

William Winter
All Saint's Junior College
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THE PROBLEMS OF SOUTHERN POLITICS

Where in all of the South could there possibly be a more dramatic place to discuss the present-day problems of Southern politics than here at All Saints' College, located as it is between the lines at Vicksburg—lines that literally and figuratively remain to this good day, defying the efforts of so many once and for all to lay them at rest. It is to this one-time no-man's land that I come, therefore, with some fore-boding and much confusion, hoping that I will not be mistaken in the darkness for the enemy and that I may be relieved to find that this is not really still a no-man's land but common ground after all. It is to this end, at least, that I would direct my search, for if the history of the last hundred years – the last ten more than the previous ninety – tell us anything, it is that great geographical region that we call the South will be able to prosper and progress only as it increasingly finds common cause with the nation of which it is and always has been a vital and irreplaceable part.

So, tonight, within weeks of the centennial anniversary of the Siege of Vicksburg, the result of which, more than any other single event, made certain that the Mississippi River would not flow again through a divided land, I come to discuss with you the politics of a South that at last under the dynamic impetus of the space age may well lay claim to the remainder of the twentieth century for its own. And what could be a more exciting and rewarding way to write the history of the sixties and seventies of this century than in the economic and political ascendancy of this region as a happy sequel to those same melancholy decades of the last.

By way of beginning, therefore, let me suggest that the political problems of the South that demand priority are those that are and will be to an ever increasing degree associated with the economic development of the region. This is to say that they are political considerations related to future events rather than to past circumstances. They

are problems related to our concern with a race, but the color is red – not black, and the race is with the Communist, not the Congolese – Americanized or otherwise.

The cold facts of the matter are that this great area of the United States has, as it always has since the very earliest days of the American republic, too much to contribute to the political leadership of this nation to jeopardize both our region and our nation by denying to the nation our full participation in the shaping of the great decisions that can spell the difference between survival and destruction.

This country would not have gotten off the ground in the first place but for the likes of Southerners such as Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Mason, and others too numerous to mention here. It would not be the country that it is today with the contributions in the intervening years of men like Jackson and Clay who had they been living at the time, I am persuaded never would have let the Civil War be fought. From our own state the national stature and leadership of Lamar, George, Williams, and Harrison among others are well established.

And today even though there be those in the South who seem not to appreciate the significance of their contribution, I feel immeasurably more secure about our country's safety because there are men like Stennis and Russell and Hill in the United States Senate. Too frequently, however, their ability to function effectively is diminished by provincial considerations that may be wholly inconsistent with the national interest or, for that matter, with the regional interest. Which is just another way of saying, as I have already said, that we cannot separate our destiny as a region from the destiny of the country.

The chief political goal of the South in these last four decades of this century must be, then, to find the means whereby the great political leadership potential of this region that has contributed so much in the past is given an opportunity to come back into full flower. This can only be done as the people understand the full significance of the times in which we live. There may have been a point when the picture of a shot-gun house filled with barefoot, semi-literate parents and children was so commonplace as to make us only half aware of its existence. And even during World War II we may not really have been shocked to find draftee rejections in some areas of the South exceeding forty percent as a result of inadequate educational opportunity.

But in this era of the electronic computer and the space capsule we can no longer indulge ourselves the luxury of isolation, if indeed it ever was a luxury. And we cannot tolerate the non-development of our citizenry, just as we could not afford the unhappy statistics of 1900 that showed the average value of the school houses of the South to be the magnificent sum of \$276.00 each.

So, if there is one priority that I would place above all the rest as the chief concern for Southern political leadership at the present time, it would be that of the maintenance of an effective educational system – not just the maintenance, but the improvement of such a system. This must mean a public educational system, for with all deference to this exceptionally fine institution, it is going to take the full resources of public support to assure educational opportunity for all who must have it if our region is to prosper.

We are not living in a world that will not let us forget that just because we came from a good family and joined the right clubs and lived in the right part of town our success is automatically assured. We are living in a world that is not interested in who we are or where we come from half as much as in what we can do. And for our state and our region we can compete in this world and in this nation only as we develop the processes of learning competent to meet the needs of a people that have their sights on the stars. This, in fact, is the area from which, in all probability, we shall soon see the vehicle emerge that will carry a man to the moon and back. The educational requirements of the predominantly agricultural society of a few years ago are no longer adequate to meet the stern requirements of today's age of space. They are not even adequate for the ever-growing demands of agriculture.

So the first and overriding call on the political leadership of the South in the years just ahead is the preservation of effective public education. We must not let anything interfere with the ability of the youth of this region to secure here in the region as good an education as is available anywhere in the country, and this opportunity must be available to all of the bright young men and women and not just to the chosen few. Only in this way can the South be true to its promise.

But as we step up the training of the young Southerners to prepare them to take their places in the highly competitive world of the 60's and 70's, we must know that the process of migration to other areas will continue if we do not develop here in the region

that means of applying these bright minds. In the last ten years, as an example, Mississippi gave up over 400,000 of its citizens to other states, and these were not by any means all Negroes. They were almost forty percent of the graduates of Ole Miss, Mississippi State, Mississippi Southern, M.S.C.W., and Delta State. They were some of the best brains that we had.

Jonathan Daniels expressed the problem very succinctly:

“The problem of statesmanship is to keep more
Who love (the South) from leaving. The North
and West were built by the arrival, not the departure,
of all kinds of people. And some of those who came
found contempt and antagonism here as well as
opportunity. The South will not long flourish if it
gains plants and loses people. And it will not be the
South if it does not hope to keep all its people at
decent standards and in good, warm relationships.”

This leads then to another area of effort which for the present-day South or at least for some areas of the South is demanding of the best that we have. This has been a section which has a long and well-deserved heritage of graciousness and hospitality. The South is not and never has been a place where men took pride in bitterness and violence, regardless of the provocation. The South's true image is one of gentility and humaneness, and this is not the point in history when that image should be ignored. We then have the responsibility for the maintenance of law and order and the preservation of domestic tranquility.

This means that other solutions must be found for the ever-present problems of race relations than the bull-whip and the shotgun. It is my observation that very few mobs ever spontaneously and automatically form. But regardless of what motivates unthinking men to take the law into their own hands, it is the clear and unmistakable duty of Southern politicians to see to it that it does not happen. And this duty extends not just to the dispersal of mobs once they have formed but to the deliberate and calculated avoidance of any statements or actions that would tend to incite their formation in the first place.

Our political leadership must appeal to the best that is in us – not the worst; to our higher selves not our baser instincts. Only in this way can our section diminish some of the tensions that have already caused us so much grief and even now threaten more. This is no time to be drinking from the wells of bitterness and recrimination. The political leader who can successfully turn his people from a preoccupation with the race issue and all of the supercharged emotions of anxiety, fear, and hate which that issue suggests, will, in my opinion, have served well the cause of Southern statesmanship and helped to put this region on the road to a happier and better day.

One of the fictions that we have indulged ourselves for a long time – at least since the Civil War—is that there is just one massive, monolithic, single-minded South. Nothing could be more preposterous, and nowhere is it demonstrated more effectively than in the vote of recent presidential elections. Yet this is a mistake that both the politically experienced and the naive make, as they continue to talk about the Southern electoral bloc. There is just no such creature, or if there was, he has gone the way of the great whooping crane. His number is very, very small.

We can look at the election results from 1948 on and see what has happened to this so-called unity. To chart it on the map makes the area look like a checkerboard. Whereas in the four presidential contests prior to 1948 every state of the old Confederacy voted the Democratic ticket in every single election, in the last four races, Arkansas, Georgia, and North Carolina are the only states of the eleven that have supported the Democratic candidates every time. Mississippi has divided its electoral vote in those years between the Democratic candidates and a third party slate and incredibly has yet to pick a winner. Louisiana has a record of even greater diversity, having supported the Republican nominee as well as a third party slate, but last year it returned to the Democratic fold.

The point simply is that any calculated effort to organize a purely Southern political force would appear to be difficult of accomplishment in the face of the diverse attitudes of the different states. And as the race issue and its related considerations diminish in the upper South, it would seem less and less likely that massive regional political unity is in the cards. The high-water mark of this effort may well have been reached in the initial undertaking in 1948.

What is apparent is that as more and more states of the South become increasingly urbanized and industrialized, as more missile plants and space projects move into the South, as more demands of twentieth century civilization with technical and scientific development are made on the South, as the reapportionment of Southern legislatures becomes an accomplished fact, as old voting habits are transformed by the influx of young and new faces, the political complexion of the South is going to lose much of its purely regional identity.

This does not necessarily mean that the historic conservative traditions of the South have to be sacrificed in the process. It can and I think does mean that to a more effective extent responsible conservative Southern statesmen will be able to lead affirmatively in causes of great national concern to protect the national interest rather than to exhaust their ability and their influence in primarily negative defensive maneuvers on issues of purely regional concern.

James McBride Dabbs tells the classic story about one of Jackson's famous foot-cavalrymen in which endurance and wry humor are incomparably mixed: The General, riding back along the column, came upon a soldier, too old to fight, nearly gone but still slogging. "Well Soldier," said the General, "I hope you'll make out." "Yes, General, yes, I'll make it. But, General – I hopes to God I never loves another country!"

I would agree with Mr. Dabbs that surely a region that produced a soldier like that is capable of providing the men to lead us successfully through the remainder of the twentieth century.