

The Argument Against D.C. Statehood Is Rooted in Racism

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In February of 1873, James Shepherd Pike, a radical Republican journalist and longtime advocate for black suffrage, was assigned by the *New York Tribune* to cover a Deep South state legislature in the midst of Reconstruction. At the time, governments across the region, thanks to the policies enacted by the federal government, had begun to see an influx of black men among their ranks, and Pike sought to explore the reality of such a swift change of fortune. The resulting work was Pike's infamous 1874 book, *The Prostrate State: South Carolina under Negro Government*. As he detailed over the course of 300 pages, Pike viewed the governance of a southern legislature by black politicians as one of the most egregious forms of democracy he'd ever witnessed. Citing widespread corruption amongst the black legislators and their general disenchantment with their white counterparts, Pike posited the grand experiment of Reconstruction was a failure.

"The ignorance manifested is black with its denseness. And it is not too much too [sic] say that, as the negro, in slavery had absolutely no morale, he comes out of it entirely without morale," Pike wrote. "The black constituency of Charleston itself is today represented by men who belong in the penitentiary."

The Prostrate State was regarded as an authoritative declaration when it hit shelves. Published as a series of newspaper articles before being bound together as a book destined to find a place on the nightstand of any politically literate white supremacist, Pike's racist analysis was deemed at the time an upstanding work of contemporary history. It wasn't until 1957 that historian Robert Franklin Durden would debunk the notion that Pike's work was a foundational text. Pike didn't seek to examine the efficacy of black politicians in the first years they were allowed access to the democratic process, wrote Durden, but instead simply railed against President Ulysses S. Grant.

Long before then, though, the damage was done—by Pike and a plethora of others. Come the turn of the 20th Century, the more truly representative governments that had sprung up across the South after the Civil War had largely been undone by the efforts of organized white supremacy. It would reign more or less uninterrupted in the region for the next 65 years.

The underlying fear—from the perspective of the white politicians and news moguls and businessmen who backed their efforts—was that a government run in part by black citizens would be a government wealthy whites could not control. To have a seminal work from an abolitionist such as Pike to point to was the intellectual excuse for stealing back these governmental bodies.

It would be nice to believe that such arguments have been relegated to the history books since Durden's debunking and the civil rights gains of the 1960s, but, like the reporting in Pike's book, that wouldn't be close to the truth.

On Thursday, for the first time in 25 years, the House Committee on Oversight and Reform heard arguments from officials pushing for statehood for the District of Columbia. The hearing concerned a renewed attempt to upgrade the nation's capitol from its current non-voting representation in Congress to one of statehood, with voting members in both chambers. As it currently stands, Delegate Eleanor Holmes Norton, a Democrat, represents D.C. in the House of Representatives, but is only allowed to vote in the committees on which she sits, not on any legislation up before the entire chamber.

The Democratic House proposal, H.R. 51, offered by Norton, would carve out a two-square-mile area—housing Capitol Hill, the White House, and the Supreme Court—as federal land, with the remainder of the District forming as a new state. The bill, which has 200 co-sponsors, is the latest edition of legislation Norton has been championing for decades. In 1993, two years into Norton's tenure as delegate, the House resoundingly rejected her first statehood proposal, 277-153, with 40 percent of Democrats and all but one Republican voting against it. Arguments from the conservative side of the aisle focused on the state of affairs in D.C.'s local government, with then-GOP Representative Tom DeLay quipping that the District's "hug-a-thug attitude on violent crime" and the city's reputation as "a liberal bastion of corruption and crime," disqualified D.C. (In 2006, DeLay was forced to resign from Congress after numerous scandals, ethical violations, and a criminal indictment.)

In 2019, there is still a conservative bloc hell-bent on denying the people of D.C. just representation. And, as the statehood supporters were forced to discover first-hand this week, the ghosts of Pike and DeLay still buttress anti-statehood arguments.

"We cannot ignore the elephant in the room, the District government currently faces serious allegations of misconduct," said Ohio Representative Jim Jordan.

Jordan, the ranking Republican on the committee, spent the majority of his opening remarks focused on the absence of D.C. Council Member Jack Evans, who is currently embroiled in a federal grand jury investigation for attempting to leverage his political position for employment and for illegally accepting cash and stock shares. (Eleven of the 13 council members were present to discuss the issue of statehood.)

To acquiesce to the District's request would violate what has become a core tenant of the GOP's chosen approach to urban America, be it a national or local race. During the 2016 presidential election, in an interview with a Boston radio station, Senator Ted Cruz derided "New York values" as being somehow counter to those of the average American. Two years later, Wisconsin state Assembly Speaker Robin Vos casually commented that, "if you took Madison and Milwaukee out of the state election formula, we would have a clear majority." Earlier this week, President Donald Trump threatened San Francisco with federal action for allowing the needles of homeless drug-users to drain into the ocean. (The claim was quickly debunked by local experts.) "We can't have our cities going to hell," the president told the press.

The basis of the bias in every one of these cases is clear, and it applies to the District's fight for statehood. Forty-six percent of D.C.'s 700,000 residents are black. Republicans assume (most

likely correctly given their current political positions) this part of the D.C. population would not vote for their candidates, so they have no desire to grant them their constitutional rights. Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell admitted as much in June. “[Democrats] plan to make the District of Columbia a state—that would give them two new Democratic senators,” he told Fox News.

But arguments that race is the reason conservatives so adamantly oppose D.C.’s push for statehood are met with outrage. Democratic Representative George Connolly demonstrated as much, calling the GOP’s position race-based during Thursday’s hearing. A witness opposed to statehood, Roger Pilon of the Cato Institute, called upon Connolly to officially remove his remarks from the record; Connolly defiantly replied, “Never!”

The facts are very clearly on the side of statehood. Not only do the denizens of D.C. favor it by a wide margin, the numbers simply demand the creation of a 51st state. If admitted, the new state would be more populous than Vermont and Wyoming and close on the heels of six others. The IRS already collects more tax revenue from the district than 22 current states, and its budget outranks at least 14 state governments.

Representative Jordan’s contention that corruption is somehow a barrier to statehood quickly falls apart. If applied to the nation’s current roster of states, the stringent measure would almost certainly result in a culling of membership: New York is out, thanks to the dealings of Governor Andrew Cuomo’s former associates; Illinois elects a corrupt governor at least once a decade; North Carolina—with the Greg Lindberg scandal and the recent bout of election fraud—is easily gone.

“Certainly officials in Ohio have been the subject of multiple political scandals for many years,” D.C.’s Norton said in reply to buckeye Jordan. “But no one is suggesting that Ohio ought to lose its status.”

The United States has not admitted a new state to the union in 60 years, and given the current balance of the Senate and the current president, there is little chance that D.C. achieves statehood this year. But to allow the GOP to claim the reason for this denial is one based on a wariness over a shaky government is to acquiesce to their imbalanced rules of play. The reasons should be stated clearly and for the record: Republicans fear cities and those who inhabit them because they stand in the way of GOP power.