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“I’ll Take Mississippi”: The Gubernatorial Campaigns of Charles L. Sullivan

By Erin Hendricks
Best Original Commentary

In an eulogistic piece entitled “The Quest--Not the Victory,” award-winning writer Joseph P. Ellis detailed the thirty years in the life of Mississippian Charles L. Sullivan, who attempted to obtain a place in the state’s political realm that he never achieved. Written shortly after Sullivan’s 1979 death in a tragic plane crash, the article reviewed his life including his three separate attempts at the Mississippi governorship, asserting that, though Sullivan never claimed the title he sought after, his campaigns and their impact proved far more lasting than a term or two in the office of governor.¹ What kind of man would inspire such praise? Why did such an admired politician never manage to win the vote of the people who spoke so favorably of him after his death? The numerous articles and pieces written about this question demonstrate the complexity of the possible answers. Although the opinions and hypotheses presented in the articles drastically differ from one another at times, some similar thoughts run through them all. When conducting a thorough inspection into the gubernatorial campaigns and losses of Charles L. Sullivan, most observers have found that, though a worthy and admirable candidate, an unfortunate combination of ill-timing, the influences of other politicians, and his persistent stand on what were then radically progressive issues formed the main reasons for his failure.

Born on August 20, 1924 in New Orleans, Sullivan lived for most of his early years in Greene and Perry

Counties. According to his widow, Mrs. Mary Sullivan, Charles could not recall a time when he was not interested in politics. His ambition to become a political representative of Mississippi formed as a young child.² He attended Tulane University, and then earned his law degree at the University of Mississippi in 1950. Sullivan began to practice law in Clarksdale, Mississippi, later becoming a municipal judge and serving as district attorney for the eleventh district from 1956-60.³ From this office he launched into his first gubernatorial campaign in 1959, beginning his career in politics.

Charles Sullivan did not succeed in winning his run for governor in ‘59 but did succeed in being thrust into the eye of the Mississippi public by amassing an unexpected 131,000 votes. In this race, he established himself as a prominent figure in the state’s politics and propounded his distinctive platform---a platform that would change very little throughout his lifetime. Sullivan set a precedent of characteristic forthrightness by breaking political norms and, before the final votes were cast, declaring his intention to try again in ‘63.⁴ He so impressed his more successful opponents that the final leg of the race became a contest for who could get Sullivan’s support, with each side claiming that their candidate highly regarded the young politician and had slung no mud at him.⁵ The campaigns of 1963 and 1971 followed the same pattern, and though Sullivan gained more popularity with each race he was never able to secure the majority of

Mississippians’ votes.

The 1959 campaign set a precedent for Sullivan not only in the results of his campaigns, but also in an unlucky trend that would stick with him throughout his political career: bad timing. Whether a primary came a bit too early or a gain in popularity peaked a little too late, the clock never seemed to work for the candidate. According to one writer, “Sullivan himself believed and frequently said that in 1959 he was denied a spot in the primary and an enhanced shot at the nomination because his campaign caught on a little late in that year.”⁶ Many political observers echoed this thought, reflecting a belief that had the primaries occurred only a few weeks later, Sullivan may have had a good chance at the runoffs.⁷ Years later, after the ‘71 campaign Sullivan would again cite timing as a detrimental factor.⁸ Timing played a prominent role in a particular incident affecting the outcome of the election of 1963. Paul B. Johnson’s interference with the integration of James Meredith into the University of Mississippi in 1962 occurred while Johnson was a candidate for governor. As lieutenant governor, Johnson performed his part in the drama simply to fill in for Governor Ross Barnett. Sullivan is reported to have later complained that Johnson’s role was merely a painful twist of fate, for had Governor Barnett not been detained by fog and arrived on the scene in time his lieutenant governor might never have gleaned the fame from the incident that proved so beneficial to his winning

run.⁹ Even the fickle tide of popular opinion the politician so strived to gain worked against him in his largest war against timing. Sullivan began as an "outsider" and an "underdog" when only long-established politicians were being elected. Then, after years of hard work, he finally became one of those long-established politicians and gained good standing with the enduring powers of Mississippians just when the people had begun to elect those very outsiders and underdogs he had once shown himself to be.¹⁰

While time seemed to work against Charles Sullivan quite often, Sullivan worked against time. While the candidate himself claimed, "I am politically, economically, and governmentally conservative,"¹¹ the issues that he pushed on the platform were often astoundingly progressive, calling for change in areas in which many Mississippians found no need for it. Many journalists and political commentators of his time took note of Sullivan's forward-looking standpoints on key issues of governmental races and seemed to find this trait worthy of their written words. This fascination found its way into publication, and before long the subject himself acknowledged that he was not a political conformist. The people did not need Sullivan's recognition of the fact to let them know that they were dealing with a new type of politician--his actions spoke for him. Sullivan, a veteran pilot from World War II and the Korean war who maintained his position in the Air National Guard Reserves long into his political career,¹³ turned to flying as a useful mode of transportation long before the practice became common. In fact, Sullivan traveled to many of his speaking engagements in his own personal plane, using it to take his campaign all over the state.¹⁴

This same willingness to try new things showed through in Sullivan's everyday conversations. In an article

titled "A Distinctively Different Mississippi Politician," writer Billy Skelton recalls a coffee shop conversation in which he and other men (among them Sullivan) discussed John Glenn's first orbital flight into space. While many of the men expressed doubt about the mission's success, Sullivan confidently asserted his faith in it, adding that he wished he were making the flight himself. Skelton stated, "If nearly anyone else had said he would like to sit in for Glenn on that pioneer flight, I probably would not have believed it. I never doubted Charlie; I honestly think he envied Glenn the opportunity."¹⁵

While Sullivan's ambitious and futuristic attitudes may have inspired admiration in some, they did not always find appreciation in the voters of Mississippi or Sullivan's opposing candidates. The politician's progressive attitudes often got him into hot water in the ballot box and were, quite possibly, one of the deciding factors in his inability to achieve office. As one writer put it, "He always went a step further than necessary..."¹⁶ This held true even when it would appear that Sullivan held the voters in his hands. Though Mississippians seemed to appreciate his refreshingly straightforward and honest attitude, many could simply not stomach the revolutionary reforms he proposed to implement into the state's system.

An example of this drive to take on controversial issues was Sullivan's promotion of the concept of reapportionment of the legislature. He reasoned that reapportionment (one of his key planks in '59) was necessary to balance the representation in the state using relative population in each of the counties. It seems that Sullivan could have had the votes on this particular issue right from the start if he had simply promoted this doctrine in those counties that were grossly underrepresented. However, Sullivan,

never one to take the path of least resistance, launched headlong into the matter by boldly taking his platform into those counties that would be most adversely affected by the legislative change. Ironically enough, when votes were counted some of those more-than-comfortable people to whom Sullivan had dared to promote his change agreed with him. He carried Noxubee County, for example--quite a surprise considering the area had three representatives.¹⁷

Perhaps the most unpalatable of Sullivan's propositions was his stance on the necessity for statewide legalization of liquor. His strong speeches and attitudes in favor of this action earned him the nickname "Whisky Charlie,"¹⁸ a pseudonym indicative of the way many Mississippians viewed his legislative proposal. Nevertheless, Sullivan stuck to his guns and from his first campaign onward, he never relented in his abhorrence of what he called the hypocrisy of state liquor laws and "the dishonest black market tax"¹⁹ that the state permitted to exist. As Sullivan declared, "The state should be honest on this question...The only solution is legalization with local and county options."²⁰ This concept was, in many ways, new to the Mississippians still clinging to prohibition. While a surprising number of people did support Sullivan in '59, the move proved a bit too hard to swallow for most voters. This confirmed the predictions of many "old guard politicians" projecting that Sullivan's appeal would be to young people, but the liquor issue ruined his chances of winning.²¹ Sullivan refused to give in, and in '63 he again ran with the same position, boldly stating, "I think the people of Mississippi are ready for it now."²² Unfortunately, they were not. The rejected optimist once again lost his bid for the governorship. By the time Sullivan's third campaign came about, legalized liquor had been

approved under the Johnson administration, eliminating the need for debate. Quick to point out his foresight in his successful campaign for Lieutenant Governor in 1967, Sullivan reminded voters that, though he had known they would not necessarily like what he had to say, he had dealt truthfully with them on the issue while Johnson had promised to keep the state dry.²³

The legalization of liquor was by no means the only element of Sullivan's platform. Several other issues soon came forward to claim the people's attention, and in each of them the politician showed unequalled foresight by pushing positions that would not become popular with most until years later. Sullivan's strong support of the right-to-work law was one of these issues. When questioned, he answered that the right-to-work law was designed to protect the worker and that he was "opposed to any attempt to weaken or repeal such a law in our state."²⁴ With this declaration Sullivan probably lost the votes of any big labor bosses in the state. However, by standing firm he helped keep the law hanging on in Mississippi.

In 1971, Sullivan yet again defied convention and predicted the future with his goal of desegregating the highway patrol. Two among his reasons stood out above the rest. Sullivan predicted that the federal courts would carry through desegregation one way or the other, and went on to cite for his other reason that it was simply "the right thing to do," a statement that might have lost him popular standing.²⁵ Sullivan's progressive stance on the right-to-work question, taken together with his views about liquor and topics like the desegregation of the highway patrol and reapportionment presents a picture of a man ahead of his time. It comes as no great surprise to read Sullivan's following summary of his visions of what Mississippi could some

day be:

Economic, educational, social and political progress, unparalleled in our history can be achieved through the dedicated efforts of a positive, aggressive administration which realizes Mississippi has not even begun to realize its potential and which is not content with the stagnation of simply maintaining that which we now have.²⁶

After reading this statement, one realizes that, for Sullivan, politics was progress, and a politician without a vision for the future, though that vision may prove costly, would be detrimental to the growth of their state.

There are two smaller pejorative relationships with other politicians that merit a mention. The first of these occurred just after the 1963 primaries from which Paul B. Johnson and former governor J.P. Coleman emerged to move on into the runoffs. Speculation at the time surrounded the question of which candidate Sullivan would support after his own defeat. Many believed that Sullivan had determined to back Coleman, but he later seemed to withdraw his support. Some hypothesized that the young politician had been "prevailed upon" not to publicly support Coleman. Others wondered about the possibility of pressure from an unknown source.²⁹ No matter what the reason, the public saw this withdrawal as duplicity on the part of Sullivan, and, as a certain journalist from the Greenwood Commonwealth put it, "It is beginning to appear that if the entire story--why Mr. Sullivan withdrew his support of Coleman at the last minute--ever came out, it would make Johnson's previous campaign tactics look like Boy Scout pranks."³⁰ Although this statement may have been meant as a reflection upon the possible effects of the incident on Coleman's campaign, Sullivan, as the

source of the confusion, could have been injured by this instance for his future campaigns. The other hazardous influence from a fellow politician came in 1971 in the form of Charles Evers. Evers, an African-American and fellow candidate, came out with a statement in which he stated his wish that those people who could not vote for him would kindly vote for Charlie Sullivan come election time. To some, this may appear to be a compliment to the personality and platform of any opponent, but just as with the influence of John Bell Williams, this was not a very helpful occurrence for Sullivan. In his thinking, the statement was a strategic move by Evers to defeat Sullivan. The offended politician made a concerted effort to remind voters that he and Evers were opponents in the gubernatorial race.³¹

The final, hugely significant politician, holding what many believe to be the most important role in shaping Charles Sullivan's career and the outcome of his campaigns, was James O. Eastland. No one seems to know the exact origin of the running feud between the two men. Even Sullivan, when questioned about it, answered that he did not know reasons for differences with Eastland regarding the governor's race other than the fact that in the 1960 presidential election Sullivan was an independent elector-- Eastland had supported Kennedy and Johnson, the Democratic nominees. Beyond that, he answered, he had no idea.³² Sullivan failed to mention the vehement dislike he had expressed toward the two running mates in that presidential campaign and the adamant stand he had taken as an un-pledged presidential elector in an attempt to thwart their presidential program. These sentiments are obviously more of an incentive for dislike on both men's parts than Sullivan would admit. Whatever the reason for the rift between the two men, because of Eastland's influence,

Sullivan lost the race for governor in 1971. In that particular race, described as one of the "major political upsets in the state's recent history,"³³ Eastland threw his support to William Waller and what should have been a clean-cut victory for then-Lieutenant Governor Charles Sullivan brought yet another loss to the dejected candidate.³⁴ According to David Hampton, this final blow seems to have made a lasting and perceivable impact on the confidence and determination of Sullivan, for he would never again seek Mississippi's gubernatorial office. In fact, even his bid for senator was only able to exist after Eastland's shadow disappeared, for "it took the announcement by Democratic U.S. Senator James O. Eastland that he would not seek re-election to bring Sullivan out of seven years of retirement, and he is headed for success."³⁵ The meaning of success could be extremely variable, however, for less than a year after Hampton penned this prediction, Sullivan's life abruptly ended.

There are, of course, several less significant factors that may have contributed to Sullivan's failure to become governor. Sullivan fluctuated from campaign to campaign in terms of staffing, going from having a small volunteer staff to a large, paid staff and then back to what he started with. This drew criticism not only from Sullivan himself but also from his opponents, for while in one race he devoted little attention to his campaign, in another he focused on it far too much and was made a mockery of by those who ran against him.³⁶ Like all politicians and people in general his words and actions were often misinterpreted, causing confusion and sometimes costing some votes. Finally, while Sullivan held great appeal for Mississippi's middle and upper classes and his core group of supporters were consistently faithful to him, he was never able to excite the enthusiasm of the rural and lower-class

voters. This may have had something to do with his off-stage demeanor, for while he was a dynamic speaker, Sullivan was in actuality refined and reserved when he stepped down from the podium.³⁷

For Charles L. Sullivan holding the office of governor meant more than just politics and power—it meant a genuine concern for the people of Mississippi, a commitment to the best for the state, and a career characterized by a struggle to attain his goals and cause his state to reach its fullest potential. In a speech at the Neshoba County Fair in '67, Sullivan declared that, "If it comes down to Mississippi versus Charlie Sullivan's future, I'll take Mississippi, and you won't have to question it."³⁸ Through a look at the political life of the courageous candidate one can see quite plainly that, in keeping with his honest and straightforward nature, he did just that. In his article, "The Quest—Not the Victory" Ellis describes the life of the man who gave up so much of his own future for the benefit of their state, asserting that even in those very losses that seemed such a defeat for the candidate he was able to give of himself, always taking Mississippi. In the inimitable words of Ellis:

It is the trying that strengthens and defines a man, not the prize or the accolades of the people. It is the quest, not the victory. Mississippi is a better state—a better place to live—because of Charlie Sullivan's single-minded pursuit of the state's highest elective office. True, he did not achieve this goal, although he deserved it. But in trying he left his imprint upon state political affairs for a generation. Many of the bold programs he courageously proposed have come to pass even under the lesser men who defeated him.³⁹

Whenever Sullivan was faced with the

option to back down from a controversial issue or to continue to press for what he believed was best for his state, he chose the latter, quite often sacrificing his own ambitions and goals for the good of Mississippi. In so doing he was able to exert powerful influence long after his death, and though he may not have lived to see his programs supported by the majority or even to know that many of them would one day become a permanent part of the state's legislature the venerable man could rest in knowing that, no matter what the price or personal loss, he always took Mississippi.

Notes

1. Erle Johnston, *Politics: Mississippi Style* (Forest, Mississippi: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1993), 23.
2. Mary and "Biz" Sullivan, interview by author, 1 March 2003, Jackson, MS, tape recording and notes. Mary is the widow of Sullivan, and Biz is their son.
3. Herber Ladner, ed., *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register 1968-1972*, 24.
4. David Hampton, "Campaign 'Flying High' For Democrat Sullivan," *Jackson Daily News*, 26 May 1978.
5. Ibid.
6. Ben Pryor, "Primaries Seem to Come Too Soon For Charlie Sullivan," *Clarksdale Mississippi Press Register*, 20 April 1979.
7. Ibid.
8. David Hampton, "Campaign 'Flying High' For Democrat Sullivan," *Jackson Daily News*, 26 May 1978.
9. Erle Johnston, *Politics: Mississippi Style* (Forest, Mississippi: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1993), 153.
10. Billy Skelton, "A Distinctively Different Mississippi Politician," *Clarion-Ledger Daily News*, 20 May 1979.
11. David Hampton, "Campaign 'Flying High' For Democrat Sullivan," *Jackson Daily News*, 26 May 1978.
12. Film Reel D-285. Speech by Sullivan at Neshoba County Fair, 6 August 1970, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.
13. Herber Ladner, ed., *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register 1968-1972*, 24.
14. Billy Skelton, "A Distinctively Different Mississippi Politician," *Clarion-Ledger Daily News*, 20 May 1979.
15. Ibid.
16. Terry Keeter, "Sullivan Followed by Controversy Through Quest for Elusive Dream," *Commercial Appeal*, 20 April

1979.

17. Erle Johnston, *Politics: Mississippi Style* (Forest, Mississippi: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1993), 137.

18. Terry Keeter, "Sullivan Followed by Controversy Through Quest for Elusive Dream," *Commercial Appeal*, 20 April 1979.

19. "Sullivan Calls His Stand 'Open Book'," *Clarion-Ledger*, 28 June 1959.

20. Ibid.

21. "Charles Sullivan Has Come a Long Ways," *Daily Herald*, 24 July 1963.

22. Terry Keeter, "Sullivan Followed by Controversy Through Quest for Elusive Dream," *Commercial Appeal*, 20 April 1979.

23. Ibid.

24. "Sullivan Calls His Stand 'Open Book'," *Clarion-Ledger*, 28 June 1959.

25. Terry Keeter, "Sullivan Followed By Controversy Through Quest For Elusive Dream," *Commercial Appeal*, 20 April 1979.

26. "Sullivan in Governor's Race Again," *Clarion-Ledger*, 5 March 1963.

27. Terry Keeter, "Sullivan Followed By Controversy Through Quest For Elusive Dream," *Commercial Appeal*, 20 April 1979.

28. Charles B. Gordon, "Sullivan's Hat Tossed into Ring for Governor," *Jackson Daily News*, 20 May 1971.

29. "State Politics Scan Sullivan's Role," *Daily Herald*, 9 August 1963.

30. Ibid.

31. Charles B. Gordon, "Sullivan's Hat Tossed into Ring for Governor," *Jackson Daily News*, 20 May 1971.

32. Ibid.

33. Ben Pryor, "Primaries Seem to Come Too Soon for Charlie Sullivan," *Clarksdale Mississippi Press Register*, 20 April 1979.

34. Ibid.

35. David Hampton, "Campaign 'Flying High' For Democrat Sullivan," *Jackson Daily News*, 26 May 1978.

36. Ibid.

37. Ben Pryor, "Primaries Seem to Come Too Soon for Charlie Sullivan," *Clarksdale Mississippi Press Register*, 20 April 1979.

38. Film Reel D-100. Speech by Sullivan at Neshoba County Fair, August 1967, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi.

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"State Politics Scan Sullivan's Role." *Daily Herald*, 9 August 1963.

Appendixes

Appendix A

Charles Sullivan campaign pamphlet from the 1963 gubernatorial race. Produced by Sullivan's campaign headquarters. Found in Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi. Located in file on Charles L. Sullivan.

Appendix B

Promotional campaign letter by Charles Sullivan to the people of Mississippi. Found in Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson, Mississippi. Located in file on Charles L. Sullivan.

Erin Hendricks is a junior at Southern Miss and is enrolled in the Senior Honors program.

She is currently pursuing a double major in English and History and hopes to complete a minor in Spanish before moving on to graduate school. Erin has no specific career plans at present, but hopes for a future that involves her greatest passions—traveling, working with people, and living a life that gives back to the One who has given her so much.