

**Paul Ylvisaker,
“Indigenous Leadership,”
and the Origins of
Community Action**

by Sam Klug

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Abstract

This report examines how Paul Ylvisaker developed his view that the development of “indigenous leadership” represented the key to solving the urban problems of the 1960s. It also looks at how that view shaped the development of the community action programs at the Ford Foundation and in the Johnson administration. I argue that his conception of what “indigenous leadership” meant and the role it should play in US urban politics was formed through a brief stint working on a Ford Foundation project in Calcutta. This conception then affected his management of early conflicts in the Ford Foundation’s Gray Areas program, where community action originated. Ultimately, I argue, this story illuminates one way in which debates about community action, antipoverty policy, and urban politics in the early to mid-1960s were conditioned by Americans’ competing visions of decolonization and the postcolonial world.

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In the winter of 2018, I received a Rockefeller Archive Center Grant-in-Aid to conduct research for my first book project, provisionally titled *The Internal Colony: Black Internationalism, Development, and the Politics of Colonial Comparison in the United States, 1940–1975*. This book argues that competing interpretations of decolonization contributed to a deepening rift between liberal politics and the Black freedom movement in the United States between 1940 and 1975. Drawing on the archives of government officials, philanthropic organizations, social movement groups, and individual activists and writers, I show how contests over racial and class inequality at home were deeply intertwined with Americans’ ideas about colonialism, development, and the international order. One particular area of focus is 1960s-era debates over metropolitan politics, and how these debates came to implicate views of decolonization and postcolonial politics in Africa and Asia. Leading liberals promoted an image of the United States as the first postcolonial state, and philanthropists and antipoverty policymakers sought to apply the lessons of international development policy domestically. Many African Americans, meanwhile, began to characterize American racism as a form of internal colonialism, drawing on a long tradition of Black internationalist thinking about colonialism as racialized economic exploitation. The concept of internal colonialism became central to the political language of the Black Power movement as it sought to transform metropolitan political economies after the passage of the Civil Rights and Voting Rights Acts. On the battlegrounds of metropolitan politics, Black activists informed by the colonial analogy clashed with social policymakers who understood African American poverty in developmental terms.

My research at the RAC provided essential information on how philanthropists’ and policymakers’ understandings of postcolonial politics influenced their views of the US urban crisis. Most significant was the wealth of information I discovered about Paul Ylvisaker, who directed the Ford Foundation’s Public Affairs Program. Ylvisaker was the architect of the Gray Areas program, which would be a primary

influence on the development of community action programs in Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Ylvisaker's prominent role in the development of the new policy instrument of community action has been widely discussed in scholarship on the Ford Foundation and antipoverty policy, from Alice O'Connor's *Poverty Knowledge* to Karen Ferguson's *Top Down*.¹ The international influences on his thinking have received less attention, although they are mentioned briefly in Daniel Immerwahr's *Thinking Small*.² Several of Ylvisaker's speeches and his oral history illustrated the increasing importance of the development of what he called "indigenous leadership" to his thinking about how problems of urban poverty could be addressed—and confirmed the importance of decolonization in shaping his actions within the United States.

Before 1960, Ylvisaker was known in urban planning circles for his view that urban poverty and problems of crime and social disorder needed to be viewed in light of broader metropolitan systems, including, centrally, the problem of white flight and capital investment in the suburbs. As Karen Ferguson notes, however, this emphasis was attenuated over the course of the early 1960s. As I argue, Ylvisaker turned away from a vision of segregation and disinvestment as the predominant causes of urban poverty, and toward a view that urban communities lacked sufficient "indigenous leadership." This emphasis on "indigenous leadership" was deeply connected with his understanding of postcolonial politics. This conception of a lack of "indigenous leadership" motivated in important ways his development of the new policy instrument of community action.

A 1963 speech at an urban planning conference in Indianapolis provided an occasion for Ylvisaker to emphasize the newly prominent place of "indigenous leadership" in his conception of urban problems and community action. He continued to see cities and suburbs as linked, but he retreated from his stark condemnations of white suburbanites for contributing to urban problems of a few years earlier. In 1963, he argued that the American metropolis had always operated as a continuous "system" for the attraction and assimilation of largely working-class migrants—"once the Scotch, the Irish, the Jews, the Italians, now the Negroes, the Puerto Ricans, the mountain Whites, the Mexicans, and the American Indians" — which turned "third - class newcomers into first - class

citizens.”³ The main obstacle to this process, Ylvisaker now argued, was not urban disinvestment and suburbanization, but merely inefficiency. The process took, in Ylvisaker’s estimation, three generations on average.⁴ Linking his agenda to the obsession with national goal-setting characteristic of New Frontier liberalism, Ylvisaker mused that urban planners might make their collective aim “to do in one generation for the urban newcomer what until now has taken three.”⁵ His approach, reframed basic ideas of Chicago-school sociology in the language of “systems analysis” that was rapidly entering the world of urban planning, and he acknowledged that this argument might strike observers as “mechanistic.”⁶ Ylvisaker’s systemic analysis relied to an extraordinary degree on human intervention, however. Because “a social system can’t be perfected by clever manipulators,” he maintained, “the problem we regard as the toughest to lick—and we see no easy answers—is that of generating indigenous leadership (we’re still looking for a down-to-earth definition of that elusive term) and the spirit of self-help.”⁷ Finding the right “indigenous leaders” was not only important to the success of community action. It was the key to the entire urban crisis.

This analysis inevitably raised the question: Who were the right “indigenous leaders?” This question, I argue, came to implicate Ylvisaker’s views of decolonization and postcolonial politics, views that were forged, in part, through his activities with the Ford Foundation in India. In 1961, as he was working to design the Gray Areas program, Ylvisaker was sent to Calcutta as part of a team of Ford Foundation consultants.⁸ The Foundation, which had earlier played a role in community development planning in Delhi, viewed Calcutta as an extreme case of the stress that rural-to-urban migration could place on all cities, including those in the United States.⁹ Foundation officials hoped to “make possible full exploitation of the Calcutta ‘laboratory’ as a case example for students of urban problems of the relation of rapid urbanization to development (and vice-versa).”¹⁰ Thus, the Ford Foundation sent Ylvisaker, whose portfolio as director of Public Affairs was almost entirely domestic, to India for the project’s opening.

Ylvisaker spent only ten days in India, but the impact of the trip on his thought was lasting. In Calcutta, he encountered fairly mundane tasks of urban planning: the two largest physical challenges were the construction of a bridge and the

clearing of land for future development. The challenge was entirely political. Ford's objectives could be hampered by the municipal corporation council, on which the Communist Party of India held twenty-four of twenty-seven seats. The only person standing in the way of complete communist control was Bidhan Chandra Roy, the Chief Minister of the state government of West Bengal. Roy, a British-educated medical doctor, had once been Mohandas Gandhi's personal physician, and he had served as mayor of Calcutta in the 1930s and as Chief Minister of West Bengal from 1948 onward.¹¹ Roy made an immediate impression on Ylvisaker in Calcutta. The Public Affairs director described him as "shrewd as hell" and a "master politician."¹² Crucial to Ylvisaker's perspective was his idea that Roy's past experience in the Indian independence movement counted as a positive asset to the Foundation. His credibility in laying claim to India's anticolonial traditions could only help him in his battle with the communists. Ylvisaker argued that the Foundation could help Roy "win" in his battle for control in the city.¹³ Ford would serve, in Ylvisaker's vision, as Roy's "passport to the big money" and as a "foil in his public relations" that would allow him, when challenged by local opposition, to say, "my experts agree with me."¹⁴ Thus, Ylvisaker argued, the only priority for the Ford Foundation's involvement in Calcutta should be strengthening Roy's political position. Even projects that may have seemed dubious from an urban planning perspective, such as a proposal to fill 55,000 acres of land to the south of the city, were worth supporting. Ylvisaker believed that Roy was the key to the Ford Foundation's success in Calcutta, above all else. He represented the model of "indigenous leadership" that Ylvisaker would soon try to replicate in cities across the United States through the Gray Areas program.¹⁵

Ylvisaker's experience in India echoed through his Indianapolis speech. The fact that urban communities, had "political and social organization ranging from the closed country club to the open door, with leadership ranging from the greatest statesmanship to the basest demagoguery," meant that "urban social change will express itself in diverse, often militant form."¹⁶ The mention of militancy here is key to understanding Ylvisaker's view of so-called "indigenous leadership." If militancy often frightened other Ford Foundation officials, Ylvisaker argued that it could serve a useful purpose. After all, he reasoned, "American independence,

too, came by fiery patriots as well as by cool-headed generals and far-sighted diplomats.”¹⁷ Although both elements were necessary, he had no doubt about which should ultimately prevail: “One supplemented the other; one without the other was ineffective; but at one stage, the first had to give way to the second to avoid the negation of every hope by permanent civil war.”¹⁸ This image of militancy tempered was perfectly encapsulated by the anticolonial turned anticommunist B.C. Roy. This type of person—one with a militant past and a sober, if not conservative, outlook on the present—was, in both postcolonial politics and the US urban crisis, the kind of “indigenous leader” Ylvisaker prized.

The most prominent conflict in the early years of the Gray Areas program reinforced Ylvisaker’s view that empowering some “indigenous leaders” and seeking to weaken others was the key to the program’s success. Philadelphia was one of the first cities chosen for a Gray Areas demonstration project. There, a growing conflict between the president of the city’s NAACP chapter, Cecil Moore, and the pastor of Zion Baptist Church, Reverend Leon Sullivan, began to implicate the Ford Foundation. The two figures worked together in the 1950s, as Sullivan recruited Moore, a veteran of the Second World War and a civil rights lawyer, to work for the local Citizens Committee Against Juvenile Delinquency.¹⁹ In 1963, Moore was elected president of the Philadelphia chapter of the NAACP, partly because he was willing to engage in confrontational tactics of boycotts and pickets, which the NAACP tended to avoid.

Just after his election as NAACP chapter president, Moore organized protests against the Ford Foundation’s community action agency in the city, the Philadelphia Council for Community Advancement (PCCA). Moore criticized the agency for merely conducting surveys and doing little of substance to benefit Black Philadelphians. More threatening to Ford, however, was Moore’s argument against the Foundation’s tax-exempt status. He threatened to organize boycotts of Ford Motor Company dealers and outlets. Although, as historian Matthew Countryman notes, Moore was unable to mobilize a sustained mass protest among Black Philadelphians against the PCCA, Ford Foundation officials treated Moore’s threat of organizing a Ford boycott as a problem that had the potential to derail the entire Gray Areas program.²⁰

Ylvisaker's oral history, held at the Rockefeller Archive Center, reveals clearly how he envisioned the elevation of Leon Sullivan as an alternative "indigenous leader" to Moore as the potential solution to this crisis. Sullivan, who a few years earlier had led "don't buy where you can't work" campaigns in Philadelphia, had by 1963 turned away from direct action and toward educational solutions to the problem of employment discrimination.²¹ In early 1964, he opened the first Operations Industrialization Center (OIC), which provided industrial job training to unemployed and underemployed Black Philadelphians. Sullivan was initially reluctant to work with the PCCA, and his history of organizing militant direct-action protests made some Ford Foundation officials wary of supporting him.²²

Ylvisaker, however, viewed Sullivan's past militancy as an essential asset for an "indigenous leader" to have, just as B.C. Roy's militancy had been an asset in Calcutta. His oral history reveals how he won the support of the Ford Foundation's board for funding Sullivan's OIC. Ylvisaker devised a plan for the Ford Foundation's trustees to meet Sullivan apparently by chance—what he called in his oral history a "Machiavellian act."²³ According to Ylvisaker's recollection, Sullivan "from six feet six . . . looked down at Henry Ford [II] and [John J.] McCloy and all these guys" and "had the . . . trustees around him like the Sermon on the Mount in a few seconds."²⁴ Henry Ford II was so taken with Sullivan that he asked, in a revealing statement of elite philanthropy's vision of Black Americans at the time, "My God, how do we manufacture more of you?," to which Sullivan supposedly replied, "By giving me some money."²⁵ After this meeting, Ylvisaker encountered little resistance in gaining the support of his Ford Foundation superiors for Sullivan's organization.²⁶ The Foundation authorized an initial grant of \$201,200 for Sullivan's OIC.²⁷

If Calcutta's B.C. Roy was the model of "indigenous leadership" that Ylvisaker hoped Sullivan would equal, Sullivan became the Ford Foundation's model for the rest of the United States. After the establishment of the Community Action Program in the Johnson administration's Office of Economic Opportunity, moreover, the OIC garnered even more funding. By 1967, the OEO was providing \$2.7 million per year in funding for the Philadelphia OIC, and the first eight branches established outside of Philadelphia relied on funding from three federal

agencies.²⁸ Sullivan credited the early support of Ylvisaker, in particular, for enabling his organization's initial survival and extraordinary growth.²⁹

This account of the importance of “indigenous leadership” in the thinking of Paul Ylvisaker and in the development of community action in the United States adds to a growing literature on the transnational sources of US antipoverty policy.³⁰ More than that, it illustrates how a particular vision of postcolonial politics came to influence the policy instrument of community action, pushing it toward a politics of elite brokerage. Ford Foundation officials such as Ylvisaker emphasized that the bottom-up participation, which community action is known for promoting, always had to be mediated through leaders whose political stances and tactics were acceptable to those disbursing antipoverty funds.

¹ Alice O'Connor, *Poverty Knowledge: Social Science, Social Policy, and the Poor in Twentieth-Century U.S. History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001); Karen Ferguson, *Top Down: The Ford Foundation, Black Power, and the Reinvention of Racial Liberalism* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013).

Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

² Daniel Immerwahr, *Thinking Small: The United States and the Lure of Community Development* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

³ Address by Paul N. Ylvisaker at the 1963 Citizen's Conference on Community Planning, Indianapolis, IN, January 11, 1963, p. 3, p. 5, folder 28, box 27, Office Files of Wilson McNeil Lowry, Ford Foundation Records, Rockefeller Archive Center.

⁴ Address by Paul N. Ylvisaker at the 1963 Citizen's Conference on Community Planning, p. 5.

⁵ Address by Paul N. Ylvisaker at the 1963 Citizen's Conference on Community Planning, p. 5.

⁶ Address by Paul N. Ylvisaker at the 1963 Citizen's Conference on Community Planning, p. 6. On “systems analysis” and its path from the military-industrial complex into antipoverty policy, see Jennifer S. Light, *From Warfare to Welfare: Defense Intellectuals and Urban Problems in Cold War America* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2003).

⁷ Address by Paul N. Ylvisaker at the 1963 Citizen's Conference on Community Planning, p. 6.

⁸ Daniel Immerwahr briefly discusses Ylvisaker's Calcutta experience as one of the many instances of overseas community development programs' impact on community action at home. See Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*, 144–46.

⁹ Request for Foundation-Administered Action No. 0D-801G, February 17, 1961, box 5, Paul N. Ylvisaker Papers, Harvard University Archives.

¹⁰ Request for Foundation-Administered Action No. 0D-801G, February 17, 1961.

¹¹ Nitish Sengupta, Dr. Bidhan Chandra Roy (New Delhi: Ministry of Information and Broadcasting, 2002).

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- ¹² Paul Ylvisaker to Robert Culbertson, March 19, 1961, box 5, Paul N. Ylvisaker Papers.
- ¹³ Paul Ylvisaker to Henry Heald, March 24, 1961, box 5, Paul N. Ylvisaker Papers.
- ¹⁴ Paul Ylvisaker to Henry Heald, March 24, 1961, box 5, Paul N. Ylvisaker Papers.
- ¹⁵ Ananya Roy, Stuart Schrader, and Emma Shaw Crane show how the territorial imagination of “gray areas” was linked to fears of insurgency in the decolonizing world and of violent uprisings in US cities. in originated in the context of Cold War foreign policy. See Ananya Roy, Stuart Schrader, and Emma Shaw Crane, “‘The Anti-Poverty Hoax’: Development, Pacification, and the Making of Community in the Global 1960s,” *Cities* 44 (2015): 139–45.
- ¹⁶ Address by Paul N. Ylvisaker at the 1963 Citizen’s Conference on Community Planning, p. 6.
- ¹⁷ Address by Paul N. Ylvisaker at the 1963 Citizen’s Conference on Community Planning, p. 6.
- ¹⁸ Address by Paul N. Ylvisaker at the 1963 Citizen’s Conference on Community Planning, p. 6.
- ¹⁹ Countryman, Up South, 85–86.
- ²⁰ Countryman, Up South, 129.
- ²¹ Leon H. Sullivan, *Build, Brother, Build* (Philadelphia: Macrae Smith, 1969).
- ²² Michael Harris to Edward J. Meade, Interoffice Memo, December 18, 1963; Edward J. Meade to Paul Ylvisaker, Interoffice Memo, December 19, 1963; Ford Foundation – Gray Areas – 1964 (January–June) folder, box 5, Paul N. Ylvisaker Papers.
- ²³ Interview with Paul Ylvisaker by Charles T. Morrissey, 27 September 1973, p. 49, folder 227, box 40, Oral History Project (FA618), Ford Foundation Records. See also Ferguson, *Top Down*, 62–63.
- ²⁴ Interview with Paul Ylvisaker by Charles T. Morrissey, 27 September 1973, pp. 49–50, folder 227, box 40, Oral History Project (FA618), Ford Foundation Records.
- ²⁵ Interview with Paul Ylvisaker by Charles T. Morrissey, 27 September 1973, p. 49, folder 227, box 40, Oral History Project (FA618), Ford Foundation Records.
- ²⁶ Interview with Paul Ylvisaker by Charles T. Morrissey, 27 September 1973, p. 50, folder 227, box 40, Oral History Project (FA618), Ford Foundation Records.
- ²⁷ Paul Ylvisaker to Norman W. MacLeod, February 28, 1964, Ford Foundation – Gray Areas – 1964 (January–June) folder, box 5, Paul N. Ylvisaker Papers.
- ²⁸ Tersh Boasberg to Joseph A. Califano, Jr., June 28, 1967, Staff: White House Correspondence, May–Dec 1967 folder, box 41, R. Sargent Shriver Personal Papers, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum.
- ²⁹ Leon Sullivan to Henry Heald, June 25, 1965, Ford Foundation – Personal (1964–1965) folder, box 5, Paul N. Ylvisaker Papers.
- ³⁰ Immerwahr, *Thinking Small*; Alyosha Goldstein, *Poverty in Common: The Politics of Community Action during the American Century* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012); Sheyda Jahanbani, “‘A Different Kind of People’: The Poor at Home and Abroad, 1935–1968,” (Ph.D. diss., Brown University, 2009); Sheyda Jahanbani, “One Global War on Poverty: The Johnson Administration Fights Poverty at Home and Abroad, 1964–1968,” in *Beyond the Cold War: Lyndon Johnson and the New Global Challenges of the 1960s*, ed. Francis J. Gavin and Mark Atwood Lawrence (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014).