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Eye of the Storm

By TOM WICKER

Mercifully, some of the sound and fury seem to have gone out of the busing issue, at least temporarily. The Nixon Administration has sent the Justice Department into Federal court to intervene against consolidation of urban and suburban school districts in Richmond, Va., but Federal judges around the country have not yet generally backed away from busing orders. And despite President Nixon's dramatic presentation on national television, his proposed pair of antibusing bills are bogged down in Congress.

Part of the trouble with the legislation is that Southern members of Congress apparently want the President to come right out with a plan to roll back openly and immediately the desegregation already achieved by busing in the South—which even he would hardly be likely to do. His own proposal would provide only for the reopening of cases that already have resulted in court-ordered busing; but if busing actually were to be prohibited in the rest of the country, it seems clear that political and legal pressures would soon put an end to it in the South as well. Nevertheless, the Southerners seem to want more immediate relief before they cooperate in letting the rest of the country off the busing hook.

Another reason for the difficulties the Nixon legislation has encountered is that its spurious promise to spin "quality education" out of \$2.5 billion already in the educational pipeline, which the President would divert into separate but equal neighborhood schools, has received no support whatever from teachers and education specialists. For at least two good reasons, no one of any stature has come forward to back the Nixon contention that compensatory education programs can actually provide quality education.

One is that most studies of such programs have shown no such result, been inconclusive, or suggested that marginally better results can be gained by integrated education. The other is that where a shred of evidence has been found to suggest that compensatory education can be effective, it has been as a result of expenditures per pupil far in excess of anything proposed or contemplated by the Nixon Administration.

Other sophistries and deceptions in the Nixon position also are beginning to surface. The President sought to give the impression that blacks as well as whites were overwhelmingly opposed to busing; now even the National Black Political Convention, which had at first appeared to support that idea, has modified its stand to

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one of approval of busing as an optional tool to achieve quality education and protect Fourteenth Amendment rights.

And although Mr. Nixon made much of the supposed cost of busing programs, a Civil Rights Commission report has just shown that less than 1 per cent of total increased busing costs in the 1970-71 school year was the result of segregation plans. The same report confirmed that there is less busing now in the desegregated school system of George Wallace's Alabama than there used to be when the system was segregated.

It may be, however, that the main reason the antibusing frenzy seems to have momentarily abated, leaving Mr. Nixon's opportunistic programs in some trouble, is the absence of the issue from recent campaign rhetoric and hints from political headlines. This is not to deny that there is strong and widespread public opposition to busing for purposes of integration; but it seems altogether likely that that opposition has been inflamed, not calmed, by expedient political "leadership."

It was no accident that Governor Wallace chose Florida for his 1972 political debut; he knew that state was ripe for his expert blend of scare-talk and defiance about busing. It was no accident, either, that Mr. Nixon moved immediately after the Wallace triumph in Florida, which had both benefited from and helped stimulate a huge referendum vote against busing. During that same period, only Mayor Lindsay and George McGovern, among the Democratic Presidential candidates, stood foursquare against the antibusing hysteria. Members of Congress jostled each other to get off the bus and on the handwagon. Political "leadership" was, in fact, capitalizing on and blowing up the issue, rather than trying to calm fears, talk sense and appeal to reason and the generous instincts of the people.

But in the recent Illinois and Wisconsin primaries, busing was not a local issue; Governor Wallace had to find something else to talk about, an easy trick for him; and Mr. Nixon has recently been preoccupied with Vietnam. As busing fell out of the artificial headlines all the political rhetoric had created, the public temperature on the issue obviously declined. Unfortunately, when the Presidential candidates arrive in a state like Michigan, where busing is a local concern, they will no doubt heat up the controversy all over again. If so, watch Mr. Nixon descend to the occasion.