

# A Haunting Issue: The Lunch Counters

Governor Hodges said only the obvious when he expressed no sympathy for lunch counter demonstrators "who deliberately engage in activities which any reasonable person can see will result in a breakdown of law and order."

These remarks were directed at Negro or white agitators who, in the Governor's words, "cause disorder or refuse to obey an order to leave either by the owner or a police officer."

Of course such agitators are a public menace. But castigating them does not get to the root of the current trouble at Southern lunch counters. The trouble is that Negro citizens, invited to trade at certain counters in a store, no longer intend to be treated like messenger boys

at the food counter and asked to take their food standing up or eat it outside.

Custom so decrees. But times change and customs change. Nothing is so powerful as an idea whose time is come. Sometimes wisdom must recognize that certain human behavior, decreed by custom, simply will not stand up in the light of changing conditions.

The lunch counter issue derives its power and persistence from that source. As long as those who seek a change in Southern civilities seek it in a peaceful manner, their power (and their haunting image on the white man's conscience) will not diminish.

Even the Richmond News Leader, fountainhead of Dixie resistance against the Brown decision, recognized the irony of some of the sit-downs:

Here were the colored students, in coats, white shirts, ties, and one of them was reading Goethe and one was taking notes from a biology text. And here, on the sidewalk outside, was a gang of white boys come to heckle, a ragtail rabble, slack-jawed, black-jacketed, grinning fit to kill, and some of them, God save the mark, were waving the proud and honored flag of the Southern States in the last war fought by gentlemen. Eheu! It gives one pause.

It certainly does.

The legal rights in this showdown may seem perfectly clear: A store owner has a right to serve whomever he pleases. But the issue becomes murky when he invites all customers into his store but refuses to serve all at some counters.

Somewhere the South's leadership must find a way to combine equity with practicality. It will not be easy, but without it, the business communities of the South will be haunted at the lunch counters for a long time.