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The Dixie Myth

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FROGMORE, S.C.—Since 1946, I have lived in a small Southern town and traveled over the South to dozens of other small towns, plying my trade as a writer. I've met a hundred Jimmy Carters, and, for that matter, Hamilton Jordans and Jody Powells. To me, none of them is really exceptional; they are the South today.

They are the current embodiment of what used to be called The Poor White. I don't mean to be a snob; my own heritage is Poor White. But for nearly 200 years, Southerners have been stereotyped into three classes: "the niggers, the white trash and the old families" — the heart of the Old South myth. The myth actually was the South's defense of slavery: Admitting the evil, there was still a defensible style of life — genteel, aristocratic, cultured — that went with it. W. J. Cash exploded it in his book, "The Mind of the South," proving there never were that many old families.

But the myth persisted stubbornly as long as the sense of evil and guilt lasted in the South. And the Poor White suffered from it; he felt the guilt and bore the stigma while, more often than not, somewhat pathetically insisting that he was from an old family. The sense of myth and reality, of confused class and intricate etiquette, was almost unmanageable.

Until the 1960s. Two things happened then to change the fundamental dynamics of race and class in the South:

1. Some of the national prosperity began to reach the South, and the ravaging poverty that had scourged it from 1865 until the end of World War II began to come to an end.

2. The racial-protest movement of the mid-1960s lifted from the white man the task of managing and defending segregation, yet leaving him the job of cleansing himself of his guilt and his image as a crude "cracker" and blind bigot.

The Southerner has always had a rage to explain himself and his history; there's William Faulkner, Flannery O'Connor, Robert Penn Warren, Walker Percy as eloquent proof. But now with the new generation it has become an object of passionate intensity to wipe out the old image: This has become one of the strongest elements in Southern life and politics today. The white Southerner is as determined about this as he is defensive about himself.

There's something humorous about the way the Good Ol' Boys have rushed off to Hilton Head, S.C., to build second homes, and to buy golf carts. But there is a far greater seriousness, and it's obviously their goal to use Jimmy Carter's residence at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue to redeem those long decades of Southern shame. These Carters, Jordans and Powells are pugnaciously parochial and, underneath, confident that the South has something to give the nation. That has been the theme of several recent books by Southern liberals — that the South has a special sense of "place," of "local pride," even of "clean air."

If these thoughts about the contradictory impulses of white Southerners are true, then they are an answer to many questions being asked about the Carter Administration, among them: Why don't they go out socially? And why do they sometimes behave badly when they do go out? And why doesn't Jimmy Carter open up the White House staff to non-Georgians?

As for those changes that came with the 1960s, it must also be remembered that Carter and his associates are beneficiaries but not agents of those changes. It was a moment when a Southern politician could face the national constituency without the taint of moral obloquy in race.

Inside the South, in state and local governments, politics didn't change that much that quickly. There was still the

heritage of loving politics, of politics being the South's theater. But Southern politics was still, is still, dominated by rural constituencies, still intensely local. The linkages between economic and political power are still too close.

It was a world in which the force of the black vote has been muted by accommodation — the white man offering concessions to the black man in order to remain the broker of real political power. In the world of Georgia politics, "issues" are a kind of window dressing that help to disguise the internecine struggle over narrow local interests. In that atmosphere the temptation is to think that there are no real issues, or that the executive can choose his issues with the assumption that a shallow commitment is enough.

This is the political environment, the state government of Georgia, in which Jimmy Carter's political sensibility was formed.

The chafe of the Old South has eased. But Carter and his generation of Southern politicians mark only another stage in the mutation of the Poor White stereotype.

Suddenly, with Carter in the White House, the importance of the Old South myth is once more a factor — by its very absence. The president's associates have often been quoted as saying proudly that his administration has no ideology.

The force of the myth is seen from another side. The Old South was the South's obsessive ideology and Carter's generation of Southern politicians has not found another ideology with which to replace it.

Instead of a vision of national life, of priorities, Jimmy Carter has brought to Washington a kind of mechanistic po-