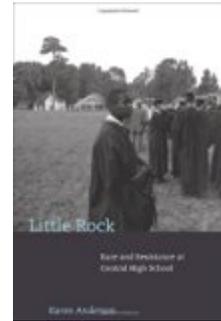


Karen Anderson. *Little Rock: Race and Resistance at Central High School*. Politics and Society in Twentieth-Century America Series. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010. 344 pp. \$39.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-691-09293-5.

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## “The Canary in the Mine”: 1950s Little Rock as the Testing Ground for Orchestrated Resistance to School Desegregation

Much has been written about African Americans’ efforts to force local school boards and resistant politicians to honor the Supreme Court’s decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) to desegregate schools. Ample scholarship also chronicles the array of resistance strategies deployed in opposition to African American demands for school integration. These works have exposed segregationists’ willingness to use violence and various forms of harassment. Grassroots resistance to desegregation was buttressed by leading southern politicians, who encouraged outright defiance of the Supreme Court ruling, as illustrated in the infamous Southern Manifesto of 1956. The struggle over school integration outside of the South has also garnered much scholarly attention. School desegregation served as the central battleground between those challenging segregation and those hellbent on preserving the system, and with it the benefits enjoyed by whites in a segregated society. The “Little Rock Crisis,” as scholars of the city’s desegregation battle have named it, became “the central symbolic event in the racial and sectional politics of the 1950s” and one of the key symbolic events in school desegregation (p. 4).

Indeed, Little Rock was “the testing ground for the South” (p. 192). As Karen Anderson shows in *Little Rock*, resistance in the city would shape resistance to school desegregation across the South, and ultimately nationwide over the next half-century. The Little Rock crisis

provided a blueprint for subsequent strategies to resist *Brown*, and served “as a site for the creation of a class-conscious thinking about race that would inform ‘color-blind’ law in the South and the nation long after the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*” (p. 8). Anderson documents the efforts of working-class whites, predominately segregationists; the middle class, predominately moderates; and business elites, respectively, to shape a vision of school reform that best fit their class-based ideologies and agendas. Anderson’s contribution to the historiography of school desegregation is timely, interesting, and rather disturbing, given that she documents the emergence of a clear and purposeful blueprint for undermining meaningful public school desegregation, while foes of desegregation nominally accepted the changing legal climate.[1] Anderson also explores the “gendered political rhetoric and iconography” of the three classes into which she divides white Arkansans (p. 15).

The *Brown* decision elicited a variety of responses among whites in Little Rock. Segregationists in the city, as was the case elsewhere in the South, used tactics reminiscent of the Jim Crow era, notably, violence and intimidation. White middle-class moderates accepted token integration, so long as the preponderance of resources in the system continued to be geared to the needs of white students. Meanwhile, Little Rock’s economic elite attempted to influence the process from behind the scenes.

Its “managerial masculinity” required working-class and middle-class whites to fall in line behind its leadership.

Anderson, while in no way de-emphasizing African American agency, focuses in this study on the white reaction to black demands for desegregation. Anderson places readers in the hallways and classrooms of Central High School, where the Little Rock Nine endured non-stop insults and tactical violence from white students, who committed these acts with impunity. These young white teenagers were not always hoodlums nor were they necessarily migrants from rural areas, the group of southern whites most often blamed for racial violence and intimidation. Some were shepherded to school by their mothers, who used their access to civic leaders and the media to fight desegregation in the halls of Central High School. While African Americans demanded meaningful school desegregation, white moderates sought successfully to limit concessions to tokenism. Little Rock would become the standard for moderate whites across the South, and ultimately across the nation, in accepting token integration while preserving a large measure of de facto segregation.

*Little Rock* is strongest in the middle chapters, where Anderson explores the role of segregationist women engaged in resisting integration and the role of moderate white women working to preserve public education while accepting token integration. The Mother’s League of Central High School was a group of working-class women who orchestrated opposition to the school’s integration by stoking racial fears and by encouraging the physical and verbal harassment of the Little Rock Nine during the 1957-58 school year. The Mother’s League then turned its energies to political organizing in the form of recalling nonsegregationist school board members and supporting a States Rights Amendment in the legislature. Anderson makes it clear that the Mother’s League received support from the elite Capital Citizen’s Council. When Arkansas closed its public high schools in 1958, the Women’s Emergency Council to Open Our Schools (WEC), “a group of indignant middle-class white women,” worked to reopen the schools and to end segregation, though they aspired to do so without significant changes to the racial status quo (p. 13). Anderson matches her discussion of white women with an exploration of the role of white upper-class and middle-class men. In her view, middle-class white men, in particular, were divided between those inclined to accept some change in racial politics, and those with more conservative leanings. The business elite was dedicated to preserving segregation and thus white male domination.

Anderson’s consideration of gender dynamics helps to highlight and explain the sociocultural values, and the constraints placed on middle-class actors in Little Rock’s drama.

Anderson is by no means alone in offering a class-based analysis of the white response to black demands for desegregation.[2] However, her analytical model leaves readers unconvinced of hard class distinctions. For example, segregationists included members of the middle class among their ranks, and some of the latter did not shrink from using violence. Segregationists also enjoyed the support of elite whites. Members of the Mother’s League mobilized their children to harass and intimidate the Little Rock Nine to the point where the schools had to be closed. This suggests a community of whites with access to institutions and structures not commonly associated with the working class. While African Americans were the targets of outright violence, whites supporting desegregation faced harassment as well. Anderson informs us that firings and workplace harassment were common. Moderates condemned rabid expressions of racism while working to ensure that de jure desegregation resulted in little actual interaction among black and white students in the public school system. Moderates’ views of appropriate race relations were not fundamentally different from those of outspoken segregationists. The white children of Little Rock continued to receive a superior education to that offered black children even after de jure integration. While drawing class distinctions among whites is useful to a point, the reader comes away from this study convinced that there was little willingness anywhere in the white community to accept de facto integration of the public schools.

The accumulation of research on school desegregation has tended to confirm the importance of Little Rock in setting a pattern. As Anderson’s study illustrates, the crystallization of a southern strategy to oppose school desegregation and the political ideology and rhetoric that would come to dominate political conservatism in succeeding decades, under the mantras of race neutrality and colorblindness, emerges here first. For scholars interested in resistance to court-ordered school busing, the Little Rock Crisis indeed served as the testing ground. Yet emerging political resistance to the desegregation of neighborhoods and workplaces, and the associated colorblind rhetoric that buttressed such resistance, also gained structure and momentum from the Little Rock affair.

A valuable contribution to civil rights scholarship, Anderson’s *Little Rock* is dense, disturbing at times, and

insightful. It is particularly useful as an explication for how outward compliance with court-ordered desegregation could be accomplished, without bringing about much change in the classroom or much redistribution in per capita spending on black and white children, respectively. We see here how a strategy emerged in Little Rock that successfully minimized the impact of Supreme Court decisions and congressional legislation in the fifties and sixties mandating desegregation. The persistence of de facto residential and school segregation today is in part

a consequence of the events Anderson describes here.

#### Notes

[1]. See Alexander Frazier, "How to 'Keep Them in Their Place,'" *The School Review* 55, no. 6 (June 1947): 339-344.

[2]. For example, see Anders Walker, *The Ghosts of Jim Crow: How Southern Moderates Used Brown v. Board of Education to Stall Civil Rights* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009).

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