

# Why Presidents Like to Play with Planes Instead of Houses

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A review by James Fallows

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In 1934, when Congress was giving him everything he asked for, Franklin Roosevelt agreed to his wife's plea to take on one New Deal project as his own, without congressional help. The project was the rehabilitation of Arthurdale, a community of starving miners in West Virginia, and Eleanor saw it as the showpiece of a new America, the model of how rural virtues and urban wealth could be combined. Over the next five years, Arthurdale never moved much further than the Roosevelts' requests to private philanthropists. By wartime, the plan had been abandoned, and after the war the few relics were sold off.

Some parts of the President's job had changed by the time Lyndon Johnson took office—such as his freedom to conduct war without consulting Congress—but not the frustrations of domestic projects. Martha Derthick's book, *New Towns In-Town*,\* part of the Urban Institute's studies of why government doesn't work, examines a particularly dismal failure. The book tells why the President who could send half a million men to war and drop all the bombs he wanted could not get a few creative, hopeful pilot housing projects built.

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\**New Towns In-Town*. Martha Derthick. Urban Institute, \$2.95.

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The book's doomed hero, the "New Towns" program, was one of the bright spots of Johnson's last year in office. By mid-1967, Derthick says, "Housing for the poor had been much on the President's mind." Well it might have been, since the ill-housed poor of Watts and Newark were calling it to his attention. At the same time, unpleasant publicity about Vietnam was beginning to tarnish Johnson's record as America's domestic reformer. An ambitious housing program might be just the thing to set the record right once more. But, as Johnson knew, housing was also the notorious quagmire of domestic politics. The main obstacles to urban housing were cost and protests: the costs were mostly for land and the loudest protests came from those who lived on the land before the bulldozers and construction crews moved in. Johnson thought of an inspired solution:

One morning in August, 1967, as he was sitting in his bedroom at the White House and talking to Special Assistant Joseph A. Califano, Jr., it occurred to the President that federally-owned land in the cities could be used for housing. Within hours, his staff had assembled a working group. . . to figure out how this could be done.

If the federal government could turn over its land to the cities, Johnson reasoned, it could beat both problems at once: the land would be free

or cheap, and the tenants could not possibly complain. It would be the ideal guns-into-butter trick: converting air bases and prison sites into new housing projects.

Less than a week after his talk with Califano, Johnson's staff had drawn up the first New Towns plan. Although Johnson saw these federal cities as a blessing spreading over the entire country, he intended to start in one special area: his own federally-controlled city of Washington, D. C. "We wanted to do it all over the country," Derthick quotes an aide as saying. "We wanted to do it well in Washington first, so that every mayor and congressman could see it done."

A perfect tract was available—335 acres of rolling, wooded land near the Fort Lincoln district in northeast Washington. The National Training School for Boys was on the site, but it was planning to move to West Virginia. Jumping ahead of the other agencies which had been queuing up to take the land when the training school moved out, Johnson imposed his New Town project. On August 30, 1967, Johnson announced plans for "a new, attractive, and well-balanced community at a major gateway to the nation's capital. . . this new development can be the best of communities."

While Johnson's staff was working out the legal and financial details for

this 5,000-unit beginning, teams of special agents began tours of other cities to find suitable tracts of federal land. After screening for obvious problems—racial tensions, for example, which eliminated Milwaukee; or federal installations which were likely to swell and need more land rather than surrender any—the teams trimmed the original list of 48 cities to six. One, like Washington, was especially close to Johnson's affections: San Antonio, Texas, became the President's second-favorite project. The others were Atlanta, with extra land near a prison; San Francisco, with two spare military forts; Louisville, with an unused area near a V. A. hospital; Clinton Township, near Detroit, with free air base land; and New Bedford, Massachusetts, with a soon-to-be-closed Job Corps center.

But as the list of New Towns was prepared, the New Town idea was undergoing fundamental alterations. In the most absorbing part of her book, Derthick explains the crucial change that occurred when the New Towns went through the bureaucracy of the two-year-old Department of Housing and Urban Development. Starting out as a simple plan for quick, cheap housing for the poor, the New Towns emerged as a more sweeping, more ambitious, and eventually more vulnerable proposal for urban

development.

At first, HUD resented the plan that Johnson handed down to them. Even the least perceptive administrators could see that it was at least an implicit criticism of the job they had done. Quickly, however, HUD warmed to the plan, realizing that it could be a vehicle for the Department's own advanced theories of urban planning. Where Johnson had seen a way to get roofs over poor heads, HUD envisioned communities "new" in every sense—technically, socially, racially.

The most controversial of these goals—most of which were missing from Johnson's first plan—was racial and social balance. While normal housing projects were mono-racial encampments of the poor, HUD wanted to see whether families of different races and incomes could be attracted to the same community. Doing so meant, among other things, keeping the proportion of poor and black residents below the critical mass that would drive the middle-class families back to the suburbs.

Johnson's staff knew what HUD was doing, and they apparently approved. If the President's social proposal became even more creative and exciting, so much the better. The difficulty, however, was that the very changes which turned New Towns from a construction project to an idealized model, minimized its chances of ever being built. A prophetic memo, sent by Abner Silverman of HUD, pointed out the prob-

lem: "In one sense, the report suggests that each of these new areas be given a 'model city' treatment without providing the financial incentives inherent in that program."

This, as it turned out, was the central theme as one New Town after another bit the dust. The rewards Johnson and HUD had to offer might have been enough to get a normal housing project started, but were not big enough to lure the cities toward New Towns. The one weakness of her book is that Derthick never quite explains just why the New Towns were so much more repugnant to the cities than more conventional projects would have been; the general impression is that the resistance grew from roots deep in custom, bias, and small-town thinking. The results were unmistakable.

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### A Sudden Groundbreaking

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The gradual disintegration of the Washington project set the pattern. The first objections came from middle-class blacks, who did not like the idea of a nearby poverty-housing project. Trying to counter that by consultation and "community participation," HUD soon found several groups squabbling over who really represented the local people.

The project's several goals—quick results, social engineering, technical innovation—began to appear contradictory. The parts of the project that could be built most quickly—cheap, plain housing for the poorest people—were dangerous to build first if the project ever wanted to lure suburbanites. The more creative types of housing were also dangerous, often because they had never been tested and might collapse. In other cities, HUD later showed that it was willing to barter away its airy goals in order to win local support, but in Washington, with idealism pumping from director Edward Logue on down, the planners persisted. None of the basic problems—cost, design, pacifying the neighbors—had been solved when, a

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few months before leaving office, Johnson insisted that the project break ground, while he could still claim credit. Barely making the deadline, the token groundbreaking ceremony took place on January 15, 1969. The only houses uncontroversial enough to build then were 120 units for the elderly, people who would not strain the schools nor antagonize the neighbors. With Johnson out of office, the project was turned back to local authorities; the presidential push which alone had held it together was gone. In 1970, HUD turned the project over to Westinghouse for further development, sometime.

In other cities, where Johnson could not glower at tardy builders, the objections came more quickly and the New Town deaths were more sudden. In San Antonio, Congressman Henry Gonzalez initially welcomed the plan to turn part of Fort Sam Houston into a housing site, but after the fort's commander reminded him of the jobs which a strong air base brought to the district, Gonzalez turned against the New Towns. Even before the Fort Lincoln groundbreaking in Washington, San Antonio's plans had been canceled. In San Francisco, plans had barely been announced to turn Fort Funston and Fort Miley into New Towns when local conservation groups erupted in outrage. Bristling as ever with civic pride, they urged that the forts be made into parks. Briefly victorious, they got the New Town plans killed—only to find, several months later, that a military office center would be built instead.

Louisville proved that the screening for racial tensions had not been thorough enough. When the New Town was first announced, Louisville officials were busy protecting themselves from attacks on the segregated housing they had built. New Towns seemed like the answer, until aldermen decided that the project was "so racially sensitive" it would have to be abandoned. Confirming Silverman's prediction, they hinted that they

would go ahead with a normal housing project, if only they didn't have to push this balanced-community goal.

New Bedford's problems were less racial than suburban. Even though the city's mayor had asked for the program, rather than watching it descend from the inscrutable HUD, the families who lived in cozy bungalows did not want a New Town in their midst.

The two cities where New Towns survived this initial-catastrophe stage had such favorable circumstances to start with that anything less than success would have demanded explanation. Atlanta was already in the middle of its own low-cost housing campaign when its New Towns project was announced. Unlike other cities, Atlanta knew that neighbors to the New Town site would not complain: one was a giant prison, the others were railroads and highways. And, in the face of likely objection, HUD dropped some of its racial goals. But before the project could begin, an unexpected citizens' suit froze it.

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In Clinton Township, HUD found the ally it lacked everywhere else—a local group ready to build its own momentum for New Towns. If partial construction of 160 units, a fraction of the original plans, can be counted success, then Clinton was successful. Even those meager results, Derthick says, are due more to the Clinton group's ingenuity than energy from HUD.

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### The Indefinite Limbo

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Toting up the results—three projects canceled, the rest in indefinite limbo, 120 houses built, 160 more underway—Derthick concludes that the New Towns were a disaster, and asks what went wrong. The answer points at the heart of the way the federal government works.

The first premise of the New Town syllogism is that housing, like education, has always been done by local governments. If Johnson could have ordered 5,000 houses built as easily he ordered 5,000 bombs dropped, then the New Towns would be built today. But, since mayors and city councils must approve the plans, the federal government must convince them that its projects are all right. If the cities are already convinced—as they clearly have been about law-enforcement grants—then money or free land is all the incentive needed. If the cities resist, the federal government must find sweet, alluring veils to throw over its programs. (Derthick spends an awkward few pages on this point, concluding: “These cases taken together suggest the proposition: the greater the local support for a project, the greater the likelihood of success.”)

The second New Town premise is that the cities were not happy about the program. New Towns was not the first project to meet this response: Model Cities, school integration plans, and certain welfare proposals have been much less popular. The common explanation for them, Derthick says, is that only the federal government is far enough removed from local biases

and interests to propose truly innovative social changes. Those being changed often resist.

But if Model Cities could get started, why not New Towns? The reason is that the federal government had far fewer rewards to offer. From the beginning, Johnson decided that New Towns would be *his* program; he would not go to Congress for a new law. This may have been the only way to start the project at all; it gave New Towns what Derthick calls the “executive virtues” of “energy, speed, and flexibility,” and it kept the program from the petty complaining, pork-barreling distortion, and probable death it would have faced in Congress. Still, without special legislation, New Towns was equally doomed. Johnson wanted, in effect, to give the federal land away; the General Services Administration refused to do so without legislative authority. So, cities chosen for New Towns were offered land at hardly-bargain rates for projects they didn't want. The failures cannot be too surprising. Similarly, Johnson's attempts to declare military land “surplus” without consulting the sacred armed services committees in Congress left him, New Towns, and HUD in such a weak position that small-time soldiers like those at Fort Sam Houston could kill the project by complaining to their congressmen.

Derthick never makes the comparison, but it is difficult to read these stories of presidential failure without remembering what Johnson was doing at the same time. The same bedside confession that produced New Towns may also have led to a new search-and-destroy policy. While petty obstacles frustrated his plan to build a few harmless houses, Johnson found no obstacle at all to his plans for Vietnam. The disproportion is too obvious to need explanation. It may help explain why Presidents besides Johnson are also more engrossed with land-clearance in the Mekong or special deals in Moscow than with urban renewal in St. Louis or conferences with mayors.

# POLITICAL BOOK NOTES

*Public affairs books  
to be published in October*

**American Civilization.** Daniel J. Boorstin. McGraw-Hill, \$29.95.

**American Military Commitments Abroad.** Roland A. Paul. Rutgers, \$12.50.

**The American Woman: Her Changing Social, Economic, and Political Roles, 1920-1970.** William H. Chafe. Oxford, \$7.50.

**Americans Are Alone in the World.** Luigi Barzini. Library Press/Nash, \$5.95.

**Aspects of Sociology.** Frankfurt Institute for Social Research. Beacon Press, \$9.95.

**The Atomic Establishment.** H. Peter Metzger. Simon & Schuster, \$7.95.

**Attica—My Story.** Russell G. Oswald. Doubleday, \$7.95. As advertised, a self-serving account of the Attica slaughter by the warden who presided over it. Still useful for its almanac-like collection of editorials, letters, documents.

**The Big Buck and the New Business Breed.** E. A. Butler. Macmillan, \$6.95. What's wrong with the country might not be free enterprise rampant, but the smug stagnation of the giant corporations. A plug for the maligned "buck smeller" of genuinely free enterprise.

**The Big Foundations.** Waldemar Nielsen. Columbia, \$10.95.

**Billions of Dollars and No Sense: America's Misplaced Priorities.** Sen. William Proxmire. Simon & Schuster, \$6.95.

**The Black Dilemma.** John Herbers. John Day, \$5.95, \$1.95.

**Black Mountain: An Exploration in Community.** Martin Duberman. Dutton, \$12.95.

**A Black Nun Looks at Black Power.** Sister Mary Roger Thibodeaux. Sheed & Ward, \$6.95, \$2.45.

**Black Political Parties.** Hanes Walton, Jr. Free Press, \$7.95.

**The Bosses.** Alfred Steinberg. Macmillan, \$9.95. The rise and fall of six old-politics bosses in the 1920s and 30s. Saturated with detail.

**The Brothers of Attica.** Brother Richard X Clark. Random House, \$7.95.

**Capital, Inflation, and the Multi-Nationals.** Charles Levison. Allen and Unwin, Ltd. \$6.95. A book which does not live up to its ambitious goal—tying the modern economic woes of inflation, unemployment, wasted resources, and concentration into one logical package. Also suffers from the increasingly rare "affluent society myopia": Levinson assumes that "society" means the rich Western nations, and that an unlimited rise in production is the answer to most ills.

**Caution—This Job May Kill You: Ralph Nader's Study Group Report on Occupational Health and Safety.** Joseph A. O'Brien, Mary Page. Grossman, \$6.95.

**Conserving Life on Earth.** David Ehrenfeld. Oxford, \$10.

**CIA: The Myth and the Madness.** Patrick McGarvey. Saturday Review Press, \$6.95. It's supposed to be about the CIA, but most of the good stuff is about the Defense Intelligence Agency (DIA), where the author worked.

**A City on the River.** Roderick MacLeish. Dutton, \$7.95.

**The Company State: Ralph Nader's Study Group Report on Delaware.** James Phelan, Robert Pozen. Grossman, \$7.95. Tells why it is no coincidence that Congressman DuPont comes from Delaware.

**The Complete Ecology Fact Book.** Philip Nobile, John Deedy. Doubleday, \$10.

**Damning the West: Ralph Nader's Study Group Report on the Bureau of Reclamation.** Richard L. Berkman, W. Kip Viscusi. Grossman, \$7.95.

**The Diffusion of Power: An Essay in Recent History.** W. W. Rostow. Macmillan, \$14.95. What Walt's been doing these last three years. Postwar history, crammed into an enormous volume and worked into a thesis of "planned" liquidation of the American empire. What religion was to Dulles, "national interest" is to Rostow. "We have not been able to formulate a concept of our own interests and policies based upon them which permitted us to avoid costly crises."

**The Doomsday Syndrome.** John Maddox. McGraw-Hill, \$6.95. From an intelligent journalist, a short-sighted, misinformed blast at the ecologists. Turning it into a them-or-us argument, Maddox says we must choose people over beasts.