

Civil Rights

Thomas E. Martin, 1965

The problem of ending racial segregation and bringing a full measure of civil rights to ALL Americans in ALL parts of the country, has been met head-on and is proving to be one of the toughest of current domestic problems. Everyone now admits that it is a problem which will take a long time to solve fully, one which requires a maximum of effort and patience and understanding on all sides.

To many of you, it may seem like an unduly long process. On the other hand, those who have been accustomed to racial segregation and to the discriminations which we now seek to end, contend that a manner of living which has developed over many decades, cannot be outlawed overnight in favor of diametrically opposed manner of living.

There is at least a limited degree of logic and justice in their argument. But conceding that the goal of equality for all will take some time and cannot be achieved overnight, there then arises the question of what is reasonable speed and how much delay is necessary. That, basically, is the core of today's civil rights problem.

The Supreme Court first decreed an end to racial segregation in public schools in 1954. Today, segregated schools are a thing of the past throughout the north. Segregation has been largely ended in the so-called border states. But the problem remains in the so-called "deep south" states, in some of which there has been a token racial integration of public schools but several of which are fighting to the bitter end against any integration, even to the point of closing down those schools to which admittance of negroes has been ordered by Federal courts.

To some of us in the north, it appears on the surface that these southern states are blatantly flouting the authority of the Federal Government. In a sense, that may be true. But the real issue here is to make the people of these states realize the basic truth that our Constitution never was meant to be a document to bestow its rights and privileges only on a flavored segment of our American people, but that rather it was intended to -- and does -- guarantee those rights and privileges to ALL Americans. In the eyes of our Constitution and our laws enacted under it, every American is entitled to these rights and privileges, regardless of race, creed or color. The people of the south already are coming to realize this basic fact. This is evidenced by the growing public feeling, in those communities where schools have been closed rather than obey court orders ending racial segregation, that no ill effects need be anticipated merely because white and negro children attend the same school. More and more, the people of these unfortunate communities are realizing that it is far better to keep their schools open on a racially-integrated basis, than it is to allow their schools to be closed in a futile protest against ending a practice which from its very inception improperly and illegally deprived some American citizens of some of the rights and privileges guaranteed them by our Constitution.

But this awakening still is only a stirring awareness among some of our southern people, and the awareness must spread far wider before full integration can be achieved peacefully. It will be done ultimately, but not until the South as a whole recognizes that under our Constitution, there is no provision for classifying Americans as first or second class Americans.

There is, of course, more than schools to the problem. One phase involves the right of franchise -- the right to vote. The principal feature of the civil rights bill we enacted last year was to make it illegal to deprive any American of his right to vote because of race. Progress is being made on this count, as well as on ending school segregation. The Justice Department recently instituted its first action against a violation of this law, in the form of a civil suit to compel the voting registrar in Carroll County, Georgia, to place certain negro citizens on his roll of qualified voters. And the Civil Rights Commission, established under this same 1957 Civil Rights Law, is beginning to fulfill its function of investigating complaints charging improper deprivation of civil rights of our citizens.

The overall problem of ending discrimination against colored people is difficult of solution in the extreme, but some progress has been made toward achieving that solution during the past five years notwithstanding the violent reactions that has arisen in some southern communities. At the risk of being repetitious, I say again that it takes times and patience and effort to upset customs which have become almost inbred over a period of many decades.