

Supreme Court Case Study 9



Legality of Segregation by Race

Plessy v. Ferguson, 1896

***** Background of the Case *****

In 1890 Louisiana passed a law ordering railroads in the state to “provide equal but separate accommodations for the white and colored races.” Violations of the law carried a fine of \$25 or 20 days in jail. Railway personnel were responsible for assigning seats according to race.

On June 7, 1892, Homer A. Plessy, who was one-eighth African American, decided to test the law’s validity by sitting in the white section of a train going from New Orleans to Covington, Louisiana. When a conductor ordered Plessy to give up his seat, he refused. He was then arrested and imprisoned in a New Orleans jail. He was tried by a New Orleans court and found guilty of having violated the Louisiana law described above. He appealed to the Louisiana Supreme Court, which found the law valid. Plessy then appealed to the United States Supreme Court, claiming his conviction and the Louisiana railroad law were unconstitutional because they violated the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Amendments.

Constitutional Issue *****

In the Reconstruction period after the Civil War, although slavery had been abolished by the Thirteenth Amendment, African Americans lived in a segregated society, especially in the South. The Fourteenth Amendment banned the deprivation of life, liberty, or property without “due process of law.” Yet laws were passed in Southern states that required segregated schools, theaters, parks, buses, and railroad trains. The *Plessy* case challenged the constitutionality of these so-called Jim Crow practices.

Homer A. Plessy challenged the constitutionality of segregation laws in Louisiana. He based his appeal on the Thirteenth Amendment, which abolished slavery, and the Fourteenth Amendment, which prohibited the states from denying “the equal protection of the law” to any person.

***** The Supreme Court’s Decision *****

A majority of the Court denied Plessy’s appeal and upheld the practice of segregation as required by the Louisiana law. Justice Henry Brown wrote the majority opinion. First, the ruling brushed aside the relevance to the case of the Thirteenth Amendment. Brown wrote that “a legal distinction between white and colored races . . . has no tendency to destroy the legal equality of the two races.”

The rest of the Court’s opinion, however, dealt with the applicability of the Fourteenth Amendment. Brown concluded that this amendment aimed strictly “to enforce the absolute equality of the two races before the law,” but that it “could not have been intended to abolish distinctions based on color, or to enforce social, as distinguished from political, equality . . .”

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Laws requiring segregation “do not necessarily imply the inferiority of either race to the other . . .” The majority noted that this was the “underlying fallacy” of Plessy’s case. Just as valid under the Fourteenth Amendment would be a similar law enacted by an African American-controlled legislature with respect to whites or other races.

The Court ruled, then, that the matter ultimately depended on whether Louisiana’s law was “reasonable.” Segregation laws “have been generally, if not universally, recognized as within the competency of the state legislatures in the exercise of their police powers.” In such matters, a legislature is free to take into account “established usages, customs, and traditions of the people,” as well as “the preservation of public peace and good order.”

Finally, the Court rejected the notion that “social prejudices may be overcome by legislation.” Brown maintained, “If the civil and political rights of both races be equal, one cannot be inferior to the other civilly or politically. If one race be inferior to the other socially, the Constitution of the United States cannot put them on the same plane.”

The Court, in effect, enunciated a doctrine that came to be called the separate-but-equal principle. If African Americans saw this as “a badge of inferiority,” it was solely “because the colored race chooses to put that construction upon it.”

***** Dissenting Opinion *****

Justice John Marshall Harlan entered a vigorous dissent from the majority’s decision. He “regretted that this high tribunal . . . has reached the conclusion that it is competent for a state to regulate the enjoyment by citizens of their rights solely upon the basis of race.” He saw segregation on racial lines as “a badge of servitude wholly inconsistent with the civil freedom and equality before the law established by the Constitution . . . The thin disguise of ‘equal’ accommodations for passengers in railroad coaches will not mislead anyone, nor atone for the wrong this day done.” Harlan saw the Constitution as “color-blind, and neither knows nor tolerates classes among citizens.”

The separate-but-equal principle was finally overturned in a series of civil rights decisions of the Court in the 1950s, most notably in *Brown v. Board of Education*.



Questions *****

DIRECTIONS: Answer the following questions on a separate sheet of paper.

1. Explain how the Supreme Court justified the practice of segregating railroad passengers in Louisiana by race.
2. What is the meaning of the separate-but-equal principle?
3. On what grounds did Justice Harlan criticize the majority’s ruling?
4. Why do you think Plessy based his appeal in part on the Thirteenth Amendment?
5. What do you think was the effect of the *Plessy* decision on the nation, especially on the Southern states?