

America's Genius: Constructive Compromise

The potential explosiveness of the South's lunch counter demonstrations lies in the inability of the hotheads on either side to understand the other's point of view.

In Charlotte Thurgood Marshall, in rousements reminiscent of the worst Southern demagogue, excited NAACP compatriots to storm every bastion of segregation simultaneously. He blamed the slowness of integration on Negro "unwillingness" to act.

In South Carolina tear gas and fire hoses were turned on Negro demonstrators and they are rounded up like cattle and herded into a stockade to await arrest. Gov. John Patterson of Alabama said: "If they (Negroes) keep this up, they're going to find what they are looking for—which is trouble."

The growing bitterness across racial lines makes it less likely that moderate leaders like Gov. Leroy Collins of Florida will exercise much influence when they point to the moral injustice underlying the failure of stores catering to the general public to provide a uniform policy for all.

As a result The New York Times said this week: "Among many observers the feeling was that unless the tension could be relieved in some . . . way, it might well progress to the point of a violent racial explosion in the South."

The North and the South stood on much the same kind of threshold 100 years ago. A small number of extremists, some in the North and some in the South, with incredible foolishness, insisted upon every jot and tittle of their respective positions in defiance of federal power and constitutional obligation.

Northern abolitionists insisted on violating the fugitive slave law. This constitutional violation gave the South its clearest justification for assertion of the right of secession.

South Carolina's secession in 1860 brought on sober soul-searching, North and South. The Southern cause had much support in the border states and the North itself. But when South Carolina not only insisted on seceding but also began firing on Fort Sumter, the time for moderation ended. Then Robert E. Lee resigned his commission in the U. S. Army and went home to stand by his brothers. Southern sympathizers in Missouri and Kentucky reluctantly gave up Dixie arguments and embraced the Union cause.

In the racial crisis of the 1960's the Marshalls and the Pattersons are flailing their arms again. They are pushing the moderates toward accepting black or white positions. The lines of biracial communication are endangered. The result of unlimited push on one side against unlimited no-give on the other imperils whatever progress has been made in the 20th century South.

Many Southerners, both white and black, do not fall in the categories circumscribed by Marshall or Patterson. They would settle for something less than everything now or something more than nothing now.

As Wilma Dykeman Stokeley posed the question recently in a speech at Raleigh, the "challenge is to confront boldly and realistically the question of how the Southern way may be merged with the American way without becoming submerged. . . . Our choice lies between being overwhelmed in the inevitable tide of full equality which is moving humanity in all parts of the world or seizing that tide and using it to capture the imagination and allegiance of the world."

But this cannot be done by extremists. It must be done by men and women of good will who realize that the genius of the American political system lies in its capacity for constructive compromise.