

# Finally, dispelling the myths behind Detroit's decline



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Black leadership ruined Detroit.

White flight doomed the city.

High taxes caused Detroit's demise.

Deindustrialization drove the city to bankruptcy.

State government caused Detroit's financial crisis.

It's all Coleman Young's fault.

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If you take anything from Free Press reporters Nathan Bomey and John Gallagher's examination of Detroit's multi-decade slide into insolvency, it should be that each of those narratives is hogwash.

Reductionist, wrong, or outright ridiculous, every one of them fails the test of nuance and complexity. Their appeal is the simplicity of self-satisfaction or blame, a shorthand that allows the city's critics to distance themselves from responsibility or true understanding.

But they are dangerous distractions. No one factor drove Detroit's decline. No one person cast the city's fortunes or doomed its future. It was the confluence of a great many things, over a spectacular span of time, that produced the mess that sits before federal bankruptcy Judge Steven Rhodes.

And here's why the danger is so palpable: Simple tag lines and slogans don't explain Detroit's financial difficulties, so clinging to them now assures failure in the effort to rebuild the city once its back on its financial feet.

Detroit needs deep analysis of what went wrong, and everyone who played a part, to come up with the strategy that will make it again rise from the ashes the way Father Gabriel Richard foretold three centuries ago. It needs thought and dedication. It needs an end to impulsive canards and wild untruths.

And yet, every week my phone rings and my e-mail inbox overflows with told and retold absurdities about what happened to Detroit. Bigots tell me that the emergence of the city's black political leadership in the 1970s was the catalyst for the downslide, conveniently ignoring the three decades of poor decision-making that preceded it.

I hear constantly about the role state government played in the city's financial deterioration, how if not for cuts to revenue sharing and other municipal support, Detroit would be just fine. But that glosses over the consistent, catastrophic stream of poor choices and fantasy-inspired budgeting our recent leadership has indulged.

Some people say the city's sole problem is high taxes: If we stopped levying them, people would move back. Never mind how we'd pay for services.

And then there's Young, the archetype for the city's take-no-crap black leadership and one of the most attractive lightning rods for the city's naysayers. The Wall Street Journal editorial page published a myopically critical commentary (and filmed an accompanying television segment for its website)

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that laid the lion's share of blame at Young's feet: He was divisive. He went to war with the city's economic establishment. He left the city a fiscal and social mess.

Bomey and Gallagher paint a far more accurate picture of Young, noting that like every other mayor the city has had for the past 60 years, he made good decisions and bad ones, did things that helped the situation and hurt it. Young managed the city's budget conservatively and brought costs down, especially in the public safety sector of city government. He forged important business partnerships that brought jobs and tax revenue into Detroit.

Young also had his foibles: the scandals, the heated, pugnacious rhetoric, the failure to recognize the big-picture implications of the city's declining financial situation. But to tar Young with near sole responsibility for Detroit troubles?

It's mendacious.

The great potential of Bomey and Gallagher's work is crucial: to remove emotion from the discussion of Detroit's problems and stick to the facts. The numbers speak for themselves, and paint a downward trend that extends as far back as the administration of Albert Cobo back in the 1950s. The narrative winds through the pattern of dereliction and mistakes that brought a once-great city to its financial knees.

It's a jolt to me in some ways, too. I'm a native Detroiter and an African American. The city's bankruptcy makes me angry and embarrassed, and inspires profound disappointment that it all happened while black people were in charge, giving easy ammo to those who want to draw a causal relationship between skin color and competence.

But truth shatters the tendency to react with emotion. It grounds the willing in facts and figures that will lead Detroit to better decisions and a stronger future.

If we can get enough people to come along, I know this city can thrive again.