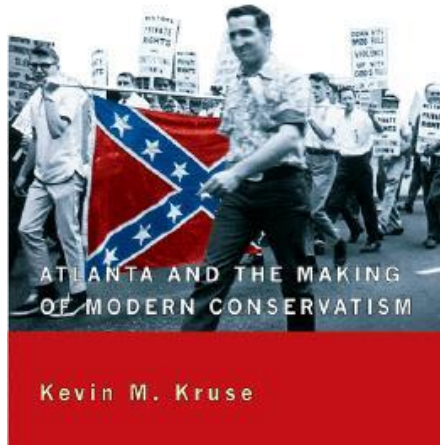


WHITE FLIGHT



White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism

Kevin M. Kruse

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During the civil rights era, Atlanta thought of itself as "The City Too Busy to Hate," a rare place in the South where the races lived and thrived together. Over the course of the 1960s and 1970s, however, so many whites fled the city for the suburbs that Atlanta earned a new nickname: "The City Too Busy Moving to Hate."

In this reappraisal of racial politics in modern America, Kevin Kruse explains the causes and consequences of "white flight" in Atlanta and elsewhere. Seeking to understand segregationists on their own terms, *White Flight* moves past simple stereotypes to explore the meaning of white resistance. In the end, Kruse finds that segregationist resistance, which failed to stop the civil rights movement, nevertheless managed to preserve the world of segregation and even perfect it in subtler and stronger forms.

Challenging the conventional wisdom that white flight meant nothing more than a literal movement of whites to the suburbs, this book argues that it represented a more important transformation in the political ideology of those involved. In a provocative revision of postwar American history, Kruse demonstrates that traditional elements of modern conservatism, such as hostility to the federal government and faith in free enterprise, underwent important transformations during the postwar struggle over segregation. Likewise, white resistance gave birth to several new conservative causes, like the tax revolt, tuition vouchers, and privatization of public services. Tracing the journey of southern conservatives from white supremacy to white suburbia, Kruse locates the origins of modern American politics.

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Alyce says

Kruse traces the evolution of segregationist discourse in the seemingly moderate city of Atlanta from overtly racist rhetoric to a more nuanced, rights-based argument that emphasized middle class values. Kruse displays how events in Atlanta helped spur national events which culminated in the legitimation and respectability of the separatist arguments of white suburban residents, couched in the “rights” discourse of private business, lower taxes, neighborhood schools and anti-government intervention. Kruse uses a thoughtful analysis of class, race and age throughout this study, revealing how race affected the meanings inherent in the more ‘respectable’ white southern “rights” discourse on private property rights, taxpayer rights, neighborhood schools and anti-government intervention. According to Kruse, white southern segregationists were not solely comprised of lower class “redneck” whites, as middle class and elite white southerners liked to portray. In fact, middle class and elite whites effectively appropriated the sentiment behind southern whites’ overtly racist calls for segregation, melding them into an evolving conservative discourse that outwardly paid lip service to “color-blindness”, masking the 1950s segregationists’ arguments in the more “respectable” and positive language of loss of rights. These white conservatives painted themselves the victims of what they saw as essentially the effects of the civil rights movement.

Jim says

kruse works with an apparently narrow topic — the history neighborhood-based desegregation within atlanta. impressively, he manages to document how more or less every major conservative policy position on every major domestic issue can be seen to flow from this issue.

kruse's book is a detailed account, relying mostly on secondary sources, of the evolution of desegregation in atlanta. starting with neighborhood desecration, kruse takes us through the progressive desegregation of atlanta schools ultimately through the capstone of legal desegregation — the 1964 civil rights act. kruse demonstrates how legal desegregation resulted in a highly segregated society and works out the key role of white flight and suburb vs. city dynamics in the maintenance of that segregation.

while that story is worth reading in itself, kruse's most important contribution is to detail the evolution of the political and ideological rhetoric of segregationists — from overt racism to more subtle race-based narratives and ultimately to the language of the modern political right emphasizing individual liberty, private over public institutions and “local” over federal government. when one argues today against federal overreach and in favor of “individual liberty” it is rather germane that those arguments were bequeathed by the overt racists of a generation ago. kruse's most interesting contribution is to show how segregation lies at the root of nearly every major domestic policy debate. from suburb vs. city, road vs. public transportation, global warming vs. deniers, public schools vs. privatization, big government vs. small, its barely an exaggeration to state that the entire modern conservative domestic agenda can be derived by asking oneself, “what would a segregationist do?”

while one might imagine such a book would adopt a partisan tone, kruse instead voices as an academic. this book is not, in any way, a politicized screed. if anything, kruse advances these broader theses with, excessive intellectual caution. in so doing, he writes a damn fine book on an important topic that helps explicate the

ongoing contributions of race in our modern politics.

Jon C. Hooper says

Reinforced how racist the south was and still is

It's hard to believe the true hatred there was and still is for black Americans in the south. Belief of the inferiority of blacks by whites is truly sad and disgusting. We have such a long way to go to true integration and no discrimination.

Andrew says

An engaging and accessible case study of the fights over desegregation in Post-War Atlanta. Kruse provides a solid blow-by-blow of the battles over apartheid housing, schooling, and public space. He also makes a thorough and convincing argument that modern Conservative thought and rhetoric are largely shaped by these battles. Today's Conservative movement - committed to privatization, individualism, and free enterprise, and deeply mistrustful of both "big government" and urban spaces - arose largely from the white backlash against desegregation. Kruse's patient approach begins with clashes over housing in West Atlanta in the 1940's and culminates in the elections of Lester Maddox and Richard Nixon and the remaking of the GOP into the party of the white suburbs and exurbs. Along the way, he charts how the vanguard of the segregationist movement transformed from the KKK and working-class "rednecks" to "respectable" middle-class suburbanites who phrase their segregationist policy preferences using colorblind language about individual freedom, law-and-order, and the need for low taxes.

I have a few minor problems with this book. Kruse is generally very smart in how he deals with class dynamics, but I wish he provided more hard data on wealth and income inequality and the overall economic state of Atlanta and its suburbs at different points in time. I also wish he spent more time comparing Atlanta against other cities. Early on, he notes that "progressive" Atlanta had more in common with segregated Northern cities like Detroit and Chicago than with Southern cities like Little Rock and Birmingham, but he doesn't do enough to show us just how typical (or atypical) Atlanta is compared to other places in either the North or the South. The process of white abandonment of cities for suburbs and public spaces for private ones played out across the United States in the second half of the 20th century. Kruse does an excellent job of demonstrating how that process affected our politics, but he left me wanting more than just a case study of just one city.

Mike Emmett says

The history of Atlanta's desegregation and the microscopic looks at its neighborhoods was very interesting. The argument stinks. Does not really show or prove that white flight=modern day conservatism/GOP nor was his research complete. What kind of conservatism is he referring to? Democratic conservatism, Republican conservatism, libertarian conservatism?

He cannot prove that modern day limited government appeals nationwide (he only focuses on the deep south) are founded on racism. He forgets quotes by LBJ stating that blacks are wild animals that need to be controlled so that he can get their vote. or the quote were LBJ says in effect: "I will dupe those n****ers voting for 50 years". Kruse does not explain the paradox that all Civil Rights Acts were almost 100% passed by the GOP while the Dems voted against it as high as 75%. Nor can he explain that when the South started going to the GOP in the 60's and 70's that the same GOP passed affirmative action and a GOP prez signed it into law or that it was the GOP that spear headed and passed MLK Jr Day (why would racist Southerners stay with a party that does that?). Or how can he explain that his villain, Goldwater conservatism is not equal to southern or New England conservatism or that Goldwater endorsed desegregation and helped establish the NAACP and attacked racists in the south? Kruse fails to explain that Strom Thurmond after a Dem president pushed for Civil Rights, became a Dixiecrat, then became a GOPer AFTER endorsing Civil Rights and defended anti-lynching laws, while at the same time Robert "kkk" Byrd stayed a democrat all his life and never came out to change his views: he was anti civil rights and fought against anti-lynching laws. Or that Al Gore's father stayed a Dem and also was against Civil Rights and against anti-lynching.

Kruse cannot even explain that for years after Civil Rights the South still went Dem or 3rd Party and would not become solid GOP until the 80's, after going in for Carter in the late 70's or even since the 80's much of the South went for Clinton. Even in statewide elections, more Dems in the supposed racist conservative areas have been placed in office for years and decades since? How can he then explain that liberal/Dem domains in NYC (Columbia Uni.), Chicago, L.A. and other northern and liberal only cities had, and still do, have enclaves closed to minorities and ruled by rich Dem whites? Would that not make them southern conservative racists as well? I guess not since he gives liberal/Democrat enclaves closed to blacks a free pass. I could go on and on and on...

His lame, half-baked argument is: whites left the cities in the South, these whites were racists, the South is now GOP domain, therefore all GOP and the South is still and forever racist. He also rests his case on the simple: well somebody said it was so, so I agree. Why would the South go to the Party of Lincoln, the party that ended slavery, that passed the 13th and 14th amendments, that passed Civil Rights, that passes affirmative action and UPHOLD ALL OF IT EVEN AFTER THE SOUTH STARTED VOTING GOP IN THE LATE 60'S AND ONWARD?! How is that Bush in 2000 and 2004 could barely hang on to Southern states like FL, LA, VA and AR is the South is full of conservative racists? Additionally, the 'argument' is that these white flight Southerners wanted the Feds out of their lives... well why would they then go to the GOP that was pushing Fed intervention in Civil Rights and that now the GOP pushes for more fed interference, at a different level than the Dems? Geez, even Obama won some evil GOP South states! Heck, the TEA Party brand of conservatism has endorsed, and helped elect, minorities in the South that the main GOP was against, i.e. Tim Scott, Mia Love, Bobby Jindal, Marco Rubio, Ted Cruz... and even stuck behind those who lost elections: Herman Cain, Allen West, Niger Innis(?). Heck, they are behind Ben Carson, Susanna Martinez... etc etc etc. White Dems voted against these minorities, and Dems even chose WHITES to go against these minorities in supposed racist GOP southern areas....

Propaganda hit piece running on libel lawsuit with crap research and arguments that only because overtly white and Democratic Princeton U published it. Lets not forget that Princeton President Woodrow Wilson loved BIRTH OF A NATION that celebrated slavery and called for the KKK uprising to kill blacks and reclaim the South from the GOP and that Wilson HATED blacks... just saying.

Colin says

This is a history, based in a case of study of Atlanta specifically, of how desegregation and the flight of the white middle class in response has proven to be a foundational element for the modern conservative movement, particularly its objection to the public provision of goods like education, housing, and mass transportation. Unlike in the rest of the state, urban Atlanta's large black population was sufficiently politically strong enough in the post-WW II era (and found a partner in Mayor William Hartsfield) to secure a minority partner position in a governing coalition with the city's business elite, even prior to the full advent of the civil rights movement. This environment meant that more extreme reactionary groups like the KKK were unable to successfully directly challenge the process of desegregation of public spaces and the growth of black political rights. The local groups that did form — again, primarily middle class and lower-middle class white residents and homeowners (who lacked resources comparable with those of the city's elite and so faced the effects of public desegregation much more directly) — still saw integration as a zero-sum game, but framed their opposition in a softer rhetoric of individual rights to private property and the “right to not associate” that was still rooted in a segregationist worldview that was unwilling to countenance sharing space with black neighbors. (Though not on par with the Klan's activities elsewhere, the book still notes many cases of violence and threats brought against both blacks and whites by these more “moderate” associations and groups.) Ultimately unable to stop the process, particularly as the federal government took up the case and a younger generation of black activists pushed for a more confrontational approach beginning in the early 1960s, white residents instead opted flee these public spaces entirely, to unincorporated suburbs and private schools where they sought to re-segregate themselves and build a new base of political power, ceding much of the urban core to the African American community but seeking to cut off tax revenues that might go to now-integrated spaces.

The history here is clearly broadly applicable beyond Atlanta, although the focus throughout is firmly rooted in the city's experience, up until a brief concluding extension of the case to the post-1970s suburban / exurban politics more broadly on the national scale. This has helped flesh out details in several other books on related subjects I've been reading recently; the author has a number of other interesting titles that I'm also looking forward to picking up (and is a good source to follow on Twitter).

Peter says

This book is part of a wave of pretty solid social/cultural histories that used local studies to examine national historical trends, many of them published by Princeton University Press in the 2000s. Kevin Kruse looks at Atlanta in the mid-twentieth century and the ways it dealt with race, specifically as it pertained to desegregation and class. For decades, Atlanta had prided itself on being forward-thinking and racially moderate- the “town too busy to hate.” That all went out the window once it became clear that black people weren't going to be content to be second-class citizens, disallowed from public services and spaces. “White Flight” traces the patterns and broad historical effects of the temper tantrum the white population of Atlanta threw in response.

Kruse goes through a number of the efforts white Atlantans tried to bolster and reinscribe formal racial separation in the period from the 1940s and the 1960s. Open racial terrorism, including bombings, came into play most often as black families attempted to buy homes in white neighborhoods. Neighborhood-based public resources such as schools, parks, pools, and busses were generally abandoned by whites — and therefore underfunded — rather than allowed use by integrated publics. Most of this affected working-class

white Atlantans; even middle-class black families couldn't afford (and certainly couldn't secure loans) to buy in middle-class neighborhoods. Things finally reached the upper classes of white Atlanta when the sit-ins at restaurants and stores began to challenge the merchant elite of the city for control of their space, and when demands came to desegregate spaces where they congregated, like golf courses. Then they lost their sense of noblesse and began flipping out, too. And in Kruse's telling, they all acted en bloc, only disagreeing on whether intransigence or flight was the proper response to desegregation- nobody thought about trying to make it work, nobody white anyway. Flight won out.

In the end, none of the formally, legally racialized bulwarks of the segregation order remained standing in the late 20th century. What we have instead is a racial order kept in place by control of capital, which in turn commands space (in the form of real estate) and force (governments, taxes, borders, cops). The new suburbs that whites fled into, not just in Atlanta but all over the US, grew into cut-off enclaves- at one point, Metropolitan Atlanta had 56 separate municipalities in it, each with its own taxes, zoning code, schools, etc. Using notionally color-blind language about "small government" and "local control," these suburbs can replicate something like the experience of segregation for the white people who live in them.

There is a caveat there, though, two things that changed in substituting informal suburban segregation for the older formal, urban version. First, people were enjoined to avoid open expressions of vulgar race hate in public and in the legally binding rules. Second, and more consequentially, white Atlantans in the segregation era enjoyed well-funded public spaces and goods. Post-white flight, suburbanites came to abjure the idea of the public altogether. In some instances, the public schools, behind the walls of exclusive zip codes, continued to have some esteem (see also, suburban Massachusetts). But for the most part, public transit, public housing, public leisure- all of these were replaced by private equivalents. Many of the principles we associate with suburban design and governance were there before white flight, but white flight codified it, standardized it, and put a ton of money and political will behind it. This privatization eventually came to be a matter of principle, as expressed by politicians from these rapidly expanding suburbs, and none more openly than Newt Gingrich, who represented the Atlanta suburbs.

In Kruse's telling, the real secession wasn't the southern states from the northern- it was the white suburbs created out of the flight from desegregation seceding from the rest of society, despite being entirely dependent on urban cores and the federal government for their very existence. Consciously or not, their leaders succeeded where earlier reactionaries failed, and actually found a way to give a substantial portion of the population just enough property to feel like they're in the master class- and just enough anxiety to be willing to fight to protect it, and to consider any other system not just wrong, but dangerous. Moreover, by helping destroy the cities in the mid-20th century, they also spiked the most viable alternative to that way of life. They even went so far as to rebuild some cities on a sort of privatopia-lite model and let their bored spawn go live in them!

In the end, soft segregationists called liberalism's bluff. Liberals weren't going to allow formal segregation anymore by the mid-20th century. This was in part due to values, but liberals had the political capital and the will to go along with it in large part due to the Cold War- segregation being a bad look when wooing developing world allies. But liberals also weren't willing to challenge capitalism, and the smarter, later generations of segregationists knew it. Crying about the big mean gummint making you serve milkshakes to black customers was for small-timers. The real action, and the real money, was in remaking segregation with the tools — capital, and the way it can command institutions and populations — at hand. *****

Elizabeth Ruth says

Required reading if you live in this city.

Steve says

Though this book is advertised as explaining how modern American conservatism's roots lie in the segregationist movement, it's mostly just a history of the civil rights movement in Atlanta with a focus on the demographics of each side. Kruse does compellingly compare the rhetoric of middle-class segregationists with the rhetoric of Contract-with-America-style secessionists, and frequently makes the point that the segregationist response to enforced integration was often to abandon the integrated area, but he doesn't explain the rise of conservatism in areas that never were and still aren't integrated. That's not to say the book isn't a good read; it's well written and the details of Atlanta's struggles to integrate are fascinating. But don't expect a polemic on the roots of modern conservatism -- you're really just getting the story of Atlanta.

Kathryn French says

Well written and researched but unutterably sad. It's an excellent look at how we've arrived in 2018 with the huge divisions across the political spectrum.

Sanjiv Sarwate says

This was a well-put-together, if infinitely depressing, look at the process of white flight in Atlanta, a city which dubbed itself "too busy to hate" and used a form of half-measures to try and preserve the Jim Crow system until it ultimately became unsustainable.

What really jumps out in these pages is the visceral hostility that white residents of Atlanta towards sharing space with African-Americans, particularly the depth of this feeling among those who were on the lower end of the economic spectrum, and therefore did not employ African-Americans in their households. Kruse posits that for these people, the public spaces like schools, parks, libraries, pools, etc. were seen as "their" spaces, and that they felt these spaces were being taken from them because of integration. As white homeowners sold to black homebuyers, the sense of "community" broke down, making these white suburban migrants more receptive to the hyper-individualistic, government is the problem message of the Reagan Revolution.

Two things limited this book to some extent. The first was the time cut-off- the book was published in 2005, and thus predates the Obama presidency. This is not the book's "fault" in any sense, but it would be interesting to see a supplement on how the election of Barack Obama affected the attitudes of those suburban migrants and their descendants.

The second was that by focusing on the white migrants only, it gives a bit of short shrift to the ordinary black homebuyer. This is an interesting companion book to Beryl Satter's "Family Properties," which goes into great depth on the institutional barriers and higher costs faced by black homebuyers due to racial exploitation and lack of FHA financing. Kruse alludes to this briefly by mentioning that higher home costs left black

buyers with less money to maintain the property, which led to property deterioration. But I wonder if in Atlanta, like the Chicago profiled in Satter's book, it was more than just higher prices.

Jennifer says

Fascinating and hard to put down. It outlines the ways that our current-day conservative politics has its roots in the fight against desegregation. The only issue is that in bringing us up date with the shifting demographics of the Atlanta area it completely ignores the increasing numbers of Latinos and Asians in the decades following the 1970s.

AskHistorians says

Really interesting study of White Flight in Atlanta, a good complement to Sugrue.

Dan Cotter says

This is a very well researched, well written book about the racial tensions and White flight in Atlanta. The city went from “the city too busy to hate” to “the city too busy moving to hate.” Learned a lot from reading this book and it is worth a read.

Fraser Sherman says

While Atlanta in the post-WW II years portrayed itself as "the city too busy to hate," willing to take moderate, reasonable steps toward integration, Kruse shows that there was no shortage of hate. While business and civic leaders saw advantages to taking baby steps, the white working-class saw themselves sold out by people whose private schools and private clubs would never have to accept blacks. After neo-Nazis and the KKK tried taking a stand, segregationists rebranded with the euphemistic "freedom of association" — meaning they didn't want to be around blacks, so all public spaces (parks, buses, sports fields, schools) should stay whites only. When segregation crumbled anyway, angry whites fled the city core for segregated suburbs. Kruse argues they also adopted the core attitudes that would define later conservatives — resentment of blacks, distrust of government, hatred of tax money going to public infrastructure (as that would benefit Those People) more. Depressing but very good.
