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THE ROLE OF THE NEGRO COMMUNITY I

THE NEGRO COMMUNITY AND SCHOOL INTEGRATION

*Dr. Rufus E. Clement**

Before undertaking the discussion of the major topic with which this paper will be concerned, I deem it wise for purposes of clarification to give my impressions, both of what the negro community seeks and expects and of what the negro community does not seek and does not expect in the resolution of the present American racial situation.

Perhaps it would be well for me to begin by suggesting some of the things which the negro community is not seeking. I am certain that whenever there is any extended exploration of the present school desegregation question, that sooner or later the opponents of desegregation will claim that the extension of the American democratic ideals of equality of opportunity and of treatment to the American public school system, would inevitably result in "the destruction of the white race," or "mongrelization." I would point out that there are two very pertinent answers to this kind of reasoning. The first is that there has been no "destruction of the white race" in the many states of these United States where negro children for many years have been included in the regular school population and enrolled in classes with other American children. The second answer to this oft-stated expression of fear is simply that the American negro community is not seeking social associations with other people. The Negro realizes that every individual has the right to choose his own social companions and that no one can be forced into a purely social relationship. To suggest that to be seated in the same classroom and to be taught by the same teacher would of itself lead to racial amalgamation is as erroneous and as far-fetched as to conclude that standing in line at a post office general delivery window or riding in the same passenger coach or airplane would inevitably lead to racial mixture.

It should also be recognized that the present struggle of the American Negro is not motivated by any desire to embarrass the United States of America in its position as world leader of the forces committed to upholding human dignity and to insuring individual freedom. Nor has the Negro's effort to publicize the disadvantages under which he has lived in America, the mistreatment which he has received and the neglect which has so often been his lot, been prompted by any desire for revenge.

If these things are true, then one might very well ask what it is that the negro community is seeking. The answer to this question is so obvious that at first glance it appears to be trite. The Negro is expecting to achieve first-class citizenship in a democracy, he is struggling for individual and group freedom, he is striving to gain the respect of the other groups which comprise

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the American population, and to be accepted on an individual basis for whatever his ability, character, intelligence, and accomplishments warrant. Viewed in this light the Negro's effort to desegregate the American public school system can be seen as only a part of his larger effort to win recognition as a human being.

The American Negro must face the fact that desegregation presents very definite problems. It will be necessary for him to have a keen understanding and appreciation of these problems if he is to help the local community peacefully to accept and to implement the rulings of the federal — and some local — courts in declaring that American public schools cannot on account of race deny the enrollment of a qualified student. Long-established customs, traditional relationships, the history of racial separation in American life, limited contacts between the two major racial groups, and cultivated prejudices must all be recognized as hurdles which must be overcome on the road to public school desegregation. These barriers exist in differing degrees and depth in various sections of those states which still are unwilling or reluctant to accept the court decisions as the law of the land. It is not easy for any group or individual to place itself fully in the position of another group or individual, however, this is exactly what the Negro must attempt to do if he is to move constructively in the field of race relations. I most assuredly do not mean that this appreciation of the other man's point of view demands an acceptance of that view. It does, nevertheless, provide reliable indices relating to the direction in which steps leading to acceptance should be taken and the timing thereof. These steps and the timing will differ from community to community even within the same state. The important thing for the Negro is for him to see and to understand all of the factors which motivate local reluctance or resistance.

In spite of the fact that the negro community as a whole is not seeking school desegregation for purely social reasons, it is not to be denied that there are probably some individuals in the group who would not be unwilling or reluctant to attempt to use public school desegregation for purposes of social advancement, if they are able to do this. This attitude stems from one of the basic evils inherent in racial segregation. It is undoubtedly true that some American negroes have been brain-washed to the extent that they feel that anything Caucasian is *ipso facto* better than anything Negroid. American racial practices and prejudices have done a good job in selling Caucasian characteristics such as skin color, hair texture, and facial features. And this selling job has been done on all segments of the American population. Too many people of both racial groups, oft-times subconsciously, have been so conditioned as to conclude, without reason, that beauty, brains and character are racial rather than individual traits. Racial pride, which must never be permitted to extend into racial chauvinism, must be inculcated into the American negro group. As paradoxical as it may seem to be, if white Americans will accept the American Negro on the basis of his individual merit such action probably will deter rather than encourage racial admixture.

Many opponents of public school desegregation are understandably concerned about the preservation of school standards in desegregated schools.

Some of the most vocal and vigorous champions of racial segregation use this as one of the chief reasons why they are opposed to including Negro and white children in the same public school classes. Let me admit that so-called "standardized tests," when administered to include large school populations in those cities and schools where racial segregation is practiced, inevitably show that on the average the achievements of the negro students are below the average achievements of white students on the same grade levels. Without getting into the question of the validity of the tests themselves and of what they actually test, I would agree that the results of these tests give us all cause for real concern. A review of the total school picture throws a great deal of light on the situation. The history of the separate school system reveals the tragic way in which the negro children in the separate system have been shortchanged for years and for decades, and the shortchanging has been inbred. Teachers who have themselves been the victims of limited opportunities, inadequate supervision, and substandard plants and programs, have been recruited to work in a system which by the very nature of its existence reproduces all of the inequalities. If by any miracle the average negro student of the segregated public school system should in test results and achievements equal the average scores obtained by other students, we would have to acclaim the American Negro as belonging to a superior race.

One other point should be kept in mind when one reviews the results of these testing programs, and that is that in spite of the aforementioned inequalities there is also a considerable amount of overlapping in achievement scores. In looking at this problem I believe it would be relevant to consider the willingness to accept the type of homogenous grouping which has characterized the school desegregation program of Washington, D. C. I believe that the negro community would wholeheartedly support this practice as being educationally sound and racially fair.

There are certain special responsibilities with which the negro community must be greatly concerned. One of these is to see that the channels of communication between the two racial groups are kept open on a sound and viable basis. This means that the responsible leaders of the group must be people who are ever ready to sit across the table from other community leaders for the purpose of exploring ways and means by which the local community may take its next step in the direction of compliance with the law. It goes without saying that these leaders of both groups will have to recognize differences of opinions among themselves with respect to the problems which desegregation of the local school system may present. The calm, intelligent approach necessary for the constructive consideration of these problems can only be made by calm, intelligent conferrees characterized by basic honesty and imbued by respect for law and order. It is particularly incumbent upon the negro personnel that they approach their task without bitterness and without impatience. Their very conduct in the period of negotiation will be reflected in the decisions which are ultimately reached. Negroes and others must understand that in these conferences, organized to find the best solution of a major and critical problem, positions of moderation and of tolerance are not to be looked upon as signs of weakness.

The negro community must in all of its actions and pronouncements proceed within the law. A substantial body of reasoned court opinions and verdicts and the unquestioned attitude of the majority of the people of the United States buttress his expectation that discrimination on account of race will soon become *passé* in American life. To him violence or force, or the threat of violence or force, or even reprisal, when such are used against him, must never be considered as effective instruments by the use of which he may achieve his desired ends. He must recognize the fact that law and the respect for law are among his most substantial allies.

When the factors resident in any given situation are properly assayed there is no reason why there should not be considerable flexibility in the programs which can be undertaken by different communities as they proceed with school desegregation. It is the duty of the negro group to be helpful in reaching agreement on such programs as will be likely to lead to desegregation with the least attendant friction, and that have promise of eventual community acceptance. In this connection I have already mentioned the use of homogeneous or ability grouping. I would not hesitate to recommend the establishment of high schools by sexes, if in the opinion of planning group such schools would tend to allay fears and to promote community tranquility. Some urban communities like Louisville, Kentucky, have approved pupil transfer plans which within certain limits make it possible for parents to send their children to particular schools. Provided no child is denied admission to a school on account of his race, transfer plans should be acceptable.

When the Supreme Court's May 5, 1955, opinion directed that public school desegregation should take place "with all deliberate speed" it recognized the existence of many factors which would tend to make it impossible to desegregate the entire public school system at one fell swoop. Now not only does the negro community have to accept this decision, but, in my judgment, it would be wise for it so to do. The assumption is always there, in fact it is more than an assumption — it is a directive, that school desegregation will begin. The speed of the movement will be influenced by a number of pertinent and important factors. It may be politic in a given community to proceed more slowly than in another. As long as this is the right decision there should certainly be no quarrel with it. Permanence of change is much more to be desired than is the speed with which change is attempted. Changes which have resulted in improved race relations have taken place in many areas of American life during the last two decades. There is a growing extension of suffrage and of office holding enjoyed by the Negro; integration of all Americans in virtually all American national athletic contests has been accepted; the curtain separating men of color from other citizens in the dining cars in American rail travel have disappeared; sleeping and seating spaces are for the most part now available to any passenger who desires to pay for such accommodations on rail or air lines. Most of these changes have come slowly, but they are now accomplished and I believe, as do you, that they are here to stay.

In a number of southern states in which school desegregation is vociferously opposed, the state legislatures have passed laws calling for the closing

of any public school which is under a court order to desegregate. In some of these states this new legislation permits the governor of the state to exercise discriminatory power, in others the laws make the closing mandatory. In discussions which have taken place, and in public speeches made by some government officials, the idea has been expressed that it is more desirable to abandon the entire public school system than it is to desegregate it. Various proposals have been put forward with the claim that if the plans which have been formulated are carried out an educational program for the children of the state can still be effectively operated. These plans for the most part call for tuition grants to be made to those children who will be enrolled in private schools operated on a segregated basis. There are, of course, many serious questions which such plans raise in the minds of intelligent people. The first of these is naturally the question as to whether or not enough private schools will actually be available in which all of the children who should be educated can be enrolled. It goes without saying that these private schools are not now in existence either in numbers, in location, or in quality, sufficient to meet the burden which the abandonment of the public school system would place upon them. In no instance has a legislature proposed to offer individual tuition grants in the size and amounts which would permit a family to send a child to a private school without the necessity for the family to contribute a substantial sum with which to defray the cost of the education which the private school would furnish; provided always that the school itself would be worthy of the name and would be able to meet accreditation standards. There is also the legal question involved as to whether or not the courts would permit public money to be used in tuition grants to children who would be restricted to attendance in segregated schools, such a plan being *prima facie* a subterfuge under which the state would try to avoid compliance with Supreme Court decisions. Even if the legal questions involved were satisfactorily settled, anyone familiar with school enrollment statistics would see that many months, and perhaps years, would pass before families could afford to send all of their children to school, and possibly before the time when actual seat space would be available for every child. Many people believe that the abolition of the public school system would mean that only a limited number of children, and these mostly from the wealthy families, would have any prospect of receiving an adequate education. They also believe that any state which closes all of its public schools would by such action drive away from the state many substantial citizens who would not desire to continue to reside in an area in which no adequate provisions were made for the education of all the children. The closing of all public schools would prove to be a great disadvantage to the average white family, and to the vast majority of all of the negro families.

If it is proper to assume that the social and economic well-being of a nation like the United States of America depend to a large extent on the intelligence and ability of its citizens, it will readily be seen that the restriction imposed on a population by a severe limitation of educational opportunities would be calamitous. The negro group must think in terms of working hand in hand with all those people who feel that it is imperative to preserve the public school system. This they must do without relinquishing the right which

recent interpretations of the United States Constitution have given them to the end that their children will have available those educational opportunities which are open to the other children in the community, and which are denied them by the segregated public school system. The preservation of the public school system under law may place upon the negro community the necessity for compromises of a temporary nature. Such compromises should be explored and agreed upon, provided they are made in the direction of full compliance with the law and are accepted as being expedient for a transitional period. The patience of Job, the wisdom of Solomon, and the integrity of the law of gravity will have to prevail if meaningful rather than specious compromises are to be worked out.

A discussion of this kind would not be realistic if it completely ignored the charges made by men like the editor of a certain southern newspaper and a Senator from the same region, that the negro population had too high an incidence of communicable diseases, of anti-social conduct and of our prison population for its children to be included along with other children in unsegregated classrooms. Without stopping to enumerate the reasons why these statistics are what they are, whatever they may be, I would aver that whatever they are, and without debating the underlying causes, they are too high. The situation imposes upon the Negro the obligation to work vigorously and continuously at the task of upgrading the group from within. More job opportunities open on a non-racial basis, affording greater economic income and resources, will assuredly be very beneficial, but this is not the only effective answer to the problem of improving the status of the American Negro. Whether it should be true or not every Negro is a sort of Exhibit A; and in the climate of race relations which now exists in some sections of this nation, the bad exhibits are always held up to be the prototype; the good exhibits which would not support the conclusions of the segregationists are easily ignored. This attitude underscores the fact that there must be developed such an overwhelming number of good, reliable, intelligent negro individuals that it would be absurd to decry the race on this account. If there be those who would complain that to be able to achieve this would impose higher standards on one racial group than on another, I would reply that there is no good reason why any individual or racial group should not attempt to reach the highest pinnacles of intellectual and social stature. Jackie Robinson would never have broken the color line in organized baseball if he had not been better than the average performers who were engaged in this great American sport. The negro family, the church, the school, the community, must see to it that there are Jackie Robinsons, Marian Andersons and Ralph Bunches without end; they must also be very vigilant lest the flowering of such individuals in great numbers should lead to the acceptance of the racial superiority myth.

In the period through which we are now passing the Negro must be prepared to accept both success and failure with equanimity. It is to be hoped that success will not lead to hilarious and unrestrained expressions, nor should setbacks, circumventions, and retaliations be accepted as reasons for despair and gloom. The Negro must see that finally the storm is passing over,

the clouds are breaking, and the sunlight of freedom is beginning to shine down upon him everywhere. In such an hour he must rise above all that is low, mean, or ungenerous, he must exhibit a true nobleness of soul, he must indeed be magnanimous. He must never forget that all of the struggle through which he is passing is but a part of the great effort of every individual to be completely accepted as a man. Though progress towards this goal may sometimes appear to be slow indeed, the goal is now in sight.