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THE ROLE OF EDUCATORS III

TOWARD A NATIONAL EDUCATION POLICY

*John Harvey Wheeler Jr.**

The negro problem, as Gunar Myrdal forcefully demonstrated, is a national problem. It is meaningless to declare that the Southerner alive today is responsible for the peculiar institution he is saddled with and to add that he must within his own resources solve this problem with deliberate speed.

On the other hand, Little Rock is not the answer. Whatever anyone else in Washington, London or Moscow may think, Southerners are people much like anyone else. They deserve the understanding that we knowingly tell ourselves must be extended when Americans brush into strange customs and folkways throughout the rest of the world. Southerners deserve the understanding Chicagoans would want if they were to be saddled with the personal responsibility for gangsterism; the understanding unions will want if the attempt is made to hold them personally responsible for labor racketeering; the understanding all of us may someday feel our due if we come to look back ashamedly on the internal difficulties associated with our Cold War period.

Little Rock is not the answer even were all men, those of the North and South alike, to agree on the essential justice of the Supreme Court rulings. To send federal troops may at first thought salve our consciences. For if we are convinced of the correctness of the law we find no difficulty in approving military intervention. Violence must be put down. Law and order must be restored. No one can disagree with these sentiments. Governor Faubus' claim that Little Rock was another Hungary is patently false. It is false because we feel certain in this case that a local popular uprising was put down justly. We sense the difference between a "good" popular revolution to throw off tyranny (Hungary) and a bad demagogic uprising to perpetuate suppression. And so we gave no more than a passing thought to Governor Faubus' cry against totalitarian imposition from the North.

The question is, however, what is going to be done next year in Little Rock? For good or ill, the inhabitants of Little Rock are people themselves, and they are in control. The long run political question is not what they can be forced to do, but rather how they can be led to want to do justice. We may try to argue that had it not been for Governor Faubus' interference all would have gone well, but the condition in the South is such that had the outbreak not come there it might have come in a hundred other places. Every southern city is a potential "Little Rock," for the same ingredients of demagogic power are present throughout the South.

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The crucial question remains: how can the South be helped to a position in which it can do the right thing? For this is the question which underlies the restoration of sanity to Little Rock and it is the question which must be answered if future Little Rocks are to be avoided.

In order to answer this question a few very simple facts must be recalled and held in the forefront of our minds. The first is that the South is undergoing a tremendous revolution. The pressure for integration is an outcome of this industrial, social and political revolution. Had not this revolution come a long way already, there would be no foundation for the large improvement already registered by the southern Negro. It is this revolution which will ultimately resolve the problem and do so very shortly in many areas. With today's speeding up of change and the consequent stretching out of time it is not fanciful to look forward to the substantive resolution of the segregation problem before the end of another generation. What we mean in saying this is that with further industrialization and general improvement in living and cultural standards throughout the population levels of the South the Negro will increasingly improve his hold on power everywhere and will be able to demand and receive in his own right those practicing attributes of full citizenship we know he deserves in constitutional theory as an American citizen.

The immediate problem arises, however, because white and Negro alike know that he *should* be able to exercise full civic rights now; both know that he *will* quickly come to do so and that the direction of change is toward his amelioration; but both also know that the actual power situation today between whites and Negroes remains in such imbalance that to pretend differently requires resort to extremities.

The Supreme Court ruling proclaiming the necessity for rapid civic equality requires for its enforcement *either* positive policies to help the Negro assume an actual power status and role comparable to his theoretical constitutional right *or* the artificial maintenance of that equality through some form of coercion.

It can be done through force. European Jews (to recall an opposite example) were forcefully held in a civic position *lower* than their real social and cultural power would have entitled them had they not been officially discriminated against and held in their second-class ghetto cultures.

The real negro problem then is how to enable a group to assume a *larger* role in the community than it is sociologically "entitled" to by its own cultural power: how to redress an imbalance between actual power and civic status so the people for the moment without power may be treated as if this were not so.

The failure to recognize this dimension of the problem is the source of most erroneous thinking, North and South. For once policy formation is thought of in terms of providing Negroes with the conditions for assuming an enlarged role and of helping them to assert and enforce their rights normally and politically, the approaches to the solution of the negro problem change.

Education is the heart of the problem for many reasons. The Negro's path to an enlarged civic status and to a higher cultural level will come largely

through the eternal "operation bootstrap" of education. But education means this to the southern white as well as to the Negro. And though statistically southern schools may rank very poor when compared with the per-capita budgets for education in the rest of the country, it must be remembered that free compulsory public education is itself a very recent achievement in the South — one that was won only through very hard political struggles. Before World War II it was not uncommon for southern high schools to grant diplomas at the 11th instead of the 12th year. The establishment of public schools and then their relative improvement (even though they may still look dreadfully primitive) is one of the great cultural achievements of the New South.

Moreover, there is no hiding the fact that poor as it may be by national standards, southern public education in some ways remains a caste prerogative. And it should not be forgotten that statistical rankings of schools and state education budgets are seldom meaningful. It may be true that the secondary schools of every northern metropolis are spending ten times more per student for public education than are the secondary schools of say, Lexington, Virginia. But the statistically poor schools of Lexington (white and colored) are taught by public servants often from leading families in their respective communities.

These financially poor schools may seem educationally primitive, but they are sound educational arenas for the maturation and tempering of young people by dedicated teachers who know and can transmit a feeling for cultural excellence and who are themselves in many cases culture paragons.

Of course, Lexington, Virginia, is not the entire South. In Richmond, Atlanta, Miami and Dallas the public schools are virtually indistinguishable from those in the urban North. But southern politics and leadership still reflect the outlook of the arcadian gentry.

Moreover, it is generally speaking true that the northern urban educational blight of blackboard jungle has not yet moved very far south, not even to the southern city. And it is precisely something like the blackboard jungle that the South fears from integration. Little will be achieved by stamping that particular northern pattern on southern education. This is a problem also intimately connected with the cultural status of the Negro — just as a similar cultural problem is at the heart of the blackboard jungle problem in northern education.

Several years ago Margaret Mead contributed a fine professional credo to Edward R. Murrow's first book in the series entitled *This I Believe*. In this she stated her belief that the difference one finds in human beings throughout society and throughout the world is not founded on genetic, physiological or mental differences, but rather on the differences in the way men become acculturated through their different environments. If we were to go to the most primitive society known in the world today — in the Australian bush country where men grub for worms and roots with a tool no better than a pointed stick — and bring a new born baby from there to Beacon Street in Boston; and if that infant were educated in a good family environment, sent

to the best schools and then on to Harvard, he would be able to grow up and take his place as one of our intellectual leaders. And if, on the contrary, a child from one of Harvard's most brilliant families were taken at birth to a tribe in the Australian bush to be educated there, he would grow up no wiser than his fellow and pass out his precarious days grubbing for worms and juicy roots.

All our biological and anthropological findings tend to support Miss Mead's beliefs. We are close to a solution of the South's segregation problem if we realize that something like this situation exists in the South. Its caste system has produced two separate cultures. Southerners know this instinctively without being able to verbalize it well except in imprecise phrases like the "mixing of the races" and it is just such phrases which anger Northerners, who for their part do not see beyond the legal and constitutional problem into its deeper cultural foundations.

Throughout a large part of the industrialized South preliminary integration has begun comfortably because in such areas the negro community is becoming urbanized and industrialized and can assimilate urban public education just as urban public educational systems in such areas can assimilate Negroes. Moreover, the white community in such areas is different from the white communities of the rural areas. In urban areas the two communities are different from their counterparts in agrarian areas and their inter-relationships are different. For such areas present policies and efforts need little adjustment. However, any efforts which could be made to demonstrate and prove to these two types of areas that they are two separate cultures, rather than one only, would facilitate the inauguration of desegregation in urban areas which are now culturally ready for it without perceiving that this is true.

However, for large areas of the South this is not possible. The only tenuously established public education system cannot survive the shock of attempting to educate in the same system with the same budgets two such diverse cultural groups. There has never been any doubt about what the attempt would bring. Even in states legally retaining their public school systems there will be many areas in which it is informally scuttled. Families financially able to do so will place their children in "private" schools. In many cases these will look much like the schools which were previously public. The best teachers will leave public school education for the more socially approved and more congenial conditions of the private schools. This, of course, is what has happened at the Warren County High School in Front Royal, Virginia. If Little Rock is one extreme, Front Royal is another.

We may not like this and we may vent our dislike by throwing legal roadblocks in the way of the Front Royal venture. But as with the application of force in Little Rock, the application of legality in Front Royal will not solve the problem. It will hurt no one but the poorer and middling classes and the Negroes themselves. For the rich can avail themselves of good private education and will not hesitate to do so. Those who cannot will be forced to send their children to public schools raided of their best teachers, deprived of the emulatory examples of their best students, overloaded with an impossible

teaching situation in which nothing but a very low common denominator is possible. This is precisely the type of development which has already taken place in the metropolitan North and has there made public school blackboard jungles an endemic urban condition.

Slightly different cultural and ethnic ingredients have populated northern schools with unassimilated (in anthropological terms, those not well initiated through the cultural life stages) anomic hordes who when they mature anarchically produce an indigenous *West Side Story* culture.

The educational problem of the South is directly comparable to that of the North. It is a national and a cultural problem and only a national educational policy will suffice to meet it. The problem essentially results from the fact that the human being has not yet learned how to live in an industrial culture — historically it is true that no culture has survived large scale urbanization with its accompanying atomization and “detrribalization.” When the family and kinship systems no longer “socialize” and assimilate the young that task must be accomplished by other institutions. Its accomplishment is a national problem for it is the cultural system of the nation which has produced the problem and there is no lesser organization able to take thought for the over-all cultural needs of such a mass society.

Returning to the educational problem of the South, it turns out to be relatively simple — much more so than that of the North — for it can be met at an earlier and simpler stage. Some guidance may be sought from the educational experience of the Army during World War II. For when it became apparent that a modern army no less than a modern factory demands a relatively high cultural level from even its lowliest members the Army had to accept the obligation to provide remedial training. For those who did very poorly on their induction examinations special schools were established. It was necessary to teach them not only how to read and write, but also how to live and function in a complex industrial culture — which the Army was in miniature. It was necessary to teach them how to live, how to take care of minimal hygienic needs, how to take care of living quarters and social relationships. The Army, that is, had to compensate for the over-all acculturation deficiencies of its inductees.

It happened that a large proportion of those culturally deficient inductees were Negroes. However, the whites in the same categories went through the same programs. And Negroes already well educated ultimately took their places in regular Army units. The Army remedial educational program should not be idealized. It had many faults and its instructional staffs could have been much better. However its equitable effectiveness is attested to today by the many Negroes who have for the first time assimilated a high culture and a correspondingly high status, and therefore remained in the Army which has helped them do this.

The Army educational program was discriminating but not racially discriminatory. Its segregations were made on the basis of educational and cultural level rather than ethnic characteristics. And the entire purpose of those segregations was to develop the below normal inductees so they could take their places with everyone else in the army system.

This is in accordance with the highest pedagogical principles. When the cultural and educational status of a student population shows two sharply divergent groups those groups must be dealt with separately in order that the lower may be brought abreast of the higher. Whenever that elevation is achieved by individuals or by groups, the continued maintenance of separate educational programs is indefensible. For the only purpose of separate treatment is to facilitate the elevation of the lower without endangering the standards maintained for the higher.

A development and an improvement of this approach could be applied to the areas of the South which are as yet unready for immediate compliance with the desegregation order. It would involve the establishment of a special federal auxiliary school system for all unintegrated areas. On the basis of tests and other evaluation methods all students, white and colored alike, deemed competent for normal public school programs could be safely enrolled in the existing educational system. No parent need ever fear the deterioration of his public school system.

For all deficient students, white and colored alike, a special remedial educational program would be instituted. The program would be designed not merely to deal with academic deficiencies, but also with the broad range of problems associated with general acculturation in a mass industrial society. Each year as qualifying levels were met, individual students could be transferred safely from the auxiliary federal system to the regular state system. Gradually, with increasing industrialization and an accompanying general heightening of the cultural level, the need for two separate educational systems would disappear.

The establishment of an auxiliary remedial educational system would be very expensive. And as often happens, the places where the need is greatest are the very places where educational funds are shortest and the talent and understanding required to operate such a program most lacking. But the problem, it must be remembered, is a national one. The shame we all feel over the conditions of all our depressed groups is a national shame. The bad international reputation this brings to America reflects on the entire country. The need for the full development and utilization of our greatest resource, our people, is a national need.

Fortunately we have a great deal of experience with similar amelioration programs in which money from the general funds of the entire nation is invested in projects for the aid and support of economic groups or regional areas deemed especially affected with the national interest. Tariffs, the farm support program and T. V. A. are very successful examples of the application of such conceptions. One of the basic conceptions of T. V. A. was to serve as a measuring rod in its field. The guiding thought should be the development of a national educational policy which will function something like a T. V. A. measuring rod for education: a standard of excellence for all other schools to aim at.

T. V. A. faced inaugural problems similar to those being faced by integration today. It seemed strange and possibly evil. A great deal of local preparatory work had to go into its planning and its inauguration. Under its

famous "grass roots" development program it adopted the general principle of refusing to move into a local area unless there had been a thorough preparation in advance and unless it was invited in by the local community. As it progressed it did so through the formation of local boards of directors, responsible for local policies. Federal directives were reinterpreted and shaped to local needs in every possible way.

Integrated education is a much more serious, much more difficult, but also a much more important program than T. V. A. But if it can be agreed in principle that this is so then our experience with the inauguration of T. V. A. can be turned to effective use for the achievement of integration.

A second federal "grass roots" program may be of some importance for integration. There is considerable evidence that the presence of a high culture and high educational standards in a community is of direct economic benefit to that community. Similarly, the Department of Agriculture knew that the inauguration of high farming standards would be of direct economic benefit to the families and the communities putting them into effect. The "demonstration farm" was designed as a practical and objective illustration of this fact. Everyone who lived around a demonstration farm could see that its owners were better off after they adopted the new standards of cultivation. Only a few years of such demonstration were needed to teach surrounding tradition-bound farmers to change their minds and adopt the new methods. It is possible to apply this also to education. Using the T. V. A. approach to the selection of pilot communities there can be developed a series of "demonstration communities" whose successful solution of their educational and race relations problems through grant-in-aid participation from federal agencies will have a dramatic educational effect on the communities surrounding them.

The country would not be found wanting of able people to make such a program work. There are literally thousands of the South's finest and most public spirited citizens who would give their lives in such an effort. And from experience thus gained there might even come knowledge of how to attack the even more difficult problem of our metropolitan blackboard jungles peopled with the young cultural escapees of our cities.