

Housing Segregation in Suburban America since 1960: Presidential and Judicial Politics. By Charles M. Lamb. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005. xiii + 302 pp. Index, notes, bibliography, appendix, photographs, tables. Cloth, \$70.00; paper, \$24.99. ISBN: cloth, 0-521-83944-0; paper, 0-521-54827-6.

Reviewed by Nicholas Dagen Bloom

To write a compelling history of governmental inaction is a tremendous challenge, but Charles Lamb nevertheless succeeds in his new book, *Segregation in Suburban America*. This surprisingly engaging tale of federal policy illustrates the reality that inaction on suburban integration resulted from a carefully considered strategy by conservative politicians to block broad implementation of the Fair Housing Act.

Lamb begins by briefly reviewing the history of the Act's creation. We learn that only President Johnson's passion for civil rights, and the immediate context of urban riots and Martin Luther King Jr.'s assassination, made passage of the bill possible in 1968. Unfortunately, the compromise legislation that emerged was both grand in its aims and vague in its powers: radicals (civil-rights activists) anticipated that it would generate new powers to force racial and social integration in the suburbs; most liberals and conservatives envisioned only further guarantees of equality under the law.

Nixon's secretary of housing and urban development, George Romney, showed an unsettling interest in using the "stick" approach, favored by radicals, to force white suburban communities to accept public housing and thus (it was hoped) minority residents. Where Romney, a very liberal Republican, saw an opportunity for the fulfillment of the civil rights movement, Nixon viewed Romney's pressure on local communities targeted for integration as an egregious example of liberal overreaching.

Nixon and his key advisers realized the potentially explosive nature of Romney's activism too late to stop a public-relations disaster. Under pressure from the right wing of his party and personally opposed to "forced" integration, Nixon eventually dropped Romney along with his programs. The president then crafted a new policy that only targeted obvious racial discrimination, rather than more subtle forms of economic and racial exclusion. According to Lamb, Nixon "left a lasting imprint by seizing policy-

making power from his HUD secretary, centralizing that power in the White House, and narrowly construing the meaning of the Fair Housing Act” (p. 165). Lamb, after treating Nixon in depth, quickly reviews inaction on the part of succeeding presidents, who, if they at first failed to grasp the reality (Carter and Clinton), quickly came to realize that suburban integration was the third rail of American politics.

The final chapter treats Nixon’s enduring legacy, bequeathed through his court appointees, in limiting legal challenges to segregation. Lamb’s analysis of different cases reveals that court action against suburban segregation demands such an enormous burden of proof (blatant racial discrimination) that it has become impossible to address broad issues of suburban integration in the courts. Only dim-witted government officials, developers, and realtors in white suburbia have failed to learn the code language for cloaking segregationist policies. Lamb does not entirely blame Nixon for the court’s resistance to fair housing, but he does claim that Nixon left a strong “imprint” on the court by choosing conservative judges and voicing his own resistance to “forced” integration.

Lamb’s work has many strengths, but the focus on national politicians does obscure the public’s influence. As he himself admits, “perhaps it was not a Nixon decision to exclude subsidized housing from the suburbs but the resolve of innumerable Americans for whom Nixon simply spoke” (p. 202). Although Lamb recounts a number of famous suburban integration controversies and examines survey research, he is limited by the nature of his sources when evaluating the relation between politicians and public opinion. The informed reader, however, can imaginatively superimpose Lamb’s book on recent works of social history by authors like Becky Nicolaides and Robert O. Self, which treat local white resistance to integration in the postwar period. The “resolve” at which Lamb hints is abundantly demonstrated in these mostly disheartening studies; against their background, the fact that Nixon took any stand against discrimination seems fairly remarkable.

Lamb’s monograph, narrow as it seems, makes a number of important contributions. The power of presidential leadership in social policy is effectively demonstrated in both implementation of policy and judicial selection. To Lamb, Nixon’s “centralization” of power undermined congressional authority and, more ominously,

principles of American democracy. Lamb also paints an illuminating portrait of the Republican Party at a key moment in its modern development. We see Romney, a northern Republican with strong civil-rights beliefs, neutered by the ascendant “southern strategy” of Richard Nixon and the new right.

Above all, Lamb’s book helps account for the strange persistence of American suburban segregation. Although it is the case that blacks have moved at record rates to suburbia since the Nixon administration, this movement in most cases has been carefully circumscribed; suburbia as a whole is less white and less wealthy than it used to be, but it is still segregated. Real-estate agents, politicians, and developers have found subtle means to perpetuate the “dual” housing market. Lamb shows that instead of using the potential powers of the Fair Housing Act to blur racial lines, presidents since Nixon have given local politicians and real-estate professionals carte blanche to sharpen social divisions.

Nicholas Dagen Bloom is author of Suburban Alchemy: 1960s New Towns and the Transformation of the American Dream (2001); Merchant of Illusion: James Rouse, America’s Salesman of the Businessman’s Utopia (2004); and the forthcoming Adventures into Mexico: American Tourism Beyond the Border. He is currently writing a history of New York City public housing for Penn Press.