

Progressivism in Decline

A Former UNC Chancellor Reacts to the "Forces of Paradox"

In the process of preparing this issue of N.C. Insight, many students of North Carolina were contacted. A number of persons assisted in conceptualization of themes and in article critiques; others responded with formal articles. The response below from Dr. James S. Ferguson came not as a formal submission but rather as a personal letter, handwritten in a brief sitting. Dr. Ferguson's background and experiences, no doubt, enabled him to address in a spontaneous style some of the most perplexing "forces of paradox."

A native Mississippian, Dr. Ferguson did his academic work at Millsaps College (in Jackson, Mississippi), Louisiana State University, Yale University, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, where he received his Ph.D. in history in 1953. He taught history at Millsaps from 1944 to 1962 and served as Dean of the Millsaps Faculty (1954-62). In 1962, he became Dean of the Graduate School at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and from 1966 to 1979 served as Chancellor there. Last summer, Dr. Ferguson returned to teaching and is now a member of the history faculty at UNC—Greensboro.

Dear Bill,

Thank you for sending me a copy of your article, "The Forces of Paradox." I found it very interesting and thought provoking, although I take issue with it mildly in a few places (especially where my own ox—the University—is gored).

First of all, North Carolina's progressive image was somewhat misleading even when V.O. Key presented it. The late Francis B. Simkins, one of the South's leading historians, believed that publicists had misread the meaning of the influence of Frank Graham and his associates in North Carolina. At best, he said, Graham's liberalism represented a thin veneer and his nonconformity was tolerated mostly on the basis of personal respect and warm friendship. "It was realized," said Simkins, "that a disarming generosity rather than a rational understanding had made him

into a radical, and that despite his utterances he was a member of an old family with friends among the rich and politically powerful."

In 1950, however, when Texas oil, anti-New Dealism, and the Black Belt (disturbed over Truman's Civil Rights Commission and Graham's role on it) were striking for control of the government, basically conservative North Carolinians were not willing to return their beloved senator to Washington. North Carolina was fitting into Southern (and national) political trends at that time. (Claude Pepper was also fired in Florida.)

The so-called "educational renaissance" in North Carolina, 1890-1910 (when Aycock, Joyner, *et al* expanded the public schools) was also based in part on fictions, especially if one looks at the May, 1980 issue of the *Journal of Southern History* (see article by Kousser). The schools were improved but very inequitably, and racism asserted itself in school policies as surely as in the Wilmington riots of 1900, etc. At no time (even in the 1950s and 1960s) did North Carolina lead the South in socio-economic indicators. It was and remains basically a poor, low-income state.

Yet, even after one recognizes that North Carolina's "progressive image" was exaggerated and somewhat distorted, it was true that in the 1950s and 1960s the state was different from most other Southern states—markedly different from the Deep South where you and I lived, different enough to eschew massive resistance with its horrible violence and regressiveness. Can we forget Emmett Till, Medgar Evers, the three civil rights workers murdered and buried at Philadelphia, and dozens of other brutalities? After all, Charlotte, Greensboro, and Winston-Salem adopted "token integration" without court action, and North Carolina never attempted to use the Pearsall Plan (while aristocratic Virginia lent its respectability to massive resistance and a six-year closing of the public schools in Prince Edward County). True, extensive desegregation didn't come until the Mecklenburg busing decisions, but even then North Carolinians did not react with violence (as did Boston, for instance, in progressive Massachusetts?). The opponents of desegregation did not attempt to

exterminate those with whom they disagreed as had been true in the massive resistance states. I know of *no instance* in which economic pressure has been used in North Carolina to suppress dissent (although I cannot speak with authority on anti-union activities).

North Carolina has had greater diversity geographically and demographically (ethnically) than other southern states and this fact has contributed to some degree, I believe, to greater tolerance of dissent than prevails in most of the South. And, yes, Dr. Frank Graham, Willis D. Weatherford, Will Alexander, Paul Green and a host of others (Irving Carlisle, a Winston-Salem lawyer, was not appointed U.S. Senator in 1954 because he believed in the "law of the land") showed some understanding of a progressive society. You are quite correct in your assessment of the way Luther Hodges and Terry Sanford gave those ideas a modified expression.

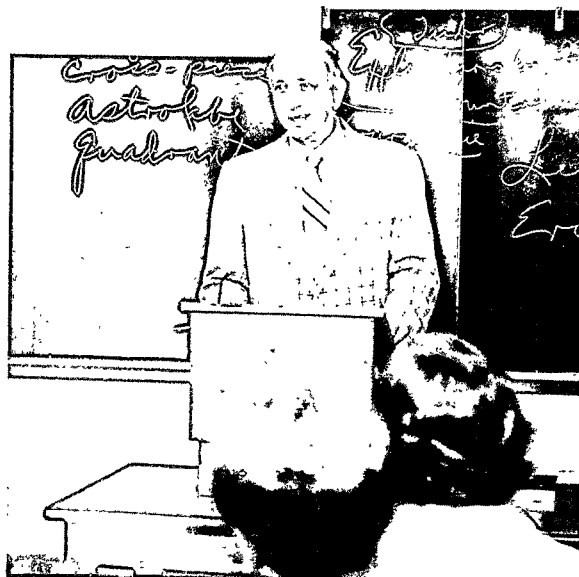
That progressivism has declined in North Carolina in the 1970s is unquestionably true, and I do not begin to understand all the reasons for that. Of course, there has been a similar development in the nation as a whole. North Carolina may have fallen heir to the image of being the home of the Klan (although we know that Klansmen are few in number and seem not to have respectability), but diverse California even nominated a Klansman for congress. To repeat, though, the state's image is blemished, and in your article you cite valid illustrations of the blemishes.

I must say a little something about "my gored ox," the University. In the first place, you seem to accept the report on differences in plants at the state schools as publicized by Mary Berry during her famous three-day swing through North Carolina. Allocations of buildings and equipment are of course made

Dr. Ferguson addressing a meeting of the UNC at Greensboro Board of Trustees.



Photos by Bob Cavin, courtesy of UNC-G News Bureau



Dr. Ferguson doing what he loves best, teaching history.

according to size and missions of the various universities. It would be easy to demonstrate the superiority of A&T's plant to ours in many programs. Of course, I am not saying that an equalization construction program was not in order, but I am saying that the differentials in plant are not as gross as depicted by the HEW.

A more fundamental question on this matter is: "What is progressive?" The policy of the Office of Education (or HEW) leads not to desegregation but to resegregation, the maintenance of the black schools as black schools—and possibly to a forced discontinuance of programs that have been proven to be effective for blacks as well as whites. The discontinuance of UNC-G's School of Nursing (which has a black enrollment above 10 percent—indeed our overall black enrollment is above 10 percent) would take away from those people the opportunity to secure quality nursing education as surely as it would deprive our white students of such education without any assurance that the displaced people would move into favored programs in the predominantly black schools. The confusion of leaders as to the goals of "dismantling the dual systems" underscores the questions: "What is progressive in such a situation?" "What is in the interest of a desegregated society?"

You are very much on target with regard to the vetoing of the Labor Institute.

I repeat, your article is a good one. My comments are not intended to provide any modification of it. I thoroughly enjoyed reading it. I look forward to seeing you sometime before long.

Best wishes,
Jim Ferguson