H-Net Reviews
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Allen Tullos. *Alabama Getaway: The Political Imaginary and the Heart of Dixie.* Athens: University of Georgia Press, 2011. xii + 364 pp. $69.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8203-3048-8; $24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8203-3049-5.

Reviewed by Jeff Frederick (University of North Carolina at Pembroke)

Published on H-South (November, 2012)

Commissioned by Matthew L. Downs

Add Allen Tullos's *Alabama Getaway: The Political Imaginary and the Heart of Dixie* to the growing list of works documenting the deplorable yet enduring culture of power that shaped Alabama history. No state has been more important to the unfolding of southern history and yet no state carries the burden of its history so onerously. Less personal than Hardy Jackson's *Inside Alabama: A Personal History of My State* (2004), and less missional than Wayne Flynt's memoir, *Keeping the Faith: Ordinary People, Extraordinary Lives* (2011), Tullos's work, largely about the last forty years or so of state history, situates Alabama into a context where change occurs infrequently if at all, and, when it does come, accomplishes little in the way of shattering hardened beliefs or altering traditional corridors of power.

Tullos's political imaginary–others might use the term "political culture"–is the collections of power, perceptions, and beliefs that have characterized the state over time. The "Heart of Dixie" is the author's appellation for Alabama's default reflex of intransigence, intolerance, distrust of outsiders, and refusal to veer away from fundamental practices and beliefs about race, class, gender, religion, and sexuality. Tullos cites common ground between the high and mighty–former governor Guy Hunt–and the ordinary–a cashier at a pecan store–who share a common response to those suggesting the state has serious problems: "Alabama is doing just fine" (pp. 2, 278). In fact, Tullos argues, this is just another variation on a theme of a state that has collectively answered "Sez you" to virtually all outsiders and most natives who've had the temerity to suggest that a second- or third-class education, medieval prisons, a sorry record of violence, a regressive tax code, and powerful unchecked interest groups may not be the best way to construct a society.[1]

Tullos, who has written about folk culture and music across several different media platforms, marshals a tremendous amount of evidence in support of his Heart of Dixie theme. Politicians like Hunt, Governor Fob James, and especially George Wallace played to deep-seated beliefs about space and place. The net result was maintaining the status quo, keeping power in the hands of the few, and generally limiting women and minorities to a handful of peripheral roles in state government. Judge Roy Moore and James shared an affinity, probably learned from Wallace, for turning ordinary Alabamians into victims of religious persecution. Wallace used the refrain that Alabamians were just as good and just as smart and just as cultured as the snooty northerners so wont to castigate them as knuckle-dragging, white-sheet-wearing Neanderthals. Moore and James used school prayer and the public posting of the Ten Commandments as a way to argue that Alabama's heritage and way of life was under attack. In the end, Tullos argues, this manner of political discourse served mainly to provide a distraction, "an Alabama getaway from the real problems of education, poverty, and health care" (p. 140).[2]

If politicians were one component of a political culture where "change" was a dirty word, interest groups were even more formidable. The Farm Bureau, utilities like Alabama Power, and other groups like the Alabama Education Association controlled the flow of legislation–almost always preferring stop to go–and used their funds to elect hand-picked candidates and construct sophisticated media campaigns to prevent changes to the stultifying state constitution of 1901. At their most powerful, these pressure groups created faux-reform: state government committees and study groups seemingly dedicated to ferreting out abuses and formulating meaningful regulations. Most such fact-finding groups, however, were stocked with majority representation from the very industries they were seemingly charged with overseeing.

One outcome of these "oafs of office" and powerful pressure groups was that much of the governing in state history was actually accomplished by federal court orders. Tullos identifies many of the court cases which forced Alabama to modify mental health practices, prison overcrowding, fair pay, racial gerrymandering, and educational discrimination and segregation. Though recent governor Bob Riley "tidied up costly, long-lingering federal lawsuits and consent decrees," other Alabama governors resisted court order as long as possible or made political hay out of their Heart of Dixie worldview (pp. 177-178). "The only way that the Ten Commandments and prayer will be stripped from Alabama's courts," Fob James once bellowed, "will be a force of arms. This is just one more demonstration of hostility toward God by the U.S. government" (p. 139).[3]

The persistence of this political imaginary and the concomitant "habits of judgement" it championed are all the more curious given Alabama's authentic history as ground zero in the civil rights drama. For as much heartache as violence, discrimination, disfranchisement, and segregation wrought, the freedom movement seemingly won. The state legislature now features a demography in approximate racial symmetry with the population at large. De jure segregation is less pronounced than at any time in state history and the Confederate flag seems unlikely to ever fly over the capitol again. Civil rights tourism is on the rise and the annual Selma-to-Montgomery March commemoration has become institutionalized as an element of progressive Americana. Half a decade ago, Alabama even elected Patricia Todd, the first legislator in state history to lead an openly gay life.

Yet for all this positive momentum, Tullos understands that Alabama remains a place where the state government can be counted on to manifest a collective indifference to real responsibility. Poverty and dropout rates haven't changed much in a half-century, and, no matter how many foreign car companies are enticed to relocate to Alabama, the state's best and brightest still find greener pastures elsewhere. "How far has Alabama come? " Tullos ponders. "Not so far, Mobile's Satchel Paige might say, that it can look back and not find the past gaining on it" (p. 272).

The strength of *Alabama Getaway* is not the new ground that it breaks, for much of the story and the conclusions the author draws are familiar to specialists. Rather, Tullos excels at compiling evidence from sources some historians might overlook and packaging them for intellectual consumption. He weaves, for example, lyrics and interview material from contemporary southern rockers The Drive-By Truckers and interjects material about the racial composition of the University of Alabama's powerful Greek system into his narrative. Tullos is a skillful writer, deserving of the best compliments a reader can offer: passages of the book merit rereading because of both stylistic grace and thoughtfulness of conclusion.

Yet other passages are burdened by unnecessary snark and interpretive asides. The author persists in derisively referring to former Governor James as Thumper and notes almost bumptiously that Condoleeza Rice "trod the ideologue's path in countless pairs of expensive new shoes" (p. 227). In fact, the entire section on Rice seems only tangentially connected to Tullos's larger premise. His characterization of NASCAR fans at Talladega, while vivid, seems unnecessarily derivative. In one paragraph, Tullos makes sweeping judgments about political figures that seem better fodder for the local tavern than this book. Former Mississippi governor Haley Barbour is "shrewdly sinister," Louisiana governor Bobby Jindal is "self-aggrandizing," and Jeb Bush is a "right-wing Christian grandstander" (p. 178). One factual error notes, "In 1990, nearly two years after Wallace's death" when in fact the governor did not pass until 1998 (p. 120). Even so, this is a book that should be read by any Alabamian willing to think beyond "Sez you," and willing to consider the promise of an Alabama capable of breaking with its past.

Notes

[1]. To be completely accurate, Tullos quotes the cashier as saying, "Alabama is doing all right," and Governor Hunt as saying, "Alabama is doing just fine." Having lived in Alabama and interviewed plenty of Alabamians, I understood the sentiments to be congruent.

[2]. Jeff Frederick, *Stand Up for Alabama: Governor George Wallace* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2007).

[3]. In the interests of disclosure, it should be noted that I served as a consultant and expert witness for the plaintiffs in the *Lynch v Alabama* property tax discrimination suit.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at:

https://networks.h-net.org/h-south

Citation: Jeff Frederick. Review of Tullos, Allen, *Alabama Getaway: The Political Imaginary and the Heart of Dixie.* H-South, H-Net Reviews. November, 2012.

URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=36286

This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.