

MY FORTY-SEVEN-YEAR FRIENDSHIP WITH WILLIAM FORREST WINTER

*Andrew P. Mullins, Jr.**

I first met William Winter when he was Lieutenant Governor of Mississippi in 1973. I was in my third year of teaching history at Saint Andrew's Episcopal High School in Jackson, Mississippi. After graduation from Millsaps College with a degree in history in 1970 and a year of basic and technical training in the Air National Guard, I began teaching and coaching at Saint Andrew's in the fall of 1971.

Winter was elected Lt. Governor in 1971 after failing to win the governor position in 1967. I did not personally know him in 1967 when I was a sophomore at Millsaps, but I liked what he advocated. I supported his positions on many things that were considered "moderate" during those trying days in the 1960s.

In the fall of 1973, I was the head football coach and tennis coach at the high school and taught five classes of American Government, U.S. History, and World History in grades 9-12.

Somehow—I don't remember exactly—I got him to come and speak to my Government class or the U.S. History class. It could have been as simple as just deciding to call his office and invite him. Nevertheless, he came, and we struck up a friendship. I remember he was very easy to talk with for a politician. We had a lot of similar interests—Mississippi's history, American history, politics, athletics of all kinds, which included being fans of the same teams. I had no idea how, nor if, this fledgling friendship would grow as it did over the next four decades.

In 1974, Winter's youngest daughter, Eleanor, enrolled in the eighth grade at St. Andrew's. Winter came to speak to another class of mine and came to one of my high school football team's games.

* Associate Professor of Education Emeritus and Chief of Staff to the Chancellor Emeritus, University of Mississippi; Special Assistant to Governor William Winter and to three State Superintendents of Education. Ph.D., University of Mississippi; M.Ed., Mississippi College; B.A., Millsaps College.

He stopped by the dressing room after the game to congratulate the team on a win.

In 1975, he ran for governor for the second time and was not able to come around the school much that fall. I remember driving to a couple of campaign rallies in small towns with him. These trips were enjoyable due to our discussions of our mutual interests and despite talk of how he felt the campaign was starting to lose ground to his opponent, Cliff Finch. After the losing campaign, he went back to his law firm. His daughter had entered the high school and began having some of my classes. Winter came around more often, and he gave an inspirational speech to the football team before a big game. Eleanor was a good tennis player and was on the high school tennis team, which I coached in the spring.

When Eleanor was in my junior year U.S. History class, we took a bus trip with the entire class to Washington, D.C. There were two faculty members and two mothers of students who went as chaperones. One of the parents was Mrs. Winter (Elise) whom I had known but not well. She was fun and very involved in the trip from the start. I enjoyed talking to her on the long drive and discovered how involved she was in her husband's campaigns. When we arrived close to dark, we began checking the students into their hotel rooms. This process was interrupted by an employee informing us that we had to change buildings due to a bomb threat which had been received at the building where we were settling into assigned rooms. This change of plans caused some confusion, but we were progressing well in getting everyone settled in the second building. Then, one of the students who was assigned to her as a roommate came to me and said, "Cheryl is missing, and we cannot find her." I said to keep looking since I thought she was probably sitting in another student's room. That is when things started getting scary. Everyone was now involved in searching for Cheryl who could not be found. The four adults decided it was time to notify the police.

I rode with a D.C. policeman through several adjoining neighborhoods which were not ideal areas in which to be lost. It was a frightening experience. Others checked the adjacent grounds and empty hotel rooms. By midnight, we had given up the search. Her parents had been notified, and that is when her father told us his daughter had a condition that included getting easily confused

when she was in unfamiliar surroundings. We were standing in the front of the hotel discussing our next move when a taxi drove up with Cheryl in it. The taxi driver told me he saw her walking alone in a dangerous area and asked if she needed help. She replied that she was lost and fortunately had the key to her hotel room with the hotel's address in her hand.

We put her in the hotel room with Mrs. Winter. We moved Mrs. Winter's bed against the door to keep any further wandering from occurring. The next morning, her father was there to pick her up and fly back to Mississippi. Elise and I discussed this incident for many years. We discussed how lucky we were, what could have been a terrible outcome, and if that outcome would have been the end of my education career since it was my class and my responsibility for each student on the trip. In fact, we laughed about this trip to D.C. just a few weeks before Elise died.

Elise and I became good friends after this trip. When I volunteered to help in the summer of the 1979 campaign for governor, Elise and I made several campaign trips around the state. Also, during the years 1980-84 when I was on the Governor's staff, Elise and I visited dozens of schools while working to generate support for the Education Reform Act of 1982.

In the years between his loss to Finch in 1975 and his third campaign for the top office, Winter went back to his law firm. Their daughter Eleanor became a valuable member of the St. Andrew's tennis team, and both parents often came to her tennis matches. Winter spoke several more times to American Government classes and enjoyed coming to football games. In 1977 and in 1978, Eleanor and her partner won two State B-BB championships to the delight of her parents.

In 1979, I ended my tenure at St. Andrew's by accepting a fellowship to the University of Mississippi to begin work on a Ph.D. That summer before my classes and the fellowship work started, I had time to accompany Winter on several of his campaign trips. He had decided to run the third time for the governor's office. On this campaign, he was relaxed and confident of a victory for several reasons. We enjoyed going around the state meeting people, speaking, running in 5K races, and doing all the things necessary in one of these statewide campaigns. When my work at UM started, I could not go with him as much as I had during the summer.

However, I went on several weekends because I really enjoyed his stories of various characters and interesting towns around the state. He was elected. His four-year term began in January of 1980.

I was willing to put my Ph.D. on hold if I could get a position on his staff, but it was very beneficial for my fellowship work and classes to wait until the academic year ended in May 1980. I asked Governor Winter if I could delay until May. He and I had discussed his top priority being education, and that was where I wanted to spend most of my time. We had discussed his overall plan for education improvement on several campaign trips. He agreed to let me delay until May because he was not going to emphasize education in the first legislative session (January to the end of April) due to the urgency of some other issues. But there would be no positions directly on his staff if I waited until May.

Therefore, in May, I took a job in the Governor's Federal-State Programs Office until an opening occurred on his staff in late August. I became a Special Assistant to the Governor. One of my first duties was to staff the Special Committee on Public School Finance and Administration and report its progress to the governor. It was called "The Blue Ribbon Committee." Winter told me he wanted me to learn every aspect of public school funding.

During his four very successful years as governor, I worked on every aspect of the Education Reform Act. I also staffed him on the Southern Regional Education Board, a sixteen-state member organization that researched many education issues including higher education. I also worked with the conservation of several natural areas that we had visited, such as Dunn's Falls and the Clark Creek Natural Area.

In the early efforts on the Education Reform Act, the staff worked tirelessly on promoting the main education issues that needed changing. Mrs. Winter was a very effective advocate for public kindergartens and several other education changes we were advocating. She and I began to visit many schools around the state in the effort to spread the word. These visits were effective because her visits were always covered by the local press. Also, she often spoke to local civic clubs during the same day of a school visit.

I began to work with many legislators during the legislative sessions because I would cover all of the Education Committee meetings in both houses. This legislative process was very

interesting to me, and I formed friendships with many of the younger legislators who were ready for change. I had floor passes to both houses as a governor's assistant. I could report daily to other staff members and to the governor on what was transpiring on education issues.

I learned a lot of beneficial lessons from Governor Winter about how to work with public officials—local, state, and federal. Over the next twenty-nine years while I worked as a special assistant to three state superintendents of education and three chancellors of the University of Mississippi, I practiced these lessons I learned from Governor Winter.

These are the primary lessons I followed:

1. Always tell the truth even when it might not immediately benefit you or the cause you are promoting; this truthfulness is the most important thing one can do in working with public officials. If they learn they can trust you, you have established the most important asset needed to be effective—TRUST. Understand that trust should never be broken or it could be lost forever.

2. When asked a question by a public official, it is okay to say “I don't know” if you follow it with “I will try to get the correct answer and get back to you as quickly as I can.” And most importantly, do exactly that.

3. Always have the sources available from where you got the information you are providing to public officials. Also, don't give your personal opinion unless asked for it.

4. If one person in the agency, department, or university calls or writes a public official and uses official stationery or presents their personal opinion as that of the entire entity, you as the representative of that entity must inform the public official, committee, or staff of the committee that that person is speaking for themselves. They are not representing the department or university you officially represent. Then, you must inform the person giving their personal opinion that they are, of course, free to give their personal opinion, but make sure it is understood by the public official that it is a personal opinion.

5. Never “burn bridges” regardless of the egregious remark or opinion of a public official. Do not get mad when one will not vote for something you are advocating. Remember, “the same person

who votes AGAINST you today might vote FOR you tomorrow.” I saw this maxim demonstrated often and at all levels of government.

6. Never repeat nor laugh at a racist joke or remark from a public official. Always show respect to public officials regardless of how despicable their behavior might be. However, establish boundaries for respect.

After Governor Winter left the governor’s office—at that time a governor of Mississippi could only serve one consecutive four-year term—he was recruited to run for the U.S. Senate in the fall of 1984 against the incumbent Senator Thad Cochran. I had remained with Governor Bill Allain primarily to educate the newly appointed State Board of Education members about the seventeen different programs in the Education Reform Act that would become effective in piecemeal fashion over the next three years. However, Winter and I would often have lunch together or go to a sporting event on the weekends while discussing whether he should run for the Senate.

He was getting a lot of pressure from Democratic Senators to oppose the Republican Cochran. I could tell he did not want to run. He personally liked Cochran. He had expressed to me on several occasions that he was afraid his heart would not be in the race. I began to give my opinion which was that because he supported raising several taxes to fund the Education Reform Act, he would be attacked as a “tax-and-spend” liberal Democrat in this race, especially against a popular and entrenched incumbent.

Several of his family members, especially Mrs. Winter, wanted him to run. He had been sad about leaving the governor’s job. He loved every aspect of being governor of the state he dearly loved. Therefore, they knew that the political adrenaline flowing again would relieve the sadness caused by leaving the governor’s office. He finally decided to run. I stopped my job in Governor Allain’s office and started working in the Winter Senate Campaign in July 1984.

He and I made numerous campaign trips around the state, and so did Elise and I. Although he did not really want to be in this campaign, he felt he owed it to his supporters to give the campaign all he had, and he did. His political acumen told him that the chances of winning a federal election during the presidential reelection of popular President Ronald Reagan was very slim. When

he lost, he accepted a fellowship in the spring semester of 1985 at the Kennedy Institute of Government at Harvard. I went to work in January 1985 as a Special Assistant to Dr. Dick Boyd, the first appointed State Superintendent of Education in Mississippi's history. During this time, Winter invited me to Harvard to lecture on the education changes occurring in Mississippi as a result of his education programs' emphases and successes. And of course, we went to several Boston Red Sox baseball games at Fenway Park while I was there.

Winter never ran for another political office. In the fall of 1985, he returned to his law firm. Free from the restraints of political life, Winter entered a stage of his life that he referred to as "enjoyable and free to pursue whatever course desired." During this thirty-five-year period, he remained very active in education, racial reconciliation, community service, open and responsible government, preservation of historical records, economic development, and church activities.

In August of 1987, Winter and I, accompanied by his son-in-law and by a college friend of Winter's, decided to go to Fort Worth, Texas, to see three Major League Baseball games in Arlington Stadium. Little did I know that this was the first baseball trip of many that would last for the next thirty-two years. Each year, he and I, along with a changing group of others, went to a different Major League Baseball park. After the total of thirty, we decided to start over and go to two favorites a second time. In addition to seeing three games in a long weekend, we visited forty-three colleges and universities and forty famous places, such as Valley Forge National Park, the Northfield Minnesota Bank that was raided by Jesse James, and the Texas School Book Depository. Winter enjoyed visiting empty college football stadiums (8) to examine the architecture and to recall different games and events that had occurred in that stadium. His recall in detail of many famous Ole Miss games in some of these places was phenomenal as to the exact date, final score, and how the game unfolded. We also visited famous people who Winter knew personally—Governor Jerry Brown when he was still the mayor of Oakland, California; Walter Mondale in his law office in Minneapolis; Donna Shalala when she was president of the University of Miami; former Governor of Texas Mark White, who took us to his favorite Mexican

restaurant in Houston; and former Governor Michael Dukakis, who cooked breakfast for us in his house in Boston. These baseball trips were some of the highlights of our friendship.

William Winter was a complex individual. He could write and speak in-depth about different topics, such as religion; different kinds of governments; politics; leadership; the law and the legal profession; the role of courts; terrorism and the protection of liberties; journalism and the responsible journalist; Mississippi writers; education; the South and southerners; Ralph Waldo Emerson—one of his favorite writers; and the history of the United States and of Mississippi. But he was not pedantic nor a show-off with his intellect. He was also just a fun, pragmatic storyteller with a good sense of humor. He loved country music with favorites like Merle Haggard, whom he met backstage at the Temple Theatre in Meridian during a Jimmy Rogers festival.

As most Mississippians are aware, our State is full of paradoxes, inconsistencies, ironies, and contradictions. I have always thought since I have known Winter, that one of the biggest ironies is that the man who has done so much in the arena of racial reconciliation has the middle name of Forrest, as in Nathan Bedford Forrest, the first Grand Wizard of the Ku Klux Klan. Winter's grandfather was a cavalry officer under Nathan Bedford Forrest during the Civil War. He admired Forrest, and thus, his grandson's middle name was given in his honor.

Winter loved everything about Mississippi and all Mississippians, even those who did not like him nor his politics. On one occasion, when the two of us were campaigning in the U.S. Senate race, we went into a pharmacy in a small town in a Southeastern county. Winter asked the pharmacist for his support. The pharmacist said he would not support him. When Winter asked why not, the man replied, "When you were governor, I asked you to get my daughter in medical school, and you would not do it." Winter replied that he did not play that kind of politics to which the pharmacist replied, "Well, I do." As we walked out, Winter turned to me and said, "Put him down as 'doubtful.'"

A story he liked to tell was about coming out of a county courthouse one day and hearing two elderly gentlemen on a nearby bench. One said, "Ain't that William Winter?" The other one said,

“I thought he was dead.” The first one said, “If he ain’t, he ought to be.”

Winter often followed the Golden Rule to turn the other cheek when he was cursed or treated ugly by others. He would simply say, “Well, we just disagree on that. Have a nice day.” He treated everyone with respect and always gave differing opinions a respectable hearing.

Winter was the quintessential transformational leader. He had many of the following traits:

1. **Courage**—Probably the most important trait for a transformational leader. “Damned if you do and damned if you don’t” decisions have to be made. One operates in the gray as these decisions are made based on the leader’s best judgement. These are not black-and-white decisions with a manual to follow. Winter was not afraid to make these types of decisions in his administrative roles throughout his long career in public service. He never shied away from controversy regardless of its effects on opinions his fellow Mississippians had of him.

2. **Visionary**—Winter had a vision of what he wanted changed to make Mississippi a better state. Plus, he could sell that vision to his constituents both orally and in his writings.

3. **Good at hiring the right people for his staff**—Winter combined young, energetic, dedicated staff members (“The Boys of Spring”) with older, experienced veterans. He was talented in getting the best from this diversity and giving credit freely for accomplishments of his staff.

4. **Perseverance**—Winter ran three times for governor. He persevered in pushing his reform in education at times when it looked doubtful for a good final result.

5. **A knowledge of the history of his constituency and how that history shaped the present**—He loved Mississippi and understood its often benighted status as well, if not better than, any other public servant.

6. **Intelligence**—Winter was an intellect on several subjects and could converse with experts in those fields, but he did not lose the common touch with his constituents. He was reared in rural Mississippi and understood the condition of his rural friends and colleagues.

7. Kindness—This trait is very important, especially when combined with toughness. Despite his many kindnesses, he was tough enough to fool those who thought his kindness was a sign of weakness. He never had rancor in his heart for those who vehemently disagreed with his beliefs through the years. He seldom missed an opportunity to help someone. I later learned of several occasions when he paid the college tuition for some individual who was poor but showed potential.

In summary, a quote from President Harry Truman in speaking of Abraham Lincoln is applicable, “He had a good head and a great brain and a kind heart.”¹ Throughout Winter’s life, consistent themes emerged—his commitment to a workable social contract, his belief in the value of every citizen, and his deep abiding love for Mississippi.

I think William Winter was one of Mississippi’s finest statesmen—one who served his state, region, and country for over seventy years. He gave me and so many others the greatest gift you can give someone—the opportunity to improve the lives of others. I am extremely fortunate to have worked with him as well as been his friend for forty-seven years.

¹ Jon Meacham, *Perspective: The Moral Utility of History*, DESERET NEWS (June 21, 2021, 11:00 PM), <https://www.deseret.com/2021/6/21/22543912/perspective-the-moral-utility-of-history-harry-truman-abraham-lincoln-better-angels-america> [https://perma.cc/R56B-USFK].