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Editor's Note

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Editor's Note

Padraig O'Malley

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Today much of public policy debate takes place in a social vacuum. This is so in part because policy issues are often rather arbitrarily assigned to particular and seemingly unconnected disciplines that put a premium on maintaining their separate baronies of intellectual hegemony, and in part because of our too-pervasive propensity to compartmentalize in order to simplify. One of the aims of the *New England Journal of Public Policy* is to invade, as it were, these baronies, to liberate the policy issues held hostage there and release them into a broader, more human context, one that accentuates the idea of connectedness as the hallmark of continuity in public affairs.

Thus the emphasis in this issue of the journal is on the concepts of place and community. What Eudora Welty calls “place in fiction” has its counterpoint in place in public policy. Shaun O’Connell explores this idea in “Divided Houses.” He shows how literary, artistic, and reportorial devices used in local fiction, poetry, autobiography, and social commentary to address elusive but common themes can broaden the frames of reference we use to understand public policy issues. All the works he reviews are written by those who have defined their own sense of what O’Connell calls “New England place.” He finds they illuminate strikingly similar concerns that update “the New England Mind and hint at the state of the nation.” All, to one degree or another, address the question of public policies that seek to remedy injustices, do so, and yet have the effect of creating further inequities. His essay makes good on the journal’s promise in its inaugural issue to extend the examination and analysis of public policy issues into an exploration of the relationships between values and culture and the manner in which the symbiosis of the two is reflected in public policy.

Place and community, of course, have a special significance in *Common Ground*, J. Anthony Lukas’s award-winning book on the impact of court-ordered school desegregation on three families in Boston, recaptured through their eyes and in the larger context of the roles played by five key figures in the public domain. Given the book’s impact on public opinion—not just in Boston but nationwide—and the plethora of overwhelmingly favorable reviews and endorsements that accompanied its publication, we believe the book merits in-depth critical appraisal. Robert Dentler and Shaun O’Connell provide such appraisals. Dentler, who was one of two court experts appointed by Federal Judge W. Arthur Garrity in 1975 to assist the court in the case, takes exception both to Lukas’s presentation of the facts and to his docudramatic method of reporting them. The former, he believes, is distorted, the latter, ill-suited to the purposes of social history. O’Connell faults *Common Ground* for being “hardly

neutral" as well as "ambiguous"—an ambiguity he attributes in part to the "enthralling, dramatic narrative" which has the "novelistic qualities of a thriller," where "selection is everything." As to what the book actually means, O'Connell concludes that *Common Ground* is "a compelling, moving myth on the dissolution and need for new resolution of community," and that "it may be the only place where such divergent elements can stand together."

4 Ian Menzies is less philosophical and more pragmatic. He puts concepts of place and community in a regional focus, arguing that despite efforts to promote regionalism in New England over the past fifty years, the results have been less than distinguished. His solution: a New England Council of Governments, which would sit in rotation in each of the six State Houses for a fixed number of days annually to consider legislative proposals. Ira Magaziner's analysis of why the Greenhouse Compact—a \$250 million industrial-development project to revitalize Rhode Island's sagging economy—was overwhelmingly voted down by Rhode Island voters in June 1984 is a case study in how a community's inherited folk wisdoms about the workings of the political process thwarted what was, by every objective standard, a worthwhile project, one that had the backing of the state's business, labor, and political constituencies. Magaziner's article also highlights the importance of *presentation* in the policy dissemination process. Too often, the public's perceptions of what the actual outcomes of public actions will be do not reflect the policymakers' perceptions of the intended outcomes.

John Shannon's paper on "de facto new federalism" was presented at a roundtable panel discussion titled "The Changing Nature of Federal/State Relations: The Fiscal Impact on New England," held at the University of Massachusetts at Boston in November 1985. The forum, which was sponsored by the John W. McCormack Institute of Public Affairs, took place before the Gramm-Rudman-Hollings proposal became law. As matters stand, Gramm-Rudman-Hollings will force a series of across-the-board cuts in nonexempt programs each year if regular budget and appropriations actions fail to achieve annual goals for reducing the deficit. It is unlikely, however, that Gramm-Rudman-Hollings is the last word on the subject of deficit reduction. Both Shannon's article and the discussion that follows make it clear that there are now no easy choices. Not only has the federal government pulled back on the state-local aid front, but it seems inevitable—in fact, unavoidable, in the absence of a tax increase—that this trend will continue. Roger Porter succinctly sets out the bottom-line mathematics of the situation: federal revenues account for 19 percent of GNP, while federal expenditure on defense, interest on debt, and entitlement spending (mainly Social Security and ancillary activities) come to 19.5 percent of GNP. In other words, if all discretionary spending were eliminated and the federal government did nothing but pay the interest on the debt and keep defense and entitlement spending at current levels, there would still be a deficit. Thus the hallmark of the *new* new federalism: as the federal government retrenches, state-local reliance on federal assistance will continue to diminish, so that the states and localities will increasingly have to handle the burden of domestic issues. In short, the centralizing trend of the past fifty years is being reversed—the *place* where an increasing range of public policy issues will be addressed is the state capital, not Washington, D.C.

David Warsh's article on the defense industry and the growth of the Massachusetts economy uses place in yet another context—that of institutions (in this case M.I.T.) and individuals (in this case Jay W. Forrester) situated in particular locations as the

makers of economic history. The main spin-off of the Cold War, he argues, was the computer, and that of the space age the semiconductor. The ramifications of each continue to reverberate through the world economy. His recounting of how Massachusetts was uniquely positioned to take advantage of revolutionary developments in the computer and yet largely missed out on similar developments in the semiconductor demonstrates the manner in which relationships between institutions and individuals (sometimes fortuitous) shape the outcome of far-reaching policy decisions. Not that Warsh leaves much to the fortuitous. Like James Howell in "The Economic Revitalization of New England" (see the *New England Journal of Public Policy*, Spring/Summer 1985), he stresses factors indigenous to the state—the tradition of entrepreneurship, the availability of venture capital, and the dominance of education—as having been the key to the transformation of the state's economy in the post-World War II era.

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Finally, James Carroll's essay on the FBI brings us back to Eudora Welty's sense of the connectedness of "place in fiction" and place in life. "Location," she wrote in *The Eye of the Storm*, "pertains to feeling; feeling profoundly pertains to place; place in history partakes of feeling, as feeling about history partakes of place."