

Two-party politics and the loss of political courage

Has the emergence of strong two-party politics robbed North Carolina of the wellspring of political courage that set the state apart in the 20th century?

Retire director of the Institute of Government John Sanders got me thinking about this question the other day. Sanders said that he was worried that partisan politics might keep today's North Carolina government from taking the kind of bold, progressive actions that pushed the state ahead during the last century.



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Several years ago in this column I made a list of 20th Century "defining events" in North Carolina history.

Several of the events that made my list involved the assumption by the central state government of additional responsibilities. Bold action by the governor and the legislature were necessary in each case.

1. The creation of the State Highway Commission in 1921 under "Good Roads" Governor Cameron Morrison. Under Morrison's leadership the legislature took over responsibility for county roads systems and authorized \$50 million in bonded indebtedness to finance construction of new highways. Walter Turner's recent "Paving Tobacco Road" tells this story in detail.

2. In 1931 during the administration of Governor O. Max Gardner, the consolidation of the campuses of North Carolina State, Women's College, and the University of North Carolina under one governing board and president, leading ultimately to the unified administration of all public higher education under the UNC system beginning in 1971.

3. Also during the administration of Governor Garner, the state's assumed primary responsibility for the funding of public schools with the passage of the "School Machinery Act" in 1931. Before this reorganization, virtually all funding for public schools came from local sources.

4. The state's Community College System began in 1957 under Governor Luther Hodges with the passage of Community College Act and the appropriation of funds for a statewide system of industrial education centers.

Looking back at these initiatives, it is easy to see how critical they were to North Carolina's progress. But at the time they were adopted, they were radical departures from settled ways of doing the public's business and they involved substantial new financial commitments for state government.

John Sanders has me worried whether any of the initiatives have gotten off the ground in today's political environment.

During most of the last century, Democratic control of state government was a given. Although there were plenty of differing opinions, there was no solid, organized, automatic opposition group.

John Sanders' comments to me suggested that such "bold" initiatives were possible, in part, because the North Carolina governor and legislators were not involved in constant partisan bickering and they did not have to worry about losing control of state government to an opposing political party.

Bold initiatives cost money as well as overturning established ways of doing things. Nowadays, any proposal to spend a substantial sum of money for any initiative is probably dead in the water. When the Democrats have a slim majority, as they do in the current General Assembly, they know that any increase in taxes, no matter how meritorious the purpose, could lead to the defeat of enough of their legislators to mean the turnover of power to the other side.

When the Republicans have a majority and take control, the "no tax increase" pledge taken by most of their legislators makes it impossible to address any state challenge that involves significant increases in resources.

If two-party competition did not have the state in a "no-response" bind, what are the challenges that a forward-looking governor and legislature might feel compelled to face?

There is no shortage of possibilities. First of all, the Leandro case requires that the state face up to the constitutional mandate to provide sound public school educational opportunities throughout the state. Meeting this requirement would mean a reaffirmation of the state's 1931 commitment and significant increased expenditures.

Others would point out the "last chance" for the state to protect a sizeable amount of undeveloped land to protect water quality and the environment.

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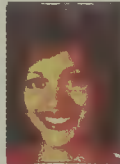
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Government critics find voice and favor

After enlightening the uninformed masses about the horrors of the diamond trade in Sierra Leone, hip hop's peddler of socio-political prose, rapper Kanye West, is at it again. His message this time around was aimed at none other than our commander-in-chief. During a recent telethon to raise money for the victims of Hurricane Katrina which aired on NBC, West took his few moments of airtime to air out exactly what he feels Bush's sentiments are toward black people, and I quote: "George Bush doesn't care about black people."

Time and place for everything

Soon after those comments, West was booed by a crowd during his performance as part of a nationally televised music event right before the first game of the NFL season at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Mass. West's performance was telecast via satellite from his live performance in Los Angeles. As the boos ensued, the network did not show the crowd's reaction, opting instead to cut to the L.A. shots. The following week, a conservative talk show host spun the crowd's response and the network's broadcast decision as an indication that American citizens still support Bush and abhor anyone who speaks out against him. It is true Bush has his supporters. There is no shortage of "W" bumper stickers on cars. But the talk show host seemingly failed to incorporate into his argument the time, place, and type of audience present.



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Had West been performing at The Apollo Theater in Harlem that night or perhaps at a liberal arts university on the West Coast, it is likely the reaction of the crowd would have been decidedly different. Though times are changing, the vast majority of African Americans and a good percentage of the MTV generation still align themselves with the Democratic Party. Many in this demographic are also in West's established fan base and blamed the slow response to Katrina on fact that most of the evacuees were poor blacks. As a result, his statement embraced what many of them may already have been feeling. But this was not the crowd at Gillette Stadium that night, so it follows that West would not necessarily receive a resounding measure of applause and cheers there.

Celebrities often suffer consequences when it comes to what they say and do, particularly if they are popular at the moment and especially if they have corporate endorsements. Along the same lines as West, the country music group, the Dixie Chicks, faced extreme antagonism from their fans when in 2003 lead singer Natalie Maines announced at a concert: "Just so you know, we're ashamed the president of the United States is from Texas. This remark sent their country fans into a frenzy of opposition, prompting some to even hold bonfires to burn their CDs. It was clearly a sign that their Heartland fan base viewed the remark as a betrayal, especially given that the Dixie Chicks and Bush are all Texas natives.

As West's comments reverberated throughout the news media, responses ranged from vehement disagreement to enthusiastic support. His impassioned ad lib tugged at the American people. Whether that tugging was at someone's heartstrings or someone's last nerve depends on who that someone is. Some felt his choice of words and platform was inappropriate. Some felt West was extremely candid and sincere. Others felt it was a ploy to boost his record sales. Either way, his image was catapulted, and it has not hurt him financially.

Corporate cash cow

Besides loss of fan loyalty, celebrities sometime stand to lose a lot more for their behavior. Last week I received an email encouraging a boycott of Pepsi products claiming that the cola and snack maker had dropped West as their spokesperson. Pepsi has denied the rumor. That's good news for West's bank account. But it's a bit inconsistent considering rapper Ludacris lost his endorsement deal with Pepsi after Bill O'Reilly, host of "The O'Reilly Factor" talk show, encouraged his viewers to "punish" Pepsi products due to Ludacris' streetwise and sometimes sexually imaginative lyrics. But Pepsi's decision to retain West may not be so odd after all, considering that the week following West's comments, his album was No. 1 and his current single "Golddigger" is in heavy radio rotation and has been sitting atop the charts for weeks.

Sponsors can easily see the benefit in keeping someone like West, who is already an established artist in the urban sector and has enormous crossover potential, on their roster. His newfound infamy and boost in recognition in the mainstream can be appealing for those sponsors looking to seem more youthful and edgy and can be a surefire way to lure the lucrative young, urban market to their product.

The fact that West can walk the tightrope among the fickle public as someone with "street credibility" and a person with an appreciable measure of intellectual depth make him an ideal marketing tool for the moment and perhaps underscores the notion that controversy sells. And though network execs were reportedly outraged at West's remarks, he has been a part of several other fund raisers and live televised events since, which also flies in the face of the worry over FCC compliance since Super Bowl XXXVIII's peepshow.

Whatever a person's beliefs, I applaud anyone with the nerve to express them publicly considering the inevitable backlash that usually comes with it. This time it seems the notion of free speech is paying off, literally and figuratively. What will happen the next time remains to be seen.

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Katrina challenge: Jefferson's ghost

The Hurricane Katrina disaster along the Gulf Coast, once again, has revealed via television, the blatant hypocrisy and goodness of America on the issue of ethnicity ("race") and/or class.

And yes, Katrina DID "bring out the worst and best in us" in response to this still ongoing emergency; for thousands of people, across ethnic lines and perhaps in an unprecedented manner, poured out their hearts and money to those unfortunate victims of "Mother Nature," while providing a scintilla of hope that, one day, truly, we could become "one nation." Indeed,



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many commentators, both national and international, not only expressed sympathy for Katrina evacuees, but some of them also expressed the "shame" that they and others felt about despicable conditions, involving both race and class that were exposed by this large natural disaster.

The above factors notwithstanding, let us be informed or reminded that this micro-disaster or national "shame" simply pales in comparison to a more protracted, man-made, macro-disaster of nearly 400 years in America, aptly described as The Real-Holocaust (1995), the title of my first book, where a minimum, guesstimated 300 million African people, "at home and abroad," have been killed by terrorism. And this man-made "racial" disaster also has been caused, in part, by "The Ghost of Thomas Jefferson." For this "ghost" is none other than the well-known, immoral, hypocritical, repetitive, double-standard phenomenon of white racism and its multiple corollaries, including "kneegroism," that has permeated American society, both before and after the Jeffersonian era. More germane, Jefferson believed that "the two races could never live peaceably side by side," for the "deep-rooted prejudices entertained by the whites," as well as the "ten thousand recollections, by the blacks, of the injuries they have sustained... will divide us into parties, and produce convulsions, which will never end but in the extermination of our or the other race." Wow! What an ugly prognosis-providing us with a spiritually beautiful challenge that we have yet to embrace.

Alas and clearly, Jefferson was the "classic" or quintessential White racist, reflecting "spiritual wickedness in high places." (Ephesians 6:12, the Holy Bible) For he opposed the barbaric-terrorist institution of chattel slavery, both verbally and in writing, simultaneously holding many Blacks in bondage. However, in his Will, perhaps in belated response to his conscience, he mandated physical "freedom" for those whom he had enslaved—BUT without compensation or reparations, with exception of a few of his "faithful servants." And this latter group, are best described today, in 2005, as "kneegroes," those who are content to exist, metaphorically, on their knees, as they continue to serve "massa" faithfully. For they fail to challenge the present racist-plantation system, while "selling their souls" for those rewards or token awards that accrue to them personally, in contrast to the liberation of their ethnic group—mentally, economically, culturally, and politically—most often imitating "massa," displaying self-centered greed and ignorance, par excellence. Therefore, Jefferson and millions of others who embrace(d) his "ghost nature," are guilty of "speaking out of both sides of their mouths" or with "forked tongues" as described by Native Americans.

To reiterate, Katrina exposed such "forked tongue" behavior-like "liberty and justice for all"—when, in fact, it was mostly poor Blacks who were entrapped, conspicuously in New Orleans—as they are in most areas of America—those who did not own automobiles and could not escape like their richer or middle-class fellow citizens. Indeed, under President George Bush, reportedly, there has been a 17 percent increase in poverty, traceable in great measure, to morally bankrupt public policies, like notorious tax cuts for the rich (the *raison d'être*-reason for being—for "conservatives"), proposed cuts in poverty programs like Medicaid, and of course, that major aggression-disaster in Iraq, initiated based upon a series of lies that, tragically, were promoted publicly by modern-day "faithful servants," like General Colin Powell and Dr. Condoleezza Rice. Therefore, the "shame" of Katrina far transcends official mistakes in disaster planning or bureaucratic ineptitude and should be perceived in a much larger context of a national failure to address The Real-Holocaust-to provide compensation and/or reparations to victims of this more protracted disaster.

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