



THE VIEW

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NEW DEBATE OVER THE OLD SUBJECT OF REGIONALISM

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

Tim Kalich, editor and publisher of the Greenwood Commonwealth recently reignited the long smoldering, sometimes flaming, debate over regionalism in Mississippi. Kalich raised the question of the propriety of all Mississippians chipping in their tax dollars to subsidize the “wind pool”.

The wind pool is a device enabling State Government in Mississippi to subsidize insurance rates for those on the Mississippi Gulf Coast who are most susceptible to seeing their property destroyed by hurricane force winds. In order to make available sufficient dollars to accomplish this task at a meaningful level the Legislature spread the responsibility for funding the wind pool over all tax paying Mississippians regardless of where they might live. I will not dare enter that fray, but it does present the opportunity to consider anew the competition among the various regions of the state. Better yet, it affords us the chance to look at recent examples of cooperation among those regions, and the potential for all Mississippians to marshal our forces to rise above the problems we have traditionally faced in this the nation’s poorest state.

Mississippi has long struggled to grab the brass ring of prosperity. In so doing, policy makers have searched diligently for the right amount of inputs that would produce the desired results in the form of income and opportunities for her citizens. For example, it has often been a struggle for some of us to convince others of us that monetary infusions into education would go a long way toward producing a qualified workforce that could in turn be translated into a key component sought by those locating industry in the state. The cycle

continues as those who benefit from employment from these industries pick up their paychecks on Fridays head out into the market place to enjoy the fruits of their labor. Along the way, state and local government gather their shares of those earnings in the form of taxes thus enhancing the ability of the state to invest in future development.

Recent events provide us with numerous examples. Mr. Kalich's concerns were directed at the prospects of all Mississippians shouldering enough of the insurance burden to resume living in the hurricane prone Gulf Coast region. I along with many others have been amazed at the energy dedicated by coast residents toward getting the doors of their businesses open and the equally strong desire to get back in permanent housing. Furthermore, the economic activity generated by casino construction and subsequent commencement of renewed operations has had a decided impact on the state's revenue stream and has jump started the flow of tax dollars at the local level. The crying need is for the insurance issue on the coast to be solved so that mortgages are once again readily available and for insurance to become affordable so that the construction of rental residential property becomes feasible. All of this will enable the return of the workforce in large numbers, and hence enable that potentially great coast economic engine to rev up to the benefit of all Mississippians from one end of the state to the other.

It seems that one who plies his trade in the Mississippi Delta could readily identify with the practice of taxpayer subsidized underwriting of risks of doing business. Federal programs designed to subsidize the outcome of various farming operations and federally supported crop insurance programs make it possible for Delta planters to take the chance at battling with mother nature in the production of food and fiber. All Mississippians benefit at some point when this vast agri-business engine succeeds.

In addition, we have witnessed a string of successes recently in providing incentives from dollars that originated with the taxpayers to entice industry into the state. These industries such as Toyota, Nissan, a number of major industries in the Columbus and Starkville area, and enhancements to existing industries like Northrup Grumman on the coast and Howard Industries in Laurel are all ultimately funded by the taxpayers with hopes of enhancing the pocketbooks of thousands of our citizens. These industries are scattered in various regions of the state and are far from the proximity of most Mississippians. However, just as in the cases of the coast and the Delta agricultural sector, benefits from their success accrue to us all. One can readily see the fallacy of each region of the state embracing the tactics of bygone days



and attempting to stand alone. In today's numbers this would hardly be possible. It is quite doubtful that Pontotoc, Union, and Lee counties could swing a \$300 million plus package of incentives to land an automobile manufacturing facility. It, likewise, would be foolhardy to allow the coast to languish when with a little help from us all the potential for returns is tremendous.

To be sure, there are regions of the state that need much more attention. The non-agricultural sector of the Delta is in dire need of attention. The same can be said of the more remote areas of southwest Mississippi. The good news is that it seems to be getting clearer than in the past that prosperity visited upon citizens in one part of the state if properly directed can benefit citizens throughout Mississippi.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

WILLIAM MARTIN WISEMAN, Ph.D

William Martin Wiseman is Director of the John C. Stennis Institute of Government and Professor of Political Science at Mississippi State University. He received his Ph.D in 1986, his MPPA in 1980, his MS in 1974, and his BA in 1973, all awarded from Mississippi State University. In addition to his duties at Mississippi State, Dr. Wiseman is a guest professor at Jackson State University. Dr. Wiseman's areas of academic interest include American government, intergovernmental relations and federalism, county and municipal management, public personnel administration, and innovations in state and local government management.

Wiseman is a sought-after speaker on state and local government, state and local politics, political theory and rural development. Often a guest editorial writer in Mississippi daily and weekly newspapers, he can also be relied upon to evaluate federal, state and local election results for all media.

He is married to the former Bonnie Parker, and they have two children. He is active in the United Methodist Church.

Dr. Wiseman's e-mail is marty@sig.msstate.edu

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