Introduction

“Busing has been a failure in Boston,” the Boston Globe informed readers in 1994, on the twentieth anniversary of the start of court-ordered desegregation in the city. “It achieved neither integration nor better schooling.” Speaking to a group of Chicago educators in 1981, assistant United States attorney general for civil rights William Bradford Reynolds offered a similar assessment: “Forced busing has, in the final analysis, largely failed in two major respects. It has failed to gain needed public acceptance and it has failed to translate into enhanced educational achievement.”

Reynolds, who played a central role in articulating and carrying out the Reagan administration’s civil rights policies, found company from across the political spectrum in describing “busing” for school desegregation as a misguided policy. Running unsuccessfully for President in 1976, Ronald Reagan told voters that “school busing has failed miserably. It has created bitterness, not eliminated it.” A year earlier, Democratic Senator Joe Biden described “busing” as a “bankrupt concept” that violated “the cardinal rule of common sense” and introduced two successful “antibusing” amendments in the Senate. Biden’s perceptive on “busing” unintentionally echoed that of the 1972 National Black Political Convention resolution that characterized “busing” as “a bankrupt, suicidal method of desegregating schools, based on the false notion that black children are unable to learn unless they are in the same setting as white children.” President Nixon welcomed the Black Political Convention’s “antibusing” resolution and that same year
told a group of white parents in Philadelphia, “busing of school children has failed to meet either of its intended purposes—failed to promote quality education for all and to end the racial isolation which we all agree must be ended.” Despite the work of civil rights advocates in every region of the country, the chorus of voices insisting that “busing” was a failed experiment dominated the debate on school desegregation. The certainty with which so many politicians, parents, and writers described “busing” as a failure has obscured the history of one of the nation’s most controversial civil rights issues.

*Why Busing Failed* reconsiders the history of “busing” for school desegregation and shows that “busing” failed to more fully desegregate public schools because school officials, politicians, courts, and the news media valued the desires of white parents more than the rights of black students. This argument requires rethinking the history of “busing” in three key ways. First, we have to understand how “busing” became the common sense way to describe school desegregation. As civil rights advocates continuously pointed out, “busing” was a fake issue. Students in the United States had long ridden buses to school, and the number of students transported to school at public expense in the United States expanded from 600,000 in 1920 to 20,000,000 in 1970. In concert with rural to urban migration, school buses made it possible for multi-grade elementary schools to replace one-room schoolhouses and for comprehensive high schools to become commonplace. School buses, in this era, were among the educational privileges enjoyed by white students. “The white rode buses, the Negro walked long weary miles in all kind of weather, cold, wind and rain, as well as the scortching [sic] heat of summer,” Rosa Parks remembered of her childhood in Montgomery, Alabama.
Reverend Theodore Hesburgh, President of University of Notre Dame and a member of the Commission on Civil Rights, said, “I remember Medgar Evers saying that his first recollection of busing was the new school buses passing him and other black children on the way to school…splashing them with mud as the white children on their way to a good school yelled out the window, ‘Nigger! Nigger!’ No objections to busing then.” In other parts of the South, as well as New York, Boston, and many other Northern cities, students rode buses past closer neighborhood schools to more distant schools to maintain segregation. Linda Brown, the plaintiff in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, rode a bus over twenty miles to attend a black school, when the white school was only four blocks away from her family’s home. In 1959 the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), ran a fundraising advertisement in the New York Times to call attention to the use of “busing” to maintain segregated schools after Brown. The advertisement features a six-year-old girl, asleep on a school bus, cradling her schoolbooks. The young girl in the image is a first grade student in Yancey County, North Carolina, where she and other black children were bused past all white schools in their home county to segregated black schools forty miles away in Asheville. “The situation in Yancey County has scores of parallels throughout the South,” the advertisement informs readers. “It’s been more than 5 long years since the Supreme Court decision of May 17, 1954—and yet the segregated school with its callous long-hauls and its myriad inferiorities continues to cheat Negro children of their right to equal training for life.” With the growing use of school buses in most school districts, white parents did not raise a fuss about it or wax nostalgic for “neighborhood schools.” In Boston, more than 50 percent of middle school students and 85 percent of high school
students were bused before court ordered “busing” with no objection until and unless it was linked to desegregation.\textsuperscript{12} Put more starkly, then, school buses were fine for the majority of white families; “busing” was not.

White parents and politicians framed their resistance to school desegregation in terms of “busing” and “neighborhood schools.” This rhetorical shift allowed them to support white schools and neighborhoods without using explicitly racist language. As early as 1957, white parents in New York rallied against “busing.” In Detroit in 1960, thousands of white parents organized a school boycott to protest the “busing” of three-hundred black students from an overcrowded school to a school in a white neighborhood.\textsuperscript{13} In Boston, Louis Day Hicks made opposition to “busing” a centerpiece of her political campaigns. “It was Mrs. Hicks who kept talking against busing children when the NAACP hadn’t even proposed busing,” the \textit{Boston Globe} noted in 1965.\textsuperscript{14} “I have probably talked before 500 or 600 groups over the last years about busing,” Los Angeles Assemblyman Floyd Wakefield said in 1970. “Almost every time someone has gotten up and called me a ‘racist’ or a ‘bigot.’ But now, all of the sudden, I am no longer a bigot. Now I am called ‘the leader of antibusing’ effort.”\textsuperscript{15} With “busing” Northerners found a palatable way to oppose desegregation without appealing to the explicitly racist sentiments they preferred to associate with Southerners.

Describing opposition to “busing” as something other than resistance to school desegregation was a choice that obscured the histories of racial discrimination and legal contexts for desegregation orders. In covering school desegregation in Boston and other Northern cities, contemporary news media took up the “busing” frame and most histories of the era have followed suit. Our understanding of school desegregation in the North is
skewed as a result, emphasizing innocent “de facto” segregation over the housing covenants, federal mortgage redlining, public housing segregation, white homeowners associations, and discriminatory real estate practices that produced and maintained segregated neighborhoods, as well as the policies regarding school siting, districting, and students transfers that produced and maintained segregated schools. I use “busing” in quotation marks throughout this book to emphasize that this term developed as a selective way to label and oppose school desegregation.

“Busing” for school desegregation was about the constitutional rights of black students, but the story of “busing” has been told and retold as a story about the feelings and opinions of white people. The violent resistance that greeted school desegregation in mid-1970s Boston engraved that city’s “busing crisis” into school textbooks and cemented the failure of “busing” in the popular imagination. One reason Boston’s “busing crisis” continues to resonate for so many readers and viewers is that it serves as a convenient end point for the history of civil rights, where it is juxtaposed with Brown v. Board of Education (1954) or the Little Rock school integration crisis (1957). In this telling, the civil rights movement, with the support by federal officials and judges, took a wrong turn in the North and encountered “white backlash.” The trouble with this story is that journalists and pundits identified a “white backlash” not only in 1974, but also in 1964. A more important issue with the “backlash” story is that the perspectives of white parents who opposed school desegregation figured prominently in the very civil rights legislation against which they later rebelled. In drafting the 1964 Civil Rights Act, for example, the bill’s Northern sponsors drew a sharp distinction between segregation by law in the South and so-called “racial imbalance” in the North, amending Title IV,
section 401b to read: “‘Desegregation’ means the assignment of students to public schools and within such schools without regard to their race, color, religion, or national origin, but ‘desegregation’ shall not mean the assignment of students to public schools in order to overcome racial imbalance.”¹⁶ This “antibusing” language was directly designed to keep federal civil rights enforcement of school desegregation focused away from the North, and white politicians and parents in cities like Boston, Chicago, New York regularly pointed to the 1964 Civil Rights Act to justify the maintenance of white schools. Politicians across regional lines, including both Democrats and Republicans, reflected and fed their constituents fears of “busing.” Local, state, and national politicians argued for white “neighborhood schools” and railed against “forced busing” and “massive busing.” Despite claims of judicial activism, moreover, federal courts were slow to act on school desegregation, especially outside of the South. By the mid-1970s, the Supreme Court’s rulings on school desegregation made it exceedingly difficult to prove that school districts intentionally discriminated on the basis of race and had the result of protecting white suburbs from “busing.” Rather than focusing on “white backlash,” this book shows how preemptive white protests shaped “antibusing” legislation and slowed the pace of school desegregation.

The battle over “busing” was never primarily a debate over policy. Social scientists published hundreds of articles on “busing” in the 1960s and 1970s but these experts were working with piecemeal data to try to make sense of school desegregation plans that were still unfolding. In 1975, sociologist James Coleman, who published widely read and cited reports on race and educational opportunity, lamented that “there has not been…any systematic and continuous and comparable gathering of data initiated
at the Federal level on the variety of consequences of school desegregation.” Without national data, Coleman continued, “it has been left to a variety of partly poorly- and partly well-conceived studies done at the local level for us to attempt to infer something about those consequences.”17 United States Civil Rights Commission Vice Chairman Stephen Horn echoed Coleman’s sentiments in 1979. “Because the Federal Government has been negligent in establishing a systematic program of analysis which would aid policymakers in judging the effectiveness and the intended and unintended consequences of desegregation,” Horn argued, “currently policymakers can pick an isolated social science study completed on one school or a district and use it to support or oppose a particular course of action.”18 Politicians and parents looked to the latest studies from policy analysts like Thomas Pettigrew, David Armor, and Gary Orfield to support their already established views on “busing,” but these reports did not reach as many people or convey the emotional charge of media coverage of “antibusing” protests.19

Rather than being a policy debate, the battle over “busing” was about how school desegregation would be defined in media and public discourse, and about how much actual desegregation would take place in the nation’s schools, especially in schools outside of the South. Understanding the history of “busing” for school desegregation requires paying attention not only to court cases and desegregation policies, but also to how television and print news media framed “busing” for national audiences. These media representations were particularly important because, even at its peak in the 1970s, court-ordered busing applied to less than 5 percent of public school students nationally.20 “Antibusing” parents and politicians also borrowed media strategies from the civil rights movement to thwart “busing” for school desegregation. “Busing” did not emerge as a hot
button national political issue because the majority of American families experienced it, but rather, television and print news helped establish “busing” as the common sense way to describe, debate, and oppose school desegregation.

The second way this book rethinks the history of “busing” is to discard the myth that so-called “de facto” residential and school segregation in the North were innocent. The history of “busing” for school desegregation is crucial to understanding how “de facto” segregation developed as a cultural and political construct. While civil rights advocates initially promoted this distinction between “southern style” and “northern style” segregation to build a political consensus against Jim Crow laws in the South, the de jure-de facto dichotomy ultimately made it possible for public officials, judges, and citizens in the North and South to deny legal responsibility for the visible realities of racial segregation. As black writer James Baldwin observed in 1965, “de facto segregation means Negroes are segregated, but nobody did it.”

Over the past two decades scholars have revealed the vast web of governmental policies that produced and maintained racially segregated neighborhoods and schools in the North, as well as the civil rights activists who fought against these structures of racial discrimination. These studies provide overwhelming evidence that, in every region of the country, neighborhood and school segregation flowed from intentional public policies, not from innocent private actions or free-market forces. Among the most important aspects of this body of scholarship is that it shows that the distinction between de jure segregation and de facto segregation is false.

In hearing school desegregation cases in the 1960s and 1970s, several federal and state court judges also cast a critical light on the de jure-de facto framework. In *Taylor v.*
New Rochelle (1961), Judge Irving Kaufman found the New Rochelle school board’s “neighborhood school” plan had intentionally gerrymandered the attendance zone to maintain a black elementary school. “It is of no moment whether the segregation is labeled by the defendant as ‘de jure’ or ‘de facto,’ as long as the Board, by its conduct, is responsible for its maintenance,” Kaufman ruled. “Constitutional rights are determined by realities, not by labels or semantics.” In Los Angeles in 1970, Judge Alfred Gitleson found that the Los Angeles Unified School District “Board has, since at least May of 1963, by and through its actual affirmative policies, customs, usages and practices, doings and omissions, segregated, de jure, its students.” Gitleson continued, “The court finds that [the] Board’s separate but allegedly equal schools were not equal in fact, either as to plant or facilities or teachers and curriculum, and that Board has not made available to all its students equal educational opportunity.” In Davis v. School District of City of Pontiac (1970), Judge Damon Keith ruled “Where a Board of Education has contributed and played a major role in the development and growth of a segregated situation, the Board is guilty of de jure segregation. The fact that such came slowly and surreptitiously rather than by legislative pronouncement makes the situation no less evil.” Similarly, Judge W. Arthur Garrity’s decision in Morgan v. Hennigan (1974) made it clear that the Boston School Committee and Superintendent “took many actions in their official capacities with the purpose and intent to segregate the Boston public schools and that such actions caused current conditions of segregation in the Boston public schools.”

The “crisis” in Boston and in other cities that faced court ordered school desegregation was about unconstitutional racial discrimination in the public schools, not about “busing.” Judges ordered “busing” as a remedy in northern school districts such as...
Boston, Denver, Detroit, Kansas City, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and Pontiac that were found guilty of intentional *de jure* segregation in violation of *Brown v. Board* and the Fourteenth Amendment. U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare chief Leon Panetta, whose advocacy of investigating school segregation in the North got him fired from the Nixon administration, said in late 1969, “It has become clear to me that the old bugaboo of keeping federal hands off northern school systems because they are only *de facto* segregated, instead of *de jure* segregation as the result of some official act, is a fraud…There are few if any pure *de facto* situations. Lift the rock of *de facto* and something ugly and discriminatory crawls out from under it.”

The challenge for civil rights lawyers and activists was that it was extraordinarily difficult to lift all of the rocks of “*de facto*” to expose the illegal discrimination underneath. Sixty years after the *Brown* decision, June Shagaloff, who led NAACP efforts to challenge school segregation outside of the South, said, “I’ve never really come to terms with whether we made a mistake or not. The reason we called them *de facto* segregated schools was we didn’t have the manpower to examine the histories of so many individual schools systems to prove intent. So we took the position that segregated schools were harmful educational for all children psychologically, in every way, and that it was the responsibility of school officials, local and state, to reorganize public school systems to eliminate the existence of segregation in fact.” School desegregation lawsuits took months of research and cost hundreds of thousands of dollars. Obtaining evidence of discriminatory actions required first extracting information from often obstructionist school officials and then sifting through decades of meeting minutes, memos, and school board policies. Each lawsuit, moreover, risked alienating donors and
politicians who supported school desegregation in Mississippi, Georgia, and Alabama, but not in New York, Illinois, or California. Civil rights lawyers and activists had to overcome enormous barriers to get a northern school district into the courtroom, much less to persuade a judge to find a school district guilty of unconstitutional discrimination.

If the framework of “de facto” segregation placed a difficult evidentiary burden on civil rights advocates, it provided “antibusing” politicians and parents with material and psychic benefits. By upholding the myth of “de facto” segregation, residents of white neighborhoods could profit from public policies that funneled resources to their communities and pass on appreciating assets to future generations, while also claiming to be free from the ugly stain of racism. The battles over “busing” showed that this faith in white racial innocence with regards to residential and school segregation was largely immune to evidence. When courts found school boards in Boston, Detroit, Los Angeles, and other cities guilty of intentional and unconstitutional racial discrimination, politicians and parents insisted that their cities could not possibly be segregated and decried the court ordered desegregation remedies, such as “busing,” as unjust and inconvenient infringements on the rights of white families. The myth of “de facto” segregation has persisted for decades because for many people no amount of evidence to the contrary could upset the bedrock belief that unlawful segregation and racism were exclusively a Southern phenomenon.

The national news media bears much of the responsibility for perpetuating the myth of “de facto” segregation and the idea that racism was unique to the South. In An American Dilemma (1944), Swedish social scientist Gunner Myrdal’s landmark study of race in the United States, Myrdal noted, “the Northerner does not have his social
conscience and all his political thinking permeated with the Negro problem as the Southerner does. Rather, he succeeds in forgetting about it most of the time. The Northern newspapers help him by minimizing all Negro news, except crime news. The Northerners want to hear as little as possible about the Negroes…The result is an astonishing ignorance about the Negro on the part of the white public in the North.”

In the two decades after Myrdal’s work, black people continued to migrate to Northern cities and television became the nation’s dominant news source, but little changed in terms of media attention to racism outside of the South. In 1968, the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, chaired by Illinois Governor Otto Kerner, highlighted the media’s lack of attention to everyday black lives in cities like Chicago, Newark, or Watts. “The news media have failed to analyze and report adequately on racial problems in the United States and, as a related matter, to meet the Negro’s legitimate expectations in journalism,” the Kerner Commission argued. “By and large, news organizations have failed to communicate to both their black and white audiences a sense of the problems America faces and the sources of potential solutions. The media report and write from the standpoint of a white man’s world. The ills of the ghetto, the difficulties of life there, the Negro’s burning sense of grievance, are seldom conveyed. Slights and indignities are part of the Negro’s daily life, and many of them come from what he now calls ‘the white press’—a press that repeatedly, if unconsciously, reflects the biases, the paternalism, the indifference of white America.”

The Kerner Commission report went on to describe the “enforced confinement [of black people] in segregated housing and schools” as one of “the most bitter fruits of white racial attitudes.” Writing in 1970, Federal Communications Commission (FCC) commissioner Nicholas Johnson noted that while
media coverage of the civil rights struggle in the South “seared the nation’s conscience” and “opened up the ‘closed society’ in the Deep South…now the racial crisis has moved North and West, and the editors and producers may have lost some of their enthusiasm for pointing out the threadbare parts of the nation’s social fabric.” Referring to the Kerner Commission’s report on civil disorders, Johnson continued, “In my judgment, the extent of surprise in each community measured precisely the failure of its news media.”

The news media played a crucial role in establishing white racial attitudes regarding segregated schools and neighborhoods as both unremarkable and incontestable. The maintenance of Northern school segregation was premised on a willful ignorance of clear and consistent policies of racial discrimination, which the news media promoted daily and nightly.

The third and final way this book rethinks the history of “busing” is by questioning the cherished idea that the news media supported the goals of civil rights advocates. The news media’s support for the Southern civil rights movement is one of the iconic stories we tell about race in America, but it is limited and limiting story. This story is powerful and widely accepted because both civil rights leaders and television journalists who covered civil rights in South declared the medium’s importance to the movement. “Had it not been for TV I do not think the civil rights movement could have succeeded as quickly,” said Julian Bond, who co-founded the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC) and served as that civil rights organization’s communications director. “I think it would have won out in the end but television brought it home just so quickly.” Robert Schakne, who covered the Little Rock school integration crisis for CBS News said, “We had no idea that our form of journalism would
essentially change the way the country thought.”³⁸ William Monroe, NBC’s Washington bureau chief described television as “the chosen instrument of the revolution,” and argued that “network-television newscasts brought in the message day after day that integration was overtaking other Southern cities and that it could not be prevented.”³⁹ “The Negro revolution of the 1960’s could not have occurred without the television coverage that brought it to almost every home in the land,” said CBS Reports producer William Peters. “Those who have tried with the written word to make the facts of Mississippi come alive to the people of Minnesota, as I have, probably applaud with me the success of television in accomplishing this difficult feat.”⁴⁰

One of the reasons the Southern civil rights movement resonated so powerfully through television and photojournalism was that it presented a stark distinction between good and evil. Virtuous black demonstrators withstood verbal harassment and physical violence from nasty white segregationists.⁴¹ Images of confrontations in Little Rock, Birmingham, and Selma framed racism in stark detail. Wallace Westfeldt, a Nashville newspaper reporter who went on to work as an executive producer of NBC’s Huntley-Brinkley Report, said, “even without any commentary, a shot of a big white man spitting and cursing at black children did more to open up the national intellect than my [newspaper] stories ever could.”⁴² Both the civil rights movement and the news media were invested in exposing these acts of excessive violence to audiences outside of the South. In the midst of the voting rights marches in Selma, Alabama in 1965, Martin Luther King told marchers and the news media, “We are here to say to the white men that we no longer will let them use clubs on us in the dark corners. We’re going to make them do it in the glaring light of television.”⁴³ This strategy successfully exposed
physical acts of violence, but it worked less well to reveal other forms of racism and
discrimination. While police and private citizens certainly perpetrated acts of physical
violence against black people in the North as well, it was far more difficult to expose the
policies and actions that produced and maintained segregated neighborhoods and schools
to the “glaring light of television.” These structural dimensions of racial segregation
often worked subtlety and developed over decades, which made them difficult to capture
and make visible in a photograph or television broadcast.

If television was successful in framing the Southern civil rights struggle as a
moral imperative, the news media did not present civil rights activity in the North with
the same moral clarity. Analysis of the coverage of “busing” for school desegregation
reveals how mainstream media personnel based mostly in the North covered civil rights
in the North differently than the South. *New York Times* managing editor Turner
Catledge recognized that his and other northern papers brought a different scrutiny to
civil rights stories and the “race beat” in the South. “We’ve had open season on the
South here now for some time,” Catledge remarked to a conference of editors and
publishers in 1963, “and it seems to me that, especially when you read the editorial pages
in the North, some people are too much concerned about what’s going on somewhere else
and too little concerned about what’s going on right at their own door.”44 While Catledge
recognized that the *Times* covered civil rights stories “at their own door” timidly, the
paper’s editorial positions on school desegregation in New York did little to change this
dynamic. The *New York Times*, like the *Montgomery Advertiser* and many other
Southern newspapers, framed civil rights activists’ demands for school desegregation as
equivalent to white protestors’ demands to maintain school segregation.45 Some city
dailies, like the *Chicago Tribune*, were openly hostile to the civil rights movement and calls for school desegregation in their cities. National television news broadcasts framed protest marches for and against school desegregation using similar camera angles, shot sequencing, and interview questions. Whereas news media helped underscore the urgency of the black civil rights movement in the South in the 1950s and 1960s, by the mid-1960s and 1970s white “antibusing” protestors received the vast majority of media attention. Television and print news helped establish “busing” as the common sense way of discussing school desegregation. By overemphasizing white parents’ and politicians’ resistance to “busing,” news media contributed to the perspective that desegregation was moving too fast and that it was unrealistic.

For their part, “antibusing” activists were careful students of the civil rights movement and the movement’s media strategies. White “antibusing” demonstrators purposefully modeled their protests on civil rights marches and television news production techniques heightened these similarities, shaping the protests into segments that looked very similar. “Martin Luther King walked all over and he got a lot of things done,” Irene McCabe announced at an “antibusing” rally in Pontiac in 1971. “This is our civil rights movement.” At a March 1964 rally against school desegregation and “busing” a white mother freely acknowledged to an NBC television reporter that civil rights activists inspired the parents’ choice of strategies. “We feel like we can prove as much as our opponents to use the same tactics,” she said. “We have as much right as they do. These are our civil rights and we’re taking advantage of them.” Framed in this way the white defense of school segregation in the North looked much more reasonable and justified than similar efforts in the South. “TV didn’t determine the outcome, but it
did aid and abet those motivated to destroy integration in any form,” Los Angeles Superior Court Judge Paul Egly said in 1981. “That (busing resistance) was the story TV could understand. TV didn’t understand the story that was going on in court. They didn’t understand the minority side. There was no story for them there because there were no riots, no pickets, nothing whatsoever but poor education and segregation.”48 As historian Nathan Irvin Huggins noted in 1978, television cameras “broadcast the sentiments of the white, Pontiac, Michigan, housewife [Irene McCabe] protesting ‘forced busing’ as earnestly as they had the achievement of Mrs. Rosa Parks in the Montgomery bus boycott.”49 It is impossible to understand the longevity and intensity of “busing” as a political issue without understanding how news media framed the subject and how parents and politicians made savvy use of television and print news to oppose “busing.”

Television reporting on controversial political issues like civil rights and the war in Vietnam created a lively debate among politicians, policymakers, and citizens regarding what counted as balanced news coverage. In Red Lion Broadcasting Co. v. Federal Communications Commission (1969), the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the constitutionality of the Fairness Doctrine, “the requirement that discussion of public issues be presented on broadcast stations, and that each side of those issues must be given fair coverage.”50 Four years later, in CBS v. Democratic National Committee, the Supreme Court found that “since it is physically impossible to provide time for all viewpoints…the broadcaster, therefore, is allowed significant journalistic discretion in deciding how best to fulfill the Fairness Doctrine obligations.”51 Beyond these court cases, a broad public debate swirled around the balance and fairness of television news, with dozens of books and articles arguing that television news was politically biased in
favor of either liberals or conservatives.\textsuperscript{52} (The Vanderbilt Television News Archive, one of the key archives for my research, was founded in 1968 in part to monitor whether network news broadcasts were presenting one-sided coverage of Vietnam).\textsuperscript{53} The Nixon administration figured prominently in these debates over political bias, as the President, Vice President Spiro Agnew, and advisors like Pat Buchanan spared constantly with the news media and looked for ways to get the President’s message directly to the American people without being filtered and criticized by broadcasters.\textsuperscript{54}

These debates over balanced coverage often overlooked the fact that the stories that television networks defined as newsworthy had little to do with political beliefs of anchors like Walter Cronkite or John Chancellor and much more to do with producers and assignment editors who determined where to assign correspondents and camera crews. Once a story like “busing” was identified as newsworthy it continued to receive regular coverage. Producing the news required anticipating the news, and at each network the majority of story assignments were made in advance in order to have the stories shot, transmitted to New York, edited, and narrated in time for the nightly broadcast. “We have the whole country to cover, and we can’t just set up cameras and wait for news to happen somewhere,” an NBC producer told journalist Edward Jay Epstein. “We have to plan it out in advance.”\textsuperscript{55} To cover national news in the late-1960s, NBC national news only had regular camera crews in New York, Chicago, Los Angeles, Washington D.C., and Cleveland, and cameramen who could form ad-hoc crews in Boston, Houston and Dallas (CBS and ABC had similar operations).\textsuperscript{56} Covering the “antibusing” protests in Pontiac, for example, meant dispatching the Chicago or Cleveland-based camera crew and then transmitting the news report electronically over
an AT&T closed-circuit “long line” connection from an affiliate station in Detroit to broadcasting facilities in New York. These “long line” connections were expensive. In his 1973 study of the television news industry, Epstein described an NBC executive rejecting a story about a new Boeing passenger place because “I just didn’t think it was worth four thousand dollar [for a long line] to go to Seattle.” These economic and technological factors meant that television producers favored stories that were sure to deliver compelling visuals, connect to establish storylines, and resonate with national audiences. “Antibusing” protests fit all three of these criteria of newsworthiness. Once television producers had identified “antibusing” protests in cities like Boston, Louisville, and Pontiac as newsworthy, these cities were more likely to be covered (and over covered) in future news plans.

When viewing the relationship of television news and civil rights over a longer time frame, it is clear that production decisions regarding what makes for compelling visual news and the cost of securing this footage outweighed any moral or political commitments television personnel brought to their work. For a time, these production dynamics favored civil rights stories that developed at a safe distance from the North. During the late-1950s and early-1960s, television producers deemed the Southern civil rights movement as worthy of the allocation of camera crews and correspondents, and the images produced in Little Rock, Birmingham, and Selma repaid the high financial cost of gathering the news and transmitting the footage back to New York. Just a few years later, however, “antibusing” protests replaced the civil rights movement in the calculus of producing television news. Whatever praise television news personnel deserve for advancing civil rights in the South must be tempered by the fact that television news
advanced the resistance to “busing” for school desegregation as a national story with the same vigor.

Television news broadcasts were not designed to produce deeply researched reports and they were particularly ill equipped to present complex stories like school desegregation that involved law, education, politics, social science, and history. Despite the enormous audience for national television news and the political and cultural influence of these broadcasts, the networks devoted very little money to research departments. “At NBC News…there have been no adequate facilities for backgrounding a story,” former anchorman Robert MacNeil noted in 1967. “An index or morgue or clipping service which collects and files information from day to day for instant retrieval is the most elemental part of a news organization. Broadcasters, however, have to rely on their memories, on what recent newspapers they can find, or on what makeshift files they are able to patch together in the midst of very busy lives.” A research director noted similar limitations at CBS. “The Evening News, our network flagship, has only one researcher to handle queries on everything from Viet Nam to multiple birth. And for the hectic, final half-hour before air, our main CBS News reference library is closed.” Without extensive research departments, network news programs in this era relied on Associated Press (AP) and United Press International (UPI) wire services for the majority of their story assignments and background. In this vein, TV news producer Av Westin described the network evening news as “an illustrated headline service…not a broadcast of record.” The wire services, in turn, produced more stories on the subjects that television broadcasts elevated as newsworthy. This dynamic meant that once “busing”
became identified as newsworthy, television news and wire service editors continued to look for stories that connected with this news hook.

The United States Commission on Civil Rights complained in 1972 that “somehow the busing-for-desegregation debate has become clouded in its own language and expressions, in which the word ‘busing’ almost always follows such labels as ‘massive’ and ‘forced’….somehow a pattern of fears and myths has become fixed in the minds of public, making it hard to sort out the facts and determine what is true and what is false.” The Commission on Civil Rights did not have the public relations budget or expertise to challenge the “fears and myths” prompted in the battle over “busing.” “Antibusing” parents and politicians were able to turn the news media to their advantage because they organized media-ready protests and speeches simplified the complex issue of school desegregation into an easily legible news hook, “busing.”

*Why Busing Failed* begins in the hub of national media, New York, where the battle over “busing” first emerged in the late-1950s and early-1960s. Like in Montgomery and Jackson, many New York politicians and citizens did not want the *Brown* decision to come to their schools. Black parents and civil rights advocates, including Ella Baker, Kenneth Clark, and Reverend Milton Galamison, thought otherwise and pressed for desegregation plans in the city. Indeed, the largest civil rights demonstration of the era occurred in New York in February 1964 when more than four hundred and sixty thousand students and teachers stayed out of school to protest the lack of a comprehensive plan for desegregation. White resistance grew as well, with white parents and politicians first objecting to rumored plans to bus students between Harlem and Staten Island and then organizing rallies to oppose plans to transfer students between
predominantly black and Puerto Rican schools and white schools. These white protests attracted national attention from the news media and from the United States congressmen who were debating the Civil Rights Act in the Spring of 1964. The Civil Rights Act included an “antibusing” provision that sought to address the demands of white parents and politicians in New York and other Northern cities.

The second chapter examines how the limited resources and political will for federal enforcement of school desegregation guidelines enabled school segregation to flourish in cities like Chicago. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act gave the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (HEW) authority to withhold funds if school districts failed to comply with rules against school segregation. In 1965, HEW briefly withheld $30 million in federal funds from Chicago, finding the city’s schools be in “probable noncompliance” with Title VI’s anti-discrimination provision. Facing pressure from Mayor Richard J. Daley, Senator Everett Dirksen, Illinois Congressmen, and President Lyndon Johnson, HEW’s case in Chicago quickly unraveled, despite overwhelming evidence that Chicago school officials were not innocent bystanders to the creation and maintenance of racially differentiated schools. HEW’s surrender in Chicago encouraged school officials and politicians in other cities to maintain positions of resistance and noncompliance with regards to “busing” and school desegregation.

Chapter three examines the fights over “busing” and school desegregation in 1960s Boston. Black civil rights activists like Ruth Batson and Ellen Jackson organized against educational inequality in Boston over a decade before the city’s “busing crisis” in the mid-1970s. Boston’s schools were resolutely segregated, with vast differentials in funding, school resources, and teacher quality. Boston’s schools grew more segregated
in the decades after *Brown*, as the district bused white children to white schools. Like their counterparts in New York and Chicago, civil rights activists, parents, and students in Boston were organized, creative, and persistent in their protests. In their efforts to desegregate Boston’s schools, the black community encountered white school officials and politicians, like Louise Day Hicks, who rose to power on the promise they would never let this happen. “Busing” helped Hicks emerge as a national icon of white resistance to civil rights, and by opposing school desegregation throughout the 1960s, Hicks and her fellow Boston School Committee members postponed dealing with the structural problems that emerged in the mid-1970s as Boston’s “busing crisis.”

The fourth chapter highlights the bipartisan and interregional political opposition to “busing.” From Arizona Senator and Republican Presidential candidate Barry Goldwater, U.S. Attorney General Robert Kennedy, and Vice President Hubert Humphrey in the 1960s to Mississippi segregationist Senator John Stennis, Oregon Democratic Congresswoman Edith Green, and New York Republican Congressmen Norman Lent in the 1970s, a chorus of politicians opposed “busing.” At the state level, several governors voiced opposition to “busing,” including most notably Florida Governor Claude Kirk, who protested court-ordered “busing” by suspending a local school board in Manatee County (Bradenton, Florida) and appointing himself school superintendent. For politicians like Kirk who aspired to the national stage, “busing” offered a recognizable issue on which to take a stand. Elected officials’ widespread opposition to “busing” sowed confusion and led many Americans to believe that school desegregation was moving much faster than it actually was. Reflecting and feeding their
constituents fears of school desegregations, politicians helped make “busing” into a recognizable issue that was easily vilified.

Chapter five examines how President Richard Nixon leveraged the Presidency’s unique political power and media platform to limit “busing” for school desegregation. Through television addresses, policy statements, and press releases the Nixon administration shaped the debate over “busing” and normalized resistance to federal court school desegregation orders. In addition to the Nixon administration’s skillful use of media to communicate their opposition to “busing,” the President reigned in the lawyers and officials who worked in the Justice Department and HEW who were on the frontline of enforcing (or not enforcing) school desegregation policies. Nixon also worked to bend the judiciary to his views on school desegregation and “busing,” appointing a record number of federal judges and four Supreme Court justices. Nixon’s appointees were in the majority in *Milliken v. Bradley* (1974), which overturned a lower court and blocked a metropolitan desegregation plan that would have involved Detroit and its suburbs. “I fear,” Supreme Court Justice Thurgood Marshall argued in his dissenting opinion in *Milliken*, that “[today’s holding] is more a reflection of a perceived public mood that we have gone far enough in enforcing the Constitution’s guarantee of equal justice than it is the product of neutral principle of law.”  

*Milliken* placed a nearly impossible burden of proof on those seeking school desegregation across city and suburban lines by requiring evidence of deliberate segregation across multiple school districts. *Milliken* meant that most suburbs were untouched by school desegregation, while city schools grow more segregated by race and class.
The sixth chapter analyzes the “antibusing” campaign led by Pontiac mother Irene McCabe. While thousands of parents across the nation raised their voices against “busing,” none received the same level of national television attention as McCabe. While McCabe did not have any formal media training, she proved skillful at making her National Action Group protests into television-friendly events. More than simply an example of white backlash to civil rights, McCabe learned from other protest movements, creating television-ready scenes that garnered attention and framed her cause in a favorable light. Most notably, McCabe led a group of “marching mothers,” on a 620-mile march from Pontiac to Washington, D.C. in support of an “antibusing” constitutional amendment. McCabe cultivated a multifaceted television persona, combining political acumen, sexuality, and, especially during the march to Washington, a calculated vulnerability that made local “antibusing” politics into national news.

The seventh chapter examines what “busing” meant to black communities. Rather than accepting “busing” as the logical frame for debating school desegregation, black people argued that white opposition to “busing” was simply a new way of expressing anti-black racism, that “busing” was a phony issue that obscured the causes of educational inequality, and that “busing” had long been used to maintain segregated schools. School desegregation plans frequently led to negative outcomes for black students and teachers, such as the closure of formerly black schools and the loss of employment for black teachers. In addition, black students in recently desegregated schools were suspended and pushed out of school disproportionately. Each of these themes illuminates reasons why black communities were often ambivalent to “busing.” The various responses and alternatives black people offered to “busing” were largely
ignored by white media and politicians, who instead focused on more adamantly “antibusing” black viewpoints, such as the National Black Political convention in Gary, Indiana or Clay Smothers, who called himself “the most conservative black man in America” and appeared at “antibusing” rallies across the country. Rather than adapting their coverage to present the multiple and often conflicting black opinions on “busing,” national media preferred black voices that did not disrupt the predetermined “busing” frame.

The eighth and final chapter returns to Boston to examine how television news defined the start of court ordered school desegregation as a “crisis.” People outside of Boston came to know and care about the city’s “busing crisis” because television news featured the story regularly. Footage of confrontations between protestors and law enforcement provided television producers with compelling visuals to illustrate “forced busing,” but said little about the students or schools that were ostensibly at the center of the story. Television news’ emphasis on the white ethnic neighborhoods of South Boston and Charlestown, moreover, obscured the ordinariness of the racial attitudes in these neighborhoods and focused attention away from resistance to school desegregation in more middle class areas like Hyde Park or West Roxbury. Like media coverage of “busing” over the prior two decades, television news coverage of Boston’s “busing crisis” framed the story in terms of white anger and rendered black Bostonians as bit players in their own civil rights struggle.

*Why Busing Failed* focuses on the places and people that played the most important roles in shaping the national debate over “busing” for school desegregation. This national perspective on the history of “busing” is important because it connects an
array of civil rights, educational, and political issues across local and regional lines. This national perspective, moreover, provides a framework for understanding the dozens of cities that had either court-ordered or voluntary desegregation plans.  

In order to reconsider the history of “busing” for school desegregation, Why Busing Failed draws on an array of sources, including congressional records, letters, memos, speeches, court decisions, desegregation plans, civil rights commission reports, magazines, oral histories, and photographs. To understand how the news media presented “busing” for national and local audiences, I have examined dozens of hours of archived television news coverage at the Vanderbilt University Television News Archive, the University of Georgia’s The Walter J. Brown Media Archives and Peabody Award Collection, as well as the NBC and ABC archives. In addition to these televiusal sources, I have collected and analyzed over ten thousand newspaper reports related to “busing” and school desegregation from the New York Times, Boston Globe, Chicago Tribune, Detroit Free Press, Los Angeles Times, Washington Post, and Wall Street Journal, as well as black newspapers, including the Atlanta Journal Constitution, Baltimore Afro-American, Bay State Banner, Chicago Defender, Cleveland Call and Post, Los Angeles Sentinel, New York Amsterdam News, Norfolk Journal and Guide, Pittsburgh Courier, and Philadelphia Tribune. This mix of sources makes it possible to trace how “busing” plans developed in different cities, how legislation and court decisions aided or limited school desegregation, and how television and print news framed “busing” for viewers and readers.

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As I have talked with people over the past six years about my research, the book that comes up most frequently is J. Anthony Lukas’ *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (1985). Lukas’ bestselling, Pulitzer Prize and National Book Award-winning story, more than any other work, has shaped popular views of the history of “busing.” Lukas’ book examined Boston’s “busing crisis” by tracing the experiences of three local Boston families—the working-class black Twymons, the working-class Irish McGoffs, and the middle class Yankee Divers—from 1968 to 1978. These family stories are woven together with profiles of five white public figures—politicians Louise Day Hicks and Kevin White, Judge Arthur Garrity, *Boston Globe* editor Thomas Winship, and Archbishop of Boston Humberto Cardinal Medeiros. “Busing,” in Lukas’ telling, was a foolhardy plan that was destined to fail. Despite their demographic differences, each of the families in his story shared a dislike of “busing,” a “common ground” shared, the book suggests, by millions of other Americans. David Halberstam described *Common Ground* as “a bittersweet book on the end of an American dream.” In his *New York Times* review, sociologist Kai Erickson praised the book as a “huge and marvelous work…Every family in the book has its genealogy, every community its history, every event its context—and Mr. Lukas seems to trace all of them back as far as his data will permit.” Sociologist Robert Dentler, a court-appointed expert who worked on desegregation plans for Boston and over a dozen other cities, was much more critical of *Common Ground*. “Dramatically engaging as the story of each family may be, no evidence from them explain at all adequately the story of school desegregation,” Dentler argued. “The thousands of filings in *Morgan v. Hennigan* go unexamined…There is no review, and there are no quotations from the public records of
the litigation expect for a sentence or two from the federal court’s liability opinion…Lukas serves as the chronicling outsider who collects, sifts, and weaves a more complete fabric of exculpation out of the stuff of…local legends.” 65

Black civil rights activists in Boston greeted *Common Ground* with anger and frustration akin to Mississippi civil rights activists’ criticisms of *Mississippi Burning* (1988) (a film that ignored the role of black activists while glorifying the FBI’s role in the civil rights movement in Mississippi). 66 Black Bostonians disputed Lukas’s presenting white resistance to school desegregation in a favorable light, his emphasis on black family dysfunction, and his selection of a black family with no ties to the decades long campaign to secure educational equality for black children (he found the black family he profiled through a social worker). Describing Lukas as a “faulty historian,” longtime Boston civil rights activist Ruth Batson lamented the seduction of Lukas’ narrative and the difficulty of dislodging it. It’s “like swimming against a strong tide,” Batson wrote, “like being in a large crowd, trying to reach a destination, advancing twenty steps and being pushed back forty steps.” 67 Batson and other black Boston community members organized a conference in 1994 at Northeastern University to document the history of community struggle for racial equality and educational justice. Batson researched, solicited questionnaires and primary documents from conference participants, and subsequently published a nine-hundred page memoir/chronology of the black educational movement in Boston, from 1638 to 1975, to ensure black activism would be part of the historical record. Batson, like other civil rights advocates, understood that how we remember the history of “busing” for school desegregation matters.
Getting the history of “busing” right is important because it enables us to see more clearly how school segregation and educational inequality continued in the decades after Brown. The majority of white Americans never supported civil rights if it meant confronting or overturning the structures of racial discrimination that created and maintained segregated schools and neighborhoods. The battle over “busing” exposed this truth. The news media, lauded for its coverage of civil rights in the South, described civil rights advocates who called for school desegregation in the North “extremists” and shored up the myth that segregation in the North was innocent rather than the product of decades of local, state, and federal policies.

For over half a century parents, school officials, politicians, and writers from across the political spectrum have described “busing” as unrealistic, unnecessary, and unfair. “Busing” is so routinely described as having failed that we have lost sight of what this equation—“busing failed”—asks us to believe about the history of civil rights in the United States. Agreeing “busing failed” makes it possible to dismiss the educational goals that were a pillar of the civil rights movement and the constitutional promise of equality endorsed by, but was never fully realized after, Brown. The “busing failed” narrative is comforting because it authorizes people to accept the continuing racial and socioeconomic segregation of schools in the United States as inevitable and unchangeable. Why Busing Failed shows that national resistance to school desegregation was immense, but not inevitable. My hope is that dislodging the “busing failed” narrative and understanding the specific choices Americans made to thwart school desegregation leads to a more honest understanding of the history of civil rights.


8 “Cradle of the Confederacy” letter, [ca. 1957], Rosa Parks Collection, Box 18, Folder 10, Library of Congress.


10 Interview with Linda Brown Smith, conducted by Blackside, Inc. on October 26, 1985, for *Eyes on the Prize: America's Civil Rights Years* (1954-1965). Washington University Libraries, Film and Media Archive, Henry Hampton Collection.


In his influential chapter on the limitations of the de jure-de facto framework, historian Matthew Lassiter argues, “The label of de facto segregation is so historically loaded—so wrapped up in artificial binaries between South and North, between the educational and residential areas, between deliberate state action and private market forces, between white culpability and white innocence—that historians should discard it as an analytical and descriptive category and evaluate it instead as a cultural and political construct.” Matthew Lassiter, “De Jure/De Facto Segregation: The Long Shadow of a National Myth,” in The Myth of


34 United States National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, 203.


56 Ibid., 102.

57 Ibid., 107.

58 Ibid., 139-42.

59 Westin, Newswatch, 57.


