

NO ESCAPE

White Flight

Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism

Kevin M. Kruse

Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005

\$35

339 pp.

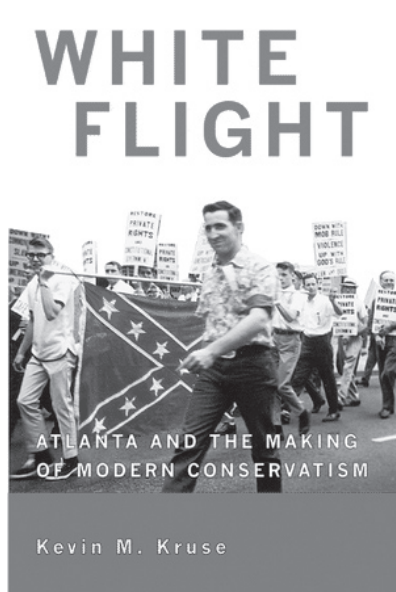
Reviewed by Nelson Rosit

Kevin Kruse has written an informative history of Atlanta's postwar racial revolution. This case study of one city has far wider implications. The book is engaging because the story is told, in large part, from a white, grassroots perspective. This study also raises issues of major interest to racially conscious European Americans.

Kruse grew up in Nashville, and received his B.A. from the University of North Carolina, so he has some Southern roots. This is not to imply that he is sympathetic to white resistance to integration. He is not, and often uses quotation marks to note his disapproval of white racial rhetoric. Despite an underlying bias, he tries to be evenhanded in his chronicle. *White Flight* is Kruse's first book and grew out of his dissertation (Ph.D., Cornell, 2000). He quickly gained tenure at Princeton, and is considered a rising young academic historian.

For many decades Atlanta has been emblematic of the so-called New South. It developed a reputation for being "progressive" and "the city too busy to hate." According to Kruse, this conventional view is highly misleading. During the 1950s and '60s white Atlantans supported racial segregation just as strongly as did whites in cities with reputations for stiff resistance. What was different about Atlanta was that by the late 1940s the city's political and business elite had already decided not to actively oppose desegregation, but rather to manage and moderate the pace of change. *White Flight* makes clear that desegregation was very much a top-down decision by a white establishment fearful that militant white opposition would be bad for business and sour the city's relationship with the federal government.

Leading the way for white capitulation were Atlanta's two mayors of the era, William Hartsfield (1942–61) and Ivan Allen Jr. (1962–70). Despite their opportunistic political skills and support from Atlanta's elite, one still wonders how these men managed to gain office in a then majority-white Southern city. Hartsfield's political coalition was nothing less than "a tacit alliance of blacks and upper-middle-class whites against the working-class whites of Atlanta."¹ Hartsfield and his staff referred to white opposition as "rabble," and Mayor Allen used the term "redneck element" to describe whites who opposed his policies. Hartsfield told a *Look* magazine reporter that talk of old Southern traditions made him "think of boll weevils and hook worms."²



The betrayal of their race and region brought kudos to the Atlanta leadership from the national media and federal government. *Newsweek*, the *New York Times*, and *U.S. News and World Report*, for example, lavished praise on the city for its peaceful desegregation of public schools in 1961. While Atlanta's elite received accolades, the burden of desegregation fell almost entirely upon middle- and working-class whites. Affluent Atlantans were insulated in their exclusive neighborhoods, private schools, and country clubs. Meanwhile, the city's public schools, swimming pools, golf courses, and modestly priced neighborhoods were conceded to blacks.

Given the grassroots opposition to school desegregation, Kruse believes Atlanta could easily have turned into another Little Rock, on a larger scale. In 1960 a majority of Atlantans favored closing the public schools rather than integrating them. A two-stage strategy was employed to defuse public opposition to desegregation. Mayor Hartsfield and his allies joined with the Help Our Public Education organization (HOPE) to support what they called "Open Schools." During an intense "educational" campaign HOPE hammered home two main points: Desegregation was inevitable, but would be kept within strict limits. For those who remained unconvinced the state formed an advisory committee, the Sibley Commission, which held public hearings. Its hidden agenda was "to let people sort of blow off steam," and thus dissipate opposition.³

The past is prologue, and while Kruse records a litany of defeats suffered by whites seeking to preserve segregation, his purpose is not to record the history of Atlanta's desegregation (an entire book could be written just on the school battle). The main objective of the book is to show how these defeats gave birth to a political movement variously described as the New Right or modern

conservatism. The author makes a compelling case for his thesis. The implications he draws from his study, however, are unsupported by his evidence.

Kruse notes that the politics of the segregated South was often democratic and populist. In fact, de jure segregation was, in large measure, instituted through the efforts of populists during the 1890s. Contrary to neo-Marxist theory, segregation favored the interests of working- and middle-class whites far more than those of the white elite. Thus when segregation fell, it was these moderate-income whites who paid the bill.

While unsympathetic to white resistance, Kruse paints a positive image of white, segregation-era, working-class neighborhoods. In communities such as Mozley Park, residents cherished their public spaces and communal institutions – schools, parks, churches, clubs, and businesses. Civic pride, the sense of ownership in and belonging to their communities, was shattered by desegregation. Whites left, bitter at their powerlessness to control events even within their own neighborhoods.

It is within this white flight that Kruse finds the genesis of modern conservatism. Because white populism and communalism had failed to protect the integrity of their communities, whites retreated into a defensive conservatism that deemphasized the collective and concentrated on defending individual property and security. This, in a nutshell, is the thesis of the book. Unable to successfully employ the courts, government, or mass media to defend their interests in the public sphere, whites withdrew into private pursuits. The antithesis of white Mozley Park circa 1950, where neighbors shared public parks and swimming pools, and attended neighborhood schools and churches, is the white upper-middle-class gated community circa 2000, with its private club, its children attending private schools, its streets patrolled by a private security force. In reality, this strategy could only work for the affluent. Kruse writes that in the post-segregation era “white southerners of all classes hoped for a privatized, racially selective world. But only upper-class whites had the financial wherewithal to exercise those ‘rights’”⁴

While grad student Kruse was researching his dissertation, Robert Putnam, a professor of political science at Harvard, was writing the best seller *Bowling Alone*. This book documented, at a national level, many of the sociopolitical developments that Kruse discovered in his Atlanta study. Putnam found that starting about 1960 “the fabric of American community life [began] to unravel.”⁵ He uncovered a growing mistrust of government as Americans began to “emphasize the personal and private over the public and collective.”⁶ Professor Putnam presented extensive evidence to support his claim that civic participation and social bonding in the United States have declined, while social estrangement has grown.

Putnam sees a correlation between “the civil rights revolution” and “the decline in social connectedness and social trust.” He admits “it seems intuitively plausible...that race might somehow have played a role in the erosion of

social capital over the last generation.”⁷ Yet Putnam, for unconvincing reasons, ultimately dismisses multiracialism as an important factor in the decline in American social capital.

Kruse’s book gives evidence for that link between racial desegregation/integration, the growing distrust of government, and the retreat into the private sphere. This is not to say that loss of ethnic homogeneity is the sole cause for the loss of social capital in postmodern societies. It does, however, appear to be a major causal factor in social alienation. What Kruse recorded in *White Flight* and Putnam tiptoed around in *Bowling Alone* Åke Daun, a Swedish sociologist, has observed in Scandinavia. Professor Daun found that as immigration makes Sweden less homogeneous a more definitive separation between public and private life has developed. There has been an increase in cynicism while levels of trust and honesty have declined.⁸

For the most part, Kruse makes a very cogent argument. Where this reviewer parts company with the author is his implication that white flight and modern conservatism have largely addressed the politics and social concerns of European-Americans. He characterizes white flight and privatization as “incredibly innovative ... strategies and tactics” that can enable whites to “preserve and, indeed, perfect the realities of racial segregation.”⁹ Here is where Kruse’s analysis breaks down. By his own admission only the most prosperous whites can fully utilize the privatization strategy. In addition, white flight, in reality white retreat, is at best a partial and temporary solution, even for well-off European-Americans. Retreat is a completely defensive strategy employed by those who have been defeated, or fear imminent defeat. Evidence of European-American defeat is manifest. From a shrinking proportion of the U.S. population, to legal discrimination against them in education and employment, to the loss of control over their borders and foreign policy, American whites appear more and more a defeated people.

If we accept that white flight is a remedy born of weakness, a question arises that Kruse did not think to ask: How might white defeat have been avoided? Kruse’s implication is that the desegregation of the South was not only morally correct, but inevitable. One writer who does not accept either of these propositions is Jan Keown. While Kruse chronicled the capitulation of “progressive” Atlanta leaders, Keown, an Alabamian and graduate of Auburn University, characterized even such segregationists as George Wallace and Ross Barnett as mere blowhards and posturers who lacked the courage of their convictions. According to Keown during the “civil rights” era,

Ordinary White men and women were willing to fight – and even die – in defense of their beliefs and way of life, but their leaders were not. If a single Southern leader, with the type of TV personality needed to win votes so that he could achieve a position of authority, had been willing to risk full-scale civil war, the people would have followed him, and the Federal government almost certainly would have backed down.¹⁰

No doubt Keown has simplified the issue. It would have taken more than one charismatic leader willing to push the envelope to preserve the segregated South. It would have required a highly skilled politician able to mobilize other able leaders while also articulating an explicitly racial consciousness that resonated with large numbers of whites outside the South, a very difficult, though not inconceivable, task.

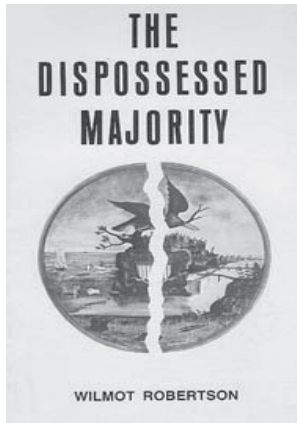
The implicit message in *White Flight* is that the study of the past finds much of its value in providing a better understanding of the present. Kruse locates the genesis of modern conservatism within white reaction to America's racial revolution. Not a novel idea, but Kruse does a good job of fleshing out the thesis. Beyond constructing counterfactual scenarios, what can self-identifying whites glean from this history? We can see that postwar white leadership has been disastrously ineffective in defending white interests. We have learned what does not work. A narrow appeal to regional loyalty does not work. A legalistic defense based on constitutional arguments does not work. Leadership based on rhetoric and political theater does not work. Leadership is certainly the key. What European-Americans need is not a strategy of retreat orchestrated by tepid conservatives, but rather an explicit appeal to white identity by a cadre more intelligent, more courageous, and more militant than any this nation has produced since the Founding Fathers. ■

*Nelson Rosit, a freelance writer on American cultural history, is a contributor to **The Occidental Quarterly**.*

ENDNOTES

1. *White Flight*, 41.
2. William Hartsfield, quoted in *ibid.*, 128–9.
3. Griffin Bell quoted in *ibid.*, 141.
4. *White Flight*, 178.
5. Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), 184.
6. *Ibid.*, 259.
7. *Ibid.*, 279–80.
8. Åke Daun, *Swedish Mentality*, translated by Jan Teeland (University Park, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), 211.
9. *White Flight*, 7–8.
10. Jan Keown, "Feet of Clay," *National Vanguard* (January 1983): 92. 12.

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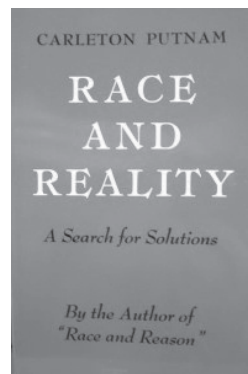
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