

Thoughts on Civil Rights Legislation

Interviewer: Mr. President, turning now to civil rights. The question is in 1957 Congress passed, at your suggestion, a civil rights bill dealing largely with voting. Do you think this Congress should pass civil rights legislation dealing specifically with problems arising from school segregation?

Dwight D. Eisenhower: I think when we get into the field of law here we must be very careful. I do believe in the law concerning voting, and I think we should have whatever correctives are necessary in the law in order to make certain that a man's privilege, of qualified citizens' privilege, of voting is not taken away from him for such inconsequential things as race, or creed, or origin. That, to my mind, is the first thing to do.

Now when we get the federal government working by law in things that are known to be primarily state, we run into difficulties. One of them is the closing of schools. To my mind, this is tragic. I tried to say the other day that I believe the image of America is not helped abroad when we have so many thousands of our children deprived of schooling for no fault of their own...and by the closing of the schools.

So, I would say that first I would like to see this problem of voting solved with the necessary, whatever laws may be necessary, including that I would like to see extended the life of the Civil Rights Commission. I'd like to see power more clear cut to make certain that they can examine into the difficulties about voting, the bars to it, and to get some kind of procedures that will makes this privilege stand so that it will not be violated. And if this is done, it's my belief that now voters themselves, local voters, state voters, and national voters, will have a greater and finer opportunity to proceed with the, as I say, the proper observance of their other rights. But I do say that until all of us take again as a standard, a standard of living by the concepts of the Constitution, and try by our teaching, our example, our beliefs, express convictions, we are not going to get too far just by laws that operate specifically upon a state-supported activity. Because as I say, if the state ceases that activity, then what do we do? That, in my mind, is the problem that takes time, dedication, but I do say this: it must be solved.

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