

3-20-1954

Letter from John C. Stennis, March 20, 1954

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United States Senate

COMMITTEE ON ARMED SERVICES

March 20, 1954

PERSONAL

Wesson, Mississippi

My dear [REDACTED]

This letter is for your information and merely an effort to briefly discuss the school situation. I have been disappointed that a financial program has not been adopted by our state legislators because I felt that whichever way the decision on segregation goes here we would be better off in Mississippi to have the program adopted.

At the same time I have felt all the time that if the United States Supreme Court should declare segregation illegal within itself that this would mean that no tax dollar could be lawfully spent in a public school which enforces segregation and thus we would be forced to spend our educational tax dollars on some other system than an outright public school system because to huddle our children together on a non-segregated basis would certainly bring a mongrelized race within a few generations. I have further been firm in my convictions that we should not abolish the public school system nor take any steps in connection therewith until the Supreme Court opinion is delivered, has been carefully analyzed, and considered from the viewpoint of educators, legislators, lawyers, business men, and other groups.

Further, it seems to me that if it should be necessary to submit a constitutional amendment to the people regarding the possible abolition of the public school system, the matter should be presented on the basis of the county option system. I favor this because I believe that even though segregation is outlawed, there are many counties in Mississippi where the negroes and whites could work out a satisfactory system among themselves whereby we would have public schools voluntarily segregated and that this plan would last for 20 to 25 years or maybe longer. I believe such a plan would work in Kemper County and in most counties of Mississippi if our white leaders really took a firm hand and got out in front and molded the opinion of our negroes to this end.

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School Segregation

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I do not discount one bit the possible influence of the outside negro organizations. My point is that the white people of Mississippi can cope with that outside influence by furnishing the proper leadership but they cannot do it by merely condemning the outside leadership or condemning the negroes and condemning the Supreme Court.

It has occurred to me that perhaps at the end of the legislative session a State Commission on Education should be created by a legislative act, composed of some elected state officials, legislators, educators, and other leaders to give special study to any decision that might be handed down by the Supreme Court and charged with the responsibility of making recommendations. It occurs to me that perhaps the Chief Justice of the State Supreme Court should be called on to serve on this Commission. Certainly some definite constructive well thought out plan ought to be developed rather than have something evolve from the rash acts of the thoughtless or the indifferent.

I of course do not know when the decision will be handed down here nor its contents but I judge that it will be before too long and I am considerably discouraged by the prospects as to just what the ruling will be. What rumors and straws in the wind that I have heard, and they are of course just rumors, have been discouraging.

I mention the Chief Justice of our Supreme Court as being a member of this Commission to illustrate the high type and high caliber of Commission that I am thinking about and I think his presence on the Commission would give the body stature before our people and also get the benefit of his judgment.

The Commission would have no actual governmental power and would not have to recommend detailed legislation and therefore would not be in conflict with his judicial position. I have not mentioned this to Justice McGehee nor to Governor White.

Suppose you think this over and let me have the benefit of your opinion. It seems to me that some plan ought to be formulated for some steps to be taken immediately following the Supreme Court ruling if it is adverse to us because otherwise rash and intemperate decisions may be made.

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With best wishes for your continued welfare and awaiting your
reply, I am

Your friend,

John Stennis
United States Senator

cc: Hon. J. P. Coleman



The enclosed letter to President Ewing is self-explanatory. I keep
hearing bad reports coming from the Supreme Court and would not be at
all surprised at a decision when they reconvene which declares segregation
unlawful as such. Think this over and let me have your reaction.

Regards.

J.C.S.

JCS/sd