

Module 10: How Will Historians Treat Richard Nixon?

Evidence 6: Race: Statement About Desegregation of Schools, March 24, 1970

A

Question to Consider

- How does the evidence below refute or support the views of the three historians outlined in the Conclusion of this module?

Document

MY PURPOSE in this statement is to set forth in detail this administration's policies on the subject of desegregation of America's elementary and secondary schools. Few public issues are so emotionally charged as that of school desegregation, few so wrapped in confusion and clouded with misunderstanding. None is more important to our national unity and progress. This issue is not partisan. It is not sectional. It is an American issue, of direct and immediate concern to every citizen. I hope that this statement will reduce the prevailing confusion and will help place public discussion of the issue on a more rational and realistic level in all parts of the Nation. It is time to strip away the hypocrisy, the prejudice, and the ignorance that too long have characterized discussion of this issue...

A FREE AND OPEN SOCIETY

The goal of this administration is a free and open society. In saying this, I use the words "free" and "open" quite precisely. Freedom has two essential elements: the right to choose, and the ability to choose. The right to move out of a mid city slum, for example, means little without the means of doing so. The right to apply for a good job means little without access to the skills that make it attainable. By the same token, those skills are of little use if arbitrary policies exclude the person who has them because of race or other distinction. Similarly, an "open" society is one of open choices--and one in which the individual has the mobility to take advantage of those choices.

In speaking of "desegregation" or "integration," we often lose sight of what these mean within the context of a free, open, pluralistic society. We cannot be free, and at the same time be required to fit our lives into

prescribed places on a racial grid--whether segregated or integrated, and whether by some mathematical formula or by automatic assignment. Neither can we be free, and at the same time be denied because of race--the right to associate with our fellow citizens on a basis of human equality. An open society does not have to be homogeneous, or even fully integrated. There is room within it for many communities. Especially in a nation like America, it is natural that people with a common heritage retain special ties; it is natural and right that we have Italian or Irish or Negro or Norwegian neighborhoods; it is natural and right that members of those communities feel a sense of group identity and group pride. In terms of an open society, what matters is mobility: the right and the ability of each person to decide for himself where and how he wants to live, whether as part of the ethnic enclave or as part of the larger society---or, as many do, share the life of both.

We are richer for our cultural diversity; mobility is what allows us to enjoy it. Economic, educational, social mobility --all these, too, are essential elements of the open society. When we speak of equal opportunity we mean just that: that each person should have an equal chance at the starting line, and an equal chance to go just as high and as far as his talents and energies will take him. This administration's programs for helping the poor, for equal opportunity, for expanded opportunity, all have taken a significantly changed direction from those of previous years--and those principles of a free and open society are the keys to the new direction. Instead of making a man's decisions for him, we aim to give him both the right and and ability to choose for himself--and the mobility to move upward. Instead of creating a permanent welfare class catered to by a permanent welfare bureaucracy, for example, my welfare reform proposal provides job training and a job requirement for all those able to work---and also a regular family assistance payment instead of the demeaning welfare handout.

As we strive to make our schools places of equal educational opportunity, we should keep our eye fixed on this goal: to achieve a set of conditions in which neither the laws nor the institutions supported by law any longer draw an invidious distinction based on race; and going one step further, we must seek to repair the human damage wrought by past segregation. We must give the minority child that equal place at the starting line that his parents were denied--and the pride, the dignity, the self-respect, that are

the birthright of a free American. We can do no less and still be true to our conscience and our Constitution. I believe that most Americans today, whether North or South, accept this as their duty. The issues involved in desegregating schools, reducing racial isolation, and providing equal educational opportunity are not simple. Many of the questions are profound, the factors complex, the legitimate considerations in conflict, and the answers elusive. Our continuing search, therefore, must be not for the perfect set of answers, but for the most nearly perfect and the most constructive.

Source:

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