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FROM CAMP HILL TO HARVARD YARD: THE EARLY YEARS OF CLAUDE D. PEPPER

by RIC A. KABAT

CLAUDE D. Pepper was born into economically deprived and socially humble circumstances on September 8, 1900, in Chambers County, Alabama. He grew up acquiring the traditional values of hard work, delayed gratification, Christian moral teachings, and, most importantly, a belief in cooperation and communitarian responsibility. These ethical standards shaped his personal life and propelled him into one of the most long-standing and productive political careers in American history. Together with contemporary liberal politicians from the South, such as Alabama congressman Carl Elliott, Senator and later Supreme Court Justice Hugo Black, Senator John J. Sparkman, Senator J. William Fulbright, and Lyndon B. Johnson, Pepper's early life experiences pushed him toward supporting an expansive role for the state in areas such as health care, education, women's rights, and regulation of the economy to solve the country's political, social, and economic problems.¹

In matters of race Pepper, like other southern liberals, had a mixed record. Along with his liberal compatriots, Pepper adhered to a position of federal activism on a broad range of interests that, for the most part, excluded racial justice but still clashed with the region's insistence on state's rights. Caught in this dilemma, Pepper's record on racial issues was inconsistent at best, duplicitous at worst.

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1. The plight of the poor in Alabama is analyzed in Wayne Flynt, *Poor But Proud: Alabama's Poor Whites* (Tuscaloosa, 1989), 59-170, 281-363. For a discussion of poor blacks see Robin D. G. Kelly, *Hammer and Hoe: Alabama Communists During the Great Depression* (Chapel Hill, 1990), 1-10. Pepper's contemporaries are described in Carl Elliott, Jr., and Michael D'Orso, *The Cost of Courage: The Journey of an American Congressman* (New York, 1992); and Virginia Van Der Veer Hamilton, *Hugo Black: The Alabama Years* (Baton Rouge, 1972).

Following graduation from the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa (1921) and Harvard Law School (1924), Pepper returned to the South to teach at the newly created school of law at the University of Arkansas. Encouraged by friends in the real estate business, he moved to Perry, Florida, in 1925 to seek financial rewards and a career in politics. He served one term (1929-1930) in the Florida legislature's House of Representatives, fourteen years (1936 through 1950) as a United States senator from Florida, and as a congressman serving the Third Congressional District encompassing parts of Miami from 1962 until his death in 1989.

A liberal Democrat, Pepper supported virtually all of President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, advocated early military preparation to oppose Nazi Germany in 1939, and introduced the Lend-Lease bill in Congress in 1940. After World War II he continued pursuing equal rights for women, protection of labor unions, increases in the minimum wage, a federally sponsored universal health care system, an end to the poll tax, and other liberal measures. Although generally in agreement with much of President Harry S. Truman's domestic agenda, Pepper publicly criticized the Cold War foreign policies of his administration. His leftist stands on America's relationship with the Soviet Union, liberal voting record on domestic issues, and glimmerings of support for the emerging civil rights movement swung many Floridians against him. A victim of the postwar Red Scare in 1950, Pepper lost a hard-fought and bitter campaign to George Smathers who accused him of having close ties to communists. Twelve years later Pepper returned to Congress as an advocate of the aged and a champion of John F. Kennedy's New Frontier and Lyndon B. Johnson's Great Society.²

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2. Claude Pepper and Hays Gorey, *Pepper: Eyewitness to a Century* (New York, 1987), outline Pepper's career. The political heritage that Pepper inherited is described in C. Vann Woodward, *Origins of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1951), 291-320; Jonathan M. Wiener, *Social Origins of the New South: Alabama, 1860-1885* (Baton Rouge, 1978), 3-136; William W. Rogers, *The One-Gallused Rebellion: Agrarianism in Alabama, 1865-1896* (Baton Rouge, 1970), 31-55; Sheldon Hackney, *Populism to Progressivism in Alabama* (Princeton, 1969), 1-121; Paul M. Gaston, *The New South Creed: A Study in Southern Mythmaking* (Baton Rouge, 1970), 15-42; and Bruce Palmer, *Man Over Money: The Southern Populist Critique of American Capitalism* (Chapel Hill, 1980).



Claude D. Pepper as a Harvard University graduate; c. 1925. *Photograph courtesy Claude Denson Pepper with Hays Gorey, Pepper: Eyewitness to a Century (San Diego, 1987).*

Claude Pepper entered Joseph and Lena Talbot Pepper's family as their fourth child; the first three had died in infancy. In their mid-twenties in 1900, the Pepper's owned a 129-acre farm outside of Dudleyville, Chambers County, Alabama.³ Overwhelmingly rural, the county's population in 1900 (32,554) had changed little ninety years later (36,876). Pine- and hardwood-covered hills of red clay still give way to small farms and villages. Like many Southerners of Scotch-Irish descent, the Peppers and Talbots had migrated from Great Britain and entered the American colonies in Virginia in the early eighteenth century. They then filtered through the Carolinas, Georgia, and eventually into Alabama.⁴

Joseph and Lena Pepper both attended local post-secondary academies, and, unlike many young rural Alabamians of similar background, they provided their son with an appreciation of the benefits derived from formal learning. Also, as an only child for his first ten years, Pepper's mother gave him lavish attention and encouraged him to read and work hard at school. He attended a one-room schoolhouse in Dudleyville until 1910 when the family moved to Camp Hill in neighboring Tallapoosa County so Claude could enroll in the town's superior school.⁵

The Pepper family expanded in Camp Hill. In 1910 Joseph was born, and his sister Sara and then brother Frank joined the family a few years later. A boisterous child, Pepper impressed his friends. Chambers County neighbor Al Sanders remembered

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3. Pepper's early life is described in Pepper and Gorey, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 1-32; and Alexander Stoesen, "The Senatorial Career of Claude Denson Pepper," (Ph.D. diss., University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1964), 1-21. See also Kenneth Stewart, "Serious Senator Pepper," *PM Magazine*, June 1, 1947; *The Tallapoosa News* (Camp Hill), June 26, 1947; and Claude Pepper to George O'Kell, October 28, 1933, vertical file, biographical fol., Claude Pepper papers, Mildred and Claude Pepper Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee (hereinafter, CPP).
 4. Genealogical information about the Pepper and Talbot families is in fol. 1, box 1, ser. 406, CPP. For population data see *Population Abstract of the United States, Volume One* (McLean, VA, 1983), 5; and Bureau of the Census, *1990 Census of Population and Housing, Documents Disc B* (Washington, 1990).
 5. *The Tallapoosa News*, June 26, 1947; Pepper to Julian Pennington, April 11, 1929, fol. 1, box 1, ser. 101, Pepper to O'Kell, October 28, 1933, Pepper, "Philosophy and Background," June 1946, Pepper, "When I was a Teener," n.d., vertical file, biographical fol., CPP.

Pepper as being “a holy terror.” At church he “used to run up and down the aisle and once he got right up there in the pulpit with the preacher.”⁶ Pepper’s boyhood companion W. H. Razor Smith recalled that the future senator and his friend Oscar Chester “were the local intellectuals.” In contrast Smith characterized himself as “the common sense man.”⁷ Pepper and Chester, fulfilling their recognized role as the local intelligentsia, frequented the public library and self-consciously discussed their literary interests with local educators. Not surprisingly Pepper served as president of the local Heflin Literary Society.

Pepper was clearly self-conscious as a child. “He was about the homeliest kid any of us had ever seen,” remembered Razor Smith, “with his little old bumpy face and snotty nose.” Pepper once “asked [Smith] what was the matter with him.” Smith “told him he was all right, but that he ought to clean himself up and pay more attention to how he looked.”⁸ Pepper followed Smith’s advice, and throughout his college and law school years he concentrated on improving his physical appearance. He continually consulted doctors about his acute acne problem, wore expensive clothing, and was well groomed.⁹ If “he seemed to have a kind of inferiority complex,” said Smith, “it was all in his own mind.”¹⁰

As Pepper progressed through high school and on to college, his father faltered in farming, business, and public service. When the young family moved to Camp Hill in 1910, Pepper’s father held a series of law enforcement jobs. Before becoming a police officer, however, Joseph opened a furniture business with one of his cousins. Unfortunately, the store—McClendon and Pepper—failed. He then started a small grocery store with a restau-

6. Stewart, “Serious Senator Pepper,” 6.

7. *The Tallapoosa News*, June 26, 1947.

8. *Ibid.*

9. Pepper to mother, January 20, 1925, fol. 17, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP. See also Harvard Law School Diary (hereinafter, HLSD) I, December 3, 7, 10, 1921; HLSD III, March 20, 1922. Pepper’s law school diaries were not cataloged within the Claude Pepper Papers when the author used them. They were pasted into a scrapbook documenting his Senate campaign of 1938. There are five diaries which do not have page numbers. Citations hereinafter are documented by date with the appropriate volume for each diary.

10. *The Tallapoosa News*, June 26, 1947. See also Stewart, “Serious Senator Pepper,” 6.

rant attached which also went bankrupt. Following two business failures, Pepper's father served as town marshal of Camp Hill, and during the early 1920s he became deputy sheriff in neighboring Alexander City.¹¹

In 1922 Joseph Pepper lost his campaign for sheriff of Tallapoosa County. Claude worked hard to get his father elected while living with his family during a summer break from law school and he gained valuable experience in electoral politics. But his father's loss put heavy financial demands on Claude. After 1922 his father moved through a variety of low-paying jobs and often depended on his son for support. Even so, Claude accepted the responsibility without complaint. In fact he willingly took on the burden. "It seems that our dear family is destined to die poor and how I hate it for mama's and papa's sake," wrote Pepper in his law school diary. "They haven't had the pleasures of comfort for sometime," he continued, "since papa's losing out in business in 1914 or thereabouts." Pepper consoled himself by "preparing to help them better."¹² He later made good on his pledge by providing his family with housing and financial support after he achieved political success in the 1930s.

The Peppers sought solace in religion as one way of relieving the emotional strains produced by their financial burdens. They attended the County Line Baptist Church in Chambers County which had been founded by Pepper's grandfather. Claude enjoyed Sunday school activities, and later he became a full member of the church. Beyond being a focal point for Christian worship, the church served as a community center. White families throughout the area converged at church to socialize and enjoy bountiful dinners on the grounds. For the most part the Peppers observed the strict moral teachings of the Baptist faith: no gambling, alcoholic beverages, dancing, or card playing. Even so, according to Claude, his mother allowed the family to square dance.¹³ Without doubt the church provided Pepper with a moral

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11. See Pepper, "Biography for Saints and Sinners," March 16, 1963, vertical file, biographical fol., Pepper to parents, October 23, 1921, fol. 16, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP; HLSD II; February 10; HLSD III, June 14, 1922.
 12. HLSD IV, December 12, 1922. For similar comments see HLSD V, January 7, 13, 1924.
 13. See Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 9. For information about the Baptist Church in Alabama and the South see Mitchell B. Garrett, *Horse and Buggy Days on the Hatchet Creek* (Montgomery, 1957), 168-85; and Flynt, *Poor But Proud*, 232-41.

THE EARLY YEARS OF CLAUDE D. PEPPER 159

code that remained with him his entire life. In addition, church oratory inspired the young man. As Al Sanders noted, Pepper clearly identified with the church's preacher and modeled at least his early oratory after him.¹⁴

Armed with his fundamentalist moral teachings, Pepper graduated from Camp Hill High School in the spring of 1917. Recognized as a scholastic leader by his peers, he hoped to pursue a political career. Because of his flair for oratory, residents of Camp Hill referred to Pepper as "senator." Years later he recalled writing "Claude Pepper, United States Senator" on an office door of a Chambers County justice of the peace. Razor Smith remembered the incident differently. According to Smith, Pepper wrote his name and future title on the door of the school's privy.¹⁵ At any rate, Pepper planned to enter politics from an early age.

Following graduation Pepper had hoped to attend college, but unfortunately he had no money. In order to accumulate cash, Pepper entered the hat cleaning business. He spent the summer of 1917 traveling through central Alabama and west Georgia repairing hats. Much like his father, Pepper failed to prosper as an entrepreneur. After several months of lackluster business and several ruined hats, he ended his struggling business career.¹⁶

A teaching job followed. In September Pepper received notice from the school superintendent in Dothan, Alabama, that the city desperately needed schoolteachers. With the United States at the height of its involvement in World War I, the country experienced a shortage of teachers, especially in rural communities like Dothan. With many young men fighting on the Western Front or working in some type of military activity stateside, opportunities opened for Pepper. A friend had recommended Pepper for a teaching position, and, with no other options available, Pepper accepted the offer.¹⁷ Although only six-

14. Stewart, "Serious Senator Pepper," 6.

15. See Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 20; Stewart, "Serious Senator Pepper," 6; and Stoesen, "Senatorial Career," 4.

16. Pepper, "When I was a Teener." See also Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 15; and Stoesen, "Senatorial Career," 5.

17. Pepper to Pennington, April 11, 1929; Pepper, "Philosophy and Background"; Pepper, "Biography for Saints and Sinners"; Pepper, "Pepper Biography," n.d., vertical file, biographical fol., CPP.

teen and qualified to instruct up to the second grade, he taught a fifth-grade class.

Through the fall semester Pepper taught basic reading, writing, and mathematics at the local grammar school. Paid sixty dollars a month, Pepper assumed his own living expenses, sent money to his parents, and still saved for college. During the second semester Pepper taught at the high school with an expanded role as athletic director. In return he received a five dollar raise. Yet, Pepper wanted to attend college, and after the end of the school year he left Dothan to seek a higher paying job.¹⁸

He found one in Ensley, Alabama. Arriving at the suburban Birmingham town during the summer of 1918, Pepper began working in a steel mill owned by the Tennessee Coal and Iron Company. He lived at a boarding house in nearby Bessemer. Working twelve hours a day, seven days a week soon made an impression on Pepper— a negative one. Within several weeks he tried to get a job in the administrative office as a secretary. Failing that he arranged, with an administrator he had befriended, to operate the torch machine that cut off flawed pieces from steel rails. Pepper considered it an easier task than the roller job he had previously held.¹⁹

Pepper's tough steel mill experience introduced him to the plight of industrial workers. His memories of the poor working conditions, low pay, and general helplessness of the blue-collar laborers remained vivid. As Pepper recalled, "Anyone who complained about the hours was told to get out."²⁰ As a result he worked hard to improve the conditions of the working class throughout his career. As a senator, Pepper supported virtually all of the New and Fair Deal labor legislation, including the minimum wage. In addition he became a close associate of the American Federation of Labor and Congress of Industrial Organizations (AFL-CIO) and continually accepted the political support of organized labor.²¹ Later observers considered Pepper's

18. Pepper, "Biography for Saints and Sinners"; Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 18.

19. Stewart, "Serious Senator Pepper," 6; Pepper, "Philosophy and Background"; Pepper to Pennington, April 11, 1929; Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 18-19.

20. Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 18.

21. For Pepper's connections to organized labor see Tilford Dudley Affidavit, April 27, 1950, fol. 20, box 1, ser. 204G, CPP; Tampa *Morning Tribune*,

union affiliations strange since he was a deep South politician, but they failed to take into account his early experience as an industrial worker. Pepper's steel mill job, though only lasting one summer, increased his already-present empathy for the poor and working class.²²

Unfortunately for Pepper his meager savings still did not allow him to enroll at the college of his choice, the University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. Even though the Baptist Young People's Union (an organization in which he remained active) offered him a scholarship to attend Baptist-affiliated Howard College in Birmingham, Pepper did not want to commit himself to the small school. He did visit Howard in September 1918 but departed after only one night.²³

Pepper was determined to attend the state university. Before leaving for Howard he had discussed with a local banker, E. L. Andrews of the Bank of Camp Hill, the possibility of getting a loan to attend college. Andrews promised him that a deal could be arranged, and Pepper now asked Andrews to fulfill his pledge. The banker did so, and the future senator funded his years at the University of Alabama on borrowed money. Pepper also largely bankrolled his law school years at Harvard with loans from Andrews. Going into debt did not bother Pepper. As he told his parents in 1924, "I will be in a position to handle it [paying Andrews back] when I get started for I suspect I will be making about as much if not more than he makes in the bank."²⁴

Pepper participated in various undergraduate organizations at Tuscaloosa. He joined the staff of the yearbook (*The Corolla*) and edited the campus newspaper, *The Crimson*. Several debating societies served as the future senator's oratorical forums, and he served in student government. The freshman did not lack for

April 30, 1950; Jasper [FL] *News*, April 7, 1950; George B. Tindall, *The Emergence of the New South* (Baton Rouge, 1967), 535; James C. Cobb, *Industrialization and Southern Society* (Louisville, 1984), 89-90; F. Ray Marshall, *Labor in the South* (Cambridge, 1967), 154-282; and Barbara S. Griffith, *The Crisis of American Labor: Operation Dixie and the Defeat of the CIO* (Philadelphia, 1981), 139-60.

22. See Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 18-19.

23. Stewart, "Serious Senator Pepper," 7; Stoesen, "Senatorial Career," 6-7; Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 19.

24. Pepper to family, May 12, 1924, fol. 16, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP.

confidence during his first year at college and ran (but lost) a campaign for student body president. As a senior Pepper traveled to Chapel Hill, North Carolina, and participated in the Southern Oratorical Contest. Later that year (1921) he attended the Midwest Conference of Colleges and Universities in Columbia, Missouri. Thoroughly ambitious, he sought and achieved election as vice-president of the organization.²⁵

Success did not come without disappointment. Although Pepper desperately wanted to join a fraternity, the Greek community rejected him. He later blamed his exclusion on his acne problem. "I will be fair," he wrote in his diary in 1921, "I can't blame any fraternity at Alabama for not taking me in even though I did make good successes there on account of my face and maybe other things." The "truth, I think," he continued, "is that when I went there I had no pull."²⁶

Pepper needed no "pull," though, to gain membership in the Student Army Training Corps. With the war in Europe still three months from its end, colleges across the country required their male students to participate in the army's preparation program. Pepper proved something less than the ideal soldier. The corps's commanding officer resented several articles in *The Crimson* critical of his actions, and on one occasion he ordered the entire newspaper staff locked in their dorm rooms. Pinned up for a week, Pepper spent Armistice Day in his dormitory. After seven days the officer freed the offending journalists.²⁷

Army service changed Pepper's life. While doing some heavy lifting he developed a hernia. The painful injury translated into disability money from the government. Designed to train disabled World War I veterans, the federally funded vocational program enabled Pepper to enter law school. In light of Pepper's financial status, the opportunity was, as Pepper later claimed, "Amazing!" Equally remarkable, he could apply the benefits toward the school he longed to attend—Harvard. Unlike his experi-

25. Pepper outlined his university years in "Philosophy and Background," and "Biography for Saints and Sinners." See also Pepper to Pennington, April 11, 1929, and Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 19-25.

26. HLSD I, December 3, 1921.

27. Pepper, "Biography for Saints and Sinners"; and Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 21-22.

ence at Tuscaloosa, where he worked part time shoveling coal at the university's power station, at Harvard Pepper used his disability money and loans from Andrews to avoid employment and to devote all of his energies to his studies. This turn of fate reinforced Pepper's sympathy for governmental activism. If federal money had not been available, he could not have attended Harvard Law School. Pepper later cited this fortunate opportunity as contributing to his political liberalism.²⁸

Traveling by train from Camp Hill to Savannah and then by ship to Massachusetts, Pepper reached Cambridge in September 1921. Along the way he met another Harvard-bound Southerner named Wallace Walker from Atlanta, and they decided to room together. They remained lifelong friends. After arriving at Cambridge they found an apartment at a rooming house close to campus that cost them each \$20.00 per month. With \$50.00 a month from his disability check, Pepper had a little left over. Even so, he almost always ran out of money by the end of the month. "Things cost more than I expected and more than they will cost next year," Pepper informed his parents, "because I had to room out in a private house because the dormitories are taken months in advance."²⁹ Despite his family's impoverishment and the fact that they many times depended on Claude to send money, Pepper sometimes asked his father for financial assistance. He masked his embarrassment with humor. "What a joy it must be to have a fine son to whom you can send money?"³⁰ Throughout his Harvard years Pepper faced constant financial problems.³¹

The Harvard experience proved enormously important to Pepper's personal growth and professional ambitions. During the 1920s the law school ranked as one of the most prestigious in the nation. Such legal luminaries as Felix Frankfurter, Roscoe Pound, Francis Sayre, and others formed the faculty, and Pepper mixed with classmates such as Thomas Corcoran and James Landis. Harvard served as an ideal training ground for a young man from Alabama with political goals. Not only did Pepper

28. Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 24.

29. Pepper to family, n.d., fol. 16, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP.

30. Pepper to parents, June 6, 1922, fol. 16, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP.

31. HLSD II, January 4, 16, February 10, 1922; HLSD III, April 13, 1922; HLSD V, January 13, 1924.

become acquainted with men who would soon take commanding positions in the nation's government, economy, academia, and legal system, he encountered a social and cultural life much more sophisticated and cosmopolitan than he would have found in the South or Midwest. Simply put, Pepper acquired an excellent legal education and a broad exposure to America's cultural elites.³²

Pepper could hardly contain his amazement. Harvard, he noted, comprised "perhaps the largest number of people of position, favor, wealth, culture, family, and tradition that was assembled anywhere in the world." He found the experience overwhelming when he first arrived. "I realize that not only is the prestige so many times greater here but that you actually learn something," wrote Pepper to his parents, "and they see that you do learn it or they kick you out." Nevertheless, Pepper adjusted and let his family know that he remained "delighted with the place and the work." Yet, feelings of inadequacy often surfaced. "Wonder if I deserve any credit for being where I am," wrote the introspective law student, "it has been handed out to me. I have mostly accepted thus far in life. Haven't really tried much it seems." In his diary he often recorded his anxieties. "What of my life if I flunk out of this place, what will Camp Hill say? What can I say? Have I got anything in me?" Pepper assured himself that he could not "fail and by God [he] won't. I am going to do something worthwhile in this world in spite of my past follies & indolences & weaknesses and fate is with me. My dad and mama need me & I am going to respond."³³

While Pepper's law school diary reflected some typical fears and foibles of a young graduate student, it also shed light on his development as a southern liberal. Scattered throughout the diary are references to politics, Pepper's political ambitions, international affairs, race relations, Jews, labor unions, and relations between Northerners and Southerners. Interspersed with those observations are comments about his social life and a topic that

32. For information about Harvard during the early twentieth century see Samuel Eliot Morison, *Three Centuries of Harvard* (Cambridge, 1936), 323-481.

33. HLSD I, November 19, 26, 1921; HLSD II, February 9, 1922; Pepper to family, n.d.

seemed to obsess him—women. Overall, Pepper's Harvard diaries reveal a sensitive and caring individual burning with ambition.

In these formative years Pepper emerged as a staunch southern Democrat with liberal leanings. "I am passionately fond of our old South & zealous to preserve the best that the great noble past has left us," wrote Pepper. He considered Southerners generally "quick tempered, impetuous, [who] take a chance, fight at pleasure of opponent . . . [who are] free, liberal, sincere, individual[istic], your friend, an awful enemy." Broadcasting his views did not win Pepper converts. For example, while at a restaurant he loudly defended Woodrow Wilson's internationalist policies. "I saw a fellow at nearby table smile and listen," noted Pepper, and "say 'that's one of those Southern Democrats.'"³⁴

Wilson became Pepper's political hero. A Virginian and the first native Southerner elected president since the Civil War, Wilson attracted wide support in the region. In addition, by backing progressive reforms such as the eight-hour day (Adamson Act), tariff revision (Underwood-Simmons Tariff), rural development (Rural Credits Act), workmen's compensation (Kern-McGillicuddy Act), and child labor restriction (Keating-Owen Act), the president demonstrated that Southerners could be liberal and progressive. Although Wilson's institutionalization of racial segregation in the federal work place marred his administration's record of social justice, it did not alienate his white southern constituency or his white supporters in the North. Along with domestic liberalism, Wilson advocated an ambitious international role for the United States. The president hoped to make the postwar world "safe for democracy" through the creation of the League of Nations with strong American involvement.³⁵

Pepper backed all of Wilson's policies. By 1922 he felt "bitterly towards Republicans for [their] treatment of Wilson," who had left office and had suffered a series of strokes. Pepper condemned "republican [sic] action on the league of nations," and

34. HLSD I, December 8, 1921; HLSD III, March 15, 1922; HLSD IV, December 6, 1922.

35. Woodrow Wilson's domestic policies are analyzed in Arthur S. Link, *Woodrow Wilson and the Progressive Era: 1910-1917* (New York, 1954), 1-80, 223-51; Woodward, *Origins of the New South*, 456-80; Tindall, *Emergence of the New South*, 1-32.

he “wouldn’t vote for the 4 power treaty now being put up.” Pepper believed that Republican obstruction of Wilson’s internationalist goals damaged the country. “Nationalism exacts a terrible charge for her existence,” wrote Pepper. “I wonder if there will be a great change in the attitude towards war. Of course,” Pepper noted, “not except temporarily.”³⁶

In the fall of 1922 Pepper actively supported William Gaston’s campaign to unseat Wilson’s archenemy and foe of internationalism Senator Henry Cabot Lodge of Massachusetts. With the exception of his father’s race for sheriff, the Gaston-Lodge contest served as Pepper’s first taste of political campaigning. He toured Boston neighborhoods speaking in support of Gaston and defending Wilson’s foreign policy. The Democratic headquarters in Boston “pay my expenses,” Pepper informed his parents. “I don’t suppose I’ll get to join Lodge in debate,” he wrote, “but I’ll pitch some little pebbles at his stately head.”³⁷ Pepper’s persuasions notwithstanding, Gaston lost.³⁸ The future senator remained a Wilson proponent throughout the 1920s and wondered whether the former president would return to active politics. “Mr. Wilson getting in better health,” Pepper noted to himself, “wonder what political influence he’ll exert in future.”³⁹ Throughout his political career Pepper remained an ardent Wilsonian internationalist and liberal.

Although isolated politically in the Republican Northeast, Pepper retained his enthusiasm for his native region and the Democratic party. He sought out fellow Southerners, and they often discussed the problems confronting the region. With the “Jacksons,” a couple from his hometown who had moved to Boston, Pepper (“over breakfasts of biscuits, ham, grits, etc.”) analyzed Dixie’s dilemmas. At a time when H. L. Mencken, editor of *The American Mercury*, and other national journalists continually criticized the South as the “Sahara of the Bozart,” the young

36. HLSD III, April 19, 1922.

37. Pepper to parents, October 31, 1922, fol. 16, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP.

38. The Lodge-Gaston campaign is discussed in Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 28-29; Stoesen, “Senatorial Career,” 18-19; and Jonathan Daniels, *The Time Between the Wars: Armistice to Pearl Harbor* (Garden City, NY, 1966), 72. See also *New York Times*, November 9, 11, 1922.

39. HLSD IV, December 6, 1922.

Alabamian defended his homeland. "Jacksons & I yesterday were talking of conditions at home," Pepper noted in his diary, and "I said that if we pretended to be conscientious we would go back home and help."⁴⁰ He discussed his home region with seemingly anyone who would listen. He filled his diary with notations: "Told Rand [fellow student] about South, politics, etc., wish Rand could come South," and "had long discussion with Ozias [friend and student] about South, customs, temper, etc."⁴¹ Although Pepper admired Yankee culture, he also self-consciously attempted to persuade his northern friends that a South existed which Mencken would not have recognized.

Unlike the stereotypical Southerner, but very much like a young person, Pepper maintained a high level of idealism. "I wonder," mused the aspiring lawyer, "if I'll lose my ideals someday." He concluded that he probably would not and observed, "I think one can combine the practical and the ideal." With this in mind Pepper hoped "to render a service which will be valuable and shall reflect upon me the honor that it achieves." The young Southerner believed that the "world [was] getting better," and "illiteracy [was] declining." In addition Pepper sympathized with the problems of the poor. "It makes me sad to see the plight of people," he wrote, "hair drawn, sallow, emaciated, unhappy, wearied they all seem. The dirt, the sorrow, the tragedy of it all." But Pepper hoped to help them. "We keep our heads down on the grindstone, our noses on the ground, and play along until our energy all gone & the frail structure decayed, then we [vanish] into oblivion." Yet, he wanted "to see it better."⁴²

Pepper's reaction in December 1922 to the negative treatment received by a doctor who had created a clinic for the poor in Boston was not surprising. According to Pepper, "Dr. Lorenzo of Austria [was] going back to Vienna because of the antagonism of the American doctors." The Boston physicians opposed Lorenzo's "conducting [a] free clinic for poor cripples." Human suffering and poverty among the rural people with whom he had grown up in the dirt hills of Alabama— or the slums of Boston— clearly concerned him. For Pepper the incident proved

40. *Ibid.*, December 26, 27, 1922.

41. HLSD II, January 16, 1922; HLSD III, March 28, 1922.

42. HLSD III, March 18, May 6, 16, 1922.

that the “medical profession [was] darn selfish.” Throughout his political career Pepper supported the creation of a comprehensive national health care program.⁴³

Pepper’s views on organized labor and the working class also reflected a liberal mindset. If his experiences at the Ensley steel mill and university power plant in Tuscaloosa had made him sympathetic to unionism, his exposure to industrial life in the Northeast confirmed his views. In January 1922 he noted in his diary that he went to “Widner [sic] Library to read on labor unions.” Three months later Pepper wrote that he had “discussed labor conditions with [his friend] Rodney. I taking the side of labor in that they had not had a fair chance for a long time past, if ever.” He believed that unions had “been crushed for so long.” The organizations, thought Pepper, should be recognized as the legitimate representatives of working people.⁴⁴

Unions did not get the respect they deserved, Pepper later argued, because they did not properly manage and represent themselves. At a law club meeting in December 1922 he supported fellow club member Thompson’s view of labor problems. “Labor unions should [agree] each with the other not to bargain individually,” noted Thompson, “then if [an] employer tried to hire or deal with them as individuals the great rule of law enforcing breach of [contract] which has been so powerfully used against labor would be turned against capital.” Pepper added to Thompson’s analysis. “Labor must hire the same trustworthy lawyer” as the employer, “preferably a corporation lawyer.” He held these convictions throughout his political career, and in the 1930s and 1940s he strongly endorsed the Wagner Act and other pro-labor legislation and opposed the anti-labor Taft-Hartley Act.⁴⁵

In race relations Pepper showed few liberal convictions. The young Alabamian, like many white Southerners, believed in the inferiority of blacks. “I have no hatred of [the] negro,” noted

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43. HLSD I, December 9, 1921. For information about Pepper’s later thoughts on doctors and American medicine see “Meet the Press Interview,” June 9, 1950, fol. 5, box 15, ser. 203B, CPP; and Tampa *Morning Tribune*, February 18, 1950.
44. HLSD II, January 23, 1922; HLSD III, April 22, 1922.
45. HLSD IV, December 11, 1922. See also Miami *Weekly News*, April 14, 1938; Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 218-19.

Pepper, “just difference in social status, that’s all.” He observed that “his [a black person’s] position [was] tragic.”⁴⁶ As this statement demonstrates, Pepper had ambivalent beliefs about the position of blacks in American society. According to Pepper, if blacks wanted equality with whites they should demand that status. Because the black masses did not, whites assigned them to an inferior position. In Pepper’s mind blacks lived lives of deprivation and inequality because they could not (or would not) compete with whites.

The future senator showed little appreciation of the massive obstacles— segregation, disfranchisement, and economic exploitation— that prevented blacks from effectively challenging the color line. When black persons asserted themselves, Pepper respected them. Otherwise, the timid behavior of oppressed blacks confirmed his preconceived notion of black inferiority. Pepper later used his ambivalence about race to appeal to both whites and blacks during the beginnings of the civil rights movement in the late 1940s.⁴⁷

Pepper’s reaction to an incident that occurred at Harvard reflected his attitudes about race. Members of the Texas Club (a private organization consisting of students from Texas) decided to have a party in February 1922. They looked through “their catalogue & invited all [the students] from Texas,” Pepper noted, and found “that they’ve invited Mr. Dodson COLORED whom now they don’t want & don’t know what to do with.” Pepper thought that the white Texans had no alternative “but lynch him if he comes.”⁴⁸

Even in jest Pepper’s statement showed a deep insensitivity to black people. His comment also demonstrated indifference to the plight of a fellow law student who, as a Southerner, probably faced similar problems in adjusting to the Ivy League. Five days later Pepper seemed to show a little pity toward the beleaguered student. “Mr. Dodson spoke up in contracts class,” wrote Pepper, and “I laughed at McFadden” (a white Texas Club member).

46. HLSD III, March 17, 1922.

47. For Pepper’s later views on civil rights see Pepper, “Vote for FEPC,” n.d., fol. 1, box 1, ser. 424, CPP. See also *New York Times*, July 12, 1948, April 8, 1950.

48. HLSD II, February 27, 1922.

"But if that negro has come from Texas, and being as poor as I judge from his clothes, he deserves credit & I admire him."⁴⁹

The young Southerner did not admire blacks who lived in the North. On a trip with attorney friends Harman Caldwell and Hap Hagood, Pepper entered the home of a black family in Boston. They interviewed the woman of the house about a personal injury she had suffered. "House pretty good & clean," wrote Pepper and he liked "to see these negroes getting on well." Even so, he thought that it grated "just a bit to hear them sometimes speak sharply or the like."⁵⁰

Whatever his feelings about this family, he distinguished between northern and southern blacks. Talking to his friend Rodney, who sympathized with the bad conditions under which blacks lived, Pepper dismissed the concerns of his Yankee friend. "Poor Rodney," he sarcastically noted, "was so sorry for the sweet negroes of the South."⁵¹ Pepper's ambivalence inspired him to wonder whether blacks in the North were actually black. On his way back home in June 1922 he stopped at Savannah. "Saw real negroes again," he noted.⁵²

Thoroughly segregated and disfranchised, blacks in the South also suffered from vigilante violence. Lynching decreased as the twentieth century progressed but still occurred frequently in the 1920s.⁵³ Pepper condemned the crime, yet he refused to support making it a federal offense. Like many other white Southerners, Pepper argued that making lynching a federal crime encouraged the accumulation of power by the national government over the states. In essence, he and fellow whites in the region used the slogan "states' rights" as a smoke screen to preserve the South's racial practices. Pepper noted that he was "opposed to the proposed bill before Congress sponsored by the Judas, H. C. Lodge, for Federal Government to stop lynching in [the] South. It perhaps should be stopped," he wrote, "but

49. Ibid., March 4, 1922.

50. HLSD IV, December 9, 1922.

51. HLSD II, January 23, 1922.

52. HLSD III, June 20, 1922.

53. Violence against blacks is analyzed in C. Vann Woodward, *The Strange Career of Jim Crow* (New York, 1966), 43, 114-15; and Joel Williamson, *The Crucible of Race: Black-White Relations in the American South Since Emancipation* (New York, 1984), 253-75.

would best be done by the people and state governments, which will soon do it anyhow." Pepper believed that "all that will prevent friction between the North & South, should best be discouraged, than otherwise, especially for republicanism [sic] trying to get hold down there."⁵⁴

Pepper consistently opposed the poll tax which sought to disfranchise poor whites and blacks, but his opposition to proposed anti-lynching legislation remained unchanged through his early political career. Although he later portrayed himself as a supporter of equal rights for blacks with only minor slips into racial demagoguery, his concern for civil rights issues actually revolved around his attempts to attract both the white and black vote. As a senator, Pepper actively filibustered to prevent the passage of anti-lynching laws. During the 1940s, however, he stopped participating and introduced legislation to ban the filibuster. Pepper claimed that he based his actions on ethical principles.⁵⁵

Even so, Pepper's actions were politically motivated and reflected his ambivalence about racial issues. He realized that after the Supreme Court's ruling in *Smith v. Allwright* in 1944 many blacks began voting in the South. To attract these new voters he slowly moved closer to a pro-civil rights political posture when speaking to liberal audiences in the North and West and to blacks in the South. For example, at the Democratic national convention in 1948 Pepper informed potential supporters that he believed "in civil rights . . . in accordance with the Constitution." That same month he announced on the Senate floor that Southerners should not "array themselves as their forefathers did in 1860 against human rights for any part of our people." Moreover, six months later he told a gathering of Young Democrats at the University of Florida that it was his "intention to support President Truman's whole program of civil rights if it beats me in the next election."⁵⁶ Yet, a year and one-half later, in the midst of his reelection campaign, Pepper's literature promised voters that the senator was "absolutely opposed to any attempt by the

54. HLSD II, May 25, 1922.

55. *Congressional Record*, 75th Cong., 3rd sess., 1938, 83,1054; and *Congressional Record* clipping, July 28, 1948, fol. 13, box 57, ser. 201, CPP.

56. *New York Times*, July 12, 1948; *Florida Alligator*, December 17, 1948.

government to abolish or interfere in any way with the customs and traditions of the Southland."⁵⁷

Pepper's wavering also entered into his personal correspondence. "I am not willing," Pepper wrote his friend Professor William Carleton of the University of Florida shortly after the Democratic convention of 1948, "to put myself on the wrong side of a moral issue, to throw myself across the stream of history, and to identify myself with those who seem to have no appreciation whatsoever of the true principles of democracy involved in this issue." What concerned him "more than anything else about the whole effort [convention] was the tragic discovery which I had always hoped against hope was not true, that the differences between the North and West on the one hand and the South on the other respecting civil rights are no more to be reconciled than the differences on the issue of slavery."⁵⁸

Nevertheless, six months later Pepper told James A. Davis of Clearwater that "there has been a gross misrepresentation by the president's enemies and the reactionary element as to what the Civil Rights program as recommended by the president means." According to Pepper, "it does not and Congress cannot abolish segregation as we now know it in our local communities, in our state, and in the South." He informed Davis that "the idea that the president has ever recommended that Congress could make compulsory the abolition of segregation in restaurants, swimming pools, hotels, theaters, and picture shows, schools, religious and fraternal organizations, is utterly preposterous." Pepper made a strong effort to let segregationists in Florida, such as Lovich Williams of Inverness, know that "it is unnecessary for me to tell you that I do not have any view different from yours or any other southerner about racial equality."⁵⁹

Apparently not recognizing the irony, Pepper outlined his own dilemma concerning race and politics in a private letter to

57. "Claude Pepper and the Compulsory FEPC," n.d., Campaign Memorandum, Political Campaign 1950, fol. 3, box 42, P. K. Yonge Library of Florida History, University of Florida, Gainesville.

58. Pepper to William Carleton, August 12, 1948, fol. 13, box 57, ser. 201, CPP.

59. Pepper to James A. Davis, December 26, 1948, fol. 12, box 57, ser. 201, Pepper to Lovich Williams, February 11, 1944, fol. 16, box 14, ser. 431A, CPP.

H. S. McKenzie, editor of the Palatka *Times-Herald*, after losing his Senate seat in August 1950. “The race prejudice is so strong in our state and in the South,” observed Pepper, “and is, of course, such an available weapon for the Demagogue and the candidate who wants that kind of instrument, and the honest Liberal is, of course, so vulnerable upon the subject that I just don’t know what the future possibilities are for us.”⁶⁰ Like other southern liberals, Pepper was caught between his concerns for social and racial justice and the fear of electoral defeat. The result was an inconsistent record on the major social justice issue of the twentieth century—racism. Pepper’s ambivalence about race reflected in his later political maneuvering was a logical continuation of his ideas dating back to his years at Harvard.

Pepper’s prejudices expanded at Harvard to include Jewish people. During his first few months in Boston he noticed the relatively large resident Jewish population as compared to the few Jews who lived in Alexander City and Camp Hill. Pepper also commented negatively on the Zionist movement taking place in the Middle East. Apparently, he considered Jewish encroachments on Arab land wrong. In a sarcastic mood Pepper jotted in his diary, “Give Palestine back to the Jews and make them give Revere Beach [a section of the city heavily populated by Jews] back to Boston.” On New Year’s Eve 1921 Pepper attended a celebration at the Copley Hotel. At the party, he “watched disgusting array of drunken fools, idealistic staggering Jews & loose bellied old women.” The celebrants’ behavior seemed to confirm Pepper’s antisemitism.

Why Pepper held such negative notions about Jews remains a mystery. Very likely, he expressed his opinions because he had little exposure to Jews in eastern Alabama, and their cultural and religious customs seemed strange to the young Southerner. In this respect he was not alone. Jewish customs also alienated a number of northern Protestants as well. Many Jews living in the Northeast had only recently arrived from eastern Europe, and their long process of assimilation had just begun. Whatever its origins, Pepper’s antisemitism stayed confined to his diary,

60. Pepper to H. S. McKenzie, August 2, 1950, fol. 3, box 22, ser. 201, CPP.

61. HLSD I, November 19, December 31, 1922.

and later in his career he strongly supported Jewish concerns and the State of Israel.⁶²

If Pepper found Jews unappealing, he also thought Northerners a strange breed. "Saw Beal" (fellow student), wrote Pepper, an "eccentric Yankee who dropped in." He considered Beal "stupid, queer, ill at ease, [with] no manners." According to Pepper, the Northerner cared "nothing for anything but getting ahead." He had not "seen enough of his type to understand them" during his first months in Cambridge.⁶³ Yet, Pepper still showed little understanding later. At a party in May 1922 he tried to convince his northern friends to tell stories for entertainment. The polite refusals of his friends puzzled Pepper. "Here was a crowd of supposedly well educated people," he observed, and "anything of that sort didn't appeal." Pepper concluded that "the art of communication [could only be] found in secluded sparse corners." As his comment suggested, Pepper accepted Southerners' stereotypes of Northerners as cold and aloof. He considered Yankees "rather rigid in character & not prone to sentimentalism, but fine character withal."⁶⁴

In his diary Pepper stated specifically what he admired about Yankees. Northerners "will treat a Southerner [well] if he behaves as a gentleman." Pepper also admired what he called the "Harvard" type. "I should like to have that calm, quiet, logical way," wrote Pepper, and he wondered "what [he was] like or [would] be?"⁶⁵ He hoped to gain a broad education. Thinking he was deficient in knowledge of the arts, he often asked his friend Ozias to guide him in the humanities. "I didn't know a thing about those things," he observed. Pepper projected his own ignorance onto all Southerners. "I'm sorry that we Southerners don't know about & appreciate those things," he wrote. "We are as a class," thought Pepper, "very rural and in many respects common."⁶⁶

If Pepper had an inferiority complex as a Southerner living in the North, he experienced similar feelings toward women. Throughout his diary Pepper recorded a fairly typical young

62. See Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 181-82.

63. HLSD I, December 22, 1921.

64. HLSD III, May 7, 1922.

65. HLSD II, January 19, 1922.

66. HLSD IV, December 8, 1922.

man's sexual coming of age, and he frequently commented on the qualities necessary for his "ideal" woman. For Pepper she would encourage his political ambitions while simultaneously maintaining a stable and loving home and family. Pepper still suffered from both acne and a lack of confidence, and his contact with the opposite sex was limited.

Pepper's problems did not prevent him from dating. During his first year at Harvard he met and courted a young woman named Mary Wood. Mary did not fulfill his expectations, and Pepper soon began dating another woman named Camelia.⁶⁷ These two women ultimately did not satisfy Pepper's high standards for serious romance. For Pepper the right woman had to be beautiful, educated, and value his ambitions as much as he did. After attending a party at Radcliffe College in December 1921, Pepper recorded his thoughts about the college women he had met. "All of them were good girls," thought Pepper, "but were unfortunately not the extra social type." Unlike the Radcliffe women, Pepper desired a southern woman who would be "soft, refined, cultured, musical, imaginative, tender."⁶⁸

In Josie Reaves, a neighbor in Alexander City, Alabama, Pepper thought he had found such a woman. Attending school in Montgomery while Pepper studied at Harvard, Reaves corresponded with Pepper on a regular basis. "I wonder if I could love her," wrote Pepper. "No college but she is sensible, pretty, emotional, fine in thought, etc." Nevertheless, Pepper knew that he could never marry a provincial woman like Reaves. "I must have a woman who will help me on, lift me up, make me be great," he confessed, "yet, is thoroughly feminine, handsome, charming, graceful, cultured."⁶⁹ Unfortunately, according to Pepper, Josie Reaves did not meet his demanding requirements.

With such severe standards, Pepper pondered whether he would ever find a woman to wed. "I wonder if any girls who know me would really marry me," he confided to his diary. "When? Where? Whom? Shall I ever take the leap?" The future politician was determined "to be careful, [and] find one who has all the qualities of grace, charm, easiness, is accomplished, intel-

67. HLSD I, November 23, 1921.

68. *Ibid.*, December 9, 1921.

69. HLSD II, January 8, 1922.

ligent, warm to respond to, [has] friendliness, & has good family history and strong family in the affairs of the world."⁷⁰ Pepper did not find a woman to fit this list of demands while attending Harvard. According to all available evidence, he later found all his desired qualities in his wife Mildred Webster of St. Petersburg.⁷¹

Pepper's ambitions ran from women to politics. During his early years he found more success at the latter than the former. In 1924, his last year of law school, Pepper participated in the semifinals of the Ames Moot Court Contest. Although he and his teammates had prepared for weeks before the competition, they lost the case. Even so, Pepper made a positive impression on Dean Roscoe Pound. The dean told Pepper that he would "be a great trial lawyer." At their meeting, the future senator asked Pound to write a letter of reference to support his application for Oxford University the next year. Pound agreed to help Pepper and "said if [I] did go to England, just stay a year & have a good time."⁷²

Pepper never made it to Oxford. With his family at Alexander City facing financial difficulties, he gave up his dream of traveling to Britain. "It looks like a hard road doesn't it," Pepper asked himself. "What it all may mean for me I dare not conjecture."⁷³ Yet, his indecision proved short lived. At the end of his last semester (spring 1924), a secretary at the law school, Dickey Ames, introduced Pepper to J. C. Futrell, president of the University of Arkansas. He offered Pepper a job as professor at his institution's new law school, and, strapped financially, Pepper accepted. The new teacher wrote his parents that he would soon "get a long breath, buckle up [his] belt, and hit for Dixie." Through his new job, Pepper informed his parents, he would have some leisure time, make a "good salary," and live in a healthy environment. In fact, he seemed pleased with the college's location at Fayetteville, nestled in the Ozark Mountains.⁷⁴

70. HLSD III, June 28, 1922.

71. Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 53.

72. HLSD V, January 17, 1924. See also Pepper to parents, February 12, 1924, and n.d., fol. 16, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP.

73. HLSD V, January 10, 16, 1924.

74. Pepper to parents, April 30, May 12, 1924, fol. 16, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP.

THE EARLY YEARS OF CLAUDE D. PEPPER 177

After visiting his family in Alexander City, Pepper spent three weeks in a New Orleans hospital having a hernia repaired. Following the surgery he began teaching at Fayetteville. With only one other colleague, Julian S. Waterman, on the law school's faculty, Pepper played an important role in the institution's founding. He introduced a moot court program, helped develop the library, and became a popular instructor among the students. Years later Pepper would serve in the Senate with one of his students, J. William Fulbright of Arkansas.⁷⁵

At this point another student named Donald Trumbo made a greater impact on Pepper's career. Trumbo's father operated a bank in Muskogee, Oklahoma, and had investments in Florida real estate. When Arthur visited Fayetteville he met Pepper, and the two became friends. At the end of the school year in June 1925 Trumbo invited Pepper to attend a meeting in Chicago as a paid legal consultant concerning real estate investments in Florida. Bored with his teaching career in Arkansas, Pepper accepted an offer by William B. Davis, a participant at the Chicago meeting, to work in his law office at Perry, Florida. By the end of the month Pepper was a Florida resident.⁷⁶

Pepper enjoyed his new home. Located on the west coast of Florida approximately fifty-five miles south of Tallahassee, Perry had a population of about 2,500 in 1925, a thriving lumber industry, and a subtropical climate. Pepper believed that his "future look[ed] unusually good from the money point of view." He informed his family that the "town is growing fast, they are paving miles of streets here, new and good homes are growing up, railroads are coming in, [and that he would be] making \$10,000 a year within five years." Feeling confident, Pepper told them that he would send them all enough money each month to pay their bills and living expenses.⁷⁷

As a defense attorney, Pepper gained notoriety in "a score of murder cases in which [he took] a leading or active part." In

75. Pepper to Lena Pepper, August 26, 1924, fol. 18, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP; Pepper to Pennington, April 11, 1929.

76. Pepper, "Philosophy and Background"; Donald Trumbo to Pepper, September 23, 1929, fol. 4, box 1, ser. 409, CPP. See also Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 34-35.

77. Pepper to parents, n.d., fol. 18, box 1, ser. 401A, CPP.

addition, he argued several cases in the Supreme Court of Florida. As he put it, "I like the match of wits, the human interest, and the strategy which characterizes trial work, in addition to the point of law involved." Nevertheless, he also experienced "sheer delight in working out a brief or presenting a case orally to the Supreme Court." Three years after arriving in Perry, Pepper sought a seat in the Florida House of Representatives.⁷⁸

Pepper defeated Taylor County incumbent W. T. Hendry by playing up Hendry's failure to vote on a bill requiring farmers to dip their cattle to remove ticks. Claiming that the county needed a representative who would remember to vote when important issues were decided, he won his first political office. At the legislative session that ran from April through June of 1929, Pepper introduced no bills of lasting importance. He chaired the Committee on Constitutional Amendments and sat on eight other committees. If not playing an important legislative role, he did receive praise from the press for his oratorical talents. The Tallahassee *Daily Democrat* described him as the "eloquent and logical member from Taylor County."⁷⁹

Pepper served only one term in the Florida House. According to Pepper, he failed to win reelection because of his stance on a racial issue during a special session of the legislature. When President Herbert Hoover's wife invited the wife of black congressman Oscar dePriest of Chicago to a formal luncheon scheduled for June 12, 1929, Florida legislators passed a resolution protesting the action. Pepper voted against the measure explaining that "I am a Southerner and a Democrat like my ancestors before me and have always voted for the Democratic nominees, but I consider such a resolution as this out of place as an act of this body."⁸⁰ Although he condemned the motion because of its harsh tone toward the president and not because of its racial bias, as a freshman legislator from a thoroughly racist county, his pronouncement was reckless and, as he later claimed, may have contributed to his defeat a year later. Though he had used white supremacy slogans while campaigning for Democratic

78. Pepper to Pennington, April 11, 1929.

79. Florida Legislature, *House Journal*, 1929, 9-11; Tallahassee *Daily Democrat*, May 17, 1929.

80. Florida Legislature, *House Journal*, 1929, 1145.

presidential candidate Al Smith a year before, Taylor County voters questioned their solon's act of conscience.

Whether Pepper lost his seat in the legislature as a result of the dePriest incident is difficult to determine. As a new and obscure representative from a small county, he warranted little attention from the press, and his statement against the resolution did not receive coverage in the newspapers. Contrary to Pepper's later explanations, the incident may not have played an important role in his reelection campaign a year later. His opponent, Alton H. Wentworth, a lifelong resident of the county, ignored the racial issue and successfully attacked Pepper for supporting an unpopular retail sales tax. Available evidence does not support Pepper's argument that he sacrificed his first political office because of an unpopular and courageous stand against racism.⁸¹

The young lawyer's driving ambition soon overshadowed his initial disappointment over his electoral loss. As he recorded in his diary in April 1922, "I should have the sense to not spend my time idly but reading gathering knowledge & thus power that I may force myself ahead & with position. I must."⁸² Such single-mindedness formed Pepper's character throughout his political career. A tireless worker with lofty political ambitions, the young Southerner soon found the legal profession tedious and unfulfilling.

Pepper considered a public service career as the best outlet for his talents. Believing that his own hard work combined with the help of his family and community had contributed to his success, Pepper successfully combined his southern heritage with twentieth century liberalism. As Pepper once put it, "Liberalism was . . . my honest disposition."⁸³ His political inclinations reflected his early struggles with economic hardship and the combination of private effort and public help that lifted him out of poverty and into a productive life. Along with fellow liberals from the South, he considered an activist government the basis of social stability and progress.

81. See Stoesen, "Senatorial Career," 30. For Pepper's version of why he lost his legislative seat in 1930 see Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, 41-43.

82. HLSD III, April 15, 1922.

83. Pepper, *Eyewitness to a Century*, xiii.