

The Great American Cop-Out

William Van Til

For years the big yellow school bus has been a symbol of American progress. It has carried rural children to consolidated schools with facilities and programs comparable in quality to those of schools in more thickly settled areas. It has emancipated the suburban housewife from serving as an eternal chauffeur shuttling children between home and school. It has spared urban youngsters the unreliabilities of our faltering contemporary transportation systems and has brought them to schools offering wider curricular choices and better equipment than those available in limited neighborhood schools. The big yellow school bus blended well into a mobile America which increasingly lived on wheels. In 50 years, tax-supported transportation of students to and from schools grew from 256,000 students in 1920 to 20,000,000 students in 1970.

But the history of school busing included some dark pages. Today we prefer to forget that throughout the twenties, thirties, forties, and fifties the school buses carried black children and youth from the shanties and hovels in which they lived to the inadequate black schools to which they were assigned. On long daily pilgrimages the black children repeatedly passed white schools built in accordance with the policy of definitely separate and certainly unequal. Many black Americans today remember vividly getting up before dawn to ride to school and to return near sundown after a round trip of many miles past the "neighborhood schools" of the white communities, largely Southern, sometimes Northern.

Then came *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, 1954, a decision which has often been cited but too seldom read. By a unanimous 9-0 vote, the Supreme Court said,

In these days, it is doubtful that any child may reasonably be expected to succeed in life if he is denied the opportunity of an education. Such an opportunity, where the state has undertaken to provide it, is a right which must be made available to all on equal terms.

We come then to the question presented: Does segregation of children in public schools solely on the basis of race, even though the physical facilities and other "tangible" factors may be equal, deprive the children of the minority group of equal educational opportunities? We believe that it does.

Many white Southerners resisted the decision--and many were the white Northerners who looked down their noses at the racist attempts at political evasion by their Southern fellow citizens. But with remorseless steadiness, though agonizing slowness, the new order of things came to the South after initial racist agitation and isolated bombings in the middle 1950s, school desegregation in the South proceeded. Grudgingly, the South yielded to the ruling of the Supreme Court against *de jure* school segregation. In the 11 states of the Old Confederacy, the percentage of Negroes in schools with a white majority

increased from 18% to 39% in the 1968-70 period. Meanwhile, in the same period the percentage of Negroes in white majority schools in New York City declined from 19.7% to 16.3%; Detroit dropped from 9% to 5.8%; Philadelphia from 9.6 to 7.4; St. Louis from 7.1 to 2.5, etc.)³

So in the South black children increasingly rode the buses to desegregated schools which usually were nearer to their homes and usually were newer and better than the schools they had formerly attended. The black students had greater educational opportunities than they had before and the white students were scholastically unharmed by the presence of blacks in the same classrooms. There even seemed promise of integration, the achievement of that American dream of each man being respected as an individual and treated as a fellow human being.

But the North discovered that problems of desegregation and integration were not confined to the South. In the sixties the protest against "the opposite race" came first from white Northerners of working-class and lower-middle-class backgrounds and of relatively recent European ethnic ancestries. They were first to encounter desegregation because they were economically unable to flee to the suburbs. Yet nobody regarded as "important" paid much attention to them; such economic and ethnic group members were the forgotten men of the 1960s. Few condemned their racism more roundly than other Northerners who were higher in the social pecking order.

Then in the summer of 1971 the great American cop-out moved into high gear. Lower court decisions threatened to precipitate an invasion of the elite environs of the white upper-middle and upper classes. A minority among blacks joined the protesters in the name of black control of black communities.

So the rhetoric poured out about good education for children. Touching concern was demonstrated for the quality of the education at the end of the bus ride. Pieties emanated from political figures in high places. The "neighborhood school" was sanctified. More money was promised for the improvement of de facto segregated ghetto schools; that such schools were separate and unequal was not mentioned.

The bus was cast as the villain of the piece. Influential white Americans had learned that the ubiquitous yellow vehicle could even cross the invisible lines that separated cities and suburbs. Through legislation, political oratory, and proposed constitutional amendment, a campaign to betray the mid-twentieth century commitment to desegregation and integration was under way. The code word sanctioning separate and unequal and masking racism and discrimination was "antibusing."

Let us call a spade a spade rather than a horticultural instrument. The present antibusing campaign is an attempt to turn the clock back to separate and unequal. When antibusing is coupled with an endorsement of desegregation and integration, it is an injunction to make bricks without straw. The onslaught on busing is the great American cop-out.

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