

Inside Newark: Decline, Rebellion, and the Search for Transformation**Robert Curvin****Rutgers University Press: New Brunswick, 2014****377 pages, index, 19 Photographs, 4 figures, 4 tables****Hardcover, \$30.00****ISBN: 978065712****DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.14713/njs.v2i2.53>**

Robert Curvin's *Inside Newark: Decline, Rebellion, and the Search for Transformation* offers a brief history of the city from its beginnings to the 1950s and a more in-depth analysis of the complicated and contentious personality that has become synonymous with Newark over the past sixty years. Newark is celebrating its 350th Anniversary in 2016 and it is extraordinarily useful to have this well-written volume that chronicles the highs and lows of New Jersey's largest city.

When Kenneth Gibson became mayor in 1970 he stated, "Wherever America's cities are going, Newark will get there first."¹ Curvin adeptly provides evidence to validate this statement and *Inside Newark* should serve as a primer for those interested in the life, death, and resurgence of urban industrial centers across the nation.

Bob Curvin passed away in 2014. This book is his legacy. In the Introduction he states, "The passion that went into writing the book stems from the inseparability and attachment to Newark, not to mention the trauma of witnessing a historic rebellion." (p.4) The photo section provides an iconic photo of a very young Curvin, on the first night of the Newark Rebellion (often referred to as the Newark Riot by non-Newarkers), bull horn in hand, addressing an angry crowd outside of the 4th Police Precinct on a hot July evening in 1967. It is this activist Curvin whose voice we read on every page. It is the eyewitness account of Civil Rights leader Curvin, that makes this book such a compelling read.

¹ See http://www.nj.com/newark/index.ssf/2009/10/panel_examine_legacy_of_ken_gi.html.

Former Newark Mayor Sharpe James stated in Curvin's *Star Ledger* obituary, "He knew everybody. Everybody knew him. He was a walking encyclopedia about where Newark's been, where we are today, and where we are going." That is exactly what *Inside Newark* is, Curvin's encyclopedia of Newark. He candidly looks at the good and the bad — explaining and condemning the bad while extolling the good and offering prescriptions for what needs to be done to ensure a city with a hopeful and stronger a future. This is a skillfully told story juxtaposing hard data with personal narrative. He objectively criticizes and congratulates city political and social leaders on their successes and failures. Federal policy is also critiqued and Curvin is quick to point to failed policy and the devastating impact that policy has had on the disenfranchised.

Of particular note is Curvin's critique of Newark's post 1967 rebellion mayors Gibson, James, and Booker. Curvin is critical of not just politicians but other city leaders who let greed get in the way of effective government and the implementation of social programs that would benefit the city's residents. He lays blame on all three mayors for putting self-interest above the interests of those they took an oath to serve and expresses his disappointment that this intersection of politics and corruption did not end with the ascendance to power of three African American mayors.

According to Curvin, Gibson and James were cheerleaders for Newark and knew, cared about, and understood their constituency. Unfortunately, their system of patronage prohibited them from governing as effectively as they should. Curvin explained that Gibson and James, in a fashion, succumbed to the "long standing and deeply embedded culture of illegality in the state, and particularly in Newark, (that) stifles efforts to improve the performance of government as well as brighten the city's image." (p. 24)

Curvin goes on to describe the dashed hopes offered by former Mayor Cory Booker who promised an end to corruption and cronyism. His account of a less than stellar Booker administration may surprise the non-Newark reader. Certainly the tone of his description of the Booker years is a bit terse. The chapter on Booker is titled “Black Mayor on a White Horse” and explains that Booker’s major sin was his use of Newark as a stepping stone for national recognition. Managing his quest for celebrity interfered and weakened his effectiveness as mayor. Gibson and James loved the city. Booker used the city. Curvin states, “Newark was not Cory Anthony Booker’s life...he could have been the kind of mayor many of his supporters outside of Newark believed he was. But he was just too busy looking to that next step.” (p. 261)

The overwhelming poverty that still plagues the city is the unfortunate result of failed leadership and it is this oppressive poverty that, according to Curvin, presents major challenges to the city’s recovery. He states, “Concentrated poverty is the overarching problem; its complications are most prominently manifested in the dysfunction of the schools, the pervasive violent crime, and the reality of joblessness for thousands of people, many of whom are young and who have no legitimate options for a safe and crime-free livelihood.” (p. 310)

He ends the book with a seven-point plan for improvement that is dependent on finding leadership that will sincerely and strategically put Newark first and a strong citizenry willing to stay the course and dedicate themselves to creating a Newark worthy of its promise. If America is to live up to its potential, it is we the people who have to adhere to practicing good civics — supporting our elected leaders and making them accountable. Without this support, Curvin warns, this experiment in democracy will not succeed.

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