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Source: *The Georgia Review*, FALL - 1947, Vol. 1, No. 3 (FALL - 1947), pp. 272-279

Published by: Georgia Review

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41394773>

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A More Perfect Union

By RAYMOND MOLEY

THE first fifteen words of the Constitution of the United States: "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union," were the best and most enduring words of the wisest men of their time. They may well be the wisest words to guide us in all our future. I shall not labor these words with legalistic interpretations, for they mean exactly what any layman reads in them.

A more perfect union is one in which the various states are not trying to run one another's business. Nothing so hinders the efforts of the progressive citizens of some Southern states to elect good men as does the misguided and misbegotten interference of people in the editorial offices in New York. Some Southern demagogues are made in the North. I do not want to assume that no differences exist among the states, when everybody knows they do exist. But I would like to make it clear that I am one Northerner who is not trying to tell Southern states what to do.

Our need for a more perfect union was never so great. This country has accepted vast responsibilities abroad, and those responsibilities carry with them huge commitments in money and goods. We are a strong nation, but we shall have to be increasingly strong or we shall fail. World stability in these days needs immense efforts, and sometimes it seems as if we should have to do the job all alone. Hence, we must look to our own sources of strength and our own symptoms of weakness.

We can better take stock of ourselves by looking at the pages of recorded history. Arnold Toynbee, in his great work *A Study of History*, analyzes the forces which produce the breakdown and disintegration of civilizations. Nations are not destroyed by attacks from without. They can survive wars, even wars that they lose. They die from within—from poverty and confusion, from the lack of creative thought, and from the lack of unified political faith.

I shall leave such matters as social unity, racial unity, and economic unity to others more qualified to discuss them when I consider "a more

NOTE: The author of this paper first deliberately put together his ideas on "a more perfect union" in preparing a speech he recently made at Agnes Scott College. This paper is in a way of speaking a re-statement of that speech.

perfect Union." I am interested in government and in the life blood of government—which is called politics. What are the signs of the times in that field? What is happening, and what needs to happen in our political union? What is its state of health, and what is needed to provide it with ever-increasing vitality?

The great upset of the Democratic party in Congress in the elections of 1946 did not mean a return to reaction and the end of humanitarianism in government. Throughout the country there was no sentiment against the great movement of the past fifteen years toward making the government serve human objectives. There was, however, a widely held belief that there must be efficiency as well as good intentions in government—a head as well as a heart in public office—and that concrete practical achievement as well as good intentions should be the purpose of government.

The people believe this country is too big to be run by remote control from Washington, that Federal encroachment on the rights and functions of the states should be stopped.

But to insure greater national unity, we must consider first our Constitutional system of vital states and our powerful national government; and, second, our party system, which so deeply affects what our government does to and for all of us.

For more than a century the South has revealed to the rest of the country a basic lesson in government. And the rest of the country seems to have been unable to understand it. That lesson is that the United States is too big for a centralized government and that the states are too small to accommodate an expanding economy and culture.

The great growth of problems which cross state lines has revealed to a greater and greater extent that the more perfect union created by our Constitution had one almost fatal defect, a defect we have been trying to cure for more than a century. The Constitution made ample provision for a strong but limited central government. It provided for vital and self-sufficient states. But it failed to recognize that between the central government and the states is a realm in which great regions with common problems need the means for interstate cooperation. If the makers of our Constitution had provided some political machinery for regional cooperation among states, we might have avoided many of the failures of our past. We might have avoided the greatest tragedy of all, the war that began in 1861. The drawing of a simple choice between a state's right to secede and the preservation of the Union was rationally artificial.

Those who found no middle ground between the Union and the state were singularly devoid of statesmanship. The issues which precipitated conflict were regional and should have been attacked on a regional basis. The failure of rational statesmanship in the decades before 1860 opened the way to extremists. And the vice of radicals is that they create artificial, over-simplified alternatives. An association of those states in which slavery existed might well have found a way to peaceful adjustments.

Howard Odum, one of the notable intellectual leaders of the South, points up in his book, *The Way of the South*, a plea for regionalism. "The way to train youth," he says, ". . . and to guarantee security and reality for the new generation, to raise standards of living and insure equal opportunity and security, is to develop regional capacities and programs and to work out interregional optima rather than drain some regions to the benefit of others or concentrate abnormal situations subversive to the development of a great unified nation."

Some adjustments have been found in the past for regional problems. Seven thirsty states, for instance, found a way to share the Colorado River.

For several years national governors' conferences have been held, at which the means for common consideration of common problems were found. Out of those governors' conferences have grown regional conferences of states to work out the problems which lie between the nation and the states.

Conferences of the governors of the Northern, Eastern, Far-Western, South-Eastern, Mid-Western and Rocky Mountain states have been held. These meetings have developed valuable methods of meeting regional problems and have considered a means of providing greater elasticity to our Federal structure.

Ultimately, there should be a Constitutional recognition of regionalism. This could be done without weakening the Federal union and would provide helpful means of strengthening the integrity of the states. But a Constitutional change is not imminent. We must meanwhile conserve as best we can the powers of the states and promote informal ways of cooperation.

We have learned some sound lessons in the past fourteen years. We have learned that there is a point at which the growth of Federal power ends in frustration, confusion and incompetence—that what Washington wants to do, however earnestly, is not what Washington really does. We have found that the progressive weakening of our

states by Federal invasion has actually operated as a denial of the help and protection which the citizen should expect from his government.

There are many states in this country whose sources of revenue have been so drained by the Federal government that they are unable to pay their teachers and other indispensable civil servants a decent living wage. And hundreds of local private institutions, including schools, colleges and hospitals, have found the going harder and harder because the pockets of private donors have been thoroughly ransacked by the Secretary of the Treasury.

Much of the national revolt against the Democratic party, which began in 1938 and culminated last fall, was due to a reassertion of our faith in states' rights. The best proof is the immense majorities given to such competent governors as Dewey in New York, Warren in California, Bricker in Ohio, Baldwin in Connecticut, and others. These men were not given successive votes of confidence because of their political theories, their personal charm, or the color of their suspenders. They were supported because they administered the affairs of state governments with honesty and efficiency. State affairs, such as the keeping up of insane asylums, highways and prisons, are prosaic but indispensable. They are matters that need close attention, and they are not proper subjects for a national bureaucracy. Perhaps the states may enlarge their usefulness and grow in power and public respect, for they are the vitals of our civilization.

Regionalism should rest on the realities of present-day social, political, and economic life, not on historical antagonisms or obsolete differences. As President McKinley said in his first inaugural, in 1897: "The North and the South are no longer divided on the old lines, but upon principles and policies; and in this fact surely every lover of the country can find cause for true felicitation."

Those words were intended to seal and file away the record of a generation of misunderstanding and conflict. They were uttered thirty-six years after the inauguration of Lincoln. A child who was born when McKinley was inaugurated is now past fifty. Among those who were born when Lincoln was inaugurated, the few survivors are now four score and six.

The change noted by President McKinley in the factors that once differentiated the North and the South is many times more pronounced today than it was when he spoke. We are on the verge of a very rapid obliteration of the economic differences between Georgia and Iowa or

between Louisiana and Illinois. Industrial growth in the South is obvious to everyone. More striking still is the tremendous range of new farm machines in the South, from mechanical cotton pickers to tiny tractors.

The effect of a revolution in agriculture on the politics of this country has been and will be enormous. The first effect, twenty-odd years ago, of power-driven farm machinery was a trend toward larger farms. That was because the first machines were large and costly. Now the one-family farm can get small and cheap machines to do what the earlier big machines did. Great political significance will flow from the creation of more individual property owners, more capitalists and small businesses. This is a fulfillment of Jefferson's recipe for democracy, which pointed out that the safest custodian of political liberty is the small farmer, with a property stake in stable government. This man was, Jefferson, the salt of the democratic earth.

With the mechanical means of making a good life on a personally owned farm, the vanishing individualist will once more take form and substance. The most spectacular result will come gradually and will relate especially to the South. Except in the delta, the cotton land east of the Mississippi has been declining in fertility. For this and many other reasons, there has been a big drift of Negroes and whites to coast cities and to the North. The decline of cotton has introduced more diversified farming. The South is finding it profitable to grow much the same products as the North and West. Thus, the nation is losing its sectional differences.

The introduction of small, cheap machinery will greatly accelerate this trend. It is a trend toward national unity. It is a trend away from party divisions based on economic differences. Farmers in Iowa and Georgia will have more and more common problems. This trend, together with the scattering of the Negro population throughout the nation, may ultimately break up the political situation which has created the Solid South.

Broad political patterns are written in such developments. Wise people will lift their eyes from current unrests and see the larger facts of the future. Political adjustments invariably follow economic change, and, in the course of time, the development of more industrial and agricultural likenesses between the South and North will alter our system of political parties. Ultimately, we shall see the growth of two truly national parties throughout all states, North and South.

For our party system is not bound by Constitutional straight-jackets.

Our political parties are informal, mostly extra-legal associations of citizens. They connect the legislative and executive branches of the government; they supply cohesion between the states and the national government. They provide the means by which the scattered people across a great continent may develop unity in fundamental *political faith*; they help us to maintain a political creed which distinguishes us in a confused world. This party unity is voluntary and needs no legal compulsion. It can change with the times and can march in the rhythm of progress.

There is health in the clash of parties. Competition between them makes for better government. They offer the corrective influence of watchfulness. They supply the tonic of criticism. They keep alive democratic channels of free expression—a free press. Their debates offer an invigorating education in citizenship. They can, if they still will, offer to individuals and groups, too deeply immersed in self-interest, significant lessons in idealism. There is safety in two parties. In some countries abroad we have seen that the supreme rule of a single party has led to the supremacy within that party of a small group of leaders, and that such a concentration of power has occasionally led to dictatorship and totalitarianism.

Northerners should appreciate that the South has for its state and local affairs a workable and rational substitute for a two-party system. Its primary contests give the states and the nation distinguished leadership. But the nation needs the unified force of a two-party system in national decisions and at national elections. The price which the North should pay for this unity is to recognize that the complex problems of racial differences are matters for the states to determine. They certainly are not matters for remote control and for interference by zealots in New York editorial offices who have never seen the South. They are not matters for coercive national legislation.

I can well realize that members of Congress who are under heavy pressures from minorities in their states and districts might vote for legislation which is a clear violation of states' rights. Until the North has either produced statesmen who can resist such pressure or has educated its minorities in the ways of a higher unity, a single party system is inevitable in the South. But it should be the mission of reasonable people, North and South, to resist the tyranny of minorities and to teach the necessity of more and more unity in the great objectives of our common nation.

To be perfectly specific, the condition under which all states, in-

cluding the South, can develop a strong two-party system is that the determination of suffrage requirements, restrictions on employment and the setting of social standards of equality should be strictly and permanently left to the states. The great majority of the states of the union must recognize and respect those rights of the states.

In return for this assurance, there will be as a natural consequence the development of a genuine party of opposition in the South. The fact that such an opposition to the national Democratic party exists is shown in every significant roll call in Congress. There were two dominant domestic issues before Congress in 1947: first, equality of bargaining power between management and labor and, second, the reduction of national expenditures and the trimming down of our Federal bureaucracy. These two objectives cannot be attained by the Republican party alone. They are being carried out by a coalition of like-minded Senators and Representatives from all the states, North, South, East and West. There is no sectionalism in this.

The views of many New Yorkers on national affairs have been more clearly represented by Senators George and Russell than by their Senators, Wagner and Mead. Connecticut's junior Senator, Baldwin, stands shoulder-to-shoulder with Georgia's great Senator George on practically every vital issue, foreign and domestic. We must find the means by which this unity of purpose in each of two great parties may be registered in national elections. The election of Presidents should follow the division in interest and principle which is reflected in the deliberate votes in Congress.

Healthy parties, based on genuine divisions of interest, are essential to a healthy nation. Our national Executive should represent not a fraction of one half of the electoral vote, but a genuine majority of the whole electoral vote. The impediments to such a choice should be removed. Otherwise, we shall drift into a simple majority selection by all electors, which no thinking person wants. For such a reliance upon mass votes would soon trample upon and destroy the last vestige of states' rights.

We shall contribute most toward world unity if we have a more perfect union at home. For a long stretch of centuries ahead we shall be a great force in the world. We can use that force as force has been used in the past—in imperial designs, in exploitation, and in vain glory. Or we can use it to give to the world some more practical means of international cooperation. We can use it to promote an international tolerance in which all forms of economic life can exist side by side.

We can use it to raise progressively the horizons of life for all people everywhere.

This we can do if we have proved *at home* our faith in tolerance, in mutual trust, in subduing science to the ways of peace. For the life span of our nation depends on what is within us. Our inner integrity, moreover, must be more than material strength. I am a little impatient with those voices we are hearing who say that America, through strength alone, can save the world. We have brought into being power beyond all past power. What remains is to find intelligence beyond all past intelligence, vision beyond all past vision. Our character must grow with our strength.