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Nixon and Coleman: the politics of integration

by Don Chipman



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In the last few years many articles have been written criticizing James Coleman, author of the Coleman Report's One and Two. Some critics have tried to point out that his research is less than scholarly. Others have accused Coleman of failing to recognize the difference between his scientific findings and his personal beliefs. All of these efforts have accomplished more for Coleman's image as a significant policy maker than anything else. In reality no single human could bring to the forefront the influence that many of his critics believe he possesses.

In one incident, for example, Coleman was criticized as the scholar who influenced President Richard Nixon of radically changing the federal government's school integration policies. According to Biloine Young and Grace Bress in their article "Coleman's Retreat and the Politics of Good Intentions", Coleman was a "significant participant" in the Nixon decision to transfer school integration efforts to the jurisdiction of the federal courts.¹ A close investigation of these events reveals that contrary to popular belief Coleman actually had very little to do with this decision. Even before Coleman arrived in Washington as an aid to Nixon, the administration was well on their way of shifting this responsibility to the courts. Desperately Coleman challenged this action, even going beyond his own research capabilities to predict that integration does promote achievement.

Initially Nixon intended to use some of Coleman's studies as a rationale for federal educational aid cuts. The Westinghouse Study and the 1966 **Equality of Educational Opportunity Report** were specifically used to point out that quality equipment did not make a significant difference in achievement scores, thus federal funds could be more adroitly used elsewhere—Vietnam. However, since public schooling was a popular home town congressional program, ultimately Nixon signed a bill that increased educational aid rather than reducing it.²

Keeping in mind his Southern Strategy, Nixon continued to attempt to walk the line between the conservatives and the liberals. He appeared to be probing in various directions, attempting to establish a sound integration policy, acceptable to all. At one point, he asked Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) Secretary Richardson to submit an amendment to an educational finance bill, forbidding the use of federal dollars to support bussing. Richardson, disgruntled, threatened to resign. After a meeting, the President withdrew his proposal, and Richardson remained with the administration.³ **New York Times** writer, Fred Hechinger, noted in 1970, "Education was caught between white segregationists, black power and sheer difficulty. Integration was not dead but it appeared at least to be in limbo."⁴

Apparently the term "quality schools" was something everyone could agree was significant. Despite the fact that integration had proceeded to the point that the South was more totally integrated than the North, Nixon did not dwell on this fact. Coleman believed that quality schools meant integrated schools and challenged the Administration to move forward on this issue. Within this context Coleman made his famous statement "integration alone would reduce the existing achievement gap between blacks and whites as much as 30 per cent."

Yet this announcement was not a plea for total integration as much as it was a call for assistance in developing educational alternatives. "The nation's school authorities," said Coleman, "seem too transfixed with one technique of integration when there is a variety of ways to make it work . . . federal aid is needed to develop possibly the voucher plan and after-school facilities to attract all types of people."⁵ A *New York Times* interpretation of this statement pointed out that Coleman was in fact suggesting that integration could be achieved in a number of ways, such as integrated trips to museums and to laboratories where individuals would learn in a variety of environments.⁶

Coleman often cited the fact that Americans lived in an information rich society, where education could be taught by volunteer tutors, by store-front schools, by large corporations, television, radio, newspapers, magazines and books, through the use of vouchers.⁷ Ultimately, he noted integration was not a question of increasing achievement 30 per cent or any other per cent, but basically a question of morality. "Are we willing," he asked, "to let schools be the vehicle through which the society separates individuals into two parts, separate and unequal?"⁸

During his Washington tenure, Coleman acted as an advisor on the Federal Emergency School Aid Act, which was designed to assist schools undergoing court-ordered desegregation. His recommendations were large in the area of providing finances for interracial experiences *outside* the public school system through the utilization of private agencies and other educational enterprises.⁹

Eventually the Administration decided that the enforcement of school desegregation efforts should be limited to *de jure* components only. Since Coleman believed that *de facto* and *de jure* segregation could not be distinguished except supposedly one takes place in the North and the other in the South, he thought that these proposed policies were too limited and accused some of the federal administrators of being "neosegregationists."¹⁰

Earlier in February 1970, Senator John Stennis pointed out this same discrepancy and attempted to introduce an amendment which would require the government to cut funds where Northern *de facto* segregation existed. In April, however, that specific education bill was passed without the Stennis proposal.¹¹

By the summer of 1970 the Nixon Administration was backing away from the original Johnson school integration commitment. The Civil Rights Commission scored the Administration for its retreat. Kenneth Clark, New York University professor, blamed Nixon for defaulting on school integration leadership.¹² Coleman, before Walter Mondale's Senate Select Committee on Equal Educational Integration, again discussed the academic benefits of integration. Through such policies, the achievement gap between the two races could be narrowed as much as "25 per cent," he stated. Yet as an appendage to this announcement, he continued to advocate educational flexibility by supporting such experiments as the Parkway School Program of Philadelphia.¹³

Eventually, the Administration found a new individual to rally their forces. He was Alexander Bickel, a Yale professor who claimed that complete integration was impossible and called the **Coleman Report** nothing more

than an ambiguous statement.¹⁴ Bickel, a staunch supporter of neighborhood schools, was in; and Coleman, after six months, was out.

Was Coleman's influence the primary factor in the Administration's policy change? Did Coleman, as some have charged, have a monopoly on governmental thinking? Even before Coleman's arrival in Washington, the Nixon Administration had decided to change its policy. In the fall of 1969, the Administration announced that it would renegotiate with one hundred school districts who had received federal school aid cuts, due to segregation policies.¹⁵ Leon E. Panetta, testifying in March 1970, stated that the HEW retreat was attributed to Senator John Stennis' concern for Mississippi's integration policies. According to Panetta, Stennis threatened to withdraw as Senate floor leadership of the President's embattled Safeguard Antiballistic Missile System if the Administration persisted in promoting integration at all costs. "The retreat," said Panetta, "was a political choice aimed at appeasing the South." He noted that neither Bob Haldeman nor John Ehrlichman was aiding the integration effort, thereby leaving Robert Finch the sole defender.¹⁶ While the President and his staff had access to Coleman, he was hardly a significant advisor. At the time that Coleman was supposedly advising the Administration to switch to court enforcement, Bickel was writing Nixon's educational policy statements. According to Syracuse University Professor Gerald Grant, the President's March 26, 1970, educational statement reflected the differences of expert advice with Coleman on one side of the issue and Bickel on the other.¹⁷ In trying to assess the role that individuals played in this important policy change, George Wallace was probably a more significant advisor than either Coleman or Bickel. After winning a 1970 Alabama Governor's election, Wallace predicted that there would be a dramatic change in the Administration's integration policies. Approximately 28 days later, Finch resigned.

Earlier in that year, Leon Panetta, Director of the Civil Rights Enforcement Division, had resigned. By the end of 1970, U.S. Commissioner of Education, James Allen was on his way. This action made it a clean sweep; Nixon had a completely new staff. Elliot Richardson became HEW Secretary, Sidney Marland, who endorsed moderate bussing, became the new Commissioner of Education and J. Stanley Pottinger assumed Panetta's position. The newest desegregation policy was announced in August, 1970, by Attorney General John Mitchell.¹⁸ In essence the Administration decided to rely on court action to enforce integration. "This will consist," stated Mitchell, "of filing and arguing lawsuits based upon the jurisdiction of the Fourteenth Amendment."¹⁹ No longer would the federal government send marshalls to the South or anywhere else.

It was the untimely fate of the school integration effort to fall upon the eve of a foreign war which shook this nation to its very foundations. Many with educational foresight and dedication were forced to retreat, propelling into the White House an individual whose record lacked the same quality of commitment. From the beginning Nixon had written off the civil rights vote. With most of the big Northern states controlling their 1968 delegates, Nixon was forced to go South where Republicans were not restrained. Here was the birth of the Southern Strategy, conceived in necessity but gradually assuming the spec-

tacle of a grand design. Under the guidance of Mitchell, this political strategy decreed that anything the South might perceive as faintly hostile was forbidden.

Ultimately, desegregation enforcement programs were deemphasized and shifted out of the governmental domain and into the courts. The pivotal personnel elements in this action were the Senators from Mississippi and South Carolina, John Stennis and Strom Thurmond, and Governor George Wallace, who applied the pressure, gently at first, hoping to suspend HEW desegregation guidelines authorized by the 1964 Civil Rights Act.²⁰ Avowing that he favored freedom of choice plans, Nixon set to work changing his staff, realigning educational policy and in general slowing the momentum of the desegregation effort. Those who advocated the old Johnson policies were eventually overwhelmed and retreated to the sidelines. And in the overall analysis, Coleman was not a significant participant but simply one small voice in a time of overwhelming political change.

Footnotes

1. Biloine W. Young and Grace B. Bress, "Coleman's Retreat and The Politics of Good Intentions," *Phi Delta Kappan*, November, 1975, 159-166.

2. Gerald Grant, "Shaping Social Policy: The Politics of the Coleman Report," *Teacher College Record*, 75 (September 1973), 28.

3. *New York Times*, August 4, 1971; August 10, 1971; September 1, 1971.

4. Fred M. Hechinger, "Education," *New York Times*, March 9, 1970.

5. *New York Times*, March 9, 1970.

6. Fred M. Hechinger, "Education," *New York Times*, March 9, 1970.

7. James S. Coleman, "Letter to Editor," *New York Times*, January 12, 1970.

8. James S. Coleman, "Letter to Editor," *New York Times*, March 13, 1970.

9. Grant, "Shaping Social Policy," p. 50.

10. James Coleman, "Letter to Editor," *New York Times*, March 13, 1970.

11. *New York Times*, February 19, 1970; April 2, 1970.

12. *New York Times*, April 12, 1970.

13. *New York Times*, April 22, 1970.

14. *New York Times*, September 26, 1970.

15. *New York Times*, September 17, 1969.

16. *New York Times*, March 1, 1970.

17. Gerald Grant, "Shaping Social Policy," p. 46.

18. *New York Times*, March 4, 1970; June 26, 1970.

19. *New York Times*, August 14, 1970.

20. Rowland Evans, Jr. and Robert D. Novak, *Nixon in the White House: The Frustration of Power* (New York: Random House, 1971) pp. 113-176.

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