P. 700 – 709 Taking on Segregation

The Civil Rights Act of 1875 had outlawed segregation in all public spaces, but it was overturned by the Supreme Court in 1883 and declared unconstitutional. This coupled with the “separate but equal” provisions of the Plessy v. Ferguson ruling of 1896 cleared the way for statutory enforcement of racial apartheid. Southern states did not hesitate to enact laws to create and enforce segregated society. These

Jim Crow laws made it illegal for the races to “mingle” – outlawing interracial marriage, dictating separate schools, streetcars, waiting rooms, railroad coaches, elevators, drinking fountains, and public restrooms – and this is a partial list. Black accommodations were always inferior to services provided for whites.

Some people moved North to get away from the blatant segregation in the south, only to find the same practices in force there. Segregated neighborhoods and schools were the norm, and competition with white workers for jobs sometimes led to violence between groups.

After WWII many returning service men and women of color were determined to make changes in the United States. Civil rights organization began an active campaign to end segregation in all forms.

The NAACP led this drive, and had been in the fight since 1909. The strategy was to focus on segregation in education – the difference between the education of black and white students – where white schools received 10 times the funding given to black schools. The fight began in 1938 led by Thurgood Marshall and his team of young law students. By 1951 they had brought 32 cases before the US Supreme Court and won 29.

Each case chipped away at the segregation permitted in Plessy v. Ferguson – the most prominent of these cases was Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka Kansas, known as Brown v. Board. The challenge was to a law that forbade an elementary student, Linda Brown, from attending the all-white elementary school four blocks from her house and instead forced her to travel 21 blocks to the black school.

SCOTUS unanimously struck down the segregation laws as a violation of the Fourteenth Amendment’s Equal Protection Clause. Chief Justice Earl Warren, writing for the court said “IN the field of public education the doctrine of separate but equal has no place” separate facilities, he stated, could never be equal. The Brown decision impacted 12 million school children in 21 states.

Reaction to Brown was mixed at best. Kansas and Oklahoma officials felt the process of integrating schools would be fairly easy. The governor of Texas fought desegregation with the Texas Rangers, and warned that the process would take years in his state. Georgia and Mississippi vowed to fight the court decision with every means at their disposal.

But by 1955 more than 500 school districts had desegregated their classrooms across the US. Some issues arose, and of course the KKK turned up to protest. SCOTUS issued a second ruling that became known as Brown II which directed that the process of desegregation go forward with “all deliberate speed” everywhere. President Eisenhower was not a fan, and at first refused to enforce the ruling. Then came the events in Little Rock…..

Arkansas had, interestingly, been ahead of the curve on the issue of desegregation. The state had admitted African American students to the state universities with little fanfare and some scout troops and unions had quietly dropped previous racially discriminatory practices. With desegregation advocates on the city school board the superintendent of schools began to move forward shortly after the Brown decision with the plan of getting the Little Rock schools to comply with the directive of the courts.

The governor, Orval Faubus, was not a fan. When the Little Rock Nine came to school in September 1957 he sent in the Arkansas national guard to prevent the students from entering Central High School. A federal judge ordered the governor to let the students into the school. The NAACP stepped in to provide rides to the students but one, 15 year old Elizabeth Eckford who had no phone and had not been contacted, set out on her own to go to school. She made her way through angry abusive crowds to a bus stop determined to get to school. While she waited, two white people waited with her to ensure she would make it safely onto the bus.

Eisenhower was forced to act to enforce the court’s order. He nationalized the Arkansas National Guard, placing them under his own command, and sent in a thousand paratroopers to get the nine students safely to school. The soldiers could only do so much, and the students faced harassment from their classmates inside the school building. At the end of the year the governor shut down Central High rather than let integration continue there.

September 9 1957 Congress passed the Civil Rights Act of 1957, the first since Reconstruction. Senator Lyndon B. Johnson of Texas worked to move the bill through Congress – it gave the attorney general greater power over school desegregation and gave the federal government jurisdiction to prosecute violations of African American voting rights.

 MLK and the SCLC p. 705

After the Montgomery Bus Boycott the young MLK Jr and his nonviolent “soul force” became known to the world. “Soul force” was a kind of non-violent resistance to unjust laws. This movement was based on the writings of Mohandas Ghandi, and Henry David Thoreau to peacefully resist bad laws, and the teachings of Jesus to love your enemies. MLK held fast to his philosophy, even after the murder of Emmett Till spurred a wave of racially charge violence across the south. There were beatings and shootings of civil rights workers, some fatal.

In 1957 MLK and a group of ministers and civil rights leaders to found the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or SCLS to carry on non-violent protests against the “evil of second class citizenship”. The leaders hoped to build a grassroots movement and win the support of African Americans throughout the South. MLK traveled speaking and meeting with countless people to spread his ideas as the president of the SCLC.

Ella Baker, a member of the NAACP was the first director of SCLC, and went on to help found the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee, or SNCC (snick) in 1960 to organize the activities for civil rights protest and actions on college campuses. Many student protesters risked losing scholarships or expulsion from school for their activities, but SNCC gave them a way to coordinate their work with the larger movement.

The movement continued to spread, across the South and into the North, as the SCLC, and the SNCC’s college students, and their supporters worked to end segregation in the US.