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Q. Are you going to visit Norway, Mr. President?

The President. I hope I'll be able to go back. I went to Norway once when I was a young man. I loved it. I'd love to be able to go back someday; one of the best trips I ever made in my life.

NOTE: The exchange began at 10:07 a.m. in the Oval Office at the White House. A tape was not available for verification of the content of this exchange.

Question-and-Answer Session on *Brown* v. *Board of Education* in Beltsville, Maryland

May 17, 1994

The President. Good morning. Do you know why we're here? Why are we here, somebody?

Q. To talk about the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* decision and how it affects us today.

The President. That's right, we are. What was the ruling in *Brown* v. *Board of Education*? What did the Supreme Court say?

Q. That ''separate but equal'' was unjust and unconstitutional.

The President. And what were the facts in the case? What gave rise to the case? What was the case about?

Q. Unsegregating schools in the South.

The President. In the South and in Topeka, Kansas. It was about a little schoolgirl named Linda Brown whose parents thought she should not be sent to a segregated school. The United States Supreme Court made that decision in 1954, 40 years ago today. Before that, the Supreme Court had ruled that ''separate but equal'' was constitutional, right? And when the Supreme Court makes a ruling like that, it's the law of the land until they change their minds.

During the Civil War, President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation freeing the slaves, in 1863 in the White House, on the same floor that I sleep every night, in what is now the Lincoln Bedroom—the room where your father spent the night last night, right? Secretary Riley's 93-year-old father spent the night last night in the room where President Lincoln signed the Emancipation Proclamation, freeing the slaves.

Secretary Riley. He said he heard Lincoln all night long. [*Laughter*]

The President. Then, after the Civil War was over, the 14th amendment to our Constitution was adopted, which declared that everybody had to be equal under the law. But there was still a lot of racial prejudice in the country and a lot of discrimination. And a few years after that, the Supreme Court decided a case called *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*. Have you studied that? And the problem with *Plessy* v. *Ferguson* was that blacks and whites had to sit in a different place on the train, and the 14th amendment said that nobody could be discriminated against under the law. And by law, they were required to sit in a different place on the train. So what did the Supreme Court say in *Plessy* v. *Ferguson*?

Yes?

Q. That trains or whatever were equal, and they could be separate.

The President. That's right. If the facilities were equal, they could be separate without violating the 14th amendment, right? So the *Brown* decision overruled that. Now, why did they overrule that? What was the argument? Why was ''separate but equal''—what's the matter with that?

Go ahead.

Q. Well, people were still being——

The President. So they——

Q. [*Inaudible*]

The President. One argument was that even though they were supposed to be separate but equal, they weren't really. Right? Okay, what else? What else is wrong with ''separate but equal''?

Q. That if they are separated, they wouldn't be equal.

The President. That's the heart of it. Because they were separated, right, they wouldn't be equal. That's very important. The argument was that if they were separated, the act of separating people by race under the law itself was a message of inequality.

Do you believe that? Do you believe that? Nearly everybody believes that now, right?

You look around this room today. This is America: people from all different racial and

ethnic groups. We have one county in America, maybe more than one but at least one, Los Angeles County, that now has people from 150 different racial and ethnic groups. And someday, if the population trends continue, the number of nonwhites in America will be greater than the number of whites, so that everybody will be ultimately protected by a requirement that no one can be discriminated against by the law based on their race.

But the essence of *Brown* was two things, and you guys got them. One is, well, they're not really always equal, these separate facilities. The other is, the act of separating people by their race under the law is itself an act of inequality.

Now, since then, we've had all kinds of problems and challenges with the aftermath of the *Brown* decision. You know, what do you do when people's living patterns are separate? That's how busing got into the whole issue of how to integrate the schools. And what do you do when people in one place are a lot poorer than people in another place? And how do you deal with the practical problem—there are all kinds of practical problems. Many of them have been solved more satisfactorily in places like in magnet schools, where people come as a matter of choice. And they come together and you try to get different kinds of people, both different races and different incomes.

So I wouldn't—by no means have all the problems that were dealt with in the *Brown* decision, the problems of racial inequality and income inequality and the history of discrimination, those problems have not all been overcome. And today we have some new problems, at least problems that are more severe. There's more violence. The families and communities are under greater stress. There are a lot of problems that you face that people our age 40 years ago didn't face. We know that.

But the number one lesson I want to leave with you is that this is a very much better country because of that *Brown* decision, and it is a very different country because of the *Brown* decision. And the three people who are here with me today each have a different insight on that.

But I want you to think about how different the country might have been. We're in the basketball playoffs now, so I'm thinking about this is the first one in a long time where Michael Jordan hasn't played. Michael Jordan played at the University of North Carolina: Would he have been able to play there, would he have even gone there if there had been no *Brown* decision? We're not sure.

So I want to introduce these three people, each in their own turn, and ask them to say something. First, I'd like to start with Thurgood Marshall, Jr. His father argued the *Brown* decision and many other decisions before the Supreme Court and became the first African-American Justice on the Supreme Court. He now works in the White House on the staff of Vice President Gore. And I'd like to introduce him and have him say a few words.

Mr. Marshall.

[*At this point, Mr. Marshall made brief remarks on the importance of the case and the responsibility of society and all individuals to advance the spirit of the case.*]

The President. I'm going to give you a chance to ask them questions, too. But I want all of them to talk first.

One of the big issues that was inevitably a part of the *Brown* decision was, okay, the Supreme Court says you can't have any "separate but equal" school districts anymore. They're unconstitutional. Well, it's one thing for a court to issue an order and another thing for millions of people to change their lives, right?

I mean, how are you going to integrate all these schools? And what happens to the teachers, and what happens to the principals? And how do the kids get to new schools? And do the white kids go to the black schools, or do the black kids go to the white schools? Do you have to build new schools? There are mind-bending details that had to be worked out, plus the fact that in many parts of the country, there were still millions of Americans who didn't agree with the decision who were determined to resist it at every turn.

So the Supreme Court's in the news this week because I just appointed Judge Breyer

from Boston to the Supreme Court. And he's a very distinguished judge. I think he'll do a wonderful job. And they'll have these hearings in a couple of months, and you'll be able to follow that. And I urge you to follow these hearings, see the questions they ask him and the answers he gives. Supreme Court's very important.

But the Supreme Court is nine people. They don't have any enforcement authority. So, then the lower courts have to somehow figure out how to enforce an order and approve plans and do things to try to figure out how was this *Brown* decision going to be implemented.

One of the States involved in the *Brown* decision in addition to Topeka, Kansas, was the State of South Carolina. Secretary Riley, the Secretary of Education, was the Governor of South Carolina before he became Secretary of Education. His father was the lawyer for one of the school districts involved in the desegregation effort in *Brown* 40 years ago. And he, as a Governor, made a national reputation for his commitment to improving the education of all the children of South Carolina, which is why I named him the Secretary of Education. So I'd like for him to talk a minute now about this *Brown* decision and what happened after it was decided and how it affected his life.

Secretary Riley.

[*Secretary Riley described growing up in a segregated environment, his experience in integrating the schools of South Carolina, and his regret for the lack of social interaction with African-Americans during his youth.*]

The President. After the *Brown* decision was decided, like I said, all people had to figure out, well, how are we going to integrate our school system, and how fast? So they went back to the Supreme Court, and there was a second *Brown* decision that said "with all deliberate speed." So, who knows what that means, right? For people who didn't want to integrate, they said "with all deliberate speed" might be 4 or 5 years. For people who did want to integrate, they said it would be 4 or 5 weeks.

So that was the issue there: How long could they take to integrate? And the court order in Greenville said, "'All deliberate speed' is 30 days. Do it." And they did it, because they had leaders like Secretary Riley and his family who believed it was the right thing to do and who made it work. I'll say a little more about that in a minute. But believing in your heart that something is the right thing to do makes a big difference in whether it gets done or not.

Now, after these things happened, there was still resistance to integration all across the South and in other parts of America, and there were still other questions that had to be resolved and other issues about how this would be done.

In my home State and Mr. Green's home State of Arkansas, in Little Rock, there was a case that went all the way to the Supreme Court involving the Little Rock school system, called *Cooper* v. *Arens*, which was also a very large decision in the history of the Supreme Court law affecting the schools.

In Little Rock, the then-Governor of our State called out the National Guard to stop the integration of the school, which had been ordered by the Supreme Court, devised by the local school board. And then the President of the United States, as you saw in the movie, took over the National Guard and used it to protect the right of Ernest Green and eight other people to attend Little Rock Central High School.

I want him to talk a little bit about his experience, how he felt, what he went through. You saw the movie, which was premiered, interestingly enough, in the auditorium at Little Rock Central High School, and he and I were there the night that it was premiered in the auditorium where he became the first black student to go and to graduate. He's done rather well. I want him to tell you a little bit about what he's doing with his life now so you'll understand the enormous consequence of this decision. But first, I think you need to understand a little more about what happened. So I'd like to ask Mr. Green to talk now.

Ernest Green.

[*Mr. Green described his experience in integrating Central High School in Little Rock and pointed out the clear connection between the* Brown *decision and the recent events in South Africa.*]

The President. I want to give you a chance to ask questions, if you have any questions of any of them or me. But let me just follow up on one thing Mr. Green said.

You heard Dick Riley say how much he regretted the fact that he grew up in a segregated society. A lot of us who were southerners, who grew up in the South, really knew better. We knew that segregation was wrong. And we knew that—those of us who were white knew that it was hurting us, that we were being deprived of the opportunity to know people, to share their feelings, to share their life experiences, to share their music, their culture, to deal with people who were just being cut off.

And the things which happened to integrate the country integrated the South, at least in the beginning, more than any other part of the country because it was the most segregated part and it was the part that had the highest percentage of African-American population. And I am convinced that those things, first the education decisions and then the voting rights decision, they did help to inspire and give energy to what ultimately happened in South Africa.

The United States contributed $35 million last year to helping to build democracy in South Africa, helping train people to vote, helping conduct, show people how to run the elections, helping to figure out how this could be done. But I also have to tell you that I think it is virtually inconceivable that I would have ever become President of the United States had it not been for the *Brown* decision because of the relationships—and the voting rights decision—and the relationships that subsequently I developed with the African-Americans in my State whose support helped to make me Governor and with people around the country who made me President. So there is a sense in which, in very tangible, real ways, these decisions freed a lot of Americans to be more than they otherwise would have been.

So, do you have any questions to any of them or me that you want to ask? Yes, in the back.

[*A student asked Mr. Green what kept him going in that very difficult situation. Mr. Green said that his main motivation was the goal of opening up opportunities in Little Rock, but that support from the other eight students involved and their families and churches was important.*]

Q. When you were in school, how did integrating your school affect you?

The President. My public schools were not integrated until 2 years after I left. That's the point I was trying to make with Ernest. The integration of the schools throughout the South basically took about 15 years after the *Brown* decision. So I'm a little bit younger than Ernie, not much.

And so our school—what happened was, a lot of these school districts sat around and waited for the Justice Department to come after them, the Federal Government to say, where is your plan, or for somebody to force the States to adopt a plan. And that's why I wanted to make the point that after *Brown* v. *Board of Education*, all of these schools didn't integrate overnight, and it took a significant number of years before it happened throughout the South and throughout the country.

Ernest Green. Mr. President, I think one of the things you want to point out about the Little Rock case is that Little Rock was much earlier than many of the other cases, and that the fact that the Federal Government finally used their power and might to underscore it may have helped, I like to think, fuel part of the modern civil rights movement.

As you know from the movie, we had 1,000 paratroopers that came to Little Rock to enforce the Court order. But this was the first time that school desegregation had been undergirded by Federal support in that manner.

The President. I also want to make another point that I think might have been passed over. Ernie mentioned this. Arkansas was actually a good candidate for a peaceful, successful integration of Little Rock Central High School. We were the first State in the South to integrate our law school. We had an integrated medical school. We had a newspaper in Little Rock, the Arkansas Gazette, which was, I think, one of the—by any standard—one of the finest papers in the country, which was strongly supportive of integration. We had a lot of leadership, white

leadership, in Little Rock that was strongly supportive of integration.

And in cases like this, when countries or cities or States can go one way or the other, the impact of leadership is pivotal. When the Governor called out the National Guard to stop the integration, it wasn't even all that popular in Little Rock; a lot of the white people didn't like it. But it was wildly popular out in our State in the more rural areas where the racial animosity was greater and the fear of change was greater. And so it was a politically popular decision. But it wrecked the chance we had to become the first southern State that would really have a beginning statewide successful, peaceful integration.

Later when Atlanta began to integrate, a lot of leaders in Atlanta looked at what happened in Little Rock and said, ''We don't want that to happen here, and we're not going to permit it.'' Very interesting.

So how people behave in times of crisis is very important and makes a big difference. The Court decision still is carried out by people, and as I said, what's in their heart makes a difference.

Do you have any questions for them? Any more?

[*A student asked Mr. Green how he felt the first day at Central High School. He responded that he and his companions were fearful, but seeing their struggle televised, reinforced their determination to stick it out.*

Another student asked how Mr. Green's brother felt about the situation. Mr. Green said his brother thought he was a little wacky at the time but that his brother was now in the building trades which opportunity he thought was directly attributable to the Brown *decision.*

A student then asked Mr. Marshall how the Brown *decision has affected his life. Mr. Marshall responded that it gives him a perspective on problems that society now faces, such as racism and violence, and reminds him of the need for everyone to work together to oppose the politics of division.*]

The President. Go ahead, you're next.

Q. This is for both Mr. Green and you, Mr. President. While the integration was going on, did you ever feel like taking the law into your own hands and doing something drastic? [*Laughter*]

Mr. Green. Thank you, Mr. President. [*Laughter*]

The President. There are some benefits to this job. [*Laughter*]

[*Mr. Green responded that he and the other eight students faced 2,000 white students and that fighting was not an option. He advocated nonviolence as a real and effective tool for resolving conflicts.*]

The President. I want to make two points about it. First is, back then, the law was our friend and lawlessness was our enemy. In other words, the Supreme Court was the friend of integration. The President was enforcing the Supreme Court order. And after President Kennedy was elected, Robert Kennedy was the Attorney General. He was out there killing himself trying to get the schools integrated and to enforce the law. So the law was seen as the friend of the people who wanted change.

The second point I'd like to make is, people were willing to put themselves on the line, these people like Ernie. Mr. Marshall's father worked for years and years and years. They were willing to pay the price of time. What you have today in a lot of communities is young people taking the law into their own hands either because they can't manage their own aggressions and they've got a gun handy, or because they're doing it for some—it arises out of drug dealing or something like that, where people want a quick benefit instead of a long-term benefit.

And I think one of the things the schools have to drum into our kids today is that you always have to be living for your lifetime. You always have to be thinking about what it's going to be like down the road. No one is entitled to instant gratification all the time, to get what they want when they want it, right now. You have to be willing to pay the price of time.

And these nine young people of whom Ernie was the leader were willing—they paid an enormous price for themselves as well as for everybody they represented by saying, ''In my life this will be better.'' And if I could change one thing about what's going on today, when there's so much mindless violence among young people and kids are just getting shot at random, it's because people

are going around acting on their impulses in the moment.

And the law can still be your friend if you're willing to work and have discipline and take time with it. Nobody gets everything they want just when they want it. You have to pay the price of time and be willing to take the kind of disciplined risks that Ernie Green did. And that, I think, is one of the things we really have got to somehow hammer home to everybody in your generation.

You've been great. The teacher's telling me it's time to stop. The principal is. Thank you all very much. You were terrific. Thank you, gentlemen.

[*At this point, the President was presented with several gifts.*]

The President. The great thing about the United States, the great thing about the United States is that all the history of our country lives in the present and helps to pave the way for the future.

I had Senator Byrd in my office last night, who is the chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee. They have to approve all the money that gets spent, like if we send any money to your school, it comes through that committee. And he had just finished reading "The Federalist Papers" written by Madison and Hamilton, just read them all again, because he said they have relevance to today.

Brown is important today. It's living in your life today. And what you have to do is to make the most of this experience and make the most of your own life, so that 40 years from now young people will be sitting in this school and other schools around the country, and they will be living the accumulated history of America.

That's the only way this works. That's the brilliant thing about our country. That's why we wanted to come here and talk about it, because we know the spirit and the meaning of that decision is alive in your lives today. And as long as you believe that and you do your part, then this country is going to be around a long, long time.

Thank you.

NOTE: The question-and-answer session began at 11:35 a.m. at Martin Luther King, Jr., Middle School. A tape was not available for verification of the content of these remarks.

Remarks on the 40th Anniversary of *Brown* v. *Board of Education* in Beltsville

May 17, 1994

Thank you. Thank you very much. My good friend Ernie Green; Secretary Riley; Attorney General Reno; your principal, Bette Lewis. I'd also like to recognize in the audience today two of my partners in trying to make America a better place, two of your distinguished Representatives in Congress, Senator Paul Sarbanes and Congressman Steny Hoyer. Thank you for being here.

I have a number of people here who work in the White House, but I want to recognize one in particular. We just finished teaching a class here on *Brown* v. *Board of Education*. I was joined in that class by Secretary Riley, who as a young man was involved along with his father with the integration of public schools in South Carolina; and with Ernest Green, whose background you know; also with Thurgood Marshall, Jr., now a member of the Vice President's staff in the White House, whose father argued the *Brown* v. *Board of Education* case before the Supreme Court and later became the first African-American ever to sit on the United States Supreme Court. Thurgood Marshall, Jr., I'd like him to stand up and be recognized.

I'd like to thank Robin Wiltison and the students who were in her class today. They certainly showed us why Martin Luther King Middle School is a blue-ribbon school. I was deeply impressed with the students. And they asked good questions, and they were very well-informed. And I think it's fair to say that those of us who came here to participate may have enjoyed the class even more than they did.

We are here today because, as all of you know by now, 40 years ago on this day the United States Supreme Court handed down the decision called *Brown* v. *Board of Education*. The Supreme Court has been in the news a lot lately because I've just announced the appointment of a distinguished judge, Judge Stephen Breyer, from Boston, to be the new Justice to the Supreme Court to fill