

**The  
meaning  
of  
the  
SIT-INS**

by

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## THE MEANING OF THE SIT-INS

Since February 1, 1960, the so-called race problem has taken a fresh and dramatic turn. Beginning on that date in Greensboro, N.C., a wave of sit-ins by Negro college students at lunch counters of variety stores has swept across the South, from Florida to West Texas.

Back in the early 1940's, Howard University students, members of the college chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, initiated sit-in demonstrations designed to break the color bar at lunch counters in Negro areas in Washington, D. C. The present generation of youth renewed the demonstrations, also under NAACP auspices, in Wichita, Kansas, and Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, in the summer of 1958.

As the result of these well-organized and peaceful demonstrations by orderly young Negroes, colored citizens may now be served at nearly 100 lunch counters which previously barred them in Oklahoma City and other urban centers in the state. Similar success crowned the efforts of the young people in Wichita when a state-wide drug-store chain abolished the color bar at its lunch counters.

For some undetermined reason, the 1958 successes in Oklahoma and Kansas caused no immediate visible ripple in North Carolina or Tennessee. In February, 1958, the movement was revived by Negro and white students at Washington University in St. Louis. A year later it burst out spontaneously in city after city. It has made men and women of the Negro youths overnight.

It has electrified the Negro adult community with the exception of the usual Uncle Toms and Nervous Nellies. It has baffled law enforcement officers. It has stirred white college students from coast to coast as they have not been stirred on any issue since Pearl Harbor. It has upset the managements of the chains of variety stores (although they won't admit it publicly) and it has set the politicians, in this election year, to calculating anew.

### No Student Prank

What is the importance of the lunch counter campaign of hundreds of Negro college students? Obviously, this effort is not a student prank. Obviously, too, it has only relative concern with freedom to sit down in a public business establishment and eat a hamburger or a slice of pie and drink a cup of coffee.

The message of this movement is plain and short: Negro youth is finished with racial segregation, not only as a philosophy, but as a practice. The overwhelming response of Negro adults to the bold venture of their children signals that they, too, whatever the myth to the contrary, are finished with segregation.

Among the first to sit down in North Carolina was a veteran who had served in the United States Air Force. He said he served cheerfully in the unsegregated air arm of his country's defense force. He trained, studied, ate and played with white boys in uniform. His unit was in the Far East where the United States was trying to demonstrate the advantages of democracy in the face of the growing strength of Chinese communism.

When this young man came back to his native North Carolina to begin his belated study to be a doctor, the old pattern of segregation by skin color seemed silly and cruel. It just did not make sense. The Supreme Court had spoken. The Government had a national policy. The Air Force had a policy. The United States was preaching democracy to Indonesia and to Viet Nam. Yet in North Carolina, U.S.A., he could not sit down in a Woolworth store and eat a sandwich.

So he and his friends sat on the stools waiting for service and by this simple act forced a nation

to take a new look at the old race problem. For suddenly it was not Greensboro alone, but Durham and Raleigh and Chapel Hill and Tallahassee and Chattanooga and Nashville and Norfolk and Richmond and Atlanta and Orangeburg and Memphis and East Texas and San Antonio.

The South brought the sit-downs upon itself. The process began decades and decades ago, nurtured in the time of slavery which seems, in retrospect, to have done more harm to the minds and hearts of the free southern white men and their descendants than it did to the slaves and their descendants. In modern times it is propped up by the South's refusal to abandon the Dred Scott decision of 1857. That decision held that since Scott was a slave he was not a citizen and thus was not protected by the Constitution. "A black man," it said in effect, "has no rights which a white man is bound to respect."

The Dred Scott ruling was reversed by the Emancipation Proclamation, by the Civil War, and by the Amendments to the Constitution, but for the South, on the Negro question, there was no Civil War verdict and there were no Amendments to the Constitution. Aided by a monumental indifference on the part of the North and frequently by open collusion, the South, in effect, maintained the Dred Scott opinion, practically intact, until the outbreak of World War II.

The Dred Scott concept was maintained by means of intimidation, terror and mob violence (short-memored citizens tend to forget that as late as 1935 twenty-five persons were lynched, twelve of them in July, August and September—an average of one every  $7\frac{1}{2}$  days). It was sustained, also, by widespread disfranchisement of Negro citizens and by the consequent perpetuation in office of those who kept the system in force. It was sustained through restrictive legislation enacted by the southern state legislatures and by the ruthless application of economic and cultural force wielded by those whom the system benefited.

#### Justice Harlan's Dissent

In his classic dissent to the "separate-but-equal" ruling of the United States Supreme Court in 1896

in *Plessy v. Ferguson*, Mr. Justice Harlan wrote these prophetic words:

"If laws of like character (that is, segregation laws) should be enacted in the several states of the union, the effect would be in the highest degree mischievous. Slavery as an institution tolerated by law would, it is true, have disappeared from our country, but there would remain a power in the states, by sinister legislation, to interfere with the full enjoyment of the blessings of freedom; to regulate civil rights common to all citizens upon the basis of race; and to place in a condition of legal inferiority a large body of American citizens . . ."

There did, indeed, "remain a power in the states . . . to interfere with the full enjoyment of the blessings of freedom" and the southern states have exercised that power to the *nth* degree.

They have restricted the employment opportunities of Negroes and have enforced, as long as possible, and wherever possible, a racial differential in wages.

They subscribed to the ghetto idea, finding it useful not only in maintaining status, but in facilitating control of a population segment.

They instituted and wove into a smothering pattern a thousand different personal humiliations, both public and private, based upon color. Through legal and extra-legal machinery, through unchallenged political power, and through economic sanctions, a code of demeaning conduct was enforced which cast down children before they could dream, and eroded manhood after it came of age.

At best they evaded the Fifteenth Amendment and at worst they contemptuously ignored it: Negro citizens were denied the right to register and vote. The persistence in this tactic is there for all to see.

Given the green light by the *Plessy* decision in 1896, southerners happily set up the segregated Negro public school which neither they nor the indifferent North ever pretended was equal to the public schools for white children.

The shocking statistics of this inequality over the decades cannot, of course, tell us how many hundreds of thousands of Negro youngsters from, say, 1900 through 1959 have been cheated and crippled as men and as citizens by being deprived, wholesale, of the same education offered their white fellows.

How many in this country were surprised to learn that in much of the South Negroes are barred from public libraries, zoos and art galleries? But they are.

With due allowance for many unknown factors, was the deprived number 100,000 a year? 200,000? Does our Negro population today lack the greater stability, the steadier guiding force and the higher achievement factors which would have been added to it by the presence of five million better educated ones?

The sixty-year record notwithstanding, the Deep South resisted and has continued to resist compliance with the 1954 Supreme Court ruling outlawing segregated public education as violative of the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment. It clings to *Dred Scott*: We are told there is no Fourteenth Amendment because it was not legally ratified; even if it exists, it does not apply to public schools; even if it exists, the Supreme Court had no right to rule upon the question as such ruling would be "legislation"; and even if the Amendment exists and the Supreme Court has ruled, no compliance is possible because desegregated schools will lead to intermarriage and *intermarriage* is unthinkable.

The Negro students who have sat down at lunch counters in the South since February 1 were brought to the stools by this southern history, and by the empty and stubborn repetition of nineteenth century mumbo-jumbo that is utterly meaningless in the seventh decade of the twentieth century.

### Timidity in the North

The South, however, has not been the only performer on this human rights stage. The North has helped to drive home to Negro college youth that one must act, rather than wait, if one would

attain and enjoy the dignity and rights which belong to American citizens and to human beings. If the South has been contemptuous and ruthless, the North has been timid and hypocritical, a seeker of racial-quiet-at-any-price.

Except for a few zealous crusading lovers of freedom for all men and a few unashamed descendants of the Abolitionists, the North has cautioned the Negro to be calm and to go slow. It has grasped every opportunity, no matter how slender, to "see the point of view" of the South.

It has swallowed whole the elaborate fabrication, delineated and redelineated to this day, of the "Tragic Era" of Reconstruction. This oft-told tale, repeated in speech, song, story, films, scholars' tomes and political tirades furnished the pretext for (a) the exclusion of the Negro from politics and (b) the reiterated demand upon the North to keep "hands off" the race question henceforth since the North was held to be responsible for the South's period of torment.

And the North, by and large, has kept its hands off and has allowed the South to do with the Negro pretty much as it pleased. There is no need to recount here the record of shadow-boxing over anti-lynching and civil rights bills in the Congress, with northerners frequently (with notable exceptions) in coalition with the South.

Since the public school decision in 1954, the North has eagerly absorbed the massive propaganda material of the hard-core southern states, of the admittedly extremist elements, in Dixie.

It was a northern national magazine that in 1956 carried to its millions of readers Mississippi Novelist William Faulkner's cry to the NAACP and to the North to "Go Slow" on school desegregation. Northern editors, speakers, college professors, ministers, conferees and truck drivers appropriated Faulkner's wail and made it their own.

In April of 1960, a national newsmagazine, surveying what it called the "ordeal" of the South (not the ordeal of the Negro), served up not only the old plaint that the issue is being "rammed down the South's throat" and being pressed "too

fast," but another popular refrain: the North, on race discrimination, is as guilty as the South. It aired the hyperbole that the Negro is as bad off in the North as he is in the South and that the South loves him, while the North wants none of him.

Well, how fast is desegregation proceeding? The Southern School Reporting Service in Nashville, Tenn., which has been at work as a fact-recording agency on this problem since 1954, released figures in April, 1960, revealing that in the six years since the Supreme Court decision, six percent of the Negro school children in the southern and border states have been admitted to desegregated classes.

Ninety-four percent have not been affected. Slightly more than 2,500,000 Negro children out of just 3,000,000 in affected areas are still in Jim Crow school systems six years after the Supreme Court said such schools should be abolished.

This blinding speed of one per cent a year is what the South is screaming about—and what the North has accepted as "going too fast." And judging by the leather-lunged opposition to a civil rights bill by southerners and by the raucous vows of never to comply with the school ruling, no one is ramming anything larger than a cough drop down the throat of the South.

Of course, the assertion that the Negro is no better off in the North than he is in the South is always a lie, sometimes plausible, sometimes crude. If a Negro can stay in 90 percent of the hotels in Ohio, but in not a single hotel in Alabama, does that make Ohio "as bad as" Alabama?

### The City Hall Ban

There is not a single Negro white collar worker in a city hall or a state house in the entire South. Compare that to the Negro white collar workers in the state house in Columbus, Ohio, or in Lansing, Mich., or Harrisburg, Pa., or Albany, N. Y., or Sacramento, Calif.

In the school year 1956-57, Oregon spent \$356 per pupil in attendance in her unsegregated schools, but in the school year 1956-57, Mississippi spent \$107 per pupil in attendance in her segre-

gated Negro schools. This fact, according to the propaganda, makes the Negro child in Oregon "no better off" than the Negro child in Mississippi. Ohio last year spent \$330 per pupil in its mixed schools, while South Carolina spent less than half as much on its Negro pupils. Yet the North is listening in dewy-eyed sympathy to the Dixie fairy tale that "the North shouldn't point the finger at us because it is as bad as we are."

The Negro students have been impelled to their action program in lunch counters because they are no longer able to stomach this humbuggery from the non-southern states. They know all about the old days in the South; they know what their mothers and fathers had to accept, and what their grandfathers and grandmothers endured.

They know about going to the back door, using the freight elevator, riding in the rear of the bus, living on dirt streets, forgetting about election day, being thankful for food and shelter on a farm — and no cash. They know about the insults, the beatings, the whippings, the killings. They went into Woolworth's and bought a lipstick or a tablet or costume jewelry, but when they wanted to buy a hamburger, that was "social."

They did not see how the North could agree with all this and they looked vainly for some understanding and moral support. But the North has been "busy" and ever so wary of becoming involved in a sticky business like a racial dispute involving, of all things, justice.

So the Negro students sat down, asking only simple justice. From the northern white people who are so much more free than the southern white people, the Negro students have received mixed messages. The northern white students have rallied with funds and vocal moral support. They have manned protest picket lines. Even in the South, white students have joined in the demonstrations and some have suffered arrest and abuse in consequence.

Some northern adults, including, I am ashamed to say, some Negroes who have the appearance of adults, have brushed off the whole thing with either indifference or condemnation. They do not

know how late it is in the day, nor how gray their acquiescence to injustice has made their little world.

The ponderous processes of the law and the dextrous deception of politics also helped propel the Negro students on the lunch counter protest. All during the sit-ins the Congress was debating a civil rights bill aimed, it was said, at protecting the right of the Negro to vote in the South.

From day to day and week to week there were cloakroom huddles over parliamentary maneuvers. What rule would permit what? How could this clause be best challenged? What was the word from the Senate leadership to the House leadership? Will Title II survive unscathed? Can six words be slipped into Title VI and thus nullify the whole title? Shall this be done on Thursday, or held over until next Tuesday? What does the White House say? Will the Attorney General accept this change? How about the Lausche amendment? Registrars or referees?

The bill that finally emerged from the House and Senate is nothing about which to loose hosannas to the skies; it is a severely trimmed version of the Administration civil rights proposals which, when advanced in 1959, were termed "moderate" by no less an authority on moderation than President Eisenhower.

It is probable that under this bill it will not be easier for a Negro in certain areas of the South to register and vote. It may be no more difficult, but it is not likely to be easier. There seems to be only one tiny gain and that is that this bill empowers the Federal government itself to enroll Negro citizens under certain conditions.

Certainly either political party is welcome to claim whatever credit it can for this bill. There is precious little credit to be shared. The Democrats had their heroes as did the Republicans. The Democrats did their dirty work and the Republicans did theirs. In fact, at times one did not know whether Senator Dirksen, the Republican Minority Leader, was pushing the Administration bill or tearing it to pieces.

The Majority Leader, Senator Lyndon B. John-

son, keeps saying the legislation is a "good bill." He and Senator Dirksen and President Eisenhower were described as "happy" over the final bill. It is not recorded, however, that any of these three ever suffered discrimination at the polling place so that their joy over the bill is not to be confused with the feelings of Negro citizens on the subject.

We Americans are properly revolted over the slaughter of men, women and children with automatic weapons by the police in the Union of South Africa. The world is outraged over the use of armored cars and tanks against unarmed men and women, the invasion of homes and the merciless lashing with whips, the mass arrests, the herding, imprisonment and banishment. Civilized men everywhere condemn this senseless and corrupting cruelty.

It has to be cause for shame, then, that within our own United States, the Mississippi House on April 12 passed a resolution commending the government of South Africa for its "firm segregation policies."

The commendation includes, it is fair to conclude, the shooting down of civilians who demonstrated their objection to the degradation embodied in racial segregation. It must include, also, the whipping of men and women from their homes in order to force them to work.

Against this animalism the Negro college students sit undaunted in protest. Who can say them

may? Is the distance so great between the contempt of lunch counter exclusion and the crack of a bull whip or the death rattle of a Sten gun?

Nor is Johannesburg, South Africa, so far in spirit and practice from Birmingham, Alabama. A stark and frightening report from the Alabama city in *The New York Times* for April 12 pictures there "the emotional dynamite of racism."

We owe them and their white student cooperators a debt for re-arming our spirits and renewing our strength as a nation at a time when we and free men everywhere sorely need this clear insight and this fresh courage, so quietly and so humbly offered.

It is no extravagance to venture that they, in a sense, constitute another beacon in an Old North Church, another hoofbeat under a Paul Revere.

**NATIONAL ASSOCIATION FOR THE ADVANCEMENT  
OF COLORED PEOPLE**

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