

FLORIDA ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY

US SINCE 1945 BOOK REVIEW: 1945 - 1963

AN ASSIGNMENT SUBMITTED TO

DR. FEINMAN

DEPARTMENT OF HISTORY

BY

DAVID GLAUBER

DAVIE, FL

17 SEPTEMBER 2003

Book Review

Patterson, James T. *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its*

Troubled Legacy. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001. 285 Pages.

“Our Constitution is color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among its citizens.” This quote, by John Marshall Harlan, the lone dissenter in the infamous 1896 Plessy v. Ferguson case, which started the precedent that public facilities could be separate in entity, as long as the conditions of those facilities were equal started a trend whose very foundation would not be rocked until the May 17, 1954 unanimous vote by the Supreme Court, under the leadership of Earl Warren, to finally declare that separate, but equal was impossible inside public schools. Unfortunately, Warren did not include Harlan’s line in his decision and only implied it. But nonetheless, Southerners, to a large extent would not accept the decision that had been handed down from the High Court and were intent on making sure that the new social revolution, which the Court intended to impose on America could not be imposed if the people of the South banded together. James T. Patterson in his book, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy* explains in his narrative that the decision of the Supreme Court in voting to desegregate public schools, helped to progress the advancement of black rights in America, believing that the obstacles were society’s ways of coping with social change. Patterson’s strongest claim is that social change takes time and that while the Supreme Court may interpret and rule on whether the laws which govern the citizens of the United States are constitutional or not, it cannot change overnight the views of those which it helps to govern.

Desegregation of public schools, the center of the controversy, is not what many black families had desired for their children. They did not wish for their children to grow up in a hostile environment, where they were not wanted. Probably, there were no more blacks that wanted to integrate with whites, as there were whites that wanted to intermingle with blacks. As parents, all that they desired for their black children were schools that were equally funded and had the same facilities as white schools, so that their children could grow up in life and truly have the potential to fulfill the “American Dream.” Education was believed to be the key to fulfilling that Dream. However, whites in the South, which included the senator from Mississippi, James Eastland, did not believe that blacks were entitled to live that Dream. He viewed the white race as being “superior” and the black race as being “inferior.” For him and millions of southerners, it was as simple as that. Patterson explains that desegregation was sought as a last resort and after attorney Thurgood Marshall had already won victories in *Sweatt v. Painter*, which allowed Herman Sweatt to integrate into the University of Texas Law School, and in *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents for Higher Education*, which granted George McLaurin the right to attend the Graduate School at the University of Oklahoma. Marshall, in desiring to be a black activist, but still knowing his bounds, decided hesitantly to push for desegregation in public schools at large because there was now precedence. He realized, as well, fighting every school in court individually had the potential to bankrupt his Legal Defense Fund

Many whites in the South who resisted change before and after the *Brown* decision resorted to many underhanded tactics to put fear into the hearts of blacks who dared to challenge the hierarchy in America. Patterson devoted the largest chapter in his

book to discuss the very incessant retaliation of whites, in dealing with rebel blacks. Many whites preached that blacks would stain the purity of their race by interrelating with white women. Segregationists in the South to demonstrate their anger and hatred of blacks used tactics that would have made Adolph Hitler, who had also attempted to create a pure and superior race, proud. Blacks who protested or were involved in suits of discriminatory practices were fired from their jobs, denied credit, and told to pay debts, with threats that they would have their houses foreclosed on if they did not pay. On the truly sad side of the story, many blacks did not have to worry about paying for their houses, as vengeful and hateful whites, of which the Ku Klux Klan terrorist organization was a part of made sure to burn down the houses and damage the cars of anyone who tried to bring about change. Many blacks as well that were introduced as “tokens” into white schools were discriminated against and pressured into leaving the school that the *Brown* case claimed that they had a right to attend. Basically, blacks were sentenced to cease to exist in society if they dared to try and mix with whites. Additionally, in following with Cold War propaganda, a shadow was cast over these so-called troublemakers as potentially being connected with the Communist Party.

But still, blacks would start the ball rolling with a new mindset after *Brown v. Board of Education*. On December 1, 1955, Rosa Parks undertook in a courageous act of refusing to move to the back of the public bus in Montgomery, Alabama. She was subsequently arrested, an act, which infuriated blacks, but also led to black action, as opposed to litigation, which had been the specialty of Thurgood Marshall. Martin Luther King Jr., holding the honor of Rosa Parks and blacks everywhere in his hand, led the Montgomery Bus Boycott, which led to the integration of public buses after a year’s time.

As Patterson explains in his book, the movement towards achieving civil rights was catapulted by the decision in *Brown*, even though *Brown* in itself was not the succeeding factor.

In what is perhaps the most surprising and puzzling irony is that President Dwight D. Eisenhower, who had fought, as a General, against the very barbaric nature of Adolph Hitler's Nazi Germany because he was a threat to the free world, did nothing to help combat similar acts of discrimination and treatment at home. As Roy Wilkins, the executive secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People concluded, "if [Eisenhower] had fought World War II the way he fought for civil rights, we would all be speaking German today." The author, James T. Patterson believes that the South had trouble in accepting integration because Eisenhower himself did not believe in it. Patterson believes that if "Ike" as the President had supported the Supreme Court decision, less turmoil and reluctance to accept it would have ensued. Eisenhower shifted responsibility instead to local officials and would only intervene on one occasion in Little Rock, Arkansas, much to the disgust of segregationists and to the bitter disappointment of integrationists who wished that he would do more. In Arkansas, Ike federalized the National Guard to allow a token number of black students to integrate into Central High School in the state's capital. Ike also tried to protect his reputation by only signing two rudimentary pieces of Civil Rights legislation.

Under President Kennedy, not much was done to advance the Civil Rights movement, as Kennedy was afraid to stir up trouble. President Lyndon Johnson, who is responsible for the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and Voting Rights Act of 1965, is the man who really helped to advance the intent of *Brown v. Board of Education*.

Richard Nixon, as President signed affirmative action into law, but, after Conservatives in the Burger Court of the Seventies started interpreting laws, the color-blind view of Harlan, which was implied by Warren had come full circle and was starting to be used against blacks. But in a surprise observation, it was noted that blacks in integrated schools of today do not show better testing results than other blacks in schools which are predominantly black. Perhaps this is due to an improvement in black education, or a devaluation of the value of education in white households? But perhaps as Patterson suggests is that the races of the same social status have become far more equal, but the problem with equality today is that students from a higher social class, white or black, attend better schools and thus the increased amount of money that their families contribute to education is comparably higher than in poorer families, giving them a better chance to succeed in society.

The book that James T. Patterson, a Professor of History at Brown University, has written is an invaluable contribution to the understanding of Civil Rights in America today. His narrative, a thoroughly analytical study, would be a great read for any American who desires to get a better understanding of race relations since the *Brown* case. This book, as well, would have great appeal to history scholars, alike, offering a refreshing look into the scope of the events, positive and negative, which have impacted race relations and thus the history of the United States. Patterson contends that while *Brown* in itself never had the ability to change the racist views of Southerners in the United States, it started a change that made people realize that things were going to be different, sooner or later. As Tennessee Williams wrote in the *Glass Menagerie*, “the greatest difference between two places is time...” The time today is more accepting and

less worried about skin color than it was in 1954 when *Brown* was handed down. People today are more willing “to judge a person, not based upon the color of their skin, but on the content of their character,” as Martin Luther King Jr. had asked for in his famous 1963 March on Washington speech.

Patterson includes many anecdotal personal accounts of discrimination, which makes the reading very fascinating. His book seemingly includes as sources, just about every book on Civil Rights that has been written. As well, he also makes use of papers, like the New York Times, USA Today, and the Boston Globe, along with magazines, like the Atlantic Monthly and Newsweek. Not to mention that he has researched the records of the Supreme Court decisions. While he may have used an extensive amount of secondary sources, the basic intent of this study is not necessarily to provide new information, but to put it into a new perspective. Patterson has really done his homework for this book and the end result shows. To facilitate the understanding of his topic, he also includes an appendix in the book with many charts and figures. Furthermore, there are selected pictures, which are appropriately placed throughout the book to give the reader a better visual understanding of different key events. Finally, he includes a Bibliographical Essay for persons, most likely scholars, who are interested in pursuing the topic further. If you have sixteen dollars and ninety-five cents, this two hundred and eighty-five page book is well worth the money.