

THOUGHTS ON MILWAUKEE AND CIVIL RIGHTS, 1958–1968

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As I wrote my biography of Clement J. Zablocki, I became interested in determining who opposed Civil Rights in Milwaukee from 1958 to 1968. In 1958, a police shooting led to the beginning of Civil Rights agitation in the city. The area became a focus for Civil Rights opponents as Alabama Governor and Presidential candidate George Wallace famously campaigned for city's Polish American votes in 1964. After a series of protests and riots in the South Side of Milwaukee in 1967, the city passed an Open Housing ordinance in the next year. That dictionary of popular wisdom, *Wikipedia*, explains that Milwaukee's Polish Americans opposed Civil Rights as part of a "White Backlash." I have decided to test that argument.

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¹ *Wikipedia*, s. v. 'Democratic Presidential Primaries, 1964,' http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Democratic_Party_presidential_primaries,_1964#Wisconsin; Accessed June 4, 2014.

PART ONE: AN IMAGINED MILWAUKEE

As the 1967 civil rights protests of Fr. James E. Groppi gained national attention, the *New York Times* reported that local lore described the Milwaukee's 16th St. Viaduct as the world's longest bridge, since it connected Africa to Poland.² In other words, this bridge connected the nearly all black "Inner Core" with the Polish American community in the South Side of Milwaukee. During the protests, Fr. Groppi, his Youth Commando leader Prentice McKinney, and even the *New York Times* referred to this bridge as "the Mason-Dixon line," representing the boundary between the African American north and the white south.³ This local in-joke captured the socially constructed "mental map" of many Milwaukee residents. While this idealized view of the city clearly deviated from geographic and demographic realities, this perception shaped how the public—and subsequent scholars—examined the incidents.⁴ *In the minds of many*, Civil Rights protest in Milwaukee became a conflict between interracial civil rights activists confronting racist Polish Americans.

However, this is a case in which the historical recollections do not necessarily tell the truth. The reporting of the era often assumes that the South Side opposition to Fr. Groppi was Polish American. Yet journalists rarely interviewed members of the crowd. One African American *Journal* reporter

² *New York Times*, September 17, 1967. This joke has been told many times to the author.

³ Tape 33, segment 2, August 23, 1967, WTMJ-TV News Records, Area Research Center, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin; Tape 34, segment 11, August 29, 1967, *ibid.*; *New York Times*, September 15, 1967.

⁴ For a comprehensive review of Milwaukee Civil Rights historiography during the 1960s, see: J. Dougherty, 'African Americans, Civil Rights, and Race-Making in Milwaukee,' in V. Greene, M. Anderson *Perspectives on Milwaukee's Past*, ed, University of Illinois Press, Champaign 2009. Key works include: F. Aukofer, *City with a Chance: A Case History of the Civil Rights Revolution*, Bruce Publishing, Milwaukee 1968; H.W. Maier, *The Mayor Who Made Milwaukee Famous: An Autobiography*, Madison Books, Lanham, MD 1993; J.S. Pula, *Polish Americans: An Ethnic Community*, Twayne Publishers, New York 1996, pp. 128–132; J.T. McGreevey, *Parish Boundaries: The Catholic Encounter with Race in Twentieth-Century Urban North*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago 1996, pp. 196–207; J. Gurda, *The Making of Milwaukee*, County Historical Society, Milwaukee 1999, p. 360; S.G. Meyer, *As Long as They Don't Move Next Door: Segregation and Racial Conflict in American Neighborhoods*, Rowman and Littlefield Publisher's, Inc., Lanham 2000, pp. 189–196; S.M. Leahy, *The Life of Milwaukee's Most Popular Politician, Clement J. Zablocki: Milwaukee Politics and Congressional Foreign Policy*, The Edwin Mellen Press, Lewiston 2002, pp. 94–96, 105–108; P.D. Jones, *The Selma of the North: Civil Rights Insurgency in Milwaukee*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge 2009; J. Dougherty, *More Than One Struggle: The Evolution of Black School Reform in Milwaukee*, University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 2004.

called the South Side of Milwaukee a “strange land” and a “foreign land” as she followed protesters down S. 16th St. In that same day’s issue, the *Milwaukee Journal* story explained that the South Side was the most racially conservative. It “proved” this statement by mentioning that more than 100,000 Polish Americans lived on the South Side.⁵ When Mayor Henry Maier demanded that suburbs pass Open Housing laws before Milwaukee, the newspaper promised to pay particular attention to the city of Cudahy with its populations of Polish, German, and Slovakian origin.⁶ In the dark age of the Polish joke, *Journal* reporters assumed Polish Americans to be racists.

It is easy to make such false assumptions. Within the South Side of Milwaukee County, Polish Americans constituted the second largest ethnic group. However, they constituted the largest group in nineteen census tracts. Their churches stood out as landmarks of Polish American culture. The South Side had Polish restaurants, Polish funeral parlors, Polish taverns, and even a Polish language newspaper until 1962. Since they voted overwhelmingly Democratic, Polish American Democrats dominated political life. This led many to equate Lincoln Avenue with the Main Street in any Polish city. Ray Kintis of Kenosha joked that Civil Rights marchers did not want Open Housing. He said: “I bet they just want to become Polish.”⁷ No one mentioned that even the most Polish American tracts had hundreds of German American residents and often had at least one hundred from another ethnicity.⁸

Leading political figures assumed that Polish Americans dominated the racist city’s opposition to Civil Rights. While sitting in the White House, Press Secretary (and former Milwaukee resident) George Reedy told President Lyndon B. Johnson that racist Polish Americans cheered George Wallace at a 1964 Milwaukee rally.⁹ After receiving telephoned death threats in 1967, Youth Commando leader Prentice McKinney declared callers to be Polish American.¹⁰ Radical activist Saul Alinsky declared that the Poles fought for freedom in Poland, but in Milwaukee they were “primitive, prejudiced slobs.”¹¹ Before,

⁵ *Milwaukee Journal*, August 29, 1967.

⁶ *Milwaukee Journal*, September 19; December 20, 1967.

⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, October 13, 1967.

⁸ U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Censuses of Population and Housing: 1960, Census Tracts: Milwaukee, Wis.*, Government Printing Office, Washington 1961.

⁹ K. Germany et al. ed, *The Presidential Recordings: Lyndon B. Johnson*, W.W. Norton, New York 2007, April 6, 1964, 743. According to the footnotes, Reedy’s comments were inaccurate as they related to the La Follette family. Based on that inaccuracy, it is reasonable to suggest that Reedy did not know the South Side of Milwaukee as much as he thought that he did.

¹⁰ WTMJ Tape 33, August 23, 1967, segments 2, 4, 12, WTMJ Records.

¹¹ *Milwaukee Journal*, October 29, 1967.

during, and after these protests, Civil Rights activists made ethnic slurs against Polish Americans. Fr. James Groppi even mocked Thaddeus Kosciuszko—the Polish champion of American and African American liberty—as a “mercenary” and a “professional killer.”¹²

Like Polish Americans, African Americans in Milwaukee also lived in a real community and an imagined community. The bulk of the African American population lived north of the 16th St. Viaduct in what was known as the Inner Core. Unlike Polish Americans, the color of their skin announced their presence. Black residents likewise had their own churches, restaurants, taverns, and a newspaper. The Census Bureau focused on twenty-nine census tracts with one hundred or more non-white households. Of these twenty-nine districts, nine had white majorities. Of the twenty tracts that had black majorities, nine had over a thousand white residents. Every tract had at least one hundred fifty whites.¹³

Letters to the editor in the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel* imagined an African American community along the lines of racial stereotypes. According to many correspondents, African Americans lived in shoddy homes since they were dirty and unkempt. Black people had irresponsibly had too many children. Their children attended crowded schools because they only liked being around other black people. They did not have jobs because they were lazy. The police arrested blacks because they had no respect for law and order. Civil Rights agitation constituted an attempt by the lazy to take the property away from hard working white people. If only African Americans spent as much time improving their homes as they did protesting, Milwaukee would not have a racial problem. Even the defenders of Civil Rights expressed racist sentiments. In 1963, *Milwaukee Journal* editorialized that minstrel shows were harmless fun.¹⁴

The master of creating a false mental map was Milwaukee Mayor Henry Maier. The mayor subsumed the Civil Rights debate into his war of words against the state and the federal government. Maier had a point in stating that issues like racism and urban blight did not stop on city boundaries. However, his demand for additional state and federal funding often excused his inaction and his pandering to racists for a referendum banning Open Housing. Maier constructed a mental map of Inner Core residents hemmed in by racist suburbs.¹⁵ He never

¹² WTMJ Tape 34, August 29, 1967, segment 11, WTMJ Records; Aukofer, *City with a Chance*, 110–116.

¹³ U.S., Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *U.S. Censuses of Population...*

¹⁴ *Milwaukee Journal*, February 9, 1963.

¹⁵ Tape 26, segment 3, October 13, 1965, segment 3, tape 26, WTMJ-TV Records, Area Research Center, Golda Meir Library, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, Milwaukee, Wisconsin.

mentioned that the Milwaukee North Side neighborhoods actually hemmed African Americans into substandard housing. After the 1967 protest marches on the South Side, Maier used the “dumb Polak” stereotype to characterize counter protesters. He explained that South Side hooligans were unfamiliar with black people rather than bigoted.¹⁶ Poor geography proved to be great politics for Maier, as he won every ward and 86 percent of the vote in his 1968 re-election bid.

PART II: THE RACIST CITY OF MILWAUKEE, 1958–1968

This Africa versus Poland spatial analysis falls apart in the technological realities of 20th Century America. The automobile became a mass item by the 1920s. By the 1950s, it was not uncommon for young people to have their own cars. Newly opened expressways facilitated fast travel using the AMC Rambler station wagons made in the city. So when George Wallace had only one public appearance in Milwaukee in 1964, Serb Hall stood empty until after rush hour. Then an overflowing crowd filled the building.¹⁷ After Fr. Groppi led a home protest in suburban Wauwatosa, newspaper accounts reported that most spectators came from outside of the suburb.¹⁸ It is telling that one of the centers of violent resistance was a “Crazy Jim’s” used car lot at the southern end of the 16th St. Viaduct. On Sunday, September 10, 1967—the day of the most violent counter protests—“Crazy” Jim Groh sponsored a “Crazy Jim’s Demo,” a demolition derby attended by thousands in the far southwestern suburb Hales Corners. That same night opponents to Civil Rights stood in his used car lot carrying signs saying “Crazy Groppi’s Demo.”¹⁹ A reasonable person could infer that drunken car enthusiasts cheered the destruction of old cars in the afternoon and then threw their empty beer bottles at protesters and police on South 16th St.

¹⁶ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, September 15, 1967, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=cNcpAAAIIBAJ&sjid=AREEAAAIBAJ&pg=7451%2C3005612>; Accessed February 18, 2014.

¹⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, April 2, 1964. Only after the speech did Kendzioriski get to meet Wallace. See *ibid.*

¹⁸ *Milwaukee Star*, August 27, 1966.

¹⁹ *Milwaukee Journal*, September 12, 1967. I am indebted to a fine undergraduate paper for insights on James Groh. See Z. Sell, ‘South of the ‘Mason-Dixon Line’: Milwaukee’s Anti-Open Housing Movement,’ January 5, 2008, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, paper in possession of the author.

The Milwaukee residents did not recognize the uncomfortable reality that the city systemically discriminated against its increasingly large black population. Yes, a few sang “Dixie” in Polish at Wallace’s 1964 Serb Hall rally. Yes, a few—but only a few—held signs at Crazy Jim’s used car lot stating: “Polish Power”. (They carried far more with other statements.) Yet only South Side conservative and Universal Telephone Company office manager Florian Zalewski stated that opposition to Open Housing helped preserve a Polish community.²⁰ I want to emphasize: *The story of Civil Rights agitation in 1960s Milwaukee is about protesters confronting a racist city.* Rather than searching for the phantom Polish American primitive, prejudiced slobs of Saul Alinsky’s imagination or focusing on obscure figures like Florian Zalewski, we should look at the institutions openly engaging in discrimination. Realtors, employers, police officers routinely discriminated against African Americans. Usually opponents to Civil Rights had ties to these groups or to the radical John Birch Society (JBS).

At the heart of this racism was the real estate industry. The “race and ethnicity” of a piece of property had a definite financial value. Based on maps produced by the Federal Government, local realtors steered African Americans to the Inner Core. Outside of the Inner Core, property owners refused to rent or to sell to African Americans. Banks refused to finance purchases or improvements. Insurance agencies often refused to cover Inner Core properties. Too often, reporters focused on the Polish last names of Civil Rights opponents Richard C. Nowakowski and Casimir Kendzierski. No one ever mentioned their real estate backgrounds.

Employers contributed to economic problems. While large employers like A.O. Smith and American Motors hired African Americans, others like Allen-Bradley openly refused. Or other corporations placed African Americans in menial jobs, refusing to promote them to higher-ranking positions. The construction union leaders openly stated that African Americans were unqualified. When conservatives demanded that African Americans get a job, they never said anything about employers denying people a chance at a living wage.

Conservatives argued that they supported the rights of property and the individual at the expense of government. This narrative became quite prominent in the early 1960s. Again, only Florian Zalewski said that state sponsored discrimination hurt African Americans. However, Zalewski feared more the tyranny of the Federal government.²¹ Other conservatives never once complained about the clear neighborhood or governmental pressures to not rent or to not

²⁰ *Milwaukee Journal*, June 7, 1963.

²¹ [Milwaukee] *Catholic Herald Citizen*, June 4, 1964.

sell to African Americans. They certainly did not stand up for the rights of private individuals to make business transactions. Instead, conservatives always championed discriminating property owners and ignored their racist neighbors and their racist governments.

William Grede, the owner of Grede Foundaries, a former president of the National Association of Manufacturers, and a co-founder of the John Birch Society, loomed over the conservative movement in Milwaukee. Throughout his life, Grede supported the organization. JBS believed that the entire future twentieth century world leadership met in Switzerland in 1902 to create a universal socialist government. Birchers even argued that Presidents Dwight Eisenhower and John F. Kennedy were Communist agents. Like the Tea Party in current times, the Republican Party in 1962 and in 1964 suffered an influx of JBS activists. The 1964 Republican standard-bearer Barry Goldwater remarked about Birchers: “They believe in the Constitution, they believe in God, they believe in freedom.”²²

JBS strongly opposed government action while championing the Neoliberal ideas. They defined all government activity as Communism. They pledged to use Communist tactics to destroy what they called Communism. Birchers organized small cells of committed activists who then helped organize ad hoc front groups. They executed this strategy well, since I only detected their presence after most issues of the *Milwaukee Journal* and *Milwaukee Sentinel* were put online. Searches of Google News showed only a few degrees of separation between William Grede and groups opposed to desegregation in schools, opposed to Open Housing, and in favor of George Wallace for president. For example, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee student Wells H. Perkins served as a delegate candidate for George Wallace. The previous summer, the *Milwaukee Sentinel* reported that Perkins had attended a Grede sponsored “Freedom School” in Colorado.²³

The Birchers often had connections to the more racist members of the Republican Party and supporters of Alabama Governor George Wallace and Milwaukee police officers. Wallace’s showing in the 1964 Democratic Presidential Primary must be seen as a successful Republican and Bircher ploy to embarrass Governor John W. Reynolds and President Lyndon B. Johnson. Outside of former realtor Casimir Kendzioriski, all Polish American leaders supported Reynolds.

²² *New York Times*, July 18, 1964.

²³ *Milwaukee Sentinel*, October, 28, 1963, <http://news.google.com/newspapers?id=mW5QAAAIBAJ&sjid=FBEEAAAIBAJ&pg=7218%2C6270896>; Accessed December 6, 2010. The “Freedom School” in Colorado should not be confused with the Freedom Schools created in Milwaukee to protest racism in Milwaukee Public Schools.

Reporters failed to emphasize how easy it was for someone to switch party registrations on primary day. They also did not make connections between news stories about a few suburban and South Side Republicans and Birchers calling voters. Odds are that they called lists of committed Republicans rather than Polish American factory workers. As part of their secrecy, JBS did not take credit for the Wallace showing in 1964. The overwhelming Lyndon B. Johnson landslide in the general election suggests that there was no Polish American defection from the Democratic Party over Civil Rights.

George Wallace for good reason campaigned among the wives of police officers. George H. Sprague, the leader of the Milwaukee police union, belonged to the John Birch Society. The JBS front group “The Committee on Police Support” (COPS) handed out pro-police bumper stickers at Civil Rights protests. Sprague helped persuade Civil Rights opponents to demand a referendum banning Open Housing legislation in Milwaukee. He did this at a meeting in which he showed the Bircher produced film *Anarchy U.S.A.* With police leadership like this, it is not surprising that marchers often complained about beatings from the poorly educated, poorly paid, and poorly trained officers. Police officers even burned down the headquarters of Fr. Groppi’s Youth Commandos. Of course, not every police officer was a bigot. Yet, more often than not, police officers stood on the side of those against Civil Rights.

The political leaders within the city were at best disinterested in fighting racism. Almost every white politician in the city had an Eagles Club membership. All observers agreed that political hopefuls had to belong to the club. The organization pointedly refused to admit African Americans. Only Representative Henry S. Reuss—who represented the Inner Core and the rest of the North Side of Milwaukee—resigned due to pressure from Fr. Groppi. Mayor Maier had let his membership lapse as part of a policy not to show favoritism. South Side Representative Clement J. Zablocki and most of the city’s judges defiantly stayed in the organization.²⁴

The city’s taverns often became the centers for opposition to Civil Rights. News reports often mentioned drunken spectators coming out of or going into taverns during the evening marches. News stories usually mentioned that police arrested someone for throwing a bottle. Or a thrown bottle injured a police officer or a marcher. On September 3, the *Milwaukee Journal* reported that African Americans came out of North Side bars to participate in the marches. On the South Side, bar patrons came out to watch the protests. Police often

²⁴ *Milwaukee Journal*, September 1, 1966; *Milwaukee Sentinel*, August 24, 1966.

pushed disruptive spectators backed into the taverns. David Mueller, a clerk at American Motors and an occasional *Catholic Herald-Citizen* columnist, told the *Milwaukee Journal* that bar patrons often cursed and screamed at the marchers.²⁵ After violent counter protests against Civil Rights marchers in 1967, Mayor Maier promised to speak to the grass roots leaders of the South Side—union stewards, barbers, and *tavern owners*.²⁶ Protests and alcohol were always mixed.

My survey of correspondence from 1958 to 1968 shows that if anything, correspondents with a Polish American name were slightly less likely to oppose Civil Rights. With perhaps the exception of the first protest that crossed the S. 16th Viaduct, opponents to Civil Rights came from a variety of ethnic groups and areas in the city. The one scientific survey of racial attitudes in most Polish American neighborhood confirms this view. In 1967, the *Milwaukee Journal* polled 83 South Side residents living near Kosciuszko Park. Two out of three people endorsed anyone's right to demonstrate at any portion of the city. Four out of five denounced white hecklers. The newspaper also reported specific comments made by respondents. Of the ten mentioned, seven had Polish names. Only one anonymous person approved of the hecklers. Only one person called for demonstrators to stay on their side of the town.²⁷

Many people are interested in the relations between ethnic groups. Certainly there is great value to studying how different groups interacted. But the ethnic explanation of Milwaukee's discrimination ignores Milwaukee's racist power structure. It also ignores wealthy radicals who socially constructed a vision of a tyrannical federal government—just as that government began taking action to fight racism. Most observers failed to note that image of the prejudiced Polish American slob matched the stereotype found in defaming Polish jokes of the decade. Future histories of Milwaukee in the Civil Rights era should stress that the city and its residents created and ignored racism within its boundaries. Only pressures from the Federal Government and the relentless protests of Fr. James E. Groppi led to change. In the process, however, Civil Rights advocates and reporters scapegoated Polish Americans as racists.

²⁵ *Milwaukee Journal*, September 9, 1967.

²⁶ *Milwaukee Journal*, August 30, 1967.

²⁷ *Milwaukee Journal*, September 4, 1967.