

Alabama Getaway: The Political Imaginary and the Heart of Dixie

Allen Tullos

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The “Heart of Dixie” is what Alabamians like to call their home state, but the realities behind this image, as the author demonstrates, reveal a place flawed by minimal support of public services, an abusive penal system, disregard for the environment, and regressive taxes. The author, a son of Alabama himself, offers an impassioned (some readers will say biased) account of how the ghosts of slavery, the “Lost Cause,” and Governor George Wallace haunt the state and inflame its inequalities.

At times Tullos calls Alabama the “sez-you” state, for its stubbornness to respond to modernization. An illuminating chapter on over-crowded prisons, which have historically emphasized punishment over rehabilitation, concludes that because Alabama ranks last among all states in spending per prisoner, and provides so many incompetent public defenders, inmates have little hope for turning their lives around.

As in all states, the buck stops with its chief executive, and Alabama’s governors, following in the footsteps of George Wallace, receive the author’s harsh scrutiny. These “oafs of office” pander to voters by attacking affirmative action, feminists, gays, welfare cheaters, and “tree-huggers.” Governor Fob James, who reinstated the chain gang for prisoners, blatantly avoided appointing women and minorities to government positions; Governor Guy Hunt was removed from office for campaign fraud; and Governor Don Siegelman was convicted of bribery and extortion.

The author praises black Alabamians for fighting the reality and image of the “Heart of Dixie” by advocating economic equality, anti-poverty programs, childcare, fair housing, health care, and progressive taxes. Although change has been too slow, African-Americans have experienced a degree of success in those endeavors and will likely see additional improvements as more blacks are elected to the state and local governments. Not all African-Americans are praised, however. In a poignant chapter, Condoleeza Rice, Alabama’s most powerful woman who rose from a comfortable childhood in Birmingham to become Secretary of State under President George W. Bush, is challenged for turning away from the Jim Crow and civil rights movement legacies of her native state.

Tullos teaches American Studies at Emory University and has written *Habits of Industry: White Culture and the Transformation of the Carolina Piedmont*, edited *Long Journey Home: Folklife in the South*, and is senior editor of the online journal, *Southern Spaces*. Here he provides a compelling view of Alabama’s challenges, and possibly a blueprint for meeting them. Informed readers of politics and Southern culture will be engrossed, and some likely infuriated.

KARL HELICHER (March / April 2011)

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