

A comprehensive survey of the Southern Negroes' progress in their struggle for first-class citizenship, and their prospects in the months to come

The South in Conflict

By Herbert Hill

THE MAJOR unresolved issue in the history of the United States—the Negro's status in American life—has emerged again in the sharpest terms, more significant now than at any time since the Reconstruction period. The important social forces responsible for this development are many, but the two most significant factors are the removal of the sanction of law from racial segregation and the unparalleled militancy and discipline of the Southern Negro in his quest for equal rights as a full citizen. The Negro has now begun to intervene decisively in determining his own destiny. This is undoubtedly the most important factor in the fight for civil rights today.

During the past decade, the nation's highest courts have repeatedly struck down the validity of Jim Crow statutes in voting (the white-primary cases), interstate transportation and public recreational facilities, and finally, on May 17, 1954, in the school-segregation cases voided once and for all the 1896 doctrine of "separate but equal," which provided the legal basis for segregation and second-class citizenship for 16 million American Negroes.

Colored people throughout America have responded to these great legal victories in an unusually intense and dedicated manner. Today, the Negro community and its important institutions are engaged in making a reality of the pronouncements of the Federal courts. For the past 25 years, the struggle to destroy the Negro's second-class citizenship was in the courtroom. Today, that victory has been substantially won and the battleground has

shifted to the field of social action. The various "legal" schemes of several Southern states to evade school integration are but delaying tactics, a rear-guard action of the defeated, as is the matter of "interposition," which was decided once and for all in an Appomattox farmhouse in 1865. The decisive factor from now on in school desegregation will be the ability of local Negro communities in the South to conduct an intransigent struggle against what often appear to be insuperable difficulties.

The attacks against Negroes who are working within the law for compliance with the Supreme Court order range from severe economic pressure, as a result of the activities of White Citizens' Councils, to mob violence and murder. But Southern Negroes continue to struggle with a discipline and a courage rare in our recent history.

The White Citizens' Councils are responsible for the economic intimidation of Negroes who openly support the move to integrate Southern schools. The slogan of these Councils is "no job, no credit, no loan" for Negroes unwilling to submit to segregation. In 1955, in four Alabama counties, Dallas, Perry, Hale and Morengo,



ALABAMA UNIVERSITY: ONE OF FIVE EXCEPTIONS

As the rights of labor were the acid test of American politics in the 1930s, so the rights of the Negro are the burning social issue of our day. Here we present a comprehensive report on the Southern Negroes' struggle for equality by a man who has watched it at first hand through all the stages of its development. Herbert Hill, Labor Secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, is co-author of the recently published *Citizen's Guide to Desegregation: A Study of Social and Legal Change in America*. He has paid numerous visits to Southern cities large and small since the original Supreme Court decision in May 1954.

Councils were formed with the admitted purpose of applying economic pressure to "troublemakers" who would upset "the Southern way of life." In Dallas County, a call brought in 600 members at \$3 a person. Alston Keith, a lawyer, chairman both of the Dallas County White Citizens' Council and of the local Democratic party, summed up the aims of his group: "The white population of this county controls the money. We intend to make it difficult if not impossible for any Negro who advocates desegregation to find and hold a job, get credit or renew a mortgage."

Other such groups have organized in Florida, Georgia, South Carolina and elsewhere. The strongest Councils are in Mississippi, where White Citizens' Councils were quickly established in 29 of the state's 82 counties. In November 1954, the president of the Mississippi NAACP organization was Dr. E. J. Stringer, a young dentist. Under Dr. Stringer's leadership, the Columbus branch of the organization exceeded its 1954 membership quota by 300 per cent. Dr. Stringer soon found that his automobile liability insurance, compulsory under Mississippi law, was canceled. Creditors who had given him a reasonable time to make payments suddenly demanded that he pay immediately. After the dentist received a check from a patient, a Negro schoolteacher, the local school officials ordered her dismissed because of "a contribution" to the NAACP. Dr. Stringer and his wife today sleep in the middle room of their home—safer, they explain, in the event of a bombing.

On January 20, 1955, the NAACP filed with the White House affidavits from Negro farmers, businessmen and professionals charging economic pressure against them because of their support of Negro rights. One farmer, who owned 73 acres of rich Mississippi delta soil, stated in his affidavit that, although his farm produced as much as a bale and a half of cotton per acre, he was unable to get loans for operations. Because of drought and the demand for immediate payment of a \$3,500 mortgage, he was in grave danger of losing his farm—as had many others because of anti-segregation activity.

In another Mississippi city, the president of an NAACP branch and owner of a \$37,000 business stated that he was warned by a member of the City Council and two police officers to post a sign over his place, "For Colored Only," in order to boycott himself against white trade. "I was told," he said, "that their reason was to protect me from the 'poor whites' and to keep the mean white people from bombing my place. I refused their request. As a result, pressure was put on whites who stopped locally around my place for service. My business is very young and I didn't have money for operation. I went to my local bank but was turned down. No reasons were given for not granting my application."

The White Citizens' Councils are one of many groups committed to open attack against the Negro community and organized defiance of the law. Among others are the

Southern Gentlemen of Louisiana, the National Association for the Advancement and Protection of the Majority of White People, the Southernaires of Mobile, Alabama, the Heritage Crusade of Gulfport, Mississippi, etc.

A most unfortunate aspect of the growth of these organizations is the participation of trade-union leaders and members in their activities. The Executive Council of the newly merged AFL-CIO, in its first meeting in Miami during February, received a confidential report on trade-union participation in the activities of White Citizens' Councils. The resultant resolution attacking the Councils and the strong statement by George Meany were most welcome, but it will be necessary for the trade-union movement to act vigorously and promptly for its own self-protection in this matter. In several instances, the White Citizens' Councils have already been used to prevent union organization and clearly pose a serious danger to existing unions in the South.

The extremely effective bus boycott by Negroes in Montgomery, Alabama and the subsequent arrest of 93 Alabama Negroes, including 25 ministers, is indicative of the organization and persistence with which Southern Negroes will continue to directly challenge all the forces of white control. It is, of course, interesting to contrast the hysteria and violence of the white mob on the campus of the University of Alabama with the calm discipline and order of the Negroes in the Montgomery bus strike.

Recent newspaper headlines have been featuring and emphasizing the elements of conflict in school desegregation. But there is another and at least equally important record which has received little attention. Ralph McGill, editor of the *Atlanta Constitution*, has stated: "Most newspapers seem to have forgotten that there is another side to the story, that Texas is going ahead with integration, that Arkansas is quiet, that North Carolina is quiet, that Tennessee is quiet, that southern Missouri, which is very Southern in attitude, is going ahead with integration."

The fact is that the once solid pattern of school segregation in 17 Southern and border states and the District of Columbia has now been decisively shattered. At the beginning of the September 1955 school term, some positive action had been taken to comply with the Court's desegregation ruling in 11 of the 17 states which previously enforced school segregation. In 5 of these 11 states, the desegregation move was made after the May 31, 1955 "implementation" order. In 6 other currently desegregated states, one or more communities had initiated school desegregation following the May 17, 1954 decision. The District of Columbia followed this latter pattern.

Within the first twelve months after the 1954 decision, school desegregation occurred in two towns in Arkansas, 29 counties in West Virginia, 30 communities in Missouri, five towns in Delaware, six cities in Kansas, and in scattered communities in Texas, Arizona and New Mexico, among others. But even before this development

cases involving the right of Negro students to attend graduate and professional schools had been won. Thus, by 1955 all of the Southern state universities, except in five states (Alabama, Florida, Mississippi, Georgia and South Carolina), had admitted some Negro students into graduate or professional schools—in addition to several junior colleges and a substantial number of Catholic educational institutions. It is clear that compliance with the law has not been insignificant.

The temporary setback at the University of Alabama, involving Miss Autherine Lucy, represents the first instance in which mob violence actually stopped the enforcement of a court order establishing the right of a plaintiff to enter a hitherto "lily-white" school. Thus, we enter a new stage in the struggle for Southern school desegregation, in which whites use physical terror in attempting to stop desegregation. This development all too clearly shifts the battleground from that of legal maneuvering to direct social conflict. For the Negro, effective action now

today. In Arkansas, proportionately more Negroes than whites have been paying their poll taxes, and over 85,000 Negroes voted in the 1952 Presidential election. In North Carolina, where 55,000 Negroes voted in 1948, well over 100,000 registered and voted in the national election of 1952. In 1948, approximately 700,000 Negroes were registered voters in the South, and in 1952 the Negro vote in the South approximated 1.3 million.

The importance of the Negro vote was evident in the 1948 elections in states such as Ohio and Illinois, where the vote of predominantly Negro wards gave Harry S. Truman the margin which enabled him to carry these states. The decisive character of the Negro vote was again seen in Michigan in 1952 when Governor G. Mennen Williams carried the state by a few thousand votes. The large Negro vote cast in Detroit alone certainly made the difference.

The Negro's decision on how he should vote is inevitably bound up in the struggle he has gone through



SOUTHERN NEGROES LINING UP TO VOTE: WHEN RACIST RUNS AGAINST RACIST, DEFEAT THE INCUMBENT

takes many forms. Foremost of these will be vigorous attempts to secure the right to vote in those areas of the South where Negroes, in hundreds of counties, are prevented from voting through the use of many devices, including violence.

Not so long ago, Southern Negroes took the attitude that "Politics is white folks' business." Of great significance for the political development of the entire nation is the sharp leap forward in the Negro's awareness of the electoral process.

Today, the Negro constitutes one-fourth of the Southern population, with a present potential of 6 million votes. Since 1946, a remarkable increase in the voting strength of Negroes in South Carolina serves dramatically to indicate a veritable political revolution. In 1946, 35,000 Negroes registered and voted in South Carolina. In 1952, more than 130,000 Negroes voted. In Florida, where approximately 40,000 Negroes voted in 1948, more than 120,000 are now registered. In Louisiana, where 60,000 Negroes voted in 1948, well over 150,000 are registered

to get the right to vote. Therefore, Negroes in the North as well as in the South vote on the basis of what appears to be the obvious interest of the Negro community and against those who are the enemies of civil rights. Today, this has much concrete meaning for the forthcoming national election, because Negro voters in Michigan, Illinois, Ohio, New York and elsewhere have deep roots in Mississippi, Alabama and Georgia. In 1956, the political careers of many so-called "liberals" in the North are going to be adversely affected because they belong to the party of Eastland and have done nothing themselves on behalf of the civil-rights fight.

During this past year, officials of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People working in the South have been murdered precisely because they were organizing register-and-vote campaigns. Among these were Reverend George W. Lee in Belzoni, and Lamar Smith, who was shot down on the steps of the County Courthouse in Brookhaven, Mississippi. In many counties, Negroes have been threatened with loss of jobs,

foreclosure of homes and farms and other steps if they tried to register. But the time is now passing when violence, cross burnings, threats, intimidation and burning effigies labeled "this nigger tried to vote" can prevent large numbers of Negroes from entering the voter's booth.

In the light of the magnificent personal courage of these Southern Negroes who are now insisting on their right to vote, the paralysis of the Federal Government in securing law enforcement and the collusion of the state Democratic administrations in preventing Negro citizens from voting has helped create a new voting consciousness among Negroes which will be sharply expressed in the coming election.

In 1956, Negroes will present themselves at registration



AMERICAN SCHOOL: THE BURDEN PUT DOWN AT LAST

booths and ballot boxes for the first time in many Southern communities. Their insistence on the right to vote will be, in effect, a direct confrontation of the traditional power structure of Southern communities. Where Negroes do secure the right to vote and there is no choice between candidates, the policy will be to vote against those in office, locally and nationally, as the only means of expressing discontent. This tactic, of course, also has the practical value of preventing the accumulation of seniority and therefore vital committee control in Congress.

Organizationally, the most important leadership in the struggles of the Southern Negro today is the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, which operates through a mass membership in 700 branches below the Mason-Dixon line (together with an

additional 800 branches elsewhere). The morale and militancy of local Negro leadership is such that spontaneous forms of dynamic action are developed and pressure is for the most vigorous challenging of the Jim Crow system. This militancy is the product of a decade of victories nurtured and sustained by NAACP legal successes.

An aspect of these developments that has ominous implications is that, by and large, the Negro has so far fought this battle alone. Now it is no longer a matter of filing a "friend of the court brief" in some NAACP legal case or passing a resolution at a convention or voting a small contribution to help some "downtrodden colored people." In the South, practically all the respectable pillars of society—the Governors, the doctors and the lawyers, the editors and the religious leaders—have either joined with the White Citizens' Councils and announced their defiance of the law or, more quietly, have provided the respectable cover for those who engage in open violence. With very rare and isolated exceptions, white institutions and individuals have not come forward to join in the fight—even though now the Negro who demands his rights is acting within the law and the whites who insist on segregation have declared themselves outside the law. Where are the responsible and moral white people?

This unfortunate condition is characterized by Adlai Stevenson's proposal that the most conflict-ridden and violent issue in our national life be kept out of the political campaign; his feeble subsequent attempts to explain away his position have done nothing to help. What is vitally needed now in those Southern states where the segregation conflict rages is to create an atmosphere for a public dialogue between the white and colored communities, to permit the voices of the Negro community to be heard, to openly debate the issue and hear the Negro's point of view.

White people will no longer be deciding all the questions. Southern Negroes now insist that they, too, have a right in determining their status in the communities in which they live and work. Let those who aspire to political power and statesmanship make clear that the law must be observed and help to create a condition where all may be heard and issues may be freely argued without fear and violence.

The emergence of a new body of constitutional law and the militancy of the Southern Negro now pose the race question in a new way and end an era. In retrospect, white Southerners may one day look on the Supreme Court's anti-segregation decision as the beginning of their own liberation, the dawn of the day when they may at last put down the burden which comes with constant tension over an unresolved moral issue and social conflict. It will then be remembered that it was the Negro who fought so well with so little to free the South—and perhaps all America—from its own evil.

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