

## VOICE OF EXPERIENCE

# Mayor Allen Explains Why He Spoke On Civil Rights Bill

By PAT WATTERS

*"We cannot dodge this issue . . . We must take action now to assure a greater future for our citizens and our country."—Mayor Ivan Allen, before the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce.*

NOT EVEN considering its considerable political implications, Mayor Ivan Allen's endorsement of the Kennedy public accommodations legislation was one of those sort of surprise news stories of the highest significance.

I was intrigued with the question of why he did it.

In the past, he has not sounded off to any great public extent on the essentials of civil rights, sticking instead to specifics of local situations. He was not one of those on either side with stock reactions easily predictable. His credentials in the blue-chip community of business (whose freedoms are supposed to be so threatened by the legislation) are well known.

### INFLUENCE

And his stand flew in the face of a unanimity of virtually all the rest of the state's political leadership against the legislation.

(The importance of all these factors on the influence of his stand in the climate of public

opinion shouldn't be overlooked. As a leadership and prestige influence, they say to people puzzled and troubled over the measure that it is possible to be for the historical imperatives and morality involved without being hounded as a hopeless idealist or Communist or something.)

He didn't have to speak out. His stand was bound not to sit well with some. I finally went over and asked him why he did it.

In effect, he said he did because he was qualified to. No other political officials in America, he pointed out, have had to face full-blast the practical job of the civil rights revolution as have city officials like himself. (And not all city officials either, he said—which is true over most of Georgia.)

He is convinced from such experience, he said, that it is high time, nine years after the school ruling, that the federal government help out with the problems created by the mandates of the federal courts. This, he said, is the "biggest social problem in my lifetime," and Congress needs to act as it finally had to in comparable social upheavals of the past. He listed as comparable child labor, women's suffrage and the labor struggle.

"The country's in the biggest mess it's ever been in, and Congress has not taken a single step to help clarify things . . . Congress can't expect local gov-

ernments to handle as difficult a problem as this . . . with no help, no definitions, no support. It's been damn unfair."

He cited ten recent desegregation steps Atlanta has made as an example. (These were listed in his statement to the committee, along with, incidentally, an assessment of our achievements and still-serious shortcomings better than any I've ever seen, a portrayal of Atlanta to the nation and world more honorable and in the real sense more favorable than any in some years.)

### IN MIDDLE

In most of those ten steps, Mayor Allen pointed out, he was caught in the middle—working for "logical agreements." His point was that so much of it shouldn't be on a mayor and city officials, and that often to the hurt of a city and the nation, officials duck out of such responsibility. "You never please many with any decision" in the situation, he said.

His decision to speak, then, and what he said came out of the pragmatic knowledge of firsthand experience such as few in America have of a situation about which many have opinions. As such, what he said was significant. His decision to say it may be even more important at this crucial midpoint in his first political office—for what it says of his character and his concept of his responsibility. Out of such decisions come important leaders.

