as a leader and fighter for the black cause. He constantly spoke out publically against white citizens who discriminated against the black population, which became 70% by the time Young left office. In electing Young, African Americans wanted a liberal leader who prioritized civil rights above the rest of the liberal agenda. Young, however, took a passive approach to civil rights. He believed if the city became a national city with a multi-dimensional economy and cultural hub, the racial animosity would fix itself. Young aimed to make the suburbs reliant on the city, economically but for social life, culture, and shopping.

Young identified with the Democratic Party but took a conservative approach to running the city. Thus, Young did not adhere to any political ideology. The consistency throughout Young’s time as mayor was his vision for Detroit as a nationally significant city. However, Young only pursued this vision within the city’s means taking pragmatic approaches to projects. Thus, when Detroit went farther into debt in the late 1980s, Young slowed building and put his vision on the back burner.

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<sup>69</sup> Bomey and Gallagher, “How Detroit went broke.”

This essay sheds light on the capabilities of one man in rebuilding a city. All these projects stand today as reminders of a desperate attempt to revive Detroit. Young's critics use failed projects such as the Renaissance Center and PeopleMover to demonstrate the Mayor's unnecessary spending on superfluous projects. However, the fact remains that Young brought the city out of debt in his pursuit of a vision. As historians and sociologists have both shown, much larger forces than Coleman Young played a role in Detroit's downfall. The question becomes then, what value is there in studying a vision that never transpired of one man who despite being a strong leader with a great amount of support could not overcome societal forces around him.

Studying Coleman Young and his time as mayor gives us a new lens in which to view Detroit and its current situation. Retrospectively, there are many things Young could have done but for the most part, the long-standing mayor acted extremely responsibly keeping the city's finances in check. Thus, in studying Coleman Young, we are forced to redistribute agency to more than just one man in the creation of this crisis. Although scholars such as Sugrue conclude that the conflict extends back to World War II, we could see moments where Detroit seemed to move forward as in 1977. However, institutionalized racism, lack of employment and population loss eventually wins out. Yet, studying Young and his vision allow us insight into how these long standing issues weave into every aspect of Detroit except the Detroit in Coleman Young's head. As Detroit moves forward, scholars and the public alike must contextualize Coleman Young within his surroundings. In doing so, the magnitude of sociological problems reveals itself.

This essay addresses the way in which we should look at cities in crisis. Though no major city experienced the same dramatic fall, parallels in deindustrialization and



institutionalized racism emerge between Detroit and the many cities Young aspired Detroit to mimic. Coleman Young's vision guided him in making decisions through crisis. Although it was not ultimately successful, Young pushed the city and explored many different options such as the complete make over the River Front and the Casino industry. In thinking of things that had never existed before, Young ensured that Detroit did not stay static. Furthermore, he moved Detroit forward through physical projects that were incredibly innovative. The Detroit Free Press stated that Detroit's history is a series of "if only" moments: "If Mayors Jerome Cavanagh and Roman Gribbs had cut the workforce in the 1960s and early 1970s...if Mayor Dennis Archer hadn't added more than 1,100 employees...If Kilpatrick had shown more fiscal discipline."<sup>70</sup> In the case of Coleman Young, I am inclined to turn the tables and say if only President Ford granted Detroit \$2.8 billion to Move Detroit Forward or if only the many new businesses Young tried to attract to Detroit had come. In the case of Detroit and Mayor Coleman Young, we see the uselessness of a vision without economic support and reparation of societal inequalities brought on by suburbanization and racial animosity.

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<sup>70</sup> Bomey and Gallagher, "How Detroit went broke."

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