

## A Flaw in the Perfection of Inaction

*Southern democracy, as Alexander Heard discovered, boasts a rich tradition of chicanery and local color. By J. DAVID WOODARD, PHD '78*

WILLIE STARK, THE central character in Robert Penn Warren's matchless *All the King's Men*, described Southern politics best: "If you mean to imply, I said, 'that politics, including that of your erstwhile pals, is not exactly like Easter Week in the nunnery, you are right . . . politics is action and all action is but a flaw in the perfection of inaction.'"

The practice of democracy in the South has always been a little different from the way things were done in the rest of the country.

Sometimes the disparity came from the dirt-grinding, nerve-ending poverty that carpeted the region like the morning fog. "We had practically no money at all for thirty years," wrote Ben Robertson in his 1942 memoir, *Red Hills and Cotton*, "so we stayed home, and worked in the fields, and sat on the piazzas and talked, and we fished and trapped rabbits and went to all-day singings and to old Confederate reunions at the Courthouse."

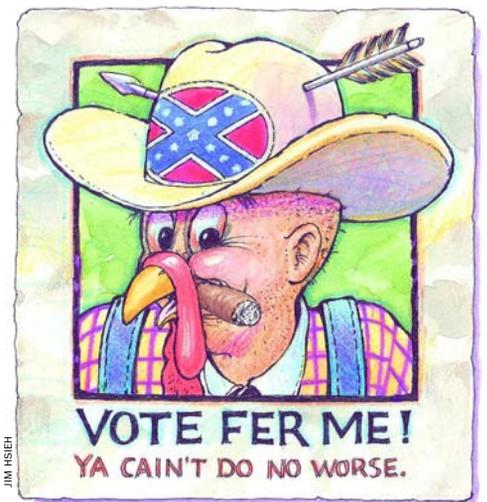
Sometimes the differences were in the personalities of the people elected to public office. Gene Talmadge, the fiery Georgia governor, pulled off his coat, snapped his gallsuses and said, "Sure I stole, but I stole for you." Kissin' Jim Folsom, of Alabama, invited *Life* magazine reporters to breakfast in 1947, where he quickly killed two beers and smacked his lips loudly to declare, "The only thing better for breakfast than beer is whiskey." South Carolina Gov. Strom Thurmond stood on his hands to impress his fiancée, and Gov. Jimmy Davis of Louisiana sang "You Are My

Sunshine" when he campaigned for office, and then made it the state song when he was elected.

Always, the dissimilarity with the rest of the country was racial. It came out in the worst ways, as in 1898 when South Carolina Sen. "Pitchfork" Ben Tillman declared on the floor of the U.S. Senate that the black race "must remain subordinate or be exterminated."

The texture of Southern politics was captured in a profound book, *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (1949), written by V.O. Key, a venerable political scientist who never taught at Vanderbilt but whose picture still hangs in Calhoun Hall. In academe, few books endure; this one has and for a good reason. To map the political culture of the South, Professor Key sent out two junior associates to interview 538 people in sessions averaging 70 minutes each.

One of those conducting interviews for the book was Alexander Heard, who would later become chancellor of Vanderbilt. Heard worked from memorized questions and then typed up his notes with carbon copies each night. Every interview was coded and classified, sometimes with copies of state constitutional provisions, registration figures, poll tax data, clippings from newspapers, and county-by-county primary and general election returns. In those days, before Google and computers, this material was extraordinarily difficult to obtain. "Key probably had a greater impact on American political science than any other individual of his time or since," wrote William C. Havard in 1979, in his capacity as chairman of the Vanderbilt Department of Political Science.



Today the interviews are housed in the Special Collections Department of the Jean and Alexander Heard Library, and when the boxes talk they tell a fascinating story. Reading the transcripts from the perspective of 50-plus years is like taking a trip back in time, before shopping centers, fast-food restaurant chains and television plastered a homogeneous character on the region.

No other part of the country could rival the South when it came to flamboyant antics and outlandish statements. Huey Long named a baldheaded opponent "Turkey Head," and Lyndon Johnson once said his political opponent was so stupid he "couldn't pour piss out of a boot with the instructions written on the heel." Given the history of the place, it was not surprising to hear that Louisiana Gov. Earl K. Long ran around with New Orleans stripper Blaze Starr, or that his wife had him declared insane for doing so. South Carolina Sen. Strom Thurmond married a beauty

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queen; he was 67, and she was 22.

In reading documents of Heard's interviews, sometimes one can almost see the skeptical headshaking that must have accompanied the response to a question Heard posed of a prominent banker, politician or community leader. For example, Jim Folsom had just been elected governor of Alabama in 1946 as the Southern politics interviews were being conducted. "We'll just have to wait and see," said one person, but his silence was deafening.

Once in the mid 1980s, when the press asked Louisiana Gov. Edwin Edwards, "Who is the greatest politician you've seen in your lifetime?" the governor responded in a deep Cajun drawl. "My lifetime, it would have to be every time I shave and look at him in the mirror I see him." Edwards is now serving time in federal prison.

Lester Garfield Maddox made his political reputation in opposition to racial integration. When elected governor of Georgia in 1967, he celebrated by peddling a bicycle backwards down Peachtree Street.

The Heard interviews took place in the South before the Civil Rights Movement, when African Americans faced a humiliating and tedious process to vote. A meeting with an Alabama mail carrier, active in the NAACP, revealed that black registrants were subject to a "slow-down" process at the county courthouse. The registrar would leave during inter-

views with black registrants, would not accept a check from blacks to pay the poll tax bill, and required applicants to come back with the exact change in cash before adding them to the voting rolls.

In Memphis, Tenn., Alexander Heard interviewed black voters who told him about "boodlers," or people who sold their vote to local bosses associated with the E.H. Crump machine in Shelby County. Ralph McGill, another Vanderbilt alumnus who would subsequently serve as editor of the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, wrote of Memphis politics in his book, *The South and the Southerner*, "There was never any restriction against Negroes voting so long as they voted right."

Corruption, especially at election time, was widespread in the region. In one memorandum, written just for Professor Key's reading, Alexander Heard explained how money from Georgia Power executives was given to county judges to guarantee the votes for the corporate candidate in the upcoming election. The memo also told of thousands of dollars being spread around the Florida panhandle in defiance of state campaign finance laws.

All of this chicanery was familiar. It was a kind of bequest, a secret understanding of the "way things are done" in the South. Harper Lee alluded to it in her book *To Kill a Mockingbird*. "In Maycomb, grown men stood outside in the front yard for only two rea-

sons: death and politics." The legacy of vote-buying became a small but enduring piece of American political history in the 1948 election for the junior U.S. senator from Texas. When he was elected president, *Life* magazine reminded Americans that Lyndon Johnson won his senate seat with an "87-vote landslide." That margin came from Box 13 in Jim Wells County, when someone added a loop to the "7" in the election-night total of 765 votes for Johnson, making the sum 965 and giving him a statewide victory. The defense of the outcome by LBJ biographer Robert Caro is classic: "The Valley's vote for LBJ was nothing more than the normal run of Texas politics."

Protection of local interests was paramount in the South. In 1947 Alexander Heard told how an illiterate character he named "Tom," from Clayton, Ga., finally won election to the state senate.

The man ran for, and habitually lost, every election he entered, for sheriff, county clerk or mayor. People sometimes threw a token vote his way, but since he couldn't read it didn't matter. But everybody loved Tom, a big rangy fellow with a penchant for wide-brimmed Stetsons and hoedown music; he had been a bailiff at the courthouse for as long as anyone could remember.

In 1946, just before the Democratic primary, the county veterans got together and decided to back Tom for the state senate. "Why not?" they reasoned. "We've sent all the best people around to the legislature ... and all they've ever done is put their hand in the till and line their own pockets." Could Tom do any worse? So the people of the county, accustomed to getting nothing from their government, decided to make it official. Of course, Tom won, and to quote Heard, "Sure enough, he did no worse than his predecessors."

Willie Stark was right. No matter what, the abiding aspect of Southern politics was the "perfection of inaction." Alexander Heard would have loved to interview Willie Stark.

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*J. David Woodard, PhD'78, holds the Thurmond Chair of Government at Clemson University. During the 2003–2004 academic year, he was a visiting professor at Vanderbilt where he completed research for a book, The New Southern Politics, from which this article is taken.*

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