

The 1957 Central High crisis, as Governor Faubus saw it

In a 1991 booklet called The Faubus Years, former Arkansas governor Orval E. Faubus offered this explanation and defense of his actions in the 1957 Central High School integration crisis:

Following my election in 1954, I was inaugurated as governor on January 11, 1955. The U.S. Supreme Court decision nullifying the separate but equal doctrine in the public schools was handed down on May 17, 1954. During my first term some public schools proceeded with integration. These included Fayetteville, Bentonville, Charleston, Hot Springs, Fort Smith and Hoxie. Opposition developed at Hoxie, the federal authorities intervened and the district was torn apart by the conflict. Another district, Sheridan in Grant County, made an early announcement that it would integrate the schools. The opposition was so intense that the decision was rescinded. Still, by 1957 Arkansas had more integrated public schools than 11 other states combined which had a comparable problem with the change from the separate but equal school system. ...

In Little Rock a small band of white integrationists began the discussion of a plan to integrate Central High School. ... The plan was never clear as to how many students, who they were and from whence they came. Those who sought to gain the information were put off with indefinite answers. The sponsors always claimed the plan would have only a limited number of black students. It was widely discussed day after day for months by radio, television and the print media, and from pulpits, schools and all manner of meetings.

Finally, it began to be widely disseminated that the integration of Central High School would set the pattern and the example for all the state and for all the South. Editorials to that effect appeared in a number of newspapers.

Those who opposed integration of the schools by court order and by compulsion, which was the great majority in Arkansas, became concerned. They thought, "If the Central High School case is to set an example that affects us, then we better be concerned about the outcome."

Thus the anti-integration meetings began. There were rallies with great attendance in various places with prominent people as speakers. Out-of-state speakers were brought in and the interest in Central High School, a local school, spread beyond the state borders.

The small band of white integrationists, who hoped to become overnight celebrities, while denying their integrationist sentiments, saw their hopes and plans jeopardized by the rising tide of opposition. They redoubled their efforts and became more determined.

Thus, Central School in Little Rock became a focal point of contest. It became a key point of conflict, not just for the city, not just for the state, but for a wider field including the nation.

I have always felt, and still firmly believe, that if the school authorities in Little Rock had handled the affair quietly, the intense conflict over integration at Central High would never have developed. If the school authorities had said, "This is our own local problem. We'll handle it the best we can based on our local conditions. This does not concern any other school. Just us." If they had said that and the media had followed that lead, there would have been no Central High School Crisis as we now know it.

There were other forces at work, other unusual factors in the Central High School situation.

The little band of white integrationists had seen themselves as instant celebrities, their names became household words. They were to receive credit and praise for a plan and an accomplishment that had been achieved by no others. In their impractical dreams and misguided views they saw their acclaim in the publicity, for which they had already arranged, about to be swept away in the rising tide of opposition. They became more desperate in their demands for help from higher authority.

I could not then, nor could I in the years that have followed, detect any such attitude in the black leaders who were involved in the controversy. I give them full credit for sincerity in their efforts, for the faith that their cause was just, and for honest hope that their goals would be achieved. In later years some black leaders have emerged who might be regarded as extremists, but no such black leaders were apparent then.

Another factor was the oft expressed thought that Little Rock was deliberately chosen as the place to bring about court-ordered integration in the South. There is now some concrete evidence to bolster that thought.

Osro Cobb, a native of Arkansas, a longtime resident of Little Rock and a prominent Republican leader in the state, was the U.S. Attorney for the Eastern District of Arkansas. In that position he represented the federal authorities during the so-called Central High School Crisis. Since that time, Mr. Cobb has written a book entitled "Osro Cobb of Arkansas" in which he discusses his role in the controversy.

In Chapter 21, page 175 of his book, Mr. Cobb writes:

"I operated from the eye of the hurricane that enveloped the city, representing the federal government as chief law enforcement officer with the responsibility of collaborating with the Justice Department to cope with the situation.

"Thurgood Marshall, who later became a justice of the U.S. Supreme Court, participated in some of the court hearings regarding Central High School. During a recess in one of the hearings, he volunteered the information to me that Little Rock Central High School had been picked as a target for testing integration because the Little Rock community had exhibited a remarkable tolerance in race relations."

At the time of the Little Rock crisis, Thurgood Marshall was the chief counsel for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. Evidently Little Rock was chosen in the

highest circles of some national organizations.

Another major factor, perhaps the most important, was the attitude of the national Republican administration in Washington, which was then quarterbacked by Attorney General Herbert Brownell. It is conceded by almost everyone, if not all, that Brownell was calling the plays for the national administration in the Little Rock Central High School Crisis.

On June 6, 1990, at a symposium on civil rights issues held at the Dwight D. Eisenhower Library in Abilene, Kansas, in which both Brownell and I participated, the former attorney general in a speech to the symposium made the following statement:

"Over a period of months we in the Justice Department had the growing realization that a clash of historic importance between the president, who was required by the Constitution to enforce the law of the land, and political leaders in the South, was inevitable.

"We had engaged in 'contingency planning' so we would not be caught unprepared. Thus, by the time the groups from White Citizens Councils from various parts of the South converged on Little Rock, Arkansas, we had completed our studies ..."

At another point in his speech Brownell, in speaking of sending federal troops to Little Rock, said: "He (the president) ordered the 101st Airborne Division, which he knew had crowd-control experience, to go to Little Rock."

The Brownell statement tends to confirm the reports we had from soldiers in the 101st Division that they had been training for several days at their home base of Fort Campbell, Ky., in preparation for their dispatch to Little Rock.

Now it becomes clear why the Central High School Crisis occurred. Because of the widespread publicity of a "plan" to integrate the school and make it an example for all the state and the South, it became a focal point of contest. Even Brownell in his speech at Abilene, and Mr. Cobb in his book, speak of gathering forces at Little Rock.

It was now apparent that Little Rock was deliberately chosen for integration and a confrontation if necessary. It is clear that more than the local integration leaders were involved in the decision.

And now it is clear that the federal authorities did not want a quiet peaceful solution to the Central High problem. Brownell wanted "a clash of historic importance" and he wanted it in Little Rock, the capital of a state that had only eight electoral votes, which were always cast in the Democratic column.

Now it is clear why Brownell did not respond to my phone calls from Little Rock seeking information and a way to avoid violence. Now it is clear why Congressman Brooks Hays, a man of infinite goodwill, and I, had our efforts for an amicable settlement torpedoed by the attorney general at the Newport conference when we had made genuine progress with the president.

In this situation with the opposing forces gathering at Little Rock, with no assistance available from federal authority to prevent disorder, or restore order if violence occurred, I placed a small force of National Guardsmen on duty to preserve the peace. They were to be assisted by the state police.

Although crowds gathered, everything was peaceful with the few Guardsmen in control. In the course of events a federal judge, at the request of the Justice Department (Brownell), ordered me to remove the National Guard. I promptly complied with the order. The next school day there was disorder and the president sent 1,100 troops of the 101st Airborne Division to Little Rock and placed 10,000 federalized National Guardsmen on duty. Brownell had what he had planned, "a clash of historic importance."

As the opposing forces were gathering before school began, I conferred with my counsel, W. J. Smith. He advised me to let violence erupt and then call out the National Guard.

I could not wait for violence because the evidence I had from the state police and others with whom I conferred, had convinced me that an incident similar to the one that later occurred at the University of Mississippi would occur at Central High School. I could have been blamed for any blood that was shed because of my failure to take preventive measures. It could have been said that I had blood on my hands, so to speak. I had served with a front-line infantry division in all five major campaigns on the continent of Europe in WWII and participated in the major battles of Normandy, Mortain and the Battle of the Bulge and I knew something about bloodshed. This I could not permit when it was in my power to see that it did not happen. I told my counsel that I had a duty to perform and I would not shirk from it, even though my actions would place me at a disadvantage in the controversy.

I am fully convinced that my handling of the situation, and my advice to the people once the school and the city were occupied by the federal troops, helped to prevent violence and disorder.

School was conducted the entire year of 1957-58 with federal soldiers on the school grounds and in the rooms and hallways of the Central building. Then the people of the Little Rock district voted to close the senior high schools rather than submit to another year of classes under the control of federal troops or U.S. marshals. The senior high schools only remained closed for a year. All other schools operated normally. ... Classes were resumed in all Little Rock schools in the school year 1959-60.

In all that two-year period, there was no property damage, no one was injured sufficiently to be hospitalized and no one was killed. Contrast that record with the racial riots that followed in more than 200 American cities, none of them in Arkansas, in which many lives were lost, thousands were injured and property damage ranged into the millions of dollars, and Little Rock and Arkansas came out remarkably well.

Source: Arkansas Online, Little Rock 1957.