



The President poses with his valet and friends in the White House Rose Garden, June 11, 1957. John Moaney, devoted valet to President Eisenhower, beams proudly as he stands beside the president, posing with a group of his friends from the African Methodist Episcopal Church of Copperville, Maryland. Front row from left: Moaney's wife; his mother, Mrs. Ethel Moaney; and Mrs. Eisenhower. Foreground: Barbara Mills with purse around her neck. (National Park Service)

ESTABLISHING A BEACHHEAD

No postwar president has had more than eight years to shape the issues of his day. Eisenhower faced this short-term/long-term conundrum over civil rights and was acutely aware that he had little time to make progress without risking policy blunders that might perilously inflame emotions that might set back the cause.

In the case of equal opportunity in the United States, Eisenhower established a beachhead that would assure no future rollback of the civil rights measures he advanced. To do this he used measures based on the federal authority he possessed, at the same time using the courts and the legislative process, thereby leveraging the strength of the coequal branches of government. By the time Ike left the White House, matters under federal jurisdiction had been largely desegregated. Together with Congress and the

courts, few law-abiding Americans could reject the voice of their federal institutions.

In tackling the civil rights issue, Ike approached it the way he had undertaken other major challenges during the war.

In conversation with the Civil War historian Bruce Catton, Eisenhower told the famed author, "The principles of war are neither exclusive nor specialized. They are the principles of life which are fulfilled whenever an individual has a task or an objective to perform. They are a matter of common sense. Human nature is constant, as are the elements of political power, military power, economic power and morale . . . an army is not licked until it admits it."¹

In the coming years it would be presumed by Eisenhower's critics that his measured approach to civil rights was a sign of indifference. It would take almost sixty years before historians could see that laying the groundwork for progress was as critical a contribution as making impassioned speeches and taking sides. In Eisenhower's case, fundamental to his philosophy and his objectives was to keep the country united and to assure a civil dialogue that might avert open rebellion and bloodshed. By choosing to desegregate the federal areas over which he had control, Eisenhower set legal precedents that would go a long way toward forcing the segregated part of the country to come to terms with the long-term futility of those ways.

The first true test of Eisenhower's civil rights commitment came to a head in September 1957.

On September 24, 1957, the president of the United States looked firmly into the television camera from his studio in the White House, his jaw tight, his eyes signaling that he meant business.² He had returned from Newport, Rhode Island, to speak to the nation—indeed the world—from "the house of Lincoln, of Jackson and of Wilson" to explain why he was authorizing the deployment of five hundred 101st Airborne paratroopers to one of America's cities. This would be the first imposition of federal troops in the South since Reconstruction, the period that came on

the heels of the Civil War. Eisenhower's projection of overwhelming force in Little Rock, Arkansas, sent a powerful message to the people of that state and observers throughout the world: The rule of law would prevail.

Before coming to the presidency, Eisenhower had had varying exposure to racial issues. Growing up, he saw only episodic examples of it. Although his mother had migrated to Kansas from Virginia, the Brethren community had not been slaveholders.

As many as one hundred blacks lived in the town of Abilene in those years. While social clubs were segregated, Ike's own school was integrated. Years later he recalled an occasion when members of his school's football team made it clear they would not line up against the opposing team, which included an African American. According to accounts, Ike volunteered to line up across from the black player and shook his hand before and after the game—a gesture his teammates refused to make.

According to Ike's journal: "The rest of the team was a bit ashamed."³

The army was segregated as Ike came up through the ranks, so it was not until he was in charge that he confronted the issue of race relations directly. He would learn from experience the limitations placed on any open-minded leader.

Not long after Pearl Harbor, when our Allies in the Pacific region were under pressure to shore up their military capability, Eisenhower made some noteworthy advancements for soldiers of color. While still at War Plans, before being sent to Europe to take up command of American forces, Eisenhower identified and planned to deploy a black division to Australia. Australia's laws forbade the use of black troops. "All right—no troops" was Eisenhower's response.⁴

During the war he was insistent that the blood supply be integrated—a controversial proposition, especially among Southern units. He told Gen. Alfred Gruenther, responsible for implementing his decision, to "stand his ground."⁵

In Europe, Eisenhower desegregated many Red Cross Clubs and pushed hard to give blacks the chance to volunteer for

combat. He was aware of the backbreaking work they were doing as support personnel and thought they should be given the right to move upward in the ranks.

Just before the Battle of the Bulge, Eisenhower ordered Gen. John C. H. Lee to see to it that African American troops were given the opportunity to serve in combat "without regard to color or race." Of those who volunteered from across the operation, however, preference was given to those troops who had already had basic training, a critical factor for combat survival.⁶

Under Eisenhower's command the military also experimented with using "Negro units" within white units; the supreme commander also replaced white GIs with black ones where appropriate. Given the exigencies of war, this was all he could do within the legal restrictions imposed by the military—that is, the federal government.⁷

On his return from Europe, Eisenhower testified before Congress about the bravery and competence of these troops, lauding the fact that nearly five thousand black soldiers had taken advantage of the opportunities that had been made available to them.

Stories were reported to the supreme commander of the successful utilization of these troops, even in units that came from America's South—despite initial concerns about racial tensions from a number of generals, including George Patton.

"There was not a single objection brought to my attention [regarding these black troops]. On the contrary from all sides there were heartwarming stories," Eisenhower recalled.⁸

Some of the black units had white leaders and others black—even in Southern squads. This experience convinced Eisenhower that with the right approach, desegregation could be peacefully implemented, "that the thing could be done."⁹

As the historian David Nichols pointed out: "Amid the stresses of a great war, Eisenhower had quietly undermined the myth that Negroes were unwilling and inadequate warriors."¹⁰

During the 1952 campaign, Eisenhower had spoken of the promise to "eliminate discrimination against black citizens in every

area under the jurisdiction of the federal government." And by the fall of the campaign Eisenhower and his attorney general had ramped up his profile on the matter, noting decades of Democratic rhetoric on the subject of equal rights with no action behind the words.¹¹

President Harry Truman had taken some steps during his presidency. In 1946, for example, he had established the President's Committee on Civil Rights, and on July 26, 1948, he had issued an executive order to desegregate the armed forces—but little had actually been done in the intervening years to implement the order.

"A Republican administration," Ike said during the campaign, "will not arouse false hopes of Negroes by promising what it never intends to deliver."¹² Truman was furious about these thinly veiled accusations, and such pronouncements put many of Ike's Southern supporters in an awkward position—but this had little effect on the candidate. He continued to highlight that gap between action and words. Eisenhower wanted to start with the District of Columbia, a city under federal oversight and jurisdiction.

"After 20 years of talk about moving mountains, [the Democrats have] not even brought forth a mouse," candidate Eisenhower had said. Truman defensively replied that the inexperienced Eisenhower should know "that the President can't get things done in the District of Columbia simply by waving a wand."¹³

Until his election as president, Eisenhower had no policy-making opportunity to change racial conditions in the United States beyond what he had already done. But rising to the presidency would give him an opportunity to lay the framework for civil rights. Now as president, he set forth on a strategy for progress.

In Eisenhower's first State of the Union address, he stated his objectives. Before a joint session of Congress, he declared his "dedication to the well-being of all our citizens and to the attainment of equality of opportunity for all so that our nation will ever act with the strength of *unity* in every task to which it is called."¹⁴ In that same speech, Eisenhower specified measures to desegregate Washington, D.C. He continued:

Our civil and social rights form a central part of the heritage we are striving to defend on all fronts and with all our strength. I believe with all my heart that our vigilant guarding of these rights is a sacred obligation binding upon every citizen. To be true to one's own freedom, is, in essence, to honor and respect the freedom of all others.

A cardinal idea in this heritage we cherish is the equality of rights all citizens of every race and color and creed.

We know that discrimination against minorities persists despite our allegiance to this idea. Such discrimination—confined to no one section of the Nation—is but the outward testimony to the persistence of distrust and of fear in the hearts of men. . . .

Much of the answer lies in the power of fact, fully publicized; of persuasion, honestly pressed; and of conscience, justly aroused.¹⁵

Eisenhower then outlined his intention to use the office of the president to "end segregation in the District of Columbia, the Federal Government, and the Armed Forces." He went on to add that federal contracting would also be opened up for equal access to opportunity.

Eisenhower wanted the nation's capital to be a "showplace" of peaceful civil rights progress: "We expect to make true and rapid progress in civil rights and equality of employment opportunity."¹⁶

In consultation with Attorney General Herbert Brownell, the president believed that these stated goals could realistically be achieved, given the short four to eight years Eisenhower could have in office.

The response to this section of Ike's State of the Union address was noteworthy. Even though the president did not outline his full civil rights agenda, in the context of several desegregation cases before the Supreme Court in that term and his pronouncements on the campaign trail, there was concern in a number of corners that Eisenhower might be inclined to push too hard on

civil rights. A number of visitors came to his office to warn about the potential repercussions.

One such visitor, Gov. James F. Byrnes of South Carolina, a Democrat, insisted on talking to the president. Eisenhower invited Byrnes to the White House for lunch, and during their meeting the governor told Ike that he was deeply concerned about the pending court decisions on desegregation.

In Eisenhower's private diary, on July 24, 1953, he wrote that Byrnes predicted that if desegregation were to happen, "a number of states would immediately cease support for public schools." Ike noted that several times during the meeting Byrnes made the point that the South

no longer finds any great problem in dealing with adult Negroes. They are frightened at putting the children together.

The governor was obviously afraid I would be carried away . . . and as a consequence take a stand on the question that would forever defeat any possibility of developing a real Republican or "opposition" party in the south. I told him that while I was not going to give my advance attitude toward a supreme court opinion that I had not even seen and so could not know in what terms it would be couched, that my convictions would not be formed by political expediency.

Then as an aside, Ike wrote his own thoughts about the matter, as he often did about issues he was trying to think through: "I do not believe that prejudices, even palpably unjustified prejudices, will succumb to compulsion. . . . Consequently, I believe that federal law imposed upon our states in such a way as to bring about a conflict of the police powers of the states and of the nation, would set back the cause of progress in race relations for a long, long time."¹⁷

Despite warnings issued to him by Democrats and Republicans alike, President Eisenhower and Attorney General Brownell made desegregating the District of Columbia a first order of business.¹⁸

There was an opening in the Thompson case, a legal measure brought to challenge the segregation practices of Thompson's Cafeteria in Washington, D.C. In 1872 and 1873 a measure had been passed that allowed blacks access to all public accommodations in Washington, D.C. Over the decades, however, due to the lack of enforcement, the black population had been deprived of these services. The management of the nation's capital was the responsibility of Congress, and Southern Democrats had run the House Oversight Subcommittee for decades. The failure to enforce the law was considered a "lost" measure, so the Eisenhower administration decided to challenge it. Herbert Brownell's Justice Department argued the case in the Supreme Court, and it unanimously ruled that such segregating policies were illegal.

The president responded immediately, calling together civic leaders and phoning Hollywood studio executives asking them to pressure local theaters to admit the city's blacks into what had been segregated movie houses. Eisenhower also put onto the district board of commissioners Samuel Spencer, a Harvard-educated lawyer and an outspoken advocate for desegregation.

Within the year Washington, D.C. was desegregated, without violence.¹⁹

Even in the social sphere things began to change. For instance, Mamie presided over desegregating the annual White House Easter egg roll in 1953 and visited a black women's sorority, Delta Sigma Theta, on May 28 of 1953, as an honored guest. These were only the beginning of the change that was under way.

Another critical part of the Eisenhower strategy was the determination to appoint only federal judges who were prepared to uphold the law—and its spirit—regarding equal opportunity. White supremacists were weeded out and rejected from any consideration.

In addition to this, Eisenhower directed Brownell to make a concerted effort to identify qualified African Americans for service in government. E. Frederic Morrow was selected to serve on the president's personal staff, the first black man in American history to do so. J. Ernest Wilkins Sr. was appointed assistant

secretary of labor, the first black ever to participate in presidential cabinet meetings. In 1955 George E. C. Hayes was appointed to the Public Utilities Commission. He was a black attorney who had, incidentally, defended at least one "suspect" in the McCarthy hearings and had also managed a part of the segregation issue before the Supreme Court.

Concurrently Vice President Richard Nixon was assigned to chair a commission on employment for African Americans who were seeking to become government contractors. It would be the precursor to a 1955 Eisenhower measure that established a committee on government employment aimed at equal opportunity for all government employees.²⁰

Even before Eisenhower was elected president, a challenge had been brewing to the Supreme Court's ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson*. This 1896 decision had established the principle of "separate but equal" in public facilities, and it raised the question, decades later, of whether separate education could in fact be deemed "equal." The Supreme Court would rule on this matter, but it would be up to federal district courts to administer the findings of the court.

Chief Justice Fred M. Vinson, hinting at some dissent on the matter, asked the administration for its views on this pending case. Reluctant to cross constitutional lines with a reply, the administration soon found that the question was moot. On September 8, 1953, the chief justice died unexpectedly, leaving a vacancy at the very top of the court.

Nevertheless Attorney General Brownell filed an amicus curiae brief, which is a "friend of the court" document in which a non-litigant may offer new information or some perspective on the case at hand. The administration's brief stated that the administration believed that "segregation of public schools was unconstitutional."²¹

Eisenhower nominated California governor Earl Warren—whom he admired and whose views were well known to him—for the position of chief justice. As soon as the appointment was made, the matter of *Plessy v. Ferguson* was promptly brought before the nation's highest court, the result of a challenge that came from

a case known as *Brown v. Board of Education*, which originated in Topeka. A successful effort was made by Warren to assure a unanimous ruling, a crucial one given the far-reaching impact of the court's decision to eliminate segregation in the nation's public schools.

Lucius Clay, one of Ike's intimates and a close professional associate on the subject, noted that Eisenhower and Earl Warren "functioned as partners." Warren established the court's priorities, and Eisenhower, "by stressing compliance with *Brown*," lent the stature of the presidency to a ruling that was, in essence, "unsettled law," meaning that there had not been laws beforehand that had established a widely recognized precedent. The president's determination to enforce *Brown* effectively countered segregationists who opposed civil rights measures on states' rights grounds.²² Clay went on to say that Eisenhower agreed with *Brown*, and viewed the landmark ruling as a "[political] burden, not a blunder."²³

Clay did not believe, however, that Eisenhower's complicated relationship with Warren, which emerged not long after, had anything to do with civil rights or "even the appropriate role of the courts on civil rights matters." In due course Eisenhower came to fear that Warren, who harbored presidential ambitions, had found an outlet for his political frustrations on the court by "expanding" its authority "well beyond its traditional and appropriate limits." Others noted that the Warren Court "proceeded to discover new 'inherent rights' not enumerated in the Constitution."²⁴

Later, in his memoirs, Earl Warren would blast Eisenhower for trying to affect the outcome of *Brown* negatively by failing to single out this decision for a public endorsement. Further, Warren reported bitterly, before *Brown* he attended a presidential "stag dinner," at which the president seated him next to a Southern segregationist—a gesture Warren interpreted as a go-slow on *Brown*. On the publication of this story a number of associates, including Attorney General Brownell (who had also been at the dinner), recalled that the evening had been about the Bricker Amendment, not *Brown*.²⁵

In the coming decades much would be made of President Ei-

senhower's refusal to publicly voice his support for *Brown*, the court's landmark decision, beyond his usual pronouncements about upholding or "obeying" the law and his assertions about the importance of promoting measures to assure equal opportunities for people of all races, colors, and creeds. But there again the key to Eisenhower's approach was a principle:

I believed that if I should express either approval or disapproval of a Supreme Court decision in one case, I would be obliged to do so in many, if not all, cases. Inevitably I would eventually be drawn into a public statement of disagreement with some decision, creating a suspicion that my vigor of enforcement would, in such cases, be in doubt. Moreover, to indulge in a practice of approving or criticizing court decisions could tend to lower the dignity of government, and would, in the long run, be hurtful. . . . In this case, I definitely agreed with the unanimous decision [in *Brown*].²⁶

Another indication of Eisenhower's support for the measure—in an area where he did have authority—was, again, in the District of Columbia. After the Supreme Court ruled on *Brown*, Ike called the D.C. commissioners together and asserted that D.C. should "lead the way" to desegregate its schools "as an example to the entire country." By September 1954 the D.C. schools were integrated—again, "with no violence."²⁷

Eisenhower and the White House staff had no illusions about the difficulties awaiting them. Brownell likened the "debate" over this issue as reminiscent of the passions that led to the bloody Civil War. Avoiding the prospect of violence was a key concern. Emotions were highly charged, and *Brown* had overturned the daily lives of "at least two generations of Americans." Until 1954 Southerners were in compliance with the 1896 Supreme Court ruling, and "separate but equal" had been the law of the land. "To expect a complete reversal of these habits and thinking in a matter of months was unrealistic," wrote the ever-pragmatic president.²⁸

In this regard, a significant source of concern revolved around

the potential for using troops to enforce the court decision. The conundrum was that while troops could be utilized to enforce the ruling, they did not have the authority to compel localities to operate the schools. There was always the danger that a school district would shut down the public schools and open private ones instead, as Senator Byrnes had warned.²⁹

Violence had already begun to grip the nation. In 1955 a fourteen-year-old African American, Emmett Till, was murdered in Montgomery, Alabama, which was experiencing citywide boycotts. Shootings were jeopardizing public safety, bombs were being detonated, and police were working overtime to avert more bloodshed by providing convoys for buses as they made their way through the city.

This violence against the black population was "indefensible," the president later recalled, "and the administration, as well as all other sensible people, was outraged."³⁰

Extremist groups promised more violence, and the South was already exacting revenge on innocent blacks by denying them credit, firing them from their jobs, and threatening their families. They promised more bloodshed if the black community "pushed the whites too far."³¹

Despite this, in Eisenhower's 1956 State of the Union address, he outlined his administration's determination to address voting rights. The president was mindful that the 1950 national census had revealed that fewer than one in four African Americans voted.

For that reason the Eisenhower administration proposed, in its 1957 civil rights legislation, a voting rights measure, a "legally constituted" commission with the power to subpoena witnesses and compel them to testify regarding allegations of voter infringement.

These initiatives, discussed by Eisenhower's full cabinet, also included the establishment of a Civil Rights Division in the Justice Department. The 1957 bill, which included these elements, would be the first civil rights legislation passed by Congress since the post-Civil War Reconstruction period, eighty-two years before.

Eisenhower later recalled that "these proposals were little less than revolutionary."³²

On July 13 eighty-three Southern Democrat and four Republican representatives signed a manifesto deriding the bill, along with a pledge to "defeat this sinister and iniquitous proposal."³³ Nevertheless, the administration's civil rights bill passed the House of Representatives, with the votes of 168 Republicans and 102 Democrats. But the bill died in the Senate Judiciary Committee, which surprised the president. Democratic liberals, including Lyndon B. Johnson, John F. Kennedy, J. William Fulbright, Albert Gore Sr., and Mike Mansfield, to name just a few, opposed the bill. These prominent Democrats were insistent that on voting rights, any measures taken against possible racists who violated a voter's civil rights should be subject to a jury trial. It would be up to such juries to determine whether a defendant was in contempt of court—a method that had been used for centuries.

Eisenhower was against their position: "The basic purpose here would be to put into the hands of a local jury, who might be prejudiced, the determination of contempt of court." He favored giving that determination to a judge who could be more impartial.³⁴

The next day, in a telephone call with Georgia senator Richard Russell, Eisenhower said that he understood the problems and the adjustments the South would have to make, but "I told him I could not yield in my purpose of protecting a citizen's right to vote. This was the overriding provision of the bill that I wanted set down in law; *with his right to vote assured, the American Negro could use it to help secure his other rights.*" (Emphasis is Eisenhower's.)³⁵

The Democrat-controlled Senate voted to strip the bill of the voting rights section—threatening that if Eisenhower insisted on it there would be "no legislation whatsoever" for the rest of the term. Indeed, other threats were issued to the White House, letting the president know that there could also be retaliation over other pending bills important to the administration.

The Southern representatives were in fact threatening to engage in all-out war.³⁶

Herbert Brownell recalled an episode in the midst of this contention. He and his wife were attending a Washington reception one evening at the American Bar Association. The attorney general of Georgia, Eugene Cook, and his wife, were in attendance. On meeting Brownell, Mrs. Cook "murmured" an outrageous epithet and "refused to shake hands."³⁷

Eventually Eisenhower and Lyndon Johnson worked out a compromise over the hostile objections of the Southern Democrats. While the final bill was far from the president's liking, and many had urged him to veto it, Eisenhower wanted to get started on its other key provisions as soon as possible. In 1960 the president brought new legislation to Congress that would fix some of the problems with the original bill, including a first step toward voting rights, this time with Lyndon Johnson's support—though a broader measure remained a sticking point with Congress.

With the *Brown* decision, each school district was required to submit a plan for how it would implement the ruling's requirements. Many places around the country complied without incident. Such was also the case in Little Rock, Arkansas.

At the same time the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) had recruited nine schoolchildren and registered them to start at the high school that autumn. They were countered by a segregationist group called the "Mother's League," which applied for an injunction against the Little Rock school board to prevent those black students from attending the high school.

Only four days after the Senate approved the compromise on Eisenhower's landmark 1957 civil rights legislation, Arkansas governor Orval Faubus called out the state's National Guard to "preserve peace and good order" as Little Rock's students prepared to return to school. (It was later discovered that Faubus had not asked his law-enforcement officials for a public safety assessment before he did so.)³⁸

On August 27, just as the summer of 1957 was fading and

the Little Rock schools were preparing to open their doors for a new year, the chancellor of the Pulaski County Chancery Court granted the Mother's League an injunction on the basis that "integration could lead to violence."

In a test of the validity of the school board's plan, Judge Ronald Davies, an Eisenhower appointee, who had been temporarily assigned to Little Rock, ruled that there was no reason to discard the original desegregation plan. On August 30 he nullified the injunction and ordered the authorities to proceed with integration. On the day the nine young African Americans tried to enter Central High School, a mob awaited them.

The school board again petitioned the court to suspend the integration plan. The judge refused, encouraging an injunction against the governor. Faubus called Eisenhower, pleading with the president of the United States for "understanding."

Eisenhower replied: "The only assurance I can give you is that the Federal Constitution will be upheld by me and every legal means at my command."³⁹ He later reflected: "I did not believe it was beneficial to anybody to have a trial of strength between the president and a governor. In any showdown, the Federal government would always win. . . . Surely there was a way to resolve this matter."⁴⁰

Faubus's request to meet the president seemed likely to provide a face-to-face opportunity to settle the matter. But Brownell advised against it. Eisenhower nevertheless agreed, if the discussion would be based on a serious desire to resolve the situation. He must have reasoned that he would give Faubus one chance to do the right thing.

On September 14 Orval Faubus came to Newport, where the president was staying for a brief vacation. Eisenhower urged the Arkansas governor to revoke his orders to the National Guard and thus allow the black children to attend school. While Faubus said many of the things he knew the president was hoping to hear, when the Arkansas governor got back to Little Rock, he did nothing to change the National Guard's orders.

The president had had enough. He had given Faubus time, and the governor had failed to change the guard's orders. Ike would now use his full powers to ensure that the law would be followed.

Determined not just to enforce the court order but also to make an example of Little Rock, Eisenhower sent in the 101st Airborne—the paratroop division that had played such a key role in the invasion of Normandy. Overruling the expressed reservations of Joint Chiefs of Staff, the president, in Executive Order 10730, federalized the Arkansas National Guard. He then flew back to Washington.

On September 24, in that fateful speech, the president ordered the mob to disperse in and around Central High School, and explained, “where ever normal agencies prove inadequate to the task and it becomes necessary for the Executive Branch of the Federal Government to use its powers and uphold the Federal Courts, the President’s responsibility is inescapable.”⁴¹

On explaining his reasoning for the intervention, he left his viewers in little doubt about the critical nature of breaking the law. He also spoke of the impact these events were having on the nation’s internal and national security:

In the South, as elsewhere, citizens are keenly aware of the tremendous disservice that has been done to the people of Arkansas in the eyes of the nation, and that had been done to the nation in the eyes of the world.

At a time when we face grave situations abroad because of the hatred that Communism bears toward a system of government based on human rights, it would be difficult to exaggerate the harm that is being done to the prestige and influence, and indeed to the safety of our nation and the world.

Our enemies are gloating over this incident and using it everywhere to misrepresent our whole nation. We are portrayed as a violator of those standards of conduct, which people of the world united to proclaim in the Charter of the

United Nations. There they affirmed “faith in fundamental human rights” and “in the dignity and worth of the human person” and they did so “without distinction as to race, sex, language or religion.” . . .

If resistance to the Federal Court orders cease at once, the further presence of Federal troops will be unnecessary and the City of Little Rock will return to its normal habits of peace and order and a blot upon the fair name and high honor of our nation in the world will be removed. Thus will be restored the image of America and of all its parts as one nation, indivisible, with liberty and justice for all.⁴²

By invoking the international impact of these events, as well as reminding our citizens that the United States is a country of laws, Eisenhower used these key points because he knew that people could agree on them—and in doing so find some common ground. The president, however, was not indifferent to the human cost of these terrible events, especially on those who had borne the brunt of this grotesque display of violent racism.

On September 30 the president received a letter from the parents of the Little Rock Nine:

We the parents of nine Negro children enrolled at Little Rock Central High School want you to know that your action in safeguarding their rights have strengthened our faith in democracy. Now as never before we have an abiding feeling of belonging and purposefulness. We believe that freedom and equality with which all men are endowed at birth can be maintained only through freedom and equality of opportunity for self-development, growth and purposeful citizenship. We believe that the degree to which people everywhere realize and accept this concept will determine in a large measure America can true growth and true greatness. You have demonstrated admirably to us, the nation and the world how profoundly you believe in this concept. For this we are deeply grateful and

respectfully extend to you our heartfelt and lasting thanks. May the Almighty and all wise Father of us all bless guide and keep you always . . .

On October 4, Eisenhower sent a reply:

Dear Mr. Brown,

I deeply appreciate your September thirtieth telegram, signed also by other parents. The supreme law of our land has been clearly defined by the Supreme Court. To support and defend the Constitution of the United States is my solemn oath as your President—a pledge which imposes upon me the responsibility to see that the laws of our country are faithfully executed. I shall continue to discharge that responsibility in the interest of all Americans today, as well as to preserve our free institutions of government for the sake of Americans yet unborn.

I believe that America's heart goes out to you and your children in your present ordeal. In the course of our country's progress toward equality of opportunity, you have shown dignity and courage in circumstances which would daunt citizens of lesser faith.

*With best wishes to you, Sincerely Dwight D. Eisenhower*⁴³

The military force provided by the 101st Airborne had the desired effect, and the sneering, fist-shaking, foulmouthed crowd around Central High School eventually dispersed, and the students were able to attend school until the end of the year. But the subject of Gov. Orval Faubus would always bring the president a special sense of frustration. Faubus had “stimulated resistance to integration for political and personal gain,” he fumed.⁴⁴

Consistent with the administration’s fears, however, on February 20, the school board petitioned the district court to “postpone” the desegregation efforts because of the anger and hostility that had overtaken the community. The judge agreed to a two-and-a-half-year hiatus on the desegregation plan, barring the black students from attending the high school in 1958.

William Coleman Jr., a distinguished African American lawyer, brought this case to the Supreme Court. *Cooper v. Aaron* entailed a suit brought against the chairman of Little Rock school board and a Negro student denied admission to Central High School. “On September 29, the Court filed a compelling and dramatic unanimous opinion in favor of desegregation. In an unprecedented show of resolve,” Coleman remembered, “the opinion was personally signed by each of the nine judges, three of whom were recent appointees of President Eisenhower. To my knowledge the signatures of nine justices have never—before or since—graced a decision of the Court.”

In Coleman’s assessment, *Cooper v. Aaron* assured that *Brown v. Board of Education* would not be an empty victory but truly “transformational.”⁴⁵

Criticism for sending in federal troops, however, rained down on the president, most notably from Southern Democrats, who saw the use of the 101st Airborne as an “illegal ill-advised use of troops [that] makes the United States a military dictatorship.”

Sen. Olin Johnston of South Carolina even proposed that Faubus declare a “state of insurrection,” and he called for reestablishing a national guard to confront federal troops—in what would amount to another civil war. And James Eastland, a Democrat from Mississippi, declared: “The president’s move was an attempt to destroy the social order of the South.”

A mass meeting in Kentucky put Eisenhower on mock trial for “treason.” And a local politician from Georgia wrote to warn the president not to come to Georgia. If he did, he could expect “violence and physical injury.”⁴⁶

Days later Sen. Richard Russell sent the president a telegram blasting him for his actions, which he termed “high-handed,” and accusing him of “illegal methods . . . [in] carrying out your order to mix the races.”

Eisenhower wrote the senator a detailed defense of his actions, while taking exception to the senator’s outlandish comparison with Nazi Germany: “I must say I completely fail to comprehend your comparison of our troops to Hitler’s storm troopers,” the president replied. “In one case military power was used to further

the ambitions and purposes of a ruthless dictator; in the other to preserve the institutions of free government."⁴⁷

Martin Luther King Jr., who the president would invite to the White House nine months later, wrote Eisenhower telling the president that the vast majority of Americans stood with him. "In the long run," he wrote, "justice must finally spring from a new moral climate, yet spiritual forces cannot emerge in a situation of mob violence."⁴⁸

Coleman, over the span of years, would look back at this time and recall that the country was on the "precipice" of civil war. Resistance grew, lynchings were commonplace, and violence increased at the same time that "Congress was not helpful. It rejected an Eisenhower proposal to authorize the attorney general to intervene to protect the constitutional rights of any citizen. It rejected financial assistance to desegregating schools."⁴⁹

Eisenhower said that he and his administration were determined that a fair, just, and moral America assume its responsibilities for the nation's less fortunate and for those who had been the victims of racism. Ike would face heavy headwinds, especially among Democrats, whose main political base consisted of Southern whites. Still, determined to be a president for the whole country, the Middle Way was, in his view, the only prospect the United States had for *sustainable* social and racial progress.

The objective of desegregating the areas controlled by the federal government had been difficult enough to attain, and they included measures of far-reaching impact such as progressive federal court appointments and the desegregation of federal contracting. But the attitudes prevalent in individual states would be harder to tackle, and they were outside any president's jurisdiction at that time.

To advantageously influence local affairs, "the President [had] endeavored to keep the trust of both sides so that when he acted he would be supported by the public," Herbert Brownell recalled.⁵⁰

While Eisenhower's critics later blamed him for not doing more to create a new moral climate in this country, he realized that if the whole nation were to make good on its constitutional promise, it would require bringing the whole country along.

However, Eisenhower did avoid a potent problem that any other leader might have failed to confront: He managed to prevent furthering the Southern cause by falsely transforming Southerners "into martyrs."⁵¹

After his retirement Eisenhower remained in touch with his colleagues on this vital national issue. In *Going Home to Glory*, David Eisenhower noted that Eisenhower "strongly supported the Kennedy civil rights bill as it was developed, but he still disapproved of 'dramatic pronouncements' and demagogic appeals emanating from the right or left. His voice, as always, was one of moderation and restraint."⁵²

In telephone discussions with his successor, President John F. Kennedy, Eisenhower "readily agreed" to pick up the phone and line up GOP votes for Kennedy's civil rights bill. In a letter to Kennedy on June 14, 1963, Eisenhower wrote: "As I then told you, I think this matter has become one that involves the conscience of the individual and the nation, and indeed, our moral standards."⁵³

Eisenhower persisted in this theme, and while he generally avoided, after leaving office, trying to influence Republican votes, he did not hesitate to speak his own mind on this particular issue. He made it clear publicly that he supported the Kennedy measure: "With the passage of this law," he said, "Republicans should take upon themselves a moral commitment: to do their utmost to see this law is implemented not merely by the powers of legally constituted enforcement agencies, but by the hearts of a determined and free people."⁵⁴

Eisenhower's willingness to help the Democrats pass legislation they themselves had opposed during his presidency was a notable example of his determination to put the country first, rather than his political party.

Eisenhower's civil rights record was a classic tale of being first. Emotions were high, as expectations and impatience grew. By the end of Eisenhower's second term many African Americans who had benefited from his efforts were restless and increasingly angry. They were not ready to hear that any level of "patience" might be required. Eisenhower had used this word, but for many it was frustrating to hear, even if it was not meant to be patronizing.

Perhaps Ike's critics thought they knew his thinking—but they certainly did not know his heart. He truly believed that actions always speak louder than words—as the wooden motto on his desk said: "Gently in Manner, Strongly in Deed."

"Although [such a] stance damaged his reputation for civil rights leadership," the historian David Nichols has written, "Eisenhower did not abandon his pledge that he not 'claim political credit for a simple matter of American justice.'"⁵⁵

As Eisenhower later recalled: "The Administration had steered a difficult course between extremist firebrands and extremist die-hards. This was due to conviction, not politics."⁵⁶

It was also in keeping with Eisenhower's overall objectives—to build a platform on which the civil rights revolution could be built. Eight years would never be enough time to bring about a change of heart in the minds of millions—but by adopting such a strategy and putting in place people, such as the critical step of appointing enlightened federal judges who'd be there long after he was gone, he set the stage for civil rights progress in the years to come.⁵⁷

"Eisenhower and the chief justice he appointed [Earl Warren] were men whose career accomplishments were anchored in relentless courage . . . the modern civil rights movement was launched," noted Bill Coleman, who had served on the legal defense fund of the NAACP.⁵⁸

But perhaps most meaningful to Eisenhower was a message he received in October 1962 from the president of Harvard University, Dr. Nathan M. Pusey, notifying the former president that Harvard's first African American professor, Dr. William Hinton,

who died in 1959, left all of his life savings—\$75,000—to the university to establish a Dwight D. Eisenhower Scholarship Fund for graduate students at Harvard. The gift was made on the condition that it be done to recognize the progress toward equal opportunities that began in the Eisenhower administration.

Ike wrote Dr. Pusey to thank him and told the Harvard president that he could "not recall having been given a personal distinction that had touched me more deeply."⁵⁹