

RANDOM THOUGHTS ON SOUTHERN POLITICS AND CIVIL RIGHTS

by

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Historically the story of America must be told as an exciting saga of men who, though banded together to promote their general welfare, constantly fought the oppression of power wrongly used. As a protection against abuses of power, civil rights and civil liberties under the Bill of Rights and the Reconstruction Amendments have become more meaningful through years of interpretation by the Courts. The press of American life is toward greater concentrations of economic and political power. In this context, an increasing number of men are being forced to make personal decisions for liberty and, in so doing, run afoul of the law. Out of this have come the great changes in America.

Politics and civil rights are the stuff of dreams and if man yearns both for personal security and for freedom, then he is born to paradox and, as in all great struggles, and paradoxes, men develop a mythology.

Let us look at the American mythology. First, the southerner (and he is joined by others) seems to say the Civil War wasn't fought over the issue of slavery.

To this the only retort is: the abolitionists fought to abolish slavery; the planters fought to maintain it; Winston County, Alabama, small farmers seceded from Alabama and refused to go to war thinking the issue was slavery. The north sought to

trample the "vinyard" where the grapes of wrath were stored" while the South fought and sang "our heritage to save."

But in the South, memories of the war were always more comfortable if the word "slave" were transposed to "states rights" or "sovereignty", and, as a part of a poor remembrance of times past, the South has continued to save its way of life, a way of life that includes in it the dregs of separate but equal, a separate that was and an equal that was not.

Although the myth would have it otherwise, legal segregation is a comparative youngster. The generation of Americans which is just now turning to Social Security was born with segregation. Segregation statutes and ordinances grew in the 1890s and early 1900s. They were born of an inter-marriage of Conservative and Populist ambitions while the United States looked briefly, but for long enough, the other way.

And there always comes a cropping the myth that the South would eventually have changed if either the Civil War hadn't been fought or if the Supreme Court and the agitators (whether of the inside or outside variety) had merely left the South alone.

Let's examine this. Negroes are recognizable. When seen, they were not merely slaves, they were also black men and women. As such, they were not readily assimilable into white society. They wore body-wide marking which fixed their position in society even more clearly than did the brand or caste mark. Do not misunderstand me, there always have been anti-slave men. Many of the founders of this nation abhorred slavery. Jefferson, whose states rights phraseology is now used for the justification of segregation wrote: "I tremble for my country when I reflect that God is just, that his justice cannot sleep forever," and, in Jefferson's first draft of the Declaration of Independence, he scathingly attacked George III for his part in the slave trade.

Benjamin Franklin presided over the Abolitionists, and Patrick Henry said "I will not, I cannot, justify it". John Adams refused to own slaves and Washington freed his.

There can be little doubt that there was abolitionist sentiment in the early American years. But, in 1792 Eli Whitney invented the gin and the slave rapidly became the one commodity of the South whose value went up while the price of cotton went down. As with every great technological achievement, whether it's the splitting of the atom or the shooting of the moon, with Mr. Whitney's gin, dreams of voluntary freedom for the slaves were forever dashed to the soil of the South, a land then being robbed of riches soon to be fertilized with blood.

The power of the gin was great and even after the abolition of slavery, the reconstruction period and an intervening decade, the southern white was himself a slave to cotton; and, in his slavery, he needed as always, Negro labor, a cheap labor force to do menial tasks, "Negro type jobs". Although the place of the Negro was clearly fixed in the mind of the South, a new device of certainty, of law was required. Thus came racial segregation, a legal instrument which told every black man every day in every known way "You are different from us." "You are an outcast." "You are black, and, for this reason alone, you cannot aspire to non-meniality." "You must always remain a servant, a mental slave."

Legal segregation was merely one more political creation to carry forward the southern way of life. It simply put the Negro "in his place", it took away all trust-to-luck and just as a war was fought over human bondage and reconstruction was waged over a prostrate South, the last quarter of the 19th Century was a struggle by white men for political and economic certainty. And through it all, the southerner was loyal to his way of life,

a way of life which in large measure never existed. Since it didn't exist and never had existed, the southern way of life was a fine subject for idealization and the fiction grew. Some today when dreaming of the South of yesterday see hoop skirted beauties standing on the porch of the beautiful white columned house surrounded by gentlemen in an air conditioned front yard, being served mint juleps by happy slaves (they were all happy, you know). But as a lawyer friend of mine, born in a poor section of North Alabama said one night at a political rally: "

"Our southern way of life he wants to preserve. God help us. I can hear the rustle of magnolia leaves and smell the stench in my nostrils. Our southern way of life; I'll tell you what that means to me. It means a little boy walking to school through fields after a rain because the road was too rutted to walk on. It means 'not-for-sale-beef' and yellow striped overalls, babies with bloated bellies and mamas turning yellow searching for a bite to eat. Vote for him and he'll preserve our southern way of life. God help us if we do."

The southern way of life required indolent Negroes who had illegitimate children (and, a few years ago weren't allowed to marry), who were illiterate (and, a few years ago weren't allowed to learn to read), who were paupers (and, a few years ago were never paid). The southern way of life existed only in myth form but it is embraced South and North alike as a day of peace and happiness in a time and place that never were.

But the myth served one all important purpose. It gave the Negro a model of what he was expected to be and he continued to be "The Slave", written about by James Oppenheim who said:

"They set the slave free, striking off his chains . . . then he was as much ^{of} a slave as ever.

He was still chained to servility,

He was still manacled to indolence and sloth,

He was still bound by fear and superstition,

By ignorance, suspicion, and savagry . . .

His slavery was not in the chains, but
in himself. . . .

They can only set free men free . . . and there is
no need of that;

Free men set themselves free".

And then the new myths. First is that of the South
being politically a conservative section. Who are Alabama's
conservatives? John Sparkman? Lister Hill? I think not. And
what of their predecessor, Mr. Justice Black? What about the
Bankheads?

And our Governors, a perplexing lot. For many years
they have worn economic liberalism as campaign dress. Take
Governor Wallace for example. While he was thrilling crowds
with a prospective stand in a doorway, he was also pledging
an increase in expenditures for public education, expanded and
improved health care facilities and programs, one hundred dollars
a month for old age pensioners, and protection of the working
man. Incidentally, he was approved by the Alabama Labor Council
AFL-CIO.

And what of the other southerners. What of Huey Long,
brother Earl and son Russell? What of Folsom? What of Kefauver,
Gore, Pepper, Barkley, Johnson, Yarbrough?

In my home state of Alabama, it's not the Tennessee
Valley Authority area that produces conservatives, nor the
tens of thousands of small farmers, nor the thirty thousand steel
workers, nor the million Negroes. Our state and much of the South
is impoverished. It is poor and it is populist and, as such it
is far more "liberal" on economic matters than is generally
believed.

Populism is a product of poverty. The South has, and
has had, its share of both.

Another new myth is that moderates in the South are being forced to take sides.

And who are the Southern moderates? They are, of course, educated, upper middle-class business oriented southerners. They are, in the main, important cogs in, but are rarely movers of, that great ambivalence, the power structure. And, in the South, as in all America, upper middle-class business men live and die within the definition of "respectability." In modern America, the words "controversy" and "controversial" are anathema. Who hasn't heard the voice of business saying "J.B., he's a good man, but just too controversial." "No, we can't give him the nomination (or job, or business, or membership), he's got too many scars; you know, too controversial."

Strange that a man like Truman could be elected to the Presidency, but quite possibly not to membership in the country club, or to a seat on the Board of Directors, "Too controversial" someone would have said. The businessman thrives on anonymity and cocktails at the club, not on controversy.

The businessman in the South and all across the land, and the agencies with which he is aligned, says "law and order." But in the South, it is difficult to be for law (the Supreme Court's Brown decision) and order. The term contains its own contradiction. It's law vs. order and it's a long jump from the businessman's desire for order, to the liberal's desire for law. After all, we've had order in the South for one hundred and fifty years. When the businessman is told by the power structure it is respectable to be for law as well as order, he speaks.

It's not so much that the moderate must now take sides, it's just that he never really existed. He was and is the voice of business.

Just as the moderate never existed, the unreality of his

belief that there is something to negotiate, that the white man has something "to give" the Negro never existed. The truth of the matter is, as far as rights are concerned, there is little left to which the Negro is not, by law, entitled. What can the white man "give" him? The right to vote? The right to serve on and be tried by an impartial jury? The right to public employment, state, municipal or federal? The right to free and unfettered use of public facilities? The right to spend his money where he pleases? to picket peacefully? to parade? to speak? to go to the school nearest him? to buy a home directly or indirectly financed by a federal agency? to march unsegregated in the army? But when the white man enters into negotiations with the Negro, he acts as though he were giving him something. He allows the Negro that to which the Negro already has a right. And the desire to keep open "lines of communication" with the Negro almost seems a part of this fiction. Everyone speaks of communication. Service on formalized bi-racial committees has become a part of the pattern of our lives. Perhaps they are now needed as an agency to ameliorate and avert crisis when outright warfare threatens. But, I submit that in truth, we need fewer bi-racial committees to discuss racial problems and many more bi-racial committees to discuss and solve common problems.

Not only do we believe some myths about the South, but, worse than that, liberals tend to classify some fact as fiction. The white supremacist is right on at least three counts. First, he says "there is no such thing as token integration; it's like being a little bit pregnant; give them an inch and they'll take a mile." Second, he says "they have more crime, less money, less education, more social disease, higher illegitimacy rates and so forth." And third he says, "there'll be more intermarriage." Now, out of respect for rationality, if for no other reason, why not simply confess that there is to be no satisfaction with tokenism and standards of slum-dwelling Negroes are too low and must

be raised. And, who can say intermarriage won't increase. If tomorrow there is one interracial marriage in Alabama that will be one more than today's law allows.

But with all his misconceptions many southern white men are striving to re-meet the Negro and to know his movement. Somehow many southerners, both black and white, seem to sense that the race problem will meet a more amicable solution in the South than in the North. They seem to ~~emphatically~~ ^{empathetically} feel that there is less bitterness in Birmingham than there is in Harlem. We must recognize that Negroes struggle against different restrictions in different places and different problems do require different solutions. And, it is in the solutions that there is, indeed, great diversity.

Let's look for a moment at the Negro in the South. Here, he is a winner. Everyday's newspaper tells him of a victory, of a Harvey Gantt or a James Meredith. He hears victory in the melody of jangling silverware at a Birmingham lunch counter and in jeers at a New Orleans school house. Everyday is jubilation day. He's winning.

The northern Negro sees progress being made in the South, but finds himself ghettoed into a city he does not love, into a life which he cannot live. The ropes are subtle, but they are real, and like Gulliver in Lilliput, he can breathe, but he cannot move.

How Negroes attempt to reach the goal of integrated public education demonstrates the tactical division of the movement. For example, in southern public education, the struggle is geared to the abolition of race as a permissible standard for the classification of students. Southern school cases say that the use of a racial standard is not permissible under the Fourteenth

Amendment. Conversely, in the North, Negroes increasingly attempt the use of race as a standard for school placement. It matters little whether it is in Philadelphia, where transfer procedures are attacked by Negroes or in New York where transfer procedures are supported, the goal is to racially balance the school system. And for this racial balancing, there must be, of necessity, a racial standard.

In the South, Harlemism, single ghettoism has not yet become a part of life. There are thousands of little Harlems South of the Mason-Dixon line, but they are, by and large, small and scattered across the face of the community rather than concentrated into a single definable area. In the South, where the status of the Negro was fixed by law there was no need to ghetto him. Myriad numbers of Negro sections in every southern city are near white schools, and, for this reason, total and immediate desegregation would result in a racially balanced school system. Grade-a-year desegregation plans grant twelve years for the creation of white-black patterns of housing and for the growth of single large ghetto areas such as now exist in northern cities.

Indeed, token integration may be in the long run "token dis-integration" and if this be the case, the South will have thrust upon it the same set of problems now existing in the North.

White southerners do have a relationship with Negroes. It may be paternal and dominant; it may be degrading; but it is a relationship, a contact. In the hurry of New York, it must be difficult for a Negro to smile on the way home from the world of white men, a fast moving sort of rude world in which few people know anyone, anyway. And it's more difficult to hate the animate object that you know than it is to hate the inanimate.

Also, we should note that by and large, Negroes in the South are seeking equal rights within the framework of the one cultural characteristic which they have always been allowed, the Christian religion. And their tactics, unlike those which call for walking away with tools and barring egress and ingress at work sites and restaurants, are generally tactics of love. The southern movement revolves around a certain sense of Judea-Christian rightness. A gang of northern Negro youths in their idle frustration may rough up a Michigan father who is standing near a schoolhouse with his daughter and when doing so shout "This is for Birmingham." But, in Birmingham, there have been few such examples of intense hate and active bitterness.

In the South, the movement comes alive in churches and Negroes march and sing like Joshua "til walls come tumbling." The very act of going to jail is, in and of itself, a religious experience. It is a sort of baptism, a re-birth, a free man setting himself free. Throughout the North, it is lay agencies at work in the protest field. In the South, it is the Southern Christian Leadership Conference or the Alabama Christian Movement and it is sit-ins, peaceful picketing and parades; an adherence to means protected by the First and Fourteenth Amendments to the Constitution. In the South, there is no stacking of humans like cordwood in store entrances, no chain holding men and women, and no lying in the street to block traffic. The difference is, with Dr. King they wait for the lights to change. And it may well be that they are also waiting for a Dr. King on the street corners of New York.

Now, with this in mind, let us discover where we in the South have been and, where we are going.

Until the last decade, there had been little basic change in southern politics since the day Mr. Whitney invented that damned cotton gin. Prior to the Civil War, race (slavery) was the major American political question. And during most of that period, southern politicians were for slavery (save those few from the poor white non-slave country who got elected). After the war, Negroes and their new found freedom were the issue and, today, they are still the issue. Looked at pragmatically and issue-wise, there has been little change in the South's politics.

For more than a century, the central theme of southern politics has been white supremacy. The words change from time to time, but the name remains the same. It might be called states rights, individual liberty, our southern way of life, but translated, it still means and it always has meant "nigger, I'm better than you."

Now let's look for a moment at the white southerner. And, incidentally, the white southerner isn't just a southerner any more. He now lives in and hails from almost all sections of the nation. He votes in Detroit and Indianapolis and Chicago. In the South, he may be a newcomer from a far away place. This is especially true in states like Georgia, Texas, Florida and North Carolina where industrial growth has burgeoned. He, often as not, becomes "transplanted" as the cliché goes and winds up a race-baiting publisher or perhaps a member of the John Birch Society.

The more sensible transplants, of course, retain their sense of rightness and if not absolutely committed to non-controversy, they defend the nation at cocktail parties. But, no matter what they do when they get here, they do come, they hold good jobs, make money, join the country club, and vote

Republican. And, thus we approach the great structural, indeed the only major change in southern politics. The rise of urban Republicanism in a time of the reapportionment of state legislatures.

There is not now, nor has there been a Democratic Party in the South for some years. The South has not had a one-party system. It has had a no party system. There is no effective state Democratic organization. No-partyism has resulted in the cult of the personality, the primary has served as the general election, the party has been the government. And it was the race issue that made the Democratic Party what it is and will now unmake it. As the direct result of no-partyism, a Presidential nominee cannot rely on any southern organizational entity; he is provided no platform from which to speak and no defense of his policies.

But, the Republican Party is arising. With genuine southern rejection of the policies of Eisenhower, the party of Lincoln is moving toward the slogan of the Alabama Democratic Party, "For the Right - White Supremacy". Republicanism is becoming the receptacle of no party disillusionment. It is growing in both urban and blackbelt areas. The southern Republican meets success because he operates in a vacuum. He profanes the Democratic Party. That's his job. But what does the fictional Democratic Party do? Nothing, but join the attack. After all, the Republican attack is on the states rights issue (i.e. race). So the debate is over who can best preserve our "southern way of life", both sides conceding that the National Democratic Party seeks its destruction. Thus, the National Party and President Kennedy are powerless, the position of those opposed to segregation is never presented and the Republicans keep inching toward victory. In this vacuum, Republican

victory is inevitable. Within the coming political year, the Republicans have an excellent chance to elect two members of the United States House of Representatives from Alabama. Why shouldn't they win? They offer the young man and woman a place for political productivity. They have an organization not made up of office holders. There is no control of the party other than that of the Goldwater minded. The slogan of the party might well be "What this country needs is a good 5 cent Negro." The Republican Party offers status and is safe/^{and a} respectable center of non-controversiality. And, importantly, the Southern Republican Party offers you a vote in the Democratic Primary (Republicans sticking to the convention method of nominee selection) and another opportunity to vote against the Negroes in the fall.

And so it becomes obvious that only one thing can challenge the rising Republican Party and that is the emergence of a new liberal coalition to take over the reins of the Democratic Party. That the Republicans will win important Congressional seats in the near future is inevitable, but, in the long run, assuming the registration of great numbers of Negro voters, the Republican Party will lose again. It cannot, as a right wing party, appeal to the traditionally populist, non-slave holding sections of the South. The history of the mountain country is that of Lincoln Republicanism and later, populism. And, lest this be discounted, it should be noted that a mass of poor and unregistered white southerners still exists, and, as literacy tests and the poll tax fall for the Negro, they fall for the white. Also, it should be noted that present strongholds of the Republican Party, the cities and the Black Belt Counties, contain great numbers of ^{potential} Negro voters.

There is no doubt that the burgeoning Negro vote will increasingly influence the political thinking of southerners.

The breed of Southern governors now ranges from Sanford, Sanders, and Combs to Wallace, Barnett and Faubus. Southern mayors' chairs are most often held by men who promised Negroes a "better than southern" way of life. And, so, we can see the future as one in which Negro rights is still the key issue, but the winners will not be those whose campaign is premised on denial of them.

With an eye to the future, let's take the factors which led to racial segregation in the late 19th century, and see where we are today. In the late 19th century, southern conservatives were in danger of losing control of government if the populists and poor whites joined forces with Negro voters. The doctrine of manifest destiny was becoming a part of American life and for the first time, this nation was attempting to conquer lands peopled by other races. The South was still a slave to cotton and to a smattering of new industry, both of which demanded menial, sometimes convict labor. And the Supreme Court joined ranks with the separatists in the case of Plessy v. Ferguson.

Today, the southern conservatives are once again in danger of losing the power of government if a populist-poor white-Negro coalition is developed and joined by liberal business and professional men. Were this the only factor involved, we might find the South and all America walking the road of the 1890s. But the doctrine of manifest destiny is no longer with us, and instead of a conquest of foreign lands, and other races, our nation is attempting to befriend the world's colored population. And in America, there is a declining demand for the menial labor required of cotton pickers and miners and mill hands and "Negro type jobs" are being abolished by automation as rapidly as they were created by Mr. Whitney's cotton gin.

Jobs are like ropes. They can be used to bind a man.

The Supreme Court of the United States has invalidated Plessy v. Ferguson and its outgrowths and, at every instance, the weight and power of the Executive Branch of the United States government is being employed to strike down racial barriers.

The factors which made for a racially divided America no longer exist. And most important, the Negro has decided as all free men do to set himself free.

The Birmingham of yesterday and the Jackson, Remlap, Gordo, Weogufka, Petal, Hattiesburg, Mound Bayou, Slidell, Selma and Albany are a million miles away. New ideas are traveling to every rickety southern farm house, to every slum home, to every church member and auto mechanic. They come by newspaper or magazine to a literate person who talks to those who do not read; by television and radio and sermon and by the growing number of voices now being heard, voices which cry for peace and justice, for a fair deal for all men.

1964 will be a political year unlike those of the last 100 years. Only once since Lincoln's election in 1860 has the question of race been of primary importance. Mr. Truman, in 1948 encountered the fury of the race issue when with banners flying, "Dixie" ringing, and cries of "Goodbye Harry, Goodbye", the solid South walked out of its Democratic Party. Race prejudice is irrational and is, by its very nature, unpredictable. It was a fact of government in Germany and was and is a fact of government in South Africa. It has been successively a fact of government and then a fact of life in America. President Kennedy obviously believes that the American people are as dedicated as he has shown himself to be to the brotherhood of men. Thus, 1963 and 1964 thrust upon us a truly great

national debate, a debate being conducted in the mind and heart of every man, in every living room, in every place of work and worship. It is in the answer which will come from this debate that this generation of Americans controls perhaps the future of mankind. And, we may be certain that the United States will not be the land of the free tomorrow unless it is the home of the brave today. We must make decisions and speak our minds.

If Republican liberals win nomination for the Presidency, we can expect the political question of 1964 to be "Who can best meet the challenge of civil rights?"

If the Republican right wing wins, with its desire to tie together American rural conservatism, the West and the South, the debate will be over the basic issue of whether or not we will have a program to secure for all their civil rights.

There is no doubt that Senator Goldwater will continually express his belief in the American dream, but he will speak of state's rights, and the means of assuring equality. He will favor state action in the place of federal action even though the rights being discussed are federal rights, and decades of state's rights have left us a Pandora's box of state's wrongs.

And, in 1964, we will hopefully see the end of southern racism as an American political reality. Under the guise of the free elector movement, the Governor of Alabama will run for President of the United States. After secret and not-so-secret meetings with Barnetts, Rainachs, and Perezes, Mr. Wallace has been selected as the white supremacy candidate for President and no Thurmond-Wright ticket will this be. The appearance of well-known John Birchers on the platform with Mr. Wallace and his meetings with Mr. H. L. Hunt demonstrate a certain cohesiveness of the far right. Indiana, Maryland, perhaps

Florida and other states will soon re-meet the right wing movement. Liberals discount the prospect of the extremist. But I would remind them that Wallace receives an excellent reception from large numbers of people wherever he goes and, after all, there were more Klansmen in Indiana in the 1920s than there were in Alabama and who with a rudimentary knowledge of history does not remember the Copperhead movement during the Civil War.

Although the Southern Goldwater people dream that Mr. Wallace will not run for President if their man is the nominee (and will no doubt say this in order to corral convention votes against the liberal wing of the Republican party), he will run regardless.

In his candidacy, Mr. Wallace will have an opportunity to spread his doctrine across the land in preferential primaries. If he loses then as he certainly will, he still will have infected each state in which he speaks and the issue will be more clearly drawn for Mr. Goldwater when and if he arises nominee.

Prejudice is caught - not taught, and, unfortunately, many people of the North seem not to have been inoculated against it. Who can say that state's rightsism will not sound a beautiful chord to the new American Babbitt who could never bring himself to vote against the Negro if the question were rawly posed. When he hears a medly of state's rights, that terrible prayer decision, and communists in the Negro movement, who knows? Indeed, the far right is already campaigning with the pressing questions of God and country. Within the next twelve months, they will no doubt lasso mother.

And so, Mr. Wallace runs either way, with the glint of Aaron Burr "dreams of empire" in his eye, repeating over and

over again, if to himself, "if only lightning strikes." And, as he conjures it, what does he have to lose? When he loses the primaries, he has independent elector votes to throw to Goldwater or to negotiate with for the acquisition of the vice-presidency. And, if he loses, so what. He's lost before and really there's nothing to lose. . . . just the world.

If we are to debate the great problems of this land, then we must have a courageous and restrained white and Negro citizenry. The President, his party and the liberal Republicans will, as they should, offer to the American people a sense of direction and rededication. The President in his traditional role is the man upon whose shoulders the mantle of leadership has fallen. He wears it well.

Southern politics and this Nation's future are inextricably one. The problem of race will be solved simply because it must be solved. In a great civilization, no other reason is necessary. For the white American, the challenge is real. With courage, he can free himself as does the Negro from the bondage of our history. For the Negro, the challenge is simple, but the future is fraught with problems. The non-violent movement based on Judeo-Christian concepts will change the South and its politics. Indeed, it may change a nation and a world that cries for solutions. But the Negro must hark to the temperate words of an old timer:

"And I hereby enjoin upon the people so declared to be free, to abstain from all violence, unless in necessary self-defense; and I recommend to them that in all cases, when allowed, they labor faithfully for reasonable wages."

What "Uncle Tom" said that? Abraham Lincoln, the Emancipation Proclamation, 1863.

Thank you.