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6411R – Race relations in North and West

Guest: W.J. Simmons (Administrator of Citizens' Council)

Morphew: All of us in the organization have been leading very busy lives lately, but you've had a great number of speaking engagements and I'm wondering if you've noticed in filling these engagements any increased interest, any awakening of opinion among residents of the North and West on the subject of race relations.

Simmons: Yes I have indeed, Dick, and of course the number of invitations which have come to our organization have been indicative of this interest.

Morphew: What accounts for this...is it a sudden awakening of the people in the North or is it just a gradual build up?

Simmons: Dick, I think it's a result of a gradual buildup, but suddenly it has reached the breaking point, so that it has now overcome the natural reluctance that some people in the North have seemed to feel to talk about this. And now conditions have reached the point in many northern cities where it just simply can no longer be swept under the rug.

Morphew: In other words, this entire subject of race relations, or so-called 'civil rights' as some people choose to designate it, has been something that a lot of people in various sections of the country thought that it just wasn't nice to discuss, let's ignore it and maybe it will go away, but they've now realized that it won't go away.

Simmons: Yes, I think so, and it obviously will not go away, in fact, it's becoming more obvious every day.

Morphew: What is your 'frank appraisal' of the congressional Civil Rights proposal?

Simmons: Well, the civil rights proposal really has nothing to do with civil rights. It has to do with increasing the power of the central government to regulate people's lives. It's very strange that this whole approach to race relations would be disguised under the name 'civil rights.'

Morphew: I'm sure many people in the audience are wondering the same thing I am. In other words, the label 'civil rights' has been attached to legislation currently under consideration in the proposals of the past several years, is really an inaccurate label, is that what you're trying to say?

Simmons: Yes, it's completely inaccurate, Dick. To make that clear, let's go back just a bit. The civil rights question in this country is not a new one, it's quite old. As a matter of fact, it's just about exactly 100 years old. The first civil rights bill was introduced in Congress in 1866, as I recall, by Senator Lyman Trumbull of Illinois. Now, he defined 'civil rights' as the right to make and enforce contracts, to sue and be sued, to give evidence, to inherit, to purchase, sell, lease and hold property, and to convey real and personal property, that's a direct quote from Senator Lyman Trumbull. He said further that his bill had nothing whatsoever to do with social and political rights. The senator, incidentally, was not kindly disposed toward the South, but he insisted at the time that the imagined right of Negroes to attend school with white children is not a civil right and never was.

Morphew: When the question was first raised even free people of color had no 'status before the law at all,' many could not own property or make a residence in certain states.

Simmons: That is correct. The constitutions, for example, of the states of Indiana and Illinois denied Negroes the right to become citizens of those states and the 14th amendment was adopted as a means of conferring upon the Negroes civil rights, namely legal rights, which they had not enjoyed anywhere in this country prior to that time. As a matter of fact, Thaddeus Stevens, who I think would be a good authority on a matter of this time (laughs), who advocated the most stringent type of Reconstruction legislation, complained in referring to the 14th Amendment, 'it covers only civil rights' he said, 'it does not touch on social and political rights.'

Morphew: So that when the subject of so called 'civil rights' first came up, there was a very great distinction between civil rights and social and political rights. But now the label civil rights is being given to legislation which in fact deals in the social and political areas.

Simmons: Precisely so, and this is entirely in error. Proof of this is that the very Congress which approved the 14th Amendment established segregated schools for white and colored children in Washington, D.C. And 11 state legislatures in the North and border states likewise provided for segregated schools. It might be interesting to our listeners to know which states these were, Dick. They were California, Illinois, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia. And 2 years after the 14th Amendment was in effect, 2 additional states established segregated

schools. These were Indiana and Maryland. And Governor Oliver P. Morton of Indiana, remarked with amazing prescience, 'Placing white and colored children together in schools would cause conflict and impair the usefulness of the schools.'

Morphew: That was a hundred years ago.

Simmons: That was a hundred years ago, Dick. And as if Governor Morton was gazing in a crystal ball, here's an item appearing just a few days ago in a Chicago paper, headline 'Teachers Tale of Terror' in the Chicago public schools. Let me read just one short quote from this if I may.

Morphew: Yes, please do.

Simmons: This teacher, Mrs. Dorothy Kaplan, is relating her experience in a Chicago school, and this is quoting from the paper: 'She passed around a sheet of paper and asked the children to write their names for an attendance record, and then she said it came back filled with silly names and obscene words.' Continuing to read, 'In desperation the young teacher said she asked the hostile 5th graders, why are you being so rude to me? No one said anything for a moment, Mrs. Kaplan recalled, and then one boy near the back of the room, stood up and said, because you are white. Everybody else just giggled, she said.' But to illustrate the difficulties involved in the public evaluations of this problem, just a few paragraphs down in the paper an assistant principal said this, 'But the violence had nothing to do with color.'

Morphew: In other words, the problem, in many areas they're still trying to sweep the problem under the carpet.

Simmons: Yes, Dick, they certainly are, particularly in the academic field.

Morphew: Getting back to this proposed civil rights legislation, do you believe that the rank and file outside the South is yet aware of the dangers implicit in such legislation, or do you believe that they've been led to believe that it's something that will mainly affect the South, so after all why should they worry about it?

Simmons: I think they have been told that, but I think they are beginning to see through this deception. Just as example, the other day I was talking with a friend in Washington and he said that the mail of senators from the Middle West in particular is running heavily against the civil rights bill. Now this certainly shows a reawakening in that part of the country and the news item I just read from the Chicago paper would bear that out.

Morphew: The school boycotts going on in the Midwest might have something to do with that.

Simmons: I would certainly think so. As a matter of fact, I think it would make it absolutely inevitable that a reawakening will come on the part of the great majority of people in those sections and then I think we will see a change in the overall attitude.

Morphew: I was going to ask, do you believe that the subject of civil rights might have a somewhat reverse political effect in future years from what it's had in recent years. That is, do you believe that this whole question might result in the creation of a white bloc vote?

Simmons: Yes, I think so, and I think there are signs of it already. I think it's just as inevitable as the day following the night. This applies, incidentally, not only in the North but it applies in the South. We have seen several evidences in recent southern elections of a white bloc vote which transcends party lines and factional politics.

Morphew: Predictions of the outcome of this struggle?

Simmons: Well, it's sort of a risky thing to be a prophet on anything, particularly large questions in the affairs of people, but it would seem to me a virtual impossibility for the 90% white majority in the United States of America to permit their country to be turned into a replica of some of the so-called new, emerging nations in Africa. To me, that is absolutely incomprehensible. They may put up with oppression for awhile. They may put up with a certain amount of inconvenience. They already have. But they will not, and they cannot, see their entire country and their entire system of values overturned.