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The 1968 New York City School Strike Revisited

The story of Ocean Hill-Brownsville

by Vincent Cannato and Jerald Podair

In the fall of 1968, more than 50,000 New York City teachers went on strike for a total of 37 days in three separate walkouts that kept more than a million students out of the classroom. They sprang from a controversy in an experimental school district located in an obscure Brooklyn neighborhood called Ocean Hill–Brownsville. In the tumultuous year of 1968, these strikes were about more than just a labor battle over salary or working conditions. They turned into a bitter conflict about who would control the city. They exposed and exacerbated tense relations between blacks and whites and inflamed an anti-Semitism that had always existed just under the surface of interethnic and interracial relations. They tore at the heart of the liberal political coalition, as the labor movement came into conflict with the civil-rights movement. And they provided another piece of evidence that something had gone seriously wrong in New York City and in American cities in general.

The strikes of 1968 helped diminish the standing of the city's mayor, John Lindsay, a national figure with great ambitions who had promised a more efficient city government as well as a more just city for those living at the margins of society. By the end of 1968, Time magazine put Lindsay on its cover under the banner "New York: The Breakdown of a City," and its accompanying article talked about "John Lindsay's ten plagues."

The Ocean Hill–Brownsville controversy would lead to a political takeover of the city's schools by New York state. It effectively ended any meaningful discussion of school reform for at least three decades, leaving millions of children stuck in a system that would continue to underperform. Ocean Hill–Brownsville also helped transform the city's political culture, weakening the city's liberal coalition and strengthening the power of outer-borough whites who would go on to elect Ed Koch in 1977 and Rudy Giuliani in 1993. In the starkest terms, the strikes pitted wealthy whites and poor blacks against middle-class whites and caused massive cognitive dissonance for many liberals who found themselves condemning striking unionized workers for being reactionary and bigoted.

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In this way, New York City would prove to be a harbinger of national political trends that would unfold after the 1960s all the way down to the present, when political pundits scratch their heads and try to understand the mysteries of the so-called white working class. Revisiting New York of the late 1960s, and specifically the Ocean Hill–Brownsville controversy, might help these pundits figure out how the national political landscape changed so dramatically.

At the center of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville controversy was Mayor Lindsay. The tall and handsome patrician had been elected as a reform Republican mayor of New York in 1965 on the promise that he would hack away at the influence of the various "power brokers" he believed were leading New York toward stagnation and preventing minority groups from gaining their rightful place in the city. Education was one of those areas in which Lindsay was eager to make change. He believed deeply in the obligations owed by the privileged to the most vulnerable. The governing philosophy of his administration, expressed by one of his aides, was "those who have nothing or those who have the least should get the most even if it is everything you have." But in many instances, those who bore the burden of Lindsay's policies were not wealthy Manhattanites, but middle- and working-class whites living in the outer boroughs.

Black New Yorkers had been protesting the conditions in city schools since the early 1960s. But the beginning of the actual Ocean Hill–Brownsville controversy was a more mundane attempt on the part of the Lindsay administration to get more state funding for city schools. If it could break up the single mammoth city school district and treat each borough as the separate county that it actually was, the Lindsay administration believed, the entire city would be eligible for tens of millions more dollars a year from Albany.

In 1967, Lindsay created the Mayor's Advisory Panel on Decentralization of the New York City Schools to recommend an administrative overhaul of the school system. In a move with deep significance, Lindsay named McGeorge Bundy to head the panel. Bundy, a Boston Brahmin, had served as national-security adviser to Presidents Kennedy and Johnson before taking over the Ford Foundation. There was no representative of the teachers' union on the panel, or anyone to represent middle-class whites.

Late in 1967, Bundy's panel recommended that the school system be broken up into a "community school system, consisting of a federation of school districts and a central education agency." The problems of inner-city schools, argued the Bundy Report, were the problems of an unresponsive school bureaucracy. Bringing control over education back to neighborhoods and communities would reform the school system. The Bundy Report was only an advisory document. The Lindsay administration needed to get legislation through in Albany to implement it. It went nowhere. Lindsay simply did not possess the political skills to secure such a dramatic reform.

And while Lindsay and Bundy's elite commission was debating the theoretical future of city schools, New Yorkers closer to the ground were also debating similar ideas. New York's black community had become deeply frustrated with the condition of inner-city schools. In 1964, local civil-rights leaders led by the Reverend Milton Galamison organized a one-day boycott of city schools to protest the slow pace of integration. In 1966, Galamison led a takeover of the Board of Education, with his allies declaring themselves the "Peoples' Board."

If anything, city schools were becoming more segregated in the 1960s. The percentage of African Americans in New York City had increased from 6 percent in 1940 to nearly 20 percent in 1968. By 1963, minority children represented 40 percent of all students in the public schools. Most African Americans were stuck in inner-city neighborhoods, and their schools were becoming increasingly all-black. The number of schools with a minority population of more than 90 percent grew from 8 percent in 1955 to 28 percent in 1968. White flight from the outer boroughs made the trends worse as the white student population declined between 1957 and 1964, from 65 percent to 43 percent in the Bronx and from 72 percent to 54 percent in Brooklyn. Outer-borough high schools that had been integrated in 1960 found themselves becoming overwhelmingly minority in just a few years due to white flight.

With integration becoming increasingly difficult and "black power" gaining influence, some in the African-American community began to argue that the way forward was not integration but "community control" of the schools. The black community would create the school curriculum, hire teachers and staff, and have control over the budget.

In April 1967, independent of the Bundy Panel, the city's Board of Education attempted to appease advocates of community control by creating three experimental school districts where a limited version of community control could be tested. Local elected school boards would hire an administrator to run the schools in each district. But "the basic functional relationships would remain the same" in terms of how these districts related to the Board of Education.

One of these districts was in a predominately black and Puerto Rican neighborhood in Harlem. Another was a lower-Manhattan district with a mix of low-income Asian, Hispanic, black, and some white students. The third was Ocean Hill–Brownsville. Lindsay aides later recognized that choosing three low-income, mostly minority districts was a mistake. "In choosing three of the most-deprived neighborhoods of the city, instead of selecting at least one middle-income area where the experiment would not pit black against white," Lindsay aide Barry Gottehrer later wrote, "the confrontation, in retrospect, was inevitable."

The Board of Education did not provide additional funds for these districts, so Bundy's Ford Foundation filled the gap. In 1967 and 1968, Ford gave more than 1 million dollars in grant money to the three experimental districts and other community control-related projects, including $160,000 to the Reverend Galamison's church for "programs to inform and assist communities to establish close relationships with NYC schools."

Deep inside Brooklyn, cean Hill–Brownsville had been predominantly Jewish well into the 1950s, home to the young Norman Podhoretz, Alfred Kazin, and Henry Roth, not to mention the notorious gangsters of Murder, Inc. But the area changed rapidly, and by 1968, it was 95 percent black and Puerto Rican. The Jews that remained were often the owners of small businesses unable to relocate. They aroused the ire of the newer residents who saw them as symbols of white authority.

Another such symbol was the cohort of mostly Jewish teachers in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville public schools, members of the fledgling United Federation of Teachers (UFT), which had become the school system's bargaining agent in 1961. The Jewish teachers and their black Ocean Hill–Brownsville pupils represented both the successes and failures of the New York City public-school system. The teachers, themselves the product of that system, were the beneficiaries of a competitive Board of Examiners testing apparatus that offered opportunities for career advancement and material gain.

But their black students, often recent arrivals in the neighborhood, appeared doomed. For them, the idea of the public schools as an escalator of upward mobility was a cruel joke. Ocean Hill–Brownsville's Junior High School 271 was one of the worst-performing in the city, with 73 and 85 percent of its pupils testing below grade level in reading and math, respectively. Only 2 percent of its graduates qualified for admission to one of the city's specialized high schools that sat at the top of the system's meritocratic pyramid. Interactions between teachers and pupils at JHS 271 and the other Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools sometimes degenerated into violence, with a rising level of assaults against educational personnel there.

Lindsay, whose personal experience with whites outside Manhattan was perfunctory and who, in the words of a contemporary observer, "doesn't understand the life of a mailman or a cop," appeared to view municipal politics as a zero-sum game in which the gains of the city's middle class had come at the expense of the minority poor. To Lindsay, New York's public-sector unions and the white ethnic groups that predominated in them were self-interested impediments to racial justice in the city. In contemporary lingo, Lindsay saw these working-class whites as deeply laden with "white privilege."

Albert Shanker, the grim-visaged UFT president, was the labor leader Lindsay liked least, a sentiment fully reciprocated by the Queens-bred son of Russian-Jewish immigrants. Lindsay viewed the brusque Shanker as déclassé, vulgar, and worse; he was the only person whom Mary Lindsay, the city's first lady, banned from the private living quarters at Gracie Mansion, the mayor's official residence. At one point during negotiations at City Hall, Shanker deeply offended Lindsay's sense of decorum by putting his feet on the mayor's desk and revealing his sagging socks. To the Lindsay people, Shanker and his union failed their test of selflessness and concern for the public interest. They were simply "power brokers" looking to put their own power ahead of the public good. One mayoral aide called Shanker "a terrible, terrible person," while another remembers Lindsay calling Shanker an "evil man."

But to Shanker, Lindsay was the embodiment of every upper-crust Protestant, reeking of moral sanctimony and a whiff of genteel anti-Semitism, who had looked down at him and "his kind" for generations. Lindsay and Shanker's incompatibilities would impart an ethnocultural sting to the events to come at Ocean Hill–Brownsville and beyond.

During the summer of 1967, a local board composed of local residents was elected, which in turn chose Rhody McCoy, the principal of a special service school for emotionally disturbed children, as the experiment's administrator. McCoy, a black nationalist and an admirer of Malcolm X's, immediately clashed with white UFT representatives over the parameters of the local board's powers, which had been vaguely defined (probably deliberately so) by the Board of Education. The union and McCoy squabbled throughout the 1967–68 academic year: Who controlled the content of the school curriculum? Who controlled the selection of administrators? Most important, who controlled the hiring and firing of teachers? McCoy argued that if "community control" meant anything at all, it meant that the people of Ocean Hill–Brownsville, speaking through their elected local board and through him, could select the men and women who would teach their children.

Shanker and the UFT had different views. The union membership was heavily invested in the Board of Examiners system, which employed race-blind standards of merit to select and advance teachers. What McCoy and the local board proposed to do was a potential body blow, not just to their livelihoods but also to the very value system by which they governed their professional lives. Shanker believed it was an existential threat to his union.

Founded in 1960, the UFT was struggling to establish a voice in the management of the public-school system after decades of teacher disempowerment. Shanker believed that if a local school board could decide unilaterally who would teach in its schools, the UFT would be a union in name only. He also worried about the racial and ethnic implications of the UFT's dispute with McCoy and the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board. The board was almost all nonwhite. The Ocean Hill–Brownsville teaching cohort was predominantly white and Jewish. JHS 271 was already becoming a racial powder keg. The school's black teachers, led by Leslie Campbell, later known as Jitu Weusi, had begun to self-segregate from their white counterparts. The day following the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. on April 4, 1968, pupils left their classrooms, attacked teachers, and destroyed school property. Campbell, at a memorial service for King, told students: "You've got to get your minds together. You know who to steal from. If you steal, steal from those who have it. Stop fighting among yourselves."

One month later, Shanker's fears were realized. On May 7, the local board, along with McCoy, met and selected 19 Ocean Hill–Brownsville educators to receive letters of "termination of employment." All were union members. All except one were white (one black teacher was mistakenly included on the list). All but a handful of the teachers were Jewish.

The letters turned the simmering controversy into a citywide crisis. It drew stark battle lines. Most of Manhattan supported the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board and the community-control experiment. For professional elites in business, media, academia, and politics, the opportunity to exhibit empathy for impoverished African-American children in a distant neighborhood in their battle against white middle-class civil servants was an almost irresistible form of what today would be called "virtue signaling." Their support for African Americans at Ocean Hill–Brownsville announced, in the parlance of the 1960s, that they "gave a damn," without the necessity of personal sacrifice.

The minority poor in Manhattan and elsewhere in the city had a more personal and immediate reason to back McCoy and the local board: racial solidarity. Outer-borough whites aligned with Shanker and the UFT. This was in part an expression of support for other unionists, since Shanker argued that "a union is worth nothing if it fails to defend the rights of its members to their jobs."

But the more powerful motivations were racial. The terminations at Ocean Hill–Brownsville set in motion forces that would eventually transform the political and social landscape of the city. For decades, that landscape had been defined by the rivalry between Jews and white Catholics. Separated by ethnic, religious, and cultural chasms that appeared unbridgeable, their New Yorks intersected, when they did at all, uncomfortably and awkwardly.

"There is probably a wider gap between Jews and Catholics in New York today than in the days of Al Smith," Nathan Glazer and Daniel Patrick Moynihan wrote in Beyond the Melting Pot in 1963. The competing value systems they described—cosmopolitan and rationalist for Jews, and traditional and religious for Catholics—had taken on sturdy lives of their own. Yet even as Glazer and Moynihan were writing, the beginnings of a thaw between Jews and Catholics in New York and beyond could be detected. New York Archbishop Francis Cardinal Spellman spoke out frequently against anti-Semitism and discrimination and cultivated friends and allies in the Jewish community. More significantly, in the early 1960s, Spellman would join other cardinals in crafting the Second Vatican Council's revised teachings on the relationship of Catholics toward Jews and other non-Christians. By 1968, the teacher terminations ordered by the local board at Ocean Hill–Brownsville only furthered the rapprochement between Catholics and Jews.

The Ocean Hill–Brownsville crisis also highlighted the split within New York's Jewish community. More affluent Jews living in Manhattan increasingly came to identify with the interests and ideology of non-Jewish liberals. These more affluent Jews felt a growing distance toward their less-well-to-do co-religionists living in the outer boroughs, who were less concerned with theoretical ideas of social justice and more concerned about the actual conditions of their neighborhoods and schools. These apprehensive outer-borough Jews looked for help where they could find it. With Mayor Lindsay and Manhattan elites, not to mention virtually the entire black community, either actively demanding the removal of the teachers or indifferent to their plight, it was clear that assistance would have to come from elsewhere.

It did. It came from Italian, Irish, and East European Catholics who identified with Jews on the basis of growing concerns over rising crime rates, burgeoning welfare costs, deteriorating neighborhoods, and educational anarchy—as symbolized by the Ocean Hill–Brownsville terminations themselves. Their differences over forms of religious worship and the venality of machine politicians became much less significant. Where Jews saw Jewish teachers victimized at Ocean Hill–Brownsville, white Catholics saw white ones. After May 1968, these perspectives would meld into a powerful electoral force in city life. White Catholics and Jews were two-thirds of New York's 1968 population. Together, they could elect a mayor who would "give a damn"—about them.

After the terminations were announced, both sides dug in their heels. McCoy vowed that the fired teachers would never set foot in the Ocean Hill–Brownsville schools again. Shanker threatened a citywide strike if they were not reinstated. Over the summer, a trial examiner ruled that the teachers at the heart of the dispute had not been given due-process protections and had been dismissed without cause. He ordered their return to the classrooms. McCoy and the local board defied him. Lindsay, openly sympathetic to the community-control experiment, hesitated to put the full power of his office behind the trial examiner's ruling. When he could not obtain ironclad assurances from Lindsay or the Board of Education that the Ocean Hill–Brownsville teachers would be reinstated with classroom assignments, Shanker called a walkout on September 9, 1968, the opening day of the new school year. This first strike lasted for only two days but was followed by a second strike on September 13 that lasted another 17 days, at which time Lindsay cut a deal with Shanker to bring the teachers back to the classroom and install neutral observers in Ocean Hill–Brownsville to prevent their harassment. The Ocean Hill–Brownsville Board had been left out of the negotiations and felt aggrieved as the decision appeared to weaken the community-control experiment. Tensions between UFT teachers and the board, as well as the replacement teachers hired by the board (many of whom were young left-wing activists), increased and eventually led to the third and longest strike, which lasted from October 14 to November 17.

The strikes were the most racially incendiary in the city's history, filled with charges of bigotry and anti-Semitism that swept through New York like a virus. It is hard to exaggerate the ill will that the strikes generated. The urban historian Fred Siegel has called Ocean Hill–Brownsville "a conflict so intense that it was described in apocalyptic terms at the time." With nearly a million students missing weeks of school and working parents scrambling to make sure their children were being supervised, the city was in chaos. But there was a deeper ideological conflict that also drove the crisis and inflamed tensions.

As the strikes intensified, Lindsay receded into the background and the controversy boiled down to a battle between Shanker's UFT against McCoy and the OHB governing board. It was a battle over political power, but also over ideology. Shanker and the UFT saw the world in universalist, color-blind terms. Most teachers were traditional liberals who believed in civil rights and integration. They believed in due process, merit, and the promise of equality of opportunity. They were proud of what their union had achieved for its members.

McCoy and his supporters saw the world through a completely different lens. Imbued with ideas of black nationalism, they supported race-based policies in the hiring of teachers and pushed for a strongly Afrocentric curriculum. They were skeptical of middle-class notions of merit and equal opportunity and saw the mostly white teachers as succeeding on the backs of the black community. Concerns about violence in schools and student misbehavior were not, they believed, a matter of discipline but instead an issue of white teachers' forcing middle-class values on black students. Deeply suspicious of the white community and the city's political establishment, community-control supporters could sometimes descend into extremist rhetoric and paranoia. While Shanker's UFT wanted to teach children "to make it within our society," McCoy and the African-American Teachers Association (ATA) called for a "black value system" and racial separatism. This conflict in values could not be bridged in any meaningful way within the context of city politics at the time, and it highlighted the shattering of the postwar ideological consensus after the 1960s and the polarizing politics that has succeeded it.

Although the most militant community-control supporters, including Campbell, McCoy, JHS 271 assistant principal Albert Vann, and Brooklyn CORE leader Robert "Sonny" Carson, insisted that their animus toward the terminated teachers was not a function of their religion or ethnicity—they were merely whites who happened to be Jewish—they attacked the educators, or acquiesced in attacks on them, as Jews. Advocates for the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board among Manhattan elites either wished away expressions of anti-Semitism or dismissed them as isolated and exaggerated. Lindsay in particular viewed them as red herrings, distractions from what was for him the "real" issue of community control. But his attitude smacked of victim-blaming. Anti-Semitism before, during, and after the Ocean Hill–Brownsville strikes was real and deeply disturbing.

Equally so was the failure of most of the city's black leadership to denounce it. The stage had been set in December 1967 when John Hatchett, a public-school teacher and a member of the African-American Teachers Association, published an article entitled "The Phenomenon of the Anti-Black Jews and the Black Anglo-Saxon: A Study in Educational Perfidy" in the organization's newsletter. Hatchett charged that Jewish teachers were guilty of "horrendous abuse of the (black) family, associates and culture" and had "educationally castrated" black students. The ATA would be a thorn in the side of the UFT both during and after the Ocean Hill–Brownsville strikes. Its members appeared fixated on the Jewishness of their adversaries in the union. ATA officer and JHS 271 assistant principal Albert Vann argued that the Jewish teachers who had received termination letters should be "responsible" Jews and voluntarily leave their jobs. At the height of the third and final strike in November, the ATA issued a screed in its newsletter against "the Jew, our great liberal friend of yesteryear, whose cries of anguish still resound from the steppes of Russia to the tennis courts of Forest Hills…who keeps our children ignorant."

The most egregious instance of anti-Semitism during the Ocean Hill–Brownsville crisis came in the form of an unsigned letter placed in the

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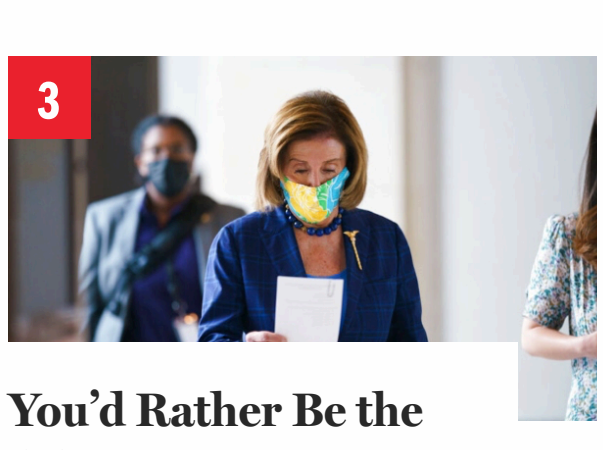
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mailboxes of UFT teachers at JHS 271 during one of the brief periods they were back in the classroom. It read in part:

> If African American History and Culture is to be taught to our Black Children it Must be Done By African Americans who Identify With And Who Understand The Problem. It is Impossible For The Middle East Murderers of Colored People to Possibly Bring To This Important Task The Insight, The Concern, The Exposing Of The Truth That is a Must If The Years Of Brainwashing And Self-Hatred That Has Been Taught To Our Black Children By Those Bloodsucking Exploiters and Murderers Is To Be Over Come.

The source of this material was never definitively established. Nonetheless, a furious Shanker had hundreds of thousands of copies made and circulated them citywide. Supporters of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board sought to minimize the letter's importance and faulted Shanker for publicizing it. Their argument has lived on in subsequent accounts of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville crisis written from a left-wing perspective. They argue that Shanker overstated the extent of anti-Semitism at Ocean Hill–Brownsville to bolster the UFT's cause in the city's Jewish community.

Had the letter been an isolated instance, this argument would have merit. But this was not the case. It was of a piece with the utterances and writings of ATA members, as well as with the casual dismissal of the anti-Semitism issue by most black leaders, including McCoy, who said, "We have more important things to be concerned about than making anti-Semitism a priority." It thus rises to the level of moral equivalence with articulations of anti-black racism during the strikes, which were often expressed indirectly and behind closed doors. A few weeks after the strikes concluded, ATA member and JHS 271 teacher Leslie Campbell appeared on radio station WBAI and read a poem composed by an Ocean Hill–Brownsville student "dedicated" to Albert Shanker, which began: "Hey, Jew boy, with that yarmulke on your head / You pale faced Jew boy—I wish you were dead." Campbell defended the poem at the time, and indeed for the rest of his life, as an authentic expression of racial pain.

A month after the WBAI broadcast, an exhibit entitled "Harlem on My Mind" opened at the Metropolitan Museum of Art. Its catalogue, written by Harlem residents, stated, "Our contempt for the Jew makes us feel more completely American in sharing a national prejudice," and "Behind every hurdle that the Afro-American has yet to jump, stands the Jew who has already cleared it." The museum's director, Thomas Hoving, an Upper East Side liberal and former Lindsay Parks Commissioner, defended the language as "anything but racist" and "true." "So be it," he concluded grandly, as if to settle the issue of anti-Semitism from above. While pressure from Jewish groups and presumably major Jewish benefactors of his museum forced Hoving to withdraw the catalogue, his words were emblematic of the use of both class and ethnocultural discriminations to secure racial peace in New York.

The existence of anti-Semitism at Ocean Hill–Brownsville was an embarrassment to Manhattan elite supporters of the community-control experiment and the local board. Some of these supporters were themselves Jewish, and it is not surprising that they sought to downplay its significance. But it was difficult to dismiss what a post-strike report issued by the Anti-Defamation League termed "crisis level" anti-Semitism in New York City. Responsibility thus lies not with Albert Shanker and his mimeograph machines, but with John Hatchett, Leslie Campbell, Albert Vann, and those in both the black and white communities who were silent or indifferent in the face of it.

After keeping his teacher out for a total of 37 days between September and November 1968, Shanker finally broke Lindsay's will. On November 17, the exhausted parties—which did not include representatives of the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board—announced a settlement that gave the UFT most of what it had sought. The terminated teachers were reinstated and the local board placed under state supervision. The sense of betrayal among community-control supporters was deep. Galamison would say that there were times he thought Lindsay "would have gladly put every resident of Ocean Hill in a gunny sack and dropped them in the East River." Even more extreme, one of the intellectual godfathers of community control, activist Preston Wilcox, called the final settlement "an attempt to rape Black people of the opportunity to control their own destinies." So much of Lindsay's mayoralty had been based on the idea of expanding opportunities for minorities, as well as keeping the city from erupting into chaos. When it came to the strikes and the community-control experiments, he failed on both accounts.

Things only got worse in 1969 when New York's state legislature passed a school-decentralization law, supported by the UFT, that effectively ended the Ocean Hill–Brownsville community-control project. The legislation created about 30 new, smaller community districts within the city. Each district would be governed by an elected community school board, but within the overall structure and control of the Board of Education. Afterward, turnout for community-board elections would regularly run in the single digits, and many community boards became notorious for corruption and incompetence.

Partially as punishment for Lindsay's ineptitude during the crisis, the state legislature took control of the city's education system away from City Hall. Lindsay went from appointing all members of the Board of Education to appointing only two. The Ocean Hill–Brownsville debacle thereby managed to kill any possibility of education reform in the city for the next 30 years. During those decades, the city's schools experienced a continued decline in quality. The real losers in the controversy were public-school children of all races and ethnicities who were now condemned to continue their education in increasingly substandard schools. This would begin to change when Rudolph Giuliani successfully fought to regain mayoral control over city schools and Michael Bloomberg began to use that mayoral control to implement serious education reforms.

The Ocean Hill–Brownsville crisis worked a sea change in Jewish attitudes toward African Americans and other ethnic whites in New York. A post-strike Harris Poll revealed sharp divisions between Jews and blacks and a convergence of views among Jews and white Catholics. By margins of 63 to 8, and 48 to 9 percent, respectively, Jews and white Catholics supported the UFT during the strikes. Blacks favored the Ocean Hill–Brownsville local board by 50 to 14 percent. Jews believed blacks had engaged in anti-Semitism during the crisis by 66 to 12 percent. White Catholics agreed, 40 to 20 percent. Blacks, by a margin of 40 to 23 percent, denied the presence of anti-Semitism. By a margin of 2 to 1, Jews believed that blacks and not Catholics were the main sources of anti-Semitism in the city. "Seven out of ten Jews, Italians, and Irish in New York have clearly joined cause," the Harris Poll concluded. "It is almost as if blacks and whites are living in different worlds instead of the same city."

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The new racial and cultural alignments had immediate political effects. During the 1969 mayoral election campaign, a desperate Lindsay, who had been booed off the stage of a Brooklyn synagogue by angry congregants during the crisis amid chants of "Lindsay must go," sought to mend fences with outer-borough Jews, admitting to vaguely defined "miscalculations" and "mistakes." It was not enough to sway them. In a result that would have been unthinkable even four years earlier, 55 percent of Jewish voters cast ballots for one of the two Catholic Italian-American candidates opposing Lindsay, Democrat Mario Procaccino and Republican John Marchi. Both were social and cultural conservatives. Lindsay, who ran on the Liberal Party ticket after losing the Republican primary to Marchi, drew enough votes from Manhattanites and minorities to exploit the divisions among his rivals and win reelection by a plurality.

His 1969 reelection was merely a temporary victory for Lindsay, who would shortly after switch to the Democratic Party. His second term proved just as divisive as his first; crime and disorder continued to take their toll, the city's population continued to decline, and a slowing economy put added pressure on New York's fragile fiscal situation, eventually leading to a massive budgetary crisis in 1975. Ocean Hill–Brownsville was a perfect example of the failures of Lindsay and modern liberalism: Promise a lot and deliver little to nothing, while exacerbating deep-seated tensions. Lindsay was personally committed to civil rights and to improving the lives of minorities in New York, but in reality, after his eight years as mayor, the condition of most black New Yorkers was substantially worse than it had been when he was first elected.

Ocean Hill–Brownsville had shifted the tectonic plates beneath the city's political landscape. Henceforth it would be race, rather than religion, ethnicity, or class, that would determine outer-borough Jewish electoral allegiances. Many historians have oversimplified this shift, dismissing it as a Jewish embrace of "white" identity, as well as a rejection of what they assume was a "natural" Jewish racial liberalism. But it is more accurately viewed as a natural impulse toward self-preservation. The Jews of Brooklyn, Queens, and the Bronx saw their co-religionists attacked not just as whites but also as Jews, in base, crude language that evoked painful memories of the Holocaust, then only two decades in the past. Manhattan elites and black community leaders whom they expected to speak out forcefully against this language did not do so.* Under the circumstances, it is hardly surprising that outerborough Jews sought a safe harbor with sympathetic white Catholics.

For many contemporary historians, the Ocean Hill–Brownsville story is an example of the extension of the civil-rights movement to northern cities—and its failures are cited as proof of the intransigence of northern white racism in its unwillingness to deal with the discrimination and inequality faced by African Americans. That is a narrow and simplistic view that ignores both the complexities of the community-control struggle as well as the many miscalculations and strategic errors of both white liberals and African-American community-control advocates. Modern liberalism believes in the all-powerful explanatory power of "white racism," but while it explains many things, it does not explain all things. Ocean Hill–Brownsville shows how real history cannot be so neatly summed up by those two words.

The complexities do not stop there. For John Lindsay and McGeorge Bundy were correct in many of their criticisms. The city's education bureaucracy was sclerotic and self-serving, best revealed even today by Bel Kaufman's extraordinary novel Up the Down Staircase. And black parents were also correct that their children were not getting the quality education they deserved and that parents should demand more voice in their children's education.

The UFT was also correct that the due-process rights of its members were being ignored under community control and that white, mostly Jewish, teachers were being scapegoated for the failures of urban schools—often in anti-Semitic and anti-white language. But Ocean Hill–Brownsville showed the ultimate power of Shanker and the UFT, a power that would only grow. Today, teachers' unions around the country are the backbone of the Democratic Party and contemporary liberalism. As in the 1960s, the teachers' unions vehemently oppose attempts at education reform. But unlike the situation in the 1960s, many of those reforms, such as charter schools, school choice, education standards, and testing, are often pushed by conservative and centrist politicians. While the teachers' unions of the 1960s foreshadowed some of the growth of neoconservative disillusionment with liberalism, today's teachers' unions are firmly on the left politically and ideologically.

Regardless of where the teachers' unions are politically today, the Ocean Hill–Brownsville controversy does provide a window into our own tortured political situation. The battle over community control and the subsequent teachers' strikes show the pernicious and poisonous effects of a top-down political coalition. The roots of those politics date back to Lindsay's New York and have come into full bloom in our own time. Neither Lindsay nor Bundy were products of public schools and would never send their own children to them. Yet they were willing to impose their agenda on schools in an effort to protect their own interests. The ultimate costs of their meddling would never be borne by their friends and colleagues, but rather by those working and middle-class New Yorkers whom Lindsay and his allies held in barely concealed contempt.

Those in the Manhattan managerial and professional classes who decried the choices Jews made during the Ocean Hill–Brownsville crisis believed that their own interests lay with community control as a means of maintaining social stability and racial peace. "What you have," Shanker argued perceptively after the strikes, "is people on the upper economic level who are willing to make any change that does not affect their own position. And so it is the middle-class interests that are narrow and selfish and the civil-service teacher who must be sacrificed. I'm not sure this is a WASP attitude. I think it is only human. But what if you said give 20 percent of Time, Inc. or U.S. Steel to blacks? Who would be narrow then?"

Liberal politics today is largely driven by a coalition of elite white professionals, whether called the "coastal elites" or the gentry class. Their rhetoric and virtue-posturing notwithstanding, they seem both disconnected from the minority poor they claim to represent and hostile to a middle-class America that embarrasses them. The Ocean Hill–Brownsville crisis offers an early glimpse of what happens when a group becomes generous with the lives and well-being of others but stingy with their own. This is probably its most enduring legacy: a reminder that whether it be a John Lindsay yesterday or a Bill de Blasio today, those who profess to "give a damn" speak of thee, not of me.

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* Civil-rights and labor leaders Bayard Rustin and A. Philip Randolph, who condemned expressions of anti-Semitism during the Ocean Hill–Brownsville strikes, were notable exceptions in this regard.

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Vincent J. Cannato, associate professor of history at the University of Massachusetts Boston, is the author of, among other works, *The Ungovernable City: John Lindsay and His Struggle to Save New York*.

Jerald Podair is professor of history and Robert S. French professor of American studies at Lawrence University and the author of *The Strike That Changed New York: Blacks, Whites, and the Ocean Hill–Brownsville Crisis*.

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