

"Massive Resistance" and the Little Rock Nine

Read about resistance to desegregation and the nine African American students who dared to integrate Little Rock's Central High School.

Overview

- A campaign of "**Massive Resistance**" by whites emerged in the South to oppose the Supreme Court's ruling that public schools be desegregated in *Brown v. Board* (1954).
- Southern congressmen issued a "Southern Manifesto" denouncing the Court's ruling. Governors and state legislatures employed a variety of tactics to slow or stop school desegregation; white Citizens' Councils emerged to lead local resistance.
- In September 1957, President Eisenhower sent federal troops to Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas to enforce the Court's desegregation order.

Massive Resistance

After the Supreme Court ruled school segregation unconstitutional in the 1954 *Brown* cases, it ordered that schools be desegregated with "all deliberate speed." But many white Americans, especially in the South, responded angrily to the Court's rulings. They did not want public schools to be desegregated. Soon, "**Massive Resistance**, a campaign to block desegregation at the local, state, and national level, was underway

To this end, a group of 101 southern congressmen issued a "Southern Manifesto" accusing the Supreme Court of a "clear abuse of judicial power," and vowing to use "all lawful means to bring about a reversal" of the Court's decision in *Brown*. White **Citizens' Councils** opposed to desegregation organized in towns across the South. Composed of white businessmen, civic leaders, and ordinary citizens, the Citizens' Councils led local and statewide efforts against public school desegregation.



Figure 1: Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus speaking before a school integration protest in Little Rock. Note the young white woman waving a Confederate battle flag. Image courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

In late summer 1956, crowds of angry whites prevented the desegregation of public schools in Texas, Tennessee, and elsewhere. And, since the Supreme Court's ruling applied to public but not to private schools, some counties simply closed public schools altogether.

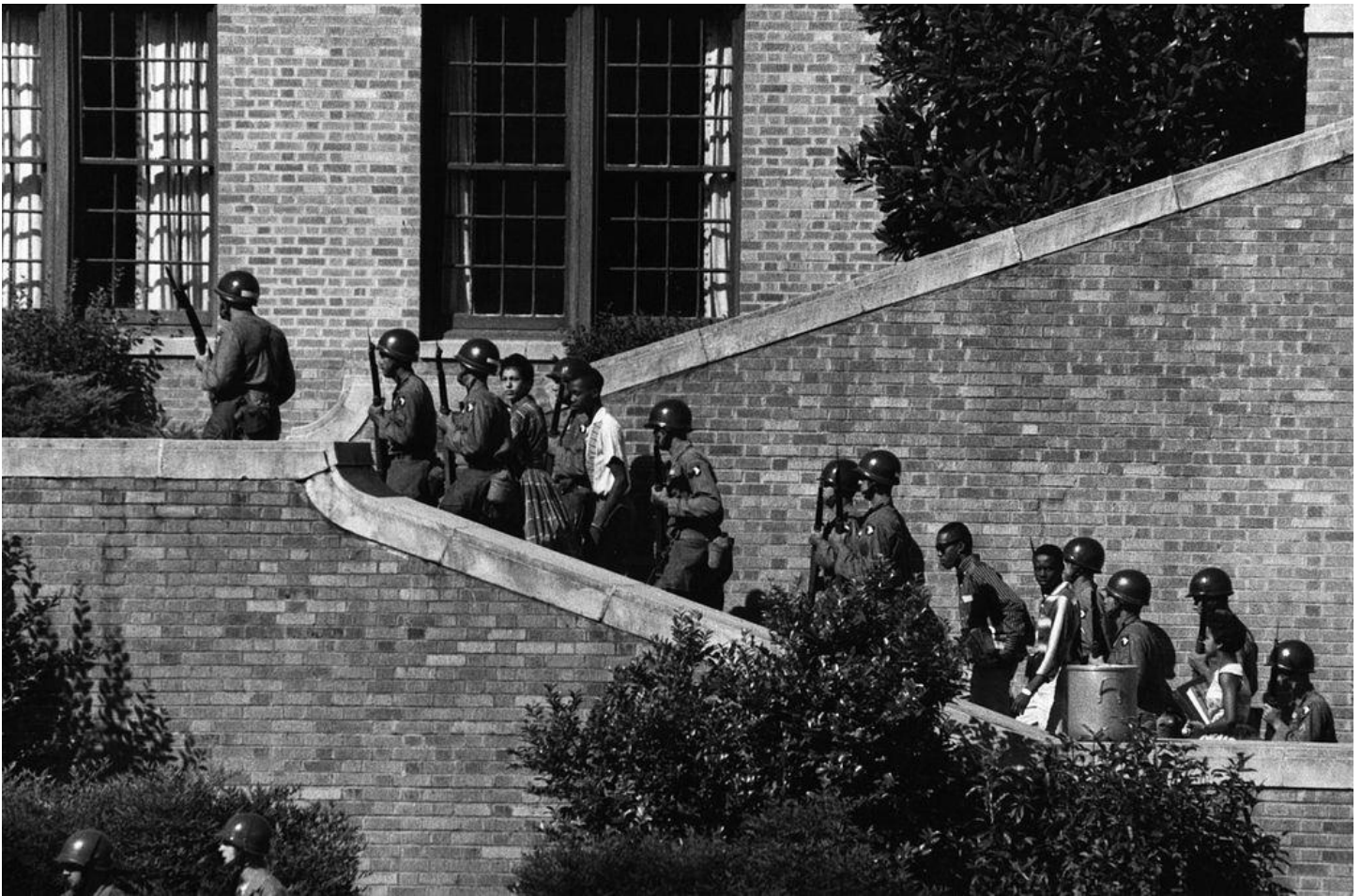
Massive Resistance spread beyond opposition to school desegregation to encompass a broad agenda in defense of the race prejudiced traditions in the South. Some southern states outlawed the NAACP. In 1956, Georgia incorporated the Confederate battle flag into its state flag, and within a few years South Carolina and Alabama began flying the Confederate battle flag over their state capitol buildings. Even President Eisenhower did not personally support the Court's ruling in *Brown*, saying privately, "I don't believe you can change the hearts of men with laws."

The "Little Rock Nine"

On 3 September, the first day of school, a small group of African American high school students, accompanied by an escort of ministers, were turned away from Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas by a large crowd of white citizens and armed troops from the Arkansas National Guard.

Among the African American students soon to be known as the **Little Rock Nine** was Elizabeth Eckford. She recounted her efforts that morning: "I walked up to the guard who had let the white students in.... When I tried to squeeze past him, he raised his bayonet and then the other guards closed in and they raised their bayonets. They glared at me with a mean look and I was very frightened and didn't know what to do. I turned around and the crowd came toward me I tried to see a friendly face somewhere in the crowd—someone who maybe would help. I looked into the face of an old woman and it seemed a kind face, but when I looked at her again, she spat on me.

Television and newspaper reports showing of the event drew national and international attention to the issue of school desegregation.



Soldiers from the 101st Airborne Division escort the Little Rock Nine students into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas. [Image](#) courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

Eisenhower Enforces Desegregation

Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus removed the National Guard from the school only after a federal district court ordered him to do so on September 20. On September 24, President Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard and ordered more than a thousand federal troops from the 101st Airborne to Little Rock. It was the first time that federal troops had been deployed in a southern state since the end of [Reconstruction](#) in 1877.

President Eisenhower addressed the nation on television from the White House on the evening of September 24. In his address he called attention to the necessity of law and order, and to his obligation as president to “support and insure the carrying out of the decisions of the federal courts.” He also reminded Americans that segregation was a blight on the international image of the United States in the midst of the Cold War. Due to segregation, Eisenhower said, “We are portrayed as a violator of those standards of conduct which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations. There they affirmed ‘faith in fundamental human rights and in the dignity and worth of the human person’ and they did so ‘without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.’”

Protected by the armed federal troops who accompanied them to school, September 25 was the first full day of school for the African American students at Central High. That day, as the *New York Times* reported, some classrooms were half-empty, and “from time to time groups of [white] students threw down their books and walked out of school. Some of them chanted . . . ‘two, four, six, eight, we don’t want to integrate.’”

Troops remained in Little Rock for the 1957-1958 school year. After the troops were withdrawn, however, Governor Faubus closed Little Rock’s public schools for the 1958-1959 school year. “Massive Resistance” persisted: by 1964 fewer than two percent of black students in the South attended school with white students.

What Do You Think?

1. How do you think the “Southern Manifesto,” and Governor Faubus’s deployment of the Arkansas National Guard looked in the eyes of people outside the United States who looked to the country as a land dedicated to freedom?
2. When the US Supreme Court interprets the US Constitution is it sometimes, in effect, making new laws? Is such “activism” on the part of the Supreme Court part of its job?
3. Would Central High School have been successfully desegregated if the federal government had not aided local African American citizens?