

# The Journal of Mississippi History

---

Volume LXXXI

Spring/Summer 2019

No. 1 and No. 2

---

## CONTENTS

- Introduction 1  
*By Charles C. Bolton*
- Edmund Favor Noel (1908-1912) and the Rise of  
James K. Vardaman and Theodore G. Bilbo 3  
*By Jere Nash*
- Paul B. Johnson Sr. (1940-1943), the New Deal, and the  
Battle for Free Textbooks in Mississippi 23  
*By Kevin D. Greene*
- Race and Wartime Politics during the Administration  
of Governor Thomas L. Bailey (1944-1946) 43  
*By Charles C. Bolton*
- Fielding L. Wright (1946-1952): Legacy of a  
White-Supremacist Progressive 61  
*By James Patterson Smith*

COVER IMAGE — Governor Paul Johnson Jr. viewing a portrait of his father, Governor Paul Johnson Sr. Courtesy of the Winfred Moncrief Photograph Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History.

James P. Coleman (1956-1960) and Mississippi Poppycock <i>By Robert Lockett</i>	81
Master of Racial Myths & Massive Resistance: Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr. (1964-1968) <i>By Patricia Michelle Boyett</i>	97
Cliff Finch (1976-1980) and the Limits of Racial Integration <i>By Chris Danielson</i>	121
Kirk Fordice (1992-2000): Cutting Against the Grain <i>By Andy Taggart</i>	133

*The Journal of Mississippi History* (ISSN 0022-2771) is published quarterly by the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, 200 North St., Jackson, MS 39201, in cooperation with the Mississippi Historical Society as a benefit of Mississippi Historical Society membership. Annual memberships begin at \$35. Back issues of the *Journal* sell for \$7.50 and up through the Mississippi Museum Store; call 601-576-6921 to check availability. *The Journal of Mississippi History* is a juried journal. Each article is reviewed by a specialist scholar before publication. Periodicals paid at Jackson, Mississippi. Postmaster: Send address changes to the Mississippi Historical Society, P.O. Box 571, Jackson, MS 39205-0571. Email [journal@mdah.ms.gov](mailto:journal@mdah.ms.gov).

© 2019 Mississippi Historical Society, Jackson, Miss.

*The Mississippi Department of Archives and History and the Mississippi Historical Society disclaim any responsibility for statements made by contributors.*



# Introduction

by *Charles C. Bolton*

When Dennis Mitchell, editor of the *Journal of Mississippi History*, approached me in 2017 about creating a special issue on neglected Mississippi governors, I had my doubts. What else was there to say about these men? I knew that David G. Sansing,<sup>1</sup> longtime professor of history at the University of Mississippi, had written brief biographies of Mississippi's governors for *Mississippi History Now*, the online publication of the Mississippi Historical Society, and that he had also recently published *Mississippi Governors: Soldiers, Statesmen, Scholars, Scoundrels* (2016). In addition, I knew, as someone who had done a good deal of archival research in Mississippi sources over the previous three decades, that the documentary record for many of the state's chief executives remained quite limited.

Despite these initial misgivings, I resolved to explore the idea further. I started by narrowing the time frame to the twentieth century, the period of Mississippi history I knew best. I ultimately recognized that some governors of this era—James K. Vardaman, Theodore G. Bilbo, Ross Barnett, William F. Winter—had indeed received substantial attention from historians and that a closer look at some of the others might be worthwhile. I was also fortunate to identify seven scholars who expressed enthusiasm about the opportunity to write essays focusing on some of the “neglected” individuals who occupied the Governor's Mansion in the twentieth century.

The eight men who are the subjects of the articles in this issue are E. F. Noel, Paul B. Johnson Sr., Thomas Bailey, Fielding Wright, J. P. Coleman, Paul B. Johnson Jr., Cliff Finch, and Kirk Fordice. Since source material remains thin for some of these former governors, I suggested to the authors that although their essays should focus on their particular subject, they might also need to highlight a particular theme important to understanding the governor and the time during which he served. So, these pieces are not, strictly speaking, biographical accounts of the men highlighted here, al-

---

<sup>1</sup> Since Bolton wrote this introduction David Sansing, a past president of the Mississippi Historical Society, died in 2019 at age 86. Sansing taught at Ole Miss from 1970 to 1994. He published massively on the state's history and taught thousands of students, including your editor.

though important biographical details are included in all the essays.

Jere Nash's essay looks at E. F. Noel, and while uncovering a variety of new information about the man, Nash also shows the important role that Noel played in advancing the careers of James K. Vardaman and Theodore G. Bilbo, two of the most influential governors (and politicians) in early twentieth-century Mississippi. Kevin D. Greene examines the life of Paul B. Johnson Sr. and focuses specifically on his work as a progressive New Dealer and his signature reform, free textbooks for schools. Charles C. Bolton's essay concludes that during Thomas L. Bailey's brief tenure in the governor's office, he represented a moderate alternative to most of the state's political establishment, which viewed the economic and military mobilization associated with World War II as a threat to the state's system of segregation and black disfranchisement. Fielding L. Wright is perhaps best known as a leader of the Dixiecrats in the late 1940s. In his article, James Patterson Smith illustrates how Wright came to occupy this prominent position in the South's political opposition to racial change and how, in the process, Wright's earlier reputation as a southern progressive was forgotten. Robert Luckett's study of J. P. Coleman details the governor's battle with hardline, massive resisters over what strategy the state should adopt in its response to the U.S. Supreme Court decision, *Brown v. Board of Education*, which declared racial segregation unconstitutional. Patricia Michelle Boyett's essay on Paul B. Johnson Jr., who served in the immediate aftermath of the 1960s civil rights reforms, examines how the governor used both racial myths and a continued strategy of massive resistance to maintain white privilege even after the official end of racial segregation. Chris Danielson demonstrates the crucial role played by Cliff Finch in integrating the state's Democratic Party in the 1970s. Danielson identifies this political event as the governor's greatest achievement, although Danielson notes that it had the unintended consequence of bolstering the growth of the state's Republican Party. The final essay is a reflective piece about Kirk Fordice by one of his key staffers, Andy Taggart. Drawing largely on his own personal recollections, Taggart views Fordice as an atypical politician, a characteristic that proved both a strength and a weakness for the first Republican since Reconstruction to serve as governor of Mississippi.

# Edmund Favor Noel (1908-1912) and the Rise of James K. Vardaman and Theodore G. Bilbo

by *Jere Nash*

By the time Edmund Noel campaigned successfully for governor in 1907, Mississippi was a white supremacist state. The black vote had been virtually eliminated from elections, and Jim Crow was the law of the land, both by statute and custom.<sup>1</sup> No serious candidate in the fifty years between the adoption of the state Constitution in 1890 and World War II argued otherwise.

The racial question for each election, then, was how vituperative

---

AUTHOR'S NOTE: There is disagreement in the historical record of the spelling of Noel's first name. While it appears he was named for his paternal grandfather, Edmund Favor Noel, there were no birth certificates issued in 1854. When the 1860 Census workers came through Holmes County, they recorded the four-year-old Noel as Edmund. However, ten years later, Noel was recorded as Edmond. The 1910 Census, taken when Noel was governor, had him recorded as Edmund as did the 1920 Census when he was back home practicing law. Early in his legislative career, the legislative journal rosters identified him as either Edward or Edmond. When Noel returned to the Senate later in his career, the 1924 and 1926 journals listed him as "Noel, Senator Edmund F. (Ex-Governor of Mississippi)." Nevertheless, throughout Noel's tenure in public life, newspaper reporters and editors referred to him as E. F., Edmund, Ed., Edward, and Edmond. The front page article in the July 31, 1927, *Jackson Daily News* announcing Noel's death spelled his first name Edmund. On the other hand, Noel's death certificate spelled his typewritten name "Edmond" but it also gave Noel's date of birth as "4/4/1856" which was off by a month. When Noel recorded his will in the Holmes County Chancery Clerk's office, he signed it E.F. Noel. While Noel's first name is spelled "Edmond" on the nameplate of his official portrait that hangs in the hallway of the State Capitol, if you visit Noel's home in Holmes County, which is on the National Register of Historic Places, the property is listed as the Gov. Edmund F. Noel House. Finally, Noel and his wife are buried in the Odd Fellows Cemetery in Lexington. On Noel's tombstone his first name is spelled Edmund while on his wife's tombstone, his first name is used three different times and is spelled Edmond all three times. For purposes of this article, we favor the paternal grandfather and the tombstones.

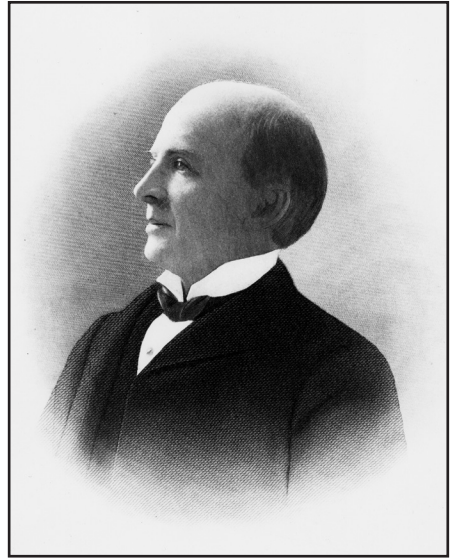
<sup>1</sup> The most damning description of this era of Mississippi history is found in Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1989), especially 3-32.

---

*JERE NASH served as campaign manager, director of policy, and chief of staff for Governor Ray Mabus from 1987 to 1991. He is co-author of three books, Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2008, Mississippi Fried Politics: Tall Tales from the Back Rooms and America's Great Storm: Leading through Hurricane Katrina.*

white candidates would be in their denunciation of black Mississippians. Candidates either followed in the footsteps of James K. Vardaman and Theodore G. Bilbo, or they took a more restrained approach favored by John Sharp Williams, Pat Harrison, and Earl Brewer.

Though firmly in the restrained camp, Noel ironically had more to do with advancing the careers of Vardaman and Bilbo—and their brand of race baiting that came to define Mississippi for much of the country—than perhaps any other single politician of their time.



*E. F. Noel, Courtesy, Mississippi Department of Archives and History*

Born March 4, 1856, on the family farm in Holmes County, Edmund Noel lived through the Civil War in Mississippi as a young child. His father fought for the Confederacy and ended up in federal prison. During Reconstruction, Noel was sent to Louisville, Kentucky, to live with David Sanders, his mother's brother, to attend high school, and ultimately to study with Sanders, an attorney in private practice, to learn the law. Noel returned to Mississippi in 1877, was admitted to the bar, and opened a law office in Lexington. Four years later, he was elected to the post of state representative and then, was successful in a campaign for district attorney in 1887. In 1895, he advanced to the state senate and was re-elected in 1899. Noel's first wife died one year after their 1890 marriage, and in 1905, he married Alice Josephine Tye Neilson, who would later serve as Mississippi's First Lady. Neilson's father, John Tye Neilson, was also a Confederate army veteran, and her great-grandfather on her mother's side, Abraham Clark, was one of the signers of the Declaration of Independence. Neilson had two sons from a previous marriage, one of



whom, Edwin Neilson, became a law partner of Noel's in Lexington.<sup>2</sup>

Noel's writings and speeches give the impression that he was intelligent, direct, and sure of himself. While he rarely engaged in the bombastic and hyperbolic speeches that characterized Vardaman and Bilbo, he nevertheless felt free to speak his mind. In reply to one quarrelsome constituent, Governor Noel wrote: "Your letter of 10<sup>th</sup> inst. was received. It is altogether needless for two persons to talk or write of matters about which they so widely disagree as you and I do." Yet, Noel took three pages to explain himself before ending with, "This letter is needless I suppose and no reply is expected."<sup>3</sup>

Noel was apparently neither unashamed to mix his religion with his politics, nor reluctant to embarrass fellow politicians who did not meet his standards, leaving one historian to observe that Noel had a tendency to "lecture legislators like schoolboys." For these reasons his opponents nicknamed him "Granny Noel," and his habits led Delta aristocrat LeRoy Percy to once call him a "canting, narrow, small board Baptist." In her 1965 thesis on Noel, Sue Lucas interviewed two people who apparently had known the former governor. One of them described Noel as a "well-read man with a logical mind," while the other remembered Noel as a "serious, matter-of-fact sort of person who was never known to tell a joke or carry on any foolishness."<sup>4</sup> Examining Noel through a larger lens, another writer summed him up as "never a demagogue, but safe, prudent, conservative, and stubborn."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Charles Granville Hamilton, "The Turning Point: The Legislative Session of 1908," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 25 (April 1963): 95-96; Lawrence Edward Kight, "The State is on Trial: Governor Edmund F. Noel and the Defense of Mississippi's Legal Institutions Against Mob Violence," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 60 (Fall 1988): 196-197; Cecil L. Summers, *The Governors of Mississippi* (Gretna, LA: Pelican Publishing Company, 1980), 90-91; David G. Sansing, *Mississippi's Governors: Soldiers, Statesmen, Scholars, Scoundrels* (Oxford, MS: Nautilus Publishing Company, 2017), 141-143; "Ex-Governor Noel Dies Saturday at Home in Lexington," *Jackson Daily News*, July 31, 1927; Dunbar Rowland, *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register*, 1912, State of Mississippi, 82-83. There is disagreement among these and other sources as to the date of the death of Noel's first wife, with the length of their marriage varying from one to three years. For purposes of this article, the date of her death was taken from Noel's obituary and from her tombstone in the Lexington cemetery.

<sup>3</sup> Noel to Mr. R. L. Jones, February 15, 1909, Series 861, Box 1211, Folder 220, Noel Files, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH).

<sup>4</sup> Sue T. Lucas, "Edmond F. Noel: Progressive," (Master's thesis, Mississippi College, 1965), 8-9. Notice the spelling of Noel's first name.

<sup>5</sup> Hamilton, 95-96; Lewis Baker, *The Percys of Mississippi: Politics and Literature in the New South* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1983), 33; A. Wigfall Green, *The Man Bilbo* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1976), 27; Dennis J. Mitchell, *Mississippi: A New History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), 269.

While those qualities did not serve him well at the end of 1909, seven years earlier, in his second term as a state senator, they were the impetus behind his move to fundamentally alter Mississippi's political landscape.

### Noel and Party Primary Elections

By the turn of the century, Mississippi had become a one-party state, with the Democratic Party in complete control of the state's political infrastructure. Hence, the election of consequence was the party primary. Except, there were no primary elections. Nominations for candidates to represent the Democratic Party in the general election took place at conventions, which were typically small gatherings dominated by a few power brokers who supervised the county or state executive committees. "Political power was more restricted than ever," observed one historian, "and under the convention system for making nominations, the real power lay in the hands of small cliques of politically active men. Planters, merchants, and bankers dominated party conventions."<sup>6</sup>

In his classic book about this period of Mississippi history, Albert Kirwan captured in one paragraph the state's dismal economic conditions, the reasons for the backlash against the convention brokers, and the emotional tie to the Democratic Party:

In the period 1880-1890 conditions were generally bad, but after the latter date, they grew worse. Banks were reluctant to lend money on even good lands and interest rates were high. The farmer became convinced that he was the "forgotten man." To him it seemed the enemy class—Wall Street speculators who gambled on his crop futures; the railroad owners who evaded taxes, bought legislatures, and over charged him with discriminate rates; the manufacturers, who taxed him with a high tariff; the trusts, that fleeced him with high prices; the middleman, who stole his profit—had got control of the Democratic Party—the party which had redeemed him from Negro-Republican rule. To seek salvation in the Republican Party

---

<sup>6</sup> Stephen Cresswell, *Rednecks, Redeemers, and Race: Mississippi After Reconstruction, 1877-1917* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 191; Albert D. Kirwan, *Revolt of the Rednecks: Mississippi Politics, 1876-1925* (New York: Harper & Row, Harper Torchbooks, 1951), 122.

was as useless materially as it was unthinkable morally.<sup>7</sup>

Primary elections were the answer, and ever since joining the state senate, Noel had advocated for a law requiring elections for party nominations in lieu of conventions. Primaries were a central tenet of the progressive agenda at the turn of the century and, as one historian characterized Noel, he “regarded himself as the original progressive leader of the state.”<sup>8</sup>

Noel complained conventions tended to defeat “candidates whom the people would have chosen and naming those having the least popular support.” Moreover, he wrote, “Arbitrary and unjust apportionments of delegates, trades, and chicanery opened opportunities and temptations.” A number of newspapers joined Noel in denouncing conventions and agreed with a *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* editorial that portrayed the law establishing conventions as “conceived in sin and born into iniquity.” Noel picked up a key supporter when Andrew Longino was elected governor in 1899. Longino urged adoption of the primary law in his message to the legislature in January 1900, and even though the reform failed in the 1900 session, it overcame one hurdle by passing the senate.<sup>9</sup>

Noel’s primary election legislation, the first senate bill introduced in the 1902 regular session, required elections for party nominations, complete with a runoff if a candidate was unable to secure a first ballot majority. Even today, our primary law retains the runoff feature and provides for an August election, the date set by Noel. It was signed into law by Governor Longino on March 4, 1902.<sup>10</sup> In his history of the forty-year period after Reconstruction in Mississippi, Stephen Cresswell called it one of “two events” that “marked the coming of a new era in state politics.”<sup>11</sup>

Not only did Noel’s bill force candidates to meet directly with voters and solicit their support in person, but Section 9 paved the way

---

<sup>7</sup> Kirwan, 93-94.

<sup>8</sup> Hamilton, 96; Lucas, 13-29.

<sup>9</sup> E. F. Noel, “Mississippi’s Primary Election Law,” *Publications of The Mississippi Historical Society*, 8 (1904): 241; Kirwan, 123-128.

<sup>10</sup> Senate Bill 1, introduced on January 8, 1902, *Journal of the Mississippi Senate*, 1902 Session, 45; *Journal of the Mississippi Senate*, 1902 Session, 445; Chapter 66, *Laws of 1902*. A comprehensive argument in favor of primary elections can be found in the report submitted by its supporters in the *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1902 Session, 292-294.

<sup>11</sup> Cresswell, 191-192. The other “event” noted by Cresswell was the opening of the New Capitol Building in 1903.

for what became known in the South as the “white primary.” That provision restricted a political party’s primary to voters who were “not excluded by regulations of the party State Executive Committee.” Right on cue, the Mississippi Democratic Party’s Executive Committee met in Jackson on June 22, 1903, and adopted a resolution providing “that every white Democrat who will be entitled to vote at the general election in November 1903 be permitted to vote at the primary election to be held by order of this committee.” Pursuant to Noel’s bill, party leaders hung a “whites only” sign over their ballot boxes.<sup>12</sup>

This action appears consistent with what motivated Noel to push for the bill’s passage. In addition to his view that “the people” participating in elections should be limited to “white people,” Noel elaborated on another impetus in a revealing article he wrote in 1904 for the Mississippi Historical Society, in which he expressed concern that conventions were beginning to undermine the cohesiveness needed to buttress white supremacy. First, Noel set forth his position on black voting:

The Mississippi Constitutional Convention of 1890 contained some of the ablest statesmen in the United States, who knew that white supremacy could be legally established only by indirection, as anything aimed directly at the negro, as a race, would be self-destructive . . . Illiterates, tax delinquents, criminals and certain other classes, embracing all the negroes and comparatively few of the whites, were disfranchised.

And then Noel described what was needed to ensure white supremacy:

White supremacy could be maintained only by the members of that race remaining together, politically; otherwise, comparatively few Negroes who were qualified to vote might wield the balance of power. No political organization can long be kept from fractional contests, without confidence in the fairness of its methods of ascertaining and carrying into effect the will of the majority.

And it was the troubles associated with the convention system that

---

<sup>12</sup> Kirwan, 131; “State Ex. Committee,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 22, 1903.

were becoming “more flagrant and far-reaching, causing constantly increasing danger to white supremacy.”<sup>13</sup> Consequently, for forty-one years, or until the United States Supreme Court prohibited the use of white primaries in 1944, Democratic primaries, which decided every major election in Mississippi during that time, were closed to black voters.<sup>14</sup>

In the meantime, when it came to the campaigns of white candidates, Kirwan concluded, the “primary law was to work some profound changes in Mississippi politics.” “The technique of campaigning was revolutionized,” he argued, because candidates would be appealing to tens of thousands of average voters instead of a small number of convention delegates.<sup>15</sup>

Cresswell was blunter: “Under the old convention system, a candidate needed to be skilled at diplomacy and negotiation. Under the primary system, the candidate must be skilled at moving and motivating great crowds of people. Thus the new system could encourage the rise of demagogues and the use of dangerous techniques such as fanning the flames of race hatred to arouse and motivate voters.” Another historian agreed: “With racial antipathy perhaps more intense than at any other time since the days of Reconstruction, and with the poor whites having the first genuine opportunity to vote under a new state primaries law, the rise of the anti-racial agitator in Mississippi politics was a simple matter.” Cresswell’s conclusion: “Passage of the Noel Primary Election Act in time for the 1903 election was a godsend for Vardaman.”<sup>16</sup>

### Noel and the 1903 and 1907 Campaigns

Noel left the Mississippi Senate in 1903 to mount a campaign for governor, though it was his misfortune to join a field that included one of the last Civil War veterans to run for office, F. A. Critz of Clay

---

<sup>13</sup> Noel, *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society*, 241-242.

<sup>14</sup> *Smith v. Allwright*, 321 US 649 (1944), was the Supreme Court decision that invalidated white primaries. See also Michael J. Klarman, “The White Primary Rulings: A Case Study in the Consequences of Supreme Court Decisionmaking,” *Florida State University Law Review*, 29 (Fall 2001): 55-107; and O. Douglass Weeks, “The White Primary,” *Mississippi Law Journal*, 8 (December 1935): 135-153.

<sup>15</sup> Kirwan, 132; Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 12-13.

<sup>16</sup> Cresswell, 193-194; Eugene E. White, “Anti-Racial Agitation in Politics: James Kimble Vardaman in the Mississippi Gubernatorial Campaign of 1903,” *Journal of Mississippi History*, 7 (April 1945): 91; Jesse L. White Jr., “Mississippi Electoral Politics, 1903-1976: The Emerging Modernization Consensus,” (Ph.D. diss. Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1979), 123-124.

County, and James K. Vardaman, a newspaper editor and wordsmith turned fiery stump speaker. A newspaper owner in Winona and Greenwood, Vardaman had tried for statewide office in 1895 and again in 1899 but had been passed over by the state conventions. The new election law was his ticket to the governor's office.<sup>17</sup>

In seeking to understand Noel, one good way is to compare his campaign speeches with those of his chief opponent and polar opposite: Vardaman. What follows are two speeches where the candidates took different approaches to education, the role of blacks, and campaign rhetoric.<sup>18</sup>

### Vardaman

When I speak of educating the people, I mean the white people. The Negro is necessary in the economy of the world, but he was designed for a burden-bearer. Six thousand years ago the Negro was the same in his native jungles that he is today. Where a government has been given to him he has relapsed into barbarism. His civilization veneer lasts just as long as he remains in contact with the white man. Then why squander money on his education.

### Noel

I am not seeking an office where oratory has any place. It is an office of work, not words. Now as to the school question. Vardaman talks a lot about it, but doesn't understand a thing about it . . . . As for Vardaman's plan to take the Negro schools away from the race, I want to tell you that you can't establish a public school for Negroes without establishing one for whites. Under our constitution the entire control of the public schools is absolutely in the hands of the white people.

Throughout the 1903 election, Noel stuck to the issues

---

<sup>17</sup> Nannie Pitts McLemore, "The Progressive Era," *A History of Mississippi*, 2 Vols. (Hattiesburg: University & College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 2: 33-36; William F. Holmes, *The White Chief: James Kimble Vardaman* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1970), 59-80; Kirwan, 144-146.

<sup>18</sup> Heber Ladner, "James Kimble Vardaman, Governor of Mississippi, 1904-1908," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 2 (October 1940): 176-178.

and refused to make black Mississippians the crutch of his campaign. Given that, Vardaman and Critz led the primary, with Vardaman winning the runoff handily. In a move that portended his fallout with Vardaman, Noel supported Critz.<sup>19</sup>

Four years later, however, Noel caught a break. Incumbent U. S. Senator Hernando DeSoto Money announced his retirement in advance of the 1907 elections, so the primary ballot would not only feature the governor's election, but also a very competitive Senate campaign that included Vardaman as the outgoing governor, vying against John Sharp Williams, a popular congressman from Yazoo County.

The difference between the two Senate candidates—and the difference between the two sides of the campaign equation at that time in Mississippi—became apparent at the Williams-Vardaman debate in Meridian on July 4. Since his inaugural address as governor, Vardaman had come out in favor of modifying or repealing the Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments. Williams took him on, arguing that a race baiter like Vardaman could never persuade Congress to make those changes. The turnout was the largest in any election at the time, with Williams edging Vardaman by a sliver of 648 votes.<sup>20</sup>

Meanwhile, six candidates signed up for the governor's race, all from the west side of the state, and all, for lack of a better description, restrained on the issue of race. The field included Charles Scott, a wealthy planter of Bolivar County; Thomas Sisson, a lawyer from Montgomery County; Emmet Thomas, speaker of the house from Washington County; Jeff Truly from Jefferson County; Earl Brewer from Coahoma County; and Noel.<sup>21</sup>

With the campaign season dominated by the Vardaman-Williams fireworks, the election for governor was an afterthought for many voters and focused on minor public policy differences among the candidates, all of whom adopted the "progressive" label.<sup>22</sup> Thanks to the publicity he had acquired from earlier campaigns, Noel led the first primary, with Brewer a close second. Scott came in third. Vardaman subsequently sent "messengers" to Noel and Brewer to determine if either would be a candidate for the 1911 U.S. Senate race, on which Vardaman had designs. When Brewer refused to commit and

---

<sup>19</sup> McLemore, 36; Holmes, 111; Kirwan, 146-161.

<sup>20</sup> Kirwan, 189; Cresswell, 200-201; McLemore, 44.

<sup>21</sup> McLemore, 41-42.

<sup>22</sup> Hamilton, 95; White Jr., 138-141; Kirwan, 185-190.

Noel promised he would not be a candidate, Vardaman announced his support for Noel. Out of 114,812 votes cast in the Democratic runoff, Noel's margin over Brewer was a scant 2,002 votes.<sup>23</sup>

### Noel and the Senate Appointment

While Noel's accomplishments as governor were substantial, it was a decision he made during the Christmas holidays in 1909 that set the stage for the next four decades of Mississippi politics.

It all started soon after the 1907 elections when Vardaman moved his base of operations from the Delta to Jackson and launched *The Issue*, a newspaper that would act as his mouthpiece for the upcoming campaign he was planning for 1911. With Williams in place for six years, Vardaman eyed the other Senate post, this one held by Anselm McLaurin, whose term would be up that year. In explaining Vardaman's motivation for seeking public office so soon after his defeat, William Alexander Percy observed, "He craved public office because the spot-light was his passion."<sup>24</sup>

Suddenly, three days before Christmas, 1909, McLaurin died at his home in Brandon.<sup>25</sup> Even though senators were still chosen by the state legislature, it had become custom in Mississippi for legislators to ratify the primary winner. The problem as 1909 was coming to an end was twofold: there was an immediate vacancy that needed filling and a primary was not scheduled for another two years. Governor Noel had a choice: he could fill the vacancy until the legislature met to choose a replacement for the remainder of the term or bypass the legislature and appoint someone to complete the term. Noel's fateful choice of the first option extended the career of Vardaman and introduced Mississippi to a freshman state senator from Pearl River County—Theodore G. Bilbo.

Even though Noel was under pressure to appoint Vardaman, he snubbed the former governor, and on December 27, named James Gordon, a Monroe County native, to serve as senator until the legislature could choose a successor. Gordon, who

---

<sup>23</sup> Holmes, 192; McLemore, 44; Hamilton, 94.

<sup>24</sup> Cresswell, 202; Kirwan, 191-192; Charles Granville Hamilton, "Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era," (Ph.D. diss., Vanderbilt University, 1958), 142-143; William Alexander Percy, *Lanterns on the Levee* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1941), 143.

<sup>25</sup> Baker, 39; Kirwan, 191.



achieved the rank of colonel in the Confederate Army and later served as a member of the legislature, was seventy-six when he became Mississippi's newest United States senator.<sup>26</sup>

While Noel's choice was arguably the conservative and prudent one—recognizing the legislature as the appropriate appointing authority—his decision turned the legislature into a mini-convention. For reasons lost to history, Noel opted against giving an ally one of the most important political posts in the state and, instead, converted the legislature into the kind of nominating vehicle he had spent his life opposing. Consequently, ten men announced their candidacies for the appointment when the 1910 legislature convened a few days later. It soon became clear the contest was between Vardaman and everyone else. The ensuing “political spectacle” became “the talk of the state” and took more than forty contentious days to produce a nominee.<sup>27</sup>

Not until the fifty-eighth ballot did legislators choose LeRoy Percy, the wealthy planter from Washington County, to represent Mississippi in the United States Senate. In doing so, they made the unfortunate decision to utilize a secret ballot to cast their votes. “The Secret Caucus,” as it became known, evolved into the “rallying cry” for the pro-Vardaman leaders who promised revenge in 1911. As Cresswell noted, “for several years in Mississippi ‘secret caucus’ was a powerful and emotional phrase. The term led voters to believe that secret meetings had elected a Delta aristocrat to the U.S. Senate.”<sup>28</sup>

Moreover, the clandestine nature of the balloting gave Bilbo an opening to allege that Percy's followers had attempted to bribe him, echoing Vardaman's complaint “that whiskey and lumber interests used bribery” to secure Percy's appointment. Grand jury and legislative investigations led to charges and counter-charges,

---

<sup>26</sup> Holmes, 201-202; Cresswell, 202; Frank Smith, “Mississippi Planter, Legislator Doubled as Outdoor Writer,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 7, 1989; MDAH Subject File on James Gordon. In addition to differences in styles between the two men, Vardaman and Noel became embroiled in a bitter controversy during 1908 over the collection and settlement of funds that were to be used to purchase, of all things, a silver service for the newly constructed battleship, the *USS Mississippi*. Moreover, as ungrateful as it may sound, Noel once pointed out to a constituent that Vardaman's endorsement had little to do with his 1907 gubernatorial runoff victory, writing “I do not owe my election to Gov. Vardaman nor to his friends.” See Noel to Mr. R. L. Jones, February 15, 1909, Series 861, Box 1211, Folder 220, Noel Files, MDAH.

<sup>27</sup> See Noel's December 26, 1909, letter to Mr. B.T. Hobbs in Willie D. Halsell, ed., “J.K. Vardaman's Christmas-Tide, 1909,” *Journal of Mississippi History*, 34 (February 1972): 54-55; Morgan, 31-35; Kirwan, 191-192.

<sup>28</sup> Cresswell, 203; Baker, 40-45; Percy, 143-147; Holmes, 212-215; Kirwan, 193-197.

which led to a criminal trial in Yazoo County and an attempt by the Mississippi Senate to oust Bilbo (a move that failed by a single vote). As one newspaper editorialized, "The fair name of the grand ole state is being dragged through the slime and mire." The upshot of the selection process was that Vardaman had garnered all the publicity he needed to mount a campaign against Percy. In the meantime, Bilbo refused to resign and issued a statement calling the investigation a "whitewash."<sup>29</sup>

Noel soon resurfaced as a player when Percy, in response to the controversy, proposed that everyone agree to advance the election to later in 1910. The deal fell through when Noel refused to agree to appoint Vardaman, even had he prevailed in the early election, leaving Vardaman to claim that Percy and Noel were in collusion.<sup>30</sup>

Thus began a campaign that lasted from the spring of 1910 to August of 1911. Much like the 1907 primary, not only would the hotly contested Senate race be on the ballot, but so would all the state and legislative offices. Bilbo saw his opening, aligned himself with Vardaman, and announced his campaign for lieutenant governor. One newspaper writer captured the spirit of the election: "Bilbo is Vardaman property, his by right of discovery, by virtue of the celebrated frame-up, the purpose of which was to destroy an honorable senator, ruin a private citizen, and bring disgrace on the state."<sup>31</sup>

Issues took a back seat to candidate personalities, class, and race. Percy's followers were, according to one historian, "hopelessly outnumbered. Farmers with their rudimentary education and callused hands resented the polished and articulate Percy." To the delight of Vardaman, Percy inadvertently highlighted the class differences when he lost his temper before an unruly crowd and called them cattle and rednecks. Vardaman's followers soon appropriated the labels for their campaign literature.<sup>32</sup>

The 1911 primary election turnout was the largest the state had ever seen. Vardaman and Bilbo won in stunning landslides, while Earl Brewer, whom Noel had defeated four years earlier, became governor. As one historian concluded, "Theodore G. Bilbo owed his

---

<sup>29</sup> Morgan, 31-35; Kirwan, 197-210; Cresswell, 203-205.

<sup>30</sup> Baker, 46-47; Holmes 232-233; *The Issue*, April 21, 1910; Kirwan, 211.

<sup>31</sup> Cresswell, 203-209; Kirwan, 208-219.

<sup>32</sup> Baker, 49-51; Cresswell, 205-206; Percy, 146-148; Kirwan, 212-231.

rise in state politics to the 1903 primary law and to Vardaman.”<sup>33</sup>

Following the election, Noel’s antipathy for Vardaman resurfaced when the governor took advantage of a legislative investigation that found Vardaman had failed to account for \$2,721.27 in expenses when he was governor. Noel sued the newly elected senator, though Vardaman persuaded a judge to issue an injunction preventing the litigation from going forward.<sup>34</sup>

Vardaman would finally represent Mississippi in the U.S. Senate, while Bilbo would go on to win two campaigns for governor, follow Vardaman to Washington as a senator, and become the public face of Mississippi politics for a generation. The Vardaman senate campaigns of 1907 and 1911 bracketed Noel’s tenure as governor and have largely overshadowed the public policy changes he helped create, many of which remain with us today.

### **Noel and the Governor’s Office**<sup>35</sup>

Those of us who have worked for a governor and have managed the affairs of the office are tempted to wonder how different it must have been more than a century ago when Noel assumed the duties and responsibilities of the position. We know from his farewell message to the 1912 legislature that his office staff consisted of a secretary and a stenographer.<sup>36</sup> Gubernatorial staffs now number between thirty and forty. We also know Noel communicated regularly with the legislature in written messages. In the 1908 session alone he sent close to a dozen messages that were reprinted in the journals and that covered a wide variety of public policy issues, something not done today.<sup>37</sup> That kind of communication is left

---

<sup>33</sup> Morgan, 35; Cresswell, 205; White Jr., 106; Vincent A. Giroux Jr., “The Rise of Theodore Bilbo,” *Journal of Mississippi History*, 43 (August 1981): 192.

<sup>34</sup> Holmes, 259-260; Kirwan, 232.

<sup>35</sup> In choosing Noel for this volume, your author got lucky in that Hamilton’s Ph.D. dissertation, referenced earlier, contained a lengthy chapter describing the legislature’s work during Noel’s administration, as did Lucas’s thesis. See also Hamilton, “The Turning Point,” 93-112, and McLemore, 45-49.

<sup>36</sup> “Message of the Governor,” January 4, 1910, *Journal of the Senate*, 1912 Regular Session.

<sup>37</sup> Noel sent so many messages during the 1910 session that one Jackson editor remarked, “To count the day lost whose low descending sun viewed no special message; it is a cold day when [Noel] fails to advocate ten to twenty widely scattering messages.” See Hamilton, “Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era,” 175.

mostly to private conversations between legislators and a governor.

At that time, apparently anyone could walk up to the Governor's Mansion on Capitol Street and transact business with the governor. In an indication of how the governor interacted with people of his day, Noel once wrote, "The [Mansion] is on the direct line of travel from the city and depot to the Capitol, making the Governor, whose signature and suggestions are in constant demand, easy of access."<sup>38</sup> Today, of course, a fence encircles the Mansion and security officers are everywhere.

And Noel thought the position drastically underpaid. When asked by a constituent for a donation to his church, Noel replied, "The salary of the office of Governor is not sufficient to meet the expenses entailed by the position and my means are limited. I am paid less as Governor than I made as a practicing lawyer and my expenses are nearly double."<sup>39</sup>

Given the absence of oral histories and memoirs from the period, it is unlikely we will ever know the full extent of Noel's influence on the passage of legislation in the 1908 and 1910 sessions, as opposed to the efforts of individual legislators, the press, or outside interest groups. One suspects it was a combination of many factors, though, as is still true today, the governor tends to get public credit for any legislative successes.

In an observation that would surely rankle Noel, one historian, writing fifty-six years later, speculated that Vardaman's presence in Jackson may have helped pass Noel's legislative package, which mirrored Vardaman's: "Since more of the legislators gave political allegiance to Vardaman than to Noel, his recommendations may have been more influential than Noel's. His 1907 race, his political orientation toward the next senatorial election in 1911, and his weekly advice to legislators through the columns of *The Issue* helped his leaders in the legislature."<sup>40</sup>

What we know from Noel's speeches and other written materials is that he rarely was the racial demagogue that Vardaman and Bilbo were. The progressive measures he advocated—primary elections, elective judiciary, restrictions on large corporations, income tax—came from sincere beliefs. That being said, those sincere beliefs were directed at helping the white citizens of his state. He made that point clear in his inaugural address, when he observed: "In his distribution

---

<sup>38</sup> Gene Holcomb, "The Mississippi Governor's Mansion," *Journal of Mississippi History*, 2 (January 1940), 14.

<sup>39</sup> Noel to Miss Eunice Callahan, September 8, 1909, Series 861, Box 1216, Folder 316, Noel Files, MDAH.

<sup>40</sup> Hamilton, "The Turning Point," 95.

of blessings the Giver of all Good was, to Mississippi, exceedingly generous. Our climate, soil and forests, if property utilized, [are] the elements of marvelous prosperity. In the purity and excellence of the lineage of our white citizenship our State is unsurpassed.”<sup>41</sup>

At the top of Noel’s list as governor was alcohol. Even before he was inaugurated, Noel gave the keynote speech at a large rally in Jackson on January 9, 1908: “If I were called upon to name one thing that has wrought the most harm in the world, caused more poverty, heartaches, blighted lives, frustrated ambitions, than all other agencies for evil combined, I should say the intemperate use of intoxicating liquors . . . It is an evil without mitigating incident . . . the saloon is an enemy to the Christian religion. It is the destroyer of the happy home.”<sup>42</sup>

Eleven years before the Eighteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution that prohibited the “manufacture, sale, or transportation of intoxicating liquors” was ratified, the 1908 session of the Mississippi legislature, at Noel’s urging, approved a similar measure.<sup>43</sup> Since the law failed to prohibit the importation of liquor into the state or the consumption of alcoholic beverages, one historian described the measure as a “dry” law, just not a “bone dry” law.<sup>44</sup> The 1908 law is still on the books and remains the reason Mississippi has “dry” counties and “wet” counties.<sup>45</sup> Even after the Eighteenth Amendment was repealed in 1933, Mississippi’s prohibition remained intact until 1966.

Mississippi has elective judges today largely because Noel fought for them much of his career, arguing that:

Election of judges . . . requires neither more nor different virtue and sense from that involved in choosing district attorneys and other officers. If our carefully culled, high-grade electors are unfit to name judges, their unfitness is equally applicable to other officers and would prove them unworthy of self-government. The people wish to settle this question

---

<sup>41</sup> Edmond Favor Noel, “Inaugural Address,” January 21, 1908, in *Inaugural Addresses of the Governors of Mississippi, 1890-1980* (University, Miss.: The University, 1980).

<sup>42</sup> Noel’s address is quoted in Rev. T. J. Bailey, *Prohibition in Mississippi* (Jackson: Hederman Bros. Printing, 1917), 124-125.

<sup>43</sup> Chapter 113, *Laws of 1908*, 112.

<sup>44</sup> Hamilton, “The Turning Point,” 103.

<sup>45</sup> Hamilton, “Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era,” 155.

for themselves and should be trusted with its settlement.<sup>46</sup>

While the sentiment was surely worthy, there is nothing in Noel's history that would suggest he was thinking about anyone other than white voters.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, after years of work, and at Noel's urging, the 1910 legislature approved a constitutional amendment that was ratified by the voters in an election later that year, to make chancery and circuit judges elective.<sup>48</sup>

The reason Mississippi still has a handful of agricultural high schools can be traced back to the 1908 legislature and the law passed at Noel's suggestion to authorize county boards of supervisors to establish one agricultural high school "for the purpose of instructing the white youth of the county in high school branches, theoretical and practical agriculture." Two years later, after litigation forced the legislature's hand on the whites-only policy, the lawmakers amended the law to authorize the boards of supervisors to establish not more than two agricultural high schools, "one for white youths exclusively and the other for colored youths exclusively."<sup>49</sup>

The single board of trustees that governs all of Mississippi's universities dates back to the 1910 law passed by the legislature, at Noel's request, that gave one board "sole supervision and control."<sup>50</sup> In that same session, the legislature created the Mississippi Normal College, to train "quality teachers for the public schools,"

---

<sup>46</sup> Noel Inaugural Address, January 21, 1908. See also Noel's February 17, 1908, message to the legislature in the *Journal of the Senate*, 1908 Session, 329-330.

<sup>47</sup> In one case Noel refused to reappoint a black notary public in Greenville, telling a constituent, "I believe it to be best that Negroes should not be appointed to office in this state." In another letter to a constituent, Noel demonstrated racial paternalism at its best when he wrote, "It is cowardly and vicious for a superior race to deal unjustly with an inferior race." Letters from Noel's papers as governor in Hamilton, "Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era," 183.

<sup>48</sup> Chapter 358, *Laws of 1910*, approved by Governor Noel on March 30, 1910, amended Section 153 of the 1890 Constitution (added to the constitution, following the 1910 election, by Chapter 415, *Laws of 1912*). Supreme Court judges were not made elective until 1914, when the legislature approved, and the voters ratified, the change to Section 145 of the 1890 Constitution. See Chapter 514, *Laws of 1914* (added to the Constitution by Chapter 156, *Laws of 1916*).

<sup>49</sup> Chapter 102, *Laws of 1908*, 92; see also Hamilton, "Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era," 178-180, and Lucas, 49-55. In her discussion of the 1908 law Lucas wrote, "These schools were, of course, to be attended by the white children in the counties and no provision was made for the Negroes to have a similar school . . . Like most Southern progressives, Noel saw no paradox in the combination of progressivism and support of the principle of white supremacy."

<sup>50</sup> Chapter 114, *Laws of 1910*, 98; see also Hamilton, "Mississippi Politics in the Progressive Era," 186.

which ultimately became the University of Southern Mississippi.<sup>51</sup>

The 1908 and 1910 sessions of the legislature passed a number of measures in keeping with the progressive spirit of the time, including more rigorous regulation of corporations,<sup>52</sup> protections for workers injured at sawmills and for telegraph operators who were affiliated with unions,<sup>53</sup> restrictions on child labor,<sup>54</sup> and what today we would call consumer protections. One 1910 law made it unlawful for a firm to “manufacture, produce or sell any article of food which is adulterated, misbranded, or insufficiently labeled,”<sup>55</sup> while another measure adopted that session required “every hotel and inn keeper to furnish clean and fresh bed linens, unused by any other person or guest since the last laundering of such bed linens, on all beds.”<sup>56</sup>

In 1910, Noel spoke out firmly in favor of ratifying the Sixteenth Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, which authorized Congress to impose the income tax. In a special message to legislators, he wrote: “The most equitable of all taxes are those upon net incomes in excess of the few thousands of dollars, exempted to meet expenses of living or unexpected business reversals . . . The adoption of this amendment . . . empowers the Federal Government, in its discretion, to call for a share of the net incomes of those who are most able to contribute to the expense of government.”<sup>57</sup>

Finally, to Noel’s great credit, and that of his wife Alice, the Governor’s Mansion was expanded, restored and preserved during his term. In an early message to the 1908 legislature, Noel proposed four options for the future of the crumbling building:

---

<sup>51</sup> Chapter 119, *Laws of 1910*, 105.

<sup>52</sup> Chapter 118, *Laws of 1908*, 120; Chapter 119, *Laws of 1908*, 124.

<sup>53</sup> Chapter 131, *Laws of 1908*; Chapter 93, *Laws of 1908*, 75, prohibited companies in the state from “blacklisting” and refusing to employ telegraph operators who were affiliated with labor unions.

<sup>54</sup> Chapter 99, *Laws of 1908*, 88, provided that no child who was under the age of twelve would be allowed to work or be employed in any mill or factory and that no child under the age of sixteen would be allowed to work more than ten hours in a day or fifty-eight hours in any one week.

<sup>55</sup> Chapter 132, *Laws of 1910*, 119.

<sup>56</sup> Chapter 163, *Laws of 1910*. All these reforms were supported by Noel at one time or another through his messages to the legislature. For example, he addressed the need for child labor and food safety regulations in his message on page 832 of the *Journal of the Senate*, 1908 Session.

<sup>57</sup> The formal ratification recorded in Chapter 361, *Laws of 1910*, 308; Noel’s legislative message is in the *Journal of the House of Representatives*, 1910 Special Session, 21. See also Noel’s message to the 1912 Legislature, *Journal of the Senate*, 137. The Sixteenth Amendment was proposed by Congress in 1909 and approved by the required number of states in 1913.

Shall the lot be disposed of and provision made for the Governor to live in a place and manner of his own selection? Or,

Shall the Mansion be allowed to remain in its present dilapidated, unhealthful and decaying condition? Or,

Shall the lot and building be sold and a Mansion erected elsewhere? Or,

Shall the grounds and building be modernized and beautified and be made a credit and source of public pride?

Noel then went through a long list of reasons to support option #4, proclaiming that “the patriotic citizenship of this State are ashamed of the present condition of the Executive Mansion. The appearance of the building and grounds bring mortification to all who are proud of their State.”<sup>58</sup>

Noel and his wife organized a number of groups to support the renovation, and on March 7, 1908, they hosted a reception at the Mansion for legislators and other state officials to expose its “decrepit” conditions. Two weeks later, the legislature appropriated \$30,000 for “repair and improvement of the Governor’s Mansion, the erection of an annex thereto, and the grading, paving, and ornamentation of the grounds and walks.” After the work was completed, Noel happily moved his family out of the Edwards Hotel and into the Mansion in April 1909.<sup>59</sup>

Two other legacies of the Noel Administration continue to this day. Mississippi’s state holiday to honor Robert E. Lee—“our beloved Confederate Chieftain and Southern Hero”—was approved by the governor on March 30, 1910. A few weeks earlier, Noel signed legislation authorizing a monument to the Mississippi Women of the Confederacy, “in order that all future generations shall learn the lessons of the magnificent heroism of Mississippi’s Daughters during the Confederate War and that the state may forever show that she values their patriotic devotion in that time of her deepest distress.”

---

<sup>58</sup> “Message to the Legislature,” February 26, 1908, *Journal of the Senate*, 1908 Session, 436-438.

<sup>59</sup> Holcomb, 14-17; Chapter 30 and Chapter 138, *Laws of 1908*. Chapter 30 appropriated the \$30,000 while Chapter 138 authorized the expenditure. See also David G. Sansing and Carroll Waller, *A History of the Mississippi Governor’s Mansion* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1977), 101-107.



That monument now stands on the south side of the Capitol.<sup>60</sup>

Noel was enough of a progressive that he called for reforms that were decades ahead of their time—equalization of property taxes, reapportionment of legislative districts based on population, campaign finance disclosure, and regulation of lobbyists. That being said, when Noel declared in a legislative message that “there can be no self-government unless the will of the majority is ascertained and crystallized into law. It can only be ascertained at elections, and the result of such elections should be reflected in legislation,” he was surely referring to the will of the white minority of Mississippi’s population.<sup>61</sup>

After leaving the governor’s office, Noel turned down appeals in 1916 to run for the state Supreme Court but opted instead to oppose Vardaman in his 1918 Senate re-election campaign. Mississippi Congressman Pat Harrison was also a candidate in that race, and it was Harrison who took the Senate seat away from Vardaman. Noel finished a distant third. The next year, he was urged to run for his old state senate seat in Holmes County, which he did successfully, and then was re-elected in 1923. He died at his home on July 30, 1927, at the age of seventy-one. His wife Alice died six years later, and they are buried next to each other at the Lexington Cemetery.<sup>62</sup>

In the first half of the twentieth century, twenty-one white men served Mississippi as governor or United States senator. Of that number, the only two names most Mississippians recognize today are James K. Vardaman and Theodore G. Bilbo. Noel gave them the platform they needed in 1902 and the cause they needed at the end of 1909. I doubt he regretted either decision though he probably was not happy with the outcome.

---

<sup>60</sup> Chapter 171, *Laws of 1910*, 164, enacted the holiday, while Chapter 153, *Laws of 1910*, 147, authorized the erection of the monument.

<sup>61</sup> “Message to the Legislature,” March 6, 1908, *Journal of the Senate*, 1908 Session, 543.

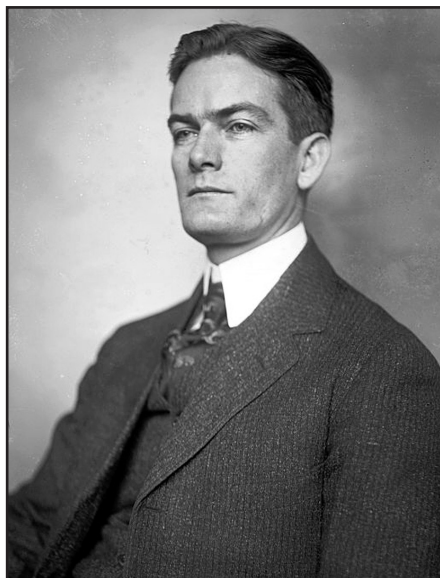
<sup>62</sup> “Noel Not a Candidate,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 31, 1916; Sansing, 142-143; *Lexington Advertiser*, April 4, 1919, and August 8, 1919. Tombstones in the Lexington Odd Fellows Cemetery.



# Paul B. Johnson Sr. (1940-1943), the New Deal, and the Battle for Free Textbooks in Mississippi

by *Kevin D. Greene*

Tuesday, January 16, 1940, was a cold, clear winter day in Jackson, Mississippi. At high noon a crowd of thousands, including the Mississippi legislature, former governor Hugh L. White, reporters, family, and friends, watched as Mississippi inaugurated its forty-sixth governor, Judge Paul Burney Johnson Sr. A Hattiesburg lawyer, judge, and veteran politician, Johnson stood stoically on the steps of Mississippi's capitol as Supreme Court Chief Justice Sydney Smith administered the oath of office before "a crowd rated by many keen observers as the greatest ever gathered in Jackson."<sup>1</sup> Immediately after, Johnson delivered an hour-long address to the legislature and the crowd that highlighted his multi-faceted



*Paul B. Johnson Sr., Courtesy,  
Mississippi Department of Archives and  
History*

agenda. Humbly, Johnson expressed his willingness "to dedicate and consecrate" his life to the performance of his duties as Mississippi's newest governor. He admonished, moreover, those in the audience to revel in the moment, suggesting while "Europe is an upheaval unparalleled in its history," Mississippi was "trying to build goodwill among

---

<sup>1</sup> *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, January 17, 1940.

---

KEVIN D. GREENE is an assistant professor of history and director of the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage at the University of Southern Mississippi. He is the author of "Just a Dream:" The Invention and Reinvention of Big Bill Broonzy, a cultural and intellectual examination of the life of William "Big Bill" Broonzy.

men.”<sup>2</sup> As the speech progressed, Johnson boasted of the state’s recent advancements in health care, scientific improvements in agriculture, economic growth, and industrial progress. To Johnson, at no point in Mississippi’s history had “labor and capital been on such friendly terms.”<sup>3</sup>

In a sense, the address’s first thirty minutes showcased Johnson’s attempt to unify Mississippi’s electorate under the banner of his populist ideologies by heralding the Magnolia State’s progress, even as it sloggled through the Great Depression. After all, two of his predecessors, Theodore Bilbo and Martin “Mike” Conner, had limited success in bringing economic relief to a state \$12 million in debt at the height of the Depression.<sup>4</sup> The real fireworks began as Governor Johnson explained policy details in his strikingly New Deal, progressive agenda. Intending to bring Mississippi out of the Depression, Johnson argued for tax increases; the creation of child welfare services; a repeal of the poll tax; the consolidation of state government commissions and offices; plans for timber, oil, and gas conservation; cheap automobile tags; homestead exemption; and the construction of a central state hospital. Yet the most progressive plank in his platform spoke nothing of revenue creation, bureaucratic consolidation, or resource conservation. The issue “close to [his] heart” argued for a free textbook program for all children of the state.<sup>5</sup> On free textbooks Johnson proclaimed:

Our government is reflected in its citizenship. How can we build a great people in such a situation? How can a child obtain an education without books? It is the duty of the State to see that every child shall have an opportunity to acquire at least an elementary education and I recommend free text books for every child in the State. Knowledge is the basis of happiness and self-protection. To know and value his rights, no educated man can be enslaved. I believe first that it is our duty to build men and women. The greatest resource of our state is our children. Igno-

---

<sup>2</sup> Paul B. Johnson, “Governor’s Inaugural Address,” Jackson Capitol Building, Jackson, Mississippi, January 16, 1940, Box 5, Folder 8, Johnson Family Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

<sup>3</sup> Johnson, “Governor’s Inaugural Address.”

<sup>4</sup> John K. Bettersworth, *Mississippi: A History* (Austin, Tex.: The Steck Company, 1959), 423.

<sup>5</sup> Johnson, “Governor’s Inaugural Address.”

rance and illiteracy are the greatest enemies of mankind.<sup>6</sup>

For years, Johnson, the undisputed champion of the “runt pig people,” had campaigned at every corner in Mississippi urging voters to recognize how beneficial a free textbook program could be in the improvement of Mississippi’s educational future.<sup>7</sup> The battle over the free textbook program would become one of Johnson’s most difficult challenges as he began directing Mississippi toward New Deal liberalism. His innate ability to persevere in tough times, coupled with his gift for forming powerful relationships across his life, prepared him for a lifetime in public office. As the sun set on his lengthy career in state and national politics, Mississippi’s free textbook program became his crowning achievement.

Paul Burney Johnson Sr. was born on March 23, 1880, to Jane McClenahan Johnson and Thomas Benton Johnson in Hillsboro, Scott County, Mississippi. His paternal grandparents, Jourdan Johnson and Sarah Burney Johnson, had married in 1808 after arriving in Mississippi from Virginia and South Carolina, respectively. Paul “Burney” Johnson was named after his grandmother. His grandparents’ home, or what he called the “Johnson homestead,” stood in Lawrence County, Mississippi, “near Monticello.”<sup>8</sup> There, his paternal grandparents raised ten children between 1808 and 1838. His maternal grandfather, William Hays McClenahan, an Irish immigrant from New York, married Sarah Robinson in the early nineteenth century and, at some point, lived in Pelahatchie and Morton, Mississippi, in bordering Scott and Rankin Counties. Paul B. Johnson’s parents, Thomas and Jane Johnson, raised ten children of their own (two died in infancy) near Hillsboro, where Thomas Johnson practiced law for thirty years. In addition, Thomas Johnson served four years in the Confederacy beginning at age twenty-two, enlisting in Mississippi but serving in the Army of Northern Virginia, where he was both captured and wounded several times, “but never severely.”<sup>9</sup>

Forced at an early age to become the family breadwinner due to

---

<sup>6</sup> Johnson, “Governor’s Inaugural Address.”

<sup>7</sup> Johnson qualified himself as a populist champion of the “average man” and used the term “runt pig” as a metaphor for Mississippi’s mass of poor and rural voters. If given an equal opportunity, he argued, even a “runt pig” could become a fine hog. See *Betterworth*, 425-26.

<sup>8</sup> Paul B. Johnson to Kate Barksdale, December 30, 1937, Box 5, Folder 2, Johnson Family Papers.

<sup>9</sup> Thomas Benton Johnson served in the 12<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Infantry regiments in Robert E. Lee’s Army of Northern Virginia and may, in fact, have served in the 1<sup>st</sup> Texas. See *Compiled Service Record*, Thomas B. Johnson, 12<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Infantry, 19<sup>th</sup> Mississippi Infantry, and 1<sup>st</sup> Texas Infantry, Fold3.com. Also see, Paul B. Johnson to Kate Barksdale, December 30, 1937, Johnson Family Papers.

his father's poor health, Paul B. worked on the family farm, in cotton fields, at local lumber mills, and blacksmith shops around Hillsboro. He attended a one-room, lean-to school in rural Scott County and enrolled in Harpersville College, the former Stonewall Jackson Institute, which enrolled roughly 125 students.<sup>10</sup> After completing his studies at Harpersville, Johnson taught in a local rural school, worked as a store clerk, and studied law by candlelight after work. In 1899, Paul B. Johnson moved with his family to the rapidly growing south Mississippi timber town of Hattiesburg. While in the Hub City, he taught in a local school, worked for the J. J. Newman Lumber Company, and continued his education at Millsaps, eventually following his passion for studying law by completing the college's law course.

Tragedy struck in 1902 when his mother passed away. As a result, his ailing father "broke up housekeeping" and moved in with Paul B. Johnson's sister, ultimately losing the family's records, heirlooms, and library, and falling into tremendous debt, reconciled by Paul Burney after he became a judge. A year later in 1903, Johnson was admitted to the Mississippi State Bar. Within a year, he had opened his own law practice in the Hub City, garnering enough attention and respect in Hattiesburg's business and legal communities to win a seat on the bench as a judge for the city of Hattiesburg from 1907 to 1908. Around this time, he married Corrine Veneable, and the two raised four children, including future Mississippi governor Paul B. Johnson Jr. In pursuit of his growing political ambitions, Judge Johnson was appointed Circuit Judge of the Twelfth Judicial District of Mississippi in 1910 by the governor and elected to the position four years later in 1914.<sup>11</sup>

Johnson's first real test as an aspiring politician—one that would prepare him for future political battles—came late in his first term on the bench as a circuit court judge. In the fall of 1913, Judge Johnson became the subject of an investigation by the Mississippi legislature concerning the nature of the judge's conduct in the district. J. C. Clark, a Laurel, Mississippi, native, implored the legislature to investigate charges of what amounted to "tyranny in office." On October 28, Clark listed more than a half-dozen accusations against Johnson, alleging the judge had abused his power. Clark accused Johnson of infractions that included jury tampering and humiliation, witness intimidation, fixing evidence,

---

<sup>10</sup> *Biographical and Historical Memoirs of Mississippi* (Chicago: The Goodspeed Publishing Company, 1891), 341.

<sup>11</sup> "Governor Johnson Passes Away," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, December 27, 1940

preferential treatment, suspension of habeas corpus, denying representation to the charged, conspiracy, and using the bench to secure illegal business transactions. Clark claimed he had even heard Judge Johnson boast that he “made juries render the verdicts he wants,” essentially accusing the judge of controlling “everyone connected to his courts.”<sup>12</sup>

Johnson was quite suspicious of the origin and nature of the charges, as powerful business interests and western boomtown culture sought influence over the Twelfth District’s court system. To Johnson, these baseless accusations stemmed from “the work of the whiskey ring, the lawless element, and the railroads, who want a judge who will perform to their liking.”<sup>13</sup> After all, Johnson had fostered a hardnose reputation for cracking down on what he considered duplicitous, criminal activity. For example, in March of 1913, Judge Johnson presided over the grand jury selection of the Second District of Jones County. As the jurors were empaneled and sworn in, Johnson reminded the courtroom of the dangers plaguing south Mississippi towns, including gambling, carrying concealed firearms, public drunkenness, and illicit liquor and cocaine consumption, as well as prostitution and vagrancy. Without “fear, favor, or affection,” Judge Johnson charged the jurors to objectively uphold the law at all costs.<sup>14</sup>

As the investigation took shape, Judge Johnson defended himself in a *Richton Dispatch* op-ed directed to the investigative commission’s head, Mississippi state senator Albert Anderson of Tippah County. In the piece, Johnson admitted that he had “perhaps made mistakes” on the bench. Yet no “honorable gentleman,” he argued, would suggest he had “intentionally done any man a wrong or injury” during his tenure as circuit judge.<sup>15</sup> The Laurel Mississippi Pastor’s Association (LPA) seemed to support his argument as well in a public vindication of Johnson. A front-page column in the *Laurel Daily Argus* testified that Johnson had “given them a clean city and county,” believing the charges were, in fact, inspired by the “lawless element of the district . . . for sinister motives.”<sup>16</sup> By backing Johnson, the LPA agreed he faced persecution due to his strong enforcement of the law and the

---

<sup>12</sup> “Only Charges Are J. C. Clark’s” *Laurel Daily Argus*, October 28, 1913.

<sup>13</sup> “Johnson Convinced He Will Be Vindicated,” *Laurel Daily Argus*, October 28, 1913.

<sup>14</sup> “Circuit Court Convened for March Term This Morning,” *Laurel Daily Argus*, March 17, 1913.

<sup>15</sup> Paul B. Johnson Sr. to Mr. A.C. Anderson, Chairman Investigative Committee, *Richton Dispatch*, October 21, 1913.

<sup>16</sup> “Laurel Pastors Endorse Johnson,” *Laurel Daily Argus*, October 27, 1913.

“punishment of criminals.”<sup>17</sup> To make their point, the LPA placed copies of their resolutions in “the *Laurel Daily Argus*, the *Hattiesburg News*, and the New Orleans and Mobile papers for publication.”<sup>18</sup>

The following week, between Tuesday, October 28, and Halloween 1913 in the Forrest County Courthouse, a legislative committee, under the leadership of Senator Anderson, explained the charges, introduced evidence, and examined witnesses. The courthouse nearly burst from the overcrowded mass gathered to witness the events. Rather quickly, the committee uncovered the disingenuous nature of the charges against the accused, as attorneys and judges across Forrest and Jones counties testified on Johnson’s behalf. The commission examined a local judge, twenty-three lawyers, two ministers, a deputy sheriff, one banker, a former justice of the peace, a farmer, and six local businessmen. Johnson’s accuser, J. C. Clark, failed to make an appearance. Several of Johnson’s political and personal enemies, including a deputy sheriff and a local Hattiesburg attorney, offered the commission their personal accounts of the judge’s alleged abuses.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, on Friday, October 31, 1913, Chairman Anderson decreed, “In our judgement the testimony given the committee does not warrant impeachment proceedings being brought against Johnson, but in some instances he is subject to criticism, which will be fully discussed and pointed out in a brief report addressed to the legislature.”<sup>20</sup> Despite the investigation’s highly publicized nature, Johnson’s reputation remained intact, and he ultimately won a second term in the Twelfth District in August of 1914 by a margin of five hundred votes.<sup>21</sup>

After serving his second term on the Twelfth District bench, Johnson announced his bid for a seat in the United States Congress for Mississippi’s sixth congressional district. On Saturday, June 21, 1917, on the courthouse square in downtown Hattiesburg in front of a crowd “estimated at four to six thousand,” Judge Johnson outlined his platform. His program offered a solidly progressive agenda, calling for the conservation of piney woods timber, legislation for the prevention of war profiteering, adoption of child labor laws, money for improving rivers and harbors, and advocacy for a federal highway system. In response,

---

<sup>17</sup> “Laurel Pastors Endorse Johnson.”

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> “Political Foes Heard in the Probe of Johnson,” *The New Orleans Item*, October 30, 1913.

<sup>20</sup> “Johnson Cleared of Charges Made by His Accusers,” *New Orleans Daily Picayune*, November 1, 1913.

<sup>21</sup> “Judge Johnson’s Big Victory,” *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, August 21, 1914.



the boisterous crowd applauded their candidate, chanting “Johnson” in unison while “hats were thrown in the air and handkerchiefs waved.”<sup>22</sup>

Johnson ran a strong campaign against governor and veteran politician, Theodore Bilbo, the “Prince of the Peckerwoods” from Poplarville, who had surged to the top of Mississippi’s progressive political era.<sup>23</sup> Of course, Mississippi’s electoral politics centered on a one-party system ensuring that Democratic party factionalism and late-summer primaries determined all outcomes in the state’s election cycles. And in this era of Mississippi politics, political rivals often engaged in bitterly derisive and caustic campaigns.<sup>24</sup> Bilbo attacked Johnson’s progressive record on organized labor, arguing Johnson’s time on the bench in Hattiesburg had, in fact, placed him in much closer proximity to corporate officials whom he favored far more than wage laborers.<sup>25</sup> Johnson supporters shot back, “His (Bilbo) low moral character is well known to every person in the state . . . send him into oblivion and let him be forgotten.”<sup>26</sup> The Congressional election would not be the last time Judge Johnson would campaign against Bilbo, although the two would hold a tenuous but mutual respect for one another throughout their careers. In the end, Bilbo’s decision as governor to back federal United States Department of Agriculture regulations placing federal agents near independent cattle farmers distrustful of federal regulation destroyed his campaign.<sup>27</sup> Johnson won the first primary with

---

<sup>22</sup> “Judge Paul B. Johnson Speaks to Crowd of Over Thousand People,” *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, June 22, 1917.

<sup>23</sup> Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press), 24-57.

<sup>24</sup> V. O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1949), 229-253.

<sup>25</sup> “Read This Before You Vote: Gov. Bilbo’s Labor Record vs. Judge Johnson’s Labor Record,” September 5, 1918, Box 9, Folder 7, Johnson Family Papers.

<sup>26</sup> “Let Him Pass,” *Jackson Daily News*, September 8, 1918.

<sup>27</sup> Theodore Bilbo and Paul B. Johnson shared an intense rivalry across their long political careers. Bilbo would remain a potent force in Mississippi politics as a two-time governor and United States senator until his death in 1947. Mississippi’s factional, one-party system ensured that Johnson and Bilbo remained constantly at odds across much of the 1920s and 1930s. Their rivalry transformed into open war during the 1935 campaign for the governorship, when then-Senator Bilbo backed Johnson’s opponent Hugh L. White in one of the most vicious elections in Mississippi History. Recognizing Bilbo’s undeniable impact on state politics, though, Johnson put his feelings for the cantankerous, erstwhile governor aside in 1939 to form a coalition that would lead to his election to the governor’s office. In fact, the first official correspondence Johnson sent as the forty-sixth governor was to none other than Theodore Bilbo. See Paul B. Johnson Sr. to Theodore Bilbo January 17, 1940, Box 5, Folder 12, Johnson Family Papers. See also, Dennis Mitchell, *Mississippi: A New History* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi), 310-11; and Morgan, 216-24.

8,787 votes to Bilbo's 6,420. Prophetically, *The Daily Clarion-Ledger* predicted Johnson's victory in the second primary over the "Rubber Stamp Governor."<sup>28</sup> Once the dust settled, Johnson had crushed Bilbo by 5,000 votes, capturing sixteen of the district's seventeen counties.<sup>29</sup>

For the next four years, Johnson made a name for himself as a junior Congressman from Hattiesburg, working toward his progressive agenda and building lifelong relationships in Washington that would eventually aid his aspirations in Mississippi state politics. Johnson's time on Capitol Hill seemed to suit the judge quite well, both professionally and personally. On August 26, 1919, Johnson delivered a well-received and impassioned speech to the House of Representatives arguing for the creation of a land redistribution program of the "more than 300,000,000 acres of wild, unused land" in the United States to aid war-weary veterans from World War I seeking a fresh start.<sup>30</sup> His successes in Congress, moreover, translated into personal gains. In February of 1921, Judge Johnson reported owning no less than twenty lots of downtown property to the city of Hattiesburg's real estate tax commission.<sup>31</sup> One month earlier, Johnson had shipped a 1921 Nash Sport Model convertible by train from Hattiesburg to Washington, D.C. on the New Orleans and Northeastern Railway.<sup>32</sup> In July of 1921, Corrine Johnson received an unsigned letter and attached newspaper clipping from *The Philadelphia Public Ledger* championing the judge's reputation as a "ladies man of good looks, fine manners and pleasing personality."<sup>33</sup> "The Other Congressmen," the letter suggested, were "simply green with envy."<sup>34</sup> Despite these successes, Johnson would only serve in the 66<sup>th</sup> and 67<sup>th</sup> United States Congress, preferring to return to Hattiesburg in 1923 to continue his legal practice and pilot his rapidly expanding law firm. Steadily, for the next seven years, Johnson began crafting a path toward his ultimate political goal—the Mississippi governor's office.

Johnson campaigned for governor the first time in 1931 against

---

<sup>28</sup> "Change of 956 Votes Would Elect Johnson," *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, August 22, 1918.

<sup>29</sup> "Paul Johnson, Hattiesburg's Congressman: Who Took His Seat in the New Congress Yesterday at the National Capitol," *Hattiesburg American*, May 20, 1919.

<sup>30</sup> Paul B. Johnson, "Justice to the Poor Means Strength to the Nation," speech before the United States House of Representatives, August 26, 1919, Box 7, Folder 7, Johnson Family Papers.

<sup>31</sup> City of Hattiesburg, Mississippi, Real Estate Tax List, Paul B. Johnson, February 1, 1921, Box 1, Folder 4, Johnson Family Papers.

<sup>32</sup> Southern Railway Company Freight Bill, Box 1, Folder 4, Johnson Family Papers.

<sup>33</sup> Unknown author to Corrine V. Johnson, July 21, 1921, Box 1, Folder 12, Johnson Family Papers.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

five candidates: Hugh White, Stewart Broom, Lester Franklin, George Mitchell, and eventual winner, Mike Conner. Many considered Johnson one of the strongest contenders, given his earlier 1918 defeat of the then wildly unpopular, term-limited incumbent, Theodore Bilbo. Although running on a progressive platform, including a free textbook program for elementary school children, Johnson lost in the first primary, ultimately throwing his political weight behind Columbia, Mississippi, industrialist Hugh L. White. Despite Johnson's backing, White lost the second primary and Mike Conner became Mississippi's forty-fourth governor.<sup>35</sup>

Johnson ran again in 1935 in what would become one of the most notorious gubernatorial elections in Mississippi history. Promising his familiar platform, including free textbooks, homestead exemption, cheap automobile tags, old-age pensions, and public hospital reform, Johnson seemed poised to make a deeper run than his last in 1931. Indeed, Johnson won the first primary by 696 votes over Hugh L. White. Throughout the second primary, Johnson espoused potent populist rhetoric as he attacked, with some success, White's wealthy, "Ole Millionaire White" background. Almost overnight, everything changed when one of the most infamous politicians in American history decided yet again to dabble in Mississippi politics. By mid-August, former Louisiana governor and then-junior U.S. senator Huey P. Long endorsed Johnson as his preferred candidate in the election. In dramatic fashion, the election quickly shifted in aim and tone.<sup>36</sup> Because of Long's public endorsement of Johnson, the Johnson campaign went on the defensive to buffer Long's interference in Mississippi state politics. White's team, with unabashed support from anti-Long senators Pat Harrison and Theodore Bilbo, Johnson's old nemesis, along with the *Jackson Daily News's* chief editor Frederick Sullens, relentlessly assailed Johnson as a puppet of Long's demagogic ambitions to fracture the 1936 Democratic National Convention and to control Mississippi politics.<sup>37</sup> The charges and attacks, which Johnson vehemently denied, became so vicious that he would admit the following spring that the White campaign coalition

---

<sup>35</sup> Annie Kate Hollingsworth Jackson, "The Political Rise of Martin Sennett Conner" (master's thesis, Mississippi State College, 1950), 54-64.

<sup>36</sup> Long had entered Mississippi politics well before the 1935 election. He had, in fact, endorsed Mike Conner in the 1931 gubernatorial race. See T. Harry Williams, *Huey Long* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1969), 533-34. For the 1935 election see, Curtis Norban Cochran, "Hugh L. White and the Inauguration of the BAWI Program in Mississippi" (master's thesis, Mississippi State College, 1950), 16-39; and Morgan, 80-86; 96-106.

<sup>37</sup> Cochran, "Hugh L. White and the Inauguration of the BAWI Program in Mississippi," 22-36.

of "Harrison, Bilbo, White and Sullens" was collectively "working night and day to destroy me."<sup>38</sup> The vitriolic and toxic nature of the campaign leeches into the polling place, as Election Day closed with various documented brawls, shootings, stabbings, and throat slashings in Alcorn, Quitman, Tallahatchie, and Smith counties. In the end, Huey Long's impact, coupled with machinations from Mississippi's two U.S. senators, proved too much for Johnson. In some ways, though, the 1935 election was perhaps more of a repudiation of Long rather than a rejection of Johnson. White had carried fifty counties to Johnson's thirty-two, ultimately edging out his opponent by twelve thousand votes. Following his defeat, Johnson returned to his law practice and continued his active involvement in the newly formed Mississippi State Bar Commission.<sup>39</sup> Despite the defeat, Johnson was as determined as ever to win the governor's chair. He would make his mark in the 1939 election.

Although much less vitriolic than the 1935 election, the 1939 race for governor yet again exposed the inherently quirky nature of Mississippi's one-party politics. Senior United States senator Pat Harrison, along with incumbent governor Hugh White, vowed to dominate Mississippi's Democratic Party following the 1935 election. Johnson, still burning from the nastiness of the previous election, became equally determined to defeat the Harrison-White coalition in 1939. But he would need powerful allies to pull it off. Resting in the middle of this political tug of war stood former Mississippi state senator, lieutenant governor and governor, and first-term United States senator, Theodore Bilbo. Bilbo had won the 1934 race for United States Senate and faced an election year in 1940, with Mississippi incumbent governor Hugh White eyeing his seat in the U.S. Senate. With Harrison's backing, White would be a strong candidate and capable of challenging the Bilbo machine if the duo could put their own man in the governor's chair. Furthermore, if Bilbo were to survive the 1940 election with his Senate position intact, then he desperately needed an ally in the governor's office as well. Incredibly, he found a collaborator in his longtime archrival, Paul B. Johnson Sr. Of course, the future of the New Deal in Mississippi, like four years earlier, stood at the center of the 1939 race, and with Bilbo in his corner, Johnson could run and win as Mississippi's legitimate New

---

<sup>38</sup> Paul B. Johnson Sr. to T. M. Hederman, April 20, 1936, Box 5, Folder 1, Johnson Family Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Johnson was heavily involved in the Mississippi State Bar Commission's first few annual meetings. See draft of 1933 and 1934 Annual Meeting Programs, Box 1, Folder 10, Johnson Family Papers.

Deal candidate against whomever the conservative Harrison-White faction might support. This time around, however, the looming July 1940 Democratic National Convention offered an opportunity for the Johnson-Bilbo team to closely position Mississippi within Roosevelt's inner circle. Both men believed that a Johnson victory in 1939 and a successful bid by Bilbo for a second term in 1940 would loosen for good Pat Harrison's longstanding grip on Mississippi's place in national politics.<sup>40</sup>

By the late summer of 1938, Johnson and Bilbo began strategizing through meetings and correspondence on the proper path that might lead to a Johnson victory.<sup>41</sup> From September 1938 to July 1939, Johnson and Bilbo exchanged views on tactics, expressed their concerns, and supported the other wherever possible, with Bilbo indicating to his new-found friend that he supported Johnson "a hundred per cent, against the world, the flesh and the devil"<sup>42</sup> Meanwhile, the Harrison-White faction encouraged a bevy of candidates to enter the race in hopes of diluting Johnson's chances of winning the first primary. As the race began to take form, Johnson faced six challengers, including: George Ritchey, Mark W. Gantt, J. B. Snider, Lester Franklin, Thomas Bailey, and old political foe and former governor, Mike Conner. Harrison and White threw their support behind Thomas Bailey, but clearly Conner posed the most serious threat to the Johnson campaign. As the summer of 1939 approached, Bilbo admonished Johnson to "say absolutely nothing, publicly or privately" of his opposing candidates because they would "be for you in the second primary."<sup>43</sup> After his 1935 run, Johnson had gained, whether deserved or not, a reputation for becoming so hostile during campaigns that "he bites his friends and then [he] bites himself to death."<sup>44</sup> In letter after letter, Bilbo urged his friend to "just talk Johnson," speak only of his own campaign platform, and, at all costs, avoid attacking

---

<sup>40</sup> As junior senator from Mississippi, Bilbo served in the lean years of the Great Depression. Recognizing Mississippi's abject poverty, Bilbo threw his full weight in support of Roosevelt's New Deal programs. In the 1939 election, patronage from the Works Progress Administration (WPA), for example, became one of the race's most pivotal issues. For an in-depth description of the WPA in the 1939 governor's race, see Morgan, 216-24.

<sup>41</sup> For correspondence between Bilbo and Johnson during the 1938-39 campaign, see Boxes 367-417, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

<sup>42</sup> Theodore Bilbo to Paul B. Johnson Sr., June 6, 1939, Box 410, Folder 17, Bilbo Papers.

<sup>43</sup> Theodore Bilbo to Paul B. Johnson Sr., May 31, 1939, Box 409, Folder 6, Bilbo Papers.

<sup>44</sup> "Johnson Near Swoon at Meridian," *Jackson Daily News*, August 13, 1939.

his competitors.<sup>45</sup> By early June, Johnson had heeded Bilbo's advice, admitting that he had not assailed any candidates, and because of it, felt "stronger each day."<sup>46</sup> Quickly, though, accusations spread, essentially attacking Johnson's relationship with Mississippi's political potentate, Bilbo. He understood that President Roosevelt's Works Progress Administration (WPA) carried significant weight in Mississippi politics, and its patronage had supported Harrison and White. To help steer the election in favor of Johnson, Bilbo pulled a few strings in Washington by successfully lobbying Roosevelt to remove Mississippi WPA leadership officials "in a jiffy" in favor of Bilbo-Johnson-friendly appointees.<sup>47</sup>

The Bilbo-Johnson relationship paid off. Their strategy of keeping "Conner, Franklin, Bailey and Snider in a continuous battle among themselves" allowed for Mississippians to see Johnson in a new light.<sup>48</sup> He won the July primary over Mike Conner by twenty-three thousand votes and bested the Harrison-White candidate, Thomas Bailey, by forty-four thousand votes. Interestingly, correspondence between Johnson and Bilbo dried up from the July primary to the August runoff. Perhaps the two felt their work together had set in motion the inevitability of a Johnson victory. Nevertheless, in preparation for the second primary, Harrison and White backed Conner as an anti-New Deal candidate. When the runoff finally came at the end of August, Johnson flayed Conner by more than twenty-seven thousand votes, in what Bilbo boasted to Roosevelt was "the largest majority ever received by a candidate for governor in the history of Mississippi."<sup>49</sup> The resounding victory successfully pulled the Magnolia State within Roosevelt's and the New Deal's spheres of influence.<sup>50</sup> The unlikely Bilbo-Johnson alliance worked brilliantly. Together, they had influenced one of the most powerful American presidents in history to replace Mississippi WPA officials with those more to their liking. In August of 1940, incumbent Bilbo would go on to defeat Hugh White in the Mississippi primary for United States Senate. One year later, in 1941, Pat Harrison died in

---

<sup>45</sup> Theodore Bilbo to Paul B. Johnson Sr., June 6, 1939, Bilbo Papers.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>47</sup> Theodore Bilbo to Paul B. Johnson Sr. July 7, 1939, Box 413, Folder 4, Bilbo Papers.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>49</sup> Theodore Bilbo to Franklin Roosevelt, August 30, 1939, Box 420, Folder 4, Bilbo Papers. Roosevelt replied with an official White House letter indicating he planned to keep a Bilbo-Johnson ally as head of the WPA, claiming the "good people of the state of Mississippi have spoken—and how." See Franklin Roosevelt to Theodore Bilbo, August 31, 1939, Box 420, Folder 6, Bilbo Papers.

<sup>50</sup> Theodore Bilbo to Paul B. Johnson Sr., July 1, 1939, Box 413, Folder 4, Bilbo Papers.

office, leaving Governor Paul B. Johnson Sr. to handpick his replacement, James O. Eastland. Johnson's victory, in many ways, signified an important shift in Mississippi politics, as the state climbed ever so slowly toward the New Deal and out of the Great Depression. As his January 1940 inauguration neared, governor-elect Johnson stood as determined as ever to transform his longstanding dream for a free textbook program for Mississippi students into a political reality.

The idea for free textbooks became popular during the progressive era as larger metropolitan school systems—New York, Chicago, Cleveland, and Detroit—undertook measures to reform public education in the early twentieth century.<sup>51</sup> As these improvements took hold, many of these newly consolidated school systems began offering free textbook rental programs as tools for improving attendance, curriculum, and quality of instruction.<sup>52</sup> The New Deal inspired some state public school systems, including Mississippi, to emulate these progressive policies. By the time Johnson was elected governor in 1939, Mississippians who had lived through WWI and the Depression faced a “long history of inadequacies” within the state's public education.<sup>53</sup> Maintaining the existence of a dual system of segregated public education in a rural and deeply impoverished state ensured most Mississippians received a vastly inferior education compared to most of the nation. The preservation of segregation in public education, in fact, became “ultimately more important than any other measure,” including in the area of curriculum.<sup>54</sup>

Throughout Johnson's quest for the governor's chair in the 1930s, Mississippi's white public education experienced an over two-decades process of consolidation. At the same time, select Mississippi schools received earmarked resources for physical improvements from both municipal and state levels. Federal dollars from New Deal programs aided Mississippi schools throughout the leanest years of the Depression, but much of the aid was funneled away from black and rural schools.<sup>55</sup>

---

<sup>51</sup> Donald and Jo Ann Parkerson, *The Struggle for Public Education: Ten Themes in American Educational History* (Lanham, Md.: Rowman and Littlefield, 2017), 29-43.

<sup>52</sup> “Editorial Comment: Free Textbooks,” *Educational Research Bulletin* 3, no. 7 (1924): 144-45; George E. Carrothers, “Free Textbooks: A Rejoinder,” *Educational Research Bulletin* 3, no. 11 (1924): 234.

<sup>53</sup> Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 19.

<sup>54</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>55</sup> Harvey Kantor and Robert Lowe, “Class, Race, and the Emergence of Federal Education Policy: From the New Deal to the Great Society,” *Educational Researcher* 24, no. 3 (1995): 4-21.

Of course, Johnson never forgot the abject poverty he witnessed as a student and teacher in Mississippi's rural public schools and the number of students who simply could not afford to attend school. Johnson had spent the previous decade stumping in every corner in Mississippi promising a free textbook program, and when the legislature reconvened in the winter of 1940, free textbooks became his agenda's top priority.

The Mississippi state legislature assembled on Monday, January 22, 1940, after a cold winter break. By Wednesday, January 24, *The Daily Clarion-Ledger* reported the house committee on education was ready to deliver the textbook bill to the house floor the following day. Optimistically, the newspaper boasted, "An overwhelming sentiment in the legislature in favor of free textbooks is expected to give the first measure in the governor's program comparatively easy sailing in both the house and senate."<sup>56</sup> On Thursday, January 25, the "Book Bill" made it out of the education committee and was introduced to the public. If passed, the bill would create a five-member "state textbook rating and purchasing board" with the governor serving as its ex-officio chairman. The five-member committee would be charged with vetting and purchasing textbooks for the first through eighth grades and mandating their use. Any teachers or schools refusing to implement the new program would face teaching license revocation. If passed, any candidate for the board would be "an educator of known character" with at least five years' experience teaching and/or supervising within Mississippi's public schools. Potential board members, moreover, would be forbidden to have personal or professional relationships, under penalty of law, with textbook agents, legal counsel, or authors. The bill provided for the appointment of a commission secretary and would abolish the existing elementary textbook board. If approved, these parts of the bill would initially cost the state somewhere around 1.3 million dollars.<sup>57</sup>

The bill created the first legislative stir of the session as a "spirited floor fight" broke out as members of the house argued over when the bill might make it to the chamber floor. Some members suggested the bill remain longer on the docket for closer perusal. Nevertheless, the majority agreed to set the bill as a special order for the following Tues-

---

<sup>56</sup> "Free Book Bill Nears Reporting," *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, January 24, 1940.

<sup>57</sup> "Free Textbooks Bill Gets Oked by Committee" *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, January 25, 1940.



day.<sup>58</sup> On January 30, the House of Representatives voted 118 to 5 to pass the bill, with one amendment removing the public-schools-only clause in favor of free textbooks for all Mississippi elementary schools, public or private. A few dissenters suggested the organizational framework might be too weak and unmanageable for such a large task due to the piece's quick movement through the floor. Oppositional voices and amendments drowned in the house's fervor to pass the bill.<sup>59</sup>

As the bill moved into the senate, the loudest oppositional tones rose from educators across Mississippi. Before the senate floor vote on February 5, Senator Clark Rakestraw of Union County read a written statement by former state senator and president of the Mississippi Education Association, Walter N. Taylor, warning the bill was unworkable, given that many school districts preferred a list of options over a single text. Taylor questioned, moreover, the five-member commission's capacity to assess hundreds of books for their single selections. The following day, before a senate-organized public hearing on the bill, Professor H. M. Ivy, school superintendent of the all-white Meridian Separate School District, vehemently argued that African American and white Mississippi students could not read the same civics textbook because of black disenfranchisement. To Ivy, teaching young black students about laws and voting rights would prevent white Mississippians from living "harmoniously, happily, and cooperatively beside the negroes" in the state. The textbook bill, as passed in the house, in fact, did not provide any provisos for separate textbooks for black and white Mississippi students. Nevertheless, M. E. Morehead, assistant superintendent for Hinds county schools, echoed Ivy's concerns by suggesting that the state "could provide the negro with a set of texts best suited to his level of intelligence for one-third of what it costs for a white child."<sup>60</sup> Despite these propositions, the nearly two-hour public hearing, according to the *Daily Clarion-Ledger*, "failed to develop any new objections."<sup>61</sup>

When the bill hit the senate chamber at 10:30 a.m. on Wednesday, February 8, the senate echoed these same concerns, striking right to the heart of Jim Crow Mississippi politics and segregationist society.

---

<sup>58</sup> "Free Textbook Bill Forms Purchasing Board," *Jackson Daily News*, January 27, 1940; "Textbook Bill Set as Special Order Tuesday," *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, January 26, 1940.

<sup>59</sup> "Textbook Action Fixed in Spirited Session," *Jackson Daily News*, January 26, 1940.

<sup>60</sup> "State Educators Urge Changes in 'Free Textbooks,'" *Jackson Daily News*, February 7, 1940.

<sup>61</sup> "Textbook Plan Moving Toward Final Adoption," *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, February 7, 1940.

The senate education committee, as well as senators from across the state, were mainly concerned with three specific issues related to race and segregation. First, reverberating H. M. Ivy's concerns, voices from the floor expressed strong animosity against any notion that African American students would receive the same civics lessons as those of white children. Second, senators objected to the mandate that free white and black textbooks must be stored within the same facility throughout the summer. For segregationists, mixing white and black textbooks in the same physical space when not in use would certainly contaminate white textbooks, so eliminating this potential issue was seen as a "health precaution."<sup>62</sup> Finally, in what became known as the "needy act," Senator John A. Lake of Greenville suggested scaling back the bill's aim so that its target would center on families with considerable economic challenges preventing textbook purchases. This amendment, though, faced harsh opposition and fierce debate. Pressures from the Johnson administration demanded the bill cover all children in Mississippi regardless of background. The opposition, however, suggested passing such a sweeping measure might "bankrupt the state . . . at one fell swoop," in addition to lacking any clear "mandate from the people" to pass such reform.<sup>63</sup> In the end, the arguments in favor of the "needy act" crumbled when a statement in the chamber articulated "that white taxpayers would have to carry an undue load under such a proposal since there would be a great many needy negro children" when compared to whites.<sup>64</sup> Nevertheless, the amendments for separate textbooks and storage facilities for white and black students held strong. As the chamber called roll for the final tally, the bill passed by a final vote of thirty-seven to nine with the Jim Crow amendments intact.<sup>65</sup>

By Monday, February 13, word spread of the bill's passage, prompting the American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) to threaten Mississippi's legislature over the constitutionality of the textbook measure.<sup>66</sup>

---

<sup>62</sup> "Textbook Bill Passes Senate; Needy Act Fails," *Jackson Daily News*, February 9, 1940.

<sup>63</sup> Senator David Crawley of Kosciusko, Mississippi, offered fiery testimony in support of the bill's "needy act" on the senate floor, arguing the legislation in its then-current form would far exceed cost expectations. See "Textbook Bill Passes Senate; Needy Act Fails."

<sup>64</sup> "Textbook Bill Passes Senate; Needy Act Fails."

<sup>65</sup> "Senate Votes Textbooks 37-9 As House Endorses More Liberal Pensions," *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, February 9, 1940; "Mississippi Senate 'Takes Low'; To Forget Jim-Crow Textbooks," *The Pittsburgh Courier*, February 24, 1940.

<sup>66</sup> "Mississippi's Textbook Bill Object of Attack," *The Chicago Defender*, February 24, 1940.

Arthur Garfield Hayes, legal counsel for the ACLU, telegraphed Governor Johnson asking for an all-out veto of the bill or face an attack from their legal team on the bill's constitutionality. The ACLU focused on the illegal nature of mandating two separate civics textbooks for black and white students, as African American students would be prevented from receiving any lessons on civic engagement and suffrage.<sup>67</sup> Governor Johnson had remained steadfastly silent on the bill as it worked through both chambers, but in an interview statement for the newspapers, he replied:

I haven't answered the telegram for I saw no need for doing so. When the bill is signed by the governor it will meet all constitutional requirements. There is no intent on the part of Mississippi to discriminate against anyone. The constitutionality guarantees will be safeguarded, and I am sure no reasonable person will have cause to complain. Much false propaganda is being put out by enemies of the free textbook bill.<sup>68</sup>

Facing this development, a joint house and senate education committee quickly rewrote parts of the legislation, essentially removing the provision for separate civics textbooks and the amendment creating segregated book storage facilities.<sup>69</sup> Johnson had learned from his former nemesis turned friend, Theodore Bilbo, about the importance of house committee appointments and the need for keeping a close eye on the "organization of the legislature."<sup>70</sup> Bilbo reminded governor-elect Johnson in October before his inauguration that committee appointment "means everything. They can wreck you in the beginning by stacking the committees."<sup>71</sup> To Bilbo, ensuring a strong relationship with a favorable "Speaker" who could appoint committees capable of aiding Johnson in the achievement of his "whole program . . . in the first thirty or sixty days" was paramount. "That," Bilbo cautioned, "is the time to do the work—before you make any appointments."<sup>72</sup>

---

<sup>67</sup> "Test Threat on Textbook Act Ignored," *Jackson Daily News*, February 13, 1940.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>69</sup> "May Give Free Books Final Approval Today," *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, February 15, 1940.

<sup>70</sup> Theodore Bilbo to Paul B. Johnson Sr., October 16, 1939, Box 3, Folder 12, Johnson Family Papers.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*

On Friday morning, February 17, 1940, as champions of the bill from both chambers moved quickly to call for a final disposition and to send the legislation into its signatory stage, the opposition received five minutes for a final decree. Veteran senator W. B. Roberts of Rosedale, one of the few remaining Mississippi legislators who had been present at the 1890 constitutional convention, addressed the floor with a reminder of where many Mississippians still stood. To Senator Roberts, the “Jim Crow” requirements—different civics textbooks and segregated storage facilities—had to remain in the bill so the legislature, at the very least, could continue proclaiming “to the world that in Mississippi the white race [was] still paramount.”<sup>73</sup> Urging a revote on the segregation provisions, Roberts pleaded:

There is no question of the right of this legislature to separate the negro and the white man. The supreme court has upheld our separate transportation systems and our separate schools. I was at the constitutional convention of 1890, when the best brains and stoutest hearts proclaimed that in Mississippi the race issue is paramount and that there can never be any personal contact between the white and black races. I don't care what the press writes about it.<sup>74</sup>

Despite his disputation, a roll call vote resulted in a twenty-two to eighteen approval of the measure without the “Jim Crow” amendments. By noon, Governor Johnson signed the bill into law. As he affixed his signature on the landmark legislation Johnson offered a rare smile as he proclaimed, “This is the happiest moment of my public life.”<sup>75</sup>

The Mississippi State Textbook Rating and Purchasing Board met for the first time on May 23, 1940. Over the next two and a half years, Governor Johnson, ex-officio chairman of the textbook board, attended only four out of dozens of meetings held between May 1940 and December 1943. His last meeting with the textbook board came

---

<sup>73</sup> “Johnson Approves Initial Law of Program; ‘Jim Crow’ Controversy Flares Anew,” *Jackson Daily News*, February 17, 1940.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>75</sup> “Johnson Signs Free Books Bill into Law,” *Jackson Daily Clarion-Ledger*, February 17, 1940.

on June 2, 1942.<sup>76</sup> A series of health problems, including severe hypertension, racked Governor Johnson throughout 1942 and 1943, forcing the indefatigable statesman to take extended periods of rest away from his office. His health deteriorated rapidly in the fall of 1943, when on November 2 he suffered a heart attack. Two days before Christmas he suffered another attack, slipped into a coma on Christmas Eve, and died at his home in Hattiesburg the day after Christmas.<sup>77</sup>

Johnson's ambitious term brought New Deal-flavored victories in both old-age pensions and aid to dependent children, but he faced a daunting task in his attempt to convince the legislature to increase taxes. Many of these battles no doubt distracted his attention from the book commission's charge. Nevertheless, he remained incredibly proud of the law and reminded the legislature of its accomplishment at its opening in January of 1942, as he urged a continuation of the program for junior and senior high schools as well.

Today 50,000 children who had never been to school one day before, or were unable to continue, are now being given the opportunity to attend school because of the textbooks that were provided for them . . . . For ten years I appealed to the people to give the children of Mississippi free school books. I was laughed at, derided, and sneered at by thousands of people, but it did not deter me, and how happy I am today to be able to see these boys and girls attend school and have books to study. It is the greatest blessing that any Legislature has provided in this State at any time.<sup>78</sup>

Paul B. Johnson made education reform a top priority at precisely the moment when New Deal legislation had often ignored American schools in

---

<sup>76</sup> Minutes of the Mississippi State Textbook Rating and Purchasing Board, May 23, 1940, to November 20, 1942, Mississippi State Textbook Purchasing Board Minutes Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford.

<sup>77</sup> Signs of his heart problems appeared in the summer of 1939 as Johnson campaigned for governor for the third time. See "Johnson Near Swoon at Meridian," *Jackson Daily News*, August 13, 1939. In addition, the Johnson Family account book lists increasing expenses for treatments, appointments, and medications for Johnson between 1942 and 1943. See Johnson Family Account Book, 1942-1944, Box 1, Folder 6, Johnson Family Papers. For details of Johnson's death, see "Governor Johnson Passes Away," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, December 27, 1943.

<sup>78</sup> Paul B. Johnson Sr., Message of Paul B. Johnson, Governor State of Mississippi, to the Mississippi Legislature, January 7, 1942, Box 7, Folder 7, Johnson Family Papers.

favor of labor and infrastructure training programs. As World War II took hold of the nation and world, the New Deal gave way to an intense focus on wartime buildup. Nevertheless, Paul B. Johnson Sr.'s administration stands as an example of how public education became an important political issue bridging both the Progressive and New Deal eras in Mississippi.

# Race and Wartime Politics during the the Administration of Governor Thomas L. Bailey (1944-1946)

by Charles C. Bolton

Mississippi voters selected Thomas L. Bailey as the state's forty-eighth governor in the summer of 1943. Bailey had long occupied a prominent place on the Mississippi political landscape. For at least some observers, his election—and subsequent gubernatorial administration—seemed to offer a more reasoned alternative to the wartime concerns voiced by a portion of the state's political leaders, expressed most prominently by a trio of the state's national legislators: U.S. Representative John Rankin and U.S. Senators Theodore Bilbo and Jim Eastland.<sup>1</sup> During World War II, all three of these politicians frequently and sharply sounded the alarm about what they viewed as a coming racial apocalypse, one that would under-



*Portrait of Governor Thomas Lowry Bailey by Marie Hull (American, 1890-1980). Oil on canvas. Courtesy Delta State University Art Department, Marie Hull Collection.*

---

<sup>1</sup> Though Eastland, and especially Bilbo, became well-known, outspoken white supremacists during the war years, Rankin—the House member representing northeast Mississippi since 1920—was equally vociferous on the race issue. Historian Jason Morgan Ward labeled him “the House’s most notorious Negrophobe.” See Jason Morgan Ward, “‘A War for States’ Rights’: The White Supremacist Vision of Double Victory,” in *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. By Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134.

---

CHARLES C. BOLTON is professor of history and associate dean in the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of North Carolina Greensboro. His previous books include *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi: A Biography* and *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980*. The author would like to thank Sean Farrell and Jere Nash for their comments on previous drafts of this essay.

mine the state's long-standing practices of racial segregation and black disfranchisement. At times, the fears of these men—and those of perhaps a majority of the state's political leadership—about threats to the state's racial arrangements seemed more important than supporting their own national party and its leader, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the fight against fascism. While Bailey shared the desire to preserve white privilege in Mississippi, he sometimes proved less willing than his fellow Democratic politicians to elevate the race issue above all others during the war years.

By the spring and summer of 1943, racial tensions were indeed peaking nationwide. In June, a major racial disturbance occurred in Detroit, a city that had experienced a rapid influx of both white and black workers (many from the South) to power the "Arsenal of Democracy." Also in June, in Los Angeles, military personnel attacked young Mexicans, "zoot-suiters," in a week of violence that led to hundreds of injuries and more than one hundred arrests.<sup>2</sup> Mississippi also experienced several racial incidents during that same time, including conflicts that erupted in communities surrounding Camp Van Dorn in southwest Mississippi and Camp McCain in the central part of the state.<sup>3</sup>

Much of the racial unrest that roiled the southern home front by 1943 accompanied federal mobilization policies that challenged southern racial practices—most notably racial segregation. In the early 1940s, as the United States inched closer to war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt took small but significant steps to answer black demands to end discrimination in employment and in the military. Though FDR did not accede to the call from black activists to end segregation in the military, he did sign the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which created the World War II draft. That legislation officially disavowed discrimination: "in the selection and training of men . . . there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color." In June 1941, hoping to forestall a planned "March on

---

<sup>2</sup> Dominic J. Capeci Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), ch. 1; Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

<sup>3</sup> Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 48; Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1994), ch. 12. According to Wynn, the racial tensions surrounding these two Mississippi military bases were among sixty-eight such conflicts nationwide in 1943 alone.



Washington” organized by black labor leader A. Philip Randolph and others, FDR issued Executive Order 8802, establishing what came to be called the Fair Employment Practices Committee, or FEPC. That order also touted the principle of nondiscrimination: “there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color, or national origin.”<sup>4</sup>

The federal government’s wartime nondiscrimination policies placed southern racial practices into stark relief and provided an opening for challenges to the racial status quo, even in Mississippi. As a result, political leaders such as Bilbo, Eastland, Rankin, and others stiffened their resolve to preserve the kinds of racially discriminatory separation so carefully crafted over the preceding decades. During the congressional battle to eliminate the southern poll tax in 1942, Rankin called the effort “a long range communistic program to change our form of Government and . . . to take control of our elections out of the hands of white Americans.” In a speech to the Mississippi legislature in April 1944, Bilbo warned that the “people of the South must draw the color line tighter and tighter, and any white man or woman who dares to cross that color line should be promptly and forever ostracized.”<sup>5</sup> While Mississippi politicians, like other southern leaders, disliked key aspects of the president’s home front policies and especially blamed FDR and his administration for unsettling the South’s racial landscape, they generally avoided criticizing the president directly. Southern politicians typically supported President Roosevelt’s foreign policy leadership. They also appreciated how economic mobilization, through the development of Army camps, shipyards, munitions factories and other federal installations, had lifted the region from the economic doldrums. And they could not discount the president’s continuing popularity with their constituents. While southern whites in general may have also worried about the long-term durability of racial segregation and black disfranchisement, they generally discounted fears expressed by their leaders that President Roosevelt

---

<sup>4</sup> Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 210-211; “Selective Training and Service Act of 1940,” <http://www.legisworks.org/congress/76/publaw-783.pdf>; “Executive Order 8802,” <https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/thelaw/eo-8802.html>.

<sup>5</sup> Rankin quoted in Ward, “A War for States’ Rights,” 134-135; Address by Senator Bilbo Before the Mississippi Legislature, April 12, 1944, *Congressional Record*, Appendix, April 17, 1944, 1801. See also, J. Lee Annis Jr., *Big Jim Eastland: The Godfather of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 60-61.

posed a threat to southern traditions. Indeed, a spring 1943 Gallup poll showed that 80 percent of all southerners solidly backed FDR.<sup>6</sup>

Thomas Bailey entered the 1943 governor's race with a distinguished resume. Born in January 1888, Bailey hailed from Webster County. He started out as a high school teacher and principal but later studied law and opened a practice in Meridian. Elected to the state House of Representatives from Lauderdale County while in his late twenties, Bailey served in that body for almost twenty-five years (twelve as Speaker). Bailey had a reputation in the legislature as supporting progressive reforms for whites. He backed the creation of the homestead exemption program, improvements in the state highway system, and Governor Hugh White's "Balance Agriculture with Industry" project. Bailey had a particularly strong record as a friend of public education (primarily for white students); among other efforts, he supported a guaranteed eight-month school session, teachers' pensions, free textbooks, compulsory education, and an independent higher education board. Mississippi political observers also widely perceived Bailey as an enemy of "The Man," U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo. During Bilbo's second gubernatorial term from 1928 to 1932, Bailey was speaker of the Mississippi House and became one of the so-called Big Four, a powerful legislative group that blocked numerous Bilbo initiatives. Furthering burnishing Bailey's progressive standing was his equally impressive wife, Nellah Bailey, a public librarian in Meridian for thirty years and a prominent and active clubwoman on the state level. After Thomas Bailey's death in 1946, Nellah Bailey became the first woman elected to statewide office in Mississippi, when in 1947 she won the position of state tax collector.<sup>7</sup>

Bailey, who had previously run unsuccessfully for governor in 1939, had three opponents in the 1943 race. All were familiar names on the gubernatorial ballot over the previous two decades. Dennis Murphree, the sitting lieutenant governor, had served as chief executive for ten

---

<sup>6</sup> Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), ch. 8 and 9; "Anti-New Deal 'Revolt' Fails to Materialize," *The Southern Patriot*, July 1943; "People of the South Will Support the President for Reelection in 1944," *The Southern Patriot*, June 1943.

<sup>7</sup> David G. Sansing, "Thomas Lowry Bailey: Forty-eighth Governor of Mississippi: 1944-1946," *Mississippi History Now*, <http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/265/index.php?s=extra&id=147>; "Tom L. Bailey is Candidate," *Webster Progress*, September 1, 1938; "Bailey Sold Mississippi to Mississippians," *Vicksburg Sunday Post Herald*, November 3, 1946; Hope Ridings Miller, "Land of Cotton Still the Solid South; Despite Dissatisfaction It Will Go Along for Fourth Term," *Washington Post*, September 8, 1943.

months in the late 1920s after Governor Henry Whitfield died in office. Murphree had already lost two races for the top office, in 1927 and 1935. Lester Franklin, a protégé of two giants of twentieth-century Mississippi politics—James K. Vardaman and Bilbo—was a three-time loser in the gubernatorial sweepstakes. However, he had served as chair of the State Tax Commission and worked for the Federal Trade Commission in Washington, D.C. Mike Conner, a Yale Law School graduate, had served as speaker of the Mississippi House for almost a decade, from 1915 to 1924. Although Conner failed in his 1923 gubernatorial bid, Mississippi voters elected him to that office in 1931, where he served during the Great Depression and the early New Deal. Although he engineered a number of reforms, including passage of a state sales tax and changes to the higher education board, according to historian Dennis Mitchell, Conner as governor was “wedded to a business-friendly philosophy, . . . [he] offered next to nothing to his constituency, and simply relied on the federal largesse, which he tried to administer honestly.” Conner sought the governor’s chair again in 1939 but lost in a run-off to Paul Johnson Sr. In 1943, Conner led the four-man field in the first primary and squared off in the second round against Bailey.<sup>8</sup>

During the second primary of the gubernatorial campaign, local issues played a prominent role in the race. Both Conner and Bailey stressed their credentials as supporters of public education. Mike Conner touted himself as the “true friend of public education,” citing his achievements as governor, which went beyond the mere “promises as a candidate.” Thomas Bailey, for his part, could point to his many legislative actions over the years to support public education—as well as his past work as an educator. He stressed his belief that “equality of opportunity in our democracy begins with the school.” Bailey also garnered a good deal of support from women voters, who perhaps played an outsized role in this election, since many men were away working war jobs or on military duty (although some voted via absentee ballot). Helen Crooks, state chairwoman of the “Tom Bailey Women’s Committee,” touted Bailey in a statewide mailing to women voters as the candidate who “has done more for the aged, the school teachers, home owners, the youth, and every age

---

<sup>8</sup> David G. Sansing, “Dennis Murphree: Forty-second and Forty-seventh Governor of Mississippi: 1927-1928; 1943-1944,” *Mississippi History Now*, <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/265/index.php?s=extra&id=143>; Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 20; Dennis J. Mitchell, *A New History of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), ch. 11.

group in the state than any other public official.” Crooks proclaimed that “Women Can, Women Will, Women Must Elect Tom Bailey Governor.” In the end, Bailey bested Conner by nearly 20,000 votes out of almost 280,000 cast and won fifty-seven of the state’s eighty-two counties.<sup>9</sup>

Despite the centrality of local concerns in the contest, national issues loomed prominently over the state’s political proceedings in 1943. National Democrats were especially anxious about Mississippi’s gubernatorial election that year and watched it as a harbinger of whether the Democratic South (the only viable political entity in the region at the time) would support FDR’s upcoming bid in 1944 for an unprecedented fourth term. *Time* magazine described the August Democratic primary as “the first ballot-box test of 1943’s anti-New Deal sentiment in the South.” Turner Catledge, a Mississippi native who wrote for *The New York Times*, concluded just prior to the first primary vote that it “will give some indication of the present standing of the Roosevelt Administration in the Solid South.”<sup>10</sup>

The national media made little distinction between the four Mississippi gubernatorial candidates, since they all espoused opposition to efforts to alter southern race relations. *Time* magazine noted that while all four men supported FDR’s foreign policy, they all “unanimously bayed against New Deal ‘meddling’ in the race question. All stood foursquare for white supremacy.” Conner and Franklin offered the most strident rhetoric. Conner talked about “crackpots and meddlers” in Washington, people who “are trying to force upon us political and social equality with the Negro.” Franklin, for his part, claimed the South was “faced with grave trouble, which is being brought upon us by outside meddlers who do not understand our problems with respect to our relations with the negro race.” He affirmed that he was “for White Supremacy and racial purity [sic] first, last and always, and will not tolerate any crackpot theories seeking to bring about equality between the races.” Bailey expressed much the same sentiments, though in more subdued language. For instance, he noted in one instance that “meddlesome foreign societ-

---

<sup>9</sup> “Mike Conner – True Friend of Public Education,” April 1943, Broadsides Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson (MDAH); Tom Bailey to the Teachers, School Bus Drivers and School Trustees of the Schools of Mississippi, August 19, 1943, and Helen Crooks to The Women of Mississippi, n.d., 1943, both in Subject File: Thomas L. Bailey, 1928-1943, MDAH; “Roll of Counties,” 2<sup>nd</sup> Primary, August 24, 1943, Subject File: Elections, 1943, MDAH.

<sup>10</sup> “Eyes on Mississippi,” *Time*, August 16, 1943; Turner Catledge, “Watch Mississippi as New Deal Test,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 1943.

ies have sought to hamstring us in dealing with our own problems and relations in Mississippi and the south. I have more than once joined the fight against repeal of the poll tax in our own state legislature.”<sup>11</sup>

Interestingly, the northern black press saw this subtle distinction in rhetoric as a sign that Bailey offered a potentially progressive voice on southern race relations. In the second primary, Conner amped up the anti-black rhetoric, reportedly promising at one rally in Bolivar County that “if I am elected, I will give every white man a pistol to protect his family from the n\_\_\_\_a.” Bailey, however, refused to match this appeal and simply noted that “this is no time to bring up the race issue.” He suggested that inflaming such passions would be “a handicap to the present war effort.” As a result, some black observers, such as M. S. Stuart, a *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist originally from Mississippi and living in Memphis, believed that although Bailey had not “promised any radical reforms in racial conditions . . . he refused to run on a platform of race prejudice and abuse. He dared leave himself open to the inference that in fairness he would be the governor of all the people, including the darker half.” That perception of Bailey as a racial moderate persisted into Bailey’s term as governor. When John H. Young III, a special correspondent for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, interviewed Governor Bailey in early 1945, Young acknowledged that Bailey did not support suffrage for blacks but did give “the impression that a new type of thinking is being applied to the Negro. It is a progressive thought, which includes the Negro in the State program on a decidedly higher level than has ever before existed in Mississippi.”<sup>12</sup> Bailey’s racial moderation, of course, probably did not garner him many votes—no blacks cast ballots in the all-white Democratic primary—but his more subdued stance does not seem to have cost him many votes either.

In Mississippi, during the 1943 election, Conner’s anti-New Deal (and by extension, anti-FDR) attack was sometimes perceived as support

---

<sup>11</sup> “Eyes on Mississippi”; Arthur Evans, “New Deal’s Bid for Negro Vote Irks Mississippi,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 1, 1943; Platform of Lester Franklin, Candidate for Governor of Mississippi, n.d., 1943, Box 992, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

<sup>12</sup> “Negroes Fear Future Violence in Mississippi,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 7, 1943; M. S. Stuart, “Southern Say-So,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 9, 1943; James B. Lloyd, ed., *Lives of Mississippi Authors, 1817-1967* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 425-426; John H. Young III, “Even Mississippi Has Two Sides in Race Relations, One Hopeful, the Other, Dark, Discouraging,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 24, 1945.

for the interests of the economically privileged at the expense of the common man. C. L. Lundy of Holmes County claimed that Conner was “the rich man’s candidate” and that “the banks and money powers here are doing their level best to elect Conner.” After Bailey’s victory, J. C. Raper of Tupelo attributed the future governor’s success to the fact that he “was for the common man and a friend to the president.” M. C. Durr from Brookhaven saw a vote for Conner as a “backward step,” since “his life and policy conform more to the order of Hitler, Wilkie [sic], and their kind which is a vote in the direction of Slavery for the poor man.” And despite Conner’s strong anti-black stance, that approach did not satisfy either those who feared the Republicans more or those who favored a quieter endorsement of white supremacy. Durr feared that Conner’s opposition to President Roosevelt would ultimately lead to the victory “of some Negro loving trouble maker like Wilkie [sic].” J. D. Roberts, a Conner supporter (and struggling typist), noted after the election that “the bailey Voters say you Dwelt on the Rasial Negrow Ishue two Much.”<sup>13</sup>

Conner’s perceived hostility to the president certainly heightened some lower-class resentment that Conner might not be a friend of the common man. An assist to Bailey from a popular state leader, Theodore Bilbo, another perceived champion of poor whites, further diminished support for Conner in the second primary. In the first primary, Bilbo had backed Lester Franklin, a man he believed was “truly in sympathy with Southern ideals” and who had “been urging and supporting white supremacy.” For the runoff campaign, the senator officially claimed to be uninterested. Although Bilbo was in Mississippi during the weeks between the two elections, he said he would be in his home county of Pearl River “putting in 24 hours a day now finishing Juniper Grove Church and building the pastor a home.” Both second primary candidates had opposed Bilbo in the past, but Bailey had been a particularly prominent obstacle for Bilbo during his second gubernatorial term. As a member of the legislative Big Four, Bailey had “wrecked Bilbo’s gravy-train.” So, many Bilbo supporters thought “The Man” would favor Conner in 1943 as the lesser of two evils. Bilbo, however, had other thoughts. Already looking ahead to his 1946 reelection campaign, Bilbo worried that a successful Governor Conner would become a formidable challenger.

---

<sup>13</sup> C. L. Lundy to Theodore G. Bilbo, August 21, 1943; J. C. Raper to Senator Bilbo, August 25, 1943; and J. D. Roberts to Mike Connor [sic], August 27, 1943, all in Box 790, and M. C. Durr to Senator Bilbo, Box 788, all in Bilbo Papers. Wendell Willkie was the 1940 Republican presidential candidate.

Bilbo privately signaled his support to Bailey in the run-off contest and had his former campaign manager send out three thousand letters “to our key men throughout the State.” After the election, Bilbo credited his clandestine support for Bailey with “saving the day” for the newly elected governor. Bilbo crowed that “in this fight I followed the Bible strictly by not letting the right hand know what the left was doing,” though his actions had more to do with a cold calculation about his own political future than with deflecting attention from his charitable deeds. Bilbo also told national Democratic leaders, such as Senator Joseph Guffey of Pennsylvania, that “we whipped ‘the hell’ out of the leading anti-Roosevelt, anti-New Deal candidate, including all the corporations.”<sup>14</sup>

The national considerations that served as a crucial background for Mississippi’s gubernatorial election of 1943 continued to simmer in the aftermath of Bailey’s triumph. When the Executive Committee of the Mississippi Democratic Party met in the days after the second primary, a subcommittee of that body submitted a resolution “severely criticizing the New Deal with reference to the racial question and its ‘orgy of Federal spending.’” Another faction of the Executive Committee, described by one member as those who welcomed the “triumph of the liberal forces that are grateful for, and loyal to, our National Party,” presumably the Bailey voters, submitted a substitute resolution. It maintained the original critique of federal race “meddling” and lambasted the usurpation of states’ rights in general but preceded these statements with a long preamble praising FDR and his administration. That statement, among other things, claimed that Roosevelt had “brought us out of the trials, tribulations and despair of economic collapse to a period of business prosperity and to a high level of restored human dignity; and has thus for lead [sic] our Armed Forces girdling the world from victory to victory without any material loss of our cherished traditions and principles.” The Executive Committee deadlocked on which statement to approve, and the meeting adjourned with both sides planning

---

<sup>14</sup> Theodore Bilbo to McCoy, Chrestman, and Ward, July 29, 1943, Box 1084; Theodore Bilbo to M. C. Durr, August 10, 1943; Dick C. McCool to Theodore G. Bilbo, August 9, 1943; J. D. Roberts to Theodore G. Bilbo, August 7, 1943; and Theodore Bilbo to Forrest B. Jackson, August 10, 1943, all in Box 788; and Theodore Bilbo to Hansford L. Simmons, August 30, 1943, and Theodore Bilbo to Joseph F. Guffey, August 29, 1943, both in Box 790, all in Bilbo Papers; Charles Granville Hamilton, *Mississippi, Mirror of the 1920's* (Aberdeen, Miss.: Gregg-Hamilton, 1979), 51; Matthew 6:3. The actual text of this verse is: “But when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”

to submit their resolutions at the party's 1944 state convention.<sup>15</sup>

By the time the party assembled in Jackson in June 1944, whatever "liberal" forces existed within the party leadership following the 1943 gubernatorial election had weakened considerably. Herbert Holmes, conservative state chairman of the party, marshaled his forces and kept the Bailey men at bay. The meeting, held on June 7, one day after D-Day, was reportedly "the shortest convention on record and one of the quietest." The most excitement at the event came during the keynote speech. Although the state convention typically featured the titular head of the party, the sitting governor, as the convention's keynote speaker, Holmes bypassed Governor Bailey in favor of Ripley banker and lawyer, Fred Smith. He gave a rousing anti-New Deal speech and linked FDR's policies to an expansion of black rights. Everyone at the meeting, of course, knew of the recent U. S. Supreme Court ruling, *Smith v. Allwright*, which had held the white primary unconstitutional. Fears about the implications of this ruling largely united the state's Democratic leaders. As W. T. Wynn, chair of the convention's Resolutions Committee, noted, the decisive issue became "whether Congress has a right to invade the sanctity of the States and say that the State has no jurisdiction over the qualifications of its voters. Deep underneath the issue and bluntly stated is whether ultimately white supremacy will continue, or black supremacy will supersede [sic] white supremacy in our political sovereignty." While Bailey was himself no enemy of white supremacy, he did not seem as dedicated to the cause as others. For instance, delegates had discussed submitting a resolution to the state convention asking the governor to call a special session to repeal the primary system. However, Bailey never indicated much enthusiasm for this action.<sup>16</sup>

The state meeting selected eighteen delegates to attend the national convention in July in Chicago, but in a somewhat unusual move, the state's entire congressional delegation—including Bilbo, Eastland and Rankin—and Governor Bailey were not elected to any of the slots. At

---

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Toler, "Mississippi Primary Plans are Completed," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 5, 1944; T. D. Davis to Friends, September 9, 1943, and Resolution of the State Democratic Executive Committee of the State of Mississippi (substitute resolution), n.d., August 1943, both in Box 1108, Bilbo Papers.

<sup>16</sup> "Mississippi Primary Plans are Completed"; Turner Catledge, "Mississippi Joins New Deal 'Rebels,'" *New York Times*, June 8, 1944; W. T. Wynn, "A Mississippi Leader States the Issue," *The Southern Weekly*, August 5, 1944, in Box 64, Walter Sillers Papers, Charles W. Capps Jr. Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.



district caucus meetings on the evening of June 6, the seven hundred or so Democrats in town for the convention judged the governor and the state's U. S. Senators and Congressmen "too New Dealish." Bailey, along with Senators Bilbo and Eastland, however, did receive three of the eight at-large delegate seats named by the convention. In a resolution passed with almost unanimous support, the delegates received instructions to press national Democrats in Chicago to support four issues: to restore the two-thirds rule at the national convention, which gave southern Democrats veto power over what they viewed as questionable decisions; to declare opposition to federal efforts to repeal the poll tax; to support states' rights; and to avoid making "any declaration for social equality between the colored and white races." Should the Mississippi delegates fail to secure assurances from the national convention to support these measures, they were "absolved from any obligation to vote for the nominees of the Democratic National Convention and are at liberty to vote for any Democrat holding views in harmony with those expressed in this resolution."<sup>17</sup>

When the national Democrats held their convention a month later in Chicago, the "revolt" planned against the national party by the Mississippi delegation, as well as those from South Carolina and Texas, bore little fruit. White Southerners hoped to prevent the adoption of a strong civil rights plank in the platform, certainly nothing bolder than the bland statement of 1940 promising to uphold due process and equal protection of the laws. The president had signaled as much when he met with Georgia governor Ellis Arnall—one of the South's most moderate politicians—two weeks prior to the convention. Arnall told FDR everything was lined up for the president, "if only he could keep the Negro problem from coming too much to the fore." Roosevelt reportedly communicated to Arnall that everything "is all fixed," as the Democrats would produce a short platform. The president was correct about the platform's relative brevity, but it did contain a fairly strong statement on race: "We believe that racial and religious minorities have the right to live, develop and vote equally with all citizens and share the rights that are guaranteed by our Constitution. Congress should exert its full constitutional powers to protect those rights." On a voice vote on the platform, many southern delegates shouted their disapproval

---

<sup>17</sup> "Mississippi Joins New Deal 'Rebels,'" Wynn, "A Mississippi Leader States the Issue"; *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1944* (Chicago: Democratic Party, National Convention, 1944), 138.

because of this clause but to no avail. Press reports back in Mississippi claimed that its delegates had “not only had this plank stuffed down their throats but were forced to swallow the nails in the plank too.”<sup>18</sup>

While white Southerners had what turned out to be unrealistic hopes that they could block a pro-civil rights platform plank, few expected southern delegates to prevent FDR’s nomination for a fourth term, especially given his broad popularity among the southern people. Even so, the Mississippi delegation to the Democratic convention determined to try. The group canvassed before the presidential vote, and Mike Conner urged the group to follow the instructions from the state party and vote for U. S. Senator Harry Byrd from Virginia. In a “fiery speech,” Conner “severely criticized President Roosevelt and the New Deal’s attitude toward the South.” The caucus voted to support Byrd. Only Governor Bailey and Circuit Judge Jesse Graham of Meridian voted against the measure. On the first and only presidential ballot, Mississippi threw its twenty votes to Byrd (he received a total of eighty-nine votes to Roosevelt’s 1,086).<sup>19</sup>

White Southerners did achieve one victory at the convention: preventing the vice-presidential re-nomination of Henry Wallace, a man who, according to the *Chicago Defender*, was hated by white Southerners “because of his outspoken championship of complete freedom for the Negro.” Southern Democrats initially divided their support for the vice-presidential nomination among several candidates—all the Mississippi delegates backed Alabama Senator John H. Bankhead on the first ballot—but eventually threw their support to Harry S. Truman, perceived as someone who could both defeat Wallace and be trusted to protect southern traditions. Afterwards, many of Mississippi’s top political leaders vied for credit in securing Truman’s nomination, including Missis-

---

<sup>18</sup> Robert H. Ferrell, *Choosing Truman: The Democratic Convention of 1944* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 66-67; “The Present Political Dilemma,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 9, 1944; *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1944*, 94-95; “The Fighting South,” *West Point (Miss.) Daily Times Leader*, n.d., 1944, in Wynn, “A Mississippi Leader States the Issue.”

<sup>19</sup> *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1944*, 110, 256, 270; “State Delegates to Vote for Byrd,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 18, 1944. Mike Conner was elected as a delegate in the district caucus balloting.

ssippi House Speaker Walter Sillers, Theodore Bilbo, and Jim Eastland.<sup>20</sup>

With Truman on the ticket, most of Mississippi's political leaders, at both the state and national levels, urged support for the Roosevelt-Truman ticket in 1944. At the local level, however, some Mississippi Democrats pointed to the instructions issued at the June state party convention and refused to endorse the national presidential ticket. At an October 1944 mass meeting of Democrats in Washington County, the attendees pledged to support the Republicans unless some or all the state's nine presidential electors agreed to follow the directions of the state party and vote for someone other than FDR for president in the Electoral College. Those at the meeting claimed that "the sentiment is stronger against the New Deal now in Mississippi than on June 7."<sup>21</sup>

One item that had further angered many white Mississippians was the U. S. Army's July order prohibiting segregation at post exchanges and theaters and on government-run transportation. The official statement from the Washington County meeting complained about, among other matters, the "anti-segregation order which has made every military post in the South a potential powder keg." While Governor Bailey "urged" FDR and the Secretary of War to reconsider the anti-segregation directive, some Mississippians thought the governor could have protested the move more vigorously. John Batte, who owned a furniture company in Jackson, described Bailey's communication to federal officials as "about the mildest and weakest statement that I ever

---

<sup>20</sup> Walter White, "People and Places," *Chicago Defender*, August 12, 1944; "Truman Nomination Credited to Sillers," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 3, 1945; "Close to Truman," news clipping, *Meridian Star*, April 1945, Box 1125, Bilbo Papers; William F. Winter to Daddy and Mama, July 24, 1944, copy in author's possession; Maarten Zwiers, *Senator James Eastland: Mississippi's Jim Crow Democrat* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 29-31. Ironically, Truman's later support for civil rights would precipitate the walkout of Mississippi's delegation at the 1948 Democratic National Convention, because of the adoption by the party of a strong civil rights plank. See Kari Fredrickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), ch. 4.

<sup>21</sup> "Democrats of County Opposed to Roosevelt Declare Intention to Back Sheldon G.O.P.," *Greenville Delta Democrat-Times*, October 25, 1944.

heard a man in public office make about an issue so vital to the south.”<sup>22</sup>

Ten days before the presidential election, three of Mississippi's nine presidential electors announced that they found the Democratic platform “obnoxious” and would cast their ballots for Harry Byrd. Two additional electors declared they were also considering such an action. Most estimates at the time suggested that anti-Roosevelt voters represented only about 10 percent of the state's electorate. So, selection of this split electoral ticket would greatly overrepresent the amount of anti-FDR sentiment in the state. The week before the presidential election, Governor Bailey, recovering from an operation and with “his chest bulging with bandages,” sprang into action. He called a special session of the legislature and asked the lawmakers to “enact legislation giving ‘all qualified electors the right to freely express their choice at the ballot box.’” He claimed that the bolting electors were “in effect voting for Dewey”—the Republican presidential candidate. The Friday before the national election, the legislature approved, and Governor Bailey signed, a bill giving lawmakers the power to name a new group of electors and to print a supplemental ballot, which included five new pro-FDR electors to join the four committed Roosevelt men already on the slate. This solution, however, did nothing to help the twenty-five thousand soldiers absent from the state who had already or would vote using the ballot with the divided ticket of electors. State representative Jesse Shanks estimated that the soldiers would have voted “99 to 1 for Roosevelt and Truman” and lambasted the electoral bolters for effecting “a stab in the back for our finest citizens, men who are giving their lives for the very democracy that we are denying them.” Two hundred and twenty-five thousand supplemental pink ballots were quickly printed, and the State Highway Patrol distributed the new tickets to polling places around the state. On election day, the original ballots with the anti-FDR electors were only used in a few counties, such as Washington. Ninety-four percent of Mississippi voters chose

---

<sup>22</sup> “Democrats of County Opposed to Roosevelt Declare Intention to Back Sheldon G.O.P.”; Morris J. MacGregor Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2001), 44-46; “Bailey Protest Ban of Racial Segregation in Military Camps,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 31, 1944; John C. Batte to Thomas G. Abernethy, September 1, 1944, Box 382, Thomas G. Abernethy Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford.

the Democrats and almost all of them utilized the pro-FDR pink forms.<sup>23</sup>

Amid these political maneuverings, the two legislative sessions of the Bailey administration (1944 and 1946) brought positive changes to the people of the state. Rod Sparrow, Jackson correspondent for the Associated Press, noted in 1946 that Bailey had begun “to effectuate a great progressive program in the state.” During the 1944 legislative session, a large surplus—generated by taxation on unprecedented war profits—was used to pay down the state’s debt, while at the same time, Bailey led a major reorganization of the parole board, the penitentiary system, the state college board, and other state agencies. At the beginning of the 1946 legislative session, Bailey proposed a twenty-seven-point program to the legislature, which passed virtually the entire agenda during the session. Buoyed by a continuing revenue surplus of more than \$15 million, the legislature approved state expenditures for a host of new projects: highways, state office buildings, schools for the blind and deaf, and public education in general, including funds specifically dedicated to black education.<sup>24</sup>

Bailey’s record as governor led his supporters to tout him as a possible opponent to Senator Theodore Bilbo in his reelection campaign of 1946. Ironically, Bilbo had backed Bailey over Conner in 1943 in part to prevent what he thought might be a strong challenge from a sitting governor. Bailey did indeed seem to pose a real threat to Bilbo’s incumbency, in large part “because of the unparalleled success of his legislative program,” according to the local press. Bailey, however, never clearly indicated that he would run for the U. S. Senate seat, and his declining health ultimately short-circuited any plans he may have been contemplating. Beginning in late February 1946, Bailey underwent a series of surgeries to treat a tumor on his spine. Periods of brief recovery were followed by relapses,

---

<sup>23</sup> “Governor Confers with Rice after 3 Party Electors Bolt,” Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, October 30, 1944; “The Still-Simmering South,” *Time*, November 6, 1944; “Bailey Appeals to Legislature for Vote Laws,” Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, November 2, 1944; Nat Caldwell, “Mississippi Picks New Electors,” *Nashville Tennessean*, November 3, 1944; Nat Caldwell, “Mississippi Governor Signs Pro-Roosevelt Elector Bill,” *Nashville Tennessean*, November 4, 1944; William A. Winter to William F. Winter, November 13, 1944, copy in author’s possession. Before the election one of the two waffling electors agreed to join the Byrd forces; the other pledged to support Roosevelt-Truman, but this endorsement came too late for him to avoid being replaced on the supplemental ticket.

<sup>24</sup> Rod Sparrow, “‘Most Progress’ Seen for Magnolia State,” Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, November 24, 1946; Kenneth Toler, “Bailey Set Revenue Record,” January 1946, Subject File: Thomas L. Bailey, Jan.-Apr. 1946, MDAH; “Governor Bailey is Dead,” Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, November 3, 1946; “Says State Will Build for 25 Years,” West Point (*Miss.*) *Daily Times Leader*, January 15, 1946.

until Bailey finally succumbed to his illness on November 2, 1946.<sup>25</sup>

With Bailey unable to run for the U.S. Senate in 1946, incumbent Theodore Bilbo cruised to victory in the summer Democratic primary but not without arousing a firestorm of controversy. During the campaign, he suggested that violence might be necessary to keep black voters from the polls. Those comments led to a full-scale investigation by the U. S. Senate and a battle over whether to seat the Mississippi senator in the Eightieth U. S. Congress (Bilbo died in 1947 before that question was resolved). Had Bailey been able to run, he would have represented a moderate alternative to Bilbo in 1946, someone committed to maintaining racial segregation but who tried to downplay the race issue whenever possible to focus on other matters—someone in the mold of Georgia’s moderate governor, Ellis Arnall.<sup>26</sup>

Although his career was cut short by illness, Thomas L. Bailey seemed to offer an alternative to the racial paranoia of someone like Senator Bilbo, who, whenever possible, stoked racial fears to address the challenges to the state’s social relations wrought by war mobilization. Bailey, of course, had impeccable segregationist credentials. He had supported efforts to tighten Mississippi’s transportation segregation laws in both the 1944 and 1946 legislative sessions. And when the U. S. Supreme Court declared interstate bus segregation unconstitutional in June 1946, Governor Bailey reaffirmed that “segregation will continue down here. Neither the whites nor the Negroes want it any other way.” Yet Bailey did not go out of his way to rail against the erosion of Mississippi’s racial traditions, a la “The Man.” Hodding Carter Jr., editor of the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times* and an outspoken Bilbo critic, described Bailey as someone who “never descended to pitting class against class, race against race and religion against religion, as have some of the louder, more blatant and less worthy of our politicians.” In April 1946, when the National Negro Council asked President Truman to send federal troops to Mississippi to protect black voters, particularly black veterans, in the upcoming Democratic primary election, Bailey refused to comment on the matter. Despite repeated calls for Governor Bailey to call a special session of the legislature to adjust Mississippi’s election laws to guarantee black disfranchisement, Bailey refused to summon lawmakers for such

---

<sup>25</sup> “Bailey Is Still Senate Prospect, Friends Declare,” *Jackson Daily News*, April 3, 1946; Kenneth Toler, “Bailey Wants Senate Post,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 7, 1946; “Governor Bailey is Dead,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 3, 1946.

a meeting. Black Mississippians, for their part, continued to appreciate Bailey's racial moderation. After the governor's death, a group of black Methodists in north Mississippi commended Bailey for "promoting a better understanding between the two racial populations in Mississippi."<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> "State Statute Sets Partitions on Buses," Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, May 14, 1944; "Bill Asks Legislature For Separate City Buses for Negroes, Whites," *Atlanta Daily World*, January 1946, reel 96, Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File; "'Jim Crow' Will Continue in South, Governor of Mississippi Asserts," *New York Times*, June 5, 1946; "Tom Bailey," Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, November 5, 1946; "Bailey Withholds Comment on Story," Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, April 28, 1946; "No Special Session in '46 Planned by Governor," Jackson *Daily News*, September 15, 1946; "Negro Methodists Commend Bailey's Understanding," Jackson *Daily News*, December 3, 1946.





# Fielding L. Wright (1946-1952): Legacy of a White-Supremacist Progressive

by *James Patterson Smith*

On Sunday morning, May 9, 1948, Mississippi's greying, fifty-three-year-old governor, Fielding L. Wright, took to the airwaves at 7:30 a.m. for an unprecedented statewide radio address "to the Negro citizens of Mississippi." In the 1940s, African Americans constituted half of the state's 2.2 million residents.<sup>1</sup> However, a maze of discriminatory practices barred all but a minuscule number of black Mississippians from the ballot box. Oddly, the text of the speech had been released to the newspapers on the previous afternoon, guaranteeing front-page Sunday morning headlines appearing simultaneously with the broadcast.<sup>2</sup> Significantly, this broadcast took place on the eve of a widely-promoted protest rally



*Fielding Wright, Courtesy, Mississippi Department of Archives and History*

---

<sup>1</sup> Heber Ladner, *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register 1945-49*, State of Mississippi, 80. See also, the 1952 edition of this work with a breakdown of black and white percentages in the populations of each of Mississippi's eighty-two counties, according to the 1950 Federal Census.

<sup>2</sup> Fielding Wright, "Governor Wright Speaks to the Negroes of Mississippi," May 9, 1948, incomplete WRBC transcript in OH transcripts/AU 1002 116558, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson. See also, complete Wright press release, "Address to be Delivered at 7:30 Sunday Morning May 9, [1948], Over a Statewide Radio Network," in Fielding Wright Subject File, January to May, 1949, MDAH.

---

*JAMES PATTERSON SMITH holds a Ph.D. in history from Vanderbilt University and is professor emeritus of history at the University of Southern Mississippi. Smith is the author of Hurricane Katrina: The Mississippi Story and co-author with Dr. Gilbert R. Mason Sr. of Beaches, Blood and Ballots: A Black Doctor's Civil Rights Struggle.*

against President Harry Truman's 1948 civil rights program. Over the previous twenty years, Fielding Wright had been acclaimed for his progressive legislative record in transportation, education, tax policy, industrial development, natural resource conservation, public health, old-age pensions, and welfare. His constructive engagement with the state's problems had earned him the endorsement of Hodding Carter's liberal-leaning *Delta Democrat Times* in the 1947 governor's race.<sup>3</sup> This progressive record, however, was soon forgotten. Through the spring of 1948, Wright emerged as a leading southern anti-Truman, states' rights activist. Wright's May 9 broadcast "to the Negroes citizens of Mississippi" underscored the racist and backward-looking underpinnings of the 1948 states' rights or "Dixiecrat" movement. In accepting a leadership role in such a movement, Fielding Wright built the profoundly negative image that has long obscured his substantial achievements as a progressive legislator.

In fact, Fielding Wright, an attorney born in 1895, had been raised at Rolling Fork in Sharkey County, a 70 percent black-majority county in the cotton-rich Mississippi Delta. In the 1940s, thirty-five of Mississippi's eighty-two counties held black majorities. Wright was the grandson of a wealthy planter. His father had managed family plantations and served several terms as sheriff of Sharkey County.<sup>4</sup> The Delta experience had shaped Fielding Wright's obsession with the pillars of legalized discrimination that upheld white political power in Mississippi's black-majority counties.<sup>5</sup> For Wright, white political control was the crux of the matter in 1948.

The true purpose of the May 9 radio speech emerged as Wright launched harsh criticisms of President Harry Truman's 1948 civil rights proposals and laid out his case for bolting the Democratic Party if they were not withdrawn. Adding red meat to the mix, he asserted that the "wise of both races" would "recognize the absolute necessity of segregation" as a bulwark "to protect the integrity" of both races. From the governor's chair, Fielding Wright then threw down

---

<sup>3</sup> Editorial, *Greenville Delta Democrat-Times*, reprinted in the *Jackson Daily News*, "Editorials of Note," June 18, 1947.

<sup>4</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, December 8, 1946; Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-68* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 74; and Elbert Hilliard, "A Biography of Fielding Wright: Mississippi's Mr. State's Rights" (master's thesis, Mississippi State University, 1959), 7.

<sup>5</sup> Ladner, *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register*, 1952 edition, population map.

a warning to Negroes: "If any of you have become so deluded as to want to enter our white schools, patronize our hotels and cafes, enjoy social equality with the whites, then true kindness . . . requires me to advise you to make your home in some state other than Mississippi."<sup>6</sup>

In matters of race and civil rights, instead of grappling with the requirements of the future or probing for compromise, Wright looked to the past, seeking desperately to preserve Mississippi's post-Reconstruction, semi-feudal racial caste system. Thus, from 1948 forward, a bitter defense of segregation and white supremacy welded to the decoy language of states' rights came to dominate the image of Fielding Wright. Within weeks, his outspoken stance propelled him to the vice-presidential nomination of the white-supremacist States' Rights or "Dixiecrat" Party with Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina as its presidential standard bearer. In the process, Wright's prior record as a southern progressive was all but lost to memory and all but lost to the state's own self-image and its larger identity within the nation.

Until 1948, both Wright and Thurmond had records as government-activist progressives. Thurmond's pre-1948 progressivism as a South Carolina legislator and governor has been well recognized in recent scholarship. In Wright's case, reconstruction of his thinking has been limited by the fact that his personal papers were lost in an office fire shortly after he left public life.<sup>7</sup> Thus, recent historians have been quick to dismiss Fielding Wright as "ultra-conservative" or "reactionary," based largely on press coverage of the 1948 Dixiecrat campaign.<sup>8</sup>

The word "reactionary" certainly fits the tenor of Wright's May 9, 1948, broadcast. However, in policy arenas beyond the race issue, Wright's broader twenty-year legislative record defies such blanket labeling.

---

<sup>6</sup> Wright, "Address to be Delivered at 7:30 Sunday Morning May 9, [1948], Over a Statewide Radio Network."

<sup>7</sup> Elbert R. Hilliard to Michael Skaggs, September 18, 2002, Wright Biography File, MDAH. It has been more than forty years since two unpublished master's theses and a JMH article examined Fielding Wright's career. He has gotten little attention since. See Hilliard, "A Biography of Fielding Wright"; Charles P. Smith, "Governor Fielding Wright's Legislative Programs: 1946-1952," (master's thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 1976); and Elbert R. Hilliard "The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright," *The Journal of Mississippi History* 41, no.1 (February 1979): 5-23.

<sup>8</sup> Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York: Hill and Wong, 2012), 62-69; Nadine Cohodas, *Strom Thurmond and the Politics of Southern Change* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1994), 36-39, and 97-123; John Egerton, *Speak Now Against That Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 390; and Frederickson, 78, 135, 154, and 171.

Among other things in his make-up, Fielding Wright was a committed Methodist layman who gave speeches to civic and church groups on his view of government service as a form of “Christian Stewardship.”<sup>9</sup> He was a pragmatist who saw government as an instrument of constructive change. At the close of his successful 1947 campaign for governor, he expressed his unreserved approval of the large number of depression-era state initiatives undertaken since he had first entered the legislature in 1928. “Probably never in the history of the state,” he said, had so much state action been so “successfully undertaken to stimulate and make prosperous the family life and business life of all Mississippians.” Wright advocated more such state action to address a wide range of problems.<sup>10</sup>

Like Hodding Carter and other southern progressives, Fielding Wright saw increased health and education investments as necessities for the state’s long-term economic well-being.<sup>11</sup> In an overlooked passage from his January 1948 inaugural address, Wright asserted that the “protection and reclamation of our human resources is the first duty of the state.” No longer, he said, should “economic progress be thwarted by workers who are incapacitated” by illness or lack of education. On the campaign trail he stated his belief that the income of Mississippians was “closely tied in with the level of our education.” “Better schools,” he asserted, “always mean better income . . . more prosperity,” and “better opportunity” for young people.<sup>12</sup> In his successful 1943 campaign for lieutenant governor, Wright even publicly called for the equalization of black and white teacher pay. He took the theme to its logical conclusion when, as governor, in 1950, he challenged the legislature to recognize that “children of both races are entitled to equal opportunities.”<sup>13</sup>

Wright often affirmed his belief in balanced budgets and might fairly be called a fiscal conservative. However, in an era of revenue surpluses,

---

<sup>9</sup> Fielding Wright, “Christian Stewardship in Today’s World,” Series 941, Box 1835, Fielding Wright Speeches, MDAH.

<sup>10</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 1, 1947.

<sup>11</sup> Ann Waldron, *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1993), 204.

<sup>12</sup> Wright, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1948, Subject Files: Wright, January 1948, MDAH; Wright, Statement from 1955 campaign brochure, Fielding Wright Campaign File, MDAH; *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 1, 1947; and Wright, “Message to the Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature, January 3, 1950,” 6, General Collection, MDAH.

<sup>13</sup> Wright, “Message to the Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature, January 3, 1950.” See also, editorial, *Jackson Daily News*, February 19, 1949, which recalled Wright’s 1943 campaign advocacy for equalizing black and white teacher pay.

Fielding Wright called repeatedly for spending the bounty on needed development projects, not cutting taxes. For these stances, friends in the state senate in 1946 dubbed Wright “Mississippi’s pied piper of progressive . . . possibilities.”<sup>14</sup> Two years later, both Strom Thurmond and Fielding Wright won fame for their utter hostility to Truman’s civil rights initiatives. However, both men continued to be amenable to a raft of progressive state spending measures into the 1950s.<sup>15</sup>

Fielding Wright’s roots as a progressive perhaps arose from his firsthand experiences with the great Mississippi River flood of 1927. Wright was a World War I veteran and later commanded a National Guard unit activated in the 1927 flood. The flood experience made him an advocate of state investments in flood control and flood relief for those who lost crops in the great disaster.<sup>16</sup> After finishing a law degree at the University of Alabama, Wright had been a town alderman, and beginning in 1928, he served four years in the state senate followed by eight years in the Mississippi House of Representatives. For almost five years, from 1936 to 1940, he held the powerful post of speaker of the house. He was strong-willed and persistent in pursuing his goals. Still, Wright was generally credited with being a good listener, calm, and serious-minded in deliberations. However, he gave somber and dry (some said stern) stump speeches, and he did not enjoy campaigning.<sup>17</sup>

Wright left public service in the early 1940s to make money as an oil-lease lawyer. After a four-year hiatus from office, he was elected lieutenant governor in 1943. He moved up to the governor’s office in November of 1946, upon the death of Governor Thomas Bailey. In 1947, Wright cemented a hitherto-unthinkable Delta-Hills alliance with Mississippi’s infamous U.S. Senator, Theodore Bilbo, on the promise that if the race-baiting Bilbo were expelled from the U.S. Senate, he, Wright, would reappoint him.<sup>18</sup> With his own strength in the Delta and Bilbo’s organizational pull in the Hills and Piney Woods, Fielding Wright won

---

<sup>14</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 11, 1946. See also, Tom Karsell’s statement in *The New York Star*, as quoted in Anne Rothe, ed., *Current Biography 1948* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co, 1949), 695-696.

<sup>15</sup> William F. Winter, “New Directions in Politics, 1948-1956,” *A History of Mississippi*, ed. by Richard Aubrey McLemore, 2 Vols. (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 2: 141; and Cohodas, 36-39, and 97-123.

<sup>16</sup> Hilliard, “The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright,” 7

<sup>17</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, November 3, 1946, and January 18, 1948; and *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 19, 1948, and July 18, 1948.

<sup>18</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, January 15, 1947; and *Meridian Star*, June 13, 1947.

a full term in the governor's office in a 1947 first-primary victory over four opponents.<sup>19</sup> At the very top of Mississippi politics, he joined an unusual Delta-based triumvirate, which included Mississippi House Speaker Walter Sillers of Bolivar County and U.S. Senator James O. Eastland of Sunflower County. On specific development issues, Wright and Eastland opposed Sillers. However, all three hailed from counties with overwhelming black majorities, where their local political careers rested on black disenfranchisement. Thus, they cooperated in 1948.

Wright left one of his biggest marks as a progressive on the struggle for Mississippi's first paved state highway system. Wright envisioned thousands of miles of publicly financed paved arteries as offering farmers and other entrepreneurs the stimulating effect of more efficient market access. In 1929, at a time when "dust or mud" offered the best description of Mississippi's roads, Fielding Wright, as a freshman state senator, co-authored a major paved highway bill that died at the point of Governor Theodore Bilbo's veto pen in a dispute over how the proposed new state road system would be managed.<sup>20</sup>

By 1932, Wright had switched to the Mississippi House of Representatives, where his expertise won him appointment as chairman of the Highways and Highway Finance Committee. His insistence on de-politicized management of any new road system brought him into conflict with Delta power broker Walter Sillers, House Speaker Thomas Bailey, and Governor Mike Conner. In 1936, Wright boldly organized a successful move to overthrow Speaker Bailey in favor of Horace Stansel, a fellow roads advocate. Stansel then appointed Wright chairman of both the House Rules Committee and the House Highways and Highway Finance Committee. Upon Speaker Stansel's untimely death, Wright himself was elected house speaker and boldly retained both chairmanships. From this uniquely powerful position Wright outmaneuvered the ever-obstructive Walter Sillers and delivered the 1936 highway bill to a new progressive governor, Hugh White.<sup>21</sup> Later, in 1949 when Wright himself had moved to the governor's office, he publicly and pointedly faced down big oil's opposition to his

---

<sup>19</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, November 3, 1946; *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 19, 1948; *Jackson Daily News*, January 18, 1948; and V. O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, New Edition (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1949), 236.

<sup>20</sup> Hilliard, "The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright," 17-20; *Meridian Star*, June 13, 1947; Wright, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1948; and *Jackson Daily News*, December 4, 1949.

<sup>21</sup> Hilliard, "The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright," 17-20.

gas tax plan to finance a new secondary or “farm-to-market” road system.<sup>22</sup> His decades-long focus on radical improvements in state transportation systems established Wright’s progressive credentials.

In the matter of taxation, progressives favored revenue schemes that asked the more prosperous to bear a greater share in taxes and deplored measures that put disproportionate burdens on the poor. During the 1932 fiscal crisis, when legislative conservatives pressed for severe budget cuts, Wright committed himself to finding a way to save the schools and hospitals from the threatened budget axe. Governor Mike Conner proposed to meet the crisis with a 3 percent sales tax. In March of 1932, Wright voted with the majority for the sales tax. At the time, it was the only revenue bill that could garner the required legislative super majority.<sup>23</sup> Though regressive in a narrow sense, the sales tax was progressive in its larger impact. It kept the schools and hospitals open.

Offsetting the sales tax vote, six years later in 1938, Fielding Wright, as speaker of the house, led the battle for homestead exemption. Homestead exemption was a progressive measure that removed from tax rolls homes valued under \$5,000. It likely saved thousands of poorer families from tax foreclosure sales and made home ownership an option for many others. However, homestead exemption shifted the tax burden to wealthier property owners in general, and it redistributed the regional burden from the Hills to the Delta.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Wright’s fight for homestead exemption put him at odds with friends from his home region and again pitted him against Walter Sillers and the interests of the Delta’s great land magnates.<sup>25</sup>

Governor Hugh White later recalled that monied interests nearly killed the homestead exemption bill in the House Ways and Means Committee. To save it, Speaker Wright resorted to the controversial and politically risky step of removing the bill from Ways and Means to bring it directly to the floor of the full House for a vote. Moreover, in floor action, Wright maneuvered successfully to kill all weakening amendments, and the bill passed into law.<sup>26</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Wright, “Address to the Legislature,” reprinted in the *Jackson Daily News*, November 14, 1949; and *Jackson Daily News*, May 7, 1956.

<sup>23</sup> Hilliard, “The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright,” 13-15.

<sup>24</sup> Key, 233.

<sup>25</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, December 8, 1946.

<sup>26</sup> Hugh White, letter reprinted in 1947 campaign leaflet, Subject File: Wright, July 1947, MDAH; and Hugh White, statement in the *Hinds County Gazette*, July 11, 1947.

In 1936, when Hugh White put forward Mississippi's revolutionary Balance Agriculture with Industry (BAWI) initiative, once again Speaker Wright supported the legislation needed to carry it into effect. As enacted, this first-in-the-nation, state-sponsored industrialization program authorized counties and municipalities to issue bonds to purchase potential factory sites, construct buildings, and grant local tax exemptions to attract new industry. Over the first twelve years of the program, Mississippi's manufacturing jobs base grew by 62.2 percent.<sup>27</sup> In succeeding years Wright seldom took to the stump without praising BAWI's importance in helping build "a bulwark against unemployment, poverty, and want."<sup>28</sup> These are hardly the words of a limited-government traditionalist.

Going further, Wright cast depression-era votes for unemployment compensation and for other federally-matched, social safety-net initiatives, including aid to impoverished families with dependent children and a state-level, old-age pension program. On the campaign trail in 1947, Wright claimed that "it had been a great pleasure" to him that since 1936, every succeeding regular session of the legislature had found the means to increase state appropriations for these programs. He advocated consistently for further increases in state funding so that more of Mississippi's needy elderly, poor children, and disabled people could be served.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, as governor, albeit after heated exchanges with the bill's sponsors, Wright in 1948 signed into operation what was perhaps the most liberal workman's compensation law in the nation.<sup>30</sup> Like other twentieth-century progressives, Wright saw poverty and education as two sides of the same coin. Relief programs might mitigate suffering, but only education could eradicate its cause. One of the first acts he signed as governor took Mississippi into the federally-subsidized school lunch

---

<sup>27</sup> *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, July 28, 1950; *Jackson Daily News*, December 8, 1946; *Meridian Star*, June 13, 1947; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 28, 1947; and *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, September 16, 1949.

<sup>28</sup> Wright, 1947 Rolling Fork Candidacy Announcement Speech, and 1955 Radio Address, both in Series 941, Box 1835, Fielding Wright Speeches, MDAH; and Wright, 1955 campaign brochure, Subject File: Wright, 1955-56, MDAH.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*; and *Jackson Daily News*, June 20, 1947.

<sup>30</sup> Bill Minor, "After One Man's 26-year Vigil, Legislature Enacts Workman's Comp Law," in Minor, *Eyes on Mississippi: A Fifty-Year Chronicle of Change* (Jackson: Morris Books, 2001), 150-151; Dennis Mitchell, *Mississippi Liberal: A Biography of Frank E. Smith* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 65; and Charles C. Bolton, *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi: A Biography* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 76.



program.<sup>31</sup> Faced with a string of large budget surpluses, in five years as Mississippi's chief executive, Wright refused to even consider tax cuts.<sup>32</sup> Instead, he went on a spending spree, advocating and signing into law dramatic increases in public school funding, including teacher pay raises, which Wright proudly claimed totaled a cumulative 66.5 percent. He doubled the higher education budget and brought to fruition plans for the new four-year medical school and teaching hospital at Jackson and a new training college for black teachers at Itta Bena.<sup>33</sup> Moreover, when the costs of the Korean War threatened to dry up federal funding, Wright flew to Washington to make a successful appeal for the federal matching funds needed to save the medical school and teaching hospital project.<sup>34</sup>

To his credit, in his 1943 campaign for lieutenant governor, Wright had taken a public stand for ending the appalling race-based funding gaps in Mississippi schools.<sup>35</sup> As governor, with budget surpluses available, he instituted Mississippi's first sustained effort to equalize black and white teacher pay, provided the first buses for black school children, and inaugurated an unprecedented program of state aid for classroom construction, which included earmarked set-asides specifically for black schools.<sup>36</sup> Not surprisingly then, Wright favored proposals for broader federal aid to the public schools, especially if federal funds could be used to help equalize black and white teachers' salaries.<sup>37</sup>

However, for Fielding Wright and most other southern white leaders, support for federal aid to education carried one important caveat—such aid must never in any way challenge the sacred cow of racial segregation.<sup>38</sup> He was willing to overlook inescapable evidence that segregation and black disenfranchisement enabled and drove local school boards in the gross underfunding of schools for Mississippi's black children. To the end of his life, Fielding Wright remained a political white supremacist

---

<sup>31</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, March 13, 1947, and *Jackson Daily News*, March 18, 1947.

<sup>32</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, September 10, 1947, and November 1, 1947; *Jackson Daily News*, January 5, 1949; and Hilliard, "A Biography of Fielding Wright," 75.

<sup>33</sup> Wright, Message to the Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature, January 3, 1950; See also, Wright, statement from 1955 campaign brochure, and Wright, 1955 Radio Address.

<sup>34</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, October 7, 1950.

<sup>35</sup> Recalled in editorial, *Jackson Daily News*, February 19, 1949.

<sup>36</sup> Wright, statement from 1955 campaign brochure, and Wright, 1955 Radio Address.

<sup>37</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 10, 1949, and *Jackson Daily News*, May 10, 1949.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.* For a fuller discussion of the conflicted feelings of Mississippi's white leadership about federal aid to education in this era, see Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 39-43.

and an unrepentant segregationist. After the 1954 *Brown* decision, Wright announced his support for a state constitutional amendment to allow closing the public schools rather than desegregating them, "with the hope," as he put it, that the measure would "never be used."<sup>39</sup>

Undemocratic and anti-progressive though it was, political white supremacy came naturally to Fielding Wright. From Reconstruction lore, Wright and his Delta peers convinced themselves that the votes of black folks should never again be allowed to determine election outcomes. Thus, in 1948, it was the Delta powerbrokers who led in resurrecting the language of states' rights to symbolize their struggle to retain state control over the post-Reconstruction barriers erected against black voting. Early in 1948, President Harry Truman sent to Congress civil rights proposals to end the poll tax, make lynching a federal crime, end segregation in interstate transportation, and establish a permanent federal Fair Employment Practices Commission.<sup>40</sup> It was a program guaranteed to heighten the insecurities of white minorities living in Mississippi's thirty-five black-majority counties.

On first hearing of the Truman program, Governor Wright told the press that his own opinion, "if fully expressed, might be so fiery as to be unprintable." In the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1944 *Smith v. Allright* decision outlawing the white primary, Truman's attack on the poll tax was seen as the leading edge for an eventual federal dismantling of all remaining barriers to black voting. "If liberty is to be retained," Wright argued, "control of elections . . . voting qualifications, and . . . how and when the franchise shall be granted must remain at home."<sup>41</sup> The liberty at risk, of course, was the liberty of the white minority to rule in black-majority counties. Rather than joining Truman in helping to shape policies to address the rising demands for more consistent democracy at home and around the world, Wright united with fellow Deltans Walter Sillers and James O. Eastland in devising strategies to spread panic and harden resistance in the forty-seven less-threatened, white-majority counties of Mississippi.

In outlawing the racially exclusionary white primary, the Supreme Court destroyed the most effective post-Reconstruction bulwark

---

<sup>39</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, August 2, 1954.

<sup>40</sup> Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs, Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), II, 183; and David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 587.

<sup>41</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 1, 1947; and Wright, Speech at Tallulah, Louisiana, September 17, 1948, Series 941, Box 1835, Fielding Wright Speeches, MDAH.

southern states had erected against black voting.<sup>42</sup> In 1946, when the state legislature fumbled an early effort to circumvent the ruling, Wright warned, “If they don’t change these laws, someday when they address the gentleman from Sharkey and he rises from his seat, he’ll be black as coal.” Sharkey was Wright’s home county and 70 percent black.<sup>43</sup> As governor, Wright signed into law a 1947 measure calling for a re-registration of party primary voters and empowering local party executive committees to deny persons the right to vote in a primary if they did not swear adherence to a written statement of segregationist party principles. Though stated in non-racial terms, the intent was to screen out potential black primary voters.<sup>44</sup>

However, eight months before this fix was crafted, Mississippi’s notoriously racist U.S. Senator, Theodore Bilbo, publicly suggested election eve intimidation to deter black voters. On primary election day in 1946, black voters—many of them returning World War II veterans—were beaten on courthouse steps in Gulfport, Canton, Prentiss, Clarksdale, McComb, and Decatur. The senator won, but his tactics triggered an investigation that threatened to expel him from the Senate.<sup>45</sup> Ironically, the beating of black war veterans in Mississippi and other southern states so deeply distressed President Truman, himself a World War I combat veteran, that in December of 1946, he created the Presidential Committee on Civil Rights. The report of this investigative group laid the foundation for Truman’s 1948 civil rights program.<sup>46</sup>

Truman signaled a new commitment to civil rights in his State of the Union address broadcast on nationwide radio on January 7, 1948. He challenged the nation to live out its principles and pointed out that “discrimination based on race” was unacceptable in a world where Soviet propaganda magnified American shortcomings to the peoples of color emerging from European colonialism. The president pledged to seek answers that would “embody the moral and spiritual elements of tolerance, unselfishness, and brotherhood upon which

---

<sup>42</sup> Key, 326-29, 539-40, and 645-52; and editorial, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 5, 1944.

<sup>43</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 9, and November 10, 1946; and *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 9 and 17, 1946.

<sup>44</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, March 14, 1947.

<sup>45</sup> Chester Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 250 -51; and Mitchell, 385-86.

<sup>46</sup> Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), xvi - 6; Robert Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 293-294; and McCullough, 589.

true freedom and opportunity must rest.” A follow-up Special Civil Rights Message, written to Congress detailed Truman’s proposals for federal guarantees of voting rights, equal employment opportunity, and freedom from the fear of lynching. In response, Wright, Eastland, Sillers, and other segregationists dragged out Civil War-era states’ rights theory and disingenuously accused the president of promoting miscegenation, interracial marriage, and social chaos.<sup>47</sup>

Every member of the Southern Governor’s Association quickly announced opposition to the Truman civil rights initiatives. Within this group, Fielding Wright quickly stood out due to his radical eagerness to launch an all-out, election-year war on a sitting president of his own party. Wright’s bitter salvos characterized Truman’s new “Negro policy” as part of a “sinister” plot that “deliberately aimed to wreck the South.”<sup>48</sup> After months of such heated rhetoric, Fielding Wright of Mississippi and J. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina—governors of the two states with the greatest proportion of blacks in their populations—became the vice presidential and presidential nominees of the breakaway States’ Rights Democratic Party.

Within Mississippi, the anti-Truman revolt began and had its strongest support in the black-majority Delta counties from which hailed U.S. Senator James O. Eastland, House Speaker Walter Sillers, and Governor Fielding Wright, who now united to craft a resistance strategy. Eastland critiqued Truman’s stance in blunt terms: “Every decent Southerner wants the Negro to have a square deal . . . to prosper . . . and do well,” he said, but “the only rule that we of the South lay down is that he [the Negro] must stay out of politics.” If Congress had the authority to end the poll tax, it could, in Eastland’s view, end “every other safeguard” erected to protect white control of political offices at the county and state legislative levels. This possibility, he argued, was “the real fight on that proposal in the national Congress.”<sup>49</sup> Speaker Sillers saw the 1940s push for Negro voting as “more deadly . . . than in reconstruction” and worried that southern people were too

---

<sup>47</sup> Truman, 183; Gardner, 66-68; and McCullough, 587-597.

<sup>48</sup> Fielding Wright, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1948; and *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 8, 1948.

<sup>49</sup> James O. Eastland, “Address to Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature,” January 29, 1948, AU 1000, SR 24, TR 014a, MDAH; and Eastland to Wright, May 10, 1948, Series 1, Subseries 20, Box 1, Folder 10, James O. Eastland Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford.

complacent. The civil righters, Sillers wrote, still aimed in the end to give blacks “control over our political affairs.”<sup>50</sup> As early as 1944, Sillers had proposed to Eastland a strategy of bolting the party and assembling an “independent bloc in electoral votes” as the best defense “of the white race and its supremacy in the affairs of the country.”<sup>51</sup>

Eastland had seriously toyed with Sillers’s idea of independent electors in 1944. In the end, his personal friendship with Harry Truman led Eastland to support the 1944 Roosevelt-Truman ticket.<sup>52</sup> However, by early 1946, the continual appearance of civil rights measures in Congress drove the senator to the conclusion that the only solution going forward was for the South to field independent presidential electors who would be able to trade with all groups to protect the South’s peculiar institutions.<sup>53</sup> Eastland and Sillers collaborated to promote Fielding Wright’s emergence as the public face of the revolt against Truman in Mississippi and the South.<sup>54</sup>

Their initial goal was to assemble enough delegate votes at the 1948 Democratic National Convention to repudiate the civil rights program and block a Truman nomination for reelection. If not successful at the convention, they intended to mount a third party attack that would deny Truman an Electoral College victory in the fall and throw the election into the U.S. House of Representatives.<sup>55</sup> As Sillers saw it, if in the fray the Republican Party with its equally objectionable civil rights agenda somehow won, the South would “at least defeat the scoundrels” in the National Democratic Party “that had sold us out.”<sup>56</sup>

---

<sup>50</sup> Sillers to Eastland, February 20 and March 9, 1945, Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 133, Folder 10, Eastland Collection.

<sup>51</sup> Sillers to Judge V. A. Griffith (Mississippi Supreme Court), May 20, 1947, Box 1, Folder 10, and Sillers to Eastland, July 7, 1955, Box 34, Folder 6, both in Walter Sillers Jr. Papers, Charles W. Capps Jr. Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi; Greenville *Delta Democrat Times*, December 21, 1947; and Sillers to Eastland, May 28, 1945, Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 133, Folder 10, Eastland Collection.

<sup>52</sup> Eastland to R. I. Ingalls (Pascagoula), August 15, 1944, Series 1, Subseries 20, Box 1, Folder 6, Eastland Collection.

<sup>53</sup> Eastland to Dr. J. A. Rayburn (Pontotoc), February 11 and March 9, 1946, Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 133, Folder 13, Eastland Collection.

<sup>54</sup> J. Lee Annis, *Big Jim Eastland: The Godfather of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 81-82.

<sup>55</sup> Eastland to Stein, February 27, 1948, Series 3, Subseries 20, Box 1, Folder 10, Eastland Papers; Maarten Zwiers, *Senator James Eastland: Mississippi’s Jim Crow Democrat* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 34; and Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequence Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 211.

<sup>56</sup> Sillers to Eastland, February 14, 1948, Box 1, Folder 10, Sillers Papers.

Wright and Eastland purchased and sent out three hundred complimentary copies of Birmingham attorney Charles Wallace Collin's ultra-racist tome, *Whither the Solid South*, outlining Electoral College resistance strategies similar to those Sillers and Eastland had discussed for years.<sup>57</sup> Wright, Sillers, and Eastland all invested tremendous effort through countless coordinated speeches and rallies to gain control of the statewide apparatus of the Mississippi Democratic Party to ensure the election of anti-Truman delegates to the Democratic National Convention and an anti-Truman slate of Mississippi Democratic electors for the November 1948 ballot.

Wright's January 20, 1948, inaugural address opened the public phase in this campaign. At a point of emphasis near the end of an otherwise progressive-sounding speech, Wright threw down the gauntlet to Truman and national Democratic leaders. He pictured the entire South—not just black-majority counties—as being abused and “misrepresented by those who seek to tear down and disrupt our institutions and our way of life.” Thus, he asserted, the time had come “for the militant people of the South . . . to band together for the preservation of true Americanism.” The “true Americanism” which Wright had in mind was the Jeffersonian localism that had hitherto permitted states to distort voting requirements to create white supremacy at the polls in locales where it was threatened. The situation, Wright said, compelled Mississippi and the South to fight “with all means at our hands,” including a break with the national party in the fall presidential election.<sup>58</sup> Across the state, headlines overlooked Wright's long list of new progressive proposals. The next day's *Clarion Ledger* led the pack with headlines that screamed, “Governor Flays Party, Suggests Bolt . . .” Wright now was seen as the angry man defending the besieged ramparts of white supremacy against Harry Truman and the national Democratic Party.<sup>59</sup>

In an era when the New Deal was still broadly popular, Wright and Sillers crafted a quick succession of well-orchestrated events designed to create a sense of crisis and stir white support for bolting the national

---

<sup>57</sup> Richard D. Chesteen, “‘Mississippi is Gone Home:’ A Study of the 1948 States’ Rights Bolt,” *Journal of Mississippi History*, 32 (February 1970): 47. See also, Charles Wallace Collins, *Whither the Solid South: A Study in Politics and Race Relations* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing, 1947), 1-321.

<sup>58</sup> Wright, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1948.

<sup>59</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 21, 1948. See also, summaries of statewide comment on Wright's address in the *Jackson Daily News*, January 29 and February 1, 1948, and in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 8, 1948.

party.<sup>60</sup> Daily conferences between Sillers and Wright produced a steady stream of well-publicized legislative resolutions denouncing Truman's civil rights program.<sup>61</sup> On January 29, Senator Eastland addressed a radio-broadcast joint session of the Mississippi legislature in which he equated the struggle over Truman's civil rights program to memories of Reconstruction and the alleged Republican attempt to "create Negro republics here" and "bring about racial amalgamation."<sup>62</sup>

On February 2, Wright again grabbed the headlines when he blasted the formal release of Truman's Special Civil Rights Message as a "stab in the South's back" and called for a statewide rally in Jackson on February 12 to mobilize Mississippi at the grassroots level for an "all out fight" against the enemies of the Southern way of life. During the next week, the Southern Governors Association meeting at Wakulla Springs, Florida, uniformly rejected Wright's proposed party bolt as "too drastic" and settled instead on a strongly worded protest resolution. However, the publicity over Wright's challenge to the other governors helped build a crowd of four thousand or more for the Jackson rally on February 12. Here, surrounded by Confederate symbols, Wright declared that Mississippians would carry "the stigma" of "losing self-respect" unless they withheld their votes from Truman.<sup>63</sup>

Headline-making events and speeches continued around the state on regular basis leading up to simultaneous county Democratic Committee meetings on March 21. At eighty-two county courthouses, local leaders heard a radio address in which Wright again denounced the president and urged party activists to attend a meeting of "Jeffersonian States' Rights Democrats" in Jackson on May 10. This rally was scheduled only days before Mississippi precinct caucuses were to start the state and national party delegate selection process.<sup>64</sup>

Thus, with strategic precision, on Sunday, May 9, morning newspaper headlines announced Wright's 7:30 a.m. radio address characterized deceptively as a message "to the Negro citizens of Mississippi." Pointedly, this address to "Negro citizens" drew

---

<sup>60</sup> Hilliard, "Biography of Fielding Wright," 84.

<sup>61</sup> William Winter, interview by Robert J. Bailey, November 1, 1977, AU 115, OHP 209-210, MDAH; and, Winter, "New Directions in Politics," 141-42.

<sup>62</sup> James O. Eastland, "Address to Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature," January 29, 1948.

<sup>63</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, February 3, February 4, and February 13, 1948.

<sup>64</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, March 20 and March 21, 1948; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 21, 1948; and Mitchell, *A New History of Mississippi*, 391-92.

a picture of white people suffering from “the wickedness of the misrepresentation” of their motives. Twice in the broadcast Wright warned any blacks “so deluded” as to want to end segregation to leave the state.<sup>65</sup> It is inconceivable that these remarks had any intent but to build crowds for the so-called “nationwide” meeting of “Jeffersonian States’ Rights Democrats” the next day in Jackson where Strom Thurmond, the governor of South Carolina, was to deliver the keynote.

At Jackson on May 10, fifteen hundred delegates from nine states together with perhaps two thousand local onlookers sang a chorus of “Dixie” and heard Fielding Wright set the angry and defiant mood for the day in his introduction of Thurmond. In turn, Thurmond drove home the southern sense of betrayal and outrage at Truman and national Democratic leaders. The Carolinian drew thunderous applause as he vowed that “all the bayonets of the army cannot force the Negro into our homes, schools, churches or places of recreation.”<sup>66</sup> The delegates resolved to meet in Birmingham on July 17 to draft a plan to use the Electoral College to solve the problem if the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia failed to purge Truman or his civil rights plank.

Wright, Sillers, and Eastland’s five months of nonstop crisis mongering paid off on June 22, when the Mississippi Democratic State Convention selected a national convention delegation that pledged to walk out and reconvene in Birmingham if Truman were the Democratic nominee or if the Democratic platform included a civil rights plank. Moreover, the Mississippi Democratic Party’s slate of nine presidential electors also pledged not to vote for Truman or any other pro-civil rights candidate in the fall.<sup>67</sup>

Once they assembled for the Democratic National Convention at Philadelphia in mid-July, Wright and the Mississippi delegation found themselves on the radical extreme of the civil rights debate. No other southern delegation was prepared to walk out en masse in protest. With no positive program to offer, “the general opinion,” said Ralph McGill of *The Atlanta Constitution*, is that “the scheming

---

<sup>65</sup> Wright, “Address to be Delivered at 7:30 Sunday Morning May 9, [1948], Over a Statewide Radio Network.” See also, Wright, “Governor Wright Speaks to the Negroes of Mississippi” May 9, 1948, and *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 9, 1948.

<sup>66</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 11, 1948. See also, Frederickson, 104-106; and Cohadas, 144-145.

<sup>67</sup> Resolution of the Democratic Convention of the State of Mississippi, June 22, 1948, Box 62, Folder 1, Sillers Papers.



little men” from Mississippi “would not be satisfied with less than a repeal of Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation.” This characterization was a far cry from the heroic regional image that Wright, Eastland, and Sillers had hoped to cultivate.<sup>68</sup> When the Democratic National Convention endorsed a strong civil rights plank, the Mississippi delegation walked out behind its governor and headed for Birmingham.<sup>69</sup>

There, on July 17, 1948, whatever was left of Fielding Wright’s image as a forward-looking progressive was lost in the sea of racial bigotry and Confederate battle flags in which he accepted the vice presidential nomination of the “Dixiecrat” or States’ Rights Democratic Party. In the chaos of the Birmingham meeting, the emergence of Strom Thurmond as the splinter party’s presidential nominee with Fielding Wright as his running mate seemed accidental. Neither man apparently expected nomination.<sup>70</sup> The pre-nomination speechifying was so racially inflammatory that the American Broadcasting Company abruptly pulled the plug on its radio coverage. The *Montgomery Advertiser* bemoaned the descent of the delegates into “nigger stories . . . wild and lewd,” rather than crafting any positive program or message.<sup>71</sup> Such was the coarse cloth with which Fielding Wright covered himself in 1948.

The “Dixiecrats” as they came to be called, focused their campaign on winning sufficient Electoral College votes in the South to throw the November presidential election into the House of Representatives. To this end, Thurmond and Wright dutifully campaigned across the South.<sup>72</sup> However, the strategy failed. In November, Truman won outright reelection in a legendary upset victory over Republican Thomas Dewey. Thurmond and Wright carried only Mississippi, South Carolina, Alabama, and Louisiana—the four states with the greatest African-American proportion in their populations.<sup>73</sup>

In succeeding years, Fielding Wright continued to talk states’ rights and defend Mississippi’s racial status quo. However, the failed 1948 party-bolt strategy lost its appeal for him. Wright

---

<sup>68</sup> Bill Minor, “Mississippi Democrats Ready to Walk Out,” *New Orleans Times Picayune*, July 11, 1948, in *Eyes on Mississippi*, 50; and Ralph McGill, editorials, *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 12, 13, and 14, 1948.

<sup>69</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 15, 1948.

<sup>70</sup> Frederickson, 133-138; Cohodas, 174-177; Annis, 89-90; and Zwiers, 54-56.

<sup>71</sup> Quoted in William D. Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats: Alabama Politics 1942-1950* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1974), 115 and 179, n.67.

<sup>72</sup> Frederickson, 74 and 169-170.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 144, 152, and 184; and Key, 329.

conceded that a continued diehard stance would cost Mississippi "its standing with everybody in America."<sup>74</sup> In 1952, Wright, out of office, endorsed the national Democratic Party ticket of Adlai Stevenson of Illinois for president and Alabama's John Sparkman for vice president.<sup>75</sup> However, Wright never let Mississippians forget what he still construed to have been his own heroic stance in 1948.<sup>76</sup>

In 1955, in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown* school desegregation decision, Wright attempted to ride his image as a segregationist crusader back into the Mississippi Governor's Mansion. In the course of the 1955 campaign, he brazenly claimed that his 1948 Dixiecrat vice presidential run made him "the man most feared by Negro leaders who seek to integrate the schools."<sup>77</sup> He buried his own new slate of progressive development proposals behind a constant barrage of headline-grabbing promises to use "the police power of the state" to the utmost to block integration of the schools.<sup>78</sup> The news media gave the former governor the advantage over J. P. Coleman, Paul B. Johnson Jr., and Ross Barnett.<sup>79</sup> In contrast to Wright, Attorney General J. P. Coleman claimed to see no need to be "thrown into a panic" when there had as yet been no effort to enforce the 1954 decision.<sup>80</sup> To the surprise of many, Wright finished a distant third in the Democratic primary field. Coleman defeated all comers to win the 1955 governor's race.<sup>81</sup>

Nine months later, on May 4, 1956, Fielding Wright died of a heart attack at age sixty. Thus, the 1955 campaign, with its bitter racial overtones, became the concluding statement for a public career that began in 1928. *The Commercial Appeal* and *The Clarion-Ledger* led their coverage of Wright's death with accounts of his vice presidential run on the 1948 States' Rights ticket and reminded readers of his 1955 campaign pledge to defy the federal courts to maintain segregated schools. His friend Fred Sullens of *The Jackson Daily News* ran a short

---

<sup>74</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 11, 1950; and Zwiers, 104-105.

<sup>75</sup> *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 20, August 27, September 9, and September 26, 1952.

<sup>76</sup> Wright, Message to the Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature, January 3, 1950; and Wright, 1955 campaign Radio Address.

<sup>77</sup> Undated and unattributed news clipping, Subject Files: Wright, 1955, MDAH.

<sup>78</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, August 2, August 3, August 13, and October 3, 1954; and *Jackson Daily News*, February 15, February 17, and May 27, 1955.

<sup>79</sup> *Jackson Daily News*, April 6, 1955.

<sup>80</sup> J. P. Coleman, Inaugural Address, January 17, 1956, General Collection, MDAH; and Hilliard, "Biography of Fielding Wright," 103.

<sup>81</sup> Charles Smith, "Governor Fielding Wright's Legislative Program," 14.

inside editorial noting Wright's record for roads, education funding, public health, hospitals, medical education, and homestead exemption. However, *The Jackson Daily News*, like other dailies, focused major front page coverage on the significance of the attendance of Strom Thurmond and a large South Carolina delegation at Wright's funeral.<sup>82</sup>

Thus, the 1948 States' Rights campaign irreversibly branded Fielding Wright. However, it was a branding largely imposed by his own hand. His upbringing in a black-majority Mississippi Delta county imposed on him a racial myopia from which he never escaped. In the long view of things, President Harry Truman seized the moral high ground when he embraced the civil rights program of 1948. In contrast, Wright aligned the Mississippi governor's office with uncompromising resistance. In so doing, Wright made his name synonymous with crisis mongering and backward-looking racial injustice. Had he stayed home in 1948, his demonstrated capacity for constructive engagement with many issues of the day would have been the most memorable and most instructive aspect of his legacy. However, this possibility was largely lost. Tragically for his state, it was Fielding Wright's 1948 example of bitter racially-motivated defiance that became the all-too-familiar model for Mississippi leadership during the crucial days of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and beyond. The time and energies thus wasted cannot be reclaimed.

---

<sup>82</sup> *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 5, 1956; *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 5, 1956; and *Jackson Daily News*, May 5, 1956.



## James P. Coleman (1956-1960) and Mississippi Poppycock

by *Robert Luckett*

A few short weeks after the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* decision of May 17, 1954, James P. Coleman, the attorney general of Mississippi, made a statement about the future of public education in the state. He was in a precarious situation. As the state's chief attorney, he was responsible for the legal defense of the Jim Crow status quo—white economic, political, and social control. Eyeing a run for governor in 1955, his political future depended on his ability to undermine the advancements of the modern civil rights movement and hold at bay the insistence of the federal government that its power superseded that of the states. In the aftermath of the *Brown* decision, white backlash had rejuvenated massive



*James P. Coleman, Courtesy,  
Mississippi Department of Archives  
and History*

resistance to black empowerment, and white leaders throughout the South denounced the United States Supreme Court's decision and declared their refusal to abide by it. Some even pronounced that they had rather see public education end altogether rather than succumb to integration. It was Coleman's turn to make a statement.

Significantly, Coleman did not believe it was necessary to abolish public schools in order to maintain segregated education, but he toed the segregationist line and blamed the Supreme Court for a bad

---

ROBERT LUCKETT is an associate professor of history and director of the Margaret Walker Center at Jackson State University. He is the author of *Joe T. Patterson and the White South's Dilemma: Evolving Resistance to Black Advancement*.

decision, which, he believed, illegitimately overturned legislative and judicial history. Instead of legal precedent, Coleman argued, the *Brown* decision relied “upon the opinions of nine psychological and sociological publications as authority.” Not only that, the Court “did not undertake to say how or when that separate education can be in fact abolished.” Coleman remained hopeful because the decision dealt with segregation by race, and he believed that there was plenty of room for gerrymandering “normal district boundaries. This is the answer to a sizeable portion of the problem.” He closed, declaring, “We did not ask for this school crisis. It has been forced upon us. We will not shrink from the challenge. Our public-school system and separate education for the races will be preserved.”<sup>1</sup> His sentiment replicated what most segregationists were saying, but the notion that there might be some way out of the predicament beyond line-in-the-sand racist defiance and the complete abolition of public schools was more unconventional.

Coleman represented a brand of white supremacy much more resilient and savvy in its effectiveness than the proponents of total massive resistance. It was a type of bend-but-not-break segregation that sought to defy black progress without resorting to explicitly racist tactics. The end goal was the same—the maintenance of white supremacy. But leaders like Coleman who adhered to this more malleable brand of segregation recognized that outright racism was more susceptible to the attacks of modern movement activists and to the federal government’s reluctant but increasing willingness to demand adherence to the laws of the nation, including Supreme Court decisions like *Brown*. With the murder of Emmett Till, the Montgomery Bus Boycott, and the integration of Little Rock Central High School on the horizon, the doors to the civil rights movement were prepared to swing wide open. Thus, Coleman’s assertion of a way to avert desegregation by redrawing school district lines, rather than closing schools, represented his realization that the state could move away from being an openly racist regime while inherently maintaining racial distinctions.

In his book *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*, Joseph Crespino illustrates the perverse motives of white leaders, like Coleman, who engaged in “strategic ac-

---

<sup>1</sup> James P. Coleman, “‘Meeting the School Crisis,’ An Address by Attorney General J. P. Coleman of Mississippi,” June 1, 1954, TV Station WLBT, Jackson, Mississippi, Box 273 (Civil Rights), Folder: Segregation, Thomas Abernethy Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford.

commodation” of the civil rights movement. If they were to retain power, they had to abandon unconcealed racism and acquiesce to some demands of the movement. Over time, “the emotional, overtly racist politics of massive resistance . . . gradually gave way—even in Mississippi—to more subtle, color-blind political language” that appealed to a growing national conservative movement.<sup>2</sup> “Color-blind” politics did not mean the elimination of racist prerogatives; rather, their reinforcement through measures that did not deal with racial power on the surface masked their intent.

In this analysis, previous arguments about Richard Nixon’s “Southern Strategy” that brought racist rednecks into the conservative, Republican fold are turned on their heads. Instead, the conservatism of the 1970s and 1980s emanated from the grassroots level in the South.<sup>3</sup> Crespino shows that white Mississippi was never monolithic, and he calls for more investigation into the diversity of the white experience as a means to reveal a more complete understanding of the civil rights movement. James P. Coleman mastered the manipulation of the calculated accommodation that Crespino describes.

Like Crespino, Anders Walker describes white efforts to thwart the modern civil rights movement in his monograph, *The Ghost of Jim Crow: How Southern Moderates Used Brown v. Board of Education to Stall Civil Rights*. Walker explores how men like Coleman “sought to counterbalance extremism and manage the desegregation crisis.” For those white leaders who eschewed the ranks of massive resistance, their goal was not to support the civil rights movement but “to assemble a response to *Brown v. Board of Education* that was peaceful, legal, and attuned to northern sensibilities.” Anders argues that they were savvy purveyors of a type of Jim Crow policy that was “aimed at preventing violence, preserving as much segregation as possible, and complying, formally, with the Supreme Court.”<sup>4</sup> Anders’ fundamental argument is convincing although some of his terminology and points require some honing.

As opposed to Crespino’s “strategic accommodation,” Walker refers to Coleman’s work as “strategic constitutionalism” in the context of *Brown*. It was “a peaceful, legalist response” meant to present a “progressive image of the South” while “curtailing the Court’s ruling.”

---

<sup>2</sup> Joseph Crespino. *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 4, 9, 19, 30.

<sup>3</sup> Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 8-9.

<sup>4</sup> Anders Walker. *The Ghost of Jim Crow: How Southern Moderates Used Brown v. Board of Education to Stall Civil Rights* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 3-4.

If Walker's argument slips, it is in the assertion that Coleman represented moderation and that his "work to end racial violence benefited blacks." Coleman's success was not a "moderate" victory for African Americans. If anything, Coleman molded a version of Jim Crow that was more dangerous and less susceptible to federal and activist attacks. Walker acknowledges that Coleman was "remarkably successful" and that his ilk "discreetly shifted the burden of constitutional change onto black shoulders, held them responsible for their plight, and meanwhile exaggerated the extent to which they suffered from illegitimacy, immorality, and other social ills."<sup>5</sup> Instead of a moderate stance, Coleman helped to forge a system of power that was more insidious than the proponents of massive, hardline resistance ever imagined.

James P. Coleman was born on a red-dirt farm in Choctaw County near Ackerman, Mississippi, on January 9, 1914. He worked his way through an undergraduate degree at the University of Mississippi and through the George Washington School of Law in 1939. Over the course of the next decade, his ascent in state politics included working for U. S. Representative Aaron L. Ford (D-Miss.) before becoming a district attorney and circuit court judge. In 1951, he was elected state attorney general and found himself at the forefront of the segregationist cause. As a committeeman for the Mississippi delegation to the Democratic National Convention in 1952, he kept the state from bolting the national party over a requirement to support the party's nominee for president. In 1948, Strom Thurmond of South Carolina and Governor Fielding Wright of Mississippi had led the States' Rights Democrats, or Dixiecrats, in forming their own segregationist party in response to the civil rights platform adopted by the delegates.<sup>6</sup> As was the case with the *Brown* decision, Coleman's commitment to the national ticket of the Democratic Party had nothing to do with a desire to dismantle Jim Crow in 1952. He felt he had a better chance of defending white supremacy in Mississippi with a seat at the national table.

As benign as that might sound, Coleman's stance was quite controversial for white Mississippi, which had exploded in outrage at the Supreme Court's decision. In the wake of *Brown*, white leaders in the Mississippi Delta founded the Citizens' Council, which grew to become the largest private, segregationist organization in the nation. Often re-

---

<sup>5</sup> Walker, *The Ghost of Jim Crow*, 5, 47.

<sup>6</sup> John D'Emilio. *The Civil Rights Struggle: Leaders in Profile* (New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1979), 43.



ferred to as the “White Citizens’ Council,” the founders were so assured of their supremacy that they did not deem it necessary to describe their organization as “white.” They assumed that only white people could be legitimate citizens, so they named themselves the “Citizens’ Council.”

William J. Simmons was one of the most prominent leaders of the Citizens’ Council, and a few days after the *Brown* decision, he wrote to then-Governor Hugh White. Simmons told White that the Supreme Court decision was not just an assault on segregation in schools but an assault on segregation everywhere. Praising White for his “strong reaction in defense of the preservation of our society and our institutions,” Simmons was happy that White had created a committee to fight *Brown*, and he proposed a six-step, detailed plan to further defy the Supreme Court opinion. Of note, Simmons proposed the closing of all public schools that might face desegregation. “The time has come when we will do either one of two things. We will fight, or we will submit to racial amalgamation.” Two weeks later, that letter appeared in the *Jackson Daily News*, the largest newspaper in the state, and was forwarded to all state legislators, the Mississippi congressional delegation, and every southern governor.<sup>7</sup>

In an infamous segregationist treatise, Tom Brady, a Mississippi circuit court judge and leading philosopher for the Citizens’ Council, declared the day the *Brown* decision was handed down to be “Black Monday.” Addressing the Council in remarks that were printed in a sixteen-page pamphlet, Brady utilized segregationist rhetoric tied to religion when he asserted that “this Supreme Court seeks to set aside all the laws of eugenics and biology!”<sup>8</sup> In this context, Coleman’s idea that segregation could be defended in any way other than an all-out defiance of the federal government was much more than a debate over semantics.

Coleman’s philosophy was put to the test when he threw his hat in the ring for governor in 1955. A primary plank in his platform was the defense of segregation but by all legal means. In a state that led the nation in the total number of known lynchings between 1877 and 1950, or the equivalent of a lynching every six weeks for seventy-three years, his messaging did not foreshadow success, and he encountered

---

<sup>7</sup> William J. Simmons to Hugh L. White, May 15, 1954, and William J. Simmons to Thomas G. Abernethy, June 1, 1954, both in Box 273 (Civil Rights), Folder: Segregation, Thomas Abernethy Collection, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi.

<sup>8</sup> “‘A Review of Black Monday’ by Judge Tom P. Brady of the Fourteenth Circuit Court District, Brookhaven, Miss. In an Address Made to the Indianola Citizens’ Council October 28th, 1954,” 16, Box 273 (Civil Rights), Folder: Segregation, Thomas Abernethy Collection.

significant opposition in the Democratic primary. Ten years away from the Voting Rights Act, voters remained nearly all-white and committed to their racist system of power. And the Democratic ticket in the race was crowded with former governor Fielding Wright as well as future governors Ross Barnett and Paul B. Johnson Jr., whose father had served as governor in the early 1940s.<sup>9</sup> Wright had the experience, and Barnett honed his renowned racist demagoguery, while Johnson decried the legacy of Hugh White. Coleman toed a different line.

Avoiding the issue of desegregation on the front end of his campaign, Coleman touted his toughness on crime and illegal gambling during his time as state attorney general and accused his opponents of being weak. During the campaign, Bill Minor, a journalist noted for his commitment to civil rights, touted Coleman's work, which had ironically inspired a few to take the law into their own hands. At a rally for Coleman, a group of "citizens of Monroe County armed themselves with shotguns and pistols and raided a honky-tonk containing slot machines and other contraband," which the vigilante group was proud to say "proves the absolute necessity for a law authorizing the people to recall public officials who either cannot or will not discharge their sworn duty."<sup>10</sup> While Coleman may not have been proud of that specific moment, he stayed on his message of law-and-order, a tactic that Richard Nixon took up with great skill a decade later. For his part, Coleman attempted to avoid the explicit discussion of race relations while guaranteeing white, racialized power, but he could not stay out of the racist fray.

On the stump in 1955, Coleman connected to his primary message from the start: "From this very moment we are beginning an unrelenting fight to see to it that the people—NOT THE BOSSES—will elect their Governor. This is one time we are going to have a people's election [original emphasis]." Coleman was not a populist, but he cast his opponents as part of the same political machine that had ruled Mississippi since the 1890 state constitution had instituted black disfranchisement and white political control. But by the third page of a sixteen-page address, he was compelled to talk about "SEGREGATION

---

<sup>9</sup> D'Emilio, 43; Equal Justice Initiative, *Lynching in America: Confronting the Legacy of Racial Terror*, 3<sup>rd</sup> Edition, <https://lynchinginamerica.eji.org/report/>; "For release by the press from and after 6 P. M.—May 28. COLEMAN PUTS THE QUESTIONS TO HIS OPPONENTS PASCAGOULA, MISSISSIPPI May 28, 1955," Box 2, Folder: Coleman, J. P. (1/2) 1950-1959, Wilson F. Minor Collection, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>10</sup> "Coleman Puts the Questions to His Opponents."

AND THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS original emphasis],” as the Supreme Court held the full attention of black and white Mississippians in 1955.<sup>11</sup>

In that year with what became known as *Brown II*, the Supreme Court ruled that desegregation should come to public education with “all deliberate speed,” an intentional oxymoron since “deliberate” was slow and “speed” suggested quickness. The contradiction gave the white South time to formulate strategies for postponing school desegregation, which didn’t come to Mississippi until 1969 when the Supreme Court demanded compliance with *Brown* in its *Alexander v. Holmes* decision. Even before 1954, segregationists strategized on ways to blunt attacks on separate-but-equal education. As Coleman noted during his campaign, since 1946, the Mississippi legislature had spent \$65 million on buildings in an effort to shore up the state’s failure to comply with the dictates of separate-but-equal.<sup>12</sup> In the South, segregation was never meant to be equal, but the glaring discrepancies between white and black schools was a weak spot in the defense of white supremacy.

Taking aim again at a common segregationist target, Coleman first blamed the Supreme Court for ignoring the law and trying to make public schools come under the purview of the courts. “On the same day this decision was rendered, without a moment’s delay, I told the people of Mississippi that the Supreme Court would be unable to enforce this unreasonable decision upon an unwilling people.” Coleman continued and asserted that he “must point out that standing before you is the only candidate in this race who has had any official responsibility whatever in the last four years for the maintenance of segregation in this State [original emphasis].” He touted his televised defense of segregated education in 1954, pointing out that his opponents had not taken such a public stand.<sup>13</sup>

More than uttering empty words, Coleman had authorized every white attorney in Mississippi to fight desegregation, and he claimed that no civil rights lawsuit had ever been filed in Mississippi. “When you go to the polls on August 2, your ballot most certainly will determine the education of your children and the maintenance of segregation for the next four years, possibly for the next fifty years.” Then, Coleman made an audacious assertion: “I have said that those who propose to mix the races in our public schools had might as well try to

---

<sup>11</sup> James P. Coleman, “Advance on J. P. Coleman Rally Speech To be delivered Tuesday night, May 10, 8:00 P.M.,” Box 2, Folder: Coleman, J. P. (1/2) 1950-1959, Wilson F. Minor Collection.

<sup>12</sup> “Advance on J. P. Coleman Rally Speech.”

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

dip the Atlantic dry with a teaspoon. I here and now give the people of Mississippi my solemn pledge that if I am elected Governor there will be no necessity to abolish the public schools, nor will there be any mixing of the races in those schools." Whether he could uphold that bargain remained to be seen, but he turned for the second half of his address to economics in Mississippi, law enforcement, public utilities regulation on natural gas and power companies, and old-age pensions.<sup>14</sup>

Coleman's platform, "A Program for Progress," emphasized his levelheadedness as attorney general when it came to the *Brown* decision. "As in all times past, I will be a TRUE FRIEND to ALL our educational efforts [original emphasis] . . . . I already have a record on this subject. This is no task for the amateur or the hothead." But, over the course of the campaign, his opponents made sure that the century-old white southern arguments of nullification, interposition, and states' rights kept resurfacing.<sup>15</sup> Slavery and the sectional tensions between the North and South stood at the core of these racist theories.

For nullification, white Southerners argued that states could reject federal laws they deemed unconstitutional since the states created the federal government through their common consent. Interposition took the theory of nullification a step further and declared it was a state's duty to assert itself to reject federal laws that that state deemed unconstitutional. The old racist mantra of "states' rights" was at the heart of both ideas, rooted in the Tenth Amendment, which reserved for the states all powers not specifically delineated as the purview of the federal government. The Civil War, as well as state and federal courts, had rejected all these tactics, but, a century later, white Southerners continued to hide behind them.

Coleman recognized the authority of the federal government, but he was focused on Mississippi and tried to make his position clear: "I am a Democrat. I shall take no foolishness from any National Level politicians who are enemies of the South. At the same time, I most certainly shall do nothing to give aid or comfort to the Republican party which has proven in so many ways that it, too, continues to be unfriendly to the South." Instead, "I shall not spend my time trying to remedy what is wrong with the United States; I think the chief duty of a Governor is to try to correct what

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

<sup>15</sup> "A Program of Progress: The J. P. Coleman Platform for Governor," Box 2, Folder: Coleman, J. P. (1/2) 1950-1959, Wilson F. Minor Collection.

is wrong in his own state. That is true state's rights."<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, other segregationists held onto states' rights, nullification, and interposition and trumpeted them after the *Brown* decision. Coleman's ability to navigate these issues was about to determine his political future in 1955.

When the first primary for the Democratic nomination rolled around on August 2, 1955, Paul Johnson's attacks on Hugh White, the outgoing governor, had made an impact. Johnson won the first primary, but due to the crowded field, he did not garner the 50 percent of the vote needed to take the primary outright. To the surprise of some, neither Fielding Wright nor Ross Barnett made the second round. Instead, James P. Coleman was in the runoff. Johnson's negative messaging had had an impact but not necessarily a positive one. Some like Governor White did "not believe there has ever been a nastier campaign conducted in Mississippi than Paul Johnson conducted," and three weeks later, Coleman won the nomination on August 23. Without a Republican opponent in the general election, Coleman was the governor-elect, but the questions of states' rights, interposition, and nullification continued to rear their ugly heads.<sup>17</sup> Coleman stepped into the middle of it all.

After the *Brown II* decision, Judge Tom Brady of "Black Monday" infamy, U. S. Congressman John Bell Williams, and U. S. Senator James Eastland—three of the state's most prominent, outspoken segregationists—released a statement supporting nullification and interposition as effective tactics of last recourse for states. Coleman disagreed. In an "unfortunate" choice of words, as Congressman Williams described it, "the Governor-elect, in what must have been a rare moment of impetuosity, chose to use the term 'poppycock' in referring to them." In Coleman's mind, the racist states' rights arguments were tied to a century-old question of Confederate history that the Civil War had decided, and for Coleman, those tactics threatened the white South with federal intervention in its affairs. Williams rebuffed Coleman's logic; he believed nullification was not linked to secession: "Nor can it be said with reason that interposition—the legal and peaceful means of resisting unconstitutional usurpation of States' rights—would bring Federal troops to the interposing states." Williams argued the only way to fight the *Brown* decision was

---

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.

<sup>17</sup> William M. Whittington to Hugh White, August 25, 1955, and Hugh White to William M. Whittington, August 26, 1955, both in Box 310, Folder: Politics—Letters to Hugh White 1952-1956, William Whittington Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford; D'Emilio, 43-44.

through interposition and nullification, but Coleman did not back down.<sup>18</sup>

As the acting attorney general and governor-elect, Coleman prepared his inaugural address to the state legislature on the topic of nullification and interposition. In an unexpected turn, Coleman wrote to James Silver, a longtime friend, for help. Silver was a history professor at the University of Mississippi who made headlines seven years later when he gave his presidential address to the 1963 Southern Historical Association annual meeting and coined the racist system of power in Mississippi as "The Closed Society." For those efforts, Silver was forced out of the state and took a position at the University of Notre Dame, but in 1956, Silver's later reputation had not coalesced in the public's eye.<sup>19</sup>

For his speech to the legislature, Coleman hoped Silver could articulate an argument against nullification. "I do not want to put excess labor upon you, but if you can help me again lay this ghost, now almost a hundred years after its final death, I shall be deeply grateful." The next day, Silver agreed to do whatever he could.<sup>20</sup> As his inauguration and legislative address neared, Coleman revealed much of his attitude towards the challenges facing Jim Crow Mississippi. To be clear, Coleman had no desire to undermine the system of power that guaranteed white supremacy, but he did believe in a more sophisticated, nuanced, and durable manner to defend white power in the state beyond total massive resistance to any black advancement.

At his inauguration in January 1956, Coleman recognized that white Mississippi faced a moment in history much like it had at the end of the era of Reconstruction. "So, I say to you, the Members of this joint assembly, that probably more than at any other time since 1876, the people need you; they realize they need you." For Coleman, the answer was "GOOD GOVERNMENT AND HONEST LAW ENFORCEMENT [original emphasis]," not an all-or-nothing focus on the defense of Jim Crow. After dealing with his vision for normal state business, Coleman broached

---

<sup>18</sup> John Bell Williams, "Statement of Congressman John Bell Williams, Thursday, Dec. 15, 1955," Box 2, Folder: Coleman, J. P. (1/2) 1950-1959, Wilson F. Minor Collection.

<sup>19</sup> Hodding Carter to James Silver, March 20, 1962, and James Silver to Hodding Carter, March 20, 1962, both in Box 22, Correspondence: 1962: O - Typing. 1963: A - R. Folder: Hodding Carter: Correspondence: 1962: S. (January - June), Hodding and Betty Werlein Carter Papers, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>20</sup> James P. Coleman to James Silver, December 19, 1955, and James Silver to J. P. Coleman, December 20, 1955, both in Box 23. Folder 12: Correspondence w/ J. P. Coleman, James W. Silver Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford.

the topic of public education.<sup>21</sup> His argument centered on what the state had done and needed to do to meet the dictates of separate-but-equal.

Foremost, Coleman knew the state had to spend more money on education. Although dollars had been infused into both black and white schools since 1940, that funding remained unequal, Coleman admitted. In 1954, one of the most obvious indicators was the fact that white teachers were making \$2,447 annually while black teachers only made \$1,184 per year. The governor believed in the "SEPARATION OF THE RACES [original emphasis]," but per sixty years of Supreme Court jurisprudence, separate had to be equal even if the white South's intention was to guarantee that it never was going to be.<sup>22</sup> Otherwise, segregation might fall in the face of assaults by the likes of the NAACP.

To reemphasize his commitment to Jim Crow, Coleman declared segregation had been confirmed by "the experience of ninety years . . . to be for the welfare of all concerned." Then, addressing his message to the entire nation, Coleman stood by his campaign pledge to keep public schools open and defy any integration. The governor was confident that, after four years of his administration, segregation in Mississippi was going to be healthy for his successor. After the farce and fiasco of a trial that had freed the murderers of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in 1955, Coleman promised "that during the next four years the full weight of the government will unfailingly be used to the end that Mississippi will be a State of law and not of violence."<sup>23</sup> In closing, the governor wanted to assuage national doubts.

Ignoring the reality and history of lynching in the state, Coleman emphasized that "the white people of Mississippi are not a race of negro killers." Instead, he noted, "Official statistics for the State of Mississippi for 1954 show that in that year, the last for which we have figures available, eight white people were killed by negroes and only six negroes were killed by whites, while 182 negroes were killed by members of their own race." For Coleman, the bottom line was the fact that "there were thirty times as many negroes killed by members of their own race as by members of the white race." In Coleman's mind, such statistics proved

---

<sup>21</sup> James P. Coleman, "Inaugural Address of Governor J. P. Coleman, Tuesday, January 17, 1956 (for release for all news purposes from and after 12:30 p.m., January 17<sup>th</sup>)," Box 1, Folder 8: Coleman 1956-1957, Kenneth Toler Collection, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>22</sup> Coleman, "Inaugural Address."

<sup>23</sup> Coleman, "Inaugural Address."

that white people were not a threat to black Mississippians. Then, emphasizing *de facto* segregation in the North, Coleman called out the ambiguity of the *Brown* decision in terms of its enforcement but promised to help blacks in Mississippi when they had “problems which deserve the assistance of the state government.”<sup>24</sup> One month later, Coleman agreed to bring a similar address to the Mississippi Historical Society.

This time, the governor broached “The Origins of the Constitution of 1890.” Coleman wanted to call a constitutional convention to draft a new version of the state’s governing document and remove explicit, racist language and intent. As always, his goal was not to undermine white supremacy but to make it more durable in the face of activist attacks. Again, Coleman turned to James Silver, and the University of Mississippi professor was glad someone in the governor’s position was going to give a professional paper, which few politicians ever attempted.<sup>25</sup> And Silver had an opportunity to share with the governor a version of Reconstruction history that was controversial for most white Southerners.

After talking to Charlotte Capers, the director of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Silver put together some materials for Coleman. Ultimately, Silver argued “it was corruption among the whites, dangling for Negro votes, from 1875 to 1890 that was the basic cause of the calling of the convention” to broker black disfranchisement. When a farmer’s movement arose and the one-party system of white Democrat rule was threatened, Silver argued, black voting became important, and the Convention of 1890 was meant to suppress that vote.<sup>26</sup> Formed for the explicit purpose of black disfranchisement, the 1890 Constitution was susceptible to assault due to the demands of the Fifteenth Amendment not to deny the right to vote based on race. Therefore, with Silver’s help, Coleman declared that the state needed to change its governing document, but the legislature’s opinion was another matter.

Coleman’s attempt to call a constitutional convention narrowly failed. Instead, the state legislature took the opportunity to announce its position on the issues of states’ rights. As had happened in every southern state, Mississippi legislators adopted a resolution “invoking the historic

---

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> James P. Coleman to James Silver, December 10, 1956, and James Silver to James P. Coleman, December 11, 1956, both in Box 23, Folder 12: Correspondence w/ J. P. Coleman, James W. Silver Collection, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi; D’Emilio, 44.

<sup>26</sup> James W. Silver to James P. Coleman, December 18, 1956, Box 23, Folder 12: Correspondence w/ J. P. Coleman, James W. Silver Collection.



doctrine of interposition to protect the sovereignty of this and the other states of the Union” after the *Brown* decision. The all-white legislature decried “the usurpation and encroachment on the reserved powers of the states by the Supreme Court” and declared that “its decisions of May 17, 1954, and May 31, 1955, and all similar decisions are in violation of the constitutions of the United States and the State of Mississippi.”<sup>27</sup> With the support of Governor Coleman, the legislature then created what became one of the most dangerous, state-funded segregationist organizations in American history—the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission.

In 1956, with a biennial appropriation of \$250,000, the Sovereignty Commission set out “to protect the sovereignty of . . . Mississippi . . . from encroachment thereon by the federal government.” Along with investigating civil rights activities, the Commission engaged in a propaganda campaign designed to obscure the reality of race relations in the state, and Coleman signed the Commission into law and served as its chairman. The Sovereignty Commission proved to be an important, state-mandated ally in the maintenance of white power, and the Citizens’ Council welcomed the state agency into the segregationist fold. Writing to Ney Gore, who had been named the first director of the Commission, the founder of the Citizens’ Council, Robert Patterson, remarked on the large number of members they had in common and encouraged Gore to call on him any time in the fight “to maintain states’ rights and racial integrity.” In turn, Gore affirmed that the Council’s support was going to “be invaluable to us” and established an “informal coalition” with deep pockets and racist motives.<sup>28</sup>

Coleman supported the mission of the Sovereignty Commission from the beginning. The governor believed the racist spy agency could work behind the scenes to ensure the stability of white supremacy without making public waves, but he stirred more controversy when he opposed siphoning off some of the Commission’s state funds to support the work of the Citizens’ Council. John Herbers, a United Press staff correspondent,

---

<sup>27</sup> *Senate Concurrent Resolution No. 125*, February 29, 1956, Box 7516, Folder: Attorney General Correspondence: Joe T. Patterson State Sovereignty Commission 1956, Mississippi Attorney-General’s Office. Correspondence-Subject, 1931-1980, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

<sup>28</sup> Yasuhiro Katagiri. *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States’ Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 6; Robert B. Patterson to Ney M. Gore Jr., June 15, 1956, Identification #99-40-0-152-1-1-1; Ney M. Gore Jr., to Robert B. Patterson, June 19, 1956, Identification #99-40-0-151-1-1-1; and Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission, *Minutes*, June 20, 1956, Identification #99-13-0-4-3-1-1, all in Sovereignty Commission Records, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson.

reported that the move to support the Council with Commission dollars was going to pass the legislature “despite a blistering condemnation by Gov. J. P. Coleman, who had charged some members were afraid to vote against it because it bears a segregation tag.” His opposition was not about his distaste for the mission of the Commission or the Council but “because it ‘was started as a raw grab for political power’ and would permit use of public money by private organizations in violation of the Constitution.” A prominent Council lawyer and future president of the American Bar Association, John Satterfield, believed the funding was going to pass constitutionality because it “makes use of public funds for a public purpose.”<sup>29</sup> That logic assumed that the public was white and ignored the fact that almost half the population in Mississippi was African American.

In the end, Coleman could not ward off the use of state funds for the private purposes of the Citizens’ Council. Before those funds were cut off in 1965, the state contributed \$193,500 to the Council’s coffers through the Sovereignty Commission.<sup>30</sup> True to his word, though, Coleman was able to prevent the closure and desegregation of any public schools in Mississippi as governor. Jim Crow remained intact, and Coleman seemed to have found a way to preserve the racist system of power in the state without resorting to the defiance that had marked much of white supremacy. There were, however, other challenges over the course of his four years in office.

Amidst a rising tide of civil rights activism, Coleman acquiesced to the desegregation of the Veterans Affairs (VA) hospital in Jackson, to the chagrin of the Citizens’ Council, but Coleman’s decision thwarted, as he saw it, an unnecessary confrontation with the federal government, which ran the VA. Through his Sovereignty Commission operatives, he orchestrated the tragic story of Clyde Kennard’s doomed effort to integrate Mississippi Southern College (now the University of Southern Mississip-

---

<sup>29</sup> John Herbers, “‘Blistered’ Council Fund Up for Vote,” United Press, April 17, 1958, Box 1-A. Folder 16: WCC—J. P. Coleman, A. E. Cox Papers, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>30</sup> Attachment, “Grants Given Beginning July 1, 1960 through June 30, 1962,” in Albert Jones to Joe Patterson, August 24, 1962, and Attachment, “Proposed Budget: Expenditures for July 1962,” in Albert Jones to Joe Patterson, August 24, 1962, both in Box 7516, Folder 1 of 4: Attorney General’s Correspondence: Joe T. Patterson Sovereignty Commission 1959-1962, Mississippi Attorney General’s Office, Correspondence—Subject, 1931-1980, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; Neil R. McMillen. *The Citizens’ Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 337-338.

pi) with little public awareness, and, facing an international outcry, he invited the FBI to investigate the 1959 lynching of Mack Charles Parker.<sup>31</sup> These all stood as seminal moments that turned into segregationist victories during Coleman's tenure, but despite the success of his tactics, the tide turned with the 1960 election of Ross Barnett as governor.

Buoyed by the Citizens' Council, Barnett heralded an administration built on racial terrorism in the state, reminiscent of the dark days of James K. Vardaman and Theodore Bilbo, but Barnett's reign was short-lived. After James Meredith's successful integration of the University of Mississippi in 1962, white Mississippians came to realize that they were going to have to heed Coleman's example and agree to a modicum of black progress to preserve white dominance and privilege. Although Coleman ran for governor again in 1964, he lost in the Democratic primary run-off to Paul Johnson Jr., who labeled him a "Kennedy liberal," but Coleman must have been in the back of Johnson's mind when he delivered his inaugural address. Johnson surprised most observers, making a "pledge to strengthen Mississippi's ties with the rest of the nation and to shun ignorance, prejudice and hate."<sup>32</sup> Like Coleman, Johnson was not about to abdicate the throne of white supremacy, but he continued to put the state on a path that guaranteed the long-term stability of a muted version of Jim Crow, which has proven impossible to eradicate over the past fifty years.

---

<sup>31</sup> "August 9, 1956, JACKSON VA HOSPITAL INTEGRATION," Box 1, Folder 6: Citizens Council 1950-1957, Kenneth Toler Collection; Zack J. VanLandingham, "Clyde Kennard, aka Clyde Kenard, Clyde Kinnard, Clyde Smith," December 17, 1958, Box 7516, Folder 3 of 4: Attorney General's Correspondence: Joe T. Patterson Sovereignty Commission 1959-1960," Mississippi Attorney General's Office. Correspondence—Subject, 1931-1980, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; D'Emilio, 43-44.

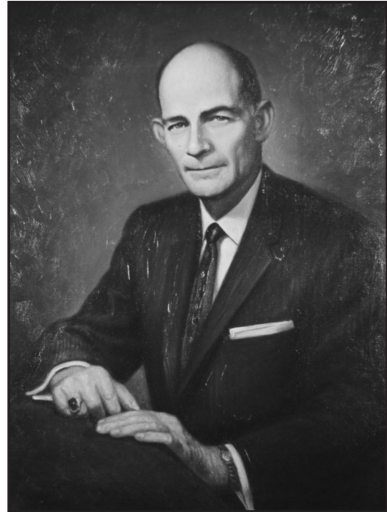
<sup>32</sup> Claude Sitton, "New Mississippi Governor Gives Anti-Hatred Vow at Inaugural," *New York Times*, January 22, 1964, Walter Lord Papers, Box 9, Folder: Newspaper Clippings 7-63 – 5-64, John F. Kennedy Presidential Library, Boston, Massachusetts; D'Emilio, 44; Robert Luckett, *Joe T. Patterson and the White South's Dilemma: Evolving Resistance to Black Advancement* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).



# Master of Racial Myths & Massive Resistance: Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr. (1964-1968)

by Patricia Michelle Boyett

The twelve-year-old black boy shook with sobs in the front pew of the First Union Missionary Baptist Church in Meridian, Mississippi, and collapsed in grief on his mother's shoulder. He had last seen his brother James nearly seven weeks earlier, on Sunday, June 21, 1964. James, his friend and fellow civil rights activist Mickey, and Andrew, who had just arrived in Mississippi for the Freedom Summer project, planned to investigate a church burning in Neshoba County. Young Ben begged them to take him along. He had marched with James and Mickey in protests; he had even been arrested, but James refused this time. He promised to be back soon. Ben waited for James to return—for forty-four days, until August 4, when FBI agents dug the bodies of his brother and the two white activists from an earthen dam.<sup>1</sup>



*Paul B. Johnson Jr., Courtesy, Mississippi Department of Archives and History*

The mourners could not know it yet, but the killings of James

---

<sup>1</sup> John Blake, “‘Mississippi Burning’ Murders Still Smolders for One Brother,” *CNN News*, June 28, 2014, <http://www.cnn.com/2014/06/28/us/mississippi-murders/index.html>; Hank Klibanoff, “The Lasting Impact of a Civil Rights Icon’s Murder,” *Smithsonian Magazine*, December 2008, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/the-lasting-impact-of-a-civil-rights-icons-murder-92172099>.

---

*PATRICIA MICHELLE BOYETT is the director of the Women’s Resource Center at Loyola University New Orleans. She received her Ph.D. and her M.A. in history at the University of Southern Mississippi, her B.A. in history at Mississippi Valley State University, and her B.F.A. in theatre at Arizona State University. Her book, Right to Revolt: The Crusade for Racial Justice in Mississippi’s Central Piney Woods won the Eudora Welty Book Prize in 2017.*

Chaney, Michael (Mickey) Schwerner, and Andrew Goodman contributed monumentally to a major turning point that occurred in the summer of 1964. Some historians and journalists portrayed Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr., Mississippi's fifty-fourth governor, as one of the southern moderates fostering that shift. Upon Governor Johnson's death in 1985, *The Washington Post* memorialized him as a bold leader "who deplored violence" and "whose moderate policies were credited with a decrease in violence that led to desegregation." *The New York Times* acknowledged that Johnson campaigned on a segregationist platform but contended that once in office, he "guided Mississippi into desegregation" and attributed his "moderate policies . . . with helping to end violence in the struggle of black people to gain civil rights." In a more nuanced interpretation, historian Joseph Crespino theorizes that the assassination of John F. Kennedy, demonstrating "the dangerous anarchical potential of racial extremism," likely "chastened" Johnson and argues that he transformed into a moderate during his tenure. In contrast, David C. Carter contends that Johnson's reputation as a "moderate" compared to Governor Ross Barnett reflected a transition in "style (and intelligence)" rather than "substance."<sup>2</sup> Johnson was not chastened; he was clever.

A master of racial myths and massive resistance, Governor Johnson sustained a world of white privilege even as Jim Crow fell. As lieutenant governor, he solidified his reputation as a staunch segregationist when he blocked James Meredith from enrolling at the University of Mississippi and capitalized on that formidable image to seize the governor's seat. Once in power, Johnson remained devoted to white supremacy, but he redesigned the battleground. Most whites, he knew, ignored the daily oppressions blacks confronted. But violence attracted the media, elicited public outrage, and forced federal intervention. If he could diminish Klan violence, he could sustain the white supremacist state. When violence erupted, he often inverted the narrative using common racist propaganda that portrayed white Mississippians as the victims of black criminals and communists—the twin bogeyman that haunted white

---

<sup>2</sup> First and second quotes, "Ex Mississippi Gov. Paul Johnson," *The Washington Post*, October 15, 1985, digital edition. Third and fourth quotes, "Paul B. Johnson Jr. Dies at 69," *The New York Times*, October 15, 1985, digital edition. Fifth and sixth quotes, Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2007), 117, 115-119, 125-126, 132-137, 143, 223. Seventh, eighth, and ninth quotes, David C. Carter, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Civil Rights Movement: Civil Rights and the Johnson Administration, 1965-1968* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2009), Kindle edition.

America, and he depicted young activists as their pawns. Portraying himself as the guardian of law and order, he targeted both Klansmen and activists. Certainly, his cooperation with the FBI to investigate Klan killings helped deliver a crushing blow to the hooded order, which contributed to the dismantling of the most brutal edges of the white supremacist state. But Governor Johnson was no moderate. He remained as committed to white supremacy as Klansmen. He was simply smarter.<sup>3</sup>

Born in Hattiesburg to Paul Burney and Corrine on January 23, 1916, Paul B. Johnson Jr. came of age in a town battling with its racial complexities. Eight years prior to Johnson's birth, Hattiesburg patriachs seceded from Perry County and named their new county Forrest after Confederate General Nathan Bedford Forrest, the Klan's first Grand Wizard. As the railroad hub and economic center of south Mississippi, Hattiesburg moguls recruited the needed black labor force with higher wages and better living conditions. The emergence of strong black working and middle classes fostered the growth of radicals who relied on the rope over the dollar to sustain racial control. Hattiesburg ranked 9th out of 210 Mississippi towns for lynching. Although occasionally townspeople condemned lynching, racial justice eluded the city. When Johnson was twelve, five hundred whites demanded authorities investigate the lynching of Emanuel McCallum. Despite substantial evidence, the grand jurors failed to deliver indictments.<sup>4</sup>

Fourteen years later in 1942, Paul Sr. struggled to mitigate the federal intervention lynching caused during his second year as governor. During the debacle, Paul Jr. fought in World War II, rising from private

---

<sup>3</sup> The author makes a similar argument in her book. See Patricia Michelle Boyett, *Right to Revolt: The Crusade for Racial Justice in Mississippi's Central Piney Woods* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

<sup>4</sup> Biography/Historical Sketch, Paul B. Johnson Family Papers, McCain Library & Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, [hereinafter cited as PBJ bio and PBJ Papers; and all collections housed at McCain Library & Archives, cited as McCain, USM]; George R. Watson, "Historical Hattiesburg," 1974, City documents (1884-1960), A-17, Reel #113, Hattiesburg Municipal Records, McCain, USM; The National Lists: Places of Death, The Lynching Century: African Americans Who Died in Racial Violence in the United States, <http://www.geocities.com/Cosmosum/Base/8507/NLPlaces1.htm>, [hereinafter cited as The National Lists, The Lynching Century]; Elizabeth Hines and Eliza Steelwater, Project Historical American Lynching Data Collection Project, <http://users.bestweb.bestweb.net/~rg/lyncihgs/Mississippi%20Lynchings.htm>; Newspaper Clippings, Lynching, Hattiesburg, The Anti-Lynching Campaign Reports, Pt. 7, Ser. A, Reel 13, Papers of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People, The Library of Congress, Washington D. C., [hereinafter cited as NAACP Papers]; Special Session of Grand Jury Report, January 10, 1929, *Forrest County: Minute Books Circuit Court*, vol. 9, 549, Circuit Court, Hattiesburg, Mississippi.

to captain in the Marine Corps. Before shipping out, he graduated from the University of Mississippi, passed the bar, and married his college sweetheart, Dot Powers. While Johnson fought in the Pacific for the Four Freedoms articulated by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt, a mob in Shubuta castrated two black teenagers and hanged them. Governor Johnson condemned the killings. Days later, he dispatched the National Guard and state troopers in a failed effort to stop the lynching of Howard Wash in Laurel. Johnson demanded the grand jury investigate, but it neglected to even mention the lynching. President Roosevelt, under pressure from the black press's Double V campaign and the prospect of Japan using the lynchings to expose America's hypocrisy, had FBI Director J. Edgar Hoover dispatch agents to Laurel, marking the first time since Reconstruction that the federal government intervened in the nearly six hundred lynchings in Mississippi. Although the governor told a reporter that he welcomed the FBI, he complained: Northerners failed to understand "our feelings toward the Negro"; that "we'd rather die" than dine with "Negroes." Despite a vigorous federal prosecution, the all-white jury acquitted the killers.<sup>5</sup> The elder Johnson set a precedent that his son followed: condemn lynch mobs in the interest of mitigating federal intervention but defend white supremacy.

Paul Jr. faced deeper challenges as he lived in an era of a bold Civil Rights Movement and a powerful Klan. After thrice losing his bid for governor, he served as lieutenant governor under Governor Barnett (1961-1964). Barnett became famous for his vulgar racial rhetoric, particularly in response to James Meredith, a black Air Force veteran, who

---

<sup>5</sup> Quoting Victor H. Bernstein, "The Story of 3 Lynchings—And How Mississippi Does Nothing About Them Is Another Matter," n. d., stamped October 28, Federal Bureau of Investigation Report, Howard Wash FBI File, #44661-A, Federal Bureau of Investigation Central Records System, Washington D. C., copy in author's possession. For investigation, prosecution, and results, see full Wash FBI File and Newspaper clippings, October 1942, and NAACP correspondence, in Anti-Lynching Campaign Report, Pt. 7, Ser. A-II, Reel 27, NAACP Papers. For Johnson's background, see PBJ Bio, PBJ Papers. For World War II, see Franklin Delano Roosevelt, "The Four Freedoms," Franklin Roosevelt's Annual Address to Congress, Washington D. C., January 6, 1941, Franklin Delano Roosevelt Presidential Library and Museum, Hyde Park, New York, <http://docs.fdrlibrary.marist.edu:8000/od4frees.html>; Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 4, 191-196, 201-220. For federal intervention history, see Michael R. Belknap, *Federal Law and Southern Order* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), xix-xxxi and 1-26; and *U. S. v. Shipp*, 214 US 386 (1909). For lynching statistics, see lynchings by year, Douglas O Linder, Famous American Trials, 2012, University of Missouri-Kansas City School of Law, <http://law2.umkc.edu/faculty/projects/ftrials/shipp/lynchstats.html>.



filed a racial discrimination lawsuit against the University of Mississippi when it denied him admission. After a sixteen-month battle, the U.S. Supreme Court ordered Meredith's admission. In September 1962, using the discredited interposition theory, Barnett physically blocked Meredith from entering the university twice. The U.S. Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a restraining order forbidding all state officials from interfering with Meredith's registration. Meredith, accompanied by Department of Justice official John Doar and U.S. Marshal James P. McShane, made a third attempt on September 26. Johnson, backed by twenty unarmed state troopers, guarded the gates of the university and denied Meredith entrance. When McShane shoved Johnson, the lieutenant governor stood his ground and raised his fist; that image hardened his reputation as a guardian of white supremacy. On October 1, under the protection of the Mississippi National Guard, federalized by President Kennedy, Meredith desegregated Ole Miss amidst a riot that left two dead and hundreds injured. The Fifth Circuit charged Johnson and Barnett with criminal contempt, but it eventually dismissed the case. Johnson capitalized on his stand against Meredith to launch his gubernatorial bid in 1963 with the slogan "Stand Tall with Paul."<sup>6</sup>

Johnson centered his campaign on preserving white supremacy. During a speech to the Jackson Citizens Council, he called on citizens in every county to join the councils, "the only nation-wide organization (with its birthplace in Mississippi) dedicated to preserving the integrity of the white race." His five-point plan included collaborating with southern leaders to remove the Kennedys from office; opposing school integration; enlarging the Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission (MSSC); and disentangling federal funds from federal proscriptions that "endanger our sovereign rights to govern ourselves." After defeating former governor James P. Coleman in the primary, Johnson worried that hatred of the Kennedys aided Republican challenger, Rubel Phillips. Appealing to racial fears, Johnson warned: "A two-party system in Mississippi would divide" whites "into two political camps and thereby

---

<sup>6</sup> Quoting Seth Cagin and Philip Dray, *We Are Not Afraid: The Story of Goodman, Schwerner, and Chaney and the Civil Rights Campaign for Mississippi* (New York: Nation Books, 2008), Kindle edition. For campaign, see "Stand Tall Paul and Carroll Win," and "Phillips Carries Free State Jones," both in *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 6, 1963. For contempt charges, see U. S. Court of Appeals for the Fifth Circuit - 330 F.2d 369 (5th Cir. 1963). For Meredith case, see *Meredith v. Fair*, 83 S Ct. 10 (1962). For Meredith's story, see Charles W. Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: James Meredith and the Integration of Ole Miss* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2009).

place the balance of power in the hands of the Negro minority.” On November 5, Johnson won in a landslide. Seventeen days later, the assassination of President Kennedy thrust a southerner, Lyndon Baines Johnson, into the presidency. To the surprise of many, President Johnson vowed to pass the pending Civil Rights Act that would prohibit segregation, enforce *Brown*, and forbid discrimination in the workforce. Governor Johnson also shocked many when his inaugural speech on January 21 focused on law and order. “Mississippi,” he declared, “must acquiesce to social and political change . . . hate, or prejudice, or ignorance will not lead Mississippi while I sit in the Governor’s chair.”<sup>7</sup> However, Johnson wielded the weapons of law and order against civil rights activists too. His masterful use of nonviolent massive resistance imperiled the success of the Movement as much as Klan terror.

Johnson’s hometown of Hattiesburg provided him with the blueprint for his massive resistance strategy. In January, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), and the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO) launched Freedom Days in Hattiesburg, in which eligible black voters tested registrar Theron Lynd’s compliance with the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals ruling to cease discriminatory registration procedures. In response, the Mississippi Highway Patrol (MHP), Mayor Claude Pittman, and local law enforcement officials gathered information from informants, briefed Governor Johnson, and implemented a plan to appropriate the Movement’s nonviolent strategy. Lynd admitted prospective voters at a sluggish pace. Officers arrested activists who violated the laws, and court officials convicted them, but peacefully and selectively to diminish nationwide media coverage and mitigate federal intervention. MSSC inspectors spied on activists. Local newspapers published the names of protestors so white bosses, landlords, and businessmen could fire, evict, and refuse to conduct business with them. It proved a clever counter-reaction because most

---

<sup>7</sup> First and second quotes, PBJ speech, May 17, 1963, Jackson Citizens Council, Jackson, Mississippi, Ser. II, Subser. 4, PBJ Papers. Third and fourth quotes, Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 89. Fifth and sixth quotes, Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr., January 21, 1964, *Mississippi Senate Journal*, 1964, 37-38. Lyndon Baines Johnson, speech, November 27, 1963, *American Experience, The Presidents*, PBS, [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/36\\_1\\_johnson/psources/ps\\_firstspeech.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/36_1_johnson/psources/ps_firstspeech.html). See also, John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1995), 211; United States, Civil Rights Act 1964 (Washington, D.C.: U. S. Government Print Office, 1969); “Stand Tall Paul and Carroll Win,” and “Phillips Carries Free State Jones,” both in *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 6, 1963.

Americans failed to understand the detrimental impact of nonviolent massive resistance. Still, Freedom Days garnered some attention and increased black registration. Building on the success, SNCC and COFO organized Freedom Summer, recruiting some one thousand mostly white college students to register black voters and teach in freedom schools.<sup>8</sup>

Governor Johnson vowed to suppress both Freedom Summer's "invasion" by an "army of agitators" and the rise of a new Klan. Immediately after his inauguration, Johnson commanded all MHP officers who belonged to the Klan to become informants. Many complied; others sustained their loyalty to their racist brethren. Through his informants, Johnson learned that Sam Bowers, a Mississippi member of the Original Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Louisiana, led a faction of Mississippians in February to create the White Knights of the Ku Klux Klan of Mississippi. Bowers, the Imperial Wizard, established the headquarters in his hometown of Laurel. He quickly built the White Knights into the most powerful Klan in the state and planned to launch a war against Freedom Summer. Johnson shared the information with the FBI.<sup>9</sup> In addition, Johnson designed the "policed freedom of movement" plan after the Hattiesburg model, which legislators approved. Johnson secured the right to issue police powers to the MHP to suppress racial clashes. He permitted city leaders to assign curfews and restrain people's movements, pool their resources to suppress mob violence,

---

<sup>8</sup> Fact Sheet: Hattiesburg, Mississippi, n. d., 1964, Ser. 15, Reel 38, Sandy Leigh, Hattiesburg Report, February 11, 1964, Ser. 7, Reel 15, and Hattiesburg Report, January 22, & 27, 1964, Ser. 7, Reel 15, all in Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee Papers, 1959-1972, Martin Luther King Center, Atlanta, Georgia, [hereinafter cited as SNCC Papers]; A. D. Morgan to T. B. Birdsong and R. L. Morgan, January 22, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 10, PBJ Papers; Elliott Chaze, *Hattiesburg American*, January 22 and February 8, 1964.

<sup>9</sup> Quoting "Paul Says State Ready For Invasion," *The Laurel Leader-Call*, May 14, 1964. FBI Summary Report, February 3, 1965, Bowers FBI File, vol. 2, #157-18-115, 10, 72, Vernon F. Dahmer Federal Bureau of Investigation File, Robert Helfrich Papers, McCain, USM, [hereinafter cited as Helfrich Papers]. For the presence of various Klan groups in the Central Piney Woods and Mississippi at large, see U. S. House, 89<sup>th</sup> Congress, *Activities of Ku Klux Klan of the United States*, index, 55, 58, 59, 62, 67-69, 76-77. See also, U. S. House, 90<sup>th</sup> Congress, *The Present Day Ku Klux Klan Movement Report*, Pt. 2, 153-154. For suggestions about Johnson's mindset about the Klan, see Governor Paul B. Johnson Jr., January 21, 1964, *Mississippi Senate Journal*, 1964, 37-38, and Erle Johnston to Governor Johnson, May 1, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 9, and A. D. Morgan to Johnson, March 12, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 10, both in PBJ Papers. See also, George Saxon, interview by Reid Stoner Derr, June 3, 1993, digital file, Mississippi Oral History Project, the Center for Oral History and Cultural Heritage, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg [hereinafter cited as MOHP]. For Bowers's planned war against Freedom Summer, see "Imperial Executive Order," May 3, 1964, Klan Misc. Info., Helfrich Papers.

and raise fines and extend jail sentences for lawbreakers. Johnson's Commissioner of Public Safety T. B. Birdsong implemented an "intelligence network" that created a flow of information about every local Movement's meeting places and plans, ordered collections of photographs and fingerprints of every arrested activist, and encouraged mass arrests. Birdsong cautioned all officers to avoid violent arrests and suggested officers host civic meetings informing citizens of the repercussions of disturbing the racial order. To mitigate federal intervention, legislators made it unlawful to file false complaints with federal authorities.<sup>10</sup>

Klansmen jeopardized Johnson's strategy when they decided to murder Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman, which intensified the Movement, media attention, and federal intervention. The three vanished on June 21, 1964, after Deputy Cecil Price arrested them and released them from jail at 10:00 p.m. On June 23, J. Edgar Hoover informed President Johnson that FBI agents found their burned-out vehicle. The parents of Goodman and Schwerner flew to Washington, D.C. to pressure President Johnson and their Congressmen to act. The NAACP planned to initiate demonstrations in the nation's capital. Mickey's wife, Rita, demanded the president launch a full-scale investigation and send "scores of federal marshals . . . to Mississippi" to protect every activist.<sup>11</sup>

President Johnson had no plans to supply enough federal marshals to protect every activist, for he knew the white South would perceive that act as akin to Reconstruction. Rather, he used all his considerable political skills to broker a collaborative investigation between Mississippi and the FBI. In his many conversations with Governor Johnson, the president relied on their shared southern culture, such as the exchange of pleasantries, to move the governor toward cooperation. He guided Johnson to meet with former CIA director Allen Dulles, who he

---

<sup>10</sup> Quoting T. B. Birdsong to All Law Enforcement Officers, June 9, 1964, Charles Marx Papers, McCain, USM. *Mississippi Free Press*, June 20, 1964; "State Officials Develop Anti-Violence Methods," *Hattiesburg American*, June 24, 1964; "Paul Says State Ready For Invasion," *Laurel Leader-Call*, May 14, 1964; "State Prepared for Influx of Students," *Hattiesburg American*, June 19, 1964; Current Status of Mississippi Legislation, n. d., Matthew Zwierling Collection, McCain, USM; Kenneth Toler, "Governor Seeks Power for Patrol," *The Atlanta Journal and The Atlanta Constitution*, March 8, 1964, Ser. 15, Reel 38, SNCC Papers.

<sup>11</sup> Quoting Cagin and Dray, Kindle edition. "Lyndon Johnson and J. Edgar Hoover on 23 June 1964," Tape WH6406.14, Citations #3837 and #3838, Presidential Recordings Digital Edition [Mississippi Burning and the Passage of the Civil Rights Act, vol. 8, ed. Kent B. Germany and David C. Carter] (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2014–), <http://prde.upress.virginia.edu/conversations/9080016>, [hereinafter cited as LBJ Recording]; Johnson and Hoover, Tape WH6406.14, Citation #3853, LBJ Recording.

insisted would serve as “an impartial, objective observer” in assessing how the president might assist. President Johnson asserted, “It’s just imperative that we work together as closely as we can with all the resources of the state and the local people . . . [to] see that the law is observed and that we avoid any violence.” Within weeks, the president and Hoover reestablished an FBI office in Jackson, infiltrated the state with agents, and sent hundreds of naval officers to drain swamps in search of the bodies. President Johnson also continued to emphasize to Governor Johnson that activists and politicians constantly pressured him to flood Mississippi with marshals, but he considered it best to rely on the collaborative federal and state relationship. Though he delivered the message in a friendly manner, the veiled threat of shifting federal intervention into occupation was surely not lost on the governor.<sup>12</sup>

Governor Johnson was not the President’s pawn. He wanted to avoid federal occupation and thus accepted the cooperation with the FBI as a necessary compromise. To his relief, Hoover had insisted that the FBI planned to solve a missing person’s case, not destroy Jim Crow. Governor Johnson responded to the president in respectful tones; however, he also capitalized on his access to the president to convince him that activists were more dangerous than Klansmen. The president referred to Klan violence as “acts of terror” and “terrorism.” Governor Johnson used the term once but appeared to refer to activists, stating that the National Council of Churches that was supporting Freedom Summer “is where our real danger lies.” During a conversation on June 23, Governor Johnson repeated: “The real danger in it, Mr. President, is these youngsters . . . you already have a hard-core group of people with long police records that are professional agitators. And these youngsters don’t realize what they’re getting into. They’ve been in here a good while and they’ve stirred up a great deal of tension. And now these youngsters come in when the tension is getting toward the boiling point.” He reiterated his concerns during a June 26 conversation: “If they continue to send these youngsters in here without them properly

---

<sup>12</sup> Quoting “Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson on 23 June 1964,” Tape WH6406.16, Citation #3878, LBJ Recording. “Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson (President Johnson preceded by Allen Dulles) on 26 June 1964,” Tape WH6406.17, Citation #3919, LBJ Recording; Jack Nelson, *Terror in the Night: The Klan’s Campaign Against the Jews* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1993), 86-88; Clayborne Carson, *In Struggle: SNCC and the Black Awakening of the 1960s* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1991), 114-115; Dittmer, 246-252; “J. Edgar Hoover Arrives in State,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 10, 1964.

being oriented and realize what they're getting into with the nucleus with your hard-core communist leaning type people with police records; unless . . . the Council of Churches keeps these youngsters out of here the best that they possibly can, we going to have lots of acts of violence."<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the summer, Governor Johnson sought to stem the negative publicity from the Neshoba case with a myriad of myths about the state. During June, Mississippi's "hospitality" month, he attempted to offset white supremacist oppression with stories publicizing Mississippian's congeniality. He also supported the myth that spread across white Mississippi: the volunteers staged the disappearance of the activists to force federal intervention and reverse the racial order. The missing activists, he surmised, "could be in Cuba." Selecting a communist country, no doubt, played into the narrative that the activists were communists. When a reporter approached Johnson with Governor George Wallace, who was in Jackson, and inquired about the case, Johnson responded jestingly, in earshot of Rita Schwerner who was seeking a meeting with him, "Governor Wallace and I are the only two people who know where they are—and we're not telling." Johnson refused to meet with Schwerner. COFO workers referred to "hospitality month" as "hostility" month. Johnson's "protective custody" of activists, they asserted, translated into officers forcing them into vehicles, informing them that they had found one of their friends "cut-in-half in a swamp," and claiming a black person had raped a volunteer. They asked rhetorically: "Is this 'hospitality month' in Mississippi or . . . 'hostility' month."<sup>14</sup>

The pervasive hostility toward activists exploded on July 2 after President Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964. The president requested the support of the governor and revealed that he had asked civil rights leaders to "take this thing slow . . . kind of adjust to it," rather than staging "invasions." The governor responded its "success" hinged on how quickly "the big niggers like to move . . . they could make it mighty, mighty rough." President Johnson advised the gov-

---

<sup>13</sup> First, second, third, and fifth quotes, "Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson (President Johnson preceded by Allen Dulles) on 26 June 1964," Tape WH6406.17, Citation #3919, LBJ Recording. Fourth quote, "Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson on 23 June 1964," Tape WH6406.16, Citation #3878, LBJ Recording. Nelson, 87-88; Carson, 115; "Killed by the Klan," prod. and dir. Charles C. Stuart, Discovery Channel, Stuart Productions, Inc., 1999, videocassette.

<sup>14</sup> Second and third quote, Cagin and Dray, Kindle edition. All other quotes, "Hospitality Month in Mississippi," n. d., Ser. 15, Reel 39, SNCC Papers. See also, Jay West, "President Should Halt Our 'Long, Hot Summer'" *Laurel Leader-Call*, June 26, 1964; Florence Mars with Lynn Eden, *Witness in Philadelphia* (Baton Rouge: LSU Press, 1989).

error “to keep a stiff upper lip . . . . I know what a spot you’re under and you know mine. And we just have to work together the best we can.” Instead, Governor Johnson publicly pledged to challenge the constitutionality of the Civil Right Act and advised Mississippians to defy it. Following Johnson’s guidance, the Association of Citizens Councils of Mississippi counseled citizens to resist nonviolently and promised legal assistance to noncompliant proprietors suffering from federal lawsuits. After Governor Johnson spoke at the Mississippi Democratic Convention on July 28, the delegates passed resolutions condemning the act and lauding the governor’s planned challenge.<sup>15</sup>

The federal judiciary also helped Johnson sustain white supremacy. In April, Johnson had signed a bill that prohibited demonstrators from marching in front of entrances to public buildings. Activists sued, claiming that it violated their First Amendment rights of free speech to assemble and petition the government. In mid-July, the federal district court dismissed the case. In addition, a judge dismissed a COFO lawsuit against the Klan, the Americans for the Preservation of the White Race, the Citizens Council, and local, county, and state law officers charging that they prevented blacks from exercising their constitutional rights through acts of terror and by passing unconstitutional legislation designed to impede black political participation.<sup>16</sup>

Shocking evidence of Klan terror received nationwide attention on August 4, when FBI agents, on a tip from an informant, found the bodies of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman. Despair gripped activists as they packed into the First Union Missionary Baptist Church for Chaney’s funeral. Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) leader Dave Dennis bellowed that even if the authorities brought the killers to court, the jury of their relatives would acquit them. His eyes fell

---

<sup>15</sup> Quoting “Lyndon Johnson and Paul Johnson on 3 July 1964,” Tape WH6407.03, Citation #4150, LBJ Recording. PBJ, Address to State Democratic Convention, July 28, 1964, Ser. II: PBJ Jr., Subser. 4, and Resolutions Passed at the 1964 State Convention of the Democratic Party of the State of Mississippi, Ser. II, Subser. 9, both in PBJ Papers; James Saggus, “Governor Advises Citizens Not to Comply with Law Until Tested,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 3, 1964; Susan M. Weill, “Mississippi, Daily Press in Three Crises,” in *The Press and Race: Mississippi Journalists Confront the Movement* ed. Dave R. Davies (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 38; “Official Council Statements on the ‘Civil Rights Act,’” *The Citizen*, July-August, 1964 issue bound in vol. 8-9, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville, Mississippi, [hereinafter cited as MML-MSU].

<sup>16</sup> “3-Judge Court Dismisses Hattiesburg Negroes’ Suit,” *Laurel Leader-Call*, July 17, 1964, 12; “Local Negroes Lose Picketing Suit,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 16, 1964, 1; Bill No. 546, Antipicketing Law, vol. 471, Reel 47, Congress of Racial Equality Papers; “Judge Mize Dismisses COFO ‘Scattergun’ Suit,” *Hattiesburg American*, July 30, 1964, p. 1.

upon Ben's distraught face. Ben looked so much like James. Dennis's voice broke: "I look at the young kids here . . . Little Ben Chaney . . . I'm sick and tired of going to the funerals of black men who have been murdered by white men." He demanded the mourners honor the fallen by joining the Movement. "If you . . . take what these white men in Mississippi are doing to us . . . and don't do something about it . . . then God damn your souls! Stand up! . . . We want our freedom NOW!"<sup>17</sup>

Activists understood that freedom required power, which Governor Johnson struggled to deny them. To obtain power, they created the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) and selected sixty-eight delegates to challenge the seating of the state's Regular Democrats at the Democratic National Convention in Atlantic City. Testimony by legendary figures, including Martin Luther King Jr. and Fannie Lou Hamer, proved that Mississippi had used voter discrimination and terror to exclude blacks from the political process. The Credentials Committee, under pressure from President Johnson, who feared losing the southern vote, offered the MFDP two at-large seats—a compromise the MFDP considered a betrayal. Most regular delegates, perceiving the Democratic Party's recognition of the MFDP a betrayal, left their seats vacant. Governor Johnson denounced the challengers as "dissident, non-resident troublemakers" and "professional Negro extremists." In a televised speech on August 25, Johnson played the victim card again: "An underground assault is being waged against us by the welfare-staters, the beatniks, the communist-front agitators, the ethnic and socio-religious groups of the country which, with the aid of an uninformed northern press, have done everything in their power to malign the fine people of Mississippi." A month later, he cautioned Mississippians against voting for Lyndon Johnson and Hubert Humphrey, calling them "the

---

<sup>17</sup> Quoting Dave Dennis, Address at the Funeral for James Chaney, First Union Baptist Church, Meridian, Mississippi, August 7, 1964, in *Rhetoric, Religion, and the Civil Rights Movement, 1954-1965*, Vol. 2, ed. David W. Houck and David E. Dickson (Waco: Baylor University Press, 2006), 775-778. "Freedom Summer Clip: The Eulogy," <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/features/freedomsummer-eulogy/>; Blake, "'Mississippi Burning' Still Smolders," *CNN News*; Cagin and Dray, Kindle edition. For discovery of the identity of informant, see Jerry Mitchell, "New Details on the FBI Paying 30K to Solve the Mississippi Burning Case," *Journey to Justice*, February 15, 2010, [blogs.clarionledger.com/jmitchell/2010/02/15/did-the-fbi-pay-30k-to-locate-the-bodies-of-the-three-missing-civil-rights-workers/](http://blogs.clarionledger.com/jmitchell/2010/02/15/did-the-fbi-pay-30k-to-locate-the-bodies-of-the-three-missing-civil-rights-workers/).



most dangerous political combination in the history of this nation.”<sup>18</sup>

Governor Johnson continued to walk a thin tightrope as Klan violence persisted and as Klan propaganda reflected the governor’s rhetoric. A week after agents found the bodies in Neshoba, a pilot, on Sam Bowers’s orders, dropped leaflets across the Neshoba County Fair, which stated “Schwerner, Chaney and Goodman were not civil rights workers [but] Communist Revolutionaries, actively working to undermine and destroy Christian Civilization.” Johnson was failing to diminish Klan power, which in turn led to intensification of federal intervention. In September, J. Edgar Hoover transformed the FBI’s mission from an investigation to a war on the Klan when he implemented the counterintelligence program (COINTELPRO) “to expose, disrupt and otherwise neutralize the activities of the various klans and hate organizations, their leadership and adherents.”<sup>19</sup>

The Klan tested the FBI with a series of bombing attacks in McComb in September. Governor Johnson facilitated close coordination with federal, state, and local officials to investigate, and on October 1, announced the arrests of Klansmen. Although a jury convicted several Klansmen, Judge W. H. Watkins released them on probation. In Meadville, on November 6, agents and the MHP arrested Klansmen for the murders of two black men whose corpses had turned up during the Neshoba search. When agents turned the case over to state authorities; however, they refused to present it to a grand jury. Desperate to sustain control over law and order in Mississippi, state legislators passed a bill providing greater powers to the MHP. In December, FBI agents arrested suspects in the Neshoba case. On January 15, 1965, a federal grand jury in Jackson handed down indictments against Bowers and seventeen other Klansmen for violating the civil rights of Schwerner, Chaney, and Goodman; however,

---

<sup>18</sup> First and second quote, PBJ speech, n.d., Ser. II, Subser. 4, PBJ Papers. Third quote, PBJ televised speech, August 25, 1964, and Freedom Democratic Party Delegates and Alternate Delegates, Ser. II, Subser. 9, both in PBJ Papers. Steve Max, *The Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party: Background and Development*, Ser. 16, Reel 41, and *Freedom Registration Vote*, September 1, 1964, Ser. 16, Reel 4, both in SNCC Papers; Steven F. Lawson, *Running for Freedom: Civil Rights and Black Politics in American Since 1941* (New York: McGraw Hill Inc., 1991), 101-102; Carson, 125-126; Dittmer, 125-129, 288.

<sup>19</sup> First quote, *Mars with Eden*, 108-109. Second quote, Nelson, 93-94.

local authorities refused to indict a single defendant on state charges.<sup>20</sup>

In the wake of this turbulence, Governor Johnson remained as committed to segregation and black disfranchisement as ever. Even after President Johnson won reelection that November in a landslide despite the defection of Mississippi and the rest of the Deep South from the Democratic Party, Governor Johnson fought the implementation of *Brown* and the Civil Rights Act. Section VI of the act prevented the federal government from denying funds to schools involved in desegregation litigation. So, Johnson encouraged school boards to initiate lawsuits. He also supported a Supreme Court case from Atlanta challenging the constitutionality of the Civil Rights Act's public accommodation clause. In December, the justices unanimously affirmed its constitutionality. Johnson denounced the decision as a "dangerous doctrine."<sup>21</sup> The court's affirmation of the bill imperiled segregation, one of the most substantial fortifications of white supremacy.

Simultaneously, activists sought to dismantle another formidable fortification—white control over the political system. On January 4, five MFDP candidates launched a Congressional challenge in which they requested that Congress seat them rather than the Regular Democrats because Mississippi registrars had refused to register black voters who had not paid their poll taxes, a requirement for state, not federal, elec-

---

<sup>20</sup> FBI Report, February 3, 1965, Bowers FBI File, vol. 2, #157-18-115, and Preliminary Prosecutive Action, Supplemental Prosecutive Summary, Section 58, FBI Files #44-25706-12, MIBURN, 1-12, both in Helfrich Papers; T. B. Birdsong, Commending the Legislature of the State of Mississippi, Paul B. Johnson, and Joe T. Patterson, December 8, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 10, J. Y. Thomas, Sovereignty Commission Report, December 3, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 9, Charles E. Snodgrass to A. D. Morgan, December 4, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 10, Governor Paul Johnson Jr., press releases, September 30, 1964, October 1, 1964, and October 29, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 5, Charles E. Snodgrass to A. D. Morgan, November 6, 1964, and attached FBI Press Release, n. d., Ser. II, Subser. 10, all in PBJ Papers; Jerry Mitchell, "'64 Suspects in Klan Murders Scoffs at Reinvestigation Talk," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 23, 2000, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger* Online Archive; "Ex-Miss, Deputy Charged in '64 Deaths," *MSNBC.com*, January 24, 2007; W. F. Minor, "Concern Over State's National 'Image' Noted," *New Orleans Times Picayune*, December 13, 1964, Klaus & Elisabeth Spears Papers, McCain, USM; *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 4, 1964.

<sup>21</sup> Quoting Governor Paul Johnson Jr., press release, December 16, 1964, Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers. "Johnson Victory Nears Record 15 Million Mark," *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 4, 1964; "September Integration Aim for Aided Schools," *Hattiesburg American*, February 5, 1965; "I Would Not Sign the Compliance Thing,"—PBJ," *Hattiesburg American*, February 15, 1965; Drew Pearson, "Rights Loophole Exploited," January 30, 1965, Rabbi David Ben-Ami Papers, McCain, USM; "CR measure Being Put to Test Across Nation," *Hattiesburg American*, July 3, 1964; James Saggus, "Governor Advises Citizens Not to Comply with Law Until Tested," *Hattiesburg American*, July 3, 1964; "1964 Civil Rights Act Survives Supreme Test," *Hattiesburg American*, December 14, 1964.

tions, and had delayed certification of black voters to prevent their participation. Conversely, Freedom Vote registrars allowed all eligible voters to cast ballots. In the spring, the MFDP held hearings across the state, taking depositions from four hundred witnesses who gave ten thousand pages of testimony that mobs, the Klan, and police abused them when they tried to register, engaged in political activities, and participated in protests. The U.S. Civil Rights Commission bolstered the MFDP's findings when it held investigative hearings in Jackson that produced similar testimony from one hundred Mississippians. To undermine these hearings, Governor Johnson led a contingent of officials to testify and correct the MFDP "lies" and to tell the real "Mississippi story." These hearings demonstrated the need for the Voting Rights Act, which President Johnson proposed in the wake of the murders during the Selma-to-Montgomery march. The act would prohibit states from using voter qualifications designed to disfranchise persons based on their race or color, prevent states from using literacy exams to qualify voters, and allow Congress to send federal registrars into states with low voter turnout. Moreover, in mid-June, the Fifth Circuit ordered Theron Lynd, Forrest County registrar, to register persons meeting registration requirements.<sup>22</sup>

Governor Johnson responded with a two-fold strategy to sustain white political power over Mississippi. First, he worked with leaders in several southern states to challenge the constitutionality of the proposed Voting Rights Act. Second, he called Mississippi legislators into a special session to repeal the good moral character and interpretation requirements for registering. On August 5, at the Neshoba County Fair,

---

<sup>22</sup> Quoting "Federal Commission Opens State Hearings," *Laurel Leader-Call*, February 10, 1965. "Caves Says He Practices Fair Registration Plan," *Laurel Leader-Call*, February 12, 1965; MFDP Congressional Challenge - Fact Sheet, Pt. 2, Reel 9, SCLC Papers; MFDP Congressional Challenge Brief, Abernethy Collection, Thomas Abernethy Papers, J. D. Williams Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford, [hereinafter cited as Abernethy Collection]; WATS Reports, February 8, and 10, 1965, Ser. 7, Reel 15, SNCC Papers; USCCRLE, *Law Enforcement, A Report On Equal Protection in the South*, 1-4, 45-46, 53, 64-65; Maurice Dantin to William Colmer, February 7, 1965, and William Colmer to Judge Darwin Maples, February 22, 1965, both in William Colmer Papers, McCain, USM; President Lyndon Baines Johnson, Address to Congress, March 15, 1965, American Experience, The Presidents, Lyndon Baines Johnson, PBS, [http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/36\\_1\\_johnson/psources/ps\\_overcome.html](http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/amex/presidents/36_1_johnson/psources/ps_overcome.html); Voting Rights Act of 1965 (Public Law 88-352; 78 Stat. 241), United States Congress, in *Federal Civil Rights Laws: A Sourcebook*, November 1984, 54-71, Ser. 43, in John C. Stennis, MML-MSU; *United States v. Theron Lynd, Circuit Clerk and Registrar of Voters of Forrest County and the State of Mississippi* (June 16, 1965), case no. 22477, transcript, 13, Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals, The United States of America v. Theron C. Lynd Collection, McCain, USM. See also, Frank R. Parker, *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi After 1965* (Chapel Hill: North Carolina Press, 1990), 26, 29; Dittmer, 338-349.

Johnson implored the public to approve the amendments, explaining they would strengthen his challenge. He theorized that the Voting Rights Act would pass and survive legal challenges and that it would fuel massive black registration. In addition, he expressed concern that the requirements for registration could ultimately prevent whites from voting and shift power to blacks. By repealing restrictive voting requirements, he could ensure white numerical dominance at the polls. He also called on the four hundred thousand unregistered eligible whites to register.<sup>23</sup>

Johnson did not articulate why he thought that the state requirements for registering would prevent more whites than blacks from registering. Perhaps he understood that the Civil Rights Movement's voter-registration education had prepared more blacks than whites to pass the registration exam and that the federal registrars would ensure the fair evaluation of registration applications. Moreover, the movement had fostered massive political mobilization of the black population through the proliferation of Freedom Days registration campaigns and the development of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party and the Freedom Vote. Finally, SNCC, COFO, CORE, and the NAACP, which were so deeply embedded in counties across the state, served as a powerful and organized machine to deliver black citizens to the courthouses to register and to the polls to vote.<sup>24</sup>

The day after Governor Johnson's Neshoba County speech, President Johnson signed the Voting Rights Act, and the federal government ordered Federal registrars into Mississippi, Louisiana, and Alabama. Panicked, Governor Johnson beseeched the President to refrain from sending registrars into Mississippi until after the state vote on the amendments. He insisted that the Klan would use the arrival of registrars to defeat the moral character and interpretation amendments, particularly in Adams County where "our own registrars are registering Nigras." The President refused. On August 17, voters approved the amendments, but Adams County voted against them. Still, Johnson's hopes must have soared in September, when the U.S. House of Representatives used the passage of the Voting Rights Act to dismiss the MFDP challenge,

---

<sup>23</sup> PBJ, Address at Neshoba County Fair, August 5, 1965, Ser. II, Subser. 4, PBJ Papers; Voting Rights Act of 1965.

<sup>24</sup> For the various ways that civil rights activists had politically mobilized the black population in Mississippi, see Charles Payne, *I've Got the Light of Freedom: The Organizing Tradition and the Mississippi Freedom Struggle* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2007); Dittmer; Boyett.

claiming that the new legislation would prevent future discrimination.<sup>25</sup>

Enraged by the increase in black voting, Klan leader Sam Bowers decided to orchestrate the murder of Vernon Dahmer, a founding member and former president of the Forrest County NAACP and a plaintiff in the Lynd case, who sought to increase black voter registration by volunteering to collect poll taxes at his store. Bowers ordered a klavern in Jones County to firebomb Dahmer's home and shoot anyone who ran from the house. On January 10, 1966, Klansmen executed Bowers' orders. Dahmer stood inside his burning home, shooting back at the Klansmen, so that his family could escape. His daughter sustained burns on her forehead and arms, but she survived. Dahmer suffered from massive burns and smoke inhalation and died within a day of the attack.<sup>26</sup> Bowers had made a fatal mistake. The Neshoba case had initiated the war against the Klan; the Dahmer case would deliver the mortal blow. The FBI ordered an army of agents into Forrest County to launch the DABURN (Dahmer burning) investigation. Days later, in his State of the Union Address, President Johnson called on Congress to pass "legislation to strengthen authority of Federal courts to try those who murder, attack, or intimidate either civil rights workers or others exercising their constitutional rights" and to increase the punishment for the commission of such crimes.<sup>27</sup>

Governor Johnson used his power to fight both Klansmen and activists. He ordered the MHP to work with the FBI, issued a public state-

---

<sup>25</sup> Quoting "Lyndon B. Johnson and Paul B. Johnson on 6 August 1965," LBJ Recording. For the repealed amendments, see, Miss. Const., art. 12, sec. 241-A, sec. 244. For the dismissal of the challenge, see "Contested Elections in the First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth Districts of the State of Mississippi," Hearings Before the Subcommittee on Elections of the Committee on House Administration House of Representatives, Eighty-Ninth Congress, First Session, September 13 and 14, 1965, 33, 49-51, Election Contest, Abernethy Collection.

<sup>26</sup> FBI Report, March 21, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 30, #44-1512-2579; FBI Report, March 23, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 30, #44-1512-2576; FBI Report, January 20, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 8, # 44-1512-188; FBI Report, January 20, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 8 # 44-1512-189; Pitts, written confession, n. d., FBI File, #[?] and Billy Roy Pitts, typed confession, September 30, 1967, FBI File, #44-31694-555, both in Billy Roy Pitts Notebook; FBI Report, January 13, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 9, # 44-1512-342; and FBI Report, January 13, 1966, DABURN FBI File, vol. 9, # 44-1512-373, all in Helfrich Papers; WATS Report, December 19, 1965, Ser. 15, Reel 38, SNCC Papers; James K. Dukes, interview by Patricia Boyett, May 12, 2010, MOHP; Nikki Davis Maute, "Her Memories of Firebombing," *Hattiesburg American*, February 13, 1994; "Firebombing Victim Dies," *The Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 11, 1966; "Killed by the Klan," videocassette.

<sup>27</sup> Quoting President Lyndon Baines Johnson, State of the Union Address, in Dittmer, 391. Nelson, 29, 72; Don Whitehead, *Attack on Terror: The FBI Against the Ku Klux Klan in Mississippi* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1970), 238; "Firebombing Victim Dies," *The Jackson Clarion-Ledger*; "Killed by the Klan," videocassette.

ment characterizing the perpetrators of Dahmer's murder as "morally bankrupt," and called for Mississippians to cooperate with law enforcement and to ignore "the cowardly voices of hate and fear which would destroy us." Yet he ordered the MHP to spy on the revived Hattiesburg Movement and continued his struggle against black suffrage—the right that Dahmer died fighting to achieve. Lawyers representing Mississippi and other Deep South states demanded that the U. S. Supreme Court find the Voting Rights Act unconstitutional, claiming that the federal government lacked the authority to abolish literacy and voter qualification tests. Conversely, Attorney General Nicholas Katzenbach revealed that many illiterate whites had registered in southern states, proving that the South used the test to disfranchise blacks. After the act's passage, 250,000 blacks registered, demonstrating its necessity. On March 7, 1966, the Supreme Court found the act constitutional.<sup>28</sup>

The ruling proved useful in the DABURN case. By the end of March, the Department of Justice indicted Bowers and thirteen other suspects for violating *U. S. Code, Title 18, Section 241*, which prohibits persons from engaging in a conspiracy to impede citizens "in the free exercise and enjoyment of any of the rights or privileges" guaranteed by the Constitution; and for violating Section 11(B) of the Voting Rights Act of 1965, which prohibits any person from using intimidation, threats, and/or coercion against a person who is attempting to vote, has voted, or is assisting others in their efforts to vote.<sup>29</sup>

Although Governor Johnson supported the DABURN case, during the March Against Fear in June 1966, he demonstrated again that his opposition to white supremacist violence stemmed from the negative media publicity rather than his concern for black lives. On June 5, Mississippi attracted such attention when a white man shot James

---

<sup>28</sup> Quoting Governor PBJ, press release, January 11, 1966, Ser. II, Subser. 5, "Racial Violence," *Hattiesburg American*, January 27, 1966, and Mississippi Highway Patrol Reports, January 10, 1966 - September 18, 1967, all in PBJ Papers. "High Court Upholds 1965 Voting Rights Act," *Hattiesburg American*, March 7, 1966; "Mississippi, 5 Others Challenge," *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 17, 1966; "Katzenbach Defends 1965 Voting Rights Act," *Hattiesburg American*, January 18, 1966.

<sup>29</sup> Quoting Title 18, U. S. C. Section 241, Federal Civil Rights Statutes, The FBI website: <http://www.fbi.gov/about-us/investigate/civilrights/federal-statutes#section844h>. Voting Rights Act of 1965. See also, *Hattiesburg American*, March 28, 1966, FBI press release, March 28, 1966, FBI File, vol. 7, #44-31694-262, FBI Report, March 19, 1966, Bowers FBI File, vol. 4, #157-18-459, FBI Report, March 28, 1966, FBI File #44-31694-262, and FBI Report, March 31, 1966, Bowers FBI File, vol. 4, #157-18-482, all in Helfrich Papers; Ford O'Neal to A. D. Morgan, March 17, 1966, and Correspondence, Charles E. Snodgrass to T. B. Birdsong and A. D. Morgan, March 30, 31, and April 4, 1966, all in Ser. II, Subser. 10, PBJ Papers; Whitehead, 249-250.

Meredith at the onset of Meredith's sixteen-day pilgrimage from Memphis to Jackson to break the terror that permitted racial segregation and black disfranchisement to persist despite civil rights legislation. After the shooting, Dr. King and Stokely Carmichael, along with many other civil rights leaders, rushed to Mississippi to continue the march and used it as an opportunity to register black voters. Frustrated, Governor Johnson emphasized that authorities had arrested the shooter, who hailed from outside Mississippi, and claimed that Mississippians "deplored" the assault. Although he sent twenty state troopers to protect the marchers, he castigated these "agitators," who "have now seized upon this isolated incident to create a big production to foment strife and hate." He implored Mississippians to ignore them.<sup>30</sup>

Johnson's commitment, however resentfully, to protect the marchers waned after the first week, and he reduced the number of state troopers to four. Surely, the enormous expansion of the march, which led to mass registration of black voters, influenced Johnson's decision. So too did the declining sympathy of the media toward civil rights activism. That decline began when Carmichael rallied a crowd in Greenwood by shouting, "We want black power! . . . Every courthouse in Mississippi ought to be burned tomorrow to get rid of the dirt . . . What do you want?" Some six hundred blacks shouted, "Black power!" To Johnson's delight, many journalists condemned Carmichael's speech as reverse racism and black militancy. The reduction in troopers and the condemnation of black power created a permissive atmosphere for white violence. On June 21, when King led a contingent to a rally at the Neshoba County Courthouse, white mobs beat them. In Canton, local and state patrolmen tear-gassed and clubbed activists. President Johnson refused to deploy the National Guard and deferred to Governor Johnson. Capitalizing on the national press's critique of black power, Johnson declared that activists "thrive on incidents" and applauded the "patience and forbearance" of most Mississippians "in the face of extreme provocation." Black power became the enduring symbol of the march and instigated a shift in the struggle as activists debated its meaning and as white supremacists cap-

---

<sup>30</sup> Quoting PBJ Press Release, June 7, 1966, Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers. Carter, *The Music Has Gone Out of the Movement*. See also, Adam Fairclough, *To Redeem the Soul of America: The Southern Christian Leadership Conference and Martin Luther King Jr.* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1987), 318-322; Dittmer; Carson.

itized on the fear it instilled in many whites to malign the Movement.<sup>31</sup>

During a speech at the Neshoba County Fair on August 4, 1966, Johnson compared black power leaders to Hitler and Mussolini, claimed that black power advocates did “not call for the ballots—they call for blood” and denounced “Black Power” as a “storm that contains the thunder of terror and the lightning of violence . . . . It harbors the seeds of a hurricane of hate and hostility that could sweep sanity aside and introduce an era of anarchy that would represent a real and present danger to the very fabric of society in the United States.” Police brutality, he insisted, proved a ruse used to destroy democracy. American police, he claimed, were at “war,” as demonstrated by the “riots” rippling across the nation. Johnson ignored the reality that violent responses by black activists to white attacks remained rare and greatly paled in comparison to the systemic, pervasive, and persistence violence Klansmen, mobs, and police used against blacks.<sup>32</sup>

Governor Johnson’s continued fearmongering helped him undermine programs for black uplift and oppose federal legislation and emboldened the Klan. The governor and state leaders used their control over the administration of federal War on Poverty programs to deny or lessen black access to Medicaid and Medicare, Job Corps opportunities, and welfare. Johnson characterized the Child Development Group of Mississippi (CDGM) as a corrupt black power organization bent on radicalizing black communities. Sam Bowers, who shared Johnson’s perspective of black activism and uplift, activated his new underground Klan cells in 1967. Klansmen used a car bomb to murder Wharlest Jackson, treasurer of the Natchez NAACP chapter, bombed the Blackwell Real Estate Office in Jackson because its agents sold homes to blacks in white neighborhoods, and bombed Temple Beth Israel in the capital city. Johnson condemned the murder of Jackson as “an act of savagery which stains our state” and the bombing of Temple Beth Israel as a “despicable” and “cowardly” assault. Yet he also appeared before the U.S. Senate Judiciary Committee to oppose the Civil Rights Act (1966), which

---

<sup>31</sup> First and second quote, Dittmer, 336; 389-402. All other quotes, PBJ Press Release, June 24, 1966, Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers. Jill Wakeman, “Journey to Mississippi,” transcript, Jill Wakeman (Goodman) to Friends, June 25, 1966 and July 8, 1966, all in Jill Wakeman (Goodman) Papers, McCain, USM. See also, Carson, 207-211, Fairclough, 318-322, and Carter.

<sup>32</sup> Quoting PBJ Address, Neshoba County Fair, Philadelphia, Mississippi, August 4, 1966, Ser. II, Subser. 4, PBJ Papers. For the occasional use of violence by black activists, see Boyett, 11-112, 169-173, 217-219.



President Johnson had proposed in the wake of Dahmer's murder.<sup>33</sup>

During Johnson's final months in office, the racial rage that had gripped Mississippi spiraled toward its climax. The Neshoba case came to trial in October in Meridian. An all-white jury acquitted seven defendants and deadlocked on verdicts for four. Still, the jurors found Bowers and six other defendants guilty, marking the first time that a Mississippi jury had convicted Klansmen in a federal civil rights case since Reconstruction. Freed by Judge Harold Cox, who allowed the convicted Klansmen to post bond pending the sentencing hearing, the Imperial Wizard launched a fall bombing campaign that included attacks in Laurel and Jackson. In late December, Judge Cox sentenced the convicted men. Bowers received the maximum ten years. Judge Cox permitted Bowers to post bond pending an appeal. Acting on Bowers's orders, in early January 1968, a cell led by Thomas Tarrants bombed two black churches in Meridian. Finally, however, over two years after Dahmer's murder, the FBI war against the Klan approached its decisive battle. In late January, the state delivered murder and arson indictments against Bowers and eleven Klansmen in the Dahmer case, marking the first time since Reconstruction that a Mississippi jury had indicted Klansmen on capital charges for an attack on a black civil rights activist.<sup>34</sup>

The reigns of the governor's office transferred from Johnson to former congressman John Bell Williams just weeks before the indictments in the Dahmer case. In his inaugural address, Governor Williams modeled his vision after Johnson's by promising to fight federal encroachment and condemning Klan violence while blaming

---

<sup>33</sup> First quote, Press Release by PBJ, February 28, 1967. Second and third quotes, Press Releases by PBJ, September 19, 1967, both in Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers. Press release by PBJ, October 10, 1966, and Statement by PBJ Before the Senate Judiciary Committee, n. d., both in Ser. II, Subser. 5, PBJ Papers; FBI Report: Bombing Investigations in Mississippi, June 18, 1968, Bowers FBI File, vol. 7, #158-18-1009, and FBI Non-Prosecutive Summary Report, March 7, 1968, Thornton FBI File, vol. 1, #157-4361-96, both in Helfrich Papers; Nelson, 12, 46.

<sup>34</sup> *United States v. Cecil Ray Price, et al.* (1967), case no. 5291, United States District Court, Southern District Court of Mississippi, transcript, Eastern Division, Jackson, Mississippi, [hereinafter cited as *U. S. v. Price* (1967) transcript]; Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission Report, April 4, 1967, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; William F. Dukes to SAC, Jackson, November 23, 1967, vol. 6, #157-18-867, SAC, Jackson to FBI File, December 6, 1967, vol. 6, #157-18-883, *Laurel Leader-Call*, December 30, 1967, Bowers FBI File, vol. 6, #157-18-904, and FBI Report: Bombing Investigations in Mississippi, June 18, 1968, Bowers FBI File, vol. 7, #157-18-1099, all in Bowers FBI File, Helfrich Papers; "Special Grand Jury Slated," *Hattiesburg American*, December 22, 1967; "4 Defendants are Released," *Hattiesburg American*, January 27, 1968; "Bowers, 9 Others Remain in Jail," *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 27, 1968; "'Break' Brings 12 Indictments," *Laurel Leader-Call*, January 26, 1968; Nelson, 50, 65-70, 106; Mars, with Eden, 250; Whitehead, 260-284.

it on black provocation. Yet changes were coming. Blacks voted in record numbers in 1967 and elected black leaders across the state in counties where blacks constituted a majority. Under Williams's tenure, the state won four convictions in the Dahmer case, including one arson conviction and three murder convictions, which helped decimate the Klan. Governor Williams lost his battle against school desegregation; Mississippi finally complied with *Brown* and the civil rights acts. However, over the next decade, white flight and private schools led to virtual re-segregation of education in much of the state. Mississippi, like the rest of America, had progressed, but racism still thrived.<sup>35</sup>

Governor Johnson greatly contributed to the racism that infected his state. His disdain for the Klan appears exaggerated as demonstrated by an interview in 1970. When discussing the murders of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman, Johnson claimed that the Klansmen "did not actually intend to kill these people . . . They were going to hang these three persons up in a big cotton sack" for a few days to "more or less scare them off." However, their plans failed when "the Negro boy from over at Meridian," who Johnson called the "ringleader," "was acting kind of smart aleck and talking pretty big." One of the Klansman hit him with a chain and "killed him as dead as a nit." Johnson concluded, "After this boy had been killed," they decided, "Well, we've got to dispose of the other two." As Philip Dray and Seth Cagin argue in *We Are Not Afraid*, which examines the Neshoba case, Johnson's story resembles so many in which racists seek to portray blacks as acting out of line and leaving whites with no choice but to use force against them. It also seems highly improbable that Chaney would have responded in such a way "while in the hands of a lynch mob." Finally, as they contend, many whites like Johnson seemed to think such a diabolical murder becomes less evil when "rationalized as the beating

---

<sup>35</sup> For inaugural address, see John Bell Williams, January 16, 1968, *Mississippi Senate Journal* (Jackson 1968), 35-39. For elections, see State of Mississippi General Election Returns, November 7, 1967, Evelyn Gandy Papers, McCain, USM; James Saggus, "Mississippi Elects Williams Governor," *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 8, 1967; "Negroes Win 7 State Offices," *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 8, 1967. For convictions in the Dahmer case, see *State of Mississippi v. Charles Clifford Wilson* (1968), case no. 158/6795, *State of Mississippi v. William Thomas Smith* (1968), case no. 158/6797, *State of Mississippi v. Cecil Sessum* (1968), case no. 158-/6796, *State of Mississippi v. Lawrence Byrd* (1968), case no. 159/6803, all in *Forrest County: General Docket State Cases Circuit Court*, vol. 5, 164-167. For John Bell Williams's tenure and changes in Mississippi in the late 1960s and early 1970s and the full story on the Dahmer case, see Boyett, 173, 174, 201, 213, 214. For general struggles in the state after the Movement, see Boyett, 223-244.

of a Negro that got out of hand.”<sup>36</sup> Johnson, like so many whites of the era, sustained a fealty to white supremacy and possessed little, if any, empathy for the deep suffering blacks experienced across Mississippi.

Certainly, Johnson’s cooperation with the FBI’s war against the Klan marginalized white supremacist terrorists and ironically made it safer to expand the civil rights activism he so deplored. His acts proved not those of a moderate, but rather, a pragmatic racist, who understood that Klan violence forced federal intervention, threatened Mississippi’s state sovereignty, and would break Jim Crow. Moreover, Johnson became a master of racial myths as he drew false equivalencies between activists and Klansmen and portrayed activists as communists and terrorists. And he sought to use the activists’ highly successful nonviolent resistance method against them by calling on citizens to model that behavior in public. If only they had listened, Johnson seemed to think, he could have sustained white supremacy. Johnson used every method at his disposal to hold together the crumbling house of Jim Crow. During his tenure, he deployed the MSSC as agents of a police state against activists; he waged battles against the Civil Rights Acts of 1964, the Voting Rights Act, and the proposed Civil Rights Act of 1966; and he encouraged noncompliance with *Brown* by supporting school board lawsuits. These actions delayed registration of black voters, school integration, desegregation of public spaces, the hiring and promotions of black employees, and racial justice. Thus, even as Johnson helped release Mississippi from its Klan stranglehold, he served as a key leader in preserving white privilege. Much of his rhetoric, including his claims that the media lied about Mississippi, his false equivalencies between Klansmen and freedom fighters, and his portrayal of activists as terrorists and white radicals as frustrated victims survives in America today. Perhaps the tortured past is not so past.<sup>37</sup>

---

<sup>36</sup> Quoting Dray and Cagin, Kindle edition. See also, Carter.

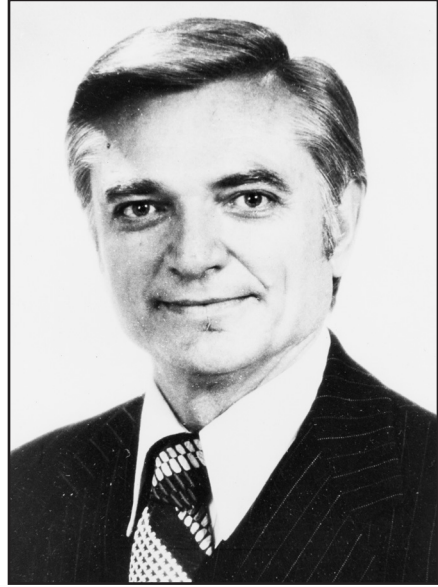
<sup>37</sup> For reference to Charlottesville, see Joe Heim, “Recounting a Day of Rage, Hate, Violence and Death,” *The Washington Post*, August 14, 2017, digital edition; Rosie Gray, “Trump Defends White Nationalist Protestors,” *The Atlantic*, August 15, 2017, digital edition; and Elle Reeves, “Charlottesville: Race and Terror,” *Vice News Tonight*, S1, EP 2012, aired on Home Box Office, August 14, 2017.



# Cliff Finch (1976-1980) and the Limits of Racial Integration

*by Chris Danielson*

Cliff Finch generally does not come to mind when one recalls governors of Mississippi who were elected after the civil rights movement. Elected in 1975 and serving immediately before the much more well-known William Winter, Finch, if he is remembered at all, mostly brings to mind a colorful character whose administration was marked by scandal and who quickly faded into obscurity after failed bids for higher office. Yet the reform administration of Winter was aided by Finch's pioneering 1975 gubernatorial victory, which brought the Mississippi Democratic Party into the modern era by healing its lingering racial divisions from the 1960s and undercutting biracial challenges



*Cliff Finch, Courtesy, Mississippi Department of Archives and History*

from the emerging Republican Party. But the Democrats' unity proved temporary, with continuing racial antagonisms within the party contributing to the rise of the Mississippi Republican Party in later years.

Charles "Cliff" Finch, the eldest of five children of a farming family, was born on April 4, 1927, near Pope, Mississippi. He attended public schools in Panola County, and after graduation, served in World War II in the 88<sup>th</sup> Infantry Division in Italy as a gunner. Unable to make a living in postwar Mississippi, he worked overseas in Guam, earning and borrowing enough to enter the University of Mississippi in 1953. He fin-

---

*CHRIS DANIELSON is a professor of history at Montana Technological University. He earned his Ph.D. from the University of Mississippi in 2006, and in 2008 won the Mississippi Historical Society's Franklin L. Riley Prize for his doctoral dissertation The Voting Rights Act and the Creation of Black Politics in Mississippi, 1965-1986.*

ished law school there in 1958, working various jobs to make ends meet. Finch then opened a law practice in Batesville, and in 1959, defeated eight opponents in a legislative primary, winning a majority due to his personal connections, because he “had chopped cotton and plowed with more people than the others knew.” After two terms as a state representative, he then served two terms as the district attorney in Batesville.<sup>1</sup>

Finch’s first statewide race was for lieutenant governor in 1971, where, with little money, he placed second in the primary against William Winter and Elmore Greaves. Winter won, and notably, both he and Finch campaigned without resorting to the racist appeals to white voters that had been so common among white candidates in the 1960s. That was a sign of the effect on white candidates of the three hundred thousand black voters who had registered since the Voting Rights Act of 1965. Greaves, who ran an openly racist campaign, received only five percent of the vote.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the growth of the black electorate, whites within the Democratic Party were still unwilling to share power with African Americans. The split in the party, which had begun with the challenge by the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party (MFDP) against the all-white Mississippi Democratic delegation at Atlantic City in 1964, still had not been resolved by the 1970s. The integrated Loyalists enjoyed national recognition from the party but very limited state power, while the Regulars, composed mostly of the white segregationists, still held control of the state government.<sup>3</sup>

The rift between the Regular and Loyalist Democrats from the 1968 Democratic convention continued under Governor William Waller, who had been elected in 1971. Waller showed his limits as a racial moderate when he rejected an invitation from Aaron Henry to hold a joint meeting and possibly send a united delegation to the 1972 Democratic National Convention. Waller made gestures of reconciliation towards the Loyalists as the convention approached and as he realized that the Regulars would not be seated by the national party without Loyalist participation. Yet many white Regulars still opposed a compromise with the Loyalists, which would have required affirmative action to

---

<sup>1</sup> Cecil L. Summers, *The Governors of Mississippi* (Gretna, La.: Pelican Publishing Co., 1980), 141-43.

<sup>2</sup> Charles C. Bolton, *William Winter and the New Mississippi: A Biography* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 154-55.

<sup>3</sup> For the MFDP and Atlantic City, see John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1994), chapter 12.

increase the representation of women and minorities in the convention delegation beyond their token efforts. Leon Bramlett, the Regulars' state chairman (and future Republican gubernatorial nominee), echoed the sentiments of many white Democrats when he said, "I don't think any of those men would be interested in a union with the Loyalist group." After an unsuccessful lawsuit by the Regulars to block their seating, the Loyalists again won national recognition and were seated.<sup>4</sup>

While Waller's limited attempts at biracial cooperation distinguished him from his segregationist predecessors, the split between the two factions continued throughout his term. His modest number of black appointments and outreach efforts were countered by his other actions, such as vetoing bills to fund hospitals in heavily-black Delta counties. In a sign of the continuing acrimony, a furious Aaron Henry of the Loyalists told Waller that blacks and poor whites "must finally, as hard as we have tried not to, accept you as our active enemy."<sup>5</sup>

Due to Cliff Finch's herculean efforts, the 1975 governor's election led to the healing of the divided Mississippi Democratic Party. In a move supported by both Regulars and Loyalists as a way to bridge divisions, the state legislature passed a bill in January that allowed voters to select 75 percent of the delegates for the national convention during the June 1976 congressional primaries.<sup>6</sup> In the gubernatorial primary runoff in August 1975, Finch defeated Lieutenant Governor William Winter to win the Democratic nomination for governor. Finch had long shed his segregationist past including support for Ross Barnett and instead embraced a populist-style campaign for governor. Despite his \$150,000 salary the previous year, he carried around a lunch pail with bologna sandwiches and reached out to the "forgotten people of the state" by working at a variety of blue-collar jobs during the campaign. Observers commented that Finch's populist campaigning resembled that of Alabama governor George Wallace, but unlike Wallace, Finch openly sought black votes. For the general election campaign, Finch won the

---

<sup>4</sup> Ken Bode, "Mississippi's Two Democratic Parties," *The New Republic*, March 25, 1972; Frank Parker, *Black Votes Count: Political Empowerment in Mississippi after 1965* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1990), 149.

<sup>5</sup> Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics* (Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1995), 212-13; Roy Reed, "A New, Biracial Course Found in Mississippi," *New York Times*, January 21, 1976; Edward Blackmon Jr. to Bill Minor, May 3, 1978, Box 5, 1978 Senate Election Folder, Wilson F. Minor Papers, Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>6</sup> Bill Pardue, "Senate Approves Delegate Election," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 22, 1975.

endorsement of Loyalists and civil rights veterans Charles Evers and Aaron Henry, and at the same time, received behind-the-scenes support from Klansmen and other segregationists because Henry and most black Democrats had supported Winter in the primary. Finch also hired Warner Buxton, the student body president at Jackson State College during the 1970 Mississippi Highway Patrol shootings, to serve on his staff.<sup>7</sup>

Finch campaigned for black support because his opponents did the same. Henry Jay Kirksey, a sixty-year-old black cartographer and former MFDP member, opposed Finch with an independent campaign that drew little support from the state's black political leaders. Kirksey, a plaintiff in a suit challenging the state's legislative reapportionment system, accused his opponents of trying to keep him off the ballot. Local black leaders throughout the state actively campaigned against him and neutralized any hopes that he could be a spoiler.<sup>8</sup>

Finch's more serious threat in the campaign for black votes came from his Republican opponent, Gil Carmichael. Carmichael, a Volkswagen dealer from Meridian, who had previously run against Senator James Eastland in 1972, ran as a moderate Republican who championed economic development and an end to the cheap export of the state's natural resources. He also backed a number of progressive issues, including a new state constitution, ratification of the Equal Rights Amendment (ERA), compulsory school attendance, reduced punishment for marijuana possession, and handgun licensing. His support for gun control and the ERA cost him some support with white voters and alienated conservative Republicans. Carmichael also said some party conservatives opposed his support for the ERA. His issues-oriented campaign, which he put forth in both personal campaigning and television ads produced by campaign strategist Walter DeVries, contrasted with the vague economic proposals and rhetoric of Finch. Finch ignored Carmichael and refused to hold press conferences, and instead, issued muddled

---

<sup>7</sup> "The Common Touch," *Newsweek*, September 8, 1975; Bass and De Vries, 216. Winter also had black staffers in his 1975 campaign. See R.W. Apple Jr., "Republican Courts Mississippi Blacks," *New York Times*, August 18, 1975; Fred Banks, interview by author, June 28, 2005, tape recording, copy in author's possession.

<sup>8</sup> George Alexander Sewell and Margaret Elliott Dwight Barrett, *Mississippi Black History Makers* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1984), 79; Jack Elliot, "Kirksey Charges State, Opponents Trying To Keep Him Off Ballot," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 2, 1975; Linda Buford, "Kirksey Vote: No Counties Won, No Black Support," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 6, 1975.



statements describing himself as a “progressive, but conservative.”<sup>9</sup>

With the absence of open race-baiting, both men freely campaigned for the black vote and sought to create black-white coalitions to help them into office. Carmichael countered Finch’s black endorsements by employing on his strategy committee Robert Clark, the first African American elected to the Mississippi House of Representatives after the Voting Rights Act went into effect. Carmichael also had personal connections with the black community, such as when he hired black salesmen at his car dealership in 1968.<sup>10</sup> During the election, he opened a campaign office in Fayette, the stronghold of Finch supporter Charles Evers. Carmichael also visited the all-black town of Mound Bayou, a first for any gubernatorial candidate in Mississippi.<sup>11</sup>

State Representative Robert Clark became one of Carmichael’s most prominent supporters and the front man for his outreach to black Mississippians. The 1975 election was still in an era when black Mississippians, due to the Democratic Party schism and the party’s long history of white supremacy, did not necessarily identify as Democrats. Clark saw himself not as joining the GOP, but as trying to broaden political and economic opportunities for black people. He said that Carmichael’s election would “force the [Democratic] party to become a real party and include all the people.” Some black organizations also took Carmichael’s efforts seriously. Black cooperatives, which were institutions that promoted community development in the poor areas of the state, were lured to Carmichael by the potential access to state funds under his administration.<sup>12</sup>

With the exception of Clark, Carmichael’s efforts did not sway the most prominent black political and civil rights figures in Mississippi. Aaron Henry publicly endorsed Finch in an open letter to the press that did not

---

<sup>9</sup> Alexander P. Lamis, *The Two-Party South* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 50-51; “Republican Courts Mississippi Blacks”; “New Breezes Blowing on the Old Magnolia,” *Time*, November 3, 1975; Roland Evans and Robert Novak, “Carmichael’s Mississippi Is Viewed,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, October 18, 2005; Jack Elliott, “Batesville’s Backing Its Man, Finch,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 1, 1975; Gil Carmichael, telephone interview with author, August 31, 2006.

<sup>10</sup> Bass and DeVries, 210; Gil Carmichael, interview with author, tape recording, October 13, 2004.

<sup>11</sup> “Gil Carmichael Opens Campaign Office Here,” *Fayette (Miss.) Chronicle*, October 30, 1975; Gil Carmichael, interview by Jeff Broadwater, transcript, Washington, D.C., July 18, 1991, Congressional and Political Research Center, Mississippi State University, Starkville; “Mrs. Gil Carmichael Campaigns Wednesday in Claiborne County,” *Port Gibson (Miss.) Reveille*, September 18, 1975; Walter C. Gough to Gil Carmichael, folder 328, 1975 Campaign Correspondence, Gilbert E. Carmichael Papers (GEC), Special Collections Department, Mitchell Memorial Library, Mississippi State University, Starkville.

<sup>12</sup> Robert Clark press conference, folder 454, and John M. Perkins to the Voice of Calvary, folder 47, both in 1975 Campaign Correspondence, GEC.

even mention Carmichael by name. Henry criticized “the unredeemable posture of the total Republican Party . . . an institution that not only has been against, and vetoed, program after program that would benefit the poor of our state and nation; but an institution that has fostered programs that now has all America teetering on the brink of economic, social, and moral decline.” He also dismissed the possible gains in federal patronage and funds that the state might get from the Ford administration if the state elected its first Republican governor in the twentieth century.<sup>13</sup>

Henry’s disdain for the GOP did not translate into enthusiasm for Finch. He flatly stated that he did “not feel that Cliff Finch was the best choice that we had during the Democratic primaries” but that he “needs our help in providing for him the stamina to withstand the forces that still exist . . . that would advise him to return to a policy of racism.” Charles Evers, while declaring that he “had a lot of admiration and respect for Gil” and liked his platform, said that a vote for a Republican candidate is “a vote of suicide.” He echoed Henry’s concerns about the national GOP’s hostility to social welfare spending and argued that Great Society programs would be cut under a Republican administration.<sup>14</sup>

Carmichael ran a strong race but could not win enough of the black vote from Finch to win the Governor’s Mansion. Black voters ignored Kirksey’s campaign and only delivered a few percentage points of the total vote to him. Statewide, Finch won 52.2 percent to Carmichael’s 45.1 percent. Finch’s populist appeal, along with the traditional identification of black voters with the Democratic Party, gave him 80 percent of the black vote, as opposed to the 50 percent Waller received in 1971. Most of Carmichael’s strength came from his home area of east-central Mississippi and urban areas like the Gulf Coast and Hinds County. Finch won sixty-six of eighty-two counties, including most of the predominately black counties. Carmichael only won two black-majority counties, Leflore and Washington. Clearly, the Democrats enjoyed the upper hand with their prior groundwork with black voters through the Loyalist wing. Leslie Burl McLemore, a former MFDP officer who supported Carmichael, said that the Republicans had

---

<sup>13</sup> “Finch ‘Recommended’ For Governor; ‘Our Only Viable Choice’; Total GOP Posture ‘Unredeemable’ For Poor,” *Lexington (Miss.) Advertiser*, October 23, 1973.

<sup>14</sup> “Evers Raps GOP Candidates; Calls For Support OF Finch,” *Fayette (Miss.) Chronicle*, October 30, 1975.

needed to “work on people over time” if they wanted a victory in 1975.<sup>15</sup>

Finch recognized the critical role black voters played in his campaign and moved to finally fuse the Loyalist and Regular wings of the Democratic Party. The two sides worked out a compromise after the election but before the 1976 presidential primaries began. Aaron Henry, leader of the Loyalists, and Tom Riddell, leader of the Regulars, became the co-chairs of the new Democratic state party organization. Both factions agreed to a pattern similar to the rules used by the national Democratic Party in 1972. The compromise increased the state executive committee from thirty-five to one hundred members and rotated all party offices among members of different races and genders. The Regulars reentered the national party, and the Loyalists won greater access to state and county politics, since the county Democratic executive committees now opened up to black participation. Increased access did mean a loss of independence because black Democrats had to accept minority status in the state party instead of the dominant position they had in the Loyalist organization.<sup>16</sup>

Finch held three biracial inaugural balls in January 1976 that heralded both his swearing-in and the healing of the divided Democratic Party. His inauguration dramatically highlighted the fusion when former governor and segregationist Ross Barnett sat a few seats from James Allen, a black businessman and aide to Finch. Finch also named Charles Evers and Aaron Henry colonels, which were honorary positions on the governor’s staff. Finch enlarged the Minority Affairs Council that William Waller had created by broadening black participation on the council and adding representatives of Chinese and Choctaw descent. This new diversity could not obscure continued division in the party. The state’s presidential primaries in 1976 illustrated the Janus-faced nature of fusion. In heavily-black Holmes County, local Democrats elected a slate split between uncommitted delegates and ones pledged to the conservative George Wallace and the liberal Sargent Shriver, the running mate of George McGovern in 1972. The Holmes County situation repeated itself in other counties across the state. The political marriage of the Loyalists and Regulars held together through the

---

<sup>15</sup> *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register 1972-1976*, 497, 500; Gil Carmichael to President Gerald Ford, folder 167, General Political, GEC Papers; Bass and DeVries, 216; Lamis, 51; “Kirksey Vote: No Counties Won, No Black Support,”; Jack Elliott, “Finch Shows Rural, Black Strength,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 6, 1975; Leslie Burl McLemore, interview with author, tape recording, November 19, 2004.

<sup>16</sup> Parker, 149-50; Lamis, 52.

1976 presidential election, in which Democratic presidential nominee Jimmy Carter carried Mississippi by 49.6 percent over President Gerald Ford's 47.7 percent. As Georgia Congressman Andrew Young said when the Magnolia State decided the Electoral College in favor of Carter, "The hands that picked cotton finally picked the president." Finch's fusion policy had helped elect not just himself but a president as well.<sup>17</sup>

Ultimately, Finch proved to be far more important for his election and his unification of the state party than for any accomplishments as governor. His administration championed economic growth, with the theme "Help Build Mississippi." Economic projects during his administration included a new law on strip mining and the construction of the Yellow Creek nuclear power plant by the Tennessee Valley Authority (TVA) near Iuka in northeastern Mississippi. Other economic projects included the ongoing construction of the Tennessee-Tombigbee Canal and the Grand Gulf nuclear power plant near Port Gibson, but work on those projects began under the previous administration.<sup>18</sup>

Finch could only boast limited accomplishments in improving the Magnolia State's economy. His programs to help unskilled workers and poor people, such as repealing sales taxes on food and drugs, ran into opposition from the conservative Democratic legislature. A crisis in the state's savings and loan associations led Finch to call a special session of the legislature in 1976 to deal with the emergency. He signed into law new legislation allowing the state to take over the reorganization of the institutions while minimizing depositor losses. Mother Nature also hampered him. The Pearl River flooded over Easter weekend in 1979, inundating much of Jackson and other areas, which forced

---

<sup>17</sup> Roy Reed, "A New, Biracial Course Found in Mississippi," *New York Times*, January 21, 1976; "Mayor Evers Attends Governor's Council in Jackson," *Fayette (Miss.) Chronicle*, January 29, 1976; "Holmes Democrats Elect Delegates And Executive Committee," *Lexington (Miss.) Advertiser*, February 19, 1976; Lamis, 52; Steven F. Lawson, *In Pursuit of Power: Southern Blacks and Electoral Politics, 1965-1982* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987), 256. For example, in Jefferson County the Wallace-Shriver split occurred, in Wilkinson County Wallace polled a majority, and in Claiborne County the entire delegate slate was uncommitted. See "Jefferson County Elects Democratic Executive Committee and Delegates," *Fayette (Miss.) Chronicle*, February 19, 1976; "Wallace Polls 55% of County Ballots at Precinct Meetings," *Woodville (Miss.) Republican*, January 30, 1976; "Claiborne Democratic Slate Uncommitted," *Port Gibson (Miss.) Reveille*, February 19, 1976.

<sup>18</sup> Summers, 144.

him to call another special legislative session to provide flood relief.<sup>19</sup>

While he increased the number of minority appointments, Finch's efforts were not much greater than tokenism. Despite fusion, only seven percent of Finch's appointments in his first year in office went to African Americans. Charles Evers became dissatisfied when Finch began to appoint white segregationists, another part of Finch's base, to state jobs in larger numbers than he did African Americans. The anger became an open break when Finch rebuffed Evers and a delegation of the state's black mayors when they protested the beating of a fellow mayor by a state patrolman. The early fragility of fusion began to show with the Finch-Evers split.<sup>20</sup>

Scandal also dogged Governor Finch, as a federal grand jury conducted a three-year investigation of his administration, with several state agencies accused of corruption and mismanagement, including the use of state antipoverty funds to pay for Finch's office furnishings. Although Finch was never indicted, several of his key appointees and aides were, casting a cloud over his tenure. His marital problems also entered the headlines. Zelma Finch moved out of the Governor's Mansion and to Laurel during his time in office. Finch attributed her behavior to mental illness during televised remarks. There were rumors that the Finchs had fought frequently at the Mansion.<sup>21</sup>

Finch made no secret of his ambition for higher office. When James Eastland decided to not run for reelection in 1978, Finch entered the Democratic primary to succeed him. Finch ran in a field of nine Democratic candidates, including former governor William Waller. Even at

---

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, 144-45; "Reduced Land Tax To Be Requested By Farm Bureau," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 3, 1977, 3; "Governor Charles Clifton Finch," [https://www.nga.org/cms/home/governors/past-governors-bios/page\\_mississippi/col2-content/main-content-list/title\\_finch\\_charles.default.html](https://www.nga.org/cms/home/governors/past-governors-bios/page_mississippi/col2-content/main-content-list/title_finch_charles.default.html); "Charles (Cliff) Finch dies at 59; Governor of Mississippi in 1970's," 24 April 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/24/obituaries/charles-cliff-finch-dies-at-59-governor-of-mississippi-in-1970-s.html>.

<sup>20</sup> Bolton, 199; Joseph L. Rauh Jr. to Charles Evers, August 29 1978, and Henry to Rauh, September 1, 1978, both in Charles Ramberg Papers, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson; Charles Evers and Andrew Szanton, *Have No Fear: The Charles Evers Story* (Hoboken, N.J.: John Wiley & Sons, 1998), 286-87.

<sup>21</sup> Summers, 144-45; Bob Zeller, "Investigation of Funds Unsettled," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, February 17, 1978, 17; "Charles (Cliff) Finch Dies at 59; Governor of Mississippi in 1970's," *New York Times*, April 24, 1986, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/04/24/obituaries/charles-cliff-finch-dies-at-59-governor-of-mississippi-in-1970-s.html>; Robert S. McElvaine, "A Big Mississippi Thank Y'all," August 15 2003, <http://articles.latimes.com/2003/aug/15/opinion/oe-mcelvaine15>; Bill Minor, "Musgrove Divorce? What Would Have Thought It?" *Clarksdale Press Register*, 27 June 2001, [http://www.pressregister.com/article\\_e90f27b3-4563-593a-9b63-032c21c568dc.html](http://www.pressregister.com/article_e90f27b3-4563-593a-9b63-032c21c568dc.html).

this early stage, the strains of fusion were showing. Black civil rights veterans Charles Evers and Henry Kirksey filed as independents, and Evers lashed out at black leaders who campaigned for the white Democrats. NAACP leader Aaron Henry refused to endorse any candidate before the primaries. The state AFL-CIO had endorsed Columbia attorney Maurice Dantin for the Democratic nomination, but Henry predicted that most black voters would go with Finch since Dantin had made no attempts to win NAACP support. Despite Henry's claim, Dantin led the first primary and defeated Finch in a runoff to win the Democratic nomination. Dantin went on to lose to Republican Congressman Thad Cochran in a bitterly contested three-way race where Evers siphoned off many black Democratic votes from Dantin, while many white Democrats voted Republican.<sup>22</sup>

Finch's poor showing indicated that his laboring for fusion of the Democratic Party factions was not going to reap him long-term political dividends. That did not prevent him from announcing his candidacy for president in January 1980, with the intention of unseating fellow southern Democrat Jimmy Carter. Without a hint of humility, he said that he "waited, hoping and praying there would be somebody who would come out and lead this country and restore its greatness, but no one did. Now, there is someone." Yet by the time he had announced, he had failed to get his name on the ballot in New Hampshire, a failure that did not keep him from saying that it was "a strong indication that I can be the next president." His antics added to the absurdity of his campaign, which included driving an eighteen-wheeler to Washington and getting himself photographed in a heart-shaped bathtub. Carter rolled over his opponents in the subsequent primaries and caucuses, including in Mississippi, where Governor William Winter and the state Democrats backed Carter over Finch. Finch withdrew in June 1980 and returned to his law practice in Batesville. He died of a heart attack in his law office on April 22, 1986, at age fifty-nine.<sup>23</sup>

The fusion of the white and black wings of the state Democratic Party

---

<sup>22</sup> "Blacks Are Criticized By Evers For Backing White Candidates," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 29, 1978; "Blacks Favoring Finch, NAACP Says," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 10, 1978; *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register, 1980-84*, 446-47, 455-56; Chris Danielson, *After Freedom Summer: How Race Realigned Mississippi Politics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2011), 107.

<sup>23</sup> "Gov. Finch Announces Candidacy," *The Shreveport (La.) Times*, January 17, 1980, 2; "Muddling Through Once Again," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, December 31, 1979, 4B; David W. Kubissa, "Debs Remain, Finch Abandons Presidential Hopes," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 31, 1980, 3A; "Carter Maintains Winning Stride Throughout South," *Pensacola News Journal*, March 16, 1980, 4; "A Big Mississippi Thank Y'all!"; "Charles (Cliff) Finch Dies at 59" *New York Times*, April 24, 1986.

was Finch's greatest legacy. This action integrated and modernized the state Democrats and finally led to a shedding of the party's segregationist past. That was vividly seen in 1977, when James Eastland attended a highly publicized Democratic fundraiser in Biloxi while he entertained another reelection bid to the U.S. Senate. "Big Jim" Eastland, the Citizens' Council supporter who had once boasted that his tailor sewed special pockets in his suits to hold the civil rights bills that he killed, listened to Aaron Henry tell the audience that "this is a new experience for some of us, breaking bread with Jim Eastland." Political correspondent Bill Minor observed that Henry's comments "brought down the house."<sup>24</sup> Henry endorsed the senator's planned bid for a seventh term and urged black Mississippians to "give him [Eastland] a chance" to reverse his past record and let their votes "make a Javits of an Eastland."<sup>25</sup>

Of course, in the end, Eastland did not run again, which led to Finch's abortive attempt to succeed him. The Democratic Party's fusion also enabled the election of William Winter, considered by many as the most progressive governor in modern Mississippi history. Gil Carmichael made a second run for governor in 1979, but with far less success. Despite his racial moderation, his Republican Party label made him look like a lily-white alternative to the biracial Democrats. Winter easily defeated him, winning with a coalition of white and black voters to amass 61 percent of almost 700,000 votes cast. Winter went on to push through the legislature a major reform of the state's education system, creating publicly funded kindergartens, compulsory school attendance, a reading aide program, teacher pay raises, and certification mandates. The Education Reform Act of 1982, which passed with the critical support of black legislators, was the most important education law in the state's history, one that Winter biographer Charles Bolton called "a racial turning point" for the state.<sup>26</sup> Finch's healing of the party played a role in Winter's important achievement.

Yet in the long run, Finch played a role, however unwitting, in turning Mississippi Republican. Many white Mississippians never reconciled

---

<sup>24</sup> Bill Minor, "Breaking Bread with Blacks," *Jackson Capitol Reporter*, October 20, 1977.

<sup>25</sup> Norma Fields, "Startling Things Came From Holly Springs," *Northeast (Tupelo) Mississippi Daily Journal*, December 26, 1977; J. Todd Moye, *Let the People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2004), 19; Aaron Henry to NAACP Leader and Civil and Human Rights Supporter, January 1, 1978, Box 1, Folder 9, Ed King Papers, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford; Sewell and Barrett, 86.

<sup>26</sup> Bolton, 189, 229-31.

themselves to a biracial Democratic Party. Some white Democrats had tried to kill the education bill because of its benefits to black Mississippians, while prominent white Democrats like U.S. Senator John Stennis refused to campaign for or endorse black Democratic candidates such as Robert Clark, who twice tried and failed to get elected as Mississippi's first black congressman since Reconstruction. White Democrats began to shift, albeit slowly, to supporting Republicans—first Ronald Reagan for president in 1980, then again in 1984 and then they soundly rejected Winter's attempt to unseat Republican Senator Thad Cochran. Trent Lott won the Senate race in 1988 to replace John Stennis, making both Mississippi senators Republicans. Although Ray Mabus, a Democrat, had won the Governor's Mansion in 1987, Kirk Fordice defeated him in 1991 to become the first Republican governor since Reconstruction. Fordice ran as a cultural conservative on issues like abortion but also used racially charged ads on welfare to mobilize white voters. This victory was followed by Republicans winning control of Mississippi's U.S. House seats as the old Democratic delegation retired in the 1990s. Although Ronnie Musgrove managed to win a close election as governor in 1999 by having the state House of Representatives decide the election, his defeat by Haley Barbour in 2003 marked the last time a Democrat has occupied the Governor's Mansion, and both houses of the legislature have been held by Republican majorities since 2011. In 2019, the office of attorney general is the only statewide office held by a Democrat. The continued salience of racial issues and racially polarized voting, such as the state flag controversy and the state Republican embrace of Confederate heritage and iconography, remain. The dominance of an overwhelmingly white Republican Party in the state shows that the legacy of Finch's fusion policy was a relic of the recent past and a victory that was short-lived. Even his political skills could not overcome the white supremacy deeply rooted in many Mississippi voters.<sup>27</sup>

---

<sup>27</sup> Ibid, 227-29, 246-47; Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, *Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 206-07, 228-30, 257-58, 277-77, 279-84; "Party Control of Mississippi State Government," [https://ballotpedia.org/Party\\_control\\_of\\_Mississippi\\_state\\_government](https://ballotpedia.org/Party_control_of_Mississippi_state_government); Rich Cohen, et al., eds., "Mississippi State Profile 2018," *The Almanac of American Politics*, [https://ballotpedia.org/Mississippi\\_state\\_profile\\_2018](https://ballotpedia.org/Mississippi_state_profile_2018).



# Kirk Fordice (1992-2000): Cutting Against the Grain

*by Andy Taggart*

Governor Kirk Fordice scowled when I interrupted a meeting he was hosting in his ceremonial office on the third floor of Mississippi's historic state capitol.

Our offices adjoined by a door, and though Governor Fordice had given me complete discretion as his chief of staff to enter his office at any time I deemed it necessary, I was also expected to exercise the judgment to know that there were times to use the door and times not to use it. That particular meeting on January 11, 1994, consisted only of the governor and the state auditor.

The reason for my interruption was personal, not professional. Still, I walked in, apologized to both the governor and the auditor, and though Governor Fordice was not



*Kirk Fordice, Courtesy, Wikipedia Commons, [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirk\\_Fordice#/media/File:Kirk\\_Fordice.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Kirk_Fordice#/media/File:Kirk_Fordice.jpg)*

pleased with the interruption, I could also tell that he sensed that my reason would prove to justify my having barged in on his meeting. He followed me through the door to my office, and I told him in a broken voice that I had just received word that my father had suffered a heart attack and died during the previous night at the age of sixty-three. I needed to leave the office immediately to take care of my family.

During many years prior to his election as Mississippi's first post-Re-

---

*ANDY TAGGART was the first chief of staff to Governor Kirk Fordice, serving most of Fordice's first term in office, during the years 1992 to 1994. He is co-author of two books, Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2008 and Mississippi Fried Politics: Tall Tales from the Back Rooms. Taggart is CEO of the law firm of Taggart, Rimes & Graham, PLLC in Ridgeland, Mississippi.*

construction Republican governor, Kirk Fordice had earned a reputation as a hard-nosed, blustery and boisterous leader—often described by his detractors as a “bull in a china closet,” or, more pointedly, a “bully.” As CEO of a heavy construction company that made its mark building and installing massive bank stabilization mats along the Mississippi River; as a colonel in the United States Army Reserve; and as national president of a huge and influential trade association, the Associated General Contractors, Fordice had spent a career barking orders to work crews trying to tame the river, haranguing troops on his Army engineer’s detail and arguing on behalf of his industry before Congress. As is the case in many instances, Fordice, while being a vocal critic of the federal government, benefited immensely from his firm’s federal contracts.

He fought minority set-aside contracts as violative of his company’s right to equal protection of the law in a case that see-sawed back and forth between trial courts and appellate courts for years. Widely read, Fordice was as comfortable discussing the campaigns of Napoleon as he was Ronald Reagan’s philosophy during the Cold War.

Still, when he announced that he was running for governor in January of 1991, few in the state outside his hometown of Vicksburg and the inner circles of the organized Mississippi Republican Party had heard the name Kirk Fordice, let alone had any notion that he could be elected to statewide office on a first try. Fordice spent the months leading up to the highly contested primary set for August of 1991, in which he was pitted against a sitting statewide Republican official, yelling at leaders in the state’s Republican Party establishment about their lack of support for him, despite his many years supporting Republican candidates financially and his volunteer service as secretary to the Mississippi Republican Party State Executive Committee.

Fordice’s opponent in that 1991 primary was the then-sitting State Auditor Pete Johnson, nephew of a former governor and grandson of another former governor. Because Johnson had recently been recruited by many longtime Republican activists and elected officials to switch from the Democratic Party to the Republican Party, many of them said they felt an obligation to support him when he announced his intention to run for governor.

After Fordice’s surprising primary win over the heavily favored Johnson, Fordice began an even more strident cycle of visits to Republican Party leaders. In some visits, he loudly demanded to know why they thought a person who had been a lifelong Democrat deserved their support over one

who had been a lifelong Republican, and why they chose to support what he called a “professional politician” over himself, a private businessman.

In November, Kirk Fordice defeated incumbent Democratic Governor Ray Mabus, who was vying to become the state’s first governor since the adoption of the Constitution of 1890 to serve successive four-year terms.<sup>1</sup> When Mabus declined to concede defeat on the night of the 1991 election, Fordice stormed the stage at the hotel where his own supporters were gathered and shouted over the sounds of the jubilant crowd, “Tonight, I am proud to accept election to the governorship of the State of Mississippi!”

That tone, and Fordice’s propensity to project loudly in any setting, came to mark the early years of his service as governor. I was often asked how I could work for a guy who yelled at me all the time. My honest response always was: “The Governor has only yelled at me once, but he yells around me a lot.”

So, on the cold January morning at the beginning of his third year of office, when I broke the news to him of my father’s death, people who knew him only as a public figure with a pushy persona would have been surprised at the scene in my little office.

Governor Fordice took my right hand in a handshake, then wrapped his left arm around me in a paternalistic bear hug. He said quietly, “Do whatever you need to do to take care of yourself and your family. We’ll take care of business here.”

Daniel Kirkwood Fordice Jr., was born on February 11, 1934, in Memphis, Tennessee, where he completed high school. He studied engineering at Purdue University, earning both undergraduate and graduate degrees. Upon graduation, he joined the United States Army, and then, the Army Reserve. But most of his adult life prior to his election to office in 1991 was devoted to building his business, Fordice Construction Company.

Perhaps spending thirty years trying to master the Mississippi River is good training for public office in an age that seems marked more by rancor and bitterness than by compromise and resolution. Fordice prided himself in the “CEO to CEO” approach he took to economic development while governor, making the case that as a business owner himself, he was better suited than most

---

<sup>1</sup> The state’s prior constitutional one-term limit on gubernatorial service was extended to two terms during the 1980s, though then-Governor Bill Allain, the first governor eligible to run for a second consecutive term under the new provision, chose not to run for reelection in 1987. Ray Mabus was elected governor in 1987 and ran to succeed himself in the 1991 election. Kirk Fordice’s election in 1991 and reelection in 1995 made him the first in the twentieth century to be elected to successive terms.

public officials to recruit other business owners into the state.

No doubt the self-confidence—and even swagger—that Fordice developed pushing men and machines in the mud on the flat banks of the Mississippi River helped him believe when few did that he could be elected governor on his first try for high office.

And, no doubt, the skills he learned during those years and his rugged commitment to ethical dealings equipped him to lead in state government.

Mike Moore, who served as the state's attorney general for the entire time that Fordice served as governor, had also built a reputation for his frank, in-your-face approach to issues of public consequence. The two found themselves at odds quite frequently, most notoriously in the context of Moore's celebrated and successful litigation against the nation's largest tobacco companies, which Fordice strongly opposed.

So, when Moore asked for a meeting with Fordice one day early in the governor's first term, the attorney general might have thought that the fact that he was bringing unwelcome news would lead to a confrontation between the two, even a shouting match. All the same, Moore calmly related to Fordice that a mid-level director who had recently been hired in a major state agency under the governor's purview had been engaged in self-dealing, trying to direct work in such a way as to benefit a business owned by that state employee.

Fordice looked at me and asked whether Attorney General Moore's allegations were true. "First I've heard of it," was my response.

"Then find out whether it's true, and if it is, that person no longer works here," Fordice replied.

We found out that the attorney general had, in fact, brought accurate information to the governor's attention, and the state employee in question was terminated that same day.

And so it was with key appointments Fordice made early in his first term, which earned him even among his adversaries a certain grudging admiration for his apparently non-political and merit-based hiring decisions.

Examples abound.

Kirk Fordice was the first governor to serve in office when it came time to appoint a permanent Gaming Commission to oversee development and regulation of the state's nascent gaming industry. Fordice had made no secret of his opposition to legalized gaming (casino gambling), but the legislature had adopted the authorizing legislation and Governor Ray Mabus had signed it into law in the year before Fordice took office.

Ironically, an opponent of gaming had to name the three com-

missioners provided for by law to oversee Mississippi's foray into casino gambling. Fordice was lobbied by a great many people who wanted a gubernatorial appointment to the Gaming Commission. But he early on established a key litmus test for appointment—anyone who wanted the job was immediately disqualified.

Consequently, when Fordice decided upon the candidates he wanted to appoint, he was turned down by a number of them. He finally resorted to a call to patriotism and prevailed upon three men, late in their careers and decidedly non-gamblers, whom he cajoled into service.

Mississippi, alone among the states that legalized casino gambling in a big way, was notably scandal free in the ramp-up of an industry rife with the prospect for scandal.

Similarly, Fordice's approach to the appointment of his key military leadership ran counter to convention. Under some previous governors, the appointment of the adjutant general, the commanding officer of the state's contingent of the National Guard, was a highly political process. The appointment often went to senior officers who had shown political loyalty to a new governor. After Fordice's election in 1991, he named a volunteer committee of military veterans and commissioned them with the task of recommending to him a candidate for adjutant general.

Fordice's committee came back to him with the name of James Garner, a highly respected officer in the Army National Guard, and Fordice accepted the recommendation and named Garner as adjutant general.

At the news conference announcing the appointment of General Garner soon thereafter, a reporter asked Fordice whether Garner had contributed financially to his campaign. Bewildered, Fordice turned to Garner and asked, "Did you?"

Garner sheepishly responded, "Well, I voted for you, Governor." It was the first Fordice knew of it.

On the other hand, Fordice's dogged sense that every policy issue had only a right and a wrong position made it difficult for him to be successful in the legislative arena, where issue after issue has a wide range of possible resolutions.

On one such occasion, a delegation of senior legislators came to call upon Fordice in his office to explain their concern about geographic restrictions in the state's new gaming laws. The authorizing legislation provided that casinos would be allowed in Mississippi only on waterfront properties, and that, while the gaming barges (often referred to as "boats") did not have to be capable of navigation, casinos did actually have to be situ-

ated on barges and actually on the water in counties bounded by the Gulf of Mexico (technically, the Mississippi Sound) or the Mississippi River.<sup>2</sup>

Legislators understood that the language of the new law would prevent the development of any casinos on the protected, or eastern, side of the Mississippi River levee system, an intricate and extensive set of earthwork levees, the Mississippi portion of which runs from DeSoto County in extreme northwest Mississippi (suburban Memphis) to Warren County (Vicksburg).

They approached Fordice with maps and charts that they rolled out on a large table in his office, explaining that in order to avoid flooding events, and to foster stability in the gaming industry, the law should be tweaked to allow casinos to locate on the protected side of the main Mississippi River levee in the river counties.

Fordice had already, and on many previous occasions, made it clear that he would have vetoed the original gaming legislation had he been governor when it was adopted, and that he adamantly opposed any encroachment of the gaming industry beyond the waterfront geography dictated by the original legislation.

On the day that the legislative delegation approached him with their pitch that he should agree to amended legislation, the late Bill Minor<sup>3</sup> of Marshall County was chairman of the Senate Finance Committee and primary spokesman for the delegation that called on the governor. Minor was only a few minutes into his spiel for amended legislation when Fordice exploded.

“Dammit, I told you I was not going to support any expansion of the territory where we allow gambling, and now that is exactly what you are asking me to do,” Fordice thundered. “You are wasting all of our time here, because I told you not to come here if you’re coming to ask me to do that.”

Minor, no shrinking violet himself, and a longtime veteran of many difficult legislative battles, burst through the door leaving the governor’s office, shouting with equal vehemence, “That man’s crazy! I’m never coming back up in this office again!”

No bill purporting to expand the geographic reach

---

<sup>2</sup> For a review of the legislative process that led to the odd result that casino gaming in Mississippi had to be conducted on barges, but that the boats were not required to be navigable, see Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, *Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power: 1976-2008* (University Press of Mississippi, 2009), 218-219.

<sup>3</sup> Not the same person as the late journalist and columnist Bill Minor, also of Mississippi, and a persistent critic of Kirk Fordice.

of casino gaming ever made it to Fordice's desk.<sup>4</sup> And Senator Bill Minor never returned to Fordice's office.

Fordice's legacy of fiscal responsibility may best be summed up in two key policy successes. He pushed for and ultimately signed into law legislation limiting any year's budget writers from appropriating more than 98 percent of the coming year's projected total revenues. His interest in that legislation arose out of the hard lessons learned during the immediate years leading up to his first year in office, when legislative officials had projected too-rosy revenue collections, then budgeted to spend 100 percent of the overly optimistic projections. When revenues proved short of what had been hoped, Fordice's predecessor, Governor Ray Mabus, was forced by law to cut agency spending during the middle of existing budget years.

Under the new 98 percent rule, the likelihood of mid-year budget cuts was reduced, though there remained little to do about legislators adopting overly optimistic revenue projections.

Fordice's second fiscal success arose partly as a consequence of his conservative leadership on state spending, partly because of a sales tax hike that became law over his veto, and partly a consequence of the growth of the gaming industry during his eight years in office. Within weeks of taking the oath of office, Fordice had been forced to order cuts in state spending necessary to account for a looming \$75 million shortfall. But by the time he left office, Fordice presided over a budget surplus of \$300 million, a swing during his eight years as governor of \$375 million to the good in the state's General Fund.

Success in the fiscal arena notwithstanding, any fair review of his time in office must also acknowledge that Fordice's tenure in office was marred by a number of missteps, personality issues, and personal choices.

He steadily refused to do the hard, person-to-person work required to build strong relationships with legislators, particularly Democrats who were still in the majority in both chambers during Fordice's terms. The lack of those personal relationships cost him in policy fights that might have gone differently if he could have prevailed upon members to support his initiatives out of personal affinity and trust, rather than

---

<sup>4</sup> On the heels of the massive destruction caused by Hurricane Katrina on the Mississippi Gulf Coast in August of 2005, the Mississippi Legislature only two months later sent legislation to the desk of then-Governor Haley Barbour allowing for the location of casinos on dry land so long as within eight hundred feet of the water in the Gulf Coast counties and on properties that otherwise would have been legal gaming sites for a "boat" under the original legislation. See <http://billstatus.ls.state.ms.us/documents/20055E/pdf/HB/0001-0099/HB0046SG.pdf>.

simply because he had determined they were “right” for the state.

Then, because he had spent his adult life up to the time he took office running a highly successful business enterprise, Fordice arrived in office with the expectation that as leader he would make decisions, and the structure of the government, of which he had been elected chief executive, would simply fall in line. His personality was such that he believed that, as boss, he had the authority to give orders that would be followed.

Of course, that’s rarely the way government works. As one senior legislator put it wryly, “Governors come and governors go, but the legislature is always here.”

Finally, midway through his first term, Fordice announced that he and his wife, highly popular and widely admired First Lady Pat Fordice, were having irreconcilable marital differences. Though it might seem odd by the standards of today that the public would be fazed by the marital status of elected officials, in the Mississippi of the early 1990s, the governor’s announcement sent shockwaves through the state’s political nerve centers.

When Mrs. Fordice announced a few days later that she did not know what the governor had meant by his announcement, and that she had no intention of granting him a divorce or of leaving the Governor’s Mansion as First Lady, shockwaves turned to amazement.

Fordice himself later followed with a statement requesting privacy and respect for his family while he and Mrs. Fordice worked through their personal issues.

Rumors abounded at the time that Fordice might not run for reelection in 1995 in view of the revelations about marital difficulties, and a number of high-profile political officials, including Republicans, began testing the waters to see how they might fare if they chose to run for governor, either against Fordice or in the event that he chose not to run.

But, cutting against the grain, Fordice did run for reelection in 1995. At an early campaign appearance against popular Democratic Secretary of State Dick Molpus, who was challenging him, Fordice brought Mrs. Fordice to the stage with him at Provine Chapel on the campus of Baptist-owned Mississippi College, introduced her to the assembled crowd, and to audible gasps from around the chapel, kissed her firmly on the lips.

The campaign was over before it started.

Fordice was reelected with just shy of 56 percent of the vote against Molpus that November. The vote totals represented a historic high voter turnout for state office elections to that point in Mississippi history.

Late in Fordice’s second term, he was photographed at an air-



port with a woman other than Mrs. Fordice. He and Mrs. Fordice did later divorce, Fordice married the woman described as his high school sweetheart, and the two of them also later divorced.

Though Kirk and Pat Fordice were not married at the time of his death in 2004, she cared for him during the months of the rapid deterioration of his health due to leukemia. She then served in the role of family matriarch at his very public memorial and funeral services. Upon her death in 2007, Pat Fordice was buried beside her former husband as he had requested before his death.

Kirk Fordice's political legacy is difficult to assess, but objective evidences of his influence on twenty-first century Mississippi may be found.

Most notably, Phil Bryant, a two-term Republican governor himself, likely owes his political career to Kirk Fordice. While serving as a young member of the Mississippi House of Representatives, Bryant was tapped by Fordice in 1996 to fill the unfinished term of disgraced State Auditor Steve Patterson. After being elected twice to that office, including a time when he served as the only Republican official holding statewide office in Mississippi, Bryant was elected in 2007 as lieutenant governor, then in 2011 to the first of two terms as governor. In each of those elections, Bryant's personal appeal and record of service led to significant margins of victory. Yet none would have been likely, or at least have come as early in his career but for the Fordice appointment in 1996.

Former state representative Curt Hebert of Jackson County, similarly, was named to high office by Fordice on the heels of a predecessor's scandal in office. In Hebert's remarkable case, Fordice appointed him to the Mississippi Public Service Commission in 1992 when a slot on the commission was vacated due to its holder having violated election laws before he ever took office. Hebert, until his appointment by Fordice, not well-known outside his own legislative district in Pascagoula, parlayed his Public Service Commission tenure into an appointment at the patronage of then-United States Senator Trent Lott to the Federal Energy Regulatory Commission. There Hebert later rose to the position of chairman, chief overseer of the nation's energy policies and regulations. Again, it seems very unlikely that such an extraordinary stream of events could have been possible if not set in motion by Fordice's original appointment of Hebert.

On the other hand, Fordice's legacy also bends the other direction. In 1994, the Mississippi legislature was debating whether to create an intermediate court of appeals to help alleviate the egre-

gious backlog of work at the Mississippi Supreme Court. Prior to that time, all appeals from Mississippi's trial level courts went directly to the Mississippi Supreme Court, with no intermediate level of review such as has long been a part of the federal court system.

As legislation progressed in 1994, it seemed likely that the legislature would, in fact, be sending a bill to Fordice's desk creating an intermediate court of appeals. As that likelihood increased, Fordice mobilized his staff to work toward an effort to amend the bill to provide that the court of appeals would be filled by judges appointed by the governor, subject to the advice and consent of the state senate, rather than being comprised of elected judges.

All other judges in Mississippi, from justice court judges to justices of the Mississippi Supreme Court, are elected. Fordice believed that an appointed judiciary, at least at this new appellate level, would result in the highest quality judges, reasoning that many attorneys who would serve honorably and well as judges would never submit themselves to a political campaign but would be willing to serve if appointed.

Those of us serving on Governor Fordice's staff at the time went to work, and it seemed as though we were gaining traction in our efforts to build sentiment—and count votes—in support of an amendment providing that judges on the new court of appeals would be appointed rather than elected.

The day arrived for the floor vote in the state senate on the bill, and the plan was in place to have the floor amendment offered. After considerable debate, during which many argued that the effort was just a power grab by the governor, and not in the legitimate interest of a high-quality judiciary, the outcome of the amendment was still in doubt.

When the vote finally came, the amendment failed by a single vote. The bill then passed the senate, with the provision for elected judges intact.

I was dismayed by the defeat and said so in our offices in the presence of former State Senator Ollie Mohamed, who was part of Governor Fordice's legislative team, and former State Senator Ellis Bodron, who often visited in the office due to his friendship with Mohamed.

Bodron, who, like Mohamed, is now deceased, leaned back and blinked his eyes and said, "Don't let it bother you, Mr. Taggart. The people of Mississippi would rather have another election than a new BMW plant."

I am confident that Bodron was correct in his assessment. Indeed, that proposition might still be true today. But I am equally confident that a few more personal relationships between Governor Fordice and members of the state senate might have

made the difference in that one vote that one day, and today, we might have at least one court composed of appointed judges.

After Governor Fordice left office, he and I were part owners of hunting property just north of Greenville in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. The governor owned a well-trained and well-behaved Labrador Retriever named Lance, and while the governor did not really care much whether he actually shot a duck on a duck hunt, he did love to watch Lance retrieve.

Along with my three sons, who were quite young at the time, Governor Fordice, Lance, and myself loaded up one winter morning and headed out for a duck hunt. At first light, when the first duck appeared within shooting range, all three of the boys shot, some more than once. Still, the duck continued on its way unharmed.

Lance was straining to go on the retrieve but so well trained that he did not leave the governor's side, awaiting the command, which was the sharp calling of his name, "Lance!" before he was allowed to strike out on a retrieve.

Since no duck was down, the governor never gave that command, and Lance acted like a six-year-old boy in a doughnut shop, wanting everything he sees but trying hard not to misbehave. So, as though he was talking to a little boy, Governor Fordice patiently explained to Lance what had happened, that yes, the boys had shot but they had missed, so the duck was still flying, and as good a dog as he was, Lance simply could not fly. "Directly, here, we'll get another one," the governor promised his retriever. I still laugh about that moment when our sons and I think of it together. Kirk Fordice cut against the grain, sometimes uncomfortably so.

But there was a great deal more to the man than was commonly known, and I am better person for having been his friend.

# JOIN THE MISSISSIPPI HISTORICAL SOCIETY

and receive the

## Journal of Mississippi History

plus the

## Mississippi History Newsletter

Join or renew dues online at [www.mississippihistory.org](http://www.mississippihistory.org)  
or complete the form below.

First name	Middle initial	Last name
Mailing Address		Apt/Suite #
City	State	Zip code
email address		

**Annual Dues** (Add \$10 for all foreign subscriptions.)

- \$35 Individual
- \$50 Family
- \$75 Supporting
- \$100 Corporate
- \$200 Patron
- \$500 Lifetime

Mail completed form and check (made payable to Mississippi Historical Society) to Mississippi Historical Society, P.O. Box 571, Jackson, MS 39205-0571.

---

### NOTE TO PROSPECTIVE CONTRIBUTORS

Initial submissions should be made to editor Dennis J. Mitchell, [dmitchell@meridian.msstate.edu](mailto:dmitchell@meridian.msstate.edu) or P.O. Box 571, Jackson, MS 39205-0571. Preferred manuscript length is 25–40 pages (double-spaced), exclusive of footnotes. The *Journal* encourages the inclusion of illustrations—photographs, drawings, maps, tables—that enhance the essay.

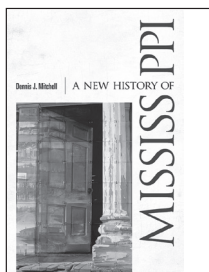
*The Chicago Manual of Style* (latest edition) should be followed, with some exceptions (primarily dates: the *Journal* prefers “December 1, 1866,” to Chicago’s “1 December 1866”).

For more information contact *Journal of Mississippi History* editor Dennis J. Mitchell at [dmitchell@meridian.msstate.edu](mailto:dmitchell@meridian.msstate.edu) or 601-479-6293.



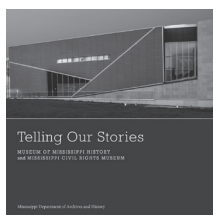
**The Mississippi Encyclopedia**

Senior editors **Ted Ownby** and **Charles Reagan Wilson**  
Associate editors **Ann J. Abadie**, **Odie Lindsey**, and **James G. Thomas, Jr.**  
An A-to-Z compendium of people, places, and events in Mississippi from prehistoric times to today  
**\$70**



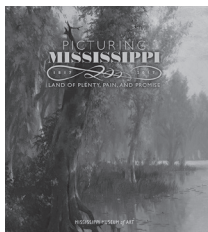
**A New History of Mississippi**

**Dennis J. Mitchell**  
The first comprehensive history of the state in nearly four decades  
**\$40**



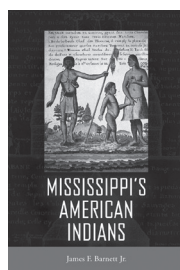
**Telling Our Stories**  
**Museum of Mississippi History and Mississippi Civil Rights Museum**

Mississippi Department of Archives and History  
The definitive guide to two state-of-the-art museums—the Museum of Mississippi History and the Mississippi Civil Rights Museum, which both opened in December 2017, in celebration of the state's bicentennial  
**\$25**



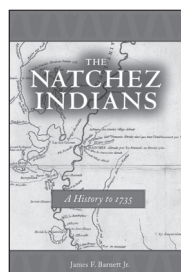
**Picturing Mississippi, 1817-2017**

**Land of Plenty, Pain, and Promise**  
Mississippi Museum of Art  
A collection of essays that explore the current state of the history of art in Mississippi  
**\$39.95**



**Mississippi's American Indians**  
**James F. Barnett Jr.**

The full story of the state's once thriving and diverse American Indian population  
**\$40**



**The Natchez Indians**  
**A History to 1735**  
**James F. Barnett Jr.**

The most complete and detailed examination of a vanished tribe  
**\$28**

ALSO AVAILABLE AS EBOOKS



[www.upress.state.ms.us](http://www.upress.state.ms.us) • 800-737-7788



# The Southern Quarterly

Published by The University of Southern Mississippi since 1962, *The Southern Quarterly: A Journal of Arts & Letters in the South* is a scholarly journal devoted to the interdisciplinary study of Southern arts and culture, including literature, history, anthropology, and the traditional arts.

**TO SUBSCRIBE:**

Individuals \$40/year

Institutions \$70/year

Send article, poem, photo essay,  
or interview submissions through  
**[aquila.usm.edu/soq](http://aquila.usm.edu/soq)**.

**CONTACT:**

The Editor, SoQ

118 College Drive #5078

Hattiesburg, MS 39406

[SouthernQuarterly@gmail.com](mailto:SouthernQuarterly@gmail.com)



THE UNIVERSITY OF  
**SOUTHERN  
MISSISSIPPI.**