



# Talking to Strangers: Anxieties of Citizenship since Brown v. Board of Education

*Danielle S. Allen*

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"Don't talk to strangers" is the advice long given to children by parents of all classes and races. Today it has blossomed into a fundamental precept of civic education, reflecting interracial distrust, personal and political alienation, and a profound suspicion of others. In this powerful and eloquent essay, Danielle Allen, a 2002 MacArthur Fellow, takes this maxim back to Little Rock, rooting out the seeds of distrust to replace them with "a citizenship of political friendship."

Returning to the landmark *Brown v. Board of Education* decision of 1954 and to the famous photograph of Elizabeth Eckford, one of the Little Rock Nine, being cursed by fellow "citizen" Hazel Bryan, Allen argues that we have yet to complete the transition to political friendship that this moment offered. By combining brief readings of philosophers and political theorists with personal reflections on race politics in Chicago, Allen proposes strikingly practical techniques of citizenship. These tools of political friendship, Allen contends, can help us become more trustworthy to others and overcome the fossilized distrust among us.

Sacrifice is the key concept that bridges citizenship and trust, according to Allen. She uncovers the ordinary, daily sacrifices citizens make to keep democracy working—and offers methods for recognizing and reciprocating those sacrifices. Trenchant, incisive, and ultimately hopeful, *Talking to Strangers* is nothing less than a manifesto for a revitalized democratic citizenry.

"Allen understands that democracy originates in the subjective dimension of everyday life, and she focuses on what she calls our 'habit of citizenship'—the ways we often unconsciously regard and interact with fellow citizens. . . . [Her] focus on race is entirely appropriate."—Nick Bromell, *Boston Review*

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