

# States of the Union

## O PIONEER!

## O MORRIS!

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*Conquering, holding, daring, venturing as we go the unknown ways  
Pioneers! O pioneers!*

—WALT WHITMAN

*Pioneering doesn't pay.*

—ANDREW CARNEGIE

**T**HE JACKET flap on Morris Milgram's new book calls him "a pioneer of integrated housing," which is true and says much about the current state of such housing. State and Federal fair housing laws abound, yet the desegregation movement remains painfully rudimentary and continues to rely on the frontier talents of this man, who is as stubborn as Davy Crockett, as resourceful as Daniel Boone and as dream-intoxicated as Joseph Smith. Unlucky in reforms, we are lucky in our reformers.

Milgram points out in *Good Neighborhood: The Challenge of Open Housing* (Norton, 248 pp. \$10.95), that Congress first passed fair housing legislation in '66—1866, that is. "All citizens of the United States," the law says, "shall have the same right in every State and Territory as is enjoyed by white citizens thereof to inherit, purchase, lease, sell, hold, and convey real and

personal property." A sensible statute but one that was stillborn. It took a St. Louis couple named Jones to breathe life into the law a century later, by suing a white builder for refusing to sell them a house because they were black. In upholding the Joneses, the Supreme Court declared, "when racial discrimination herds men into ghettos and makes their ability to buy property turn on the color of their skin . . . it is a relic of slavery. . . ."

Although Milgram applauds the ruling, litigation is not generally his way. He is a builder and an entrepreneur, a master investor and an indefatigable promoter. If he had been born 150 years ago he would doubtless have taken his place among the leading abolitionists, but he neither would have published inflammatory editorials, as Lloyd Garrison did, nor have publicly burned the U.S. Constitution, as did Wendell Phillips. No, Milgram would have developed plantations worked by free, wage-earning blacks, proving that freedom was good business.

I met Milgram in 1964, about a decade after he built Concord and Greenbelt Knoll, his first two racial-

ly integrated developments outside Philadelphia. He had just suffered a nasty setback in affluent Deerfield, Illinois: The town fathers had summarily rejected his proposed subdivision, condemned his land, and turned it into a municipal park. The interview took place in a dingy hotel room in Waterbury, Connecticut. Milgram was full of plans and energy, popping vitamin pills ("You ought to try these"), discoursing on segregation in America ("I can feel things changing, I really can") and intermittently telephoning Connecticut friends and "contacts."

Following the Deerfield disaster he decided there was an easier, quicker way to provide equal housing. "Instant integration," as he called it, might be accomplished by buying segregated apartment buildings and throwing them open to tenants of all races. No sooner said than done: Milgram immediately went on a fund-raising tour and launched a direct mail campaign. He used the several million dollars he amassed to purchase three apartment buildings in the D.C. area.

From instant integration Milgram proceeded to found an astonishing series of new organizations, many of them described in *Good Neighborhood: the Mutual Real Estate Investment Trust (M-REIT)*, National Neighbors, the National Committee on Investment in Tithing, Sponsors of Open Housing Investment, National Housing Partnership, and several more. The long list attests to Milgram's remarkable resiliency, and also to the cursed persistency of the evil he has been trying to expunge. Americans do not suffer desegregation lightly.

Along with the descriptions, Morris offers his special brand of practical wisdom—tips on how to start a local fair housing organization (not all that difficult), how to deal with a bigoted realtor (know the law—it's on your side), what to expect in the way of affirmative action from HUD officials (alas, very little). He is especially astute about

"the myth of the tipping point," noting its banefully circular consequences: "A substantial portion of the housing industry still seems to believe that once a building has more than one or two per cent black residents, this figure will soon rise to about 25 or 30 per cent, at which point an all-black status is inevitable. . . . The resulting virtually total exclusion of blacks from many communities increases the minority demand on open development, thus strengthening the 'tipping point' theory."

Yet while all of this is perfectly true, it will probably persuade no one not already toiling in Milgram's vineyards. For his book seems addressed mainly to believers; it is likely to sharpen their weapons and renew their faith without adding many soldiers to their thin ranks. An Appendix, listing about 50 national and local organizations that concentrate on open housing, is sadly similar to a list I compiled 10 years ago: Some of the old names are gone; a few new ones, mostly Milgram creations, have arisen.

I wish Morris had given us more of himself in the book—his day-to-day ingenuity, his bouncer-than-thou attitude—and less of an organizational overview. It would be nice, for instance, to learn something about those thousands of telegrams he is said to have dispatched in a single night in 1967, the night of the Detroit riots. "Detroit is burning," each telegram began, and then went on to ask the recipient to buy shares in M-REIT, an organization dedicated to the dispersion of ghettos. According to a mutual friend, Milgram sold thousands of shares through that one impromptu effort.

What we get instead is a distillation of Milgram's quarter-century experience on the ramparts and hustings of desegregation—all the conclusions and few of the personal details. Nevertheless, we ought to be grateful: The literature of fair housing, like the cause itself, is woefully underrepresented. The scarcity

is, in fact, part of the problem; it signals a national reluctance to look in the mirror. Beware of evils that permeate the social landscape but seldom break into print. They are a democracy's dirty little secrets, maybe the only ones that matter. Thus we endlessly debate the pros and cons of school integration, while we steadfastly evade the critical de facto question: Where, and near whom, shall we choose to live?

If we can learn anything from Morris Milgram's long and frustrating struggles in fair housing, it is first, that busing is the opiate of the people, and second, that Tocqueville was right as usual. "As soon as it is admitted," he wrote in 1835, "that the whites and the emancipated blacks are placed upon the same territory in the situation of two foreign communities, it will readily be understood that there are but two chances for the future: the Negroes and whites must either wholly part or wholly mingle."

**A**S A NATION we have never fully faced up to Tocqueville's lean, hard insight. We would like to have it both ways: in our ideology, wholly to mingle; in our daily lives, wholly to part. Years ago in Skokie, Illinois, I covered a meeting of white residents who were protesting the presence of the town's first black family. "I moved out here so my kids could have grass and trees and sunshine," a young father shouted. "And now look what's happening!" He was evidently under the impression that blacks blotted out the sun; most of us seem to share the delusion.

It may be well, therefore, to cite a few pre-Milgram books, if only because they and their message have been so soon forgotten. One must start with Morris Abrams' remarkable ice-breaker, *Forbidden Neighbors* (1955); it remains the last word on America's first century of segregation. I especially recommend the opening chapter, recounting how the Cicero, Illinois police drove

Harvey E. Clark Jr. out of town when he and his family tried to move into an all-white building. "Get out of Cicero and don't come back to town or you'll get a bullet through you," the police chief told the War veteran.

Soon after Abrams' book came George and Eunice Grier's *Privately Developed Interracial Housing*, an analysis of 50 such projects built since World War II. The work was never published, merely circulated via a kind of civil rights *samizdat*, yet it was an inspiration to Milgram and a few other builders.

In 1962 Harry and David Rosen wrote *But Not Next Door*, an angry (and angering) account of Milgram's ordeal in Deerfield; and in 1970 Little, Brown brought out *Because It Is Right*, an ingenuous attempt by a Du Pont executive, James L. Hecht, to convert America's racist hearts. We need only read the first sentence to learn why he failed: "To deplore is far easier than to change."

Milgram's entry in this sparse procession is less shrill than most and considerably more technical. It eschews the subject of violence, though black fear of white retaliation continues to be a powerful inhibitor of racial integration. His enemy is not the racist mob but the red-lining banks, the discriminatory builders and brokers, the government bureaucrats who refuse to enforce the law, and the "neutral" trustees of investment funds who fortify segregation with their capital. The problem, in short, strikes Milgram as institutional, and so does the solution.

The civil rights movement of the 50s is played out. *The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved*. But we at least have the consolation of knowing that Morris Milgram continues to wheel and deal on our behalf, while the rest of us ply our narrow trades and cultivate our (frequently segregated) gardens. If there is a way out of the American Dilemma, we shall need all the help from Morris we can get.