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CARTHAGE-ON-THE-MISSISSIPPI MAYOR DISPUTES CENSUS: LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL IN ST. LOUIS?

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Earlier this month, the US Census Bureau published its periodic estimates of municipal population. As so often in the past, world record holder St. Louis was reported to have lost more population than any other major city in the nation. From 2000 to 2003, the city lost more than four percent of its population, dropping from 348,000 to 332,000.

In the best “kill the messenger” tradition, St. Louis Mayor Francis Slay was reported by the *St. Louis Post Dispatch* to have characterized the Census numbers as “bogus and unreliable.” Taking a page out of the transit industry “we-know-population-better-than-the-Census-Bureau” book, Slay cites various city-developed indicators to dispute the Census numbers. The transit industry tried a similar tack to dispute the continuing loss of transit market share reported in the 2000 Census. They have been less strident since a subsequent Census Bureau survey indicated that there is a structural bias in Census responses that tends to *overstate* the actual transit share (which, of course, means that it understates other modes, like driving alone and car pools).

Hizzoner should have checked history. Cities and chambers of commerce have routinely issued population estimates that were, in the end, found to be overly optimistic. For example, late 1990’s estimates from the state of California indicated that Los Angeles had added 400,000 people since 1990. The Census found little more than 200,000. Or there were the late 1950s estimates that put the population of San Francisco at over 800,000 and Cleveland over 1,000,000, numbers that were not achieved in the 1960 census and surely will never be.

More than 2000 years ago, Carthage had risen to prominence on the Mediterranean Sea, with more than 500,000 people. Then it was sacked and salted into oblivion by the Romans, with resulting 100 percent loss of population. More than 100 years ago, St. Louis had risen to prominence among cities west of the Alleghenies. It peaked in 1950 and has now lost more than 60 percent of its population. This is less than Carthage, but the actual number lost, more than 500,000 is virtually the same.

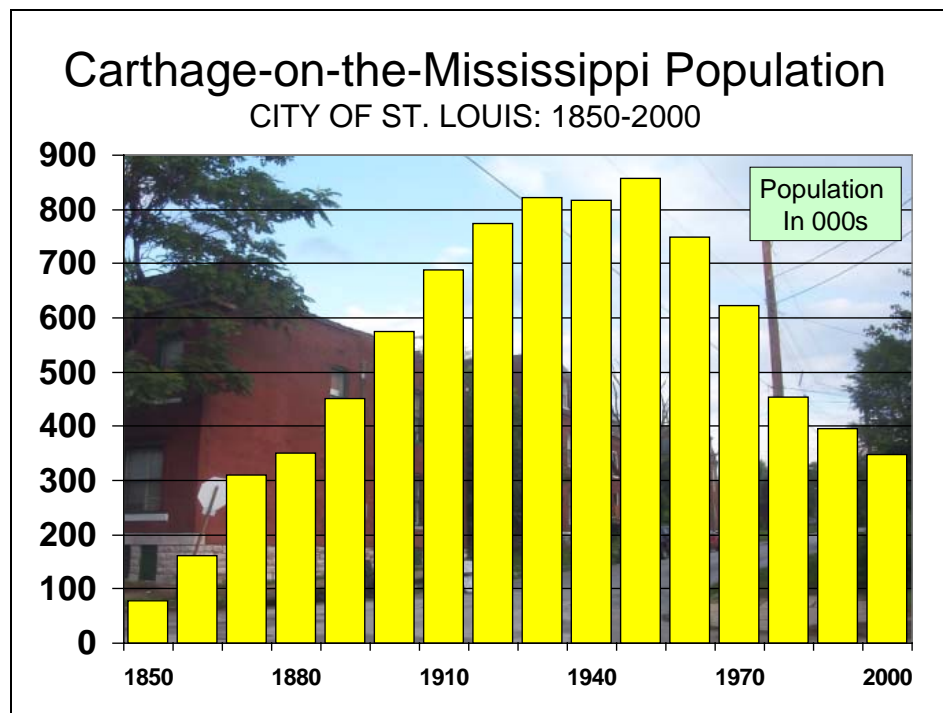
It has been a long, steep slide for Carthage-on-the-Mississippi. In 1870, St. Louis was the fourth largest city in the nation. Actually, it should be considered third, because one of the larger cities was Brooklyn, which began its career of forgotten-ness when it was forcibly merged into New

York by the state legislature in 1898. The Brooklyn Dodgers and Jackie Gleason's *Honeymooner's* television series kept the name from disappearing, but by 1960 they were gone.

Philadelphia just ahead of St. Louis as number two in 1870, though it had more than double the population. Philadelphia is falling, like St. Louis, but not as fast.

The 1870 census was the last that showed a smaller population for St. Louis than today. At its 1950 peak of 857,000, the city of St. Louis was the eighth largest in the nation. Now it ranks 53rd, behind a whole lot of unheard-of places like Mesa (Arizona), Arlington (Texas, not Virginia) and Virginia Beach (Virginia, not Texas). At the current rate, St. Louis will drop below 300,000 by the 2010 census and will reach its lowest population since the 1860 census.

Generally unknown places like Stockton and Bakersfield, California are likely to be larger in 2010, and St. Louis could fall to 60th or lower. It took 80 years to grow from 311,000 in 1870 to 857,000 in 1950. It will take only 60 years to fall back below 300,000. But, of course, the 2010 numbers, when announced, will doubtlessly be characterized as "bogus and unreliable."



But St. Louis does have competition. Pittsburgh and Buffalo have also lost more than one-half of their population, as has the city of Antwerp (Belgium), inside its pre-consolidation 1982 borders. Liverpool and Manchester are near that figure, while some Italian cities, especially Milan, have a running start at it, with unprecedented losses in the last three decades. They started losing later, because they became affluent later, so their unsustainably high densities could be sustained a bit longer. And who knows, maybe the public schools are a disaster.

Even the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* told Mayor Slay to drop it. But, with a not untypical mindlessness, the paper editorialized about how the answer was consolidation with suburban St. Louis County, which the *Post* claims would make service delivery more efficient. The *Post* like

so many who don't take the time to look at the data seems to have missed the reality that municipal consolidations *raise* costs per capita, rather than lowering them. The reasons are simple. First of all, people care about smaller communities like they cannot care about larger ones. Second, special interests take advantage of the lobbying economies of scale (the only economies of scale of larger governments) to ensure that their good takes precedence over that of the citizenry. Thus, voters, when given a chance and armed with the facts, routinely turn down municipal consolidations. That's why they have to be imposed by legislatures and parliaments on their vassal subjects who don't know what's best for themselves. Besides, these same voters are already heavily subsidizing inefficient core cities through their state and federal taxes (in Minneapolis-St. Paul, through their local taxes as well).

The real miracle is that cities like St. Louis have lost so little of their population. They (or at least the courts) went to great lengths to bus their middle classes out of town in the 1970s. Those who remained either couldn't afford to move or sent their kids to private schools.

Urban judiciaries thought "broken windows" were good for the community and encouraged, by their permissiveness, more crime (remember when graffiti was considered art). Fortunately changed attitudes and changed times are turning around the problem of crime, though things are still considerably worse than they were 40 years ago.

The interests that control the cities have driven costs up and retarded service, while the corruption Lincoln Steffens described for streetcar riders has undergone a metamorphosis, but not been eradicated. At the turn of the 20th century, Steffens paid Philadelphia city government a backhanded compliment, conceding that at least the people got a 95 percent return for their taxes. That would be a bargain by today's standards.

The necessary, but perhaps not sufficient condition for a genuine rebirth of the American city is to deliver quality education with public funds. This will require focusing on educational performance and "breaking whatever eggs" necessary to make it happen. Of course, that is too dear a political price for any central city politician to pay, because the interests that profit from public education's mess would work hard to ensure retirement at the next election.

So, St. Louis is lucky to still have 332,000 people. That's still more than Carthage.

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