

1954 Bell Tolls for Nation

By James McBride Dabbs

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THE SUPREME COURT'S anti-segregation decision of May 17, 1954, rang a bell. The Nation assumed that it was rung for the South. It was in fact rung for the Nation.

The South at first was disposed to respond, or at least not to resist. It has been remarked that the white South was dazed, like a man hit over the head, and that it took several months for the White Citizens Councils to come out fighting. This is not quite accurate. The South was also hit in the heart.

There was much newspaper opinion to the effect that "Well, this is it. We knew it would come sooner or later, and now there's nothing to do but accept it." And though there was little pleasure expressed publicly at the prospect, I am sure there was in the heart of many a white Southerner a feeling of release comparable to that felt when slavery was outlawed: "Well, thank God, that's done with."

At that moment, the South would have accepted, though perhaps grudgingly, a positive, progressive leadership. It should be remarked here that in its attitude toward its leaders, the South still exhibits a touch of aristocracy and feudalism. We elect the leader; but elected, he is, in a sense, God's man. The South Carolina churchwoman who said that her basically liberal group could not take a certain public stand because "our Governor has spoken otherwise" expressed this view.

Haunted by Gettysburg

IN 1954, "GOD'S MAN" in South Carolina, and to a considerable degree across the South, was Gov. James Byrnes, better known affectionately as "Jimmy." Byrnes had been a Supreme Court Justice, Secretary of State and, indeed, "Assistant President" under Roosevelt, and was at that time dean of Southern political leaders. Southern governors made pilgrimages to his shrine.

Along with Byrd of Virginia and several others, he probably could have swung the South toward the future. He decided, however, to oppose the Supreme Court decision, adopted again the Lost Cause and the White Citizens Councils gathered to his support. Your white Southerner is still haunted by the gallant image of Gettysburg, where glory rides with failure.

The last decade has brought the South much failure but little glory in action done or remembered. But it has illustrated Toynbee's theory that to challenge a group on the make is to increase its power.

With the omission of the Border States, the South generally decided to oppose the Supreme Court decision. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People there-

fore had to take cases to court, and grew stronger in the process. The white South fought the NAACP mainly as a "foreign" organization; Southern Negroes knew better and supported it with their pocket change and their checks; its growing income matched its growing expenses.

But the obstructions raised against the just and now legal demands of the Negro brought on in 1960 the demonstrations. These ran like wild-fire across the South. The legal fight, of course, continued, and continues, but to this was added the popular demonstration.

Had the South still not been haunted by the Lost Cause, it could have accepted the demonstrations. All they said originally was: "Look. We're unhappy. We want what other people want—the usual public rights of Americans."

One of the main themes of Southern life has always been that the Negroes are happy; if they are not, something must be done. The best spirit of the South has always assumed some responsibility in regard to the Negro, although this responsibility has shown much blindness and selfishness. The fact that the demonstrations have achieved as much as they have and with relatively little violence is because they spoke to the better heart of the South.

But again the South, haunted by the Lost Cause, offered strong opposition, with mass arrests, fire hoses, police dogs and cattle prods. The tempo increased, the Negro Movement—or just the Movement, as Negroes call it—spread across the Nation, and now such a civil rights bill as has not been proposed since the 1870s has passed the House and lies on the desks of the Senate.

It Goes Back to 1619

THE BELL that rang for the South is now ringing for the Nation. Why did this happen?

It didn't happen because the South resisted the 1954 decision, though doubtless Southern resistance built up a stronger Negro leadership in the South, and this tended to extend the movement beyond the South. It began to happen in 1865, when the South was defeated. Indeed, it began to happen in 1619, when African slaves were first put to work on the soil of what was to become the free United States.

Basically because of this anomaly, the Civil War was fought; for the victors to have failed to free the slaves would have revealed deep ignorance as to what the war was really about. But having freed them, the Nation had assumed the responsibility of making American citizens of them, since no other course was possible in the free American air.

The Nation, however, did not realize the responsibility it had accepted. In the famous Hayes-Tilden compromise of 1877, Hayes became President and

in return withdrew the last troops from the South and gave the Negroes back to the, by then, not so tender mercies of the South.

A Phalanx of Forces

THIS ATTEMPT to deny history has necessarily failed. The forces that overthrew it are world-wide: two world wars and Korea with their democratic slogans; the accompanying burst of industrialism in the United States; the movement of millions of Negroes to Northern cities; the appearance of white prejudice there, and the power of the franchise in the hands of the blocs thus created.

In the 1880s and '90s, when the Negro was being locked in by segregation, a perceptive observer could have predicted the struggle of the last ten years. A few men, some of them Southerners, did point out that the Negro could not be kept a second-class citizen. And, after all, Jefferson in effect predicted the Civil War in 1784 when he trembled for his country because "God was just and His justice would not sleep forever."

But I doubt that anyone could have predicted the essential thing that's happening to the Negro, especially in the South, today. In fact, few as yet have even noticed it. The Negro is beginning to appear as a Southerner.

As for the Negro Southerners, they're out to get their American rights; white Southerners have kept those rights from them and therefore they don't easily see themselves as being Southerners also. Theoretically and actually, however, I think it can be shown that they are.

Similarities Ignored

FIRST, theoretically. If there is a South—and men tend to agree on this, though they generally fail to define it—all the people who live here have been made by it and have in turn made it. For various reasons, we have played up the differences between whites and Negroes. If we were honest, we would begin to see the similarities.

Actually, these similarities appear, especially in the demonstrations, both in the goals the Negroes have set and in their methods. The goals? Rarely abstract justice, freedom, equality, though the great word "freedom" rings through all their songs. Rather, acceptance into the community.

It may be strange that any sense of community remains, but it does, and the Negro is requesting, is demanding, that he become completely a part of that community. Of course, he doesn't want it as it is, because it has pushed him to the outskirts; he wants to change it.

He does not want, however, to destroy it. What we have here is the old Southern sense of community, which has been remarkably strong in the white South.

Its Finest Aim

AS TO METHOD, the demonstrations in their beginnings, where one looks for basic truth, were most Southern in the union they showed between the surface of life and the depths, between manners and morals, between culture and religion. To say it in two words, the demonstrations began, and were long maintained, in a spirit of Christian courtesy.

In spite of all contrary opinion, I would maintain that this is the spirit the South at its best aimed at. Robert E. Lee is the South's greatest figure not because he led the Lost Cause but because he was this kind of man.

But, basically because of the weight of slavery, the South had no chance of attaining its ideal. The Negroes, not permitted to be publicly involved in Southern life, observed and got the drift, and when the time was ripe, in 1960, they appeared, and they approach more nearly the Southern ideal than we have come before.

They have brought to the surface, and fused, cultural themes many had thought lost forever, and are using these to guide them more surely into the future. This is the miracle taking place in the South.

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