

## Massive Resistance

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In the wake of the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954), white Southerners launched a coordinated campaign of Massive Resistance to prevent school desegregation in the South. Spearheaded by U.S. Senator Harry F. Byrd of Virginia, the Massive Resistance movement utilized legal and political measures to halt integration. As part of the movement, state legislators enacted interposition resolutions, pupil placement acts, and school-closing measures that enabled the South to defy the Supreme Court's ruling for half a decade. In the end, however, a broad array of forces united to defeat Massive Resistance and the movement collapsed by early 1960.

The Southern campaign against *Brown v. Board of Education* began in May 1954, as soon as the decision was announced. Senator James Eastland of Mississippi, an outspoken segregationist, warned that the white South would "not abide by nor obey" the *Brown* decision. Governor Herman Talmadge of Georgia agreed. He complained that the Supreme Court's ruling had "blatantly ignored all law and precedent," reducing the "Constitution to a mere scrap of paper." Senator Harry Byrd, the former Governor of Virginia and powerful political boss of the "Byrd Machine," shared these feelings. He condemned the Supreme Court's "sweeping" school desegregation order and warned that racial mixing in the schools would result in "implications and dangers of the greatest consequence."

Many, if not most, Southern whites agreed with Byrd. They viewed segregation as a traditional cornerstone of race relations, and few wanted any changes to the racial status quo in the schools. Nevertheless, Southern whites were far from unified. Regional variations across the South, disparities in education and income levels, and differences in the ethnic makeup of local communities meant that Southern whites remained quite distinctive. For example, some whites embraced violence and mob politics as a way to intimidate African Americans and "keep them in their place." Others repudiated violence, joined White Citizens' Councils, and employed economic and legal means to buttress white supremacy. Still other groups rejected both of these opinions, choosing instead to defer to the Supreme Court's decisions on constitutional matters such as desegregation and civil rights.

The difficult task of organizing the Southern white populace for opposition to the *Brown* decision fell to the region's politicians. As Harry Byrd and his allies struggled to unite Southern whites behind the Massive Resistance campaign, they hit upon the writings of James J. Kilpatrick, the Editor of the Editorial page at the *Richmond News Leader*. In a series of articles published in January 1956, Kilpatrick argued that the *Brown* decision represented a federal violation of states' rights. Drawing on a traditional Southern argument originally presented by James Madison, Kilpatrick held that a state could "interpose" itself between its people and the federal government, in the event that the federal government exceeded its constitutional powers. Although this argument was ultimately rejected by Madison himself, Kilpatrick found it a compelling way to challenge the federal government's school desegregation order.

The interposition doctrine gained widespread support in Virginia and around the South. On February 1, 1956, the Virginia General Assembly passed an "Interposition Resolution," pledging to "resist by every means available the federal government's encroachment upon Virginia's sovereign powers" over state education. A month later, on March 12, 1956, 101 of the South's 128 congressional members signed the Southern Manifesto. It was a brazen document that denounced the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, calling it an "unwarranted exercise of power." Although the authors of the Manifesto

did not explicitly endorse interposition, they pledged to “use all lawful means” to “bring about a reversal” of the *Brown* decision.

The Southern Manifesto unified the white South in a way that few other documents could have. On one level, it provided emotional support to local school board and government officials who actively opposed school desegregation. On another, broader level, the Manifesto lent a veneer of social legitimacy to the Massive Resistance movement by providing it with a link to dozens of national political figures who opposed desegregation. Finally, on a historical level, the Manifesto invoked a common Southern argument used since the antebellum period; namely that the South was a distinct region that could only settle its unique racial problems without outside pressure.

Inspired by the Southern Manifesto, six southern states passed interposition resolutions in April 1956. The Alabama, Mississippi, Georgia, and Florida state legislatures actually declared the *Brown* decision null and void. The Southern states were not simply posturing, either; each state legislature also pursued pragmatic tactics to avoid school desegregation. One such method was the passage of pupil placement acts, which required African American students to complete applications, tests, and in some cases personal interviews before their request for transfer to a white school would be considered by the state. Another legislative tactic pursued in a handful of states, empowered the Governor to close public schools should the federal courts require that they desegregate. This tactic was used at the height of Massive Resistance, when Arkansas Governor Orval Faubus and Virginia Governor J. Lindsay Almond Jr. closed public schools in a last ditch effort to prevent desegregation.

The Massive Resistance campaign failed to halt school desegregation, however, because a wide array of forces united to strike it down. The National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) challenged pupil placement laws; white parents contested school-closing orders; and the federal courts ruled that Massive Resistance statutes were unconstitutional. By 1960, white segregationists had abandoned Massive Resistance and adopted other forms of passive resistance, including token integration and programs of school choice.