The Travesty of Integration

Halfhearted compliance frustrates the law of the land.

By CARL T. ROWAN

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Nine years ago, in a monumental decision, the United States Supreme Court ruled that our Constitution forbids any state or school district to separate schoolchildren according to their race. We have seen with pride the peaceful compliance of citizens in a Louisville, or a St. Louis—and we have expressed shame over the violence, the rancor and bitterness that erupted in Little Rock; New Orleans; Clinton, Tennessee; and Oxford, Mississippi.

But there has been a largely unpublicized development over these nine years which I consider as reprehensible as segregation itself, as cowardly as the actions of the riffraff who have resorted to violence in opposing implementation of the court's decree. I refer to the fact that scores of communities have, by devious means, *pretended* to comply with the letter of the law while ignoring the spirit of justice and decency that the law embodies.

Leaders in these communities have soothed whatever pangs of conscience they might have had (and, regrettably, have satisfied several judges) by admitting a few Negroes to previously all-white schools, while leaving the vast majority of Negro youngsters to endure all the injustices cited by the court as a reason for outlawing Jim Crow.

The magnitude of this practice is spelled out clearly in the 1962 "Statistical Summary" compiled by the Southern Education Reporting Service, a Nashville fact-finding agency which publishes *Southern School News*.

Consider North Carolina, which once laid claim to being "most enlightened" of all the Southern states. Nine years after the court's ruling only 16 of its 173 school districts were "integrated." This is hardly a record for enlightened Tarheels to brag about. The disgusting truth is that in those 16 supposedly integrated districts last year only 901 Negro children were in school with white youngsters. The other 77,404 colored pupils in those 16 districts were still in all-Negro schools.

It bothers me—and it should bother lawyers, judges and all who treasure a society based on justice under law—that in the current school year only 901 of North Carolina's 339,840 Negro schoolchildren have secured relief from a practice that, according to our highest tribunal, "generates a feeling of inferiority . . . that may affect their hearts and minds in a way unlikely ever to be undone."

It disturbs me that Mississippi, Alabama and South Carolina have yet to free a single Negro child from this stigma of state-imposed racial isolation. But it bothers me even more that our society is such that we credit with "compliance" districts such as the 31 in Virginia which last year admitted 1,230 Negroes to white schools, while 99,683 Negroes in those districts remained Jim Crowed.

In Texas they may boast about the "peaceful transition" to "integration" in Dallas or Houston, but the meaningful thing to me is that a "whopping" 2.16 percent of the Negro children in that state attended integrated schools last year.

I am as critical of a community which practices legal gimmicks and administrative trickery to frustrate justice as I am of one which shows open hostility to change and to the rules of conduct decreed by society. In fact, I am inclined to think that in our affluent society a rash of phonies and sharpies on school boards and city councils is a far more dangerous symptom of social illness than large numbers of people who openly resist the court ruling out of ignorance, time-encrusted fear or admitted bigotry.

Only dishonorable intent, a sleazy contempt for law and a disregard for justice permit a community to use a "pupil-placement law" to put two Negroes in a white school and thus cloak policies that cheat 20,000 other colored kids. And only where the spirit of liberty has grown weak can people wink an editorial or judicial eye at such deeds.

When one considers the heart of the court's argument in outlawing segregated schools, and then considers how little really has been done to eradicate the fundamental injustice, it becomes obvious that these token integration schemes are affronts to our concept of justice.

Anyone who has lived in the South, as I have, or has even visited there for a reasonable time, has seen the great mass of Negro youngsters who are handicapped because their parents have been ill-clothed, ill-fed, ill-educated and ill-treated. It is obvious that without the great liberating force of education, these youngsters will be also-rans in that great American game called the Pursuit of Happiness.

The youngsters who need good education most are the ones least likely to get relief from the ramshackle schools, obsolete equipment and ill-prepared teachers that mark segregated systems. These needy youngsters stand no chance with the "placement" boards.

The few Negroes who get into desegregated schools under the token plans are for the most part of higher socioeconomic status and higher-than-average intelligence—youngsters likely to do pretty well, no matter what. The result is a situation that bodes ill for future race relations in the South and for the cities to which the educationally handicapped Negroes are likely to migrate. The Washington, D.C., school system's biggest burden is the large number of youngsters who still bear the mark of past segregation in the District and the even larger number of educationally deprived youngsters who have moved in from the Deep South.

The "Hero" Is to Blame

Why these token plans that aid the handful of Negroes who are least in need while the masses are neglected? I pin the blame on the "Southern moderate," the "fabled hero of the daily press," in the words of Ernest Q. Campbell, assistant professor of sociology at the University of North Carolina.

When this glorified moderate favors a bit of school integration, says Campbell, he demands that the individual Negro adopt "the middle-class accouterments as his price of admission." This means, Campbell explains "that a Negro child who comes to a desegregated public school must be especially neat, especially bright and especially nice."

In Little Rock some "moderates" argued at first that all the Negroes in the first group to be admitted to white schools ought to be light-skinned. In other communities there have been demands that all Negroes in the token delegation be girls—so as to preclude the "wrong kind" of interracial romances.

In still other communities board members have extended their "planning" to ensure that the token Negroes enter a lower-middle-class school, but hopefully not middle class, and surely not the silk-stocking school.

Whatever the pattern or the motivation of these halfhearted schemes of compliance, the result is the same: millions of children are going through school under the same handicaps, bearing the same burdens of discrimination and racial stigma, that their grandfathers had to endure.

There is something about these legal dodges, these obvious frauds, that leaves me baffled. I've agonized through enough April fifteenths to know that when Congress lays out a new tax law, everybody is affected—bingo! But the Supreme Court can rule on a fundamental matter of human decency, and nothing changes for little brown-faced kids in McMinnville, Tennessee, my hometown, or in hundreds of similar communities. Nothing will change except as some kid goes marching before the school board with his lawyer and then waits out long, costly litigation.

Justice Delayed Is Denied

"We as a people abhor 'class' legislation or decrees," a friend explains. "It is tradition that constitutional rights belong to the individual."

Of course! How could even a Negro be so stupid as not to figure that out? But, then, what about the individual rights of Joan and Barbara Johns, two youngsters whom I interviewed in 1953 in Farmville, Virginia? These two girls helped lead a strike of Negro pupils because "the tarpaper building we studied in was cold in winter and the rain leaked in." Prince Edward County rushed up a new building—but not before the Johns girls and other Negroes had decided that "separate but equal" could never be enough and that integrated schools would be their goal.

Barbara was an original plaintiff in the Prince Edward County lawsuit, and her sister later was listed as an intervenor, so the Supreme Court was talking about *them* in that 1954 decision. The Johns girls never enjoyed a day of desegregated schooling in the county, however—and Negro youngsters there now do not get *any* public schooling, the county having shut the schools rather than desegregate.

And there was a lad, Harry Briggs Jr., whose name was attached to the suit in Clarendon County, South Carolina, because his parents felt the boy deserved something better than the gross inequalities of education in this county. In that 1954 ruling, the Supreme Court was talking specifically about *Briggs*, and *his* constitutional rights—and it ruled in Harry Briggs Jr.'s favor.

Briggs finished public school without getting a day of relief from segregation. Clarendon County has yet to take the first step toward compliance with the decree of our highest tribunal.

William Gladstone once said succinctly what Briggs, the Johns girls and many

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other plaintiffs of all races have come to know: "Justice delayed is justice denied."

Hundreds of thousands of Negro youngsters have completed public schooling in the South since the 1954 court decision—and all but a handful are forever denied the justice the court said was their due.

This would not be such a tragedy, for the youngsters or the nation, were it a judgment in dollars that they await. However late it comes, a money settlement is welcome to a plaintiff. But this generation of Negro youth will never benefit from the jurists' finding, "in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place. Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal."

We rationalize this travesty by saying that we want "peaceful change" and by convincing ourselves that to comply enthusiastically with the court's decision would cause "trouble." And, of course, everybody's against trouble!

But does any American know of any great social advance in the history of mankind that was not accompanied by "trouble"? When we Americans reach the point of soft indifference where we hate trouble more than injustice, we shall have reached the dawning of our era of greatest troubles.

Many Americans recognize the injustice in the school situation, but they fall back on the excuse that "Rome wasn't built in a day." They want to believe that time cures all ills—and evils. A white Alabama-born professor of religion was so shocked when he finally saw the cowardice and unreality of this notion that he joined a group of Freedom Riders.

John David Maguire of Wesleyan University in Middletown, Connecticut, later explained, "I had told myself that time would effect change, that time would reconcile, that time would tell. But I saw that time is simply a neutral receptacle within which men and movements shape society."

Others, particularly the more haloed of the moderates, offer excuses. "Ours is a rural area; change comes harder here." Or, "I know what Louisville did, but the Southern way of life is more strongly entrenched here." These are the rationalizations of timid, sometimes narrow-minded people who can't face the real challenges of a democratic society.

The Less Painful Way

Consider Frederick County, Maryland; nine years ago its 1,300 or so Negro pupils were taught in nine obsolete, utterly inadequate, Jim Crow schools. The mores of this predominantly rural community, the harsh memories of the county's involvement in the Civil War, the level of Negro leadership, all were such that few people expected the situation to change appreciably for decades.

But 1,300 of Frederick County's Negro youngsters were in predominantly white schools this fall, along with their Negro teachers. Only 50 or so Negro children are using the sole remaining all-Negro school, and they are awaiting transfer to a nearby integrated school once it is enlarged.

What was different about Frederick County? Only the morality and integrity of its leadership, particularly of its school superintendent and its school board. Here were leaders who realized that, even for the short run, it was cheaper, less painful and far more beneficial to all concerned to do what was right than to try to outwit the future.

In the 17 states and District of Columbia where enforced segregation was law and policy prior to 1954, there are today more than 3,200,000 Negroes enrolled in public schools. More than 3,000,000 of them are as victimized by Jim Crow as the appellants who asked our highest court for relief a decade ago.

Of the area's 6,229 school districts, 5,257 still are under the sway of Jim Crow. That they will change I have no doubt. But how soon, amid what strife, and to whose benefit? None of us can be sure. Much will depend on the example set by schoolmen in the 972 Southern districts which already are "integrated."

But these latter districts hardly make a good case for democracy when a mere 255,367 of their Negroes are in school with whites (these mostly in Washington, D.C., Baltimore, St. Louis and Louisville) and almost 800,000 remain Jim Crowed.

After almost nine years it seems to me that Americans should ask themselves whether we intend to retain a judicial system of undoubted integrity, or whether we are prepared to accept change only as it comes under the pressure of sit-ins and protest demonstrations—only as it flows out of violence and near anarchy.

"Why Pick on the South?"

I know that some readers already are complaining: "Well, why pick on the South? Why single out Winston-Salem, or Norfolk? Their token integration is no more a sham than the integration of Chicago or Detroit." It is this kind of obfuscation that permits a people to ignore the challenge of reason and of conscience and spend decades making holier-than-thou digs at one another.

The question never has been whether Memphis ought to emulate the myopia of a Philadelphia or a Cleveland. The question raised by the Supreme Court decision is whether all of our communities can approach the ideals of justice and common sense spelled out by Jefferson in 1776—or by former Secretary of Labor James P. Mitchell, who said in 1957:

"The day of America's greatest achievement will not dawn, I assure you, until the hue of a man's skin is no longer a measure of his capability."

I say that, if a city wants to resort to pretense, our courts ought to recognize it for what it is—publicly and officially. Admittedly it is difficult to know what the court meant in 1954 when it ordered school officials to end Jim Crow "with all deliberate speed."

It is obvious, however, that the court did not mean "with all deliberate hocus-pocus," as most "integrated" districts seem to think.

I see some hope that this burlesque is going to be halted by the courts. Judge J. Skelly Wright has ordered the curtain rung down on it in New Orleans, and the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals has ordered Knoxville to formulate something speedier than its "grade-a-year" plan. In ordering the schools reopened in Prince Edward County, Virginia, and in the University of Mississippi case, even Southern-born judges have made it clear that they mean to crash through state-imposed racial barriers.

But we will get no genuine movement until the leaders of our "token-integration" communities realize the price they shall have to pay, in self-esteem and civic development, for their perpetuation of an injustice and a sham. **THE END**