

Governor John Bell Williams Address on
the Integration of Public Schools in Mississippi

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WILLIAMS: Ladies and gentlemen, friends and fellow Mississippians. I speak to you in a fateful hour in the life of our state. I have sought this time that I might visit in your homes through the medium of television and radio to discuss a mutual problem, the most important problem facing us in our state and one that concerns the future of the things nearest and dearest to us, our children. I will try to be as deliberate and objective as I can, though, for me as well as for you, the subject is one which understandably tends to arouse emotions. But I ask you to reason with me at a time when reason must outweigh emotion and calm must prevail over hysteria. This is not a time for histrionics or emotional tirades. If we lose our heads now, we may lose, also, our children's future. The moment that we have resisted for 15 years, that we have fought, hopefully to avoid, at least, to delay is, finally, at hand. We have reached the millennium. The children of Mississippi, white and black, have been denied the right to attend the school of their choice by an arbitrary edict of the United States Supreme Court. From the sanctuary of their secluded chambers, isolated from the practical problems of everyday living, protected from the normal experiences of regular social contact among all races and economic strata, they have arrogated unto themselves the power to sit as sole and final arbiters of our children's welfare and as self-appointed dictators of our children's future. Through a series of decisions, the high court has taken away from the people the right and the responsibility to run their own schools and to safeguard the best interests of their own children. In the years since 1954, when the Supreme Court first overstepped its judicial authority to assume lawmaking powers, the full resources of the state of Mississippi have been constantly employed in a struggle to salvage our constitutional right to operate our own schools in our own way with our own money for the best interest of our own children of whatever race or economic status. During these 15 years, our governors, our attorneys general, our legislatures, our school boards, their attorneys and administrators, our congressional delegations in Washington and our other state and local officials, have stood four-square, shoulder to shoulder in fighting an uphill battle against those forces that would dissolve our freedoms. Throughout these 15 years, Mississippi has been used as a proving ground for every kind of radical so-called civil rights experiment that could be dreamed up by the witchdoctors of the pseudo-liberal left and their fellow revolutionaries. These elements have had the full support of phoning federal administrations fearing the power of their strategically located and rigidly controlled block votes. Even Presidents of the United States, dreading the wrath of their vengeance, have cravenly yielded to their demands, however unreasonable, however unconstitutional. They have furnished them with troops and money and legal aid, and they have placed entire departments of the federal government at their disposal. Even before Lyndon Johnson led the cheers for these radicals by chanting their theme

Song, "We Shall Overcome", to a joint session of the United States Congress, the southern states, and Mississippi, in particular, have been open, defenseless, marked and singular targets for all the vitriolic hate and abuse that could be heaped upon us by anyone with a politically motivated cause. Mississippi has faced trying times before. Our people suffered the terrible ordeal of civil war fought on our own ground. We were dragged through the terrible days of the Reconstruction, and, yet, we survived, and from the carnage of that era rose a greater and finer state and people. An agricultural state, we survived the era of five-cent cotton and furnished more than our share of young men to the defense of this nation in times of war. We have walked through the shadows each time to emerge into the sunlight of a finer age and a better civilization. We didn't weather these crises by the easy expedient of surrender. In every instance, we knew setbacks and reverses, yet we never yielded in our determination to survive, and we did survive, and we maintained our honor and our self-respect. In times of great stress and strife, it is customary, and properly so, that the people look to their elected officials and, more especially, to their chief executive, to provide the leadership and to suggest the course that might accomplish their escape from their dilemma. By the same token, the people have a right to expect their leaders to be open and candid with them, that their leaders will give them an honest assessment of the solu...of the situation confronting them no matter how good, no matter how bad that situation might be, and that's why I speak to you tonight. When the District of Columbia public schools were fully integrated overnight into a unitary school system in 1955, President Eisenhower proclaimed that these schools would serve as a model of integration for other states to follow. At that time, Washington's public school racial population was about the same proportion that now exists in the state of Mississippi. The result of the Washington experiment became obvious in less than a year when standards deteriorated drastically. Police patrols were dispatched to keep peace in the schools, and Whites began to flee these schools by the thousands. In 1954, Washington numbered among its schools some of the finest in the country. In scholastic achievement, nearly half of the schools in Washington were rated in the top five percent of all the schools in the nation. Today, the Washington public schools are segregated again, not by law, but by the practical fact that nearly all of the white children have fled the school system, and it is now more than 96 percent black. No longer does Washington brag about the high standards in its schools, indeed they cannot, because the former high standards are no more. These standards fell victim long ago to the acts of a blind social experiment that has failed miserably. Instead of becoming a showcase of successful integration, the District of Columbia public school system has become a national disgrace. All of this has been freely admitted by Dr. Carl Hansen, who was superintendent of the Washington schools throughout the period of change and for quite a number of years thereafter, in testimony delivered before a number of federal courts. The tragic case of the Washington schools is the

only precedent available by which we can judge the possible effects on our school system. Except for the obvious advantage that Washington had over our schools in having the full financial support of the federal government, which we do not have, the situations are parallel indeed. The story of the Washington schools is one that we might well contemplate, and the story has been the same wherever it has been tried under similar circumstances. Now, our public schools have been forced into the same dire, serious, troublesome and impossible predicament. Quality public education in a great portion of our state has been made an impossibility under conditions inflicted on our public schools by a vindictive, autocratic, arbitrary Supreme Court. I am frank to tell you, as much as it grieves me, that our arsenal of legal and legislative weapons has been exhausted. I would be less than honest if I were to suggest that there might be some magic formula that could be applied, some radical or spectacular maneuver that could be employed or hope of some last minute reprieve that might come to provide escape from the calamity certain to befall our public schools in their next semester's operations. Now, this is not to infer that our best legal efforts will not be expended in the hope of relief in the future. We will not surrender, nor will we yield, in our continued efforts to provide escape for our people from this cruel yoke of judicial tyranny. The results of great legal research and expertise have already gone into the records of these federal courts, though they have chosen, thus far, to ignore these facts. Yet, sooner or later, an appellate court will find itself in a position where it has no choice but to give full review and take appropriate notice of these facts. When that time comes, we must be given relief. We will give legal support to our teachers whose individual and employment rights are being violated by these arbitrary actions, and we will enter suits on behalf of our aggrieved students whose constitutional freedoms have been usurped by these orders of the high courts. We will institute litigation to compel equal application of these judicial laws to other areas of the country which, now, because of their politically strategic positions, enjoy immunity from their application. We will continue to fight, as long as these intolerable conditions endure, for the right of our children to be given a quality education whether it be in public or private schools or both. But, in facing the immediate ordeal, I am compelled to repeat, as distastefully as it is to contemplate; there is no panacea for a statewide solution prior to the opening of our schools for the next semester. It's easy for each of us to say what ought to be done. At this point, the crux of the problem is not so much what ought to be done, but, rather, what can be done. The courts have directed the immediate establishment of what they call a unitary system. Yet, they haven't defined what they mean by the term unitary. They have said that we must forcibly integrate our systems fully and completely overnight, and, when practical difficulties in accomplishing this were raised even by federal agencies themselves, the court told us to do it by the numbers. Let us explore, just for a moment, the courses available to us as a state. We can acquiesce in total surrender to their orders and suffer the obvious consequences: a sudden

deterioration in the quality of education, immediate lowering of standards, interminable disciplinary problems and the destruction of teacher and pupil morale everywhere. We could brazenly shout defiance of the federal government and the court orders, yet, we know from experience the futility of that course. We know that such a course would avail nothing more than additional grief and strife. We could close our public schools entirely, or we could keep them open in the fond hope that a brighter day might dawn which would see the return of their control to our own people through our school boards. Shall we abandon public education and rely entirely on setting up a private school system? These are questions that should be answered. In my contemplation of the various alternatives, I am strongly of the opinion that we must preserve our public school system as an absolute necessity for the good of all. While a majority of our public schools will find it extremely difficult to survive under the [owners] of the court orders, it must be recognized, also, that, in a substantially large area of our state, the problem is not so acute. With such a divergence of conditions, it becomes necessary that we mold into one objective the many and varied alternatives and suggested plans of action. Such a plan, to be workable, must contemplate a continued strong and vibrant system of public education. In the light of the burden placed upon our public schools by the Supreme Court, their preservation in many of the areas of the state is not going to be an easy matter. Nor is it going to be easy to establish private schools as any kind of workable alternative, though I shall ask the legislature to seek ways and means of rendering assistance toward this end. In the recent special session of the legislature, loans were authorized to assist children in obtaining an education in private and parochial schools only to run headlong into an injunction against their operation by the federal courts. While this is yet to be heard on its merits, there is little doubt but that the court, following its usual arbitrary line of decisions in this area, will render them invalid. It will be my intention in the next session to renew my request to the legislature that it authorize tax credits for taxpayers who contribute money to educational institutions, whether public or private. We will explore other possible avenues by which we can encourage and assist in the creation and operation of private schools throughout our state. To those who would hold that in seeking to lend support to private schools in our state that I am concurrently seeking the death of our public schools, I would caution a moment's reflection. If you remember, the main thrust of my administration at the outset was to upgrade public education in Mississippi and to update our dangerous and antiquated system of Highways. Even in this our educational needs were given first priority. With the courageous cooperation of the legislature, we brought a new day to our public schools, our teachers and to public education. For the first time within my memory, the needs of public education in our state had been given first priority on the agenda of a new administration's goals, and, in line with my recommendation, the legislature enacted into law the most comprehensive and far-reaching program of public school improvement

ever known in the history of this state of ours. In order to accomplish these improvements, I had to recommend additional revenues to defray the additional costs. I shouldered this responsibility, and I recommended these tax increases knowing full well that it would cost me dearly in whatever popularity I may have enjoyed at the time. Yet, it had to be done, and the legislature recognized that it had to be done, and they assumed their responsibility, also, at no little risk to their political futures. I don't think it's necessary for me to proclaim further my support for quality public education in our public schools. My record speaks for itself. If our public school system is destroyed, it will not be your governor who brings that about. I didn't seek this office to preside over the destruction of public education in our state nor do I want to see the fruits of my administration go down the drain and into the sewers of power politics. If our public school system suffers – and suffer it will, this is inescapable – it will not be because of our people's lack of support for the principle of public education. The fact is that our people have always supported our public school system even to the extent of devoting a greater proportion of our tax revenues for public school support than any other state in the union. On the other hand, a strong private school system may very well supplement and add strength to our public schools. There is no doubt that a strong system of public schools will have to be the ultimate primary vehicle for providing the education for both black and white, but this is not to say that it must be the only system, and each must respect the rights and responsibilities of the other. Parents must decide for themselves what type of school their child will attend. In many cases, parents unable to defray the costs of private schools for their children, unwilling to place their children in the public schools under existing circumstances, will have no choice but to keep their children out of school for the semester unless some accommodations, probably locally, can be made for them. Parents must be left free from extraneous pressures and coercion in exercising their right to choose what is best for their children. But whatever the situation and whatever course is chosen in January, even that may have to be altered, perhaps, even reversed, in September. We can't permit our people to become polarized or committed irrevocably to any particular position at this point, for times change and what may be today may not be tomorrow. No one can say what our circumstances may be next September or next January, and we would be utterly foolish if we burned our bridges behind us. It's senseless to engage in name calling, vilification and categorizing because of the present decision of any individual family. Our fight has been for freedom of choice, and that fight will continue on and on until we have gained an ultimate victory. To restrict parents in exercising the choices remaining to them after the court's decisions, whether to patronize public or private schools or to withdraw their children, is wholly inconsistent with the freedom of choice concept, and it handicaps us greatly in seeking to advance that principle. Our schools rightfully belong to us, yet, we no longer control them. They are, now, under the complete control of majority of the Fifth Circuit Court

of Appeals backed up by the Supreme Court. Judging by recent orders of the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, they intend to retain absolute control and, through force and threats, run our schools without regard to our wishes or the best educational advantages of our children, white or black. The task at hand is monumental. It brings into immediate focus the problems confronting 148 public school districts, 795 school board members, 970 attendance centers, 40,000 public school teachers and staff personnel, 600,000 enrolled students and an indeterminate number of parents and guardians. In addition to this, Mississippi has about 100 private schools in operation, today, throughout the state, and this number is growing rapidly. Instead of heated rivalry between the two school systems, one seeking to gain advantage at the expense of the other, it is my hope that there might be, instead, a spirit of cooperation to the end that all of our children may be given the best education it is within our power to provide. For instance, it might be well for our school administrators, in communities where the needs are great and the facilities limited, to make arrangements with legitimate private school administrators for the use of their physical facilities at times and hours when they are not required for public school purposes. The same spirit of cooperation, in my opinion, should exist between our churches and private schools even as it exists now between our churches and our public schools. The preservation of quality public education for our children is a challenge that demands the full cooperation of all the people of Mississippi, regardless of faith or race or philosophy. Now, I have every confidence to believe that the administrators and supporters of the private school system will, in turn, support to the fullest the efforts of public school administrators in seeking to return the people's control over the public schools to the people. In passing, let me say that we owe a great debt of gratitude to those members of our school boards who have served through the years with skilled devotion and courage. These boards have fought a good fight to preserve and maintain the quality and integrity of our public schools. They have done so without compensation and at great personal risk and sacrifice and, in many cases, without the sympathetic understanding of the general public. I ask you, the public, to join in petitioning them to remain at their posts of duty in the face of the difficult conditions visited upon them and to pledge our continued support and encouragement for their efforts. Let's remember that even the parents who may decide to withdraw their children from the public schools still have an economic interest as taxpayers in seeing these schools operated efficiently and economically. Whatever may come, it is absolutely essential that good people serve on our school boards. There is no limit to what free men of good will in voluntary association can accomplish. There is, likewise, no limit to the damage that could be visited on us by irresponsible actions of small minorities hell-bent on dividing our people and frustrating honest and intelligent efforts to bring order out of disorder. The ultimate answer depends upon us. We became free, and we can stay free by doing for ourselves, but, in doing for ourselves, we must, also, work with others in

resolving a common problem. Like many of you, I'm a parent. I have two children in our Mississippi public schools. Their year and a half in public schools, since returning to Mississippi, has been the happiest of their school careers. Yet, the school they attend is under a court order, and no one, at this point, knows what changes will be forced on it in the next semester. They don't know whether they will be separated arbitrarily from their friends and teachers even if they are permitted to return to the same school. They don't know even whether they will be reassigned to that school, or [similarly] reassigned to another school on the other side of town simply to help create some kind of predetermined racial balance by the numbers as ordered by the courts and HEW. As a parent, I share your dilemma. Like you, Mrs. Williams and I face a dread and serious decision within our own family. Like you, we will try to reach a decision that will serve the best educational interests of our children. The court orders apply to school boards and administrators. They are the only people who must follow these orders under penalty of prosecution. You, as parents, are free to follow whatever course you may deem best for your children. You are under no legal compulsion to place your children in any particular school, though the courts have denied you the freedom to enroll your children in the public school of your choice. As your governor, I will not presume to suggest which of these three options should be followed by any particular parents. Different situations confront parents in the several school districts, and the decision must be yours, as parents, to be made in the light of conditions that prevail in your particular school or community and must be made in the best interests of your children. I would say this, however, while it is your right to exercise whatever option you choose for your child, it is, likewise, the right of your neighbor to do the same for his child. No parent should be subjected to criticism or recrimination for choosing to send his child to any particular school. It is my hope that we can stand up to this crisis unified as one in a determination to preserve the peace and dignity of our state. How the people of our state react in this time of great emergency and trial, how we deport ourselves in the face of adversity, will determine whether we may ever expect relief. As earnestly and emphatically as I can, I want to urge restraint on the part of our people. Most of us resent this denial of our rights by the courts, and it follows that tempers usually rise under these conditions. Let us remember that the public schools, after all, are public property, and willful damage or destruction of these properties is senseless. It's like cutting off a nose to spite a face. Nothing can be gained through violent acts of any kind. That has been proven time and time again. So, let us accept the inevitable fact that we are going to suffer one way or the other, both white and black, as a result of the court's decrees. With God's help, let us make the best of a bad situation. Let us show to the world that we have the same indomitable spirit that characterized our valiant ancestors who endured the rigors and hardships of reconstruction to emerge undaunted in the struggle for dignity and self-determination. To this end, I seek the support, the cooperation, the sympathetic understanding of all Mississippians of all races

and all philosophies. As we emerge into the dawn of a new decade, let's petition the guidance and blessings of divine providence that, whatever we do, whatever decisions we make, whatever course we choose, will be the right one; that we will not despair, but that we will face the future with hope with an unbounded determination that these next ten years will witness a return of our government to its ancient landmarks of constitutional liberty, and that freedom, under God, will become once again the living hallmark of America's greatness. Thank you. Good night.

END OF RECORDING

INDEX

District of Columbia public schools - 2
Eisenhower, Dwight D. - 2
Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals - 5
Freedom of Choice (in education) – 1, 3, 5, 7
Integration – 2, 3
Johnson, Lyndon - 1
Parents – 5, 6, 7
Private Schools - 3, 4, 5, 6
Public Schools – 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7
Segregation - 2
Tax Credits - 4
United States Supreme Court – 1, 3, 4, 5