Introduction

James Wolfinger

If there is no struggle there is no progress. Those who profess to favor freedom and yet deprecate agitation are men who want crops without plowing up the ground; they want rain without thunder and lightning. They want the ocean without the awful roar of its many waters. This struggle may be a moral one, or it may be a physical one, and it may be both moral and physical, but it must be a struggle. Power concedes nothing without a demand. It never did and it never will.

—Frederick Douglass, West India Emancipation Speech (1857)

African American politics has always had a fierce urgency. The third decade of the twenty-first century has only underscored that fact. The killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Walter Wallace Jr. and many other violent incidents have roiled the United States. The COVID-19 pandemic and its attendant economic dislocations have had a clearly disproportionate impact on the African American community. These may have been new events, but, in many ways, they served more as a culmination of centuries of unequal and racist treatment. Well before 2020, African Americans had less access to adequate medical care, lower life expectancies, and poorer health outcomes related to environmental racism. They faced higher unemployment rates and held less wealth than white Americans. And they too often found social systems such as education, public health, and law enforcement arrayed against them as they sought fair treatment in American society. Former president Donald Trump at best showed a callous disregard for the needs of the African American community. At worst, he fomented racial divisions that recalled some of the worst moments in American history.¹

This state of affairs has been particularly bitter, coming on the heels of the presidency of Barack Obama who had brought great hope to millions of Americans who dared to believe that a new order had arrived. A nation founded on racial hierarchy and Black exploitation had finally begun to atone for its original sin by electing as president a man of African descent. Few truly
believed the United States had entered a postracial society, but hope for advancement abounded. Under President Barack Obama, African Americans obtained a depth and diversity of political representation that they had not previously held.2

Yet, despite the hopefulness of the Obama era, African Americans always understood that politics did not stop at the White House door. Throughout the years of the Trump administration, African Americans expanded the Black Lives Matter movement, campaigned for a living wage (Fight for 15), protested police abuse across the country, and organized to support a new wave of women and minority candidates who remade the House of Representatives in the 2018 elections. For four long years, African Americans exercised their political rights in innumerable ways as they continued their demand for equitable treatment in American society.

In 2020, African Americans helped lead a historic wave of voter turnout that won the election for Joseph Biden and Kamala Harris. In Philadelphia, more than 749,000 voters cast ballots—the highest turnout since 1984—with 81 percent of the vote going to Joe Biden and 18 percent to Donald Trump. In a city where African Americans make up 44 percent of the population and exit polls showed Trump improved his performance in white and Latino neighborhoods, Black Philadelphians clearly played a pivotal role in securing a key swing state for the Democrats. Across Pennsylvania, polls showed that some 92 percent of Black voters went for Biden. The election of a woman of color to the second highest office in the land was certainly a major point of pride for many African Americans. Yet, Black Philadelphians expressed tempered feelings about the outcome. Black voters told reporters that, more than anything, voting Trump out of office fueled their desire to cast a ballot. “I was proud of us for [coming out to vote], I was proud of Black people,” said Carmela Dow. “I was proud of Philadelphia, but I wasn’t impressed with Biden winning. I was relieved but I wasn’t celebrating.” “We get married to these images and these people,” added community organizer Walter Palmer, “but they don’t live where we live and they don’t come from where we come from.” Some regretted that Bernie Sanders did not head the ticket. Others expressed concern about Biden’s and Harris’s criminal justice background. Many questioned how strong of an ally they had in the White House. Lamont Steptoe, who recalled efforts to suppress the Black vote in the 1950s and 1960s, summarized these views: “I was glad to hear President-elect Biden say that he thanked Black people for having his back and that he would have our back, but governments are governments,” he said. “So, there’s only so much expectation. For those of us who are proponents of reparations and other progressive agendas for people of color, you just have to realize that it’s a long distance run that requires stamina and endurance.”3
Despite the understandable wariness of Black voters, the kind of activism that takes on police abuse, pushes education reform, challenges environmental racism, and puts presidents in office demonstrates the real power of Black politics. Historically and today, Philadelphia is one of the most important sites for the expression of that Black political power. By focusing on Philadelphia’s past, If There Is No Struggle There Is No Progress: Black Politics in Twentieth-Century Philadelphia gives readers a deep historical sense of the people and movements that made the city a center of political activism for more than a century. In doing so, it forcefully makes the case for why Philadelphia must be central to any analysis of African American political history.

In the decades after the Civil War, Philadelphia had a small but highly politically engaged Black population that numbered some twenty-two thousand people in 1870 (3.3 percent of the population). African Americans, led by Octavius V. Catto, pushed to obtain the right to vote, end segregation of the city’s schools, and desegregate the streetcars. In response, the Pennsylvania state legislature passed laws ending segregation on the street railways in 1867 and in the education system in 1881. Many white Philadelphians recoiled at such changes: the schools remained segregated by custom for decades afterward, and Catto was shot and killed attempting to vote in 1871. Despite racial violence, the Black community continued to grow, reaching nearly thirty-two thousand people in 1880. They supported hundreds of Black-owned businesses, the Philadelphia Tribune, and Frederick Douglass Memorial Hospital. By 1900, the number of Black Philadelphians had nearly doubled to 62,613 people, and the population was large enough to merit the attention of a young scholar investigating the Black experience in America. W.E.B. Du Bois, in his classic study, The Philadelphia Negro, not only found African Americans confronting many social problems related to education, employment, and the police but also recounted a vitality, a resilience, that suggested the world could change, that such circumstances were not immutable. This tension between social problems and African Americans’ will to overcome them emerged as a central theme of the twentieth century and continues today.4

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, African Americans employed what Clem Harris in Chapter 1 calls civil rights liberalism. This combination of electoral and protest activism in the pursuit of equal political and civil rights, focused on obtaining voting rights, protection from police brutality and extralegal violence, and equal opportunity in the workplace, city school system, and public accommodations. In this campaign,
African Americans used the ballot in tandem with protests to hold onto their rights of citizenship within a system of de facto segregation in Philadelphia and across the industrialized urban North. The fight against extralegal violence and legal disenfranchisement was not just a Southern story but an American one. At a time when the Republican Party had developed urban machines and pulled away from its Civil War–era radical egalitarian impulses and the Democratic Party represented the Jim Crow South, Black Philadelphians found the principles of white Progressives appealing. African American political leaders such as Harry Bass and George White quickly learned, however, that Progressives were at best unsteady allies. African Americans could draw on some of the Progressives’ arguments about the need to end machine politics and use “scientific” approaches to solving problems as a way to combat racialized thinking, but they understood Black politics would only truly advance if they were rooted in the community and based on the needs of the people.

The Great Migration of the World War I era spurred the development of Black politics in Philadelphia and across the urban North. The city’s African American population surged to 134,229 people in 1920, giving Philadelphia a larger number of Black residents than Chicago, Baltimore, or any other city except New York City, which had 152,467 African Americans. Women played a significant role in this chain migration, establishing kin networks that attracted so many migrants that Black Philadelphians expanded from their South Philadelphia enclave to neighborhoods in the northern and western parts of the city. New arrivals supported the local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the National Urban League as well as the Tribune. Most newly arrived African Americans were “working poor,” and they sought employment at the area’s major companies such as the Pennsylvania and Reading Railroads, Baldwin Locomotive, Midvale Steel, Cramps Shipyard, and the Philadelphia Rapid Transit Company.5

As African Americans moved into new neighborhoods and took jobs historically regarded as reserved for white men, they encountered significant resistance. Like Chicago, Tulsa, Springfield, Illinois, and numerous other cities, Philadelphia exploded in racial violence. The shootings of people and destruction of property resulted in four deaths and many injuries as well as many buildings destroyed across the city in 1918. In response, many African Americans came together to form the Colored Protective Association. They also supported Black attorney John Asbury for state senate, and he made the passage of an equal rights bill one of his first orders of business. White senators ultimately defeated the bill, but it was a harbinger of further activism to come.6
A larger population with greater financial resources led to a flowering of African American culture as well as politics, as David Canton examines in Chapter 2. By 1930, the city’s Black population had reached almost 220,000 people. They frequented venues such as the Dunbar Theater at Broad and Lombard Streets and read the works of author Jessie Redmon Fauset as the city enjoyed a Renaissance that resembled more than rivaled Harlem’s. Passage of the Nineteenth Amendment in 1920 opened greater space for women such as Sadie Tanner Mossell Alexander to join her husband Raymond Pace Alexander and other men as leaders in the community. This generation of urban African Americans, termed the “New Negro,” made greater demands for the dignity and equality they deserved. Although they continued to support the Republican Party throughout the 1920s at higher levels than Black voters in Chicago and New York City, their demands gained them little with Philadelphia’s GOP.7

The Great Depression threw Philadelphia, like every American city, into turmoil. In the early 1930s, Philadelphia’s unemployment rate exceeded 25 percent and another 35 percent of workers in the city only worked part-time. As usual, when times were bad for white workers, they were rotten for their Black counterparts. African Americans, who always faced the cliché, “last hired, first fired,” had their unemployment rate crest at 61 percent. Tens of thousands of Black Philadelphians lost their homes, making a mockery of the city’s nickname, “City of Homes.” Even more stood in breadlines, trying to stave off starvation.8

Desperation led to political realignment. Stanley Arnold details in Chapter 3 how the city’s entrenched Republican machine ignored African Americans’ plight. Frustrated Black Philadelphians turned from the GOP to other political organizations. Many African Americans ignored generations of Southern Democratic politics to join the Roosevelt coalition. Some turned to liberal interracial activism advocated by the interfaith center, Fellowship House. Others wanted more militant representation, and they found a home in the left-leaning National Negro Congress (which held its 1937 convention in Philadelphia) or in the Communist Party. Black activists engaged in rent strikes and demanded that the government provide decent public housing, which led to the construction of the James Weldon Johnson and Richard Allen Homes. They also protested employers’ discriminatory policies with “Don’t Buy Where You Can’t Work” campaigns. A generation of Black political activists led by Arthur Huff Fauset and his wife Crystal Bird Fauset, Marshall Shepard, and Hobson Reynolds emerged in the 1930s and dominated the scene for nearly thirty years. Shepard and Reynolds worked together to pass the Pennsylvania Equal Rights Law in 1935. Yet, despite this victory, many Black political leaders wondered just how much
power they held within the Democratic Party to actually transform Philadelphia’s politics. Over time, however, they saw few options better than the Democratic Party and decided to make their political home there. That shift, begun in the 1930s, set the contours for African American politics for the next century.9

World War II brought a Second Great Migration of African Americans to Philadelphia. The city’s Black population, which stood at 250,880 in 1940, grew by 50 percent, to 376,041, by the decade’s end. Philadelphia reached its highest population in 1950 at 2,071,605 people, and nearly every new resident the city gained over that decade was African American. Federal funds granted to industries across the city during the war served as a siren song for Black migrants. They came to work at the shipyards and munitions plants, the textile mills and locomotive works. In doing so, they joined an enormous demographic wave that, between 1941 and 1979, sent some five million people from the South to the cities of the Northeast, Midwest, and West.10

Despite the nation’s need for their labor, African Americans encountered deep racism. Philadelphia, and many other cities, like Detroit and Mobile, Alabama, saw conflicts flare as new Black residents sought equal access to housing and jobs. After the hard years of the Depression, African Americans were, at first, happy that they could find work, but they quickly learned that employers and, too often, unions relegated them to segregated facilities and menial labor. Across the nation, African Americans waged the Double V campaign: victory over Fascism abroad and racism at home. Labor leader and political activist A. Philip Randolph led the March on Washington movement that demanded the federal government prohibit discrimination in hiring at industries receiving defense contracts. This effort led President Franklin Roosevelt to issue Executive Order 8802, banning racial and ethnic discrimination in defense industries and establishing the Fair Employment Practices Committee (FEPC). In Philadelphia, Carolyn Moore emerged as a strong leader of the NAACP, and she used her office to campaign for public housing and the end of employment discrimination at area munitions factories, shipyards, and, most notably, the Philadelphia Transportation Company. The transit company became one of the most notable flash points in war-era race relations when white workers walked off the job just two months after D-Day rather than accept African Americans in driving positions. The federal government, fearing the walkout would hamper war production, put down the strike by sending five thousand armed troops into the city. Luckily, Philadelphia did not explode in violence, but the strike highlighted the city’s simmering racial tensions that could easily boil over.11

In the postwar period, Philadelphia politics underwent a sea change. The Republican Party that had dominated the city’s politics for generations had a widely held and well-deserved reputation for corruption. Liberal pol-
Iticians Joseph Clark and Richardson Dilworth, with significant support from a Black population that, by 1960, grew to 529,240 people (for the first time over a quarter of the population), led a Democratic surge that threw out the Republican machine and realigned the city’s politics. In 1958, Black voters rejoiced when they elected Robert N. C. Nix Sr. as the first African American representative from Philadelphia in Congress, where he joined William Dawson of Illinois, Adam Clayton Powell Jr. of New York, and Charles Diggs Jr. of Michigan. Despite this significant advance, Black Philadelphians knew that Clark, Dilworth, and other white Democratic leaders produced mixed results for the African American community. On the one hand, they increased civil service opportunities and implemented a Home Rule Charter that provided for a Commission on Human Relations, which was one of the first agencies in the nation dedicated to fighting discrimination. On the other hand, they participated in a nationwide urban renewal program that had a disproportionate impact on African American communities in Chicago, New York City, and other major urban areas. They also failed to halt realtors’ blockbusting practices that roiled neighborhoods across the city, and they were powerless to arrest the deindustrialization that claimed some 250,000 jobs from the 1950s to the 1980s.12

Although many white communities in Philadelphia and its suburbs, such as Levittown, reacted with violence to African Americans seeking housing, others came together with a different vision for postwar living. As Abigail Perkiss examines in Chapter 4, some white Philadelphians, particularly in the upscale northwest Philadelphia community of West Mount Airy, joined with Black neighbors to emphasize cosmopolitan liberalness, class commonality, and economic self-interest over racial difference. Black Philadelphians in the professional class, notably led by Raymond Pace and Sadie Alexander, spearheaded the development of a coalition that pushed an agenda of equality of opportunity. That political strategy was a clear product of the liberal interracialism that dominated the era.13

Cecil B. Moore highlighted the obvious limitations of the liberal strategy. Arriving in Philadelphia after serving in World War II, Moore headed the NAACP in the 1960s and established himself as the local leader of a national radical political impulse typified by Malcolm X and the Black Panther Party. To Moore, the older generation of Black political leaders, epitomized by the Alexanders, lacked authenticity or a real connection to the African American community. As Clem Harris argues in Chapter 5, Moore, the Reverend Leon Sullivan, and other local leaders in the 1960s believed the key to racial advancement and true equality lay not in integrating West Mount Airy but in building grassroots movements that featured women organizing for adequate state support, men demanding the integration of companies that had “whites only” employment policies, and young people protesting for
equal educational opportunities. African Americans demonstrated at construction sites, boycotted Tasty Baking Company over its hiring policies, demanded that publicly run Girard College desegregate after more than a century of following its original benefactor’s mandate to educate white male orphans, and launched a major protest at the board of education to challenge inferior schools for Black students, the prohibition of traditional African dress, and a curriculum that ignored African American history.  

African American protest politics in the 1960s engendered a sharp white reaction that often centered on interactions with the police. By 1970, the city’s Black population stood at 653,791 people, just over one-third of all Philadelphia residents. This many people largely pressed into the city’s worst and most run-down neighborhoods, and facing an economy that provided too few opportunities for working people, created a tinderbox. The police had two major clashes with Black Philadelphians in this era, the first in August 1964 following a traffic stop in North Philadelphia and the second at board of education protests in 1967. Conflicts such as these helped fuel the rise of Frank Rizzo, first as police commissioner and then as mayor. Rizzo, who liked to think of himself as one of the nation’s toughest cops in Richard Nixon’s law-and-order era, routinely provoked confrontations with the city’s Black population. In Chapter 6, Timothy Lombardo highlights how Rizzo used these confrontations to build a loyal base in the city’s white working-class neighborhoods that exacerbated long-standing racial tensions. 

In the 1970s and 1980s, African American communities and their political leaders challenged Rizzo’s politics by building a local political movement that finally brought them significant formal power. They formed alliances with other minority populations, especially Puerto Ricans, and backed a number of candidates who won office. In the early 1970s, David Richardson won a seat in the Pennsylvania House of Representatives and C. Delores Tucker became the first Black female secretary of state. Charles Bowser made an unsuccessful run for mayor, but he paved the way for the electoral successes of W. Wilson Goode, who rose from the city’s religious establishment, and John Street and Michael Nutter in subsequent years. Goode’s election placed Philadelphia in the same ranks as Chicago, Atlanta, Cleveland, and Gary, Indiana, in selecting African Americans as mayors in the era. 

Black Philadelphians finally had formal political power, but it came just as cities across the United States faced some of the most significant problems in their history. As Alyssa Ribeiro examines in Chapter 7, fiscal troubles, abandoned housing and aging infrastructure, public health crises stemming from crack cocaine and AIDS, and hostile police-community relations all challenged Philadelphia. The city had increasing needs and a shrinking tax base just as the federal government reduced its support of urban communities. At the same time, Philadelphia residents staunchly opposed tax
hikes that could have helped lower-income populations. Despite a common desire to bolster Black neighborhoods, African American politicians had to practice an austerity that severely limited their freedom to act. Nonetheless, multiracial coalition building based on neighborhood issues and opposition to the Rizzo administration laid the foundation for African Americans to gain and keep political power into the twenty-first century.\textsuperscript{17}

Although African Americans finally obtained and now continue to wield political power, grassroots organizations still push for a more egalitarian city in the first decades of the twenty-first century. Founded by six women in northeast Philadelphia, the Kensington Welfare Rights Union, for example, campaigns for social justice and fair treatment for poor and homeless people. The Black Lives Matter movement calls attention to abusive police practices and demands reform. Black politicians, religious leaders, and community organizers as well as ordinary people in the city’s neighborhoods deplore the impact of the carceral state and push political leaders to dismantle it. With the city’s African American population stabilizing at about 660,000 people in 2010 (43 percent of the population) and estimates showing that number will grow to about 690,000 in the 2020 census, Black Philadelphians have the population base to hold any politician accountable. As Stephen McGovern recounts in Chapter 8, mass mobilization in opposition to law enforcement policies that disproportionately target individuals and neighborhoods of color helped propel James Kenney, a longtime city council member who had become increasingly sensitive to demands for reforming the criminal justice system, to the mayor’s office in 2015. They also played a large role in Larry Krasner’s unexpected victory in the district attorney race in 2017. Grassroots activism and the election of politicians critical of police practices and the carceral state have yielded real political change in the contemporary era. African American activists make it clear that they plan to continue to apply pressure to make sure politicians meet the needs of their community.

Looking back over the long history of Philadelphia’s African American political experience, it is clear that elections and political offices matter. The importance of electing Wilson Goode, John Street, Michael Nutter, and Robert N. C. Nix Sr. to the mayor’s office and Congress cannot be underestimated. But politics means something deeper than elected office. It is embedded in the city’s social movements that drew on class, gender, and other markers of identity to mobilize Black Philadelphians throughout the twentieth century. Women and men, poor people, and those in the professional class, all engaged in political activism. They did not always agree with each other and at times the infighting could be severe. But their mobilizations ultimately led to advocacy for a wide array of changes in the city and be-
yond: job rights, access to housing, equal educational opportunities, fair treatment by the police, and many other goals. Taken as a whole, their campaigns that played out over more than a century of Philadelphia’s history highlight the interplay between activism and the broader political context that shaped developments in the African American community and the larger city.

In the end, If There Is No Struggle There Is No Progress: Black Politics in Twentieth-Century Philadelphia comes out at a time when African Americans and their allies have rightful concerns about their future in the United States, and this book allows readers to place activists and their causes today in historical context. Times may be hard today, but they often have been. Politically active African Americans, like all people, have made mistakes, have missed opportunities, have confronted situations with no good solutions. But this book shows how they have also displayed creativity, tenacity, and discipline. This is a complicated history, one neither triumphalist nor nihilist. This is a history for our difficult time. This is a history from which we can learn, grow, and face new challenges with a timeless spirit born of a faith that political activism can make the world a better place.

NOTES


