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6521 – School Problems Resulting from 1964 Civil Rights Act

Guest: Rep. John Bell Williams (D-MS)

Morphew: Introduction...recently governors from 8 southern states met in Washington with members of their states' delegations to discuss school problems resulting from the CRA, you were in on it, how many people attended it?

Williams: Dick, I would say, and this would have to be a guess, but I would say there were between 80 and a hundred members of Congress and governors there. I believe there were 7 governors and one representative of a governor who was unable to be there, the governor of North Carolina.

Morphew: The 8 states represented were Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Louisiana, Mississippi, North and South Carolina...this is the first such meeting to be held in quite some time isn't it?

Williams: I believe it is, Dick. I believe it's the, oh, possibly the first meeting of this type that has been held between southern governors and members of Congress in a group since I've been in Congress. As a matter of fact, I don't recall when we have had a meeting of this nature previously dealing with a common problem that affects all of the southern states.

Morphew: Do you think this exchange of ideas is a healthy thing?

Williams: Oh, I do. I think that it is a very wholesome thing for representatives of the several states in the United States Congress to get together with their governors, let their hair down in a sense, and air out the common problems that we face today. Quite obviously it's the governor's business to look after intrastate affairs, but in view of the fact that the federal government has involved itself so deeply into the local affairs of the

several states I do feel that a liaison between the members of Congress and the governors is certainly in order. I think it's very, very fruitful.

Morphew: This meeting was called to discuss school problems but what was the exact concern?

Williams: Of course, the concern was the preservation of our public school systems in the South. The problem stems from the demand by the commissioner of education, Mr. Keppel (sp?) for so called integration compliance orders requiring that the southern public schools, that is in Mississippi, Alabama, Georgia, South and North Carolina, and the other southern states agree as a consideration of accepting federal aid for these schools under the Federal Aid Act that was passed recently to agree to integrate entirely their public school system by 1967. That's not only the integration of the public school classroom, it's the integration of the faculties and the integration of the school buses, and all of the southern governors who were there expressed deep concern over what this will do to our public school system and most if not indeed all of the members of Congress there who were present expressed the same concern.

Morphew: So the commissioner of education has notified the various local school districts that if they want to receive federal funds under the school aid act that was passed this past April they must submit statements of compliance that he's drawn up, promising to do certain things.

Williams: Oh, yes. He has stipulated what he wants the schools to do, not what is best for the schools, not what the schools can do but what the schools must do according to him in order to participate in the Federal Aid Act. As a matter of fact, I have been deeply concerned over whether or not our people should go along with this and sign these compliance agreements. Of course, I know it's very, very distasteful to us, and indeed, I can't quite resolve in my own mind whether it would be the thing for us to do. I do know this, that if we follow the requirements of this compliance order to the letter it will mean absolute destruction of our public school system. But the thing that concerns me as to whether or not we should consider this at all is a statement which is being put out by the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare from the commissioner's own office, written by a college professor, Professor of Law at the University of Wisconsin and endorsed fully by the commissioner of education, and I read the first sentence of his statement. The title of it is, "Southern Education Faces the Facts." He says this, he says, "The issue posed for southern schools by Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act is not whether they will desegregate. It is whether they will desegregate with or without continuing federal aid and assistance." Now, to me, it just appears that the federal government is going to use force if necessary to compel compliance with its own bureaucratic ideas of what constitutes desegregation. Desegregation, as you know, is a term that is quite different from the term integration. Desegregation leaves at least a freedom of choice. Integration is a condition which is being forced upon our people and our people I just do not believe will accept forced integration. Let me say this, Dick, when I say that I, quite frankly, don't feel that I'm in a position to say whether we should consider signing this compliance agreement or not it's based, as I say, on the fact that the

federal government whether we like it or not has the power with the pistol at the back of our heads to make us do what the federal government has predetermined that we shall do. I think at this point we have reached the stage where we are going to have to use our ingenuity and our talents in the direction that we will suffer the least possible injury because indeed I think the future forebodes injury and if we can avoid complete destruction I think that we will have served the best public purpose.

Morphew: As a matter of fact, the idea of forced integration, for the sake of securing a racial mixture in the schools, has been rejected by people in the North as well as the South, hasn't it?

Williams: Well, of course it has. As a matter of fact, Dick, I think that it is just one of the rules of nature that people of a kind or even in the animal kingdom that tend to mix with their own kind and any attempt to disturb that through any artificial means is going to be a disruptive act and certainly not a cohesive one. As a matter of fact, I hold in my hand a copy of the Philadelphia Inquirer of May the 18th, nineteen hundred and sixty-five. And I'll hold it up and I would suggest that you take a look at the headline.

Morphew: The headline reads: "Only 58 Offer to Teach in Integration Plan."

Williams: That's correct. Now the story behind this headline is that there are one hundred and three public schools in the city of Philadelphia school system which have more than 90 percent of its school population made up of one race. Either they are 90 percent plus colored or they are 90 percent plus white. The school board in Philadelphia determined that they would make every effort to bring about a voluntary re-shifting or reassignment of faculty members from these white to the colored schools and from the colored to the white schools. They even went so far as to offer an incentive of one month's pay to any teacher who happened to be in a predominantly all white school to transfer to a predominantly all nigrā school and they offered the same incentive to Negro teachers to transfer to predominantly all white schools. Out of one hundred and three schools, which indeed would have a minimum of a thousand faculty members at least, only 58 faculty members thus far have volunteered to transfer in spite of the incentive of an extra month's pay. Of these 58, according to this newspaper item, 45 are colored teachers who have agreed to transfer to white schools and 13 are white teachers who have agree to transfer to colored schools. Now, with that in mind, it appears to me that it is quite evident that the faculty members of one race prefer indeed to teach members of their own race.

Morphew: And in NYC and Philadelphia, where it has been suggested that such transfers be made mandatory, the teachers' unions have threatened to strike in both cases

Williams: Indeed that's true, and I believe there's mention of that made even in this newspaper article that I have exhibited to our audience.

Morphew: You say that the complete application of these integration provisions in the southern states would result in the destruction of our educational system...who would be hurt worse, the whites or Negroes?

Williams: Oh, I think it's quite obvious that the members of the Negro race would suffer the greatest. I don't think that there's any question about that because if this should come about because of the high economic level enjoyed by the white people I'm quite certain that a great number of white people who are financially able to do so would see to it that their children were sent to private schools. The end result, as you know, of the forced integration in the District of Columbia schools has been virtually to return to an all segregated school system because the white people have fled the District of Columbia to escape this school system in numbers so great that the public schools now are somewhere in the vicinity of 90 percent Negro whereas at the time they were integrated they were only about 55 percent colored.