



This excerpt was adapted from Dr. Carol Anderson's book *White Rage: The Unspoken Truth of Our Racial Divide*. In chapter three, "Burning Brown to the Ground," Anderson details how white politicians in the North and the South systematically resisted legal demands to desegregate schools, including the U.S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka*.

This excerpt focuses on how state-level resistance played out in the state of Virginia.

BURNING BROWN TO THE GROUND

JIM CROW DOMINATED the lives of black people in America from 1890 well into the twentieth century. ... In the early 1930s, under the direction of brilliant legal tactician Charles Hamilton Houston, the NAACP launched a campaign in the courts to destroy Jim Crow and overturn the *Plessy v. Ferguson* decision that had made "separate but equal" the legal cornerstone of racial segregation in America.

Virginia, despite being the wealthiest Southern state and the fifth richest in the entire nation, with a constitution and statutes requiring the provision of public schools and compulsory attendance, was ... determined not to educate its black population. In Prince Edward County, for example, no high school existed for blacks until 1939, and by 1947 Robert Moton High "was jammed with more than twice the number of students it was designed to hold." ... The other black schools in Prince Edward County, too, were

poorly constructed with no indoor plumbing and thus serviced only by outhouses.

In the Deep South, the educational opportunities were at least as bleak. ... [In 1941, the federal government estimated that it would require, in 2014 dollars, \$1.2 trillion to equalize the schools in America.] The result of such widespread disparities in funding was that the U.S. educational system, despite the demands of parents and students craving high-quality schools, had deliberately produced a sprawling, uneducated population that would bedevil the nation well into the twenty-first century.

In one court case after the next, from 1935 to 1950, the NAACP had convincingly demonstrated that Southern governments were simply incapable of meeting *Plessy's* Jim Crow standard of "separate but equal." And because the legal bedrock of the South was predicated on that dictum, the proven inability to have both equal and separate simultaneously left

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Dixie in judicial danger, which was just as Charles Hamilton Houston intended. With the legal precedent duly laid, the time to take down *Plessy* as fundamentally unconstitutional was now. Houston's protégé, Thurgood Marshall, led the next phase of this legal battle. ... In December 1952, Marshall argued before the U.S. Supreme Court that racial segregation violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth as well as the due process clause of the Fifth Amendment. And with that, a series of legal, political, and cultural explosions went off below the Mason-Dixon Line ...

Th[e] day of reckoning came. After nearly sixty years of racial purgatory, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled in *Brown* that Jim Crow schools violated the equal protection clause of the Fourteenth Amendment and, in the D.C. case [*Bolling v. Sharpe*, one of five cases that made up the *Brown* case], the due process requirement of the Fifth Amendment. Even the [NAACP's] taciturn Roy Wilkins could barely contain himself. "May 17, 1954, was one of life's sweetest days," he later recalled. Nor was the significance of this judgment confined to the education of black children. "If segregation is unconstitutional in educational institutions," observed Charles Johnson, president of Fisk University, "it is no less so unconstitutional in other aspects of our national life." At that moment, it appeared that citizenship—true citizenship—might finally be at hand for African Americans.

To Southern leaders who had already been readying their political arsenal, the decision in *Brown* was but a declaration of war. Wilkins later admitted, "My sense of euphoria was a bit naïve. Swept away, elevated, exalted, I failed to anticipate the ferocity of the resistance that quickly grew up in the Deep South." There was a "cold, clinical cruelty of the response."

[T]he Southern states made clear that they were ready for war. The first step was to ensure that only those who felt threatened by *Brown* could vote. ... As difficult as

voter registration had been before *Brown*, it became much more so after the ruling. ... [African American voter registration in predominately black counties in Alabama, for example, ranged from 0 to 0.9 percent. In Mississippi, by 1960, 98 percent of age-eligible African Americans were not registered to vote.] States relied as well upon another mechanism of insidious discrimination ... : Legislative apportionment gave overwhelming and disproportionate power to rural counties, especially those that held the most ardent white segregationists and the largest black populations outside the urban areas.

On May 31, 1955, the Supreme Court handed down an implementation decision, *Brown II*, stating that desegregation in public schools must happen "with all deliberate speed." Recognizing that disfranchisement and legislative apportionment would not be enough to stop the progress stemming from *Brown*, the Deep South and Virginia soon added to their arsenals the discredited legal hocus-pocus of interposition, which argued that the state could put itself between federal law and U.S. citizens to stop enforcement of any ruling with which the state disagreed.

The so-called Southern Manifesto, however, was the shot heard around America. On March 12, 1956, Representative Howard Smith (D-VA) and Senator Walter George (D-GA) introduced "the Declaration of Constitutional Principles" before their respective chambers in Congress, asserting that the Supreme Court had violated states' rights, abused judicial authority, and undercut the separation of

powers. Signed by 101 members of Congress, all from states of the old Confederacy—Senator Lyndon Johnson (D-TX) was one of only a handful of holdouts—the Southern Manifesto signaled to their constituencies that Massive Resistance to *Brown* was not some base, primeval white supremacy but rather a principled, patriotic stand to defend the Constitution. The Southern Manifesto gave sanction from the highest levels to use the levers of government to defy the U.S. Supreme Court until, with the federal judiciary and African Americans tiring of the fight, *Brown* simply collapsed.

The game plan of stall and defy was now in place. Southern states used and abused the legal process to pass one unconstitutional law after the next, knowing that the process to overturn the statutes would be costly. [As one segregationist attorney general noted, "As long as we can legislate, we can segregate."] ... Those extended legal battles allowed year after year to drizzle by while the continued existence of separate and decidedly unequal schools consigned black children to some of the worst education that America had to offer.

In Virginia, the birthplace of Massive Resistance, a full decade after *Brown*, only 1.63 percent of blacks were attending desegregated schools. ... [W]hen local school boards in Charlottesville, Norfolk, and Front Royal were under federal court orders to admit black students, Governor James Lindsay Almond closed, in his words, every "school threatened with desegregation." Ironically, because the white, well-funded schools in those cities matched that description (no one was clamoring to integrate overcrowded Moton High in Prince Edward County), he had shut out nearly thirteen thousand white children from getting an education.



While *Brown v. Board* initially felt like a victory for African Americans, it quickly galvanized resistance to racial integration.

Systematized racism not only destroys black lives but also undermines the very strength of the United States.

School closures spread now to besieged Prince Edward County. This time, black children were in the cross-hairs, where they would remain for nearly a generation. With *Brown* looming over their heads, Virginia's political officials passed a series of laws to close the public schools, siphon tax dollars into private academies, and pay tuition for white students, while ensuring that there was nothing in place for African American children to continue their education. On November 11, 1955, the Gray Commission (named after State Senator Garland Gray) rolled out a phalanx of recommendations to keep Virginia's schools separate and unequal.

The Gray Commission's plan was put into action after a 1959 Fourth Circuit decision reversed a district court ruling that had given Prince Edward County a full seven years to comply with *Brown*. With the Fourth Circuit now ordering the schools to integrate by the fall of 1959, county supervisors immediately abolished the property tax that funded public schools and diverted the money into a cache for tuition grants to support the all-white Prince Edward Academy. The supervisors added their county funds to grants offered by the state to ensure that the costs for this private education were covered with public dollars. In addition, sixty-seven of the sixty-nine teachers at Prince Edward Academy were all from the now-closed public schools.

The defiance of Prince Edward County was singular—no other school system in the nation remained closed for five years (1959 to 1964) rather than comply with *Brown*. The impoverished but determined African American community managed to send some children away to relatives, but only thirty-five black students were able to attend those out-of-state schools on a full-time basis. During those five long years, critical in terms of child development,

most African American students spent their formative education time in activity centers that the black community cobbled together. ... The resources were simply not available to be open more than three days a week. ... These years had taken a great toll on the children.

Once again, black parents, with the determined Reverend L. Francis Griffin as the plaintiff, had to haul Virginia back to court. But as the *Washington Post* reported, when the lawsuits hit, Prince Edward County supervisors simply "denied that the Virginia constitution requires the operation of public schools in any county." Finally, cutting through that absurdity, the U.S. Supreme Court handed down two unequivocal decisions that forced the schools to reopen. Even then local and state authorities "employed every weapon in their arsenal to ensure that the newly reopened system remained segregated, impoverished and academically substandard." ... Stall and defy had transformed into stall and undermine, but the results were the same: devastating.

Prince Edward County is emblematic of the way that systematized racism not only destroys black lives but also undermines the very strength of the United States. Even as thousands of African American children were left behind educationally, the economy was beginning a seismic transformation that would require even more of its citizens. ... By the time Prince Edward County finally decided to implement at least parts of *Brown* in the 1970s, the heyday of industrial America, where gainful employment had not required a strong education—just a strong back—was already well over, with the knowledge-based economy taking hold. That economy was primed for those who had had the benefit of years of good schools and, in particular, for whites who had a well-funded public school system that went all the way through the

twelfth grade and graduated the lion's share of them as college-ready.

By contrast, an entire generation of black children who had fought long and hard to receive a quality education was now forced to face this cold, hard new economy with neither the necessary education nor work skills. It was not just black America, however, that suffered the cost of this waste of human lives and talent. The brutally relentless tactics of stall and defy, then stall and undermine—tactics that went on for at least four decades—left the United States with millions of citizens who lacked the education needed to be competitive in a global, technology-driven economy. This, in turn, left the United States lagging far behind other developed countries and placed the nation at enormous economic risk.

African Americans weren't the only ones who took a hit. The states of the Deep South, which fought *Brown* tooth and nail, today all fall in the bottom quartile of state rankings for educational attainment, per capita income, and quality of health. Prince Edward County, in particular, bears the scars of a place that saw fit to fight the Civil War right into the middle of the twentieth century. Certainly it is no accident that, in 2013, despite a knowledge-based, technology-driven global economy, the number one occupation in the county seat of Farmville was "cook and food preparation worker." Nor is it any accident that in 2013, while 9.9 percent of white households in the county made less than ten thousand dollars in annual income, fully 32.9 percent of black households fell below that threshold. The insistence on destroying *Brown*, and thus the viability of America's schools and the quality of education children receive regardless of where they live, has resulted in "the economic equivalent of a permanent national recession" for wide swaths of the American public. ♦

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