

The Segregated Ballot Box

SINCE the Supreme Court decision on desegregation, the fight for civil rights in the South has had its battleground in the schoolhouse. The education and future of children have been at stake in this fight. If Attorney General Brownell and Senator Douglas have their way, there is a chance that a second front will be opened up—one concerning a large group of American adults and their right to exercise the electoral franchise.

The crucial importance of such a second front can scarcely be overestimated. If Federal district attorneys down South can start action so that the same qualifications which admit white people to the ballot box are made applicable also to Negroes, then the nearly century-old aftermath of the Civil War may be on its way to liquidation. Southerners who share the feelings and the fears of Senator Ervin know that the final battle for white supremacy may be at hand. They have barricaded themselves behind the ancient Anglo-Saxon right that entitles every man to a trial by his peers—in this case every segregationist to a trial by fellow segregationists.

AMERICANS who do not happen to be Southerners should be thoughtful and responsible before passing judgment on those of their countrymen for whom segregation is a harrowing issue. Thoughtfulness and responsibility, however, do not mean indecisiveness or wish-washiness. In this spirit, while we welcome the civil-rights proposals put forth by Attorney General Brownell, we would be much happier if the authority to be granted the U. S. district attorneys were aimed primarily at making the Fifteenth Amendment at long last operative. This admirably brief and pointed amendment states:

“Section 1. The right of citizens of the United States to vote shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any State on account of race, color, or previous condition of servitude.

“Section 2. The Congress shall have power to enforce this article by appropriate legislation.”

Congress would be following Section 2 by authorizing Federal judges to issue civil injunctions — which means no trial by jury—against those who are found responsible for having violated Section 1.

Several private organizations—the N.A.A.C.P. first of all—have done admirable work in bringing before the Federal courts cases of violation of basic rights, and the Federal judiciary, under the leadership of Mr. Justice Warren, has reacted magnificently. But the Fifteenth Amendment needs specific reinforcement, since the devices that have been used to prevent individual citizens from exercising their rights in the polling booth have been most frequently devious and specious. To safeguard all other civil rights, other remedies can be used aside from civil injunctions brought at the request of Federal attorneys. In general, we are distrustful of all monopolies or potential monopolies, and we are unwilling to concede the monopoly of virtue or of civil libertarianism to anybody—not even to the successors of Mr. Brownell.

But again, we think that a second front in the battle for civil rights is needed, just as unrelenting pressure is needed on the first front—the one where the rights of children are at stake. The Fifteenth Amendment has been in our Constitution for eighty-seven years, and only the Federal government can make it operative.

If and when Negroes enjoy their franchise in the South as they do in

the North, then whatever advantage they can gain will be gained by themselves, according to their skill in playing the game of politics. As has happened with other groups at various times considered inferior, the skill the Southern Negroes can develop in playing this game will allow them to reach a greater measure of equality. Voting cannot make them automatically equal, but will give them the chance to move step by step, one election after another, toward political equality.

OF ALL the competitive games in our competitive society, politics is the fairest. It is not easily learned, and as a rule all our so-called minority groups have had a hard time at first. Before conquering their proportionate share of public offices, they have had to overcome the vested interests of other previously entrenched groups. It has frequently happened that the leaders each group has given itself at the beginning have been of a rather poor quality. But improvement both in leadership and in political skill has invariably come.

This was the case with the Irish and with the Germans and with the Italians and with the Jews, as it is the case in our own days with the Puerto Ricans—each group fighting with others that were already on top, and at the same time gaining some measure of recognition from them. Ultimately the sharper differences and conflicts dwindle, and links are established that go beyond all groups.

This is the way America has been made and is being made, thanks to the toughness and fairness of American politics. This will certainly happen south of the Mason-Dixon Line. Both whites and Negroes know that it will happen. It will never be too soon.

A Report from the South

On the Negro Voter

EDWARD GAMAREKIAN

ON AUGUST 11, 1956, Governor James P. Coleman of Mississippi told the platform committee of the Democratic National Convention in Chicago that in his state Negroes were free to pay their poll tax, to register, and to vote. Somehow things didn't turn out just that way during the 1956 election: In nearly all of Mississippi's eighty-two counties Negroes were stalled, blocked, rejected, intimidated, and even threatened when they tried to exercise their rights as citizens. The registration figures Governor Coleman himself had compiled when he was state attorney general in 1954 showed that there were thirteen counties in which no Negroes were registered at all, nine other counties in which six or less were registered, and twenty-nine others in which fewer than a hundred were registered.

Furthermore, the governor surely knew why Negro registration was low in Mississippi. It is fairly common knowledge that in Lowndes County, where only fifty-two out of a possible 9,200 Negro voters were registered, Negroes received anonymous letters like the one sent to Caleb Lide: "Last warning. If you are tired of living, vote and die." In Forrest County, where only sixteen out of a possible thirteen thousand Negro voters were registered, the registrar disappeared when Negroes tried to register, told them to come back later, said the books weren't open to colored people that day, or simply said "No." To test their understanding, Negroes might be asked such questions as "How many bubbles are there in a bar of soap?" Governor Coleman could have discovered without much difficulty that some Negroes in Forrest County have been paying their poll taxes

for more than thirty years in the forlorn hope of being allowed to register and vote some day.

From 485 Down to Zero

In Humphreys County Negroes were not even permitted to pay their poll tax until 1953. When seventeen Negroes finally brought suit against the sheriff, a Federal court ordered him to end this practice, and in 1953



485 Negroes succeeded in paying their poll tax. But these 485 soon found themselves the victims of a campaign of pressure and intimidation, and only two hundred of them actually registered. A year later the number was down to 126. The newly formed Citizens' Council began circulating lists of the registrants and still more withdrew. As the 1955 gubernatorial primary approached, Negro registration dropped to ninety-two. These few held firm until the shotguns came out.

On May 7, 1955, one of the county's Negro leaders, the Reverend George W. Lee, was shot in the face by a shotgun fired from a car passing close to the one he was driving. His murderers were never apprehended. The sheriff said that Lee probably had had a heart attack and was killed in the crash that followed, and that the lead pellets in his face were probably fillings from his teeth. With that statement the matter was considered closed. The Citizens' Council then told Gus Courts, president of the local unit of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, "We're not going to let Negroes in this county vote and we're not going to let the N.A.A.C.P. operate. You're leading the Negroes, trying to get them to register and vote; we're going to put you out of business." And they did. On November 25, 1955, Gus Courts, while working in his grocery store, was shot and seriously wounded by a shotgun fired, again, from a passing car. Gus Courts made up his mind. He packed up and left Mississippi.

No Negroes vote in Humphreys County today. They have given up for the time being and say they will not make another attempt until they are guaranteed Federal protection.

IN THE OTHER COUNTIES the methods used to prevent Negroes from registering and voting were usually less brutal. Economic pressure was the most common weapon. Another effective technique was that used in Jefferson Davis County. The 1954 registration survey indicated that 1,221 of the 3,900 Negroes of voting age in the county were registered. During the summer of