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Fielding L. Wright (1946-1952): Legacy of a White-Supremacist Progressive

by James Patterson Smith

On Sunday morning, May 9, 1948, Mississippi's greying, fifty-three-year-old governor, Fielding L. Wright, took to the airwaves at 7:30 a.m. for an unprecedented statewide radio address "to the Negro citizens of Mississippi." In the 1940s, African Americans constituted half of the state's 2.2 million residents.¹ However, a maze of discriminatory practices barred all but a minuscule number of black Mississippians from the ballot box. Oddly, the text of the speech had been released to the newspapers on the previous afternoon, guaranteeing front-page Sunday morning headlines appearing simultaneously with the broadcast.² Significantly, this broadcast took place on the eve of a widely-promoted protest rally



Fielding Wright, Courtesy, Mississippi Department of Archives and History

¹ Heber Ladner, *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register 1945-49*, State of Mississippi, 80. See also, the 1952 edition of this work with a breakdown of black and white percentages in the populations of each of Mississippi's eighty-two counties, according to the 1950 Federal Census.

² Fielding Wright, "Governor Wright Speaks to the Negroes of Mississippi," May 9, 1948, incomplete WRBC transcript in OH transcripts/AU 1002 116558, Mississippi Department of Archives and History (MDAH), Jackson. See also, complete Wright press release, "Address to be Delivered at 7:30 Sunday Morning May 9, [1948], Over a Statewide Radio Network," in Fielding Wright Subject File, January to May, 1949, MDAH.

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against President Harry Truman's 1948 civil rights program. Over the previous twenty years, Fielding Wright had been acclaimed for his progressive legislative record in transportation, education, tax policy, industrial development, natural resource conservation, public health, old-age pensions, and welfare. His constructive engagement with the state's problems had earned him the endorsement of Hodding Carter's liberal-leaning *Delta Democrat Times* in the 1947 governor's race.³ This progressive record, however, was soon forgotten. Through the spring of 1948, Wright emerged as a leading southern anti-Truman, states' rights activist. Wright's May 9 broadcast "to the Negroes citizens of Mississippi" underscored the racist and backward-looking underpinnings of the 1948 states' rights or "Dixiecrat" movement. In accepting a leadership role in such a movement, Fielding Wright built the profoundly negative image that has long obscured his substantial achievements as a progressive legislator.

In fact, Fielding Wright, an attorney born in 1895, had been raised at Rolling Fork in Sharkey County, a 70 percent black-majority county in the cotton-rich Mississippi Delta. In the 1940s, thirty-five of Mississippi's eighty-two counties held black majorities. Wright was the grandson of a wealthy planter. His father had managed family plantations and served several terms as sheriff of Sharkey County.⁴ The Delta experience had shaped Fielding Wright's obsession with the pillars of legalized discrimination that upheld white political power in Mississippi's black-majority counties.⁵ For Wright, white political control was the crux of the matter in 1948.

The true purpose of the May 9 radio speech emerged as Wright launched harsh criticisms of President Harry Truman's 1948 civil rights proposals and laid out his case for bolting the Democratic Party if they were not withdrawn. Adding red meat to the mix, he asserted that the "wise of both races" would "recognize the absolute necessity of segregation" as a bulwark "to protect the integrity" of both races. From the governor's chair, Fielding Wright then threw down

³ Editorial, *Greenville Delta Democrat-Times*, reprinted in the *Jackson Daily News*, "Editorials of Note," June 18, 1947.

⁴ *Jackson Daily News*, December 8, 1946; Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-68* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 74; and Elbert Hilliard, "A Biography of Fielding Wright: Mississippi's Mr. State's Rights" (master's thesis, Mississippi State University, 1959), 7.

⁵ Ladner, *Mississippi Official and Statistical Register*, 1952 edition, population map.

a warning to Negroes: "If any of you have become so deluded as to want to enter our white schools, patronize our hotels and cafes, enjoy social equality with the whites, then true kindness . . . requires me to advise you to make your home in some state other than Mississippi."⁶

In matters of race and civil rights, instead of grappling with the requirements of the future or probing for compromise, Wright looked to the past, seeking desperately to preserve Mississippi's post-Reconstruction, semi-feudal racial caste system. Thus, from 1948 forward, a bitter defense of segregation and white supremacy welded to the decoy language of states' rights came to dominate the image of Fielding Wright. Within weeks, his outspoken stance propelled him to the vice-presidential nomination of the white-supremacist States' Rights or "Dixiecrat" Party with Governor Strom Thurmond of South Carolina as its presidential standard bearer. In the process, Wright's prior record as a southern progressive was all but lost to memory and all but lost to the state's own self-image and its larger identity within the nation.

Until 1948, both Wright and Thurmond had records as government-activist progressives. Thurmond's pre-1948 progressivism as a South Carolina legislator and governor has been well recognized in recent scholarship. In Wright's case, reconstruction of his thinking has been limited by the fact that his personal papers were lost in an office fire shortly after he left public life.⁷ Thus, recent historians have been quick to dismiss Fielding Wright as "ultra-conservative" or "reactionary," based largely on press coverage of the 1948 Dixiecrat campaign.⁸

The word "reactionary" certainly fits the tenor of Wright's May 9, 1948, broadcast. However, in policy arenas beyond the race issue, Wright's broader twenty-year legislative record defies such blanket labeling.

⁶ Wright, "Address to be Delivered at 7:30 Sunday Morning May 9, [1948], Over a Statewide Radio Network."

⁷ Elbert R. Hilliard to Michael Skaggs, September 18, 2002, Wright Biography File, MDAH. It has been more than forty years since two unpublished master's theses and a JMH article examined Fielding Wright's career. He has gotten little attention since. See Hilliard, "A Biography of Fielding Wright"; Charles P. Smith, "Governor Fielding Wright's Legislative Programs: 1946-1952," (master's thesis, University of Southern Mississippi, 1976); and Elbert R. Hilliard "The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright," *The Journal of Mississippi History* 41, no.1 (February 1979): 5-23.

⁸ Joseph Crespino, *Strom Thurmond's America* (New York: Hill and Wong, 2012), 62-69; Nadine Cohodas, *Strom Thurmond and the Politics of Southern Change* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1994), 36-39, and 97-123; John Egerton, *Speak Now Against That Day: The Generation Before the Civil Rights Movement in the South* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 390; and Frederickson, 78, 135, 154, and 171.

Among other things in his make-up, Fielding Wright was a committed Methodist layman who gave speeches to civic and church groups on his view of government service as a form of "Christian Stewardship."⁹ He was a pragmatist who saw government as an instrument of constructive change. At the close of his successful 1947 campaign for governor, he expressed his unreserved approval of the large number of depression-era state initiatives undertaken since he had first entered the legislature in 1928. "Probably never in the history of the state," he said, had so much state action been so "successfully undertaken to stimulate and make prosperous the family life and business life of all Mississippians." Wright advocated more such state action to address a wide range of problems.¹⁰

Like Hodding Carter and other southern progressives, Fielding Wright saw increased health and education investments as necessities for the state's long-term economic well-being.¹¹ In an overlooked passage from his January 1948 inaugural address, Wright asserted that the "protection and reclamation of our human resources is the first duty of the state." No longer, he said, should "economic progress be thwarted by workers who are incapacitated" by illness or lack of education. On the campaign trail he stated his belief that the income of Mississippians was "closely tied in with the level of our education." "Better schools," he asserted, "always mean better income . . . more prosperity," and "better opportunity" for young people.¹² In his successful 1943 campaign for lieutenant governor, Wright even publicly called for the equalization of black and white teacher pay. He took the theme to its logical conclusion when, as governor, in 1950, he challenged the legislature to recognize that "children of both races are entitled to equal opportunities."¹³

Wright often affirmed his belief in balanced budgets and might fairly be called a fiscal conservative. However, in an era of revenue surpluses,

⁹ Fielding Wright, "Christian Stewardship in Today's World," Series 941, Box 1835, Fielding Wright Speeches, MDAH.

¹⁰ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 1, 1947.

¹¹ Ann Waldron, *Hodding Carter: The Reconstruction of a Racist* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books, 1993), 204.

¹² Wright, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1948, Subject Files: Wright, January 1948, MDAH; Wright, Statement from 1955 campaign brochure, Fielding Wright Campaign File, MDAH; *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 1, 1947; and Wright, "Message to the Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature, January 3, 1950," 6, General Collection, MDAH.

¹³ Wright, "Message to the Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature, January 3, 1950." See also, editorial, *Jackson Daily News*, February 19, 1949, which recalled Wright's 1943 campaign advocacy for equalizing black and white teacher pay.

Fielding Wright called repeatedly for spending the bounty on needed development projects, not cutting taxes. For these stances, friends in the state senate in 1946 dubbed Wright “Mississippi’s pied piper of progressive . . . possibilities.”¹⁴ Two years later, both Strom Thurmond and Fielding Wright won fame for their utter hostility to Truman’s civil rights initiatives. However, both men continued to be amenable to a raft of progressive state spending measures into the 1950s.¹⁵

Fielding Wright’s roots as a progressive perhaps arose from his firsthand experiences with the great Mississippi River flood of 1927. Wright was a World War I veteran and later commanded a National Guard unit activated in the 1927 flood. The flood experience made him an advocate of state investments in flood control and flood relief for those who lost crops in the great disaster.¹⁶ After finishing a law degree at the University of Alabama, Wright had been a town alderman, and beginning in 1928, he served four years in the state senate followed by eight years in the Mississippi House of Representatives. For almost five years, from 1936 to 1940, he held the powerful post of speaker of the house. He was strong-willed and persistent in pursuing his goals. Still, Wright was generally credited with being a good listener, calm, and serious-minded in deliberations. However, he gave somber and dry (some said stern) stump speeches, and he did not enjoy campaigning.¹⁷

Wright left public service in the early 1940s to make money as an oil-lease lawyer. After a four-year hiatus from office, he was elected lieutenant governor in 1943. He moved up to the governor’s office in November of 1946, upon the death of Governor Thomas Bailey. In 1947, Wright cemented a hitherto-unthinkable Delta-Hills alliance with Mississippi’s infamous U.S. Senator, Theodore Bilbo, on the promise that if the race-baiting Bilbo were expelled from the U.S. Senate, he, Wright, would reappoint him.¹⁸ With his own strength in the Delta and Bilbo’s organizational pull in the Hills and Piney Woods, Fielding Wright won

¹⁴ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 11, 1946. See also, Tom Karsell’s statement in *The New York Star*, as quoted in Anne Rothe, ed., *Current Biography 1948* (New York: H. W. Wilson Co, 1949), 695-696.

¹⁵ William F. Winter, “New Directions in Politics, 1948-1956,” *A History of Mississippi*, ed. by Richard Aubrey McLemore, 2 Vols. (Hattiesburg: University and College Press of Mississippi, 1973), 2: 141; and Cohodas, 36-39, and 97-123.

¹⁶ Hilliard, “The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright,” 7

¹⁷ *Jackson Daily News*, November 3, 1946, and January 18, 1948; and *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 19, 1948, and July 18, 1948.

¹⁸ *Jackson Daily News*, January 15, 1947; and *Meridian Star*, June 13, 1947.

a full term in the governor's office in a 1947 first-primary victory over four opponents.¹⁹ At the very top of Mississippi politics, he joined an unusual Delta-based triumvirate, which included Mississippi House Speaker Walter Sillers of Bolivar County and U.S. Senator James O. Eastland of Sunflower County. On specific development issues, Wright and Eastland opposed Sillers. However, all three hailed from counties with overwhelming black majorities, where their local political careers rested on black disenfranchisement. Thus, they cooperated in 1948.

Wright left one of his biggest marks as a progressive on the struggle for Mississippi's first paved state highway system. Wright envisioned thousands of miles of publicly financed paved arteries as offering farmers and other entrepreneurs the stimulating effect of more efficient market access. In 1929, at a time when "dust or mud" offered the best description of Mississippi's roads, Fielding Wright, as a freshman state senator, co-authored a major paved highway bill that died at the point of Governor Theodore Bilbo's veto pen in a dispute over how the proposed new state road system would be managed.²⁰

By 1932, Wright had switched to the Mississippi House of Representatives, where his expertise won him appointment as chairman of the Highways and Highway Finance Committee. His insistence on de-politicized management of any new road system brought him into conflict with Delta power broker Walter Sillers, House Speaker Thomas Bailey, and Governor Mike Conner. In 1936, Wright boldly organized a successful move to overthrow Speaker Bailey in favor of Horace Stansel, a fellow roads advocate. Stansel then appointed Wright chairman of both the House Rules Committee and the House Highways and Highway Finance Committee. Upon Speaker Stansel's untimely death, Wright himself was elected house speaker and boldly retained both chairmanships. From this uniquely powerful position Wright outmaneuvered the ever-obstructive Walter Sillers and delivered the 1936 highway bill to a new progressive governor, Hugh White.²¹ Later, in 1949 when Wright himself had moved to the governor's office, he publicly and pointedly faced down big oil's opposition to his

¹⁹ *Jackson Daily News*, November 3, 1946; *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 19, 1948; *Jackson Daily News*, January 18, 1948; and V. O. Key Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation*, New Edition (Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press, 1949), 236.

²⁰ Hilliard, "The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright," 17-20; *Meridian Star*, June 13, 1947; Wright, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1948; and *Jackson Daily News*, December 4, 1949.

²¹ Hilliard, "The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright," 17-20.

gas tax plan to finance a new secondary or “farm-to-market” road system.²² His decades-long focus on radical improvements in state transportation systems established Wright’s progressive credentials.

In the matter of taxation, progressives favored revenue schemes that asked the more prosperous to bear a greater share in taxes and deplored measures that put disproportionate burdens on the poor. During the 1932 fiscal crisis, when legislative conservatives pressed for severe budget cuts, Wright committed himself to finding a way to save the schools and hospitals from the threatened budget axe. Governor Mike Conner proposed to meet the crisis with a 3 percent sales tax. In March of 1932, Wright voted with the majority for the sales tax. At the time, it was the only revenue bill that could garner the required legislative super majority.²³ Though regressive in a narrow sense, the sales tax was progressive in its larger impact. It kept the schools and hospitals open.

Offsetting the sales tax vote, six years later in 1938, Fielding Wright, as speaker of the house, led the battle for homestead exemption. Homestead exemption was a progressive measure that removed from tax rolls homes valued under \$5,000. It likely saved thousands of poorer families from tax foreclosure sales and made home ownership an option for many others. However, homestead exemption shifted the tax burden to wealthier property owners in general, and it redistributed the regional burden from the Hills to the Delta.²⁴ Thus, Wright’s fight for homestead exemption put him at odds with friends from his home region and again pitted him against Walter Sillers and the interests of the Delta’s great land magnates.²⁵

Governor Hugh White later recalled that monied interests nearly killed the homestead exemption bill in the House Ways and Means Committee. To save it, Speaker Wright resorted to the controversial and politically risky step of removing the bill from Ways and Means to bring it directly to the floor of the full House for a vote. Moreover, in floor action, Wright maneuvered successfully to kill all weakening amendments, and the bill passed into law.²⁶

²² Wright, “Address to the Legislature,” reprinted in the *Jackson Daily News*, November 14, 1949; and *Jackson Daily News*, May 7, 1956.

²³ Hilliard, “The Legislative Career of Fielding Wright,” 13-15.

²⁴ Key, 233.

²⁵ *Jackson Daily News*, December 8, 1946.

²⁶ Hugh White, letter reprinted in 1947 campaign leaflet, Subject File: Wright, July 1947, MDAH; and Hugh White, statement in the *Hinds County Gazette*, July 11, 1947.

In 1936, when Hugh White put forward Mississippi's revolutionary Balance Agriculture with Industry (BAWI) initiative, once again Speaker Wright supported the legislation needed to carry it into effect. As enacted, this first-in-the-nation, state-sponsored industrialization program authorized counties and municipalities to issue bonds to purchase potential factory sites, construct buildings, and grant local tax exemptions to attract new industry. Over the first twelve years of the program, Mississippi's manufacturing jobs base grew by 62.2 percent.²⁷ In succeeding years Wright seldom took to the stump without praising BAWI's importance in helping build "a bulwark against unemployment, poverty, and want."²⁸ These are hardly the words of a limited-government traditionalist.

Going further, Wright cast depression-era votes for unemployment compensation and for other federally-matched, social safety-net initiatives, including aid to impoverished families with dependent children and a state-level, old-age pension program. On the campaign trail in 1947, Wright claimed that "it had been a great pleasure" to him that since 1936, every succeeding regular session of the legislature had found the means to increase state appropriations for these programs. He advocated consistently for further increases in state funding so that more of Mississippi's needy elderly, poor children, and disabled people could be served.²⁹ Moreover, as governor, albeit after heated exchanges with the bill's sponsors, Wright in 1948 signed into operation what was perhaps the most liberal workman's compensation law in the nation.³⁰ Like other twentieth-century progressives, Wright saw poverty and education as two sides of the same coin. Relief programs might mitigate suffering, but only education could eradicate its cause. One of the first acts he signed as governor took Mississippi into the federally-subsidized school lunch

²⁷ *New Orleans Times-Picayune*, July 28, 1950; *Jackson Daily News*, December 8, 1946; *Meridian Star*, June 13, 1947; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, July 28, 1947; and *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, September 16, 1949.

²⁸ Wright, 1947 Rolling Fork Candidacy Announcement Speech, and 1955 Radio Address, both in Series 941, Box 1835, Fielding Wright Speeches, MDAH; and Wright, 1955 campaign brochure, Subject File: Wright, 1955-56, MDAH.

²⁹ *Ibid.*; and *Jackson Daily News*, June 20, 1947.

³⁰ Bill Minor, "After One Man's 26-year Vigil, Legislature Enacts Workman's Comp Law," in Minor, *Eyes on Mississippi: A Fifty-Year Chronicle of Change* (Jackson: Morris Books, 2001), 150-151; Dennis Mitchell, *Mississippi Liberal: A Biography of Frank E. Smith* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 65; and Charles C. Bolton, *William F. Winter and the New Mississippi: A Biography* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 76.

program.³¹ Faced with a string of large budget surpluses, in five years as Mississippi's chief executive, Wright refused to even consider tax cuts.³² Instead, he went on a spending spree, advocating and signing into law dramatic increases in public school funding, including teacher pay raises, which Wright proudly claimed totaled a cumulative 66.5 percent. He doubled the higher education budget and brought to fruition plans for the new four-year medical school and teaching hospital at Jackson and a new training college for black teachers at Itta Bena.³³ Moreover, when the costs of the Korean War threatened to dry up federal funding, Wright flew to Washington to make a successful appeal for the federal matching funds needed to save the medical school and teaching hospital project.³⁴

To his credit, in his 1943 campaign for lieutenant governor, Wright had taken a public stand for ending the appalling race-based funding gaps in Mississippi schools.³⁵ As governor, with budget surpluses available, he instituted Mississippi's first sustained effort to equalize black and white teacher pay, provided the first buses for black school children, and inaugurated an unprecedented program of state aid for classroom construction, which included earmarked set-asides specifically for black schools.³⁶ Not surprisingly then, Wright favored proposals for broader federal aid to the public schools, especially if federal funds could be used to help equalize black and white teachers' salaries.³⁷

However, for Fielding Wright and most other southern white leaders, support for federal aid to education carried one important caveat—such aid must never in any way challenge the sacred cow of racial segregation.³⁸ He was willing to overlook inescapable evidence that segregation and black disenfranchisement enabled and drove local school boards in the gross underfunding of schools for Mississippi's black children. To the end of his life, Fielding Wright remained a political white supremacist

³¹ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, March 13, 1947, and *Jackson Daily News*, March 18, 1947.

³² *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, September 10, 1947, and November 1, 1947; *Jackson Daily News*, January 5, 1949; and Hilliard, "A Biography of Fielding Wright," 75.

³³ Wright, Message to the Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature, January 3, 1950; See also, Wright, statement from 1955 campaign brochure, and Wright, 1955 Radio Address.

³⁴ *Jackson Daily News*, October 7, 1950.

³⁵ Recalled in editorial, *Jackson Daily News*, February 19, 1949.

³⁶ Wright, statement from 1955 campaign brochure, and Wright, 1955 Radio Address.

³⁷ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 10, 1949, and *Jackson Daily News*, May 10, 1949.

³⁸ *Ibid.* For a fuller discussion of the conflicted feelings of Mississippi's white leadership about federal aid to education in this era, see Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Integration in Mississippi, 1870-1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), 39-43.

and an unrepentant segregationist. After the 1954 *Brown* decision, Wright announced his support for a state constitutional amendment to allow closing the public schools rather than desegregating them, "with the hope," as he put it, that the measure would "never be used."³⁹

Undemocratic and anti-progressive though it was, political white supremacy came naturally to Fielding Wright. From Reconstruction lore, Wright and his Delta peers convinced themselves that the votes of black folks should never again be allowed to determine election outcomes. Thus, in 1948, it was the Delta powerbrokers who led in resurrecting the language of states' rights to symbolize their struggle to retain state control over the post-Reconstruction barriers erected against black voting. Early in 1948, President Harry Truman sent to Congress civil rights proposals to end the poll tax, make lynching a federal crime, end segregation in interstate transportation, and establish a permanent federal Fair Employment Practices Commission.⁴⁰ It was a program guaranteed to heighten the insecurities of white minorities living in Mississippi's thirty-five black-majority counties.

On first hearing of the Truman program, Governor Wright told the press that his own opinion, "if fully expressed, might be so fiery as to be unprintable." In the aftermath of the U.S. Supreme Court's 1944 *Smith v. Allright* decision outlawing the white primary, Truman's attack on the poll tax was seen as the leading edge for an eventual federal dismantling of all remaining barriers to black voting. "If liberty is to be retained," Wright argued, "control of elections . . . voting qualifications, and . . . how and when the franchise shall be granted must remain at home."⁴¹ The liberty at risk, of course, was the liberty of the white minority to rule in black-majority counties. Rather than joining Truman in helping to shape policies to address the rising demands for more consistent democracy at home and around the world, Wright united with fellow Deltans Walter Sillers and James O. Eastland in devising strategies to spread panic and harden resistance in the forty-seven less-threatened, white-majority counties of Mississippi.

In outlawing the racially exclusionary white primary, the Supreme Court destroyed the most effective post-Reconstruction bulwark

³⁹ *Jackson Daily News*, August 2, 1954.

⁴⁰ Harry S. Truman, *Memoirs, Years of Trial and Hope* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1956), II, 183; and David McCullough, *Truman* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1992), 587.

⁴¹ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, November 1, 1947; and Wright, Speech at Tallulah, Louisiana, September 17, 1948, Series 941, Box 1835, Fielding Wright Speeches, MDAH.

southern states had erected against black voting.⁴² In 1946, when the state legislature fumbled an early effort to circumvent the ruling, Wright warned, “If they don’t change these laws, someday when they address the gentleman from Sharkey and he rises from his seat, he’ll be black as coal.” Sharkey was Wright’s home county and 70 percent black.⁴³ As governor, Wright signed into law a 1947 measure calling for a re-registration of party primary voters and empowering local party executive committees to deny persons the right to vote in a primary if they did not swear adherence to a written statement of segregationist party principles. Though stated in non-racial terms, the intent was to screen out potential black primary voters.⁴⁴

However, eight months before this fix was crafted, Mississippi’s notoriously racist U.S. Senator, Theodore Bilbo, publicly suggested election eve intimidation to deter black voters. On primary election day in 1946, black voters—many of them returning World War II veterans—were beaten on courthouse steps in Gulfport, Canton, Prentiss, Clarksdale, McComb, and Decatur. The senator won, but his tactics triggered an investigation that threatened to expel him from the Senate.⁴⁵ Ironically, the beating of black war veterans in Mississippi and other southern states so deeply distressed President Truman, himself a World War I combat veteran, that in December of 1946, he created the Presidential Committee on Civil Rights. The report of this investigative group laid the foundation for Truman’s 1948 civil rights program.⁴⁶

Truman signaled a new commitment to civil rights in his State of the Union address broadcast on nationwide radio on January 7, 1948. He challenged the nation to live out its principles and pointed out that “discrimination based on race” was unacceptable in a world where Soviet propaganda magnified American shortcomings to the peoples of color emerging from European colonialism. The president pledged to seek answers that would “embody the moral and spiritual elements of tolerance, unselfishness, and brotherhood upon which

⁴² Key, 326-29, 539-40, and 645-52; and editorial, *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 5, 1944.

⁴³ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, April 9, and November 10, 1946; and *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, April 9 and 17, 1946.

⁴⁴ *Jackson Daily News*, March 14, 1947.

⁴⁵ Chester Morgan, *Redneck Liberal: Theodore G. Bilbo and the New Deal* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1985), 250 -51; and Mitchell, 385-86.

⁴⁶ Michael R. Gardner, *Harry Truman and Civil Rights: Moral Courage and Political Risks* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 2002), xvi - 6; Robert Ferrell, *Harry S. Truman: A Life* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1994), 293-294; and McCullough, 589.

true freedom and opportunity must rest.” A follow-up Special Civil Rights Message, written to Congress detailed Truman’s proposals for federal guarantees of voting rights, equal employment opportunity, and freedom from the fear of lynching. In response, Wright, Eastland, Sillers, and other segregationists dragged out Civil War-era states’ rights theory and disingenuously accused the president of promoting miscegenation, interracial marriage, and social chaos.⁴⁷

Every member of the Southern Governor’s Association quickly announced opposition to the Truman civil rights initiatives. Within this group, Fielding Wright quickly stood out due to his radical eagerness to launch an all-out, election-year war on a sitting president of his own party. Wright’s bitter salvos characterized Truman’s new “Negro policy” as part of a “sinister” plot that “deliberately aimed to wreck the South.”⁴⁸ After months of such heated rhetoric, Fielding Wright of Mississippi and J. Strom Thurmond of South Carolina—governors of the two states with the greatest proportion of blacks in their populations—became the vice presidential and presidential nominees of the breakaway States’ Rights Democratic Party.

Within Mississippi, the anti-Truman revolt began and had its strongest support in the black-majority Delta counties from which hailed U.S. Senator James O. Eastland, House Speaker Walter Sillers, and Governor Fielding Wright, who now united to craft a resistance strategy. Eastland critiqued Truman’s stance in blunt terms: “Every decent Southerner wants the Negro to have a square deal . . . to prosper . . . and do well,” he said, but “the only rule that we of the South lay down is that he [the Negro] must stay out of politics.” If Congress had the authority to end the poll tax, it could, in Eastland’s view, end “every other safeguard” erected to protect white control of political offices at the county and state legislative levels. This possibility, he argued, was “the real fight on that proposal in the national Congress.”⁴⁹ Speaker Sillers saw the 1940s push for Negro voting as “more deadly . . . than in reconstruction” and worried that southern people were too

⁴⁷ Truman, 183; Gardner, 66-68; and McCullough, 587-597.

⁴⁸ Fielding Wright, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1948; and *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 8, 1948.

⁴⁹ James O. Eastland, “Address to Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature,” January 29, 1948, AU 1000, SR 24, TR 014a, MDAH; and Eastland to Wright, May 10, 1948, Series 1, Subseries 20, Box 1, Folder 10, James O. Eastland Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, J. D. Williams Memorial Library, University of Mississippi, Oxford.

complacent. The civil righters, Sillers wrote, still aimed in the end to give blacks “control over our political affairs.”⁵⁰ As early as 1944, Sillers had proposed to Eastland a strategy of bolting the party and assembling an “independent bloc in electoral votes” as the best defense “of the white race and its supremacy in the affairs of the country.”⁵¹

Eastland had seriously toyed with Sillers’s idea of independent electors in 1944. In the end, his personal friendship with Harry Truman led Eastland to support the 1944 Roosevelt-Truman ticket.⁵² However, by early 1946, the continual appearance of civil rights measures in Congress drove the senator to the conclusion that the only solution going forward was for the South to field independent presidential electors who would be able to trade with all groups to protect the South’s peculiar institutions.⁵³ Eastland and Sillers collaborated to promote Fielding Wright’s emergence as the public face of the revolt against Truman in Mississippi and the South.⁵⁴

Their initial goal was to assemble enough delegate votes at the 1948 Democratic National Convention to repudiate the civil rights program and block a Truman nomination for reelection. If not successful at the convention, they intended to mount a third party attack that would deny Truman an Electoral College victory in the fall and throw the election into the U.S. House of Representatives.⁵⁵ As Sillers saw it, if in the fray the Republican Party with its equally objectionable civil rights agenda somehow won, the South would “at least defeat the scoundrels” in the National Democratic Party “that had sold us out.”⁵⁶

⁵⁰ Sillers to Eastland, February 20 and March 9, 1945, Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 133, Folder 10, Eastland Collection.

⁵¹ Sillers to Judge V. A. Griffith (Mississippi Supreme Court), May 20, 1947, Box 1, Folder 10, and Sillers to Eastland, July 7, 1955, Box 34, Folder 6, both in Walter Sillers Jr. Papers, Charles W. Capps Jr. Archives, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi; Greenville *Delta Democrat Times*, December 21, 1947; and Sillers to Eastland, May 28, 1945, Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 133, Folder 10, Eastland Collection.

⁵² Eastland to R. I. Ingalls (Pascagoula), August 15, 1944, Series 1, Subseries 20, Box 1, Folder 6, Eastland Collection.

⁵³ Eastland to Dr. J. A. Rayburn (Pontotoc), February 11 and March 9, 1946, Series 3, Subseries 1, Box 133, Folder 13, Eastland Collection.

⁵⁴ J. Lee Annis, *Big Jim Eastland: The Godfather of Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 81-82.

⁵⁵ Eastland to Stein, February 27, 1948, Series 3, Subseries 20, Box 1, Folder 10, Eastland Papers; Maarten Zwiers, *Senator James Eastland: Mississippi’s Jim Crow Democrat* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2015), 34; and Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequence Since 1945* (New York: Basic Books, 1976), 211.

⁵⁶ Sillers to Eastland, February 14, 1948, Box 1, Folder 10, Sillers Papers.

Wright and Eastland purchased and sent out three hundred complimentary copies of Birmingham attorney Charles Wallace Collin's ultra-racist tome, *Whither the Solid South*, outlining Electoral College resistance strategies similar to those Sillers and Eastland had discussed for years.⁵⁷ Wright, Sillers, and Eastland all invested tremendous effort through countless coordinated speeches and rallies to gain control of the statewide apparatus of the Mississippi Democratic Party to ensure the election of anti-Truman delegates to the Democratic National Convention and an anti-Truman slate of Mississippi Democratic electors for the November 1948 ballot.

Wright's January 20, 1948, inaugural address opened the public phase in this campaign. At a point of emphasis near the end of an otherwise progressive-sounding speech, Wright threw down the gauntlet to Truman and national Democratic leaders. He pictured the entire South—not just black-majority counties—as being abused and “misrepresented by those who seek to tear down and disrupt our institutions and our way of life.” Thus, he asserted, the time had come “for the militant people of the South . . . to band together for the preservation of true Americanism.” The “true Americanism” which Wright had in mind was the Jeffersonian localism that had hitherto permitted states to distort voting requirements to create white supremacy at the polls in locales where it was threatened. The situation, Wright said, compelled Mississippi and the South to fight “with all means at our hands,” including a break with the national party in the fall presidential election.⁵⁸ Across the state, headlines overlooked Wright's long list of new progressive proposals. The next day's *Clarion Ledger* led the pack with headlines that screamed, “Governor Flays Party, Suggests Bolt . . .” Wright now was seen as the angry man defending the besieged ramparts of white supremacy against Harry Truman and the national Democratic Party.⁵⁹

In an era when the New Deal was still broadly popular, Wright and Sillers crafted a quick succession of well-orchestrated events designed to create a sense of crisis and stir white support for bolting the national

⁵⁷ Richard D. Chesteen, “‘Mississippi is Gone Home:’ A Study of the 1948 States’ Rights Bolt,” *Journal of Mississippi History*, 32 (February 1970): 47. See also, Charles Wallace Collins, *Whither the Solid South: A Study in Politics and Race Relations* (New Orleans: Pelican Publishing, 1947), 1-321.

⁵⁸ Wright, Inaugural Address, January 20, 1948.

⁵⁹ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, January 21, 1948. See also, summaries of statewide comment on Wright's address in the *Jackson Daily News*, January 29 and February 1, 1948, and in the *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, February 8, 1948.

party.⁶⁰ Daily conferences between Sillers and Wright produced a steady stream of well-publicized legislative resolutions denouncing Truman's civil rights program.⁶¹ On January 29, Senator Eastland addressed a radio-broadcast joint session of the Mississippi legislature in which he equated the struggle over Truman's civil rights program to memories of Reconstruction and the alleged Republican attempt to "create Negro republics here" and "bring about racial amalgamation."⁶²

On February 2, Wright again grabbed the headlines when he blasted the formal release of Truman's Special Civil Rights Message as a "stab in the South's back" and called for a statewide rally in Jackson on February 12 to mobilize Mississippi at the grassroots level for an "all out fight" against the enemies of the Southern way of life. During the next week, the Southern Governors Association meeting at Wakulla Springs, Florida, uniformly rejected Wright's proposed party bolt as "too drastic" and settled instead on a strongly worded protest resolution. However, the publicity over Wright's challenge to the other governors helped build a crowd of four thousand or more for the Jackson rally on February 12. Here, surrounded by Confederate symbols, Wright declared that Mississippians would carry "the stigma" of "losing self-respect" unless they withheld their votes from Truman.⁶³

Headline-making events and speeches continued around the state on regular basis leading up to simultaneous county Democratic Committee meetings on March 21. At eighty-two county courthouses, local leaders heard a radio address in which Wright again denounced the president and urged party activists to attend a meeting of "Jeffersonian States' Rights Democrats" in Jackson on May 10. This rally was scheduled only days before Mississippi precinct caucuses were to start the state and national party delegate selection process.⁶⁴

Thus, with strategic precision, on Sunday, May 9, morning newspaper headlines announced Wright's 7:30 a.m. radio address characterized deceptively as a message "to the Negro citizens of Mississippi." Pointedly, this address to "Negro citizens" drew

⁶⁰ Hilliard, "Biography of Fielding Wright," 84.

⁶¹ William Winter, interview by Robert J. Bailey, November 1, 1977, AU 115, OHP 209-210, MDAH; and, Winter, "New Directions in Politics," 141-42.

⁶² James O. Eastland, "Address to Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature," January 29, 1948.

⁶³ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, February 3, February 4, and February 13, 1948.

⁶⁴ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, March 20 and March 21, 1948; *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 21, 1948; and Mitchell, *A New History of Mississippi*, 391-92.

a picture of white people suffering from “the wickedness of the misrepresentation” of their motives. Twice in the broadcast Wright warned any blacks “so deluded” as to want to end segregation to leave the state.⁶⁵ It is inconceivable that these remarks had any intent but to build crowds for the so-called “nationwide” meeting of “Jeffersonian States’ Rights Democrats” the next day in Jackson where Strom Thurmond, the governor of South Carolina, was to deliver the keynote.

At Jackson on May 10, fifteen hundred delegates from nine states together with perhaps two thousand local onlookers sang a chorus of “Dixie” and heard Fielding Wright set the angry and defiant mood for the day in his introduction of Thurmond. In turn, Thurmond drove home the southern sense of betrayal and outrage at Truman and national Democratic leaders. The Carolinian drew thunderous applause as he vowed that “all the bayonets of the army cannot force the Negro into our homes, schools, churches or places of recreation.”⁶⁶ The delegates resolved to meet in Birmingham on July 17 to draft a plan to use the Electoral College to solve the problem if the Democratic National Convention in Philadelphia failed to purge Truman or his civil rights plank.

Wright, Sillers, and Eastland’s five months of nonstop crisis mongering paid off on June 22, when the Mississippi Democratic State Convention selected a national convention delegation that pledged to walk out and reconvene in Birmingham if Truman were the Democratic nominee or if the Democratic platform included a civil rights plank. Moreover, the Mississippi Democratic Party’s slate of nine presidential electors also pledged not to vote for Truman or any other pro-civil rights candidate in the fall.⁶⁷

Once they assembled for the Democratic National Convention at Philadelphia in mid-July, Wright and the Mississippi delegation found themselves on the radical extreme of the civil rights debate. No other southern delegation was prepared to walk out en masse in protest. With no positive program to offer, “the general opinion,” said Ralph McGill of *The Atlanta Constitution*, is that “the scheming

⁶⁵ Wright, “Address to be Delivered at 7:30 Sunday Morning May 9, [1948], Over a Statewide Radio Network.” See also, Wright, “Governor Wright Speaks to the Negroes of Mississippi” May 9, 1948, and *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 9, 1948.

⁶⁶ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 11, 1948. See also, Frederickson, 104-106; and Cohadas, 144-145.

⁶⁷ Resolution of the Democratic Convention of the State of Mississippi, June 22, 1948, Box 62, Folder 1, Sillers Papers.

little men” from Mississippi “would not be satisfied with less than a repeal of Lincoln’s emancipation proclamation.” This characterization was a far cry from the heroic regional image that Wright, Eastland, and Sillers had hoped to cultivate.⁶⁸ When the Democratic National Convention endorsed a strong civil rights plank, the Mississippi delegation walked out behind its governor and headed for Birmingham.⁶⁹

There, on July 17, 1948, whatever was left of Fielding Wright’s image as a forward-looking progressive was lost in the sea of racial bigotry and Confederate battle flags in which he accepted the vice presidential nomination of the “Dixiecrat” or States’ Rights Democratic Party. In the chaos of the Birmingham meeting, the emergence of Strom Thurmond as the splinter party’s presidential nominee with Fielding Wright as his running mate seemed accidental. Neither man apparently expected nomination.⁷⁰ The pre-nomination speechifying was so racially inflammatory that the American Broadcasting Company abruptly pulled the plug on its radio coverage. The *Montgomery Advertiser* bemoaned the descent of the delegates into “nigger stories . . . wild and lewd,” rather than crafting any positive program or message.⁷¹ Such was the coarse cloth with which Fielding Wright covered himself in 1948.

The “Dixiecrats” as they came to be called, focused their campaign on winning sufficient Electoral College votes in the South to throw the November presidential election into the House of Representatives. To this end, Thurmond and Wright dutifully campaigned across the South.⁷² However, the strategy failed. In November, Truman won outright reelection in a legendary upset victory over Republican Thomas Dewey. Thurmond and Wright carried only Mississippi, South Carolina, Alabama, and Louisiana—the four states with the greatest African-American proportion in their populations.⁷³

In succeeding years, Fielding Wright continued to talk states’ rights and defend Mississippi’s racial status quo. However, the failed 1948 party-bolt strategy lost its appeal for him. Wright

⁶⁸ Bill Minor, “Mississippi Democrats Ready to Walk Out,” *New Orleans Times Picayune*, July 11, 1948, in *Eyes on Mississippi*, 50; and Ralph McGill, editorials, *The Atlanta Constitution*, July 12, 13, and 14, 1948.

⁶⁹ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, July 15, 1948.

⁷⁰ Frederickson, 133-138; Cohodas, 174-177; Annis, 89-90; and Zwiers, 54-56.

⁷¹ Quoted in William D. Barnard, *Dixiecrats and Democrats: Alabama Politics 1942-1950* (Tuscaloosa, Ala.: The University of Alabama Press, 1974), 115 and 179, n.67.

⁷² Frederickson, 74 and 169-170.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 144, 152, and 184; and Key, 329.

conceded that a continued diehard stance would cost Mississippi "its standing with everybody in America."⁷⁴ In 1952, Wright, out of office, endorsed the national Democratic Party ticket of Adlai Stevenson of Illinois for president and Alabama's John Sparkman for vice president.⁷⁵ However, Wright never let Mississippians forget what he still construed to have been his own heroic stance in 1948.⁷⁶

In 1955, in the wake of the U.S. Supreme Court's *Brown* school desegregation decision, Wright attempted to ride his image as a segregationist crusader back into the Mississippi Governor's Mansion. In the course of the 1955 campaign, he brazenly claimed that his 1948 Dixiecrat vice presidential run made him "the man most feared by Negro leaders who seek to integrate the schools."⁷⁷ He buried his own new slate of progressive development proposals behind a constant barrage of headline-grabbing promises to use "the police power of the state" to the utmost to block integration of the schools.⁷⁸ The news media gave the former governor the advantage over J. P. Coleman, Paul B. Johnson Jr., and Ross Barnett.⁷⁹ In contrast to Wright, Attorney General J. P. Coleman claimed to see no need to be "thrown into a panic" when there had as yet been no effort to enforce the 1954 decision.⁸⁰ To the surprise of many, Wright finished a distant third in the Democratic primary field. Coleman defeated all comers to win the 1955 governor's race.⁸¹

Nine months later, on May 4, 1956, Fielding Wright died of a heart attack at age sixty. Thus, the 1955 campaign, with its bitter racial overtones, became the concluding statement for a public career that began in 1928. *The Commercial Appeal* and *The Clarion-Ledger* led their coverage of Wright's death with accounts of his vice presidential run on the 1948 States' Rights ticket and reminded readers of his 1955 campaign pledge to defy the federal courts to maintain segregated schools. His friend Fred Sullens of *The Jackson Daily News* ran a short

⁷⁴ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, August 11, 1950; and Zwiers, 104-105.

⁷⁵ *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, June 20, August 27, September 9, and September 26, 1952.

⁷⁶ Wright, Message to the Joint Session of the Mississippi Legislature, January 3, 1950; and Wright, 1955 campaign Radio Address.

⁷⁷ Undated and unattributed news clipping, Subject Files: Wright, 1955, MDAH.

⁷⁸ *Jackson Daily News*, August 2, August 3, August 13, and October 3, 1954; and *Jackson Daily News*, February 15, February 17, and May 27, 1955.

⁷⁹ *Jackson Daily News*, April 6, 1955.

⁸⁰ J. P. Coleman, Inaugural Address, January 17, 1956, General Collection, MDAH; and Hilliard, "Biography of Fielding Wright," 103.

⁸¹ Charles Smith, "Governor Fielding Wright's Legislative Program," 14.

inside editorial noting Wright's record for roads, education funding, public health, hospitals, medical education, and homestead exemption. However, *The Jackson Daily News*, like other dailies, focused major front page coverage on the significance of the attendance of Strom Thurmond and a large South Carolina delegation at Wright's funeral.⁸²

Thus, the 1948 States' Rights campaign irreversibly branded Fielding Wright. However, it was a branding largely imposed by his own hand. His upbringing in a black-majority Mississippi Delta county imposed on him a racial myopia from which he never escaped. In the long view of things, President Harry Truman seized the moral high ground when he embraced the civil rights program of 1948. In contrast, Wright aligned the Mississippi governor's office with uncompromising resistance. In so doing, Wright made his name synonymous with crisis mongering and backward-looking racial injustice. Had he stayed home in 1948, his demonstrated capacity for constructive engagement with many issues of the day would have been the most memorable and most instructive aspect of his legacy. However, this possibility was largely lost. Tragically for his state, it was Fielding Wright's 1948 example of bitter racially-motivated defiance that became the all-too-familiar model for Mississippi leadership during the crucial days of the civil rights movement in the 1960s and beyond. The time and energies thus wasted cannot be reclaimed.

⁸² *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, May 5, 1956; *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 5, 1956; and *Jackson Daily News*, May 5, 1956.

