

**Address by Governor William Winter  
Center for the Study of the American South  
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There is no more appropriate place for us to have this discussion about the South and the challenges and changes that confront us than the place where we are gathered today - here at Chapel Hill - here at the Center for the Study of the American South. For this campus is where for a long time in the politically and economically bleak years of the last century so many of us looked for and found the intellectual stimulation that was too often lacking in our own states.

This is the place where Howard Odum, having left Ole Miss for the more academically benign climate of the University of North Carolina, wrote in 1930 that the challenge facing the South was one of "transforming its deficits of social waste to a balance of social gain and [thereby] becoming representative of the best that America could produce."

This is the place where that same year Frank Porter Graham assumed the presidency of this university and began to inspire a whole generation of young Southerners to pursue goals that would lift the region out of its preoccupation with the past.

This is the place where in more recent years Bill Friday has raised academic statesmanship to a new high in the region and has been a driving force behind the establishment and work of this Center. And now this is the place where we have in Chancellor Moeser a worthy successor to these illustrious predecessors and a leader who in bringing us here today has confirmed his understanding of the vital role that this university can play in helping shape the future not just of North Carolina but the whole region.

There are so many of you in this room today who have for a long time been providing this kind of enlightened leadership. I am honored to be in your company and to be involved with you in support of the expanding role of the Center as well as the Program on Southern Politics, Media and Public Life.

And now that we are here what must we think about? Let me begin by reminding ourselves of how we have arrived at where we are. Let me begin by starting in an unlikely place, out of the recollections of my boyhood on a Mississippi farm a long time ago.

Let me share with you a snapshot of one of those experiences. It was of a meeting with an old man.

He was not really an old man -- he could not have been more than fifty -- but I thought of him as old. People appear older to fourteen-year old boys. That was my age when I saw him in the weather-beaten cabin on the Bull Farm. It was in the middle of the depression, and he was one of the countless displaced persons who had been roaming the backroads of the South in those bitter years of the mid-thirties -- hungry, homeless and in despair.

He was now working for the government -- on halves. Dispossessed by the harsh economics of five-cent cotton, he had been picked up by a New Deal program called the Farm Security Administration and put back to work as a sharecropper with the U.S. Government as his landlord. The land was rented by the government from a local farmer, and it was derisively called the Bull Farm because of an ill-conceived plan to use oxen rather than mules to pull the plows. My family's farm was next to the Bull Farm.

My introduction to the man was through his son -- a boy my own age with whom I rode the school bus. On this chill Saturday morning in late February 1937, I paid my friend a visit. There in the bleak cabin huddled in front of a miserable little fireplace was the boy's father. It was too wet and cold for him to be in the fields. This day in the dim light that came through the dingy panes of one little window, he was holding a large book. As we spoke, he put the book down. I noticed its cover. It was the Sears and Roebuck catalogue. In those bleak and desperate times the catalogue and the King James Bible were about the only literature that one ever saw in the homes of most tenant farmers, who constituted the overwhelming majority of the rural population.

I never knew if the man could read. I rather doubt that he could. That was not unusual in those days. Half of the rural whites and ninety percent of the rural blacks in the South were functionally if not totally illiterate. Still many cast about for ways to comprehend the mystery and wonder of a world that seemed to lie beyond their grasp and even beyond their imagination. Never having heard of Scott or Wordsworth or Longfellow, they could only browse through the Sears and Roebuck catalogue.

I have often contrasted my own life with that of my young schoolmate from the Bull Farm. Whereas his father was illiterate, my parents had been teachers. And our home, modest

by today's standards and lacking electricity and indoor plumbing, nevertheless had a bookcase filled with great books.

What I did not understand then but that I have since come to comprehend is that for so many people -- black people and white people alike -- living and growing up in the rural South in generations gone by, there were these walls imposed by poverty and ignorance and class and race that left thousands of them marooned in permanent intellectual isolation and economic deprivation. A few escaped, but so many did not. Many still have not.

It has been an appallingly slow and tortuous journey out of that dark past. As late as the mid-1950's, twenty years after my visits to the Bull Farm, only one white in four and one black in forty was finishing high school in my state. Even today you can walk down the roads and streets of almost any of our small towns and rural communities, and at least one out of every five or six adults you meet will be functionally illiterate, and in some places it will be higher than that.

There is a strange and haunting paradox about all of this. In a region that has for so long prided itself on its commitment to taking care of its own, on sustaining strong family values, on helping each other, we tended to neglect that most essential of all our social responsibilities, and that was the extension of adequate educational opportunity to all of our people. And there is an even stranger and more intriguing paradox. In this region where for so long so many have lacked the most elementary reading skills, we have produced such a disproportionate number of celebrated writers. My late neighbor, Willie Morris, suggested an explanation for this abundance of successful authors. "It beats trying to make a living farming," he said.

Howard Odum thought that there was something to the notion that the tensions, frustrations and deprivations arising out of our troubled and conflicted past helped create the elements that uniquely set the region apart. He spoke of how the whole range of human experience here in the South combined to establish a setting of such indefinable contrast and complexity:

The South was American and un-American, righteous and wicked, Christian and barbaric. It was a South getting better, a South getting worse. It was strong and it was weak, it was white and it was black, it was rich and it was poor. There were great white mansions on hilltops among the trees, and there were unpainted

houses perched on pillars along hillside gullies or lowland marshes. From high estate came low attainment, and from the dark places came flashing gleams of noble personality. There were strong men and women vibrant with the spontaneity of living, and there were pale, tired folk, full of the dullness of life. There were crusaders resplendent with some perpetual equivalent of war, and there were lovers of peace in the market place. There were freshness and vivacity as of a rippling green-white rivulet, and there were depth and hidden power as of gleaming dark water beneath an arched bridge.

Thus was described the mystique and the cultural richness of our region that made it a place where great literature was inspired. It was the literature of Faulkner, of Wolfe and Welty and Warren -- writing stories about people and places they knew, their own postage stamp, as Faulkner once said.

But now as we look into a new century with conditions greatly changed from the scenes of squalor and poverty which I remember from my boyhood, we still have to ask if Odum's characterization of that earlier South is still not applicable in many ways to our region today. It certainly describes many of the elements of the South where great literature continues to be inspired. It also describes the huge gaps that still remain between our promise and our performance, between our destiny and our doubts, between our best qualities and our worst.

No one can argue that this is not an infinitely better region than that one which Odum knew. It has achieved by almost every measure an enhanced quality of life for most of its people. Motivated and inspired by ideas that in so many instances came from the intellectual forces of universities like this one, we produced in the last third of the last century a generation of more creative and enlightened leaders than we had known before. We marshaled our unprecedented domestic resources to raise the level of education, create new economic opportunities and break down the barriers of racial segregation that had for so long denied fundamental rights to millions of our fellow Southerners. We worked at restoring our land and forests and cleaning up our streams. It is obvious that we have come an incredibly long way. But as far as we have come, we still have so much more to do.

The South is now very much a part of a new technological society that has seen incredible advances in science and mathematics capable of creating machines that outperform the human mind.

The grandsons and granddaughters of that man on the Bull Farm are now the computer programmers of this new age with technical skills undreamed of a few years ago. No one questions the amazing utility of these developments, as they make many of the daily tasks of living infinitely better. Through these miracles there now is available on our computer screens an array of information the like of which we have never known before. Much of the world's great literature can be called up with the flick of a button. But access and understanding are two different things. Know-how is not the same as wisdom.

Now we are called on to create out of this new information age, that even Odum could not have imagined more than a half-century ago, a cultural imperative that will preserve our common humanity. We can either let all this technology diminish our human-ness or we can employ it to enhance the ability of more of our people to lead more fulfilling lives.

The difference now and in the simpler world of the 1930's is that even though then there were so many people with limited skills and limited access to knowledge but who were still groping through a Sears and Roebuck catalogue to satisfy their quest for learning, now we have so many more people with unlimited access to information who are struggling over how to apply that information in a truly meaningful way. Unless we learn how to arrive at wise and thoughtful solutions to the issues that confront us, we shall see our region continue to struggle and to be haunted by fears and doubts about its future in a new and hostile world.

For the irony is that even though we have put behind us here in the South so much of what had been wrong and indefensible and have achieved this greatly increased level of material affluence and productivity that we once thought would automatically produce a good society, we are finding instead a disturbing lack of civil discourse and an increase of partisan rancor, a growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, a predisposition to getting while the getting is good, and a continuing lack of trust between blacks and whites. And so in our self-centered preoccupation with our own private interests we tend to stop talking to each other and retreat literally and figuratively into little enclaves behind locked gates, living in suspicion and distrust of our neighbors and our neighbors living in ignorance of us.

This is where this university and this center must call into play the collected wisdom and inspiration of those who have done so much to shape this region for the better, who have helped preserve its noblest qualities, and who, if we will only listen, will help us to avoid the nightmare that David Cohn once said was too often our common fate, "With heaven in sight, we insist on marching perversely into hell."

These fountainheads of wisdom cannot be reserved just for the bastions of the intellectual. They must be made a part of the currency of the marketplace and the arena of public policy-making. That is why this center must be involved with citizens and public leaders across the region, mobilizing that spirit of community and good will that still exists in abundance but that so often gets overlooked and overwhelmed by the political hucksters and the fast buck fortune-seekers.

We must work to instill in more of our community leaders the vision and civic courage that will cause them to confront and deal with difficult public issues whether on race relations or urban sprawl or education or housing or health care before they spiral out of control. So many of these local officials work in lonely and isolated situations without the benefit of wise and knowledgeable advisors. They need all the help they can get to protect them from the raw and uncompromising pressures of biased or uninformed public opinion.

This is why I hope that emphasis on leadership will be an expanded role of this center. It might be well to recall the singular role that the Lamar Society played in the 1960's.

Then a relatively small number of academicians, journalists and business leaders - some from right around here - helped change the politics of the region in a nonpartisan way by encouraging public leaders to raise their sights and move away from their preoccupation with the defense of racial segregation. The result was the creation of important public policy initiatives such as the formation of the Southern Growth Policies Board and the election of a remarkable bipartisan group of progressive Southern governors in the 1970's.

I do not suggest that the center should get into the business of trying to elect candidates, but I do think that it could well be in the business of helping create a climate of informed public opinion where public leaders will be better able to act on difficult and unpopular issues instead of feeling that they must pander to the most selfish and cynical of their constituents.

It is my opinion that there is not enough of this kind of work being done by institutions like this one around the region. It is a sad commentary on our so-called enlightened society when the inane and preposterous opinions expressed on talk radion and on some TV shows appear to have more acceptance among much of the body politic than thoughtful voices of reason. We must do more to make those voices heard.

I have been particularly impressed with the impact of the Seminar for Southern Legislators, which Ferrel Guillory and Bill Whichard have been conducting. The legislators who have participated tell me it is the best thing of that kind that they have ever done.

What we also need is a better understanding of what it is in the South that we must be intent on preserving – of what is valuable and irreplaceable and what sets us apart in the right kind of way. It is important that we maintain an appreciation for the institutions and people that have shaped our lives and given us our values and our virtues. For it is only through what Eudora Welty has called a "sense of place" that we are able to establish our identity as to who we are and what we stand for. But at the same time we must not succumb to the tendency to indulge in a nostalgic remembering of a romantic past that never was.

Some of you I am sure have heard the story that is supposed to have come out of Holly Springs, Mississippi some thirty years after the Civil War. A visitor from New York City was sitting on the front porch of one of the imposing old antebellum mansions that grace that little town. His hostess was one of the grand old ladies of the community and the keeper of the Confederate flame. A marvelously bright full moon beamed down through the magnolias on an idyllic June evening. The New York guest commented to his Southern hostess on how beautiful the moon was.

"Oh," she said, "but you should have seen it before the war."

This over-romanticizing of our history is a pitfall which those of us who would be faithful to that history must avoid. We saw this tendency in the controversy over the Confederate flag in my state last year, where we almost fought another civil war over a symbol that meant different things to different people. Thus our state flag became a divisive emblem rather than a unifying one. It is one thing to be informed by history. It is another thing to be consumed by it.

Miss Welty in the introduction to One Time-One Place, the great volume of photographs of places that she had known, tells why she started writing stories:

But away off one day up in Tishomingo County, I knew this anyway: that my wish, indeed my continuing passion, would be not to point the finger in judgment but to part a curtain, that invisible shadow that falls between people, the veil of indifference to each other's presence, each other's wonder, each other's human plight.

This sensitivity to the needs and feelings of our neighbors has been one of the region's most enduring qualities. It is a part of our heritage which must not be lost, and now it must include all of our neighbors, not just the ones who look like us.

And why can't this region that has produced some of the world's greatest literature and music and art let those contributions be the elements that people first think about when they think about the South – not our propensity for confrontation and violence?

Why can't we do what Flannery O'Connor only half jestingly suggested, and let culture be our money-crop?

And why can't the education of all of our people in the best possible way be our number one priority now – and in the future?

And why can't the South now at long last use more of its rich resources of human and physical capital to make the investments that will create a higher standard of living for more of our people and ensure that nobody gets left out?

None of this means that the South need give up its distinctiveness. What it will mean on the contrary is that the South can finally put behind it the elements that were its worst characteristics and now bring to the fore the civic and cultural qualities that ought to be its strengths. That would be a great advance not only for the South but for the nation.

All of us in this room today, whether we acknowledge it or not, are here because of the impact that great thinkers and teachers and public leaders have had on our lives. I know that is true in my own life. It was my good fortune to have been taught as an undergraduate at Ole Miss by an alumnus of this university. His name was Jim Silver, the author of The Closed Society.



He helped liberate me from that society. That process of liberation from prejudice and ignorance must continue.

To provide the leadership and inspiration to do that must be the commitment of this Center. That will not be easy to do. In the face of so much change and so many tantalizing choices it gets harder and harder to know what the right course is. But the models are there, molded and shaped by the intellectual forces in universities like this one. It must be in leadership centers like this that we find the ways to overcome the blunders and tragedies that so often marked our past. We must get more of our fellow Southerners to join us in this quest.

If Frank Graham were with us today, I think he might have repeated what I heard him say in the fall of 1950 on the floor of the United States Senate in his farewell speech at the end of his too-brief tenure in that body. He had been appointed by Governor Kerr Scott to fill a vacancy and had been narrowly defeated in the ensuing election as a result of a bitter racist campaign that had been waged against him.

I was a young aide to Senator John Stennis of Mississippi at that time and happened to be in the Senate Chamber when Senator Graham made his address. I have never forgotten his words that day. This is a part of what he said:

In this America of our struggles and our hopes, the least of these our brethren has the freedom to struggle for freedom; where the answer to error is not terror, the respect for the past is not reaction and the hope of the future is not revolution; where the integrity of simple people is beyond price and the daily toil of millions is above pomp and power; where the majority is without tyranny, and the minority without fear, and all people have hope.

Let us make those words be our guide in the South of this new century.