

Florida Atlantic University

Southern Modernization

An Essay Submitted To

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by

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## Southern Modernization

The South's path to modernization was a long and rocky journey. Over the protests of large factions of segregationists, several key events and decisions, domestic reform programs, groups, and people transformed the South from a distinct, backwards region into a mainstream part of American society. President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal domestic program established public assistance institutions and broke the southern caste system when the Agricultural Adjustment Administration's policies resulted in black migration to the cities. After the New Deal, the South was never the same. Additionally, several Supreme Court cases helped to overturn the South's Jim Crow legacy. The unanimously-decided 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling brought the most historic change by ordering the integration of public schools. Integration became the law of the land, but southerners did not rush to adhere to it. The Civil Rights Movement, which followed the High Court's historic decision, pressed the issue of equal rights. The movement's demands were heard by President Lyndon Johnson, who promoted equality in his Great Society domestic program. The Great Society was the watershed that pushed the South over the top towards becoming a mainstream part of the U.S. Johnson's program banned racial discrimination in federal and state institutions which desired federal funds.

The South's transformation into a modern society that culminated with the Great Society began with the New Deal. Before Roosevelt initiated his domestic agenda, the region was poor, largely rural, and backwards. No government institutions existed to help people in need, only charities. *Laissez-faire* government was the dominant philosophy of the region with a stronger focus on balancing budgets than on helping people in distress.<sup>1</sup> Additionally, Jim Crow

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<sup>1</sup> Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, New Perspectives on the South, ed. Charles P. Roland (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1994), 16.

segregation was fully entrenched in daily life. Former President Jimmy Carter explains in his memoir about his childhood in rural Plains, Georgia that “Our two races, although inseparable in our daily lives, were kept apart by social custom, misinterpretation of Holy Scriptures, and the unchallenged law of the land as mandated by the United States Supreme Court.”<sup>2</sup>

With high unemployment, poor crop prices, and an increasing number of foreclosures during the Great Depression, southerners reluctantly welcomed the New Deal. Southern nerves over using money from their state budgets were calmed through the use of federal dollars to aid their plight.<sup>3</sup> A shift away from *laissez-faire* government was the trade-off for this assistance. The New Deal introduced the South to new institutions, including the Works Projects Administration (WPA), Social Security, and the Agricultural Adjustment Administration (AAA). The WPA created jobs for unemployed southerners. This program was especially revolutionary as it enabled more southern white women than ever before to secure employment. Black women were helped by this program as well, but they were usually given more demeaning work, including cleanup duties instead of the sewing projects than many white women were assigned to. This discrimination was due to the local implementation of the program.<sup>4</sup> In addition to the WPA, the introduction of Social Security payments enabled many unemployed southerners to survive the Great Depression.

Attempting to raise crop prices by decreasing crop supplies, the Agricultural Adjustment Administration offered subsidies to farmers who did not farm on part of their land. The AAA also coerced farmers to plow-up excess cotton, which resulted in increased crop prices.<sup>5</sup> Not all

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<sup>2</sup> Jimmy Carter, *An Hour Before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 17.

<sup>3</sup> Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 82.

<sup>4</sup> Martha H. Swain, “A New Deal for Southern Women,” in Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, vol. 2: *The New South*, 2d ed., Major Problems in American History, ed. Thomas G. Paterson (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company), 336-37.

<sup>5</sup> Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 40-43.

farmers were enthused by this plan. For instance, Jimmy Carter explains that his father was “never able to forget the forced plowing up of cotton and [the] slaying of hogs during the earlier years of the New Deal.”<sup>6</sup> With the AAA’s drive to reduce land cultivation, farmers did not need as many workers. Consequently, sharecroppers, tenants, and blacks were driven off the land and into the cities in search of work. In the process, the historic agricultural tie that bound blacks to white authority was broken. Southern distinctiveness also withered away with the construction of infrastructure for the cities by the federal government, including schools and roads. The migration of northern companies to the South after World War II further helped to transform the region by promoting urbanization.<sup>7</sup> Together, urbanization and increased sources of employment decreased southern poverty and increased its prosperity.

In addition, several Supreme Court cases helped to overturn the South’s Jim Crow legacy and to modernize the region in the process by ending the South’s white primary system, and by ordering the integration of graduate schools, law schools, and public schools. These landmark cases included *Smith v. Allwright* (1944), *Sweatt v. Painter* (1950), *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents* (1950), and especially, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) and its follow-up *Brown II* in 1955. In *Smith v. Allwright*, the Supreme Court ruled that Democratic primaries in the South, which prevented blacks from voting, were unconstitutional. According to this ruling, “If the state requires a certain electoral procedure, prescribes a general election ballot made up of party nominees...and limits the choice of the electorate in general elections for state officials...to those whose names appear on such a ballot, it endorses, adopts and enforces the discrimination against Negroes.”<sup>8</sup> In other words, if blacks could not participate in the primaries where party

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<sup>6</sup> Jimmy Carter, *An Hour Before Daylight: Memories of a Rural Boyhood* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2001), 70.

<sup>7</sup> Roger Biles, *The South and the New Deal*, 155-56.

<sup>8</sup> “*Smith v. Allwright*, 1944,” in Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, 330-31.

candidates were chosen in a region with one political party, then blacks had no say in the final election results. This decision gave blacks an avenue into politics that was legitimized and reinforced by the 1965 Voting Rights Act.

Six years after the *Smith v. Allwright* decision, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) brought two lawsuits before the Supreme Court over violations of the 1896 *Plessy v. Ferguson* Supreme Court case, which established the “separate, but equal” doctrine. In *McLaurin v. Oklahoma State Regents*, the Supreme Court ruled that the University of Oklahoma Graduate School could not discriminate against George W. McLaurin by forcing him “to attend classes in an anteroom separate from but equal to the schoolroom of his white classmates.”<sup>9</sup> Justices claimed that intangible factors, including McLaurin’s inability to communicate with his classmates deprived him of true equality. Likewise, in *Sweatt v. Painter*, the Supreme Court decided that the University of Texas at Austin could not compel law student Herman Sweatt to attend a segregated wing of its law school because this makeshift school was not equal to the original. The High Court claimed that the segregated school “lacked tradition, prestige, and the other ‘qualities which are incapable of objective measurement but which make for greatness in a law school.’”<sup>10</sup> While these were important decisions, historian James T. Patterson explains that the University of Texas at Austin Law School and the University of Oklahoma Graduate School only accepted a handful of whites during the 1950s. Additionally, Patterson maintains that the integration ruling did not apply to undergraduate

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<sup>9</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980: The Story of the South’s Modernization*, A History of the South, eds. Wendell Holmes Stephenson and E. Merton Coulter, vol. 11 (Louisiana: Louisiana State University Press, 1995), 154-55.

<sup>10</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 155.

education.<sup>11</sup> This was a start, however, which set precedents that paved the way for the most historic Civil Rights ruling in *Brown v. Board of Education*.

*Brown v. Board of Education* overturned the nearly 60-year “separate, but equal” precedent set by *Plessy v. Ferguson* in 1896. According to the *Brown* ruling, “separate educational facilities are inherently unequal” because they make blacks feel inferior to whites.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the Supreme Court ordered the integration of public schools. This ruling did not establish a timetable for integration; that decision was left for the *Brown II* follow-up case. *Brown II* ordered the integration of public schools to be carried out “with all deliberate speed.” This vague timeframe allowed southern politicians to slow down their implementation of the court’s decision anytime that violence erupted over the matter.<sup>13</sup> Massive Resistance, as it was called, delayed the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education*, but the ruling remained. The Civil Rights Movement that followed ensured that this decision was upheld and that the South continued its transformation towards becoming a modern society.

According to historian Paul Escott, Civil Rights activists “pressed to desegregate schools, reinstate voting rights, and end segregation in public accommodations through boycotts, sit-ins, freedom rides, and protest marches.”<sup>14</sup> In 1955, the Civil Rights Movement began in Montgomery, Alabama when a black seamstress and Civil Rights activist named Rosa Parks refused to give up her bus seat to a white passenger. After repeated attempts by the bus driver to get her to move, he called the police. Upon their arrival, the police arrested Ms. Parks.<sup>15</sup> With

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<sup>11</sup> James T. Patterson, *Brown v. Board of Education: A Civil Rights Milestone and Its Troubled Legacy*, Pivotal Moments in American History, eds. David Hackett Fischer and James M. McPherson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), 18-19.

<sup>12</sup> “*Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka, Kansas*, 1954,” in Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, 354-55.

<sup>13</sup> Morton J. Horowitz, *The Warren Court and the Pursuit of Justice* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1998), 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, 349.

<sup>15</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 178.

her arrest, began a ten-year struggle for Civil Rights that were finally granted as part of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. Immediately following Parks' arrest, however, African-Americans, led by Civil Rights activist Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. began a one-year boycott of Montgomery's bus line. During the course of this year, blacks were harassed by police officers who arrested blacks for minor traffic offenses and White Citizens' Council segregationist groups who dropped bombs on the houses of several Civil Rights leaders, including King's house. Despite these hardships on African Americans, when the boycott ended in December 1956, blacks stood victorious with Montgomery's bus line desegregated.<sup>16</sup>

Little Rock, Arkansas in 1957 was the next major battleground and victory for African Americans. Arkansas Governor Orville Faubus refused to support the forced and unpopular integration of Little Rock Central High School.<sup>17</sup> Faubus' efforts included calling out the Arkansas National Guard to prevent integration. Rather than adhere to integration, the school was closed over the matter. In order to desegregate the school and to enforce the Supreme Court's *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling, President Dwight D. Eisenhower federalized the Arkansas National Guard.<sup>18</sup> While African Americans won token integration to Central High School, White Citizens' Councils continued to fight against public school integration throughout the South.<sup>19</sup> Historian Numan Bartley explains that this "massive resistance offered nothing in the way of solutions to southern problems, but it did prevent anyone else from dealing constructively with them."<sup>20</sup> Despite these obstacles, blacks still made progress in the South towards equality and towards transforming the region as a whole. Bartley explains, "Little Rock restored popular acceptance of the proposition that changes in racial practices were unavoidable.

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<sup>16</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 180.

<sup>17</sup> Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions: The South in the 1950s* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2000), 251.

<sup>18</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 228-29.

<sup>19</sup> Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 283.

<sup>20</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 260.

By the fall of 1958, a majority of white southerners again accepted desegregation as a certainty. By early 1961, three-quarters of all southerners—black and white—believed desegregation was inevitable.”<sup>21</sup>

In February 1960, sit-ins at Woolworth’s Department Store added momentum to the Civil Rights Movement. At Woolworth’s four black college students sat at the store lunch counter and asked for service. They were not asked to leave, nor were they served. This spontaneous act of civil disobedience spread to cities across the South.<sup>22</sup> Segregationists did not have an easy answer for the problem because there was no centralized leadership. In addition, the students were willing to go to jail and did not have property that could be threatened. Bartley claims that the South’s growing materialism sparked these student protests.<sup>23</sup> For their actions, white segregationists attacked the black students. Historian Pete Daniel claims that “as the press and television publicized the sit-ins, many southern whites were embarrassed by media images of white ruffians dumping ketchup and sugar on peaceful students, burning them with cigarettes, and in some cases striking them.”<sup>24</sup> Black and white Freedom Riders, who rode on interstate buses from the north into the South pushed the issue of Civil Rights even more.

In May 1961, integrated buses with blacks in the front and whites in the back left Washington D.C. and headed into the South. These Freedom Riders, who attempted to permanently integrate interstate buses, were attacked by segregationists, including the Ku Klux Klan. Harassment towards blacks was not limited to physical attacks, but included arrests for “inflaming public opinion.”<sup>25</sup> Ultimately, the Freedom Riders were successful because they forced the federal government to legalize and enforce integrated interstate transportation.

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<sup>21</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 234-35.

<sup>22</sup> Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 284.

<sup>23</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 301.

<sup>24</sup> Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 285.

<sup>25</sup> Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America’s Uncivil Wars: The Sixties from Elvis to the Fall of Richard Nixon* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 121-25.



Additionally, the federal government forced southerners to remove “whites only” signs from interstate terminals.<sup>26</sup>

Martin Luther King, Jr.’s April 1963 “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” was another big moment for the Civil Rights Movement. According to his letter, blacks tried everything they could to fight discrimination, including negotiating with white political leaders, before they began protesting in the streets. He claimed that blacks were tired of waiting for their rights. King supported peaceful protests, but he argued that “justice too long delayed is justice denied.” King’s explanation of how black children became mentally scarred when their parents had to explain to them the realities of discrimination in their neighborhoods was a down to earth example of why he fought for Civil Rights.<sup>27</sup> His message resonated with middle-class Americans all over the country who suddenly felt sympathetic to him and his movement. The following month in Birmingham, Alabama, a race riot occurred in the city. This riot pitted defenseless blacks against police with fire hoses and K-9 dogs. This scene encouraged President Kennedy to be more active in keeping the peace in the South. With Kennedy’s intervention, King ended his protest in Birmingham and whites in Birmingham agreed to desegregate their businesses and to hire blacks.<sup>28</sup>

In June 1963, on the heels of the Birmingham fiasco, Kennedy once again came to the defense of Civil Rights activists. At this time, Kennedy used the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision to force integration at the University of Alabama. Over Governor George Wallace’s protests, Kennedy federalized the Alabama National Guard to allow black students to register at

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<sup>26</sup> Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America’s Uncivil Wars*, 125.

<sup>27</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Martin Luther King, Jr.’s Letter from Birmingham Jail, 1963,” in Paul D. Escott and others, eds., *Major Problems in the History of the American South*, 361-66.

<sup>28</sup> Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America’s Uncivil Wars*, 131-32.

the University.<sup>29</sup> Slowly, but surely, the Civil Rights Movement helped to transform the South into a modern society. Large segments of the South still opposed Civil Rights, but the federal government's growing involvement slowly passed them by through the rule of law. King's March on Washington in August 1963, where he delivered his "I Have a Dream Speech" cemented his legacy and his movement's success. Within a few months of this speech, in November 1963, President Kennedy was assassinated in Dallas, Texas. To honor the fallen President, the goals of the Civil Rights Movement were incorporated into President Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society.<sup>30</sup>

Johnson's Great Society forever changed the face of southern society. In 1964, Johnson lobbied southern Congressmen in support of the Civil Rights Act. The passage of this act officially made the federal government responsible for the enforcement of Civil Rights. The federal government established the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission and the Office of Federal Contract Compliance to listen to and fight against discriminatory actions. Recipients of federal funds were forbidden from discriminating against blacks. Consequently, all remaining white and colored only signs were eliminated from southern society. Furthermore, Title IV of the Civil Rights Act ended the busing of students to far away schools. Busing was previously undertaken in order to comply with the *Brown v. Board of Education* decision. Instead, the *Brown* decision was applied to smaller cities and towns, and other places where integration was feasible and not a burden to white or black students.<sup>31</sup>

The Voting Rights Act, which was another part of the Great Society, further modernized the South. This act strengthened the federal government's responsibility towards ensuring black voting rights. No longer could blacks be kept from voting solely because of the color of their

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<sup>29</sup> John Morton Blum, *Years of Discord: American Politics and Society, 1961-1974* (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1991),

<sup>30</sup> Mark Hamilton Lytle, *America's Uncivil Wars*, 137-38.

<sup>31</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 370-72.

skin. Additionally, the 1965 Aid to Education Act, which granted federal funds for poor school districts, struck at the heart of segregation. By using economic leverage over school districts, the Aid to Education Act, Lyndon Johnson, and his Great Society were able to force integration in the South. Historian Numan Bartley explains, “With both the federal bureaucracy and the federal judiciary demanding integration, local white resistance gradually declined.”<sup>32</sup>

Collectively, the Great Society, the Civil Rights Movement, the Supreme Court, and the New Deal modernized the South. Public assistance programs that began during the New Deal established a foundation to move the South away from *Laissez-faire* government. By the time the Great Society came around, southerners heavily relied on federal assistance programs for growth and prosperity. Accepting this assistance, however, forced southerners to kill Jim Crow. This was a slow process and the march towards integration for public schools was anything but smooth. Politicians and segregationist groups fought bitterly with Massive Resistance to prevent the implementation of *Brown v. Board of Education*. Historian Pete Daniel, explains “Integration came not from good will or enlightened leadership but from laws and litigation, from reluctant compliance. Southern blacks and whites moved in an uneasy dance as the tension and violence of the age of segregation dissipated.”<sup>33</sup> The Civil Rights Movement pressured the federal government to enforce the Supreme Court’s *Brown* ruling and to bring about equal rights for African Americans. King’s “I Have a Dream” speech and his “Letter from a Birmingham Jail” spoke powerfully of the need for change in the South. Legislation during the Great Society, including the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act guaranteed that change. This legislation killed Jim Crow and in the process, transformed the South into a mainstream part of American society.

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<sup>32</sup> Numan V. Bartley, *The New South, 1945-1980*, 374.

<sup>33</sup> Pete Daniel, *Lost Revolutions*, 305.