

## **Gene Patterson, NG '42**

### *Lecture – Part IV*

#### **During the Civil Rights movement**

Well, 40 years ago, when I became editor of the Constitution, the second phase of my life began. The time had come to face up to the major domestic issue, now that we'd solved the principal foreign one by defeating Japan and Germany. That major domestic issue then and now in America was the relation between our races.

When I was a freshman on this campus, more than 75 years had passed since Appomattox. We thought that had solved the issue of slavery in America. But the South's African Americans were not free yet. They were shackled in a new bondage in the southern states, these supposedly freed men, by state laws requiring them to live separately from white citizens.

We had a U.S. Constitution that said all citizens would have equal protection of the laws. But black American citizens of the South had separate laws. By Georgia law, no black students could attend my elementary and high schools in Adel, Ga. The same laws required this campus to be white only when I attended NGC. It may be hard for you to imagine the way of life that I experienced. But we're talking history, and history really is a living thing. It happens every day. You just have to get as old as I am to realize that the pages of history turn with your own years, and the pages turning with my years brought us forward from a time of state laws in Georgia when schools were required to be separate. Plessy vs. Ferguson, a ruling by the Supreme Court, had said "separate but equal" was OK. But in 1954, the United States Supreme Court said "separate and equal is inherently unequal," and ordered a reversal of the old Supreme Court holding and a reversal of the southern way of life. With all deliberate speed we were ordered to desegregate the schools of the South.

But that would only be a start. Within 10 years the Congress would pass a law desegregating public accommodations. It's hard for you to conceive now what I lived through then. In my youth, a black person could not go to the same restaurant that I went to. They might get served carryout through a back window, but if they tried to enter they'd be thrown out and arrested. Hotels and motels automatically excluded blacks.

Movie houses didn't admit black citizens. Restrooms were separate in filling stations all over the state and all over the South. Two sets of restrooms doubled costs in the poorest section of America: Colored Women, Colored Men, White Women, White Men – drinking fountains the same thing. You had to have two of everything, so that the two races could be kept separate. Seating was separate on buses and trains by law. Public libraries were segregated, public golf courses, public beaches, and public swimming pools. Church congregations mirrored southern laws by excluding black worshipers from their services.

So Ralph McGill at The Atlanta Constitution, the bravest of all the southern editors on this issue, kept writing in the early 1950s, talking about that case Brown v. Board of Education, which was due for a decision by the Supreme Court. He kept writing: "someday it'll be Monday." Monday is the day the Supreme Court hands down its rulings. Well, Monday came. I was London bureau chief of the old United Press then, and Mr. McGill was in London on a trip. New York headquarters of UP told me to run him down, find his hotel, talk to him and get a quote from Ralph McGill about this Supreme Court ruling. I found him in a little hotel, this man who was later to become my dearest friend and mentor when I joined The Constitution.

I asked him, "Will you give me a quote on this ruling by the Supreme Court?" which I described to him. He'd not heard about it, and there was a long pause. This was still a time in the South where you could be fired if you said the wrong thing. If you were in the white community and you kept a store and you sold to black customers, the whites would no longer trade there. If you were a country newspaper editor who printed editorials sympathetic to desegregation and compliance with the Supreme Court ruling, your advertising would disappear. It was a self-buttrressing, silent freeze that lay over the South. And Mr. McGill still worked for some people in Atlanta who didn't approve of even his gentle attempts at questioning the state laws. So his answer to me was very diplomatic. He said, "Well you can quote me as saying, "I'm surprised that the court ruling was unanimous." That was all.

When I got to Atlanta to work I discovered he had bravely joined the battle for change in the South's old way of life. Southern politicians resisted that 1954 Supreme Court order and built a whole new politics in the South based on nullified federal law,

interposing state law as being sovereign and superior to federal law. Well, the Civil War settled that, didn't it?

But here we were, with the whole politics of the South being prisoner to the prating of demagogues. And we had 'em here in Georgia, and they had 'em in Alabama, and they had 'em in Mississippi, Louisiana, South Carolina and Arkansas. And we fought those politicians. That was the first easy way to fight for change in the racial attitudes of the South: tell our readers that these governors are misleading you – they are getting your votes by unworthy means. They are trying to tell you that you don't have to obey the U.S. Supreme Court. And they're wrong. You could say that without actually coming out for racial justice couldn't you?

But then it got tougher, because the southern politicians overreached so badly that you had George Wallace standing in the schoolhouse door instead of desegregating the University of Alabama. You had Ross Barnett, governor of Mississippi, refusing to protect James Meredith when he desegregated the University of Mississippi in Oxford. And standing aside when student riots led by outsiders started firing on federal marshals surrounding the Lyceum at Ole Miss and started wounding them, and killed two people before federal paratroopers restored the order that the state's governor wouldn't enforce. Orval Faubus, governor of Arkansas, defied court orders to let black children into Central High School, and you know what happened? The 101st Airborne Division had to move in there and escort those kids into school and shove Faubus aside. It took federal force to do it because the state leaders abdicated. The same in Alabama – George Wallace defied to the end any attempt to desegregate his state. Thank heaven, Georgia had a courageous governor, Ernest Vandiver, who obeyed court orders to desegregate the university at Athens and he put state troopers, not federal paratroopers, on the Georgia campus to stop riots.

Then things starting coming apart for the segregationists. In Montgomery, Ala., a seamstress named Rosa Parks sat down on a bus too far forward, and when the front filled up and a white man got on the driver came back and said, "The law says you gotta go back to the rear of the bus." She was tired from a day's work and said, "I'm not moving." And he said, "Well I'll call the police, 'cause the law says you gotta move." And she said, "I'm sitting right here." She did. He had her arrested. That was the way the

South worked back then.

So history unfolded in a hurry then. A young preacher in Dexter Avenue Baptist Church, Martin Luther King Jr., led his people out of the pews and into the streets. He boycotted the buses in Montgomery, Ala. "We just won't ride those buses if the white owners don't want us." Mainly blacks rode those buses. Suddenly they were largely empty. Their former black riders walked.

Howell Raines' wonderful book, "My Soul Is Rested," quotes one of the black women walking to work, saying, "My feet are sore, but my soul is rested."

Black student sit-ins started in Greensboro, N.C., because restaurants wouldn't serve black people. Across the street from The Atlanta Constitution, at Rich's department store downtown, we had the spectacle of black Atlanta University students parading around the store because it would not serve black customers in its tea room. They could buy things in the store, but they couldn't eat. And across the street, in full bed sheets with pillowcases pointed over their heads, paraded the Ku Klux Klan.

Suddenly, fire hoses were knocking black people around in Birmingham. Police loosed snarling dogs against them. These direct actions were beamed to the rest of the nation by a new news medium called television, and they were suddenly in the living rooms of all Americans. And these events were not acceptable to the American majority.

Martin Luther King's example soon led black demonstrators into the streets wherever injustice needed protesting, and pressure grew on Congress to remedy these wrongs. Thank the Lord for that man and for his principle of non-violence. King was influenced by Mahatma Gandhi in India, and he understood that you couldn't win against a hostile majority by simply fighting them. You had to convince that hostile majority that it was wrong. And you did this by his religion's teaching that you don't answer violence with violence, you answer it with restraint, love, and acceptance of the fact that the human heart and the human conscience can be changed by your example. So we accept their blows, we don't return those blows. And no matter how angry we are, remember we shall overcome only if we stay nonviolent yet unbowed.

And that was the great secret of the progress that we made in the 1960s. It's as old as the cross. And of course Martin went there, as I think he knew he would.

A majority of the white South echoed their politicians. They preached anger, and

defiance of the national law. It was time for newspapers to speak. Some did.

The Atlanta Constitution had the good fortune to be owned by a modern man. His name was Gov. James M. Cox. He had been governor of Ohio. He was the Democratic Party's presidential nominee in 1920. He was defeated by Warren G. Harding, who was one of the worst presidents we ever had, and the main issue was the League of Nations, which Woodrow Wilson had devised and urged upon Europe and America. Europe accepted it. America rejected it. Winston Churchill felt America's rejection of the League sent Europe on the slide to Hitler's bloody domination and fated Americans to fight the terrible war that followed in my generation.

So as history unfolded, I started writing as editor of the Constitution in 1960, alongside Mr. McGill. His column ran on the front page and mine ran on the editorial page. His example – and this is a thing to remember, young friends – the example of a brave person can teach others to be brave. Over the entrance to the Infantry School at Ft. Benning, Ga., is the motto of the infantry: "Follow me." So Mr. McGill started me into saying what I meant, instead of denouncing white politicians for their excesses, and start addressing the central issue: We've got to change. We have committed a monstrous wrong against a race of Americans, and the federal judiciary has recognized that. The White House, the federal military have recognized that. And with television's impact, the American majority is going to recognize that and it's going to empower its representatives in Congress and its occupant of the White House to make the South change.

So do we wait to be forced? Or do we do what's right now? Why don't we rectify, not justify our past? That needed to be said. And I am a white southerner, and the stuff I started writing offended my friends and my kinfolks deeply because they didn't agree with it. But it needed saying.

The March on Washington was an enormous example of what Martin Luther King was preaching in the streets. So I wrote a piece up there. I went to cover that speech. I saw the man standing in front of the Lincoln Memorial put his prepared text aside and start preaching from the heart. And what he preached was "I have a dream" and the next day, for the next morning's paper, after the end of that, I wrote this in the Constitution (*reading from his column*):

The march was ended. The marble Lincoln brooded over meadows snowy white with litter and placards. In the sudden silence left by 200,000 departed people, the meaning of what had happened here slowly settled into shape. It may have been historic.

It may be that this will be marked down as the date when the Civil Rights movement grew up.

Two upheavals occurred here.

1. Breaking a rising national fever of shrillness and disorder, Negro demonstrators embraced a constructive discipline.

Pardon my use of "Negro." Prior to that it had been "colored people," after that it became blacks, after that African Americans. The determinant is what people want to be called in a free society, and at that time they wanted to be called Negroes. (*He continues reading.*)

2. Rejecting a further rise of bitterness and anger, Martin Luther King defined a new purpose expressed in bright hope through love of a country.

What this Negro maturing will mean to a nation that is much in

need of both pacification and racial progress will depend on the response of the country, of course. The country saw it happen, and has been handed the challenge.

The reaction of the marching Negro multitude and its leaders was unmistakable. They were proud, awestruck and more than a little bewildered by the implications of the new vein they had struck here. It all seemed slightly accidental.

For the first time various Negro leaders had concerted their efforts. Those efforts had been getting at ragged cross purposes.

Here, for the first time, the leaders sat down in council. They decided to show the country discipline and order, instead of making a bitter and trouble-fraught march on the Capitol to goad and anger Congress. The crowd obeyed. The council of leaders got together on the March day itself and pressured SNCC's John Lewis to temper a bitter and negative speech he had planned to make. More than preaching they wanted progress.

Now, I wrote this in one day, the next. I'd not had that much time to reflect on what might be history.

*(Reading again.)*

But it still would've been just a large turnout of people who came and heard predictable things if Martin Luther King Jr. had not gotten carried away to spontaneity by the roars on an electrified crowd. In a few impassioned and triumphant moments below the great seated statue of Abraham Lincoln, King swept the marchers to a new vision of the

Negroes' destiny in America by praising and celebrating America, and lifting their eyes from the valley of despair to purple mountain majesties.

"I have a dream," he boomed, again and again, and each dream showed him liberty and pursuit of happiness for all races of Americans soon, from the cliffs of the Rockies to the slopes of the Alleghenies, from Stone Mountain in Georgia to the broad Mississippi. "I have a dream," he roared, weeping, and his dream stretched from sea to shining sea, and all the way from the speaker's stand at the Lincoln Memorial to the far end of a crowd that stretched to the Washington Monument.

The rapt crowd was on its feet, seeing the Negro's dream really wrapped in red, white and blue, and the answering ovations seemed to seal a very important bond.

King has preached hope, and not despair; faith in the white man, not bitterness; identification with America, not doubt of its capacity for social justice. In this tremendously positive and upbeat moment, he found 200,000 Negro Americans had that dream too and responded.

Well, history unfolds. Scarcely two weeks after Martin Luther King Jr. moved the nation with the "I Have a Dream" speech, I had to write this (*reading*):

A Negro mother wept in the streets Sunday morning in front of a Baptist church in Birmingham. In her hands she held a shoe, one shoe from the foot of her dead child. We hold that shoe with her.

Every one of us in the white South holds that small shoe in his hand.

It is too late to blame the sick criminals who handled the dynamite. The FBI and the police can deal with that kind. The charge against them is simple. They killed four children.

Only we can trace the truth. Southerner – you and I. We broke those children's bodies. We watched the stage set without saying it. We listened to the prologue unbestirred. We saw the curtain opening with disinterest. We have heard the play.

We – who go on electing politicians who heat the kettles of hate.

We – who raise no hand to silence the mean and little men who have their nigger jokes.

We – who stand aside in imagined rectitude and let the mad dogs that run in every society slide their leashes from our hand, and spring.

We – the heirs of a proud South, who protest its worth and demand its recognition – we are the ones who have ducked the difficult, skirted the uncomfortable, caviled at the challenge, resented the necessary, rationalized the unacceptable, and created the day surely when these children would die.

This is no time to load our anguish onto the murderous scapegoat who set the cap in the dynamite of our own manufacture.

He didn't know any better.

Somewhere in the dim and fevered recess of an evil mind he feels right now that he has been a hero. He is only guilty of murder. He thinks he has pleased us.

We of the white south who know better are the ones who must take a harsher judgment.

We, who know better, created a climate for child-killing by those who don't.

We hold that shoe in our hand. Southerner. Let us see it straight, and look at the blood on it. Let us compare it with the unworthy speeches of Southern public men who have traduced the Negro; match it with the spectacle of shrilling children whose parents and teachers turned them free to spit epithets at small huddles of Negro school children for a week before this terrible Sunday in Birmingham; hold up the shoe and look beyond it to the state house in Montgomery where the official attitudes of Alabama have been spoken in heat and anger.

Let us not lay the blame on some brutal fool who didn't know any better.

We know better. We created the day. We bear the judgment. May God have mercy on the poor South that has been so led. May what has happened hasten the day when the good South, which does live and have great being, will rise to this challenge of racial understanding and common humanity, and in the full power of its unasserted courage, assert itself.

Well, with the help of the federal judiciary and the 101st Airborne Division, we finally did accept the laws. Great governors like Ernest Vandiver, who'd been elected on a segregationist platform, when ordered by federal courts to desegregate The University of Georgia, did. It destroyed his political future. He wanted to run for the Senate. He took soundings and found out he had no

support. The following governor Carl Sanders was a moderate on race, who supported Lyndon Johnson's run for president in 1964, when Georgia went Republican for the first time. Barry Goldwater, who took the state, had voted against the 1964 Civil Rights Act. And Sanders four years later lost his second bid for the governorship to a young candidate who offered to do what Sanders had refused to do – to offer Gov. George Wallace, the segregationist governor of Alabama, an invitation to address the Georgia legislature – the code word being "I'm on your side" to the segregationists. I'm sure that governor, who defeated Sanders, is ashamed now that he used that code because he went on to become a champion of human rights as president of the United States, Jimmy Carter.

In Florida Gov. LeRoy Collins, now recognized as the greatest statesman that state ever produced, ran for the Senate in 1970 and lost to a now forgotten opponent. Because he had been the foremost moderate of all southern governors – going on television, talking to his people saying, "We have got to change, we have got to obey the Supreme Court, we've got to do right by all our citizens." He paid for it with his political life. President Lyndon Johnson paid for it with his, because he rammed the Civil Rights Acts of 1964 and 1965 through the Congress, knowing his course would lose the South for the Democratic Party, which it did. Vandiver and Sanders paid for it here in this state with their political lives.

The segregationists went out of office very popular. They're now scorned and forgotten.

The men and women who stood up and did the right thing at the cost of their own defeat are renowned and respected, and their children are very proud of them.

What this brief history really tells us is: Like a platoon leader saying "Follow Me" and leading up the beach, there is a more important side to political leadership than winning office.

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