

## CHAPTER ONE



### Introduction

#### **Race as a Central Issue in U.S. Politics**

At the beginning of the twentieth century, African-American sociologist W. E. B. DuBois wrote that “The problem of the twentieth century is the problem of the color-line,—the relation of the darker to the lighter races of men in Asia and Africa, in America and the islands of the sea.”<sup>1</sup>

DuBois’ prediction came true in the U.S. during the second half of the twentieth century. The ascension of the race issue to national prominence came during the 1950s and 1960s when African-Americans won court and legislative battles against segregation in education, public accommodations, and housing. It was the first of these areas, education, that was perhaps the most controversial. In the 1954 *Brown vs. Board of Education of Topeka* decision, the U.S. Supreme Court unanimously ruled that segregation in public education was in violation of the fourteenth amendment of the U.S. Constitution, and thus illegal. This ruling invalidated laws in the southern and border states which required blacks and whites to attend separate schools. For the first 15 years after the *Brown* decision, action against desegregation in public education was largely confined to those states that had mandated separate schools, the southern and border states. In these states it was easiest to prove that there had been intentional segregation of the schools. In the 1970s, however, cases arose challenging non-southern school districts for intentionally segregating their public schools, even in the absence of laws mandating segregation. In many cases where the districts were found liable, busing was ordered as a remedy for past intentional segregation. This generated a great deal of opposition, and injected race

into the political debate in localities where the issue had previously been sublimated.

Of those political issues with a strong racial content, very few have inflamed the public more than school desegregation, particularly when it is attempted in the form of busing. For many individuals, advocacy of busing represents an "extremism" of the civil rights movement. Persons who had no opposition to the desegregation of the armed forces, to the elimination of barriers in the use of public facilities, and who supported some aspects of the *Brown decision* have drawn the line when desegregation mandates the transportation of students from one neighborhood to another. Even many dedicated liberals view "forced busing" as beyond acceptable limits of integration.

The controversy over mandatory busing was so strong that for a time it became a major issue in national elections. Alabama Governor George Wallace made it a central issue in the 1972 and 1976 Democratic primaries, while one-time presidential front-runner Senator Henry M. Jackson (D-Wash) joined the anti-busing bandwagon in 1976. Since the late 1970s and 1980s busing shared the distinction with abortion, a balanced budget, and the American flag as the subjects of proposed amendments to the U.S. Constitution. The fact that there was an impetus to constitutionally ban forced busing attests to its salience as a political issue. This salience is due to the racial component of the controversy over busing. The increasing polarization over racial issues renders unpopular decisions to desegregate public schools, particularly when the methods to desegregate go beyond what many consider the boundaries of acceptability.

Orders mandating busing, as well as those imposing affirmative action remedies, are measures where courts have moved beyond mandating that municipalities merely cease discriminatory practices in the present. Here municipalities are required to address *past* discrimination. When such remedies are imposed, localities without a history of laws mandating segregation, and where racial issues had not previously dominated political discussion, suddenly become the battleground of disputes over political issues closely related to race. This study looks at two localities where court-ordered busing and the mere threat of busing presented tough challenges to the local political leadership, and how the different actions of the local leadership led to very different outcomes when school desegregation was ordered by the federal courts.

When examining court-ordered desegregation of public schools in the United States, the most infamous cases are those of the southern city of Little Rock, Arkansas and the northeastern city of Boston,

Massachusetts. It is the latter case that is a major focus in this study. Boston's experience with school desegregation can be regarded as a "worst-case" scenario. Violence plagued some of Boston's public high schools from the very first day of the implementation of the desegregation order in September 1974. As the school year progressed, the violence reached crisis proportions, necessitating the involvement of state law enforcement officials. The violence took the form of stonings of buses, several stabbings, and racial brawls in a few of the high schools. There was also racial violence outside of the school in some of the neighborhoods affected by the court order. The violence was at such a level that the Boston situation received worldwide press coverage, and the city was developing a national reputation for racial intolerance. Moreover, Boston had to cope with the costs of increased law enforcement and a temporary acceleration of white flight from the city.

While Boston was going through its desegregation crisis, a federal court ordered the desegregation of the public schools of the nearby city of Buffalo, New York. Buffalo is the other focus of this study. Buffalo did not encounter the problems that Boston encountered, and those few scholars who are familiar with this city's case might regard it as a "best case" scenario. The first phase of Buffalo's desegregation program began in 1976. Unlike Boston, in Buffalo there were no reported incidents of violence. In 1977 the second phase saw the introduction of specialized "magnet schools" in the black neighborhoods of Buffalo, which resulted in the voluntary movement of many white students to inner-city schools that were previously predominantly black. A third phase, implemented in 1980 and 1981, involved the forced busing of large numbers of white students into black neighborhoods. Again there were no reported incidents of violence, nor was there an acceleration of white flight from the public schools, as had been the case in Boston.

This study explores the factors that would lead to either success or failure when a controversial measure such as school desegregation is implemented, with a primary focus on the actions of the local leadership. It is a comparative study that looks at two cities, Boston and Buffalo, which share many similarities in matters related to school desegregation.

### **Similarities Between Boston and Buffalo**

Boston and Buffalo are similar on seven key dimensions that are relevant to the issue of school desegregation. These are (1) geographic

location, (2) size of the city, (3) partisanship, (4) religion and ethnicity, (5) black proportion of the total population, (6) segregation of housing patterns, and (7) the development of the school desegregation cases. As for geographic location, both cities are located in the Northeast, in neighboring states, and they are less than 500 miles apart from each other. They are also both mid-sized cities. In the 1970 U.S. Census (the last before the cities began desegregating their schools), Buffalo's population was 458,000, and Boston's was 628,000.<sup>2</sup>

Demographically speaking there are many similarities between the two cities. Both cities were overwhelmingly Democratic in both voter registration and elected representation. The Democratic superiority in the two cities is directly related to their ethnodemographic similarities. Both Buffalo and Boston have large white ethnic populations and Roman Catholic majorities. South Boston shares similarities with South Buffalo.<sup>3</sup> Both are working class Irish communities with their share of very old housing. Buffalo's predominantly Italian West Side community is similar in many ways to Boston's North End and East Boston. Buffalo, however, has a much higher proportion of East Europeans, mainly Poles, but this ethnic community shares many of the same demographic characteristics as the other ethnic groups.

There are similarities in the black populations of the two cities. Prior to World War II the black populations in both cities were relatively small, and they were based in small neighborhoods in close proximity to the central business districts. In Boston the center of the black community was in the centrally located South End, while in Buffalo it was in the Ellicott District of downtown. After the War the black communities in the two cities branched out further. In Boston the black community stretched into Roxbury during the 1940s through the 1950s, then southward into North Dorchester during the late 1960s, then throughout the 1970s it extended further south into Mattapan. In Buffalo it extended north into the Masten District in the late 1940s through the early 1960s, then eastward into the Fillmore District in the late 1960s through the mid-1970s, then north into the University District from the late 1970s on. In both cities, as the black population expanded, it remained rigidly segregated. By the time the school desegregation cases went to court, Boston's black population was 16 percent of the total, and Buffalo's non-white population was 21 percent of the total. In the public schools, whites were 54 percent of Boston's students, and 61 percent of Buffalo's students.<sup>4</sup> The increase in the number of blacks over the

decades did little to decrease the racial segregation of the housing patterns. These segregated housing patterns led to segregated schools, particularly in the elementary and intermediate levels.

In both Boston and Buffalo the perception during the 1960s and early 1970s was that the state governments could impose remedies to satisfy the black parents in their struggle against city governments. Both Massachusetts and New York were reputed to be liberal states whose governments were not hostile toward civil rights. These states' governors during the late 1960s and early 1970s were liberal Republican patricians who had expressed some support for civil rights. Moreover, the state legislatures were considered to be liberal.

Despite the liberalism of the state governments, however, they did not grant relief to those who were advocating the desegregation of the urban public school systems. Only token measures were adopted by both states, measures the states later attempted to rescind. In 1965 the Massachusetts state legislature passed the "Racial Imbalance Act," which mandated that the school districts of Boston, Springfield, and Cambridge make attempts to address the issue of racial imbalance. This law exempted the suburban school districts and placed the burden solely on the three large urban districts, those with the largest number of blacks. Nine years later the legislature reversed itself and struck down the Act. This latter move was vetoed by Governor Frank Sargent, who favored his own plan of circumventing the Act.

Simultaneously the Buffalo school system was given mild directives by the state government to address the problem of racial imbalance. In 1965 the city was ordered to begin taking steps to desegregate the schools, but desegregation moved at such a slow pace that in 1972 the New York State Commissioner of Education ordered the Buffalo Board of Education to implement a desegregation plan that would include busing. The state legislature responded by passing a bill outlawing busing for the purpose of achieving school desegregation.

In both cities it became apparent that the only recourse available to the black community was the federal courts, whose judges were appointed for life and thus spared from political retribution by hostile white voters. The federal district courts ruled in favor of the plaintiffs in both cities and mandated busing as a means to ensure school desegregation. While these decisions may have been satisfactory to the plaintiffs, the constituents represented by the defendants saw this as a further erosion of their democratic rights. The remedy

mandated by the courts was quite in line with the U.S. Constitution, but it was not perceived as legitimate by opponents because it was not supported by persons who were elected into office.

What made desegregation unpalatable to many was that in both cities busing was mandated as a means to remedy racial imbalance. This is a measure that would break the insularity of the ethnic enclaves. The courts' argument that busing would serve to combat discrimination in the public schools is not an argument that was well received by white ethnics. Many in the working class ethnic communities were indifferent because they did not believe that African-Americans were severely discriminated against or that there was a need for federal remediation. Most of the affected ethnic neighborhoods were poor neighborhoods with many residents who were unlikely to see themselves as being better off than blacks. They too historically suffered from discrimination, and many in these communities were not unfamiliar with poverty. Because of their lack of interaction with blacks, they were totally unaware of the fact that their children's schools, underfacilitated as they were, were in better condition than the schools in the black community.

### **Differences Between Boston and Buffalo**

Despite their many similarities, there are some fundamental differences between Boston and Buffalo, differences that I believe did contribute to dissimilar outcomes when school desegregation was implemented. One difference is the ethnic histories of the two cities. Boston's largest ethnic group is Irish-Americans, and they historically encountered a great deal of ethnic and religious discrimination in their efforts to advance economically and politically in Massachusetts. Buffalo also has a large population of Irish-Americans, and of other white ethnic groups which share the Catholicism of the Irish-Americans. But in Buffalo, neither the Irish, nor the Poles, nor the Italians were subjected to the same level of discrimination as their Catholic counterparts in Boston. As a result, in Boston there was a much higher level of resentment against the elite power structure, and school desegregation was regarded as an assault by this power structure.

Closely related to the inter-ethnic struggles in Massachusetts is the division between Boston and the rest of the state, a division very noticeable in the Massachusetts legislature. Many of the actions taken by "outstate" legislators were designed against Boston, often



out of disdain for the ethnic politicians who dominated the city. This heightened many Bostonians' resentment against directives given by outsiders, including directives to desegregate the schools. In New York State, on the other hand, Buffalo is part of "outstate," or "Upstate" as it is labeled by many New Yorkers. (Buffalonians prefer to call their region of the state "Western New York," not "Upstate".) Buffalo is not often the focus of legislation by hostile anti-urban legislators, hence there is less cause for resentment against desegregation. Those few legislative disputes between Buffalo and the rest of New York State are rarely, if ever, the result of inter-ethnic tensions. The difference between Boston and Buffalo in regard to their relation to the rest of their respective states is a difference that is closely related to the inter-ethnic tensions within Massachusetts.

Though both cities' desegregation cases were remarkably similar, the cases had some key differences that led to dissimilar outcomes. Both cases were filed in federal courts in 1972, but in Boston the decision was rendered in 1974, two years before Buffalo. The two-year difference provided Buffalo with a chronological advantage over Boston, and allowed officials in that city to capitalize on Boston's experiences, while giving them time to develop strategies to avoid some of the problems that Boston encountered in 1974.

Another difference in the two cities' court cases is the structure of the judges' decisions. In Boston the decision was phased in over a two-year period, with forced busing of both white and black students being required from the outset. The first phase of the plan required the desegregation of schools in grades 1 through 12, covering all sections of the city except for Charlestown and East Boston. Those two areas were exempted in the first phase, and kindergarteners were to be exempted indefinitely. With the other areas of the city, white communities were paired with sections of the inner city, and selected students were to be exchanged. Phase II, implemented in 1975, extended desegregation to Charlestown, while East Boston was indefinitely exempted from mandatory student reassignments. Instead there were magnet school programs placed in East Boston to attract students from the inner city.

In Buffalo the decision was phased in over a six-year period, with most of the forced busing of white students being deferred until the sixth year of desegregation. The first phase involved the closing of schools in black and white communities, and the reassignment of students. There were also boundary changes which required the mandatory transfer of a small number of black and white students. Phase II, implemented in 1977, involved the closing down of selected

predominantly black neighborhood schools and reestablishing them as magnet schools with specialized curricula designed to attract students from throughout the city. Meanwhile many of the displaced students in the inner city were reassigned to predominantly white schools. Phase III, implemented in 1980 and 1981, involved the first large-scale forced busing of white students. In selected predominantly white schools, grades pre-kindergarten through two were removed, the schools redesigned as "Academies" housing students from grades three to eight, while the younger children were bused to designated "Early Childhood Centers" in the inner-city. Meanwhile in the inner-city schools designated as Early Childhood Centers, all grades above the second were removed, and the children bused to the paired Academies in the predominantly white neighborhoods. Phase III, the final phase of the Buffalo Plan, was fully implemented in 1981, five years after the initial phase.

The extended length of the implementation in Buffalo is one area in which the two municipalities are fundamentally different in regard to desegregation, a difference that had some impact upon the way the masses reacted to the decisions. This does not, however, in any way negate my assertion that the two are very similar cases. The reason why Buffalo's plan was more gradual than Boston's was because the members of the Buffalo Board of Education agreed to cooperate with the federal court, and were able to convince the judge to allow them to delay the facet of the plan that required massive forced busing of white students. Conversely in Boston the School Committee refused to cooperate with the courts or to develop a plan desegregating the schools. Therefore the federal court developed its own plan, one that was more controversial than a phased-in plan such as Buffalo's. This still supports my general position that the elites were responsible for the differences. The different actions of the elites on the two cities' school boards led to the different desegregation plans.

There is one very obvious political difference between Boston and Buffalo of the 1970s, a difference that is obvious to any observer. In Buffalo there were black elected officials on the municipal level, whereas in Boston there were none on that level. In this book I discuss how the presence of municipal black elected officials played a key role in ensuring a more peaceful transition in Buffalo.

Between Boston and Buffalo there are differences in geographic location, economic structure, size, and neighborhood identification, but I do not see these as being significant enough to prevent one from considering the two cities very similar in regard to factors relating



to school desegregation. The fundamental differences in this regard are those concerning inter-ethnic relations, year of the court decision, and racial characteristics of elected officials. These are differences that form the basis for this study.

### Interviews of Community Leaders

The qualitative data for this study is gathered through interviews of influential persons in the black and white communities of Boston and Buffalo. For respondents I selected local leaders who had some connection with the school desegregation cases in Boston or Buffalo. The cast of informants includes elected officials, appointed government officials, judicial officers, community activists, and representatives of neighborhood organizations. All of these are persons who were familiar with the intricacies of the desegregation decisions in their respective cities. The following table provides a geographic and racial breakdown of the informants:

**Table 1.1**  
**Racial And Demographic Background of Informants**

	<b>Boston Informants</b>	<b>Buffalo Informants</b>	<b>TOTAL</b>
White Informants	18	21	39
Black Informants	12	14	26
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>65</b>

There was a total of 65 informants, 30 of whom were from Boston, and 35 from Buffalo. Of the 30 from Boston, 18 were white and 12 were black, and of the 35 in Buffalo, 21 were white and 14 were black. Fifty-nine of the interviews were conducted in person, while six were conducted over the telephone. The 59 face-to-face interviews were conducted during five trips to each city (and one to New York City) that were made over a seventeen-month period from December 1993 to May 1995. All but two of the interviews were taped, and later transcribed. The transcripts range from four pages (a seventeen-minute interview) to 25 pages (a two-hour interview). The mode was 12 pages (45 minutes on tape).

Of the 65 informants, 37 were past or current elected officials, five of whom held offices in state government, while 32 held office in municipal government. Five of the informants held appointed office, four on the municipal level and one on the federal level. Three were officials in federal courts. The remaining 20 informants were private citizens who were nonetheless highly visible in their respective communities. Three were religious leaders, eleven were civil rights activists and attorneys, four were antibusing activists, and one was a tenant activist. Among the elected officials were individuals who had been unelected community activists during the court cases, and among the 20 informants identified as community leaders were heads of organizations and agencies.

### **Definitions of Unique Terms**

In order to provide clarification for readers, it is important to explain the meanings of several key terms that are occasionally used throughout this thesis. Massachusetts itself is officially designated as a **commonwealth**, not a state. It is one of four “states” that are so designated. The reason why I will persistently use the term commonwealth in this thesis is because the meaning of the term provides insight into the ethnic character of Massachusetts. The Massachusetts Bay Colony was founded by Puritans as a Christian settlement. It had a theocratic government whose purpose was to uphold godly principles. The term commonwealth reflects the moralistic disposition of the founders, who believed that their system of government would be to the benefit of all of the inhabitants. This contrasted with the vision of government held by later immigrants, namely those arriving from Ireland.

Massachusetts also has unique names for government institutions. The legislature of the commonwealth, including the senate and house of representatives, is officially designated as the **Great and General Court**, commonly referred to as the “General Court.” In references to Massachusetts the terms legislature and General Court will be interchangeably used. Another unique term describing Massachusetts governmental institutions is **School Committee**. This is synonymous with the terms “board of education” and “school board,” which are used in localities in other states. Another local peculiarity is the tendency of Bostonians to refer to schools with the use of the definite article. For example, Solomon Lewenberg Middle School is

referred to as “the Lewenberg,” while Jeremiah Burke High School is affectionately called, “the Jerry.”

There are also some terms denoting ethnic groups that must be defined. The terms “**Yankees**” or “**Brahmins**” refer to the white Anglo-Saxon Protestant descendants of the Puritan settlers. In this context these terms are used to distinguish New England W.A.S.P.s from those W.A.S.P.s who settled in other regions of the country. This term also has class implications. Yankees and Brahmins are persons with a high social standing, either due to the prominent roles their families have played in politics, or due to the financial security of their families, or, most often, due to both. New England Brahmin families became established early because they were the individuals who were responsible for the founding of their municipalities. In Boston they proudly labeled their city as “The hub of the universe,” and to this day the term “**the Hub**” is commonly used by Bostonian writers when referring to their city. Though Buffalo is not in New England, New England Yankees settled there and established the city as a municipality. Therefore the term is sometimes used to refer to Anglo-Saxon Protestants in that city.

Some neighborhoods within the Hub are commonly referred to by nicknames rather than their official names. South Boston is often called “Southie,” East Boston is known as “Eastie,” Charlestown is called “The Town,” and some refer to West Roxbury as “Westie.” Throughout this book these nicknames are occasionally used by both the writer and by some of the respondents.