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Coddling the Segregationists

President Nixon, whose Administration has often charged that the courts are coddling criminals, now has labeled as villains those who want to enforce and administer the school desegregation law. He has read the riot act, not to those school districts which stand accused of continuing segregation but rather to public servants in his own official family who want to assure compliance with the law.

The President has threatened to transfer or even fire any official in the Justice Department or the Department of Health, Education and Welfare who seeks to impose busing of children beyond the minimum required by law. This introduces the remarkable theory of minimal law enforcement. Its effect is more likely to be a shift to complete nonenforcement since few officials will risk their careers by testing how little busing is too much. Inaction will be the better part of valor.

The central message will surely not be lost. Never, in any of his dealings with the issue of school desegregation, has Mr. Nixon addressed to those charged with failure to observe the anti-segregation laws a warning remotely comparable in force to the one he has now issued to Federal officials bent on fulfilling their obligation to enforce these laws.

Where does this Presidential action leave Secretary Richardson? In the White House, Mr. Richardson's authority was clearly overshadowed by Gov. George C. Wallace who called on Mr. Nixon to seek a court ruling holding busing for desegregation purposes to be unconstitutional, in total disregard of the Supreme Court's unmistakable ruling to the contrary last April.

Mr. Richardson has up to now rejected the subservient political role which so fatally undermined the effectiveness of his predecessor, Robert Finch. That stand has made him highly successful in building bridges of understanding and confidence between his department and the nation's education leadership. Secretary Richardson's credibility as well as his authority will be shaken unless he can demonstrate to his staff and to the country that he, not Governor Wallace, is the President's chief educational adviser.