



# THE VIEW

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## DRAWING BATTLE LINES IN THE RURAL/URBAN DIVIDE

BY  
MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

I have a cousin who I'm told by those who know is the type of hardworking, intelligent, and frugal family farmer who will make it when others don't. He doesn't believe in shortcuts, and before he abandons the tried and true farming practices he has to be convinced that the new approach will add value.

Imagine my surprise a few years ago when I was in his home in rural north Mississippi and there on his kitchen table was a computer. That computer contained an ample array of farm budgeting and decision-making software. This was prior to the advent of the modern day high-speed Internet generation. The fact is for this hardworking farmer it may still today be prior to the arrival of high-speed or broadband Internet service to his rather remote location. Folks like this farmer and others in rural states like Mississippi had cause to rejoice last week when the President's massive \$785 billion stimulus package was signed into law because among other things it included \$7 billion for extension of high-speed Internet into the most rural areas in the country.

While this boost to the extension of broadband capabilities to the "end of the road," as the saying goes, seemed like good news, it was met with a startling degree of criticism. In fact, if rural high-speed Internet access had been submitted to social triage it would have been sent to the back of the line if not shown the exit altogether. The gist of most of the criticism was put quite bluntly: rural life is just not worth the expense.

There has been a growing awareness in recent years that rural areas in the United States have been steadily losing their political clout. All sorts of demographic data paint a rather bleak picture of rural life. As compared to the middle of the last century the numbers necessary to get the attention of policy makers are not "out there" anymore and they are continuing to dwindle. For example, according to the late rural researcher William P. Browne in his book *The Failure of National Rural Policy*, the number of "for profit" farms has

declined from over 6.5 million in the 1930's to around 650,000 today. From a time when over half of the nation's population was engaged in agriculture, that figure is now less than 1 percent, and of those who continue to live in rural areas less than 10 percent are engaged in farming. In other words, of all rural dwellers over 90 percent are engaged in something other than agriculture. Finally, of the nation's population of 300 million, only 50 million are considered to be rural.

The startlingly negative reaction to the investment in the extension of high-speed Internet services into rural areas contained in the stimulus package clearly reflects a loss of reverence for the nobility of rural life. In a February 3, 2009 article in the *New York Times* reporter David M. Herszenhorn characterized the stimulus package investment in rural high-speed Internet as "a cyberbridge to nowhere." Other industry analysts could hardly resist stereotyping rural citizens by fearing a massive expenditure for a service that rural folk didn't need and didn't know how to use. Former Federal Communications Commission economist Michael Katz was even more blunt. He stated on National Public Radio's *Morning Edition* that "Other people don't like to say bad things about rural areas so I will." He went on to label rural areas as "environmentally hostile, energy inefficient, and weak in innovation, simply because rural people are spread out across the landscape." Katz concluded by saying, "The notion that we should be helping people who live in rural areas avoid costs that they impose on society is misguided." One researcher stated that rather than taking rural high-speed Internet to rural areas those in rural areas should simply "move to town."

Conditions surrounding access by those in our sparsely populated rural areas to high-speed Internet are quite similar to those that existed in May of 1933 when in the early days of the Great Depression President Franklin Roosevelt signed legislation creating the Tennessee Valley Authority. That act brought electricity and other services to the remote Tennessee Valley at government expense because there was no way that the private sector could have afforded to do it alone. The success of that endeavor, particularly in its early days, cannot be denied.

Perhaps the desire for rural high-speed Internet access has not attained the degree of urgency that the need for electric lights in the Tennessee Valley exhibited in the 1930's. Much of Mississippi is considered very rural. Yet the need for information in rural Mississippi is as important as it is anywhere. Furthermore, our excellent and strategically-located Community College system has made a valuable commitment to offer hundreds of courses "online" to those whose life and work requirements don't allow them the luxury of sitting in the classroom. How many of these potential contributors to society are being left behind because they live too far down that rural road to be reached by educational programming? Do we simply tell them to move to town because rural life isn't worth it anymore?



## **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 email is [marty@sig.msstate.edu](mailto:marty@sig.msstate.edu).

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Elected to the United States Senate in 1947 with the promise to "plow a straight furrow to the end of the row," John C. Stennis recognized the need for an organization to assist governments with a wide range of issues and to better equip citizens to participate in the political process. In 1976, Senator Stennis set the mission parameters and ushered in the development of a policy research and assistance institute which was to bear his name as an acknowledgment of his service to the people of Mississippi.

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