

## **The Honorable William M. Bulger**



*“Integrity without knowledge is weak and useless, and knowledge without integrity is dangerous and dreadful.”*

—*Samuel Johnson, Rasselas*

**W**illiam Bulger looms large in Boston politics. Bill was first elected to the Massachusetts House of Representatives as a Democrat in 1960. He took his seat a few weeks before John F. Kennedy’s inauguration. Bill heeded JFK’s stirring call to be people of courage, judgment, integrity, and dedication—a call proposing these traits as ideals of public service. This was JFK’s famous “City on a Hill” speech. While today’s generation of politicians may find it impossible to appreciate the zeal and optimism JFK kindled, in 1960, Bill did not. By 1970, he was elected to the State Senate. Soon after, Bulger served as that body’s President for eighteen years. Finally, Bill led the University of Massachusetts for almost eight years, as its President, having been invited by the Board of Trustees and formally receiving his appointment from a Republican governor.

Bill’s life began in South Boston. Early in life, he seized the reins of his own destiny. In his 1996 political memoir, *While the Music Lasts: My Life*

*in Politics*, Bill recalls how as a ninth-grader in catechism class, he overheard two boys from Catholic college preparatory schools talking about books, schoolwork, and ideas in a way that was totally foreign to him at the time. He knew then and there that his own education was inadequate. Initiative led him to march into Boston College High and ask what it would take to apply there. Realizing his own educational deficiencies, Bill offered to repeat the ninth grade. BC High accepted his offer. A part-time job at John's Meat Market and some help from his sister, Jean, helped Bill meet the \$150 annual tuition. It was a momentous decision, one that placed him on the academic path to Boston College and Boston College Law School.

BC High was but the first of many great influences on Bill's young life. Books brought Bill beyond the projects of South Boston. At seventeen, he says, "Books came like storms whirling through my mind, leaving me uncomfortably embarrassed when normality returned." His intellectual influences are Dr. Samuel Johnson and Father Carl Thayer. Johnson's insight on character profoundly impressed Bill, as he warned that knowledge without integrity could be dangerous. And Bill's teacher, Father Carl Thayer, was Johnson's equal in judging men's character: "Show me what a man does when no one else is around, when no one knows what he is doing, and I'll tell you what kind of person he is."

It was Father Thayer who introduced Bulger, the college student, to the ancient Greeks and Romans. That course began for Bill a relationship with Father Thayer that would last until the end of Thayer's life in 1990. Father Thayer most admired men of action: Demosthenes, Thucydides, and Cicero. He used these ancients to teach Bill the skill of political persuasion while preserving personal integrity.

After studying "Oration on the Crown," a speech Demosthenes delivered in the face of his own defeat, Bulger chose to write his college paper about James Michael Curley's 1946 trial and 1947 imprisonment for mail fraud during his last term as Mayor of Boston. What intrigued Bill about the prosecution of Curley was that in order to get someone who was deemed "bad," the prosecutors themselves felt free to behave badly, even illegally.

When he reached voting age, Bulger supported Curley during one of his many successful runs for Mayor. Under the slogan, "Curly Gets Things Done," James Michael was re-elected for a fourth term in spite of being under indictment. Much of Bill's political career was modeled after the best of Curley. In Bulger's 2009 biography of Curley, he captures their mutual view of politics:

“I think, if I understand Curley correctly, that he was not so much interested in the power as he was in what the power enabled him to accomplish.”

It is men like Curley and Bulger, men of dedication and talent, who do, in fact, make sacrifices by devoting themselves to public service, who are essential for the survival of our democracy. As Bulger explains again in the Curly biography:

“Why do they stay at it? Why do they choose public service in the first place?

I think there is a basic recognition that this kind of service is worthwhile no matter what the cost. And this sense of its value grows with experience.

Others may think the politician is on an ego trip, or the politician has base motives, psychological or otherwise, for selfish gain or enrichment in some way. But the politician who stays the course soon realizes that it will just have to be enough that he himself knows what good he has done.”

In Bulger’s view, the life of James Michael Curley affirms the idea that a life in politics remains worth undertaking even though it often includes some rough periods.

But what motivates Bill Bulger to withstand the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune in politics? Bill’s first motivation for his own career in politics was to improve tomorrow for his family. A lucky excursion-boat trip to the picturesque community of Steel Pier, on the tip of Cape Cod, led Bill to a dance with Mary Foley. That friendship led to a marriage of fifty years, producing nine children and thirty-two grandchildren. His second motivation was his love of his neighborhood, South Boston, his childhood home and his family home since 1966. In politics, Bill could also build a better tomorrow for his neighborhood. Throughout Bill’s career, the national media has trashed the reputation of South Boston. This cruel and false portrait comes, as Bill surmises, because “the rootless have always had contempt for the rooted, which may explain why social engineers chose South Boston for their disruptive forced busing experimentation.”

Bulger well understood that attacks and lies are common in the political arena. In Bill’s first race for the Massachusetts House of Representatives, his opponents attacked him personally, referring to him as “Same-Suit Bulger,” because Bill’s blue suit was the only one he owned. Bill never responded in

kind. Although possessing a quick wit, Bill never used it to disparage an opponent personally, but he often used it to decry unacceptable political actions. For example, when describing Judge W. Arthur Garrity's stewardship of forced busing in Boston, Bill said, "this most important case... was handled with the sensitivity of a chainsaw and the foresight of a mackerel."

One provocation constant in most of Bill's future campaigns also came in his first one. The *Boston Globe* frequently whipped it up. Bob Dineen, an opponent's "horse holder," tried to tar Bill with the image of Bill's brother Jim: "You belong in prison with your brother." Bill's father had been apprehensive that Jim (aka a fugitive called Whitey) Bulger's problems would hurt Bill's political prospects.

Loyalty has been a prime virtue in Bill's life. Take Ted Kennedy's first race for Senate. Jack was President of the United States, Bobby the Attorney General, and the campaign was supported by the large war chest of Ambassador Joe Kennedy. One premise of Ted's campaign was that he was rich and needed nothing. Unfortunately this implied that candidates without wealth—Abraham Lincoln comes to mind—are inherently larcenists and fundamentally without character.

Bill had already publicly announced his support for Teddy's primary opponent, Bill's South Boston neighbor Eddie McCormack. The Kennedy campaign organized and invited several prominent Massachusetts politicians to luncheon at the famous Boston restaurant Locke-Ober, whose most famous dish was lobster Savannah. Bill ordered the lobster Savannah. While Bill was eating the succulent lobster, campaign staffers began counting heads, going around the table asking who would be with Ted. Everyone was eagerly pledging support.

When it came to Bill, he said, "I can't be with you, Ted. The McCormacks are my neighbors."

Ted was unhappy and responded, "I don't know whether we should try to persuade him. I don't think we can afford to feed him."

"Well," Bill replied, "I just came to be sociable."

Another example of Bill's loyalty is evident in his support of Paul Mahoney for a district court judgeship. Mahoney, Bill's administrative assistant, was appointed subject to the approval of the Executive Council, as Massachusetts's law requires. Bill appeared before the Council to testify in Paul's support. Two enemies of Bill's, the controversial Harvard professor Alan Dershowitz and Harvey Silvergate, were there to oppose. The two had wrongly predicted to the Council, in advance of the hearing, that Mahoney would be indicted. Further, Dershowitz had publicly attacked Bulger and

Mahoney as “thugs,” “henchmen,” “crooks,” etc. Bulger knew that Mahoney’s reputation was about to be savaged, which prompted him to preempt the attack.

Echoes indeed of the Crown Oration! When the Chairman tried to silence Bill, Bulger quoted Edmund Burke’s admonition that there comes a time when forbearance ceases to be a virtue. “We have reached that time with this pair,” he said. “These two are murderers,” Bill told the Council, “murderers of reputations. Too many have put up with them too long.”

Bill then recited a list of points in Paul’s favor. Knowing Paul’s character allowed Bill to say with assurance that neither Dershowitz nor Silvergate could offer a single fact that argued against Mahoney’s approval:

“These men have no grievance against Paul Mahoney. All you will hear from them is their antipathy toward me. With that in mind, consider their credibility. They are crafty men, vindictive men, manipulative men, true connivers.”

As anticipated they offered no evidence damaging to Mahoney. The Council approved the appointment. Paul has served faithfully and competently on the bench for twenty years. Much more than a judgeship was at stake: since then Dershowitz has dropped his attacks on Mahoney but continues to attack Bulger personally by trying to link him to his brother’s activities, calling him “head of the mob” or “the real Godfather.”

These battles with antagonists and the press have occurred repeatedly throughout Bill’s career. The issue comes down simply to the integrity of a man’s reputation. Bill and James Michael Curley shared a common antipathy for the press when it oversteps its role in relation to politicians:

“If the press would rule, then let it stand for election, rather than rule through intimidation of those who are in fact chosen by the electorate.”

Unfortunately, the press has one tool Bill feels strongly it should not wield: the ability to tarnish a man’s good name without consequences. It comes from what Bill sees as that “shifty and dishonest decision” of the Supreme Court in *Sullivan v. The New York Times* (1964). For most of the existence of our Republic, like any other citizen, a public office holder could sue a publisher for libel, unless the publisher could prove the truth of his statements. This liability for false defamation fostered responsibility on the part of the press. But the Supreme Court held in *Sullivan* that persons in

public office could not sue for libel unless they could prove actual malice. The court simply made it virtually impossible for the victim to do anything about libelous publications. The media, granted such immunity, were given a license to lie.

Principled politicians take stands, even against what is perceived as popular wisdom. Bill saw the forced busing decree of W. Arthur Garrity as unjust and unwise, and always insisted that it would prove counterproductive. He understood the issue as being not about race but about misuse of the state's power. The forced busing of South Boston's children was a danger to them and to the community. Even if busing could rescue black children from schools they did not want to attend, which was doubtful, would it not drive white children of the poor into schools they did not want to attend? And would it not do so on the basis of their skin color? The goal, after all, was to rescue children from undesirable schools, not to evict them from desirable schools.

Forced busing was popular with unaffected proponents including politicians from Ted Kennedy to Mayor Marian Barry of Washington, D.C., as well as reporters Robert Turner of the *Boston Globe* and Tom Wicker of the *New York Times*. These proponents of forced busing would not put their own children at the disposition of Garrity, but would insist otherwise for the parents of children in South Boston.

Dr. Coleman was a sociologist who initially fostered the busing idea, but then opposed it. He described the unintended result as aligning aggrieved black parents against the School Department and the "innocent third party," namely South Boston.

Bill opposed forced busing based upon the natural right of parents to supervise the education of their children. Black parents, Bill believed, should have been encouraged and assisted in choosing any school for their own children. It should have been the same for all: maximum choice. The forced-busing decree proved counterproductive, as he warned. The school population dropped from 94,000 to about 55,000 students in only a couple of years. The children of South Boston attended schools with black children with no problem; it was the uprooting of children from South Boston neighborhood schools and shipping them all over the city on the basis of skin color that was the basis of the community's objection. South Boston people were the innocent third party in the drama.

Dr. Coleman told Bill that the most segregated of acts is the choice of the racial isolation of suburbia. Bill gently needled a State Senator, asking whether there might be some guilty feeling on the part of the folks from



*Bill joins Pavarotti at the microphone.*

Wellesley (Judge Garrity's home) or Hyannis Port. The proponents of this terribly ill-advised policy, especially the *Globe*, pitted black people and white people against each other unnecessarily. The *Globe* thought of itself as a heroic proponent of Civil Rights. But in fact, by their encouragement of the judge, they were foisting an impossible burden upon the city. The *Globe's* writers lived in the suburbs, as did the *Globe's* owners. Few today can envision the plight of a South Boston parent with children in public school. Bill blamed the social planners who were willing to oppose the natural right of parents to educate their children. South Boston families had no alternative, unless they had the money to afford private schools.

That was not Bill's last brush with controversy. His Presidency of the University of Massachusetts's system ended abruptly. He had prepared himself for the possibility that his differences with the Republican Governor could force him to leave his post prematurely. He remains grateful for the time he served U Mass. It was always a struggle, but a good one on behalf of a broader educational opportunity for the people of the Commonwealth. Few goals are more worthwhile. Bill comforted himself by recalling Demosthenes:

“Demosthenes was a man who meant what he said and said what he meant. When fortune was unkind, he knew that he had done his best and had done it unselfishly. I admired his manner of using his power of persuasion. The power of persuasion had worked for me through eighteen years and ten elections for the Presidency of the Senate and seven years as President of U Mass.”

An abrupt end may make a task feel thankless, but it does not make it meaningless. Bill also thought of his friend Congressman Joe Moakley, whose timely phone call one evening had forever enriched Bill’s perspective on politics:

“We had been friends since childhood. One day in 1991 Joe phoned to inform me that the doctors could do no more for him. He asked me to prepare remarks for his funeral. He went on to explain how he was putting things in order. “I’m just seeing things as they really are, Bill,” were his words. As we were reviewing his many political milestones, it struck me that one accomplishment that had no political gain attached, Moakley’s charitable work to successfully pursue the murderers of six Jesuit priests and their housekeepers in El Salvador, gave him the greatest comfort and meaning at the end.”

His friend Moakley had discovered what the ancient Pericles had already declared: “It is by honor and not by gold that the helpless end of life is cheered.” Like Moakley, at the close of his political career, Bill Bulger was cheered by knowing he had behaved honorably and served his fellow citizens.