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Race and Wartime Politics during the the Administration of Governor Thomas L. Bailey (1944-1946)

by *Charles C. Bolton*

Mississippi voters selected Thomas L. Bailey as the state's forty-eighth governor in the summer of 1943. Bailey had long occupied a prominent place on the Mississippi political landscape. For at least some observers, his election—and subsequent gubernatorial administration—seemed to offer a more reasoned alternative to the wartime concerns voiced by a portion of the state's political leaders, expressed most prominently by a trio of the state's national legislators: U.S. Representative John Rankin and U.S. Senators Theodore Bilbo and Jim Eastland.¹ During World War II, all three of these politicians frequently and sharply sounded the alarm about what they viewed as a coming racial apocalypse, one that would under-



Portrait of Governor Thomas Lowry Bailey by Marie Hull (American, 1890-1980). Oil on canvas. Courtesy Delta State University Art Department, Marie Hull Collection.

¹ Though Eastland, and especially Bilbo, became well-known, outspoken white supremacists during the war years, Rankin—the House member representing northeast Mississippi since 1920—was equally vociferous on the race issue. Historian Jason Morgan Ward labeled him “the House’s most notorious Negrophobe.” See Jason Morgan Ward, “‘A War for States’ Rights’: The White Supremacist Vision of Double Victory,” in *Fog of War: The Second World War and the Civil Rights Movement*, ed. By Kevin M. Kruse and Stephen Tuck (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 134.

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mine the state's long-standing practices of racial segregation and black disfranchisement. At times, the fears of these men—and those of perhaps a majority of the state's political leadership—about threats to the state's racial arrangements seemed more important than supporting their own national party and its leader, Franklin D. Roosevelt, in the fight against fascism. While Bailey shared the desire to preserve white privilege in Mississippi, he sometimes proved less willing than his fellow Democratic politicians to elevate the race issue above all others during the war years.

By the spring and summer of 1943, racial tensions were indeed peaking nationwide. In June, a major racial disturbance occurred in Detroit, a city that had experienced a rapid influx of both white and black workers (many from the South) to power the "Arsenal of Democracy." Also in June, in Los Angeles, military personnel attacked young Mexicans, "zoot-suiters," in a week of violence that led to hundreds of injuries and more than one hundred arrests.² Mississippi also experienced several racial incidents during that same time, including conflicts that erupted in communities surrounding Camp Van Dorn in southwest Mississippi and Camp McCain in the central part of the state.³

Much of the racial unrest that roiled the southern home front by 1943 accompanied federal mobilization policies that challenged southern racial practices—most notably racial segregation. In the early 1940s, as the United States inched closer to war, President Franklin D. Roosevelt took small but significant steps to answer black demands to end discrimination in employment and in the military. Though FDR did not accede to the call from black activists to end segregation in the military, he did sign the Selective Training and Service Act of 1940, which created the World War II draft. That legislation officially disavowed discrimination: "in the selection and training of men . . . there shall be no discrimination against any person on account of race or color." In June 1941, hoping to forestall a planned "March on

² Dominic J. Capeci Jr. and Martha Wilkerson, *Layered Violence: The Detroit Rioters of 1943* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1991); and Thomas J. Sugrue, *The Origins of the Urban Crisis: Race and Inequality in Postwar Detroit* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996), ch. 1; Eduardo Obregón Pagán, *Murder at the Sleepy Lagoon: Zoot Suits, Race, and Riot in Wartime L.A.* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003).

³ Neil A. Wynn, *The African American Experience during World War II* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2010), 48; Ulysses Lee, *The Employment of Negro Troops* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, United States Army, 1994), ch. 12. According to Wynn, the racial tensions surrounding these two Mississippi military bases were among sixty-eight such conflicts nationwide in 1943 alone.

Washington” organized by black labor leader A. Philip Randolph and others, FDR issued Executive Order 8802, establishing what came to be called the Fair Employment Practices Committee, or FEPC. That order also touted the principle of nondiscrimination: “there shall be no discrimination in the employment of workers in defense industries or Government because of race, creed, color, or national origin.”⁴

The federal government’s wartime nondiscrimination policies placed southern racial practices into stark relief and provided an opening for challenges to the racial status quo, even in Mississippi. As a result, political leaders such as Bilbo, Eastland, Rankin, and others stiffened their resolve to preserve the kinds of racially discriminatory separation so carefully crafted over the preceding decades. During the congressional battle to eliminate the southern poll tax in 1942, Rankin called the effort “a long range communistic program to change our form of Government and . . . to take control of our elections out of the hands of white Americans.” In a speech to the Mississippi legislature in April 1944, Bilbo warned that the “people of the South must draw the color line tighter and tighter, and any white man or woman who dares to cross that color line should be promptly and forever ostracized.”⁵ While Mississippi politicians, like other southern leaders, disliked key aspects of the president’s home front policies and especially blamed FDR and his administration for unsettling the South’s racial landscape, they generally avoided criticizing the president directly. Southern politicians typically supported President Roosevelt’s foreign policy leadership. They also appreciated how economic mobilization, through the development of Army camps, shipyards, munitions factories and other federal installations, had lifted the region from the economic doldrums. And they could not discount the president’s continuing popularity with their constituents. While southern whites in general may have also worried about the long-term durability of racial segregation and black disfranchisement, they generally discounted fears expressed by their leaders that President Roosevelt

⁴ Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 210-211; “Selective Training and Service Act of 1940,” <http://www.legisworks.org/congress/76/publaw-783.pdf>; “Executive Order 8802,” <https://www.eeoc.gov/eeoc/history/35th/thelaw/eo-8802.html>.

⁵ Rankin quoted in Ward, “A War for States’ Rights,” 134-135; Address by Senator Bilbo Before the Mississippi Legislature, April 12, 1944, *Congressional Record*, Appendix, April 17, 1944, 1801. See also, J. Lee Annis Jr., *Big Jim Eastland: The Godfather of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 60-61.

posed a threat to southern traditions. Indeed, a spring 1943 Gallup poll showed that 80 percent of all southerners solidly backed FDR.⁶

Thomas Bailey entered the 1943 governor's race with a distinguished resume. Born in January 1888, Bailey hailed from Webster County. He started out as a high school teacher and principal but later studied law and opened a practice in Meridian. Elected to the state House of Representatives from Lauderdale County while in his late twenties, Bailey served in that body for almost twenty-five years (twelve as Speaker). Bailey had a reputation in the legislature as supporting progressive reforms for whites. He backed the creation of the homestead exemption program, improvements in the state highway system, and Governor Hugh White's "Balance Agriculture with Industry" project. Bailey had a particularly strong record as a friend of public education (primarily for white students); among other efforts, he supported a guaranteed eight-month school session, teachers' pensions, free textbooks, compulsory education, and an independent higher education board. Mississippi political observers also widely perceived Bailey as an enemy of "The Man," U.S. Senator Theodore Bilbo. During Bilbo's second gubernatorial term from 1928 to 1932, Bailey was speaker of the Mississippi House and became one of the so-called Big Four, a powerful legislative group that blocked numerous Bilbo initiatives. Furthering burnishing Bailey's progressive standing was his equally impressive wife, Nellah Bailey, a public librarian in Meridian for thirty years and a prominent and active clubwoman on the state level. After Thomas Bailey's death in 1946, Nellah Bailey became the first woman elected to statewide office in Mississippi, when in 1947 she won the position of state tax collector.⁷

Bailey, who had previously run unsuccessfully for governor in 1939, had three opponents in the 1943 race. All were familiar names on the gubernatorial ballot over the previous two decades. Dennis Murphree, the sitting lieutenant governor, had served as chief executive for ten

⁶ Ira Katznelson, *Fear Itself: The New Deal and the Origins of Our Time* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2013), ch. 8 and 9; "Anti-New Deal 'Revolt' Fails to Materialize," *The Southern Patriot*, July 1943; "People of the South Will Support the President for Reelection in 1944," *The Southern Patriot*, June 1943.

⁷ David G. Sansing, "Thomas Lowry Bailey: Forty-eighth Governor of Mississippi: 1944-1946," *Mississippi History Now*, <http://mshistorynow.mdah.state.ms.us/articles/265/index.php?s=extra&id=147>; "Tom L. Bailey is Candidate," *Webster Progress*, September 1, 1938; "Bailey Sold Mississippi to Mississippians," *Vicksburg Sunday Post Herald*, November 3, 1946; Hope Ridings Miller, "Land of Cotton Still the Solid South; Despite Dissatisfaction It Will Go Along for Fourth Term," *Washington Post*, September 8, 1943.

months in the late 1920s after Governor Henry Whitfield died in office. Murphree had already lost two races for the top office, in 1927 and 1935. Lester Franklin, a protégé of two giants of twentieth-century Mississippi politics—James K. Vardaman and Bilbo—was a three-time loser in the gubernatorial sweepstakes. However, he had served as chair of the State Tax Commission and worked for the Federal Trade Commission in Washington, D.C. Mike Conner, a Yale Law School graduate, had served as speaker of the Mississippi House for almost a decade, from 1915 to 1924. Although Conner failed in his 1923 gubernatorial bid, Mississippi voters elected him to that office in 1931, where he served during the Great Depression and the early New Deal. Although he engineered a number of reforms, including passage of a state sales tax and changes to the higher education board, according to historian Dennis Mitchell, Conner as governor was “wedded to a business-friendly philosophy, . . . [he] offered next to nothing to his constituency, and simply relied on the federal largesse, which he tried to administer honestly.” Conner sought the governor’s chair again in 1939 but lost in a run-off to Paul Johnson Sr. In 1943, Conner led the four-man field in the first primary and squared off in the second round against Bailey.⁸

During the second primary of the gubernatorial campaign, local issues played a prominent role in the race. Both Conner and Bailey stressed their credentials as supporters of public education. Mike Conner touted himself as the “true friend of public education,” citing his achievements as governor, which went beyond the mere “promises as a candidate.” Thomas Bailey, for his part, could point to his many legislative actions over the years to support public education—as well as his past work as an educator. He stressed his belief that “equality of opportunity in our democracy begins with the school.” Bailey also garnered a good deal of support from women voters, who perhaps played an outsized role in this election, since many men were away working war jobs or on military duty (although some voted via absentee ballot). Helen Crooks, state chairwoman of the “Tom Bailey Women’s Committee,” touted Bailey in a statewide mailing to women voters as the candidate who “has done more for the aged, the school teachers, home owners, the youth, and every age

⁸ David G. Sansing, “Dennis Murphree: Forty-second and Forty-seventh Governor of Mississippi: 1927-1928; 1943-1944,” *Mississippi History Now*, <http://www.mshistorynow.mdah.ms.gov/articles/265/index.php?s=extra&id=143>; Chester M. Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 20; Dennis J. Mitchell, *A New History of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2014), ch. 11.

group in the state than any other public official.” Crooks proclaimed that “Women Can, Women Will, Women Must Elect Tom Bailey Governor.” In the end, Bailey bested Conner by nearly 20,000 votes out of almost 280,000 cast and won fifty-seven of the state’s eighty-two counties.⁹

Despite the centrality of local concerns in the contest, national issues loomed prominently over the state’s political proceedings in 1943. National Democrats were especially anxious about Mississippi’s gubernatorial election that year and watched it as a harbinger of whether the Democratic South (the only viable political entity in the region at the time) would support FDR’s upcoming bid in 1944 for an unprecedented fourth term. *Time* magazine described the August Democratic primary as “the first ballot-box test of 1943’s anti-New Deal sentiment in the South.” Turner Catledge, a Mississippi native who wrote for *The New York Times*, concluded just prior to the first primary vote that it “will give some indication of the present standing of the Roosevelt Administration in the Solid South.”¹⁰

The national media made little distinction between the four Mississippi gubernatorial candidates, since they all espoused opposition to efforts to alter southern race relations. *Time* magazine noted that while all four men supported FDR’s foreign policy, they all “unanimously bayed against New Deal ‘meddling’ in the race question. All stood foursquare for white supremacy.” Conner and Franklin offered the most strident rhetoric. Conner talked about “crackpots and meddlers” in Washington, people who “are trying to force upon us political and social equality with the Negro.” Franklin, for his part, claimed the South was “faced with grave trouble, which is being brought upon us by outside meddlers who do not understand our problems with respect to our relations with the negro race.” He affirmed that he was “for White Supremacy and racial purity [sic] first, last and always, and will not tolerate any crackpot theories seeking to bring about equality between the races.” Bailey expressed much the same sentiments, though in more subdued language. For instance, he noted in one instance that “meddlesome foreign societ-

⁹ “Mike Conner – True Friend of Public Education,” April 1943, Broadsides Collection, Mississippi Department of Archives and History, Jackson (MDAH); Tom Bailey to the Teachers, School Bus Drivers and School Trustees of the Schools of Mississippi, August 19, 1943, and Helen Crooks to The Women of Mississippi, n.d., 1943, both in Subject File: Thomas L. Bailey, 1928-1943, MDAH; “Roll of Counties,” 2nd Primary, August 24, 1943, Subject File: Elections, 1943, MDAH.

¹⁰ “Eyes on Mississippi,” *Time*, August 16, 1943; Turner Catledge, “Watch Mississippi as New Deal Test,” *The New York Times*, August 1, 1943.

ies have sought to hamstring us in dealing with our own problems and relations in Mississippi and the south. I have more than once joined the fight against repeal of the poll tax in our own state legislature.”¹¹

Interestingly, the northern black press saw this subtle distinction in rhetoric as a sign that Bailey offered a potentially progressive voice on southern race relations. In the second primary, Conner amped up the anti-black rhetoric, reportedly promising at one rally in Bolivar County that “if I am elected, I will give every white man a pistol to protect his family from the n____a.” Bailey, however, refused to match this appeal and simply noted that “this is no time to bring up the race issue.” He suggested that inflaming such passions would be “a handicap to the present war effort.” As a result, some black observers, such as M. S. Stuart, a *Pittsburgh Courier* columnist originally from Mississippi and living in Memphis, believed that although Bailey had not “promised any radical reforms in racial conditions . . . he refused to run on a platform of race prejudice and abuse. He dared leave himself open to the inference that in fairness he would be the governor of all the people, including the darker half.” That perception of Bailey as a racial moderate persisted into Bailey’s term as governor. When John H. Young III, a special correspondent for the *Pittsburgh Courier*, interviewed Governor Bailey in early 1945, Young acknowledged that Bailey did not support suffrage for blacks but did give “the impression that a new type of thinking is being applied to the Negro. It is a progressive thought, which includes the Negro in the State program on a decidedly higher level than has ever before existed in Mississippi.”¹² Bailey’s racial moderation, of course, probably did not garner him many votes—no blacks cast ballots in the all-white Democratic primary—but his more subdued stance does not seem to have cost him many votes either.

In Mississippi, during the 1943 election, Conner’s anti-New Deal (and by extension, anti-FDR) attack was sometimes perceived as support

¹¹ “Eyes on Mississippi”; Arthur Evans, “New Deal’s Bid for Negro Vote Irks Mississippi,” *Chicago Daily Tribune*, August 1, 1943; Platform of Lester Franklin, Candidate for Governor of Mississippi, n.d., 1943, Box 992, Theodore G. Bilbo Papers, McCain Library and Archives, University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg.

¹² “Negroes Fear Future Violence in Mississippi,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, August 7, 1943; M. S. Stuart, “Southern Say-So,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, October 9, 1943; James B. Lloyd, ed., *Lives of Mississippi Authors, 1817-1967* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1981), 425-426; John H. Young III, “Even Mississippi Has Two Sides in Race Relations, One Hopeful, the Other, Dark, Discouraging,” *Pittsburgh Courier*, February 24, 1945.

for the interests of the economically privileged at the expense of the common man. C. L. Lundy of Holmes County claimed that Conner was “the rich man’s candidate” and that “the banks and money powers here are doing their level best to elect Conner.” After Bailey’s victory, J. C. Raper of Tupelo attributed the future governor’s success to the fact that he “was for the common man and a friend to the president.” M. C. Durr from Brookhaven saw a vote for Conner as a “backward step,” since “his life and policy conform more to the order of Hitler, Wilkie [sic], and their kind which is a vote in the direction of Slavery for the poor man.” And despite Conner’s strong anti-black stance, that approach did not satisfy either those who feared the Republicans more or those who favored a quieter endorsement of white supremacy. Durr feared that Conner’s opposition to President Roosevelt would ultimately lead to the victory “of some Negro loving trouble maker like Wilkie [sic].” J. D. Roberts, a Conner supporter (and struggling typist), noted after the election that “the bailey Voters say you Dwelt on the Rasial Negrow Ishue two Much.”¹³

Conner’s perceived hostility to the president certainly heightened some lower-class resentment that Conner might not be a friend of the common man. An assist to Bailey from a popular state leader, Theodore Bilbo, another perceived champion of poor whites, further diminished support for Conner in the second primary. In the first primary, Bilbo had backed Lester Franklin, a man he believed was “truly in sympathy with Southern ideals” and who had “been urging and supporting white supremacy.” For the runoff campaign, the senator officially claimed to be uninterested. Although Bilbo was in Mississippi during the weeks between the two elections, he said he would be in his home county of Pearl River “putting in 24 hours a day now finishing Juniper Grove Church and building the pastor a home.” Both second primary candidates had opposed Bilbo in the past, but Bailey had been a particularly prominent obstacle for Bilbo during his second gubernatorial term. As a member of the legislative Big Four, Bailey had “wrecked Bilbo’s gravy-train.” So, many Bilbo supporters thought “The Man” would favor Conner in 1943 as the lesser of two evils. Bilbo, however, had other thoughts. Already looking ahead to his 1946 reelection campaign, Bilbo worried that a successful Governor Conner would become a formidable challenger.

¹³ C. L. Lundy to Theodore G. Bilbo, August 21, 1943; J. C. Raper to Senator Bilbo, August 25, 1943; and J. D. Roberts to Mike Connor [sic], August 27, 1943, all in Box 790, and M. C. Durr to Senator Bilbo, Box 788, all in Bilbo Papers. Wendell Willkie was the 1940 Republican presidential candidate.

Bilbo privately signaled his support to Bailey in the run-off contest and had his former campaign manager send out three thousand letters “to our key men throughout the State.” After the election, Bilbo credited his clandestine support for Bailey with “saving the day” for the newly elected governor. Bilbo crowed that “in this fight I followed the Bible strictly by not letting the right hand know what the left was doing,” though his actions had more to do with a cold calculation about his own political future than with deflecting attention from his charitable deeds. Bilbo also told national Democratic leaders, such as Senator Joseph Guffey of Pennsylvania, that “we whipped ‘the hell’ out of the leading anti-Roosevelt, anti-New Deal candidate, including all the corporations.”¹⁴

The national considerations that served as a crucial background for Mississippi’s gubernatorial election of 1943 continued to simmer in the aftermath of Bailey’s triumph. When the Executive Committee of the Mississippi Democratic Party met in the days after the second primary, a subcommittee of that body submitted a resolution “severely criticizing the New Deal with reference to the racial question and its ‘orgy of Federal spending.’” Another faction of the Executive Committee, described by one member as those who welcomed the “triumph of the liberal forces that are grateful for, and loyal to, our National Party,” presumably the Bailey voters, submitted a substitute resolution. It maintained the original critique of federal race “meddling” and lambasted the usurpation of states’ rights in general but preceded these statements with a long preamble praising FDR and his administration. That statement, among other things, claimed that Roosevelt had “brought us out of the trials, tribulations and despair of economic collapse to a period of business prosperity and to a high level of restored human dignity; and has thus for lead [sic] our Armed Forces girdling the world from victory to victory without any material loss of our cherished traditions and principles.” The Executive Committee deadlocked on which statement to approve, and the meeting adjourned with both sides planning

¹⁴ Theodore Bilbo to McCoy, Chrestman, and Ward, July 29, 1943, Box 1084; Theodore Bilbo to M. C. Durr, August 10, 1943; Dick C. McCool to Theodore G. Bilbo, August 9, 1943; J. D. Roberts to Theodore G. Bilbo, August 7, 1943; and Theodore Bilbo to Forrest B. Jackson, August 10, 1943, all in Box 788; and Theodore Bilbo to Hansford L. Simmons, August 30, 1943, and Theodore Bilbo to Joseph F. Guffey, August 29, 1943, both in Box 790, all in Bilbo Papers; Charles Granville Hamilton, *Mississippi, Mirror of the 1920’s* (Aberdeen, Miss.: Gregg-Hamilton, 1979), 51; Matthew 6:3. The actual text of this verse is: “But when you give to the poor, don’t let your left hand know what your right hand is doing.”

to submit their resolutions at the party's 1944 state convention.¹⁵

By the time the party assembled in Jackson in June 1944, whatever "liberal" forces existed within the party leadership following the 1943 gubernatorial election had weakened considerably. Herbert Holmes, conservative state chairman of the party, marshaled his forces and kept the Bailey men at bay. The meeting, held on June 7, one day after D-Day, was reportedly "the shortest convention on record and one of the quietest." The most excitement at the event came during the keynote speech. Although the state convention typically featured the titular head of the party, the sitting governor, as the convention's keynote speaker, Holmes bypassed Governor Bailey in favor of Ripley banker and lawyer, Fred Smith. He gave a rousing anti-New Deal speech and linked FDR's policies to an expansion of black rights. Everyone at the meeting, of course, knew of the recent U. S. Supreme Court ruling, *Smith v. Allwright*, which had held the white primary unconstitutional. Fears about the implications of this ruling largely united the state's Democratic leaders. As W. T. Wynn, chair of the convention's Resolutions Committee, noted, the decisive issue became "whether Congress has a right to invade the sanctity of the States and say that the State has no jurisdiction over the qualifications of its voters. Deep underneath the issue and bluntly stated is whether ultimately white supremacy will continue, or black supremacy will supersede [sic] white supremacy in our political sovereignty." While Bailey was himself no enemy of white supremacy, he did not seem as dedicated to the cause as others. For instance, delegates had discussed submitting a resolution to the state convention asking the governor to call a special session to repeal the primary system. However, Bailey never indicated much enthusiasm for this action.¹⁶

The state meeting selected eighteen delegates to attend the national convention in July in Chicago, but in a somewhat unusual move, the state's entire congressional delegation—including Bilbo, Eastland and Rankin—and Governor Bailey were not elected to any of the slots. At

¹⁵ Kenneth Toler, "Mississippi Primary Plans are Completed," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 5, 1944; T. D. Davis to Friends, September 9, 1943, and Resolution of the State Democratic Executive Committee of the State of Mississippi (substitute resolution), n.d., August 1943, both in Box 1108, Bilbo Papers.

¹⁶ "Mississippi Primary Plans are Completed"; Turner Catledge, "Mississippi Joins New Deal 'Rebels,'" *New York Times*, June 8, 1944; W. T. Wynn, "A Mississippi Leader States the Issue," *The Southern Weekly*, August 5, 1944, in Box 64, Walter Sillers Papers, Charles W. Capps Jr. Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.

district caucus meetings on the evening of June 6, the seven hundred or so Democrats in town for the convention judged the governor and the state's U. S. Senators and Congressmen "too New Dealish." Bailey, along with Senators Bilbo and Eastland, however, did receive three of the eight at-large delegate seats named by the convention. In a resolution passed with almost unanimous support, the delegates received instructions to press national Democrats in Chicago to support four issues: to restore the two-thirds rule at the national convention, which gave southern Democrats veto power over what they viewed as questionable decisions; to declare opposition to federal efforts to repeal the poll tax; to support states' rights; and to avoid making "any declaration for social equality between the colored and white races." Should the Mississippi delegates fail to secure assurances from the national convention to support these measures, they were "absolved from any obligation to vote for the nominees of the Democratic National Convention and are at liberty to vote for any Democrat holding views in harmony with those expressed in this resolution."¹⁷

When the national Democrats held their convention a month later in Chicago, the "revolt" planned against the national party by the Mississippi delegation, as well as those from South Carolina and Texas, bore little fruit. White Southerners hoped to prevent the adoption of a strong civil rights plank in the platform, certainly nothing bolder than the bland statement of 1940 promising to uphold due process and equal protection of the laws. The president had signaled as much when he met with Georgia governor Ellis Arnall—one of the South's most moderate politicians—two weeks prior to the convention. Arnall told FDR everything was lined up for the president, "if only he could keep the Negro problem from coming too much to the fore." Roosevelt reportedly communicated to Arnall that everything "is all fixed," as the Democrats would produce a short platform. The president was correct about the platform's relative brevity, but it did contain a fairly strong statement on race: "We believe that racial and religious minorities have the right to live, develop and vote equally with all citizens and share the rights that are guaranteed by our Constitution. Congress should exert its full constitutional powers to protect those rights." On a voice vote on the platform, many southern delegates shouted their disapproval

¹⁷ "Mississippi Joins New Deal 'Rebels,'" Wynn, "A Mississippi Leader States the Issue"; *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1944* (Chicago: Democratic Party, National Convention, 1944), 138.

because of this clause but to no avail. Press reports back in Mississippi claimed that its delegates had “not only had this plank stuffed down their throats but were forced to swallow the nails in the plank too.”¹⁸

While white Southerners had what turned out to be unrealistic hopes that they could block a pro-civil rights platform plank, few expected southern delegates to prevent FDR’s nomination for a fourth term, especially given his broad popularity among the southern people. Even so, the Mississippi delegation to the Democratic convention determined to try. The group canvassed before the presidential vote, and Mike Conner urged the group to follow the instructions from the state party and vote for U. S. Senator Harry Byrd from Virginia. In a “fiery speech,” Conner “severely criticized President Roosevelt and the New Deal’s attitude toward the South.” The caucus voted to support Byrd. Only Governor Bailey and Circuit Judge Jesse Graham of Meridian voted against the measure. On the first and only presidential ballot, Mississippi threw its twenty votes to Byrd (he received a total of eighty-nine votes to Roosevelt’s 1,086).¹⁹

White Southerners did achieve one victory at the convention: preventing the vice-presidential re-nomination of Henry Wallace, a man who, according to the *Chicago Defender*, was hated by white Southerners “because of his outspoken championship of complete freedom for the Negro.” Southern Democrats initially divided their support for the vice-presidential nomination among several candidates—all the Mississippi delegates backed Alabama Senator John H. Bankhead on the first ballot—but eventually threw their support to Harry S. Truman, perceived as someone who could both defeat Wallace and be trusted to protect southern traditions. Afterwards, many of Mississippi’s top political leaders vied for credit in securing Truman’s nomination, including Missis-

¹⁸ Robert H. Ferrell, *Choosing Truman: The Democratic Convention of 1944* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 66-67; “The Present Political Dilemma,” *Atlanta Daily World*, July 9, 1944; *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1944*, 94-95; “The Fighting South,” *West Point (Miss.) Daily Times Leader*, n.d., 1944, in Wynn, “A Mississippi Leader States the Issue.”

¹⁹ *Official Report of the Proceedings of the Democratic National Convention, 1944*, 110, 256, 270; “State Delegates to Vote for Byrd,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 18, 1944. Mike Conner was elected as a delegate in the district caucus balloting.

ssippi House Speaker Walter Sillers, Theodore Bilbo, and Jim Eastland.²⁰

With Truman on the ticket, most of Mississippi's political leaders, at both the state and national levels, urged support for the Roosevelt-Truman ticket in 1944. At the local level, however, some Mississippi Democrats pointed to the instructions issued at the June state party convention and refused to endorse the national presidential ticket. At an October 1944 mass meeting of Democrats in Washington County, the attendees pledged to support the Republicans unless some or all the state's nine presidential electors agreed to follow the directions of the state party and vote for someone other than FDR for president in the Electoral College. Those at the meeting claimed that "the sentiment is stronger against the New Deal now in Mississippi than on June 7."²¹

One item that had further angered many white Mississippians was the U. S. Army's July order prohibiting segregation at post exchanges and theaters and on government-run transportation. The official statement from the Washington County meeting complained about, among other matters, the "anti-segregation order which has made every military post in the South a potential powder keg." While Governor Bailey "urged" FDR and the Secretary of War to reconsider the anti-segregation directive, some Mississippians thought the governor could have protested the move more vigorously. John Batte, who owned a furniture company in Jackson, described Bailey's communication to federal officials as "about the mildest and weakest statement that I ever

²⁰ Walter White, "People and Places," *Chicago Defender*, August 12, 1944; "Truman Nomination Credited to Sillers," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 3, 1945; "Close to Truman," news clipping, *Meridian Star*, April 1945, Box 1125, Bilbo Papers; William F. Winter to Daddy and Mama, July 24, 1944, copy in author's possession; Maarten Zwiers, *Senator James Eastland: Mississippi's Jim Crow Democrat* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 29-31. Ironically, Truman's later support for civil rights would precipitate the walkout of Mississippi's delegation at the 1948 Democratic National Convention, because of the adoption by the party of a strong civil rights plank. See Kari Fredrickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), ch. 4.

²¹ "Democrats of County Opposed to Roosevelt Declare Intention to Back Sheldon G.O.P.," *Greenville Delta Democrat-Times*, October 25, 1944.

heard a man in public office make about an issue so vital to the south.”²²

Ten days before the presidential election, three of Mississippi's nine presidential electors announced that they found the Democratic platform “obnoxious” and would cast their ballots for Harry Byrd. Two additional electors declared they were also considering such an action. Most estimates at the time suggested that anti-Roosevelt voters represented only about 10 percent of the state's electorate. So, selection of this split electoral ticket would greatly overrepresent the amount of anti-FDR sentiment in the state. The week before the presidential election, Governor Bailey, recovering from an operation and with “his chest bulging with bandages,” sprang into action. He called a special session of the legislature and asked the lawmakers to “enact legislation giving ‘all qualified electors the right to freely express their choice at the ballot box.’” He claimed that the bolting electors were “in effect voting for Dewey”—the Republican presidential candidate. The Friday before the national election, the legislature approved, and Governor Bailey signed, a bill giving lawmakers the power to name a new group of electors and to print a supplemental ballot, which included five new pro-FDR electors to join the four committed Roosevelt men already on the slate. This solution, however, did nothing to help the twenty-five thousand soldiers absent from the state who had already or would vote using the ballot with the divided ticket of electors. State representative Jesse Shanks estimated that the soldiers would have voted “99 to 1 for Roosevelt and Truman” and lambasted the electoral bolters for effecting “a stab in the back for our finest citizens, men who are giving their lives for the very democracy that we are denying them.” Two hundred and twenty-five thousand supplemental pink ballots were quickly printed, and the State Highway Patrol distributed the new tickets to polling places around the state. On election day, the original ballots with the anti-FDR electors were only used in a few counties, such as Washington. Ninety-four percent of Mississippi voters chose

²² “Democrats of County Opposed to Roosevelt Declare Intention to Back Sheldon G.O.P.”; Morris J. MacGregor Jr., *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Center of Military History, 2001), 44-46; “Bailey Protest Ban of Racial Segregation in Military Camps,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 31, 1944; John C. Batte to Thomas G. Abernethy, September 1, 1944, Box 382, Thomas G. Abernethy Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford.

the Democrats and almost all of them utilized the pro-FDR pink forms.²³

Amid these political maneuverings, the two legislative sessions of the Bailey administration (1944 and 1946) brought positive changes to the people of the state. Rod Sparrow, Jackson correspondent for the Associated Press, noted in 1946 that Bailey had begun “to effectuate a great progressive program in the state.” During the 1944 legislative session, a large surplus—generated by taxation on unprecedented war profits—was used to pay down the state’s debt, while at the same time, Bailey led a major reorganization of the parole board, the penitentiary system, the state college board, and other state agencies. At the beginning of the 1946 legislative session, Bailey proposed a twenty-seven-point program to the legislature, which passed virtually the entire agenda during the session. Buoyed by a continuing revenue surplus of more than \$15 million, the legislature approved state expenditures for a host of new projects: highways, state office buildings, schools for the blind and deaf, and public education in general, including funds specifically dedicated to black education.²⁴

Bailey’s record as governor led his supporters to tout him as a possible opponent to Senator Theodore Bilbo in his reelection campaign of 1946. Ironically, Bilbo had backed Bailey over Conner in 1943 in part to prevent what he thought might be a strong challenge from a sitting governor. Bailey did indeed seem to pose a real threat to Bilbo’s incumbency, in large part “because of the unparalleled success of his legislative program,” according to the local press. Bailey, however, never clearly indicated that he would run for the U. S. Senate seat, and his declining health ultimately short-circuited any plans he may have been contemplating. Beginning in late February 1946, Bailey underwent a series of surgeries to treat a tumor on his spine. Periods of brief recovery were followed by relapses,

²³ “Governor Confers with Rice after 3 Party Electors Bolt,” Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, October 30, 1944; “The Still-Simmering South,” *Time*, November 6, 1944; “Bailey Appeals to Legislature for Vote Laws,” Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, November 2, 1944; Nat Caldwell, “Mississippi Picks New Electors,” *Nashville Tennessean*, November 3, 1944; Nat Caldwell, “Mississippi Governor Signs Pro-Roosevelt Elector Bill,” *Nashville Tennessean*, November 4, 1944; William A. Winter to William F. Winter, November 13, 1944, copy in author’s possession. Before the election one of the two waffling electors agreed to join the Byrd forces; the other pledged to support Roosevelt-Truman, but this endorsement came too late for him to avoid being replaced on the supplemental ticket.

²⁴ Rod Sparrow, “‘Most Progress’ Seen for Magnolia State,” Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, November 24, 1946; Kenneth Toler, “Bailey Set Revenue Record,” January 1946, Subject File: Thomas L. Bailey, Jan.-Apr. 1946, MDAH; “Governor Bailey is Dead,” Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, November 3, 1946; “Says State Will Build for 25 Years,” West Point (*Miss.*) *Daily Times Leader*, January 15, 1946.

until Bailey finally succumbed to his illness on November 2, 1946.²⁵

With Bailey unable to run for the U.S. Senate in 1946, incumbent Theodore Bilbo cruised to victory in the summer Democratic primary but not without arousing a firestorm of controversy. During the campaign, he suggested that violence might be necessary to keep black voters from the polls. Those comments led to a full-scale investigation by the U. S. Senate and a battle over whether to seat the Mississippi senator in the Eightieth U. S. Congress (Bilbo died in 1947 before that question was resolved). Had Bailey been able to run, he would have represented a moderate alternative to Bilbo in 1946, someone committed to maintaining racial segregation but who tried to downplay the race issue whenever possible to focus on other matters—someone in the mold of Georgia’s moderate governor, Ellis Arnall.²⁶

Although his career was cut short by illness, Thomas L. Bailey seemed to offer an alternative to the racial paranoia of someone like Senator Bilbo, who, whenever possible, stoked racial fears to address the challenges to the state’s social relations wrought by war mobilization. Bailey, of course, had impeccable segregationist credentials. He had supported efforts to tighten Mississippi’s transportation segregation laws in both the 1944 and 1946 legislative sessions. And when the U. S. Supreme Court declared interstate bus segregation unconstitutional in June 1946, Governor Bailey reaffirmed that “segregation will continue down here. Neither the whites nor the Negroes want it any other way.” Yet Bailey did not go out of his way to rail against the erosion of Mississippi’s racial traditions, a la “The Man.” Hodding Carter Jr., editor of the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times* and an outspoken Bilbo critic, described Bailey as someone who “never descended to pitting class against class, race against race and religion against religion, as have some of the louder, more blatant and less worthy of our politicians.” In April 1946, when the National Negro Council asked President Truman to send federal troops to Mississippi to protect black voters, particularly black veterans, in the upcoming Democratic primary election, Bailey refused to comment on the matter. Despite repeated calls for Governor Bailey to call a special session of the legislature to adjust Mississippi’s election laws to guarantee black disfranchisement, Bailey refused to summon lawmakers for such

²⁵ “Bailey Is Still Senate Prospect, Friends Declare,” *Jackson Daily News*, April 3, 1946; Kenneth Toler, “Bailey Wants Senate Post,” *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 7, 1946; “Governor Bailey is Dead,” *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 3, 1946.

a meeting. Black Mississippians, for their part, continued to appreciate Bailey's racial moderation. After the governor's death, a group of black Methodists in north Mississippi commended Bailey for "promoting a better understanding between the two racial populations in Mississippi."²⁷

²⁷ "State Statute Sets Partitions on Buses," Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, May 14, 1944; "Bill Asks Legislature For Separate City Buses for Negroes, Whites," *Atlanta Daily World*, January 1946, reel 96, Tuskegee Institute News Clippings File; "'Jim Crow' Will Continue in South, Governor of Mississippi Asserts," *New York Times*, June 5, 1946; "Tom Bailey," Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, November 5, 1946; "Bailey Withholds Comment on Story," Jackson *Clarion-Ledger*, April 28, 1946; "No Special Session in '46 Planned by Governor," Jackson *Daily News*, September 15, 1946; "Negro Methodists Commend Bailey's Understanding," Jackson *Daily News*, December 3, 1946.

