

# The Irish of South Boston

John H. Morgan

*We have Biff Mahoneys  
And Buff Maloneys  
And clowns who know how to clown  
So if you want to stay healthy  
Stay the hell out of Southie  
Cause Southie is my home town.*

—South Boston neighborhood anthem

The people have a long history of being hostile to outsiders," wrote Louis Jaffe, Harvard law professor, about the inhabitants of Boston's South End. As a consultant to the Massachusetts Department of Education Jaffe urged that the impending federal court desegregation ruling exempt "Southie" from any busing plan. Jaffe's warnings went unheeded, and the buses rolled between the overwhelming black Roxbury ghetto and the neighboring, predominantly Irish South End, sparking an onslaught of racial violence one journalist described as "unparalleled in modern Boston history, a day of hatred against outsiders not witnessed here in decades."

On the first day of busing, 515 of the 525 whites from South Boston assigned to Roxbury High refused to go. When the buses carrying 56 out of an expected 500 black students arrived with police escort in South Boston, the vehicles' windows were smashed with bricks and bottles, and the awaiting crowd chanted "Die, Nigger, Die!" By the end of the first week of busing, 49 Bostonians had been arrested (almost all from South Boston and Roxbury) and dozens injured. Boston Mayor Kevin White wrote to Federal Judge W. Arthur Garrity, who handed down the busing order, "Violence which once focused on the schools and

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buses is now engulfing the entire community in racial confrontation....What we have in this city is hysteria, and hysteria breeds violence."

Why of all places was Boston, the famous abolitionist "cradle of liberty," hit with the racial violence most outsiders believed to be a peculiarly Southern and, for that matter, outdated phenomenon? Many of the reasons stem from ignorance about the "other" Boston unassociated with Cambridge and the liberal suburbs: the lower-middle, working-class ethnic neighborhoods, such as South Boston. I wish here to explore from the Irish point of view the sense of political powerlessness of South Boston, the ethnoconsciousness of the Irish who inhabit it, and the institutional forces such as the Boston School Committee, the Church, Roxbury, and local politicians that have affected it.

Boston, one observer noted, is a "city of neighborhoods," a patchwork quilt of ethnic areas, which, though faded with the years, still manages to hold together. South Boston is heavily Irish, East Boston is still predominantly Italian, and Roxbury is the black sector.

Many believe that the city also has serious racial barriers to blacks that go beyond neighborhood boundaries. Blacks number 17 per cent of the population, but make up only 1 or 2 per cent of the city's fire and police force. "Boston is a racist city and always has been," observes Boston College law professor Leonard Strickman, and local NAACP head Thomas Atkins agrees, calling Boston "one of the most racist cities in the country." Nevertheless, the State of Massachusetts is known for its general liberalism—it was the only state that George McGovern carried in 1972—and for its tough civil rights laws, such as the

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first open housing statute in the country. In 1965 the state legislature even passed a much heralded Elimination of Racial Imbalance Law, which required that no public school contain more than 50 per cent minority students.

But for the City of Boston the law might just as well have never existed, because that is how local educational officials handled it—they pretended it was not there. Former Federal Housing official Dan Richardson remarked: "We pass great laws here, but when it comes to Boston there is never any enforcement. This must be one of the most segregated cities anywhere in housing and in schools, North or South." The figures tend to document this claim. According to State Board of Education estimates, the number of racially imbalanced schools in Boston increased from forty-six in 1965 (the year the Racial Imbalance Act was passed) to sixty-five in 1971.

The Boston School Board, which ignored the Racial Imbalance Act for nine years, has traditionally been, like South Boston, dominated by the Irish and dedicated to racial segregation. When new schools were built in Boston, they were invariably constructed, wrote one commentator, "within, rather than on, the frontiers of racially discrete areas, thus ensuring that the composition of those schools would remain unracial." In 1973 the National Educational Association cited Boston as holding the record for hiring the smallest percentage of minority teachers of any city in the country. When black schools got too crowded, trailers were hauled in to be used as temporary classrooms rather than sending black pupils across color lines. Michael True, a professor at Assumption College in Massachusetts, states that the city school committee, which has never had a black member, has been a major impediment to fundamental change over the years, adding that because of public neglect, "Boston schools have deteriorated faster than those in other cities."

Finally, after years of waiting for enforcement of the Racial Imbalance Law, the local NAACP filed suit two years ago against the school board. Fifteen months later U.S. District Judge W. Arthur Garrity issued his findings: The Boston School Committee "knowingly carried out a systematic program of segregation affecting all the city's students, teachers and school facilities" and "intentionally brought about and maintained a dual school system." By the time Judge Garrity handed down his decision in June, 1974, says Mr. D. Bradnoy, the citizens of Boston had demonstrated their opposition to any attempt at busing: Thirteen out of fourteen voted against busing in a nonbinding referendum, and the state legislature officially killed the Racial Imbalance Act. But Garrity's decision was still the law ("a lousy rotten law," according to Mayor Kevin White), and the State Education Board hastily drew up "Phase I" in pupil assignment. The result was the scheduled bus-

ing of 18,000 schoolchildren in 80 of the city's 200 schools, including Roxbury and South Boston High, and the reassignment of 45,000 more to different schools.

The citizens of Boston reacted angrily to the busing plan, and for the first few weeks of school over 12,000 pupils boycotted classes. To no one's surprise Boston School Superintendent William J. Leary refused to enforce truancy laws, which hold penalties for parents as well as students. "If you are fearful of putting your children's lives in danger by putting them on a bus," he told a group of mothers and students, "be my guest down at the beach." Eventually the violence that greeted the first days of busing subsided in most areas, and the boycott lost much of its appeal. By the fifth week of busing attendance was reported near normal in some schools and citywide attendance averaged 72 per cent. But while many schools attempted to regain a sense of normalcy, strained as it might be, South Boston became more isolated, militant, and determined as ever to "Keep Southie White!" Southie, which had been the headquarters of the citywide protest and boycott, became even more violent and militant as neighborhood allies lost the strength and the will to fight.

To the 38,000 residents of Southie, the isolation from the rest of Boston was nothing new. Surrounded on three sides by ocean and on the fourth by a six-lane expressway, South Boston and the Irish who live there stand proudly outside the mainstream of Boston life, and have for over a century. Historian C. Vann Woodward notes that "Whites in South Boston boasted in 1847 that not a single colored family lived among them." In their book *The Zone of Emergence* Robert A. Woods and Albert J. Kennedy wrote that in the early 1900's "The physical advantages of South Boston and the compact social and religious organization of a large part of its population...combined to hold its people as their resources...developed within its boundaries."

One of the main reasons for what one visitor describes as the "tightness" of the Irish population in Southie is simply the fact that they are Irish. In his study of Boston in the late nineteenth century Oscar Handlin noted that the Irish were the only group with a full institutional life, the only group that "felt obliged to erect a society within a society." Woods and Kennedy once wrote of the Irish in South Boston:

It is perhaps the most conspicuous fact to be observed of the generation now in maturity that it has been brought up in large numbers to the modern American standard of comfort through the cooperative opportunity afforded by a close family bond. There has been a comparatively small amount of distinguished achievement on the part of individuals. The strength and protection of a united home have made mediocre capacity count to its full ex-

tent. The wages of a somewhat barren field of opportunity have served as a pressure upon the natural family affections to hold the group together.

But while a certain strength from within derived distinctively from family and culture, it was primarily prejudice from without that kept the Irish banded together and impeded the upward mobility of many. Compared to other immigrant groups, writes Stephan Thernstrom in his recent book *The Other Bostonians*, "The Irish of Boston were highly distinctive in their inability to find jobs that offered security, prestige and financial reward." In 1890, 65 per cent of working Irish male immigrants were employed in low manual jobs—a figure double that of most other immigrant groups. The Irish also had the distinction of having the highest death rate in the city, according to R.S. Anson.

The Boston newspapers (with the exception of the *Globe*) traditionally carried help wanted ads with the initials N.I.N.A. (No Irish Need Apply) following the ad. Many upper-class Bostonians agreed with anti-Catholic Edward A. Freeman when he stated that the best way to cure the city's social ills was to hope that every Irishman would kill a Negro and be hanged for it. Despite significant gains in status, wealth, and power (especially in highly organized local politics), Thernstrom writes that "in 1950 as in 1880, the Irish were bottom dog" among the foreign immigrants. Undoubtedly, many Irish rose from the lower working-class ghettos and advanced economically and socially, but many, like the inhabitants of Southie, were, and are, content in their isolation and traditionalism. "Nothing is revered in Southie as much as the past," declares an Irish priest who has worked in the area. Even today, Southie residents who moved to their neighborhoods a decade or more ago are still referred to by their neighbors as newcomers.

Many observers point to the isolation of Southie, physically and culturally, as the main reason for their apparent racism. While this is certainly an important factor, it is by no means the only one. Job displacement, fear of crime, a sense of betrayal by local officials, a feeling of political powerlessness, and pride in ethnic identity are all important components that must also be considered. Between 1930 and 1960, reports Thernstrom, the black population in Boston tripled, and increased another two-thirds in the sixties. Many of the blacks settled in the Roxbury district, and for neighboring South Boston this meant a substantial increase in job competition, especially in manual labor. In addition, South Boston was heavily hit in the 1950's as the heart of the Boston shipping industry declined with the growth of trucking and development of highways. The South Boston harbor area became economically depressed and jobs became even scarcer.

Fear of crime in Roxbury is also of major concern to

Southie residents, and their fears are substantiated by statistics. The police district covering Roxbury and a section of nearby Dorchester has, on a per capita basis, four times the number of rapes, three times the aggravated assaults, and nine times the robberies Southie has. Anson has noted that despite the tough racist militancy of the residents toward the Roxbury blacks, the element of fear is probably the most important aspect of their racism. "Many Southies," contends Anson, "regard blacks not so much as people but as a plague, a disease that rots whatever neighborhood it touches." Louise Day Hicks, a well-known former congresswoman, defeated mayoral candidate, and leader of the Southie antibusing forces, was responsible for helping circulate the statement that "100 black murderers of white people were walking the streets unapprehended." The figures could not be documented, but the damage had been done, and the rumor still circulates.

Thus far the role of local politicians and church figures has been a further cause of frustration and anger to the South Boston citizens. Ted Kennedy, once an extremely popular figure in Southie, was booed down, pelted with garbage, and physically assaulted by antibusing demonstrators when he attempted to speak in favor of desegregation at a rally in the city. "You're a disgrace to the Irish!" chanted the crowd. "Why don't you let them shoot you like they shot your two brothers!" someone screamed at him. Finally he was hustled off to safety, where he told the reporters present: "Anyone in public office has to expect this." But he was stunned and frightened by the hatred of the mob.

Democratic Mayor Kevin White is now referred to in Southie as "Mayor Black," and his political bickering during the busing crisis with Republican Governor Francis Sargent, along with his refusal to take a definitive stand on busing, has left him with little support from either camp. Even the Roman Catholic Church came under fire from the Irish when Boston's Cardinal Humberto Madeiros testified on behalf of achieving racial balance and then closed off new enrollment to parochial schools in order to keep out students escaping from the busing order.

Perhaps the most inflammatory remarks of the period came from an unlikely source—the White House. During a press conference President Ford answered a newsman's question concerning the Boston busing turmoil by stating that although he believed citizens should abhor violence and obey the law, "the court decision... was not the best solution to quality education in Boston.... I respectfully disagree with the judge's order." Attack on Ford's statement came quickly from Mayor White, Senator Kennedy, and National Urban League head Vernon E. Jordan, who charged that the President was encouraging "those working to create violence and confrontation." Harvard law professor Frank Michelman charged that Ford's portrayal of the busing case was "insensitive and flawed." But for the residents of Southie, *Newsweek*



Religious News Service

reported, "they were clearly cheered by the President's remarks."

**T**o the inhabitants of Southie the busing order represented a move on the part of outsiders to break up their closely knit Irish neighborhood, and their violent reactions to it were based on a mixture of cultural pride, racism, fear of crime, job infringement, and betrayal by religious and political leaders. They were simultaneously attacked by some and portrayed by others as local heroic fighters. They were caught up in a controversy so violent and emotional it was difficult for them to tell who was really behind them, and to what extent, and who opposed them—and why.

Daniel J. Friedman, in his book *White Militancy in Boston*, asserts that one of the prime causes of militancy directed toward blacks, especially among blue-collar workers, is a pervasive sense of political powerlessness that transcends simple racism. According to Friedman: "Those respondents who are dissatisfied with their political power over busing decisions, those who feel that they are accorded less status than they deserve, and those who believe that the city government acquiesces to militant protest activities are most militant...blue collar respondents are most likely to support militant actions against the black community."

The vast majority of material studied for this article tends to support Friedman's conclusions, but it is much too easy to leave it simply at that. In many ways—the isolated Irish influence, for example—South Boston is a unique environment with decidedly peculiar components not to be found in studies of other areas. If we are to accept the political powerlessness theory, we must not neglect the underlying factors of race, economics, and status, and how they each play an important role in the overall larger scheme of powerlessness. Like pieces of a puzzle, each can be examined individually, but it is equally important to see how they interlock and affect each other.

Perhaps the best way to view the interdependent nature of these factors is to consider the statement made by South Boston resident Jerry Carey, as quoted by R.S. Anson (*New Times*, November 28, 1974):

Our trouble is that we are poor and powerless but not the right kind of poor and powerless. We don't have affirmative action working for us or minority preference in hiring. And the Civil Liberties Union doesn't consider our plight worthy of attention. If blacks want to control their neighborhood and their schools, that's called community control and everyone thinks it's a good thing. If we want to control our neighborhood and our schools, that's called racism, and the Department of Justice flies in a squad of lawyers to see if we are conspiring to deprive people of their civil rights. I mean, what the hell do you call a situation like that?

**T**o write off the integrity and crucial significance of the Irish cultural experience (both their growing militant ethnoconsciousness and their increasing feel of political powerlessness) is irresponsible—whether sanctioned by Church, government, or the courts. Herbert Gans has presented all too painfully the gross damage to human growth and development that the national and city policies for urban development rain down upon ethnic groups when such policies are ill-informed both about the nature of ethnocultural experience and its centrality to a stable community. The Irish experience is not succumbing to E.C. Banfield's reading, which says that with the middle-classification there is a concomitant deethnization. Though his theory seems sound, the fact is that the Irish of South Boston are more loyal to their ethnocultural identity than to the near bankrupt American Dream of middle-classification. Educators, politicians, churchmen, and city planners all must gain this insight before the Southie experiences can reach a creative avenue of expression.