

# William F. Winter and the Politics of Racial Moderation in Mississippi

by Charles C. Bolton

On May 12, 2008, William F. Winter received the Profile in Courage Award from the John F. Kennedy Foundation, which honored the former Mississippi governor for “championing public education and racial equality.” The award was certainly well deserved and highlighted two important legacies of one of Mississippi’s most important public servants in the post–World War II era. During Senator Edward M. Kennedy’s presentation of the award, he noted that Winter had been criticized “for his integrationist stances” that led to his defeat in the gubernatorial campaign of 1967. Although Winter’s opponents that year certainly tried to paint him as a moderate (or worse yet, a liberal) and as less than a true believer in racial segregation, he would be the first to admit that he did not advocate racial integration in 1967; indeed, much to his regret later, Winter actually pandered to white segregationists in a vain attempt to win the election. Because Winter, over the course of his long career, has increasingly become identified as a champion of racial justice, it is easy, as Senator Kennedy’s remarks illustrate, to flatten the complexity of Winter’s evolution on the issue

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of race.<sup>1</sup>

During the 1950s and 1960s, however, when William Winter served as a state legislator, state tax collector, and state treasurer, white Mississippi's resistance to the black freedom movement was the most uncompromising and sustained of all the southern states. During these years, massive resistance to any changes in the racial status quo dominated Mississippi political life. Winter, however, because of his early life experiences, was disposed to reject the uncompromising, ultra-segregationist mentality that played such a prominent role in Mississippi politics in the post-World War II period. He managed to hold public office while cautiously offering an alternative approach, one that sought some accommodation to the demands of the black freedom movement and the federal government for racial change. This position did not reject segregation but did advocate for gradual adjustments in the state's racial arrangements and acceptance of legal mandates for racial justice. Not surprisingly, both die-hard white segregationists and civil rights activists rejected this moderate racial approach. However, as the civil rights confrontation in Mississippi escalated in more violent directions by the early 1960s, more whites in the state began to embrace the racial moderation of men like William Winter. Especially after the Ole Miss crisis of 1962, Winter was increasingly identified as the most prominent spokesman in Mississippi for the position that sought a more reasonable resolution of the state's civil rights impasse.

Like most white Southerners, William Winter's early life experiences shaped his racial outlook. Winter was raised during the Great Depression on a farm ten miles northwest of Grenada in an isolated country outpost. His father farmed and served in the state legislature. The Winter place produced cotton and other crops, and the elder Winter was landlord to ten or so tenant families, mostly black but also a couple of poor white households. The land had been in the Winter family since the early 1840s when William Winter's great-grandfather had settled the place soon after the removal of the Choctaws. The black families working as tenants on the Grenada farm during William's youth were descendants of the slaves that had toiled on the same land a century before. Winter grew up with a number of the black tenant children: Roy, Elmo (Cricket),

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<sup>1</sup> Wayne Woodlief, "Trio Reminds How Courage is Timeless," *Boston Globe*, May 15, 2008.

Peaches, John Henry, Excel, Josh, Dude, Man-Son. Despite the harsh system of racial segregation that existed throughout the South during the 1930s, social relations in rural areas followed a different rhythm than that of the region's towns and cities, with blacks and whites who lived near each other and worked together interacting on a more intimate and personal level than the Jim Crow paradigm dictated. Winter and his black contemporaries became fast friends. They fished and swam together in nearby Dry Creek. They visited in each other's homes. They played baseball on a makeshift diamond in a pasture out back of the modest Winter home. In the fall and winter, they hunted rabbits and squirrels together.<sup>2</sup> Winter's grandfather probably had strikingly similar experiences on the same piece of land with the ancestors of Roy, Cricket, and many of the other black boys of William's youth.

For the young William Winter, segregation and white supremacy were not matters to be contemplated. As historian Tim Tyson has aptly observed, for southern whites, the established relations between white and black that assumed white supremacy in all interactions were so ingrained that most whites "could no more ponder [them] than a fish might discuss the wetness of water." Winter's first inkling about the unfairness of the South's racial arrangements came when he and his black neighbors separated to go to school. While his friends walked two miles to a one-room school that went only to the sixth grade, William rode a bus into Grenada to attend a modern, twelve-grade school. Many mornings Winter's bus would pass Cricket, Peaches, and the others trudging the dirt roads to their schoolhouse. Winter remembered "feeling that it was wrong," but he also thought "It was a lot better to be a white boy."<sup>3</sup> School segregation thus reinforced the sense of white privilege, while also creating at least the slightest pangs of doubt about the equitableness of the established system toward his black friends.

Winter's parents, especially his father, also laid the groundwork for his racial views. William's father, William Aylmer Winter, grew up in the shadow of the Civil War and Reconstruction, with ancestors who conveyed a strong belief in white supremacy shaped by these momentous

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<sup>2</sup> William Winter memoir, unpublished draft, William Winter personal collection. For information on the rural system of segregation, see Mark Schultz, *The Rural Face of White Supremacy: Beyond Jim Crow* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> William Winter memoir; Timothy B. Tyson, *Blood Done Signed My Name: A True Story* (New York: Crown, 2004), 17.

events. Aylmer's father, who lived in the Winter household for the first six years of the future governor's life, until his death in 1929, rode with Nathan Bedford Forrest during the Civil War and was one of the leaders of the Grenada Ku Klux Klan during Reconstruction. Aylmer's grandfather, William H. Winter, had been a substantial planter before the war.



Image courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History

*A young William Winter with his paternal grandfather.*

Aylmer himself, by the time he reached middle age during his only child's youth, can best be described as a racial paternalist. In politics, he favored the business progressivism of a Mike Conner over the racist-tinged populism of a Theodore Bilbo. The elder Winter certainly abhorred the baser expressions of white supremacy, such as lynching. William Winter recalled that his father was particularly troubled by the 1937 news of the blacks killed by acetylene torch at the hands of a white mob in nearby Montgomery County. Like other whites with more moderate sentiments about the shape of race relations, Winter's father had "a Jacksonian sense

of fairness" concerning the treatment of blacks. While he strongly believed in racial segregation, he thought that a certain amount of equity should prevail. As a legislator, he had advocated additional funding for black schools in Grenada in the mid-1930s, a decade before the post-World War II equalization campaign gained more widespread legislative support. He believed that the requirements to vote should apply equally to everyone, black and white. He certainly thought literacy should be one of those requirements, but he did not believe that literate blacks should be denied the franchise. Whatever problems did exist in human relations, Aylmer Winter remained convinced that it was up to the state of Mississippi to fix them. Federal intervention, such as that during the Reconstruction his grandfather had mobilized to fight against, was

unnecessary. Strongly imbued with a sense of noblesse oblige, Aylmer Winter also tried to help out those less fortunate than him. During the Depression years of William's youth, his father would often give his impoverished tenants an extra bushel of corn or a pig "off the books" to help make ends meet. Both parents encouraged the young Winter to treat all people with respect and to help those less fortunate.<sup>4</sup>

Despite its isolated location (the farm did not get electricity until 1949 and the road that runs in front of the Winter place remains unpaved today), the Winter homestead was not cut off from the wider world. Aylmer Winter was an "avid reader," and as a result, the house was full of periodicals and books. In addition to receiving the *Memphis Commercial Appeal* six days a week, the Winters also subscribed to *Time*, *Life*, *Liberty*, *Christian Herald*, *National Geographic*, and the *Saturday Evening Post*. Books of all descriptions, both fiction and non-fiction, also filled the house. By the time he was in elementary school, William was already devouring many of the reading materials at his disposal; he was especially fond of the American Biography set his father purchased for him, full of narratives of great American heroes such as George Washington and Thomas Jefferson.<sup>5</sup> While the isolation of the Winter farm actually sheltered William Winter from daily exposure to the harshest realities of race relations in the country's most violent state during the Jim Crow era, the intellectual environment within the Winter home steadily opened up the vistas of a wider world to a smart and curious boy.

If William Winter's experiences growing up in rural Grenada County laid the basis for relatively moderate sentiments concerning race relations and a less parochial view of the world than a typical Mississippi farm boy, these tendencies received further reinforcement during his days at Ole Miss in the early 1940s and as a result of his experiences in

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<sup>4</sup> Julia C. Brown, "Reconstruction in Yalobusha and Grenada Counties," *Publications of the Mississippi Historical Society* 12 (1912): 236; William Winter memoir; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, August 29, 2001, transcript, Mississippi Oral History Program (MOHP), University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg; William Winter, interview by Jack Bass, n.d., transcript, William Winter personal collection; Neil R. McMillen, *Dark Journey: Black Mississippians in the Age of Jim Crow* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1989), chap. 7; The term "Jacksonian sense of fairness" is from Tony Badger, "'Closet Moderates': Why White Liberals Failed, 1940–1970," in Ted Ownby, ed., *The Role of Ideas in the Civil Rights South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2002), 95.

<sup>5</sup> William Winter memoir; William Winter, Bass interview.

the Army during World War II. When Winter entered Ole Miss in the fall of 1940, he arrived at an institution not necessarily known for challenging the biased verities of white Mississippi. The university primarily excelled at providing additional education and a social network for members of Mississippi's white elite, but Ole Miss did gather together perhaps the most concentrated collection of intellectuals in the state. By training and inclination, a number of Winter's professors, even at such a parochial and conservative university as Ole Miss, tended to question their world more than the typical Mississippian. Winter found himself drawn to two such professors in particular. During his freshman year, he encountered H.B. Howerton, a political science professor who was somewhat conservative but introduced Winter to the possibilities of political reform. More important, in his sophomore year, Winter took classes from history professor James Silver, who Winter later described as "not in the conventional mode. He challenged a lot of the old shibboleths, the old conventional ideas of the Deep South." Silver, in his classes and through the Omicron Delta Kappa speaker forums he initiated, introduced the young man from Grenada County to a host of new ideas and viewpoints, many of them controversial. Silver also encouraged his students to think for themselves, and for Winter, the history professor raised the possibility that all things, including the South's seemingly immutable social arrangements, could potentially be changed. Winter became a history major, and he and Silver became lifelong friends.<sup>6</sup> As Silver and his unconventional views on race increasingly came under attack in the 1950s and 1960s, Winter the aspiring politician sympathized with his mentor and friend and shared many of his opinions but necessarily had to remain circumspect about his relationship with his old professor.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> William Winter, Bass interview; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, May 17, 2006, tape, MOHP. For an insightful history of Ole Miss during these years, see Charles W. Eagles, *The Price of Defiance: Ole Miss, Race, and James Meredith* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, forthcoming, 2009).

<sup>7</sup> When Silver was preparing *Mississippi: The Closed Society* for publication, he showed Winter the page proofs and told him the book was going to give Winter some good publicity. The passage Silver referred to had Winter attending a 1963 dinner with Silver and other "moderates" at the home of Jackson rabbi Perry Nussbaum, where they discussed doing "something about Barnett's policies." Winter told Silver he did not think the publicity would help him get elected governor, and in the published version of the book, Winter's name was replaced by a blank line. See William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton,



Winter's World War II assignment had the most profound effect on the young man's racial attitudes. After finishing Officer Candidate School at Fort Benning, Georgia, at the top of his class in October 1944, Winter hoped to be assigned to lead an infantry unit in western Europe. His superiors, however, decided Winter's talents could best be used by having him stay behind and train other troops, and he was sent to nearby Fort McClellan, Alabama, where he was detailed to one of the two all-black training regiments in the U.S. Army. Like other white Southerners assigned to this task, Winter was at first resentful and dismayed. The paternalistic approach to black/white relations he had been raised with made him particularly unprepared for the non-southern black trainees he encountered. While Winter described southern blacks in the regiment as "good Negroes" who willingly accepted the discipline of military life, he viewed the blacks from northern cities as "the unholy crew from the slums of Harlem and Chicago," a group



Image courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History

*William Winter with his father, Senator William Aylmer Winter, in 1932.*

that was resentful of discipline from white officers. These black troops undoubtedly were particularly disposed to view a white Mississippian with disdain, someone who hailed from the home state of Bilbo, in 1944 busily making loud pronouncements about the need to send all African Americans back to Africa. Of course, the other side of the paternalistic ethos that Winter had inherited from his father stressed the importance of treating everyone fairly, and lieutenant Winter got over his initial disappointment, did his typically good job with the task assigned him, and even earned the respect of many of those northern blacks he had initially viewed with such distrust. When he left McClellan, a black ser-

May 18, 2006, tape, MOHP; and James W. Silver, *Mississippi: The Closed Society* (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964), 208.

geant from Detroit told Winter that the men in the regiment were losing a real friend. Looking back on his assignment in 1946 while stationed in the Philippines, Winter recalled that “a year ago I was spending full days training colored soldiers and enjoying the work—even though I may not have admitted it at the time.”<sup>8</sup>

Perhaps more important than his work training black troops was Winter’s experience at McClellan working within an integrated officer corp. When Winter arrived at McClellan, all the commissioned officers and most of the noncommissioned officers in the regiment were white; all the enlisted men were black. Shortly after Winter arrived at McClellan, however, as part of the Army’s limited efforts at desegregating the armed forces during the war, black officers joined their white counterparts to train the all-black regiments. The black and white officers lived together, ate together, and shared the same recreational facilities. The black officers came from around the country; many were graduates of some of the nation’s best colleges and universities. For Winter, the experience of working and living with black officers who were clearly his equal in intelligence and ability, led him “to understand how unreal was the world in which I had grown up, the segregated world.” If life on the base gave Winter a glimpse of what an integrated society could be, certainly not the apocalypse that many white Southerners envisioned, the reality of southern social relations clearly reappeared every time the black and white officer colleagues headed to nearby Anniston, Alabama, where strict segregation in restaurants, movie houses, and every other public venue remained firmly in place. Winter recalled years later that the contrast between social relations at the fort and in Anniston “bothered a lot of us. It bothered a lot of us who were Southerners, that there was this barrier, this artificial barrier that somebody had arbitrarily placed on us.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> William Winter memoir; William Winter, Bass interview; Robert L. Flegler, “Theodore G. Bilbo and the Decline of Public Racism, 1938-1947,” *Journal of Mississippi History* 68 (Spring 2006): 1-27; William Winter to his parents, December 18, 1944, William Winter to his father, January 30, 1945, William Winter to his father, December 27, 1945, and William Winter to his father, February 21, 1946, all in William Winter personal collection. Many historians have come to see World War II as an important watershed in southern history in a variety of ways, including race relations. For an example, see Neil R. McMillen, *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 1997).

<sup>9</sup> William Winter, Bass interview; Morris J. MacGregor, *Integration of the Armed Forces, 1940-1965* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1989), chap. 2.



World War II, and the New Deal before the war, initiated major economic and demographic changes throughout the South, and as the war ended, southern moderates and liberals envisioned the possibility of more change for their region, even in the seemingly settled realm of race relations. Historians have debated whether or not the possibility for progressive racial change actually existed in the postwar South, if there was a real chance for alterations in southern life, and when and why this window of opportunity quickly closed, certainly in the aftermath of the *Brown* decision, if not before. Of all the southern states, those white Mississippians holding moderate or even liberal views, especially on racial matters, had perhaps the least room to maneuver.<sup>10</sup> Winter's childhood, time at Ole Miss, and World War II experiences had not led him to abandon racial segregation and embrace racial integration, but all these experiences had molded a young man who believed that the South's segregated system was destined to face change in the future and that Mississippi and the South needed to make some gradual adjustments in race relations. Like his forebears, however, Winter believed that Mississippi needed to make those changes on its own, not have the federal government mandate the South's racial arrangements. For Winter and the small group of public men in Mississippi who believed that change was coming and that they should help guide that transformation, even this extremely moderate and cautious position would prove difficult to advance in a state determined to broach no changes in established race relations.

After completing his war service, Winter returned to Ole Miss in the fall of 1946 to pursue a law degree. The following fall, he and a number of other former veterans still attending school were elected to the state legislature. As young men who had seen the world beyond Mississippi, many of the "freshman caucus" that took their seats in the Mississippi House in January 1948 entered the capitol hoping to make progressive changes in the state. The racial moderates in the group, such as Winter, even planned to introduce legislation abolishing the poll tax, one of the disfranchising mechanisms used against black voters in the state. The legislature of 1948, however, barely had time to find their seats when Fielding Wright, the state's governor and soon-to-be vice

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<sup>10</sup> Badger, "Closet Moderates"; Michael J. Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights: The Supreme Court and the Struggle for Racial Equality* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), chap. 7.

presidential candidate of the States Rights Party, reordered the state's political agenda in his inaugural address by placing the defense of white supremacy from an increasingly "meddlesome" federal government at the top of the priority list.<sup>11</sup>

The young progressives of the 1948 legislature did manage to enact some meaningful reforms in a number of areas of Mississippi life, most notably the adoption of a workman's compensation law, but they also discovered that the defense of racial segregation from outside attack required their total support. When the House passed a resolution after Wright's speech, pledging that "Mississippians and Southerners will no longer tolerate these abuses and efforts to destroy the South and her institutions, and hereby pledge our full support to the Governor in his efforts to protect and uphold the principles, traditions, and way of life of our beloved Southland," only one representative dissented, E.S. Stephens of Lauderdale County. In the following days, a number of other resolutions expressed the dedication of the Mississippi House to resist federal attempts to force racial change on the South. William Winter co-sponsored one of the resolutions, along with another of the young progressives, Brinkley Morton, and two members of the old guard, Speaker Walter Sillers and Russell Fox. The resolution expressed "opposition to recommendations of the President's Civil Rights Committee," the body that had proposed new civil rights laws, including a permanent Fair Employment Practices Committee, a federal anti-lynching law, and an anti-poll tax measure. As a young, ambitious legislator, Winter sought to curry favor with the legislative leadership by demonstrating his commitment to an issue that they deemed of upmost importance. At the same time, Winter did not seem to be one of the true believers in the Dixiecrat efforts to resist all federal efforts to reform southern race relations. Later in 1948, writing in the *Mississippi Law Journal* about South Carolina's recent efforts to evade the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in *Smith v. Allwright*—which outlawed the white primary—Winter noted the futility of "any effort, whether by state or party" to try and dodge the rulings of the nation's highest court. Overall, Winter's role in the Dixiecrat revolt of 1948 was minimal, primarily limited to the pub-

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<sup>11</sup> William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, May 18, 2006, tape, MOHP; transcript of Eudora Welty/William Winter class at Millsaps College, March 1, 1989, William Winter personal collection; Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932–1968* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2001), 70–76.

lic expressions of opposition to the emerging civil rights movement that were periodically required of all members of the legislature.<sup>12</sup>

After the failed Dixiecrat revolt in the fall of 1948, racial issues receded somewhat in importance in the business of the legislature, but only because the threat from the federal government seemed to ease, at least for a time. Whatever hope more moderate whites, such as William Winter, might have had of altering Mississippi social relations in the immediate post-World War II period, completely evaporated in the campaign to keep the Federals at bay. The lesson white moderates learned from 1948 was that the best



Image courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History

*Photograph of William F. Winter from 1948 Mississippi House of Representatives.*

approach to the issue of race relations was to avoid addressing the matter directly. Perhaps gradual changes could be made, if the issue did not become emotionally charged over the role of federal involvement in advancing black civil rights. The U.S. Supreme Court decision of 1954, *Brown v. Board of Education*, of course, shattered the relative calm and completely undermined the moderate white position on race. The decision offered a bold federal declaration against racial segregation and both encouraged the state's nascent civil rights movement to press harder for change and provided the impetus for the emergence of an outspoken and well-organized campaign of massive resistance to any alteration in the racial status quo.

In 1954, Winter was still in the legislature, halfway through his second term as state representative from Grenada County, and his

<sup>12</sup> "Miss. Legislators Back Gov. Threat Against Party," *Atlanta Daily World*, January 27, 1948; Mississippi Legislature, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi, 1948* (Jackson: The House, 1948), 90–91, 167; House Concurrent Resolution 22, Legislative Reference Bureau, Mississippi State Capitol, Jackson; William Winter, "Constitutional Law—Fourteenth and Fifteenth Amendments—State Action Where Party Kept Negro From Voting in South Carolina White Primary," *Mississippi Law Journal* 19 (1948): 244–246.

first instinct was to oppose the call for massive resistance to *Brown* that began to sweep the state following the decision. In the summer of 1954, some of Winter's constituents in Grenada County asked him to attend what they described as a meeting to discuss "the effects of the *Brown* decision." At that meeting, held at the Greenwood City Hall and attended by legislators and other influential citizens from a number of nearby counties, people offered "lurid descriptions" of "subversive black activity, particularly as it related to alleged plots to register to vote." Others talked about the ways to get around the decision, including the abolition of the public schools. Members of the crowd also emphasized the necessity of white people sticking together and the possibilities of evading the *Brown* decision through state action. Winter cautiously rose to address the assembled crowd and told them that "the precedents are clear that the courts are not going to let us do anything indirectly that they would not let us do directly." In a careful way, Winter suggested that the kinds of defiance being proposed would not likely work. Winter's comments elicited silence. As he left the meeting, only one person offered any support for Winter's position, Means Johnston, a respected older lawyer, who told Winter, "I think you are exactly right about what you said in there." Although Winter's questioning of the tactics proclaimed by what he realized later was the embryonic White Citizen's Council had raised eyebrows, the presentation of his critique was not done in a way that caused the excited segregationists to ride Winter out on a rail. Indeed, at least one observer at the meeting, fellow legislator David Womack, believed that Winter's very presence at the meeting indicated that he would join the group. Winter, however, refused to sign up, even as the new group became a primary topic of conversation during September 1954 while the legislature met in special session. When a local Citizens' Council chapter formed in Grenada County, the organizer of the group, John Lake, the manager of a local hosiery mill, asked the state representative from Grenada to join the group. Winter told Lake that he agreed with the group's objectives, but he did not want to get "officially identified, because I don't know where this is going to lead." Lake accepted the explanation.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> William Winter memoir; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, July 3, 2007, tape, MOHP; Neil R. McMillen, *The Citizens' Council: Organized Resistance to the Second Reconstruction, 1954-64* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1972), chap. 2. Dave Womack produced a list for Walter Sillers listing Citizens' Council members from

In the period before and immediately after the *Brown* decision, however, racial matters dominated the business of the state legislature, and legislators faced intense pressure from hard-core white segregationists to toe the party line of not yielding an inch to efforts to dismantle the state's system of racial apartheid. Between 1953 and 1955, the state legislature met four times—once for its regular biennial session in 1954 and three times in special session (1953, 1954, and 1955). The main item on the agenda was, initially, how to improve segregation in anticipation of a ruling from the U.S. Supreme Court, and then, after May 1954, how to preserve segregation despite *Brown*. As the various stratagems for maintaining segregation came up for a vote, Winter supported some of the measures, as “sometimes it was expedient to go along with the game.” At times, Winter had practical reasons for supporting the obstructionist measures of the chamber's most ardent segregationists. For instance, although he voted in December 1953 against a constitutional amendment to close the public schools if the U.S. Supreme Court outlawed “separate but equal,” Winter voted for a similar proposal in the fall 1954 special session following the *Brown* decision. Winter shifted his vote primarily because hardliners had pledged to block the funding of the recently-passed Minimum Foundation education program—the first comprehensive funding plan for education in the state's history—until the legislature passed the constitutional amendment and Mississippi voters ratified it.<sup>14</sup> At the same time, as Winter later recalled, “there were bills in the legislature that were introduced that were so offensive that I couldn't support them.” One of these was the April 1955 resolution to censure Hodding Carter, editor of the Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, for an article he wrote in *Look* magazine in 1954 condemning the newly-

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the House of Representatives, and William Winter's name is on the list. It is likely that Womack, from Humphreys County, attended the Greenwood meeting, where he compiled this list. See Dave Womack, “Members of the Citizens Councils in the House,” n.d., Box 112, Walter Sillers Papers, Delta State University, Cleveland, Mississippi.

<sup>14</sup> William Winter, interview by Jere Nash, April 14, 2004, tape, in author's possession; Mississippi Legislature, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi, 1954 and 1953 Special Session* (Jackson: The House, 1954), 1391–1392; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, August 29, 2001. Legislators had to vote on proposed constitutional amendments three separate times, on three separate days. Winter voted for the amendment in the fall of 1954 on the first and second votes, but he was absent on the third vote.

formed White Citizens' Council. Eighteen House members joined Winter in voting against the censure resolution.<sup>15</sup>

Image courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History



*William Winter with Senator James O. Eastland during Eastland's 1942 campaign, when Winter served as his driver.*

Although the state's hardcore segregationists, the massive resisters, seemed to have gained the upper hand soon after the *Brown* decision, their dominance was not total. Indeed, a relative moderate on matters of race, James P. Coleman, won the governor's office in the summer of 1955. In part, Coleman's victory can be attributed to the fact that the forces of massive resistance were still mobilizing during the 1955 governor's campaign, but also, Coleman was a strong segregationist. He was not advocating surrender on the issue of black civil rights. Even

so, according to William Winter, "there were limits to which [Coleman] would not go in defense of segregation." He disagreed with the *Brown* decision and thought the "decision represents an unwarranted invasion of the rights and powers of the states." At the same time, Coleman did not think Mississippi needed to take on the federal government over this issue. As Winter noted in 1956, "Governor Coleman's position throughout the Civil Rights controversy [has been] that the least said about the problem, the better off everyone concerned will be." Coleman, like most white racial moderates, believed that changes in southern race relations would be "an orderly but maybe time-consuming process that would diminish the confrontation and diminish the dislocation of society." Winter shared these principles. Racial moderates, like Coleman

<sup>15</sup> William Winter memoir; "Editor Condemned in Mississippi House," *New York Times*, April 2, 1955. Winter had spoken out earlier against efforts to censure individuals thought to have "dangerous" views. When a legislator in 1950 accused Winter's former professor, Jim Silver, of being a communist, Winter rose to his defense in the chamber, claiming that during his years at Ole Miss, he had "never detected anything communistic, subversive or un-American." See Eagles, *The Price of Defiance*, and William Winter, Bass interview.



and Winter, essentially tried to steer a middle course. They rejected massive resistance. At the same time, white racial moderates did not embrace the civil rights movement. They often referred to themselves as “practical segregationists” and sought to preserve the prerogatives of white supremacy while eliminating the worst features of segregation, such as racial violence and the most overt forms of racial discrimination. The speed at which the moderates sought to make adjustments to the state’s racial arrangements was both too slow and too limited for black activists and too fast for dedicated white segregationists. While the gradualism advocated by men like Winter and Coleman fell far short of the racial equality demanded by black activists, this moderate approach also remained far removed from a stance that would broach no change in black/white social relations without a fight.<sup>16</sup>

William Winter’s response to the 1955 murder of fourteen-year-old Emmett Till in Sumner County by Roy Bryant and J.W. Milam reveals the nature of the moderate mindset. Many white Mississippians in 1955 believed that the young Chicago boy got what was coming to him for his violation of the state’s racial code; Bryant and Milam had merely done what the Citizens’ Council suggested: brooked no effort to alter the state’s racial mores. At the same time, the brutal killing of Till and the subsequent acquittal of his murderers, who later confessed the crime to journalist Bradford Huie, mobilized a generation of activists, both black and white, to fight against the injustice of the South’s racial arrangements. For William Winter, Governor Coleman, and other racial moderates, the Till murder and the trial of Bryant and Milam neither pushed them to join the Citizens’ Council crowd and resist efforts to change the South nor bolstered their conviction to challenge racial segregation. Rather, in the minds of the racial moderates, the attention focused on Mississippi by the events surrounding the murder of Emmett Till represented a setback to the gradualist approach to racial improvement. Winter believed that the killing and the resulting trial

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<sup>16</sup> William Winter, Nash interview; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, May 18, 2006, tape, MOHP; William Winter to Stanley L. Richards, April 27, 1956, William Winter personal collection; Klarman, *From Jim Crow to Civil Rights*, 388–389; John Dittmer, *Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 1994), 66–69; Michael D. Lassiter, *The Silent Majority: Suburban Politics in the Sunbelt South* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), chap. 1; Joseph Crespino, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2007), chap. 1.

were blown way out of proportion by the national media. As he noted seven months after the events, "there have been many other cases, both before and since, that were more flagrant in their misapplication of justice." At the same time, Winter believed the passions that the Till murder and subsequent trial had inflamed on all sides concealed the fact "that a great deal more progress in solving the difficult race question is being made than is generally thought." He believed that a solution to racial issues would require "the continued application of patient and wise understanding for a long period of time."<sup>17</sup>

With Coleman's election as governor, Winter made a bold play to increase the influence of the forces of moderation in the state legislature. After Winter was elected to a third term in the House, he announced his intention to challenge the long-time, powerful, and conservative Speaker of the House, Walter Sillers—"Mr. Massive Resistance"—for the top leadership position. Actually, Winter had considered getting out of the legislature soon after the April 1955 special session. He later recalled that in 1955 he "was somewhat disillusioned with the legislative process .... I saw as a result of the supreme court decision, several years of being involved in a bitter no-win contest with the federal government." When no opposition appeared for Winter's Grenada seat, however, Winter regained hope that he might be able to lead a reshaping of legislative priorities. Coleman initially gave Winter his blessing to try and unseat Sillers and promised support. Winter did not couch his opposition to Sillers specifically in terms of race. Neither he nor Coleman saw the issue as one of embracing black civil rights or ignoring the defense of segregation. Rather, both men sought to limit the focus on the race issue in the interest of addressing some of Mississippi's considerable economic and educational problems. Had Winter succeeded in his bid to unseat Sillers, one could certainly envision that Mississippi history in the late 1950s and early 1960s, even on the volatile issue of race, might have taken a different course. Joe Wroten, one of Winter's supporters at the time, years later reflected that "I think if William had won, we would have avoided most of the violence of the 1960s, avoided the confrontation at Ole Miss." Winter secured substantial support, forty votes, for

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<sup>17</sup> Stephen J. Whitfield, *A Death in the Delta: The Story of Emmett Till* (New York: Free Press, 1988); William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, December 8, 2006, tape, MOHP; William Winter to Norrell H. Noble, April 20, 1956, Box 24E, William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH.

his speakership bid. The Winter partisans were newly elected members and those who had tried to offer moderate opposition to the massive resistance measures of the preceding two years. Sillers, however, once he had secured enough pledges to guarantee his reelection, convinced Coleman to withdraw his support for Winter's challenge in exchange for a promise that Sillers would support Coleman's legislative program.<sup>18</sup> In the end, Winter's failed attempt to unseat Speaker Sillers raised some questions about the Grenada legislator's racial loyalties. After all, Winter, a politician with a less-than-stellar record of protecting the racial boundaries of Mississippi society, had opposed one of the most stalwart and effective champions of white supremacy at a critical juncture in the state's history.

With Sillers still in control of the House, and with Coleman's blessing, the preservation of segregation became the "major issue" on the legislative agenda during the 1956 session. Sillers dealt with Winter and the forty members that supported him for speaker by marginalizing them in terms of committee assignments. For instance, the House had three Judiciary committees. Sillers appointed only two Winter supporters to the seventeen-member Judiciary "A" committee, which would initiate work on all the additional massive resistance measures in the works. Winter partisans, including Winter himself, dominated the Judiciary "C" committee, which wrestled with bills such as the one that proposed to require that all minors who applied for a fishing license also had to demonstrate that they could safely handle a gun. In addition, Winter lost his chairmanship of the important House Agriculture Committee.<sup>19</sup>

Winter and his fellow moderates mustered limited opposition to the vast array of massive resistance measures put before the 1956 House. Of six massive resistance bills that came up for a vote early in the session, Winter voted yes on four of the items, including one that would abolish common law marriages and another that prohibited the "fomenting

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<sup>18</sup> Jere Nash and Andy Taggart, *Mississippi Politics: The Struggle for Power, 1976-2006* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 86-87; William Winter, interview by Robert J. Bailey, November 1, 1977, tape, MDAH; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, August 29, 2001; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, May 18, 2006, tape, MOHP; Bill Minor, "Winter's Try For Speakership in '56 Was Derailed By Coleman," *Jackson Clarion-Ledger*, May 18, 1986.

<sup>19</sup> "Miss. Legislature Meets With Segregation as Major Issue," *Atlanta Daily World*, January 4, 1956; William E. Keith, "Power of Speaker Is Amply Displayed," *Jackson State Times*, January 22, 1956.

and agitation of litigation.” On the other two pieces of legislation, one to abolish the state’s compulsory education law and one that made it unlawful to advocate “disobedience of state laws,” Winter did not vote. A number of legislators joined Winter in abstaining on some or all of these six bills, a strategy designed to prevent the “ayes” from prevailing without recording a potentially damaging public opposition to the effort to preserve racial segregation. In the end, however, there were only a total of eight negative votes recorded against the six measures. The 1956 legislature also passed at least two laws to strengthen the state’s segregation code: one to “prohibit mixing of races in swimming pools, parks, etc.” and one to “require separate toilet facilities for races in intrastate travel.” Winter voted for the former and withheld his vote on the latter. When the state’s interposition resolution, which represented the clearest expression that the state refused to recognize the validity of federal law expressed in the *Brown* decision, came up for a vote, Winter and seven other House members offered an amendment stating that “We expressly reject the doctrine of nullification,” in other words the essence of the interposition mechanism. Failing to muster much support for this position, however, no legislators voted against final passage of the state’s interposition resolution. One of the most contentious issues that arose during the 1956 session involved the creation of the State Sovereignty Commission. Although Winter and all but two initially voted for the commission, he joined a group of twenty-three legislators who voted for a failed motion to reconsider the first vote, after it became clear that the bill would allow the Citizens’ Council to play a major role in the operations of the state agency. Ultimately, only three representatives voted against funding the spy agency, but Winter joined a group of thirty-one House members who abstained from voting on the Sovereignty Commission funding bill.<sup>20</sup>

Winter and other moderates offered only halfhearted support for the massive resistance agenda of 1956, but they ultimately did not put up much real opposition. Of course, to do more, given the excited attitudes of the defenders of racial segregation, would have been political

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<sup>20</sup> Yashuhiro Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission: Civil Rights and States’ Rights* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), xxxiv, 5–8; Mississippi Legislature, *Journal of the House of Representatives of the State of Mississippi, 1956* (Jackson: The House, 1956), 104–105, 114, 122–123, 137–139, 263, 357–358, 572, 659, 688, 787–788, 908; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, July 22, 2008, tape, MOHP.

suicide. Winter refused to blindly support—although he rarely directly opposed—legislative efforts to resist the *Brown* decision. He also did not join the White Citizens' Council. In the end, he managed to stake out a position in which he sometimes questioned massive resistance while not crossing the line in a way that he became completely ostracized from the mass of white officialdom that avidly jumped on the massive resistance bandwagon. Winter's balancing act, however, did not bode well for his future in the legislature. With that body obsessed with maintaining racial segregation against all attacks, both external and internal, Winter's relative lack of interest in defending an embattled segregation and his more progressive ideas about the possibilities of government to move Mississippi forward in other areas would likely receive a limited hearing. In addition, the legislative leadership, after Winter's failed attempt to unseat Speaker Sillers, viewed him as a potentially dangerous renegade. Fortunately, for Winter, at the end of the 1956 session, he found a way to stay involved in state politics, yet exit from the legislature. Governor Coleman, acting to repay his young supporter for the failed speaker race made in part at the behest of the governor, tapped Winter for a plum statewide office, state tax collector, to fill a vacancy caused by the death of the incumbent. This post, which collected the state's notorious "black market tax" on illegal liquor, allowed the tax collector to keep 10 percent of all the funds collected, which meant that the job was reportedly the second most lucrative for a public official anywhere in the nation—after that of President Dwight Eisenhower.<sup>21</sup>

As state tax collector, Winter maintained his position of advocating a path of cautious and moderate change in the area of race relations. He continued to work with those white leaders within and outside of state government who tried to check the extremism of the Citizens' Council crowd. In 1957, he and other moderates organized the Young Democrats in Mississippi, a group "pledged to progressive action, rather than to useless 'crying in our beer.'" The group included men such as Charles Deaton, a staffer of moderate Mississippi congressman Frank Smith, former legislative colleague George Rogers, and moderate newspapermen such as Paul Pittman of the *Tylertown Times* and Hal Decell of the *Deer Creek Pilot* in Rolling Fork. One of the national heroes of the Young Democrats crowd was a rising star in the Democratic party, John

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<sup>21</sup> William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, May 18, 2006, tape, MOHP; Norman Ritter, "A Tax on Lawbreakers Only," *Life*, May 11, 1962, 11–12.

F. Kennedy. Winter and others in the Mississippi delegation to the 1956 Democratic convention had labored hard to have Kennedy named as Adlai Stevenson's running mate. In fact, Winter had worked closely with Robert Kennedy on the floor of the convention in the final hours of the failed bid to "corral" southern votes for JFK. When the Young Democrats sponsored a Kennedy speech in Jackson during the fall of 1957, Kennedy called for Southerners to adhere to the *Brown* decision as the law of the land. The two thousand listeners, which included most of the moderate contention in the state, recognized that Kennedy represented a moderate, national Democratic voice on civil rights. The previous summer Kennedy had supported southern efforts to water down the first civil rights measure considered by the Congress since Reconstruction. Winter himself had favored the "reasoned point of view" supported by Southerners and their northern allies on the 1957 Civil Rights Bill. Winter told Senator Stennis at the time that the compromise on the civil rights measure showed that "we can make a very strong case for ourselves when we base that case on logic and common sense, by which, in the long run, this whole difficult problem must necessarily be resolved."<sup>22</sup>

William Winter and those who advocated a more moderate approach to addressing the challenge to segregation than the one advocated by Citizens' Council supporters had great hope that the state might avoid major conflict over the race issue. In early 1957, Winter lauded Governor Coleman's leadership in keeping the racial peace in the state: "He has discouraged intemperate actions on every hand and consequently Mississippi is the only state in the South that has not had a great deal of unfavorable publicity last year." Later that year, a crisis erupted over the integration of the Little Rock, Arkansas, public schools, eventually leading President Eisenhower to send in troops from the 101<sup>st</sup> Airborne Division to restore order. As these events were unfolding, Winter and his mentor and friend, Jim Silver, paid a visit to William Faulkner in Oxford.

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<sup>22</sup> Charles Deaton to William Winter, June 22, 1957, and Paul Pittman to William Winter, June 30, 1957, both in Box 6797, Mississippi State Tax Commission Records, MDAH; Dennis Mitchell, *Mississippi Liberal: A Biography of Frank Smith* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 138–140; William Winter to Lawrence E. Noble, Jr., August 21, 1956, Box 24E, William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH; Mark Stern, *Calculating Visions: Kennedy, Johnson, and Civil Rights* (New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 1992), chap. 1; William F. Winter to John Stennis, July 24, 1957, Box 6797, Mississippi State Tax Commission Records, MDAH.



Sitting on the lawn of Rowan Oak, Faulkner's antebellum home, the conversation soon turned to the events occurring in Little Rock. The Nobel Prize-winning writer commented that "he was glad that Coleman was keeping things cool in Mississippi but he didn't know what the next fellow would be like." The men ruminated on the string of racial demagogues that had assumed leadership positions in Mississippi over the years and wondered whether the future would bring more of the same or whether more moderate leadership might prevail. Winter, however,



Image courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History

*William Winter and United States Senator John C. Stennis.*

soon recognized that many white Mississippians supported the cause of resistance to the federal government advocated by Arkansas governor Orville Faubus. When Winter attended the Ole Miss-Vanderbilt football game in Nashville in early October 1957, he noted the Ole Miss alumni, Citizens' Council members, who refused to stand up when the national anthem played at the beginning of the game.<sup>23</sup>

Within two years, the state elections of 1959 seemed to prove that the Coleman brand of moderation could not survive in an atmosphere of rising civil rights demands, federal requirements for compliance with Brown, and hysterical white fears about broaching any change in social relations. Ross Barnett, who had lost two previous races for governor running as a racial moderate himself, entered the 1959 campaign for the top state office as the Citizens' Council candidate, pledging to preserve segregation at all costs and resist the federal government's efforts to force school integration. Carroll Gartin, who was a popular two-term

<sup>23</sup> William Winter to Lawrence E. Noble Jr., February 6, 1957, Box 27B, William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH; William Winter memoir; Elizabeth Jacoway, *Turn Away Thy Son: Little Rock, the Crisis That Shocked a Nation* (New York: Free Press, 2007); William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, May 18, 2006, tape, MOHP.

lieutenant governor and a Coleman man, represented Barnett's main opposition, and many political observers thought, the likely winner in the first Democratic primary. The Citizens' Council actively demonized Gartin as a racial moderate, and it got help from Senator James Eastland, who still held a grudge because Gartin had opposed the senior Mississippi senator in his reelection bid in 1954. Eastland, seeking a third candidate to prevent Gartin from taking the race in the first primary, privately convinced Clarksdale District Attorney Charles Sullivan to enter the race. Sullivan was a fiery campaigner, and although he entered the race too late to win, his campaign succeeded in the way Eastland had hoped, siphoning off votes from the more moderate Gartin. Perhaps more important, the Gartin candidacy suffered from its close identification with Coleman, especially after the governor in April 1959 invited the Federal Bureau of Investigation to look into the lynching of Mack Charles Parker, an accused rapist, in Pearl River County. In the context of Mississippi politics of 1959, Coleman's act was equivalent to an admission that the federal government had the right to intervene in the state's affairs, notably on the treatment of the state's black citizens.<sup>24</sup>

Winter had his own campaign that year, for a full term as state tax collector. At the time he accepted the post, Winter urged the legislature to abolish the office. Walter Sillers and other House leaders, still miffed at Winter's challenge to the Speaker, bottled up legislative efforts to rid the state of its state tax collector and transfer the duties to another office. Since the legislature refused to eliminate the office, Winter decided he would run for election in 1959. Not surprisingly, given the high pay associated with the office, the race attracted a field of nine challengers. While the lure of fortune may have inspired the large number who sought the office, many of them made sure to inject race into the campaign, emphasizing that the incumbent had not joined the Citizens' Council and had generally not been beating the drums for the cause of racial segregation. Fortunately for Winter, most of his opponents were virtual unknowns, while Winter had been actively engaged in state politics for over a decade. In the first primary, Winter bested his next closest chal-

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<sup>24</sup> William Winter memoir; William Winter, Bass interview; Nash and Taggart, *Mississippi Politics*, 17–18; Jesse Lamar White, Jr., "Mississippi Electoral Politics, 1903–1976: The Emerging Modernization Consensus," (Ph.D. diss., Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 1979), 404–412; Howard Smead, *Blood Justice: The Lynching of Mack Charles Parker* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), chap. 8.

lenger by more than one hundred thousand votes, but he failed to win a majority, as each of the other aspirants for the job had his own local base of support. For instance, the only six counties that Winter lost in the first primary, all in southwest Mississippi, were carried by Sheriff Billy Priester of Adams County, a former president of the state sheriff's association. His runoff opponent in the second primary was John Whitfield Birdsong, the man who had been listed first on the ballot in the first primary and who carried the politically-fortunate names of both a former governor (Whitfield) and a former head of the state highway patrol (Birdsong). The only other race in the second primary was the Barnett-Gartin contest for governor, and Barnett and Birdsong joined together for a ticket, the BB slate. Winter, of course, was tagged as a Coleman-Gartin supporter. Winter's margin of victory in the second primary was less than fifty-five thousand votes, and the incumbent lost this round in twenty-five of the state's eighty-two counties. He managed to survive and win reelection, however, despite his questionable devotion to racial segregation, a sign largely of Winter's statewide name recognition and the fact that the tax collector's position was not perceived as a crucial post in the fight to maintain segregation.<sup>25</sup>

After his victory in the 1959 election, Winter stood as one of the most-recognizable statewide officials who represented the racially moderate position in Mississippi politics. The new governor, on the other hand, was backed (some would say controlled) by the White Citizens' Council. Barnett indicated his determination to resist the civil rights movement to the bitter end. Part of that resistance involved challenging the national Democratic party. Soon after Barnett's inauguration in January 1960, he and others in the massive resistance faction indicated that they would bolt the party at the 1960 convention if necessary rather than accede to a candidate or platform that challenged racial segregation. When the Democrats met that year in Los Angeles, Winter and both U.S. Senators, Stennis and Eastland, favored the nomination of Lyndon Johnson. The Barnett faction of the Mississippi delegation, however, narrowly prevailed with a plan to support Ross Barnett himself for the presidency. Soon after the convention, the state's Democratic party decided to back

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<sup>25</sup> William Winter, Bass interview; George W. Rogers Jr., interview by Charles Bolton, October 14, 2007, tape, in author's possession; William Winter, interview by Jess White, William Winter personal collection; F. Glenn Abney, *Mississippi Election Statistics, 1900-1967* (University, Miss.: Bureau of Governmental Research, 1968), 361-363.

a lineup of unpledged electors in the 1960 presidential contest. Consequently, the race in Mississippi became a three-way battle between the state's small but growing group of Republicans, Barnett's unpledged slate of electors, and the Democratic John F. Kennedy–Lyndon Johnson ticket. Despite the fact that the Democratic party platform in 1960 had a strong civil rights plank, the standard bearers for the party did not yet have the credentials of strong civil rights advocates they would later acquire. Kennedy's record on civil rights going into the fall campaign was lackluster at best; in Mississippi, the most serious obstacle to his candidacy was probably religion, not race. Senators Stennis and Eastland signed on to support the national Democratic ticket in 1960 largely because of Kennedy's running mate, Lyndon Johnson, their Senate colleague and majority leader.<sup>26</sup>

By October, Winter found himself at the center of the presidential campaign in Mississippi. He helped set up a Kennedy-Johnson headquarters. His wife, Elise, chaired a committee that hosted a reception in Jackson for JFK's mother. In late October, Winter gamely debated Barnett backer Charles Sullivan in the Delta community of Marks. The flier announcing the clash described Winter as representing "those supporting the *platform* of the national Democratic party," in other words the side of civil rights for blacks. Sullivan was described as "that incomparable orator and statesman from Clarksdale—Mississippi's next governor," three years before the next statewide election. The announcement emphasized that Sullivan would show "the vital importance to the South of the unpledged Democratic electors in the big fight to maintain our way of life." Winter received a respectful hearing from the crowd, but few in the audience supported his point of view. He and Elise also joined the LBJ special on its whistle-stop tour through Mississippi in October. Seeking to bolster Kennedy's candidacy in the South, Lyndon Johnson and his family boarded a train in Virginia and headed toward New Orleans, making stops at southern communities along the way to stump for JFK from the back of the train. At Meridian, the Winters

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<sup>26</sup> White, "Mississippi Electoral Politics, 1903–1976," 415–416; John Stennis to William Winter, January 25, 1960, William Winter to John Stennis, February 9, 1960, and William Winter to John Stennis, August 19, 1960, all in Box 6797, Mississippi State Tax Commission Records, MDAH; Jeremy D. Mayer, *Running on Race: Racial Politics in Presidential Campaigns, 1960–2000* (New York: Random House, 2002), chap. 2; Bill Minor, interview by Charles Bolton, March 2, 2000, transcript, Delta State Oral History Project, Cleveland, Mississippi.

boarded the LBJ special, along with Stennis, Eastland, Coleman, Gartin, attorney general Joe Patterson and others. Stopping in Laurel, Hattiesburg, and Picayune, but not Poplarville, given the recent upheaval surrounding the Mack Charles Parker lynching, big crowds turned out, and Johnson's speeches were fairly well received. Although neither Kennedy nor Johnson was that controversial racially in 1960—unlike the party's platform—the Citizens' Council made sure to record the names of those who rode the train with Johnson that fall. In the years to come, as both Kennedy and Johnson began to show more support for the cause of black civil rights, those Mississippi politicians on the LBJ special list, including Winter, would be tagged as Kennedy-Johnson racial liberals. In the end, Winter's efforts on behalf of the national Democratic ticket in Mississippi failed, as the Barnett unpledged electors carried the state, eventually casting their ballots for Virginian Harry Byrd.<sup>27</sup>

Winter's support of the national Democrats ultimately had little to do with race. Indeed, Winter believed in 1960 that the issue consumed too much of the state's attention at a time when more pressing matters faced the country, especially the dangerous international conflict between the United States and the Soviet Union. In the months leading up to the 1960 presidential race, Winter told John Stennis that "it just makes me sick to contemplate how much time and energy and attention is consumed on the race question because of the emotional and frenzied efforts on both sides, with the result that our attentions tend to be diverted here in this most critical era of history when it is evident that the survival of civilization is at stake." The civil rights fight, however, was not going away. By the summer of 1960, Mississippi had largely managed to contain black activism in the state only through state and private action that intimidated, threatened, and even killed blacks who sought change, yet new challenges from black Mississippians continued and would soon intensify, and white hostility to granting any change in black civil rights showed no signs of abating.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> William Winter to Lawrence E. Noble, September 29, 1960, Box 6796, Mississippi State Tax Commission Records, MDAH; "Hear the Great Debate," flyer, William Winter personal collection; William Winter, Nash interview; William Winter, Bass interview; William Winter memoir; Bill Minor, Bolton interview; White, "Mississippi Electoral Politics, 1903-1976," 417.

<sup>28</sup> William Winter to John Stennis, February 9, 1960, Box 6797, Mississippi State Tax Commission Records, MDAH.

White moderates such as Winter faced criticism by both black activists and massive resisters. Civil rights leaders, such as Martin Luther King Jr., saw white moderates as a major impediment to the goals of the civil rights movement. Writing in 1963 from a Birmingham, Alabama, jail, King noted that “the Negro’s great stumbling block in his stride toward freedom is not the White Citizen’s Counciler or the Ku Klux Klanner, but the white moderate, who is more devoted to ‘order’ than to justice. . .who paternalistically believes he can set the timetable for another man’s freedom.” In some ways, King’s assessment was correct. The gradualist approach to racial change advocated by white moderates was an ineffective approach, especially after *Brown*. It did little either to promote civil rights changes or to dampen the massive resistance of those whites who demanded the absolute preservation of racial segregation. Yet, for public officials in Mississippi like Winter, who favored change (if not all that the civil rights activists clamored for), it is hard to see how they could have done more. The atmosphere in the state regarding the issue of race was toxic in the early 1960s. Publically advocating any accommodation to the demands of the black civil rights movement was a difficult proposition, a fact recognized by some outside observers. When Benjamin Muse visited the state several times in 1961 on behalf of the Southern Regional Council, an Atlanta-based group that advocated racial justice in the South, he noted that the state had “many more moderates” than he anticipated. He estimated that perhaps a majority of “educated Mississippians are silently, or privately moderate on the race issue. That is, they are prepared to accept the inevitable without disorder.” Among public officials, Muse singled out Winter, former governor Coleman, a Mississippi Supreme Court justice, and at least nineteen members of the state legislature. Muse, however, noted the difficulty faced by these public officials: “even the most marginal public approach,” advocating anything less than absolute resistance to racial change, “requires courage.”<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> Martin Luther King, Jr., “Letter from a Birmingham Jail,” April 16, 1963, [http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles\\_Gen/Letter\\_Birmingham.html](http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html) (accessed August 2, 2008); Memorandum, March 6, 1961, March 13, 1961, and October 14, 1961, all in Benjamin Muse Papers, Rare Book, Manuscript, and Special Collections Library, Duke University, Durham, North Carolina; Matthew D. Lassiter and Andrew B. Lewis, eds., *The Moderates’ Dilemma: Massive Resistance to School Desegregation in Virginia* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998), 196.



In the early 1960s, hard-line segregationists in Mississippi demanded unanimity of white thought in the ongoing showdown over the issue of black civil rights. A good example of the atmosphere that existed in the state at the time can be seen in the flap that developed during 1961 surrounding the election for the editor of the student newspaper at Ole Miss, the *Mississippian*. One of the candidates, Billy C. Barton, had worked during the summer of 1960 as an intern at the *Atlanta Journal*. One of the stories he covered was an Atlanta sit-in protest. A member of the Georgia Citizens' Council notified Mississippi Citizens Council leader William J. Simmons about Barton's activities. Largely based on this snapshot of Barton's summer job and the reasoning that the Ole Miss student was a "close friend" of P.D. East, a maverick and racially moderate newspaper editor in Petal, and also apparently knew Jim Silver at Ole Miss, Simmons convinced the State Sovereignty Commission that "Barton is well regarded in left-wing circles as a promising young man." The Commission began to spread rumors that Barton was a civil rights activist and NAACP member.<sup>30</sup>

As these events unfolded, Ole Miss history professor Jim Silver conducted his own investigation. He talked to Barton and secured a signed statement. He wrote P.D. East, who responded that "he had never heard of Barton." Silver had a copy of a letter that Barton had written to Governor Barnett, in which Barton proclaimed his innocence and asked for the governor's help in clearing his name. Rightly convinced that the Sovereignty Commission had launched a smear campaign against Barton, Silver sent Winter the documents he had assembled. Silver realized that if the attack on the Commission came from him it would have limited effect, given the professor's long-standing reputation as an outspoken critic of Mississippi's efforts to limit open discussion of controversial issues. Silver urged Winter to turn over the information to sympathetic newspapermen. Winter declined, and the two men continued to discuss the matter during late January 1961. Silver remained convinced, despite Winter's continued objections, that the information should be made public; Silver thought the exposure "would have a healthy effect in calming down the Sovereignty boys. This is a big mistake they have made and the opposition as well as the State ought to be able to find a way to profit

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<sup>30</sup> Gregory Crofton, "Sovereignty Files Reveal Persecution of Former DM Staffer," *Daily Mississippian*, April 21, 1998; William J. Simmons to Albert Jones, August 17, 1960, Sovereignty Commission Files, 7-0-2-86-1-1-1, MDAH.

by it." Silver ultimately agreed to accept Winter's judgement, but Silver dubbed the state politician, "Will—the non-militant." Although Winter avoided inserting himself into the middle of the Barton controversy, Ole Miss students helped expose what Jim Silver had rightly identified as the Sovereignty Commission's "big mistake." Two months after Silver sought Winter's assistance in outing the Commission's attack on Barton, the story did break in the press, after the head of the Sovereignty Commission sent Simmons's original "confidential" letter about the original charges to Mac Dale, the editor of the Ole Miss newspaper (Barton was managing editor of the *Mississippian* at the time). Dale had asked Governor Barnett about the rumors about Barton, and the Sovereignty Commission's director unbelievably replied to Dale's inquiry by supplying him with William J. Simmon's letter of half-baked accusations. The Commission was overconfident about the universal appeal of its positions and overreached by trying to smear a candidate in a campus election. Soon, the moderate white press, leaders of the Ole Miss student body, and at least one state legislator were criticizing the "Gestapo" tactics of the Sovereignty Commission.<sup>31</sup>

Winter avoided the Barton event manufactured by Mississippi's white segregationists. He declined to provide any leadership attacking the Sovereignty Commission, but he probably felt lucky to avoid this particular racial minefield in the Mississippi of the early 1960s. Although the Barton incident at Ole Miss clearly showed the State Sovereignty Commission capable of gross fabrications to resist desegregation and as downright mean by directing its ire at a college student, white Mississippians still supported the overall objectives of the Commission: to preserve segregation and maintain white supremacy. How those objectives would be achieved remained necessarily vague. The Sovereignty Commission had crossed a line but massive resistance remained a popular position. Why would it not? The tactics utilized by the advocates of massive resistance had, with only the smallest of setbacks, succeeded in their program of absolutely no racial desegregation.

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<sup>31</sup> Jim Silver to William Winter, January 17, 1961 and January 28, 1961, both in William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH; Malcolm Dale to Ross Barnett, December 6, 1960, Sovereignty Commission Files, 7-0-2-22-1-1-1, MDAH; "Barnett Denies Barton Smear," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 16, 1961, Hazel Brannon Smith, "State Sovereignty Commission Should Be Abolished," *Northside Reporter*, March 16, 1961; Crespino, *In Search of Another Country*, 38-41; "Three Students Back Billy Barton," *Memphis Commercial Appeal*, March 16, 1961; "Mississippi: Thought Control," *Time*, April 28, 1961.



Image courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History

*Candidate William Winter at a campaign event in 1967.*

Given this atmosphere, Winter, in his public pronouncements in the early 1960s, made only the most subtle attacks on the massive resistance policy advocated by the Barnett forces, while also reassuring white audiences that a more reasoned approach did not necessarily mean embracing civil rights protesters. On several occasions, Winter claimed that the state's white citizens had developed a "militant inferiority complex." He told the Jackson Rotary Club in August 1960 that "we must remove the defensive complex that has made us too preoccupied with lashing back instead of striking forward." When he addressed the Greenville Rotary Club the following February, Winter emphasized that the state "had to face up to certain facts we don't like" and that Mississippians could "solve no problems by building fences around our community or our state....Our contribution does not lie in withdrawal

or retreat.” Without mentioning specific policies or individuals, most of those who heard Winter speak knew that he was criticizing the Barnett administration, the Citizens’ Council, and by implication, the massive resistance stance toward civil rights.<sup>32</sup>

Winter also emphasized that the Mississippi style of absolute defiance toward any accommodation to civil rights demands, which had indeed isolated the state from the rest of the nation, was an outlook clearly intolerable in the Cold War era. At another speech in Greenville, this time to the local Kiwanis Club in May 1961, Winter spoke of the “Soviet challenges,” which he said demanded that Americans “prove that we can rise above a comfortable, tranquil, self-satisfied existence. We can solve no problems if we isolate ourselves. These [Soviet] challenges demand that we be responsible and intelligent.” At the same time, Winter made it clear that he did not support civil rights protesters. When Winter gave this May 1961 speech in Greenville, white segregationists in neighboring Alabama were using violence to halt the freedom riders in their effort to desegregate interstate bus terminals. Winter told his audience that “he hoped Mississippi people will not permit themselves to be goaded into irresponsible action by agitators.” Winter suggested that whites should simply ignore such black activism. While Winter clearly pinpointed the pitfalls of Mississippi’s massive resistance approach, he offered little concrete guidance on how a more moderate plan would actually work, especially in an atmosphere where civil rights activists were accelerating their protests in Mississippi with each passing week.<sup>33</sup> Winter’s approach in the early 1960s was an attempt to find some middle ground in what seemed to be an atmosphere of increasingly dangerous racial confrontation in the state. Advocating even this cautious approach was not without risks. Massive resistance in Mississippi grew bolder as success remained generally untarnished. It was really unclear how far the true believers among this crowd might go to maintain Mississippi’s opposition to the civil rights movement. Winter and other whites who advocated any type of compromise on racial segregation faced potentially

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<sup>32</sup> Bethany Lamar Baskin, “The Rise of William Forest Winter,” (MA thesis, Mississippi State University, 1992); “No Substitute For This Advice,” (editorial), Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, February 12, 1961.

<sup>33</sup> “Confused World Places Heavy Burden on U.S., Winter Warns,” Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*. For details on the early civil rights movement in Mississippi, see Dittmer, *Local People*, chap. 4–6.

dangerous retaliation from whites; for politicians like Winter, they also gambled on their reelection chances.<sup>34</sup>

A showdown between the federal government and the state of Mississippi over racial desegregation finally occurred in the fall of 1962, over the admission of a black man, James Meredith, to the University of Mississippi. After Meredith attempted to enroll at Ole Miss in 1961, his challenge ended up in a protracted legal fight in the federal courts. On September 13, 1962, federal district judge Sidney Mize was forced to rule against the university, issuing an injunction at the behest of the U.S. Supreme Court that required Ole Miss to desist from further efforts to block Meredith's enrollment at the school. Later the same day, Barnett addressed Mississippians through a statewide TV and radio feed. He told his fellow white citizens that the state faced its "moment of our greatest crisis since the War Between the States." He claimed the federal government was ready "to break us physically with the power of force" and that "professional agitators and the unfriendly liberal press and other trouble makers are pouring across our borders intent upon instigating strife among our people." Barnett painted a bleak picture with a clear choice for action: "The day of expediency is past. We must either submit to the unlawful dictates of the federal government or stand up like men and tell them no. The day of reckoning has been delayed as long as possible. It is now upon us. This is the day, and this is the hour. Knowing you as I do, there is no doubt in my mind what the overwhelming majority of loyal Mississippians will do." Winter, watching the speech with four or five others, "scoffed" at Barnett's address. Winter thought, "Nobody is going to take him seriously."<sup>35</sup>

Much to his chagrin, Winter discovered over the next two weeks that Barnett's rhetoric had "mesmerized" the state. Expressions of public support for Barnett's stance of total resistance were many. Those who

<sup>34</sup> Erle Johnston, *The Defiant Years, 1959-1973: An Interpretative Documentary with Personal Experiences* (Forest, Miss.: Lake Harbor Publishers, 1990), 137-140; Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, 98-100; Lewis Lord, "Sovereignty Unit PR Chief Praised for Slapping Extremists," *Greenville Delta Democrat-Times*, June 1, 1962; William Winter, Bass interview; J. Todd Moye, *Let The People Decide: Black Freedom and White Resistance Movements in Sunflower County, Mississippi, 1945-1986* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 33.

<sup>35</sup> William Winter, Bass interview; "Governor Ross Barnett's Address to the People of Mississippi," September 13, 1962, [http://www.jfklibrary.org/meredith/contro\\_02fr.html](http://www.jfklibrary.org/meredith/contro_02fr.html) (accessed June 3, 2008). For a detailed discussion surrounding Meredith's attempt to enroll at Ole Miss, see Eagles, *The Price of Defiance*.

avored compromise felt helpless and fell silent. The climax of white hysteria came on the eve of the riot that engulfed the Ole Miss campus on the night of Sunday, September 30, 1962. The Saturday evening football game between Ole Miss and Kentucky at Jackson's Veterans Memorial Stadium became the scene of, as civil rights scholar Taylor Branch described it, "the last militant race rally among respectable whites for at least a generation." Over forty thousand fans waving rebel flags converged on the stadium. During halftime Governor Barnett fired up the assembly. Here is Winter's description of that moment:

Over the stadium's public address system [Barnett] stated his case. Calling for calm on the one hand, he incited the crowd on the other. Everyone was standing—or almost everyone. We had guests from Kentucky. Unaware that this was anything more than a dull half-time ceremony featuring some of the local politicians, they remained seated when the governor was introduced. A man in the seat behind them demanded to know if they were for letting that nigger go to school with white folks. Why weren't they standing up for the governor? They felt as trapped as some of us Mississippians. They meekly got to their feet.

As a child, Winter had heard all the stories about the Civil War from his grandfather and father. Now he realized how that conflict started—mass hysteria fueled by racial fear. The following evening and into the next morning, Winter followed the battle of Oxford through periodic TV and radio reports. When the melee ended and James Meredith finally integrated Mississippi's schools on the morning of October 1, two people were dead and more than 150 had been injured.<sup>36</sup>

In the aftermath of the Ole Miss debacle, in which the massive resisters finally lost a battle to the civil rights movement and the federal government, Winter saw the possibility for political change. A week after Meredith's enrollment at Ole Miss, Winter told his cousin in California, Jimmy Hall, that the violence surrounding the desegregation of Ole Miss resulted from the fact that "many Mississippians have been victimized by the deliberate efforts on the part of some to inflame their passions." Win-

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<sup>36</sup> William Winter, Bass interview; Taylor Branch, *Parting the Waters: America in the King Years, 1954–63* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1988), 659; William Winter memoir; William Winter, Nash interview.



ter told another correspondent that Governor Barnett had to shoulder most of the blame. Yet Winter believed most “thinking Mississippians” could not “earnestly and sincerely condone what has happened.” While deploring the violence caused by Meredith’s desegregation effort, Winter thought that an event like the Ole Miss melee was necessary “to cause some people here to be willing to go to more reasonable methods of resolving our problems.” Winter thought the Ole Miss events would ultimately lead to “a more moderate approach adopted by our state, in the pattern of most of the other Southern states, which have already experienced some of these adjustments.” Although Winter discerned that the voices of white moderation were “still relatively weak,” he also thought that “men who previously kept their silence now are beginning to face facts and to say some things that it was impossible to say before.”<sup>37</sup>

By the end of October, Winter was among the relatively small group of Mississippi officials speaking out publically for a more moderate approach to solving the race issue. Addressing the Mississippi Library Convention in Greenville at their annual meeting, Winter portrayed the recent actions of the state as wrong-headed, without referring specifically to Barnett or Ole Miss, and urged Mississippi to move forward rather than continue to look back. Winter explained that the problem was that people found themselves “fighting a battle against tyranny abroad and against conformity at home. This is a time when there is almost a fanatical insistence on the part of some men in owning the minds and souls of other men. The practitioners of this art are particularly adept at the technique of converting the half truth into the big lie—of transforming a man’s fears and prejudices into the dogma of his faith—of confusing self-interest with willful self-destruction.” Winter told the librarians that “this is a time to build up—not to tear down.” He noted that the state was in the early stages of constructing a facility in Hancock County that would test the rockets that would send American astronauts to the moon and was poised on the brink of a tremendous “economic and industrial break through.” To take advantage of the opportunities to develop its economy, however, the state needed to focus on improving its “second-rate educational system.” Though Winter’s speech to the library association perhaps seems somewhat tame as a

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<sup>37</sup> William Winter to Jimmy Hall, October 8, 1962, Box 27B, William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH; William Winter to Wade P. Huie Jr., October 8, 1962, Box 6797, Mississippi State Tax Commission Records, MDAH.

rejection of the massive resistance that had recently focused so much national and international opprobrium on Mississippi, Winter's address, directed to whites who had mostly opposed (largely in silence) the Barnett/Citizens Council/Sovereignty Commission approach to the black freedom movement, was welcomed as a breath of fresh air. When James Meredith considered leaving Ole Miss in late November, Russell Barrett, a sympathetic political science professor, showed Meredith Winter's speech to the librarians as a way of encouraging the student about the changing white public opinion in the state.<sup>38</sup>

Winter continued to hone this message of turning away from massive resistance in the interest of economic and educational advancement in the months ahead. When he addressed an audience at All Saints' Junior College in Vicksburg in March 1963, Winter called for political leadership in Mississippi that would "appeal to the best that is in us—not the worst; to our higher selves not our baser instincts. Only in this way can our section diminish some of the tensions that have already caused us so much grief and even now threaten more. This is no time to be drinking from the wells of bitterness and recrimination." Winter pressed the need for a leader "who can successfully turn his people from a preoccupation with the race issue and the supercharged emotions of anxiety, fear, and hate which that issue suggests." What needed to be focused on instead, according to Winter, was the economic development of the South, which required "an effective educational system." Winter also suggested that it was important for Mississippi to find "common cause with the nation," especially in light of the battle against communism, and to uncover other solutions "for the ever-present problems of race relations than the brick and the bomb."<sup>39</sup>

The fact that Winter spoke out in such a forthright manner in the months after the crisis at Ole Miss over Meredith's enrollment did not indicate a massive shift in Winter's thinking about how to accommodate the changes demanded by the civil rights movement. For the most part,

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<sup>38</sup> William Winter, "A Time For Responsibility," speech to the Mississippi Library Association, October 27, 1962, William Winter personal collection; "Library Group Hears Daniels Stress State's Creativity, Winter Call For Greater Effort," *Greenville Delta Democrat-Times*, October 28, 1962; Jay West, "Winter Asks Our People To Build Up Mississippi," *Laurel Leader-Call*, November 15, 1962; Larry Noble to William Winter, November 21, 1962, William Winter personal collection.

<sup>39</sup> William Winter, "The Problems of Southern Politics," speech at All Saints' Junior College, March 27, 1963, William Winter personal collection.

Winter's ideas remained unchanged. What Winter hoped had changed was the atmosphere in Mississippi, and to an extent, it had. While Barnett had managed to create a white supremacist hysteria over Meredith's impending desegregation of Ole Miss, the violence on campus sobered many whites in the state. If white Mississippians did not yet embrace desegregation as a positive good, more of them could now clearly see the real pitfalls of continuing down the massive resistance path. Whatever the limitations of pursuing racial moderation at this point in the state's history, Winter had a real political calculation to make in speaking out like he did in the aftermath of the Ole Miss events. He was a sitting state politician with ambitions to higher office. On the one hand, Winter hoped to capitalize on what seemed to be at least the slightest softening of white attitudes toward an uncritical acceptance of massive resistance, perhaps more in line with his moderate approach. More Mississippians realized that some accommodation to black demands would have to be made and that the state would not win a confrontation with the federal government over this issue. At the same time, Winter had to worry that his pleas for moderation and adjustment to change would merely alienate the mass of white Mississippi voters. Even for those who saw the need for a new approach, most still did not relish a messenger who told the state that it "should throw in the towel" and accept the demands of the civil rights movement.<sup>40</sup> Until at least 1965, white Mississippians, beginning to change but still susceptible to racist appeals, were the only ones that had the vote in the state.

As the 1963 election approached, it looked as if Winter had clearly miscalculated about how many white Mississippians were ready to accept racial change of any kind. Indeed, in the period following the Meredith enrollment crisis at Ole Miss through Freedom Summer of 1964, Winter's hopes that a changed approach to race relations in the state was on the horizon were frequently dashed by unfolding events. The 1963 campaign devolved into a more racist campaign than the contest four years earlier, seriously undermining Winter's belief that moderation might replace extremism in Mississippi's approach to race. The governor's contest that summer was a rematch of the 1955 election, when, with the civil rights movement and its massive resistance opposition barely off the ground, race had played only a minor role. Paul Johnson Jr., lieutenant governor during the Barnett years, ran on the platform

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<sup>40</sup> William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, March 12, 2008, tape, MOHP.

of "Stand Tall With Paul," an allusion to the fact that Johnson had once filled in for Barnett during the several times that Meredith's admission to Ole Miss had been halted by state officials. His major opponent was former governor J.P. Coleman, long identified as a racial moderate. One of the chief charges lodged against Coleman in 1963 was that he was a Kennedy supporter. Like Winter, Coleman had been on the LBJ special in 1960. Few remembered that in 1960 JFK had offered only the most lukewarm support for the civil rights movement. The Kennedys, of course, had enrolled Meredith at Ole Miss, and by the summer of 1963, Kennedy had become more closely identified as a supporter of the civil rights movement. Segregationists tagged Coleman as a racial moderate who supported the Kennedys.<sup>41</sup>

An open and blatant appeal to racial prejudice characterized the campaign. For example, at a Laurel campaign stop, Johnson told a racist joke about the singer Lena Horne. In Johnson's telling, the black singer and entertainer asked, "Mirror, Mirror, on the wall, who's the fairest of them all?" The mirror replied, "Snow White is Nigger and don't you forget it." At many of Johnson's appearances, the Magnolia State Quartet accompanied him, singing "Stand Up For Johnson, Sing Out For Paul," which included references to Johnson's role in blocking James Meredith from attending Ole Miss. A Johnson print ad contained a picture of a bed in the governor's mansion, identified as the bed Kennedy had slept in one night in 1957 as the guest of then-governor J.P. Coleman following Kennedy's Jackson speech to the Mississippi Young Democrats. One of Johnson's radio spots had Johnson pointing out that the NAACP opposed him and adding that, "You know what NAACP stands for, don't you? It stands for Niggers, Apes, Alligators, Coons, and Possums." Johnson led the first primary, knocking the third candidate, Charles Sullivan, out of the race. In the second primary, Johnson defeated Coleman by sixty-five thousand votes.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, May 18, 2006, MOHP; William Winter lecture, class at Millsaps College, March 1, 1984, transcript, William Winter personal collection.

<sup>42</sup> James A. Peden Jr., interview by Charles Bolton, December 17, 2007, tape, in author's possession; William Winter lecture, class at Millsaps, March 1, 1984, transcript, William Winter personal collection; Katagiri, *The Mississippi State Sovereignty Commission*, 140-141. For information on the Magnolia State Quartet, see "C.O. Stegall Biography," <http://www.providentials.com/cobio.php> (accessed June 5, 2008).

In 1962, the legislature had finally agreed to Winter's long-standing request to abolish the office of state tax collector, and Winter considered his own political options. He thought about running for lieutenant governor, but fellow moderate Carroll Gartin planned to seek that office. Winter even thought about trying to return to the legislature and mount another bid to unseat Speaker Sillers. He finally decided to seek the office of State Treasurer. His two opponents in the race, B.G. "Bob" Jones and Charlie Mosby, were virtual unknowns, while Winter had been in public office since 1948. Mosby, from Meridian, had been one of the ten candidates in the 1959 State Tax Collector's race, finishing fifth in the first primary. In one of the last Mississippi campaigns that depended primarily on stump speeches to reach voters around the state, both of Winter's opponents did not miss an opportunity to tell the voters that Winter was a racial moderate and a Coleman supporter. At a campaign stop in Calhoun City ten days before the first primary, Jones brought up the fact that Winter was a Kennedy backer, as proved by his presence on the LBJ special in 1960. As Winter later recalled, "he had me as engineer on the train." Winter followed Jones at the podium and simply ignored the attack. In most instances, Winter did not need to respond. He focused attention on his spotless and distinguished record during sixteen years of "elective public service." People took note of the fact that Winter had worked to abolish the last elective position he held, one that everyone knew paid him handsomely. Many voters saw a candidate, that while perhaps more moderate on race than most of them, was not advocating anything radical in this area and was certainly a proven, honest and efficient public servant. Few perceived the state treasurer's office as very crucial in the battle to oppose racial change. In addition, Winter had a beautiful, charming wife (who accompanied him and sometimes filled in for him on the campaign trail), was a veteran, and was "an active churchman." When necessary, Winter simply denied the charges that he was a "Kennedy liberal" and reaffirmed that he supported racial segregation. Winter received almost 60 percent of the vote in the first primary.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>43</sup> William Winter, White interview; "William F. Winter for State Treasurer" ad, Greenville *Delta Democrat-Times*, August 4, 1963; "William Winter: Man of Unusual Ability" (editorial), *McComb Enterprise-Journal*, August 2, 1963; William Winter, interview by Bill Edmonds, April 17, 1999, William Winter personal collection; Abney, *Mississippi Election Statistics, 1900-1967*, 323-324, 361.

Image courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History



*William and Elise Winter.*

Winter managed to win his race despite his history of racial moderation. A number of other relatively moderate state officials, none as outspoken as Winter, also won their contests in 1963, including Gartin for lieutenant governor and Joe Patterson for attorney general. The racist tactics that marred the campaign were focused primarily on the governor's contest. Winter recognized that there were

"many voters who are still rabid over the Meredith case" and that "the race issue has re-emerged as the paramount issue in the state." Winter thought that the continuing obsession with race was "one of the real tragedies of our time, and of course the price of it, while far too early to assess, is surely going to be very great in terms of economic opportunities and political leadership." Yet Winter found himself powerless to help Coleman, his political mentor. During the second primary campaign, the Johnson people told Winter that they had their eye on him and to keep out of the governor's race. Although Coleman's forces urged Winter to get more involved in the battle, he did little, a fact that angered Coleman and his supporters. Winter had managed to win his election by largely ignoring the racial hysteria that continued to grip a sizeable part of white Mississippi. He attracted enough moderate voters, had a solid record of public service, and faced two political unknowns. Although Coleman's candidacy indicated that a segment of white voters in Mississippi perhaps did want new leadership, Johnson's ability to highlight his role as a defender of white supremacy in the still-racially charged world of Mississippi proved decisive. The fact that the massive resisters



particularly targeted Coleman as an enemy of white supremacy certainly doomed his candidacy. As Coleman told Benjamin Muse soon after the election, "The Citizens' Council took it out on me."<sup>44</sup>

With Johnson's election, Winter's optimism flagged about the state's prospects once again, as he thought the state was doomed to four more years of state-sponsored racial conflict and resistance of the federal government. His fears turned to despair and "a sense of just very dark feelings about the future" following the assassination of John F. Kennedy in November 1963. Perhaps most troubling to Winter were the expressions of joy over the killing from the mouths of segregationist leaders and their followers. Stories even circulated that schoolchildren had applauded in their classrooms on hearing the news. At an address to a small group in Jackson on the Sunday after Kennedy's death, Winter deplored "this personal hatred of people that has been expressed here in this city of Jackson by people who cheer the murder of the president of the United States." At the same time, the expression of sorrow over the assassination and an affection for the dead president from "many, many average, obscure people" led Winter to believe that some sense of "basic decency" existed among his fellow Mississippians. Although Winter did not believe that JFK's assassination "will suddenly turn this state around," he did note that the killing had bolstered his own resolve to speak out against the forces of white racial extremism in the state: "as far as I am concerned personally I am going to do more than I have been willing to do in the past to try to retain in this state a respect for the political heritage that was able to give us a man like John Kennedy."<sup>45</sup> If the 1962 Ole Miss crisis had initially sparked Winter to speak out more forcefully for the moderate position, JFK's assassination further prodded the state official to take a bolder stand in the days ahead.

Despite Winter's initial despair, Kennedy's murder did in fact bolster the cause of racial moderates in the state. Governor-elect Paul B. Johnson Jr., hearing of the tragic shooting in Dallas while addressing a meeting of the Mississippi Economic Council, asked for a moment of

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<sup>44</sup> William Winter to Reverend C. Brinkley Morton, August 20, 1963, and William Winter to Guy Richardson, August 20, 1963, both in box 27B, William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH; William Winter, conversation with author, July 5, 2007; William Winter, Bass interview; Memorandum, January 1964, Benjamin Muse Papers.

<sup>45</sup> William Winter, Bass interview; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, May 18, 2006, MOHP; William Winter to Frank E. Smith, December 10, 1963, Box 27B, William Winter unprocessed collection, MOHP.

silent prayer and quickly adjourned the gathering. A memorial service at Ole Miss attracted thousands and was "one of the most integrated gatherings that Mississippi had seen in modern times." When Benjamin Muse visited the state in January 1964, he noted that Kennedy's photo was displayed prominently in stores around the state and in general sensed that the assassination "had a softening effect upon Mississippi attitudes" concerning defiance of the federal government. The possibilities for moderation brightened with Johnson's inauguration speech in January 1964. The new governor sounded a decidedly moderate tone in his address. He told his listeners "that you and I are part of this world, whether we like it or not; ... we are Americans as well as Mississippians." The governor claimed he would uphold law and order in his administration and offered this ringing declaration: "Hate, or prejudice, or ignorance will not lead Mississippi while I sit in the Governor's chair." As historian Neil McMillen has aptly noted, "Johnson's enthusiasm for organized extremism did not even survive the inauguration ceremonies." Johnson's inaugural clearly indicated a break with the Citizens' Council domination of state government that had characterized the Barnett years, an approach that sanctioned absolute resistance to racial change, including violence if necessary. William Winter embraced Johnson's new persona, but the racial hatred that Johnson and others had helped to stir up among whites during the 1963 campaign did not abate because of sympathy for a slain president or a few conciliatory words by the new governor, especially in the face Mississippi's increasingly mobilized black freedom movement.<sup>46</sup>

By 1963, the Mississippi civil rights movement had struggled for two years to register black voters in the state, first in southwest Mississippi and then in the Delta. Medgar Evers and students from Tougaloo College had also launched a broad-base attack on segregation in the capital city. Whites had responded at every turn with violence and intimidation. In fact, by early 1964, the Ku Klux Klan, largely dormant for decades in the state, made a reappearance and began a campaign of terror directed at those who sought racial change. In 1961, the three primary civil rights

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<sup>46</sup> William Winter, Bass interview; Reid Stoner Derr, "The Triumph of Progressivism: Governor Paul B. Johnson, Jr., and Mississippi in the 1960s," (Ph.D. diss., University of Southern Mississippi, 1994), 197–231; McMillen, *The Citizens' Council*, 348–349; William Winter lecture, class at Millsaps College, March 1, 1984, transcript, William Winter personal collection.

organizations working in the state, the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), the NAACP, and the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee (SNCC), had joined together under an umbrella group known as the Council of Federated Organizations (COFO). The movement won few victories, and by early 1964, with white violence escalating, COFO moved forward with a planned summer project, which would bring northern white volunteers to the state to assist local blacks in registering black voters and challenging racial segregation. The decision was based in part on focusing national attention on Mississippi, for the racial violence in Mississippi seem to attract little notice as long as the victims were local Mississippi blacks. The strategy worked, especially after three civil rights workers—one black, two white—disappeared in June 1964 after being arrested by Neshoba County lawmen.<sup>47</sup>

In the face of the growing confrontation in Mississippi between the local black civil rights movement—backed by national reinforcements—and an increasingly violent white cadre of segregationists, Winter found that his expressions of moderation generally fell on deaf ears. Two days after the three civil rights workers disappeared under suspicious circumstances in Neshoba County at the beginning of the violent Freedom Summer of 1964, Winter spoke to the Hinds County Democratic convention. His speech offered no calls to defend segregation or states rights, but rather, suggested that delegates take the high road in the brewing storm. He urged the delegates “to try to insure the swift and safe passing of our great state and nation through the perilous times in which we live” and “to make certain that our particular contributions to this journey will be calculated to keep the train on the track and not derail it into the sloughs of defeat and hopelessness and despair. Let us, therefore, cross our bridges as we come to them and by all means let us burn none behind us.” Winter received a cold reception from the delegates, and he returned to his office, “very depressed,” realizing that the delegates had been expecting a “fighting speech.” After Winter’s talk, the delegates replaced the body’s chairman and secretary, “who were merely segregationist, and elected ultra, ultra segregationists to succeed them.” When Winter made his appearance a few weeks later at the Neshoba County Fair, an annual ritual for all sitting and aspiring politicians in the state, he sensed “a dark cloud over the fairgrounds,” as the federal search continued for the missing men, James Chaney,

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<sup>47</sup> Dittmer, *Local People*.

Andrew Goodman, and Michael Schwerner. Winter ventured no comments about what he thought might have really happened to the civil rights workers, that they were likely murdered by the Neshoba County officials who arrested them. To do so would have been not only politically untenable but also physically dangerous.<sup>48</sup>

For the next couple of years, racial violence plagued Mississippi. In the process, the national media pilloried the state. Yet for all their efforts, white segregationists could not stop change from occurring. Indeed, their virulent opposition actually helped fuel reform. Civil rights activists had calculated correctly by focusing attention on Mississippi, the ugliest gash in the nation's festering wound of white supremacy. The state's violent opposition to black citizens who merely sought to vote or be served in a restaurant sickened enough white Americans, who perhaps saw an unconscious reflection of where their own more-buried racial hatreds might lead, and prodded their leaders to enact new legislation to protect black civil rights. With the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, the civil rights movement received federal support for the end of segregation and disfranchisement. Continued black activism remained essential to testing the new laws, and hard-core white segregationists persisted in their resistance to these efforts, at times resorting to violence. To be sure, there were significant numbers of white Mississippians who rejected the violence of white segregationists and who favored a more reasoned approach to solving the state's racial problems. For the most part, however, these moderates continued to remain silent and were immobilized.

As the state lurched from one racial crisis to the next, many of those who now favored moderation and accommodation to the new realities created by the civil rights movement looked to Winter as their champion. When Benjamin Muse visited Mississippi in 1964, he found that the state's entire white moderate group, from newspaper editors and professors to business leaders like Billy Mounger and labor leaders such as Claude Ramsey all "talked about Winter with wistful admiration:

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<sup>48</sup> Memorandum, July 11, 1964, Benjamin Muse Papers; Mitchell, *Mississippi Liberal*, 174; William Winter speech to Hinds County Democratic Convention, June 23, 1964, Box 10, William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, December 19, 2007, tape, MOHP; Lassiter and Lewis, *The Moderates' Dilemma*, 198-199. For an insightful history of the Neshoba County fair, see Trent Watts, "Mississippi's Giant House Party: Being White at the Neshoba County Fair," *Southern Cultures* 8 (Summer 2002): 38-55.

"There's the man who could save the state! If we could get him elected! In 1967 maybe?" As Muse noted, Winter had shown a particular facility for getting elected and maintaining his standing as a political leader "without sacrificing his convictions on the race issue (or getting into the controversy)." Since the fall of 1962 but even more so after the summer of 1964, Winter was the most prominent state official who consistently counseled an end to violent resistance to the law of the land as the only way that Mississippi could move forward. In January 1965, Winter spoke to the Catholic Youth Organization at their integrated annual meeting in Jackson. Many of Winter's supporters told him the appearance at the integrated function would hurt his future gubernatorial chances. Although the speech did not create as much controversy as some of Winter's advisors anticipated, Winter did offer the integrated gathering of young people a message that focused on the future. He told them that Mississippi had to stop trying to defend the last one hundred years and get ready to face the next one hundred years. To move forward would require the state "to lay aside old slogans and myths." Winter noted that improved education, economic development, and "domestic tranquility" were the necessary ingredients for Mississippi to prosper in the future. When Winter talked to his fellow Jackson lawyers in May 1965 on Law Day, which included a number of men who had been actively involved in the Citizens' Council, he offered an admonition to respect the law: "In the past I am sorry to say that too many of us here in Mississippi have not asserted the leadership that we were capable of in times of confusion and crisis. Too many of us lawyers have sat on our hands and by our silence and acquiescence have lent our support to positions that from a legal standpoint, if indeed not from a moral and ethical standpoint, have been patently wrong" by allowing "to go unchallenged the irresponsible and demagogic attacks on our system of justice." In the summer of 1965, Winter made his annual pilgrimage to the Neshoba County Fair. After listening to a string of politicians, including Governor Johnson, decry the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the pending Voting Rights Act of 1965, Winter took the podium and offered a strikingly different message. He criticized the "rash and reckless defiance by a political leadership that would invite bloodshed and the destruction of our institutions." He told the fair goers that "It's our job, yours and mine, to see to it that more of our people understand that good citizenship in the times in which we live demand the very best qualities we have, not our worst qualities.

Our state needs as never before, the constructive leader who will find the solution, who will find the way, not the despairing critic who knows only the voice of alarm.”<sup>49</sup>

Winter’s moderate expressions of acceptance of civil rights changes did not go unchallenged. As Mississippi wrestled in early 1965 with how to respond to the demands of the U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare that local school districts submit school desegregation plans or risk the loss of federal funds, Winter, acting in his capacity as state treasurer, pointed out the importance of federal funds in the state budget and how much would be required in new state taxes to replace these monies. State senator and Sovereignty Commission member Hayden Campbell lashed out at Winter’s remarks as a “misleading statement,” which would have the effect of “surrendering and signing away control of our public school system to a Federal Bureau.” Winter could sense “that a climate is being created where it is now possible to take a public position against massive resistance,” and Winter was certainly staking out that position, but the forces of white resistance had not completely surrendered. Indeed, massive resistance to the effort to desegregate the public schools would persist for another five years. Assessing the political advisability of Winter’s calls for moderation and obedience to the law of the land remained difficult. As he told one former Mississippian in the summer of 1965, “I am afraid the bitter-enders have one more inning. I would like to take them on, but I want to do so with some hope of success.”<sup>50</sup>

In addition to speaking out for moderation in his public appearances, Winter also joined moderate religious leaders in Mississippi, following the violence of 1964, in their efforts to assist black religious communities attacked by white segregationists and to urge whites to condemn racial violence. Throughout the South, segregationists and racial moderates in various denominations and individual congregations battled over

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<sup>49</sup> Memorandum, January 1964, Benjamin Muse Papers; William Winter memoir; William Winter, Edmonds interview; Ed McCusker, “Lay Aside Past, Speaker Urges,” *Jackson Daily News*, January 24, 1965; Newsfilm, D33, MDAH.

<sup>50</sup> Hayden Campbell press release, February 17, 1965, and Statement of Treasurer William Winter, February 17, 1965, both in Box 25C, William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH; William Winter to Fred Berger, July 26, 1965, Box 27B, William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH; Charles C. Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All: The Battle Over School Desegregation in Mississippi, 1870–1980* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2005), chap. 5.



how to respond to the civil rights movement. Winter had been an active Presbyterian his entire life and was a leader in the Mississippi Presbyterian church, although he was certainly not the kind of politician who wore his religion on his sleeve. He also knew from direct experience that religious belief and racial toleration did not necessarily go hand-in-hand. In



Image courtesy Mississippi Department of Archives and History

*William and Elise Winter.*

June 1963, after attending J.P. Coleman's opening rally in Ackerman for his gubernatorial bid, Winter traveled to Memphis for a meeting of the Presbyterian Synod of Mississippi scheduled for the following day. That night, Byron de la Beckwith assassinated Mississippi civil rights leader Medgar Evers. Winter learned about the killing when he came down for breakfast the following morning. Eating with one of the respected elders of the Mississippi Presbyterian church, the man told Winter, "The nigger got what he deserved." Winter sat in shocked silence. He marveled at how such a religious man could make this assertion. After the murders of Schwerner, Goodman, and Chaney and a spate of church bombings in southwest Mississippi during the summer of 1964, Winter joined an interracial gathering of civic and religious leaders, including Rabbi Perry Nussbaum, Episcopal bishop John Allin, and Catholic priest Bernard Law (later Cardinal Law), to form a group known as the Committee of Concern (known today as the Mississippi Religious Leadership Conference). The group quietly raised money to rebuild black churches burned by the Klan. Within six months the committee had raised \$50,000, much

of it in contributions by Mississippians, and with help from northern and western college students, had rebuilt six black churches. White clergy leaders also tried, with somewhat less success, to inspire white people of faith "to express outrage at what was going on and bring some sanity to the situation." In addition, members of the Committee of Concern emphasized the message that Winter highlighted in his speeches around the state: whatever white Mississippians might think about the new civil rights statutes, the law had to be obeyed.<sup>51</sup>

By the spring of 1966, Winter was seriously considering a run for the governor's office, a move he had been contemplating for at least a couple of years. Although the racial atmosphere in Mississippi, and across the South, had become increasingly more hospitable to a moderate white leadership, due in large part to the enfranchisement of black voters through the Voting Rights Act of 1965, Winter recognized that his gubernatorial candidacy in 1967 was still a long shot. In April 1966, Winter told Jim Silver that a recent poll conducted "indicates still a massive resentment and that the sure way to win is to cuss LBJ and the Feds." Although Winter realized that the lingering strength of massive resistance thoughts among whites presented "a real dilemma" for his potential candidacy, he told Silver that "If I can get the money, I may just bow my neck and plunge into the Governor's race."<sup>52</sup>

Over the next year, Winter continued to speak out as voice of racial moderation in a state still plagued by conflict, sometimes violent, over the transition to a post-Jim Crow society. At a dinner honoring newspaperman Bill Minor in the summer of 1966, Winter praised the journalist for helping to create a more racially tolerant atmosphere in the state. Winter also told his fellow white Mississippians, still smarting from the image created in the national media of a racist, violent backwater, that "Instead of reacting with anger to honest reporting of instances of

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<sup>51</sup> William Winter, Bass interview; Randy Sparks, *Religion in Mississippi* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), chap. 10; Dittmer, *Local People*, 266–271; William Winter memoir; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, December 8, 2006, tape, MOHP; "Beauty for Ashes," February 5, 1965, *Time* [[http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,839238,00.html?iid=chix\\_sphere](http://www.time.com/time/magazine/article/0,9171,839238,00.html?iid=chix_sphere)] (accessed June 17, 2008); Charles Lemuel Young Sr., interview by Donald Paul Williams, November 14, 1998, transcript, Civil Rights Documentation Project, Tougaloo College Archives, Tougaloo, Mississippi.

<sup>52</sup> " 'Mississippi' On TV: A Self Portrait," *Los Angeles Sentinel*, March 31, 1966; "The Changing South," *Chicago Daily Defender*, May 2, 1966; William Winter to Jim Silver, April 11, 1966, Box 10, James W. Silver Collection, Department of Archives and Special Collections, University of Mississippi Libraries, Oxford.

injustice, more of us ought to respond with a demand that the injustice be ended.” Winter did just that a couple of months later after a riot erupted over the effort by blacks in Grenada to integrate the public schools. In the worst instance of racial violence associated with school desegregation attempts in Mississippi, a white mob assaulted black schoolchildren and white reporters while local law enforcement looked away. The Grenada confrontation had been brewing for months, as local black activists had launched, during the summer of 1966, a broad-based boycott against Grenada merchants who had failed to abide by the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Winter had quietly helped to defuse one racial confrontation at a high school football game the Friday before the September 1966 school riot. The day after the violence surrounding the school desegregation attempt, Winter sat down and wrote out a petition denouncing the violence and calling on “all law-abiding citizens” to join together to resolve the racial conflict that had divided the town. He took the petition to Grenada, and by himself, walked around Grenada soliciting signatures. Many of the local businessmen, weary of the demonstrations that had plagued the town for months, eagerly affixed their names to the document. Not all whites, however, deplored the recent violence, and they did not appreciate Winter’s efforts. While walking around the town square with his petition, Winter received cold stares from some white observers, and one hollered from an upstairs window, “Nigger lover, go back to Jackson.” As a politician contemplating an upcoming run for governor, Winter’s actions in the aftermath of the Grenada school riot were certainly courageous. For many of his supporters, the Grenada events seemed to make Winter’s anticipated bid for the state’s highest office an iffy proposition. A former Mississippi resident who had moved to Washington D.C. to work for the American Broadcasting Company told Winter that “I’d hate to see you and Elise get involved in a Mississippi campaign if Grenada reflects even in a small way the general feeling in the whole state. I don’t know if you could do enough good to make it worthwhile.”<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> William Winter, “The Responsible Journalist in a Free Society,” speech at the Bill Minor Dinner, June 25, 1966, Box 2235, Mississippi AFL-CIO Records, 1949-1986, Southern Labor Archives, Georgia State University, Atlanta; Bolton, *The Hardest Deal of All*, introduction; William Winter memoir; William Winter, interview by Charles Bolton, May 18, 2006, tape, MOHP; Dick to William Winter, September 23, 1966, Box 27B, William Winter unprocessed collection, MDAH.

By 1967 Winter represented the hopes of white Mississippians hoping to move beyond the racial conflict that had defined Mississippi history in the preceding decade. Winter was particularly well-positioned to assume the leadership of this body of white opinion. The moderate approach to the heated topic of civil rights for black Mississippians, however, clearly had its limits, a fact that became painfully clear in the gubernatorial election of 1967. Winter won the first primary in large part because of his moderate stance, and his campaign inspired many white Mississippians who were now at last ready to accept the racial changes sweeping the South. However, the black electorate was not yet fully mobilized in 1967, and the forces of segregation and resistance still carried a great deal of weight. Although he defeated three strong segregationist opponents in the first primary—former governor Ross Barnett, John Bell Williams, and radio personality Jimmy Swann—Winter realized early on that he would not win the election with moderate white votes alone. Shortly before the first primary, his ambition for higher office led him to make a play for the votes of those who still longed for a stance of massive resistance to racial change. At a forum sponsored by the Citizens' Council he had long opposed, Winter said: "As a fifth generation Mississippian whose grandfather rode with Forrest, I was born a segregationist and raised a segregationist. I have always defended this position. I defend it now."<sup>54</sup> Winter wanted to win, even if he had to embrace a position—the absolute defense of racial segregation—he had long sought to weaken. The strategy did not work, in large part because ample evidence existed, for anyone who knew anything about recent Mississippi politics and history, that Winter had always rejected the massive resistance plan. Winter lost the second primary to John Bell Williams. As late as 1967, white Mississippi was not yet ready for a racial moderate in the governor's mansion. Even the state's most devoted and prominent proponent of racial moderation could not steadfastly maintain that position.

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<sup>54</sup> "William Winter," *Mississippi Newsletter*, July 28, 1967, Freedom Information Service, copy provided to author by Jan Hillegas.