The Fires Next Time

written by Gregory Smithsimon | March 26, 2012

On December 3, 1967, Regina and Charles Schneibel were trapped by fire in their Lower East Side apartment. Charles was unable to open the wooden shutters he'd installed in their home after one of their children had fallen from the window and died. In the blaze, Charles, Regina, and their two oldest children suffered severe burns. Their three youngest children died of smoke inhalation. Incredibly, the death of the three children didn't even merit its own headline, because it wasn't the biggest fire tragedy to report. They shared a story with five children in Brooklyn who had died in a similar fire earlier the same day. A month earlier, a mother, her two children, and her niece and nephew were all killed in a fire.

All thirteen victims died in an era of New York's history when more than 300 people, mostly poor Black and Latino New Yorkers, were killed every year by fire. The fires were one of New York's worst disasters, and the toll was devastating. By the time the fires were out, thousands of New Yorkers had been killed between 1965 and 1983. One South Bronx neighborhood that held 836 buildings in 1970 had nine left in 1980. Other tracts lost more. Tens of thousands of people lost their homes. City officials had advocated abandoning whole neighborhoods and then closed fire stations in the very Black and Latino neighborhoods that were burning out of control. The deaths were the direct result of those policies. It was the closest New York City came to genocide in the twentieth century.

For the current generation of writers making sense of contemporary New York — from William Sites' *Remaking New York* to Miriam Greenberg's *Branding New York* — the city's crises, fiscal collapse, and shock therapy of the 1970s are the Big Bang from which today's neoliberal New York erupted.[1] Joe Flood contributes to the study of this vital period a rich description of the era and explains how a handful of officials with the power to stop the fires watched while New York burned. The fires are not an unknown part of New York's history.[2] But there has been no broad history of the fires until now. In presenting the protracted trauma, *The Fires* makes the story of the burning of the South Bronx so engaging that we are a little less likely to ever forget. It is a much needed book. But the reckoning of the fires is not done.

The Fires tells the story of what firefighters call the "War Years" by following the rise of John O'Hagan, a determined, reforming firefighter who rose through the ranks to become the youngest fire chief and one of the only New Yorkers to hold simultaneously the titles of chief and fire commissioner. Flood tells an engaging story of how O'Hagan single-handedly modernized the fire department, literally writing the book on high-rise fire codes, improved fire fighting techniques, and professionalized firefighting. O'Hagan should have been the best person to face down the Fires. But in a failure that spoiled an otherwise exemplary legacy, O'Hagan's actions exacerbated the worst fire disaster in the city's modern history.

The Fires is Flood's first book, and he is an unnervingly good writer. Flood, himself the son of a police officer, lends the urgency of a crime story to the story of city bureaucrats. O'Hagan used the RAND corporation's computer analysis to justify closing fire departments in the Bronx even while whole neighborhoods burned, thus earning the appreciation of financially strapped mayors John Lindsay and Abe Beame. In Flood's telling, this is a story of hubris, of the reforming O'Hagan who, like his blueblood counterpart Lindsay, put too much faith in rational management methods. In the process, Flood tells of the rise of RAND from a group of World War II slide rule warriors to an influential, politically savvy, and high-priced consulting organization. No one else has made the story

of rational management and early computer modeling read like an engrossing Greek tragedy.

Along the way, Flood weaves together many threads of this story. He explains how redlining by banks and the federal government's Home Ownership Loan Corporation explicitly denied non-white neighborhoods the loans that building owners needed to maintain their property, leading to the deterioration that was a precursor to the fires. He just as deftly dismisses some of the popular assumptions about the chaos of the era when he demonstrates that the notorious killing of Kitty Genovese did not, in fact, reflect a callous city that ignored a murder victim's cries, but a typical case of residents who did call for help.

Flood makes a convincing argument that even the politically progressive explanation for the fires—that they were caused by cold hearted landlords burning tenants' homes for fire insurance payoffs—accounted for only a minority of the fires. The most common cause of the conflagrations was more dismaying for how mundane it was: a much larger constellation of powerful people allowed perfectly normal fires to burn out of control and displace tens of thousands of families. Flood's explanation underscores Hannah Arendt's argument about the banality of evil: the fires were not generally the work of malevolent villains who held a torch to the buildings. Instead, Flood presents it as the perfect storm: a city in tight financial straits, a reforming mayor and a fire commissioner who believed that rational management could deliver more with less, and a computer model by RAND that reassured them that the cuts to fire service were sound.

As rich and breathtaking as the story is in Flood's telling, one omission is glaring: race. In following the story of reforming hubris and the "best of intentions," Flood seeks to make the point that the burning of the South Bronx was not, first and foremost, a story of racism. From the beginning, Flood derides this view as a "conspiracy," an understandable but still mistaken attribution of far too much planning and competence to a dysfunctional city government. City housing commissioner Roger Starr proposed boldly enough that hundreds of thousands of poor residents in the South Bronx and Brooklyn should be forced out of their homes. But Flood discusses Starr after telling the story of the fires, as if Starr's proposal was an afterthought, not a prescription.

It is difficult to argue that the fires weren't fed by the racism of the city's elite when Starr suggested the Bronx be leveled to reduce city expenditures, and when, as Flood acknowledges, the spokesperson for the city's powerful Municipal Assistance Corporation complained that "New York's in trouble because it's got too many fucking Blacks and Puerto Ricans." Flood shows that Blacks and Puerto Ricans weren't the cause of New York's problems. But that's what it means to be a scapegoat.

Flood seems to believe that he cannot have the complex causality of his story and evoke racism at the same time: racism is a simple, easy-to-identify evil, and this is a story of misplaced confidence, of the deadly effects of everyday city politicking and seemingly benign bureaucratic jockeying, of unintended consequences as often as malicious intent. But it is in unraveling something as complex as the fires that we see the most deadly effects of race. And it is to prevent future tragedies on the scale of the fires that it is absolutely imperative that we have the best possible understanding of how racism actually catalyzes such an event.

The book's first oversight is its assumption that well-intentioned liberals aren't racist. Flood sees a paradox in the fact that the fires took place on the watch of a crusading fire chief and Mayor Lindsay, "an ardent supporter of civil rights." Liberals are not progressives or radicals. Lindsay may have been a supporter but was never a civil rights activist. The adage that in a crisis you can always count on a liberal — if you're a conservative — is never more true here. For a brand of liberal then and now, "supporting" civil rights while doing over the poor has been the rule, not the contradiction: Daniel Patrick Moynihan, another sometime supporter, famously advocated neglect of African-

Americans. ("Benign" was always a meaningless modifier of that neglect.) In my own research on the building of New York's Battery Park City neighborhood (the planning of which spanned the War Years), a parade of liberals, including Mayor Lindsay and Governor Nelson Rockefeller, enjoyed reputations as crusaders against racism and ghetto poverty even while they unceasingly insisted that the state reinforce that segregation by building elite enclaves like Battery Park City.

This combination of claims of liberal virtue and actions of capitalist avarice is best captured in David Halberstam's term "the best and the brightest." As Flood points out, Lindsay and Rockefeller embodied the term when they claimed to care for the downtrodden and did them such harm. But the irony of the term is less pronounced in Flood's account. And while it is important to chronicle the policymakers, it is unfortunate that this history of the burning of the South Bronx does not include in its extensive interviews conversations with the people who lost homes, families, and communities to the fires. In another way, the book demonstrates that the best and the brightest are not only a relic of the seventies, for Flood himself fits the bill, with the full ambiguity of that term. Harvard educated, 29, a quick study and remarkably knowledgeable, Flood leaves the impression he could well reach a position of influence like O'Hagan. That Flood's generation will still govern a highly segregated city makes it all the more important that a better understanding of the role of race in the War Years emerge from this account of the fires.

Eric Klinenberg's social autopsy of the 1995 Chicago heat wave that killed 739 people (also primarily poor, politically disempowered people of color), describes the broad, multi-institutional causes of that disaster as a "total social fact." To Klinenberg, whose account of the instantly forgotten heat wave is comparable in its scope and accomplishment to Flood's study of the burning of the Bronx, a total social fact is "one that integrates and activates a broad set of social institutions and generates a series of social processes that express the inner workings of the city.… When hundreds of people die slowly, alone and at home, unprotected by friends and family and unassisted by the state, it is a sign of social breakdown in which communities, neighborhoods, networks, governmental agencies, and the media charged with signaling warnings are all implicated."[3] In both the heat wave and the fires, racism is like the water in a marsh: omnipresent, but absorbed into the very structure of the place more than visible on its own. Just as the every part of the marsh is waterlogged, on second inspection all the institutions Flood dissects are steeped in racial inequality.

Poor people of color were already subjected to dangerous overcrowding and substandard housing. Poor African-Americans were concentrated in poor neighborhoods as no other group was. At the city level, they were politically disenfranchised. Then there was O'Hagan, for whom ghetto fires were a "blind spot." He reformed firefighting at so many other levels, but did little to address tenement fires. Why? Within the FDNY as a whole, Flood explains, fighting fires in high-rent Midtown skyscrapers was always more prestigious than saving the lives of low income residents. One firefighter noted that the department's leadership consistently cut its teeth in the prestigious Midtown firehouses, and was rarely drawn from stations in poor neighborhoods. (Thus snubbed, Bronx fire stations produced generations of radicalized firefighters union leaders.) That downtown got attention and the ghetto could be so ignored were part of the mechanics and the assumptions of racial inequality.

As Flood tells it, the RAND computer models were a central player in the story of how the city justified closing down firehouses. The computer models were presented with the veneer of objectivity that can be lacquered on statistics. But any honest modeling would have recognized that the ghetto fire companies were the busiest, and the least-utilized fire companies were in comfortable parts of Queens and Staten Island, as well as in city councilmen's neighborhoods. To correct that problem, RAND followed O'Hagan's instructions to re-design their models to compare ghetto fire companies against each other to determine which stations would be cut. Year after year, hundreds of low-income households were burnedout, and year after year, the city closed fire houses in those

same neighborhoods. Overweening proponents of computer simulations alone fail to account for the disaster.

Flood argues that fires set by landlords for insurance money never amounted to more than small a minority of fires in the Bronx. While this appears true, the fivefold increase in arson in those years still required that landlords dehumanize their tenants enough to burn them in their homes for insurance proceeds. Without acknowledging racism's moral corrosion, it's difficult to explain how that happened. Flood concludes his argument that the fires were tragic, not malicious, by observing that "No one with any power, it seemed, had any interest in saving the Bronx, and many were doing just fine letting it burn." Precisely. To return to Arendt, what is morally fundamental about the human condition is that people should not be treated as objects. We discard objects when we are done with them. We even destroy buildings. But someone who destroys another person as a means to an end violates the most basic meaning of what it is for them themselves to be human. Politicians initially preferred cutting ghetto fire companies because there was less political power in poor and Black neighborhoods. But the disaster, the death toll, the children burned to death in their bedrooms occurred in public view. To ignore such a basic human emergency would not have been possible without stunning dehumanization. For these observers, the ongoing disaster did not sound an urgent alarm. A city government, fire chief, media, populace, landlord class, and political system allowed the burning to continue once it was going on because racism denied most of them recognition of the human condition.

The lessons for today are disconcerting. As sociologists Douglas Massey and Nancy Denton showed in their study of the creation of Black ghettoes in the 1920s, African-Americans first relocated from scattered black enclaves into large ghettos to protect themselves against a nationwide wave of deadly, large-scale race riots.[4] For a racial group who cannot always count on protection from the fire department, who feels threatened by the police, and who would feel uneasy around large numbers of white neighbors, living with fellow African-Americans is a basic survival strategy. But while ghettoes provide collective protection, those same sociologists have detailed how damaging social policies can be targeted at African-Americans precisely because they are residentially isolated: from underfunded schools, to police harassment, to slower property value appreciation, to poor fire protection. Whether they move to Black neighborhoods or white ones, African-Americans looking for a place to live are forced to choose between risky compromises.

The risks for Black residents continue today. Choose any city with a large African- American population. Make two maps, one of where Blacks live, and one of where subprime mortgages or foreclosures are prominent. The maps are interchangeable. In the short term, losing one's home to foreclosure is less dangerous than losing it to fire. In the long term, any mass displacement can cause overcrowding, social disruption, building abandonment, even epidemic disease. One lesson from the War Years to be carried over to today is that financial crises are especially devastating to Black and Latino communities, and that we need to be vigilant to prevent the current cycle from being as damaging — to African American families' investments in their homes, to the school performance of children threatened by displacement, to neighborhoods punctured by abandonment and uprooted families — as the last one. The fires' other lesson is utterly denied in the contemporary political rhetoric that promises to respond to the fiscal crisis by painlessly cutting "fraud, waste, and abuse": cuts to municipal services exact a human toll, and it is borne unevenly.

Until *The Fires*, the burning of New York had languished in the city's collective memory. Flood has brought the story forward in bold relief, compellingly told and in impressive detail. With this account in hand, an annual day of commemoration in New York to the fires, akin to the annual September 11 ceremonies, would help remember the children of Regina and Charles Schneibel, and remind us of the dangers of overconfident bureaucrats, dehumanizing landlords, impersonal computer models, politicians' promises of budget cuts without consequences, and deeply saturated

racism. Until then, Flood’s account keeps alive a memorial flame that should not be extinguished.