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**Welcome** to a free reading from *Washington History: Magazine of the Historical Society of Washington, D.C.* We hope this essay will help you fill idle hours and provide food for thought and discussion.

Voting season is upon us, so it seems timely to look at what we Washingtonians can—and cannot—vote for. Our self-determination remains limited. Representation in Congress does not include the all-important ability to vote on the House floor, and federal control hobbles the city's budget and legal processes. Activists have argued for self-determination since the city's inception, but what form should that take? George Derek Musgrove argues that in the late 20th century, particularly after we gained limited home rule in 1973, the idea to make D.C. the 51st state emerged as the most promising strategy. A member of the *Washington History* Editorial Board, co-author with Chris Myers Asch of *Chocolate City*, and associate professor of history at University of Maryland-Baltimore Campus, Musgrove reviews the state of the statehood movement since the beginning in “‘Statehood Is Far More Difficult’: The Struggle for D.C. Self-Determination, 1980-2017” for vol. 29, no. 2 (fall, 2017), © Historical Society of Washington, D.C.

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## **ABOUT THE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF WASHINGTON, D.C.**

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# “Statehood is Far More Difficult”

*The Struggle for D.C. Self-Determination, 1980–2017*

BY GEORGE DEREK MUSGROVE

THE STATEHOOD SOLIDARITY COMMITTEE, one of numerous groups calling for D.C. statehood over the years, published this appeal around 1980. The recent mayoral call for statehood and full rights of citizenship for the District of Columbia is the latest salvo in a 215-year struggle. *Historical Society of Washington, D.C.*

# Support

# D.C. STATEHOOD

**Paid for by the Statehood Solidarity Committee**  
**Treasurer: Nancy Belknap**



On April 15, 2016, Mayor Muriel Bowser announced a new push for D.C. statehood before a packed Emancipation Day breakfast in the swanky Willard Hotel. The mayor's plan was simple and quick. The city would draw up a new statehood constitution and submit it to the voters in the 2016 election, just seven months away. A "yes" vote would "send a bold message to the Congress and the rest of the country, that we demand not only a vote in the House of Representatives. We demand two senators—the full rights of citizenship in this great nation," the mayor declared. With Democrats expected to maintain control of the presidency and perhaps gain control of Congress, Bowser wanted the city to be prepared to capitalize on what she and other observers assumed would be a favorable political environment.<sup>1</sup>

On Election Day, however, the plan collapsed. Though District voters approved the new statehood constitution by a resounding 87 percent, Republicans secured the presidency and both houses of Congress. A contrite Mayor Bowser admitted that her campaign had failed, but vowed to be prepared "for when we ha[ve] like-minded people elected in the White House and in Congress."<sup>2</sup>

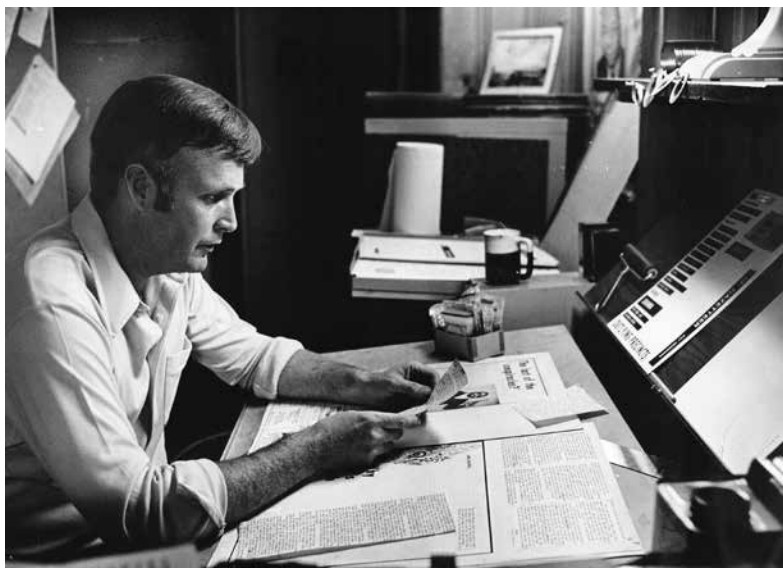
As residents retool after the city's latest failed bid for statehood, it is worth stepping back and exploring how the struggle for D.C. self-determination came to this point. The desire for self-determination, representation in Congress, and freedom from federal controls that keep Washington a colony have animated local activists since the city's

inception. Washingtonians have differed, however, on the shape that self-determination would and could take. In the late 20th century, particularly after D.C. gained limited home rule in 1973, the idea to make D.C. the 51st state emerged as the most dominant strategy in the struggle for D.C. self-determination.

Between 1980 and 2017, statehood advocates were in the ascendance within local activist circles, yet hostility to increased D.C. autonomy became national Republican Party orthodoxy. Drawing on the records of the Self-Determination for D.C. Coalition, D.C. Statehood Commission, the Sharon Pratt Kelly administration, Citizens for New Columbia, interviews with statehood activists, and local news coverage, this study examines how statehood became the dominant strategy, why statehood activists have consistently failed to advance the cause, and how their focus on a single strategy and their legacy of failure have shaped city politics.<sup>3</sup>

Statehood would likely not have become a serious issue in D.C. politics in the mid-20th century were it not for Julius Hobson. One of the city's most controversial and successful activists, Hobson had desegregated multiple D.C. institutions during his tenure as president of the D.C. Congress of Racial Equality in the early 1960s and inspired a generation of Black Power activists through his bold style and confrontational tactics. In late 1970 the mercurial former government statistician was campaigning for school funding equalization when he picked up the statehood issue.<sup>4</sup>

Statehood had not been a popular strategy among District residents in their 170-year fight for self-determination. Initial demands focused on voting rights and self-government. As early as 1800, lawyer Augustus Woodward argued that disfranchising the citizens of the seat of government made D.C. residents "a collection of slaves in the bosom of a nation of freemen."<sup>5</sup> After Congress granted limited municipal government in 1802, the push for full voting rights and national representation was muted by the fear that Congress might move the seat of government to another location; few city leaders in the 19th century questioned Congress's ultimate authority over the District and the citizens therein. On the Virginia side of the Potomac, Alexandria residents grumbled about the statutory ban on federal buildings in Arlington County and threats to ban the domestic slave trade before voting to retrocede, or return, to Virginia in 1846.



Editor Sam Smith, seen pasting up the *Capitol East Gazette* in 1973, was an early supporter of statehood. Courtesy, Washington Post

The first D.C. resident to campaign specifically for statehood as a remedy for the voteless citizens of Washington was A. E. Redstone. In 1893 Redstone formed the Home Rule Committee and called for the establishment of a state of “Columbia.” Though a prominent labor leader, Redstone could not gather more than a handful of supporters for his idea. For the next eight decades, residents focused on securing either a return to the home rule (elected local government) of 1801–1874, or representation in Congress.<sup>6</sup>

As the city lurched toward the restoration of home rule in the late 1960s, statehood re-emerged as an appealing strategy for black nationalists and New Leftists frustrated with the glacial pace and incomplete nature of liberal reform. In 1969 Reverend Douglas Moore of the Black United Front, St. Patrick’s Episcopal Church’s Reverend Jesse Anderson Jr., and *Washington Afro-American* editor Chuck Stone announced the creation of the D.C. Statehood Committee. Echoing Malcolm X, they vowed to use “whatever means necessary” to make Washington the 51st state. The committee never followed up on its announcement, but it inspired Sam Smith, the editor of the alternative newsweekly, *Capitol East Gazette*, to take up the issue.

A white D.C. native who entered the self-determination struggle through Marion Barry’s 1966 Free D.C. campaign, Smith had since become a ubiquitous presence in D.C. New Left circles, reporting on and often working with local activists. In June 1970 he published “The Case for DC Statehood,” in which he condemned the “endless quibbling over colonial reorganization that passes for a fight for freedom” and called on D.C. residents to embrace the “clear, just and attainable goal” of “unfettered, uncompromised, self-determination”—statehood.<sup>7</sup> The public response to Smith’s manifesto was, in his words, “underwhelming,” and things likely would have ended there were it not for Julius Hobson.

In 1970 Hobson joined with anti-freeway activist Sammie Abbott and Northeast community church leader Reverend Joe Gipson to form the D.C. Statehood Committee with the immediate goal of placing a statehood referendum on the ballot in a March 23, 1971, special election for a non-voting delegate to Congress. Legislators had created the delegate position in 1970 at the behest of President Richard Nixon, who supported it as an interim step to home rule and congressional representation. Engaged in a contentious fight with members of Congress who vowed to plow miles of



A street sign hosted a “Hobson for Congress” bumper sticker during his failed run for non-voting delegate in 1971. Courtesy, *Washington Star* collection, DC Public Library, © *Washington Post*

freeways through the center of the city, Hobson, Abbott, and Gipson wanted nothing to do with a government reorganization that left congressional oversight intact. The law that created the non-voting delegate did not allow for additional ballot items, however, forcing the group to revise their plan and run Hobson for non-voting delegate in the hopes that he could advocate for statehood from the House floor.<sup>8</sup>

The 1971 campaign, which pitted Hobson against Walter Fauntroy, pastor of New Bethel Baptist Church and member of the appointed City Council, opened a split in the struggle for self-determination that would bedevil the movement for decades to come. On one side were Hobson and the coalition of black nationalists, anti-freeway activists, and New Leftists who had formed the multi-racial Statehood Party. They demanded immediate statehood, reasoning that despite solid congressional opposition, incessant, uncompromising demand would bring the concept from the margins to the center.

On the other side were Fauntroy and a robust coalition of black church leaders, national liberal activists, and many of the city’s white liberal voters. They favored a gradualist approach: successive campaigns for home rule, a constitutional amendment securing voting members of Congress, and budget autonomy. Their motivation was strategic. If a statehood bill lost badly, Fauntroy argued, it could do long-term damage to the self-determination cause.

The Fauntroy faction’s ability to organize on the ground made the difference in the campaign. With

his formidable political organization, Fauntroy handily defeated Hobson's small and disorganized D.C. Statehood Committee, establishing the gradualist approach as dominant.<sup>9</sup>

Stubborn and contemptuous of democratic decision-making when the popular will did not mirror his own, Hobson took his statehood case to Congress. Within months of losing the delegate race, he was working with California Democrat Ronald Dellums and Iowa Republican Fred Schwengel to introduce a statehood bill in the House of Representatives, a bill that Fauntroy promptly killed. The following year Hobson convinced South Dakota Senator George McGovern to sponsor a statehood bill, only to see him back down after Fauntroy mobilized his impressive national network to pressure the would-be Democratic presidential nominee not to proceed.

Furious with the failure of this second effort, Hobson blamed Fauntroy for "holding up home rule in the District of Columbia." Yet while Hobson fulminated against him in D.C., Fauntroy was in South Carolina, organizing African American residents of the 6th district to defeat John McMillan, the segregationist chair of the House District Committee, in the Democratic primary. The following year, Fauntroy worked to craft a successful home

rule bill with his Congressional Black Caucus colleague Charles Diggs of Detroit, who had risen to become chair of the House District Committee following McMillan's defeat. After the home rule bill passed in 1973, Fauntroy pushed for a D.C. Voting Rights Amendment (D.C. VRA), which would grant the District voting representation in Congress "as though it were a state."<sup>10</sup>

Checkmated before Congress, Hobson focused his energy on the D.C. Council, to which he had been elected as an at-large member in 1974. In 1976 Hobson introduced a bill calling for a city-wide referendum on statehood. If successful, the referendum would have triggered a constitutional convention, a vote on a new state constitution, and a petition to Congress for admission as a state. Hobson secured co-sponsorships from 11 of his Council colleagues, but when he attempted to move the bill, only Marion Barry and David Clarke supported him. The *Post* chided the Council for "paying lip service to statehood . . . then ducking the issue," while Hobson accused them of opposing self-determination. Nonetheless, the bill generated increased public interest in statehood, causing an uncharacteristically satisfied Hobson to argue that the cause was becoming "respectable."<sup>11</sup>

Yet just as Hobson had begun to establish statehood as a legitimate strategy, the cancer that he had been fighting since 1971 took his life, robbing the Statehood Party of its most capable and accomplished activist. In the wake of his passing, the party fell into disarray. By 1979 it could boast only one elected official, Councilwoman Hilda Mason, who had assumed Hobson's old Council seat. Party membership had dropped to less than one percent of city voters.

Worse, the Statehood Party had become entirely marginal to the struggle for D.C. self-determination. In August 1978 a robust coalition of self-determination activists and national liberal power brokers, organized as the Self-Determination for D.C. Coalition, had successfully pushed Fauntroy's D.C. VRA through the Democratic-controlled Congress. It was then sent to the states for ratification — once ratified by 38 states, it would become part of the Constitution. Having had no hand in the measure's passage, statehood activists were faced with the difficult choice of joining the fight for the D.C. VRA or advocating for statehood and potentially sabotaging their fellow self-determination activists' efforts. Most stayed on the sidelines.<sup>12</sup>

Just as statehood forces reached their lowest ebb, they were unexpectedly revived by Ed Guinan,



Nonvoting Delegate Walter Fauntroy, pictured in 1985, believed a D.C. Voting Rights Amendment was more likely to succeed than statehood. Courtesy, Washington Post

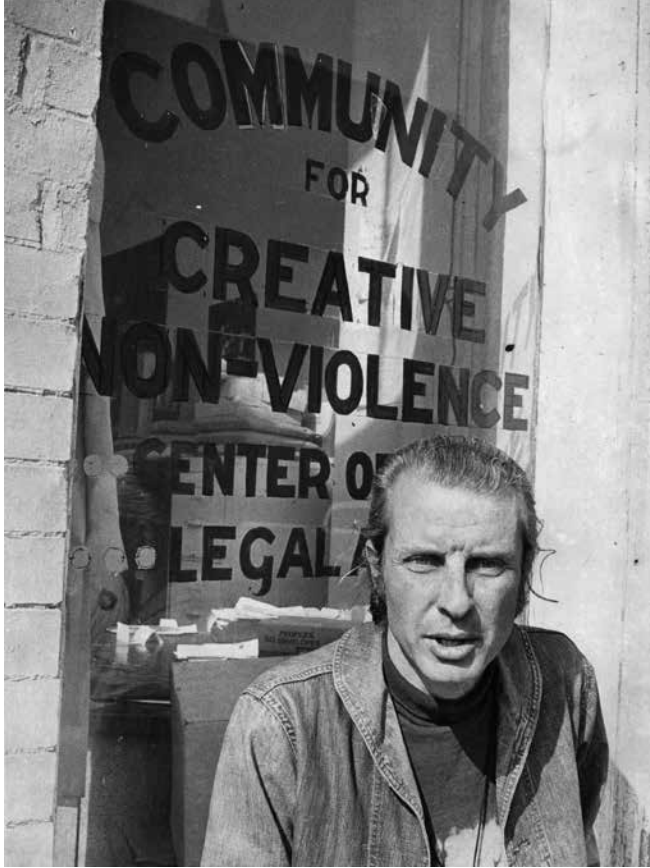




The first elected D.C. Council of the 20th century. Julius Hobson, at-large, member, was missing on picture day. Front row, from left: Nadine Winter, Polly Shackleton, Mayor Walter Washington, Chair Sterling Tucker, Willie J. Hardy. Second row, from left: William Spaulding, Arrington Dixon, Rev. Jerry Moore, David Clarke, Marion Barry, Rev. James Coates, John Wilson, Rev. Douglas Moore. *Courtesy, Washington Star collection, DC Public Library, © Washington Post*

a radical Catholic priest and anti-poverty activist who had founded the Community for Creative Nonviolence. A registered though inactive member of the Statehood Party, Guinan had been impressed by Hobson's claims that statehood could empower the poor and dislodge the city's more conservative political leadership. Using a newly enacted law that allowed citizens to place initiatives and referendums on the ballot (Hobson's last legislative victory on the Council), Guinan drafted a statehood initiative and, without consulting anyone in the Statehood Party, filed it with the D.C. Board of Elections.<sup>13</sup> The initiative required a four-step process: an up or down vote on statehood, the election of 45 delegates to a constitutional convention, the submission of the constitution to the voters for ratification, and an application to Congress for admission to the Union.<sup>14</sup>

Guinan's initiative earned a lukewarm reception. Fauntroy argued that a vote for statehood would "send conflicting signs to the state legislatures" then considering the D.C. VRA. Mayor Marion Barry and members of the Council voiced their support for statehood but kept their distance. The only prominent city elected official to actively campaign for the initiative was Hilda Mason, but her support masked the deep ambivalence that many in the Statehood Party felt toward the measure. With no money and few active members, many feared that the party was unprepared to run a costly and time-consuming campaign. Guinan countered that the public would make no distinction between the initiative and the party, and if it failed, the party would lose its already slim public standing. The party reluctantly decided to support the initiative, which



Father Ed Guinan of the Community for Creative Nonviolence, 1974.  
Courtesy, *Washington Star* collection, DC Public Library, © *Washington Post*

passed in November, though by an unimpressive ratio of three to two.<sup>15</sup>

The Statehood Party was on the verge of collapse, voters were lukewarm to the strategy, and a majority of the city's elected officials were non-committal if not hostile. Yet Guinan's initiative bound the city to pursue statehood.

Passage of the statehood initiative marginalized the well-connected elected officials, lobbyists, and civil rights activists who had dominated the local struggle for a decade. With the city's political establishment standing aloof, what *Washington Post* reporter Tom Sherwood described as "a potpourri of liberal community activists, a few elected or appointed officials and a sprinkling of political unknowns" declared their candidacies for the 45 constitutional convention delegate seats. Few had the political networks to raise money or do extensive campaigning. With the press largely ignoring the election, only about half of those who went to the polls bothered to vote for a statehood constitutional delegate. Ironically, Ed Guinan lost his bid for an at-large seat.<sup>16</sup>

As the constitutional convention opened in January 1982, old Statehood Party hand Sam Smith was apprehensive. He worried that "the convention will turn out roughly akin to what an Up With People performance would look like if

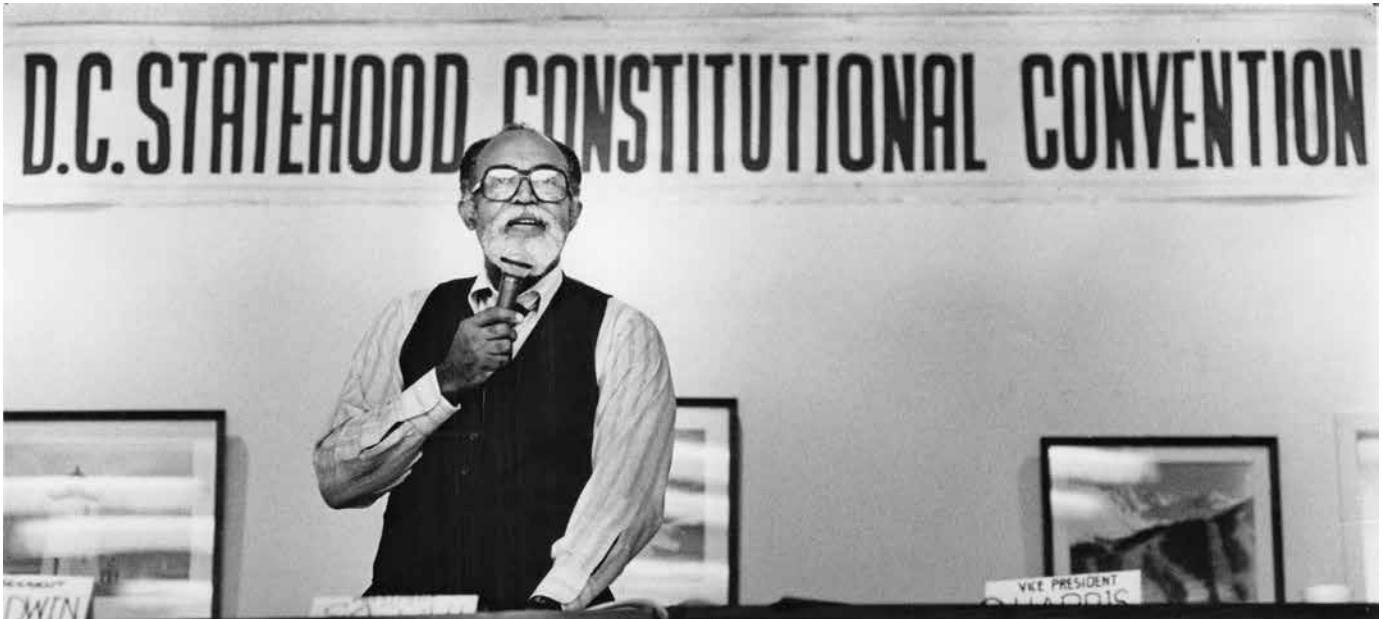
produced by the DC School Board—a reflection of the District's bizarre political culture, which sometimes seems to consist of several hundred people each trying to stage a coup with no help." Early meetings appeared to prove him correct. Delegates lacked leadership and organization; sessions deteriorated into endless squabbling over obscure rules. The Council, wary of giving power and money to a bunch of political novices, appropriated only \$150,000 to pay for convention business and required delegates to complete their work in just 90 days.<sup>17</sup>

Despite these challenges the convention produced a final document within budget and on time, though far outside the bounds of the national political consensus. The constitution for the state of "New Columbia" staked out a host of political and social positions typically left to legislators. It guaranteed full employment, gay rights, a living wage, public ownership of utilities, the legality of affirmative action, expanded rights for those accused of a crime, and public workers' right to strike. Delegate Philip Schrag conceded that the document was as much a "manifesto for social reform as an outline for a form of governmental structure."

Though Convention President Charles Cassell lauded the constitution as "the most progressive official state document...in the history of this nation," most of the District's political elite were less impressed. The D.C. Republican Party and the Greater Washington Board of Trade denounced its economic provisions, the *Washington Post* and the *Washington Star* claimed its dense social clauses would doom it to failure before Congress, and most city elected officials refused to discuss it in public forums. Even Smith expressed his wish that the delegates had simply copied another state's constitution and "saved the new world order for later."<sup>18</sup>

Bound to the statehood strategy by popular vote but convinced that what Walter Fauntroy called the document's "crippling provisions" would doom it before Congress, city leaders counseled a "yes" vote but did not campaign for the document in the run-up to the 1982 election. It won by only 53 percent of the vote.

In September 1983 Mayor Barry submitted the draft State of New Columbia constitution to Congress, where Fauntroy gave it a "snowball's chance in July in Florida." Though Cassell chafed at Fauntroy's characterization, he had to admit that the statehood forces had no machinery to lobby Congress and could count only "three congressmen



President Charles Cassell opened the proceedings of the Constitutional Convention, 1982. *Courtesy, Washington Post*

out of 535 who have indicated that they accept the idea of statehood."<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile the D.C. VRA was dying a slow and agonizing death. With supporters of the amendment strategy losing ground within the local self-determination struggle, and a ferocious conservative movement turning the Republican Party against D.C. self-determination, only 16 state legislatures would ratify the amendment before time ran out in August 1985.<sup>20</sup>

Many gradualists reluctantly joined the statehood camp. As early as 1982 Fauntroy had tempered his opposition, choosing to characterize statehood as a "new chapter in our continuing struggle for self-determination." In 1987, following his successful effort to secure Democratic gains in the 1986 elections, he made a good faith attempt to bring a statehood bill to the floor of the House. Self-Determination for D.C. also joined the cause, reasoning that statehood could not be "stopped either by active support of an alternative or opposition to the concept." Their national affiliates, however, did not agree and left the coalition.<sup>22</sup>

By the end of the 1980s, statehood forces had convinced most of the city's leadership to (grudgingly) adopt their strategy in the struggle for D.C. self-determination, but they still lacked the resources to carry on the fight. And then, once again, an outsider came to their rescue.

**T**he Reverend Jesse Jackson had first become familiar with D.C.'s lack of self-government when he worked with Walter Fauntroy in the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. As a civil rights leader in Chicago, he helped Fauntroy on the D.C. VRA campaign in the '70s, and when the local movement turned toward statehood in the '80s, Jackson, who won the city's vote in the 1988 Democratic presidential primary, succeeded in inserting a pro-statehood plank in the party platform—the first time either major party had done so. Often in D.C. to lobby Congress or participate in national events, Jackson decided to make it his second home, rehabilitating a boarded-up house in LeDroit Park in 1989.<sup>23</sup>

Jackson's decision to move to D.C. was also strategic. During the 1988 Democratic presidential primary his opponents had accused him of inexperience in government. Intent on running for president again in 1992, Jackson believed that he needed to hold elected office in the interim to burish his credentials. Jackson considered running for D.C. mayor, but concluded that leading a "city under occupation" would dilute his "national



This logo for the State of New Columbia, ready to be the 51st state, was designed to accompany the constitution hammered out in 1982. *Courtesy, Special Collections, DC Public Library*



leverage” and make him politically vulnerable to his opponents in Congress. Convinced that a successful campaign for D.C. statehood would, as he wrote in a 1989 op-ed, “mobilize a national progressive movement that could redefine American politics,” Jackson decided to run for D.C. “shadow senator” instead.<sup>24</sup>

First Jackson had to create the position. Though the 1980 statehood initiative called for a shadow delegation of two senators and one representative elected to lobby Congress on the city’s behalf, the Council had consistently put off holding elections, citing a lack of clear guidelines about the position qualifications (there were none) and cost (a projected \$1.3 million). City politicians were also wary of creating three citywide offices-without-portfolio for potential political rivals. Jackson brushed their concerns aside, calling a February 1990 press conference where, flanked by Councilmember Hilda Mason, he shamed the Council into holding elections. In November Jackson dominated the contest.<sup>25</sup>

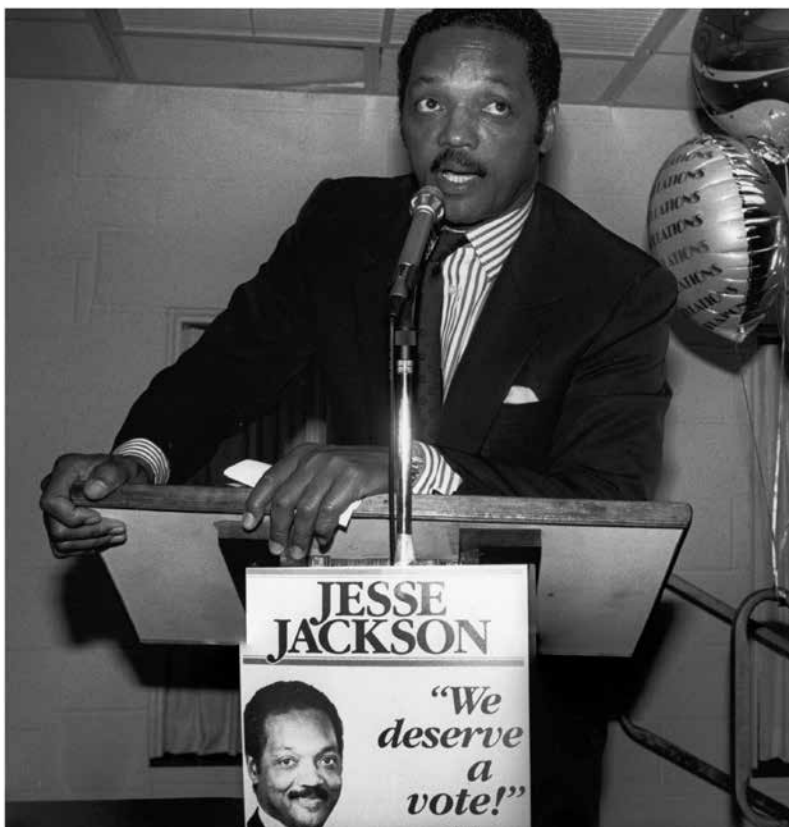
Jackson’s campaign accelerated two developments in the statehood struggle already well

underway. First he tied the struggle to African Americans’ desire for a majority black state. During his campaign kickoff, Jackson framed the statehood fight as a civil rights struggle, arguing that statehood “may be the only way to integrate the U.S. Senate.” He also framed statehood as the only way for the city’s African Americans to gain self-determination. In February 1990, when Maryland Governor William Donald Schaefer offered to support retrocession of the District back to Maryland if the statehood drive failed, Jackson rejected the idea outright, likening it to South African apartheid. “Really what he’s proposing is a kind of Bantustan concept” in which the city’s black majority would be submerged within Maryland’s white majority, Jackson snapped. Only statehood could bring residents “sovereignty, self-respect.”<sup>26</sup>

Jackson also tied the statehood struggle to the Democratic Party. Writing to all members of the Democratic National Committee, Jackson congratulated Democrats for having “taken a forthright stand” on D.C. statehood in the past but implored them to move beyond rhetorical support to “become strong advocates.”<sup>27</sup> Most would not. In response to opposition from his Maine constituents and protests from moderate Democrats, Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell refused to grant Shadow Senator Jackson a Capitol Hill office and access to the Senate floor.<sup>28</sup> Jackson persisted, lobbying senators and hitting the campaign trail for Democrats in the 1992 election (in the hopes of amassing political IOU’s that could be called in for support of statehood). By the end of the year, 30 Democratic senators had committed to voting “yes” on Senator Ted Kennedy’s statehood bill, and Democratic presidential nominee Bill Clinton promised to sign the legislation, should it pass.<sup>29</sup>

Jackson rooted his efforts in the Democratic Party because Republicans remained near uniform in their opposition to D.C. Statehood. President George H. W. Bush promised to veto statehood legislation should it clear Congress, while the 1992 Republican Party platform called for “closer and responsible Congressional scrutiny of the city, federal oversight of its law enforcement and courts, and tighter fiscal restraints over its expenditures.” After two years of lobbying, Jackson had secured only one G.O.P. co-sponsor for the statehood bill.<sup>30</sup>

Many Republicans had been encouraged to oppose statehood by a robust grassroots campaign coordinated by Citizens United Against D.C. Statehood, a direct mail and advocacy group founded in 1990 by Republican activist Floyd Brown soon



Jesse Jackson addresses supporters after clinching shadow senator seat, 1990. *Courtesy, Washington Post*

after Jackson came to town. It sent out thousands of inflammatory mailers to conservatives asking, “Do you want a U.S. Senator who applauds Castro? . . . who embraces Arab terrorists? Or Black Muslim hatemongers? Or who wants socialism for our economy? . . . My friend, that’s what you’ll get if Ted Kennedy’s plan to make Washington, D.C. the nation’s 51st state goes through.”<sup>31</sup>

While conservatives mobilized activists outside of D.C., where they could influence members of Congress, statehood activists conducted street protests in D.C., where they had little impact. From July to October 1993, Citizens for New Columbia, an independent activist group that coordinated closely with D.C. Mayor Sharon Pratt Kelly, conducted weekly pickets outside the Longworth House Office Building, while 200 protesters engaged in civil disobedience, blocking the intersection of Independence and New Jersey Avenues SW, symbolically pouring out iced tea, and chanting “No taxation without representation!” The disruptive protests and the city’s reluctance to prosecute demonstrators only strengthened many Republicans’ resolve to oppose the bill.<sup>32</sup>

In fall 1993 informed observers calculated that the statehood bill would fail if brought up for a vote. D.C. non-voting Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, an accomplished lawyer and former Carter Administration appointee who had replaced Fauntroy in 1990, nonetheless reasoned that a vote on the bill would “give the undemocratic treatment of the District the serious national attention that it could never attract in any other way.” She convinced the House Democratic leadership to place it on the schedule for November.<sup>33</sup>

Norton’s gamble backfired. With statehood proponents and Democratic leadership openly admitting that the legislation had no chance of passage, few in the Democratic caucus took it seriously. A total of 105 Democrats joined the entire Republican caucus to vote against the legislation, sending it down to a crushing defeat. “If the White House had pushed this, we would have won,” Jackson argued. “The House leadership was talking this down, saying it was a symbolic vote, not a substantive one. No deals were cut here.”

Rather than begin a national conversation about D.C. Statehood, the vote ended it. “It was an overwhelming defeat,” Virginia Republican Thomas Bliley said of the vote. “I would doubt the leadership will let this come back to the floor unless [proponents] can show substantially more support than they have today.”<sup>34</sup> With news of the city’s financial woes soon crowding statehood out



Republican activist Floyd Brown, photographed in 1994, led a campaign opposing statehood. *Courtesy, Washington Post*

of the headlines, statehood advocates could not muster any more support. No statehood bill has reached the floor of either chamber since.

Fast on the heels of the statehood bill’s defeat, Marion Barry was re-elected to a fourth term as mayor, and the city posted a \$700 million deficit, prompting Congress to impose a Financial Control Board, the first major erosion of home rule since it returned in 1974. Jackson withdrew from what had become a hopeless cause, returning to Chicago in 1995.<sup>35</sup> In his absence, the shadow delegation slipped into irrelevance, filling with political unknowns who lacked gravitas both on Capitol Hill and among District residents.<sup>36</sup> The statehood effort had been momentarily buoyed by Jackson’s national profile; with his departure, grassroots statehood forces relapsed into their previous state of disarray.

Jackson’s retreat to Chicago created a clean slate from which to restart the struggle in the face of renewed direct congressional control. Statehood activists founded new organizations that have dominated statehood organizing down to the present, experimented with a wide range of tactics for advancing the cause, and drew a new generation into the struggle.



Soon after President Clinton signed the National Capital Revitalization Act of 1997 that reinforced the Financial Control Board and largely stripped the mayor and council of their powers, activists affiliated with Jesse Jackson's then-disbanded Rainbow Coalition founded the Stand Up! for Democracy in D.C. Coalition to demand "full democracy" for the city.<sup>37</sup> As their first action, they partnered with Reverend Willie Wilson of Union Temple Baptist Church to bus several hundred protesters to Clinton, North Carolina, where they staged a raucous picket outside the home of Senator Lauch Faircloth, a conservative who opposed D.C. self-determination. Statehood activist Mark Thompson said, "We want to repeat history and unseat Lauch Faircloth, just like we did John McMillian in '72." But without accompanying voter registration and mobilization, the protests posed no threat. Rather, Faircloth used them to turn out conservative small town voters, claiming that his "stand" on the 1997 bill had "incurred the wrath of Jesse Jackson, Louis Farrakhan and D.C. Mayor Barry." Faircloth did indeed suffer a close loss to millionaire trial lawyer John Edwards, but D.C. activists could not claim the credit.<sup>38</sup>

Next, Stand Up for Democracy took its case to the courts. In June 1998, 20 activists led by lawyer George LaRoche sued the federal government, claiming that the city's lack of congressional representation was a violation of residents' right to equal protection and a republican form of government. They sought an injunction directing the Control Board to "disband itself."

That September, the city—with pro bono help from Covington & Burling—filed its own suit, symbolically gathering residents from all eight wards, including former mayor Walter Washington, legendary activist Dorothy Height, and former appointed Council Chair John Hechinger, to join a suit charging that congressional representation was a right of citizenship. To help the city with public relations, the old liberal coalition that had spearheaded the struggle during the 1970s reunited as the Coalition for D.C. Representation in Congress, popularly known as D.C. Vote. Co-founder Daniel Solomon, a D.C. native and Clinton appointee, envisioned the group as a "big tent" that could unite the disparate factions of self-determination activists and provide them with paid staff and a regular source of funding. The following year, the Statehood Party, now completely shut out of elected office following Hilda Mason's 1994 retire-

ment, combined with Ralph Nader's Green Party to form the D.C. Statehood/Green Party.

The D.C. District Court consolidated the two suits, and in March 2000 a three-judge panel, while asserting its sensitivity to the "inequality of the situation plaintiffs seek to change," ruled that the city's legal status did not violate the Constitution, and that residents seeking congressional representation must do so through Congress.<sup>39</sup>

Frustrated in the courts, local activists turned to civil disobedience and street theater. In January 2000 Ben Armfield, a middle-aged, white computer programmer from Petworth who had never engaged in statehood organizing, headed down to the Capitol in a huff when he heard that the House was debating the D.C. budget. Once in the gallery, he stood and shouted, "Mr. Speaker, as a citizen of the District of Columbia, I must protest this vote," before being led away by the Capitol Police. His action inspired Stand Up! for Democracy and the D.C. Statehood/Green Party, which dispatched activists to conduct similar protests in July.<sup>40</sup> Activists returned to the Capitol on April 16, 2001, tax day, when Amy Slemmer, executive director of D.C. Vote, led a mock "Bonfire of the 1040s" in Senate Park. Members of Stand Up! for Democracy stood in front of the main post office on Massachusetts Avenue NW encouraging filers to include a letter of protest with their tax forms.<sup>41</sup>

Though this new group of activists was interracial, composed of old residents and new, and refreshingly inventive—a feat in and of itself in the racially polarized city—they were small, inadequately funded, and ultimately ineffective.

From the outset, Eleanor Holmes Norton had pursued a two-track approach to D.C. self-determination. While never wavering in her forceful demands for statehood, she regularly pursued incremental expansions in city authority and the powers of her office in the hopes that the latter would strengthen her claims on the former.<sup>42</sup> Her approach, however, grated on more doctrinaire grassroots statehood activists who viewed as misguided any strategy that did not foreground statehood. "When it comes to charting success, she should be embarrassed," argued media personality and statehood activist Mark Plotkin. "She takes credit for crumbs." Indeed she did, but in a House of Representatives dominated by conservatives who often advocated a rollback of home rule, Norton knew that statehood was off the table.<sup>43</sup>



Stand Up! for Democracy continues to work for statehood. In 2016 Sandra L. Morgan, Anise Jenkins, Evanna Powell and Lino Stracuzzi carried their banner in a Tax Day protest. *Photograph by Phil Portlock*

Determined to find a path around G.O.P. objections to statehood, in 2007 Norton worked with Representative Tom Davis, a moderate northern Virginia Republican and one of the few G.O.P. supporters of D.C. self-determination, to draft the District of Columbia Fair and Equal House Voting Rights Act. If passed, the bill would replace D.C.'s non-voting delegate with a voting representative and, in a nod to political realities, create an additional, at-large House seat for dependably Republican Utah, which had grown tremendously in population, ahead of the 2010 census.

The partisan warfare that had enveloped the Capitol in the 1990s made such deal-making increasingly difficult. With the George W. Bush White House arguing that the legislation was unconstitutional and threatening a veto, only 22 Republicans supported the bill. Democrats, led by House Speaker Nancy Pelosi, nonetheless forced it through the chamber only to see their efforts stymied by a G.O.P. filibuster in the Senate.<sup>44</sup>

Not only did partisan warfare kill the 2007 bill, it led to the defeat of one of the bill's co-sponsors, Utah Republican Chris Cannon, a staunch conservative who had committed the unpardonable sin of working to grant a Democratic jurisdiction a vote in the House. In the 2008 election, Cannon faced Jason Chaffetz, a former Brigham Young

University football player and movement conservative who interpreted Article 1, Section 8 of the Constitution as giving Congress an affirmative right, perhaps even a duty, to intervene in District affairs. Chaffetz hammered Cannon for his support of the D.C. bill, which he deemed transparently unconstitutional. Chaffetz trounced Cannon by 20 percentage points.<sup>45</sup>

Once on Capitol Hill, Chaffetz convinced Utah Republicans to withdraw their support for Norton's bill (which she reintroduced in 2009), sponsored legislation to force the city to hold a referendum on gay marriage, and opposed a bill to exempt District laws and the budget from congressional review.<sup>46</sup> His constituents appreciated his work on D.C. Gayle Ruzicka, the president of the right-wing Utah Eagle Forum, applauded Chaffetz's opposition to gay marriage in D.C.: "When he was taking a lead in trying to stop that, we noticed it back here."<sup>47</sup>

The National Rifle Association also placed Norton's bill in its crosshairs. In 2008 the conservative majority on the Supreme Court had struck down the city's handgun ban, but the Council passed a series of laws that made getting a gun so difficult as to effectively reinstate the prohibition. To the NRA, Norton's bill became a vehicle to re-litigate the case. "We don't really care about the voting rights aspect," stated NRA spokeswoman Alexa Fritts. "We're



committed to restoring those Second Amendment rights to law-abiding citizens in D.C. by whatever means necessary.” When Norton’s bill went before the Senate, Nevada Republican John Ensign attached an amendment that would eliminate D.C. gun laws. The NRA then threatened to count a vote to decouple the gun amendment from the legislation as a vote against gun rights, scaring off many bill supporters. Forced to choose between their ability to regulate guns or a vote in the House, city leaders and statehood activists abandoned the bill.<sup>48</sup>

That November, the door closed on Norton’s strategy. In the 2010 mid-term elections Tea Party candidates vowing to “take our government back” from the country’s first black president, secured across-the-board gains and returned control of the House of Representatives to the G.O.P. Chaffetz, who would become the chairman of the Subcommittee on Federal Workforce, Postal Service, and the District of Columbia, was clear on the prospects for D.C. self-determination in the years ahead: “I know that . . . the new (D.C.) government will want as much autonomy as possible, but that’s not in the Constitution.”<sup>49</sup>

**M**ayor Muriel Bowser entered office in January 2015 determined to restart the stalled struggle for D.C. self-determination. A fifth-generation Washingtonian and two-time Ward 4 councilmember, Bowser knew the statehood issue well and appeared both strategically flexible and tactically thoughtful.<sup>50</sup>

Almost immediately, the mayor’s support for District self-determination was tested. In the face of fierce opposition from congressional Republicans, Bowser stood firm in support of a November 2014 ballot initiative supporting marijuana legalization (embraced by 65 percent of voters) and a Council-backed 2012 referendum amending the Home Rule charter to allow the city to spend locally raised tax dollars without submitting them to Congress for approval (supported by 83 percent of voters).

Bowser’s strong stands inaugurated a new moment in the statehood struggle, one in which the mayor would lead the charge. Mayors had been involved in the past, but only in supporting roles, backing the D.C. delegate or shadow senator. In 2016 Bowser determined to coordinate the statehood struggle from her office.

A shrewd political operator, Bowser sought to avoid the mistakes of previous campaigns. Rather than elect delegates to a constitutional convention and engage in long rancorous debate as residents



D.C. Mayor Muriel Bowser speaks out for statehood, December 2015. *Associated Press*

had in 1982, she appointed a five-person New Columbia Statehood Commission—the mayor, Council chair, and the three shadow members of Congress—that would hear, but not be bound by, citizen input. The process was rushed and undemocratic, leaving many grassroots statehood activists and residents to grumble about being shut out. Ann Loikow, founder of D.C. Statehood Yes We Can, dismissed the commission’s 12 hours of hearings as a “sham.”<sup>51</sup>

Simultaneously, Bowser lobbied Democratic front-runner Hillary Clinton to support her effort. Republicans remained staunchly opposed to statehood. Their reason, typically obscured behind claims of unconstitutionality and preferences for another path to self-determination, was made plain by Republican presidential candidate John Kasich. “If you want to be honest,” Kasich admitted to the *Post* in April 2016, Republicans oppose D.C. statehood because they know “that’s just more votes for the Democratic Party.” The response from the Clinton camp was mixed. The campaign endorsed a strong statehood plank for the Democratic Party platform, then showed a lack of respect for D.C. self-determination by hand-picking all the D.C. delegates to the party’s national convention.<sup>52</sup>

Mayor Bowser’s brief statehood campaign ended abruptly on November 8, 2016, with the election of Donald Trump to the presidency. Her



Campaign posters on November 3, 2016, included the referendum on statehood. *Associated Press*

failed effort captured the trends that have dominated statehood organizing for a generation. Statehood activists have not been able to build the robust constituency and political machinery needed to advance their cause. Indeed they came to dominate the local struggle and entrench themselves in the city's self-determination lobbying apparatus largely by chance.

The rise of statehood activists and their ability to gain official sanction have marginalized alternative strategies for gaining D.C. self-determination—a constitutional amendment to provide voting representation in Congress or retrocession—that have been far more popular (and successful) than statehood in previous periods. Statehood activists' weakness has left the cause open to (and sometimes even solicitous of) manipulation by talented or well-resourced outsiders who, in taking up the struggle, have come to lead it.

At the same time that statehood activists came to dominate the local struggle, the national Republican Party lurched hard to the right following the 1980 election of Ronald Reagan, the first modern G.O.P. candidate to oppose increased D.C. self-determination. Republicans have remained opposed to statehood since. Congressional Democrats, for their part, have been divided between an aging group of liberals determined to carry forward the struggle and a growing group of moder-

ates who give statehood rhetorical support but refuse to cut the deals that could make it happen. The result of these developments has been stagnation. The city is wedded to a strategy with minimal national support pushed by an activist community too weak and disorganized to move the struggle forward.

Writing in 1970, at the dawn of the statehood struggle, journalist Sam Smith argued that statehood could "be done more directly and more simply than all the tortured meanderings proposed by those who claim to have a pragmatic vision of the District's future."<sup>53</sup> He believed that statehood was a superior strategic choice because it was elegantly simple and quick. In 1999, after statehood had suffered a crushing defeat before the House of Representatives and solid G.O.P. opposition combined with the city's near-bankruptcy made the cause seem quixotic at best, former newspaper editor Chuck Stone, who had inspired Smith to embrace the cause, gave a different take on the city's chosen path to self-determination. "Statehood," Stone posited, "is far more difficult because statehood is clear independence."<sup>54</sup>

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## NOTES

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