

Crisis in Little Rock: Race, Class & Violence During the Desegregation of Central High School, 1957-1958

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“When hate is unleashed and bigotry finds a voice, God help us all.”

The above quotation first appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette* on September 8th, 1957. It accompanied a picture that has since become internationally recognized as one of the most dramatic scenes of the Civil Rights Movement. It is a picture of a young Negro girl by the name of Elizabeth Eckford and the moment captured her as she walked to school on her first day of class. Clutching her books tightly, and holding back tears, she bravely made her way through a screaming mob of whites shouting epithets and racial slurs at her.

Elizabeth and eight other Negro students, more commonly referred to as the “Little Rock Nine,” were denied entrance to the school by the Arkansas National Guard acting under orders from Governor Orval Faubus. Under the guidance of Little Rock’s NAACP chairman, Daisy Bates, the nine students won a legal battle against the Governor and an injunction was issued to remove the troops. However, as the Little Rock Nine entered Central High School in late September 1957, mob violence forced them out after only a few hours in class. Eventually, the might of the national government was called upon as President Eisenhower mobilized the 101st Airborne Division and then placed the Arkansas National Guard under federal control. Little Rock’s Central High School resembled a battlefield as a constitutional showdown took place between the national government and the state of Arkansas.

The eyes of the world focused on Little Rock, and the city has become legendary within the Civil Rights Movement. At the time, however, racial tensions exploded over this test case of school

desegregation. Mob violence existed before, during, and after the nine entered Central High. Threats on the students’ lives were common and, for the next eight months, the Little Rock Nine endured harassment from their peers as well as the Little Rock community. While most accounts of the crisis focus on the constitutional aspects of the case, they tend to avoid the key issues that help us better understand the factors that contributed to the crisis and the resulting violence. Considerations of race and class are paramount to understanding the episode as it unfolded *within* the community of Little Rock.

The crisis had its roots in the landmark 1954 Supreme Court ruling, *Brown v. Board of Education*. Ruling unanimously, the high court struck down segregation in public education. This controversial ruling threatened to dismantle Jim Crow, and southern states were reluctant to comply. An exception, however, was Little Rock, Arkansas. Arkansas was not located in the Deep South and therefore was regarded by many as moderate when it came to race relations. Over time, however, Arkansas would also reveal its disgust for the federal court order and later joined with its southern neighbors in resisting it.

Little Rock in the 1950s was set in its tradition of Jim Crow, yet was perceived as a progressive state capital. Libraries, parks, and public buses had all been integrated by the mid-fifties, and even 33 percent of Arkansas blacks were registered to vote.¹ According to Juan Williams, “This relatively progressive attitude toward race relations made Little Rock an unlikely stage for the crisis that developed there in 1957.”² As the 1950s progressed, however, neighborhoods became more separated, as suburbs created black and white enclaves. Blacks lived in the east and southeast, while whites were concentrated in the west.³ This only reinforced the traditional southern attitude towards segregation, and while Little Rock could boast of taking a progressive stance on desegregation with some public facilities, most others,

¹ Juan Williams, *Eyes on the Prize: America’s Civil Rights Years, 1954-1965* (New York: Viking Press, 1987), 92.

² *Ibid.*

³ Sara Murphy, *Breaking the Silence: Little Rock’s Women’s Emergency Committee to Open Our Schools, 1958-1963*, ed., Patrick C. Murphy (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 30.

including hotels, movie theaters, restaurants, drinking fountains, and restrooms remained segregated in the post-World War II era.⁴

Still, at the time of the crisis in 1957, the public was amazed that such turmoil could exist in a city that had such a high reputation when it came to civil rights. *Time* magazine reported, “Little Rock had long enjoyed better race relations than almost any other Intermediate South city of comparable size.”⁵ It is not surprising, then, that just five days after the *Brown* decision, the Little Rock school board met and decided to comply with the Supreme Court’s desegregation order pending further instructions.⁶

Virgil T. Blossom, superintendent of the Little Rock School District and a liberal in his stance towards desegregation, outlined a plan for the school board that would call for desegregation at the high school level first, then at the junior high/intermediate level, and finally at the grade school level. This transition was to start in the fall of 1957 at Central High School.

After the Blossom Plan was introduced, segregationists in Little Rock began voicing their dissatisfaction with the decision. Their opposition was based mainly on the fact that the phase-in plan limited integration to one school – Central. A new, all-white high school named Hall was being constructed to cater to the affluent white students living on the west side. This left Central with about 2,000 students, all of which were from a working-class neighborhood.⁷ According to Elizabeth Jacoway and Fred Williams, “By building a white high school in the west of the city, to which the affluent members of the white community could send their children, while focusing desegregation on Central High School, which would affect predominantly working- and lower-middle class families, the Blossom Plan was open to criticism that it forced integration on one section of the community while sheltering others from its impact.”⁸ This decision sparked hostility among middle-class whites in Little Rock, and created resentment

⁴ Ibid., 31.

⁵ “The Meaning of Little Rock”, *Time*, 7 October 1957, 25.

⁶ Murphy, *Breaking the Silence*, 33.

⁷ Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 93.

⁸ Elizabeth Jacoway and Fred C. Williams, *Understanding the Little Rock Crisis: An Exercise in Remembrance and Reconciliation* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 80.

against those affluent whites whose children would not have to attend an integrated school. Wilmer Counts added, “The old working-class neighborhoods would bear the stresses of the social experiment of school integration, while the affluent white preserves would enjoy pristine white schools that would be spared the strains of educating children of both races in the same classrooms.”⁹

As more and more citizens of Little Rock voiced their criticism of the Blossom Plan, state leaders began to take notice. The appearance of the *Southern Manifesto* in 1956 advocated outlawing public education in the South in order to prevent integration. The entire Arkansas legislation endorsed it with their signatures.¹⁰ Soon thereafter, Little Rock was host to a meeting of the White Citizen’s Council, an organization firmly opposed to integration. The guest speaker was Governor Marvin Griffin of Georgia. Griffin encouraged the citizens of Little Rock to oppose the Blossom Plan as well as the Supreme Court order to desegregate schools. He also called upon Governor Faubus to do the same and set an example for his state. Sara Murphy stated that, “Little Rock’s Capital Citizens Council (CCC) had only five hundred members, two hundred of whom lived outside the city, but the noise they were making was having its intended effect on leaders both at the local and state levels.”¹¹

Following this meeting, a group of local women formed the Mothers’ League of Little Rock Central High, a pro-segregationist organization devoted to rejecting the integration of Central High School.¹² The Mothers’ League, while small in number, was very active. Before school started in September, the women circulated a petition to oust Superintendent Blossom, and, just weeks after the nine Negro students were successfully admitted into the school, the Mothers’ League started a phone tree to persuade students to stage a walkout demonstration.¹³

⁹ Wilmer I. Counts, et al., *A Life is More Than a Moment: The Desegregation of Little Rock’s Central High* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 5.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Murphy, *Breaking the Silence*, 38.

¹² Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 98.

¹³ Murphy, *Breaking the Silence*, 50.

The Mothers' League acted out of the fear of miscegenation. They felt that their precious white heritage would be infected with the admission of the nine students. The long tradition of miscegenation gave way to the misguided notion of race-mixing as a result of blacks and whites inhabiting the same classrooms. Phoebe Godfrey concluded that, "For poor and working-class whites, like those in the Mothers' League, integration was a direct threat to privileges based on whiteness. Anti-miscegenation laws, both on the books and based on folk-ways, gave poor and working-class whites a legally and socially enforced way to ensure 'white grandchildren.'"¹⁴

As the beginning of the school year neared, Little Rock's citizens became more volatile towards the situation. Although Little Rock's White Citizen's Council was few in number, their strength lay in the fact that they could concentrate all of their efforts in one place, since only one school was being desegregated.¹⁵ In addition, these parents knew they had support from the outside. Citizens' Councils from other southern states joined their Arkansas counterparts. Little Rock's Citizens' Council even started a myth that the nine children were from the north and paid by the NAACP to integrate the school.¹⁶ Thus, the group was able to articulate its grievances effectively, whereas the portion of the white community that felt bound to obey the law and who accepted racial change did so passively.¹⁷ This resistance made the enforcement of the *Brown* decision more difficult to achieve and ultimately put Little Rock's community stability to the test.

Part of the violence during the crisis stemmed from those middle-class whites who, although having reluctantly accepted the *Brown* ruling, were annoyed at those parents they viewed as bringing the crisis upon the rest of the white community. Godfrey noted, "Their anger was directed not only at the Little Rock Nine but also at 'white trash' whites who by virtue of being white,

¹⁴ Phoebe C. Godfrey, "Sweet Little Girls? Miscegenation, Desegregation and the Defense of Whiteness at Little Rock's Central High, 1957-1959" (Ph.D. diss., Binghamton University, SUNY, 2001).

¹⁵ Jacoway and Williams, *Understanding the Little Rock Crisis*, 80.

¹⁶ John A. Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line: Black Activism in Little Rock, Arkansas, 1940-1970* (Gainesville: University of Florida Press, 2002), 125.

¹⁷ Jacoway and Williams, *Understanding the Little Rock Crisis*, 81.

embarrassed middle-class whites by making them look bad in the public eye."¹⁸ Still, these parents contributed to the violence through their inaction and unwillingness to get involved. Jerrold Packard added:

In fact, the image of armed troops symbolically holding back the black tide gave tremendous comfort to those parents who quietly, but intensely loathed the prospect of African-American children fouling their white schools. Equally overjoyed was the local Ku Klux Klan and its attendant groupies of Central's own teenage segregationist thugs.¹⁹

Conflicts of interest arose when the National Guardsmen were removed via the injunction, and the Little Rock police were left to secretly escort the nine students into Central. Mob violence broke out, and rioters planned to overrun the police and take the students out by force, if necessary. This created an awkward situation for the Little Rock police, who were white and had opposed desegregation in the first place, yet were ordered to hold back the crowd with barricades. *Life* magazine claimed that, "The reports coming into Washington from Little Rock clearly indicated the inability—and in some instances the unwillingness—of the Little Rock police to cope with the mob."²⁰

Several students themselves felt that the parents were inflaming the situation and perpetrating unnecessary violence. "If parents would just go home and let us alone, we'll be all right," one student remarked, "We just want them to leave us be."²¹ It is important to note that although several of Central's students opposed integration, they knew it was the law and felt compelled to obey it. Williams added, "The president of the [student] council told reporter Mike Wallace that if only the white parents would stay away from the school, there would be no violence."²²

For many, however, the chief architect of the violence was Governor Orval Faubus. A one-time moderate on the issue of

¹⁸ Godfrey, "Sweet Little Girls?", 226.

¹⁹ Jerrold Packard, *American Nightmare: The History of Jim Crow* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2002), 256.

²⁰ "A Historic Week of Civil Strife," *Life*, 7 October 1957, 40.

²¹ Wilson Record and Jane Cassels Record, eds., *Little Rock USA: Materials for Analysis* (San Francisco: Chandler Publishing, 1960), 78.

²² Williams, *Eyes on the Prize*, 112.

integration, Faubus realized early in 1956 that if he did not come out as a strong opponent of the Blossom Plan, he would risk losing his bid for re-election. According to Packard, "He tragically concluded that if he didn't make a point of forcefully resisting racial integration in the schools, he would open the door for overtly segregationist opponents to wipe him off the polling booth floor."²³ Faubus' own father believed that his son's primary motive was to embarrass the affluent whites who had fled to Little Rock's suburbs.²⁴ Whatever his motives, it was certain by his actions that the Arkansas governor had a hand in creating the crisis.

Faubus made statements about public opposition to the plan for desegregation, and quoted polls for support. He even testified that weapons had been taken from both blacks and whites prior to his decision to call out the troops.²⁵ *Time* reported that Faubus' critics insisted he was exaggerating circumstances and that "almost single-handed he had created the reality of violence from its myth."²⁶ In an editorial featured on the front page of the *Arkansas Gazette*, the newspaper placed the blame for the disorder on Governor Faubus, and urged him to faithfully carry out the court order to desegregate, warning, "he should do so before his own actions become the cause of the violence he professes to fear."²⁷

Many of the students involved also placed blame on the governor for starting trouble at the school. When asked how long he thought the tension was going to last, Ralph Brodie (president of Little Rock's student body) replied, "It's up to Governor Faubus."²⁸ Superintendent Blossom, concerned for the safety of his students, tried on numerous occasions to persuade Governor Faubus to publicly state that he wanted no violence or disorder when school began. According to Blossom, Faubus refused

²³ Packard, *American Nightmare*, 255.

²⁴ Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954-1963* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 223.

²⁵ Virgil T. Blossom, *It Has Happened Here* (New York: Harper, 1959), 60.

²⁶ *Time*, 22.

²⁷ "The Crisis Mr. Faubus Made," *Arkansas Gazette*, 4 September 1957.

²⁸ *Little Rock USA*, 43.

because he feared such a statement would be misinterpreted as one in support of integration.²⁹

By contrast, some did not fault Governor Faubus alone, but defended him and attributed his actions to one who was trying to keep a lid on racial tensions that were about ready to explode. The governor may have predicted violence where there may not have been any, but it was obvious that a majority of Little Rock's residents were opposed to desegregation. Brooks Hays concluded that, "it was this sentiment rather than the threat of violence that accounted for most of the Governor's actions."³⁰ Some even blamed Superintendent Blossom for the violence at the school. Murphy argued, "Blossom was at least partially responsible for that because he had repeatedly urged the governor to make a statement supporting the minimal integration that was to take place at Central High School."³¹

The threat of violence *inside* the school was just as dangerous, if not more so, than what was happening between the parents and community outside of Central. This harassment, too, was due to racial and class tensions among the students. At the beginning of the school year, Principal Matthews instructed teachers via a memo to treat the Negro students with "professional impartiality."³² This became hypocritical in retrospect, for a majority of the administration, staff, and student body harbored resentment against the nine from the very beginning. The violence inflicted upon the nine students ranged from a small group of bullies who tormented them daily to the larger student body that stood by, witnessing the attacks, and did nothing.

The nine students were constantly bullied from the moment they entered Central High. Packard stated, "All were subjected to every kind of vile treatment that their white classmates could devise. They were called niggers...and each of the nine was abused in the halls and classrooms and cafeteria of Central High, so much so that one or another of them was often on the verge of

²⁹ Roy Reed, *Faubus: The Life and Times of an American Prodigal* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1997), 200.

³⁰ Brooks Hays, *A Southern Moderate Speaks* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1959), 154.

³¹ Murphy, *Breaking the Silence*, 36-37.

³² Elizabeth Huckaby, *Crisis at Central High: Little Rock, 1957-58* (Baton Rouge: Olympic Marketing Corp., 1980), 32.

breaking down.”³³ The white students devised many attacks on the nine, including pushing them down stairs, striking them with fists, kicking them, dumping food on them, and spitting on them.³⁴ Elizabeth Eckford remembered that in gym class, a typical daily routine involved whites flushing all the toilets at once while the black students were in the showers, thus scalding them terribly.³⁵

Despite the fact that the nine were escorted from class to class everyday by federalized Arkansas National Guardsmen, they were not immune to attacks by whites. Jefferson Thomas and Terrance Roberts (two of the nine) were attacked in early October. The National Guardsmen, just six feet away from the altercation and witnesses to the attack, did nothing to stop it or to otherwise protect the two boys.³⁶ John Kirk noted, “The inaction of the guardsmen emboldened other white students, who began to intimidate black students further.”³⁷ Black and white students viewed the soldiers differently. Since the guardsmen were all southern youths, they were far less sympathetic towards the black students that required their protection.³⁸

The violence only increased after the guardsmen left in November of 1957. It was at this point that Jefferson Thomas was seriously hurt and knocked out after a particular altercation.³⁹ Ernest Green, the only senior of the group, recalled that after the guards left, there were more bomb threats, lynching threats, and incidents where white students would put broken glass on the floor of steaming shower rooms for the black students to step on.⁴⁰ With no armed guards for protection, the white community resumed their task of trying to remove the nine Negro students from the school. One of the nine, Melba Patillo-Beals, stated that, “segregationists urged Central High’s student leaders to

³³ Packard, *American Nightmare*, 258.

³⁴ Reed, *Faubus*, 232.

³⁵ Elizabeth Eckford, interview by author, 2003.

³⁶ Daisy Bates, *The Long Shadow of Little Rock: A Memoir* (New York: David McKay Co., 1962), 125.

³⁷ Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line*, 120.

³⁸ Beth Roy, *Bitters in the Honey: Tales of Hope and Disappointment Across Divides of Race and Time* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1999), 253.

³⁹ Kirk, *Redefining the Color Line*, 121.

⁴⁰ Ernest Green, interview by author, 2003.

antagonize and taunt us until we responded in a way that would get us suspended or expelled.”⁴¹

In fact, one of the nine, Minnijean Brown, was suspended and later expelled half way through the school year. An out-going and spirited individual, Brown was targeted by white students because they believed she walked the halls as if she “belonged” there.⁴² To the administration, Brown was seen as a “troublemaker.” Superintendent Blossom believed that Brown, while intelligent, was quick-tempered and when harassed by white students, she retaliated and they, in turn, targeted her more than some of the other black students.⁴³ In November, Brown was suspended following an incident in the cafeteria. Several boys were kicking their chairs out into the aisle, hitting her legs as she traveled through the cafeteria with her lunch. After several hits, Brown eventually dropped her tray, spilling the contents on her perpetrators.⁴⁴ She was suspended for this action, and later in February, was expelled after a verbal argument with another student. Elizabeth Eckford recalled that the nine did not even bother to report the bullying by the springtime, because the administration would not do anything about it, and did not believe them when they did report it.⁴⁵

Even though only about fifty students bullied the nine on a regular basis, being ignored was sometimes more painful. This type of treatment was especially hard to endure when it came from teachers. For example, one of Thelma Mothershed’s teachers would not even touch her admit slip. Thelma would be told to put the slip on the teacher’s desk, and then the teacher would slide it over to herself with the back of a pencil.⁴⁶ Not only were the nine Negro students ignored by white students at Central, they were also shunned by their own peers back at the all-black Horace Mann High School.⁴⁷ Most white students, even those that knew some of the nine before they entered Central, were afraid to make

⁴¹ Melba Patillo Beals, *White is a State of Mind: A Memoir* (New York: Penguin, 1999), 11.

⁴² Roy, *Bitters in the Honey*, 179.

⁴³ Blossom, *It Has Happened Here*, 158.

⁴⁴ Minnijean Brown-Trickey, interview by author, 2003.

⁴⁵ Eckford, interview by author, 2003.

⁴⁶ Thelma Mothershed-Wair, interview by author, 2001 & 2003.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

contact with any of them for fear of alienation from their peers.⁴⁸ Thus, they chose to alienate the nine from the rest of the student body. This had a profound impact on the lives of the nine students. According to Minnijean Brown-Trickey, “People made choices. There was no script for this event. Some people chose to treat us the way they did and some people chose to sit by and do nothing to help.”⁴⁹

In May of 1958, Central High School graduated one black senior, Ernest Green. The following year, Governor Faubus closed the public schools of Little Rock to halt integration. After the closing of the Little Rock schools in the fall of 1958, the school board resigned and a new board was elected, with three avowed segregationists, who fired over forty teachers who had stood up for integration or had shown friendship towards the nine black students during the previous year.⁵⁰ In the fall of 1959, Jefferson Thomas was the lone African American at Central High. Little Rock’s Hall High School had three African Americans to its 730 whites, and by 1960, five African Americans were counted among Central’s student body of 1,515 with eight more the year after that.⁵¹

Today, Central High has a predominantly black administration, staff, and student body. Elizabeth Eckford stated that these statistics should not be viewed as an overall success on behalf of the nine. “Central today is desegregated, but not integrated,” Eckford added, “It may be predominantly black, but courses are still segregated. Most of the students enrolled in the honors and A.P. courses are white.”⁵² Central High School has become an inner-city school within a predominantly black neighborhood surrounded by a community that still deals with racial strife.

As the Little Rock Crisis approaches its 50th anniversary, there are still lessons to be learned from this event. Beth Roy noted, “What the world saw of desegregation in Little Rock was a morality tale about power and race....What many white citizens of Little Rock

⁴⁸ Eckford, interview by author, 2003.

⁴⁹ Brown-Trickey, interview by author, 2003.

⁵⁰ Counts, *A Life is More Than a Moment*, 24.

⁵¹ Mary L. Dudziak, *Cold War Civil Rights: Race and the Image of American Democracy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 149.

⁵² Eckford, interview by author, 2003.

saw was also a story about power, but of a very different sort. Their story was about class, about an abuse of privilege by affluent people within their own community.”⁵³ In reflecting on her experience, Melba Patillo-Beals stated that, “If my Central High School experience taught me one lesson, it is that we are not separate. The effort to separate ourselves—whether by race, creed, color, religion, or status—is as costly to the separator as to those who would be separated.”⁵⁴ Elizabeth Eckford concluded that her perceptions today are very different from nearly fifty years ago. According to her, “racism goes across *all* classes.”⁵⁵ Minnijean Brown-Trickey warned that by focusing on the individual actions against other individuals, “we fail to learn the larger lesson of the event.”⁵⁶ The movement for civil rights is far from over in this country, but we have certainly come a long way, thanks to nine young warriors who bravely walked up the steps of Central High School and into the pages of history, forever altering the way we view ourselves and those around us.

⁵³ Roy, *Bitters in the Honey*, 3-4.

⁵⁴ Melba Patillo-Beals, *Warriors Don’t Cry: A Searing Memoir of the Battle to Integrate Little Rock’s Central High*, (New York: Pocket Star, 1994), 312.

⁵⁵ Eckford, interview by author, 2003.

⁵⁶ Brown-Trickey, interview by author, 2003.