Becoming the American Community We Should Be—But Have Never Been

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Prologue

Richmond, Virginia was in smoke and flames on April 3, 1865. The fire -- intentionally set to destroy anything of value that might help Union troops -- encouraged looting and bred chaos as the Confederate government escaped to Danville, Virginia and citizens fled the city. Two hotels, three newspapers, rail depots, bridges, the Confederate post office, banks, tobacco factories, flour mills and a paper mill were destroyed. Quoting Shakespeare, a London Times reporter wrote, “Hell is empty, and all the devils are here.”

Yet, above the ruins of the city, for the first time in almost four years, the American flag was raised at 7:30am on April 3, 1865, by Richard Gill Forrester, a young man of African American and Jewish descent. It was the same flag 14-year old Forrester pulled from the trash, hid in his clothing and concealed under his mattress on the day Virginia seceded from the Union, four year earlier.

Richard, his parents and his 19 siblings lived in Richmond as free people of color who were registered as slaves owned by their Jewish relatives, a strategy used to keep the family intact. They were affluent, and his father was an active participant in Reconstruction efforts, elected to the Richmond City Council and a member of the school board.

The Forresters were participants in Richmond’s civic, economic and political life, and while unrepresentative of most African Americans, their lives were evidence of the promise of equality, a core democratic ideal, and what could be if all men and women were given the opportunity. Yet, they and others like them represented a threat to the old order and the countervailing principle of supremacy. That threat led Richmond’s leaders to secession, to war and to “burn the village to save it” from the Union army when the Confederate cause was lost. In the years that followed, it led their successors to do the same, using political and economic tools to sacrifice the city’s residents -- sometimes, intentionally and sometimes, with callous disregard -- rather than build an integrated community.

To be sure, Richmond’s story is one of southern history, but it is also an American story and one that can help us understand why democracy has proven so frustrating, today. It illuminates the earliest and most deep seated defects in our founding DNA, including slavery and its legacy. It also demonstrates how those defects create persistent inequities that ensure -- even as we have made progress -- the “America” of our essential and aspirational principles doesn’t

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exist – and has never existed. In Richmond as throughout the nation, our frequently stated commitments to liberty, equality and constitutional democracy collide full force with the realities of our history and the institutional legacy it has bequeathed.

So, here’s the question for us today: can we create and sustain the America that never was? Can we build a multicultural democracy in which everyone participates politically and economically, and a new, inclusive American identity takes hold? We believe we can, but only if we acknowledge the truth and adopt a new paradigm to organize our communities, and our political and economic life.

Part One: Present

I.

It’s tempting to ignore the past and respond to America’s frustrations with a recitation of recent political history, the promise and flaws of elected leaders and the failure of leaders to not only provide a compelling vision but to deliver the goods in support of that vision. Such analysis is helpful and necessary, but taken alone badly incomplete. Donald Trump is a symptom, not a cause.

While we have made progress, the fundamental flaws of our founding have never been dismantled or undone. There remains a large gap between democratic norms—and our highest civic aspirations—and the realities of power and privilege in America. Well-off white men founded the country, and well-off white men still have vastly disproportionate wealth and political influence compared to other groups. The racial inequities that have defined American history in turn have made it easier for those with wealth and influence to maintain political control and rewrite law and practice in ways – intentional or not -- that reinforce disparities affecting people of color and women, as well as low and moderate income white Americans.

To be sure, there have been periods of major progress. The twentieth century was shaped by seismic social movements that struggled and in important ways succeeded in creating a more equitable and inclusive society: women’s suffrage, civil rights movements, labor movements, feminism, LGBT movements, disability rights activism. The core ideas that all have the right to equal citizenship and equal treatment under the law have gained wider acceptance. In economic terms, too, much of the twentieth century is a story of greater and more broadly distributed prosperity, leading to dramatically higher literacy rates, life expectancies, and overall living standards for the population as a whole. Crucial reforms enacted in the New Deal and extended

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3 As historian Jill Lepore writes concerning the founding propositions of the United States, “The real dispute is between ‘these truths’ and the course of events: Does American history prove these truths, or does it belie them?” Lepore, These Truths: A History of the United States (Norton, 2018), p. xv.


in the Great Society established a stronger safety net, and for a generation after World War II, the economy grew in a broadly equitable way that led to impressive gains in real living standards for even the poorest one-fifth of Americans.  

Recent decades, however, have placed the very real democratic gains of the twentieth century under threat, as well as undermined the legitimacy of democracy itself. Since the 1970s, income and wealth inequality have been rising not falling, and the disproportionate political influence of the very rich has grown rather than shrunk. The past decade has shown that racial anxieties and resentments – historically stoked to divide those with common interests, and allow the few to maintain wealth and power -- have intensified rather than faded, as many expected after the election of Barack Obama. Evidence of our continuing failure to treat women as fully equal participants in all arenas of life is all around us. The inability of governments to arrest these trends and enact more policies benefitting the majority of the population has predictably led to loss of faith in democracy itself. The degraded, hyper-partisan nature of national politics leaves precious little room for effective governance and problem-solving to meet our deep challenges. Even worse, each of these challenges have been compounded by our complex digital world and global economy that magnifies old problems while creating new ones as well.

Time is of the essence. There is little reason to believe that growing inequities will dissipate in the absence of bold action, and our constitutional republic will attenuate where grave power imbalances thrive. What’s required is a bold new paradigm to create the America that should be: Community Wealth Building.

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8 The most recent Gallup polling from late December 2018 shows that just 51% of all Americans characterize relations between whites and blacks as “good” or “very good,” compared to 70% in the late 2000s. Notably, the same poll shows that 59% of blacks rated black-white relations as “somewhat” or “very” bad, compared to 28% in 2001 and 33% as late as 2013. See Mohamed Younis, Gallup Poll, “Most Blacks Rate Race Relations with Whites as Bad,” February 21, 2019, Gallup.com, accessed February 24, 2019.

9 A recent Pew survey found wide support for democratic values, but that 61% of Americans believe “significant changes” are needed in the “fundamental design and structure of American government.” Pew Research Center, “The Public, the Political System, and American Democracy,” April 26, 2018.


11 See, for instance, the critique of the impact of social media on political polarization in the U.S. offered by Zeynep Tufekci in “Russian Meddling is a Symptom, Not a Disease,” *The New York Times*, October 3, 2018 and other writings.

12 The term “community wealth building” was coined in a report by the nonprofit research organization the Democracy Collaborative, published by the Aspen Institute in 2005. As used in that report and in subsequent publications from the Democracy Collaborative, community wealth building refers to innovative local economic
Community wealth building is both a strategy for directly confronting entrenched inequalities of wealth, power and opportunity and a method of community-driven problem solving that aims at inclusivity and empowerment. Community wealth building seeks to harness the full range of resources available in a community and establish shared goals for sustained community change. While we do not contend that this process will or should be conflict-free, in many cases the process of the change can be positive-sum (in which everyone benefits from improved community outcomes) rather than zero-sum.

Importantly, community wealth building also seeks to change the dominant logic of our existing politics and create a new political equation. Entrenched economic and political elites as well as many ordinary citizens are at this point in our national life all but impervious to claims and arguments made from “the other side of the aisle” or the other side of the ideological spectrum. We contend however that at the community level, there is enough commonality of interest and shared concern for local public institutions among different groups that a serious and quite practical conversation about addressing entrenched community problems is possible, desirable and necessary. At this level, it is possible to ask challenging but essential questions—do we really want forever to be a community marked by a 40% child poverty rate and of the lowest rates of upward mobility in the nation? —without being immediately dismissed on ideological grounds or pulled into a hyperpartisan vortex which prioritizes political gamesmanship over practical problem solving.

Community wealth building efforts are defined by four distinctive features:

- Inclusive community participation, on the front end, in the process of change;
- Establishment of bold equity goals and corresponding metrics for tracking progress;
- Use of holistic strategies encompassing physical, financial and human capital to build wealth for individuals and communities;
- Use of inclusive economic tools and strategies that build on existing assets and bring more capital and resources into communities

A comprehensive community wealth building approach necessarily involves and integrates to the degree possible the fundamental policy systems driving the development and distribution of wealth: not only economic development, but also education, workforce development, housing, transportation, and the systems of governance that ultimately allocate resources in communities.

To be sure, effort—in the form of political engagement, political leadership, and community organizing—is required to make these conversations happen and move them to the forefront of local political agendas. In the absence of such effort, local politics and governance development strategies aimed at broadening ownership of wealth while meeting local needs. Richmond, Virginia adopted the term in 2014 to describe its comprehensive poverty reduction efforts by establishing the Office of Community Wealth Building, directed by Thad Williamson (who previously worked with the Democracy Collaborative as an affiliated researcher). Our usage of the term in this article builds on and extends earlier work, by proposing Community Wealth Building not only as a set of local economic development tools but as an entire paradigm for governance.
will often continue to revolve around ribbon cuttings, pet projects, and political careerism, at best focusing on problem mitigation rather than root cause problem solving. Community wealth building offers a new paradigm not only for policy but for the practice of democratic citizenship. It requires individuals from diverse backgrounds but in close proximity to engage with one another, to debate, to disagree, to build consensus and ultimately, to build community. It is rooted in a renewed appreciation that the legitimacy of any democratic government, including our own, must be anchored in its ability to solve problems effectively and meet the concrete needs of the people.

II.

Deep down many Americans know our country is in a state of total failure. That’s true for folks on the left and the right. We know that our futures have been sold and that our children’s futures have been sold . . . Politicians pay lip service to the middle class but spend no time helping them. Black lives matter more and illegal immigrants who break the law get a free pass. Evangelical Christians in this country no longer feel that they have the right to religious freedom and have watched what they perceive as a sacred institution in marriage gutted. All the while, politicians they voted for to represent them just plain don’t. Now enter Trump.  

Stephanie Delgado-Garcia had volunteered for Clinton in Pennsylvania and went to vote with her formerly undocumented immigrant parents. She took a picture of her mother wearing a Hillary button in the voting booth. “I felt like I lost my country that night,” she said. “Here was a man who essentially told the American public that the America I thought was great was in fact broken for making my story possible.”

At first glance, it’s hard to believe these individuals live in the same America. While both are sincere in their convictions and concern for our country, it appears they inhabit two, very different worlds. Yet, what they have in common is hiding in plain sight. Both are appealing to an America that never existed.

That is a strong—and painful—claim, so let us pause to explain.

Consider four prominent frames for understanding our current political moment. These frames are not mutually exclusive; each of them tap into deep current of American political thought and practice to try to comprehend the challenges we face.

American Nostalgia. One traditional lens celebrates America as a beacon of liberty for the world: the freest, most powerful, and most just nation in human history. In the words of Ronald Reagan (in turn channeling John Winthrop), this view interprets America as a “shining

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city on a hill…still a beacon, still a magnet for all who must have freedom, for all the Pilgrims from all the lost places who are hurtling through the darkness, toward home.”¹⁵ This narrative points to the durability of American political institutions, the triumphs in the hot and cold wars of the 20th century, the nation’s material prosperity. Yet versions of this narrative warn that America’s favored place is fragile and indeed under threat: by the weakening of traditional moral values; decline in religious institutions; the rise of identity politics and affirmative action empowering racial minorities, sexual minorities, and women; and the presence of immigrants.

American Insecurity. A related but distinct frame declares that the American Dream is over. Many Americans fear they aren’t doing as well as their parents, and their children will do worse. The next rung of the economic ladder appears permanently out of reach, and the one percent have a firm hold on wealth. Income inequality in the U.S. has been steadily increasing since 1980, with notable increases over the last 15 years. In 2016, the United States Gini Coefficient, a formula that has been used for a century to measure inequality in national economies on a scale from 0 to 1 (with 1 being the most unequal) was 0.48—worse than Iran, and the worst among advanced industrialized nations.¹⁶ In addition, as a result of poorer health and mental health, declining job opportunities, and other challenges, mortality rates across race, ethnicity and gender lines are rising, including so-called “deaths of despair” among middle-age White men and women which have doubled since 1990.¹⁷ To make matters worse, Washington and Wall Street are synonymous. Well-heeled lobbyists have the ear of our elected officials, and when democratic institutions work – which is rare -- they work for those writing big checks, not the person who works a job or two to make ends meet. If those institutions did work, things would be different, so we need to try something new. This perspective, commonly labeled “populism,” argues that achieving real change will require sweeping aside an entrenched status quo in Washington.

As we have learned all too well, the political upshot of the populist critique is indeterminate. Consider the case of Bernie Sanders and Donald Trump, two very different men with very different goals. In 2016, both in effect ran against each of the major political parties, and both argued that they would stand up for folks who work hard and play by the rules. Sanders created a campaign and a movement promising a significant redistribution of wealth and dedication of sizable new government resources to address the concerns of those feeling economically adrift. The substance of Sanders’s populism focused on the nexus between corporate power, the political influence of the affluent, and the ways an entrenched elite perpetuates and extends economic inequality and insecurity.

At the other end of the spectrum, Donald Trump positioned himself (however improbably) as someone who could “tell it like it is” by giving voice to the angst and frustration of those who “don’t recognize [their] country.” Trump at times also criticized specific companies, but his version of populism primarily targeted government itself, portrayed as a


“swamp” needing to be drained, as well as immigrants. Trump’s stunningly effective slogan “Make America Great Again” astutely taps into a combination of each of the views described above: uncritical reverence of the past and severe anxiety about the present and future. Trump’s version of populism produced an Electoral College victory in 2016, and has allowed him to retain enthusiastic support from his base, who regard all challenges to Trump as evidence of an unaccountable, anti-democratic “deep state” that is nefariously thwarting the president and hence the popular will.

Durable America. A third lens, associated with much academic political science and some mainstream politics, stresses the durability of American democracy and its economy. Rhetoric about the United States as the shining beacon on the hill and a light to all nations is understood as more mythology than fact, and the power and global ascent of the United States is attributed to economic factors and natural geographic advantages rather than the inherent morality of American institutions and the American people. This view holds that while America was never as great as some imagine, its future isn’t as bleak as current anxieties on left and right might suggest. American political institutions and associated norms are generally stable, domestically and globally battle-tested, and the economic stress of much of the working class and the poor must be considered in the context of overall rising wealth and improved technology. (The working class may not have secure jobs anymore, but they certainly have cell phones and often Netflix.) The United States has shown a capacity for self-correction and moral progress in the past, and will again in the future. In this view, anxieties about present and future are either exaggerated or addressable by discrete policy initiatives to counter specific problems. While the Trumpian moment is not without serious dangers, the probability is that he will leave office – or be removed – this too will pass, and that the American project will in the end, muddle through.

American Sham. A fourth lens, associated with some activist movements but also an increasing number of Americans, holds that rhetoric about democracy and American community is inherently a sham. The personal flaws of the Founders only magnify the deeper flaw of a nation built on white supremacy and oppression. This view does not deny the impact of democratic social movements to build a measure of social justice in America, but views these movements as fundamentally an uphill struggle. Democracy is “fugitive,” consisting in episodic moments in which hard-won progress is secured, moving us only one step closer on a thousand-

18 The nativist strain in Trump’s politics stands in sharp contrast to Reagan’s view, however: In his 1989 Farewell Address, Reagan remarked that in his vision of the shining city on the hill, “if there had to be city walls, the walls had doors, and the doors were open to anyone with the will and the heart to get here.” Reagan, op cit.

19 David Runciman thus writes, “It is possible to argue that since Trump was elected, American democracy has been working as it is meant to. There has been an ongoing contest between Trump’s disruptive menace and a system designed to withstand a lot of disruption, especially when it emanates from demagoguery. The demagogue is discovering the world of difference between words and deeds…..Beyond his narrow circle, which is shrinking all the time, the institutions of American democracy are proving relatively resistant to capture.” Runciman, How Democracy Ends, (New York: Basic Books, 2018), 19. In a similar vein, The Bright Line Watch project assessing democratic performance in the United States finds that academic experts tend to have a significantly more positive assessment of the condition of American democracy than the wider public. The project’s ongoing survey of academic political scientists has to date shown a mild but not catastrophic erosion of democratic norms under the Trump administration across 27 discrete metrics of democratic practice. Bright Line Watch Wave 7, October/November 2018, http://brightlinewatch.org/wave7/, accessed February 24, 2019.
mile journey. Most of the time, the real work is resisting inherently oppressive institutions and carving out small spaces of collective and personal freedom. Bolder aspirations for what America might become are largely pointless, because the powerful, rich, white elites who have held power from the beginning and hold most of the power now will never let such aspirations come to fruition.

Each of these views has considerable plausibility, and versions of each of these views are widespread in our political discourse. Certainly, some elements of these views would resonate with both the Trump voter and the Clinton voter quoted, above. But none offers either a fully accurate diagnosis of our unique historical moment or a promising response. Instead, they leave us in a box of our own design. Trumpist politics purports to speak to nostalgia for lost American community, but in practice offers a disturbing politics of white nationalism and nativism that fails to serve the vast majority of Americans. Saber-rattling about trade is a cover for tax giveaways to the wealthy and deregulation that will accelerate our march to plutocracy rather than renew or expand the American Dream. On the left, while there is an important place for the demythologizing (often protest) politics recommended by the “American Sham” view in driving change forward, this is not a substitute for a governing vision. Finally, the centrist notion that the historical durability of American institutions and society assures that we will inevitably muddle through offers no practical assistance at all: it is merely wishful thinking based on the erroneous assumption that the future will be just another version of the past.

III.

Our view is rather different.

The way out of the unpromising box drawn above is to act upon a compelling vision of Community Wealth Building, even as our country is being riven by cultural and economic angst in a seemingly “zero sum” national environment. To have vision is “to see” possibilities for a different future that transcend the limitations of the past while also mapping out a practical pathway to move from here to there. That vision must pay equal attention to identity—who we are and aspire to be as a people and as a nation—and to the economic structure and policy that assure that these aspirations are translated into the experiences of Americans.

Unquestionably, those Americans who find comfort in a nativist path for the country, and those who have a “winner take all/zero-sum” point of view, will reject what we propose. But we believe that most Americans are looking for both a common vision of who we are and a new economic paradigm to secure opportunity for all.

That means we must claim our agency and responsibility as democratic actors in this moment of American history. The dangers of Trumpian frames to democracy and equality are obvious, but the dangers of centrist complacency or leftist fatalism are equally real. Responsibility in this moment entails having the courage and imagination to plough a new path for American democracy in the 21st century, judiciously combining political imagination with

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hard-eyed realism. As Abraham Lincoln put it in another moment of crisis, “As our case is new, so we must think anew, and act anew.”

Part of thinking and acting anew must involve affirming the value of democracy itself and the positive possibilities of political engagement. Community Wealth Building is not just about policies and structural changes, it’s also about ordinary citizens getting deeply engaged in the work of democracy.

To fulfill our promise, however, we must reckon with the past. America’s framers believed that a nation of citizens -- secure in their inalienable rights -- could give their consent to be governed by representatives of their choosing, creating a constitutional republic.

But a republic for whom and for what purpose?

**Part Two: Past**

Nowhere have the conflicting answers to that question been more violently and poignantly expressed than in Richmond, Virginia. Richmond is our home, and we are deeply aware of the city’s painful history and legacy. In Richmond, violent racial oppression collided with efforts to not only resist that oppression but build and sustain an inclusive community, even when the odds seemed long. Richmond is a unique place, but its connection to our earliest mistakes and its contemporary effort to build a more equitable city reflect a more universal narrative. In so many ways, the following section tells the story not only of Richmond but of America.

Richmond, the English settlement, emerged after years of war and conflict between the British and the indigenous Powhatan. The British hoped to settle land northwest of Jamestown and ultimately brokered a limited 1646 treaty. The treaty was later voided by the Virginia Assembly, leading to an influx of settlers and marginalization of the Powhatan. Decades later, the neighborhoods of Shockoe Bottom, Shockoe Slip and Church Hill were cobbled together into one entity, chartered as a town and governed by the British Crown’s representatives in Jamestown. By the time Richmond became a city in 1782, it had also become a force in the political and economic life of the colonies and the new nation. Revolutionary activism was part of its lifeblood, and during the Revolutionary War, the state capitol was moved from Williamsburg to Richmond – a year before the city was decimated by fire by the British troops.

Simultaneously, Richmond was becoming a major center for the American slave trade and ultimately became the largest slave port in America outside of New Orleans. Between 1800 and 1861, it is estimated that 300,000 to 500,000 enslaved men, women and children were bought and sold at the Shockoe Bottom slave auction, then transported south and to the Caribbean. By 1857, the Richmond-based slave trade, fueled by the production of cotton, was worth about $100 million in today’s currency.

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21 Abraham Lincoln, Annual Message to Congress, December 1, 1862.

and the result was a national economy engaged in cotton production and international trade, predicated upon increasingly valuable and profitable slave labor.

By the time the Civil War ended, the legacy of slavery in Richmond was at least two-fold. First, an entrenched belief in white supremacy and exercise of the tools necessary to maintain that fiction. Second, a significant African American population, including descendants of enslaved men and women, some of whom – given Richmond’s urban industrial slave system – may have lived independently of their owners. Some slaves could earn and keep wages, and built institutions, including several of the African American churches still in existence today. Some became active participants in political life in the city and the Commonwealth after the Civil War.

For a brief period after the war, most registered voters in Richmond were African American, and from 1865 until 1895, 25 African Americans served on the city council. Yet every effort by African-Americans to build community was met by white establishment efforts to undermine black progress. A strict vagrancy law accompanied compulsory labor with depressed wages for newly freed slaves. Segregation laws separated African Americans and Whites at voting sites, on street cars, and in schools and cemeteries. Annexation – increasing the size of the city by absorbing contiguous county land – was used as a tool to dilute African American voting power, and in 1871, a single majority-minority district was drawn to contain that voting strength within Jackson Ward. By the end of the 19th century, resistance to African Americans in economic and political life was feverish and accompanied the rising “Lost Cause” sentiment that led to the establishment of statues depicting Confederate generals across the city.

The new state constitution adopted in 1902 cemented segregation in Virginia and set the stage for generations to come. Customs and Jim Crow laws hardened segregation across almost every aspect of public and private life in the Commonwealth of Virginia: public transportation, public assembly, public facilities, party primaries, employment, marriage, housing, and secondary and post-secondary education.

Even in this oppressive atmosphere, Richmond generated extraordinary leaders like Maggie L. Walker, who utilized fraternal organizations, the black-owned bank over which she presided, and other collective self-help tools to build community and build wealth in Jackson Ward, one of the most prosperous African-American urban neighborhoods in the South in the early 20th century.

But Jackson Ward itself could not survive a postwar policy of “urban renewal,” a policy aimed at concentrating African-Americans in particular Richmond neighborhoods while prioritizing highway construction and commuter mobility in the rapidly suburbanizing region. City leaders armed themselves with robust tools to achieve their goal, namely, a master plan, and a new city charter that created a city manager and a nine-member city council, elected at-large. From 1941, when the Richmond Housing Authority was created, until the 1970s, one African American community after another was destroyed in the name of “renewal,” and the men,

23 Ibid., p. 134, 137.
women and children who lived in those communities were displaced, with many pushed into public housing.

In the 1950s alone, the city destroyed 4,700 units of housing and replaced them with 1,736 units of public housing. 24 Significant portions of the land acquired were used to facilitate the building of new federal highways (the Richmond-Petersburg Turnpike, I-95 and I-64) that almost encircled the new public housing projects, denied walkable access to other parts of the city, aided easy ingress and egress for white residents who were moving to FHA supported suburbs, and to build public facilities and industrial sites.

Richmond’s “renewal” eliminated and destabilized African American communities. It clustered many of Richmond’s lowest income residents – predominantly African Americans who were two or three generations from slavery – in eight public housing projects and encouraged white resident to flee to suburbs in Henrico and Chesterfield counties. In short, it initiated economic free-fall in the city of Richmond.

The story of deliberate racial segregation in Richmond’s housing is intertwined with Richmond’s equally tragic experiences with racial segregation in public education and in establishing a political structure in which African-Americans could finally gain political voice.

By the time Richmond’s first African-American mayor Henry L Marsh claimed the helm in 1977, Richmond was plagued with significant challenges that had been created to thwart city growth and prosperity, or were the progeny of white supremacy: the concentration of public housing and poverty in the East End, largely-segregated schools, middle class exit and a declining tax base, lack of a regional transportation system and the inability to annex. By the 2010s, the City of Richmond had a poverty rate of 25%, including a child poverty rate of 40%; was consistently appraised as having one of the three most challenged public school systems in Virginia; and was ranked by national scholars as being one of the worst 2% of localities in the United States in fostering upward social mobility. 25


Part Three: Community Wealth Building and Local Leadership

I.

Here then is the question for Richmond: is it possible for local political and civic leadership, combined with ordinary citizens, to work together to forge a future path that confronts our deep legacy of racial inequality? Must Richmond forever be simply the “Capital of the Confederacy” or could it instead be known as a capital of community wealth building? Our answer to that question is yes: and we further add, if it can happen in a place as challenged as Richmond, it can happen almost anywhere.

A standard view of the politics of the American South is that whereas local and state political institutions tend to be fundamentally conservative and resistant to social equality, the federal government has generally been a progressive actor in enforcing federal civil rights laws and other basic standards. The federal government has indeed often been a critical, positive actor in Richmond’s journey to redress its history of institutional racism. Congress and the courts were indispensable allies when Richmond’s residents sought to lower or eliminate legal barriers to housing, employment, educational and other forms of discrimination. New Deal policies created a new relationship between the people and the federal government, and in so doing, ushered in decades of progressive change. It’s clear to us – even during a time of conservative retrenchment – the federal government plays a critical role protecting core civil liberties and rights, and establishing a floor of protections for all who live and work in the United States. The authority needed to exercise that role must be protected where it continues to exist and reinvigorated where it has been diminished.

However, as noted above, the federal government’s track record building rather than destroying community in Richmond -- even in the mid and late twentieth century -- is mixed, and the New Deal was replete with limitations and contradictions, sometimes leaving a legacy of discriminatory policies. In addition, the core idea of the New Deal—an ever-stronger federal government as the principal instrument of progressive social change— is under attack and, at least in the near term, will continue to struggle to provide solutions to our nation’s most pressing challenges. While significant efforts must be devoted to enlivening the federal government as a partner in creation of a fair and just America, it’s clear that journey is fraught with difficulty and engenders a loyal opposition.

From a Richmond perspective, our city’s residents simply cannot wait for national politics to become more favorable, for more external resources from the federal government to suddenly appear, or for change to slowly trickle down I-95 from Washington to Richmond. For the first time in our city’s history, there is a broad, cross-cutting consensus and shared understanding among the city’s political and civic leadership of the ways our current circumstances are shaped by the painful, racist historical legacy described above. Many Richmond residents, black and white, understand that our patterns of housing segregation, educational segregation, and concentrations of poverty result from decisions made by both local and state policymakers in the 19th and 20th centuries who were seeking to perpetuate patterns of white supremacy.
Our city’s current young African-American mayor, as well our current young white school superintendent, speak regularly and comfortably about “structural racism” and legacies of exclusion. Richmonders, for once, are no longer interested in a theory of change once summarized as “waiting for the Yankees to come save us.” They are interested in taking action now, beginning with resources already on hand, but seeking support from other levels of government and policy wherever it can be found.

Central to Richmond’s embrace of the idea of community wealth building is the idea that local political and civic leadership can drive a process aimed at fundamental change in the city’s social and economic conditions. Richmond’s recent municipal leaders have embraced the proposition that setting out on a bold course of change is both possible and necessary, even if we don’t have all the answers at hand, even if we don’t have all the needed resources in place, even if we recognize that seeking to reverse trends decades and centuries in the making will encounter roadblocks, challenges, failures, and reversals alongside moments of progress and promise.

II.

So how does one go about overturning 400 years of history, in the absence of significant new state and federal resources and in the context of a fiscally strained City? That’s the practical challenge that confronted the members of the Anti-Poverty Commission formed by Mayor Dwight C. Jones in 2011 and the many community members who engaged in the deliberation and planning that ultimately led to the creation of the Office of Community Wealth Building and its constituent programmatic initiatives.

We took fellow Richmonder Arthur Ashe’s advice to heart: “Start where you are, use what you have, do what you can.” In our case, this meant simultaneously undertaking four strategic exercises:

- First, envisioning what it means to move a household sustainably out of poverty into economic thriving, and then identifying a broad strategy to achieve this goal (living wage, full-time employment combined with comprehensive support services);

- Second, setting a broad community goal for transformation (in Richmond’s case, cutting child poverty 50% in fifteen years by lifting a thousand adults a year into stability), to shift the conversation from being satisfied with marginal improvements to the status quo to addressing and meeting needs at the scale they exist;

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26 Private communication of Rev. Benjamin Campbell to Thad Williamson, 2013.

27 Disclosure: Thad Williamson served on the Mayor’s Anti-Poverty Commission and was primary author of its final report, and then co-chair (with Councilwoman Ellen Robertson) of the subsequent Maggie L. Walker Initiative for Expanding Opportunity and Fighting Poverty which developed specific actions plans to implement Commission recommendations. He then served as the first Director of the Office of Community Wealth Building from June 2014-May 2016 under Mayor Dwight C. Jones and then as Transition Director and Senior Policy Advisor for to Mayor Levar M. Stoney from November 2016-June 2018.
• Third, taking an inventory of existing community wealth and existing resources to identify gaps and resource needs that must be filled if hundreds and hundreds of residents are to be engaged in this strategy;

• Fourth, developing a plan to generate the resources required to activate the plan, starting first with resources within our “zone of control.”

Mayor Jones announced the creation of the Office of Community Wealth Building (OCWB) in April 2014, in conjunction with his budget proposal for FY 2015. The Office was charged with coordinating implementation of a series of initiatives recommended by the Mayor’s Anti-Poverty Commission, spanning workforce development, economic development, transportation, education and housing. In December 2015, City Council ratified the Office of Community Wealth Building as a permanent agency of city government and formalized its dual function: developing and leading implementation of a citywide poverty reduction strategy, and directly managing the City’s workforce development programming. Legislation establishing the Office also requires the Mayor to make an annual report on the City’s poverty-fighting progress according to an established, consistent set of metrics. The bold goal set by the Office is to achieve a 40% reduction in overall poverty, including a 50% reduction in child poverty, within Richmond by 2030. In practical terms, this means building the capacity to move 1,000 adults a year sustainably above the poverty line.

In 2017, Richmond’s new Mayor Levar Stoney—who had made supporting OCWB’s work a key part of his platform in the 2016 municipal election—endorsed this goal, and made expansion of the Office a key highlight of his first budget. This support, combined with a new state grant from the Virginia Department of Social Services allowed OCWB’s budget to nearly triple in one year. Consequently, the City now has four workforce centers (up from 1 in 2016) that service City residents without restriction, and OCWB as a whole now directly serves approximately 750 households annually with workforce services and related supports. These services, which include holistic support and the development of long-term career plans to move households not just to employment but on a trajectory towards long-term economic stability, are available without restriction to all City residents. Many additional families are reached through allied educational and housing initiatives developed or supported by OCWB.28

Despite these promising steps and increased investment, OCWB’s work remains very much under development. The City of Richmond is currently working on extending the community wealth building paradigm throughout the whole of city government, as well as working towards expanding the capacity of OCWB itself. But we are encouraged by the support this initiative has generated among not only municipal elected leaders but also business leaders, community organizations, ordinary residents, and the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Equally important, the work in Richmond parallels work going on in dozens of communities nationwide that are informed by or clearly consonant with a community wealth building paradigm: that is, an effort to develop community-wide strategies for addressing long-standing inequities in effective ways. In the following section we spell out the substance of this strategy.

III.

Community wealth building’s aim is to both strengthen the asset and wealth base of low-income neighborhoods and cities, and to expand who benefits from such assets, with the long term aim of changing the entire structure of opportunity in American localities. As noted above, community wealth building efforts are defined by four distinctive features, designed to achieve these ambitious goals: inclusive participation, bold equity goals, a holistic approach to wealth, and inclusive economic strategies. The following section details each component part of community wealth building.

Inclusive Participation

Whatever their social class, race or income level, Americans resent being treated as “problems” to be managed or acted upon rather than respected as equal civic agents. We know just how difficult—and rewarding—it can be to build strong relationships of mutual respect across lines of difference, as a critical component of inclusive community building processes. We also know that conflict and disagreement are inevitable in a pluralistic society. But without this relational foundation, even the best policy ideas and initiatives will eventually founder and fade away.

Setting Bold Equity Goals

Achieving lasting systemic change is by definition a long-term process. It requires simultaneously taking a long view while also working day-by-day with a sense of urgency and a determination to take advantage of immediate opportunities.

Setting clear goals is essential to both galvanizing and sustaining this work. Such targets, in our view, must be bold: bold enough to motivate sustained, committed work, and bold enough to motivate changes in practices, resource distributions and the institutional status quo. Communities like Richmond cannot become markedly better places by continuing to do more and more of the same.

Concrete goals help in three ways: they help in motivating the work, in organizing the work, and in communicating the work. But for goals to have teeth they must be a) widely promulgated and shared across the community, within multiple sectors and b) rigorously tracked through a system of metrics and regular reporting.

Defining Wealth Holistically

Community wealth building is about building wealth an in inclusive manner. But what do we mean by wealth?

Our use of the term intends a holistic meaning: wealth is the total sum of the resources an individual may access or use in support of both their daily activities and in pursuit of their long-term, lifetime goals. There are eight major categories of wealth we are concerned with: public
assets (like parks and libraries), shared community assets (nonprofit spaces, congregation-owned properties), assets held by households and individuals, business ownership, residential ownership, financial capital, human capital, and social capital. A strong community has an abundance -- and equitable distribution -- of each of these forms of wealth; yet even neighborhoods and cities classified as poor have at least some significant assets and strengths to build upon.

**Economic Tools and Integrating Policy Systems**

We have contended that public policy must aim to tackle deep-seated economic, racial and gender inequalities, starting from a ground-up, community driven perspective. Community wealth building identifies five broad economic tools, which in turn allow for countless variations, combinations, and innovations.

First, community wealth building seeks to utilize or unlock existing assets that may exist in a community but are not fully used. Second, over time, community wealth building aims at the holistic development of assets: in particular, the skills and experience of people, but also more tangible assets such as buildings and infrastructure. Third, community wealth building focuses on being more intentional about the flow of income streams within communities, in two ways: first, seeking to keep local dollars more frequently circulating in the community (enhancing local economic multipliers), and second, by redirecting income streams flowing through anchor institutions and other institutions of concentrated wealth to support the needs of local low-wealth neighborhoods through contracts and employment opportunities. These strategies can strengthen the tax bases of cities, benefiting all residents. Fourth, community wealth building seeks to broaden ownership of assets within communities by encouraging local ownership and where feasible employee and community ownership. Successful employee-owned firms can help individuals build wealth above and beyond wage earning, while community land trusts help secure long-term affordable housing within communities to offset the impacts of gentrification in urban neighborhoods. Finally, community wealth building welcomes—and in some cases seeks to catalyze—the attraction of new public and private investment to communities, according to rules and policies aimed at assuring maximum local benefit from the new investment, whether in the form of employment, ownership, or contracting opportunities.

Economic strategies like these have a vital role to play in directly building wealth. Even more important from a policy point of view is the work of integrating different policy functions into a common strategy. In a city like Richmond, at any given time the City’s economic development agencies, public transit company, public housing authority, public school system and social service agencies all may be pursuing independent strategies rather than working off a single, integrated community plan. The result, too often, is economic development projects that don’t actually lead to sustained employment for people in poverty, or school progress plans that don’t deliver tangible results because underlying neighborhood challenges are not being simultaneously addressed. In general, our localities tend to be program-rich but system-poor.

That’s why, in our rendering, it is critically important for community wealth building to be viewed as a **policy paradigm**: a lens for organizing and integrating a community’s major agencies and systems around shared, transformative goals.
There are many possible ways to structure larger-scaled community collaboration incorporating both collective impact principles and a community organizing mindset. Adopting this approach of course does not in itself guarantee success: additional resources are needed, as well as competent execution of strategies supporting the stated goals. But the process of a community organizing itself for change is a prerequisite for having a reasonable chance of achieving sustained change in larger-scale community outcomes; a prerequisite for taking maximum advantage of additional external resources, if and when they become available; and a prerequisite of generating the sustained political pressure needed to obtain additional resources and support.

**Part Four: Community Wealth Building as National Policy Paradigm**

Community wealth building is thus an emerging policy paradigm for locally-driven, systemic change. Community wealth building strategies are fully consonant with collective impact and community organizing approaches to achieving measurable change through harnessing local resources in pursuit of shared goals. And community wealth building is aimed not just at any particular set of discrete outcomes (important as these may be) but at systemic change in the distribution of wealth and power in our communities and hence in our larger democracy.

Understanding the potential of community wealth building as a local strategy is important in itself. But we make the further contention that community wealth building can and should also be understood as a promising national policy paradigm. By “policy paradigm,” we mean an approach to governance that articulates both the ends of policy and an account of how public authority (in law and governance) ought to advance those ends.

A compelling policy paradigm for the 21st century must do two things: it must explicitly state a theory of American national identity and purpose, and it must develop the social and economic policies capable of realizing that purpose. All Americans want to live in communities that provide employment opportunities, education, healthy public amenities, vibrant civic and social networks, and safety and security. A successful governing paradigm must demonstrate how democratic engagement and the political process can help communities achieve those goals, as directly and as tangibly as possible.

Neither political party has in recent decades offered a persuasive account of or sustained commitment to policies which might address the core, common concerns of citizens: jobs, housing, education, safety and security. As suggested above, this failure helped opened the door for Donald J. Trump, who as a presidential candidate claimed to offer something different. Setting Trump aside, the predominant policy approaches championed by political leadership have consisted of what we might term Goldwater-Reagan conservatism, DLC centrism, and New Deal liberalism.

Goldwater-Reagan conservatism is clear about the ends it seeks to promote: minimal interference with the established socio-economic order, and providing business with a minimum of constraints on operations. These goals are represented as “liberty,” and the characteristic
policy strategies are threefold: reducing taxes, limiting government spending, and limiting or repealing government regulation of business. This bundle of ideas is clear, internally consistent, and also aligned with the collective self-interest of many powerful groups and individuals. Further, Goldwater and Reagan each articulated a soaring vision of human liberty and portrayed government as the primary threat to such liberty. It is little wonder that this set of ideas—despite being subject to scores of critiques from academic observers—remains politically potent. Our disagreement with this viewpoint rests at both the level of goals and means. First, most politicians and policy writers in this paradigm do not regard rectifying our current inequalities of race, class and gender as a top priority. Second, those who do seek to address these concerns in some form believe we must do so through the market or by relying primarily on nongovernmental entities.

**DLC centrism** aims to carve a so-called third way between Goldwater-Reagan conservatism and New Deal liberalism. This approach, strongly associated with President Bill Clinton and the allied Democratic Leadership Council (DLC), generally acknowledges the desirability of expanding educational and economic opportunity, is broadly supportive of gains made by women and racial minorities, and believes that government has an important role to play in fostering a good society. The DLC in the 1990s stated that it sought “to define and galvanize popular support for a new public philosophy built on progressive ideals, mainstream values, and innovative, non-bureaucratic, market-based solutions.” Similarly, an influential white paper by William Galston and Elaine Kamarck that helped shape the early agenda of the DLC stressed the importance of Democratic Leadership Council showing an understanding of the “social values and moral sentiments of average Americans.” and recommended “the consistent use of middle-class values -- individual responsibility, hard work, equal opportunity-- rather than the language of compensation.” Market-based policy interventions are seen as the best avenue for promoting equity. The DLC thus supported President Clinton’s welfare reform and free trade policies of the 1990s, and also supported expansion of the Earned Income Tax Credit and market-based health care reform. Discussion of inequities associated with race, gender, and income inequality were to be framed not in terms of structural injustices but within a language of individual responsibility. This approach also favored get-tough-on-crime messaging in response to the 1988 presidential election; as Galston and Kamarck remarked, “By concentrating on race alone,

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29 The contemporaneous description of President Reagan’s program by policy analysts John Palmer and Isabel Sawhill is helpful here: “What is distinctive about Ronald Reagan is his conviction that prosperity requires a much more limited role for government, while the preservation of peace and of traditional values, requires, in many cases, an expanded role. He combines the libertarian’s distrust of government in the economic sphere with a more traditionally conservative belief in moral absolutes and the need for a strong defense against external threats. It is a consistent philosophy given its premises that economic growth will flow from the inherent entrepreneurial spirit and enterprise of the American people; that social problems can be largely solved by church, family, and neighborhood; that freedom is our greatest national asset; and that its protection requires, above all, military strength.” Palmer and Sawhill, eds. *The Reagan Record: An Assessment of America’s Changing Domestic Priorities* (Urban Institute, 1984), p. 2.

30 Thus Barry Goldwater: “We can shatter the collectivists’ designs on human freedom if we will impress upon the men who conduct our affairs this one truth: that the material and spiritual sides of man are intertwined; that it is impossible for the State to assume responsibility for one without intruding on the essential nature of the other; that if we take from a man the personal responsibility for caring for his material needs, we take from him also the will and the opportunity to be free.” Goldwater, *The Conscience of a Conservative*, (Victor Publishing, 1960), p. 70.
Democrats avoid confronting the fact that for years they have been perceived as the party that is weaker on crime and more concerned about criminals than about victims.”

Our disagreement with this framework reflects disagreement about both ends (we believe a bold articulation of our commitment to inclusive community is essential for any governing framework) and means (we do not that think that the market or market mechanisms are always or automatically the best policy tool); as well as the sober observation that to date, DLC-recommended policies have shown little to no capacity to arrest, let alone reverse, long-standing trends towards increased economic disparity, and have exacerbated inequity in our criminal justice system. At the same time, we do not think that simply sweeping aside all policy tools or ideals that reflect DLC centrist thinking is wise or necessary; instead, such tools should be re-evaluated and assessed from a community wealth building framework.

New Deal liberalism, associated with the presidency of Franklin Roosevelt and his political heirs Harry Truman, John Kennedy, and Lyndon Johnson, as well as many other politicians, offered a breakthrough in American political history: the New Deal, while internally contradictory in many ways, stood consistently and compellingly for the idea of using public power proactively to both mold the market and to re-shape market outcomes. Taken together the various reforms of the 1930s represented a fundamental shift in the relationship between government and capitalism as well as in the scope of the federal government. To simplify greatly, the four fundamental planks of the New Deal included provision of social insurance; regulation of business activities, especially with respect to finance; support for organized labor; and establishing government’s ability to manage economic conditions through both fiscal and monetary tools. Well into the 1960s and even 1970s, liberal politicians and academics expressed confidence that this approach could bring about sustained prosperity, and even, with proper focusing, bring an end to poverty and the worst consequences of economic disparity.

Since the 1970s, however, two of the core planks of the New Deal—support for organized labor and support for assertive government regulation of business activities in the public interest have weakened substantially (cataclysmically in the case of labor). While aspects of the social insurance systems established in the New Deal remain intact (e.g., Social Security), the safety net itself has largely been weakened since the 1970s, with the significant exception of


33 Peter Edelman, former policy adviser to Robert F. Kennedy, thus writes with respect to the 1964 Economic Opportunity Act, “To those involved, the new law was truly a war on poverty, and confidence abounded that it would be a war that could be won.” Edelman, So Rich, So Poor: Why It’s So Hard to End Poverty in America (The New Press, 2012, p. 4). Reflecting on the persistence of poverty in an affluent society, influential economist John Kenneth Galbraith attributed the “disgraceful” persistence of poverty in an affluent society to lack of political will to commit the necessary resources to provide an income base for all and employment opportunities for all those able to take advantage of them. See Galbraith, The Affluent Society, 40th Anniversary Edition (Houghton Mifflin1998; originally published 1958), Chapter 22.
the 2010 Affordable Care Act. Further, history shows that the capacity of New Deal-type policies to expand depends on rare alignments of political forces: the huge Democratic super-majorities FDR enjoyed between 1932 and 1938 in response to the Depression and the huge majorities President Johnson enjoyed in the 1965-66 term in which most Great Society legislation passed. In the far more common periods of mixed government, the accomplishments of the New Deal have either been in a holding pattern or on the defensive.

Although the New Deal continues to be revered by many progressives, it’s unclear whether a paradigm based on a rapid growth in federal power can win the lasting support of most Americans, at least in the near term. Further, it is important not to lose sight of the very real limitations of the New Deal, even from a progressive point of view. Founded as a compromise with conservative Democratic southerners fully committed to the region’s racial caste system, the New Deal never named racial equity as a key goal. African-Americans did benefit from specific New Deal policies, and as a group shifted political loyalties from the party of Lincoln to Roosevelt in the 1930s; but impactful federal civil rights legislation was delayed until the 1960s. In the meantime, as we have seen in Richmond, many federal policies associated with the New Deal in fact help underwrite the patterns of housing (and educational segregation) associated with postwar suburbanization.

Hence, there is much justifiable skepticism about whether the federal government can be the sole driver of an agenda focused on racial, economic, and gender equity. More importantly, we believe a compelling policy paradigm must put political agency in the hands of ordinary citizens, and not rest alone on hopes for what elected officials in Washington may or may not be willing or able to do. Traditional policy thinking encourages us to think of local experimentation as a laboratory for what national policy might someday undertake. Community wealth building flips this frame by stating clearly that the end goal of local and national policy is the transformation of local communities so as to promote economic security, inclusivity and equity while promoting meaningful opportunity for all. Importantly, achieving these goals both implies and requires a broadening and re-balancing of power within local communities. Building wealth and promoting equity in the communities where people live is the ultimate measure of success; the pathway to that success will require forging a new partnership between local, state and federal government. The role of state and federal policy—and it is a crucial, indispensable role—is to support, facilitate and enable this partnership: through law, policies, and direction of resources. Bold local leadership and action can catalyze change that has national impact; at the same time, activity at the federal level should establish a nationwide baseline of civic rights and economic opportunity that allows localities to pursue and implement change.

For instance: not only Richmond but many other communities are involved in work involving elements of a community wealth building agenda: bold equity goals, a holistic approach to wealth building, establishment of shared metrics, community participation on the

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34 This observation does not mean we are opposed to bold national efforts in support of critical policy goals such as redressing climate change. Policy advocates continue to cite the New Deal as a kind of synonym for the idea of a bold national effort, as in the now-current term “Green New Deal.” We have no criticism of invocations of the New Deal for this purpose; rather we raise questions about whether future bold national efforts can or ought to follow the paradigm Roosevelt developed of necessity, featuring rapidly expanding federally-designed initiatives as the primary or sole driver of change.
front end. But there is as yet no federal effort to extend this work to other communities, to establish and promulgate best practice standards, or to systematically steer federal resources to communities that are taking this approach. Indeed, the experience of many local communities with federal agencies is one of frustration at both the sheer lack of resources available and the difficulty of less politically connected communities in accessing larger grants.

We see community wealth building as a paradigm based on all levels of government working together, but based on a shared understanding that the goal is systemic, community-level change in fundamental patterns. The key questions in assessing any policy should be: does this help build wealth at the local level? Does this help build equitable community at the local level? Sometimes these goals might be best advanced by statewide or nationwide initiatives and programs, mirroring the most successful elements of the New Deal such as the Rural Electrification Administration, or by reforming or reversing policies that undermine these goals. But the sine qua non of this approach is communities organizing themselves—perhaps with assistance and encouragement from higher levels of government—to set bold goals and marshal available resources in support of those goals.

Without well-organized efforts to establish transformative community goals, achieving and sustaining measurable change will be nearly impossible. Equally important, this process does what the New Deal paradigm (and the other dominant paradigms) do not: bring individual citizens to the table. Few people will ever be in position to alter federal policy, and few people are bold enough to claim to know what is best not only for one community but for every other community as well. But everyone has a view—and tangible knowledge—about their own community’s needs and possibilities. Community wealth building invites these views and this knowledge to the table—on the front end—and deliberately seeks out not only the most informed, most expert, most involved local voices, but the voices of the whole community, in an equitable fashion. In this way, community wealth building gives substance to the idea of democratic participation by ordinary people in shaping the goals and agenda of one’s community. Only a process such as this, we contend, can give reinvigorate faith in democracy among the many citizens who now feel both ignored by policy and powerless in the political arena.

The path we have sketched out here is hard work, no doubt. Community wealth building is not a snappy slogan or a one-size-fits all policy gimmick. Rather, it is a process for both rebuilding the fabric of our communities on an equitable basis, and for rebuilding the fabric of citizen engagement in our frayed democracy. It requires thinking about processes of change from a decades-long perspective, even while acting with immediacy and urgency now on shared community problems and citizens’ most tangible needs. This is the long road to rebuilding community, from the roots up. There is, we contend, no viable short cut to take consistent with our aspirations to create a truly inclusive democracy.
Epilogue

Richmond’s initial community wealth building efforts are a work-in-progress. Whether the city achieves its ambitious goals remains to be seen; but also depends in part on factors beyond the city’s control. Certainly, the overall national economic climate has an important effect both on municipal budgets and the ability of under-employed persons to find jobs. As noted above, state and federal policy significantly impact the policy flexibility available to cities to pursue innovative strategies – against a backdrop of protected rights – as well as the scale of resources available to drive transformative change.

Indeed, in Richmond as elsewhere, policies and structural arrangements that reinforce economic and racial segregation and exclude communities from wealth have to be challenged and changed, whether through incremental means or more radical steps. Communities do not exist in a vacuum but within a larger state and national structure. Hence a community wealth building approach must encompass local, state and national governance systems to be effective. Bold community goals should inspire re-assessment of policies at all levels of government.

The significance of the work done in Richmond, Rochester, Philadelphia and numerous other cities is that it represents the first steps on a path forward for more direct civic participation in the policy process, for charting a concrete path towards more equitable outcomes, and for finding practical solutions to problems at the local level. Participation and the hope that one’s efforts can make a different are critical to sustaining the legitimacy of democratic institutions.

Equally important, the hard work of building community together creates engagements and relationships that cannot happen when citizens stay in their own comfort zones and narrow spheres of influence. Democracy cannot work if people who disagree do not engage with one another—and if people do not learn how to work (and argue) with people who have different interests or points of view. As theorists since Tocqueville have recognized, this democratic competency is best learned at the local level, where the problems are practical and there is opportunity for real civic dialogue, rather than partisan shouting.35 Democracy is best served when citizens engage and dialogue with one another in the public arena with the aim of addressing or solving shared problems.

We believe community wealth building—led at the local level but with ample support from the state and federal level, and with a supportive architecture of federal rights and policy—should be at the core of a progressive, inclusive, and effective governance paradigm. It offers a framework for challenging America’s deep legacies of inequality, racism, and sexism in fundamental ways, and for expanding democratic participation, one community at a time; and a pathway for building the American community that never has been but should and must be.