



# THE VIEW

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## THE MYSTERIOUS DISAPPEARANCE OF POLITICAL DISCOURSE

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

Allow me a brief respite from dissecting the events of the current political season in order to ponder what, to me, may perhaps be a more serious turn of political events. It seems that every year about this time I need to take a moment to vent my frustrations over the apparent continuing decline of political discourse among the students who populate University classrooms.

These students have returned to campus for the fall semester and have had a couple of weeks to settle into the routine of a new school year. No doubt a handful of said students are exceedingly grateful for landing a spot in my Mississippi Government and Politics class. After all this is an election year in Mississippi and that should make simple the age old game of distracting the professor by pretending to be profoundly interested in his favorite discipline.

Yet, something is evidently amiss. There was a time when I could enter the classroom and make the customary speech about getting your licks in now with the one in the room in a position of authority because as soon as you take off that cap and gown you will have missed such a chance for a long while. One only had to introduce such topics as abortion, prayer in schools, or competing positions between the Republicans and Democrats to exchange the role of professor for that of a referee. Ah, those were the days. While the students of today are no less bright than their predecessors, something has happened to the ability of the current crop to engage in spontaneous debate on the political and social issues of the day. I cannot decide at this point whether we should blame

these young people or point the finger squarely at ourselves. I am prepared, in the best sense of academia, to offer a few theories.

First of all, we have allowed the necessary emphasis on math and science that has been building since the old Soviet Union launched Sputnik to become a “zero sum game” with the social sciences. The interpretation has become one that says, “Smart people are interested in math and science and the social sciences are for everyone else.” Such thinking calls forth the question of whether we should know how to get along with each other so that we may make use of scientific discoveries for peaceful purposes?

Another theory associated with the approach taken by the various systems of education has to do with our efforts to continuously measure and compare performance among school jurisdictions and even states. These efforts virtually demand that all measurement be based on a knowledge/fact approach characterized by mechanically graded multiple choice tests. There is little time or inclination to gage critical thinking concerning events in the public square by assigning essay types of tests. Thus, it should be obvious to me why, when I impart some controversial fact designed to shock students awake, I am met with blank stares and occasionally the question from one of the braver souls in the class, “Is this going to be on the test?”

Perhaps these students are “hunkering down” under the growing heat of political correctness. The days are pretty much gone when college campuses were the bastions of free speech. The ability to teach or discuss based on the ability to take unpopular, sometimes shocking, positions has succumbed to the attacks from both the right and the left. Can we blame these newest initiates to the debates of the “ought” and “ought not” of public life for ducking and covering rather than risking censure or worse?

Then there are the roles of parents and other mentors during their growing up years. It has become quite the fashion to berate the government and to deny any possibility that anything but misery could ever be dispensed by such an institution whose only obvious success is lifting one’s hard earned money from his wallet. How can the value of our political system be assessed when students begin from a premise that the object of study is universally evil?

This position is often reinforced by the overheated partisanship that we are witnessing in Mississippi and in Washington. Rather than rationale discourse, discussions often leap directly to political hardball. Furthermore, once one has taken sides he/she is expected to be thoroughly acquainted with the

predetermined “talking points” of the party of their choosing. No doubt this would favor the good soldier who has traded in his or her independent thinking for loyalty to the party line.

I would only say to these students who will pass this way but once that we may have given you the wrong impression. We somehow stumbled upon a form of government in which virtually every decision is based on compromise. Furthermore, we have found ways to enable everyone to have places at the table and thus for their voices to be heard. For our form of government in Mississippi and in the country as a whole to work best there must be an abundance of civil political discourse so that all sides will be represented. I would strongly urge today’s students to accept the invitation to use the college classroom to prepare to articulate their beliefs on the “oughts” and “ought nots” of public life and the proper place of government in enforcing them.

## 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](mailto:marty@sig.msstate.edu)

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