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The President as a Scofflaw



Little Rock, 1957

By JONATHAN YARDLEY

GREENSBORO, N. C. — President Nixon's statement on the Austin, Tex., school case has come as a severe blow to the South. That may seem surprising, but only if one is unaware—as Mr. Nixon certainly seems to be—of the remarkable steps this region has taken in recent weeks to prepare itself for the inevitability of thorough, even traumatic racial change.

Until the Supreme Court declared in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg case that busing was an entirely legitimate tool for abolishing the dual school system, the white South genuinely expected that under the Nixon Administration and Burger Court the "extreme" measure of busing could be avoided. Yet, once that decision was reached and lower courts began implementing it in local cases, the South responded with admirable equanimity and common sense. Since May the order of the day

generally has been: we are going to obey the law, we are going to obey it fully, and we are going to obey it in good spirit.

Greensboro is a case in point. A suit comparable to that in Charlotte was long ago instituted by a group of black parents, and when the Charlotte decision was reached the suit moved swiftly to its predictable conclusion. But only the conclusion was predictable. Instead of community-wide resistance and school-board recalcitrance—responses Mr. Nixon and his aides evidently regard as characteristic of the South—the city acted positively to meet its responsibilities. The school board offered the court a detailed plan involving pairing of elementary schools and zoning of junior and senior highs; the plaintiffs offered a somewhat more extensive plan; and within days the two had amicably reached an agreement that the court could accept with-

out difficulty as a consent order.

From that point the city was mobilized. Though more than a few white parents fled to the local day school or one of the unaccredited "Christian" academies, by and large the city made clear it would stick with the public schools. Parents, including those from the most affluent white areas, organized trips to the schools where their children were assigned. Most importantly, an organization called Concerned Citizens for Schools was formed (it had been quietly in the works well before the Supreme Court decision) to focus community sentiment on public education—and on public education in a radically changed situation.

The success of the organization has been extraordinary. Though no one would dare predict how Greensboro will react when cold reality hits on August 26, it has probably done as much as possible to insure a tranquil

AUG 20 1971

and productive period of adjustment. Down to the finest details—cheerleaders, student government, Hi-Y clubs, football practice—arrangements have been made to make a sticky situation, if not wholly comfortable, far less sticky. In other cities—Durham, Norfolk, Raleigh—much the same has been done.

And along comes Mr. Nixon. In words clearly designed for the most cynical political purposes—especially, one supposes, for the votes of the key 1972 state of Texas—he tells us in effect to ignore or circumvent the law. How else is one to read his declaration that busing orders will be enforced only to the “minimum”? His bizarre attack on “busing for busing’s sake”? His incredible demand that no emergency Federal school-assistance funds be spent for the transportation of students?

To be sure, the President has touched a responsive chord. Many people in the South are deeply troubled over busing, and not for a moment are all of them racists—nor, for that matter, for a moment are all of them white. Our children are suddenly going to be taking long bus rides, instead of going to school by foot or car pool, and that alone is enough to make all of us hesitate.

But it is not to such painful parental concerns that Mr. Nixon addresses himself. Rather, he raises the false hope that what has been done by the courts can somehow be undone elsewhere—not, of course, specifying where—and thus he bolsters those who would encourage our communities to resist. He also, by implication, encourages the South in a disrespect for the law that has steadily waned in recent years. The South has come, however slowly, to understand that the law must not be tampered with for political expediency, and it has committed itself to obeying it dutifully. For the President of the United States to imply that it can be evaded is unconscionable, and a disservice to every Southerner who is working earnestly for racial peace.

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