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The Meaning of Southern Politics From Calhoun to Clinton

Six years ago when I moved to Nashville I came up with a quick pithy response for friends and family who wanted to know what it was like to live in the South or whether the South was different from the northeast and middle Atlantic states where I had grown up, gone to college, and worked. In the South, I answered, you can get sweet tea (with free refills) and there are tire treads on the side of the road. The brief answer explained aspects of both southern culture and southern politics. Tire treads (political) signified minimalist state governments who left their transportation departments without enough money to clear refuse and abandoned cars from the highways. Does one example indicate a pattern? And, more to the point, does this example–or even a pattern of underfunded services–indicate a southern political tradition?

At the University of Mississippi in October 1994, a group of scholars debated the existence of a southern political tradition. The symposium sought to identify "persisting characteristics of southern political life" (p. ix) in order to better understand the distinctive South. Following the footprints of Richard Hofstadter's *The American Political Tradition*, the organizers asked the participants to "employ a biographical approach" (p. x). The historians found several overlapping traditions, such as Democratic dominance of the region, weak party organizations, and a political culture that allowed demagogues to prosper. In the book that resulted from the conference, Lacy Ford writes about John C. Calhoun; William J. Cooper, Jr.'s subject is Jefferson Davis; Manning Marable discusses Booker T. Washington's politics of accommodation; Raymond Arsenault explores southern demagoguery; Paul Conkin illuminates Lyndon Johnson's political philosophy; and Robert McMath deconstructs the political biographies of Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton. A commentary by a second scholar follows each essay.

The region's most identifiable political trait was the Solid (Democratic) South that lasted from the end of Reconstruction until the civil rights era. Ford locates the intellectual origins of the single party South in the career of John C. Calhoun. Following the lead of Calhoun's biographer, Charles Wiltse, whose subtitles for his three-volume study were "nationalist," "nullifier," and "secessionist," many observers have highlighted the shifts in Calhoun's political thinking. Ford argues that while Calhoun altered his means, he maintained a consistent end. Calhoun wanted to protect the South's interests within a developing and expanding America. As Calhoun told the Senate in 1847, "I am a Southern man and a slaveholder … I would rather meet any extremity upon earth than give up one inch of our equality–one inch of what belongs to us as members of this great republic" (p. 6). To protect the institution of slavery and the rights of slaveholders as well as non-slaveholding southerners, Calhoun believed that the South should unite in a single party. Calhoun feared party competition, according to Ford, because it required that parties court fringe elements (such as the abolitionists) in order to achieve majorities.

Jefferson Davis, too, came to view political parties as dangerous to the existence of the South. Cooper paints Davis's realization as a sudden and total transformation caused by secession and the onset of the Civil War. A consummate politician in the pre-war years (that is, one who engaged in pragmatic bargaining and horse-trading), Davis presided over a new political reality as president of the Confederacy. "Because traditional politics had not succeeded in saving the Union," Cooper writes, "it certainly could not be relied upon to preserve the Confederacy" (p. 40). The new political order was missionary, requiring devotion, moral fervor, and agreement, and "disagreement … became for Davis a challenge to the cause" (p. 41).

Whatever caused Davis's transformation, the shift had a profound effect on southern politics, Michael Perman writes in his fine commentary on Cooper's es-

say. The Confederacy nurtured an American idea, a "widespread distaste for party politics" (p. 44) that had existed in the early American republic, into a southern one, an "antipathy to party" (p. 45). Perman maintains that from the Civil War until the 1970s the South functioned "not as a one-party, but as a no-party, system" (p. 49). Southern leaders rejected partisanship because parties could lead to "division, corruption, and insecurity" (p. 50). In this account, the Civil War emerges as an important watershed not in the destruction of the South but in its creation–at least for its political traditions. In the antebellum period, Ford emphasizes, Calhoun's suggestions for a solid political front had been rebuffed by other southerners. Yet, southern leaders resurrected Calhoun's vision, intended to perpetuate the interests on the slave South, to protect regional interests after the demise of the peculiar institution.

The idea of the no-party South reinforces the notion of southern distinctiveness. While the Democratic Party was dominant, southern Democrats had few meaningful connections to the national party, and within the region the political order relied as much on personality or factionalism as on any coherent Democratic organization. Ford finds it noteworthy that the no-party period corresponds with the era of the South's least influence on national affairs.

Casting a long shadow on the region and contributing to the no-party feeling, Perman asserts, was the specter of race. "Whenever white men divide into opposing parties," he writes, "the black vote immediately becomes an electoral quarry for both groups" (pp. 48-49). African-Americans thus figure prominently, if indirectly, in the development of southern political traditions. Although questions of race suffuse these essays, the authors rarely consider the views of African-Americans. Marable's essay on Washington does explain how some black leaders, especially Washington, shied away from overt political activity, which aided disfranchisement.

Several authors noted a third political tradition–the enduring competition between conservative and egalitarian ideologies. While the egalitarian tradition resurfaced sporadically, the conservative impulse predominated (often with a heavy hand). Patricia Sullivan's thought-provoking commentary (which follows but ignores Marable's essay) proffers the existence of a related tradition, one that she associates with the political sensibilities of black southerners. She argues that southern blacks developed a political philosophy "based on a belief in racial equality and liberal democracy" (p. 72). She further contends that during the New Deal era, these attitudes shaped southern politics as "broad-based coalitions dedicated to expanding democracy in the South" (p. 76) emerged at all levels of government and society, reaching the peak of their influence in 1946. This thesis stands, in Sullivan's words, as a counterpoint to Perman's political tradition. (It is a thesis she extends in her book *Days of Hope: Race and Democracy in the New Deal Era* [Chapel Hill, 1996].) Sullivan exposes a forgotten era before the civil rights years, but her assertion of a liberal high tide in the early 1940s seems based more on a sense of what might have been than on an illumination of what was. Sullivan's broad-based coalitions did not make a significant dent on the southern political landscape of the period. Yet her essay rightly acknowledges the power of African-Americans' demands for political participation and the ways in which their different conceptions of the role of government would help transform the South and the nation. The limited nature of change has been a constant source of disappointment to many observers of the region. (See David L. Carlton's May 13, 1997 H-South review of Numan Bartley's *The New South* for a commentary on the southern school of disappointment.)

Collectively, the essays underscore a southern political style rather than southern governance, none more so (on the surface) than Arsenault's chapter on the folklore of the southern demagogue. Although he hints at traditions of low taxes and small government, Arsenault focuses on the appeals made by demagogues to their constituencies. In this way, Arsenault raises an intriguing issue about southern politics, in which style may have been more important than substance. Demagogues connected to the masses not by offering programmatic prescriptions to improve their lives, but by challenging the authority of the elites and for one brief moment legitimizing a "life-and-death struggle for self-respect and cultural self-determination" (p. 115). The demagogic tradition began in the late 1880s and has continued to the present, although Arsenault finds three distinct generations of demagogues, proving that within each southern subculture a multiplicity of traditions exists.

To succeed, demagogues needed to articulate the frustrations felt by embattled rural southerners in the teeth of the rise of the New (or urban) South. In his commentary, George Wright chastises Arsenault for avoiding the foundational racism of southern politics but Arsenault believes that the demagogues' cultural appeals were based on "much more than racial scapegoating and an issueless politics of personality" (p. 113). Arsenault also manages to link the culture of southern politics to the policies of southern state governments. He contends that rural voters feared concentrations of power and state

activism. Thus voters responded to cultural appeals but not to offers of empowerment through the authority of the state.

Where Arsenault finds diversity within one southern political tradition, Conkin offers a diverse South. He identifies the Rim South, which in contrast to the rest of the region had a smaller black population, an insignificant cotton economy, and attachments to non-southern states. The Rim South boasted a different political custom than the typical patrician or populist traditions. In the Rim South, a unionist tradition dated back to the Civil War era. Lyndon Johnson emerged as the prototypical unionist leader (indeed, Conkin admits he created the category to fit LBJ), his politics less dominated by race and less defensive about southern racial customs. (In a 1958 political autobiography in *Texas Monthly*, Johnson's list of characteristics did not include "southerner.") Conkin contends that Johnson's understanding of how racial divisiveness threatened the national interest (his paramount concern) in the 1950s and 1960s pushed him to forge a national coalition on civil rights. LBJ's efforts helped achieve federal civil rights legislation, sparking two-party competition in the South. Conkin concludes that "in 1965 the Civil War finally ended" (p. 162), bringing to a close one century-long southern political tradition.

In the book's final essay, McMath considers two southern politicians–Jimmy Carter and Bill Clinton–who appealed to voters in a re-reconstructed South. The strategies needed to forge effective coalitions at home aided their ability to construct national majorities. In the wake of the civil rights movement, Carter and Clinton faced a more diverse South. In response, each constructed a political biography that appealed to liberals and conservatives. They did this on the shoulders of yet another southern political tradition–business progressivism, a term coined by George Tindall about the 1920s. Business progressives, McMath asserts, have balanced the promotion of corporate-driven wealth with positions stressing efficiency (to quell popular fears of big government), have appealed to urban voters while empathizing with the suburban and rural evangelicals, and have "accept[ed] the end of segregation without embracing affirmative action or denigrating symbols of the Old South" (p. 181). A tricky and combustible mixture that has become more challenging as the GOP ascends.

McMath finds that the new political climate (black voters, contested elections, two-party politics) part not so much of a New South but of a New America. In the New America, winning politicians must connect with a "conservative-leaning white majority without alienating the minority voters whose support they must have to win" (p. 196). Increasingly, the New America follows the New South, a point Peter Appelbome makes in his fine new book, *Dixie Rising: How the South Is Shaping America's Values, Politics, and Culture* (Times Books, 1996). He asserts that southern values have become mainstream ones. What is striking is that in shedding its old constraints, like the no-party tradition, the South has emerged as powerful and influential on the national stage. Ironically, an end to the suppression of the black vote has signaled the liberation of the South, not its death knell.

The thoughtful essays in *Is There a Southern Political Tradition?* offer several ways to understand southern political history, reveal overlapping traditions and eras, and clarify foundations of the present New South. It will provoke useful and informed discussions about the region and its politics in upper-level courses about the South. Students and observers will have a strong base from which to consider today's growing southern influence, which Arsenault supposes may include a fourth wave of demagogues (he lists Oliver North, Ross Perot, and Newt Gingrich, among others). And as the South now reconstructs the rest of the nation in its image, all Americans, not just southerners, need to take heed.

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