

Background to the Little Rock Nine

Three years after the Supreme Court declared race-based segregation illegal [*Brown v. Board of Education*], a military showdown took place in Little Rock, Arkansas. On September 3, 1957, nine black students attempted to attend the all-white Central High School.

Under the pretext of maintaining order, Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus mobilized the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the students, known as the Little Rock Nine, from entering the school. After a federal judge declared the action illegal, Faubus removed the troops. When the students tried to enter again on September 24, they were taken into the school through a back door. Word of this spread throughout the community and a thousand irate citizens stormed the school grounds. The police desperately tried to keep the angry crowd under control as concerned onlookers whisked the students to safety. The nation watched all of this on television. President Eisenhower was compelled to act.

Eisenhower was not a strong proponent of civil rights. He feared that the Brown decision could lead to an impasse between the federal government and the states: now that very stalemate had come. The rest of the country seemed to side with the black students, and the Arkansas state government was defying a federal decree. The situation hearkened back to the dangerous federal-state conflicts of the 19th century that followed the end of the Civil War.

On September 25, Eisenhower ordered the troops of the 101st Airborne Division into Little Rock, marking the first time United States troops were dispatched to the South since Reconstruction. He federalized the Arkansas National Guard to remove the soldiers from Faubus's control. Over the next few months, the African American students attended school under armed supervision.

The following year, Little Rock officials closed the schools to prevent racial integration. But in 1959, the schools were reopened, and both black and white children were in attendance. The tide was slowly turning in favor of those advocating civil rights for African Americans. An astonished America watched footage of brutish, white Southerners mercilessly harassing clean-cut, respectful African American children trying to get an education. Televised broadcast swayed public opinion toward desegregation.