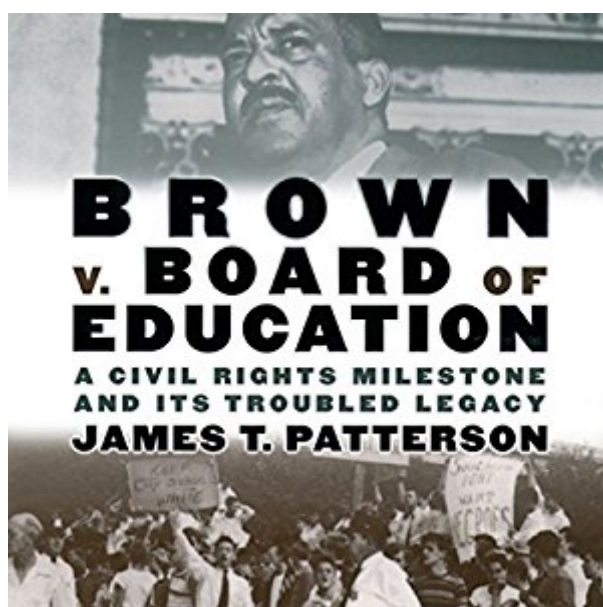


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Brown V. Board Of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone And Its Troubled Legacy: Oxford University Press: Pivotal Moments In US History



Synopsis

Many people were elated when Supreme Court Chief Justice Earl Warren delivered the decision in *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* in May 1954, the ruling that struck down state-sponsored racial segregation in America's public schools. Thurgood Marshall, chief attorney for the black families that launched the litigation, exclaimed later, "I was so happy, I was numb." The novelist Ralph Ellison wrote, "another battle of the Civil War has been won. The rest is up to us and I'm very glad. What a wonderful world of possibilities are unfolded for the children!" Here, in a concise, compelling narrative, Bancroft Prize-winning historian James T. Patterson takes listeners through the dramatic case and its 50-year aftermath. A wide range of characters animates the story, from the little-known African-Americans who dared to challenge Jim Crow with lawsuits; to Thurgood Marshall, who later became a Justice himself; to Earl Warren, who shepherded a fractured Court to a unanimous decision. Others include segregationist politicians; Presidents Eisenhower, Johnson, and Nixon; and controversial Supreme Court justices, such as William Rehnquist and Clarence Thomas. Most Americans still see *Brown* as a triumph - but was it? Patterson shrewdly explores the provocative questions that still swirl around the case. Could the Court - or President Eisenhower - have done more to ensure compliance with *Brown*? Did the decision touch off the modern civil rights movement? How useful are court-ordered busing and affirmative action against racial segregation? To what extent has racial mixing affected the academic achievement of black children? Where, indeed, do we go from here to realize the expectations of Marshall, Ellison, and others in 1954? The Pivotal Moments in American History series seeks to unite the old and the new history, combining the insights and techniques of recent historiography with the power of traditional narrative.

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Customer Reviews

Having grown up during the 1950's I wanted to familiarize myself in regard to civil rights, in particular as it applied to the historic 1954 Supreme Court ruling "Brown vs. the Board of Education." I found that President Eisenhower was not in favor of getting involved in civil rights for African Americans. He is quoted as saying that appointing Earl Warren as Chief Justice to the Supreme Court was the "biggest damn fool mistake I ever made." Roy Wilkins of the NAACP is quoted as saying if Eisenhower fought World War II as he did for civil rights, "We'd all be speaking German today." I was disappointed in Eisenhower's approach to civil rights for African Americans. Ten years after the 1954 Brown ruling, things hadn't changed regarding civil rights. The heroes in the book are those workers who fought in the trenches for civil rights, particularly during the 1960's. Most of them are not remembered, but their contributions remain, nonetheless. President Johnson's greatest legacy remains getting the government behind racial justice. The 1954 Brown ruling hasn't had the effect it may have desired regarding schools, but by the 20th anniversary of Brown, America had been brought kicking and screaming forward for civil rights for African Americans. The book lists a number of cases and studies with their results and I have concluded we don't really know whether integration has improved test scores in schools. Having been a teacher myself for 32 years I do know that children are not bigoted as were some children and adults I knew as a kid. Kids often reflect their parents behavior. This is a book that is definitely worthy of your time. I did find one error in the book. The author said Julius and Ethyl Rosenberg were executed in July of 1953 when actually it was on June 19, 1953.

Much more needs to be written about the Brown v. Board of Education era. Patterson indeed does a good service of describing the "trouble legacy" of Brown. For while school integration and the end to separate but equal laws were a major revolution of sorts in this country, Brown left unresolved significant questions and problems concerning the education of African descended students and other minorities. For example, while Brown focused on legal and structural changes in public education, which led to the desegregation of schools, it did not address issues of integrating school curriculum and preparing teachers and school officials for a multicultural transformation of schooling. It simply assumed that the solution to racism in this society was to provide a way for Blacks to assimilate in the larger White society instead of empowering themselves to respect and

build their own culture and institutions. While Patterson deals with the legal aspects Brown, he too avoids or overlooks the pedagogical and cultural issues that went unaddressed in Brown. Thus, Patterson's work doesn't add significantly anything new to the history of Brown that is not dealt with in J. Harvie Wilkerson's *From Brown to Bakke* or Kluger's *Simple Justice*.

Patterson succeeds in writing a very different book than Kruger's unequalled "Simple Justice." While *Simple Justice* told the story of how *Brown v. Board of Education* came to be, Patterson asks whether *Brown* should have been. After giving a brief history of *Brown* (covering, in summary fashion, much of the ground covered by Kruger), Patterson examines the aftermath of *Brown*. The question Patterson addresses throughout the book is whether *Brown* marked a step forward in civil rights. Patterson successfully debunks the argument that *Brown* was a step backwards. As he says, anyone who thinks that the country was better off before *Brown* had better buy a two way ticket if he wants to go back in time, because he will want to turn right around and come back. Before *Brown*, most black children were educated in tarpaper shacks, by grossly underpaid teachers, with no supplies, and even less respect. Did *Brown* solve all problems? Of course not. As Patterson notes, what *Brown* does do is prove that there are limits to the power of the courts to accomplish social change. However, the Supreme Court did set an unequivocal moral tone, which set the stage for the civil rights movement, which (building on the constitutional foundation built by *Brown*) changed the world we all live in. Has racism ended? No. But no one should expect any Supreme Court decision (or even a series of decisions spanning less than 25 years) to undo the racial history of this country which had taken 400 years to build. The real shame is that beginning in the late 70's, the courts, Congress, and the President have all worked to reverse the moral tone set in *Brown*. Unfortunately, they have succeeded all too well. But one can not fairly blame that on the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown*. A thought provoking book which should be read by anyone who is interested in the history of race relations in the second half of the 20th Century.

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