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THE ROLE OF PUBLIC OFFICIALS III

*William B. Hartsfield**

First I think that I should explain some of the situations here in the South and some of the circumstances under which we must operate. The great problem down here is that we have to recognize the Supreme Court's decision as an accomplished fact and as the law of the land, unless changed by another Constitutional amendment or by congressional action. There are still thousands of people who are not doing that. And that is the job of the decent people and the moderates — a job that they have not been doing too well, but I hope that they will do in the future. Our state government does not accede to this recognition; we are still afflicted with the demagogues who have been mining this racial hatred for many years, just for votes.

Our chief trouble is that the best element of our state, and indeed of the South, has been largely silent, while the demagogues have been "making political hay" for many years. Therefore we have thousands of our people who have been impressed by these demagogic arguments, and their thinking must be changed. Thousands of Georgians believe — honestly believe — that the school situation is just the work of some evil people in the North, some extreme liberals, and even Communists. And particularly do they believe this about the Supreme Court. They think that if they will just hold out and continue supporting the demagogues and continue fighting, that in some way they are going to be successful in defying the highest Court in the land.

Georgia is rurally dominated. We have that to contend with. We have 159 counties, and most of them are rural. We must operate under the famous county-unit system, under which some of the rural voters have a vote which equals 70 votes in Atlanta. We have tried to change this, having in mind that this would produce a change in climate in this school situation. Indeed, several cases have gone to the Supreme Court. I myself, last year, took a case there and the Supreme Court turned me down, but by a five to four decision.¹ And we may try again. We think it is ironical that the Court that has handed us a great problem somehow doesn't go along with us when we try to produce the climate to enable us to handle the problem.

Our legislature has passed a series of laws trying to avoid the decision of the Supreme Court. Several years ago the people voted a constitutional amendment authorizing the government to close public schools and to make state grants for pupils, in the event of a segregation decision in the state. Then the legislature passed a series of laws designed to strengthen the hand of the government in closing the schools and in making pupil grants. Finally the legislature, recognizing that Atlanta is a big city which is probably more

* Mayor of Atlanta, Georgia.

¹ *Hartsfield v. Sloan*, 357 U.S. 916 (1958).

liberal than the balance of this state, and that probably the first efforts to comply with the law of the land would come in that city, passed separate laws about independent school systems. These laws were designed to make it impossible for Atlanta to continue its schools if segregation were ordered. Now we have a law, passed at the last session of legislature, which makes it unlawful for us to levy any local school tax in the event our schools are ordered to integrate. We have pending here in Atlanta, a case brought by the attorneys for some negro children, in federal court, which will be heard, we understand, sometime in June. However, this case attacks segregation generally, and the principle of segregation. There has been no attempt on the part of any child to enter any particular school, and we do not think that the crisis will arise until this is actually done. When an effort will be made to enter a negro child in a white school we do not know. It could be this Fall; it could be next year.

Let us grant then, that after great pain and travail, after all sorts of legal maneuverings back and forth in state and federal courts, we are finally faced with the cold and stark decision that either we must admit negro children to public schools or have no schools whatever. I am afraid that it is the firm decision of our state officials, often repeated and affirmed, to close down the elementary schools rather than to comply. And, I think if they are reopened it will have to be on the petition of somebody to get the court in some way to require their reopening. This situation is somewhat confused. Nobody knows what the courts will do. But suppose we do in some way preserve the Atlanta schools, or the state finally relents. What then are the practical problems involved?

First, one of our troubles in this great question is the fact that our rurally dominated legislature is most familiar with the country Negro. Most of these Negroes are somewhat backward, as the result of years of unsatisfactory and poor farming life and the general condition of the South. It must be remembered that the South itself, up to fifteen or twenty years ago was called the nation's economic problem number one. It is still the lowest income area in the nation. That complicates our problem. After the Civil War there was no help for the South. We went through reconstruction; we went through an era of a colonial economy; we went through an era of unfair trade rates designed to keep us from manufacturing; we had to go North for our wants. All of this operated to hold down the people — white and colored; to make education poor, and poorest, of course, was the Negro, thus creating the problem which we have today.

In Atlanta the situation is somewhat different. We have six fine negro colleges. Those graduating classes, for years, have poured into the community the high-type, educated Negro. Here we have probably the largest number, per capita of well-educated and prosperous Negroes of any place in America. I think most of the children of these people would cause no problem whatever. They could hold their own in any classroom. But, in many of the country counties, the Negro is admittedly more backward. His background is so different from the white people that it would be a great problem. Indeed, in a dozen or more country counties, the negro people outnumber the whites;

and, in those country counties it would really be sending the white children to Negro schools, instead of the reverse. This is a problem which to me is almost impossible. I don't know the answer.

But, in Atlanta, it is my opinion that most of the whites and negro children would probably continue going to the same schools. The negro schools are located in the area where there are the largest number of Negro people. I would estimate that probably 10% of them would have to be taken care of in different schools and would probably be integrated into white schools. I believe this could be done if done carefully and sympathetically. I think that the thing that we've got to do down here if we ever get to that problem — and I think some day we're going to get there — would be to set up placement boards.

Such a law was passed in Alabama, and incidentally the Supreme Court has upheld it if fairly operated. Such boards could examine the capabilities of the children, their educational capacity and even their background, to determine whether their presence in the classroom would form any problems, either for them or for the white children. I think that a placement board system is the only way to handle this problem when it comes to a head. I am frank to say that any unwise or ill-considered or politically manipulated mixing of the children indiscriminately will cause harm to the children of both races.

We must remember that public opinion and the habits of generations are powerful factors, and we've got to consider them whether we like them or agree with them or not. We must go somewhat slowly. I don't think it exactly fair to attempt to unload this great and terrific problem here in the deep South on one generation of innocent children, either white or colored, and especially in an atmosphere so emotionally charged.

I am a moderate, and as such I get a lot of valid criticism. The lot of the moderate in the South is not any easy one. Being a political official, I often get in trouble on other things when I know that the real opposition is silent opposition about the race matter. We moderates are often caught between the extremists of both sides. Down here I make many talks to my citizens, both white and negro; and, oftentimes the negro audiences hear me say that we've got to keep our sense; we've got to keep our minds attuned to the right things; we've got to be in a spirit of good will; we've got to be patient with each other. And oftentimes when they chide me about progress I say that the most important thing is not how fast we're moving, but in what direction we're moving. Let us always, on all occasions, be found moving in the right direction.

I think in Atlanta we're honestly trying to move in the right direction. We're trying to create an over-all climate of good will in this troublesome race matter; we're trying also to educate our people, both white and negroes, in the art of getting along together. I constantly preach that we must maintain a close liaison. We must know the Negro; we must know the better-class Negro. We must judge them by the best, and not by the worst. You know, it's one of the habits of mankind to judge other races by the worst instead of the best. We must reverse that. We seek to educate all of our people.

I once made a speech at a negro college that was very well received.

Here is what I said: The greatest advocates, the finest advocates of education for the white people themselves ought to be the Negro people; because it is among the educated people where you have the only hope, and it is among the uneducated people where you have the most trouble. So, here in Atlanta we're trying to move in the right direction: the way of love and of decency and of common sense; and finally, we're trying to move the way that I think our God would have us move.