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## **Who Will Be the President of Our Cities?**

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By Mitchell Moss

The April 7th Democratic presidential primary in New York State should provide an opportunity for serious debate about public policies for our cities. While the candidates are aggressively seeking urban votes, they are avoiding the fundamental issue of what the federal government can or should do to save our cities. Cities are no longer a fashionable topic in American politics. For most Americans, cities have become synonymous with crime, homelessness, racial conflict, and poverty. After 12 years of Reagan and Bush, it has become politically correct to view these problems as beyond the capability of government to solve. At both the state and federal levels, budget deficits provide a convenient way to justify a policy of malign neglect.

This abandonment of cities has been reinforced by the continuing flow of population to the suburbs. According to the 1990 U.S. Census, 60 percent of the people who reside in metropolitan areas live outside the central city. In the nation as a whole, city-dwellers account for less than 30 percent of the population, while suburban areas account for 48 percent and rural areas 23 percent.

Despite real evidence of an urban undercount in the 1990 Census (Does anyone really believe that the Census includes everyone who shares living quarters in four-story walk-ups in low-income areas?), the Bush administration has resisted all attempts to obtain an accurate count. In view of the fact that

legislative districts will be based on the 1990 census, cities will soon discover their power shrinking in Albany, Trenton, Sacramento and Washington, D.C.

While the Democrats' failure to capture the White House in recent presidential elections is typically attributed to lackluster candidates, the changing geographic distribution of the national electorate is also a factor. As political analyst William Schneider has pointed out, in 1960 cities were responsible for 33 percent of the presidential vote; in 1988, 29 percent. During the same period, the share of suburban votes in presidential elections rose from 33 percent to 48 percent. Schneider notes that since 1960, "the urban vote has become smaller but more one-sidedly Democratic," while the suburbs have grown larger and more Republican.

Even the congressional leadership reflects the cities' dwindling clout. The top leaders of the House and Senate are four white males with roots in small-town and rural America.

Finally, racism plays a part in this national policy of urban neglect. Cities are no longer considered "American" but rather centers of an "alien culture" dominated by minorities, immigrants, the homeless and drug addicts. In an era when foreign aid has lost public support, it should not come as a surprise that cities with their foreign cultures are no longer seen as worthy of government aid.

Yet the reasons for federal attention to cities are even more compelling. How well do candidates Bill Clinton and Jerry Brown know them? Though the emphasis of Clinton's campaign thus far certainly hasn't been on cities, it has been on the need to invest in human capital. He backs community development banks. His record in Arkansas in education is consonant with the needs of our large cities. Likewise, his advocacy of apprenticeships and worker retraining reveals an appreciation of the nexus between knowledge and economic self-sufficiency.

Cities are by definition those places that are richest in human potential, but they are also where that potential is at greatest risk. In them the large corporations that fuel national prosperity got their start; but if their roads and schools and services are neglected, the business that could hire the immigrant and minority worker, who might otherwise be relegated to a life of crime or indigence or dependency, never flourishes. The necessary conditions for promoting

prosperity - the school buildings, mass transit, the office space - already exist in our cities; the cost of reproducing them elsewhere would be an impossibly high multiple of the cost of simply maintaining them.

Jerry Brown's regressive federal flat tax would deprive urbanized and therefore high-tax states like New York of the means to do this by ending the deductibility of state and local taxes. Similarly, Brown's recent conversion to protectionism does not bode well for cities, which thrive on international trade and finance.

Futurists once predicted that advances in telecommunications such as teleconferencing, telecommuting, facsimile would make our costly and congested cities obsolete. Although many corporate headquarters, manufacturing industries and back offices have left central cities, there are still two vital functions that cities serve: as gateways to the rest of the world, and as centers of creativity and innovation in the arts, finance, advertising, publishing and customized manufacturing. Moreover, cities remain hubs of higher education - one of the few industries where American quality and know-how are still valued, as demonstrated by the huge number of foreign students who seek advanced degrees here. Airports have superseded ports for international passenger travel, and since 1973 - as a result of airline deregulation - the number of American cities that have become international gateways has risen from 15 to 26. A federal government alert to our deepening involvement in the world economy could not let our links to it weaken.

Cities continue to be the landing point for immigrants. During the 1980s, one-sixth of all immigrants to the United States settled in New York City, and they have provided the energy and resources to revitalize neighborhoods and to start new retail and manufacturing enterprises.

These assets have not been sufficient to prevent the growth of urban poverty. In 1979-89, the income of the most affluent fifth of all New York City families rose by 5 percent, while the inflation-adjusted income of the poorest fifth declined by 30 percent. Drugs and the violence they generate threaten the stability of working-class neighborhoods, while AIDS and tuberculosis stretch the capacities of urban hospitals.

Though the need has never been greater, both the states and the federal

government pursue a bipartisan policy of public disinvestment in cities. A student enrolled in a New York City public school receives only three-fourths of the state aid that a student in the rest of the state receives, according to school finance expert Robert Berne. The federal government provides six percent of the total funding for elementary and secondary education in the United States, but this money is not directed to areas most in need, and there are no requirements that federal funds go only to states that have equitable systems of school finance. Only half of our nation's high school graduates attend college, yet public school systems do little to prepare students for the workplace with vocational education, and the U.S. Department of Education spends less than \$2 billion on vocational education and adult programs.

When states and the federal government do invest in cities, they show a preference for "showcase" projects - those that add to the quantity of downtown office space rather than to the quality of life in residential neighborhoods. Renewing urban waterfronts with high-use recreational facilities such as ice-skating rinks is one way to enhance the attractiveness of cities as places to live as well as to work. The greatest impediment: environmental regulations that treat humans as a threat to, rather than a fundamental part of, the ecosystem. When the omnipotent Port Authority of New York and New Jersey can't get a federal permit to dredge its waterfront for shipping, a message is sent to prospective private and public developers that new waterfront activity is not welcome.

Simply pouring federal money into cities is no solution, for traditional federal categorical grant programs simply reinforce the inertia of entrenched urban bureaucracies, which serve themselves before they serve their clients. Rather, Washington must build upon the successes of local, nonprofit organizations such as churches, libraries and settlement houses that provide integrated community services. As a result of congressional action last year, federal funds will soon be available to encourage colleges and universities to assist cities with research and technical assistance. That is a long-overdue remedy for institutions that typically turn their back on their home towns.

For the near term, the most important priority is a sensible federal drug policy. During the Reagan years, the First Lady felt that just saying no was a sufficient deterrent to drug use. During the Bush years, drug policy has been

geared to eliminating the sources of supply through the eradication of marijuana crops in rural areas and a war against cocaine producers in Latin America. Neither administration has tried to control the demand for drugs or to make it as easy to obtain drug treatment as it is to obtain drugs.

The problems of cities took a long time to develop and will take a long time to solve. We can learn much from the success of the nation's defense policies, which deploy multiple layers of weaponry to fight a single enemy. A federal urban policy should similarly embody the principle of "creative redundancy." It should also evince a willingness to make long-term commitments, to learn from mistakes, and to correct rather than terminate programs that don't initially succeed.

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