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# THE VIEW

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## SETTING THE HISTORICAL RECORD STRAIGHT

BY

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Teaching American Government to classes comprised largely of college freshmen is one of my more enjoyable academic experiences. Over the last few years, however, I have become increasingly concerned over an ever more glaring deficit in the preparation of these students, most of whom are graduates of Mississippi high schools. Their knowledge of the Civil Rights movement nationally and in the state of Mississippi is almost non-existent. This is the case regardless of whether the students are white or black. Any mention of the events of this era is met with a blank stare.

It has been said that there have been four great eras in the history of the United States. These include the American Revolution and the nation's founding, the Civil War, the Great Depression and World War II, and the Civil Rights Movement. Somehow the telling of the history of the Civil Rights Movement has been given short shrift by the Mississippi History books. The legislatively mandated and newly operational Civil Rights Education Commission has been given the charge to correct this slighting of events in Mississippi during this historic period.

Because Mississippi was arguably in the bull's-eye of the Civil Rights Movement, one would think that omitting the events that occurred during this time of upheaval would be tantamount to omitting the Civil War from our history books. Yet for some reason the telling of the story of the struggle for equality of some of us against the rest of us is virtually missing. One may speculate as to what those reasons may be. We may still be disagreeing over the meaning of these events. Or it may be that we are still too embarrassed by the laws and customs of that day and of the heinous activities associated with

our trying to enforce them. Whatever the reasons, it has become obvious that the time has come to make the historic record of Mississippi during the 1950's, 1960's, and 1970's complete by including the various accounts of the Civil Rights Movement in the curricula in our schools. This is the task given the Civil Rights Education Commission by the legislature and from the initial meetings it is apparent that this will be easier said than done.

One of the first issues that has arisen has to do with the sheer volume of Civil Rights related activity in Mississippi. Hardly a day passed over the two-plus decade period of this epic struggle without multiple events covering the front pages of Mississippi's newspapers. Thus, the question of how to boil this multitude of events down into curricula that best foster understanding of this important time must be addressed. Secondly, it is apparent that the interpretation of events from the black perspective, particularly in the eyes of those who were present, and the interpretation of events from the white perspective are sometimes very different, regardless of how sympathetic white observers may be. Thirdly, there will ultimately be the issue of how some of Mississippi's more revered political figures of the era will be treated in this new historical material. Former Governors such as Ross Barnett, Paul B. Johnson, Jr. and John Bell Williams come to mind. In a true telling of the history of Civil Rights in Mississippi, can the actions of these figures be omitted any more than those such as Medgar and Charles Evers, Fannie Lou Hamer, or James Meredith?

Beyond the relating of actual events, the greatest value of an understanding of the Civil Rights movement may be in the gaining of a basic knowledge of how the United States Constitution worked to guarantee equality of all the nation's citizens. Mississippi was a key battleground for the sorting out of fundamental issues of federalism and separation of powers. The story of how black citizens, when denied the right to vote, when denied access to public facilities, and when relegated to sub-standard segregated schools and other establishments, used the Constitution to overcome these inequalities is basic to understanding constitutional intent and the role of the State and Federal Courts. African-Americans, faced with entrenched legislative bodies at both the national and state levels and similar reluctance to move on the part of the executive branches, resorted to the courts, where they hoped that their Constitutional argument for equal treatment under the law would be heard. African-American "Freedom Riders" gained access to federal courts by busing into Jackson and violating State laws by drinking from "Whites Only" water fountains in "Whites Only" waiting rooms. This is only one class of events that handed the role of guaranteeing the rights of all citizens over to the federal

government, and hence signaled the beginning of the end of the state sovereignty argument for the state serving as the guarantor of individual rights. Separation of powers left the courts free from the influence of the other two branches of government in interpreting the law of the land and the Supreme Court's reaffirmation of the superiority of the federal level served to counter the state's rights argument.

This, and the rest of the history of the Civil Rights movement in Mississippi, is a story that must be told if the knowledge of our state's history is to be complete. The legislature had a good idea when it created the Commission and the Commission chaired by Governor William Winter has a tough job in meeting this legislative challenge.

## 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.

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