

A battleground of the second civil war the struggle for integration in mississippi...

[Politics](#), [Civil Rights](#)



Approximately 100 years after Union troops settled the issue of slavery, a second Civil War played out in America's courts and on the streets of the America South. In Mississippi, as in Alabama, Georgia and other states where the Civil Rights movement played out, the U. S. Supreme Court's ruling in *Brown vs. the Board of Education* and the ensuing battle over school integration inflamed white folks, who adopted every available tactic to maintain the doctrine of "separate but equal." Black folks responded with incredible courage, implementing strategies that would eventually turn the tide in the battle for civil rights.

Attempts to implement integration throughout Mississippi elicited a widespread campaign of intimidation against black folks that was as far-reaching and destructive as the violence that protesters were met with in Mississippi and other parts of the South. In *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi*, Charles C. Bolton reveals the lengths to which the establishment was willing to go to prevent integration from taking hold in Mississippi. "Two years of widespread harassment of black parents had clearly demonstrated that whites were willing to use threats and sometimes violence..." (Bolton, 159). Those threats went beyond the burning of crosses on lawns, or late-night phone calls. They often resulted in parents of black students losing their homes, their jobs and their credit ratings, indicating that intimidation was a truly community-wide effort. The extent of this intimidation extended to government services, with some black families even losing welfare benefits (Bolton, 152).

The schools themselves were the subject of considerable protests and political maneuvering. In the towns of Dundee and Rosa Fort, white teachers assigned to all-black schools were permitted to resign but were kept on salary for the remainder of the school year. In 1970, white students in Tunica left the town's unitary public school system in protest over integration in favor of church-based schools, which were little more than babysitting facilities (Holton, 168). In previous decades, the state's political leaders had embraced a strategy aimed at improving black schools so that the two races could remain segregated in the event the federal government sought to enforce integration. "Some whites in the state, including a number of political leaders, began to see possible benefits in improving black education. Reform might forestall an increasingly likely legal challenge to the whole notion of separate but equal arrangements..." (Bolton, 32). Additionally, it was believed that upgrading black schools was important if the state was to receive badly needed federal education funding (Bolton, 32).

This flawed strategy gave way to more forceful and direct measures. The White Citizens' Council, formed in 1954, consisted of lawyers, doctors, bankers, merchants, teachers and other white civic leaders from throughout the state. This group's avowed intention was to avoid overt violence (though its members often encouraged and took part in violent intimidation), instead emphasizing economic and legal retribution against black folks and supporters of integration. The council proved effective in slowing the progress of desegregation in Mississippi. Where non-violent tactics failed, the

Citizens' Council and other anti-integration groups, such as the Ku Klux Klan, turned to verbal and physical intimidation and, as was often the case, assault and murder.

The climate for African-American protest in Mississippi had slowly improved during the decades of the 20th century. By the late 1950s, protest was still a dangerous prospect, but black folks responded to local and state-sponsored intimidation with the non-violent tactics that gradually gave integration and the Civil Rights movement moral ascendancy in all parts of the South.

Protest took the form of rallies, marches, sit-ins and boycotts. In 1961, the NAACP tried to turn the tables on the White Citizens' Council by carrying out an economic boycott in Clarksdale. This tactic, which was aimed at allowing black folks access to Clarksdale stores, brought economic pressure to bear on store owners and remained in effect until passage of the Civil Rights Act in 1964.

African-American activists and advocacy groups also made successful use of the judicial system, taking advantage of progress made through the courts on the civil rights front at the federal level. Several early attempts were unsuccessful, but eventually suits filed in Leake, Biloxi and Jackson counties forced Mississippi's first court-ordered desegregation ruling. Initial efforts to speed up the process failed, specifically a suit filed in 1964 to force an expansion of the first-grade-only desegregation ruling. However, by 1965, the one-grade-a-year desegregation plan was stepped up to four grades a year in Benton County. After three African-American students were expelled from Clarksdale High School for demanding an observance of black history,

the local NAACP took the matter to court and received a favorable ruling from a federal judge (Bolton, 208).

Perhaps the most well-known incident from the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi was the Freedom Summer in 1964, during which three activists were murdered. Two of the three killed by members of the Ku Klux Klan were white activists who had come to Mississippi to join with black protesters. The two murdered white students, Andrew Goodman and Michael Schwerner, were among about 1, 000 white folks brought in by the Council of Federated Organization as part of a statewide initiative aimed at registering black voters and mobilizing support among the African-American population. A key component of the group's organizational activities was the establishment of Freedom Schools. These were alternative (and free) schools set up to educate black citizens of all ages on the need for social change and to encourage as many as possible to take part in the Mississippi Civil Rights movement. After the first year, forty-one Freedom Schools throughout Mississippi were instructing approximately 2, 500 students.

The ultimate triumph of integration in Mississippi came at a high price. As in other civil wars, there were martyrs and countless acts of bravery. As it proved, the only way to sweep away the remnants of an oppressive society and win the war over integration was to challenge the very precepts upon which segregation it was based. Despite persistent attempts to maintain the doctrine of separate but equal, black activists and citizens overcame institutionalized resistance and, with the support of the federal government, succeeded in forcing the integration of Mississippi's schools.

Works Cited

Bolton, C. C. *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi*.

Oxford, MS: University of Mississippi Press. 2005.