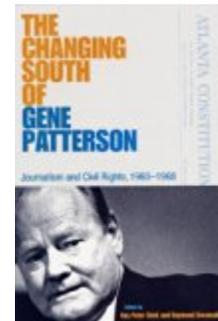


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The Moderate Crusade: Gene Patterson and Civil Rights America

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There is a pantheon of twentieth-century Southern journalists who spoke frankly on racial issues, and they are often held up as exemplars of a liberal South that might have been. One such person, often overshadowed by Ralph McGill and Hodding Carter, was Gene Patterson, McGill's successor at the *Atlanta Constitution* and later editor of the *St. Petersburg Times*. Patterson, a Pulitzer Prize-winning "Jimmy Cagney" look-alike with "eyes blue and piercing" and "jaw jutting," was a "tough, jaunty" editor (pp. 7-8) whose years at the *Constitution* spanned from 1960 to 1968, placing him in a vantage to comment upon some of the most momentous years in modern American history. In this volume, Roy Peter Clark (senior scholar at the Poynter Institute) and Raymond Arsenault (professor at the University of South Florida) collect a number of Patterson's columns, which collectively reveal an engaging portrait of a thinking Southerner, grappling with the tensions—both positive and negative, in his view—of a culture besieged with change.

Roy Peter Clark opens the book with "A Journalist's View: How Gene Patterson Persuaded His Southern Kinfolk To Do What Was Right." Clark comments on the herculean feat of Patterson's output—an editorial every day for eight years—and asserts that Patterson's corpus remains "one of the most impressive bodies of work in the journalism of the twentieth century" (p. 4).

Clark fills in the biographical information on Patterson, particularly detailing how his rural upbringing in South Georgia conditioned a deep-rooted sympathy for the average Southerner. Three themes identified by Clark's careful eye dominate Patterson's editorials. First, Patterson urged Georgians to confront squarely the issues of race relations, and next, he applauded "powerful models of leadership," those Southerners who stuck their necks out on behalf of racial reconciliation in one form or another. Third, like most Southern liberals, Patterson wrote columns "establishing his credentials as a Southerner" with essays detailing nostalgic glimpses of a vanishing Georgian ruralness and Southern charm and culture (pp. 14-15). Clark's essay is well written and succinct, a fine introduction to what lies ahead.

The book's opening is matched by Raymond Arsenault's "A Historian's View: Gene Patterson, Southern Liberalism, and the Vise of History." Arsenault's task is to further historicize and conceptualize this trend of Southern liberal journalists in the twentieth century. Arsenault adopts Morton Sosna's definition of Southern liberalism as one confined to simply racial liberalism—the "willingness or unwillingness to criticize racial mores" (p. 19). Two distinct clusters of Southern journalists thus emerge as part of Southern racial liberalism. First were the post-World War I reformists (George Fort Milton Jr., Louis Jaffe, John Temple Graves, Gerald Johnson, and others), none of whom "broke completely free from the segregationist mind-set, but they all made important strides in the right direction" (p. 21). They were followed

by the Depression-era journalists, such as Mark Ethridge, W. J. Cash, Ralph McGill, Josephus Daniels, and Hodding Carter, who stressed the need for racial tolerance but privately grappled with the complexities of such a process. Arsenault is careful to credit these journalists with much while recognizing that their writings “have not worn well” in sounding antiquated to modern ears (p. 24). By the 1950s, then, “the vise of history” (p. 25) trapped journalists such as these men between the immovable massive resistance movement and the irrepressible black freedom struggle. Arsenault then interjects a concise but excellent summary of the civil rights movement, followed by some words on the internal dynamics of Patterson’s Georgia. The end result is an excellent placing of Patterson in his historical time and space. According to Arsenault, “Patterson tried to strike a balance between ideology and practicality, between an intellectual commitment to liberalism and a largely emotional attachment to regional identity” in “sustaining and deepening” the dialogue that his predecessor McGill had established (pp. 38, 41). The chapter is a fine set-up for the reader to be attuned to precisely these tensions that mark Patterson’s writings, and by extension, Southern moderates in general.

Then the authors let Gene Patterson speak. The columns are grouped chronologically, with a time-line opening each chapter to steep the reader in background events. A gifted writer, Patterson’s early columns are “tentative and probing,” as Clark points out (p. 4), dismissive of the segregationist attempts to “justify instead of rectify Southern wrongs” (p. 49), impressing upon Georgians the need to avoid the racist excesses of Louisiana and Mississippi’s racial turmoil, and stressing the “dignity and manliness” of Georgia’s dealings with integration (pp. 58, 62). He appeals to African Americans sitting-in at Atlanta’s public places, suggesting that it would be feasible if the Movement “withdrew its force as an expression of faith before asking for talks,” and questions whether the breaking of laws by African Americans might give “cause for comfort to some white consciences, where none have been comfortable before” (pp. 59, 67). The uneasiness in Patterson’s well-worded but questioning columns is palpable, and his constant refrain to a South “combative and independent” yet “full of respect for neighbor and regard for the right thing” (p. 80) rings of a man falling back on core beliefs while events shake him profoundly. The net result is a portrait of a man clear about what he opposes, less so about what he favors.

As both the Movement and resistance to the Movement hardened, Patterson finds his voice by maintaining

a steadfast position between extremes. In response to President Kennedy’s proposed Civil Rights Bill in 1963, Patterson writes that “the law has served its valuable purposes as the starter on the engine of racial progress. But the engine must run on the sustained power of voluntary decision in the hearts of people” (p. 132). He laments the rioters of Savannah and applauds the NAACP for their distancing from the mobs, saying that “Negro and white, Americans are making easy judgments of each other instead of directing calm judgment toward the goal of racial fairness” (pp. 137-139). The first steps toward a more independent voice arrive in 1963, in a matter-of-fact column on the irrationality of miscegenation (pp. 144-145), and more personally, a searching column in response to the Sixteenth Street Church bombing in Birmingham. In this editorial, read aloud by Walter Cronkite on the CBS Evening News, Patterson stated that “every one of us in the white South holds that small shoe in his hand ... we know better. We created the day. We bear the judgment” (pp. 146-147).

As the decade wore on, Patterson’s writings reveal himself to be more comfortable in his spokesman’s role, even as tensions mounted in American society. His blunt denunciation of “lawlessness” in SNCC demonstrations (p. 159), celebration of segregationists who disavow racial violence (pp. 171-173), and pointed rejection of Malcolm X as a “demagogue” (p. 185) display an unease with the pace of racial change which provide him additional fodder to maintain his moderation. Sharp rejoinders to the Black Power movement (pp. 209, 211) and disdain for the SCLC’s anti-Vietnam position (p. 223) bristle with both disappointment and a sort of self-satisfied air of the correctness of the moderate position.

The last section of the book contains a hodge-podge of different supplements, including two additional essays by Patterson. The first, written in 1994, is a remembrance of his World War II experiences that might have been more effective had it folded in how Patterson’s anti-war attitudes were influenced or challenged by the Vietnam War. The second, the transcript of a speech given on the fortieth anniversary of the University of Georgia’s desegregation, comments (more or less favorably) on the progress of race relations in Georgia through the twentieth century. “Whether we jumped or were pushed,” wrote Patterson, “white Southerners did turn out to be better than we were” (p. 262). A short celebratory essay follows the speech, written by Howell Raines, formally executive editor of the *New York Times*, who worked under Patterson and comments on Patterson’s management style and influence on others. (Raines’s assertion that

he often thinks about, when confronted with a problem, “What would Gene do?” is a suggestive comment amidst current headlines regarding the Jayson Blair scandal.) The book closes with excerpts of an interview with Cynthia Tucker, an African-American journalist who holds the same editorial position that Patterson did at the *Atlanta Constitution*, who reinforces Patterson as “not only progressive but courageous” (p. 284) in his struggles to articulate the possibilities of racial change. This last section explores Patterson’s personal legacy rather than his historical significance, but lays some groundwork for establishing the benefits and perhaps also the limits of Patterson’s work.

This collection is an admirable compilation of primary sources for understanding a Southern mind amidst the civil rights movement. Certainly there are some ten-

sions in the contextualization of Patterson’s work, especially regarding definitions of liberalism and moderation; Clark sees Patterson as evolving from moderate to liberal, while Arsenault instead says Patterson “wanted to be a southern liberal” but “also wanted to avoid both condescension and the atavistic excesses that had bedeviled so many well-meaning southern journalists” (p. 38). Such qualifiers perhaps signal that we need more probing analysis of these categories of moderate and liberal, and especially how they changed over time and in response to different impulses. And yet, with its well-done introductions and judicious editing of Gene Patterson’s columns, this book can play a key role in doing just that. As historians work to understand the Southern white mind amidst the changes of the second Reconstruction, the strengths, inconsistencies, and equivocations of Gene Patterson will be a useful guide.

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