



U.S. Senator Frank Porter Graham toured Wake County, including Fuquay-Varina, on June 17, 1950 during his bitter re-election campaign against Willis Smith, who won in the second primary. President of

the University of North Carolina for many years, Graham is considered the single most important symbol of progressivism in North Carolina.

Forces of Paradox

A Profile of North Carolina

by Bill Finger

On February 22, 1978, *The New York Times* ran a front-page story entitled, "North Carolina's Leaders Worried by Blemishes on the State's Image." The article summarized recent events that had cast the state in its most negative national image in this century: the Joan Little trial, the J.P. Stevens textile campaign, the Wilmington 10 and Charlotte 3 cases,

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the University of North Carolina desegregation controversy, and the state's death row population and incarceration rate. Covering both sides of the story, the *Times* piece included subsections labeled "Reappraisals Rejected by Liberals" and "Fly Specks On A (White) Table Cloth," quoting Terry Sanford's folksy rejection of these events as aberrations. But the thrust of the story was that North Carolina could no longer be viewed as an enlightened Southern state.

V.O. Key had dubbed North Carolina a "progressive plutocracy" in his classic state-by-state study, *Southern Politics* (1948). This assessment became a yardstick for the next generation of journalists and academics. "Many see in North Carolina a closer approximation to national norms," wrote Key. "It enjoys a reputation for progressive outlook and action in many phases of life, especially industrial development, education, and race relations."

Today, these three arenas of life—industrial development, education, and race relations—remain at the top of the concerns of many North Carolinians. Ironically, though, lack of progress in these three has been chiefly responsible for the declining image of the state.

In 1975, journalist Jack Bass and pollster Walter DeVries undertook an update of the Key study. The Rockefeller Foundation funded Bass and DeVries, just as it had funded Key in 1948. The methodology followed Key's, interviews primarily with politicians

and emphasis on economic and political changes. But their project led to opposite conclusions. In their *Transformation of Southern Politics*, Bass and DeVries ended the North Carolina chapter like this: "When one compares indices of economic development, the level of participation and modernization of the political process, the relative neglect of long-standing social problems, the controlling oligarchy's perpetuation of 'no-growth-if-it-hurts-us,' two decades of a congressional delegation among the most conservative in the South, and the emergence of race as a significant political issue, what remains is a political plutocracy that lives with a progressive myth."

How far down does the Bass and DeVries conclusion bring North Carolina? And how far ahead of the rest of the South had Key placed the state? Why was North Carolina perceived for so long as the enlightened buffer between the backward South and the rest of the nation? And why does it now hover near the bottom in many measurements of progress such as average wage (50th), infant mortality (47th), per capita population in prison (44th), and per capita spending on public school education (41st)?

In recent years, North Carolinians have taken to debating about the state, often in a "blemishes" vs. "I love it here" framework. Editorialists, politicians, and

U.S. Senator John F. Kennedy and Governor Luther Hodges at a Democratic fund-raising dinner in Washington, D.C. January 23, 1960.



Photo courtesy of N.C. State Archives

citizens have rallied behind North Carolina, both defensively and with an open mind, with a deeply rooted love for their state. Most of those who believe the *New York Times* assessment is correct often defend North Carolina on other issues. And many of the state's resident critics still cherish it as a place to live. This fervor people feel about North Carolina seems to nourish the debate, to supply the energy North Carolinians expend to ponder over the opportunities to change their state even while relishing the attributes that keep them here. This process of reflection involves more than banter at a Saturday night cocktail party or at family discussions at Sunday dinner. It's thoughtful, serious stuff—carried on no less fervently by the average man or woman on the street than by politicians, scholars, and journalists—and it does make a difference in the lifestyle Tar Heels have made for themselves.

Attitudinal surveys have found that North Carolinians like where they live as well, if not better than, persons in any other state.* In a research project in progress in Roanoke Rapids, worker after worker, whether for or against the union, from a black or a white tradition, is saying, "I like it here." Pro-South sociologists like John Shelton Reed contend that intangibles—climate, natural resources, a closeness to the land, vacation opportunities, clean air, small-town friendships, and family networks—soften the impact of economic indicators, resulting in such sentiments as the Roanoke Rapids workers are expressing. Other pro-South voices, like the quarterly *Southern Exposure*, view these intangibles as a tradition which makes grappling with the social indicators, racial controversies, and union battles more possible, more hopeful perhaps, than for the rest of the country.

People on both sides in the "blemishes" vs. the "I love it here" debate rarely overcome clichés to address the fundamental forces at work in this paradoxical state. Writers and scholars who examine the region, regardless of approach or emphasis, by definition place the South rather than North Carolina at the center of concentric circles of analysis. When statistical profiles of the state are attempted, such as the Bass-DeVries project, investigators tend to concentrate on electoral politics, one of the more visible and easily measurable sides of life. But often less than a third of the state's eligible voters go to the polls, a critical fact that limits the scope of the conclusions from such research designs.

An examination of the state from a somewhat different perspective—in a multidisciplinary, holistic fashion—might add another dimension to these studies and might fuel an even more intensive debate among North Carolinians interested not only in the past but also in the future of their state.

**A landmark study for such measurements is the 1968 Comparative State Elections Project. Undertaken by the Institute for Research in Social Science at UNC-Chapel Hill, it surveyed the attitudes of 7,600 people across the country and targeted 13 states for public opinion polls. In North Carolina, 82.3 percent of the respondents felt they lived in the best state. This rate was higher than any of the 13 states and easily topped the national sample (62.6 percent). For an overview of the quality of life literature, see Tom Murray's article.*



Photo by Karen Tam, Raleigh News and Observer

Ben Chavis, chief spokesman for the Wilmington 10, addressing supporters at a Raleigh dinner.