

William Faulkner, "Letter to a Northern Editor," *Life*, March 5, 1956

I have highlighted segments that are either important or that need explanation/contextualization.

With those you should be able to formulate in brief sentences Faulkner's position on the matter and contextualize it, and see its limits as well.

My family has lived for generations in one same small section of north Mississippi. My great-grandfather held slaves and went to Virginia in command of a Mississippi infantry regiment in 1861. I state this simply as credentials for the sincerity and factualness of what I will try to say.

5 From the beginning of **this present phase of the race problem** in the South, I have been on record as opposing the forces in my native country which would keep the condition out of which this present evil and trouble has grown. Now I must go on record as opposing the forces outside the South which would use legal or police compulsion to eradicate that evil **overnight**. I was against
10 compulsory segregation. I am just as strongly against compulsory integration. **Firstly of course from principle. Secondly because I don't believe it will work.**

There are more Southerners than I who believe as I do and have taken the same stand I have taken, at the same price of contumely and insult and threat from other Southerners which we [...] were willing to accept because we believed we
15 were helping our native land which we love **to accept a new condition which it must accept whether it wants to or not**. That is, by still being Southerners, yet not being a part of the general majority Southern point of view; **by being present yet detached, committed and attainted neither by Citizens' Council nor NAACP;** by being in the middle, being in position to say to any incipient irrevocability:
20 'Wait, wait now, **stop and consider first.**' [...]

So I would say to the NAACP and all the organizations who would compel immediate and unconditional integration: 'Go slow now. Stop now for a time, a moment. You have the power now; you can afford to withhold for a moment the use of it as a force. You have done a good job, you have jolted your opponent
25 off-balance and he is now vulnerable. But stop there for a moment; don't give him the advantage of a chance **to cloud the issue by that purely automatic sentimental appeal to that same universal human instinct for automatic sympathy for the underdog simply because he is under.**'

And I would say this too. The rest of the United States knows next to nothing about the South. The present idea and picture which they hold of a people decadent and even obsolete through inbreeding and illiteracy—the inbreeding a result of the illiteracy and the isolation so that there is nothing else to do at night—as to be a kind of species of juvenile delinquents with a folklore of blood and violence, yet who, like juvenile delinquents, can be controlled by firmness once they are brought to believe that the police mean business, is as baseless and illusory as that one a generation ago of [...] columned porticoes and magnolias. The rest of the United States assumes that this condition in the South is so simple and so uncomplex that it can be changed tomorrow by the simple will of the national majority backed by legal edict. In fact, the North does not even recognise what it has seen in its own newspapers. I have at hand an editorial from the *New York Times* on the rioting at the University of Alabama because of the admission as a student of Miss Lucy, a Negro. The editorial said: ‘This is the first time that force and violence have become a part of the question.’ That is not correct. To all Southerners, no matter which side of the question of racial equality they supported, the first implication [...] of force and violence was the Supreme Court decision itself. After that, by any standards at all and following as inevitably as night and day, was the case of the three white teen-agers, members of a field trip group from a Mississippi high school (and, as teen-agers do, probably wearing the bright parti-colored blazers or jackets blazoned across the back with the name of the school) who were stabbed in passing on a Washington street by Negroes they had never seen before and who apparently had never seen them before either; and that of the Till boy and the two Mississippi juries which freed the defendants from both charges; and of the Mississippi garage attendant killed by a white man because, according to the white man, the Negro filled the tank of the white man’s car full of gasoline when all the white man wanted was two dollars’ worth.

This problem is far beyond a mere legal one. It is even far beyond the moral one it is and still was a hundred years ago in 1860 [...]. The Northerner is not even aware yet of what that war really proved. He assumes that it merely proved to the Southerner that he was wrong. It didn’t do that because the Southerner already knew he was wrong and accepted that gambit even when he knew it was the fatal one. What that war should have done, but failed to do, was to prove to the North that the South will go to any length, even that fatal and already doomed one, before it will accept alteration of its racial condition by mere force of law or economic threat.

Since I went on record as being opposed to compulsory racial inequality, I have received many letters. A few of them approved. But most of them were in opposition. And a few of these were from southern Negroes, the only difference being that they were polite and courteous instead of being threats and insults,

70 saying in effect: 'Please, Mr Faulkner, stop talking and be quiet. You are a good
man and you think you are helping us. But you are not helping us. You are
doing us harm. You are playing into the hands of the NAACP so that they are
using you to make trouble for our race that we don't want. Please hush, you look
after your white folks' trouble and let us take care of ours.' This one in
75 particular was a long one, from a woman who was writing for and in the name
of the pastor and the entire congregation of her church. It went on to say that the
Till boy got exactly what he asked for, coming down there with his Chicago
ideas, and that all his mother wanted was to make money out of the role of her
bereavement. Which sounds exactly like the white people in the South who
80 justified and even defended the crime by declining to find that it was one.

We have had many violent inexcusable personal crimes of race against race in
the South, but since 1919 the major examples of communal race tension have
been more prevalent in the North, like the Negro family who were refused
acceptance in the white residential district in Chicago, and the Korean-American
85 who suffered for the same reason in Anaheim, Calif. Maybe it is because our
solidarity is not racial, but instead is the majority white segregationist plus the
Negro minority like my correspondent above, who prefer peace to equality. But
suppose the line of demarcation should become one of race: the white minority
like myself compelled to join the white segregation majority no matter how
90 much we oppose the principle of inequality; the Negro minority who want peace
compelled to join the Negro majority who advocate force, no matter how much
that minority wanted only peace?

So the Northerner, the liberal, does not know the South. He can't know it from
his distance. He assumes that he is dealing with a simple legal theory and a
95 simple moral idea. He is not. He is dealing with a fact: the fact of an emotional
condition of such fierce unanimity as to scorn the fact that it is a minority and
which will go to any length and against any odds at this moment to justify and,
if necessary, defend that condition and its right to it.

So I would say to all the organizations and groups which would force integration
100 on the South by legal process: 'Stop now for a moment. You have shown the
Southerner what you can do and what you will do if necessary; give him a space
in which to get his breath and assimilate that knowledge; to look about and see
that (1) nobody is going to force integration on him from the outside; (2) That he
himself faces an obsolescence in his own land which only he can cure; a moral
105 condition which not only must be cured but a physical condition which has got
to be cured if he, the white Southerner, is to have any peace, is not to be faced
with another legal process or maneuver every year, year after year, for the rest
of his life.'