



# Integration Must ..... Move

by  
ROY WILKINS

Executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, Roy Wilkins, who graduated from the University of Minnesota, was for fifteen years editor of THE CRISIS and prior to that, from 1923 to 1931, managing editor of THE CALL, the Negro weekly of Kansas City. In this article he carries forth the discussion initiated by Agnes Meyer in her January article, "*Race and the Schools.*"

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## Integration Must Move

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A GOOD deal of nonsense has been written and spoken upon the public school desegregation question. With some notable exceptions, we have exhibited little honesty, ingenuity, common sense, and courage in approaching it. The *Atlantic* recognized the significance of the problem by featuring the sincere article, "Race and the Schools," by Agnes E. Meyer in its January issue. Yet Mrs. Meyer, for all her knowledge of and devotion to the public school system and her sincerity as an American liberal, has repeated some of the interpretations that have placed the situation on dead center and kept it there.

Hardly anyone sits down to a typewriter on this question without cautioning the Negro to abjure haste. William Faulkner used the columns of a multimillion-circulation weekly magazine to shout "Go slow!" to the NAACP. As the final caution Mrs. Meyer in the January *Atlantic* counsels, "make haste slowly."

Those who read and run might gather from all this that Negroes had been knocking down school doors, browbeating administrators and boards of education, or throwing picket lines around the schools from which they are barred. Nothing could be further from the truth. The majority of Negroes are mild and forbearing, much to the irritation of a growing number among them who wish for a program of more action.

There has been no pell-mell rush toward desegregation, no demand for instantaneous change.

Certainly the NAACP has not advocated overnight alteration of school patterns. However, both the NAACP and Negro citizens generally have insisted that school boards come to grips with the question and that beginnings in good faith be made. Five days after the 1954 decision of the Supreme Court, Dr. Channing H. Tobias, NAACP board chairman, set the tone for the organization's procedure in a message to its Southern leaders meeting in Atlanta:

"It is important that calm reasonableness prevail, that the difficulties of adjustment be realized, and that, without any sacrifice of basic principles, the spirit of give and take characterize the discussions. Let it not be said of us that we took advantage of a sweeping victory to drive hard bargains or impose unnecessary hardships upon those responsible for working out the details of adjustment."

Here was the calm deliberation which since then has been urged so insistently upon Negro citizens. Here was consideration for school administrators and others upon whom would fall the burden of planning desegregation. But here, also, was quiet determination upon basic principles, upon change in the old order, upon access to light and opportunity after fifty-seven years in the semidarkness of the separate-but-never-equal doctrine.

It is this determination that the opponents of the Negro's aspiration are trying to break with

their repeated cries of "Slow down." They are shadowboxing over speed; the real target is any change at all.

THE handwriting regarding segregated schools was on the wall as early as 1935, when Donald Gaines Murray won his way, via the Maryland Supreme Court, into the Law School of the University of Maryland. The picture became clearer through U.S. Supreme Court decisions in 1938, 1948, and 1950, together with other federal court decisions in this period forbidding a racial differential in teachers' salaries.

With the principle unmistakably stated in the University of Texas case in 1950, it was only a matter of time before a challenge on the elementary and secondary levels would be before the courts. No governor, or attorney general, or state board of education, or mayor, or local school board, or responsible school administrator can claim today that the 1954 decision on public schools was sudden. All of them had had a maximum notice of nineteen years and a minimum one of four years (from the Texas case). That they understood what was foreshadowed is demonstrated by the frantic building programs for Negro schools into which the Southern states plunged from 1949 to 1954 in a desperate effort to stave off the inevitable.

No, the Negro is not "pushing too fast"; he spent nearly two decades making his moves in a slow, orderly manner through the courts. Today he is proceeding with moderation and behaving with dignity under an intense fire of falsehood, intimidation, and persecution. Politically shackled and economically harassed, he has endured the persecution of state governments in which he has no voice and the ruthlessness of power structures in which he has no influence.

While he does not rant, he remains determined. A Gallup poll last December revealed that 69 per cent of Southern Negroes want the Supreme Court decision enforced, as against 53 per cent nearly two years before. Only 13 per cent were recorded as opposed. A survey published in the *Catholic Digest* in August, 1957, showed that 93 per cent of the Southern Negroes supported the policies of the NAACP.

All this would indicate that the Negro American is neither wild-eyed and obstreperous nor divided on this issue. He believes that the way to begin is to begin. He cannot be expected to cheer a beginning such as that in Winston-Salem, North Carolina, where one Negro child has been integrated in the entire city system, nor that in Little Rock, where nine Negroes are distributed among

1991 whites in Central High School. If he greets these and similar efforts with something less than enthusiasm, it does not mean that he wants to go too fast; it means merely that he does not want to stand still.

Another favorite myth is that the Negro by insisting on some movement in good faith toward desegregation is seeking to destroy the public school system and the standards of public education. Governor Luther Hodges of North Carolina used this as a theme in a state-wide radio and television talk in 1956.

The only people who have threatened to destroy the public schools in certain states are white people, mostly politicians in high and low offices. The Negro wants more and better schools, not fewer.

Nor does the Negro seek to lower educational standards. Who knows better than he on how great a scale his children have been cheated of a decent education over all these years? He knows that a frightening number of them are lagging behind whites at certain levels. But he does not follow the "logic" which says that the way to cure this condition is to *maintain the segregation which produced it*.

Allowing for the 350,000 Negro children who have been integrated since 1954, there are still slightly more than two million Negroes remaining in segregated schools. Some commentators seek comfort by concentrating on the 350,000, but most Negroes and fair-minded whites, while welcoming this beginning, keep their sights on the presently immobile two million. Negroes know that not all these two million children are below par, that some of them can equal or surpass their grade levels in any test. They know, too, that still more could pass easily if given brief, intensive, and sympathetic remedial attention.

Assuming that a mere 10 per cent of the two million could pass their tests tomorrow, would their integration "ruin" public education standards? Obviously not, and the integration total would jump more than 50 per cent. If those who can quickly be brought to standard were added, the total would be still more satisfying — and no white child would be retarded thereby.

And, speaking of retardation, what of the present plight of average and superior children now attending all-white schools in company with a not negligible number of children who are below average, even poor? Recent figures from a Texas city purport to show that 59 per cent of whites in the fourth grade were at or above their grade level as compared with only 13.5 per cent of Negroes. But, aside from the contrast with Negroes, this survey reveals that more than 40 per cent of the *white* children are below average.

Excluding a few experts, is anyone complaining that the presence of this two fifths is ruining the education of the three fifths?

If this argument is valid with respect to Negroes, it is valid with respect to the substantial number of substandard white children. It becomes, therefore, a problem of education rather than one of race.

As THE Negro views the present situation, there would seem to be certain requisites to a beginning toward reducing tensions and getting on with desegregation. The segregation problem is not the same in the North as it is in the South. The difference is apparent to even a casual observer of trolleys, buses, city halls, state legislatures, parks, theaters, restaurants, hotels, factories, and white-collar employment. As for schools, despite de facto segregation there are Negro teachers and students in "mixed" situations, with Negro honor students, class presidents, and athletes. In New York City the desegregation principle has been recognized, the Supreme Court respected, proposals drawn up, and debate encouraged. *There is movement.* The same cannot be said for Richmond, Savannah, Jacksonville, Mobile, Shreveport, or Hattiesburg.

Further, the segregationists must face, sooner or later, the fact that the soothing double talk handed to Aunt Mandy and Uncle Jim falls on the deaf and scornful ears of today's Tom, Dick, and Harry. These latter have traveled far from the home county; tens of thousands have been off to war and seen far places; thousands more have gone to school under the GI bill; they have radios and television sets; they read newspapers, magazines, and books. That is why the Montgomery bus protest lasted one year instead of five days as predicted by local whites who "knew" their Negroes. That is why the time-tested formula of dividing the "good" Negroes from the "radical" ones has failed on the school desegregation issue.

Next, there should be, among those genuinely desirous of getting something done, an end to the characterization of court action and political pressure as "force." This perversion reduces legal action in accordance with a decree of the nation's highest court to the same level as mob action stirred by a John Kasper. The same rea-

soning lumps together as extremists the NAACP, which supports the Supreme Court, and the White Citizens Councils, organized specifically to defy the Court. Inveighing against the employment of political action by Negro citizens is asking them to forgo an instrument which is the very backbone of a democratic society, one that is used for everything from cutting a curbstone to, say, fixing the rate for interstate natural gas. They cannot be expected to acquiesce.

Equally pointless are the running references to the Era of Good Feeling that is alleged to have existed in the years prior to the 1954 decision of the Court. It is true that Southern whites experienced few racial tensions, for they found that a segregated society, rigidly controlled through political disfranchisement, economic ceilings, and social customs, was comfortable and relaxing. But for the Negro it was an era of frustration.

While we were making the world safe for democracy in one war and destroying *Hitler's* master race theory in another, the Negro rode in the back of the bus, lived in a ghetto across the railroad tracks, sent his children to Jim Crow schools, worked at restricted jobs, enjoyed either inferior or no public recreation, endured daily humiliation and insult, received uneven justice in the courts, and was the victim of violence. He is not overcome with nostalgia for the pre-1954 days; he has bid them a grim and tearless good-by.

The Negro *wants* to be a partner in this great social change. He has offered his cooperation from the very beginning, but his peaceful petitions offering aid in drawing up desegregation plans were rejected, filed away, or turned over to local segregationists so that the signers could be fired from their jobs. The Negro is still deeply interested in building better schools for all children. He believes segregated schools have hurt white children as he knows full well they have hurt his. But partnership implies mutual respect and consultation, leading to cooperative movement. Where these necessary conditions have been met, he has been a willing collaborator.

If Mrs. Meyer's admonition, "The chief responsibility for leadership is still that of the white population," is to be meaningful in the light of present-day urgencies, there must be the sharing of responsibility for plans and results which is inherent in the partnership concept.