

School Integration

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THIS PIECE IS NOT INTENDED TO BE A WELL-RESEARCHED DOCUMENTARY. IT IS, RATHER, IN THE REALM OF A CONFESSIONAL--A STATEMENT OF PERSONAL FEELINGS, IMPRESSIONS, AND THOUGHTS REGARDING THE HISTORY OF SCHOOL INTEGRATION IN THIS COUNTRY FROM THE LATE 50's TO THE PRESENT.

BUSING IN BOSTON

de ja vue for an Immigrant Southerner

The long standing racial tension in the Boston Public Schools, and indeed in the whole city, is a disillusioning, disgusting de ja vue for one who was a high school student in a small town in Arkansas during the Little Rock integration crisis.

In the 60's the Northeast, particularly New York and Boston, presented an alluring, almost magnetic fascination to a young person in the South with intellectual interests. As Willie Morris aptly wrote in his brilliant North Toward Home,

Why did we come? Not because the materials for our work did not exist in those places we knew best. Not merely for fame and money and success, for these also some of us could have had, and perhaps in more civilized ways in places far removed (from the East).... Not even because we wanted to try ourselves in the big time, and out of curiosity to see how good the competition was. We had always come, the most ambitious of us, because we had to, because of the ineluctable pull of the cultural capital when the wanderlust was high and was too compelling to resist.

Thus, at the end of my studies at Baylor University, I came to Boston to study and work. Now, six years later, I find the citadel of liberty, liberalism, Eastern culture, and intellectual excellence embroiled in a racial struggle which, in my perception, is amazingly similar to the one which the South endured, and rose above, 15 years ago. The same epithets, the same inexcusable recalcitrance, the same demagoguery, the same process of code-wording--"states rights" then, "community control" now, "the blacks don't really want it either", then and now--the same dearth of moral and political leadership, pervade Boston as pervaded the South in the 1950's.

The conservative politicians in Boston have used racist rhetoric, encouraged defiance of the law, and instigated public agitation. The liberal politicians--by walking the fence, maintaining low profiles, minimizing risks to their political careers, and generally refusing to exert firm moral leadership--have by their

hypocrisy proven to be even more disgusting. And the demagogic politicians, Kerrigan and company, with their utter defiance of all that is just, legal, egalitarian, and rational, are the most disgusting of all.

The Boston School Committee has stalled, ranted and raved, and used every avoidance tactic at their command. Result--dearth of leadership. (Hopefully, the recent advent of more moderate leadership in this group will make a difference here.)

The Boston City Council has defied the law, instigated violence, and threatened the public safety in the name of "the people" (meaning, of course, the people who happen to agree with them) and vilified the one man who has exerted leadership--Judge Garrity. Result--dearth of leadership.

The Mayor of Boston, the great White liberal hope, can be best described as the "artful dodger" of the whole situation, more skillfully avoiding taking a position than Richard Nixon was in denying the truth. Result--dearth of leadership. (Again, some of White's more recent actions hopefully indicate that the Mayor is beginning to take a more positive forceful role, a role he should have taken from the outset.)

Angry parents have organized IOAR, the White Citizens' Council of the 70's, have militantly defied the law, and have thus instigated in the city an explosive atmosphere which endangers the very children they purport to be protecting.

To make matters worse, the National leadership has offered no support whatsoever to those few leaders who are trying to enforce the law. In fact, first Nixon and now Ford have both stated repeatedly that they do not believe the law is right and have given only fleeting lip-service to its enforcement. By their statements, non-action, and negative action, they have planted themselves firmly behind a de facto segregationist policy and have attempted to reverse a long-standing national policy of racial equality.

All of the negative forces described above, bigotry, alive and well in Boston and the country at large, have contributed to the proliferation of a set of fallacious arguments against school integration that are in many points exactly the same and in all points, very similar to the arguments that pervaded the South in the 50's:

1. "We are against busing but not integration. Other methods must be explored"--(which will, of course, take much, much longer.) In my estimation, individuals who believe this premise fall into two categories:

- (1) Those who really believe it, and
- (2) Those are against busing because they really oppose integration itself.

In intent, the difference is significant, but in effect, it is not. At this juncture in American history, opposition to busing is opposition to integration. Different, more creative methods of implementation certainly must be explored-- but such exploration must be done in addition to busing, not instead of it. Busing is the only way integration can happen now, and the time it should have happened was many yesterdays ago.

2. "Busing is inherently bad and will, per se, do harm to the school children subjected to it"--Nothing could be further from the truth. In many rural areas of the country, the school bus is the only way that the majority of students have to get to school. I grew up on a farm, rode a bus to school every day for eleven years, and have noticed no intrinsic, mystical harm to my personality as a result. In fact, the daily bus rides afforded many of the major socialization experiences of my public school life.

Busing is only a method that will, hopefully, not always be necessary on a large scale. It does no intrinsic harm. The most unfortunate aspect of busing, in my opinion, is its massive costs, representing money that could also be well spent in other aspects of the educational endeavor. However, until a more effective tool is found, how else are we, in a small way, to redress 200 years of social inequality? Can a dollar figure be placed on those long years of

repression? It appears to me that the only alternative to busing is a complete reordering of the political power structure, housing patterns, neighborhood configurations, school district arrangements, and general opportunity patterns in this country. In spite of the problems it presents, particularly cost, busing is obviously easier to implement than the other changes mentioned above. If the howl and cry against busing and for segregation is loud and long, imagine what it would be if these other "peculiar institutions" of our country were changed in a rapid, forceful way! Hopefully, busing in a massive way is a tool to help, in the long run, bring about equality in the other areas mentioned above.

3. "Busing and school integration are being forced on us by outsiders who don't really understand our community."--Like it or not, there are many laws which are national in scope, and this is one of them. When basic human rights are at issue, the national government is obligated by the Constitution to defend them. Many issues are within the province of local and state governments, and variation from area to area is not only allowed but also in many respects desirable. However, when a local or state government is violating and/or refusing to defend a basic right which forms the foundation of our republic, as stated in the Constitution, the national government has not only the prerogative, but also the obligation, to intervene.

4. "This whole process of school integration is happening too fast. It is being rammed down our throats by impatient, idealistic social planners. If we were let alone and allowed to move at our own rate (our being defined as the white majority and rate being defined as very, very, very slowly), we would eventually solve the problem. It is unrealistic to expect social change of this magnitude to happen so quickly."--The above paragraph constitutes one of the most widely accepted and utterly ridiculous arguments against busing and school integration. Blacks in this country have been waiting for equal rights since that sad day in 1776 when Thomas Jefferson's anti-slavery clause was struck from the original draft of the Declaration of Independence to appease the slave colonies. Is not 200 years

long enough? I say too long, far, far too long! In the context of more recent history, the Brown vs. Board of Education decision was made over 20 years ago. The opponents of integration act as if it were yesterday. If one grade had been integrated each year since then, the whole process could have been completed twice over! In short, it is utter hypocrisy to while about integration happening too fast when the issue is put in historical context. Twenty years later and very little change certainly do not constitute "all deliberate speed." The fact of the matter is that opponents of integration will not move at all until they are forced to do so.

5. "Our children are the ones who suffer. They have to go to schools inferior to the one in our neighborhood and be transported through racially tense neighborhoods where harm might come to them."--This argument is perhaps the most serious one presented against integration. All of us can certainly identify with parents' fears for the well being of their children. However, I believe that the most telling response to this argument is a verse in the Bible, "The sins of the mothers and the fathers will be visited on the children." This ancient saying reaches across the years of Western History and becomes, in my judgment, a basic sociological process in massive social change of this type. The fact is that, yes, some white children may have to attend schools that are inferior to the ones in their neighborhood. But why are these schools inferior? Because of years of segregation and oppression. Now that this situation is being rectified, "The sins of the mothers and fathers are being visited on the children." The fact also is that, once white children do start attending other schools, their parents will take an interest in the quality of the schools and see that they are improved.

It is also true that some children will be bused through or into racially tense neighborhoods. But why are these neighborhoods racially tense? Because of years of segregation and oppression, institutionalized and fostered by this and previous generations of parents. And the tension is exacerbated by this generation of parents' recalcitrance, resistance, and defiance. Again, "the sins of the mothers and the fathers are visited on the children." Unfortunate as it is, this statement is true and the innocent will, in the short run at least, suffer to some extent. But this

suffering is far outweighed by the long-term benefits that the children will gain from attending integrated schools and by the benefits that our whole society will accrue by redressing 200 years of social injustice.

If the above are the arguments against integration, what are the arguments for it? Why should we stand behind a national policy of school integration in this country?

--Because it is right. As one who grew up in the South and saw institutionalized racial inequality in its most blatant form, and as one who now lives in the East and sees more subtle but perhaps more dangerous institutionalized racial inequality (honest bigotry in the South and dishonest bigotry in the East), I believe and feel intensely that the primary reason that we should integrate the schools, and indeed our whole society, is that it is the right thing to do. In a complex, ambiguous world there is still a place for acting on basic moral values--issues of human rights and racial equality constitute such an area of concern. Every humanitarian moral value that has developed in Western Civilization, and every value upon which our national government is based, argues for increased equality and integration.

---Because of inherent educational opportunities integration offers students. Educational opportunities regarding values, attitudes, and exposure to varied cultural and ethnic backgrounds are geometrically increased in an integrated setting. And I do believe that the basic cultural identity and contributions of various groups can be maintained in an integrated society.

--Because separate but equal has proved, in case after case, to in reality be separate and unequal. As long as groups that are discriminated against in a variety of ways are segregated educationally, educational institutions and opportunities for these persons are bound to be inferior. For example, if a group is not given its equitable share of political power, from whence are they to get the political clout to insure quality education for their children? Again, if a group is discriminated against economically, from whence are they to get the money to ensure quality education?

The reality is that when white middle class children start attending minority schools, these schools ultimately will become a part of their parents sphere of self interest. Those parents will then join forces with the minority parents to ensure that the schools are of high quality.

--Because of the years of segregation, repression, and inequality to which black school children of this country have been subjected. The costs of years of institutionalized bigotry to our society, and to those individuals discriminated against--costs in injured personalities and underdeveloped minds--has been staggering. This situation must be rectified or history will correctly label the United States of America, a country whose government is supposedly founded upon basic human rights, as the most hypocritical of all nations!

--Because the national law should be enforced equally and fairly in all parts of the country. It is interesting that the law was enforced firmly in the South but not in other areas of the nation. Northern, Eastern, and Western politicians waxed eloquent in moral outrage against discrimination in another area of the country, but when the problems become evident in their own areas, they suddenly start singing a different tune and using arguments very similar to the ones Southern politicians used against integration in the 1950's. A few courageous persons, e.g., Abraham Ribicoff of Connecticut, have pointed out this hypocrisy and have continued to argue for a pro integrationist national policy. We need more leaders of this caliber, leaders who will insist that the law should be clearly stated and equally, fairly, and firmly enforced--at home as well as in another region, in our schools as well as in the schools of the South.

--Because in America, rights afforded to one should be rights afforded to all, and when rights are taken from one, the freedom of each of us is jeopardized.

What elements will have to be present before integration will work in Boston? I believe that the answer to this question can be found by once again turning to recent history and examining the elements that were present in the South and the country at large that made integration work there to the extent it has:

1. BASIC RESPECT FOR THE LAW--In spite of all their resistance, Southerners have a basic respect for "the law of the land." People, even many of the staunchest of segregationists, finally came to say, "We do not like this, we do not agree with it. We feel imposed upon. But it is clearly the law of the land and we must together do what we can to make it work." There are, thankfully, some indications that this attitude is beginning to manifest itself in Boston.

2. A CLEAR NATIONAL POLICY--Integration was for a time a clearly stated, firmly enforced national policy. In contrast to the hypocrisy we now experience, each branch of the national government of the 60's--executive and legislative, as well as judicial--executed its share of the responsibility in clearly stating and firmly supporting its own laws.

3. MODERATE LEADERSHIP--Black and white moderate leadership in Southern communities soon grew tired of the extremists' ranting and raving. They gradually took control of the political and educational power structures in the South, with a philosophy of "let's sit down together and do what we can to make integration work."

4. THE STUDENTS WERE ALLOWED TO WORK OUT PROBLEMS IN THE SCHOOLS THEMSELVES--At the same time that parents were working on political problems, they began to realize that day to day relationship problems in the schools were best handled by the students themselves. Thus, at the same time that parents became more involved in certain aspects of the educational endeavor, they removed themselves from other aspects. Parents began to realize that their children, not as yet totally indoctrinated by prevailing values, were not as prejudiced as they were and were thus more equipped, attitudinally and emotionally, to handle personal relationships within the schools.

5. FORCE WHEN NECESSARY--The use of force, e.g., National Guard, was as unfortunate and unpopular as it was courageous and necessary. The fact of the matter was that integration would probably not have happened as quickly in the South had not the Federal Government used full moral and physical force to support it.

6. MORAL OUTRAGE OF THE REST OF THE COUNTRY--As noted above, the rest of the nation was morally outraged at the injustice they saw in the South. As yet, however, no such moral force has been brought to bear upon the Boston community. In fact, national leaders and local leaders around the country are beginning to vascillate and back away from a pro-integrationist policy. Interestingly enough, the major spokespersons in the white community today for integration are moderate-liberal Southerners who have experienced the change as it occurred, struggled with the issues emotionally, morally, and intellectually, supported integration at home, and seen their communities reap the benefits.

I submit that, until a significant number of the above elements are present in Boston and the country at large, until enough time elapses to give the change time to occur, and until people realize that the way to deal with accompanying problems is to do away with these problems rather than do away with integration itself, integration will not work in Boston or anywhere else where there is major resistance on the part of the white majority.

For the past eight years, our country has vascillated and backtracked on the general issue of civil rights and the specific issue of school integration. We need again a strong, clear, pro integrationist policy in this country, supported by all branches of the Federal Government. If we, the citizens, allow our nation to back away from the courageous commitments made in the 14th amendment, in Brown vs. the Board of Education, in civil rights legislation passed in the 60's, and in the stated national policy of that period, it will be the saddest day for human rights since Jefferson's original anti-slavery phrase was deleted. If we are to be true to ourselves, our neighbors, our heritage, and our values, we must not, we cannot, vascillate from this commitment. A resurgence of national energy in support of an integrated, egalitarian society is long overdue!