

A LIFE OF ACCOMPLISHMENT

*Dennis W. Miller**

I am pleased to be afforded an opportunity to write a tribute of a truly great Mississippian, Governor William Winter. Looking back, my admiration, friendship, and association with him spans over forty-five years.

As a junior at Gulfport High, I expressed enough interest in learning about government to be invited to American Legion Boys State at Hinds Community College. This week-long gathering allowed attendees to learn about political parties, public office, and how laws were made. As fortune would have it, I was elected State Treasurer and traveled to the Capitol with the Boys State Governor, Lieutenant Governor, and Secretary of State. We were greeted by the Lieutenant Governor William Winter, who stepped in on behalf of the Governor at that time. I was impressed by the genuineness with which he engaged each of us about his duties and thoughts for us as future leaders. We took a photograph together. I was pleasantly surprised to receive that black and white photo a few days later with a handwritten note. That encounter in the summer of 1973 led me to look further into Governor Winter's educational background, his service to the country, and his public service to Mississippi.

As a young person, I was impressed that Governor Winter had been in the armed services, as had many men in his generation. I also admired his tenacity to study law and, with a few of his classmates, run for the Mississippi House of Representatives, where he held a seat in the Legislature for two terms. His progression from there to the Office of Tax Collector and State Treasurer was equally impressive as his leadership appealed to the populace. Unfortunately, he lost his 1967 race for Governor. Instead, in 1968, he joined a law firm then known as Watkins, Pyle,

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Edwards & Ludlam. He stepped back into public office in 1971 when he was elected Lieutenant Governor.

Eight years later, in 1979, Governor Winter was elected Governor of the State of Mississippi on his third try. I had a view of his work for his four-year term from a short distance away. The newly elected Lieutenant Governor, Brad Dye, allowed me to serve in his administration. It was clear that William Winter had a plan for his years in the office.

Governor Winter believed that improvement of public education should be on the front burner in the Legislature. Early on in his term, in one of his State of the State addresses to the Joint Assembly of the Legislature, I witnessed his strong determination to accomplish something meaningful for the state. Speaking from the podium of the House Chamber in the temporary Capitol (formerly Jackson Central High School), he told the Members that it was “boat-rocking time in Mississippi.” In spite of the fact that governors were limited to one term and considered “weak” in political standing in Mississippi government, he prevailed. He meant his words, and the passage of the Mississippi Education Reform Act of 1982 that provided public kindergarten changed future generations of Mississippians for the better.¹

After leaving office in early 1984, Governor Winter rejoined the law firm. He was not just a partner in a law firm though. He continued to be active in the community and state. His term of service on the Board of Trustees of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History—51 years—is unmatched.

My closest years to Governor Winter began shortly after, in 1993, when I joined the law firm at his encouragement, among others. I observed and learned so much during our years of partnership. My earlier observations of Governor Winter when I was a teenager proved to be very true. It was clear that his priorities were in the right place: God, Family, Profession, Workplace, Community, and State. Anyone was welcomed into his office. He chose to never sit behind his desk for a conversation. Instead, he moved around and arranged two chairs so that the visit was clearly sincere.

¹ See generally 1982 Miss. Laws 1st Extraordinary Sess. ch. 17.

I began to really listen to advice he gave young graduates. His most memorable charge to them was to accept the role of “citizen.” He encouraged all to register to vote and participate in the betterment of their community and state.

As I assumed additional internal management roles in the law firm beyond my practice area, I also realized that he often had the perfect advice for resolving issues, small or large. Governor Winter seemed to be continually honored by many as the years went by. Our firm was proud to take part in many of those occasions. A highlight of those ceremonies was his receipt of the John F. Kennedy Profile in Courage Award for Lifetime Achievement presented in the John F. Kennedy Presidential Library and Museum in Boston. Another favorite of mine was the Mississippi Forestry Association’s State Tree Farmer of the Year Award given for his care of family-owned forest lands in Grenada County.

In late 2011, lawyers at Watkins, Ludlam, Winter, and Stennis, P.A. joined the law firm of Jones Walker LLP. I thanked him many times for his support and encouragement to me in this endeavor that set the future of our law firm on solid ground.

Governor Winter believed and was enthusiastic in the future as a Partner in our firm, as a native Mississippian, and proud American. His advice and counsel are truly missed. He set examples for us to follow and left his mark in many places. A life of accomplishment to be strived for by all.

