

White Backlash in the Civil Rights Movement: A Study of the White Responses to the Little Rock Crisis of 1957

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For my honors project in the Africana Studies Department I decided to research the response from white southern citizens during the integration of Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957. I want to explain the significance of Little Rock and its memorable story of desegregation broadcasted across the nation. Little Rock was in many ways the beginning of the Civil Rights Movement and a representation of tension between state and federal governments. The population shifted to appear predominantly segregationist and actively invested in halting plans for integration. Many white citizens chose not to participate, but others chose to join violent, vicious mobs. The complex environment leading up to the crisis of Little Rock was unexpected given the city's reputation of liberality and particularly progressive southern Governor. No one could have predicted the nation's first massive backlash to *Brown v. Board of Education* to be ignited in the small capitol of Arkansas or foreseen the mob violence that would follow. Analyzing white southern responses to African Americans at this time exposes the many dangerous ideologies and practices associated with American culture. Little Rock provides a specific location and event to compare to the other significant moments of white counter protest events in Birmingham, Montgomery, and Atlanta. I want to know how the white population evolved from moderate to outspoken on issues of education over the already integrated bus systems and stores. In my project, I explore approaches the white administration chose to take, including the School Board and the state government, to explain the initial and evolving response the state of Arkansas had to the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision handed down on May 17, 1954.

I applied for the Grua/O'Connell Research Grant to take a research trip down to Little Rock and Fayetteville, Arkansas. Over winter break, I drove from my hometown in Nashville, Tennessee to Little Rock and Fayetteville for the Special Collections and Archives material to develop my primary source research. I visited Central High School, still in session today, and drove through the capital to get a better understanding of the city. I then continued on to the University of Arkansas at Fayetteville for their extensive manuscript collections including the personal and public documents of Governor Orval Faubus, Virgil T. Blossom, and Sarah Alderman Murphy. I went through issues of the Citizen's Council magazine, a segregationist organization, and numerous letters sent to Little Rock from around the country. These collections provided invaluable insight into the lives of Governor Faubus, the School Board members, and the students attending Central High School at the time. This research brought a new perspective to the questions I investigate by bringing to life the threats of terror, action, and silence. I realized desegregation was seen by many white people as an end to southern culture and the heritage of racism in the upper and deep South. Governor Faubus and Virgil Blossom were receiving daily calls to action by fellow southern politicians to join their front against integration. I spent each day buried in primary source material taking notes on the personal documents of politicians, news articles, and other various papers connected to the Little Rock Crisis.

As a result, I am better able to develop my understanding of this moment in history and write about the impact of desegregation on our nation. Through these documents I saw the lack of governmental leadership, the absence of developed public support for our laws, and the evolution of a small city in the upper South as they fought their own neighbors over integrated education.

Faculty Mentor: Professor Brian Purnell

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