



N.C. Gov. James Hunt (L) and former U.S. Sen. Robert Morgan.

Photo courtesy of Raleigh News and Observer

# *“A Load Not Easy To Be Borne”* ***The Politics of Tobacco*** ***in North Carolina***

*by Ferrel Guillory*

**I**n the politics of tobacco, North Carolina is the Atlas of states. Of the tobacco-growing states, none is more powerful than North Carolina. However, as the mythological Atlas was condemned to hold on his back “the cruel strength of the crushing world,” so Tar Heel politicians are fated with the burden of protecting the people who grow and sell the controversial golden leaf. It is, as the Greek poet Hesiod wrote of Atlas’ task, “a load not easy to be borne.”

Tobacco’s political base is not nearly as strong as it was a decade ago. The scientific evidence

connecting cigarette smoking to lung cancer and heart disease makes defending tobacco more difficult for a politician, and the influence of anti-smoking forces has increased. At the same time, Congress is less dominated by veteran, powerful Southerners sympathetic to tobacco-growing.

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And we intend to keep it king.”*

*Gov. James Hunt  
campaigning for re-election, 1980.*

In response to anti-smoking pressures, North Carolina politicians are groping for new strategies, shifting the tone and emphasis of their arguments in defense of tobacco. For example, they contend less frequently that the link between cigarette smoking and disease has not been proven conclusively. “We have absolutely withdrawn from that fight of defending cigarette smoking,” says Congressman Walter Jones (D-N.C.), member of the Tobacco and Peanut Subcommittee of the U.S. House Agriculture Committee. At the national and at the state level, North Carolina’s politicians are in a transition.

In Washington, they are focusing their attention more exclusively on the price support system, defending it as a social program which can preserve the family farm and rural culture. “I no more want to tie my defense of tobacco farmers to health than a Detroit automobile manufacturer wants to tie his defense of automobiles to emission controls or accidents,” former U.S. Senator Robert Morgan (D-N.C.) said in a May, 1980, speech. “If there are those who want to drive a knife into the heart of one of the last islands of traditional rural life and threaten numerous rural communities, then cut out this program.”

In Raleigh, Governor James B. Hunt has sought expanded industrialization in rural areas, and state Agriculture Commissioner James A. Graham has promoted agricultural diversification. Both strategies suggest a recognition that tobacco may not always dominate North Carolina as it has in the past. But if politicians have come to such a realization, they do not admit it publicly. “In this state, tobacco is still king,” said Hunt in May of 1980. “And we intend to keep it king.”

Tobacco-state officials retain some important political advantages. Tobacco remains a legal crop, with no serious attempt being mounted to alter that situation. Further, the tobacco price support

system is the only commodity program with a permanent authorization in federal law. Strategically, this puts tobacco-state congressmen in a stronger legislative position than corn- or wheat-state congressmen who must appeal regularly for a renewal of the government programs vital to their constituents. Tobacco-state representatives have to do nothing in order for the leaf program to continue except defend it against challenges.

Within the state, politicians have another kind of advantage by remaining pro-tobacco. Nearly 300,000 North Carolinians are employed in producing and marketing tobacco and making cigarettes. Joseph W. Grimsley, N.C. Secretary of Administration and former campaign manager for Gov. Hunt, calculates that 40 percent of the Democratic Party vote in the state is east of a line from Durham to Fayetteville, the region most heavily dependent on tobacco production.

Pro-tobacco politicians may have an easier time at the polls in state races, and North Carolina’s congressmen may be able to sustain the government’s tobacco program. But even working together, they cannot control all the forces affecting demand for their state’s major cash crop. Some congressmen concede that the pro-tobacco position, in five or 10 years, could suffer some losses. If fewer people smoke, particularly teenagers who may be influenced by federal anti-smoking efforts, cigarette sales will decline. At the same time, “low-tar” cigarettes, which contain less tobacco than “full-flavor” brands, are gaining a far larger share of the market than in the past. Moreover, high-quality foreign tobacco costing half as much to produce as American leaf may create stiff competition in traditional export markets. All these factors combined could significantly reduce tobacco production in North Carolina.

Should demand for North Carolina tobacco decrease dramatically, profound economic and

social changes in the state would follow. However, precious little political leadership is being exercised to prepare North Carolinians for that eventuality. Politicians simply do not perceive the political climate conducive to a frank discussion of a future with less dependence on tobacco.

### Shifting Alignments in Washington

North Carolina's congressmen have in effect abandoned the health issue to the cigarette industry lobbyists, letting the industry fight administrative and regulatory actions such as the Department of Health and Human Services anti-smoking campaign and the Federal Trade Commission limits on cigarette advertising. By focusing on federal legislation, such as the federal cigarette tax and the farm support program, the state's delegates in Washington are exercising their power where they have the most leverage.

"The tobacco area congressmen as such perhaps had a greater impact back in the days when Harold Cooley was chairman of the [House] Agriculture Committee," says U.S. Rep. Charles Whitley (D-N.C.). Even so, North Carolina members of Congress, as well as those from other tobacco states, still hold key committee positions helpful in defending tobacco. Whitley, Jones, and Congressman Charles G. Rose (D-N.C.) sit on the House Agriculture Committee. Rose chairs the Tobacco and Peanut Subcommittee, where he can make tradeoffs with congressmen from other states. In the Senate, Sen. Jesse Helms (R-N.C.) is the chairman of the Agriculture Committee.

From this base, North Carolina congressmen can build broader coalitions as a part of their new strategy for backing tobacco. As a senatorial aide put it, "The politics of tobacco is really the politics of a coalition of agricultural interests." At the conclusion of a pro-tobacco speech on the Senate floor in 1980, then Sen. Morgan seemed to be speaking to a broader group of potential allies than tobacco spokesmen have in the past. If the tobacco program is gutted, Morgan warned, "Watch chaos enter into an otherwise stable and tranquil area. Watch the number of family farms decline even more."

Sticking together has become a more visible strategy in recent years. In 1977, for example, the House of Representatives, by a 229-178 vote, made tobacco ineligible for export under the Food for Peace program. The defeat stunned tobacco-state congressmen. Sponsored by a little-known Colorado Republican, the bill showed that Congress, without a vigorous counter-effort by tobacco defenders, was willing to strip away some government-endowed advantages for tobacco. The Food for Peace program, which historically had included tobacco along with foodstuffs, was a vulnerable target in Washington because of the celebrated anti-smoking campaign of Health, Education, and Welfare Secretary Joseph Califano.

The Senate eventually restored tobacco as a legal part of the Food for Peace program, largely because of the efforts of the late Sen. Hubert H. Humphrey of Minnesota, who supported the tobacco program out of loyalty to farm support systems. Even with Humphrey's intervention,



Former President Carter on his visit to Wilson, N.C., in 1978 From left: Insurance Commissioner John Ingram, Carter, Attorney General Rufus Edmisten, and Secretary of State Thad Eure.

Photo courtesy of Raleigh News and Observer

there were 37 votes in the 100-member Senate against tobacco.

Later in the 1977 session, legislation to phase out the tobacco price support program was deflected when tobacco-state congressmen let it be known they would vote against a sugar support program if sugar-state congressmen did not back tobacco. And in another effort to broaden political support for tobacco, seven North Carolina congressmen voted in 1978 for federal loan guarantees for New York City. "That was our tobacco swap," Rose said later. "We'll try to help New York if New York will help the tobacco area."

As a general strategy, North Carolina congressmen seek to keep tobacco-related legislation off the House and Senate floors, for fear that a bill involving tobacco will provide anti-smoking forces an opportunity to try to change the government's policy toward the commodity. As 1981 approached, when other commodity programs were due for renewal, there was discussion in Washington over whether to have a section in the Omnibus Farm Bill make some changes in the price support system, particularly to help with export sales. A similar issue arose in 1977 and provided an illustration of the political influence of the North Carolina Farm Bureau Federation. At that time, farm organizations from every other tobacco-growing state backed some alterations in the price supports, but as a result of the lone opposition of the North Carolina organization, the idea of tobacco legislation was scuttled.

While the farm support program occupies the principal attention of the congressional delegation, recent efforts to increase the federal cigarette tax, which has remained at eight cents per pack for about 25 years, have also caused some concern. But in the new spirit of cooperation, tobacco-state congressmen show a begrudging tolerance for the possibility of a modest increase. "A slight increase in tobacco taxes might be hard to defeat," said Jones. "I'm not accepting it, but I don't think a slight increase will cause any great havoc in the retail market."

### "It's Perceived As A Sensitive Subject"

While the state's congressmen in Washington have the primary responsibility of maintaining the farm support program, the Raleigh-based political leadership has a more narrow responsibility: to promote the concerns of tobacco farmers and cigarette manufacturing already in place in the state. But such a task is getting more difficult than it was in the past. "Basically, you have to fight a delaying action," says Grimsley, the Hunt cabinet member. "In time tobacco will be a much smaller economic factor. That's why we have to get industrial jobs in the east."

Publicly, state officials have not yet admitted the possibility that the tobacco economy could be in a decline. Hunt has not linked his search for new industry with a threatened tobacco economy, and Agriculture Commissioner Graham has not described crop diversification as an alternative to tobacco. Instead, North Carolina officials have fought the most visible and easily accepted battles.

For a while, HEW Secretary Califano was an easy target for Tar Heel officials to score points with their constituents. Hunt and Morgan met with President Carter about Califano's anti-smoking campaign, and later Carter agreed to come to Wilson, N.C., where he reaffirmed his support for the tobacco program. But at the same time, Carter permitted an expanded anti-smoking campaign to proceed. And when Califano left the cabinet, state officials not only were left without their bete noire, they also faced the reality of a changing tobacco world.

Recently, state officials have begun to confront at least some immediate threats to tobacco. In June, 1980, for example, before the annual gathering of the Flue-Cured Tobacco Cooperative Stabilization Corporation, Hunt gave a pro-tobacco political speech, but he also issued a sober warning. He told the farmers that unless they moderated their use of the chemical MH, which controls tobacco suckers, Germany, one of North Carolina's largest foreign tobacco markets, might not buy North Carolina tobacco. Stabilization has since initiated a program to monitor excessive

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#### Preparing for curing.

Photo courtesy of N.C. State University



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MH residues, a step that might help retain the lucrative German market.

While some hard talk on tobacco seems more possible than in the past, a tentative political freedom seems to be emerging as well. There is still no room in North Carolina politics for waffling on the price support program, but, says Grimsley, "you can talk about it [smoking] as a youth education program." Governor Hunt reportedly told Califano that he would encounter no problems from North Carolina on his program of public health education on smoking.

State leaders have so far limited their public discussions of tobacco's problems to meeting short-term emergencies like the MH issue or to accepting unpopular federal programs like the anti-smoking campaign. Without shouting about it, however, the Hunt administration apparently understands that industrialization could be needed to pick up the economic slack left by a possible tobacco decline — if not immediately, then in the next generation. And Graham seems to understand that tobacco is going through some profound changes as well.

"In 20 years, 10 years, there's definitely going to be some change," explained Graham in a lengthy interview, which he opened by offering his visitor a gold tobacco leaf lapel pin. "Smokers' tastes are different. This new generation coming on, I'm not sure what they'll be. . . . I don't stand up for tobacco because it will help me politically. I stand up for tobacco because I think it's right. . . . I'm not against tobacco, but tobacco has to make some adjustments."

Then, inadvertently, puffing on a cigar, Graham illustrated the quandary in which North Carolina politicians find themselves. He pointed to pictures of his grandchildren on the shelf behind his desk. "When your own grandchildren, when that pretty young thing up there asks you about smoking — Bam!" The back of his hand slashed quickly across his desk, signaling how vigorously he would rebuke a youngster wanting to smoke. Even though they know intellectually that the future of tobacco

depends heavily on a new generation of smokers, Graham, as well as many other North Carolina politicians, would discourage a teenager from smoking.

Finally Graham turned his attention to the political evolution in his home state. New attitudes are accompanying new industry, he said. With Hunt, who grew up on a farm, as governor, Graham said, there remains a strong advocate for tobacco and other agriculture programs. But beyond 1984, Graham speculated, "that's when you're going to see a turn, a whole new outlook on how this state is ruled. We are definitely moving out of an agrarian society into a mixture."

By seeking out new industry, Hunt is stimulating this evolution, which ultimately should diminish further tobacco's importance in the North Carolina economy. Hunt continues to advocate the cause of tobacco growing and manufacturing in the state, but, without publicly articulating it, he is in effect attempting to expand an industrial base that may one day provide an alternative to the economics of tobacco. In that sense, a politician is trying to control events with a bearing on the future of this tobacco-oriented state.

But as they approach the issue of tobacco's future, North Carolina politicians are not so much exercising leadership as they are being controlled by circumstances. By refusing to address frankly tobacco's possible demise, they risk losing the opportunity to regain control over events that will affect the lives of every North Carolinian. If tobacco farming is going to decline, political leaders have a responsibility to address the dilemma head-on — to find ways of preserving rural traditions, to stimulate more intensive research on tobacco as a source of nutrients rather than nicotine, to seek alternatives, and to explore options before the future arrives.

"It's perceived as a sensitive subject," says an aide to a North Carolinian in Congress. "Your average politician thinks in the short term. We're talking about long term." And all the while, Atlas' burden is getting heavier. □