

“We Should Get Out Because New York Is Shot!” The Staten Island Secession Movement in New York City (1980-1993)

The title of this paper comes from a quote from an anonymous Staten Island resident from an August 9, 1993 issue of *The New York Times* and summed up a common sentiment felt by many residents of the New York City borough of Staten Island in the summer of 1993. The proposed presentation, a summary of the sixth and final chapter of a Ph.D. dissertation in History in progress, explores the Staten Island secession crisis and the governmental response to that crisis by David Dinkins, New York City’s first and to date only African-American mayor.

After several years of organization and agitation, the voters of Staten Island in a two to one margin on November 2, 1993, cast their ballots in a non-binding referendum to secede from New York City. On that same election day, Dinkins lost his re-election bid by a narrow margin. Commentators quickly linked the two votes and argued that the high turnout of voters in Staten Island, a borough of New York City that was at the time the only borough in New York City with a white majority, played a significant role in the electoral defeat of Dinkins. In his autobiography and post-election interviews, Dinkins cited the efforts by the activists who led the secession-movement as one of the main reasons for his election defeat. According to Dinkins, latent and overt racism triggered by the election of the first African-American mayor in 1989 election rather than legitimate grievances centering on city government’s policies were the driving forces behind the secession movement.

The paper, a work of social, urban and political history, challenges Dinkins’ interpretation of the Staten Island secession movement’s essential nature. The paper draws heavily upon the local coverage of the event and interviews of several secession activists and argues that Dinkins’ depiction of the Staten Island secession movement as social movement motivated largely by racism ignores the long-standing grievances of the people of Staten Island that pre-dated Dinkins’ election as mayor in 1989. The presentation, a portion of the larger paper, will focus on how the Staten Island secession movement can trace its roots to the distinctive history of the island and its unique political culture. Moreover, the presentation argues that Dinkins’ failure to address the legitimate grievances of the secession-activists related to a host of issues ranging from the real and perceived failure of the city government to provide adequate services to the island to the city’s high taxes and lack of local political control over the island fueled the secession movement.

Despite the results of the 1993 referendum, Staten Island never seceded from New York City due to a collection of legal barriers that prevent it from doing so and, in part, because Rudy Giuliani, the Republican candidate who defeated Dinkins in the 1993 election, promised to meet the secession movement’s long list of political demands. While largely forgotten, the episode in New York City history provides insight into not only into modern conservatism in the United States but also into the politics of working class-whites in New York City as well as the history of the Democratic Party often overlooked by other historians.