Categorizing Decisions

Adults, both black and white, made decisions about the crisis in Little Rock. As you read about the various ways teachers, parents, and others in the community responded to events, use colored pencils to underline the choices they made and at least one consequence of that choice. Choose one color for the choice and a second color for the consequences or results of that choice. Then compare and contrast these choices with those you examined on Reproducible 3.17. What similarities do you notice? What differences do you consider most striking?

1. Daisy Bates, the president of the Arkansas NAACP, not only advised the Little Rock Nine but also served as their advocate. After Jefferson Thomas was physically beaten twice within a single week, she made a decision. She writes:

   After talking with Mr. Thomas, I checked my daily records. The boy who attacked Jeff had been repeatedly reported to school authorities for hazing the Negro students.

   At nine o’clock that morning, when Superintendent Blossom arrived at his office, Clarence Laws and I were waiting to see him. We asked him what he intended to do about the continued brutal attacks on the children by the organized gang — attacks that had been reported many times. He said he was not aware of a large number of repeaters. We showed him the record of the pupils who had taken part in various attacks. As he looked at the long list of names and the repeated brutalities against the nine children, his expression lost some of its hardness and his face seemed to soften. Momentarily there was no sign of the defiant attitude I had observed in him whenever anyone dared criticize him or his desegregation plan. Then as he straightened his shoulders, I said, “If you are really interested in clearing up this trouble, you should expel some of these repeated troublemakers.”

   He looked at me and blurted, “You can’t tell me how to run my school.”

   “No, I can’t,” I retorted, “but it’s up to you — not the Army — to maintain discipline inside the school. By not doing so, you are subjecting the children to physical torture that you will have to live with the rest of your life.” As we left his office, I realized that we would have to seek help from some other source.*

2. Daisy Bates writes:
   One day Gloria [Ray] started on her way down from the third floor of Central High
   School. She had taken only a few steps down the flight of steel steps when she heard
   a woman’s scream from behind her. Gloria quickly connected the scream with some
   impending danger to herself. And she was right.
   A boy had silently been following her down the stairway. He was about to lunge
   at her to push her down the flight of stairs. The scream had alerted Gloria to the
   attack from behind.…
   Many of the teachers — particularly the younger ones — did everything within
   their power to protect the nine students. Some went out of their way to help the
   students catch up with work they had missed when they were barred from entering
   the school in the first weeks of the term. Concerned over the lack of protection
   given the Negro students within the school, the teachers took it upon themselves to
   oversee the hallways in between class breaks. In this way they attempted to discourage
   the segregationist students from torturing the Negro children.
   One of the teachers had been standing in the doorway of her classroom looking
   down the stairway. It was she who had witnessed the attack on Gloria and had
   screamed the alert.*

3. Ann Tompson’s parents made a decision soon after the school board announced plans to
   integrate Central High School. She recalls:
   My family were just ordinary, salt-of-the earth people. My dad was a hardworking
   man who lived day-by-day, week-by-week. Although we were very poor, I didn’t really
   know it. I felt as though I was the luckiest person in the world. Our life was very
   typical. Every day, I went off to school, my dad went off to work, and my mom
   worked hard at home. My parents’ main concerns were making a living and raising
   their family.
   Segregation was simply the way of life; we never knew anything else. As it was in
   most southern cities, the blacks had their part of town, and the whites had their
   part. I can’t remember ever going into a restaurant and seeing blacks there. I never
   really thought about it. My parents were wonderful people, but they were also a
   product of their society. We were all taught that you just don’t mix. We were very
   ignorant about segregation and integration. It wasn’t even an issue until we found
   out that they were going to integrate Little Rock Central High.

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I was a fifteen-year-old tenth grader when they made the announcement. At first, many of the parents refused to believe that it was actually going to happen. Some parents formed groups and committees to try and stop it, but my parents didn’t really take part in any of that. It’s not that they weren’t interested; they just didn’t know what to do or where to go. Ultimately, they just decided that their child was not going to an integrated school, and that was that. I don’t think it was really out of hate for anyone. I think it was out of ignorance and fear of the unknown. “What would this lead to?” “What would be next?” That was the mind-set; people just didn’t know what to expect. And we couldn’t understand why they would ever want to leave their black school and come to Central in the first place.*

4. Daisy Bates writes:

When Governor Faubus was forced by the Federal Court to withdraw the Arkansas national guardsmen and to stop interfering with integration at Central High, [Eugene] Smith was Assistant Chief of Police. When school authorities wondered how they could protect the Negro students, Smith came to their aid. “Just give me the men and I will protect the children,” he said.

When I was told to have the students assemble at my house by 8:15 a.m. on September 23, I asked who would protect the students. The reply was: “Smith, of course.”

At 6 a.m. the next morning, facing a mob of one thousand, Smith stood with one hundred of the department’s best men, blockading the streets to Central — a school he and his children had attended. Later, when the mob learned that the Negro students had gone inside the school, it surged against the police lines, ignoring Gene Smith’s command to halt. One of the mob’s leaders ran up to Smith and Smith knocked him to the pavement. Many were arrested and sent to jail.

… But when reporters questioned Smith on how he stood on the issue of integration, he replied, “That’s out of my province. Our function is to do everything we can to protect life and property and preserve the public peace. And that’s what we do every day.”**

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5. Daisy Bates writes:

Mr. [Dunbar] Ogden was a Southerner whose roots lay deep in the old plantation tradition: his heritage was linked to the slave-owning South. His great-grandfather, David Hunt, was said to have owned more slaves than any other man in Mississippi — and probably the South…. His father held a high ministerial post in the Presbyterian Church.…

The first time Mr. Ogden attracted my attention was when he was elected President of the Greater Little Rock Interracial Interdenominational Ministerial Alliance in June, 1957. It was this that led me to telephone and ask him to walk with the students to Central High School.

When I talked to him that night, he was momentarily hesitant. “If it’s God’s will, I’ll be there.” Later he admitted that much of his hesitancy was due to simple fear. But much in his background and tradition also caused him to wonder and hesitate. “I was still thinking in terms of ‘separate but equal,’ he explained. “I was incapable of a real relationship with Negro friends because I was still condescending in my attitude.”

The next morning, when the children assembled to go to school, Mr. Ogden was there to walk with them. With him was his son David. The father was pleased and proud that his son had accompanied him. “When I left the house this morning,” he told me, “I wasn’t sure how many would be here. I phoned all the ministers that I thought might come, but there was doubt in their voices. ‘Isn’t this a bit dramatic?’ ‘Is this the responsibility of the ministry?’ In fact, more than one replied, ‘I’m not sure that this is the will of God.’ But as I was getting into the car, David came out of the house and said, ‘Dad, I’ll go with you. You may need a bodyguard.’”

Only three ministers had come, and Mr. Ogden said somewhat apologetically, “I’m very discouraged that I wasn’t able to get more, but frankly, I had to pray for courage myself. All I could think of was a pop bottle hitting me on the back of the head.”

He never suspected that the white citizens of Little Rock would turn on him. He was, after all, a minister and a Southerner. But that day, when he saw the stored-up hate in the mob and their contorted faces, when he heard them screaming not only for the blood of the nine Negro children but for his and all connected with him, he realized how vicious was the system under which he had lived all his life. “I became aware of where segregation led. I had to make a decision,” he told me later.…

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To the segregationists, Mr. Ogden had become a traitor…. Members of his church stopped attending services, stopped giving financial support, and finally forced him to resign….

The night before Mr. and Mrs. Ogden left Little Rock … they came to see me…. “I’m sorry I got you into this,” I said.

He was silent for a moment. Then he said, “Don’t feel sorry. If I had to do it all over again, I would. I believe that I’m a better Christian for having been privileged to participate in such a worthy cause.”

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