



THE VIEW

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WHAT DOES IT MEAN TO BE DEFINED AS RURAL?

BY

MARTY WISEMAN, Ph.D.

As I have attempted to wipe away the fog of the recession I have struggled mightily lately with my fears about the future of Mississippi and other states like it. What is the message that we – the profoundly rural – are being sent, and how much of it should we heed?

The sources of some of these fears have been expressed previously in this space. One should be reminded of the public comments of conservative thinker and columnist George Will when he talked of wealth creation during the nation's first century being based on land speculation followed by a similar period of wealth creation from capital facilities (factories and equipment) development. Now, Will states that we have arrived at an era when the engine driving the creation of wealth is the brain. The question of where that leaves Mississippi is unavoidable. Furthermore, any notion that all of the world wants to emulate our country's vast rural areas was shattered when a handful of economists, in evaluating the recent federal stimulus package, roundly protested the expenditure of \$12 billion to extend wireless broadband capabilities into the rural hinterlands by labeling such an effort as one to construct a "cyber bridge to nowhere." One such economist implied that it was a waste of money because rural folks neither wanted broadband nor would they know how to use it if they had it.

With days of the "family farm" fast fading into history, there are continuing efforts to define what "rural" means today. In a recent meeting of a national group of rural practitioners a fairly frequently appearing topic was placed on the table for consideration. The question posed was "What is the current definition of rural?" This always seems simple enough except that the discussion usually closes with no resolution to the question. A litany of definitions comprised by a number of federal agencies was highlighted. Suffice it to say that Mississippi is thoroughly rural in all of them. However, there was a common element that was unmistakable. Amidst all of the new phrases employed to define "urban", "suburban", "exurban" and other catchy names for the patterns of where Americans live there was a common last line after all of these descriptions. That line said "and everything else is rural." The message was quite clear. The home of 50 million of the nation's people is increasingly being viewed as a mere residue of America's 300 million total population. Given these

definitions, it is little wonder an economist from his perch in urban America can get away with labeling a connection to the rural countryside as a cyber bridge to nowhere.

Only a couple of weeks ago a new book hit the streets that attempts to chronicle the troubling turn of events in rural America. Based on their extensive research sociologists Patrick J. Carr and Maria J. Kefalas authored, *Hollowing Out the Middle: The Rural Brain Drain and What it Means for America*. Based on 18 months of living in a small town in Iowa, not unlike many towns of 2,000 people in Mississippi, Carr and Kefalas document the process of “de-population” of approximately 700 of the nation’s rural counties that have lost over 10% of their population in the last few years. As you may have guessed a number of these counties were in Mississippi – primarily in the Mississippi Delta.

In their useful typology of rural small town citizens Carr and Kefalas labeled one particular group as the “Achievers”. This group is comprised of those young people in every town whose intellect, once recognized and nurtured, enables them to go off to get an education and then, in George Will’s terms, to market that brain power in places where there are jobs requiring it. We all know that all too often those “brains” only come home for Christmas and family reunions. The research discussed in *Hollowing Out The Middle*, clearly demonstrates that the sorts of jobs that keep the owners of these brains at home are increasingly scarce in rural America. Furthermore, those who do choose to stay are increasingly faced with stagnant wealth creating ability that among other things contributes to a downward spiral of resources for declining rural schools that are potentially in positions to contribute to solutions.

If the situation sounds dire, the reality is that it is time to sound the alarm. But far from throwing in the towel, there are resources that Mississippi and states like it can call upon. The value of Mississippi’s Community Colleges must be embraced as never before. They are strategically placed on the front lines. The research and development engines of Mississippi’s universities must be put on “wartime footing” and organizations like the Mississippi State Extension Service must be infused with new skills and new missions in rural development while there is still time. If the brain drain can be stopped there will once again be traffic on that bridge into rural America.

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.

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