

RACIAL CRISIS IN THE DEEP SOUTH



By HODDING CARTER

A noted editor reports that the desegregation crisis is worsening in his state, and that a new, dreadful barrier is being erected between Negroes and whites.

I am not setting down this story as a traditional warning to other Americans to let the South determine its own destiny. Instead it is told only with the conviction that it is needful for the nation to know of the hardening of the hearts of white and black men in the Southern areas of greatest Negro density—and especially in Mississippi—and to know why this tragic deterioration in human relations is taking place.

I am moved to write it because of a disturbing increase in the number of symptomatic incidents on both sides. Of these the "wolf-whistle" asserted murder of a fourteen-year-old Chicago Negro boy, Emmett Till, and the subsequent acquittal of the two Mississippi white men accused of his kidnaping and slaying, is only the most dramatic and, superficially, the most incomprehensible.

And I am using Mississippi partly because I live here and so better know what is happening here than elsewhere, and principally because otherwise unalterably opposed antagonists and impartial newspapermen and other detached observers of the Southern scene agree that Mississippi is the state with the worst tensions, the most fixed resolves and the most dramatic examples of racial recessions that have risen in the wake of the Supreme Court's decision.

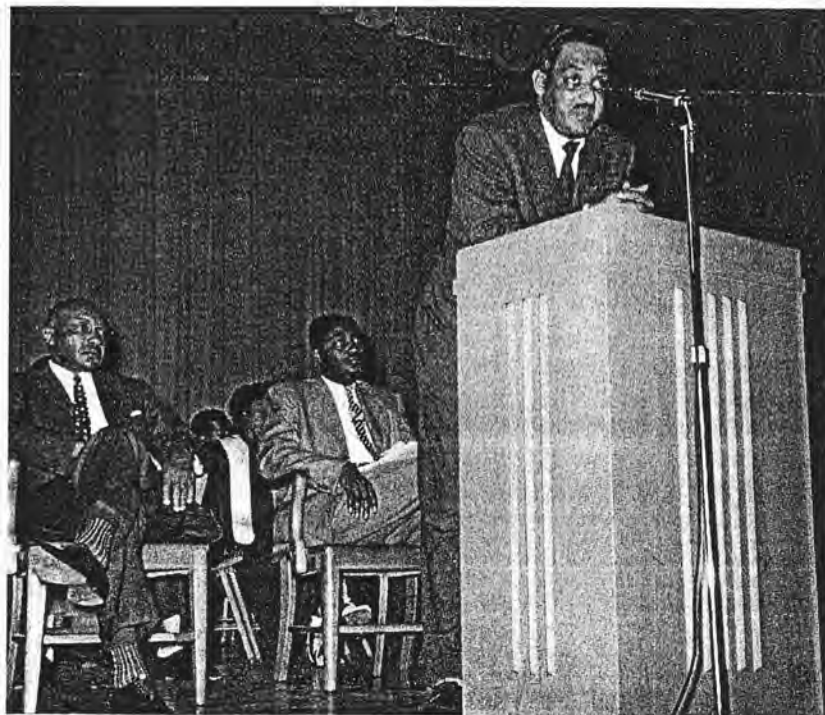
Listen to what they are saying:

"They are not going to tell us what to do in this state," says Gov. Hugh White. "So far as we are concerned, they can head up. Integration is out of the picture. . . I'd just like to know how they can enforce it."

"All we want is to maintain the status quo," says Herman Moore, of Indianola, one of the founders of the mushrooming Citizens Councils. "We'll do it."

"We now tell the NAACP people they have started something they will never

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Thurgood Marshall, who carried the school desegregation fight to the Supreme Court, addresses a recent NAACP conference in Jackson, Miss. Most white Mississippians, the author reports, consider the NAACP "ahead of the Communist Party . . . as the fountainhead of all evil and woe."





Accused of advocating and practicing racial integration at their co-operative plantation, Dr. D. R. Minter and A. E. Cox were "advised" to leave Holmes County, Miss. Shown with them here are their families.

Editor Hazel Smith accused a sheriff of wantonly shooting a Negro. A \$10,000 libel verdict against her was reversed by the courts because her charge was "substantially true."



Emmett Till, the dead boy (right), and Mrs. Roy Bryant (below) whom Till allegedly annoyed. Mrs. Bryant's husband and his half brother were tried for Till's murder, but were found not guilty.



The Till Case ...

Mrs. Mamie Bradley, Till's mother, being interviewed at the white men's trial. Subsequently, a Mississippi grand jury refused to indict the two men for kidnaping.



Till was kidnaped from this cabin.

About 2000 persons gathered at Till's funeral in Chicago. And at a New York meeting, angered Negroes chanted "March! March!"



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Racial Crisis in the Deep South

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finish," says Ellis W. Wright, president of the Citizens Council in Jackson, the state capital.

Here is the Mississippi president of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People commenting on his state organization's demands for integration.

"We just gave them the courtesy title of petitions, but they were more in the nature of ultimatums," says Dr. A. H. McCoy, Negro dentist, warning that if violence will follow, "some white blood will flow too."

And now Ben Price, an able and objective roving correspondent of the Associated Press, who recently wrote a penetrating series on the South since the Supreme Court's integration decision. Commented Price, after noting that there is some movement toward desegregation in border and Southwestern states:

"Georgia, South Carolina, Louisiana, Alabama and Florida, however, are ranging themselves in the anti-integration columns. But nowhere have race tensions reached the same peak as in Mississippi. Both sides in Mississippi have made clear publicly that this is a no-quarter battle. Each has ruled out compromise."

Two years ago, even a year and a half ago, I would have challenged these statements. We were making notable headway in Mississippi in the matter of living together; perhaps not so fast nor in so many directions as impatient people might want, but undeniably we were getting ahead. New schools, hospitals and recreational facilities were reducing the material inequalities between Negro and white. Adding to the Negro's status as a citizen were a five-year record of no lynchings, a tendency—however grudging—to give the Negro the vote, and a continuous insistence from the judicial benches, the pulpits and the newspapers of Mississippi upon equal justice.

And we Mississippians, who are usually more sensitive than most people to the opinions of others, even while denying the validity of such opinions, were finding ourselves praised beyond our borders for what we were doing in agricultural development, in industrial growth, in human relationships and even in social legislation.

But now has come a foreboding interruption of our purposefulness and growing amity. It dates from the decision of the United States Supreme Court, a year and a half ago, which held that segregated public schools were unconstitutional. This is not the time to argue the merits or demerits of that decision. Say simply that the decision was inevitable. But let me add that it hasn't meant anything in those Southern areas where the Negro's numbers are the highest in proportion to the white population. Especially this hasn't meant anything in Mississippi. That is, it hasn't meant anything good.

White Mississippi's universal refusal to accept the court's decision is determined and angry. That should have been expected. What is much more dangerous is the retrogression at every point of racial contact, and the innumerable bits of evidence that relations between the two races in Mississippi are steadily worsening.

Let's look at some of them:

(1) In Lincoln County, Mississippi, a Negro who was politically active in behalf of one white candidate in a contest for a county office was shot to death in daytime before a considerable number of witnesses, almost in the shadow of the courthouse last summer. Three white men were arrested as his slayers. But they could not be indicted because the state could not find a single witness, white or Negro, who would testify before the grand jury.

(2) A few weeks before the Till murder, a white man was found guilty in one Mississippi county of the rape of a Negro girl. In another county a Negro man was found guilty of the rape of a white woman. The Negro received the death sentence. The white man got two years.

(3) Last spring in Belzoni, Mississippi, a Negro minister was shot to death while driving in his automobile after dark. He had been a leader in Negro efforts in the county to gain the vote and was a member of the NAACP.

(4) Elsewhere in the state two other Negro ministers who sought the ballot for fellow Negroes were beaten.

(5) The number of Negro voters in Mississippi, out of a Negro population of more than 900,000, has dropped from an estimated 20,000 five years ago to less than 9000; and the total will hardly increase, thanks in part to an amendment to the state's constitution which requires that registrants must be able to read, write and interpret any portion of the constitution which is given them to read. No Negroes vote in Tallahatchie County, where the Till boy's body was found.

And more significant than any of these examples of violence and tension is the story of what has happened to two white men in Holmes County, Mississippi, where the Negro population is 73 per cent of the total. They have been "advised" to leave the county. They have not yet decided whether they will leave or stay.

One of these men is Dr. D. R. Minter, a forty-three-year-old physician, a native of North Carolina, the son of one Presbyterian minister and brother of another, a missionary-minded idealist, who, upon his return as a lieutenant colonel from three years of service in the Pacific, began medical practice at an obscure co-operative plantation, Providence community, in a remote section of Holmes County.

His associate in this venture is A. E. Cox, a native Texan, a graduate of Texas Christian University and associate of Sherwood Eddy. Cox has been operating the plantation for thirteen years, and has maintained a federally chartered credit union which makes loans to small Negro farmers and tenants. Both men are married. Each is the father of three young children. Mrs. Cox, a registered nurse, works with Doctor Minter in the community's clinic. Mrs. Minter is secretary and receptionist for the clinic.

Because of the co-operative nature of the farm and the pair's unfathomable ministry to Negroes, they have for a long time been looked upon with suspicion. Animosity came to a head about a year ago when Doctor Minter testified for the defense in the libel trial of an aggressive young newspaper editor in the county, Mrs. Hazel Brannon Smith, who had accused the sheriff of unnecessarily shooting a Negro while dispersing a Saturday-night gathering. Doctor Minter treated the Negro. The sheriff denied that the boy was even shot. Mrs. Smith was found guilty in Circuit Court of libel to the tune of \$10,000. In November the Mississippi Supreme Court unanimously reversed the verdict in a decision which contained a forthright rebuke to jury and sheriff.

There were also other reasons for animosity. All of them were lumped together as "proof" that the two men were communists. In the summer of 1955 rumors began to be circulated in the county that there was mixed swimming in the plantation's small pool and that unsegregated gatherings of an unspecified nature were being held. The climax came in September at a mass meeting of 400 to 500 white citizens of the county, with the two men present.

The gathering heard a two-hour recording of statements made by six Negroes who were questioned about an unrelated incident—the use of obscene language to a white girl by one of them—in which the Negroes, in response to leading questions, said in brief that the men had advocated and practiced racial integration. The accused men, both Southerners, insisted, amid heckling and audible threats, that they had not violated Southern racial taboos. But they have been subjected to anonymous phone calls and threatening letters. They lived for ten nights under intermittent guard of highway policemen and sheriff's deputies.

The mass meeting was presided over by a newly elected member of the State Legislature and head of the Tchula chapter of the Citizens Councils. John Herbers, the United Press' bureau chief in Jackson, reported in an uncontradicted signed story that the meeting was held under the auspices—unofficial, as is usual—of the county's Citizens Councils, branches of the white vigilante organizations which were born in the nearby county of Sunflower almost coincidentally with the Supreme Court's decision. The recorded interrogation was directed by the county attorney, head of the Lexington chapter, and participated in by a half-dozen citizens—also council members—who held no law-enforcement positions.

The ideal children's game is one that doesn't always end up in a fight.

DAN BENNETT

Those incidents and others are taking place to a drumfire accompaniment of angry speeches, denunciation of outside interference and a deluge of inflammatory letters to editors of Mississippi newspapers and to the adjoining Louisiana and New Orleans metropolitan dailies. On every hand one hears, "It's going to get worse before it gets better." We listen to tales of the disappearance from hardware stores of all available arms and ammunition and rumors of secret meetings of men of both races.

Individual Negroes and Negro groups, in and outside of Mississippi, are also guilty of adding fuel to the fire.

(1) Near Memphis, just over the Mississippi line, only a few days after the Till trial, six young Negroes, two of them barely older than Till himself, beat a white man, kidnapped his woman companion and raped her repeatedly. Both the man and woman testified that when the Negroes saw them in a parked car, one of her assailants shouted, "There's a white woman! Let's get her!" When they forced the man from his car, they told him to get going because "One of our boys was killed down in Mississippi the other day and we're liable to kill you."

(2) Negro ministers and political leaders in Memphis, planning a church campaign to register "at least 60,000 voting Negroes" before the city election on November tenth, heard one of their principal spokesmen say, "This is no time to talk loud and wave an empty gun," an appeal which was not taken in adjoining Mississippi in the symbolic way in which it was undoubtedly meant, and which since it implied bloc voting, was provocative enough.

(3) At a New York mass meeting, Dr. T. R. M. Howard, the most militant of the Mississippi Negro leaders, boasted of how he was protected night and day by two armed bodyguards, a display of precaution which, however well it might be received elsewhere, is considered downright revolutionary in Mississippi. At the same mass

meeting, angered Negroes, listening to a principal spokesman of the NAACP, began a chant of "March! March! March!"

(4) In Chicago, Till's body was laid out in state for three days while highly wrought-up Negroes and other citizens milled around the body, many of them promising violent vengeance. The prolonged wake was not designed either to improve relations in Mississippi or to provide any solution of Mississippi's crisis.

(5) In the weeks immediately following the Till trial there were a number of reports by motorists along Mississippi highways of bricks being thrown through their car windows, allegedly by lurking Negroes. Mississippi tourists in the Midwest report being cursed by Negroes.

(6) A planter in Washington County reported to my newspaper that during his absence from his plantation a group of Negroes in an automobile bearing an Illinois license plate and described by tenants as being from Chicago, assertedly tried to persuade tenants to leave his place and come to Chicago, where "they could be free."

(7) In Chicago and elsewhere, Negro political leaders and chapters of NAACP have resoundingly demanded such absurdities as the sending of Federal troops to Mississippi, the disenfranchisement of all its citizens and the same kind of economic retaliation it denounces in the Citizens Councils.

On each side of the color line the growing ill will is rooted in fear—fear on the Negro's part that the white man is again determined to destroy or negate his civil rights and return him to an old bondage; fear among the white people that the Negro is bent on retaliation and political domination; and, far worse, a fear that is sexual in its nature—namely, that the intimacy of public-school association will in time lead to the most complete human intimacy with miscegenation as the end result.

This sexual alarm may help explain the failure to convict the men accused of slaying Emmett Till. His behavior, however trivial, was sexually offensive. Nor is this reaction racially one-sided. The editor of the Negro paper in my city, while editorially condemning the misbehavior of Negro men toward white women, wrote that "in the meantime the white people of our communities should stop their white men from meddling and chasing Negro women on the streets. White people who have the leadership of our communities must see to it that elements in their group who are guilty of such conduct should be punished just as a Negro is punished for his conduct."

White Mississippians answer their critics with counterquestions. Why wasn't the Memphis rape played up in the Northern press, they ask, as was the Till case? Or the rape-murder that so horrified the citizens of Houston, Texas? Or the wanton shooting down of a Mississippi storekeeper and his wife by a Negro motorist from Illinois when the pair protested the behavior of the group of which he was a member in front of their store?

Why, they ask, doesn't the Northern observer make anything out of the fact that, both North and South, the Negro, numbering only 10 per cent of the national population, commits proportionately far more crimes of violence against the white majority and against his own fellows as well than do the whites against the Negro? Why do so many non-Southern newspapers refuse to identify the Negro wrongdoer as such, while identifying by race the outstanding Negro and by region the offending Southern white? Why do some national publications make blanket accusations against an entire state for the failure of twelve men to punish the alleged offenders? Why did they describe the Till murder as a lynching? And why, in order to prove their point, do they place halos above Negro victims, who,

whatever else they may be, were certainly not angels? Why is all of Mississippi blamed for such crimes, with reputable Northern newspapers declaring that the character of the Till murder trial showed how abysmally set in the dark ages Mississippians in general are? Does not the conduct of the Till case judge and prosecutors, the protests by Mississippi's newspapers and the general public's revulsion contradict such a blanket indictment? Is all Illinois guilty because three boys were horribly murdered there? Does not the NAACP use political and economic pressures? So ask Mississippians.

The non-Southerner may say that this reaction indicates a hypersensitivity to just criticism, a guilt complex, an unhealthy preoccupation with race. Perhaps, but none the less real or threatening for all that.

I know that probably a majority of the white people in Mississippi feel that ours is a beleaguered state, a surrounded island in a sea of compromise or surrender to integration. North and south and east and west of Mississippi, the state universities of Tennessee, Louisiana, Arkansas and Alabama have opened or are about to open their doors to Negro students. Mississippians read in their papers that 134,000 Negro students are attending integrated schools in eight formerly segregated states and the District of Columbia; and they stare apprehensively at Hoxie, Arkansas, not far from Mississippi's western border, where the enrollment of a handful of Negro children among 500 white students has made of the drab little village a near battleground. They read the warning literature of the Citizens Councils and the sex-ridden pamphlets and leaflets of psychopathic hatemongers, and the gleeful text and pictures in Negro national publications, all dwelling upon the threat or the reality of racial intermarriage, and they grow no less afraid. They listen as political leaders, from governors and United States senators to city councilmen, counsel disobedience, evasion and educational anarchy. They hear the injunctions to the Negro to use the ballot as his weapon, and they look at the state's heavily Negro counties, where no or almost no Negroes now vote; and they vow to keep things that way. They inspect the Air Force bases in Mississippi, and see there the workings of nonsegregation on the training fields and in the barracks and swimming pools and clubs, and their fear moves them to swear that such things won't happen beyond the borders of the bases, no matter what it takes to prevent them. All the time they are conscious that time itself is running out on them.

And they nourish their hate and fears upon a passionate antagonism against the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, the organization which comes out ahead of the Communist Party—with which they emotionally identify it—as the fountainhead of all evil and woe.

This wrath is understandable in human terms. It has been the NAACP which has bested the traditional South in every legal battle from the Negro's right to Democratic Party membership to the school-integration decision. It is the NAACP which comes to the aid of the Southern Negro accused of violent crime; which has called incendiary mass meetings throughout the North; which has mocked Southern attitudes with impunity, refused any compromise and employed the tools of ridicule, reverse racism and unending belligerence which the Southerner would resent from any source and especially from members of the racial group which in Mississippi generally keeps its collective mouth shut. It is the NAACP which, in full-page ads in Eastern newspapers, calls for an end to "racial tyranny in Mississippi," urging Americans to contribute to its war chest in order "literally to help save the American way of life." And the fact that much of the NAACP's bill of par-

ticulars would stand up in court doesn't help make its accusations any more acceptable. The hatred that is concentrated upon the NAACP surpasses in its intensity any emotional reaction that I have witnessed in my Southern lifetime. And it may be added that the hatred for the white South among NAACP members may well match it.

So what now?

I am trying to write measuredly. During the past summer I was absent from Mississippi and the South for some three months. Possibly because of this absence, I was not prepared for the deterioration which I found when I came home at September's end. From every person of both races to whom I have talked since—and they number many scores—I have had almost identical comment: "There's going to be worse trouble," they say, or "It's going to get worse before it gets better."

Save for a detestable handful, these dismayed yet determined people are not professional rabble-rousers or demagogues or chronic pessimists. Among them are ministers and priests and businessmen, large-scale planters, small farmers and embittered poor whites, Negro tenants, lifelong Southerners and newcomers. They have one common denominator, their common infection with a sense of tragedy.

It is not reassuring to have a sober-minded friend say that he has put a curfew on his wife and daughters for fear of racially motivated violence. Or to have a farmer, angry beyond reason, enter my office and reveal that he and his fellows had planned to give me a going-over, and would have, except that they didn't want to "give the NAACP an incident." Or to have a citizen whose people have lived in this river country for four generations say that if it weren't for the complexity and size and obligations of his holdings, he would move to a more relaxed land. Or to be berated incessantly because we wanted the Till boy's murderers to be punished. Or to discover the names of respected fellow citizens among the announced leadership of the chapter of the Citizens Councils which at long last was recently organized in our city.

Yet those white Mississippians who fear, and other Americans, white and black, who believe that there is any chance for significant or even token integration in the black-belt schools need neither fear nor hope. There is no chance within the ascertainable future. Negro parents may continue to sign petitions, even though their jobs become immediately forfeit, but—and of this I am sure, after talking to numbers of them—the same parents aren't going to follow through with any meaningful attempt actually to enroll their children in the dominantly Negro counties.

I am not prophesying what is going to happen in other Southern regions. But integration is not going to become a reality in the black belts of Mississippi, Alabama, South Carolina, Louisiana and Georgia or in many areas in other Southern states until and unless the white people of those states change their minds—which isn't likely for a long time to come.

Nor in my state is there much likelihood of widespread assertion by the Negro citizen of his right to the ballot. An amendment to the state constitution, as previously noted, permits virtual disenfranchisement of any citizens by any registrar who wishes to exercise the right of challenge which it grants him. The economic club, which hangs over the counties with Negro majorities, will take care of most would-be voters anyway.

And to judge from the record to date, those who shudder at the possibility of equal justice for all men in Mississippi also have nothing to fear. That record indicates that there will continue to be almost no possibility for a white man, found guilty of a crime against a Negro, to receive a penalty as severe as is meted out to a Negro for the same offense against a white.

Why is all this so? Let's talk in percentages, the factor which our critics elsewhere most often overlook. Mississippi has still the highest proportion of Negroes to whites in the United States, and the pressure of numbers remains the principal gauge of tolerance everywhere. The percentage is decreasing radically. Nevertheless, in more than half of Mississippi's counties, Negroes form a majority of from anywhere from 55 to almost 80 per cent. In these same counties the percentage of educated Negroes is the lowest in the state and by far the lowest in the South and the nation. More Negro Mississippians work as farm and plantation laborers, proportionately, than in any other state; and the classic relation of landowner to plantation worker is not conducive to mutual respect. Mississippi has almost the highest percentage of rural to urban dwellers, another factor unhelpful to moderation of attitudes. According to a recent news story, 65 out of 100 Mississippi college graduates go elsewhere to seek their fortunes, which has an obvious meaning if education itself has meaning. Percentage-wise, as has been already pointed out, Mississippi has the lowest per-capita income and nearly the highest rate of illiteracy in the nation. The cultural lag between the two races in Mississippi is wider than that between any other sizable racial groups in the nation.

And over and above all these factors and others is the emotional conviction of a majority of Mississippians that ours is a misunderstood and abused state.

But there are hopeful signs too. Newspapers thrive upon the startling, the dramatic, the tragic, the violent and the challenging. They generally tend to play down the good side of the everyday news. I would like to illustrate this by listing a few happenings in Mississippi which took place at about the same time as the Till trial. They are limited in number because they are taken entirely from the files of my own small paper.

Within this short period a white girl risked her life to rescue a Negro child from the river in which Emmett Till's body was found. . . . Our town raised sufficient funds, amounting to more than \$2000, donated by both races, to send our Negro high-school band to New York—the only band invited from the state of Mississippi—to participate in the Negro Elks Convention parade. . . . Our school board authorized the construction of the third Negro school to be built in our little city since World War II. . . . A second Negro staff physician was appointed to the state mental hospital. . . . A new Negro assistant county agent reported for duty in our county, and our newspaper published his picture and an account of his background, which includes service in Korea. . . . We published also a three-column picture and story about a former Negro sharecropper in our county who is grossing \$200 a day with a mechanical cottonpicker which he bought in used condition for \$3000.

There are other forces at work in Mississippi which can temper and may eventually end this conflict.

Normal human revulsion against unfairness may be one such force. In the wake of the mass meeting in Mississippi's Holmes County, at which the doctor and plantation manager were told to leave the state, there came reports that at least a minority of those citizens present at the meeting were ashamed. There is also the very human difficulty to remain incensed and combative when no real enemy presents itself.

Two other forces may become more effective in time. One is economic, the other spiritual. Many successful, business-minded Mississippians know that the present situation can be greatly harmful to our state's worth-while and intelligently conceived program to balance our agricultural economy with industry. Already Mississippi has attracted since World War II nearly 100 major industries, some of them with branch plants and others which have completely rooted themselves in Mississippi. They have come for a number of reasons: a plentiful and willing labor supply, availability of raw materials, new markets, a co-operative plant-building program, and so on. In many instances they have come in search of peace, for behind them were the memories and the realities of labor turmoil. These newcomers do not want to exchange one sort of strife for another. I think that our more responsible leaders are becoming aware of this.

And there is a second, and potentially the most important factor, the spiritual force about which one speaks gingerly and even self-consciously. The South has a reputation for being religious. In the black-belt counties some of the clergy, especially the younger clergy, may be skeptical as to the depth and breadth of the South's religious impulses, for many of them have either been silenced or simply exiled because they have spoken for man's unity. But this spiritual reservoir, nevertheless exists. The Christian world knows that it will endure, despite the silencing or banishment of clergy-men.

Meanwhile, ours is a besieged state, but one not inclined to surrender. No one should expect that a decision of a Supreme Court can soon or conclusively change a whole people's thinking. That must be understood.

THE END



THE SATURDAY EVENING POST