

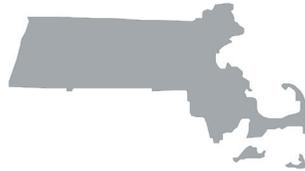


### **South Boston, September 12, 1975**

Police wearing their riot helmets line the street in south Boston as women, led by anti-busing advocate Louise Day Hicks (black coat), march to protest the busing of students. Source: PBS, “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Movement, 1954-85,” Teacher’s Resources at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

## “Militant Mothers”: Boston, Busing, and the Bicentennial of 1976

KATHLEEN BANKS NUTTER



**Abstract:** *By early 1975, the anti-busing organization known as ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights) expanded its base of protest from opposing, at times quite violently, the court-ordered desegregation of the Boston public school system. Arguing that “the issue of forced busing is a women’s issue,” ROAR — whose membership was predominantly female — expanded its focus and began to specifically target the flourishing women’s liberation movement in Boston. The group disrupted various public forums, including Bicentennial events. Throughout, ROAR militants were politicized, as were countless other women in the 1970s. Historian Kathleen Banks Nutter was a teenager living in Boston at the time and personally effected by the events she analyzes in this article.*

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On Saturday, January 11, 1975, the Governor’s Commission on the Status of Women convened at Boston’s City Hall, awaiting the arrival of Governor Michael Dukakis who was to sign the proclamation declaring “Massachusetts International Women’s Year.” But Dukakis never arrived. Instead, according to the *Boston Globe*, “an angry mob of about 150 anti-

busing mothers converged at City Hall,” and the governor hastily canceled his appearance. There was a lengthy and raucous exchange between those associated with the Commission on the Status of Women and the so-called anti-busing mothers. Trying to restore order, Commission Chair Ann Blackman told the *Globe*, “Frankly, I do not want any embarrassing things going on when the governor arrives. Please, you’re our guests here and you’re disrupting this meeting.” To this, Elvira (aka Pixie) Palladino of East Boston replied, “No, you’re our guests. This City Hall belongs to us and we are here because we want freedom for our children.”<sup>1</sup>

By early 1975 the anti-busing organization known as ROAR (Restore Our Alienated Rights) sought to expand its base of protest from strictly opposing, at times quite violently, the court-ordered desegregation of the Boston public school system. Arguing that, in their words, “the issue of forced busing is a women’s issue,” the predominately female ROAR specifically targeted the flourishing women’s liberation movement in Boston. It ultimately disrupted public forums such as one organized by the governor’s office to kick off the International Women’s Year as well as the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) rallies held in Boston later that spring.<sup>1</sup> At the same time, in anticipation of the nation’s 200<sup>th</sup> birthday in 1976, ROAR also shifted its attention to the Bicentennial during the spring of 1975, turning the celebratory rhetoric on its head by claiming the right to fight those who, in the minds of many white Bostonians, would deny them their most basic rights as parents.

ROAR women were politicized, as were countless other women in the 1970s. But, the women of ROAR used confrontational tactics honed by anti-war and women’s liberation activists in the 1960s, much of which had been first inspired by the black Civil Rights movement, to make their case for segregation in a most virulently racist and class-specific way. Self-proclaimed “conservatives,” the ROAR women used radical strategies to maintain what they saw as “traditional” maternal values. It is this potentially disruptive nexus of politics and strategy, shaped by the race, class, and gender concerns of the time that suggests the need for a deeper reexamination of this period.

Much has been written about the tumultuous — and ultimately failed — effort to desegregate the Boston public schools.<sup>2</sup> Most accounts emphasize the vital role that social class played in what amounted to a violent racial confrontation between poor blacks and poor whites. As the historian Ronald Formisano has argued, “Antibusing in Boston, especially its organized active expressions, can be seen as a case of reactionary

populism, a type of grassroots social movement that has flared frequently in American history.”<sup>3</sup>

Such an argument certainly helps us understand the anti-busing movement’s frequent use of Bicentennial rhetoric, but it does not address the important part that white women played in this movement. Although the concerted efforts of African American women to improve their children’s education through desegregation and the ways in which they then organized to assist in the implementation of busing as the court-ordered remedy have been documented, the activism of white women opposed to desegregation has not yet been fully explored.<sup>4</sup> Nor has the impact of gender ideology within this “reactionary populism” been adequately examined. Gender was very much entwined with ideologies of race, ethnicity, and class — all of which came together in the Boston anti-busing movement in the mid-1970s.

“Conservative” women have been, until fairly recently, more neglected by historians than their more “progressive” sisters.<sup>5</sup> The historian Kim E. Nielsen has recently suggested that we need to be even more nuanced in our consideration of conservative women. Nielsen persuasively argues that:

In the context of right-wing women’s history, we must rethink right-wing women’s movements in all of their political aspects . . . It means recognizing that gender is present in right-wing movements not only in the bodies of its members. Gender is at the core of right-wing ideologies, formations, and negotiations of power — even when women are physically absent.<sup>6</sup>

In other words, the roles of both men and women in conservative movements, such as the Boston anti-busing movement, were shaped by traditionally restrictive notions of “appropriate” gender-specific concerns. Furthermore, as the sociologist Abby L. Ferber has pointed out, “Movement tactics, behaviors, displays, and activities can all take gendered forms.”<sup>7</sup> Certainly, when white working-class ethnic women took to the streets to protest school desegregation they did so, they themselves proclaimed, as *mothers*. Such a focus adds an additional dimension to the examination of “forced busing” in Boston, but one that I believe helps to enrich our understanding of race, class, and gender in post-industrial America.

When Judge W. Arthur Garrity handed down the *Morgan v. Hennigan* decision on June 21, 1974, racial tension had been building in the city of Boston for over a decade. After the *Brown v. Board of Education of*

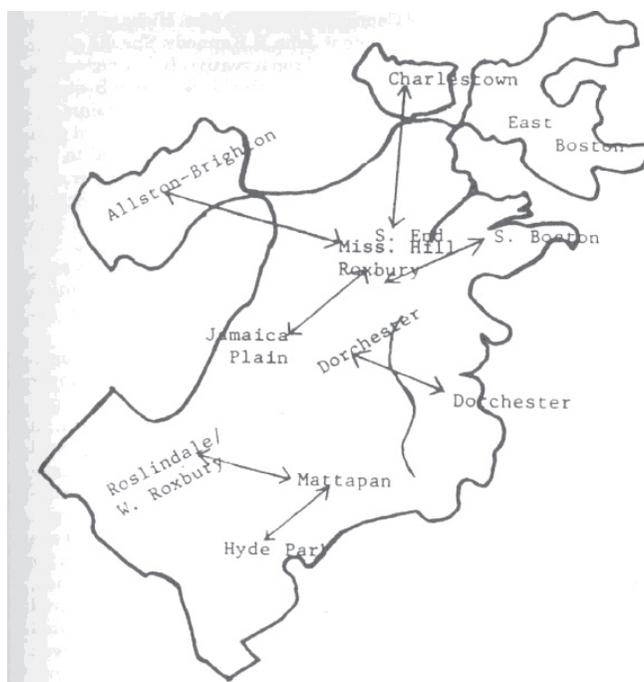
*Topeka, Kansas* decision in 1954, which deemed “separate but equal” unconstitutional in the nation’s schools, all eyes turned South . . . but in Northern cities such as Boston, black parents also recognized the damage done to their children through segregated, inferior schooling. By the early 1960s, local black community activists began pushing the all-white Boston School Committee to address the situation. They encountered stiff opposition. Led by Louise Day Hicks, the Committee refused to admit that the Boston school system was either segregated or inferior, citing instead the “voluntary” residential patterns that shaped the racial composition of the city’s schools. Black parents responded by staging one-day school boycotts as local NAACP leaders repeatedly sought a hearing before the School Committee.

In 1965, after a white Unitarian minister from Boston, James Reeb, was beaten to death by white Southern segregationists during the historic March to Selma, a stunned Massachusetts state legislature passed the Racial Imbalance Act (RIA), which sought to impose sanctions, including the loss of state funding, on schools with a student body more than 50 percent nonwhite.<sup>8</sup> But, like any law, the newly enacted RIA had to be enforced. In Boston, this was not the case and over the next few years, the city’s schools grew even more racially imbalanced. According to the political scientist D. Garth Taylor, in Boston “black enrollment in predominantly minority schools was 77 percent in 1968 and 82 percent in 1972, making it more segregated than any major city south of Washington DC.”<sup>9</sup> Nonetheless, the Boston School Committee steadfastly refused to enforce this law, despite the loss of millions of dollars in much-needed state education aid. This remained the situation until Boston was ordered to desegregate its schools by a federal district court judge.

In his June 1974 decision, Judge Garrity ordered the schools to achieve racial balance by busing students, pairing schools that had a majority of white students with those schools nearby that had a majority of black students. Thus, the predominately African American neighborhood of Roxbury and the primarily white Irish American enclave of South Boston came to be paired. Furthermore, Phase I of the process was to start with the



**Louise Day Hicks**



**Paired Districts in Boston’s Desegregation Plan**

Source: *Morgan v. Kerrigan*, 401 F. Supp. 216 (1975), p. 253, as reprinted in Taylor, *Desegregation in Boston and Buffalo*, p. 71.

upcoming school year, scheduled to commence in less than three months, while Phase II would complete the process the following year.

Two recent Supreme Court decisions validated Garrity’s ruling. In 1971, the Court ruled in the case of *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenberg Board of Education* that when faced with pre-existing residential segregation patterns, busing was the only recourse in desegregating city schools. In the 1973 case of *Keyes v. Denver, Colorado School District No. 1*, the Supreme Court “ruled for the first time that the *Brown* decision applied to Northern cities as well.”<sup>10</sup> As school and city officials scrambled to, literally, set the wheels in motion, and the black community organized to facilitate the transition, many in Boston’s white community, especially the economically depressed neighborhood of South Boston, also organized.

Many white working-class Bostonians viewed busing as a liberal, white middle-class attack on the sanctity of their turf and their rights

as parents, and they claimed that they were victims and their children mere pawns. But in doing so, they “racialized” their discontent and their growing alienation from government, much as those identifying with President Richard Nixon’s “Silent Majority” had been doing since the late 1960s.<sup>11</sup> By the 1970s, that Silent Majority found its voice. Critics of right-wing movements have argued that white racism was a touchstone within a budding conservative movement that would give rise to the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s and come into full bloom with the Contract with America in 1994.

According to political scientist Jeanne F. Theoharis, however, excusing the virulent racism of many whites in Boston during the first two years of court-ordered busing as “reactionary populism” is overly simplistic and flawed. Theoharis argues that those scholars who “elide white ethnic working-class alienation and political powerlessness with opposition to desegregation, [thus are] naturalizing racism as a response for politically alienated working-class whites.”<sup>12</sup>

Indeed, ROAR frequently claimed it was the media, especially the *Boston Globe*, which portrayed all whites from South Boston as racists.<sup>13</sup> ROAR consistently claimed its agenda was based upon parental and community control. It also appears that much of its racism was heightened by the generalized discontent with liberalism. In actuality, ROAR was formed several months before Garry’s June 1974 order under the name of “The Save Boston Committee.”

The Committee, organized by Hicks, then a Boston city councilor, first met in February of 1974 to organize efforts to repeal the RIA. The previous fall, the state legislature had passed a law that required the consent of a child’s parents before that student could be bused away from the closest school. Such a law would have made enforcement of the RIA even more difficult, and Governor Francis Sargent vetoed it. Busing opponents did not give up; they continued to advocate, in Hicks’s words, for “the custodial rights of parents over their children.”<sup>14</sup> Several state legislators from Boston opposed busing, including Raymond Flynn, the state representative from South Boston, and that neighborhood’s state senator, William Bulger.

To facilitate their much-needed attendance, Hicks scheduled the Committee’s weekly meetings at City Hall on Fridays, when both houses of the Massachusetts General Court were in recess. Into mid-March, “attendance was by invitation only, and was limited to the longtime anti-busing activists . . . along with people who were effectively organizing neighborhood anti-busing organizations.”<sup>15</sup> Those people were primarily

women such as Rita Graul, also Hicks’s administrative assistant, Virginia Sheehy, and Pat Ranese, all from South Boston. Representing East Boston was Pixie Palladino, and from Hyde Park came Fran Johnnene.

By mid-March, the Save Boston Committee went public, announcing as its chair Thomas O’Connell, a Hyde Park father of seven. O’Connell informed the press that while the assorted neighborhood groups would come together for one mass march on April 3, 1974, marchers from each neighborhood represented would be identifiable by colored armbands. According to the *Boston Globe*, the colors were “drawn by lot . . . South Boston, to no one’s disappointment, drew green. Orange went to East Boston, blue to West Roxbury and Roslindale, purple to Hyde Park, red to Dorchester.”<sup>16</sup>

The urban educational specialist J. Brian Sheehan has argued that “the stress on neighborhoods grew out of the feeling many white homeowners had that they were being pushed from the city.” The solidarity of ethnically distinct enclaves that political scientist Emmett H. Buell, Jr., labels “defended neighborhoods” was also deeply rooted in the recognition that “even a common cause could not overcome traditional neighborhood parochialism.”<sup>17</sup> Although grassroots concerns would eventually undermine unity and challenge leadership, solidarity was the order of the day on April 3. Armbands in place, the estimated 20,000-plus marchers proceeded from City Hall Plaza to the State House to make clear their opposition to the RIA. School Committee Chair John J. Kerrigan “had ribbons tied all over his left arm,” while Louise Day Hicks made clear her desire to transcend her South Boston powerbase by wearing, as a *New York Times* reporter noted, “an arm band of many colors.”<sup>18</sup> Despite the impressive turnout of busing foes on the eve of the sixth anniversary of the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., the Massachusetts state legislature did not repeal the RIA. Thus, there appeared no way to stop what many on both sides of the issue assumed would be some form of court-ordered busing in Boston. School desegregation in the city that often touted itself as “the cradle of liberty” seemed inevitable. Shortly after Judge Garrity’s order came down on June 21, 1974, the Save Boston Committee chose a new name, one more befitting perhaps its increasingly aggressive stance against busing.

A month before the Garrity ruling, an old friend drove Hicks to visit yet another friend, Marjorie Walsh, the principal of Roxbury’s Maurice J. Tobin School. While in the car, Hicks and her friend, also a teacher, discussed a new “more dynamic name” for the Save Boston Committee. The *Boston Globe* reported that:

We said we had to be strong, to show courage, that our voice had not been heard,” Mrs. Hicks later would recall. “In the back seat of the car I noticed a stuffed lion, a child’s toy, and I said, ‘Maybe we could roar.’” Roar! They thought about it a moment. It sounded right. It could be an acronym. They tried words to form the acronym, eventually coming up with “Restore Our Alienated Rights,” a name the committee adopted several weeks later.<sup>19</sup>

Initially led by Hicks, ROAR was at first a rather loose, semi-secret organization of both men and women opposed to “forced” busing.<sup>20</sup> They were inspired in part by the actions of those who brought revolutionary



**May 2, 1973**

Louise Day Hicks (lower right) at a large gathering of demonstrators outside the State House in Boston to protest busing of school children and to repeal the state’s racial imbalance law. Source: PBS, “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Movement, 1954-85,” Teacher’s Resources at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

politics to the streets of Boston in the 1770s. Now, two centuries later, they were willing to take to the streets to make their grievances heard. Throughout, women — as well as a rather traditional gender ideology — played an active role. Thus, while women held a majority of the leadership positions, both within the neighborhood chapters of ROAR and the city-wide executive board, and in the rank-and-file, they did so explicitly as *mothers*.

On the eve of the first day of school, Boston Mayor Kevin H. White also acknowledged his female constituents’ maternal role. In a televised address on the night of Monday, September 11, White said, “I have listened to mothers and I have heard the anguish in their voices — voices explaining inconvenience and hardship that parents and children both will be forced to endure.”<sup>21</sup> That anguish would be voiced even more loudly by the women with the start of the school year the next morning.

When the buses rolled on September 12, 1974, all involved knew this would be no ordinary school year in Boston. Many white parents opted to send their children elsewhere, to parochial schools if they could afford it, or out of town if they could arrange such.<sup>22</sup> Some just kept their children at home, out of concern for their safety or in support of the boycott called by ROAR. Absenteeism was especially acute in the middle- and high-school grades, averaging 50 percent of those enrolled for the first six months of the school year. Of the 1,300 students enrolled at South Boston High School, only 124 attended the first day, 56 of whom were African American students bused from Roxbury.

An even smaller fraction — less than a tenth of those assigned — of white South Boston students got on the bus to start the school year at Roxbury High. There, the 44 white students were welcomed by neighborhood parents and volunteers from Freedom House, an African American community-organizing center.<sup>23</sup> It was a very different scene across town at South Boston High, where violence was a constant throughout the fall. Local and national media outlets covered the frequent stoning of the buses that brought black students from Roxbury to South Boston High; the angry white crowds, men and women who stood outside, yelling racist epithets; the gauntlet that black students had to pass through each day; and the graffiti-scrawled walls reading “Never!” and “Niggers Go Home!”<sup>24</sup>

The violence reached a crescendo on December 11, when a black student stabbed a white student at South Boston High. The day before, as South Boston High English teacher Ione Malloy noted in her journal, “There was a milk-and-food fight in the cafeteria at lunchtime. Two black

students and one white student were suspended.”<sup>25</sup> That day, there was also a riot at Walpole State Prison, hence the usual contingent of state troopers was not on duty at the high school the following day when seventeen-year-old senior Michael Faith of South Boston stepped in to try to break up a fight and was stabbed by James White, an African American student from Roxbury. Tension had been mounting at the school for weeks and now pandemonium ensued as “a voice on the loudspeaker ordered the white students to leave the building.”

Many of the white students joined the ever-present mob outside that swelled to a thousand or more as the news of the incident spread. White South Boston mothers who the day before might have been taking part in the frequent “mothers’ prayer vigils” were this day, according to the *New York Times*, yelling “a stream of racial invective and jibes at the police.”<sup>26</sup> As school officials scrambled to get the black students out of the building safely and onto the buses, police cruisers and other cars were overturned in the street in front of the high school, and windows were shattered. As the mood became increasingly angrier, Louise Day Hicks stood atop the high school steps and tried to calm the crowd. Looking “distraught,” as the *Boston Globe* would later remark, she took the bullhorn offered her by State Senator William Bulger who stood at her side.

Her chestnut-brown hair, usually so meticulously coiffed, was dull and windblown . . . Her face . . . was ashen without makeup and deeply lined with worry. In more than a decade of leading the antibusing movement, she was without peer in speaking to angry crowds; no one could equal her remarkable ability to focus the seething anger and frustration of these people, her people. But Louise Day Hicks had never faced a challenge like this before.<sup>27</sup>

Hicks assured the crowd that “Mikey,” the injured student, was stable, but she was booed when she announced that the high school would be closed for the rest of the week. Hicks implored the crowd to step aside so the 125 black students, who had been herded into three classrooms in the rear of the building, could board the buses and “go back to Roxbury.” The crowd roared back, “Bus ‘em back to Africa.” Hicks then pleaded, “Do it for me. I’m asking you because I’ve been with you all the way. We have nothing to gain by keeping them here. Please help me!” According to the *Globe*, a “burly man” yelled back, “Shut up, Louise.” Ione Malloy remarked in her journal that Hicks “looked scared.”<sup>28</sup> More than thirty

years later, Barbara Faith, sister of the stabbing victim and then a twenty-year-old “transitional aide” at South Boston High recalled that:

the day that Michael got stabbed, I think it shocked [Hicks], how much hate was engendered, and a lot of it had to do with this building up of all the ‘never, never, never’ thing. He got stabbed, and there was a riot, and she stood up on those front stairs asking people to go home. It’s like, “Hello! Barn doors open, baby; you started this! People are not going to go home quietly.” And there were riots. It was horrible.<sup>29</sup>

Indeed, the alleged remarks of Pixie Palladino as reported by the *Globe* seem to fit the tenor of the scene on the steps of South Boston High — and reflect the beginnings of a brief and eventually divisive power shift within ROAR. Alerted by phone of the situation, Palladino left her East Boston home and joined the South Boston melee, yelling at police, according to the *Globe*, “the worst Italian curse you can make.” She went on to say, “I’ve had it. How much more can people take? This has been happening too long and it’s not going to stop until they stop sending those kids over here.”<sup>30</sup>

Finally, four very tense hours after the stabbing, decoy buses left the front of the building as the 125 black students were rushed onto other buses out the back. With the high school now closed until the new year, hardly anyone in this troubled city expected the situation to improve.

ROAR was a visible presence that December day as it had been throughout the fall. But as 1975 began, the organization shifted its focus from the streets to public venues seemingly unrelated to the “busing crisis.” Such was the case when 150 ROAR members decided to attend what was supposed to be the ceremonial signing of a state proclamation declaring 1975 as “International Women’s Year.” The women told the *Boston Globe* that they were there for this meeting of the Massachusetts Commission on the Status of Women because “We’re women too.” Wearing what had become ROAR’s trademark blue and gold tam o’shanter and sporting buttons reading “STOP FORCED BUSING,” many of the women also carried small American flags.

According to the *Globe*, “For the next hour and a half, there was a noisy and hostile confrontation between the mothers of South Boston, Charlestown, and Hyde Park and the generally affluent and suburban women who sit on the commission.”<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, although the liberal Boston paper referred to the white working-class Boston women as



### **The Soiling of Old Glory**

Stanley Forman

*Boston Herald American*

The photograph depicts a white teenager, Joseph Rakes, about to assault black lawyer and civil-rights activist Ted Landsmark with a flagpole. It was taken in Boston on April 5, 1976, during a protest against court-ordered desegregation busing. It appeared in newspapers across the country and won the 1977 Pulitzer Prize for Spot Photography. Source: PBS, “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Movement, 1954-85,” Teacher’s Resources at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).



**September 16, 1974**

African American students are bused back to the Roxbury section from South Boston under a heavy police escort. Source: PBS, “Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Movement, 1954-85,” Teacher’s Resources at [www.pbs.org](http://www.pbs.org).

“mothers,” it did not so designate the “suburban women,” — many of whom were most likely mothers as well. While some of the ROAR women appeared to harbor hostility, others simply asked for a forum. The *Globe* quotes one woman as saying, “We want someone to listen to us.”

Perhaps the *Globe* declined to emphasize the motherhood of suburban women because it was clear that political and class differences were in play. After pleading to be heard, one ROAR woman asked, “Why can’t poor white kids be bused to your suburban schools?” Yet another woman, who according to the *Globe*, “burst into tears, pointed her finger at the 40 or so commission members sitting on the other side of the room,” said, “Until the very end, we’ll fight.”<sup>32</sup>

Three months later, the women of ROAR were still willing to fight, this time at a state ERA rally held in Boston’s historic Faneuil Hall. When the ROAR women descended upon the April 9 rally, they did so, according to Pixie Palladino, because the pro-ERA forces had “failed to recognize the busing controversy as a ‘women’s issue.’”<sup>33</sup> Co-opting the language of the modern women’s movement was potentially a shrewd way to mask the otherwise overt racism that was at the core of ROAR’s ideology. At the same time, it also allowed conservative ROAR women to make a public statement against feminism as they sought to maintain traditional gender roles they viewed as under assault.

This new, more confrontational approach as represented by Palladino was part of the shift in ROAR leadership that had begun after the stabbing at South Boston High in December 1974. The shouting down of Louise Day Hicks was a sign of things to come. Revered by many and recognized as the “Mother Superior” of anti-busing in Boston, Hicks was solidly middle class, the daughter of a respected judge who still lived in the South Boston manse in which she had grown up, and was herself an attorney.<sup>34</sup> A tall woman, Hicks was known for her flowery hats and her soft voice, in which she often expressed concern for all “the boys and girls” in Boston’s school system. As School Committee Chair, Hicks had steadfastly refused to implement the Racial Imbalance Act throughout the 1960s. Now, as a city council member, the fifty-eight-year-old grandmother maintained her polite-but-determined stance against desegregation and, as already noted, had been a co-founder of ROAR in the spring of 1974. Dismissed by many, then and since, as a political opportunist who was merely pandering to the white racism of her South Boston constituency, Hicks was more complicated than that.<sup>35</sup>

Hicks’s style of quiet-but-dogged resistance to desegregation through busing, however, was in the process of being eclipsed in the spring of

1975. The shift is best represented by the increased public profile of Pixie Palladino. In his examination of the fight over busing in Boston, *Common Ground*, J. Anthony Lukas describes Palladino as “a tough-talking, street savvy daughter of an Italian shoemaker from East Boston, accused of punching Ted Kennedy in the stomach at a rally and cursing a Catholic monsignor, who even after her election to the School Committee [in the fall of 1975] was heard muttering about ‘jungle bunnies’ and ‘pickaninnies.’”<sup>36</sup> The forty-two-year-old mother of two was hardly “muttering” as she led the 50 or so ROAR women into the April 9 ERA rally.

According to the *Boston Globe*, the “catcalls, chanting and singing” [“Southie is My Home Town”] of the ROAR women “forced Kitty Dukakis, wife of Governor Michael Dukakis, to leave the building.”<sup>37</sup> Carrying signs that read “Feminists Do Not Represent [the] American Majority” and “Busing Stinks,” the ROAR women loudly chanted “STOP ERA” when anyone attempted to speak.

Yet another sign some ROAR women held read, “Retire Women Legislators Who Support the Equal Rights Amendment” — somewhat ironic given that during her one term in Congress (1971-1973), Louise Day Hicks had supported passage of the ERA.<sup>38</sup> But now, in the spring of 1975, these militant mothers were better represented by the vocal Palladino who led the “catcalls.” Even the venerable Florence Luscomb, who had fought for women’s suffrage in the 1910s and many another progressive causes in the decades since, was “shouted down” when she tried to remind the ROAR women that they were in “Faneuil Hall, the Cradle of Liberty.”<sup>39</sup>

Evoking Bicentennial rhetoric, especially in Boston, was quite common in 1975; ROAR was hardly alone in using the occasion to advance its agenda. By then, however, ROAR goals were expanding beyond fighting desegregation and crystallizing into a deepening discontent with liberal politics in general. The elite members of the Boston 200 organizing committee must have been gnashing their teeth that the “busing crisis” coincided with what was to be a lengthy and multi-faceted celebration of 1776 in the “Cradle of Liberty.”<sup>40</sup> How many tourist dollars were lost remains unclear but surely many out-of-towners opted to forego a trip to the racially charged, frequently violent Boston of the mid-1970s. Those tourists who dared to attend the 205<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Boston Massacre would have seen ROAR out in full force.

On March 5, 1975, an estimated 400 ROAR members gathered at City Hall, in the city council chamber that Louise Day Hicks allowed them to use for their weekly Wednesday night meetings. The ROAR contingent then marched a few blocks to the Old State House where a reviewing stand

was in place for the annual re-enactment of the Colonial confrontation in which British troops fired on a crowd of demonstrators, killing five. Now, 205 years later, ROAR marched as in a funeral procession, some carrying a coffin in which a young woman lay, representing, according to the attached placard, “Miss Liberty, b. 1776 – d. 1974.” Others carried signs that read: “Have You Ever Seen the Words Forced Busing in the Constitution?,” “Boston Mourns Its Lost Freedom,” and the more ominous, “If You Think This Is a Massacre, Just Wait!”<sup>41</sup> Upon reaching the reviewing stand, the assembled ROAR men and women sang “The Star Spangled Banner,” “America,” and “Southie is My Home Town,” the self-proclaimed ROAR anthem (set to the tune of the “Colonel Bogey March”). They then chanted “Garrity Killed Liberty” until reenactment sponsors asked them to stop so that the evening’s true “entertainment” could begin.<sup>42</sup>

A month later, ROAR was also a presence at City Hall Plaza for Boston’s Patriots’ Day celebration, marking that day in April 1775 when the American Revolutionary War officially began in nearby Concord and Lexington. The 15,000 spectators in attendance were treated to a concert from multiple marching bands and orchestras from around the country, all 2,000 musicians led by Boston Pops Orchestra conductor Arthur Fiedler. But if anyone cared to look up from the Plaza they would have seen, according to the *Boston Globe*, ROAR’s “initials . . . prominently displayed in the windows of City Hall’s fifth floor offices. And on the balcony of the office of City Councilwoman Louise Day Hicks . . . a man held ROAR’s red, green and, white flag throughout the celebration.”<sup>43</sup> ROAR was not present to celebrate America’s Bicentennial. As one South Boston woman asked the journalist J. Anthony Lukas, “How can we celebrate our country’s history when we are being denied the very rights we fought for in the Revolution?” But when Lukas asked if they were revolutionaries, several ROAR women responded, “No, no . . . we’re conservatives . . . We want to go back to the old way.”<sup>44</sup>

There would be no going back. The city of Boston was forever changed, even scarred by the violent and ultimately unsuccessful battle to desegregate its schools.<sup>45</sup> Certainly, for many women — ethnic American and working-class, formerly involved in little more than their churches and their families, their participation in ROAR changed them even as they claimed to be seeking a return to the past. As one woman commented at the time, “I know it’s changed me for good. In the beginning, we’d never have been in politics, we were very shy. Now courtrooms don’t bother us.”<sup>46</sup>

Writing in the fall of 1976 for one of Boston’s alternative news weeklies, *The Real Paper*, author Kathleen Kilgore referred to the anti-busing women she interviewed as “militant mothers” who were motivated by maternal concerns regarding the safety of their children. Kilgore, like the women of ROAR, downplayed the racism that was the heart and soul of the organization. Although these “militant mothers” often too glibly denied the racist implications of their struggle, it was true that other issues concerned them as well. ROAR leader Virginia Sheehy claimed emphatically that ROAR’s struggle was class-based. Kilgore quotes Sheehy as saying, “if busing went away tomorrow, I know we’d go on to something else. The whole thing about class — and busing is really a class issue — about who gets what in this country, that would still be there.”<sup>247</sup>

Like many of the ROAR women, Sheehy had long been involved in the Home and School Association, Boston’s equivalent of the PTA. Unlike many of them, Sheehy had been a community activist even before busing, working with the Sierra Club in its attempt to halt the expansion of Logan Airport. In that effort, Sheehy told *The Real Paper* that she had worked alongside black women from the Columbia Point section who were equally concerned about the effects of airport expansion on their neighborhood. But, said Sheehy, such “links” were a thing of the past. “Busing has torn the fabric that linked us.” On the more positive side, she felt that busing had generated a much-needed skepticism among working-class white Bostonians regarding two long-standing pillars of their community, the Catholic church and the Democratic party. “It has brought us out of ourselves. It woke us up to where the real power lies.”<sup>248</sup>

Yet another “militant mother” profiled by Kilgore was Agnes Smith, a former public school teacher and mother of two. Smith resigned from ROAR’s executive board to serve as the unpaid principal of Liberty Academy in her Dorchester neighborhood, one of the several alternative private schools opened by white parents opposed to busing. Kilgore reported that Smith felt the more confrontational tactics employed by ROAR had been “overdone,” but that what she was now doing, “giving children a decent education when they wouldn’t be getting one otherwise is a lot more important, even if it never makes the six o’clock news.”<sup>249</sup> So, too had Roslindale mothers Terry Libby and Joan Philips moved from ROAR demonstrations to reviewing textbooks for questionable content and speaking on such matters to interested parents’ groups in the Boston suburbs. But Kathleen Kilgore did not see the women she interviewed as feminists — far from it. She concludes her *Real Paper* piece by noting that:

The ROAR women I talked to seem to spend little time worrying about their own personal motivations, or whether they are doing the right thing — as women in the women’s liberation movement do. The women in the anti-busing movement are not rejecting their own values — instead, they believe they are reaffirming them, fighting for what their parents, their schools and their church have taught them.<sup>50</sup>

Indeed, countless white women, from South Boston to Hyde Park, from East Boston to Charlestown, took to the streets — as mothers who saw themselves protecting the interests of their families. They learned how to write letters to political officials, draft petitions, set up their own schools, engage in confrontational demonstrations, make court appearances with relative ease, and swear at police and elected officials with even greater confidence. Using tactics honed by progressive movements for social change, these conservative women made their stand.

After its founding in 1974, ROAR established a more formal organizational structure and even attempted to build a national movement. By 1976, though, many of the parochial concerns Buell notes beset defended neighborhoods had reared their heads. ROAR was riven with factional infighting and began to fade away the following year.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, ROAR left its mark on those who participated in it. The militant mothers of ROAR found their voice, an outlet for their conservatism, and a frequently racist channel for their anger, fears, and frustrations.

It can be argued that by 1977 — when Louise Day Hicks lost her seat on the Boston City Council and Pixie Palladino lost her School Committee post to its first African American member, John O’Bryant — the crisis had passed. That was hardly the case. Over the next several decades, other issues emerged that energized a growing conservative movement, including abortion, sex education in schools, immigration, and homosexuality. Each was viewed as a threat to a perceived traditional way of American life. Under the mantle of “motherhood,” conservative women have often led such cultural battles. That they do so employing the tactics of the feminists they so criticize is deeply ironic. The emerging American conservative movement was transformed during the 1970s and gained momentum because of the actions and apparent “success” of groups such as ROAR. The “Silent Majority” found its voice, contributing to the election of Ronald Reagan in 1980, the election of a Republican majority in Congress, and slowing the pace of liberal reform.

The historian Ronald Formisano has summed up the struggle to desegregate the Boston schools as “a war nobody won.”<sup>52</sup> The Boston public school system experienced an ever-shrinking white-student population — 60 percent of all students enrolled in Boston schools were white in 1974; by 1999 just 15 percent were. It also faced threats of lawsuits brought by white parents claiming their children were victims of reverse discrimination. Thus, in July of 1999, the Boston School Committee voted to end race-based school assignments. Two months later, Judge W. Arthur Garrity, the man who put the wheels in motion twenty-five years earlier, died of cancer in his Wellesley home.<sup>53</sup>

Many of the “militant mothers” have since died as well, Louise Day Hicks in 2003, Elvira “Pixie” Palladino in 2006, and scores of the rank-and-file, dedicated to stopping “forced busing” in Boston. Each had used tactics borrowed from feminism, but in the defense of traditional conservative values. Many of these women were transformed into skilled activists. In turn, these “militant mothers” energized modern American conservatism in a profound way.



## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Maria Karagianis, “Women protest busing, Gov. Dukakis stays away,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, Jan. 12, 1975, pp. 1, 8.

<sup>2</sup> The Equal Rights Amendment (ERA) was a proposed amendment to the U.S. Constitution that was intended to guarantee that equal rights under any federal, state, or local law would not be denied on account of sex. The ERA was originally written by Alice Paul and first introduced into the U.S. Congress in 1923. In 1972, it passed both houses of Congress but failed to gain ratification by more than 35 states before its June 30, 1982, deadline. On July 21, 2009 Representative Carolyn B. Maloney, Democrat from New York, reintroduced the ERA in the U.S. House of Representatives.

<sup>3</sup> The classic scholarly examination remains Ronald P. Formisano, *Boston Against Busing: Race, Class, and Ethnicity in the 1960s and 1970s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina, 1991); see also: Thomas M. Begley, “The Organization of Anti-Busing Protest in Boston, 1973-1976” (Ph.D. diss, Cornell University, 1981); Emmett H. Buell, Jr., with Richard A. Brisbin, Jr., *School Desegregation and Defended Neighborhoods: The Boston Controversy* (Lexington, MA: D.C. Heath and Company, 1982); J. Michael Ross and William

M. Berg, *"I Respectfully Disagree with the Judge's Order": The Boston School Desegregation Controversy* (Washington, DC: University Press of America, 1981); J. Brian Sheehan, *The Boston School Integration Dispute: Social Change and Legal Maneuvers* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1984); Jack Tager, *Boston Riots: Three Centuries of Social Violence* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 2001), Chapters 9 and 10; D. Garth Taylor, *Public Opinion & Collective Action: The Boston Desegregation Conflict* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1986); and Steven J. L. Taylor, *Desegregation in Boston and Buffalo: The Influence of Local Leaders* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1998). Journalistic accounts abound as well; here, the standard-bearer is J. Anthony Lukas, *Common Ground: A Turbulent Decade in the Lives of Three American Families* (New York: Vintage Books, 1986); see also: Jon Hillson, *The Battle of Boston: Busing and the Struggle for School Desegregation* (New York: Pathfinder Press, 1977); Alan Lupo, *Liberty's Chosen Home: The Politics of Violence in Boston* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1988, first published 1977). Two memoirs have also enriched my understanding of this time and place: Michael Patrick MacDonald's haunting account of growing up in South Boston, *All Souls: A Family Story from Southie* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999) and Ione Malloy, *Southie Won't Go: A Teacher's Diary of the Desegregation of South Boston High School* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1986).

<sup>4</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, p. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Polly Welts Kaufman, "Building a Constituency for School Desegregation: African-American Women in Boston, 1962-1972," *Teachers College Record*, Vol. 92, 4 (Summer 1991): pp. 619-631; Jeanne F. Theoharis, "'We Saved the City': Black Struggles for Educational Equality in Boston, 1960-1976," *Radical History Review* Vol. 81 (2001): pp. 61-93.

<sup>6</sup> See, for example: Kathleen Blee, *Women of the Klan: Racism and Gender in the 1920s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991) and her more recent work, *Inside Organized Racism: Women in the Hate Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002); Donald T. Critchlow, *Phyllis Schlafly and Grassroots Conservatism: A Woman's Crusade* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005); Rebecca E. Klatch, *Women of the New Right* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1987) and, more recently, *A Generation Divided: The New Left, the New Right, and the 1960s* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999); Kim E. Nielsen, *Un-American Womanhood: Antiradicalism, Anti-feminism, and the First Red Scare* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2001).

<sup>7</sup> Kim E. Nielsen, "Doing the 'Right' Right," *Journal of Women's History* Vol. 16, 3 (2004): p. 171.

<sup>8</sup> Abby L. Ferber, "Introduction," in *Home-Grown Hate: Gender and Organized Racism*, Abby L. Ferber, ed. (New York: Routledge, 2004), p. 11.

<sup>9</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, pp. 35-36.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, *Public Opinion & Collective Action*, p. 41.

<sup>11</sup> Taylor, *Public Opinion & Collective Action*, p. 41.

<sup>12</sup> There is a growing body of scholarship regarding the rise of modern conservatism; see, for example: Rick Perlman, *Nixonland: The Rise of a President and the Fracturing of America* (New York: Scribners, 2008); Bruce J. Schulman and Julian E. Zelizer, eds., *Rightward Bound: Making America Conservative in the 1970s* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008).

<sup>13</sup> Theoharis, “We Saved the City,” p. 63.

<sup>14</sup> See, for example, the Oral History Interview of Joanne Sweeney, OH-049. John Joseph Moakley Archive Oral History Project, John Joseph Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University.

<sup>15</sup> Taylor, *Public Opinion & Collective Action*, p. 77.

<sup>16</sup> Richard Knox, Thomas Oliphant, and Ray Richard, “The First Year,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, May 25, 1975, sec. A, p. 7; see also: Sheehan, *The Boston School Integration Dispute*, pp. 185-186.

<sup>17</sup> Knox, Oliphant, and Richard, “The First Year,” sec. A, p. 7.

<sup>18</sup> Sheehan, *The Boston School Integration Dispute*, p. 186; Buell, *School Desegregation and Defended Neighborhoods*, p. 135.

<sup>19</sup> John Kifner, “Busing Opponents Protest in Boston,” *New York Times*, April 4, 1974, p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Knox, Oliphant, and Richard, “The First Year,” sec. A, p. 8.

<sup>21</sup> Hillson, *The Battle of Boston*, p. 29.

<sup>22</sup> John Kifner, “Boston Is Tense on Eve of Busing,” *New York Times*, Sept. 12, 1974, p. 41.

<sup>23</sup> In his testimony before the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights hearings held in Boston in June 1975, Father John Boles, Director of Education, Archdiocese of Boston, said that overall enrollment in the city’s Catholic schools actually declined in 1974-75 as compared to 1973-74. Boles also made reference to the proclamation of his superior, Humberto Cardinal Medeiros, in February 1974, that he would not allow increased enrollment in Boston’s Catholic schools as a way to escape busing. See: United States Commission on Civil Rights, Hearing Held in Boston, Massachusetts, June 16-20, 1975, p. 210. While the official policy of the Catholic church was in support of desegregation, D. Garth Taylor argues that, “early attempts at moral leadership by Cardinal Medeiros and the Catholic church hierarchy did not prevail. Anti-busing leaders found a receptive home for their rhetoric in the Catholic doctrine of ‘parent’s control over children’s education’ — at least as this doctrine was interpreted by the average parishioner.” See: Taylor, *Public Opinion & Collective Action*, p. 103. Also worth noting, as does Taylor (p. 100), in this predominately Catholic city (70 percent in 1980), “At the time of Judge Garrity’s ruling, for instance, the mayor and all members of the city council were Catholic.” So, too, the judge.

<sup>24</sup> U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, *School Desegregation in Boston: A Staff Report prepared for the hearing of the U.S. Commission on Civil Rights in Boston, Massachusetts, June 1975* (Washington, DC, 1975), p. 18; Sheehan, *The Boston School Integration Dispute*, p. 189; Buell, *School Desegregation and Defended*

*Neighborhoods*, p. 108; Freedom House Institute on Schools and Education, *Boston Desegregation: The First Term, 1974-75 School Year* (Roxbury, MA, 1975), John Joseph Moakley Papers, John Joseph Moakley Archives and Institute, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

<sup>25</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, p. 141; in an interesting comparison of methods of protest in Northern Ireland and South Boston, the scholar Jack Santino refers to South Boston anti-busing demonstrations as “street theater,” also arguing that there is a continuum from graffiti to mural.” See Santino, “Public protest and Popular Style: Resistance from the Right in Northern Ireland and South Boston,” *American Anthropologist* Vol. 101, 3 (Sept., 1999): pp. 515-528, quotes, p. 524, p. 522. Perhaps the explosion of racist graffiti explains, in part, why in 1975 the Boston Mayor’s Office of Culture Affairs coordinated a murals project in South Boston with the theme “pride of Southie,” stressing “notable historical events and landmarks of the district.” See: Mark Favermann, “Community Mural projects of 1975 and 1977 at Boston, Mass., USA,” *Leonardo* Vol. 11, 4 (Autumn 1978): p. 298.

<sup>26</sup> Malloy, *Southie Won’t Go*, pp. 50-51. See also: Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, pp. 81-82; Sheehan, *The Boston School Integration Dispute*, pp. 194-196;

<sup>27</sup> John Kifner, “South Boston Schools Shut in Clashes Over Stabbing,” *New York Times*, Dec. 11, 1974, p. 28.

<sup>28</sup> Knox, Oliphant, and Richard, “The First Year,” sec. A, p. 19.

<sup>29</sup> Knox, Oliphant, and Richard, “The First Year,” sec. A, p. 19; Malloy, *Southie Won’t Go*, p. 53.

<sup>30</sup> Oral History Interview of Barbara Faith, OH-063. John Joseph Moakley Oral History Project, John Joseph Moakley Archive and Institute, Suffolk University, Boston, MA.

<sup>31</sup> Gary MacMillan, “Crowd got blood it was looking for, but it was its own,” *Boston Globe*, Dec. 12, 1974, p. 28.

<sup>32</sup> Karagianis, “Women protest busing, Gov. Dukakis stays away,” p. 1.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 8.

<sup>34</sup> Jean Dietz and Robert J. Anglin, “Equal rights rally disrupted by busing foes,” *Boston Globe*, April 10, 1975, p. 1.

<sup>35</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, p. 2.

<sup>36</sup> For Hicks as “political opportunist,” in addition to Formisano, Lukas, and Lupo, see also: George V. Higgins, *Style Versus Substance: Boston, Kevin White, and the Politics of Illusion* (New York: MacMillan Publishing Co., 1984).

<sup>37</sup> Lukas, *Common Ground*, p. 137.

<sup>38</sup> Dietz and Anglin, “Equal rights rally disrupted by busing foes,” p. 1.

<sup>39</sup> Joan Kuriansky, *Louise Day Hicks, Democratic Representative from Massachusetts* (Ralph Nadar Congress Project, 1972), p. 18.

<sup>40</sup> Dietz and Anglin, “Equal rights rally disrupted by busing foes,” p. 1.

<sup>41</sup> “The Bicentennial Begins in Boston,” advertisement in the *New York Times*,

Mar. 23, 1975, p. 364; see also: Christopher Capozzola, “‘It Makes You Want to Believe in the Country’: Celebrating the American Bicentennial in an Age of Limits.” In Beth Bailey and David Farber, eds., *America in the Seventies* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2004), pp 29-49.

<sup>42</sup> James Ayers, “Busing foes take their protest to reply of Boston Massacre,” *Boston Globe*, Mar. 6, 1975, p. 6.

<sup>43</sup> J. Anthony Lukas, “Who Owns 1776?” *The New York Times Sunday Magazine*, May 18, 1975, p. 39.

<sup>44</sup> Ron Hutson and Viola Osgood, “Crowds jam Plaza for Boston’s celebration,” *Boston Sunday Globe*, April 20, 1975, p. 50.

<sup>45</sup> Lukas, “Who Owns 1776?” p. 40.

<sup>46</sup> According to Ronald Formisano, “In 1973 roughly 60 percent of the students in the public schools had been white. By 1980 the percentage had dropped to 35, by 1987 [two years after Judge Garrity ended his direct supervision of the Boston school system] it was 26 percent.” See Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, pp. 210-211. Since then, the percentage of white students enrolled in the Boston public schools has declined even further; in 2005 it stood at 14 percent according to the *Boston Globe* online accessed June 1, 2010. NB: According to the U.S. Census Bureau, in 2006 the percentage of Bostonians who were white was 56 percent of the city’s total population.

<sup>47</sup> Kathleen Kilgore, “Militant Mothers: The Politicization of ROAR Women,” *The Real Paper*, Nov. 13, 1976, sec. 4, p. 6.

<sup>48</sup> Kilgore, “Militant Mothers,” sec. 4, p. 5.

<sup>49</sup> Kilgore, “Militant Mothers,” sec. 4, p. 5.

<sup>50</sup> Kilgore, “Militant Mothers,” sec. 4, p. 6.

<sup>51</sup> Kilgore, “Militant Mothers,” sec. 4, p. 6; see also: Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, pp. 146-150.

<sup>52</sup> Tager, *Boston Riots*, p. 219. ROAR would hold its first “national” convention — in Boston, of course — in May of 1975. See convention pamphlet, Fran Johnnene Papers, City of Boston Archives and Records Management, West Roxbury, MA.

<sup>53</sup> Formisano, *Boston Against Busing*, p. 203.

<sup>54</sup> “A Change of Course in Boston,” *New York Times*, July 17, 1999, p. A12; Carey Goldberg, “Judge W. Arthur Garrity Is Dead at 79,” *New York Times*, Sept. 18, 1999, p. A15.