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Early in 1994 *Time* magazine proclaimed Las Vegas, Nevada “The New All American City,” a “city so freakishly democratic” that Americans just could not resist. ¹ Twenty-three years earlier, *Look* magazine had conferred the same title upon Birmingham, Alabama, stressing its progress in race relations.² Such media castings of normality must have surprised the American public in both instances. By the time of each city’s designation as “All-American,” the public had long been subjected to stories of their seemingly abnormal internal actions and qualities. Both cities suffered from stigmatized identities in the wider American perception that were fully formed by the mid-1960s. Las Vegas symbolized the abnormalities of legalized gambling, sexual promiscuity, and organized crime. Mention of Birmingham evoked associations with the deviance of racial intolerance and violent resistance to progressive change. A survey of the two cities’ national media representation provides insight into key aspects of these images’ development and endurance from 1945 to 2000.

I. Stigma and Place

Urban historians have largely ignored the phenomenon of stigmatization, especially when applied to such modern cities as Birmingham and Las Vegas. In their defense, examining such a

mental process represents dangerous territory for the historian. The “mind” of Americans has admittedly lacked consensus, and left few concrete sources for the historian’s examination. Yet the means by which the cities became classified and ultimately stigmatized deserves historical analysis. An interdisciplinary approach to revealing this process is worthwhile. Sociological research into the manner in which stigma forms in relation to individuals and groups provide a useful framework. With only the slightest conceptual modifications, one can directly apply key findings in these fields to the history of place. With regard to Birmingham and Las Vegas, one needs only to allow city to assume the position of the individual, while viewing nation as a community or group with shared values. Admittedly, this approach glosses over the wide array of differences, including the diversity of values within any nation. It nevertheless allows ready observation of place-based stigmatization’s development and perpetuation in relation to media coverage. In this context, the generalization proves more valuable than its obvious danger.

Alongside the sociological conceptualization, determining the media’s capacity to shape public opinion is also important. A cursory look at mass communication theory exposes the media as a primary force in the development of popular opinion. Sociological theory concerning stigma reveals its basis to reside primarily in these shared social perceptions. Thus, the media play a central role in developing and perpetuating the stigmatization of individuals, groups, and ultimately places. When viewed with sociological and media theories in mind, the developmental and endurance patterns of stigmatized cities become readily apparent.

Sociologist Gerhard Falk defined stigma simply as “an attribute in a person or group which is viewed as setting that person or group apart from the rest of society.”³ Acknowledging such differentiating attributes plays a primary role in defining communities of people. Emile

³ Gerhard Falk, Stigma: How We Treat Outsiders (New York: Prometheus Books), 366.
Durkheim first conceptualized this importance in the late-nineteenth century. He proposed that communities unify in response to individuals whose behavior seemingly threatens the common good. The community defines its social and moral character against that of individuals viewed as different and dangerous. Community members then ostracize deviants from the social consensus and label them as dangerous outsiders. Thus, the attribution of stigma is a product of perceived deviance.

Additional sociological research has revealed this deviance to take two basic forms. The simplest and most useful sociological paradigm for deviance’s role in stigma development comes from Kenneth Plummer. Plummer proposes that stigma results from either societal or situational deviance. Societal deviance refers to attributes perceived in advance by society to be abnormal. Contemporary examples of this could include homosexuality, physical disability, immorality, and racism. Situational deviance results from specific abnormal acts committed by the individual and viewed as being outside the norms of acceptable behavior by the larger community. Examples of this could be any number of crimes, eccentricities, or simply the expression of views contrasting with the established consensus. Stigma forms when society identifies the individual or group with either situational or societal deviance.

National newspaper, television, and magazine coverage of Birmingham and Las Vegas from 1945 to 2000 exhibited all of the previously mentioned characteristics of stigmatization.

News reports and exposés often portrayed the cities as contradicting national norms. The basis of

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6 For this study, *The New York Times* is considered a national newspaper. Its qualification as the nation’s paper includes a nationwide circulation that eclipses that of its competitors. Additional research by the author has also revealed a marked tendency within each city’s population and leadership to react instantaneously to negative portrayals of their municipalities by the *Times*. Thus the newspaper’s influence extends far beyond the city of its origin. Similar local reactions are not so readily apparent in response to more recent nationally distributed newspapers as *USA Today*. Magazine coverage includes only those distributed on a national level.
such portrayals appears rooted in perceptions of both societal and situational deviance. Writers and reporters repeatedly emphasized each city’s societal deviance through a tendency to equate them with preconceived regional stereotypes. Likewise, the media extensively covered, and often evoked well after the fact, any situational event that seemingly reinforced the cities’ abnormalities.

Beyond simply relating such events and stereotypes, the media exhibits an appreciable ability to construct and alter perceptions of deviance underlying the classification of place. Media theory has revealed the power of mass communication to shape public opinion. While any attempt to gauge the specific degree to which this occurs remains speculative at best, research ranging from the 1920s to modern times has determined its existence nonetheless. Thus, stigma’s roots in the public’s perception of normal and deviant characteristics warrant a brief overview of media theory.

Theorists have espoused the linkage between mass media and public perception since the early 1920s. Journalist and social commentator Walter Lippman was among the first to examine the influence of media in his 1922 book *Public Opinion.* Lippman primarily concerned himself with the irrationality of public opinion and its consequences for the American democratic system of his time. He felt that the notion of democratic rule had developed in a simpler time when individuals could directly observe all that impacted their lives and form opinions accordingly. By the 1920s, the world had become too interconnected and complicated for individuals to develop accurate images of all that concerned them. They subsequently formed stereotypes—a word made famous by Lippman—upon which they based actions and political decisions. 

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The power of the news media, according to Lippman, resided in its ability to inform the masses of what they could not see, and thus served as the basis for the stereotypes’ development. The public, unable to observe all actions and places, possessed no alternative view against which to weigh the media’s reporting of events and trends. Lippman further contended that reporters and editors shaped public opinion by choosing what stories to cover, the frequency with which they printed them, and the language used to convey their subjects. The public opinion and expectations the media set through initial coverage determined the type of representation editors were willing to print thereafter. Editors seemed hesitant to alienate established beliefs, and thus cautious about printing articles that contrasted with accepted norms; they relied, after all, on the maintenance of large circulations to draw the money of advertisers. The media thus played a direct role in shaping and perpetuating public opinion.9

Following Lippman’s early examination, something of a consensus has formed among communications scholars concerning the power of media to shape public opinion.10 Numerous scholars have subsequently supplied theories about how this occurs. Several of these theories are useful in understanding the historical relationship of media and stigmatization of place. Two insightful theories are Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann’s “Spiral of Silence Theory” and Shanto Iyengar’s “Accessibility Bias Theory.”

Noelle-Neumann finds mass media to hinder the formation and presentation of individualistic beliefs. She explains this by constructing a “Spiral of Silence” framework upon

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which individuals constantly monitor and adapt their beliefs and expressions to the perceived norm. In the modern world, mass media serves as the primary source for revealing these norms to the population. Borrowing from Lippman, she concedes that media is often the only source of such norms because people cannot witness all actions or interact with all others directly. People subsequently tend to accept media representation of events and places as true and indicative of widespread opinion. Fearing social ostracism if they go against such norms, they suppress any differing opinions. Eventually the suppressed opinions may disappear altogether, leaving the individual’s opinion in concert with that of media and supposedly that of the wider public.¹¹

Media also influences public perceptions through the manner in which it presents events. Iyengar argues that the frequency with which media expresses a particular theme is of primary importance to the degree that it shapes public opinion. His “Accessibility Bias Theory” holds that material most frequently observed becomes most accessible to memory. In turn, information that an individual more readily retrieves from memory dominates opinions and beliefs. The placement and structure of media reports also play an important role. For example, research by Iyengar indicates that newspaper stories appearing closer to the front pages are more likely to shape opinion than latter articles, and those newspaper articles with accompanying photographs shape opinion to a greater degree than those without.¹² Media therefore owns the ability to shape public opinion simply through the frequency and manner in which it reports events.

Although scholars have ignored the interplay between media and the stigmatization of place, they have amassed valuable research in related fields. Much work, for example, exists concerning media’s influence on the stigmatization of the disabled and aged. The research of


Lawrence A. Powell and John B. Williamson reveals a dual relationship in which media representations influence both the public perception of the elderly and the elderly’s own beliefs concerning their worth and capabilities.\textsuperscript{13} Others, such as Paul K. Longmore, have shown that screen images directly shape popular perceptions of the disabled while simultaneously perpetuating established stereotypes.\textsuperscript{14} It stands to reason that if scholars have shown media to influence and perpetuate the abnormality of humans, that the media has accomplished the same result concerning popular perceptions of place. In a sense, the media has represented both Birmingham and Las Vegas as disabled—the former by its easy acceptance of vice, and the latter by its virulent racism. Regardless of positive strides taken by each city, the media still considers them “challenged” by their essential, and respective, disabilities.

A brief look at the historical development of Birmingham and Las Vegas reveals the relevance of these sociological and communications theories to the cities’ deviant images. Both cities own relatively short but nevertheless eventful histories. One can trace much of the cities’ stigmas to historical situational events and characteristics as portrayed by the media. Beyond this, societal preconceptions of the South and West also play a key role in how the media has addressed each urban area’s deviance and how the public has reacted to this coverage.

\textbf{II. The Basis of Stigma}

Early on, boosters liked to associate Birmingham with the ideal of the “New South.” Founded in 1871, the town seemed to turn its back on the South’s troubled agrarian past. Situated at a rare convergence of railroad transportation and all of the natural resources for the production

of iron and steel, founders foresaw this city as prospective center of southern industry. The early years bore out their expectations. Six blast furnaces and factories dotted the local landscape by 1885.\(^\text{15}\) The young town’s population boomed with this appearance of industry, growing by an astonishing 748 percent from 1880 to 1890. By 1910 it had become the largest city in Alabama, claiming a population of 138,685 people.\(^\text{16}\) Yet in many regards this booming “New South” city proved not so new after all.

It was actually planter interests that, by 1859, first conceptualized this “New South” industrial center. Plans called for an industrial slave center that would help move the South into the industrial future while preserving the status quo of established labor and race relations. While the Civil War intervened to render this plan impossible, the city that emerged soon afterward differed only in its acceptance of wage labor over slavery. Historian W. David Lewis and social geographer Bobby Wilson have shown that most of its founders and early industrialists shared a common planter or merchant background. These men represented the elite of the old South, their business practices and labor relations formed on the plantation. Following the federal government’s withdrawal from Reconstruction, these elites reestablished their dominance over blacks and poor southern whites. This was vividly evident in Birmingham, where industry owners embraced mostly black convict labor and kept the workforce divided along racial lines for some time to come. The “New South” industrialists further traveled the path of the old South, choosing reliance upon labor-intensive methods over the capital-intensive technological advancements contemporaneously employed by northern industry. The divided labor force was,


after all, cheap and readily available while technological innovation required considerable capital outlays. The booming town did, as Lewis suggests, resemble “an overgrown iron plantation.”

Birmingham’s system of racial division matured in the twentieth century’s first three decades. By 1910, blacks held 75 percent of steel mill and iron furnace jobs. Total black employment in the industry fell to 54 percent by 1930, as pro-union whites entered the city’s industrial workforce in large numbers. Jobs within the plants subsequently took on an increased stratification of white and black work. Labor organization strengthened this process, as unionized white workers exercised their newfound influence on management to enforce job discrimination. Blacks also faced additional segregation in the social sphere during this period. The city commission instituted streetcar segregation in 1923. Throughout the teens, twenties, and thirties the city refused to zone an adequate amount of land for black residency. Overcrowded black neighborhoods continued to lack basic services, and homes reminded one of sharecropper shacks. Attempts at reform in the teens and twenties primarily served only to bring blacks more firmly and efficiently under governmental control. Then, the Great Depression decimated local industry. Conditions in Birmingham, already substandard for local blacks, grew exponentially worse as unemployment and hunger gripped the town. Its devastating effect prompted Franklin Roosevelt to proclaim Birmingham the “worst hit” city in the nation.

The racial inequality built into Birmingham’s labor force and social system began to manifest itself in active unrest immediately following World War II. Between 1945 and 1965,

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18 Lewis, Sloss Furnaces, 475.
fifty racially motivated bombings occurred within the city limits, earning the city the derisive moniker of “Bombingham.” Race stood as the motivation for most if not all of these violent acts. Most regularly the home of an outspoken black resident or that of a black family that sought to move into an all-white neighborhood, served as the setting for a bombing. Then, in 1963 the city experienced what many consider the most important demonstrations of the Civil Rights Movement. In May of that year, the world watched in horror as local police, under the direction of notoriously racist commissioner of public safety Eugene “Bull” Connor, unleashed vicious dogs, fire hoses, and clubs on protesting schoolchildren. Then, in September, a bomb exploded in the 16th Street Baptist Church, killing four black girls. While these horrendous acts directly influenced the United States Congress’s decision to pass the Civil Rights Act of 1964, they also solidified Birmingham’s reputation as a violent, racially intolerant city. The city concurrently entered a long period of population decline, falling from its peak of 340,887 residents in the early 1960s to 242,820 residents by 2000. Much of this loss, as with the similar examples of Detroit and Cleveland, resulted from industrial stagnation and white flight to the suburbs. Yet Birmingham carried an additional burden because of its highly publicized deviant actions of the 1960s. Although the following decades would see vast changes in the city-- including the election of a predominantly black city government by 1979 and a successful shift from an industrial to service economy-- the stigma of racism continued to mar the city’s image and shape national media representation of the place.

Much like Birmingham, seemingly abnormal events and characteristics in Las Vegas’s history have influenced the national media’s coverage and the public’s perception of the city. In an area first settled in 1855 by Mormon pioneers, the city’s official incorporation had to wait until June 1911. The young desert city initially served as a railway stopover, and increasingly claimed notoriety in its early years as a divorce center. Ample sunshine and mild winters combined to prompt more ambitious ideas of a resort center similar to Palm Springs among town leaders and boosters throughout the twenties. Then, the early 1930s legalization of gambling in Nevada, improvement of access roads, and the nearby construction of Hoover Dam combined to further heighten the town’s prospects. As the dam became a destination for curious travelers, Las Vegans embraced the idea of a gaming-centered economy. World War II’s soldiers and defense workers then reinforced the logic of this idea through their eager patronization of the town’s still small gaming emporiums.\textsuperscript{24} City leaders and businesspeople subsequently employed various themes designed to draw tourists to Las Vegas hotels and legal casinos over the decades that followed. These ranged from the idea of America’s last western frontier to modernistic atomic testing to an almost simultaneous promotion of “Sin City” and family-friendly adult Disneyland.

Whatever the approach, the idea of a tourist-based economy surpassed all expectations in Las Vegas. With the largest booms after 1945, and most specifically after the 1980s, the city finished the twentieth century anchoring the fastest growing metropolitan center in the United States. Between 1990 and 1997, the metropolis grew by 48 percent, adding 409,453 residents.\textsuperscript{25}


As historian Hal Rothman argues, the post-industrial gaming economy of Las Vegas offered the same financial opportunity that had earlier drawn residents to such industrial boomtowns as Detroit. In post-modern Las Vegas an individual with even marginal education could expect to make a good living. A relatively low cost of living combined with the high wages and ample benefits of a unionized gaming and tourist industry, to render such expectations generally realistic.\(^{26}\)

Despite its rapid growth and democratic opportunity, Las Vegas also experienced problems. First, its existence as a gambling center proved too tempting for less than reputable figures. Second, for much of the period following 1945, its open promotion of legalized gambling and physical gratification seemingly lay outside the confines of American moral norms. Although the growth of gambling across the nation in recent years suggests the practice’s wider acceptance by American society, Las Vegas has maintained its position and image as the center of American gaming.\(^{27}\)

The first of these problems—that of organized crime—has undeniably played a role in Las Vegas’s development and history. It first reared its head in 1945 with the murder of race wire owner James Ragan and known-gangster Bugsy Siegel’s efforts to purchase the El Cortez casino. This, along with Siegel’s construction of the Flamingo Hotel established a pattern in which, over the next two decades, many strip resorts depended upon disreputable financing and direct mob

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involvement for their construction and operation. In 1950 the Kefauver Hearings into organized crime brought the first, albeit limited, national attention to organized crime’s infiltration of the city’s gaming industry. From this, national best sellers such as Ed Reid’s and Ovis Demaris’s *Green Felt Jungle* appeared, casting Las Vegas as a violent, greedy, immoral, and crime-infested city. The late 1970s and early 1980s witnessed a rebirth of such ideas, as the federal ABSCAM investigation exposed the mob’s control of the Stardust Hotel. Yet, despite decades of charges, Americans seemed to maintain affection for the seemingly wayward city.

As for the popular appeal of this center of gambling and “sin,” David Schwartz and John Findlay offer insightful explanations. Schwartz argues that post-war suburban Americans did not mind gambling and a certain freedom of morality if it was safely confined to areas distant from their own communities. At a safe distance, the suburbanites could enjoy the escapist pleasures of the otherwise deviant place, and then return home without endangering their communities’ moral standards. Findlay, contends that Las Vegas offered much more than mere escapism; its gambling evoked the American perception of the risk and opportunity-laden western frontier and identity. To Findlay, Las Vegas also embodied a new and innovative western society emanating from southern California in the post-war period. Gambling, and by association Las Vegas, offered modern Americans the thrill of chance so central to the westward expansion of the

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nineteenth century. This chance further nurtured ideas of democracy and egalitarian tendencies.\textsuperscript{32}
Social standing alone did not determine the odds of winning or losing at the tables.

In contrast, media coverage of post-World War II events in Birmingham and Las Vegas mostly preoccupied itself with the deviant aspects of each city’s history. Birmingham’s association with race transfixed the national media during this period. One can see this in both the numerous stories directly related to racially-based events and those bearing no relation to race. All the while, stories have associated Birmingham with regional stereotypes of the racist South. Las Vegas’s media exposure harbors similar tendencies. At various times the media has trumpeted the city’s deviance as exhibited through organized crime, gambling, and sex. Popular conceptions of the isolated and democratic West also influenced the nature and effect of such coverage.

Media representation of this sort abounds in the formative period of each city’s stigmatization. For Birmingham, one can find examples concentrated on the topics of racial segregation in 1960 and the civil rights demonstrations and church bombing of 1963. The negative coverage initiated at this time continued throughout the ensuing decades in various exposes and revisitations of race relations in the city. Examples of its endurance reside in articles concerning the 1979 mayoral election of Birmingham’s first black mayor and the bombing of the All-Women, New-Woman abortion clinic in 1998. Representations of Las Vegas’s deviance first appeared in the 1910s through 1930s and centered on divorce. In the 1930s, the “abnormal” Las Vegas became a contextual side note to stories concerning Hoover Dam. Newspaper travel

stories in the late 1940s and the media’s 1960s emphasis on organized crime’s infiltration of the gaming industry helped cement the idea of a deviant and western Las Vegas. The ABSCAM investigation of the 1970s and 1980s, the MGM fire of 1980, and the mayoral election of former mafia attorney Oscar Goodman in 1998 provided additional opportunities for the media to emphasize Las Vegas’s tradition of deviance.

III. The Building of Stigma

On April 8, 1960 city leaders in Birmingham reacted with shocked outrage at an expose of their city appearing in the *New York Times*. The front page headline read “Fear and Hatred Grip Birmingham.” *Times* reporter Harrison E. Salisbury had produced a full two-page indictment of the city’s race relations. Salisbury wrote of a “brooding Birmingham,” on the verge of outright racial conflict. It was a cowering city he observed, a place where “no one talk freely” out of fear of violence and retribution. His article revealed that every aspect of life within the city was strictly segregated. He named “Bull” Connor as the brutal enforcer of the racial status quo. In the rare cases that individuals in Birmingham spoke or acted out against the norm, Salisbury detailed the wrath they encountered. He offered the example of one student who participated in a public “prayer for freedom.” Later that evening, “seven hooded men” arrived at the youth’s house armed with “iron pipes, clubs, and leather blackjacks into which razor blades had been sunk.” When they left, the youth, his sister, and mother lay severely beaten, the mother with crushed hands, a broken leg, and severely lacerated scalp.\(^{33}\)

Neither Bull Connor nor his fellow commissioners should have expressed surprise at the media’s negative portrayal of their city. The *New York Times* began noticing Birmingham’s

racial problems early in the 1950s and increasingly addressed the topic during the course of the decade. Local segregation alone had served as the basis for sixteen stories in the paper between 1950 and 1959. Additional stories dealt with violence perpetrated by whites upon blacks, racially motivated bombings, and intolerance among white citizens. The articles’ increasing frequency, in a major newspaper with great agenda-setting power, mirrored the nation’s growing awareness of racial tension as the Civil Rights Movement advanced. Yet Salisbury’s piece was the first outright and prominent indictment of the city as a whole by the national newspaper. As such, it was an important step in constructing the city’s racist stigma in the public’s mind.

Over the next three years, additional media coverage of events solidified Birmingham’s image as a racist, violent, and intolerant city. Coverage of key events in 1961 and 1963 proved central to this identity’s formation. In response to the Salisbury article and the city’s subsequent libel suit against the New York Times, CBS decided to film a segment of CBS Reports in

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Birmingham early in 1961. Titled “Who Speaks for Birmingham” and eventually airing nationally on the night of May 18, 1961, the program further exposed the city’s racial intolerance and violence, while also deeming it representative of regional southern racism. The narrator, respected television journalist Howard K. Smith, announced Birmingham as “the largest segregated city in the South.” Further, he credited the local *Birmingham Post-Herald* with being the “voice of the segregated South.” As for the question raised in the program’s title, Smith contended that the violent and uncooperative “Bull” Connor had “emerged as the voice of Birmingham.”

Such condemnations of Birmingham also appeared in popular periodicals of the time. The CBS program, for example, quoted a contemporary piece by Salisbury from *Time* magazine. Having appeared on May 16, 1960, and titled “Birmingham Story” the *Time* article echoed his earlier piece that placed Birmingham at the forefront of southern racial intolerance and violence. It found that “in the dearth of leadership, the silence of fear, the bomb blasts of hatred, Birmingham is the toughest city in the South and likely to get tougher.” Thus, in touting Birmingham’s racial problems in 1960, the media simply built upon the preexisting racist identity of the South.

If such media representations and linkages had not established Birmingham’s social deviance from the rest of the United States to an adequate degree, coverage of local events in 1963 ensured the city’s future stigmatization. In May, Salisbury’s prophesied racial conflict came to pass, as civil rights demonstrations overwhelmed the city. With the city’s jail space

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37 *CBS Reports: Who Speaks for Birmingham*, program transcript, Birmingham Department of Archives and Manuscripts, Lynn Henley Research Library, Birmingham, Alabama.
overfilled, and hundreds of teenage prisoners confined at the state fairground’s livestock pavilion, the demonstrations soon turned violent. Bull Connor’s police force ruthlessly employed his much vaunted armored tanks, dogs, and firehoses.\textsuperscript{39} The national media captured it all, both in print and image. As violent reactions on the city’s part increased, articles concerning the demonstrations gained more prominent placement in the \textit{New York Times}. In the one month period between April 15 and May 15 alone, the paper’s editors deemed some twenty-three articles dealing with the protests as worthy of front page placement.\textsuperscript{40} The most powerful among these appeared on May 4, with an accompanying image of a police dog violently grasping the abdomen of a young protester as a uniformed Birmingham police officer held him in place.\textsuperscript{41} This image, along with others like it, undoubtedly strengthened the national perception of Birmingham as a violent center of racism. When this coverage combined with the \textit{New York Times} twenty-eight articles focusing on the tragic 16\textsuperscript{th} Street Baptist Church bombing in the week

\textsuperscript{39} “Police Considers K9s One of Top ‘60 Achievements,” \textit{Birmingham News}, April 16, 1961. Connor bragged in this article of his numerous instruments of social control. These included police dogs, water canons, and a specially equipped armored vehicle.


following its September 16, 1963 occurrence, the stigma stood solidly entrenched and available for future media use as events warranted.  

World events also played a role in the nation’s acceptance of this stigmatization in the post-World War II era. Aware of the contradiction of racism and American democracy’s supposed egalitarianism, the public and government sought to rationalize the identity it held of itself and projected to the Cold War-era world. This led parts of the nation to form their identity in opposition to parts seen as deviantly racist. Actions of the United States government contributed to this process. As historian Mary L. Dudziak has argued, Cold War-influenced concern over the United States’ international image prompted the government to purposefully label the South, and violently racist areas within it, as deviant from the national norm.  

At a time when the United States actively sought to export its influence, governmental system, and economic theory abroad, internationally publicized instances of racial violence  


proved embarrassing and threatened its success. The Soviet Union made great propagandistic use of racist events and images—such as those flowing out of Birmingham—in extolling capitalism’s inherent inequality. This particularly threatened the United States’ democratic images in the newly independent nations of Africa. To quell the success of the Soviet propaganda campaign, the United States government initiated one of its own. In addition to characterizing southern areas as abnormal within the American system, the campaign championed instances of federal intervention as proof of the triumph of more widely shared values of equality and democratic capitalism’s progress even in the nation’s most backward region. The media’s portrayal of Birmingham thus took on a degree of official sanction. The South, with its brutal and uncompromising “Bull” Connors, assumed the role of repository for the nation’s sin. As an isolated and deviant exception to the national norm, the city provided rationalization for the inconsistency of racial oppression in a democratic system. Against this image, the rest of the nation could form its own racially progressive identity.44

Media stigmatization of Las Vegas lacked the cataclysmic event found in Birmingham’s response to the Civil Rights Movement. It subsequently proceeded in a more subtle manner. As with Birmingham’s racial intolerance, Las Vegas’s gambling and, to a lesser degree, organized crime eventually became favorite topics for the national media’s shaping of the city’s image in American minds. Pre-1945 media representations of Las Vegas, however, appeared primarily as contextual material for pieces examining celebrity marriage problems.45 Las Vegas received

mention on its own merit in the *New York Times* only four times during its first forty years. The first two instances occurred in 1911, as the newspaper examined the young “rival” to Reno’s established divorce industry.\(^{46}\) The city did not appear again as the lone subject of a *Times* article until 1936. That year, the newspaper briefly examined the “Wild West town” neighboring Boulder Dam.\(^{47}\) Three years later the newspaper offered a one paragraph examination of the city’s decision to close its bars for three hours in observance of Good Friday. According to the *Times* reporter, the “saloons” of “America’s last frontier hit the Sawdust Trail” on that day.\(^ {48}\)

Between 1945 and 1949, the *New York Times* continued to cover Las Vegas primarily in relation to Hoover Dam’s emergence as a tourist destination. These stories, however, tended to place more emphasis on Las Vegas’s growth as a tourist draw in its own right. Representative titles include “Las Vegas Vacation Center: Seeing Boulder Dam by Automobile,” and “Lively Las Vegas: New Vacation Wonderland is Growing up Rapidly Around the Great Lake at Hoover Dam.”\(^ {49}\) One 1947 article conceded Las Vegas’s status as a stand-alone a tourist attraction. “Desert Attractions: Tourism is Las Vegas’ Major Industry and Spring Business is Booming,” marked the first instance of the national media acknowledging the city as a tourist destination in its own right.\(^ {50}\)

Each article of this period, although highlighting attractions other than casinos, invariably mentioned the city’s legalized gambling. *Times* reporter Ward Howe characterized the city as “the gateway to Boulder Dam,” where “neon signs lend a garish effect and signal invitations to

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try one’s luck.”51 Jack Goodman used the first two paragraphs of his article to detail the growth of local gaming resorts before stipulating that “not all vacationists are heading for the gambling casinos.”52 Fellow reporter Grady Johnson introduced the city as “known only for its legalized gambling and easy divorce laws,” before noting its low rates of juvenile delinquency, and the outdoor recreational activities at Mt. Charleston and Lake Mead.53

Explicit ties to preexisting regional conceptions of the West also appeared in each of these early articles. Howe reaffirmed the locals’ propensity to call the city “a frontier town,” while himself characterizing it as a “gateway” and “picturesque desert town.”54 Goodman emphasized both its “desert” location and proximity to “many noteworthy western park areas.” A photograph of men on horseback and dressed as cowboys at a nearby dude ranch accompanied his article.55 Johnson’s article called attention to the West as a place of recreation, its dry climate, and democratic tendencies. To him Las Vegas resided “in the heart of some of the West’s most scenic playgrounds,” where visitors could “soak up Sun and breath the dry desert air.” It was also a place where individuals in “dinner jackets, cowboy shirts, and jeans,” mingled on the same dance floors without notice.56 These articles set a pattern of showcasing Las Vegas’s exceptionalism, symbolized by gambling, western isolation, democratic social activities, and a liberal sense of morality.

As with the South, the West certainly owned a distinct regional image by the mid-twentieth century. Frederick Jackson Turner’s frontier thesis had long ago described the vast

West as both safety valve of opportunity and fountain of American democracy.\textsuperscript{57} In the late nineteenth century, the western paintings of Thomas Moran, Albert Bierstadt, and Frederic Remington joined with popular western writers such as Owen Wister and Bret Harte to cast the West as individualistic, masculine, and free.\textsuperscript{58} Around the same time, the United States initiated its national park system, with most of the parks located in the West. These parks, which preserved extraordinary and seemingly representative landscapes provided ever increasing numbers of tourists with false images of the pristine West.\textsuperscript{59} The first five decades of the twentieth century witnessed the rise of the motion picture industry and specifically the popularity of the western movie. These films carried on the tradition of the frontier image.\textsuperscript{60} That the mid-century media chose to cast the emerging tourist city of Las Vegas within the colorful contours of this established western image is not surprising.

An additional, more soundly negative image of Las Vegas concerns the city’s association with organized crime. The production of this stigma resembles Birmingham’s racist identity in that its national media coverage has been primarily event-based. While the media first revealed

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\textsuperscript{58} Lee Clark Mitchell, \textit{Westerns: Making the Man in Fiction and Film} (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1996), 57-149.


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the existence of organized crime in the city in 1950 through its limited coverage of the Kefauver Hearings, the subject did not receive extensive coverage until the early 1960s.

On November 16, 1950, the *New York Times* printed a small story on page twenty-five titled “Investigation in Nevada.” This article was the only one to appear in the *Times* that year specifically addressing Senator Kefauver’s local hearings into organized crime’s influence over the Las Vegas gaming industry. The article did, nonetheless, tie the gaming industry to the late gangster Bugsy Siegel and mob figures in New York.\(^{61}\)

Thirteen years later the *New York Times* made up for its subdued treatment of the Kefauver Hearing. In November 1963--the same year that Birmingham became front-page news and the lead story on television networks--the newspaper ran a series of front-page stories exposing organized crime’s control of the Las Vegas gaming industry. In the first of these articles, Reporter Wallace Turner wrote of casinos run by convicted felons misusing “hundreds of millions of dollars.” Further, he labeled the gambling-fueled mob as a powerful “new force in American life.”\(^{62}\) In the third article of the series, he credited Las Vegas with bringing together a “greater collection of skilled law violators than exists anywhere in the country.” He went on to detail the involvement of such public personalities as Frank Sinatra and Dean Martin with gambling interests, implying an association with organized crime. Yet even Turner’s indictment of Las Vegas as a criminal haven could not resist linking the city to its isolated western placement. The “desert and mountain milieu” served as the setting for this “most intensive concentration of gambling” ever to appear in the world’s history.\(^{63}\)

\footnote{61}{“Investigation in Nevada,” *New York Times*, November 16, 1950, 25.}


Extensive exposure of the city’s organized crime problem also appeared during this period in other media outlets. As mentioned, the best-selling book *The Green Felt Jungle* (1963) dismissed Las Vegas as a city controlled by crime and without redeeming value.\(^{64}\) Television exposes appeared linking the city’s vice-centered gaming and entertainment industry with organized crime. David Susskind’s popular television talk show, *Open End* aired a two-hour special on March 15, 1964 that sought to detail “the link between a seemingly innocuous nickel bet and narcotics and prostitution” controlled by organized crime.\(^{65}\) Two years later, NBC televised a three and one-half hour special titled “American White Paper: Organized Crime in the United States,” which examined organized crime in Las Vegas and Youngstown, Ohio. In the end, it argued that while local interests controlled the crime in Youngstown, Las Vegas’s gambling industry fostered more insidious national affiliations.\(^{66}\)

This dramatic upswing in media coverage of Las Vegas’s ties to organized crime can be seen as the culmination of a wider historical trend in which the United States public sought to identify itself and the national purpose in the 1950s and early 1960s. By the end of the 1950s, the American press, government, and public had begun to question the nation’s success and direction in its Cold War struggle with the Soviet Union. International events had seemingly eroded the unquestioned confidence of world leadership the United States experienced in 1945. The Soviet Union’s emergence as a nuclear power in 1949, its successful launch of Sputnik in 1957, and its economic growth rate that seemingly outstripped that of the United States in the mid-1950s, along with the disastrous Suez Crisis, the failure to help the Hungarian Revolution, and the U2 spy-plane incident all combined to cast uncertainty among many Americans. Occasional

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\(^{64}\) Reid and Demaris, *The Green Felt Jungle*, 1-11, 14-29, 82-85, 92-99, 194-220. Basically the entire book is a condemnation of Las Vegas’s gambling, immorality, and corruption. The pages listed offer a representative glimpse of this.


economic downturns during the Eisenhower years strengthened this idea that something had
gone wrong. Led by the press and government, some Americans began to look inward for the
cause of their seeming deficiency. Corruption, conformism, and crass materialism stood central
to the conclusions they reached.67

As early as 1952, Dwight Eisenhower’s presidential campaign had revealed this
uncertainty within American consciousness over the moral centering of the nation. Eisenhower
constantly cast the campaign as a “crusade” to bring the nation back “to the things he thought
America stood for.”68 Even his campaign slogan of KIC (Korea, communism, and corruption)
emphasized the threats facing America and the waywardness of its culture.69 Concerns over
internal weakness, corruption, and communist infiltration obsessed the nation. The House
Committee on Un-American Activities (HUAC) had been exposing imagined communists with
impunity while such popular game shows as the $64,000 Question proved dishonest. Meanwhile,
consumerism had taken hold as the suburbanites enjoyed their increased personal wealth and
buying power of the immediate post-1945 period.70 Some contemporaries, such as
John Kenneth Gabraith in his 1958 best-seller, The Affluent Society, warned about the excesses
of consumerism and private-sector wealth while highlighting the persistence of public-sector
poverty in America.71 Countervailing forces of traditional morality and hedonistic materialism
thus fought for the American public’s allegiance throughout the 1950s and early 1960s.

From this cultural apprehension, Las Vegas emerged as an easy target for those
frustrated by the nation’s drift. With the media’s help, as evidenced in the increased

69 Ibid., 277.
70 William H. Chafe, The Unfinished Journey: America Since World War II (New York: Oxford University Press,
concentration on organized crime in the early 1960s, it became an isolated repository for the containment of widespread corruption and American materialistic shortcomings. Much like Birmingham, the city became a deviant example against which wider American society could define its moral center. Yet this city also displayed attractive qualities. As a representative of the American West, it served as an available counterbalance for suburbia’s and conformist society’s perceived tendency to emasculate formerly individualistic men.\(^{72}\)

As William Whyte observed in 1956, the conformist impulse of post-war suburban society worked to transform men from independent “inner-directed” beings into “other-directed” grey-suited clones of corporatism.\(^{73}\)

Las Vegas offered a convenient yet isolated escape from these consensus norms if they became too overbearing. No such partially positive attributes attached themselves to media representations of Birmingham.

In this enlivened characterization of Las Vegas as a bastion of organized crime, as well as the contemporary casting of Birmingham as a center of racial intolerance, the media’s intertwining of event and situational-based deviance is clear. Organized crime’s infiltration and control of gambling served as the deviant event for Las Vegas. Likewise, Birmingham’s reaction to civil rights protests stood as the perfect abnormal action to provoke widespread condemnation.

These events took place in the context of established local stereotypes and deviance. Media coverage had already revealed the comfortable acceptance of gambling and divorce in Las Vegas before exposing mafia involvement. Coverage of Birmingham likewise established the primacy of segregation and violence in the city before the violent upheavals of 1963. Additionally, the media had placed each city squarely within the established stereotypes of their respective

\(^{72}\) Chafe, *The Unfinished Journey*, 121-123, 134. Chafe sees suburbia as having an emasculating effect on the perceived identity of the American man through its bringing him more squarely into the normal routines of family life and assault on individualism.

regions—for Las Vegas, the freer, more democratic, and isolated West, while Birmingham fell into the accepted image of the racist South. This made Las Vegas’s gambling and Birmingham’s racism more readily identifiable and associable with each city. The cities therefore developed a dual-level stigmatization, based on both situational events and perceptions of setting reinforced by a popular culture particularly shaped by Cold War and other frustrations. The national media’s coverage of local events following the deviance-establishment period of 1945 to the mid 1960s, reveals that this dual-level stigma, once applied, proved a lasting characterization. As Lippman noted in 1922, editors concerned with maintaining circulation prove hesitant to deviate from established norms in public expectations.  

IV. The Endurance of Stigma

This trend first exhibited itself in the wider media’s reaction to Look magazine’s naming of Birmingham to its prestigious list of All-American Cities in 1971. While at first glance such recognition seemed to deviate from the city’s established popular stereotype, a closer examination of the national press’s reaction to it reveals a distinct continuity. For example, an article appeared in The New York Times titled “Proud Birmingham Steers Into Mainstream, U.S.A.,” which acknowledged the strides made by Birmingham since 1963, but still brought attention to the problems that had existed, those that continued to exist, and the piece reinforced ideas of regional differences. Reporter Roy Reed stressed Birmingham’s troubled past through explicit references to the city’s various identities of “Bombingham,” “the police-dog capital of the South,” and “the most segregated city in America.” The issue of regional identity emerged as he supposed that “Northerners who move” to the southern city might consider it “Americanized

“enough” to feel at home; faint praise indeed.\textsuperscript{75} Other seemingly favorable accounts of Birmingham’s progress appearing in the 1970s adopted a similar tone. A \textit{Time} magazine piece appearing in 1976 began with the following caption:

Birmingham! The All-American City!...Blacks sitting in at stores and restaurants. “Nigger lover” scrawled on shattered plate-glass windows of merchants suspected of sympathizing with them...

Birmingham! The Magic City!...Firemen battering black women with high-pressure hoses, snarling police dogs...

Birmingham! The football Capital of the South!...
The mangled bodies of four little girls in a bombed out church. Martin Luther King Jr. and Theophilus Eugene (“Bull”) Connor—the irresistible black force meeting the immovable white object—confronting each other amid the flamed...

Birmingham?\textsuperscript{76}

Although the article’s purpose was to champion the progress Birmingham had made in race relations since the 1960s, its introductory emphasis on racism and accompanying photographs of


\textsuperscript{76} “A City Reborn,” \textit{Time}, September 27, 1976, 55-56.
police dogs and crying women evoked the traditional image of a racist and violent Birmingham. It further postulated that Birmingham had quite a way to go to achieve true racial harmony. Quoting then councilman Richard Arrington, the article suggested that much of the obvious change has been mere “tokenism.”

Other instances of the media’s negative portrayal of Birmingham’s racial progress can be found in its reporting of events throughout the 1970s and 1980s. Richard Arrington’s election as the city’s first black mayor in 1979 exemplified this. The New York Times provided extensive coverage of the late October election, with representative titles in its A section reading “Birmingham, Once a Citadel of Segregation, Elects is First Black Mayor,” and “Birmingham Runoff Today Is Focus of Racial Tensions.” The articles, despite having attempted to portray Birmingham as a pacesetter of racial progress, emphasized the city’s persistent racial divisions. Reporter Howell Raines wrote that the election “split” Birmingham’s “electorate along racial lines” bringing “racial animosities here to their highest pitch since the civil rights demonstrations of 1963.” His series of articles frequently reiterated that 90 percent of the white electorate refused to vote for Arrington. He then tied this characteristic to regional southern norms, emphasizing that the defeat of white mayors in Raleigh and Durham, North Carolina was only possible through the support of each city’s black electorate. While this was undeniably true, such emphasis overlooked the ominous factors of black politicians’ reliance on white-dominated

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77 Ibid.
economic machines for election and the overwhelming burdens they would face in central cities rapidly losing residents, professionals, merchants, and industry to suburbia. Overall, the coverage of Arrington’s victory proved simplistic and dwelled on continued racial division rather than any relative progress and challenges it represented for a city where blacks were denied the vote only fifteen years earlier.

Coverage of events in Las Vegas during this period also continued to draw upon the city’s established reputation for deviance. The media’s reaction to a new exposure of organized crime’s ties to the gaming industry and the tragic MGM Grand fire clearly illustrated its reliance on the city’s abnormal classification. The front page of the February 24, 1980 New York Times featured an article on the federal ABSCAM investigation into organized crime. Through secret recordings and undercover work, the Federal Bureau of Investigation uncovered widespread racketeering, union corruption, murder, bribery of elected officials, and skimming of Las Vegas casino revenues by organized crime figures. This article and others that followed made much of the Las Vegas connection, even though large corporations were in the process of taking over the industry. More importantly, they treated the mafia’s involvement in the gaming industry as no surprise. One revealing passage stated that “in recent years . . . organized crime has infiltrated a variety of businesses in addition to gambling and pornography.” In other words, the story

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82 David R. Goldfield, *Cotton Fields and Skyscrapers: Southern City and Region*, 2nd edition (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press), 176-77; David R. Goldfield, “Black Political Power and Public Policy in the Urban South,” in David R. Goldfield, ed. *Region, Race, and Cities: Interpreting the Urban South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1997), 163-89. Goldfield offers a more complex evaluation of black political empowerment since the Civil Rights Movement. While acknowledging continued biracialism in the lack of white voter support for black candidates in the South, he also stresses a lack of economic power for blacks accompanying increased political power. This, in addition to changing urban demographics, has left black administrations indebted to white economic powers and unable to institute dramatic change in many southern cities.


84 Gerth, “U.S. to Seek Charges From a Wide Inquiry on Organized Crime,” New York
implied that the only surprise was in organized crime’s spread beyond the realm of Las Vegas’s acknowledged vices.

The MGM fire of November 21, 1980 offers an example of how established media stereotypes of deviance often extended beyond the boundaries of events directly associated with perceived abnormalities. The *New York Times*’ initial coverage of the fire proved straightforward and factual. A front page article by Pamela Hollie respectfully conveyed the tragic circumstances of the fire that left just over eighty people dead and approximately 3,500 trapped for several hours. But the next day an article appeared that employed virtually every available stereotype of the city. Referring to Las Vegas as a distant “desert fantasy land,” reporter John Crewdson detailed how the greed of gambling and desire for a good time quelled any remorse for the fire’s victims. He focused his story on individuals occupying the casinos around the newly “black gap in a brilliant neon universe.” Citing individual reactions as representative of a larger city reaction, Crewdson wrote of a man at the Desert Inn Casino placing a $10.00 bet with his friend over the fire’s eventual body count. The article further stated that tragedy was meaningless to a city that experiences “a thousand tiny personal ones” on a daily basis. The reporter ended his assault by questioning the morality of locals who continued gambling as the fire raged. Quite simply he applied the time-honored one-dimensional stereotype of the city’s gambling and sinful deviance to a horrible event that owed no direct connection to gaming. This resulted in one of the most thoroughly unscrupulous articles ever to grace the pages of the long-respected newspaper, and one has to question the judgment of *Times* editors in publishing such a piece.

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*Times*, February 24, 1980, 1.


The racial stigma of Birmingham has also resulted in unprofessional reporting in recent years. On January 29, 1998 a remotely detonated pipe bomb exploded outside the city’s New Woman, All Women abortion clinic. The blast left nurse Emily Lyons gravely injured and security guard Robert Sanderson dead. This event marked the first fatal bombing of an abortion clinic in United States history.\(^{87}\) In its coverage of this terrible incident, the *New York Times* proved commendable. In a series of articles over the following days, journalist Rick Bragg stuck to the issue at hand, impartially relating the circumstance and tragedy of the bombing. He made no speculative connections between the city’s history of bombings and this latest blast.\(^{88}\) If any fault can be found in the *Times*’ coverage, it resides in reporter Kevin Slack’s later articles that emphasized the bombing’s and bomber’s “southern” identity.\(^{89}\)

Print coverage in other large markets lacked the *Times*’ tact in dealing with the tragedy. A storyline in the *Atlanta Constitution-Journal* read “Birmingham Clinic Bombing: A City’s Past Comes Roaring Back.” Reporter Marlon Manuel went on to equate directly the clinic bombing with the city’s epidemic of racially motivated blasts from 1945 to 1963. More specifically he drew comparisons to the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing of September 15, 1963.\(^{90}\) On the same day, an equally unfair commentary by Clarence Page appeared in the *Chicago Tribune*. Having recently viewed Spike Jones’s documentary *4 Little Girls*, Page directly evoked both the 16th Street Baptist Church bombing and the derisive label “Bombingham.” He somehow saw the

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event as evidence that racial progress in “Birmingham and the rest of the South” still had far to go.\footnote{Clarence Page, “Pro-Life Until You Get in Their Way,” \textit{Chicago Tribune}, February 1, 1998, 19.}

Although both articles addressed the bombing as an act of extremism destined to galvanize pro-choice activists, its circumstances simply did not warrant an equation with Birmingham’s past racial violence. Both atrocities obviously resulted from an extremist mindset, yet the more recent was otherwise unconnected to previous bombings in the city. The bombings of the 1940s to 1960s stemmed from a series of events that were distinctly racial, systemized, and connected to Birmingham’s characteristics of the time.\footnote{The most thorough explanation of Birmingham’s racially motivated bombings from 1945 to 1963 can be found in Eskew’s \textit{But for Birmingham}, pp., 19-83. Eskew painstakingly chronicles the local white’s violent reaction to blacks attempting to move into the white-zoned neighborhoods surrounding Legion Field and Birmingham-Southern College. This was systemized violence in that it was carried out by structured vigilante groups who often warned neighboring whites of impending blasts and systematically overlooked by the local police force and press.} Thus, history warrants association of that violence with the racially segregated Birmingham of that period. The clinic bombing, by contrast, was more random in nature and bore absolutely no relation to race. The North Carolina perpetrator of the blast could have chosen any number of clinics in other cities to bomb as a means of publicizing his extremist ideals.\footnote{Mason, \textit{Killing for Life}, 30-31.} Nor does evidence suggest that he cared about the race of those receiving abortions, injured, or killed in the blast. The city merely happened to be the setting of the bomber’s choice. Thus, the media’s 1998 linking of these two events, only served to further develop a false continuum of racist deviance upon which systematic and intolerant violence has supposedly survived unchecked in Birmingham since the 1940s.

Las Vegas also ended the twentieth century with the media drawing upon its established stigmatized reputation. The election of Mayor Oscar Goodman provided the opportunity for national media to review the city’s relationships with organized crime. In his career as an attorney, Goodman had made a name for himself defending such infamous mafia clients as
Meyer Lansky and Tony Spilotro. As his June 8, 1999 runoff-election victory played out, the New York Times could not resist highlighting his past, and by association, the city’s history of criminal association. Storylines such as “A Colorful Lawyer Is Running for Mayor” and “Mob Lawyer Wins Race,” indicated the direction of the Times’ coverage. Each of these articles and others covering the event specifically listed Goodman’s past defense of Las Vegas gangsters. Reporter Todd Purdum went so far as offer detailed descriptions of how Goodman kept Spilotro out of Las Vegas jails “despite accusations that he had killed 22 people.” Purdum also wrote of Las Vegas’s stigmatized image directly, calling it a “sin-soaked city, which has worked hard in recent years to reinvent itself as a family friendly resort in which mob rule is a distant memory.” Yet neither he nor his fellow reporters displayed any qualms about playing up Goodman’s relationship with that distant memory.

Overall, national media representation of Las Vegas and Birmingham from 1945 to 2000 displays key examples of the sociological elements required for stigma formation and persistence. In each instance, the role of media led it to expose local events that often proved deviant to perceived national norms. Each city’s situational deviance thus became common knowledge to distant observers. Yet the media often went far beyond the mere reporting of events by placing each city within popular regional stereotypes that conformed to established ideas of societal deviance. Such stereotypical reporting found a receptive audience in an America challenged with overcoming its perceived shortcomings during the Cold War period. This ready acceptance provided a strong foundation for the perseverance of the cities’ abnormal classifications. The media exploited this foundation by continuing to call upon historical event-

based stereotypes in later instances that did not warrant such association. This practice continues unimpeded. It revealed itself most recently in a series of *New York Times* exposés on Las Vegas that appeared from May 30 to June 4, 2004. The articles’ singular focus on Las Vegas’s growth related problems paint the city as virtually uninhabitable by family-oriented individuals. Instead, a post-apocalyptic wasteland emerges that fosters only uncontrollable adolescents, drug addiction, hardened strippers, and shattered dreams. As a result of such reporting, both “Sin City” and “Bombingham” maintain recognizable locations on the mental maps of the national consciousness.

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