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Retreat From Integration

The United States Commission on Civil Rights has bluntly stated what had become increasingly evident—that the Nixon Administration is permitting “a major retreat in the struggle to achieve meaningful school desegregation.”

The commission's statement was deliberately delayed until the facts and implications of the Administration's approach to the enforcement of desegregation could be carefully reviewed. The pattern which emerges from that analysis is one of a deliberate softening of attitudes, often hidden behind a screen of optimistic predictions and deceptive claims. It is a pattern that, in the commission's view, encourages those who, since the 1954 Supreme Court ruling, have developed high skills at evasion.

The six-man commission headed by the Rev. Theodore M. Hesburgh, president of the University of Notre Dame, was unanimous in sketching a critical picture of contradictions between the Administration's stated goals and its actions. It points out that the Administration has accepted integration delays in South Carolina and Alabama and has taken the unprecedented step of requesting the delay of the Government's own desegregation plans in Mississippi.

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The indictment does not end with these specific actions. The commission properly points out that the Administration's shift from the administrative enforcement of guidelines set down by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare to reliance on court orders is a segregationist victory. Federal judges who, in the South, are frequently unsympathetic to desegregation pose less of a threat than termination of Federal funds by administrative ruling.

Perhaps the most serious threat to the future of desegregation is contained in an amendment introduced by Representative J. L. Whitten, Democrat of Mississippi, which would make freedom-of-choice plans acceptable substitutes for effective desegregation. Although the Whitten amendment was passed by the House almost two months ago, the first Administration opposition to this blatant effort at sabotage was voiced only last week by H.E.W. Secretary Robert Finch. Freedom of choice in white-supremacy regions offers no choice at all: intimidation and economic blackmail aimed at Negro parents who try to avail themselves of their “freedom” make the plan meaningless.

Despite his lame attempt to defend Administration policies before the Institute of Black Elected Officials yesterday, there is persuasive evidence that Mr. Finch and officials in his department's civil rights office are honestly dedicated to racial equality. But they lack the backing of the President, who, in his efforts to please Southern conservatives, has refrained from speaking out on this crucial issue.

The commission, in calling for “a great positive statement,” warns poignantly that “time is running out on us as a nation.” It is the President's responsibility to heed this warning and assert his leadership unequivocally for integration in the schools.

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