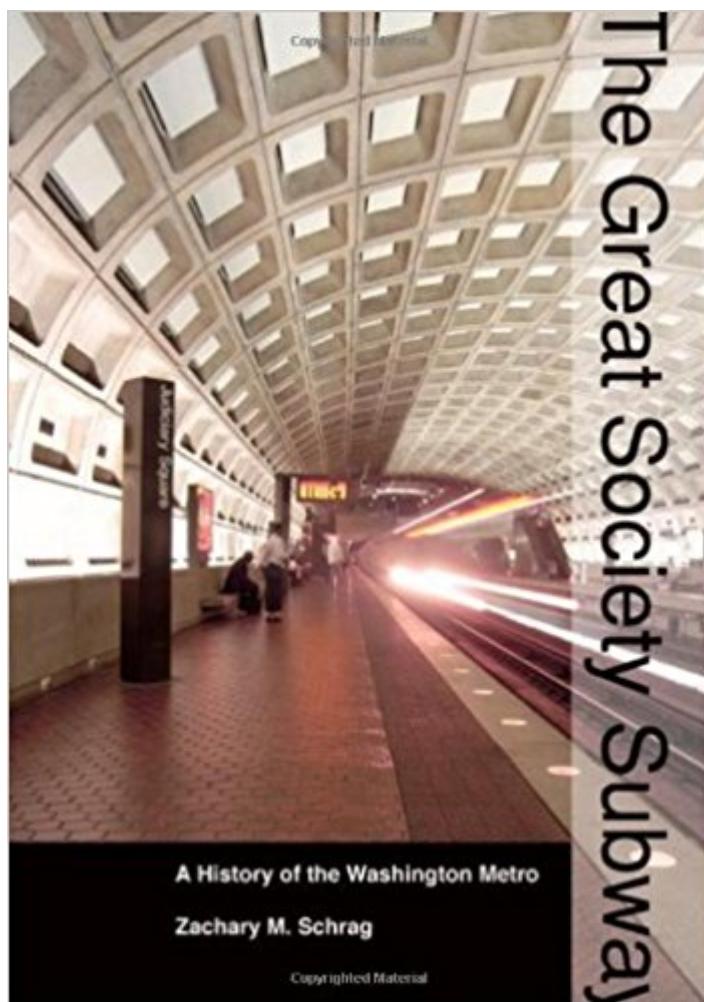


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# The Great Society Subway: A History Of The Washington Metro (Creating The North American Landscape)



## Synopsis

Drivers in the nation's capital face a host of hazards: high-speed traffic circles, presidential motorcades, jaywalking tourists, and bewildering signs that send unsuspecting motorists from the Lincoln Memorial into suburban Virginia in less than two minutes. And parking? Don't bet on it unless you're in the fast lane of the Capital Beltway during rush hour. Little wonder, then, that so many residents and visitors rely on the Washington Metro, the 106-mile rapid transit system that serves the District of Columbia and its inner suburbs. In the first comprehensive history of the Metro, Zachary M. Schrag tells the story of the Great Society Subway from its earliest rumblings to the present day, from Arlington to College Park, Eisenhower to Marion Barry. Unlike the pre-World War II rail systems of New York, Chicago, and Philadelphia, the Metro was built at a time when most American families already owned cars, and when most American cities had dedicated themselves to freeways, not subways. Why did the nation's capital take a different path? What were the consequences of that decision? Using extensive archival research as well as oral history, Schrag argues that the Metro can be understood only in the political context from which it was born: the Great Society liberalism of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. The Metro emerged from a period when Americans believed in public investments suited to the grandeur and dignity of the world's richest nation. The Metro was built not merely to move commuters, but in the words of Lyndon Johnson, to create "a place where the city of man serves not only the needs of the body and the demands of commerce but the desire for beauty and the hunger for community." Schrag scrutinizes the project from its earliest days, including general planning, routes, station architecture, funding decisions, land-use impacts, and the behavior of Metro riders. The story of the Great Society Subway sheds light on the development of metropolitan Washington, postwar urban policy, and the promises and limits of rail transit in American cities.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

"Extensively researched, cleverly structured, and finely written, this book stands out for the way it provides an integral, comprehensive account of a key urban service." (Georg Leidenberger American Historical Review)"In this superbly-written book, Zachary Schrag... explains how this achievement came about and what its impact is... A joy to read." (Gregory L. Thompson Technology and Culture)"The author makes us privy to the thinking that went into the system's design." (Dennis Drabelle Washington Post Book World)"Schrag does a thorough job with his subject." (Rachel DiCarlo Washington Times)"A timely look at how the Metro got where it is today." (Civil Engineering)"It's a fascinating look at a modern transit triumph." (Trains)"A graceful, fact-packed history of the genesis, development, and current state of the Washington Metro system." (H-DC)"The Great Society Subway is a great book for students of contemporary transit history." (Alexander D. Mitchell Railfan and Railroad)"An excellent book... a welcome and readable addition to the literature of how we construct the societies we inhabit." (Alex Marshall Regional Plan Association Spotlight)"An exhaustively researched, engagingly written study of the planning, designing, building, and operating of the Washington Metro." (Sy Adler Journal of American History)"[Schrag] shows the interrelationship of citizens' hopes and fears, visionaries' ideas, politicians' need to succeed, engineers' practical requirements, and the ebb and flow of affecting events over time. It is a fascinating story well told... a love story by an historian for his city and its people." (William W. Millar Journal of the American Planning Association)"A masterful new book... Schrag's The Great Society Subway gives an eloquent and hopeful explanation of how this marvelous system came to be, and backs it up with an enormous amount of evidence and keen historical perspective." (Washington History)"A meticulously researched account." (Phil Hervey Urban Land)"Schrag has written a valuable study of the role of infrastructure in shaping the modern, urban world, and he aptly shows both the possibilities and limitations of major public investments... insights especially illuminating." (J. Lawrence Lee CRM: Journal of Heritage Stewardship)"A welcome and readable addition to the literature of how we construct the societies we inhabit." (Alex Marshall Hartford Courant)"Without question high drama... I strongly recommend that you put down the latest Baldacci mystery and

ready this very well written, comprehensive, and entertaining book... one terrific book that belongs on lots of shelves, from planners to historians to rail buffs to politicians." (Konrad J. Perlman *Journal of Planning Literature*) "A remarkable book. It has drama, it has pathos, it has passion, it has literary grace." (Bob Post *Journal of Transport History*) "In clear and engaging prose, Schrag interweaves facts with a wide range of pragmatic, political, and aesthetic matters with discussions of those who posed and resolved the issues." (Pamela Scott *Journal of Social History*) "In clear and engaging prose, Schrag interweaves facts with a wide range of pragmatic, political, and aesthetic matters with discussions of those who posed and resolved the issues." (Pamela Scott *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*) "A masterful work of urban policy history, *The Great Society Subway* tells the inside story, from idea to reality, of the development of the Washington Metro from the perspectives of all the key players. There's nothing like it available." (Carl Abbott, *Portland State University*)

Many residents and visitors rely on the Washington Metro, the rapid transit system that serves the District of Columbia and its suburbs. In the first comprehensive history of the Metro, Zachary M. Schrag tells the story of the Great Society Subway from its earliest rumblings to its emergence as the nation's second-busiest rapid transit system. Using extensive archival research as well as oral history, Schrag argues that the Metro can be understood only in the political context from which it was born: the Great Society liberalism of the Kennedy, Johnson, and Nixon administrations. He scrutinizes the project from its earliest days, including general planning, routes, station architecture, funding decisions, land-use impacts, and the behavior of subway riders. The story of the Metro sheds light on the development of metropolitan Washington, postwar urban policy, and the promises and limits of rail transit in American cities. "A fascinating look at a modern transit triumph." — *Trains* "The author makes us privy to the thinking that went into the system's design." — *Washington Post Book World* "Extensively researched, cleverly structured, and finely written, this book stands out for the way it provides an integral, comprehensive account of a key urban service." — *American Historical Review* "[Schrag] shows the interrelationship of citizens' hopes and fears, visionaries' ideas, politicians' need to succeed, engineers' practical requirements, and the ebb and flow of affecting events over time. It is a fascinating story well told... a love story by an historian for his city and its people." — *Journal of the American Planning Association* "This is a remarkable book. It has drama, it has pathos, it has passion, it has literary grace." — *Journal of Transport History*

To a third generation Washingtonian, this book got everything right and in a most readable way. Local and national, history at its best. A book about building a subway usually would not be considered a page turner. This one briskly moves along, better than Metro in its current state of disrepair. The author really gets the zeitgeist of each decade, especially the 1950s and early 60s. As a journalist who started his career at the old Evening Star, it is dismaying to read how the Star and Post both enthusiastically lined up behind plans, which fortunately did not come to fruition, to turn this city into a mass of concrete and highways.

This is a college professor's history of the construction of the DC Metro system, so it might have been stuffy. Instead, it is very readable, and many aspects of how the Nation changed culturally show up in the book. It covers the design of the system, and the construction challenges, but perhaps more interestingly it covers the cultural and political history of putting the system in place...something I doubt could be initiated today. The place of people of color, people with disabilities, people from economically disadvantaged areas, and women each figure prominently in the story, as does the continuing battle between the road and mass transit for government funding and rights-of-way.

As a DC Metro resident, I enjoyed reading how the Metro became what it is today. Interesting to see how the city developed around the different stations.

This book should be mandatory reading for all the engineering studies. The detail of the politics, the players and the schedule to implement a mega project.

During the earliest stages of building this line, I actually lived in the Suburban Virginia area, and while very interested in the construction, I saw very little, except test borings on Wisconsin avenue, as I had to work. Now, having read this book, I know much more about the process, and in 1977 we actually rode on the downtown portion. As expected, there were many, many roadblocks to construction, thrown up by local politicos, just plain mean spirited people who had the power to do so. This book provides an interesting overview of the behind the scenes action in trying to build a subway system, only to be constantly delayed, and to see costs skyrocket as the years went by. Recommended reading for those who not only are interested in the actual construction, but also those who want to know more about the dysfunction that often attends the hyper-political atmosphere of nearly anything done in Washington, DC

I am an engineer currently working for WMATA. This book does a great job explaining the roles of the various agencies involved in the planning of metro and the formation of WMATA. It properly puts into perspective how difficult a political problem it was to plan and construct the system in the face of highway proposals, protests from other agencies and locals, and the inherent problem within tri-jurisdictional control. If you live in DC and are genuinely interested in public transit, read this.

This book is incredibly well researched and thought out. Its thesis is proved not by beating you over the head but by the historical record. Moreover, it's quite a page turner. My only quibble would be the organization in the middle; in my opinion it tended to bounce between chronological and topical. That is a small price to pay for this great read. I recommend this book.

The author obviously spent a great deal of time doing research in preparation for writing this volume. It not only covers the history of the capitol's subway system, but the social and economic factors leading up to its construction. A very thorough provoking history of a unique transportation system.

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