

## 20th-Century Virginia Module

### Massive Resistance

A lot of the south was watching to see what Virginia would do. In the fall, the governor appoints what's known as the Gray Commission in November of 1955, the Gray Commission issues a report. The key provision, and the most controversial one, was a recommendation that the state begin to make available tuition grants so that any white family that objected to sending their child to a school which was integrated could get a tuition grant from the state to go to private school. In January of 1956 the state overwhelmingly voted to amend the Constitution to allow for tuition grants.

The Gray Commission would actually have allowed some integration in places. It was very clear that Arlington especially was ready to integrate its schools. Also, the mountainous parts of Virginia, there're very few African Americans and they would've made financial sense to integrate the schools because running two separate school systems was costly. So the fear was that there were parts of the state that would in fact comply with the court decision and for a lot of people in the southern part of the state, that was untenable.

So, it's in the spring/summer of 1956 that Harry Byrd and others began to try to formulate a plan and this leads to the real showdown in August and September of 1956 when the governor calls a Special Session of the legislature and what come to be known as the Massive Resistance Laws are passed. The most important components of Virginia's Massive Resistance Laws were that the people placement was taken out of the hands of local officials and put in the hands of a state people placement board, so that meant that people in Arlington, for instance, could not automatically send to a formerly white school a handful of black students.

Secondly, the Massive Resistance Laws provided for tuition grants. Most importantly, though, what the Massive Resistance Laws did is that they empowered the governor to take control of and close down any schools which integrated as a result of court orders.

On the other side of the issue, there were various people who made very clear that they were more committed to public education than they were to segregation. I think if you had surveyed most white Virginians at the time of the *Brown* decision they would have preferred to maintain segregation, but that doesn't mean they're necessarily willing to defy the Supreme Court. If forced to choose between segregation and public education, they would prefer public education.

The portions of the state, which had the heaviest concentration of African Americans, most of whom were prevented from voting by a variety of reasons, were vastly overrepresented in the Virginia legislature. In the 1956 Special Session when the Massive Resistance Laws were implemented, the key vote in the state Senate was 21 to 17. The 17 who voted against massive resistance actually represented more Virginians than did the 21 who voted to implement the law.