

## Trotter Review

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Volume 1

Issue 2 *Trotter Institute Review*

Article 4

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6-21-1987

# Boston School Desegregation: The Fallowness of Common Ground

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### Recommended Citation

Dentler, Robert A. (1987) "Boston School Desegregation: The Fallowness of Common Ground," *Trotter Review*: Vol. 1: Iss. 2, Article 4.

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<sup>5</sup>Personal communication, V. Stone, Research Director, Radio-TV News Director Association, September, 1986.

<sup>1</sup>Personal communication, R. Jackson, News Director, WILD-AM, June, 1986.

<sup>1</sup>See, For example, Allen, R.L. (1981). Communication Research on Black Americans. In H. Myrick, (Ed.) *In Search of Diversity: Symposium on Minority Audiences and Programming Research*, Washington, D.C.: Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

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# Boston School Desegregation: The Fallowness of Common Ground

by  
Robert A. Dentler



**Editor's Note:** Many of the individuals who were involved in the Boston public school desegregation in the 1970s are critical of the best-selling book about this period, *Common Ground*, by J. Anthony Lukas. Blacks who were involved with the desegregation efforts since the 1960s assail the book as misrepresenting the black community and perpetuating racial stereotypes. Announcements have been made concerning plans to produce a television docudrama from this book. Consequently, there is cause for concern about increasing the circulation of any

misrepresentation. The following article examines the book to see if it provides a "reliable account."

This article is excerpted from a longer essay which appeared in the *New England Journal of Public Policy* (1986), 2 (1), 81-102. Dr. Robert A. Dentler, Professor of Sociology at the University of Massachusetts at Boston, is the court-appointed expert in the Boston school desegregation case (1975-87) and co-author of *Schools on Trial: An Inside Account of the Boston Desegregation Case*.



*This essay scrutinizes the book by J. Anthony Lukas, Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families, to assess whether it presents a valid and reliable account of the issues, people, and events it chronicles. The substantive core of the book is shown to be the politics of Boston public school desegregation. The parts played by the three families in this event are dramatically portrayed but cannot be corroborated and are not interpreted. The parts played by five major policy leaders, when tested against other evidence, are found to be distorted, questionable legends woven in order to argue that four of the five leaders made flawed decisions that plunged Boston into violence. Lukas's docudramatic method of reporting works to cloak the ignorance, fear, and hostility of the minority of citizens in the white enclaves of Boston who initiated racial violence in the robe of civic innocence.*

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*Common Ground*, by J. Anthony Lukas, a Pulitzer Prize winning journalist and former reporter for the *New York Times*, was published by Alfred A. Knopf and released in September 1985 to become a best seller in the nonfiction book trade in less than a month. Excerpts from its 659 pages were printed in advance in the *Atlantic*, the *Boston Observer*, and the *Washington Monthly*. Within a week of its release, other sections were published on the Op-Ed pages of the *Boston Globe* and the *New York Times*. A dozen reviews appeared almost simultaneously with its release to bookstores, and all of them contained praise. In his advance appraisal, David Halberstam wrote, "This is a bittersweet book on the end of an American dream." A month after publication, the Kennedy Foundation sponsored an eleven-member panel of discussants, most of whom spoke favorably about *Common Ground* following a speech by Lukas before a large audience assembled in the John F. Kennedy Library.

My interest in *Common Ground* is professional as well as scholarly. Before coming to Boston in 1972 as dean of education at Boston University, I had worked on twelve northern school desegregation cases; and before joining Judge W. Arthur Garrity, Jr., in January 1975 as one of two experts he appointed to help plan and oversee his court orders, I had consulted with Mayor Kevin White, Governor Francis Sargent, and State Education Commissioner Gregory Anrig, independently of the court. Anthony Lukas sought me out as a source in 1976, and I spent many hours answering his questions. The policy issue for me, therefore, is whether *Common Ground* provides an accurate account of the turbulent decade it aspires to chronicle.

Social and political demography as well as intergroup history get short shrift from Lukas. Notes on the social facts about Boston are inserted into every chapter, but these are seldom expanded upon or integrated into interpretation; indeed, they are subordinated to the dramaturgy of personal motives. Boston's black residents made up less than 20 percent of the city in 1960, for example. Politicians were elected at large, and black voters did not make up an organized political subcommunity of the city. Four of the five members of the Boston School Committee were elected in 1961 and 1963 by white-dominated ward organizations whose members were patronized in turn by committee members. Three members struggled to establish themselves to the right of Louise Day Hicks on

the race issue, and the issue cost Arthur Gartland, the only moderate member, his seat. The choice before Louise Day Hicks from 1963 to 1966, then, was not between racial bigotry, as an act of personal conviction, and the path of political expediency: the choice for four committee members, including Hicks, was among degrees of denial concerning the facts of segregation.

At the time, there were few school committees or boards of education in the urban Northeast that were behaving differently. There were a few school superintendents, some groups of parents, and beleaguered moderates on boards, who said that the *Brown* decision of 1954<sup>1</sup> would come to apply to all parts of the nation. Under pressure from the New York Board of Regents, for example, the city of White Plains desegregated its one identifiably black public school in 1964 by converting it into a community center. The winds of integration gusted across the cities and largest suburbs of Pennsylvania, New York, and Connecticut in those years. A handful of northern cities and suburbs undertook steps toward partial desegregation from 1963 to 1968, but white resistance was so deep each year that some civil rights leaders turned away from this goal and embraced community control instead. As the 1960s drew to a close, desegregationists could point with pride to White Plains, Berkeley, Evanston, and Englewood, New Jersey, but no big-city systems had as yet reformed their racially dual schools.

Nothing distinguished Boston less in 1964 on this issue than the intransigence of Louise Day Hicks. There were three or more board members like her on every city school board from Santa Barbara to Providence in that year. Neither Mrs. Hicks nor Boston was even the northernmost case: that distinction went to Minneapolis, where the dispute went to federal court at the close of the 1960s. The raising of the segregation issue in 1963 and the manner of white reactions to it over the five years that followed differed from the same phenomena in dozens of other cities only in regard to timing. The debate in Boston was comparatively belated, and it was insular in scope, failing to draw heavily on the experience of other urban school systems.

In his chapter on Louise Day Hicks, Lukas also develops his assumptions about the Massachusetts Racial Imbalance Act. He characterizes it as the product of "moral fervor" engendered by the "outrages of Selma . . . [and] Martin Luther King's impassioned address on the Boston Common." The coalition of suburban and rural legislators who passed it, Lukas claims, were happy to point a finger at the cities. "Few paused to wonder whether the moral imperatives of the Southern civil rights struggle could be applied mechanically to a Northern city where segregation had developed differently," Lukas writes, but he does not document, let alone identify, the alleged difference.

Lukas also asserts that the authors of the Racial Imbalance Act did not pause to ask "whether quality education might not be possible in a predominantly black school." In fact, that question was debated in the course of framing the law. The question has also been the topic of continual research, conferencing, and experimentation among educators and social scientists since the *Brown* decision, and it had been treated often in the newspapers of the day. What is more, no legislation ever passed in Massachusetts without a coalition among suburban and rural legislators. Racial segregation was an urban issued raised



by black parents who were concentrated in the cities of the state. Their leaders took it to the legislature. And there was nothing mechanical about the new law. It simply adopted the rule of thumb that identified public schools enrolling more than 50 percent non-white students as racially imbalanced, a rule followed in other parts of the country at that time. This definition had drawbacks, but mechanicalism and the question of quality education in predominantly black schools were not among them.

There is but one notable difference between southern and northern school segregation, and that is in the degree of explicitness. State laws prohibiting racially mixed schools in the South seemed important in 1954, but the importance diminished with every passing year as civil rights claimants tested the forms of racism common to social institutions in every region of the United States. One of those forms has been dealt with in the *Brown* decision: the argument that racially isolated, racially identifiable black schools could be as effective educationally as racially inclusive schools. This question was explored and refuted in the South long before it made its way North. And it was in the South that segregationists had perfected the critique of desegregation remedies as mechanical and therefore harmful.

Thus, the chapter entitled “The Chairwoman” formulates the central subject of *Common Ground*, and its interpretations guide Lukas into and through the terrain of that subject, which is court-ordered school desegregation in Boston. Contrary to his interpretations, Boston was never on the leading edge of that subject nationally. The choice of Louise Day Hicks between advocating reforms consistent with the *Brown* decision and resisting those reforms was not, as Lukas suggests, a fateful one for Boston or the nation. Nor did her intransigence set into motion an evolving pattern of rising white resistance to racial injustice in Boston. There were not ten elected officials in any post from mayor to city councilman who were less resistant at the time, and Boston politicians were carried into and out of office in those years on waves of white fear and ignorance. Lukas’s interpretation that the state legislature, the State Board of Education, and later the state and federal courts failed to develop rational policies fitted to northern conditions discloses the flawed quality of his social history.

Lukas truncates the political history of school desegregation, even though it is his central subject. He does not trace its evolving features as they moved northward from Baltimore to New York City in the decade after 1954. He says of this evolution, “When the legislature passed the Racial Imbalance Act on August 16, 1965, Massachusetts became the first state in the Union – and to date the only one – to outlaw *de facto* segregation in its public schools.” That act was unique only technically, however, and it was based on policy commitments made earlier in other states and localities. Progress in reform was slow, to be sure, but it came earlier and faster in New York, Connecticut, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and California than it did in Massachusetts. The call for racial justice in Boston’s public schools was neither novel nor ahead of its time, and what distinguished white public reactions in Boston was the uniformity, not the substance or the intransigence, of early maneuvers of resistance and avoidance by white politicians.

The chapter on Judge Garrity includes a capsule history of Supreme Court desegregation decisions from 1954 to 1974, and on this stands the policy premise of *Common Ground*. “By then, the line between *de facto* and *de jure* segregation had become so fine as to be almost indistinguishable to the layman’s eye. . . . But others . . . thought it a distinction worth preserving: surely, a free society ought to defend the right of its citizens to make genuinely private choices, no matter how reprehensible. If government could abolish purely voluntary school segregation . . . then what was to prevent it from requiring a private citizen to accept Irish, black, or Portuguese guests at his dinner table?” Thus, the constitutional rights of private citizens are pitted against the wrongs of “voluntary” racial discrimination. The wall erected to prevent this had been eroded during 20 years of Supreme Court decisions, and Judge Garrity was chosen by fate to go into the resulting breach.

The reader gets but a single sentence of quotation from the liability opinion given by Judge Garrity in *Morgan v. Hennigan*. It is the sentence which concludes that the Boston School Committee “knowingly carried out a systematic program of segregation affecting all of the city’s students, teachers and school facilities and . . . intentionally brought about and maintained a dual school system.” Although this is the heart of the matter in *Common Ground*, the reader receives none of the facts on which this conclusion was based. Nor do we learn much about the correctness of the conclusion, only that Thomas Atkins of the NAACP thought highly of it and that the court of appeals upheld it.

The tragedy enacted by Judge Garrity, Lukas assures us, lay not in the finding of liability but in the remedies adopted to right those wrongs. Unidentified critics are alleged to have said the judge wasted his energies on the liability opinion when he should have spent them on the search for a remedy. Lukas fails to note that in school desegregation disputes, it is the defendant who must fashion the first remedial proposal and that it was in Boston that the School Committee refused to do just that.

The tragedies narrated in *Common Ground* arose, according to Lukas, from the juxtaposition of hidden flaws in individual character and events that conspired against fulfillment of what would be best for ordinary people. The book’s chronicle relies, therefore, on the selection of events that seem best suited to express the adverse twists of fate. For example, Lukas writes that Judge Garrity began to devise his own permanent remedy long before one was due from the School Committee. This is simply not true. He also reports that Garrity’s first two choices for the role of court expert were Thomas Pettigrew and Paul Ylvisaker, but “both turned him down.” In fact, Judge Garrity never conferred with Pettigrew, and in his meeting with Ylvisaker, he never broached the subject.

Edward McCormack is featured by Lukas as one of the four masters appointed by Judge Garrity to make findings of fact and to recommend courses of remedial action. McCormack, according to *Common Ground*, developed a compromise plan early in 1975 that would have brought peace as well as racial justice to Boston. The other three masters are mentioned only once, although two of them, Charles Willie and Francis Keppel, had deep expertise in desegregation, while McCormack had never



dealt educationally or legally with the issue. “Although the judge had adopted . . . a ‘team’ approach, Eddie McCormack was clearly first among equals, the team’s unofficial captain.” In fact, the presiding master was Jacob J. Spiegel; and while McCormack was the most dominating as well as the most creative personality on the team, he was not the captain. He did not create the elements of the masters’ proposal; did not appraise its educational consequences; did not do the legal or demographic research on which it was based; and did not investigate the prospects for federal aid. These and other vital tasks were carried out by other team members. McCormack, meanwhile, specialized in testing a wide range of interest groups and organizations in order to assess and cultivate their support for the proposal, and he set the pace of the planning effort.

“This is storybook stuff . . . fashioned locally . . . for exculpating Bostonians from the implications of their own uncompromising commitments to the status quo.”

Lukas suggests that Judge Garrity failed to approve [a] McCormack compromise out of some flaw in character, some Thomistic or puritanical penchant for caution, some inherent inability to embrace the practicalities of compromise. This, he writes, converged with the evolving rigidities of the Supreme Court and with the raging cross-pressures blowing across Boston. In this plot, both flaw and context destroy the last remaining chance for racial peace.

This is storybook stuff, however. It was fashioned locally as part of the means for exculpating Bostonians from the implications of their own uncompromising commitments to the status quo. Lukas serves as the chronicling outsider who collects, sifts, and weaves a more complete fabric of exculpation out of the stuff of these local legends.

In place of a researched account of the conditions under which Mayor White changed between 1974 and 1976 from an advocate for racial justice and adherence to constitutional law into a vigorously defiant opponent of court actions, Lukas focuses on trivia. He records stories about White telephoning the Garrity home during a crisis of racial violence and getting turned away as if White would really believe he could hold backstage conversations with a federal judge in the midst of complex civil litigation. Lukas even suggests, without having examined court documents, that Judge Garrity attached the mayor as a defendant in the case as a vindictive reaction to the telephone calls. The course of White’s movement from the liberal center of the controversy toward the outer edges of the antibusing ideology is not chronicled; instead, the Kevin White in *Common Ground* fades away before our eyes. We get snippets about his success in being reelected in 1976, but the chapter ends with the legend of his political self-destruction. Once again, the opportunity to explore the forces at work within a part of the electorate, a part committed to defiant and even violent resistance to desegregation of the public schools, is sacrificed

in favor of the interpretation of flaws in the character of an individual leader.

The chapter on Thomas Winship, “The Editor,” departs from the essentially docudramatic treatment of the other four leaders. Here, Lukas deals with the career of a newspaperman and with the impact of school desegregation on the *Boston Globe*, a newspaper whose traditions and content he understands from earned professional familiarity with urban journalism. *Common Ground* is at its best in this chapter. It is one that will be reprinted for years to come for use in college courses on journalism.

The story of the editor coheres with other parts of *Common Ground* in one important respect, however: it is devoid of an account of why and how the attacks against the *Globe* became so violent and were so long-sustained. The response of Winship and others on the *Globe* is covered superbly. How the paper’s leadership fumbled along the path toward their Calvary, contributing to their own pain, links this chapter to others as well. Just what it was that spawned the South Boston lion of violence and what made it roar with such telling effects is left unexplained, however, and it becomes hard to link the fortunes of the *Globe* to the diverse and volatile subcultures of Boston.

Although *Common Ground* is the story of school desegregation in Boston framed among many subplots, only two public schools are treated in any detail in the book. The chronicle of Charlestown High School during the 1974–76 years is strong and fully researched and provides a glimpse of Lukas’s journalistic abilities at their best. Had he done nothing else during his years on this project, this chronicle would vindicate his effort. Across the growing shelf of books and articles about the Boston Public Schools, nothing equals this reconstruction of daily life in and around the old high school for precision, relevance, and selection of detail. Indeed, no other source save the liability opinion of the federal court offers a fuller account of the nature and implications of racial segregation and discrimination and how these ideologies and practices undermined the learning opportunities for all students, before and during the earliest period of desegregation.

Much is gained by intensifying the focus on what journalists call the human interest elements in *Common Ground*, but much is also sacrificed. A reader cannot learn what transpired in the course of state and federal court proceedings over the years 1969 to 1978, and what a reader can learn is factually unreliable. And a reader cannot learn what in particular it was that the *Boston Globe* did in reporting on the dispute that may have contributed to attacks on the paper, its staff, and its facilities.

In addition to generating a kind of vacuum around the particulars of policy actions and media actions, Lukas avoids the question of how unique or representative Boston is among cities. Shall we read about Boston because its happenings are unlike those that took place in other American cities in the same years? This cannot be the intent, surely, because the militancy of opposition to school desegregation in Pontiac, Louisville, Pittsburgh, Kansas City, Indianapolis, and San Francisco, to mention places from diverse regions, was just as fierce and just as dependent on the arguments summarized in the book *Disaster by Decree*.<sup>2</sup> So, too, when Lukas reports on how white youths attacked Rachel Twymon’s sister and family when they moved into a white neighborhood, we recall similar attacks in Detroit, Chicago, and Philadelphia.



*“Journalists, unlike social scientists, are not burdened by disciplinary responsibility for gauging whether their reports are more or less generalizable . . .”*

Can it be that we are to take a case study of Boston as representative of urban America? There is a solid grain of truth in this idea, but Lukas does not consider it seriously, and his emphasis upon the historicity of Boston and its Bunker Hill distracts the reader from considering it. Journalists, unlike social scientists, are not burdened by disciplinary responsibility for gauging whether their reports are more or less generalizable, and one cannot fault Lukas for working within his professional tradition. Journalists also do not have to assess whether the stories of one or two neighborhoods within a city are indicative of the stories of other parts of the same city, and indeed we learn little from *Common Ground* about South Boston, the core of resistance and defiance toward racial justice, let alone a dozen other neighboring subcommunities.

Unlike a sociological monograph or a novel by E.L. Doctorow, *Common Ground* should be appraised on two counts: Is its chronicle of what happened accurate, and is the point of view through which the chronicle is interpreted adequate to the scale of the events themselves?

On the first count, *Common Ground* records many facts and many statements offered as facts that are in error. A surfeit of details and conjecture is sometimes used in preference to a selective decision about which facts matter. No one needs, for example, to pile a persecution complex on top of the facts that Cardinal Medeiros suffered from diabetes and high blood pressure and was received by some parishioners with manifest hostility in order to provide an account of his despair. Nor does one need an account of the Mystery Nighters in order to learn how Arthur Garrity came to work on campaigns for John Kennedy. Many details are included because they add to the human interest factor, no doubt, but the standard of selection and verification is made of rubber.

On the second count, *Common Ground* is much weaker. If we are to read a hundred pages about violent reactions to changing racial policies, for example, the factual details presented should point toward something that is causally commensurate with the scale of the reactions. No evidence is mustered in the chapters on the five leaders to suggest that one or all of them caused the bloodshed, terror tactics, sniper attacks, or mob violence documented in the book. In his book, *The Boston School Integration Dispute*,<sup>3</sup> anthropologist J. Brian Sheehan narrates the same bloody record and finds it necessary to invent a conspiracy between Yankee Brahmin business leaders and “black politicians” in order to account for it. His conspiracy theory is another myth, to be sure, but at least it has scope.

The family chapters cannot account for the violence, because none of the families is situated to offer an interpretation. The McGoffs, or Alice and her daughter Lisa at least, are deeply implicated in desegregation protest activities, and their story is made exceptionally vivid for this reason. They were eager to tell Lukas their recollec-

tions years afterward in order to justify their conduct — indeed, perhaps, to memorialize it with pride.

Mrs. Alice McGoff paid little attention to the school dispute until the spring of 1973, when she attended a meeting and heard a Dorchester mother warn that “indiscriminate mixing of blacks and whites would be a disaster. ‘The three R’s will be turned to Riot, Rape, and Robbery, she said.’ . . . To Alice, the idea of sending her children to a school halfway across the city when they had a perfectly good school right across the street was utterly ridiculous. Moreover, what she knew of conditions in Roxbury strengthened her resolve . . . she knew it wasn’t safe over there.” That is the full reconstruction of her knowledge and attitudes. It certainly does not suffice as motivation for what followed.

Kevin White toured a half-dozen cities in the North in 1976 and spoke eloquently on what he called “the disaster of busing in Boston.” At that time he was still mayor. It was not until 1982 that he made public his conviction that Boston was a particularly racist city; but when he was running for office, he could not have been expected to account for “the disaster” in these terms or even in terms of voter attitudes. His own public reputation as a political liberal, while rusting away, made this impossible. And Edward McCormack, with his close ties to the politics of South Boston, his lifelong loyalty to his uncle, John McCormack, and his real-estate as well as political interdependence with Kevin White, did not tell Lukas about the intensity of rejection accorded the “McCormack compromise plan” by South Boston’s political leaders, William Bulger and Raymond Flynn.

In a speech at the Kennedy Library, J. Anthony Lukas said no one should make Judge Garrity a scapegoat for the wreckage wrought by Bostonians, yet his own sources and his record of their accounts in *Common Ground* do precisely that. They assert that the liability opinion took too long in coming; that it failed to distinguish between northern and southern forms of racial segregation; that the judge adopted the Phase I remedy hastily and without prudent forethought; that his Phase II remedy was both rigid and draconian; and that his intrusion into School Department operations stimulated racial strife. Judge Garrity is not the only source of the problem: Louise Day Hicks is deemed a political anomaly rather than the symbol of protest. Cardinal Medeiros, we are told, was a poor choice on the part of a key person in the Vatican. Kevin White fails to keep his eye on Boston when his leadership is needed most. Tom Winship makes the *Globe* cosmopolitan and objective just when some readers yearn most for parochialism and for coverage that is sympathetic to protesters.

It is not Lukas who invents the exculpation of those who acted out the violence in the citywide movement that came to be named ROAR. His role is that of the visiting stranger who gathers the wool of exculpation heaped up by others. If Boston is the unique, historical Cradle of Liberty its citizens believe it to be, can the relentless hostility toward black parents and students and a small band of white moderates be reconciled with the image? Will stories about flawed leaders help restore the loaded surfaces of conventional ideology that cover over the realities of life near Bunker Hill? If the staff and offices of the *Boston Globe* are subjected to gunfire, can it be for reasons grounded in the ignorance and fears of subscribers



who cannot bear to read what the *Globe* reports? Or shall the same surfaces of convention be smoothed over by the excuse that the *Globe* lost touch with its subscribers?

*Common Ground* leaves such questions unanswered. We are left to answer for ourselves why some white students at Charlestown High, goaded by their parents, snubbed, terrorized, and attacked black students inside and outside the school. We cannot learn from reading this book how opposition to racial desegregation came to be carried to such extremes.

Northerners were shocked when similar extremes flared in Little Rock in 1957; but there, remember, a white school board and many administrators and teachers had tried to initiate desegregation, only to be blocked and attacked by Governor Faubus and others in the State House. Is it possible that the hands that rocked the Cradle of Liberty were culturally identical to the hands that blocked the schoolhouse door at Central High School in Little Rock nearly 30 years ago? None of Lukas's sources explore this question.

Something that has large potential value or utility but is being unused is often called fallow. The criminal-court record in the rape of a white woman by Freddie Twymon is chronicled in minute detail in Lukas's last chapter on the Twymon family. Its inclusion in *Common Ground* is presumably justified at one level of meaning by the author's effort to track the lives of every family member. At another level of meaning, however, this story discloses the fallowness of the book. We learn what heinous assaults took place but not why, whether on the level of individual psychology or on the plane of Boston and American society.

Were the sacrifices and gains accomplished by those who built the civil rights revolution wasted on Freddie Twymon? Is this story, by any assessment the grimmest individual behavior recounted in *Common Ground*, indicative of something, or is it finally meaningless in its blanketing import of despair? To what extent does the story sound an echo for the ROAR speaker who equated the black community with rape and robbery?

It was Martin Luther King, Jr., who revived Gandhi's dictum that poverty itself is the greatest violence that human beings wreak upon one another, but Lukas does not tell his readers what was done to Freddie Twymon that he would act so. Nor does he probe what was done to Lisa McGoff that she would lead others to terrorize black students. She remembers feeling sickened by being a part of the protest march in which her schoolmate bludgeoned black attorney Theodore Landmark with the staff of an American flag while he was crossing City Hall Plaza on an innocent mission. By her own account, she was sickened not so much by the violent hatred expressed as by the realization that its criminality would be used to discredit her protest.

Lukas's theory of community versus equality defines community in narrow terms characteristic of closed, ultratraditional neighborhoods organized around ethnic and class homogeneity. Surely the ideal of community refers to something grander than tribal attachments to a place. In any event, it was not the quest for equal educational opportunity that led to the disintegration of closed neighborhoods in Boston and other big cities. That breakdown of barriers began during the dislocations of the Great Depression and the explosion of social and economic change during World War II. Lukas gives us many

*"These stereotypes have functioned to rationalize discrimination and segregation, the methods by which blacks are oppressed, confined, and isolated."*

details about Charlestown and the South End in support of this history of deep and irreversible change, and he shows us how the McGoffs were stranded in a backwater housing project left over from the 1930s; but he does not make the mental connections essential to comprehending how racism, white and black together, is forged in the crucible of a profit-centered, privatistic urban culture.

The question is not one of rightness or wrongness, however, nor of sympathies, but of why events went the way they did in Boston. One cannot answer this by recording what a few respondents say they did and how they felt about it. Not even the events themselves can be described validly by this method.

A part of the answer to the question comes from the effects of racism. Central to racist thought has been the view that the stereotyped qualities attributed to black Americans by some white Americans are biologically innate. These stereotypes have functioned to rationalize discrimination and segregation, the methods by which blacks are oppressed, confined, and isolated. Decades of racist rhetoric prefigure and drench the issue of school desegregation in Boston. Pieces of that rhetoric are picked up by Lukas in his chronicle of Charlestown and in his report on Codman Square in Dorchester. Generally, however, the substance, pervasiveness, and uses of racist ideas and actions go unexamined in *Common Ground*. Those who can afford to buy the book may include some readers who keep their stereotypes under firm control as part of a custom of civility, but *Common Ground* is not likely to increase their awareness of the damage this ideological virus can do, whether leashed or unleashed. Colin Diver experiences such an awareness when he feels the agonizing pressures of defending his property and family from intruders. The pain of recognizing his own racism is part of what motivates him to relocate to Newton from the South End. This is one of the few contexts in which a major aspect of the thoughtways of many Bostonians is presented, however.

Another explanation of events in Boston surely lies in the political culture of the city. It was organized for nearly a century around wards that preserved and patronized the closed, vertically structured, white ethnic enclaves so brilliantly described in *Street Corner Society* more than 40 years ago. Six of these wards were Irish and two were Italian. Ordinary citizens at the base of each enclave had ward bosses and other minor politicians who mediated their claims with the big bosses downtown. Public offices, including school principalships and custodial jobs, were bought and sold in a white marketplace where money, votes, and loyalties were the currency of exchange. Black, Hispanic, and Asian households had no place in the political culture, which lay like a seamless blanket across all services that involved public finance, real estate and facilities, and taxation.

From 1950 to 1970, hundreds of thousands of households relocated from Boston to the suburbs and out of the



region as well. The aging white population that was left in the central city grew puzzled, angry toward the relocators and about themselves, and increasingly antagonistic toward politicians who concentrated less on the neighborhood wards and ever more intensely on the profits to be taken from downtown renewal, gentrification projects, and, in the 1960s, federal investments in urban assistance.

Politicians who, like Louise Day Hicks, Albert O'Neil, Fred Langone, and John Kerrigan, continued to bank on the white ethnic enclaves found themselves cut off from the newer, more profitable politics of renewal and finance under Mayors Collins and White. New school construction was a part of the new politics, beginning in 1954. Crumbling and fire-unsafe facilities were left in operation as part of avoidance of conflict with the enclave dwellers, while new buildings were placed in ways that reinforced redevelopment. Some enclaves, such as East Boston and South Boston, were left out of the redevelopment process, except where Massport cut into real estate in order to expand the airport and harbor areas.

Black Bostonians were immaterial, at least until 1965, to the grinding impasse facing white families who could not make it out of the crumbling public housing projects left over from 1937 and the endless miles of wooden, arson-prone walkups nearby. Until their numbers grew, blacks were a small, divided minority stuffed away toward near invisibility when viewed from South Boston. The march on Selma could be watched on television, but it was far away. When black parents organized and dared to press claims for the education of their children, however, the challenge to white ethnic families became apparent. What was happening nationwide in the Kennedy and Johnson years came to Boston. For some white families, affirmative action and the other trappings of equal treatment seemed to be part of the same plot that caused suburbanization, urban demolition, job insecurity, and the shredding of such old enclaves as the West End and Charlestown. That the demolition cut an even broader swath through black Roxbury provided no comfort.

Unlike Buffalo, a sister city whose economy had been more severely decimated by the Great Depression, Boston hosted no sizeable, radically deprived white ethnic sub-community like the Polish Americans. The Boston Irish, poor and struggling as they were in the aftermath of World War II, could take pride in the success of their rise to political hegemony. When a federal court ordered school desegregation in Buffalo, the occasion offered renewed and enlarged opportunities for Polish-American children as readily as it did for black Americans, and after some years of tension, both groups worked collaboratively toward that end. Boston, meanwhile, had already undergone commercial transformation. It was not a rusting manufacturing and steelworking city like Buffalo, and by 1970 it had become a contender for at least a basement slot in the world-class city competition as a financial, medical, scientific, and higher educational center. Its political structure had turned toward federal concerns with the Kennedys, and its mayors and their aides had gone to Harvard or M.I.T. What some of the Boston Irish saw in the racial issue of public schooling was but one more occasion for a downward slide in their hegemony.

If we can begin to answer why events happened the way they did, we may also speculate on whether the violence of 1974 and 1975 could have been prevented. This essay has argued that the claim that better litigation, better re-

*“Given the initial impetus of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we can speculate that distributive justice, coupled with effective housing, transportation, and education programs, would have made school desegregation in Boston a concomitant of urban reconstruction rather than the result of a court dispute.”*

medial plans, and better efforts by city and state authorities could have stemmed the tide of strife is specious. Nor would a different Cardinal and a different editor of the *Boston Globe* have made a difference, either.

Kevin White in 1974 was probably as competent a mayor as a mayor of Boston could possibly be. He could have committed to the cause of racial peace the full weight of his machine, but only in the certain knowledge that all would be lost for him and for the middle managers of his organization. Some American cities have had political leaders who have made such a commitment, but they can be counted on the fingers of two hands. His successor's investment in the politics of antidesegregation would have been greater than his ever became, substantial as that was by 1976. The alienation between the white enclaves and City Hall was in itself too extreme by 1970 to have made such a choice an effective one, however courageous.

The violence might have been prevented had the federal government developed and carried out a national urban policy. Such a policy was beginning to be framed as early as 1960, parts of it by leaders from Boston, but it was drained away by the Vietnam War and the privatistic politics of the Nixon years. Given the initial impetus of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, we can speculate that distributive justice, coupled with effective housing, transportation, and education programs, would have made school desegregation in Boston a concomitant of urban reconstruction rather than the result of a court dispute. Many big cities of the North, including Boston, were within reach of redressing racial wrongs in public education as part of new school construction and other programs of the times. By the time of the inner-city riots and burnings that followed the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., that opportunity had decayed.

When we reflect upon opportunities missed, it becomes obvious that no contemporary central city in the United States can be interpreted through the ancient visions of the Greek city-state, the self-sufficient fortress cities of medieval Europe, or the shining city on a hill of the Puritans. Boston today is a small dot in the great nexus of an international commercial and environmental ecosystem, as it has been since at least 1945. As the world and the nation go now, so goes Boston, a dwindling dot in an expanding metro area. The ignorance, fear, and anger of those who tried to lock the gates of Charlestown, Dorchester, or West Roxbury are the mental and emotional debris from which an urban legend of innocence is spawned. J. Anthony Lukas fails to find the facts that exist in the midst of that debris and that put the rule of



equal treatment above the custom of special advantage within the closed neighborhood, no matter how hardened the crust of local custom has become. Alice McGoff, Lisa McGoff, and Freddie Twymon, together or apart, cannot be exculpated. They are what the later decades of the American twentieth century made them become. With the Boston Public Schools, as with Watergate, justice finally prevailed, but not before the worst in many people

crawled out from under the rock of convention.

## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup>*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka et al.*, 349 U.S. 294, 1954.
- <sup>2</sup>Graglia, L.A. (1976). *Disaster by Decree: The Supreme Court Decisions on Race and the Schools*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- <sup>3</sup>Sheehan, J.B. (1984). *The Boston School Integration Dispute: Social Change and Legal Maneuvers*. New York: Columbia University Press.

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# Newspapers and Their Relationship to The Black Agenda

by  
Dexter D. Eure, Sr.



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Presentation made to the 1986 National Urban League Conference, San Francisco, California, July 22, 1986. Dexter D. Eure, Sr., is Director of Community Relations for the *Boston Globe* newspaper

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Once again we assemble here in San Francisco to evaluate what can be done to improve fair treatment and access for minorities in the establishment media.

At this very same San Francisco Moscone Convention Center two years ago, the Rev. Jesse Jackson addressed the Democratic National Convention — and this singular event proves that America has changed and will continue to change.

Jackson's impact during that presidential campaign and at the convention was truly a psychological boost for blacks and "have-not" Americans and, as he would say, for the "boats stuck on the bottom."

His presence in that campaign means that black America will never again be locked out of debate on issues involving world affairs, defense, the national budget, federal judiciary nominations, and our many and varied domestic concerns.

All of these as well as many other issues, of course, are often promulgated on the front pages of our newspapers and on television and radio news programs. The news media, as we all know, can often very much influence the very events it calls news. As a person who worked for the CIA once said, "Information is Power." In that vein, then, the news media — which gathers an awesome amount of information — is awesome in its power.

The news media, by print or electronics, influences and shapes society's attitudes; it is essential then, if not vital, that the media accurately reflect every aspect of our society — including the good, the bad, and the ugly. By keep-

ing this nation — as well as the world — in its proper context, we can better understand — and thus better solve — the problems that envelop us, such as racism, sexism, unemployment, hazardous waste, and the consequences of a nuclear meltdown.

To help present an accurate picture of who we are and what's happening around us, the news media need input from every diverse segment of society — and not merely from that limited view of society held by many of our unenlightened publishers, editors, news supervisors, and reporters.

Attempts to integrate the newsrooms have met with only qualified success. As the 1968 Kerner Report told us, a major contributor to the discontent and resentment of black Americans was the negative manner in which they were depicted in the nation's newspapers and on national television. And often, these one-sided impressions were created by white editors and reporters who innocently or deliberately reflected these views in their particular newspaper, on television, or on radio.

Some argue that if more blacks and other minorities were not only hired, but promoted to important decision-making roles, these prejudices and negative reflections would disappear from the media altogether. Let's talk about that.

For the sake of this paper, let's say, for instance, that Katherine Graham of *The Washington Post*, Arthur Ochs Sulzberger of *The New York Times*, Warren H. Phillips of *The Wall Street Journal*, Allen H. Neuharth of *U.S.A. Today*, William O. Taylor of *The Boston Globe*, David E. Easterly of *The Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, Charles T. Brumback of *The Chicago Tribune*, James M. Moroney, Jr., of *The Dallas Morning News*, and Tom Johnson of *The Los Angeles Times* decided to promote blacks to top editor posts.