

# THE EDUCATIONAL THOUGHT OF BENJAMIN ELIJAH MAYS

by

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(Under the Direction of William G. Wraga)

## ABSTRACT

Benjamin Elijah Mays, most widely known as a former president of Morehouse College, was one of the foremost African American educators of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Although an accomplished theologian and civil rights activist, Mays dedicated the greater part of his career to combating racial segregation and securing high quality educational opportunities for black students. Although Mays's thinking on education has been a point of exploration in extant scholarship, a systematic and comprehensive study of his educational thought remains necessary.

This study seeks to document and explain Mays's educational thought, focusing primarily on his 60-year career as an educator, including his early years as an instructor at Morehouse College, his six-year tenure as the dean of school of theology at Howard University, his twenty-seven-year tenure as president of Morehouse, and his twelve-year tenure as a member of the Atlanta School Board. It elucidates the ways in which Mays's upbringing in the Jim Crow South, and his perception of Christianity, democracy, and social responsibility shaped his thinking on education.

This study employs historical research methods as a means to contextualize Mays's life experiences and their influence on his educational thinking, as well as a way to situate his publications and speeches in the larger educational and historical discourses of his time. Further, it explores the legacy of May's educational thinking and its implications for current educational practice. The meaning of Mays's views on education in today's educational landscape transcends the current obsession with standardized testing and highlights the imperative of holistic educational practice, the importance of balancing intellect *and* character.

INDEX WORDS: Benjamin E. Mays; Morehouse College; Atlanta Public Schools; Desegregation; African American Education; Democracy; Christianity; Social Responsibility

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## DEDICATION

First, I would like to dedicate this dissertation to God. Your grace, love, and mercy gave me joy and peace over these last four years. Thank you for being with me and counseling me throughout the dissertation writing process. To my wife and best friend Alex, who shared with me the highs and lows of the last four years and managed to remain a constant source of strength and support, I love you and am forever indebted to you. To my parents, who always encouraged and willingly financed my scholarly endeavors, from academic camps during the summers to last minute airfare to South America across the world, I love you. To my friends who have held me up, prayed for me, and spoken life into me, the road would have been much longer and difficult without you. Thank you all for your support.

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## Chapter 1

### Introduction

This dissertation is an intellectual biography of Benjamin Elijah Mays. Perhaps most widely known as the president of Morehouse College between 1940 and 1967, Mays was also an accomplished public theologian, a vocal civil rights activist, and a dedicated educator. A man of tremendously humble beginnings, Mays was born in 1894 a few miles outside the small town of Ninety-Six, South Carolina. Despite fierce opposition and deliberate interference from his father, a man who had been born into slavery and did not see the virtue of education, Mays developed an “insatiable desire to get an education”<sup>1</sup> and was restless in his pursuit of it. Although he was 20 years old when he earned his high school diploma, Mays would go on to earn his B.A. degree from Bates College in Maine, as well as his M.A. and Ph.D. degrees in religion from the University of Chicago. Having attained the highest levels of education available, Mays then dedicated the greater part of his career to ensuring that subsequent generations of black students would have access to a quality education.

This dissertation focuses on Mays’s career as an educator. It covers approximately 60 years of his lifework, including his early years as an instructor at Morehouse College, his six-year tenure as the dean of school of theology at Howard University, his twenty-seven-year tenure as president of Morehouse, and his twelve-year tenure as a member of the Atlanta School Board. To provide a larger intellectual context in which to analyze Mays, the study will also include an examination of the life and educational experiences that helped shape his views on education,

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin E. Mays. *Born To Rebel*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971), 35.

most notably his change in thinking on the necessity of school integration. Having experienced firsthand the racism and oppression that came with living in the segregated Jim Crow South, Mays's spent the majority of his career fighting for quality education and the dismantling of public school segregation, decrying its perpetuation of feelings of intellectual inferiority among black students and intellectual superiority among white students. Yet, in the latter years of his career, Mays began to question his position on segregation and for all practical purposes abandons it.

The legacy of Benjamin Elijah Mays is one that is difficult to encapsulate, a task complicated primarily by the wide range of his professional offices and achievements. An accomplished intellectual, Mays was also a theologian, a preacher, a writer, a peace advocate, a social and political activist, a college administrator, and above all, an educator. Although throughout his career, Mays wrote incessantly about the form, function, and necessity of education for Blacks, he never articulated a comprehensive educational philosophy or model specifically for educating blacks. Instead, his views on black education took shape over the course of his career, emerging mainly through his numerous publications, speeches, and personal relationships with students. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., for example, was one of Mays's students and embodied many of the educational ideals Mays advocated: excellence, civic engagement, and religious fervor, to name a few. But even in all of King's greatness, he represented only one of many men Mays mentored, his life one of the many that Mays touched and transformed. If Mays posited and adhered to a philosophy of education, it was undoubtedly fluid, although grounded in principals of Christianity, democracy, and social justice. If and when it was cohesive, it was so in the lives of men like King, who used their religious faith as a tool to affect change and progress.

It is important to note that pointing out the nebulousness of extant research on Mays educational philosophy is not intended to dismiss the previous work of Mays scholars. Rather, it is intended to highlight a sincere interest in articulating a more comprehensive view of Mays's philosophy of education. Nearly all dissertations on Mays have mentioned his views on education, as any discussion of his work is incomplete without the inclusion of education. However, the handful of dissertations that have examined closely his educational thought have done so in either a comparative fashion, attempting to relate his views on education to those of other African American intellectuals, or in a highly specific, interpretive way, looking at Mays's educational experiences as a way of explaining another part of his life. Although extremely valuable to any serious student of Mays, these works have generally been limited in scope and not dedicated solely to exploring deeply Mays's educational thought.

Explorations of his educational thought have also been printed in edited collections of essays about his life, but given the spatial limitations of an essay, there is, undoubtedly, more to be said. This becomes even more evident when one discovers that many of these published essays were originally conceived as chapters in the aforementioned dissertations. Therefore, a systematic and comprehensive study of Mays's educational thought is still necessary. While it cannot be said that Mays's views on education have gone without scholarly attention, the dearth of research on the subject speaks to the need for further inquiry and study.

That Mays's views on education have received limited attention is wholly not surprising considering the diversity and magnitude of his accomplishments. The renown and prestige he brought to Howard University's School of Divinity as its dean, as well as his contribution to the field of African American religious studies with his seminal, co-authored text, *The Negro's Church* have been duly noted and celebrated within the theological community for many years.

Likewise, the revitalization of Morehouse College during his 27-year presidency remains one of Mays's most remarkable life achievements and his tenure continues to be celebrated as one of the golden eras of Morehouse's history. And though less studied, Mays's role in the finalization of the desegregation of Atlanta Public Schools while serving as the president of the Atlanta School Board concluded a nearly two-decades long civil rights struggle in the city and marked the final chapter of an illustrious career in education.

Ultimately, what extant scholarship has provided students of Mays is a clear view of how brilliant was Mays in affecting change. We see how skilled he was at accelerating the maturation of stunted academic departments, as in the case of Howard, breathing life into dying institutions, as in the case of Morehouse, and inspiring compromise in politically hostile spaces, as in the case of the Atlanta Public Schools. Such scholarship presents Mays as an extraordinary man with an undeniable capacity to educate, lead, and affect change simultaneously, but does so without adequate exploration of the motivational contexts from which his worldview emerged. How Mays conceived his vision for change through educational means cannot be overshadowed or consumed in the changes themselves. If the outcomes of Mays's work as an educator are as worthy of study as the abundance of corresponding research suggests, it can be argued that the philosophical stance that directed his educational pursuits deserves, at least, equal scholarly treatment.

### Literature Review

This study intends to situate Benjamin E. Mays, as an educator, within scholarly discourses of American education history, African-American education history, and the African-American intellectual tradition. As a man who devoted his professional career to shaping facets of American education, Mays must first be situated within the context of American education

history. Consequently, this study seeks to extend the work of scholars like Merle Curti and Clarence Karier, both of whom examine the history of education through the lens of “men and ideas.”<sup>2</sup> Curti’s seminal text, *The Social Ideas of American Educators*, chronicled the history of social ideas and philosophies espoused by leading American educators, paying close attention to the ways in which these educators engaged issues like nationalism, gender, and race.<sup>3</sup> Further, Curti’s work aimed to determine the extent to which individuals’ personality and social circumstances shaped their social philosophy, as Curti argued that “the history of a man’s ideas is part and parcel of the story of his life, and his ideas at any period of his life can be adequately appreciated only in the light of his whole personality.”<sup>4</sup> Curti’s point is crucial to this study, as it will provide a lens through which to examine the social circumstances and intellectual conditions that led Mays to become one of the leading figures in American and African-American education during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Within the context of African-American education and the African-American intellectual tradition, this study also builds on the work of scholars like Wilson Moses, Wayne Urban, V.P. Franklin, and Derrick Alridge. Moses’s biographical account of Alexander Crummell, for example, sought to explore Crummell’s life and “broaden the definition of nineteenth-century black culture and to give exposure to the ideas of Alexander Crummell and his peers on the concepts of civilization and racial destiny.”<sup>5</sup> Similarly, Urban’s biography of Horace Mann Bond

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<sup>2</sup> Merle Curti. *The Social Ideas of American Educators*. (New York: Scribners Son’s, 1935), v.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., xiii.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., xix.

<sup>5</sup> Wilson J. Moses. *Alexander Crummell: A Study of Civilization and Discontent*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), 9.

explored Bond's life and his struggle to reconcile his occupation as a college administrator with his deep desire to become a prominent scholar.<sup>6</sup>

Writing within the African-American intellectual tradition, Franklin's work examined "the African American intellectual tradition using the autobiographies of black leaders and literary artists."<sup>7</sup> It sought to examine prominent African-American intellectuals' use of autobiography as a means of personal liberation and professional advancement. Also situated within this intellectual tradition is Alridge's intellectual history of W.E.B. Du Bois, a work that aimed to explore more comprehensively Du Bois as an "educational thinker in twentieth-century American history."<sup>8</sup> The work of Moses, Urban, Franklin, and Alridge then, provides a second context in which to situate this study. Like the work of Moses, Urban, and Alridge, this study aims to provide a focused biographical account of Mays as an educator, paying special attention to the formation of his educational thoughts in the midst of a race and class-conscious society.<sup>9</sup> Further, it extends the work of Franklin as it looks to Mays's autobiography as not only an informative primary source, but also an artifact belonging to the African-American intellectual tradition.

This study also builds on the work of scholars who have written specifically about Mays. The first scholarly work written on Mays was a dissertation written by Barbara Sue K. Lewinson in 1973. It was entitled *Three Conceptions of Black Education: A Study of the Educational Ideas*

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<sup>6</sup> Wayne Urban. *Black Scholar: Horace Mann Bond*. (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1992), x.

<sup>7</sup> V.P. Franklin. *Living Our Stories, Telling Our Truths: Autobiography and the Making of the African-American Intellectual Tradition*. (New York: Scribner, 1995), 9.

<sup>8</sup> Derrick P. Alridge. *The Educational Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History*. (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), 1.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 10.



of Benjamin Elijah Mays, Booker T. Washington, and Nathan Wright, Jr. Lewinson, in her preface wrote that the comparative nature of her study evolved from an initial interest in Mays's work as an educator and evolved into a comparative study.<sup>10</sup> She makes clear, however, that Mays's educational thought is the central focus of her study, "using Mays's thinking as a point of departure, to compare two different conceptions of black education with his: that of Booker T. Washington and of Nathan Wright, Jr."<sup>11</sup> Of the body of extant literature on Mays, Lewinson's work is most dedicated to exploring his thoughts on education. Its comparative framework and date of publication, however, limited Lewinson's ability to treat fully Mays's philosophy of education. His work with the Atlanta Public Schools (APS), which extended into the 1980s, is a significant part of his life's work and provides further insight into his views on education. A study of his educational thought is incomplete without an analysis of his years working with APS.

Other studies of Mays have not examined his educational philosophy as closely as does Lewinson's, but they inform this study because of their general contribution to the discourse on Mays. Verner Matthews submitted a dissertation exploring Mays and his concept of racial justice, in which he explores the educational experiences and views of Mays.<sup>12</sup> His treatment of Mays's educational thought is limited, but it provides a crucial contextual element for Matthews' development of a Maysian concept of racial justice. Dereck Rovaris published *Mays and*

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<sup>10</sup> Barbara S. K. Lewinson. "Three Conceptions of Black Education: A Study of the Educational Ideas of Benjamin Elijah Mays, Booker T. Washington, and Nathan Wright, Jr." (PhD diss., Rutgers University, 1973), 2.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>12</sup> Verner R. Matthews. "The Concept of Racial Justice of Benjamin Elijah Mays (1895-1984) [sic] and Its Relevance to Christian Education in the Black Church." (PhD diss., New York University, 1991).

*Morehouse*, which looks at Mays's revitalization of Morehouse during his 27-year tenure as Morehouse president. Of special interest to this study is Rovaris's discussion of Mays's push for graduate education among faculty. He believed deeply that Morehouse's faculty needed to attain the doctoral degree if the institution was to reach to its greatest potential. How Mays perceived the educational needs of his faculty and his institution contribute to an understanding of his philosophy of education.<sup>13</sup>

In 2006, Carolyn O. Wilson Mbajekwe submitted to Emory University a dissertation entitled *A Vision for Black Colleges in post-Brown America: Benjamin E. Mays, Frederick D. Patterson and the Quest for a Cultural Pluralism-based Definition of Collegiate Desegregation*. The aim of Mbajekwe's dissertation was to examine the movement among black educators, specifically Mays and Patterson, president of Tuskegee, "to defend the continued existence of historically black institutions" in the wake of the 1954 *Brown* decision.<sup>14</sup> Further, Mbajekwe sought to "examine Mays's and Pattersons' ideas about black colleges, desegregation, and racial empowerment as they were articulated in the wake of the Brown decision."<sup>15</sup> Her findings were that although Mays and Patterson were proponents of desegregation, they were not supportive of any desegregation policies that would impede or ultimately dissolve black institutions. Both men wanted to place black and white institutions of higher education on equal footing. Indeed, Mbajekwe's dissertation is extremely successful in accomplishing its aims, examining Mays's

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<sup>13</sup> Dereck J. Rovaris. *Mays and Morehouse: How Benjamin E. Mays developed Morehouse College, 1940-1967*. (Silver Spring: Beckham Publications Group, Inc., 2005).

<sup>14</sup> Carolyn O. Wilson Mbajekwe. "A Vision for Black Colleges in post-Brown America: Benjamin E. Mays, Frederick D. Patterson and the Quest for a Cultural Pluralism-based Definition of Collegiate Desegregation." (PhD diss., Emory University, 2006), 1.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

philosophy of desegregation in higher education; however, like Lewinson's, it does not capture Mays philosophy of education in its fullness.

More comprehensive texts that look at Mays include two festschrifts on his life: Lawrence Carter's *Walking Integrity* and Samuel Dubois Cook's *Benjamin E. Mays*. Carter's work actually includes chapters from the dissertations of Lewinson (1973) Rovaris (1994) (Rovaris' book was submitted as a dissertation originally), Matthews (1991), and Gavins (1978). In essence, *Walking Integrity* seeks to examine Mays's life in its fullness, as chapter topics range from Mays's early years in South Carolina to his tenure as the dean of Howard's School of Religion. Other chapters, such as former Morehouse president Hugh Gloster's "Black Male Model of the Century: A Funeral Tribute to Dr. Benjamin Mays" seek to remember Mays as both friend and mentor, to recall and pay tribute to Mays's contribution to African American progress and cement his legacy as an iconic figure in American education.<sup>16</sup> Carter's edited collection, undoubtedly, is significant as it serves as a point of departure for more detailed study on Mays, but it does not cover in depth Mays's educational thought.

Samuel DuBois Cook, a former student and longtime friend of Mays, in 2009 published the second festschrift on Mays, mirroring in structure and aim Carter's edited collection. Unlike Carter's festschrift, however, Cook commissioned original, unpublished essays to comprise the entirety of his collection. Cook highlighted this distinguishing feature of his book, noting that, "they [the essays] are, therefore, special and unique." Cook's work is also unique in that, excluding Mays's contributory essay, "all of the contributors...were Mays's former students,

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<sup>16</sup> Lawrence E. Carter, Sr., ed., *Walking Integrity: Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King, Jr.* (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998).

colleagues, and friends” and wrote their essays during the 1960s and ‘70s.<sup>17</sup> Thus, while the authors’ relationships with Mays provide a level of intimacy and insight less prevalent in Carter’s work, such intimacy may eliminate the critical distance needed to write objectively (in so far as objectivity is either possible or desirable). Moreover, the era in which the essays were written restricts a comprehensive view of Mays’s life, as Mays continued working up until his death in 1984.

While several of the essays in Cook’s text mention Mays’s views on education, as they were integral to his worldview, only one is dedicated to examining his philosophy of education. Entitled, “A Glance at the Educational Philosophy of Benjamin Elijah Mays,” the essay, as the title implies, does not provide a comprehensive treatment of Mays’s views on education. The author mentions briefly Mays’s “belief in a philosophy which united religion and education,” but devotes the majority of the essay to examining Mays’s tenure at Morehouse and his position on the education issues about which Mays was most concerned, such as the evils of segregation and the future of black colleges and universities.<sup>18</sup> Like other work written about Mays’s views on education, this essay in Cook’s text does not explore Mays’s philosophy of education in depth or great detail.

#### Statement of Purpose

The purpose of this study is to systematically explore the educational thoughts of Benjamin Mays from the early 1920s through the early 1980s, with the goal of documenting and explaining Mays’s educational thought. Further, the purpose is to make a unique scholarly

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<sup>17</sup> Samuel Dubois Cook. *Benjamin E. Mays: His Life, Contributions, and Legacy*. (Franklin: Providence House Publishers, 2009), xi.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 144.

contribution to the discourse on Mays, one that builds on and expands existing views of Mays as an educator and as an intellectual.

### Research Questions

The study will attempt to answer the following questions:

1. What were the principle features of Benjamin Mays's educational thought?
2. What were the principles or ideas that influenced Mays's thinking about education?
3. Where did Mays views on education sit in relation to his African American contemporaries involved in education?
4. How did Mays conceive aspects of his philosophy of education in light of the political and institutional realities in which he worked?
5. What are the implications of Mays's philosophy of education to the contemporary education discourse?

### Methods

Fraenkel and Wallen defined historical research as “the systematic collection and evaluation of data to describe, explain, and thereby understand actions or events that occurred sometime in the past.”<sup>19</sup> For educational researchers, then, the historical method can serve a number of purposes: 1) “to make people aware of what has happened in the past so they may learn from past failures and successes;” 2) “to learn how things were done in the past to see if they might be applicable to present-day problems and concerns;” 3) to assess whether the results of past approaches to problems “may offer policymakers some ideas about how present plans

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<sup>19</sup> Jack R. Fraenkel and Norman E. Wallen. *How to Design and Evaluate Research in Education*. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2000), 573.

may turn out.” 4) “to test hypotheses concerning relationships or trends;” 5) “to understand present educational practices and policies more fully.”<sup>20</sup>

Howell and Prevenier echoed Fraenkel and Wallen’s position on historical research, noting that history’s reliance upon artifacts and sources allows researchers to interpret the past and/or tell a story. For Howell and Prevenier, history could be conceived as “the stories we tell about our prior selves or that others tell about us.”<sup>21</sup> Further, they maintained, “in writing these stories, however, historians do not discover a past as much as they create it; they choose the events and people they think constitute the past, and they decide what about them is important to know.”<sup>22</sup> Given the magnitude of the task of “creating” the past, historians must rely on sources that are chosen carefully and scrutinized for authenticity, a daunting task that many have characterized as scientific. To be sure, historians “have developed sophisticated techniques for judging a source’s authenticity, its representativeness, and its relevance” and “have invented ingenious strategies for decoding and interpreting sources.”<sup>23</sup>

For historians, sources are generally grouped into four categories: documents, numerical records, oral statements, and relics. Documents are sources of information that have been recorded as written or printed text. Numerical records, sometimes considered a subcategory of documents, include all types of “numerical data in printed form.” Oral statements, unlike documents, are sources of information attained through verbal accounts of events. Lastly, relics

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 574.

<sup>21</sup> Martha C. Howell and Walter Prevenier. *Reliable Sources: An Introduction to Historical Methods*. (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2001), 1.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

are objects, such as clothing or buildings, “whose physical or visual characteristics can provide some information about the past.”<sup>24</sup>

Sources can further be categorized as either primary or secondary. Marius and Page defined primary sources as “texts nearest any subject of investigation” and secondary sources as texts “always written *about* primary sources.”<sup>25</sup> As these sources are hierarchically categorized, Marius and Page implore historians to always seek out and use primary sources in their historical writing, as using texts written by their subjects of study will always strengthen their authority on the matter of study.<sup>26</sup>

Ultimately, consulting such an array of sources will help contextualize Mays’s work to the extent that strong enough connections can be established between his experiences and ideas regarding education in a way that resonates with his legacy as an educator. There are challenges inherent in the pursuit of articulating Mays’s views on education, however. As Marius and Page assert, “historians try to solve puzzles in the evidence and to tell a story that will give order to the confusion of data we inherit” as well as “make connections, assign causes, trace defects, make comparisons, uncover patterns, locate dead ends, and find influences that continue through the generations until the present.”<sup>27</sup> One of these is being ever mindful of the tenuous relationship between causes and effects, a relationship that if treated too liberally can compromise quality research. Establishing strong connections between personal events in Mays’s life and the ideas that may have emerged as a result of those events is a difficult task that will require much time,

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 576.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Marius and Melvin E. Page. *A Short Guide to Writing About History*, 7<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: Longman, 2010), 14.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 7.

effort, and interpretation. The scholarly artifact a historian produces, then, is a product of informed judgments as much as it is a product of reliable sources.

As such, historical research finds that objectivity is also a tremendous challenge. As this study seeks to examine the role of education in Mays's life, educational biography will be useful framework through which to tell Mays's story. According to Craig Kridel, educational biography is an elusive term, but generally refers to "telling the life of another whose career falls within the field of education."<sup>28</sup> Still, as subgenre of biography, educational biography has a myriad of approaches. Kridel, citing the work of Stephen Oates, outlined three: the scholarly chronicle, the critical study, and the narrative biography. The scholarly chronicle is a detached and informative approach "that reflects the biographer's quest for objectivity and consists primarily of 'a recitation of facts.'"<sup>29</sup>

Critical study, on the other hand, is a detached but analytical approach to study an individual with the purposes of determining the significance of his/her life contributions. Narrative biography, Kridel maintained, contains elements of the other two approaches, but its purpose is "to wed scholarly, critical perspective with a story in narrative."<sup>30</sup> Given the aims of this dissertation, critical study and narrative biography will prove most useful, as they will provide a lens through which to examine Mays and his development as an educator. They will also help generate more detailed explanations of Mays's philosophical stance on education and draw more nuanced conclusions about the relationship between his life experiences and the shaping of his worldview.

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<sup>28</sup> Craig A. Kridel. *Writing Educational Biography: Explorations in Qualitative Research*. (New York: Garland, 1998), 8.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 9.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., 10.



### Data Sources

Currently, there is a solid body of scholarly research on Mays, including a handful of dissertations as well as several books and articles. This study will rely heavily on primary sources penned by Mays. During his lifetime he wrote numerous books, journal articles, and newspaper articles, and delivered a multitude of addresses, lectures, and sermons, many of which have yet to be published. A large portion of these sources have been archived at educational institutions across the country. Bates College, Mays's undergraduate alma mater, possesses a few archived documents, but the bulk of the archival material, known as the "Mays Papers" is in holding at the Moorland-Spingarn Research Center at Howard University. Mays served as the dean of Howard's School of Religion and donated his personal papers to the university in the 1970s. FBI documents on Mays, which were acquired through the Freedom of Information Act, were examined but proved to be irrelevant for the purposes of this study.

Of Mays's writings, *Born to Rebel*, an autobiography published in 1971, is his most lauded and perhaps most oft-cited work. As a biography of Mays has yet to be published, *Born to Rebel* continues to serve as the most informative source scholars can cite in discussions of Mays's life, especially his earlier years. In this study, Mays's autobiography, in addition to other historically appropriate texts, will be used to establish a context in which to explain Mays's life and career trajectory. Indeed, that individuals use autobiographies to depict their own lives in the most favorable of lights is a forethought when citing Mays's autobiographical accounts. As Marius and Page noted, researchers must maintain high critical standards in assessing the validity of our sources, and in the case of autobiographies, must "be skeptical of them" (p. 78), since "when anyone writes anything about themselves, they have a natural desire to shape their image

for posterity.”<sup>31</sup> Thus while it is necessary to maintain a critical distance when relying on May’s autobiographical accounts, in the absence of alternative, corroborative sources, his recollections will prove adequate. Lastly, *Born to Rebel* is key in the explanation of Mays’s philosophy of education, as he outlines many of his views on education and explains the personal experiences that birthed and gave shape to those views.

While Mays’s autobiography provides a clear overview of his life, it was in his other published writings and speeches that he articulated most clearly and forthrightly his philosophy of education. For example, in his book *Seeking to Be a Christian in Race Relations* (1957), which was a treatise on maintaining one’s Christian identity in the midst of racialized social struggle, Mays tackled mainstream educational issues like public school desegregation and racially correlated funding disparities and challenges America to make changes. In his scholarly articles for journals like *The Crisis*, *Phylon*, and the *Journal of Negro Education*, Mays maintained his critical posture, imploring America to uphold its creed of equality and justice. The weekly column Mays published between 1946 and 1981 in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, a black-owned and operated newspaper, also reflected these views. In that 35-year span, he wrote just shy of 1,600 columns and confronted myriad issues, many of which revolved around education. Most of these articles, if not all, are currently on microfilm. The original manuscripts submitted for publication are part of the Mays Papers at the Moorland Spingarn Research Center at Howard University.

As a gifted orator, Mays was in demand as a speaker, a truth supported by the approximately 800 unpublished speeches archived at Howard. Mays took seriously opportunities to speak before captive audiences, as he understood them to be moments not only to share his

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<sup>31</sup> Marius and Page, *A Short Guide*, 78.

worldview, but also moments to challenge the worldviews of the audience. His speeches reveal an earnestness about the necessity of education that is not conveyed as forcefully in his publications and reinforce his belief that education must be socially useful and capable of initiating change. How Mays talks about education in his catalog of speeches is significant for this study because it broadens the view on Mays's thoughts on education, leading us to a more thorough understanding of his philosophy of education.

Other primary documents acquired from the FBI offer a different perspective on the character of Mays. As Mays reports in his autobiography, President Kennedy in 1961 was considering him for membership on the Civil Rights Commission. The FBI documents acquired report the vetting of Mays for possible an appointment in the State Department. The records show correspondence between field agents and unnamed informants who presumably had access to information regarding Mays. Generally, however, the documents report Mays's consistent integrity, his steadfast adherence to personal principles and tireless effort to live above reproach. Perhaps, what is of most interest is how highly impersonal the FBI documents are, especially when juxtaposed to Mays's personal recounting of the process. If the FBI was only concerned with assessing Mays's character, political opponents like Senators Richard Russell and Herman Talmadge, according to Mays, were intent on assassinating it.<sup>32</sup>

### Assumptions

The following assumptions apply to this study:

1. Historical research is capable of helping researchers make connections between events and ideas in such a way that facilitates the creation of functional philosophies.

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<sup>32</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 227.

2. The primary source documents are authentic, accurate reflections of the ideas and thoughts of the individual being studied.
3. Benjamin Mays thoughts about education were broad and detailed enough for a researcher to be able to interpret and construct a philosophy of education.
4. This study will make a significant contribution to the scholarly discourse surrounding Mays's life and work.

### Scope of Study

This study will consist of:

1. Review of the secondary literature about Benjamin Mays, Morehouse College, Howard School of Religion, and the Atlanta School Board.
2. Collection of significant primary sources related to Benjamin Mays, Howard School of Religion, Morehouse College, and the Atlanta School Board.
3. Situate Mays within the social and political context of his time, comparing his views with those of his contemporaries.
4. Analysis of the development of Mays's ideas on education.
5. Analysis of primary sources to establish overarching themes regarding his view of education.

### Limitations of the Study

The purpose of this study is to examine and explain the educational experiences, work, and thoughts of Benjamin Mays. In doing so, this study will analyze Mays's commentary on education as expressed through his numerous books, articles, and speeches, as well as the oral histories of individuals, primarily students, who maintained relationships with Mays. This study

is not intended to serve as an exhaustive account of Mays's life, and although it will consider the larger social and historical contexts in which Mays lived, the primary focus will be on the educational ideas he posited during his lifetime.

### Organization of the Report

Chapter I provides an overview of the study, including introduction, background of the problem, significance of the study, statement of the purpose, scope of study, research questions, methodology, assumptions, limitations, and organizations of the report.

Chapter II begins with a broad historical context in which to situate Mays early life. It then moves into a more detailed explanation of Mays' life in South Carolina, his educational experiences, and the foundational elements of his thinking on education.

Chapter III explores Mays's career beginnings at Howard University as the dean of the School of Religion and moves into an examination of his first nine years as president of Morehouse College. This chapter also examines Mays's educational writings during this period of time, which begins in 1934 and ends in 1949.

Chapter IV examines the remainder of Mays's presidential tenure at Morehouse and the course of his educational thought.

Chapter V explores Mays's years as the president of the Atlanta Public School Board and examines the challenges he faced while leading the district through the final stages of school desegregation.

Chapter VI examines the same time period as the previous chapter but is more general in scope, focusing primarily on Mays' work and educational thought outside the context of the Atlanta Public School System.

Chapter VII summarizes the findings of the study based on the research questions and discusses the implications of Mays's work for the contemporary education discourse.

## Chapter 2

### Mays's Early Life and Education

This chapter explores the ways in which Mays's early years as a young black man in the South and his collegiate and graduate school years in the North shaped him as an individual and influenced his educational thinking. The chapter begins with a historical overview of the United States during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and moves into a biographical account of Mays's life in the South, his journey to the North to become as educated a person as possible, and the early formulation of his views on education. At its conclusion, this chapter notes how Mays's life and educational experiences helped form the three pillars of his educational worldview: Christianity, democracy, and social responsibility. Because these pillars remained central to Mays's educational thought for the duration of his career, even when his topics of discussion change, this chapter also introduces the idea of a "dynamic continuum of thought," which is a concept that seeks to capture both the steadiness of Mays's core ideas over time (continuum) and the constancy of the evolution and movement (dynamic) of his educational interests.

### Historical Context

At the conclusion of the Civil War, a still badly fractured United States was undergoing tremendous political and social changes. After "Radical" abolitionist-minded Republican's assumed control of Congress, they worked diligently to punish Southern rebels for their cessation and to bring newly freed blacks into full citizenship. In 1865, Congress established the Freedmen's Bureau as an agency dedicated to helping blacks transition into freedom and in 1866 imbued the Bureau with tremendous governing power over the South's restoration and direction

of free blacks. For seven years, the Bureau oversaw a diversity of matters, including physical relief, labor arrangement, and land purchases, though made its most significant impact in helping the freedpeople expand their educational opportunities. Between 1865 and 1872, the Bureau spent millions of dollars on school facilities and teaching personnel, all while working with local blacks and northern missionary societies, in order to improve Southern blacks' education and subsequently their social standing in American society.

During this period, blacks also witnessed tremendous political gains, as Congress passed the thirteenth, fourteenth, and fifteenth amendments—which outlawed slavery, redefined U.S. citizenship, and guaranteed the franchise respectively—as well as a pair of civil rights acts prohibiting racially discriminatory practices in public spaces.<sup>33</sup> The fifteenth amendment, especially, redefined the political landscape of the South, as the black enfranchisement led to the election of many black congressmen who served at both the state and federal levels. During this period of “Radical Reconstruction,” two black men served as United States senators, while fourteen black men served in the U.S. House of Representatives. By 1901, that number had increased to 20 black representatives. Of this number, South Carolina had the most among southern states with 8 representatives. At the state level, too, black South Carolinians exercised considerable political influence, outnumbering whites nearly two-to-one in the first legislature, though they never controlled the senate and by the 1870s had lost control of the lower house.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Derrick P. Alridge, *The Educational Thought of W.E.B. Du Bois: An Intellectual History*: (New York: Teachers College Press, 2008), 11-12; W.E.B. Du Bois. *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York: Bantam, 2005), 20.

<sup>34</sup> John Hope Franklin and Evelyn Brooks Higginbotham, *From Slavery to Freedom: A History of African Americans* 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw Hill, 2011), 243-245.



During Reconstruction, blacks, ostensibly, were more economically empowered than they had been prior to emancipation and wasted no time taking advantage of their newfound freedom. Many freedmen, for example, sought to control the terms of their employment as independent laborers, while others eagerly pursued land ownership as a means of self-sufficiency. White planters did not adjust well to this change in the agrarian dynamic. Those expecting to employ some variation of the antebellum plantation labor system found that newly freed blacks vehemently opposed labor arrangements that mirrored slavery, such as gang labor, and found unappealing wage labor agreements “because of planters’ failure to pay either part or all of the wages due them.”<sup>35</sup> Planters and freedmen found common ground, however, in sharecropping, a system Franklin and Higginbotham described “as a flawed resolution to the economic tug-of-war between the planters’ need for greater stability and control over agricultural production and the freedpeople’s need for less risk in economic compensation.” In giving blacks “responsibility over the cultivation of crops on a specific plot of land and ownership of a percentage of the harvested crop,” sharecropping, indeed, liberated blacks from the heavy hand of white oversight. However, what blacks gained in their self-governance they forfeited in economic dependence. Not only did sharecropping pay wages lower than those paid to hired slaves in the antebellum South, but it also shifted a disproportionate amount of the economic burden of farming to its black labor force. The nature of sharecropping was such that black laborers usually acquired their tools and farming materials from the white planter, who, in turn, charged the materials against the black laborers’ percentage of the final harvest. According to Franklin and Higginbotham, the cost of sharecropping “was so great that at the end of the year ex-slaves were indebted to their employers for most of what they had made and sometimes more than what they

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 254.

had made.” Evidently, this labor arrangement was far more economically advantageous for whites than for blacks, and was a pivotal factor in both the economic recovery of the white south and socio-economic retardation of the black south.<sup>36</sup>

Although the 1860s had ushered blacks into a new era of social and economic mobility, their progress would not go unchallenged. The faction of Radical Republicans that had overrun congress during early Reconstruction began to lose political ground in the late 1860s and early 1870s as large numbers of ex-Confederates were pardoned of their treasonous participation in the Civil War and therefore regained their right to vote. Following these ex-Confederate soldier’s absolution, Southern states witnessed an explosive growth among Democrats, as many of these men returned to the polls seeking to restore the antebellum South. Between 1870 and 1875, the Democratic Party reclaimed the legislatures of North Carolina, Virginia, Georgia, Texas, Arkansas, and Alabama, leaving only South Carolina, Florida, and Louisiana as “Republican” states. While the Democrats had taken the helm of Southern politics, extra-legal groups like the Ku Klux Klan, the White Brotherhood, and Knights of the White Camelia, through physical intimidation and vigilantism, sought to ensure that white Democrats would retain their political control and hopefully restore the South to its old form.

Recognizing the significance of the franchise in realizing white Southern rule, these organizations, along with independent whites, terrorized blacks in order to deter them from voting. Indeed, these groups were able to regulate black movement in the South with relative ease, partially because of the secretive nature of their activity, but also because of the tenuous presence of Union troops in the South. By the late 1870s, Reconstruction had begun to unravel further as Congress came to question the constitutionality of much of the period’s legislation and

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 254-255.

controversial Supreme Court rulings limited the interpretive reach of the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Further complicating the black franchise was the 1876 presidential election of Rutherford B. Hayes and his decision to withdraw immediately Union troops from the South. Although Union troop presence in the South had never abated white-on-black violence in any significant way, the absence of a military presence bespoke Hayes's *laissez faire* approach to Southern race politics and established a more relaxed relationship between the federal government and Southern states. Of course, such an approach also signaled the coming decline in the political economy of Southern blacks. In the absence of an advocate at the Federal level and no military protection at the local level, the Southern black risked his life by going to the polls. Inevitably, blacks' political participation decreased dramatically in the years following the troop withdrawal. For whites, however, the withdrawal of Union soldiers and diminishing federal involvement were encouraging signs that Reconstruction was coming to an end. As Franklin and Higginbotham noted, "for the great majority of white Americans, Reconstruction after the Civil War had proven to be a tragic era, riddled with problems and pitfalls that could be corrected only in a new and unequal racial order." The lengths to which many whites would go to preserve this new racial order became evident in the years following Radical Reconstruction.<sup>37</sup>

The last two decades of the 19th century were very difficult for blacks, as regressive legislative and judicial actions, widespread lynching, and pseudoscientific claims challenging black humanity, worked to strangle black progress. For many white Southerners, the integrity of Southern culture depended on codifying blacks' maltreatment. Congress's repeal in 1883 of the Civil Rights Act of 1875 initiated this regression, and was followed by state-led efforts to suppress any attempt to treat blacks equally. As Franklin and Higginbotham found, "Democratic-

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 256-259.

controlled state governments throughout the South moved steadily toward legalizing the color line, enacting so-called Jim Crow laws to ensure that racial discrimination operated in more than customary or de facto social relations.”<sup>38</sup> Determined to fight for their civil rights, black citizens throughout the South filed lawsuits protesting state-sanctioned segregation. The most notable case filed as a challenge to this type of racially discriminatory legislation was Louisiana’s *Plessy v. Ferguson*. Conceived as a test case to assess the constitutionality of Louisiana’s separate-car law, *Plessy*, 1892, made its way to the Louisiana Supreme Court where the court found the law to be not only constitutional but in keeping with nature and custom. Unsatisfied with the outcome, Homer Plessy’s counsel appealed and in 1895 argued its case before the U.S. Supreme Court. Again, the Justices ruled against Plessy, consequently affirming the constitutionality of “separate but equal” legislation. Shortly thereafter, Southern legislatures moved aggressively to pass more laws that would limit blacks social and political mobility.<sup>39</sup>

While whites were working incessantly to stifle black progress, blacks looked amongst themselves to continue the progress they had made since emancipation, subscribing to an ideology of self-help that found in institutions, like the church and schools, powerful sources of race pride and social capital capable of ensuring sustainable progress. The black church was one of the most important institutions for blacks during Reconstruction and remained so in the years after, as it was the only institution fully owned and operated by blacks. The material and symbolic significance of this reality was not lost on the freedmen, as the membership of black churches increased exponentially between the 1850s and 1870s. As such, the church was able to address not only the spiritual needs of its congregation, but also its social, political, and

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 259-261.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 261-282.; Alridge, *The Educational Thought*, 13.

educational needs. Thus, many blacks looked to the church as a place for personal development, a place for learning and also a place for training blacks how to respond to the social and political challenges facing their communities. This spirit of social activism and community reform pervaded many black churches in the wake of Reconstruction and reflected the Social Gospel, as represented in the emerging Progressive ethos of late nineteenth century America.<sup>40</sup>

More than religion, education was an extremely contentious issue in the South. The idea of universal education in the South had encountered opposition from white planters who viewed educated field hands as economic liabilities. Neither white nor black laborers with an education fit into the exploitive agrarian order wealthy planters so desperately wanted to preserve. Many of these white planters, however, had underestimated the tremendous educational progress blacks had made in the wake of emancipation and the potential problems their education posed for all whites. As Anderson noted, during those post-bellum years of Reconstruction, “the ex slaves’ initiative in establishing and supporting a system of secular and Sabbath schools and in demanding universal public education for all children presented a new challenge to the dominant-class whites—the possibility of an emerging literate black working class in the midst of a largely illiterate poor white class.”<sup>41</sup> Recognizing the tenuousness of the South’s racial caste system, a small group of industrial-minded planters began promoting in the late 1800s universal education for all children in the South, color notwithstanding. Their motives, to be sure, were purely economic. As Anderson maintained, “proponents of southern industrialization increasingly viewed mass schooling as a means to produce efficient and contented labor and as a socialization process to instill in black and white children an acceptance of the southern racial

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<sup>40</sup> Franklin and Higginbotham, *From Slavery*, 251, 313-315.

<sup>41</sup> James D. Anderson, *The Education of Blacks in the South, 1860-1935* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1988), 27.

hierarchy.”<sup>42</sup> The effort to maintain such a hierarchy had been articulated most clearly by General Samuel Chapman Armstrong and institutionalized most effectively through his founding of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in 1868.<sup>43</sup>

By the 1880s, however, Armstrong’s idea had secured wider influence via his most distinguished pupil and acting president of the Tuskegee Institute, Booker T. Washington. Washington had attended the Hampton Institute during Armstrong’s presidency and believed so deeply in the virtue of the industrial philosophy that he replicated it at Tuskegee. Although Washington and his team of wealthy northern white industrialists were very proactive and vocal in their support for the industrial model of education, most African Americans during the late 1800s remained invested in controlling their own educational destinies and were equally as vocal in their support of an instructional model that would keep them liberated from any social constraints. Anderson contended that, “the prevailing philosophies of black education and the subjects taught in black schools were not geared to reproduce the caste distinctions or the racially segmented labor force desired by...postbellum white industrialists.”<sup>44</sup> Blacks’ resistance to industrial education and advocacy of classical training was widespread but found its most vocal advocate in W.E.B. Du Bois, a northern intellectual who deplored Southern accommodationism.

Du Bois, among other black leaders and educators, rejected Washington’s philosophy of black progress and called for freedmen to be responsible for their own educational development, pursuing those experiences and acquiring those skills that would enable their full participation as citizens in the American democratic order. They looked to the classic liberal arts curriculum as the key to their educational success. Quite similar to the curriculum taught in northern white

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Alridge, *The Educational Thought*, 14.

<sup>44</sup> Anderson, *Education of Blacks*, 28.

schools, the liberal arts course of study included, but was not limited to, subjects like reading, writing, spelling, grammar, history, diction, geography, music, and arithmetic.

These courses were neither thought to be pure mimicry of white schooling nor the antidote for residual psychological ills of slavery; rather, they were viewed as tools capable of debunking the pervasive pseudoscientific myths of racial inferiority and as the core ingredients for building a black leadership cadre.<sup>45</sup> Indeed, it was important to show that black students could perform well in traditional courses believed to be of the highest intellectual order as a means of weakening the grip of white supremacy. However, it was equally, if not more important for African Americans to secure “the intellectual and moral development of a responsible leadership class that would organize the masses and lead them to freedom and equality.”<sup>46</sup> The struggle between the Washingtonian and Du Boisian philosophies of education was intense and shaped black education throughout the first two decades of the twentieth century, waning largely because of Washington’s death in 1915.

Religious independence, educational empowerment, and social activism were at the core of black life in the United States during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Blacks, determined to make positive strides in their communities, worked tirelessly to advance their race but they were reminded often of the high cost of progress. It was during this same period of striving that violence against blacks increased dramatically. According to Franklin and Higginbotham, “in the last sixteen years of the nineteenth century, more than 2,500 lynchings occurred” and “the great majority of the victims...were African Americans.” When lynchings began to decline, violent race riots during the early part of the twentieth century swept through

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 28-29.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 31.

the nation. Cities as far south as Atlanta, Georgia and as far north as Springfield, Illinois witnessed violent, days-long skirmishes between blacks and whites, many of which led to the loss of both black and white life.<sup>47</sup>

This enduring tension between black progress and white resistance defined the time into which Mays was born. The U.S. Supreme Court had decided in 1896 the significance of race in the United States, but Mays learned early and often the nuances of what it meant to be black in the Deep South, what it meant to be subject to the whims of a prejudiced white majority. These realities necessarily shaped the course of his life and the substance of his educational experiences.

#### Mays's Early Years: The Farm, the School, and the Church

Benjamin Elijah Mays was born on August 1, 1894 on the outskirts of the town of Ninety-Six, South Carolina. His parents, Hezekiah and Louvenia Carter Mays, had been born into slavery fewer than ten years before the Civil War concluded and made their living as farmers. Benjamin, the youngest of eight children, was raised in a home that celebrated the family's African heritage and appreciated the diversity of hues found within the family and among members of the local black community. It was imperative for Mays's mother that her children develop strong identities. Self-love, Mays accounted, was an important principle in his home, so much so that his mother reminded him often that his skin color, despite societal claims, was neither cause for shame nor an excuse to think of himself as less than others. His sense of self was further buttressed through his identification with and admiration of nationally influential black leaders like Frederick Douglass, Booker T. Washington, and Paul Laurence Dunbar, as

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<sup>47</sup> Franklin and Higginbotham, *From Slavery*, 282-286.



well as local ministers and teachers, all of whom were proud race men of sorts.<sup>48</sup> Despite a sense of domestic security and solid race pride, Mays was not ignorant of the sobering realities of what it meant to be black in the South. In the opening paragraph of his autobiography, he recalled vividly his first childhood memory:

I remember a crowd of white men who rode up on horseback with rifles on their shoulders. I was with my father when they rode up, and I remember starting to cry. They cursed my father, drew their guns and made him salute, made him take off his hat and bow down to them several times. Then they rode away. I was not yet five years old, but I have never forgotten them.

The mob, Mays later learned, was one of many that terrorized and lynched blacks in Greenwood County, South Carolina during the Phoenix Riot of 1898.<sup>49</sup>

Having been born slaves and working the majority of their lives as farmers, Mays's parents were not very well educated. His mother was unable to read or write, while his father was able to read fairly well, having learned as a child from the son of his master. Of Mays's eight siblings, only one finished high school, while the others barely earned beyond a fifth-grade education. Still, Mays's earliest introduction to formal education began in his home. There was not much present in the way of reading material, but the family read the *Atlanta Journal* as well as the more local *Greenwood Index* and owned a Bible, a dictionary, Sunday school books, and a few illustrative books about Paul Laurence Dunbar, Frederick Douglass, and Booker T. Washington.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, *Born to Rebel* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971), 2.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 3, 11, 20.

Prior to Mays's enrollment in school, his sister Susie had taken the time to teach him basics like the alphabet, how to count to one hundred, and provided some elementary instruction in reading. This early educational exposure proved invaluable to Mays, who began his first school term at the age of six. Mays's first formal educational experience required him to walk nearly six miles roundtrip to the Brickhouse School, a place he described as "a frame, one-room building with a wood stove in the center of the room, with boys seated on one side and girls on the other." On his first day of school, Mays's pre-school preparation was evident to his instructor, as he was much more familiar with the curriculum than were his classmates. His teacher praised his in-class performance and shared with his parents at church how intelligent was Bennie, as he was affectionately called. That experience established in Mays the zeal to be an excellent student and work diligently to meet the expectations of his instructors.<sup>51</sup>

Mays also broadened his educational development in his community church, Mount Zion Baptist Church. The same type of inspiring encouragement and support he found as a boy in his grade school instructor he found among the church's parishioners. Precocious, Mays attended Mount Zion's adult Sunday school classes. There, he engaged the adult members with questions and comments regarding the day's lesson and developed a deeper interest in the black church and Christianity. As was the case in school, Bennie's enthusiasm was met with steady support and encouragement. That the seasoned parishioners of Mount Zion expressed a deep belief in his potential made an invaluable impression on Mays as a young boy. As he recalled:

The people in the church did not contribute one dime to help me with my education. But they gave me something far more valuable. They gave me

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 11.

encouragement, the thing I most needed. They expressed such confidence in me that I always felt that I could never betray their trust, never let them down.<sup>52</sup>

The steady doses of encouragement and support he received from his schoolteachers and adult church members stirred up in Mays a passion for educational excellence that would drive him on for years to come.

Although Mays's teachers and church members were enthusiastically supportive of his educational pursuits, he did not receive the same measure of support at home. Mays's father vehemently opposed his son's "insatiable desire to get an education," while Mays "longed for his sympathetic approval, or at least his consent."<sup>53</sup> The elder Mays saw no value in extending his son's education since he could only conceive of Southern black men as either preachers or farmers, neither of which, he believed, required any learning beyond what the brick house had already provided the younger Mays. Further, Mays's father believed that formal education corrupted otherwise good men, perpetuating in them foolishness and a lack of integrity. Mays's mother, on the other hand, was sympathetic to her son's desires and expressed her support through both her love and prayers. Her faith in God and belief in prayer began influencing Mays to the extent that he too began to pray. He prayed for deliverance from the limitations of his circumstances, specifically that God would provide a way for him to escape the farm and continue his schooling elsewhere. For Mays, leaving the farm to get an education was a matter of identity, self-discovery, as his aim was "to find *my* world, to become myself."<sup>54</sup> He believed deeply that he "was 'called' or driven to do something other than farming"<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 17.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 9.

At the age of fifteen, Mays had the opportunity to leave the farm when the pastor of Mount Zion, the Reverend James Marshall, arranged for Mays to attend a Baptist Association School in McCormick, South Carolina. The experience proved indistinct from his time at the Brickhouse School. Just as had been the case in his early years of schooling, Mays was only able to attend the McCormick school for four months of the year due to agricultural custom, too few for such an intellectually ambitious young man. After only two years, Mays returned to his family's farm. Prepared for the possibility that the McCormick school would be the extent of his education, Mays pondered briefly a career as a railway mail clerk, having been intrigued by a black railway clerk during his returning train ride home. He was unable, however, to forsake his desire to further educate himself and decided to apply to the high school departments of Benedict College in Columbia, South Carolina and State College in Orangeburg, South Carolina. Mays decided to attend State College.

#### High School at State College of South Carolina

Founded in 1896 "as the Colored Normal, Industrial, Agricultural and Mechanical College of South Carolina," State College, which at the time offered secondary and post-secondary instruction, was the most affordable place for Mays to attend high school.<sup>56</sup> Still, Mays knew that he faced a tremendous obstacle in his father. Reverend Marshall had been Benjamin's advocate two years prior, convincing the elder Mays to allow his son to attend McCormick, but Mays's decision to attend State College was one he made without outside counsel. Mays recalled, "When Father saw that I was determined to go to a better school, and

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 38; Julian B. Roebuck and Komanduri S. Murty, *Historically Black Colleges and Universities: Their Place in American Higher Education* (Westport: Prager, 1993), 88.

knew that I had to have money in order to do so, he angrily threw a ten-dollar bill at me.”<sup>57</sup> Soon after, Mays departed the farm for Orangeburg; he did so without his father’s blessing.

When Mays arrived at State College he was placed in the eighth grade under the care of Professor N. C. Nix, a mathematics instructor. During his first two years, Mays, as he had done his entire school-aged life, returned home at the beginning of March to work the family farm. Discouraged by the slow pace at which he was advancing, Mays, in his third year, decided to take measures that would ensure his enrollment for a full term. He, along with Professor Nix, wrote Hezekiah to express the imperative of his remaining at State College for the entire academic year if he were to graduate in a timely manner. Despite his father’s fierce opposition and threat to send the local sheriff to bring him home, Mays stood his ground and remained at State College until the term concluded in May. That decision marked a turning point in the life of the nineteen year-old Mays. He had defied his father, but his life had finally become his own. As he recounted:

So the break with my father came and it was final. I disobeyed him without regret and with no pangs of conscience. It was now crystal clear to me that I must take my education into my own hands and that I could not and must not permit my father to dictate or determine my future.<sup>58</sup>

Though Mays had never garnered his father’s moral support for his pursuit of education, he had secured his financial support for the four months he was permitted to attend school. In the absence of his father’s aid and seeking desperately to attend school for the full term, Mays had to find a way to earn the six dollars per month he needed to cover his attendance costs. He found

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<sup>57</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 38.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

several ways: a two-month subsidy from his brother John, a job cleaning outhouses provided by one of his instructors, and a summer job as a Pullman porter.<sup>59</sup>

Mays spent his high school years working diligently inside and outside the classroom. When he wasn't tending to his side jobs, he consumed himself in study, driven by a passion to learn. He described his desire as a longing "to know, for I sensed that knowledge could set me free."<sup>60</sup> Unlike many classmates who spent their time vying for the attention of members of the opposite sex, Mays and a few other serious students devoted their time to academic excellence. They were subsequently "considered odd and called bookworms."<sup>61</sup> May's instructors, on the other hand, recognized his dedication as the sign of a good student and showered him with praise and support.

Of these, none influenced Mays as much as did his mathematics instructor Professor Nix. Nix motivated his students by appealing to the sense of intellectual inferiority many of them had internalized after living in the South for so many years. To stir his students, Nix constantly referenced the ease with which white students across the state could handle the same problems his students struggled to answer. Though Mays understood the motivation behind Nix's methods, he admitted that his instructor's incessant references to whites' intellectual prowess "made me wonder sometimes if he himself did not believe there was a difference in mentality between black and white."<sup>62</sup> Mays was not convinced that God had made blacks inferior to whites but Nix's racially charged rhetoric disturbed him. Nevertheless, Mays admired Nix and Nix's educational pedigree inspired Mays to continue his own education, as he was an alumnus of

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<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 39.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Benedict College and spent a brief time studying at the University of Chicago. According to Mays, it was Nix and “the proud and proprietary way he talked about the university” that made him want to attend the University of Chicago for further study.<sup>63</sup>

Although students at State College were permitted to pursue degrees in subjects like math, English, and history, the school operated within the industrial model of education first established by Samuel Chapman Armstrong at the Hampton Institute and made popular by Booker T. Washington at the Tuskegee Institutes during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Just as Hampton and Tuskegee’s aim was to train black students in industrial trades and agriculture, so it was at State College.<sup>64</sup> All students were required to learn a trade of some sort and spend one day per week working on their respective trades. Initially, Mays took to harness making and shoe repair but quickly abandoned those trades for painting after his instructor suggested he may have more success in that area. The emphasis on acquiring trades and agricultural training was so great, Mays recalled that, “at commencement, if the valedictorian had majored in English or history, the president saw to it that some boy or girl always gave a speech extolling the glories of agriculture and the trades.”<sup>65</sup> Despite having a knack for painting, Mays had no passion for his trade, as his heart belonged to scholastics matters. In 1916, Mays’s dedication to his studies paid off, and he graduated from State College as valedictorian.<sup>66</sup>

Still, Mays was not satisfied. Being valedictorian at State College, he believed, was not evidence enough of his intellectual capacity, primarily because all of his classmates were black. Truly, many Southern whites had so long and so relentlessly beaten upon the mind and soul of

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>64</sup> See James Anderson’s *Education of Blacks in the South* (1988).

<sup>65</sup> Mays, 43.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 43-46.

their black neighbors that many blacks came to internalize feelings of inferiority. Mays was not among that lot, but was compelled, nevertheless, to disprove widely held notions of white superiority. Mays's angle was to test his wits against those of white students, as he was convinced that competing alongside white students was the only way to accurately assess the depth and breadth of his own intellect. Since South Carolina during the early twentieth century was under the heel of Jim Crow, Mays knew that attending college with whites in his home state was impossible. Only by journeying north to college would it be feasible for him to attend school with and compete among whites. Thus Mays set his sights on New England.<sup>67</sup>

#### A Freshman at Virginia Union University

Although Mays believed it necessary to leave South Carolina to further his studies, his leaving home did not sit well with everyone in his family or his academic community. Mays's sister-in-law, for example, advised him to return home after high school to teach in the county and tend to the family farm since his parents' aging was making it more difficult for them to manage it. While he agreed that returning home would be helpful to his parents, he also knew that it would extinguish his dream of becoming more educated and severely limit his occupational opportunities. Even the president of State College, Robert Shaw Wilkinson, tried to stop Mays from leaving South Carolina for college, though his aim was to keep Mays on campus to enrich the institution's college department. When President Wilkinson discovered Mays's plans to leave State College, he immediately sabotaged Mays's side job as a painter, a job his painting instructor, Mr. Davis, secured for him and provided what little income Mays had at the time. Determined, Mays pressed on.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 47-48.



During his senior year, Mays scoured the catalogues of Northern institutions, seeking a place to embark upon the next chapter of his academic career. Among the schools he researched were Dartmouth and Brown Universities. However, after perusing their catalogues, Mays became discouraged by the costs of attendance and the curricular demands to the extent that he abandoned temporarily his plans to attend a New England college in favor of enrolling in a Northern prep school. Mays contacted several schools, the Holderness School in Portsmouth, New Hampshire being the only one of which he mentioned by name, but found that none would grant him admission. He recalled vividly that he “received little or no encouragement from any one of” the schools to which he applied, but was moved by the letter he received from the rector of the Holderness School. Unlike the other replies he had received, the reply from Holderness, he felt, “had the virtue of honesty” despite being “disappointing” and “dispiriting.” As it read:

My dear Sir:

I wish I could help you in your laudable desire to get an education, but if I should admit a boy of your race to Holderness School I should lose several students. So I am obliged to decline to receive you.

Despite being denied admission, Mays appreciated Reverend Webster’s sincerity and willingness to state “clearly that he could not take me because of my race.” As he noted, “Quite often Northern schools ‘put it on the South’ when they refused to accept Negro students, but the rector of Holderness School ‘told it like it was.’”<sup>69</sup> Clearly, Mays found Reverend Webster’s candor refreshing.

Still, Mays was disheartened by the prospect of not being able to attend a Northern school during the fall of 1916 and sobered by the candid prejudice and apathy that laced many of the

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 51.

schools' admission denials. However, Mays found a silver lining in the advice of Professor F. Marcellus Staley, an instructor at State College. When Professor Staley learned of Mays's dilemma, he suggested Mays attend Virginia Union University. Founded in 1865 by the American Baptism Home Mission Society in Richmond, Virginia,<sup>70</sup> the college was not in the North, but for Mays it represented a step in the right direction. At Virginia Union, Mays discovered a sound college curriculum and a thoroughly dedicated and academically disposed student body, much different than that of State College. He even noted that, "there were a few students...in my class whom I admired and who were worthy competitors in the pursuit of academic excellence."<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, it was also at Virginia Union University, a predominantly black college, that Mays first encountered whites who, as he put it, actually "expressed an interest in Negroes."<sup>72</sup> Given the racially hostile climate in which Mays had been raised, and the psychological trauma that haunted his existence, he was sincerely surprised, if not confused, to encounter friendly whites. As noted earlier, his first childhood memory revolved around the vigilant, blood-thirsty spirit of racism that possessed many whites during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. And only a couple of years before enrolling at Virginia Union, Mays had experienced firsthand the unbridled violence that accompanied such virulent racism. During a visit home as a junior year in high school at State College, a local white doctor named Wallace Payne assaulted Mays, without provocation, at the post office in Epworth. As Mays recalled, Payne struck him simply for being a 'black rascal and 'trying to look too good.' Mays recounted

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<sup>70</sup> Cynthia L. Jackson and Eleanor F. Nunn. *Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara:ABC-CLIO, 2003), 13.

<sup>71</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 51-52.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

the humiliation he incurred from not being able to strike back in defense for fear that he would be murdered on the spot. This incident, among others that Mays endured made a tremendous impression on him. Most notably, he recalled, during the first twenty-two years of his life, not only did he live in constant fear of being lynched or beaten without just cause, but he also concluded that, “that the Southern white was...not only my enemy but the enemy of all Negroes.”<sup>73</sup>

One can surmise, then, that Mays’s experiences with whites at Virginia Union were refreshing but also challenging, as they countered what he believed to be generally true about whites, especially Southern whites. Indeed, Mays was impressed by the open-mindedness of whites at Virginia, but what he found most impressive, however, was black students’ equitable opinions of their black and white professors. He was pleased that the students at Virginia Union made no distinctions between the intellectual capacities of black and white professors, a reality he attributed to black teachers taking the time to cast themselves in a positive light before their students.<sup>74</sup>

As a freshman, Mays took courses in English, German, Latin, and mathematics, performing well in each. In fact, after his first semester, he had done so well in his algebra course that he was hired to re-teach the course to classmates who had failed during the semester. Just as Mays’s time in the classroom proved fruitful for his scholastic development, so too did his time outside the classroom engaged in intense intellectual exchanges regarding racial matters prove invaluable for his social development. Mays was, no doubt, familiar with the racial customs of the South, and though Richmond was significantly bigger than a Greenwood or an Orangeburg,

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 45, 49.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 52.

he observed that, in attitude and substance, they were one in the same. For example, Richmond's streetcars were segregated, as were the movie theatres. Both businesses allowed black patrons but provided designated seating for their use. For Mays and several of his freshman classmates, the segregated movie theater emerged as a contentious issue, the essence of the debate being "whether Negroes should or should not patronize the segregated theaters in Richmond."<sup>75</sup>

Mays, who went only once to a segregated theater, stood firm in his conviction against patronizing such theaters. As he concluded, "there is a difference between voluntary segregation and compulsory segregation. One has to accept compulsory segregation or pay a penalty; but one does not have to accept voluntary segregation."<sup>76</sup> Mays saw the necessity in riding a segregated streetcar if it were his only mode of transportation, but he could not see the necessity in *volunteering* "to accept an embarrassing seat in a Jim Crow theater." Ultimately, Mays would only spend his freshman year of college at Virginia Union, as the draw of New England was too strong to ignore. However, his experiences there left an indelible mark upon him, boosting his belief in his own intellectual abilities and laying the foundation for some of the moral and ethical ideals that would later come to define his character and ultimately his worldview.<sup>77</sup>

#### Bates College: Realizing a Dream

Even while enrolled at Virginia Union, Mays was not shy about his desire to attend school in New England for the remainder of his collegiate years. Virginia Union's president, George Rice Hovey, advised Mays against a move to New England, as did several classmates who expressed concern about his acclimating to the cold weather and distance from home. Still, Mays remained resolute in his decision to leave. Despite the discouragement of friends and

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<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 52-53.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid., 53.

President Covey, Mays did find support in his mathematics instructor, Roland A. Wingfield, and the YMCA faculty adviser, Charles E. Hadley. As both men were alumni of Bates College, they took the liberty of contacting the college's president, George Colby Chase, on Mays's behalf. With their recommendation, Mays was admitted to Bates College as a sophomore, though his classification was contingent upon the quality of his performance during a six-week probationary period. He began his coursework at Bates in September of 1917 and was granted full sophomore classification following his successful completion of his probationary exams.

Founded in 1855 by Free Baptists, Bates College was established initially as a seminary but by the 1860s had become a full-fledged college. Modeling itself after Oberlin College in Ohio, Bates was especially dedicated to educating students from financially modest backgrounds, but was quite notable for its "liberal" admissions policy, which promoted not only coeducation, but also racially integrated education.<sup>78</sup> To say the least, Bates was rare among Northern colleges and universities.

When Mays arrived in Lewiston, Maine, the town in which Bates is located, he found it to be as cold as his friends had warned, but he also found that "the hearts at Bates were warm." He was one of only a few black students at Bates, and they were among fewer than fifty blacks in the entire town, but Mays felt accepted by the majority of the whites he encountered. He recalled vividly how life-changing was the experience:

I was living in a predominantly white world, and how different a world it was from any I had known before! The teachers and students were friendly and kind. I was treated as a person, as a human being, respected for what I was. Faculty and

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<sup>78</sup> Charles F. Phillips, *Bates College in Maine: Enduring Strength and Scholarship* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1952), 10, 12, 13.

students, men and women, greeted me when I met them on campus and on the street. We met and mingled as peers, not as “superior” and “inferior. This was a new experience for me. I was getting another view of the white man—a radically different view. They were not all my enemies. For the first time, whether on campus or in the town of Lewiston, whether alone or in a group, I felt at home in the universe.<sup>79</sup>

Mays noted that his experience in Maine was not wholly without racial incident, but the few incidents he did experience were often perpetuated by curious children or negligibly ignorant adults.<sup>80</sup>

Just as he had at State College, Mays covered the \$400 attendance costs of his sophomore year through a combination of odd jobs during the academic year, summer and holiday work as a Pullman porter, and loans from both his brother and Bates’s loan fund. During his junior and senior years, however, scholarships covered Mays’s costs.

Mays quickly established his reputation on the Bates campus as a standout student, making his mark first by winning the sophomore declamation contest. Mays had read about the contest in the school’s catalogue prior to his enrollment and decided then that he would participate. Thus, he spent that summer preparing diligently for the contest, which would be held early that fall. During those summer months, Mays was employed as a Pullman porter on the New York Central Railroad, but committed himself to rehearsing and memorizing his chosen speech, “The Supposed Speech of John Adams.” By the start of the fall semester, Mays had mastered the speech and performed well enough to compete against five other students in the

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<sup>79</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 54, 55.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*, 55.

finals. Prior to the final competition, Mays sought the help of several faculty members with training in speech. With their expertise, Mays sharpened his speaking skills and subsequently won the contest by unanimous decision, a victory that immediately catapulted him into the campus spotlight. As Mays recalled, “After only eight weeks at Bates, I had won first prize in the sophomore declamation context, and I was elated to win over my five white competitors.”<sup>81</sup> For Mays, evidently, the victory was doubly rewarding. Not only had he been able to establish himself quickly as a standout student at the college, but he had also begun chipping away at the myth of white superiority.<sup>82</sup>

Along with Mays declamation victory came an invitation to try out for Bates’s debate team. Professor A. Craig Baird, an English instructor and debating coach, personally asked Mays to consider trying out for the team, though Mays, always concerned with his studies, declined the offer. Baird persisted, however, and during a third meeting convinced Mays to try out for the team. Mays did earn a slot on the debate team but did not participate until his senior year due to a combination of inexperience and team politics.<sup>83</sup> His minor status on the team proved to be good fortune, however, since Mays was unsettled by his initial academic performance at Bates. As he recounted:

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 56.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 58-59; Although Mays, in *Born to Rebel*, recalls having not actively participated as a member of the debate team until his senior year, there is record of his debating at the Bates-Tufts Debate on April 25, 1919 during the spring of his junior year. See Bates-Tufts Debate manuscript, Medford, Massachusetts, April 25, 1919. Bates people files, Mays, Benjamin, Folder 1, Edmund S. Muskie Archives & Special Collections Library, Bates College, Lewiston, Maine.

Until I entered Bates, I had always been a “straight A” student. During my first semester at Bates, I made only one A, and was embarrassed and chagrined to receive the first and only D in my whole academic career.<sup>84</sup>

Interestingly, Mays’s only A of the first semester came in Greek, a class in which he struggled for most of the semester, so much so that a fellow classmate antagonized him endlessly about his difficulties with the language. Mays, however, found his classmate’s disdain to be adequate fuel to drive him to master the subject. Consequently, he dedicated days and nights to studying Greek and remained in the counsel of Professor Chase, the course instructor. Although Mays’s diligence did earn him higher grades, he never developed a love for Greek. He did, however, learn a valuable lesson about the value of developing relationships with course instructors, a lesson that would stay with Mays throughout his days as Morehouse president. As he noted, “I always urged every student to seek an early conference with his teacher if he was having difficulty with a subject.”<sup>85</sup>

Although Mays’s A in Greek represented a bright spot on an otherwise dim first-semester report, he maintained for years that his mediocre performance in his other courses cast a lingering shadow on his overall academic performance at Bates. His failure to be elected to Phi Beta Kappa, he believed, was proof positive of his assertion. Mays admitted that he was disappointed about not being elected, so much so that he “was inclined to blame racial prejudice,” but he knew that his overwhelmingly positive experience with whites at Bates would not support such a claim. Truthfully, he knew that he could look only at the record of his academic performance for an explanation. In his six semesters at Bates, Bennie earned “twenty-

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<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 58.



two A's, thirteen B's, six C's, and one D," a range of grades he estimated represented "an A-minus or B-plus average." In the aggregate, his grades bespoke an above average performance, but, as Mays surmised, it was also likely "that the six C's and the one D spoke loudly in that Phi Beta Kappa Committee meeting."<sup>86</sup> Beyond their implications for denied entrée into Phi Beta Kappa, Mays's grades were significant in that they represented for him a great equalizer in his quest to debunk myths of black inferiority. He spoke candidly about their importance:

It may appear that I attached undue importance to my grades. They were tremendously important to me, but not just for themselves. They were the evidence I had promised myself to produce, the proof that superiority and inferiority in academic achievement had nothing to do with color of skin. Only in New England, I had felt, could I get the evidence; in New England I had produced the proof."<sup>87</sup>

Indeed, Mays's academic performance at Bates validated the convictions he had held since his childhood, that God had not endowed white men with any more intelligence than he had black men. At Bates, Mays concluded with certainty that he was intellectually capable of anything to which he committed time and effort. Ironically, it was also during this time at Bates that Mays was forced to question the validity of one of his deeply held beliefs, that whites, in general, were his enemy. If brief encounters with friendly whites at Virginia Union planted in Mays a seed of ideological transformation, his tenure at Bates brought about its full bloom. The abundance of positive encounters he had with white teachers and classmates alike made it impossible for Mays to reconcile his broad perception of whites with the truth of his everyday experiences among

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<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., 58.

them. As he later reflected, “How could I, after Bates, generalize and say that all white people are prejudiced against Negroes?”<sup>88</sup> In short, he knew that he could not.

As Mays was a man who believed in the importance of spiritual development, it is important to note that in the midst of the aforementioned academic and social transformations, he was also undergoing a tremendous spiritual transformation. As mentioned previously, Mays’s early religious experiences revolved around his mother’s prayers and attendance at Mount Zion. It was there that his theological foundation was first established and he first felt a call to vocational ministry, a call he would heed in 1919 while at Bates. Under the leadership of the conservatively disposed Reverend Marshall, Mount Zion’s congregants exhibited a degree of moral piety that was not common in black churches in Greenwood County at the time, according to Mays. Marshall adhered to a literal interpretation of the Bible and believed it was reprehensible to question the text. Mays recalled that Marshall preached sermons rooted in a Gospel that “was highly other-worldly, emphasizing the joys of heaven and the damnation of hell,” a gospel intended to soothe the battered minds, bodies, and souls of black people living in the Jim Crow South.

According to Mays, Marshall’s sermons were indeed salvific in substance, but they offered no measures for present relief or earthly liberation. Rather, “the Gospel he [Marshall] preached was primarily an opiate to enable them to endure and survive the oppressive conditions under which they lived at the hands of the white people.” Although Marshall’s gospel was socially passive, Mays admitted that it was necessarily so, as a more socially disruptive message

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 60; Benjamin E. Mays. Why I Went to Bates. *Bates College Bulletin*. 1966. Bates People Files. Mays, Benjamin, Folder 2, Edmund S. Muskie Archives & Special Collections Library, Bates College, Lewiston, Maine.

during that time could have cost Marshall his pastorate or even his life.<sup>89</sup> Although Mays did enter Bates College holding to many of the theological beliefs to which he had been exposed during his years attending Mount Zion, he would, nevertheless, undergo a transformation in his understanding of the Christian gospel.

It was in Bates's Department of Biblical Literature and Religion where Mays was first exposed to a more liberal interpretation of Christianity, one that sought to understand the implications of Christian doctrine in the modern world. Led by Professor Herbert Purinton and offering courses such as literary biblical interpretation and biblical criticism, Bates's religion department was considered a significant force in the movement of academic Protestant Liberalism, identifying itself most readily with the Evangelical branch of that movement.<sup>90</sup> According to Jelks, "Evangelical Liberalism thought itself to be in continuity with historical faith in placing emphasis on the person and work of Jesus as the Christ." Scholars like Walter Rauschenbusch and Shirley Jackson Case were among the most acclaimed Evangelical Liberals of the time, and it was their works that would challenge and stretch Mays's views on Christianity.<sup>91</sup>

Rauschenbusch's championing of a Social Gospel, especially, resonated with Mays, as Rauschenbusch maintained "that the social order should be Christianized" and followers of Christ "could not be a passive agent in the social order, but should promote the teachings of

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<sup>89</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 14-16.

<sup>90</sup> Randal M. Jelks, "Mays's Academic Formation 1917-1936." In *Walking Integrity: Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.* ed. Lawrence Carter, Sr. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 111-129.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

Jesus to individuals as well as the collective society.”<sup>92</sup> Emerging out of a late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century Protestantism that had divided itself into ‘Private’ and ‘Public’ factions, the Social Gospel was a “public” theology, in that it focused on “the social order and the social destinies of men” as opposed to a ‘private’ theology that focused on “individual salvation out of the world...and fulfillment or its absence in the rewards or punishments in another world in a life to come.”<sup>93</sup> Writing in the midst of World War I, Rauschenbusch, who was the most visible and vocal spokesman of the Social Gospel of his era, articulated the ethos and relevance of the Social Gospel in the following quote:

The social gospel is the old message of salvation, but enlarged and intensified. The individualistic gospel has taught us to see the sinfulness of every human heart and has inspired us with faith in the willingness and power of God to save every soul that comes to him. But it has not given us an adequate understanding of the sinfulness of the social order and its share in the sins of all individuals within it...The social gospel seeks to bring men under repentance for their collective sins and to create a more sensitive and more modern conscience. It calls on us for the faith of the old prophets who believed in the salvation of nations.<sup>94</sup>

According to Jelks, Mays identified with Rauschenbusch’s philosophy for several reasons: first, it challenged the accommodationist approach to segregation that had been promoted during his years at Mount Zion; second, it affirmed the philosophy of racial egalitarianism he learned at home and at church; third, it troubled the “the singular emphasis in Baptist theology of

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), 179.

<sup>94</sup> Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: MacMillan, 1918), 5-6.

individualist's piety and conversion as the most important act of Christian life."<sup>95</sup> Most importantly, however, Rauschenbusch's Social Gospel equipped Mays socially and spiritually to attack more effectively the Jim Crow power structures he so desperately sought to dismantle.<sup>96</sup>

In the spring of 1920, Mays graduated from Bates with his bachelor's degree, having achieved success both inside and outside the classroom. He had been an excellent student but also excelled in extracurricular offerings such as the college's annual oratory competitions and served well in leadership positions with student organizations such as Forum, the Phil-Hellenic Club, the Debating Council, and the Y.M.C.A. His performance as a debater was duly noted and celebrated when Bates awarded him the prestigious Drew Medal, an honor bestowed only upon Bates's best debaters.<sup>97</sup> The academic achievement and personal growth he experienced at Bates never escaped his memory, as he always credited the school and its egalitarian culture for his progress during those years. Mays's recalled fondly Bates's influence on his life, stating that, "Bates College did not 'emancipate' me; it did the far greater service of making possible for me to emancipate myself, to accept with dignity my own worth as a free man."<sup>98</sup>

#### Graduate School at the University of Chicago

Mays departed Bates College with the same ambition with which he entered, though he possessed a renewed confidence in his racial and spiritual identities and stood proudly upon the firm educational foundation he had laid during his four years of college work. Though earning a

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<sup>95</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 118.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 118-119.

<sup>97</sup> *The Mirror*, 1920. Bates People Files. Mays, Benjamin, Folder 2. Edmund S. Muskie Archives and Special Collections Library, Bates College, Lewiston, Maine.

<sup>98</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 60.

college degree was an exceptional feat for any black man during the early twentieth century, especially one from the South, Mays was not satisfied with his B.A.; he desired more. During his senior year, after heeding his calling into Christian ministry, Mays jettisoned plans to pursue graduate studies in mathematics and chose instead to pursue graduate studies in the New Testament at the University of Chicago, a plan inspired first by Professor Nix at State College. However, lacking the fiscal means to attend immediately the University of Chicago, Mays decided to delay his entrée by one semester, spending the majority of the fall saving money to cover his cost of attendance. Thus in August of that year, Mays married Ellen Harvin in Virginia, and returned north immediately to begin working again for the Pullman Company in order to earn the money he needed to enroll at the University of Chicago in January. Harvin returned to her job as a schoolteacher in South Carolina.<sup>99</sup> Through December of 1920, Mays labored and saved, and on January 3, 1921, he arrived in Chicago, \$43 in hand.<sup>100</sup> He enrolled the same day.

Founded in 1890 as a Baptist college and expanded in 1892 into a university, the University of Chicago was the outgrowth of the philanthropic and religious impulses of John D. Rockefeller, a wealthy oil magnate, and the educational ambitions of the American Baptist Education Society, a representative organization of the Baptist denomination. Led in its early years by President William Rainey Harper, the university moved aggressively in establishing itself as a premiere institution of higher learning. The Divinity School, Goodspeed contended, played a significant role in helping the university shape this image, as it “was from the first a vital, growing, progressive part of the University.”<sup>101</sup>

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 61.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 61; Jelks, “Formation,” 119.

<sup>101</sup> Thomas W. Goodspeed. *A History of the University of Chicago*. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1972), 2, 4, 364.

Although Mays arrived in Chicago with very little money, he found himself in surprisingly fortuitous circumstances. The Divinity School, he learned, charged “virtually no tuition” to be enrolled. This policy, undoubtedly, was a boon for Mays, especially in light of previous school years at Bates during which he had been required to borrow money and work odd jobs to cover the costs. Mays also discovered that the liberal ethos of the University and its Divinity School did not extend to race relations among students and faculty. Mays recalled vividly the difference between the racially progressive climate to which he had grown accustomed at Bates and the open prejudice he encountered at the University of Chicago. In the dining halls, for instance, many white students refused to eat near black students. Similarly, many white professors refused to acknowledge their black students outside the classroom. His experiences off campus were no different, as many restaurants in the surrounding Hyde Park area refused to serve blacks. Mays encountered more prejudice while in Chicago, both on and off campus, than he had during his tenure at Bates, though Chicago’s racial climate, he noted, was still preferable to that of Greenwood County.<sup>102</sup>

According to Jelks, Mays’s adoption of Evangelical Liberalism while at Bates helped ease his transition into the liberal, critical-minded department of religion at the University of Chicago. Mays too recalled the ease with which he embraced the philosophical disposition of the university’s religion department. He claimed that, “despite my extremely conservative background and orthodox religious upbringing, the ultra-modern views of the University of Chicago scholars did not upset my faith. What they taught made sense to me.”<sup>103</sup>

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<sup>102</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 65.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

It is important to note here that Mays's tenure at the University of Chicago covered a fourteen-year span, beginning in January of 1921 and culminating in December of 1935, with the fulfillment of the requirements for both an M.A. and a Ph.D. in religion. Mays attended the university in fits and starts due to pressing financial circumstances that led him to accept job offers from Morehouse College, South Carolina State College, the Tampa, Florida branch of the National Urban League, the YMCA, and the Institute of Social and Religious Research.<sup>104</sup>

As Jelks noted, Mays's time at the University of Chicago can be examined in two periods: the first of which clusters the time blocks of January-August 1921 and September 1924-August 1925 and the second of which spans September 1932-December 1935. Mays's first stint at Chicago, Jelks observed, "was during the time [of] the Divinity School's high period in socio-historical research on the New Testament."<sup>105</sup> Shirley Jackson Case, who was an alumnus of Bates College and a colleague of Herbert Purinton, Mays's religion instructor at Bates, was among the leading scholars in the field and was a faculty member at the University of Chicago during this period.

During his time at Bates, Mays had become familiar with Case's writings, but it was during his time of study the University of Chicago, under Case's tutelage, that he began to engage fully Case's ideas on the New Testament and learn the value of interpreting scripture through a socio-historical lens. Case, Jelks contended, was interested in the context from which the Bible emerged and maintained that, "the scriptures did not simply drop out the sky, but rather were shaped by an evolving interaction between culture, politics, and geographic location."<sup>106</sup> Mays's master's thesis on the New Testament reflected heavily Case's position. Entitled "Pagan

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<sup>104</sup> Ibid., 66, 101, 105.

<sup>105</sup> Jelks, "Formation," 121.

<sup>106</sup> Jelks, "Formation," 122.



Survival in Christianity,” the thesis examined the ways in which early Christian doctrine appealed to and meshed with local pagan beliefs and therefore promoted the development and ensured the survival of the Christian faith. As Mays argued, when one juxtaposes Christian principles with “pagan” beliefs, it becomes clear “that these ethical principles were not peculiar to Christianity and that Christianity was not an entirely new religion, but that many of the fundamental teachings of Christianity were known to Judaism and to the Pagan world.” Thus, he contended, “Christianity was wholly dependent upon the forces of the Pagan world and Judaism.”<sup>107</sup>

When Mays returned to the University of Chicago’s Divinity School in 1932 to begin his doctoral studies, he remained driven by the same purpose that carried him North to Bates, the nagging desire to prove his intellectual capacity and human worth. As he recalled, “my determination was all a part...of my resolution to overcome, in part at least, the wounding circumstances which had characterized my early life.”<sup>110</sup> During this period, Mays studied closely with Henry Weiman, “one of America’s leading theologians” and “a leader within the Chicago School” whose research focused on the necessity of a scientific approach to studying human conceptions of God. According to Jelks, Weiman argued that the efficacy of science, lay in its ability to lift “the veil of sentimentality from Christianity and removed any obscurest tendencies which religious traditions used to protect their exact notions about God.”<sup>111</sup> Weiman’s

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<sup>107</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Pagan Survivals in Christianity” (MA thesis, University of Chicago, 1925), 5.

<sup>110</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 134.

<sup>111</sup> Jelks, “Formation,” 126.

scholarship directly shaped that of Mays, as his dissertation title, “The Development of the Idea of God in Contemporary Negro Literature,” revealed. In this study, which was later published as *The Negro’s God: As Reflected in His Literature*, aimed to explain black Americans’ conceptualizations of God, as articulated through classical Negro literature (i.e. fiction) and “mass” literature (i.e. sermons and Christian education materials). He concluded that African Americans’ conceptions of God were developed in three ways: 1) “ideas of God adhere strictly to traditional compensatory patterns;” 2) “the idea of God to support a growing consciousness of social adjustment;” 3) the “growing tendency or threat on the part of a few post-war writers, particularly the younger post-war writers, to abandon the conception of God ‘as a useful instrument’ in social reconstruction.”<sup>112</sup>

### Summary

While it is impossible to determine with specificity the degree to which State College of South Carolina, Virginia Union University, Bates College, and the University of Chicago influenced Mays’s development, what is evident is that his experiences at each school nurtured his growth in three important areas: self-identification, race relations, and spiritual worldview. Although Mays was fortunate to leave Greenwood County with firm educational roots planted by his family and nurtured by teachers and members of his local community, his experiences during high school, college, and graduate school were instrumental in affirming his long-held convictions about the fallacious nature of white racists’ claims regarding innate black inferiority.

Despite the absence of whites at State College, the opportunity to excel academically among blacks was important for Mays, as it was his in-class experiences among blacks at State

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<sup>112</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Development of the Idea of God in Contemporary Negro Literature” (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 1935), 11.

College that prepared him academically to compete with whites at Bates and the University of Chicago. Nevertheless, his experiences at State College were unable to put to rest the question that had prodded Mays for nearly two decades: are blacks inferior to whites? For him, there was only one way to answer this question, and answer it in the negative. He had to plant himself in an academically challenging environment that allowed him to match wits with white students.

Bates provided that environment and gave Mays his first chance to compete intellectually alongside whites. His string of successes, both academic and extracurricular, initiated the process of unloading the heavy burdens of inadequacy and inferiority that, for so long, had weighed upon his mind and soul. Determined to further educate himself, Mays enrolled at the University of Chicago. At the culmination of his tenure at the university, Mays had earned both his master's and Ph.D. in religion, a tremendous feat for any man, but especially a man of color during the 1930s. But for Mays, the achievement had significance beyond itself. Earning a Ph.D. signaled the successful completion of a journey towards intellectual self-actualization, a journey that had begun during his childhood. This is not to say that Mays's acquiring a doctoral degree represented the apex of his development as an intellectual; rather, it is to acknowledge that such an achievement, for Mays, provided indisputable proof that blacks were not inferior to whites, that, indeed, God was not a god of favoritism.

Although Mays recalled settling at Bates in 1920 this very question of black inferiority, his reflections on graduation from the University of Chicago in 1935 identify the culmination of his graduate education as the point at which "the question of innate racial inferiority had been settled in my mind forever."<sup>113</sup> While, Mays gives conflicting accounts of the point at which he no longer pondered the veracity of claims regarding innate racial inferiority, it may be that he

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<sup>113</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 137.

did, in fact, tussle with feelings of racial inferiority during the fifteen years between his graduations from Bates and Chicago. His claim to have settled the matter at Bates does not seem to preclude the possibility of his wrestling again with the specters of doubt and inadequacy that haunted him for much of his early life, especially given the fifteen-year gap between his time at Bates and Chicago. Nevertheless, by the time Mays finished his doctorate at the University of Chicago, he was sure of his intellectual ability and that of all members of the black race.

At the culmination of his formal education, Mays had also turned a positive corner in his perceptions of whites. Mays's one and only year at Virginia Union marked the beginning of a transformation in his view of whites, as he mentioned that Virginia Union was the first place at which he came to know "a few white persons who expressed an interest in Negroes."<sup>114</sup> The brevity of Mays attendance at Virginia Union did not allow him to develop genuine relationships with white students or faculty, but his three years at Bates did. At Bates, Mays not only competed academically with white students, but he also befriended them. The significance of his having a cordial relationship with any white person was not beyond Mays. As he reflected, "I still knew no white Southerners whom I considered my friends, but I had made many friends at Bates and my racial attitude was undergoing a tremendous change."<sup>115</sup>

Mays's racial attitude continued to change at the University of Chicago, though his experiences were not nearly as warm as they had been in Maine. Many faculty and students alike exhibited open prejudice towards the university's black population, but such discrimination did not retard Mays's progressive view of race, nor did it blind him to the individual nature of racial encounters. Mays recalled his time at the University of Chicago as fondly as he had his time at

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<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 52.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 60.

Bates and maintained that both experiences taught him that, “despite many unpleasant and humiliating racial experiences...all white cannot be categorized as enemies of the Negro.”<sup>116</sup> Evidently, Mays’s time at the University of Chicago led him to grow wiser in his understanding of race and prejudice. Discrimination notwithstanding, Mays cited his pleasant encounters with whites as the impetus for such a dramatic change in his view of race relations.

Finally, Mays’s spiritual transformation began at Bates College and blossomed more fully at the University of Chicago. The Liberal Protestantism of both institutions’ religion departments provided Mays a theologically sound, but also intellectually and ethically relevant framework for advancing his sociological disposition. Unable to reconcile his home church’s theology of passivity and social disengagement with the oppressive realities of Jim Crow, Mays found in Liberal Protestantism, particularly Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel, a refreshingly utilitarian view of Christianity, one that saw terrestrial deliverance from oppression as a legitimate outcome of putting one’s faith into action.

At Bates particularly, Jelks noted, Mays came to believe “that the Christian had an obligation to Christianize the social order” and “solidified his belief in the social character of Christianity and the positive impact that a social faith and sound biblical interpretation could have on the prevailing social order.”<sup>117</sup> More than any other theological concept to which Mays was exposed while attending Bates College and the University of Chicago, Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel seems to have had the most profound impact on his worldview. Not only did the Social Gospel’s synthesis of Christian doctrine, social justice, and democracy provide Mays with

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 138.

<sup>117</sup> Jelks, “Formation,” 118.

an inspiring personal philosophy with which he was able to identify, but it also provided him with a sharp philosophical lens through which to interpret his ideas regarding education.

## Chapter 3

### Early Years as a Professional Educator

This chapter explores the beginning of Mays's journey as a professional educator, looking specifically at his educational writings during the 1930s and 1940s. The chapter begins with an examination of Mays's work and education-related writings while serving as Howard University's dean of the School of Religion and moves into an examination of his writings on education during the first nine years of his presidency of Morehouse College. As this chapter is the first to explore Mays's writings, it is also the first to highlight the characteristics of his dynamic continuum of thought, focusing on the centrality of Christianity, democracy, and social responsibility in his articulation of his views on education. Because Mays shared his views on education through multiple outlets, this chapter is organized according to genre and chronology, meaning that his speeches, for instance, are organized chronologically, as are his scholarly writings and weekly newspaper columns.

### Historical Context

The 1930s and 1940s were among the most tumultuous years in American history. Following the stock market crash of 1929, the United States over the next several years experienced an economic crisis of unprecedented proportions, a period that historians would later call the Great Depression. Unemployment and poverty rates soared as factory workers in cities were laid off in large numbers and farmers in rural areas experienced one of the worst droughts in the nation's history. State and local relief programs became cornerstones of depressed

communities across the nation, but given the large numbers of newly unemployed and poverty-stricken people seeking help, many of these programs failed.<sup>118</sup>

President Herbert Hoover, who had been elected in 1929, faced a tremendous challenge in leading the United States in the early 1930s. As the economic crisis deepened, his political footing grew shallower.<sup>119</sup> By the presidential election of 1932, Hoover, a Republican, had become so unpopular that the election of a Democrat was a forgone conclusion. The governor of New York, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, emerged as the Democratic Party's favorite, promoting plans for a "new deal" to resurrect the economy; he defeated Hoover in a landslide victory.<sup>120</sup>

The New Deal, as Roosevelt's legislative program was called, aimed to restore structure to the American economy and confidence to the American people. As Brinkley noted, it "constructed the foundations of the federal welfare system...extended national regulation over new areas of the economy," and ultimately "produced the beginnings of a new liberal ideology that would govern reform efforts for several decades." Still, the New Deal was unsuccessful in bringing an end to the Depression. Interestingly, World War II, the second of the Great Wars, would provide the spark the United States needed to resuscitate its economy.<sup>121</sup>

Although World War II began in 1939 with Germany's invasion of Czechoslovakia and Poland, the United States did not join the war effort until December 7, 1941, when Japanese pilots bombed the U.S. Naval Base at Pearl Harbor. Fighting alongside the Allied forces of Great Britain and the Soviet Union, the United States went to war against the Axis powers of Germany, Italy, and Japan. The United States' entry into the War not only unified American citizens, but it

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<sup>118</sup> Alan Brinkley, *American History: A Survey*, (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 680-681.

<sup>119</sup> *Ibid.*, 688-690.

<sup>120</sup> *Ibid.*, 692-694.

<sup>121</sup> *Ibid.*, 701, 716, 724.



also helped pull the nation's economy out of the depths of the Depression. Dramatic increases in federal spending, much of it in the way of capital investments in the West and the boom in war-related production strengthened the nation's economy. When the War finally came to an end in 1945, Brinkley noted, "the United States had emerged not only victorious but in a position of unprecedented power, influence, and prestige."<sup>122</sup> Yet, the weight of war was still heavy upon the nation's shoulders. The millions of lives that were lost, the devastation of nuclear warfare, and the rapid spread of communism left much of the Western world dispirited and uneasy. Mays, too, was moved by the tragedies of the war and was deeply troubled by humanity's capacity for jingoism; however, he believed in the goodness of men and looked to education as the means by which men could reach their potential.<sup>123</sup>

#### Career Beginnings at Howard University

In mid-1934, having completed all of his course requirements at the University of Chicago, Mays began seeking employment at churches, colleges, and universities. Although he had been in negotiations with a church in St. Louis about a pastoral position, he received his first job offer from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee. Mays the accepted position, but found himself unsure of his decision after Mordecai Johnson, the president of Howard University, offered him "the deanship of Howard's School of Religion." As Mays recalled, "Although I was morally obligated to go to Fisk, I was strongly drawn to Howard, both because I felt that it

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<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 736-737, 743-744, 751, 765.

<sup>123</sup> James T. Patterson, *Grand Expectations: The United States, 1945-1974* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5-6. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 9, 2012); ), William H. Chafe, "America Since 1945," In *New American History* ed. Eric Foner (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1997), 162. *eBook Collection (EBSCOhost)*, EBSCOhost (accessed May 9, 2012).

offered the greater challenge and because I know Mordecai Johnson very well.” Thus, Mays sought an honorable release from his commitment to Fisk, traveling to Nashville to discuss with Fisk president, Thomas E. Jones, his dilemma. According to Mays, “Jones graciously granted my release and I accepted the position at Howard.”<sup>124</sup>

Founded in Washington, D.C. “as a private university in 1867 by act of the U.S. Congress,” Howard University, during the 20<sup>th</sup> century was considered one of the premiere Historically Black Colleges and Universities in the country.<sup>125</sup> When Mays arrived, Fisher asserted, he became “a member of the greatest community of African American scholars of that day and possibly of all time,” a community that included: Alain Locke, Sterling Brown, Kenneth Clark, Charles Drew, and Howard Thurman, just to name a few.<sup>126</sup> And while we can assume that the significance of joining a cadre of such highly respected black scholars was not lost on Mays, his recounting of what led him to Howard clarifies his thoughts on matter.

As noted previously, Mays wanted to begin his career at Howard due to his personal interest in Mordecai Johnson’s success and the professional challenge to vitalize the university’s School of Religion. Mays and Johnson were friends prior to Mays’s arrival at Howard, but because Johnson was serving as the first black president of the university, he was especially invested in Johnson’s success. As Mays put it:

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<sup>124</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 139.

<sup>125</sup> Julian B. Roebuck and Komanduri S. Murty, *Historically Black Colleges and Universities*, (Westport: Praeger, 1993), 73.

<sup>126</sup> Miles Mark Fisher, IV, “The Howard Years,” In *Walking Integrity: Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.*, ed. Lawrence Carter, Sr. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 132.

I am basically a ‘race’ man. I believe in the black man’s ability and my heart leaps with joy when a Negro performs well in any field. For me it was imperative that the first Negro president of Howard University be an unqualified and triumphant success. I had watched Howard’s growth during Johnson’s first eight years there; and I was eager to help him build a great university by making the School of Religion a first-rate institution.<sup>127</sup>

For six years, Mays, as dean of the School of Religion, dedicated himself to that task, working diligently “to increase the enrollment, to improve the faculty, to rehabilitate the physical plant, to enlarge and improve the library, to establish an endowment” and “to seek accreditation by the American Association of Theological Schools.” He was successful in each of these endeavors except the establishment of an endowment.<sup>128</sup>

#### The Necessity of Religious Literacy

Because Mays was the dean of Howard University’s School of Religion between 1934 and 1940, much of his writing during that time focused on the role of religion in students’ academic development. He enthusiastically advocated the study of religion as a crucial part of students’ college curriculum, especially black students. In 1938, for example, Mays published an article in *The Crisis*, entitled “The Most Neglected Area in Negro Education,” which argued that it was time for black leaders and philanthropists to “put forth every effort to bring theological and religious education among Negroes up to the standard set for colleges and universities.” As Mays saw it, the inadequate religious education of blacks was a problem with far-reaching

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<sup>127</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 141.

<sup>128</sup> *Ibid.*, 145.

consequences, affecting not only those being trained for ministerial positions but also those whose college education was leading them to challenge the validity and necessity of religion.<sup>129</sup>

Mays emphasized improved training for black clergy primarily because of the rapidly increasing “academic and cultural level of the Negro,” and the communicative challenges he believed would inevitably follow. As he argued:

Only an enlightened ministry will be able to command the respect of the trained Negro. We are training Negro men and women away from respect for an untrained ministry, and we are training them away from religion as presented and interpreted by an inadequately trained clergy. Despite this fact, we have done all too little to prepare a ministry that can lead the more enlightened Negro who, in many respects, is religiously illiterate and, for that reason, is often anti-religious.<sup>130</sup>

Mays believed that if ministerial training failed to take into consideration the changing educational landscape of black America, it would render itself useless.

In the same way, Mays called for a renewed emphasis on the religious education of black college students. He contended that, “The time is at hand when departments of religion should be established in our Negro colleges in order that our students will come out with a genuine appreciation for the ethical and cultural values of historical religion.” Again pointing to the significance of sound seminary training, Mays insisted that “It is the duty of the seminaries to train men to teach in these colleges,” especially since, he contended, “One of the greatest menaces to religion comes from teachers of religion who are poorly prepared.” In many black colleges

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<sup>129</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Most Neglected Area in Negro Education,” *The Crisis* 45, no. 8 (August 1938): 268.

<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*

and universities across the country, Mays held, the training provided by departments of theology “is so far below, in actual academic quality, other departments such as biology, chemistry, mathematics, social science, and the like, that the departments of theology are not respectable.”<sup>131</sup>

But inept teachers of religion were not the only threat to sound religious training in colleges, according to Mays. He believed that “Another great menace to real religion comes from scholars in scientific fields who are brilliant in their area, but who are virtually illiterate in the area of religion.” The problem, Mays argued, was that “The average college graduate has nothing more than a Sunday school boy’s interpretation of religion” and “Since this adolescent view of religion fails to harmonize with knowledge gained in other fields, he often attempts to disregard as valid the whole of the religion.” Even more, despite knowing “practically nothing about religion, he often speaks with authority in that field frequently to the detriment of young minds who are unable to view critically what their teachers hand out to them from day to day.” An anti-religious teacher was an even greater danger, Mays declared.<sup>132</sup>

Thus, it was imperative, for Mays, that seminaries and colleges devote adequate time and energy into developing their religious education programs. As he asserted, “We must insist that our colleges and universities give their students a chance to know something about religion just as they give them a chance to know something about such disciplines as philosophy, sociology, psychology, biology, physics, chemistry, and mathematics.”<sup>133</sup>

Mays extended this argument in 1940 in an article entitled, “The Religious Life and Needs of Negro Students,” in which he voiced concern over what he viewed as black students’

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<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid.

declining interest in and support of the church, a disinterest he attributed to a growing wave of passionate, though relatively uninformed, religious criticism in the country. Mays argued that, “within recent years, religion, and organized religion in particular has been heavily criticized because of what many people believe to be its conservative character.” Criticizing religion and the church, he argued, was a “modern” and “up-to-date” pastime for many individuals, especially “Negro students, both the church and unchurched.” When compared to science, he found “that some Negro students in theological seminaries appear to be far more tolerant and sympathetic toward science when its limitations are pointed out than they are toward religion and the church when its limitations are revealed.” Although for Mays, science indeed had value, particularly as a means of alleviating the psychological pain caused by segregation and racism, he did not accept it as superior to religion.<sup>134</sup>

What Mays found most troubling about students who were critical of religion was that very few of them knew enough science or religion to justify their claims, and many were not “willing to concede that science has limitations.” He contended that, “many Negro students, as students generally, are confused in their religious thinking” due to “poor backgrounds in religion,” and in some cases, never having “had a single course in religion.” Further, he argued that religious ineptitude, led many students “to believe that there are no standards of reference in the area of ethics and morals.” Because for many students, “right and wrong are wholly relative,” and “the guide for conduct can be found neither in religion nor in the Bible...One must rely upon his own best judgment and that of the group.” Believing that black students needed improved

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<sup>134</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Religious Life and Needs of Negro Students,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 9, no. 3 (July 1940): 336.

religious instruction and new experiences to counterbalance their notions of both the church and science, Mays outlined a set of fundamental religious needs for the black student.<sup>135</sup>

First, he argued, black students needed to “develop a critical but fair appreciation for the Negro church in particular and for the Church generally.” Mays acknowledged that the church was a flawed institution, but he did not view its flaws as grounds for complete dismissal. He argued that “to see these defects without properly evaluating the significance of this institution as to its role, past, present, and future, in American life would be” an unscientific endeavor. Thus, it was imperative that black students learn about the invaluable contributions of the Negro church to the uplift and progress of black people. Mays wanted black students to appreciate the Christian history of black Americans and the enduring spirit of the black church in order to better understand the futility of their criticism. Most importantly, he wanted black students to recognize their historical claim to the black church, insisting that, “whether in its present form or in a modified form, it is their responsibility to help make it more efficient by criticizing it constructively from the inside rather than hurling epithets at it from the outside.”<sup>136</sup>

Second, Mays claimed, black students needed “to have an intelligent understanding of the Bible and a fair knowledge of the historical development of the Christian religion.” He found it to be of no advantage to students to have no foundational knowledge of the Bible, its contents, or its historical conception. In fact he maintained that, “there are certain things in the Bible with which high school or college men should be familiar.” Students without such knowledge he believed were ill-equipped to distinguish between truth and fallacy and could not establish intellectually sound opinions regarding Christianity. He also encouraged schools to develop a

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<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 336-337.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 337-338.

curriculum that provided students with “some knowledge of the history of religions and a clear idea of the development history of Christianity” so that students “will also see that the human spirit throughout all time has been reaching out toward something beyond itself.” To be clear, Mays did not advocate a curriculum designed to convert all students to Christianity. Rather, he wanted students to be knowledgeable enough in their beliefs to ensure that “whatever the position he arrives at, it should have basis in knowledge and understanding.”<sup>137</sup>

Third, Mays insisted, colleges and high school were responsible for instructing these students in religious matters. He contended that, “if education is to deal with the whole culture...the college can no more escape its responsibility in the area of religion than it can escape its responsibility in the area of literature and mathematics.” He believed schools needed to acquire instructors of religion who were as intellectually gifted as instructors in other fields, because such professors would “do much to offset the anti-religious attitude engendered in students.” The need for religion courses in high schools and colleges was made greater by the limited capacity of the black church to adequately educate students in serious religious matters, a reality Mays attributed to the non-professional standing of instructors and the limited time churches reserved for formal religious instruction.<sup>138</sup>

Ultimately, Mays believed that students, particularly black students, should exhibit a strong understanding of religion, especially Christianity as means of preserving and perpetuating their black American identities. It was not about proselytizing or indoctrination. Rather, it was about educating students in their history. Mays wanted students, especially those who were

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<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 339-340.

<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 340.



critical of religion and the Christian church, to understand how integral were the church and Christianity in directing the course of black life in America. As he noted:

It is not enough for the Negro to parade the fact that Christianity was used by many to prove that slavery was ordained of God. As a fair critic, he must also make it plain that others used Christianity to prove that slavery was incompatible with the will of God. The searchlight of Christianity could not shine forever upon the institution of slavery without dissolving it. The Negro would have been in a sad plight after emancipation if the Christian church had not come to his rescue educationally and religiously. Christianity has been and still is one of the most powerful weapons the Negro possesses with which to press his claims in American life. It cannot be denied, therefore, that the Negro's heritage in America is a religious one. To understand this fact is necessary if the Negro student is going to be able to see clearly the significance of the church in American life.<sup>139</sup>

Surely, Mays's emphasis on religious education was not free from the influence of religious orthodoxy, but its focus on broadening one's understanding of self and the world spoke to his firm belief in the liberal arts curriculum orientation and its capacity "to help students become worldly, tolerant, and capable of significant societal participation."<sup>140</sup>

#### Mays at Morehouse

In the summer of 1940, Mays resigned from the deanship of Howard's School of Religion to assume the presidency of Morehouse College. Originally founded in 1867 as the Augusta Institute, Morehouse had its beginnings "in the basement of Augusta's Springfield

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<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 339.

<sup>140</sup> William Watkins, "Black Curriculum Orientations: A preliminary inquiry," *Harvard Educational Review* 63, no. 3 (1993): 328.

Baptist Church” and was supported initially by the American Baptist Home Mission Society. In 1913, however, the Institute relocated to Atlanta, Georgia and was renamed Atlanta Baptist Seminary. It was renamed Morehouse College shortly thereafter “in honor of Henry Lyman Morehouse (then the secretary of the American Baptist Home Mission Society).”<sup>141</sup>

Mays, who had been employed both as a mathematics instructor and acting dean at Morehouse between 1921 and 1924, was courted for the Morehouse presidency in early 1940 but claimed that initially he did not take seriously the college’s interest in him, even telling the recruiting board member that he enjoyed his “work at Howard and was not looking for a job.” In May of that year, however, Mays recalled, “a long-distance call from Trevor Arnett, a Board member and former president of the General Education Board, informed me that I had been elected to the presidency of Morehouse College.” Mays informed Arnett that he would consider the offer, but that he would first have to speak with President Mordecai Johnson. After three weeks of consulting with President Johnson, seeking wise counsel from colleagues, and investigating the overall condition of the college, Mays “accepted the offer to become the sixth president of Morehouse College.”<sup>142</sup>

The reasons Mays accepted the presidency of Morehouse were similar to those that led to his acceptance of the deanship of Howard’s School of Religion; he was intrigued by the tremendous challenge that accompanied the Morehouse presidency and felt a special connection with the school since he had begun his teaching career there as a mathematics instructor nearly twenty years prior. As he put it, “I found a special, intangible something at Morehouse in 1921

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<sup>141</sup> Julian B. Roebuck and Komanduri S. Murty, *Historically Black Colleges and Universities*. (Westport: Praeger, 1993), 59; Cynthia L. Jackson and Eleanor F. Nunn, *Historically Black Colleges and Universities: A Reference Handbook* (Santa Barbara: ABC-CLIO, 2003), 9.

<sup>142</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 66, 92, 170.

which sent men out into life with a sense of mission, believing they could accomplish whatever they set out to do. This priceless quality was still alive when I returned in 1940.” For twenty-seven years, Mays served as the president of Morehouse College, tirelessly seeking ways to elevate the institution, to improve its financial standing, make it an institution of unqualified excellence, and above all, instill “in Morehouse students the idea that despite crippling circumscriptions the sky was their limit.”<sup>143</sup>

In his quest to push Morehouse to new heights of achievement, Mays promoted among the faculty a firm belief in intellectual freedom. The freedom to speak one’s mind without bureaucratic repercussion was important to Mays, something he believed he and each faculty member were entitled to as scholars. Despite being the “face” of Morehouse, Mays was adamant about maintaining the integrity of his intellectual identity, refusing to kowtow to either the Board of Trustees or donors to the college. Thus, during his tenure at Morehouse, Mays recalled, “I never ceased to raise my voice and pen against the injustices of a society that segregated and discriminated against people because God made them black.”<sup>144</sup> This was especially true with regards to education, as he frequently delivered speeches and wrote articles that inspired his students, his community, and people across the nation to view education as a privilege that demanded of men a commitment to live with a greater sense of purpose and global responsibility.

#### The Elements of a Postwar Philosophy of Education

Between 1944 and 1945, for example, Mays delivered several speeches that outlined his vision of the educational needs students would have in the aftermath of the World War II. The first speech, which he delivered on May 24, 1944 before the Northern Baptist Convention in

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<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 172.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 181, 188.

Atlantic City, NJ, addressed the necessary educational aims of Baptist colleges as they prepared to honor their pasts while preparing for an uncertain future in a postwar America. Their educational agenda, Mays contended, should revolve around two immutable convictions: “1. That education without religion and without integrity is dangerous; and 2. That the human mind must be forever free—never restricted, never circumscribed.” Although Mays initially contextualized these convictions as pertaining to Christian institutions, he insisted that, “the first task is one that confronts every liberal art college in America irrespective of races.” For Mays, it was the duty of all colleges “to spiritualize a highly technical and mechanized civilization,” to “supply the cement that holds mechanism together.” He believed it imperative that all aspects of a college curriculum have some potentially spiritualizing function and be more than “means of making a living, ...increasing our comfort...increasing our profit and certainly more than means for destroying humanity.”<sup>145</sup>

The necessity of increasingly spiritualizing oneself was especially important for blacks, Mays believed, given the uneven pace at which blacks were advancing relative to racial attitudes and regional customs. According to Mays, if:

the Negro is developing much faster than the doors of opportunity are opening...he will need a ‘unique kind of education and a sound leadership that will give him historical perspective, deep anchorage in religious faith, and a conviction about God that will enable the Negro to move ever forward footsteps

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<sup>145</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Ministry of Our Negro Christian Colleges,” (speech delivered at the Northern Baptist Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, May 24, 1944, manuscript pages 6-8). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 1; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

firm with poise, hope, and faith—without frustration, without cynicism and without developing the spirit of hate or revenge.<sup>146</sup>

The success of black people, Mays seemed to believe, would depend heavily on their capacity to endure the resistance and rejection that were sure to continue in the years to come.

Mays echoed these sentiments in the second of these addresses delivered in 1945 at Morehouse's 78<sup>th</sup> Founder's Day program, and, in fact, included excerpts from his first speech in the second.<sup>147</sup> The second speech, however, was delivered closer to the war's end and necessarily reflected Mays awareness of the growing discourse on post-war educational philosophies. Major educational reforms, he believed, were emerging nationally in colleges and universities preparing for a post-World War II society, and he pondered the future philosophical landscape of higher education writ large and Morehouse College's place in that landscape. He also understood that while many of the "new" questions facing all colleges and universities were of some significance—"Should the colleges become more technical or vocational in their curricula?; Will we need the same emphasis on technology in peace as in war?; and What kind of skills will we need in order to build the kind of world that we claim we are fighting for?"—he contended that any educational philosophy worth developing should be morally and ethically robust enough to

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<sup>146</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 9.

<sup>147</sup> A close study of Mays' writings and speeches reveals that he often recycled sections of articles and speeches. As Mays was highly in demand as a speaker, one can assume that his "recycling" of previous material was an efficient way of preparing for the numerous speaking engagements for which he was booked annually.

shape a student's character as well as his intellect.<sup>148</sup> The following quote speaks to Mays's position on the underdevelopment of non-intellectual skills:

One of the fundamental defects in the world today is the fact that man's intellect has been developed to a point beyond his integrity and beyond his ability to be good. The conflicts between nation and nation, the hatred between race and race, and the ill will between man and man are not exclusively intellectual issues. They are equally ethical and moral. It will not be sufficient for Morehouse College, for any College for that matter to produce clever graduates, men fluent in speech and able to argue their way through; but rather honest men, men who can be trusted both in public and private life—men who are sensitive to the wrongs, the sufferings, and the injustices of society and who are willing to accept responsibility for correcting the ills.<sup>149</sup>

Producing such individuals, Mays argued, could not be accomplished solely through intellectual training; rather, it required the thorough development of what he called "spiritual skills," a broad range of abilities that he believed included but was not limited to developing character, exercising one's democratic and Christian convictions, and operating courageously to acknowledge and act upon what is good. Mays was convinced that, "our world is sick today not because we do not know but because we, like Pilot of old, lack the moral courage to act on what we know. The present crisis is a moral crisis located in the will."<sup>150</sup> Thus, for Mays, intellectual

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<sup>148</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, (untitled speech delivered at Morehouse College *Founders Day Program*, February 19, 1945, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 1; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>149</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 1.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 2.

training alone was an insufficient means by which to educate people. Intellectual development was but one component of a larger educational agenda. Thus Mays posited a more holistic educational philosophy. He was adamant about doing more as president of Morehouse than simply developing intellectual giants who lacked the heart and compassion for their fellow man or the moral fortitude to fight for justice. As he contended:

It will not be the purpose of Morehouse College to produce scholars: experts in science, history, literature, philosophy, and religion—these are mere means. It will be the purpose of Morehouse College to develop first of all men: men who are scholars—men who are experts in science, history, and philosophy. But the end must always be to develop good men.<sup>151</sup>

In a third speech delivered in 1945, later published as an article, Mays articulated a more comprehensive vision for how to develop the “good men” he believed were critical to ensuring the country’s welfare. Delivered at Howard University’s commencement, this speech signaled a shift in the complexity of Mays’s thinking regarding education in a postwar America. Entitled, “Democratizing and Christianizing America in This Generation,” the speech revealed a more fully developed vision of the transformative power of Christianity and democracy as core elements of an effective educational philosophy. The significance of this speech is twofold. First, it reveals the depth and clarity of Mays’s perspective on America, as viewed through the lenses of religion, politics, and education. Second, and closely tied to the first point, it serves as an ideological reference point for understanding Mays’s development as an educational leader, scholar, and activist. This speech speaks to the core of Mays’s worldview and how it permeated his personal and professional endeavors.

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<sup>151</sup> Ibid.

As this speech was delivered during final months of World War II, Mays built his thesis around the cultural and political phenomena that gave birth to Nazi Germany and Communist Russia. Referencing the mass indoctrination that changed the global identities of those countries, he wrote:

If people can be changed for the worse, it is reasonable to suppose that they can be changed for the better. If men can be educated for evil purposes, it is safe to assume that they can be educated for good purposes...If Germany through brutal means can build a kingdom of evil in one decade and if Russia, through brutal processes, can construct a new order in two decades, we can democratize and Christianize America in one generation.<sup>152</sup>

In referencing Nazi Germany and Communist Russia, Mays was by no means advocating the adoption of autocratic methods for citizenship training or nation building; rather, he was highlighting the efficacy of governments driven by a determination and dedication to realize their political aims. Their ignoble means and purposes notwithstanding, Nazi Germany and Communist Russia successively restructured their respective societies, a feat that, for Mays, spoke to the capacity for large-scale change where there is an undeterred will to realize that change.<sup>153</sup>

That America projected a global image of democracy and Christianity but refused to commit itself to their practice was a sore spot for Mays. And while he recognized the presence of some forms of democratic and Christian practice, he believed America was capable of much more.

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<sup>152</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Democratizing and Christianizing America in This Generation," *The Journal of Negro Education* 14, no.4 (Autumn 1945): 527.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.



As he contended:

But I do mean to say that we here in America have never deliberately planned to make our democracy function effectively, as Hitler planned to make his kingdom of evil function effectively. And we have never been as serious about living Christianity as the Russian leaders were about building a new economic and political structure. We have never been excited about a democracy for all the people and we have never been excited about a Christianity that was to be lived on the earth and that was to function in every area of life.<sup>154</sup>

Undoubtedly, Mays recognized the absurdity in looking to autocratic means to achieve democratic ends; however, he also recognized that “the will, the objectives, and the purposes of a Government are far more basic than the methods used.” In the same way Nazi Germany and Communist Russia willed their political aims upon the people, Mays believed that an America committed to democracy could will its political aims upon its citizens. As he maintained, “If a democratic government really wanted its democracy to function more perfectly, it would find ways and means within the democratic framework to make it function more perfectly. And it could be done without violence or revolution.”<sup>155</sup>

The imperative in Christianizing and democratizing America for Mays was rooted in the nation’s historical identity claims. He argued:

The United States is obligated by virtue of its Christian pronouncements to become Christianized and democratized. If America is to maintain integrity of soul, and if our Government is to escape the label of hypocrisy and deception, it

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid., 528.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid.

has no choice but to plan deliberately to bring to full fruition the four freedoms<sup>156</sup>—for which we claim we fought on the battlefields of Europe and Africa; and for which we claim we are fighting in the Pacific.<sup>157</sup>

For Mays, the Christian church was key to realizing this vision. Due to its unique claim of being an institution established by God and its belief in God as the common origin of man, the Church, Mays insisted, had an obligation to Christianize and democratize the United States. This obligation was made more by the fact that “The Church also asserts that human life is sacred and that each individual is of intrinsic worth and value.” According to Mays, “Any institution that has the nerve to make such claims is obligated—if for no other reason than to maintain integrity of soul, to strive with might and main to make good on its pronouncements.” The Church,

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<sup>156</sup> On January 6, 1941, two years into World War II, United States president Franklin D. Roosevelt delivered the annual State of the Union Address before Congress; it was entitled, “The Four Freedoms.” In the final paragraphs of the speech, Roosevelt spoke about working toward “a world founded upon four essential human freedoms.” They are as follows: “freedom of speech and expression;” “freedom of every person to worship God in his own way—everywhere in the world;” “freedom from want, which translated into world terms, means economic understandings which will secure nation a healthy peacetime life for its inhabitants—everywhere in the world;” “freedom from fear, which, translated into world terms, means a world-wide reduction of armaments to such a point and in such a thorough fashion that no nation will be in a position to commit an act of physical aggression against any neighbor—anywhere in the world; See, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, “State of the Union Message to Congress: ‘The Four Freedoms,’” Washington, D.C., January 6, 1941, in *Great Speeches* ed. John Grafton (Mineola: Dover, 1999), 99.

<sup>157</sup> Mays, “Democratizing,” 528.

<sup>157</sup> *Ibid.*, 528.

therefore, must operate with a compulsion to see all persons treated ethically and equally, not only within the church but also in secular society.<sup>158</sup>

The federal government, Mays believed, was also integral to realizing the Christianization and democratization of the United States. He lauded the U.S. Constitution, claiming that, “No greater document has ever been conceived by the minds of men.” In a democracy that proceeds from the minds of such men, Mays held, opportunity for advancement should abound. Not only should the federal government ensure full employment opportunities for all citizens, but it should also abolish segregation in publicly-funded institutions and ensure that institutions serving the public good are on equal footing financially. Schools, for instance, Mays noted, were institutions that deserved to be but were not always on equal footing. For instance, he argued that, “the South is too poor to bring the educational standard of the South up to the national average and if it were economically able to do so, the South would not do so. The jim crow system stands in the way.” Thus Mays contended that it was the Federal government’s duty to rectify the inequalities, proposing that it “should establish a minimum annual per-capita expenditure and a minimum classroom expenditure below which no American child would fall.” In the absence of federal involvement, according to Mays, positive change in the South was unlikely.<sup>159</sup>

Mays’s position on federal involvement in public education during this period was similar to that of Horace Mann Bond, one of Mays’s contemporaries and then president of Lincoln University, an HBCU located in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Bond, in 1938, had expressed interest in federal support to public education in an article about the necessity of

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<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 529.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 530.

African Americans being recognized as a national minority, his overall position being that any federal involvement in education funding should narrow disparities, not widen them. As he contended:

The function of the state in the American Democracy is to continue to equalize educational opportunity for all children to the degree necessary to fit them for full participation in the American society. It can so easily happen that Federal funds become an instrument for widening the gap now existing between children of different “racial” groups, who yet are all Americans. That Alabama, or Mississippi, or Georgia, or Louisiana, or Arkansas, or South Carolina, should so administer affairs is painful but understandable. That the Federal Government should do so is intolerable, and inconceivable if we are to retain, in an agency devoted to equalization of our population, any semblance of consistency between national ideals and national behavior.<sup>160</sup>

Mays and Bond, then, shared a belief in federal support to education and held that its aim must be egalitarian and capable of eliminating disparities in state funding to schools.

Lastly, Mays contended that beyond the Church and the Federal government’s role in Christianizing and democratizing the United States, it was imperative to “call upon the colleges, the universities, and the public schools to become exponents of the democratic way.” Again referencing the cultural reformations Germany and Russia were able to initiate partially through their educational systems, Mays argued that American schools could be utilized in a similar fashion. However, he did acknowledge that such an overhaul “would require drastic changes in

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<sup>160</sup> Horace Mann Bond, “Redefining the Relationship of the Federal Government to the Education of Racial and Other Minority Groups,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 7, no. 3 (July 1938): 459.

practice and policy,” and “In some situations the text books would need to be rewritten.”<sup>161</sup> In essence, we would have to change our educational aims, a point made clearer in the following quote:

In our public schools, colleges, and universities we would dedicate our teachings to truth. We would cease to perpetuate lies and myths about race. We would cease to kid ourselves about objectivity in teaching. We would be honest and admit that all teaching is propaganda of some kind. The notion that that the teacher’s job is to present all sides of a question and let the student make up his own mind would be greatly modified. All points of view are not equally good and all teachers are propagandists for what they believe to be true and for what they believe to be right. If we are willing to fight and die for democracy and the four freedoms abroad, we should be willing to teach them in the schools of this country. We would realize the fact that what hurts one hurts all and that the destiny of each American is tied up with the destiny of all Americans.<sup>162</sup>

Education, for Mays, was just as key to transforming American culture as were democracy and Christianity. Similar to George Counts, who, as a social reconstructionist, “was concerned with the social and economic inequities of American society and thought schools had a positive obligation to ‘change the social order,’”<sup>163</sup> Mays believed in the power of schools, teachers, and,

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<sup>161</sup> Mays, “Democratizing,” 531.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> Eliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed. (New York: Macmillan College Publishing Company, 1994), 67.

students and wanted to harness that power to initiate a cultural reformation that eschewed moral relativism in favor of absolute moral truth.<sup>164</sup>

Throughout the late 1940s, Mays maintained a critical position toward the status quo educational aims of colleges and universities. In 1947, for example, he spoke before the Association of American Colleges and questioned the virtue of most American colleges' stated missions and goals, focusing specifically on their aim of helping students "secure a good position that brings economic security, prestige, and social standing."<sup>165</sup> Seeking to highlight what American education *should* value, Mays outlined what aims were absent from American education. He stated:

The fundamental aim of American education is not to develop a thorough democratic society. It is not to develop a thorough functioning Christianity. It is not to make men honest, nor to free them of their prejudices. The aim of American education is to provide skills so that the student can "get on" in the world within the existing framework. This is largely true despite what we say in our catalogues and despite what we, as college presidents, say in public address.<sup>166</sup>

Just as Mays had argued in previous years, skill-oriented intellectualism alone could not provide the necessary elements necessary for building a sound educational philosophy. The inherently

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<sup>164</sup> Mays, "Democratizing," 531.

<sup>165</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Preparing Graduates of Church-Related Colleges to Live in One World," (speech delivered at the Association of American Colleges, January 15, 1947, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 1; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript pages 1-2.

technical nature of a subject, Mays believed, did not preclude the possibility of it contributing “toward a solution of the complex problems of life and ways in which living can be improved and humanity made better.” In fact, he maintained that “if the true aims of education are to perfect a thorough democratic society and a thorough functioning Christianity, our various skills will be used to these ends and not merely to the end of ‘getting on’ in the world.”<sup>167</sup>

At the close of the decade, Mays’s public speeches continued to be fueled by a postwar ethos that extolled education as the means by which men would reach their full human potential. In 1949, for example, Mays spoke before Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama and outlined four aims toward which educators and their respective institutions should strive in the process of shaping young minds. According to Mays, “the first function of an institution of learning is to create in the student a desire to achieve some-thing [*sic*] noble, something great, something worthwhile, by helping him develop his mind to the ultimate.” The occupational aims or circumstances of a student were irrelevant, as for Mays, the mind should be used to its maximum capacity and for the pursuit of excellence, whether one became an engineer or a housekeeper. To reiterate his point, Mays declared that, “the function of an institution of learning is to rouse the student, to make the student restless and dissatisfied with mediocre, ordinary performance.” However, if the institution and its teachers were to be successful in rousing the student to excellence, Mays believed, both entities had to be models of excellence and intellectual ambition. As he contended, “if the teachers have no desire to achieve further, if the teachers are satisfied with ordinary, mediocre performance, so will be the students.”<sup>168</sup>

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 4-6.

<sup>168</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Function of a College,” (speech delivered at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, October 28, 1949, manuscript pages 2-4). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 1; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

The second function of the college, Mays maintained, was to instill integrity in its students in the midst of developing their intellect, arguing as he had in previous speeches that, “intellect without integrity is exceedingly dangerous.” As Americans, the troubling consequences of neglecting our moral development, Mays claimed, were most evident in the byproducts of our distortion of democracy, one of the most nefarious being segregation. He believed that only when the virtue of integrity is overshadowed by intellect could an entire nation support a democracy so willing to endorse “by words and deeds a segregated system which is both un-Christian and undemocratic; a system that destroys the soul of both the segregated and the persons who do the segregating.”<sup>169</sup> Further, Mays argued, only in a society that privileged intellect over integrity could defense spending so grossly outweigh spending to equalize funding for public education. Mays articulated his criticism of the exorbitant military budget in the following quote:

In the most enlightened era in history, we Americans are spending today seventy-six cents out of every federal dollars [sic] on past, present, and future wars. A further sign of our short sightedness is the fact that we spend \$15,000,000,000 a year in preparation for war and cannot spend \$300,000,000 a year to equalize educational opportunities. It seems that at the present moment man may not be good enough, may not be moral enough to save civilization from catastrophe.<sup>170</sup>

For Mays, evidently, the most pressing global issues, such as war, oppression, and injustice, were not fiscal issues; rather, they were moral issues. Thus, if integrity and character development

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<sup>169</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 4-5.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 5.



were central to solving the greatest of human problems, it was imperative that colleges and universities devote themselves to shaping the integrity and character of their students.

The third function of an institution of learning, Mays posited, was to “to train boys and girls, men and women, for participation in a free-democratic society.” While he admitted that America was no model for true democratic practice, citing segregation as its biggest obstacle, Mays maintained that all his travels had led him to the conclusion “that only a democratic world is worth surviving.” To be sure, Christianity was also a central component to Mays argument for a democratic society, as he believed they were complementary ideologies. The second function of the institution, then, is of a dual nature. The logic in tethering the two worldviews, for Mays, was in the fact that “the Christian religion and democracy are the only two systems that make the individual supreme and human personality sacred.” In their unadulterated forms, these two ideologies, Mays went on to argue, were far superior to the Fascism and Communism exemplified in Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia, respectively.<sup>172</sup>

However, because democracy and Christianity, as practiced in America, were but perversions of their true forms, Mays contended that neither ideology was capable of impeding the spread of Fascism or Communism. Rather, he argued that only when America decided to devote itself fully to the Christianizing and democratizing of America with the same vigor with which it fought against Fascism and Communism would it be capable of defending itself against Fascist or Communist thought. As Mays argued, “If we loved Democracy and the Christian Religion as much as we hate Communism, we would democratize and Christianize America in ten years,” a task he believed was central to the nation’s survival. Again leveling the charge of

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<sup>172</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 6

morals-based citizenship training upon educational institutions, and in this instance the Church, Mays contended that:

If the school and the Church neglect their task of making America truly Democratic and truly Christian, I tremble, I fear that this evil, atheistic, brutal Godless system of Communism will overtake us...Despite the circumscribed, restricted environment in which we live, the schools must never lose sight of the democratic principle nor of the Christian ideal.<sup>173</sup>

If schools and churches failed to inculcate in our nation's youth basic principles of democracy and Christianity, Mays feared, the United States was bound to crumble "as did Rome, Babylon, Persia, and modern Germany."<sup>174</sup>

Finally, Mays claimed that the fourth aim of education was to train America's youth to be socially engaged and responsible, to be sensitive to the plight of their fellow citizens and recognize the shared nature of man's failures and triumphs. Indeed, Mays argued, "We are our brothers keeper," and by virtue of being such, our task is to ensure that all men are valued equally and uplifted with steady fervor. An excerpt from the speech's closing paragraph captured the sincerity of Mays's belief not only in collective responsibility but also collective identity and moral duty:

If I am learned and my fellows are illiterate, it does me no good. If I am rich and my fellows are poor, it doesn't help me. If my body is strong and vigorous and the bodies of my fellows are weak and frail, it is not credit to me...I am a part of the illiterate. I am related to the poor. I am part of the weak and the frail. I am a part of the suffering of this world. I am involved in the humanity...We are what we

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<sup>173</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 7-8.

<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

are by the Grace of God. And God will hold me accountable for what I do with his grace.<sup>175</sup>

Education, then, for Mays, required a form of spiritual conditioning rich enough to spur young men and women into social action, to convict their hearts in ways that led them to work for equality for all persons. The necessity of social responsibility as an educational aim, one can surmise, stemmed from Mays's belief in democracy and his abiding faith in core Christian principles, in this case the idea that Christians were to love their neighbors as themselves, to want for their fellow citizens the same things they want for themselves. Although, social responsibility was the final educational aim Mays articulated in this speech, in essence, it encapsulated the first three aims of education, as one could argue that encouraging students to work towards a noble cause, instilling in students moral integrity, and equipping students to practice true democracy and Christianity, are, in fact, principles of social responsibility. That education was, for Mays, by its very nature, an endeavor in social responsibility is made clear in one of the final lines of his speech: "the motto of education should be 'All men up and no men down.'"<sup>176</sup>

### Mays's Scholarly Writings

In his scholarly writings, Mays posited many of the same arguments about black education and postwar America he had in his speeches. In his 1942 article, "The Role of the Negro Liberal Arts College in Post-War Reconstruction," which predates but clearly inspires the aforementioned speeches, Mays outlined a number of educational aims he believed black colleges and universities needed to pursue in order to create a more thoroughly democratic

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<sup>175</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 8.

<sup>176</sup> Ibid.

society. The approach included both citizenship and subject-based components. Beginning with the citizenship-based components, he maintained that, “One of the major tasks of the Negro liberal arts college is to strive to keep alive in the breast of Negro youth the spark of Hope.” Mays, having grown up in the segregated South, knew intimately the negative psychological impact racism could have on young blacks and was dedicated to ensuring that black children and youth did not abandon their dreams because of it. He believed that “every time a member of a suppressed group lands in a significant place, it strengthens the hands of democracy.” The education and training available at black liberal arts college, he believed, was crucial to ensuring that black people continued to push the limits of democracy and secure important positions in society.<sup>177</sup>

Further, because Mays believed so deeply in the mission of black liberal arts colleges and the transformative power of democracy, he declared that, “the Negro liberal arts college (all negro colleges) should be experiment stations in democratic living. It should be a living protest against the undemocratic practices which the Negro experiences on every hand in his environment.” The black college, he insisted, could not preach to its student body democracy all the while practicing authoritarianism, especially in light of widespread black disenfranchisement in mainstream society. Rather, black colleges must empower their students, allowing them to “have a basic share in shaping the policy of the college community.” Mays was not calling for nominal student representation in college affairs, as he held, “Students should not be ‘figure-heads’ and their opinions should be weighed and considered with the same care as that of faculty members.” Without the opportunity to responsibly exercise power, Mays believed, there could be

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<sup>177</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Role of the Negro Liberal Arts College in Post-War Reconstruction, *The Journal of Negro Education* 11, no. 3 (July 1942): 402.

no reasonable expectation that black students would be prepared to appreciate freedom or value democracy.<sup>178</sup>

Further, Mays maintained that the black liberal arts college must maintain healthy relationships with the local community. As he asserted, “It will be a great pity if Negro liberal arts colleges become highbrow institutions whereby students with ‘better-than-thou’ attitudes are turned out to work among the masses.” The imperative to be “community-minded” applied to all colleges and universities, Mays contended, but he believed it to be especially important for black schools due to the socio-economic and cultural familiarity between black college students and local black communities. Mays claimed that, “If the Negro arts students are to assume a superior air toward the average and less-than-average citizens in the community, the vast majority of them will be taking that attitude toward their parents, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts, and near kin” and would subsequently be limiting severely their capacity to be effective citizens.<sup>179</sup>

Alleviating such attitudes among black college graduates, Mays argued, would require a proactive approach to building relationships between the college and the local community. Not only would professors need to recognize “so completely their solidarity with the common man,” but the college student would need to understand that “his or her destiny is tied up, and inevitably so, with the great mass of Negroes who must do the ordinary work of the world and who need their souls lifted.” The human pursuit of individuality, Mays held, must be halted for the greater good of man. The following quote captures best May’s opposition to unbridled individualism:

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 403.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 403-404.

A community-minded college would go a long way toward assisting the student to move away from the erroneous conception of the absolute freedom of the individual—the old idea that the ‘selfish interest of the individual’ is alone to be taken into consideration. Many of the ills from which society suffers today are traceable to this view of extreme individual self-interest. In the new day of tomorrow each individual must consider himself in relation to the social whole—the community and the world. This community-mindedness must not be wholly racial even if one is forced to live in a bi-racial civilization; it must include all races, all nations and the world.<sup>180</sup>

The move beyond individualism, for Mays, was a move toward social responsibility, a concept by which he believed black liberal arts colleges must define their educational goals. Reforming educational aims was imperative for black schools, as he argued that, “education can no longer be considered as gaining equipments and acquiring skills to get ahead in the world.” Education, if it is to be of any practical use, cannot be compartmentalized and unrelated to the needs of the people.<sup>181</sup>

Extending his point regarding the necessity of democratic practices within black colleges, Mays noted that these institutions must also “contribute their share to the saving and the developing of democracy in this country” through citizenship training. Mays contended that “Citizenship as it relates to the Negro and the ballot can never be fully realized until there is intelligent concern and intelligent leadership emanating from Negro colleges,” leadership he believed would emerge when college students were thoroughly trained in “the history and

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 404.

<sup>181</sup> Ibid., 405.

development of the American Government and how this Government functions.” Black students especially, he believed, needed to “be conversant with and understand every item in the Constitution of the United States.” Moreover, he held, “The Negro student should be encouraged not only to know his Government but it should be urged upon him that it is his duty and responsibility to participate in it, however hazardous the journey to that end may be.” The task of the black liberal arts college, then, was “to make their faculties and students citizenship-minded.”<sup>182</sup>

Also among the duties of black liberal colleges was that of developing “scholars of the first magnitude.” For Mays, the task was a difficult one because he believed that the pervasiveness of racial prejudice sometimes hampered intellectual development and truth seeking among black *and* white people. As he noted, “scholarship has been stifled in many sections of America because the men have been inhibited in their thinking, research and utterance by environmental prejudices.” Unlike many white scholars who have subscribed to racially prejudiced thinking, however, Mays argued that “teachers in the Negro liberal arts colleges have an opportunity to rise above these crippling restrictions,” and in turn come to make up a large percentage of the new scholars in the South. The likelihood of black scholars becoming an influential force in Southern scholarship, Mays contended, would be attributable not only to freedom from prejudice, but also attendance at elite northern institutions where “Negroes have sat at the feet of the best in American scholarship and have returned as professors in Negro colleges.”<sup>183</sup> According to Mays, the rise of black scholars was simply the product of a basic equation:

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<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 406.

<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 407.

Superior training plus freedom of inquiry should enable the Negro scholars in the Negro liberal arts colleges and universities to make an inestimable contribution in advancing human knowledge both in the South and the nation. Not having any special age-long traditions or prejudices to defend, the Negro scholar should gain the objectivity required in truly great scholars.

Although Mays knew that creating such a powerful cadre of black academics would come at a price, for instance a reduction in a professor's teaching load, he believed that the immediate sacrifice was worth the potential long-term payoff in the possibility of eradicating segregation. To be sure, Mays did not necessarily prescribe excellence as *the* remedy for racism's ills, but he did hold to the belief that producing top notch black scholars may be "one of the ways Negro colleges will cease to be labeled Negro colleges and will become just colleges...one of the ways to abolish discrimination."<sup>184</sup>

Lastly, Mays charged black liberal arts colleges with the task of developing "students of sound integrity." He expressed genuine concern that the human character had not kept pace with the development of the human mind and pointed to World War II as evidence. As he noted, "There seems to have been a tacit assumption within recent decades that if the mind was developed and if one was trained to think logically, good character would automatically follow." The brutal realities of war, however, he argued should "banish forever from our minds such erroneous ideas." Indeed, man had reached new heights in his intellectual capacity, but his capacity to be humane lagged so far behind as to make his intellectual gains insignificant. In the following quote, Mays identified the nexus between needs of humanity and the duty of the black liberal arts college:

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<sup>184</sup> Ibid.



One of the fundamental defects in the world today is the fact that man's intellect has been developed to a point beyond his integrity and beyond his ability to be good. The conflicts between nation and nation, the hatred between race and race, and the ill will between man and man are not exclusively intellectual issues. They are equally ethical and moral. Man knows more about science, religion, philosophy, and literature than he has ever known. And yet he is just as confused, or more so, than he has been at any time in history. The trouble with the world lies primarily in the area of ethics and morals. It will not be sufficient for the Negro liberal arts colleges, nor any colleges, to produce clever graduates, men fluent in speech and able to argue their way through; but rather honest men who can be trusted both in public and private life—men who are sensitive to the wrongs, sufferings, and injustices of society and who are willing to accept responsibility for correcting the ills.<sup>185</sup>

Mays's final point is core to his citizenship-based view of college education and the role it should play in shaping the human narrative. Given his emphasis on the need to develop further the human character, one can surmise that, for Mays, many of the other aspects of citizenship-based education, such as community mindedness and democratic practice, would follow from strong character development.

Surely, Mays's heavy emphasis upon citizenship training reveals his deep commitment to improving the human condition through non-intellectual means, but his commitment was not intended to come at the expense of the intellect. In his charge to black liberal arts colleges, Mays

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<sup>185</sup> Ibid., 407-408.

<sup>187</sup> Ibid., 410.

also posited an approach to preparing black students seeking to live in a more democratic society. Mays believed postwar America would present tremendous challenges for blacks returning from the war and those graduating from college, as their experiences would make them less inclined “to accept the *status quo*,” but inevitably lead to their frustration and disappointment. The question then, as Mays believed, was “What can the liberal arts college do to help develop poise and emotional stability?” The most intellectual suggestions came in the way of developing a sense of historical-mindedness and becoming religiously anchored.<sup>187</sup>

Historical-mindedness, Mays held, could be achieved several ways, the first being through the study of philosophy. Philosophy, he argued, was valuable because it “would enable a student to develop a well-rounded view of life...give him a broad view so that narrow specializations would not warp his mind.” Studying the classics, he believed, would also “give the Negro student a breadth of history and an understanding of the ideals of ancient people, a necessity in achieving poise.” Further, he maintained, becoming historical-minded allowed the black student to achieve an historical perspective, to understand “that his sufferings and his ills are fragmentary parts of sufferings of all peoples in history from the dawn of man up to the present.” Specifically, Mays argued that for the black college student to best understand the history of suffering, every black liberal arts college should offer courses in which the student can “study the role of minority groups in history to see how they have influenced the reconstruction of society,” or enroll in a course “given in the study of Jewish civilization and the Jew’s contribution to mankind.” Moreover, he contended that, “Negro history should be compulsory so that educated Negroes might be challenged to accomplish as much with their degrees as some slaves and some Negroes of Reconstruction accomplished without being able to write their

names.” According to Mays, it was impossible for someone to remain poised in the midst of chaos without a strong understanding of his history and the achievements of his ancestors.<sup>188</sup>

Finally, Mays called for the black liberal arts college to instill in students “a faith equivalent to that of their ancestors.” Quoting his previously published article, “Religious Life and Needs of Negro Students,” Mays argued that coupled with a strong intellect, an unshakeable religious faith was essential for black students seeking a means by which to remain poised in uncertain times. He claimed that, “Religion at its best is a faith in God which gives one poise and stability and the strength and courage to carry on in the midst of chaos and insecurity.” It was the duty of black liberal arts colleges, then, to “set up a program of religion that will give the Negro student this kind of poise and balance” and prepare him operate in the “post-War world without fear, without bitterness, without hate; but determined.”<sup>189</sup>

#### Du Bois and the Black College

Mays was not alone among black educators of the twentieth century regarding his views on the necessity and power of black colleges and universities. W.E.B. Du Bois, for instance, also championed black institutions of higher education and in his 1903 groundbreaking text, *The Souls of Black Folk*, posed a question similar to that posed by Mays in 1949:

If it is true that there are an appreciable number of Negro youth in the land capable by character and talent to receive that higher training, the end of which is culture, and if the two and a half thousand who have had something of this training in the past have in the main proved themselves useful to their race and

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<sup>188</sup> Ibid., 410.

<sup>189</sup> Ibid. 410-411.

generation, the question then comes, What place in the future development of the South ought the Negro college and college-bred man to occupy?<sup>190</sup>

For Du Bois, the answer was simple: the black college and its graduates were to be key agents in the social and economic development of the South, as he held that, “no secure civilization can be built in the South with the Negro as an ignorant, turbulent, proletariat.” Blacks must necessarily be elevated above the laborer’s lot, he contended, and “the foundations of knowledge in this race [black people], as in others, must be sunk deep in the college and university.”<sup>191</sup> Therefore, he maintained, the function of the black college must also be to “maintain the standards of popular education...seek the social regeneration of the Negro...and...help the solution of problems of race contact and cooperation.” It must generate “some loftier respect for the sovereign human soul that seeks to know itself and the world about it; that seeks a freedom for expansion and self-development; that will love and hate and labor in its own way, untrammelled alike by old and new.”<sup>192</sup> Like Mays, then, Du Bois saw the black college as a significant force for social uplift and intellectual and spiritual liberation among blacks. Not only was it capable of propelling blacks to new social and cultural heights, but it also had an obligation to do so.

*The Pittsburgh Courier*

During the 1940s, Mays established himself as a dynamic public speaker and expanded his audience as a public writer. Indeed, he had been writing throughout the 1930s and early 1940s, penning articles for academic journals, Christian publications, and Southern, black-owned newspapers, but it was during his tenure at Morehouse that he secured a steady writing engagement as a weekly columnist for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, a black-owned and operated

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<sup>190</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Blackfolk*, (1903; repr., New York: Bantam, 2005), 77.

<sup>191</sup> *Ibid.*, 77-78, 79.

<sup>192</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.

newspaper in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. The opportunity arose after one the paper's columnists, M. S. Stuart, a resident of Memphis, Tennessee, died unexpectedly, leaving his column, entitled "Southern Say So," without a writer. Ira F. Lewis, the president of the Pittsburgh Courier Publishing Company, still wanted a Southern black's perspective included in the paper and so wrote to Mays in April of 1946 expressing his interest in bringing Mays on to take over Stuart's column. He wrote:

Mr. Stuart did the race, the paper, himself and his company a great deal of good for the use he made of his column. We wanted a free-thinking, substantial, vulgarly referred to as "free wheeling" southern man to write a column of comment, views and reviews, touching on the activities of our group in the South, as well as the things of interest concerning the group. Mr. Stuart did a good job on this, and we would like to replace him with a man from that section of the country... The circulation of the *The Pittsburgh Courier* at the present time is in excess of 300,000, reaching perhaps, nearly two million people per week. It is my belief that you would welcome this audience for an opportunity not only to serve our group and the cause of civic, social, political, and economic good will, but to give this vast audience an opportunity to know the real Dr. Mays.<sup>193</sup>

For Mays, such an opportunity was fortuitous, as it allowed him to write for a much larger audience and with greater frequency. Moreover, he was given the freedom to discuss any and all matters relevant to black Southerners. While Mays continued to publish in scholarly journals during this time, the newspaper column provided a weekly outlet for his thoughts and concerns.

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<sup>193</sup> Ira F. Lewis, letter to Benjamin Mays, April 5, 1946, 1-2. Mays Papers, Installation 1, Box 4; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

With an initial compensation of \$1,000, he agreed to the terms of the contract and began writing and submitting articles in June of 1946.<sup>194</sup>

### Post-War Challenges in Education

As Mays's contract with *The Pittsburgh Courier* began within a year of the end of World War II, much of what he wrote about during his first year continued to reflect national concerns about the post-war challenges Americans faced, especially with regards to educational institutions. In November of 1946, for example, Mays published an article entitled, "Colleges and Overcrowding," in which he expressed concern over the structural and administrative limitations of colleges and universities' in light of the growing demand for higher education following the passage of the G.I. Bill at the war's end. Citing his own experiences at Morehouse, Mays contended that the G.I. Bill created so great a demand for college education that most schools, unable to accommodate such swelling enrollments, were being forced to turn students away for lack of space. That these institutions' were not able to build facilities more quickly than their enrollments were growing was in an issue Mays attributed to the federal government. As he contended:

It all adds up to this: as much as the Government has done and is doing to help educate veterans, it is not doing enough or it is moving too slow to meet the emergency or both. For example, the Government was fairly apt in providing housing for students but it was slow in providing educational facilities such as additional classrooms and other educational equipments...It was almost stupid for

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<sup>194</sup> Ibid., Note that all citations from Mays's column with the *Pittsburgh Courier* have been taken from his submitted manuscripts to the paper and not the published articles.

the Government to anticipate more housing for veterans without in the same breath to anticipate additional feeding and educational facilities.<sup>195</sup>

Although Mays found fault with the government's implementation of the G.I. Bill, he did not absolve himself from the responsibility of ensuring American veterans were provided opportunities to take full advantage of the legislation. Mays made his position clear:

But our colleges and universities have an obligation to perform. We are obligated to take as many students as possible who have lost two, three, and four years from college in the service of their country. It would not be fair to the student nor to our country to take as few students as we can. We are obligated to see these youngsters through...It is our patriotic duty to extend ourselves now as these young men extended themselves on the battle fields of the world.<sup>196</sup>

Further, while Mays expressed concern about the educational circumstances facing colleges and universities across the nation, he was optimistic about their prospects for success in the midst of perceived chaos and believed that veteran students were an integral part of these institutions' success. For Mays, swelling enrollments did not impede the possibility of doing "a great educational job, provided administrators, students and teachers move in complete unity toward their objectives." Moreover, he maintained that by virtue of being "older and more mature," veterans were institutional assets, modeling responsibility and exhibiting a serious disposition that "should help to build morale and lift the academic standard of the colleges."<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>195</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Colleges and Overcrowding," (manuscript submitted to *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 16, 1946, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Installation 1, Box 4; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>196</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 2.

<sup>197</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 3.

## Segregation in Higher Education

Beyond the issue of overcrowding, Mays found that one of the greatest postwar challenges in the field of education was segregation in schools, particularly America's colleges and universities. During the late 1930s, the NAACP had begun stirring up the discourse on segregation in higher education after its legal branch, the Legal Defense Fund, argued and won two cases against law schools that had denied admission to African American students,<sup>198</sup> challenging their provision of "equal" educational opportunities for African American students as required by the 1896 *Plessy* ruling. Although much of the discourse revolved primarily around the racially discriminatory practices of predominantly white educational institutions seeking to prevent black students from enrolling, the form and function of historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) became a part of the conversation on educational segregation. In December of 1946, for example, Mays responded to a concerned minority that claimed that HBCUs, by virtue of serving predominantly African American populations, were guilty of sanctioning and perpetuating racial segregation. Mays dismissed the likelihood of this claim on the grounds that segregation was a legal and customary reality of Southern life that had been established by whites and imposed upon blacks. For Mays, this meant that, "the Negro is necessarily not a party to segregation."<sup>199</sup>

By reestablishing a socio-historical context in which to discuss segregation, Mays, in essence, reframed school segregation as a national problem, locating its inception in the racist

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<sup>198</sup> See *Murray v. Maryland*, 182 A.590 (1936) and *Missouri ex rel. Gaines v. Canada* 305 U.S. 337 (1938).

<sup>199</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "The Negro College," (manuscript submitted to *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 7, 1946, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Installation 1, Box 4; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.



psyche of white America. For the sake of consideration, Mays, however facetiously, did pose a series of hypothetical solutions designed to eliminate segregationist practices in HBCUs—dissolving HBCUs; dismantling *all* segregated schools; transferring HBCU enrollments to all white schools; allowing HBCUs to die out—all of which he ultimately dismissed as inadequate. For Mays, the merit of a school could not and should not be determined by its racial designation. And although he noted that, “the job is to make so-called Negro colleges as good as the best so-called white colleges,” he believed that in succeeding at such a job, “there will be nothing about Negro colleges to designate them as such except the variations in color.”<sup>200</sup> The following quote reveals the depths of Mays’ optimism regarding HBCUs progress and the inevitability of de-racializing discussions of educational quality:

If it is a first class college, it is neither Negro nor white. And make no mistake when we become sufficiently enlightened, students of all races will attend the better schools whether they were originally designed for Negroes or whites. Our present task isn’t to tear down Negro colleges, but the task is to make them so good that you cannot label them as colored, or designate them by the word Negro. It seems to me that there is no other choice for the Negro college.<sup>201</sup>

Mays vision for the eradication of segregation in colleges and universities was rooted in his belief in Christianity and democracy as practical philosophies. As he contended at the conclusion of the article, the dissolution of segregation in Southern colleges “will be the result of making all

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<sup>200</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 2-3.

<sup>201</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 3.

institutions first rate and of developing and practicing religion and a democracy that will make it impossible for segregation and prejudice to survive.”<sup>202</sup>

Although during the 1940s, Mays wrote most profusely on educational issues related to colleges and universities, he never lost sight of the educational issues that plagued the South’s K-12 public school systems, especially those in Georgia. In 1947, for instance, Mays published an article entitled “While Rome Burns.” Titularly metaphorical, Mays criticized the Georgia legislature’s decision to spend 40 days in session “fiddling” to circumvent the U.S. Supreme Court’s ruling in favor of blacks’ right to vote while the state, as it pertained to education, was being consumed in flames of mediocrity. To emphasize the absurdity of such an unnecessarily long and narrowly focused session in the midst of what he perceived to be dire educational circumstances, Mays dedicated an entire paragraph to highlighting the statistical realities of Georgia’s educational system and the corresponding national trends.<sup>203</sup>

According to Mays, Georgia ranked poorly nationally in its “ability to support education,” “educational effort,” and “educational efficiency,” and dedicated far fewer dollars to education than most other states. Further, and perhaps consequently, Mays contended, Georgia was among the least educated states in terms of years of school completed by its citizens and was at the lesser end of wide gaps in spending per pupil and teacher salary scales. Even when taking into account the segregated nature of Southern school systems, Georgia’s per pupil spending along racial lines fell behind the regional average, with white and black students receiving fewer dollars than their Southern counterparts. For Mays, Georgia’s statistics were simply symptomatic

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<sup>202</sup> Ibid.

<sup>203</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “While Rome Burns,” (manuscript submitted to *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 29, 1947, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Installation 1, Box 4; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

of a larger socially regressive problem in the South, one characterized by widespread illiteracy, disease, and limited access to quality healthcare, all of which, in addition to poorly funded education, were stymieing genuine growth in the region. Thus, as Mays perceived the Georgia legislature's response to black enfranchisement in light of more significant, socially pressing issues, it *was* simply fiddling while the state burned.<sup>204</sup>

Such an outcome was inevitable, however, Mays believed, when people neglected large issues—broken statewide education system and poor healthcare—and focused on the minutiae—in this case, blacks voting. He argued that racism was inherently socially regressive and maintained that, “prejudice, narrowness, hatred, the desire to keep others down are inseparable from backwardness, poverty, ignorance and disease. We cannot keep others backward without keeping ourselves backward.”<sup>205</sup> Regardless of whether Mays's indictment of the state legislature was intended to shame or inspire the state's political leaders into civic duty, his charge was clear: education is central to the welfare and progress of the state, but education cannot flourish in the midst of racism and prejudice.

As a college president, Mays always made it a point to write articles that spoke to the needs of college students. For example, in his 1947 article, “If I Were a Freshman,” he addressed incoming college freshmen across the country and advised them in ways to avoid common pitfalls associated with college matriculation. Having already spent over ten years in college administration, Mays was under no illusions about why many students attended college. Whether due to family tradition, parental pressure, or potential social mobility, he knew that many students enrolled in college for reasons unrelated to educational advancement. He admitted,

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<sup>204</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 2-3.

<sup>205</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 3.

however, that he liked “to believe that most of them will go to college because they want to go and because they have a worthwhile aim in view; because they have in mind the kind of service they want to render in the world and because of the belief that college will help them qualify for that service.” Whatever the reason for enrollment, Mays understood the virtue embedded in a college education and articulated a clear vision of how freshman should approach their first year of college with excellence.<sup>206</sup>

There were three core strategies Mays believed freshman should follow to be successful in their first year of college. The first strategy was to identify academically successful upperclassmen and model their habits. According to Mays, although “freshmen enter college with good manners and good behavior...they soon become city-wise,” a behavioral transformation he said was sometimes due “to the bad influence of some upperclassmen.” Rather than emulate “the trifling, lazy upper-classmen who do not study,” Mays asserted, “he [the freshman] should emulate the upper-classmen who keep reasonable hours at night and who can stay in and study week-ends if circumstances demand it.” The second strategy Mays posited was to begin the semester with a steady work ethic. As he put it, “I would keep my work before me...I would not loaf for the first thirty days or until the end of the football season before beginning to study; otherwise, he may find it too late to do well in his work.”<sup>207</sup> The third and final strategy Mays suggested was to work diligently to attain a commendable academic record, not simply for the sake of making high grades, but because he believed one’s undergraduate

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<sup>206</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “If I Were a Freshman,” (manuscript submitted to *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 20, 1947, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Installation 1, Box 4; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>207</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript pages 1-2.

performance bore lifelong implications. The following quote encapsulates Mays's position more clearly.

Do not work for grades for the sake of making high marks. But do not fool yourself; marks count. They have a way of rising up in years after to embarrass you. A college record is like death. It is permanent. Marks will bless or curse you when you apply for admittance to graduate school. They will help you to get in or keep you out of medical school. When you apply for a college position as a teacher, your college record will follow you. When your unborn son goes to college, your record may inspire him or it may embarrass him. Your college record is like death. It is permanent. Make it respectable.<sup>208</sup>

One can clearly see the influence of Mays's own educational experience in his treatment of the ways in which college freshman should approach their first year of schooling. Mays, having prospered academically according to a formula of intense study, believed that all students could benefit from his approach to scholastic achievement. For him, the key to academic success was rooted in hard work and dedication to purposeful studying and learning.<sup>209</sup>

### In Opposition to Regional Education

Segregation in education remained a central issue for Mays during the late 1940s. Between 1947 and 1948, for example, Mays responded to what he viewed as a rising tide of segregationist policies in higher education in the South. According to Mays, in the wake of the *Gaines* decision, which ruled that the state of Missouri must provide its black citizens with the

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<sup>208</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>209</sup> Ibid.

same educational opportunities as those offered to white citizens,<sup>210</sup> many Southern governors were looking for ways to circumvent the court's directive requiring that racially segregated graduate schools be equalized or integrated.<sup>211</sup>

One of the alternatives that emerged during the Southern Governor's Conference of 1947 was regional education. Regional education, originally proposed by Governor Jim McCord of Tennessee, was a concept that sought to centralize professional educational opportunities for blacks by establishing regional institutions dedicated to serving graduate/professional school-bound blacks across Southern states, thus absolving each state from the responsibility of providing graduate schools for its black students. Leading the preliminary talks, McCord suggested the states begin with medical training, and "proposed that the Southern states take over Meharry [the oldest and most prestigious black medical school in the South] and operate it as a regional college of medicine, dentistry, and nursing for Negroes from all over the South." McCord's idea was well received among his gubernatorial counterparts, but Mays found the idea to be an inherently flawed scheme to deny blacks equal access to quality education.<sup>212</sup>

Of Mays's numerous observations regarding the problems with regional education, two reveal best the depth of his concern. First, Mays was troubled by the blatant exertion of power by white politicians over black educators. As he contended:

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<sup>210</sup> Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality*, (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 211-212.

<sup>211</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Another Move to Increase Segregation," (manuscript submitted to *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 22, 1947, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Installation 1, Box 4; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>212</sup> Ibid.

In all these proposals, discussions, and the establishment of professional schools for Negroes, the Negro people have no voice. The presidents of Negro colleges have had to go along and do what the States demanded whether they agreed with it or not. Certainly they have felt that they had to go along with the State. It is the will of the strong imposed upon the weak. It all goes to show how helpless we are even when our own destiny is being determined. With all our fight against segregation it is spreading rapidly before our very eyes.<sup>213</sup>

Mays, here, expressed his frustration and, perhaps, emerging disenchantment with the struggle for racial equality.

Second, Mays challenged the notion that separate schools, potentially in the form of regional educational institutions, could be equal. As he maintained:

The separate schools will probably never be equal. As long as human nature remains as it is and as long as we Negroes are a minority in numbers, wealth, prestige, influence, and power, that which is designed specially for us is more than likely to be inferior, more or less, to that designed specially for whites. The American Negro faces a dilemma.<sup>214</sup>

Thus for Mays, the very nature of man was at the heart of the discriminatory practices against which he was fighting, in this case regional education. By nature, he believed, man was interested primarily in his own welfare and was not inclined to share his power or his resources in the absence of external pressure or opposition.

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<sup>213</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>214</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2-3.

By January of 1948, the South had moved closer to implementing regional education, and Mays, as one could expect, had grown bolder in his opposition to the idea. Like many prominent African American educators at the time, such as Charles Johnson of Fisk University, Mays was wholly unsold on either the equalizing intent or power of regional education. Looking again to Meharry as an example, he contended:

Regional education for Negroes not only perpetuates and extends segregation but it perpetuates inequality. I hope I am wrong but I do not believe that all the Southern States combined are going to put as much into Meharry annually as the State of North Carolina is going to spend annually for the education of the white boys of that State. Equality of medical education for Negroes and whites is not in their thinking. The main object is to keep Negroes out of the medical schools now designed and operating for whites.<sup>215</sup>

Mays posed a twofold solution to his disbelief in the sincerity of the equalizing aims of regional education. The first was for participating Southern states to make a financial investment in Meharry significant enough to equip the institution for regional operation. Specifically he declared:

If they had in their plan to double the facilities at Meharry, bring the present plant up to date, and in addition provide an adequate annual budget, I would not be so inclined to question their motives. It would possibly cost ten or fifteen million dollars to do what I am suggesting here over and above the annual output. If they

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<sup>215</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Regional Education Again," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 1, 1948, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Installation 2, Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.



did this I could believe they were trying to provide equality of medical education for Negroes.<sup>216</sup>

As it stood, however, there were no plans to equip Meharry to accommodate the increase in student enrollments that would surely follow its designation as a regional school of medicine for blacks. Secondly, Mays insisted that he would believe in regional education only when Southern states decided to equalize their K-12 systems. He claimed:

When the South spends as much per capita for each Negro child as it spends for each white child, when it goes back and equalize[s] facilities, and when it pays Negroes as much as it pays whites of equal competence, then and not until then will I believe that the South means what it says when it argues “separate but equal.”<sup>217</sup>

Until Southern states could meet both conditions, which, seemingly by default, would eliminate discriminatory practice in public education, Mays refused to endorse regional education, just as he refused any strategy or ideology that viewed the pursuit of equality through a lens of gradualism. Mays did not subscribe to the belief that racism and discrimination were to be eradicated over a period of time; rather, he fought for and believed wholeheartedly in their immediate abolishment and the necessity of Christianity and democracy in doing so. Noting that segregation was instituted quickly, Mays argued that it could be abolished in the same fashion “when Democratic and Christian people make up their minds.” Undoubtedly, Mays’s possessed an enduring faith in the socially transformative power of Christianity and democracy.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>217</sup> Ibid.

<sup>218</sup> Ibid.

As the debate over regional education continued, so did Mays's public objections. In May of 1948, for example, Mays detailed the problematic nature of regional education as it pertained to school quality. Drawing lines of distinction between Southern schools and those in Eastern and Western parts of the country, Mays highlighted not only the educational implications stemming from differences in economic climates across regions but also those stemming from social differences, particularly segregation. He argued that, "despite the fact that the South spends a much higher percentage of its tax money for education than many sections of the North do, it is still true that the best universities of the nation are found in the East and the West and not in the South." Indeed, the South's economic woes were partially responsible for its educational circumstances, but so too was its allegiance to racial segregation, Mays argued. Although segregation influenced the societal norms of the East and the West, it was not as deeply entrenched as it was in the South. Not to make segregation the scapegoat of the South's poor educational quality, Mays noted that even if segregation were abolished, "the colleges and universities of the North [*sic* South] would not, on the whole, equal those of the East and West." However, he highlighted the fact that, "when we must build two of everything, it makes it even more difficult for the South to equal the East and West."<sup>219</sup>

Mays extended his argument that segregation was at the root of the perpetual stagnation among Southern colleges and universities. As he contended:

I doubt if a university that deliberately plans and fosters segregation can be as great as a university that opens its doors to all. I believe one of the reasons that Harvard, Columbia, and Chicago are great universities is the fact all races of earth

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<sup>219</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "I Need More Faith," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 8, 1948, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Installation 2, Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

can study there, move about and mingle freely. The minds of the professors and students are freer than the minds of professors and students in a strictly segregated institution. A university in the South which denies entrance to a qualified student because of color can hardly become as great as one that draws no such artificial distinction, however great the financial support of the segregated institution. I believe a prejudiced mind can never grow in quality and soul as much as an unprejudiced mind. Prejudice cramps the mind, and stifles the soul.<sup>220</sup>

It was this stance on the inhibiting nature of segregation that informed Mays's opposition to regional institutions, not to mention his acute awareness of the constancy of racial discrimination. For Mays, it was unreasonable to think that regional education would reflect higher ideals of equality than individual segregated state institutions. As he put it, "we have no guarantee that a group of Southern States will be any more just in providing funds for a regional school than they have been in providing funds for their respective Negro State schools." History had much to say about how poorly blacks in the South had been treated, thus Mays contended that there was no reason to assume regional education would be any more endearing to black students than had been segregated state funded colleges and universities.<sup>221</sup>

Simply put, Mays argued that segregation was an ideology that adhered to implicit and explicit notions of inequality and therefore precluded the possibility of educational fairness in either state schools or regional institutions. Mays clarified his reasoning:

The man who believes in segregation can hardly be fair toward the man he segregates as he is toward the man he does not segregate. The man who believes

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<sup>220</sup> Ibid.

<sup>221</sup> Ibid.

Negroes should be in a segregated school will hardly appropriate as much money for the Negro school as he will for the white school. In his mind there is a differential and he just cannot deal fairly with the object he segregates.<sup>222</sup>

Thus for Mays, the notion of “separate but equal” was ideologically incompatible with the basic premise of segregation, which maintained, even if only implied, that all people are not equal and therefore are unworthy of fair and equal treatment. In fact, he viewed the idea of “separate but equal” as a useful barometer for measuring racial progress and turned the meaning of the phrase on its head. He concluded that, “When we are fair enough to have ‘separate but equal’ become a reality segregation will be a thing of the past,” his point being that the fair and equal treatment of racially segregated schools would serve not only as a signal of the end of segregation but also as a primer to racial integration.<sup>223</sup>

#### In Defense of Black Colleges and Universities

Between 1948 and 1949, as Mays was fighting against Southern politicians’ schemes to perpetuate segregation, he found himself defending the aims and purposes of private HBCUs and their relatively new consortium, the United Negro College Fund (UNCF), against critics who argued that black schools, by virtue of serving primarily black students, were guilty of perpetuating segregation. The UNCF, which was founded in 1944 by Tuskegee University

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<sup>222</sup> Ibid., 2;

<sup>223</sup> Ibid; Mays echoed these same sentiments in his weekly chapel talk at Morehouse in December of 1948. See “President Mays Criticizes Regional Educational Plan.” *The Atlanta Daily World*, December 22, 1948. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

president Frederick D. Patterson, was created as a conglomerate of black colleges operating collectively to secure steady funding streams for African American higher education.<sup>224</sup>

However, because the organization was dedicated to the advancement of black colleges, it became an easy target for people looking to deflect attention away from the implications of racially discriminatory policies of white colleges. Detractors of the UNCF justified their positions by highlighting the organization's mission of raising "money to keep the Negro private colleges healthy and thriving." As the claims cleverly ignored the larger racist and segregated contexts in which black colleges and universities were actually operating, Mays took to task the so-called critics of HBCUs and the UNCF, as well as the flawed logic upon which their criticisms were based.<sup>225</sup>

First, he noted that, "if the Negro private colleges should not be supported because they perpetuate segregation, the tax-supported Negro colleges should not receive appropriations from the States because they too perpetuate segregation...Strict logic leads to no other end." Mays argued his second point more extensively:

But if those who say that the private Negro colleges should not be supported are logical, they must go further. They must oppose equally the efforts of all private white colleges to get funds for existence because the private white colleges that exclude Negroes are also perpetuating segregation. They must not even stop here.

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<sup>224</sup> Marybeth Gasman, *Envisioning Black Colleges: A History of the United Negro College Fund*, (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007), 3.

<sup>225</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Integration—A Two Way Traffic," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 24, 1948, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Installation 2, Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

They must fight against state appropriations to white colleges in the South that are supported with tax money.<sup>226</sup>

Attacking private black colleges for perpetuating racial segregation not only missed the larger contextual realities that made such colleges racially monolithic, but it also ignored the widespread practice of racial segregation in private white colleges and racially segregated public colleges and universities. To harp on segregation at private black colleges at the exclusion of the all “guilty” parties was, for Mays, “grossly unfair.” As he maintained, “If Negro private colleges should not be supported because they are restrained by law from admitting white students then all colleges that do not admit both races should be closed or permitted to die.” To do otherwise, Mays insisted, would give credence to the claim “that the Negro institutions are not fit to survive but white institutions are.”<sup>227</sup>

Truthfully, Mays saw no virtue in discussing the value of colleges and universities along racial lines, as he knew that the true value of an institution was always to rest in its capacity to educate men and women in matters of the mind and the spirit. One could surmise, then, that for Mays, assessing a school according to its racial composition was rather reductive and crude. However, such a position had no bearing on his belief in the necessity of black colleges and universities in a racist society, as the following statement makes clear:

Our job is to fight segregation and discrimination with all our might but while we fight against them, we will strive to build and maintain first class colleges. Some day segregation will go. It is incompatible with Democracy, science, and Christianity. Unless America turns its back on these three and become [sic] Nazi,

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<sup>226</sup> Ibid.

<sup>227</sup> Ibid.

segregation will some day end. When it does end, we will need then as now good colleges whether [*sic*] previously existed for Negroes or whether previously they served whites. Integration will not be a one way traffic; it will be a two way traffic...To see it otherwise, to see it only as a one-way traffic, as a means of destroying everything Negroes have built up, may be an unconscious sign of the inferiority complex.<sup>228</sup>

Clearly, Mays believed desegregation and integration in America were inevitable, although he knew that the nation was fast coming upon an ideological crossroads that could lead to either tragedy or triumph. The fate of the nation, Mays believed, depended on its capacity to live out fully the strains of Christianity and democracy it espoused. In constantly juxtaposing racism and segregation against Christianity and democracy, Mays revealed his belief that the future of the United States was hinged upon the purity of its political philosophy and the sincerity of its religious convictions.<sup>229</sup>

In March of 1949, Mays found himself again defending the existence of black colleges and universities against those who charged such schools with perpetuating segregation. As he had in 1948, Mays contended that black schools funded by the state were thriving not because they believed in maintaining racially monolithic student bodies, but because state legislatures were determined to “delay Negro enrollment in the state schools now attended by whites only.” The presidents of public and private black schools, Mays maintained, were not driven to success by a desire to perpetuate segregation; rather, they were “simply striving to build and maintain first class colleges that cannot be labeled ‘Negro.’” In other words, Mays claimed that for

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<sup>228</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>229</sup> Ibid.

presidents of HBCUs, the most pressing professional aim was to build undeniably excellent colleges and universities, institutions of such high quality that when segregation came to an end, they would be capable of attracting both black and white students. Because desegregation was inevitable for Mays, he claimed that “when that time comes we will need every good college in the land and integration will flow in two directions: Negroes will be in what is now called white colleges and whites will be in what is now called Negro colleges. It cannot be otherwise” In an integrated society, Mays believed, the quality of a school would, or at least should, determine its infrastructural health and institutional lifespan, not its racial composition.<sup>230</sup>

### The Value of a College Education

As was his custom for many years as a contributing writer for *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Mays, in 1948, wrote an article addressing that year’s black college graduates, this particular piece challenging commonly held beliefs about the inherent value of a college education. Mays challenged first the notion that individuals became successful simply by graduating from college. He claimed that upon graduation, “the first thing they [college graduates] will learn is that there is nothing magical about a college degree...A college degree per se is not a guarantee that one will succeed in the world.” For Mays, much more was required to succeed, as a college degree alone possessed no power in itself to realize change or achieve success. More closely tied to success than a college degree, Mays argued, were a number of factors, including the following:

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<sup>230</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Do Negro Colleges Perpetuate Segregation?,” manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 19, 1949, manuscript page 1. Mays Papers, Installation 2, Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; For a similar piece, see Benjamin E. Mays, “To the 1949 College Graduate,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 19, 1949). Mays Papers, Installation 2, Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.



“intellectual ability, deepseated integrity, the ability to work hard, competence in some chosen field, punctuality, the ability to get along with people, willingness to earn position and status by the sweat of one’s brow, and a strong, neat, healthy body.” These factors were only some prerequisites for success, according to Mays, though he was emphatic in noting that not one of these abilities was unique to the college graduate. He reminded these students that “although statistics will probably show that a college man’s chance of success is much greater than that of a non-college man, they will also show that many college men fail and that many men who have never gone to college have been and are highly successful.” Mays was by no means cynical about the value of a college education; however, he understood that as the college degree became more common, a complementary set of skills would become even more crucial for one’s success. As he put it, “A college degree holds no particular charm today. It is largely what you can do rather than from what college you graduated.”<sup>231</sup>

The road to success would likely be even more difficult and disappointing for the college graduate who failed to develop any personal discipline and lacked a stellar academic record, Mays claimed. Among those students who may have been interested in a medical career, for example, he contended that many will find that they are unable to meet the basic academic requirements for admission. He argued that, “many in this number will be those [students] who have squandered their time, never learned how to discipline their minds, socialized too much, and kept late hours too frequently.” Others students who ignored their academic performance in

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<sup>231</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Graduates of 1948,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 5, 1948, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 2 Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

college, he claimed, would learn through bitter experience that their laissez faire approach to earning an education cost them a graduate degree or a job.<sup>232</sup>

In essence, Mays was trying to impress upon these students the idea that the long-term costs of mediocrity were far greater than the immediate costs of excellence. This truth was evident to Mays, as he noted that despite the large numbers of people graduating from college, there were far more unoccupied professional positions than there were outstanding individuals to fill the positions. Seemingly, pervasive mediocrity had left these positions vacant. However, despite mediocrity having become normal amongst college students, Mays stated emphatically that the most desirable professional positions were indeed designated “for the man or woman who has an excellent mind and who can support that mind with outstanding character.” Consequently, he argued, it was imperative that all students maximize their educational opportunities and refrain from wasting their time and talents.<sup>233</sup>

#### The Perils of College Athletics

As his primary emphasis as a college president was upon scholarship and maximum intellectual development, Mays was very sensitive to those aspects of collegiate life that could potentially derail an institution’s scholastic mission. College athletics was no exception. In fact, during his deanship at Morehouse in the early 1920s, Mays had garnered a reputation for “being against intercollegiate sports,” not because he truly opposed them but because he “was against students who, though failing in their work, went on a basketball tour for two or three weeks.” Despite there being nearly twenty years between his tenures at Morehouse, Mays claimed that,

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<sup>232</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 1-2.

<sup>233</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

“this reputation persisted throughout the twenty-seven years of my presidency...because we didn’t buy players and didn’t produce championship teams.”<sup>234</sup>

Mays was especially sensitive to the “buying” of players,” a practice he detailed in a 1949 article entitled, “We Cannot Afford It.” Here, Mays highlighted the troublesome nature of football scholarships, noting, not only the competitive disadvantage that stemmed from disparities in endowments from one college to another, but also the generally exploitive nature of collegiate sports. For Mays, college football coaches’ “buying” of high school football players, by which he meant their recruiting of physically gifted but oftentimes academically inept students in exchange for an athletic scholarship, was highly problematic. He was not critical of all college football coaches, but he was so toward those who chose to “scout around the country to find brilliant high school players and once found...buy them.” He also criticized those college presidents who silently endorsed their coaches’ recruiting tactics or intentionally remained ignorant and therefore complicit in the process.

Mays did recognize, however, that there were many college presidents and coaches who opposed the buying of players. As he noted, “there are some college presidents and some coaches who do not purchase players and who believe that the subsidizing of players is bad business and in the end destroys the educational aims of the college.” Mays surely counted himself among them, arguing that the practice of buying players “demoralizes the player and prostitutes him... The student becomes a means and not an end.”<sup>235</sup> Yet, in spite of the system being exploitive, Mays found, high school athletes were eager and willing participants in it. As

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<sup>234</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 92-93.

<sup>235</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “We Cannot Afford It,” (manuscript submitted to *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 19, 1949, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 8; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

he recalled, “Every year I get letters from high school students offering themselves for sale. They tell me about their athletic ability and want to know how much aid they can get by way of athletic scholarships.”<sup>236</sup>

One can assume that Mays was disturbed by such inquiries, just as he was troubled by the implicit assumption that accompanied the awarding of athletic scholarships, that one’s athletic performance took precedent over academic achievement. He contended that, “If a college buys a player and brings him to the college mainly because he is a good player, it stands to reason that he will hardly be dropped for poor scholarship...If the scholarship is granted mainly because he is a good athlete, scholarship is secondary.” When scholarship became a secondary concern, Mays argued, the student not the school was most likely to suffer. Further, he maintained that having not been prepared for college while in high school and having not invested the appropriate time in his studies during college, the collegiate football player who was purchased would scarcely be fit for graduate school or professional school upon graduation. In Mays’s words, such a person “is stuck.”<sup>237</sup>

Beyond the exploitive nature of athletic scholarships, Mays was critical of the competitive disadvantage and academic dilution of colleges that were unable to subsidize football players’ educations. He noted that:

Subsidizing players is so great now that a college which doesn’t subsidize is at a decided disadvantage. I believe it is almost impossible for a college to have an

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<sup>236</sup> Ibid.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid.

exceptionally good football team without heavy subsidy. I certainly think it is impossible to have a winning football team without buying players.<sup>238</sup>

Thus, schools with the fiscal capacity to recruit and retain on scholarship premiere high school football players would hold a considerable on-field advantage over schools without the means to do so. This was especially true for black colleges and universities, as neither the schools nor their athletic programs were capable of financing scholarships on the same scale as large, predominantly white universities. Even if athletic programs at HBCUs were capable of financing widespread athletic scholarships, however, Mays argued that there was no virtue in doing so since colleges were designed to educate students “not produce brilliant athletes.”<sup>239</sup>

Black colleges and universities especially should be addressing more pressing concerns than the development of their athletic programs, Mays contended, such as improvements in teacher pay, teacher quality, the libraries, laboratory equipments, and the physical plant. He concluded that, “To take money from these essentials and use it to build a winning football team is stupid.” For Mays, then, the educational purposes of an institution were never to be compromised for the sake of building its reputation in athletics. Schools that actively sought to “buy” players, he argued, were guilty of not only compromising the integrity of their academic missions but also setting poor examples for their students.<sup>240</sup>

Further, when colleges bought players, Mays contended, “every student knows that his college will do almost anything in order to win.” Of course, the darker side of this truth was most evident to the football players themselves, realizing only at the culmination of their career that their being purchased was a precursor to their being discarded. Accordingly, Mays maintained, in

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<sup>238</sup> Ibid.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>240</sup> Ibid.

the wake of their college football careers, “these exploited boys [football players], meeting the cold realities of life, will curse their Alma Maters for having used them in this way.”<sup>241</sup>

### Summary

During the 1930s and 1940s, Mays harnessed the power of public speech and the written word to call the United States of America to a higher plain of humanity. His call for society to radically transform itself through education and the implementation of the core principles of democracy, Christianity, and social responsibility was neither political rhetoric nor academic rambling. His call to social reform through these practices was sincere, a logical extension of the Social Gospel disposition he had developed during his years at Bates College and the University of Chicago. For Mays, the quality of human life, for blacks and whites, was central to his thinking on education. He emphasized democracy, Christianity, and social responsibility, not simply because they were personal philosophies to which he adhered, but also because he believed that each was central to the transformation of humanity, circumstances notwithstanding. Understanding that Mays’s worldview and philosophy of education were rooted in these principles is key to understanding his views and development as a professional educator in subsequent decades.

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<sup>241</sup> Ibid.

## Chapter 4

### The Morehouse Years

This chapter explores the content of Mays's writings and speeches on education between 1949 and 1968. This chapter begins with an examination of his writings on a variety of educational topics that were of interest to him during the final 18 years of his tenure at Morehouse College, including but not limited to the destructive nature of segregation, his views on the 1954 *Brown v. Board* decision, the purposes of education, teacher quality, and the necessity of bi-lateral integration policies. Further, it highlights the enduring quality of Mays's core beliefs of Christianity, democracy, and social responsibility and reinforces the concept of his educational thinking developing along a dynamic continuum. Similar to the previous chapter, this chapter is organized in a chronological fashion; however, his speeches, scholarly articles, and newspaper columns are woven more intricately to better capture the fluidity of his thought.

### Historical Context

Although United States and the Soviet Union fought as allies during World War II, growing tensions between the two countries in the years following “grew to create what came to be known as a ‘Cold War’—a tense and dangerous rivalry that would cast its shadow over international affairs for decades.” The Soviet Union's commitment to expanding the communist presence into Western Europe and its acquisition of nuclear weaponry only exacerbated these tensions, as the United States was determined to contain the spread of communism. However, the

task only became more difficult when China's nationalist government collapsed and came under the control of a communist regime.<sup>242</sup>

While many Americans were worried about the global implications of the spread of communism throughout Europe, others, mostly African Americans, were deeply concerned about the domestic implications of issues like racism and segregation. No longer willing to work gradually toward equality, blacks during the 1950s wanted immediately the freedom to fully exercise their civil rights. What followed, then, was “an open battle...against racial segregation and discrimination, a battle that would prove to be one of the longest and most difficult of the century.”<sup>243</sup> The 1954 U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*, which found legal segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional, was one of the most significant social and political events of the twentieth century and helped ignite the firestorm of resistance in the black community that birthed the Civil Rights Movement. Alongside the landmark *Brown* decision, the rise of an “urban black middle class” and the influence of a more global, postwar ethos among veterans imbued blacks with a greater sense of identity and agency within the American democratic landscape.<sup>244</sup>

But the United States would endure more growing pains in the 1960s, as the U.S. entered the Vietnam War, the Civil Rights Movement became national in scope, and the Johnson administration took aggressive legislative action to address myriad social issues like poverty and racial discrimination. The intersection of the Civil Rights Movement and the legislative agenda of the Johnson administration cannot be overstated. During the 1960s, blacks across the nation

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<sup>242</sup> Alan Brinkley, *American History: A Survey 9<sup>th</sup> ed.* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1995), 769, 776-779

<sup>243</sup> Ibid., 805.

<sup>244</sup> Ibid., 805-807; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 389.



were broadening their protest efforts against segregation, especially in public education, and implored the government to acknowledge just how fleeting were justice and equality for blacks. President Johnson, who assumed the presidency after Kennedy's assassination and understood well the explosive potential of American race relations, moved quickly to pass civil rights legislation that would secure equality for black Americans.<sup>245</sup> The outcome of the Johnson administration's efforts was the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The bill, whose origins were in the Kennedy administration, not only "promised to attack racial discrimination in employment as well as to banish Jim Crow in public accommodations," but it "also authorized the attorney general to bring suits against officials, including school administrators, who tried to advance *de jure* programs of racial discrimination," and permitted the federal government to deny financial aid to school districts that practiced *de jure* segregation.<sup>246</sup> While the groundbreaking legislation was not a panacea for all of black America's ills, it did seem to represent a good faith effort on the part of a government that, for centuries, had all but ignored the deleterious effects of racism and discrimination.

#### Segregation: Late 1940s and the Early 1950s

Between 1949 and the early 1950s, Mays's writings on education were focused heavily on the social impact of segregation in education. For Mays, racial segregation in the United States was dangerously paradoxical, as it was antithetical not only to the democratic principles on which the country was founded but also to the Christian ideals to which many Americans claimed to adhere. He also believed that segregation had far greater moral and psychological implications for *all* Americans, color notwithstanding, than most people realized. In an article

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<sup>245</sup> Brinkley, *American History*, 823-825; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 525.

<sup>246</sup> James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 123-124.

entitled “Segregation in Higher Education,” for example, Mays argued that segregation was dangerous to anyone involved in its practice, as it “destroys the soul both of the segregated and those who do the segregating.” Although he found segregation to be no different within the context of higher education, especially in the South, he did express a sincere belief that colleges and universities were the institutions most capable of initiating a movement to dismantle segregation.<sup>247</sup>

Mays maintained that, “we should begin in higher education because colleges and universities are centers of light. They are torch bearers of truth.” However, if colleges and universities are to fulfill their purpose, if they are to be centers of light and bearers of truth, Mays argued, they cannot do so while operating in the darkness and mendacity of segregation. While Christianity and democracy, by their very nature, opposed segregation on religious and moral grounds, science troubled the foundation of segregationist’s claims by proving empirically that racial designations were of no biological significance. Operating according to the belief, then, that segregation is a practice rooted in an untruth, Mays argued that, “it is extremely difficult and may be impossible to teach the unadulterated truth in segregated institutions,” since “one must be all too often defending in these ‘centers of light’ that which is contrary to the very essence and purpose of higher education.” In other words, Mays held that truth and falsehood could no more occupy the same space than could light and darkness.<sup>248</sup>

Beyond stifling the truth, Mays argued that the perpetuation of segregation had far-reaching intellectual implications. He asserted:

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<sup>247</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Segregation in Higher Education,” *Phylon* 10, no. 4 (1949): 401.

<sup>248</sup> *Ibid.*

Segregation in education restricts and circumscribes the mind. It puts a limit to free inquiry and investigation. And I believe that the human mind can never develop to its maximum unless it is free of all crippling circumstances. I believe that circumscriptions, such as segregation, not only limit the development of the mind in the social sciences, but in the natural sciences, in the humanities, and in religion. Those who believe in segregation and defend it set a limit to their own mental development.”<sup>249</sup>

Here, again, Mays noted that segregation severely limited man’s intellectual capacity, a truth he believed applied to those perpetuating segregation and those subjected to segregation.

In Southern colleges and universities, for example, Mays argued that professors experienced less intellectual freedom than their colleagues at Northern institutions. He contended that, “this lack of freedom in the colleges and universities in the South can be explained in part by a segregated system that cramps the soul and spirit as well as the mind.” Moreover, he held that, “since the system must be defended at all cost, it dominates the thinking in higher education as it does in other areas.” It was no surprise to Mays, then, that the nation’s most academically elite colleges and universities were located in the North, far removed from Jim Crow racism and segregation. Mays was not arguing that northern universities were better institutions simply by virtue of their geographical locations or hefty endowments. Rather, he believed that northern institutions were superior to Southern institutions because they provided their professors with a freer professional environment. To further his point, Mays noted that, “many of the most brilliant and liberal professors in the universities of the North are Southern men,” many of whom he

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<sup>249</sup> Ibid., 401-402.

supposed defected from the South “because they had better facilities to work with in the North and because the atmosphere was freer.”<sup>250</sup>

Mays asserted, however, that the constraining power of segregation was equally oppressive upon black students in colleges and universities. He argued that not only were black students underrepresented in higher education and denied the full breadth of privileges afforded their white peers, but they were also bound intellectually through the practice of segregation.

Mays clarified his point in the following quote:

He [the Black student] must study, think, and move in a segregated pattern. He is taught one thing in his college, but must live another thing in the larger environment. If there is a main stream in education, as there is in business, politics, and other areas, it is located in the so-called white colleges and universities. In the segregated pattern, the Negro is cut off from the main stream. In the segregated Negro institution, he is likely to think of himself as a marginal person outside of the main current. He also misses the competition and stimulation that he would get in the larger environment. And as long as the Negro colleges are strictly segregated, they will be considered by white people as peripheral and not due the same consideration as the colleges in the main stream.<sup>251</sup>

This marginalization of black college students and HBCUs, Mays contended, was not only a tremendous impediment for students’ intellectual development, but it was also responsible for stigmatizing the colleges and universities to the extent that it made even more difficult their task

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 402.

<sup>251</sup> Ibid.

of garnering private financial support. As long as institutions of higher education remained segregated, Mays held, black schools would always receive less private funding and support than their white counterparts.<sup>252</sup>

However, when the eradication of segregation came to pass, as Mays believed it eventually would, he insisted that the quality of a college and its students would weigh much more heavily upon public perceptions of education than racial customs. However, Mays did not view the desegregation of colleges and universities as a panacea to widespread racism and discrimination. As he asserted, “I am not naïve enough to believe that if we abolish segregation in higher education, or if we abolish segregation altogether, our racial ills will be solved.” Mays was acutely aware of both the crippling power of segregation and the heightened racial tension that accompanied it. Indeed the North struggled with *de facto* segregation its own accompanying set of racial problems, but they were not as deepseated as those perpetuated by *de jure* segregation in the South, Mays argued. He defended his position with certainty, arguing, “that racial feelings are more tense and conditions in almost every area are worse where the lines of segregation are tightest.”<sup>253</sup>

Even more problematic for Mays was the fact that for many Southern whites, preserving racial barriers in the South took precedence over more pressing regional issues, such as politics, economics, and education, areas in which Mays described Southerners as “a poverty ridden people.” Further, he expressed frustration that during a time “when we should all be working and pulling together for the total good of the South, we are largely a divided people working on opposite sides of the fence.” Segregated communities, by their very nature, Mays asserted, bred

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<sup>252</sup> Ibid.

<sup>253</sup> Ibid., 406.

more distrust and suspicion among people than did non-segregated communities. This harsh truth, for Mays, was central to his argument for the desegregation of higher education. He surmised that if it was “reasonable to assume that the leadership of the South will come from our colleges, universities, and professional schools,” it was imperative that “we begin there to abolish segregation and work from that point downward.” The freedom of mind and spirit needed to carry the nation forward could not emerge from institutions in which students were “restricted by the walls of segregation.”<sup>254</sup>

### Segregation in K-12 Education

Although Mays spent the majority of his professional life as college administrator, he knew well that segregation also wreaked havoc upon black youth in K-12 educational contexts. In his article, “Improving the Morale of Negro Children and Youth,” for instance, he claimed that segregation was the primary source of low morale among black children and youth, a condition in which they lacked the “spirit, confidence, hope, enthusiasm, aspiration, ambition, and freedom from fear” that, ostensibly, their white counterparts possessed. Legal segregation, Mays believe, pinned upon the hearts and minds of black children a stigmatizing “badge of inferiority.” He maintained that, “the moment the Negro was segregated by law, prejudice and discrimination against him increased by leaps and bounds. It said...to every white child that the Negro child...is inferior and that he...is something that he could and can kick around.” Inevitably, these discriminatory beliefs manifested into institutionalized racial discrimination,

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<sup>254</sup> Ibid.

most visibly in the way of “inferior schools, inferior accommodations, and inferior jobs.”<sup>255</sup>

Mays described the severe psychological trauma that followed:

The consequences are that many Negroes accepted their inferior status and I fear too many of them came to believe that subordinate roles and inferior positions were ordained for them. The Negro child was taught early or learned early that certain things were not meant for him. In many of them the nerve of aspiration was cut, ambitions dulled, hopes shattered, and dreams killed. As a result many a Negro youth has set low ideals and standards for himself because he feels it is useless for him to aim at the stars.<sup>256</sup>

Still, Mays noted, black children’s spirit had not been broken, neither had their morale been crushed. In fact, Mays claimed that the morale of black children was constantly increasing, and his aim was to ensure that it continued to do so.<sup>257</sup>

Central to Mays’s plan to boost further the morale of black youth in America was education, particularly providing black youth with opportunities to learn in desegregated schools. Successful legal challenges to segregation in higher education, most notably in the way of the *Sweatt* and *McLaurin*<sup>258</sup> cases, Mays held, were already improving the morale of black youth. In *Sweatt v. Painter*, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that Heman Sweatt, an African American man, be admitted “to the University of Texas Law School...on the ground that the colored school established by the state failed to offer equal educational opportunity.” Similarly, in *McLaurin v.*

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<sup>255</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Improving the Morale of Negro Children and Youth,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 19, no. 3, The Negro Child in the American Social Order (Summer 1950): 420.

<sup>256</sup> *Ibid.*, 420-421.

<sup>257</sup> *Ibid.*, 421.

<sup>258</sup> *Ibid.*

*Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education*, the Supreme Court ruled against segregated instruction on racially integrated campuses, a decision stemming from the University of Oklahoma's admission of George McLaurin, a 68 year-old African American, to its graduate school and subsequent implementation of a segregated instruction policy.<sup>259</sup> As Mays believed, "When the Negro child sees and hears that Negroes are now attending universities formerly reserved for whites only, his morale is boosted to a degree beyond measurement."<sup>260</sup>

Moreover, Mays argued, the core issue of educational equality in such cases would inevitably begin to trouble segregationist policies in K-12 public schools in the South, since "Very few Negro high schools in the South are equal to the white high schools." Mays even went so far as to predict that the outcomes of these cases could lead to "Negroes and whites...going to the same high school in some sections of the South." However, Mays noted that a truly equal approach to educating black and white youth in the South would make a tremendous difference for black students.<sup>261</sup> He claimed:

If the Southern states should perform a miracle and make the Negro public schools equal to the white public schools, there would still be an improvement in the Negro child's spirit. The very fact that his school would look as good as that of the white child's will prove to be a builder of morale for the Negro child. No one can know with precision what it does to the soul of a Negro child when he sees that the physical plant of the white school is so much better than the plant for Negroes. The segregated system with its inevitable consequences of inequality

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<sup>259</sup> Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 267, 283.

<sup>260</sup> Mays, "Improving," 423.

<sup>261</sup> *Ibid.*, 423.



has warped the minds and spirits of thousands of Negro youths. They either grow to manhood accepting the system, in which case they aspire to limited, racial standards; or they grow up with bitterness in their minds.<sup>262</sup>

For Mays, then, the fight against segregation was not optional. He believed that segregation was inherently destructive and would forever compromise the humanity and integrity of black people *and* white people.

Mays also believed that exposing black youth to science and history could play a pivotal role in boosting their morale. Science, Mays noted, had been used during much of the early part of the twentieth century to discredit claims that ascribed full humanity to black people and argued for the equality of all races. Matters were only complicated further for black teachers who were trying to counter notions of inferiority while teaching out of textbooks that supported such ideas. And “though many Negro teachers succeeded admirably in combating this pseudo-science,” Mays contended, “the false doctrine of Negro inferiority must have had its damaging effect upon millions of Negro youth.” By 1950, however, Mays contended, science had begun to come to new conclusions about the biological significance of race. He charged that, “science has reversed itself, and the idea of the equality of races has been so popularized that every intelligent Negro youth knows what science has to say about the potential equality of all races.” That science had adopted a view of human life also espoused by Christianity was a point that, for Mays, could not be overstated. As he asserted, “For a long time the Christian religion had to wage this battle alone. Now science supports religion in declaring that of one blood all races and

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<sup>262</sup> Ibid.

nations are made.” Thus, Mays concluded, “modern science is a great aid to improving the morale of Negro children.”<sup>263</sup>

Lastly, Mays called for educating black youth in the history of black people, as he believed that, “the greatest way to improve the morale of Negro children and youth is to be able to point out to them what adult Negroes have achieved under the most adverse circumstances.” Recalling, “what it did to my young soul to read about Booker T. Washington, Frederick Douglass and Paul Lawrence Dunbar,” Mays believed deeply that possessing an acute awareness of black achievement could expand black youth’s horizons. The pictures of Washington, Douglass, and Dunbar that hung on the walls of Mays’s childhood home, he maintained, were evidence enough for him “that other Negro boys could achieve distinction” if those men could. Thus, Mays held that, “Every Negro who achieves significantly is a builder of morale for the Negro child,”<sup>264</sup> regardless of whether he was of national or local repute. Ultimately, the aim was to instill in black children and black adolescents a deep sense of self-worth and an unrelenting passion to pursue the desires of their hearts.

#### Bond on the Morale of Black Youth

On the issue of boosting black youth’s morale, fellow HBCU president Horace Mann Bond again expressed ideas similar to those of Mays. In the same 1950 issue of *The Journal of Negro Education*, Bond articulated many of the same sentiments regarding morale among black as had Mays. Bond, like Mays, believed that black youth’s morale could be improved through greater exposure to exemplars of black achievement. Men like Booker T. Washington, W.E.B. Du Bois and J.C. Price, he contended, were successful because their familiarity with the

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<sup>263</sup> Ibid., 424.

<sup>264</sup> Ibid., 425.

achievements of great African Americans like Charles Sumner and Frederick Douglass inspired them to be so. As Bond put it, for men like Washington and DuBois, who had been delivered from or bypassed the yoke of slavery to become “highly cultured men,” success was unquestionably attainable. For them, he held, “the entire world was ‘their oyster,’—they had a deep conviction that they were in the right, and on the way to success. Instilling in contemporary black youth that same sense of being “in the right” and “on the way to success” was crucial to improving their morale, he argued.<sup>265</sup>

For Bond, then, it was imperative that black youth be given “a contemporary milieu that permits them to entertain the conviction of rightness and a bright hope for a better future.” This contemporary milieu, he believed, could best be created in schools, particularly schools staffed primarily by black teachers. As he contended, “An infusion of Negro teachers through the entire gamut of the public schools would heighten the morale of all children, and certainly provide a much healthier educational situation for the Negro child.”<sup>266</sup> While this point does not necessarily mirror any of the points Mays posited in his article, it does show an overlap in Bond’s and Mays’s thinking about the importance of black youth having accessible models of black success.

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<sup>265</sup> Horace M. Bond, “Improving the Morale of Negro Children and Youth,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 19, no. 3, The Negro Child in the American Social Order (Summer 1950): 409; This particular issue of *The Journal of Negro Education* included a section devoted to exploring ways to improve the lives of black children and youth. Mays’s and Bond’s articles cited above are two of three articles published in that issue that bear the title, “Improving the Morale of Negro Children and Youth.”

<sup>266</sup> *Ibid.*, 410-411.

### Toward School Funding Equalization

As noted, Mays believed that providing black students with equal educational expenditures was of the utmost importance for ensuring that they would be able to break free of the psychological chains of racial discrimination. He also believed that given the nation's political climate in the wake of the *Sweatt* and *McLaurin* cases, local equalization efforts were inevitable, even if they were only being used as a delay tactic to prevent the full-fledged desegregation of public schools. In January of 1950, Mays identified one county in Southern Georgia that launched such an initiative: Bulloch County. Led by the county school board and in collaboration with local blacks, the county initiated a survey of the needs of the black schools in the county with the aim of bringing them up to par with the county's white schools.

This initiative followed a series of petitions filed by black residents who were no longer willing to ignore the physical reminders of gross funding disparities within the county. According to Mays, "It is obvious to all observers that the Negro schools are inferior to those for whites in almost every area." In Bulloch County, specifically, Mays argued, black schools were severely understaffed and poorly equipped, most notably in the way of transportation. For instance, Mays highlighted the fact that, "Negroes have the use of five 'battered' buses for the junior pupils while there are forty-three buses for the white kids who go to the junior high

schools.” Given that Bulloch County was comprised of approximately 40% blacks, it was not difficult for Mays to identify the problem in its allocation of school resources.<sup>269</sup>

Despite Mays’s confident declaration that school equalization was an inevitable outcome of major judicial victories, he remained reticent as to the motivation of equalization efforts. That counties throughout the South were beginning to move to equalize black and white schools was not, for Mays, necessarily a sign of a cultural transformation. He believed that the sincerity of these efforts needed to be assessed. A tremendous variable factoring into the initiative’s success, he argued, was local whites’ dedication to seeing it through. He asserted:

It will depend first of all upon the integrity of the white officials who have the power to equalize facilities. It will depend upon the fairness of the white teachers and the white community. The white teachers and the white community must be fair and enlightened enough to want equality of educational opportunities for Negroes.<sup>270</sup>

The proposed timeline of the equalization campaign was also of interest to Mays as means of identifying the sincerity of the initiative. Regarding the survey, Mays held that, “If the school

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<sup>269</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Is This the Solution?,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, January 21, 1950, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 8; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Note: Mays published a follow-up article on January 28 entitled, “I Detest Gradualism,” that extended much of his argument on school equalization as discussed in the piece published on January 21.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 2.

officials act on the findings immediately and provide means of equalizing facilities within a reasonably short time, it will be great. However, he asserted that, “if they plan to equalize facilities so gradually that it will take them many years to do it, that will be tragic.” The use of time, Mays believed, was an important tool for determining Bulloch County’s sincerity, which, he maintained, “must be the core of the plan.” Thus, if county officials proved to be more interested in a gradual approach to equalization than an immediate one, Mays held, “the survey would turn out to be a means of avoiding federal suits and not a means of equalizing educational opportunities.”<sup>272</sup>

Indeed, although Mays argued for increasing educational expenditures for blacks at the local level, he was not convinced that Southern whites were racially progressive enough to fight for black children’s educational rights with the same fervor with which they would fight for their own children. So it was on these grounds of skepticism that Mays called again for supplemental educational aid from the federal government to be provided to public schools. The following quote captures Mays’s point:

I believe in Federal aid to education because the proper education of the people of the United States is a national problem. It is not only the responsibility of the state and local governments, but it is also the responsibility of the Federal Government. A student who lives in Georgia, Nebraska or Mississippi should not be penalized because his state is too poor to provide for him schools as good as those that are provided for the boy who lives in New York or New Jersey.<sup>273</sup>

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid.

<sup>273</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “I Believe in Federal Aid to Public Schools,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 4, 1950, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers

The disparities among schools from region to region, Mays believed, had national implications and were justification enough for the federal government to supplement educational expenditures to ensure that the poorest regions of the country were brought up to the national education standard.

As evidence of the national scope of the education problem, Mays claimed that, “During World War II, 659,000 men were rejected under Selective Service primarily because of shortages in schooling.” Even in times of peace, he argued, the nation suffered because of its undereducated population. He maintained that, “As a rule illiterate people are an economic liability,” approximating that, “We [the United States] lose perhaps billions of dollars a year in production and in crime because the rate of literacy is so low.” Clearly, for Mays, the imperative in providing federal aid to public education was not only about ensuring equal educational opportunities for blacks, but also about ensuring national security.<sup>274</sup>

The relationship between national security and federal education spending was an issue that Mays discussed again in his 1951 article, “Defense and Education,” in which he highlighted the funding disparity between federal aid to public education and the national defense budget. At that time, Mays estimated that the United States government spent approximately “\$60,000,000,000 a year for defense,” primarily out of gripping fear, he asserted. Passively dismissing rebuttals of those who may have wished to justify such spending by pointing to a volatile global climate, Mays insisted that even if the world were at peace, “we would not be able to get the Government to spend one billion dollars a year to equalize educational opportunities.” Education, Mays’s point implied, simply was not a high priority for the federal government.

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Installation 1 Box 8; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>274</sup> Ibid.

However, as Mays was willing to momentarily suspend reality for the sake of consideration, he outlined the potential impact of a \$60,000,000,000 education budget upon the nation's educational infrastructure.<sup>275</sup>

If there were such a budget, even for only one year, colleges and universities across the nation, Mays argued, would be able to establish multi-million dollar endowments, through which they could greatly improve their campuses and expand enrollments. Using private colleges and universities as an example, Mays argued that if each “had forty millions in endowment most of them would have more money that they could use.” Further, he claimed, “they could construct all of their new buildings, pay for all research and give heavy scholarships from income on their endowments.”<sup>276</sup> The ways in which \$60,000,000,000 could be appropriated for expanding opportunities at colleges and universities, Mays knew, was virtually limitless. The truth about federal spending for education, however, was sobering. Mays admitted that his fantastic vision of a \$60,000,000,000 education budget was “supposition contrary to fact.” He doubted that the future would bring with it change, insisting that, “if peace comes in our time, we will settle down again to complacency.” Neither a complacent attitude towards domestic affairs nor an overly aggressive approach to national defense, Mays held, was sustainable for the long-term welfare of the United States. At some point, he believed, the government must invest in its people, to ensure that there will be a country worth fighting for.<sup>278</sup>

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<sup>275</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Defense and Education,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 6, 1951, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 10; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>276</sup> Ibid.

<sup>278</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.



*Brown v. Board of Education*

In the years following the Supreme Court's rulings on segregation in higher education, Mays watched closely as the their impact began to resonate in the nation's K-12 settings. In his 1951 article, "Yes, Coercion Helps," for instance, Mays examined the efficacy of judicial challenges to segregation and how the subsequent rulings shaped public education policy at the elementary and secondary levels. Mays's overall argument in the article was that coercion through judicial means was one of the most legitimate and effective ways for blacks to realize social change. Within the context of education, specifically, Mays maintained that, "Only the mentally stupid would deny the fact that the great strides that have been made in improving Negro schools in the South were made mainly because legal pressure was brought to bear through Federal Courts." Further, he claimed that, "Southern educators and southern politicians never began talking in earnest about equalizing school facilities for Negroes until Negroes began to sue in Federal Courts." For Mays, then, there was no question as to the efficacy of blacks litigiously fighting for their rights.<sup>279</sup>

School funding reform in South Carolina during the early 1950s was, for Mays, a testament to the efficacy of judicial challenges to segregation. Around that time, the state had "passed a three per cent sales tax and the Supreme Court of the South Carolina...placed its approval upon a \$75,000,000 bond issue for construction of school buildings," the primary reason, he argued, being "that South Carolina knows that Negroes are suing and that they are tired of being given second rate schools."<sup>280</sup> The pressure to rectify funding disparities in the

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<sup>279</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Yes, Coercion Helps," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, August 11, 1951, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 10; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>280</sup> Ibid.

state's public schools had grown since a federal court ruled "that Clarendon County, South Carolina must equalize the school facilities for Negroes with those of the whites."<sup>281</sup> According to Mays, such a ruling only increased fear among many whites that court-ordered desegregation was imminent. He detailed the depth of Southern whites' fear of desegregation and lengths to which they were willing to go to preserve their way of life:

South Carolina, Georgia and other southern states know that the only way they may be able to maintain separate schools is to make the Negro schools equal. They even know that in time segregation will and must go. But they want to postpone that day as long as possible. They go so far as to say that even when segregation goes there will be less mingling of the races if the present Negro schools are made as good as those established for whites. The White South and white Americans for that matter are willing to pay heavily for segregation.<sup>282</sup>

For Mays, then, the South Carolina Supreme Court's ruling that Clarendon, South Carolina must equalize school funding was proof that coercion, in this case through the courts, yielded positive outcomes for blacks.

However the U.S. Supreme Court chose to rule on the matter of *segregation*, Mays contended that, "the fact that segregation itself is being attacked, means that Negroes will get better schools faster than they would get them if the attacks on segregation were not made."<sup>283</sup> Moreover, in the aggregate, he believed that, "Federal suits, whether for equalization of

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

<sup>283</sup> Ibid.

educational opportunities or for the abolition of segregation per se, are bound to be for the good and for the advancement of the South and the Nation.”<sup>284</sup>

The significance of the events unfolding in Clarendon County was not lost on Mays. Although the “three judge court in South Carolina...ruled that segregation does not violate the Federal Constitution,” Mays was encouraged by the positive impact blacks’ newfound litigiousness was having on local education policy. Indeed, he argued, whites in the South were moving quickly to equalize public school funding because it was clear that a failure to do so could bring segregation to an abrupt halt. As he asserted, “They [whites] know that it may come to an end very soon if Negro schools are not rapidly and greatly improved.” Truthfully, he contended, “They even know that segregation cannot last forever. But they intend to postpone the ending of segregation as long as they can.”<sup>285</sup>

The Supreme Court also recognized the high-stakes nature of segregation cases, Mays held. However, the political line it was being forced to walk was uniquely dangerous. On one hand, Mays noted, the Supreme Court had to consider the implications of a decision in opposition to segregation, highlighting the fact that it would surely “hesitate to hand down a decision that the South vigorously opposes.” Yet on the other hand, he contended, the Court could “hardly afford to hand down a decision in favor of segregation,” as “Such a decision would reflect unfavorably upon our Democracy” and “play right into the hands of the Communists the

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<sup>284</sup> Ibid.

<sup>285</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Clarendon County Case,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 5, 1952, manuscript page 2). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 10; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

world over.” Mays summed up the Court’s dilemma quite aptly: “It has a very hot potato in its hands.”<sup>286</sup>

Given the highly complex and contentious nature of segregation, Mays was not sure how the Supreme Court would rule on the matter, but he was quite sure that the implications of the decision *would* reach beyond the borders of the United States. The following quote captures his thinking:

Somehow, I have always feared what the United States Supreme Court might do on this subject. Even the Supreme Court will hesitate to hand down a decision that the South vigorously opposes...It can hardly afford to hand down a decision in favor of segregation. Such a decision would reflect unfavorably upon our Democracy and the people of the earth would lose faith in our democracy. Their faith in it is not too strong now. The colored peoples of Asia, South America and Africa will watch eagerly what the Supreme Court does on this subject. Not only the colored peoples but the white peoples as well. A decision in favor of segregation by the highest court in the land will play right into the hands of the Communists the world over. A decision of that character would resound around the world.<sup>287</sup>

If the Supreme Court failed to uphold the integrity of the Constitution and the freedoms it so boldly espoused, Mays believed, America would be thrust further into the spotlight of global scrutiny, under which its pseudo-Democratic veil would be lifted and its domestic blemishes exposed.

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<sup>286</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 1.

<sup>287</sup> Ibid.

The outcome of a pro-segregation ruling could also have devastating domestic consequences, Mays held. He believed that, “If the Supreme Court should place its stamp of approval upon segregation in public schools, it is highly conceivable that many areas in the north where no segregation now exist would set up segregated schools.” Further, being skeptical of the base notion that separate schools could, indeed, be equal, Mays maintained that, “Even if the facilities are equal and the teachers are equally good, it [segregation] denies the pupils the opportunity of competing with members of all races and groups,”<sup>288</sup> an opportunity to which he often noted as being partially responsible for his overall development personally and scholastically.

Still, Mays knew that the magnitude of the decision could lead the Supreme Court to stall in deciding on the constitutionality of segregation. He was confident that the Supreme Court would refrain from ruling in a way that would damage the United States’ global reputation, but he also believed that the Court’s fear of a Southern backlash would likely influence its decision making process. In the face of such tremendous political pressure, the Supreme Court, Mays held, would likely “continue to hedge and dodge this problem for sometime to come,” doing “so with the hope that the South will come around in time to accept non-segregated schools.”<sup>289</sup>

The Clarendon County case, which had come to be known as *Briggs v. Elliot*,<sup>290</sup> again became a focal point for Mays in 1952. By this time, the court had agreed to hear not only the Clarendon County case, but also four other school segregation cases that had developed in different regions of the country, including one that emerged out of Topeka, Kansas, known as *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*. Each of the cases was being litigated by the NAACP’s

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<sup>288</sup> Ibid.

<sup>289</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>290</sup> Kluger, *Simple Justice*, 301-305, 314.

Legal Defense Fund (LDF) and was “asking the United States Supreme Court to declare segregation unconstitutional.”<sup>291</sup> Although the LDF had been fairly unsuccessful in arguing against the constitutionality of segregation at the state level, they did strike a resonant chord during the Topeka case, emphasizing new research that highlighted the deleterious psychological effects of segregation upon the psyche of black youth.

The Fund, recognizing that Topeka’s school facilities for black and white students were virtually identical and therefore equal, argued against the fact that Topeka legally required and enforced segregation. Further, relying on the psychological research of Drs. Kenneth and Mamie Clark, the Fund’s lawyers posited that, “children who were part of such an officially sanctioned system...were made to feel inferior. And children who felt inferior would necessarily lose motivation to learn.”<sup>292</sup> The crux of the LDF’s legal argument, then, became, as Mays reiterated, that, “Even if the facilities are equal, salaries are equal, and the teachers are equally well trained, if the Negro child is forced to attend an all Negro school, it injures the Negro child both mentally and spiritually.”<sup>293</sup>

Again, Mays highlighted the imperative in the Supreme Court’s being thoughtful in its ruling, noting that it had a number of options at its disposal. In one instance, it could rule clearly in favor of segregation; however, it could also look to exploit various legislative loopholes in a way that would allow it to avoid ruling on the issue of segregation altogether. In another

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<sup>291</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “What Will the Supreme Court Do?,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 28, 1952, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 8; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>292</sup> Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 7.

<sup>293</sup> Mays, “What Will the Supreme Court Do?,” manuscript page 1.

instance, the court could rule firmly in opposition to federally legislated segregation or declare all legislated segregation, “whether decreed by federal, state or local government,” unconstitutional. On a spectrum of possible rulings, the latter was the most favorable in Mays’s eyes, since “no kind of segregation could be sustained by law.”<sup>294</sup>

Of course, a ruling upholding the constitutionality of segregation was, for Mays, the worse possible outcome. He asserted that, “The greatest tragedy of all would prevail if the United States Supreme Court should rule in such a way as to place its stamp of approval upon segregation,” as he contended that “It would saddle segregation upon us for possibly another fifty years.” While only a few months earlier in 1952, Mays predicted that the Supreme Court would stall in ruling on the constitutionality of segregation, by June he had come to advocate such a move. He believed that if the Supreme Court could not muster the courage to declare segregation unconstitutional, it would “be better for the judges to hedge, hold what we have gained, and do nothing to confirm this evil.”<sup>295</sup> Even if the court were reticent to rule in opposition to segregation for fear of a Southern political uprising, Mays believed that a hasty decision in favor of segregation could inflict an equal amount of damage to the socio-cultural infrastructure of the country.

Just as Mays had anticipated, the Court heard arguments for the cases but stalled, and “in June 1953, ordered a rehearing of the cases in October (later extended to December).”<sup>296</sup> Nevertheless, Mays followed the case closely over the next two years, publishing a number of articles leading up to and after the ruling, two of which captured again the essence of his views

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<sup>294</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 1-2.

<sup>295</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>296</sup> Ibid., 57; Tony Badger, “Brown and Backlash,” in *Massive Resistance: Southern Opposition to the Second Reconstruction*, ed. Clive Webb (New York: Oxford, 2005), 39.

on segregation and his interpretation of the significance of the Court's decisions. The first article, published in 1955, was entitled, "A Recent Supreme Court Decision: How Decisive?" Here, Mays set out to do two things: first, to situate the ruling in its proper historical context and therefore highlight its socio-cultural magnitude; and second, to examine the contemporary implications of the decision in light of the ubiquity of racial prejudice in Southern states.

Having lived the majority of his adult life under the heel of Jim Crow segregation, Mays recognized fully the historical significance of the Supreme Court's decision in May of 1954, characterizing it as "the most epoch-making decision in the area of human rights since the emancipation of the slaves in 1865."<sup>297</sup> Indeed, the Court's ruling undermined the long-lasting *Plessy* decision, but the justices, as did Mays, knew that the decision could do little in the way of transforming the racist ideology that governed the mind of the South. The Court's refusal to impose a timeline for desegregation, Mays maintained, was evidence of this fact, as it was driven by its "taking into consideration local conditions, hostility to the decision—and the obstacles that must be overcome before segregation can be completely abolished in the public schools."<sup>298</sup> In the absence of a clear timeline, Mays held, the question loomed large: how decisive was the Supreme Court's decision? The following quote details the degree to which Mays found the decision to be decisive:

It is decisive in the sense that since segregation based on race and color is unconstitutional in the public schools in the five cases upon which the decision was based, it is unconstitutional in public schools everywhere in the United States and that any school board that does not comply voluntarily with the decision can be

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<sup>297</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "A Recent Supreme Court Decision: How Decisive?," *Chicago Review* 9, no. 3 (1955): 21.

<sup>298</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.



made to comply if a suit is brought against it. Segregation in the public schools cannot be maintained on the grounds of race or color.<sup>299</sup>

But the reach of the decision did not stop at public schools. By implication, segregation based on race was outlawed in all spaces receiving public funds, including colleges, universities, parks, and libraries. As Mays put it, “the back of segregation has been broken,” and therefore would “no longer be able to walk arrogantly over America clothed with legal and constitutional authority.”<sup>300</sup>

#### Segregation after *Brown v. Board*

Mays was not too far removed from the realities of the South to believe that a ruling from the nation’s highest court would be sufficient to transform the hearts and minds of whites in the region. As he put it, “we must now be realistic and face the stubborn facts.” There was no question, Mays argued, that several states in the South, the upper-Atlantic, and the Midwest would comply with the decision without incident; however, he held that “in the states of Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Florida and Louisiana the situation will be different.” Undoubtedly, Mays argued, the states knew “that they must yield to the mandates of the courts eventually, but they will hold out as long as they can.”<sup>301</sup> Given the court’s refusal to set a deadline for the desegregation process and in “remanding the cases to the district judges, and in taking under consideration local conditions,” Mays contended, “the Supreme Court may have given encouragement to the thousands of school districts not directly involved in the decision to ‘sit tight’ until pressured by the courts.”<sup>302</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Ibid.

<sup>300</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid.

<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 24.

Thus, Mays conceded that despite the decisiveness of the ruling in regards to the legality of segregation, the decisiveness of the *implementation* of the ruling was yet to be seen, as he believed it would depend most heavily upon two variables: first, the willingness of top officials to build interracial coalitions prepared “to study the local situations, to recommend what can be done now, and then start at once to desegregate;”<sup>303</sup> second, a willingness among black people to initiate the desegregation process where there was no compliance among top officials.

The second variable, for Mays, was critical. He believed that the degree to which blacks involved themselves in the fight for desegregation would have tremendous influence on the reach of the *Brown* decision. As he contended, “People who are the ‘underdogs’ must themselves take the initiative to be free,” since “The man who occupies the vantage point will hardly take the initiative for the ‘underdog.’” Providing a brief history of black-led struggles for equality in all areas of American life, highlighting especially the NAACP’s spearheading of and victory in the *Brown* cases, Mays argued that the precedent for successful black leadership in civil rights struggles had been established and should be followed if permanent change were to be achieved. It was because “Negroes feel the sting of segregation and second class citizenship,” Mays asserted, that “they must take the initiative to rid America of this blot on our civilization and in doing so...render a service to America and to the world.” Further, Mays was confident that, “Once Negroes make the first move, thousands of white people will come, as they have come in the past, to their rescue,” although he remained resolute in his stance that “the move toward freedom must start with the oppressed.”<sup>304</sup> In the absence of sound black leadership, then, Mays believed, segregation in public schools was likely to persist indefinitely.

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

The second article that captured Mays's view of the *Brown* decision and its impact on segregation was published in 1956 and was entitled, "The Moral Aspects of Segregation Decisions." Similar to the piece published in 1955, this article highlighted the merits of the Supreme Court's landmark decision; however, its exposition of the ideologically schizophrenic nature of segregation and democracy provided a deeper analysis of Mays's perspective on American culture and domestic policy. Further, it connected the decision to the three core elements of Mays view of education: democracy, Christianity, and social justice.

Mays attacked the institution of segregation on the grounds that, above all, it was immoral. He argued that "Whenever a strong, dominant group, [presumably whites] possesses all the power...makes all the laws...writes all the constitutions...collects and holds all the money...determines all policies...and deliberately places heavy burdens...upon the backs of the weak that act is immoral." Further, he asserted, "If the strong group is a Christian group or a follower of Judaism...the act is against God and man—thus immoral." Finally, he claimed, "If the strong group is atheistic, the act is against humanity—still immoral."<sup>305</sup> Mays rooted his argument in his fundamental belief in the equality of man. As he argued:

No group is wise enough, good enough, strong enough, to assume an omnipotent and omniscient role; no group is good enough, wise enough, to restrict the mind, circumscribe the soul, and to limit the physical movements of another group. To do that is blasphemy. It is a usurpation of the role of God.<sup>306</sup>

In essence, Mays argued, for the strong to intentionally manipulate and immobilize the weak on the grounds of immutable characteristics like skin color is to "penalize the group for conditions

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<sup>305</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "The Moral Aspects of Segregation Decisions," *The Journal of Educational Sociology* 29, no. 9 (1956): 361.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid.

over which it has not control; for being what nature or nature's God made it," an act he deemed the most immoral "of all immoral acts."<sup>307</sup>

The significance of the *Brown* decision, then, for Mays, was in its aim to make right one of the greatest moral wrongs in the history of the United States. He argued that when people "Segregate a race for ninety years, tell that race in books, in law, in courts, in education, in church and school, in employment, in transportation, in hotels and motels, and in government that it is inferior—it is bound to leave its damaging mark upon the souls and minds of the segregated," and it was these conditions that the Supreme Court sought to change and these damaging marks it sought to prevent.<sup>308</sup>

As noted previously, Mays abhorred segregation on several grounds, one of which was its incompatibility with justice and equality. He highlighted the fact that in a segregated society, "the segregated is somebody that can be pushed around as desired by the segregator," as "the segregated has no rights that the segregator is bound to respect." What emerges, then, from this maltreatment of the segregated by the segregator is a vicious cycle of oppression that creates and constantly reaffirms the gross distortion "of human personality." Deeming this distortion "the chief sin of segregation," Mays argued that, "It gives the segregated a feeling of inherent inferiority which is not based on facts, and it gives the segregator a feeling of superiority which is not based on facts."<sup>309</sup> Such an intellectually dishonest justification for the elevation of one group over another, Mays believed, was not only psychologically damaging, but also antithetical to the governing of a democratic society. Attacking erroneous claims that blacks lauded the *Brown* decision "because they want to mingle with white people," Mays argued instead that

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid., 362.

<sup>308</sup> Ibid., 363.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid.

blacks wanted “segregation abolished because they want the legal stigma of inferiority removed and because they do not believe that equality of educational opportunities can be completely achieved in a society where the law brands a group as inferior.”<sup>310</sup> In essence, for Mays, blacks wanted justice, to be affirmed by the law as equal partners in the promises of a nation that proclaimed equality for all men, race notwithstanding.

Mays’s appeal to justice in his call for the abolishment of segregation, though discussed solitarily, was part and parcel of his belief in the virtue of democracy and its connection to morality. Thus, Mays challenged organized opposition to the *Brown* decision on moral and political grounds. He argued that, “to deliberately plan through nefarious methods, through violence, boycott, and threats to nullify the Decision of the highest law in the land is not only immoral but it encourages a disregard for all laws which we do not like.”<sup>311</sup> Further, he asserted that, “To write into our constitutions things that we do not intend to carry out is an immoral act,” alluding here to the disingenuous act of including in state constitutions the phrase “separate but equal” without any intent to ensure its enforcement. Even when states began to honor their constitutions by investing millions in black schools to equalize expenditures, their compulsion to do so, Mays noted, was rooted in a desire “to maintain segregation,”<sup>312</sup> not right a longstanding wrong.

Therein lay the significance of the Supreme Court’s decision for Mays. Unlike the scrambled efforts of Southern states looking for ways to preserve racial segregation, the Supreme Court’s decision, Mays held, was intended to uproot the legal justification for the immoral and anti-democratic practices instituted after the 1896 *Plessy* decision. He believed the *Brown* ruling

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<sup>310</sup> Ibid.

<sup>311</sup> Ibid., 364.

<sup>312</sup> Ibid.

to be so historically significant that he hinged the integrity of our democracy and the legitimacy of our constitution upon the states' willingness to comply with it. As he claimed:

We are morally obligated to implement the Decision or modify the federal constitution and say plainly that this constitution was meant for white people and not for Negroes and that the Declaration of Independence...was meant for white people and not Negroes. Tell the world honestly that we do not believe that part of the Declaration of Independence which says in essence that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.<sup>313</sup>

The choice, for Mays, was clear: the United States should either implement the law of the land, and do so with fidelity, or revise its most sacred texts to reflect the depth of its exclusivism and intolerance.

Lastly, but also posited on moral grounds, was Mays's argument that legalized segregation must be abolished if the United States were to truly live out its Christian identity. As he asserted, "We are morally obligated to abolish legalized segregation in America or reinterpret the Christian Gospel...and make the Gospel say that the noble principles of Judaism and Christianity are not applicable to colored peoples and Negroes." If government(s) of the United States could not muster the courage to dismantle segregation, he argued that they must "Tell the world honestly and plainly that the Fatherhood of God and the Brotherhood of Man cannot work where the colored races are involved."<sup>315</sup> Again, Mays posed the dilemma in dichotomous terms, suggesting that the U.S. was "morally obligated to move toward implementing the Decision in

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid., 365.

<sup>315</sup> Ibid.

the deep south or lose our moral leadership in the world.” A moral failure under such close global scrutiny, Mays believed, would devastate the country and force it to “play the role of hypocrisy preaching one thing and doing another”<sup>316</sup> There was no question, for Mays, that being cast in the light of moral cowardice could seriously undermine the global stature of the United States; thus, he viewed the Supreme Court decision, ultimately, as an opportunity for the nation to extend its reach, as an opportunity “to achieve greatness in the area of moral and spiritual things just as it has already achieved greatness in military and industrial might and in material possessions.”<sup>317</sup>

While Mays never lost sight of the national significance of the *Brown* decision, he believed that the global implications of the decision loomed large and were weightier, insisting that, “If we lose this battle for freedom for fifteen million Negroes we will lose it for 145 million whites and eventually we will lose it for the world.”<sup>318</sup> In all its bigotry and shortsightedness, the United States, Mays was convinced, possessed deep within it a potential for democratic greatness and a moral fortitude that could inoculate the most immoral of ideologies and oppose the most tyrannical of governments.

### Paying for College

During the 1950s, Mays also engaged a number of other educational issues. For instance, in 1953 he wrote an article exploring the connection between public school finance and the necessity of alumni giving. Entitled, “Do Students Pay for Their Education,” the article maintained that students, by way of taxes and subsidies, only pay for a fraction of the educational expenses they incur throughout their matriculation. Mays noted that, “every American child can

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<sup>316</sup> Ibid.

<sup>317</sup> Ibid., 366.

<sup>318</sup> Ibid.

get a high school education to no cost to him or her, and not enough cost to his parents to pay for eleven or twelve years of schooling.” In truth, he argued, “Generations of dead people who paid taxes are contributing toward the education of the students in this generation.” These funds provide not only for K-12 education, but also for state-operated “universities, colleges, technical schools and professional schools” and their associated facilities. The overarching point, for Mays, then was that “students, past nor present, do not and cannot pay for their education,”<sup>319</sup> as he contended that, “All education is subsidized, whether private or public, by the state or by philanthropy.”<sup>320</sup> Thus, he argued that because the full cost of educating students exceeded both their and their parents’ financial capacity, they should feel compelled to support financially their colleges and universities upon graduation.

#### Black Students’ Reading Habits

Mays was also concerned during the 1950s about black college students’ apathy towards reading. Mays, recalling an incident in which he heard “a professor complain that he knew a bright student who graduated from a certain class A college with honors who had not read one book outside of class assignments,” found the story to be “a sad commentary on the student, the college, and the professors.” Although Mays firmly believed that, “One’s literacy and education do not consist wholly in what is assigned in the class room,”<sup>321</sup> his experiences as an

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<sup>319</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Do Students Pay for Their Education?,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 7, 1953, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 13; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>321</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Do Our Students Read?,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 16, 1954, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 14 Folder 43; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.



administrator led him to conclude that many black students thought otherwise, citing their sporadic use of the library as evidence. Mays contended that, “When there is not the pressure of tests and final examinations the patronage is woefully thin,” which he concluded meant “that our students for the most part read what they must read—what is assigned as required reading.”<sup>322</sup>

Mays believed that the underwhelming phenomenon had an explanation, however, a part of which he believed had domestic roots. He argued:

Readings is a habit. One needs to acquire the habit early. Once the habit is formed reading becomes a delight—otherwise a bore. Too many of our students come from non-reading homes. The parents of these pupils did not have the opportunity to be trained and some of the parents did not take advantage of the opportunity.

Books and magazines are rare in such homes.<sup>323</sup>

Similarly, he maintained, public schools were not fostering a love for reading among their students. He noted that even when one encountered “modern, well equipped grammar and high schools throughout the south...when you visit the libraries the shelves are mostly empty.”<sup>324</sup>

Inevitably, colleges and universities enroll large numbers of students who have read very little, if anything at all. Of course, then, the burden to stimulate the student to read fell upon the shoulders of the college instructor, “which,” Mays noted, “is a hard job with so many years wasted” and assumed “that the college teachers are widely read themselves.”<sup>325</sup> Whatever the case, Mays argued that students should take advantage of all opportunities that allow them to read within and without their areas of study, especially the three months during the summer

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 1-2.

<sup>325</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

when most students were not enrolled in school. As a more direct measure to spur reading among black students, he also advocated a graduation policy requiring that “a student read so many books each year over and above the books required in regular course work.”<sup>326</sup>

### The Qualities of a Good College

In 1944, at the tail end of World War II, federal legislators signed into law the GI Bill of Rights, which opened up the doors of U.S. higher education to war veterans and forever changed the face of higher education. With the bill’s passage, nearly “sixteen million men and women who served in the armed forces” received “a federal subsidy to continue their schooling or training.” According to Ravitch, “During the seven years which the benefits were available, 7.8 million veterans used them to attend universities, colleges, high schools, trade schools, and training programs,” and “Of that number, 2,232,000 attended institutions of higher education.” Such a rapid expansion in opportunities in higher education caused enrollments at colleges and universities around the country to swell dramatically and student populations to become much more socio-economically diverse.<sup>331</sup>

By the mid-1950s, higher education experts realized that the expanding enrollments of the late 1940s and early 1950s were not simply a momentary trend but were likely to persist for decades. When the American Association of Collegiate Registrars projected “that by 1970 colleges and universities would be enrolling triple their current numbers,” Freeland claimed,

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid.

<sup>331</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 12-15, 17.

school officials “stopped worrying about maintaining their institutions...and concentrated on ensuring adequate places—and appropriately trained faculty—to accommodate the expanded applicant population that would appear after 1960.”<sup>332</sup> During that time, the *Brown* decision, which had already ruled racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional, began to spur conversations about what role desegregation would play in higher education and how it would influence school quality.

Mays, always concerned with the standing of black colleges in the higher education discourse, addressed this very issue in a 1955 article that sought to identify the most important qualities he believed were necessary for colleges to be deemed high quality. Although for many people, “the size of a college” or “the number of football games it wins” may indicated the quality of a college, for Mays, such assessments were grossly inadequate. If colleges and universities were to be judged by sheer size or the quality of their athletic programs alone, he contended, top tier schools like Chicago and Harvard would rank beneath schools like New York University and Notre Dame. Surely, he argued, there were more appropriate criteria by which a school’s excellence could be measured; he identified five.<sup>333</sup>

The first indication of a school’s excellence, according to Mays, was the presence of “an eager, wide awake student body with brain, character and ambition,” since “the teacher cannot teach without students.” The second measure of a school’s quality, he maintained, was whether

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<sup>332</sup> Richard M. Freeland, “The World Transformed: A Golden Age for American Universities, 1945-1970,” in *The History of Higher Education* 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., eds. Lester F. Goodchild and Harold S. Wechsler (Needham Heights: Ginn Press, 1989), 599.

<sup>333</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “What Makes a Good College?,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 9, 1955, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 16 Folder 38; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

or not it employed high quality faculty, teachers who were “well prepared, dedicated” and stimulating. If an institution could not boast of a high quality faculty, Mays held, it was undoubtedly “an inferior college despite its buildings, size and victorious football team.” The third measure of a high quality college, Mays asserted, was “the quality of work its graduates do when they meet the stiffest competition in the great universities of the nation.”<sup>334</sup> As he argued, “If a reasonable number of the graduates of a college cannot meet successfully the competition in graduate and professional study in the great universities, it is not a good college.” Fourth, Mays claimed that a college could only be considered good if “its graduates do well in the world,” arguing specifically that “a college must be able to point to a large number of its graduates who are towers of strength in education, the professions, business, religion and the affairs of the state.” The final criterion for a college to be deemed “good,” Mays insisted, was its possession of “good equipment and facilities where faculty and students can do their work.”<sup>335</sup>

As it stood, Mays looked to these criteria and no further as measures to determine the quality of a college. However, in the midst of shifting social dynamics in the wake of the *Brown* decision, he feared “that a sixth, false standard is developing in the minds of Negroes and white people,” one that assessed the value of a college according to number of white students enrolled. Mays lamented the fact that one of the most common questions fielded by colleges, presumably HBCUs, was how many white students were enrolled, and was disturbed that, “If the answer can be we have two white students enrolled or several white students enrolled...it seems that in the questioner’s mind the college has arrived.” This preoccupation with the presumably inherent value of white enrollments at black schools was not drawn along racial lines, as Mays noted,

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<sup>334</sup> Ibid.

<sup>335</sup> Ibid.

“that in the minds of some Negroes and some white people, a premium is placed on ‘whiteness.’” Consequently, he contended, the implication was that “the enrollment of one white student is sufficient to enhance the value of a college.”<sup>336</sup> Of course, Mays rejected this position, attributing it to an interdependent psychological complex of black inferiority and white superiority. Steadfast in his views of what made a college excellent, Mays could not be swayed in his belief that “If a college is first rate it is first rate and if it is second rate the presence of white students will not per se make it first rate.”<sup>337</sup>

### Mays on Teachers

During the mid-1950s, Mays also began to engage more directly issues relating to teachers and education. In 1954, for example, he voiced concern about what he believed was an impending teacher shortage in an article entitled, “Where Will the Teachers Come From?” His concern was legitimate. The years immediately following World War II were difficult ones for the teaching profession, as it witnessed a dramatic decrease in the number of available qualified teachers. According to Ravitch, Benjamin Fine, “the education editor of the *New York Times*...in 1947...reported that three hundred and fifty thousand teachers had left the public schools since 1940 for war service or better jobs.” He also discovered, “that the average teacher’s salary was \$37 per week...that fewer students were entering teaching, and that men were deserting the teaching profession.” These hard-hitting truths sparked growing concern among educators across the nation in the late 1940s and fueled speculation of a teacher shortage in years to come.<sup>338</sup>

In his article, Mays explored many of the same issues and factors that were contributing to the shortage. The first issue he identified was the small number of people actually entering the

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<sup>336</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.

<sup>338</sup> Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, 4-7.

teaching profession. For Mays, this was an issue that could be linked directly to the relatively poor pay of teachers. As he contended, “Although salaries in the teaching profession have advanced within recent years, they do not compare favorably with salaries paid in other fields say in industry and government.” Further, Mays argued, “a man can graduate from college with an A.B. degree and get as much salary in industry or government as a man with an A.M. or Ph.D. can get in the teaching profession.”<sup>339</sup> Given the salary discrepancy between teaching and other professions, Mays highlighted, there was little monetary incentive for students to pursue careers in education.

The second issue, which Mays connected to the first, was that schools were “not graduating enough top people to have enough to go around.”<sup>340</sup> Despite the large numbers of students graduating college each year, only a fraction of those students were enrolling in graduate school to pursue further study, according to Mays. However, even among those who had earned master’s degrees, he contended, “too many of them have average records and would not be encouraged to work towards a doctorate in a first rate university,” an especially problematic reality for colleges and universities looking to build faculties around individuals who had earned doctorates. Because Mays understood that a shortage of top college graduates for each professional field was greatly exacerbated by the disparity in buying power across professions, he believed that institutions needed to look beyond money as a means of boosting interest in the teaching profession, as he held that, “The joy and reward that come from

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<sup>339</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Where Will the Teachers Come From,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 23, 1954, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 14 Folder 43; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

developing young minds, the opportunity to do a creative work and to be loved by students are not to be taken lightly.”<sup>341</sup>

In 1956, Mays went deeper into his analysis of the significance of teachers. Speaking before the Teachers State Association of Texas, an organization dedicated to securing high quality education for black students and quality working conditions for black teachers,<sup>342</sup> he delivered an address entitled, “An Adequate Philosophy of Life for Teachers in Today’s Educational Picture.” Mays knew that in the two years since the *Brown* ruling, many public schools in the United States had integrated and become hotbeds of racial tension, which, of course, presented tremendous challenges for teachers. He recognized the heavy burden upon teachers’ shoulders, characterizing the “times” as ones “that try men’s souls,”<sup>343</sup> and inquired as to the philosophy teachers were adopting in response to such times, he asked:

What philosophy do you teach your students, by precept and example? What philosophy do you cling to, bow down before and worship as if it were very God? What do you swear by, work for, live for and if needs be, what is that you will die for?<sup>344</sup>

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<sup>341</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>342</sup> Vernon McDaniel, *History of the Teachers State Association of Texas* (Washington: National Education Association, 1977), 9-10.

<sup>343</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “An Adequate Philosophy of Life for Teachers in Today’s Educational Picture,” (speech delivered before the Teachers State Association of Texas, San Antonio, Texas, November 29, 1956, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Speeches Box 2; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>344</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 1.

Given the nature of public speaking, one can assume that Mays's question was delivered with rhetorical intentions and therefore required no answer, if not also serving as a clever means of preparing the audience to receive his six-fold philosophy of life for teachers.

The first of Mays's proposed six elements necessary for an adequate philosophy for teachers in such troubling times was "the recognition of the fact that struggle...is inherent in the very nature of existence itself."<sup>345</sup> As he believed, "Take the struggle out of life and it wouldn't be worth living." The second required element, Mays believed, was "a firm determination to develop and utilize the mind to its fullest capacity." According to Mays, above all other gifts given man, "God's supreme gift to man is his mind...and not to develop it to the full and not to use it is a sin."<sup>346</sup> Mays's belief that the mind was a gift to be used for good led him to posit that the man with a mind should use it to spark original ideas, not rehash old ones. Further, he should be able to "distinguish truth from error" and intellectually grounded enough to not be "swept off his feet by what he sees on TV or hears over the radio, however eloquently put."<sup>347</sup> The third element Mays included in his philosophy was "a sane state of dissatisfaction" and "An eternal restlessness with mediocre, ordinary performance." He believed that the point at which man became satisfied was also the point at which man began to decay. Mays believed this truth to transcend social designations and occupations, but he noted specifically that in the case of educators, "The teacher who is satisfied with his teaching will never teach better."<sup>348</sup>

The fourth element of Mays's philosophy for teachers was "to keep before you a vision of high ideals." Perhaps the most fleeting of his prescribed philosophical elements, this vision of

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<sup>345</sup> Ibid.

<sup>346</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>347</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 3.

<sup>348</sup> Ibid.



high ideals Mays described metaphorically, as “something that that teases you, tantalizes you, calls you, beckons to you, challenges you, but it always evades.”<sup>349</sup> He believed it to be something worthy of pursuit yet always beyond man’s grasp. The fifth element of Mays’s philosophy stemmed directly from his religious beliefs. As he contended:

No philosophy of life is adequate without high religion which accepts in one’s life the fact that God is the father of all mankind, that all men are brothers that Christ died for all men and that the life of each and every child is of intrinsic worth and value.<sup>350</sup>

Because Mays believed that all men derived life and value from God, he saw no virtue in a God-less philosophy of life for teachers. By the very nature of their jobs, Mays understood, teachers, in order to be effective, could hold no prejudices against children of diverse races and ethnicities. Mays believed that teachers, especially, needed to be racially progressive and supportive of their students, and charged them with the task of teaching “your kids the Negro, the white child, the mexican [*sic*] to walk the earth with dignity.”<sup>351</sup>

Finally, Mays claimed, “the sixth thing that makes an adequate philosophy of life is freedom of mind and spirit in the midst of persecution and crippling circumscription.”<sup>352</sup> Since the 1954 *Brown* decision, Mays asserted, blacks had endured intense persecution at the hands of disgruntled whites who opposed any change to the racially segregated society to which they had grown accustom. Reiterating the necessity in blacks fighting for their mental and spiritual freedom, Mays insisted that they do so “without hatred, without bitterness, without violence, with good will and love.” Always thinking beyond the local and national implications of the

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<sup>349</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 4.

<sup>350</sup> Ibid.

<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 4.

struggle, Mays reminded his audience that the stage on which blacks were fighting for freedom was under a global spotlight, reminding these teachers that, “In this fight to be free we are not fighting for ourselves.” Indeed, Mays contended, the fight was against anti-democratic factions in America, but it was also against the spread of Communism, Nazism, and Fascism in all corners of the world.<sup>353</sup>

In 1959, Mays broached again the subject of teacher development while speaking at Berea College in Kentucky. Entitled, “The Teacher’s Growth as a Whole Person,” the speech sought to outline a comprehensive approach to preventing teachers from becoming stagnant professionally, with an emphasis on the non-intellectual areas of teacher development. The first of these areas in which teachers needed growth, Mays believed, was “character and purpose.”<sup>354</sup> Reiterating a position he developed and posited in the mid 1940s, Mays argued that, “There seems to have been a tacit assumption within recent decades that if the mind was developed and if one was trained to think logically, good character would follow.” Such an assumption, Mays contended, was flawed, insisting that, “The crisis through which the world has just passed and is passing at present should banish forever from our minds such erroneous ideas.”<sup>355</sup> Truthfully, he asserted, “one of the fundamental defects in the world today is the fact that man’s intellect has been developed to a point beyond his integrity and beyond his ability to be good.”<sup>356</sup> The biggest

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<sup>353</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 5.

<sup>354</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Teacher’s Growth as a Whole Person,” (speech delivered at Berea College, Berea, Kentucky, June 12, 1959, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Speeches Box 3; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Mays makes many of the same points in a speech delivered on June 19, 1961 entitled, “In Pursuit of Excellence in Home, School and Community.”

<sup>355</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>356</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 3.

problems facing mankind, he held, were not of an intellectual sort; rather, they were moral and ethical dilemmas. The men and women who would be capable of effectively engaging such issues, then, would be those whose characters were shaped by teachers who were not only good scholars, but also “good men and women.”<sup>357</sup>

Effectively educating students in ways that built character and identified purpose, Mays argued, also required a spiritual reconceptualization of curriculum. Another argument first posited in the 1940s, Mays, here, insisted that, “all subjects need to be spiritualized,” or “liberalized.”<sup>358</sup> He believed that “subjects like mathematics, physics, chemistry, and history should” had far greater use than simply increasing man’s standard of living. The true aim of teaching, Mays claimed, was to identify the ways in which traditional curriculum can contribute “toward a solution of the complex problems of life and ways in which living can be improved and humanity made better.” This was, in his opinion, the goal of a liberalized curriculum. It required the teacher to “understand the meaning and depth of liberal education to the extent that students may develop a sense of values beyond the mere technical which will qualify them for a new kind of leadership which is needed in a high technical age.” Particularly, this goal required teachers to be well trained and committed to lifelong learning. As Mays insisted, a teacher’s “specialty should be built on a program of general education with a knowledge of an and appreciation for the values inherent in the social sciences, the humanities, philosophy and religion,” which, he asserted, required “study for growth far beyond the field of concentration in which the M.A. or Ph.D. was earned.”<sup>359</sup>

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<sup>357</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 4.

<sup>358</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 6.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 9.

Mays also believed that a teacher's growth was heavily dependent upon his attitude towards and relationship with his local community. The danger of classism among faculty and subsequently among students, as he had articulated in 1942<sup>360</sup>, loomed large on the campuses of black colleges and universities that remained disconnected from their local black communities. Mays was especially weary of students adopting an attitude of superiority, as he believed that if students were to "assume a superior air toward the average and less-than-average citizen in the community...the vast majority of them will be taking that attitude toward their parents, sisters, brothers, uncles, aunts or near kin."<sup>361</sup> Truthfully, Mays argued, "Any student or teacher who feels superior to others or better than they because of college training is unfit to make the most outstanding contribution."<sup>362</sup> Thus, it was imperative that faculty remain in touch with the local community, Mays held, not only because he viewed it as a matter of duty, but also because he believed in the interconnectedness and interdependence of man. As he argued, "However learned the teacher may become, his destiny is tied up, and inevitably so, with the great mass of people who must do the ordinary work of the world and who need their souls lifted by contact and fellowship with the more privileged among us."<sup>363</sup>

Mays extended further his point on the importance of community in teacher growth, asserting his disbelief that "the teacher can grow as a whole person who lives in community isolation on the campus."<sup>364</sup> Mays took issue with the tendency of teachers to show concern only

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<sup>360</sup> See Benjamin E. Mays, "The Role of the Negro Liberal Arts College in Post-War Reconstruction, *The Journal of Negro Education* 11, no. 3 (July 1942): 402.

<sup>361</sup> Mays, "The Teacher's Growth as a Whole Person," manuscript page 10.

<sup>362</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 11.

<sup>363</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript 12.

<sup>364</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript 13-14.

for those matters pertaining to their areas of specialization, insisting that all matters of significance for the college should be of significance for the faculty. Moreover, individual instructors, he maintained, had much to offer and gain in becoming active members of their institutional communities. For Mays, however, teachers' "community" involvement did not begin and end at the gates of campus. He claimed that they could also benefit from opening their homes to students as a means of fostering a more intimate sense of community. Further, Mays believed, "The teacher in this way enhances his work in the classroom and such sharing and fellowship in the home give the teacher an opportunity to develop helpful friendships and to counsel students in ways not possible in the classroom."<sup>365</sup>

Lastly, Mays defined the teacher's growth through community participation in terms of his willingness to take "some responsibility for the behavior of students on the campus and in the community." Mays noted that while "A teacher quite often could assist a student with a helpful, friendly suggestion," he may refrain from doing so because "he feels that any deviation on the part of the student from good behavior is not concern of his but only that of the counselor, dean of men or dean of women."<sup>366</sup> The teacher who actively sought opportunities to gently and lovingly direct students in proper institutional and public decorum, then, Mays argued, was the one who was growing.

Beyond these, Mays posited three additional elements he believed were necessary to ensure teacher growth: maintaining professional integrity; remaining intellectually and professionally sharp; and preserving a sincere love for students and teaching. The charge to maintain "integrity on the job," Mays believed, was necessary to challenge the tendency among

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<sup>365</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 15-16.

<sup>366</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 17.

teachers to become complacent in their positions and comfortable in their instructional routines. He contended that, “the temptation to drowse to non-effectiveness as a teacher is great and the challenge to do creative work is equally great,” especially for those teachers who “begin their teaching careers on crutches dishing to their students year by year lectures which they took down from their professors when they were working for their doctorates.”<sup>367</sup> Such teachers, he held, “have little or no regards for the changes that have taken place in their discipline between the time they were students and the time of their teaching.”<sup>368</sup> In Mays’s eyes, not only were teachers of this sort lazy, but also lacking integrity.

Interpreting the college instructor’s behavior through the lens of common occupational practice, Mays found any teacher who recycled graduate school lecture notes for his own pedagogical purposes to be a cheater. He argued that, “Such a teacher not only cheats by receiving pay for work not well done but he may and probably does untold damage to the students who are seeking a good education.”<sup>369</sup> Such an act is even more egregious, Mays held, when one considers seriously the freedom of time management and trust inherent in the academic position. Because “nobody can know how many hours a teacher works over and above the 12 or 15 hours he actually teaches in the classroom,”<sup>370</sup> Mays contended, it is important that teachers be judicious in their use of time and unwavering in their commitment to reading and staying abreast “with what is happening in his area of specialization, writing and research.”<sup>371</sup> To

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<sup>367</sup> Ibid., 18.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

<sup>369</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> Ibid., 21.

do otherwise, he believed, betrayed a dishonest character and an implicit disregard for the privileges of the profession.

Mays also connected teachers' growth to their willingness to remain professionally alert, by which he meant their willingness to avoid "becoming too conservative and too traditional."<sup>372</sup> Mays saw this point as a clear extension of his call for greater integrity among teachers, highlighting again the connection between teacher growth and a teacher's willingness to stay with his field's knowledge curve and innovate accordingly. Mays criticized heavily teachers whose pedagogical methods simply mirrored those of former professors, emphasizing his belief that, "All too many teachers cease to grow because they do not have the imagination to try anything new. They still do and imitate what their teachers did."<sup>373</sup> The teacher aiming for growth, then, must put his mind to the task of pedagogical innovation and be "willing to blaze new paths."<sup>374</sup>

The task of keeping alert, Mays insisted, also required teachers to remain sensitive to the needs of students and stand poised to inspire them. For black students, especially, the weight of segregation was so heavy upon their shoulders, he believed, that they often lacked sufficient motivation to set their sights high. However, as social customs changed and previously closed opportunities began to open for the black college student, Mays insisted, the teacher must seize the moment to inspire. Doing so, he claimed "will make him a better teacher as he develops new enthusiasm for his job and creates new ways to inspire the student to strive for excellence as he prepares for tomorrow's world."<sup>375</sup> Beyond instructional innovation and student relationships,

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<sup>372</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>373</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>374</sup> Ibid.

<sup>375</sup> Ibid., 27.

Mays saw research as an indispensable element of remaining professionally alert. Indeed, Mays understood that teaching took priority over research in many institutions of higher education, as it did at Morehouse College, but he was not willing to concede that heavy teaching loads were just reason to excuse faculty from conducting research altogether. As he contended, “A heavy teaching load may curtail the magnitude of the research but it could hardly curtail the beginning of research on a modest scale.”<sup>376</sup> Thus, Mays insisted that, “A teacher should aim to do enough study or research to write a few worthwhile articles for reputable magazines.”<sup>377</sup> Again, managing to do so, he held, contributed “to the teacher’s growth as a whole person.”<sup>378</sup>

Lastly, Mays declared that the teacher who experienced the most exponential growth on the job was the one who loved his job and his students. The following quote captures Mays’s position best:

As important as the pay check is, the teacher who develops the whole person is the one who teaches beyond the clock and beyond the pay check. It is one who loves his job and literally gives himself to the students and empties his life into theirs not so much because he expects a check at the end of the month or because he expects a raise or promotion, but because he is on fire with his subject and loves the students. If a teacher is not worth far more than the college is able to pay him, he is not worth what he is being paid. No truly able teacher can be evaluated in terms of salary.<sup>379</sup>

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<sup>376</sup> Ibid., 28.

<sup>377</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>378</sup> Ibid.

<sup>379</sup> Ibid., 32.



Although Mays believed that teachers were grossly underpaid, he also understood that not all their work could be valued monetarily. He insisted that, “the teachers the students never forget are those who not only were great scholars but those who gave of themselves in extra time, true fellowship and genuine concern for the students’ development and welfare.”<sup>380</sup> One can surmise that, for Mays, the teachers most capable of growing were those most willing to give endlessly of themselves, those whose inward, undeniable call to teach drove them on.

### Mays and the Purpose of Education

As noted previously, Mays was in high demand as a commencement speaker during his professional career and thus delivered many speeches at colleges and universities across the country. In 1958, for example, Mays delivered a speech before Fisk University’s graduating class entitled, “Education, to What End?,” a thorough commentary on how students should conceive the aims and purposes of education. As a means of building his case, Mays highlighted first the economic context from which, he believed, his argument needed to emerge. Quite simply, he acknowledged that, “education is a costly item,”<sup>381</sup> both monetarily and personally. While

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<sup>380</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>381</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Education to What End,” (speech delivered at Fisk University’s commencement, Nashville, Tennessee, May 26, 1958 manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Speeches Box 2; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Although this study dates the speech, “Education to What End,” in 1958, Mays delivered a speech, similarly titled “Education for What?,” on August 18, 1947 at Fort Valley State University in Fort Valley, Georgia. Because the existing manuscript is handwritten and highly illegible, it is difficult to know the extent to which the speech from 1947 influenced the speech from 1958. The ease of legibility is also the reason the author has chosen to reference the speech from 1958 rather than that from 1947. Lastly, note that Mays continued to deliver variations of this speech throughout the remainder of his career, occasionally under the title “A Philosophy of Education”: March 10, 1972. “Education to What End?” Benedict College, Columbia, South Carolina; May

education required billions in tax dollars and philanthropic generosity, Mays understood that it also required the personal sacrifice of students and their families; thus in no sense could it be considered free. Because education carried with it a cost, Mays argued that it also carried with it responsibility, an obligation to one's personal development and an obligation to one's community and the world. Employing the same communicative strategy he often used to introduce his core argument, Mays, in this speech, asked rhetorically about education: "Why all this striving, toiling, struggling, sacrificing..."<sup>382</sup>

Mays's first argument for the purpose of education was that it "is good for its own sake even if it had no monetary value." To extend his point, Mays argued the following: "It is better to be literate than illiterate; wise than foolish; intelligent than unintelligent; it is better to know than to not know." There was tremendous value, Mays believed, in being able to engage the greatest thinkers, writers, and artists history had to offer, to be intellectually dexterous enough to distinguish truth from error and substantive arguments from empty rhetoric. Such skills, for Mays, were invaluable. Similar was Mays's second argument for education, which was its capacity "to keep selfish, mean, unscrupulous men off your neck." Deeply embedded in man, Mays contended, was a predisposition to exploit the weak, a bent towards manipulation that could only truly be thwarted by educated men capable of thinking for themselves.<sup>383</sup>

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5, 1974. "A Philosophy of Education;" September 19, 1976. "Education to What End: Why Are You Here?," May 9, 1981. "Educate to What End?" University of the District of Columbia, Washington, D.C., nd.

<sup>382</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>383</sup> Ibid., 3.

The third end of education, according to Mays, was “a divine restlessness...a divine dissatisfaction with ordinary mediocre performance and with all that is low, mean, and base.”<sup>384</sup>

An educated man, then, should not only be at unrest with what is common when what is uncommon is in reach, but he should also be capable of and dedicated to moral discernment. The educated man, Mays argued, had no business walking in darkness when fully cognizant of the light. This notion of “divine restlessness” mirrors that included in Mays’s philosophy of life for teachers, as presented in 1956, and remained a central tenet of his overall philosophy of education. Its inclusion in this speech reveals again the ideological continuity in Mays’s educational philosophizing, just as his call for a rejection of “all that is low, mean, and base,” a clear extension of his original point, reveals the dynamism in his thinking.<sup>385</sup>

Mays’s fourth point, which focused on the pursuit of the ideal, was another point of overlap with his philosophy of life for teachers. Just as he had in that speech, Mays, here, argued that people should always be striving for that which is desirable, but, in its perfection, is unattainable, that which is eternally evasive and deceptive.<sup>386</sup>

The fifth end of education, he asserted, was “to develop your mind and character so that the community and the world will be enriched by what you contribute to them.” Mays did not condemn the accumulation of wealth, but he rejected thinking that measured a man’s contribution to the world by his material possessions. He urged the students to remember that they would “be known by and judged by the quality of your mind and the nobility of your

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<sup>384</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>385</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>386</sup> Ibid., 5.

soul.”<sup>387</sup> History, he argued, had proven such to be true, citing the influence of Jesus, Buddha, Abraham Lincoln, and Aristotle as a proof positive.<sup>388</sup>

Finally, Mays argued that education was intended to “broaden your sympathies and increase your understanding so that you will accept your solidarity with all mankind.”<sup>389</sup> A college degree, Mays reminded the graduates, did not grant them license to reject those without degrees; rather, it required of them humility and an enduring commitment to contributing to the welfare of all men. God, Mays argued, endowed individuals with intellectual gifts and talents; thus, it was to the glory of God and the welfare of his creation, man, that all people should devote their gifts and talents. According to Mays, the world deserved the best that all its inhabitants had to offer. To do otherwise, he believed, was a blatant sin against God and a rejection of one’s responsibility to humanity.<sup>390</sup>

#### Education During the 1960s

At the onset of the 1960s, Mays continued to write on a number of educational issues, writing occasionally on less prominent educational issues that were of interest to him, but focusing most intently upon what he believed were the most pressing matters of his time: teacher training and school desegregation/integration. Mays’s interest in important, but less pressing educational matters is reflected in articles like the one he wrote in May of 1962 entitled, “What Can Be Done?” which examined poor testing outcomes among black college students and the ways in which curriculum could improve outcomes. Mays highlighted the fact that, “Whether it is the National Merit Scholarship Test, the Graduate Record Exam, the Medical Aptitude Test,

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<sup>387</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>388</sup> Ibid., 7.

<sup>389</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>390</sup> Ibid., 10-11.

the College Board Examination, Civil Service, or Foreign Service Entrance Examination, Negro students, on the whole, do not do well.”<sup>391</sup> The truth, Mays argued, was that there were numerable legitimate explanations for black students’ poor performance on standardized tests, but his primary interest was identifying viable solutions to the problem. His suggestions were of a curricular nature.

First, Mays contended, students looking to pass standardized exams needed to develop a mastery of mathematics. Particularly, he believed that, “A thorough mastery of high school mathematics would in all probability qualify a student to pass the mathematics section of the test.”<sup>392</sup> He expressed even more confidence that “a student who has mastered the first two years of college mathematics could pass with flying colors.” In the same way, Mays held that students looking to succeed on exams needed a strong command of English, as he contended that “Any examination that is given must include a section on English; perhaps grammar, syntax, the ability to write and express one’s ideas in a clear and intelligent manner.” Again Mays argued that the student most likely to succeed on this portion of an examination was the “student who has mastered four years of high school English and two years of college English.”<sup>393</sup> For examination questions that may cover material on “government and society,” Mays held that “one would need to know much about how our democratic institutions function, and how people

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<sup>391</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “What Can Be Done?,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 12, 1962 manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 25 Folder 9; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>392</sup> Ibid.

<sup>393</sup> Ibid.

behave,” knowledge he believed could be provided most effectively through “Courses in history, political science, sociology and psychology.”<sup>394</sup>

For good measure, Mays argued that students should be prohibited from graduating from college “without some skill in a language other than English—Spanish, French, or German,”<sup>395</sup> and insisted that they become familiar with principles of natural science and read more widely. Although much of what has been discussed about Mays thus far has focused the complexity of his thought on educational success, especially with regards to character development, this article is a hard-hitting reminder of how pragmatic he was. Indeed, he never ceased to advocate the full development of man’s moral nature and character, but he also never lost sight of the value of quantifiable skill sets. Just as he had argued for decades that intellect could not address matters of the heart, Mays was also aware that the heart was not equipped to address adequately matters of the mind. Mays’s concession of the point is captured best in the last lines of the article:

It may be true that a wide knowledge of mathematics will not of itself make a man a good diplomat, but if a knowledge of high school mathematics is a prerequisite for entering foreign service, our students should qualify. What happens in the classroom is mighty important. This problem must be solved in the classroom.<sup>396</sup>

### Mays and Teachers

The topic of teachers was always of significance for Mays during his career as an educator. As the previous section revealed, Mays had a heart for teachers and was invested in their development and success. During the 1960s, his work reflected the same interest in teachers and their development, but much of his commentary built on previously articulated concerns

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<sup>394</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>395</sup> Ibid.

<sup>396</sup> Ibid.

about teacher shortages in colleges and universities. It is difficult to know for sure, but the subject of teachers may have been the most professionally frustrating educational issue Mays wrote about during the 1950s and 1960s, given that a shortage of high quality teachers was not only a cause for concern for colleges and universities across the nation but also presented a tremendous challenge in faculty development for him as president of Morehouse College.

In his 1962 article, “Who Will Teach in the Colleges,” Mays made known again his disquiet about the seemingly limited supply of teachers. He declared that, “I am disturbed about the future of our colleges. Too few students are contemplating college teaching.”<sup>397</sup> Many of the brightest students graduating college, Mays believed, were pursuing careers in professional fields other than teaching, which inevitably was creating “a shortage of highly trained college teachers,” by which he specifically meant individuals with doctorates. Mays contended that, “An outstanding faculty should have at least 50 per cent of its teachers who have earned the doctorate,” and was thus troubled that there were “not enough Ph.D.’s available in the United States to staff all of the colleges in the United States with 50 per cent of the faculties having earned the doctorate.” Even those students who earned Ph.D.s, Mays found, were much like their non-Ph.D. counterparts who had graduated college in that they too were uninterested in pursuing teaching careers. Reiterating the depth of his concern, Mays asked, “What are we going to do if our best students are seeking careers elsewhere?”<sup>398</sup>

The answer, Mays believed, lay with other professional fields like medicine, law, and religion, arguing that colleges must adopt the same personnel-building tactics employed in those

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<sup>397</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Who Will Teach in the Colleges?,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 8, 1962 manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 25 Folder 9; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>398</sup> Ibid.

fields: “We must recruit college teachers.”<sup>399</sup> To recruit effectively, however, he believed that colleges and universities needed to promote the prestigious nature of a faculty appointment, with particular emphasis on the following facts:

College salaries are increasing year by year. The opportunity to be outstanding in the teaching profession is as good as it is anywhere else. In a good college there is academic freedom. More and more teachers will have time to do research if they have anything on the ball. They will be able to write articles and books. This certainly will give prestige.<sup>400</sup>

Mays also believed that schools needed to “encourage more women to take Ph.D. degrees and prepare for college teaching”<sup>401</sup> if the shortage of teachers were to be counteracted.

In a follow-up article published three months later, Mays again voiced concern about the shortage of faculty members with doctorates but explored in more depth his position on the necessity of increasing the number of faculty with doctorates. Mays contended that while “there may be enough persons with the M.A. degree to go around...you can never be as certain of the academic rigor of the M.A. as you can be of the Ph.D.” And although he conceded that there are variations “in the quality of any degree,” he maintained that “on the Ph.D. level the Ph.D. discipline has been rigorous even if the quality of the degree from X University is not as good as it is from Y University.” Thus, for Mays the imperative in developing and recruiting more teachers with doctorates was a matter of both professional survival and institutional quality control. Without a steady supply of instructors with Ph.D.s, Mays believed, colleges and

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<sup>399</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>400</sup> Ibid.

<sup>401</sup> Ibid.



universities could no longer look readily to the Ph.D. as a standard of competence or as a measure of faculty excellence.<sup>402</sup>

Further, he argued that a shortage of doctorates would likely lead to institutions permitting faculty members *with* doctorates to “teach as long as they are physically and mentally able to do so,”<sup>403</sup> admittedly an inadequate short-term solution for a long-term problem. Assuming the problem would persist, Mays also predicted that faculty members having only an “M.A. degree of high quality will have to be encouraged to teach and to continue advanced study during the summers,” and “that rating boards will have to reduce the number of Ph.D.’s required on a college faculty for accreditation.”<sup>404</sup> One can assume that Mays found none of these options preferable to increasing the number of Ph.D.s being prepared for college teaching, but his pondering alternative means of addressing the problem spoke to his refusal to forfeit the pragmatic for the ideal.

#### Paying for Performance

Because Mays, self admittedly, was “old fashion enough to believe that teaching is not only a profession but a calling,” he held high standards for teacher training and development, contending that teachers, above all, should be motivated, not by prestige or money, but by an inner compulsion to fulfill their professional duties.<sup>405</sup> Given his position, it is no surprise that Mays took issue with the notion that higher salaries could/would yield more desirable outcomes

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<sup>402</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Shortage of College Teachers,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 9, 1963, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 25 Folder 9; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>403</sup> Ibid.

<sup>404</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>405</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Teacher’s Growth,” manuscript page 33.

among teachers. As noted earlier, Mays believed that offering competitive salaries in education was a necessary strategy to recruit better teachers, but he was not casual in his position on teacher compensation.

In his 1965 article, “Increase in Salaries is Not Enough,” for example, Mays questioned the presumed correlation between pay and performance, as well as the long-term implications of what appeared to be an indiscriminate spike in salaries across industries and professions, particularly education.<sup>406</sup> The following quote captures Mays’s perplexity:

Salaries continue to go up in government, industry and in education. Even average teachers and poor ones are getting increases. Will increase in pay make a poor teacher a better teacher? Will it make an average teacher a better teacher? ... Will it buy devotion and loyalty? Will higher pay make a more dedicated teacher? Will he prepare better? Will he study more: Will the high salaried teacher work more diligently and patiently with the deprived student? Will the teacher feel obligated to begin to do some research or step up his research if he is doing research?<sup>407</sup>

Mays did not oppose paying teachers, or any worker, a generous wage, assuming their performance warranted it, but he did vehemently oppose handsomely rewarding those whose efforts were mediocre or sub-par. Still, even for those teachers who legitimately deserved a pay increase, he argued that such an increase “should be for the purpose of easing the financial strain so that worker...can devote more time to creative thinking, unearthing new ideas so that the

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<sup>406</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Increase in Salaries is Not Enough,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 6, 1965, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 26 Folder 19; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>407</sup> Ibid.,

quality of his work will be improved.”<sup>408</sup> Clearly, Mays viewed compensatory increases as a reward for dedicated teachers who had exhibited consistently their commitment to high quality instruction, not at all as a means of enticing mediocre teachers to perform at a higher level.

Clearly, Mays possessed high expectations of teachers but primarily because he held them in such high esteem and believed there was no profession more noble than that of teaching. In a 1966 speech entitled, “Qualities of a Great Teacher,” Mays articulated his admiration for teachers and reminded them of the privilege and responsibility embedded in the profession. Forthrightly Mays declared, “Let no teacher despise his or her profession. Never apologize for being a teacher. It is the noblest of professions,” As he reminded them, regardless of one’s professional aspirations or achievements, all people “must be taught by a teacher.” However, the privilege of shaping the lives of the individuals who would eventually lead our nation, Mays held, was not to be taken lightly and should be governed by a tremendous sense of responsibility. For Mays, the teacher had no greater responsibility than the mastery of his subject matter. He argued that, “it’s dishonest, it’s criminal...to try to teach what you do not know,” insisting that “the worst crime is to handicap youth by not knowing what you teach.” Surely, Mays conceded, “a student may get over the damage done by poor teaching,”<sup>409</sup> but his criminalization of the act bespeaks the earnestness with which he thought about the teaching profession.

### Teacher Training

As noted earlier, Mays, in all his idealism, was also pragmatic in his approach to educational problems, offering praxis-oriented solutions when theory was of little use. For

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<sup>408</sup> Ibid.

<sup>409</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Qualities of a Great Teacher,” (speech delivered at a “Teacher of the Year” banquet, March 5, 1966, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Speeches Box 5; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

instance, in 1967, Mays delivered a speech entitled, “Broadening Our Educational Perspective,” in which he called upon institutions of higher learning to “assume responsibility for providing leadership through expanded programs in teacher education.”<sup>410</sup> The first task with which he charged colleges and universities was the “improvement of student teaching.” Mays, affirmatively referencing a book by James Bryant Conant, noted that, “Dr. Conant stressed the great need for improving the critical experiences of student teachers.”<sup>411</sup> According to Mays, “A major weakness in the program of student teaching has been the failure of teacher education institutions to provide basic preparation for the classroom teachers, sometimes referred to as Cooperating Teachers who work with student teachers.” As a means of strengthening preparation, he held, “any Cooperating Teacher should have a minimum number of hours in the preparation and supervision of student teaching.” He also asserted that, “In such a course or courses emphasis should be placed upon the objectives and goals of student teaching to include such items as skills in directing learning and demonstrating professional competence.” Most importantly, he argued, the accelerated pace of school integration would require “that teacher education institutions arrange for student teachers to have practice in situations comparable to those they will face when they are employed in the public schools.”<sup>412</sup> It was only logical, Mays held, that students receive training that was contextually appropriate and practically applicable.

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<sup>410</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Broadening Our Educational Perspective,” (speech delivered at unknown location, April 13, 1967, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Speeches Box 5; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>411</sup> Although Mays does not specify to which of Bryant’s books he was referring, the description of the book as “dealing with teacher education,” as well as the time period, leads the author to believe that Mays was referring to *The Education of American Teachers* (1963).

<sup>412</sup> Mays, “Broadening,” manuscript page 1.

The second task Mays entrusted to colleges and universities was teacher training in early childhood education, contending that, “It is unmistakeably clear that the next move in public education in the south is public assumption of responsibility for the education of children below six years of age.” He attributed the rise of early education programs to four factors: “1. Private kindergartens and nursery schools; 2. Public kindergartens supported by local funds; 3. Kindergarten financed through the elementary and secondary act of Title I; 4. The magnificent program of Head Start under the Economic Opportunity Act.” These programs presented a special problem for educators, however, Mays claimed, because they were “expanding faster than our teacher education program to train teachers and supervisors in this new field.” He predicted that as Southern states more readily assumed financial responsibility for public kindergartens, funds for “teaching children below six years of age” would be allocated shortly thereafter. His charge to colleges and universities, then, was “to get on with the training of personnel in the field of early childhood education.” Universities, he declared, “must provide immediate training for demonstration teachers and supervisors in early childhood education,” while “the four year colleges must include preparation of early childhood teachers in their teacher education curriculum.”<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>419</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

### Desegregation and Integration

The final major point of focus for Mays in the 1960s was the desegregation/integration of American society, particularly its educational institutions, and the implications for black Americans. Although the terms desegregation and integration are oftentimes used interchangeably, Mays made it a point to differentiate between the two, as he believed the spirit and outcomes of the two were quite different. Simply put, Mays defined desegregation as nothing more than “the absence of segregation.” He argued that, “When the courts opened public schools and universities, golf courses and swimming pools, abolished segregation on dining cars...and on buses...they were not integrating the facilities. They were desegregating them.”<sup>421</sup>

Integration, on the other hand, he believed “is largely spiritual,” and can be defined specifically as the “unification and mutual adjustment of diverse [*sic*] groups or elements into a relatively coordinated and harmonious society and culture.” This is not to say, however, that Mays saw no virtue in the aims of desegregation. While he admitted that differences between integration and desegregation were far from insignificant, he believed desegregation to be “an indispensable step in the march toward integration,”<sup>422</sup> claiming that it “creates the atmosphere, plants the seed, tills and fertilizes the soil so that integration can sprout and grow in a normal fashion.”<sup>423</sup> Still, for Mays, integration, in all its utopianism, was not a legitimate aim for which the world should be aiming, as he viewed desegregation and integration not as “ends in themselves but mere means to ends.”<sup>424</sup>

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<sup>421</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>422</sup> Ibid.

<sup>423</sup> Ibid., 1-2.

<sup>424</sup> Ibid., 2.

The aim of desegregation and integration, Mays insisted, must be greater than a mere tolerance of black and white social interaction in parks, churches, and schools. In the same way, he asserted, it could neither force black assimilation into mainstream society nor ignore the necessity and historical significance of black achievement. Rather, the aim must “be to incorporate everything that is good and everything that is needed into the main stream of American life.”<sup>425</sup> For blacks, then, Mays argued, this meant that desegregation must be a means toward liberating ends. As he declared:

To state the case more positively, the end of desegregation, and eventually integration, should be to unshackle the minds of Negro youth, loose the chain from the Negro’s soul, free his heart from fear and intimidation so that he will be able to develop whatever gifts God has given him and share the fruits of his mind and soul with humanity around the globe in the arts and sciences, in the professions and sports, in business and industry, in medicine and law, in music and dance, and in painting and sculpture.<sup>426</sup>

The black’s claim to an unshackled mind and a liberated heart, Mays contended, was not unique to him, but rather was the birthright of all people on earth. Thus, he argued that, “no society has the right to smother ambition, to destroy incentive, to stifle growth, to curb motivation, and circumscribe the mind.”<sup>427</sup>

Mays also believed that the end of desegregation and integration should prove liberating for whites in the South, as he had argued for years that segregation inflicted psychological trauma upon whites as well as blacks. The following quote captures his thinking:

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<sup>425</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>426</sup> Ibid.

<sup>427</sup> Ibid., 3.

We seek to desegregate the south not only to free the Negro's mind but the mind of the white south as well. Prejudice and segregation have contributed their share toward keeping our southland below par both economically and educationally. The time we should have spent developing our economy and utilizing the manpower of every Southerner, we have used much of it trying to keep one group down. Desegregation is not only good for the Negro but for the nation.<sup>428</sup>

What the South had the potential "to contribute to the nation in mind, heart and spirit," Mays contended, was hidden and would only be revealed once it was "freed of its prejudice and fears."<sup>430</sup>

The perceived purity of American democracy and sincerity of the Christian Gospel, Mays argued, were also wrapped up in the nation's desegregation efforts. It was highly hypocritical, he contended, for the United States to depict itself as a nation of freedom yet actively seek ways to restrict the minds and movements of particular groups because of their racial identities. In the same way, he found it hypocritical for the United States "to expound brotherhood and foster caste, to preach Christian fellowship and deny it to certain racial groups because they are Africans or Negroes."<sup>431</sup> Thus the imperative in desegregating and integrating the United States, for Mays, was not only to push its citizens to live out the principals and creeds to which many simply gave lip service, but also to exhibit before the world the tenets of a sound Democracy and a righteous Christianity.<sup>432</sup>

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<sup>428</sup> Ibid.

<sup>430</sup> Ibid.

<sup>431</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>432</sup> Ibid.



In all of Mays's optimism regarding America's potential in an integrated society, he was also keenly aware of the immediate challenges integration would pose for black Americans. For example, in an integrated society, where men would be judged according to merit and not race, the historical contexts from which ethnic and racial groups had emerged would lose relevance. As Mays asserted, in such a society, "No allowance will be made for our [Black people] shortcomings because for 246 years our ancestors were slaves and for another 100 years we were enslaved again through segregation by law and by custom." Thus while Mays held that with integration, one could expect a tremendous shift in the way race shaped society, he also believed that the United States' legacy of racism and oppression would continue to haunt blacks for generations. Specifically, Mays was arguing that despite the socially repressive and often poverty-stricken circumstances from which most blacks emerged, integration now required them "to compete in the open market with those who have been more favorably circumstanced...for several centuries."<sup>433</sup> Surely, Mays contended, blacks could easily blame history or their circumstances for their plight, but he insisted that doing so would yield no progress and would ultimately be of no avail. For Mays, there was one way to advance against seemingly insurmountable odds: a commitment to hard work.

According to Mays, there was no substitute for hard work, especially when one found himself in a less than favorable position. As he claimed, "he who starts behind in the great race of life must forever remain behind or run faster than the man in front."<sup>434</sup> Applied to an educational context, this meant that students must commit to investing more time into mastering their areas of study and becoming proficient intellectually. As Mays put it:

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<sup>433</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>434</sup> Ibid., 5.

Whether we like or not, we must read more and socialize less, study more and frolic less, do more research and play less, write books and articles and become recognized in our respective fields. It is better by far to be known by the articles we write than by the bridge we play; by the books we publish than by the house we live in. It is better to have our students rave about our great teaching than about our beautiful cars. It is better to have our colleagues envious of our scholarship and research than of our houses and land.<sup>435</sup>

In short, Mays was calling for blacks to invest in and develop themselves to the extent that their life circumstances and personal histories became moot points, to accept the new responsibilities that accompanied new opportunities. Successfully competing in an integrated society would require such personal devotion to excellence, Mays believed, because skill and character would take precedent over skin color and personal histories. Thus, black people must take it upon themselves to build the confidence and skills necessary to make their voices heard and respected in all arenas of public life.

#### Mays and the Black Studies Movement

In June of 1967, Mays retired as president of Morehouse College and was named Professor Emeritus of the college. According to Rovaris, Mays's retirement came nearly two years after he originally intended to resign from the presidency when he "was requested by the Board of Trustees to stay another year so that he could serve during the College's centennial

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<sup>435</sup> Ibid., 6.

anniversary year.” Shortly after retiring from Morehouse, Mays accepted a visiting professorship at Michigan State University for the 1968-1969 academic year.<sup>436</sup>

Although Mays had devoted nearly three decades of his life to higher education, promoting the development of “an academic community that was supra culture, supra race, supra religion, and supra,” he learned quickly during his first year of retirement the extent to which his aims as an administrator had been disconnected from student concerns. As he recalled, “Since I retired from Morehouse College I have discovered a great deal in talking with many angry black students, on both white and black college campuses, hearing things I never heard or knew during my twenty-seven years in the president’s chair.” Not only did some black students find Mays’s views hopelessly utopian, but they also “saw no ground for hoping to solve black-white relations through a desegregated-integrated society. They believed that white racism was here to stay.”<sup>437</sup> These students’ frustration and budding nihilism was symptomatic of a growing sentiment among black citizens across the nation, one rooted in a Black Nationalist ethos that would eventually reshape the course of American history and American higher education.

During the mid-1960s, the Black Power Movement, which had ties to the Student Movement, the Free Speech Movement, and the Anti-War Movement, swept across black communities and college campuses across the country and “ushered in a new dialog about relations of power in society and the university, the pervasive character of racism, and the need for struggle to overturn the established order and create a more just society.” The phrase, “Black Power,” had become the movement’s rallying cry when made popular in 1966 by Stokely

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<sup>436</sup> Dereck J. Rovaris, “Mays’s Leadership at Morehouse College,” in *Walking Integrity: Benjamin Elijah Mays, Mentor to Martin Luther King Jr.* ed. Lawrence Carter, Sr. (Macon: Mercer University Press, 1998), 375.

<sup>437</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 310-311.

Carmichael, the leader of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, and struck a chord with many frustrated young black college students across the country who had grown tired of simply waiting for a change in U.S. race relations. As Carmichael and Hamilton articulated in their seminal text, *Black Power*, the call for black power was a call “to reclaim our history and our identity from what must be called cultural terrorism, from depredation of self-justifying white guilt.”<sup>438</sup> But it was also a call for “a relevant education” and “a focus on cultural grounding, studying and recovering African culture and extracting from it models of excellence and possibility.”<sup>439</sup>

As the Black Power Movement grew in popularity among college and university students who took seriously the charge “to engage in struggle in the classrooms, on campus in general and in society” and were adamant about becoming self-determined, it gave birth to the Black Studies Movement. The struggle for a black studies curriculum began in 1966 at San Francisco State University when the Black Student Union began pressuring the school’s administration to create “a legitimate Black Studies Department funded by the college and controlled by Black people.” Despite strong initial resistance, the students, by 1968, successfully secured a black studies program and department, the first in the country. Following San Francisco State University’s successful creation of a black studies department, the demand for black studies increased dramatically among black students at other colleges and university campuses.<sup>440</sup>

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<sup>438</sup> Maulana Karenga, *Introduction to Black Studies* (Los Angeles: The University of Sankore Press, 2002), 12; Stokely Carmichael and Charles V. Houston, *Black Power: The Politics of Liberation in America* (New York: Random House, 1967), 34-35.

<sup>439</sup> Karenga, *Introduction*, 12.

<sup>440</sup> *Ibid.*, 15-19.

However, as the movement gained more momentum, Mays noted, some of its followers began promoting an agenda that was much more anti-white than it was pro-black.<sup>441</sup> Based on its original aims of “self-determination, cultural grounding, relevant education, cultural pluralism, and student activist,” the Black Studies Movement was not in conflict with Mays’s views on education and/or black uplift; in fact, they echoed much of what he believed regarding education. Yet, when black students began moving beyond advocating for a curriculum that celebrated black contributions to society and began lobbying for the jettisoning of non-black curricula and the dismissal of all white faculty members at HBCUs, he challenged their assertions.

For instance, in a 1968 article entitled, “I Don’t Understand It,” Mays took exception to the fact that “some Negro students in the interest of Black Consciousness are raising questions about white teachers in Negro Colleges.”<sup>442</sup> He believed that such questions were erroneous and betrayed the students’ ignorance of history, particularly that of white teachers’ centrality and contributions to HBCUs, all while overlooking the limited supply of black Ph.D.s available for hire. Moreover, he found such questions highly problematic because of their segregationist undertones. If students at black colleges and universities were pushing in any way for a racially monolithic academic community, Mays contended, they were, in essence, promoting racial segregation, an unconscionable act for Mays. He was unequivocal in his position on segregation, stating that, “I hope the time will never come when Negroes go back to a completely segregated

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<sup>441</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 311.

<sup>442</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “I Do Not Understand It,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 27, 1968, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 2 Box 44; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

society, whether it is forced or voluntary...It is against what we have been fighting for for a long time.”<sup>443</sup>

Even as an uncompromising, self-proclaimed race man, Mays saw no virtue in self-segregation, asserting that, “It will be most unfortunate if the emphasis on blackness goes so far as to blind Negroes to the realities of life.”<sup>444</sup> He believed that blacks’ and whites’ destinies were far too intertwined for either to walk in the fullness of its destiny without the aid of the other. This acknowledgement of interconnectedness, Mays argued, did not preclude the possibility of preserving and celebrating black culture. As he insisted, “We can appreciate being Negroes without inviting segregation all over again.”<sup>445</sup> The two realities were not mutually exclusive in his eyes.

As the movement among students grew stronger at both black and white colleges and universities across the country, so did Mays’s critique of it. In May of 1968, Mays had become overwhelmed by the ubiquitous use and ambiguity of concepts like “Black university” and “Black curriculum,” pushing those who employed the terms to define them more clearly. As there appeared to be no commonly agreed upon working definition for either idea, Mays could only speculate about their meanings.

Assuming on one hand that black students, in calling for a “Black university,” were indeed demanding an institution operated and financially supported solely by black people, Mays questioned the feasibility of such an institution. He asked curiously, “are there enough competent Negroes available to make all institutions now serving Negroes black institutions?” For Mays, the question wasn’t one of sheer numbers, as there were large numbers of black Ph.D.s employed

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<sup>443</sup> Ibid.

<sup>444</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>445</sup> Ibid.

outside of the academy. Rather, it was one of how black institutions would lure these individuals away from their careers and into college teaching. Following the same line of thinking, Mays asked: “If a black university means support by black people, are black people economically secure enough to furnish the millions needed to operate the predominately Negro institutions?”<sup>446</sup> Again, Mays offered no answer to his inquiry, as the question was intended to highlight the type and magnitude of challenges he believed would follow a “Black” university in this mold.

On the other hand, Mays entertained the possibility that what many people meant by black university entailed more than simply an institution controlled and financed by black people. He believed that some advocates’ vision of a black university depended heavily upon a curriculum devoted to black issues, which, for Mays, was insufficient reason to label an institution “Black.” As he insisted, “If we mean by a black university that it is one devoted to the teaching of Afro-Negro American culture and history, then it would hardly qualify to be called a black university.”<sup>447</sup> Mays took up the same position regarding the notion of a “black” curriculum. He asked:

Do we mean a curriculum where nothing is taught except courses dealing wholly with black people? Or do we mean a curriculum that takes into account the culture and history of black people, what African and American Negroes here contribute to civilization in science, art, literature, sports, and courses designed to make Negroes proud of their past and proud to be what they are?<sup>448</sup>

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<sup>446</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Clarity Please,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 25, 1968, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 2 Box 44; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>447</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 2.

<sup>448</sup> *Ibid.*

In response to the possibility that a black curriculum could be that dedicated solely to instruction in matters dealing with black people, Mays remained silent. However, in response to the possibility of a black curriculum being that which takes “into account the culture and history of black people,”<sup>449</sup> Mays expressed favor, though he found “black curriculum,” like “black university,” to be a misnomer. His position was that there were too many academic disciplines that “do not lend themselves so readily to a particular people.”<sup>450</sup>

Thus, Mays insisted that, “when we talk about a black university or a black curriculum, we ought to know precisely what we are talking about,” and when we talk about “a university oriented toward the culture and accomplishment of black people and one designed to help solve the economic plight of Negroes, let us search for the right name.”<sup>451</sup> As a man who aimed to affect change through the written word and speech, Mays understood well the nuance and power of language and the significance of clarity in meaning and was adamant that people be discriminate in their choice of words.

In the latter part of 1968, Mays began to articulate in more depth his position on the aims and associated dangers of integration and self-segregation, the latter being a threat posed by some supporters of the Black Student Movement. In a speech entitled, “Let Us Not Integrate or Segregate Ourselves Out of Existence,” he argued specifically for a culturally balanced approach to desegregation and integration. As a man who had drawn great strength and inspiration from the achievements of black people throughout history, Mays was deeply invested in preserving black history and realizing black achievement, admitting that he had “great pride in...every

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<sup>449</sup> Ibid.

<sup>450</sup> Ibid.

<sup>451</sup> Ibid.



worthwhile institution that Negroes run and control.”<sup>452</sup> On the other hand, Mays knew firsthand the crushing weight of racial segregation and that black achievement in a segregated society was severely limited and therefore was also dedicated to abolishing the American caste system. The challenge, Mays believed, was to pursue racial integration cautiously. As such, he found himself in a difficult position ideologically. While he refused “to be swept off my feet by the glamor [*sic*] of a desegregated society,” he also did “not want Negroes to integrate nor segregate themselves out of existence.”<sup>453</sup> He believed that both were possible and dangerous.

The notion of blacks integrating themselves out of existence was not nominal for Mays. Since the 1954 *Brown* decision, he argued, questions regarding the direction of integration revealed a unilateral thinking about ways to establish an “equal” society, one that heavily favored white culture and white institutions and implicitly devalued black culture and black institutions. Specifically, questions about the relevance of black schools and businesses in an integrated society, Mays contended, illuminated two general dispositions toward the meaning of integration:

Integration to some people means that you move from black to white and never from white to black. It means in the second place that in the thinking of these people nothing that Negroes have built is good enough to survive in an integrated society.<sup>454</sup>

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<sup>452</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Let Us Not Integrate or Segregate Ourselves Out of Existence,” (address delivered at the presidential inauguration of Benjamin F. Patton, Benedict College, Columbia, South Carolina, November 2, 1968, manuscript page 2). Mays Papers Speeches Box 5; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>453</sup> Ibid.

<sup>454</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 3.

Mays found this to be especially true in education. He lamented the fact that, “To many Negroes and thousands of white people, when we speak of integrating the high schools, we mean sending Negroes to white high schools, and never whites to Negro high schools,”<sup>455</sup> even when a black school outperforms its white counterpart. Mays found the same to be true of bussing, and highlighted that, “The emphasis on getting Negroes into white public schools is so great that little or no pressure is placed on the Board of Education to make the Negro schools as good as the white schools so that bussing would become a two-way street.”<sup>456</sup> Surely, if integration were to persist with the notion that white institutions were the best institutions, Mays argued, blacks could very well integrate themselves out of existence.

However, Mays knew that blacks, if they were unable to look beyond their own racial identity, were equally capable of segregating themselves out of existence. In this case, Mays’s concern about blacks engaging in exclusionary practices to their own demise coincided with the aforementioned trend of pro-black, student activism during the mid-1960s. As the push for Black Studies engulfed most major colleges and universities during the final years of the 1960s, Mays found it useful for explaining in detail how blacks could eventually segregate themselves out of existence. The call among many black students attending white institutions to expand black student enrollment and increase the number of black faculty members provided him with even more useful illustrations:

I know that on the campuses of three great universities of the north Negro students mean well when they insist that their universities go out to get more Negro scholars, and offer to recruit the best and average Negro high school

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<sup>455</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>456</sup> Ibid.

graduates, without regard to what their efforts may do to weaken the Negro colleges, but this doesn't sound like being genuinely interested in blackness and in perpetuating or building black colleges and universities.<sup>457</sup>

As Mays had argued previously,<sup>458</sup> if black students at white schools pressured their administrations to recruit the brightest black students and the best black faculty in the country, HBCUs would inevitably suffer, as their limited resources would prove inadequate to retain top black scholars who were being courted by much larger and wealthier institutions.

Thus for Mays, the only efficient approach to desegregation and integration was one of balance, one that advanced healthy racial interaction while ensuring the preservation of those cultural institutions and achievements that provided power and relevance to different racial groups. He believed that whites should not be aiming to whitewash black culture any more than blacks should be promoting an isolationist, black nationalist agenda if integration were to become a national goal. Instead, every citizen of the United States must be committed to “continue the fight for a completely desegregated society which will eventually develop into an integrated society where institutions previously all-lily-white will become salt-and-pepper, and previously all-Negro institutions will be black, tan, and white.”<sup>459</sup> For Mays, the interconnected fate of man required such an approach, as he believed no race could reach its full potential if it depended upon the rejection or exploitation of another.

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<sup>457</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>458</sup> See the following articles: Mays, “Black Students in White Universities,” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 13, 1968; Mays, “How Solid?” *The Pittsburgh Courier*, July 27, 1968.

<sup>459</sup> Ibid., 8.

### Summary

During the period between 1949 and 1968, Mays educational thought became much more topic-oriented than it had been in previous years. Although the broadening of his educational interests was likely due to an expansion in the number of educational issues in the United States during the 1950s and '60s, that Mays was capable of writing thoroughly and competently on such a multitude of educational issues speaks volumes about how well versed he was in the field of education. Further, as the chapter's document analysis shows, Mays, during this period, managed to discuss a range of educational topics without abandoning his core principles of democracy, Christianity, and social responsibility. For instance, in opposing segregation in educational institutions, Mays could always apply the principles of Christianity, democracy, and social responsibility to support his claims. Not only was racial segregation in schools, or anywhere else for that matter, antithetical to Christian belief, but also it was anti-democratic and socially irresponsible, he believed.

Again, this is significant because it reveals that Mays, despite being fluid and flexible in his educational interests, saw no need to abandon his core beliefs. For him, democracy, Christianity, and social responsibility were principles with enduring virtue and universal application. Collectively, they operated as the lens through which he could view the world and interpret educational matters.

## Chapter 5

### Atlanta Desegregation and the School Board

This chapter explores Mays's views on the educational challenges facing the city of Atlanta between the 1940s and 1970s, with particular focus on his tenure as a member and president of the Atlanta School Board between 1969 and 1981. It begins with a discussion of the history of the desegregation of the Atlanta Public School System and Mays's response to it, as expressed through articles published between the late 1940s and late 1960s. These sections are followed by a detailed analysis of the desegregation of Atlanta's public schools and an analysis of Mays's educational thought interpreted through the lens of desegregation. This chapter, along with chapter 6, also explores the circumstances that led to a shift in Mays's thinking regarding the necessity of desegregation/integration in public schools.

#### Mays and the History of the Desegregation of Atlanta's Public Schools

Although Mays throughout his career recognized and treated the issue of segregation as one of national import, he knew firsthand that its implications were often greatest for people living in the Southern region of the United States. Further, as a native son of the South, he was very sensitive to the ways in which segregation affected people of color and never hesitated to speak out about it, especially with regards to education. Thus, during his tenure as president of Morehouse College, Mays took particular interest in the ongoing civic struggle in Atlanta between black citizens and the Atlanta School Board over the issue of school segregation. Having secured an outlet for his writing with *The Pittsburgh Courier*, Mays took the opportunity

to publish several articles on desegregation efforts in the city, while voicing his concerns locally via speeches before fellow citizens and civic organizations.

In 1949, for example, Mays published an article that highlighted Atlanta's public school funding disparities and black Atlantans petitioning and eventually filing suit against the city's board of education "to equalize educational opportunities for Negro and white pupils." Mays believed that "it would be so much better if equal opportunities would come without court action," but he acknowledged that he would "be naïve to believe that the School Boards of the South are voluntarily going to increase negro appropriations so far beyond that for whites that at the end of a given period there would be equal educational opportunities for Negroes."<sup>460</sup> Only with federal involvement, Mays believed, would black schools see funding increases and local educational disparities be rectified. Yet, Mays was not wholly convinced that equal educational opportunities for blacks could be secured simply by equalizing expenditures. Segregation, by its very nature, he contended, perpetuated inequality. It was through court action, he argued, that segregation would most likely be abolished and all students would gain access to equal educational opportunities.<sup>461</sup>

Mays highlighted again the inherent inequities of segregated schools in 1950, delivering a speech before members of Atlanta's Hungry Club Forum, a racially integrated forum in which Atlanta's black and white leaders gathered to discuss civic matters. Commenting on a recently filed lawsuit by 200 black Atlantans against the city's school board on the grounds that the board perpetuated school inequalities, Mays noted that "the motive behind the Atlanta suit represents

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<sup>460</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Unfortunate But Necessary," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, May 14, 1949, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 8; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>461</sup> Ibid.

the growing conviction, rightly or wrongly, among Negroes everywhere that there can be no equality under segregation—the growing belief that the ‘separate but equal’ theory is a myth.” Mays rejected the claims of critics who attacked the lawsuit as a scheme to ensure black students would simply be among white students, arguing instead that the purpose was to ensure that black students would have access to the same quality of education afforded their white peers.<sup>462</sup> In the absence of voluntary policy changes created by sound legislative challenges, Mays held, it was unlikely that Atlanta’s public schools would achieve intra-district equality.

Throughout the 1950s, Mays continued to monitor closely the struggle over school segregation, regularly writing newspaper columns and scholarly articles on the implications of national affairs like the Supreme Court’s landmark rulings in *Brown v. Board* in 1954, followed by *Brown II* in 1955, in addition to local affairs like the filing of a second desegregation lawsuit against the Atlanta School Board in 1958. Indeed, the *Brown* decisions ruled that legally mandated segregation in schools was unconstitutional and called for the desegregation of public schools, but they failed to include any specific instructions on how quickly and in what manner states were to proceed in desegregating their schools. Many Southern states, Mays predicted in his writings, would exploit the ambiguity of the ruling, trying to delay desegregation indefinitely, circumstances under which, he insisted, “the initiative to desegregate will have to be taken by Negroes.”<sup>463</sup>

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<sup>462</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Negro Patrons of the Public Schools,” (speech delivered before the Hungry Club Forum, October 4, 1950). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 9; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>463</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “A Supreme Court Decision: How Decisive?” *Chicago Review* 9, no. 3 (1955): 25.

Mays proved prophetic in his claim that many Southern states would push back against the Supreme Court's ruling. In 1958, three years after the *Brown II* ruling, the Atlanta Public School system had done so little to desegregate its schools that a group of black parents, represented by the NAACP, filed another lawsuit against the city's school board, this time demanding that black children be admitted to desegregated schools. The suit was known as *Calhoun v. Latimer*. Mays, in an article published shortly after the case was filed, openly supported the lawsuit and took to task those critics, black and white, who questioned the suit's political timeliness. For Mays, the measure of an issue's timeliness and/or appropriateness simply came down to the pursuit of justice. As he maintained, "if the cause is just and if it is right to change a wrong, and if we go about it in the right spirit and in the frame work of democracy and Christianity, the time is always ripe to take the next step in an effort to correct a great wrong."<sup>464</sup>

In June of 1959, when the district court required the Atlanta School Board to submit a plan for desegregation, Mays, again, joined the conversation with an article entitled, "Will The Atlanta Plan Stand?" In the article, Mays challenged not only the efficacy of the plan but also its sincerity. As presented to District Judge Frank Hooper, the plan called for the gradual elimination of desegregated schools over a period of twelve years and required that potential transfer students meet seemingly arbitrary academic and psychological criteria. Mays concluded,

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<sup>464</sup> Alton Hornsby, Jr., "Black Public Education in Atlanta, Georgia, 1954-1973: From Segregation to Segregation," *The Journal of Negro History* 76, no. 1 (Winter-Autumn, 1991): 21. Benjamin E. Mays, "The Atlanta Suit," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 8, 1958, manuscript page 2). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 19; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.



that the plan was “not a good one and that it is designed to make it impossible for any Negro Child to comply with the requirements which are set down for admission to a white school.”<sup>465</sup>

In the end, Judge Hooper did approve the plan, and the Atlanta Public School system began desegregating in August of 1961. However, throughout the 1960s, the desegregation plan would face a series of challenges, some of them judicial, others social. In response to a 1961 case involving a white student seeking to employ the city’s transfer option as a means of avoiding attending a school with incoming blacks, Judge Hooper “ruled against racially motivated transfers within the public school system.” His motivation was to prevent the mass exodus of white students from and resegregation of schools that had enrolled a small number of black students. Essentially disarming whites looking to turn the transfer option on its head, Judge Hooper’s decision meant that neighborhood schools were the only option available to students in Atlanta’s public schools. For whites living in transitional neighborhoods, this ruling meant that their children would likely attend schools with blacks, an unpalatable prospect for many white parents. In 1964, the desegregation plan was amended, but the process of desegregating Atlanta public schools was still fraught with challenges. Throughout these years, Mays maintained his position as a civic commentator, writing newspaper columns and delivering speeches.<sup>466</sup>

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<sup>465</sup> Matthew Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), 71; Benjamin E. Mays, “Will The Atlanta Plan Stand?” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 19, 1959, manuscript page). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 22; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>466</sup> Kevin Kruse, *White Flight: Atlanta and the Making of Modern Conservatism* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 164; Gary Orfield and Carole Ashkinaze, *The Closing Door: Conservative Policy and Black Opportunity* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 106.

Of course, in light of the residential changes that had been happening across Atlanta since the late 1940s, many whites had already begun to flee the city for the suburbs. The racially insular neighborhoods of northern Atlanta had not witnessed the magnitude of change in its residential landscape that had reshaped the demographics of the western and southern sections of the city. In the midst of school desegregation efforts, the rate at which whites fled the city, and consequently their schools, increased dramatically. In 1964, “the Atlanta Board of Education responded to pressure from federal courts and greatly accelerated its plans for integration,” deciding that “no longer would white facilities remain unused, while black schools became dangerously overcrowded.” Touted as a neighborhood-based, freedom of choice plan, the new policy allowed the school board to assign “all entering high school students to the school of their choice,” and ensured that “students already enrolled could transfer to any high school they wished if space was available and the school was geographically near the student’s residence.” The decision meant that a larger number of black students would have granted their transfer requests, thereby increasing black enrollments at white schools. Increased transfers among high school students further enraged many whites who, in “losing” their neighborhoods, were also “losing” their elementary and middle schools to swelling black enrollments. If history was any indicator of how whites would respond to school desegregation, it was no surprise that many abandoned public schools in favor of private schools, a viable educational alternative they believed served as both an academic and social safe haven for their children.<sup>467</sup>

Although there were enough white students in the city to move forward with desegregation of Atlanta’s school population, the lethargic pace at which the school board moved

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<sup>467</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 165-167; Charles Vert Willie, *School Desegregation Plans That Work* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 1984), 187.

to fully integrate schools, coupled with the accelerated pace of white flight began to complicate the school board's efforts to achieve racially balanced schools. For instance, according to Kruse, "as late as the 1969-1970 school year, only 20,000 students in Atlanta's system of over 100,000 pupils attended desegregated schools." This imbalance had been perpetuated by the district's racially skewed "freedom of choice" plan, and although it would eventually be abolished, by the early 1970s, it had helped perpetuate the decline of the white student population to fifty percent of what it had been at its peak. Thus by 1971, there were three times as many black students as white students in Atlanta's public schools. Without substantial numbers of white students, the Atlanta school board's task of desegregating its schools became more complicated than it had ever been.<sup>468</sup>

#### Joining the School Board

Such were the challenges Mays faced when, in October of 1969, he was elected to the school board.<sup>469</sup> Only two years removed from his presidency at Morehouse College, Mays had been coaxed by friends and influential Atlantans to run for the board position, a decision that led not only to his election to the board but also to his election as school board president, making him the third black member of the board and the first black to hold its highest office. Although this was Mays's first time serving on the Atlanta school board, he was no stranger to its challenges. For nearly two decades Mays had followed and written about the board's involvement in school desegregation, publishing one of the last of these articles only a few weeks prior to his election. Published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, the column spoke to the two

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<sup>468</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 238.

<sup>469</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "The Atlanta Election," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 15, 1969, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 2 Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

most pressing issues the board faced: white flight and resegregation. According to Mays, “the way white people run when Negroes move into their area and when Negroes enter a previously all white school” presented a tremendous challenge to the board’s school desegregation efforts. However, he was prepared to reach his ultimate goal: “to bring unity to the Board and to take the lead in moving the school system toward becoming a completely unitary one”.<sup>470</sup>

Following Mays’s election, the board engaged again the issues of student integration and teacher integration, both of which became priorities following a 1970 court order. Immediately, the board began working to devise desegregation plans that could address racial imbalances among students and school personnel.<sup>471</sup> Per the district court’s order, the board was “required to integrate the faculties of the public schools of the city of Atlanta on a ratio of substantially 57 percent black teachers and 43 percent white teachers in each school.”<sup>472</sup> Regarding student integration, the board was required to implement geographical zoning and school pairings that spur racial diversity in the schools. The board also moved to comply with the 1968 *Green v. New Kent County* ruling that dismissed the legitimacy of “freedom of choice” plans. Having abandoned its choice plans, the board followed the court’s orders, instituting a more just transfer policy that allowed “majority-to-minority student transfers” for the purposes of achieving more

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<sup>470</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Pattern is the Same,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, October 25, 1969, manuscript page 2). Mays Papers Installation 2 Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Melvin Ecke, *From Ivy Street to Kennedy Center: Centennial History of the Atlanta Public School System* (Atlanta: Atlanta Board of Education, 1972), 418.

<sup>471</sup> *The Washington Post, Times Herald*, “Negro Will Direct,” January 3, 1970. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1993).

<sup>472</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, “Board of Education President Issues Statement on Schools,” February 3, 1970. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

racial balance.<sup>473</sup> The district also redrew its zoning boundaries to increase desegregation, but the changes influenced only 16 percent of the student population.<sup>474</sup> Still, with a relatively small number of white students, Atlanta's schools struggled to achieve some semblance of true racial integration. The school board worked diligently to move the city toward truly integrating its schools, a daunting task in the midst of dramatic population shifts. Devising a way to racially balance schools became the primary policy concern of the school board and would remain so for the duration of Mays's tenure as president.

The response to the inefficiency of new school integration efforts among black and white liberals in the city took the form of two integration proposals, one of which sought to utilize a bilateral busing plan, the other of which proposed the consolidation of schools in the city of Atlanta with those in the surrounding suburbs.<sup>475</sup> Following the 1971 Supreme Court ruling in *Swann v. Charlotte-Mecklenburg County Board of Education*, which allowed both busing and city-county school consolidation, such proposals were at the core of a ideological trend among southern moderates fighting to secure integrated schools in cities witnessing rapid resegregation. Although Charlotte was successful in its use of busing and consolidation, the Atlanta School Board rejected both plans. Busing as an integration strategy proved to be an especially contentious issue. As acting board president, Mays expressed concern that two-way busing could further agitate white flight to the extent that there would be no whites left in the city to participate in the busing plan.<sup>476</sup>

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<sup>473</sup> Willie, *School Desegregation*, 190; Kruse, *White Flight*, 239.

<sup>474</sup> Willie, *School Desegregation*, 190.

<sup>475</sup> Lassiter, *The Silent Majority*, 107.

<sup>476</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 239; Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 157-158.

That the Atlanta Public School System, along with others across the country, in the early 1970s, were still trying to figure out *how* to desegregate their schools was, for Mays, a testament to the enduring influence of racism and prejudice in the United States. He understood that the struggle to desegregate the schools in America was part and parcel of a larger struggle against segregation at large. For example, Mays argued that the struggle to desegregate schools in certain communities was tied directly to residential demographics, noting that, “The housing pattern in this country is largely a pattern of segregation.”<sup>477</sup> Even a self-proclaimed progressive city like Atlanta, he claimed, was a “a highly-segregated city, residentially,”<sup>478</sup> a reality he attributed to the fact that, “White people still believe the old myth—that if they live in the neighborhood with Blacks, the neighborhood will run down, the community will deteriorate and property value will decline.”<sup>479</sup> Despite evidence to the contrary, Mays argued, most whites were unlikely to reject such a myth and live voluntarily among blacks.

Thus he concluded that the process of desegregating public schools would require an alternative approach, such as student busing or housing reform. Because he was skeptical that whites would voluntarily live among blacks, Mays promoted housing reform that would provide “open housing” and “disperse low-income housing throughout the central city and the suburbs,”<sup>480</sup> a strategy he believed would create racially blended communities. Without changes in housing patterns, however, Mays believed busing to be a viable option to promote

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<sup>477</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Why Desegregation Moves So Slow,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 25, 1972, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 2 Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>478</sup> Ibid.

<sup>479</sup> Ibid.

<sup>480</sup> Ibid.

desegregation, as he held that “as long as the housing pattern is as it is desegregation will not exist without busing.”<sup>481</sup> In other words, if there were no way to ensure that whites and blacks began living in close enough proximity to create racially integrated neighborhood schools, busing, for Mays, was an alternative strategy to do so.

Beyond the challenge of residential proximity, Mays contended that the desegregation process also encountered obstacles in those white parents who hesitated to send their children to school with black children because they believed “the achievement level of their children will be lowered.” Again, Mays argued to the contrary and noted that there was actually evidence revealing, “that the achievement level of Blacks increases in a desegregated school and no damage is done to the achievement level of whites.”<sup>482</sup> Mays also claimed that many whites’ reticence about desegregation was rooted in a deep, but unspoken social fear of miscegenation. As he put it, “a major number of white parents are afraid that their daughters, in a desegregated school, will meet Black boys socially which may lead to intermarriage.”<sup>483</sup>

Whatever the reason or combination of reasons that led whites to flee cities like Atlanta for surrounding suburbs, the outcome of their flight was dramatic residential segregation. For supporters of integrated schools, as was Mays, busing appeared to be the most plausible remedy to overcome the limitations of residential segregation. Yet, for those individuals less enthusiastic about school integration, busing was a threat to the racially insular life they had created in suburbia. Inevitably, the debate surrounding the merits of busing stirred concern among those who opposed busing and school integration altogether. This was especially true in Atlanta, where Mays and the school board were considering busing students and had been named as defendants

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<sup>481</sup> Ibid.

<sup>482</sup> Ibid.

<sup>483</sup> Ibid.

in a lawsuit demanding that the school find a way to desegregate schools further. Mays acknowledged the veracity of the claims in the suit but highlighted the complex nature of desegregating a residentially segregated city like Atlanta:

The charges are that there are too many schools that are virtually all black, too many that are virtually all white and too few that are thoroughly desegregated.

The charges are true. The question is how to remedy this situation when the school enrollment in Atlanta is 77 percent black and 23 percent white. The Atlanta schools have been becoming blacker and blacker and less pale for the last twenty years. Twenty years ago the school enrollment was around 69 percent white and 31 percent black.<sup>484</sup>

As this study revealed, the question for Mays, then, had never been *do* you integrate, but *how* do you integrate, especially given circumstances like those in a city like Atlanta where the residential landscape had undergone such dramatic changes in the percentages of blacks and whites living inside the city? If the city could not reach beyond its own borders and garner support from surrounding counties, Mays resigned, the task was nearly impossible.<sup>485</sup>

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<sup>484</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "If I Were Honest," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, December 9, 1972, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 2 Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>485</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Brown v. Board of Education: Twenty Years Later: With Special Reference to Atlanta," (speech, unknown location, 1974, manuscript page 14). Mays Papers Speeches Box 13; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Benjamin E. Mays. Date unknown. "Reflections on Desegregation in the Public Schools From Where I Sit," manuscript page 5). Mays Papers Speeches Box 12; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.



While one element in the city demanded busing to bring racial balance to the schools, another, primarily comprised of white parents, was frightened by and opposed the prospect of busing white students to black schools, Mays held, especially if it meant their children would be in the minority.<sup>486</sup> Generally, he contended, people can accept busing “if a few blacks were bused to white schools and no whites to black schools” or “if whites were a large majority in every school.” However, when blacks comprise the majority of the student population, the idea of busing becomes less palatable. As he had argued in the aforementioned article, many whites were opposed to their children attending racially integrated schools because they were concerned about their safety and academic achievement, if not the possibility of “black boys and white girls falling in love.”<sup>487</sup> Truthfully, however, Mays maintained that with “Little bussing or much, the problem is the same.”<sup>488</sup> There remained a disproportionate amount of black students in the Atlanta Public Schools, a reality he knew could not be altered simply by shuffling enrollments through busing. Ultimately, what Mays found tragic about the impasse, locally and nationally, was the absence of “leadership in the white communities of the nation to dispel these fears,” that there were so few whites who possessed “the courage to stand up and say let us make desegregation work and do our bit to undo the educational wrongs heaped upon Negroes for centuries.”<sup>489</sup>

The U.S. District Court for the Northern District of Georgia also rejected busing as an option for Atlanta’s schools to achieve integration. During the early 1970s, it handed down several rulings which declared the Atlanta Public School system unitary and found that any

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<sup>486</sup> Ibid

<sup>487</sup> Ibid.

<sup>488</sup> Ibid.

<sup>489</sup> Ibid.

remaining segregation was *de facto* and therefore beyond the legal scope of *Brown*. Like Mays, the court believed “no device short of massive busing... ‘would have any effect on the racial ratio of Atlanta schools, and that solution [busing] would simply speed up the transition of Atlanta to an all black school system.’”<sup>490</sup> Mays and the District Court assessed accurately the mood of Atlanta’s white community. According to Lassiter, “the prospect of two-way busing between the southside...and Buckhead deeply alarmed white families and business leaders in northside Atlanta, and the threat of a metropolitan desegregation plan produced extreme hostility from the overwhelmingly white counties beyond the city limits.”<sup>491</sup>

Still, in 1972 the city was at a crossroads in its school desegregation saga. In that same year, the U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals in New Orleans had “overruled the U.S. District Court from the Northern district of Georgia,” finding that the Atlanta system was not thoroughly desegregated.<sup>492</sup> Once again under the watch of a U.S. District Court, the school board, along with the NAACP, and Action Forum, a biracial coalition of Atlanta’s white business elite and top black leaders, were permitted to meet to draft a compromise plan to resolve once and for all the

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<sup>490</sup> *New York Times*, “Court Again Rejects Atlanta Busing Plan for Racial Balance,” Jun 9, 1972, 16. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2007); *Atlanta Daily World*, “Federal Court Bars Mass Busing in City Schools,” July 30, 1971, 1; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003); Leon W. Lindsay, *The Christian Science Monitor*, August 11, 1971, 4. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Christian Science Monitor (1908-1997).

<sup>491</sup> Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 108.

<sup>492</sup> William Mahoney, “Atlanta School Desegregation Off to Good Start,” *Atlanta Daily World*, August 31, 1973, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003);

city's desegregation issue.<sup>493</sup> Mays noted that, in collaboration with "a Negotiating Committee of the Board of Education and a Committee of the NAACP with a representative of the Legal Defense Fund participating," the plan was filed in District Court on February 22, 1973. It included the following provisions:

1. The teaching staff will be brought in line with the 1970 directives by September, 1973 thru attrition and not by transfer.
2. Student desegregation would be increased by requiring all White Schools (32 in number) to have a minimum of 30 percent Black enrollment. This would be done by transportation of students, pairing, and re-zoning of schools and professionalizing the M to M [Majority to Minority] transfer plan, and by closing some schools. This would leave some all Black Schools.
3. The administrative staff from top to bottom would be desegregated so the staff would be 50 percent Black and 50 percent White by September 30, 1973. A Black Superintendent is expected.<sup>494</sup>

Given the rapid exodus of whites from Atlanta's public schools, the plan, for Mays, had only two worthwhile aims: "reverse white flight or stabilize present enrollment."<sup>495</sup>

In April of 1973, the District Court approved the plan filed by the Atlanta School Board and the Atlanta NAACP. In the final terms of the plan, the school board addressed the NAACP's

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<sup>493</sup> Clarence Stone, *Regime Politics: Governing Atlanta, 1946-1988* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1989), 97, 104.

<sup>494</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "A Bird's Eye View of the Atlanta School Case," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 24, 1973, manuscript page). Mays Papers Installation 4 Box 11; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>495</sup> Ibid.

primary concern regarding desegregation of teachers and agreed to increase the black presence in the city's teaching force and administrative staff, including the superintendent position. It also agreed to increase the number of student transfers and to create "a program of biracial magnet schools."<sup>496</sup> With regards to students, Lassiter noted that the plan included "one-way busing of black students to ensure minority enrollment but left untouched more than half of the district's facilities where the black population exceeded 90 percent." In return for the school board's concessions, "the local NAACP branch agreed to drop its ongoing lawsuit against the board and ease its demands for massive, metropolitan-wide busing." Indeed, the terms of the final plan were straightforward but controversial nonetheless.<sup>497</sup>

Unbeknownst to Mays, national representatives of the NAACP were deeply angered by the outcome of the negotiations in Atlanta. As he recalled, "We thought when we were negotiating that we had the blessing and the concurrence of both the National and the local NAACP. It turned out that the National NAACP and the Legal Defense Fund oppose the plan."<sup>498</sup> The National NAACP advocated a policy of "maximum integration"<sup>499</sup> in such cases and had been pushing for the mass busing of 30,000 students to achieve "integration" in Atlanta's schools. That the local chapter essentially ignored the national policy and conceded the school board's request to bus approximately 3,000 students organizations in exchange for "a promise...that blacks will get nine of 17 key executive positions in the system" was telling of how differently

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<sup>496</sup> Kruse, *White Flight*, 238.

<sup>497</sup> Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 108; Kruse, *White Flight*, 239.

<sup>498</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "The District Court of Atlanta." (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 21, 1973, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 4 Box 11; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>499</sup> Susanna McBee, "Atlanta Blacks Trade Busing for Power," *The Washington Post*, March 4, 1973, E1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Washington Post (1877-1993).

members of the NAACP perceived the possible outcomes of the suit. For those laboring at the local level, the fifteen-year suit had simply reached a breaking point, especially after witnessing firsthand the city's schools go "from 70 per cent white to 78 per cent black" during that period. For Jondell Johnson, then the executive director of the Atlanta NAACP, the willingness to compromise stemmed from the fact that with such disproportionately high numbers of blacks in the school system, "it was too late to get real integration." As Johnson explained further, "You can't get nothing from nothing. So we thought it would be better to gain control and assure our kids quality education."<sup>500</sup>

Representatives at the national level did not share the Atlanta chapter's willingness to write off the possibility of real integration. Furious that a local branch would presumably forfeit the academic futures of black students for the professional advancement of black teachers and administrators, the national NAACP suspended temporarily the Atlanta NAACP and its president Lonnie King and scrambled to obstruct the finalization of the settlement. According to Mays, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund found the Compromise Plan too weak and expressed concern "that the District Court ardered [sic] the Atlanta Board to abolish all White Schools but did not say that all Black schools should be abolished."<sup>501</sup> Despite the LDF's objections to the plan, Mays noted, the School Board remained under mandate "by the District Court to set in motion the Compromise Plan in all of its aspects by September 30, 1973."<sup>502</sup> Having already installed the city's first black school superintendent in Dr. Alonzo Crim, he maintained that, "Atlanta has no

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<sup>500</sup> Ibid.

<sup>501</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Status of the Atlanta Plan," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, June 23, 1973, manuscript page). Mays Papers Installation 4 Box 11; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>502</sup> Ibid.

choice but to move forward with implementing the Plan unless a new order comes from the Court.”<sup>503</sup> It is interesting to note here that although Mays endorsed the compromise plan, he did not believe it to be without flaws or useful beyond its immediate context. As he noted:

We here in Atlanta have never, never argued that the Atlanta plan (Compromise) was the best plan nor have we encouraged any other system to adopt the Atlanta plan...The only thing we have said and the only thing we say now is that given Atlanta’s history since 1952, this is the most viable plan for Atlanta.<sup>504</sup>

However, as the terms of The Atlanta Compromise were not ideal for everyone invested in the widespread integration of the city’s public schools, Mays anticipated further litigation. Organizations like the ACLU and the NAACP (at the national level) were satisfied with the administrative concessions, but took issue with the settlement’s treatment of student desegregation, especially with regards to the minimal busing. Organizations like Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), on the other hand, opposed the compromise for its inclusion of busing at all and argued instead for local community control of schools and freedom of choice plans.<sup>505</sup> Despite their different aims, Mays knew that each of these organizations was looking to challenge the plan as it stood and represented a threat to the stability of the Atlanta Public School System. Thus in January of 1974, while delivering his acceptance speech to begin his fifth year

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<sup>503</sup> Ibid.; Benjamin E. Mays, “Greetings: Atlanta School Family,” (speech delivered at Georgia Tech University, Atlanta, Georgia, August 21, 1973). Mays Papers Speeches Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>504</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Brown v. Board of Education: Twenty Years Later: With special Reference to Atlanta,” (speech delivered, 1974, manuscript page 13). Mays Papers Speeches Box 13; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>505</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, “Black Parents Get Spotlight at Today’s Court Hearing,” March 29, 1973, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

as school board president, Mays illuminated the chief task of all persons invested in seeing the plan come to pass:

It is my considered judgment that the top priority facing this Board, the Superintendent, staff and teachers is to make the Atlanta plan work, called by some the compromise plan. This is essential because there are groups attacking us in the Court: The Legal Defense Fund, the American Civil Liberties Union, and Core. Mainly the constitutionality of our plan must be established by the Court. To avoid years of further litigation we must make this plan work.<sup>506</sup>

Mays anticipated correctly the continued opposition to the plan.

In 1974, in the midst of the District Court's deliberations on the original terms of the settlement, attorneys for the NAACP and ACLU were pursuing lawsuits that challenged the merits of the plan. Regarding the case filed jointly by the NAACP and ACLU, lead attorney, Elizabeth Rindskopf, noted that the organizations were "not terribly concerned about the administrative portion of the plan," but cited "the failure to use further busing within the city to increase desegregation at predominantly Black schools with students from predominantly white northside schools as a major flaw of the plan."<sup>507</sup> The Southern Regional Council too had

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<sup>506</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, (presidential acceptance speech delivered at the Atlanta Board of Education, Atlanta, Georgia, January 7, 1974, manuscript page 2). Mays Papers Speeches Box 7; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>507</sup> Douglass Wells, "New Court Challenges Pose Threat to City's School Desegregation," *Atlanta Daily World*, April 5, 1974. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

“denounced the compromise for sacrificing the futures of poor black children for a resolution designed to stabilize the business climate and cater to the affluent families of both races.”<sup>508</sup>

Further, as argued through the plaintiff’s testimonies, the burden of desegregation had fallen disproportionately upon the shoulders of low-income blacks.<sup>509</sup> In a separate suit filed by the ACLU, “attorney Margie Hanes” claimed that the government was responsible for segregation and objected “to the plan’s failure to include students from schools in predominantly white suburbs to further desegregate Atlanta’s schools.”<sup>510</sup> As a remedy, the ACLU legal team proposed a desegregation plan that included more elaborate busing schemes and “an education ‘federation’ among nine metro area school districts which would share students and facilities,” the participating districts being located “in the cities of Buford, Marietta, Atlanta and Decatur and the counties of Fulton, Gwinnett, DeKalb, Clayton, and Cobb.”<sup>511</sup> Mays and other school officials rejected Rindskopf and Hanes’ claims, maintaining their position that there simply were not enough white students attending Atlanta’s public schools to achieve a perfect racial balance.

Shortly after, the U.S. Fifth Circuit of Appeals ruled again on the desegregation suit in Atlanta, this time upholding the terms of the original 1973 Atlanta Compromise. While the court took note of the dramatic resegregation of Atlanta’s public schools, it could find no discriminatory practice on the part of local officials and therefore found the district to be in compliance with the requirements to be declared unitary. It also noted that despite the longstanding judicial struggle for integration in Atlanta, there was nothing the courts could do to

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<sup>508</sup> Lassiter, *Silent Majority*, 108.

<sup>509</sup> Wells, “New Court,” 1974.

<sup>510</sup> Ibid.

<sup>511</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, “New Lawsuit Seeks More Busing,” March 26, 1974, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).



stop white flight, which had been the major catalyst behind the city's resegregation. Further, as quoted by *New York Times* journalist B. Drummond Ayres, Jr., the court reminded the plaintiffs that ““The aim of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment guarantee of equal protection, on which this legislation is based, is to assure that state-supported educational opportunity is afforded without regard to race. It is not to achieve racial integration in public schools.”” This point was made even more clearly in July of 1974 when the United States Supreme Court ruled in *Milliken v. Bradley* that the city of Detroit had no constitutional authority to advance an interdistrict plan that would merge the city's schools with surrounding suburban districts.<sup>512</sup>

Of course, many activists found the court's opinion controversial, but others, like Warren Fortson, counsel for the Atlanta School Board, believed the decision was “evidence that the Appeals Court...was ‘kind of picking up on the mood of the country.’”<sup>513</sup> As Ayres noted, many judges and activists throughout the South, by that time, had “also softened their demands for total school desegregation, usually in the face of massive white flight.” Such was not the case for the ACLU. Following the court's ruling, ACLU attorney Margie Hanes argued that the court's opinion proved her organization's claim that school integration could not be accomplished within the existing geographical boundaries of the Atlanta Public School System. A modified metropolitan school merger, Hanes held, was the solution, ““a federation of systems that involve the whole area, one that is too big to flee.””<sup>514</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> B. Drummond Ayres, “Atlanta Upheld on School Plan: Court Allows End of Busing Demands to Be Traded for Jobs for Blacks,” *The New York Times*, October 25, 1975, 36. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2007); Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 179-180.

<sup>513</sup> Ibid.

<sup>514</sup> Ibid.

In 1977, Mays, still acting as school board president, openly questioned whether the ACLU and its attorneys, still fighting in court for their “federation,” had ‘the best interest of the child at heart’ or were merely dragging out the case for monetary gain.<sup>515</sup> Throughout 1977, the plaintiffs held to their argument that resegregation in Atlanta had not simply been a coincidence. As they contended, “‘The segregation didn’t just happen. It was planned [...] Acts of federal, state and local governments and policies of school boards have been the cause of the segregation we have.’”<sup>516</sup> The defendants argued to the contrary.

In 1978, Mays was called to testify as an expert witness in the case on behalf of the defense. He made clear his view on busing and reiterated his new perspective on school desegregation:

If you can have good education with all members of a system being Jewish or all being Caucasian, I think you can have quality education—given equal facilities, equal libraries, equal buildings and teachers with the same qualifications and who care—with black pupils...The situation is different from what it was 24 years ago...I want to make it clear again that I am not arguing for segregated education—but we are dealing with a concrete situation.<sup>517</sup>

The “concrete situation” Mays spoke about was the resegregation of Atlanta’s public schools. As he and other school officials had argued since the early 1970s, whites’ abandonment of the city’s

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<sup>515</sup> Joan Mower, “City School Officials Oppose Metro School Desegregation,” *Atlanta Daily World*, November 24, 1977, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

<sup>516</sup> Ibid.

<sup>517</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, “‘Massive Busing’ Rejected by Mays as Key to Quality Schools in City: Objects to Metro Area Deseg Plan,” March 24, 1978, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

schools had severely impeded the board's ability to balance racially the student population. There simply were not enough white students in the school system to drastically change the schools' racial compositions. The three-judge federal court agreed and ruled in favor of the defendants, finally bringing the nearly twenty-one year old issue to a close. The following year, the Supreme Court affirmed the Atlanta ruling.<sup>518</sup>

Mays's expert witness testimony in 1978 spoke volumes about the ideological transformation he had undergone since the 1940s, '50s and '60s with regards to school desegregation and integration. For nearly three decades as president of Morehouse College, Mays had promoted desegregation and integration and maintained that they were inevitable. Surely, he contended, a change in race relations would come to pass, and thus charged American citizens to prepare themselves for the coming of that day. In less than a decade serving as school board president, however, Mays had begun to articulate a different position. Perhaps integration, as he envisioned it, was not simply just a matter of time.

Though Mays insisted during his testimony that he was not condoning or arguing on behalf of segregated education, he willingly admitted that times had changed and recognized that he had come to believe in the possibility of an equally endowed, though racially homogenous school environment. While one could interpret Mays change in thought as a concession of defeat, it is likely more accurate to understand his shift in thinking as the outcome of his enduring commitment to practicality. This is not to suggest that he had given up on the prospect of integration, but having witnessed firsthand Southern whites' consuming racial prejudice and enduring commitment to segregation, he knew that neither he nor the ACLU was capable of

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<sup>518</sup> Orfield and Carole Ashkinaze, C. *The closing door: Conservative policy and black opportunity*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991), 107.

changing their minds. Desegregation, Mays understood, was a matter of law. It could be initiated by the people and affirmed by the courts. Integration, on the other hand, was a matter of the heart, “a spiritual entity,”<sup>519</sup> as he called it, and as such could be initiated and realized *only* by the people.

Mays understood that black people’s desire for and commitment to justice were not sufficient means to melt the cold heart of the Deep South. So as blacks continued to pour into Atlanta, Whites, especially those in racially transitioning areas, continued to flee for the suburbs, together resulting in a 75% decline in white enrollment. These events only gave credence to a truth Mays came to believe early in his tenure on the school board, one that captured the essence of the struggle to desegregate Atlanta’s public schools: “there is something the Supreme Court cannot do. It can’t stop white people who run when Negroes move into a school or into a community”<sup>520</sup>

#### Atlanta Public Schools Workers’ Strike

During the 1970s, school districts across the country became targets for protest as teachers’ unions experienced explosive growth. The two most popular teachers’ unions, the American Federation of Teachers (AFT) and its rival the National Education Association (NEA), experienced dramatic increases in their membership, while “Thousands of other noninstructional school personnel became members of the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal

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<sup>519</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Integration As a Matter of Heart,” *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 21, 1970, 9. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Christian Science Monitor (1908-1997).

<sup>520</sup> Ibid; In 1992, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled on another school desegregation case out of Atlanta entitled *Freeman v. Pitts*. The court found that despite dramatic shifts in the demographics of metropolitan county of Dekalb, private choice rather than public policy was the greatest factor in that shift, meaning that there was no constitutional matter at hand to debate (See Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 198-199).

Employees” (AFSCME). During this time, Ravitch found, “there was nothing tenuous about the position of teacher unions.” She contended that, “both the AFT and NEA had become major powers, not only in their school districts but in state legislatures and in the nation, and the real question was whether any school district had either the political power or legal resources to deal with them as equals.”<sup>521</sup>

In 1975, in the midst of a litany of legal battles regarding the future of desegregation in Atlanta’s public schools, Mays began feeling the presence of Atlanta’s teacher unions. On one hand was the AFSCME, which was threatening to strike if the board failed to deliver on the \$240 pay raise it promised the schools’s “nonclassified workers, cooks, maids, and custodians” during budget talks earlier in the fiscal year.<sup>522</sup> On the other was the Atlanta Association of Educators (AAE), a local branch of the NEA, whose members were equally upset about the prospect of not receiving a pay raise and were maintaining a growing list of professional grievances against the board.

When the school board reneged on its promise to increase school workers’ pay by \$240, the AFSCME and the AAE immediately threatened to strike in protest. As president of the school board, Mays was the lead representative in discussions with the each of the organizations’ members. While he did not deny that the board had agreed to increase workers’ pay by \$240, he explained that unexpected state budget cuts were the reason the board could no longer deliver on its promise to raise salaries. As Mays put it, “The state gave us the money necessary to offer the raise in the first place and the state has taken it away.” But the denial of pay raises was not simply a matter of budget restrictions; it was also a matter of teacher retention. As

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<sup>521</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade*, (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 313-315.

<sup>522</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, “School Board Hears Threats of Walkout,” September 5, 1975, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

Superintendent Alonzo Crim noted, the “denial of the pay increase had made it possible for the school system to keep at least 319 first-year teachers,” while “two hundred teacher aides...were maintained because of efforts not to release employees.” Presumably, the board could have found a way to honor its agreement, but as Mays highlighted, if it had done so, ““we would have to let some people go.””<sup>523</sup>

However noble, the school board’s decision did not resonate with the disgruntled school employees. Members of AFSCME, especially, rejected Mays’s explanation and insisted that the he and the board were fully capable of finding a way to honor its promise to increase workers’ salaries. Mays held his ground, however, denying that the board could meet the AFSCME’s demands without sacrificing jobs. With neither side willing to budge, the possibility of a strike loomed large. That possibility only became greater when members of the AFSCME demanded the board sign a contract agreeing to its demands. The board, still citing the need to balance budget constraints with employee retention, refused to acquiesce.<sup>524</sup>

As if the standoff with the AFSCME over pay raises were not enough, Mays and the school board were also under growing pressure to meet the demands of the AAE, which had become hostile toward the board, accusing it of harboring anti-labor sentiments. At the root of this accusation was the AAE’s frustration with the school board’s continued opposition to the practice of dues checkoff. For members of the AAE, dues checkoff, which was the option to have union dues payroll deducted and required board approval, was a significant issue they believed deserved the board’s immediate attention. The board believed otherwise. At an impasse,

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<sup>523</sup> Ibid.

<sup>524</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, “Teachers Press Demands on Local School Board: Dr. Mays Sees No Way to Meet AAE Demands,” September 11, 1975, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

the conflict boiled over at a board meeting when an “angry group of city teachers stormed out of the meeting after the board refused to vote on the question of payroll deductions for teachers who are members of the AAE.” Shortly thereafter, AAE members expanded their demands to include an “18 per cent salary increase which includes a cost of living increase,” though it did not cease pressing the board to vote on the issue of dues checkoff.<sup>525</sup>

In mid-September, one week after the explosive board meeting, nearly 1,000 members of the AFSCME and approximately 200 members of AAE agreed to form a new coalition to vocalize more effectively their demands, as both organizations agreed that neither had “been granted their employee rights.” The AFSCME, which was still fighting to secure its \$240 raise, took the lead role in the school board negotiations, while the AAE, whose list of demands had grown to include “improved educational policies for class size load and teaching materials,” assumed a more supportive role. Practically, this meant that the AFSCME would initiate the strike if the its demands were not met, while the AAE would exhibit its support for the strike “by not crossing picket lines.”<sup>526</sup>

Now facing a conglomerate of school workers, the board was even more fearful about the prospect of a district-wide strike. Mays knew well that a strike among teachers and non-professional workers would reflect poorly upon the Atlanta Public School system, but he was far more concerned with the damage a strike would inflict upon the city’s students. In the midst of this push for teacher and workers’ rights, he claimed, ““Everybody is forgetting the child, and that troubles me.””<sup>527</sup> Shortly after the Atlanta coalition formed, Mays, in an article published in

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<sup>525</sup> Ibid.

<sup>526</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, “Dr. Mays Says Strike Would Harm the Children, Schools,” September 18, 1975, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

<sup>527</sup> Ibid.

the *Tri-State Defender*, voiced further his concern about teacher strikes, their increasing popularity among discontented teachers across the country, and the subsequent suffering of students. Generally, Mays believed, teacher strikes were aggressive political maneuvers to secure more money. As he asserted:

There can be no doubt that the main reason for strikes is more money. Other things may be thrown in, but the top priority is more money. I have heard many union men speak of unionizing the teachers, including Albert Shanker, but I have never heard one say that they were striking for the benefit of the students. I have never heard one say that the quality of education would be improved by teachers striking. There is a fallacy in making money the main object of striking. Since students are never mentioned, it must be assumed that if teachers get more money students will be benefited and the quality of education will be improved. This assumption is fallacious.<sup>528</sup>

Clearly, Mays found the idea of teachers' striking to secure a pay increase reprehensible, just as he found foolish the idea that increased teacher pay necessarily yielded improved teacher performance.<sup>529</sup>

Relying heavily on anecdotal accounts of subpar academic achievement among students attending public schools in cities like Chicago and New York and the relatively high pay rate of

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<sup>528</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Students Suffer Most," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, September 27, 1975, manuscript page 2). Mays Papers Installation 4 Box 11 Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>529</sup> See Benjamin E. Mays, "Increase in Salaries is Not Enough," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, March 6, 1965, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 1 Box 26 Folder 19; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.



teachers in those cities, Mays set out to prove his claim. He argued that while “teachers in Chicago are among the best paid teachers in the nation...I have heard no one say that the Chicago schools are models of excellence.” In the same way, he claimed teachers in New York “are well paid so far as public schools go,” but “The people in New York with whom I talk say that New York schools on the whole are rotten.”<sup>530</sup> The veracity of Mays’s anecdotal evidence notwithstanding, his point was simply that quality teaching could not necessarily be purchased. This is not to say, however, that Mays did not sympathize in some ways with teachers or that he opposed paying teachers well. In fact, he declared that, “Teachers should have more money,” and that “The states should make enough money available so that teachers would not be tempted to strike and students forced out of school.”<sup>531</sup> Yet, on the whole, he was not convinced that paying teachers higher salaries would yield greater student achievement.

While it can be said that Mays’s opinion on teacher strikes, in the general sense, did not speak directly to what was happening in Atlanta during 1975, his position made clear his disdain for educators who failed to place central or at least take into consideration the welfare of students. Indeed, money had been the linchpin of most strikes in Northern school districts, but in the South, as the region had yet to develop a comparable unionized infrastructure across trades and industries, workers in cities like Atlanta were not fighting for money as much as they were fighting for greater bargaining rights and union recognition. As Ayres reported, “Unions, particularly public employe [*sic*] unions, are still viewed with skepticism in the South, the sturdiest bastion of right-to-work sentiment in the United states.” Still, the AFSCME and AAE believed their demands deserved attention and resolved that a work strike, if the board would not

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<sup>530</sup> Ibid.

<sup>531</sup> Ibid.

concede, was the most effective means of spurring negotiations. They put their resolution into effect on October 14, 1975.<sup>532</sup>

During the one-day strike, participants and onlookers estimated that between 25 and 40 percent of Atlanta's school employees did not report for work, leaving the schools shorthanded but still open and operating.<sup>533</sup> Reporter Yvonne Shinhoster described the outcome of the strike as "dubious," given that "virtually all of the system's 180 schools remained in session and a majority of the schools' teachers crossed the picket lines to report for work."<sup>534</sup> Although the city witnessed minority participation in the strike, the legality of a strike among city employees quickly emerged as the leading issue and came under the review of U.S. Federal Judge Newell Edenfield. Before the day's end, Edenfield "ordered the striking employees back to work for at least 10 more days of talks until declaratory judgment on the legality of union recognition and collection bargaining for AAE and AFSCME is decided."<sup>535</sup> While much of the media coverage of the strike focused on the demands and actions of the AAE and AFSCME, Shinhoster, echoing Mays's core concern regarding strikes, held that, "Perhaps, those to be affected the most by the

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<sup>532</sup> B. Drummond Ayres, Jr. Special to The New York Times, "Atlanta Teachers Strike; Return to Work Ordered," *New York Times*, October 15, 1975, 49. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times (1851-2007).

<sup>533</sup> Yvonne Shinhoster, "Judge Orders School Employees to End Strike, Report to Work: AAE-AFSCME Walkout First In History Here," *Atlanta Daily World*, October 16, 1975, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

<sup>534</sup> Ibid

<sup>535</sup> Ibid.

strike will be the students.”<sup>536</sup> On the day of the strike, she noted, some high schools reported that ‘students seemed to be staying away in droves.’<sup>537</sup>

Although the conversation about Atlanta’s schools and the local workers’ unions quieted down after Judge Edenfield’s order, Mays remained publicly vocal in the following weeks. In late October, for example, he published another article outlining his concerns about student welfare and teacher strikes. Presumably in response to accusations of his harboring anti-union sentiments, Mays opened the article articulating his high regard for students and indifference toward unions. He wanted to make clear that he was far “more pro-school children than...anti-union,” describing himself as being “out of harmony with what I gather Labor unions are saying.”<sup>538</sup>

Mays was especially out of harmony with the union-driven political arrangement in which “School Boards allow their responsibility as elected or appointed officials to be taken away by union leaders in that the union official must dot the ‘I’s and cross the ‘T’s’ in the administration of Public Schools.” He contended that under such circumstances, “the Boards forfeit their right to govern and the teachers have bartered away their freedom.” Ultimately, Mays lamented, “the union officials speak for the School Employees and...Teachers go along with the decision because as an individual, the teacher is not strong enough to stand alone against the Union’s decisions.”<sup>539</sup>

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<sup>536</sup> Ibid.

<sup>537</sup> Ibid.

<sup>538</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “In Defense of Students,” (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, November 8, 1975, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Installation 4 Box 11; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>539</sup> Ibid.

Mays could find no virtue in such a political arrangement and openly attacked unions for what he identified as their “three major aims: more money, more power, and more members,” and their perpetuation of the idea that “what is good for the officials of the union is good the for the child and the power the union extracts from the Board of Education is good for the child.”<sup>540</sup> He argued that current outcomes in teacher strikes suggested otherwise. In his observations of “strikes across the nation” and based on conversations “with parents and teachers about the impact of strikes on education and who wins,” he reported that, “Invariably the answers are ‘the students suffer most and the teachers gain nothing.’”<sup>541</sup> In places like Baltimore, for example, teachers who went on strike lost pay for their absence, while others in cities like New York were simply released from their positions following drastic budget cuts.

No doubt, Mays had been diligent in highlighting for the AFSCME and AAE the significant impact the state’s budget cuts in education had on the board’s decision to deny pay increases, but neither organization found his argument convincing. The explanation for the shortfall was quite clear, Mays contended, “yet the unions are demanding an 18% increase in wages and the restoration of the \$3.4 million that the state had given the School System and at a special session of the Legislature...the State took away.”<sup>542</sup> Quite simply, Mays argued, “It isn’t good logic to demand money which isn’t there.”<sup>543</sup>

By December of 1975, the AFSCME resurfaced with a second set of demands, this time seeking broader union influence and threatening to “initiate a recall election against three

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<sup>540</sup> Ibid.

<sup>541</sup> Ibid.

<sup>542</sup> Ibid., 2.

<sup>543</sup> Ibid.

members of the Atlanta Board of Education,” one of whom was Mays.<sup>544</sup> Although Mays and local AFSCME president Willie Bolden had a history of discord around the board’s refusal to grant a \$240 pay increase to the Atlanta’s school workers, with regards to the election recall, Mays claimed to have no knowledge of “what would lead this union to take this unwise action.”<sup>545</sup> He was confident, however, that the union’s plan, if employed, would neither be fruitful nor lay the groundwork for another strike. Mays was quoted as saying, “I do not believe they will succeed in their recall nor do I believe they will strike again, despite Mr. Bolden’s threat that if their second round of demands are not met by the Board, his union will definitely strike again.”<sup>546</sup>

Essentially calling the AFSCME’s bluff, Mays went on to declare that he and the board had no intentions of giving into the organization’s demands for union representation. He stated that, “We do not plan to turn the public schools over to the unions, giving them our wrists, saying, “cluff [*sic*] them,” and extending our ankles, saying, “Put on the chains.” To do so, as he had insisted a month prior, would be surrendering the board’s power and handing it over to the union. The board, if stripped of its current power and subjected to the desires of the AFSCME and AAE, Mays stressed, would “be free no longer.”<sup>547</sup> There was no benefit, he believed, in relinquishing power to the unions.

Although the Atlanta teachers’ strike in 1975 came and went with minimal fanfare, Mays knew how tenacious the unions could be and pegged them as being a possible long-term problem

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<sup>544</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, “Won’t Give Unions Schools, Mays Says,” December 9, 1975, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

<sup>545</sup> Ibid.

<sup>546</sup> Ibid.

<sup>547</sup> Ibid.

for school boards across the country. As he shared with some fellow educators in 1975, “We [the Atlanta School Board] have had trouble with the unions and there is no guarantee that there will not be more trouble in the future.”<sup>548</sup> Once again, Mays’s prognostication proved accurate.

In April of 1979, the city’s teachers threatened to strike again if they were denied a 9.5 percent pay raise. According to a local newspaper, the teachers were “angry because the school board’s budget for next year allotted a 6.5 percent increase in salary,” while “The state legislature approved the 9.5 percent increase for other state school systems.” The school board, rather than using the allocated funds solely to raise teachers’ salaries by nearly 10 percent, was looking to distribute “the money among all employees in the school system, which would give every employee the 6.5 percent raise.”<sup>549</sup>

Immediately, the AAE responded to the school board by mailing surveys “to its members asking them if they would be willing to picket the school board’s headquarters everyday after school; give themselves a holiday; hold a mass rally on May 14 before the budget meeting; refuse to do any work after school hours; or strike.” According to Jesse Moore, the AAE’s executive director, the survey’s responses favored all proposed measures aside from a strike. He also insisted that the school board was capable of providing the 9.5 percent raise, although Superintendent Crim and Mays wholly disagreed, arguing “that such a raise would cost \$7.1

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<sup>548</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, (Untitled speech, 1975, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches Box 13; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>549</sup> *Atlanta Daily World*, “Mays Responds to Survey, Vowing No Pay for No Work,” April 29, 1979, 1. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Atlanta Daily World (1931-2003).

million,” while “the state only allocated \$2.3 million—less than half that amount.”<sup>550</sup> Again the school board and the city’s teachers were at an impasse.<sup>551</sup>

### Summary

Mays’s interest in and relationship with the Atlanta Public Schools spanned several decades prior to his election to the school board and ascent to its presidency. As president of Morehouse College, he watched closely the city’s push for school integration, presumably not knowing that he would one day be a central figure in the final chapters of Atlanta’s school desegregation saga. During those years, Mays wrote about the desegregation of Atlanta’s schools with the emotional curiosity and interest of a black southerner, while maintaining the critical distance one would expect of a trained scholar. One can say, then, that prior to his joining the Atlanta School Board, Mays viewed the desegregation of public schools, in the case Atlanta’s public schools, with a restrained optimism. He knew that school desegregation/integration presented tremendous challenges to educators and school districts alike, but he was confident that their coming to pass was simply a matter of time; he believed they were inevitable.

One can imagine, then, how challenging and educative an experience serving on the school board must have been for Mays for him to change his position on the necessity of school desegregation/integration. Although Mays’s view on the necessity of school desegregation stemmed from his own educational experiences and aspirations as a student, and while we may never know what his personal and professional expectations were when he joined the Atlanta School Board in 1969 and was elected to its presidency in 1970, how sharply he turned from his

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<sup>550</sup> Ibid.

<sup>551</sup> A full narrative explaining the outcome of the second conflict between the AFSCME, AAE and the Atlanta School Board has yet to emerge from available documentation.

life-long position on segregated schools speaks volumes about the impact his participation in the school desegregation process had on his thinking.

Surely, Mays remembered well the sting of racial discrimination and the internal confusion wrought by school segregation. He had experienced both firsthand and for the entirety of his professional career as a college administrator had openly opposed them in any form. Yet, when Mays joined the school board, he learned quickly how wide was the chasm between his beliefs (theory) about the inevitability of public school desegregation and the realities (practice) of racism, white flight, and public school resegregation. Perhaps, in spending decades writing about and speaking out against racism and racial segregation, Mays intellectualized the racism and desegregation to the extent that his sensitivity to them began to dull. If so, it is plausible to argue, then, that Mays's departure from the ivory towers of academe and subsequent arrival in the public school arena jarred his senses and challenged his position on the inevitability of school segregation. Just as his time at Michigan State revealed to him the extent to which he had been distant ideologically from his students at Morehouse, Mays first year on the Atlanta School Board exposed perhaps how naively optimistic he had been about the school desegregation process.

The Atlanta Public School System was fraught with problems that Mays, one can assume, neither anticipated nor was fully prepared to solve, the biggest perhaps being rapid white flight. Without question, desegregating/integrating a school district with a racially balanced population was among the steepest of uphill battles for districts trying to achieve racial diversity in their schools. How much more difficult was the task of desegregation for districts that were losing thousands upon thousands of white students annually? As Mays would discover, it was virtually impossible.



Resigning himself to that fact and beginning to think more deeply about the long-term implications of clinging hopelessly to the Supreme Court's opinion on the inherent inferiority of segregated schools, Mays abandoned his position on the necessity of desegregated schools for two primary reasons. First, it was for the sake of practicality. What white flight meant for the racial composition of Atlanta's schools and subsequently their desegregation was far too clear for Mays to ignore. He could either cling to the belief that segregated schools were, by definition, inferior, or he could embrace a new philosophy, one that emphasized the academic possibilities of segregated schools and sought to boost teacher morale. Always the pragmatist, Mays chose the latter.

Second, Mays jettisoned his belief in the necessity of desegregated schools because he believed that it condemned the future of black education. As a man who was unabashed in his love for black people, Mays could not accept the idea that an all-black school, just by virtue of not having white students, was scholastically doomed. If provided the appropriate resources and staffed with highly capable teachers, he believed, segregated schools were just as capable of high academic achievement as their desegregated counterparts. Given the historical trend in school funding disparities along racial lines, however, Mays knew that black schools' achievement was tied to a very big "if."

## Chapter 6

### The Final Years

This chapter explores Mays's educational thought between 1970 and 1981, the final years of his career as a professional educator. The period of analysis for this chapter parallels that of the previous chapter, but examines specifically Mays's writings on education beyond the context of his tenure on the Atlanta School Board. During that same 12-year time span, Mays continued to write profusely on educational issues he believed deserved attention, such as the status of desegregation/integration, student achievement, curriculum, teacher quality, and the state of public schools. During this period, Mays's belief democracy, Christianity, and social responsibility remains firm, but their presence in his work is far more subtle than in previous years.

This chapter will also explore Mays reaffirmation of his long-held positions on the tremendous privilege of formal education and the innumerable social issues to which, he believed, education could be and should be dedicated. However, it was also during this period that he began to reveal a dramatic shift away from his thinking on the necessity of desegregation and integration. Although for the majority of his career as an educator, Mays had fiercely opposed racial segregation in schools, by 1970, fewer than two years into his tenure on the Atlanta School Board, he had begun to question openly whether desegregated/integrated schools were, in fact, the only type of schools capable of providing black students with an excellent education. Finally, because Mays retired from his position on the school board in 1981 and

passed a few years later in 1984, this chapter serves as an intellectual endpoint for Mays's life and helps us to identify more clearly the full trajectory of his educational thinking.

### Historical Context

The latter years of the 1960s were defined by global and domestic crises. Across the Pacific, U.S. troops had been fighting in a war whose progress and purpose were equally difficult to comprehend. Domestically, the United States was also engaged in a war of sorts. As Brinkley put it, "By the end of 1967, the twin crises of the war in Vietnam and the deteriorating racial situation at home, crises that fed upon and inflamed each other, had produced profound social and political tensions." The anti-war movement that had begun in 1965 became such a powerful political force between 1966 and 1967 that it was able to penetrate the heavily cocooned Washington D.C. political arena and "stimulate opposition to the war from within the government."<sup>552</sup>

As opposition to the Vietnam War intensified, so too did racial tensions across the country. Blacks had scored social and political victories with the passing of Johnson's Civil Rights Acts in 1964 and 1965, but neither of the bills seemed to satisfy fully their desire for equal economic and political opportunities. The impulse among black citizens to secure access to the same opportunities and privileges afforded white citizens was deep-seated and manifested itself in myriad ways. While some blacks, in response to this impulse, joined the Black Power Movement or became a member of a Black Nationalist organization like the Black Panther Party or the Nation of Islam, others took to the streets in violent protest. Throughout the latter half of

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<sup>552</sup> Brinkley, *American History*, 840-845.

the 1960s, large-scale race riots erupted in major cities, like Los Angeles, Chicago, and Detroit, as blacks grew tired of being the victims of racial discrimination and injustices.<sup>553</sup>

These social and political events necessarily shaped the national discourse on education during the late 1960s and 1970s. As Ravitch noted, “The civil disorders in poor black communities in the mid-1960s had their counterpart in the world of education, in rebellion by minority scholars against the conventional wisdom that for years had explained the low educational performance of minority children as a function of their ‘cultural deficiencies’ or ‘cultural disadvantages.’” These scholars and activists argued, “that black children had been deprived of their own rich cultural heritage in feckless efforts to make them think and act like whites” and that in order to remedy “the defects of ghetto education,” these students “needed to study their culture” and be afforded opportunities to “identify with black heroes.” Advocates of this Afrocentric approach to education, Ravitch contended, were so intent on restoring black children’s “self-esteem and racial pride” that they were willing to do so, “even it meant ignoring the Supreme Court’s admonition that ‘Separate educational facilities are inherently unequal’”<sup>554</sup>

### A Challenge to the University

In June of 1970, Mays spoke before the graduating class of Emory University, delivering an address entitled, “Three Enemies of Mankind: A Challenge to the University.” Mays, as an educator and college administrator, had always believed in the socially transformative power of higher education and had argued in 1949<sup>555</sup> that colleges and universities were necessarily the spaces in which social change must begin. Though this speech in 1970 is timely in its language

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<sup>553</sup> Ibid., 828-830; Patterson, *Grand Expectations*, 654; Chafe, “America Since 1945,” 169.

<sup>554</sup> Diane Ravitch, *The Troubled Crusade* (New York: Basic Books, 1983), 268-270.

<sup>555</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Segregation in Higher Education,” *Phylon* 10, no. 4 (1949): 401-402.

and cultural references, at its core, it speaks to the longevity of Mays's core beliefs: Christianity, democracy, and social justice.

Echoing points he made in many of his post-World War II writings, Mays, expressed "hope that the university will always be what Disraeli says it is, 'A center of light, liberty, and learning.'" Yet, he insisted that "a university must be more," as humanity had "not yet conquered three of the major enemies of mankind; War, Poverty, and Racism."<sup>556</sup> He reaffirmed his belief that it would "not be enough for our universities to train their graduates how to make themselves secure in the economic, political, and educational worlds and forthwith insulate themselves from the basic issues of our time."<sup>557</sup> Rather, he declared that the time had "come for educational institutions to train their students to be seriously concerned about the urgency and the commitment to eliminate war, abolish poverty, and exterminate racism," a claim quite consistent with those he made in the mid-1940s.<sup>558</sup>

That man, despite all his educational advancements, had yet to figure out a way to avoid war was unsettling for Mays. He was disheartened by the fact that even as colleges and universities began to multiply throughout the world, there was no correlative decline in the

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<sup>556</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Three Enemies of Mankind: A Challenge to the University," (commencement speech delivered at Emory University, Atlanta, Georgia, 1970, manuscript page 3). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 6; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; For a similar speech, see Benjamin E. Mays, "Beyond Academic Excellence," (address delivered at the presidential inauguration of Hartford Community Junior College).

<sup>557</sup> Ibid.

<sup>558</sup> See Benjamin E. Mays, "The Function of a College," (speech delivered at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, AL, October 28, 1949). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 1; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

jingoism that continuously led men and their countries into war. Thus, Mays concluded that, “It can be argued with considerable evidence that education has given us more facts and better trained minds but it has hardly made us any more sensitive to the perils of war...Our universities do not educate to this condition.”<sup>559</sup> Of course, Mays contended that colleges and universities *should* train students in “how they might use their minds to establish programs designed to eliminate the conditions that keep mankind forever at war,” and even proposed that, “Some university should list as one of its major objectives a blueprint for universal peace.”<sup>560</sup> Colleges and universities, he was convinced, had to become integral agents in eliminating war, as he argued that, “The question of man’s survival on earth is too critical a matter to be left entirely in the hands of politicians and heads of state.”<sup>561</sup> If people failed to take steps to “abolish war,” May asserted, “war will abolish mankind.”<sup>562</sup>

The abolishment of poverty, Mays believed, was the second social issue to which colleges and universities needed to become dedicated. In the United States alone, he noted, there were millions of families with so little income that they were unable to adequately provide food for themselves. He was especially concerned that these statistics represented a segment of the school age population, highlighting the harsh reality that, “Many children go to school without breakfast, are too hungry to learn, and are in such pain that they must be taken home.”<sup>563</sup> But the despair of poverty and hunger, he found, was oftentimes even greater for pregnant women, who, in their malnourished state, birthed children who inevitably suffered from poor health. Mays

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<sup>559</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 5.

<sup>560</sup> Ibid. manuscript page 6.

<sup>561</sup> Ibid.

<sup>562</sup> Ibid.

<sup>563</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 7.

reported that, “There are thousands of babies born daily who have protein deficiency during their early years,” a condition, which in “early childhood can cause permanent brain damage, causing I.Q. deficits of as many as 18 to 22 points, from which the child will never recover.”<sup>564</sup>

Here, Mays drove home the first part of his main point, which was that poverty severely limits the life chances of those it holds captive. Rather implicitly, he reminded his audience that *all* people should be afforded the chance to succeed in life, not just those with the financial means to do so. The second part of Mays’s point, then, was that colleges and universities should be more in tune with and work more diligently on behalf of socio-economically marginalized persons to increase their access to resources that expanded their possibilities for success. The following quote summarizes his vision:

We should know the conditions and circumstances under which people live in the slums and ghettos of our cities, and become so involved that we will help to build a United States where no family of four will have to live on an annual income of less than \$5,000, where every able-bodied man will be guaranteed a job with an adequate minimum wage, where schools are adequate, and where recreational facilities are available.<sup>565</sup>

For Mays, as long as there was a class of suffering or oppressed people in the world, he believed it his duty and that of all privileged people to fight for the liberation and deliverance of those in bondage.

Finally, Mays called colleges and universities to become leaders in the abolishment of racism. In the United States, Mays contended, the legacy of racism need only be verified by

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<sup>564</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 8.

<sup>565</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 9.

looking at “Slavery and segregation, which have been with us for a total of 350 years.”<sup>566</sup> Mays reminded his listeners that blacks’ struggle for equality had been long and taxing. He reminded them that, “Negroes are the only people in the United States who have had to spend tens of millions of dollars to get what the Constitution guarantees them and what all Europeans get when they come to this country simply by virtue of being born white,” or that “No other ethnic or racial group has had to sit-in and demonstrate in order to have places of public accommodation opened to them.”<sup>567</sup> In essence, he reminded them that black Americans, for centuries, had been and, in many ways, still were second-class citizens.

Still, he held to the belief that colleges and universities were places where a transformation in thinking on race would occur. He believed institutions of higher education were poised “to desegregate and integrate America to the end that this great nation of ours... will truly become the lighthouse of freedom where none will be denied because his skin is black, and none favored because his eyes are blue.”<sup>568</sup> Whether or not racism *could* be destroyed was of no consequence for Mays; to work towards its abolishment was a cause worthy of the effort. As he admitted, “White folks and black folks may never get rid of race prejudice; but, win or lose, God knows I must try to help build a society where black and white can live in the same community in peace and with justice, for I believe that brotherhood is better than racism.”<sup>569</sup> For Mays, then, there was tremendous value in the efforts of men whose aims, even if unsuccessful, were just and worthy.

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<sup>566</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 10.

<sup>567</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 11.

<sup>568</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 12.

<sup>569</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 13.



Thus, in the final paragraphs of his speech, Mays called again the 1970 class of Emory to a higher moral plain. Acknowledging the likelihood of their future success, he implored them to remember their privilege and to devote their time and resources to causes that would improve the world. He challenged them to “never turn your back on the millions who are poor, but rather do your part to enable them to rise to positions of respectability and honor.” Further, he charged them to reject claims of the inevitability of war and to “never be satisfied until America is committed to the proposition that equality, freedom, and justice are the God-given rights of every American.”<sup>570</sup> And while Mays certainly did not downplay the difficulty inherent in these tasks, he was not willing to concede that individuals were incapable of affecting legitimate social change. Recalling the lofty tasks of Judaeo-Christian figures, like Abraham and Jesus, and African-American legends like Harriett Tubman and Martin Luther King, Jr., Mays illuminated the transformative power of one person driven by one purpose. As he put it, “I believe every man is called of God if he believes it strong enough; called to do something worth while, something unique, something so distinctive that if he does not do it it will never be done.”<sup>571</sup>

In October of 1970, Mays extended his charge to colleges and universities in a speech delivered at the University of Chicago entitled, “What Is Relevant in General and Liberal Education,” which explored the longevity of curricular developments in and the aims of higher education. Although the specific circumstances surrounding Mays’s invitation to speak at the University of Chicago are unclear, what is notable is that Mays, an alumnus of the university, promoted the university’s agenda for general education as a means of building a more thoroughly educated citizenry. As Clarence Faust, former dean of the College at the University of Chicago,

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<sup>570</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 14.

<sup>571</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 16.

argued, “One of the great needs of the country...is the development of effective programs of higher general education.” He contended that between elementary and secondary schools and graduate schools lay the liberal arts college, whose “function is to prepare young people...to deal not with the special problems parceled out in our society to the members of various occupations and professions...but with the problems that confront all members of our society alike.” In the same way, he held, general education should equip people to “appreciate and enjoy the products of man’s creative activity in literature, music, and art; and man’s capacity for reflective thought concerning the nature of the universe and of man’s place and role in it.”<sup>572</sup> Its purpose is to shape well-rounded citizens.

In his discussion of general education, Mays argued that, “Few men are wise enough to know the exact kind of curriculum or contents of a general or liberal education which we might adopt now that will be wholly adequate for every student, to say nothing of five or ten years from today.”<sup>573</sup> He held that the constant ebb and flow of what was considered good curriculum and sound instructional practice in the field of education was proof positive of this claim. That education was a theoretically unstable field, primarily due to its search for relevance, and seemingly always in transition was not troubling for Mays; however, he believed that it required of educators balance in thinking and practice. He held that, “Although changes in education are taking place all the time, I do not subscribe to the theory that everything we did in yester years

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<sup>572</sup> Clarence H. Faust, “The Problem of General Education,” In *The Idea and Practice of General Education: An Account of the College of the University of Chicago* ed. F. Champion Ward. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 4, 6-7.

<sup>573</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “What Is Relevant in General and Liberal Education,” (address delivered at the University of Chicago, October 30, 1970, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 6; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

was bad or nonproductive in preparing our students for life.” In the same way he argued that “not everything we are doing now is out of joint and not every change we make for the future will be valuable under close scrutiny tomorrow.”<sup>574</sup> The ultimate aim for educators, then, he argued, was “to try to make our educational programs more and more adequate for our students in our time.”<sup>575</sup>

But the question of what determines adequacy immediately follows such a statement. Mays believed that, “Our courses of study should meet the current needs of our students and prepare them as much as possible to do the work of the world that needs to be done,” but he also acknowledged that “it is not always easy to determine when a course or curriculum is relevant.” He asserted that, “We need to ask the question relevant to what?”<sup>576</sup> For students pursuing professional careers in fields like medicine or law, corresponding courses are undoubtedly relevant for their future success. However, for these same students, the relevancy of knowing Shakespeare or being philosophically competent is less clear. The challenge, then, is being able to distinguish “between knowledge that is relevant to making a living and knowledge that is relevant to life itself knowing full well that knowledge that is relevant to making a living has to be relevant to life itself.”<sup>577</sup> Thus, while he admitted that knowledge of classic literature or philosophy was not likely to improve one’s skill as an engineer or heighten one’s abilities as a surgeon, he did insist that “knowledge of these disciplines will broaden one’s educational

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<sup>574</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>575</sup> Ibid.

<sup>576</sup> Ibid.

<sup>577</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 2-3.

horizon, enrich his life and in many instances make him a better man, a more humane person, and one more concerned with the welfare of others.”<sup>578</sup>

However, whether students come to a full understanding of this truth, Mays argued, and “Whether a curriculum is relevant and adaptable to meet the needs of a rapidly changing society depends almost wholly upon those of us who teach.”<sup>579</sup> He asserted that, “When students complain about irrelevant courses, they are often complaining about irrelevant teachers, teachers who are unable to adopt new methods and new ways of doing things and unable to adapt themselves to change.” Consequently, Mays claimed, it was the duty of teachers to highlight and make relevant those disciplines students were likely to dismiss as irrelevant. Emphasizing again his long-held assertion “that knowledge is good for its own sake even when it is never used directly in the art of making a living,” he insisted that the “faculties should see to it that this emphasis is not lost sight of however drastic the change may be in an effort to gear the curriculum to what the students demand and what the occupational world requires.”<sup>580</sup>

In saying that, Mays was neither discounting the importance of students’ curricular desires nor their need for occupational preparation; rather, he was reminding college instructors of their instructional authority and professional responsibility to promote educational experiences that helped students develop into well-rounded individuals. As he reminded them, “To be able to enjoy the best in music, art, literature, and science is not a mere luxury to be enjoyed but an experience to enrich life and to make man better.” Further, “In the hands of a gifted, creative and

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<sup>578</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 3.

<sup>579</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 6.

<sup>580</sup> Ibid.

imaginative teacher every course can be made relevant and more and more relevant to fit the urgency of the changing times.”<sup>581</sup>

This is not to say, however, that Mays privileged the abstract over the practical. He believed and had argued for years that college and university curriculums must be developed with the meeting of social needs in mind. He insisted, “that college and university courses should be related to community problems not for the sheer sake of knowing but for the sake of contributing solutions to community problems and also to bridge the social gap between institutions of higher learning and the most needy people in the community.” Mays admitted to possessing limited knowledge of how *all* fields of study could be connected to community issues, but he was adamant in his belief that faculty should be creative enough to establish those connections and students should be required to serve in some community-oriented capacity before being permitted to graduate.<sup>582</sup>

But it seems to me that no student should be allowed to earn an A.B. or B.S. degree without somewhere along the way he is given an opportunity to engage in some meaningful community activity that will broaden his social vision and will be helpful to the people in a particular community... This relationship should not be left to chance nor be haphazardly done but it should be a part of the curriculum planning of the technical school, college or university.<sup>583</sup>

Overall, Mays’s contention regarding the necessity of faculty commitment to adapting pedagogically and making all courses relevant for students stemmed from a strong aversion to educational conservatism. He recalled that at the end of his nearly three-decade tenure as

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<sup>581</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 6-7.

<sup>582</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 9.

<sup>583</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 10.

president of Morehouse, one of his greatest disappointments was the “lack of diversity [in pedagogical techniques] and experimentation on the part of the faculty.”<sup>584</sup> Moreover, he was convinced that his “faculty on the whole was far more conservative and less ready to accept changes in the curriculum and less willing to experiment in order to find new ways of doing things than the administration was.”<sup>585</sup> Implying that he believed their educational pedigree to be of consequence regarding their willingness and/or ability to be pedagogically innovative, Mays went on to highlight the fact that members of his faculty “held A.M. and Ph.D. degrees from some of the most prestigious and renowned universities in this country,” only to be disappointed that he “found a reluctant [*sic*] to change that was baffling.”<sup>586</sup> If the Morehouse faculty’s resistance to change was at all symptomatic of a more pervasive phenomenon in higher education, Mays resolved, there was little question as to why students so willingly dismissed certain courses as irrelevant.

Driving home his point, Mays noted again “that some of the complaints that students often make of irrelevant methods and courses can be explained by the fact that too many professors are not willing to try new courses and new ways of teaching.”<sup>587</sup> The long-term implications of their refusal to adapt were not negligible, Mays contended, noting “that the colleges that will stand the best chance of keeping curricula relevant and the best chance of finding dollars to support their institutions will be those institutions that are not allergic to experimentation and change.”<sup>588</sup> In this regard, Mays held, the welfare of colleges and

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<sup>584</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 12.

<sup>585</sup> Ibid.

<sup>586</sup> Ibid.

<sup>587</sup> Ibid.

<sup>588</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 13.

universities, would not be contingent necessarily upon the frequency with which a course's content was updated; rather, it would depend much more heavily upon the pedagogical strategies and innovations a faculty member was willing to employ to broaden the appeal of a course.

In October of 1971, Mays delivered at the Pratt Institute in New York City another speech on the social responsibility of institutions of higher education. Restating much of what he had articulated in speeches delivered approximately one year before at the University of Chicago and Emory University, Mays emphasized the need for colleges and universities to include in their academic requirements for students community engagement opportunities tailored to address urban problems. Mays acknowledged that the task was “too mammoth for the academic community to do the whole job” and that “People who live in the inner city, local, state and federal government—all must share in the work of the inner city.”<sup>589</sup> However, he insisted that, “higher education cannot escape or elude its share of the responsibility in what is happening in the inner city,” especially if, as Mays believed, “The future health of the nation and that of higher education might well depend upon what we do with the inner city as more affluent people, black and white, flee to suburbia leaving the inner city to poor whites and poor blacks.”<sup>590</sup>

With wealthy whites and subsequently the greater part of the tax base fleeing from urban centers, Mays feared for the futures of the majority minority student populations left to attend urban schools. He noted that an urban area, “more than any other geographical area in the nation will find the quality of education deteriorating because if much of the cost of education depends

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<sup>589</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Higher Education in an Inner City,” (speech delivered at the Pratt Institute in New York City, New York, October 16, 1971, manuscript page 8). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 6; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>590</sup> Ibid.

upon ad valorem taxes, there will be less school money coming from property tax.”<sup>591</sup> But a decline in the quality of education, Mays contended, would be only one of a litany of devastating social problems that would follow white flight. He argued:

that by and large lower income people will be concentrated in the inner city, unemployment will be greater, the dropout rate in our schools will be higher, housing facilities will be less adequate, crime will increase, health care will become less available, there will be a polarization of the races and industry will tend to flee from the inner city to the suburbs and counties making it more difficult for poor people to get to work.<sup>592</sup>

Surely, he asserted, “Higher educators could argue that this is none of their business, let the government, the church, politicians take care of these matters.”<sup>593</sup> Indeed, Mays held, they could argue that their job was “to train the mind and develop skills for our students,” but he believed that “that this is a point of view which higher educators in the 1970’s cannot take.”<sup>594</sup> The privileged, Mays held, no matter what their occupation, had a responsibility to fight for the social justice of the less privileged. Thus, he contended, “If it is true that the best minds are to be found in our institutions of higher learning, it is equally true that these minds can neither escape nor elude the problems of the inner city.”<sup>595</sup> They must face them head-on.

Mays’s vision of how schools like the Pratt Institute and other institutions of higher education could prepare students for community-mindedness began with the curriculum. In the

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<sup>591</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 9.

<sup>592</sup> Ibid.

<sup>593</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 10.

<sup>594</sup> Ibid.

<sup>595</sup> Ibid.



same way schools encouraged students to take a semester to study abroad or intern within specialized industries, he suggested, they could also establish need-specific outreach programs to benefit local communities. Relative to more traditional programs, Mays argued, “It might be just as profitable or more so if institutions of higher learning would concentrate more heavily on the needs of the inner city and work out constructive programs and schedules whereby students could do a semester’s work in the inner city near his institution or somewhere else.”<sup>596</sup> Such an idea was central to Mays’s belief in spiritualizing education, as he was convinced that, “Whatever discipline the student may be majoring in, there are problems and needs in any inner city that would aid the student to better understand his own discipline and possibly make him more sensitive to human need.”<sup>597</sup>

#### A Challenge to and Defense of HBCUs

In addition to his vision of the general role of colleges and universities in American society, Mays had a very particular vision for the role of black colleges and universities in that society. The future for predominantly black schools, Mays believed, was bright, although it remained under constant threat. He knew that some black students would attend white schools but remained confident that there would be “an adequate number of Black students to support Black colleges,” as well as an increased number of whites enrolling in HBCUs. Mays’s optimism about the future of black colleges was rooted in two assumptions: “(1) More people will go to college in the years ahead than [*sic*] now and that every college that is serving a useful purpose will be needed; (2) And Black colleges will not be permitted to starve and die because they are

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<sup>596</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 11.

<sup>597</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 12.

Black.”<sup>598</sup> If his assumptions proved sound, Mays envisioned “three major roles for the Black colleges to play in the years ahead.”<sup>599</sup>

The first role of a black college, he argued, was to “offer a curriculum that prepares the Black students to enter the various occupations that will enable them to compete favorably in a highly competitive society.”<sup>600</sup> Alluding to the racial, isolationist thrust of some segments of the Black Studies Movement, Mays declared that regardless of what “one may think about building a Black university that offers a curriculum relevant to the needs of Black people, Negroes cannot live in a totally Black society wholly separate and distinct from the white society, one that is separate and distinct in education, economics, business, politics, and other community affairs.”<sup>601</sup> The community to which privileged individuals, especially the college educated, were called to serve, he believed, transcended race. Thus, he contended, “Graduates of Black colleges must be prepared to serve the total community in every aspect of life and those who think otherwise will be disillusioned.” Through this catholic lens, then, Mays concluded that the first purpose of black colleges and universities was to provide a curriculum “deep enough and broad enough to meet the needs of all students who elect to enter a Black college.”<sup>602</sup>

While Mays opposed the black nationalists’ approach to reshaping the black college curriculum, he did believe that “Black colleges must provide a curriculum and an experience that

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<sup>598</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Black Higher Education: Past, Present, and Future,” (speech, unknown location, November 17, 1971, manuscript page 13). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 6; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Also see, Benjamin E. Mays, “Black Higher Education: Past, Present, and Future,” February 1979.

<sup>599</sup> Ibid.

<sup>600</sup> Ibid.

<sup>601</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 14.

<sup>602</sup> Ibid.

are highly relevant to the black community.”<sup>603</sup> Thus, the second role of a black college was to develop an appropriate curriculum able to speak to “what is going on in the Black communities and courses...designed to help Black people improve life in their communities,” Mays argued. There were two parts to this curricular approach. The first part called for black college’s faculty and students to become directly involved “in the life of Black people in the slums and ghettos of our cities.” As he had stressed before, black colleges could not simply talk about the major problems plaguing black communities; they had to become agents in the process of solving those problems. The second part called for a more racially inclusive approach to curriculum development and teaching. Mays demanded that course offerings in economics, history, literature, education, science, religion, and athletics highlight blacks’ contributions to those fields, that they “be designed to give the Black man due credit for his contribution to American life in these areas.” Indirectly addressing those in favor of racially designating such courses, Mays made clear his position on the issue, stating that, “It does not matter what you call this emphasis—Afro-American Studies or Black Studies, so long as relevant courses dealing with the Black experience are given.” Although Mays had called all colleges and universities to develop curriculums capable of producing more well-rounded graduates, his specific call for black colleges to highlight and uplift black people was rooted in his belief that predominantly black colleges, more than their predominantly white counterparts, were “uniquely qualified” to do so.<sup>604</sup>

Finally, Mays envisioned black colleges serving “as the conscience of the nation.” He maintained that, “Being close to the Black poor and Black students and professors themselves

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<sup>603</sup> Ibid.

<sup>604</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 15.

being members of a suppressed minority, they are more likely to spearhead movements to abolish interracial injustices.” Mays pointed to historical trends in social activism among blacks as further justification for his vision, noting that, “It was at Howard University, a black institution...that the ground work was laid to go to the Supreme Court to get segregation in the public schools declared unconstitutional and a violation of the 14<sup>th</sup> Amendment.” In the same way, Mays argued, it was on the grounds of North Carolina A & T, a black institution, “that the nonviolent student revolution started which lead to the downfall of segregation in establishments of the cities in the South.” It was conceivable then, for Mays, that with social issues like segregated education and unemployment still plaguing black communities, the black college would remain central in the struggle for justice.<sup>605</sup>

Undoubtedly, the future roles of black colleges and universities were important to Mays, but he knew his vision was only viable if HBCUs managed to survive. Ironically, racial integration, one of the primary causes for which professors and students at black colleges had been fighting, represented one of the greatest threats to black colleges’ survival. Mays feared that, “All mergers of Black and white institutions whether private or state supported will mean liquidation for the Black colleges under the hypocritical disguise of integration.” And of course, in the absence of HBCUs, the national presence of black faculty would diminish and be limited to a handful of white institutions, an unacceptable prospect for Mays, who held that “The Black man’s image in education will not be adequately maintained with a few stellar Black professors in white colleges and universities.”<sup>606</sup> Thus, for Mays, Howard University was necessary. The Atlanta University Center was necessary. Tuskegee and Hampton were necessary, not only

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<sup>605</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 16.

<sup>606</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 17.

because they stood as living reminders of black progress, but also because they “provide the image that Black students need and must have.”<sup>607</sup>

As the previous paragraph reveals, Mays, during the 1970s also became a more vocal defender of black colleges and universities. Indeed, integration had opened up previously unthinkable educational opportunities for black students across the country, but as these opportunities multiplied, so too did the number of would-be critics questioning the long-term relevance of black higher education. In 1976, Mays addressed detractors of HBCUs in a speech entitled, “The Black College in Higher Education.” Due to his own experiences as both a student and administrator at an HBCU, Mays admitted that he never contemplated the future of higher education without black colleges. As he maintained:

I have never been deceived into believing that Black colleges were interim institutions, to go out of existence when white colleges became liberal enough to accept Negroes without discriminating against them. I have argued for as long as I can remember that the Black man’s image in education and that his contribution to American life must be equated with the Black colleges.<sup>608</sup>

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<sup>607</sup> Ibid.

<sup>608</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Black College in Higher Education,” (speech delivered at the University of Albuquerque, 1976, manuscript page 7). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 8; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Mays delivered several speeches similar to this one in following years including the following: Benjamin E. Mays, “The Black College and the Development of the Mind,” (speech delivered at Wilberforce University at the Dr. Charles E. Taylor Day Banquet, March 18, 1977); Benjamin E. Mays, “In Defense of the Black College,” (speech delivered at the CCBE State Meeting, April 20, 1977); Benjamin E. Mays, “Black Experience in Education,” (speech delivered at the Ford Fellows in Educational Journalism Seminar on Desegregation in Higher Education and Black Colleges,

Yet, Mays understood that for many, the task of integration was to be a unilateral one solely on the part of blacks. This was an idea to which Mays refused to subscribe.

He insisted that, “Integration must never mean the liquidation of Black colleges,” and declared, “I for one will fight to maintain the Black image in education and fight for the survival of Black colleges.”<sup>609</sup> According to Mays, the racial makeup of a school should have no bearing on its right to exist; rather, he argued that, “every good college and every college that is needed has a right to live.” For Mays, then, the black college’s right to exist stemmed from its unique position as a dual-minded institution. As he stated:

The Black colleges have a role to play which if they do not play it will hardly be played. The white colleges are designed primarily to meet the needs of white America. The curricula are so designed. The Black college has a double role. The Black colleges must be as much concerned with Shakespear [*sic*] Tennyson and Marlow as white colleges. But the Negro institutions must give equal emphasis to the writing of Dunbar, Countee Cullen and Langston Hughes... The Black colleges must include works of great white historians like Schlesinger and Toinbey, but the Black colleges must include the works of John Hope Franklin,

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October 19, 1978); Benjamin E. Mays, “Education Can Turn Things Around,” (speech delivered at Livingstone College, Salisbury, North Carolina, November 10, 1978); Benjamin E. Mays, “Information and Inspiration for the 80s,” (speech delivered at the Annual Georgia Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers, Atlanta, Georgia, July 22, 1979); Benjamin E. Mays, “The Black Colleges and United Negro College Fund: Contribution to American Life and History,” (speech delivered in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, October 16, 1979); Benjamin E. Mays, “The Church is the Mother and the Cornerstone of Colleges, Universities, and Seminaries in the U.S.,” (speech delivered at Morris College in Sumter, South Carolina, April 27, 1981).

<sup>609</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 16-17.

Carter G. Woodson and Charles Wesley. It is not enough for Black colleges to be conversant with capitalism, but he must know and help the small Black capitalist.<sup>610</sup>

Summarily, Mays's point was that only black schools were taking the time, or in some sense felt obligated, to expose students to both a Eurocentric and Afrocentric curriculum. It was not that Mays believed white colleges and universities were incapable of teaching about blacks' contributions to history; rather, he was convinced that they saw little value in blacks' contributions to history and therefore neglected to teach them altogether.

Black colleges and universities, Mays insisted, were valuable nevertheless. History had proven it so, he maintained, pointing specifically to HBCUs production of influential black leaders, like W.E.B. DuBois and Booker T. Washington, both of whom emerged from their respective HBCUs and came to wield tremendous social influence. Thus, Mays contended, if we "blot out the Negro colleges and the leadership they have produced and are still producing and blot out our state colleges, we would leave a great void in America and the world."<sup>611</sup> What was even more disturbing for Mays, however, was the fact that black colleges and universities seemed to be the only schools whose futures were in question in light of desegregation.

Similar to his speech in 1976, here, Mays expressed deep disappointment in those who held to the idea that black schools automatically became irrelevant when white schools opened

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<sup>610</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 17.

<sup>611</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Towards the Development and Advancement of Black Colleges," (speech delivered before the National Organization of Black University and College Students at the Morris Brown Student Center, November 17, 1978, manuscript page 22). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 9; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

enrollment to black students, and pondered why few, if any, people ever questioned the necessity of other schools who catered to ethnic or religious minorities. As he noted:

Nobody ever raised the question to blot out Brandeis and the Jewish seminary in New York because they are Jewish. Nobody says that Notre Dame and Catholic University should go because they are Catholic. Nobody says that Vanderbilt, Emory and Duke should go because they are United Methodist in origin. Nobody ever says that University of Chicago, Bucknell, Colgate Rochester and Brown should go because of their Baptist heritage.<sup>612</sup>

Thus, for Mays, it was nonsensical that black schools should consider closing their doors simply because white schools had begun accepting black students, especially since black schools, far more than their white counterparts, he argued, fostered environments in which black students could “feel completely at home on the campus and...feel that his university is theirs.”<sup>613</sup>

Although the question, ‘Why Black colleges now that Negroes can enroll in any white college?’ presupposes that the value of black and white colleges lies in their racial makeup, Mays argued to the contrary. As he maintained, “We need the Black colleges in the future to help make America what it ought to be...The Black colleges must survive in order to make America what it claims it is.”<sup>614</sup>

### A Change of Heart

In 1970, Mays, in his second year as president of the Atlanta School Board, spoke before a gathering of teachers to discuss useful strategies to “improve the educational opportunities for inner-city children.” He admitted that given the topic of discussion, the implication for the child

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<sup>612</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>613</sup> Ibid.

<sup>614</sup> Ibid., 23-24.



attending inner-city schools was that he “does not have as good an opportunity as the child in the suburbs, due perhaps to the fact that most of the children in the inner-city are black, poor, more segregated,” and therefore in need of greater assistance.<sup>615</sup>

Mays held that if educational opportunities for students in such environments were inferior to those of suburban students, and they usually were, “and if the Supreme Court was right in 1954 in arguing that segregated schools are inherently inferior,” therefore, “we [educators] are right in trying to find ways to improve the educational opportunities of the inner city.” Their aims were even more righteous, he held, when considering the greater implication of the Supreme Court’s ruling, that certain school districts in the United States, particularly those experiencing dramatic white flight, would “have inferior schools a mighty long time.”<sup>616</sup> Such a notion was unacceptable for Mays and initiated in him a dramatic shift in thinking on segregation.

Whereas for decades Mays had attacked segregation for being immoral and inflicting trauma upon the segregated and inflating the ego of the segregationist, by 1970, he had begun to realize how the tone of the segregation discourse, as set by the Court in 1954, could ultimately have devastating consequences for black America. If, as noted above, the most logical conclusion one could draw from the Supreme Court’s ruling on segregated schools was that they, by virtue of being racially monolithic, would forever be subject to sub-par education, then Mays insisted that educators prepare themselves to challenge the legitimacy of the ruling. As he declared:

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<sup>615</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, (untitled speech, November 11, 1970, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 6; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>616</sup> Ibid.

It may become your job and mine to prove the Supreme Court wrong and prove that segregated public school education can be superior education or certainly equal education. As much as I deplore segregated anything, I cannot accept the thesis that a segregated black school cannot be just as good as a segregated white school. Given good facilities, good dedicated teachers and motivated students, I believe a segregated black school can be just as good as a segregated Gentile or white school.<sup>617</sup>

This significance of this quote for understanding the change in Mays's thinking cannot be overstated.

For the majority of his life, Mays vehemently opposed segregation, usually on the grounds that it perpetuated inequality. In the wake of the *Brown* decision, and for nearly 16 years after, Mays held his position on segregation, championing the court's ruling and its main finding that segregated schools were unequal. Yet, only two years removed from the presidency of Morehouse, and subsequently two years into his tenure as president of the Atlanta Public School Board, Mays found that the *Brown* decision no longer resonated with him. One can only speculate as to why he rejected the Court's opinion, but it is plausible that his ideological about-face was connected to the practical appeal of the ethnocentric educational movement during the late 1960s and early 1970s, in addition to his witnessing firsthand the struggles of urban systems enduring resegregation.

As Ravitch noted, "Initially, the leaders of the traditional civil rights organizations resisted the turn to ethnocentrism and clung to the traditional liberal concept of individual rights...and colorblindness." However, as more militant, ethnocentric groups made "tangible

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<sup>617</sup> Ibid.

gains, the lofty goal of formal legal equality seemed abstract and empty indeed, utterly lacking.”<sup>618</sup> As Mays was indeed involved with the traditional civil rights movement, it may be that by the early 1970s he had become disenchanted with the movement’s approach to current issues and found in the movement toward ethnocentric education a more tenable approach to contemporary challenges in education. Whatever the case, Mays during the 1970s held a more optimistic view of segregated schools and their possibilities for academic excellence.

#### A Charge to Educators

Still, Mays knew that segregated schools, especially those in the inner city, posed challenges and therefore he proposed “some rather wild suggestions as to how we might improve the educational opportunities for the inner-city child.” Mays’s overarching vision included “summer programs of eight weeks with only two scheduled fixed disciplines a day: English and mathematics,” two subjects in which many black students, Mays believed, were weak. He prescribed a traditional approach to these subjects, requiring structured, one-hour instructional periods for each subject during the day, but sought balance in proposing that, “The other hours in the day would be spent on field trips and under the guidance of expert teachers.” This second instructional approach was decidedly more progressive, as Mays’s aim was to make sure the “Classes would be centered around what was observed on the field trip projects.”<sup>619</sup> To explain further his vision of how to incorporate field trips into in-class learning, Mays focused on how inner-city teachers, like those in Atlanta for example, could approach a unit on the Civil War:

The field trips in connection with the Civil War would be a visit to Stone

Mountain where the images of three Confederate Generals are carved in stone in

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<sup>618</sup> Ravitch, *Crusade*, 270.

<sup>619</sup> Mays, untitled speech, 1970, manuscript page 1-2.

order to perpetuate the South's effort and leadership in the Civil War: Jefferson Davis, Stonewall Jackson and Robert E. Lee. From Stone Mountain they would visit the cyclorama where much of the activities of the Civil War can be seen, especially the burning of Atlanta by Sherman. After these visitations, the students would have a minimum of eight hours in class to study the Civil War, its causes its determination and Lincoln's role in the freeing of the slaves. Most importantly, considerable time would be spent acquainting the students with the part Negroes themselves played in their own emancipation.<sup>620</sup>

For Mays, then, while field trips were central to his proposed educational program, they were designed to be catalysts for more in-depth classroom learning experiences.

Mays was especially interested in making sure students, their race notwithstanding, were exposed to more teaching about blacks' contributions to American history, because he believed it to be "just as essential for white students to know Black History as it is for black students to know the contributions the white man has made to American life."<sup>621</sup> However, because he understood that blacks were disproportionately represented in inner-city schools, he focused much of his proposed program's educational content on helping black students' cultivate their historical and intellectual identities. For example, Mays lamented how wide was the "gulf...between middle class blacks and those below" and subsequently "how little black students know about what black people are doing in their own communities." Across the nation, he noted, blacks owned and operated businesses and controlled organizations, yet many black people knew little about these institutions' inner workings. Thus Mays proposed that inner-city

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<sup>620</sup> Ibid, manuscript page 3.

<sup>621</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 3-4.

students spend a day visiting black-owned companies and organizations in their communities to gain a greater perspective on black entrepreneurship and leadership, after which they “would spend two hours a day for four days learning the history of Negro business and its future.”<sup>622</sup>

Mays sought to apply the same formula to show students how blacks came to affect change in employment, civil rights, politics, and sports. He believed that by introducing black students to successful black men and women in these fields and by tying these experiences to in-class discussions on the significance of blacks’ contributions in these areas, teachers could show firsthand the tremendous progress blacks have made in the face of adversity, thereby inspiring their students to dream more ambitiously and believe in the attainability of success through hard work and preparation.<sup>623</sup>

Overall, Mays was clear about the objectives of his proposed program and how he believed it could positively influence inner-city students. He reiterated his point that “the ability to read well, articulate well and communicate with exceptional skill and to possess mathematical skill are basic to learning,” but noted again that he looked to “the community oriented approach to provide ways of improving the quality of education because the programs will be relevant and alive.”<sup>624</sup> Community-oriented learning was also valuable, he contended, because it was capable of motivating students. According to Mays, “It is assumed that if children of the inner-city can be motivated by seeing black people who have done and are doing things, we have gone a long way toward improving the quality of their education and improving their educational opportunities for all education begins with desire.”<sup>625</sup>

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<sup>622</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 4.

<sup>623</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 6.

<sup>624</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 8.

<sup>625</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 9.

In addition to teachers, Mays believed, principals were key to improving the quality of public education in America. In fact, in a speech entitled, “Public School Education, a Challenge to Principals,” he contended that, “Excepting students, principals are the most important group of educators in the public school systems of this nation.” Of course, Mays, as previously noted, thought quite highly of teachers and claimed that, “Every man who is anything much can point to some teacher who inspired and motivated him to strive for excellence, to reach for the stars and grasp after the moon.”<sup>626</sup> Yet, he remained convinced that the principal was the most significant educative agent in public schools, if for no other reason than the fact that “He sets the tone for academic excellence in his school” and “The teachers take on his values of what good education is to be in their schools.” Thus, Mays believed that if the principal values “high standards the teachers catch the spirit of aiming for high educational goals.” In the same way, Mays held, students would begin to mimic the values of their teachers.”<sup>627</sup> He believed that, “If these supposition are inherent in the teachers reflecting the virtues from the principal, the students will inherit them and will strive to be like their teachers.”<sup>628</sup> In essence, one can surmise, Mays subscribed to the belief: as the principal goes, so goes the school.

As firm as was Mays in his belief that the principal was the driving force in any school’s development, he did not forsake the significant influence and contributions of educators not holding the principalship, the teachers, administrators, and school boards, in the overall success

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<sup>626</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Public School Education, a Challenge to Principals,” (speech delivered at Danforth Associate Conference, Miami, Florida, March 15, 1976, manuscript page 2). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 8; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>627</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 3.

<sup>628</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 4.

of public schools. In fact, Mays sought to rally and inspire them for what he believed was a coming battle for the public schools. He encouraged his fellow educators to remember that “your job and mine is to work to save the public school system,” reminding them of how openly critical people were becoming towards public education, and insisting that, “Never before in my time has there been so much criticism of our public schools.”<sup>629</sup> That the public schools were under assault and needed “saving” was even more evident to Mays as he highlighted how some public school detractors believed student achievement had reached such poor levels as to be grounds for the abolishment of public schools or a severe cut in school funding.<sup>630</sup>

Ultimately, Mays found both measures to be counterintuitive for improving school performance, since neither would ultimately help the schools. Rather than swiftly dismantle the public school system or deny it appropriate funds, he proposed revitalizing school systems’ teachers, students, and parents. In his view, there was “an element of despair and frustration that have descended upon the public schools which must be broken,”<sup>631</sup> one that required the collective effort of all persons involved in the educative process. The following quote captures best Mays’s vision:

I believe that given a normal mind with dedicated, prepared teachers, teachers who love their students, teachers who teach beyond the pay check, those who teach as if God sent them into the world to teach, given parents who see to it that their children do their home work and parents who support a reasonable amount

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<sup>629</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 6.

<sup>630</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 7.

<sup>631</sup> Ibid.

of discipline in the schools, Johnny and Mary will learn to read, write, spell, and figure.<sup>632</sup>

Mays insisted that there was “nothing magic about this;” rather, “It is largely a matter of patience, will and determination to prepare these youngsters for the world tomorrow.”<sup>633</sup>

But it was not only from those seeking to abolish public education that schools needed to be saved, Mays held. He believed that schools also needed salvation from teachers’ unions and politicians. Those who believed “public schools can be saved by unionization” represented a tremendous threat to schools, in Mays’s view, because they sought to “wrest control of school systems from the boards of education and place them in the hands of organized teachers’ unions” with the hope of securing “first rate education.” In short, he found such means for improving education to be nonsensical and problematic, as they were wholly unconcerned with the welfare of students. To make matters worse, the push for teacher unionization had become a hot-button issue among politicians to the extent that some congressman were seeking “to make collective bargaining of teachers a federal law” and “take control from state, county, and independent school systems.” If educators who opposed the unionization movement were to stand by idly, Mays contended, it would be “tantamount to casting our children to the wolves to be destroyed and their education paralyzed,”<sup>634</sup> especially since he was convinced that, “Politicians in Washington don’t know enough about education to be dabbling in it.”<sup>635</sup>

Mays readily acknowledged that he and all educators who agreed that teachers’ unions could prove detrimental to public education were preparing themselves to fight an uphill battle,

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<sup>632</sup> Ibid.

<sup>633</sup> Ibid.

<sup>634</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 8.

<sup>635</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 9.



however righteous. Because labor unions were financially powerful enough to lobby in Washington and “spend huge sums of money on candidates who run for legislation and for the United States congress,” Mays recognized that many of the politicians involved in teacher unionization could “be coerced to do that which they know may mean legislating the public schools into slavery.” Without comparable resources and influence, his course of action was to increase public awareness of teacher unionization, to “take our case to the public, to our state and local boards of education so that they understand what congress may do to our public schools.”<sup>636</sup> Despite the tremendous challenge unions posed to the future of education, Mays believed in the American people’s heart for public education and its power to influence the course of public education policy.

#### Community Involvement in Education

In 1978, Mays revisited the issue of community responsibility and public school education in a speech delivered before the United States Office of Education. Then in his eighth year as the Atlanta School Board president, Mays had experienced nearly a decade of challenges in public education and expressed openly his concern about the generally critical tone with which people across the nation were speaking about public schools. As he had come to conclude, “Public education is in trouble all over the United States,” and “Its critics are legion.”<sup>637</sup> Generally, Mays argued, the criticisms were of the following sort: “Teachers are incompetent, teachers are not dedicated, teaching for the money not for the love of the job... too much taxes

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<sup>636</sup> Ibid.

<sup>637</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Community Involvement in Education,” (speech delivered before the United States Office of Education at the Hyatt Regency Hotel, Washington, D.C., June 20, 1978, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 9; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

for education when we are not getting results...on test scores many or most of our students fall below the national average, and now the emphasis on tax cuts is becoming popular.”<sup>638</sup> While he did not deny that these criticisms were rooted in *some* truth, he admitted that he intended “to praise the public schools not bury them.”<sup>639</sup>

Surely, Mays conceded, there were students across the country underperforming and struggling academically, but their doing so, he insisted, did not give license to critics to label and denigrate such students and their schools. Rather than focusing on students’ scholastic shortcomings, he held, would-be critics would do better in helping educators identify and implement effective educative solutions. For instance, Mays believed teaching to be “one of the grandest professions among all the professions,” and therefore emphasized it as a central component in improving public education.<sup>640</sup> However, he also understood teachers’ limitations in the overall educative process and advocated a more community-oriented approach to increasing student performance, his driving question being: “How can a community become involved to help this great enterprise?” Quite simply, his answer was that “We all must be involved: teachers in each school, principals in each school, counselors in each school, area superintendents in each school, the children themselves in each school, parent-teacher association in each school, and by all means the parents in the community school.”<sup>641</sup>

While Mays had always charged educators, in the professional sense of the word, with the task of teaching students, his inclusion of the parental unit indicates further development of his communal perspective on education. However professional educators have succeeded and/or

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<sup>638</sup> Ibid.

<sup>639</sup> Ibid.

<sup>640</sup> Ibid., 2-3.

<sup>641</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 3.

failed in their duty to educate students, Mays insisted that, the outcomes “cannot be laid wholly at the door of the school systems of the nations.”<sup>642</sup> While the educative process takes place and is assessed primarily within the K-12 environment, Mays highlighted the fact that the process of learning begins in the home:

Parents have been educating these children long before they reached elementary and secondary school levels. If they have not caught the spark from some kind of teaching by words and teaching by example, teaching by reading to their children or with their children, insisting that certain hours in the evening they must devote to study so that when they come to the public schools they bring something to the school. If they are not doing this, they are not fulfilling their duties as parents.<sup>643</sup>

Thus Mays called for a partnership between teachers, administrators, and parents as a means to ensuring student achievement.

In the Atlanta Public School System, Mays noted, educators and parents were working in just this fashion. Between 1976 and 1978, the school system had begun to focus on and make steady improvements in students’ skills in reading, writing, and math, the logic being that “if a student can’t read, he can’t be educated,” and “If he can’t read he can’t get a job” or be “a leader in his community.” Further, Mays and the city’s leading educators insisted, “that at the end of each three months that progress be made in these areas.”<sup>644</sup> However, if a student failed to make progress, his/her teaching “community” would respond accordingly, a phenomenon captured best in the following quote:

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<sup>642</sup> Ibid.

<sup>643</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 4.

<sup>644</sup> Ibid.

If no progress has been made, the principal, teachers and counselors will call the parents of these students who are not doing well to acquaint them with what is going on so that the parents can never be able to say that I didn't know my child was not doing well. If he is not in school, let the parents know that he is not in school. If the parents can't come during the working hours, arrange time after working hours when they can come. Yes, I know they are tired, but it is their child. They can never be too tired to have a conference about their own child or their own flesh and blood.<sup>645</sup>

Again, Mays emphasized here the need for educators and parents to work together to prioritize young people's education. Although the school was the primary educative agent for most students across the country, Mays recognized and respected the value and authority of parents in the overall educative process.

Shortly thereafter, in October of 1978, Mays spoke again on the community-oriented nature of education at the Parent-Community Conference on Public Education in New Orleans, Louisiana. Although the speech, in subject matter, was similar to the one he delivered in June, it was noticeably more universal in its discussion of educative agents. In the traditional sense, Mays argued, education was the responsibility of "parents, the home, the teachers, principals, and boards of education in the public schools." It was also the responsibility of "the students, professors, presidents and trustees, and board members who shape the policies of education in our colleges and universities." Though less conventional, he noted, education was also the duty of "businessmen, foundations, corporations, politicians, and diplomats." As he viewed it, "nobody is left out" of the educative process. This truth, however, he acknowledged was as

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<sup>645</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 5.

sobering as it was inspiring. Mays believed that while there were those seeking to positively influence the world through education, there were also strong anti-social elements promoting the miseducation of the world. As he declared, “Make no mistake; our jails and penitentiaries are out there educating. Gambling dives, the prostitutes out there on the streets, the gangster, the dope business, are out there educating.” For Mays, then, it was even more imperative that people invested in positive change take seriously their roles as teachers, for “If we fail, it will be a great tragedy on mankind.”<sup>646</sup>

Despite having universalized the act of teaching, Mays still echoed some of the particular duties of individuals during the educating process. For instance, the parental unit and the domestic setting, he believed, were instrumental in the educative development of students, mainly because “parents are responsible for the examples they set for their children in the home.” Further, Mays argued that, “Sociologically speaking, the parents must beneficently frame their children, making it hard for them to go astray.”<sup>647</sup> He claimed that parents who “drink liquor freely in the home, smoke marijuana, stay out late sociolizing [*sic*], gambling in the home, cheating on their marital vows, can hardly advise their children not do to these things.” Most importantly, however, he noted that, “These things are not good for the education of the next generation.”<sup>648</sup>

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<sup>646</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “We Are Responsible for the Education of the Next Generation,” (speech delivered at the Parent-Community Conference on Public Education in New Orleans, Louisiana, October 20, 1978, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 9; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>647</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 2.

<sup>648</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 4.

Beyond parents and the domestic setting, Mays argued, public school teachers and college professors were also instrumental in ensuring students were afforded an adequate education. Despite the fact that teachers were constantly being criticized, he insisted that, “public school teachers stand exceptionally high in the education of the next generation.”<sup>649</sup> Recalling the tremendous impact his teachers and professors had on his life, Mays concluded that those “teachers have made me responsible for the education of the next generation.” In the same way, he claimed, current teachers were responsible for building the next generation. However, Mays reminded his audience that building the next generation through education was not solely the task of professional educators. Reiterating his overarching point, he stated, “In one way or another, we are all educators. Let us do our jobs so well that God will bless us and the next generation will look upon us with honor and respect.”<sup>650</sup>

By 1979, Mays had begun to speak with a greater urgency about the need to educate properly America’s youth for the challenges they would face as the nation’s leaders in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Because the United States was a democracy, Mays argued, it was imperative that it invest in “Education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century...because a democracy needs an educated citizenry, a knowledgeable public, a people who read books, magazines, articles and listens to informing programs on television on radio.”<sup>651</sup> Further, he believed that the coming century held for its leaders many of the same educational challenges that plagued leaders of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and

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<sup>649</sup> Ibid.

<sup>650</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 10.

<sup>651</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Education for Survival in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century,” (speech delivered at unknown location, July 16, 1979, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 10; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spangarn Research Center, Howard University.

therefore required teachers to prepare students specifically for those challenges. As he contended:

Our mission in the public schools is to train the youths of the nation, to give them a background, a grounding in the basic skills: reading, writing, composition, mathematics, the language arts, so that our young people will be better able to cope with the problems of the 21<sup>st</sup> century than we were in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>652</sup>

That all students were fluent in basic areas of knowledge was important, Mays argued, since these students would fill all public and private occupations eventually.

Beyond subject matter, he insisted, education for the 21<sup>st</sup> century must also emphasize “a keen sense of the public schools responsibility to teach morality and ethics in our colleges, universities, and public schools.”<sup>653</sup> The plethora of social problems the world was facing and would continue to face required it, Mays held:

The problems of war and peace, homicide and murder, crime and racism, theft and vandalism, alcoholism and dope, childhood pregnancies and childhood and adult delinquencies, unequal justice administrators in our courts against minorities, unemployment (especially among Blacks), discrimination against the aged and neglected mothers whose children have no legitimate fathers, and discrimination against those on welfare, and wars that we cannot win because of distrust among the nations—each nation, democratic or communist, competing in the arms race to build the most deadly nuclear weapon. These are some of the

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<sup>652</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 7.

<sup>653</sup> Ibid.

problems that must be dealt with in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. We will solve them with ethics, morality and an application of the Jewish and Christian principles.<sup>654</sup>

For Mays, then, the future was not a matter of whether or not there would be challenges, but rather how could the world respond most effectively to those challenges? As he had contended for years, it would be in large part through the world's adoption of a Judeo-Christian worldview. If, however, humanity failed to commit to practicing the moral and ethical principals embodied in the faith of Jews and Christians, Mays worried, "we will hardly survive through the 21<sup>st</sup> century."<sup>655</sup>

This was especially true, Mays argued, if educators failed to answer fully and faithfully the call to a higher moral plain, as he maintained that, "We educators are called upon to seek solutions to these problems not by platitudes and preaching but by examples demonstrating that we are an epitomy [*sic*] of what we preach." Like social activists, and religious leaders, Mays argued, educators were obligated to their task, even in the face of adversity. As he asserted:

We do not stop working for a warless world because we have fought war from the time civilization began in the east. Preachers don't stop preaching against sin because people keep on committing it. Nor do we stop improving our educational systems because they are not perfect and enemies last out against us.<sup>656</sup>

Mays' contention, here, seems to be that educators' desire and commitment to providing quality education should not be easily swayed by public opinion or the appearance of possibly bleak outcomes. The task given to educators, he believed, should neither be oversimplified nor made overly complicated. As he determined, "We in the public school systems across the world can do

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<sup>654</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 8.

<sup>655</sup> Ibid.

<sup>656</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 9.



only that which we are called to do and that is to serve and prepare the young for the days ahead.”<sup>657</sup>

### The Status of Desegregation and Integration

During the 1970s, Mays continued to voice concern regarding the pace and outcomes of desegregation and integration. As noted in the previous chapter, Mays was dissatisfied with the slow pace at which schools were desegregating and moving towards integration; however, he was also discontent with the rapidly increasing rate of unemployment among black teachers in districts ostensibly working towards desegregating their schools and how the jobs of black teachers were simply being written off as collateral damage in the process. Mays seemed deeply disturbed by the fact that, “A part of the desegregation picture is the way that thousands of black teachers have either lost their jobs in the name of integration or have been demoted,” and cited such a reality as evidence that the integration process still had “a long way to go.”<sup>658</sup> He admitted that while it was difficult “to get accurate statistics on the number of black teachers who have lost their jobs under the guise of integration,” he believed it was true that black teachers were displaced and demoted at disproportionately higher rates than their white counterparts and, in

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<sup>657</sup> Ibid.

<sup>658</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Education in the New South,” (speech delivered at the Danforth Conference, Athens, GA, August 21-27, 1971, manuscript page 20). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 6; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; For similar speeches, see: Benjamin E. Mays, “The Public Schools Since 1954,” (speech delivered at Greater St. Petersburg Council on Human Relations Annual Brotherhood Month Observance, February 19, 1978); Benjamin E. Mays, “The Public Schools Since 1954,” (speech delivered at the Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission in Dallas, Texas, February 24, 1982).

essence, were being “sacrificed on the altar of unemployment, all in the name of carrying out court orders of integration.”<sup>659</sup>

Fairclough echoed Mays’s sentiments, noting that “For virtually all black teachers, the period immediately before integration was a time of uncertainty and apprehension,” especially since “The basic premise of integration, that white schools were better than black schools, encouraged an implicit assumption that the white teachers were also better.”<sup>660</sup> And as Fultz held, “fundamentally undergirding displacement, too, were the White South’s cultural blinders which simply could not or would not acknowledge African-American competency and therefore insisted that Black educators were unqualified.”<sup>661</sup> Ultimately, that such large numbers of black educators found themselves in powerless positions where they were being demoted or fired without regard, revealed the severe limitations of the *Brown* decisions. Without question, the rulings represented a dramatic turning point in the history of the United States, as they overturned *Plessy* and initiated the dismantling of Jim Crow, “but the rulings did nothing to sufficiently balance historically imbalanced power relationships.”<sup>662</sup>

How the United States would proceed with desegregating its schools in coming years was a matter of possibilities, for Mays. Indeed, he claimed, “It took the May 17, 1954 Decision of the United States Supreme Court to reveal to black folks and white people too, how deeply entrenched are the roots of white and black prejudice and black distrust and resentment of

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<sup>659</sup> Adam Fairclough, *A Class of Their Own: Black Teachers in the Segregated South* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2007), 394.

<sup>660</sup> Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 166-67.

<sup>661</sup> Michael Fultz, “The Displacement of Black Educators Post-*Brown*: An Overview and Analysis,” *History of Education Quarterly* 44, no.1 (Spring, 2004), 40.

<sup>662</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

whites;” however, he maintained an enduring optimism and held that, “Despite the slow pace of integration in public education, there is need of faith to believe that we can do a better job than we are doing and have done to further desegregate the schools.”<sup>663</sup> Thus the driving question for educators, Mays contended, should be, ““What kind of city should we have ten years from now?”” The failure or refusal to take seriously this question could have devastating consequences, he warned:

As long as the top leadership in our communities keep silence on the question of segregated or desegregated schools and as long as white folk flee the central city and our leadership is unwilling to tackle the problem as to what kind of relationship Negroes and white people should have and what kind of city we should build for our children, we will have segregated schools.<sup>664</sup>

For Mays, the likelihood of there being segregated schools in the future was great, if only because of the depth of people’s racial prejudice. He admitted that nobody really knew what would be the outcome “in completely desegregating the schools,” but he predicted “that we will end up, due to our prejudices and housing patterns, with some schools all black and some all white, a few tokenly desegregated schools, and a few fairly well desegregated schools.”<sup>665</sup>

Given Mays’s prediction about the future of school desegregation, it is no surprise that he also believed education would be a major human rights issue in the decades to come.<sup>666</sup>

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<sup>663</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 26.

<sup>664</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 27.

<sup>665</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 33.

<sup>666</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Human Rights in the 1970’s and Beyond,” (untitled speech, March 10, 1972, manuscript page 2). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 7; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

Specifically, he claimed that, “Much of it will center around equality of education and quality education not only for Blacks and other minorities but for poor whites as well,” and “will include the constant battle to eliminate both subtle and blatant discrimination in a non-segregated community.” Surely, as both a resident of Atlanta and school board president, Mays had witnessed firsthand how fierce was the resistance to desegregation, as many whites’ refusal to attend school with blacks had reshaped the entire city; however, these experiences alone did not lead him to the conclusion that segregation in schools would be a decades-long problem. As Mays traveled the nation, visiting major cities like Washington, D.C., Philadelphia, Chicago, and New York, he recalled that, “people were and still are talking about the plight of the public schools,” particularly the elusiveness of quality education. According to Mays, the concerns of citizens in these cities were directly tied to the ongoing struggle for school desegregation and the fact that “the quality of education in our schools is complicated by race.” As he contended, “Were there no Blacks who have been short-changed educationally for 350 years and were there no other deprived minorities, there would be far less talk about the deficiencies in public school education.”<sup>667</sup>

As it stood, however, the legacy of racism in America was such that many public schools across the nation *were* indeed segregated and suffering from significant deficiencies. That many of these schools would remain segregated was not lost on Mays, but he insisted that those educators committed to fighting for school equality remain so. As he declared:

Let those of us who by profession have sympathy and empathy for all the people who believe in quality education for every child, let us insist that whether a school is thoroughly integrated, partially desegregated or not desegregated at all, that

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<sup>667</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 3.

every school has the best equipment, the best teachers and the best counselors. Let the people who oppose busing be as anxious to have quality education in the slums as they are to have quality education in the rich suburbs, and let us be willing to pay for it, Black and white with our tax dollars.<sup>668</sup>

As Mays had stated before, access to a quality education was a human right, one that belonged to every American child and was the responsibility of “every state of the Union.” However, he also acknowledged that the manner in which each state would try to fulfill its obligation to provide an equal education to all children would take many forms, such as “token desegregation...heavy desegregation, and settling...for an all-Black and an all white school system so long as the dollar spent on each system is equal per child and equal in building and in equipment.” Knowing full well that the latter outcome was likely in cities enduring white flight, Mays charged “Black principals and teachers” with the task of making sure “that if they end up in an all-Black school, it will be as good as one that is all white.” Asserting again his new stance on the supposed inherent quality of segregated institutions, Mays declared, “I cannot accept the premise that that which is black must of necessity be inferior.”<sup>669</sup>

### Black History and the Curriculum

In 1975, Mays became more vocal in his call for colleges and universities to include in their curriculums a greater emphasis on blacks’ role in American history. The conspicuous absence of blacks from American history courses was no surprise to Mays, as he argued that, “there had been a great omission in histories written in this country since its beginning in

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<sup>668</sup> Ibid., manuscript page 5.

<sup>669</sup> Ibid.

1776.”<sup>670</sup> This was due, in part, to the fact that black people were originally brought to the United States in bondage and were considered “chattels, occupying the position of cattle, hogs, cows, horses or any other saleable object.” But Mays also linked the neglect of blacks’ contributions in American history to the fact that “history is not written for slaves nor for the common man,” but “for men who occupy in government and other notable positions,” most of whom are white men. Nevertheless, Mays maintained, “Black people have earned the right to have a place in the curriculum of American schools.”<sup>671</sup> Not only have black people “fought and died for this country from the Revolutionary War thru War in Vietnam,” he asserted, but “For 246 years the Black man helped build America with his enslaved bodies.” Without question, then, Mays argued, “His [the Black man] contribution to America [*sic*] life must be dramatized on the pages of history.”<sup>672</sup>

What was more, for Mays, however, was the sense of identity and pride that came with knowing one’s history. As he noted:

I adore George Washington but Booker Washington inspires me more than George for Booker Washington is mine. I love white abolitionists, Garrison, Stowe Wendell Philips and others, but I love Fred Douglas more than these for Fred Douglas is mine. I am thankful for what Lyndon Johnson did for this country and Negroes but Martin Luther King is dearer to me than Johnson for King is

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<sup>670</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Place of Black History in American Schools,” (speech delivered at Emmanuel Junior College, Swainsboro, Georgia, September 22, 1975, manuscript page 4). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 6; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>671</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 5.

<sup>672</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript page 6.

mine. So for pride in what you are and motivation to inspire Blacks to develop and achieve to the nth degree, Black history deserves a place in the curriculum of American schools.<sup>673</sup>

But not for these reasons only. Mays, as he had argued since 1970,<sup>674</sup> believed that white students would also benefit from exposure to black history, since, “The average white American knows little about what Blacks have done for the country.” As he held, “In order to be well informed as an educated man or woman, white people should know something about the history and culture of Black people,” as should all people.<sup>675</sup>

Mays’s point here echoed that made by Carter G. Woodson nearly forty years before in his book, *The Miseducation of the Negro*. Woodson, who is generally considered to be father of the study of black history, argued that, “no one can be thoroughly educated until he learns as much about the Negro as he knows about other people.” This especially applied to blacks. Like Mays, Woodson believed that, “if the Negro is to be elevated he must be educated in the sense of being developed from what he is.” For Woodson, this did not require the abandonment of Eurocentric studies for Afrocentric studies necessarily; rather it required educators to strike a balance in each area of study. For instance, he claimed that with regards to history, “We would not neglect to appreciate the unusual contribution of Thomas Jefferson to freedom and democracy; but we would invite attention also to two of his contemporaries, Phyllis Wheatley...and Benjamin Banneker.” In the same way, he held, “We would in no way detract from the fame of Perry on Lake Erie or Jackson at New Orleans in the second struggle with

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<sup>673</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 6-7.

<sup>674</sup> See Mays, untitled speech, November 11, 1970, manuscript page 1.

<sup>675</sup> Mays, “The Place of Black History,” manuscript page 7.

England; but we would remember the gallant black men who assisted in winning these memorable victories on land and sea.”<sup>676</sup>

When Mays retired from the board in August of 1981, it was surely not a decision he had come to lightly. As he shared in his retire speech, “I have spent many sleepless hours trying to decide if I should run for another 4 years for the Atlanta School Board...For several weeks friends from all over the city have called me wanting to know if I were going to run again.” However, after serious deliberation, he thought better of it, for several reasons. The most pressing reason was his age. As he declared, “I am 87 years old, perhaps the oldest board president in the United States,” and “I have several things to do before I die.” Not surprisingly, each of the “things” was scholarly.<sup>677</sup>

First on Mays’s agenda was completing “the process of writing a volume” tentatively titled, *Brown vs. The Board of Education*. He felt that the landmark Supreme Court decision had “not been treated properly” and wanted “to finish this book at the end of 1982”. Second on his agenda was the compilation all of the articles he published in *The Pittsburgh Courier* into a book, “treating them topically,” which he believed would “make a good volume.” Finally on his agenda was a third book, this one intended to be an examination of his presidency at Morehouse, aptly titled, *My Twenty-seven Years at Morehouse: My Successes and My Failures*.<sup>678</sup> As of yet, none of Mays’s proposed projects has been published, although the manuscripts may still exist.

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<sup>676</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933, repr., Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998), 136, 155.

<sup>677</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Statement By: Dr. Benjamin E. Mays,” (retirement speech, August 19, 1981, manuscript pages 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 11; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>678</sup> *Ibid.*, manuscript pages 1-2.



In sharing his final thoughts, Mays described his twelve years with the board as having “been wonderful years” and “The eight board members” as having “been lovely to work with.” Despite occasional differences in their points of view, he recalled, they were always successful in working together “on fundamental issues” and “for the good our students.” Reflecting on the personal commitment he made to the board, Mays declared, “One thing I do know—I have not cheated on the job. I have given the best I have to the Atlanta schools.” It was necessary, then, to move on. Quoting the book of Ecclesiastes, he reminded his audience that, “‘To everything there is a season and a time for every purpose under the heavens. A time to be born and a time to die, a time to plant and a time to pluck up that which has been planted.’ So this is the time for me to step down from the Atlanta School Board.”<sup>679</sup>

### Summary

Between 1968 and 1981, Mays continued to write prolifically on a diversity of educational issues, many of which continued to reflect his long-held views on education, as well as his growing familiarity with K-12 educational contexts. As his commencement speech at Emory University revealed, Mays continued to advance his position on the necessity of college graduates using their education to better the world and to face head-on the challenges of their generation. He also stood firm in his positions on the necessity of teachers taking seriously the privilege of shaping America’s children, reemphasized the value of black colleges and universities in the midst of further school integration, and argued for the inclusion of black history in the public school curriculum. And while in many ways, Mays’s educational thinking during the final twelve years of his professional career was consistent with that of his first thirty-five, there is a notable shift in his interest in afro-centric education issues.

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<sup>679</sup> Ibid., manuscript pages 3-4.

As noted in Chapter 5, Mays's position on the necessity of desegregation in public schools changed dramatically during this period, as he realized how difficult it would be to change the hearts and minds of those committed to school segregation. He therefore resigned himself to making the most out of a rapidly resegregating school system and began advocating curricular measures that would take into account and build up the identities of the predominantly black students with whom he was interacting and on whose behalf he was now working. On one hand, Mays was disenchanted by racism he encountered in the public school system and its impact on school desegregation, but on the other hand, he saw it as an opportunity for black students, black teachers, and black schools to challenge and dispel myths about black intelligence and academic achievement.

## Chapter 7

### Findings and Implications

In this final chapter, the research questions posed in chapter one are answered. The following section explores the implications of his educational thought for the contemporary education discourse and practice.

### Research Findings

#### 1. What were the principal features of Benjamin Mays's educational thought?

One of the principal features of Mays's educational thought was what Eliot Eisner called religious orthodoxy, which he described as an ideology that operated generally on the assumption that God exists and that his word, usually recorded in a holy text, was an essential component of shaping the educational practices of believers. According to Eisner, "at the heart of the religious enterprise is a conception of how life ought to be lived and a conception of the kinds of habits and beliefs that will lead to its realization." Practitioners of Judaism, for instance, were likely to identify with orthodox, conservative, or reform systems of belief, and consequently "embrace different ideas about what it means to be a Jew." How they understood God's purpose and expectations for their lives, then, necessarily influenced heavily their educational practices.<sup>680</sup>

The centrality of religious orthodoxy in Mays's educational thought is evident in his many writings on the value of holding a Christian worldview. Throughout the 1940s, for

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<sup>680</sup> Eliot Eisner, *The Educational Imagination: On the Design and Evaluation of School Programs* 3rd ed. (New York: Macmillan College Publishing Company, 1994), 57-58.

instance, Mays placed Christianity at the center of his discussions on education. Not only did he argue that a thorough understanding of Christianity was central to black college students' intellectual development,<sup>681</sup> but he also maintained that it was a necessary component of an effective and relevant philosophy of education.<sup>682</sup>

Another principal feature of Mays's educational thought was Social Reconstructionism. Most often associated with men like George Counts, Sidney Hook, and Harold Rugg, Social Reconstructionism, as defined by William Watkins, is a counter-hegemonic philosophy that "questioned the capitalist order as facilitator and generator of racism" and "viewed schools and curriculum as an instrument to challenge and eventually change unjust economic, political, and social arrangements." Although Social Reconstructionism was fashioned by progressive educators as a broad approach to educational reform, Watkins asserted, "the ideals of a collectivist, egalitarian, reformed society found some support among the politically conscious Black intelligentsia, civil rights leaders, and labor activists."<sup>683</sup>

Given Mays's activist disposition, it is no surprise that much of his writing embodied elements of Social Reconstructionism. Like Counts, Mays believed educational institutions should actively engage and seek to change society. He believed that if the ills of American society were to be challenged, they would have to be challenged in the halls of America's colleges and universities, as it was these institutions that would inculcate in students the most

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<sup>681</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "The Religious Life and Needs of Negro Students," *The Journal of Negro Education* 9, no. 3 (July 1940).

<sup>682</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Democratizing and Christianizing America in This Generation," *The Journal of Negro Education* 14, no.4 (Autumn 1945).

<sup>683</sup> William Watkins, "Black Curriculum Orientations: A Preliminary Inquiry," *Harvard Educational Review* 63, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 332-333.

valued democratic ideals of our nation. For Mays, then, Social Reconstructionism America's educational institutions were powerful spaces for intellectual development, and as such, they had a responsibility to help shape the minds of the country's emerging citizenry.<sup>684</sup>

The last principal feature of Mays's educational thought was the freedom and brotherhood of man. Despite growing up in a culture where racism and racially motivated violence against blacks were common, Mays never internalized the notion that he, because of his skin tone, was inferior to any other person. He was convinced that God made him equal to and loved him as much as any white person and therefore vehemently opposed segregation or any other social institution that tried to bind people because of their race, religion, or gender. Mays's educational journey from the one-room schoolhouse in South Carolina to the University of Chicago was fueled by this belief in the equality of man, as was his scholarship and commitment to educating young blacks.

## 2. What were the principles or ideas that influenced Mays's thinking about education?

Mays's educational thought was heavily influenced by the basic tenets of Christianity, democracy, and social responsibility. Christianity had been central to Mays's overall worldview since his childhood, as his mother, who he described as being "very religious," was the spiritual leader in Mays home and he counted her among his earliest spiritual influences. At the family's local Baptist church, Mays's religious training buttressed his growing love for education. Sitting "as a boy in Sunday school, discussing the Sunday school lessons with the adults, asking questions and making comments," he recalled, "they encouraged me and gave me their blessings." Mays never forgot or devalued the value of those church experiences in his

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<sup>684</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Segregation in Higher Education," *Phylon* 10, no. 4 (1949): 401.

educational development. He admitted that while, “The people in the church did not contribute one dime to help me with my education...they gave me something far more valuable. They gave me encouragement, the thing I most needed.”<sup>685</sup>

Throughout his high school and college years, Mays’s view of Christianity would go relatively unchanged. When he reached the University of Chicago, however, his Christian faith would undergo a radical transformation. There, Mays embraced fully the Social Gospel of Walter Rauschenbusch. Rauschenbusch’s Social Gospel called for the preaching of the Gospel as a means of Christianizing society and thereby delivering humanity from its sinful ways. The immediacy of Rauschenbusch’s theology with regards to social issues, as well as its promotion of human equality, resonated with Mays in a powerful way and provided him with a viable alternative to the accommodationist theology to which he had been exposed at the church of his youth. Mays’s adoption of the Social Gospel as his primary theological lens changed the way he viewed not only his faith, but also the world. If the Social Gospel, in as much as it was capable of explicating God’s relationship with humanity, was also capable of initiating a moral transformation in society through the preaching of the Gospel and application of Christian doctrine, it is reasonable that Mays would extend its application to social problems like education.<sup>686</sup>

For Mays, democracy, like Christianity, was also central to his thinking on education. As a black man born and raised in the Jim Crow South, Mays viewed democracy as much more of a

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<sup>685</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, *Born To Rebel* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1971), 10, 17.

<sup>686</sup> Martin E. Marty, *Righteous Empire: The Protestant Experience in America* (New York: The Dial Press, 1970), 179; Walter Rauschenbusch, *A Theology for the Social Gospel* (New York: MacMillan, 1918), 5-6; Benjamin E. Mays, “Democratizing and Christianizing America in This Generation,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 14, no.4 (Autumn 1945).

fleeting ideal than an actual reality. He knew well the oft-cited, democratic creed of the United States and was familiar with the government's proclivity for global political posturing, but he knew better the sharp sting of racism and the heavy burden of segregation. America, Mays resigned, was a democracy more in name than in practice, yet he believed it was capable of fulfilling its promise of providing equality for all men.

Schools, Mays believed, were one site where democracy could and must flourish. His incessant critiques of racial school segregation stemmed from this belief, as did his call for federal funding to public schools. Mays recognized that schools were among the most powerful socializing institutions in a nation and therefore needed to be devoted to raising up an intelligent and spiritually sensitive citizenry capable of sustaining a democracy. Schools, if American democracy were to thrive, could not at the same time promote democratic living and deny students equal opportunity on the grounds of race. Rather, as Mays declared, they had "to become exponents of the democratic way."<sup>687</sup>

The third principle that influenced Mays's educational thought was social responsibility, essentially the idea that man had a duty to be his brother's keeper. Most likely stemming from Mays's Christian faith and his belief in democracy, social responsibility called on men and women to develop a greater sensitivity to human suffering and work toward its relief. Education then, Mays believed, should inculcate in humanity a willingness to identify with all men and labor for the common good. Within this context, then, Mays could see no good in a man's wealth if his neighbor was poor. He could see no virtue in an intelligent man's pontificating if his

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<sup>687</sup> Mays, "Democratizing," 531.

brother would illiterate. Accordingly, he contended, “We are what we are by the Grace of God. And God will hold me accountable for what I do with his grace.”<sup>688</sup>

3. Where did Mays’s views on education sit in relation to his African American contemporaries involved in education?

To establish an appropriate context in which to answer this question, it is helpful to use William Watkins’s *Black Curriculum Orientations* to interpret the various historical strains of black educational thought. Conceived as an intentionally race-conscious group of curriculum ideologies, the purpose of the *Black Curriculum Orientations* was to “describe the historical curriculum experience(s) of Black America.” Unlike mainstream curriculum theorizing, which Watkins argued, “generally evolved in an environment free from physical and intellectual duress and tyranny,” black curriculum theorizing and therefore “black social, political, and intellectual development in all cases evolved under socially oppressive and politically repressive circumstances involving physical and intellectual duress and tyranny.”<sup>689</sup>

The conditions under which blacks had to conceive their social and educational ideologies, he maintained, caused them to be “distorted, unnatural, and stunted.” The black curriculum ideologies that emerged from these circumstances, then, ran “the gamut from capitulation to accommodation to outright defiance,” a diversity of positions that can be attributed to the fact that “Black curriculum outlooks are the result of views evolving from within the Black experience, as well as from views that have been imposed from without.” The

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<sup>688</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “The Function of a College,” (speech delivered at Stillman College in Tuscaloosa, Alabama, October 28, 1949, manuscript page 8). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 1; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>689</sup> William Watkins, “Black Curriculum Orientations: A Preliminary Inquiry,” *Harvard Educational Review* 63, no. 3 (Fall 1993): 332-333.



six orientations that emerged—the functionalist, accommodationist, liberal, reconstructionist, Afrocentrist, and Black Nationalist—were shaped within the context “of the struggle for the U.S. curriculum,” as well as the black American experience.<sup>690</sup>

As one of the premiere black educators of the 20th century, W.E.B. Du Bois is an important figure with whom to compare Mays. This is especially so since Mays cited Du Bois as one of his earliest intellectual influences. As he recalled, “I met Dr. Du Bois through *The Crisis* when I was in high school, in Orangeburg, Carolina...I was anxious each month to read his editorial, ‘As the Crow Flies.’” Moreover, Mays recounted, “I liked what he said and having been born and reared in Greenwood County, South Carolina, I instinctively embraced the Du Bois philosophy.” Mays was quite candid in saying that, “The impression that Du Bois made upon me was tremendous.”<sup>691</sup>

Du Bois’s influence on Mays’s thinking is evident in his writings on education. As noted in Chapter 3, Mays and Du Bois both believed that black colleges and universities needed to be instrumental in the transformation of American society. As noted before, this idea of education being useful for social change is central to Social Reconstructionism. It is more than appropriate, then, as Watkins observed, that, “as a curricularist, DuBois has been described as a Black Social Reconstructionist.” Specifically, Watkins claimed, Du Bois “advocated a curriculum that would criticize capitalism, promote democracy, propagate common schooling, foster emancipatory thinking, support societal transformation, and seek a higher civilization, all of which are part of

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<sup>690</sup> Ibid.

<sup>691</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “William Edward Burghardt Du Bois,” (speech on Dr. Du Bois, Pan-Africanism and Liberation of Southern Africa—Some Black American Perspectives, United Nations, New York, February 23, 1978, manuscript page 2). Mays Papers Speeches Box 9; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

the Reconstructionist educational program.” Mays advocated much of the same in his educational philosophizing.<sup>692</sup> Thus, like Mays, “DuBois perceived the curriculum as social capital: Black people must use education not simply to study the world, but to change it.”<sup>693</sup>

Beyond social reconstructionism, the educational thought of Mays and Du Bois shared a particular pragmatism, especially with regards to segregated educational environments. In 1935, for instance, Du Bois published an article in *The Journal of Negro Education* entitled, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?,” in which he pondered the necessity of schools designated specifically for black students. As much he desired to live in an America that did not privilege skin color, Du Bois knew how the country was from that type of society. As he declared, “I am no fool; and I know that race prejudice in the United States today is such that Negroes cannot receive proper education in white institutions...Under such circumstances, there is no room for argument as to whether the Negro needs separate schools or not. The plain fact faces us, that either he will have separate schools or he will not be educated.” To those whose rebuttal may have been, “Why not fight for integrated schools?,” Du Bois answered matter-of-factly: “Any agitation and action aimed at compelling a rich and powerful majority of the citizens to do what they will not do, is useless.”<sup>694</sup>

Mays echoed Du Bois’s point 35 years later while serving as the president of the Atlanta School Board. In trying to lead Atlanta’s public schools through the final leg of its desegregation

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<sup>692</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “Education to What End,” (speech delivered at Fisk University’s commencement, Nashville, Tennessee, May 26, 1958 manuscript page 1). Mays Papers Speeches Box 2; Manuscript Division, Moorland Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>693</sup> Watkins., “Black Curriculum,” 333-334.

<sup>694</sup> W.E.B. Du Bois, “Does the Negro Need Separate Schools?,” *The Journal of Negro Education*, 4, no. 3, The Courts and the Negro Separate School (July 1935), 329.

process, Mays was also working desperately to reverse or at least slow the pace of white flight, since he knew that without whites living in the city, there could be no true school desegregation. For twelve years, Mays's efforts to keep white students in the city's schools were to no avail. He learned, just as Du Bois had concluded in 1935, that it was useless to try to force people to do what they had no interest in doing. As he put it, even the court "can't stop white people who run when Negroes move into a school or into a community"<sup>695</sup>

Another of Mays's contemporaries and a significant figure in African American education was Horace Mann Bond. Like Mays, Bond had been a professional educator for most of his career, serving as the president of two HBCUs, as well as serving as the dean of Atlanta University's School of Education. As noted in Chapter 4, Mays and Bond shared similar positions on the educational needs of black youth. They also shared similar views on desegregation/integration in public schools. Bond, for instance, in 1952 advocated fighting for the integration of schools, even if required endless litigation. As he put it, "We need...to sue, and sue, and sue, for access to every opportunity available to every other American citizen. We need...to plan for a genuine integration—on our terms—and fight for it." Further, he declared, "We need to press...with all of the force of persuasion and law, to arrive at integration beyond the scope of mere physical occupancy of space within an institution." Lastly, he insisted that, "we need not feel ashamed, and convinced of our minority inferiority, as to think of integration as a one-way street, leading only by the door of the majority into final unity."<sup>696</sup>

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<sup>695</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Integration As a Matter of Heart," *The Christian Science Monitor*, March 21, 1970, 9. ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The Christian Science Monitor (1908-1997).

<sup>696</sup> Horace Mann Bond, "The Present Status of Racial Integration in the United States, With Especial Reference to Education," *The Journal of Negro Education* 21, no. 3 (1952): 249.

Mays shared Bond's disposition toward school integration, especially his contention that blacks must view integration as a two-sided enterprise. In fact, as noted in Chapter 3, Mays wrote an article entitled, "Integration—A Two Way Traffic," in which he made clear his position on integration necessarily being bilateral. Unless the United States became a Fascist state, he contended, "segregation will some day end. When it does end...Integration will not be a one way traffic; it will be a two way traffic."<sup>697</sup> Like Bond, Mays believed the United States would one day integrate its schools, and when it did, it would do so in a cooperative, equitable way.

Lastly, among the leading African American educators of the 20th century and one of Mays's contemporaries was Carter G. Woodson. Woodson, whose life and scholarship were devoted to highlighting black people's historical contributions to civilization, was best known for laying the groundwork for the study of African American history and is generally considered the father of the field. Situated within Watkins's curriculum framework, his thinking could best be characterized as a mix of subdued Black Nationalism and Social Reconstructionism. Black Nationalism, according to Watkins, called for black people to separate from mainstream society, develop a collective consciousness, and revitalize their culture, while the aim of Social Reconstructionism was to transform society through educational means.<sup>698</sup>

For example, in Woodson's seminal text, *The Miseducation of the Negro*, he advocated an educational framework that not only equipped black people to know themselves and their culture but also one that enabled them to affect change. This was crucial, he contended, because "The chief difficulty with the education of the Negro is that it has been largely imitation resulting

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<sup>697</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, "Integration—A Two Way Traffic," (manuscript submitted and published in *The Pittsburgh Courier*, April 24, 1948, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Installation 2, Box 50; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>698</sup> Watkins, "Black Curriculum," 329, 331.

in the enslavement of his mind.” Moreover, he argued, “the keynote in the education of the Negro has been to do what he is told to do,” and “Any Negro who has learned to do this is well prepared to function in the American social order as others would have him.” If black people were to reach their full potential and make significant and unique contributions to society, they would require a deeper knowledge of self. As he held, “To educate the Negro we must find out exactly what his background is, what he is today, what his possibilities are, and how to begin with him as he is and make him a better individual of the kind that he is.” In a practical sense, Woodson believed, this also meant that black people’s contributions to civilization and society needed to be included in the general school curriculum. As noted in Chapter 6, Woodson also held that, “no one can be thoroughly educated until learns as much about the Negro as he knows about other people.”<sup>699</sup>

Relative to Woodson, Mays was more Social Reconstructionist than he was Black Nationalist. He was more interested in how education could liberate black people than he was in creating an educational model specifically for black people. This is not to say, however, that Mays and Woodson had no philosophical overlap. In fact, Woodson’s work would ultimately have a great influence on Mays’s thinking on education. Mays, who had befriended Woodson during the 1920s after Woodson spoke before the Tampa Urban League, embraced Woodson’s call for the inclusion of black history in the school curriculum. During the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s, he highlighted its value for improving black students’ identities and insisted that it was a foundational to a well-rounded education. Reminiscent of Woodson’s argument about white’s needing to know about black history, Mays even contended that, “In order to be well informed as

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<sup>699</sup> Carter G. Woodson, *The Miseducation of the Negro* (1933, repr., Trenton: Africa World Press, 1998), 134, 136, 151.

an educated man or woman, white people should know something about the history and culture of Black people.”<sup>700</sup> The full extent to which Woodson influenced Mays’s thinking on education is difficult to know. What is clear, however, is that his impact on Mays’s educational thought was of enduring quality.

#### 4. How did Mays conceive aspects of his philosophy of education in light of the political and institutional realities in which he worked?

Until his election to the Atlanta School Board, Mays worked in relatively insular environments at Howard and Morehouse. Academe was not free from political and institutional influences, but it did provide Mays with a level of intellectual and personal freedom he may not have been afforded anywhere else. As revealed in his autobiography, Mays cherished his autonomy, so much so that he recalled being willing to depart Morehouse if the Board of Trustees or external donors ever threatened it.<sup>701</sup> Further, prior to Mays joining the Atlanta School Board, his philosophy of education operated more along the theoretical than the practical. As dean of Howard’s School of Religion and president of Morehouse College, Mays was likely far too busy with administrative duties and fundraising obligations to put into practice what he theorized.

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<sup>700</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, “I Knew Carter G. Woodson,” (speech delivered before The Association For the Study of African American Life and History, Inc., New Orleans, Louisiana, October 18, 1980, manuscript page 5). Mays Papers Speeches Box 10; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Benjamin E. Mays, “The Place of Black History in American Schools,” (speech delivered at Emmanuel Junior College, Swainsboro, Georgia, September 22, 1975, manuscript pages 6-7). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 6; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>701</sup> Mays, *Rebel*, 188.

Mays's intimacy with educational *ideas* and distance from educational *practice* may very well have accounted for his feelings of aloofness when first learning about black students' grievances at the height of the Black Studies Movement and the haste with which he abandoned his long-held views on the necessity of school desegregation after joining the Atlanta School Board. The political and institutional realities of serving on the school board, especially, seemed to have challenged Mays's educational thought in a way that nothing ever had before.

Central to Mays's educational thought was a belief in the immorality of segregation and firm conviction that one day, segregation would be abolished. For decades, Mays held this position and defended it with fervor. He discussed the details of how desegregation/integration *should* happen more often than he pondered whether or not desegregation/integration *would* happen. One can only imagine, then, how disheartening it must have been for Mays to be leading the charge to desegregate Atlanta's schools only to discover that true desegregation had become an impossibility. Atlanta's political and institutional realities were such that the city's school system had almost become completely resegregated. Without enough white students to truly desegregate Atlanta's schools, then, Mays had to rethink the tenability of his position on segregation.

If desegregation were not possible, he reasoned, it would be necessary to devise a plan that maximized educational opportunities within the context of segregation. Mays did not find this type of concession easy or desirable. In fact, his commentary on the subject, as recorded in speeches and interviews from the time, reveal that he may have been deeply disillusioned by the impossibility of school desegregation in Atlanta. Still, Mays understood the need for a practical approach to resolving the issue. If it were inevitable that the Atlanta Public Schools would become all-black, Mays resigned to make them the best all-black schools they could possibly be.

Without the ability to change the hearts and minds of Atlanta's fleeing white citizens, he that working diligently to improve black schools was all he could do.

5. What are the implications of Mays's philosophy of education for the contemporary education discourse?

Currently, American education, with all its emphasis on academic achievement and high-stakes testing, is focused solely on students' intellectual development. The privileging of particular bodies of knowledge through initiatives like STEM (Science Technology Engineering Mathematics) and selective subject testing only reinforces this truth, while passively devaluing non-tested subject areas and the students interested in them. Surely, these assessments tell us something about student achievement, but they do not and cannot tell us everything. The current educational discourse's obsession with statistics and hard, content knowledge limits not only our understanding of student learning but also students' development into well-rounded people. Mays's philosophy of education, then, could inject into the contemporary education discourse revolutionary ideas about what it means to be educated and advocate a more holistic and democratic approach to education.

While the acquisition of content knowledge is indeed an important part of any student's educational process, Mays believed that it was insufficient in its ability to prepare students to deal with complex social and political issues. As many of the challenges students and educators face during the 21<sup>st</sup> century are, in substance, the same as those faced by educators and students during the mid-20<sup>th</sup> century, Mays's point remains relevant. The burdens of war, economic strife, and global instability weighed as heavily upon Americans of Mays's generation as they do upon the American people today, but as Mays noted, these problems are not wholly of the intellectual sort. They are "equally ethical and moral," and therefore cannot be solved simply by further



developing man's intellect. This was especially true, Mays argued, since, "One of the fundamental defects in the world today is the fact that man's intellect has been developed to a point beyond his integrity and beyond his ability to be good." Surely, Mays believed, it was good for man to grow more intelligent but not at a pace exponentially greater than that of his moral and spiritual development. To do so was incredibly dangerous, he held.<sup>702</sup>

Students' acquisition and development of what Mays referred to as "spiritual skills," then, were key to achieving wholeness in their educational training. "Spiritual skills," he contended, were "skills in how to live together in harmony and good will...skills in human trust and religious faith...skills in how to get rid of selfishness and how to abolish war...And most of all...skills on how to develop techniques by which man will not only have the kind to see the good and desire it, but that he will possess the will to choose the good and act upon it."<sup>703</sup> He viewed them as a vital complement to more technical or intellectual skills.

The application of Mays's spiritual skills in a contemporary educational context could deemphasize the importance of growing and developing the whole student. If, as Mays contended, the highly intellectual but ethically and morally bankrupt student or citizen is a danger to society, then balancing out his intellect with spiritual skills becomes vital for the

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<sup>702</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, (untitled speech delivered at Morehouse College *Founders Day Program*, February 19, 1945, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 1; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University; Benjamin E. Mays, "The Ministry of Our Negro Christian Colleges," (speech delivered at the Northern Baptist Convention in Atlantic City, New Jersey, May 24, 1944, manuscript pages 6-8). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 1; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University.

<sup>703</sup> Benjamin E. Mays, (untitled speech delivered at Morehouse College *Founders Day Program*, February 19, 1945, manuscript page 1). Mays Papers, Speeches, Box 1; Manuscript Division, Moorland-Spingarn Research Center, Howard University

preservation of that society. Moreover, by committing to developing students' spiritual skills, schools become more actively engaged in the process of cultivating an intelligent *and* thoughtful citizenry.

The application of Mays's educational thought to America's current educational discourse would also emphasize the necessary role of democracy in the educational aims of schools. Like the acquisition of spiritual skills, Mays believed, possessing a thorough understanding of and willingness to perpetuate democracy was key for American students' educational process and essential for the survival of democracy. Not only would students be fluent in the tenets of democracy, but they would also be capable of engaging in democratic practices at school and in their daily lives beyond school, thereby ensuring the perpetuation of democracy in American life.

Essentially, Mays's educational thought offers the contemporary education discourse a blueprint for holistic citizenship training. It's emphasis on developing students' "spiritual skills" as a means of amplifying their moral and ethical sensibilities and focus on inculcating in them democratic principles as a means of purifying and extending the life of American democracy tempers the current emphasis on high test scores and achievement. Mays's educational thought challenges schools to abandon their focus on training high achieving students in favor of developing well-rounded people.