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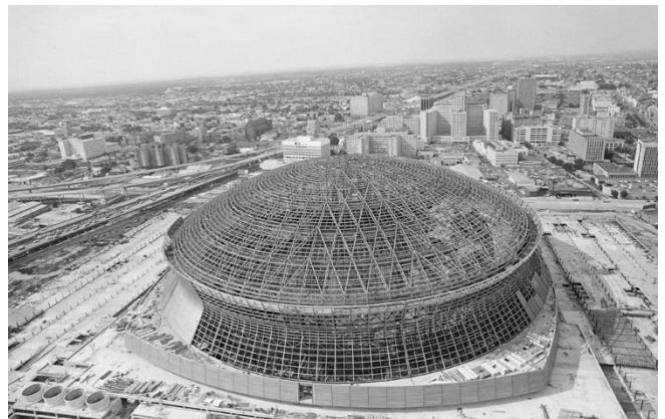
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Superdome Services, Inc.: Tracing the Convergence Between Black Enterprise and Neoliberalism in a Post-Civil Rights Era New Orleans, 1974-1977

By: Daniel Pantini

Abstract: Utilizing records drawn from New Orleans' *Times Picayune* and *Louisiana Weekly* newspapers, this research paper will attempt to explore early manifestations of neoliberalism during the 1970s Superdome controversy. In 1974 a predominantly-Black firm, Superdome Services, Inc. (SSI) was awarded a multi-million-dollar contract to manage the new Superdome, making them the largest Black-owned public contractor in the country. Within 3 years, political and media campaigns emphasizing on the company and its leaders' alleged incompetence, theft, and criminality led to the cancellation of their contract and privatization of Superdome management. This paper will attempt to relate the press coverage of this era to early developments in neoliberalism its relation to racial politics, demonstrating how neoliberal rhetoric and ideology successfully infiltrated public figures across the political divide.

Following the major victories of the Civil Rights Era, many organizations and activists who had once advocated for issues of civil rights and equality under the law began what we might refer to as the “economic thrust,” a move towards economic rights, including the reduction of inequality and expanding upwards economic mobility.¹ In New Orleans of the 1970s, this economic thrust coincided with a time of



Louisiana Superdome under construction.

IMAGE COURTESY OF THE PRESERVATION
RESOURCE CENTER OF NEW ORLEANS

¹ “Economics: The NAACP’s New Thrust,” *Louisiana Weekly*, Dec. 4, 1976.

tremendous political and economic change, marked by massive downtown economic (re)development projects spearheaded by liberal, pro-growth mayor, Maurice “Moon” Landrieu, and widespread Black incorporation into the city’s political system. Politically, the 1970s saw the rise of a number of new Black political organizations whose ability to effectively organize voters won them an unprecedented influence on electoral politics in the city and sway in the Louisiana statehouse.² On the development side, New Orleans experienced a rapid succession of large-scale projects: renovations of the riverfront and gentrification of the French Quarter, the creation of one of the nation’s first downtown Central Business Districts (referred to simply as the CBD), and the construction of skyscrapers intended to attract professional businesses, luxury real estate, hotels, and high-end shopping.³ Constructed in the heart of downtown New Orleans, the Louisiana Superdome represents the crown jewel of 1970s New Orleans redevelopment. It was built to act as a multi-event stadium that would not only provide hundreds of jobs to New Orleans residents but serve to attract tourists, businesses, conventions, and more to a city struggling with unemployment and other financial woes. This “20th century Tower of Babel” served as a symbol for a reborn, revitalized New Orleans.⁴

This project tracks the rise and fall of Superdome Services Inc., a local Black-owned firm contracted to provide management, security, maintenance, ticketing, and landscaping services to the Superdome in 1974, serving as the nation’s largest Black-owned public contractor until their

² James H. Gillis, “Black Politicos Have Come a Long Way,” *Times-Picayune*, Sep. 26, 1976; Kent Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 251-256.

³ Pierce Lewis, *New Orleans: The Making of an Urban Landscape*, 2nd ed. (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2017), 10-115; Jane S. Brooks and Alma Young, “Revitalizing the central business district in the face of decline: the case of New Orleans, 1970-1990,” *University of New Orleans College of Urban and Public Affairs Working Papers, 1991-2000* 5 (1991): 5-7.

⁴ Edward Haas, “The Southern Metropolis, 1940-1976” in *The City in Southern History: The Growth of Urban Civilization in the South*, ed. by Blaine Brownell and David Goldfield (Port Washington, N.Y.: Kennikat Press, 1977), 186-190; Howard Jacobs, “How the Easter Bunny Got its Name,” *Times-Picayune*, April 9, 1976.

removal from the project by the State of Louisiana in 1977.⁵ Superdome Services, Inc., or more succinctly, “SSI,” came into being in early 1974 with the express purpose of bidding on a contract put out by the Louisiana Dome Stadium Commission (incidentally, headed by then-Mayor Landrieu—a longtime proponent of the Superdome from his days in the State legislature and City Council) to operate the various services required by massive the Superdome project which was to open later that year.⁶ SSI’s leaders had explicit political connections, with president and spokesperson Sherman Copelin also running one of the most powerful Black political organizations to emerge in New Orleans following the 1965 Voting Rights Act, the Southern Organization for Unified Leadership (SOUL).⁷ As historians and media critics alike note, Copelin’s position in SOUL was hardly incidental to SSI’s success—SOUL was instrumental in organizing votes to elect both Mayor Landrieu (elected 1970) and Louisiana Governor Edwin Edwards (elected 1971) and a political favorite for much of the two politicians’ tenures.⁸ The rise of SSI thus parallels the rise of nascent Black electoral organizations that had begun to take off in the post-1965 years. Although SSI formally existed as a separate entity from the political organization SOUL, their leaders and connections were shared. While the political influence of SOUL, its leaders, and other major New Orleans Black political organizations would continue to rise (with Copelin winning an election to the statehouse in 1986), the tenure of SSI was cut short

⁵ Clancy DuBos, “Un De Nous Autres!: The passing of Edwin Washington Edwards closes a colorful chapter of Louisiana politics,” *New Orleans Advocate*, July 12, 2021.

⁶ Ferdinand Delery, III, “\$2 Million Dome Contract Sought by \$1,000 Company,” *Louisiana Weekly*, March 23, 1974; Paul Atkinson, “Dome Bidder’s Assets \$1000,” *Times-Picayune*, March 16, 1974.

⁷ Erin Bremer, “Sherman Copelin: SOUL Man” in *Courtroom Carnival: Famous New Orleans Trials*, ed. S. L. Alexander (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing, 2011), 152-153. Copelin would go on to have a colorful political career in the years following the Superdome project, including a tenure in the Louisiana statehouse and multiple arrests for corruption charges. To explore his career would constitute a whole other paper, so I will refer interested readers to Bremer.

⁸ *Ibid.* 153. For more reading on the influence of SOUL and other post-1965 Black political organizations, see Kent Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 246-270.

through a combination of negative media and political campaigns in the press and statehouse, and any promise it held for meaningful economic development curtailed.⁹

In examining SSI, I seek to explore the varied justifications from supporters for their contract and their significance, the extent to which their specific model held potential for accomplishing this “economic thrust” of the Civil Rights movement, and the various arguments weaponized by conservative forces within Louisiana that led to their demise. This paper aims to capture and analyze this specific political and economic moment—a period of transformation for Black and white Louisianans, and all Americans, really—following the incorporation of African Americans into many urban polities. This goal will primarily involve an examination of newspaper records from the *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, the establishment daily newspaper, and the *Louisiana Weekly*, the premier Black newspaper of 20th century New Orleans. On the issue of assessing primary sources in New Orleans, the *Times Picayune* has historically received heated criticism for its coverage of racial issues.¹⁰ While scholars cannot completely disregard sources drawn from the *Times-Picayune*, they must be appropriately contextualized with alternative sources and accounts, particularly those from the *Louisiana Weekly*—which often offers a much more nuanced and sober view of issues important to Black New Orleanians.

While many Americans tend to have recognizable political associations with both the 1960s as the era of civil rights, anti-war protests, feminism, and the sexual revolution, etc. and

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Dwight Ott, one of the *Times Picayune*'s first Black reporters, argued in a 1993 letter to the *Times-Picayune* that: “For most of its years, historians and journalists said, the newspaper has been a powerful force in New Orleans, shaping and reflecting racial attitudes and the character of the city. And for the greater part of its years, the newspaper gave readers an image of black people as intellectually and morally inferior, relegated to a lower social caste than white people and often little more than lazy or criminal. It’s that image of black people that many people carry today...The Times-Picayune was a paper with no full-time black reporters until the 1970s, one that rarely wrote about black people unless they committed crimes.” See: Chris Adams, “Together Apart: New Orleans’ newspapers give white view of the city,” *Times-Picayune*, June 17, 1993.

the 1980s as the era of Reagan, Wall St., the 1970s has often belied a simple interpretation. In the discipline of American History, it has been broadly defined as an era of transition marked by inflation, financialization, the oil crisis, and the creation of a new world-wide economic order. I will attempt to contribute, in a small part, to a more meaningful definition of how this period of “transition” took place on a local level—how the radical *zeitgeist* of the Civil Rights Era’s moved beyond calls for revolution and came to champion of entrepreneurial success. While recognizing that not all radical movements and organizations disappeared in the 1970s, I seek instead to explore transformations in those more mainstream Black political organizations that began to participate in existing political and economic structures, namely electoral politics. In this endeavor, the politically-connected SSI and the media controversy surrounding their tenure in the Superdome will serve as a case study through which the contours and manifestations of emerging ideas associated with a growing move towards neoliberalism might be examined. This project holds implications for the relationship between electoral politics and capitalism, the emerging doctrines of personal responsibility, and the domination of a managerial, economic logic on society.

On Neoliberalism:

In understanding and defining neoliberalism, I am aided immensely by the recent work of the political theorists Lester K. Spence and Wendy Brown, whose exploration of the topic has helped me to place the premier political controversy of 1970s New Orleans into a larger context of national, and soon to be global, political developments. In *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics*, Spence traces the origins of neoliberal policy in the United States and the impact that this turn has had on developments in Black politics. Spence argues that the neoliberal turn begins in the early 1970s, during the Nixon administration, wherein a

combination of high unemployment and inflation forced a re-evaluation of traditional economic doctrine. Unemployment and inflation are two seemingly contradictory forces—with inflation traditionally thought to be brought about by high consumer demand for a limited supply of goods while unemployment (and thus reduced incomes) would seem unlikely to increase consumer demands. Such a contradiction, according to Spence and other prominent scholars of neoliberalism, led to creative new policy responses informed by the budding tradition of neoliberalism. Responding to this crisis, policy-makers turned to interventions such as government deregulation, privatization, reduced expenditures on social services, and the private sector for solutions to problems thought to be brought about by an over-bearing and over-intrusive state.¹¹ Spence, paying particular attention to the African American experience, argues that while the neoliberal era has seen increased inequality and concentrated increases in racial wealth disparity, scholars must also look to the *intra*-racial wealth gap to fully understand developments in Black politics. Spence writes:

...neoliberal ideas and policies are not simply produced and reproduced by whites to withhold resources from blacks. Black institutions and ideas have themselves been transformed. Black elected officials and civil rights leaders reproduce these ideas, participating in a remobilization project of sorts, one that consistently posits that the reason black people aren't as successful as their white counterparts is because of the *lack of hustle*, it's because they don't quite have the work ethic necessary to succeed in the modern moment. A remobilization project that consistently posits that the greatest danger black people face is one posed by other black people, black people who are not only not productive but are in fact counter-productive. This remobilization project posits that there are two types of black people—black people who have the potential to be successful *if they take advantage of their human capital*, and black people who have no such potential.¹² (Emphasis added)

Here, we see Spence tracing the damaging and divisive impact of the neoliberal turn on Black politics, turning it into a game of “hustle” (or the taking-advantage of human capital, to be

¹¹ Lester K. Spence, *Knocking the Hustle: Against the Neoliberal Turn in Black Politics* (Brooklyn, NY: Punctum Books, 2015), 7-8.

¹² Spence, 25

discussed below) wherein winners and losers are clearly defined by measures of individual economic success. Furthermore, Spence argues that these ideas serve to naturalize structural racism and inequalities by implying that it is a lack of personal initiative that has prevented tangible racial equality, rather than economic and social policies. Far from being merely a cultural issue, this “hustler” mindset exists within the very Black institutions that contribute to neoliberal policy-formation in predominantly-black municipalities, such as New Orleans. Neoliberalism, as demonstrated by Spence, is not exclusive to one race or political affiliation but deeply embedded in political institutions and thought writ large, serving to deepen racial- and class-based inequalities while blaming simultaneously blaming its victims for their own failure to overcome these inequalities.

If we are to believe that neoliberal ideas have such a strong hold over policy and institutions, we must understand where such ideas come from as well. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown attempts to define the primary ideological underpinnings of neoliberal thought, out of which emerge justifications for the policy measures (deregulation, privatization, austerity, etc.) documented by Spence. Her central premise is that under a neoliberal model of society, “all conduct is economic conduct; all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic terms and metrics, even when those spheres are not directly monetized.”¹³ Brown points out that while not all realms of human activity are *directly* monetized or commercialized, neoliberal subjects are conditioned to operate as market agents

¹³ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2015), 10; In this set of arguments, Brown is building directly on Michel Foucault's notion of *neoliberal governmentality* developed in his lectures at the Collège de France in 1978-79. See Michel Foucault, Arnold Davidson, and Graham Burchell, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978-1979* (London: Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008): 239-289.

(again, Spence's who must be developing their own "human capital" in order to succeed against others. In this model:

Both persons and states are construed on the model of *the contemporary firm*, both...are expected to comport themselves in ways that maximize their capital value in the present and enhance their future value, and both persons and states do so through practices of entrepreneurialism, self-investment, and/or attracting investors.¹⁴

Just as a corporate firm must maximize profits to shareholders, practitioners of neoliberal restructuring envision an ideal society as operating in terms of economic efficiency with subjects who continuously "invest" in themselves in order to best navigate the marketplace.

While the subject of liberalism was the rational individual, the neoliberal subject undergoes a further transformation from mere *human* into *human capital*. This transformation can be best understood by tracking the changing conceptions of *labor* from liberalism to neoliberalism. Departing from the liberal premise of universal equality and capacity, labor under neoliberalism changes "from a simple unit you plug into an economic equation...into something human beings can *themselves transform* through skill development, education, creativity, and perhaps most important of all, choice."¹⁵ In other words, humans' life project "...is to *self-invest* in ways that enhance its value or to attract investors through constant attention to its actual or figurative credit rating, and to do this across every sphere of its existence."¹⁶ Failure to succeed is thus attributed to a failure to adequately develop one's individual human capital (in other words, a "lack of hustle") due to stupidity, laziness, or any other of a host of personal (rather than systemic) failures.

¹⁴ Ibid. 22.

¹⁵ Spence, 9.

¹⁶ Brown, 32-33; Emphasis added.

With failure measured on such personal terms, success is similarly envisioned not as a stroke of luck or fortunes at birth, but as the product of an individual's aptitude at navigating the market and making wise self-investment choices. In a society marked by growing inequality, unemployment or underemployment, and economic precarity, the insidiousness of this logic of human capital lies in its ability to naturalize this inequality by separating out society into the "winners" and "losers." Spence writes:

Increasingly exposing populations to pain and suffering the way neoliberalism does can only occur under very specific circumstances. Somehow, members of society must be convinced that losers deserve what they get, that they lose not because the deck is stacked against them but rather because they have something wrong with them that can only be dealt with punitively. And they must see themselves in the winners.¹⁷

Attempts to remedy this dichotomy of winners and losers by addressing inequality through state power can easily be framed, using the language of neoclassical economics, as interfering with the workings of the market—which is seen as an efficient distributor of spoils that will reward talent, hard work, and skill. In practice, this means treating pro-labor interventions such as unionization and wage legislation as “distort[ions] in the ability of markets to function properly by taking away the ability of individuals to negotiate their wages based on their own human capital.”¹⁸ Similarly, welfare programs that might go toward addressing inequality are framed as disruptive to the natural workings of the labor market and targeted for disincentivizing impoverished workers from participating in the minimum-wage service labor necessary for the economy to function.

The overarching theme behind all of these behaviors, decisions, and assumptions of society is that of economic market-logic applied at a large scale—the neoliberal tenet that “all

¹⁷ Spence, 22

¹⁸ Spence, 19.

domains are markets, and we are everywhere presumed to be market actors.”¹⁹ While the purveyors of neoliberalism attempt to portray the ideology as a natural development of the free market (often employing naturalistic language, e.g. “survival of the fittest” or “the food chain”) or as merely a common-sense understanding of society (under an assumption that supply and demand “laws” are universal), neoliberalism—the idea that market logic should can apply to all areas of social and political life—is a relatively new intellectual invention. This paper will attempt to track its early manifestations in 1970s New Orleans, demonstrating how neoliberal rhetoric and ideology successfully infiltrated both sides of the political divide and came to be espoused by Republican and Democrat, liberal and conservative, and black and white alike.

The Dawn of SSI:

The announcement of SSI’s bid on the Superdome contract was met with much fanfare in the local press. For example, the *Times-Picayune* focused on the company’s lack of experience and on their low capitalization, a mere \$1,000, relative to the enormous size of a contract that was valued at \$11.5 million over five years (equivalent to \$63.99 million in current-day dollars).²⁰ As reported by the *Louisiana Weekly*, the company was 76.48% Black-owned and founded at a time when there were no Black elected officials in the city of New Orleans²¹ Even before the Superdome opened, SSI met resistance due to the nature of their contract with the state of Louisiana—a “cost-plus” agreement. What this meant was that SSI would be reimbursed for the expenses of operating the Dome after-the-fact, rather than receiving a predetermined

¹⁹ Brown, 36.

²⁰ Delery. “\$2 Million Dome Contract Sought by \$1,000 Company.”

²¹ Ibid; Rev. Dr. AL Davis, a long-time figure in the New Orleans civil rights movement whose career spanned the pre- and post-1965 years, would be appointed to the City Council in 1975, won re-election, and served until his 1978 death.

amount of funds to spend from the State. Such cost-plus contracts were illegal under Louisiana law until SSI's specific contract was ratified by the legislature, despite no changes in the law banning cost-plus contracts themselves—presenting quite the legal conundrum. Although I do not wish to get lost in technicalities, the nature of this cost-plus contract is important to understand, as it would be used to justify attacks on SSI on the grounds that they had received special treatment in the form of an illegal contract and that they were “incentivized” to charge the state more than needed for their operations, essentially amounting to a charge of theft.²²

Upon securing the contract, SSI began operations with the opening of the Superdome in August of 1974. At this point, media accounts begin to conflict—SSI and the Superdome experienced a near-endless series of media scandals, some related to the inflated budget of the Superdome itself and some related to political officials in charge of the state's Superdome Commission. However, the lion's share of media attention fell on the Black-owned SSI and their principal figureheads, New Orleans' Black politicians and businessmen, Sherman Copelin and Don Hubbard. Rehashing every *Times-Picayune* article that criticized some aspect of SSI's business practices, their management of the Superdome, or personal dealings of Copelin and Hubbard would be a mammoth task that this paper will not be able to accomplish. However, the media critiques (repeated in the Louisiana Statehouse by various politicians as well) were twofold, the vein consisted primarily of charges of incompetence and unprofessionalism, the second around charges of political patronage—Copelin and Hubbard being *too* effective at manipulating the rapidly-transforming local political machine to work in their interests. Throughout this paper, I seek to examine the nature of the charges waged against SSI, the

²² “Dome Needs New Management—Little,” *Times-Picayune*, April 30, 1976, 17.

specific framing of the controversy, and tactics utilized by conservative forces to advocate for the termination of their contract.

Historiography:

The historical exploration of Black politics in 1970s New Orleans might be said to begin with Arnold Hirsch in a 1992 chapter, “Simply a Matter of Black and White: The Transformation of Race and Politics in Twentieth-Century New Orleans,” in which Hirsch examines the long history of 20th century Black and Creole politics with special attention to the post-war era.²³ Hirsch begins the process of assessing the entrance of Black New Orleanians into the electoral system, clearly a new conversation among historians as his footnotes are littered with a wide range of primary sources and few secondary historical sources. Hirsch pays special attention to issues of inequality and judges Black political developments on the extent to which they are able to provide a way out of ghettoization, impoverishment, and unemployment for working-class and racialized populations.

Hirsch deemed the Landrieu administration’s incorporation of Black politicians as a key development in the patronage system of New Orleans that benefited connected individual but neutralized serious challenges to the status quo. This position is revealed in the line, “New Orleans’ reified system of ethnic patronage politics remained—as elsewhere—essentially conservative and incapable of fundamentally altering conditions for the city’s poor masses.”²⁴ Skeptical of the business-friendly Landrieu and the paternalistic model of patronage

²³ Arnold Hirsch, “Simply a matter of Black and White: the transformation of race and politics in twentieth-century New Orleans” in *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization*, ed. Arnold Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 263-319. There are a number of primary sources that reflect on the state of Black politics in New Orleans, but Hirsch is one of the first to offer a historical, rather than popular or journalistic, account of the era in question and its politics.

²⁴ Hirsch, 298.

he perpetuated, Hirsch critiques the Landrieu administration and the Black leaders who were caught up in it, seeing little potential for meaningful change or redistributive efforts in the SSI enterprise.

All serious historical work on Black politics in New Orleans coming after Hirsch must contend with the charges of patronage and paternalism that he puts forth to characterize 1970s New Orleans. One recent exploration of the era in question comes from the late Black Marxist scholar Clyde Woods in “The Second Reconstruction, 1965-1977: The Neo-Bourbon War on Poverty and Massive Resistance in Concrete.” Writing nearly twenty-five years after Hirsch, Woods is better equipped to analyze the workings of the political machine as beyond any one leader and a result of class dynamics at play. He argues that the “Second Reconstruction” was marked by deceptively progressive-sounding policies “intentionally designed to misdirect and thwart fundamental social change.”²⁵ He critiques the creation of a *racial reform sector*, wherein federally-funded antipoverty and community development programs “created a stratum of poverty, community development, and labor managers, workers, and entrepreneurs,” whose ability to effectively challenge state and corporate power was now undermined by their newfound relationship with the public sector and power in state institutions. This argument has a direct lineage to Hirsch’s charge against Black electoral groups: while drawing their legitimacy from claims to represent the Black masses, they were incapable of making fundamental change to the system that now wrote their checks, and thus ultimately unrepresentative of those who elected them into office. The difference here is that while Hirsch assigns blame to the individual

²⁵ Clyde Woods, “The Second Reconstruction, 1965-1977: The Neo-Bourbon War on Poverty and Massive Resistance in Concrete” in *Development Drowned and Reborn: The Blues and Bourbon Restorations in Post-Katrina New Orleans*, ed. Laura Pulido and Jordan T. Camp (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2017), 187.

groups and the seemingly uniquely corrupt political culture of Louisiana and New Orleans, Woods argues that this reform complex was a national phenomenon, that the promise of electoral politics in advancing the radical goals of Civil Rights Movement was compromised everywhere, not just in the Crescent City.

The most recent development in the story, Megan French-Marcelin’s “Doing Business New Orleans Style: Racial Progressivism and the Politics of Uneven Development,” characterizes the developments of the 1970s as a local *growth machine*.²⁶ She argues that those massive, expensive redevelopment projects listed above were the defining feature of the Landrieu years and serve as the best way to understand and analyze political developments in the city.²⁷ French-Marcelin writes that “Landrieu delineated the expansion of development as a civil rights issue—the opportunity to reimage New Orleans as the interracial cosmopolitan center of the new South.”²⁸ “Economic development,” specifically in the form of massive downtown construction projects, was conflated with civil rights under the premise that profits from speculative real estate would provide more opportunities for all. Development projects, particularly those funded by the federal government (thus not coming out of state or local taxes) were offered as a creative solution to combat New Orleans’ fiscal insolvency and racial inequality at the same time. What gave this era of development a particularly *neoliberal* character was the emergence of “an economic program wherein the cardinal function of local government was to facilitate private profiteering and promulgate the market as the arbiter of

²⁶ Megan French-Marcelin, “Doing Business New Orleans Style: Racial Progressivism and the Politics of Uneven Development” in *Neoliberal Cities: The Remaking of Postwar Urban America*, ed. Andrew J. Diamond and Thomas J. Sugrue, (New York: NYU Press, 2020) 101.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*

thriving cities.”²⁹ Neoliberal governance meant moving away from efforts to provide social services or create economic opportunity for residents and choosing instead to shift efforts towards making the city an attractive climate for business investment (through tax-incentives and deregulation), handing off the responsibility for the city’s wellbeing and future to the private sector.

The insularity of New Orleans traditional local white elite-led economy had largely curbed speculative growth and creation of a new capitalist investor class, so that when Landrieu allied with a new speculative investor class he was able to “position[n] growth as the liberal economic alternative to the Jim Crow economy.”³⁰ Far from the racially segregated order of Jim Crow, this neoliberal development was, “by the post– Civil Rights era...inherently interracial” and relied on buy-in from Black leaders and institutions discussed by Spence to garner support.³¹ Spence points to intra-racial divisions as a hallmark of the neoliberal era and French-Marcelin demonstrates how this elite operates on a local level, writing that New Orleans’ experience was marked by “an emerging interracial elite who assumed roles in the growing trend of privatization as if participation would manifest itself as civil rights.”³² Part of Spence’s argument regarding neoliberalism is that it required and received buy-in from Black institutions and leaders just as much as white institutions and leaders. French-Marcelin demonstrates that this dynamic begins in early in New Orleans with a growing interracial middle class that positioned themselves against the racialized lower class and promoted distinctly middle-class policies.

²⁹ Ibid. 98.

³⁰ Ibid. 99

³¹ Ibid. 100.

³² Ibid.

French-Marcelin's criticism of Landrieu, diverging from that of Hirsch, is not exactly grounded not in the patronage networks he created with Black leaders and white developers, but in his utilization of Civil Rights efforts and the language of egalitarianism to advance a development agenda that did not address the issue of inequality but rather served interests of real estate speculators and developers. Black politicians are implicated in this reading as well as Landrieu, as they provided the necessary representation Landrieu needed to convince his working- and middle-class voting base that the redevelopment projects would serve them, too. French-Marcelin notes that while Landrieu may have legitimately supported Civil Rights causes (he was a strong advocate for desegregation from the onset of his political career), they were ultimately at the service of his pro-growth and pro-developer agenda. What is so significant about French-Marcelin's new analysis is her ability to bridge the often-separate discourses around development and Black incorporation into city politics, showing that the two were directly intertwined with each other. While the incorporation of Black political leaders and institutions into the mainstream receives rightful attention in the literature, French-Marcelin demonstrates that this was not the only major political development of this era. Instead, rising Black political power in the 1970s went hand in hand with a rise of developers and representation of their interests in municipal government. In fact, the two were related and increased private sector developments were pointed to as the solution for overcoming New Orleans' history of racial inequality.

There are few works that recount the politics surrounding the Superdome's opening in the 1970s. Instead, most work written on the structure center around sports or its role as a shelter during Hurricane Katrina. One crucial piece that looks at the Superdome's early history comes from UNO graduate student Matthew Higgins, who reveals a phenomenon I will call the *dual*

controversies of the Superdome—the concurrent financial and management issues that came to be associated with the project. One set of issues resulted from the project’s over-budget construction and underperforming initial earnings, the other resulting from the perceived mismanagement of the facility by SSI.³³ In the primary source material, these two “controversies” are often conflated, and SSI is often associated with, and their alleged mismanagement, blamed for the early financial troubles of the Superdome. In the historiography, there are few mentions of SSI in discussions of the Superdome and instead discussion tends to center around the project’s financial troubles (and opportunities).³⁴ Even though press accounts often flattened the differences between the two (the Superdome’s finances and its management team), it is important that I pay attention to which version of the “Superdome controversy” is being discussed in any given piece.

The Supporters:

The Superdome project and its associated management team, Superdome Services, Inc., falls at the intersection of the *racial reform sector* and the *growth machine*—with supporters utilizing both the language of affirmative action and economic development alike to justify the project’s importance and SSI’s contract. Such a contentious and lucrative project attracted a wide array of commentaries from supporters and opponents whose justifications draw on and

³³ Matthew B. Higgins, "A House Divided: The Evolution of the Louisiana Superdome from a Divisive Concept into a Symbol of New Orleans and the Surrounding Areas," Master’s thesis, University of New Orleans, 2009, 17.

³⁴ For example, the 1983 article, “Managed Growth and the Politics of Uneven Development in New Orleans” by Smith and Keller includes a section titled “The Superdome Controversy” that frames the project’s issues as primarily financial, with a one-paragraph mention of SSI that neglects to mention how the issue of race and incompetence contributed to the “controversy” in the press beyond merely the financial expenditures. See Michael Peter Smith and Marlene Keller, “Managed Growth and the Politics of Uneven Development in New Orleans,” in *Restructuring the City*, ed. Susan Fainstein (New York: Longman Inc., 1983), 136; In a more recent account from 2016, journalist Brian Boyles speaks to Copelin about “the contentious early years of the Superdome,” yet makes a point to separate out legitimate financial troubles from the exaggerated and racially-charged attacks on SSI, leading to a much different conception of “controversy.” See Brian Boyles, “Muhammad Ali and the Early Days of the Superdome,” *64 Parishes*, June 8, 2016.

help to develop ideas and assumptions related to neoliberalism. I will first examine arguments made in favor of the Superdome that allowed for its rise to power, followed by an analysis of the attacks made by conservative forces that led to its ultimate removal from power—demonstrating how both sides begin to rely on a set of common assumptions surrounding the ascendancy of economic logic, market-behavior, and the doctrine of human capital.

The most prominent spokesperson for SSI was the leader himself, Sherman Copelin, whose opinion first appears in an interview following the announcement of SSI's bid on the Superdome's services contract in March 1974. While the low initial capitalization of SSI mentioned above inspired speculations that Copelin was running a con and the bid for such an expensive contract was illegitimate, Copelin explanation for SSI's 10-cent highlights the unique the business model of the company.³⁵ Printed in full in the *Times-Picayune*, Copelin argues that:

Unfortunately, in the city of New Orleans, there is a certain tradition that every time a major project— be it private or public— is presented, what happens is that certain select blacks...participate. They are my friends, okay. I am not knocking them. I might be in their number once or twice. My whole posture [with SSI] was I was going to involve people who don't fit into that category, and people who have really worked in this community. If I had put it [the share prices] at any higher amount, some of those people couldn't have afforded it. We wanted to make sure that they came in and participated.³⁶

In this public statement, Copelin attempts to defend SSI as not simply a money-making machine for himself or these “certain select blacks,” but an attempt at redistribution—not to the masses, the poor, or the unemployed, but to Black community leaders whose opportunities for investment and economic advancement were otherwise limited. This sentiment is repeated by A.L. Davis in November 1974, who argues that “SSI was brought about because we believe definitely that black people and minorities ought to have a piece of the action in this mammoth project, the

³⁵ Atkinson, “Dome Bidder's Assets \$1000.”

³⁶ Ibid.

largest ever in the city of New Orleans and the State of Louisiana.”³⁷ Furthermore, Davis argues that SSI’s composition was meant to be a “cross-section” of Black New Orleanians, “not [just] two people,” Copelin and Hubbard.³⁸ While Davis and Copelin may be said to represent the Old and New Guard in New Orleans Black politics (marked by the 1965 transition and its impact on local political organizing), both leaders argue that SSI represents an attempt to distribute profits from the Superdome project towards a prospective Black middle class.

What Copelin reveals in outlining SSI’s strategy is a turn away political struggle and an explicit move towards the economic, with political clout going towards a contract that will serve to enrich a necessarily limited selection of Black New Orleanian investors. The break between the political versus the economic had developed to such a point that Copelin could couch his targeted economic development efforts in the language of Civil Rights, claiming that they represented a benefit to the Black community as a whole rather than his middle-class investors. To represent the divergence between political and economic activism that had taken hold by this era, it is useful to compare Copelin to an earlier era of Civil Rights activists. Jacquelyn Dowd Hall’s *The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past*, explores the early roots of the Civil Rights Era in 1940s *civil rights unionism*, a coalition movement of Black radicals and labor leaders who:

...proceeding from the assumption that, from the founding of the Republic, racism has been bound up with economic exploitation...sought to combine protection from discrimination with universalistic social welfare policies and individual rights with labor rights.³⁹

³⁷ Earl Lawless, “‘SSI Performing’ – Davis: Copelin, Hubbard to Stay,” *Louisiana Weekly*, Nov. 29, 1975.

³⁸ *Ibid.*

³⁹ Jacquelyn Dowd Hall, “The Long Civil Rights Movement and the Political Uses of the Past,” *The Journal of American History* 91, no. 4 (2005): 1246.

This “first phase” of the Civil Rights Movement sought to extend the social the economic citizenship guarantees of the New Deal Era beyond an exclusive white group and to simultaneously utilize the political momentum of the New Deal to “break the grip of the Southern oligarchy” that had come to reign during the Jim Crow Era.⁴⁰ With Dowd Hall’s intervention, it becomes clear that the so-called “economic thrust” outlined by the NAACP above was hardly the first struggle for “economic” rights or material gains. Instead, what this new “economic thrust” (embodied in New Orleans by Copelin, Hubbard, and SSI) reveals is an assumption that *politics had been resolved* with the passage of anti-discrimination and voting expansion legislation. This meant that new battles on the Civil Rights front would occur within the “economic” realm of the private sector rather than through social policy in the public sector. It is only with this assumption that Copelin can frame the private sector economic development efforts that would do little towards promoting universal welfare as part of the Civil Rights tradition.

Yet how can we say that economics had come to dominate over politics in light of the explosion of Black leaders who actively engaged in formal/electoral politics during this era? Although Copelin and Hubbard were not elected officials during the 1970s, they were leaders of New Orleans most powerful 1970s political organization, SOUL, and heavily involved in electoral politics. However, scholars such as Hirsch, Woods, and French-Marcelin demonstrate that the goal of these political efforts was no longer the expansion of universalistic social welfare policies, individual rights, and labor rights espoused in the *civil rights unionism* phase. Instead, political organizing primarily served more limited efforts to facilitate Black enterprise and economic development. Rather than using political appointments to expand government-

⁴⁰ Ibid.

guaranteed rights to economic security and welfare, the early neoliberal era saw a turn towards the private sector and private development as the cure to the problems that earlier political activism and government intervention had failed to solve.

As wide-based as the “cross-section” of investors described by Davis may have been, the profits from the SSI contract remained limited to those with the capital and prior knowledge necessary to invest and would naturally concentrate at the top. In this strategy, the public sector exists merely as a conduit whose granting the of the Superdome contract to SSI would allow the company to reap the benefits of the multi-million-dollar award that they would then distribute to their shareholders. This represents a hallmark of the neoliberal policy—wherein the state neglects to enact any redistributive itself but instead relies on private sector actors to spread wealth and create prosperity. This is not to say that there weren’t programs leftover from the Great Society reforms where the state was making small efforts at redistribution, but to point to a model of state behavior that would set the stage for a widespread move towards private-led economic development at the expense of state-led redistribution. The state begins to contract out to the private sector the responsibility of creating jobs and opportunity and addressing social ills. Although this may seem a commonplace occurrence in the 21st century with the ascendancy of the public-private partnership, this new strategy represents a divergence from state-led antipoverty or economic redistribution programs of the Great Society or New Deal reform eras.

Mayor Moon Landrieu, a staunch defender of the Superdome project and of SSI’s tenure in particular, rests his own defense of SSI on the notion of racial inclusion and affirmative action. Exemplifying this stance, he was quoted in the *Louisiana Weekly* saying that he “going to bend every which way to get minority participation in this project,” making an explicitly race-based

appeal for SSI.⁴¹ In one October 1974 article that arrived amidst a wave of bad press criticizing SSI's ability to clean and secure the Superdome, Landrieu asked for patience for the newly-formed company and all Black businesses who are starting to finally starting to gain serious traction in the city economy. "Minority firms," Landrieu insists, "are expected to perform at the same level as those who have been in business for 50 to 100 years."⁴² Landrieu agrees with the *Times-Picayune* and New Orleans business establishment that SSI is not as effective as established white businesses who could perform the same function as them. However, he insists that it is not the result of race, unintelligence, or innate incompetence, but instead the result of their relative newness compared to established firms.

Despite this alleged inefficiency, Landrieu justifies SSI's contract by stating, "you have to pay some price in order to obtain that minority involvement and we have paid that price and we are paying it today."⁴³ For Landrieu, Black leadership in the Superdome *is* causing financial loss, but it is a necessary sacrifice that the city must make in order to incubate Black businesses to eventually contribute to the local economy. This sacrifice can be conceived in monetary terms as a price that New Orleans must pay for the promise of future growth. Here we can observe French-Marcelin's *growth machine* in action, with Black enterprises such as SSI framed as both a Civil Rights victory ("minority involvement" being key here) while also essential to the future growth of New Orleans.

A counterargument arrived days later in a letter to the editor submitted to the *Times-Picayune*, arguing that Landrieu was treating the Superdome as a "vocational school" for SSI, and that they should be removed for poor performance lest they continue to strap taxpayers with

⁴¹ Ferdinand Delery, III, "Mayor Raps Media in Dome Row," *Louisiana Weekly*, April 6, 1974.

⁴² Paul Atkinson, "Moon: Be Patient with SSI," *Times-Picayune*, October 14, 1975.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

further financial burdens.⁴⁴ Landrieu opens himself and SSI up for this attack when he constructs SSI's contract as a "price" or sacrifice that the city is paying for minority inclusion (that would pay off at some later date), rather than, say, a debt for a long history of minority exclusion. SSI and affirmative action are portrayed as pro-business and pro-growth economic choices on the grounds that that investment will yield future gains for the city as a whole—the promise of the neoliberal *growth machine*. Operating within this framework, opponents such as the *Times-Picayune* reader quoted above can then argue against minority incorporation or affirmative action on economic grounds rather than having to face more complex questions of race, historical debt, and a legacy of inequality. This is not to say that this economic framework would never have developed without Landrieu, but simply to state that as Mayor, he was an influential voice in debates within the city. His arguments matter and would have consequences for the development of political and economic discourse for years to come. As we will see, these latter forces soon overpower the proponents in SSI's camp, leading to SSI's termination a mere few years later as the tide turns against minority incorporation as an efficient and profitable economic decision.

While Landrieu primarily focuses on the potential of SSI for those the leaders and investors who are enriched by the enterprise, perhaps an even more important justification for SSI was in its ability to provide low-skilled employment, particularly to the nearly 30 percent of Black New Orleanians who were unemployed in the 1970s and the many more who were underemployed (formally employed, but only part-time or making wages that left them in poverty).⁴⁵ At the height of its tenure, SSI was employing 200 full-time workers and 1200 to

⁴⁴ Victor McGee, "Vo-Tech for SSI," *Times-Picayune*, October 18, 1975.

⁴⁵ French-Marcelin, 107.

1500 workers on days with events scheduled—and was said by critics to represent “the single largest source of unclassified jobs in the state.”⁴⁶ Governor Edwin Edwards remarked in January 1976 that the Superdome’s significance was not just that it spurred development around the area or provided employment, but specifically that it provided employment for “the welfare mothers who are working, who have never worked before.”⁴⁷ Edwards employs the racialized and habitually unemployed “welfare mothers” trope to describe the potential of the project in providing work for Black women who have been routinely excluded from formal economic opportunities. The assumption here is that these “welfare mothers” have the capacity to work but have hitherto lacked the chance to do so, an inefficiency that will be solved by the low-skill (and low-wage) jobs provided by the Superdome project. Understanding his audience, Edwards defends the project with an appeal that combines both racism and economics—suggesting that SSI is the only chance that Louisianan taxpayers will have to rid themselves of the burden of supporting the unemployed “welfare mothers,” who, by definition, rely upon the state dole rather than their own merits for support. SSI head Don Hubbard makes a similar appeal to the revolutionary opportunities for employment represented by SSI, arguing:

it is the first time to my knowledge that minorities on a large scale have had the assurance they can go to their own people for a job...and be treated with dignity... [SSI helps] the little man who can’t pass the civil service exam or walk in and put his resume on the desk. That same man who, after all, is responsible for providing the votes to allow us to get where we are and the categories and the capacities that he can qualify for.⁴⁸

⁴⁶ Millie Ball, “Only Bank to Lend to SSI in Early Days is Paid Back,” *Times-Picayune*, Jan. 6, 1977; Bill Voelker, “Politics-Free Dome Up To Courts,” *Times-Picayune*, July 30, 1976. “Unclassified jobs” refer to jobs within government that lack strict eligibility and merit requirements and also lack the same protections offered to the more formalized category of “classified employees.” Basically, the charge here was that SSI was allowed to select the employees they wished without having to go through formalized channels that would measure their applicants’ qualifications, merits, background, etc.

⁴⁷ Tex Stephens, “Gov. Edwards Has Plan to ‘Save’ Dome Stadium,” *Louisiana Weekly*, Jan. 31, 1976.

⁴⁸ Dwight Ott, “No Landrieu Rift, Says SSI,” *Times-Picayune*, Sept. 29, 1975.

In this passage, Hubbard positions SSI as a sympathetic employer capable of offering positions to those in New Orleans who might have difficulty escaping unemployment—yet not out of a place of sympathy or pity, but as a repayment for the votes that can be obtained for SOUL-backed candidates (it was SOUL’s political clout that allowed SSI to rise to its position in the first place). While this can be rightfully viewed as a plus for the hundreds of workers who are able to secure employment with SSI, one does think of what benefit this has for the thousands more who are unable to secure such employment or unsupportive of the political stances and candidates that may be required of them to obtain such positions. While there is nothing new about the transaction of employment for political support, there is something striking about how clearly the relationship is laid out in this public statement.

Yet a later statement by Hubbard reveals that patronage is not all that is at play here, and that there is a more nuanced relationship between SSI, their employees, and the economic establishment of New Orleans. In discussing the issue of “no-shows” on event nights at the Superdome, Hubbard argues that “it’s our option to decide whether to call them again, but you have to consider the circumstances. It may be a case of sickness or death. We try not to run the Superdome like a plantation.”⁴⁹ When faced with the charges that SSI was a lenient employer who ought to rein in and discipline their employees, Hubbard defends his business practices by referencing SSI’s status as a Black-owned business and its unique understanding of the history of slavery—hereby attempting to show why his business would not implement the plantation-like conditions that the press seeks.

Yet the extent to which SSI was any more understanding or sympathetic of an employer than a white-owned business was put under scrutiny in the weeks surrounding the Sugar Bowl

⁴⁹ “Ticket Sellers No Show; SSI, ‘No Plantation,’” *Times-Picayune*, Dec. 27, 1975.

Strike in December 1976. While Hubbard claims that SSI has a special relationship and sympathy towards their Black employees due to a shared history and heritage, strikers would challenge this attempt to paint such a rosy image of SSI's management. While little information is available on this threatened strike and the union organizers failed to gather enough support in early 1977 to fully turn the Superdome into a union site, documents surrounding the event serve to reveal some of the employee conditions and union demands at the Superdome.⁵⁰

In a document entitled "S.S.I. Exposed" from the New Orleans Equal Rights Committee, workers from SSI, or a presumed representative of these workers, lambast SSI for calling in scabs during the 1976 Sugar Bowl Strike on New Year's Eve and refusing to negotiate with union organizers.⁵¹ The document suggests that "SSI controls the very lives of workers by forcing them to starve or work for slave wages."⁵² Furthermore, it positions the leaders of SSI as working hand-in-hand with government forces, writing "workers are presently paid \$2.70 an hour and are forced to live off the bare necessities while S.S.I pockets huge profits from the sweat off the workers' backs."⁵³ While the origin of this document is unclear and the actual wages that individual workers made likely varied, there is reason to believe that under financial pressures from the state, wages would have been one of the first cuts SSI would make.⁵⁴

⁵⁰ "SSI Employees Vote to Sever Ties With Unions," *Louisiana Weekly*, April 13, 1977.

⁵¹ New Orleans Equal Rights Committee, "SSI Exposed," 9th Ward Citizens Voter League Collection, Xavier University of Louisiana Digital Archives and Collections, Xavier University, New Orleans, LA.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Ibid. For reference, \$2.80/hour in 1977 amounts to roughly \$12.78/hour in 2021 dollars according to the CPI Inflation Calculator, "In2003Dollars.com." While this is currently below the federal minimum wage and thus might seem a bit high to warrant just drastic language, the inflation rate was rising quite rapidly during the 1970s, to the level that \$2.80 in 1970 was worth \$19.96 in 2021 dollars and had fallen nearly 35% by 1977. This shows just how poorly wages have failed to keep up with inflation but also how high inflation has been since the 1970s.

⁵⁴ I can find no other materials on the Equal Rights Committee that created the document, although it is included in the records of the 9th Ward Citizens Voter League, an influential local organization that had correspondences with many politicians

What is interesting is that the document presents a complication to Hubbard's claims that SSI's management is any better for their employees than that of a white-owned firm. The union organizers argument that SSI pays "slave wages" serves to directly counter to Hubbard's affront that he tries to not operate SSI like a plantation and attempts to quash the romantic image of employer-employee Hubbard attempts to paint. Instead, what the strike demonstrates is that SSI has strayed far from any claims at increasing stability or prosperity within the Black community and instead only provided more avenues for precarious employment. Even as their stated goal was to counter the market forces that lead employers to overwork and exploit their workers in the sake of increasing profits, they themselves became implicated in these same forces and adopted the same market logic themselves—personal enrichment at the expense of workers' economic security. While this is not to say that SSI is any more exploitative than another services contractor would be, the claims made in the article show the difficulty of attempting to defy the impetus of profit-maximization while operating within an economic system where such behavior is required to participate.

The Opponents:

While attacks from within SSI were infrequently publicized, the attacks from local press and political figures were seemingly endless. Charges of incompetence and inefficiency along with moves to terminate SSI's contract arrived in the *Times Picayune* almost as soon as the company formed. As mentioned before, the nature of the cost-plus contract (approved by the legislature, yet still charged by some as being illegal) was a frequent point of contention with SSI's enemies. They posited that the contract, wherein SSI would bill the State based on how much the Superdome operations cost, as merely as an incentive to overinflate the budget and swindle taxpayers out of money.

The charges did not stop there; leadership and employees alike were repeatedly lambasted for a host of issues with the Superdome's security and cleanliness, some of which likely resulted from genuine negligence and others from a lack of funds to hire and train the necessary personnel. In an illustrative example, the *Louisiana Weekly* reported in 1975 a statement by Louisiana State Treasurer Mary Evelyn Parker, writing to Superdome's Secretary-Treasurer William Connick (not a member of SSI, but of the larger state organization, the Superome Commission, responsible for managing the finances of the Stadium and SSI's contract) that he, paraphrased by the *Louisiana Weekly*, "could no longer tolerate being abused and aggravated by incompetent people (referring to blacks)."⁵⁵ This charge followed one of the largest *Times-Picayune*-led media scandal of 1975 that Copelin had allegedly accepted a \$50,000 payoff from a national organization known as Family Health Foundation (FHF) for signing off on low-income health clinics they were to build under his watch while working as the director of New Orleans' Model Cities office (a federally-funded welfare program), a position he held prior to any involvement with the Superdome project. The ups and downs of this controversy in the local press would require another paper to fully explore, but the reaction is important to note for our purpose here. Parker's statement reveals how the media came to associate an alleged political payoff (hardly the first to have happened in Louisiana politics) as a uniquely corrupt action that not only disqualified Copelin from his leadership position but served to disqualify the entire company as being incompetent "abusers" and "aggravators." According to the *Louisiana Weekly*, conservative forces in state politics such as Mary Evelyn Parker attempted to use the over-exaggerated FHF political scandal to argue for the removal of Copelin and SSI from the

⁵⁵ Earl Lawless, "Dome Commission Defeats Proposed "Probe" of SSI: Would Void Contract of Black Group," *Louisiana Weekly*, November 15, 1975.

Superdome on the grounds of incompetence. Once racism is no longer as openly acceptable in print in a post-Civil Rights Era, it is up to the *Louisiana Weekly* to point out the veiled meaning behind Parker's charge: that Louisianans are allowing themselves to be "abused and aggravated" by the Black leaders of SSI and that they must avoid their further encroachment in the power structure.

Another instance of the conflation between race and charges of incompetence comes from another political figure, Louisiana State Representative Michael Thompson of Lafayette, LA, who argues that "'there is absolutely no security at the Dome...there is a total lack of motivation' by Superdome Services, Inc. to perform its security, crowd-control, and janitorial functions...[and] 'the performance is not being done in a workman-like manner.'"⁵⁶ In this quote, we see Thompson repeating old racial stereotypes of laziness and lack of motivation against SSI, yet connecting them not to any explicit racial identity but instead to lack of a "workman-like" quality. In a 1976 article regarding disputes between SSI and the aforementioned Superdome Commission, the *Times-Picayune* characterizes Connick's main complaint with SSI as not lying with Copelin and Hubbard, but in the fact that "the two are not backed up by a strong, competent staff"—lacking competence in what were supposed to be 'low-skill' jobs, as reflected in the meager wages paid to employees.⁵⁷ Not to belabor the point, but SSI's management and leaders alike were continually charged with laziness, ineptness, and incompetence, all of which were repeatedly thrown around as the reason they ought to be dismissed and replaced with a "legitimate" or "professional" group.⁵⁸

⁵⁶ Ed Anderson, "2 Legislators Hit SSI Security, Crowd Control," *Times-Picayune*, December 27, 1975.

⁵⁷ Ed Anderson, "Copelin Threatens to Quit Dome," *Times-Picayune*, April 23, 1976.

⁵⁸ Anderson, "2 Legislators Hit SSI Security, Crowd Control."

Incompetence was not the only racialized charge waged against the SSI team, as underhanded claims of theft, shiftlessness, and untrustworthiness would comprise a second strand of attacks added onto charges of incompetence. In one example, *Times-Picayune* reporter Paul Atkinson subliminally accuses SSI of theft, writing “\$19,000-plus of the equipment the state now owns or supposedly owns is gone— vanished, stolen or lost. SSI, of course, is the firm entrusted with Superdome security. Great gobs of clothing—more than \$11,000 worth— simply disappeared”⁵⁹ A few days later, the same reporter quoted Louisiana State Representative Kevin Reilly, calling SSI “...a figurehead; [who is] doing nothing, in my opinion, except stealing uniforms. And, by the way, it was the security people who stole the uniforms, wasn’t it?”⁶⁰ While Reilly’s statement represents the one of the most explicit charges of theft published in the *Times Picayune*, these quotes effectively illustrate the charges waged against SSI and its employee base. Either through negligence, laziness (the “lack of motivation” mentioned above), or criminal intent, they were personally responsible, as individuals, for missing property. Moreover, in treating the business as a “figurehead,” Reilly attempts to extend his charge of to the entire firm itself, treating SSI’s contract as a theft from the State and taxpayers for services that are supposedly not being delivered.

Recall the *Times Picayune* letter to the editor quoted above, which argued that Mayor Landrieu was treating the Superdome as a “vocational school” for SSI and causing taxpayers undue financial burden for little returns. Charges that SSI was merely a “figurehead” fit into this same vein of opposition which argued that Louisiana taxpayers should not be forced to fund a contract with a company that was unable to fulfill their duties. This position is framed as

⁵⁹ Paul Atkinson, “Best Free Show? It’s Now the Dome,” *Times-Picayune*, January 16, 1977.

⁶⁰ Paul Atkinson, “State May Have to Settle Dome Contracts Outside of Court,” *Times-Picayune*, January 25, 1977.

common sense—if SSI cannot perform the job, they should not be paid to do so any longer. By combining an effort at minority incorporation with an effort towards economic development or growth, Landrieu opened up an avenue for criticism that the whole goal of affirmative action should be abandoned on the grounds that it was not economical. When the pressures of growth were placed against efforts towards racial equality, growth, measured in strictly economic terms, eventually won out. Such is the pattern of neoliberal development in the wake of the Civil Rights Era—political efforts and actions that are incompatible with the growth machine are repeatedly shut down based on economic arguments that are treated as neutral and rational.

In assessing the various charges of incompetence, laziness, or criminality waged against SSI in order to advocate for their removal, it is useful to return to the issue of human capital. Conservative opponents often pointed out explicitly that they were not attacking SSI leadership or employees on the grounds of race and rejecting claims that their charges are race-based. Instead, the common refrain centered around SSI's incompetence and unprofessionalism—put in other words, their alleged lack of sufficient human capital to manage such a sophisticated operation. The historical record suggests an extension of Brown's conception of human capital outlined above, demonstrating that when market demands fail to take hold and people fail to comport themselves as effective market-actors (SSI's alleged inefficiency and economic drain on taxpayers), neoliberal opponents often mobilize racial and cultural stereotypes (laziness and incompetence, for example) to explain away their failure to achieve projected levels of success and efficiency. Rather than pointing specifically to race as the source of SSI's failure, they are

instead charged with incompetence and a failure to meet an apparently neutral and objective measures of success, thrift, and efficiency.

A report commissioned from the Arthur D. Little Consulting Firm by the State of Louisiana in 1976 symbolizes this discursive shift—as outright attacks on racial grounds were no longer acceptable grounds on which to advocate for exclusion, a new language of professionalism and competency emerges, aided by allegedly “neutral” management consulting firms. In the 1976 report, lauded by the *Times-Picayune* for its “objective, expert confirmation of the need for changes and the direction that they should take,” argues that “the Superdome be placed in the hands of professional managers whose experience matches their responsibilities.”⁶¹ The “expert” status of the consultants allowed their recommendations, which conveniently aligned with the rhetoric and interests of conservative forces within the city and statehouse, a veneer of professionalism, neutrality, and legitimacy. The attacks made on SSI thus did not have to represent a political attack against newcomers to the political and economic scene, but instead could be framed as an attempt to correct for their lack of sufficiently developed human capital (in other words, their “incompetence) by placing a more efficient actor in their place. With the language of competence and professionalism, neoliberal logic transforms battles in which the stakes are ultimately, or at least largely, political into purely economic question of which actors can be the most efficient, calculating agents.

Conclusion:

While concerns of space have necessarily limited the claims I have been able to make and prove within this small essay, I hope that I have effectively demonstrated the nascent stages of an ideology, that of neoliberalism, that would grow to dominate political discourse to such an extent

⁶¹ “Superdome: Little Big Report,” *Times-Picayune*, May 1, 1976.

as to seem commonsensical. The criticisms waged against SSI outlined in this paper would eventually achieve their intended effect, as management of the Superdome was turned over from the state-run Superdome Commission to the privately-owned Hyatt Management Corp in 1977, who proceeded to terminate the exclusive contract of SSI.⁶² While there were some efforts to keep on SSI as a subcontractor or retain certain employees, followed by a series of lawsuits involving the State of Louisiana, Hyatt, and SSI to recoup the losses from the terminated contract, SSI would never again regain control of this project or any project of this size in the future. In an interesting reflection on the struggle, Hubbard argues that the Hyatt resembles:

“...the old northern “carper-baggers” of the 19th-century...’northern money is moving south and in this case at the expense of significant minority participation in the Dome. Hyatt has not taken politics out of the Dome, but rather they have sided with a particular political faction which has sought to pressure, discredit, and plot to kick SSI out of the Dome.”⁶³

Hubbard touches upon an important insight—that the posturing to “take politics out of the Dome,” and the surrounding language of incompetency and unprofessionalism that emerged to form this argument, was ultimately a political struggle rather than merely a question of economic efficiency.

The neutral language of economics and business-sense that aim to transform all struggles into economic problems (that have calculatable economic solutions) obscures thornier questions of political conflict where solutions are not so clear. As we saw throughout this paper, these ideas are not only employed by traditional opponents to Civil Rights, but by some of its proponents as well. As we look towards further explorations of neoliberalism in theory and practice, the early experience of New Orleans is essential for an

⁶² Ben Young, “Hyatt ‘Terminates’ SSI’s Dome Contract: ‘We’re Still in Dome’ Says SSI Officials,” *Louisiana Weekly*, October 15, 1977.

⁶³ Ben Young, “SSI Not Out Yet, Suit Filed Pending Hearing,” *Louisiana Weekly*, October 22, 1977.

understanding of the more recent surge in neoliberal policy in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.⁶⁴ The era following the 1970s would see widespread approval of the tenets of neoliberalism and policies of privatization introduced in this paper, including the reduction of social safety nets and a widespread turn towards private sector strategies in the operation of once-public goods and services.



New Orleans Skyline in the 21st century

IMAGE COURTESY OF BY VERRUCKTEDAN AT WIKIPEDIA

⁶⁴ For an exploration of more recent trends in neoliberalism, see Cedric Johnson, *The Neoliberal Deluge Hurricane Katrina, Late Capitalism, and the Remaking of New Orleans* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011); Anna Hartnell, *After Katrina Race, Neoliberalism, and the End of the American Century*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2017).

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