Why *Massive Resistance*?

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On May 17, 1954, the United States Supreme Court invalidated public school segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*. Most politicians outside of the Deep South reacted to *Brown* with restraint. Governor Francis Cherry of Arkansas promised that his state would “obey the law. It always has.” The governor of Virginia, Thomas B. Stanley, guaranteed a “calm” and “dispassionate” response to *Brown*, and the state’s superintendent of public education predicted “no defiance.” That spring and summer, *Brown* attracted little attention in Democratic primaries in Arkansas, Alabama, Florida, and Texas. Throughout most of the South, newspaper editors urged calm and avoided talk of defiance. The *Nashville Tennessean* declared that southerners “have learned to live with change. They can learn to live with this one.” Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution* was reported to have said that “[s]egregation is on the way out . . . and he who tries to tell the people otherwise does them great disservice.” The day after *Brown*, the school board of Greensboro, North Carolina, voted six to one to instruct the superintendent to study means of compliance, and within a week the Little Rock school board had followed suit.¹

Political reaction in the Deep South was often more defiant. Governor Herman Talmadge declared that “Georgia is going to resist mixing the races in the schools if it is the sole state of the nation to do so.” Senator James Eastland of Mississippi announced that “the South will not abide by or obey this legislative decision by a political court,” and Mississippi officials warned that they would abolish public education before integrating. The Louisiana legislature, in session when *Brown* was decided, overwhelmingly resolved to censure the Court’s “usurpation of
power” and adopted a new school segregation law. That fall, voters in Georgia and Mississippi passed constitutional amendments that authorized legislatures to close schools rather than desegregate them. By September Talmadge was declaring that “no amount of force whatever can compel desegregation of white and Negro schools,” while Governor-elect Marvin Griffin was announcing that “come hell or high water, races will not be mixed in Georgia schools.”

Over the next eighteen months, most of the region fell in line behind the defiant proclamations of the Deep South. Citizens’ councils, new organizations that were committed to preserving white supremacy by all means short of violence, began forming in Mississippi in the summer of 1954, quickly spread to Alabama, and then expanded across the South, achieving a maximum membership of perhaps 250,000. Whites flocked to the councils as southern blacks began filing desegregation petitions with school boards; many whites reasoned that “[w]e must make certain that Negroes are not allowed to force their demands on us.” The Supreme Court’s enforcement decision in Brown II fueled further resistance, as many southern whites detected weakness or “backtrack[ing]” in the justices’ efforts to be conciliatory. A Florida segregationist thought the Court had “realized it made a mistake in May and is getting out of it the best way it can.” When lower courts began ordering desegregation, violence erupted, which further radicalized white opinion. The admission of Autherine Lucy to the University of Alabama in February 1956 produced a race riot, and Alabama whites, already riled over the Montgomery bus boycott, now joined citizens’ councils in droves. That month a segregationist rally in Montgomery drew 10,000 people. Early in 1956, several state legislatures in the South adopted interposition resolutions that purported to nullify Brown. They also passed dozens of laws designed to avoid desegregation—measures that authorized school closures, repealed compulsory attendance requirements, cut off public funding for integrated schools, provided public money
for private schools, and attacked the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). In March 1956, most southern congressmen signed the Southern Manifesto, which assailed the Court’s “clear abuse of judicial power” and pledged all “lawful means” of resistance.³

Political contests in southern states quickly assumed a common pattern: Candidates tried to show that they were the most “blatantly and uncompromisingly prepared to cling to segregation at all costs.” “Moderation” became “a term of derision,” as the political center collapsed, leaving only “those who want to maintain the Southern way of life or those who want to mix the races.” Moderate critics of massive resistance were labeled “double crossers,” “sugar-coated integrationists,” “cowards,” and “traitors.” Most officeholders either joined the segregationist bandwagon or else they were retired from service. A Virginia politician observed that it “would be suicide to run on any other platform [than segregation].”⁴

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Why did Brown so radicalize southern politics, leading candidates for public office to compete for the most extreme segregationist positions? Politics does not usually work this way. Rather, politicians generally strive for the middle, seeking to assemble majority coalitions by appealing to median voters who, by definition, are moderates rather than extremists. There were white racial moderates in the South—people who favored compliance with court orders, opposed school closures, and would have tolerated gradual desegregation. The justices in Brown II had consciously appealed to such moderates and sought to empower them. Why did that strategy fail so abysmally? Why were so few moderate voices heard in the South after Brown?

One explanation focuses on southern politicians. Either because they miscalculated their constituents’ preferences or because they demagogically capitalized on their constituents’ fears,
politicians became extremists and created an environment that chilled the expression of moderate sentiment. On this view, massive resistance was not inevitable, at least outside of the Deep South. Politicians could have espoused more moderate positions without losing office, as evidenced by electoral results in Tennessee and Texas. Had they chosen this route, politicians might have mobilized more vocal support from the large bloc of moderates, who instead fell silent.⁵

It is true that some politicians had incentives for extremism, regardless of their constituents’ preferences. In Virginia the Byrd machine had reason to drum up massive resistance to school desegregation, which could distract voters from debates over public services that were gradually weakening its political position. But in most of the South, it was not politicians who were primarily responsible for massive resistance. The political dynamics of the segregation issue, combined with certain features of southern politics, propelled public debate toward extremism, independently of the machinations of politicians. Most officials, including those who were ordinarily inclined toward racial moderation, became more extremist to survive, and those few who resisted were generally destroyed.⁶

Several factors helped foster massive resistance. Diehard segregationists had stronger preferences than did most moderates. They also had the capacity and the inclination to use repressive tactics to create the appearance that southern whites were united behind massive resistance. Diehard states similarly exerted pressure on more moderately inclined neighbors to support massive resistance. Further, legislative malapportionment exaggerated the political power of extremists. Perhaps most important, the desire of nearly all southern whites to preserve segregation if possible virtually ensured an attempt at massive resistance. Differences among whites concerned the costs that they were willing to bear to preserve segregation, not their
preference for it. Finally, the use of federal troops, which proved necessary to suppress massive resistance, ironically bolstered it in the short term.

Although many white southerners were prepared to comply with Brown, and a few actually agreed with it, hard-core segregationists tended to be more intensely committed. Some white moderates came from regions with small black populations, so that school desegregation would not greatly affect them. Ardent segregationists tended to come from rural areas with large black populations or from working-class urban neighborhoods without rigid residential segregation. Those who were most committed on the segregation issue tended to be most adamantly opposed to Brown. By virtue of their strong preferences, they were also likely to control southern racial policy. Legislative commissions that were appointed to recommend responses to Brown were generally dominated by black-belt segregationists. The legislator who chaired Virginia’s commission, Garland Gray, came from Southside, and he had already recorded his “unalterable opposition” to the Court’s “monstrous” decision. All five members of the Arkansas legislative committee that recommended policy on school segregation represented the delta region, with the state’s largest black populations.7

Diehard segregationists were not only more intensely committed than their adversaries were, but they also had the inclination and the capacity to silence dissent. Massive resisters wanted to suppress opposition because they believed that only by presenting a united front could they induce the Court and the nation to retreat from Brown. This issue arose mainly in the context of whether to allow local-option desegregation. If given a choice, portions of many southern states—northwestern Arkansas, West Texas, northern and western Virginia, East Tennessee, the city of Atlanta—were prepared to comply with Brown. But massive resisters in state government were determined to eliminate that choice for fear that any deviation from
universal segregation would make integration appear inevitable, embolden the NAACP, and undermine the campaign to convince northern integrationists that the South would never tolerate Brown. Thus, the Virginia legislature revoked Arlington County’s right to elect school board members as punishment for the board’s 1956 vote to desegregate, and it rejected the Gray Commission’s initial proposal for local-option desegregation. In 1957 the Texas legislature required local communities to conduct referenda before desegregating or else lose their state education funds. More than 120 school districts in Texas had desegregated before this law was passed, but almost none did so for several years thereafter. Massive resisters in Georgia worried that Atlanta, with its “wrecking crew of extremists, ultra-liberals and renegade politicians,” could prove to be the “Achilles’ heel in the fight to keep segregation.” When Mayor William B. Hartsfield asked the state legislature to adopt local option, Governor Griffin declared that the mayor “cannot throw in the towel for me or any other Georgian,” and Senator Richard Russell warned against “surrender” talk. The Southern Manifesto was a highly successful effort by senators such as Russell and Harry Byrd to coerce moderates—Lister Hill, John Sparkman, William Fulbright, Brooks Hays—into maintaining a united front.8

Their incentive to suppress dissent is clear, but why were massive resisters so effective at doing so? The answer, in short, is that the South was not an open society characterized by robust debate on racial issues. In 1960 a law school dean in Mississippi pointed out that “[f]riends won’t argue among themselves” about segregation, and “you can’t think out loud hardly.” James Silver, a history professor at Ole Miss, charged that Mississippi had “erected a totalitarian society which has eliminated the ordinary processes through which change can come about.” A South Carolina minister, noting that people were afraid even to protest the beating of a local band teacher for his allegedly integrationist statements, observed that “fear covers South Carolina like
the frost.” In such an environment, white moderates were “immobilized by confusion and fear,” and they mostly went into hiding.⁹

In the mid-1950s, massive resisters were a majority in much of the South, and thus they could use the levers of government to suppress dissent. Public school teachers and university professors lost their jobs or were harassed by legislative investigating committees for daring to support integration or even for urging obedience to law and criticizing mob violence. Unwilling to tolerate such assaults on academic freedom, many of them resigned and moved elsewhere, which only exacerbated the problem of the closed society. Integrationist university students faced similar harassment and expulsion. Some southern states targeted speech as well as speakers, removing offensive books from circulation. When the Georgia board of education banned textbook statements that charged whites with discrimination against blacks, the chairman explained that “[t]here is no place in Georgia schools at any time for anything that disagrees with our way of life.” An Alabama legislator sparked a national controversy by demanding that public libraries ban a popular children’s book about the marriage of two rabbits, one white and one black. Even the staunchly segregationist Montgomery Advertiser thought this was “idiocy,” but the legislator defended himself on the ground that “the South has room for only one viewpoint.”¹⁰

Private suppression of dissent supplemented public suppression. Citizens’ councils applied economic pressure to blacks who pursued integration and to whites who were deemed insufficiently committed to segregation. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission had difficulty enlisting Mississippi whites to serve on the state’s advisory committee after a citizens’ council editor warned that “any scalawag southerner who fronts for our mortal enemies will face the well-deserved contempt and ostracism that any proud people would feel for a traitor.” White
students who initially befriended the Little Rock Nine were condemned as “Nigger lovers,” as were Ole Miss faculty and administrators who were civil to James Meredith. When a few white families refused to boycott desegregated schools in New Orleans in 1960, they received death threats, homes were vandalized, parents were fired from jobs, and one family gave up and moved North. Violence was the last resort for compelling white conformity. A mob beat up a white minister in Clinton, Tennessee, for escorting black students to the desegregated school. When a white woman contributed an essay to the moderate publication, *South Carolinians Speak*, in which she urged gradual desegregation, her home was bombed.11

Such pressure suppressed the traditional organs of moderate racial opinion. Newspapers that advocated desegregation or simple compliance with law were boycotted and sometimes shut down. The editor of the only South Carolina newspaper that urged compliance with *Brown* was driven out of the state, as was the editor of one of the few Mississippi newspapers that criticized Governor Ross Barnett’s antics at Ole Miss. Southern ministers who advocated integration, or simply protested against extremist resistance, were usually evicted by their congregations. In 1963 twenty-eight Methodist ministers in Mississippi signed a statement supporting school desegregation, and all but seven of them were gone within a year. Many other ministers simply suppressed their private convictions that segregation was immoral. Under pressure from public officials, some southern universities stopped inviting integrationist speakers. Citizens’ councils harassed social clubs that expressed interest in hearing opposing viewpoints. Some television stations refused to air national programs that discussed integration, explaining that they were not “running a propaganda machine for the NAACP.”12

If southern society was closed for whites, it was hermetically sealed for blacks. Because blacks were the most integrationist of southerners, suppressing their viewpoint was critical to
maintaining the veneer of solid support for segregation. Blacks were subject to the same forms of segregationist pressure as whites but often more intense. Citizens’ councils announced that “[w]e intend to make it difficult, if not impossible, for any Negro who advocates desegregation to find and hold a job, get credit, or renew a mortgage.” Police harassed integrationist blacks, busting up their meetings, arresting them on fraudulent charges, and sometimes beating them. During the Montgomery bus boycott, public officials who were pursuing a “get tough” policy arrested scores of blacks on phony traffic charges and tried to disbar the black lawyer who filed the bus desegregation suit and to alter his draft classification. A black man in Bessemer, Alabama, was sentenced to six months in jail for breach of the peace and inciting to riot for reproducing a picture from a northern newspaper of a black man praying to God that equal rights would be extended to all. The most aggressive black integrationists were targets of extraordinary white violence. Daisy Bates, leader of Little Rock’s desegregation forces, had her home firebombed seven times within two years. \(^{13}\)

Southern society was closed, but Mississippi verged on totalitarianism. The state sovereignty commission spied on civil rights workers and channeled public funds to citizens’ councils. The legislature made it a crime to incite a breach of the peace by urging “nonconformance with the established traditions, customs, and usages of the State of Mississippi,” and Governor James Coleman threatened to prosecute speakers who entered Mississippi to agitate the race issue. A white newspaper editor, who was sued for libel for criticizing law enforcement officers who mistreated blacks, observed that “in much of Mississippi, we live in an atmosphere of fear.” When the long-time Ole Miss history professor, James Silver, criticized the state as a “closed society” in 1963, public officials, failing to perceive the irony, announced that “it is time to get rid” of Silver and “to stifle his degrading activities.”
Mississippi officials concocted phony charges against blacks who pursued integration. Clyde Kennard, who tried to desegregate Mississippi Southern University, was later sentenced to seven years at hard labor for allegedly trying to buy twenty-five dollars’ worth of stolen chicken feed. When Medgar Evers called Kennard’s sentence “a mockery of judicial justice,” he received thirty days in jail for contempt. Nobody ruled Senator Eastland in contempt, though, when he told white Mississippians that “[y]ou are not required to obey any court which passes out such a ruling [Brown]. In fact, you are obligated to defy it.” In many parts of Mississippi, blacks still faced “systematic racial terrorism.” A visitor to Jefferson County reported that “[i]t is all but unbelievable to see the fear that is shown by the Negro people.” In many counties, not a single black person dared register to vote. In the early 1960s civil rights workers in Mississippi were routinely beaten, bombed, shot at, and occasionally killed.¹⁴

Racial moderates had neither the inclination nor the capacity to use such methods. They did not control state or local governments, and thus they could not fire segregationist teachers, expel segregationist students, or use law enforcement apparatus to harass citizens’ council members. Nor did moderates make harassing phone calls to segregationists, burn crosses on their lawns, or blow up their homes. When Robert Williams, the president of the NAACP branch in Union County, North Carolina, advocated that blacks meet “violence with violence” in the wake of Mack Parker’s lynching in Mississippi in 1959, the national office immediately suspended him. Thus, hard-core segregationists were not only more intensely committed to their position than were moderate whites, but they were also more willing to use coercive measures to achieve victory. The suppression of moderate opinion had a cascading effect: As some people were intimidated into silence, the pressure on others to conform intensified.¹⁵
Just as within one state diehard segregationists could pressure moderates by denying the inevitability of desegregation, so could extremist states pressure their moderate neighbors. Politicians had difficulty explaining to constituents why they had to desegregate when neighboring states were not doing so. This dynamic partially explains Governor Orval Faubus’s dilemma over school desegregation in Little Rock in 1957. Alabama and Texas had flouted desegregation orders the previous year, and the segregationist governor of Georgia, Marvin Griffin, visited Little Rock two weeks before schools were scheduled to open, expressing shock that any governor with troops at his disposal would allow integration. Citizens approached Faubus on the street, demanding to know “if Georgia doesn’t have integration, why does Arkansas?” On other occasions, citizens’ council members asked why Faubus remained silent, while governors in South Carolina and Georgia were denouncing Court decisions that banned segregation in public parks, playgrounds, and golf courses. Alabama citizens’ councils pressured their congressmen “to join us in this fight, so we won’t have to go to Mississippi, Georgia or South Carolina” to find real segregationists.16

Comprehending this dynamic and the importance of maintaining regional unity, diehard states in the Deep South pressured their more moderate neighbors to conform to massive resistance. The Columbia State criticized states that were abandoning segregation without a fight, because “surrender of some states makes it harder for the others to hold the line.” Soon after he had fomented violent resistance to desegregation in Clinton, Tennessee, John Kasper, the South’s leading peripatetic troublemaker, told Birmingham segregationists that “[w]e want trouble and we want it everywhere we can get it.” When sixteen Clintonians were arrested in connection with Kasper’s disturbances, several attorneys general from southern states agreed to defend them—an expression of regional solidarity. Senator Eastland also traveled through the South, speaking to
mass segregationist rallies, warning against efforts “to pick them off one by one under the
damnable doctrine of gradualism,” and criticizing “border states [that] have weak-kneed
politicians in the capitol . . . [and] weak governors.” Both the interposition movement and the
Southern Manifesto were partially aimed at pressuring moderate states to support massive
resistance. The perceived importance of maintaining regional unity led Virginians to criticize
North Carolina’s token integrationism as “abject surrender” and Alabamians to regard Virginia’s
later abandonment of massive resistance as a “crippling blow.”

Extremists also benefitted from legislative malapportionment, which in every state
favored rural districts that contained the most committed white supremacists. In Alabama and
Georgia, black-belt counties enjoyed nearly twice the representation that their populations
warranted, meaning that whites in those counties, where blacks were generally disfranchised,
exercised even more disproportionate political power. Moreover, such counties tended to reelect
the same representatives for decades, which enhanced their legislative seniority and thus further
augmented the political power of diehard segregationists. Moderate racial opinion in cities was
often nullified by malapportionment. For example, Atlanta had little clout in the rural-dominated
Georgia legislature. Georgia’s unique county-unit system, which extended malapportionment to
elections for state executive office, explains the extremism of governors such as Talmadge and
Griffin. In other states, which elected executive officers on the principle of one person, one vote,
governors often tried to force legislative reapportionment, but their efforts came to naught. When
Governors Big Jim Folsom and Leroy Collins called special legislative sessions in Alabama and
Florida in the mid-1950s to consider reapportionment, legislators instead enacted massive-
resistance measures. Had Brown been decided after Reynolds v. Sims (1964) invalidated
malapportionment in state legislatures, rather than before, massive resistance might have played
out rather differently.¹⁸

Yet the most important explanation for the temporary triumph of massive resistance may be this: Many southern whites—perhaps a majority outside of the Deep South—preferred token integration to school closures, but very few favored token integration over segregation. Thus, opinion polls on Brown revealed minimal support among southern whites, but referenda on school closures showed substantial white opposition. Consequently, until it became clear that preserving segregation entailed school closures, moderate whites had every reason to allow massive resistance to run its course, as they, too, preferred to avoid desegregation. The difference between white “moderates” and “extremists” was in the costs they were prepared to bear to maintain segregation, not in their preference for it.¹⁹

From this perspective, the crucial development of the mid-1950s was the growing conviction among white southerners that Brown could be successfully defied and segregation preserved. Massive resisters may have been emboldened by the fierce and successful opposition to desegregation put up by whites in Milford, Delaware, in the fall of 1954. If border-state whites could frustrate desegregation, how could it possibly be imposed on the real South? Brown II furthered this conviction, as many southern whites sensed the beginnings of a judicial retreat. President Dwight David Eisenhower’s obvious lack of enthusiasm for Brown, his statements rejecting the use of federal troops to enforce desegregation orders, and his refusal to intervene against violent resistance to desegregation in Texas, Alabama, and Tennessee in 1956 encouraged southern whites to question the inevitability of integration. Historical memories of the first Reconstruction, when southern whites had worn down the (never intense) commitment of northern whites to protecting the political and civil rights of southern blacks, inspired hope that determined resistance could nullify Brown. One segregationist editor, urging white
southerners to “shape their destiny and control their way of life, just as they did in the far more
dangerous period of Reconstruction,” triumphantly concluded: “[o]ur forefathers saved white
men’s civilization. We can do it again.” Analogies to Prohibition also offered solace to southern
whites: Many Americans, in the North as well as the South, had drawn the lesson from that
historical episode that national efforts to coerce social reform against strong resistance were
doomed to failure.20

One cannot know how many white southerners genuinely believed that Brown could be
nullified and segregation preserved. But many southern politicians spoke this way, and
constituents may well have believed what they wanted to. Governor Lindsay Almond of Virginia
had “faith that the decision ultimately will be reversed,” and Senator Byrd thought that “if people
are firm enough and determined enough,” the justices might change their minds. A Louisiana
legislator observed: “When those birds in the Supreme Court realize we mean business, we’ll
find we won’t have to change our entire school system.” A South Carolina judge expressed
confidence that “this decision will be eventually reversed, though it may take years.” Countless
other southern politicians insisted that desegregation would not come “in a thousand years” or in
their “lifetime.” The principal purposes of the Southern Manifesto included convincing white
southerners that desegregation was not inevitable and convincing northerners that the South
would not capitulate. Efforts at undermining the perceived inevitability of desegregation also had
a cascading effect: The fewer people who accepted desegregation as inevitable, the less so it
became.21

Such political rhetoric convinced at least some people. A circular from a white
supremacist organization declared that “[t]he fact that the Supreme Court has ruled as it has, in
favor of the black man, is no sign that the whole thing is settled. Many times in the past the
Supreme Court has reversed itself, and many other times it has merely overlooked enforcing its rulings.” A reporter from Norfolk, Virginia, noted that after the “general air of calm resignation” following Brown I, the notion had developed “that the fatal day would be delayed for many years,” and “in some quarters there was actual belief that integration would never come.”

Political journalist Samuel Lubell, who was interviewing white southerners during this period, reported that “[b]y the spring of 1957 the segregationists, emboldened by the lack of opposition to their efforts, had come to believe that nullification of the Supreme Court’s decision was in sight.” According to Gallup polls, the number of white southerners who believed that school desegregation was inevitable fell from 55 percent early in 1956 to 43 percent in August 1957.22

Once Eisenhower used federal troops at Little Rock, however, only school closures could prevent desegregation. As several schools closed in Virginia and in Little Rock in 1958, white southerners had to confront a previously avoided question: What costs were they prepared to bear in order to preserve segregation? Many had supported massive resistance as a bluff or as an initial response but were unwilling to pursue it to its logical conclusion—the abolition of public schools. Parents’ groups that were dedicated to saving public education sprang up across the South, and some local chambers of commerce mobilized against school closures.23

The speed with which massive resistance crumbled outside of the Deep South after schools were closed suggests one of two possibilities: Either many whites had endorsed school closures only as a bluff to induce a retreat by the Court and by integrationist northerners, or they had genuinely supported closures but without carefully calculating the costs. Once the bluff was called, and the costs of school closures were made concrete, the attitudes of white southerners toward school desegregation changed rapidly.
A post-Little Rock poll revealed that two out of three whites in Virginia would rather close schools than integrate them. Reflecting that opinion, in 1958 Governor Almond closed schools in Charlottesville, Norfolk, and Warren County, while continuing to give fiery speeches that endorsed massive resistance. But private-school arrangements quickly proved unsatisfactory, especially in Norfolk, where a federal judge enjoined public employees from teaching in private schools and thousands of children went uneducated. Public opinion in Virginia changed rapidly as a result. By November, newspapers that had formerly supported massive resistance were calling for “speedy abandonment” of that “futile” strategy and the adoption of “a new approach.” Public officials soon reflected that opinion shift. Although Southside politicians continued to endorse “massive resistance all the way,” Governor Almond changed his tune virtually overnight. After federal and state courts invalidated school closures in January 1959, Almond repudiated massive resistance in favor of local option and token integration. He criticized proposals to abandon public education as “going back to the dark ages” and warned that Virginia “cannot secede from the Union [or] overthrow the federal government.” An opinion poll showed that two out of three Virginians supported the governor’s new policy.24

Attitudes toward school desegregation also changed quickly in Little Rock. Governor Faubus had promised an easy transition from public to private education, and in September 1958 Little Rock voters supported school closures in a referendum by a margin of greater than five to two. But the white private school quickly proved unsatisfactory, especially after a federal court blocked its use of public money and public school buildings. In December school board elections showed that voters were evenly divided between candidates of the citizens’ council and those of more moderate businessmen. In February 1959, the two thousand members of the Little Rock Chamber of Commerce voted by a margin of better than three to one to reopen high schools with
token integration. The businessmen could easily count the costs of school closures: Ten businesses had relocated to Little Rock in the two years before September 1957, but not a single one since. In May 1959 voters narrowly recalled segregationist school board members in retaliation for their purges of moderate teachers and replaced them with token integrationists. By the time that Little Rock public high schools reopened with a few blacks that fall, the private-school corporation had gone bankrupt. In 1960 Samuel Lubell discovered that the same Little Rock whites who two years earlier had preferred to see Central High burned down rather than “infested with niggers” now favored token integration over school closures.25

Because their moment of truth arrived later, Georgians were able to learn vicariously from the tribulations of others. Little Rock officials and businessmen visited Atlanta to warn of the economic and social costs entailed by diehard segregationism. In his 1958 gubernatorial campaign and then repeatedly over the next two years, Governor Vandiver had rejected local option and token integration in favor of school closures. Yet public opinion began to shift as school closures loomed once Judge Frank Hooper ordered Atlanta to desegregate in 1960, which he later postponed until 1961. Parents’ organizations, business leaders, and most newspapers preferred token integration to school closures. Reflecting this opinion shift, Vandiver encouraged the legislature to appoint the Sibley Commission, which searched for an honorable means of retreat. By early 1961, as the desegregation crisis hit the University of Georgia, Vandiver was declaring that “[w]e cannot abandon public education” and urging the repeal of statutes that required integrated schools to close and their replacement with provisions for local option and public tuition grants for students to attend private schools. Henceforth, Vandiver insisted that federal court orders must be obeyed, and he bragged that his administration had kept the schools open.26
These dramatic turnabouts in Virginia, Arkansas, and Georgia help explain the political dynamics of massive resistance. Until attempted, nobody knew whether it could succeed. After Little Rock, however, only school closures could preserve segregation. Once they were tried, public opinion turned rapidly against them because of the harm to education and to business development. Moderates, who had previously possessed little incentive to oppose massive resistance, now asserted themselves, and the debate rapidly swung in their favor. Token integration, though “still . . . objectionable,” was “not intolerable,” and it was preferable to school closures. Moreover, this dynamic favoring moderation was as self-reinforcing as the earlier one that supported extremism: As the first moderates asserted themselves and demanded open schools, others found it easier to follow.27

Yet the realism that was impelled by Little Rock, New Orleans, and Ole Miss had little immediate effect on Governors John Patterson, George Wallace, and Ross Barnett. In the late 1950s, diehard resisters may genuinely have believed that desegregation could be avoided and the Court induced to back down. Explaining their behavior in 1962-63 is more difficult, as they surely understood by then that they could not preserve “segregation forever” and that to “fight harder next time” was no formula for success. The reason that politicians continued to make such pledges is probably that voters in Alabama and Mississippi continued to reward them for doing so. For example, Wallace plainly anticipated political gain from fomenting a desegregation fight with the federal government, even though his stand in the schoolhouse door in Tuscaloosa was a carefully orchestrated charade. The real question is why voters rewarded such irresponsible pledges once desegregation had become inevitable. Perhaps they were so embittered at the prospect of externally coerced racial change that they preferred, in the best southern tradition, to fight futile battles rather than to capitulate. Many whites in Mississippi and Alabama, though
conceding that “you can’t fight the Federal government and win,” still insisted that “we’ll never accept it voluntarily” and “they’ll have to force it on us.” As William Faulkner pointed out, Mississippi whites “will accept another civil war, knowing they’re going to lose.”

Finally and ironically, massive resistance could end only after Eisenhower had proved his willingness to use federal troops to enforce desegregation orders, yet the deployment of these forces bolstered massive resistance in the short term. As a general rule, external threats tend to unify a polity. When NATO forces bombed Serbia in 1999, even critics of President Slobodan Milosevic temporarily rallied behind him in opposition to outside attacks. Historically, white southerners were especially sensitive to outside interference with their “way of life.” Thus, when Eisenhower sent federal troops into Little Rock, moderate white southerners united with extremists in assailing the president. Ironically, though Little Rock should have discouraged extremism by demonstrating the futility of massive resistance, its immediate effect was to further radicalize southern opinion and to empower politicians who promised defiance of “federal tyranny.”

On statewide television, Faubus referred to Little Rock as an “occupied” city, implicitly appealing to the bitter historical memories that Arkansas whites had of the Civil War and of Reconstruction, when federal troops had invaded the South. Southern political opinion overwhelmingly supported Faubus and condemned Eisenhower. A North Carolina congressman asserted that “[t]he issue of integrated schools is dwarfed by the precipitous and dictatorial stab at the rights of an individual state.” Several southern politicians compared the use of federal troops at Little Rock to the Soviet Union’s invasion of Hungary in 1956. Governor George Timmerman of South Carolina criticized the president for “trying to set himself up as a dictator,” and he resigned his commission in the naval reserves. Senator Russell condemned the use of
“storm troopers.” Circuit Judge George Wallace compared Eisenhower to Hitler and accused the president of substituting “military dictatorship for the Constitution of the United States.”

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It is ironic that after Brown southern whites abandoned tried-and-true evasive techniques that for decades had successfully nullified the constitutional rights of blacks, in favor of outright defiance. Southern whites had eschewed open confrontation with the Court over black jury service and black suffrage, while completely sabotaging those rights through the discriminatory exercise of administrative discretion. But rather than using similarly fraudulent mechanisms to circumvent school desegregation, the white South declared war on the Court, nullified Brown, and used state troops and vigilante mobs to block the enforcement of desegregation orders. Such open defiance forced President Eisenhower’s hand, alienated national opinion, radicalized southern politics, fostered violence, and irritated Supreme Court justices. One cannot know how long token school desegregation might have persisted had white southerners played their hand differently, but in retrospect massive resistance almost certainly proved a mistake from their perspective. The nature of southern politics may have impelled that mistake. Southern politicians reaped rewards for adopting extremist positions. Governor Faubus won four more terms in office because he called out the militia to block the desegregation of Little Rock schools, and state legislators across the South saw political profit in passing interposition resolutions. The electoral incentives of southern politicians led them to respond to Brown in ways that ultimately facilitated its enforcement. The harder southern whites fought to maintain Jim Crow, the more they seemed to accelerate its demise.
*. James Monroe Distinguished Professor of Law and Professor of History, University of Virginia. A revised version of this chapter, containing more extensive documentation, appears in my book, From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality (Oxford University Press 2003).


All Deliberate Speed: Segregation-Desegregation in Southern Schools (1957), 130-46.


30. SSN, Oct. 1957, pp. 4, 5, 8, 9, 13, 15, 16; Nov. 1957, pp. 7, 9, 11, 15, 16; Dec. 1957, p. 2;
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