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# Class Replaces Race: Re-emergence of Neopopulism in Mississippi Politics

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# CLASS REPLACES RACE: THE REEMERGENCE OF NEOPOPULISM IN MISSISSIPPI GUBERNATORIAL POLITICS

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After being dominated for two and one-half decades by strong racial appeals, battlelines in Mississippi's gubernatorial contests showed a significant shift in the early 1970s. Instead of defining public alternatives in terms of race, candidates began to define them in terms of class. A reemergence of the neopopulist appeal, which was so effective in the early decades of this century, has occurred and has been a major factor in the election of Mississippi's last two chief executives. The changing trends in gubernatorial politics and some of their implications are the primary concerns of this article. Some observations also will be made relative to the 1976 presidential vote in Mississippi in the light of the changing patterns in the governor's race.

## THE EARLY NEOPOPULISTS

Actually, class or race has played the major role in shaping electoral division in Mississippi since the early days of statehood. During the decades of the 1830s and 1840s, the Whigs and Jacksonian Democrats vied for political control of the state. The center of Whig strength rested in the old river counties where support was drawn largely from planting and commercial interests. The Democrats secured their strongest backing from the poorer whites in the new counties located in the Pearl River and piney woods area to the east and north of the old Natchez district. While the Whigs were able to elect some state and national officials, the Jacksonians generally dominated in this early two-party struggle as the creation of new back country counties enhanced their strength.<sup>1</sup>

In the 1850s, the defense of slavery and the growing clamor for secession pushed the Whig-Democratic economic divisions into the background.<sup>2</sup> Through the traumatic period of Reconstruction and the

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1. John E. Gonzales, "Flush Times, Depression, War, and Compromise," in *History of Mississippi*, 2 vols., ed. Richard A. McLemore (Hattiesburg, Ms., 1973), I: 285-87

2. For a further discussion of political parties and the secession question in Mississippi, see Glover Moore, "Separation from the Union," *ibid.*, pp. 441-46.

subsequent era from 1876 to 1890 in which whites sought to ensure their hold on state government, race prevailed as the basic political issue. However, class conflict remained just below the surface. Agrarian discontent with the economic policies of the Redeemers led to the growth of Greenback, Grange, Alliance, and Populist movements throughout Mississippi. The controlling elements of the Democratic party used fear of black rule as the major device for thwarting the "revolt" of the small farmers.<sup>3</sup> Race was finally displaced as the dominant electoral concern by the "understanding clause" of the 1890 Constitution and the adoption of the white primary in 1903.

The new primary law came at the precise moment that the Progressive movement was beginning to produce Southern politicians who were willing to attack "predatory corporations."<sup>4</sup> As a "friend of the people," James K. Vardaman campaigned in 1903 among the poor whites of the hill section which had been receptive to the Populists in the 1890s and was elected governor. His platform diverged sharply from the interests of the delta planters and contained many of the old Populist themes—taxation of utilities, reduction of interest rates, equalization of tax assessments and humane treatment of the handicapped, the infirm, and the imprisoned. The spirit of neopopulism, inaugurated by Vardaman, evolved into an identifiable voting bloc which took its clearest form when Theodore "The Man" Bilbo was a candidate.<sup>5</sup> This plain-folk appeal resulted in five governorships between 1903 and 1939 and recreated the antebellum Whig-Jacksonian economic split within the majority Democratic party.<sup>6</sup> The struggle between the neopopulists and the conservatives during the first half of this century continued to have geographical centers of strength in the form of the poor hill sections versus the wealthy delta area. In the second Democratic primary for governor in 1927 Theodore Bilbo defeated Dennis Murphree—a fiscal conservative. Bilbo carried 75 percent of the hill counties while Murphree led in 73 percent of the delta counties and in a majority of those adjacent to the delta.<sup>7</sup>

V. O. Key pointed out that the line dividing delta and hills was more than economic since the mores, morals, and life-styles of the

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3. A. D. Kirwan, *Revolt of the Rednecks* (Lexington, Ky., 1951), 308-9.

4. M. L. Billington, *The Political South in the Twentieth Century* (New York, 1975), 2-4.

5. V. O. Key, Jr., *Southern Politics in State and Nation* (New York, 1949), 232.

6. The neopopulist governors of the period were James Vardaman (1903), Theodore Bilbo (1915), Lee Russell (1919), Theodore Bilbo (1927), and Paul Johnson, Sr. (1939). For a more detailed examination of this era, see *ibid.*, pp. 230-46.

7. Alexander Heard and Donald S. Strong, *Southern Primaries and Elections, 1920-1949* (University, Al., 1950), 79-80.

two areas also differed. Yet, Key observed that the geographical division between the delta and hills was not as sharp as it was once reported to have been. More fusion of population between the regions was occurring, and the advances in transportation, communication, and education reduced their isolation. The delta planter and the red-neck were becoming more states-of-mind than persons living in clearly defined areas.<sup>8</sup>

### REAPPEARANCE OF THE RACIAL ISSUE

Race was not ignored by the neopopulists and the conservatives in the interim between 1903 and 1947; however, it was not the major political issue since there was no immediate threat to white supremacy and segregation. With the onset of federal intervention after World War II, race once again emerged as the overriding concern in state-wide campaigns. Governor Fielding Wright set the tone for the new emphasis in his 1948 inaugural address when he declared "vital principles and eternal truths transcend party lines and the day is now at hand when determined action must be taken."<sup>9</sup>

Gubernatorial elections from 1951 through 1967 were decided primarily on the basis of which candidate could most effectively preserve the system of segregation and white political control.<sup>10</sup> Neopopulist-oriented candidates continued to seek the governorship, but they soon learned that it would be their projected competence in terms of defending segregation rather than socio-economic appeals which would insure victory.

The potent operation of race as the major conditioner in gubernatorial contests from 1951 to 1967 can best be illustrated by observing the voting patterns of the state's predominantly black counties (those with 60 percent or more black population). White voters in these counties had the greatest apprehension concerning pending changes in race relations and forcefully expressed their attachment to Southern traditions by their dramatic reversal of support from J. P. Coleman in 1955 to Paul B. Johnson, Jr., eight years later.<sup>11</sup>

Both men were originally of the neopopulist tradition and faced each other in the Democratic runoff primaries of 1955 and 1963. In the

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8. Key, pp. 230-31.

9. *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, 20 January 1948. Also see Walter Lord, *The Past That Would Not Die* (New York, 1965), 5-38, 60-77.

10. Earl Black, "Southern Governors and Political Change: Campaign Stances on Racial Segregation and Economic Development, 1950-69," *Journal of Politics* 33 (August 1971): 703-34.

11. The black vote in these counties during the period was virtually nonexistent.

1955 primary, Coleman and Johnson touted their abilities to preserve segregation. Coleman, then attorney general, capitalized on his experience on behalf of the state in the Willie McGee rape case to win the runoff by carrying 95 percent of the predominantly black counties.

In their second encounter in the 1963 runoff, Paul Johnson, Jr., now lieutenant governor, was given an opportunity to improve his image with white voters. Substituting for Governor Barnett, Johnson had barred James Meredith at the gate to the University of Mississippi in the September 1962 crisis. "Stand tall with Paul" echoed through the state. Coleman, on the other hand, was being attacked for having campaigned for the racially moderate Brooks Hays (Dem.-Ark.) and for endorsing Kennedy in 1960. Johnson won the runoff and had in his column 84 percent of Mississippi's predominantly black counties. In 1955, Johnson carried only 5 percent of this same set of counties.<sup>12</sup>

#### REEMERGENCE OF NEOPOPULISM

New political realities were created by the procedural changes of the Second Reconstruction. With the registration of thousands of black citizens, "even Mississippi was engulfed in the unexpected surge of racial moderation" in the 1971 gubernatorial contest.<sup>13</sup> Ardent segregationist Jimmy Swan was eliminated in the first primary, and the second primary found the two contestants opposing busing but avoiding other aspects of race. Fortenberry and Abney note that the overtures made by white candidates to black voters in 1971 signaled the displacement of race from the forefront of electoral competition. At the same time, they also present evidence pointing to the return of economic division.<sup>14</sup> In his runoff campaign against Lieutenant Governor Charles Sullivan (a delta-type conservative), former Jackson District Attorney William Waller campaigned with a rhetoric aimed at reactivating the dormant class appeal. He attacked the "Capitol Street Gang," stressed his ties to the working man by his slogan "Waller works," and even referred to himself as a "Red-neck."<sup>15</sup> Some of his proposals in the primary race had Populist over-

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12. Tip H. Allen, Jr., *Mississippi: The Presidential and Gubernatorial Elections, 1947-1964* (Mississippi State, Ms., 1967), 10.

13. Norman V. Bartley and Hugh D. Graham, *Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction* (Baltimore, 1975), 154.

14. Charles N. Fortenberry and Glenn Abney, "Mississippi: Unreconstructed and Unredeemed," in *Changing Politics of the South*, ed. William C. Havard (Baton Rouge, 1971), 521-24.

15. Neal R. Pierce, *The Deep South States of America: People, Politics, and Power in the Seven Deep South States* (New York, 1974), 188.

tones: for example, support for consumer protection and an end to the long-standing policy of making interest-free state deposits in the major banks of the Jackson area.<sup>16</sup>

Waller's success with neopopulist campaign imagery was repeated by Charles "Cliff" Finch in the 1975 election. A former state legislator and district attorney, Finch billed himself as the working man's candidate and used a lunchpail as his campaign symbol. During the primaries and the general election, Finch set aside one day a week for performing some type of manual labor ranging from operating a bulldozer to sacking groceries. His avoidance of a formal platform and use of plain-folk appeal calling for more jobs for all Mississippians enabled him to defeat Lieutenant Governor William Winter in the second primary with 57 percent of the vote.<sup>17</sup>

Finch continued his working man's strategy as he confronted Republican Gil Carmichael and black independent Henry J. Kirksey in the general election. Carmichael mounted a vigorous issue-oriented campaign centered around constitutional revision and the reorganization of state government. He took an early lead on election night as the returns from many of the more urban areas were reported; but as the vote from rural Mississippi trickled in, the "working man's candidate" chipped away at Carmichael's lead. Cliff Finch was eventually elected with a margin of 52 percent. However, Carmichael had made the strongest race for governor in Mississippi of any Republican in the century with a 45 percent total in the balloting.<sup>18</sup>

The 1975 election reveals that Mississippi gubernatorial politics has now gone full cycle. The neopopulist appeal, initiated by Waller in the 1971 campaign, came to full bloom in Cliff Finch's victory over Carmichael. As in the 1920s and '30s, the 1975 governor's race pitted the less affluent classes against the wealthier elements of the electorate. Race had again been replaced by class as the significant factor in the electoral decision.

An examination in Table 1 of the county by county Finch support in the 1975 contest against Republican Gil Carmichael indicates strong positive correlations between the Finch vote and such socio-economic factors as percent of persons employed in blue collar jobs, percent of families below the poverty level, and percent of housing valued below \$5,000. On the other hand, there are sharp negative correlations between Finch's strength and the percent of persons employed in white

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16. Jack Bass and Walter DeVries, *The Transformation of Southern Politics: Social Change and Political Consequences* (New York, 1976), 212.

17. *Jackson Daily News*, 27 August 1975.

18. *Ibid.*, 5 November 1975.

TABLE 1  
Socio-Economic Correlates of Neopopulist Electoral Support in  
Mississippi

	1975 Finch Vote	1976 Carter Vote
1974 est. county population .....	-.6723***	-.6323***
Percent rural .....	.6790***	.7573***
Median school years completed .....	-.5831***	-.6460***
Per capita income .....	-.6026***	-.6213***
Percent employed in white collar jobs .....	-.7333***	-.7391***
Percent employed in blue collar jobs .....	.3743***	.3218***
Percent population black .....	.1551**	.1062
Percent families below poverty level .....	.4202***	.4438***
Percent housing valued below \$5,000 .....	.5659***	.5585***
County assessed value .....	-.5990***	-.6646***
Percent vote for Finch .....	—	.6558***

Significance of correlations:   \*.05  
                                     \*\* .01  
                                     \*\*\*.001

SOURCE: U.S. Department of Commerce, Bureau of the Census, *Census of Population: 1970*, vol. 1, pt. 26, *Characteristics of Population: Mississippi* (Washington, 1971), pp. 137-337.

collar jobs, median school years completed, per capita income, and county assessed value.

Within the traditional economic cleavage, two significant changes in the voting pattern stand out in the 1975 returns. First, the geographic base of neopopulist and conservative support is shifting from the old delta-hills confrontation to an urban-rural split. Table 1 reveals a positive correlation of .679 between the amount of rural population in a county and the vote for Cliff Finch. He carried all of Mississippi's twenty-three counties which contain no urban population and led in twenty of them by 60 percent or more of the vote. Carmichael, conversely, had very strong urban backing, and had in his column thirteen of the state's sixteen urban counties, that is, those which according to the 1970 census had 50 percent or more urban population.<sup>19</sup>

19. Guy T. Peden, Jr., ed., *Mississippi Statistical Abstract, 1977* (Mississippi State, Ms., 1977), 34-37, 519-21. For a more extensive analysis of socio-economic patterns as they relate to county policy choice in Mississippi, see William Giles, Gerald Gabris, and Dale Krane, "Dynamics in Rural Policy Development: The Uniqueness of County Government," paper presented at the annual meeting of the Midwest Political Science Association, Chicago, April 1978.

A second major change in the voting is reflected in the fact that Finch's victory underscores the expanding role of black votes in state elections. Blacks and working-class whites, who just a few years earlier expressed strong alienation toward each other when race was the main electoral theme, were drawn together in support of Cliff Finch's neopopulism. Finch, a strong backer of Governor Ross Barnett in the desegregation crisis of 1962, had the endorsement of black leaders Aaron Henry and Charles Evers in his 1975 effort. Evers was Mayor of Fayette and brother of the slain civil rights champion, Medgar Evers; and Henry was head of the state NAACP. Bass and DeVries point out that Finch received 80 percent of Mississippi's black vote in his victory over Carmichael.<sup>20</sup> The insignificant positive correlation (.155) between the percentage of blacks in a county and the Finch vote indicates that it was socio-economic pleadings rather than racial overtures which placed heavy numbers of blacks in the victor's column. All of the predominantly rural counties with heavy black populations went for Finch. However, the rural counties with very low percentages of blacks also went just as heavily for him.<sup>21</sup> During the period of racial politics in the gubernatorial election, the predominantly rural black counties had the strongest records of support for segregationist candidates since blacks as a rule were not voting, and the fear of social and political change by whites in the counties was quite strong. Now, these counties were in the same category as their rural white counterparts.

Blacks are generally at the lower level of the socio-economic ladder in the more urban counties of the state, and they cast their votes, along with the working-class whites, for Cliff Finch. Yet, the black vote in the urban areas was more than offset by the large number of middle and upper class voters, mostly white, who balloted for Gil Carmichael.<sup>22</sup>

### PRESIDENTIAL OVERTONES

In the interim between his election in 1975 and the 1976 Democratic convention, Governor Finch was able to put the working-class coalition into a more structured form. This was achieved by his bringing together the two factions of the Democratic party in Mississippi, the "Regulars" and the "Loyalists," into a unified state party. These groups had developed during the civil rights struggle, the "Loyalists"

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20. Bass and DeVries, p. 216.

21. Peden, pp. 44-53, 519-21.

22. *Jackson Daily News*, 5 November 1975.



having a largely black base and the "Regulars" consisting of old line white Democrats. A co-chairpersonship system for the party was established in which a black from the "Loyalists" and a white from the "Regulars" served. Subsequently, for the first time in many years, Mississippi sent a unified delegation to the 1976 Democratic convention.

In his 1976 campaign Jimmy Carter was endorsed by all elements of the state party, ranging from Senator James Eastland to black leaders Charles Evers and Aaron Henry. Some Mississippians observed that parts of the Carter rhetoric sounded quite similar to that used earlier by Governor Finch. In a very close race Carter carried the Magnolia state by slightly over 50 percent of the popular vote.<sup>23</sup>

Table 1 reveals a significant positive correlation of .655 between the Finch and Carter vote. The table also indicates that the same type of socio-economic division persisted in the presidential race as had earlier prevailed in the gubernatorial balloting. This cleavage, like the previous one, reflects a geographical configuration along the lines of urban and rural counties. The Republican candidate for governor, Carmichael, had captured 81 percent of the more urban counties; and Ford carried 62 percent of this group. Democrat Finch won all of Mississippi's predominantly rural counties, and Carter swept 78 percent of these. In the presidential race, Republicans improved their standings in the marginal counties, that is, those which fall into neither the urban nor rural categories. They had carried only two of these counties in the governor's contest, but in the presidential voting the Republicans led in eight of them.<sup>24</sup>

A heavy majority of Mississippi's black vote went for Carter. Dan Cupit, Carter's campaign manager in the state, pointed out that the common factor in the black and rural white support for the Democratic candidate was the large working-class population.<sup>25</sup> Table 2 shows the percentage of the vote received by Finch (1975) and Carter (1976) in Mississippi's counties and also indicates the percentage of non-white and urban population in each county.

### A LOOK AHEAD

Though obscured by the race issue for over two decades, Mississippi's persistent economic division has been restored in the guber-

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23. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, 4 November 1976.

24. Peden, pp. 34-37, 513-16.

25. *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, 4 November 1976.

TABLE 2

Democratic Support Compared with Urban/Rural and White/Nonwhite Population (in Percentages), Mississippi Counties, 1975-76

COUNTY	FINCH	CAR- TER	UR- BAN	NON- WHITE	COUNTY	FINCH	CAR- TER	UR- BAN	NON- WHITE
Adams .....	45	52	53	48	Lincoln .....	54	39	41	31
Alcorn .....	67	66	43	12	Lowndes .....	41	44	60	33
Amite .....	65	52	..	51	Madison .....	47	55	35	63
Attala .....	59	57	37	41	Marion .....	46	49	33	31
Benton .....	75	74	..	42	Marshall .....	71	71	24	62
Bolivar .....	50	59	43	62	Monroe .....	53	55	39	31
Calhoun .....	65	59	..	26	Montgomery ...	62	51	43	31
Carroll .....	65	50	..	51	Neshoba .....	56	52	30	28
Chickasaw .....	58	53	34	36	Newton .....	54	42	19	30
Choctaw .....	70	49	..	28	Noxubee .....	53	52	18	66
Claiborne .....	52	78	26	75	Oktibbeha .....	31	45	56	35
Clarke .....	53	51	18	36	Panola .....	83	62	14	51
Clay .....	50	53	46	50	Pearl River .....	62	53	38	18
Coahoma .....	51	60	54	65	Perry .....	65	50	..	26
Copiah .....	57	53	35	50	Pike .....	49	50	38	44
Covington .....	62	52	..	33	Pontotoc .....	66	65	20	18
DeSoto .....	75	55	25	35	Prentiss .....	67	65	29	12
Forrest .....	42	42	78	25	Quitman .....	69	65	16	58
Franklin .....	66	47	..	39	Rankin .....	44	36	28	28
George .....	69	60	..	12	Scott .....	55	49	32	33
Greene .....	71	57	..	22	Sharkey .....	55	54	..	65
Grenada .....	50	47	50	44	Simpson .....	56	45	15	31
Hancock .....	57	51	57	14	Smith .....	61	43	..	22
Harrison .....	41	45	83	18	Stone .....	53	51	37	23
Hinds .....	31	39	84	39	Sunflower .....	55	56	31	63
Holmes .....	55	63	24	68	Tallahatchie ....	77	56	15	61
Humphreys .....	59	63	22	65	Tate .....	73	59	23	47
Issaquena .....	64	61	..	62	Tippah .....	67	69	22	16
Itawamba .....	70	67	17	16	Tishomingo ....	73	65	..	5
Jackson .....	43	42	71	16	Tunica .....	74	73	..	73
Jasper .....	56	57	..	47	Union .....	61	69	34	16
Jefferson .....	72	76	..	75	Walthall .....	59	55	..	41
Jeff. Davis .....	64	59	..	50	Warren .....	38	41	57	41
Jones .....	49	47	51	25	Washington .....	44	55	64	55
Kemper .....	58	58	..	56	Wayne .....	62	52	26	33
Lafayette .....	49	53	57	28	Webster .....	68	53	..	23
Lamar .....	56	43	2	13	Wilkinson .....	64	64	..	68
Lauderdale .....	42	32	67	31	Winston .....	56	51	36	40
Lawrence .....	58	51	..	32	Yalobusha .....	77	59	28	41
Leake .....	63	54	18	39	Yazoo .....	55	49	40	54
Lee .....	48	53	44	21					
Leflore .....	43	50	53	58	For state .....	52	50	45	37

SOURCE: Guy T. Peden, Jr., ed., *Mississippi Statistical Abstract, 1977* (Mississippi State, Ms., 1977), pp. 34-37, 44-53, 513-16, 519-21.

natorial contest. However, some significant questions are posed by the reemerging class pattern. With the state's white population divided along socio-economic lines, black votes have become pivotal. The crucial question is: can the present coalition between the white working class and black voters be maintained so as to form a dominant voting bloc? There is always the possibility that as the economic status of blacks improves in the state, they will fragment along class lines. In other words, affluent blacks might join affluent whites—thus weakening neopopulist strength and the pivotal nature of the black vote.

It should also be remembered that the coalition which Governor Finch has developed within the Democratic party contains groups and individuals who exhibited great antipathy toward each other only a decade and a half ago when race was the overriding issue in state politics. Though race has diminished as an issue in state election campaigns and attitudes on the subject have shown considerable change, the element of race has not completely faded from the Mississippi scene. In many of the municipalities and counties with heavy black populations, slates of black and white candidates still vie for control of local government. Much integration has been achieved in the public schools. Yet, white academies flourish in areas of the state with moderate to heavy black population.

Will old suspicions and mistrust related to race emerge to destroy or jeopardize the new coalition within the Democratic party? Recent developments since the presidential election of 1976 indicate that this could be a problem. For example, Bill Minor, a veteran correspondent on Mississippi politics, notes blacks are becoming concerned over the fact that a number of Governor Finch's more recent appointees are persons with strong Klan or Citizen Council backgrounds and that no black as yet has been named to head a state department or agency.<sup>26</sup> Unhappy over the role of blacks in state government and with the general stance being taken by the state Democratic leadership, black mayor Charles Evers entered the 1978 Mississippi race for the United States Senate as an independent. The Evers candidacy siphoned large numbers of black votes from the Democratic coalition which had been so successful in the preceding presidential and gubernatorial elections. This significantly contributed to the victory of Republican Thad Cochran who won with 45 percent of the vote.<sup>27</sup>

From another perspective, there is always the possibility that some

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26. *Meridian Star* (Ms.), 25 December 1977.

27. *Jackson Daily News*, 8 & 9 November 1978.

white politicians in an effort to destroy the neopopulist coalition might appeal to latent racial feelings among working-class whites. This could be done by haranging the point that the latter group is in an "unholy alliance" with Mississippi blacks. At the time of this writing, no evidence of this tactic has surfaced.

Some contemporary writings portray "new South" coalitions emerging with socio-economic bases, and one source suggests that "the white South is split politically along the same class lines that existed before the Civil War . . . ." <sup>28</sup> Such divisions have been apparent in several recent Mississippi elections. The effective mobilization of less affluent citizens, black and white, by candidates who can overcome previous animosity is an absolute requirement for the continuation of a viable neopopulist coalition in the state. Does the development of biracial class-oriented politics in Mississippi indicate that race finally has been supplanted by class as the dominant axis around which elections will revolve or will the strains of organizational and partisan concerns stymie the current trend? Of course, a complete answer to this question lies in the future; but at this juncture in Mississippi's history, the replacement of the old politics of race by the "new" politics of class would signal the state's return to a more national pattern of interest articulation and conflict resolution.

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28. Jack Bass, "The Death of the Old Politics of Race: Key to the New South," *Politicks and Other Human Interest*, 17 January 1978, p. 21.