



# THE VIEW

Issue #21

October 16, 2009

## ARE WE SPLITTING THE PHILOSOPHICAL SHEETS?

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

Have you hugged your white, over 50, Republican, evangelical Christian neighbor today? Have you “high fived” your liberal, Ph.D., card carrying ACLU member, occasionally Episcopalian, Democratic buddy at the country club lately? If not you had better do so in a hurry because before long neither may be available for such comradery. According to journalist and author Bill Bishop in his book *The Big Sort: Why the Clustering of Like-Minded America is Tearing Us Apart*, the opportunities to consort with those who think differently from us are becoming more limited by the day.

Political consultant to the Democrats and pundit of note James Carville, in his recent visit to Mississippi State University along with his politically polar opposite wife Mary Matlin, made a point that fits Bishop’s thesis precisely. Carville said that everybody, regardless of political persuasion simply implores government to “do the right thing.” Seems easy, he said, until the question is asked, “What, then, is the right thing?” Each side is certain, even to the point of at times quoting scripture, that it knows what is “the right thing.” The differences of opinion on this topic are growing ever wider.

Consider two recent examples in the news. A May 30, 2009 story in the Jackson *Clarion Ledger* told of Liberty University’s cancelling of the formal recognition of the College Democrats on its campus. The administration at the conservative religious-based Liberty University founded by the late evangelist Jerry Falwell maintained that the fact that recognition had been granted in the first place was an oversight by an administrator who failed to consult school policy barring Democrats. Then there was the case of the Arlington (Texas) Independent School which forbade the viewing of President Barack Obama’s speech to the nation’s schools, citing the time it would take away from the busy school day. Yet, several days later the school was scheduled to bus its students to Dallas Cowboys Stadium for a speech by former President George W. Bush. No doubt there are stories to be told where Republicans and conservatives have been slighted for nothing more than their beliefs also. These go beyond the issues related to Christian Crosses, Jewish Stars of David and Ten Commandments in public places. Party affiliation and political philosophy used to be the stuff of good natured ribbing at backyard barbecues and family reunions. Now our differences are literally pulling us apart according to Bill Bishop’s well-researched *Big Sort*.

Bishop employs copious amounts of data to show that in the last thirty or so years we have undertaken a pattern of segregating ourselves from each other according to our personal beliefs. He meticulously demonstrates how Democrats and Republicans have separated themselves from each other geographically, and in the process have become more distrustful of one another. Bishop quotes University of California Davis political scientist Robert Huckfeldt as finding “that as communication between members of the two parties diminishes, the two sides come to see each other as more extreme or radical.” Does this sound familiar?

These divisions are not only becoming apparent geographically but in the churches in which we worship and in the news programs that we view. Bishop cites an interesting study in that regard. Stanford University Professor Shanto Iyengar and Washington Post reporter Richard Moren took a list of news stories all run on left-leaning MSNBC and randomly labeled them as being from FOX News, CNN, National Public Radio (NPR), or the BBC. Democratic participants in the study preferred CNN and NPR. Republicans flocked to FOX News. The Fox label tripled the hits for Republicans while the chances that a Republican would pick a story labeled NPR or CNN were only one in ten. According to *Big Sort* author Bishop, there is a human inclination to find overwhelming support for our own opinions within a news article or report. With so many options now we no longer have to partake of news with which we don’t already agree.

What’s the upshot of this new found desire to “tailor make” our philosophical surroundings? Bishop quotes philosopher Francis Fukuyama as saying that “people are picking and choosing their values on an individual basis, in ways that link them with smaller communities of like minded folks.” J. Walker Smith of Yankelovich Partners adds that the traditional American democratic notion of accommodating differences through compromise in order to sustain a shared way of life is going to fade away. These are dire predictions indeed. Tension has been a part of our unique system of governance since that summer in Philadelphia in 1787, but compromise has virtually always carried the day.

Perhaps we should all try one more time. Play golf with a right wing Republican. Take your favorite liberal Democrat to lunch. It may be more important now than you think.





## **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).

## **ABOUT THE INSTITUTE:**

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.

**Mississippi State**  
UNIVERSITY

Mississippi State University does not discriminate on the basis of race, color, religion, national origin, sex, age, disability, sexual orientation, group affiliation, or veteran status.