

THOUGHTS AND OBSERVATIONS ON MY FRIEND, WILLIAM WINTER

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Over a remarkable life of ninety-seven years, William Winter distinguished himself as a leader who was always ready to tackle tough, critical issues and challenges. He never shied away from engaging in heavy lifting on matters of importance. He was a man who loved history, studied history, understood history, and made history.

As a young legislator in the wake of World War II, Winter challenged the old guard by running against powerful and recalcitrant House Speaker Walter Sillers Jr. He stood up to the Ku Klux Klan and the White Citizens' Council during the dark days of the 1950s and 1960s when to do so took raw courage. His life was threatened by the Klan multiple times, but he persevered and never backed down. He fought doggedly and skillfully to bring kindergartens, compulsory school attendance, reading aides, and other much needed educational reforms to Mississippi. He chaired early efforts to replace the Confederate symbol on the state flag. He relentlessly pursued racial harmony and was the catalyst for President Bill Clinton's Advisory Board on Race. His accomplishments were vast and valuable.

Winter's political courage was recognized on the national stage when he received the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award. Commenting on Governor Winter's outspoken opposition to the idea of privatizing Mississippi's public schools in order to bypass the Supreme Court's decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*,¹ presidential advisor Vernon Jordan stated, "That kind of courage,

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¹ 347 U.S. 483 (1954).

that kind of willingness to speak out, to stand up, to take a position contrary to the consensus of white people was quite extraordinary.”²

My friendship with William Winter began with a letter composed on an old manual typewriter. My letter was a request to then-Lieutenant Governor Winter for an opportunity to work in his office for two weeks during the summer of 1973 to gain a practical understanding of the intersection of politics and policy for a college project I had undertaken.

Typical of his generosity, Lieutenant Governor Winter wrote back inviting me to join him for a couple of weeks of work and observation in his office in the State Capitol. He had never met me and took a chance that I might have something to offer. This started a life-long friendship and remarkable journey for a nineteen-year-old kid.

Toward the end of my two weeks, Winter called me into his office to let me know he would be going to Biloxi at the end of the week to deliver remarks to an education group and would not be around on my last day in the office.

That evening, I went to the Jackson Public Library and did research on the range of education issues confronting Mississippi. I prepared a paper based on my research and presented it to Winter the next day, hoping it might have some value for his upcoming remarks. After reading what I had cobbled together, he called me into his office to tell me he planned to incorporate much of my research into his speech and invited me to fly down to Biloxi with him.

The next day, I flew in an airplane for the first time in my life. I was delighted at my first opportunity to fly and ecstatic that my words were making it into the remarks of a man I deeply admired.

On the flight back to Jackson, Winter suggested that I extend my two weeks in his office and continue working for the rest of the summer. Knowing of my meager financial resources, he invited me to stay in an extra bedroom in his home. My poorly crafted but earnest typewritten letter was a seed that grew into the most productive and valuable summer of my life, cementing what would become a lifelong friendship and collaboration.

² THE TOUGHEST JOB: WILLIAM WINTER'S MISSISSIPPI (The Southern Documentary Project 2014).

Governor Winter was an incredibly versatile man with wide-ranging talents and interests. His passions included an astonishing blend of politics, education, history, athletics, culture, and racial harmony, combined with an abiding curiosity about people, life, and ideas.

Winter had a keen and special interest in culture and ideas. While Governor, he started a series of cultural forums. He and Mrs. Winter organized a series of gatherings over dinner at the Governor's Mansion that brought notable writers, musicians, civil rights icons, athletes, historians, and others to the Mansion for lively conversation and discussion.

Winter lured Eudora Welty, Walker Percy, Leontyne Price, Willie Morris, Shelby Foote, Margaret Walker, William Styron, Dean Rusk, John Glenn, and so many others to the Mansion for lively and informed discussions. I had the good fortune to attend these cultural gatherings, making audio recordings to preserve the remarkable discussions.

In his keynote address at the 2003 dedication of the William F. Winter Archives and History Building, the insightful historian David Halberstam said to Governor Winter, "I believed for a long time that America would not be whole until Mississippi really became part of it. And you, more than any other politician, are the architect of the new Mississippi and thus the new America."³

Governor Winter always appealed to our better nature. At every turn, on every issue, Winter exercised courage and embraced collaboration. He was a humble man with little to be humble about. We would all do well to follow his example when navigating life's challenges.

³ *Id.*

