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Phases of a Man Called 'Moon': Mayor Landrieu and Race Relations in New Orleans, 1960-1974

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Phases of a Man Called "Moon":
Mayor Landrieu and Race Relations in New Orleans, 1960-1974

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in
History

by

Frank L. Straughan, Jr.

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Abstract

This study examines the political career of Maurice Edwin “Moon” Landrieu from his election to the Louisiana legislature in 1960 to the end of his first term as mayor of New Orleans in 1974. Landrieu was a white southern liberal who vigorously supported the agenda of the civil rights movement. He succeeded in building an unprecedented coalition between liberal, middle-class whites and a large segment of the black community. As the 1970s unfolded, however, he found his coalition increasingly threatened not just by disgruntled white conservatives, which might be expected, but also by angry black radicals of the Black Panther Party. This study argues that Landrieu’s firm commitment to opening up political and economic opportunity to all citizens enabled him to keep his progressive, biracial coalition together and to help pave the way for the 1978 election of Ernest “Dutch” Morial, the first black mayor of New Orleans.

Southern, Urban, Politics, New Orleans, Progressives, Liberals, Mayors, Moon Landrieu, Segregation, 1960 New Orleans School Crisis, 1966 New Orleans City Council, Human Relations Committee, Black Panthers

Introduction

Early in Maurice Edwin “Moon” Landrieu’s political career, his critics called him “Moon the Coon”¹ and “nigger lover” for his vigorous fight for civil rights and full social, political, and business participation for blacks. “You right, I am,” the young white upstart responded cheerfully. “I flat am, without any shame or apologies.”² Despite conservative opposition, Landrieu—who legally changed his first name to “Moon” during his mayoral campaign—became mayor of New Orleans on May 4, 1970. This victory was due to the unprecedented coalition he had built between liberal, middle-class whites and a large segment of the black community. As the 1970s unfolded, however, Landrieu would find his coalition increasingly threatened not just by disgruntled white conservatives, which might be expected, but also by angry black radicals of the Black Panther Party who questioned Landrieu’s sincerity in promoting the civil rights agenda. Particularly from the time he was in the Louisiana legislature in 1960 until he became mayor in 1970, Landrieu struggled to keep his liberal, biracial coalition intact amidst growing racial tensions in the city and in the overall Civil Rights Movement.

Though several scholars have investigated political and social events in New Orleans in the 1960s and 1970s, few have focused on the inner workings of Landrieu’s first administration. How did his upbringing, education, and experience as a legislator and city councilman influence his approach to the mayoral office? What was the impact of his appointment of African Americans to important posts in city hall? How did he reshape the pivotal Human Relations Committee (HRC), inherited from the previous mayor, Victor Schiro? And how did these various steps help or hurt his efforts to deal with the three confrontations that took place in the

early 1970s between the police department and the Black Panthers? To understand this significant era of New Orleans history, a close study of Landrieu's role as legislator, city councilman, and mayor is needed.

A wealth of primary source material is available for such a study. The New Orleans Public Library contains the Landrieu Papers and the Human Relations Committee Records. These collections include numerous documents pertaining to the Landrieu administration, including press releases, meeting minutes, informational bulletins, newspaper clippings, photographs, cartoons, and other materials. In addition, local coverage of Landrieu's activities before and during his mayoralty is available in such newspapers as *The Times-Picayune*, the *New Orleans States-Item*, and *The Louisiana Weekly*. Interviews with Landrieu and a video documentary on his career provide additional details. Particularly useful are the internet site *Humid Beings* featuring a panel discussion on Landrieu as Mayor and "Moon Landrieu: Reflections of Change (A Video Documentary)," a University of New Orleans thesis by Dawn Watts Perez.

Several pertinent secondary works are also available. General overviews of New Orleans politics include Joseph B. Parker's *The Morrison Era*, Liva Baker's *The Second Battle of New Orleans*, and Arnold R. Hirsch and Joseph Logsdon's *Creole New Orleans*. Though no full-length study of Landrieu's career has been written, books that provide useful information include Kim Lacy Rogers' *Righteous Lives* and Kent B. Germany's *New Orleans after the Promises*. Several analyses of the Civil Rights Movement and the Black Panther Party supply important information, including Elaine Brown's *A Taste of Power*, Orissa Arend's *Showdown in Desire*, and the aforementioned studies by Rogers and Germany.

Based on these various sources, this study will provide a detailed analysis of Landrieu's triumphs and mistakes as he embarked on his first term as mayor of New Orleans. After an overview of his family, education, and early political activity, the discussion will focus on Landrieu's relationships with the Human Relations Committee and the Black Panther Party. In examining these subjects, this study will argue that Moon Landrieu was a significant example of a white Southern liberal urban politician who embraced the Civil Rights Movement by striving to give black citizens of New Orleans their rights and freedoms. In his quest to accomplish these goals as mayor, however, he realized that the poverty and racial problems of New Orleans in the 1970s were more complex and deep rooted than just political equality could solve.

New Moon: Early Life

New Orleans' future mayor was born Maurice Edwin Landrieu on July 23, 1930. The boyhood nickname "Moon" belonged to his older brother Joseph, but as the years passed it was handed down to Maurice. Although widely known by his nickname during his early career as lawyer, state representative, and city councilman, he did not legally change it until he was a candidate in the 1969-1970 mayoral election.³ Landrieu came from a large, modest, blue-collar Roman Catholic family. His father, Joseph, was a power plant worker for New Orleans Public Service and his mother, Loretta, ran the family grocery store.

Maurice Landrieu's upbringing provides important clues to his later progressive position on race relations and civil rights. He grew up on West Adams Street in a working-class neighborhood in Uptown, a district named for its location upriver from the historic French Quarter. Like much of New Orleans in the 1930s, the Landrieu's neighborhood was racially mixed including both white and black families. These families co-existed peacefully, accepting segregation as the system in force. In his childhood, for example, Landrieu felt great affection

for the local black woman who did his family's cooking and washing. Yet he also knew at the time that "there was always that barrier....[I]t's enough to confuse a child."⁴

The Landrieu family's grocery store on West Adams Street offered more opportunities for the young Maurice to take note of the complexities of race relations. His mother ran the store out of the front room of the family's "shotgun," a house whose rooms all opened off one long hallway (you could fire a shotgun down it, as the locals would say). Both white and black neighbors patronized the store throughout the Depression years. Landrieu remembered all the grocery items including bread, milk, and bags of beans, as well as the ice box, the kerosene pump, and one of the most popular items of all: the grocery store scale.

"[T]he black parents in the neighborhood brought their babies in....so they could see whether the baby was gaining weight, and put 'em on the scale," Landrieu reminisced in a 1988 interview. It was a "common occurrence," he said, and "I remember my mother huggin' those babies, as any woman would, kissing the babies." Yet, after describing this pleasant scene, Landrieu suddenly turned serious. "Big difference between that, though," he added, "and treating that person as a social equal."⁵ Mrs. Landrieu might hesitate to hug and kiss the black mothers of those babies, and black parents probably did not go any further than the storefront area of the family home. This was the barrier that so confused him as a child. The Landrieu children learned from their mother's example to treat all persons as courteously and fairly as possible. But they also learned that the racial divide in the 1930s South could only be bridged just so far.

After graduating with honors from Jesuit High School, Landrieu was urged by his strong-willed German mother to enter Loyola University in New Orleans. On a four-year baseball scholarship, the promising "fastball" pitcher pursued his lifelong ambition of becoming a

“middle-class” certified public accountant. Loyola, a private Catholic institution, was then noted for both its academic programs and for its emphasis on Christian fellowship and service.⁶ At 21, Landrieu received his B.A. in Business Administration in 1952, graduating in just three years. He remained at Loyola during what would have been his fourth year to help his baseball team. In return, Loyola’s coaches signed him to a four-year scholarship. While at Loyola, Landrieu met his future wife, Verna Satterlee, who introduced him to the world of politics and broadened his outlook on life. She was active on the student council and encouraged Landrieu’s involvement. Fascinated by the processes of government, Landrieu decided he would become a lawyer instead of a CPA, receiving his LL.B. degree in 1954.⁷

Landrieu developed a critical perspective on segregation during his law school years. His individual relationships with Norman Francis and Ben Johnson, the first black students to integrate Loyola law school, fueled a growing conviction that the social system in which he lived was morally wrong and inhumane. Their friendship and an eye-opening experience greatly influenced his maturing attitudes about race relations and civil rights. On a college trip in the early 1950s to the National Conference of Catholic College Students, his traveling companions from various southern schools included several black students attending Xavier University in New Orleans. Landrieu later recalled that this was “the first time that I was having contact with a black, on an equal level, but I didn’t even realize that we couldn’t stop to eat where we wanted to eat, or go to the bathroom.” The Xavier students explained the problems that black citizens faced daily in the North and the South. This encounter forced Landrieu to do some very serious soul-searching on the subject of race.⁸

After serving a three-year stint in the army, Landrieu returned to New Orleans to begin his law career. In 1957, he opened a law office in a \$50-a-month walkup above a children’s shop

in a mixed neighborhood on Broad Street. As Landrieu would joke years later, “Loyola is where the ‘poor boys’ went to get into politics to make a name for themselves....Tulane is where the ‘rich boys’ went to join the big firms.”⁹ In 1958, Landrieu partnered with Pascal Calogero, a friend and former Loyola law school graduate, to form the law firm of Landrieu, Calogero and Kronlage. The firm mostly handled the cases of both black and white New Orleanians.¹⁰

Rising Moon: Not Politics as Usual

Landrieu began to participate in Louisiana politics in the late 1950s. Just wanting to “jump in,” he first tried the 1958 race for councilman, but he had not lived in his residence long enough to qualify, so he waited for the 1960 legislative races. By allying with deLesseps “Chep” Morrison, mayor of New Orleans, Landrieu, with some luck, became the “compromise” candidate on Morrison’s ticket representing the 12th Ward.¹¹ Morrison had founded his own political organization in the mid-1940s, the Crescent City Democratic Association (CCDA). This organization was considered to be a “reform political machine” pushing for government clean-up and a measure of social justice for the poor. Morrison was elected mayor in 1946, re-elected in 1950, defeated in the gubernatorial race against “Uncle Earl” Long (Huey Long’s brother) in 1956, and now determined to run again for governor in 1960. As part of his campaign plans, Morrison had authorized the founding of an auxiliary group, the Young CCDA, to bring in new blood with enthusiasm for the “great game.” When Landrieu joined the Young CCDA in the late 1950s, the inexperienced but energetic lawyer in his late twenties caught the attention of the Morrison camp.¹²

Both Landrieu and Michael J. O’Keefe, another Young CCDA member, were recruited to assist in Morrison’s gubernatorial campaign. In exchange, the two newcomers would receive support in their own bids for political office. Landrieu’s energetic campaign in the 12th Ward

race gives early insight into his political ethos. He refused to put “For Segregation” and “Against Taxes,” two truisms of New Orleans politics, on his platform card. He figured since he was not for segregation and wanted to feel free to study any tax, he would rather lose a race than have to live with a lie. The courage to support this principle would soon be tested.¹³

When the election was held in 1960, O’Keefe was elected state senator, and Landrieu won enough of the working-class vote in the 12th Ward to be elected to the Louisiana House of Representatives. Morrison, however, was not so fortunate. He was defeated in the governor’s race in one of the ugliest, most racially charged political battles of the turbulent civil rights era. During the campaign, Landrieu saw Morrison’s foes up close and came away more convinced than ever of the need for sweeping social change.¹⁴

Morrison, a liberal white Democrat, had faced two rivals in 1960, both of them staunchly conservative white Democrats. Jimmy Davis, the ultimate victor, was a former governor as well as a popular country-western singer. Willie Rainach ran as an extreme states-rights segregationist. When Rainach finished third in the fall primary, the run-off fell to Morrison and Davis. Both men knew that winning Rainach’s segregationist constituency was the key to winning the governor’s post.¹⁵

As Landrieu helped promote Morrison’s candidacy, he was appalled by the racist rhetoric of Davis, Rainach, and their segregationist supporters. “I had a lot of doors slammed in my face, and a lot of people called me ‘nigger lover,’” he reported. Some people snarled at him, “I wouldn’t vote for you if you associate with Chep Morrison if you were the last man on earth.” In response, Landrieu told more than one segregationist, “Spare me the indignity of having you vote for me. If I have to get elected on your vote, I don’t want it.” He remarked that he began to develop a “rather serious dislike” for Davis and Rainach. When Morrison was defeated,

Landrieu concluded, “My guy had lost, and I was kinda damn mad about it, and we’d lost on a purely racial basis.”¹⁶

In November 1960, Landrieu took his seat in the Louisiana House of Representatives in the midst of the controversy over school desegregation. Since the 1954 *Brown* decision declaring segregation illegal, the Louisiana legislature had enacted statutes and passed resolutions all with the sole purpose of circumventing racial integration. Under the new leadership of Governor Jimmy Davis, the legislature proposed to dissolve the old Joint Legislative Committee on Segregation and create in its place a new State Sovereignty Commission. The purpose of both bodies was to assert the state government’s right to resist pressure from the federal government and the Civil Right Movement to end racial segregation in Louisiana.¹⁷

Landrieu was advised by veteran lawmakers to “learn and listen,” but the feisty young freshman legislator was one of the few courageous pro-integrationist voices to oppose the new State Sovereignty Commission.¹⁸ He was soon confronted by pro-segregation leaders Willie Rainach and Leander Perez. Rainach threatened Landrieu by saying that “We know your kind and we’re gonna get you.” Landrieu looked at him and retorted, “Take your best shot.” Decades later, Landrieu commented on this youthful act of defiance: “You know, the kind of bravado that a 29-year-old kid would tell this to Leander Perez and Willie Rainach, these two giants....So I guess from that point forward, I was kinda marked.”¹⁹

The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was growing impatient with the pace of school desegregation. The “massive legislation” antics of Louisiana lawmakers, the “open-ended” timeframe of *Brown*, and local school officials’ interpretation of “with all deliberate speed” all acted to preserve segregation. The NAACP asked

Federal Judge J. Skelly Wright in 1959 to order the New Orleans school board to commence with school desegregation. The school board, isolated and abandoned by Mayor Morrison and the city's elite, felt ill equipped to make such a political decision and left it to Wright to formulate a plan. In May 1960, Wright called for a grade-by-grade desegregation plan. The city's already existing integrated neighborhood pattern meant that if each child attended the nearest school to his or her home, then complete, not token, desegregation would be accomplished.²⁰

Landrieu's "sense of conscience" instilled by the Jesuits at Loyola had never allowed him to "square racial segregation with Christianity."²¹ He was appalled by the segregationist crusade of "massive resistance."²² He told his fellow lawmaker, Salvador Anzelmo, "Sam, they can't eat me. You know, the hell with 'em. I ain't gonna do it." Knowing that his strong stance probably jeopardized his political future, Landrieu asserted, "So what? If I never get to be president, I can always go back to practicing law."²³

Realizing that the Orleans Parish school board was actually going to comply with Judge Wright's order, Governor Davis convened a series of special legislative sessions in late November of 1960 to push through a package of pro-segregationist "hate" bills. Davis and a majority of the legislature would rather close down the city's public schools than see them integrated. Under Davis's accelerated plan, a suspension of the usual rules called for the twenty-nine-bill package to be sent to committee without first being read. Landrieu was the lone New Orleans representative who requested a reading of the bills before voting. He objected strenuously that details of the bills had not been disclosed in advance to New Orleans legislators. "[Y]esterday the bills were dropped on my desk," Landrieu said. "I had no opportunity to review them." Landrieu's objection to suspension of the rules was voted down by the House 93 to 1.

He regretted the strains placed upon the legislators by the special session. “I don’t know what it is about this legislative process that could turn good friends against one another,” he said, adding that “I have nothing but the greatest respect for the legislators from these country parishes.” At the same time, however, Landrieu argued that to pass bulk legislation does a great injustice to everyone concerned.²⁴

To make his position perfectly clear, Landrieu told the House in his personal privilege address that “he came to this session with an open mind,” but he would not be “coerced, intimidated or threatened” into voting for legislation that would “affect law and order.” He added, “I will oppose anyone who for his own political ends would threaten law and order.” Publicly acknowledging that he was a “firm” segregationist, Landrieu said, “I tell you here and now if I had to choose between accepting five Negro children, or closing the entire public school system, I will stand for open schools.” Putting his political career on the line, Landrieu persisted and voted against every bill that directly affected New Orleans - seventeen of the twenty-nine bills – as each came up for passage.²⁵ Four days after the session opened, the entire arsenal of devices to prevent integration sailed through both houses of the legislature. The interposition statute invoking the authority to nullify “unlawful encroachment” by the federal government on Louisiana’s public schools was passed unanimously. Governor Davis signed the bills as fast as they arrived on his desk. In response, Federal Judge Wright, refusing to be intimidated by Davis, enjoined the entire state legislature with a restraining order.²⁶

Historian Morton Inger raises an interesting point in his book *Politics and Reality in an American City* about the voting strength of a united New Orleans delegation. Inger argues that had the delegation remained united, Davis probably would have backed down. To support this

contention, he uses the power the delegation exerted in quashing a Davis bill to remove Morrison and Police Chief Clarence Giarrusso from office.²⁷

Landrieu's position on school desegregation angered many of his white constituents. His life was threatened. "I wish I could say that resolve carried me without fear throughout, but it didn't," he later remarked. Landrieu's political career survived the state legislature and he was even called a "hero" by the leaders of the opposition during that turbulent session, a term to which took exception. "There wasn't anything heroic about it," Landrieu later told Allan Katz in a 1978 interview. "I was miserable because I couldn't figure out a way to evade or finesse the issue....I wanted my cake and eat it too." The issue, of course, was segregation. As historian Edward Haas sums it up, Landrieu was just caught up in the realities of his time.²⁸

After the special legislative session came to an end and the turmoil over the school desegregation subsided, Landrieu settled into his legislative agenda of achieving political and social justice for blacks. His attempts to modify the state's voter registration forms and to integrate Audubon Park, however, were thwarted by angry whites. Although his legislative initiatives appeared futile and he had alienated many whites, Landrieu had developed a strong, loyal black following. The New Orleans social elite also took notice of the courageous action of the young freshman lawmaker. Both would play a powerful role in Landrieu's mayoral bid in 1969.²⁹

Having second thoughts about his legislative service, Landrieu ran unsuccessfully for New Orleans councilman-at-large in 1962. Fortunately for his legislative career, his constituents in the 12th Ward continued to support him, consisting mainly of black voters, the white liberals in Save our Schools (SOS), and the National Council of Jewish Women. In 1964, he easily won reelection to his legislative seat, taking two-thirds of the vote in a decisive Democratic first

primary. Even so, he found he still preferred to return to New Orleans. He ran again in 1965 for council-at-large and this time defeated the incumbent, Joe Di Rosa, by 504 votes. Although Landrieu's legislative years (1960-1966) were difficult, he had cultivated significant black support.³⁰

Half Moon: City Politics and Social Justice

Landrieu came back to a significantly different New Orleans than it had been in 1960. By 1966, some of the most blatant symbols of segregation had been removed, including "whites only" signs on government buildings, downtown stores, and lunch counters. The Louisiana State University in New Orleans (now the University of New Orleans) had opened in 1958 as the first integrated public university in the entire South. Classes were also integrated in 1963 at the private Tulane University. Employment opportunities and voter registration for black citizens had begun to expand. These changes had come about because of landmark federal legislation like the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Also very important was local pressure from such civil rights groups as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). Mayor Victor Schiro, elected in 1961 and 1965, had not fought these trends in New Orleans, but neither had he vigorously supported them. His strategy was to react piecemeal to racial challenges rather than to develop an overall pro-integration policy. Much remained to be done and Landrieu embarked on his new position as New Orleans City Councilman-at-Large with a long and difficult agenda.³¹

Landrieu liked Mayor Schiro on a personal level but felt he was not dynamic enough to push programs through. First on Landrieu's agenda was to propose a biracial commission to improve race relations in the city. He eagerly endorsed an ordinance establishing the Human Relations Commission (HRC) in 1967. The city had long lagged behind the rest of the nation in

creating such a body. These commissions, first established in Chicago in the 1940s, were riot prevention instruments used by local municipalities to improve race relations.³² The best way to solve problems, Landrieu believed, was just to get people together and have them talk about their troubles. He used the closing of city pools by the Schiro administration as an illustration, asserting, “You can’t solve any problem by banning the institution.” When the pools were closed, all youths were denied swimming. In his view, the pool problem and many others “could be solved by a good sound biracial committee.”³³ Schiro, pressured by the business community, acquiesced and backed Landrieu’s proposal for a “broadly representative, expertly staffed and well funded commission to meet on an aggressive and permanent basis the many debilitating urban problems facing the city.”³⁴

The Human Relations Committee (HRC) was created by an ordinance passed on September 21, 1967. In drafting the ordinance, care was taken to give voice to people who, according to Daniel C. Thompson, a professor at Dillard University, would fill a “dangerous, potentially explosive vacuum” created by New Orleans’s discriminatory political system.³⁵ Previously, a federally funded anti-poverty program, Total Community Action, Inc. (TCA), had identified six municipal areas in particular need of assistance. The HRC would include elected members from all of these targeted areas: Central City, the Ninth Ward, the Irish Channel, and three public housing projects known as Desire, St. Bernard, and Fisher Homes.³⁶

Although the HRC was officially sanctioned by city government, the group had no legislative or judicial powers. Its basic goal was to make New Orleans an “open community” which fostered and celebrated individual, ethnic, religious, and racial diversity. It functioned strictly as an advisory body to the mayor and the city council, identifying and making

recommendations in problem areas such as slum housing, recreation, job opportunities, and police abuse.³⁷

The 28-member HRC was composed of twelve elected neighborhood representatives and sixteen mayoral appointees nominated by various civic and religious organizations. This broad representation was equally divided by race, white and black. Mayor Schiro appointed one member as chairman, with all members serving one-year terms. In addition to the 28 non-paid members, the commission had a paid staff consisting of a director, assistant director, and clerical personnel.³⁸

The first HRC election was held on March 9, 1968 in each of the six target areas. Its impressive turnout of 18,105 voters far exceeded the committee's predictions. Under the leadership of Chairman Msgr. Arthur T. Screen, the new biracial body was eager to prove itself to win the trust of the people at the grassroots level. It published a monthly newsletter, Progress, to keep the community informed. Within its first year of operation, the HRC had a solid record of community involvement despite little mayoral oversight.³⁹

Two of its earliest accomplishments concerned unemployment and recreation. The Answer Desk at City Hall, manned by volunteers, was established to help solve community problems humanely. The majority of complaints addressed by the Answer Desk within the first year centered on the lack of job opportunities due to discrimination. Thereafter, the HRC targeted job creation in the lowest strata of the uneducated and the unemployed. The HRC also partnered with the Committee for Open Pools (COP) in securing the repair and opening of the Audubon Park Pool which had been closed since 1962. Both the Audubon Park and the Pontchartrain pools were opened in June, 1969.⁴⁰

Perhaps the most morally satisfying achievement for Landrieu and the HRC was the passage of a public accommodations ordinance in late 1969. With every meeting of a convention in New Orleans, the need for such an ordinance was obvious. White bar owners in the central business district near some of the larger hotels were exploiting loopholes in the Federal Public Accommodations Act to discriminate against black convention delegates. While establishments providing lodging or food along with service could not discriminate on the basis of race, those establishments which sold only alcoholic beverages could and did discriminate. The HRC urged city leaders to “face up to the moral question of discrimination or suffer the economic consequences.”⁴¹

In the 1960s, the convention and tourism industry was becoming a larger slice of the economic pie. Thousands visited each year pumping millions of dollars into city coffers. The persistent racial bigotry of white business owners was creating a negative image of the city. Landrieu cautioned that “if New Orleans is not ready for a public accommodations law, it had better get out of the tourist business.” He confirmed that the number of complaints that the city had received had grown in recent months from those conventions whose delegates had been embarrassed by having doors closed on them. It was his opinion that “if a public accommodations ordinance was not acceptable to New Orleans, the city must reevaluate itself and decide if it wants to be a great city or if it wants to be a village or town.”⁴²

The HRC had been preparing the ordinance for over a year. During this time, they had investigated and documented numerous complaints of racial discrimination occurring in local neighborhood bars and lounges. One such glaring incident occurred directly across the street from the Criminal Courts Building. It involved a white attorney and his black client who stopped into the bar for some beers. The bar owner, who identified his establishment as a “white

bar,” refused service to the black client and then in a threatening manner denied the white attorney service also. To address this incident and others like it, the HRC drafted an ordinance which would make such discriminatory practices illegal in New Orleans.⁴³

On December 16, 1969, councilmen Moon Landrieu and Henry B. Curtis introduced the ordinance at the request of HRC Chairman Msgr. Arthur T. Screen. Landrieu and Curtis were the only two councilmen willing to sponsor the measure at the time.⁴⁴ More than fifty civic, religious, and political groups endorsed the ordinance, including the Greater New Orleans Hotel and Motel Association, the Chamber of Commerce of the New Orleans Area, the League of Women Voters, the Urban League, and the Metropolitan Area Committee. The ordinance was also supported by both Mayor Schiro and Police Superintendent Joseph I. Giarrusso.⁴⁵

Councilman Philip C. Ciaccio and several others were in favor of an amendment to the Landrieu/Curtis ordinance. They proposed a “halfway” ordinance which would restrict coverage to the central business district and the French Quarter. Civic, business, and tourist leaders viewed any amendment to the ordinance that limited access and jeopardized the tourist industry as dangerous and unacceptable. They cautioned that the city could no longer allow blind racial prejudice to stand in the way of attracting larger conventions and participating in the lucrative professional sports boom. For example, even though New Orleans had been chosen as the site of the 1970 Super Bowl, it could just as easily be replaced by Los Angeles at a moment’s notice if the city did not pass a complete law.⁴⁶

The Public Accommodations Ordinance was unanimously passed at the December 23, 1969 meeting of the City Council and signed into law that same day by Mayor Schiro, scheduled to become effective January 1, 1970. The ordinance banned racial and religious discrimination in bars, taxicabs and places of public accommodation with the exception of barbershops, beauty

shops and bona fide private clubs.⁴⁷ Although it was challenged by eighty disgruntled white bar owners in several court battles, the law finally went into effect on January 8, 1970 at 12:01 a. m. with no incidents. Landrieu called the passage of the ordinance as representing “the highest traditions of this country...[H]old on to it.”⁴⁸ The HRC saw the ordinance as a “psychological” boost for the black residents of the city. In doing what was morally right, not to mention financially prudent, the city of New Orleans looked as if it had turned the corner on race relations.⁴⁹

Full Moon: Landrieu as Mayor

Landrieu decided the time was right to run for mayor of New Orleans in the 1969-1970 election. As councilman, he had fought a continual uphill battle getting the HRC established and convincing fellow councilmen to support civil rights measures. As mayor, he could set the city’s agenda and transform city government by making strategic appointments and putting the full weight of the mayor’s office behind his progressive programs. As far as desiring the office, then, Landrieu had the requisite “fire in the belly.”

From a practical standpoint, Landrieu also seemed to have the voter support to win. The liberal white vote was virtually assured, though the conservative white opposition was still formidable. But it was the tremendous new strength of black voters favoring Landrieu that might seal the election. The Voting Rights Act of 1965 became a potent force in Landrieu’s mayoral success. No time was wasted in organizing campaigns to raise the number of black votes.⁵⁰ In 1952, the African-American vote comprised only 13% of Orleans Parish voters. By 1964, the number had slowly climbed to about 18% (35,736 black voters). After 1965, however, vigorous voter registration drives produced dramatic results. By 1968, the African-American vote in Orleans Parish had jumped to 28% (63,165 black voters), representing a nearly 80% increase in

participation within the black community.⁵¹ Three black political groups, newly formed since the Voting Rights Act of 1965, all backed Landrieu's candidacy: the Black Organization for Leadership Development (BOLD), the Southern Organization for Unified Leadership (SOUL), and the Community Organization for Urban Politics (COUP).⁵² Landrieu could rely on strong support from black middle- and working-class residents as well as the poorer blacks in public housing projects like Desire. His chances seemed good. After surviving the crowded first Democratic primary, the liberal Landrieu would be in a runoff with conservative Jimmy Fitzmorris in the second Democratic primary in December.⁵³

Both candidates appeared in a televised debate that took place on December 8, 1969. Asked if they would include blacks in top positions in city government, Fitzmorris answered that he would "...seek out the most qualified people for the job—black or white." Landrieu answered, "Yes, I do hope to appoint a Negro as a department head; perhaps more than one." Fitzmorris' response was considered vague by the black community and they equated "qualified" with "white" and more of the same. Landrieu's direct response was considered honest and sincere.⁵⁴ In a November 4, 2009 panel discussion, sponsored by the Louisiana Humanities Center and hosted by Errol Laborde, former Landrieu executive assistant Robert Tucker remembered a city virtually paralyzed by race. "Totally segregated....[I]t was going to go straight down or straight up." Landrieu's response to that single question was a rallying call to every black voter. Tucker summed it up by saying, "and the rest is history."⁵⁵

When election day arrived on December 13, 1969, Landrieu and Fitzmorris split the white vote, as expected, with less than half committed to Landrieu. But Landrieu managed to garner an astounding 88.4% of the African-American vote. Although there was no lack of explanations for Landrieu's victory, Allen Rosenzweig's statistical analysis of the election

concluded that Fitzmorris represented the status quo while Landrieu simply matched the mood of the voters for change and improvement. In the April 7, 1970 general election, Landrieu was victorious over Ben C. Toledano, the only Republican candidate to make a serious bid for mayor in a solidly Democratic city. Landrieu won with 98% of the black vote and 40% of the white vote. Politics in New Orleans had changed forever, and Moon Landrieu was among the principal promoters and beneficiaries of that change.⁵⁶

Among the first steps taken by the new mayor in 1970 was the appointment of several blacks to city government posts. Perhaps the most significant and visible appointment was that of Robert Tucker as Special Assistant to the Mayor. His duties included performing a study of the Desire Housing Project in August, 1970. This report would figure importantly during a subsequent confrontation between city authorities and the local Black Panther Party, a subject discussed at greater length below.⁵⁷ In September, 1971, when the HRC was examining the Louisiana Domed Stadium project, the group urged the mayor to promote construction jobs for minorities. In response, Landrieu tapped Clyde McHenry, executive director of the Interracial Council for Business Opportunity, to become the new Special Coordinator for Minority Involvement for the project. Landrieu then announced that “McHenry...will work directly with Robert Tucker...to ensure that blacks and other minorities participate in the economic opportunities that will be attendant to the Dome Stadium Project.”⁵⁸ Three months later, in December 1971, Robert Tucker was elevated to Executive Assistant to the Mayor, becoming the first black to hold an executive position in New Orleans city government.⁵⁹

Another highly visible black appointee was Eunice Carter, who began in the Louisiana Welfare Department as the first black hire in its history. “I had never worked around whites before and I was sure they had never worked around blacks,” Carter later remarked. “I was

really scared.” In October, 1971, Tucker hired Eunice Carter to be his secretary, whose duties included greeting some very surprised white visitors at the front desk of a major city government office.⁶⁰

To determine how well minority hiring was proceeding in city government, Mayor Landrieu asked the HRC to conduct a survey in 1971. Questionnaires were sent to all city government heads to collect statistics, a practice that continued for many years.⁶¹ When Landrieu first took office, blacks comprised about 10% of those serving in city government. That statistic had risen to 40% by the time he left office in 1978.⁶²

The mayor also worked to improve race relations in city government offices in 1971 through the use of a training film, *Black and White: Uptight*. The film was first shown during one of the mayor’s staff meetings. Thereafter, the mayor decided, the film should “be shown to all supervisors in the various departments in an effort to sensitize supervisors to the vagaries of racial prejudice.”⁶³

The HRC underwent a metamorphosis when Moon Landrieu became mayor in May of 1970. Devoting considerable time and attention, Landrieu changed the role of the HRC. Instead of functioning “outside” of the administration, the group’s ideas and knowledge of special problems and needs of the community as well as racial tensions were solicited and implemented at the administration level internally. Landrieu enthusiastically encouraged the group’s expanding footprint as it strived to make New Orleans an “open community” in the words of *The Times-Picayune* in June 1970. The HRC, now consisting of 30 members (two additional seats were added to represent Spanish-speaking persons), launched many new services during his mayoralty.⁶⁴

When the Answer Desk, the city's central information and referral bureau, celebrated its fifth birthday in 1973, it was a funded branch of the HRC having dedicated office space at City Hall. Handling over 200,000 inquires a year with a volunteer staff of 90, the Answer Desk expanded to include six additional branches. The People-Helper was created in July 1970 in the foyer of City Hall. The reception area with trained volunteers received visitors and provided them with literature about and directions to the appropriate department or office they were seeking. It assisted over 115 persons on its first day. The Mobile Answer Desk was a new program announced by the mayor's office in May of 1971. A fully equipped office on wheels, the vehicle operated five days a week serving low income neighborhoods not covered by federal anti-poverty programs like Total Community Action or the Model Cities Program. It provided people with advice and referral services with the intent in the future to offer professional services.⁶⁵ The Spanish Answer Desk utilized bilingual volunteers to service the city's Cuban and Latin-American residents. Juniors and seniors from area high schools manned the Saturday Answer Desk. Their task was to follow up on services for clients seen during the week. Long-term plans for the agency included a Crisis Phone Service to offer assistance after hours and computerized records for organizational efficiency.⁶⁶

Another example of an HRC project that began under Mayor Schiro but was greatly expanded by Mayor Landrieu was the distribution of an informational pamphlet called "Know Your Rights." According to a memorandum in December 1970, the HRC "printed 5,000 copies and announced the availability of this booklet in the press and in the HRC newsletter, and then distributed them to individuals and groups who requested copies." The second page of the pamphlet clarified people's civil rights: "This book tells you what they are. It shows you what you can do and what you cannot do if you are questioned or arrested. The pictures on the next

pages show what rights you have and what rights policemen have. You may want to share this book with your neighbors and friends.” This pamphlet was an important part of Landrieu’s plan to improve race relations in the city.⁶⁷

In February 1972, Landrieu’s administration and the HRC expressed their support of “Cornucopia,” a food collection project for needy families in New Orleans. Launched by students at fifteen area high schools, it collected non-perishable food stuffs for distribution at local agencies to help meet demand. The mayor hoped to involve city employees and the business community in the effort.⁶⁸

The HRC, to promote the community’s dental health, began to implement a fluoridation program through the Sewerage and Water Board of New Orleans. Fluoridation provided a successful means of controlling tooth decay in the absence of sufficient preventive dental services. Not only were beautiful smiles of interest to the HRC, but also Beautiful Blocks. This neighborhood beautification campaign encouraged community pride and participation as residents competed for the Block of the Year award.⁶⁹

Although the HRC accumulated many success stories in making New Orleans an “open community,” its weak enforcement powers often failed the people most in need of its services. Job discrimination and police abuse were major areas of frustration to the black community. Numerous complaints in these areas went unresolved. The lack of subpoena powers limited the HRC’s investigation into the employment practices of area businesses; hence, complaints of blacks being paid less than whites for the same job could not be adequately substantiated or addressed. Allegations of police abuse and brutality were handled internally by the police department, leaving little oversight by the HRC. The only exceptions were those incidents that ignited an outpouring of community protest.⁷⁰

Over the Landrieu years, the Human Relations Committee became institutionalized at City Hall. Serving as a public voice for equality and diversity, it demonstrated just how far city government had come on the issue of race. Despite such progress, however, a crisis involving the Desire Housing Project in fall 1970 nearly threatened to derail the advances made by the mayor and the HRC.

Eclipsed Moon: The Black Panthers

The national trend towards liberal reform had both inspired and aided Moon Landrieu in his pursuit of civil rights goals for African Americans. As a city councilman and then as mayor, he could point to numerous signs of progress on race relations in New Orleans. The Domed Stadium Project promised new employment opportunities, government and business offices were abandoning longstanding “whites only” policies, and various institutions ranging from schools to pools were starting to integrate. Though white conservatives’ resistance to such measures continued, Landrieu was confident he could handle this sort of opposition.

When some blacks began to call for much more radical change, however, Landrieu and many other liberal politicians nationwide were less certain how to proceed. By the mid-1960s, many black activists, especially urban youth in the ghettos, were growing impatient with Dr. Martin Luther King’s moderate agenda and conciliatory attitude. Some were drawn to the more militant rhetoric of figures like Malcolm X, who urged blacks to reject the piecemeal reforms of white liberals, to demand respect and full civil rights now, and even to take up arms when necessary for self-defense. Though Malcolm X was assassinated in 1965, his ideas helped prompt young activists like Stokely Carmichael to speak of “black power,” a term that soon came to describe a new militant wing of the civil rights movement. Within this whirlwind of the Black Power movement, the Black Panthers were born in 1966.⁷¹

The Black Panther Party (BPP) set up a chapter in New Orleans in August 1970, four years after the group's founding in Oakland, California. An all-black organization, the BPP had the long-term goal of cooperating with other radical groups, black and white, to bring about a socialist revolution in America. In the meantime, the BPP was determined to awaken black communities to the source of their oppression, which the BPP claimed was the white capitalist establishment and its enforcers, the local police. The group also established helpful services within black communities; in New Orleans, these included free clinics with sickle-cell counseling and free breakfast programs for schoolchildren. These programs were designed both to help poor black families and to make them question why their government had failed to provide similar services. The BPP's male and female members included a number of student activists. But the vast majority were former gang members recruited from the same ghetto neighborhoods that erupted in massive race riots in the 1960s, ranging from Watts (Los Angeles) in 1965 to Detroit in 1967. Combining a Marxist philosophy with a ghetto mentality, the BPP established chapters in several American cities until internal rivalries, drug abuse, and violence finally undermined the organization. In 1970, however, with their black leather jackets, Afro hair styles, and reputedly large arsenals of weapons, the Panthers were a provocative symbol of black militancy and a nightmare for liberal white mayors like Moon Landrieu.⁷²

The dilapidated Desire Housing Project was the specific focus of Black Panthers' demands in New Orleans in 1970. When Mayor Landrieu learned that a group of BPP organizers had rented space nearby the project in August 1970, he sent Robert Tucker, his Special Assistant, to investigate conditions at Desire. Tucker's report, conducted just four months into Landrieu's mayoralty, was completed in September 1970. The results were shocking. The Desire project, located at the outskirts of the city, had opened in May 1956, but it

had not been built to last. Designed for large, poor black families, Desire had 388 four-bedroom apartments and 968 three-bedroom apartments. It was constructed without cement floors and as the ground beneath the buildings subsided, the foundations did not hold, causing water, sewer, and gas lines to twist and rupture. The two-story brick structures were literally falling apart before the first residents moved in. As the years passed, residents not only contended with these problems, but also they faced deteriorating social conditions around the housing complex. As Tucker's report stated, the project was plagued with nightly violence, drug use, poverty, and unemployment. He spent three days in Desire and concluded it was "one of the most potentially explosive areas in the city of New Orleans."⁷³

Meanwhile, Clarence Giarrusso, the newly appointed Chief of the New Orleans Police Department (NOPD), had sent two undercover black policemen to infiltrate the Panthers group. These two men, Israel Fields and Melvin Howard, thought that they had convinced the group of their commitment. The Panthers, however, were highly suspicious of all outsiders. Unbeknownst to the police, the Panthers quickly discovered the officers' true identity, for which there would soon be serious consequences.⁷⁴

The Black Panther Party's headquarters in August 1970 was an apartment at 3542 Piety Street, one block from the Desire project, which they rented from Gus Broussard, a local black landlord and grocery store proprietor. When the landlord realized who his tenants were, he went to see the mayor to inform him of his intention to evict the Panthers. "This was kind of new to us at the time. There had been no disturbance that I know of prior to that," Landrieu later recalled. "I don't think there was any great concern on our part. The man came to see us and wanted these people out of his house." The mayor assured Broussard that the police would assist him if the tenants resisted eviction. As Landrieu noted, "We were required by the law, our own

moral commitment to the law, to evict them.” To the mayor, the issue at this point was simply property rights and the rule of law.⁷⁵

Any hopes for an orderly eviction were dashed when the Panthers decided to punish the two police infiltrators. On the night of September 14, 1970, the Panthers held a mock trial at which an assembly of about one hundred black militants heard the charges against the two traitors. Both men were shoved to the floor and .357 magnum pistols were held to their heads. As many as twenty men at a time were allowed to kick and beat the officers who were then forced to wipe up their own blood with their clothing. Officer Howard was hit numerous times about the head with the magnum pistol. Officer Fields suffered chipped bones of the hands and a wrist injury. One of his ears showed where a nail driven through a board has passed through it and into his neck. Though the two men were eventually released alive, their injuries were severe. Clearly, the Panther problem was no longer just an issue of property rights.⁷⁶

More violence followed that night of September 14 and into the early morning hours of the next day. A police officer patrolling the area reported being fired upon by snipers. Two buildings and two automobiles were set ablaze, and firemen trying to extinguish the flames were also fired upon. In addition, Sherman E. West, 17, and Mrs. August Stanley were reported being shot by a sniper. Mrs. Stanley was shot in the eye and another bullet hit her shoulder while she was in her apartment on the phone. At least four other Desire residents were hit by sniper fire.⁷⁷ These incidents of sniping and arson, in addition to reports that the Panthers planned to firebomb landlord Broussard’s grocery store, convinced the mayor to call an emergency meeting with Police Chief Clarence Giarrusso. These men, along with the U. S. District Attorney, the fire department, and other city officials, decided to apply for felony warrants for the occupants of the Panthers headquarters.⁷⁸

The Times-Picayune described the scene as “grim” at Central Lockup as New Orleans police geared up for the raid on the morning of September 15, 1970. The police arrived at the Panthers’ headquarters in busloads. What followed, the newspaper reported, was a “war.” Another news report stated that black families could be seen fleeing the area. Police moved in heavily armed with the Louisiana State Police armored van. The police assault teams used tear gas as they were being fired upon by snipers. After the officers had filled the building with tear gas, they moved in. According to one eyewitness, the police had been firing so fast in such a short period of time that water had to be poured on the walls to keep the sheetrock from expanding due to the heat. Eventually, sensing no alternative, fourteen Panthers surrendered and were arrested. Amazingly, no one was shot during this police assault.⁷⁹

The situation would turn deadly that night, however, after police learned that the Panther’s were planning to fire bomb Broussard’s grocery at 3501 Piety. In response, they placed four officers inside the building. After several hours, four men were spotted approaching the grocery with a fire bomb. Gunfire ensued, resulting in three of the men being taken to Charity hospital while the fourth man, Kenneth Borden, 21, remained lying in the street motionless for several hours. Once the situation became calm, authorities were able to remove Borden’s dead body. There were conflicting accounts as to who shot him.⁸⁰

In a press conference held on September 16, 1970, Mayor Landrieu expressed his opinions about the raid, the Panthers’ motives, and the overall significance of the incident. He asserted that the raid was necessary because the Panthers had refused to obey Broussard’s eviction notice and “some of the Panther group had resolved to go back to destroy Mr. Broussard’s grocery store.” Furthermore, the Panthers had brutalized the two undercover policemen; in Landrieu’s words, “I can only say that they were tortured beyond your imagination

and mine.” For resisting lawful eviction, conspiring to destroy the landlord’s property, and viciously beating two police officers, the raid and the arrests were justified.⁸¹ Understandably, Landrieu had no sympathy for the Panthers’ viewpoint that the victims were counter-revolutionaries and their punishment was a form of ghetto justice.

As for the Panthers’ motives, the mayor dismissed the notion that the group’s main objective was to assist Desire residents to get much-needed improvements in their living conditions. “This isn’t a local group of individuals who are simply disenchanted with the services, this is not a civil rights uprising, this is not a racial incident,” he argued. “This was precipitated by a small group of self-styled revolutionaries, who are not concerned about community improvements.”⁸² Rather awkwardly for Landrieu, his Special Assistant Robert Tucker’s report on the deplorable conditions at Desire happened to be released on the very day of the Panther raid. Having assigned Tucker to this task back in August, the mayor was certainly aware that the Panthers’ criticisms of Desire were legitimate, whatever their motives were in voicing them.⁸³ But a WWL television editorial on September 17th did address the problems at Desire and speculated on the connections between the raid and the report. It stated that “the black leaders in the Desire project spoke out after the shootout and what they had to say was simple: the violence between the police and the Black Panthers was intense and disruptive,” and yet, “It doesn’t compare to the daily violence which goes on constantly throughout the project (crime, dope addition, poverty, and unemployment).” The implication was that despite the Panthers’ violence, they had at least drawn attention to problems associated with the Desire housing project.⁸⁴

Finally, the mayor addressed the overall issue of race relations and whether racism had played a role in the raid. He pointed out that the “two young men who were brutally beaten and

tortured were black, the police officer who was fired upon was black, the store-owner last night was black; this thing doesn't know any race and it doesn't know any sex." It was true that the Panthers showed no mercy for blacks who did not agree with their agenda. Yet Landrieu was not being entirely candid in downplaying the racial issue. The conditions at Desire were in part a result of racism, as the Panthers claimed. The project was located far away from the city's center, the shoddy construction went ignored because the residents were going to be black, and city officials had ignored the project's social problems for far too long. Another WWL editorial noted that "because of Tucker's report and the recent events, Landrieu is now well aware of the problems of Desire."⁸⁵ Many citizens were doubtful of the mayor's claim that racial issues were not a factor in the police effort to oust the Panthers from the vicinity of the Desire project.

The police raid on September 15th had been violent but quick. By 2:30 p. m., calm had returned to the Desire area and municipal buses could be seen crossing the creaky bridge headed into the project. According to Althea Francois, one of the New Orleans Panthers, she and others not arrested in the raid returned briefly to the Piety Street location but soon found other lodging. As the days passed, with many Panthers still locked up in Orleans Parish Prison, the only thing she and other Panthers could do was to continue with their free breakfast and sickle cell programs. During this lull, the group considered their options. Of course, Mayor Landrieu and Police Chief Clarence Giarrusso hoped that the Panthers would decide to leave New Orleans after the Piety Street shootout. But this was not to be.⁸⁶

On October 25, 1970, the Panthers made their intentions clear: they established a new headquarters in the Desire Housing Project itself. Project residents had mixed reactions to this move. For some who had themselves experienced police brutality, the police raid had actually strengthened support for the Panthers. Others noted that despite the shootout, the Panthers'

commitment to community programs had continued uninterrupted. Many younger residents were intrigued by the Panthers and their defiant display of “black power.” Thus, though residents feared more violence, there was not widespread protest against the Panthers’ arrival. Indeed, one Panther spokesman maintained that apartment number 3315 had been “given to us by the people of Desire.”⁸⁷

The mayor, the police chief, and the Housing Authority of New Orleans (HANO) saw things differently. To them, the Panthers were guilty of criminal trespass, for it was not up to Desire residents to offer public housing units to anyone, least of all the Black Panther Party. Furthermore, the group had reportedly added fortifications to their Desire apartment and had amassed a considerable cache of weapons. All the evidence indicated that the Panthers were determined not to be evicted again. One member even asserted that “this time they are going to have to kill a whole lot of us.”⁸⁸

Tensions increased when the Black Panther Party’s national leadership sent a representative from their National Committee to Combat Fascism (NCCF). Harold Holmes, spokesman for the NCCF, declared that “the pigs [police] of New Orleans have threatened to use whatever force necessary to extract the NCCF from the Desire project,” but the Panthers “will resist this expulsion...by the fascist power structure....”⁸⁹ Such language, designed to outrage city officials and police, had the intended effect.

Chaplain William Barnwell of the Religious Staff Association at Tulane University issued a call for a meeting of all parties involved. His statement asked Landrieu, Giarrusso, the HANO Board, and the NCCF “to make renewed attempts to reach an agreement with each other.” Such an agreement, he hoped, would facilitate “intelligent and responsible action, non-violence without bloodshed.” Both Landrieu and Giarrusso agreed and decided to ask members

of the clergy to join the negotiating effort on November 16, 1970, a month and a day after the shootout. But the effort failed. It quickly became apparent to everyone that the Panthers were not leaving and they could not be “negotiated out” of Desire.⁹⁰

Meanwhile, the mayor was under growing pressure to order a second police raid on the Panthers’ headquarters. Many white citizens, including police officers, viewed the group as nothing but thugs and criminals who should be treated as such. Landrieu knew that such sentiments might build into a white backlash that would undermine the progress he had made on improving race relations in the city. On the other hand, he did not have the same solid legal grounds as he had had in September to authorize a police raid. As Landrieu later recalled, “There were no felony charges against those in the building. Only the misdemeanor of criminal trespass, and we tried up to the last minute to negotiate a peaceful settlement.”⁹¹

On November 19, 1970, Mayor Landrieu instructed Police Chief Clarence Giarrusso to move his officers into place as a show of force and as a final effort to get the Panthers to surrender. Helmeted police arrived at the Desire project heavily armed with bulletproof vests. They also brought their armored car called the “war wagon,” while helicopters hovered above. Greatly complicating matters were the hundreds of young blacks who had rallied in support of the Panthers. These youths had placed themselves between the Panthers and the police, and they were not following police instructions to move out. Just as many had feared, the Panthers did not back down even after seeing the heavily armed officers.⁹²

From his post at police headquarters, Mayor Moon Landrieu made the extremely difficult decision to call off the raid. He ordered Giarrusso through a special communication line to withdraw his forces. Though the police complied, there can be little doubt that many officers were shocked and disgruntled by the decision. Yet Landrieu knew that the death of hundreds of

young people would also mean the death of his political career. Furthermore, it was late on a November afternoon, with nightfall rapidly approaching. A shootout in the dark would greatly jeopardize the safety of both officers and bystanders. With the only grounds for the raid being the misdemeanor of criminal trespass, Landrieu concluded that a confrontation at this time was not worth the consequences. At 3:50 p. m., the police officers departed on their buses, followed by their war wagon and helicopters.⁹³ It was like a giant wave had been moving in to destroy an entire community, but the wave had retreated before any damage was done.

Just as Mayor Landrieu seemed to have run out of options, a bizarre incident involving movie actress and activist Jane Fonda provided him with a solution. In late November 1970, Fonda came to New Orleans to attend a conference and also to lend support to the Black Panthers. Known for her radical politics, Fonda sympathized with the group concerning their confrontations with the New Orleans Police Department. She learned that several Panthers and supporters at the Desire headquarters wanted to attend the Revolutionary People's Constitutional Convention in Washington, D. C. She rented four vehicles for nineteen blacks and six whites so they could attend. The police, well aware of Fonda's political leanings, were able to trace her vehicle rentals and take advantage of the Panthers' travel plans.⁹⁴

On November 25, 1970, the police began the first of two actions designed to end the Panther problem in New Orleans. Officers set up a roadblock on Interstate 10 eastbound at the Paris Road exit to stop the Panthers on their way out of the city. The plan worked with no violent incidents, the officers intercepting and arresting twenty-five individuals. In a later press conference, Chief Clarence Giarrusso said that it was the rental car connection to Fonda that made the action possible (much to Fonda's chagrin, no doubt).⁹⁵

The police carried out the second step of their plan very early on the following morning of November 26, 1970, which happened to be Thanksgiving Day. Mayor Landrieu had realized that the persons arrested on Interstate 10 came from the Panthers' Desire apartment. That meant that the number of individuals at the Panther headquarters had been greatly reduced. The next stage, therefore, was to arrest the remaining Panthers in the apartment. But how could they do so with minimal violence?

Landrieu approved a plan to have police officers trick the Panthers by wearing disguises and pretending they wanted to make a donation. Some officers were dressed as postal workers and others wore the clerical garb of priests. These officers then forced their way in. Most of the occupants were sleeping, so the police were able to invade with a minimum of gunfire. They arrested the remaining Panthers and seized an assortment of weapons. Many Panther supporters criticized the mayor and the police for their trickery, particularly the impersonation of priests. Mayor Landrieu responded that it was his duty as mayor to give final approval to the police department's planned action. In any case, Black Panther activity ceased to exist in New Orleans after this surprise raid.⁹⁶

Mayor Landrieu faced a terrible quandary when confronted by the Black Panthers. They were not interested in promises of upward mobility in a capitalist society and rejected compromise, distrusted all authority, and demanded immediate resolution to longstanding problems. Worse yet, they were willing to die for their objective. From September to November of 1970, Landrieu's attention was focused on purging the Panthers from New Orleans, especially from the Desire area. The three confrontations between the Black Panthers and the NOPD were counter-productive.

Once the Panthers left, conditions in Desire improved slightly for a brief period. The city did make some improvements, but Landrieu's attention was needed in running the city. After all, he was in office less than six months when the Panthers came to town. Furthermore, the Panthers' confrontations made Landrieu realize that no matter how hard he tried, he was not going to be able to help everyone. He did not fully understand the Panthers and their goals, nor did he understand the residents of Desire. Landrieu was accustomed to dealing with individuals, black and white, who were willing to compromise and work things out. He did his best to improve conditions in Desire. The problems there, however, were so long in the making that it was going to take years, not a few months, to correct, if that was even possible.⁹⁷

Conclusion

Early in his political career, Moon Landrieu embarked on a crusade based on the liberal ideas of inclusion, compromise, and equal rights for all. As a member of the Louisiana Legislature, Landrieu stood up to pro-segregationist leaders Leander Perez and Willie Rainach and the entire legislature itself, voting against every bill that directly affected keeping the public schools in New Orleans segregated. Landrieu's legislative years (1960-1966) were difficult, but he was able to cultivate significant black support.

When Landrieu became a city councilman, he endorsed an ordinance establishing the Human Relations Committee in 1967. One of Landrieu's and the HRC's most satisfying achievements was the passage of a public accommodations ordinance in late 1969. With continued black support, he was elected mayor in 1970 and would serve until 1978. One of his first acts as mayor was to bring blacks into city government. Landrieu also expanded the HRC to offer additional services to the community such as the Answer Desk, the People-Helper, and the Mobile Answer Desk.

The city of New Orleans was still segregated in 1969, making that year's mayoral race pivotal. New Orleans needed a mayor who was going to break the bonds that held segregation in place and move the city forward. Landrieu promised blacks a voice in city government. For the first time in the city's history, blacks were becoming "complete" citizens. Early in his career, Landrieu had the guts and courage to stand up to the segregationists. Blacks saw hope and a future in Landrieu. As he strove to improve the political atmosphere, while repairing the city's streets and managing the budget, he remained committed to improving race relations. By the end of his term, the Landrieu coalition would be instrumental in electing the city's first black mayor, Ernest N. "Dutch" Morial.

End Notes

¹The derogatory term “coon” dates back to at least 1887. As H. L. Menchen later explained, the term came “originally from the name of the animal [raccoon] which Southern Negroes were supposed to enjoy hunting and eating.” See Harold Wentworth and Stuart Berg Flexner, eds., *Dictionary of American Slang*, 2nd supp. ed. (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell, 1975), 122.

² Kim Lacy Rogers, *Righteous Lives: Narratives of the New Orleans Civil Rights Movement* (New York: New York University Press, 1993), 108-109.

³ Dawn Watts Perez, “Moon Landrieu: Reflections of Change (A Video Documentary)” (master’s thesis, University of New Orleans, 1996), 3.

⁴ Rogers, *Righteous*, 59.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Regarding the tradition of Christian fellowship and service at Loyola University of New Orleans, see Robert Lorenz, “Catholic Student Protest and Campus Change at Loyola University in New Orleans, 1964-1971” (master’s thesis, University of New Orleans, 2009).

⁷ *The States-Item*, April 11, 1978.

⁸ Rogers, *Righteous*, 59-60.

⁹ *States-Item*, April 11, 1978.

¹⁰ Perez, “Moon Landrieu,” 4.

¹¹ For more on Landrieu as a “compromise” candidate, see *The Times-Picayune*, December 5, 1965.

¹² Joseph B. Parker, *The Morrison Era: Reform Politics in New Orleans* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Company, 1974), 69, 84.

¹³ *States-Item*, April 11, 1978.

¹⁴ Parker, *Morrison*, 84; Rogers, *Righteous*, 63-64.

¹⁵ Rogers, *Righteous*, 63-64.

¹⁶ Rogers, *Righteous*, 64.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Liva Baker, *The Second Battle of New Orleans: The Hundred-Year Struggle to Integrate the Schools* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1996), 383.

¹⁹ Rogers, *Righteous*, 64-65.

²⁰ Robert L. Crain, *The Politics of School Desegregation: Comparative Case Studies of Community Structure and Policy-Making* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1968), 253; Morton Inger, *Politics and Reality in an American City: The New Orleans School Crisis of 1960* (New York: Center for Urban Education, 1969), 76-90.

²¹ Baker, *Second Battle*, 382.

²² “Massive resistance” is a generic term widely used today to describe white southern opposition to the struggle for civil rights in the post-Second World War South. See George Lewis, *Massive Resistance: The White Response to the Civil Rights Movement* (London: Hodder Education, 2006), 1-5.

²³ Baker, *Second Battle*, 384.

²⁴ *Times-Picayune*, November 6, 1960.

²⁵ Landrieu’s fellow lawmaker, Salvador Anzelmo, voted against sixteen of the seventeen bills. See Baker, *Second Battle*, 384.

²⁶ *Times-Picayune*, November 7, 1960; November 14, 1960.

²⁷ Inger, *Politics and Reality*, 46.

²⁸ Rogers, *Righteous*, 65; *States-Item*, April 11, 1978; Edward F. Haas, *DeLesseps S. Morrison and the Image of Reform: New Orleans Politics, 1946-1961* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1974), 264.

²⁹ Rogers, *Righteous*, 108.

³⁰ Perez, “Moon Landrieu,” 5; Rogers, *Righteous*, 73.

³¹ Kent B. Germany, *New Orleans after the Promises: Poverty, Citizenship, and the Search for the Great Society* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2007), 85, 353n8; Rogers, *Righteous*, 77; Robert L. Dupont, *On Higher Ground: The University of New Orleans at 50* (New Orleans: UNOPress, 2008), 45-46, 57; Garrine P. Laney, *The Voting Rights Act of 1965: Historical Background and Current Issues* (New York: Novinka Books, 2003), 11-20; Arnold R. Hirsch, “Simply a Matter of Black and White: The Transformation of Race and Politics in Twentieth-Century New Orleans,” in Joseph Logsdon and Arnold Hirsch, eds., *Creole New Orleans: Race and Americanization* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1992), 262-319.

³² Arnold R. Hirsch, *Making the Second Ghetto: Race and Housing in Chicago, 1940-1960* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983), 41-45, 177.

³³ *Times-Picayune*, December 6, 1965.

³⁴ *Times-Picayune*, August 15, 1967.

³⁵ Germany, *Promises*, 130.

³⁶ *Times-Picayune*, August 15, 1967; September 22, 1967.

³⁷ *Times-Picayune*, September 8, 1967.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ *Times-Picayune*, March 19, 1968; April 12, 1968.

⁴⁰ *Times-Picayune*, April 12, 1968; April 19, 1968; May 29, 1969.

⁴¹ *Times-Picayune*, August 14, 1969; November 8, 1969.

⁴² *Times-Picayune*, November 21, 1969.

⁴³ Letter dated June 9, 1969 from Attorney Robert Glass to Human Relations Committee Director John A. Pecoul, Human Relations Committee Records, Box 3, in the Landrieu Papers, Mayoral Archives, New Orleans Public Library, New Orleans, Louisiana [hereafter referred to as Landrieu Papers].

⁴⁴ Human Relations Committee Memorandum, Landrieu Papers, Box 3.

⁴⁵ *The Louisiana Weekly*, January 3, 1970; *Times-Picayune*, December 19, 1969.

⁴⁶ *Times-Picayune*, December 20, 1969; December 22, 1969.

⁴⁷ Beauty shops and barbershops were excluded because they provided professional services of a distinctly private, personal, and confidential nature. Private clubs were excluded because they were restricted to members only. See *Times-Picayune*, December 24, 1969.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ *Times-Picayune*, December 31, 1969.

⁵⁰ Germany, *Promises*, 246-247.

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- ⁵¹ Arnold R. Hirsch, "New Orleans: Sunbelt in the Swamp," in Richard M. Bernard and Bradley R. Rice, eds., *Sunbelt Cities: Politics and Growth since World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983), 123.
- ⁵² Charles D. Hadley, *The Transformation of the Role of Black Ministers and Black Political Organizations in Louisiana Politics*, vol. 11 of The Louisiana Purchase Bicentennial Series in Louisiana History (Lafayette: University of Louisiana at Lafayette, 2002), 459.
- ⁵³ Germany, *Promises*, 247, 262.
- ⁵⁴ *Times-Picayune*, December 9, 1969.
- ⁵⁵ Humid Beings, "Mayor Moon Landrieu – A Panel Discussion," The Canary Collective, <http://nola.humidbeings.com/features/detail/267/MAYOR-MOON-LANDRIEU-A-Panel-Discussion> (accessed February 1, 2011).
- ⁵⁶ Allen Rosenzweig, "How Landrieu Won: A Statistical Analysis," *New Orleans States-Item*, January 7, 1970.
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- ⁵⁸ Landrieu Papers, Reel 58; WWL-TV Editorial, May 16, 1971, Landrieu Papers, Box 44, Reel 59.
- ⁵⁹ Orissa Arend, *Showdown in Desire: The Black Panthers Take a Stand in New Orleans* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2009), 39.
- ⁶⁰ Eunice Carter News Release, Landrieu Papers, Box 17, Reel 50.
- ⁶¹ Cecil W. Carter Memorandum, Landrieu Papers, HRC Box 41, Reel 58 (Folder 1).
- ⁶² Rogers, *Righteous*, 109.
- ⁶³ Landrieu Papers, HRC Box 41, Reel 58 (Folder 1).
- ⁶⁴ *Times-Picayune*, June 21, 1970.
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- ⁶⁶ *Times-Picayune*, January 16, 1972; August 15, 1977.
- ⁶⁷ HRC Memorandum of December 31, 1970, Landrieu Papers, Box 41, Reel 58 (Folder 2).
- ⁶⁸ *Times-Picayune*, February 8, 1972.
- ⁶⁹ *Times-Picayune*, January 25, 1973; July 21, 1970.

⁷⁰ *Times-Picayune*, July 26, 1969; May 21, 1970; September 28, 1976.

⁷¹ On the rise of the Black Power movement, see Nathan Wright, Jr., *Black Power and Urban Unrest: Creative Possibilities* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1967).

⁷² For the origins and philosophy of the Black Panther Party, see Elaine Brown, *A Taste of Power: A Black Woman's Story* (New York: Anchor Books, 1992); on the New Orleans chapter of the Black Panther Party, see Arend, *Showdown*.

⁷³ On the shoddy construction of the Desire Housing Project, see *Times-Picayune*, June 19, 1989; on Robert Tucker's investigation of conditions at Desire, see the WDSU-TV editorial, September 16, 1970, Landrieu Papers, Box 47, Reel 60, and Gene Bourg, "Desire Project Incubator for Crime, Report Says," *States-Item*, September 15, 1970; on Tucker's remarks, see the WDSU-TV editorial, September 16, 1970, Landrieu Papers, Box 47, Reel 60.

⁷⁴ Regarding the police infiltration of the Panthers, see *Times-Picayune*, September 19, 1970 and *Louisiana Weekly*, September 26, 1970.

⁷⁵ Landrieu, quoted in Arend, *Showdown*, 43-44.

⁷⁶ *Times-Picayune*, September 19, 1970; *Louisiana Weekly*, September 26, 1970.

⁷⁷ *Louisiana Weekly*, September 19, 1970.

⁷⁸ *Times-Picayune*, September 17, 1970; September 19, 1970.

⁷⁹ *Times-Picayune*, September 16, 1970; *Louisiana Weekly*, September 19, 1970; Malik Rahim interview in Arend, *Showdown*, 70-73.

⁸⁰ *Times-Picayune*, September 16, 1970; September 17, 1970.

⁸¹ Landrieu Press Conference, September 16, 1970, Landrieu Papers, Box 44, Reel 59.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ WDSU-TV editorial, September 16, 1970, Landrieu Papers, Box 47, Reel 60.

⁸⁴ WWL-TV editorials, September 16, 1970 and September 17, 1970 (quotation), Landrieu Papers, Box 44, Reel 59.

⁸⁵ Landrieu Press Conference, September 16, 1970, and WWL-TV editorial, September 16, 1970, Landrieu Papers, Box 44, Reel 59.

⁸⁶ Paul Atkinson, "Desire Area Residents Nervous after Shootings," *Times-Picayune*, September 16, 1970; Althea Francois interviews of May 24 and May 31, 2005, in Arend, *Showdown*, 91.

⁸⁷ Arend, *Showdown*, 95; Harold Holmes, quoted in *Times-Picayune*, November 19, 1970.

⁸⁸ *Times-Picayune*, November 19, 1970; Black Panthers member, quoted in Arend, *Showdown*, 96.

⁸⁹ Harold Holmes, quoted in *Times-Picayune*, November 19, 1970.

⁹⁰ Chaplain William Barnwell, quoted in *Times-Picayune*, November 19, 1970; Arend, *Showdown*, 95.

⁹¹ Landrieu, quoted in *Times-Picayune*, November 20, 1970.

⁹² *Times-Picayune*, November 20, 1970.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Times-Picayune*, November 27, 1970; *Louisiana Weekly*, December 5, 1970.

⁹⁵ *Louisiana Weekly*, December 5, 1970. Thirty-one people, both members and non-members, were arrested and all were charged with violation of Louisiana's criminal trespass law.

⁹⁶ *Times-Picayune*, November 27, 1970.

⁹⁷ Between 1971 and 1975, the Housing Authority of New Orleans decided that modernizing Desire was too expensive and decided to perform "as needed" maintenance and improvements. The buildings were falling into decay. Crime was increasing and the 1970s and 1980s witnessed residents moving out one by one. Between 1996 and 2001, the Desire Housing Project was demolished and a new mixed-income neighborhood was on the horizon. For further information see Desire Housing Project, New Orleans, Louisiana (1956-2001), <http://www.blackpast.org> (accessed February 1, 2011).

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