

Mike Wallace Interviews Thurgood Marshall (1957)

*John Q. Barrett**

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On Tuesday, April 16, 1957, newsman Mike Wallace had a televised conversation with Thurgood Marshall, Director-Counsel of the NAACP Legal Defense & Education Fund, Inc. The interview aired in New York City on Wallace's interview show, "Night Beat," broadcast at 11:00 p.m. on the DuMont Network's channel 5 (WABD).¹

In May 1954, Marshall and his colleagues had won in *Brown v. Board of Education* a unanimous United States Supreme Court decision holding racial segregation in public schools to be unconstitutional.²

Three years later, Wallace was interviewing Marshall, age 49, about resistance to *Brown*, and about what Marshall saw as insufficient resistance to that resistance.

In the interview, which is available on YouTube ([click here](#)),³ Marshall criticized the President of the United States, Dwight Eisenhower, for not having done enough since *Brown* to get all of the American people to support the decision. Marshall also stated, with force, charm and humor, his opposition to anti-integration Southern Democrats, his belief in the secret ballot and thus his unwillingness to reveal whether he had voted for or against Eisenhower, and his (Marshall's) willingness to work with white Southerners coming to terms with *Brown*.

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¹ See *On Television*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 16, 1957, at 67 (listing this 11:00-12:00 p.m. program).

² See 347 U.S. 483 (1954), available at www.law.cornell.edu/supct/html/historics/USSC_CR_0347_0483_ZS.html.

³ See http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IoPLitU6jVg&feature=player_embedded. Hat tips: Tomiko Brown-Nagin on Legal History Blog, <http://legalhistoryblog.blogspot.com/2012/04/mike-wallace-interview-of-thurgood.html>, linking to Gilbert King's website for his book DEVIL IN THE GROVE, www.gilbertking.com/Gilbert.html.

The rest of that April 1957 month illustrated some of what Marshall discussed with Wallace that Tuesday evening. Just two days later, the Florida Senate passed a resolution—which the Florida House had passed earlier—stating that Florida considered the *Brown* decision “null and void” and would not abide by it. The Florida Attorney General stated that most Floridians thought *Brown* was wrong, did not want integration and would not integrate their schools. (The Governor, by contrast, criticized the resolution—he said it “stultifies our state.”)⁴

Nine days after that, on Saturday April 27, 1957, Marshall spoke at Rutgers University’s annual academic weekend, during a day-long program devoted to “America’s Race Relations.” Marshall said there that one difficult task ahead was to repeal state racial segregation laws, which he described as “prevent[ing] people from exercising their God-given right to associate” with others. His fellow speakers that day included Southern newspaper publishers Hodding Carter and A. Reed Sarratt, New Jersey labor leader Arthur Chapin, Georgia civil rights leader Harold Fleming, and New York lawyer Telford Taylor.⁵

The connections to Justice Robert H. Jackson, three years gone in 1957? His work in Washington, London and Nuremberg with Telford Taylor during 1945-1946, and their continuing relationship as Taylor succeeded Jackson as chief U.S. prosecutor at Nuremberg of Nazi war criminals and thereafter. Jackson’s great admiration for Thurgood Marshall as an advocate. Marshall’s ensuing moves into “Jackson jobs”—in 1965, Solicitor General of the United States, and in 1967, Associate Justice of the Supreme Court. And *Brown*.

And one more nod that no smoke—see the film clip—should obscure: On April 7, 2012, Mike Wallace died at age 93. His interview fifty-five years earlier with Thurgood Marshall was a piece of shared greatness.

⁴ See Associated Press (AP) report, *Florida Vote ‘Voids’ High Court Decision*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 19, 1957, at 15.

⁵ See *Integration Job Cited*, N.Y. TIMES, Apr. 28, 1957, at 68.