

FIVE QUESTIONS WITH GOV. WILLIAM WINTER

The Center for a Better South's Five Questions series starts with an interview with former Mississippi Gov. William Winter of Jackson, Miss. The governor answered these questions in August 2005 following a trip by Better South directors to Mississippi during the previous month.

BETTER SOUTH: What can progressive Southern candidates do to attract moderate voters who have voted for conservative candidates over recent years because of race?

WINTER: Despite all of the advances that we have made, the politics of race continues to haunt us. We simply must acknowledge that for a shrinking minority, race will continue to be a compelling factor in their political attitudes.

For most moderate, reasonable people, though, I believe that a call to come together around the issues of education, job creation, environmental protection and the recognition of the worth and dignity of every citizen will resonate favorably.

When more of us are appealed to by our politicians by pointing out that we all have about the same basic needs and aspirations, then the superficial differences based on what we look like tend to fade away. We Southerners -- black and white -- need to remember that we have so much in common and that we can teach the rest of the country so much in race relations. I saw that recently happen in that most unlikely of places -- Neshoba County, Mississippi.

BETTER SOUTH: Governor, as one of the founding members of the LQC Lamar Society, you've been pushing for educational advances for more than 40 years. How have things gotten better in the South and where do we need to be focused on heading?

WINTER: At about the same time that the South finished dismantling Jim Crow, it began to focus on reforming and improving its system of public education. Those two transforming movements have

ABOUT WILLIAM WINTER

William F. Winter served as Governor of Mississippi from 1980 to 1984. He has been a long-time advocate for public education, racial reconciliation, and historic preservation. Governor Winter has served as Chairman of the Southern Regional Education Board, Southern Growth Policies Board, Commission on the Future of the South, National Civic League, Kettering Foundation, Foundation for the Mid South and the Mississippi Department of Archives and History. He was a member of President Clinton's National Advisory Board on Race. An attorney in the firm of Watkins Ludlam Winter & Stennis in Jackson, Mississippi, he is a graduate of the University of Mississippi School of Law. He is married to the former Elise Varner, and they have three daughters and five grandchildren.

been the basis for the heartening progress that the region is now making. The key to the maintenance of that progress lies in our commitment to a continuation of enhanced investments in education across the board and at all levels. The South cannot have a world-class economy unless we create a world-class system of education. Recent national surveys indicate that we are making encouraging strides in that direction, but that progress is still uneven across the region. We cannot let up in our efforts until we have assured every child the opportunity for an adequate education. We need more emphasis on early childhood education and the elimination of those factors that cause so many students to drop out of school.

BETTER SOUTH: Governor, exactly what is a Southern progressive?

WINTER: A Southern progressive is one who understands and appreciates the richness of the South's history and culture and in particular its myriad contributions to the world's literature and the arts and who seeks to build a society that is worthy of that heritage. That means that we must be advocates of public policies and civic initiatives which will enable all Southerners to share fully in the educational and economic progress of the region.

A Southern progressive is one whose regional pride is reflected in a commitment to preserve and protect the South's incredible natural bounty, to build communities which enhance the quality of life of their people, to respect and honor the diversity of our citizenry, to promote civility, tolerance and fairness in all of our relationships, and always to be mindful of

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-- William F. Winter

our responsibility to pass on to succeeding generations a better and nobler society.

BETTER SOUTH: Based on your experience as a leading Southern progressive, how can we help Southerners see the light and build a real progressive movement for the 21st Century? In other words, how can we stop the Regressive Juggernaut that brushes aside civility, tolerance, fairness, shared sacrifice and responsibility in favor of greed, bigotry and hypocrisy?

WINTER: In the past Southern progressives in both political parties -- leaders in the mold of Terry Sanford in North Carolina and Linwood Holton in Virginia -- were opposed by some of the most reactionary and uncivil forces in the South. They prevailed, however, by successfully appealing to the better instincts of people and by directing their attention to the basic needs and concerns of everyday citizens. I believe that opportunity presents itself again at this time.

There are certain issues on which just about everybody agrees. For example, everyone wants an adequate education for

their children; they want a fair chance at a sustaining job; they want to live in a decent house on a safe street; they want access to affordable health care; and above all else they want to be accorded dignity and respect by their fellow citizens. Why can't we direct more of our energy toward the attainment of those reasonable aspirations instead of on appeals based on greed and bigotry? From my conversations across the region I believe that there are a lot of people ready for that sort of approach.

BETTER SOUTH: What is your hope for the South?

WINTER: My hope for the South is that as we face a period of continuing change and unparalleled growth, we not let the pressures that accompany that change rob us of the qualities that have made the region so special. The Southern Growth Policies Board points out how wise and farsighted initiatives are needed if, in Terry Sanford's words, we are to 'avoid Northern mistakes in a Southern setting.' Already in our fastest-growing areas we are seeing the problems which reckless development can cause. Clogged highways, foul and unhealthy air, overtaxed utility systems, and the consumption of some of our prime open spaces and productive farm land by urban sprawl threaten the quality of life for many people. We must work to preserve the livability of the region.

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ABOUT THE FIVE QUESTIONS SERIES

The Center for a Better South's Five Questions project is an online interview series that allows Center staff members to pose challenging questions to Southern leaders for their views on how to deal with public policy issues.

The Center for a Better South hopes the Five Questions format will offer participants a way to offer insights and pragmatic solutions to vexing challenges faced by the South. The series will allow leaders to have a new way to provide ideas to help move the South forward.

Republication encouraged. Media organizations are encouraged to reprint the Five Questions interview on editorial pages to stimulate conversation and provide people living in the South with a new way of looking at things. No reprint permission is needed, but the Center would appreciate informal e-mail notification of any reprints. Please contact us at: info@bettersouth.org for any questions or comments.

I hope that the education of all of our people in the best possible way will be our first priority now and in the future and that we will concentrate on finding ways to use our rich resources of physical and human capital to create a higher standard of living for all of our people.

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