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HTS 3068: Civil Rights Short Paper

Congratulations, You Played Yourself

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*, segregationists engaged in mass campaigns to terrorize, confound, or otherwise hamper supporters of desegregation. These 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). Even in the face of overwhelming violence and disenfranchisement, Blacks in the South successfully resisted these tactics by engaging in boycotts that brought local economies to a standstill. The most impactful was the boycott of segregated buses in Montgomery, which not only succeeded in its goal but also boosted the resolve of the integration movement (Bloom 1987). These successes would never have been possible without the broader trends of Southern industrialization and urbanization (Winders 2019). As Black people in the South began to migrate to cities and work better-paying jobs, they gained economic power, political know-how, and confidence. 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 media. Judge Thomas Brady stoked the fires of Southern resistance with his strongly-worded *Black Monday* speech, while newspapers like the Richmond *News Leader* accused the federal government of violating the constitution and spread racist propaganda which portrayed black men students as a threat specifically to white girls (Bloom 1987). This web of rhetoric created the atmosphere of hatred that birthed the white citizens’ council in 1954 and motivated white families to heavily resist segregation even if it meant giving up their own children’s education (Bloom 1987).

In the city of Little Rock, Arkansas, the conflict between a segregationist state and a determined black resistance created two major changes in the political opportunity structure. The movement for integration won when it exploited these changes to engineer a strong coalition consisting of businesses, the government, and Northern liberals. Little Rock in 1957 was the nexus of white resistance because of its location “in the heart of the plantation country in Arkansas” (Bloom 1987:111). Other cities, like Greensboro in North Carolina, had desegregated peacefully because their powerful businesses wanted to avoid demonstrations or federal retaliation (Bloom 1987). Desegregation cannot happen when racism is in equilibrium: Just enough to secure the social dominance of whites, but not enough to demand any real sacrifice from racist groups. In Little Rock, Black people’s refusal to go quietly would make that equilibrium impossible. Daisy Bates, the co-founder of the city’s black newspaper, pressured Eisenhower to take action by declaring that the Black students would wait until federal protection was assured to go to school (Bloom 1987). The watchful eye of national media made Eisenhower sweat. With an uncertain election coming up in 1956, he could not afford to alienate the Northern Black voters that came with the Great Migration (Winders 2019). Furthermore, because he wanted to enter new markets in Africa and Asia, Eisenhower had to counteract Soviet accusations that America was racist (Winders 2019). His decision to send federal troops to enforce integration was a stunning victory for the integration movement because it showed segregationists that states could no longer disobey the Supreme Court with impunity (Bloom 1987). Arkansas’ desperate attempt to stop integration by shutting down schools would ultimately backfire by crushing the local economy. Families with students began to move out of Little Rock, taking with them their buying power and labor. This damaged businesses so much that Little Rock lost over 100 million dollars of manufacturing investment from 1956 to 1958 alone (Cobb 1997). To preserve business development, the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce spread the “lesson of Little Rock,” warning other cities to de-segregate peacefully or suffer economic death (Cobb 1997). In conjunction with the Southern Regional Council’s pro-integration outreach to business leaders, this warning convinced city governments like Atlanta’s to desegregate public spaces, job markets, and politics (Cobb 1997). When racism became unprofitable, it became unsustainable, and businesses in Little Rock forced schools to re-open.

References

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