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Cold War Civil Rights

Mary L. Dudziak

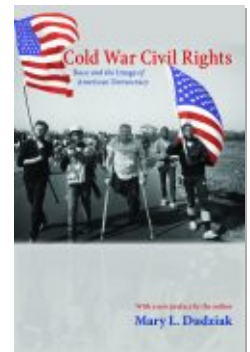
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CHAPTER 4

Holding the Line in Little Rock

Little Rock has unfortunately become a symbol of Negro-White relations in the United States.

AMERICAN CONSULATE, LOURENÇO MARQUESZ, MOZAMBIQUE
TO DEPARTMENT OF STATE, SEPTEMBER 30, 1957¹

The school year would not begin easily in Little Rock, Arkansas, in 1957. On September 4 of that year, nine African American students tried to enroll at Little Rock's Central High School. Their admission had been ordered by a federal district court. However, just two days earlier, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus declared that the students' enrollment threatened "imminent danger of tumult, riot and breach of the peace and the doing of violence to persons and property." He proclaimed a state of emergency and ordered the Arkansas National Guard into service. These troops surrounded Central High School on September 4 and turned the students away as they tried to enter the school.²

What transpired that day would capture the attention of the international media and of President Dwight D. Eisenhower. School desegregation in Little Rock was no longer a local or state issue, but a critical national problem.³

As the *Arkansas Gazette* reported it,

The first Negro applicant to try to enroll at Little Rock Central High School . . . , Elizabeth Eckford, 15, was twice blocked from entering the grounds, walked calmly down two blocks then sat out 35 minutes of vocal abuse while waiting for a bus to go home. . . . When she approached Guardsmen at the corner they drew together and blocked her entrance to the sidewalk.⁴

Eckford was harassed in front of television cameras as “a crowd of 200 saw her and rushed to the scene.” A white woman, Grace Lorch, ultimately came to her defense and boarded a bus with Eckford, taking her away from the scene. Seven of the nine students arrived together and, on orders of the governor, were also turned away.⁵

Governor Faubus was something of a latecomer to resistance. Little Rock had a reputation as a progressive southern community, and Faubus had been thought of as a moderate. In contrast to Georgia Governor Herman Talmadge, Faubus had given no speeches of defiance after *Brown* was decided. Instead, he gave African Americans a role in the state Democratic leadership during the 1954 gubernatorial campaign. In addition, there was progress, albeit with mixed success, toward desegregation in other communities in Arkansas after 1954. Faubus’s most direct statements on school desegregation prior to Little Rock were to declare the issue a local one, to be handled by local school boards.⁶

As school prepared to open in 1957, however, Faubus announced his “prayerful” decision to call in the troops. “They will act not as segregationists or integrationists,” he pledged, “but as soldiers called to active duty to carry out their assigned tasks.” Their duty was to maintain order, but, Faubus continued, it would not be possible to maintain order “if forcible integration is carried out tomorrow in the schools of this community.”⁷

A school desegregation plan had been developed by the Little Rock school board. As did many other communities, Little Rock set about exploring how it might implement *Brown v. Board of Education* immediately after that decision was handed down. Community

support for compliance with *Brown* was evident when the school board was reelected after the desegregation plan was announced. With desegregation set to begin with the opening of the 1957–58 school year, however, the opposition became more active and vocal. Mrs. Clyde D. Thomason, a member of a Little Rock mothers' committee opposed to desegregation, filed suit in state court in August 1957, seeking an injunction against the plan. Based on unsubstantiated testimony by Governor Faubus of an increase in gun sales in the Little Rock area, the state court issued an injunction on August 29. The school board then turned to the federal district court. As fate would have it, the case came before a nonsouthern judge. Judge Ronald N. Davies from South Dakota was sitting by designation in federal district court in Arkansas. Judge Davies ordered desegregation to go forward. When Faubus called out the National Guard on September 2, the school board returned to the district court. Judge Davies noted that "[t]he chief executive of Little Rock has stated that the Little Rock police have not had a single case of inter-racial violence reported to them and that there has been no indication from sources available to him that there would be violence in regard to this situation" and denied the school board's petition to delay desegregation.⁸

As the crisis deepened, the federal government was drawn in. Judge Davies called upon U.S. Attorney General Herbert Brownell to investigate allegations that African American students had been denied admission to Central High. President Eisenhower ultimately found himself involved in the crisis as well. While Faubus telegraphed the president complaining of federal interference and concerns that his phone lines were being tapped by federal agents, Little Rock Mayor Woodrow Wilson Mann urged Eisenhower to become more involved. Eisenhower's response to Faubus was to emphasize that "when I became President, I took an oath to support and defend the Constitution of the United States. The only assurance I can give you is that the Federal Constitution will be upheld by me by every legal means at my command."⁹

For the next three weeks, desegregation in Little Rock was at an impasse. As school went on at Central High, the "Little Rock Nine" stayed home, unable to pass through the national guardsmen still

surrounding the school.¹⁰ The Little Rock crisis was to become a defining moment. It was not the first civil rights event in Eisenhower's presidency to capture widespread international attention. Following the 1954 *Brown* decision, Emmet Till's brutal murder in 1955 had outraged the world, the 1955–56 Montgomery bus boycott had focused international media attention on civil rights protest, and Autherine Lucy's attempt to cross the color line at the University of Alabama in 1956 had become a civil rights crisis with international impact. Little Rock, however, was a crisis of such magnitude for worldwide perceptions of race and American democracy that it would become the reference point for the future. Later presidents, facing crises of their own, would try their best to avoid "another Little Rock." Foreign commentators would judge American progress by how far the nation had come from Little Rock. If slavery had been the benchmark against which American racial progress had been measured in the past, Little Rock provided a new measure, as the Cold War required more of the leader of the free world.

When school first opened in September 1957, the *Arkansas Gazette* had expressed its confidence that "the world will see that we are lawabiding people."¹¹ The world would, unfortunately, draw a different lesson from Little Rock.

On September 11, the people of Little Rock learned that even Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was concerned about the difficulties in their city. The *Arkansas Gazette* quoted Dulles as saying that the Little Rock crisis, along with school desegregation battles elsewhere in the South, "are not helpful to the influence of the United States abroad." The *Gazette* reported that "Radio Moscow has been chirping happily about the troubles of integration," and the Little Rock crisis was a particular subject of its attention. President Eisenhower later described the situation in his memoirs. He wrote that Faubus's "outrageous action" in Little Rock

called to my mind the first act of the Rodgers and Hammerstein musical *South Pacific* in which the hero, a Frenchman, mistakenly calls the heroine's American hometown "Small Rock." Before September 1957, that line was meaningless to

foreign audiences. Thereafter, no one anywhere would miss the point: the name of Little Rock, Arkansas, would become known around the world.

According to Eisenhower, “Overseas, the mouthpieces of Soviet propaganda in Russia and Europe were blaring out that ‘anti-Negro violence’ in Little Rock was being ‘committed with the clear connivance of the United States government.’”¹²

Coverage of the Little Rock crisis had blanketed the international media beginning with the incidents of September 4. Elizabeth Eckford’s trials appeared on front pages around the world. The *London Times*, the *Times of India*, the *Tanganyika Standard*, the *South China Morning Post*, and many other papers carried stories virtually every day for the entire month of September. According to the U.S. embassy in Brussels, Little Rock “has been followed in the Belgian press with far greater interest than any other American domestic issue in recent years. The more dramatic aspects of the case, including photographs of beatings and other violence, have usually been given greater prominence in the press than leading local or foreign news articles.” International coverage of the crisis was so noteworthy to U.S. newswriters that there was widespread coverage in U.S. papers of the coverage abroad.¹³

On September 6, for example, the *Times of India* carried a story on its front page under the title “Armed Men Cordon Off White School: Racial Desegregation in Arkansas Prevented.” That same day the front page of the *Tanganyika Standard* declared, “Troops Stop Negroes Going to School.” “Little Rock Troubled” proclaimed a page-one headline in the *East African Standard*, followed by a front-page story the next day: “Eisenhower Intervenes as School Bars Negroes.” The *Egyptian Gazette* repeatedly placed Little Rock in the context of school desegregation struggles elsewhere in the American South. The paper’s September 5 front-page story outlining the facts of the exclusion of the Little Rock Nine from school was tempered with news of successful school desegregation efforts in Van Buren and Ozark, Arkansas, and Louisville, Kentucky.¹⁴

The September 4, 1957, edition of the *London Times* described Eisenhower’s reaction to the Little Rock crisis with some skepticism:

Questions about the action taken by the state government in Arkansas brought forth from the President only a restatement of the axioms on which he has based his own “gradualist” approach to the problem. “You cannot change people’s hearts merely by laws,” he observed, and the Supreme Court’s ruling in 1954 therefore had caused “emotional difficulties” for both sides. Southerners, he implied, were genuinely frightened by what they thought would lead to “a mongrelization of the races.”

Difficult though the problem might be, he added, “We are going to whip it in the long run by Americans being true to themselves, and not by law”—a comment that seems to be as wide of the real issue as was Polonius’s advice. Who is to say that the southerners—who see in attempts to integrate their schools a threat to the whole social fabric of their communities, and who try to prevent it by every means—are not being true to themselves?¹⁵

International papers often commented on the international attention itself. According to the *Montreal Star*, “The world watches Negroes in the United States going to Southland schools under the muzzles of loaded rifles, just ninety-four years after the Emancipation Proclamation was signed by another Republican, Abraham Lincoln.” In London, the *Times* spoke of “the lonely, isolated negro children whose pictures have touched and shamed millions, in the United States and abroad.” Student organizations and other groups around the world also registered their support for the Little Rock Nine and their opposition to Faubus’s actions.¹⁶

Dutch papers noted that Little Rock harmed American prestige. In Stockholm, Sweden, *Svenska Dagbladet* wrote that the events in Arkansas “will be watched with concern throughout [the] Western world.” If the federal government did not take a strong stand, it would pose a serious threat “not only to President Eisenhower’s personal prestige but also to [the] position of [the] U.S. in [the] eyes [of the] free world.” According to the *Irish Times*, the crisis had “given Communist propagandists the text for innumerable sermons to coloured peoples everywhere.” The Swiss press expressed dismay

over the “incalculable harm done” by Little Rock to the “Occidental position throughout [the] non-European world.”¹⁷

At home, the impact of the Little Rock crisis on world opinion was widely understood. Harry S. Ashmore wrote in 1958 that Little Rock “has become a symbol that arouses strong emotions among people everywhere in the world.” The crisis “was about as handy a package as the Russians have had handed them since they set out to woo the colored peoples of the earth.” William Ross of Brooklyn, New York, wrote to Governor Faubus that he was “furnishing the Communists with priceless propaganda material and hurting our standing with Asian and African countries.”¹⁸

It was a short step, in the consciousness of 1950s Americans, from international criticism to Cold War implications. U.S. editorial writers and political figures regularly noted the negative impact Little Rock was thought to have on the nation’s standing in the Cold War. The Soviet Union’s extensive use of Little Rock in anti-American propaganda—often simply republishing facts disseminated by U.S. news sources—reinforced the concern that Little Rock redounded to the benefit of America’s opponents in the battle for the hearts and minds of peoples around the world.¹⁹

For example, *Komosomolskaya Pravda* carried a Little Rock story under a banner headline declaring “Troops Advance Against Children!” According to the *Current Digest of the Soviet Press*, related articles were accompanied by photographs including “[a] photo of the national guard unit in Little Rock directing a Negro girl away from the high school.” The Soviet paper *Izvestia* suggested that “[r]ight now, behind the facade of the so-called ‘American democracy,’ a tragedy is unfolding which cannot but arouse ire and indignation in the heart of every honest man.” The tragedy was that in the southern states of the United States

fascist thugs of the Ku Klux Klan are organizing a savage hunt for Negro children because the latter plan to sit in the same classrooms with white boys and girls. National guard soldiers and policemen armed to the teeth bar Negro children from entering the schools, threaten them with bayonets and tear-gas bombs and encourage hooligans to engage in violence with impunity.²⁰



Careful, the Walls Have Ears

September 11, 1957. (Reprinted with permission from *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette*)

In Little Rock, “troops in full battle dress, armed with rifles with unsheathed bayonets and with tear-gas bombs, surrounded the high school to ‘defend’ it against nine Negro children who wished to study there.” These circumstances raised questions about the American form of government.

The patrons of Governor Faubus . . . who dream of nooses and dynamite for persons with different-colored skins, advocates of hooliganism who throw rocks at defenseless Negro children—these gentlemen have the audacity to talk about “democracy” and speak as supporters of “freedom.” In fact it is impossible to imagine a greater insult to democracy and freedom than an American diplomat’s speech from the tribu-



Right into Their Hands

September 11, 1957. Editorial cartoons around the nation expressed concern that the world was listening in on the school desegregation crisis in Little Rock and that the crisis provided communists with an effective propaganda weapon. (Reprinted with permission from *Oakland Tribune*)

nal of the U.S. General Assembly, a speech in which Washington was pictured as the “champion” of the rights of the Hungarian people.

Izvestia believed that “the events in the U.S. South cannot remain a matter of indifference. The tale of the American racists, who abuse human dignity and stoop to the level of animals, must be told.” Since the United States promoted democracy abroad, it was “even more impossible to remain silent when these gentlemen attempt to act as the world’s mentors.”²¹

Americans were well aware of the existence of such coverage. Drawing upon this widespread understanding, a political cartoon in the September 7 *Minneapolis Star* suggested that the “Three ‘R’s” in Arkansas were “Race Hate,” “Rights Denial,” and “Red Propaganda Boost.”²²

Governor Faubus’s actions were seen to be such a strong aid to the Soviet propaganda machine that *Confidential* magazine suggested that the governor’s role might actually be part of a communist plot and the governor a communist agent. “The Commies Trained Gov. Faubus of Arkansas,” declared a full-page headline framing a photo of the governor. According to the article,

When Governor Orval Faubus of Arkansas openly defied the government of the United States on the school integration issue, he handed to the Communists the handsomest gift they could possibly have received from any American. Four-fifths of the people of the world are colored. All over the world—in Asia and Europe, in Africa and the Middle East—the Communists have invoked the name of Little Rock to tell colored people that the United States is a land of lynching and repression. . . . [T]hanks to Faubus’ actions and the Red propaganda that plays upon them, no American can travel abroad without being asked by every foreigner about Little Rock.

For *Confidential*, these circumstances naturally led to the question, Was Faubus “unwittingly playing a pro-Communist game? Or is he deliberately aiding the Soviet propaganda machine?”²³

The state of Arkansas had its own suspicions of communist influence, which culminated in a hearing held before the Special Education Committee of the Arkansas Legislative Council in December 1958. State Attorney General Bruce Bennett told the committee that the hearings would prove that Little Rock was one of the “predetermined trouble areas . . . designated officially by the Communist Party many years ago to be developed for trouble purposes.” He argued that “from 1928 to 1958 an intensive communist conspiracy climaxed in Little Rock, and . . . the purpose of these incidents is to attract and use the Negro—not to help the Negro.” The NAACP had been heav-

ily involved in promoting school desegregation in the city, and Bennett believed that “[m]any of the officials of this organization both local and national, have an almost incredible tie-in with Communist and Communist front organizations.” Local organizer Daisy Bates and legal director Thurgood Marshall were among the NAACP leaders singled out for their allegedly subversive connections.²⁴

U.S. embassies around the globe sent dispatches to the State Department detailing the international impact of events in Little Rock. In Copenhagen, the U.S. embassy telegraphed the State Department that the mission was “embarrassed over heavy local press play and general Danish reaction [to the] Little Rock race problems.” In Lourenço Marques, Mozambique, the American consul warned that the crisis had “unfortunately become a symbol of Negro-White relations in the United States.” He believed that “[o]ur moral standing has been very considerably damaged and . . . any pretension of an American to advise any European Government on African affairs . . . would be hypocrisy.” In the Netherlands, the Dutch reportedly reacted to Little Rock with “quiet indignation,” while some saw in Little Rock “the well-worn analogy between Hitlerian methods and the activities of American racists.” The fact that many thought there was “very little difference between the two” was “what hurts America in the eyes of the world.” In São Paulo, Brazil, a legislator took the United States to task in the legislative assembly.

The so-called American democracy has been able by means of the world press to hold itself out as a standard for other peoples but we, the Brazilians, will always reject racial fights and never will agree that any restriction may be imposed on a Brazilian whatever his origin simply because he was born with a black skin.²⁵

According to the U.S. embassy in Paramaribo, Surinam, press reports had led to “an open reinforcement of suspicions about some of the moral emphasis which the United States places on world affairs problems.” As a result of Little Rock “[t]he reporting officer has heard more volunteered negative criticism in the last week about race matters in the United States than he has in the year he has been here.” According to the officer, this was “not helpful to our national standing in Surinam.”²⁶

Not all nations were critical. The U.S. embassy in Bonn reported that Germans did not feel it was their place to cast aspersions on the United States, and press coverage, with the exception of “tabloids and east zone press” was not sensationalized. “Persecution and extermination of millions of Jews do not permit us [to] blame Americans or report with indignation events [in] Arkansas.” The U.S. embassy in South Africa reported that “[t]he effect of Little Rock, of course was to confirm to South African ‘Apartheid’ supporters—most white South Africans—that the forces against integration were gaining in the United States.” In South Africa, a nation “caught up in their own apartheid policy,” whites “appear to derive some inner consolation and a feeling of greater support for their own ideas out of incidents such as Little Rock.”²⁷

As the world looked on, governor Faubus dug in. On September 10, the Governor received a summons ordering him to appear in federal court and “show cause why he should not be charged with contempt.” Faubus then let President Eisenhower’s staff know that he was looking for a way out. Eisenhower and Faubus met at Eisenhower’s vacation retreat in Newport, Rhode Island, on September 14. In private, Eisenhower stressed the importance of a peaceful resolution of the crisis and told Faubus that he wished to avoid embarrassing him publicly. When the meeting ended, the president believed that he had received an assurance from Governor Faubus not to violate the orders of the court.²⁸

As Faubus returned to Arkansas, the foreign and domestic press published smiling photos of the governor and the president. Eisenhower believed, and the nation hoped, that the men had come to an agreement that would end the impasse. Yet within a couple of hours, plans for a joint statement started to unravel. Faubus later insisted that “he would remove the guardsmen only on condition that the Justice Department recommend a delay in desegregation pending a Supreme Court test of the state’s interposition law.” In spite of this clear defiance, Eisenhower remained reluctant to intervene.²⁹

As the Arkansas National Guard continued to encircle Central High, the London *Times* reported the president’s “deep disappointment that voluntary means had not been found to comply with the court’s orders” yet noted that “many people feel that a greater exer-

tion of authority by the President might have avoided a head-on collision in the courts.”³⁰ The *Times* blamed Faubus’s personal ambition and desire for reelection to a third term for the crisis in Little Rock. Yet the paper commented that moderates in Arkansas were angry about “the part President Eisenhower is playing in this bitter controversy—or rather not playing.” There was “a feeling of helplessness—of betrayal almost—among moderates, who feel that there is no one but the President who can speak clearly and strongly for them. The sour joke is current: ‘If President Eisenhower were alive all this wouldn’t have happened.’”³¹

The pressure on Faubus from the president was followed by a federal court order. On September 20, Judge Davies enjoined Governor Faubus from interfering with desegregation. If Faubus wanted to call in the troops, “the proper use of that power in this instance was to maintain the Federal Court in the exercise of its jurisdiction . . . and not to nullify it.”³²

Faubus responded to the court order by withdrawing the National Guard, then promptly leaving town. At the Southern Governors’ Conference at Sea Island, Georgia, Faubus told a reporter that he expected violence if integration were attempted. Back in Little Rock, Mayor Mann urged residents to be calm.³³

The morning of September 23, 1957, came to be known as “Black Monday” in Little Rock. *Sacramento Bee* reporter Relman Morin described a “frightening sight.” Eight African American students had walked calmly into school that morning as the city police held back the crowds surrounding Central High. Momentarily distracted by a diversion, the crowd soon realized that the students had entered the school, and mayhem broke loose. The crowd had already beaten three “Yankee” reporters for *Life* magazine and four African American reporters whom they believed had intentionally created a diversion to enable the students to enter the school. Now the crowd battled the police.³⁴

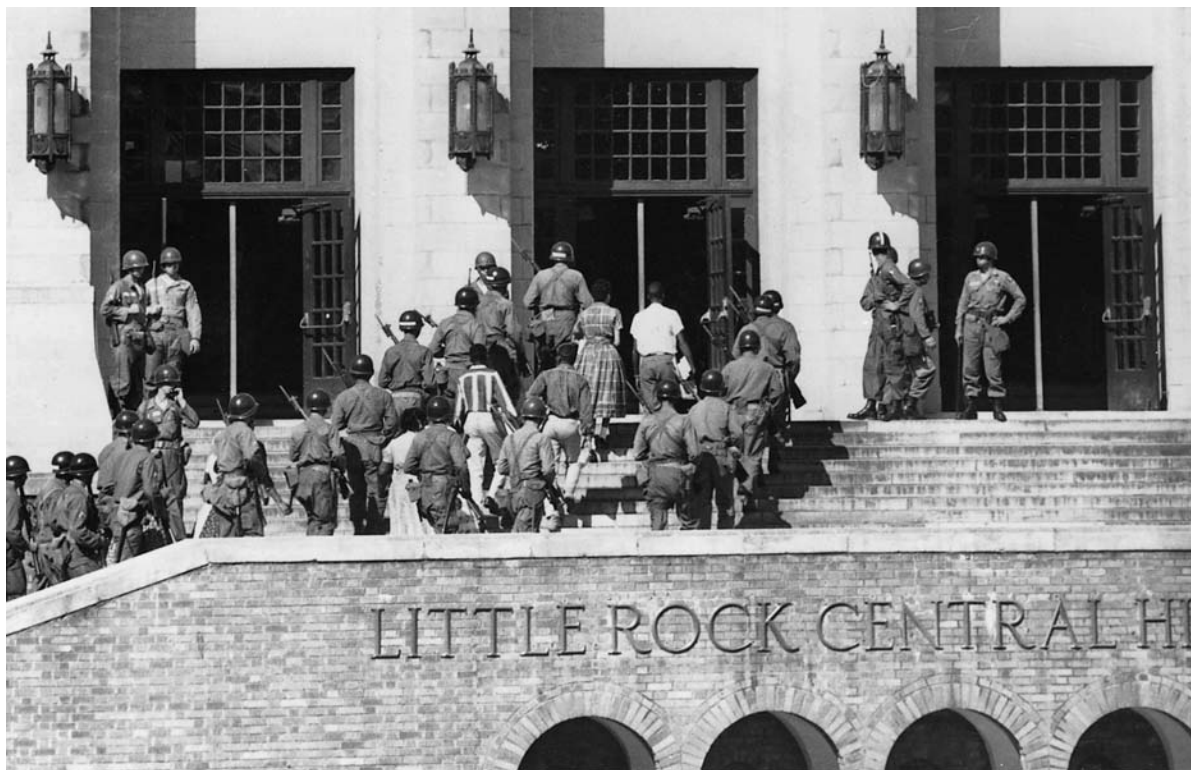
Concerned that growing crowds would be even more threatening to the safety of the students by the end of the school day, the mayor, the school superintendent, and the assistant police chief decided to remove them in the middle of the day. As one of the African American students, Melba Pattillo Beals, remembered it, the students were

hurried down a dark passageway to the basement of the school. There they got into two cars driven by frightened white men. "Listen to your driver's instructions," the assistant police chief warned the students. "Your lives depend on it." The students were ordered to put their heads down, and the cars sped past the crowds and beyond the reach of rocks and sticks hurled in their direction. The students made it safely home.³⁵

From his Newport retreat, President Eisenhower decided that the time had come for action. He issued a proclamation finding a "wilful obstruction of justice" in Little Rock and commanding those engaged in obstruction of justice to cease and desist. The president thought that "every right-thinking citizen will hope that the American sense of justice and fair play will prevail in this case. It will be a sad day for this country—both at home and abroad—if school children can safely attend their classes only under the protection of armed guards."³⁶

The following day, crowds surrounded the school, and the Little Rock Nine waited at home. Mayor Mann sent the president a telegram saying that "[t]he immediate need for federal troops is urgent." He warned that the "[s]ituation is out of control and police cannot disperse the mob." Mann urged, "I am pleading to you as President of the United States in the interest of humanity law and order and because of democracy world wide to provide the necessary federal troops within several hours." By this time, for Eisenhower, "the question had become not whether to act, but what force I should use to insure execution of the court's order." Eisenhower decided to rely on federal troops, and by that afternoon, five hundred paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division were stationed in the city. Another five hundred arrived later in the day. Armed with bayonets, the troops ringed Central High School on the morning of September 25. From the perspective of Governor Faubus and his supporters, the "occupation" of Little Rock had begun.³⁷

Only two months before, in July 1957, Eisenhower had told reporters, "I can't imagine any set of circumstances that would ever induce me to send Federal troops . . . into any area to enforce the orders of a federal court."³⁸ What had caused the president to change his mind so dramatically?



Paratroopers from the 101st Airborne Division escort nine African American students into Central High School in Little Rock, Arkansas, September 25, 1957. (UPI/CORBIS-BETT-MANN)

Eisenhower's decision to act was not based on support for desegregation. He was not a supporter of court-ordered desegregation or of the *Brown* decision itself. Eisenhower communicated his feelings about the desegregation cases to Chief Justice Earl Warren while the cases were pending. He invited Warren to a dinner at the White House. Following the meal, Warren later wrote, Eisenhower took him by the arm, and "as we walked along, speaking of the Southern states in the segregation cases, he said, 'These are not bad people. All they are concerned about is to see that their sweet little girls are not required to sit alongside some big overgrown Negroes.' " Justice Warren felt that President Eisenhower's lack of support for *Brown* contributed to the resistance to the decision. He believed that "much of our racial strife could have been avoided" if the president had stood up for the principal of equality. The nation seemed to agree with Justice Warren's assessment. According to a 1955 Gallup Poll, one of the main criticisms of Eisenhower's leadership was that he "encourages segregation." When *Brown* was decided, Eisenhower was asked whether he had "any advice to give the South as to just how to react to the recent Supreme Court decision banning segregation." The president responded, "Not in the slightest." He thought that South Carolina Governor James Byrnes "made a very fine statement when he said let us be calm, and let us be reasonable, and let us look this thing in the face." As for his own role, Eisenhower said, "The Supreme Court has spoken, and I am sworn to uphold the Constitutional process in this country. And I am trying—I will obey it."³⁹

Notwithstanding his lack of enthusiasm for *Brown*, Eisenhower became deeply involved in managing the Little Rock crisis. He was concerned, in part, with the threat the crisis posed for the rule of law. As Eisenhower described it in his memoirs, "[t]hat situation, if a successful defiance of federal court orders continued, could lead to a breakdown of law and order in a widening area." Eisenhower was also angry with Governor Faubus, who he felt had defied him. But the breakdown of law and order and the management of an insubordinate governor were not all that was at stake. In addition, Eisenhower wrote, "around the world it could continue to feed the mill of Soviet propagandists who by word and picture were telling

the world of the ‘racial terror’ in the United States.” It was a mix of factors, domestic and international, that led to Eisenhower’s extraordinary action in Little Rock.⁴⁰

The president’s top aides emphasized the international impact of the Little Rock crisis. The U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, Henry Cabot Lodge, wrote President Eisenhower that:

Here at the United Nations I can see clearly the harm that the riots in Little Rock are doing to our foreign relations. More than two-thirds of the world is non-white and the reactions of the representatives of these people is easy to see. I suspect that we lost several votes on the Chinese communist item because of Little Rock.⁴¹

Secretary of State John Foster Dulles was “sick at heart” over the Little Rock crisis. On September 24, 1957, as President Eisenhower was returning to Washington to deliver his public address on Little Rock, Dulles put in a call to Attorney General Herbert Brownell. As the two exchanged concerns about Little Rock, Dulles told Brownell that “this situation was ruining our foreign policy. The effect of this in Asia and Africa will be worse for us than Hungary was for the Russians.” Dulles thought that “there should be an awareness of the effect of all this.” Brownell indicated that he had taken Eisenhower “the USIA report which mentioned the use Nasser and Khrushchev were making of it.” He believed that President Eisenhower “was very alert to this aspect.” In addition “[t]here has been considerable in the papers since then.” Brownell believed that Secretary Dulles’s “part of the problem would not be solved” by Eisenhower’s decision to send in the troops, “although firm action would certainly help a lot.” According to records of the phone call, the men “discussed the seriousness of the situation at some length.” Brownell asked Dulles to look over a draft of the president’s speech, which Dulles agreed to do.⁴²

Later in the day, Dulles called Eisenhower with suggestions to “put in a few more sentences in this draft speech emphasizing the harm done abroad.” Dulles dictated the following statement to the president’s secretary:

It would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety, of our nation in the world. Our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent [sic] our nation. We are portrayed as a violator of the standard of conduct which the peoples of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations whereby the peoples reaffirmed “faith in fundamental human rights and in the dignity and worth of the human person” and did so “without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion.”

According to the draft language, Eisenhower would “beg the people of Arkansas to erase the blot upon the fair name and high honor of our nation.” This was a time when the nation “faces the gravest of peril” from enemies abroad, and “patriotism cannot be reconciled with conduct which injures grievously our nation.”⁴³

The president returned to Washington to take his case to the nation. He hoped that speaking “from the house of Lincoln, of Jackson and of Wilson” would best convey his sadness and “the firmness with which I intend to pursue this course.” Eisenhower’s televised address drew heavily upon Dulles’s suggestions. He reminded the nation of the Supreme Court’s ruling in *Brown*. “Our personal opinions about the decision have no bearing on the matter of enforcement,” he suggested. “[T]he responsibility and authority of the Supreme Court to interpret the Constitution are very clear.” Many southern communities had begun the process of desegregation and in doing so had “demonstrated to the world that we are a nation in which laws, not men, are supreme.” The president regretted that “this truth—the cornerstone of our liberties—was not observed” in Little Rock. Because of resistance to court-ordered desegregation in that city, “both the law and the national interest demanded that the President take action.”⁴⁴

According to the president,

A foundation of our American way of life is our national respect for law. In the South, as elsewhere, citizens are keenly aware of the tremendous disservice that has been done to the

people of Arkansas in the eyes of the nation, and that has been done to the nation in the eyes of the world.

This situation had perilous implications.

At a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred that Communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety, of our nation and the world.

Our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our whole nation. 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.⁴⁵

The president called upon the citizens of Arkansas to put an end to obstruction of the law in their state.

If resistance to the Federal Court orders ceases at once, the further presence of Federal troops will be unnecessary and the City of Little Rock will return to its normal habits of peace and order and a blot upon the fair name and high honor of our nation in the world will be removed.

Thus will be restored the image of America and of all its parts as one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.⁴⁶

Ending with the exact language of the last words of the Pledge of Allegiance, Eisenhower appealed to patriotism. Little Rock was not simply an internal dispute: the nation, the national image, and national security were at stake. Patriotism required that the needs of the nation be placed ahead of sectional loyalties.

Secretary Dulles was pleased with the president's speech. But as Attorney General Brownell had suggested, Dulles's "part of the problem" was not yet solved, and Little Rock's impact on U.S. foreign affairs continued to be felt.⁴⁷

The president's address to the nation was also an address to the world, and it was widely covered in the international press. Eisenhower's

actions were widely and favorably viewed as safeguarding the image of democracy. In the Netherlands, the independent newspaper *Algemeen Dagblad* announced that “Eisenhower’s airborne troops again are bearers of democracy’s banner on which [is] inscribed [the] words ‘human rights,’ ” just as they had been during World War II. The largest newspaper in Wales praised Eisenhower for demonstrating “the ultimate political courage.” In Brazil, the Bahia state legislature passed a motion approving of the president’s action. In Hong Kong, the *South China Morning Post* found Eisenhower’s action to be “firm and decisive.” It was “an answer both to legal quibblers and to the lawless few whose conduct unjustly exposed Americans as a whole to new propaganda blasts from the Kremlin.” On September 30, the *Egyptian Gazette* ran a story devoted to a commentary in the British *Observer*. That paper called Eisenhower’s actions “belated but strong” and claimed that although a crisis like Little Rock could not happen in Britain, “it could happen in Kenya or Central Africa where the British Government has certain rights and duties comparable” to the U.S. government’s relationship to the State of Arkansas.⁴⁸

According to a front-page editorial in the Luxembourg paper *Tägliches Blatt*, Eisenhower had “save[d] not only a principle but the soul of a country which, if it had permitted the situation in Little Rock to continue, could no longer have laid claim to being the leader of the free bloc.” Although Little Rock had made a “deep impression” on the Portuguese in Mozambique, the one “ray of light” was Eisenhower’s stand, demonstrating “a determination to see to it that American democracy is no farce.” Eisenhower’s action was seen as upholding the rule of law and maintaining the principles laid down by the Supreme Court. According to an editorial in the Brazilian *Diário de Notícias*, “the drastic step of the American President will not surprise those who know the respect for law in that country and the part which the Supreme Federal Tribunal plays in the structure of American political life.”⁴⁹

Political parties of all kinds came out in support of Eisenhower. In Uganda, the secretary general of the United Congress Party asked the American consul to “convey to the President and the people of the United States the sincere appreciation of the United Congress

Party of Uganda for the President's sustained efforts and firm stand on the question of enforcing the Ruling of the Supreme Court against segregation in American schools." Even communist leaders could find favor with Eisenhower's action. Costa Rican Communist Party leader Manuel Mora Valverde suggested that "[n]ot every man . . . would have dared to take the step taken by Eisenhower. . . . I am of the personal opinion that Mr. Eisenhower is worthy of admiration as a man, even though he continues to be the President of an imperialist power." There were, of course, dissenters. In China, the *People's Daily* thought that the "U.S. government did not really intend to protect black people's rights, but to hoodwink the public domestically and abroad."⁵⁰

U.S. officials tried to put the best face possible on the nation's handling of the Little Rock crisis. AFL-CIO President George Meany, U.S. delegate to the United Nations General Assembly's Social and Humanitarian Committee, told that committee that the Little Rock crisis was "only one episode in a peaceful revolution which had been going on for several years." In response to widespread criticism in France, Secretary Dulles sent a telegram to the U.S. embassy in Paris on September 30 with the text of a statement that embassy personnel could use in reporting on Little Rock. The statement stressed that

there is one essential point to be drawn from the events at Little Rock: that is, that the full force of the United Government [sic], both moral and physical, has been directed to enforcing the law and order and to ensure the carrying out of the decision of the Supreme Court. Although we deplore the events themselves and make no RPT no effort to excuse those who have caused them, it nevertheless has appeared to me worthy of note here that our national authority is being used to ensure the education of children, in dramatic contrast to the uses to which Soviet armed might was put last year in Hungary.⁵¹

Although many saw a foreign affairs boost from Eisenhower's actions, Georgia Senator Herman Talmadge drew upon international

affairs in quite a different way. "We still mourn the destruction of the sovereignty of Hungary by Russian tanks and troops in the streets of Budapest," he said. "We are now threatened with the spectacle of the President of the United States using tanks and troops in the streets of Little Rock to destroy the sovereignty of the state of Arkansas." Senator Richard Russell of Georgia called the action "totalitarian." "Our founding fathers . . . would turn over in their graves" upon hearing of it, he insisted. Similarly, Senator James O. Eastland of Mississippi considered the action an attempt to "destroy the social order of the South" and thought that "[n]othing like this was ever attempted in Russia."⁵²

As Orval Faubus would have it, his own vision of democracy was implicated by the Little Rock crisis. In an address that was nationally broadcast while federal troops ringed Central High, the governor asked, "In the name of God whom we all revere, in the name of liberty we hold so dear, in the name of decency which we all cherish, what is happening in America?" Faubus claimed that federal intervention in Little Rock had resulted in a denial of constitutional rights to the people of Arkansas.⁵³

The dispute between Eisenhower and Faubus about the meaning of democracy paralleled a debate about the nature of the U.S. system of government in the international press. What was the nation's true nature? Was the face of democracy represented by Orval Faubus and the white women and men who screamed and struggled with authorities upon hearing the horrifying news that African American students had entered Central High School? Or was the face of democracy that of President Eisenhower, the general who had helped lead the Allies through World War II and who now seemed poised to lead his nation through another important test?

The intensity of the international media coverage of Little Rock finally declined in October 1957, and observers drew lessons from the crisis. In the Netherlands, *De Maasbode* believed that the Little Rock crisis "must be seen as one of last violent convulsions of [a] system and mentality that is [a] thing of past."⁵⁴

According to *Hindustan Times* reporter Michael Owen, the furor over Little Rock

has had repercussion all over the world, causing a further denigration of American democratic stock in Asia and once again posing the old question that if this is how America feels towards those whose pigmentation of skin is not the shade of their own, that if the Governor of a comparatively unimportant state can defy the Supreme Court of the nation, then what exactly are the real feelings of Americans towards Asians, brown, black or yellow?⁵⁵

In Indonesia, Owen wrote, one newspaper asked “whether Governor Faubus should not be hauled before the Un-American Activities Committee for alienating half of the world from the U.S.” In Japan, Owen reported, “a conservative citizen of some prominence raised the question: ‘If Americans can regard Negroes as inferior, how do they really regard Asians?’”⁵⁶

Owen believed that Eisenhower’s actions did not “appreciably mitigate the international effects of the affair.” The president’s statements had not “[r]esulted in reassuring Asia that their ingrained suspicion that the shape of American democracy is in reality only ‘skin-deep,’ is unfounded.” He felt that “[t]he periodical occurrence of episodes like that at Little Rock are not only subversive to international concord and understanding but also serve to drive more and more Asians to the conclusion that there cannot be, at least not in this sorry generation, any real meeting ground between Occident and Orient.”⁵⁷

Meanwhile, President Eisenhower had difficulty deflecting attention from Little Rock. The *South China Morning Post* reported that on October 3, “Reporters attempting to question the President on Foreign Affairs had a difficult time at to-day’s 28-minute press conference because of the intense pre-occupation of most correspondents over the situation in Little Rock. . . . Out of 17 questions asked at the press conference, 13 concerned the Little Rock situation.”⁵⁸

As Central High settled into an extraordinary school year under military guard, Arthur Larson, director of the U.S. Information Agency (USIA), suggested to the president that he send an open letter to the Central High School students. In Larson’s view, “the students themselves are the best source of hope in this situation.”

Larson thought that Eisenhower should encourage students to act in a “democratic manner that does justice to our proud heritage.” Such efforts would mean that “the good name of Arkansas . . . could be held up for all to admire. At the same time you would help to show the world that freedom and equality not only are enshrined in our laws but also dwell in the hearts of our people.” In this and other instances, Eisenhower declined to follow his staff’s advice to appeal personally to members of the Little Rock community.⁵⁹

As a semblance of order, if not tranquillity, descended at last on Little Rock, the military presence declined. The 101st Airborne would leave the city by early November, and the Arkansas National Guard deployment was decreased by four-fifths. The remaining troops would patrol Central High School for the rest of the school year. Then, during the summer of 1958, the future of integration in Little Rock was placed, again, in the hands of the courts. On June 20, 1958, District Judge Harry J. Lemley, who had replaced Judge Davies, ordered that desegregation be postponed for two-and-a-half years. Judge Lemley agreed with the school board, which had sought the postponement, that the students’ education suffered under the difficult conditions Central High had endured that school year. According to Judge Lemley, the difficulties in Little Rock

did not stem from mere lawlessness. . . . Rather, the source of the trouble was the deep seated popular opposition in Little Rock to the principle of integration, which, as is known, runs counter to the pattern of southern life which has existed for over three hundred years. The evidence also shows that to this opposition was added the conviction of many of the people of Little Rock, that the Brown decisions do not truly represent the law.

Providing a “breathing spell” in Little Rock was, in Lemley’s view, an appropriate exercise of the court’s discretion and consistent with the Supreme Court’s requirement in *Brown v. Board of Education II* of desegregation “with all deliberate speed.”⁶⁰

Many reacted with outrage and disappointment to the district court’s ruling. Maurice H. Goodenough of Clichy-sous-Bois,

France, expressed his views directly to Judge Lemley. "Those who welcome that kind of publicity can thank you for having put Little Rock back on the front pages of the world's newspapers," he wrote the judge.

Last fall, here in France, the population was literally "lapping up" their daily portion of Little Rock. They were following it with the same interest they give to their national sports, and I assume that other peoples around the globe were doing the same. Little Rock had become America's entry in an international exhibit.

You must be very ignorant of where America is in relationship to time and space; if not, you must be willfully seeking the loss of America's prestige and position, with its ultimate disastrous [sic] consequences.⁶¹

Civil rights leaders A. Philip Randolph, Lester B. Granger, Reverend Martin Luther King Jr., and Roy Wilkins sent a joint statement to President Eisenhower claiming that Judge Lemley's decision had "shocked and outraged Negro citizens and millions of their fellow Americans. This opinion is being construed, rightly or wrongly, as a green light to lawless elements in their defiance of Federal authority." They felt that "[t]he process of peaceful advancement toward equality of citizenship for all Americans" had "reached a critical turn." Resistance to civil rights reform had "assumed a significance beyond the question of racial justice, important as that is. The welfare of the whole country is involved." The nation faced important internal and external concerns. Among the people, there was "a pattern of calloused disrespect for law. Moral values have been corrupted. Mob violence has emerged as an instrument to maintain the status quo." Basic constitutional liberties were threatened, and politicians at all levels had disobeyed the law. Externally,

It is no secret that the foreign relations program of our nation has been hampered and damaged by the discriminatory treatment accorded citizens within the United States, solely on the basis of their race and color. In our world-wide struggle to strengthen the free world against the spread of totalitarianism,

we are sabotaged by the totalitarian practices forced upon millions of our Negro citizens.⁶²

The statement called for “a clear national policy and a program of implementation” to eradicate racial segregation. They urged the president to direct the Justice Department to file a brief supporting desegregation in an appeal from the Lemley decision and to take other steps to ensure that, throughout the nation, “the law will be vigorously upheld with the total resources at [the president’s] command.”⁶³

While the NAACP prepared an appeal of the district court order, Orval Faubus avowed his opposition to “integration by force” and was overwhelmingly reelected to an unprecedented third term as governor of Arkansas. Faubus explained his July 29 victory in the Democratic primary, which assured his November reelection, as “a condemnation by the people of illegal Federal intervention in the affairs of the state and the horrifying use of Federal bayonets in the streets of an American city and in the halls of a public school.” Just over two weeks later, noting the governor’s involvement in encouraging opposition to the court ordered integration plan, the court of appeals reversed Judge Lemley’s postponement. According to the court,

The issue plainly comes down to the question of whether overt public resistance, including mob protest, constitutes sufficient cause to nullify an order of the Federal court directing the board to proceed with its integration plan. *We say the time has not yet come in these United States when an order of a federal court must be whittled away, watered down, or shamefully withdrawn in the face of violent and unlawful acts of individual citizens in opposition thereto.*⁶⁴

As the opening of the school year neared and the Supreme Court took up the Little Rock case, one reporter found that “[t]he situation at Little Rock looks infinitely more dangerous today than it did a year ago.” Relman Morin wrote that “[s]entiment has crystallized. Resistance to desegregating Central High School . . . has become truly massive.” It was “a tense moment in the history of the South and the whole nation.”⁶⁵

In spite of the alarm over Little Rock's impact on international opinion, when foreign opinion was surveyed it appeared at first glance that in Western Europe the survey results were not much worse than before. A November 1957 report found that "opinions of race relations in the U.S. are highly unfavorable, but apparently have not become materially more so as a result of Little Rock." Compared to April 1956, there were no great changes when survey respondents were asked, "From impressions you have received from any sources, would you tell me your opinion of the treatment of Negroes in the U.S.[?]" According to the report, "[t]hat the Little Rock happenings have apparently had no major effect in worsening opinion of the treatment of Negroes in the U.S. . . . may be owing to the fact that America's standing in the area of race relations was already in a very depressed state prior to the Arkansas desegregation incidents, and hence not readily susceptible to further decrease."⁶⁶ Discrimination against Autherine Lucy at the University of Alabama "was an international *cause célèbre* in early 1956 and . . . in all probability did much to lower U.S. standing in the race area to the very unfavorable levels" found in April 1956. In other words, European opinion could not go down because it was already so low. The figures were quite discouraging. In Norway, 82 percent of respondents had a bad opinion or a very bad opinion of the way the United States treated African Americans. In Great Britain, France, and West Germany, the percentages were 66 percent, 65 percent, and 53 percent, respectively. In Italy, only 34 percent had a bad or very bad opinion of U.S. race relations, but only 12 percent had a good or very good opinion.⁶⁷

According to the report, the lack of significant change in these numbers did not mean that Little Rock had not had an effect. "The absence of any general decline . . . does not preclude the possibility, of course, that the Little Rock happenings have had considerable effect in confirming and solidifying already held unfavorable attitudes." Such an occurrence was "rather strongly suggested" by the survey results.⁶⁸

A favorable overall opinion of the United States persisted despite these highly negative views about race. The report suggested that

this may have been due in part to the respondents' belief that, over the previous decade, "on balance Negroes in the U.S. have been drawing closer to equality with whites." There were policy implications from these survey results. The more favorable views about the improvement of racial conditions over time "underscore the value of making every effort to place recent racial developments in a broader perspective" in the projection of America abroad.⁶⁹ This broader perspective, reflected in documents such as *The Negro in American Life*, could present racial change as a gradual, democratic process and America as being on a trajectory toward ever greater equality.

The USIA took on the task of developing a strategy for responding to international criticism. The director of planning for the agency described its approach in a September 24, 1957, memorandum for a staff report for the president:

As the Soviet propagandists step up their attacks on "racial terror" in the United States following recent developments in Little Rock, USIA media are attempting to minimize the damage by summarizing anti-integration events on a factual basis, supplying facts whenever possible to balance adverse sensational items, quoting editorials and official statements which indicate steady determined progress toward integration, and informally suggesting to friendly editors possible constructive treatment.

The report noted that "USIS posts in all areas reported heavy but reasoned coverage of the Little Rock episode" through the previous week. "News photos were particularly damaging to U.S. prestige." The foreign relations crisis was continuing. "Agency officials are apprehensive that this week's violence in Little Rock will have serious adverse public reaction abroad."⁷⁰

For its response, the State Department prepared "Talking Points to Overcome Adverse Reaction to Little Rock Incident." The document was "intended for guidance on a world-wide basis." The first strategy recommended was to place the Little Rock crisis "in perspective." To do that, U.S. officials could suggest that "[t]he events at Little Rock are widely misunderstood and misinterpreted. Distressing as they are, they arise from the force and strength of the

American people's insistence upon complete equality. They measure, in a sense, the sweeping and basic character of one of the most important reforms in our history." The talking points stressed that "marked progress toward integration" had been achieved "in most parts of the country; it will inevitably spread throughout our entire nation." Unrest was perpetrated by a "small minority." It was the "basic nature of the American people" to be law abiding. Finally, "[t]he President's intervention has demonstrated the determination of the American people and the effectiveness of the American system in preserving the rights of the individual under law." Overall, "tremendous strides have been made in removing racial barriers in the US."⁷¹

Another way to put Little Rock in perspective was to talk about the difficulties other nations faced. "The problems we are experiencing are not unique to the US," the talking points emphasized. "These situations result from the effort of free societies to maintain and expand the freedom and equality of the individual," and were "not be confused with those tragic disturbances that arise through the efforts of certain other nations to repress human liberty." Ultimately, Little Rock provided an opportunity to compare Cold War adversaries.

In the US, national authority is being used not to suppress individual equality and freedom but to uphold them. In the Little Rock incident national authority has been invoked to maintain equal rights of a minority. In the Soviet Union national authority has been repeatedly invoked to suppress the rights of minorities.⁷²

A USIA pamphlet on school desegregation, *The Louisville Story*, was distributed before Little Rock news broke, and it provided a useful counter to Little Rock. The American consulate in Port Elizabeth, South Africa, found these materials "most welcome." After distributing copies of the pamphlet, the *Port Elizabeth Evening Post* published a story comparing Little Rock with Louisville in just the way the consulate had hoped. According to the paper, "There is trouble in Arkansas," but "let us keep eruptions like this . . . affair in perspective. Let us not be misled by news of such transitory hap-

penings into believing that the vast programme for the removal of the schools colour bar in the United States is not progressing very well." The *Post* believed that "[t]he truth about the 'desegregation' programme in the United States is that it is making surprisingly smooth progress and already is far advanced." To put Little Rock in perspective, the paper described desegregation in Louisville. The Louisville story was "told in a happy, illustrated brochure recently published by the United States Information Service." It highlighted "the great change achieved in only three years in the United States, since the Supreme Court ruled that to keep the children apart in tax-supported schools was a denial of equal opportunity and, therefore, unconstitutional." In spite of this "balanced" coverage, the American consulate reported that South African blacks remained "somewhat shocked" over Little Rock but "realized that the events at Little Rock were counter . . . to U.S. national policy."⁷³

USIS staff in different countries supplied news media with materials on race in the United States that could result in coverage American officials were more comfortable with. As one American consulate put it, "Through friendly contacts with the local editors and others, we can, through judicious selection of materials, bring our point of view to bear in different situations." American efforts at spin control had their successes. In Rio de Janeiro, the U.S. embassy reported that "[s]everal papers frontpaged USIS photos showing peaceful integration elsewhere." According to a report concerning U.S. efforts in Africa, Nigerians "were willing to accept our explanation that Little Rock was not all of the US, nor was it typical of America." USIS material was also distributed in Australia to good effect. It was used by prominent radio and television commentators. "The effort was particularly effective in Sydney where a commentator who had previously been critical reversed his stand."⁷⁴

The USIA described its efforts to provide "perspective" on Little Rock in a semiannual report to Congress. The agency's strategy was to present the crisis "in the context of the significant advances of our Negro population as well as the general development of integration in the public schools." The agency "supplied facts and photographs on typical integrated schools" for use in Voice of America broadcasts and newsreels. Overseas officers organized discussions

with “distinguished American Negro personalities.” For example, singer Marian Anderson discussed American race relations during a concert tour in Asia. As might be expected, the agency reported to Congress, the source of its appropriations, that its efforts had been successful. “Reports from posts abroad indicate that this consistent, factual handling of the racial question contributed substantially to the generally restrained and well-balanced reaction to the Little Rock story overseas.” While there had been communist-inspired sensationalism, “the main body of responsible foreign newsmen and officials described the general situation accurately and referred to Little Rock as an episode in a period of social change.”⁷⁵

A reprieve from Little Rock coverage would come, but not quite the way American officials would have hoped. On October 4, 1957, the Soviet Union launched the Sputnik satellite, rushing dramatically ahead of the United States in the space race. For Americans, the idea of a Soviet spaceship circling overhead led to a crisis in national confidence and, ultimately, a renewed commitment to improving education as well as accelerating the space race itself. Internationally, Sputnik, following Little Rock, was a second blow to U.S. prestige. In Genoa, Italy, news of Sputnik “crowded out Little Rock coverage.” The American embassy reported that Sputnik had had a “greater and more adverse impact upon local attitudes and United States prestige.” Sputnik and a subsequent Soviet spacecraft “for the time being overshadowed Little Rock and other U.S. racial news items” in South Africa as well.⁷⁶

When the initial shock of Sputnik had subsided, the task of rehabilitating America’s image remained. The double blow to U.S. prestige in Arkansas and in the heavens made the task all that much more compelling. As had been the case with *Brown*, strong federal government action would always provide the greatest benefit. Rather than spending their efforts placing negative news “in context” and attempting to divert the world’s attention from racial incidents, meaningful government action gave the USIA and other government officials something worth reporting. In the Little Rock crisis, helpful action came first in Eisenhower’s order to send in the troops. It came again in the form of a definitive Supreme Court ruling in *Cooper v. Aaron*.⁷⁷

When the school year ended at Central High in June 1958, Melba Pattillo took her schoolbooks into the backyard of her home, placed them in a pile, and set them on fire. The flames consuming her schoolwork could not take away the searing memories of her difficult year, and the sixteen-year-old girl stared into the flames, wondering if she could go back the next fall. Eight of the nine African American students had made it through the school year. Minnijean Brown was expelled when, fed up with constant harassment by white students, she retaliated. “One Nigger Down, Eight to Go” read cards distributed by white high school students who supported segregation. At the end of the year, a measure of victory could be felt as Ernest Green, the lone senior in the group, became the first African American student ever to graduate from Central High School.⁷⁸

While the summer provided a respite for the students, the political and legal conflict over integration at Central High continued. Governor Faubus called the state legislature into a special session on August 26, just two days before the U.S. Supreme Court was to hear the Little Rock case. The legislature passed a series of bills that gave the governor broad latitude to oppose desegregation. As historian Tony Freyer has put it, “the central purpose of most of the measures was to establish a legal basis for closing any public schools under court order to desegregate and to transfer public funds to private, segregated institutions.”⁷⁹

Because the opening of the school year in Little Rock was set for the following Monday, the Supreme Court acted without delay. On Friday, September 12, the day after oral arguments, the Court issued a *per curiam* order unanimously affirming the judgment of the court of appeals, thereby reinstating the original district court order to enforce desegregation in Little Rock. A full opinion would follow on September 29.⁸⁰

In Arkansas, the Court’s order prompted Governor Faubus to put his signature to the legislation passed during the summer’s special session. One statute granted him authority to close public schools “whenever the Governor shall determine that such action is necessary in order to maintain the peace against actual or impending domestic violence . . . because of integration of the races in any

school of the district.” Faubus called for a local referendum in Little Rock, as provided for under the new law, and on September 27 the vote was 19,470 to 7,561 in favor of closing the schools rather than desegregating. High school would not open in Little Rock that fall.⁸¹

On September 29, two days after the Little Rock referendum rejecting its judgment, the Supreme Court issued its opinion in *Cooper v. Aaron*. The opinion was written by Justice William Brennan, but it was signed by all nine members of the Court. Having all members of the Court sign the opinion together reinforced the strength of their unanimity behind the principles articulated in the case.⁸²

The Court saw the case as raising “questions of the highest importance to the maintenance of our federal system of government.” According to the Court, “[t]he constitutional rights of respondents are not to be sacrificed or yielded to the violence and disorder which have followed upon the actions of the Governor and Legislature. . . . [L]aw and order are not here to be preserved by depriving the Negro children of their constitutional rights.” The Court unanimously reaffirmed its holding in *Brown* that segregated schools violated the Fourteenth Amendment’s equal protection clause.

The principles announced in [*Brown*] and the obedience of the States to them, according to the command of the Constitution, are indispensable for the protection of the freedoms guaranteed by our fundamental charter for all of us. Our constitutional ideal of equal justice under law is thus made a living truth.⁸³

The Court’s strong statement in *Cooper* helped reinforce the point the USIA and U.S. embassy staffs had been emphasizing for so long. *Cooper* illustrated the working of American constitutionalism, and it preserved the argument that racial equality was an American ideal. While *Brown* had proclaimed that the tenets of American democracy embodied in the Constitution were fundamentally inconsistent with racial segregation, *Cooper* rescued that principle from the threat of extinction posed by massive resistance.

The Supreme Court ruling in *Cooper v. Aaron* was widely covered in the international press. The London *Times* described it in detail, noting that the Court had “virtually exploded the Little Rock school

case in a shining opinion which indirectly disposed of all attempts in the south to evade the desegregation law.” The paper also covered the continuing difficulties in Little Rock in detail but blamed the problems on Governor Faubus, who “needed an issue if he were not to be out of office at the end of his second term.”⁸⁴ The paper carried stories about Little Rock on a daily basis for much of September 1958, but the articles appeared on the interior pages. The impression left by the *Times*’s coverage was that continuing racial tensions in the South were attributable more to individual actors, such as Faubus, than to the sanctioning of racism by the American government.

As the start of the school year approached in the fall of 1958, the *South China Morning Post* in Hong Kong had expressed skepticism about President Eisenhower’s commitment to desegregation, criticizing the president’s lack of support for *Brown*. In the aftermath of *Cooper*, however, Eisenhower was no longer the focus of concern. The paper instead highlighted a speech in Hong Kong by Dickinson College political science professor Donald Flaherty, who argued that continuing difficulties were the product of American federalism. Speaking at a Rotary Club luncheon, Flaherty told his audience that the Little Rock crisis was “related to the U.S. system of government,” and “there was always the possibility of strife between the national government and one or more of the state governments under the federal system.” Flaherty believed that “complete integration would be accomplished gradually. If this could be done peacefully . . . then the federal system of government would have achieved something of major importance.” The *Times of India* carried a lengthy analysis of federalism and desegregation by American journalist Anthony Lewis, who also argued that conflict over desegregation was a product of American federalism.⁸⁵

In many other countries, the press highlighted *Cooper*, then covered continuing difficulties sporadically and off the front page. Little Rock schools were closed. Massive resistance had taken hold in the community, but these circumstances did not precipitate a foreign affairs crisis.⁸⁶

Social change in the Little Rock crisis was both dramatic and dramatically limited. President Eisenhower’s strong stand in sending in

federal troops was a clear statement that the federal government stood behind federal law. It showed, as well, that regardless of his personal views, the president was committed to upholding the Supreme Court's judgments. Yet when school reopened in Little Rock in the fall of 1959, Jefferson Thomas was the lone African American student in attendance at Central High. At Little Rock's Hall High School, three African American students were enrolled and 730 whites. By the spring of 1960, five African Americans could be counted among Central's student body of 1,515. The following year, eight more African American students were assigned to these schools. In spite of these tiny numbers, Central and Hall were now regarded as desegregated schools.⁸⁷

The small numbers of African American students at Little Rock high schools did not reflect a reluctance of African American parents to send their children to these schools. Rather, Little Rock had adopted a student-assignment process benignly called a "Pupil Placement Law." Compared with the resistance measures of 1958, the Arkansas pupil placement law was quite dispassionate. The purpose of the act appeared on its face to have nothing to do with desegregation, but rather with the need for flexibility and selectivity in student assignments. The legislature determined that "any general or arbitrary reallocation of pupils heretofore entered in the public school system according to any rigid rule of proximity of residence or in accordance solely with request on behalf of the pupil would be disruptive to orderly administration." When a student wished to be reassigned, a parent or guardian was required to file a petition with the school board on behalf of the individual child. A hearing would then be held to determine the appropriateness of the transfer. The statute identified a long list of criteria relevant to pupil placement decisions, including "[a]vailable room and teaching capacity . . . ; the suitability of established curricula for particular pupils; the adequacy of the pupil's academic preparation . . . ; the scholastic aptitude and relative intelligence or mental energy or ability of the pupil; the psychological qualification of the pupil . . . ; the psychological effect upon the pupil of attendance at a particular school; . . . the home environment of the pupil," and on and on. The one factor that spoke directly to the context of desegregation in Little Rock

was the fact that in deciding whether a transfer was appropriate the school board could take into consideration “the possibility of breaches of the peace or ill will or economic retaliation within the community.”⁸⁸

Bureaucratizing the process meant that racial integration was minimized. School boards now had a cumbersome process that by itself would delay integration. They could use a long list of facially neutral criteria as a basis for refusing individual requests by African American students to attend white schools. As NAACP Legal Defense Fund lawyer Jack Greenberg put it, “violence and physical obstruction having failed, bureaucracy in the form of pupil assignment laws became the principal means of fighting integration.” The Supreme Court nevertheless allowed such plans to stand. There would be no drama attending the Court’s handling of this important issue. The lack of fanfare would not cause this issue to go unnoticed. To white southerners, the path was clear: bureaucratization could accomplish most of what overt resistance had not.⁸⁹

This lesson took hold in the South, yet the lesson was lost in Africa and Asia. The international press did not notice the pupil placement cases, perhaps because these cases did not undermine the formal and abstract principle of racial equality articulated in *Brown* and reaffirmed in *Cooper*. As a result, the bureaucratization of segregation did not pose a threat to America’s democratic image. There is no indication that the federal government was concerned with the impact of pupil placement plans on foreign affairs, even though it was clear that these plans would undermine efforts to integrate public schools. National policy projected overseas continued to be framed in the broad outlines of *Cooper* and *Brown*.⁹⁰

In spite of its minimal impact on actual school desegregation, the Supreme Court ruling in *Cooper* remained of tremendous significance in another arena. *Cooper* safeguarded the basic principle of *Brown* in the face of massive resistance. *Cooper* emphasized the supremacy of federal law and the role of the Court in defining federal constitutional principles. In so doing, the Court protected the idea of a rule of law. Individual rights could not be taken away by mob violence. By upholding the basic principles of U.S. constitutionalism, the Court protected the image of democracy. *Cooper* upheld

the principle that American democracy functioned to protect individual rights and that racial equality was a value the courts would defend. Because of *Cooper*, the narrative of race and democracy in *The Negro in American Life* would still have salience.

Measured, at least, by the degree and pace of integration, it may be that *Cooper* succeeded more in maintaining democracy's image than in actually desegregating the schools. From the perspective of President Eisenhower, the core interests at stake in Little Rock had more to do with federal authority and foreign affairs than with racial equality. Having established those broad principles, the president and his administration withdrew their presence from the continuing struggle. To the extent that safeguarding the image of America was behind Eisenhower's involvement, he got what he needed with *Cooper v. Aaron*. At this juncture, the Cold War imperative could be addressed largely through formal pronouncements about the law. More substantive social change would await another day.