

In January 2007, the Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center sponsored a symposium on the Robert G. Clark era in Mississippi politics. The following notes are from a memorandum filed for the use of Margaret Walker Alexander National Research Center and the Mississippi Humanities Council, which supported the symposium.

The Robert G. Clark Symposium  
A Commentary by Matthew Holden, Jr.\*

The Robert G. Clark Symposium was conducted with a public audience, a panel of scholars with papers in the usual scholarly format, and the presence of Representative Clark himself, who made certain comments at the end.

Ms. Cora Norman outlined the role of the Mississippi Humanities Council and the process and hopes for this forum.

Dr. Emmanuel Abston discussed the identification of public sources of information, the role of an advisory group, and the use of taped interviews that would reveal both the public *persona* and the private dimensions of career.

Dr. Abston paid particular note to the role of Rep. Robert G. Clark as his own campaign manager in 1967, the strategy that allowed him to cross racial lines, and his early support Buddie Newman at critical point which had, in turn, significant effects for his own legislative career. Dr. Abston also discussed the Clark files and archives and made reference to the Will Campbell book on Representative Clark.

Professor James Sheffield analyzed in considerable, and highly professional, detail from the point of view of an empirical political scientist some of the factors that make a difference between now and forty years ago. The key factor upon which Professor Sheffield focus was "what paved the way?"

Professor Sheffield thus touched upon the following.

- (1) James Meredith's struggle for admission to the University of Mississippi, the admission itself, and the riot that occurred in Oxford in response to that action.
- (2) The assassination of Medgar Evers in 1963 and the "freedom elections" which, though unofficial, produced so dramatic an outpouring of support as to demonstrate conclusively the interest of African Americans, where the argument had been made in some quarters that there was no such interest.
- (3) The "long hot summer" of 1964 which had as its components :

- a. One thousand organizers,
- b. The murders in Neshoba County of Chaney, Schwerner, and Goodman,
- c. The creation of the Mississippi Freedom Democratic Party, the challenge at the Democratic National Convention, and the televised public recognition of Fannie Lou Hamer,
- d. The passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, and
- e. Violence across the state.

(4) The adoption of the Voting Rights Act of 1965.

(5) James Meredith's "march against fear," the attempt on his life and the completion of the march with the pulling into the state of the major national civil rights leadership and the assembly at Greenwood which produced the debates from which the symbol of "Black Power!" resonated. Part of the same atmosphere was the Connor v. Johnson law suit which arose from the fact that there had been no reapportionment since 1890.

(6) In 1967 there were several African American candidates for the State Legislature, of which but one (Robert G. Clark) was elected.

The context for this was that the law suit was decided, the Civil Rights Act had come into existence and "outlawed arbitrary voting districts," and the Voting Rights Act had suspended literacy tests, outlawed poll tax requirements, and established preclearance to prevent other actions that would negate black voting.

Sheffield pointed out the big consequence. In 1964 6.7% of blacks of voting age registered. Three years later 59% registered. In 1980 72.8% registered. Sheffield touched briefly on Clark as a legislator, noting that in his third term he was chairman of the education committee.

Professor Charles Vincent presented a further, and more extended, historical account going back to the post-Civil War reconstruction period. He relied, in part, on Vernon Wharton, The Negro in Mississippi as a high quality historical study. Vincent cited, from that study, Blanche K. Bruce, John R. Lynch, and Hiram Revels. Not so successful in their state political careers were A. K. Davis, the lieutenant governor, and Thomas W. Cardozo, the Superintendent of Education.

Vincent further referred to the "so-called revolution of 1875", to the C. Vann Woodward thesis that "the Mississippi Way" became "the American Way," and cited Sidney . Redmond in 1930, that Mississippi was "dogged hell and smells like cheese."

Among the factors that Professor Vincent stressed was the effect of World War I which took rural African American men out of the atmosphere of the South, and the still greater effect of World War II. Professor Vincent also drew on his own experience, as a student at Jackson State University, and accentuated his concern to get from his place of employment to the emotionally more secure environment of the university.

Professor Mary D. Coleman presented a complex paper entitled "The Public Life of Robert Clark" in which she discussed (1) the family effect, (2) raised issues of the status and roles of African American women, (3) Clark's place among the 25,000 mulatto landowners, (3) fear of integration, (4) the ways through public policy has taken place and (5) an extensive discussion of the 19<sup>th</sup> Amendment ratified in which she provocatively raised questions about Rep. Clark's role. (As observer, I understood her to express dissatisfaction that Clark was not more dramatically in support of this Amendment.)\*\*

Professor Coleman also discussed, sympathetically, various challenges faced by Robert G. Clark, including "cash flow" challenges (upon which she did not further comment as to their pertinence to his legislative and political record) and his ability to compromise "just enough." This was one of the important themes in Professor Coleman's paper. She spoke of Clark's ability to form coalitions with persons whom the African American community would hold in disdain, but to do so on terms of respect. Clark "outlasted . . . and at times outsmarted . . . adversaries." As a politician he made friends with other political figures whom many blacks abhorred.

Coleman's paper touched on progress in education between 1969-2000, Alexander v. Holmes, and the status of private academies. This extensive paper also touched on issues of non-voting, of redistricting, and of the issues of creative African American politicians. As noted before Professor Coleman rather stringently discussed the Equal Rights Amendment in relation to Rep. Clark.

### Further Work That Might be Considered

#### A. Refinement of the uses of the work as it now is

The presentations each contain their own richness, and any one of them could lead in detail to critique and to new lines of work. It is, however, new work to advance scholarship and public understanding that is the most important.

The Sheffield and Vincent papers together help to define what the world was

when Clark was first elected. Sheffield raises this when he asks "what paved the way?" The same question of what paved the way is again present, though not in those words, in the equally interesting historical, and personally informed, presentation of Professor Charles Vincent. In view of the fact that half the population of the United States is probably under 35 (and thus born at least five years after Clark was first elected.) This should be useful, properly adapted, for K-12 teachers and their students now. (Imagine, as well, its usefulness for business groups, civic groups, etc. that have some interest in dealing with, or need to deal with, the Mississippi political environment.

### B. Questions of Refining Scholarship

Ideas about "history," not knowledge of history, are often particularly influential. This might mean that scholars should have new support, and be encouraged, to work carefully through what has been taken for granted. I illustrate by reference to Vincent's reliance on Wharton 19<sup>th</sup> century black political figures. Vincent has no choice unless he is going to do original research. But Wharton's methods and evidence should themselves be subject to new testing.

Apart from this, the papers on Clark should lead to new inquiries, with a further theoretical cast, on how change occurs. This should take account of legal-institutional forms, of which Sheffield in particular offers some excellent starting points. It should also take account of social and cultural forms, of which Vincent implicitly takes account in his reference to African American veterans, and of which the civil rights movement is a world-known manifestation.

There is also need for informed study of the dynamic pattern between resistance and change (almost taking Thucydides, History of the Peloponnesian War as a model). The election of Robert G. Clark was at a certain point in a many years' status struggle, between white dominance and black resistance to being dominated.

This also implies, for a political scientist at any rate, a cool study of the present forms of communication and exchange. It is obvious that the very language people choose, and the objectives they are willing to endorse belong in such an inquiry. There appear to be those persons to whom any mention of "race" is excessive, and one can measure their presence by the letters-to-the editor. Others choose to speak in terms of "racial reconciliation," though this language is more likely to be used by white persons than by black persons. Still others

prefer to speak of some form of fellowship "one person at a time," while avoiding other language.

### C. More Specific Clark-Related Matter

There are still some other matters that a political scientist would note. In this symposium, there was no good way to make use of the fact that Representative Clark himself was sitting in the room, despite his opportunity for brief closing remarks.

The nature of the constraints of the legislative process when Representative Clark entered needs to be considered further. There has been, for instance, no discussion of the particularly concentrated system of power in the Mississippi House of Representatives at the time that Clark entered. It was concentrated in the way that power was concentrated in the U. S. House of Representatives before the revolt against Speaker Cannon in 1910.

There could be some fruitful study of how this worked in the Mississippi House of Representatives once a challenged Speaker found an essential (marginal) vote in the form of support from Rep. Clark. The generalizable issue is how a legislator learns in his/her circumstance.

Since Rep. Clark was not merely a person, but African American, the nature of the relationship of Representative Clark, not merely as a person, but as a member of a subordinated group, to other persons in the subordinated group as they enter the same legislative process bears the most careful study.

I conclude merely touching on the following points, any one of which would be material for a symposium:

- (1) The legislative process and the administrative process, since the actual allocation of goods and services (as is shown in the recent controversy about the Department of Health) takes place chiefly through the administrative process.
- (2) Lessons for new politicians and for citizenship, or what should people in general and not merely the office-seeker or officeholder learn and be ready to do in order to have genuine representation?
- (3) What aren the implications for the new Mississippi polity, with two parties, of one of which is predominantly white, in the absence of more effective trans-racial communication at the interest group level. This should be faced as scholars explore the question of an emergent bi-party and bi-racial politics.

