

# We'll Remember in November: The Defense of Segregation in Frank Rizzo's Philadelphia

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On the morning of March 23, 1971, a group of furious white men and women, many carrying small children, left their homes and marched to a six-acre lot bound by Front, 2<sup>nd</sup>, and Oregon Streets in their South Philadelphia neighborhood. When they climbed atop bulldozers and physically blocked construction vehicles from entering the site, the Whitman Park community inserted themselves into one of the longest legal battles over public housing in United States history. The neighbors were protesting construction of the Whitman Park Townhouse Project because they feared that public housing would transform their community. In spite of, and in reaction to, recently passed federal anti-discrimination laws, the people of Whitman Park were determined to keep their neighborhood segregated. The protests violated federal mandates, but the residents felt entitled to this lawlessness, claiming a need for protection against alleged criminality in poor minority communities.

Whitman residents felt threatened by integration because, in a real estate market shaped by ideas about race, the possibility of black neighbors in all-white neighborhoods decreased property values and increased the number of for-sale signs. Many Whitman residents cited defense of property values as the root of their anger. The prospect of losing the investment they had made in their homes was frightening as the economy steadily declined throughout the 1970s. Their fear and anger was also deeply connected to prejudice and stereotypes about black people and black neighborhoods. Opponents of the project focused their rhetoric on economic insecurity, but the racial components of their fear compounded with their economic justifications to create a powerful anti-public housing consensus among many white, working class Philadelphia communities.

Opposition to the new housing units came to be championed by Mayor Frank Rizzo, who vocalized and promoted the sentiments of white backlash against the Civil Rights Movement. Public

housing acted as a proxy for politicians and white Philadelphians to discuss what they perceived to be problems within the African American community. Rizzo built his career on white Philadelphians' fear of rising crime rates and changing neighborhoods, while blurring the lines between blackness and criminality in his public rhetoric. His language was more often coded than explicit, but his message was clear. "Tough on crime" took on a double meaning in Rizzo's Philadelphia, it also meant tough on African Americans.

Mayor Rizzo was a hometown hero in Whitman and other white, blue-collar neighborhoods across the city. Like the residents in many of those neighborhoods, Rizzo was a second-generation European immigrant whose parents had come to America and struggled to enter the middle class. Philadelphia's white blue-collar communities identified with Rizzo. They believed the American Dream was available to all who were willing to work for it, citing themselves and their parents as proof of its efficacy. Whitman residents could not see beyond their own fear and economic insecurity to comprehend their racial advantage. They believed that public housing tenants, 85 percent of whom were African American, relied on the government rather than hard work and would receive the homes as unfair handouts.<sup>1</sup> When the Rizzo administration became an ally of the neighbors in Whitman, they swore that public housing would never be built on the site. They were wrong.

Philadelphia's white, blue-collar community saw Rizzo's election as a turning point. His victory was highly contingent on a campaign promise that no community would have public housing "forced down their throats."<sup>2</sup> Philadelphia was operating in a new political climate. The new mayor, like many white residents, regarded anti-discrimination policies as reverse racism. Their opposition, however, proved illegal and unsustainable. When the battle over Whitman Park ended in 1978 and the United States Supreme Court ordered the

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<sup>1</sup> Walter Needle, *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*, June 2, 1977. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. Temple University Special Collections Research Center. (Referenced hereafter as TU SCRC)

<sup>2</sup> Walter Needle, *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*, June 2, 1977. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

construction of the project, Rizzo's political career never fully recovered. The national political context, the demographics of Whitman Park, and Rizzo's strong appeal to the fears of white residents made it possible to delay construction of the project for ten years, but ultimately federal law reigned supreme.

Civil Rights mandates passed in the 1960s did not succeed in their goal of killing legal and institutional discrimination, but they did make it much more difficult to keep alive. The fight to keep Whitman Park segregated mirrored broader racial tensions of Rizzo's Philadelphia. Frank Rizzo appealed to disenfranchised and insecure white Philadelphians with the coded concept of "law and order" politics, which ultimately insured that whites who opposed civil rights law would be immune from legal penalties. "Law" applied to those who Rizzo cast as criminal, usually minority citizens, and "order" implied the maintenance of a racist status quo. When white backlash was legitimized by the Rizzo administration through their continued support for Whitman protesters, white ethnic voters mobilized against federal mandates and created a powerful political movement. Rizzo supporters saw civil rights reforms as an affront to their own rights, which spawned criminal action within Philadelphia's municipal government, allowed police discrimination, and inspired violence in a formerly peaceful South Philadelphia community.

### **Why Whitman? : The Context of White Backlash in Philadelphia**

National social and political trends of the 1970s are important to understanding the story of Frank Rizzo and Whitman Park. In 1963, 31 percent of white American adults felt that the government was moving too quickly on civil rights. By 1968, that number had reached more than 50 percent, which suggested that white adults thought African American progress was a threat to their own security.<sup>3</sup> From 1961 to 1968, the average aggregate income for whites increased 56 percent, while for nonwhites it increased 110 percent.<sup>4</sup> The Civil Rights Act of 1968 (also known as the Fair Housing Act) was aimed at achieving equal opportunity housing. These unprecedented challenges to institutionalized discrimination

threatened white control over the job and housing market for the first time with viable legal support. White South Philadelphia grandmother Theresa O'Donnel spoke to her anxiety about these changes when she explained her vote for Frank Rizzo at his 1975 election result rally,

We can't have a cultured, educated, gentle man [as mayor]. He has to deal with... Well, you know what he has to deal with. I used to live in North Philadelphia, but I had to move. There were some nice ones but then others started moving in and I was scared. They'll shoot you in a minute. They want to better themselves? Let them go right ahead. But not at my expense.<sup>5</sup>

O'Donnel's views were shared by many other white working-class Philadelphians, who were not only uncomfortable with the speed of progress for people of color, but also with the lack of progress for themselves.

In the wake of the Civil Rights Movement, many Italian, Irish, Russian, and Polish working-class second- and third-generation immigrants felt the Democratic Party, once the party of the blue-collar worker, was neglecting them and becoming a party that catered to minorities. Historian Jefferson Cowie clarifies that, "As the distinction between 'black' and 'blue collar' unconsciously suggests, white men were workers in the popular political lexicon, and black people and women were others--non-workers, welfare recipients, or worse."<sup>6</sup> This is clear when Mrs. O'Donnel says "others" to describe her African American neighbors. O'Donnel's willingness to defend her views, but her unwillingness to explicitly involve skin color is telling about coded politics of race in the 1970s. Elected officials learned how to capitalize on the black vs. white, worker vs. non-worker distinction, which changed the way that Americans politicized race.

Frank Rizzo was one of the first public figures to master this rhetoric. His electoral success in Philadelphia's overwhelmingly white blue-collar neighborhoods proved that playing on racial

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<sup>5</sup> Joseph R Daughen and Peter Binzen. *The Cop Who Would Be King: Mayor Frank Rizzo*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1977. 14.

<sup>6</sup> Jefferson Cowie. *Stayin' Alive: The 1970s and the Last Days of the Working Class*. New York: New Press. 2010. 77.

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<sup>3</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*. 14-15.

<sup>4</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich*. 28.

divisions could be the key to winning an election.<sup>7</sup> President Richard Nixon, who based his Southern Strategy and “law and order” approach in his 1968 campaign on Rizzo’s rhetoric, used race to divide the national electorate.<sup>8</sup> John D. Ehrlichman, counsel and assistant to the president for domestic affairs under Richard Nixon, believed that blue-collar white voters would be able to become more politically conservative and “avoid admitting to [themselves] that [they were] attracted by a racist appeal.”<sup>9</sup> This is hugely important in understanding Rizzo and the Rizzo supporter. By avoiding explicitly racialized language and instead underpinning public rhetoric with negative black stereotypes, the city administration and the Whitman Area Improvement Council could maintain that their actions were not racially discriminatory. Open expression of white supremacist values was not socially or politically acceptable, but, as Rizzo said, Whitman residents could still, “vote white”.<sup>10</sup> He and his supporters had a tacit agreement, a vote for Rizzo meant a vote for protection of white interests.

Whitman Park became a white neighborhood by way of an urban renewal program.<sup>11</sup> When all existing houses on the site were demolished in 1960, 70 percent of the families removed were black.<sup>12</sup> The Whitman Area Improvement Council (WAIC) was formed the following year to oppose the high-rise public housing that was originally planned for the site. The WAIC partially succeeded in stopping the construction, which transitioned the project from traditional public housing to the newly developed Turnkey Home-Ownership Program. This new program was designed so that participating families would be granted eventual ownership of their homes by paying 25 percent of their monthly income over 30 years, maintaining the property, and

paying their own utilities.<sup>13</sup> In 1963 the six-acre lot was designated as the Whitman Urban Renewal Area. This provided the residents with free grants from the Redevelopment Authority (RA) to improve their neighborhood. The designation as an urban renewal area also required more clearance of land for development, and the subsequent demolition removed almost all remaining black families in the neighborhood. By the end of 1963, Whitman Park was 98% white.<sup>14</sup>

Whitman Park was once racially diverse, so why would public housing and the thought of black people moving to the area compel residents to mount such intense opposition? The civil rights efforts of the 1960s did not heal racial tensions in the area; it intensified them. In 1970, for the first time since WWII, the population of all Philadelphia neighborhoods fell below 2 million residents<sup>15</sup>. Philadelphia’s African American population rose from 24 percent in 1960 to 34 percent in 1970.<sup>16</sup> A dramatic loss of population had weakened Philadelphia’s economy and the crime rate was on the rise. Whitman Park residents, along with many other white ethnic city dwellers, connected the rising crime rate to the increase in black population. This made the politics of white backlash particularly appealing to both the long and newly established white residents of Whitman Park, who believed their quality of life and their neighborhood would be harmed by integration and civil rights reform.

### **Politics of Protection and Race in Rizzo’s Philadelphia**

The Whitman Urban Renewal Area remained vacant until 1970, when developer Multicon Inc. signed a contract with the city of Philadelphia, the Philadelphia Housing Authority, and the Redevelopment Authority to build 120 low-

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<sup>7</sup> Sal A Paolantonio, *Frank Rizzo: The Last Big Man in Big City America. 10th Anniversary Ed. ed.* Philadelphia: Camino Books, 2003. 112.

<sup>8</sup> Paolantonio. *The Last Big Man.* 154.

<sup>9</sup> Carter, *From George Wallace to Newt Gingrich.* 30-31.

<sup>10</sup> Harmon Gordon, *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*, September 7, 1978. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>11</sup> Lombardo, “The Battle of Whitman Park”. 410.

<sup>12</sup> Philadelphia Conference of Human Services and the Housing Association of Delaware Valley, “History of Whitman Park” (June 1970). Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 4. TU SCRC.

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<sup>13</sup> Philadelphia Conference of Human Services and the Housing Association of Delaware Valley, “History of Whitman Park” (June 1970). Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 4. TU SCRC.

<sup>14</sup> Philadelphia Conference of Human Services and the Housing Association of Delaware Valley, “History of Whitman Park” (June 1970). Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 4. TU SCRC.

<sup>15</sup> Paolantonio, *The Last Big Man.* 15.

<sup>16</sup> Daughen and Binzen, *The Cop Who Would Be King.* 62.

income housing units.<sup>17</sup> Multicon was selected from 30 options submitted by developers because their models were the least expensive, at about \$12,513 dollars per house.<sup>18</sup> When construction began and was promptly halted by the protesters in March of 1971, misinformation and anger quickly spread through the city's white ethnic communities. The day that protests began, conservative columnist William J. Storm incorrectly reported that residential opposition stemmed from the fact that the houses, "priced \$18,000-20,000 will be offered instead to outsiders with incomes less than \$5,000".<sup>19</sup> Reports failed to mention that 50 percent of the units would be reserved for tenants who had previously lived in Whitman Park, and that the tenants would be financially responsible for utilities and repairs. Many reports also failed to mention that each potential family would be thoroughly screened and the minimum annual income was raised to between \$7,000-8,000 as a concession to the opposition.<sup>20</sup> Ninety-five percent of Philadelphians on the public housing waitlist were non-white.<sup>21</sup> Tension was steadily rising between those who wanted the project stopped and those who claimed that the protests were a poorly disguised attempt to keep the neighborhood segregated.

In the spring of 1971 early in the dispute, WAIC President Fred Durdning threatened that the protests could become violent.<sup>22</sup> Delaying construction, however, proved easier than Durdning had anticipated. Residents were supported by the union construction workers as well as the

Philadelphia Police, at the time headed by then-commissioner Rizzo. Whitman residents quickly learned were exempt from the "law and order" policies that the commissioner was becoming so famous for. Protesters engaged in vandalism, picketed without permits, and violated court orders without fear of arrest. As a result of these illegal actions, Multicon agreed to halt construction pending further orders by the court one month after the picketing began.<sup>23</sup> From early spring to mid-summer, the Whitman protesters and Mayor James Tate's administration exchanged threats and multiple court orders.<sup>24</sup> By the end of July, Durdning bragged publicly that despite the injunctions, unions and police were still honoring picket lines.<sup>25</sup>

Growing impatient with their lame duck mayor, the WAIC filed a lawsuit against Multicon, the PHA, and the Redevelopment Authority. They charged the townhouse project was being built under an illegal contract that had failed to meet community approval requirements.<sup>26</sup> While they scrambled to find a justification for their opposition that would hold up in court, it was getting harder for Whitman residents to afford legal fees. As the 1971 mayoral election approached, their signs read, "Live Better--Go On Welfare", "This Land is Our Land--Whitman Taxpayers", "For Sale, 12,000 votes, 39<sup>th</sup> ward", and "We'll remember in November".<sup>27</sup> The Whitman residents were looking for a hero and when the election came, they found one.

Frank Rizzo emerged as a champion to the Whitman residents. By 1971, he had cultivated a public image, politicized the Philadelphia Police force, and translated his "law-and-order" strategy from policing to politics. His nomination by the Democratic Party was a strategic concession to the city's white ethnic population, whose attitudes

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<sup>17</sup> William J. Storm. *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*, March 31, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>18</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*, May 1, 1970. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>19</sup> William J. Storm. *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. March 23, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>20</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. March 25, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>21</sup> "Testimony by Yale Rabin" as found in "Resident Advisory Board by Rose Wylie, Trustee and Housing Task Force of the Urban Coalition V. Frank L. Rizzo, Individually and in his capacity as Mayor of Philadelphia." December 4, 1975. Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 4. TU SCRC.

<sup>22</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. April 9, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

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<sup>23</sup> Harmon Gordon. *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. April 30 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>24</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. July 6, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>25</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. July 21, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>26</sup> Harmon Gordon. *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. July 7, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>27</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. July 15, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.



about race and civil rights were driving them towards the Republican Party. Throughout his campaign for mayor, Rizzo promised that no public housing would be built against the wishes of the surrounding community. In a campaign speech, he said:

I have seen all manner of people crying into their beer about welfare; and since this issue is a vote-getter, politicians are crying the loudest. Continuously, we are all called upon to provide for those who contribute nothing to society except greater burdens... This is not to say that I am against helping the needy.<sup>28</sup>

In this statement, the collective “we” referred to taxpayers opposed to welfare, while welfare recipients themselves were reduced to burdens. The mayor ignored the disadvantage that most welfare recipients encountered, yet acknowledged the existence of the needy. In doing so, he implied that these people belonged to two distinct categories. One day after the Whitman protests began, Whitman resident Sophie Horman wrote a letter to the editor of the *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin* echoing Rizzo’s rhetoric:

If homes are built for the irresponsible ‘poor’-- for when the owner has not got his own dollars invested, he could care less about upkeep, repairs, and yes, even payments... Whom do we subsidize when dwellings costing 18,000 plus are being built for the poor? Certainly not the real poor, the fellow who has sweated, alongside with his wife, to save and struggle to pay for a home, and now to be taxed to death to pay for the homes of others.<sup>29</sup>

Horman and Rizzo shared the idea that there was a distinction between the “real poor” and others who were poor because they lacked talent or a sufficient work ethic. Among Rizzo and his supporters, it was understood that African Americans fell into the latter category. Public housing tenants, if they were black as the Whitman residents presumed, would not qualify as truly poor because of their skin color

and the stereotypes that came with it. The neighbors in Whitman conceived of themselves as hard-working taxpayers, and in contrast saw public housing residents as free-riders who capitalized on the hard-work and contributions of others.

The residents of Whitman Park demonstrated a short memory and a double standard about welfare and government aid. Since 1963 when Whitman became an urban renewal area, over one quarter of residents themselves had received \$2,718,278 in direct grants from the Redevelopment Authority and FHA to make improvements to their own homes.<sup>30</sup> Historian Timothy Lombardo explains that, “In contrast to the public housing tenants and welfare recipients they classified as undeserving, they defined their community as a class of hard-working people that earned their right to certain privileges.”<sup>31</sup> Throughout the Whitman dispute, Rizzo made it clear that he would only answer to the needs of those whose hard work was legitimized by the whiteness of their skin.

### **Backlash, Bureaucracy and Breakdown in Philadelphia’s Municipal Government**

Once elected, Mayor Rizzo cemented his alliance with the city’s white ethnic community by taking legal action against Multicon to permanently end construction of the project in Whitman. The PHA and the Redevelopment Authority had insisted since the picketing began that they were “shocked” about the protests.<sup>32</sup> The housing agencies asserted community approval had not been an issue in the 13 years leading up to construction.<sup>33</sup> Despite this fact, when Multicon tried to back out of the project in spring of 1972, Rizzo changed the city’s position on the initial contract. The mayor sided with the Whitman residents, echoing their charge that the contract with Multicon Inc. was void because it lacked community approval. When the contract

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<sup>30</sup> “Resident Advisory Board Et Al., V. Frank Rizzo Et Al,” November 5, 1976. The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 1. TU SCRC.

<sup>31</sup> Lombardo, “The Battle of Whitman Park”. 404.

<sup>32</sup> “PHA Official ‘Shocked’ Over Whitman Protest.” *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*, April 11, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>33</sup> “PHA Official ‘Shocked’ Over Whitman Protest.” *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*, April 11, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

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<sup>28</sup> Daughen and Binzen. *The Cop Who Would Be King*. 154.

<sup>29</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*, March 24, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

defaulted on April 27<sup>th</sup>, Multicon had barely completed any construction. Their progress was impeded not only by protesters who physically blocked the site, but also by repeated vandalism, union support for the protestors, and nightly destruction of progress that the developers made during the day. Although he was no longer commissioner, Rizzo continued to control the police force, which assured protesters that they would not be arrested.

Multicon Inc. responded to the false allegations by the city government with a \$1.5 million damages suit against the city of Philadelphia, the PHA, the Redevelopment Authority, and the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development.<sup>34</sup> The city's legal complaints against Multicon were contradictory and not well founded, but Rizzo ordered the city to sue the developer and halt their plans to resume building. Deputy Mayor Phil Carroll justified this "based on the fact that the builder's contract expired in April and that the city is tired of policing the site."<sup>35</sup> This was a blatant lie. The city administration was scrambling to find ways to halt construction through the court system, despite the fact that halting construction of Whitman Park was illegal discrimination by federal standards. This forced the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development (HUD) to break their silence on the issue in July 1972.

HUD and the federal government rejected the city's claims that the contract expired and was signed without community consent. Title VIII of the Fair Housing Act stated that no person in the United States could be denied the benefits of any program or activity receiving federal funding. Between 1963 and 1975, the total amount of government funds spent in the Whitman Urban Renewal Area was over \$11 million, with about \$6 million coming directly from the federal government.<sup>36</sup> Rizzo

responded to HUD's disapproval by simply ignoring their resolution method. When HUD realized there would not be compliance, they demanded \$2.5 million from the city to cancel the project, including a \$1.5 million payment to Multicon and a \$1 million payment to the federal government for funds used to purchase the land. Rizzo had lost an important alliance with Richard Nixon, and the new presidential administration was less willing to overlook civil rights violations.

As the city, the housing institutions, Multicon, and the Federal Government battled in court over the contract and continued to stall construction, a stronger case was emerging out of Whitman Park. This time, the plaintiffs were the Urban Coalition and Resident Advisory Board (RAB). They represented the 14,000 people on the public housing waitlist and had spent the year following the start of the protests closely watching the case while building one of their own.<sup>37</sup> Leaders of the RAB and Urban Coalition included community activists Nellie Reynolds and Shirley Dennis as well as former mayoral candidate Charles Bowser. The plaintiffs charged that the underlying problem was not a contract disagreement, but a civil rights issue.<sup>38</sup> The plaintiff's lawyer, Jonathan Stein, told the media, "We'll show there was racial motivation in the community and in the minds of city officials and the mayor's office itself."<sup>39</sup> In October 1975, the Whitman Park Townhouse dispute went to trial as a civil rights case in Pennsylvania's Supreme Court.

### **The Whitman Dispute Goes to Trial**

The ideology of white backlash had little power on its own, but with Mayor Rizzo in control of the city's institutions, racially and socially conservative policies dominated Philadelphia,

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Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 4. TU SCRC.

<sup>37</sup> "Testimony by Yale Rabin" as found in "Resident Advisory Board by Rose Wylie, Trustee and Housing Task Force of the Urban Coalition V. Frank L. Rizzo, Individually and in his capacity as Mayor of Philadelphia." December 4, 1975. Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 4. TU SCRC.

<sup>38</sup> Jim Smith, *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. October 8, 1973. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>39</sup> Harmon Gordon, *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. October 8, 1975. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

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<sup>34</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. June 29, 1971. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>35</sup> Dennis Kirkland, *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. June 22, 1972. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>36</sup> "Testimony by Yale Rabin" as found in "Resident Advisory Board by Rose Wylie, Trustee and Housing Task Force of the Urban Coalition V. Frank L. Rizzo, Individually and in his capacity as Mayor of Philadelphia." December 4, 1975.

drowning out the voices of those who called for reform. Rizzo's influence became clear in October 1975 when former chair of the Redevelopment Authority, John Greenlee, testified and revealed that Rizzo had ordered him to void the contract with Multicon Inc. on the grounds that, "he would not allow people in the housing authority to ruin nice neighborhoods."<sup>40</sup> Greenlee told the judge that he had explained the potential legal problems to the mayor upon hearing this, as well as the damages that would be owed to the Department of Housing and Urban Development and Multicon. Rizzo responded that there would be no compromise because, "the people felt that there would be black people moving in and there's no way in handling that."<sup>41</sup>

Rizzo turned the PHA and the Redevelopment Authority into puppets of his administration. The mayor proposed a "contract of agreement" to the PHA and Redevelopment Authority that gave his office full oversight over of operations, and more importantly control over construction of public housing. When the then-independent agencies refused to comply, Rizzo launched an investigation.<sup>42</sup> The investigation into the PHA and Redevelopment Authority distracted the media and the public from underlying deficiencies in Philadelphia's housing program while also serving as a source of blackmail. Mayor Rizzo forced the PHA to accept the contract by threatening to have Frosteena Key, the only board member who was actually a public housing tenant, removed from her home because her salary was allegedly too high to meet minimum income qualifications.<sup>43</sup> The mayor then ousted Greenlee and installed his finance director, Lennox Moak, whose opinion was that, "there should be no housing program other than demolition."<sup>44</sup> Rizzo's white constituency saw these developments as sure signs of victory.

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<sup>40</sup> "Rizzo Wanted to Stop Whitman-Greenlee", *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. October 30, 1975. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>41</sup> Ewart Rose, *Philadelphia Inquirer*. November 10, 1975. Philadelphia Inquirer Clippings Collection—SCRC 171. TU SCRC.

<sup>42</sup> Daughen and Binzen, *The Cop Who Would Be King*. 231-236.

<sup>43</sup> Daughen and Binzen, *The Cop Who Would Be King*. 198-199.

<sup>44</sup> Daughen and Binzen, *The Cop Who Would Be King*. 196.

Federal law mandated that public housing could not be built in racially impacted areas, which meant predominantly minority neighborhoods that suffered from low employment, poor infrastructure, and historic neglect. This provision was included in the Fair Housing Act in an attempt to disrupt the cycle of ghettoization and urban poverty. Rizzo and the Whitman Residents were fighting to keep the mechanisms of white supremacy in place. Under the more palatable guise of being anti-special privileges and anti-handout, Whitman opposition legitimized anti-civil rights policies and rhetoric in mainstream political culture. In doing so, they were able to maintain the cycle of oppression that ensured that they, the white working-class, would be at least marginally more economically secure.

The RAB and the Urban Coalition had the burden of working against the city government as well as the burden of proof. To win their case, the groups had to show that preventing the construction of Whitman Park disproportionately disadvantaged the city's African American community. In order to do this the prosecution had Yale Rabin, an M.I.T. professor and urban planning scholar, prepare a report to show the severity of racial divisions in Philadelphia neighborhoods. Rabin's report confirmed what was plain to see when walking around Philadelphia's neighborhoods; the city was segregated. Of the 54,000 families in Philadelphia living below the poverty line, which was defined as a monthly income of \$500, 58 percent of the families were black.<sup>45</sup> Rabin concluded that not only was the city segregated, but the city government had a hand in engineering the racial divisions. Rabin explained,

...blacks--particularly the lowest income blacks-- are isolated both racially and by their lack of purchasing power to the lowest cost, poorest quality housing in the city which is located in the black residential areas of the city...Now, given that understanding, the effect of the failure to build the Whitman project is to deny every black household in the city of Philadelphia

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<sup>45</sup> "Testimony by Yale Rabin" as found in "Resident Advisory Board by Rose Wylie, Trustee and Housing Task Force of the Urban Coalition V. Frank L. Rizzo, Individually and in his capacity as Mayor of Philadelphia." December 4, 1975. Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 4. TU SCRC.

who is in need of and eligible for public housing another opportunity to live outside of black residential areas of the city of Philadelphia.<sup>46</sup>

The report showed that the dispute over Whitman Park was much larger than one Philadelphia neighborhood. The denial of black access to homes in white neighborhoods was systematic.

The Rizzo administration, the WAIC, and the city's housing institutions had effectively fought to keep African Americans out of the white nonracially impacted neighborhoods. In doing so, they were also assuring that Philadelphia's black community remained in poverty or, at least, geographically isolated from white communities. This led well-known conservative Judge Raymond Broderick, a Nixon appointee, to assert that the project, "was a unique opportunity for these blacks living in racially impacted areas of Philadelphia to live in integrated nonracially impacted areas," in accordance with title VIII of the Fair Housing Act.<sup>47</sup> Hundreds, possibly even thousands, of public housing units were not built during Rizzo's mayoral tenure because HUD refused to finance projects in all-black areas, and that was the only place the city was willing to build them.<sup>48</sup> When asked if he had ever considered the racial impact of his actions, the mayor said, "I would have to say that it never entered my mind. But thinking it over, I would say that there is a possibility that that might affect the minorities-- that they might be shortchanged, but it would not change my position."<sup>49</sup>

### **Decision and Discontent: Whitman Loses their Power in City Hall**

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<sup>46</sup> "Testimony by Yale Rabin" as found in "Resident Advisory Board by Rose Wylie, Trustee and Housing Task Force of the Urban Coalition V. Frank L. Rizzo, Individually and in his capacity as Mayor of Philadelphia." December 4, 1975. Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 4. TU SCRC.

<sup>47</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. November 9, 1976.

Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>48</sup> Jim Smith, *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. December 1, 1975. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>49</sup> "Resident Advisory Board Et Al., V. Frank Rizzo Et Al.," November 5, 1976. The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 1. TU SCRC.

In November 1976, Judge Broderick ordered the construction of Whitman Park. He determined that Philadelphia's city government had been fostering racial discrimination, and argued that certain city officials must have been aware of the existence of racially motivated opposition. In his opinion, Broderick stated,

The evidence is uncontested that Mayor Rizzo, both before and after taking office in 1972, considered public housing to be black housing and took a stand against placing such housing in white neighborhoods. Further, the city must be charged with knowledge of the fact that, as pointed out therein, the cancellation of the Whitman Park Townhouse Project had an obvious disparate effect on the black community and that the natural consequences of the action taken by the city would be to produce that disparate impact.

The defense had failed to convince the judge that their argument had no racial components. Fear of low property values and undesirable neighbors was not sufficient legal cause for stopping the project. Accompanying the ruling, the judge ordered that the PHA must develop a plan within 90 days to further integrate all Philadelphia public housing.<sup>50</sup> Rabin's testimony, testimony from public housing tenants, and testimony from the mayor himself had made it abundantly clear that stoppage of the construction of Whitman Park was about race. It was an attempt to halt civil rights reform, and the Rizzo administration's deliberate action to protect the interests of his white supporters had made white protectionism seem legally viable and municipally endorsed.

The organized white backlash continued when the WAIC and the Rizzo administration refused to accept the ruling and filed a series of appeals. The decision did not settle the dispute, but instead brought a renewed anger and passion to Whitman opponents. Well known Whitman resident and Republican committeewoman Gert Hogan said after the ruling, "I don't care if 60 black people live next to me as long as they pay their own way. If I

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<sup>50</sup> "Resident Advisory Board Et Al., V. Frank Rizzo Et Al.," November 5, 1976. The United States District Court for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Housing Association of Delaware Valley Records. Series 12. Box 1. TU SCRC.



see one bulldozer out there—all it will take is one call and I'll have 500 people out there.”<sup>51</sup> Hogan's scenario was not an empty threat. She and the other Whitman residents' protests were unaffected by the court's decision. The WAIC had been extremely well organized throughout the dispute and remained confident that the mayor would never allow arrests to be made. Editorialist Claude Lewis wrote in 1978 while the trial was awaiting appeal,

The people, despite the court, have the iron willed--, if irrational support of Mayor Frank Rizzo. They know that they are right because Big Frank, who works in a \$130,000 official and lives in a \$150,000 house and who is the champion of the little guys, says they don't have to have new houses where weeds and garbage now grow.<sup>52</sup>

Frank Rizzo made the people of Whitman Park feel that they were above the law. The racial privilege that the police force and city officials had afforded protesters throughout the dispute seemed limitless. Fred Durning warned that, “If we don't win in the courts it will go back to the streets, that's when I see people getting killed and a lot of horrible things happening.”<sup>53</sup>

In March 1978, the United States Supreme Court refused to hear the case. The residents of Whitman Park were incensed. After the Supreme Court announced they would not hear the case, Fred Durning told the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, “It's no secret that people are buying rifles, hand grenades and dynamite. There's nothing that I can do to stop them. They are ready to die for it. If the project is built, we're going to have a Vietnam in Whitman.”<sup>54</sup> Threats of violence by the WAIC were present from the start of the dispute, but 1978 brought a renewed fervor to their backlash.

The people of Whitman were at war, but with whom? Was their violence directed toward the federal government that was enforcing civil rights mandates, or were they threatening their prospective neighbors? Possibly both. Violent rhetoric and support from their leader had legitimized their cause, justified their anger, and preyed on their fear of slipping through the cracks of the American system. Whitman residents had pledged their allegiance to Rizzo, a man who once said, “the only thing these Black Power leaders understand is force”, and whose main response to race riots was to purchase military equipment for the police force.<sup>55</sup> This message that underpinned the Rizzo administration was carefully delivered, yet explicit enough for the city's angry white ethnic population to understand easily: you should be afraid of African Americans, they are a problem for the city, and fighting civil rights with violence or protest is a viable solution.

As the anger persisted, the Carter administration lost its patience with Philadelphia's municipal government and their commitment to white backlash. At this point Rizzo was still a Democrat, even if only nominally. The president warned that unless the city complied with building Whitman Park, as well as public housing in other predominantly white neighborhoods, the White House would withhold \$102.8 million dollars for job and housing rehabilitation.<sup>56</sup> The city was in the midst of a financial crisis. Philadelphia's municipal government had lost federal money that was withheld as a penalty, spent over \$1 million to settle with Multicon, and paid 8 years of legal fees in an attempt to fulfill Rizzo's promise to “preserve the neighborhoods of the city at any expense.”<sup>57</sup> Impending fiscal doom meant that the Rizzo administration was out of options. They could no longer afford to cater to white backlash and maintain segregation in Whitman Park. The day after the decision was announced, the *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin* read, “Rizzo Aides Not Happy, Will Comply”. In that same article, South Philadelphia resident Ted Hudson, who had been advised by

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<sup>51</sup> *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. September 3, 1977. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>52</sup> Claude Lewis, *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. September, 1978. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>53</sup> Jan Schaffer, *Philadelphia Inquirer*. January 26, 1976. Philadelphia Inquirer Clippings Collection—Whitman Park, SCRC 171. TU SCRC.

<sup>54</sup> Murray Dubin, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 5, 1978. Philadelphia Inquirer Clippings Collection—Whitman Park, SCRC 171. TU SCRC.

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<sup>55</sup> Paolantonio, *The Last Big Man*. 94.

<sup>56</sup> Murray Dubin, *Philadelphia Inquirer*, March 5, 1978. Philadelphia Inquirer Clippings Collection—Whitman Park, SCRC 171. TU SCRC.

<sup>57</sup> Ernest Holsendolph, *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*. November 22, 1976. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

Durding not to speak to the press, told reporters, “As far as I’m concerned, it is a racial issue. We really don’t want them down here.”<sup>58</sup>

In his official response to the decision, the mayor gave a speech in Northeast Philadelphia announcing that he would no longer seek a third term. Rizzo announced that he was ending his mayoral tenure in order to become a spokesman for what he described as “white ethnic rights”.<sup>59</sup> The audience was enthralled with his message and furious that Mayor Rizzo had been forced to comply with the federal government’s ruling. The mayor said:

You’ve been called a racist and I’ve been called a racist, you’re not racist, you’re good Americans...My parents and your parents got no special treatment. People like you and me, we’re tired of being treated like second-class citizens.<sup>60</sup>

A resurgence of support following this speech inspired the Mayor to resume his campaign. Rizzo’s supporters mobilized, but this time so did his opponents.

Rizzo’s campaign was defeated by enthusiastic black voter turnout. Blatant disregard for civil rights law was not sustainable. Without the support of the Rizzo administration, the protesters were forced to lay down their pickets. Threats of violence decreased as police presence increased, protesters were arrested, and the prospect of new neighbors seemed like a real possibility. Whitman residents had to face that public housing tenants were real families about to move in across the street, rather than an aggregate, faceless nuisance that would ruin the neighborhood. On March 18, 1980, two months after Rizzo left office, three construction trucks with a police escort arrived at the overgrown six-acre lot bordered by Front, 2<sup>nd</sup> and Oregon streets.<sup>61</sup> The Whitman Park Townhouse Project was finally completed in 1982. By 1994, every townhome was privately owned.

Rizzo-Era Philadelphia shows that racism is insidiously popular when economic instability, increased competition, and political figures themselves, pit white citizens against minority citizens. Rizzo sought to preserve white ethnic Philadelphia’s place in the middle class by keeping African Americans out of it, but ultimately federal law was more powerful than popular prejudice. Frank Rizzo embraced white backlash in mainstream political culture and made it the centerpiece of a broken municipal government that was not equipped with the checks and balances required to protect minority residents. Rizzo’s brand of racial conservatism perfectly matched that of white ethnics living in Philadelphia neighborhoods like Kensington, Roxborough, Port Richmond, and Whitman Park. Although Rizzo’s racialized “law and order” politics proved to be an electoral success during the early and mid- 1970s, the administration’s unlawful commitment to white backlash could not survive past Rizzo’s mayoral tenure.

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<sup>58</sup> “Rizzo Aides Not Happy, Will Comply” *Philadelphia Daily Bulletin*, February 28, 1978. Philadelphia Evening Bulletin Clippings--Whitman Park, SCRC 169. TU SCRC.

<sup>59</sup> Lombardo, “The Battle of Whitman Park”. 418.

<sup>60</sup> Paolantonio, *The Last Big Man*. 222.

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