



The Political Use of Racial Narratives: School Desegregation in Mobile, Alabama, 1954-97

Richard A. Pride

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Arguing that politics is essentially a contest for meaning and telling a story is an elemental political act, Richard A. Pride lays bare the history of school desegregation in Mobile, Alabama, to demonstrate the power of narrative in cultural and political change. "The Political Use of Racial Narratives" describes the public, personal, and meta-narratives of racial inequality that have competed for dominance in Mobile. Pride begins with a white liberal's quest to desegregate the city's public schools in 1955, and traces which narratives - those of biological inferiority, white oppression, the behavior and values of blacks, and others - came to influence public policy and opinion over four decades. Drawing on contemporaneous sources, he reconstructs the stories of demonstrations, civic forums, court cases, and school board meetings as citizens of Mobile would have experienced them. This process invites readers to trace the story of desegregation in Mobile through the voices of politicians, protestors, and journalists and to determine which narratives were indeed most powerful. Exploring who benefits and who pays when different narratives are accepted as true, Pride offers a step-by-step account of how the culture of Mobile changed each time a new and more forceful narrative was used to justify racial inequality. More than a retelling of Mobile's story of desegregation, "The Political Use of Racial Narratives" promotes the value of rhetorical and narrative analysis in the social sciences and history.

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