

THE CIVIL RIGHTS MOVEMENT: COUNTDOWN PART II

By Roosevelt Fitzgerald

Separate but equal, is inherently unconstitutional." So said the United States Supreme Court on May 17, 1954. With that, the schools of the nation were to be integrated "with all deliberate speed."

A number of people had assumed that the ruling would only apply to the South. After all, was it not there that the problem existed? Not so. In the South, de jure or segregation by law had existed while in the North and West, de facto segregation had been the order of the day. The latter was the case in Las Vegas — at least on the elementary level.

The Supreme Court's decision was hailed as a magnificent triumph by Black people and non-black liberals. The "die hard" bigots felt that it was an example of judicial usurpation. They felt that education had not been mentioned in the Constitution. They also felt that when the Fourteenth Amendment

had been adopted, in 1868, that 26 of the 37 states which ratified it had, already in establishment and full operation, segregated schools. They additionally felt that the sanctity of the Plessy vs. Ferguson decision of 1896, which gave legitimacy to the belief of "separate but equal" practices, had been upheld in the Lum vs. Rice decision of 1927 in which it was declared that "separate but equal is within the discretion of the state in regulating its public schools and does not conflict with the Fourteenth Amendment."

Those, and other such views were articulated throughout the country and especially in the South. The general populace, recognizing that it had the support of local authorities, decided to follow the tact of John C. Calhoun's century and a half old theory of "Nullification." It

decided to determine that the 1954 ruling would be null and void and, in its own way, adopted a policy of "civil disobedience."

No initiatives were taken in effecting the decision. Just the opposite. The prevalent KKK mentality dominated. Threats of reprisals were made and Black people generally kept quiet. They knew that the law had been passed but they had learned a long time ago that laws meant nothing to those white people who did not care to abide by them especially since it was they who were charged with upholding the law.

Las Vegas, which had had a relatively short history of segregation, found itself in a relatively unique position. The population of the town was quite small — less than 50,000 and the Black population was just a shade over 4,000. While the majority of Black people, at that time, lived on the west-side, there were some who did not. Had the city

fathers abided by the ruling of the Shelley vs. Kramer decision of 1948, which ended restrictive covenants in buying and selling houses, housing restrictions would have ended then. They elected, however, not to do so. Subsequently, Blacks, who arrived in Las Vegas between the years of 1948 and 1971, when the fair housing law was enacted in Nevada, were generally restricted to the west-side.

Even the number of schools in Las Vegas in 1948 was small. At that time, the extent of segregation in the schools was restricted only to the old Westside school. Obviously, the problem — if there was one then, could have been easily solved and the complaints we now hear about "bussing" would have had no cause to exist.

Rather than the schools and the city unifying in taking definitive action against the growing problem of segregation, they chose to take a tentative ap-

proach. Perhaps they thought that the town would not boom as it did. If so, they sought to anticipate the future rather than address the present. Some times it is safe to predict. More of

Las Vegas was no exception. The local police department was kept on 24-hour duty. Chief Al Kennedy made arrests of those who were eighteen or older and Judge Walter Richards

The school year 1954-55 was tense. For racists, there was much more at stake than keeping Black children in sub-standard schools. Much more so than today, the educated per-

the better neighborhoods were all white. Children of different races would be classmates and neighbors and friends. More than anything else, it seems, Black people and

bers were harrassed and fired from their jobs, denied credit and brutally assaulted.

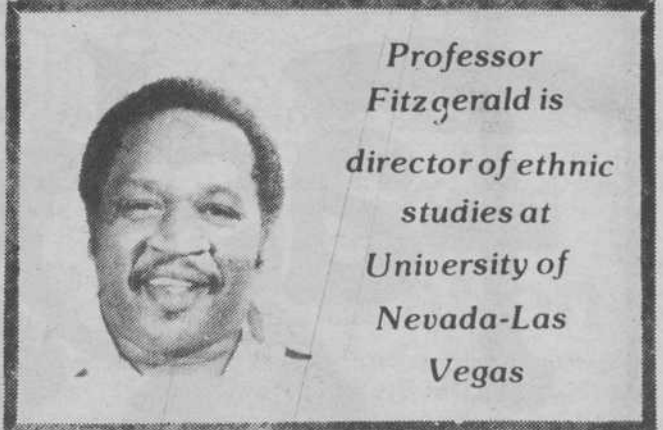
The status quo at all costs. That was the same plan against Black people. In the South, large numbers of Black people were murdered. Women and children first? — Not with Black people. In late summer, 1955, the true colors of the racists were shown. On August 28, in Money, Mississippi, a fourteen year old child, while visiting grandparents,

was arrested and charged with having whistled at a white woman. His body was later found bloated, bleached, bludgeoned, bailed, bound and bloody in the fluvial silt of a Mississippi river.

How do you tell a mother That her child will not be home That his life has been snatched away Before he was even half grown What kind of people would do such a thing

To such a child as he And call themselves by christian names What audacity With murderers lying at their sides Many women lay in bed While other women knelt and cried

Because Emmett now lay dead Where was Batman when we needed him Or even the man of Steel While those sheeted S.O.B.s followed their rule Of kill, kill, kill



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son was looked up to and admired. One's level of education also affected one's income, position in society and quality of life. Because of those factors, keeping Blacks in "their place" was most important.

Consider the following scenario: With a good education, one generally gets a good job with good pay. Good pay gives one the opportunity, in a capitalist society, to have more and better material goods. The better houses were in the better neighborhoods and

white people should not be friends — friends like each other and do not think of themselves as being better than or worse than the others. Every now and then, people who get married are friends. That is the bottom line.

The tension in the country was electric. People were afraid to speak in public — they did not know who they could trust. The NAACP was coming under fire and its membership rolls were more closely guarded than the Pentagon Papers. Known mem-

ten than not, it is better to act.

Around the country, there was hostile reaction to the desegregation order.

issued subpoenas for the parents of those who were minors. The common belief was that the problems were caused by "troublemakers."

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