



APPALACHIAN REGIONAL COMMISSION

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Ms. Carol Rasco
Assistant To The President For Domestic Policy
The White House
Washington, DC 20220

Dear Carol:

Thank you for taking time for our meeting yesterday concerning the Appalachian Regional Commission (ARC). I hope you find the information and material useful and that you will feel free to contact me if you would like additional information.

Also, I hope you will find the Governors' resolution of value. To a person the Governors believe that the ARC has been vital in bringing economic development to the Region. The partnership structure gives them a key voice on matters of policy, and the regional approach provides previously neglected rural areas with the kind of attention and access to information and resources which usually are available only to urban areas. Clearly the lessons we have learned can be of enormous benefit to the Lower Mississippi Delta. We stand ready to assist in any way we can.

On a related matter I enclose a copy of the Epilogue from a recent book on the Mississippi Delta by James C. Cobb. I meant to leave it with you during our meeting. I have not read the entire book, but the Epilogue mentions both the Lower Mississippi Delta Development Commission and the Appalachian Regional Commission. I thought you might find it interesting.

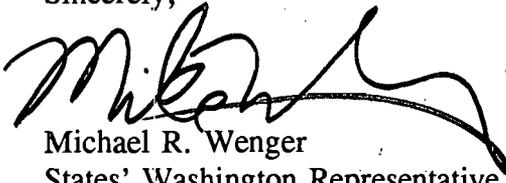
Finally, I want to make you aware of the Annual Conference of the Development District Association of Appalachia, which brings together approximately 450 local, elected officials from throughout the 13-state region. It will be held on March 14-16 at the Crystal Gateway Marriott Hotel in Arlington, Virginia (near National Airport).

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This conference is a perfect opportunity for the Administration to speak directly with the people most responsible for economic development in Appalachia. If you would like to take advantage of this opportunity, please let me know and I will make the appropriate arrangements.

Again, thank you for your time, and I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,



Michael R. Wenger
States' Washington Representative

Enclosures

— T · H · E —
**MOST SOUTHERN
PLACE ON EARTH**

The Mississippi Delta and the Roots of Regional Identity



JAMES C. COBB

- ▽ Epilogue:
- ▽ An American Region
- ▽

The Delta's capacity to provide a literary as well as a musical window on American society at large should come as no surprise. Despite its image as an isolated, self-sustaining, ultra-southern anachronism, many of the Yazoo-Mississippi Delta's primary identifying qualities, especially the enduring contrasts in lifestyles and living conditions that it presents, are less a reflection of its Old South beginnings than a postbellum experience characterized by more than a century of consistent and close interaction with the pervasive influences of the modern American economic and political system.

As the 1990s began, the relationship between conditions in the Delta and the economic and political climate in the nation at large was more obvious than ever. Nicholas Lemann observed in 1991 that Clarksdale whites saw the town's black community as "a welfare colony floating on a tide of federal transfer payments, sapped of the will to work." As had been the case almost continuously since the New Deal Era, however, by no means all the Delta's recipients of public subsidies were black. A white developer of low-income housing conceded as much when he observed that "if you took away the farmer's government subsidy payment, the welfare, and the unemployment check, this whole place would blow away."¹

Despite congressionally imposed limits of fifty thousand dollars per person in annual subsidy payments, Delta planters still sought on occasion to collect massive amounts of federal money. In August 1990 the *New York Times* reported on the case of Richard Flowers and his partner, who reportedly oversaw a fourteen-thousand-acre planting operation in the Delta and managed, through a sophisticated organizational scheme that involved thirty-seven interlocking corporations and fifty-one trusts, to claim eligibility for \$1.3 million in federal payments. Even plantations whose subsidies did not exceed the fifty-thousand-dollar limit seemed to be thriving. Consolidation and a virtual corporate invasion—among others, the Stovall plantation, where J. W. Fowler fumed about his losses to the Yankees and Muddy Waters once ran a jook joint, was now operated by the Prudential Corporation—put the size of the average

cotton farm in Coahoma County at approximately two thousand acres, while rising cotton prices promised profits in the neighborhood of \$100 per acre.²

The Delta's ties to Washington went well beyond farm subsidies and welfare checks. Tony Dunbar observed "an overriding fact of life in the Delta" when he noted that "there is very little that is not touched by the federal government. What to plant, when to plant it, where to plant, whom to hire, how to house farm workers, how to finance the farm, not to mention public welfare, the schools, and local government itself are all strongly influenced by the federal government."³

Economic-development leaders had hoped for years to stimulate local industries and businesses in order to reduce the Delta's dependence on outside capital and federal programs, but such efforts met with relatively little success. Many of those concerned about the economic problems of the region had expressed high hopes for the catfish industry, which by 1990 employed approximately six thousand workers in Mississippi, many of them in the Delta area. Catfish processing did indeed seem to be the long-sought "home-grown" industry that had eluded the Delta for so long, but the events of 1990 indicated that the catfish was unlikely to become the symbol of the Delta's economic salvation. The predominantly black work force at the Delta's several catfish-processing plants had encountered stiff resistance and considerable harassment as they pushed for union representation in 1986. The primary motivation for unionization was the desire for better wages and working conditions, but changes in these areas came slowly, so slowly that workers at the Delta Pride plant at Indianola went out on strike in September 1990. "It's a hellhole," charged one striking worker who was making \$4.02 per hour after three years with the company. "It stays nasty. . . . All day long they're harassing you, treating you like animals. They're right in your face with a stopwatch." Some workers complained of standing in blood and fish intestines for hours on end. Others told of having to get permission from a supervisor before going to the bathroom and of male supervisors following females into the toilets. Rumors persisted that white male supervisors had sought sexual favors from female workers in exchange for better jobs or wages.⁴

Assessing the situation at Delta Pride, a local black leader concluded that "the only thing that's changed from the plantation is the crop. . . . Instead of cotton, it's catfish." An Indianola minister agreed, accusing Delta Pride of following "the plantation approach, which assumes that labor is disposable." Certainly, for workers paid on a piecework basis, the parallels between picking cotton at three dollars per hundred and filleting fish at three dollars per fifty-pound tub were obvious enough. Moreover, following the example of local planters, who once relied on commodities and food stamps to subsidize their workers, at Delta Pride (where the average annual wage was more than forty-four hundred dollars below the minimum poverty-level income for a single parent with three children) the personnel department assisted employees in applying for welfare.⁵

The Delta Pride strike also seemed to evoke memories of the ill-fated 1965 cotton-choppers' strike on the Andrews Plantation. Certainly the workers were confronting similar disadvantages in terms of their low skill levels and the abundance of underemployed labor in the area. In reality, however, the Delta Pride strike had less to do with the persistence of the plantation mentality among Delta whites than with the sobering realities of employment in any slow-growth, low-wage, low-skill industry not only in the South but anywhere in the nation in the 1990s. With the market for catfish showing signs of saturation, the quest for continuing profits entailed a redoubled emphasis on worker productivity in conjunction with stubborn resistance to significant wage increases. The Delta's distinctive economic and cultural context may have strengthened management's hand and stiffened its resolve during the three-month strike, but the fundamental disadvantages confronting workers at Delta Pride could actually be found throughout a manufacturing sector beset by slow growth, global competition, automation, and industrial migration to cheaper labor markets. (The strikers were exultant after finally winning modest wage concessions from Delta Pride in December 1990, but the settlement came amid reports of lagging sales and warnings of lower prices at the pond bank for catfish producers.) The Delta's susceptibility to such national and global economic trends became even more apparent in August 1991 when the Schwinn Bicycle Company, considered one of the area's most progressive and generous employers, shocked state and local development leaders by suddenly announcing that the ongoing recession had forced it to shut down its Greenville plant and rely more heavily on its Taiwanese manufacturing facility.⁶

The relationship between the fortunes of the Delta and the political and fiscal climate in the nation at large was also evident in the saga of the Lower Mississippi Development Commission. Created by Congress in October 1988, ostensibly to recommend solutions to the woeful economic and social problems that prevailed throughout the lower Mississippi area, the nine-member commission spent eighteen months compiling data for a report on the needs of the region. Although the area's difficulties were already well publicized, the commission's findings nonetheless revealed human suffering and institutional deficiencies of staggering proportions. The poorest of the 214 counties in the study area was Tunica, where nearly 53 percent of the population lived below the poverty line, while Humphreys County, where twenty-nine of every one thousand babies died before their first birthday, had the area's highest infant mortality rate. Overall, eleven of the fifteen counties with the highest frequency of infant deaths lay wholly or partly within the Yazoo Delta, and all of these had higher infant death rates than Chile or Malaysia.⁷

Meanwhile, overwhelming evidence of hard-core unemployment, severe educational deficiencies, and the utter absence of local capital or entrepreneurial expertise left little cause for optimism. Commission member Webb Franklin, a former Republican congressman from the Delta, predicted that the region would benefit from the migration of "smokestack industries" from the North,

but consistent indications of "redlining" of areas with large black populations by many firms suggested that Franklin might be unrealistic in his expectations. Beyond questions of race was the matter of the geographically isolated, educationally and institutionally underdeveloped Delta's fundamental unattractiveness as a potential location for business or industry. One observer concluded that "people on Wall Street see more attractive investments in Venezuela than in the Mississippi Delta."⁸

Conditions such as these seemed to call for drastic measures, such as a massive neo-New Deal recovery program along the lines of the Appalachian Regional Commission. Whereas the ARC had been launched in the relatively supportive social and political context of 1965, however, the mood of the Congress and the White House was dramatically different in 1990. Bowing to the social and fiscal conservatism that gripped official Washington, commission members took pains to characterize their recommendations, in the words of Delta congressman Mike Espy, as "politically possible and not terribly expensive." As Espy's remarks implied, the commission's report, which appeared on the same day as a presidential-congressional summit conference aimed at reducing the massive federal budget deficit, emphasized local, state, and regional self-help initiatives as the primary remedy for the Delta's woes. Such recommendations appeared to fly in the face of the commission's own findings relative to the Delta's massive human and material deficiencies, but a White House official praised the group for submitting a "good solid report" that "doesn't take the approach of looking for the federal government to heal all the ills in this area." Even the minimal commitment the report requested from Washington was too much, however, for the Bush administration, which sought to project a "caring attitude" without actually "endorsing" the report or its recommendations.⁹

As had been the case historically, a reluctance to commit federal funds to relieve human suffering in the Delta did not necessarily reflect a consistent commitment to frugality in other government programs or initiatives. As the commission began to release its findings, Congress debated the number of B-2 bombers to purchase at \$500 million apiece, and the estimated \$250 billion savings and loan bailout moved into high gear. Shortly after the report appeared, the United States undertook a massively expensive commitment of troops and equipment to the defense of United States interests in the Persian Gulf.¹⁰

Although Congress and the White House had little time and less money to devote to the problems of the region, Tony Dunbar observed that "an optimism flows through the black communities of the Delta that is completely at odds with economic reality." Similarly, Nicholas Lemann found that among Clarksdale blacks "nearly everyone has the feeling of being on a communal upward trajectory," adding that "the transition from a plantation economy to a welfare economy doesn't look like such a bad trade from the black perspective." Lemann's fascinating account of the experiences of black migrants who fled the Delta for Chicago in the 1940s and came back in the 1970s and 1980s

chronicled the remarkable odyssey of a people who had abandoned one promised land for another only to return to the first. Upon resettling in the Delta, these migrants found it much improved and generally more to their liking than a Chicago whose onetime allure had long since succumbed to a choking tangle of economic stagnation and social pathology. Ironically, however, returnees also found that many of the problems they hoped to leave behind in Chicago were already awaiting them in the Delta. The spray-painted symbols of Chicago gangs marked poorer neighborhoods in the larger towns of the region. Meanwhile, gang-related violence was becoming distressingly commonplace, as were broad-daylight muggings on the days when social security and welfare checks arrived. Cocaine circulated freely, and even residents of smaller towns complained of an influx of drug dealers. "We caught it from Chicago; the hard stuff is here," complained one Leland resident. Having fled its oppression and suffering to pursue a better life in the urban North, returning migrants found a changed Delta far more hospitable than the one they had left. Unfortunately, however, the same Delta whose barriers to black advancement had once made the promise of full participation in American life seem so remote could now offer little protection from the perils of such participation, including the contagion of social deterioration that seemed to be spreading outward so rapidly from what had once been the great land of hope just up the I.C. line.¹¹

Traditional wisdom has long held that isolation from the major currents of the American political and socioeconomic mainstream was primarily responsible for the human and material extremes that were the key to the Delta's image as a region. Typically, this "isolation" theory has also been offered to explain the Delta's enduring southernness, although by the 1990s one also heard it in conjunction with the designation of the Delta as an American "Third World," a region that had somehow been bypassed by the progressive economic, social, and political forces that seemed to have had such a positive impact on American society at large. In reality, however, many of the human and material extremes that were the keys to the Delta's identity either as the "South's South" or "America's Ethiopia" were shaped not by its isolation but by pervasive global and national economic influences and consistent interaction with a federal government whose policies often confirmed the Delta's inequities and reinforced its anachronistic social and political order as well.

Recent statistical trends pointing to rapidly widening gaps in income and opportunity throughout the United States suggest that the economic and social polarization that is synonymous with the Mississippi Delta may be observed wherever and whenever the pursuit of wealth, pleasure, and power overwhelms the ideals of equality, justice, and compassion and reduces the American Dream to a self-indulgent fantasy. As socioeconomic disparity and indifference to human suffering become increasingly prominent features of American life, it seems reasonable to inquire whether the same economic, political, and emotional forces that helped to forge and sustain the Delta's image as the South writ small may one day transform an entire nation into the Delta writ large.