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New York Newsday - December 10, 1992

Urban Aid Is For Everyone

By Mitchell Moss

The spirit of the holidays season has led the mayors of America's cities to equate the election of a democrat to the presidency with the arrival of Santa Claus. Within days of Bill Clinton's election, New York Mayor David Dinkins sent him a four page congratulatory letter, plus a "wish list" for federal help to pay for health care, infrastructure, schools, housing and police. By Thanksgiving weekend, the National League of Cities was calling for a \$60 billion program to aid urban America. Unfortunately - for us New Yorkers and for the nation - a 1960s-type federal commitment to rebuild cities will not recur in the 1990s.

Rather than tell President-elect Clinton what he should do for cities, we need to recognize why the cities of America are not high on the American agenda. Even the Los Angeles riots last spring - while capturing the attention of the news media - didn't produce any sustained national effort to improve the conditions within poor urban neighborhoods.

Federal support for cities must be based on an understanding of the new demographic, political and economic forces shaping America. Simply put, the share of the nation's populations that lives in large central cities, yet big-city mayors still act as if they were Democratic warlords. In 1990, the top 40 cities in the United States accounted for only 15 percent of the nation's population. The diminished political influence of cities was reflected in the 1992 presidential

campaign; the Clinton-Gore bus tour bypassed most downtowns because the democrats needed the votes of suburbanites in states such as New Jersey and Illinois to beat George Bush.

Compounding the demographic shift is a federal government that is intrinsically anti-urban. The U.S. Constitution gives two senators to each state, regardless of its population. Thus New York and California, which together have 47 million people - almost 20% of the nation's population - have four U.S. senators, while five largely rural states, Alaska, Montana, North Dakota, Vermont and Wyoming, with a combined population of 3 million - fewer people than live in Brooklyn and Queens combined - account for 10 percent of the entire U.S. Senate.

Even if Clinton were to seek a "Marshall Plan" for cities, he would be fighting an uphill battle with Congress. This was apparent last summer when Congress stipulated that rural enterprise zones be included in a bill establishing urban enterprise zones - legislation that was eventually vetoed.

In view of the substantial demographic and political obstacles facing any federal program to emphasize "universal programs" which help all Americans, rather than just those in cities. Contrast the most successful domestic programs of this century; Social Security and the Interstate Highway Act, with the cascade of urban programs such as Urban Renewal, Model Cities and Community Development Bloc Grants that have come and gone over the past 40 years. Moreover, broad-based programs for federal health care or public infrastructure can be designed to help cities meet some of their most pressing problems, in caring for people with AIDS or in modernizing mass transit systems.

Rather than emphasize the problems within cities, our mayors ought to focus attention on the problems shared by cities and suburbs, such as crime, drug abuse and the lack of adequate day care. Cities no longer have a monopoly on social problems or fiscal crises, as demonstrated by the wave of carjacking in New Jersey's suburban malls and the recent budget cutbacks by Nassau and Suffolk Counties. And almost any federal initiative aimed at critical problems such as vocational education, prenatal health care or drug abuse will disproportionately help cities, since they have such a large share of the population in need of public and community services.

Beyond all this, the mayors of America should remind Congress, not of the

needs of their cities, but of their assets. Cities and their surrounding metropolitan areas are the nation's hubs of economic innovation and cultural creativity, where the most advanced business services are produced, where new manufacturing technologies are developed, where leading scientists discover new drugs, where immigrants are converted into productive citizens, and where airports and telecommunications systems link the nation to the rest of the world.

For the past decade, the mayors of America have gotten down on their knees and begged for federal aid, with remarkably little success. It's time to recognize that federal programs - no matter who is in charge - are more effective when they address issues of national concern, not just the poor living in cities. We need a new rationale for federal urban aid, one that emphasizes broad-based universal programs, that forges a coalition with suburban communities and metropolitan areas that are vital to the nation's culture.

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