

February 26, 1959

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Dear Ralph:

I was truly interested in your letter of the twenty-third. I agree with your observations about the Southern Senatorial group, except that I place Olin Johnston, Thurmond and Eastland in a special group. These three, it seems to me, reflect a viewpoint that is not only extreme but rigid. They seem so entrenched in their prejudices and racial antagonisms that they never show so much as a glimmer of a readiness to see the other side of the problem.

I was particularly interested by your evaluation of Senator Talmadge. With the equipment he has, it would be a pity if he allows it to be dissipated by a too great anxiety to be "right" -- to pick the expression out of your letter.

It occurs to me that, in these times, there are great opportunities for our abler Southern Senators and Congressmen to rise to real heights of statesmanship. With the party machine normally in pretty good order and confronted by no active, virile and growing opposition party, most of them can be fairly well assured of re-nominations and therefore need not worry too much about their political careers. Many people consider that Holland, Stennis, Fulbright and Talmadge have real ability. If they should choose to use that ability with the single thought of promoting the national good, as their own study of the facts might reveal the nation's good, they could become outstanding figures on the national scene, and in history.

At least four others of the so-called Southern group are committed to partisan political ambitions, beyond redemption.

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For the two Virginia Senators I have a very great liking, and, in many ways, great respect. I think their attitudes toward race are far more flexible than are those of some of the others, even though they have felt forced to take leadership in intransigence. While they sometimes put revenues above obvious national need, it is such a great relief, these days, to find conservatives in spending that I cannot fault them seriously in this particular regard.

Political developments have given to the Democrats a great majority in both the Senate and the House. I rather suspect that for the political leadership in these two Houses this is not an unmixed blessing because the Democrat Party is not, by any stretch of the imagination, unified insofar as adherence to common economic convictions and political aims makes a party. The Northern and Southern Democrats have a marriage of convenience and though there is a great deal of family fighting and even, in the election years, talk of a divorce, the matter goes no further than that when the prize of committee chairmanships remains so glittering and tempting.

As you know, the reason that I so earnestly support moderation in the race question is because I believe two things. The first of these is that until America has achieved reality in the concept of individual dignity and equality before the law, we will not have become completely worthy of our limitless opportunities. The second thing is that I believe that coercive law is, by itself, powerless to bring about complete compliance with its own terms when in any extensive region the great mass of public opinion is in bitter opposition. This generalization was true under the carpet-bagging government of the South, under the Prohibition Amendment and the Volstead Act, and it is still largely true within the four states you name in the deep South.

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But this second fact does not excuse us from using every kind of legitimate influence to bring about enlightenment through education, persuasion, leadership and, indeed, example. Of course, we cannot overlook the need for law, where law is clearly necessary and useful. Stated in another way, neither government -- at any level -- nor we, as individuals, can neglect our clear responsibilities and duties if we are to progress steadily, even if slowly, toward realization of what we like to call the American dream.

The legislative program I have placed before the Congress is a modest, but I believe, effective, one. Its enactment should be accomplished quickly. One of the finest results that I would anticipate would be a wider acceptance of the philosophy of progress through moderation. This might inspire extremists on both sides to gravitate a bit more toward the center line, which is the only path along which progress in great human affairs can be achieved.

This letter is long but, as you see, your communication found me in much the same mood as you apparently were.

With warm regard,

Sincerely,



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