

The Importance of *Brown v. Board*

Roger Wilkins

Professor Patterson's book is a wonderful piece of research, terrific writing, and very provocative. But anybody who doesn't think that *Brown v. Board* made a difference isn't following Big Ten football. When I went to the University of Michigan in the mid-1950s, the Big Ten was the best football conference in the nation. The southern schools had all white boys; no black athletes. But in 2001 the Big Ten was whipped about four to nothing in Bowl games by the Southeast conference. In football, speed kills, and Florida has got speed and the rest of those southern schools have got speed. And when I look at basketball games and I see the University of Alabama sending five black starters onto the floor and remember the struggles to integrate it back in the 1960s, I'm looking at a different country.

I was an intern for Thurgood Marshall in the summer of 1955, working on some of the mop-up work after *Brown v. Board*. I believe deeply in integration. I've also been a member of the Washington, D.C. school board for a year and I haven't used the word "desegregation" once in all of my work on it. Those statements may sound like contradictions but perhaps I can explain them.

I was born in Kansas City, Missouri, seventy years ago, so I remember segregation. I was born in a segregated hospital. My first educational experience was in a one-room segregated schoolhouse. When it closed I, a five year old, was bused way across town to a segregated elementary school. My father died when I was eight and we moved to New York, where I was taught by white teachers in a *de facto* segregated school in Harlem.

Then my mother remarried and in the early 1940s we moved to Grand Rapids, Michigan, where all of a sudden I found myself the only black kid in a virtually all white school. Boy, was that painful. But it was useful, because it taught me something that I could never have learned in a segregated school. You really have to feel it to understand the grinding weight on a kid's soul of segregation, of a society that tells you in every way it can

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think of – economically, culturally, politically and legally – that you are inferior and second class, no matter what your parents may tell you. The message that envelops you from people in power makes it very difficult for you not to feel inferior, not to be ashamed of your thick lips and your broad nose and your brown face and your kinky hair.

In that integrated school I learned that whites weren't super people. I learned that they weren't all smarter than I was. A lot of them, in fact, were not nearly as smart as I was, and relatively few of them were smarter. Some were better basketball players, some were worse. Some of them were really lousy people; some were really lovely people who are still friends of mine today. I could not have learned those things in segregation and I could not have been as effective a citizen in this country had it not been for those experiences with my white classmates in Grand Rapids.

Now as for *Brown*: While I obviously can't speak for every black person of my generation and some would disagree, for me, May 17, 1954 was a second emancipation day. That's because *Plessy v. Ferguson*,¹ which in effect said that the Declaration of Independence, the 13th, 14th and 15th Amendments to the Constitution of the United States, the Gettysburg Address – all those good documents – apply to other people but not to you, was a stake in our hearts. *Plessy* in effect said, "You are so inferior that the Supreme Court had to carve out an exception from those documents for you, keep you separate, and that separation – which is invariably unequal – represents your own inequality." However often you told yourself that was a lie, it was very difficult to ignore the fact that the Supreme Court had found no reason to change its mind from the time *Plessy* was handed down in 1896.

It is of course perfectly true that courts can't make a difference if the executive branch doesn't do its enforcement job, and after *Brown*, President Eisenhower didn't do his job. He lived in the South as a kid and had come up in a segregated institution, the United States Army, and he just didn't believe in integration. That was particularly sad because he was the most popular man in the country. Had he just given his approval in ringing words, it would have made a great difference.

But the interesting thing is what the resistance to *Brown* accomplished. If it did nothing else, the resistance raised consciousness. Maybe white people weren't thinking about *Brown*, maybe civil rights didn't get much coverage in the *New York Times*, but black people were thinking and talking about the resistance, and we were getting madder and madder and madder. I do believe that the *Brown* decision had something to do with emboldening the black people in Montgomery. After all, the people who planned the bus boycott were the NAACP, and they were people who were in step with *Brown*. And no matter where we were, we identified totally with

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Elizabeth Eckford, with Ernie Green and the others in Little Rock, with the people in Plaquemine Parish in Louisiana, and with the people in Clinton, Tennessee, all facing that resistance. So it seems to me that all of the tinder for the 1960s was built up in the late 1950s.

If Thurgood Marshall had lost *Brown v. Board* in 1954 blacks would have been devastated, but he won, and blacks felt empowered. Black lawyers accomplished that. Of course they had help from fine white lawyers, but black lawyers accomplished that; the NAACP accomplished that; and black people were relieved of some of the impotence the society had imposed upon us.

But then, you might ask, if I've lived through all of that history and if I believe deeply in integration, why am I on the school board and not talking about desegregation?

It's because we know more now than Thurgood or Bob Carter or Kenneth Clark or I did back in the early 1950s. We were really naive. Most of us thought that racial meanness was an individual thing. We talked about it as prejudice. We even had our particular demons – Senator Bilbo of Mississippi and the Talmadges of Georgia were prime examples – but the black movement was a middle class movement. The few white people we knew were liberal white people who would join the NAACP, so we thought white people were pretty good people. We thought that the more that white people were exposed to people like us, the sooner they would conclude that gee, these people aren't what we thought they were, they are regular people, they're Americans, and we'll hang around with them and let our kids go to school with them. As Richard Kluger quoted Bob Carter as saying, "We really had the feeling then that segregation itself was evil – and not a symptom of the deeper evil of racism...The box we thought we were in was segregation itself."² What we didn't know then was that racism was at the core of American culture. We didn't understand how deeply white skin privilege was ingrained in the culture and the power structure of the country.

And so here we are in this residentially divided city, where race, class and geography are so important. That has an impact on schools. What we have to do is improve the schools where the poor black kids live. It is not a given that you get a terrible education in an all-black school; you simply get an incomplete education, just as you get an incomplete education in an all white school. But given the distribution of resources, we can't emphasize desegregation; we have to emphasize the best education.

NOTES

1. Plessy v. Ferguson, 163 U.S. 537 (1896).
2. Richard Kluger, *Simple Justice: The History of Brown v. Board of Education and Black America's Struggle for Equality* (Knopf, 1975), p. 534.