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MEMORANDUM

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Student Protest Movement in the South

X OF 142-A

Background

On February 1, 1960, four freshmen from North Carolina A & T College sat down at the lunch counter of a Woolworth store in Greensboro, North Carolina, and requested service. They remained for more than an hour, when the store closed: they had not been served.

What happened in Greensboro had occurred in recent years elsewhere in the South. The Greensboro incident grows in importance, however, because of the accumulating evidence that Negroes throughout the South saw in its example a means for release from discrimination and slights. These demonstrations have spread with such rapidity as to make crystal clear that the South is in a time of change, the terms of which cannot be dictated by one race. The deeper meaning of these demonstrations seems to show that segregation cannot be maintained in the South short of continuous coercion and the intolerable social order which would result.

The present wave of protest has had certain characteristic features which are likely to continue. For example, the movement has been spontaneous and contagious; it has been carried out by students; it has concentrated for the present on one sort of service -- lunch counters of stores which sell other commodities to Negroes: it has tendered to concentrate on branch stores of large chains: it has been generally nonviolent.

These "sit ins" mark a new trend in the Negro attack on segregation, adding to legal suits economic pressure and direct action.

The present wave of Negro protest may or may not peter out; it may or may not call for larger gain than a cup of coffee; it may or may not develop methods other than the present sit-in. Whatever turn events take, what has happened so far is a definite warning that the South must build into its societies social, economic and political practices which meet the needs and aspirations of the new order of Negroes.

Observations

It should be recognized that these Negro students have chosen a goal which no one can legitimately grudge and have pursued it by means which were selected after mature decision.

Negro adult leadership has widely and firmly supported the movement but has not directed it. Negro leadership feels that instead of expressing disapproval it has an obligation to support any peaceful movement which seeks to remove from the customs of the Southland any unfair practices based upon race or color.

It is also interesting to note that the Durham, North Carolina, Committee on Negro Affairs conducted a survey of the 5- and 10¢ stores located in Durham. The survey indicated that between 50- and 60% of persons entering the 10¢ stores were colored people. Obviously, therefore, the students' protest is against a system which accepts the business of Negro patrons while depriving them of the opportunity of the use of dining facilities.

Toward a Solution

Many responsible citizens are dismayed by events of the past week. This includes not only persons who are dedicated enemies of Negro equality but also those who are friendly to the Negro cause and who have doubts as to the practical wisdom of the student protest. The fact that these protests may lead toward violence gives pause to all.

There is sufficient evidence to conclude that one irritant which has motivated the students is resentment over the pace of school desegregation. There is also much evidence to indicate that white Southerners have almost always underestimated the extent of Negro dissatisfaction. Consequently, they tend to be shocked when Negroes demand something which Whites have hardly bothered to notice they didn't have. In many instances White leadership in the South has hardly yet begun to conceive the dimensions involved in these times or to acknowledge that citizens must learn to live with these changes.

It would seem reasonable to state that the few stores against which the protests have been directed should not have to alone bear the burden of decision. This would appear to be a job for the entire community of each city, guided and supported by elected officials and civic leaders.

The alternatives in the present situation are few and plain. One is to maintain segregation; this will invite a test of strength and will invariably lead to violence.

The second alternative is to eliminate the lunch counters completely. The third alternative is that of equal treatment. This is a decision that the business and civic leaders of the community must make and determine.

It is interesting to note that Oklahoma City was faced with a similar condition in 1958 and the Greater Oklahoma City Council of Churches took over and pulled the city out of its confusion, and in doing so has acquired the trust of both races. This solution might well be recommended to the beleaguered cities in the South.

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