Prologue

The Republican Convention and the Reality Tour

Si monumentum requiris, circumspice!

If, during the 2000 Republican National Convention, you wandered about the city of Philadelphia from one protest to the other looking for a coherent focus of the sort the World Trade Organization provided in Seattle, you wandered in vain. The protest was made up of the usual grab-bag of leftist causes, all in search of an event that would focus their efforts into one coherent action. The Republican Convention, however, was doing its best to deprive them of this cause by espousing the very same identity politics that motivated the protesters. What exactly were the protesters supposed to protest in Colin Powell advocating affirmative action? There was plenty of military imperialism to protest, but the war in Kosovo was a distant memory, and besides, wars are no longer scheduled to happen during political conventions. As a result, most of the protest was rage looking for a cause, and the inchoate thrashing which followed therefrom was largely the result of protest being co-opted by the dominant culture’s main control mechanism, namely, sexual liberation. If the left dug far enough into the culture they hated, they inevitably found some connection with the forces of sexual management, which they would invariably defend. This meant that the protesters were against globalism but for global population control, because that was sexual, and once the issue became connected with sexual liberation, well, that was, as the young punk anarchist had told me, different.

What the overwhelming majority of the protesters ignored was the one thing that might have given their protest some coherence, namely, the city itself, whose state of devastation offers mute proof of the baneful effects that government policies have had on Philadelphia for the entire second half of the twentieth century. If cities could speak, Philadelphia might have borrowed a phrase from the architect Christopher Wrenn. “Si causa requiris,” Philadelphia might have told the protesters by way of paraphrase, “circumspice.” If you need a monument to the folly and malice of government policy over the past fifty years, look around you.

As a matter of fact, one group did just that. The Kensington Welfare Rights Union created an impromptu tent village at the corner of 6th and Jefferson in the area far enough north of the renewed center city to show what has happened in the shadow of all of the new high-rise downtown buildings. They also organized a bus tour, known as the Reality Tour, of the area around the camp, a section of what was once working-class Philadelphia known as Kensington. What those who took the bus tour learned is what anyone who grew up in Philadelphia knew already, namely, that the city beyond the high-rise hotels and office towers of center city has been so devastated that the only analogue that makes any sense is war-torn areas of places like Mostar in Bosnia. The analogy to Bosnia is especially apt because ethnic conflict led to the destruction of both cities, but ethnicity is not something that the KWRU discusses on its tour.
Tamsin, our tour guide, allows the facts to speak for themselves, and to a certain extent they do, but only to a certain extent. Philadelphia now has 40,000 abandoned homes and 17,000 vacant lots. If you require a monument to what happened to Philadelphia, none would be more imposing than the abandoned Schmidt’s brewery building at Second and Girard. Schmidt’s used to provide the beer for Philadelphia’s saloons and bars when the area around Girard between 2nd and 5th Streets was a thriving German neighborhood and long after it was not. My grandfather attended school at St. Peter’s at 5th and Girard, where St. John Neuman is buried and where, at the time, the language of instruction was German. When Schmidt’s went out of business in 1982, 1,400 people lost their jobs. Now the building looks like the abandoned cliff-dweller villages of the Anazi in the Southwest, serving as a refuge for the city’s homeless, who like cave dwellers in southern France, decorate their abodes by painting the walls. One of the tour guides informs those on the bus that graffiti is the only art form available to the homeless. When I ask which part of Kensington she is from, she tells me that she is from Seattle.

Kensington, in other words, has acquired an aura which draws young people from all across the nation to come and contemplate a devastation that is in many ways as mysterious as it is obvious. As in the Bible, the very stones cry out in Philadelphia. However, just what they are saying is not immediately clear. Tamsin, who is from that part of Kensington known as Connecticut, has studied history at the University of Pennsylvania and is well versed in the devastation that has visited Philadelphia. She talks about the abandoned factories on American Street, the heroin that gets sold on Elbow Alley, and the prostitution that flourishes at the corner of Front and Lehigh. But she seems less aware that Kensington was a place where people of a particular background used to live until they got moved out by forces which have yet to be explained. Cheri Honkala, the lady who is the driving force and media presence behind the KWRU, did not grow up in Kensington. She ended up there when she became homeless, because Kensington, which was once a thriving industrial blue-collar neighborhood, where it was said you could get a job in five minutes by walking down American Street, is simply the city neighborhood where the homeless congregate. And they congregate there because the natives have been driven out, leaving large numbers of vacant buildings.

Cheri is not on the bus tour, but Katie Engle, who is president of KWRU, is. Katie is considerably older than the average volunteer, and, unlike them, she actually comes from Kensington. On our first stop, at “Bushville,” named in honor of the candidate who would eventually become the nation’s president, Katie gives a long impassioned speech about HMOs and how the poor are being systematically deprived of health care. It is a theme which she returns to repeatedly. Katie is in her fifties and has had two heart attacks, so it is not surprising that health care is on her mind. When I ask her if she still has relatives in Kensington, she replies that she does, but that “they don’t want to have anything to do with me because I’m poor.” Katie, like Cheri, wants more government action. Yet the underlying theme of the Reality Tour is that government action created this mess in the first place.

During the ’90s as part of the Democratic Party’s recurrent efforts to revitalize the nation’s cities, the Clinton Administration approved $80 million dollars for Philadelphia and declared Kensington’s American Street part of an “Empowerment Zone,” designating $17 million to rehabilitate it. The textile and hosiery mills left town during the ’50s under
the enabling gaze of the Eisenhower Administration. When the mill workers whose lives had been disrupted by workers imported from the South during World War II attempted to unionize, the people who owned the mills closed them down and moved them down South to capitalize on cheaper, non-union labor. When, twenty years later, the people down South tried the same thing, the mill owners moved again, this time across the border into Mexico. By now, the mills are probably all safe in China, or Nicaragua, or Vietnam, where Communist governments provide the infrastructure for capitalist exploitation of the working class. However, the Republican attempts to abandon the city pale in comparison to the destruction which the Democrats wrought by trying to rehabilitate the cities through schemes like urban renewal and “fair” housing laws. All one can say without the danger of being contradicted it that the destruction of Philadelphia was a bi-partisan effort.

Which is in many ways how the natives feel. Maureen is a red-headed Irish Catholic graduate of Little Flower High School who was not part of the Reality Tour. She is a recent refugee from Kensington, living in Northeast Philadelphia, at least temporarily, which is to say until the same forces which drove her out of Kensington drive her out of there too. Maureen did not want to leave Kensington. She felt she was forced out by the violence. Her story points up the fact that there are in effect two Kensingtions, the one composed of people who have been driven out, the other composed of the homeless who see it as the only place left to go. At certain points the two groups intersect, as in the case of Katie Engle. They manifest their alienation by two opposite extremes, both of which bespeak despair of the political process. On the one hand, there is the activism of the “homeless” faction in the mode of the civil-rights movement, featuring publicity stunts, parades without permits, etc., in the hopes of freeing up more federal money; on the other hand, the natives end up voting with their feet, like Maureen, or they manifest the same alienation from the political process by not voting at all. The KWRU announced that in the last mayoral election, only 17 percent of Kensington’s registered voters went to the polls. Maureen says much the same thing. She and her husband don’t vote.

If their convention was any indication of their priorities, the Republicans don’t seem overly concerned about Maureen’s vote. Like the Love Parade in Berlin and the Biker Rally in Sturgis, South Dakota, the Republican Convention was one more example of identity politics. Principles took a back seat to ethnicity as one Republican woman of color after another took the podium to give Cokie and Sam the impression that this was the real party of inclusion. The only exception to this rule was when Hispanics and men of color like Colin Powell took the podium to extol the virtues of military imperialism and affirmative action. The highpoint of this preliminary phase of the convention took place when Bush advisor Condoleezza Rice took the primetime stage to extol the virtues of military imperialism and her granddaddy, who went off to college and became a Presbyterian minister, when he ran out of money and heard that scholarships were available for that purpose.

In a convention that was scripted down to the last smile and semi-colon, there were no spontaneous outbursts and no deviations from the script, not by John McCain and George W. Bush, and so certainly not by Professor Rice, who informed the audience that the lesson she drew from her granddaddy’s impromptu conversion to Presbyterianism, is that her family has remained “Presbyterian and college educated ever since.” Now in a

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country which has nothing but versions of Protestantism to offer, this may be the best that we can expect. It is certainly better that a Dionysian Baptist like the former incumbent and his neo-pagan minions, but it is an ethnicity all the same, and it was not Maureen’s ethnos.

At the convention they made it clear that the Republican Party is the Protestant party, and that Protestants come in two colors, black and white. This alliance of upper-class WASP and lower-class black was once known as the civil-rights movement. It was also, *mutatis mutandis*, the coalition which destroyed Philadelphia. Upper-class WASPs, largely Episcopalian and Quaker, united politically with the blacks they brought up from the South to work in their factories during World War II to defeat the group in the middle, namely, the largely Catholic ethnicities who lived in neighborhoods like Kensington.

The Republicans used to run this city, but the Republicans who used to run Philadelphia over fifty years ago were a different sort. They were white, they were Protestant, they were Masons, they also lived in neighborhoods like Kensington, but they were also wary of outsiders. Mayor Robert Lamberton became famous overnight in the early ’40s when he turned down $19 million in federal housing funds, saying that it smacked of socialism. It was the last time anyone in Philadelphia – Democrat or Republican – had any qualms about money from Washington, even if the money were used to destroy the city, which is how urban renewal money was used. The planners had an ethnic identity that went deeper than party affiliation. In 1947 Edmund Bacon, who, in 1964, would land on the cover of *Time* as urban planner extraordinaire, and Oscar Stonorow, a student of Walter Gropius who was also Bacon’s brother-in-law, and Walter M. Phillips, a WASP aristocrat who would have enormous behind-the-scenes influence over the city in the coming years, put their heads together and came up with the Better Philadelphia Exhibit, their plan for the city’s future. It covered almost an entire floor of one of the large downtown department stores, and its message could be grasped by even the most obtuse student of architecture: the future was Bauhaus and the enemy was the rowhouse, the traditional building block of housing in the city. Lest the especially dull-witted miss the latter part of the message, Messrs. Stonorow and Bacon constructed a full-scale model of 13th and Natrona, an intersection in South Philadelphia, complete with dreary corner store and strategically placed trash can to show that vernacular architecture in the city of homes was an example of “everything that was wrong with Philadelphia,” as the writer from *Architecture Digest* put it.

Lest anyone think this was a nonpartisan affair, the people who attended the Better Philadelphia Exhibit were given what seemed to be a blank piece of paper, which when placed under a black light at the exit of the exhibition informed them that they should vote for Barney Samuels, the man who, it turns out, was the last Republican mayor of Philadelphia. Edmund Bacon thought that his shameless campaigning for Samuels might mean the end of his career as a city planner in Philadelphia, but he was wrong. When it comes to city planning, ethnic blood runs thicker than political water. The Democratic reform team which came to power in 1951 was a coalition which included Catholics (in fact, it never could have come to power without their votes), but it was run by WASP blue-bloods like Joe Clark of Chestnut Hill and Dick Dilworth (who came from Pittsburgh) and Walter Phillips, the man who in many ways made the whole reform ticket possible by assembling the *dramatis personae*, including Bacon, and infusing them with his vision,
which was a combination of WASP noblesse oblige and the Enlightenment’s faith in things like urban planning.

On September 15, 1948, one year after the Better Philadelphia Exhibit and one year before the Democrats gained their first toehold in city government, the Philadelphia City Planning Commission under Phillips’s aegis came up with its map of redevelopment areas and public housing sites. I say “came up with,” not “published,” because the contents of the map would remain secret for the next six years (although somehow these confidential documents ended up in the possession of Quakers in Chicago). Just why it had to remain secret became obvious when it became public. The largely Catholic ethnics who lived in the neighborhoods that were scheduled to be torn down were outraged and made their outrage known to their elected representatives. What followed was a war which eventually destroyed the reform coalition, which then broke down into its ethnic components over the dispute of whose neighborhood got torn down and where integrated public housing would be built.

The scale of the devastation which the Philadelphia City Planning Commission prepared for Philadelphia was simply breathtaking in scope. All of North Philadelphia from Diamond (the border would later be moved north to Lehigh) to Spring Garden Street and from Broad to 5th was scheduled to be torn down. The same fate awaited all of “East” Philadelphia from Vine Street north of Market to Tasker in the south, and from 8th Street to the Delaware River. All of what is traditionally known as South Philadelphia from South Street to Dickinson and from Broad to the famous 9th Street Market was also scheduled to be torn down, even though the best housing stock in South Philadelphia, owned by the Italian elite, doctors, lawyers, etc., was to be found along Broad Street.

The most shocking part of the map, however, lay in the gray-hatched patch off to the northeast well outside of the intensive-use central area where some of the city’s oldest housing stock existed. That part of town was known as Bridesburg. It was, like Kensington, which lay to the south, industrial and residential combined, which was the pattern of industrial 19th-century Philadelphia. What Bridesburg did not have was rundown houses. What Bridesburg did have was ethnic homogeneity. It housed the overwhelming majority of the Polish population of Philadelphia. Ask those who know the history of urban renewal in Philadelphia today why Bridesburg was targeted for destruction, and you will get no answer. That is so for one simple reason: according to the criteria which the renewers themselves established, Bridesburg was not blighted, if by blight one means deteriorated housing stock. Bridesburg was a mixed-use neighborhood, but so was just about all of the rest of old Philadelphia. The trouble with Bridesburg lay not in its buildings.

When I asked one of the priests at St. John Cantius parish, which serves the Polish population there, why the planned destruction didn’t happen, he couldn’t come up with an answer either. But the answer in both instances has to do with ethnicity. Bridesburg survived because the Poles refused to move from the neighborhood. Unlike their Irish co-religionists, they were not seduced by the siren song of assimilation. The same thing can be seen in Polish neighborhoods like Hamtramck near Detroit. The Poles who were successful didn’t move to the suburbs when they made money. Instead, they tore down the conventional housing stock and built a brick palace in its place.
Bridesburg was not blighted, but it was Polish. The Philadelphia Planning Commission, like the Philadelphia Housing authority, the agencies which plotted this destruction had no Poles on their boards or planning commissions. As a result, what went by the name of urban renewal was, in effect, one ethnic group, namely the WASPs from Germantown and Chestnut Hill, coming up with a plan for destroying the neighborhood of another ethnic group, without that group’s consultation or permission, even when the obvious indicators of blight were missing. Taken as a whole the Planning Commission Map of 1948 was a recipe for ethnic cleansing on a massive scale. The Jews were to be moved from Philadelphia’s “East Side” to make way for Society Hill, the residential enclave where the city’s Nomenklatura were to be housed; the Italians were to be moved from large areas of South Philadelphia, the Irish from large areas of North Philadelphia. The fact that blacks were to be removed from areas around Temple University and the University of Pennsylvania would mean more ethnic cleansing for the Catholic ethnics as well, as wave after wave of displaced blacks would have to seek housing in adjacent, which is to say, Catholic and ethnic, areas. Each instance of urban renewal and redevelopment was like a rock dropped into a pool. The number of units of public housing which got built never equaled the number of units which got torn down, and as a result, more blacks got displaced than got housed by government efforts. As a result, Catholic ethnics were either removed directly, when their houses got torn down to make way for the projects, or indirectly by the waves of blacks who had to move to neighborhoods adjacent in price and geography when the houses they were living in were torn down and never replaced.

This book tells the story of housing policy and social engineering in four large cities in the period during and following World War II. Since housing was just one focus of social engineering, this book tells other related stories as well, all of which had an impact on these cities. There was a time when the Western World, and many Americans, believed in progress. As anyone who has seen the rebirth of cities in Europe after their destruction during the war can say, that progress is not a mark of American cities. This book is an attempt to explain why. The fundamental fact, however, is available to anyone who takes the time to go beyond the showcase buildings at the center of downtown Detroit or Philadelphia and look at the poverty and destruction that surround them in what were once thriving neighborhoods. If you require a monument to the folly of the social engineering that brought about that devastation, just look around.

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