Atlanta: Smart Politics And Good Race Relations

DOUGLASS CATER

ONE CHILLY MORNING in early January this year, a group of Negro ministers of Atlanta convened at the Wheat Street Baptist Church and set out to break through the segregation barriers on the city busses. Press accounts of the episode seemed to indicate a grim repetition of the story that has been told in Montgomery, Birmingham, Tallahassee, and elsewhere in the Deep South. The Reverend William Holmes Borders, who led the ministers, had exhorted his group to practice complete pacificism while occupying the forbidden forward seats. There would be no striking back if struck, no cursing if cursed. "If they put us in jail, we'll go. If they kill us, we'll die," Mr. Borders declared. In the state capitol a few blocks away, Governor Marvin Griffin ominously ordered the state militia on "alert." Next day, there were the anticipated arrests, and *Life* magazine duly carried the photograph of the Negro ministers behind bars in the county jail.

Despite the press stereotypes, the Atlanta story had subtle shadings that made it a bit different from other instances of massive resistance in the Deep South. Behind the public posturing a more significant drama was being enacted that escaped the notice of most critics. In Atlanta, unlike Montgomery and Birmingham and Tallahassee, the bus challenge did not signal an abrupt and irrevocable break in the circuits of communication between Negro and white communities. It had come only after the most intimate consultation between the Negro leaders and city and transit-company officials. No one in these consultations doubted that a legal test of the bus-segregation law in Georgia, already invalidated elsewhere, was inevitable. Mayor William Hartsfield, a veteran of twenty years in office, hoped devoutly it could be postponed until after the May elections, in which he would again be a candidate. The Negro leaders argued that their own leadership problems forbade further delay. The head of the privately owned transit system voiced his primary concern that his company not be whipsawed between the state law and a Negro boycott.

THERE WAS considerable gamesmanship on both sides. Having been forewarned as to the time and place of the incident, the driver promptly declared the chosen bus "out of commission," let anyone get off who wanted to, and then conducted the ministers on a nonstop tour through the city streets. A cavalcade of press and television cars trailed out behind the bus. After a time, the ministers rang the bell and climbed off, insisting on leaving by the forward door. The only sharp words reported that morning were exchanged between white spectators and some overzealous press photographers.

Next day there were further consultations, the city officials being reluctant to make arrests and the Negro ministers stubbornly demanding to be arrested. More argument arose over whether a patrol wagon had to be sent for the ministers or whether they should come to the station under their own power. Finally the police chief consented to dispatch a patrol wagon in the charge of a Negro detective. The ministers were booked and bonded within a two-hour period. There were bars on the detention room, but nobody closed the door.

Afterwards both sides sought to allay the feelings of those who might be overly wrought up. The Rev. Mr. Borders, emphasizing the orderly nature of the Negro plans, announced: "We've accomplished our objective. The fight will be in the courts henceforth and we won't attempt to ride the busses integrated again until it is settled." Mayor Hartsfield, urging restraint in terms that had dollars-and-cents meaning, told a gathering of white civic leaders: "If Atlanta loses control of peaceful race relationships we are gone. It is of special importance to downtown businessmen to maintain decent race relations and avoid violence. If our transportation system goes to pot, you haven't got a town."

Indeed, the angriest person in the whole affair was the rabidly segregationist attorney general of the state, Eugene Cook, who has the task of prosecuting the ministers for violating a state law. Cook, it is reported, privately expressed outrage to the city officials for having wittingly set up a court test of the segregation statute instead of arresting the Negroes on trumped-up charges of disturbing the peace. So far he has failed to bring the case to trial. The Negroes are now trying to get a declaratory judgment from the courts.

'The Beauty of Atlanta . . .'

The episode, in the view of a good many Atlantans, was typical of their city. "It represents not so much the facing of an issue in a do-or-die fashion as the avoidance of a conflict that could not be resolved by public controversy," Harold Fleming, a native Atlantan who is head of the biracial Southern Regional Council, remarked to me. "Nearly always in Atlanta it's the manipulative adjustment of interests rather than the head-on clash. Just recently we concluded a hot election for the school board in which the Negro member was re-elected by a tremendous majority. No one brought up the Supreme Court school decision, despite the continual harangue against it from the woolhat boys at the capitol. Neither candidate for mayor mentioned the race issue. A Negro candidate for alderman made a good showing against a seasoned white opponent. This may not seem

like much, but compared to a lot that is happening in the Deep South these days it's progress."

T. M. Alexander, the unsuccessful Negro candidate for alderman, made a similar point: "Atlanta Negroes want to see signs of progress, but we are not trying to ram it down the white man's throat. We think it can be negotiated. The beauty of Atlanta is that there is a liaison between the Negro and the better class of the white community."

It was impressive how often this theme of negotiation was voiced by the community leaders I interviewed during a recent visit to Atlanta—impressive because in many parts of the South one hears angry denial that there is anything left to negotiate. In this sprawling metropolis, there have so far been few overt steps toward desegregation. But the Negro here has been achieving a degree of political and economic integration into the community life as important as court-dictated integration. Contrary to those who, despairingly or hopefully, cling to the myth of a monolithic South, there is abundant evidence that Atlanta, though an island in a state violently committed to preservation of the old order, is already a city in transition.

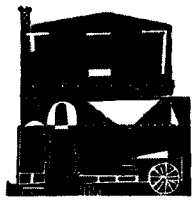
Atlanta's Mayor Hartsfield

There are some who say you can chart the course of the city by its mayor. When William Hartsfield, a spry man of sixty-seven who rather resembles Harry Truman in bearing and manner, first ran for office in 1937, the Negro vote was a trivial thing, publicly spurned by realistic candidates. This spring, more than twenty-one thousand Negroes voted in the city primary, in nearly the same ratio to their total population as the whites. A precinct-by-precint analysis revealed that although Hartsfield carried most of the upper-middle-class white neighborhoods, he would have been defeated except for his overwhelming majority among the Negroes.

During the last two decades it has been noted that Hartsfield, an Atlantan of rather humble origins who taught himself law, has developed a corresponding interest in Negro problems. His friends insist that there is nothing cynical about it. "With the mayor it may have been somewhat political at first," George Goodwin, a First National Bank vice-president, remarked. "But somewhere along the way he developed a keen pride in what he has been able to do for Atlanta's race relations. He likes to boast that while he has been mayor, nobody from Atlanta has ever had to be ashamed of his home town."

Whatever his convictions, Mayor Hartsfield has shown the skill of a consummate politician in dealing with the explosive situations that come along. A year and a half ago, faced with a court order to desegregate the municipal golf courses, he arranged to time its public release three days before Christmas, when the city was too full of brotherly love to get involved in a race riot. To forestall any rebellions among the golf-course employees, he called them into secret session and faced them with the alternatives: comply or close up. If the courses were closed, he reminded them, they would be out of jobs. To a man, the employees voted for compliance. Thus forearmed, the mayor announced the courses would be desegregated the next day.

During the night, obscenities were scrawled in yellow paint on the benches and pavilions at some of the courses. Hartsfield had crews out before dawn painting out every last trace. So swift and surreptitious were his counterintelligence operations that word of this particular bit of provocation never reached the newspapers.



On the fateful morning, television crews assembled at Atlanta's Bobby Jones course to get some shots of the Negroes who had initiated the court action finally teeing off. The cameramen were out of luck. Hartsfield, apprehensive over the wide advance publicity given to the event, had persuaded the Negroes to choose another course. "They told me they had promised the television people they would appear," he remarked recently. "I said, 'Those TV boys aren't interested in watching you hit the ball. They want to get pictures of you getting beat up!'"

The barriers went down without an incident. Some time later, Governor Griffin announced to a public gathering that if he had been handed the court order to desegregate golf courses, he would have "plowed them up next morning and planted alfalfa and corn." Hartsfield, by then able to point to his success in keeping open recreation facilities used by seventy thousand white golfers, retorted drily, "Next year will be a political year and any person dissatisfied can offer for city office." The issue has not been raised since.

According to his close associates, the mayor devotes to the task of preserving his city's tranquillity all the tender affection and loving care that the average man bestows on his family. He has time for little else. When outraged Georgia Tech students marched on the governor's mansion year before last to protest Griffin's attempt to prevent their team from playing in a nonsegregated Sugar Bowl game, they found the mayor calmly surveying the situation from the sidelines. "Some damn fool had called in the county police," he told me recently. "They don't know the first thing about how to handle those kids the way my police force does. I was scared stiff something would touch off a riot."

A sociable fellow, Hartsfield invited me along on one of his nocturnal drives in his police prowl car, a lonely ritual for keeping contact with the city after hours. We drove through the streets till midnight, noting improvements and projects under construction and listening to the police calls on the radio. It was a quiet evening. "You should hear it on the first and the fifteenth of the month," he commented. "On payday, especially when it's hot, you've got trouble."

We rode through mile after mile of the beautiful new Negro suburban neighborhoods on Atlanta's West Side, where a biracial planning committee he set up had succeeded in breaking through the rim of white suburbia that completely encircled the city after the war, hemming in the Negroes. I detected pride but no note of paternalism as the mayor

pointed out modern houses, many in the thirty- to fifty-thousand-dollar price range, that attested to Negro economic achievement. It was the same way late in the evening when we stopped by to pay our respects to "Chief" W. H. Aiken, a veteran Negro political leader who runs a luxury apartment hotel. Aiken appeared pleased but not particularly surprised to have the mayor calling on him so unceremoniously. To me, a Southerner used to the nuances of the old Negro-white relationship, here was detectable change.

Hartsfield discussed his difficulties with considerable frankness, admitting there were problems ahead for which no ready solutions are apparent. "We'll just have to keep on dickering," he remarked. I got the impression that to this man who has proved himself a politician in the best sense of the word the prospect was not particularly frightening.

Takes More Than Luck

A major reason for Atlanta's good fortune, the mayor testifies, is that it has so many intelligent and educated Negroes who choose to remain despite the widespread exodus from the South. The six Negro colleges located in the city, all interlocked in the Atlanta University system, provide a steady output of talented leaders. They also have helped to diversify Negro leadership. In many places in the South, the Negro ministers are the single group able and independent enough to attempt to voice their people's needs. In Atlanta the ministers are only one element in the leadership, their particular drives modified and strengthened by lawyers, banking and business representatives, and educators.

To a degree, the Negro in Atlanta has had to win recognition by excelling. Dr. Rufus Clement, president of Atlanta University, for example, is recognized as the member on the city school board best qualified by previous training. When Clement was first elected four years ago, School Superintendent Ira Jarrell told me, he had from the start made contributions extending widely beyond race matters. "Everything Dr. Clement has ever said has been wise and just," she commented.

In turn, Dr. Clement, while not concealing his attitude toward school segregation, has bided his time in pressing for a showdown. He agreed last year when the board called on the Educational Testing Service up in Princeton, to make an analysis of achievement among Negro and white students. A quiet-spoken,

thoughtful man, he told me that he is aware that it will reveal disparities between the two races. But he is also confident that it will show wide overlapping, demonstrating that the Negro is not inferior per se. Though he believes that integration of the schools could be accomplished in Atlanta with little difficulty, he expresses sympathy with those who fear "bringing the state down on our heads." His caution, others point out, may also stem from a fear of causing damage to the valuable university system that he helps to administer.

I CALLED ON T. M. Alexander, the defeated Negro candidate for alderman, who is a successful businessman and realtor. His office, as executive vice-president of the Southeastern Fidelity Fire Insurance Company, was beautifully paneled in California redwood and old brick with a sliding glass wall opening onto a garden patio—one of the most impressive executive suites I had seen in Atlanta.

Where had the capital come from to start the seven-year-old Southeastern Fidelity? Alexander, a slender, deeply earnest man who was born and educated in the South, answered with a sweep of his arm that within two blocks of his Auburn Avenue office there was over $80 million in capital resources owned by Negroes. The treasurer of his company, L. D. Milton, heads the Citizens Trust Company of Georgia, the only Negro bank in America belonging to the Federal Reserve System.

"But the dollar isn't segregated in Atlanta any more," Alexander announced. "There are at least half a dozen white banks I could call right this minute and get a loan." Because Negroes could get credit, they had been able to prove that they were good credit risks, and vice versa. This is the fundamental lesson of all economic progress.

Alexander is a member of the Mayor's West Side Mutual Development Committee, which was formed several years ago to deal with racial strife in the housing field. Unscrupulous real-estate agents, both white and Negro, had been promoting a practice known as "blockbusting," by which Negro families were leapfrogged into the middle of established white neighborhoods. It often resulted in panic and mass evacuation among the whites and recriminations against the Negroes. The biracial committee, having carefully assessed the problem, worked out the westward course of expansion for Negro housing. In some areas, on the other hand, it had arranged to buy back homes from Negroes who were located in white neighborhoods.

I was told that Alexander had devised the committee's slogan, "We Protected the Integrity of Communities." Wasn't this, I asked him, merely a polite way of masking segregation? He disagreed. "It has gotten away from the idea of fixed boundary lines, buffer zones, and all the rest. I couldn't sell that to Negroes. But we can buy the idea of community integrity. We want to know when we build homes in nice neighborhoods that they will be protected from downzoning and all the other things that destroy property value."

Alexander was philosophical about his recent defeat. His campaign, particularly the reactions he got from white audiences, had been a heart-warming experience. There had been no unpleasant incidents, and his hat was already back in the ring for next time.

But he had been genuinely incensed when Governor Griffin, not himself an Atlantan, had at the last minute issued a statement calling on the whites to vote as a bloc against him. He expected nothing better of Griffin, Alexander said. But he won-

dered just how long the "big mules" in Atlanta—those business leaders who wield backstage political power—were going to put up with this demagogic interference in the city's affairs. "They have always been willing to let the woolhat politicians have the Negro issue to play with and be amused," he concluded. "That isn't going to work any more."

Country Boys and City Boys

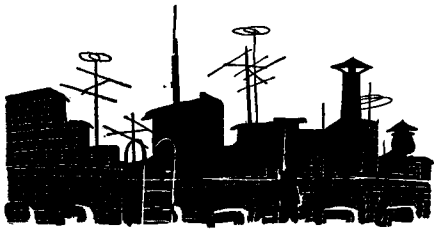
Alexander raised a problem that may have considerable bearing on Atlanta's future. As he noted, the city's leading business interests, many of them Northern-owned, have traditionally reached an understanding with the backwoods politicians who, under Georgia's county-unit system, dominate the state government. It has been a live-and-let-live proposition, each accommodating the basic needs of the other. Eugene Talmadge and his son Herman could lambaste the "city boys" while at the same time receiving economic sustenance from them. The race issue, in this cynical arrangement, was always regarded as a fairly harmless way for the politician to let off steam and garner votes.

Last year, Atlanta's business leaders were confronted with the serious dilemma of whether to back Senator Walter George, the aging champion of honest conservatism who had been in the Senate since 1922, against Herman Talmadge, who peddled a newfangled variety. Reluctantly and after much soul searching, they chose Talmadge, with the rationalization that age versus youth made the political odds too costly.

How would they choose if the decision lay between the entrenched reaction of the state's politics and the dynamic needs of the city's? What will they do if the governor or the state attorney general really tries to slam on the brakes against any further changes in segregation? The answers to these questions, a good many Atlantans admit, may determine whether the city continues its healthy growth or falls victim to the distemper prevalent in the region.

One of the biggest of the "big mules" invited me to join him and a group of compeers who were lunching together after an executive directors' meeting at a leading downtown bank. They were a gregarious lot, full of Deep South mannerisms. But one detected, too, by their casual references to places and incidents, how cosmopolitan the successful big businessmen have become. New York is two hours and forty-five minutes by air—closer than Savannah was twenty years ago. A tycoon like Robert Woodruff, chairman of the finance committee of Coca-Cola, is as much at home one place as the other.

There is a subtle and hopeful difference that makes their chauvinism more impressive than the typical civic-club variety. In the last few years the leading Atlanta businessmen have become growth- and planning-conscious. Starting in 1949, a Metropolitan Planning Commission, spurred by a brilliant young Harvard-trained planner named Philip Hammer, worked out in successive studies—"Up Ahead" and "Now—For Tomorrow"—a grand design for the evolving city complete with arterial expressways that will lead from a rejuvenated center to orderly suburban clusters. It envisaged the schools, parks, and playgrounds of a future dream city. Atlanta's business leaders do not consider such planning Utopian; this spring they pushed through an $87-million bond issue as partial payment toward it. They point quite candidly to what it means to the very



existence of, say, Rich's department store, the largest in the Deep South, which last year had net sales of nearly $80 million.

But despite their preoccupation with orderly growth, they are reluctant even to contemplate the possibility of a showdown with the forces that may disrupt such growth. They tend to minimize the effects of the county-unit system, which increasingly strangles the growing city. "The system is a good thing as far as Atlanta is concerned," one businessman who knows better told me. "Since a large popular vote doesn't count, the state politicians don't pay any attention to us." Not being paid attention to, by his definition, meant being let alone—a unique theory of the joys of disfranchisement. That the state politicians do pay attention to Atlanta can be readily seen in the revenue flow, the state collecting 21.5 per cent of its taxes there while returning only 4.6 per cent. Atlanta's scheme of improvement must rely on the Federal government, not the state, for the bulk of its supplementary aid. States' righters aren't always cities' righters.

It is easy to come away from a tour of the South with a conviction of total gloom. In the first of a series of *Saturday Evening Post* articles, "The Deep South Says *Never*," John Bartlow Martin points to the rise of Southern resistance since 1954. "At that time the South was divided, perplexed, resigned," writes Martin. "Today the Solid South is a fact, and its resistance to desegregation is granitic."

He has been deeply—one gathers almost fearfully—impressed by the white Citizens' Councils, which combine sophistication with their ruthlessness in a way the old Ku Klux Klans never did. Particularly in the rural areas, they are currently exercising a bitter dominance.

But it is possible to agree with Martin that the councils are a sobering symptom of the South's anxiety without leaping to the conclusion that they speak for a "solid" or a "granitic" South. In Atlanta the councils wield very little influence.

Martin has failed to notice another substantial group in the white South—watchful, troubled, and so far silent before a problem that they know rhetoric alone will not solve. In this group are the men who act behind the scenes to prevent the showdowns that the Citizens' Councils threaten again and again. They are conducting what amounts to a holding operation until ways can be found to chart an orderly course ahead. What they look for are not words but examples of what works in the changing pattern of race relations.

It would be foolish to try to predict the outcome of the South's present crisis. But the example set by Atlanta provides at least some ground for hope.

A Surprise For Uncle Louis

G. GERALD HARROP

HAMILTON, ONTARIO

THE CANADIAN ELECTION of June 10, like the U.S. election of November 2, 1948, just couldn't happen. Ask the professional political pundits if you don't believe us amateurs. Ask the Gallup pollsters.

As the campaign closed there were no signs that it had had much effect. The Gallup figures remained pretty constant, and showed Prime Minister Louis St. Laurent's Liberals commanding forty-eight per cent of the votes, the Progressive Conservatives (Tories) well behind with thirty-four per cent, and the rest divided among the other parties, the Cooperative Commonwealth Federation (C.C.F.) getting ten per cent and the Social Creditors seven per cent. The re-election of Uncle Louis would make it six in a row for the Liberals. The Canadian government, coming to power in 1935, was the oldest in the democratic world—the oldest, some of its opponents said, outside of the Soviet Union. The election appeared to be in the bag for the Liberals.

So we all said, including the editors of *Maclean's*, "Canada's National Magazine," whose issue dated June 22 editorialized thus: "For better or for worse, we Canadians have once more elected one of the most powerful governments ever created by the free will of a free electorate. We have given that government an almost unexampled vote of confidence, considering the length of its term of office. It could easily be forgiven for accepting this as a mandate to resume the kindly tyranny it has exercised over Parliament and the people for more than twenty years."

SUPPOSE for a moment that control of the United States government depended only on the outcome of the struggle for the House of Representatives. Suppose further that outside the Solid South the opposition was divided three ways, with third and fourth parties in control of some of the Western states. Add to this a Democratic leader, himself a Southerner, not clearly identifiable as liberal or conservative but a man of great integrity and considerable personal charm—a rather elderly man, something like one's father. Complete the sum with a time of unprecedented prosperity. Now estimate the chances of the Republican Party.

This is an almost perfect parallel to the situation in Canada on Election Day. In Quebec, their "Solid South," the Liberals held sixty-six of the seventy-five seats. In the last election, 1953, they had won twenty-seven out of thirty-three in the Atlantic provinces and fifty out of eighty-five in Tory Ontario. And in the western provinces the main opposition party held only nine of sixty-two seats and was the fourth party. All together, in 1953 the St. Laurent government won 170 of the 265 seats. On June 10, 1957, then, Uncle Louis seemed firmly in the saddle and "We never had it so good."

This was the situation that confronted sixty-one-year-old prairie lawyer John Diefenbaker when he carried the Tory convention last December and faced an imminent election. Diefenbaker took on a speaking schedule that would have taxed the strength of a brewer's horse. He carried his message to the people in the short six weeks of a Canadian campaign, concentrating on Ontario and the Atlantic region.

Diefenbaker traveled to the prairie hamlet and the maritime fishing cove as well as to Toronto and Montreal. Diefenbacker has the head-shaking, posturing, throbbing eloquence of the stereotype of an old-fashioned courtroom pleader. He is very effective or very corny, depending on your politics. But there is no denying the sincerity of his conviction that the majority party had been in power too long and grown too dearly fond of that power. His campaign revived memories of the Willkie of 1940 and the Truman of 1948. This was Canada's first TV election, but Diefenbaker did not depend on TV. The television performances of all parties were drab, canned affairs.

Mr. Howe's Friday

The main personal target of opposition speakers was not the prime minister but United States-born septuagenarian Clarence Decatur Howe, minister of trade and commerce and general factotum in all the Liberal ministries since 1935. His opponents concede his executive ability and drive, but charge that his passion for industrial achievement is only exceeded by his contempt for the House of Commons. In arguing that the Defence Production Act should remain in effect for five years instead of three, Howe gave as his reason: "That would mean coming back to Parliament in three years and I've more to do than spend my time amusing Parliament." In many ways, C. D. Howe is Canada's Charley Wilson.

The climax of this arrogance was the June 1, 1956, culmination of the pipeline debate—or lack of debate, as the Tory and C.C.F. opposition would prefer to call it. Here Mr. Howe's proposition was to authorize the loan—to a largely U.S.-controlled pipeline company—of some $80 million to complete the uneconomic prairie leg of a pipeline to bring natural gas from Alberta to the east. Conservative and C.C.F. members threatened to filibuster, and to prevent this tactic the government introduced closure—not to terminate an inconclusive and repetitious debate (its legitimate use) but to stop the debate before it started and get the legislation through in time to meet a deadline promised the company. (The Social Creditors, who control Alberta and want to sell its gas, supported the government.)

Amid scenes of confusion unparalleled here in this century, the Tory and C.C.F. opposition parties raised points of order and privilege to get themselves a chance to talk at all. But Howe rammed his bill through to the strains of "Onward, Christian Soldiers" and "Hail, Hail,