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HTS 3068: Civil Rights Short Paper

The movement for school desegregation in the South succeeded when segregation outlived its usefulness for elites, forcing the white resistance to give up. Specifically, the economic risk caused by conflict over school integration put pressure on Southern businesses to campaign against segregationists. Simultaneously, the media spectacle created by mob violence created an electoral hazard for the federal government which made its hands-off integration enforcement policy increasingly dangerous.

Segregation would never have been defeated without the historical developments that gave levers of economic and political power to the civil rights movement. Long before the mob violence at Little Rock, NAACP lawyers were working with federal courts to weaken the foundations of segregation by incrementally integrating individual institutions. First came graduate schools, then interstate buses and railroads, then electoral primaries (Bloom 1987:90). These efforts culminated in the *Brown vs. Board of Education* decisions in 1954, which declared “separate but equal” institutions unconstitutional under the fourteenth amendment (Winders 2019). The first decision overrode the 1896 *Plessy* decision which upheld Jim Crow, while the second created a timetable for desegregation that aimed to hold Southern states accountable. *Brown* was important to the success of desegregation because it legitimated civil rights activists’ demands and drew national attention to the issue of segregation. Both of these factors strengthened the influence that black leaders had over the opinions of voters in the North, which would prove vital when the battle over integration intensified. In addition, the *Brown* decision put segregationists in a very bad position relative to powerful businesses and politicians. If they disobeyed the court order, they would spook the national government by upsetting the balance of federalism, and they would alienate businesses by destabilizing the legal order (Bloom 1987:88).

In response to *Brown*, pro-segregation organizations like the white citizen’s council and the klan engaged in mass campaigns to terrorize, confound, or otherwise hamper supporters of desegregation. These segregationist groups used three broad types of tactics to achieve their goals. First, direct repression in the form of “economic coercion, political murders, and...lynchings” (Bloom 1987:89). Second, obstruction of federal enforcement through state law. States from Virginia to Texas cut off funding to schools that tried to integrate and in some cases even sent state troops to expel black students (Bloom 1987). Even though these efforts clearly violated federal law and hurt businesses by driving families away, President Eisenhower slithered out of any responsibility to intervene by using sly rhetorical strategies, such as lying about the degree of state resistance (Bloom 1987). Third, the bugles of local media.

References

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