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The Lessons of Chicago

If Senator Everett Dirksen has any doubt about the urgent need for a Federal fair housing law, he has only to visit his home state of Illinois. Chicago and its suburbs have been the scene of marches and countermarches by Negroes and whites on the housing issue. After Negro demonstrations brought an agreement to promote open occupancy in housing, white landlords picketed in protest. With another march scheduled for Cicero today, fresh explosions of community bitterness on both sides are feared.

What is happening in and around Chicago could occur in any metropolitan area in the country. In Dayton, Ohio, there has been rioting which only the National Guard could quell and which arose from the endemic unrest in that city's Negro ghetto. Tightly segregated neighborhoods are not guarantors of peace; on the contrary, they breed conflict. The fact is that racial discrimination in housing is as fundamental an injustice as Jim Crow public facilities or barriers to voting. The nation has long evaded this hard problem; many people would prefer to keep on evading it, but events make it plain that evasion is no longer possible. Nor should it be.

The question before Senator Dirksen and his Republican colleagues—who will determine the fate of the open-housing section of the civil rights bill which the Senate begins considering Tuesday—is not whether to take up the housing issue at this time. The demonstrations in the streets have already placed it on the nation's agenda. The real question is whether it is going to be settled lawfully and responsibly in the halls of Congress or irregularly and perhaps violently in the streets by rival displays of pressure and intimidation.

A comprehensive statute placing the legal authority and moral sanction of the Federal Government behind the principle of open occupancy is essential. As matters now stand, many landlords and real estate agents in Chicago and elsewhere are still asserting the "right"—morally indefensible though it is—to discriminate against Negroes in the sale or rental of property.

In this respect, the housing question is back on the level where the school desegregation issue was a decade ago when Southern states were still proclaiming the illusory doctrine of "massive resistance." But in housing as in education, the question to be asked is not if or when but only how is desegregation to be accomplished.

Senator Dirksen, refusing to be drawn into the practical implications of his negative stand, has repeatedly asserted constitutional scruples. Yet, he raised no constitutional objections when the Senate recently approved a bill to enable the Federal National Mortgage Association, a mixed Government-private corporation, to buy more than \$4 billion worth of housing mortgages. Many of these mortgages are on houses in the very suburbs which Negroes are trying to enter.

The willingness of Chicago real estate brokers to break their industry's solid front against open occupancy was crucial in making possible the agreement in Chicago. Other such shifts are sure to come. But Senator Dirksen and his fellow lawmakers have it within their power to give this inevitable development their constructive support and thus make it easier and more orderly. That is the path of sound conservatism.