

Supreme court case powell v. alabama essay sample



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On March 25, 1931, seven young white men entered a railroad stationmaster's office in northern Alabama. They claimed that while they were riding the rails, a " bunch of Negroes" picked a fight with them and threw them off the train. The stationmaster phoned ahead to the next station, near Scottsboro, Alabama. A Scottsboro deputy sheriff made deputies of every man in town with a gun. When the train stopped, the posse (group of people legally authorized keep the peace) rounded up nine young black men and two young white women. The women, Ruby Bates and Victoria Price, were dressed in men's caps and overalls.

The deputy sheriff tied the black youths together and started questioning them. All of them were from other states. Five of them were from Georgia. Twenty-year-old Charlie Weems was the oldest. Clarence Norris was nineteen. Ozie Powell was sixteen. Olin Montgomery, seventeen, was blind in one eye and had only 10 percent of his vision in the other eye. Willie Roberson, seventeen, suffered from the sexually-transmitted diseases syphilis and gonorrhea, which made him walk with a cane. The other four boys were from Chattanooga, Tennessee. Haywood Patterson and Andy Wright were nineteen. Eugene Williams was thirteen. Wright's brother, Roy, was twelve. None of them could read.

As the deputy sheriff loaded his prisoners onto an open truck, one of the women, Ruby Bates, spoke up. She told the deputy sheriff that she and her friend had been raped by the nine black youths. In Scottsboro, the sheriff sent the women off to be examined by two doctors. Meanwhile, news of the rape had spread throughout the county. By nightfall, a mob of several hundred people stood before the Scottsboro jail, promising to lynch (hang)

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the prisoners. The sheriff, barricaded inside with twenty-one deputies, called the governor. The governor sent out twenty-five National Guardsmen, but by the time they arrived at the jail, the crowd had given up and drifted away.

Significance:

- The Scottsboro trials gave the American public insight into the prejudices and procedures of Southern courts in their treatment of blacks and other minorities.
- This case was the first time that the United States Supreme Court interpreted the Sixth Amendment of the Constitution and its guaranty to a criminal defendant of “ the Assistance of Counsel for his defense”.

Trials:

- Their trial began on April 6, 1931, with the National Guard keeping a crowd of several thousand people at bay only 100 feet away from the courthouse.
- The boys did not have a proper lawyer; they were being defended by whoever wanted to pick up their case.
- Their defense lawyer had no clue what they were doing and didn't take the trial seriously.
- One of them was a real estate attorney who told the boys to admit to the crime. Since the boys had no clue as to what was going on they listened in hoped of avoiding the electric chair.
- The other was a 70-year-old local attorney with no criminal defense experience
- The verdict was read only two hours after the trial.
- Nonetheless, all of the defendants except twelve-year-old Roy Wright were found guilty and sentenced to die in the electric chair.
- Due to Roy Wright's age, the prosecution had asked for a life sentence for him rather than the death penalty. In spite of this request, seven of the jurors wanted to give Roy the death penalty. The judge was forced to declare a mistrial.

Confessions:

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In the end the two girls admitted to making up the story in order to avoid getting in trouble. Victoria Price was in serious trouble because her friend, Ruby Bates, was a minor. It's a federal crime to take a minor across state lines for the purpose of prostitution because of the Mann Act of 1910.

Racism:

- The jury was all male and all white
- Racism and prejudice seemed to over take the court through out the whole trial.
- Lead to unfair verdicts Supreme Court steps in:
 - . In November, the U. S. Supreme Court ruled that seven of the defendants had been denied due process of law under the Fourteenth Amendment due to the belated and casual treatment of the appointment of their attorneys by Judge Hawkins.
 - The Court noted that until the very morning of trial no lawyer had been named to represent the defendants. The Court concluded that during the most critical time of the trial, from their arraignment to the start of the trial, the defendants were without the aid of any attorney. They were entitled to legal advice, a thorough investigation and most important preparation. The Supreme Court found that it was the duty of the trial court to give the defendants a reasonable time and chance to hire attorneys or to appoint counsel under such circumstances which prevents counsel from giving effective aid in the preparation and trial of the case. This failure of the trial court was a clear denial of their right to due process of law.
 - The U. S. Supreme Court overturned all the convictions under the equal protection clause of the Constitution because the state of Alabama excluded African Americans from all juries at the time

Final Verdicts:

In 1936, Haywood Patterson was tried for the fourth time and convicted again. He was sentenced to 75 years. That same year, Clarence Norris was sentenced to death, Andrew Wright to 99 years, Charles Weems to 75 years, and Ozie Powell pled guilty for assaulting a sheriff and was sentenced to 20 years. Charges against Leroy “ Roy” Wright, Eugene Williams, Olen Montgomery, and Willie Roberson were dropped in 1937. Of all the Scottsboro Boys, Clarence Norris lived the longest. His sentence was reduced in 1938, and he was paroled in 1946. Thirty years later, the Governor of Alabama admitted that the Scottsboro Trials were unfair and Norris was pardoned. He was the only Scottsboro Boy left alive. Conclusion:

It was a sad case in American history where fear and prejudice ruined the lives of these young men. But there are two lights at the end of the tunnel: • 1st the supreme court ruling that guaranteed that every American has the right to Adequate counsel • 2nd the Supreme Court ruling that allowed African Americans and woman into the jury box.