



James Farmer

Integration or Desegregation

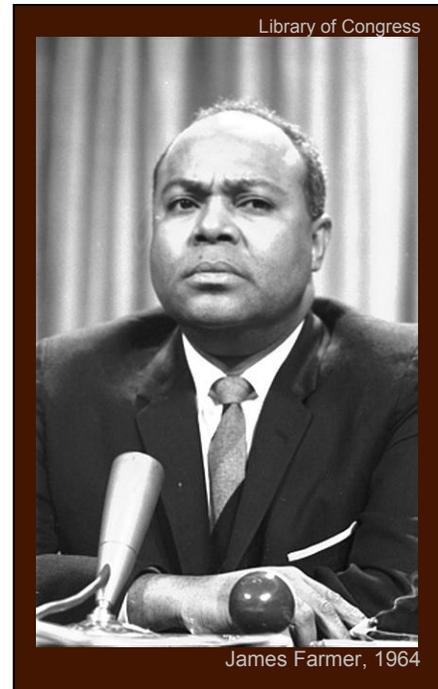
Ch. 5 of *Freedom — When?*

1965 EXCERPT

One feels his two-ness — An American, a Negro, two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals, in one dark body

The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self. . . . He would not Africanize America, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach the Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American without being cursed and spit upon. . . .

—W. E. B. DU BOIS, 1903
[ellipses in Farmer]



No word has served to epitomize the movement's goals for these last ten years as well as "integration." We would be integrated into America and destroy "segregation," the hated opposite of this new concept. So we demanded integrated schools and housing and employment, and integrated commercial messages on television, and integrated casts on opera and dramatic stages, and integrated movies, and mayors' committees, and civic-planning boards, etc. The value of integration took on the status of a self-evident truth.

Today, however, many Negroes, gripped by a new wave of self-pride and group-pride, are beginning to ask critical questions of the integrationist creed: How can we be prideful without advocating an inverted form of "separate but equal"? Is self-pride another term for self-segregation? Must we renounce ourselves and our community for the sake of integration?

Let me say immediately that much of "integration" re-mains valid for us and, in our view, for America, but with somewhat altered emphasis and meaning.

What do we mean by "integration"? For some the term means complete assimilation, a kind of random dispersal of Negroes throughout the society and the economy. There would be no Negro neighborhoods, no Negro schools, no jobs reserved for Negroes. America would be a land of individuals who were American and nothing else, and Negro individuals would differ from their fellow Americans only in their skin color — that most insignificant of human differences. Some of us even dreamed that differences of color too would soon melt away when love and colorblindness permeated the land. As I have said, no one can question the ultimate goodness of this ideal. The question is: Is it too good to be true?

Integration has been the nation's implicit ideal since America was a glint in Jefferson's eye. It is nothing but Jeffersonian individualism extended to all people. But it did not become a practical political goal until quite recently, and the reasons for this make an important story. Like most Americans, Negroes were still accepting "separate but equal" as the law of the land as late as the mid-forties, and our major

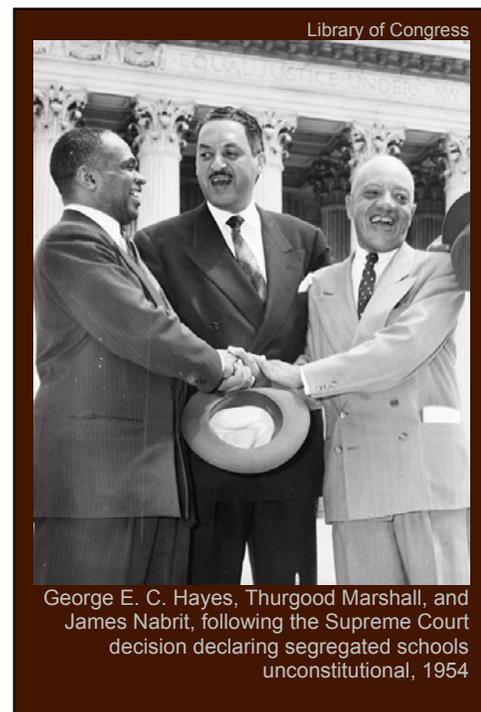
efforts were expended in making the “equal” of “separate but equal” a reality. In the decades before the 1954 Supreme Court decision desegregating schools the NAACP brought to the court cases treating discrimination in education, voting, interstate and intrastate travel, public facilities, and selection of juries. The court in those years invariably found that Negro facilities were palpably unequal and ruled that segregation was constitutional only if facilities and accommodations were truly equal. In other words, the whole burden of the civil rights movement’s case then was: if facilities are going to be separate, at least make them equal. Separate but equal was reaffirmed.

Toward the end of the forties NAACP lawyers and strategists began to argue that in certain respects separate facilities could never be equal. For example, a Negro relegated to a Negro law school could not hope to make professional contacts that would enable him to swim in the main stream of the profession as readily as someone at a white law school — and this was true no matter how beautiful the buildings and how well-stocked the library at the Negro law school was. A Pullman seat in a car reserved for Negroes could not be the equal of a seat in the white car because the manifest intention of “for Negroes only” was to convey inferiority. By a natural process of evolution the demand for what we might term equal-if-separate turned into a demand for desegregation.

To argue that a beautiful Negro law school or a plush seat in a Negro Pullman was inferior to its white counterpart demanded some subtlety. To argue that the segregated public school system treated Negroes as second-class citizens demanded no subtlety at all. Comparison of expenditures per student, school plant, teachers’ salaries, experience and training of teachers, books and supplies, and other measurable factors, made it clear that throughout the country, and in the South particularly, the Negro, forced by law and fact into segregated schools, was being deprived of equality under law. The 1954 Supreme Court decision attempted to correct this intolerable inequity in the only way practical and intelligent men could — by eliminating the dual school systems.

But the court added a theoretical dimension to its factual and practical findings: “Separate educational facilities,” it said, “are *inherently* unequal” [emphasis added in Farmer article] and it cited as evidence certain psychological data — principally those of Professor Kenneth Clark — which document the serious psychological damage race separation causes in Negro youngsters. Now, I am not certain what “inherently unequal” or even “separate educational facilities” mean in this context, and I will want to return to these phrases shortly; but first I would like to explain how we interpreted the court’s decision. For us it was a recognition of what every Negro knows: that the system of segregation was mounted and perpetuated for the purpose of keeping the black man down; that it was and is a conspiracy to instill in the Negro *and the white* a sense of Negro inferiority. Segregation is slavery made legal. Segregation *means* inferiority, as indelibly as the scarlet letter meant adulteress to the New England Puritans. The Negro knows this; it was intended that he know this, and so too must any American with the most rudimentary sense of history know it. And now the court was saying that this country would segregate no more. So we began to protest against segregated schools of all kinds, *de facto* and *de jure* [by fact and by law], demanding quality integrated education, knowing all the time that we were combating and helping eliminate the hated *meaning* which had been assigned to our lives.

As separate schools were inferior, so too were separate neighborhoods (quite obviously the *meaning* of segregated neighborhoods is simply that the great white world doesn’t want black folk living next to



it; anyone who doubts this need only observe the hysteria and violence which ensue when a Negro family moves into a white neighborhood). The effect of living in an enforced ghetto is conveyed graphically in the desolation and wreckage, human and material, in which most Negroes live today. So we moved to desegregate housing and some aimed at dismantling the ghetto.

Indeed, every instance and symbol of segregation and every invidious discrimination could now be legitimately challenged. There are millions, and we took them on one by one, case by case. At lunch counters, restaurants, rest rooms, swimming pools, amusement parks, beaches, labor unions, banks, factories, offices, department stores, professional societies, churches, colleges. To the most rabid integrationists even the institutions of Negro communal life were implicated. They saw no reason for a Negro Medical Society; all energies must be directed to breaking down the AMA [American Medical Association]. Negro colleges, Negro churches, Negro newspapers were at best tolerated as unnecessary anachronisms.



Integration was a white man's cause as well as a black man's, and the literally thousands of interracial organizations which came into being to fight the good fight became themselves temporary models of integrated living. CORE [Congress of Racial Equality] was one, and remains one. Many whites recognize the superiority complex demanded of the white man in a segregated system to be as harmful in its way as the inferiority complex demanded of Negroes. Many quite sincerely set about curing themselves and their neighborhoods and schools of this affliction.

The rabid integrationist aims at mixing every unit of society in "ideal" proportions. In middle-class neighborhoods housing committees were formed to persuade reluctant white homeowners to accept respectable Negroes, and courageous and well-to-do Negroes were sought who would brave white wrath. And when one or two Negroes had entered a neighborhood, the same committees, now with the eager help of the Negroes, organized to keep other Negroes out. We mustn't let the neighborhood tip, they said. Housing developments adopted informal quotas to help engineer integrated living. Dedicated builders, like Morris Milgrim of Philadelphia, began to persuade investors that quality housing projects, open to all, could return a modest profit, and integrated oases soon sprang up in several previously all-white deserts. Many liberals grew uncomfortable with the irony that in order to achieve integration they had to adopt racial quotas of various sorts, designating Negroes in order to eliminate racial designations, as it were, and some became discouraged at the solemn spectacle of Negroes chasing whites from suburb to suburb — in quest of integration. But among white liberals and some black liberals the dream of complete integration persisted.

Almost imperceptibly the demand for desegregation had shaded into a demand for black dispersal and assimilation. We were told, and for a while told ourselves, that *all* Negro separation was inherently inferior, and some folk began to think that Negroes couldn't be fully human in the presence of other Negroes. But what of Africa? Was separation inferior there too? And what of the *de facto* separation of other minority groups, the Jews and Chinese, for example. Was separation so self-evidently inferior for them as it was for us?

I am not a lawyer, but I think that the phrase “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal,” which supports the philosophy of total integration, invites some misinterpretation. Separation need not be inferior in all cases and all places. What is crucial is the *meaning* the culture places upon the separation. Separation, in other words, is not necessarily segregation, *though in America, Negro separation in fact and in law means segregation*. This is the crucial insight. The separation of Negroes in America *means* segregation — slavery. In its decision the Supreme Court was offering a particular and indisputable reading of the meaning of American history. In the context of our civilization with its history of racism, the court said, separate educational institutions are inherently inferior.

When a Negro child goes through the doors of a segregated school, he knows implicitly that his culture is telling him to go there because he is not fit to be with others, and every time a Negro child hears of a white parent who becomes hysterical at the thought that his child will have to endure the likes of him, he feels the pressure of his inferiority a little more firmly. As a result he is damaged. And this too the Supreme Court saw. As long as the ideology of racial inferiority and superiority persists, segregation will be an insult and blackness a stigma.

One does not undo the accumulated meanings of centuries by waving a magic wand: “*Abracadabra!*” Once you were segregation. Now you are separation. This is tokenism: the belief that by one gesture, one concession, yes, even one sincere cry of the heart, one moment of honest compassion, the country will transform the manifest meaning of historic life-ways. The desegregation fight is crucial to all Americans. What we are attempting is nothing less than to reverse the latent *meaning* of our lives and practices. For a civilization to do this takes remarkable strength of purpose, time, persistence, and most of all, honesty. Because the foot is on his neck, Negroes have been much more honest about America than the whites. We know this civilization is still segregated in its heart of hearts. We test the spirit of its ways, and white Americans who would be honest about America listen attentively when we tell them about their country.

Now, this distinction between separation and segregation was often made by Malcolm X. Time and again, he denied that the Black Muslims were segregationists. We are separationists, he said, not segregationists. Without qualification all American Negroes hate segregation. Some Negroes, however, would *choose* to live separately, and Malcolm saw this and tried to make it a *legitimate* desire. But in one very essential respect I differ strongly with Malcolm. He believed that Negroes can change the manifest meaning of their separated existence solely by the force of their own wills. I believe that there is much Negroes can do for themselves, but I do not believe they can separate truly if the nation does not simultaneously desegregate.

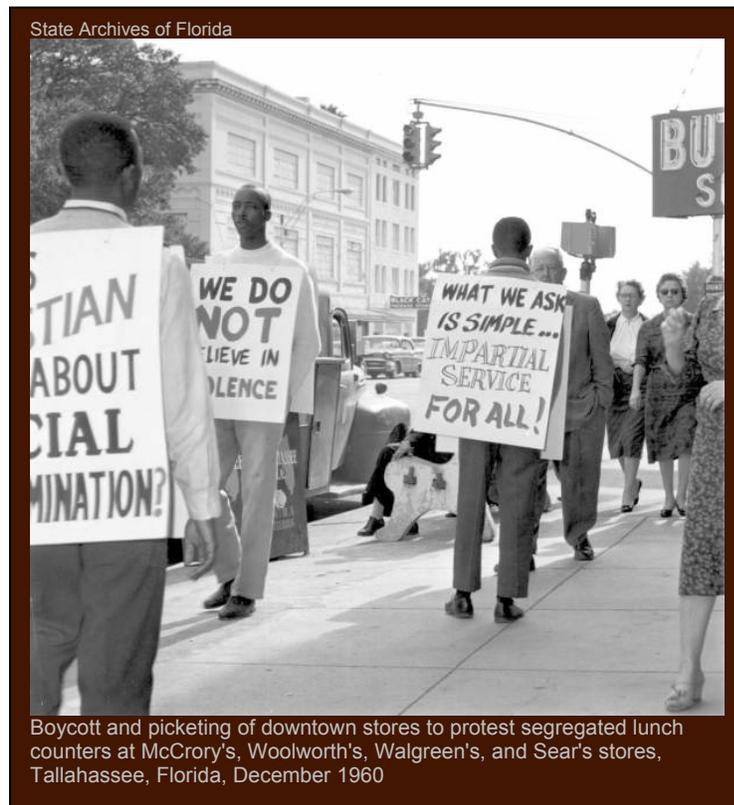
Culturally we are Americans, and like all men we know ourselves, in part, by what our culture tells us about ourselves. The fact is that American segregationists take delight in the Black Muslims’ program. I do not believe the rumor that the Ku Klux Klan and some Texas millionaires support the Muslims, but I do know that they take no small comfort from Muslim activities. Even CORE’s decision to emphasize self-help in the Negro community succeeds in making Parents and Taxpayers Associations breathe easier. And Negroes know this. In other words, there is a certain validity to the integrationist insight that separate Negro efforts and institutions simply perpetuate segregation. If, in his heart of hearts, the Negro believes that self-separation is only a rationalization for cowardly acceptance of segregation, then separation will fail.

*The only way Negro separation would not mean segregation is if the Negro has the sense that he chooses to live separately, and this will happen only when total freedom of choice is a reality in America. Desegregation and the development of Negro self-pride work side by side. Desegregation makes separation possible.**

What we wish is the freedom of choice which will cause any choice we make to seem truly our own. That freedom of choice must apply throughout American society and American life. A person should

* Of course, Negroes do not have the right to exclude whites who choose to live among them. [Footnote in original]

be able to choose where he wants to live and live there. If he chooses to live in Lovely Lane in Orchard Gardens, he should be able to, if he has the money to swing it. He should be able to work at any job for which he is qualified and equipped, regardless of his color. Jim Brown, a thoughtful man and pretty good fullback, offended some people when he said that he personally wouldn't want to live with whites but that he damned well wanted to know that he could if he did want to. I think he represents the thinking of many Negroes.



But many other Negroes will choose to integrate; they should be permitted to. James Baldwin asks whether it is worth integrating into a sinking ship. Many middle-class Negroes, whose spines are straighter than Baldwin and others suppose, would answer, "You're damned right it is." Many will buy their twenty- or thirty-thousand-dollar homes and move into neighborhoods which suit them culturally and financially. Indeed, most Negroes integrating such a neighborhood will probably have a higher educational level than their white neighbors, prejudice being what it is. It is easy to scoff at the spectacle of a middle-class Negro shoving his way into a white enclave. Some say, "Does white approval mean that much? Why go where you're not wanted?" But I have known many of these men. They brave abuse nobly and stand tough witness to noble ideals. Their

acts shake the system of segregation and for that reason their efforts are more closely connected to efforts to eliminate the psychological ghetto than is commonly granted.

We must not forget that there are solid, perhaps incomparable, values in truly integrated living. W. E. B. Du Bois, a proud black man, once said that the real tragedy in our world today is not that men are poor; all men know something of poverty. Nor that men are ignorant; what is truth? Nor that men are wicked; who is good? But that men know so little of men.

It is important for Negroes to know white men and for white men to know Negroes. I might add that white men should insist that we live among them for their own sakes. And if some Negroes resist white blandishments, they will be fuller men for having resisted a valuable temptation.

Those who glibly abuse "middle-class" Negroes often commit the racist fallacy of demanding that black men behave according to their definition of him. If a black man wants to skip five thousand lunches, as Dick Gregory says, in order to buy a Cadillac, then he should. At CORE we have come to believe that in a free society many Negroes will choose to live and work separately, *although not in total isolation*. They will cultivate the pride in themselves which comes in part from their efforts to make this a free land. Even those living and working in "racially balanced" situations will value their Negro identity more than before. In helping themselves, they will come to love themselves. From loving themselves, they will determine to help themselves. They will be Americans and Negroes. They will be free to pick and choose from several rich traditions. They may thrill to the example of modern Africa and search out the richness of Africa's past as Du Bois did. Or they may as Americans and Westerners

seize as models such great American cultural heroes as Lincoln or Hemingway or Duke Ellington. They will be as American as St. Patrick's Day and Columbus Day and Rosh Hashanah.

We are beginning now to see a more ideal division of effort within CORE and among the groups comprising the entire civil rights movement. Clearly the desegregation movement must continue unabated. We must demand that segregation end. Tokenism of all kinds must be rejected. We shall demand quality integrated education, now definitely adding to it the demand that Negro history be taught in the public schools so that our youngsters can learn that they are ancient citizens of this land. There must be open housing and fair employment practices, in law and in fact. And we will still demand preferential, compensatory treatment (I shall discuss this more fully later). In brief, there should be no abatement in the efforts of the last years. At the same time we will enter the Negro community, working with those masses who couldn't care less about integrating and couldn't afford it if they did care. Our efforts in the ghettos to help the people build a community life and a community spirit will be spurred by the knowledge that desegregation is taking place simultaneously. In this way segregation will be transformed into separation. Perhaps "independence" is a better term than separation. We shall become independent men. We will accept, in other words, part of Malcolm's insight that segregation will become separation only with a separate effort of Negro heart and soul rejecting the notion of some of the older civil rights organizations (and of the original CORE) that desegregation and integration *in itself* will accomplish miracles. But we will correct the Muslims' belief that the Negro can do all things alone. There must be simultaneous desegregation and we must demand it. By this amendment we will affirm that we are Americans and that the civil rights movement is an American movement.

It is clear from this summary that there is something for everyone to do. How often I have been asked by white middle-class liberals, "But what can I do?" The answer is simple. You can integrate your neighborhoods and schools as purely and diligently as ever. You are responsible for segregation and only you can end it. The white man should be an integrationist. And the fact that some Negroes now build their own lives independently without apology has no bearing upon this white responsibility. Nor, I think, should whites advise Negroes to separate themselves, for that always sounds suspiciously like a demand for segregation. Separation, independence, must be our choice to make and our program to achieve. It should affect the traditional integrationist efforts of civil rights and civil liberties groups, church and labor groups, fair housing and fair employment committees not a jot.

Is it divisive of me to suggest that all parties to the movement will not share identical perspectives? Some think so. But I believe that one cannot be all men at all times and remain himself. There is a twoness, to use Du Bois's term, in the movement as there is in the Negro, and no synthesis, as far as I can see now, is possible. Perhaps ultimately, God willing. We should not be frightened by slight ambivalences. They are a sign that we are becoming free, for freedom eludes simple definitions.
