

Title: A Tale of Two Cities: How the Government Caused and Maintained Racial Inequality in Oakland, California 1945- 1970**CE Type: Independent Capstone Thesis**

Minorities living in Oakland, California after World War II faced many of the same challenges and limitations as those living in the Jim Crow south. Racial inequality in the city stemmed from a combination of government policy at the federal and local level. Federal policy created the conditions for inequality to flourish by condoning housing discrimination and promoting a variety of racist policies that promoted suburban economic development at the expense of Oakland's economic development. The Oakland city government exacerbated these policies by governing in the interest of white residents and to the detriment of nonwhite residents. This situation was made possible by Oakland's at-large city council election system. The at-large system politically marginalized minorities, as it allowed whites—who comprised a large majority of the city until 1970—to dominate city council elections. Many years every council member was a white conservative, even though minorities comprised twenty-eight percent of the population by 1960. Political marginalization allowed the government and private industry to maintain discriminatory policies. Discrimination severely limited occupational and residential opportunities, confining minorities to the oldest and poorest sections of Oakland while most new economic growth occurred in white sections of the city and neighboring East Bay suburbs. These conditions caused disproportionately high levels of poverty and unemployment among Oakland's minority communities. Oakland's extremely conservative newspaper, the *Oakland Tribune*—the city's only major daily paper after 1953—worked tirelessly to maintain conservative domination of the city. It consistently promoted conservative interests—such as an anti-fair housing proposition and at-large elections—and disparaged liberal interests, such as anti-poverty programs and a proposed ward election system. This editorial philosophy helped those in power maintain the political, economic and social status quo, which placed whites over nonwhites, rich over poor and business interests over the public interest. A variety of primary sources are used in this thesis, including newspaper articles from the *Oakland Tribune*, the *California Voice* and the *San Francisco Chronicle* and documents from the Institute of Governmental Studies Library, UC Berkeley, and the Oakland History Room in the Oakland Public Library. The main secondary source—and the inspiration for the thesis—is *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post-War Oakland* by Robert Self.

Introduction¹

On Labor Day in 1947 union members in the tens of thousands marched through downtown Oakland, celebrating the holiday and the recent election of four liberal city councilors to five available seats. Although liberals were still outnumbered five to four on the council, their electoral victory imbued the marchers with a sense of optimism. This hope for the future was reflected by the parade floats, many of which reflected labor's aspirations, such as full employment, public housing and a more open city government.

One float asked people to “take the power out of the tower” — the “tower” being the *Oakland Tribune* building— representing a main goal of East Bay labor organizations. The *Tribune* was extremely conservative, often vilifying organized labor while promoting Republican domination of city government. This Republican domination meant Oakland's city government worked to maintain the status quo from 1940—when nonwhites comprised five percent of the population—throughout the 50s and 60s, when the nonwhite population increased to thirty percent. As their population grew, minorities threatened white control of Oakland politics and economy. In response the city government used public policy to discriminate against nonwhites—such as routing freeways through primarily minority areas, destroying low income housing, opposing public housing, segregating schools and concentrating economic growth in primarily white areas. The city government also condoned discrimination by private industry, which limited housing and employment opportunities for nonwhites, making it extremely hard to ascend the economic and social ladder.

Although liberals claimed victory against the *Tribune* in 1947, it was an anomaly. Only five candidates between 1941 and 1965 won election to the city council more than once without *Tribune* support, even though at least fifty-four percent of registered voters in Alameda county (which includes Oakland and surrounding suburbs) were Democrats after 1936, a number which rose to sixty-two percent by 1960.²

This paradox is explained by several factors, including Oakland's at-large city council election system. This system gave the *Tribune* an immense amount of power, as viable candidates needed city wide recognition, which the paper provided-- favorably for conservative interests and candidates, and unfavorably for liberal interests and candidates. This was an extremely efficient strategy for maintaining political control over Oakland; as the above statistic proves, the *Tribune* was adept at getting their preferred candidates elected, and keeping them in office. Between 1933 and 1965, seventy-one percent of council races elected an incumbent, and of the seventeen non-incumbents elected between 1941 and 1965, eleven had *Tribune* support.³

Yet the advantage provided by the *Tribune* to conservative candidates only mattered in local elections, as Oakland voters often picked liberal candidates for state and national office. Clearly a majority consistently favored conservative leadership for their city.

¹ NOTES: In this thesis I consider “nonwhite” and “minority” to be synonyms. Also, African- Americans were by far the largest minority group in Oakland and Alameda County, meaning much of the information I found focused solely on their socio- economic condition. Many of the primary sources cited in this thesis lack page numbers because either 1) they were not available or 2) due to a researching error, I neglected to transcribe them. Finally if I do not specify where I found a newspaper article, it means I looked at it on microfilm.

² Edward C. Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules In Oakland?* (New York, 1972), 31; Eugene C. Lee, *California Votes* (Institute of Governmental Studies Library, University of California, Berkeley), A-91

³ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 30-31.

Why did many vote liberal in national and state elections, but conservative in local elections? The answer seems to be “homeowner politics,” an extremely conservative philosophy that induced homeowners to protect property values from all threats, real or imagined. “Homeowner politics” first had an impact on Oakland politics in 1950 after the liberal councilmen mentioned above were instrumental in securing 3,000 units of federally financed public housing. The local branch of the Committee for Home Protection organized a recall of three of the pro-housing council members, claiming public housing—or “socialized housing”—would depress private real estate values. This was a successful tactic, as one councilman failed to regain his seat in the recall election, a victim of anti-communist hysteria. The next year two more liberals lost their seats to CHP backed candidates running on anti-public housing, anti-communist platforms, and the last liberal councilman died in office, ending liberal influence in Oakland politics until the late 1960s.⁴

The new conservative councilors quickly stalled the plans to build 3,000 new public housing units. By 1966 only 500 had been built, even though Oakland had constantly faced a housing shortage. Since the federal government would pay for the units, ideology, not budget concerns, impeded many poor residents from living in adequate housing. Yet this was an ideology a majority of Oakland voters—comprised almost entirely of middle and upper class whites—clearly approved of.⁵

This white majority, which comprised seventy-four percent of Oakland’s population in 1960 and fifty-nine percent in 1970, lived primarily in and around the Oakland Hills region—the largest, most affluent, most populous and most racially exclusive area of the city. They expected specific policies from officials they elected, namely protection of property values by blocking high density and public housing from their affluent enclave that formed the city’s western boundary.⁶

Evidence suggests most white people also wanted protection from minorities themselves. According to a 1964 study conducted by a UC Berkeley Sociologist, sixty percent of Oakland whites felt prejudice toward minorities, while one in three would act upon this prejudice in a discriminatory manner. This racism was clearly evident during city elections. Due to the city’s at-large election system, Oakland whites consistently elected conservatives who governed in the interest of the city’s white, real estate and business communities and to the detriment of its minority and poor communities.⁷

Oakland’s nonwhite population—comprised primarily of southern blacks who migrated to the Bay Area searching for employment-- exploded during and after the war, increasing from five percent in 1940 to thirty-five percent in 1966. In 1960 blacks comprised twenty-three percent of Oakland’s population, while all other nonwhite people—including Hispanics, Asians and Native Americans—comprised less than eleven percent. African- Americans were also the nonwhite group most affected by racist government policy and discrimination by private industry.⁸

⁴Marilynn Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II*, (Berkeley, 1993), 220

⁵ Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II*, 220

⁶ <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland50.htm>

⁷ Floyd Hunter, *Housing Discrimination in Oakland, California: A Study Prepared for the Oakland Mayor’s Committee on Full Opportunity and the Council of Social Planning, Alameda County*, (Berkeley, 1963-1964). Institute of Governmental Studies Library, UC Berkeley. NOTE: From this point on “Institute of Governmental Studies Library” will be referred to as “IGS Library.”

⁸*Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland50.htm>

Discrimination and poverty confined this growing population to the city's oldest and poorest areas. From 1940 to 1950 the percentage of blacks in West Oakland increased dramatically, from sixteen percent of the population to sixty-one percent. In 1950, ninety percent of blacks lived in just twenty-two percent of the city. Such extreme population density increased overcrowding rates, defined as more than one person per room. In 1940, fifteen percent of all black households in West Oakland were overcrowded, which increased to thirty-one percent in 1950. Racial segregation intensified throughout the post war decades. Four neighborhoods classified as "poverty target areas" by Oakland's Economic Development Council were seventy-five percent nonwhite in 1966, while non-poverty areas were seventy percent white.⁹

Public policy decisions compounded this crisis. By 1956 Oakland and East Bay neighbors Berkeley and Richmond condemned all of their temporary war housing by 1956, which displaced 3,000 black families, or 12,000 individuals. Public officials also condoned unequal building practices for rich and poor areas of Oakland. Between 1960 and 1966, 18,000 new housing units were built in Oakland; seventy-three percent of this construction occurred outside the city's four poverty target areas. Meanwhile 11,800 housing units were destroyed during this time; sixty-seven percent of these demolitions— mostly for freeway, rapid transit and urban renewal construction— occurred inside these poverty target areas. Not surprisingly, seventeen percent of non whites lived in overcrowded quarters in 1966, compared to less than two percent of whites.¹⁰

Oakland: Colony or City?

While southern blacks streamed into western and northern cities during and after the war looking for work, millions of white city dwellers across the country moved to the suburbs. Oakland and its suburbs were no different; 163,000 whites left the city between 1955 and 1966, causing the white population to drop fifty-six percent during this time.¹¹

It would be incomplete to say that whites merely fled the city, as many incentives drew them to the suburbs, especially low housing costs. With a government insured mortgage, it often became cheaper to buy a new suburban home than to rent an apartment in the city. Between 1933 and 1963 the FHA insured \$119 billion worth of mortgages, and half of all suburban houses built in the 50s and 60s had FHA insured mortgages. New Deal housing legislation also stipulated homeowners receive tax breaks for mortgage interest payments and property taxes, a generous housing subsidy not given to renters. In 1981 this subsidy totaled \$35 billion. With this government assistance the homeownership rate increased from forty-four percent in 1934 to sixty-three percent in 1972, evidence that the government was primarily responsible for suburban growth. With such tremendous growth, suburbs turned from exclusive areas to the normal expectation of the middle class.¹²

⁹ Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II*, 93, 95; Robert Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, (Princeton, 2003), 262; *Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

¹⁰ Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II*, 231; *Oakland in Transition_A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

¹¹ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 166
<http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland50.htm>

¹² Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, (New York, 1985), 215-216

This transformation meant homeowner politics appeared as a major force nationwide—both in suburbs and in Washington. To protect the huge investment made in suburban housing markets, the FHA refused to insure suburban mortgages for nonwhites. In 1938, its *Underwriting Manual* said “it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial groups.” This policy followed mid twentieth century conventional wisdom, which said minorities lower property values and pose a larger investment risk than whites. It would not change until federal fair housing legislation in 1968.¹³

The FHA, ever vigilant to protect property values, also recommended suburbs develop restrictive covenants—agreements which legally forbid minorities from buying property—to prevent “inharmonious racial groups” from living in proximity to each other. The Supreme Court outlawed such agreements in 1948, but suburbs quickly adapted. San Leandro, the suburban community bordering Oakland to the south, turned its covenants into “neighborhood protective associations,” or groups of homeowners that determined who could live in their neighborhood as long as “race and creed” were not taken into account. Such associations were extremely effective in maintaining San Leandro’s racial exclusivity and protecting property values. By 1970 blacks comprised thirty-four percent of Oakland’s population, while just eighty-four blacks lived in San Leandro, comprising just over one percent of the population. In 1980 the average house in San Leandro was worth \$96,400, thirty thousand dollars more than the average house in Oakland.¹⁴

Within Oakland, pervasive housing discrimination confined nonwhites to areas of the city experiencing racial transition. The UC Berkeley housing report surveyed forty Oakland real estate brokers and lenders and found one-third either practiced or abetted housing discrimination against minorities. The remaining two-thirds were still not committed to open housing, as only four percent signed a 1964 Fair Housing petition circulated by the League for Decency in Real Estate.¹⁵

Unfortunately for these minorities unable to leave Oakland, jobs and capital followed whites out of the city for cheap suburban land prices. In the early 1960s East Bay suburban land often sold for as little as \$8,000 per acre, while the city of Oakland paid \$179,000 for a single acre of land to build a school. This disparity helped induce the mass exodus of companies and firms: between 1961 and 1966 Oakland lost 10,000 manufacturing jobs, even though 41,000 new manufacturing jobs came to Alameda County between 1951 and 1964. By the end of the decade the suburbs south of Oakland accounted for ninety percent of the county’s auto, truck, tractor and engine manufacturing.¹⁶

Deindustrialization disproportionately affected minorities, as it removed a large section of the economy which employed many nonwhites. Both the white and blue collar service jobs that replaced manufacturing jobs during the 1960s and 1970s were less open to minorities. Education requirements barred many from the burgeoning fields of financial, insurance, and information services, while racial prejudice made employers reluctant to hire minorities in blue collar service jobs, such as waiters or doormen. By 1964 these slim job prospects produced an eleven percent unemployment rate for Oakland as a whole and a twenty percent unemployment rate for blacks.

¹³ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 104

¹⁴ Self, *American Babylon: Race and The Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 105, 335, 338

¹⁵ Theodore Tarail, *Summary of Study by Floyd Hunter on Housing Discrimination in Oakland for Oakland Redevelopment Agency Discussion*, August 1964. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 165

¹⁶ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 171

Unemployment increased even though the number of Oakland jobs increased by 4,000 between 1960 and 1966 because the number of Oakland residents employed in the city decreased by 10,000, while non-residents employed in the city increased by 14,000. These statistics suggest many whites moved from Oakland but continued to work in the city.¹⁷

The “free market” did not create such extreme post war disparities between cities and suburbs. The government shaped the nature of suburban growth to yield the highest property values possible, and thus better protect the FHA’s massive investment in suburban homeowners. The federal government not only provided whites a new house that was cheaper than many urban apartments, they literally paved the way there. In 1956 congress approved a 42,000 mile interstate highway system, with the federal government covering ninety percent of the cost. This vast road system accelerated the movement of people, capital and jobs from cities to suburbs, and thus was partially responsible for eighty-three percent of America’s growth occurring in the suburbs by 1970. This phenomenal growth further protected the FHA’s investment in suburbia, and thus took priority over urban mass transit, which only received one percent of government transportation expenditures in the post-war generation.¹⁸

Three major highways-- all of which traversed West Oakland, the city’s poorest area-- were built connecting Oakland with neighboring suburbs in the decades after WWII. Highways made it easy to live in the suburbs but visit the city for work and recreation. An *Oakland Tribune* ad for homes in a Pleasanton subdivision from June 1968 shows how highways promoted suburban growth. Although Pleasanton is thirty-one miles away from Oakland, the ad estimated only a thirty-two minute driving time between the two communities once the freeway system was completed. Therefore freeways made Pleasanton a more attractive place live, helping induce Oakland whites to leave the city to “Live in the Grand Manner of Early California... with 1968’s most modern conveniences and luxuries.” According to the ad these included central air conditioning, a “spectacular” eighteen foot high entry foyer and a panoramic indoor-outdoor kitchen and family room. Homes started at \$25,900, and VA and FHA financing was available—for those who qualified.¹⁹

One must remember that prosperity of this kind was barred from large sections of the population, eliciting intense anger and frustration. The Black Panther Party routinely interpreted unequal growth between East Bay suburbs and Oakland as an imperial state exploiting a colony. Conservatives lampooned this analysis as militant and bombastic, but it was grounded in truth. Besides outgrowing cities, suburbs also exploited them. Suburbanites used Oakland while giving little in return. Oakland’s Economic Development Council estimated half of Oakland’s jobs were held by non- residents, including seventy-five percent of those paying over \$10,000. Oakland was also the center of East Bay freeway traffic, a new age transportation hub suburbanites had to pass through to travel long distances along the coast or to cross the San Francisco Bay. Unfortunately for Oakland residents, these freeways created no long term jobs and destroyed thousands of low rent housing units.²⁰

Like all colonial subjects, many Oakland resented their inferior status. This thesis will focus on the fight by Oakland’s poor and minority communities for greater political and economic power during the 1960s. This fight was embodied in the 1963 Rumford Fair Housing

¹⁷ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 170-172; *Oakland in Transition A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley.

¹⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 250, 283

¹⁹ *Oakland Tribune* 2 June 1968

²⁰ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 238

Bill, 1966's Proposition F, which authorized 2,500 public housing units, and 1968's Proposition M, which proposed to replace at-large elections with a ward system. Each represented a serious threat to *Tribune*-conservative domination of the city, provoking these forces to oppose them in an effort to maintain the status quo.

Chapter 1

Fair Housing: A Threat to the Conservative Status Quo

Two types of conservatives opposed fair housing in the postwar East Bay: racial conservatives feared the potential evils of integration, and political conservatives viewed fair housing as an attack on property rights and personal liberty. It's important to note that many of the latter were conservative only when it came to protecting real and perceived threats to their property. Homeownership epitomized the American dream in post-war America. Congress endorsed "A good home in a suitable living environment for every American family" as an official policy after World War II.²¹

In reality, government housing policy limited the definition of "American" to middle and upper class whites. In 1964 the Oakland Redevelopment Agency surveyed discrimination in Oakland housing: of 486 houses listed for sale in the *Oakland Tribune* on April 26, twenty-one percent had racial restrictions; of 675 rental units, seventeen percent had racial restrictions. This was seven months after passage of the Rumford Fair Housing Act, which supposedly banned "racial and religious discrimination in the sale or rental of (a) all housing (except duplexes) that is publicly assisted or subject to government insured mortgages, and (b) of all apartment dwellings."²²

The Act was a product of ten years of effort by Governor Pat Brown and state Assemblyman Byron Rumford of Berkeley, the first African- American elected to state government. Although monumental, the Act had many limitations that prevented it from reducing discrimination significantly. Besides excluding thousands of privately financed housing units, it created weak enforcement provisions. The Fair Employment Practices Commission—the state agency established to investigate claims of housing and employment discrimination— only had a staff of fifty for a state of eighteen million, making its scope was extremely limited. The Commission heard only 315 cases during the twenty months the law was in effect between 1963 and 1966, and ruled discrimination occurred in 115 of them.²³

Yet evidence suggests the Rumford Act convinced some people to abandon discriminatory practices. One white person interviewed by UC Berkeley Sociologist Floyd Hunter in a 1964 Oakland housing survey expressed opposition to the Rumford Act, but conceded he would now sell to minorities. "I believe a person has a right not to sell," he said, continuing, "Prior to the Rumford Act, I would simply refuse."²⁴

Even with limited enforcement ability, the conservative backlash against the Rumford Act was virulent and immediate. Within three months of its passing the California Real Estate Association had obtained 767,000 signatures to place Proposition 14—which proposed to revoke the Rumford Act— on the November 1964 ballot.²⁵

Pre-election coverage of Prop 14 from the *Oakland Tribune* inflamed white homeowner fears by making the Rumford Act appear to threaten personal liberty. One *Tribune* editorial said "one of man's basic rights in a free society... is the privilege of controlling the occupancy of his

²¹ Davis McEntire, *Residence and Race: Final and Comprehensive Report to the Commission on Race and Housing*, (University of California Press, 1960), 4

²² *Comments of the Oakland Redevelopment Agency Concerning the Floyd Hunter Report*, 1964. Institute of Governmental Studies Library, UC Berkeley; *Oakland Tribune* 16 June 1964

²³ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 77

²⁴ Hunter, *Housing Discrimination in Oakland, California, 1963- 64*. IGS Library, UC Berkeley.

²⁵ Kevin Starr, *Golden Dreams: California in an Age of Abundance, 1950-1963*, (New York, 2009), 465

property” and chided the Rumford Act for upholding “one right while destroying another... as so frequently happens when we try to compel social consciousness by legislation.”²⁶

The *Tribune* seemed intent on scaring its readers as much as possible. An editorial claimed the FEPC had the power “to investigate, judge, conciliate and punish, thus throwing the muscle of the state behind property owners.” The paper failed to report a press conference held one week earlier by FEPC executive director Edward Howden to debunk such claims. According to the *San Francisco Chronicle*, Howden said “jail terms may be imposed only by the courts” and that “even in civil matters, the commission must turn to the court for an enforcement order.” According to Howden, the FEPC could not punish anyone, a fact misrepresented to *Tribune* readers.²⁷

In the *Tribune*'s opinion, the rights of property owners to determine who could live in their property trumped the rights of prospective renters or buyers. Real Estate groups agreed. The California Real Estate Association president said the Rumford Act was leading the state “down the road of socialism.” CREA routinely referred to the Act as “Forced Housing” which threatened the “American way of life.” “Drop the cloak of minority civil rights,” CREA literature said, “and there stands the police state in the name of social justice, with a dagger poised directly at the very heart of freedom.” Besides believing the Rumford Act curtailed liberty, white homeowners also feared open housing threatened property values, which increased fifty percent between 1950 and 1970.²⁸

The *Tribune* also printed many articles presenting arguments against Prop 14, often quoting a politician or civil rights leader appealing to readers' moral conscience. As evidence in this chapter proves, arguments supporting fair housing made little impact on many whites who viewed the Rumford Act as an attack on their way of life and a threat to their economic security.

Race defined the Prop 14 vote in Alameda County. Six of the eight suburbs south of Oakland voted for the measure by sixty-seven percent or more, mirroring the three-to-one margin with which Prop 14 passed statewide. All had nonwhite population percentages below ten percent, and four had below four percent.²⁹

In Oakland, Prop 14 only passed by fifty-five percent as the city's large minority population voted overwhelmingly against the measure. Primarily nonwhite West and North Oakland voted against Prop 14 by over seventy-five percent, while the primarily white Oakland Hills supported the measure by over seventy percent.³⁰

What caused this extreme racial disparity in the voting? The housing survey mentioned above provides some clues. Whites felt increased integration would reduce social status. Hunter reported whites often used racial stereotypes to justify negative feelings toward minorities. Other races were “less well educated, less cultured, less emotionally stable, less healthy, less ambitious, less law abiding or less moral.” Whites feared integration would spread these cultural deficiencies. Hunter quoted one Oakland white as saying “I don't want Negro grandchildren, and I don't think a majority of other white people in this community do! If that makes me a bigot, make the most of it!”³¹

²⁶ *Oakland Tribune* 25 October 1964

²⁷ *Oakland Tribune* 11 October 1964; *San Francisco Chronicle* 1 October 1964

²⁸ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 167, 256.

²⁹ *San Francisco Chronicle* 11 May 1964; Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 262; <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/>

³⁰ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 169, 262-63

³¹ Hunter, *Housing Discrimination in Oakland, California*, 1963-64. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

Hunter reported fear of losing social status was the second largest factor causing discrimination, while fear of economic loss was the first. Byron Rumford said this fear was so pervasive among whites that even “those who expressed themselves as liberals” felt compelled to vote for Prop 14 “in order to protect their homes.”³²

Home ownership was the biggest investment most suburbanites made, and many fought fiercely to protect it from all threats, real and perceived. One of these perceived threats was that integration lowered property values, a notion heavily promoted by the real estate industry, which profited enormously from the stable markets segregation ensured. A 1949 article in *Real Estate Subdivisions* asserted “practically all real estate subdividers” agree that the entry of minorities into white neighborhoods “tends to depress real estate values” by a rate of fifty to seventy-five percent. Many real estate professionals therefore believed discrimination was an essential part of their job, a sentiment expressed by a real estate informant Hunter interviewed, who said “There is more trouble from real estate brokers in white areas than from the property owners.” Based on his survey, Hunter estimated one-third of Oakland’s 670 real estate brokers and lenders “either practice or abet housing discrimination.”³³

These real estate professionals were following customs established by the federal government. A variety of socio-economic factors determined whether the government would insure a loan, including one’s residence. City districts around the country were classified by the government based on perceived investment risks in terms of real estate, loans and mortgages. Areas considered desirable for lending purposes were labeled “A” a scale which ended at “D” signifying neighborhoods considered most risky for investment. These rankings were based on building age and conditions, along with neighborhood amenities and infrastructure, but the most important factor in determining a neighborhood’s classification was its racial composition. Even a small nonwhite population would result in a “D” ranking, disqualifying residents for government insured loans and making it hard for developers to acquire financial backing to build in “red” areas, the color a “D” classification received on government maps.³⁴

This racism was codified in the Federal Housing Administration’s Underwriting Manual, which in 1938 said “it is necessary that properties shall continue to be occupied by the same social and racial groups.” This meant that until federal fair housing legislation in 1968, the government supported suburbs that barred nonwhites while at the same time insuring very few loans in the cities most nonwhites were confined to. Less than one percent of new housing built throughout the country between 1935 and 1952 went to nonwhite families, and in 1964 only three percent of mortgage loans in the San Francisco-Oakland SMSA were government insured.³⁵

A glance through the *San Francisco Chronicle*’s and *Tribune*’s Real Estate section illustrates the unequal opportunities discrimination provided whites over nonwhites. A September 5, 1964 ad in the *Chronicle* promoted homes in a subdivision nine minutes from downtown San Francisco that are “bound to appreciate- as much as \$5,000 in five years according to families living in Doelger homes in the area” and near good schools, pristine

³² Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 263

³³ John Denton, *Apartheid American Style* (Berkeley, 1967), 57; Hunter, *Housing Discrimination in Oakland, California*, 1963- 64. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

³⁴ Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis*, (Princeton, 1996), 44

³⁵ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 104, 116; Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules In Oakland?*, 76

beaches, shopping centers and other amenities, “as close as you can get to The City, and still call it Country.”³⁶

The two and three bedroom homes started at \$19,950, but “as little as \$650 down plus closing costs moves you in” according to the ad, which also encouraged prospective buyers to get an FHA insured loan. According to a *Tribune*, people should not buy a home exceeding two and a half times their annual income, meaning one needed to make at least \$8,000 a year to afford the above house. Considering the median income for white Oakland residents was \$8,505 in 1965, this government subsidy allowed the middle class to enjoy the idyllic suburban lifestyle, as the FHA revolutionized the mortgage industry in several important ways.³⁷

Before government insurance programs, one’s down payment on a house would be about thirty percent of the mortgage with an interest rate between six and eight percent. With an FHA insured mortgage most down payments were below ten percent with an interest rate between four and seven percent. This assistance made homeownership available to the middle class on a large scale.³⁸

The \$119 billion worth of mortgage insurance issued by the FHA over its first four decades of operation succeeded in its primary goals: to revive the construction industry, increase homeownership and increase employment. Housing starts increased from 93,000 in 1933 to 619,000 in 1941, and by 1972 the FHA had helped nearly eleven million families to own houses and another twenty-two million to improve their properties. Such spectacular growth increased the homeownership rate from forty-four percent in 1934 to sixty-three percent in 1972.³⁹

Government insurance from the FHA and the Veterans Administration insured almost half of all suburban mortgages in the 1950s and 60s, including many around Oakland, as 163,000 whites moved from the city moved to the suburbs between 1955 and 1966.⁴⁰

Discrimination, combined with the federal government’s racially exclusive mortgage guarantee programs and poverty, kept East Bay suburbs almost completely white. Between 1950 and 1970 the population of San Leandro, which borders Oakland to the south, increased 149 percent to 68,698. During this time the number of black residents increased from twenty to eighty-four. One real estate professional Hunter interviewed said “It’s the brokers who keep Negroes out of San Leandro.” Suburban housing markets opened up significantly to blacks with federal fair housing legislation in 1968; by 1980 907 blacks lived in San Leandro, an increase of 9,787 percent over 1970.⁴¹

The stable housing markets segregation produced in East Bay suburbs were considerably more profitable than in Oakland. By 1980, Oakland had a homeownership rate of forty-three percent and a median home value of \$66,600, while four of the city’s suburbs had homeownership rates of at least sixty-two percent and median home values over \$90,000. This disparity is primarily due to the government’s racist mortgage insurance program. Between 1945 and 1960 the FHA and VA insured \$3.3 million worth of home loans in San Leandro, a shocking difference when compared to the dearth of loans guaranteed in Oakland.⁴²

³⁶ *San Francisco Chronicle* 5 September 1964

³⁷ *Oakland Tribune* 20 September 1964; *Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

³⁸ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 204-5

³⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 215, 205

⁴⁰ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 166

⁴¹ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 335;

⁴² Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 338, 104

Real estate companies made sure prospective homeowners knew about this unequal distribution of wealth. A 1968 *Tribune* ad for homes in Pleasanton, a suburb about thirty minutes from Oakland, said it made sense to look at a home not just as a shelter, “but also as a fine investment.” One thing needed to protect this investment is “the rising value of the land” on which the house is built. Another ad promoted a sub-division in Walnut Creek, a suburb about twenty minutes outside Oakland, by encouraging people to “escape... from crowds, confusion, city tensions, noise, fog and smog” to “country calm, freedom.” The implication is obvious: property values in Pleasanton and Walnut Creek are guaranteed to grow, while those in Oakland—a community subject to “city tensions” and other maladies—are not.⁴³

Homeownership was a good investment because it built equity. A 1968 *Tribune* article profiled a family who moved from an East Oakland apartment to a house in San Leandro; according to the father they were tired of paying \$135 a month in rent “with nothing to show for it.” The house “looked like a good investment, and we can build equity as the property appreciates and profit from tax deductions on interest,” he said. Many homeowners counted on property values rising annually as they made long term financial plans, according to a 1968 *Tribune* article. “Most... are attempting to buy as much house as mortgage lenders will qualify them for,” the article said. “Their reasoning is prices will continue to rise, inflation will allow them to meet payments with cheaper money” and increase their equity.⁴⁴

With so many advantages over Oakland, East Bay suburbs grew rapidly. Before 1960 San Ramon, about thirty minutes outside Oakland, was farmland. By 1964 it had \$50 million worth of houses, along with a shopping center, eighteen hole golf course, four schools, a medical center and a fire station. Plans called for 10,000 total homes, representing \$300 million of property.⁴⁵

Companies followed middle class whites from Oakland to the suburbs, stripping the city of jobs, investment and tax dollars. Those who could not follow jobs out of the city suffered the consequences. Oakland’s “public finance burdens as well as its racial tensions” were partly due to “San Leandro’s discouragement of Negro immigration” according to a 1960 report on race and housing. Oakland had to provide social services to an expanding nonwhite population, thereby raising its revenue costs, making it difficult to set as low a tax rate as “exclusionist San Leandro.”⁴⁶

San Leandro, along with many other East Bay suburbs, also limited multi-family housing units through restrictive zoning laws. Suburban homeowners wanted to limit apartments and condominiums for a variety of reasons: they feared school overcrowding, crime and an increased social service burden—or in the words of historian Robert Self, “suburban homeowners hoped to exclude the complicated social life they associated with large cities.” Suburbs enjoyed two main benefits from excluding this “complicated social life”: low social service costs—which meant low tax rates, essential for attracting commercial and industrial development—and high property values.⁴⁷

Suburbs thus had an advantage over Oakland in attracting jobs and development. During the 1950s, San Leandro gained 15,000 industrial jobs and \$130 million worth of industrial development, a decade in which the amount of jobs and investment in Oakland

⁴³ *Oakland Tribune* 28 September 1968; *Oakland Tribune* 25 October 1964

⁴⁴ *Oakland Tribune* 15 September 1968; *Oakland Tribune* 12 September 1968

⁴⁵ *San Francisco Chronicle* 6 September 1964; *Oakland Tribune* 13 September 1964

⁴⁶ McEntire, *Residence and Race: Final and Comprehensive Report to the Commission on Race and Housing*, 171.

⁴⁷ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 280-281

decreased. This disparity had enormous consequences on the residents of the two communities. In San Leandro, industry reduced homeowners' tax burden, according to a late 1940s flier produced by the Chamber of Commerce. "From \$1.98 a decade ago, the city tax rate has dropped to \$1.27 through ten consecutive reductions," the flier proclaimed. "Yet city services have been expanded!" Industrial growth made this contradiction possible. By this time the number of San Leandro firms increased from a "handful" to 284, helping result in sales tax revenue of \$1,200,000, "a sum far greater than for other cities of similar size and population." Industry thus financed schools, public infrastructure and civic projects, along with the tax cut city officials provided homeowners every year.⁴⁸

Oakland was in the exact opposite situation. Between 1958 and 1963 Oakland's employment dropped by 3,200 people, the result of eighty businesses declaring bankruptcy or fleeing the city. By 1965 Oakland's downtown had a vacancy rate of twenty-one percent. Thus Oakland lost tax revenue when its social service requirements were increasing. One must remember this disparate growth resulted from massive government intervention in the market. Suburbs were a government creation, not a product of laissez-faire capitalism. Government policy made it cheaper to own a suburban home than rent an Oakland apartment, stripping the city of its middle class constituency. Government supported discrimination also ensured suburban racial exclusivity, essential for attracting business and protecting property values, which encouraged developers to build houses, shopping centers and a variety of other commercial and industrial development.⁴⁹

Oakland's economic growth was not a product of the free market either. The city government supported high end residential development in the affluent Hills and Lake Merritt areas while relegating public housing and industry to poor areas, which will be analyzed in more detail in the next chapter. Here I wish to discuss the city's motivation for preserving this disparate growth, which was to maximize tax revenues. In May 1968 Mayor Reading told the *Tribune* he opposed construction of public housing in the Hills area because "It would be a gross injustice to use land which is two or three times more valuable than other land." If the city built public housing in the Hills, it would forgo many thousands of potential tax dollars compared with other houses in the area. One 264 house development had houses worth between \$35,000 and \$45,000, resulting in a total valuation of over \$10 million. Reading knew this, which is why he wanted public housing confined to "other land" — poor areas of Oakland incapable of supporting a \$10 million residential development.⁵⁰

The city also opposed fair housing because conventional wisdom dictated integration threatened property values, explaining the city's response to the Hunter report, which was commissioned by the Mayor's Committee on Full Opportunity (COFO). The report was submitted to the Mayor in September 1964, and in 1965 the COFO submitted its own report, based on Hunter's findings, that housing discrimination was "a problem of such magnitude that it requires community commitment and mobilization for its obliteration." The Committee advised that it be dissolved and new city commission appointed with more power to combat discrimination and ensure "the availability of decent, safe, sanitary housing for all, regardless of race." According to the *Tribune*, when the Mayor finally responded in January 1966, he "flatly rejected" the proposed commission and criticized the COFO for failing to shine "the white light

⁴⁸ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 108-109

⁴⁹ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 206; Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules In Oakland?*, 49, 108

⁵⁰ *Oakland Tribune* 26 May 1968, 4 October 1964

of publicity” on discrimination in the all white suburbs ringing Oakland. Reading then offered to give the COFO “staff and money if you’ll dig into San Leandro and Hayward.” This offer came a year after the city denied a COFO request for \$28,500 to fund a two person staff and an education program against discrimination. The *Tribune* reported most COFO members were resentful of Reading’s decision and planned to resign. One complained Reading only wanted them “to dig up ammunition for him to use against South County.” Another said “I think most members of the committee feel they’ve been used” and speculated COFO was only created to fulfill an Urban Renewal Administration requirement. The COFO was eventually dissolved, and still had not been replaced by 1971, meaning little progress was made in reducing housing discrimination.⁵¹

The city government opposed integration even though by the 1960s it was clear that the movement of nonwhites to white areas did not threaten property values. According to a study by the San Francisco Council for Civic Unity, not a single Oakland census tract had property values decline between 1950 and 1960, including those that had nonwhite residents for the first time. In one tract, four nonwhite families and 765 white families lived in homes with an average value of \$11,789 in 1950. By 1960, the tract had 101 non white families and 935 white families, while the average home value increased to \$19,000— an increase of sixty percent.⁵²

Racism undoubtedly was a factor in the city government opposing integration, as officials expressed similar prejudices Hunter catalogued in his report. In a 1960 city council meeting discussing public housing, a councilor proclaimed “minority groups have the obligation to assume duties as full citizens” and that the majority of welfare recipients “are from one minority group.” Four years later the same councilor opposed the Rumford Act, arguing “A property owner has an inherent right to rent or sell—or to refuse to rent or sell—to whomever he sees fit.”⁵³

Even without this racism, it’s likely the city would have opposed fair housing with the same vigor, as officials feared economic loss for the city if affluent residential areas were integrated. The above evidence was not enough to overturn decades of conventional wisdom that nonwhites lower property values. With several luxury apartments being built around Lake Merritt and \$30,000+ homes being built in the Hills during the 1960s, city officials did not want to advocate for fair housing because if integration *did* lower property values, it would be financially ruinous for the city.⁵⁴

Consider the \$2.5 million, 100 unit apartment building that opened in 1968 north of Lake Merritt with rents between \$150 and \$400. Evidence suggests a considerable number of nonwhites could have afforded the \$150 rent apartments. Nearly half of Alameda County blacks earned more than \$5,000 in 1960, close to the minimum salary of \$6,500 needed to spend one-fourth of income on rent. This is only theoretical musing though, as discrimination closed the entire Lake Merritt rental area to nonwhites through the 1960s. One Lake district had a vacancy rate of ten percent in buildings constructed in 1962 and 1963 according to the Hunter report, even though rents for one bedroom apartments were around \$100, only slightly higher than the rest of the city. Such a high vacancy rate is extremely significant considering the median

⁵¹ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 86; Committee on Full Opportunity, *Report on Discrimination in Housing in Oakland, CA*, 7 June 1965. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; *Oakland Tribune* 6 January 1966

⁵² *California Voice* 10 March 1967

⁵³ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 145, 167

⁵⁴ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 145

poverty area rent in 1966 was \$95 while each poverty area had an overcrowding rate of at least twenty percent. Clearly discrimination, not rent levels, kept many nonwhites out of Lake area apartments.⁵⁵

From the city's point of view, it made no economic sense to ensure the Lake Merrit area was open to qualified minorities through an anti-discrimination commission the COFO proposed. Based on sentiments expressed in the Hunter report, such an action would likely lessen the area's desirability to rich whites, its target clientele. The apartment buildings needed these people to avoid bankruptcy, while the city wanted to keep them living and paying taxes in Oakland, making open housing bad economic policy.

Economics also spurred the real estate industry to discriminate. Building demolitions in West Oakland caused the neighborhood to lose twenty-five percent of its population between 1960 and 1966. It was in the economic interest of the real estate industry to channel nonwhites looking to move from West Oakland toward areas of the city experiencing racial transition—primarily North Oakland and East Oakland—and away from high end residential districts, which protected property values and maximized profits. Distinct racial boundaries developed throughout the city to facilitate this objective. Very few nonwhites lived east of Telegraph Ave. in North Oakland until the 1970s, as realtors sought to maintain the racial homogeneity of the lake apartment district and of the foothill neighborhoods near Piedmont, the elite community entirely surrounded by Oakland. Similarly nonwhites did not move west of East 14th Street in East Oakland until the 1960s because realtors wanted to protect the Hills region. "...in the Sixties you had this mass migration from West Oakland to East Oakland," a former resident recalled. "The whites were giving it up out there."⁵⁶

Voting results for Prop 14 proves how powerful these racial boundaries were. More than seventy-five percent of North Oakland voters west of Telegraph Ave. voted against Prop 14, while sixty percent of North Oakland voters east of Telegraph voted for the measure. More than seventy percent of East Oakland voters west of East 14th St. voted against Prop 14, while between fifty-two and fifty-eight percent of East Oakland voters east of East 14th St voted for the measure. Finally, sixty-five percent of voters in the Lake apartment district voted for Prop 14, an area that was bordered on two sides by areas where voters rejected the measure by over seventy-five percent.⁵⁷

The weak enforcement powers of the FEPC allowed whites to discriminate with impunity. A black West Oakland businessman told the *Tribune* in 1968 how some black acquaintances "were turned away from a home when the owner's wife said it had already been rented. She cussed out her absent husband for not taking down the for rent sign. Well I returned later by myself and saw the for rent sign up again."⁵⁸

As long as nonwhites stayed in racially transitioning areas, realtors sought to maximize profits by exploiting white racial fears through a strategy called "blockbusting." The Hunter report explained that once one nonwhite person entered a neighborhood, realtors "try to get options on other homes in the area to offer to minority buyers. Dealers have not been above telephoning and attempting to panic Caucasians into selling at bargain prices." Two-thirds of the

⁵⁵ *Oakland Tribune* 19 May 1968; Committee on Full Opportunity, *Report on Discrimination in Housing in Oakland, CA*, 7 June 1965. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; Hunter, *Housing Discrimination in Oakland, California*, 1963- 64. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; *Oakland Tribune* 1 September 1968

⁵⁶ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 161-164

⁵⁷ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 169

⁵⁸ *Oakland Tribune*, 1 September 1968

realtors interviewed said blockbusting occurs regularly. One said “Blockbusting is a way to make a fast buck- not motivated by the desire to help the Negro.” Another said “unscrupulous dealers” sometimes frightened people “into selling for \$5,000 or \$6,000 under what they should have received.” Realtors would then resell the houses to nonwhites for two or three thousand more than market value. The report continued that realtors had a reservoir of all white areas they offered to people who they scared into selling. Thirty of 250 listings of the Oakland Realty Board between January and March 1964 said “Caucasian only.” Hunter noted that “Some of these are publicly financed and, therefore, illegal.”⁵⁹

Based on his interviews with realtors, Hunter found blacks were discriminated against the most out of the several Oakland minority groups. One realtor said “There is some resentment for all my minority clients, but the strongest is against the Negro.” Another guessed other minorities faced less of a problem because there were fewer of them. In 1960 Oakland had 83,618 black residents, while the population of all other nonwhite groups was 37,136. Blacks also faced a more extensive set of economic liabilities when trying to purchase a home. Financing was hard to obtain. “Banks frequently will refuse to make loans on some homes in certain areas, forcing the applicant to go elsewhere where interest rates are higher and more points are required,” said one real estate informant. Black lending institutions provided equally bad loans “because of their more limited market and greater economic risk” required “higher interest rates and more points on a shorter term.” Another informant said blacks had to pay a higher interest rate— six and a half to seven percent instead of six percent.⁶⁰

The California Supreme Court’s revocation of Prop 14 in 1966 and reinstatement of the Rumford Act threatened the housing discrimination status quo, as state law no longer sanctioned discrimination. Yet just as discrimination occurred when the Rumford Act was in effect in 1963-64, it continued after 1966. According to Edward Hayes, a Political Scientist at the University of Wisconsin who wrote a book on Oakland history, the amount of housing discrimination changed little between 1950 and 1970. Without a city anti-discrimination commission, Oakland residents experiencing discrimination could only turn to the weak enforcement powers of the FEPC. Thus it’s likely the entry of nonwhites into white areas occurred at the same slow rate throughout this time period. In the census tract mentioned above the nonwhite population increased over 2,000 percent in one decade. Clearly discrimination prevented this movement from occurring sooner. Discrimination also constrained nonwhite movement into the Oakland Hills; between 1960 and 1966 nonwhites increased from eight to sixteen percent of the Hills’s population. Considering the Hills was the most expensive area of the city, these new residents probably had the financial ability to move years before housing markets opened sufficiently.⁶¹

Therefore housing discrimination did not completely prevent nonwhites from seeking better housing, it just made the process excruciatingly slow. It also subjected nonwhites to segregation of other facilities organized on an area basis. In 1944, Gunnar Myrdal wrote in his book *An American Dilemma* that “Virtually the whole range of other publicly administered facilities— such as hospitals, libraries, parks and similar recreational facilities— are much

⁵⁹ Hunter, *Housing Discrimination in Oakland, California, 1963- 64*. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 166

⁶⁰ <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland50.htm>

⁶¹ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 86; *Oakland Hills 701 Sub Area Report*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

poorer for Negroes than they are for whites.” In Oakland these inequalities increased between the 50s and the 70s as the city’s nonwhite population grew exponentially.⁶²

In this way, Oakland’s residential segregation increased employment segregation. A 1970 report by the city planning department lamented that “an increasing number” of the East Bay’s blue collar jobs were located in southern suburbs, far enough from West and North Oakland that a car is required for job hunting and commuting. “This problem is compounded by continued patterns of housing and employment discrimination,” the report said, “which lead more blacks than any other group to live in Oakland and commute to jobs elsewhere, and by the fact that West Oakland had the lowest degree of car availability in the city.” The report also found almost half the employed black male residents work outside the city, while only two-fifths of white male residents do so. A steady reduction of jobs in nonwhite areas—in 1960 seventy-four percent of employed West Oakland residents worked in Oakland, which decreased to sixty percent by 1966—increased nonwhite unemployment. In 1966 West Oakland’s male unemployment rate was fourteen percent for males and fifteen percent for females, while East Oakland’s unemployment rate was ten percent for males and twenty percent for females. The Bay Area average unemployment rate at this time was four percent.⁶³

The segregation created and maintained by housing discrimination also perpetuated school segregation. By 1965 seventeen schools were 80-100 percent white, while fifteen were 80-100 percent black. Evidence suggests primarily minority schools were, in general, more crowded and provided a less quality education than primarily white schools. In the fall of 1967 students from “three overcrowded predominantly Negro populated schools in East Oakland” were bused “to seven ‘hill area’ schools that had available classroom space,” according to the *California Voice*. Edward Hayes said a clear disparity between schools was observable “by an outside inspection of schools; flatlands and middle income area schools had portable classrooms crowding lawns and playing fields, while the hill area schools had fewer or no portables.”⁶⁴

The substandard education provided by primarily nonwhite schools manifested itself in several ways, according to a March 1966 newsletter written by the Peralta Improvement League, a West Oakland public housing tenant organization. The newsletter complained, “We are tired of our kids being suspended just because they are black-- we want to put an end to the outrageous number of suspensions.” Also, a “great percentage” of high school graduates cannot find work because “a lot of times our kids are not trained well enough in these schools so they can get jobs.” The newsletter also reported a group of parents were going to “tour some of the rich schools in the Hills to see how they compare with ours” and that parents were picketing the Oakland School Board because they refused to provide lunches for poor children. According to the Supreme Court decision in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* case, separating nonwhite students from others “solely because of their race generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in a way likely ever to be undone.”⁶⁵

⁶² McEntire, *Residence and Race: Final and Comprehensive Report to the Commission on Race and Housing*, 89

⁶³ *Getting to Work from West Oakland: Problems and Solutions*, City Planning Department, January 1970. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; *Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969, IGS Library, UC Berkeley; *West Oakland 701 Sub Area Report*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

⁶⁴ *California Voice* 14 April 1967; Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 67

⁶⁵ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 65; *PIL Newsletter*, March 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library; McEntire, *Residence and Race: Final and Comprehensive Report to the Commission on Race and Housing*, 98

Clearly housing discrimination kept non whites under-housed, employed and educated and limited opportunities to ascend the economic and social ladder. Some whites-- namely the racial conservatives mentioned at the beginning of the chapter-- wanted nonwhites to stay this way, and thus supported Prop 14. Political conservatives-- the other type of conservatives opposing fair housing-- claimed they supported Prop 14 simply to protect their property, and that race was irrelevant. Evidence cited in this chapter proves such people were either ignorant, delusional or liars. A vote for Prop 14 was a vote for racism, discrimination and prejudice, as the measure severely limited opportunities for nonwhites. Rationalizing support for Prop 14 by employing race neutral language of “property rights” could not hide the oppression it perpetuated against minorities. This oppression was essential in maintaining white domination of Oakland economic, political and social power throughout the 1950s and 1960s.

Chapter 2

Unequal Rights for Unequal Citizens:

The Consequences of Discrimination Propagated by the Oakland City Government

A September 1, 1968 front page article in the *Oakland Tribune's* Sunday edition painted a grim picture of the city's housing situation. As of 1966, Oakland had 26,300 individuals or families living at the poverty level, but only 16,000 low rent housing units. A federal study advised 10,000 more low rent units be constructed as soon as possible to erase this gap.

This dire situation was largely the result of an extremely conservative city government that produced or endorsed policies detrimental to the interests of poor and nonwhite people. For example, between 1960 and 1966 11,800 dwellings were destroyed in the city—sixty-seven percent of which occurred in one of Oakland's four poverty target areas—for freeway, rapid transit and redevelopment projects, decreasing the number of housing units as demand continued to increase. Public housing units also decreased from 2,300 in 1960 to 1,400 in 1966, representing less than one percent of the city's housing stock.⁶⁶

Less supply and more demand for low rent housing increased overcrowding, defined as more than one person per room. By 1966 fourteen percent of units in poverty areas were overcrowded compared to three percent of units in the rest of the city. According to the *Tribune*, poverty area rents also increased from “a median of \$75 to \$95 a month during the 1960- 66 period, mainly because of a shortage of cheap housing caused by population influx and home demolition by public works.” Paying \$95 for rent was extremely expensive for those at poverty level—which was \$1,797 for an individual in 1968—meaning such people had to allocate sixty percent of their income for rent, leaving only \$657 for other necessities.⁶⁷

The government created the conditions for expensive rents in three main ways. Real estate discrimination—which the city council condoned-- limited the housing available to nonwhites, allowing landlords to charge high rents for substandard buildings. Racist mortgage guarantee programs also made it difficult for nonwhites to move from the city. Finally, the city revoked WWII era rent controls in 1950. The city council voted 8-1 to repeal rent controls after two Oakland real estate groups complained it was unfair for landlords to suffer from rent control when most other commodities in the economy were decontrolled. The council ruled there was no longer “a shortage of housing in both low and medium rental ranges as to require rent control.” This decision contradicted a housing report commissioned by the council that found Oakland had an overall vacancy rate of two percent, including a shortage of low and medium rental housing. Without rent control low income people suffered. Average rent for an apartment in 1968 ran between \$90 and \$125, yet according to 1960 census data twenty-five percent of Oakland residents made less than \$4,000 annually, necessitating rents of \$85 or less to avoid spending more than one-fourth of income on rent. With Alameda County rent allowances ranging from only \$39 to \$54 a month over 45,000 Oakland residents spent more than twenty-

⁶⁶ *Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. Institute of Governmental Studies Library, UC Berkeley

⁶⁷ *Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; *Oakland Tribune* 1 September 1968; <http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/histpovtb.html>

five percent of their income on rent by 1966. Revoking rent control epitomizes how the city governed in the interest of the power structure-- in this case landlords over tenants. Considering Oakland's rents were controlled during the war, it was economically feasible for landlords to maintain their properties with controlled rents. Yet landlords felt entitled to more profits, and the city council agreed. This decision placed business interests over the public interest; clearly the city felt profits were more important than affordable rents.⁶⁸

Oakland's poverty areas— the neighborhoods of West Oakland, Fruitvale, East Oakland and North Oakland, according to the Oakland Economic Development Council— were also extremely dilapidated. Out of 8,500 buildings in West Oakland, almost two-thirds were deteriorating or dilapidated in 1966, including half of its 19,800 housing units. Over 5,000 dwellings were destroyed in the previous six years because of building code violations and construction projects. A federal study attributed West Oakland's severe blight due to the proximity of factories, railroads and freeways.⁶⁹

Destruction of so many dwellings in West Oakland forced many to adjacent North Oakland which significantly increased overcrowding, and thus accelerated building deterioration. By 1966, one-third of North Oakland's housing units were in deteriorating buildings in 1966, placing it second to West Oakland out of the city's seven sub-areas. In 1960 North Oakland had the fourth most units in deteriorating buildings.⁷⁰

Fruitvale and East Oakland also had about twenty percent of housing units in deteriorating buildings by 1966, a blighting process accelerated by landlords who took advantage of Oakland's low rent housing shortage by subdividing already small apartments to cram more people into the same space.⁷¹

Lack of income also contributed to many living in squalid housing. Over forty-six percent of West Oakland residents had income levels under the poverty line set by the Oakland Economic Development Council, while the other three poverty areas had poverty rates of twenty-five percent and over. Pervasive discrimination discussed in the last chapter also confined many to inadequate housing. The city government therefore caused Oakland's low rent housing shortage by supporting housing and employment discrimination, which unequally distributed wealth, and by failing to replace low income units destroyed by construction projects.⁷²

Many of those in public housing felt fortunate to have both low rents and sanitary living conditions. A *Tribune* article profiled Juanita Barnes, who before moving to public housing lived in a rented house in West Oakland that had rats, no heat in the bathroom and "the landlord never repaired the place." She considers conditions in public housing "much, much better."⁷³

The article focused on the city's efforts to build 2,500 new public housing units approved by Oakland voters in 1966. By this time the vitriolic anti-communism that opposed public housing in the early 1950s had subsided, allowing the initiative to pass by about 5,000 votes. Interestingly the *Tribune* supported the measure, while other conservative groups that opposed public housing in 1950 remained neutral. According to Edward Horwinsky, former executive secretary of the Oakland Housing Authority, these conservative interests wanted Oakland's redevelopment projects—which had destroyed many low income units—to succeed. "...all the

⁶⁸ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 66, 89; Citizens Committee on Housing, *Minutes*, 5 May 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library.

⁶⁹ *West Oakland 701 Sub-Area Report*, May 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

⁷⁰ *North Oakland 701 Sub-Area Report*, May 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

⁷¹ *East Oakland, Fruitvale 701 Sub Area Reports*, May 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

⁷² *701 Sub Area Reports*, May 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

⁷³ *Oakland Tribune*, 1 September 1968

groups that opposed us in 1950 were for redevelopment,” Horwinsky said, “but they realized they had to have more public housing.”⁷⁴

The plan was for private developers to build public housing units scattered about the city to avoid placing an inordinate amount of pressure on schools. Upon completion developers sold the units to the Housing Authority, which then rented them to tenants. Resident Juanita Barnes thought this scattered housing plan was a good idea. “... there is too high a density in these larger public housing projects. We have 77 apartments with more than 300 children in our two block project and it’s pretty hard on the nerves. I think this new scattered housing is the ideal solution, smaller projects and the chance to raise a few flowers.”⁷⁵

This plan worked extremely well in some instances. Builders used new prefabrication techniques which significantly reduced building costs. The Citizens Committee on Housing estimated private developers could build a development for \$11,000, while the government would have to spend \$17,000 for the same project.⁷⁶

Low construction costs allowed the Housing Authority to charge low rents. A two bedroom unit in West Oakland’s Oak Center redevelopment project rented for \$65 a month. This was within the rental range of most West Oakland residents, as the neighborhood’s median income was \$4,800. Therefore an Oak Center resident earning the median income would spend about sixteen percent on rent. According to a black West Oakland resident quoted by the *Tribune*, this was a significant improvement over much of the area’s housing. “In West Oakland, I know poor families paying \$75 to \$80 a month rent for ramshackle houses with bad plumbing, bad wiring, rough floors and escaping gas,” he said.⁷⁷

Working with private developers also posed challenges, as they were concerned with maximizing profits, not building units to fit the community. Developers would often pressure the Housing Authority to authorize as many units as possible on a particular site, often more than the original plans called for. For example, in October 1968 the Housing Authority approved sixty-eight units for a site when the original quota called for twenty. A Housing Authority spokesman said the agency compromised with developers and would not “throw out a good project” just because the original quotas were exceeded. Wrangling with developers not only undermined the philosophy behind the scattered initiative, it also was time consuming. By October 1968 the Housing Authority had approved 974 of the 2,500 units. City government, once the exclusive builder of public housing units, now left construction entirely to private industry. The *Tribune* reported “The Mayor feels that private industry— construction and financial—should take up the program of low cost housing.”⁷⁸

This philosophy epitomized how the conservative power structure governed the city. The main purpose of public housing was not to provide disadvantaged members of society with sanitary living conditions; if this true the city government would not have stalled the federally financed units approved in 1950. Instead the city used public housing to benefit private industry, while working tirelessly to keep it out of Oakland’s affluent enclaves. Officials believed public

⁷⁴ Nicholas Petris, *Memo to: Former Council of Social Planning Citizens Committee on Housing*, 10 November 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library; Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 83

⁷⁵ *Oakland Tribune* 1 September 1968

⁷⁶ Catherine Stearns, *Minutes of the Citizens Committee on Housing*, 21 June 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

⁷⁷ *Oakland Tribune* 1 September 1968, 8 October 1968, 3 October 1968; *Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

⁷⁸ *Oakland Tribune*, 15 October 1968; *Oakland Tribune* 1 September 1968

housing threatened property values and was a poor way to use expensive land. Mayor Reading expressed this sentiment to the *Tribune* in May 1968, explaining why he opposed public housing in the Oakland Hills. “Low cost housing is a drain on the taxpayers. It would be a gross injustice to use land which is two or three times more valuable than other land,” he said. Others had a different opinion on scattered housing in the Hills. Barney Hillburn, President of the Oakland School Board, said new public housing was a “must” even though it would increase enrollment in already crowded schools. John Williams, executive director of Oakland’s Redevelopment Agency, said if public housing were scattered farther into the Hills region, it would sufficiently ease pressure on other Oakland schools.⁷⁹

Reading’s response to these officials clearly shows he worked in the interest of Oakland whites and to the detriment of nonwhites. In May 1968 he claimed schools in the Hills were just as overcrowded as other parts of the city and that “there are more vacancies in West Oakland than anywhere else.” Reading opposed public housing in the Hills area because of the loss of potential tax dollars, as was discussed in the last chapter. Yet a different kind of economic calculus also explains his opposition. Considering the city’s racial attitudes—according to the Hunter report, sixty percent of Oakland whites felt prejudice toward minorities, while one in three would act upon this prejudice in a discriminatory manner—city officials undoubtedly assumed whites did not want to live near minorities, or have their children attend school with them. This assumption could explain Oakland’s severe school segregation—by 1965 seventeen schools were 80-100 percent white, while fifteen were 80-100 percent black. The Supreme Court outlawed “separate but equal” schools several years earlier, but this mattered little to city officials bent on retaining as many wealthy whites as possible. In the mid 60s a new high school was built exclusively for Hill area children. According to Edward Hayes, “CORE and the NAACP vigorously protested the site but to no avail; the school board designated the all white district and built the school.” School and housing segregation were therefore incentives city officials hoped would keep wealthy residents—and their tax dollars—from fleeing Oakland for an all white suburb.⁸⁰

As part of his efforts to shield Oakland’s affluent areas from public housing, Reading tried to pass some of the city’s low rent housing needs onto surrounding communities. He advocated for a regional approach to low-rent housing, saying it “should not be the problem of any one single community” and urged surrounding municipalities to make low-rent housing a priority.⁸¹

One can almost hear suburban homeowner associations laughing at this plea, as the communities near Oakland were constantly fighting middle income high density development, such as condominiums, let alone low rent public housing. For example, in 1965 the West Castro Valley Homeowners Association (WCVHA) packed 400 people into a County Board of Supervisors meeting to protest a planned seven acre apartment complex. Joe Van Noy, Chairman of the WCVHA, said “It is against the public interest to zone for apartments in this predominantly single family area.” Although some low income housing developments were built in East Bay suburbs it was only after years of court battles. Incredibly, these are the communities Reading appealed to for help.⁸²

⁷⁹ *Oakland Tribune* 26 May 1968

⁸⁰ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 68

⁸¹ *Oakland Tribune* 1 September 1968

⁸² Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 278-79

In 1968 the *Tribune* reported the public housing waiting list was at 1,600 people— up from 600 in 1964—suggesting the city government was more concerned about protecting property values than providing decent housing for low income people.⁸³

Oakland’s nonwhite community grew increasingly frustrated by the city government’s apathy toward building the 2,500 units. In August 1967, the *California Voice* reported the Oakland Emergency Action Committee— a group that advocated for poor and non white citizens— sent a strongly worded letter to the Mayor and city council, accusing them of a “shocking lack of civic responsibility” for not moving quickly to implement the voters’ will.⁸⁴

Reading apparently ignored this frustration. Over a year later he still seemed intent on stalling the planning and building of new units, as shown by comments made to the *Tribune* where he ignored the advice of various city agencies. In October 1968 he complained there were no plans to build scattered public housing units in West Oakland, which he claimed was an ideal place because there was little pressure on schools. A Housing Authority spokesman said there were no plans for additional units in West Oakland because of prohibitions on “perpetuating racial ghettos with the new units” and because the Oak Center and Acorn redevelopment projects will fill schools to capacity. Reading even had the gall to say, “If you’re going to truly have scattered housing, let’s scatter it all over the city.” All over the city— except the Hills area, of course.⁸⁵

Oakland’s zoning laws sided with Reading. According to a May 1968 *Tribune* article, “Land costs and zoning now prohibits building public housing in the hill area.”⁸⁶ Zoning regulations also channeled industrial development toward the city’s traditional industrial areas-- West Oakland and Port of Oakland land along the Bay in East Oakland. These areas had fostered industrial growth since the turn of the century because they doubled as the city’s transportation hubs. West Oakland became the terminus of the first transcontinental railroad in 1869, encouraging dozens of manufacturing and processing industries to develop. Significant port improvements during the early 1900s attracted more industry, including auto assembly plants for several major car companies. Port of Oakland land was solely industrial, but thousands of immigrants and working class people lived in West Oakland, close to blue collar jobs on the docks, with the railroad or in the neighborhood’s many factories and warehouses. By 1940 West Oakland was the city’s oldest and poorest area, and thus the primary destination for the thousands of nonwhites who moved to Oakland over the next three decades. These factors also made West Oakland the ideal area— from the city’s point of view— to route three major freeways and a rapid transit line, leading a 1969 federal study to conclude “parts of [the] West Oakland area performs a significant role as a major transportation hub.” Such a role brought significant hardships on area residents; according to the study “several of the residential neighborhoods are cut off from one another by the double decked Nimitz freeway.”⁸⁷

Post war city planners continued to use West Oakland and Port of Oakland land to house Oakland’s industry. In the first edition of the Oakland General Plan, developed in 1959, about forty percent of West Oakland—land west of the Grove Shafter freeway to the Bay— was zoned for industrial use, although there was also residential housing in the area. Port of Oakland land

⁸³ *Oakland Tribune*, 1 September 1968, 24 September 1964

⁸⁴ *California Voice* 25 August 1967

⁸⁵ *Oakland Tribune* 23 October 1968

⁸⁶ *Oakland Tribune* 26 May 1968

⁸⁷ *Oakland Tribune* 26 May 1968; Johnson, *The Second Gold Rush: Oakland and the East Bay in World War II*, 14, 19; *West Oakland 701 Sub-Area Report*, May 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

remained exclusively industrial. The 1967 edition of the Plan mandated all new industrial growth occur in West Oakland or Port of Oakland land, and that the small pockets of industry located in other parts of the city be relocated in these two areas “in the interest of more harmonious and economical land use.” City officials were clearly concerned about industry disrupting life in most parts of the city, but not West Oakland. In 1959 the Oakland Redevelopment Agency said West Oakland needed “at least 1,100 acres of new industrial land if Oakland is to maintain its regional industrial position, provide jobs for its citizens, and support its economy.”⁸⁸

It makes sense that the Redevelopment Agency was not concerned about industry affecting quality of life in West Oakland, as it had designated the entire neighborhood as “blighted.” Since West Oakland borders downtown, city officials believed this blight hurt the city’s main business area, and had statistics to prove it: between 1955 and 1960 downtown property values decreased by fifty percent, while the area’s retail share out of the East Bay as a whole fell from eighteen percent to nine percent between 1948 and 1962. Department store sales dropped from forty percent to twenty percent during this time.⁸⁹

Suburban development also helped cause the above statistics, but was something city officials could not control. Conversely West Oakland’s blight could be controlled, which the Redevelopment Agency planned to do with the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan, approved in 1959. The Plan proposed several urban renewal projects for the area, which would create “a more desirable physical and social environment for an existing and future West Oakland population” and “reinforce the vitality of the downtown area, creating new job opportunities and a new tax base.” When these two priorities conflicted—which was often, as housing does not spur industrial development—business interests usually took precedence over the public interest.⁹⁰

This pro-business ideology was encouraged and subsidized by the federal government. The liberal dominated congress of the late 1940s emphasized public and private low income housing during the renovation of cities. When a conservative dominated congress took power in 1954 this policy was quickly abandoned, and urban renewal was reconfigured to spur cooperation between local governments and developers. Legislation made it easier for cities to acquire and clear property, and encouraged industrial and commercial development over housing, especially low income housing. According to the historian Robert Self, urban renewal became a “federal-local partnership” in which the federal government “financed nearly everything local cities and developers wanted.” Catherine Bauer, former Professor at the University of California- Berkeley, agrees. She contended urban renewal began as a program to build new housing for low income groups but became “a program to rebuild downtown.”⁹¹

Professor Bauer may have had Oakland in mind when she wrote the above sentence. The city’s most powerful business group-- the Oakland Citizens Committee for Urban Renewal (OCCUR) —was extremely influential in ensuring urban renewal benefited the business community. Comprised of representatives from the city’s large banks, the Downtown Property Owners Association, the Real Estate Board and the Chamber of Commerce, among other businesses and associations, OCCUR viewed urban renewal as plan for economic revival, not as

⁸⁸ *Oakland General Plan*, 1959, 1967. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 140

⁸⁹ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 139

⁹⁰ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 140, 150

⁹¹ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 142-143

a means to solve social problems. The group had little sympathy for the social problems of the day. In a 1962 letter to the Oakland city manager an OCCUR member complained about the alarming number of “culturally disadvantaged” people settling in the city, many of whom “did not want to better themselves, many are mentally incapable of bettering themselves even with assistance ... many prefer to live a life of dependency on relief and do not consider this morally wrong.”⁹²

Oakland’s first urban renewal project, Acorn, translated this insensitivity into action. Fifty blocks, or 190 acres, of West Oakland’s worst slum was condemned, destroying 1,790 housing units. By 1969 twenty industrial firms were on the site-- including Mack Trucks Inc., Pacific Telephone and the US Plywood Corporation-- representing \$10 million dollars in private investment. Even though this new development was only on thirty- three acres, its tax yield was greater than the entire 190 acre area prior to redevelopment. This was essential from the city’s perspective because it used these new tax dollars to recoup the initial \$500,000 investment made in the Acorn project. (The federal government provided the remainder of the financing.) Yet the first new housing units were not built until 1968, and were middle income units, with rents ranging from \$67 a month for a studio apartment to \$145 a month for a four bedroom apartment. Only ten percent of the 479 unit development was reserved for low income people.⁹³

Hunter reported that many were “deprived of a home in one poor section, only to be relocated, as some have contended, in as objectionable surroundings” and that they believed Acorn “like earlier demolition projects in Richmond and Berkeley, was intended to drive minorities from the community.” Evidence suggests these accusations reflected city policy, to a certain extent. Nat Frankel, chairman of the Redevelopment Agency in the late 60s, said “the chief interest” of Acorn property “is in industrial reuse and commercial. This is attractive. This is marketable. You can always sell it. It brings jobs, it brings money, it increases taxes.” The Acorn project’s main purpose was to spur economic growth, explaining why it replaced a slum bordering downtown with middle income housing. A Redevelopment Agency report said “Oakland’s central business district is expected to benefit from this higher per capita purchasing power for consumer goods resulting from the renewal of Oak Center... Acorn and Corridor projects.” The city was determined to eradicate the slum. Every structure in the Acorn area was destroyed except a church, a mortuary and one house used as the Redevelopment Agency’s field house, even though a city survey found many of the houses could have been rehabilitated. During the planning for Acorn, the area was split up into seven sections. In two of the sections, seventy percent of the structures were “substandard” and thus warranted destruction. In the remaining five districts sixty percent of more of the structures were “standard” and thus could be rehabilitated.⁹⁴

This urban renewal philosophy was not new to city officials. Andrew Heiskell, conservative publisher of *Life Magazine* expressed similar sentiments when the Chamber of Commerce invited him to speak in Oakland in the late 1950s. “Urban renewal has a practical business side... slums mean crime and social problems and to a businessman this is important...

⁹² Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 91; Author unknown, *OCCUR Letter to City Manager Wayne Thompson*, June 1962. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

⁹³ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 78; Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 148; *Fact Sheet: Industrial and Commercial Development, Acorn Project*, IGS Library, UC Berkeley; *Oakland Tribune* 8 October 1968; *California Voice* 20 September 1968

⁹⁴ Hunter, *Housing Discrimination in Oakland, California, 1963- 64*. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 148; Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 109, 116

people living in bad houses do not make good customers,” he asserted. Those who live in low income housing also “are not likely to demand higher standards in food, clothing, books and entertainment and a host of other things contributing to the ever-higher economy our way of life requires.”⁹⁵

Oakland’s urban renewal projects show how the conservative city government encouraged business interests to significantly influence civic affairs. With private industry constantly leaving the city, officials probably felt they had to work extra hard to convince businesses to stay, resulting in policies that consistently placed business interests over the public interest. According to a 1974 *Montclarion* article, Oakland’s Senior Planner said the city’s industrial zoning was the “‘most permissive’ of any city in the bay area, including Emeryville, regarded as almost wholly industrial.” Considering much of West Oakland was zoned for industrial use since at least 1957, residents had to live “side by side with factories and saw mills” while financial institutions refused to give them “home improvement loans because of the industrial zoning,” according to the article. The city council finally passed an ordinance “downzoning” the area, which more closely regulated future industrial growth, inducing a “cheer... from the west Oakland residents” in the council chamber. Mayor Reading was the only councilor to oppose the ordinance. He was “deeply concerned” over how the planning commission warned of zoning changes, and said absentee property owners are usually not notified by the process. This was after thirteen community meetings and several planning commission meetings were devoted to the topic over a year’s time. Planning staff also hung fliers and notices around the area, and mailed notices to 700 businesses. According to the *Montclarion*, Reading still proposed “‘going back and getting some input’ from industry.”⁹⁶

The Oakland General Plan had made several proposals concerning industrial regulation in 1959, including mandatory “buffer areas” between industry and residential housing formed by some combination of off street parking, general commercial uses and parks. The Plan also maintained “...living areas must be designed for beauty, safety and quiet and protected against the noise, traffic and confusion found in working areas” necessitating that “industrial nuisances such as smoke, dust, odors and noise” be “adequately controlled.” The *Montclarion* article suggests Oakland failed to meet these proposals, a conclusion reinforced by a 1969 federal study which found the proximity of factories, railroads and freeways subjected West Oakland residential areas to “the powerful blighting influences of industrial noise and truck traffic.”⁹⁷

Oakland’s government ensured urban renewal benefited the city’s white and business communities. In the late 50s and early 60s the city restored approximately fifty blocks of homes, built a new school and a new junior college in primarily white areas around Lake Merrit. Between West Oakland and downtown, seventy blocks were designated for future highway construction, underground Bay Area Rapid Transit lines and a massive office/retail/entertainment complex. About two-thirds of the financing for these projects came from the federal government. Oakland paid for the rest, but officials predicted that money spent by the city “can be repaid from taxes arising out of the increased valuation of the renewed property.” Clearly increasing property tax revenue was the main objective of urban renewal, explaining why

⁹⁵ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 114

⁹⁶ *Montclarion*, 5 August 1974. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

⁹⁷ *Oakland General Plan*, 1959, 1967. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; *West Oakland 701 Sub-Area Report*, May 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

low income housing was demolished in West Oakland, while white houses near Lake Merritt were rehabilitated.⁹⁸

Other Oakland “civic” projects also hurt poor and nonwhite interests. The Bay Area Rapid Transit system, like East Bay freeways, benefited Oakland as a whole. Suburbanites could easily travel in and out of the city, which officials hoped would spur economic activity, while private industry made immense construction profits. Yet the project was detrimental to the poor and nonwhite neighborhoods the transit lines were routed through, as approximately 450 housing units were destroyed. Compensation was provided to property owners, but it was based on the market value of the property, which is usually lower than the owner could receive on the private market. For example, BART bought some houses in West Oakland for under \$7,500, about half of the cost of a new home in the Bay Area. The grassroots newspaper *Flatlands* complained “BART feels that the property owners should not expect very much money for their property because their neighborhood is run down... fair market value can only be meaningless and cruel to a poor retired couple living in a mortgage free \$10,000 house which cannot be replaced for \$10,000.”⁹⁹

BART also provided little job opportunities for nonwhites. Construction began in 1966, but it took a year of protest for Oakland minorities to be guaranteed even a small share of the project’s 8,000 construction jobs. In 1967 blacks comprised twenty percent of workers, but most were unskilled laborers as only two percent of apprentices and less than five percent of office workers were black. These meager gains were secured by the Department of Housing and Urban Development as part of a plan that encouraged unions to recruit minority apprentices and contracts for minority owned firms. The plan prescribed only voluntary compliance by unions though, explaining why so few nonwhites were hired.¹⁰⁰

The various urban renewal projects epitomize how federal policy and the city government worked in the interest of businesses and white people and to the detriment of nonwhites. Hunter estimates, using 1960 statistics, that it would cost \$123,000,000 to replace Oakland’s 3,250 dilapidated structures and rehabilitate its 14,000 deteriorating structures, only six percent of BART’s projected cost. Instead of rehabilitation, the city government choose to replace deteriorating neighborhoods with industry or middle class housing to increase property values and tax revenue. Self notes this aspect of American political economy was “always evident” through the postwar years: “restoring property values was easier, and a higher priority, than sustaining human communities.”¹⁰¹

Many poor residents took exception to the city’s priorities. Mrs. Beatrice Slider told the *Tribune* in September 1968 that “Acorn did more damage than good. A lot of homes there could have been rehabilitated.” She knew part of reason why homes were destroyed instead of repaired. “The trouble is, low income families can’t get financing to repair their homes,” she said. A report by the Community Organizations United for Progress agreed with Slider’s assessment. “...large areas of Oakland (principally poverty areas) are almost completely cut off from financing,” the report said.¹⁰²

⁹⁸ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 140-141

⁹⁹ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 78; *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 193,194

¹⁰⁰ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 191, 197

¹⁰¹ Hunter, *Housing Discrimination in Oakland, California*, 1963- 64. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 136

¹⁰² *Oakland Tribune*, 1 September 1968

Edward Hayes argues the city government and private lending institutions were to blame for this lack of financing. According to Hayes, soon after the city notified West Oakland residents of impending urban renewal action in their neighborhood, lending institutions made “credit all but unobtainable in the blocks west of MacArthur Freeway.” Hayes also quotes Wade Johnson, President of the United Taxpayers and Voters Union, as saying in 1966, “There was \$50 million in Federal money available from the Federal Housing Administration for low-interest loans and with twenty-five years for repayment” if the “City Council would give the green light.” Yet according to Hayes the council never gave the “green light” preventing poor homeowners from receiving loans to repair their houses. When nonwhites were able to obtain loans, it usually had less favorable terms than those typically given to whites. Hunter quoted a real estate informant as saying, “Banks frequently will refuse to make loans in certain areas, forcing applicant to go elsewhere where interest rates are higher and more points are required.” Black lending institutions usually could not provide better terms, as “their more limited market and greater economic risk require higher interest rates and more points on a shorter term.”¹⁰³

Lack of financing contributed to the condemnation of many homes for building code violations—2,250 units between 1955 and 1965, with new industrial development replacing many of the demolished houses. OCCUR was the main group lobbying for a strengthened housing code as a way to battle blight, but the businessmen cared little about those whose homes were demolished, as residents were provided no relocation services. The Oakland Redevelopment Agency estimated 900 families were displaced by this code enforcement.¹⁰⁴

The city’s apathetic and pro-business ideology toward low income housing left minorities disproportionately affected by Oakland’s housing woes: seventeen percent of black and fifteen percent of Hispanic households were overcrowded, compared with only two percent of white households. Poor whites thus had far superior housing than poor nonwhites, as 40 percent of whites made under \$6,000 a year, which the city considered living in “deprivation.” Oakland’s city government caused this disparity as decades of public policy decisions destroyed many low income minority areas. Residents could not stop the destruction. Oakland’s at-large election system had politically marginalized the city’s minorities since its inception in 1953. The at-large system allowed Oakland’s conservative elements—namely the *Tribune* and white homeowners—to control all seven city council seats, even though whites comprised seventy-three percent of the population in 1960 and lived primarily outside the four neighborhoods classified as poverty districts which constituted a majority of the city’s area.¹⁰⁵

This system disenfranchised poor, nonwhite and Democratic residents, as during much of the 1960s, Oakland’s four districts with Democratic majorities were represented by Republicans. For example, in 1963 Republican Howard Rilea beat Democrat Atkin Brown for West Oakland’s city council seat by 7,463 votes, even though roughly 3,000 more West Oakland residents voted for Brown over Rilea.¹⁰⁶

The *Tribune* worked tirelessly every election to perpetuate this conservative domination. The paper did not run a traditional political “machine,” but according to historian Robert Self the

¹⁰³ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 109; Hunter, *Discrimination in Oakland*, CA. 1963- 64, IGS Library, UC Berkeley

¹⁰⁴ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 78-80

¹⁰⁵ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 46; *Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley
<http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland50.htm>

¹⁰⁶ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 293; *League of Women Voters documents*, 1968. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

Tribune's endorsement “was something akin to an anointing process.” Due to its at-large election system, Oakland politics were expensive and depended on newspaper advertising and coverage. “...anyone who wished to be considered a serious candidate for the council had to have citywide recognition,” according to Self. Since the *Tribune* was Oakland’s only major daily paper it could easily provide favorable coverage for conservatives and unfavorable coverage for liberals.¹⁰⁷

City wide campaigns were usually quite expensive. According to City Hall data compiled by the League of Women Voters, seven of the ten councilors elected between 1965 and 1967 spent over \$1,000 on their campaigns and four spent over \$3,000, while two mayoral campaigns cost over \$8,000. For reference, the Oakland median income in 1959 was \$6,303. Such astronomical costs forced many candidates to rely on powerful business and real estate interests. Mayor John Reading spent \$16,258 during his successful 1969 campaign, during which he raised over \$10,000 at a single “testimonial dinner” and received over \$7,000 in additional donations. He was thus able to save a considerable amount of money for his next campaign.¹⁰⁸

Once elected, councilors were often around for a while. Between 1953 and 1968 only five of thirty-four city council incumbents were defeated; twelve of these incumbents ran unopposed. The council also appointed nine new members between 1953 and 1968, none of whom lost their reelection bid. The majority of these councilors were conservative, meaning they were pro-business and worked to preserve white political and economic domination of Oakland. Councilors’ conservative credentials are shown by the support they received from the *Tribune*: between 1941 and 1965 only five candidates were elected to the city council more than once without the *Tribune's* support.¹⁰⁹

Such a system produced intense frustration among Oakland’s black community. An editorial before the 1967 city election in the *California Voice*, Oakland’s black newspaper, lamented that “two of our well known West Oakland citizens are vying with each other (and a white incumbent) for the city council from that district- which means the white incumbent will be a shoo-in... without even a light campaign.” The writer was clearly disillusioned and bitter about city politics, indicative of the consistent electoral failures of nonwhite candidates.¹¹⁰

Initially the writer was proved correct. Howard Rilea, the “white incumbent” received over 15,600 more votes than the second and third place candidates, the two “well known Oakland citizens.” Yet Raymond Eng, a Chinese- American doctor, polled enough votes to force a run-off election, which he won. Eng became the first Asian American to serve on the city council and an anomaly in Oakland politics-- he beat an incumbent, and did so without *Tribune* support.¹¹¹

The Defeat of Proposition M

In 1968 Oakland liberals, led by the League of Women Voters, challenged the conservative political system that had dominated the city for decades. In the summer of 1968

¹⁰⁷ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 64

¹⁰⁸ *League of Women Voters document*, 1968. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library; <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland50.htm>; *Oakland Tribune*, 3 June 1969

¹⁰⁹ *League of Women Voters documents*, 1968. Oakland History Room, elections file, Oakland Public Library; Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 31.

¹¹⁰ *California Voice* 14 April 1967

¹¹¹ *League of Women Voters documents*, 1968. Oakland History Room, Elections file, Oakland Public Library

they pressured the city council to place Proposition M-- which would replace Oakland's at large election system with a ward system-- on the November ballot. Prop M threatened *Tribune*-conservative power, as at large elections often allowed Oakland's white majority to elect conservative Republicans to all seven city councilor seats.¹¹²

The *Tribune* knew the danger Prop M posed to its influence over Oakland, explaining the unfavorable coverage of the measure. The paper contended ward elections would produce a less responsive government because citizens could only vote for two councilmen instead of all eight as the at-large system allowed. Also, councilors would only work for the "selfish" interests of their districts to the detriment of the city as a whole. An editorial a week before the election warned "civic unity and responsible city government" are victims of ward systems which produce "constant and chronic political turmoil that could paralyze effective government."¹¹³

News articles displayed a similar editorial slant. One headline proclaimed "Prop M. will bar 100,000 voters"; the lead explained that over 100,000 registered voters could not vote in the 1969 city elections if Prop M passed because only three terms were expiring. The article noted voters had enjoyed the right to vote for all councilors "since the ward system was tossed out by the people 58 years ago"; with the ward system voters "would have no voice whatever in the selection of six members of the council—and this is a two-thirds majority."¹¹⁴

Another supposed news article said the at-large system provides district representation because councilors are required to live in the district they are elected from, but also "citywide responsibility" as councilors must be responsive to all city voters. A ward system, on the other hand, makes councilors "concerned only with pleasing the voters of his own area." The article noted derisively that even after 58 years of at large elections "the desire for neighborhood boss control still exists."¹¹⁵

It is likely Prop M would have been defeated even without the *Tribune's* harsh condemnations, as it lost by nearly 27,000 votes. Like the *Tribune*, Oakland's white majority knew Prop M threatened their domination of city politics, and thus voted overwhelmingly against it. In five largely white areas of the city— in and around the Hills, and in the high rent apartment district bordering Lake Merritt—less than a third of voters supported Prop M. Conversely nonwhites voted for the initiative in significant numbers. The four areas where Prop M passed were all more than half black, including West Oakland, where the measure passed by fifty-eight percent, and North Oakland west of Telegraph Ave, where it passed by fifty-four percent.¹¹⁶

The *Tribune* was entitled to its opinion, but the historical record agrees more with a League of Women Voters member, who told the city council "Large numbers of Oakland residents... are inadequately represented by councilmen whose election depends on political and financial support of the city as a whole."¹¹⁷

Inadequately represented may be an understatement. The city government routinely used its power to benefit affluent whites— including homeowner, business and real estate interests— often at the expense of nonwhite people. Since nonwhite areas were poor, dilapidated and politically marginalized, they were easily expendable. This explains the three freeways and the Bay Area Rapid Transit Line that traversed West Oakland. Clearly city officials used the

¹¹² Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 293

¹¹³ *Oakland Tribune* 27 October 1968

¹¹⁴ *Oakland Tribune* 31 October 1968

¹¹⁵ *Oakland Tribune* 30 October 1968

¹¹⁶ Pat Heavey, *Summary of Proposition M Voting Analysis*, Citizens for Responsive Government, 11 December 1968. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library.

¹¹⁷ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 294

neighborhood to facilitate the regional dispersion of people and goods, beneficial to Oakland as a whole, but extremely damaging to West Oakland residents. A federal survey of the area found factories, railroads and freeways made residences “subject to the powerful blighting influences of industrial noise and truck traffic... several of the residential neighborhoods are cut off from one another by the double decked Nimitz freeway.”¹¹⁸

The West Oakland described above seems to contradict the General Neighborhood Renewal Plan, which asserted “Freeways should be so located as to skirt rather than cut through residential neighborhoods.” Considering the Plan also encouraged the city “to work closely with the state in determining precise routes and designs” its clear the council either supported the final routes or did not object to the state Highway Commission’s initial plans.¹¹⁹

If they had objected, the final routes may have been changed. After three years of battling the Highway Commission, the city of Fremont successfully prevented a freeway from being built where a park and civic center were planned.¹²⁰ The Oakland city council refused to fight for West Oakland citizens in this way. Freeways were going to be built through Oakland no matter what, making it in the council’s interest to route them through poor and nonwhite areas.

The city government was apathetic toward many other poor and nonwhite interests. In 1967 the council refused to grant the Oakland Emergency Action Committee a hearing to discuss unemployment and police- community relations. In a letter to the *California Voice*, the Committee noted that of 13,000 unemployed Oakland residents, “at least three-fourths of whom are from the black community” and “police practices” had caused “deep seated resentment” among many people. The Committee also reported that they had forwarded the city council over 300 letters from Oakland residents urging action on these issues. By May 1968 the Mayor and city council still had not taken action on these issues, inducing clergy members to hold a silent protest outside city hall everyday at noon “waiting for a council response.” The clergy said the protests would continue “until the walls of council indifference come tumbling down.”¹²¹

The council also ignored those whose house or apartment was demolished; according to Citizens Committee on Housing documents, in 1966 “the Redevelopment Agency had attempted to interest the city council in setting up a comprehensive relocation service but have been unsuccessful.” Compensation was provided to property owners, but it was based on the market value of the property, which is usually lower than the owner could receive on the private market.¹²²

A Tale of Two Cities

The Black Panther Party argued Oakland was a colony of East Bay suburbs; a similar relationship existed between the two sides of Oakland— the poor, primarily nonwhite poverty target areas and the affluent and largely white area in and around the Hills. In 1966 the Oakland Hills was the largest, most populous and most affluent area in the city. It had a median income of \$11,506, almost double the poverty area median income of \$6,087, and only two percent of

¹¹⁸ *West Oakland 701 Sub-Area Report*, May 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

¹¹⁹ *Oakland General Plan*, 1967. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

¹²⁰ *Oakland Tribune* 1 September 1964

¹²¹ *California Voice* 3 November 1967, 28 June 1968

¹²² Citizens Committee on Housing, *Minutes*, 9 June 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library; Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 81

residents lived below the poverty line. Housing was also significantly better—between 1960 and 1966 the median value of owner occupied single family homes increased 54 percent to 30,200, while making up eighty-eight percent of all housing units. Only four percent of housing units were in deteriorating buildings. Poor and affluent areas were separated by race as well; by 1966 poverty areas were seventy-seven percent nonwhite in 1966, while the Oakland Hills was eighty-two percent white.¹²³

Many factors contributed to this unnatural and disproportionate growth, including innumerable public policy decisions. While the city approved highways through West Oakland, it built schools in primarily white areas, as was discussed earlier in the chapter. Private industry also fueled the Hills's growth, as middle and upper class home construction was extremely profitable—in 1949 construction companies that built over 100 homes enjoyed a thirty percent return on investment—meaning developers concentrated most heavily on this growing demographic. This was true across the country, including Oakland. Over seventy percent of the 2,334 new single family dwellings constructed in the city between 1960 and 1965 were constructed in six census tracts that were among the lowest density and highest income. Conversely, the four densest tracts in West Oakland had a total of ten new houses built during the same period. Apartment construction occurred in similar fashion. Between 1960 and 1965 over 4,000 new apartment units were built in the six census tracts north of Lake Merritt, an area where rents were as high as \$300, which were extremely expensive considering average one bedroom apartment rents in 1968 were between \$90 and \$125. Only 210 new units were built in West Oakland, even though it had the city's greatest housing shortage.¹²⁴

Such extreme disparities between white and nonwhite sections of Oakland stem from the city's support of housing discrimination and its racist zoning laws. Here we should remember Juanita Barnes, a West Oakland public housing tenant who complained that the population density in her project was too large. "We have 77 apartments with more than 300 children in our two block project and it's pretty hard on the nerves," she said. "I think this new scattered housing is the ideal solution, smaller projects and the chance to raise a few flowers." It wasn't by accident Barnes lacked the space to even raise a few flowers, as a map in the 1959 edition of the Oakland General Plan proves. The map splits the city up into different zoning areas. West Oakland is either zoned as "very high density residential" "industrial" or "general commercial." Conversely ninety percent of the Oakland Hills is zoned as "low density residential" and ten percent as "public open space" or "park or recreation area." This zoning pattern had several benefits, according to a 1963 city planning document. Population densities were shaped "to preserve the character of our low density neighborhoods and channel population growth into areas more suitable for apartments." Property values were also protected "by preventing the establishment of incompatible activities and unsightly or otherwise injurious facilities." Clearly West Oakland was an area "suitable" for apartments, while the Oakland Hills was a low density neighborhood that needed its "character" preserved. Tax revenue explains why the city treated the two areas so differently. West Oakland was the poorest area of the city, and thus generated little property tax revenue for the city. Conversely the Oakland Hills was by far the most affluent area of the city, and thus generated the most tax revenue. To maintain property values in the Oakland Hills, the city kept the area racially and socially exclusive and prevented "unsightly and injurious facilities" —such as freeways, industrial development and public housing—from

¹²³ *Oakland Hills 701 Sub Area Report*, May 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; *Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

¹²⁴ Hayes, *Power Structure and Urban Policy: Who Rules in Oakland?*, 60, 61, 66

locating in the area. Since the city considered West Oakland “blighted” it was the perfect place to route freeways, locate industry and house thousands of poor and nonwhite people. All of these things lower property values, so it made sense to confine them in one area and thus protect property values in the rest of Oakland. The city obviously had little concern for those who suffered from this economic calculus.¹²⁵

Evidence presented in this chapter suggests the at-large election system and the conservative city government it produced was responsible for fueling disparate growth between Oakland’s white and nonwhite sections. Public policy actively discriminated against poor and minority people and condoned discrimination by private industry, both of which were needed for white areas to grow at the expense of nonwhite areas.

Conclusion

Government policy shaped the life expectations of all people who grew up in the post war generation. All Juanita Barnes wanted was enough room to raise a few flowers, a relatively modest aspiration. Conversely federal mortgage guarantee programs conditioned many middle class whites to believe they were entitled to a home and to live in a community that protected their home’s value. Joe Van Noy, Chairman of the West Castro Valley Homeowners Association, provides a good example of his mindset. He opposed apartments in Castro Valley because “It is against the public interest to zone for apartments in this predominantly single family area.” Van Noy would argue that apartments are against the “public interest” because they threaten property values. In reality, apartments are against “homeowner interests” not the “public interest.” Apartments provide a home to those unable or unwilling to buy a house; clearly these people are part of the “public.” Yet as far as Van Noy was concerned, they had no right to live in his community. The difference between Barnes and Van Noy is shocking. Barnes simply wanted to be treated like a human being, while Van Noy seemed to think the government should guarantee him a community of white homeowners.¹²⁶

The Oakland city government’s treatment of poor and nonwhite residents conditioned many public housing tenants to have the same aspiration as Barnes. In June 1965, Oakland Housing Authority (OHA) crews began destroying tenant gardens and backyard fences in East Oakland’s Lockwood Gardens housing project. The OHA said the destruction was a “beautification” project that would replace individual tenant areas with open turf. Tenants responded by forming a “human fence” around the remaining fences that prevented further

¹²⁵ *Oakland Tribune* 1 September 1968, 26 May 1968; City Planning Department, *Modern Zoning for Oakland – A Summary and Guide for the Proposed Oakland Zoning Regulations*, 1963. IGS Library, UC Berkeley

¹²⁶ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 279

destruction. OHA crews then began destroying fences at Peralta Villa Housing Project in West Oakland, provoking another tenant “human fence.” Peralta’s tenant association successfully picketed the Alameda County Labor Council—which furnished the OHA demolition crews as part of a summer job corps program—to stop the destruction until the situation was resolved.¹²⁷

A Peralta Villa tenant letter to Sargent Shriver, Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, explained beautification was so vehemently opposed because tenants bought “at a small cost the standard size pickets for fences” from the OHA and constructed the fence themselves. “Therefore when fences begin to be ripped down, this represents a big financial loss to tenants,” the letter said. Many tenants also said fences provided a safe play area for their children. The *Tribune* quoted William Goetz, a Lockwood Gardens resident, as saying the fences protected children from the development’s “many social problems.” “Our children have no place to play,” he said. “The front yards are pleasing to the eye but the 700 children who live in the project can’t play there.”¹²⁸

The fence destruction did not follow the proclaimed guidelines of the housing authority. Another Peralta Villa tenant letter to the Director of the Public Housing Administration (PHA) complained bitterly that PHA policy stated beautification should “contribute to the emotional growth and spirit of our tenants” and that local Authorities should “co-operate, and even initiate if necessary, with local citizen advisory committees.” According to the author, these edicts were “totally neglected in our housing project this summer” as the OHA destroyed fences at both Peralta Villa and Lockwood gardens without consulting tenants first, causing “great financial and spiritual loss.”¹²⁹

The response to these complaints incensed tenants even more, as the OHA refused to compensate tenants for the destroyed fences. A November 1966 newsletter of the Peralta Improvement League (PIL), the project’s tenant association, said they had forced the OHA to change their fence policy three times: from (1) all fences being torn down to (2) fences being torn down when tenants move out to (3) no more fence destruction, and tenants can again buy materials and construct new fences. “Well this still isn’t good enough,” the newsletter proclaimed. “OHA will change its fence policy a fourth time to read that they will rebuild our fences. Remember Mr. Commissioner! We have changed your policy three times already- and there are more changes coming!”¹³⁰

The OHA may have conceded to tenant demands, but it seems like the housing commissioners cared little about tenant opinions or feelings. The newsletter lambasted Guichard, a particularly reviled commissioner, for failing to appear at several public forums to which he was invited: an Oakland Town Meeting, a meeting of the Oakland Improvement league (of which the PIL was a member) and a special program on housing being prepared by Channel 2. The newsletter said the Commissioners, as public servants, are supposed to be answerable to the public. “But they are afraid of the public eye,” the newsletter said. “They act like they have something to hide! As tenants we know this is exactly the case! They do have a lot to hide!”¹³¹

When housing commissioners did interact with tenants, it was often to belittle them. During a Board of Commissioners meeting in February, a Commissioner called Richard York—

¹²⁷ Unnamed public housing tenant, *Letter to Director of the Public Housing Administration*, July 1965. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

¹²⁸ Unnamed public housing tenant, *Letter to Sargent Shriver*, 24 July 1965. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library; *Oakland Tribune* 13 July 1965

¹²⁹ Unnamed public housing tenant, *Letter to Director of the Public Housing Administration*, July 1965.

¹³⁰ *PIL Newsletter*, November 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

¹³¹ *PIL Newsletter*, November 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

a representative of the PIL—a “cockroach” and an “emulator of Hitler, Stalin and Khrushchev.” York wrote a letter to the city council, complaining that since the PIL began attending Board meetings, “we have had to undergo such rank insults regularly. Tenants have been repeatedly abused, insulted and interrupted while attempting to address the board.”¹³²

Other tenants viewed the Commissioners with equal disfavor. “They (the housing commissioners) do as they please,” said a Peralta Villa tenant interviewed by the PIL. “When you go to see the manager you can never see him or even get him on the phone. He’s afraid to face us.” Another tenant interviewed by the PIL agreed. “You never get a fair discussion with the housing commissioners. You are always turned aside. There is just no consideration.” Still another guessed most people don’t complain because “If they gripe they are afraid they would be put out.”¹³³

Tenants seemed most upset about the fence destruction—one person said it was the “main issue” — but they had many other grievances as well. A March 1966 PIL newsletter complained the OHA only provided a three day eviction notice, and demanded a thirty day notice. A November 1966 newsletter said commissioners tried to ban unwed mothers and their children from public housing, but could not because the Attorney General ruled such discrimination illegal. The newsletter gleefully reported “A number of commissioners were quite upset, but its illegal and that’s that!” The same newsletter also reported the Commissioners finally abolished the ban on tenants having freezers, which were previously forbidden because they were a “luxury item not in keeping with the principles of public housing.”¹³⁴

Evidence suggests the various concessions Commissioners made to tenants was due to pressure from superiors, not due to concern for tenant welfare. In her response to tenant complaints about the OHA fence policy, Marie McGuire, Commissioner of the Public Housing Administration, wrote “this problem [the fences] is by no means settled” and assured tenants that the San Francisco Regional Office is working “to find a reasonable solution acceptable to all concerned.” McGuire wrote this letter after the OHA had amended its fence policy three times, suggesting Washington may have forced Commissioners to accede to the final tenant demand and pay for the destroyed fences.¹³⁵

Even with such problems the public housing waiting list was at 1,600 people in 1968, indicating how terrible Oakland’s low income housing situation was. Several main factors contributed to the woes of Oakland’s poor and non white population. Oakland experienced a massive influx of non white people after World War II— from 14,227 in 1940 to 148,049 in 1970. The city government responded to this dramatic demographic shift by successfully maintaining the status quo from 1940— when whites possessed complete control of Oakland’s economic and political power—as Oakland’s nonwhite population increased. The at-large election system provided the city government this power, as it allowed Oakland’s white majority to elect the mayor and the entire city council. Therefore it made sense for the city government to govern in the interest of whites and to the detriment of nonwhites. This political calculus manifested itself in several ways. Freeway construction and new commercial and industrial development occurred primarily in poor and nonwhite slums, and the city neglected to provide

¹³² Richard York, *Letter to Oakland City Council*, 15 February 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

¹³³ *PIL interviews with Peralta Villa tenants*, undated. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library.

¹³⁴ *PIL Newsletter*, March 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library; *PIL Newsletter*, November 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

¹³⁵ *PIL Newsletter*, November 1966. Oakland History Room, Oakland Public Library

adequate amounts of low income housing. As the above evidence about life in public housing shows, the city also cared little for the human rights of poor and nonwhite residents.¹³⁶

The federal government also helped cause the many woes facing Oakland's nonwhite residents, as several important policies encouraged suburban growth at the expense of urban growth. Federal programs insured over \$115 billion worth of mortgages from the 1930s through the 1960s, almost all for middle class suburban whites. Mortgage insurance made homeownership cheaper than renting a city apartment in many instances, inducing hundreds of thousands to move from cities to suburbs. Oakland followed this trend; 163,000 whites left the city between 1955 and 1966, causing the white population to drop fifty six percent during this time. Jobs and investment followed this massive exodus to suburbs whose racial exclusivity allowed them to set lower tax rates than Oakland. Until the 1960s the federal government supported suburban efforts to maintain racial exclusivity in a misguided effort to protect property values.¹³⁷

This support was essential in developing America's last frontier— suburbs. In other parts of the country suburbs were only the “frontier” in a figurative sense. In the post war East Bay farmland constantly morphed into bustling suburban communities as developers sought to make money from California's real estate boom. Before 1960 San Ramon, about thirty minutes outside Oakland, was farmland. By 1964 it had \$50 million worth of houses, along with a shopping center, eighteen hole golf course, four schools, a medical center and a fire station. Plans called for 10,000 total homes, representing \$300 million of property.¹³⁸

Real estate ads constantly contrasted the freshness of suburbs with urban decline. A 1964 ad for a subdivision in Walnut Creek, about twenty minutes outside Oakland, proclaimed “downtown” had moved to Oak Grove Terrace, which had many advantages over the “old” downtown: its brand new design made “traffic and parking a lark, and shopping a constant joy”; brand new homes, schools, churches, parks and a variety of recreational facilities; “clean and fresh” air and “magnificent” scenery of Mt. Diablo. “But this wealth of conveniences is only a fringe benefit,” the ad continued, for at Oak Grove Terrace one did not have to incur “the old downtown prices.” For just under \$27,000 one could buy a three bedroom, two bath house with FHA financing.¹³⁹ According to a *Tribune* article which advised not buying a house costing more than 2.5 times annual income, one needed to make at least \$10,800 a year to move to Oak Grove Terrace. One also needed to be white. In 1960 one black person lived in Walnut Creek, a population that increased only 279 people by 1980, compromising .5 percent of the population. Considering the median income for white Oakland residents was \$8,505 in 1965, most middle class whites could afford to move from the “old” to the “new” downtown.¹⁴⁰

Therefore the federal government, either through policy or apathy, laid the foundation for Oakland's poverty by emphasizing suburban growth at the city's expense, resulting in inadequate amounts of jobs and investment and a weak middle class. The city government exacerbated these problems by formulating policy designed to maintain white political and economic power, which was detrimental to poor and nonwhite residents.

¹³⁶ *Oakland Tribune* 1 September 1968; <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland70.htm>

¹³⁷ Jackson, *Crabgrass Frontier: The Suburbanization of the United States*, 215-216; Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 166; <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/Oakland50.htm>

¹³⁸ *San Francisco Chronicle* 6 September 1964; *Oakland Tribune* 13 September 1964

¹³⁹ *Oakland Tribune* 12 May 1964

¹⁴⁰ *Oakland Tribune* 20 September 1964; *Oakland in Transition: A Summary of the 701 Household Survey*, June 1969. IGS Library, UC Berkeley; <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/WalnutCreek50.htm>

White domination of Oakland politics ended with the election of Lionel Wilson in 1977, the city's first black mayor. Unfortunately for Oakland's poor and nonwhite citizens, this electoral victory was too little, too late. One year after Wilson's election California voters passed Proposition 13, the nation's first property tax limitation measure, which slashed property taxes by more than fifty percent. Considering local governments and agencies received a majority of their funding through property taxes, such a drastic revenue cut forced municipalities to significantly reduce services. Prop 13 hit Oakland especially hard, as the city had a weak tax base and a large social service burden. Thus just as nonwhites finally acquired political power in Oakland, the value of this power was significantly lessened by reduced city revenues.¹⁴¹

Just as Propositions 14 and M, race defined the vote for Prop 13 in East Bay communities. The measure passed by more than seventy percent in many suburbs and in the Oakland Hills, while Oakland's nonwhite areas voted against it by about seventy percent. The vote breakdown makes sense because whites and nonwhites were simply voting in their own self interest. A Bay Area Urban League member explained that although Prop 13 did not "appear to have an overt racial implication, any cuts in service delivery or any employment layoffs will have an adverse impact on the minority community."¹⁴²

Most white homeowners were either ignorant or apathetic to this argument. For them Prop 13 represented a way to significantly reduce their property taxes, which had risen precipitously during the 1970s as many East Bay suburbs saw median home values rise sixty to ninety percent. This was a dramatic increase considering property values increased about ten to thirty percent from 1960 to 1970. Such burdensome taxes were a threat to the post war suburban status quo, in which homeowners expected low taxes, moderately increasing property values and little fiscal and civic connections to cities and their social problems. Therefore suburban homeowners voted for Prop 13 to ensure their financial security and to reorder California's socio-economic landscape back to "normal." Once again "homeowner politics" flexed its political muscle.¹⁴³

Census figures show East Bay suburbs continued to grow on a segregated basis from 1970 until today. San Ramon's black population increased from fifteen in 1970 to 1,181 in 2007, while the city's total population increased from 4,084 people to 57,104 during this time. Walnut Creek's black population increased from 100 in 1970 to 1,146 in 2007, while the city's total population increased from 39,844 to 65,068 during this time. Conversely over thirty- five percent of Oakland residents were black in 2000, a significant statistic considering only seven percent of California residents are black. Oakland also had nineteen percent of residents living below the poverty line in 2000, compared to fourteen percent for California as a whole. In March 2010 Oakland's unemployment rate was eighteen percent, compared with thirteen percent for California as a whole. Clearly the problems that plagued Oakland throughout the post- war decades—racial segregation, unemployment, poverty etc.—are still present today, while affluent suburban neighbors continue to grow on a segregated basis. The socio-economic consequences of this disparate growth are also similar today as in the post- war era. For example, in 2000 the median home value in Oakland was \$235,500, while in San Ramon it was \$428,700. High property tax revenues and low social service costs—in San Ramon only two percent lived under the poverty line in 2000—means the city can devote more resources to schools, libraries, parks and other civic and cultural institutions that increase the quality of life for all city residents.

¹⁴¹*New York Times* 7 May 2006; Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 320

¹⁴² Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 323-324, 316

¹⁴³ Self, *American Babylon: Race and the Struggle for Post War Oakland*, 338, 320

Financial limitations and discrimination limit the ability of poor and nonwhite Oakland residents to live in suburbs like San Ramon, which also limits their educational and employment opportunities, making it harder to ascend the economic and social ladder. This problem could be solved by integrating East Bay suburbs on a race and class basis—i.e. making it easier for minorities and poor people to live there— either through new affordable housing or rent or mortgage assistance programs. Such integration would make the opportunities inherent in affluent suburbs available to traditionally disadvantaged sections of the population, making it easier for these people to get ahead in life. Since government policy once confined a disproportionately high number of African- Americans to Oakland, while creating the conditions for racial inequality to flourish in the city, it makes sense that the government should make a concentrated effort to fix the lingering effects of this state sponsored racism. Such an effort would not provide an unequal advantage for African- Americans over other sections of the population, it would merely help level the playing field the government dramatically tilted toward whites after World War Two.¹⁴⁴

If the current status quo continues into the future, blacks will continue to move to East Bay suburbs, just at an excruciatingly slow rate, as the current demographics of San Ramon and Walnut Creek prove. This lack of residential mobility resembles how blacks slowly moved out of West Oakland to racially transitioning areas of city in the 1960s. Therefore America must decide whether it wants to resemble 1960, the apex of Jim Crow's power, or the future, where people of all races and classes have equal opportunities. Unfortunately for poor and nonwhite people, it appears as if—for now—East Bay suburbs are stuck in the past.

¹⁴⁴ <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/SanRamon70.htm>; <http://www.bayareacensus.ca.gov/cities/WalnutCreek.htm>;
<http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/06/0653000.html> ; <http://www.business2oakland.com/main/laborforce.htm>;