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Who Really Ruled in Dahl's New Haven?

by G. William Domhoff

Robert A. Dahl's *Who Governs?* (1961) is a study of New Haven, Connecticut, a coastal city with about 160,000 people in 1960. Located 80 miles east of New York City and 47 miles south of Hartford, the city is best known as the home of Yale University.

Dahl's study was the answer to all that supposedly ailed the social sciences in the 1960s. It refuted Hunter's (1953) claim that a relative handful of business leaders dominated Atlanta, and even more importantly, it "offered analogies with national politics that few other cities could provide" because of its "highly competitive two-party system" (Dahl, 1961, pp. v-vi). The United States is New Haven writ large. The book won a prize as the best book in political science for the year it was published and was one of the most widely cited books in the social sciences for the next 20 years.

In Dahl's view of New Haven in the 1950s, the local upper class was not based in the business community; the business community was passive and not very influential; and Yale University, for all its wealth, was on the periphery of local politics. The downtown business community could often block proposals it disliked which directly affected its economic interests, but it seldom took an initiatory role. When it came to power, the most important arena in New Haven was the political one. It was the mayor and his aides who initiated new programs, then sold their programs to the business community, Yale, and the general populace.

Although no one social class or interest group was able to dominate the political sector on a variety of issues, Dahl emphasized that there were indeed inequalities in New Haven. However, they were "dispersed inequalities," meaning that no one group had all of the different types of resources, such as social standing, legitimacy, wealth, knowledge, and public office, that could be utilized to exercise power. Moreover, it was relatively "easy" to "penetrate" the "political stratum," defined as the small number of citizens who are highly active in politics (Dahl, 1961, pp. 91-93). Politicians were therefore alert to "citizen desires" and would try to be responsive if they could see an "electoral payoff" (Dahl, 1961, p. 93). The result of dispersed inequalities, the permeability of the political stratum, and political competition was a pluralistic distribution of power — not a ruling class, dominant class, or power elite.

New Haven in the 21st Century

The argument about New Haven in the 1950s, a city seen at the time as evidence for the great future made possible by urban renewal, is especially poignant in terms of how things turned out there. It is now one of the poorest cities in the United States. Yale and its faculty members are islands of increasing privilege and isolation in a sea of misery. Here's how a reporter from Manchester, England, started [a story in *The Observer*](#) in 2002:

The north wind cuts cold and sudden across the historic green of New Haven. It blows through the "tent city" where the homeless huddle. And it blows round the spires and quadrangles of Yale University, one of America's richest Ivy League colleges.

The contrast is stark: Charlene Johnson, three months pregnant, emerges from her bivouac, worrying about the winter that lies between her and her due date. And all around are Yale's stone walls, elegant colonial churches and smart people walking past boutiques and coffee shops, carrying their course books.

"You know what's underneath you?" challenges Rod Cleary, who was released from prison in Los Angeles after a conviction for gang fighting, found but lost a job in New Haven, and has now been evicted. "I'll tell ya: bones. This green was a cemetery once; you're sitting on a pauper's grave. And, man, that's what it's going to be again if we ain't careful."



Map of the New York-New Haven-Hartford area
[\(click to expand\)](#)



Map of New Haven today
[\(click to expand\)](#)

The contrast this reporter draws between Yale and the poor is more than poetic. Although few Yalies can bring themselves to believe it, Yale contributes significantly to the basic problems caused by deindustrialization. It started taking a large amount of prime downtown land off the tax rolls in the 1920s and 1930s while refusing to give any compensation, just at the time when New Haven was starting to decline as a manufacturing center. In addition, it always has paid dirt-cheap wages to its thousands of staff employees, leading to strikes and tensions in the last few decades. Peter Dobkin Hall, a historian who taught at Yale for many years, and now teaches at Harvard, wrote a detailed account in 2003 for the Yale Daily News on "[How Yale Destroyed New Haven's Economy.](#)"

In 2005, Yale enjoyed a tax-free endowment of just over \$15 billion after a 22.3% return on its investments in 2004. (Among universities, only Harvard has a larger endowment, at nearly \$26 billion.) Yale alumni created the core of the endowment in good part because gifts to universities are a tax write-off. The endowment grows rapidly in large part because the capital gains on its in-and-out stock trades are not taxed (Stein, 2005). (The fact that Yale has the enormous sums to take advantage of company takeovers and private buy-outs arranged by billionaire capital funds also helps). So the university benefits in two ways from its tax-free status, but only in the 1990s did it get around to giving \$2-\$3 million each year in "voluntary contributions" to the city for fire services, a figure that rose to \$4.18 million in 2004. (For a January 2008 update by a *New York Times* reporter on the growing dominance of Yale in New Haven, [click here.](#))

In the face of these meager handouts and the increase in unemployment for low-income people in New Haven's inner city due to the Great Recession, gangs and gun violence also have increased. In an April, 2010 article entitled "[In The Shadow of Yale, A World A Million Miles Away,](#)" the *New York Times* reported that 17 people were murdered in this city of just 124,000 in the half year between October 2009, and mid-April 2010.

By late October 2011, the homicide rate was the highest it had been since 1994, with two months remaining in the year. The 29th murder of the year occurred a block from the university's main science complex, in what was considered one of the safest neighborhoods in the city (whose residents include the president of the university). Much of the previous violent crime had occurred within a few miles of Yale, but "the vast majority of the homicides have plagued streets and neighborhoods that most Yalies have never heard of, let alone visited," [according to the Yale Daily News.](#) However, most of the murders *were* known to the Yale community even if they didn't pay attention to the local newspaper or television station: students received e-mail alerts about some of them from the Yale police department, and the school's newspaper ran several detailed accounts. In addition, many of Yale's black staff reside in the same neighborhoods in which a high percentage of the murders occurred; one dining hall employee told a reporter that he knew a majority of the 25 young men who had been killed by late summer. Meanwhile, Yale's president earned a salary of over \$1.5 million a year by 2008, with the 605 full professors (excluding the medical faculty, which has even higher salaries) averaging \$177,000 a year in 2011, and the 146 associate professors averaging \$103,000. For further information and detail on homicides in New Haven in 2011, see [this story](#) and the included links to related stories.

However, there were some glimmers of renewed hope in 2012: a handful of neighborhood insurgents, backed by the resources of [UNITE HERE](#), a nationwide union, won enough seats on the 30-member Board of Aldermen to become the dominant political force in the city in early 2012. Within a week, the chief of police had resigned, and neighborhood policing had been restored. The number of murders fell from 34 in 2011 to 17 in 2012, and Yale agreed to provide most of the funds for New Haven Works, a city program that trains local residents for entry-level jobs that have been set aside at Yale, the utility company, and other firms. Just as the growth coalitions hoped in the 1950s that New Haven would be the model city for urban renewal — which turned to be a disaster for low-income citizens — so too liberals now hope that New Haven will become a model for the revival of the union movement. (For a detailed account from May 2013, see "[The New New Haven](#)" in *The American Prospect.*)

In February 2014, the *New York Times* [reported](#) that the city of New Haven seemed to be on the verge of a deal that would permit a Canadian developer to create a massive mixed-use structure "on what is now the edge of downtown." It would include 1,000 rental apartments, retail space, office space, a high-end hotel, and restaurants that would serve "organic produce grown in "rooftop gardens." The remaining sticking point concerned a state subsidy, via a bond issue, that would remove a massive, "ill-conceived, 1950s highway"

that walls off the district from the railroad station, Yale's extensive nearby medical complex, and a formerly black-and-ethnic neighborhood known as The Hill.

The huge irony of this expensive highway removal is that the highway was built with state government money at the insistence of the New Haven downtown growth coalition precisely to provide a barricade against low-income neighborhoods such as The Hill and to help clear the way for Yale's medical complex. And the irony of ironies: the new project was rationalized as one that "would advance efforts to knit neighborhoods back together." Although the downtown growth coalition destroyed these neighborhoods nearly 60 years ago, that's no problem because memories are short, and people have better things to do than read about New Haven's sordid history. So the new plan probably seems entirely new and hopeful to most citizens — especially those who are new to New Haven since the 1970s.

The battle by New Haven leaders to obtain the state subsidy for the original highway, which was opposed by state highway officials because they knew it was not needed, will receive detailed attention in this document. In one sense, the pressure to remove the highway suggests that things have come full circle, except that this time it is being done in the name of *helping* neighborhoods — even though it will mostly benefit big real estate interests. The whole episode highlights once again that New Haven is one of many failing cities whose neighborhoods were destroyed over a 50- to 60-year period by greedy elites intent on preserving their land values through the use of city, state, and federal subsidies to build convention centers and other venues that end up losing money (Sanders, 2014). The landowners are still rich — and their cities are still poor — and they are still using bailouts to keep their game going.

With New Haven's poverty and Yale's dominance as the backdrop, I turn to Dahl's study and its deficiencies, as shown by my later research, which is based on interviews and the mining of archives that Dahl either ignored or did not have access to at the time. Thanks to Dahl's professional decency and courtesy, I also had access to transcripts of the interviews he and his assistants conducted in the late 1950s. In the context of my archival discoveries on the role of a Yale University trustee in lobbying the federal government for urban renewal funds, not to mention the evidence for the Chamber of Commerce's total support for the local program, Dahl's own interviews end up as some of the best evidence against his argument.

Dahl's Study and Its Findings

Social notables and economic notables

Dahl began his study by examining lists of what he called *social notables* and *economic notables*, meaning members of the local upper class and the local business community. He wanted to see if they overlapped as much as power structure analysts had claimed. The social notables were 231 families that had attended the local debutante ball at the New Haven Lawn Club in either 1951, 1958, or 1959. But this meager list hardly gives us an accurate picture of the local upper class, as shown shortly.

As for the economic notables, who numbered 238, he included all those in the following categories:

1. The president or chairman of the board of any corporation with property in New Haven assessed in any of the five years 1953-1957 at a value placing it among the fifty highest assessments in the city.
2. Any individual or group of individuals with property in the city assessed in the years 1953-57 at a value of \$250,000 or more.
3. Any individual who was a director of three or more of the following: a firm with an assessed valuation of \$250,000 or more; a manufacturing firm with fifty employees or more; a retailing firm with 25 employees or more.
4. All directors of New Haven banks.

This grab bag of large businesses, small businesses, and individual real estate holders cannot tell us if there is a cohesive downtown business community, as there in fact was at the time. Details in a minute.

With his 231 social notables and 238 economic notables in hand, Dahl then compared the two groups and found only 24 people who were in both categories. This overlap is much smaller than what has been found in studies of larger cities (Domhoff, 1970; Domhoff, 1983). He concludes that the most important businesspeople in New Haven are not part of the local social elite. Score one for pluralism.

But there are many methodological flaws in Dahl's quick little study, so his conclusions are inaccurate. My own analysis of the social upper class and the local business community provides a very different picture, one that is consistent with research studies of other cities.

First, the upper class in New Haven is best defined by social clubs, as established in a classic study of that city which is almost completely ignored by Dahl, and certainly not utilized to look at class:

A family's class status can be determined most accurately by its club memberships because the private clubs of the area are graded according to the prestige of their members. Conversely, a man, woman, or a nuclear family is ranked by those conversant with the elite's system of values in terms of the clubs to which one belongs. Memberships in appropriate clubs are evidence of validated status and they symbolize for the initiated "who one is." (Hollingshead & Redlich, 1958, p. 81)

Based on this study, along with my prior studies of social clubs in many different cities, including New Haven, and my subsequent interviews in New Haven, I operationally defined the local upper class in terms of membership in one or more of three social clubs:

- The **New Haven Lawn Club**, an in-town family club where the debutante ball is held
- The **New Haven Country Club**, a nearby suburban club with a golf course
- The **Graduate Club**, a men's club in the heart of the downtown area

The selection of these three clubs is supported by the large overlap among them in their membership. The Lawn Club, with about 500 local members, and the Graduate Club, with a little over 400 local members, have 113 members in common. The country club, with some 650 local members, had 76 overlaps with the Lawn Club, and 56 with the Graduate Club. In addition, there are 17 people who are in all three clubs. The idea that these clubs are good indicators of upper-class standing is also supported by the fact that some of their members, including many out-of-town members, are also members of exclusive clubs in larger cities, which my earlier studies showed to be institutions of the national upper class (Domhoff, 1970, Chapter 1; Domhoff, 1975).



New Haven Lawn Club
([click to enlarge](#))

Furthermore, the people who attended the debutante ball, thereby satisfying Dahl's sole indicator of upper-class standing, were in good measure members of the three clubs. Of the 198 couples or individuals who attended the ball in 1958 and 1959, the years for which I was able to obtain attendance lists, 70 percent were in at least one of the three clubs and 29 percent were in two or more. This finding suggests that the debutante event is one part of the local upper-class scene.

Overall, then, I am saying that the social notables in New Haven in the late 1950s were a network of overlapping social circles consisting of roughly 1,350 families, who made up about 0.8% of the population in New Haven County.

Once I had a good fix on the social notables, I next developed a network definition of the downtown business community by ferreting out the interlocking directorships among all businesses in New Haven in 1959 with \$1 million or more in assets. I also looked at the local corporate law firms to see if they interlocked with the banks and corporations, as I expected they would based on my past studies. This analysis showed that there was a well-knit downtown business community. It included 54 of the 60 million-dollar firms and all five law firms with four or more partners. The 10 most interconnected firms were all financial institutions and public utilities, with the exception of one law firm. The largest bank in the city, the First New Haven National Bank, with half of all commercial bank assets, had 26 connections with seven of the other nine central firms and 52 connections to 28 organizations overall through its 25-person board of directors. It was clearly at the center of the network.

Amusingly, the First New Haven National Bank was said to be at the heart of the power structure by one of Dahl's informants, Harold Grabino, a graduate of Yale Law School who worked for the Redevelopment Agency. Grabino was talking to one of Dahl's assistants, who ended the report by saying that it "Sounds like a quote from Hunter," but of course they did not take the claims of this member of the mayor's redevelopment team very seriously:

Grabino says that generally in the South Central Project the city will lease the land, not sell it, but in the case of the First New Haven National Bank, the First National Bank said it wanted to own the property in the South Central Project, so it will get it. According to Grabino, nothing gets done without the First New Haven

National Bank saying so. According to him, it is "at the top of the power structure." The First New Haven National Bank's building is in the area which will be covered by the South Central Project. I asked him why the First National was at the top of the power structure and he suggested it was perhaps because of its control of investment money for redevelopment. (Then) he said no, this was not the reason and said, "Just look at who's on its board of directors." "Oh," I said, "you have to get the bank's support." He said, "The bank's support is necessary for anything that is done in this town including redevelopment." (Sounds like a quote from Hunter.)

It's also important that I found Yale to be connected to this network in three ways, something that would not be expected from reading Dahl. First, 11 of its trustees, officers and professors were directors of local businesses, providing Yale with 15 connections to 13 companies. Seven of the connections are with five of the most central organizations, making Yale very close to the center of the overall network. For example, the Secretary of Yale, Ruben Holden, second only to the president in power on the campus, was a director of the Connecticut Savings Bank. The assistant to the president of Yale, Charles O'Hearn, was on the board of the First New Haven National Bank, which of course links Yale directly to the heart of the New Haven business community. The full picture of the interlocks between Yale and the downtown business community is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Yale Personnel on Local Corporate Boards

Reuben Holden , secretary of the university, is on the board of Connecticut Savings Bank. (Married to the daughter of a Yale trustee, he is in the Lawn Club and the Graduate Club.)
Charles O'Hearn , assistant to the president of Yale, was a vice president of Firestone Tire and Rubber and a partner in the investment firm of Scudder, Stevens, and Clark before joining the university staff. He is on the board of the First New Haven National Bank. (He is also in the New Haven Country Club and the Graduate Club.)
Edwin Blair , a Yale trustee and a partner in a large New York law firm, is on the board of Security Insurance Company of New Haven and T.A.D. Jones and Company, a producer of coal, coke, and petroleum products, as well as corporations outside of New Haven. (He is in the Lawn Club and the Graduate Club.)
Lucius F. Robinson, Jr. , a Yale trustee and a Hartford lawyer, is a director of Southern New England Telephone, as well as a director of several companies in Hartford.
Horace F. Isleib , an investment officer in the treasurer's office, is a director of Connecticut Savings Bank and C.S. Mersick and Company.
Charles Seymour , emeritus president of Yale, is on the board of New Haven Savings Bank. (He is in the Graduate Club.)
Samuel W. Dudley , emeritus dean of the engineering school, is on the board of the National Savings Bank.
Ray B. Westerfield , emeritus professor of political economy, is chairman of the First Federal Savings and Loan Association and a director of Tradesmen's National Bank. (He is in the Lawn and Graduate Clubs.)
Fred Fairchild , emeritus professor of political economy, is on the boards of United Illuminating, and Connecticut Savings Bank. (He is a member of the Lawn Club and the Graduate Club.)
Kent Healy , professor of transportation, is on the board of the Connecticut Company, a bus company owned by the New York, New Haven, and Hartford Railroad, on whose board he formerly sat. (He is in the Graduate Club.)
Henry A. Pfisterer , professor of architectural engineering, is on the board of the New Haven Trap Rock Company. (He is a member of the Lawn Club.)

The second way Yale is connected to this network is through two of the most prestigious corporate law firms, which Yale used for its legal business. Third, Yale is connected to the rest of the business network through the fact that most of the partners in the five main law firms were graduates of Yale Law School; many of these people could be called on for information or to carry messages.

(For more detail on the entire New Haven economic network and Yale's connections to it, [click here](#).)

When it comes to Dahl's question about the overlap of social and economic notables, well, the directors of the central firms in this business network were very likely to be members of the local social elite as defined by their membership in one or more of three social clubs. This point is made most simply by a look at the board of the First New Haven National Bank; 24 of its 25 members were in at least one of the three social clubs. Thirteen of the 25 were in two of the three clubs, and two board members were among the seven economic notables who were in all three clubs.

Of the 319 local directors and law partners encompassed by the entire network, 56 percent were in one or more of the three social clubs. Those individuals with two or more directorships were even more likely to be in the social elite. Of the 91 New Haven residents on two or more boards, 80% were in at least one of the

clubs, and 40% were in two. The overlap was greater for those who sat on several boards: of the 25 men who sat on three boards, 76% were in at least one club; of the 15 who sat on four or more boards, 90% were in one of the clubs. These findings are similar to those for larger cities and the national level in general. The more central a person is in the business network, the more central he is — there were zero women in the network back then — in the social elite.

Conversely, of the 132 persons meeting none of the upper-class criteria, 42% are treasurers, managers, and vice-presidents who only sit on the board of the company they work for. They are executives who are part of the local business establishment, but they are not members of the upper class as I have defined it. There are also small companies at the periphery of the network whose directors do not have upper-class standing.

A similar picture of social and economic elite overlap emerged when I compared Dahl's own list of economic notables with my club membership lists. Of the 238 people on his list, 43 percent were in one or more of the three clubs. Of the 139 local businesspeople who were both on his list and in my business network, 70 percent were in one of the clubs. So, even his poorly constructed list of economic notables has a large overlap with the social elite when an adequate operational definition of the upper class is used.

Putting aside the fact that Dahl's two lists were ridiculously small and totally inadequate, why didn't they overlap even more with each other and with my lists of social and economic notables?

First, when it comes to the debutante lists, Dahl was wrong to assume that people from 1951 can be compared with economic notables from 1958. It ignores the fact that some of them might have been retired or dead by then. (That list had been lost and I couldn't check it.) Second, when turning to the 1958 and 1959 debutante ball lists, Dahl made no attempt to determine how many of the people on them were friends and relatives of the proud parents from outside the New Haven area. If some were, they can hardly be considered members of the local social notables. Third, I found that almost one-third of the people on the 1958 and 1959 guest lists were Yale administrators or professors. These Yalies may well be part of the social elite, but they cannot be reasonably expected to be present in large numbers on a list of economic notables. In short, the debutante lists that serve as the sole indicator of upper class standing in New Haven are even shorter than they first appear when it comes to a serious comparison with economic notables. The whole enterprise is stacked against any appreciable overlap.

As far as Dahl's list of economic notables, there were several problems in terms of a comparison with my list:

1. There were 14 names on his list who would have been on mine if they had not died or left their directorships between 1958 and 1959.
2. Eight people on Dahl's list are major executives with businesses whose headquarters are in other cities. They appeared on his list because their companies had real estate holdings, factories, or retail outlets in New Haven. While it might be possible to argue that these people have power in New Haven through their local managers, I do not think they belong on a list of local economic notables that is being compared with a list of local social notables.
3. Twenty-two people on Dahl's list are directors of two small commercial banks in the area, banks with assets of only \$12.9 million and \$3.5 million. They appear because Dahl chose to include all bank directors, even though he did not choose to include all directors of industrial corporations. Dahl biased his list with bank directors without providing any rationale for this decision, and the result is a list of economic notables which included small bankers with no connections to the dominant economic institutions or the exclusive social clubs.
4. Thirty people on the list are local property owners and small businesspeople. Their holdings are relatively small in relation to those of the major institutions in New Haven. They are car dealers, motel owners, and apartment house owners.
5. There is another, very delicate, problem with including these minor business figures on a list of economic notables that is to be compared with a list of social notables. I have to make the point very carefully because Dahl misused it to try to discredit my study. It begins with the fact that the social notables of that day were anti-Semitic (and more generally, anti-ethnic) WASPs. They did not allow any Jews, or very many Italian-Americans, into their social clubs. Therefore, because many of the

small bankers and small real estate owners were of Jewish or Italian heritage, they could not possibly overlap with a debutante list of WASP exclusionary anti-Semites.

You might wonder how Dahl could distort this point. It was very simple. He said that I, not the New Haven social notables, excluded Jews and Italians (Dahl, 1979). Talk about blaming the messenger. As I learned to my amazement from this and many other kinds of distortions, it is not always pleasant to disagree with pluralists, even when they are generally decent people like Dahl. When cornered, they can get very nasty. In this case, Dahl relied on a draft rebuttal by his former student and hatchet man, Nelson Polsby, who later altered what he wrote on the basis of my critique of it (Polsby, 1980). But he didn't alert Dahl that he had changed his draft. Dahl essentially followed Polsby in making these false and unfair accusations, suggesting to me that perhaps Dahl didn't even read my book very closely. (I had sent it to him in manuscript form and said I would be grateful for comments, but he didn't even answer the letter.) However, all that is a story for another day, if ever.

In summary on this issue, Dahl's study of the overlap between local social and economic elites in New Haven had different results from most other studies for several reasons. First, he had a narrow definition of the local upper class that may have included out-of-towners and deceased people, making his list far smaller than it was to begin with. Second, his arbitrary definition of economic notables insured that he had many minor property owners who were not part of the actual business community. Third, a list of social notables that has a large number of Yale personnel cannot possibly have major overlaps with a list of full-time economic notables. Fourth, because of the religious or ethnic backgrounds of many of the small-business economic notables, there was no way they could appear on a list of social notables due to the ugly exclusionary practices of WASPs up until the 1960s and 1970s, when they slowly began to open up their social clubs to successful businesspeople they had previously considered their ethnic inferiors (Baltzell, 1964; Zweigenhaft & Domhoff, 1982).

Although Dahl's research on the overlap of economic and social notables was an inadequate and invalid sociological mishmash, that is not the end of the argument because his overlap study was only a minor part of his overall project. His meager overlap findings were sometimes cited uncritically by gleeful pluralists, but not very often. The main focus of his book was on the degree to which people in either of his two categories involved themselves in one or more of three different "issue-areas" that are discussed in the next section.

Involvement in three "issue-areas"

Dahl's big concern in his book, due to his claim that the only serious way to study power is through reconstructing decisions to see who influenced whom, was on three different issues that he picked in a completely arbitrary fashion based on their visibility and apparent importance within the city as a whole. He did not bother to ask either local business elites or knowledgeable observers of the city for their opinions, as Hunter (1953) and others did (Bonjean & Grimes, 1974, for a summary). The three issues were:

- Nominations for office by both political parties
- Public education
- Urban renewal

Dahl's conclusion from his investigation of these three issue-areas is that neither type of notable was significantly involved in the decision-making process in New Haven. Moreover, a variety of groups took part. Most importantly, he says that elected and appointed government officials, and especially the mayor at the time, Richard C. Lee, were the key decision-makers. His negative conclusions about the role of the economic notables express his general findings:

To reconstruct these decisions is to leave little room for doubt that the Economic Notables, far from being a ruling group, are simply one of the many groups out of which individuals sporadically emerge to influence the policies and acts of city officials. Almost anything one might say about the influence of the Economic Notables could be said with equal justice about a half dozen other groups in the New Haven community. (Dahl, 1961, p. 72)

But the research that led to this conclusion isn't any better than his work on the overlap of social and economic elites, as I will now demonstrate.

Political Nominations

The area of political nominations was chosen because nominations determine which persons eventually end up in office. Dahl found that leaders within the two parties determine mayoral candidates without the help of either social or economic notables.

But political nominations are not in and of themselves a substantive issue-area in the way that public education and urban renewal are. They are a procedural device to determine which particular individuals will hold specific positions, which is not the same as a conflict over which policies will be carried out. To make nominations relevant, it therefore would have to be demonstrated that nominations affect policy outcomes and that they are relevant to the local business community. In fact, there is no evidence that it makes any difference whether one person or another is nominated, especially when there is evidence that the business community had access to the Democratic mayor — the focus of Dahl's study — through campaign finance and personal contact.

The nomination process also had a formal bias against participation by economic and social notables. It was a rule of both parties that leaders had to live in the city, but most notables lived in the suburbs and were not eligible for party office.

In short, there was no way most of them could be directly involved, but there is evidence that they were indirectly involved through campaign finance and talks with the mayor, and in other ways as well, as I will show with the two substantive issues Dahl studied.

Public Education

Dahl chose to study the school system in good part because it was the largest item in the city budget, accounting for between a quarter and a third of all city expenditures. Moreover, he argues that the schools play a large role in the lives of most citizens at one time or another. Isolating eight different decisions that occurred between 1953 and 1959, including an eye-testing program, a program to deal with juvenile delinquency, new procedures for teacher promotions, and proposals to increase appropriations for school libraries, he found that in all but a few instances the successful participants in these decisions were officially and publicly involved in the school system (Dahl, 1961, p. 151). Mayor Lee and his appointees on the Board of Education were the most important of these officials. No economic notables had any role, and only a handful of social notables took part.

But none of Dahl's findings on education has any theoretical relevance because there is no evidence that these minor issues were of any concern to the New Haven power structure. In fact, most of the economic and social notables lived in the suburbs, where they had access to better school systems. Those who did live in New Haven often sent their children to private schools. As Dahl (1961, p. 70) wrote: "Most social notables and many economic notables living in New Haven send their children to private schools; as a consequence, their interest in public schools is ordinarily rather slight."

So, as Dahl also notes, the main concern of the local business leaders vis-à-vis the school system was the control of its expenditures. Unlike most cities in most states, school finances in New Haven were controlled by a Board of Finance appointed by none other than the mayor. This meant that the business elites could control the school system if they were appointed to the Board of Finance, and of course they were so appointed. In fact, members of the Board of Finance were overwhelmingly from the business community. The Board of Finance had two main functions that were relevant to the school system. It recommended a tax rate that the elected Board of Aldermen (a gaggle of 33 members from the far-flung city wards) could raise, but not lower, and it prepared budget estimates for departments that the aldermen could cut, but not increase. Talk about constraints. Clearly, the downtown business community had a hammerlock on the school system. There was nothing, but nothing, that Mayor Lee could do for the schools without the approval of the business elites. Small wonder that later commentators rarely invoked Dahl's study of the school system as evidence for pluralism.

Urban Renewal: The Big Issue

The third issue studied by Dahl was urban renewal, the federally financed program that made it possible for cities to buy and clear whatever land the city leaders defined as slum land, and then resell it to developers, businesses, and universities. Dahl says he chose this issue because of the great amount of money involved and the potential interest of the program to the business community, but it was also the case that the issue

was receiving a large amount of newspaper and magazine coverage at the time Dahl was framing his study. In fact, by the time Dahl did his study New Haven was considered to be the ideal example of what is possible through urban renewal.

Dahl found that the number of social and economic notables involved in urban renewal was 27 times greater than would be expected by chance, particularly as members of a government committee that was officially said to be an important advisory group for the program. But he does not attach much weight to this evidence for two reasons. First, the number of notables involved was only 10 percent of all participants. Second, he had evidence that the committee on which many of them served was a passive body that did the mayor's bidding; it was primarily a rubber-stamp committee with a symbolic function.

The lack of involvement in the issue-area of urban renewal is surprising, for it is an area in which all urban theories, including growth-coalition theory, would expect businessmen to be intensely active. However, according to Dahl, New Haven's very large urban renewal program was made possible by the efforts of Mayor Lee, who took office in 1954 when the program was at a standstill. The set of adjectives used by Dahl to describe the mayor's efforts border on hero worship:

"Few aspects of local policy could be more salient to the Notables than efforts to save downtown New Haven, yet the Economic Notables were able neither to agree on nor put through a program of urban redevelopment even under a Republican mayor anxious to retain their support. When redevelopment came to New Haven the leadership for it came less from the Notables than from a Democratic mayor, whom most of them originally opposed and who as mayor had to wheedle, cajole, recruit, organize, plan, negotiate, bargain, threaten, reward, and maneuver endlessly to get the support needed from the Notables, the small businessmen, the developers (who came principally from outside New Haven), the federal authorities, and the electorate" (Dahl, 1961, p. 79)

Even the largest and most prestigious institution in the city, Yale University, was found by Dahl to be relatively powerless as compared with the mayor and the city government. Yale was the largest landowner in the city, had one of the two or three largest payrolls in the community, and provided a significant portion of the consumer spending in the downtown area through both employees and well-to-do students. Many of the local business leaders, and almost all the partners in leading law firms, were graduates of Yale, and the mayor had been the university's public relations man for the previous ten years (of which more later). But Yale was seen by Dahl as separate from the local business community and at the mercy of the mayor's wishes. This relative powerlessness was due to several factors:



Aerial view of the Yale campus
([click to enlarge](#))

Although the university is sometimes regarded by suspicious citizens of New Haven as an obscurely powerful force in local politics, in fact it is in a weak political position. Like academic people everywhere, Yale faculty members are politically heterogeneous and jealous of their individual autonomy; they can be counted on to raise a cry for academic freedom at the first suggestion from an incautious university administration that they are expected to have a single political line on anything. Certainly no administration in recent years has even hinted at the existence of a Yale party line. Although a few individual faculty members are involved in New Haven politics — the last three Democratic aldermen from the First Ward have been young Yale faculty members — most Yale people are much less interested in the politics of New Haven than in the politics of Yale, their professional associations, the nation, or the international arena. And more of Yale's faculty and other employees live outside New Haven than in the city. Finally, although the university is one of the biggest property owners in New Haven, it also happens to be far and away the largest owner of tax-free property; hence Yale officials are highly sensitive to community hostility and fearful of any action that might embroil the university in local controversy. (Dahl, 1961, p. 138)

Based on the results of most studies of urban renewal programs for the years 1950 to 1970, it would seem that Dahl's findings in New Haven represent a unique case. However, there are many major problems with his analysis. In fact, it is all wrong except for one point: Mayor Lee did have to sell the program to small businesspeople and voters. After all, he was taking land from the small businesses and pushing many ordinary people out of their housing, all the while minimizing the tax bill that eventually came due in the 1960s, when his gamble for a revived downtown failed to pay off.

It sounds crude, I know, and many readers will gasp, but I think Mayor Lee was carrying water for the growth coalition and Yale University in terms of the substance of the program. Yes, as regime theorist Clarence Stone (1993, p. 12) rightly says, showing the balance and reasonableness that makes his views the left wing of the possible in the academic community, the mayor received what he desired: publicity and the

hope for higher office. And the young professionals on his urban renewal staff had a chance to utilize their skills, and the Democratic Party could hand out patronage plums to local supporters. But contrary to Stone's emphasis, by far the biggest end result was that Yale and the business community received land and poor people were moved out of their neighborhoods. If the poor people were African-Americans, they were jammed into public housing and other ghettoized housing besides. This outcome is now admitted and deplored by a later Yale pluralist while acerbically assuring one and all that Dahl, not me, had the right analysis of how urban renewal unfolded (Rae, 2003). Urban renewal in New Haven is a long and important story, so it deserves a separate section.

Urban Renewal in New Haven

There are three key theoretical questions when it comes to urban renewal in New Haven:

- Who were the key movers and shakers behind the program?
- Why did the program suddenly take off in 1954 and 1955 after many delays?
- Why was the New Haven program the largest in the nation by 1972 in its per capita grants, receiving \$1,018 for each of its citizens while its nearest competitors, Newark and Boston, were averaging only \$453 and \$409 per person, respectively?

For Dahl, the answer to all three questions is to be found in the special skills of Mayor Lee and his aides. They organized an urban renewal coalition in New Haven when they came into office in 1954 and they convinced the federal bureaucracy in Washington to give them more money than any other city because they were very good at what they did.

In contrast to this typical pluralist interpretation, which puts its emphasis on the actions and abilities of individuals operating in the political arena on a decision-by-decision basis, my restudy of the program suggests very different answers to all three questions.

First, the downtown business community and Yale backed the program earlier and more intensely than anyone else. Dahl didn't understand this fact for three reasons: he didn't have access to written records, he didn't interview widely enough, and he accepted the claims made to him in interviews with Mayor Lee and his aides.

Second, the program moved into full gear when it did because of legislative, legal, and administrative decisions at the national and state levels. The program did not advance in New Haven or anywhere else until the federal urban renewal law was changed by Republicans in 1954, and it could not go forward in New Haven until (1) the Connecticut Supreme Court of Errors ruled on the constitutionality of urban renewal and (2) the state highway commission finally agreed to pay for the unjustifiable highway that New Haven was demanding without being willing to pay any of the cost.

Third, the large amount of money that New Haven attracted was due almost entirely to Yale University, which supplied needed expertise and major financial backing in a variety of ways, including its purchase of a local high school so the land could be used for a new undergraduate college. Most of all, Yale provided a crucial link to the key money-dispensing agency in Washington through one of its trustees, Senator Prescott Bush of Connecticut, who was a member of the urban renewal committee in the Senate (and yes, the father of one future president, George H. W. Bush, and the grandfather of another, George W. Bush).



Prescott Bush

Although Dahl is quite wrong about the eagerness of the business community, and the reasons for the program's emergence in 1954-1955, and the reasons for its large per-capita size, he is completely right that Mayor Lee and his aides played a very important role in carrying out the program. Not only did they craft a wily political and fiscal strategy that worked very well until the mid-1960s, but they played a brokering role within the growth coalition as well. When difficulties with specific projects developed, serious weaknesses in the local business community were exposed. Its leaders were unable to bring land owners and shop keepers together in such a way that they could keep a few dissidents, often smaller businesspeople the bigwigs had treated shabbily, from hampering the work of the outside developers.

Most of the top business leaders ended up sitting on the sidelines while Mayor Lee and his aides, along with Senator Bush, did the essential coordinating work with the federal government.

By the time Dahl began his study in 1957, the program was almost completely in the hands of the Democratic mayor and his appointees, who of course gave little credit to the work that had been done by business leaders and Republicans a few years before. In the 1960s, the program was to move even further from the business community, becoming for a short time the province of a strong and relatively well insulated Redevelopment Agency. But I won't be talking much about the 1960s — when the program faced many problems — because Dahl did not study that era.

The New Haven case therefore suggests that a well-organized and highly skilled government administration may be the necessary final ingredient for obtaining outside monies in some cases. But such an administration is by no means the sufficient condition implied by Dahl. In the relationship between local power structures and city administrations, it is more likely that the power structures can find and support those with political skills than that politicians can create power structures to support them. In fact, as will be shown, members of the Yale community, including the future dean of the law school, were important backers of Lee's successful run for mayor in November, 1953.

A quick history of New Haven, 1637 to 1941

New Haven, situated on the coastal road between New York and Boston, was founded in 1637 as the center of a little theocratic Puritan colony that reluctantly became part of Connecticut in 1665. In 1716 it attracted a tiny college established elsewhere in 1701 that came to be known as Yale University, which from the start was seen as an antidote to the liberal nonsense happening at Harvard (founding date, 1636). In other words, it was uptight, starchy, moralistic, and conservative from the start, and did not change much until the 1960s, under the administration of Kingman Brewster, a moderate Republican who guided the university through some very perilous times, without any thanks, of course, from most Yale grads, known to the in-group as Old Blues.



"A View of the Buildings of Yale College at New Haven" (1807)
[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

However, that gets far ahead of the story because Yale did not become a significant economic factor and negative force in New Haven until the 1930s. Still, some of the city's later problems were set in motion on that date in 1716 because Yale, like other private American institutions of higher education, was granted an exemption from property taxes. (In addition, its professors were exempted from income taxes and military service, but they lost those privileges in 1834.)

Tax exemptions are so taken for granted for private universities that they are not usually recognized for what they are — a state subsidy to the university and its students. Such a subsidy makes it possible to charge lower tuition. This may be a sensible strategy if the subsidized students are local children and develop ideas and skills at the university that later benefit the community. However, to the degree that the students are either upper class or from other parts of the nation, then the local taxpayers are subsidizing the already rich and people from other locales. This is in fact the current situation in New Haven. The local citizens suffer so that Yale students from all over the world, many of them very well to do, can pay lower tuition.

But all that was in the distant future as New Haven became a port city and then a strong industrial city known for its coaches, carriages, watches, and tools, and later its firearms. It was the home of the first commercial telephone exchange, established in 1879. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, mirroring other urban areas, there was a small move toward the suburbs by the rich, but by and large the rich and the poor lived in reasonable proximity to each other and their work, and the 100+ members of the Yale faculty lived within a few blocks of the university (Rae, 2003).

New Haven was still prosperous in 1899 when city officials had the temerity to put land used for dorms and cafeterias on the tax assessor's list, but Yale refused to pay and then won its case before the Connecticut Supreme Court of Errors. When city leaders made similar noises about 10 years later, noting Yale had the benefit of many city services, the No. 2 man in the Yale administration, Secretary Anson Phelps Stokes, wrote a spirited defense modestly entitled "What Yale Does For New Haven." In addition to noting the high culture and consumer spending Yale provided, Stokes also said that Yale saved the city money by educating local boys that otherwise would have to attend state-supported schools. This argument overlooked the

declining number of local boys at Yale as well as the fact that the state taxpayers, not just those in New Haven, would pay if these boys went instead to state-supported schools. The pamphlet was reissued in 1921 and 1929 (Whitehead, 1969).

However, there really wasn't that much money at stake when the argument was first joined because Yale only encompassed two or three city blocks. But its gradual growth early in the 20th century, and its growth spurt in the 1920s, raised its total exempt acreage to 175 in 1936, which represented one-third of the total exempt land in the city. (Yale also had another 630 acres that were used as a golf course and a bird sanctuary, but since this land was mostly undeveloped, and much of it marshy, that did not cause quite the loss its large size might suggest.) City leaders found it especially upsetting that exempt land worth \$6.2 million was vacant, to be used for later Yale growth (Whitehead, 1969).

At the same time that Yale was growing, and taking land off the tax rolls, the city of New Haven was declining for quite separate reasons. It had been by-passed as a port city when the railroads became ascendant in the second half of the 19th century, and it slowly lost its industrial base in the 20th. This was particularly the case with its once-illustrious carriage manufacturers, destroyed by the automobile. To make matters worse, the middle classes, aided by the automobile, were moving to the suburbs and the surrounding countryside, which meant that many downtown retail businesses were losing customers to suburban shopping centers. (New Haven reached a population of 162,000 in 1920, then stayed about the same for the next 40 years before beginning a decline that brought it down to 123,600 in 2000; by 2012 it had crept back up to an estimated 130,741.)

Faced with the Great Depression at the same time as it was losing industry and middle-class citizens, New Haven had a budget crisis in 1932. The banks would not lend the city any more money and the Board of Alderman had to raise the tax rate. Only Yale's growth provided any economic hope. During the 1930s it accounted for 51% of all local construction, with no other organization or sector accounting for more than a few percent. In that context, the mayor asked Yale for help in 1932, and once again Yale said no. In 1937 the mayor asked the university to put vacant land back on the tax rolls and promise not to take any further property for 10 years.. This time a new Yale president said he could not provide any money or promise to limit growth, but that he would put some of the vacant land back on the tax list.



Tax-exempt land in New Haven in 1936; Yale's land is light blue.

[\(click to expand\)](#)

The past and future of New Haven were spelled out in 1937 in a prescient book called *New Haven's Problems: Whither the City? All Cities?* by a Yale alumnus, Arnold Dana, class of 1883, who had returned to the city after many years as a business reporter for several different newspapers. Not only was he a Yale graduate, he came from an unbroken line of Yale graduates who dated back to 1727, and his father had been a Yale professor. Dana came to the following conclusion after a careful analysis of all available economic statistics:

The 40-year comparison for the years 1936 and 1897 confirms the belief that this city is actually undergoing radical transformation in many respects. Half a century ago, as already noted, there was here an exceptionally flourishing manufacturing and commercial shipping town, with Yale College highly important but not the greatest of the city's establishments. Today New Haven is rapidly becoming an institutional, professional, technical, and garment-making center with shipping an almost negligible issue and manufacturing interests slowly decreasing in importance as a source of income to the city. (Dana, as quoted in Whitehead, 1969)

After noting that only 7% of Yale's living alumni resided in New Haven, Dana then suggested that Yale provide financial aid to the city, based on the following argument:

It is open to debate whether all the rights granted by the town in 1792 to a feeble college with two professors, and two acres of land, or later in the 1830s when it owned eight acres, apply with equal force to the elaborate services afforded by a modern city with the grantee become an elaborate group of institutions, national in their affiliations and services, richly housed and endowed and owning more than 800 acres of a little city's best land. (Dana, as quoted in Whitehead, 1969)

Dana's plea went unanswered. The issue was not raised again until 1969, when Mayor's Lee's successor asked Yale for money yet again. Yale responded by helping convince the state legislature to provide money to cities with universities in them. In other words, Yale did not provide any money directly. The money the state legislature gave to New Haven helped the city, yes, but it also served as a continuing subsidy for Yale.

University officials still could not conceive of the possibility that municipal services, just like electricity and janitorial services, are a cost of running a university.

The result is that Yale has contributed far more to the decline of New Haven than anyone seems willing to admit, with the exception of former Yale historian Peter Dobkin Hall, who claims that [Yale and other tax-exempt institutions have destroyed the city's economy](#):

As a responsible corporate citizen, Yale should understand, as Harvard does, that paying living wages and adequate pensions, curbing its physical expansion, and making contributions to municipal revenues commensurate to the demands made on them by nontaxpaying students, faculty and staff, is far less costly than the ill will its current policies engender.

In a more complete and detailed indictment of Yale's role in New Haven in the twentieth century, Hall (2002) points out that Harvard has been making payments to Cambridge, Massachusetts since 1929, making that city far more livable. (Even so, Cambridge city officials estimate that the \$3-4 million they have been receiving from Harvard is [less than 10% of what it would be providing](#) if it paid property taxes.) Yale, for its part, shamelessly [claims it is contributing to a "renaissance"](#) of New Haven, due to its voluntary contributions to the city — \$4.18 million in 2004, with the promise of gradual increases over the next several years.

For even more on Yale and its difficult relationship with New Haven, see "[Poison Ivy](#)" (Bowie, 2009), which examines Yale's own view of its civic obligations.

Planning for urban renewal, 1941 to 1953

By the early 1940s, it was clear to the city planners that Yale, for all its unwillingness to pay the equivalent of municipal taxes, had to be a primary engine for any future growth that might occur. It was Yale's construction plans, Yale's yearly budget and payroll, and the consumer spending by Yale students that would underpin the economy henceforth. Yale's ability to attract government research institutes, medical facilities, and similar organizations would be critical. However, Yale did not show much interest in further growth until after World War II. Its building boom of the 1920s and 1930s was quite enough for the time being.

Even before Yale began to grow again in the 1950s, however, the downtown business community had a very great interest in the urban renewal plans and programs that were being developed at the national level. I base this claim on local archival records and my interviews with many of the participants in the urban renewal program between 1940 and 1957. The officers and directors from many of the most central organizations in the business network played prominent roles. Quite contrary to Dahl's claims about the lack of interest and energy on the part of business leaders, the records of the Chamber of Commerce, the City Plan Commission, and the Redevelopment Agency show that business leaders had a long-standing interest in urban renewal and had been developing plans for it since the early 1940s (Domhoff, 1978, pp. 63-73).

Every one of the studies done by the city, the local Chamber of Commerce, and Yale planners in the early 1940s started with the same kind of analysis made by Arnold Dana in his 1937 book, then added four specific points. First, it would be necessary to provide better highways so that suburban shoppers could come to the downtown business district. Second, the remaining industry should be moved to cheaper land on the outskirts of the city. Third, the port facilities should be improved. Fourth, land for the growth of Yale and related research institutions must be provided. In keeping with these recommendations, a 1943 plan commissioned by the city from a visiting planning professor at Yale, Maurice Rotival, suggested that a low-income neighborhood between Yale and the medical school-hospital complex, known as the Oak Street area, should be "allocated to future development of an institutional nature."

This recommendation was made even more explicit in a 1944 report on housing by a leader within the New Haven growth coalition, Douglas Orr, a prominent architect. Orr numbered Yale, its medical school, the hospital, and the telephone company among his clients. Emphasizing that land adjacent to the downtown, the hospital, and the university was too valuable to be used for housing, he recommended that housing be eliminated from the Oak Street area and the land divvied up as follows: (1) part of the area should be put in the central business district; (2) part of it should be utilized for highways into the central business district; (3) part of it should be used for professional buildings near the hospital;



The Oak Street area in the '40s, before urban renewal
[\(click to enlarge\)](#)

and (4) the northern part of it should be used for housing professional persons and graduate students from the hospital, medical school, and university.

(For more detail on planning in New Haven between 1941 and 1945, including the involvement of Yale-related planners and students, [click here](#).)

Ten years after Orr delivered his report, his recommendations were carried out exactly in the first urban renewal project, as I will show in a later section on the 1950s. However, Dahl considers such planning just so much hot air because nothing happened until 1954, when Lee became mayor. More specifically, Dahl (1961, p. 116) attributes the delays to three factors: (1) their great expense; (2) the lack of a "political process that would secure agreement on a strategic plan"; and (3) the presence of public officials "who saw no particular gain and much political loss if they were to push hard on city planning and development."



Changes in land use around Oak Street, before and after urban renewal
([click to expand](#))

While expense was certainly a major consideration, and could only be solved for New Haven and most other cities by the infusion of federal government money, the lack of a political strategy and the absence of willing public officials were not major problems at all. Those issues were not even addressed by New Haven leaders before 1953 because they could not develop their plans further until decisions had been made, first, at the national level about deepening the harbor and, second, at the state level concerning the exact location of the new shoreline Connecticut Turnpike (Route 1 at the time, now I-95). The location of the turnpike had crucial consequences for future New Haven development in terms of how traffic would be routed into the downtown area. Its location also would determine where the large food market would be relocated, a relocation that had to occur before the Southwest Area of which it and Oak Street were a part could be redeveloped. Thus, the logistics of redevelopment were closely connected to prior problems, as this account by the Union and New Haven Trust Bank makes clear:

This major project (harbor deepening) of the Chamber of Commerce was completed in 1948 by Army engineers at a cost of \$3,750,000, giving the harbor a depth of thirty-five feet.... This deepening also yielded a by-product of great subsequent value — 195 acres of new land along the western side of New Haven harbor east of the railroad station. This fill land provided a route for the relocation of U.S. Route 1.... Now under the market bill just passed by the Legislature, the city for \$70,000 will acquire from the State Highway Department, for purposes of development, all of the harbor fill land not needed.

Once the harbor was deepened and the new land was available, chamber committees devoted much of their attention to the exact location of the turnpike and to ensuring that the state would make adjacent lands available for parks, industrial development, and the new food market. These preliminary problems to further renewal and redevelopment were not finally resolved until the 1950s. At that point, the food market's land near the Oak Street area was finally free to be redeveloped.

However, the chamber did not neglect the political aspects of urban renewal. When the long-argued Housing Act finally made it through Congress in 1949, with its provision for urban renewal, the New Haven Chamber of Commerce was one of the first organizations in the city to argue for the creation of a Redevelopment Agency, just as the national-level Urban Land Institute had suggested cities do in order to compete with and by-pass local housing agencies. But Dahl presents a different view, based on his interview with Lee. He thinks the Redevelopment Agency was a Democratic initiative by Lee and his colleagues to put the Republicans on the defensive. (For a refutation of this claim, [click here](#).)

While the chamber chipped away in the late 1940s on issues of immediate concern to the downtown growth elites, Yale turned its attention once again to its own growth, coming to conclusions that dovetailed perfectly with the earlier recommendations by Rotival and Orr. The process began in 1947 when the trustees ("the Yale Corporation") appointed a top-level committee to explore the university's future needs. The committee was headed by Prescott Bush, at the time a partner in the important Wall Street investment firm of Brown Brothers, Harriman, and a trustee of the Yale Corporation. Bush's ties to the university were many and varied. He had graduated from Yale in 1917. One of his banking partners was a trustee before him, and his brother-in-law was to be a fellow trustee in the 1950s. His niece was married to the university's secretary, Rueben Holden, who was mentioned in the section on local social and economic elites because he was the second-most important campus administrator after the president and on the board of a large savings bank (see Table One). Moreover, one of Bush's former banking partners was treasurer of the university at the time, as well as a director of one of the large commercial banks in New Haven.

The Bush Committee's report, *Yale and Her Needs*, was released on January 4, 1950. It called for a 10-year growth program that would require \$80 million in gifts (\$645 million in 2005 dollars), including \$20 million for new buildings. In some ways, it was the answer to the local growth coalition's prayers. Although most of the projected buildings were to be placed within the existing framework of the campus or on available adjacent land, that would still stimulate the construction business and help the building trades. Moreover, Yale expressed a desire for off-campus housing for students in the medical and other professional schools, which as I've already stated, were near the Oak Street area. The report said:

Because of the shortage of all kinds of housing in the community, the students at the university's professional schools have to put up with some demoralizing makeshifts. This is particularly true of medical students, often housed far from the hospital where they might have night duty. Other housing is also needed for student nurses, married divinity students and their families, and members of the student bodies of the Schools of Fine Arts and Music.

Yale's formal acknowledgement that it would need more housing for its students became a context for future planning. When planner Maurice Rotival returned to New Haven in 1951 at the request of the Redevelopment Agency to update his earlier plans, he again proposed that the Oak Street area between the hospital and Yale be considered for the first project. He further suggested a mixture of institutional uses and high-rise apartments for students. Representatives of the Redevelopment Agency then met with top Yale officials in October, 1951, and a process of cooperation was set into motion. The fact that Yale expressed interest in the proposal at this meeting was absolutely essential from the point of view of the city because local urban renewal agencies could not make applications to the federal government for assistance unless they could show there was some private institution willing and able to purchase the reclaimed land. Without Yale or some other private organization, the city could not move ahead. The president of Yale from 1950 to 1963, former history professor A. Whitney Griswold, explained this point to Dahl as follows in a candid interview:

The Mayor and Logue [Lee's right hand man, and the son-in-law of a top Yale official, of whom more in a minute] both testified publicly again and again at the Citizens Action Commission meetings and at luncheons and elsewhere that if it hadn't been for Yale's willingness to step up as original bidders on that property the whole Oak Street project would have died aborning ... you know the rules, the laws, the policies in Washington that require a firm bid from some private agency in the community before contracts of this kind could be signed and the way cleared for the financing of the whole project. Well, anyhow, this is what we did. Now here again ... this was not sheer altruism on Yale's part. It was a case of, I think, truly enlightened self-interest. We were hard pressed, as we still are, for housing.

With all due respect, I think this is a smoking gun in Dahl's own data. I think it contradicts his claim that Yale had little interest or involvement in the local urban renewal program.

However, the interest Yale showed in the housing project did not lead immediately to a high-level administrative committee within the university. Instead, the president appointed a New Haven corporate lawyer, Morris Tyler, who had graduated from Yale and Yale Law School, to serve as a liaison between the Redevelopment Agency and the university. However, Tyler was not simply a Yale graduate and a local corporate lawyer. As he told me when I interviewed him, he and Griswold had been very close friends since college.

The role that Tyler played in the urban renewal program throughout the 1950s makes it very important to establish his central place in the New Haven power structure in detail because he provided Yale with a personal tie to the Redevelopment Agency and to the very heart of the downtown growth coalition. First, he was one of four senior partners in Gumbert, Corbin, Tyler, and Cooper, the only law firm among the 10 most central firms in the downtown business network that I outlined earlier. Second, he was on the board of the second-largest commercial bank. Third, his law partners sat on the boards of local businesses. (One partner was a director of the good old First New Haven National bank as well as a large savings bank and four other local corporations. Another was on the board of the third-largest commercial bank, the second-largest savings bank, and two other local corporations. Yet another partner was on several other boards.) Fourth, Tyler's firm represented several of the major banks and businesses in New Haven as well as doing some work for Yale.

In addition, Tyler was a member of the Lawn and Graduate Clubs, and was a guest at the cotillion ball in 1958-59, so he fits Dahl's definition of a "social notable." He also was the chairman of the Regional Planning

Commission of South Central Connecticut, an organization formed in 1948 at the urging of the Chamber of Commerce to coordinate planning with the smaller cities around New Haven.

Tyler did his work on the housing issue through a committee of the Alumni Council called the Committee on Graduate and Professional Schools. This committee provided a favorable report on the Oak Street proposal to the campus space committee in October, 1953:

A subcommittee on housing has been exploring the possibility of having the University act as the developer of the area which will be released by the City of New Haven when it extends College Street from George Street to Congress Avenue. After two meetings with the Urban Redevelopment Unit of New Haven the proposition looks promising. The area in question is ideally located being a twelve-acre plot bounded on the north by George Street, south by Oak Street.

The importance of Tyler's friendship with Griswold and his October, 1953, report to Yale's space committee becomes even more apparent when it is added that he and his law firm became counsel to the city on redevelopment matters in 1954 and that he was appointed to the Citizen's Action Commission that oversaw the program. When I asked Lee's Redevelopment Administrator, Edward Logue, about the importance of Tyler, he replied very simply, "He was my lawyer."

Two major points contradictory to Dahl's history of New Haven urban renewal are established by this sequence of events between October, 1951, and October, 1953. First, the contact between Yale and the city preceded the election of Lee as mayor by two years, contrary to almost all accounts of New Haven's urban renewal history, including Dahl's. Second, Yale was connected to the downtown redevelopment efforts at its highest levels by Tyler, the absence of interest in New Haven on the part of Dahl and most Yale faculty notwithstanding.

In the end, nearly five years later, Yale did not build its own housing in the area. Instead, the opportunity went to a local member of the growth coalition and his friends outside the city, who did an end run around Yale by complaining to regional urban renewal administrators that the bidding was rigged, a tactic that deeply embarrassed and angered Yale officials. This is the kind of issue internal to the power structure that did cause tensions and delays, and did require all the patience and diplomacy that Lee and his aides could muster, but it is hardly the big theoretical deal that Dahl makes of it.

([Click here](#) for a more detailed account of how Yale lost out to real estate people who were part of the Democratic Party.)

Yale's importance to the program was increased even more in 1952, with the election of Bush to the U.S. Senate as a Republican from Connecticut. Upon arrival in Washington, Bush was appointed to the Banking and Currency Committee, which was chaired by his good friend and fellow Yale trustee, Ohio Senator Robert H. Taft. The committee had oversight responsibilities on the urban renewal program, and Bush immediately began to take an interest in the program. He was one of the sponsors on the 1954 legislation that made the program more attractive to real estate interests, and he brought representatives of the Housing and Home Finance Agency to Connecticut to explain the revisions in the law to the state's mayors shortly after they were passed. As he told a Columbia University oral historian: "I remained on the Banking and Currency Committee for ten years, and in the course of that had a good deal to do with promoting the so-called urban redevelopment programs, in the state of Connecticut, under the law."

Bush's claim that he did everything he could for urban renewal in all of Connecticut receives empirical support from the calculations I did on per capita commitments by state based on data through 1972. Connecticut was at the top of the list with \$175 per person. Even without New Haven included in its total, Connecticut was second at \$132 per person, surpassed only by sparsely populated Alaska's \$166, and still well ahead of such nearby and similar states as Massachusetts (\$110), Pennsylvania (\$95), New Jersey (\$72), and New York (\$70). Clearly, then, it is Connecticut that did well, and not just New Haven. Unless Mayor Lee had some kind of contagion effect, this fact argues more in favor of some statewide influence on urban renewal in Connecticut cities than it does for the extraordinary powers of one local mayor.

Although Bush was new to the Senate, his power was enhanced by two factors. First, there was a Republican in the White House for the first time since 1932, which meant that the top appointees to the Housing and Home Finance Agency were Republicans. Second, the Republicans also held control of both houses of Congress in 1953-54, which meant that the bureaucracy was likely to be very responsive to requests from a Republican Senator on a committee that had so much influence on the fate of the agency.

Despite the interest in urban renewal on the part of Yale and the downtown business community, the program nonetheless moved along very slowly in the early 1950s. Accepting what he was told by Lee, Logue, and their assistants, whom he interviewed in 1957, well after the events of 1953 to 1956 were shrouded in the fog of memory and mythmaking, Dahl first blames these delays on the Republican mayor, William Celantano. However, as shown in the "[Power at the Local Level](#)" article on this Web site, the major problem was the lack of money at the national level due to the resistance to the program by leaders within the real estate lobby. The fact is that no federally funded programs got off the drawing boards until the program was changed by the Republicans in 1954 to meet the growth coalitions' demands (see also Domhoff, 1978, pp. 73-75).

Before considering these problems further, however, it is necessary to take a closer look at Yale employee Richard C. Lee and the election that brought him to the mayor's office in 1953.

The elections of 1953

As arguments over urban renewal at both the local and national levels were heating up, the time for the biennial mayor's election was coming around. This was the election won by Lee, who then remained as mayor until 1969, finally retiring reluctantly in the midst of the many problems that befell the city and his programs. So it is important to look at Lee and his career, including his close association with the business community and Yale. There is also the matter of who supported his candidacy in 1953.

Born in 1916 into a working class family in New Haven, Lee took a job with one of the two local newspapers, the morning newspaper called the *Journal-Courier*, shortly after he graduated from high school in 1934. In 1939, at the ripe young age of 23, he became a city alderman from his ward, joining 32 other part-time people on the very large town council (called the "Board of Aldermen"). He was slated as a candidate by the leaders of the Democratic Party, who liked his outgoing personality and his past work for the party.



Richard Lee in 1966
([click to enlarge](#))

During that same year Lee was hired by the Chamber of Commerce to do public relations and service-oriented work. For example, he headed the chamber's Better Business Bureau and organized the Junior Chamber of Commerce for the city. Due to his combination of roles as chamber employee and alderman, he was well aware of the chamber's interest in urban renewal, and he was one of the aldermen who urged the city to create a City Plan Commission. He thereby came to know Rotival and the other early planners that I discussed earlier.

Lee worked for the chamber until 1942, when he left to serve in the army. When ill health forced him to leave the service shortly thereafter, he was hired by Yale to run its wartime news clipping service. In 1944 Yale asked him to develop a public relations office, euphemistically called the Yale News Bureau, where he remained until he was elected mayor. His job was to convince the people of New Haven that Yale was a valuable part of the community.

Lee arrived at Yale in good part through the auspices of Carl Lohmann, the powerful Secretary of Yale at the time, who served on the chamber's board of directors in the early 1940s and took Lee under his wing. As all accounts make clear, Lohmann, a wealthy and erudite member of the social elite, was a mentor to Lee, and Lee reciprocated by developing a strong affinity for Yale, right down to his style of dress. He became one of the rare non-Yale graduates to be admitted to Mory's, the fabled Yale eating club. Although he remained a well-grounded machine politician who knew how to take care of and flatter constituents, he also became something of a liberal on many issues. Raymond Wolfinger, a Dahl assistant who worked at city hall and observed Lee for a year in 1957-1958, says that Lee absorbed Yale's "enlightened values":



The Mory's Association club on York Street, in the 1960s
([click to enlarge](#))

More basically, he became familiar with and sympathetic to liberal upper-middle-class values and ways of looking at the world. Many of his policies and strategies as mayor seemed influenced by his knowledge of the world of ideas and his acceptance of the enlightened values he encountered at Yale. (Wolfinger, 1973, p. 168)

For any Yalie who thought about it for a minute, Lee had to be the ideal person to sell the university to a city that was not crazy about it, not only because of its stinginess with the city, but because it had very few faculty or students of Italian or Jewish heritage at the time. (As of the early 1970s, no Catholic had ever been a trustee of Yale; the first Jewish member joined the board in the early 1960s by petitioning his way on to the ballot sent to all alumni.) After all, Lee was a local working-class lad who stressed the Irish part of his multiple-heritage background, a former employee of the Chamber of Commerce, and a member of the Board of Aldermen. He was also personable and ambitious (Talbot, 1970). He was perfect for Yale.

Like many budding politicians, Lee also was a joiner. At the time he became mayor he was on the boards of the New Haven chapter of the American Red Cross, the Boy Scouts of America, the Family Service of New Haven, the New Haven Council of Social Agencies, the Tuberculosis and Health Association of New Haven, and the New Haven Taxpayers Research Council. He was a member of the Rotary Club. For all these affiliations, he was nonetheless best known to New Haveners, according to a story on his career in the *Journal-Courier* at the time of his election victory, as the master of ceremonies at the summertime Pop Concerts. Talk about ubiquitous.

Lee continued as an alderman until 1949, when he ran for mayor at age 33 and lost by a few hundred votes. He ran for mayor again in 1951, losing by only two votes after he decided to cut a recount short so he would be thought of as a stand-up kind of person if and when he ran again. In 1952 he helped local liberals, most of them in and around Yale, in their efforts to elect Adlai E. Stevenson to the presidency, gaining many new political allies in the process.

Although he clearly wanted to be mayor, he claimed in early 1953 that he was not sure he would run this time. However, shortly thereafter he said that he had decided to try again because political friends had presented him with a petition containing many hundreds of signatures from people urging him to run. (Dahl's files say Lee organized the petition drive.) Lee's political friends at Yale then formed a committee called "Independents for Lee," which played a major role in his campaign. Its executive committee included several well-known professors and the wife of a local labor leader. Three of its members — Eugene V. Rostow, a professor at the law school; Chester Kerr, the second in command at Yale University Press, and Edward Logue, a Yale Law School graduate married to the daughter of William DeVane, dean of Yale College since 1938 — helped fashion his forward-looking platform.

Rostow, a native of New Haven, and one of the few local Jewish students to graduate from Yale up to that time, had many friends and contacts at the state and national levels through his involvement in the Democratic Party. He was best known in New Haven for his advocacy for improving the public schools. He soon became dean of the Yale Law School and later ended up a prominent figure in the Kennedy Administration, and then a neoconservative who pushed for a defense build-up and a hard line against the Soviet Union in the 1970s.

Logue was a 1942 graduate of Yale who served in the Air Force for three years before returning to Yale to earn his law degree in 1947, where he took a course in city planning with Rotival, became friends with Rostow, and married Margaret DeVane, daughter of the aforementioned Yale dean. He then returned to his native Philadelphia to practice law, but in 1949 he became a legal advisor to the newly elected liberal governor of Connecticut, Chester Bowles, who took Logue with him as an administrative assistant when he was appointed as ambassador to India. Logue and his wife both wanted to return to New Haven, which they did in 1953. He then threw himself full-time into the Lee campaign. He later became a major figure in redevelopment in both Boston and New York. As the rest of this account shows, it would be hard to underestimate Logue's role, or his close ties to Yale.

This time Lee won handily by a little over 3,500 votes. He lost the usual pro-Republican, mostly Italian precincts by 4,100 votes and won the usual pro-Democratic, mostly Irish precincts by 3,200 votes, then made up the difference by winning by almost 4,500 votes in all other precincts, some of which were up-scale and middle-class, and without any strong ethnic identification, precisely the areas in which Independents for Lee and Yale voters probably made the difference (Rae, 2003, p. 308). Retrospective accounts often claim that Lee ran an unusually forward-looking campaign that stressed urban renewal and the rebuilding of New Haven, but I could find no sign of that in the detailed coverage of the campaign by the *Journal-Courier*. If anything, the incumbent mayor talked more about the urban renewal plans the city was developing than Lee did (Domhoff, 1978, pp. 86-90).

After the election Logue gradually became Lee's right-hand man on most administrative matters, especially on urban renewal, where his appointment in February, 1955, as Redevelopment Administrator put him in charge of all city departments related to that program. It was Lee and Logue who were to play the primary roles in orchestrating urban renewal from that point forward, and they were Dahl's main informants for his book.

Reactions to Lee's victory

The reactions to Lee's victory are critical in relation to Dahl's claim that business leaders had to be pushed into action on urban renewal by Lee. To the contrary, their major concern was that the continuity of the planning not be interrupted by the arrival of a new mayor. The degree of their interest is first captured in the New Haven Chamber of Commerce minutes for November 9, 1953, just a few days after the elections. The minutes, which relate to a meeting with the city planner, Norris Andrews, also summarize the realistic problems the program faced, which can hardly be attributed to the indifference of the Republican mayor, as Dahl claimed:

Mr. Giese, Mr. Thompson, Mr. Costello, and Mr. Johnson [all leaders in the Chamber of Commerce] met with Mr. Andrews to see if they could determine what pressure could be brought on the State Highway Commissioner to make decisions regarding U.S. Route 1 and the Oak Street Connector. Mr. Andrews said there were many roadblocks. One of them is a Supreme Court decision regarding the constitutionality of the Urban Redevelopment Act. To obtain a decision, a friendly suit has been brought by the advocates of urban redevelopment against the City of Hartford.

Mr. Andrews indicated that the Urban Redevelopment Agency had full knowledge of the exact location of the Oak Street Connector. However, it was his impression that the Federal Government would not give full approval to proceeding with Number Three Project until it is determined whether the City or the State will pay for developing the Oak Street Connector.

Furthermore, the Chamber of Commerce leaders worried that they might have to sell the urban renewal program to Lee. On November 10, seven days after he was elected, they decided to ask for a meeting with him at which "the entire program would be explained to him and he would be urged to get action started on the program." The November 19 meeting, held over lunch at the New Haven Lawn Club, included Lee and five chamber officers. The minutes report that "the entire program was explained to Mr. Lee" and that "Mr. Lee said he was in entire agreement with a program for action." The final words in the minutes, which certainly were not written for the benefit of future researchers, also reveal the chamber's eagerness: "In bringing the meeting to a close, Mr. Giese promised Mr. Lee the full cooperation of all those present and assured him the chamber is willing to do anything possible to get action started and to get a steam shovel starting work on the redevelopment program."

Obviously, evidence such as this does not prove that the chamber caused the program to happen. However, it does show that its leaders were anything but hesitant about it, which is a central claim in Dahl's account. Indeed, it is a smoking gun as far as that aspect of his argument is concerned. Other evidence, including transcripts of Dahl's original interviews, demonstrates the chamber's role in the initiation of the program. For one example among several, a top chamber leader in the city, whom Dahl obviously did not take very seriously, had this interchange with Dahl:

DAHL: You suggested this to the city, did you?

CHAMBER LEADER: Yes, we (the Chamber of Commerce) had our own ten-point program which was incorporated in this phase of it. Finally, we got approval of the plan by the city and Mayor Lee took the ball and has been throwing it ever since."

That last phrase, "Mayor Lee took the ball and has been throwing it ever since," perfectly summarizes a business leader's view of the relationship between business and government. Business leaders handed him the program and he executed it. It was not easy to execute it, I agree, but the important point for now is the relationship between the chamber leader and the former public relations employee for the chamber and Yale.

Dahl doubts evidence like this for two reasons. First, Lee complained to Dahl that the business leaders were hesitant to help him, claiming he had trouble finding a chairman for the Citizens Action Commission (CAC) that was to serve as the blue-ribbon leadership group. Second, the CAC, once appointed, didn't seem to do much as far as Dahl could tell. But Dahl's interviews with Logue and Rostow show that they wanted to go slow because they didn't want the chamber group to run the whole show; they knew they needed, and they

themselves desired to have for their own reasons, labor leaders and liberals on the commission. (Even so, in the end 10 of the 18 original members of the CAC were also members of the Chamber of Commerce.) Dahl's interviews also make clear that the CAC was primarily meant to be a public-relations front group, so it is hard to fault its members for not being more active in the decision-making process.

(For details on the CAC based on Dahl's interviews, [click here](#).)

Success on the Oak Street project

While Lee was still savoring his victory, negotiation continued on the location and length of the freeway thought to be essential to the success of the Oak Street Project. There were three technical problems as well as a political issue. The first problem was that the route for the large new Connecticut Turnpike that would skirt the edges of New Haven kept shifting closer to the Long Island Sound, which made the connecting freeway--called the "Oak Street Connector" (Route 34 on the map of New Haven today shown earlier) — both longer and more expensive, and more essential in the view of the planners. The second problem was that there was no real traffic justification for this connecting freeway from the state's point of view.

The third problem was that the city would not pay one dime of the costs. As one planner remarked at the time, the problem could have been solved in a minute if the city had been willing to pitch in. But of course the city didn't want to pitch in, partly because it couldn't afford it without having to delay some other project, but also because it figured it could get the money if it yammered at the "highway bureaucrats" long enough. This is indeed what happened in the end. Mayor Lee and his aides had to expend an enormous amount of energy jawing with the highway department, and local lawyers and business leaders did their part by lobbying the state legislature in Hartford, but in the end New Haven got the freeway it wanted for nothing.



Mayor Lee and Frank O'Brien of the Redevelopment Agency examine plans for the Oak Street Connector
([click to enlarge](#))

And then there was the political problem. The state highway people were not politically naive. They knew that New Haven leaders wanted the freeway as part of their plans to save and expand the downtown. However, they did not believe this was possible. They told local planners like Rotival that the city was moving in the other direction, that is, toward its northern and northeastern suburbs. As Rotival summarized it, "They believe that New Haven is already moving to the North-East and doubt if we will be successful in the rehabilitation of the South-West, especially between the Railroad Station and the Hospital" (Domhoff, 1978, p. 91). It therefore took extra political work with the governor's office and the state legislature to overcome this analysis, which proved to be quite accurate.

Despite all these problems, the state highway commissioner agreed on November 24 to build the Oak Street Connector. It seemed like the logjam was broken, but Lee, Logue and their planners said that it did not extend far enough. They therefore had to write new position papers and proposals, and make their argument all over again. These continuing problems over the Oak Street Connector led to tensions between the Lee group and the holdover director of the Redevelopment Agency. Lee and Logue decided he "lacked the drive and zeal they wanted" (Dahl, 1961, p. 129). As Dahl's interviews with Lee and Logue make abundantly clear, they thought he was incompetent. Out he went and in came a consultant, an experienced planner who had worked for the Housing and Home Finance Agency until early 1954.

The consultant's task was to see what needed to be done to solve problems which were delaying submission of a project application. He surveyed the situation and recommended that the agency start all over in terms of its applications. Shortly thereafter, Ralph Taylor, a more experienced director from another city, was hired, and the program began to function more smoothly. This series of events, rooted in good part in interagency conflicts and personal deficiencies, provides the basis for the incredible assertion by Lee in his interview with Dahl that "Redevelopment in New Haven began in February of '55. We had to start from scratch and assemble a team and start to file all the papers and get the whole program launched."

But this claim, which is a key starting point for Dahl, is extremely misleading from the perspective of the program's basic objectives. In fact, the Rotival-Chamber of Commerce plans were basically unchanged. What changed were the applications and justifications sent to Washington. There were also small changes in what buildings were going to be placed in the project, which meant more commercial development, rewards for friendly small businessmen and politicians, and an addition to the hospital. Once it was certain that the

Oak Street Connector would make a large amount of land available, the top executives of the Southern New England Telephone Company, who were supporters of urban renewal, decided they wanted to erect new headquarters in the general area. After a minimum of negotiations, this building became a major piece of the renewal plan.

The changes in the plans necessitated by the last-minute inclusion of the telephone building and an extension of the hospital meant that there would be further delays unless pressure could be brought on the Housing and Home Finance Agency. At this point Bush was called into action once again. The issues are reflected in a letter to Bush dated March 21, 1955, from the administrator of the Housing and Home Finance Agency, in response to Bush's inquiry about the status of the New Haven application. The letter also refers to another reason for last-minute changes, the need to add two extra blocks in the northern area of the project in order to compensate for the large amount of land the highway department insisted upon for the connector:

Two questions have been the subjects of recent discussions with officials of New Haven. One, the submission and approval of a loan and grant application containing these two additional blocks. Under the agreed conditions, the New Haven delegation was informed that it was legally possible to proceed in this manner. Secondly, the question of land disposal policy was discussed. There seemed to be no obstacle for specific purpose use in the proposed redevelopment as concerned Yale University Faculty Housing, New England Telephone Company Building and New Haven Hospital extension.

Bush's role in gaining fast federal approval of the first project in 1955 was especially important because it gave a boost to Lee's reelection campaign. According to a puff piece in *Harper's' Magazine* by a public relations employee of the American Council to Improve Our Neighborhoods (ACTION), which is discussed in my [history of the urban renewal program at the national level](#), this quick approval overwhelmed the criticism Lee was receiving from the local press because of the possibility Yale might purchase land in the project:

But a week before election day, with an assist from Republican Senator Prescott Bush, federal approval of the \$7,650,000 loan and grant for Oak Street came through; the announcement by Lee and Bush in a joint press conference from the Mayor's office made eight-column headlines. Lee was re-elected by a margin of 20,000 — the largest ever achieved by a Connecticut Mayor — and the voters also gave him a 31-2 Democratic Board of Aldermen.

It's hard for me to see how delays caused by hassles over the Oak Street Connector, poor paperwork by the former Redevelopment Administrator, and last-minute additions to the project contradict the idea that the downtown growth coalition and Yale shaped the program in just the way my theory might expect. I have no problem with Dahl's claims about the details of what happened once Lee and Logue took over, and I agree that they had to do a great deal of coordinating. But to use that as evidence that there is no "power structure," and that pluralism reigns, is to miss the forest for the trees.

As for the Oak Street Connector itself, the state engineers were correct in predicting that it would never carry the traffic the city claimed it would. To this day it has not been extended more than the few miles that take it from the Connecticut Turnpike to a cross street between the hospital and Yale. There is now a parking lot for Yale-New Haven hospital personnel on the land purchased to extend the freeway. The Oak Street Connector ended up as a huge battering ram that helped destroy the Oak Street area that had been defined as a slum to be cleared for urban renewal.

Dahl's shortsightedness and tunnel vision are also apparent in the even bigger project that followed the Oak Street triumph.



The Oak Street Connector in 1960. At the upper-left, the highway dead-ends; it still does today. [\(click to enlarge\)](#)

Rebuilding the downtown business district, 1955-1957

Although the Oak Street land was useful for the telephone company, the hospital, and Yale, it wasn't the heart of the matter for the downtown growth elites. For them the big deal was a project to rebuild the main downtown street, Church Street. With a grant of \$13.3 million and a loan of another \$25.8 million from the federal government, the plan called for a new hotel, department stores, an office building, space for small modern shops, and a large parking garage. The idea was to lure suburban shoppers back to the downtown and make New Haven a commercial center once again.

Overall, the Church Street Project was the second largest redevelopment project in the country, and it is the main reason why ACTION adopted New Haven as its poster child. Since ACTION was headed by leaders in the publishing world, there were soon stories in *Time*, *Life*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*, as well as *Harper's Magazine*, about the daring and wonderful work that Mayor Lee and his aides were doing there. Lee now thought he might have the chance to run for governor or the Senate, and he had hundreds of copies of these articles mailed to potential supporters inside and outside of Connecticut.

As might be expected, Dahl gives all the credit for the Church Street Project to Lee and Logue because of what they had to go through to bring the project together, such as conflicts among major owners for the best locations, legal challenges by the small business owners who were being displaced, and nervousness on the part of the Housing and Home Finance Agency about the way the project stretched the rules (of which more in a minute). All of this is very true, and it is where politicians and appointed officials earn their keep. But in terms of the big picture, it was once again the First New Haven National Bank, Yale, and Bush who set the parameters of the action and controlled the resources that made completion possible.

The initial plans on downtown urban renewal involved a completely private project by a multimillionaire developer, Roger Stevens, known to Lee and Logue because he was a major Democratic Party fundraiser and contributor. When this plan fell through because some local businessmen held out for high prices for their land and structures, Lee and Logue began to think in terms of smaller, federally subsidized projects that would rebuild parts of the downtown in small parcels at a time. However, when Lee's aides went to the directors at the First New Haven National Bank with their tentative federal project, they were told to think bigger and to do it "right." Harold Grabino, one of Logue's lawyers, explained it to a Dahl assistant as follows:

When Lee and Logue first went to talk to the people at the First National Bank with their Church Street Project, they had a rather modest and undeveloped, unthought-out plan for the Church Street Project. The First National Bank said they would support the plan if it were made into a really big thing. I asked why. Grabino said it was partly because they didn't want to go to the trouble of relocating unless the project was really worth it and partly because they wanted to see the town grow. And to repeat: evidently what they say goes as witness the violation of policy in letting them buy land in the Church Street Project rather than rent it.

"See the town grow?" Now there's a phrase that rings true for a growth-coalition theorist. "What they say goes?" That sounds like what has been found in most community power studies, but it doesn't draw any attention in Dahl's book. Logue himself told the story directly to Dahl in the following way:

Then there was another important thing that happened there when we failed (in the private redevelopment scheme). We had another sketch made. By this time the bank was all hot about this and all for it and we got with six of them in the president's office and they told us to go back and tell Dick Lee that they were interested only if we did it right, and if we didn't widen Orange Street. You go back and tell Dick Lee that if he isn't doing things right, the bank isn't interested. So we said, well, you have to understand that we have to go federal completely in order to do that — that didn't seem to bother them — and also that Dick can't carry this whole thing on his own and he's got to have strong business support.

In the light of these accounts, which show that Lee and his aides had a clear mandate from the heart of the power network to go for broke, it is surprising that Dahl would give so much credit in his account to Logue's "initiative" in drawing up the plans, without any mention of the marching orders the bank had given him :

With Church Street, it was the Development Administrator himself (Logue) who, after months of consideration, discussion, and preliminary planning, sat down late one night and drew on a city map the boundaries he then proposed and the Mayor accepted — boundaries that in their economic and social implications seemed so bold and daring that for months the exact nature of the proposal was kept in secrecy as the Mayor, the Development Administrator, and the Redevelopment Director tested it for feasibility and acceptability. (Dahl, 1961, p. 128)

Given the facts about the role of the First New Haven National Bank in the project, this is probably the single most inaccurate interpretation in Dahl's book. He is once again operating at the middle range of analysis (the policy details) rather than the general power level that is really at issue here (who sets the boundaries, and for what reasons). Nor are his comments about "secrecy" entirely accurate. It may have been secret from the general public and the small businesspeople it was going to uproot, but it was not secret from the most important members of the growth coalition, as Dahl's own interviews show. ([Click here](#) for more detail from Dahl's interview with Logue.)

But as I already said, there were delays despite the support from the First National Bank of New Haven, due to the maneuvering for greater advantage among three or four businessmen, not to mention the anguished protests by small store owners and shopkeepers who did not even know they were going to be displaced until they read about it in the newspapers. These delays have one theoretically relevant aspect: they show again the importance of Yale. When the delays led the developer to withdraw because he did not want his money tied up in an unprofitable situation, Lee and Logue had to turn to Yale for a \$4.5 million loan in 1962. Then the negotiations over the loan between Lee and Yale led to the involvement of R. H. Macy and Company in the project, which became a major factor in ensuring its success:

In the course of negotiating the loan, Lee had met with a member of the Yale Corporation who was also a director of R. H. Macy and Company. Through him the mayor renewed relations with the Macy management that spring and by the end of the summer Lee had negotiated an agreement for Macy's to build a \$5 million department store in the project area. (Wolfinger, 1973, pp. 343-344)

But it was not just the First New Haven National Bank and Yale that made the project possible in terms of resources and clout. Bush and his aides once again had to jam the Housing and Home Finance Agency. They were the ones who got the program approved even though it stretched the federal guidelines because it was not really about slum clearance. The Lee and Logue archives that became available at the Yale University Library in the 1990s are replete with letters back and forth between Bush and New Haven about this project, along with letters between Lee and the Housing and Home Finance Agency, and between Bush and the Housing and Home Finance Agency.

The following excerpt from one of Dahl's interviews with a key New Haven urban renewal official, Ralph Taylor, makes this point very bluntly while at the same time revealing Dahl's complete lack of information on Bush's previous involvement in Yale's growth plans. Taylor is explaining why gaining approval from the federal government had been such a problem. To make the redevelopment plan technically legal, and qualify it for funding, Lee and Logue were including four residential blocks that did not really fit. Taylor says that what they were doing was a "perversion" of the concept that urban renewal is for situations where "the areas just outside of the center of the city, where there is a substantial amount of residential 'tight noose,' where the deterioration had progressed to the point where it was no longer predominantly residential, and where the re-use would be logically an extension, an expansion, of the central business district." The dialogue continues as follows:

TAYLOR: Technically speaking, what we're doing on Church Street is a perversion of that concept. What we're doing is a land use concept. We had a helluva time. We had to put pressure on Bush, who was most helpful in getting it out.

DAHL: This is one thing I didn't question Logue about last night and should have. I don't really understand why it is that Bush has been helpful on this.

TAYLOR: Bush's connections, I've never asked Logue directly why, but my own interest from what I know goes back to the fact that Yale was to be the developer on the Oak Street Connector. Bush is on the Yale Corporation and there is an.... [Here there is a blank in the transcript due to difficulties in understanding the tape.] Also Bush is on the Banking and Currency Committee, which handles redevelopment legislation. So that he has a logical interest. Also taking advantage of the Yale connection, Logue and Lee, whenever Bush comes to town, dealing with the Yale Corporation, manage to have lunch with him at Mory's. And I've gone to some of those luncheons. The preparations when we're putting on a show for Bush, preparation for this one man, is quite intensive. We put out publications limited to him.

DAHL: Is that so?

TAYLOR: Explaining what the program was, what the answers were, answers to the problems, and where he could help in getting those answers.



Women picketing Mory's because of the club's male-only membership policy, October 1970
([click to enlarge](#))

I think this exchange illustrates the differences between the power structure and pluralist perspectives. For Dahl, no one counted except Lee, Logue, and their assistants, who had the ability to organize the local urban renewal coalition and cut through red tape in Washington. But this interview, the letters in the Lee and Logue archives at Yale, and the archival material concerning the role of Yale and the Chamber of Commerce combine to show that it was Bush who cut through the red tape for the benefit of Yale and the downtown growth coalition.

Conclusion

I have not presented every last detail on every urban renewal project in New Haven. That information can be found elsewhere (Powledge, 1970; Talbot, 1970; Wolfinger, 1973). However, I think I have said enough to show that Dahl is wrong on the key issues:

1. He said the social and economic elites don't overlap, but I show they do.
2. He said the business leaders were not interested in urban renewal, but I show they were.
3. He said the business leaders didn't have any impact, but I show they did.
4. He said Yale was uninterested and powerless, but I show otherwise.
5. He said there was no downtown power structure, but his own interviews show the opposite.

Stated another way, planners and administrators drew the designs that growth-coalition leaders accepted or rejected, and politicians skillfully orchestrated the complex proceedings and dealings with the general public; but the goals and benefits were in the hands of the downtown power structure, representing the general interests of the local growth coalition and Yale University, both of which were looking for room to grow.

I also think I have shown why Dahl was wrong to say that the "decisional method" is the best way to do power structure studies. To the contrary, my analysis of his study, and my own empirical research on the issues, convinced me that it is rarely possible to use this method, whatever its hypothetical merits, unless enough time has passed for insider documents and organizational records to be available. It may be that the most serious criticism I can make of Dahl is that he never should have done this interview-based study in the first place, for it was doomed from the start to fall victim to the ambitions and plans of the politicians, planners, lawyers, and businessmen that he was interviewing. This was especially the case with Richard Lee, a consummate charmer/politician who at the time still hoped to become the governor of Connecticut or one of its senators some day.

It was even a mistake to rely on interviewees who were not ambitious or self-serving for information on the formative years of urban renewal in New Haven between 1949 and 1955. It put Dahl at the mercy of human memory, with all its frailties and its tendency to personalize events. It is not safe to assume that what people say in 1957 and 1958 is an accurate description of events that took place several years earlier, even if there is considerable consensus among interviewees. The point about mistrusting even a consensus among interviewees is critical, for it alerts us to the possibility that everyone interviewed may be a victim of the ideological consensus that has slowly formed over the intervening years and rearranged memories about what actually happened. This danger was especially great because of all the magazine hype and publicity about the New Haven urban renewal program. It is for these reasons that a document record becomes essential, but Dahl did not have that kind of record.

With the help of the document record, along with my interviews with business leaders and planners, and Dahl's revealing interviews with Lee and Logue, we can conclude that the First National Bank of New Haven and Yale University ruled in New Haven, but that Lee and Logue governed. It's an important distinction that Dahl was not able to entertain in his zeal to discredit Hunter or anyone else who argues that a dominant economic class has preponderant power. It's not that way everywhere (as [our study of Santa Cruz](#) showed), nor at every time (as [Michael Mann's four-network theory of power](#) makes clear), but it's usually that way in American cities for the reasons spelled out in the pages on [local power](#) on this web site.

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