

**Noblesse Oblige and Practical Politics: Winthrop Rockefeller and the Civil Rights Movement**  
CATHY KUNZINGER URWIN

**ON SUNDAY APRIL 7, 1968, Arkansas Governor Winthrop Rockefeller stood hand-in-hand with black leaders on the steps of the state capitol and sang “We Shall Overcome.” Approximately three thousand people, two-thirds of whom were black, had gathered at this prayer service to remember Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., slain three days earlier in Memphis. In his eulogy the governor asked the assembled crowd to “not forget that we are all creatures of God.” Rockefeller was the only southern governor to publicly eulogize King in the days following the assassination.**

Winthrop Rockefeller was unique in Arkansas history. Elected in 1966 and reelected in 1968, he was the state’s first Republican governor since Reconstruction. But it was in the field of civil rights that Rockefeller made one of his greatest contributions to the state’s history. It was not political expediency that moved Rockefeller to adopt the cause of civil rights. In fact, he repeatedly downplayed his association with civil rights during his political career in Arkansas in order to avoid alienating the segregationist vote. Winthrop Rockefeller championed the cause of civil rights because he was raised to do so. Helping to advance African-American rights, particularly in education, was a family tradition. John D. Rockefeller, Winthrop’s grandfather, made his first gift to African-American education in June 1882, when he gave $250 to the Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary, a school for black women. On Winthrop’s paternal grandmother’s side, the fight to uplift African Americans predated the Civil War. As a girl, Laura Spelman Rockefeller with her family helped runaway slaves as part of the Underground Railroad. Atlanta Female Baptist Seminary was renamed Spelman College in 1884 in honor of Laura’s parents. John D. Rockefeller continued to give money and land to both Spelman College and its counterpart for men, Morehouse College.  

This family commitment to African-American causes intensified in succeeding generations. Winthrop’s father, John D. Rockefeller Jr., was one of the founders of the United Negro College Fund. The Rockefeller family became involved with the National Urban League in 1921. Winthrop joined the executive board in 1940 and in 1947 became chairman of the Urban League Service Fund’s corporate division. In 1952 he donated Standard Oil of California stock worth approximately one hundred thousand dollars for the purpose of purchasing a league headquarters building. Rockefeller’s connection to the National Urban League, actively and financially, continued until his death.  

Rockefeller involved himself in other civil rights issues and organizations long before he ever thought of moving to Arkansas. In

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3. Winthrop Rockefeller to Rodman Rockefeller, May 16, 1969, Winthrop Rockefeller Collection, University of Arkansas at Little Rock Archives and Special Collections, University of Arkansas at Little Rock Library (hereafter cited as WR Papers), Record Group III, Box 571, File 3; *New York Times*, September 26, 1946; April 18, 1947.

1936, while learning the oil business in Texas, he tried unsuccessfully to establish a local community health organization that would be run by blacks for blacks. His interest had been aroused when his black maid suffered an appendicitis attack. Through a letter to his father, Rockefeller enlisted the aid of both the Rockefeller Foundation and the Rosenwald Foundation but ultimately failed because of disinterest on the part of the white trustees of the local black hospital.3

Rockefeller toured the United States for the secretary of war in 1946, surveying veterans' readjustment problems. James "Jimmy" Hudson, a black private detective from Harlem who had been working for Winthrop since 1937, accompanied him. At each stop on the tour, Hudson collected data on the problems faced by black veterans, and this information was incorporated into the final report. In the report Rockefeller stated that the black veteran faced great difficulty reverting to civilian life because "his color nullifies the fact that he is a veteran." The report asked the armed forces to help combat racial prejudice at home.6

Throughout the late 1940s and early 1950s, Rockefeller promoted the cause of fair employment practice legislation both in federal employment and in American industry. In a 1952 speech to the National Urban League Conference, he called fair employment practice legislation a "very useful tool" against discrimination. He called for an educational campaign to awaken people to the immorality and economic waste of racial discrimination.7

In 1953 Winthrop Rockefeller moved to Arkansas, and while he may have changed his state of residence, the causes and values he championed did not change. His move south was closely followed by the events that have been heralded as the start of the modern Civil Rights Movement: the Supreme Court decision Brown v. Board of Education and the Montgomery, Alabama, bus boycott. Governor Orval Faubus appointed Rockefeller the first chairman of the Arkansas Industrial Development Commission (AIDC) in 1955, and the following year Rockefeller warned publicly that southern opposition to integration would have a negative effect on industrialization.8 Those words would prove prophetic in 1957 when Little Rock became the site of one of the most significant desegregation cases of the modern era—the Central High Crisis. When Governor Faubus used the Arkansas National Guard to prevent the integration of Central High by nine African-American students, he forced a very reluctant President Eisenhower to send the 101st Airborne Division to the school to protect the nine students. A month after the crisis began, Rockefeller issued a statement that the crisis was damaging industry. In fact, not one major firm moved to Little Rock in the three years following the crisis.9

The Central High Crisis gives a clear indication of how important segregation was to white voters in Arkansas. Orval Faubus got what he wanted out of the crisis—a third term as governor—making him the first to win a third term in fifty years. The voters of Little Rock closed the city's high schools for the entire 1958-1959 school year rather than continue integration. And seven-term Congressman Brooks Hays, who had tried unsuccessfully to reach a compromise between Eisenhower and Faubus, was defeated in his bid for reelection in 1958 by a segregationist write-in candidate who announced his campaign just one week before the election.10 These lessons would not be lost on Rockefeller when he


8Arkansas Gazette, April 13, 23, 1956.


10Closing the city's high schools shocked the more moderate citizens of Little Rock into action, and when the schools reopened in 1959, all the high schools were integrated on a limited basis. Arkansas Gazette, October 3, 5, 1957; Orval Eugene Faubus, Down from the Hills Two (Little Rock: Democrat Printing and Lithographing, 1986), 5; Tony Freyer, The Little Rock Crisis: A Constitutional Interpretation (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1984), 148; Harry S. Ashmore, Arkansas: A History (New York: W.
decided not long afterward to become actively involved in his adopted state's politics.

Nineteen-sixty-four was an important year in the history of American race relations. The twenty-fourth amendment to the United States Constitution was ratified, abolishing the poll tax. Three civil rights workers were murdered in Mississippi, and President Lyndon Johnson pressed the Civil Rights Act through Congress. In Arkansas Winthrop Rockefeller ran for the first time as a Republican candidate for governor.

Rockefeller did not win the 1964 election but garnered 43 percent of the vote against incumbent Orval Faubus. Race was an issue which Faubus used successfully against Rockefeller. Rockefeller's involvement with the National Urban League and his family's history of interracial philanthropy were well known. A pre-election poll showed that compared with the 49 percent of the voters statewide who felt that Faubus could do the best job of keeping racial peace in Arkansas, only 28 percent thought Rockefeller most likely to do so. Rockefeller was very careful not to come out in favor of integration. The 1964 Arkansas Republican party platform mentioned the illegality of separate schools, but called for correcting the inequality in funding for these separate schools which, "it is realistic to assume" would "exist for years to come." The only mention in the platform of civil rights was a statement that "human relations problems can best be solved on the local level and, in this area, the greatest permanent progress can be made through patient, good-faith, voluntary action rather than through violence, coercive legislation or court order."^12

In part, the carefully worded appeal for voluntary gradualism in the 1964 Republican party platform was political, but it must be noted that it also reflected Winthrop Rockefeller's own philosophy. Rockefeller opposed the 1964 Civil Rights Act on the grounds that it granted extraordinary powers to the executive branch of government. He believed that in the long run, moral persuasion would be much more effective in bringing about racial equality. Rockefeller learned racial justice from his parents at least thirty years before the modern Civil Rights Movement began. In the context of the 1960s, therefore, he was not a liberal. He did not believe in giving blacks any special favors to correct existing injustices but rather the opportunity and education to compete on an equal footing with whites.

Rockefeller ran for governor again in 1966, this time against "Justice Jim" Johnson, a hard-core segregationist and one of the founders of Arkansas's white Citizens Council. Johnson did not back away from his segregationist views, but by 1966 most white Arkansans had accepted the existence of the Civil Rights Movement and the futility of trying to stop it. Johnson's extremism was certainly a major factor in Rockefeller's victory. This was the first gubernatorial election under the new voter registration system, which eliminated block purchases of poll taxes, and approximately 90 percent of Arkansas's black voters cast their ballots for Rockefeller. But Rockefeller also defeated Johnson in about half of the state's rural counties, where segregationist support had traditionally been greatest.^14

Rockefeller's years as governor, 1967-1971, coincided with vast changes in the direction, tone, and goals of the Civil Rights Movement. Largely because of those changes, Rockefeller found greater success in working for and with the black community in Arkansas during his first term in office than he would find during his second. As governor, Rockefeller's main emphasis was on creating an equal playing field, to create an atmosphere in the state where blacks and whites would be considered solely on merit rather than race. This meant giving black Arkansans a voice in government by appointing them to state boards and

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commissions and hiring blacks for positions of power, not just the traditional custodial jobs.

High on the list of the new governor's priorities was the creation of a Human Resources Commission, the purpose of which would be to determine if the state was discriminating on the basis of race. Rockefeller attempted to have this commission created as an agency of the executive branch by the Sixty-sixth General Assembly in its regular 1967 session. The bill creating the commission passed the House, but was tabled by a voice vote in the Senate. When it was brought up in the Senate, one member inquired: "Isn't that that civil rights bill?" Undeterred, Rockefeller created the Governor's Council on Human Resources by executive order in June 1967. The council first met that September; its goal was to upgrade "the employment opportunities available to our people, and make the best possible use of the state's human resources."

But, as John Ward, Rockefeller's public relations director and biographer noted, "the organization, for all its high purposes, never did much." The council, created by executive order and not legislation, had no enforcement power; its purpose was to advise and recommend. By publicizing its goals, it could provide moral support and encouragement to those who already believed in its goals and advice to those with the power to change the status quo, but it could do little more.

In June 1968 Rockefeller appointed an African American, Ozell Sutton, executive director of the Governor's Council on Human Resources. Sutton, a native Arkansan, took a one-year leave of absence from his job with the U.S. Justice Department to work for Rockefeller. Sutton tried unsuccessfully to obtain legislative authorization for the council. He also focused on improving relations between the police and the minority community through a suggested "Code of Conduct" sent to Arkansas chiefs of police and worked hard within the executive branch to increase minority appointments and state jobs.

Rockefeller dramatically improved the number of blacks appointed to state boards and commissions. Prior to his election the only boards or commissions with any minority representation were those dealing with black institutions or those with federal financing where pressure from Washington made minority representation necessary.

By far the most dramatic change came in Arkansas's draft boards. Rockefeller nominated Col. Willard A. Hawkins as state director of the Selective Service of Arkansas in January 1967. One of Colonel Hawkins's primary goals was to put minority representation on Arkansas's draft boards, which to that point had had none. Although the Selective Service was a federal agency, it was up to the governor and Hawkins to nominate members of the local draft boards and the two state appeals boards. Like the Hawkins appointment, those nominations would then be approved by the president. By October 1969 forty-eight African Americans and one Asian American were on local boards, and one African American sat on each of the two appeals boards. More than 85 percent of Arkansas's minority population was under the jurisdiction of

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16 W. Rockefeller to O'Connell, September 14, 1967, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 116, File 2.
18 Memo, William T. Kelly, chairman, Governor's Council on Human Resources, to W. Rockefeller, April 29, 1968, WR Papers, Box 52, File 2c; memo, Ozell Sutton to officials, civic leaders, and concerned persons, September 13, 1968; memo, Sutton to mayors, city managers, and chiefs of police, September 13, 1968; newsletter, Governor's Council on Human Resources, December 1968, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 116, File 2.
19 Memo, Sutton to W. Rockefeller, January 6, 1969; memo, Sutton to mayors, city managers and chiefs of police, September 13, 1968; memo, Sutton to officials, civic leaders and concerned persons, September 13, 1968; newsletter, Governor's Council on Human Resources, December 1968, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 116, File 2.
local draft boards. Integrating draft boards was relatively easy, since no one in Arkansas (i.e., the State Senate) had to approve the appointments aside from Hawkins and Rockefeller. However, there was opposition, much of which came from members of Arkansas’s Republican party. Their objections rested on their view of selective service board appointments as political patronage plums awarded at the discretion of the Republican party county chairmen. In a long December 1968 letter to the executive director of the Arkansas Republican party, Hawkins explained that while he was “most happy to receive any recommendations for appointments at any time from county chairmen or others in the county,” he had other considerations and responsibilities. These included not only his and Rockefeller’s commitment to integrating the draft boards, but also the reality of seeing that “the coming legislature work in harmony with the administration.” In other words, the predominantly Democratic legislators needed to be consulted regarding appointments in their counties in exchange for their support for the governor’s legislative program. In spite of the political realities, the integration of Arkansas’s draft boards was the most successful of Rockefeller’s attempts to bring blacks into state government.

In November 1969 Rockefeller named William “Sonny” Walker head of the state Office of Economic Opportunity, making Walker the first black department head in Arkansas and the first black state OEO director in the South. Walker publicly admitted that it was “lonely” being the first and resigned after one year in office, citing other job offers as well as the refusal of the Legislative Council to increase his salary—a salary that was paid in federal funds and was the lowest in the region for a state OEO director. The council authorized a salary, also federally funded, $1,680 higher than Walker’s for his assistant. Walker told the press that one legislator had remarked that “$15,000 was too much to pay a nigger.”

In terms of hiring blacks to fill white collar jobs in state government, Rockefeller was often criticized for not doing more. More than one year after assuming the governorship, Rockefeller publicly admitted that discrimination against blacks in state offices did exist. Although in 1968 blacks represented 21.9 percent of the population, they held less than 3 percent of the seventeen thousand available state jobs. Rockefeller refused to order department heads to hire more blacks, relying instead on “persuasion and leadership.” Even Colonel Hawkins, with his impressive record of integrating draft boards, had no black employees in his office until January 1968.

Rockefeller’s refusal to impose hiring quotas on state department heads created a situation in which long-standing prejudices would often win out. Rockefeller’s first director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, appointed in January 1967, was Glen Jermstad, an influential member of the state Republican party. In August 1967 Jermstad fired a black employee of the agency, whose employment had preceded Rockefeller’s election. An investigation by the regional Office of Economic Opportunity followed, revealing that the fired employee had a valid case in claiming discrimination. Though the black man was told there was no place for him in the proposed reorganization of the office, as he lacked the “background or the qualifications,” the white employee who was retained and given the job in the OEO’s department of education had far fewer qualifications. The fired black employee had a college degree and twenty-five years teaching experience, while the white

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23Memphis Commercial Appeal, April 12, 1968; Arkansas Gazette, November 12, 1967; August 30, 1969.

24United Press International wire copy, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 326, File 7, File 1.
man had no degree and had been a grocer. In spite of attempts to involve Rockefeller, the case still had not been resolved in May 1968.  

The lack of blacks in state jobs was a major topic of a meeting between the governor and approximately thirty leaders of the African-American community held on April 9, 1968, in the wake of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.’s death, as an attempt to prevent violent reaction to the assassination. At the meeting Rockefeller acknowledged that more needed to be done to improve the number of blacks hired by state agencies and promised to look into charges of discrimination by local state Employment Security Division offices but once again backed off from any promises to force state agencies to hire blacks. During the 1968 campaign Rockefeller was criticized by Dr. Jerry Jewell, head of the Arkansas NAACP. Jewell told the New York Times that the black vote would not be a sure thing for Rockefeller, stating “He hasn’t come out for the Negro. He could have done so much.” Regarding the governor’s black appointments, Jewell said “Sure it’s a ‘new thing,’ but they’re nothing but pets. We have more than our share of Toms.”

By 1969 the frequent pressures of black leadership had begun to pay off. The state revenue commissioner promised to fire any employee who discriminated in hiring practices and to adopt a system whereby all people would be notified of revenue office job openings rather than continue the practice of making appointments to these jobs based on political patronage.

The middle to late 1960s saw an eruption of urban riots and violent protests across the nation as the Civil Rights Movement turned its attention from legal segregation to economic discrimination, hopelessness, and despair. Though protests in Arkansas did not compare to the death and destruction of Watts or Detroit, the state saw its share of protests. As governor, Rockefeller usually found himself involved in these disturbances. Following the death of Martin Luther King Jr., on April 4, 1968, riots flared up in 110 cities across the United States. Aside from a minor disturbance in Pine Bluff, Arkansas avoided the violence at that time, largely because of Rockefeller’s own involvement in the memorial service at the state capitol. The service had been held at the suggestion of Rockefeller’s wife, Jeannette Edris Rockefeller, following a request by black leaders for a marching permit. It is also important to note that while the service may have prevented violence, Rockefeller’s presence created problems for him among some white Republicans.

Little Rock did experience several days of violence in August 1968 after an eighteen-year-old black youth was killed by a white trusty at the Pulaski County Penal Farm. The trusty was charged with manslaughter. Rockefeller called out the National Guard and imposed a curfew on the county. The disturbances ended after a few days.

The largest and most significant racial disturbances to take place during Rockefeller’s governorship occurred not in Little Rock, but in Forrest City, a town approximately forty miles west of Memphis. Forrest City in 1969 had a population of fourteen thousand, 50 percent of whom were black. White insensitivity to racial equality was especially strong in eastern Arkansas, a legacy of the plantation system. The black population of Forrest City itself had increased in recent years as mechanization forced tenant farmers into town in search of industrial jobs. In 1968 members of the John Birch Society gained control of the

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27 Alfredo Garcia, civil rights coordinator, to Walter Richter, regional director, Office of Economic Opportunity, Austin, Texas, November 11, 1967; Garcia to Richter, April 29, 1968, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 323, File 3; Arkansas Democrat, February 5, 1967.


30 Arkansas Gazette, August 30, 1969.
Forrest City school board, and in March the district fired, with no explanation, Rev. J. F. Cooley, a black, who had taught for eleven years at the city’s all-black Lincoln Junior-Senior High. Reverend Mr. Cooley’s problems seem to have stemmed from his activities in the Civil Rights Movement. In December 1968 Cooley, along with Rev. Cato Brooks Jr., formed the Committee for Peaceful Coexistence with the purpose of better expressing black grievances to the white community. Cooley had also helped organize peaceful demonstrations and worked with young black males to prevent juvenile delinquency. In January the school board dismissed Cooley as black juvenile probation officer, a position he had held for eight years. After Cooley’s March dismissal from his teaching position, junior high students vandalized Lincoln, breaking every window in the building, tearing down lockers and vending machines, and scattering debris in the halls. Cooley publicly condemned the riot, and Rockefeller called in the state police. Four youths were sentenced to juvenile training schools.

The March incident was the beginning of a long year in Forrest City. In April the Committee for Peaceful Coexistence issued a list of ten grievances against the “community power structure,” and asked for assistance from federal and state civil rights groups. The Forrest City mayor’s reaction was that “they’re just like all these groups. They can’t come up with anything.” The mayor’s response helps illustrate why change was so slow in coming to Forrest City; the white community refused to see that any inequities existed. A grand jury empaneled to investigate the Lincoln school riot failed “to conceive any justification for either the riot in March or a student walkout in April.”

Racial tension continued unabated throughout the summer, fed by the threat of a “poor people’s march” from Forrest City to Little Rock. The march, scheduled for August 20–24, was meant to “dramatize outdated conditions black people are forced to live in throughout the state of Arkansas,” according to its organizer, Reverend Mr. Brooks. Rockefeller became directly involved, holding a meeting on August 6 with leaders from both sides of Forrest City’s community. Rockefeller hoped to prevent the march by offering to travel to Forrest City with state department heads in an attempt to “find some solutions to problems that have been aggravating.” The governor went to Forrest City as promised and also met twice with Brooks before the minister agreed on August 19 to postpone the march because the governor needed time to make good on his promises of change and because the level of racial tension and fear of the marchers on the part of whites “makes it dangerous at this time.” Rockefeller, prior to his August 19 meeting with Brooks, consulted with department heads as promised and issued a lengthy response to Brooks’ complaints and requests. These complaints centered around the absence of equal opportunity and racial parity in both state services and jobs.

Rockefeller had been under enormous pressure from various groups to see to it that the “poor people’s march” did not take place—especially the State Police, who feared outbreaks of violence along the marchers’ route, and prominent Republicans, who had objected to Rockefeller’s meeting with Brooks, preferring that the governor meet with Forrest City’s “good Negroes,” blacks the white community was willing to accept. Despite the pressure and Rockefeller’s apparent success on

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34*Arkansas Gazette*, April 8, 1969.
August 19, the march did take place as scheduled, but with different leadership. Renamed a “walk against fear,” and beginning in West Memphis, it was led by Lance “Sweet Willie Wine” Watson, the leader of a militant Memphis group called the Invaders. Watson had been in Forrest City at the invitation of Brooks, helping to organize a summer boycott of white businesses by the town’s black population. While Brooks had promised to arm his marchers only with prayerbooks, Watson told the press that he and his group would “survive and defend ourselves if necessary.” Rockefeller urged all Arkansans, black and white, to “completely ignore the marchers,” and declared a state of emergency in Prairie County, where violent white reaction seemed most likely. The marchers were escorted by plainclothes state policemen, and although Watson had promised a marching force two hundred strong, only five people accompanied him. The march ended without incident in Little Rock on August 24.42

The march aggravated the racial climate in Forrest City, and several incidents in the week that followed made it much worse. After two white women were raped, allegedly by black youths, and several members of Watson’s Invaders were arrested for beating, stabbing, and robbing a white grocery store clerk, a white protest erupted in violence. Between five hundred and one thousand whites gathered in front of City Hall, beating at least seven people, including Watson. Rockefeller declared a state of emergency and sent in the National Guard to prevent further violence. One white businessman told the *New York Times* that what the crowd wanted “is for the police to shoot some Negroes. And while they know that can’t be, they do demand some show of force, and it’s all very frustrating.”43 Not a single white was arrested as a result of the incident, but Watson was charged with and convicted of disorderly conduct. In September, following protests and boycotts by white students at the junior and senior high schools, the school board closed Forrest City’s schools “indefinitely,” but reopened them after four days.44 Racial unrest and fear continued in Forrest City, Rockefeller having been unable to find a middle ground that would appease the many factions within the community. But a study of the unrest in Forrest City by a non-profit group called the Race Relations Information Center praised Rockefeller for “repeatedly putting himself on record in favor of equal opportunity and justice.”45

Many of Forrest City’s problems revolved around the schools. The 1954 *Brown v. Board of Education* decision declaring “separate but equal” schools unconstitutional had not ended segregation. Southern schools frequently adopted one of two methods to meet the letter of the law, while ignoring the spirit of it. One was gradualism, desegregating a few children at a time, as in the Little Rock Central High case of 1957. The other, and most common, was “freedom of choice” integration, as at Forrest City. Students, both white and black, were free to attend whatever school they wanted to. But few whites were likely to choose to attend an academically and physically inferior black school, while few blacks were willing to accept the social isolation and harassment that went with being one of the few to attend the white schools. In Forrest City the black schools were still all black in 1969, while the white schools were approximately 83 percent white.46

Rockefeller did not publicly condemn freedom of choice integration, in spite of the fact that it was an obvious attempt at avoidance. The governor was under tremendous pressure, even before his election, to allow school districts to maintain local control over desegregation. And Rockefeller himself had disagreed with the 1964 Civil Rights Act, considering it too vague, with too much power concentrated in the executive
branch of the federal government.\textsuperscript{47} During the 1966 gubernatorial election, Rockefeller’s advisors urged him to support legal assistance for school districts fighting the federal government’s guidelines for integration, either personally or as governor. Considering the nature of the statements being suggested, Rockefeller’s public statement of August 30 was relatively mild. He expressed disapproval for the “Federal Guidelines as they exist today” but suggested that the remedy lie in electing to Congress “those candidates who will reflect the attitude of the people.”\textsuperscript{48}

In the May 1968 special session of the Arkansas General Assembly, Rockefeller supported a bill that would permit the state to help pay the legal costs of school districts fighting integration in the courts. The legal fund had first been established in 1959 but required reappropriation each legislative session. The regular session of the General Assembly in 1967 had passed Act 655, reimbursing up to 50 percent of the expenses incurred in 1965 and 1966. Almost all of the money went to the Little Rock law firm of Smith, Williams, Friday and Bowen, which handled most of the desegregation lawsuits and drew up the new bill. This bill would extend payment through 1969. Two circumstances created a firestorm around the new bill: Rockefeller’s sponsorship of the bill and the changes in many people’s attitudes by 1968. The bill was defeated in the House. One state representative who spoke against the bill opposed it on the grounds that it financed resistance “to what now seems to be the law of the land.”\textsuperscript{49} Black leaders criticized Rockefeller for supporting the bill, and the \textit{Arkansas Gazette} noted that support for the governor had weakened in the black community.\textsuperscript{50}

\textsuperscript{47}“Meet the Press” transcript, May 3, 1964, WR Papers, Record Group IV, Box 47, File 4.


\textsuperscript{49}\textit{Arkansas Gazette}, May 29, 22, 1968.

\textsuperscript{50}Telegram, John W. Walker to W. Rockefeller, May 23, 1968, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 608; telegram, T. E. Patterson to W. Rockefeller, May 27, 1968, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 557; \textit{Arkansas Gazette}, June 2, 1968.

Rockefeller regained some of that support the following year. Under the terms of the 1964 Civil Rights Act, dual school systems had to be merged or desegregated by September 1969 or lose federal funds. When it became apparent that President Nixon planned to relax the guidelines, Rockefeller sent him a telegram asking him to reconsider “because it breaks faith with the black community and compromises to a disturbing degree the position of those who have courageously gone ahead with objectivity and a sense of justice—if not always with enthusiasm—in the implementation of federal desegregation guidelines.”\textsuperscript{51}

The Nixon administration relaxed the guidelines by extending the deadline for those districts with “bona fide educational and administrative problems.”\textsuperscript{52} In April 1970 Rockefeller was notified that forty-nine Arkansas districts operated dual school systems and were not in compliance with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. As part of his continuing attempt to appease both sides of this passionate debate, Rockefeller asked the Justice Department to delay formal action in order to give the districts time to comply with the order voluntarily. The Justice Department’s reply gave the Arkansas districts until September 1970 to achieve “full desegregation.” The Justice Department also wrote to the Arkansas Board of Education as “the appropriate agency to be called upon to adjust the conditions of unlawful segregation and racial discrimination existing in the public school systems of Arkansas.”\textsuperscript{53} This was significant, because the state board of education had thus far adamantly refused to take an active role in achieving integrated schools. The board believed that “the right to require the interpretation of the court decision as applied to individual school districts cannot be questioned,” and had consistently refused to advise school districts on matters of desegregation except upon request, claiming that “it is not our function or legal right


to question the wisdom of legal decisions by local boards." By the
time school began in September 1970, all forty-nine districts were at
least minimally desegregated, only three of them by court order. 35

The most controversial aspect of desegregation was busing. The
United States Supreme Court ruled in October 1969 in Beatrix
Alexander et al., v. Holmes County (Mississippi) Board of
Education et al., that school districts must end segregation "at once."
In December the Court used this ruling to order six school districts in
four states to desegregate by February 1, 1970.36 These decisions
increased pressure on politicians to take a stand on busing. In September
1969 the Southern Governors' Conference had passed a resolution calling
for "restraint and good judgement" in the use of busing to desegregate.
Rockefeller voted for the resolution after being the only abstention on a
failed resolution that would have condemned busing.37 But the October
and December Court rulings revived public fear of and opposition to
busing. In January Rockefeller issued a statement regarding busing: "It
should be used and used with discretion, but neither do I think we should
blatantly disregard the usefulness of the bus in implementing the court
orders and the law working toward sound integration." The Arkansas
Gazette praised Rockefeller for not "joining in the hypocritical cry
suddenly heard throughout the South after whole generations of whites
and blacks alike were bused all over kingdom come to keep schools
totally segregated."38

Rockefeller's courage and moderation regarding busing did not last
long. Opposition to his statement was immediate and strong. State
politicians, both Democrat and Republican, publicly disagreed with the
governor. Rockefeller received petitions with the signatures of 4,495
people from one county disagreeing with his stand on busing and assuring
him "that your statements will be publicized should you

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34 State Board of Education to T. E. Patterson, September 9, 1968, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 323, File 1.
35 Arkansas Gazette, April 4, May 14, June 6, 18, July 28, August 1, 30, October 15, 1970.
38 Arkansas Gazette, January 24, 1970.

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consider reelection." 39 A member of the governor's staff noted:
"Politically, this misunderstanding seems to be costing a lot of votes." 40
Consequently, Rockefeller issued a new statement on February 21 to
clarify what he called the "distortion" of his position:

I endorse the position wholeheartedly which the Southern
governors have taken on the resolution [of September 1969], and
I want to make it perfectly clear that I have not recommended
busing—and am not recommending it now.

... The decisions will be made in the local school districts,
and the responsibility for carrying out those decisions also rests
with each individual school board, working within the limitations
of the law and the various court orders. 41

Rockefeller had obviously backed down on the busing issue in an
effort to avoid alienating conservative white voters. This was a deliberate
political decision, as later recalled by Robert Faulkner, Rockefeller's
executive secretary in 1970: "I was one of them that suggested, and it
was strictly a political [move], that he modify, or 'fuzzy' if you will, his
support of busing." In retrospect, Faulkner reflected "that may have been
a mistake." 42 Rockefeller received criticism for his about-face, both
from the press and civil rights groups. Even though Rockefeller's
announcement that he would seek a third term as governor was still six
weeks away, discussion of another campaign had been going on for
months. If Rockefeller's Democratic opponent had been Orval Faubus as
expected, the governor's backpedaling on busing might not have done as
much damage. But when the Democratic candidate turned out to be a
young liberal Democrat named Dale Bumpers, Rockefeller was in

40 Memo, Donna Williams to Bob Faulkner and John L. Ward, February 20, 1970, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 324, File 1.
41 Statement by W. Rockefeller, February 21, 1970, WR Papers, Record Group IV, Box 165, Folder 4.
42 Robert Faulkner, interview by author, February 9, 1988, Little Rock, AR.
trouble. Faubus had accused Bumpers in the primary runoff of being pro-
busing; nonetheless, Bumpers won an easy victory over Arkansas's symbol of white opposition to integration.63

Rockefeller lost decisively to Bumpers in the 1970 general election. The primary reason for Rockefeller’s defeat was the return of white moderates to the Democratic fold.64 But there was almost certainly a loss of support for Rockefeller among black voters. One survey showed that in Little Rock, Rockefeller received only 49 percent of the black vote in 1970, as compared with 81 percent in the 1966 election.65

Winthrop Rockefeller died February 22, 1973. At his memorial service on March 4 one of the eulogies was delivered by William “Sonny” Walker. Walker credited Rockefeller with treating black Arkansans as “full and equal partners to progress. . . . While Win Rockefeller helped free the black man from the oppression of Jim Crow, he helped free the white man from the prison of prejudice.”66

Governor Rockefeller’s record regarding civil rights was erratic. He promoted color blindness in state appointments and jobs but refused to require state agency heads to do the same. He applauded the spirit of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 but criticized its reliance on the executive branch of the federal government for implementation. He reversed his public support of busing in an obvious attempt to gain votes.

Rockefeller was not a liberal, but in Arkansas in the 1960s his actions in race relations were liberal. As a former Democratic legislator put it: “Probably his greatest accomplishment was to make racial tolerance acceptable and respectable in Arkansas.”67 Considering the racial climate in the state during his term in office, Rockefeller showed great moral and political courage in his almost continual support of racial equality by example. When he stood on the steps of the State Capitol and eulogized Martin Luther King Jr., he did so at tremendous political risk. The same can be said of his handling of the disturbances at Forrest City. In September 1969 Rockefeller met with Arkansas’s congressional delegation and briefed them on his efforts to ease racial tension in the state. Afterwards, Rockefeller told the press that the delegation had “pledged to support his efforts.”68 Three days later, the governor was forced to tell the press that his earlier statement was a “misunderstanding” that he had not asked for, nor had he received any support, “either direct or implied.”69 The retraction should not come as a surprise considering that Congress passed four major civil rights bills between 1957 and 1968, and all passed without a single vote from an Arkansas congressman or senator.70 In the field of civil rights, Arkansas politicians, Democrat and Republican, liberal and conservative, were afraid of the political repercussions of endorsing civil rights actions or legislation. Rockefeller stands as a marked exception to that generalization.

There were concrete advances made as a result of Rockefeller’s actions. In 1968 the U. S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare conducted a review of Arkansas’s compliance with the 1964 Civil Rights Act in the area of state health and welfare services. Their report to the governor stated: “The review team was pleased with the evident progress

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63Memo, Greg Simon to Fisher and Charles Allbright, August 5, 1970, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 640, File 3; Mid-South Opinion Surveys, April 20, September 13, 1970, WR Papers, Record Group IV, Box 82; New York Times, July 28, August 11, 26, September 6, 10, 1970; Arkansas Gazette, February 24, September 2, 3, 4, 9, 1970; Pine Bluff Commercial, February 24, 1970.
65Numan V. Bartley and Hugh D. Graham, Southern Politics and the Second Reconstruction (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1975), 122, 149. Numan and Bartley base this figure on the voting returns of predominantly black precincts in Little Rock. Racially mixed precincts were eliminated from their analysis. In Faubus to Bumpers, Jim Ranchino asserts that Rockefeller held onto 88 percent of the black vote statewide. But Ranchino does not explain how he arrived at this figure. Rockefeller almost certainly received a higher percentage of the black vote in the Delta than he did in Little Rock. The only two counties he carried in 1970 were in the Delta. Statewide, the percentage of the black vote carried by Rockefeller probably lies somewhere between the 49 and 88 percent figures. But the statistical analysis necessary to verify this is not available. Numan V. Bartley and Hugh D. Graham, Southern Elections County and Precinct Data, 1950-1972 (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1978), x, 353; Ranchino, Faubus to Bumpers, 72, 74.
67Cal Ledbetter Jr., interview by author, September 15, 1987, Little Rock, AR.
68Arkansas Democrat, September 9, 1969.
69Ibid., September 12, 17, 1969.
70Ibid., April 11, 1968; Arkansas Gazette, April 12, 16, 1968.
in Arkansas in matters affecting compliance with Title VI of the Civil Rights Act. Overt, obvious forms of discrimination have almost disappeared. The attitude and desire of State people generally to achieve a nondiscriminatory treatment of people were gratifying. 

Much of the progress made by Rockefeller was done despite attempts by other politicians, particularly state legislators, to stop it. Even before Rockefeller became governor, Arkansas and Mississippi were the only states in their region without state human relations commissions. But the legislature refused to create one, so Rockefeller formed his own. In 1967 the legislature refused to consolidate the segregated state juvenile training schools despite the threatened loss of federal funds. So in 1968 the Juvenile Training School Board integrated the girls' schools without legislative authorization. The legislature protested, with one state senator remarking, "They're not going this fast in the public schools." But the schools remained integrated, without incident.

Certainly Rockefeller could have done more to improve race relations in Arkansas. But considering the political climate in Arkansas and Rockefeller's own aversion to both big government and affirmative action, he accomplished a great deal. And most importantly, he did make racial toleration "acceptable and respectable" in Arkansas. This was a tremendous legacy in and of itself. In 1987 Robert McCord wrote that Arkansans have "made much of the fact that Arkansas never experienced the violence that occurred in so many other American cities during the civil rights struggle. . . . The credit for this goes to Winthrop Rockefeller, who brought blacks into the mainstream of our society for the first time." The credit rightly belongs primarily to those people who fought year in and year out to improve race relations and civil rights. What makes Winthrop Rockefeller so unique and so important is that he was the first major political figure in Arkansas to listen and try to help.

71 J. H. Bond, regional director, to W. Rockefeller, December 12, 1968, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 420, File 1.
72 Report, U. S. Commission on Civil Rights, August 1965, WR Papers, Record Group III, Box 84, File 3.
74 Arkansas Gazette, September 27, 1967.

The Big Three of Late Twentieth-Century Arkansas Politics: Dale Bumpers, Bill Clinton, and David Pryor

DIANE D. BLAIR

The most publicized outcome of the 1994 national elections was the Republican party's capture of both houses of the U.S. Congress for the first time in forty years. A subsidiary, but no less consequential story, was evidence that the long-predicted realignment of the South, from its once solidly Democratic status to a partisanship toward Republicans, had finally materialized. The southern preference for Republican presidential candidates, well-established by the 1980s, penetrated in 1994 to congressional choices as well, with Republicans capturing a majority of all southern seats in both the House and the Senate. Republicans also held a majority of southern governorships in the aftermath of 1994 contests, and for the first time since Reconstruction, control of some southern state legislative chambers. As columnist David Broder observed, the Republicans "may have put the finishing touches on the 30-year-old effort to make the South their new foundation."

Arkansas was not entirely immune to the rising tides of southern Republicanism. For the second time in a row its four seats in the U.S. House of Representatives were split evenly between Republicans (Jay

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