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Plaquemines without The Great White Father

New Orleans

The death last month of Leander H. Perez, Sr. — for nearly half a century the rarely-disputed ruler of the oil sheikdom of Plaquemines Parish, La. — attracted little attention in the national press. And indeed, at 77, Perez seemed a curious anachronism in the America, even the South, of 1969. A throwback to Mississippi's Senator Bilbo on the one hand and Memphis' Boss Crump on the other, his crude and often demonological racism ("There's only two kinds of Nigras: bad ones are niggers and good ones are darkies") could be an embarrassment even to his friends in an era of more sophisticated discrimination. But in fact Perez remained a shrewd manipulator and a considerable power in Louisiana's topsy-turvy politics until the day he died; and his funeral — a Catholic funeral with requiem mass, despite his well-publicized excommunication in the early 1960's — attracted two governors (of Louisiana and Mississippi), two US Senators (Eastland and Ellender), and former Gov. George C. Wallace (who echoed Perez's 15-term Congressman and staunch friend, Rep. F. Edward Hebert, in hailing the deceased as "the noblest Roman of them all").

But even if the rest of the nation had ignored him completely, the good people of Plaquemines Parish (i.e., county) — a thousand square miles of farms and marshland lining the Mississippi River from New Orleans to the Gulf of Mexico and populated mainly by oil, sulfur, muskrats, and political know-nothingism — were determined to honor "the Judge" (the title Perez used almost as a first name, although he actually left the bench in 1924). The five-man Plaquemines Parish Commission Council, whose president happens to be Chalin O. Perez, son of Leander, unanimously decreed (everything in Plaquemines is passed unanimously) that in honor of "the dear departed Father of Plaquemines Parish, . . . brilliant statesman, noble leader, and truly Great American, Judge L. H. Perez," and because of his "love, devotion, and untiring efforts," particularly his "herculean" labors in rebuilding the parish after the ravages of Hurricane Betsy in 1965, all flags in the parish should fly at half-staff for two weeks, and "the birthdate of Plaquemines' Great Father," July 16, would be an official parish holiday every succeeding year. In charge of enforcing the holiday will be, presumably, Leander H. (Lea) Perez, Jr., brother of Chalin and district attorney of Plaquemines.

Meanwhile, five young Negroes, ranging in age from 19 to 24, who had entered a parish bar the night of

Perez's death and rashly announced their intention to celebrate, were promptly arrested on charges of drunkenness and "disturbing the peace." The five were given stiff jail sentences, without the option of paying the fine provided in state law.

Since the elder Perez's death, Chalin, Leander Jr., and their fellow public officials have given every indication that even though Plaquemines' Great Father is gone, his politics linger on. First, the Commission Council seized an early opportunity to prove that its zealous devotion to "Americanism" has not waned. The chance came when several black students at Southern University in New Orleans, a black state school whose faculty and facilities are both appallingly inadequate, lowered the campus American flag (in careful military fashion) to protest conditions at SUNO, and raised a multi-colored "black banner of liberation" in its place. The Plaquemines Council hurried to denounce the action as a "disgraceful display of treason and flag desecration." The Council did not, however, explain why the black students' temporary flag replacement was more treasonable than the permanent replacement of the Stars and Stripes by the Stars and Bars of the Confederacy in the hearts, and often the public displays, of "loyal" Plaqueminians. In fact, the Louisiana flag-desecration statute under which 27 SUNO students were arrested defines "flag" to mean the flags of the United States, the State of Louisiana, *and* the Confederate States of America.

Shortly after this demonstration of their loyalty to America and its ideals, the people of Plaquemines went to the polls in a local election and produced a 93.3 percent victory for the approved candidate. This is the same sort of margin which Perez-backed candidates (local, state, or Presidential) have always enjoyed in the parish's "democratic" elections, even after federal registrars arrived in 1965 to enroll some of the 97 percent of parish Negroes (*vs.* 12 percent of whites) not registered to vote. One factor helping to unify public opinion may have been that the Plaquemines Gazette, the weekly "newspaper" which serves as the official journal for all parish governmental bodies and as unofficial Perez mouthpiece, somehow neglected to mention the losing candidate's name in its pages until the story of his defeat appeared. Strangely, space was found weekly for front-page headlines announcing each parish official's endorsement of his opponent, and sample ballots on which only one name appeared.

Most recently, DA "Lea" Perez, Jr. provided graphic evidence that he fully shares the peculiar attitude toward judicial processes always held by "the Judge." On April 30 Perez Jr. and a group of Plaquemines deputies entered the federal court building in New Orleans' French Quarter and tried to arrest two men — Lawrence J. Rousselle, one of the Perezes' few remaining foes in their parish, and his New Orleans at-

torney, Benjamin E. Smith. Rousselle had been supposed to go on trial that day in a local Plaquemines court on a highly dubious charge of aggravated assault but had failed to appear. Instead, he and lawyer Smith were in New Orleans trying to have the case transferred to a federal court. They claim that Rousselle cannot expect a fair trial in Plaquemines, and the claim seems well-founded: two years ago Rousselle was charged with plotting to assassinate Perez Sr. That charge was brought shortly after Rousselle had appeared at Perez's estate (and parish Democratic headquarters) with a friend who was qualifying to run against Chalin Perez for Council president. Once Rousselle had been held in jail for two weeks on a \$75,000 bond, and once Chalin had won his election, no more was heard of the "assassination plot."

In the April 30 incident, Perez Jr. and his aides attempted to arrest Rousselle and Smith for contempt of the Plaquemines court and to cart them off to that parish, despite the attorney's claim that the Plaquemines officers had no jurisdiction in Orleans Parish, much less over an officer of a federal court. With his family looking on, Rousselle submitted, but Smith managed to fight off the deputies while banging on the door of the federal courtroom he had just left. When the judge appeared and discovered what was going on, he ordered Perez Jr. and his men to leave and issued orders forbidding further interference with Smith or his client while the removal proceedings were in litigation. The judge also reportedly gave "Lea" Perez a severe tongue-lashing.

Smith — a veteran civil rights lawyer whose home was once invaded by New Orleans police and the "Louisiana Joint Legislative Un-American Activities Committee," apparently in order to obtain some records desired by Senator Eastland's Internal Security Subcommittee but unobtainable through more regular channels — may go further. He says he will bring charges against Perez Jr. before the local or state bar associations (the same groups which recently declared themselves unable to do anything about a sometime Perez ally, New Orleans DA Jim Garrison, after the Clay Shaw trial debacle), the civil rights division of the Justice Department, and/or the FBI. And the local NAACP chapter may protest to the Justice Depart-

ment and the FBI about the convictions of the five young Plaquemines Negroes mentioned above. It will, however, surprise few people in New Orleans if nothing much happens as a result of either complaint; the federal government's record of trying to bring justice to Plaquemines Parish has always been spotty.

Ironically, however, the Rousselle-Smith episode may be symbolic, in a way, of one real change in Plaquemines Parish likely to result from the death of its "Great Father." In the old days, the parish was the center of a vast web of segregationist activities spreading throughout the South. Just over a year ago, for example, the elder Perez (aided, to be sure, by his sons and followers) was busily engaged on a plan to drive all out-of-state lawyers from Louisiana, thereby crippling civil-rights legal work in the state (NR, Feb. 24, 1968). The test case, involving attorney Richard Sobol of the Lawyers Constitutional Defense Committee, was ultimately dismissed by a federal court because its purpose was so patently harassment, but "the Judge" could at least boast of another *attempt* to turn back the "federal Gestapo" and the Zionist-Communist race mixers. Although reserving plenty of time for local quarrels and grudges (such as Rousselle himself), old Leander was always eager to move on to wider, and more dramatic, horizons — helping save Huey Long from impeachment in 1929, fighting a variety of later Longs, helping to set up the Dixiecrat party in 1948 and to sell Senator Harry Byrd on "massive resistance" in 1955.

On present evidence, neither Chalin nor Leander Jr. appears to have the same missionary zeal, nor the same legal and political acumen, as their father. And it seems unlikely (although one can never tell) that after "Lea" Perez's death the Plaquemines Commission Council will proclaim, as it did of his father, that he is "sadly missed" by "legions throughout our Country" as well as "all the people of Plaquemines."

Nevertheless, any diminution of that old-time fervor does not mean that new-fangled ideas like "equal justice" or "fair elections" or "democracy" ("I hate that word," Leander Sr. once said) are going to appear soon in Plaquemines. It is entirely possible that upon Chalin and Lea's deaths, a third generation of Perezes will be ready to assume control of a parish that remains today just as political scientist V. O. Key described it 20 years ago in his classic study of Southern politics — an "authoromous principality."

Earl Long is said to have once jibed at Leander Sr., "Whatcha gonna do now, Leander? The feds have got the atom bomb." His sons recognize that fact, one supposes, but they also know that on the pop-gun level of local politics, the atom bomb is of little use against the stubborn defenders of Plaquemines' salt-water marshes and its 'happy way of life."

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