

# School Crisis in Dixie!

*Not since the Civil War has the nation faced such an explosive situation as it will when public schools in the South open their doors next month, says this distinguished Virginia journalist. In a plea for tolerance, sympathy, and understanding in the South as well as the North, he analyzes & interprets a problem serious to Americans in every section of the country*

**THE GRAVEST** interracial crisis that has faced the South since the Civil War confronts the region as the September school opening approaches. The issue of mixing the white and colored races in the public schools of the Southern states was created by the U. S. Supreme Court in two now-famous rulings. On May 17, 1954, the Court declared racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional and all state segregation laws null and void. On May 31, 1955, the same Court, without setting a specific deadline date, ruled that the states must act in "good faith" in making a prompt and reasonable start in putting desegregation into effect. These decisions may get the most crucial test they have had thus far when the bells summon the boys and girls to classes a few weeks hence.

This month, furthermore, the whole issue seems likely to explode on the floors of the Democratic and Republican national conventions. Events at Chicago and San Francisco, when the politicians meet in those cities to nominate the party candidates and draft the party platforms, could have far-reaching repercussions.

In various sections of such border states as West Virginia, Kentucky, Missouri, and Oklahoma, where Negro students constitute a relatively small minority of the school population, desegregation in the public schools should go forward with little or no difficulty. But in the so-called "black belts" of the South, from Virginia to Texas, where the colored people often outnumber the whites by two, three, or even five to one, and along the fringes of those areas, there are possibilities of trouble—even of violence. All men of good will, however strong their opinions on this subject, pray that such trouble may be avoided.

Eyes will be especially focussed on Virginia and South Carolina, two of the states directly involved in the Supreme Court's decrees forbidding segregation. Prince Edward County, Va., and Clarendon County, S. C., both situated in larger regions where the Negro population outnumbers the white, were among the counties chosen by the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People for test cases in that organization's effort to force mixed schools. In each

## CRISIS in DIXIE



the question arises as to what will be done by the local authorities pursuant to the Supreme Court's order that they move with "all deliberate speed." These authorities have announced that they will close the schools, under the terms of state and local laws, rather than educate the races together. There is every indication that they mean it.

The intensified efforts of the NAACP became almost inevitable about a decade ago, when most Southern whites began dragging their feet and refusing to co-operate in attempts by a minority of white Southerners to obtain for the Negroes better opportunities in economic, educational, and political spheres. A group of Southerners of both races, to which I belonged, had been trying to provide such opportunities within the "separate but equal" formula, i.e., we were not proposing to end the segregation of the races, but were striving to give the Negroes an "equal break" in every respect. However, we were unable to get the co-operation of influential segments of Southern society—notably business and professional groups. The result of this indifference on the part of Southern whites was that the Negro leaders of the South who had waited for the whites to produce satisfactory results gave up and, in effect, put their case in the hands of the NAACP. That organization began pushing at once on all fronts for the total elimination of segregation—principally by bringing or sponsoring test cases in the lower courts, which were eventually appealed to the Supreme Court.

Accordingly, within a few years the Supreme Court handed down a series of decisions against the practice of limiting the graduate and professional schools of tax-supported universities to white students in any state where equal opportunity for such schooling for Negroes did not exist. It also forbade separate coaches for Negroes on interstate transportation lines. Then, slightly more than two years ago, the climax came when the Court unanimously reversed its stand on segregated public schools—a system upheld by that tribunal since 1896—and ordered the system abandoned. Twelve months later the Court ordered the localities immediately concerned to carry out its directives with "all deliberate speed."

Opposition to the Court's desegregation decrees has

[OldMagazineArticles.com](http://OldMagazineArticles.com)

## CRISIS in DIXIE



been growing in most of the states where segregation formerly prevailed. In nine of these states—Virginia, North Carolina, Tennessee, South Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama, Mississippi, and Louisiana—there seems to be no prospect of mixed public schools this fall. How long that situation will continue is anybody's guess. State and local authorities are preparing to fight the Court's decrees with all possible legal maneuvers and circumventions.

Voices of moderation are being drowned out by extremist clamor. Clarence Mitchell, Washington Bureau director of the NAACP, terms the segregationist leader, Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, "a stinking albatross around the neck of the Democratic Party," and Mississippi Circuit Judge Tom P. Brady declares that "the social, political, economic, and religious preferences of the Negro remain close to the caterpillar and the cockroach."

The background of these events is worth recalling. When, early in World War II, interracial tensions began mounting, a group of worried Negro leaders from all over the South met at Durham, N. C., and drew up a statement of principles and objectives. This restrained and reasonable manifesto, requesting the white South to move promptly and effectively to correct the many injustices from which Southern Negroes were suffering, was termed the most important pronouncement on race relations in the South made by any colored group since the Civil War. A group of white Southerners, of whom I was one, accordingly convened a conference in Atlanta, Ga., the following spring and responded affirmatively to the Durham declaration. The result was the establishment of the Southern Regional Council, a biracial organization with headquarters in Atlanta, whose objective was to meet the Negro halfway, and to eliminate discrimination.

The Durham statement did not ask for the abolition of segregation, but it did seek, among other things, equalization of school facilities, abolition of the white primary and the poll tax, the placing of Negroes on juries, establishment of equal facilities on carriers and in terminals, appointment of Negroes to boards concerned with Negro affairs, employment of Negro policemen, and an end to lynching and police brutality.

When picked representatives of the Durham colored group and the Atlanta white group met in Richmond to formulate a joint program, Dr. Gordon B. Hancock, Negro pastor, sociologist and columnist, de-

## CRISIS in DIXIE



livered the keynote address. He said:

“If Negro leadership in the South is to survive, the South must cease waiting for outside sources to extort from it in the courts concessions that should be made without a fight. . . . If the South resents interference from outside elements, then there must be a greater liberalism in the South in dealing with Negro leadership. . . . It makes a world of difference to the cause of race relations whether the capital of the Negro race is in New York City or Atlanta.”

Dr. Hancock’s challenge was only partially met, although the Southern Regional Council sought earnestly to provide the recommended reforms, as did affiliated interracial agencies in the various states.

There was a special need for equalization of public-school facilities, and while progress was made, it was not enough. For instance, in 1940 current expenditures per pupil for Negro children in seven Southern states were only 43% of those for white children, while in eight states capital outlays per pupil were only 23% of those for the whites. By 1952 these figures had been raised to 70% and 82%, respectively, but it was too late.

The unwillingness of most Southern white leaders to take any part in the movement to provide equality of opportunity for Southern Negroes gradually convinced the South’s Negro leadership that it would have to look elsewhere. The “Negro capital” moved to New York in the late 1940’s, in the sense that Negroes began looking to NAACP headquarters in that city for leadership. This was the signal for the NAACP’s determined drive to eliminate segregation. The South, white and colored alike, was not ready for anything so drastic—a fact implicit in the relatively conservative program of reforms outlined a few years before by Negro leaders of the South at Durham.

Leadership of the integrationist forces by the NAACP has resulted in an entire change of strategy. When Miss Autherine Lucy was expelled from the University of Alabama last winter, because she said the university authorities “conspired” in the violent and almost fatal campus demonstrations against her at Tuscaloosa, she was flown at once north to New York, under NAACP auspices, interviewed and televised. The same thing happened when the Rev. Martin



Luther King was convicted a few weeks later in connection with the Negro boycott of the Montgomery, Ala., bus lines—a boycott instituted in protest against segregation on those lines and the manner of its enforcement.

The manner in which the NAACP has been dramatizing various episodes in the South to further its objectives is, in my judgment, one of the things which make, at the moment, a reasonable solution of the interracial controversy difficult. The NAACP has achieved important advances for the colored race, and the following it has built up, in consequence, among members of the Negro race, especially in the North, is understandable. So long as it was filing suits for such things as equalization of public-school teachers' salaries, elimination of the white primary, and entrance of Negroes into previously all-white graduate and professional schools, the white South was not greatly aroused. These suits were won and the corresponding gains were achieved, beginning in the late 1930's, without provoking any drastic reaction.

But the big mistake was made, it seems to me, when the advocates of unlimited mixing of the races argued that since hundreds of Negroes had been admitted smoothly to graduate and professional schools, they could be admitted just as smoothly on the elementary and secondary level. This argument ignored two salient facts:

(1) Negro students who are seeking degrees in law, medicine, or advanced academic subjects are mature men and women, and they come into contact in college with equally mature whites. (2) In each of these institutions, the Negroes constitute only a tiny minority of the student body.

Warnings from responsible Southerners that any attempt to throw thousands of white and colored school children together indiscriminately in the public schools of the South was sure to provoke trouble were pooh-poohed by the advocates of total desegregation as "racist," "alarmist," and "reactionary."

The move toward desegregation brought sharp counteraction from opposing whites, chiefly through the organization of Citizens' Councils in many parts of the Deep South. Insofar as I have been able to get



the facts, these councils are often composed of respected community leaders, and the prevailing objective is to conduct the fight against wholesale mingling of the races in the schools in legal ways, with no secrecy as to membership or meetings. Yet there have been examples of outrageous economic pressure against Negroes on the part of certain councils. Furthermore, one of the white men charged with attacking Nat (King) Cole, the Negro singer, during his concert in Birmingham, Ala., was a member of the Board of the Anniston, Ala., Citizens' Council, and another was associate editor of a council publication. It should be said, however, that such happenings as the attack in Birmingham have been rare. Yet, on the fringes of the Citizens' Councils are various similar agencies, such as one terming itself "Southern Gentlemen." Until the latter organization was compelled recently by law to change its policy, its members concealed their identities and kept their meetings secret.

All these pro-segregationist agencies typify the growing opposition to the elimination of segregation from the Southern public schools. As a matter of fact, many Negroes who object to the segregation law prefer to have their children go to school with their own people. When, for example, Baltimore, Md., desegregated its schools in the fall of 1954, the Negroes were permitted to attend any school they wished. Only 2.5% elected to go to those previously reserved for whites. In Evansville, Ind., just across the Ohio River from Kentucky, the story is similar. Integration has been going forward there for seven years, under Indiana law, and 11 of the 12 public-school grades are open to Negroes. Yet only one Negro in six is in school with whites.

The Memphis, Tenn., Press-Scimitar draws the following conclusion from the Evansville situation:

"That Negro restraint matches white respect for law; that Negroes meet justice with generosity, and that the principle of justice, as Negroes identify it with integration, is important to all Negroes. But the practice of integration is important to few."

I think it is vital to point out, however, that there are hundreds of thousands of white people, especially in the Deep South, to whom these considerations are



relatively unimportant. "Mongrelization" of the white race—the amalgamation of the white and colored races to form a race of mulattoes—is their primary fear, and they would rather shut down the public schools entirely than allow even one Negro to be educated with white children.

In support of their position, they look to such a man as Dr. W. C. George, professor of histology and embryology at the University of North Carolina, who declared that "whatever its other virtues may be, the Negro race has never produced any civilization anywhere at any time," a statement which is strongly disputed by other scientists.

The depth and intensity of the opposition to integration in much of the Deep South must not be overlooked in the North. Nearly everywhere it is in direct proportion to the percentage of Negroes in the population. This is illustrated in the finding of a Montgomery newspaperman who toured northern Alabama immediately after the uproar over Autherine Lucy at Tuscaloosa and at the height of the Montgomery bus boycott. He wrote that the race problem in the northern part of the state, where only a few Negroes live, was "apparently nonexistent." All the trouble had occurred in more southerly areas where the percentage of Negroes is far larger.

Here, it seems to me, is an essential consideration for Northerners and Westerners, nearly all of whom live in areas where the proportion of Negroes in the population is infinitesimal. Too often these non-Southern observers jump to the erroneous conclusion that the race problem ought to be as readily solvable in a region which is from one-third to three-fourths colored as in one where there is a mere handful of Negroes. Throughout the United States the difficulties in obtaining satisfactory racial adjustments have been in direct proportion to the size of the racial minority concerned. Just as the Negro problem in Maine is almost nonexistent, while that in Georgia is tremendous, so the Oriental problem in Michigan—where hardly any Orientals reside—is negligible, whereas that in California is substantial.

And while the South has much to answer for in its treatment of the Negro, so have other regions of the

**CRISIS in DIXIE**

United States. This is a national, not a sectional, problem.

Consider the fact that Mayor Orville Hubbard of Dearborn, Mich., admitted frankly that Negroes "can't get in here"—meaning Dearborn (population 125,000). "Every time we hear of a Negro moving in, we respond quicker than you do to a fire," said His Honor. The somewhat smaller nearby cities of Royal Oak and Wyandotte also contain no Negro residents. Not a single Southern city excludes colored citizens in this fashion.

In New York City there is what the New York Times calls "gross discrimination against Negroes," since they are "barred from most private housing" and "many fields of employment are closed to them." There is also "the explosive issue of segregation in New York's own schools," where school districts have been laid out to provide a maximum of racial separation.

In Illinois, the state of Abraham Lincoln, there is a condition which has never been duplicated in the South—the situation at the Trumbull Park housing project in Chicago, where for three years some two or three dozen Negro families have had to be guarded from white mobs 24 hours a day by scores, if not hundreds of police.

Recently, two young men from the University of Wisconsin journeyed to Montgomery, Ala., to explore the sociological implications of the Montgomery bus boycott. But they had never even heard of the happenings at Trumbull Park, Chicago, only 150 miles from Madison, the city in which the University of Wisconsin is located. That the Negro problem is not exclusively a Southern one was suggested by Thurgood Marshall, chief counsel to the NAACP, who recently told a Detroit audience that Northern congressmen should stop criticizing the South and should attempt to solve the race problem in their own districts.

The South is far from blameless in its treatment of the Negro. I am not seeking to divert attention from this fact, but to show that, given the vastly more complex race problem confronting the region, it has done just as well as the North in this sphere, maybe better.

The amount of opposition that has arisen to the Supreme Court's decision of 1954, declaring segregation in the public schools unconstitutional, was not clearly foreshadowed at the time the decision was announced. The ruling was received with relative calm, and several border states began fairly promptly to mingle the races in the classroom.

But resistance to the Court's position soon began to mount sharply in most states farther to the south, and it continued to increase. From the upper tier of states, which includes Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee, down to South (Continued on page 100) Carolina, Georgia, Florida, Alabama,



## CRISIS in DIXIE

Mississippi, and Louisiana, the prevailing practice was to seek all possible legal ways of avoiding enforced desegregation.

Under the leadership of Virginia, six state legislatures have adopted "resolutions of interposition"—asserting the right of a state to "interpose" its own sovereignty against that of the federal government—while 101 members of Congress from the South have signed a strong manifesto of protest against the Court's decision. And the North Carolina Advisory Committee on Education recently issued the following in a report:

"No federal court has said that there must be mixing of the races—integration. No federal court has said that any child of any race must be compelled to go to school with a child or children of another race. This is of great importance. The precise federal court decision was that a law is invalid if it says that a child can be excluded from a school solely because of race. But no court has said that a child must go to a school with children of another race."

This report is based on an interpretation of the Supreme Court's decision by Judge John J. Parker of the U. S. Circuit Court of Appeals at Charleston, S. C., in a later case involving school segregation.

**D**EFIANCE of the Supreme Court is something which I and many other Southerners are unwilling to accept. But if we assume that the judicial interpretation in the North Carolina report is correct, there is considerable room for legitimate legal maneuvering on the part of Southern states and localities within the framework of the high court's ruling. For example, the "assignment plan," whereby pupils would be assigned to schools by local authorities on the basis of health, welfare, geography, or almost anything except race, is a possible approach. So is the "tuition grant" plan, under which the state would make a grant of funds for private schooling to white or colored parents unwilling to send their children to integrated schools. Other plans have been adopted in the Deep South whereby entire state systems of public education can be abolished the moment one Negro student enters a school or college previously reserved for whites. Whether these various schemes will stand up, if and when they reach the Supreme Court, is, of course, a question. I think it is certain that some of them won't.

Meanwhile progress in interracial relations has just about ceased in all but

## CRISIS in DIXIE

the border states. Three years ago, before the Supreme Court's decision, five North Carolina cities and towns had elected Negroes to their city councils; Richmond had done likewise; Atlanta, and Augusta, Ga., had each elected a Negro to its school board; and similar advances had been made elsewhere. Such things are rare, if not unheard of, today. A typical example of what is occurring was furnished recently by the City of Chattanooga and the University of Tennessee. The Chattanooga School Board modified the decision it made a year previously and which was taken to mean that the city schools would be promptly desegregated, and announced unanimously that desegregation probably would not occur for five years or more. The University of Tennessee trustees reversed their decision to begin the gradual admission of Negroes to the undergraduate departments this fall, and postponed the step indefinitely. In Mississippi, even the Negroes believe that desegregation there is "impossible" at this time, C. A. Hall, a Negro lawyer from that state, told NAACP members at a "conference workshop." He estimated that 99% of Mississippi Negroes hold this view.

Something very like "thought control" has been officially approved by the South Carolina legislature. Almost unanimously, that body adopted a resolution asking the State Library Board to remove existing books and to screen future books that are "antagonistic and inimical to the traditions and customs of this state."

The discredited Ku Klux Klan is coming back in several areas of the South. Boycotts and counter-boycotts have grown out of the widespread tension. Southern governors and chambers of commerce are wondering what effect all this will have on the continued industrial expansion of the South. Industries naturally are careful about moving into areas where there is racial conflict, or where doubt exists as to the continued operation of the public schools.

As for Southern labor, the union movement has been shaken to its roots by the controversy. Many locals in Dixie are strongly opposing the integration stand taken by parent unions in the North, and their members continue to give substantial support to local and state political figures who favor the "separate but equal" program of regional development.

**T**HE future of some 79,000 colored public-school teachers in the South has

## CRISIS in DIXIE

been jeopardized. In each of several Southern states there are almost as many Negro school teachers as in all the 31 Northern and Western states combined. (Virginia, for example, has more than 6,000, and North Carolina over 9,000.) In the Northern states, despite their official professions in favor of treating all races alike, comparatively few colored teachers are employed, even in New York, Chicago, or the other cities where the Negro population is huge. In the South, where tens of thousands of Negroes are teaching children of their own race, and getting approximately the same pay as the white teachers (the average annual salary of Negro teachers is actually higher than that of white teachers in Virginia, North Carolina, and Tennessee), it is feared that a great many will not be re-employed, if racial mixing in the schools is forced.

While neither side in this struggle can be expected to abandon its conscientious convictions, a plea for more understanding and less vitriol seems in order.

**T**wo Negro Congressmen illustrate the conflict of attitudes which exists in the race itself in the present crisis. On the one hand, we have Representative William L. Dawson of Chicago, whose belief in desegregation and civil rights for Negroes is strong, but who does not question the motives of those who disagree with him. On the other hand, we have Adam Clayton Powell, the Harlem Congressman and pastor, who delivered a sharp personal attack recently on General Mark Clark when the latter expressed opposition to the abolition of segregation in the armed forces. "It is obvious that General Clark had his price," said Mr. Powell.

Many white friends of the NAACP in the North are urging that organization to stop pushing so hard, especially in the Deep South, where violence threatens. Southerners who are friendly to the Citizens' Councils are stressing the importance of making certain that no more Council members are involved in such roughneck behavior as the attack on Nat (King) Cole, or in firing Negroes from jobs simply because they have signed petitions asking for rights to which the Supreme Court says they are entitled.

Percy Greene, a Negro editor in Jackson, Miss., put the case well when he said: "No solution can be found to the race problem . . . in an atmosphere of vituperation, vindictiveness, finger-pointing, name-calling, and the threat of retaliation."

**CRISIS in DIXIE**

Americans should be able to approach this sundering question of desegregation with a greater measure of tolerance, dignity, and restraint than is now being shown. Certainly unless there is give-and-take on both sides the prospect is for turmoil and upheaval without end in our generation.

One thing which might be helpful is for Southern communities to set up local committees from both races, as has been done in Memphis and elsewhere. These committees would not be charged with finding a "solution," but merely with maintaining a minimum of liaison, to the end that if violence or other trouble seemed near a channel of easy communication would be open. Opinion has hardened to such an extent on both sides that few channels are open today.

Such is the situation as we approach the new school session beginning next month. It is a situation deeply disturbing to all Americans, for drastic court rulings leading to the closing of the public schools in counties, cities, or whole states and to the intensification of interracial bitterness may lie immediately ahead.



The author of this timely article has been editor of the Richmond, Va., Times-Dispatch since 1936 after serving as political analyst and editorial writer for that newspaper. He is chairman of the Southern Educational Reporting Service, vice-president of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, and a lecturer on Southern affairs at leading universities, both North and South. He was awarded a Pulitzer Prize in 1947