

# 'Ethnic Treasure'

Following hard on Jimmy Carter's unfortunate use of the phrase "ethnic purity," for which the former governor had the grace to apologize, President Ford only compounded the problem in attempting to explain it away.

"Ethnic heritage is a great treasure of this country," said the President of the United States in response to a question, "and I don't think that Federal action should be used to destroy that treasure." In the context, Mr. Ford was referring to the role of the Federal Government in using housing legislation to encourage the integration of hitherto racially (or ethnically) unmixed urban areas. Put in blunter terms, what he was saying was that he did not believe in nudging Federally-assisted housing for low-income families into relatively higher-income, de facto segregated, districts in order to help minorities not only to get out of the inner-city ghettos but also to get in to areas—such as the suburbs—where upgraded and better paid jobs are now more likely to be found.

As all the Presidential candidates, and non-candidate Humphrey (to whom the question was also put last week, and who also evaded it) know, the issue is not really the use of governmental power to block integration but the use of that power under the law to promote it. It is not an easy issue, nor can any broad and sweeping generalizations be made about its exercise; for each case where it arises has to be evaluated in terms of the specific conditions of the urban—or suburban—area concerned. But it is an issue that has to be faced, not evaded.

On the face of it, of course, what the President said about the great "ethnic heritage" of this country cannot be faulted; but the President is, if nothing else, an experienced politician, and it would be most remarkable if he did not realize that the words he used could only be interpreted as a signal to the "ethnic" neighborhoods that he would in no way favor application of Federal funds or power to further the racial or economic integration of non-integrated neighborhoods, as the 1968 Housing Act provides. While most if not all the other Presidential hopefuls have been saying pretty much the same thing, it is particularly discouraging to hear this kind of pandering to racial or "ethnic" prejudices come from the President himself.

The mixture of "ethnic" strains that make up the American people is one of the great sources of this country's strength; and the cultural contributions of the original inhabitants and of the varied "ethnic," national, religious and social groups that have poured into this continent for nearly five centuries constitute a heritage of which every American should indeed be proud.

But the essence of America is not its diversity; it is the unity in that diversity—and this is in fact one of the unique contributions of American civilization to the world. In no place else on earth, on the continental scale in which it has taken place here, have so many peoples from so many lands, of such diverse backgrounds, coalesced into one nation, founded on the very principle of equality of every man and woman before the law, and aspiring to an integrated society that encourages unity and neither recognizes nor practices racial, religious or "ethnic" barriers among its people. Though this goal is still far from fulfillment, it is the essential goal; it constitutes the inner meaning of "E Pluribus Unum"; it is what the Statue of Liberty really stands for.

This is the genius of America; and this, it seems to us, is what the President of the United States should be emphasizing at all times, and especially in this year of the Bicentennial—even in the throes of a political campaign.