

Plain Talk from a Southerner about Integration

How can anyone who believes in Christianity and in any aspect of the brotherhood of man at the same time believe in forcefully segregating the schools and churches?

BY WYATT BLASSINGAME

■ IN ITS PROGRAM of "massive resistance" to integration, the South has managed to give an impression of almost absolute unanimity. Yet there does exist a significant minority of white Southerners who believes that segregation is both morally and economically wrong, and who would like to see it abolished. This minority is rarely heard from, since it is not pleasant to make yourself thoroughly disliked and sometimes actually hated by neighbors with whom, on all other issues, you are on friendly terms.

And yet, I think, those of us who believe segregation to be not only wrong but evil have a moral obligation to speak up. Therefore, I would like to set down some of the points which, as a born Southerner who finds himself at odds with his own people, I have found deeply troubling.

In this article I am not referring to those people who bomb churches

and synagogues. We have freaks and madmen in the South, but we have no monopoly on them. The real fanatic is as rare in the South as in the North or West. What I am trying to get at are some of the basic psychological problems besetting many a normal white Southerner.

I have reluctantly come to the conclusion that most white Southerners simply do not apply to the racial problem the same moral code of ethics by which they conduct the rest of their lives. It is almost as if the attitude toward the Negro was not governed by reason at all but by inherited opinion. Moreover this attitude is completely sincere, even when weirdly ambivalent.

For example: ever since the Supreme Court's decision on schools, Southern politicians have made a great point of crying, "Never!" They have cried so loudly they have convinced many who at first believed obedience to the Court's decision was inevitable though unpleasant. And yet these same politicians—and on this point at least they speak for the people—continually lament that the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People does not show sufficient "patience."

This is transparently an effort to eat the cake and have it, too. For if we are *never* going to tolerate integration, what in the name of God does the NAACP have to gain by patience? Where can it get them?

Yet I have had dozens of people tell me in earnest sincerity that on this issue the South should, out of simple fairness, be given a breathing spell in which to prepare itself. And in the same minute, they admit that

any such breathing spell would be used to prepare more barriers.

To me it is impossible to understand how anyone who believes in Christianity, in any aspect of the brotherhood of man, can at the same time believe in forcefully segregated schools and churches. For even among the most ardent Southerners there are few who claim the current system gives the Negro a fair break. But there are a great many (and again this is something I know through personal experience) who sincerely believe this system is the will of God: the Negro, they say, was set apart by God, segregated by God, and consequently it is God's wish he be kept that way.

THE OUTSIDER may laugh at this, or grow angry. It remains true. And the opinion is honestly held.

The white Southerner will often say that the Negro does not actually want integration, that the whole trouble has been spawned by the NAACP. Often this claim is made by a person who has just said to his yardboy or cook, "You don't want to send your kids to a mixed school, *do you?*" and got the answer he demanded. Or it may be based on the fact that there are many Negroes who do not want to send their children to integrated schools, particularly where doing so entails either physical danger or social ostracism by classmates. There is also the cold truth that integration of the schools will present a serious threat to the jobs of Negro teachers in the South, of whom there are approximately 6,000 in each state. Nobody could

be happy about destroying a job he has worked as hard to get as most Negro teachers have for theirs.

Even so, it is among educated Negroes that the demand for integration of schools is most widespread.

Now no individual, and certainly no white man, can speak with final authority on what "the" Negro wants or believes. But, based on simple human nature, it is my belief that here the desire is not so much for an accomplished fact as for a *right*; that the Negro wants the *right* to send his children to any public school he thinks best, the *right* to use any public park or golf course where as a citizen he is part owner.

Here, it seems to me, we are getting to the heart of the matter. Certainly this is something the Negro *must* want, if he is to take his place as a responsible citizen. It is quite possible that once that right was established, the actual exercise of it, in some cases, might not be of major importance. But the establishment of the right itself is imperative.

No section of the country is going to prosper, morally or economically, if a large percentage of its citizens is so depressed (either by outside force or lack of initiative) that it does not even desire full rights of citizenship. Yet it is illustrative of the almost schizophrenic split in Southern thinking that those very men who violently deny the Negro this basic right would be willing to fight and if necessary die to maintain that right for themselves.

AS NEGRO education improves, the demand for these rights will increase. Many a white Southerner will admit this intellectually—while

in the same breath saying sincerely he does not think the Negro actually wants integrated schools.

In a recent issue of *Life Magazine*, Virginius Dabney wrote that "No argument against integrated schools carries greater weight with white Virginians and other white Southerners than the prospect that education of the races together in the elementary and secondary schools will lead to ultimate interracial amalgamation and make ours a race of mulattoes." Mr. Dabney is implying that most Southerners believe only segregated schools prevent us from becoming "a nation of mulattoes." This is simply another form of the classic question I have been asked a hundred times, "Do you want your daughter to marry a Negro?"

About all I can do is ask in turn if the questioner believes his own daughter so anxious to marry a Negro she will rush off and do so if given the chance to meet one in the secondary or elementary schools. The answer invariably indicates that more than segregated schools prevents intermarriage.

Yet this question about "Do you want your daughter to marry a Negro?" does touch on a very real, a very tremendous Southern fear. It is not, however, the fear we will become a "nation of mulattoes." It is a fear that the ancient inbred ideal of Southern Womanhood (the capital letters are deliberate) will be violated.

W. J. Cash in *The Mind of the South* quotes figures to indicate that by 1860 approximately 80 per cent of the slaves had some mixture of white or Indian blood—and most of

this was white. As Cash points out, there were few Southern towns where the whisper, “The *image*, my dear, the living *image* of old Colonel Bascombe himself!” did not flourish. So certainly there was considerable mixing of the races during slavery.

Other authorities believe this “interracial amalgamation,” as Mr. Dabney calls it, reached its peak in the last two decades of the 19th century. Certainly as late as 30 years ago it was common for white college boys to tour the Negro quarters on Saturday night looking for sex.

Let me emphasize that in all these cases the relationship was between a white man and a Negro woman. Because it was not, and is not, “a nation of mulattoes” the white South fears. It is a violation of what Cash called “The Cult of Southern Womanhood.” Mr. Dabney knows this; every white Southerner knows it. We just find it hard to explain. It may have its roots in the early days of slavery when Negro men, only briefly removed from the jungle, might far outnumber the nearby whites.

WHATEVER the cause, no one who knows the South can deny that the fear of sexual relationship between the white woman and the Negro man is real and powerful.

And here, it seems to me, is where the NAACP makes its most serious blunder: in refusing to admit the actuality of such fear and consequently pushing its attempts to force integration in the wrong places.

The greatest progress toward integration of the schools has been in the colleges, particularly on the

graduate level. Here students meet on an intellectual plane; and at this point most of them are mature enough to accept one another on that plane. For several years after the war I taught in a small Southern college. Frequently I asked my classes to express their opinions on integration. Not once did I find a student who was vigorously opposed to it on the college level.

There were many students who favored segregation; and I know of course that taken on a wide enough scale there would be some who held violent opinions. But all over the South where the question has been put to students, there has been a general willingness to accept integration in college.

NOW AT THE other end of the educational program, in the kindergartens and first grades, there is also a minimum of opposition among the children themselves. Also, the integration of classes here has another tremendous advantage, for here the children are starting even. Most Negro schools in the South are admittedly inferior to most white schools. When a Negro child is taken from an upper grade and placed in that same grade in a white school he is severely handicapped. If a larger number are placed in the same grade the work of the entire grade may suffer.

For these reasons, it seems to me that the early moves toward integration should be aimed at the top and the bottom of the educational program. Not at the high schools. It is here, at the teen-age level, that the ancient fear of sexual relationship

between the Negro male and the white female is strongest, and with the most justification. It is natural for any parent to worry about his teen-age daughter—now add to that the dark inherent fear of race.

It is also natural for any teen-age girl to worry about, to be slightly afraid of, the potent and unknown sexual forces within herself, of which she is just becoming physically aware. Add to that the newspaper stories, the tales, half-heard and mystery-shrouded, about black rape and violence. Negro children selected for white schools may be models of decorum. The fear is still there.

Yet it is precisely in the junior and senior high schools the NAACP has chosen to make most of its attacks. I find this as hard to understand as I do some of the more extreme viewpoints on the other side. To the white Southerner, even to one like myself who approves of the NAACP's ultimate goal, it seems as though many of the Association's decisions are made more through pride or anger or blindness than through earnest desire to get the best for the children.

AND YET I do not take as dim a view of racial progress in the South as do many of my friends. Because the chief hope, it seems to me, is with the young people of both races. On the whole the white youngster is far more liberal on this matter than are his parents. The level of Negro education is rising, now that the South has been frightened into an actual attempt to make the schools more nearly equal. The Negro leaders of the future will be better

prepared than they are today. And so there is room to hope, even to believe, that the problem will eventually be solved, please God, without hatred and bloodshed. ■ ■

MEET THE AUTHOR

Wyatt Blassingame has as much right as anyone to be classified a true Southerner. He was born in Demopolis, Alabama, in 1909, attended high school in Montgomery, Ala., and graduated from the University of Alabama in 1930.

His parents' people lived in the South before the American Revolution; he had a grandfather who spent the Civil War in the Confederate Navy and his grandpa's brother was one of Bedford Forrest's hard-riding cavalrymen.

An officer in the Navy in World War II, Blassingame taught at Florida Southern College after the war. He has lived for the last 22 years on Anna Maria, a tiny island off the Florida gulf coast.

A prolific book and article writer, he won a Benjamin Franklin award for the best magazine story of 1956. His novel, *Live from the Devil* (Doubleday), will be published this spring. It deals with the Florida cattle country.

Wyatt is Southern to the teeth.

But he says, "I did marry a damyankee."

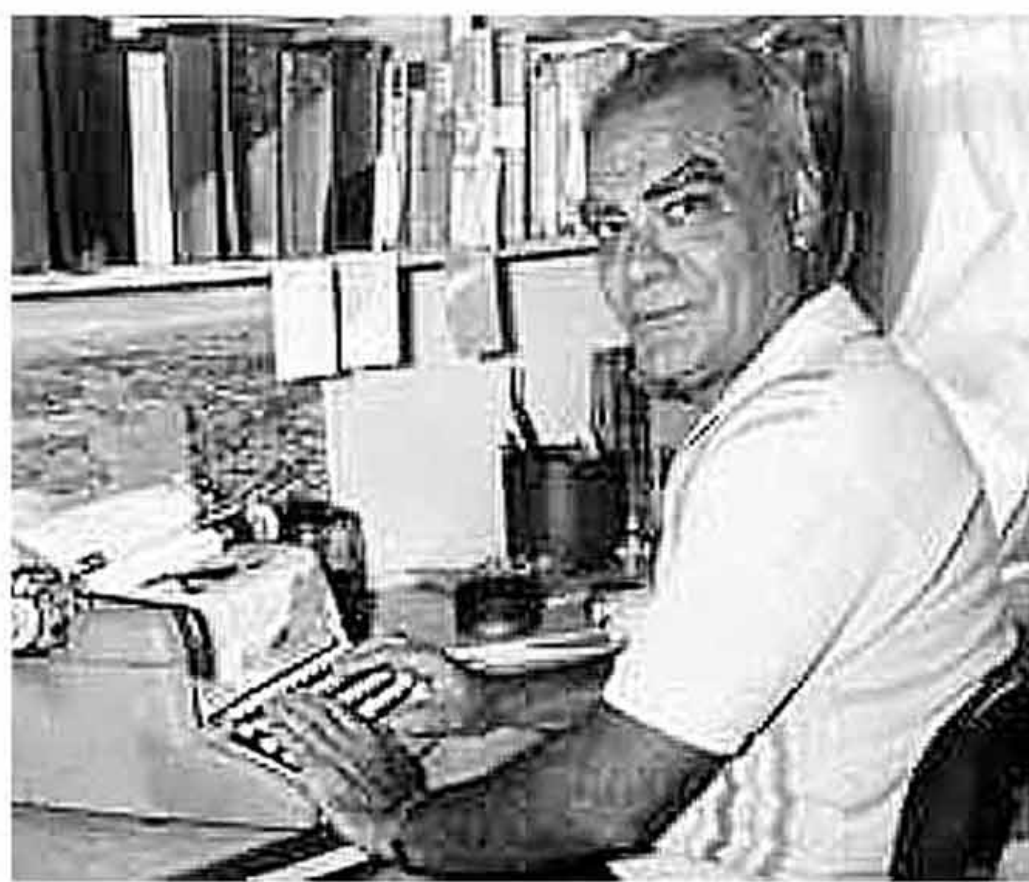


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