

Enforcing the Decision: President Eisenhower's "Address on Little Rock," September 25, 1957.

Source: Peter Levy, ed. (1992). *Let Freedom Ring, A Documentary History of the Modern Civil Rights Movement*. NY: Praeger. p. 46-48.

Introduction: The unanimous Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. the Topeka Kansas Board of Education* allowed segregated school systems to propose their own plans to reorganize. Many districts, especially in the South, actively resisted implementing the decision. In Little Rock, Arkansas, Governor Faubus and mobs of local Whites actively tried to block school desegregation. President Eisenhower, who had not spoken publicly about the integration of public schools or the Brown decision, finally acted to defend the federal courts and enforce "the law of the land." The photo on the right shows a hostile crowd harassing an African American student (Source: www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/USALittleRock.htm).



a. My fellow citizens. . . I must speak to you about the serious situation that has arisen in Little Rock. . . In that city, under the leadership of demagogic extremists, disorderly mobs have deliberately prevented the carrying out of proper orders from a federal court. Local authorities have not eliminated that violent opposition and, under the law, I yesterday issued a proclamation calling upon the mob to disperse. This morning the mob again gathered in front of the Central High School of Little Rock, obviously for the purpose of again preventing the carrying out of the court's order relating to the admission of Negro children to that school. Whenever normal agencies prove inadequate to the task and it becomes necessary for the executive branch of the federal government to use its powers and authority to uphold federal courts, the President's responsibility is inescapable. In accordance with that responsibility, I have today issued an Executive Order directing the use of troops under federal authority to aid in the execution of federal law at Little Rock, Arkansas.

b. During the past several years, many communities in our southern states have instituted public school plans for gradual progress in the enrollment and attendance of school children of all races in order to bring themselves into compliance with the law of the land. They thus demonstrated to the world that we are a nation in which laws, not men, are supreme. . . 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.

c. 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 people of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the United Nations. There they affirmed "faith in fundamental human rights" and "in the dignity and worth of the human person" and they did so "without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion."

d. I call upon the citizens of the State of Arkansas to assist in bringing an immediate end to all interference with the law and its processes. 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 all its parts as one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.

Questions

1. Why does President Eisenhower believe a "disservice" was done to the people of Arkansas by its leaders?
2. Why does President Eisenhower believe this resistance to the desegregation of schools is damaging the image of the United States?
3. In your opinion, why did President Eisenhower decide to send federal troops into Little Rock? Do you agree or disagree with his decision? Explain your view.