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“Political expedience challenging morality. Case Study: President Ronald Reagan’s 1984
Campaign rhetoric in Charlotte, North Carolina.”

HUM 104: Connections and Conflicts II

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School segregation in America has a long history shaped by underlying complex societal issues. Educational scholars would agree that the discourse surrounding segregation has shaped the way we educate our children since 1776. More specifically, consensus would suggest, nowhere has the national discussion been more important than in Charlotte, North Carolina.¹ Behind the glamour of America's second largest financial metropolis is a hidden story of socioeconomic and racial injustice the city has been unable to control. What is often overlooked however, is that the biggest challenge in solving this issue has not been community opposition to desegregation but rather political scepticism at state and national levels, shifting the discourse away from the root causes of the issue.

In this paper I will be explaining why President Reagan's 1984 Campaign speech in Charlotte, North Carolina has been overlooked in changing the public education busing system, and why it needs to be recognized as a landmark event in race relations in this country. Additionally, the stigmas that have been created surrounding racial integration, both directly and indirectly stemming from his rhetoric. Specifically, how was the President able to manipulate and twist his personal opinion, into a data and facts? In doing this, various aspects of his speech need to be dissected to see the manipulation of rhetoric in the political arena. I will point out various patterns and common themes in societal discourse surrounding Reagan's speech-work, both in 1984 and today. How did the media interpret his speech? How did his voice change public opinion and contemporary vernacular on school busing as a step towards racial

¹ Hinshaw, Davie. "CMS Most Racially Segregated School District in NC, Advocacy Group Says." Charlotte Observer. Charlotte, NC. Accessed April 14, 2020. Recent Charlotte newspaper article outlining history of school segregation and discourse in Mecklenburg County and how this has created the school system of today.

integration? These questions are essential in contextualizing the misunderstood power of rhetoric in this nation's busing debate.

Scholars generally agree, the beginning of modern desegregation movements in America began with the 1954 Supreme Court ruling of *Brown v Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*.² This landmark decision unanimously ruled it unconstitutional to racially segregate public schools in the United States.³ Lawmakers and school boards across the nation jumped on the opportunity to interpret this decision to overturn segregation, not demand integration. In Charlotte more specifically, neighborhood schools remained largely segregated throughout the 1960s. The black population generally lived in the inner city, as the white population began to move out into suburbs such as Huntersville and Matthews. This only came to exacerbate the issue making Charlotte a key target for progressive movements in desegregating the South.

The 1970s came to be a defining moment not only in the social construct of Charlotte, as a city, but North Carolina as a state, and the United States of America as a nation. The Supreme Court case of *Swann v Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education* (1971) ordered the beginning of busing students across the county in an effort to create racially balanced communities in public schools.⁴ Busing quickly became a matter of pride for Charlotteans, as they sought to

² *Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow: School Desegregation and Resegregation in Charlotte*, edited by Mickelson, Roslyn Arlin, Stephen Samuel Smith and Amy Hawn Nelson Harvard Education Press, 8 Story Street First Floor, Cambridge, MA 02138, 2015.

This book provides an introduction to Charlotte's busing issues. Collection of scholarly opinions, outlining consensus in academia on the story of school segregation.

³ United States Courts. "History - *Brown v. Board of Education* Re-Enactment." Accessed April 14, 2020. Washington, DC.

Educational resource from the US Government on the history surrounding the *Brown v Board of Education* Supreme Court Case of 1954.

⁴ Schwartz, *Swann's Way*. Oxford University Press. 1986.

create a new image of a progressive Southern city. I see one of the most defining moments in the discussion to be President Ronald Reagan's 1984 Charlotte campaign speech, in which he declared busing to be a "social experiment that nobody wants."⁵ Overlooked in the scholarly conversation is the way in which Reagan's strong opposition to busing in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools precipitated a shift in public perception of this issue, especially in North Carolina itself.

A common theme in President Reagan's speeches is the use of rhetorical techniques to effectively stretch his opinion into fact, unconventionally controlling the views of American citizens. Successful politicians are often the ones who are able to infiltrate their opinions into perceivable facts through speech, the media and everyday discourse.

The use of catch phrases and repetition was numerous throughout Reagan's speeches around the country, but especially his 1984 Charlotte speech. The word 'compassion' is constantly referred to multiple times, as Reagan seeks to spark emotion from voters, as they headed to the polls one month later. "We've found out [busing] failed. I don't call that compassion."⁶ Only in the last 20 years, has research been conducted in an attempt to understand the effect of such political rhetoric on consensus of opinion. Unfortunately, this means the words Reagan used were not seen to be highly influential like one might suggest today. Catch phrases, or expressions notable by their frequent occurrence, can be found throughout the transcript of Reagan's 1984 speech. The most notable of these would be the phrase "pawns in a social experiment."⁷ His speechwriters used the combination of repetition and catch phrases to drive

⁵ "100884a | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration." Simi Valley, CA. Accessed April 13, 2020. Complete dialogue of President Reagan's 1984 campaign speech in Charlotte, N.C.

⁶ "100884a | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration." Simi Valley, CA. Accessed April 13, 2020.

⁷ Ibid.

energy and charisma into the crowd. “4 more years! 4 more years! 4 more years!”⁸ This repetitive, engaging dialogue between Reagan and rally participants showed Charlotteans that his perspectives hold strong moral merit. Despite relatively limited intellectual discourse on this aspect of the speech, no doubt these lines and catch phrases contributed to cementing the shift in Charlotte to remove integrating schools through busing in the early 1990s.

The choice made by President Reagan to use harsh and divisive rhetoric ultimately created division between media, government and citizens over how to ensure racial integration was promoted as outlined in *Brown v Board of Education*. Initial resistance within Mecklenburg County to abandon busing quickly became outcried by political figureheads such as Ronald Reagan, George H.W. Bush and even Delaware Senator Joseph Biden who led strong national political and legal campaigns to bring back neighborhood schooling. Its impact on Charlotte can be better analyzed by looking at the tone in newspaper articles after Reagan’s controversial speech. In 2000, the academic journal “Education Week” published staggering findings in the article “Charlotte-Mecklenburg not yet desegregated, court rules.”⁹ The U.S. Courts of Appeals 4th Circuit in Richmond, Virginia had unanimously found CMS Schools remained a “vestige of segregation,” walking backwards on busing allowing for racial prejudice to reflower in to the 21st Century.¹⁰ The difference is that modern segregation is ignorantly ignored by society, in an attempt to favor political scepticism and expedience over real systemic issues.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Reid, Karla Scoon. “Charlotte-Mecklenburg Not yet Desegregated, Court Rules.” *Education Week* 20, no. 14 (December 6, 2000): 11–11.

¹⁰ Belk, Terry, and Dwayne Collins. “United States Court of Appeals 4th Circuit,” Richmond, VA. n.d., 174.

A detailed record from the US Court of Appeals 4th Circuit in Richmond, Virginia about legal proceedings regarding segregation in Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.

In counter protest, just days after the landslide Republican re-election in November 1984 the New York Times acknowledged the concern of shifting perspectives in the editorial “Reagan and the Court” as Charlotte was being brought into the national spotlight surrounding the busing debate.¹¹ Large media publications around the United States, such as the New York Times followed by the Washington Post assisted Charlotte in expressing its busing strategy as an effective integration method which could be adopted across the country, rather than a “failed social experiment,” preached by the President to limited success.¹² The “ill-informed” President’s “foot-in-mouth remark” to Charlotteans was initially denounced, attacking the city’s “proudest achievement.”¹³ Despite however strong the initial opposition would be deep “in Reagan country” perspectives were shifting, with a stark division and contrast seeping into the vernacular surrounding segregation in American public education.¹⁴ The rapid growth Charlotte experienced in the 1980s and 90s from a small southern town, to a growing metropolis of national significance, came with the desire to rewrite the region as a beacon of progressivism in a region often attacked by mainstream media as a liability to America’s path forward. The

¹¹ Wicker, Tom. “Reagan and the Court.” *New York Times*. New York, NY. 1984, sec. The Week in Review.

New York Times article expressing concern over Reagan’s ability to use rhetoric to persuade audiences, such as in Charlotte. Also, the concern of his political ability to flood the Supreme Court with political allies for personal benefit.

¹² “100884a | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration.” Simi Valley, CA. Accessed April 13, 2020.

¹³ Wicker, Tom. “Reagan and the Court.” *New York Times*. New York, NY. 1984, sec. The Week in Review.

¹⁴ 100884a | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration.” Simi Valley, CA. Accessed April 13, 2020.
<https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/100884a>.

President may have understood his expansionary fiscal economic policies awarded Charlotteans a new quality of life, however he drastically mistook his policies for his opinion.

The remarks surrounding school busing made by Ronald Reagan in Charlotte may have only constructed one sentence in his speech, however built a lasting opinion on the people of a small Southern city. It is clear when reading the transcript, the use of high modality and divisive wording allowed the “busing; the failed experiment” to be the line of legacy for Reagan.¹⁵ The bullying tactics of rhetorical devices his speechwriters employed, inherently resulted in people focusing their attention on the most captivating moment of the speech; the busing attack. The 2003 text “Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond” has an entire chapter devoted to analyzing Reagan’s “bully pulpit” tactics.¹⁶ Reagan and his speechwriters had clear understanding of American liberty, “the contingency of personal freedom,” and this idea of self-determination was used by his administration to effectively quash the argument for forced integration, citing American Constitutional rights.¹⁷

Additionally, the personal connection which President Reagan built up with his audiences allowed him to effectively manipulate the Charlotte crowd into adopting the negative connotations linked with school busing. As a “great admirer of [the] state” he fostered relationships with North Carolinians where “sky is Carolina Blue,” the “mountains are majestic”

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ritter, Kurt W., and Martin J. Medhurst. “*Presidential Speechwriting: From the New Deal to the Reagan Revolution and Beyond.*” 1st ed. Presidential Rhetoric Series ; No. 7. College Station: Texas A&M University Press, 2003.

¹⁷ Ibid; Robertson and Riel, “*Right to Be Educated or Right to Choose?*” Virginia Law Review. Charlottesville, VA. 2019.

and “support...is truly treasured.”¹⁸ This connective and emotional language has never been seen by scholars and journalists alike as the focus point of the speech, however it needs to be recognized, as this was what made the busing remarks stand out, hence leading to a change in public opinion. Many of the speeches Reagan delivered throughout his Presidency focused on enhancing the effect of this language on moral compass, swaying his popularity with the American people. For Reagan, policy had an incidental relationship with rhetoric. This means what he preached to voters took a secondary stance to his economic and political actions. His policies were the primary tool in winning votes, Nonetheless, it ensured citizens were persuaded in favor of his words and actions.

This research is critically important in understanding why school busing became such a failure in the United States. The biggest gap in scholarly discussion is that political skepticism led to societal disbelief in a system which undeniably produced positive results, especially in Mecklenburg County. Journalists and publications have been focused solely on the quantitative numbers game. Whilst in many aspects of the social sciences this approach may hold merit, this type of research overlooks the influences, both direct and indirect, which precipitated change in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg school system, driving change in these statistics. Take for example, 2002 the research findings from the University of North Carolina Charlotte, “The Academic Consequences of Desegregation and Segregation: Evidence from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.”¹⁹ This detailed publication uses a variety of evidence and data collected

¹⁸ 100884a | Ronald Reagan Presidential Library - National Archives and Records Administration.” Simi Valley, CA. Accessed April 13, 2020. <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/research/speeches/100884a>.

¹⁹ Mickelson, “*The Academic Consequences of Desegregation and Segregation: Evidence from the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Schools.*” 2002. Detailed statistical research into resegregation by busing removal in the CMS school system.

from various CMS schools, to show how resegregation in the 1990s, exposed a substantially negative effect on the racial construct, and therefore academic outcome of minority students in schools county-wide. Despite Mickelson quoting the “failed social experiment” Reagan described in 1984, she strongly views it as a “largely equivocal” factor in Charlotteans fallout with school busing.²⁰ There is indisputably a large systemic issue when “25% of black children will attend a school with 90% or more African-American enrollment” in a post Brown and Swann era, however we need to understand the social and political environments which have allowed this prejudice to flourish.²¹ Despite the importance and significance of numerical changes in Mecklenburg County’s school system in the late 20th Century, greater emphasis needs to be placed on how rhetoric from political leaders such as President Reagan, managed to sway public attitudes on racism in America. Covert segregation only precipitated from the action of leaders and individuals in our society. Ronald Reagan as the leader of the free world, held the greatest power of all to constitute the neglect of integration in our public education system.

It is clear that Ronald Reagan’s 1984 campaign speech in Charlotte was a landmark case in the story of America’s racially driven education system. The strong and divisive rhetoric he used has come to define the discourse of our political system today. Whilst scholars agree that Charlotte took a step backwards in its move to racial equality in the 1990s, they have failed to recognize how this movement was molded by the coldness of the Reagan administration. Despite the continuous pattern of angst and offence demonstrated by journalists from publications around the United States, aimed at Reagan’s attack on the city’s proudest achievement, more recognition needs to be given to how the rhetorical devices he employed in his speech, created political and

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Ibid.

societal skepticism of busing as the solution to fulfilling the requirements of Brown v Board of Education.

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