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DON'T

step to the rear of the bus

by David Selden

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SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY 1897

A Statement

by

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AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS, AFL-CIO

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DO THE BEST WE CAN

No one with any grasp of reality can believe for a minute that the Supreme Court or the national guard can force the immediate busing of the hundreds of thousands of children which would be required to overcome longstanding massive segregated housing patterns in New York, Detroit, Chicago, and other American supercities. But, likewise, no one can deny that we have the obligation—legal and moral—to do the best we can. The Supreme Court, in 1954, required school districts to proceed with "all deliberate speed." We cannot have instant integration, but we can hold steadfastly to the integration goal, and that means that we must not be panicked by Nixon, or NAG, or George Wallace.

There are signs that the panic may be subsiding. The kids, bless them, did not buy the elders' bias. They are being bused in Ponitac, Oklahoma City, Norfolk, and hundreds of other cities with little or no conflict. NAG's effort to recall Sen. Hart only generated 50,000 signatures despite its high-priced campaign. The Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the working arm of the labor-liberal civil-rights alliance, including the NAACP and the AFL-CIO, has taken a firm stand against any legislation prohibiting busing for integration. Even though the major candidates for President have been somewhat less than forthright on the busing issue, none of them—not even President Nixon for that matter—has made an all-out unequivocal statement opposing all busing for integration. Only George Wallace has campaigned heavily against busing and everybody expected that.

Now is the time for all **good** men and women to stand up for what is **right**—as they have done time and time again in the past two decades of civil-rights progress.

In a few short months, President Nixon has succeeded in undermining 25 years of efforts by the NAACP, the AFL-CIO, churches, and reform organizations to bring about racial justice and a more nearly integrated society. He has corrupted the social morals of many a liberal congressman and senator, and he has created doubt that even the decisions of the Supreme Court will be carried out.

Let us review how it all happened. The Supreme Court decided in 1954 that segregated education was bad education and that even if the former official doctrine of separate-but-equal facilities had been lived up to in practice, the education received by black children would still have been inferior to that received by white children.

COURAGE AND DIGNITY

We went through the battle of Little Rock. The issue then was whether black children would be allowed to walk to the same schools that white children walked to. We—humanity—won that battle. We went through all the other battles around the issue of school integration. We remember the hate-filled faces of the New Orleans mothers who did not want their children to attend an integrated school, and we remember the wonderful dignity and courage shown by black children in city after city. Yes, and we remember the courage shown by those whites who were willing to fight for integration in areas of this country where such actions were widely regarded as akin to sedition.

Then in 1968 we had a change in the national administration. Mr. Nixon became President and Mr. Mitchell, the victorious candidate's campaign manager, became Attorney General. Soon the shape of what came to be known as the Southern Strategy began to emerge. By tilting the law away from integration, it would be possible to win the favor of politicians who had long traded in the dirty coin of segregation.

The civil-rights-compliance unit of the Dept. of Health, Education, and Welfare was slowed down and muffled. A representative of Mitchell's Justice Department appeared before the Supreme Court to argue against the NAACP lawyers in the Charlotte-Mecklenburg case, in which the issue was how much integration would be deemed good enough to satisfy constitutional requirements. In that instance, the administration argued that all that was required was a reasonable effort, but the court found otherwise and directed the school district to reassign pupils in such a way as to maintain approximately the same racial balance in every school as that for the school district as a whole. It went further. It said that such pupil reassignments must be made even if some of the pupils would have to be bused to their schools.

The decision was unanimous. Seemingly, an important question had been decided once and for all—but President Nixon had, the year before, declared

himself opposed to school busing for purposes of integration. When reporters asked the President if he had changed his mind in the light of the court's decision, he replied that he had not, and that he still was opposed to school busing.

A month later, 10 school buses were blown up by segregationist parents in Pontiac, Mich. I happen to have grown up in Pontiac. The area has long been an incubator for rightwing movements, even though most people in Pontiac are as good and decent as people everywhere. It was a center for the Black Legion during the '30s. The rightwingers in Pontiac hardly needed a signal from the President of the U.S. for them to spring into action. They formed NAG—the "National Action Group"—to oppose "forced busing."

The hate campaign, stimulated by the opening of the school year in September, began to escalate. A recall petition was circulated against Sen. Phil Hart, who had stood steadfastly for integration, through increased busing, if necessary.

Anti-busing amendments were tacked on to President Nixon's $1.5-billion so-called school-desegregation bill to make sure that none of the money would go for transportation of pupils. Education Commissioner Marland, to his shame, came out in opposition to using federal funds for busing. Sen. Robert Griffin and Republican House Majority Leader Gerald Ford announced their intention of trying to prohibit pupil busing by constitutional amendment. Political panic began to set in. Some liberal congressmen and senators even found it expedient to backtrack on their pro-integration records. Just to make sure that the issue wasn't allowed to cool off, President Nixon in his State of the Union message in January inserted an impassioned plea for "local control" of education, which everyone understood to mean "no busing."

The busing issue, of course, is only a minor facet of the nation's overall integration problem. The Serrano and other cases outlawing local school-property taxes on the grounds that they deny children the equal protection of the laws and recent cases extending the Supreme Court integration dictum across school-district lines where the districts have been created to promote segregation, point up the fact that it will take more than the national guard, so successful in Little Rock, to give black children the right to ride to integrated schools as well as to walk. Nixon to the contrary notwithstanding, it is my personal conviction that we cannot provide either equality of education or quality of education without shifting over to statewide school systems.

Statewide systems would have the taxing power and planning authority to solve our educational and racial problems in a fair and reasonable way. In the Charlotte-Mecklenburg case, the court said that the school district was required to use all means at its command, including busing, to achieve racial balance. If education were a statewide function, we would have every right to expect the court to issue a similar directive, which would then compel maximum statewide efforts to integrate.

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