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I appreciate very much your invitation to join you at this seminar and as a former legislator to have this opportunity to share some thoughts with you. Let me simply call my remarks, "The Reflections of an Old Politician."

It was exactly sixty years ago that twelve of us Ole Miss law students ran for the Mississippi legislature from our respective counties. Eleven of us were elected — eleven of us still enrolled as students at Ole Miss. For me it was the beginning of a long and eventful political journey.

Someone asked me one time when I first decided to be a politician. I must tell you I don't remember ever specifically making that decision, but I can't recall when I wasn't interested in politics. My father was a farmer who also served several terms in the legislature. I grew up listening to the ever present political discussion around the supper table and on summer evenings on the screen porch of our farm home ten miles in the country in Grenada County. There was no television or air conditioning to keep us inside, so we usually just talked to each other and asked questions and told stories. My Confederate grandfather lived with us, and he would regale us with his experiences in the War as one of General Forrest's scouts. He particularly liked to tell us about the raid on Memphis in 1864, when he rode his horse into the lobby of the Gayoso hotel in pursuit of the Union general who had been headquartered there.

On election day I would go with him to the local polling place where my family voted. I still recall the election when I was almost six years old. The Democratic Governor of New York, Al Smith, was running for President against the Republican, Herbert Hoover. Elections in those days were conducted, at least in our rural community, in a rather informal manner and nobody ever voted for a Republican. My grandfather wanted to know if I would like to vote for Al Smith. With no one daring to protest, the old Confederate picked up a ballot, let me make an "X" by the Democrat's name and had me drop it in the ballot box. At the age of six I must have been Smith's youngest supporter, but he still lost the election to Hoover.

I was just a schoolboy, but I remember what Mississippi was like in those harsh years. Gullies along the country roads deep enough to hide a house; the streams polluted with raw sewage and industrial waste; the virgin forests stripped away and replaced by bare stumps and fields of sedge grass; the roads mostly dirt or gravel — many impassable when it rained; the rural houses unpainted, in disrepair, without electric lights or indoor plumbing. And the people — mostly all poor, many desperately poor, adult men and women, white and black, walking barefoot down the road. The per capita income of the state was less than half the national average. Over half the people

were functionally if not totally illiterate. One in four white students was finishing high school – one in forty black students.

It was amidst these unfavorable circumstances that my youthful political interests began to be shaped. For one thing I started to realize how important it was to get an education, for I saw in my parents – my mother a teacher before I was born and my father a college graduate and well-read – the advantage which they enjoyed over most of our black and white neighbors, so many of whom were illiterate sharecroppers.

It was at the same time that I came to understand how political leadership could make a real difference in how people were able to cope with difficult conditions. There was no question in my family's mind that a national political leader like Franklin Roosevelt and his New Deal was making it possible for us to keep our home and farm. As the state and the country slowly began to recover as a result of governmental programs like the CCC, the TVA, the FHA, the Soil Conservation Service and in Mississippi the BAWI, I saw firsthand how wise and compassionate public policies created by politicians working with business could improve the lives of so many people. I thought of politics as a worthy profession.

My father was my first political hero. Elected to the legislature six times by the people of his home county, he viewed public service as a noble calling. He believed that the agencies of government at all levels were the necessary force that helped keep our society stable and our citizens united, and he understood from his own life experiences that only a political system that was honest and compassionate and humane could hope to last.

Those were the lessons that my fellow students and I took to heart when we were elected to the legislature. Although our average age was under twenty-five, we were no starry-eyed idealists. We had seen enough of hard times and human misery in our growing up in the depression and serving overseas in the war to know the difference between campaign flag-waving and solving real problems.

And real problems we had. Not only was our state still dead last in almost every measurable comparison in education, in income and in care for its most vulnerable citizens but we were coming face to face with the most explosive issue of all – the long neglected issue of race. One week after we were elected to the legislature in the fall of 1947 President Harry Truman issued his famous civil rights manifesto, in which he called for ending racial discrimination in America.

It is difficult for me as a life-long Mississippian to look back on those years and comprehend the intensity of emotion that the conflict over race engendered. The subject overwhelmed every other issue. All public questions were viewed through the prism of race. Mississippi and the Deep South were as Dr. Jim Silver, my former history professor at Ole Miss, wrote, a "closed society," distrustful of new ideas and clinging irrationally and fearfully to our old racist past.

We were all prisoners of a system based on fear and mistrust and ignorance, and that system was holding us all down. If you asked me today what was the development that has had the greatest positive impact on the South, in my lifetime, I would unhesitatingly tell you that it was the elimination of Jim Crow. That is when our economic and political renaissance started. That is when we finally rejoined the union. That is when we shook loose the old chains that had held us back in almost every way for so long.

If you asked me what the next most important development was that has contributed to our recent progress, I would tell you that it was the decision of the people of our region some twenty-five years ago and in the years since then to make the maximum education of every citizen our first priority.

Those were the two causes – racial reconciliation and educational opportunity – that more than any others have commanded my attention both as a political official and a private citizen. Within those two monumental areas there have existed and still exist the great fault lines that divide us – between people of different races and, what is perhaps now even more critical, between people who have gotten a good education and those who have not. Too often those fault lines continue to divide the same people. In any event I do not believe that we shall ever be as great a country as we ought to be until we are more fully committed to addressing those two issues.

We have come a long way since the days of Jim Crow. The progress that black people have made in almost every way since the 1960's should be a source of great pride and satisfaction for all of us, and the improved quality and increased support of education have added to that result.

But having said that, let me remind you how far we still have to go to achieve the kind of society that we ought to have. We have removed most of the old legal barriers that kept people apart and we have eliminated the myth of "separate but equal." I don't have to tell you, though, that just because the laws have changed, we have not put the problems of race behind us. And it is not just a Southern problem.

I had the privilege several years ago to serve on a National Advisory Board on Race appointed by the President. That was an incredible experience, and it afforded me a chance to see how many of us are still victims of stereotypes and how much distrust and misunderstanding of each other still exists between the races. I had this matter of stereotypes in my own life brought home to me.

When the White House called me about serving on the Advisory Board, they told me who my colleagues would be – the chairman was Dr. John Hope Franklin, the distinguished African American historian now retired from Duke University, and then there were the former Republican Governor of New Jersey, a Korean American woman, a Hispanic leader, the then CEO of the Nissan Corporation, and a black woman preacher from Harlem. It was an impressive group, but I had some reservations about a

black woman preacher from New York City. I thought to myself without ever having met her, "She's going to cause trouble." And then I met her. She was absolutely delightful. We bonded immediately. Later after we had gotten to know each other well, I told her of my initial reservations.

"Listen," she said. "Let me tell you something. When they told me there was going to be an old ex-Governor of Mississippi on the commission, I knew I wouldn't be able to get along with him."

We wound up being very close friends, and I even got her to come to Mississippi where she had never been. Before she agreed to make the trip, she wanted me to assure her that she would be safe there. And when she did come, she, of course, found the warmest kind of welcome. She came back to Ole Miss just a few weeks ago.

The experiences on that Advisory Board pointed up for me how wide the gap still is between the races despite all the progress that we have made. And the gap exists not just between people in Mississippi and New York. It exists in my hometown of Jackson and here in North Carolina and in communities all over America. Eliminating that gap is arguably the biggest challenge facing us in this country today and that challenge is not going to get any simpler as our country becomes more racially diverse. Helping to solve that problem is what the Winter Institute for Racial Reconciliation at Ole Miss is attempting to do here in this region. It has already made a significant impact in a number of communities in our region but the task remains enormous.

It is one thing to make grandiose political pronouncements on that subject, but where the rubber hits the road is in the actual work that goes into building and maintaining a livable society and a unified country. That is going to require each one of us, black and white, making a personal commitment to do what we can to eliminate racial prejudice and misunderstanding and mistrust. We must work at it together across racial lines to build communities that recognize our common humanity and our common destiny. That duty particularly applies to some of our political leaders from both races who unfortunately continue to play the race card in subtle but divisive ways.

The liberation from our old biases and prejudices will enable us to ensure that our children and grandchildren will inherit a better country than has existed before. That is what responsible citizenship is all about – in doing the things that may not immediately and directly benefit us but will create for those who come after us the opportunity for a more fulfilling and productive life. That is a legacy that all of us should be proud to leave.

And now one thing more. In a time of increasing partisanship and political division, there is another huge task facing us, and that is the preservation – some might say the restoration -- of civility and collegiality in our civic and political relationships. Our region and our country have been involved in many bruising battles in the past, but we somehow never let those differences cause us to lose our sense of camaraderie or

respect for each other's ideas. The demonizing of people of a different political viewpoint and the equating of sectarian dogma with political ideology do not serve the interest of our country.

We must recognize in this socially and economically diverse region and nation there must always be room for honest dissent. We must understand that our future will be diminished if we let bitterness and rancor and anger control the political agenda. Most of us I find want about the same thing – a good education for our children, a job that is sustaining and fulfilling, a decent house and community in which to live, and the enjoyment of a life of dignity and respect. The future of our region and our country must be based on the pursuit of these goals and the recognition of our common humanity. That must be the basis of the new heritage of the South.