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The Thunder During the Storm—School Desegregation in Norfolk, Virginia, 1957–1959: A Local History

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This article contends that Norfolk, Virginia, serves as a microcosm of the social tensions that flared throughout the South in the wake of the 1954 and 1955 Brown school desegregation rulings. It provides a retrospective look at regional, state, and local actions pertinent to Norfolk's desegregation experience between 1957 and 1959. Examining both the impact of White southerners' massive resistance to desegregation and the efforts of Black and moderate White Norfolkiens to advance school integration, the author maintains that the "storm" wrought by this conflict met its demise in February 1959, when 17 Black students were peacefully admitted to the city's previously all-White secondary schools.

The 1954 Supreme Court decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas* not only overturned *Plessy v. Ferguson* (1896), but it also provided the legal recourse for African Americans to attack and dispel the racially discriminating practices that were common throughout the United States during the early half of the 20th century, particularly in the public schools. Although the desegregation of the nation's armed services in 1948 was a sign that the racial attitudes and conditions between Blacks and Whites were changing, the *Brown* decision was the catalyst that triggered the South's resistance to school desegregation. Shortly after the Court issued its landmark decision in the *Brown* case, Richmond (Virginia) newspaper editor James J. Kilpatrick, inspired by the 18th-century idea of interposition, or state's rights, defined southern defiance of school desegregation efforts as "massive resistance" (Dabney, 1971, p. 536). The purpose of this resistance was to undermine *Brown* and protect the southern tradition of segregation. It was manifested in the efforts of White southern lawyers and lawmakers to appeal the Supreme Court's decision and to legislate state laws that funded not only White flight from the public schools but the building of separate but equal schools for African Americans (Campbell, Bowerman, & Price, 1960; Dabney, 1971). Notwithstanding, the widespread defiance of Whites in the state of Virginia would eventually collapse under the pressure of federal efforts to enforce integration, resulting in a domino effect on massive resistance throughout the South.

In the wake of *Brown*, state legislators in Virginia passed a number of massive resistance laws in an attempt to block or delay desegregation and yield only token school integration in that state (Campbell et al., 1960). Among these was the Pupil Placement Act of 1956 ("Education: Public Schools—Virginia," 1956). Conceived as part of a lawful stratagem to nullify the *Brown* decision, this piece of legislation and its resultant political agencies, the Pupil Placement Boards (PPBs), formed the centerpieces of Virginia's massive resistance undertakings (Dabney, 1971). By decreeing that the enrollment of African American stu-

dents in previously Whites-only schools would disrupt the efficiency of those schools' operations, the PPB maintained the segregated status quo in Virginia's schools for nearly two years after the Court's ruling.

The Gray and Almond plans, named after Virginia governors Stanley Gray and J. Lindsay Almond, were two other legal tactics used by the state of Virginia to avoid school desegregation (Dabney, 1971). The Gray Plan established state-funded tuition grants for White students who did not want to attend integrated schools to attend private or parochial schools. The Almond Plan empowered the governor with the authority to close the state's public schools and cut off funding to those schools in the event that the federal government forced the state to comply with *Brown*.

In the port city of Norfolk, Virginia, the evasive legislative maneuvering of the lawmakers in the state capital coalesced into a peculiar and telling event. Norfolk did not have the large Black population characteristic of other Virginian and southern cities, nor did its racial climate match that of the precarious situations in Little Rock, Arkansas, or Prince Edward County, Virginia. Nonetheless, the White citizens of Norfolk were as assiduous and industrious in their fight against integration as any of their southern neighbors (Ford, 1989). The post-*Brown* crisis in Norfolk was the climax of the struggle between the city's White massive resisters, its Black citizens, and those moderate Whites who favored school desegregation. Most of Norfolk's White community supported the massive resistance resolutions emanating from the state capital in the wake of the Supreme Court decision. The Black Norfolk community saw the ruling, and the issue of desegregation generally, as an opportunity for their children to receive a better education and for Blacks to achieve long-hoped-for racial upliftment. The two communities eventually collided in 1957, as Black Norfolks began to successfully use the courts as a device to force their White counterparts to accept the idea of desegregation.

Blacks' successes in debunking the city's massive resistance machine through legal means led a number of Whites to resort to nonlegal efforts to prevent school desegregation. As the possibility of real and significant desegregation loomed over the city in the fall of 1958, Norfolk's municipal leaders closed the public schools as a last-ditch effort to prevent Blacks from enrolling in White schools. By early 1959, fearful that the schools would remain closed indefinitely, several members of the White local community began to side with Black efforts to desegregate by openly denouncing the city's massive resistance stance and urging city officials to reopen the public schools even if they were to be desegregated. As White opposition to the school-closing remedy continued to spread, the Norfolk school board and city leaders were eventually forced to comply with demands to reopen the schools. Norfolk's massive resistance thus came to an end on February 2, 1959, when the city's six all-White junior and senior high schools reopened and admitted 17 Black students (Pratt, 1994).

In many ways, Norfolk's experience with school desegregation epitomizes the massive resistance position of the South. Like the thunder that echoes throughout a fierce and violent storm, the massive resistance movement manifested itself in this tidewater southern city as a thunderous roar, albeit one that was rationally abated. Despite the storm's relatively peaceful demise, the clamor created by Norfolk's city officials and school board between 1957 and 1959 was a microcosm of the social tensions flaring throughout the South as a result of the *Brown* decision.

CRISIS IN NORFOLK

The Beginning of School Desegregation

After the Supreme Court specified enforcement of its earlier ruling in the *Brown* case with its ruling in *Brown II* (1955), racial tensions between Blacks and Whites in the Deep

South become increasingly intense as more and more Blacks began to file desegregation suits in southern courts (White, 1994). In Virginia, a number of such cases erupted in Arlington, Charlottesville, Prince Edward County, Richmond, and other areas where Blacks constituted a large portion of the population. Remarkably, while most of the large cities in Virginia were embroiled in a bitter fight against desegregation, the city of Norfolk's initial reaction to the *Brown* decision was relatively calm and seemingly quiet (White, 1992).

Believing that the races would remain forever segregated due to established housing, neighborhood, and residential patterns that physically separated Blacks and Whites, many of Norfolk's White citizens did not see the *Brown* decision as a threat to their way of life. Relying heavily on urban renewal initiatives and promises of better and equal public facilities and services as devices to appease the Black community, most White Norfolknians believed that *Brown* would have little to no impact on them (Rufus Bly, personal communication, November 25, 1995; Dabney, 1971).¹ Needless to say, their initial sentiments were short-lived and mistaken.

On January 11, 1957, Leola Pearl Beckett and a host of other Black Norfolknians (as well as Blacks from the nearby Titustown and Oakwood–Rosemount areas), with the help of their local chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), filed a suit against the Norfolk school board in federal district court (“Education: Public Schools—Virginia,” 1957; Henderson, 1958; “Norfolk School Case,” 1958). The NAACP attorneys, Victor J. Ashe and J. Hugo Madison, argued that the 53 plaintiffs in the Beckett case sought to have their children admitted to the city's White public schools without discrimination on the basis of race. The proximity clause in the *Brown* decision, the Black plaintiffs argued, was clearly being violated in Norfolk because their children were bused across town, past nearby all-White schools, to all-Black Booker T. Washington High School and the Ruffner and Jacox junior high schools. They further contended that Virginia's Pupil Placement Act was unconstitutional because it too violated *Brown* and blatantly discriminated against Black students (“Education: Public Schools—Virginia,” 1957).

Not surprisingly, the White reaction to the *Beckett* case was twofold. Initially, Norfolk city leaders called on the assistance of the state General Assembly-decreed Thomas Committee to dissuade Black plaintiffs in the case and their attorneys from seeking integration as a solution (“Get NAACP Group,” 1957; “Key Participants,” 1957). This committee, commonly known as the “Virginia Inquisition,” was created primarily to derail the NAACP's efforts in Virginia. With the full legal sanction of the state of Virginia, its members intimidated and threatened Black plaintiffs and attorneys who filed desegregation suits, and generally engaged in racist activities whose legality and overtness would today appear highly questionable (“Get NAACP Group,” 1957; “Norfolk Lawyers Probe Group,” 1957; “Plaintiffs in Norfolk Suit,” 1957). The Inquisition's efforts, however, proved unsuccessful. Subsequently, the Norfolk school board (the defendants in the case) fell back on the argument that the plaintiffs had not exhausted the administrative remedies (i.e., filing a grievance compliant with the board) afforded them. The board further contended that admittance of Black students into all-White schools would not only be detri-

¹Most of the housing for Blacks in Norfolk—with the exception of the military housing in the Lakeland and Coronado areas, which were becoming increasingly integrated—was run-down and highly underdeveloped. Shanties without plumbing or heating, outdoor lavatories, and unpaved streets and sidewalks were just a few of the characteristics that typified the Black residential areas in Norfolk. Prior to the *Brown* era, many Whites believed that pacifying Black cries for better housing and school facilities would soothe Blacks' demands for desegregation. Thus, city leaders placed greater emphasis on renovating existing housing for Blacks rather than on opening up opportunities for Blacks to reside in the better-served communities where Whites lived.

mental to the psyche of the Black students, but would violate Section 129 of the Virginia state constitution, which mandated the establishment and maintenance of efficient schools. Despite the school board's efforts to have the case dismissed on frivolous and impractical grounds, District Judge Walter Hoffman held that the Pupil Placement Act was unconstitutional on its face. He further instructed the board to integrate all six of its junior and senior high schools ("Education: Public Schools—Virginia," 1957; Henderson, 1958).

Shortly after the Fourth Circuit court's decree, the attorney for the Norfolk school board filed an appeal in the U.S. Fourth Circuit Court as a means of delaying the enforcement of Judge Hoffman's order (Brook, 1958a). Although the appeals court judge concurred with the original decree, the board's tactic successfully delayed the enforcement of the ruling until the beginning of the 1958–59 school year. Hence, despite the strenuous efforts of the Norfolk NAACP's lawyers to obtain a specific court mandate for desegregating Norfolk's all-White public schools, the forces of massive resistance temporarily prevailed.

Nevertheless, by June 1958, integration was seemingly an impending reality in the city of Norfolk. Hundreds of Black students had submitted applications to enroll in the city's White schools. Certain that Judge Hoffman would not tolerate any further evasive schemes, Norfolk school board members established a local Pupil Placement Board as part of their next massive resistance stance (Brook, 1958a; "Norfolk School Case," 1958; "We'll Do All," 1958). Using a 10-point criteria system to determine the suitability of each Black applicant, the Norfolk PPB rejected the applications of 151 Black students (Carter, 1958a). However, upon review of the situation, Judge Hoffman ordered the board to reevaluate the Black students' applications. As a result, 17 Black students, widely known as the "Norfolk 17," were accepted for enrollment (Brook, 1958b, 1958c; Campbell et al., 1960; Young, 1958). The 17 included the following: Lewis Cousins, Oliver Driver, La Vera Forbes, Patricia Godbolt, Alvarez Gonsuland, Andrew Heidelberg, Delores Johnson, Edward Jordon, Lolita Portis, Betty Jean Reed, Johnnie Rouse, Geraldine Talley, James Tuner, Patricia Turner, Carol Wellington, Claudia Wellington, and Reginald Young.

As the beginning of the 1958–59 school year approached, integration seemed imminent. The White citizens of Norfolk had exhausted all of their evasive massive resistance tactics and schemes to legally block school desegregation. Thus, some White leaders opposed to integration resorted to scare tactics. One local newspaper, the *Virginia Pilot*, published the names and addresses of several Black applicants to the city's White schools, as well as their parent's names, as a means of intimidating them ("More Negroes Apply," 1958). A cross was burned in the front yard of the home of one of the Norfolk 17 (Moore, 1958). Several of the 17 reported receiving threatening telephone calls from Whites urging them to withdraw from their efforts to integrate the schools (Patricia Godbolt–White, personal communication, December 1, 1995).

Despite the threats to their lives and financial livelihood, neither the Norfolk 17 nor the rest of the city's Black citizens gave in. On the contrary, with the help of NAACP attorneys, 65 of the 134 Black students whose applications were rejected by the PPB filed discrimination suits in the Norfolk courts. Although these suits were unsuccessful, they were highly instrumental in pressuring Judge Hoffman to set September 8, 1958, as the tentative date to desegregate Norfolk's all-White schools (Brook, 1958d, 1958e). Significantly, Whites in Norfolk capitalized on the September 2, 1958, event in Little Rock, Arkansas, as another means by which to further forestall school desegregation (Litwack, Jordan, Hofstadter, Miller, & Aaron, 1987).² That very day, Norfolk city leaders petitioned

²The school board in Little Rock, Arkansas, had sought to suspend the integration of its public schools by citing fears that the White violence directed toward nine Black students attempting to enter that city's all-White Central High School would escalate beyond control. Attorneys for the NAACP, led by chief counsel (and future Supreme Court judge) Thurgood Marshall, responded to the school board's request by appealing to the Supreme Court. On September 12, 1958, the Court agreed unanimously with the NAACP and denied the school board's request, rendering its argument moot and forcing the Little Rock schools to integrate.

Judge Hoffman to postpone the admittance of Black students to White city schools until a decision was rendered in the Arkansas case. Torn between Whites' fears over the possibility of another "Little Rock" occurring in Norfolk and Blacks' demands for swift and unwavering desegregation, Judge Hoffman decided to delay Norfolk's desegregation until September 22 (Carter, 1958b).

As September 22 approached, and as it became increasingly clear, given the events in Little Rock, that noncompliance with desegregation orders would eventually bring federal and state laws into direct conflict, members of the Norfolk school board began to issue statements favoring and supporting Judge Hoffman's desegregation decree. Speaking on behalf of the board, Superintendent J. J. Brewbaker stated that the board fully intended to enroll the Norfolk 17, despite threats by Governor Almond to close the schools and cut their funding if they did (Holloway, 1958). Francis Crenshaw, the attorney representing the Norfolk school board, provided further elaboration on the board's interposition between the state and federal law when he stated, "[I]n the event of such a conflict, the order of the court must be regarded by the school board as paramount" (Carter, 1958a, p. A1). Later, however, bowing to pressures from the governor's office, the board voted to postpone opening the schools just days before the school year was to begin. Subsequently, believing that even the slightest degree of integration was unacceptable and fearing that the Norfolk schools would eventually open under integrated circumstances, Governor Almond ordered Norfolk's six all-White schools to be closed under the pretense that the anticipation of desegregation was reason enough to justify such extreme action (Campbell et al., 1960). As a result, the doors of the six schools were padlocked, and approximately 9,900 White and 17 Black students were turned away from entering school in September 1958.

The reactions to Governor Almond's decree were diverse and far-reaching. For the majority of Norfolk's Black students, with the exception of the Norfolk 17, the closed schools had little to no impact. The governor's school-closing decision did not directly affect the operation of the city's Black schools. Nonetheless, most Black Norfolknians were enraged and affronted by the governor's action and viewed it as further evidence of his and other White southerners' blatant disregard for Black civil rights and Blacks' aspirations for social progress via legal means.

The church served as the principal outlet for Black protests about the school closings. The majority of Black Norfolknians rallied behind their local church leaders, who voiced their concerns by charging that closed schools—indeed, massive resistance, itself—constituted the very worst evils and sins against humanity. Even before Governor Almond closed the city's schools, Black churches throughout Virginia had denounced the state's and the city's massive resistance stance. Earlier that year, the 60th annual session of the Baptist General Association of Virginia, that body which then (and presently) represented the state's Black Baptist congregations, had publicly castigated state officials for their support and involvement in massive resistance ("State Baptists Condemn," 1958). The Black Baptist United Front had also come out as supporting the NAACP's school desegregation efforts, specifically denouncing Governor Almond's position as well as that of other Christian denominations that advocated the policy of separate-but-equal in race relations (Rufus Bly, personal communication, November 25, 1995).

Many in Norfolk's White community were also enraged by the closing of the schools and shortly thereafter began to publicly protest against the governor's action. Among these were U.S. Navy personnel living or stationed in the Norfolk area during the school-closing crisis. They argued that the closed schools deprived their children of an education and ultimately constituted a threat to national security (Campbell et al., 1960; "The Test of Norfolk," 1958; White, 1992). Francis Crenshaw, the attorney for the Norfolk school

board who had roundly denounced the governor's school-closing proposition, voiced widespread public concern when he argued that the closed schools not only hurt the children in the city but could also be damaging to Norfolk's economy (Carter, 1958a). According to Carter, many in Norfolk's business community agreed with Crenshaw, contending that the closed schools were detrimental to business activity. These Whites, however, were decidedly in the minority. Crenshaw himself even expressed support for massive resistance generally as the most reasonable way to deal with desegregation.

As the possibility that the schools would remain closed indefinitely loomed over Norfolk, some of the city's White high school juniors and seniors launched a protest of their own. More than two hundred White junior and senior high school students signed a petition asking the governor and school board officials to reopen the schools even if they were desegregated (Brook, 1958f; Carter, 1958c). The Norfolk League of Women Voters, a group of concerned White mothers, also sent a letter to Governor Almond and local political leaders urging them to reopen the schools ("Keep Schools Open," 1958). The Tidewater Education Foundation, the Norfolk Educational Association, and a number of White church groups also tried to counter the governor's school-closing resolution as well as soothe flaring White tensions toward the closed schools by providing supplemental classes. However, most of the city's White schoolchildren went without schooling because most of the private schools in the city, and correspondingly the state, were full to capacity (Dabney, 1971; "Private School Group," 1958; Soffin, 1958; White, 1992; Wilkins, 1958). Norfolk's White private schools could absorb only 650 additional pupils ("Room Shortage," 1958), and many of the White teachers who had initially signed up to work with the city's alternative schools soon withdrew out of fear that doing might constitute a breach of their contracts with the city as well as defiance of federal law (Campbell et al., 1960; Carter, 1958d).

Supplemental private schooling was also provided for many of Norfolk's Black schoolchildren, particularly the Norfolk 17, while the city schools were closed. The Norfolk 17 attended private tuition sessions at the First Baptist Church on Bute Street, receiving daily lessons in mathematics, science, social studies, English, physical education, and foreign languages (Charles Corprew, personal communication, December 1, 1995; Murray, 1988).³ The 17 also attended integration workshops headed by Myrtle Crawford, an NAACP volunteer. These workshops taught the children how to nonviolently react to and deal with the threats, harassment, and name-calling they would almost certainly face in the event that they were allowed to integrate the all-White schools. As Crawford recalled in an interview with the author: "My job was to prepare the students for anything. . . . We knew that those schools were going to be reopened" (Myrtle Crawford, personal communication, November 24, 1995).

On October 27, 1958, a number of White Norfolk students and their parents, frustrated by the school closings, filed suit against Governor Almond, the state attorney general, and Norfolk school officials in the federal district court in Norfolk (*Ruth Pendleton James et al. v. J. Lindsay Almond, Jr., et al.*, 1958). The plaintiffs in *James* argued that closing the schools violated the equal protection and due process clauses of the 14th Amendment of

³Several teachers from the city's all-Black schools volunteered to teach the Norfolk 17 in private sessions at First Baptist. Among these teachers were the following, who deserve recognition for their efforts: Katherine Quarles Allen, J. P. Archer, Wade E. Clark, Charles Corprew, Dr. Rudolfo Cejas, Lovella Howard, Myra Iriarte, Eleanor Green Jones, Elizabeth Jones, Pecolia Jones, and Roma B. Jones. Even after the schools were opened to Black students, the teachers and workshop coordinators continued to hold tutoring sessions for the Norfolk 17 because, as noted by Charles Corprew, the White teachers "[piled] work up on the [Black] students" (Charles Corprew, personal communication, December 1, 1995).

the U.S. Constitution. The three-judge court concurred and ruled in their favor on January 19, 1959 (Dabney, 1971). They further declared that the state could not take away control of the schools from local officials, and that public schools were to be made available to all children in the state, regardless of race. Significantly, however, the court noted that it "was not directing the reopening of schools, but rather was declaring the governor's school-closing proclamation void" ("Education: Public Schools—Virginia," 1959, pp. 45–46).

On the same day that the Norfolk federal court handed down its ruling in *James*, the Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals, in *Harrison v. Day* (1959), voted five-to-two that closing the schools to prevent integration violated Section 129 of the state's constitution, which required the state to maintain an "efficient" school system (Campbell et al., 1960). The massive resistance movement was apparently losing steam; Governor Almond, however, was recalcitrant. In a radio announcement just a few days later, he proclaimed, referring to his state's and the South's massive resisters, "We have just begun to fight" (Dabney, 1971, p. 542). The governor would soon have to eat those words and declare the failure of massive resistance not long afterwards.

After the *James* and *Harrison* decisions were handed down, the handwriting was on the wall. Apparently, the citizens of Norfolk were determined to resolve the matter of desegregation quietly and relatively peacefully. On February 2, 1959, the Norfolk 17 quietly entered Norfolk's formerly White junior and senior high schools (Murray, 1988; "Key Participants," 1958). Six of the 17 were admitted to Norview Junior High School, 6 to Norview Senior High, 2 to Blair Junior High, and 1 each to Northside Junior High and to Granby and Maury senior high schools.

Despite the earlier expressed anti-integration sentiments of many Whites, no violent outbreaks occurred as a result of the Norfolk 17 desegregating the city's schools. There were a few minor incidents, however. A Black figure was hung in effigy in front of Granby High School, and a cross was burned in the Norview Senior High School football field where it could be seen by the Black residents of the nearby Coronado area (Stern, n.d.; White, 1992). Additionally, to demonstrate their resentment of Black efforts to desegregate White schools, four White students entered all-Black Booker T. Washington high school and asked to enroll. They claimed that they wanted to play football for the school (Campbell et al., 1960; "Try to Enter Booker T.," 1958). According to Patricia Godbolt-White, one of the Norfolk 17, "Most of the teachers were really nice to us, in light of what was going on. . . . It was the students who were a problem" (Patricia Godbolt-White, personal communication, December 1, 1995).

Yet, aside from the above-noted incidents and being called "Charlie Brown," "nigger," and other derogatory names by their White school peers, Godbolt and other members of the Norfolk 17 recall that the integration of Norfolk's schools was relatively quiet in comparison to other areas of Virginia. Desegregation had finally become a reality in Norfolk. Massive resistance was dead.

CONCLUSION

Had *Brown* occurred a decade earlier, when international geopolitics did not play a large role in U.S. domestic politics, Norfolk's, and correspondingly Virginia's, massive resistance to desegregation more than likely would have been an effective stratagem to avoid integration and ensure the perpetuation of the South's separate-but-equal tradition. However, by the late 1940s and 1950s, the nation's struggle to contain communism forced it to reevaluate its longstanding racial attitudes, particularly those in South. In retrospect, it seems obvious that the same external forces that influenced the Supreme Court to decide

in favor of the African American plaintiffs in *Brown* would eventually come to bear on the people of Norfolk and lead that city's leaders to ultimately accept desegregation. According to Bell (1979) and Litwack et al. (1987), the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown* was more a reaction to the Cold War after World War II and to U.S. containment policies than to a moral or ethical finding. For the people in the Norfolk area, the desegregation of America's armed services in 1948, the economic boom that occurred after World War II, and the expansion of the city's naval base and shipyards led to the emergence of an elite, moderate White community whose new and chaste racial attitudes stemmed more from economic interests and preoccupations than from moral enlightenment (White, 1992). Thus, when the city's Blacks became engrossed in vigorous efforts to desegregate the local public schools, Norfolk's White moderate community did little to deter them. Believing that Governor Almond's school-closing decision threatened the city's economy and its children generally, many White Norfolksians sided, with circumspect, with the Black community. Like their Black city counterparts, they protested and filed legal suits to pressure the governor and local school board officials to reopen the schools.

With the fate of the southern race relations status quo hanging in the balance, the rest of the South watched the situation in Norfolk with great concern. The struggle between Norfolk's massive resisters and the supporters of school desegregation echoed throughout Virginia and the South. Yet, with the combined efforts of Blacks and moderate Whites, the demise of Norfolk's massive resistance movement was inevitable. The thunderous storm that had once consumed the city of Norfolk would end soon after it began, and a brighter day lay ahead.

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