

## THE JOURNEY OF A LIFETIME WITH WILLIAM WINTER

*Dick Molpus\**

Visualize this if you can: I am a thirteen-year-old boy in August 1963 listening to political speakers at the annual Neshoba County Fair. The humidity is suffocating, and the only “air conditioners” are paper fans given away by local churches and funeral homes. I am an odd, “nerdy” kid with “coke bottle” glasses, swooped back hair, wearing a muscle shirt even though I have no muscles. To make me even more odd, I am a teenager who actually enjoys listening to political speeches.

In 1963, the night riders had begun their reign of terror in Neshoba County, where I lived, and in numerous other places in Mississippi. They were targeting African Americans who had the “audacity” to register to vote. Churches were being burned, people beaten, and the state was falling into lawlessness.

One politician after another took to the podium to whip the crowd into a frenzy with angry racist rhetoric.

A prominent candidate for governor of Mississippi had just lashed out, shouting shocking words into his microphone, the words echoing off the Neshoba Fair cabins. Believe it or not, this is what he said, “The NAACP stands for N-----, Agitators, Apes, Coons, and Possums.” Responding rebel yells filled the air. Many in the audience were giddy with excitement. I felt as if I was going to throw up.

But then another man strode confidently up to the podium. State Tax Collector William Winter looked different, more like a sophisticated, polished Jackson attorney, which he was.

Obviously angered by what he had heard, he began in a firm voice: “The United States is built on the *law*, . . . and we must follow that law. Intimidation, church burning, and those who

---

\* Founder and Chairman, Molpus Woodlands Group; 33rd Secretary of State of Mississippi, 1984-96; Executive Director of the Governor’s Office of Federal-State Programs, 1980-83. B.B.A., University of Mississippi.

physically harm others are wrong.” The crowd became quiet. For me, that moment with William F. Winter was transformative. Even though I was thirteen, I knew it was inherently evil to hate others simply because of their skin color. Finally, I had seen courage and moral leadership from a statewide official.

Speakers exited through an open door behind the podium, and I could not get there fast enough. I put out my hand, introduced myself, and told him firmly in my squeaky voice and with as much gravitas as a thirteen-year-old in a muscle shirt could muster, “Mr. Winter, I totally agree with what you said and from now on, I am going to be your ‘man’ in Neshoba County.”

Even though he may have been amused, he didn’t show it as he put both hands on my shoulders and said, “Dick Molpus, you are now officially my man in Neshoba County!” That thirteen-year-old boy then began a lifelong journey with him that ended only when I was a seventy-one-year-old man.

A second defining moment came in the early spring of 1982 when he was governor. In late 1979, he had assembled a staff of mostly young, energetic people. What we had in common is that we were all intensely loyal to William Winter, and he knew it. Although young, we had been with him in both defeat and victory over his years in public service.

In early 1980, Governor Winter had called his staff together. Joining us was his exceedingly gracious and exceedingly strong wife, Elise Winter. He wanted to examine with us possibilities of accomplishment during his four short years. We all knew that our public schools, serving Mississippi’s 500,000 students, were woefully inadequate. There were a few bright spots in wealthy communities, but the quality of most schools was simply abysmal.

We were the only state in the U.S. without public kindergarten, and we were the only state not to require children to attend school; more than 6,000 children never entered first grade. We were at the bottom of most school rankings in our country.

The largest and most sweeping, pressing issue, we all agreed, was to improve public education.

The Mississippi legislature, steeped in the past, summarily dismissed the governor’s proposals in 1980, 1981, and 1982. A backward view still prevailed among a number of its decision-

makers about the many values of education. Public school improvements appeared doomed.

After the 1982 session, Governor Winter had to make a choice: abandon the effort for better schools or continue to fight though success seemed doubtful.

His young staff convened separately to weigh options to present to the governor. We decided to make a recommendation: go around the legislature and take the fight for better schools directly to the people affected by our schools. That effort, however, entailed huge risks.

We had considered building a “public school ticket” to run against the naysayers in the 1983 general election. We thought that might be a more likely way to pass the reform, but it would happen only *after* he left office. His legacy would reflect his inability to pass this major initiative. History would treat him as an inconsequential governor. But attempting to pass it by appealing directly to the people might end in failure, an even worse legacy.

He sat back in his chair and looked at the ceiling and thought for several minutes. Finally, he sat straight up, looked around the room, and said, “This is more important than my place in history. Let’s do it. . . . Let’s take it to the people.” And we did. To our surprise, momentum began to build, and on December 6, 1982, Governor Winter called a special legislative session to vote yes or no on better public schools. On December 22, William Winter signed the sweeping, historic Education Reform Act of 1982. Veteran journalist Bill Minor was so shocked at the success that he called it the “Christmas Miracle” in Mississippi.<sup>1</sup>

Only one person, the selfless William Winter, took that enormous risk to do what was right, what was good, and what was honorable.

These are two stories of many that could be told. We are all blessed to have had William Winter to show us that with strength and integrity, public service could be the most noble of callings.

I was and always will be proud to be “his man.” It had been a long, rich journey since the 1963 Neshoba County Fair.

---

<sup>1</sup> CHARLES C. BOLTON, WILLIAM F. WINTER AND THE NEW MISSISSIPPI: A BIOGRAPHY 229 (2013).

