



# Fus On Blacks

Their images are starkly luminescent in our minds. Appropriately etched by black and white television, nine Black teenagers attempt to gain admittance into Little Rock's Central High School in 1957, walking in single file to threats, jeers, and racial epithets from angry whites whose contorted faces make America wince and the free world blush. But the students' access to the school is blocked by members of the Arkansas National Guard. The students turn and leave. Rather than an education opportunity, they encounter a maelstrom of racism and hatred this day.

It's hard to believe 50 years have passed since that scene was acted out in real time, hard to believe America, or any nation for that matter, could have put so much history behind it. And at the center of that turbulent event, which became known as "the Little Rock Crisis," were nine teenagers, ages 14 to 17, whose names few people know or remember (Minnijean Brown, Elizabeth Eckford, Ernest Green, Thelma Mothershed Wair, Melba Pattillo Beals, Carlotta Walls LaNier, Terrence Roberts, Jefferson Thomas, and Gloria Ray Karlmark). But everyone knows their collective sobriquet: the Little Rock Nine.

The odyssey of the Little Rock Nine began in a moderate southern city in a moderate southern state, which had acquiesced to the Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* by integrating the state's university system in 1956; the city's bus system also integrated that year.

So Little Rock's Board of Education thought it could go one step further by integrating the city's premier high school, Central High School, and made plans for the change to unfold in September 1957. Everyone was optimistic. As L. C. Bates, the Black publisher of the *Arkansas Free Press*, put it, "We have a very enlightened group of people in Arkansas."

But as the first day of the school year approached, enlightenment vanished and stiff resistance appeared from Little Rock's white parents and other adults. Looking for guidance, the school board contacted Arkansas Governor Orville Faubus. But the governor had another plan in mind. He had barely been elected in the previous election. Like other white, southern politicians of the period, Alabama's George Wallace among them, he saw the school board's effort to integrate Central High as an opportunity for him to shore up his segregationist credentials and win overwhelming support in the next election.

The night before the schools opened, Governor Faubus went on television to announce that he had mobilized the state's National Guard and ordered them to only admit white students to Central High and keep all Blacks out.

Nonetheless, during the first day of classes, school administrators patrolled Central High's halls, urging white students to refrain from engaging in any unruly behavior that could tarnish the school's image. Of course there were complaints, particularly from many of the white faculty members who objected to having to cook their own meals and sweep their own classrooms because the national guardsmen would not let any of the school's Black service workers on campus. But overall, the faculty's behavior was sterling. Despite the governor's action, a federal judge ruled that the Little Rock Nine were to begin attending Central High immediately, and faculty and students were prepared to go along with the plan.

The members of the Little Rock Nine had been selected to integrate Central High because of their excellent grades. If they had not decided to take on the challenge of integration, many would have probably gone to the all-Black Paul Laurence Dunbar High School, which had a great reputation for high standards and quality education.

Neither the Black students nor their families, however, wanted simply to go to school with white people. Indeed, some of Little Rock's Blacks opposed efforts to integrate Central High because they feared such action could cause trouble for the Black community.

What the Little Rock Nine and their parents really wanted, though, was greater education opportunity, opportunity hitherto unknown to Black families in Arkansas' capital city. But more far-thinking Blacks and Whites in Little Rock and beyond wanted to push their city's and the nation's racial and social justice agenda forward.

The next morning, Daisy Bates, the head of the Arkansas NAACP (and wife of newspaper publisher L.C. Bates) contacted the students and told them to meet at her house. Eight of the nine students arrived and (along with Bates, their parents, and their ministers) proceeded to the school. As the mob shouted racial epithets, they attempted to gain access through the school's Fourteenth Street entrance. But they were turned away by the National Guard and left.

Meanwhile, unbeknownst to Bates and the other students, Elizabeth Eckford, the ninth student, had wandered into a racist inferno. She had never got the message to meet at Daisy Bates' home because her family did not have a telephone, so she arrived at the Sixteenth Street entrance to the school alone and was confronted by a large, angry mob of white adults who screamed at her, using the "N" word and making threatening gestures. Numbering over 1,000, this mob not only included parents, but also segrega-



tionists whose license plates revealed they were from other states. As the mob continued cursing Eckford, she projected calm in the midst of a storm, sitting on a bench as if waiting for the other students. Eckford could have been a victim of horrible violence at that moment, but a white woman named Grace Lorch stepped forward to protect her. She led Eckford to safety and a waiting bus that drove her away. This scene played on television sets across the nation and overseas.

Meanwhile, Daisy Bates and the Arkansas NAACP went back to court. Recognizing the importance of the case, Thurgood Marshall and other members of the NAACP Legal Defense Fund hurried to Little Rock to provide assistance. As Taylor Branch pointed out in his award-winning book, *Parting the Waters*, "Legal experts agreed that Faubus, by using the armed forces of a state to oppose the authority of the federal government, had brought on the most severe test of the Constitution since the Civil War."

Ten days into the conflict, Faubus flew to Newport, Rhode Island, to meet with President Dwight D. Eisenhower. The two men seemed to reach an accord, which was reflected in a press statement Eisenhower released. Eisenhower repeatedly stated that the law must be obeyed, and that he didn't want to use federal troops to overpower Faubus' troops. Faubus took this statement as a sign that Eisenhower really supported the segregationist position. Upon returning to Arkansas, Faubus rewrote the statement on which he and Eisenhower had agreed, thus reinstalling the impasse.

The following week, on September 20, 1957, Judge Ronald N. Davies granted NAACP lawyers Thurgood Marshall and Wiley Branton an injunction that barred Faubus from using the National Guard to bar the nine Black students from entering Central High. Complying with the court order, Faubus withdrew the Guard and issued a veiled threat. He urged the students to stay away "for their own safety." The National Guard members were replaced by Little Rock policemen, whose job it became to protect the Black students.

Using a side door, the students managed to get into Central High the next day. But when the mob learned they were in the school, it became incensed and attempted to break through police barricades to get the students who were whizzed away in cars before the mob could reach them. This scene was also shown on national television that night.

Finally, President Eisenhower decided to act. "Mob rule cannot override the decisions of our courts," he said. Eisenhower immediately nationalized the state's National Guard. He also dispatched 1,000 members of the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to Little Rock.

The next morning, a convoy, which included jeeps with mounted machine guns, met the students at Daisy Bates' home and made the trip to Central High. When they arrived at the school, the angry

mob was there, but the school was ringed with paratroopers who kept the angry mob at bay. A phalanx of paratroopers, with bayonets fixed, marched the nine students up the stairs and into the school.

Finally, they had made it, the nine students thought. Now that they were in the school, attending classes, the mob would disappear. But any such hope was soon dashed. As they went to school in the weeks to come, they continued to be greeted by venomous chants and hate slogans from a mob that would not go away. A cold war of attrition was being waged. However, each of the nine students was assigned a paratrooper, who escorted him or her to class and waited in between periods.

"Of course, we couldn't have a normal school," said Harold Engstrom, Little Rock Board of Education member in 1957. "We tried to have as close to normal a school as possible. And you couldn't follow every Black student around everywhere with a guard. You couldn't do things like that or there wouldn't be any integration."

Slowly, white student attitudes began to change during the school year. Rock-hard intransigence gave way to cautious tolerance. Only one incident stands out. When a white student hurled racial epithets at Minniejean Brown as she stood on the lunch-line near Christmas time, Minniejean became fed up. She turned and dumped a bowl of chili on the harassing boy's head. Teachers and other students in the lunchroom froze in silence, which was finally broken by applause from the Black kitchen staff. Minniejean was suspended, and then expelled, from Central High School. After she departed, some white students passed out cards that read: "one down, eight to go."

In time the mob dissipated. Fortunately, the school year ended without another incident. On May 28, 1958, Central High School held its graduation exercises. Six-hundred-and-one white students graduated and one Black student, Ernest Green. As each white student's name was called, loud applause ensued. When Ernest Green's name was announced, an eerie silence fell over the commencement exercises. Regardless, he had become the first Black graduate of Little Rock's Central High.

### Sources

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