

**The Cost of Myth-Making:
Racial Tension and School Desegregation in Memphis**

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The U.S. Supreme Court's unanimous decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* (1954) has been termed the initial "shot heard 'round the world" for the conflict over segregated schools in the South.¹ Educational policy scholar Charles Clotfelter has argued, however, that for the first several years after that resounding "shot," southern school districts waged a largely "phony war" on school segregation.² The vague nature of federal and state school desegregation laws allowed most school districts to practice token integration into the late 1960s.³ In many districts, the racial composition of schools only started to change significantly in the early 1970s.⁴ New Supreme Court rulings in 1968 (*Green v. County School Board of New Kent County*), 1969 (*Alexander v. Holmes*), and 1971 (*Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education*) finally gave specific instructions on the scope, speed, and tools appropriate for desegregation plans.⁵ Thus equipped, school boards throughout the South began to topple the racially separate schools which

¹ David R. Goldfield, *Promised Land: The South Since 1945* (Arlington Heights, IL: Harlan Davidson, 1987), 69-70.

² Charles T. Clotfelter, *After Brown: The Rise and Retreat of School Desegregation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 23.

³ See Daniel Kiel, "Exploded Dream: Desegregation in the Memphis City Schools," *Law and Inequality: A Journal of Theory and Practice* 26, (Summer 2008), for a helpful overview of the lack of specific guidelines in the Supreme Court's initial school desegregation rulings.

⁴ See *School Desegregation in the 21st Century*, Christine Rossell, David Armor, and Herbert Walberg, eds., (New York: Greenwood, 2002), in which Jeffrey A. Raffell describes the turning point for school desegregation that occurred after the Supreme Court ruled against the freedom of choice plans that so many school systems used to evade *Brown*.

⁵ *Green* mandated that to achieve desegregation, school districts had to abolish racially identifiable schools. *Alexander* required schools to desegregate immediately. *Swann* stipulated that schools must reflect the racial composition of their districts as much as possible, and established busing as an acceptable means to that end. (All described in Clotfelter, 26.)

Brown had outlawed over a decade earlier. By 1973, the South could claim to be the least segregated region of the country.⁶

The massive desegregation plans of the early 1970s, many of which provided for buses to shuttle thousands of students to schools outside of their neighborhoods, evoked strong responses from white families. Many parents preferred to withdraw their children from the affected school systems rather than have them participate in the drastic changes; in short, “white flight” plagued the South. While pure racism probably did drive some whites to leave integrated schools, it is important to avoid reducing all white behavior to a “simplistic racial motive.”⁷ To account for the “exodus” of white students from desegregated school systems, scholars have identified various “push” and “pull” factors that exacerbated the phenomenon.⁸ Generally, the severity of white flight in any given community increased with the presence of more of these factors.⁹ “Push factors” (factors which drove whites away from integrated urban schools) included the perceptions that mixed-race schools provided inferior academic instruction and suffered from a lack of discipline.¹⁰ The details of desegregation plans could also act as “push” factors. Some types of plans — those which required extensive busing, for instance — felt more onerous than others. “Pull factors” (those which drew whites toward the suburban or private

⁶Willis D. Hawley et al., *Strategies for Effective Desegregation: Lessons from Research* (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1983), 4.

⁷*Ibid.*, 114.

⁸Kiel, 295; George W. Noblit and Thomas W. Collins, “School Flight and School Policy: Desegregation and Resegregation in the Memphis City Schools,” *The Urban Review* 10, no. 3 (1978): 207.

⁹Sarah J. Reber, “Court-Ordered Desegregation: Successes and Failures Integrating American Schools Since *Brown vs. Board of Education*,” *Journal of Human Resources*, 40, no. 3 (Summer 2005), 25.

¹⁰Noblit and Collins, 208.

schools) included the availability of alternative schooling options, as well as a family's financial ability to exercise those options.¹¹

In Memphis, the desire of white parents to keep their children out of integrated schools stemmed partially from their fear of contact with blacks. This push factor may seem obvious; surely misconceptions about race contributed to nearly every instance of white flight in the South. I argue that in Memphis, however, racial tensions caused many whites to harbor an especially acute fear of contact with blacks. By the time of the debates over busing, two traumatic events had lodged themselves in the recent memories of white Memphians: the sanitation strike of 1968 and the Black Monday school boycotts of 1969. These events, during which black protestors appeared violent and unruly, informed white perceptions about blacks in the early 1970s. Consequently, a massive number of whites chose to abandon the city schools rather than send their children to desegregated institutions where they feared anarchy would reign.¹² This situation resulted because white leaders in Memphis had ignored the city's racial problems for over a decade. City officials, businessmen, and members of the press constructed and sustained a myth of racial harmony in the city that allowed racial tensions to grow unchecked until they exploded in the large-scale protest movements of 1968 and 1969. After these conflagrations, race relations in Memphis were so poor that when confronted with a major desegregation plan in

¹¹ Reber, 31.

¹² Rolland Haynes, Jr., "No School on Mondays: Protest and Boycotts in the Memphis City Schools, Fall 1969" (master's thesis, Memphis State University, 1977), 21.

1973, white students abandoned the Memphis City Schools en masse, thereby rendering meaningful desegregation impossible.

I. Constructing the Myth

In the late 1950s, the Board of Education of the Memphis City Schools had few formal opportunities to begin frustrating the goals of *Brown*.¹³ Influential figures in the city, however, lost no time in laying the groundwork for the ultimate desegregation debacle. In an effort to preserve a favorable public image for their city, Memphis's leaders expressed hollow support for *Brown*. First, instead of debating *Brown* openly, city leaders adopted a rhetoric of evasion that allowed them to hide their segregationist sympathies. In addition, 1950s Memphis suffered from a leadership vacuum: the city lacked public figures with enough foresight to prepare the conservative metropolis for the inevitable changes of the Civil Rights Era. Instead of nudging Memphis toward a more progressive and tolerant future, the city's leaders held Memphis in its conservative past by initially cloaking racial tension and then by subtly feeding suspicion between the races. In this seminal period, Memphians created and popularized a myth of racial harmony in their city. This myth allowed them to ignore their community's festering problems until those problems finally erupted into violence during the sanitation strike of 1968 and the Black Monday school boycotts of 1969.

In *Brown*'s immediate wake, the task commenced to gloss over the difficulties of desegregating Memphis's public schools. Rather than openly reject the Supreme

¹³ Due to a lack of funding, the NAACP would not file a school desegregation lawsuit in Memphis until 1960.

Court's ruling as had been done by so many southern politicians, prominent Memphians issued statements of optimism and caution.¹⁴ Edmund Orgill, a well-known businessman who was elected mayor of Memphis in 1955, encouraged Memphis to "work out its [segregation] problem within the law."¹⁵ Similarly, Milton Bowers, the president of Memphis' school board, quickly announced his intention to follow the Court's instructions.¹⁶ Memphis' two main newspapers, the *Commercial Appeal* and the *Press-Scimitar*, also contributed to the city's moderate-styled self-portrait; instead of inciting defiance, pessimism, and fear, they promoted "cooperation" and "calmness."¹⁷ These seemingly promising reactions cast Memphis as a town ready to accept change. As the experience of later decades would testify, however, Memphis's claim to this forward-thinking, "moderate" image was false.

The tempered, optimistic reactions of leading Memphians to the *Brown* decision contrasted starkly with the "incendiary" responses issued by many other southerners.¹⁸ Rather than encouraging adherence to *Brown*, some southern newspapers attacked the decision. The Jackson, Mississippi *Daily News* caustically branded it a "welcome-mat" for miscegenation and the "mongrelization of the human race," while the Atlanta *Daily World* dismissed it as destined for "defeat."¹⁹ A group

¹⁴ Peter Irons, *Jim Crow's Children: The Broken Promise of the Brown Decision* (New York: Viking Penguin, 2002), 172.

¹⁵ Laurie B. Green, *Battling the Plantation Mentality: Memphis and the Black Freedom Struggle* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), 207.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁹ Editorial, "Bloodstains on White Marble Steps," Jackson, Miss. *Daily News*, May 18, 1954 quoted in Waldo E. Martin, Jr., ed., *Brown v. Board of Education: A Brief History with Documents*, (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's: 1998), 204; Editorial, "The Decision of a Century," Atlanta *Daily World*, May 18, 1954 quoted in Martin, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 202.

of senators from eleven southern states were among *Brown*'s most prominent denouncers. On March 12, 1956, they circulated the infamous "Southern Manifesto" through Congress, hoping to gather signatures from their fellow southern representatives.²⁰ Nearly one hundred congressmen backed the document (which accused the Supreme Court of "substitut[ing] naked power for established law"), and predicted that *Brown* could only result in "chaos and confusion."²¹ Memphis' leaders appeared especially moderate in comparison with Southern politicians who actually advocated closing public schools rather than desegregating them. Louisiana, Virginia, Mississippi, and Georgia were all sites of such threats.²²

Out of a desire to portray Memphis as moderate and law-abiding, public figures adopted a new vocabulary for discussing desegregation. Prior to *Brown*, the white community had considered the need to desegregate; after *Brown*, they shifted the debate to determine whether they should take an "extreme" or a "moderate" approach toward desegregation. This new vocabulary facilitated an interesting phenomenon. People on both sides of the debate employed the same terms to speak about desegregation. Since these terms held different meanings for different groups, however, Memphians were not engaging in a single, cohesive discussion about the issue. Instead, the different groups were participating in drastically dissonant conversations.

²⁰ Albert P. Blaustein and Robert L. Zangrando, eds., *Civil Rights and the Black American: A Documentary History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 451.

²¹ Kiel, 267; Martin, 220-221.

²² Goldfield, *Promised Land*, 69-70.

For opponents of desegregation, the words “moderate” and “extreme” simply put a new spin on the old debate. In their minds, “moderate” seemed to mean “glacially slow,” while “extreme” seemed to describe any change (however minor) that irreversibly could disrupt the *status quo* in Memphis.²³ Thus, when they spoke of moderation and extremism, they were not discussing different approaches to the same ultimate goal. In truth, they were referring to completely different goals: moderation meant avoiding meaningful desegregation as long as possible, while extremism meant taking intentional steps toward achieving desegregation.

To supporters of desegregation, on the other hand, “moderation” and “extremism” retained their more literal meanings. They defined a “moderate” approach to desegregation as a gradual (yet deliberate and intentional) path toward civil rights gains. An “extreme” approach meant demanding immediate and complete desegregation without attempting to discuss the issue in a community-wide forum. For advocates of desegregation, moderation and extremism were simply two different avenues to the same goal. An article in the *Tri-State Defender*, the well-known black weekly newspaper in the area, asserted that “[c]ompromise does not apply to this goal: only to methods of approach.”²⁴ Supporters of desegregation (mostly blacks) assumed that opponents of desegregation (mostly whites) had the same aims when they used the same terms. They believed that *everyone* who championed moderation

²³ “Mr. Stevenson and Gradualism,” *Tri-State Defender*, February 18, 56.

²⁴ Paul N. Carnes, “Rev. Paul N. Carnes Says of Moderation and Desegregation: Drifting is Dangerous,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 10, 1956, (emphasis added).

would truly support desegregation. But that assumption was not necessarily true. Many whites adopted the rhetoric of gradualism to *stall* desegregation.

White leaders' call for moderation produced a cautious hope in the black community. Consequently, blacks expressed an initial willingness to avoid protest if desegregation could be achieved — however slowly — through negotiation. Wisely, however, blacks refused to place their faith whole-heartedly in promises of progress; they acknowledged that, too often, “the words ‘gradualism’ and ‘moderation’ . . . mean[t] ‘Never make a start.’”²⁵ But despite a degree of skepticism, their modest hopes were genuine. During the 1950s, prominent blacks called for “people of goodwill who would sit down and work out . . . community problems together.”²⁶ Similarly, in response to the formation of a community group that proposed to tackle racial issues, one journalist assured his fellow blacks that they could “take hope that they are not going to be a group which will hide either evasion or inactivity under the cloak of moderation and non-violence.”²⁷ These optimistic statements indicate that during the 1950s, the social eruption Memphis experienced in 1968 was far from inevitable. On the contrary, the black community was eager to exhaust bipartisan avenues toward progress before staging marches, holding sit-ins, and filing lawsuits. One black businessman remarked that blacks and whites “can do a whole lot ourselves to smooth the path [for desegregation] before such [law]suits come.”²⁸ It would not take long for the black community to realize that segregationists simply

²⁵ Nat. D. Williams, “Suggest Planned Action Program,” *Tri-State Defender*, February 25, 1956.

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ Carnes, “Drifting is Dangerous,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 10, 1956.

²⁸ A. Maceo Walker quoted in Nat. D. Williams, “Action Program,” *Tri-State Defender*, February 25, 1956.

spouted progressive language to conceal their obstructionist intentions. If these promises had been kept, the city could have avoided social strife; once they were broken, however, they would only spawn disillusionment and resentment in the black community. Thus, this evasive new rhetoric contributed to the misunderstandings between blacks and whites that eventually turned violent in the late 1960s.

When assessing Memphis's inability to address the problem of desegregation, it is important to recognize that the city lacked able leaders with the prudence to prepare the community for civil rights changes. Indeed, this "leadership vacuum" was one of the many lamentable legacies of the city's long-time political boss Edward H. Crump, who died five months after the *Brown* ruling.²⁹ Historian Anne Trotter aptly described how Crump's reign in Memphis allowed civic leadership to atrophy: "Simply stated, 'Mr. Crump' ran everything. Memphians had neither to think nor to learn how to govern themselves."³⁰ Thus, while other cities took steps toward desegregation immediately after the *Brown* decision rather than waiting for lawsuits to necessitate changes, "Memphis was sitting nervously on the sidelines of the school desegregation battle."³¹ In southern cities such as Dallas, Greensboro, and Tampa (where local leaders and businessmen formed inter-racial committees to pave the way

²⁹ Anne Trotter, "The Memphis Business Community and Integration," in *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation*, Elizabeth Jacoway and David R. Colburn, eds. (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1982), 289; Bobby L. Lovett, *The Civil Rights Movement in Tennessee* (Knoxville: The University of Tennessee Press, 2005), 111.

³⁰ Trotter, 285.

³¹ Lovett, 61.

for change), desegregation occurred with relatively little violence.³² According to Trotter, however, Memphis never witnessed the rise of a

dynamic business leadership that has done so much for cities such as Atlanta and Houston. There is not and never has been a Chamber of Commerce or other business establishment group displaying the foresight to deal regularly with basic racial problems before they escalate into major crises.³³

It is important to note that a few inter-racial progress committees did exist in Memphis; however, they served more to perpetuate a false sense of racial harmony than to effect real change.

Memphis's two main attempts at inter-racial organizations were the Greater Memphis Race Relations Committee (GMRRC) and the Memphis Committee on Community Relations (MCCR). The GMRRC — composed of fifteen of the city's best known white businessmen, clergy, and labor leaders — was organized in 1956 to identify and alleviate racial tensions in the city.³⁴ Ironically, the committee soon dissolved as a result of its members' unwillingness to meet with leaders of the black community.³⁵ Especially at the time of its inception, however, the GMRRC furnished Memphis with many glowing newspaper headlines. Memphis enjoyed proclaiming itself the proud home of a "Harmony Committee," establishing itself as a place where "Violence is Opposed," and congratulating itself with forward-thinking mantras such as "Desegregation is Bound to Come," without having to live with the messy reality

³² Elizabeth Jacoway, "An Introduction: Civil Rights and the Changing South," in Jacoway and Colburn, 12.

³³ Trotter, 282.

³⁴ John Spence, "Greater Memphis Race Relations Group Forms: Moderation is their Guide," Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, February 22, 1956 (news clippings file, Memphis Public Library).

³⁵ Trotter, 286.

of those phrases.³⁶ The MCCR, formed in 1959, proved slightly more successful than the short-lived GMRRC. During the early 1960s, the MCCR did help desegregate some downtown businesses.³⁷ Despite its modest achievements, however, it failed to diffuse racial tensions in the city.³⁸

At the same time that Memphis was publicly touting its so-called amicable race relations, the city's leaders were privately conducting a campaign to encourage whites to fear integration. Although after 1954 blatantly condemning desegregation was no longer legally defensible, leaders in the white community found another means of inciting resistance to *Brown's* spirit: censorship. Memphis already had a long history of using censorship to preserve a racial hierarchy; indeed, since the Memphis Board of Censors was founded in 1921, one of its primary concerns was regulating the media's portrayal of racial topics. The group routinely banned images and performances that did not depict blacks as subservient. In 1936, for instance, it had even prohibited a local theater from showing a boxing match between heavyweight fighters Joe Lewis and Max Schmeling.³⁹ Laurie Green suggests that

³⁶ "Race Relations Unit Adds 21 Directors," Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, March 2, 1956 (news clippings file, Memphis Public Library); Editorial, "Violence is Opposed," Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, February 28, 1956 (news clippings file, Memphis Public Library); "Grider Says Desegregation is Bound to Come," Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, February 28, 1956 (news clippings file, Memphis Public Library).

³⁷ Trotter, 287.

³⁸ The MCCR was more successful at cloaking racial tensions than addressing them. The coterie included local officials and businessmen as well as the editors of Memphis's major white newspapers. In light of this group's composition, it is no wonder that controlling the city's image was a greater priority than taking action.

³⁹ Green, 149.

city authorities were not keen on letting “audiences witness twelve rounds of a black man and white man pummeling each other as equals.”⁴⁰

While censorship of this type did keep potentially pro-black material out of the public eye, it did not necessarily exacerbate already existing racial prejudices. This would not begin to change until the 1950s, when the board increasingly started to use censorship in an effort to brand biracial relationships as obscene. Lloyd T. Binford, the head of Memphis’ censorship board from 1921 until his retirement in 1955, spearheaded this new propaganda project and set the tone for future censors.⁴¹ Binford worked tirelessly to ban any movies or plays that depicted interracial romance. As historian Whitney Strub explained, Binford operated on the “unspoken premise” that “everything from the NAACP to CORE to . . . movies [with black actors] covertly strove toward this goal of mixing the races in a very literal and sexual sense.”⁴² With a linguistic sleight of hand, the white leadership equated the interracial contact depicted in the media with “obscenity” in the minds of white citizens. By presenting interracial contact — and thus desegregation — as obscene, leaders helped inflame racist fears and suspicions. During a time when they could have been schooling citizens in racial tolerance, they were actually doing the reverse and cultivating an environment of racial ignorance and intolerance. Admittedly, the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in *Roth v. U.S.* (1957), which strictly defined obscenity as only that which is completely devoid of social value, somewhat narrowed the

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 150.

⁴¹ Whitney Strub, “Black and White and Banned all Over: Race, Censorship, and Obscenity in Postwar Memphis,” *Journal of Social History* 40, no. 3 (Spring 2007): 6.

⁴² Strub, 5.

ensorship board's license to ban offensive materials.⁴³ However, in its heyday, the Memphis Board of Censors perfected a strategy of disguising its segregationist aims as efforts to defend public morality.

In the critical years following the *Brown* decision, then, the most significant accomplishment of Memphis' leaders was a carefully constructed myth of racial harmony. By appeasing the black community with hopeful rhetoric of gradual desegregation, they intended to avoid anything more than token desegregation. As a nice complement to that endeavor, the censorship board's crusade to "police the color line" in the media encouraged white citizens to believe that a desegregated society would be plagued by obscenities and immorality.⁴⁴ Under a veneer of unity and progress, then, the social terrain of Memphis was extremely polarized: white and black communities spoke two different languages, sustained no true dialogue, and were primed to harbor intense racial resentment. In the direct wake of *Brown*, Memphis's failure to acknowledge and address head on the ugly reality of racial tension hidden just below the surface would, by the end of the next decade, come back to haunt them.

II. Sustaining the Myth

For black Memphians, as the 1950s drew to a close, the white leadership's promises of desegregation rang hollow. The lack of voluntary action by local authorities from 1954 to 1959 showed blacks that they could not rely on white leaders to initiate change. Five years after *Brown*, the Memphis City Schools were still fully

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*

segregated, as were most public facilities. Gone were the days when black Memphians would voice support for white recommendations of “moderation” and “gradualism.” Instead, statements from Memphis’ black community took on an increasingly urgent tone. One editorial that ran in the *Tri-State Defender* in 1960 bluntly reflected this change of sentiment. The author urged blacks in Memphis to “demand . . . equity and equality” and insisted that “We have been patient, too patient The piece-meal technique of granting meaningless concessions . . . won’t do. We will not be appeased with crumbs. *We want the whole loaf now.*”⁴⁵ That very year, the newly disillusioned black community set about reaching for that loaf.

In 1960, various forms of black activism commenced in earnest in the Bluff City. The Memphis branch of the NAACP experienced record growth; sit-ins and marches occurred frequently in the city’s downtown; local civil rights activists filed complaints with unflagging regularity; and the NAACP sued the Memphis City Schools for maintaining a segregated school system. This period of persistent but controlled black activism lasted in Memphis until 1968, when the staunch segregationist Henry Loeb assumed the office of mayor.

In response to the new determination of blacks, white leaders evaded the requests of activists and suppressed their initiatives. Editors of the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* and the Memphis *Press-Scimitar* intentionally kept civil rights news off the front pages; the mayor and other city officials ignored formal complaints from the NAACP, and when pressured, granted only minor concessions. The Board

⁴⁵ Editorial, “Our Opinion: We Want the Whole Loaf Now,” *Tri-State Defender*, March 19, 1960 (emphasis added).

of Education also delayed school desegregation as long as possible, with serious ramifications. Hindering civil rights progress fueled black frustrations, and keeping civil rights news quiet made white citizens oblivious to the problems in their city.

Black Solidarity and Activism

One year after *Brown*, the Memphis branch of the NAACP had been described as “one of the most lethargic [sic] in the whole U.S.”⁴⁶ This quiescence was partly a by-product of living so long under Boss Edward H. Crump’s political machine, which held power from 1911 to 1954.⁴⁷ During that era, blacks (and many whites) had grown politically complacent. They were accustomed to working *within* the machine to gain benefits for their communities, and often accepted Crump’s handouts in return for their votes.⁴⁸ After Crump’s death, fresh leadership and a revived desire for political agency caused the ranks of the Memphis branch to swell. By 1960, the Memphis NAACP had earned a reputation for being the biggest branch in the South, and from 1960 to 1968 the growth only continued.⁴⁹

In the 1960s, young graduates from LeMoyne, a local black college, provided fresh leadership and vision for the NAACP; they eagerly spearheaded large-scale membership drives and voter registration campaigns. Between 1960 and 1968, the NAACP recruited an astounding 7,000 new members. Accordingly, at the 1968 annual NAACP conference in Mississippi, the Memphis branch received an award for

⁴⁶ H.T. Lockard, interview by Laurie B. Green in Green, 191.

⁴⁷ William D. Miller, *Mr. Crump of Memphis* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1964), 102; Trotter, 288.

⁴⁸ Green, 190.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 191.

being the first branch to exceed 10,000 members.⁵⁰ Thus, during this period, it was a robust and unified black community that mobilized to desegregate the city.

The nation-wide student sit-in movement of 1960 provided an early catalyst for activism in Memphis. The movement, which started on February 1, 1960 in Greensboro, North Carolina, did not take long to spread to the southwest corner of Tennessee.⁵¹ On March 18, 1960, twelve students from LeMoyne College brought the sit-ins directly to Memphis' Main Street.⁵² Their brief occupation of the white lunch counter of McLellan's department store triggered a flurry of sit-ins, marches, and rallies that lasted for months. Although college students were responsible for the demonstrations in the first weeks of the movement, blacks from all walks of life soon joined in. As historian Bobby Lovett noted, the sit-in movement gained so much momentum that "[b]y August 20 [1961], nearly twenty-five people a day were being arrested in the Memphis demonstrations."⁵³ Furthermore, the NAACP recorded that in 1961 alone the City Court heard over 300 sit-in cases.⁵⁴ Clearly, blacks in Memphis had moved from waiting on the sidelines for desegregation to demanding it in the streets.

Blacks also demanded change during this period by sending a barrage of formal complaints and requests to white officials. In particular, activists fought

⁵⁰ Maxine A. Smith, "Reports of the Executive Secretary of the Memphis NAACP" in *Maxine A. Smith NAACP Collection*, Processed by Patricia M. LaPointe (Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library, 2004), 40.

⁵¹ Goldfield, *Black, White, and Southern*, 119.

⁵² Lovett, 189.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 195.

⁵⁴ Maxine Smith, 1961 Annual Report, (Folder I, Item 10), *Maxine Smith NAACP Collection*, Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library.

police brutality which had plagued post-*Brown* Memphis. Agendas from the local NAACP's meetings during the 1960s are filled with complaints of police abuse. Almost every month, members had written letters to the local police department, the FBI, and the U.S. Justice Department, protesting acts such as "unprovoked arrest[s]," the "unjust detaining of [a] man driving [his] sick wife to [the] hospital," and a police beating which resulted in "blood clots on the [victim's] brain."⁵⁵ From the black perspective, Memphis had far to go before it could proclaim itself a city of interracial harmony, and blacks were determined to remind white officials of that fact.

White Leaders Respond to Black Activism

As black Memphians kept busy making their concerns heard, local white leaders during this period focused their attentions on projects of their own. Their main goal to maintain their city's positive public image had not changed since the late 1950s. Memphis could not turn into another Little Rock, for if it did, a large-scale conflict would harm business and deal a blow to civic pride. Achieving that goal, however, required different types of action in the 1960s than it had in the 1950s. As discussed previously, immediately after *Brown*, white community leaders simply pacified blacks by *claiming* to support desegregation. Promises of gradual progress were sufficient to prevent activists from taking to the streets right away, but once black activists mobilized, city leaders had to take action as well in order to maintain Memphis's public reputation as a place of racial harmony. One method of quelling black activism would have been to acquiesce to the demands of civil rights workers;

⁵⁵Smith, "Reports of the Executive Secretary" in LaPointe, 36-39.

that is, to desegregate schools and public facilities. Not surprisingly, most of Memphis' white leaders did not seriously consider this approach. Even if desegregation appeased blacks, it would have aroused the anger of the white community.⁵⁶ Other ways to make Memphis seem peaceful (at least to outsiders and to local whites) included appeasing black activists with token desegregation, obstructing or ignoring their efforts, and denying them publicity. From 1960 to 1968, public officials, newspaper editors, and school board members implemented these latter tactics with seeming success.

The first real opportunity for powerful white Memphians to apply these tactics came with the sit-ins of 1960. Initially, the mayor, police commissioner, and newspaper editors tried to stop the demonstrations and quash newspaper reports of them. During the first week of sit-ins in Memphis, police officers imprisoned more than forty protestors.⁵⁷ In addition, they arrested reporters and photographers trying to cover the events for the city's black newspapers.⁵⁸ According to Lovett, only those black papers (the *Memphis World* and the *Tri-State Defender*) faithfully reported news of the sit-ins. Memphis's white papers took a different approach; instead of acknowledging the sit-ins as a sign of Memphis's racial divisions, they glossed over the frustrations that sparked the protests. The *Commercial Appeal*, for instance, quoted Police Commissioner Claude A. Armour's euphemistic reaction to the first sit-in: "We have had excellent race relations in our city and sincerely hope this will

⁵⁶ Lovett, 193.

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 190.

⁵⁸ "Victory is Won," *Memphis Tri-State Defender*, March 26, 1960.

continue.”⁵⁹ No figure of authority, however, could wish good race relations into existence. Instead, the sit-in movement snowballed, as did the white media’s attempts to keep it quiet.⁶⁰

Throughout the 1960s, whites turned a blind eye to the NAACP’s numerous formal complaints of abuse and written requests for desegregation. The businesses and city departments that received the letters often failed to respond and the few that did reply flatly denied all NAACP allegations.⁶¹ Members of the black community felt especially frustrated that the barrage of complaints about police beatings and unjust arrests fell on deaf ears. One NAACP agenda from the late 1960s laments that “of hundreds of complaints filed by [the] NAACP charging abuse, none have resulted in [the] reprimand of officers.”⁶² The police department, in fact, did not agree to conduct an internal investigation of police brutality until 1967, and that was only in response to the three hundred protestors who spent a day marching around city hall.⁶³ Activists interpreted instances of unchecked police brutality during the 1960s as indicators of the white community’s true feelings toward them. Maxine Smith, the executive secretary of the local NAACP, recorded in one agenda that police officers committed such acts “to express resentment against direct action taken by [the] NAACP.”⁶⁴ In Smith’s eyes, the officers who abused blacks under the aegis of maintaining law and order had a peculiar way of keeping the peace. Like other white

⁵⁹ Wesley Pruden, Jr., “Dozen Negroes Stage Sit-In; McLellan’s on Main Closes,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 19, 1960.

⁶⁰ Green, 220.

⁶¹ Smith, “Reports of the Executive Secretary” in LaPointe, 33.

⁶² *Ibid.*, 40.

⁶³ Lovett, 214.

⁶⁴ Smith, “Reports of the Executive Secretary” in LaPointe, 42.

authority figures of the era, they widened the divide between blacks and whites in Memphis by their efforts to suppress public displays of racial tension.

Northcross: A Case Study of Black Persistence and White Obstruction

These examples of activism and suppression help illustrate the relationship between the black community and the white community in 1960s Memphis. For this study, however, the most relevant example of a civil rights initiative and its negative reaction from the white community is Memphis's school desegregation case. The chronology of this case reveals the full extent of both the black community's determination to effect change, and the white community's persistence in quietly frustrating it. In *Northcross v. Board of Education of the Memphis City Schools*, the NAACP charged the school board with operating a segregated school system, and the litigants demanded that the board remedy the situation with a new plan for immediate desegregation of all schools.⁶⁵ To satisfy court orders, the board tended to draft desegregation plans fraught with long timelines and generous loopholes. The NAACP considered these half-hearted plans insulting and repeatedly appealed them. This see-sawing between plans and rejections significantly slowed the process of integration in the city. As with the other examples of white resistance to black activism, the *Northcross* case worsened relations between blacks and whites in Memphis.

⁶⁵ Siblings Deborah and Theron Northcross, black elementary school students in the Memphis City Schools, were two of the eighteen original plaintiffs in the *Northcross* case. From "Only Her Name Was in Court," Memphis *Commercial Appeal*, May 25, 1963.

When *Northcross* was filed in 1960 — a full six years after *Brown*'s mandate — the Memphis City Schools were still completely segregated. The school board had managed to maintain the *status quo* for that long by insisting that formal barriers to desegregation no longer existed in the school system. Rather than desegregating schools by re-zoning students, the board relied on a law that essentially required students to desegregate themselves by applying for school transfers.

In 1957, Tennessee's legislature had passed several bills to provide individual school districts in Tennessee with tools to begin the desegregation process. According to the Memphis branch of the NAACP, these "permissive acts" were not bona fide efforts to facilitate desegregation; instead, they made "it easier to prolong segregation in the public schools."⁶⁶ It was one of these laws – the Pupil Assignment Law – that the Memphis school board used as its sole tool for accomplishing desegregation.

The Pupil Assignment Law allowed students who were unhappy with their zoning assignments to submit applications for transfer to their local school boards. The school boards would then review the applications based on twenty-two different eligibility factors. Some of those factors were concrete and practical, such as proximity to schools and available classroom space. Other factors, however, were

⁶⁶ Integration Service, Inc., *Integration Service Bulletin*, 3, no. 4 (April 25, 1957), in Memphis and Shelby County Room, Memphis Public Library.

entirely subjective and “intangible,” and included concerns such as the pupil’s “sex, morals, conduct, health, . . . personal standards,” and psychological readiness.⁶⁷

The criteria for transferring under the Pupil Assignment Law provided board members with numerous grounds to deny blacks admittance to white schools. The “obstructionist tactics,” however, were not only evident in the subjective criteria. If denied a transfer, applicants could pursue “a cumbersome method” of getting the denial reviewed that, until 1961, had proven useless. Until the NAACP filed suit, the school board used this law to keep the Memphis City Schools segregated.

In 1960, eighteen black students and their parents spoke for the rest of the black community when they challenged the legality of the school board’s transfer practices. Represented by a pair of NAACP-provided lawyers, including future U.S. Supreme Court justice Thurgood Marshall, the plaintiffs in *Northcross* sought relief through one of two possible avenues. They requested either an injunction against the school board prohibiting them from “operating or fostering a bi-racial school system in violation of the Fourteenth Amendment,” or a command that the board devise a plan to restructure the school system on a unitary, as opposed to a biracial, basis.⁶⁸

The judge of Tennessee’s Western District and the Memphis Board of Education immediately began their sustained effort to thwart this attempt at desegregation. *Northcross* was automatically assigned to Judge Marion Speed Boyd, the only district judge in the area. Despite Judge Boyd’s reputation for alleged

⁶⁷ *Tennessee Code*, section 49-1742 cited by Willie Wilbert Herenton, “A Historical Study of School Desegregation in the Memphis City Schools, 1954-1970” (PhD diss., Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 1971), 55-56.

⁶⁸ Robert M. McRae, *Oral History of the Desegregation of Memphis City Schools, 1954-1974: (abridged)*, (Memphis: University of Memphis Oral History Research Office, 1997), 36.

professionalism, he fully supported the Board of Education's evasive tactics.⁶⁹ In his decision, Boyd praised the makeup of the school board, and stated that it "has fully realized it is under a clear legal duty to . . . bring about an elimination of racial segregation. The court finds it has already done that . . . when they set up operations under the Tennessee Pupil Placement Plan."⁷⁰ The NAACP quickly appealed the decision, refusing to accept a ruling that would rubber-stamp the school system's cloaked racism.

On appeal, the Sixth Circuit Court in Cincinnati exposed Boyd's racially-motivated judgment and ordered the school board to devise, as historian Roger Biles phrased it, "a comprehensive desegregation plan that would go beyond tokenism."⁷¹ The claim shared by Judge Boyd and the defendants that Memphis schools were not organized by race was "contrary to the evidence and clearly erroneous."⁷² When Judge Boyd wrote his opinion in April 1961, forty-four percent of Memphis students were black and attended forty-four all-black schools; the fifty-six percent of Memphis students that were white attended seventy-nine all-white schools.⁷³ The court took particular issue with the fact that by using only the Pupil Assignment Law as a means to desegregate, the Memphis school board had placed the burden of initiating desegregation on students and their parents. The final decision required the Board of Education to submit to the district court a new, compulsory plan for desegregation in

⁶⁹ See McRae, *Oral History*, 36 for evidence of Judge Boyd's professional reputation prior to his ruling in the *Northcross* case.

⁷⁰ McRae, 39.

⁷¹ Roger Biles, "A Bittersweet Victory: Public School Desegregation in Memphis," *Journal of Negro Education* 55 (Autumn 1986): 475.

⁷² *Northcross v. Board of Education of the City of Memphis* in Herenton, 68.

⁷³ McRae, 40-41.

compliance with *Brown* that did not require black children to apply “for that to which they are entitled as a matter of right.”⁷⁴

The Memphis Board of Education’s new plan, which the board submitted to Judge Boyd’s district court in 1962, retained delaying tactics. The plan provided for the desegregation of grades one through three for the 1962-1963 school year, and for one additional grade each subsequent year. Under this plan, which the board would put into effect through zoning and transfers, all grades would have been integrated by 1971. Although Judge Boyd upheld the gradual desegregation proposal, the Sixth Circuit Court again reversed his ruling and criticized the board’s questionable practices in its 1964 appellate decision.⁷⁵

The Circuit Court, believing that the original desegregation deadline of 1971 was too distant to satisfy *Brown II*’s “deliberate speed” requirement, instructed the Board of Education to integrate all grades by 1966.⁷⁶ In reference to the sluggish efforts of Memphis authorities to achieve meaningful desegregation, Supreme Court Associate Justice Arthur Goldberg once remarked that “‘*Brown* never contemplated that the concept of ‘deliberate speed’ would countenance indefinite delay in elimination of racial barriers in school.’”⁷⁷

The timeline, however, was not the only element of the new plan designed to delay desegregation; loopholes were also built into the zoning policies to prevent genuine progress. In the plan, the school board identified several key considerations

⁷⁴ *Northcross v. Board of Education in Herenton*, 67-68.

⁷⁵ Herenton, 71.

⁷⁶ McRae, 43-44.

⁷⁷ “Goldberg’s Stand on ‘All Deliberate Speed,’” *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, May 27, 1963.

to follow when redrawing zones, including drawing them “with a view to disturbing the people of the community as little as possible.”⁷⁸ Such language encouraged gerrymandering, as was evident in the shapes of some of the new zones. Dr. Floyd L. Bass of Memphis’ LeMoyne College, who testified in the circuit court case to this effect, brought to the court’s attention thirty-nine Memphis schools that were located in areas in which lines could be drawn to create a maximum or minimum of segregation. In each instance, the lines suspiciously preserved a maximum of segregation.⁷⁹ In response to this criterion, the Court wrote, “We do not think that drawing zone lines in such a manner as to disturb the people as little as possible is a proper factor in rezoning the schools.”⁸⁰

Throughout the litigation of the *Northcross* case, Judge Boyd and the Board of Education strove to surrender as little ground as possible to the NAACP. It was not until the late 1960s, when Judge Boyd retired and Judge Robert McRae assumed control of the case, that the Memphis City Schools planned to accomplish anything more than token desegregation. By that point, however, NAACP members had grown weary of waiting for the case to “worm” its way through the biased legal system.⁸¹ They were ready for swift, decisive action.

Historian David Goldfield, in his book *Promised Land*, offers some insightful observations about how civil rights activism in the 1960s affected the consciousness of white southerners. According to Goldfield, the black community’s persistent

⁷⁸ *Northcross v. Board of Education* in Herenton, 72.

⁷⁹ McRae, 43.

⁸⁰ *Northcross v. Board of Education* in Herenton, 74.

⁸¹ Kiel, 9.

demands for change “made blacks visible,” and made the inequalities of life in the South difficult to ignore.⁸² This visible activism had the potential to “generate a jarring contradiction between belief and reality, a conflict resolved only by acknowledging the reality or by plunging deeper into fantasy.”⁸³ As their repressive responses to black activism makes evident, white leaders in Memphis consistently obscured the black community’s struggle for visibility. Thus, for Goldfield, they “plung[ed] deeper” into their city’s myth of racial harmony instead of “acknowledging the reality” of the situation.⁸⁴ Throughout most of the 1960s, Memphis had managed to avoid the major race riots which had broken out in other cities.⁸⁵ Whites incorrectly believed this was evidence of their city’s positive race relations and they assumed the perceived relative calm would continue.⁸⁶ Indeed, in 1968, on the eve of the sanitation strike, the Memphis *Press-Scimitar* assured citizens that Memphis was “the city with the best race relations in the nation.”⁸⁷

By handling racial matters in this way, white leaders bifurcated Memphis society. Blacks and whites literally moved in two separate worlds. Although some public facilities and schools had been desegregated by the late 1960s, much progress was still needed. By 1966, for example, over ninety-seven percent of the black students who were enrolled in the Memphis City Schools still attended all-black

⁸² Goldfield, *Promised Land*, 97.

⁸³ *Ibid.*

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

⁸⁵ Beverly G. Bond and Janann Sherman. *Memphis in Black and White*, (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2003), 137.

⁸⁶ Trotter, 289.

⁸⁷ Memphis *Press-Scimitar*, March 1968, quoted by Bond, 137.

schools.⁸⁸ Additionally, blacks and whites held radically different perceptions about the city's racial dynamics. A decade of obstructed goals had bred intense frustration and pessimism in the black community.⁸⁹ On the other hand, because city officials and the press silenced news of black activism, white citizens had become oblivious to the severity of the city's racial discord. As Mayor Henry Loeb took office in 1968, few whites could appreciate the extent of the black community's frustration. It would not take long, however, to discover how quickly the behavior of this staunch segregationist could cause Memphis' myth of harmony to dissolve.

III. Exploding the Myth

A pivotal year for Memphis, 1968, marked the complete transformation of the city's social landscape.⁹⁰ The sanitation strike, which culminated with the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., exploded the city's myth of racial harmony within a few short weeks that spring. In the aftermath of the strike, praise for the city's token desegregation during the 1960s — its “striking [racial] changes,” its “[q]uiet” status, and the “credit” it “reflected on the United States” — gave way to negative national press.⁹¹ After Dr. King's murder, one particularly devastating article in *Time* described the city as both a “Southern backwater” and a “decaying Mississippi river town.”⁹² It seemed that only the condemnation of the rest of the country could force white Memphians to acknowledge their own dire racial situation.

⁸⁸ Kiel, 277.

⁸⁹ Biles, 476.

⁹⁰ See Green, 275-6; Kiel, 8; Bond, 139.

⁹¹ Trotter, 287; Strub, 11; Biles, 471.

⁹² Bond, 139; “The Assassination,” *Time*, April 12, 1968, under “U.S.,” <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,838132-1,00.html> (accessed July 20, 2008).

Many historians have explored the drastic changes which the sanitation strike wrought on Memphis' race relations and its public image — and appropriately so. They have largely overlooked, however, another massive demonstration in the city's history that closely paralleled the sanitation strike. The Black Monday school boycotts, which occurred in the Memphis City Schools during the fall of 1969, dealt an almost equally mortal blow to the racial atmosphere in Memphis. Many of the circumstances surrounding these two events are similar; they share the same root causes, catalysts, and consequences. Both the sanitation strike and the Black Monday boycotts were initially small-scale attempts to protest a decade of withheld civil rights. For sanitation workers and students alike, the time had come to seek “an outlet for long felt frustrations.”⁹³ Both movements ballooned in scope when intransigent white authorities refused to negotiate on civil rights issues. Most importantly, the sanitation strike and the Black Monday boycotts increased animosity and resentment between the black and white communities in Memphis. Unlike the protests of the early and mid-1960s, which occurred in discrete locations and suffered from dampened publicity, these two events shook the consciousness of the entire city. In particular, the negative publicity surrounding these conflicts incited fear of blacks in the minds of previously complacent white citizens. Newly armed with acute anxieties and racist stereotypes, many white parents could not bear for their children to take part in the massive desegregation plans of the early 1970s. Thus, *both* the sanitation strike and Black Mondays damaged race relations in Memphis to such an

⁹³ Trotter, 291.

extent that the 1973 busing plan turned out to be a pyrrhic victory for school desegregation.

The Memphis Sanitation Strike

For years, black sanitation workers in Memphis had endured long working hours, scanty wages, and discriminatory working conditions.⁹⁴ Several times during the 1960s, sanitation workers had attempted to unionize and stage strikes. The city responded to each attempt by declaring the unions illegal and firing the strikers.⁹⁵ On January 30, 1968, an incident occurred that spurred the workers to strike regardless of the consequences. On that day, two sanitation workers took shelter from inclement weather inside a garbage compactor. Rain caused an electrical shortage and the machine malfunctioned, crushing the two workers to death. To add to the horror of the accident, the city had provided no insurance for the workers' families.⁹⁶ Consequently, 1,375 sanitation workers decided to strike on February 12; they demanded higher pay, recognition of their union, and improved working conditions.⁹⁷

The strike was not immediately turbulent.⁹⁸ Rather, it was the “tragedy of [Mayor Henry Loeb’s] inflexibility” that caused it to evolve into a city-wide conflict.⁹⁹ In the first week of the strike, the city council negotiated a compromise with the strikers that included only a small pay increase. Mayor Loeb, who

⁹⁴ Green, 276-7; Lovett, 215.

⁹⁵ Green, 267.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 279.

⁹⁷ Lovett, 215.

⁹⁸ Bond, 137-8.

⁹⁹ Trotter, 291.

maintained that the strike was illegal, refused to authorize the agreement.¹⁰⁰ On February 22 and 23, similar instances occurred. On those days, strikers attended *ad hoc* meetings held by the city council, both of which were “emotion-charged” and unproductive.¹⁰¹ At the second meeting, council members made hasty appearance, read a statement that they had voted to support Mayor Loeb’s hard-line stance, and filed out. As the irate strikers left the meeting, police officers “indiscriminately” wielded clubs and sprayed mace.¹⁰² After these meetings, Loeb further aggravated the strikers by formally cutting them off from discussions and ordering an injunction against them.¹⁰³ As these responses demonstrated, the mayor and his councilmen failed to acknowledge that the strikers were demanding not only better pay and union recognition, but also recognition of their human worth.¹⁰⁴ Thus, the aloof and dismissive attitude of the city officials felt like a serious affront to the sanitation workers — and by extension — to the entire black community.¹⁰⁵

Following these two meetings, the strike ballooned into a community-wide protest effort; ministers, women, and students began spear-heading marches and boycotting downtown businesses.¹⁰⁶ But even as the strike dragged on into mid-March, Mayor Loeb showed no signs of relenting. The strike had become “a

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 292.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 293.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ See Green, 285 for a discussion of how the famous slogan of the strikers – “I AM A MAN” – proves this point that the workers’ concerns were abstract as well as material.

¹⁰⁵ “On the Brink in Memphis,” *Time*, August 16, 1968, under “U.S.,” (accessed July 20, 2008), <http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,838540,00.html>.

¹⁰⁶ Green, 280.

showdown” between Loeb and the black community.¹⁰⁷ Excepting a couple of brief attempts at negotiation, this trend would continue for the duration of the strike.

The city council’s two brief efforts to mediate the strike in March and April were not sincere attempts at reconciliation. In each instance, fear of negative publicity (rather than concern for the workers’ rights) motivated the council to act. The first of these calls for mediation, which took place on March 21, 1968, was clearly a panicked and desperate move by the city council. Significantly, March 22 was the day Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was scheduled to visit Memphis and lead a peaceful march through downtown.¹⁰⁸ The Memphis strike was beginning to attract national attention, and council members worried that King’s march would bring a new level of disruption and negative press to the city.¹⁰⁹ In fact, the staff of the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* also advocated some form of mediation.¹¹⁰ The city council did not wish to read news of a race riot in Memphis, and the press did not want to print it. Fortunately for both groups, a snowstorm postponed the march, which was then rescheduled for March 28.¹¹¹ In the meantime, however, the purported negotiations proved entirely fruitless. A third-party labor mediator was brought in to draft a compromise between the strikers and the city, but Loeb unequivocally rejected that settlement.¹¹² The mayor employed his own method of

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 279.

¹⁰⁸ Trotter, 294.

¹⁰⁹ Goldfield, *Promised Land*, 168.

¹¹⁰ Millie Allen Beik, *Labor Relations* (London: Greenwood Press, 2005), 229.

¹¹¹ Lovett, 217.

¹¹² Beik, 229.

persuasion during these negotiations; five days after talks began, he cut off the strikers' food stamps. The next day, the talks were abandoned.¹¹³

Dr. King's march on March 28 turned violent when a few teen-aged participants began breaking store windows downtown.¹¹⁴ The resulting riot, which included the death of a sixteen-year-old protester, catapulted Memphis into the national headlines.¹¹⁵ But even after this turbulent episode, the mayor and the city council failed to address the city's mounting racial tensions; instead, they brought in the National Guard to quell the demonstrations.¹¹⁶

Loeb's ultimate failure to usher the city through a time of racial conflict came after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. on April 4, 1968. Although Loeb did extend his sympathies to King's wife after the assassination, the intransigent mayor refused to budge from his hard-line stance against the strikers.¹¹⁷ Not even a petition signed by over three hundred black and white local ministers calling for an end to the strike changed his mind.¹¹⁸ Finally, Loeb relented after President Johnson ordered James Reynolds, the Undersecretary of Labor, to travel to Memphis and negotiate a solution.¹¹⁹ On April 16, 1968, the city recognized the union, raised the workers' wages, and instituted a system for filing grievances.¹²⁰ Two months and several riots after the first strike occurred in February, the city met nearly all of the

¹¹³ Trotter, 294.

¹¹⁴ Bond, 137-38.

¹¹⁵ Kiel, 8.

¹¹⁶ Trotter, 295.

¹¹⁷ Sharon D. Wright, *Race, Power, and Political Emergence in Memphis* (New York: Garland Publishing: 2000), 70.

¹¹⁸ Wright, 70.

¹¹⁹ Green, 283.

¹²⁰ Wright, 70.

union's demands. As one city council member admitted, "We [city officials] could have avoided all this, including the death of Dr. King," by making reconciliation and negotiation priorities from the beginning.¹²¹

Although relative calm was restored in Memphis after the sanitation strike ended, race relations in the city had sustained irreparable damage.¹²² As a result of the peaceful public image Memphis claimed for itself in the early and mid-1960s, many white Memphians had been oblivious to the frustrations of the black community. When tensions exploded during the sanitation strike, however, the "veneer of civility and order" which had comforted white Memphians during the 1960s dissolved abruptly.¹²³

The dissolution of the myth was, in itself, a positive thing. It allowed some white Memphians to recognize the need for racial reconciliation. After the assassination of Dr. King, for example, local businessman John T. Fisher organized the interracial "Memphis Cares" meeting. The city-wide forum, which drew approximately six thousand attendees, has been described as "a tough session in which various prominent Memphians voiced their thoughts about city problems and annoyed each other."¹²⁴ Thus, the collapse of the myth did create some space for healthy debate between the races. Most reconciliation projects, however, came "too little, too late."¹²⁵

¹²¹ Lovett, 223.

¹²² Bond, 139.

¹²³ Kiel, 8.

¹²⁴ Trotter, 296.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 296.

After the sanitation strike, constructive approaches to race relations in Memphis were the exception. After the myth of racial harmony dissolved, whites quickly formed new perceptions of the black community they had ignored for so long. Often, these perceptions were negative. Mayor Loeb, who enjoyed “immense popularity with whites,” provided one model for how to regard the black community.¹²⁶ His handling of the strike sent the message that blacks were rabble-rousers with whom rational leaders could not cooperate. And although Loeb’s actions seem extreme and perhaps unbelievable by today’s standards, many of his contemporaries admired his leadership. For example, local white businessmen adamantly supported Loeb’s stance on the strike until the assassination of Dr. King necessitated a new approach.¹²⁷

The local media also played a significant role in molding the perceptions of white citizens. Coverage of the sanitation strike by the white newspapers in Memphis was biased at best, and clearly degrading to blacks at worst. Labor historian Millie Beik has noted that the Memphis *Commercial Appeal* “blamed *all* racial tensions” on the strikers. Furthermore, the newspaper voiced “no criticisms whatsoever” of the ways in which Mayor Loeb and the city council handled the situation.¹²⁸ The *Commercial Appeal* also neglected to laud efforts at reconciliation which occurred during the strike. Rather than commending the blacks and whites who hashed out racial issues at the Memphis Cares meeting, the paper “buried” news of the event in

¹²⁶ Wright, 71.

¹²⁷ Trotter, 297.

¹²⁸ Beik, 229 (emphasis added).

its back pages.¹²⁹ Smaller white papers in the Memphis area spun the strike with inflammatory language. After Dr. King's demonstration on March 28 turned violent, the *Whitehaven-Southaven Star* ran an article branding the march as a display of "unlashed animalistic destruction."¹³⁰ The title of the article alone was a racist attempt to cast blacks as savage outsiders: "Africa's Bush Country Seemed Not Far Away Last Thursday."¹³¹ These unfavorable portrayals of the black community filled the silence about civil rights activism that had been standard during the previous decade. Powerful white Memphians — Loeb, the council members, and press editors — used their influence to replace whites' complacency about civil rights with a fear of blacks.

Black Mondays

In an echo of the sanitation strike, the Black Monday boycotts arose out of the black community's determination to break a decade-long delay on civil rights progress. By 1969, the *Northcross* case had effected little change on the racial composition of the Memphis City Schools. Granted, *Northcross* did pressure the Board of Education to bring about token desegregation in the beginning of the decade; in 1961, thirteen black first-graders broke the color line in Memphis when they entered four formerly all-white primary schools.¹³² But progress did not accelerate much from there; eight years later, over 70 percent of Memphis' black

¹²⁹ Trotter, 296.

¹³⁰ Lovett, 218.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 218.

¹³² Kiel, 5.

students still attended completely black schools.¹³³ Additionally, the NAACP suspected the Board of Education of discriminatory hiring practices. The number of black teachers in the Memphis City Schools did not reflect the racial makeup of the student population. And as of 1969, the system did not employ any black upper level administrators or school board members.¹³⁴

The NAACP had addressed these complaints to various Memphis officials in the late 1960s. In one letter, the NAACP even accused the school board of having “failed this community.”¹³⁵ The letter labeled the board’s minimal efforts at desegregation as merely “window dressing” over the true state of the Memphis City Schools.¹³⁶ Still, the organization’s persistent appeals to the Superintendent of the Memphis City Schools, Mayor-Elect Henry Loeb, and city councilmen brought no solutions.¹³⁷ Clearly, traditional roads to redress had limited effectiveness. Like the sanitation workers, advocates of school desegregation believed that the time for diplomatic action had passed. In the words of legal scholar and Memphis native Daniel Kiel, “the Memphis City Schools were about to embark on a new and highly divisive phase.”¹³⁸

To spur the school board to address some of these issues, the NAACP stepped up its tactics; it went from filing complaints to issuing ultimatums. On July 28, 1969,

¹³³ Bond, 139.

¹³⁴ Rolland Haynes, Jr., “No School on Mondays: Protest and Boycotts in the Memphis City Schools, Fall 1969” (master’s thesis, Memphis State University, 1977), 2.

¹³⁵ Memphis NAACP, letter to Board of Education of the Memphis City Schools on September 8, 1967, quoted in Lovett, 80.

¹³⁶ *Ibid.*

¹³⁷ Smith, “Reports of the Executive Secretary” in LaPointe, 33.

¹³⁸ Kiel, 10.

local NAACP officials sent a letter to the Board of Education in which they questioned the “intent and integrity” of the board members.¹³⁹ In the letter, the NAACP officials insisted that the school board explain and defend its discriminatory zoning and hiring practices; they demanded a written response by August 1, 1969.¹⁴⁰

Like Loeb’s disregard for the concerns of the sanitation workers, the school board’s dismissive attitude toward the demands of the NAACP caused the conflict over the schools to reach a massive scale. Initially, the school board completely ignored the NAACP’s letter.¹⁴¹ A visit from a large group of picketers finally convinced the board to pen a response.¹⁴² The NAACP interpreted the board’s “nonconciliatory” defense of its practices as a “crossing of the Rubicon.”¹⁴³ Smith especially took issue with the board’s assertion that it would make “no promise nor commitment” to increase the number of black administrators in the school system.¹⁴⁴ In an attempt to elicit action from the board rather than an “inadequate” and defensive response, the NAACP issued a final ultimatum; this “terse manifesto” included fifteen specific demands of the school board.¹⁴⁵ Again, the board did not respond to the demands and refused to negotiate with the NAACP.¹⁴⁶ Francis Coe, the one progressive member of the school board, criticized her fellow board members for their treatment of the situation. Although Coe believed that the NAACP’s actions

¹³⁹ Haynes, 2.

¹⁴⁰ Haynes, 3; Sherry L. Hoppe and Bruce W. Speck, *Maxine Smith’s Unwilling Pupils: Lessons Learned in Memphis’s Civil Rights Classroom* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 2007), 45.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*

¹⁴³ Haynes, 3.

¹⁴⁴ Hoppe, 250.

¹⁴⁵ Haynes, 5.

¹⁴⁶ Lovett, 85.

were somewhat drastic, she maintained that “the board was partially to blame” for the escalation of the conflict.¹⁴⁷ Her colleagues were “too adamant, too rigid” on the issues; they essentially drove the black community to “acts of frustration.”¹⁴⁸ As Coe explained, the NAACP was determined to cause the school board to recognize and consider its demands. Accordingly, it called on black students, teachers, and administrators to stage the first Black Monday boycott on October 13, 1969.¹⁴⁹

The “Black Mondays” campaign did not seek to combat discrimination by merely increasing the *visibility* of protestors. That strategy, which was the foundation of the sit-in movement, had failed to achieve the type of large-scale changes that the NAACP wanted to accomplish in the schools. And in fact, Frances Coe once remarked that despite the NAACP’s constant complaints, most of the school board members were “blind” to black frustrations.¹⁵⁰ This time, Memphis NAACP leaders Maxine Smith and Laurie Sugarmon took a more creative approach to activism. They designed the Black Mondays campaign to target the school board where it hurt: the purse.¹⁵¹ The Memphis City Schools received state funding based on the number of pupils that attended each day.¹⁵² The Black Mondays campaign aimed to drain the school board’s budget by encouraging black students, teachers, and administrators to boycott the schools one day per week. The five “Black Mondays” which the NAACP staged in October and November of 1969 took a substantial toll on the school system.

¹⁴⁷ Haynes, 13.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

¹⁴⁹ Kiel, 9.

¹⁵⁰ Hoppe, 49.

¹⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹⁵² Lovett, 85.

At the height of the movement, a total of 68,000 students and 675 teachers remained home on a single day.¹⁵³

The Black Mondays campaign eventually succeeded in facilitating change in the Memphis City Schools. In mid-November, a coalition including representatives from the NAACP, the school board, and local businesses met to form a compromise that would end the boycotts.¹⁵⁴ The parties agreed to restructure the Board of Education to include black members, and determined that the school system should be intentional about hiring more black teachers and administrators.¹⁵⁵

Although the boycotts nudged the Memphis City Schools closer to the goal of integrated and non-discriminatory education, they had damaging ripple effects throughout the city. The Black Monday campaign, like the sanitation strike, received much unfavorable publicity. Local newspapers and city officials gave cues to white citizens about how to perceive the black students and teachers who participated in the boycotts. Unsurprisingly, Mayor Loeb was one such model. As historian Whitney Strub explained, Loeb “simply ignored” the complaints of the Black Monday protestors and supported ordinances to limit their demonstrations.¹⁵⁶ In one instance, the mayor assured whites in Memphis that he was “just as fed up with Black Mondays as you are.”¹⁵⁷ The Board of Education sought to vilify the teachers and students who participated in Black Mondays. In a press release, the board labeled the

¹⁵³ Kiel, 9.

¹⁵⁴ Hoppe, 56.

¹⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁵⁶ Strub, 9.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 9.

boycotts as “repulsive and odious to any right thinking citizen.”¹⁵⁸ Implicitly, then, white public figures characterized blacks as “wrong-thinking” citizens whose disruptive actions should be ignored.

The negative publicity surrounding Black Mondays intensified white parents’ fears of desegregation. They did not want their children sitting in classes with the same black students who had skipped school to attend protest marches every week. White citizens barraged the school board with phone calls and telegrams opposing any sort of compromise with the NAACP. One message, which praised school board member Hugh Bosworth’s rejection of the compromise, illustrated the intense anxieties some whites felt after the Black Monday boycotts. The anonymous author of the letter thanked Bosworth for not surrendering to black “anarchy.” In a foreboding statement, he went on to assure Bosworth that “[t]he great ‘silent majority’ is with you, and we will take a hand in matters of the future.”¹⁵⁹ In the early 1970s, the sincerity of the author’s pledge became painfully evident.

IV. The Busing Plan of 1973 and Beyond

The white community’s fear of desegregation, largely cultivated by the sanitation strike and Black Monday protests, ultimately played itself out in the debates over busing in the Memphis City Schools. Because Memphis was such a residentially segregated city, the school board had managed to avoid implementing a large-scale desegregation plan throughout the 1960s. Neighborhood schools were still the norm, and the city had few neighborhoods with enough black and white

¹⁵⁸ quoted in Hoppe, 51.

¹⁵⁹ Anonymous letter to Hugh Bosworth quoted in Haynes, 21.

families from which to compose truly integrated schools. Accordingly, the black presence in white schools at the end of that decade remained miniscule. By 1969, over eighty percent of black students still attended segregated schools.¹⁶⁰

As long as the number of blacks in previously all-white schools stayed below a certain tipping point, white families felt comfortable with the schools and stayed put. As the 1971 Supreme Court ruling in *Swann v. Mecklenburg* increased the perceived threat of meaningful desegregation, however, white anxieties about desegregation rose. Civil rights leader Maxine Smith expressed the situation fittingly when the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* quoted her as having said, “The whites are afraid of majority-black schools. They can stand a little bit of black, but only a little.”¹⁶¹ When the busing mandates of the 1970s made meaningful desegregation imminent in Memphis, many white families finally “t[ook] a hand in matters” and retreated from the Memphis City Schools.¹⁶²

Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg (1971) posed an ominous threat to “segregation stalwarts.”¹⁶³ It recognized busing as an appropriate (and sometimes mandatory) means to convert a biracial school system into a unitary system.¹⁶⁴ In 1972, much to the dismay of many white families in Memphis, newly appointed District Court Judge Robert McRae ordered the Memphis Board of Education to implement a major desegregation plan consistent with the new standards set by

¹⁶⁰ Biles, 476.

¹⁶¹ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 2, 1983 cited by Biles, 482.

¹⁶² Anonymous letter to Hugh Bosworth quoted in Haynes, 21.

¹⁶³ Biles, 476.

¹⁶⁴ McRae, 66.

Swann. McRae's "Plan Z," which went into effect in the fall of 1973, included an extensive busing component: it provided for the transport of 38,000 students.¹⁶⁵

The prospect of widespread busing cued white Memphians to begin their hasty exit from the city schools. Even before the implementation of Plan Z, fearful anticipation of McRae's ruling caused significant white flight. In the words of Roger Biles, "[t]he panic engendered by the spectre of busing manifested itself in the exodus of white students from the schools — from the fall of 1970 to April, 1972, at which time Judge McRae announced his decision, some 4,030 white students left the system."¹⁶⁶

Biles's statistic foreshadowed the effects of the decision itself. Public policy scholar Sarah Reber explained the immediate and severe reaction to the Memphis busing plan when she noted that the initial "white enrollment decline in Memphis was *atypically sharp*" compared with other cities.¹⁶⁷ In the first twelve months after Memphis instituted its plan, the system lost over thirty-five percent of its white students.¹⁶⁸ By contrast, Nashville's Metro school system lost approximately eighteen percent of its white students during the first year of busing.¹⁶⁹ School desegregation expert Gary Orfield has also conducted studies which documented this trend. He demonstrated that from 1968 to 1974, white enrollment dropped more severely in the Memphis City Schools than in most other large southern school

¹⁶⁵ Gutterman, "Descriptive Study," 91-92.

¹⁶⁶ Biles, 477.

¹⁶⁷ Reber, 37 (emphasis added).

¹⁶⁸ Reber, 37.

¹⁶⁹ Richard A. Pride and J. David Woodard, *The Politics of Desegregation in Nashville, Tennessee* (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1985), 85.

districts; only Atlanta experienced a sharper decline.¹⁷⁰ White enrollment dropped more gradually in the years following the busing plan, coming to stabilize at about 20,000 in the late 1990s — a far cry from the almost 80,000 white students enrolled during the late 1960s.¹⁷¹

Private schools and the suburbs served as havens for these retreating students. Exact numbers of families that moved to the suburbs in the early 1970s to escape desegregation are unavailable. White anxieties about desegregation, however, are undeniable; it is no coincidence that fifty new private schools alone were established during the 1972-1973 school year.¹⁷² Louis Lucas, a Memphis pro-desegregation attorney, voiced his widely-shared suspicions about the new private school supporters when he said sarcastically, “The interest in God generated by busing is phenomenal. It’s amazing how many people opposed to busing have their kids riding buses to private schools.”¹⁷³ Memphians were not deluded about the real cause of the movement.

By moving to the suburbs or enrolling their children in private schools, white families succeeded in siphoning off a large portion of the white population from Memphis City Schools, thereby making meaningful integration essentially impossible. The responses to the integration plans required by *Swann* “created a virtually all-black student population with, therefore, as little mixing of the races as

¹⁷⁰ Gary Orfield, *Public School Desegregation in the United States, 1968-1980*. (Washington, D.C.: Joint Center for Political Studies, 1983), 28.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 36.

¹⁷² Biles, 479.

¹⁷³ *Memphis Press-Scimitar*, January 24, 1978, cited by Biles, *Bittersweet Victory*, 481.

before.”¹⁷⁴ Reber summed up the racial situation in Memphis schools nicely when she noted that any hope of integrated schools was “largely undone by the behavioral response of white families.”¹⁷⁵ Unfortunately, although blacks have made progress in certain areas, such as moving into the middle class, and racial tensions in Memphis have declined drastically since integration days, the Memphis City Schools remain almost as segregated today as they have ever been.

A gradual failure of school desegregation, however, is not what makes Memphis’s story unique. White flight was a reality all across the South, and many school districts are currently considering how to combat resegregation. The extraordinary pace of white flight, rather than the eventual extent of it, is the most notable aspect of the Memphis narrative. This study seeks to highlight just one important but often overlooked “push factor” that contributed to the problem of white enrollment decline: the particularly dismal state of race relations and racial perceptions in Memphis following the sanitation strike of 1968 and the Black Monday boycotts of 1969. It was unlucky for Memphis that talk of a large-scale busing plan to desegregate schools took place so soon after these two events catapulted the city into racial turmoil. The city needed mediation to brace itself for such a change,¹⁷⁶ but as Daniel Kiel affirms, Memphis’ leaders “did nothing to

¹⁷⁴ Biles, 482.

¹⁷⁵ Reber, 39.

¹⁷⁶ It is instructive to compare Memphis’s busing experience in the 1970s with that of Greensboro, North Carolina as described by Elizabeth Jacoway in *Southern Businessmen and Desegregation*. Before the implementation of busing in Greensboro, some 2,000 students, teachers, and administrators participated in special retreats to encourage understanding between the races. In stark contrast to Memphis, desegregation in Greensboro was relatively successful as a result of deliberate efforts to prepare citizens for the changes.

prepare the community for truly desegregated schools.”¹⁷⁷ Instead, city leaders and members of the press helped write the death certificate for meaningful desegregation in the Memphis City Schools. Immediately after the Brown decision in 1954, they began to set the city up for failure by concerning themselves with Memphis’s image rather than its problems. Throughout the 1960s, Memphis’s myth of racial harmony simultaneously kept many white citizens oblivious to racial tensions while allowing those tensions to grow unchecked. When the myth collapsed amid the turbulent events of 1968 and 1969, the resulting void was quickly filled with publicity that characterized blacks as uncompromising, unruly, and even violent. Thus, the legacy of the myth of racial harmony in Memphis is that white perceptions of blacks on the eve of the 1973 busing decision were particularly negative. NAACP executive secretary Maxine Smith nicely summed up the root of the problem in Memphis: “Unfortunately, those in leadership positions, those who were in a position to set the tone for the city, sort of cast a whole negative atmosphere which I think is one of the main reasons we lost so many of the young people from the school system.”¹⁷⁸

Little has happened since 1973 to reverse the effects of white flight on the Memphis City Schools; in fact, the problem of “outmigration” has worsened in recent decades.¹⁷⁹ Whereas white students comprised 42 percent of the Memphis City School population in 1973, today they make up only 9 percent of the students in the

¹⁷⁷ Kiel, 6.

¹⁷⁸ *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, January 2, 1983.

¹⁷⁹ James W. Brosnan, Jimmie Covington, and Shirley Downing, “Races staying ‘isolated’ in Memphis, study says,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 5, 2001.

system.¹⁸⁰ In addition, Memphis still maintains one of the largest and “most segregated system[s] of private schools” in the nation.¹⁸¹ Of course, one cannot quantify the degree to which racial fears have affected the continuing decline in white enrollment. True racial tensions probably account for much less white flight now than thirty-five years ago. One obstacle to integrated public schools in Memphis today is the fact that the mostly-black Memphis City Schools and the mostly-white Shelby County Schools never consolidated. Maintaining these as separate systems has rendered further attempts at integration futile.

Even if it were possible to integrate Memphis’ black and white student populations into one school system, some community preparation would likely be necessary to make such an endeavor successful. The history of school desegregation in Memphis has proven that imposing legal measures on a community to increase racial integration can achieve only limited accomplishments. Citizens who favor the *status quo* often evade top-down changes by voting with their feet. The way to facilitate lasting change is to acknowledge the anxieties that cause groups to avoid one another in the first place. A number of grass-roots initiatives with this focus are currently gaining ground in Memphis. The Bridge Builders program brings together high school students from Memphis’ city, county, and private school systems in order to encourage “diversity appreciation, community action and leadership.”¹⁸² Since its inception in 1988, Bridge Builders has expanded from serving 40 students each year

¹⁸⁰ Kiel, 13; “Memphis City Schools Facts,” Memphis City Schools Website.

¹⁸¹ Kiel, 14.

¹⁸² http://www.bridgesusa.org/ld_bridgebuilders.asp

to serving 1,500 students each year.¹⁸³ A similar organization, Diversity Memphis, aims to promote tolerance among all types of Memphians by sponsoring community forums, discussions, and special events.¹⁸⁴ Unlike the ineffectual MCCR and GMRRC of the civil rights era, these new organizations seek to foster mutual understanding among average citizens. Memphians are gradually acting on the principle that tirelessly engaging in dialogue (instead of myth-making or even legislating) produces a healthy community.

Although transparency and cooperation in civic matters have become greater priorities since 1973, Memphis still suffers from a sensitivity about the success of its public education system. As recently as July 2008, the research director of the Memphis City Schools repeatedly denied the author access to school enrollment data for the years between 1954 and 1975. The Board of Education closely monitors any publicity that the Memphis City Schools receive. Thus, the director of research was hesitant to enable studies that might portray the schools unfavorably. Also, Daniel Kiel argued that the Memphis City Schools never recovered from the “erosion of public support” that occurred after the 1973 busing plan.¹⁸⁵ A symptom of that long-established problem surfaced in June 2008, when the City Council voted to cut funding for the Memphis City Schools by \$60 million.¹⁸⁶

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*

¹⁸⁴ <http://www.diversitymemphis.org/services.html>

¹⁸⁵ Daniel Kiel, “Message to City Schools’ Students: ‘Buzz Off,’” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, June 20, 2008.

¹⁸⁶ Jane Roberts, “Funding Cuts Still on Board for MCS,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, August 7, 2008.

As political scientists Richard A. Pride and J. David Woodard have noted, public schools tend to serve as “manifestations of racial politics.”¹⁸⁷ In other words, the health of public schools mirrors the health of their surrounding communities. According to this reasoning, we cannot separate studies of school desegregation in Memphis from studies of the city itself. Likewise, any remedies for racially identifiable schools must acknowledge the anxieties in the community that originally led to the problem of white avoidance of black schools. If Memphis can take anything positive from its experiences with school desegregation, it is the lesson that a community’s fate is not determined by the actions of its leaders alone; the frustrations and anxieties of average citizens can wield an influence over civic life that rivals the power of office-holders.

¹⁸⁷ Pride and Woodard, 10.

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