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**Boston, *The Soiling of Old Glory*, and the Role of Race in Conflating Busing with
Desegregation**

April 5, 1976 is not a day that lives in infamy, but it is the day in which an infamous event occurred in Boston, Massachusetts. On this day, outside of Boston's city hall, a white high school-aged teenager named Joseph Rakes swung a flag pole—with an American flag attached—at Ted Landsmark, an African American lawyer with an interest in promoting affirmative action hiring practices in the Boston construction industry (Masur 16, 74). Rakes missed; however, in Stanley Forman's photograph entitled *The Soiling of Old Glory*, a different story is told. In the photo, Rakes appears to be thrusting the flagpole horizontally right at Landsmark's torso, leaving the viewer to imagine or assume that the weaponized flag struck its intended target (see fig. 1). This photograph originally appeared in the *Boston Herald American* and circulated through other newspapers and television news broadcasts across the United States in the ensuing days, permanently capturing an event that was heavy in symbolism, but, for those people familiar with 1974-1976 in Boston, an event that was not unexpected (Masur 69, 77). At first glance, this photograph is shocking. How could someone use the American flag as a weapon? Why does there appear to be racial violence in a northern, progressive city like Boston? Yet all is not what it appears to be in this photo, most evident in the way the actual events of the attack do not precisely align with what appears in the photo. What this photo lacks is context.

Throughout the 1960s, African Americans and other minorities in the North seized on the momentum of civil rights successes in the South, such as integration at Little Rock Central High School in Arkansas in 1957. Parents, especially, noticed subpar educational standards in majority minority public schools and average to above-average standards in predominantly white public schools. During the 1960s, African Americans attempted numerous strategies to try to integrate schools (Theoharis, "I'd Rather" 131). Their struggles reached a climax in 1974, when Judge Arthur Garrity ruled against the Boston School Committee (BSC) and issued a mandatory plan for integrating Boston's public schools that included busing students in a way that facilitated desegregation (Masur 26). White protesters, who wanted to maintain the status quo and who opposed the actions of African American activists through the 1960s and early 1970s, seized on the idea that "forced busing" was antithetical to American democracy, would undermine "taxpayer's rights," and would steal "neighborhood control" of "neighborhood schools" (Theoharis, "It's Not the Bus" 51).

It was within this surface level context of racial tensions shrouded behind euphemisms and at an anti-busing rally outside City Hall where *The Soiling of Old Glory* was snapped. The shock inherent to the photo, though, reveals several truths about the Boston busing crisis. I will argue that the flag, as portrayed in the photograph, is an instance of flag use unequivocally deemed improper by any average American viewer, and as such, associates wrongness with whatever motivations Rakes is interpreted to have had when committing the assault. Forman's selective editing of the photo helped to undermine a significant portion of the busing protesters' messaging and rhetoric and to expose the role of race and racism in the conflict over busing. Yet at the same time, I contend that it reinforced the busing protesters' fixation on busing, as the metonymy of the flag brought a sense of obligation to focus on busing as a quixotic panacea for desegregation, instead of considering alternate methods for desegregation. I seek to examine a

photograph that is often just given a cursory acknowledgment in the larger scholarly conversation about the Boston busing crisis, and I hope to identify how symbolism informed the busing conflict.

The most visible motif in *The Soiling of Old Glory* is Old Glory, or the American flag, thus taking advantage of a flag's immense potential to act as a vehicle for symbolic speech, a fact that courts of law across the world have acknowledged (Gelber 165). Political scientist Katharine Gelber examines how flags create symbolic speech through their usage by means of the self-evident phrase "flag use" to describe any scenario where a flag is being used symbolically, which includes both controversial actions like flag burning or flag desecration and noncontroversial actions like hanging a flag for Flag Day (Gelber 164). Gelber further reasons that whether a particular flag usage is controversial or not is dependent on the general public's range of opinions (Gelber 176). Krzysztof Jaskulowski, a sociologist and cultural historian, deepens Gelber's ideas by noting that national flags sometimes act as a symbol, and sometimes act as a metonym (Jaskulowski 561). To elaborate, he argues that sometimes a flag represents a country and sometimes it is literally imagined to be the notion of the country. So in a case like flag burning, some bystanders will equate burning a flag with burning the country. Combining Gelber's and Jackulowski's perspectives, I contend that in instances of contentious flag use, the flag is more often than not a metonym for a country, while a mundane use of a flag—for instance, waving a flag at the Fourth of July in the U.S.—is symbolic, just a reminder of the country it represents. Thus, the amount of social disturbance an act of flag use creates is directly proportional to the perception of the flag as a metonym for the state.

In *The Soiling of Old Glory*, the flag is used in a controversial way. The flag thus behaves as a metonym for the United States, and this effect of this particular flag use is what creates the shock value. To see what appears to be racially motivated violence generated from an American

flag conjures negative connotations. The civil rights movement in the 1960s and 1970s spreading to the North created racial binaries of blacks fighting whites for their freedom, drawing disquieting comparisons to the Civil War and the fight against slavery. Furthermore, as American cultural historian Louis Masur notes in his book about *The Soiling of Old Glory*, 1976 was America's bicentennial, and national reflection of the founding of the United States revealed dissonance between the nation's founding ideals—life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, among others—and those ideals that motivated the flag attack (Masur 42). It is ironic that a flag whose red symbolizes blood spilled to defend the country, often from willing sacrifice, would be used to attack and to steal life from another (Jaskulowski 562). *The Soiling of Old Glory* shows the betrayal of American values, particularly the desire for freedom; the betrayal of what the flag represents; and the betrayal of the United States itself through the flag metonym.

This unambiguous interpretation of the flag use in *The Soiling of Old Glory* belies the moral ambiguity that existed in larger debate over busing prior to the flag attack. Matthew Delmont, a scholar of American history, comments that television stations did not provide the same moral clarity for the Boston busing crisis as they did for the Little Rock Nine in 1957 (Delmont 220). Delmont explains that the media's focus on daily violence and chaos shifted attention towards the immediate cause, busing, and away from other attempts at desegregation (Delmont 221). Additionally, a fairly even amount of screen time was given to white anti-busing protesters and African American supporters of busing, which gave the impression that both sides had valid points (Delmont 223). The equal footing each side had played to the advantage of white supporters, who sought to reframe the busing debate not in terms of integration, but in terms of American values like liberty. They used euphemisms like “forced busing,” “taxpayer's rights,” and “neighborhood control” of “neighborhood schools” to advocate local autonomy of schools, rather than federal or state control. Especially in Boston in America's bicentennial year,

anti-busers connected these motivations to the motives of the Boston Tea Party; rather than opposing desegregation, they were seeking to preserve their liberty and personal autonomy (Theoharis, “It’s Not the Bus” 51).

This type of language, however, ignores why “neighborhood schools” were homogenous in the first place and ignores the fact that minority parents have just as much right to control which schools receive their taxpayer dollars. The argument of white parents wanting to preserve neighborhood schools glosses over the fact that certain Boston neighborhoods experienced de facto segregation (Delmont 220). The three neighborhoods most involved with the crisis were South Boston and Charlestown—mostly lower class whites with Irish descent—and Roxbury—predominantly lower class blacks (Delmont 221, 223). Thus, until 1976, the busing debate was not about desegregating Boston’s public schools, but instead focused on opposition to “forced busing.”

The editorial decisions of Stanley Forman and the *Boston Herald American* editors emphasized certain aspects of the photograph and enabled the image to influence the busing debate so that race and racism could no longer be ignored. What makes *The Soiling of Old Glory* effective is foremost the aforementioned American flag metonymy, which is enhanced by formal and technical features of the photo. First, the photo was cropped to focus on the subjects of the assault, and as Masur states, the cropping creates a “feeling of confinement and claustrophobia” (Masur 38). The confinement forces the viewer’s eyes to go straight towards the flag—that metonym suggesting betrayal—and makes it the centerpiece of the image. In comparison, the original photo shows the openness of the city hall plaza, and does not have the same sense of urgency and danger (see fig. 2). After looking at the flag in the final, edited photo, the viewer’s eyes move towards the person holding the flag: a young, white male with a serious, hostile expression on his face. This man is staring directly at his target: an older, African American man.

The white man's gaze is clearly evident in the edited photo, and less visible in the unedited photo. Regardless, the glare establishes a racial binary where the white man has power over the black man. The binary is only reinforced as the eye moves rightward from the flag. At the receiving end of the swing, Landmark is in a defenseless position, though the details of why he is defenseless are blurry. Upon closer inspection, the viewer can just discern a third person of interest: what appears to be another white man holding Landmark in place. As it turns out, this man, Jim Kelly, was not holding Landmark in place; he was pulling Landmark away from the flag's path, but that the truth is obfuscated in the photo, only showing another white man oppressing a black man (Masur 53). Finally, other minor details make the picture complete. The lighting emphasizes certain parts of the photo: the white stripes emphasize the flag, the bright white on the building faces in the background help frame and center the attack, and certain brighter clothes draw attention to bystanders who are frozen in moments of shock, mirroring the feelings of the viewer.

All in all, this specific, racist flag use could be not be "disguised as patriotism" as other instances of controversial flag use often are (Gelber 175). The euphemisms about busing were no longer effective when a white Joseph Rakes wielded an American flag against an African American Ted Landmark, with another white man appearing to hold Landmark in place. After the photo was taken, politicians condemned the attack on Landmark, but immediately began debates on the way in which race should be blamed for the attack. Some said the white protesters outside City Hall were solely to blame, others wanted to ignore race and frame the issue as one of basic human decency, and still others invoked whataboutism to question why previous crimes against whites did not draw so much attention (Masur 70-71). Other Bostonians' letters to the editor, editorials, and op-eds appeared in Boston's newspapers, and race clearly emerged as the central topic of dissension (Masur 76). Two weeks later, several black teenagers in Roxbury

nearly beat a white man, Richard Poleet, to death in an attack widely seen as retribution for the attack on Landmark (Masur 78). Yes, race was finally being actively debated instead of ignored, but along with its emergence came ugly, racial violence.

But there is a paradox to this situation: there was race-based violence before 1976. For instance, in 1974, an African American student stabbed a white classmate with an actual knife rather than a flag (Schonberg). But these prior attacks were not associated with the immortalized attack on Landmark, but were perceived as one-off incidents and did not generate the same accusations of racism. Even blatantly racist rhetoric was dismissed. Certain leaders of the anti-busing movement promoted racist caricatures: John Kerrigan, the chairman of the BSC, referred to African Americans as “savages” and alluded to them “swinging in the trees” (Masur 30). Significantly, in early 1970s, the BSC, comprised of elected members who were all white, set the policies for the entire Boston Public Schools (BPS) system and allocated funds to each school (Husock 338-339). Moreover, Kerrigan’s controversy did not end with his racist comments; he actively attempted to influence the rest of the BSC, once warning a fellow BSC member of appearing too “pro-black” to constituents (Husock 343). Howard Husock, an expert in housing and urban policy, argues that blacks were “a tailor-made political punching bag ... clearly useful as a symbolic menace” to scare white voters and parents (Husock 338). Clearly, racism was an institutional issue within the leadership of BPS. Husock, like Delmont, argues that the arguments for and against court-ordered busing were accompanied by an “absence of moral certainty,” but complicates the argument by saying blacks themselves were ambivalent because black students would face racial violence just to “integrate schools of poor quality” (Husock 345). Yet at the same time, civil rights and African American historian Jeanne Theoharis cites statistics showing fewer dollars being spent on predominantly black schools than white schools, more black schools being targeted for closure due to health and safety violations, and outdated curriculum in black

schools, among several other discrepancies between white and black schools (Theoharis, “I’d Rather” 129-130).

I argue, though, that both Husock and Theoharis can be correct at the same time: African Americans could desire desegregation, while also not actively supporting the court ordered busing plan. The high school “of poor quality” Husock referred to was South Boston High, which was located in South Boston, a predominantly white neighborhood with vocal and visceral opposition to the busing plan. Judge Garrity may have had African Americans’ interests at heart, but his actions did not reflect his beliefs. His desegregation plan was, in places, illogical. For instance, his plan decided to integrate the student populations of Roxbury and South Boston, predominately black and white neighborhoods, respectively. Upon seeing the state of South Boston High, a black aide to mayor questioned why black students had to dodge rocks just to attend a “dump” of a school (Husock 345). Perhaps if African American students were bused to either an academically superior majority white school with a hostile white crowd or bused to a similar quality school with accepting whites, the plan would have been more successful. Meanwhile for whites, rather than accept busing, many fled to the suburbs or to parochial schools (Formisano 209-210). In 1976, it was reported that “150 of 165 [public] schools appeared to be functioning smoothly” after the busing policy was implemented, but it was also reported that white and black students did not interact much during school (Formisano 205). On the political side of the education system, Boston progressed towards grudging acceptance of busing: in 1977, three African Americans were elected to the BSC and Louise Day Hicks, a leading anti-buser on the committee for years was defeated (Husock 335, 348). Overall, desegregation via busing was at worst detrimental to race relations, and at best a mediocre to moderate success.

I contend that around the time of *The Soiling of Old Glory* incident, racism became the

central factor in the busing debate for better or for worse. Specifically, racism became the central factor in the busing debate, not in a desegregation debate. Regardless of effectiveness of Garrity's busing policy, busing became equivalent to desegregation. Never mind the fact that in the 1960s, black parents and students took proactive steps to improve educational opportunities. Some of the many attempts to desegregate included civil disobedience, sit-ins, regular boycotts of public schools, creating a Black Student Union, creating new black schools, and even two attempts at creating a busing program (the first was called Operation Exodus and the second METCO) for only a few thousand black students, but none were as effective as desired (Theoharis, "I'd Rather" 131, 134-137). African Americans already attempted desegregation via busing and several other policy proposals, yet the court's mandated desegregation plan, consisting of just busing, dragged on into the late 1980s. That busing was never overturned is a victory for its supporters, to be sure. It was a hard-fought, symbolic victory for African Americans, but not the one they ultimately needed.

As a hinted at previously, the court plan's potential for success was limited when busing became equated to desegregation as a whole; busing essentially became a synecdoche for desegregation, a part representing a whole while ignoring the rest of the whole. White anti-busers originally made the debate about busing instead of desegregation and led a legitimate, overall non-violent campaign. *The Soiling of Old Glory* triggered race as a defining factor in the debate, but did nothing to re-center the debate on desegregation as a whole. If anything, it left even less room for African Americans to propose alternate solutions to integration without appearing to give up. The photo's unambiguous depiction of Joseph Rakes being in the wrong causes the motivations of his attack—opposing busing—to be labeled as wrong as well. For the African American—or anyone of any race—who supported desegregation and opposed the busing policy, choosing a side of the busing debate became a matter of choosing the lesser of two evils.

Metonyms, synecdoches, and symbols simplified desegregation in the minds of Bostonians. Busing should not have the only component of desegregation, but it was thought of in that way. Significantly, for Americans outside Boston, desegregation was likewise misread. They bought into the idea that busing would magically lead to desegregation, or as I described the situation at the beginning of this paper, act as a quixotic panacea for desegregation. Matthew Delmont emphasizes that other large cities with busing plans in place were wary of opposing the busing plan, if only to avoid appearing on national news stations as “another Boston” (Delmont 231). To avoid potential violent antipathy towards busing, parents across the nation preemptively enrolled their children in private schools, while several cities increase police presence around schools and busing routes to discourage violence (Delmont 231). The so-called Boston busing crisis taught the nation to accept busing as the solution to desegregation or suffer an ignominious reputation. It did not teach the nation that busing alone is likely insufficient to desegregate schools, and that school desegregation is a complex issue that involves careful consideration of other variables, such as de facto neighborhood segregation.

The significance of understanding what lessons the Boston busing crisis taught is evidenced by a quick summary of the rest of the history of busing in Boston. In 1988, control over busing implementation was handed over from the courts to Boston Public Schools, and was no longer mandatory (Gold). In 2013, BPS essentially undid a large portion of the busing policy by allowing parents and students to choose any school within a certain geographic zone, in other words, re-establishing the potential for neighborhood schools in a city with de facto residential segregation (Boston 1). A 2018 study of the recent Boston busing policy change indicates it is impossible for some families to have access to good schools in their neighborhoods when said neighborhoods have few quality schools to begin with, and that the new policy “diminished integration across the city” (Boston 2-3). Grudging acceptance of busing in the 1970s did not

eliminate the potential for future school segregation, and for those who imagine busing to be a synonym for desegregation because of the events in Boston, such acceptance may bring lower vigilance for future resegregation as well.

The Soiling of Old Glory is at the root of understanding the symbols and connections between different ideas in the Boston busing crisis. The reprehensible flag use depicted in the photo betrays the ideals of the U.S. For desegregation supporters, to give up fighting the anti-busing beliefs held by the flag swinger would be akin to swinging the flag themselves or fighting against personal liberty. The photo's dramatic depiction of the attack shifted the focus on the busing debate towards race and racism. But at the same time, the photo also helped conflate busing with desegregation, a process begun by anti-busers around 1974. The metonymy of the flag use creates associations between busing and race and between busing and desegregation. Other scholars, ranging from political scientists to cultural historians to scholar of African American studies, tend to focus on the big picture of the Boston busing crisis, but this single photo can provide insight into the mechanics of busing as a stand-in for desegregation. In the 21st century, in cities that did implement busing, what happens when that busing is no longer mandatory? Will resegregation occur or proliferate, similar to Boston's current situation? If so, the Boston busing crisis may once again serve as a model for what not to do. But if the lessons of Boston continue to be to blindly, passively accept the first reasonable solution in order to avoid being "another Boston," then patterns of desegregation followed by resegregation may persist.

Appendix



Fig. 1. Stanley Forman. *The Soiling of Old Glory*, 5 April 1976, Photograph, https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/en/c/c9/Soiling_of_Old_Glory.jpg.



Fig. 2. Stanley Forman. *The Soiling of Old Glory*, 5 April 1976, Photograph.

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