

The Civil City

An Interview with William H. Hudnut, III

Born in Ohio in 1932, William H. Hudnut, III, was ordained a Presbyterian minister in 1957. After a stint on the Indianapolis Board of Public Safety, he was elected to Congress as a Republican from the state's 11th District in 1972. He served one term in Congress, then, in the move that would gain him his greatest public recognition, ran for Mayor of Indianapolis in 1976. Hudnut served four terms in City Hall, finally involuntarily leaving in 1991. He currently lives in the Washington, D.C., area, where he is a senior resident fellow at the Urban Land Institute (ULI) as well as former Mayor of the Town of Chevy Chase, Maryland. The IMH conversed with Hudnut about his own career, Indianapolis, and the past and future of American cities. The interview took place via e-mail, and extended at intervals through the second half of 2005. The final text has been edited for length and continuity.

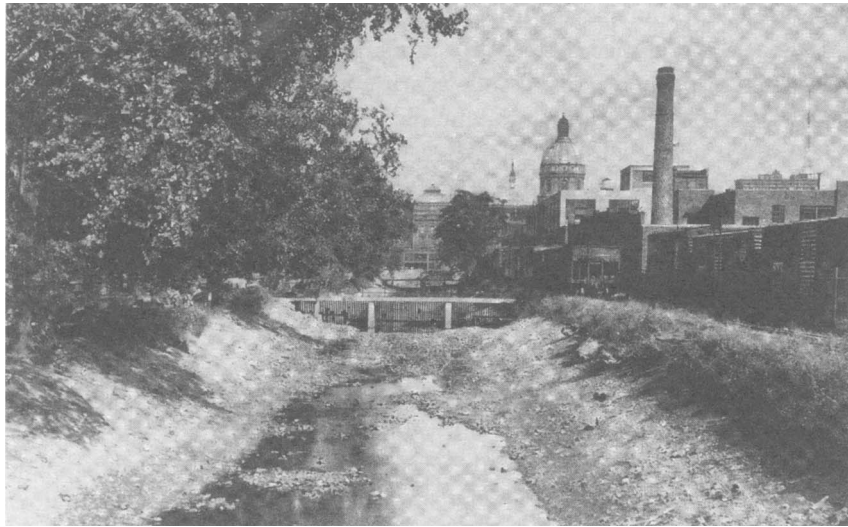
Indiana Magazine of History: You weren't a professional "city" person when you first arrived in Indianapolis to begin your work at the Second Presbyterian Church. What were your impressions of Indianapolis in those early years on the job?

William H. Hudnut: When I moved to Indianapolis in 1963 to assume the pastorate of Second Presbyterian Church, I was struck by the conservatism of the place—no federal money, support of anti-communist crusades, certain church members pushing me in the direction of a personal interpretation of religion as opposed to drawing out the relevance of religious principles to the public realm, commitment to a prevailing

orthodoxy and antipathy toward anything heterodox, a strong John Birch Society presence, that sort of thing. I was even called a communist at a cocktail party because I was wearing a red sport coat! The Sunday before the 1964 election, someone plastered all the cars in our church parking lot with Goldwater leaflets. My new city did not strike me as quite as open and welcoming of diversity (of race and of opinion) as cities I had previously lived in (Rochester, Buffalo, and Annapolis). I well remember being greeted by someone who said, "We are a town that will welcome you, and then stand back for ten years to see how you do." All this made me slightly uncomfortable.

IMH: Leaving aside the obvious physical landmarks, how is the city today different from the place that you first experienced in 1963, or even from the place you looked out the window at on your first day as mayor in 1976? How much of this change is typical of urban America, and how much of it reflects the unique flavor and history of Indianapolis?

WH: Cities are organisms. They change all the time. They don't stand still. Dick Lugar and his colleagues put Unigov and GIPC (The Greater Indianapolis Progress Commission) in place (actually, it was Mayor Barton who founded GIPC, but Dick greatly expanded the participation), and my administration tried to build on those foundations. Looking out my 25th-floor window on my first day in office, as it were, it seemed as though our central city was hollowing out, the victim of urban disinvestment. It also seemed as though we needed to be more inclusive, and perhaps more willing to think outside the box and less reluctant to take risks. We established a substantial list of priorities: neighborhood redevelopment, downtown revitalization, improvement of police-community relations, a strong financial standing, and a strategy for economic development that emphasized sports as a point of leverage. In order to accomplish these goals, our policies were to encourage downtown reinvestment without discouraging suburban investment, to maintain a Triple-A bond rating, to create an internal audit department and have external auditors look at our books and report to the public in timely fashion, to make our city as safe as possible, to promote a public/private partnership, to establish Labor and Neighborhood advisory councils, to increase the percentages of women and minorities in the police and fire departments, to upgrade the role of minorities in the city decision-making process, to save the Pacers and attract an NFL franchise. And a few other things too!



The Central Canal, downtown Indianapolis, looking toward the Statehouse
Like many urban centers, downtown Indianapolis was “hollowing out.”

Courtesy, Bass Photo Collection, Indiana Historical Society

I guess I had best leave it to the historians to decide the extent to which we achieved these goals in my sixteen years as mayor. All I can add is that I hope my epitaph will read: “He built well and he cared about people.”

IMH: You’ve mentioned the structures that shaped your term in office. One of them, Unigov, has to be counted one of the most significant innovations in urban governance of the last century. Does Unigov still offer a model for other metropolitan areas to follow? And do you feel that it has gone far enough in rectifying the inequities of service and revenue that affect American metropolitan areas?

WH: Unigov, along with the GIPC, laid the foundations for the emergence of the modern Indianapolis. It might never have been enacted if put to a referendum, because people react negatively to change and have an unwarranted fear of “big government”; fortunately, in the State of Indiana, that was not required—only positive votes in the General Assembly and a signature by the governor. This consolidation of the city and (Marion) county governance followed on the heels of similar efforts in Nashville, Tennessee, and Jacksonville, Florida, occurring at a time

(the late Sixties and early Seventies) when a fortuitous window for such reform was open. Subsequently, Jefferson County and Louisville, Kentucky, have consolidated, but many areas which have attempted similar steps—Albuquerque, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Wichita, Kalamazoo—have failed, due to opposition from the suburban constituencies that had to vote on this matter.

Unigov represented a dramatic and successful initiative to reform governance structures in Indianapolis. It had several benefits, even though it also aroused opposition and lawsuits. By incorporating the suburbs in Marion County into the city, it widened the city's tax base, thus helping to stabilize city finances and achieve a Aaa bond rating; it created a larger sense of "family" and enabled business and civic leaders who resided in the suburbs to become more active in civic affairs (neither I nor Bart Peterson would have been eligible to run for mayor, without Unigov); it gave minority interests a larger voice in governance; it made service delivery (planning and zoning, streets, trash pickup, parks, etc.) more efficient; and it centralized leadership in the office of a strong mayor system. Unigov did not consolidate schools, tax rates, township and city fire and police departments, nor any jurisdictions beyond Marion County, and it left intact the governmental structures in the excluded cities of Lawrence, Beech Grove, Speedway and Homewood. Thus it was not a complete consolidation. It was a compromise—politics being the art of the possible. I personally feel the school districts should be rearranged so that the county is divided pie-shape into eight districts ranging from the center to the outer county boundaries, because that would resolve some of the desegregation problems that have existed over the years and eliminate Indianapolis Public Schools, which has always seemed to have problems. But of course that will probably never happen. Nor will annexation of territories beyond Marion County, even though Unigov is bursting at the seams, and the regional dimensions of land use and transportation planning require regional solutions. Also, I am pleased that the current city administration has been working hard on consolidating police and fire services in the county.

Around the country, Unigov is admired as a bold step forward, precipitated not by a crisis but by reformist zeal, and several communities, such as the ones mentioned above, would like to have a similar system. Today, jurisdictional boundaries that were created in the nineteenth century are obsolete, because the metropolitan form has morphed from a heliocentric design, with a large central city and bedroom suburbs, into something resembling a constellation, with many nodes of independent



The RCA Dome, downtown Indianapolis

Courtesy, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, Indiana University School of Medicine

development occurring within the metro region, and many problems—like crime, traffic, land development, job force training, environmental degradation, and economic development—cutting across jurisdictional lines. In such areas, the Unigov model, though far from perfect, could be followed as a way of addressing these problems. There is no cookie-cutter approach. Each community has to figure out its own system of governance. But not to address regional issues is to ignore the reality of modern-day metropolitan America, encourage sprawling development, and invite paralysis caused by too much parochialism with insufficient mechanisms for collaboration.

IMH: Given the city's changing needs as you've identified them, do you feel that big public investments in sports, leisure, and tourism remain essential for vitalizing the economic and cultural base of large, aging cities such as Indianapolis? Would you be as likely to push for this sort of investment if you were taking on the mayor's job today, rather than 30 years ago?

WH: It is difficult to calculate the impact of a domed stadium or similar type of venue on a local community's economy and "psyche." Certainly, when we built the "Hoosier" Dome in the early 1980s, it appeared to me that the benefits outweighed the costs—benefits such as increased convention business (more than just the Colts playing there a few times each year), an enhanced national reputation, additional hotels, restau-

rants and activity downtown which created more tax base and more jobs, enhanced economic development opportunities, and a rallying point for civic spirit and pride. For example, when I asked Neil Norrey from Rochester, New York, why his company had chosen to purchase the abandoned Western Electric plant on Shadeland Avenue and turn it into a distribution center, he responded: "Because I read about Indianapolis on the sports pages, and thought you were the kind of aggressive, progressive city in which I would like to invest." Some people opposed the expansion of the convention center on the grounds that the money should have gone to housing, filling chuckholes, and that sort of thing, but these persons missed the point that the entire \$80 million raised from the public and non-profit sectors to finance the deal were earmarked for that purpose and could be used for none other.

Now, over twenty years later, this stadium has the smallest capacity of any in the NFL. Times change. Competition is keen. If a new stadium is necessary to keep the Colts in town, and if the convention center needs to be expanded, I am in favor of it because, in spite of the cost in public funds, the benefits mentioned above are significant. If we lost the Colts, our reputation as a major-league city would suffer a huge setback that would have consequences in other areas. I think in smaller markets, like Indianapolis or Green Bay, the presence of an NFL team means more than it does in larger cities like New York or Chicago, and as mayor, I would never set—as Mayor Daley once did in Chicago—a top limit on the amount of public dollars to be spent on a stadium, saying, "It's my way or the highway." I do not know the particulars of the new deal that has been struck in Indianapolis, and admittedly, I feel a little nostalgia and remorse in seeing the demolition of the stadium I and others worked so hard to develop. But if in the estimate of current city leaders, the new stadium is the proper step to take, coupled with another expansion of the convention center, then it should be taken, with as little public money involved as possible.

IMH: In your recent work at the Urban Land Institute, you've been writing about your concept of "civil cities." Your take on this idea seems to me to be informed by a lot of nuts-and-bolts experience that other architects and social critics involved in the dialogue can't always claim to have. How has your work as Mayor affected your perspectives on what makes a civil city; and, on the other hand, how have your explorations, research, etc., at the Institute affected the approach you would take to the task of planning a big city like Indianapolis for the 21st century?

WH: Our society and our political discourse need a big dose of civility. It used to be, "I'm OK, you're OK, even though we disagree." Now, it's, "I'm OK, and if you disagree with me, you are a scumbag." There seems to be a lot of rancor in the air right now, feelings of adverseness if not downright animosity, and a willingness, born of ideological rigidity, to fight rather than compromise. Our democracy is in a precarious position right now: polarized, antagonistic, contentious, seemingly unable to embrace honest, open dialogue where divergent opinions are explored. Civil society is incompatible with cocooning, that is, with a refusal to consider the merits of another position because one is wrapped in the blanket of one's beliefs. Certitude is never the same as certainty. Democracy cannot work without civility, without respect for others and tolerance of differing points of view. Disagreement is not disloyalty. No one has a corner on the truth, which, like love, is a many-splendored thing, often lying somewhere in the realm of indeterminate grays between absolute blacks and whites. This does not mean one cannot believe deeply and speak passionately, but one should do it without self-righteousness and with a little modesty. The genius of Abe Lincoln was that he could hold to strong moral opinions without being moralistic.

The two most civil persons I ever have met in public office are Andy Jacobs and Dick Lugar. They are neither mean-spirited nor arrogant. I have never heard either say an unkind word about another, whether that person be a political opponent or an angry citizen. They are open to discussion. They listen. They can be a role model for all of us. I tried to be like them when I was in the Mayor's office in Indianapolis (and in Chevy Chase). It is important to be inclusive. Whether it was the Michael Taylor incident (when a 16-year-old boy was shot while in police custody in 1987) or the furor surrounding our solid waste disposal plans, I felt it was important to hold open hearings on these contentious matters to give the public an opportunity to voice their opinions. Transparency is always a requisite for building public trust. The mayor is an orchestra leader who tries to bring people together on the same page, recognizing that they play different parts. That explains why I met on a monthly basis with representatives of labor and with the members of the Progress Committee (a good cross section of the community), and why I conducted four radio programs a month where people could call in with their "opportunities for service." Being a mayor taught me the art of listening and being inclusive, two requirements for a civil city.



The Indiana State Museum and the Eiteljorg Museum of American Indians and Western Art (l. to r.) were part of a planned redevelopment of downtown Indianapolis along the Central Canal.

Courtesy, Department of Pathology and Laboratory Medicine, Indiana University School of Medicine

During my almost ten years of work at the Urban Land Institute, I have come to appreciate the role that private-sector professionals—real estate developers, architects, marketing and financial experts, consultants, etc.—can play in building a more civil society. IF they are willing to exercise civic leadership. City leadership is too important to be left to the politicians. Leadership is a job, not a position. Good civic leaders are teachers, enablers, communicators, people who bring others together to make things happen. They are discerners of the signs of the times, and engage forcefully in the crucial issues their communities are facing. They forge partnerships for the common good. They promote cooperation and try to resolve tensions and reconcile conflicts. They nurture the soft infrastructure of a city—dialogue, trust, civility, respect for all opinions, openness, grace. They are servants of community, bridge builders, people who care and put their muscle where their caring lies.

During my travels with the Urban Land Institute, I have met many civic leaders. One that comes to mind is the Simboli family in Chelsea, Massachusetts. Back in the 1980s, Chelsea was a disaster area—high poverty rates, corruption, urban deterioration and blight, low education-achievement scores—and the state placed the city in receivership. The Simboli family decided to make some investments in Chelsea, which started the city's renewal. Now, they own and operate about a half-million

square feet of commercial space there. "But we try to be good corporate citizens, too," says Patricia Simboli, daughter of the family's patriarch. They have been involved for many years in a program for at-risk youth. They assisted ROCA (Spanish for "rock," and an acronym for Reaching Out to Chelsea Adolescents) to acquire a new headquarters building in the downtown area. The Simbolis shared ROCA's vision—helping Chelsea youth toward productive citizenship—and then persuaded others to share it and implement it. This was civic leadership in action.

My experience at ULI has taught me the importance of urban design and planning, something to which I paid insufficient attention during my sixteen years as Indy's mayor. But a good civic leader will pay attention to these matters. The mayor is the chief architect of a city. There has to be a vision (as we had at Circle Centre) and a plan to follow in implementing it. Zoning has to be updated as times change. Careful attention has to be paid to what's happening where, to avoid unsightliness and the proliferation of one strip development after another. Historic buildings should be preserved, or given new uses. Higher densities have to be created to avoid sprawl. Land must be used well, green space needs to be preserved, not gobbled up with promiscuous development or paved over with asphalt. Smart growth must be practiced.

ULI has a program called Advisory Services Panels. We have conducted well over one hundred of these panels in the past few years, doing about one each month. We bring into a city impartial experts in land-use planning from our membership around the country. They spend a week there, interviewing scores of people, touring the site for which remedial action is needed, and preparing recommendations about strategic steps that can be taken to revitalize a given area. We were in Oklahoma City after the bombing, in New Orleans after Katrina. We have journeyed to Europe and Asia with this program, and in each place we have gone, these volunteers have done an immense amount of good. Most times our recommendations are taken, occasionally they are not. But the point is that our members have engaged with a city, sought to help it envision and construct a better future, and given it positive recommendations upon which to act. This is civic leadership in action.

Few of us will stride across the pages of history and leave big footprints. But that does not mean we cannot be leaders, that we cannot rise to the occasion to provide vision, support, and direction. To each of us there come opportunities, on life's journey, to accomplish something worthy of being remembered. Our job is to see and seize these opportunities with relish, and not pass by on the other side of the road.