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Gareth D. Pahowka
Gettysburg College
Class of 2006

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Abstract

At the shining apex of racial reform in the civil rights era stands the historic 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. Recently passing its fiftieth anniversary, the ruling struck down legal school segregation which had been upheld by the same court some fifty-eight years earlier in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. *Brown* is highly revered today as a sacred document and cornerstone of American race-relations, but the ruling initially garnered widespread shock, outrage, and defiance in the bedrock of segregation, the deep South. At least that is what we have been told. A closer analysis of southern public opinion regarding *Brown* reveals a multitude of views ranging from pure racist condemnation to praised acceptance and affirmation of racial equality. There were indeed voices of moderation in the South. In the summer of 1954, reaction and response to *Brown v. Board of Education* in the deep South was not unanimous; there were clear voices of racial moderation that called for a calm rational response, compliance and respect for the ruling, and eager acceptance of integrated education.

Keywords

Brown v. Board of Education, Southern public response, segregation

VOICES OF MODERATION: SOUTHERN WHITES RESPOND TO *BROWN V. BOARD OF EDUCATION*



GARETH D. PAHOWKA

At the shining apex of racial reform in the civil rights era stands the historic 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision. Recently passing its fiftieth anniversary, the ruling struck down legal school segregation which had been upheld by the same court some fifty-eight years earlier in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruling. *Brown* is highly revered today as a sacred document and cornerstone of American race-relations, but the ruling initially garnered widespread shock, outrage, and defiance in the bedrock of segregation, the deep South. At least that is what we have been told. A closer analysis of southern public opinion regarding *Brown* reveals a multitude of views ranging from pure racist condemnation to praised acceptance and affirmation of racial equality. There were indeed voices of moderation in the South. In the summer of 1954, reaction and response to *Brown v. Board of Education* in the deep South was not unanimous; there were clear voices of racial moderation that called for a calm rational response, compliance and respect for the ruling, and eager acceptance of integrated education.

The *Brown* ruling struck a decisive fatal blow at a fundamental tenet of southern society, segregation. Naturally, then, this society was shaken to its core and widespread controversy exploded throughout the region. Historian Michael J. Klarman writes that in 1954 “segregation of public grade schools lay near the top of the white supremacist hierarchy of racial preferences. For the Court to invalidate it was certain to generate far greater controversy and resistance than had striking down the white primary or segregation in interstate transportation.”¹ The headlines of the region’s major papers on May 18 exuded a palpable sense of utter shock and dismay. When the sun rose on that day, southerners waking up to their morning coffee found that nine men in a marble building hundreds of miles away had radically altered the structure of their society and turned their way of life upside down. After reassuring themselves that it was not a dream, they quickly found that most of their elected officials were united in their opposition.

Georgia Governor Herman Talmadge exemplified the southern attitude of defiance adopting a position to resist the ruling and vowing to maintain segregation in his states’ schools.² He and many other southern politicians advocated openly disobeying the supreme law of the land. Talmadge vowed that “the full powers of my office are ready to see that the laws of our

¹ Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 291.

² Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 389.

state are enforced impartially and without violence.” He called for the creation of a special State Education Commission meeting “to map a program to insure continued and permanent segregation.”³ Talmadge was not a stubborn renegade. That fall, eight of the nine candidates in the gubernatorial primary race campaigned to preserve school segregation.⁴ One such candidate was the Lieutenant Governor, Marvin Griffin, who declared that “I will maintain segregation in the schools and the races will not be mixed, come hell or high water.”⁵ These voices dominated the headlines and have come to shape the popular conception of southern white reaction to *Brown*.

The historical paradigm on the subject is perhaps best succinctly put by Charles T. Clotfelter who writes that “the region’s predominant attitude was racial horror and hysterical jeremiad.”⁶ Historian Jeff Roche concurs and adds that the ruling created a “frenzied opposition throughout the South.”⁷ This traditional consensus has long held that the overwhelming majority of the region was uniformly opposed to *Brown*, swarming with hysteria, and fought it with bitter resistance. But a growing number of historians have disputed this view, contending that public opinion was not as cut and dry as was once thought. Southern governors such as Talmadge assumed they were diligently representing the voices of all their constituents. They were not. According to James T. Patterson, “even on the sensitive subject of race relations, [the South] was not a monolith.”⁸ He argues that “the notion that the ‘white south’ was uniformly racist was a flawed, often self-gratifying northern notion.”⁹ J. Harvie Wilkinson III agrees and argues that “some southerners, led by a gritty band of newspaper editors, recognized segregation’s immorality and sought its demise. But theirs were not generally the voices the nation heard.”¹⁰ There were whites—parents, school board members, principals, community leaders—who did openly support the Court.

This work supports these views and offers a balanced and objective bottom-up analysis of public opinion in the South immediately following the *Brown v. Board* decision in the summer months of 1954. This is accomplished by a detailed analysis of the main instrument of public thought, the newspaper. Prior to the maturation of twenty-four hour cable news, newspapers provided the most effective forum for public debate. To achieve a regional balance, this inquiry utilizes six papers that represent a basic cross-section of the South: *The Atlanta Constitution*, *The Jackson Daily News*, *The Times-Picayune* of New Orleans, *The Nashville Tennessean*, *Arkansas Gazette*, and the *Miami Herald*. Based upon the evidence gathered from this research, many voices of moderation were to be found in this period and their views tended to assume three broad categories. The first urged calm and cooperation while speaking out against rash action.

³ Chalmers M. Roberts, “South’s Leaders Are Shocked at School Integration Ruling,” *The Washington Post*, 18 May 1954, 2.

⁴ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 389-90.

⁵ Roberts, “South’s Leaders Are Shocked.”

⁶ Charles T. Clotfelter, *After Brown: The Rise and Retreat of School Desegregation* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 23.

⁷ Jeff Roche, *Restructured Resistance: The Sibley Commission and the Politics of Desegregation in Georgia* (Athens: The University of Georgia Press, 1998), 21.

⁸ James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 72.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 88-9.

¹⁰ J. Harvie Wilkinson III, *From Brown to Bakke: the Supreme Court and School Integration, 1954-1978* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1981), 51.

The second group went further and advocated full compliance with the law. The third category of response went the furthest and openly praised the morality of *Brown* and whole-heartedly supported the concept of integrated-schools. These moderate and even liberal reactions do not comfortably fit within the aforementioned racial paradigm and deserve further attention.

As Talmadge and other leaders vehemently condemned *Brown* and spouted fierce rhetoric calling for brazen disobedience of the law, there was another group, albeit a less prominent one, that issued soothing pleas for peace and reasoned cooperation. Indeed newspaper editors took the lead in this regard, and there were many who “urged calm and avoided talk of defiance,” Klarman writes.¹¹ There were a number of leading newspaper editors who steadfastly stuck to this message, including Ralph McGill of *The Atlanta Constitution*, Hodding Carter II of *Delta Democrat Times* (Greenville, Mississippi), Jonathan Daniels of *Raleigh News and Observer*, and Harry Ashmore of *Arkansas Gazette*.¹² From the desk of Hodding Carter came an editorial that warned against listening to “professional politicians and hotheads” and urged fellow southerners to use the upcoming months “for fairness and adjustment, not in angry and fearful debate.” Carter attempted to reassure his readers of the legitimacy of *Brown* by noting that the ruling “came from men of varied social background, beliefs and political outlook” who were “completely convinced that morality and Democratic tradition were on their side.” He further offered praise for the decision by writing that it would raise American standing “especially in a world of brown, yellow and black peoples.”¹³ Carters’ editorials provided night and day contrast with the turbulent talk of defiance such as that espoused by Governor Talmadge.

Other major editorials shared Carter’s sentiments as well. Immediately following the ruling, the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* steered away from the hysterical response when it wrote that “neither cavil nor just complaint at the court’s action helps to solve our problem.” The *Times* implored its readers to “work soberly to redirect their educational effort along lines that will be acceptable to all and at the same time will preserve its vitality.”¹⁴ Similarly, on the morning after *Brown* came down the *Atlanta Constitution* offered its opinion, which did not align with the actions of Governor Talmadge. The *Constitution* also urged calm:

It is not time for hasty or ill-considered actions. It is no time to indulge demagogues on either side nor to listen to those who always are ready to incite violence and hate. What is needed most in all the states affected is a calm, rational approach. Panic and the losing of tempers will solve nothing, but cause more harm than good. Extremists and hotheads on either side neither can change the Supreme Court decision nor reach any practical solutions. It is a time for Georgia to think clearly. Our best minds must be put to work, not to destroy, but to seek out constructive conclusions. . . . Let us not do anything for which we will be sorry later. . . . Let us all think clearly and be calm. ¹⁵

¹¹ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 389.

¹² Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 72.

¹³ “Carter Predicts Evasion of Ruling on Segregation,” *Jackson Daily News*, 19 May 1954, 12.

¹⁴ “Segregation Decision,” *Times-Picayune*, 17 May 1954, 8.

¹⁵ “The Supreme Court Has Given Us Time,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 17 May 1954, 4.

These words certainly do not mesh with Clotfelter's assessment of "racial horror and hysterical jeremiad." Clearly, the opinions of major southern newspapers can be characterized by anything but hysteria and frenzy; they called for calm and disdained any rash action. These responses did not come only from the pen of major editors.

Calm sentiments and voices of reason were shared by everyday readers as well who wrote to their papers to offer an alternative message. Elsie Brown of Nashville wrote on May 28 that "it is a time for calm, judicious thinking, and fair judgment and understanding—not for hysteria and jumping to conclusions that the whole idea is bad and bound to bring trouble." She continued, sounding like a wise grandmother chiding rowdy children: "There will be no trouble if everyone uses his head, and wants to be cooperative and a law abiding citizen, instead of using his emotions and bringing in age-old prejudice."¹⁶ In New Orleans, J. Simon pointed out to his fellow citizens that those who were lashing out against *Brown* and demanding majority rule and states' rights might keep in mind that blacks outnumbered whites "in at least one southern state." He echoed Mrs. Brown's sentiments and added: "In the question of segregation we are dealing with problems involving fundamental rights and which cannot be solved by emotional thinking. We must realize that this is a time for cool heads and clear judgment."¹⁷ In addition, it seems that portions of the religious community adopted a similar belief in this initial period after the decision. For example, the South Georgia Methodist conference drafted a statement calling on its members to "bring up all our reserves of faith, forbearance and good will in relation to this problem; to strive to be calm and dispassionate in our search for solutions to our perplexing problems." The statement goes on to implore Methodists to "seek above all things to gauge our actions by the will of God."¹⁸

Governor Talmadge certainly did not represent the unanimous opinion of all southern governors and officials. Others, including Tennessee Governor Frank Clement, resisted this furious approach and offered a more mature and civil tone of which many southerners approved of whole-heartedly. N. S. Holiday of Nashville commended Governor Clement in the *Tennessean* writing that "when comparing the reactions of other state officials to the recent Supreme Court announcement barring segregation in the public schools, it was gratifying to note the cool, calm and deliberate reactions of our own governor, our mayor, and other high officials."¹⁹ Clement had previously gone on record urging "calmness," saying that "this is no time for snap judgment, quick decisions, or demagogic excitement."²⁰ Mississippi State Representative Sam Johnson agreed with the Governor when he broke with party consensus and publicly opposed a state constitutional amendment which would have abolished public schools in order to circumvent the ruling. Johnson stated: "Drastic action at this time is likely to do more harm than good."²¹

¹⁶ Elsie Brown, "Work For the Best," *The Nashville Tennessean*, 28 May 1954, 16.

¹⁷ J. Simon, "Urges Cool Heads," *Times-Picayune*, 26 May 1954, 8.

¹⁸ Laura Barre, "Methodists' Assignment List Read," *Atlanta Constitution*, 12 June 1954, 11.

¹⁹ N. S. Holiday, "Letter to the Editor," *Nashville Tennessean*, 24 May 1954, 6.

²⁰ Roberts, "South's Leaders are Shocked."

²¹ "Tippah Legislator Says Private School Plan Dangerous," *Jackson Daily News*, 22 August 1954, 1.

These feelings were also shared by Florida's Superintendent of Schools Thomas D. Bailey who called for "sober and careful thinking, together with planning untainted by hysteria."²² Directly to the south of Tennessee, in Mississippi, the *Tupelo Journal* gave similar praise to its Governor, Hugh White, who maintained "a statesman-like attitude that school problems can be worked out to the satisfaction of thoughtful parents of both races through conferences between white and colored leaders." The editorial feared the adverse results of other officials who looked as if they were prepared to act "in a fit of anger without a thought of the consequences."²³ Although fierce and defiant rhetoric may have garnered more attention in the summer of 1954, there were certainly numerous high-profile leaders throughout the deep South that greeted *Brown* with calm heads and a spirit of cooperation.

There is some indication even that northerners were indeed surprised by the existence of this moderate white element within the southern political atmosphere. Perhaps they had assumed that the south would unite in bitter hysteria and march off with pitchforks to the Supreme Court. This was of course not the case observed Axel A. Gravem, a northerner who wrote to the *Atlanta Constitution* to share his thoughts:

Georgians are to be congratulated and admired for their lack of resentment, rancor and indignation...and for the spirit of calmness, acceptance and cooperation at a time when rash action, indignation and annoyance might occupy smaller minds. Georgia has thus stood fast in its adherence to its highest ideals under considerable difficulty.²⁴

Even the high Court itself may have been taken aback by the level of civility that prevailed in the region. Court insiders alleged that the Justices were "surprised that more stormy reactions did not take place after the ruling."²⁵ Perhaps most surprised was Justice Hugo L. Black, an Alabamian who at the time of the ruling conjectured that the South "would never be a party to allowing white and negro to go to school together" and that there is "no more chance to enforce this in [the] Deep South than prohibition in N[ew] Y[ork] C[ity]."²⁶

Justice Black may have fallen out of his seat flabbergasted when he read the reactions of some southern political leaders in the immediate aftermath of the ruling. A wide swath of the South, including government officials of all levels, diverse denominations of the religious community, newspaper editors and journalists, and everyday citizens spoke out in favor of compliance with *Brown*. Although the reactions of this category did not go so far as to openly embrace unconditional equality in education, they did however advocate compliance with the ruling as a matter of obeying the law. It seems these dignified and principled voices were often drowned out by their firebrand counterparts, but they could be heard nonetheless.

²² Roberts, "South's Leaders are Shocked."

²³ "From the Tupelo Journal," *Jackson Daily News*, 13 July 1954, 6.

²⁴ Axel B. Gravem, "Northerner Commends Georgia's Restraint In Its Reaction to Supreme Court Decision," *Atlanta Constitution*, 9 June 1954, 4.

²⁵ Edgar Poe, "High Court Surprised by Reaction on Segregation," *Times-Picayune*, 23 May 1954, 4.

²⁶ As quoted in Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 315.

At the top of the southern hierarchy of power stood the state governors. According to Patterson, several state governors, including Francis Cherry of Arkansas and “Big” Jim Folsom of Alabama, supported adherence to the new law instead of lashing out in defiance as some of their colleagues were doing.²⁷ Cherry’s first official statement after the decision was passed down was clear and unequivocal: “Arkansas will observe the law. It always has.” He added that the matter of desegregation “already has received a good deal of thought” and that the state would not “approach the problem with the idea of being outlaws.”²⁸ Cherry was not alone. Governor Phil M. Donnelly of Mississippi issued a similar statement declaring that “the citizens of Mississippi are a law-abiding people and I am confident that they will always endeavor to uphold the Constitution of the United States, which is the supreme law of the land.”²⁹ Cherry and Donnelly were joined by yet another colleague who shared similar beliefs. The official position of Governor Lawrence W. Wetherby of Kentucky was reported to be “readiness to comply with the Supreme Court’s ruling” and a willingness to do “whatever was necessary to comply with the law.”³⁰ These moderate voices stand in stark contrast to the radical rhetoric of Georgia’s Talmadge. But a candidate in the upcoming September 8 democratic primary election hoping to unseat Talmadge was Grace Thomas, an Atlanta lawyer. Mrs. Thomas made headlines when she entered the crowded primary field as the only candidate to openly endorse “peaceful compliance” with *Brown*. “It is good citizenship. As a lawyer, I think we should obey the law,” she stated.³¹ At a lower level of the political spectrum, Nashville Mayor Ben West fell in-line with this thinking. He stated: “The Supreme Court has declared the law. Our people are law-abiding citizens. We have no other thought except to conform to the law of the land.”³² Without a doubt, southern state governments and officials were in no way unanimous on *Brown*. Many favored compliance.

In addition to state governors, some high-ranking education officials also shared this respect for *Brown* as law. Arkansas State Education Commissioner Arch Ford was “confident that Arkansas would be able to meet the problem” and comply with the law.³³ To the east, a school board in North Carolina announced its intention to comply with *Brown* only two days after it was passed down. Adopted six to one, the Greensboro City School Board passed a resolution to “let the community, the state, the South and, if necessary, the nation, know that we here propose to live under rule of law.”³⁴ Calls for observance of the law were also heard in Florida where Hollis Rinehart, chairman of the Board of Control, began preparing his state for “the integration of Negroes into our institutions of higher learning and our elementary schools.” Rinehart felt that integration could be accomplished without litigation by blacks as long as

²⁷ Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education*, 72.

²⁸ “Cherry Says Arkansas to Obey the Law,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 May 1954, 1.

²⁹ “Arkansas,” *New York Times*, 18 May 1954, 20.

³⁰ “Kentucky,” *New York Times*, 18 May 1954, 20.

³¹ “Mrs. Thomas May Run On End-Segregation Vow,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 2 July 1954, 5.

³² George N. Redd, “Educational Desegregation in Tennessee—One Year Afterward,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1955): 339.

³³ “Arkansas.”

³⁴ “Greensboro Acts to Comply,” *New York Times*, 20 May 1954, 22.

“white leaders take the necessary steps” to oblige.³⁵ But perhaps the most significant evidence of high-level inclinations of compliance in the field of education occurred at a conference of the National Education Association held in July. Delegates from every state in the union adopted a resolution “asking that segregation end in the nation’s public schools.” Only two southern states cast a dissenting vote (South Carolina and Mississippi) meaning that even the deep South states of Georgia and Alabama voted in favor of the resolution.³⁶ Thus even those most intimately connected with leadership of the schools, school boards and administrators, could offer no undivided message of condemnation following the historic ruling. Many representatives of this community called for immediate adherence to *Brown*.

A portion of the southern religious community also called for compliance with the school desegregation ruling in the summer of 1954. Their language and action belong to this broad middle category of response to *Brown* which advocated respect for the law but avoided glowing endorsement of racially equal education. Historian Jeff Roche writes that the decision “caused great consternation among white southern churches” which found themselves in an often precarious position. He argues that some congregations were torn between loyalty to local sentiment and the urgings of national governing organizations. Memberships were often divided over the issue and ministers were forced to tread lightly or risk dissolution of their flock. Some privately urged worshippers to support integration while maintaining a neutral stance in public.³⁷ Whatever its message and viewpoint, organized religion would have been a particularly significant influence due to its central position in southern life. Gallup polling conducted in the summer of 1954 suggested that 85% of all southerners belonged to a church.³⁸ Accordingly, Roche writes, “church support was very important to the open school movement; for many people their minister was the only voice of authority speaking in behalf of public education.”³⁹ Indeed there were such voices, emanating from pulpits all across the South and exhorting all those who would listen to heed the word of the Supreme Court.

Examples are numerous of religious supporters of *Brown*, and they vary both geographically and by denomination. Just one day after the ruling, Rev. Harold A. Gaudin, speaking on behalf of Miami Catholics, announced that the city’s parochial schools would voluntarily abolish segregation even though they were not bound by the new law. Speaking of the decision, Gaudin stated: “I am very, very glad it has come.”⁴⁰ Across the Gulf of Mexico in New Orleans, Loyola University President Rev. W. Patrick Donnelly, “an authority on racial and labor matters,” delivered a commencement address in early June which unambiguously encouraged adherence to *Brown*: “We should all understand that the Supreme Court’s decision to end segregation in the schools is an American decision and should be accepted by us Americans.”⁴¹

³⁵ “Dixie Leaders Start Work on Problems Arising From Decision on Segregation,” *Jackson Daily News*, 18 May 1954, 8.

³⁶ Benjamin Fine, “Educators Back Segregation Ban,” *New York Times*, 3 July 1954, 1.

³⁷ Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, 53-5.

³⁸ George Horace Gallup. *The Gallup Poll: Public Opinion, 1935-1971* (New York: Random House, 1972), 1253.

³⁹ Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, 55.

⁴⁰ Adon Taft, “Catholics May End Segregation,” *Miami Herald*, 19 May 1954, 1A.

⁴¹ “Cleric Asks Gradual Integration,” *Miami Herald*, 3 June 1954, 2C.

Later that month, the General Assembly of Presbyterian Churches met in Dyersburg, Tennessee and passed a resolution approving the segregation decree and calling on its churches to assist in the integration process. The five-hundred delegates representing sixteen southern states agreed on the following statement: "Be it resolved that the Cumberland Presbyterian Church express itself as approving the decision of the Supreme Court. Also, we recommend that the Board of Missions and Evangelism be instructed to prepare and distribute materials which will aid in churches on how to meet the issues arising from the decision."⁴²

In Georgia, similar discussion and activism was taking place. There less than a week after the ruling, a meeting of the Georgia Education Commission was interrupted by a conglomerate group of United Church Women committees, Georgia League of Women Voters and B'nai B'rith representatives. Led by Mrs. Robert MacDougall, the united organizations stormed the meeting and demanded that officials comply with *Brown* instead of seeking ways to circumvent the law and maintain segregation as they were busily planning strategies to do. They advised the commission not to "disobey or circumvent the supreme law of the land."⁴³ This instance provides an excellent example of moderate southern voices resisting the racist currents that were swarming the region.

But perhaps the most vocal pro-*Brown* religious group were the Methodists. Throughout the South they quickly enacted official positions backing the law. The Florida Methodist Conference followed suit declaring that the ruling "enhances the position of the church and our nation in their search for world peace." They added: "We realize that far reaching implications of this decision for our economic and social relations and recognize that it may take many years to work out a solution for the intricate problems it intends to solve."⁴⁴ Likewise, the 134th Kentucky Conference of the Methodist Church concurred on an analogous decree: "We call upon all our people to seek to have the mind of Christ with respect to any social adjustments which this decision may necessitate; and to maintain a Christian attitude in all actions and public utterances concerning the same."⁴⁵ Finally, the North Georgia Methodist Conference joined the others on the same note. The resolution adopted by this body reminded readers that "the highest court in our land has spoken," and that "our tradition as a Methodist people includes an article of religion which, when interpreted, makes it the duty of all Christians to observe and obey the laws and commands of the governing or supreme authority in the country."⁴⁶ Though clearly in favor of banning school segregation, this group of religious moderates did not openly employ language celebrating racial equality.

Newspapers and the press provided another effective means of disseminating messages of moderation and urgings of compliance. Speaking on the Atlanta press, Roche writes that

⁴² "Segregation Ruling By Court Approved by Church Group," *Arkansas Gazette*, 22 June 1954, 10A.

⁴³ M. L. St. John, "Segregation Hearing Jolted by Women's Pleas to Obey Court," *Atlanta Constitution*, 26 June 1954, 2.

⁴⁴ "Methodists Approve Court Rule," 13 June 1954, *Miami Herald*, 8B.

⁴⁵ "Methodists Back Segregation Ban," 22 August 1954, *Nashville Tennessean*, 22 August 1954, 14A.

⁴⁶ Laura Barre, "Obey Court, Methodists Urge on Segregation," *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 June 1954, 11.

editor Ralph McGill of the *Atlanta Constitution*, an “outspoken opponent of segregation,” led this effort in his city. He argues that the city newspapers helped the integration cause by offering a “lucid alternative to the impassioned racial fears of the massive resistance politicians and their newspapers” and by emphasizing to their readers the importance of a “racially clearheaded focus” on the issue.⁴⁷ The *Miami Herald* published similar sentiments stating that “we feel that so far as this state is concerned the adjustment to [desegregation], when the time comes, will be sanely, judiciously and humanely carried out.”⁴⁸ Akin to this pro-compliance position was that of the *Nashville Tennessean*, which spoke with confidence on May 18 that the ruling would be implemented and the law respected: “The South is and has been for years a land of change. Its people—of both races—have learned to live with change. They can learn to live with this one. Given reasonable amount of time and understanding, they will.”⁴⁹ On the day after the ruling was passed down, the *Tennessean* quickly interpreted it as the “law of the land” not to be interfered with: “The existence of extra-legal difficulties, however, cannot become a permanent excuse for disregarding the legal principle. That principle has been unequivocally enunciated as the law of the land. To flout it would not only bring discredit to a great section but would merely delay what have now become inevitable decisions.”⁵⁰ The columns of Harry S. Ashmore, executive editor of the *Arkansas Gazette*, also encouraged citizens to obey the law and accept integration as inevitable. He wrote: “This is a great time of testing, a time when democracy has to protect the right of a minority. I think in the end our free institutions will meet the test and be strengthened by it. . . . Integration will come—more slowly in some areas than others—but it will come.”⁵¹

In addition to the opinion column, editorial cartoons were also effective tools employed by Ashmore, McGill, and others to influence public opinion with messages of moderation and support for *Brown*. The following three cartoons were printed within one week of the ruling and were designed to exude a calm rational response and acceptance of the decision. They each acknowledged the complexities and difficulties of school desegregation but were not framed in outrage nor did they promote disobedience or circumvention of the law. The first, figure 1, appeared in the *Arkansas Gazette* just one day after the ruling. A stoic and well-dressed bearded man is portrayed as the South. Perhaps as a sign of respect he holds his hat in his hand and serenely faces forward to the gentle encroaching ripples representing the anti-segregation ruling. He does not turn his back on the law. This idyllic scene conveys feelings of calm acceptance and respect for the Court, as the paper was intending to articulate. Most importantly, the image is titled “A Time for Greatness,” implying that Arkansas and the South should seize this historic occasion to finally establish equal justice for all in education.⁵²

⁴⁷ Roche, *Restructured Resistance*, 55.

⁴⁸ “Florida Will Take High Court Ruling in Stride,” *Miami Herald*, 18 May 1954, 6A.

⁴⁹ “Editorial Excerpts on School Bias Ruling,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1954, 20.

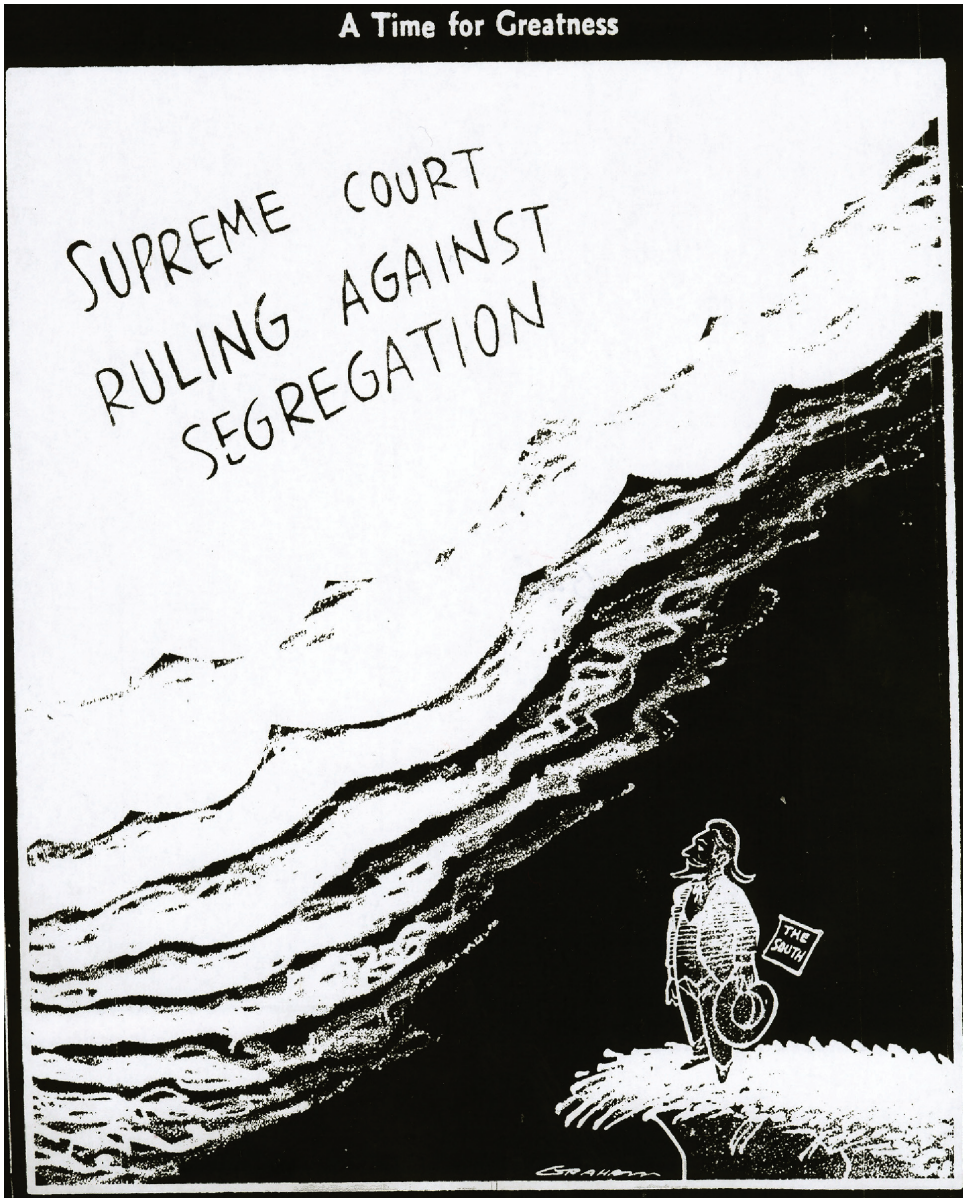
⁵⁰ “Law of the Land,” *Nashville Tennessean*, 18 May 1954, 8.

⁵¹ “Ashmore Speaks: Integration Local Task, Editor Says,” *Washington Post*, 16 October 1954, 21.

⁵² “A Time For Greatness,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 18 May 1954, 4.

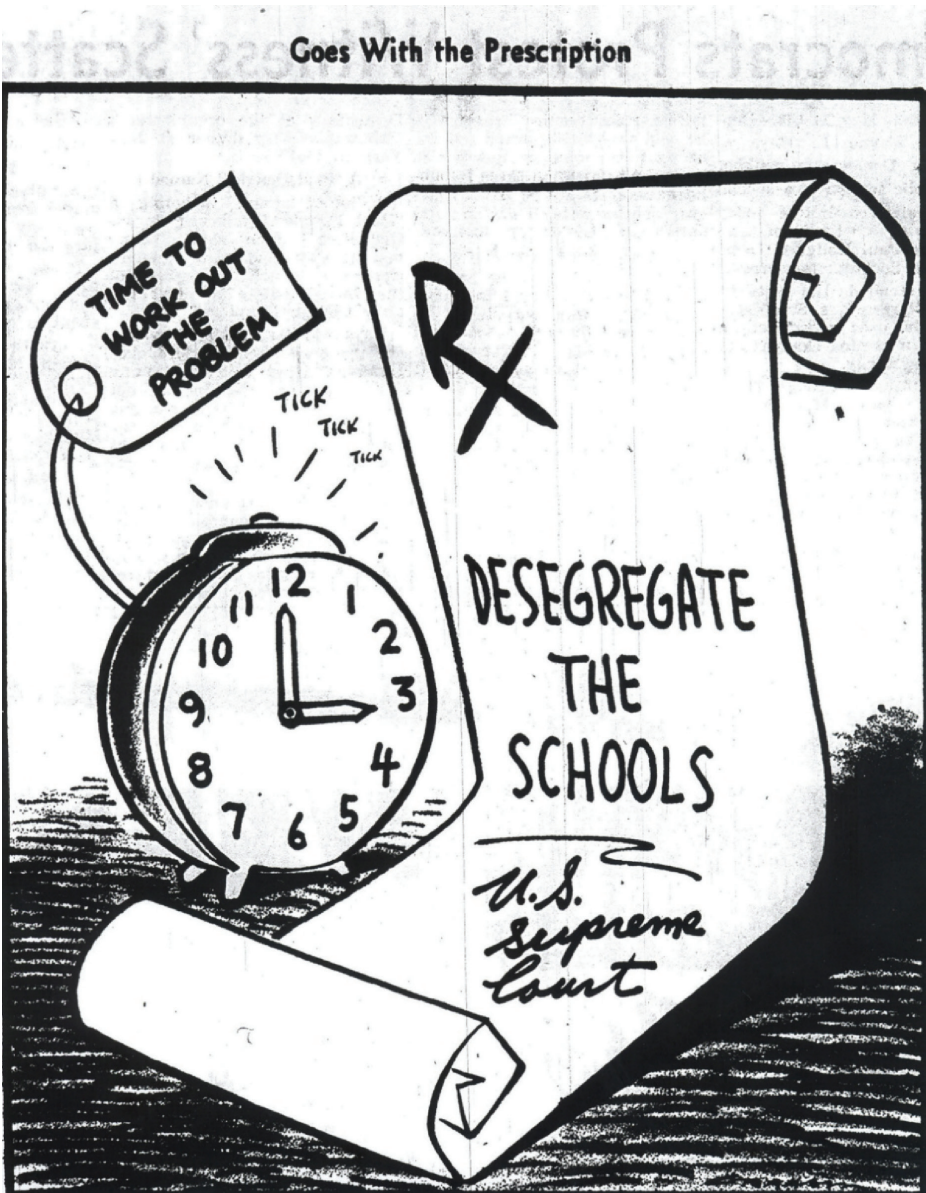
Figure 1

Arkansas Gazette, 18 May 1954



The second cartoon (figure 2) appeared in the same paper exactly one week later. Implying that it would have curative or healing effects, here the ruling is portrayed as a prescription or remedy, not a poison. But the core intent of the drawing points out to uneasy readers that Arkansans would have the necessary time to address the issue of school integration, as the Court intended for them to have. It does not in any way contain racist overtones or messages, even subliminal,

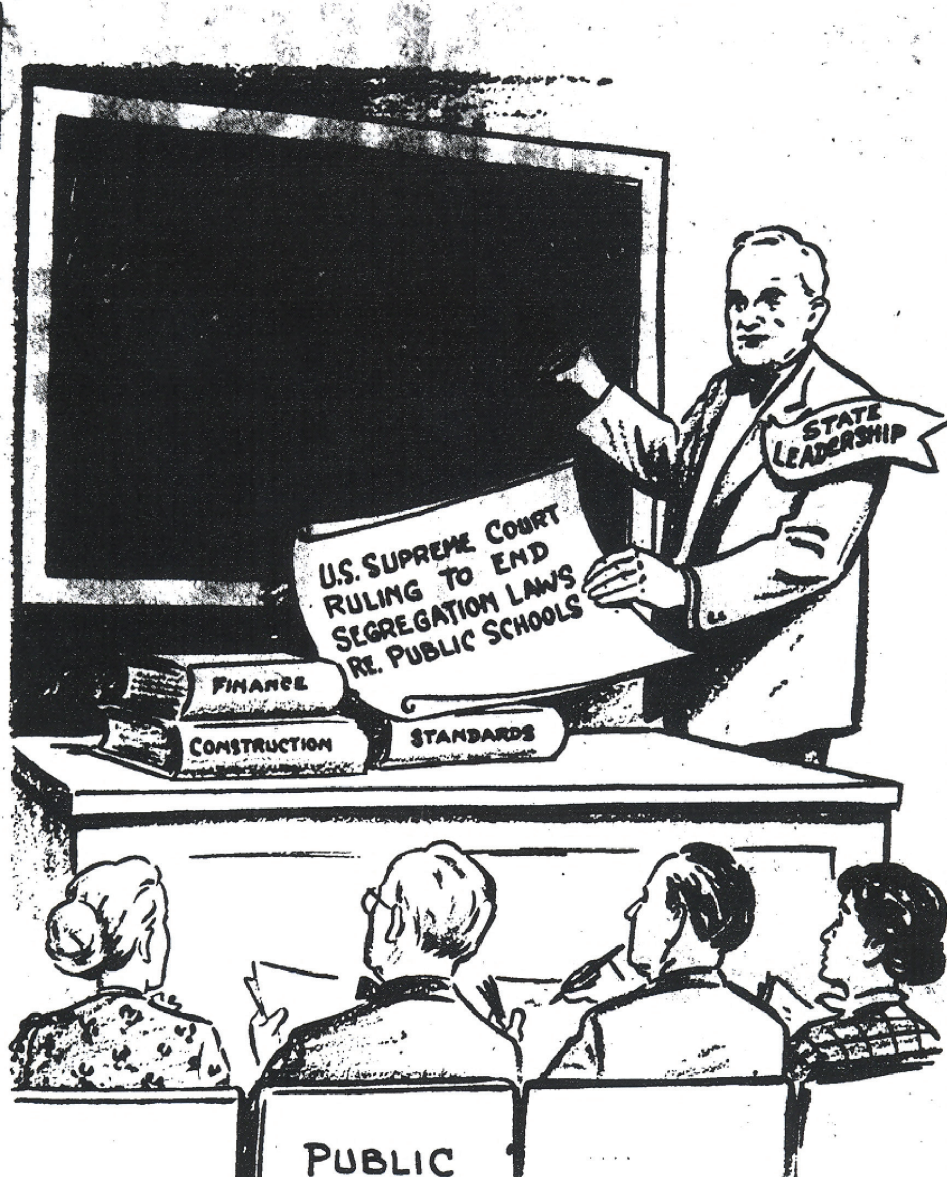
Figure 2
Arkansas Gazette, 25 May 1954



advocating defiance of the law.⁵³ The final editorial cartoon (figure 3) was printed in the *Times-Picayune* on May 19. Resembling a classroom, the setting features a man representing state officials who informs the public that Louisiana would do what was necessary to comply

⁵³ "Goes With The Prescription," *Arkansas Gazette*, 25 May 1954, 4.

Figure 3
Times Picayune, 19 May 1954



with the law. The writing on the board reads: “We’ve solved major problems before—with the will we can solve them again,” suggesting that the law would be obeyed in Louisiana schools.⁵⁴ The images and the columns that accompanied the cartoons each stressed that despite the dif-

⁵⁴ *Times-Picayune*, 19 May 1954, 10.

facilities and complications, the law would be obeyed and the schools integrated in the South. This category of moderate response certainly did not align with the frenzied hysteria that some were engaged in or that many historians now assert occurred nearly unanimously.

Clearly, many southerners intended to obey *Brown* when it was handed down. Patterson writes that when the ruling was announced there were “promising signs of compliance” that even surprised many blacks.⁵⁵ But these moderates were not limited to select Governors, education officials, religious leaders, or newspapermen alone. Everyday citizens also favored conformity with the law. H.D. Bollinger wrote the *Nashville Tennessean* to express his views and urge readers to “act constructively and go about the business of making the accommodation to the law as promptly as possible and with the intent of being fair to all concerned.”⁵⁶ Tom Cowan of Heber Springs, Arkansas offered similar thoughts when he wrote in to the “From the People” section of his local newspaper. Speaking on the court decision he stated: “The idea of segregation is a natural residue of slavery in the South. It just had to take the course it took.” Cowan regarded the impending task of integration as a “state problem and a state obligation.” “Our responsibility is to meet our obligation. I believe it can and will be done,” he said.⁵⁷ Cowan and Bollinger each viewed desegregation as a duty and obligation. They were also confident it would be done successfully, as was Mrs. P. M. Ruleau who asserted “I am serenely confident that the integration of children in the grade schools will be brought about with equal smoothness and lack of fuss and fireworks.” She also shared that she had attended school as a child with black children and that “it did me no harm.”⁵⁸ Additionally, John K. Baringer of New Orleans also took to pen and paper to urge his fellow citizens to comply with the law. He wrote:

The point I wish to make is that it is senseless, if you will, to quarrel with the court’s decision; to rail against it or complain about ‘Nine Old Men.’ It will soon be the law of the land, and like all good Americans we should and will abide by it and make it work. I don’t see how any other decision is possible—not in the Land of the Free and the Home of the Brave.⁵⁹

Bollinger, Cowan, Ruleau, and Baringer were everyday people who had the courage and will to express their beliefs even when they belonged to the minority.

In Atlanta, Mary Cooke and G. Lewis Chandler offered additional reasons why they felt *Brown* should be obeyed. Cooke declared that “it would be a very wise decision to adhere to [*Brown*] and thereby prevent a greater catastrophe, that of civil strife.” She added: “Throughout the nation, the South has been famous for its loyalty to government and its graciousness toward the fellowman, therefore if the South is the first to accept the nonsegregation law it would be

⁵⁵ Patterson, *Brown*, 72.

⁵⁶ H.D. Bollinger, “Act Constructively,” *Nashville Tennessean*, 8 June 1954, 8.

⁵⁷ Tom Cowan, “Readers Praise State Response to Court Ruling,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 26 May 1954, 4.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*

⁵⁹ John K. Baringer, “Law of the Land,” *Times-Picayune*, 29 May 1954, 6.

more fitting and favorable at a time when solidarity is most important.”⁶⁰ Chandler spoke more directly on the subject of adherence to law: “It is expected that, once a court decision or a law is made, all parties will obey and abide by it. This, all law-abiding citizens know; and our public and private schools teach our children this lesson every minute of every school day: To obey the law.” He also lashed out vehemently in his letter against resisters to *Brown* who aimed to defy the law, comparing them to “bootleggers” and “gangsters:”

If certain Southern governors and leaders really mean to lead their constituents to circumvent or disobey the recent decision of the Supreme Court, shouldn't their citizenship and right to leadership be seriously questioned—even challenged? Aren't they operating on the same principle as that off bootleggers and gangsters—to beat the law and decency at all cost?⁶¹

Thus, not only did white moderates support compliance, they criticized those that did not.

Even white school students, those most affected by the decision were not unanimously opposed to it. An informal survey of students at Miami Senior High School, which was slated to be integrated the following fall, found many students who favored the change. Vicki Miner, 18, reportedly responded “I believe students should go to the nearest school to their home, regardless of race.” Sally Staudt was less enthusiastic in her support, stating “I guess maybe it's all right.” Perry Shafon was not ambiguous when he replied “I like the decision. I think it's about time they started getting some rights.”⁶² These were the voices of whites, young and old, in the South immediately following *Brown*; white moderates were vocal and active. Sizable segments of the population backed immediate and full compliance with the law even if they did not vociferously celebrate the underpinning moral values of integrated education.

Perhaps the most valuable, helpful, and reputable evidence of all in exploring the response of white moderates is polling data from this period. The Gallup Poll organization conducted a series of formal polls on July 12, 14, and 16 throughout the South. The results further support the notion that the region was not at all monolithic on race relations. When asked if they approved or disapproved of the decision, 24% responded in the affirmative while 71% were against the decision and 5% had no opinion. This means that nearly one-in-four southerners were in favor of *Brown v. Board of Education*. When the data were classified according to education-level of the respondent, it was found that 38% of college-educated southerners supported school desegregation. This is no insignificant number. Nineteen percent high school-educated and 23% of grade school-educated respondents endorsed integration. Furthermore, when classified by age it was found that 21-29 year-olds backed the decision in the highest numbers—31% (other age brackets measured 24% for 30-49 year-olds and 23% for 50 plus

⁶⁰ Mary Cooke, “Southern Governors Should Weigh Odds,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 June 1954, 4.

⁶¹ G. Lewis Chandler, “Schools Teach Children to Obey the Law,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 28 May 1954, 4.

⁶² Richard Rundell, “Student Reactions to Ruling Mixed,” *Miami Herald*, 18 May 1954, 1B.

year-olds). Finally, when asked if they would object to having their children attend a majority-black school, the percentage of favorable responses shrank to 15%.⁶³

These numbers are astounding. Depending on the category, as many as four-out-of-ten whites in the South supported *Brown*. This broad and diverse middle group of white moderates pushed for more than a calm and rational approach to the issue but for full and complete compliance with the law. A year-long study of *Brown* and its impact and reaction in Georgia was conducted by *The Journal of Negro Education* and concluded that “certainly, many Georgians are happy about the Court’s decision and are ready and eager to work for its implementation.”⁶⁴ Yet there was still a third group of white response, those who fully agreed with the decision on all levels and who whole-heartedly embraced the concept of integrated schools, even applauding and praising the Court for its work. A Washington columnist pontificated on the moral acceptance of desegregation in the South: “It is surmised that most Southerners expected the kind of decision that was rendered, which may help explain the restrained reaction. It is suggested that they foresaw it because, deep in their hearts, a great many must feel that it was the right decision.”⁶⁵ Although they may not have all agreed with total racial equality in every situation, this “great many” southerners did however approve of integrated education.

A diverse assortment of churches and religious bodies throughout the South took the lead in this effort to promote the ideological underpinnings upon which *Brown* was based, in addition to encouraging a basic calm compliance. These groups were composed of whites and led by whites. In Little Rock, Reverend Colbert S. Cartwright of the Pulaski Heights Christian Church delivered a stirring sermon on May 23 in which he emphatically declared that “God is the father of all men and is not a respecter of persons because of skin color. All human beings are brothers because God is the Father of all.” He reminded his congregation that “the spirit of love which we must embody as Christians is a God-like love which does not know how to segregate.” Rev. Cartwright concluded by praising the ruling and further denouncing segregation: “The decision has brought our nation’s laws to a closer conformity with Christ’s spirit. . . . [There is] a basic incompatibility of the practice of segregation with God’s will. The practice of segregation is morally indefensible.”⁶⁶ Cartwright’s approach to the issue illustrated the basic pattern most in his profession followed in the summer of 1954. Religious leaders typically denounced segregation as contrary to Christian principles, praised the virtues and values of the decision, and called on the churches to take a lead role in the integration struggle.

Just five days after Cartwright spoke those words from the pulpit, delegates of the Southern Presbyterian Church met in North Carolina and approved a resolution affirming racial equality. By a vote of 236 to 169, delegates agreed that the “only division the Scripture knows is the difference between saints and sinners and believers and unbelievers.” In the “fellowship of

⁶³ George Horace Gallup, *Gallup Poll*, 1249-51.

⁶⁴ R.O. Johnson, “Desegregation of Public Education in Georgia—One Year Afterward,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 24, no. 3 (Summer 1955): 248.

⁶⁵ Thomas L. Stokes, “Court Decision is Signal for Work,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 20 May 1954, 4.

⁶⁶ Rev. Colbert S. Cartwright, “Racial Segregation: Is It Un-Christian?,” sermon printed in *Arkansas Gazette*, 30 May 1954, 4F.

faith,” they said, “we worship, work, and live together, regardless of color,” noting that “enforced segregation of the races is discrimination which is out of harmony with Christian theology.”⁶⁷ Reaction to this position was favorable in Arkansas. One minister called the resolution a “wise one” and said segregation “cannot be Christian.” Another quipped, “thank God we’re in Arkansas instead of Georgia.”⁶⁸

There were indeed however similar sentiments being voiced by organized religion in Georgia as well. The state’s Episcopalians met as a body in June and pronounced that they were in accord on the integration issue: “We agree as a group that the decision of the Supreme Court outlawing segregation in public schools is just and right.”⁶⁹ In the following month, a council of seven Atlanta ministers representing the Lutheran, Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and other denominations declared *Brown* to be “in harmony with Christian principles.” The Methodist representative stated “there is no place in the Methodist Church for racial discrimination or racial segregation.” The *Atlanta Constitution*, reporting on the meeting, wrote that “in general, the ministers agreed that the segregation pattern cannot be defended on the basis of Christian principles.”⁷⁰ Single churches often banded together in this way, conceivably to achieve a sense of strength and power, and possibly for safety purposes as well.

Such was the case in New Orleans and Florida also, where religious authorities also voiced sentiments of moderation and sought cooperative measures to advance the cause of integrated education. The Florida Council of Churches passed a resolution supporting the desegregation ruling: “We as a Council of Christian churches do not recognize the artificial standards of race, nationality or class which exist in society, but only that we are the common children of one Heavenly Father.”⁷¹ The Rabbinical Council of New Orleans adopted a similar statement: “As spiritual leaders and teachers of the Jewish people, we strongly affirm our belief in the biblical injunction that all men, regardless of race, nationality, color or creed, are children of God and therefore equal in His sight.”⁷² To be sure, women were not passive or complacent during this period either. Representing fifteen southern states, the Southern Church Women’s Association also authored a declaration in which they “affirmed [the] belief in human brotherhood and the inclusiveness of Christian fellowship. . . . [and] Accepted with humility the Supreme Court decision as supporting the broad principles of the dignity and worth of human personality.”⁷³

Still, among the most vocal religious supporters of *Brown* and integrated education in the South were the Methodists. A council of bishops met in Sea Island, Georgia and pronounced approval of the decision and stated that “we believe that this decision is consistent with the spirit and teaching of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁴ Similarly, a conference of south Texas Methodists adopted a resolution calling on its people to “abide by both the letter *and* spirit of anti-segregation.” This is

⁶⁷ George Dugan, “Church Puts Ban on Segregation,” *New York Times*, 30 May 1954, 35.

⁶⁸ “Arkansas Presbyterians Hail Action But Foresee Little Immediate Change,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 30 May 1954, 4A.

⁶⁹ Johnson, “Desegregation of Public Education in Georgia,” 241.

⁷⁰ Laura Barre, “7 Atlanta Ministers Urge Churches Help Carry Out Segregation Ruling,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 13 July 1954, 1.

⁷¹ “Florida Churches Back Integration,” *Washington Post*, 16 October 1954, 13.

⁷² “Rabbis Approve School Decision,” *Times-Picayune*, 26 June 1954, 9.

⁷³ Quoted in Johnson, “Desegregation of Public Education in Georgia,” 241.

⁷⁴ “Text of Methodist Report,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 13 June 1954, 2A.

a key distinction that indicated moral acceptance of integration, not simple dutiful compliance. Accordingly, the resolution stated: "We believe the teachings of Jesus would have us establish a relationship with one another upon the basis of character, achievement and inherent worth and not upon the basis of some physical characteristic." The language is decidedly unambiguous. With relative diversity both geographically and denominationally, a considerable sector of organized religion in the South agreed with the moral basis of *Brown*. Many of its moderate leaders criticized segregation as contrary to Christian principles, and lauded the principles of the decision. But the audiences of these messages were not passive sponges either; a significant portion of everyday southerners also fully approved of the ruling and favored school integration.

In the weeks and months after May 17, 1954, an immeasurable number of moderate white southerners wrote letters to their editors to express their embrace of and contentment with the ideological core of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Patterson writes that pro-integration people often first needed the encouragement and approval of influential community members before they made their beliefs known on this divisive issue.⁷⁶ Perhaps Patterson is referring to individuals like the Savannah Rotarians, one member of which stated upon hearing news of the decision, "It's a good thing. We can now practice the true Christian principles of brotherhood."⁷⁷ But an examination of major southern newspapers reveals no dearth of pro-integration letters from everyday people.

In Nashville, Mary Anne Black wrote of the ruling, "It will be beneficial to all. . . . It isn't constitutional to bar a student from a public school because his skin is darker in color than the skin of another student. There are qualified persons among us that can't enter a particular school or job because his skin is darker."⁷⁸ Two days earlier, Nelson Fuson, also of Nashville, wrote to his paper and reflected upon imminent integration: "The sooner we can put the new way into practice the sooner we will eliminate 'second class citizenship' in education from our community. The benefits will not be one-sided only, for those of us who are in the majority group will also gain by this great new freedom to consider children as children, regardless of color."⁷⁹ About a month later, Adde Schweid of the same city also spoke out for children: "I am a mother and know how it would hurt me if my own children were ever the victims of prejudice or discrimination. . . . Our children are ready for this change; we should not let them down."⁸⁰ Perhaps the most emphatic and verbose of the Nashville letters was that of S. Simon. He first sought to clarify that he was indeed a "True Southerner," noting that he was descended from two slave-owning grandfathers, before getting to the crux of his message:

In the whole world there is only one species of man. . . . Each individual should be judged on the basis of what he is as a person and that each individual ought to have the

⁷⁵ "Southwest Texas Methodists Urged To De-segregate," *Arkansas Gazette*, 30 May 1954, 1.

⁷⁶ Patterson, Brown, 75.

⁷⁷ Decision is Applauded by Savannah Rotarians," *New York Times*, 18 May 1954, 14.

⁷⁸ Mary Anne Black, "For Equal Rights," *Nashville Tennessean*, 4 June 1954, 18.

⁷⁹ Nelson Fuson, "Go Ahead," *Nashville Tennessean*, 2 June 1954, 8.

⁸⁰ Adde Schweid, "Best for All," *Nashville Tennessean*, 3 July 1954, 4.

opportunity for the fullest development of which he is capable. To segregate people not on the basis of what they are as persons but on the basis of what they look like or who their ancestors were does violence to both of these principles. . . . Brains are a matter of individual, not racial, endowment, and manners and morals are largely a matter of social, cultural and educational opportunities. Give the Negro children a chance and you will find them good, bad, and indifferent—just as white children are.⁸¹

Of course Nashville was not the epicenter of this line of thinking. Similar sentiments could be heard throughout the entire South. In Miami, R.C.S. and Dr. N. S. Hanoka each drafted letters both affirming and praising *Brown*. While Hanoka stuck to the latter,⁸² R.C.S. supported the law with Biblical evidence: “The Bible says all men are born equal; and I have been unable to find any place where he classifies them by race, creed, or color.”⁸³

Even more evidences of racial moderation could be found in the *Arkansas Gazette*. There some citizens chose to use the ruling as a means to criticize society and its institutions. A “housewife” wrote into the *Gazette* eleven days after the ruling and pondered, sarcastically, “I wonder if God will have a ‘white’ heaven and a separate entrance and resting place for Negroes? Or doesn’t a Negro have a soul?” She continued: “A baby is born without prejudice. Without assuming his parents line of thought, he would look equally on Negro, Indian, Japanese, German, English, or what have you.”⁸⁴ Felix Arnold also admonished the racist elements of southern culture: “It seemed to me then, and no less now, that any institution which calls itself ‘Christian’ and preaches the good Stoic doctrine of the brotherhood of many, has a moral obligation to start practicing, however belatedly, what it heretofore professed to believe.”⁸⁵ An unnamed reader did however profess what he or she believed when they wrote to the *Gazette*, providing some insight into the thoughts of those who responded affirmatively to the aforementioned Gallup poll question on integrated education. The reader wrote: “I honestly can’t see how it will hurt my children to sit next to colored children in school, or to play ball with them, or to eat lunch with them. . . . If they are left to their own unspoiled devices I imagine they will know Joe as a friend who can pitch good ball, rather than as a Negro.”⁸⁶ In addition to nullifying the notion of a monolithic South on race matters, these letters indicate among other things that southerners were willing to denounce racism, embrace integrated education, and set aside personal ideologies for the betterment of schoolchildren. To be sure, this thinking was not limited to border states alone—even in the deep South where racism ran the hottest, overtures of racial egalitarianism could be heard.

⁸¹ S. Simon, “Having a Word,” *Nashville Tennessean*, 3 June 1954, 12.

⁸² Dr. N. S. Hanoka, “Segregation Ruling Gladdens Millions,” *Miami Herald*, 1 June 1954, 6A.

⁸³ R.C.S., “Court Ruling No Reason for Dismay,” *Miami Herald*, 24 May 1954, 6A.

⁸⁴ *Arkansas Gazette*, 28 May 1954, 4.

⁸⁵ Felix Arnold, *Arkansas Gazette*, 28 May 1954, 4.

⁸⁶ *Arkansas Gazette*, 26 May 1954, 4.

One such overture came from A. B. Street who wrote the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* to note that blacks had “always given the same measure of devotion to this nation, in times of peril as well as in times of peace.” Street avowed that “the Negro in the United States is just another citizen, and not a problem.”⁸⁷ In Atlanta the opinion of Bettie E. Stokes was published in the “Pulse of the Public” section of the *Constitution*. She wrote: “For almost 100 years the Negro of the South has tolerated the demeaning penalties of segregation. . . . And now the highest court of our land has lifted one band of segregation; soul and mind may soar a little higher.”⁸⁸ Several weeks later Frank J. Toland wrote the same paper to call for a “cooperation of the races” in the wake of *Brown*. He asserted that school integration would not harm either whites or blacks and that the ruling was “the best thing that could have happened to the South.”⁸⁹ Even in Jackson, Mississippi pro-integrationists used the press to influence public opinion. Avis Brown drafted a letter that turbulent summer to share her thoughts. Her writing trembles with the trepidations of a woman who was genuinely distraught and disturbed by the radical rhetoric of racist demagogues. “It’s between midnight and dawn and I’ve not been able to sleep tonight, as well as many other nights when my soul is heavenly burdened,” she wrote. Several paragraphs later and after blaming Satan for creating segregation, from her burdened soul Mrs. Brown offered her personal feelings on race:

I have several good real Christian colored friends that I would fight the Devil himself for, and they would do the same for me and I know it. When I meet a born-again person, it matters not the color of their skin, whether it be in the South, West or anywhere, we can talk together of our Lord, or with Him and fellowship together. I am just as proud to see the colored person prosper as I am any white person.⁹⁰

In perhaps the most thoroughly segregated and racist state in the South, the words of Avis Brown transcended the issue of school integration and *Brown* to embrace the greater issues of racial harmony and equality.

Whether they advocated basic compliance with the law or they morally agreed with racial integration, many southerners, including politicians, educators, editors and journalists, and everyday people alike, were motivated in their support for *Brown* by factors relating to the Cold War. The reaction and response of many racially moderate pro-*Brown* southerners in the summer of 1954 was framed in Cold War motives. Klarman calls this the “Cold War imperative for racial change.” According to Klarman many people regarded American racism and segregation as a major weakness in the ongoing struggle against the Soviets: “In the ideological contest with communism, U.S. democracy was on trial, and southern white supremacy was its greatest vulnerability.”⁹¹ He argues that the international spotlight and scrutiny coupled with the desire

⁸⁷ A. B. Street, “For Equal Rights,” *Times-Picayune*, 30 May 1954, Section 2, 2.

⁸⁸ Bettie E. Stokes, “Alabaman Presents Her View of the Decision; Calls for Goodwill Between the Races,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 25 May 1954, 4.

⁸⁹ Frank J. Toland, “Alabaman Calls for Cooperation of the Races,” *Atlanta Constitution*, 14 June 1954, 4.

⁹⁰ Avis Herrod Brown, “Makes Plea for Christian Spirit,” *Jackson Daily News*, 24 August 1954, 8.

⁹¹ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 182-3.

to maintain the moral high-ground caused some Americans, especially southerners, to adjust their racial outlook on the broad range of civil rights issues accordingly.⁹² In regards to *Brown* specifically, there is evidence that the reaction of some southerners was indeed motivated by the Cold War imperative in the weeks and months after the ruling. The responses took three basic forms.

First, some viewed *Brown* as a positive step in reforming American democracy, the values of which were being promoted to the world. The anti-school segregation decision was a wake-up call that America must first practice what it preaches before endeavoring to spread its model elsewhere. This thinking was conveyed by R. C. S. in a letter to the *Miami Herald*: “One thing is sure: we can’t talk democracy to other people unless we are willing to practice it,” he wrote.⁹³ Many miles away in Nashville Adde Schweid shared these thoughts in her treatise on the new law: “It seems to me that the international aspects of this decision have been most neglected. Since we are attempting to sell democracy to the rest of the world (most of whose peoples happen to be colored) we must make ours as model a democracy as possible.”⁹⁴ It is unknown whether this rationale was a major motivating factor in Ms. Schweid’s support for the ruling, but it clearly affected her thinking.

A second category of Cold War reasoning that influenced southerners appeared to be the simple fact that the ruling raised American prestige and moral authority in the eyes of the world. S. Simon of Nashville concurred on this notion: “The Supreme Court action has raised our prestige enormously and might prove a more powerful weapon than the atomic bomb.”⁹⁵ Similarly, the editorial opinion of the St. Louis *Post Dispatch* reflected this thinking as well when it stated that *Brown* provided “affirmation in the eyes of millions...that the pledge in the United States of the worth and dignity of the humblest individual means exactly what it says.” The paper concluded by again citing the decision as a major weapon in the Cold War: “Nine men in Washington have given us a victory that no number of divisions, arms and bombs could ever have won.”⁹⁶

Finally, some southerners viewed *Brown v. Board of Education* as a major victory against the anti-American Communist propaganda machine. George A. Miller articulated this interpretation when he wrote a letter to his editor asserting that ruling “struck a damaging propaganda blow against international Communism.” He continued: “Outlawry or segregation in public schools will be an effective weapon in counteracting the vicious Communist lies and half-truths.”⁹⁷ Obviously international motivations found some traction in the South for encouraging white southerners to support *Brown*; many viewed the historic decision as key

⁹² *Ibid.*, 187

⁹³ R. C. S., “Court Ruling No Reason for Dismay,” *Miami Herald*, 24 May 1964, 6A.

⁹⁴ Adde Schweid, “Best for All,” *Nashville Tennessean*, 3 July 1954, 4.

⁹⁵ S. Simon, “Having a Word,” *Nashville Tennessean*, 3 June 1954, 12.

⁹⁶ “Editorial Excerpts on School Bias Ruling,” *New York Times*, 19 May 1954, 20.

⁹⁷ George A. Miller, “Segregation Ruling Hits Communism,” *Miami Herald*, 26 May 1954, 6A.

weapon in the arsenal of the ideological struggle against Communism. Respect for the law and commitment to compliance, moral acceptance of integrated education, and the Cold War imperative for racial change all serve to illustrate the point that the South did not universally unite in bitter hysteria and defiance in the summer of 1954, and that there were indeed white moderates who spoke out for racial reform.

In certain cases however, impassioned pleas for compliance and words of support were followed by action. Some communities that fateful summer saw white moderates in government and religion launching concrete action to integrate the schools, first by naming committees and panels to study the transformation and then by breaking down the racial barriers forever. Just three days after the ruling, Arkansas proclaimed itself the first state in the South to take action in accordance with *Brown*. Initiated by Governor Cherry, a statewide citizens' council was formed as a direct branch of the state legislature in order to study the massive logistical maneuvering and restructuring required by the new law.⁹⁸ In Davidson County, Tennessee the local school board authorized in mid-August the creation of a bi-racial committee to "work out problems that might arise over the elimination of segregation in the county public schools."⁹⁹ Statewide, Tennessee officials had begun considering a variety of plans for commencing integration of its schools—serious discussions intended to fully comply with the letter of the law. Further, the State Attorney General Richard Ervin ordered members of a special advisory committee to survey all school districts as to the projected course and impact of integration.¹⁰⁰ Similar efforts were underway in Florida as well, where researchers and scholars at Florida's state universities were engaged in the task as early as June. In Dade County, the *Herald* reported, leaders had been "quietly planning for many months to meet the situation which they felt was inevitable."¹⁰¹ Careful planning and studies of the impending school integration were the first steps for most southern locales that intended to speedily enforce the ruling.

Although *Brown* did not require immediate integration in time for the fall 1954 school term, some school districts in the South decided on their own to waste no time and move ahead anyway. While some politicians and officials in the deep South lashed out at the ruling and aggressively vowed to defy it, others quietly commenced integration. Most early integration efforts were found in border states, where by the 1955-1956 school year over seventy percent of classrooms were integrated. Kansas City, St. Louis, Oklahoma City, Louisville, Charleston, West Virginia, and Baltimore all moved to desegregate immediately.¹⁰² In fact, Klarman argues that most of these cities probably wanted to integrate before the ruling but were bound by state

⁹⁸ "Cherry Says Arkansas to Obey the Law," *Arkansas Gazette*, 19 May 1954, 1; see also "Integration Move Made," *New York Times*, 22 May 1954, 15.

⁹⁹ Wallace Westfeldt, "County to Name Race Study Unit," *Nashville Tennessean*, 20 August 1954, 8.

¹⁰⁰ -----, "Integration Plan Only 'Talked,'" *Nashville Tennessean*, 19 August 1954, 2; "Advisory Group Maps Integration Study," *Miami Herald*, 13 June 1954, 11A.

¹⁰¹ "Race Study to Begin this Week," *Miami Herald*, 13 June 1954, 13A; Bert Collier, "County's Schools in Good Shape to End Segregation," *Miami Herald*, 23 May 1954, 1B.

¹⁰² Patterson, Brown, 72.

law to maintain segregation.¹⁰³ On May 22, Fayetteville, Arkansas was reportedly the first city in the South to announce plans for integration. The school board encountered little opposition to the move, and of the flood of letters received the proportion approving integration to those that did not was seven to one. Charleston, Arkansas also opened integrated schools in the fall of 1954. Black primary students there had previously attended an all-black elementary school while secondary students were educated at nearby Fort Smith, with tuition and transportation paid by community tax dollars.¹⁰⁴ Some southern Catholic schools also complied with *Brown* in the summer of '54 and swiftly threw open their doors to all students, regardless of race. In late June, Reverend William L. Adrian, bishop of the Nashville Catholic diocese, announced that diocese schools would be integrated in the fall. He ordered that all-black elementary and high schools be closed and the properties sold. In August, Bishop Albert L. Fletcher of the Little Rock diocese made the same announcement.¹⁰⁵ Southern white moderates largely supported *Brown*, and some, such as Adrian, Fletcher, and the school boards of Fayetteville and Charleston, took immediate action to fulfill it.

There were many reactions to *Brown v. Board of Education* among white southerners in the summer of 1954. Some bitterly opposed the ruling and vowed to defy it all costs. This cannot be overlooked. But among white moderates there was a range of response, generally assuming three categories. Some denounced hot headed rhetoric and rash action and called for calm sober thinking. Others openly advocated complete compliance with *Brown* as a law of the highest court of the land. And some white moderates fully accepted integrated education and the moral underpinnings of the ruling. As polling data showed, these moderates were not the radically liberal few but rather a considerable portion of society from government and religious leaders to everyday people. The President of Fisk University acknowledged the diversity of views in a speech to the American Missionary Association. In his opinion, the decision was “breaking up the solid South on race issues,” and “two new categories of political and public attitude” were emerging.¹⁰⁶ The *Arkansas Gazette* also commented on the varied response in an editorial appropriately titled “today, the south has many voices.” The piece referred to a recent speech of Mississippi Senator James Eastland in which he urged the South to greet *Brown* with “stern resistance and lawlessness.” The *Gazette* pronounced that Eastland “did not, as he proclaimed, speak for the South as a whole,” and that the ruling had demonstrated in fact that “the South is no longer solid in any meaningful way.” The editorial continued: “The final testing of the peculiar institution of racial segregation which has bound the region together in the past has

¹⁰³ Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 345.

¹⁰⁴ Charles A. Hicks, “Integration and Segregation in Arkansas—One Year Afterward,” *Journal of Negro Education* 24, no. 3 (Summer, 1955): 177-8.

¹⁰⁵ “Catholics Open Tennessee Schools to Negro Students,” *Jackson Daily News*, 1 July 1954, 9; Hicks, “Integration and Segregation in Arkansas,” 180.

¹⁰⁶ “Ruling Reported ‘Cracking’ South,” *Nashville Tennessean*, 11 July 1954, 8B.

produced a wide variety of reactions. . . . The great majority of southerners, those in positions of responsibility as well as private citizens, have received the Court ruling calmly.”¹⁰⁷ On race relations and reaction to *Brown*, the South was not in any sense monolithic or solid; the region did not unite in “horror and hysterical jeremiad” as some suggest it did.



¹⁰⁷ Quoted in “Today, the South Has Many Voices,” *Arkansas Gazette*, 31 May 1954, 4.