



THE VIEW

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WE'RE HERE: FOCUSING ATTENTION ON THE PLIGHT OF OUR RURAL AREAS

BY

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Across the country little alarms are sounding in all their various tones signaling the evolution of increasingly difficult problems in rural life. This is particularly troubling for a state like Mississippi, which remains one of the more thoroughly rural states in the United States. While Mississippi's population is virtually evenly divided between those who live within incorporated areas and those who live outside of our towns, the fact remains that our municipal areas can, for the most part, hardly be labeled as urban.

I was fortunate to recently attend the 2nd National Rural Assembly in Washington. While diversity is certainly a strength of those who continue to embrace rural life, that same diversity can pose challenges in attempting to address the policy process with one voice. One of the reasons for the creation of the first two National Rural Assemblies is to give focus to the multi-faceted backgrounds of those who call rural areas home. It is indeed a fascinating tapestry woven by Native Americans, Hispanics, African-Americans, and Caucasians, all from many cultural backgrounds, but all sharing the American rural heritage. It is easy to wax nostalgic in ways that would mask the current plight of our less populated areas.

William P. Browne, the late rural economist and researcher, provides some context in his book, *The Failure of National Rural Policy*. According to Browne, over 80 percent of the nation's land mass remains in non-metropolitan areas. There was a time when virtually half of the population of the country was engaged in some occupation related to agriculture. Today, less than one

percent of Americans live on what may be considered fulltime farms or ranches. In fact, of those who live in rural areas, only 10 percent are engaged in agricultural related enterprises. Yet although dwindling steadily, 20 percent of the population of the United States, or approximately 60 million people, still live in rural areas. What of those who continue to live the rural life apart from any sustenance provided by agricultural employment? The data often paints a particularly harsh picture. Whether the issue at hand is educational attainment, health care, per capita income or continued viability of community life the numbers associated with rural areas are consistently more troubling than those for urban and suburban life. Yet the dispersal of these cases, over what is often cynically referred to as "fly over" country, often makes these rural problems disappear into the pristine landscape. In this world where agriculture remains the impetus for public policy efforts, non-farm rural development comprises what Browne labeled "The Impossible Task of Rural Advocacy".

Thus, the participating organizations of the National Rural Assembly have commenced the task of establishing a platform for rural advocacy. And not a minute too soon, I might add. In addition to the many testimonials to the plight of rural life from around the country, the centerpiece of this year's meeting was the introduction of the "Rural Compact". It should be noted here that nothing in the efforts of the National Rural Assembly or in the Rural Compact attempts to detract from the abiding need to maintain a strong and internationally competitive agricultural infrastructure. Rather, theirs is an attempt to make the case that agriculture, as well as metropolitan life, will be enhanced if rural community life is preserved.

The Rural Compact is based on a set of four principles. These are quality of education, stewardship of natural resources, health of rural people, and investment in rural communities. If one pauses to ponder the status of each of these principles in rural Mississippi it is not difficult for most to agree that these are areas that are in continuing acute need of attention in our state. For example, the Rural Compact acknowledges the value of rural schools as, in addition to their educational function, playing a vital part in the physical, economic, cultural, and political landscape of the community. As such, policies should be developed that support their success rather than simply making rural areas more remote through school consolidation. Likewise, we in Mississippi only need to consider the current debate raging over Medicare and Medicaid to identify with the concern of the National Rural Assembly over health care. Low population density, the challenge of providing transportation from remote areas and a continuing struggle to maintain hospital availability to low income citizens are all part of the rural health care challenge.

Hence the Rural Compact, as a tangible product of the National Rural Assembly, is intended to be a first vehicle to assemble the voices from the nation's diverse rural areas. Support has been thoroughly non-partisan. Senator Sam Brownback from Kansas, representing Republican Presidential candidate John McCain, speaking to a joint meeting of the National Rural Assembly and Stand Up for Rural America, endorsed the Rural Compact and acknowledged that he was already a signatory. I am proud to say that the Stennis Institute has also signed on to this urgent effort. Mississippi's Congressional delegation, led by Senator Thad Cochran and his efforts on the Senate Appropriations Committee and Congressman Bennie Thompson of the 2nd District in the Mississippi Delta and former House Appropriations member and now Senator Roger Wicker, have all demonstrated in tangible ways their concern for the plight of our rural citizens. Their efforts must be expanded and endorsed or a precious way of life will be imperiled.

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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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