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Failing the race: a historical assessment of New Orleans Mayor Sidney Barthelemy, 1986-1994

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FAILING THE RACE: A HISTORICAL ASSESSMENT OF NEW ORLEANS
MAYOR SIDNEY BARTHELEMY, 1986-1994

A Thesis
Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University
Agricultural and Mechanical College
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in

The Department of History

by
Lyle Kenneth Perkins
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ABSTRACT

New Orleans' voters elected Sidney Barthelemy as the city's second African American mayor in 1986. Historical treatments of Barthelemy's tenure generally do not hold him in the same high regard as New Orleans' first African American mayor, Ernest Morial. Yet, unfavorable evaluations of Barthelemy reflect the maturation of African American politics in the Crescent City. Symbolic victories no longer resonate with an African American populous in need of substantive gains to redress longstanding social and economic inequities.

With the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the struggle for African American equality entered its next phase, the transition from protest to politics. Denied the vote for so long, African Americans typically assigned high, even unrealistic, expectations to the liberating possibilities of the ballot. Yet, the mayoral tenure of Sidney Barthelemy illustrates the limitations of electoral politics as a vehicle for African American advancement. The consolidation of African American political power in New Orleans produced uneven gains.

While the African American middle class benefited from set-aside programs for minority businesses and increased access to municipal employment, African Americans at the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder realized little more than rhetorical service from the election black mayors. Black political power did not translate into black economic power. And cuts in state and federal funding, declining tax bases owing to white flight to the suburbs, and downturns in vital industries rendered Mayor Barthelemy impotent in uplifting conditions for poor and working-class African Americans. These

findings suggest that the struggle for African American equality must permutate beyond the narrow confines of electoral politics.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

With the passage of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the struggle for African American equality entered its next phase, the transition from protest to black political power. Increased African American electoral participation signaled this trend. In New Orleans, only twenty-eight percent of the eligible black population was registered to vote in 1964. By the summer of 1966, the figure was forty-two percent. Still, African Americans constituted only 25.2 percent of the city's voting rolls. Between 1970 and 1980, however, New Orleans changed from a white majority population to a black majority population. In 1980, blacks in New Orleans comprised 55.27 percent of the city's residents. And by 1981, African Americans constituted forty-six percent of the city's registered voters. In this period of demographic flux, New Orleans' voters elected Ernest "Dutch" Morial as the city's first African American mayor. Morial's election in 1977 reflected broader national trends. In fact, the number of black mayors in the United States increased 150 percent, from 101 to 252, between 1974 and 1984.

Ernest Morial has been the subject of considerable scholarly attention, but historians and political scientists have largely ignored his immediate successor, Sidney Barthelemy. Barthelemy's tenure proves most instructive, however, as it illuminates the inadequacies of the consolidation of black political power in redressing race-centered social and economic inequities in the Crescent City. University of New Orleans historian Arnold Hirsch concludes that in Barthelemy, "White New Orleans had found itself a

black mayor.”¹ Yet, Hirsch’s personal indictment of Barthelemy obscures the extent to which Barthelemy’s inability to translate his mayoralty into tangible gains for the majority of the city’s black residents stemmed from the fundamental impotence of electoral politics as a vehicle for African American advancement.

As historians have set about assessing the impact of African American mayors on the lives of the black populations of their respective cities, their findings typically articulate a simplistic dichotomy. In this construction, the black middle-class benefited from municipal jobs and set-aside programs for minority-owned businesses while African Americans at the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder derived few material benefits from the election of black mayors. Sidney Barthelemy’s mayoralty mirrors conventional wisdom in this regard. Yet prevailing paradigms obscure the extent to which external forces, including the downturn in manufacturing industries, budget constraints exacerbated by President Reagan’s “New Federalism,” and shrinking tax bases owing to white flight to the suburbs, rendered black mayors impotent in delivering more than rhetorical service for their poorest constituents.

In New Orleans, cuts in state aid necessitated by Louisiana’s diminished oil and gas tax revenues in the early 1980s further curtailed Barthelemy’s redistributive impulse. State and federal funds to the city decreased more than eighty percent, from forty million dollars to less than six million dollars, between 1984 and 1989.² An outmigration of 170,000 people from Orleans Parish to outlying parishes, between 1980 and 1988,

¹ Arnold Hirsch, “Simply a Matter of Black and White: The Transformation of Race and Politics in Twentieth-Century New Orleans,” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992) 318.

² Sidney Barthelemy, “The 1989 Budget Facing Cruises and Challenges,” *Louisiana Weekly*, 29 October 1988, sec. 1, p.4.

simultaneously eroded the city's revenue base.³ While municipal government raised an additional twenty-four million dollars in the form of increased fees, service charges, and fines, New Orleans realized a reduction in total revenues from 304 million dollars to 271 million dollars from 1985 to 1989. And despite a twenty-two percent reduction in the city's workforce during the same period, spending growth owing to inflation typically presented Barthelemy and the city with revenue shortfalls.⁴

Barthelemy's budgetary conundrum paralleled the experiences of black mayors nationwide. Yet urban blacks held out high, even unrealistic expectations of the country's early black mayors to redress their concerns. One year before Barthelemy took office on May 5, 1986, pollster Silas Lee III issued an alarming account of the plight of New Orleans' African American community titled "Ten Years After (Pro Bono Publico?): The Economic Status of Blacks – 1985." Lee's rejoinder to Dr. James Bobo's *The New Orleans Economy: Pro Bono Publico?* detailed a racially stratified city in which educational, economic, social, and employment disparities persisted. While the city's burgeoning black middle-class increased in size from ten percent in 1970 to thirty-one percent in 1985, black median family income amounted to only \$10,516. White New Orleanians median income of \$21,544 in 1985 thus doubled that of their black

³ Allen Johnson, "Mintz Hedges on Race Issues, Possible Meeting With Duke," *Louisiana Weekly*, 5 August 1989, sec. 1, p.1.

⁴ "City of New Orleans Ten Year Financial Review," 15 June 1989, Records of Mayor Sidney J. Barthelemy, 1886-1994, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, Executive Office of the Mayor Subject/ Correspondence Files, Box 13, File SJB Budget 1990, Folder 2.

counterparts. The fact that forty-eight percent of the black population earned less than \$10,000 proved equally problematic for the city's black political leadership.⁵

Times Picayune columnist Allan Katz observed that New Orleans' black underclass existed "in a cultural vacuum where drug use, violence, and crime [were] frequently present..."⁶ In addition to economic advancement, protection from crime and arbitrary police force thus resonated with these black New Orleanians. Yet, fiscal restraints and adversarial relationships with entrenched bureaucracies, most notably the New Orleans Police Department, thwarted Ernest Morial and then Sidney Barthelemy from securing more than incremental gains for their black constituents. As Fisk University Philosophy Professor C. Eric Lincoln correctly observed: "Anyone who expected the election of a black mayor to end the problems of crime, poverty, housing, unemployment, and the countless other frustrations of the cities is both politically and intellectually naïve. There is no magic in being black."⁷

Against this backdrop of myriad societal ills, Sidney Barthelemy toiled as New Orleans' mayor from 1986 to 1994. Political commentators have roundly criticized Barthelemy's managerial shortcomings, his inability to articulate a vision for the city, and his propensity for rewarding friends and political supporters with the lucrative spoils of city largess. Still, Barthelemy's assertion that "now is not the time to...lay the blame at the feet of black elected officials for the conditions that have developed over

⁵ C. C. Campbell, "City Threatened by Declining Revenue Base," *Louisiana Weekly*, 25 May 1985 sec. 1, pp.1, 10.

⁶ Allan Katz, "N.O.'s Black Underclass," *Times Picayune*, 7 February 1982, sec. 1, p. 33; for further explication of the black underclass in New Orleans, see Tom Dent "New Orleans Versus Atlanta," *Southern Exposure* 7 (Spring 1979): 64-68.

⁷ Roger Biles, "Black Mayors: A Historical Assessment," *Journal of Negro History* 77 (Summer 1992): 115.

decades...[since] we have only come into office a few short years ago, after the money had been spent, after the programs had been discontinued, and after the rules had been changed” warrants consideration.⁸

Sidney Barthelemy’s failure to appreciably benefit the lives of the majority of the New Orleans’ black residents thus represents broader structural impediments to African American advancement through the mechanism of electoral politics. With white lawmakers at the state and federal levels increasingly unsympathetic to the plight of majority-black urban centers, Barthelemy had to lean even more heavily on the private sector to fuel the city’s economy. In turn, dependence upon white business leaders negated any possibility of a meaningful redistribution of resources. White New Orleans thus ceded a measure of political power to the city’s black majority but retained the corresponding economic authority from which power inevitably emanates.

⁸Sidney J. Barthelemy, “Women and Minorities Are Getting Down to Business,” *Louisiana Weekly* 5 November 1988, sec. 1, p.4.

CHAPTER 2

MAYORAL ELECTION OF 1986 AND BARTHELEMY'S FIRST TERM

Sidney Barthelemy grew up in the largely Creole Seventh Ward of New Orleans. As a Creole, which in New Orleans refers to black persons of mixed-race heritage who are Roman Catholic, usually of French ancestry, and frequently enjoy a privileged economic status in the black community, Barthelemy was not immediately identified with blacks or whites in the city. Barthelemy attended the prestigious St. Augustine High School in New Orleans where he won the Purple Knight Award recognizing him as the best all-around student in 1960. Following a brief stint at a junior college in Newburgh, New York, Barthelemy spent seven years at St. Joseph Seminary in Washington, D.C. Although he earned a bachelor's degree in philosophy, Barthelemy left the seminary at the age of twenty-five before taking his final vows. Barthelemy explained that he did not believe that he had the calling to enter the priesthood, so he "preferred to leave rather than be a bad priest."⁹

Barthelemy returned to New Orleans and accepted a position with Total Community Action, an agency that administered federal programs designed to assist the unemployed in securing jobs. He married the former Michaele "Mickey" Thibodeaux in 1968, and then enrolled in the School of Social Work at Tulane University in New Orleans where he earned a master's degree in 1971. Barthelemy also became active in

⁹ A.B. Assensoh "Sidney Barthelemy: New Orleans' Pragmatic Politician," *African World News* (June-July 1986): 17.

municipal politics teaming up with other Seventh Ward activists to form an African American political organization Community Organization for Urban Politics (COUP).

COUP served as the more conservative of New Orleans' two major black political organizations and "drew heavily on the New Orleans Urban League, the one organization that nurtured black-white elite ties and cultivated a non-confrontational style suitable for racial diplomats."¹⁰ COUP's conservative tendencies stood in stark contrast to the more militant Southern Organization for Unified Leadership (SOUL), a political offshoot of the national Congress of Racial Equality (CORE). Black political organizations in New Orleans primarily served as intermediaries between New Orleans' white politicians and the black community. In exchange for a slice of city patronage in all its myriad forms, white political leaders expected SOUL and COUP to deliver the black vote.

Ernest Morial routinely accused New Orleans' black political organizations of endorsing whichever white candidate paid them the largest sum of money. Tellingly, neither COUP nor SOUL embraced Morial's bid to become New Orleans' first black mayor. SOUL endorsed a white candidate, Nat Kiefer, with whom it enjoyed a patron-client relationship. And despite Morial's credentials as a fellow Creole from the Seventh Ward, COUP issued a lukewarm endorsement of his candidacy only after deliberating for three hours and voting on the issue five times. New Orleans columnist Iris Kelso concluded that "COUP doesn't really want Dutch Morial to be elected mayor."¹¹

¹⁰ Arnold R. Hirsch, "Race and Politics in Modern New Orleans: The Mayoralty of Dutch Morial," *Amerikastudien/ American Studies*, 35 (1990): 465.

¹¹ Iris Kelso, "Morial Vs. DiRosa: A Little Matter of Power of Money," *Figaro* (New Orleans), 12 October 1977, sec. 1, pp.3-4.

Morial concurred with Kelso's assessment and in his trademark confrontational style charged that SOUL and COUP would "rather have a white guy they can deal with, bluff, fool. They don't want a black mayor like me because they know I'm on to them."¹² Most observers believe that Morial's tense relationships with COUP's leadership and the organization's wish to see one of its own, Sidney Barthelemy, become New Orleans' first black mayor contributed to the group's ambivalence toward Morial's candidacy.

While in graduate school, Barthelemy chose to work in then Mayor Moon Landrieu's office as part of an internship program. Barthelemy's COUP group had actively supported then councilman-at-large Landrieu's successful mayoral bid in 1969. And in 1972, Landrieu returned the favor when he appointed Barthelemy as the first African American to head the city's welfare department. Arnold Hirsch finds that "both COUP (which represented the most conservative and assimilationist tendencies found in the Creole Seventh Ward) and SOUL had been tied to the administration of Moon Landrieu, the first white mayor to truly open New Orleans' government to black participation. Landrieu, however, never confused the dispensing of patronage with the sharing of power, and while amenable to the former, never acceded the latter."¹³

Barthelemy parlayed his political capital into a run for the state senate in 1974. With COUP's support, Barthelemy became the first black state senator since Reconstruction. Yet, few people knew of Barthelemy's historic achievement "because Sidney and his supporters did not like to capitalize on it."¹⁴ Barthelemy cemented his

¹² Iris Kelso, "Will Dutch Morial Continue His Long String of Firsts?," *Figaro*, 9 March 1977, sec. 1, p.4.

¹³ Hirsch, "Race and Politics," 465-66.

¹⁴ Assensoh, 18.

status as a rising black political star when he became the city's first black councilman-at-large in 1978. After winning reelection to the city council in 1982, Barthelemy set his sights on becoming New Orleans' second black mayor.

Barthelemy's racially conciliatory posture and his reputation as a genuinely congenial person positioned him perfectly to succeed the polarizing Ernest Morial in 1986. Dillard University political science professor Monte Piliawsky termed Barthelemy's appeal, particularly to white voters, as the "Nixon-Carter syndrome." Piliawsky argues that "following Nixon's departure, the U.S. embraced Jimmy Carter, the homespun, 'nice-guy' born-again Christian who seemed to embody the values of civility and morality in government. Similarly, Sidney Barthelemy represented to white New Orleanians a welcome relief from the turmoil and confrontation-not to mention tax increases- that characterized the past sixteen years of New Orleans politics under both the Landrieu and Morial administrations."¹⁵ However, Barthelemy had one final order of business on the council before making a viable run for mayor.

In order to combat his lame-duck status, Ernest Morial twice attempted to change the City Charter, which limited a mayor to two successive four-year terms in office. Barthelemy, along with COUP's Lambert Bossiere and three white councilmen: Bryan Wagner, Michael Early, and Wayne Babovich constituted the Gang of Five on the City Council that frequently thwarted Morial's initiatives. And Barthelemy mobilized on a self-serving campaign to obstruct his nemesis one last time and preserve the mayoral term limit. Barthelemy couched his argument as a rejection of machine politics, noting

¹⁵ Monte Piliawsky, "The 1986 New Orleans Mayoral Election: A Reflection," *African World News* (June-July 1986): 18.

that a two-term limit “guarantees that no Boss Tweed, no Mayor Daley, no Judge Perez will ever arise here.”¹⁶

Barthelemy’s appeals resonated well enough among blacks to insure that the charter change failed. Although eighty-five percent of black voters supported the charter change, ninety-five percent of white voters rejected the measure. Moreover, white voter turnout outpaced black turnout by a margin of sixty percent to fifty-one percent. Thus Morial’s bid to succeed himself failed overwhelmingly, and Sidney Barthelemy emerged as the early favorite to replace him.¹⁷

Barthelemy’s opposition to Morial exacted a heavy toll on the aspiring mayor in the black community. Despite black voters’ failure to support Morial’s bid for a third-term, he remained enormously popular with black New Orleanians. Commenting on the nation’s first-generation of African American mayors, political scientist Michael Preston observes that black mayors “became deified in most of these cities.”¹⁸ Ernest Morial’s symbolic position as the city’s first black mayor elevated his stature to mythical proportions with most blacks in New Orleans. Morial received ninety-five percent of the black vote in the runoff election in 1977 and an overwhelming ninety-nine percent of black voters supported his reelection in the runoff election in 1982.¹⁹

¹⁶ Sidney J. Barthelemy, Letter to the Editor, *Times Picayune*, 8 September 1985, sec.A, p.30.

¹⁷ For returns from the charter change referendum, see Allan Katz and Susan Feeney, “Organizers: Black Votes Never Came,” *Times Picayune*, 21 October 1985, sec. A., P.1,4.

¹⁸ Michael Preston, “Big-City black Mayors: An Overview,” *National Political Science Review* 2 (1990): 131.

¹⁹ Huey L. Perry and Alfred Stokes, “Politics and Power in the Sunbelt: Mayor Morial of New Orleans,” in *The New Black Politics: The Search for Political Power*, ed. Michael B. Preston, Lenneal J. Henderson, Jr., and Paul L. Puryear (New York: Longman,1987), 228-236.

Morial's ability to mobilize black voters proved equally impressive given that in American politics it is atypical for black participation to equal that of whites. In the 1977 runoff election, black voter turnout reached seventy-six percent and it held at seventy-five percent in 1982. White voter turnout in the 1977 runoff totaled seventy-six percent, and that figure dropped slightly to seventy-four percent in 1982. The mayor's support among New Orleans' white voters dropped considerably during that same period from a high of nineteen percent in 1977 to fourteen percent in 1982.

Ernest Morial's popularity with New Orleans' black voters is particularly ironic given early suspicions of his intentions within the black community owing to his Creole heritage. Morial, like Barthelemy, was extremely light-skinned and not readily identified with blacks or whites in the city. As the first African American voted to the state legislature in nearly a century, Morial was greeted by a fellow legislator who literally could not recognize his skin color. *Times Picayune* columnist Iris Kelso, recounts the solon asking Morial "Where's the nigger?"²⁰ Even one of Morial's campaign organizations felt it necessary to defend his "blackness," exhorting the city's voters that "Dutch may look white, but he lives and breathes black."²¹ Rudy Lombard, who campaigned to become New Orleans' mayor in 1986, identified the root of the black community's early suspicion of Morial. Lombard observed that there existed a "serious concern among blacks in the city that the Creole community has been quite willing to

²⁰ Iris Kelso, "Will Dutch Morial Continue His Long String of Firsts?" *Figaro*, 9 March 1977, sec. 1, p.4.

²¹ "Black Unity Lost As Rights Advance; New Orleans Fabric Unravels," *Washington Post*, 23 April 1978, sec. A, p.1.

occupy positions of influence without having paid a lot of dues for the black experience...”²²

Despite his assertion that he “hate[d] to be looked at as the anti-Morial candidate,” Barthelemy’s opposition to Morial during his seven years on the City Council had endeared him to white voters with whom Morial’s combative leadership style had worn thin.²³ Yet, Barthelemy’s tensions with Morial left him vulnerable among the black voters upon whom black elected officials must typically rely for support. To many black New Orleanians, “Morial was called arrogant by the white elite simply because he sought to assert the rights of blacks in the sociopolitical life of the community.”²⁴ And Barthelemy’s bid to become New Orleans’ second black mayor became a curious referendum on race between two black candidates.

Sidney Barthelemy kicked off his campaign on November 6, 1985, promising that the “highest priority of [his] administration [would] be to bring this divided city together.”²⁵ Barthelemy emerged as the early favorite to succeed Morial. While his opponent, State Senator William Jefferson, enjoyed the support of the city’s Protestant black ministers, the major black political organizations, COUP and SOUL, backed Barthelemy. With the candidates running virtually even among black voters, Barthelemy’s much larger white base seemed to portend favorably for the election.

²² Iris Kelso, “Smoldering Division Among Blacks,” *Times Picayune*, 2 March 1986, sec. A, p.27.

²³ Susan Feeney and Allan Katz, “The Election of ’86: The Men Who Would Be Mayor,” *Times Picayune*, 3 February 1985, sec. Dixie, p.8.

²⁴ Robert K. Whelan, Alma H. Young, and Mickey Lauria, “Urban Regimes and Racial Politics in New Orleans,” *Journal of Urban Affairs* 16(1994): 7.

²⁵ Sidney J. Barthelemy, “Announcement Speech, November 6, 1985, Sidney Barthelemy Papers, 1987-1994, Amistad Research Center, Tulane University, New Orleans, Box 1.

However, the entry of a major white candidate, Sam LeBlanc, had the potential of derailing Barthelemy's candidacy.

LeBlanc's candidacy threatened to dilute Barthelemy's white base of support if voters followed traditional racial voting patterns. Most analysts felt that a white candidate could not carry the election given the fifty-one to forty-nine percent black voting majority. A black candidate could simply follow Morial's blueprint and conjoin overwhelming black support with a small share of the white vote to secure an electoral majority. Yet, LeBlanc's candidacy posed the greatest threat to Barthelemy because he trailed Jefferson among black voters. If LeBlanc carried the white vote and Jefferson's lead among black voters persisted, Barthelemy would find himself shut out of the likely runoff election.

Ernest Morial's endorsement of William Jefferson, which came as something of a surprise given the residual tension between the two men stemming from Jefferson's unsuccessful bid to unseat Morial in 1982, began an erosion of support for Barthelemy among black voters. Jefferson sought to consolidate his gains in black precincts with a series of attack ads on black radio that suggested that Barthelemy served merely as a pawn for Republican councilman Bryan Wagner. The assaults on Barthelemy, coupled with Morial's support for Jefferson, resonated with black voters. Where polls taken by Ed Renwick of the Loyola Institute of Politics and pollster Joe Walker two weeks before Morial's endorsement both showed Barthelemy with a commanding lead in the mayoral race, their subsequent polling found Jefferson leading all candidates.

Barthelemy's diminished support among black voters was even more pronounced. From the beginning of the campaign, surveys showed a close race between Jefferson and Barthelemy in the black precincts. Following Morial's endorsement and Jefferson's offensive against Barthelemy on black radio, Jefferson assumed an advantage among black voters of "43-18 percent in Renwick's poll, and 43-23 percent in Walker's."²⁶ White voters thus entered the general election on February 1, 1986, fully cognizant that a vote for LeBlanc could have the unintended consequence of propelling Morial's preferred candidate, William Jefferson, into the mayoralty.

Given Jefferson's strong lead in the black community, he appeared to be a virtual lock to make it into a runoff election against either LeBlanc or Barthelemy. And the city's electoral demographics portended poorly for the white candidate's prospects in the runoff election when matched against a black opponent. To this point, no American city with a black voting majority had elected a white mayor after an African American had served as the city's mayor. Faced with the prospect of what many white New Orleanians perceived as a continuation of the Morial years should Jefferson prevail, forty percent of white voters cast their ballots for Barthelemy. In doing so, many white voters calculated that LeBlanc's exhortation to the white community to not "vote your strategy, vote your convictions" was a gamble they could not accept.²⁷

While Jefferson prevailed in the general election by securing over sixty percent of the black vote and ten percent of the white vote, Barthelemy placed a respectable second

²⁶ Clancy DuBos, "The Election: A View From the Polls," *Gambit*, 25 January 1986, sec. 1, p.15.

²⁷ *Among Brothers; Politics in New Orleans*, produced and directed by Paul Stekler, 59 min., Deep South Productions, 1986, videocassette.

thereby insuring a place in a runoff election. Barthelemy's strong support in the Creole Seventh Ward garnered him a total of twenty percent of the city's black vote. Although Jefferson's margin of thirty-nine percent to Barthelemy's thirty-three percent appeared to portend positively for Jefferson, Barthelemy stood poised to inherit the majority of LeBlanc's support in the runoff election.

In a curious reversal of fortunes, white voters in New Orleans confronted what Earl Black and Merle Black have termed as "the limited leverage of a franchised minority."²⁸ The authors find that the "relevant political question is not whether whites or blacks will occupy most of the vital decisionmaking arenas in state government, but *which* whites will rule."²⁹ The mayoral election of 1986 thus signaled a watershed in New Orleans municipal politics. Attorney and political consultant Jim Farwell rightly observed that for the first time, there began a "reversal of the traditional process where white candidates courted black voters. Now, black mayoral candidates will court white voters. And it is entirely possible that it will be white voters who will decide which black candidate wins."³⁰ Barthelemy's posture as the centrist alternative to "one [Jefferson] perceived as the black candidate, [and] one perceived as the white candidate [LeBlanc]" seemed to position him as the most palatable option for those who had voted for LeBlanc in the general election.³¹

Race played a prominent role in the 1986 runoff election. Citing his campaign's failure to aggressively engage Jefferson's assertions that he "had never done anything for

²⁸ Earl Black and Merle Black, *Politics and Society in the South* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1987), 126.

²⁹ Black and Black, 151.

³⁰ Allan Katz, "New Pattern of Mayoral Politics," *Times Picayune*, 9 March 1986, sec. A., p.27.

³¹ Rusty Cantelli, Letter to the Editor, *Gambit*, 15 March 1986, sec. 1, p.6.

black people” as a contributing factor in the erosion of his black support, Barthelemy mounted an aggressive radio campaign on black radio to get his message to black voters.³² Barthelemy accused Jefferson of using his elected position in the legislature to further legislation favorable to his appliance rental business. Jefferson countered with a commercial that aired on WYLD, which had the largest black audience in New Orleans. The spots accused Barthelemy of “passing for white,” and asserted that if he were elected, Barthelemy would “not be a mayor for the black community.”³³ While Jefferson denied direct responsibility for the commercials, Bob Cole, who handled media relations for Jefferson, participated in the production of the advertisements.

William Jefferson’s efforts ultimately met with failure as Sidney Barthelemy swept to a resounding victory in the runoff election. Barthelemy tallied an impressive 57.89 percent of ballots cast, and he carried nearly eighty-five percent of the white vote. His historic coalition consisted of a significant minority of black voters (nearly twenty-five percent) and an overwhelming majority of white voters. Barthelemy also benefited from white voter turnout that exceeded black turnout by four percent.

Following his analysis of the election returns, Ed Renwick observed that “there is probably no precedent in the U.S. in a racially divided city for a black candidate like Barthelemy to have such overwhelming support in the white community.”³⁴ Trevor Bryant, Jefferson’s campaign manager, offered the following assessment of Barthelemy’s strong showing with white voters: “[M]any whites may have viewed Barthelemy as a

³² Iris Kelso, “Barthelemy Runoff Plan,” *Times Picayune*, 9 February 1986, sec. A., p.19.

³³ Frank Donze, “Barthelemy Acts White, Radio Ad Says,” *Times Picayune*, sec. A., p.23.

³⁴ Allan Katz, “White Vote Key to City for Mayor” *Times Picayune*, 2 March 1986, sec. A., p.3.

white candidate. Given a choice between a light-skinned black and a dark-skinned black, whites would vote for the light-skinned one.”³⁵ Prior to the election, a white Jefferson supporter expressed a similar sentiment. She argued that “the problem is [that] many people who are like us don’t want to vote for someone that’s that black. They want to vote for someone that’s a little more white, and Sid’s a little more white.”³⁶ Historians will be hard pressed to quantify the extent to which such prejudices impacted New Orleans’ 1986 mayoral election. But the historic election that pitted two black candidates against each other for the first time in the city’s history clearly exposed festering racial scabs both within and without the black community.

Although Barthelemy received limited support from New Orleans’ black voters, he outlined his agenda for New Orleans’ black community to the city’s leading African American newspaper, *The Louisiana Weekly*, within days of taking office. Citing estimates of black unemployment in the city as high as twenty-five percent, Barthelemy pledged to make the recruitment of industries and jobs a top priority of his administration. He also vowed to aggressively implement the city’s minority set-aside program and improve conditions in New Orleans’ abominable public housing projects. And noting the city’s revenue shortfalls due to state and federal cutbacks, Barthelemy committed to pushing his regressive lottery proposal in the legislature. Barthelemy

³⁵ Cassandra Jackson and Frederick Douglas, “William Jefferson Takes Defeat Graciously; Proud of Campaign,” *Louisiana Weekly*, 8 March 1986, sec.1, p.3.

³⁶ Unidentified woman quoted in the videorecording *Among Brothers*.

notably omitted any mention of reforming New Orleans' brutal police department and addressing the city's burgeoning crime rate from his "black agenda."³⁷

While Barthelemy swept into office on May 5, 1986, riding a crest of public support, his honeymoon proved short-lived. In an attempt to reconcile a state deficit of between \$600 million and \$800 million, state legislators cut nearly twenty-five million dollars in funding to the city. Coupled with a thirty million dollar deficit inherited from the Morial administration, Barthelemy conceded that "opportunities look bleak."³⁸ Barely one month into his tenure, Barthelemy stood before the now majority-black City Council and lamented that an independent financial review conducted by the New Orleans Business Council had confirmed the gravity of the city's budget woes. Barthelemy then detailed plans to prevent the deficit from "growing any larger...reducing the size of government—by canceling contracts, by streamlining, and by reducing the number of city employees."³⁹

In July 1986, Barthelemy and the City Council announced plans to erase nearly twenty-five million dollars of the city's thirty million dollar deficit. The plan included nearly seven hundred layoffs, seven million dollars in new temporary taxes and fees, and 7.6 million dollars in other cost-cutting measures. The budget prescription even extended to vital city services. Barthelemy detailed plans to layoff 195 of the city's approximately 1,000 Fire Department employees and 184 of the Police Department's 1,700 employees. Despite the magnitude of Barthelemy's budget cuts, the budget remained nearly five

³⁷ C.C. Campbell, "Hard Work and Miracles on Mayor Barthelemy's Agenda," *Louisiana Weekly*, 10 May 1986, sec.1, pp.1,3.

³⁸ Clancy DuBos, "The Problem is Upstate," *Gambit*, 7 June 1986, sec. 1, p.13.

³⁹ Sidney Barthelemy, "Remarks to City Council," 19 June 1986, Amistad Research Center, Box 1.

million dollars short of the balanced budget mandated by law. To that end, Barthelemy called on the Council to support a \$195 annual property service charge to remedy the budget shortfall. In doing so, he argued that the service charge would generate some sixteen to twenty-million dollars and allow the city to balance the budget and rehire laid off workers, particularly in the police and fire departments.

Political observers roundly praised Barthelemy's handling of the budget crisis that plagued his first months in office. Loyola University political scientist Silas Lee observed that Barthelemy had taken over "as captain of the Titanic as it was heading for the iceberg. He's managed to keep his head above water [and] given the sharks that are out there, that's no small feat."⁴⁰ Lee Madere, head of the non-profit Bureau of Governmental Research and a former city economist concurred with Lee's assessment of Barthelemy's performance. He concluded: "I have to give him good grades considering what he's been facing. He's been up to his boots in alligators."⁴¹

Still, Barthelemy's property service charge faced an uphill battle with New Orleans' voters who typically rejected revenue initiatives. Barthelemy's constituency further complicated passage of the tax measure. The mayor's strongest supporters, white voters, remained steadfastly against nearly all tax initiatives. And black voters seemed unlikely to lend support for a regressive tax that imposed the same charge on all property in the city, regardless of value. The referendum on the property charge served as the first test of Barthelemy's mayoral mandate.

⁴⁰ Susan Feeney, "Mayor's First 100 Days Spent in Crush of Crises," *Times Picayune*, 10 August 1986, sec. A. p.14.

⁴¹ *ibid.*

Yet, Barthelemy voiced the overriding conundrum presented to the city's political leadership. He recognized that if he did not "raise taxes, the quality of the city deteriorates and the middle class surely flees to the suburbs. [And] if [he did] raise taxes, the middle class feels squeezed, and the risk is that they may still flee."⁴² Barthelemy's quandary was commonplace for America's early black mayors. Faced with shrinking revenue bases and increased costs to maintain city services and structures, embattled mayors like Kenneth Gibson of Newark concluded: "Progress is maintaining the status quo."⁴³

As the vote on the service charge approached, Barthelemy warned that the bill's failure would result in catastrophic cuts in city services. Barthelemy's three mayoral predecessors, Victor Schiro, Moon Landrieu, and even Ernest Morial, joined Barthelemy to support the service charge. Morial, whose revenue measures were frequently frustrated by Barthelemy in the City Council, argued that voters should give Barthelemy "the opportunity other mayors have not had--to put the city on a sound financial footing."⁴⁴ Their appeals fell on deaf ears as voters rejected Barthelemy's service charge by a sixty-one to thirty-nine percent margin.

In light of the service charge's failure, the status quo seemed an unrealistic ideal for the cash-strapped city. Moreover, persistent rumblings about Barthelemy's lack of

⁴² Allan Katz, "Mayor Barthelemy and the Option of Desperation," *Times Picayune*, 17 August 1986, sec. B., p.3.

⁴³ Kenneth Gibson quoted in Biles, 116.

⁴⁴ Iris Kelso and Frank Donze, "3 Ex-Mayors Go to Bat For Barthelemy," *Times Picayune*, 20 September 1986, sec. B., pp.1,5.

leadership began to seep out of City Hall. Columnist Iris Kelso opined: “Nobody knows who’s in charge...But nobody thinks Barthelemy is running things. Maybe nobody is.”⁴⁵

Following the failure of the service charge, Barthelemy’s administration secured approval from the City Council to reduce the workweek of the city’s 5,600 employees to four days. City Hall and other municipal buildings closed on Fridays, and Barthelemy also ordered the closure of one-third of the city’s fire stations. In addition to these drastic measures, 200 city workers were laid off. And all city workers who retained their jobs suffered a twenty percent pay cut for the remainder of the year. The Council also approved a 1.5 percent tax on the earnings of anyone who worked in the city, although court challenges to the legality of the earnings tax negated that potential revenue stream.

Barthelemy’s 1987 budget maintained most programs at their previous levels. He returned city workers to a five-day workweek and reopened fire stations. But laid-off workers remained out of work. With the city again on stable, albeit austere footing, Barthelemy moved to articulate and implement a vision for the city’s future. In his “State of the City Address” to the City Council on May 7, 1987, Barthelemy defended himself from critics who argued that his administration lacked direction. Citing the budgetary woes that he inherited, Barthelemy explained: “I had a vision all along, but you can’t drain the swamp until you get the damn alligators out.”⁴⁶ The mayor then laid out his plans to improve the city’s substandard rental housing stock, expand the Convention Center, and combat crime through a dedicated public safety tax.

⁴⁵ Iris Kelso, “When Being Nice Isn’t Enough,” *Times Picayune*, 28 August 1986, sec. A., p.19.

⁴⁶ Clancy DuBos, “Year Two-The Mayor’s Plan,” *Gambit*, 16 May 1987, sec.1, p.11.

Voters again rebuffed Barthelemy's attempt to gain approval for a revenue measure, in this case a twelve-mill property tax increase designed to improve fire, police, and emergency services. But the Republican National Committee's selection of New Orleans as the host city for its 1988 presidential selection convention did provide some measure of solace for the beleaguered mayor. Barthelemy said his first reaction to the good news was to "Thank God. This city needs a victory."⁴⁷ The mayor next sought to make political inroads with the city's black voters.

In February 1987, the Jefferson Parish Council authorized the erection of steel street barriers to block entry into a predominantly white neighborhood in Jefferson Parish from a predominantly black community in New Orleans. Jefferson Parish officials claimed that the barriers served to placate residents who complained that burglaries and assaults from the New Orleans side were spilling over into their neighborhood. Although parish officials could not produce any specific crime statistics for that area, Jefferson Parish Council Chairman Robert B. Evans, Jr. argued that "what people in the neighborhood perceive is just as important as what can be statistically shown."⁴⁸

The barricades sparked a firestorm among New Orleans' black residents who contended that the barricades were racially motivated. Jefferson Parish Sheriff Harry Lee's "edict to his deputies, during the 1986 holiday season, to stop blacks driving through white neighborhoods" remained fresh on the minds of black New Orleanians.⁴⁹ And angry protests, including a march by an estimated 125 black residents, ensued.

⁴⁷ Allan Katz, "The Ups and Downs of Being Mayor," *Times Picayune*, 25 January 1987, sec.B., p.3.

⁴⁸ Thomas Fitzgerald, Jeff Barricades Will Stay Down," *Times Picayune*, 24 February 1987, sec.A., pp.1,4.

⁴⁹ "Barricades Down to Stay Parish Officials Agree," *Louisiana Weekly*, 28 February 1987, sec.1, pp.1,12.

Seizing the opportunity to make a symbolic overture to New Orleans' black community, Barthelemy ordered city workers to bulldoze the structures. While Evans promised that the barricades would be immediately re-erected, Barthelemy countered that they were "a bad, bad sign and I can't stand for it."⁵⁰

State highway officials agreed with Barthelemy's contention that Jefferson Parish could not legally block New Orleanians access to Monticello, a state highway, and ordered that the barriers remain down. Barthelemy and the Jefferson Council reached an uneasy détente, although Jefferson Parish Councilman Lloyd Giardina accused Barthelemy of inflaming racial tensions. The episode afforded Barthelemy an opportunity to mobilize decisively on behalf of the city's black residents. And the mayor's speech to the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) demonstrated his desire to parlay the incident into increased black support. In the text of the speech, Barthelemy credited himself with insuring that black New Orleanians "could retain our rights to travel wherever and whenever we want to...unencumbered by the barriers of racism in our backyards."⁵¹

Evaluating Barthelemy's first year in office, *The Louisiana Weekly* concurred with the ambivalent assessments that other local media outlets had assigned to the mayor's performance. The newspaper found "itself giving the mayor a mixed review, but from the perspective of New Orleans' black community, which, more than any other ethnic group in the city, is suffering in the current economic climate."⁵² While the

⁵⁰ Frank Donze, "City Crew Bulldozes Jeff 'Wall,' *Times Picayune*, 21 February 1987, sec.A., p.1.

⁵¹ Sidney Barthelemy, "Remarks For NAACP Freedom Fund Banquet," 24 April 1987, Amistad Research Center, Box 1.

⁵² Editorial, "The First Year," *Louisiana Weekly*, 9 May 1987, sec.1, p.4.

editorial acknowledged the tough choices facing Barthelemy's administration, they questioned the mayor's leadership, the competency of his administrators, and his lack of vision for the future direction of the city. The *Weekly* thus concluded that while "black individuals "genuinely like Mayor Barthelemy...they question whether he is serving their interests (the single exception to that being his strong stand in tearing down the barricades with which Jefferson Parish had blocked off two Orleans Parish streets)."⁵³

Barthelemy's second year in office began on a high note. A productive legislative lobbying effort won the city nearly fifty million dollars for a Convention Center expansion, and the state's approval for a New Orleans referendum on a hotel and restaurant tax that would provide another fifty-five million dollars for the project. The legislature also authorized forty million dollars for a state Aerospace and Economic Development Center in the Almonaster-Michoud Industrial Corridor to help Martin Marietta in its, ultimately unsuccessful, pursuit of a space station and other NASA contracts. Barthelemy also announced plans for Pic 'N' Save, a Los Angeles discount chain, to build a thirty-five million dollar distribution center in the Almonaster-Michoud corridor. Experts touted the Pic 'N' Save project as the city's biggest economic coup since the announcement of the fifty-five million dollar Riverwalk shopping mall in 1984.

State lawmakers credited Barthelemy's temperament with uniting a typically fractured New Orleans legislative delegation behind measures to benefit the cash-strapped city. Republican John Hainkel who teamed with Democrat Sherman Copelin in the House to further the city's legislative package conceded that "the mayor brought us

⁵³ *ibid.*

together. Sherman and I don't agree on much of anything but the mutual desire to pass legislation that helps New Orleans."⁵⁴ Many political observers predicted that Barthelemy's experience as a state legislator and his congenial style would serve him well in his dealings with the legislature. State Senator Fritz Windhorst observed that "Sidney doesn't whine or complain when things go badly...He doesn't threaten people who cross him. Just having him as mayor has sharply reduced the anti- New Orleans feelings in the legislature."⁵⁵

Barthelemy did not enjoy such a lofty standing with residents of the city's public housing projects following the release of a 157 page "Housing Plan for New Orleans." Reynard Rochon, the city's onetime chief administrative officer under Mayor Morial who later ran Barthelemy's 1986 runoff campaign, performed the study at Barthelemy's behest. The report, compiled over an eight-month period at a cost to the city of 100 thousand dollars, aimed to advise Barthelemy on ways to formulate a housing agenda that would ameliorate condition for residents of the city's public housing projects. The controversial plan concluded that "public housing [was] unmanageable and beyond repair [and recommended] that city officials immediately begin to find new homes for public housing residents and demolish major portions of the deteriorating projects."⁵⁶ Rochon's study additionally called for some projects to be turned over to private management.

Housing activists immediately mobilized to forestall implementation of the report's prescriptions. Jim Hayes voiced the concerns of many public housing residents at

⁵⁴ Allan Katz, "Mayor, City on a Roll At Last," *Times Picayune*, 2 August 1987, sec.B., p.3.

⁵⁵ *ibid.*

⁵⁶ Frank Donze, "Housing Project Residents Blast Relocation Proposal," *Times Picayune*, 19 February 1988, sec. B., P.1.

a boisterous City Council hearing on the issue in February 1988. He argued that housing conditions could be substantially improved “without throwing [residents] out into the private sector, where they don’t have the kinds of protections they have now from the federal government.”⁵⁷ Then summing up the suspicions of many in the audience, Hayes charged Rochon and the Barthelemy with pandering to the interests of developers and landlords at the expense of the city’s public housing residents. Hayes noted that “developers want[ed] to get the prime land under some developments...and big landlords need[ed] some help filling their vacant apartment buildings.”⁵⁸

Still, Barthelemy and a majority on the City Council supported the housing plan. Councilman Johnny Jackson Jr., who grew up in the Desire housing project, praised Barthelemy for prioritizing the issue of public housing. Barthelemy defended the study’s findings and reassured residents that the city would take no action without citizen input. Answering his critic’s charges, Barthelemy pledged that rumors that “we are going to sell the public housing developments and put the residents out [were] simply not true.”⁵⁹ Many community activists remained unconvinced by Barthelemy’s protestations. And polls began to suggest that Barthelemy’s popularity had slipped below the levels at which voters are likely to reelect an incumbent mayor.

In late 1987, a University of New Orleans poll found that seventy six percent of New Orleans’ voters thought that Barthelemy was doing a good or excellent job. Less than one year later, that figure dipped below fifty percent, according to a Loyola

⁵⁷ Clancy DuBos, “The Rochon Report: Facing the City’s Thorniest Question,” *Gambit*, 15 March 1988, sec. 1, p.12.

⁵⁸ *ibid.*

⁵⁹ Sidney Barthelemy, “Memo From the Mayor,” *Louisiana Weekly*, 20 February 1988, sec. 1, p.4.

University poll. That survey, conducted by Ed Renwick, found that “the mayor is in serious trouble...only thirteen percent of voters surveyed believe the city is better off than it was a few years ago.”⁶⁰ Barthelemy’s approval rating of fifty percent among black voters barely exceeded the forty-eight percent of white voters who believed that he was performing well. And Barthelemy appeared extremely vulnerable as potential opponents for the 1990 mayoral race began to consider a bid to unseat him.

⁶⁰ Frank Donze, “Barthelemy Faces Political Danger, Poll Indicates,” *Times Picayune*, 22 April 1988, sec. B., p.1.

CHAPTER 3 REELECTION AND SECOND TERM

With the specter of reelection looming on the immediate horizon, New Orleans' voters listed unemployment, the city's poor financial footing, and crime as the city's most pressing concerns. However, Governor Buddy Roemer's fiscal reform program, which threatened to further cut state aid to the struggling metropolis, weighed paramount in the mind of Mayor Barthelemy. Noting that the city's budget had already decreased from 324.9 million dollars in 1984 to 213 million dollars in 1989, Barthelemy implored Roemer to not balance "the state budget at New Orleans' expense."⁶¹ The mayor also threatened to withhold state-mandated city funding of New Orleans' court and jail systems.

Two factors precluded Barthelemy from securing New Orleans' fair share from the state of Louisiana. First, Governor Roemer had inherited a deficit that he estimated at 1.3 billion dollars, and he thus found it necessary to dramatically reduce spending. New Orleans also sent a divided delegation to Baton Rouge. As population shifts and reapportionment splintered the city into racially and economically polarized districts, New Orleans' state legislators found little common ground.

In the 1970s, Moon Landrieu's delegation was all-white, all-male, and all-Democratic. Barthelemy's delegation consisted of ten African Americans and eleven whites. *Times Picayune* columnist Zack Nauth observed that the New Orleans lawmakers who consistently opposed Barthelemy's "proposals, such as the inheritance tax, are white

⁶¹ Allan Katz, "For Barthelemy and Roemer: A Parting of the Ways," *Times Picayune*, 12 June 1988, sec.B., p.3.

as are most of their constituents. Barthelemy, like a majority of the city's residents, is black. Many legislators and others agree that for some voters issues are framed in terms of black and white."⁶² Because Barthelemy could not command a disciplined New Orleans bloc vote in the legislature, Roemer could ignore the mayor's requests with no fear of recourse.

With the intervention of the New Orleans Business Council, Governor Roemer and Barthelemy reached an accord in which the state agreed to appropriate nineteen million dollars to the city to offset its budget deficit. In return, Barthelemy pledged to withdraw his proposed 125-dollar service charge from the ballot. While Barthelemy's service charge had virtually no chance of success, Roemer feared that it would have impeded his chances of getting New Orleans' votes for fiscal reform. Despite the compromise, voters soundly defeated Roemer's fiscal reform package.

As Barthelemy continued his free-fall in polling related to his job performance, Dock Board Chairman Donald Mintz announced himself as a candidate for mayor. Yet Barthelemy's chief concern was that Ernest Morial would enter the race. Polls showed that in a three-way race, Barthelemy would garner only nineteen percent of the white vote and thirteen percent of the black vote. The mayor's prospects looked so bleak that some politicians argued that Barthelemy should "pull out of the race right now and convert his campaign fund, probably over \$1 million now, to his own use. All he would have to do is pay the taxes on it."⁶³

⁶² Zack Nauth, "Dueling Delegation Costs City Clout," *Times Picayune*, 3 March 1989, sec. A., pp.1, 6.

⁶³ Iris Kelso, "Squeeze Play May Be Working in the Mayoral Race," *Times Picayune*, 2 November 1989, sec. B., p.15.

Black voters in particular expressed dissatisfaction with the Barthelemy administration's servicing of their concerns. A University of New Orleans (UNO) poll indicated that black voters were less concerned about unemployment than they had been in 1986. UNO poll director, Dr. Susan Howell found that "the sharp increase in black-on-black murders and the proliferation of drugs in the black community ha[d] made crime a central concern for a majority of black residents."⁶⁴ And she noted that it would be a "natural issue for a white candidate [Mintz] to use against him. That's the issue where he's weak."⁶⁵

Barthelemy's flagging campaign picked up needed momentum when the city's black ministers announced their support for his candidacy. Most analysts had predicted that the main political ministers would withhold their endorsement until Ernest Morial, who the group had backed in both of his mayoral races, announced his intentions. The ministers explained that their support of Barthelemy was not an anti-Morial action. Instead, the Rev. Charles Brown, the group's spokesperson, "made it clear the ministers believe[d] they had a story to tell the black community...He said Barthelemy ha[d] appointed more blacks to top level jobs, named more blacks to boards and commissions and done more for minority business than any previous mayor. That includes Morial."⁶⁶ Morial's surprise announcement to sit out the election further buoyed Barthelemy's reelection effort. Prior to Morial's withdrawal from the race, a scenario in which Morial

⁶⁴ Brent J. Hodges, "UNO Poll Shows Dissatisfaction of N.O. Blacks," *Louisiana Weekly*, 25 June 1988, sec. 1, pp. 1,2.

⁶⁵ Clancy DuBos, "Barthelemy: The Polls Talk," *Gambit*, 28 March 1989, sec.1, p.12.

⁶⁶ Iris Kelso, "Black Ministers Pick Barthelemy," *Times Picayune*, 5 November 1989, sec. B., p.9.

carried the black vote and Mintz carried the white vote, threatened to shut Barthelemy out of a runoff election.

With Morial's exit, Barthelemy suddenly emerged as the prohibitive favorite in the February general election given the city's now fifty-five percent black voter majority. Barthelemy won the 1986 mayor's race with overwhelming white support and a significant minority of black votes. Yet Barthelemy quickly discerned that if people voted in traditional racial patterns, his winning coalition would likely consist of a majority of the black vote while retaining a modicum of white support. And the mayor found himself in the unfamiliar position of soliciting support from the less affluent of his black constituents.

Given the city's demographic imperatives, Donald Mintz sought to minimize the role of race in the campaign. His appeals in the *Louisiana Weekly* argued that "the opinion that only a black man may now be elected in New Orleans is a bogus issue—a discredit to thousands of black and white citizens who long ago decided that the scourge of racial politics had done more harm than good."⁶⁷ But Mintz's lack of experience in elected office and his unfamiliarity with New Orleans' voters posed additional obstacles for his candidacy. Citing Barthelemy's years of experience in city government, *Gambit*, *The Times Picayune*, and *The Louisiana Weekly* endorsed Sidney Barthelemy.

The mayor also secured endorsements from William Jefferson, the Reverend Jesse Jackson, the AFL-CIO, and all of the city's major black political organizations. Yet, Mintz remained on the offensive throughout the campaign. He scored Barthelemy's

⁶⁷ Donald Mintz Campaign Advertisement, *Louisiana Weekly*, 2 September 1989, sec.1, p.8.

handling of city patronage and cited the city's contract awarding process as a key reason that *Forbes Magazine* named New Orleans as the worst place to locate a new business. Mintz also pointed to a report that listed New Orleans as one of the five worst managed cities in America as an exemplar of Barthelemy's ineptitude. His campaign still faced an uphill battle largely due to the politics of race. In the weeks leading up to the election, Louisiana State University political scientist Wayne Parent explained that "New Orleans has only had a black candidate for mayor 12 years, and that's not long...it's going to be tough for black people to turn their backs on one of their own."⁶⁸

Polls indicating an upturn in support for Barthelemy served as evidence of the prominence of race in the campaign. While a UNO poll showed that the mayor had increased his share of the black vote from forty-two percent in October 1989 to fifty-two percent in January 1990, twenty-seven percent of black voters surveyed reported that they disapproved of the job Barthelemy was doing. Yet, Mintz received the support of only sixteen-percent of black respondents. Columnist Clancy DuBos concluded that "this illustrates...the importance in the black community of reelecting the black mayor: even those who disapprove of the job he is doing are not automatically voting for his white opponent."⁶⁹

Barthelemy moved aggressively to consolidate his gains in the black community. In his remarks to the Gulf South Minority Purchasing Council, Barthelemy touted his commitment to minority participation in city contract work. Barthelemy noted that "since

⁶⁸ Rebecca Theim and Coleman Warner, "Feb. 3 Ballot to Test Loyalties of Black Voters," *Times Picayune*, 31 December 1989, sec. B., p.2.

⁶⁹ Clancy DuBos, "Change in Black Attitudes Key For Barthelemy," *Gambit*, 23 January 1990, sec. 1, p.13.

the set-aside program began in 1984, sixteen million dollars were awarded to minority firms in the last administration, [but] during my administration we have awarded more than 116 million dollars in contracts to minorities and women... This totals thirty-one percent of contracts awarded.”⁷⁰ The mayor’s campaign attacked Mintz for his law firm’s inadequate minority hiring practices. Sandra Rhodes Duncan, the president of Rhodes Transportation and a primary beneficiary of city largess at the New Orleans Airport, implored an audience of minority entrepreneurs to “support *our* mayor! *Our* mayor, you know what I mean.”⁷¹ And Barthelemy’s campaign aired radio advertisements on WYLD radio in which the Rev. Climon J. Smith said: “Let us not be fooled by the claims of a white politician. We have made tremendous gains under our mayor. We have come too far to be turned around.”⁷²

Responding to Mintz’s criticism of his injection of race into the campaign, Barthelemy accused Mintz’s campaign of circulating racist fliers. One of the handouts depicted Barthelemy as an opportunistic politician “who is black only when it’s convenient for him.”⁷³ The illustration showed Barthelemy smiling over the deceased Ernest Morial’s casket and robbing Morial’s grave. According to Barthelemy, another

⁷⁰ Sidney Barthelemy, “Gulf South Minority Purchasing Council Annual Trade Fair and Banquet: Welcoming Remarks,” 27 September 1989, Sidney Barthelemy Papers, 1987-1994, Amistad Research Center, Box 1.

⁷¹ David Anthony, “People,” *Louisiana Weekly*, 28 October 1989, sec. 1, p.3.

⁷² Coleman Warner and Rebecca Theim, “Barthelemy Ads Exploit race, Mintz claims,” *Times Picayune*, 5 January 1990, sec. B., p.1.

⁷³ Rebecca Theim and Coleman Warner, “Barthelemy Blames Mintz For Racial Flier,” *Times Picayune*, 1 February 1990, sec. B., p.1.

flier “show[ed] me as a black man with a half-white face.”⁷⁴ Mintz denied involvement in the matter.

In February 1990, Sidney Barthelemy scored a convincing victory in his reelection bid. The incumbent mayor carried twenty-three percent of the white vote and eighty-six percent of the black vote. Barthelemy’s winning coalition marked a near complete reversal of his 1986 constituency that consisted of eighty-five percent of white voters and twenty-five percent of black voters. Barthelemy’s media consultant, Jim Carvin, opined that Mintz “counted too much on voter dissatisfaction and didn’t tell voters enough about himself.”⁷⁵ Yet Carvin conceded that Barthelemy’s support among black voters “shifted because of race. It’s very simple.”⁷⁶

Barthelemy pledged to take a more active role in the day-to-day management of his second administration. With local business leaders warning that the city stood on the precipice of bankruptcy, the mayor led a successful campaign to refinance 165 million dollars of the city’s bonded debt. Barthelemy injected the thirty-five million dollar short-term windfall from the debt restructuring into the operating budget, thereby allowing the city to fund the criminal justice system for the second half of 1991.

The city also did particularly well in the state’s capital outlay budget, with 145 million dollars allocated by the state for a variety of projects including: expansion of the convention center, a new juvenile detention center, renovation of the Wildlife and Fisheries building, and improvements for Charity Hospital. The federal government

⁷⁴ Rebecca Theim and Coleman Warner, “Mayor and Mintz Exchange Salvos on Race Issue,” *Times Picayune*, 9 January 1990, sec. B., p.3.

⁷⁵ Coleman Warner, “Timing Turns Bad For Mintz at Race’s End,” *Times Picayune*, 5 February 1990, sec. A., p.6.

⁷⁶ *ibid.*

directed timely funds to the city as well. UNO's proposed Center for Energy Resource Management received ten million dollars in federal monies. Combined with a 21.4 million dollar allocation for Lake Pontchartrain Basin projects and a seventeen million dollar federal grant in June for local housing, New Orleans stood on stable financial footing for the first time in Barthelemy's mayoralty.

Councilwoman Dorothy Mae Taylor's effort to deny parade permits to Carnival Krewes that limit membership on the basis of race or sex provided Barthelemy's administration with its next serious challenge. Coming on the heels of David Duke's racially divisive bid to become Louisiana's governor, Taylor's proposed ordinance again exposed latent racial tensions. *Times Picayune* columnist James Gill distilled the issue to its core in *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans*. Gill explains that "[t]he old-line view of Carnival—that it was an uplifting experience for which people on the streets should be grateful to their benefactors—had not changed since Comus first took to the streets."⁷⁷ But the established social and economic order of "Old New Orleans was about to collide with contemporary political reality, and Councilwoman Dorothy Mae Taylor had made clear her determination to give the white aristocracy its comeuppance."⁷⁸

The Mardi Gras flap received national attention, and Barthelemy appeared on NBC Television's *Today Show* to defend his support of Taylor's ordinance. While Barthelemy counseled compromise behind the scenes, he remained committed to the

⁷⁷ James Gill, *Lords of Misrule: Mardi Gras and the Politics of Race in New Orleans* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997), 279.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*

basic tenets of the anti-discrimination ordinance. Barthelemy contended that he had “always stood against all forms of discrimination...[and his] position on this ordinance is consistent with this stance.”⁷⁹ The mayor also feared the controversy would negatively affect the tourism business upon which New Orleans too heavily relied. In his speech to the City Council in support of the ordinance, Barthelemy admonished the council against sending “a signal that we help to foster discrimination in New Orleans. We are a big-league city in terms of conventions, tourism, and sports events. Whether we like it or not, this is the modern age.”⁸⁰

Two of the oldest and most exclusive Mardi Gras krewes canceled their parades following the City Council’s adoption of the anti-discrimination ordinance on December 19, 1991. Although the amended measure called for no action to be taken against the krewes for one year while a Barthelemy-appointed blue-ribbon committee studied the issue, the captains of Momus and Comus announced that their krewes would not parade. Proteus soon followed suit, which left Rex as the sole remaining old-line krewe amenable to integration. In a letter to Barthelemy explaining their decision, Comus’ captain cited the krewe’s particular concern over “the intense and immoderate racial bitterness expressed by various supporters of the Taylor ordinance.”⁸¹

While critics contended that Barthelemy should have assumed a stronger leadership role in the compromise discussions, his imposition of a committee to study the issue, defused a racially charged powder keg. Following five months of acrimonious

⁷⁹ Sidney Barthelemy, “Letter to Mr. David Engles,” 2 January 1992, Sidney Barthelemy Papers, 1987-1994, Amistad Research Center, Box 2.

⁸⁰ Gill, 7.

⁸¹ Captain, Mistick Krewe of Comus, “Letter to Mayor Sidney J. Barthelemy, 13 January 1992, Sidney Barthelemy Papers, 1987-1994, Amistad Research Center, Box 2.

debate, the City Council unanimously passed a final, amended version of Taylor's ordinance. The compromise bill banned discrimination on the basis of race and sexual orientation, but not gender. The adopted ordinance also dropped the specter of criminal penalties for krewe captains accused of discrimination.

Instead, persons who believed that they had been discriminated against would have to lodge a complaint with the city's Human Relations Committee at which time the krewe's captain would be required to sign a sworn affidavit stating otherwise. Although a federal judge ultimately ruled against the legality of the anti-discrimination ordinance, Comus, Momus, and Proteus have not returned to the streets. A top Barthelemy aide summed up the administration's true feelings about the whole affair: "The ordinance is bullshit. The amendments are bullshit. We're just trying to get it behind us."⁸²

In 1992, a Justice Department report that ranked the city first nationally in complaints of police brutality between 1984 and 1990, focused attention on the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD).⁸³ Rampant crime, partially attributable to a nationwide crack cocaine epidemic, also weighed heavily on the minds of New Orleans residents. NOPD statistics reflected a 127 percent increase in the city's murder rate between 1985 and 1991. During that period, robberies escalated by forty-four percent and total violent crimes increased by thirty-three percent. Given that crime and police brutality disproportionately affected New Orleans' poor, black residents, Barthelemy's

⁸² Allen Johnson, Jr., "We Can Out-finesse Him: The Coming Battle Between the Mayor and Governor Over a New Orleans Casino," *Gambit*, 21 April 1992, sec. 1, p.17.

⁸³ Bruce Alpert, "Area Police Rank High in U.S. Brutality Report," *Times Picayune*, 20 May 1992, sec. B., p.1.

failure in addressing these issues reflects negatively on the extent to which his mayoralty delivered appreciable benefits to the black underclass.⁸⁴

In 1992, African Americans constituted nearly ninety percent of the city's 352 homicide victims. Joseph Sheley, a Tulane University sociology professor who specializes in crime issues, attributed several factors to the city's "subculture of violence" including "teenage gangs and well-armed youths, low levels of education, high unemployment, and poverty."⁸⁵ Citizen groups expressed skepticism about the administration's commitment to addressing the city's burgeoning crime rate. Reverend Suzanne Meyer, a member of All Congregations Together (ACT), complained that "four years ago, the mayor came to my church with the TV cameras rolling and said churches were obligated to get involved in the fight against drugs...But now that I come to his office, he won't meet with me. I guess it's just different when you're running for re-election."⁸⁶

Upon taking office in 1986, Barthelemy retained police superintendent Warren Woodfork. Ernest Morial had selected Woodfork as the city's first African American police chief in 1984. And Woodfork inherited a department wracked with poor morale, low pay, outdated equipment, and racial divisions. A city-commissioned study of the NOPD performed by former Pentagon inspector general Col. Mickey Evans concluded that "Woodfork eventually became a good superintendent under trying circumstances.

⁸⁴ Inter-Office Memorandum, "Background for FBI Violent Crimes Symposium," 24 February 1993, Records of Mayor Sidney J. Barthelemy, 1986-1994, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, Box 35, File SJB Criminal Justice Coordinating Council (1991-1993), Folder 2.

⁸⁵ Christopher Cooper, "State No. 1 in Killings," *Times Picayune*, 5 October 1993, sec. A., p.8.

⁸⁶ Sheila Grissett, "Church Leaders: Mayor Not Acting on Drug War Vow," 10 October 1992, sec. B., pp.1, 2.

[But] he did occasionally overlook or forgive police misconduct, a practice that reportedly contributed to the rapid decline of discipline at NOPD.”⁸⁷ Under pressure due to revelations of wanton police brutality, escalating crime rates, and an ongoing federal probe into corruption within the department, Woodfork retired from the department in April 1991.

Mayor Barthelemy resisted calls from the Metropolitan Crime Commission to organize a committee of community leaders to conduct a nationwide search for the city’s next police chief. Instead, Barthelemy named Arnesta Taylor to head the NOPD. A *Gambit* editorial observed that “[i]t is no secret that Barthelemy and his wife are close friends with Chief Taylor and his wife.”⁸⁸ Taylor’s credentials as a twenty-seven year police veteran with a high school diploma ill-equipped him to administer a modern police department with a ninety million dollar budget. Taylor’s two-year tenure as chief of police amounted to an unmitigated disaster.

Mickey Evans’ study of the NOPD concluded that on Taylor’s watch, corruption and police ethics violations escalated to a level not seen since the 1950s. The report found that Taylor was considered by the “vast majority of police officers interviewed as by far the worst in recent NOPD history...[And] many cops credit him exclusively with the rapid decline of NOPD.”⁸⁹ Under Taylor, citizen complaints of mistreatment, particularly in the black community, persisted. And the racially motivated arrest of Branford Marsalis

⁸⁷ Commentary, “Morial’s Search Gets Tougher,” *Gambit*, 28 June 1994, sec. 1, p.7.

⁸⁸ Commentary, “NOPD’s Signal 108,” *Gambit*, 23 March 1993, sec. 1, p.5.

⁸⁹ Commentary, “Morial’s Search Gets Tougher,” *Gambit*, 28 June 1994, sec. 1, p.7.

(the New Orleans-born bandleader of *The Tonight Show*) following a routine traffic stop, called national attention to the NOPD's dark history of racism and excessive force.

Even Councilwoman Peggy Wilson, a staunch police supporter, conceded: "I think we have a corrupt Police Department—I think we have a brutal Police Department..."⁹⁰ Chief Taylor retired on July 31, 1993, and with only nine months remaining on his term, Barthelemy named Assistant Superintendent Joseph Orticke, Jr. to succeed Taylor. Meaningful reform of NOPD did not occur until Barthelemy's successor, Marc Morial, hired Richard Pennington to head the department shortly after taking office.

The mayor's hiring of Arnesta Taylor highlighted a fundamental shortcoming of his mayoralty. Barthelemy's propensity for distributing city contracts and municipal employment to friends and political supporters with little regard for merit undermined the effectiveness of his administration. Answering questions about patronage at the New Orleans International Airport, Aviation Board chairman Steve Murray, a Barthelemy appointee, responded that "everything that is publicly bid is bid—otherwise we check the list of contributors."⁹¹ While the mayor did not directly award contracts at the airport, he appointed the Aviation Board members who awarded the contracts. And they served at the mayor's discretion. Barthelemy explained that "you have to be able to say, if you support me, I'm going to do something for you."⁹²

Contributions from beneficiaries of city largess at the airport alone accounted for eighteen percent of Barthelemy's 3.92 million dollar reelection campaign fund. Laurence

⁹⁰ Commentary, "NOPD's Signal 108," *Gambit*, 23 March 1993, sec.1, p.5.

⁹¹ Commentary, "City Hall's Patronage Under Scrutiny," *Gambit*, 12 September 1989, sec. 1, p.7.

⁹² James Gill, "Patronage and Campaign Finances," *Times Picayune*, 3 August 1990, sec. B., p.7.

Lambert contributed 25 thousand dollars to Barthelemy's campaign between 1987 and 1989. In turn, the Aviation Board paid his firm two million dollars for extra work "he said he had done beyond what was called for in his contracts."⁹³ Lambert received the extra work despite having been successfully sued by the Board for shoddy runway repairs. The Aviation Board awarded several other firms with ties to Barthelemy, most notably Rhodes Transportation and AME Inc., contracts even though each submitted the least competitive bid. Following a successful court challenge to a contract that Barthelemy signed with two computer companies with whom he enjoyed close personal ties, one of the plaintiffs explained his reasons for bringing the lawsuit: "While City Hall has no money to repair streets or properly fund the criminal justice system, it has hundreds of thousands of dollars to give away to political friends... Maybe this lawsuit will stop it, maybe it won't, but we'll at least let people know what's going on."⁹⁴

Courts also nullified a settlement that Barthelemy reached in a police brutality case against the city in the final hours of his administration. The plaintiff's attorney, and longtime Barthelemy friend, Sonje Wilkerson, stood to receive at least twenty-five percent of the 1.2 million dollar settlement. Although Barthelemy is not an attorney, he personally negotiated and signed the settlement without the advice of counsel.

Barthelemy explained that he "was trying to clean his plate... [and] save the city some money."⁹⁵ The day before the settlement, Barthelemy and assistant city attorney George

⁹³ Rebecca Theim, "Mayor's Backers Make Millions From Airport," *Times Picayune*, 11 June 1989, sec. A., p.10.

⁹⁴ Rebecca Theim, "N.O. Broke Bid Laws in Computer Deal, Suit Says," *Times Picayune*, 15 June 1990, sec. B., p.4.

⁹⁵ Christopher Cooper, "Ex- Mayor Defends Deal on Lawsuit," *Times Picayune*, 11 August 1994, sec. A., pp.1, 7.

Blair agreed that the case was “worth \$300,000 on a good day...[and] \$300,000 is what Barthelemy authorized him to offer Wilkerson a day before the mayor settled the case on his own.”⁹⁶

Barthelemy seemed determined to leave office on a sour note. Under the terms of an 1884 legislative act, the Mayor of New Orleans could award five scholarships a year to Tulane University that would cover the students’ entire undergraduate or graduate term. In 1993, the approximate value of each scholarship exceeded seventeen thousand dollars per year. State legislators could each designate one scholarship per year. In his most brazen act of impropriety, Barthelemy awarded one of the five mayoral scholarships to his son, Sidney J. Barthelemy II.

The mayor’s reaction added further fuel to the raging controversy. Responding to questions at a press conference, Barthelemy explained that he “ma[d]e a salary as mayor, which is not a whole lot of money...I’m trying to be a good father and a good family man...”⁹⁷ Noting that the mayor’s salary placed him among the top five percent of New Orleans households in income, voters remained unsympathetic to his pleadings. Barthelemy complained that “he and other African American elected officials quickly learn that the rules change once they are elected.”⁹⁸ The Reverend Melanie Morel Sullivan responded in a letter to *Gambit*: “Sidney’s mama better not hear him saying he’s black! Somehow, the mayor’s ethnicity only comes up only when he finds it useful or

⁹⁶ Ibid.

⁹⁷ Susan Finch and Kim Chatelain, “Mayor Defends Son’s Scholarship,” *Times Picayune*, 2 June 1993, sec. A., pp.1, 8.

⁹⁸ Commentary, “The ‘Scholargate’ Mess,” *Gambit*, 15 June 1993, sec. 1, p.5.

convenient.”⁹⁹ Public pressure and revelations that Barthelemy and many state lawmakers had allotted their scholarships to the politically connected led Tulane to establish controls over the scholarship selection process. And Sidney Barthelemy II decided not to attend Tulane.

In the final two years of his second term, Barthelemy turned his attention to supporting the construction of a single, land-based casino in the city. Barthelemy believed that a European-style casino in the Rivergate would be the crowning achievement of his mayoralty. The casino would provide the city with an additional revenue source and serve as the focal point of the revitalized riverfront. But Governor Edwin Edwards cautioned Barthelemy that north Louisiana lawmakers would not support any plan that shared revenues with the city. New Orleans “would have to settle for collateral benefits—more jobs and more tourist dollars—but no direct cut of casino revenues, period.”¹⁰⁰ The bill that Governor Edwin Edwards initially pushed through the legislature directed most of the casino proceeds to the state and left the city of New Orleans to bear the increased police and sanitation costs that would accompany the project. Reflecting on the bill, City Councilman Joseph Giarusso lamented that “some members of the House of Representatives committed what, to many, amounts to a legal rape of the people of New Orleans.”¹⁰¹

Since the legislation approving the casino stipulated that it would be located on the city-owned Rivergate site near the foot of Canal Street, the mayor retained the right to

⁹⁹ Melanie Morel Sullivan, Letters From Our Readers, *Gambit*, 29 June 1993, sec.1, p.8.

¹⁰⁰ Allen Johnson, Jr., “We Can Out-Finesse Him: The Coming Battle Between the Mayor and the Governor Over a New Orleans Casino,” *Gambit*, sec., 1, p.17.

¹⁰¹ Commentary, “Time to Take Stock,” *Gambit*, 23 June 1992, sec., 1, p.5.

award a lease from a competing pool of casino developers. Barthelemy chose to grant the lease to the team of developers Christopher Hemmeter and Daniel Robinowitz and Caesars World. Critics charged that Hemmeter's expense paid junket for city officials and their spouses to his luxurious Hawaiian resort influenced the mayor's decision. Barthelemy flatly denied the charge in a letter to *60 Minutes* producer Richard Bonin, whose show aired an expose of Governor Edwards and the casino development in New Orleans. In the letter, Barthelemy characterized the project as the "most significant public development project underway anywhere in an American city today [and] certainly the largest opportunity ever presented to the poorest citizens of our city."¹⁰² Yet, Barthelemy kept no written analysis of his selection criteria, and rumblings persisted that the mayor had made his choice based on factors other than the proposal's merits.

The state casino board, which was the entity that could award a casino operating license, complicated the proposed development by selecting the rival development group of Harrah's Jazz Company. The group consisted of ten local investors and Harrah's Casino Hotels. Governor Edwards' pressure led to a partnership between Hemmeter, the ten local investors, and Harrah's. The newly formed entity operated under the name of Harrah's Jazz Company.

In a meeting with Governor Edwards, Barthelemy held firm that the development would have to proceed under Hemmeter's initial plan to demolish the Rivergate and replace it with the world's largest casino. The Harrah's group had proposed to renovate

¹⁰² Sidney Barthelemy, "Letter to Mr. Richard Bonin," 4 March 1993, Records of Mayor Sidney J. Barthelemy, 1986-1994, City Archives, New Orleans Public Library, Executive Office of the Mayor, Subject/Correspondence Files, Box 50, File SJB Gaming 1993.

the existing building at a cost of 357 million dollars. Edwards sided with Barthelemy, and the “plan that Harrah’s definitively accepted on October 13 was almost twice as expensive at \$670 million.”¹⁰³ Incoming mayor Marc Morial succeeded in extracting a better deal for New Orleans from the state, but financial problems and legal wrangling persisted for years. And when the casino finally did materialize, it did so in a fashion that differed substantially from Barthelemy’s initial vision.

As Barthelemy prepared to leave office, voters seemed ready for a change in the city’s leadership. Polls in 1994 reflected that Barthelemy’s disapproval rating had reached sixty four percent. The outgoing mayor chose to highlight the casino project, the construction of the Aquarium of the Americas, convention center expansions, the 1988 Republican Convention, two NCAA Final Four’s, and a Super Bowl as major achievements realized during his administration. Voters focused on the low points of Barthelemy’s tenure. New Orleanians cited “an unprecedented murder rate, decaying neighborhoods, and a lethargic bureaucracy [and] held Barthelemy and his administration directly accountable.”¹⁰⁴ *The Louisiana Weekly* took a parting shot at Barthelemy as well. In an editorial, the paper opined that “with [Marc] Morial in City Hall, blacks who live in public housing and those who are part of that awful working class poor category now have a sensitive voice on Perdido Street.”¹⁰⁵ And *Gambit* readers added a moment of

¹⁰³ Tyler Bridges, *Bad Bet on the Bayou: The Rise of Gambling in Louisiana and the Fall of Governor Edwin Edwards* (New York, Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2001), 199.

¹⁰⁴ Dawn Ruth, “Mayor Exits Amid Criticism,” *Times Picayune*, 30 April 1994, sec. A., pp.1, 6.

¹⁰⁵ Editorial, *Louisiana Weekly*, 12 March 1994, sec. B., p.1.

levity when they voted that Barthelemy's ideal new job would be as a garbageman, so he could "go back and clean up the City Hall he left behind."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁶ *Gambit*, 30 August 1994, sec. 1, p.55.

CHAPTER FOUR CONCLUSION

Sidney Barthelemy's tenure as mayor of New Orleans failed to appreciably benefit the majority of New Orleans' black residents. Yet, the harsh evaluations of the tenure of Mayor Barthelemy reflect the maturation of black politics in the Crescent City. No longer blinded by the novelty of the city's first African American mayor, scholars and African American residents of New Orleans have held Sidney Barthelemy to a higher standard than his predecessor. Symbolic victories no longer resonate with a black populous in need of substantive gains to redress long-standing economic and social inequities.

Barthelemy inherited a city in financial ruin, with the African American unemployment rate approaching twenty-five percent and a brutal and corrupt police department that routinely mistreated the city's most vulnerable residents. Yet, Ernest Morial's status as the city's first black mayor has romanticized his legacy and obscured the extent to which his mayoralty shared the same failings as Barthelemy's. While Morial and Barthelemy employed radically different methods, owing in large part to their divergent electoral coalitions, the tangible results that their administrations delivered proved similar. A small class of black business owners and professionals benefited from set-aside programs and city contract work. The burgeoning black middle class enjoyed greater access to municipal employment. But African American voters at the lower rungs of the socioeconomic ladder, upon whom black elected officials rely for votes, realized little more than rhetorical servicing of their concerns.

The inadequacy of the consolidation of black political power in redressing long-standing social and economic inequities in the Crescent City illustrates the limitations of electoral politics as a vehicle for African American advancement. Arbitrary state and federal funding cuts, downturns in vital industries, and shrinking tax bases owing to white flight to the suburbs, rendered black mayors impotent in uplifting conditions for their poorest constituents. As historian Roger Biles observes: “dwindling revenues surely comprised the greatest problem; black economic power could not keep pace with black political power. A black mayor, even in a city with a black majority or plurality, still had to deal with whites acting as the primary source of the city’s economic resources.”¹⁰⁷ While electoral politics remains a necessary component in securing incremental gains for black-Americans, two generations of black political leadership in New Orleans demonstrate that the struggle for African American equality must permutate beyond the narrow confines of electoral politics.

¹⁰⁷ Biles, 116.

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