MISSISSIPPI DELTA BLUES: THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S ROLE IN THE REGION’S PERSISTENT POVERTY, 1972-2011

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By

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ABSTRACT

The Mississippi Delta region has a storied history in America. Before the Civil War, the region was one of the wealthiest in the country. Cotton grew beautifully in the rich soil, and vast numbers of slaves were brought from Africa into the area to work the fields. The music created in the Delta is celebrated all over the world, but the Delta blues were a way of life for a beleaguered people, often beaten down by poor living conditions and work that offered little promise for one’s future. The legacy of the blues remains in the Delta, as well as the struggles.

Mississippi is one of the poorest states in America, and the Delta region is marred by the highest percentages of impoverished people in the State. Yet, Mississippi has long had powerful representation in Congress and has a history of receiving significant federal funding. Why do problems persist, and how can Mississippi leaders effectively better the lives of people in the Delta? Do the State and Federal governments have a moral obligation to care for its poorest citizens?

I have examined the history of the Delta, especially the period between the middle of the 20th and the beginning of the 21st centuries. Additionally, I have looked
into the policies of key political figures of Mississippi, starting with Congressman Jamie Whitten, who served as Chairman of the Appropriations Committee, and ending with Senator Thad Cochran, current Ranking Member of the Appropriations Committee. It was important to study farm policies, as well as direct funding into flood control measures over the years, because Mississippi continues to generate much of its revenue from agriculture. A broad range of social programs have also been funded over the years, to attempt to alleviate the region’s staggering problems. Most researchers and historians agree that large sums of money have been spent to help the region, and results have been insubstantial.

I conclude that an agricultural economy, and the federal government’s role in promoting this economy, has long since provided the citizens of this region viable work or reliable income. The Delta has remained poverty-stricken despite expensive federal programs directed to the region, and until federal and state leaders acknowledge the failure of this farm economy, its people will remain distressed. Efforts to bring about change in the region must be homegrown, but education combined with a sense of community and pride must be ingrained into the Delta residents before leadership can develop.
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Cotton obsessed, Negro obsessed, and flood ridden, it is the Deepest South, the heart of Dixie, America’s super-plantation belt.

-Rupert Vance, 1935

The Mississippi Delta is the western alluvial plain of the Mississippi River, a crescent shaped area that runs alongside the mighty river, from just below Memphis, Tennessee, south along Highway 61, to Vicksburg, Mississippi. In 1935, author David Cohn wrote, “The Mississippi Delta begins in the lobby of the Peabody Hotel in Memphis and ends on Catfish Row in Vicksburg” (Cohn 1935). The “Delta,” as the area is known colloquially, is known for a variety of triumphs and failures, intense poverty and great wealth, artistic magnificence and educational disappointments. This region is almost an oxymoron in and of itself. ‘Delta,” as defined by Merriam-Webster’s dictionary, is “an alluvial deposit at the mouth of a river” (Merriam-Webster 2010). Several hours north of the mouth of the river, the deposits that made the Delta the most famous agricultural land in America are now guarded behind a levee system designed to keep floodwaters out and croplands unharmed. The land that was once dotted with plantation homes and miles and miles of cotton, is now a sparsely populated, mostly poverty-stricken, flatland known more for its bad times than its successes. Yet this seemingly habitual welfare state, with its tiny ghost towns and
lingering issues between African-American and white residents, holds in it an incredibly American though utterly unique history of world-renowned authors, artists, and musicians. The struggles of those living in this particular part of the country have begotten a society that manages to captivate and befuddle.

Figure 1. Maps of the Mississippi Delta Region

Sources: Maps from Pollack 2005 and Elliott 2005.

Much of the region between the Yazoo and Mississippi rivers (the defining areas of the Delta) was developed after the Civil War. Presently, there are eighteen counties that comprise the Delta region, with only a few notable towns. Greenwood, Tunica, Greenville, and Clarksdale are among the largest cities in the area, but most of
the towns and counties are quite sparsely populated. The population in this region
continues to get smaller and smaller, though memories of vibrant communities are held
strongly in the hearts of Delta residents. In counties like Tallahatchie and Sharkey, one
could drive through the entire area and only see a handful of people, if any at all.
Tunica hums along with its bustling casinos, and Greenwood’s Viking Range
Corporation manages to drive the entire town by offering consistent jobs and tourists.
Morgan Freeman has put his heart into revitalizing Clarksdale, but the bright spots are
few and quite far between. It wasn’t always so. In 1870, 90 percent of the Delta was
virgin wilderness. By 1890, 90 percent of the area was within 5 miles of a railroad
track, developed largely by the influential Percy family. The rails opened up markets
for the region's valuable — but labor intensive — cotton crop. This development
brought wealth to the region and increased the demand for workers, drawing African-
American former slaves, as well as Chinese, German, Italian and Russian-Jewish
immigrants (Elliott 2005, 1). Even today, the unique culture brought by the varied
immigrant communities colors the landscape. Chinese groceries, Italian restaurants,
and Lebanese foods pop up unexpectedly in this flat and very rural part of Southeastern
America.

The Delta would not be the Delta, however, without the presence and
proliferation of cotton. It was the abundance of cotton that drove the entire society,
and though heat and insects, and floods and wild animals were daunting obstacles to
deal with for the average planter, the rewards for reaping a good cotton crop were great. A plantation in the 1800s would have included field hands, domestic help, and children, which would total a significant amount of slaves on a property (Cobb 1992, 14). Life revolved around the crops, the price, the weather, the availability of strong laborers, and of course, the cotton gin. Before the Civil War, an agricultural society was planted firmly in the Delta soil, and it amazingly remains there today. Yet, the Delta cotton kingdom, as it was known in its heyday, is more of a memory than reality. Its prominence has been waning since the middle of the twentieth century. The Delta’s farmland is now made up of soybeans, peanuts, rice, while China has become the new cotton kingdom for the world. The idea that this grand, wealthy, cotton-based society is within reach again is something that oddly grips Deltans still. Agriculture remains the only economic driver in the Delta, though agriculture as a driver has been declining for decades (Davis 2003, 20).

From the once omni-present cotton fields came an art form wholly inspired by the back-breaking labor partaken by African-Americans over the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries – blues music. Though slavery was outlawed in 1865, many African-Americans remained in the Delta region hoping to make a living doing what they knew – working in the fields. No longer bound to a plantation owner’s society, black Deltans began sharecropping, an all too subtle step away from slavery. In her book, *American Congo: the African-American freedom struggle in the Delta*, historian Nan
Elizabeth Woodruff writes, “The Yazoo-Mississippi Delta...as it emerged in the first two decades of the twentieth century, became a center for large-scale plantation agriculture, worked largely by black sharecroppers who formed a majority the population. In 1910, the black population in these counties was 94.2 percent in Issaquena...and 76.5 percent in Quitman” (Woodruff 2003, 30). Woodruff describes a lifestyle in which the plantation owner maintained control of nearly every aspect of a sharecropper’s life, such as when he bought food and clothes, how he paid for them, where he lived, and under what conditions he lived (Woodruff 2003, 26-28).

It is not surprising that this way of life would inspire workers to express their sorrows and hardships, yet the way they did so had an outstanding effect on American culture. The blues, the art form, and the Delta, the region, are impossible to unlink. The blues were of the Delta, the unique experience of daily life in a prison of sorts, in which there was no discernable way out. Blues songs were variations of African field calls and work songs brought to the region by slaves and cultivated into a form of cultural expression over years of pain and suffering. The exact origin of the Blues is disputed, but many researchers claim that in 1903 bandleader W.C. Handy "discovered" the blues on a train platform in Tutwiler, Mississippi. Handy heard unusual guitar sounds from a passing traveler and began to adopt what he heard. Handy's promotion of the new style eventually led to mainstream acceptance of the blues as a legitimate musical form, launching it beyond black folk culture, forever
changing American music (PBS Blues Road Trip 2010). Blues musicians such as B.B. King, Son House, Muddy Waters, Robert Johnson, and Charley Patton all hailed from the Mississippi Delta. Additionally, the Rolling Stones, Elvis Presley, Led Zeppelin, Eric Clapton, and many, many other musical acts have cited the blues as a major musical influence; in effect, these mainstream bands brought the blues music to white audiences around the world. “We cannot prove that the blues began here,” author and musician Ted Gioia writes in his book, Delta Blues: the Life and Times of the Mississippi Masters who Revolutionized American Music, “Yet the music thrived here with a special intensity that demands our attention and earns our respect. The blues, by its nature, is a raw, roughshod music, but especially on this stretch of land” (Gioia 2008, 4).

There is no doubt that the Delta community has spawned amazing talent, yet getting out of the Delta was an idea that occupied many, both black and white, throughout the years and still hold on to residents today. Population in the Delta has steadily declined over the years, and its once-vibrant towns like Greenville and Vicksburg are plagued with consistent high crime and high unemployment, still suffering from poorly performing schools and health problems. According to the National Institutes of Health in 2009, the region maintains the highest rates of obesity, hypertension and teen pregnancy in the country, with about 20 percent of its population lacking health insurance (Puderbaugh 2009, 1). The levels of poverty are staggering,
especially in America, the land of wealth and freedom. Why has this particular area’s residents struggled so much to maintain a decent and healthy way of life? Most Americans would likely think of slavery as an ancient part of American history; can the legacy of slavery still affect Mississippians today?

In her 2006 book *The Transformation of Plantation Politics*, University of Florida professor Sharon D. Wright Austin compiled data on one particular community in the Delta - Tunica, Mississippi. Tunica, a small town seventeen miles south of Memphis, has remained in the spotlight since the 1960s because of its inability to dig its way out of extreme poverty. Both Robert F. Kennedy and Jesse Jackson tried to bring attention and aid to this community, yet the statistics are still troubling. Legalized gambling in the mid 1990s made Tunica County a premier gaming destination, and it seemed logical that jobs and prosperity would follow, but this has not been the case for Tunica. Austin’s statistics speak for themselves (Austin 2006, 65).
Figure 2. Tunica County, 1960-2000.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Socioeconomic Index for Residents of Tunica County, Mississippi, 1960-2000</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poverty Rates</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td>Persons below poverty level</td>
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<td>Persons above poverty level</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Educational Attainment</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>High school graduate or higher</td>
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<td>Bachelor's or higher</td>
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<td>-----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Income Levels</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>-----------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Median Household Income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Per-capita income</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than $10,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$15,000-$24,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$25,000-$34,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$35,000-$49,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$50,000-$74,999</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>$75,000 or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The income levels are less than $3,000; $3,000-$4,999; $5,000-$9,999; $10,000-$14,999; $15,000-$24,999; $25,000 or more.

**The income levels are less than $10,000; $10,000-$19,999; $20,000-$29,999; $30,000-$39,999; $40,000-$49,999; $50,000 or more.


Source: Data from Austin 2006.
To say that the Delta has never achieved prosperity is not altogether true. The Mississippi Delta was once home to some of the wealthiest men in America. The towns along the river were cosmopolitan, thriving with immigrants and the trade opportunities made possible by the Mississippi River. John Barry’s Pulitzer Prize-winning book, *Rising Tide: the Great Mississippi Flood of 1927 and how it Changed America*, describes Greenville, Mississippi before the “Great Flood” of 1927. The small town was the epicenter for culture for the planters of the region and the thousands they employed on their plantations. After the flood, the Delta saw an exodus of black workers, to places north, like Chicago, where they could forget the tortuous conditions they experienced working to rebuild the levees. Barry writes, “The river had created the Delta, and the white man had brought blacks to clear it and tame it and transform it into an empire” (Barry 1998, 422).

Though conditions were improved by the year 2000, unemployment rates are back at a grim low. As of August of 2010, according to the Bureau of Labor and Statistics, unemployment in Tunica was at nearly 15%. Labor and Statistics charts state that Tunica’s unemployment was at a peak in 1991 at 27%, falling to its lowest point in 2000 at 3.1% (BLS 2010). Remarkable ebbs and flows as seen in the above chart show that gaming did have a positive impact on the county’s employment and poverty levels, but gaming has not sustained a comfortable lifestyle for most residents of Tunica, 70% of whom, according to the 2000 Census, are black. Austin furthermore
shows the discrepancy between incomes of black and white residents. “While most white workers earned per-capita incomes that were higher than the state average in 1999,” writes Austin, “most of the Delta’s black workers earned incomes that were approximately half of the state average and a third of the national average” (Austin 2006, 78). In her chart showing per-capita incomes of Mississippi Delta Residents by Race in 1999, it is clear that the wealth gap between white and black residents in the entire Delta area continues to get larger (Austin 2006, 81).

Figure 3. Per Capita Incomes of Mississippi Delta Residents by Race, 1999.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolivar</td>
<td>19,752</td>
<td>8,135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma</td>
<td>21,580</td>
<td>8,724</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphreys</td>
<td>19,075</td>
<td>7,889</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issaquena</td>
<td>17,235</td>
<td>6,813</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leflore</td>
<td>21,729</td>
<td>8,494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quitman</td>
<td>16,741</td>
<td>8,151</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharkey</td>
<td>19,976</td>
<td>7,751</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>18,981</td>
<td>8,198</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tallahatchie</td>
<td>16,077</td>
<td>7,184</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunica</td>
<td>22,715</td>
<td>7,929</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>21,782</td>
<td>9,010</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Data adapted from Austin 2006.

Mississippi’s reputation for keeping its residents under-educated, over-fed, and deeply poor is widely documented. Though white Mississippians continue to be burdened with these handicaps, poor black residents have always embodied the State in outsiders’ eyes. The 1960s were a particularly tough time for the State’s image, as
violence and furor over Civil Rights for African-Americans, including integration of schools cast an ugly shadow on Mississippi – and its leaders. Mississippi, however, has produced some of the most powerful figures in the federal government over the last sixty years. The Delta, in particular, has been home not only to prestigious musicians and authors, but also many of the great leaders in Washington, DC.

Senator James O. Eastland, longtime Chairman of the Senate Judiciary Committee, served in the United States Senate for over thirty-five years. Eastland was one of the first of the powerful Southern voting block that used seniority to implement – and also to impede – legislation and laws. Jamie Whitten, former Chairman of the Agriculture Appropriations subcommittee, served fifty-three years in the United States House of Representatives. John C. Stennis served for forty-one years in the Senate, as Chairman of both the Senate Armed Services Committee and the Senate Appropriations Committee. Trent Lott served thirty-four years in Congress, five of those years as Senate Majority Leader. Thad Cochran has been in Congress for thirty-seven years, serving on both the Agriculture and Appropriations Committee and is still in office. Mississippians have controlled the purse of the federal government for decades and have had significant say over agriculture policy for even longer. For a state whose main economic driver has traditionally been agriculture, the impact of having representatives in government whose duty it is to write agriculture policy has been great.
In addition, according to the D.C.-based tax research group, The Tax Foundation, using U.S. Census figures, Mississippi and New Mexico have been the top recipients of federal money since at least 1980. “Per dollar of federal tax collected in 2004, Mississippi citizens received approximately $2.02 in the way of federal spending. This ranks the state 2nd highest nationally, and represents an increase from 1995, when Mississippi received $1.54 per dollar of taxes in federal spending and was 3rd highest nationally” (The Tax Foundation 2010). It would seem to follow that the States of Mississippi and New Mexico would be using the federal funds to gradually strengthen the states’ economies and sense of well-being for its residents. Mississippi and New Mexico, however, remain two of the poorest of the United States. The U.S. Census reports that roughly 18 percent of individuals in Mississippi were considered living below the poverty line in 2000, and 21 percent in 2007. In New Mexico, the poverty levels have stayed at eighteen percent. The only other state with similar poverty levels was Louisiana, at 17.6% of the population living below the poverty line (Census 2010). Within the State of Mississippi lies the poorest of the poor – the residents of the Delta. How can a region that has received so much federal funding over the years, that has spent so much political capitol on a certain industry within the region, still be so beleaguered?

This paper will study the history of largesse that Mississippi’s Congressional representatives have maintained for most of the 19th and 20th centuries, but particularly
focusing on the 1970s until present, 2010. The Mississippi Delta is an aberration within America, the land of plenty, appearing to offer anyone the possibility of success and prosperity. As Congressional leaders focus on helping third-world nations obtain basic needs such as roads, bridges, food supplies, running water, and access to education, these same leaders seem to forget that there are Mississippians without these very same necessities. Has the lack of progress in this particular area over the years led to despair and giving up among the State’s leaders and the community itself? Or have leaders been focusing on the wrong paths towards progress for the Delta? Does the United States government have a moral or civic obligation to attend to these Americans?

Chapter 2 will focus on the history of Mississippi’s powerful representatives, the men themselves, and show how their backgrounds affected the way they responded to the Delta’s constituency. The window of 1972 to 2011 is necessary to review the tenures of these Congressmen, many of whom served for over thirty years. Chapter 3 will analyze the 1972 through early 1990s, a tumultuous period for the Delta in which economic woes went from bad to worse. The third chapter will also look at new laws that affected the area, including the establishment of a Lower Delta Development Commission and the official integration of public schools. Importantly, the policies of Senators Eastland, Stennis, and Congressman Whitten will also be examined. Chapter 4 will pick up in the mid-1990s, at the advent of legalized gaming in the area, and will
focus on the policies and leadership of Senators Trent Lott and Thad Cochran. The 21st century’s hopefulness for government as a savior, especially in the election of the first black president, Barack Obama, is to be pondered. The fifth chapter will look at non-governmental and social efforts to revitalize the Delta.

This thesis will challenge the status quo by reviewing relevant facts, and focus attention on misdirection of federal policies and funds at the hands of a Congressional delegation with all the power necessary to enact real change. This thesis will attempt to show the weaknesses of the agricultural economy for the Delta and how it keeps the residents dependent on state and federal assistance without offering any hope for new opportunities. Finally, this thesis will show how the region could achieve success in the future.
CHAPTER 2

POLITICAL GIANTS AND 20TH CENTURY PLANTATION POLITICS

Take up the white man’s burden, send forth the best ye breed, and go, bind your sons to exile to serve your captives need.
-Rudyard Kipling, *The White Man’s Burden*

This body of work covers the federal government’s role in, and responsibility for, extreme and ever-present poverty in Mississippi from 1970 to present. This chapter will focus on the history of the men involved in representing Mississippi in the 1970s through early 1990s, and the Mississippi of their respective pasts. In order to understand the Mississippi Delta in 1970, however, the early 20th Century must also be discussed.

1972 was a banner year in Southern politics. The era of the Southern Democrat was just ending, and a new about-face happened, in which many white Southern Democrats re-established themselves as Southern Republicans. According to voting records, 19.6% of Mississippians voted for the Democrat candidate for President, George McGovern, and 78.2% voted for Richard Nixon. Swept into office that year were two new Republican Congressmen, William Thad Cochran of Pontotoc and Chester Trent Lott of Grenada (voting history by State 2010). The State was changing, having resigned itself to the Voting Rights Act of 1965. This piece of legislation was passed to protect black citizens, especially in the South, from disenfranchisement, and

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it assigned federal officials to monitor certain areas of the country to make certain these laws were being enforced (Laney 2008, 7). Author and University of Illinois professor Michael Perman summarized the formation of the new Republican South in his essay for the University of North Carolina Press in April of 2010: "In the wake of the Voting Rights Act, the Democratic Party of the South and of white supremacy was forced to reconstitute itself, as newly enfranchised black voters quite naturally threw their support to the party that, under President Lyndon Johnson’s leadership, had enabled them to regain the right to vote. In response, the conservative, segregationist whites began to flee from a party that was likely to become either the region’s first bi-racial party, or worse, a party controlled by African Americans and their white allies" (Perman 2010). Though Southern states have, from the 1970s forward, mostly favored Republicans in federal races, the local politicians are just now beginning to disband the traditional Southern Democrat party in State politics in favor of a more conservative platform across the board, rather than the States-rights platform that has traditionally defined politics among white Southerners.

The boundaries of Congressional districts in Mississippi were changed after the 1970 Census, and accusations of gerrymandering increased around the South (Mississippi Code 2010). In his book published in 1980, *Protest at Selma: Martin*
Luther King and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, David J. Garrow writes:

In the wake of the 1970 Census and the attendant redistrictings, a substantial number of important submissions – and some resulting court cases – suggested that racial gerrymandering was becoming the leading weapon of those southern white officials who sought to limit and dilute the influence of black voters. Specialists in the reapportionment field believed that the ‘one man one vote’ doctrine provided racist white officials with a substantial opportunity to create congressional, legislative, county, and municipal districts in which blacks would be disadvantaged. (Garrow 1980, 203)

A Mississippian could easily glean from the redistricting of counties to Congressional district which district would be predominately African-American. Thus, black power and influence was corralled, able to be anticipated, controlled, and limited. A black district was represented by a black leader, which initially pleased the constituency, but the power wielded by this individual was easily overtaken by the much more numerous white leaders elsewhere in the State.

Yet, despite efforts by the federal government to include black voters and by the State to appease black voters, the Mississippi Congressional delegation remained a party of white men. In 1972, Congressmen Cochran and Lott joined two of the most powerful men in the U.S. Congress, Representative Gillespie V. (Sonny) Montgomery and Representative Jamie L. Whitten, as members of the Mississippi Congressional delegation. Mr. Montgomery served in the U.S. House of Representatives from 1956 to 1997, and Mr. Whitten served from 1941 to 1995. When Mr. Whitten retired from office, he was the longest serving U.S. Congressman in history. The
Mississippians serving in the U.S. Senate also built up seniority from their time in Congress. Senator James O. Eastland served as Senator from 1941 to 1978, and Senator John C. Stennis served from 1947 to 1978. In the great tradition of Southern power accumulation, Thad Cochran and Trent Lott would each serve over 35 years in Congress (Biographical guide to Congress 2010).

Focusing on the reign of power wielded by Congressman Whitten, Senator Eastland and Senator Stennis in the 1970s through early 1990s provides a broader look at the Mississippi Delta region and the policies and appropriations that affected this area. Congressman Sonny Montgomery, though enormously successful in the area of Veterans' Affairs, did not represent the Delta region, nor was he a member of the Appropriations or Agriculture Committees in the House of Representatives, so his tenure will only be briefly discussed. These three Congressmen- Whitten, Eastland, and Stennis - combined the power of the purse and the power of controlling farm policy to expand the farm economy of the State of Mississippi, seemingly trying to bring back the glory of "King Cotton." This phrase, “King Cotton,” was used during the Civil War by Southern politicians to emphasize the importance of the cotton crop to the entire nation’s economy (Dictionary of American History 2003). The backgrounds of the Mississippian Congressmen shed light on the world in which they came from; it is worth noting how they both fit in with and had little in common with the men and women they represented.
In order to understand Jamie Whitten, as well as Senators Eastland and Stennis, one must quickly examine the mid-century Mississippi that they governed. The 1930s were the beginning of the mechanized farm in Mississippi. Up to this point in Mississippi's history, the region had flourished due in large part to cheap labor. Though slavery was abolished at the end of the Civil War, a new type of enslavement had developed for the poor in Mississippi, keeping a large gap between rich and poor. Sharecropping was the way of life for much of the region, especially in the fertile Mississippi Delta. Delta author William Alexander Percy, of the great Percy planter family, touted the benefits of this sharecropping system, that even during hard economic times like the Great Depression, a tenant could count on the planter family to keep him fed, clothed, and housed (Cobb 1992, 185).

Though the New Deal created a wealth of social programs aimed at farmed economies, the payments allocated by the federal government at the time followed a top-down approach in the planter-sharecropper system of the Mississippi Delta. James C. Cobb describes this paternalistic way of life in his book on Delta history, *The Most Southern Place on Earth*. "Tenants had little or no legal status, and payments directly to them would undermine their landlord's influence over them, thereby fostering potential social upheaval and engendering considerable opposition to the program from planters with close ties to the politically potent southern bloc in Congress" (Cobb 1992, 186). Increasingly, mechanized farms only added to the woes of poor Deltans.
Better farm equipment, coupled with subsidies for using less land for planting, led to a decrease in needed farm labor. Thousands of sharecroppers were displaced, while the planting economy gained strength and power (Hyland and Timberlake 1993, 79).

Jamie Lloyd Whitten was born in Cascilla, Mississippi, on April 18, 1910. Cascilla is a tiny town in Tallahatchie County, about fourteen miles from the county seat of Charleston - right in the heart of the Mississippi Delta. In the 1970 Census, the population for Tallahatchie County was 19,338. In the 2000 Census, the population was 14,903, a nearly 23 percent drop in population for this rural area (Census 2000). According to Population and Race in Mississippi 1940-1960, between 1930 and 1940, 71 of Mississippi's 82 counties grew in population, whereas the following decade saw 58 counties, most of them rural, lose population, and the trend of population loss continued through the 1950s (Lowry 1971, 577).

The Delta that Mr. Whitten grew up in, as a privileged, educated white male, was a bustling one, with most every part of life tied to agriculture. Mr. Whitten was admitted to the bar in 1932 in Charleston, after attending both undergrad and law school at the University of Mississippi in Oxford (notably educated outside of the Delta region), he was elected to the State House of Representatives and then elected district attorney of the seventeenth district of the State. In 1941, Jamie Whitten was appointed the U.S. House of Representatives to fill the seat vacated by Wall Doxey,
after Doxey left to take short-lived special term in the Senate. Mr. Whitten would be elected to twenty-six congresses until his retirement in 1995 (Biographical guide to Congress 2010). Little has been written or analyzed about Mr. Whitten’s life before and during his tenure in Congress. A 1987 Christian Science Monitor article on Jamie Whitten described him as one of Congress’ most invisible members: “Don’t look for him on TV…. Don't look for Whitten in the newspapers, either. A Whitten press release is unheard of. He never holds press conferences and rarely grants interviews. And forget about asking the locals in Whitten's home district what they think of him. One recent poll showed that two-thirds of his constituents had never heard of their 24-term congressman - the rest return him to Washington with little opposition” (Osterlund 1987). The article goes on to describe his prowess in bringing home money to his home district. In a constituent newsletter, Whitten reported that he had delivered nearly 2,000 projects to his district during the Carter Administration (1977-1981), adding over a billion dollars to the local economy. Yet, when Mr. Whitten died in 1995, the Delta’s economy was in a sad state.

Both Jamie Whitten and James Oliver Eastland were appointed to office in 1941, just as the United States was entering World War Two. James O. Eastland had a similar, if even more privileged childhood than Jamie Whitten. Like Jamie Whitten, James Eastland was also born in the Delta - Doddsville, in Sunflower County. Not very far from Cleveland, Mississippi (the home of Delta State University and one of
the Delta's most thriving towns today), in the 2000 Census, Doddsville's population was 108 (Census 2000). Mr. Eastland's father, Woods Eastland, was an attorney who owned a 2300 acre plantation farm. Woods Eastland was such a powerful figure in Mississippi that when U.S. Senator Pat Harrison died in office, the Governor at the time, Paul B. Johnson, Sr., offered the vacant seat to Woods Eastland. The elder Eastland refused and suggested that his son James take the position (biographical guide to Congress 2010). "Jim Eastland was first elected by his daddy. We were both elected by our daddies. We were 23-year-old kids and we ran on their names," stated his longtime aide Courtney Pace in a 1979 article for The Washington Post (Baker 1979). In his biography of Senator Eastland, The Senator and the Sharecropper, Chris Myers Asch describes the Delta of "Jim" Eastland's understanding as one in which political power was skewed toward large Delta planters. Though blacks greatly outnumbered whites in Sunflower County in the 1930s and 1940s, none were registered to vote - thanks to prohibitive poll taxes and literacy tests" (Asch 2008, 45). Thus, white men, especially white, educated, wealthy Deltans with political connections, were a supreme force.

During his 37 years in office, Jim Eastland created a reputation for himself as a hard-line segregationist and friend to the planter. As Chairman of the powerful Judiciary Committee, the Committee through which the Civil Rights Act and the Voting Rights Act passed, Senator Eastland was a formidable, filibustering presence,
known in Washington as "The Chairman". Looking back on the powerful Senator, researchers at the University of Mississippi describe him as a respected politician: "Others referred to him as 'Big Jim' or the 'Godfather of Mississippi politics,' the head of a statewide network that could make or break upstart politicians, distribute patronage, and guard the southern way of life. Eastland was not a great orator in the southern demagogic tradition of James Vardaman, Theodore Bilbo, or his ally George Wallace. Instead, he preferred to work silently behind the scenes, securing profitable legislation for plantation owners, destroying the reputation of civil rights supporters, and keeping Americans fearful of a global Communist conspiracy" (University of Mississippi James Eastland Collection, 2010). A 1978 Washington Post article elaborated on Senator Eastland’s love of his 5000 acre Sunflower County, Mississippi plantation, alleging that he spent long weekends on the plantation for 45 weeks a year. “Eastland collected hundreds of thousands of dollars in government subsidies for his cotton plantation ….When the government set a limit of $55,000 in federal assistance to any one farm, Eastland divided up his land among family members, and together they collected nearly $170,000 one year soon afterward” (Kaiser 1978). Both Jamie Whitten and James O. Eastland were looked upon as providers for Mississippi-steadfastly gaining power to help themselves and their beneficiaries. The money they brought home, however, did little to improve the average Mississippian’s way of life.
John C. Stennis, though a contemporary of Senator Eastland and Representative Whitten, was not born of a wealthy Delta planter family. John Stennis was the son of a hardworking farm family in DeKalb, Mississippi, in Kemper County, the Northeastern part of the State, the "Hills." Where the white farmers of the Delta were wealthy, showy people, with large acreage and equally large personalities, the Hill people were of a different stock. Stoic, religious, steadfast - these are all adjectives used to describe Senator Stennis at one point. After excelling at Mississippi State University, John Stennis graduated with the Phi Beta Kappa key at the University of Virginia law school. After serving his home county as a Judge, Mr. Stennis entered the U.S. Senate race for the seat vacated by the 1947 death of Theodore G. Bilbo. John Stennis would serve 41 years in office. In 1985, the New York Times wrote about Senator Stennis: "He is the undisputed patriarch of the Senate, a teacher to younger members, and conscience for the entire institution. He seldom makes national headlines, but he wields considerable influence in the Senate itself, and that influence came from the quality of his personal judgment" (Roberts 1985). As Chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations and President Pro Tempore of the Senate, Senator Stennis truly carried with him a great amount of power and influence. As chairman of the Senate Committee on Armed Services, Stennis pumped thousands of jobs into Mississippi through airbases, Navy shipbuilding contracts, and NASA installations. He became a
legendary, beloved figure in the state. According to The Miami Herald in 1982, “People didn't vote for John Stennis…, they worshiped him. "It would have been like voting against God," said Wendell Phillips, a gas station attendant north of Jackson” (Rose 1982). This characterization of Senator Stennis as patriarchal figure exemplifies the dependence Mississippians felt on their elected officials.

When Senator Stennis took office in 1947, the Delta farm economy, home to the most powerful of Stennis' constituents, again experienced upheaval. Much of the paternalism and control elite whites commanded over blacks was due to the incredible dependency of a successful agricultural economy based on the backs of cheap black labor. The emergence of the mechanical cotton picker was revolutionary to farmers, just as Eli Whitney's cotton gin was at the beginning of plantation life in the South. This new mechanized picker could pick cotton at rate far cheaper than any person, and by the late 1940s and early 1950s, Mississippi planters were beginning to realize that black labor was no longer an economically feasible investment (Asch 2008, 125). In The Senator and the Sharecropper, Chris Myers Asch quotes a Delta planter in 1947, about the enormous change happening in the Delta. “Five million people will be removed from the land within the next few years. They must go somewhere. But where? They must do something. But what?” As education initiatives for the black sharecropping community were pondered, they were quickly dismissed in favor of other priorities (Asch 2008, 130). The question, amazingly, still lingers today.
So much has been written about Mississippi during the 1950s and 1960s. Tome after tome analyze, ponder, and reflect upon the intensity of racism at the time, and the surefooted brazenness of Mississippi's politicians when it came to segregation in education and lifestyle. The Delta experienced its own microcosm of what the State was experiencing at this time. Perhaps less educated and more unaware than even the poorest of other parts of Mississippi, Delta blacks were in a class of their own. During Robert F. Kennedy's "poverty tour" of 1968, he was famously quoted about the conditions with which he was met. "There are children in the Mississippi Delta," he said, "whose bellies are swollen with hunger .... Many of them cannot go to school because they have no clothes or shoes" (Robert F. Kennedy biography 2010). In 1968, Senator Eastland, Senator Stennis, and Representative Whitten had firmly rooted their positions in Congress. What appalled the rest of the country must have struck a chord with these men. With such purse strings, such respect from Administration after Administration, and such sway over the economics of the state - almost entirely agricultural - how could poverty like this remain? In the next chapter, the methods of rule from these three Congressmen after such terrible publicity as Kennedy’s visit will be examined.
By 1972, Senator Eastland had been Chairman of the Senate Judiciary for sixteen years. He had taken helm, according to the *History of the Senate Committee on the Judiciary*, at the beginning of the modern Civil Rights era. As Chairman, he successfully kept the Committee from considering the Civil Rights Act of 1957 or any hearings related to the legislation. The bill was ultimately passed on the floor,
bypassing normal Committee action (Senate Judiciary Committee history 2010). In 1972, Eastland was re-elected in his closest election yet; he won with fifty-eight percent of the vote; though in different parties, President Nixon was careful to not alienate his Southern Democrat friends like Eastland, so he provided little support for the Republican who ran against Eastland. Senator Stennis became Chairman in 1969 of the powerful Senate Committee on Armed Services, just as the United States was entering the Vietnam War. Stennis was re-elected handily in 1970, but in 1973, at the height of his career, Senator Stennis was shot in a mugging outside his Washington, D.C. home, and doctors wondered about his survival. He recovered fairly quickly, however (NASA Stennis Center history 2010). Additionally, as Chairman of the Subcommittee on Agriculture within the Appropriations Committee in the early 1970s, Jamie Whitten held the key to his more powerful constituents' livelihood. All three Congressmen were widely influential in the early 1970s, though you would not necessarily gather this by looking outside the beltway, to the Mississippi these men represented.

In *The Most Southern Place on Earth*, James C. Cobb describes the mixed results of all the Civil Rights struggles in Mississippi Delta in the 1970s: "On the one hand, there was a degree of black political participation, activism, and assertiveness unthinkable only a few years earlier. On the other hand, there was the enduring determination of a majority of whites to utilize every coercive measure at their disposal
to restrict black influence on policy-making and, despite the legally mandated integration of public facilities, to minimize social interaction between the races” (Cobb 1992, 251). According to Delta blacks at this time, however, the federal government was to blame for the miserable circumstances with which they found themselves. As the 1970s began, and new policies intended to help those affected by a pared-down farm economy and to help ease poverty among Mississippi’s black communities, Mississippi’s whites were put in charge of the welfare programs and problems began anew (Cobb 1992, 271). The result, notes Cobb, of Washington’s putting whites in charge of the direction and flow of federal aid to the Delta was that poor Deltans remained dependent, but in a new way, on the paternalism of the whites in charge (Cobb 1992, 276). The tumultuous 1960s led to a great many reforms for black Americans, and the importance of these reforms is not disputed. The results in the Mississippi Delta, however, remain to be seen.
CHAPTER 3

MANY CHANGES FEW RESULTS: 1972 THROUGH 1990s

This delta, he thought: This Delta. This land which man has deswamped and
denuded and derivered in two generations so that white men can own
plantations and commute every night to Memphis and black men own
plantations and ride in jim crow cars to Chicago to live in millionaires’
mansions on Lakeshore Drive, where white men rent farms and live like
niggers and niggers crop on shares and live like animals, where cotton is
planted and grows man-tall in the very cracks of the sidewalks, and ursury and
mortgage and bankruptcy and measureless wealth, Chinese and African and
Aryan and Jew, all breed and spawn together until no man has time to say
which is which nor cares…. No wonder the ruined woods I used to know don’t
cry for retribution! He thought: The people who have destroyed it will
accomplish its revenge.

-William Faulkner, *Go Down, Moses*

Understanding the Mississippi Delta’s past is essential to understanding its
present and its future. One could not mention the breadth of influence that a group of
Congressmen from this small state held without delving into the history leading up this
time. In the 1970s, the trio of Congressmen representing the Delta, Senator James O.
Eastland, Senator John C. Stennis, and Congressman Jamie Whitten, were at the height
of their power and influence. Yet, though the 1970s brought an end to the tumultuous
decade of Civil Rights-related incidents that drew public criticism to Mississippi, the
area was far from realizing a new way of life.

School integration, which had long been resisted by State officials, was finally
put into practice in 1970. Though *Brown v. Board of Education* ruled segregation in
schools unconstitutional in 1954, it was not until the end of 1970 that Mississippi finally agreed to comply with the law. In the Delta, whites pulled their children out of the public schools – a practice known as “white flight.” Private schools with tuition requirements prohibitive to black families opened around the Delta. As Charles Bolton states in his book, *The Hardest Deal of All: the Battle over School Integration in Mississippi*, private schools mainly flourished in a few areas of the State, such as the Delta, where the black population greatly outnumbered the white population (Bolton 2005, 179). The economic divide between black and white in the Mississippi Delta was so great in the 1970s that very few poor white children attended segregated schools in this area. Not only did whites decide to not put money and resources into schools their children were not attending, white leaders purposely remained in control of the public school boards so as to limit black power. In Yazoo County, an all-white board continued to govern the school district throughout the 1970s, though none of the board members’ children attended the public schools (Bolton 2005, 200).

Mississippi’s representatives began the 1970s with a commitment to stopping racial integration throughout the State. Senator Eastland, from his powerful position atop the Senate Judiciary Committee, spent much of the 1950s and 1960s speaking openly about his distaste for school segregation. In a 1957 interview with Mike Wallace, Senator Eastland spoke of the “harmonious” segregated school system that everyone preferred, both black and white (Eastland-Wallace Interview 2010). But in
1970, Mississippi’s federal representatives were still fighting for the separation of races. Political historian Joseph Crespino’s article on John C. Stennis’ fight for segregation in schools for the *Journal of Policy History* states that Stennis, “introduced an amendment to a federal education bill that called for equal desegregation efforts in both the North and the South, regardless of whether the segregation resulted from state action or residential patterns. Stennis complained that the federal government was pursuing a regional desegregation plan...But the real motivation, which almost every southern official conceded, was the hope that accelerated desegregation in the North would spark a broader, national backlash against school desegregation” (Crespino 2006, 304). This clever move by Senator Stennis ingratiated him to his white constituents, but he and Congressman Whitten would soon learn they needed to tune in to the significant black population of the State and town down their anti-integration rhetoric.

As the decade continued, and more and more black Mississippians felt secure enough to start exercising their rights to vote, the anti-integration fervour that helped these men maintain popularity within their state, began to wane, and thus lessen. Joseph Crespino writes about Jamie Whitten’s change of heart about race relations in his 2007 book on Mississippi politics titled, *In Search of Another Country: Mississippi and the Conservative Counterrevolution*. In 1967, Whitten effectively killed an effort to bring to light nutritional deficiencies among sharecroppers in the Mississippi Delta,
voting against his fellow Democrats more than 50 percent of the time. By the early 1980s, Whitten had increased his votes with Democrats, voting with them nearly 85 percent of the time. Whitten began sensing that his conservatism was costing him support among his increasingly empowered, and voting, black constituency (Crespino 2007, 268).

As the tide began to turn away from staunch conservatism and segregationist policies, federal policies would start to become more inclusive of the heavily black populations Stennis, Whitten, and Eastland represented. It was no longer acceptable to ignore a third of the State’s population, and the Civil Rights movement throughout the country demanded that blacks’ interests be a part of the national dialogue. Though black migration brought many thousands of African-Americans from the rural South into big, northern cities, the South remained the area with the largest African-American population, and Mississippi the most African-American populated Southern state. Fittingly, the Delta remained the region with the highest black population within the State with the highest black population. According to the U.S. Census, Mississippi’s black population has been at 35-37 percent since the 1970 Census. Black population in the State peaked at 59 percent in 1900 (Census 2010).

Despite the fact that mechanization of farms created a massive job loss for the many thousands of small farmers and farm employees of the Mississippi Delta, promotion of a farm economy continued. In the 1960s and 1970s, thousands of acres
of woodlands were cleared for farmland, much of it wetlands – bird and animal habitats that were sacrificed for what turned into marginal farmland for an agricultural economy that still hangs on by its teeth (Fisher 2010). The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers developed a complex flood control system for the Mississippi Delta, thanks to the powerful Congressmen of Mississippi’s delegation, which changed the landscape of the area from swampy wetlands to flat fields to create more farmland in this area. As the quote from William Faulkner’s *Go Down, Moses* at the beginning of this chapter alludes to, the vast Mississippi Delta was stripped of its natural beauty for what Faulkner believed was profits for a very few commercial farm owners.

Catfish farming in the Mississippi Delta rose to prominence in the 1970s and 80s. Because of the unique landscape of the Delta region, the production of catfish was a fairly easy task. Land that had been dammed from Mississippi River flooding potential was primarily meant for crop production, but marginal lands could be flooded and controlled in small plots just perfect for aquaculture. By 1986, the Mississippi Delta catfish farmers dominated commercial production of catfish in the U.S. Of the 133,000 acres devoted to catfish farming across the country, 85,000 of those were in Mississippi (Wellborn 1987, 1). Terrell Hanson of the Mississippi Historical Society writes about catfish farming history in the Delta on its website, “Mississippi History NOW.” Hanson describes how catfish farming rose to prominence. “In the early 1970s two trade associations for catfish producers were organized with the help of then
Commissioner of Agriculture and Commerce Jim Buck Ross. The Catfish Farmers of America (CFA) and the Catfish Farmers of Mississippi worked together to share ideas, solve industry problems, and to present a unified voice when representation of the industry was required” (Hanson 2010). Representation of the industry was certainly required of Mississippi’s Congressional delegation. In 1986, the Southern Regional Aquaculture Center, a thirteen state U.S. Department of Agriculture research extension center, was established and headquartered at Mississippi State University. The Administrative Center is located within the Thad Cochran National Warmwater Aquaculture Center in Stoneville, Mississippi, a long time recipient of directed, or earmarked, federal funds (USDA 2010).

Mississippi Delta farmers and farm workers benefitted greatly from the success of farm-raised catfish. Workers were needed for tending the ponds, feeding the fish, and then hand-filleting the products. Production of feed for the catfish was necessary, so farming soybeans, which were the main ingredient for the fish feed, became important. Feed mills began to spring up around the region, ensuring a local source for feed. Hopes were high among Deltans that the catfish industry would be the answer to the economic problems that lingered past the Civil Rights victories within the State. As Tony Dunbar observed about this region in his book, Delta Time: A Journey through Mississippi: “There is very little that is not touched by the federal government. What to plant, when to plant it, where to plant, whom to hire, how to house farm
workers, how to finance the farm, not to mention public welfare, the schools, and local government itself are all strongly influenced by the federal government” (Dunbar 1990, 136). Though the end of the 1970s saw the retirement of the mighty Senator James O. Eastland, it was evident that a majority of the residents of the Mississippi Delta had not gained economic strength or financial independence from the powerful man’s powerful reign in Washington.

In his book, *The Senator and the Sharecropper*, historian and former Delta schoolteacher Chris Meyers Asch writes of Senator Eastland's last years in the Senate as finally being cognizant of African-Americans as a significant part of his constituency. Eastland struggled with the decision of whether to run in 1972, and by 1977, he realized that his past segregationist fervor was too much of a burden on his image to ensure a successful re-election within a State that was trying to right its past wrongs and an unwilling and large black population. Senator Eastland spent his last years confusing his critics by supporting funding for a black industrial college (now Rust College) and hiring black staffers at the Judiciary Committee (Asch 2008, 288).

One could argue that Senator Eastland's years of bullishly defending segregation and working against the Civil Rights movement created a rise of resistance among black constituents. Mississippi's black population in effect pushed Senator Eastland out of office; yet, how much truly changed? Asch describes a situation that is eerily similar to the current status of life in the Delta. "By the 1970s, going back to the plantation
was not economically feasible; instead, many unskilled black laborers turned to the federal government. Where once the plantation owner had provided housing, medical care, and food, own government programs offered assistance such as welfare, housing subsidies, Medicare and Medicaid, food stamps, and Social Security. Poor black families still remained dependent it was only the source of their dependence that had changed" (Asch 2008, 285).

Joining Senator Stennis in the Senate following Senator Eastland’s retirement was the young Republican Congressman Thad Cochran, the first Republican in the State’s history elected to state-wide office. As a Congressman for the district which included the Capitol city, Jackson, Representative Cochran quickly earned the respect of his peers and constituents and has continued to win support easily within the State, as well as with Capitol Hill colleagues (Senator Thad Cochran 2010). In 1988, Senator John C. Stennis retired, and former Representative Trent Lott, a Republican who had represented the Gulf Coast region, won Stennis’ seat in the Senate.

In 1988, at the very end of Senator Stennis’ tenure, the Senate agreed to legislation that created the Lower Mississippi Development Commission. A nine-member commission, the group was formed to study the poverty-stricken area and recommend solutions for economic as well as social problems. The Delta, though bustling with successful catfish production among mostly white landowners, was still
gravely poor and mired in health and education inadequacies, especially among the black population. As farmers and elite whites maintained a wealthy presence, with large and prominent farms making great sums for the owners, the poor in the Delta remained devastatingly poor. Finally, poor Delta blacks felt that they were going to be given a voice. The region had recently been in the news preceding Rev. Jesse Jackson’s push for a Presidential bid, as Rev. Jackson “adopted” Tunica, Mississippi, near Memphis, to shed light on black poverty in America. Rev. Jackson called the town, “America’s Ethiopia,” citing living conditions without indoor plumbing or electricity. Following Jackson’s visit, the television news show *60 Minutes* showed America “Sugar Ditch Alley,” the area of Tunica to which Jackson referred (Austin 2006, 64).

However, despite fairly regular promotion of Mississippi's dire poverty, Delta leaders were resistant to changing their agriculturally-based way of life (as they had been since before the Civil War) and diversifying the economy of the region (Austin 2006, 66). As cotton and catfish reigned supreme, living conditions for the uneducated and underemployed populace remained stagnantly awful. The much anticipated Lower Mississippi Development Commission's report told of horrific conditions in the Delta. The poorest of all the counties studied was Tunica County, where the poverty rate among residents was 53 percent. Infant death rates were higher than both Chile and Malaysia. When the report was presented in 1990, the new administration under...
George H. W. Bush wanted to project an aura of social and fiscal conservatism; thus, the commission’s report recommended little in the way of federal dollars or commitment to deal with the problems at hand (Cobb 1992, 331-332). “Even the minimal commitment,” Mississippi historian James Cobb writes, “was too much,
however, for the Bush administration, which sought to project a ‘caring attitude’
without actually ‘endorsing’ the report or its recommendations” (Cobb 1992, 332).

*Halfway Home & a Long Way to Go*, the Commission’s report, established ten regional
objectives, to be accomplished by 1992 (Betts 1988, 10):

1. Provide a nationally competitive education for all southern states.
2. Mobilize resources to eliminate adult functional illiteracy.
3. Prepare a flexible, globally competitive work force.
4. Strengthen society as a whole by strengthening at-risk families.
5. Increase the economic development role of higher education.
6. Increase the south's capacity to generate and use technology.
7. Implement new economic development strategies aimed at home-grown business
and industry.
8. Enhance the south's natural and cultural resources.
9. Develop pragmatic leaders with a global vision.
10. Improve the structure and performance of state and local governments.

Washington and even Mississippi’s leaders were quick to move on from, or
lose interest in, the recommendations of the Commission’s report. Catfish operations
were steadily increasing, and Mississippi’s representatives in Washington had
international trade issues, both in cotton and catfish, as the some of the most pressing
issues had by some of the most powerful constituents. Initially, the idea of working at
a catfish plant was exciting for the working class population, who had been working in
the fields or in homes as domestic help. A new source of indoor job opportunities was
initially attractive, but soon after beginning their jobs, the workers found themselves in a low-wage, hard-labor situation, again under the miserable working conditions they thought the Civil Rights movement would have prevented.

In September of 1990, the mostly women and all black workforce at Delta Pride catfish company banded together to strike against the company’s policy to not let them form a union (Trice 2006, 1). The strike, in which 500 of 1200 employees refused to work until better labor conditions and pay were on the table, lasted for three months. In December of 1990, The New York Times visited Delta Pride during the strike and reported their findings – single black mothers who were pressed to compensate for low prices in the market by producing more and more at extremely low wages. “At Delta Pride, the average is $4.05, which for a full-time job works out to $8,424 a year, far below the $12,675 that the Federal Government says a single parent with three children needs to stay out of poverty. At a personnel department counter in the plant, a sign says "welfare forms." The company helps workers fill them out” (Kilborn 1990, 2). Companies in the Mississippi Delta were clearly fostering their employees’ dependence on the federal government, and using the availability of help for the poorest of the poor as a reason for not paying fair wages. As Chairman of the Agriculture Appropriations Subcommittee, a title Jamie Whitten held (with brief interruption) from 1949 until his retirement in 1994, Mr. Whitten worked as a “shadow
Secretary of Agriculture” (Binder 1995, 1). By ensuring high catfish and commodity prices during his tenure in Congress, Jamie Whitten may have been handcuffing his poorer constituents into a life of little opportunity, and little means or incentive to move off of the federal rolls.

The 1970s, 1980s, and early 1990s were a time of great change within the Mississippi Delta. Voting Rights for African Americans were established, schools were legally integrated, catfish production became a major business, and Mississippi’s incredibly long-serving and power grabbing Congressional delegation retired, giving way to a new generation of leaders. Yet for all these gains, the Delta remained stuck in poverty, with high unemployment rampant, lack of political participation the norm, and educational opportunities lacking.
I'm a Southerner, maybe that explains it all… We're fiscally conservative, but we need help from our government. We are pragmatic, we're populist. . . . I'm a little of the happy warrior.

-Trent Lott, 1996

Two of Mississippi’s most powerful Senators became a duo of political prowess in the 1990s, and their reign of power together lasted for about twenty years. Senators Thad Cochran and Trent Lott were both elected to the House of Representatives in the 1972, at the crest of Mississippi and the South abandoning the “Southern Democrat” party for the “Conservative Republican” party. Thad Cochran spent three terms as the Congressman for the district which included Mississippi’s capitol, Jackson, while Trent Lott spent eight terms representing the Mississippi Gulf Coast. Senator Thad Cochran was elected to the Senate in 1978, replacing the retiring Senator James Eastland, as the first Republican in one hundred years to win a statewide election in Mississippi (Thad Cochran 2010). His election was an historic one, one in which he beat a popular African-American named Charles Evers, an independent candidate and brother of slain Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers. Mr. Evers’s run as an Independent instead of a Democrat solidified Thad Cochran’s win, as the Democrat vote was split among Mr. Evers and the Democrat opponent, Maurice Dantin. Thad Cochran won with forty-five percent of the vote. The shift among Southern political
ideology seems apparent today, but in 1978, when Thad Cochran was asked about the significance of his win, he was yet to admit its importance. "It's not a resurgence of Republicanism in the South, or anything like that," he declared here. "No question: It's a fluke, a most unusual set of circumstances that happen to benefit me. If I had to write a script, I couldn't have done a better job" (Peterson 1978).

Throughout the 1980s, Senator Thad Cochran worked with his colleague, the much-admired Senator John Stennis, and Cochran seemed to mirror the elder statesman’s quiet approach and steady rise to power. Trent Lott waited until Senator Stennis retired in 1988 to run for office, but his rise to power was much quicker and more aggressive than Mr. Cochran’s. By 1996, the two Senators were pitted against one another for the top Leadership position in the Senate, a race that called much attention to the relationship between the two men. In June of 1996, New York Times reporter Jerry Gray highlighted the “rivalry” between the two and focused on the similar backgrounds but much different personalities. Both men attended and made a name for himself at the University of Mississippi in Oxford. Thad Cochran, four years older than Trent Lott, was a high school valedictorian and athlete, engaged in music and the arts. Trent Lott was cut from a different cloth. A magnet for attention and considered a big man on campus, Lott was unabashedly political. Both men, however, were elected cheerleaders for the Ole Miss Rebel football team, a position that, in the 1950s and 1960s was highly coveted, an elected post. After college Thad Cochran
went to law school and then joined and became partner in a prestigious law firm. Mr. Lott also attended Ole Miss law school, but then headed straight to Washington and began working as an aide to a Congressman whose position he took upon the Congressman’s retiring in 1972 (Gray 1996).

By 1996, both men held high posts in Senate leadership—Mr. Lott as the Republican Whip, the second-highest position in leadership, and Mr. Cochran as the chairman of the Republican Conference, the third-highest position in leadership. Though Trent Lott had been in the Senate only eight years at this point, and Thad Cochran had been a member for eighteen years, Trent Lott handily won the race for Republican Leader. Undoubtedly, both men used their burgeoning power and influence to cast favor and attention on their home state. Neither Trent Lott nor Thad Cochran were born into wealth, like most of their predecessors, and neither were especially educated in the important role that agriculture continued to play in the State’s economy. Thad Cochran was born in Pontotoc, Mississippi, a tiny town near Tupelo in the northeast part of the state, and his parents were educators (Thad Cochran 2010). Raised near Jackson, Thad Cochran had to learn about the unique culture of the Mississippi Delta while in office. Similarly, Trent Lott was born in 1941 in Grenada, Mississippi, but spent much of his life on the Mississippi Gulf Coast, far from the plantation culture of the Mississippi Delta (Murphy 2002). Both men would understand quickly that in order to remain in office, they would have to cater to the
needs of their wealthiest constituents, farm owners in the Delta.

As a member of the House of Representatives, Representative Cochran joined the Public Works Committee, a committee overseeing flood control policy—an always important topic for the Mississippi farmer in the shadow of the great, and often-flooding, Mississippi River. As a member of the Senate, Senator Cochran joined the Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry Committee. Thad Cochran is still a member of the Committee today, and he reigned as Chairman of the Committee from 2003 to 2005 (Thad Cochran 2010). In his thirty-three year tenure, Senator Cochran has overseen the creation of numerous farm bills, dictating such policy as crop subsidies amounts and United States Department of Agriculture regulations on products vitally important to the Mississippi Delta’s economy over the years—cotton, soybeans, and catfish, to name a few. Additionally, Senator Cochran joined the Appropriations Committee, a legacy appointment among Mississippi’s Congressional leadership in the 20th Century. As Chairman or Ranking Member of the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Agriculture from 1981 to 2003, Cochran simultaneously managed both the funding and authorizing for the Department of Agriculture and used his seat to direct millions of federal dollars to Mississippi. In a March 1999 *Mississippi Business Journal* article, writer Becky Gillette interviewed Chris Sparkman, deputy commissioner of the Mississippi Department of Agriculture and Commerce about Senator Cochran’s valuable influence on “the largest sector of the Mississippi economy,” agriculture: “He
has been very, very helpful with disaster payments ranging from aflatoxin in corn, a fungus in corn prevalent last year, to drought, to hurricane problems in the southern part of the state. You could not get a more important position as far as agriculture in the nation, or one that is more important to the state of Mississippi” (Gillette 1999).

In 2005, Thad Cochran became the Chairman of the U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations, a position he held until 2007, when the Republicans lost control of the Senate. Senator Cochran now maintains control of the nation’s spending as Vice-Chairman of the Senate Committee on Appropriations (Thad Cochran 2010). Trent Lott became Majority Leader of the U.S. Senate in 1996, and in 2001 became Minority Leader, as Democrats took control of the Senate. In 2002, after years of being one of the most powerful and influential members of Congress, Senator Trent Lott resigned his position as Leader. Lott, while speaking at Senator Strom Thurmond’s 100th birthday party, created a stir with comments seen as inappropriate and racist, and the ensuing media storm ravaged the Senator’s reputation. Though he retained his seat and was easily re-elected in 2006, he retired in December of 2007, his power formally, if not informally stripped (Nossiter and Herszenhorn 2007).

While Mississippi had two of the most powerful members of the Senate in the 1990s and early 2000s, Mississippi raked in the cash. The Delta, in particular, saw tens of millions flow into the region. One of the most important Congressionally-directed
programs affecting the Delta was the “Yazoo Pumps Project,” a $220 million U.S. Army Corps of Engineers project intending to manipulate the flow of floodwaters into the southern part of the Delta region. In the February 2, 2008, issue of *Time* magazine, Michael Grunwald described the Yazoo Pumps Project as “the most ecologically destructive Army Corps boondoggle on the books today,” that would build the largest ever hydraulic pump to protect from Yazoo River floodwaters a sparsely populated area dominated by soybean fields. Mr. Grumwald noted that the project would in effect drain enough wetlands to cover the entire five boroughs of New York City. “The pump is officially a flood-control project for poor Delta communities, but more than four-fifths of the economic benefits calculated by the Corps would go to flood-prone farmers who already collect gigantic subsidies to grow soybeans on marginal land. And the federal government is on the hook for the entire $220 million bill, because Mississippi Republican Senators Thad Cochran and Trent Lott slipped through a provision waiving local cost-sharing rules for the project” (Grunwald 8). In 2008, the Bush administration’s Environmental Protection Agency moved to veto the project, but the issue is still under appeal.

Michael Grumwald has studied the Yazoo Pumps project for years. In 2000, in an article for *The Washington Post*, he wrote about the Corps of Engineers’ deference to political pressure. Grumwald quotes a state Senator about Cochran and Lott’s undue influence on their priority list: "The politics with the Corps in Mississippi, it's like a
John Grisham novel," says state Sen. Debbie Dawkins (D-Gulfport). "Lott and Cochran say, 'Jump,' and the Corps says, 'How high?" An anonymous Corps official responds with, "We don't like to offend the politicians who pay our bills" (Grumwald 2000). One of the major supporters of the Project is the Delta Council, a chamber-of-commerce for the entire region, which is mostly made up of wealthy, white landowners. According to its official website, the organization was created in 1935 with three main objectives – promotion of agriculture, flood control, and a modern highway system (Delta Council 2011). Though the focus of the Delta Council has expanded a bit since 1935, it remains loyal to the original charter, and its Committee members remain highly influential, politically inclined and agriculturally wealthy individuals. "We're not a lot of people here, but we're just as important as anyone else," says Clifton Porter, who farms 1,400 acres and oversees flood control projects for the Delta Council, the region's well-wired chamber of commerce. "I'm sure those environmentalists think this should all be wilderness. But we're sure glad our elected officials don't think so" (Grumwald 2000).

Indeed, Issaquena County, the county in which the pump would be located, is the smallest county in terms of population in Mississippi, with a 2009 population estimate of 1,612 residents (Census 2010). The Corps of Engineers has a dedicated web page just for this project, in which they address common questions, such as, “Question: Why do we need this project? Answer: It will reduce flood damages and
protects citizens from the devastation of flooding and economic ruin. Project benefits will return $1.4 in economic benefits to the country for every $1 invested. There are over 1,300 homes in the area that are impacted by the 100-year frequency event” (USACE 2011) Many of the residents of Issaquena County are, by most accounts, in constant economic ruin, with nearly fifty percent living below the poverty line. The 2010 Census lists nine private nonfarm establishments in Issaquena County, and a thirty percent loss in population since 2000 (Census 2010). Though the project was authorized in 1941, and millions of federal funds devoted to it, there has been no ground broken. Rain falls every year and sometimes flood waters creep into Issaquena’s soybean and cotton fields, but farming operations manage to continue.
Wildlife teems in this area of so little population, and the region is known for its abundance of deer, turkey, fish, ducks, and other wild game available for viewing and hunting.

The Yazoo Pumps Project is just one example of an earmarked program made possible through the power and prestige of Mississippi’s Congressional delegation. Much attention has been paid lately to the process of earmarking funds for a certain program or entity in a Congressman’s district, and Mississippi is always mentioned among the top states receiving earmarked funds. Senator Cochran has several times received the onerous distinction of “Porker of the Month” or even “Porker of the Year” by the Citizens Against Government Waste, a private non-profit firm that writes the Congressional Pig Book each year, publishing what they see as wasteful spending of federal funds (CAGW 2011). The Citizens for Government Waste estimate that Senator Cochran has directed $2 billion to Mississippi from Fiscal Years 2008 to 2010. Cochran defends his history and the practice of earmarking, asserting that elected representatives often have more insight than a bureaucracy into what's best for states. "The primary consideration [for earmarks] is whether or not the request, or funding, is in the public interest, . . . and whether it provides quality of life or economic prospects for our future - and 'our' meaning the United States" (Jonsson 2006). Unfortunately, it can be hard to see the economic prospects in the Mississippi Delta, even with the influx of cash.
Figure 7. Kingdoms of Pork: Top Congressional Earmark States, 2010.

**Top ten states with highest 18-year earmarks totals:** California, $7.1 billion; Hawaii, $4.8 billion; Texas, $4.6 billion; Mississippi, $4.5 billion; New York, $4.2 billion; Florida, $3.7 billion; Pennsylvania, $3.5 billion; West Virginia, $3.4 billion; and Alabama, $2.9 billion.

**States with the largest average annual amount** of earmarks 1991-2008: California, $396.5 million; Hawaii, $268.7 million; Texas, $264.01 million; Mississippi, $251.4 million; Alaska, $250.4 million; New York, $235.9 million; Florida, $211.34 million; Pennsylvania, $196.8 million; West Virginia, $190.45 million; and Alabama, $164.89 million.

**States with highest annual per capita earmark averages 1991-2008:** Alaska, $425.5; Hawaii, $231.7; West Virginia, $105.8; Mississippi, $92.8; Montana, $73.3; North Dakota, $68.3; New Mexico, $64.5; South Dakota, $59.3; Nevada, $55.8; and Vermont, $54.3.

**Total and per capita annual earmark averages for selected states** 1991-2008: California ($396.5 million, $12.5); Texas ($264.01 million, $14); Mississippi ($251.4 million, $92.8).

Source: Data from Barton 2010.

The Figure above, from Capitol News Connection’s analysis of a 2010 Harvard Business School study on directed spending, points out the serious amount of money Senators Cochran and Lott have been able to dedicate to Mississippi (Barton 2010). Though earmarks were until Fiscal Year 2008 created anonymously, Mississippians are aware of how the money flows, as one can tell by reading the names of buildings at the State’s top Universities: the Thad Cochran National Warmwater Aquaculture Center at Mississippi State University's Stoneville campus, the Thad Cochran Research, Technology and Economic Development Park in Starkville, Mississippi, and
the Thad Cochran Research Center, where scientists are looking for ways to use medicinal plants as cash crops, at the University of Mississippi in Oxford (Jonsson 2006). Trent Lott also has several buildings named for him, such as the Trent Lott National Center for Excellence at the University of Southern Mississippi in Hattiesburg, and even the Trent Lott Middle School in Pascagoula, Mississippi. The power Senators Thad Cochran and Trent Lott have had, and the direct influence they have had over projects in Mississippi made the pair wildly popular among Mississippi voters. Thad Cochran has received up to 86 percent of the vote in Mississippi, receiving significant black votes, even when running against black candidates. Trent Lott generally received 65 percent of the vote in his Senate elections (Secretary of State of Mississippi 2011). In his 1978 Senate election against one of the most popular black candidates who has ever run for office, Charles Evers (brother of slain Civil Rights leader Medgar Evers), Evers predicted that Cochran wouldn’t be able to truly help Mississippi. “Cochran, he says, didn’t "bring home the bacon" during six years in the House and won't in the Senate” (Peterson 1978). Many billions of dollars and bacon later, Senator Cochran has proven his might.

Mississippi’s history of having strong representation in Congress may slowly be coming to an end. Senator Trent Lott resigned his seat in December of 2007, and joined a lobbying firm. With Lott went a great deal of influence, and his successor, Senator and former Representative Roger Wicker, is merely a freshman member in an
arena where seniority has served its members well. Senator Thad Cochran was forced to give up his chairmanship of the Appropriations Committee in 2007 when the Democrats came into power, but he retains his Ranking Member status – for now. The aging lawmaker is always surrounded by rumors of eminent retirement. Additionally, new ethics laws and regulations make it harder each year for Senator Cochran to dedicate funds to Mississippi’s people, organizations, and Universities. In early 2011, President Obama vowed to veto any spending bill that includes earmarked funding. Both the Senate and House agreed to keep earmarks out of Fiscal Year 2011 and Fiscal Year 2012 bills. Dr. Mark Keenum, President of Mississippi State University and former chief-of-staff to Senator Thad Cochran, wrote on March 6, 2011, in Jackson’s *The Clarion-Ledger* newspaper about the adverse effects that an earmark ban will have on Mississippi: “At risk is funding for research activities that have enabled our universities to spur innovation, start new companies, help existing industries remain competitive, attract new businesses to Mississippi and create thousands of new jobs.”

The Mississippi Delta now has a wealth of University and government-run research laboratories, thanks to Mississippi’s Thad Cochran and Jamie Whitten. The Mississippi State University research lab (the Delta Research and Extension Center), as well as a U.S. Department of Agriculture Agriculture Research Station (the Jamie Whitten Research Center), and the Thad Cochran Warmwater Aquaculture Center are all located in Washington County, in Stoneville, Mississippi.
which is so tiny, it’s not actually an incorporated town, happens to also be the headquarters of the Delta Council (Delta Council 2011). Washington County does have a growing economic presence in the State, but its success is not due to Mississippi’s State’s catfish research or the U.S.D.A’s crop genetics research; rather, the efforts of a Greenwood, Mississippi, businessman, and his company Viking Range, Corporation has put Washington County on the map. Mr. Carl took a community that had been struggling with the worst of the Delta’s unique problems, and he singlehandedly has improved substantially the quality of life for its residents (Holliday 2004). What Mr. Carl has done in about twenty years, Mr. Whitten, Mr. Stennis, Mr. Eastland, Mr. Cochran, and Mr. Lott have never been able to accomplish in nearly one hundred years.
CHAPTER 5
SOCIAL PROGRAMS LAUNCH WITH GREAT HOPE

I may seem to have implied that all Delta citizens were aristocrats travelling luxuriously up and down the river or sitting on the front gallery, a mint julep in one hand and a palm-leaf fan in the other, protected from mosquitoes by the smudge burning in the front yard. If so, I have misinterpreted my country. The aristocrats were always numerically in the minority; with the years they have not increased.

-William Alexander Percy, Lanterns on the Levee

When thinking of the American South, many around the world dream of Scarlett O’Hara from Gone with the Wind and her fine lifestyle before the Civil War. Even before the Civil War, the reality for Southerners was not nearly as romantic as it may have seemed. Post-Civil War, the South has labored to find its footing as agriculture profits dwindled for all but a few large farms and manufacturing seemed firmly rooted in the Northeast and Midwest. As author and Deltan William Alexander Percy noted in his quote referenced above, the cash infused into the Delta from profitable farms did not translate into a thriving community for the majority of the population, both black and white. As the 20th century was coming to a close, the Delta region still found itself mired in the same problems it had been dealing with since Reconstruction. Yet, the 1990s began a hopeful time in much of America. President Bill Clinton served from 1993 to 2001, and his two terms in office brought positive economic news for much of the middle and upper class in the United States. A Democrat from rural Arkansas, President Clinton focused attention on impoverished
American communities, and created and overhauled several programs to try to bring down poverty levels. Three of these programs directly impacted the Mississippi Delta region and have, since their inception, tried to chip away at the long-standing problems of illiteracy, poor health, high crime, high poverty rates, high teen pregnancy and infant mortality rates, as well as lack of marketable skills and lack of opportunities.

The issues facing this particular community were nearly overwhelming, but President Clinton’s AmeriCorps program, his overhaul of the Welfare system, and his rural poverty-focused Delta Regional Authority, were launched with great hopefulness and plans for helping put a dent in the long list of problems. Two other enormously successful educational programs aimed at improving low-income schooling, Teach for America and an offshoot of Teach for America called the Knowledge is Power Program, were also created in the late 20th Century. Though neither are fully federally-funded, both receive sizeable support from the federal government.

In July of 1996, Congress voted in favor of the Welfare Reform Act, and President Clinton signed into law this Act on August 22, 1996. In his first State of the Union address, President Clinton promised to “end welfare as we know it,” to make welfare a second chance, not a way of life, exactly the change most welfare recipients wanted it to be” (Clinton 2006). Included in the bill was the creation of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant program, which replaced the Aid to Families with Dependent Children program, which began in 1935. A Congressional
Research Service report shows that the number of persons receiving cash assistance in Mississippi dropped 78.6% from 1994 to 2010. In order to qualify for TANF assistance, recipients must work for a specified amount of time based on other household factors (Falk 2011). Its mandatory work rules for recipients, 60-month time limit on benefits, and its flexibility to tailor welfare programs by state have led, many sociologists conclude, to a 57 percent reduction in the number of families on welfare. According to Health and Human Service data, about 1.9 million families were on welfare in 2005, compared with 4.4 million families in August of 1996 (Wetzstein 2006). The 1996 Welfare Reform bill also contained provisions and incentives to reconnect fathers with their children and to promote marriage, using economic incentives (Solomon-Fears 2010).

A Christian Science Monitor article from 1999 analyzes the data showing that welfare assistance had decreased in Mississippi. Positive results from this reduction, however, were hard to find. Though the economy in most of the nation was robust in 1999, the Deep South’s rural areas were still deeply poor with limited job opportunities and limited training opportunities. “If [the goal] is to get people off welfare, it has been successful,” says Danny Collum, project director at the Mississippi Coalition of Block Grants, a group of organizations that work with the poor. “If it is to get people out of dependency and into self-sufficiency and out of poverty, it's certainly not working in Mississippi... For many poor people in Mississippi, the state's low...
welfare benefit - $170 a month for a single mother with two children - is hardly worth the hassle of meeting the state's tough work requirements,” says Mr. Collum. Many people make do by working odd jobs, or relying on relatives or on local charities, he says (Snajderman 1999). Finding steady work in an area with few opportunities continues to plague Delta residents in 2011, nearly twelve years after the article was written.

A 1997 New York Times article highlighted the struggles faced by TANF recipients forced to find work or lose their benefits. Despite boasting shrinking numbers in welfare rolls, Delta residents were not necessarily finding work to replace lost benefits. In Washington County, welfare rolls dropped 26 percent in 1996, despite an unemployment rate of 9.7 percent. The pattern held in the five surrounding counties, where welfare caseloads had fallen 20 percent, but the unemployment rate remained at 13.2 percent. As a reminder, this was during one of the healthiest economic times in U.S. history. Many of the jobs that exist are distant and the work difficult, and there continues to be no form of public transportation in any of the counties that make up of the Delta region. Of the 27 Greenville women placed in jobs in September of 1997, ten went to a catfish plant in Eudora, Arkansas. Employees were forced to commute on a school bus from Greenville at 6:30 a.m. for an hour to reach the plant. In Glendora, Mississippi, 90 minutes east of Greenville, a town resident estimated that of the town's 88 households that all but three received
public assistance at some point during the year (DeParle 1997).

Mr. DeParle, the author of this article, also relays the story of two women living together to make the most of their benefits and lend each other help. One had eight children from six different fathers, and one had seven children, two adopted from her brother, and was pregnant. Neither was married. Residents with little job experience, weak education and training, poor job retention, plagued with social ills such as single parenting without adequate resources for childcare and rural infrastructure that includes no form of public transportation are just a few examples of the uphill climb to self-sufficiency faced by residents of the Delta, despite the efforts of the federal government to intervene on their behalf. “Across the Delta, mothers dropped from the welfare rolls are now turning to relatives, boyfriends or other Federal programs -- most notably disability payments,” DeParle explains, “or traveling long distances in search of work” (DeParle 1997). The harsh reality of just how dependent this population is can only be gleaned by hearing from and studying the individual residents.
Another federal program created during the Clinton Administration to help serve America’s poor was the AmeriCorps program. AmeriCorps, established under the Clinton administration in 1993, is a group of (currently about 20,000) workers who serve in high poverty areas as tutors and mentors, as health and literacy advocates, while earning money for higher education (AmeriCorps 2011). Federally funded under the Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations bill each year, the Corporation for National and Community Service received $1.15 billion in Fiscal Year 2010, of which the AmeriCorps program received just over $500 million.
(National Service Corps 2011). The Mississippi Delta specifically benefits from AmeriCorps funding through the Mississippi Delta Service Corps, a group established at Delta State University in 2003 with an operating budget of $600,000.

One example of an operation within the Delta is described as part of Delta State University’s Center for Community and Economic Development: “Project MPACT (Mississippians Providing Adequate Career Training) is the program’s welfare-to-work component. Through the success of the project, our first volunteer center has been created in Bolivar County with the Mississippi Department of Human Services being the largest partnering agency. Through this collaboration, TANF recipients register with the volunteer center and are placed with for profit and non-profit agencies to work at least twenty hours a week. Because of the training and placement offered, more than fifty volunteers have been recruited and have completed the job readiness training, and more than twenty partnerships have been established. Of the participants completing the program, twenty-one percent have full-time jobs. A second volunteer center is in the process of recruiting volunteers and partnering agencies to serve Washington County” (Delta State University 2011).

As promising as the program appears at a glance, it is worth noting that only twenty-one percent of the participants finishing the program, even now, in 2011, have been able to find full-time employment. Seventy-nine percent of the participants have not. A community may have the best job-training programs available, but the lack of job opportunities for those finishing these programs makes these efforts null and uninspiring for those seeking employment.
Another notable startup under the Clinton Administration is the Delta Regional Authority. Created in 2001, the eight-state agency covers regions along the Mississippi River from Illinois to Louisiana, and it also covers underserved areas in Alabama. Modeled after the Appalachian Regional Commission, established in 1965, and the Denali Commission in Alaska, established in 1998, the Delta Regional Authority implements health programs, job training programs, gives highway and rural water grants, and brings doctors to the area (Congressional Budget Organization 2003). In the 1990s and early 2000s, the Appalachian Regional Commission was receiving annual federal appropriations of approximately $65 to $70 million a year. The Denali Commission received $35 to $50 million a year (OMB 2011). Thanks to strong Congressional backing from funding giants (Appropriations Committee Chairman and Ranking Member) during this time, Senator Robert C. Byrd of West Virginia and Senator Ted Stevens of Alaska, these independent agencies were able to maintain large yearly budgets. Upon his death in June of 2010, Senator Lisa Murkowski of Alaska said of Senator Byrd,

“A son of the depression, growing up in impoverished Appalachia, he understood and empathized with the isolation and third world conditions that plagued our Alaska Native people of rural Alaska. Because of his long standing relationship with Ted Stevens on the Senate Appropriations Committee, Senator Byrd came to know and understand the needs of our state. Our Denali Commission is closely modeled on the Appalachian Regional Commission, which Senator Byrd championed during his decades of service to our Nation” (DeLong 2010, 1).
Despite the fact that the Delta Regional Authority is closely aligned with these two agencies, the Authority has struggled to maintain a modest $9 to $13 million yearly appropriation since its creation (OMB 2011). Why the discrepancy in funding among the three independent agencies? The Appalachian Regional Commission is made up of thirteen states, and the Denali Commission only provides for one state. The Delta Regional Authority’s eight-state territory should be on par with the others, shouldn’t it?  

In a November of 2009 article for Memphis’ *The Commercial Appeal*, former director of the Delta Regional Authority Pete Johnson was questioned about the agency’s small budget. From its beginning in 2001, the Delta Regional Authority was limited in its scope -- hamstrung, some say -- by congressional mandates designed to keep it from becoming an out-of-control federal agency. Those objections came primarily from Mississippi's powerful U.S. senators, Thad Cochran and Trent Lott. "I understood their concern," Johnson says. "They didn't want to create another government bureaucracy; they didn’t want to see some boondoggle out here. They've seen billions of dollars thrown in the region and nothing happen” (Klose 2009).

Indeed, the Congressional Budget Authority (CBO) voiced mixed feelings among budgeters about the development agencies. In a 2003 report on an option of have addressed the effectiveness of these programs, but that a 1996 report by the General Accounting Office reviewed the available evidence and found that no strong
link could be made between the activities of the Appalachian Regional Commission and included counties' economic growth. Also noted was the argument that federal aid for economic development should go through national, competitive programs. If all regions of the country have needy areas, why should Appalachia, Alaska, and the Mississippi Delta have special claim to these dollars (CBO 2003)?

One of the most noteworthy federally funded programs to serve the Mississippi Delta is the Teach for America program. Teach for America was founded in 1990, though it was not originally a federal program. A 21 year old college student named Wendy Kopp created the idea for Teach for America in her undergraduate thesis for Princeton University. With ingenuity, she raised $2.5 million capital and hired staff to teach in six low-income communities around the U.S. Since its inception, the Teach for America program has grown to 28,000 teachers, working around the country, and it currently receives about $20 million in yearly directed spending, and another $11 million in grant funds from the AmeriCorps program. The Mississippi Delta was included in the program in 1992, and the region now hosts 520 individual teachers, making it the second largest region in the Teach for America system, only behind New York City (Teach for America 2011). In the Mississippi Delta, these Teach for America teachers have become crucial to the public school system. Finding teachers who are able to teach subjects like math
and science is difficult, and keeping them is even harder. A 1996 *Washington Post* story describes the school superintendent of Sunflower County’s surprise that Teach for America teacher, a 23 year old graduate of Duke University, was planning to stay. "Words cannot express my gratitude," said Jimmy Smith, the local superintendent. "This doesn't happen much around here anymore." (Sanchez 1996). Yet, counting on young, well-educated teachers from urban areas to stay teaching in these Delta communities is also difficult. Teach for America posts teachers for two years, and they are able to move after completing their two year term. Lack of continuity and strong leadership among the young teachers created some friction between Teach for America teachers and teachers who have been in the public school system for many years. Teach for America alumni Darran Simon and Ting Yu interviewed Teach for America’s Delta teachers about blending into the very small communities. “A lot of this stems back from Civil Rights, [but] there is a certain amount of distrust about outsiders coming in,” (Shelby Middle School principal) Lordi says. “And what I have seen is a fundamental shift in the degree to which communities - white, black, young, old - have come to trust TFA corps members. People can see kids learning. At the end of the day, that sort of trumps all because everybody wants to see the best for kids” (Simon, Yu 2010).

There is no doubt that the Teach for America program has infused the area
schools with energy, new ideas, and hope for generations of children who have fallen severely behind academic standards. Yu and Simon point out that in 2007, Mississippi reported that 81 percent of its fourth graders scored proficient or better in math. Yet on the National Assessment of Educational Progress, the U.S. Department of Education’s standards exam, only 21 percent scored proficient or above. Mississippi placed last in the nation; two-thirds of Mississippi Delta districts are either failing or at risk of failing (Simon, Yu 2010). Despite the success of the Teach for America program, the state legislature recently voted against bringing in a highly acclaimed charter school founded by a former Teach for America alumnus. The Knowledge is Power Program (KIPP) charter school is a public school supported by state and federal governments, as well as by donations from such entities as The Walton Family Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Doris & Donald Fisher Fund, the latter of which has donated more than $60 million to KIPP since its inception in 1994. There are currently 99 KIPP schools around the country, according to the KIPP website, and all schools operate on a free-tuition, open-enrollment (regardless of background) system. Eighty percent of KIPP students receive federal free or reduced-price meals, and 90 percent of KIPP students are either African-American or Latino (KIPP 2011).

The KIPP model, in which children, parents, and teachers each sign a compact of dedication to the student’s learning and commitment to do everything to ensure the
student is able to attend college, is unique in that the students are expected to spend much longer hours in school, and many KIPP schools also require Saturday classes. The KIPP program has proved as popular as it is successful, and many articles praising KIPP have been written in the past ten years. A July of 2009 Special Report in The Economist analyzed the facts about the first established KIPP Academy, in Houston, Texas. “Typically, says Elliott Witney, the head of KIPP’s [Houston] academy, only about 7% of students from low-income families graduate from college; KIPP’s rate so far has been over 90%, though it has not yet quite achieved its goal of 98.6 (‘body temperature’)” (The Economist 2009). Because of these startlingly successful numbers, and with KIPP schools currently in place in close-by low-income areas of Memphis, Tennessee, West Helena, Arkansas, and New Orleans, Louisiana, the State of Mississippi is continuing to mull a proposal to put a KIPP school in the Delta.

The State of Mississippi has a current “charter law” in place that does not allow for the creation of new charter schools. Bills to change the law have failed over the years, but other options, such as creating charter schools out of currently failed schools, are being weighed. Jackson, Mississippi’s newspaper, The Clarion Ledger, reported on February 9, 2011, the concerns raised by National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP)’s Mississippi chapter President Derrick Johnson: "Under the bill being considered, vital resources would be diverted from existing public schools to support charter education while over 95 percent of school-
aged children would remain in public school settings with further depleted resources," (Crisp 2011). Though the federal government does not directly fund public charter schools, federal law has been passed to encourage the creation of public charter schools across the nation. Since 1995, federal grants for start-up costs have been administered and forty states have passed new charter school laws. In Fiscal Year 2005, the Charter Schools Program, part of the Department of Education, administered over $215 million in grants (US Charter Schools 2011). Mississippi law currently prevents any grant funding from being sought.

The federal overhaul of the Welfare Program, the creation of the Delta Regional Authority and the AmeriCorps program are great examples of the U.S. government coming to the aid of its neediest citizens. The Teach for America program and the Knowledge is Power program have become enormously successful into the 21st Century, as private-public partners. The Mississippi Delta region has benefitted greatly from all but the KIPP program, but with these benefits also comes the shackle of dependency. Mississippi Delta schools are at a point in which they could not function without Teach for America, and yet federal funding, which makes up 30 percent of Teach for America’s budget, is threatened for Fiscal Years 2011 and 2012 (Will 2011). The Obama administration and Congress have declared the program an earmark, and earmarks in spending bills are banned for two years; whether Mississippi Delta schools will be affected by the Teach for America cuts is still uncertain.
Additionally, welfare and disability make up a vast percentage of household incomes. Though AmeriCorps has helped citizens with job skills and training, hardly any jobs are actually available. The intentions of these programs are admirable and the help desperately needed, but how can Delta residents learn to help themselves?
CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The richest nation on Earth has never allocated enough resources to build sufficient schools, to compensate adequately its teachers, and to surround them with the prestige our work justifies. We squander funds on highways, on the frenetic pursuit of recreation, on the overabundance of overkill armament, but we pauperize education.

-Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, 1964

The Mississippi Delta’s poverty statistics, and the lifestyle statistics that go along with living without, have been tremendously difficult to overcome in the one hundred and fifty years since the end of the Civil War. Other than poverty, the one factor that has been consistent over the years is the region’s economy. Agriculture has been, since before the Civil War, the only major economic force in the region. Farming continues to be the only way of life today, even though each year farms are considerably less profitable and less in need of employment. Without a more diverse economy, the communities of the Delta will continue to struggle, and they will eventually fade away. Too much of life in the Delta holds to a cyclical pattern in which a child is born to a young, single mother in poverty, the young single mother lacks a proper education, and thus is not able to offer or inspire her child to have a proper education, and the parent struggles to make ends meet in a community that lacks adequate economic or social resources, until that child begins the cycle again. The cycle has been incredibly difficult to stop, and federal programs to help alleviate
the problems have been mostly unsuccessful. The lynchpin to solving this conundrum is making a serious commitment to the education of the people living in this area.

In her 2006 book, *Life and Death in the Delta: African American Narratives of Violence, Resilience, and Social Change*, author and oral historian Kim Lacy Rogers weaves together dialogues among African-Americans living in the Delta to form a path between the Delta of the 1960s and the Delta of today. The future, it seems, is dim for many who have lived through decades of change in the region. Although high school dropout rates have improved, infant mortality rates lowered, and the percentages of those living in poverty have declined, the Delta’s figures compared to other regions in America are still quite dismal. Other problems continue to weigh heavily on the population. Crime rates – especially among African-Americans - have risen sharply, teen pregnancy continues to be a major problem, and obesity and diabetes have also gotten progressively worse among the poor in Mississippi Delta.

Rogers interviewed an Indianola woman named Juanita Scott, a Head Start employee who cared for and lived with her elderly mother in 1995, about the Delta of the 1990s and beyond:

To me, integration was one of the worst things that happened to black people….They lost all of their identity. They lost all their dignity. They just lost it and now they are fat in the minds, and they don’t have no directions…. 
[The all-black schools were] very much important for those kids….That is why we are losing our generation now. We’ve got people over there [in the schools] that don’t care what they do. And then our young parents don’t care what they do. So that’s when you lose the togetherness from the church, the home, and the school, and when you lose that communication, you lose that child. You lose your community, and that is what has happened. (Rogers 2006, 61)

Rogers’ book is filled with similar stories of the importance of the community before desegregation. A woman named L. C. Dorsey of Greenville, Mississippi, recalled:

We used to have a sense of community that transcended distance so that if I had a kid that was in trouble, there was a network in the community that would get that kid out of town overnight, and when the morning came, he would be in Chicago or St. Louis. People always did that. They looked after each other… the community had a sense of ownership of all the kids, and they looked after all of them,” recalled a woman named L.C. Dorsey of Greenville, Mississippi (Rogers 2006, 67-68).

Although many of the narratives in Kim Lacy Rogers’ books tie lack of community with integration of Mississippi Delta schools in the 1970s, it is important to look wholly at the situation that evolved in the Delta after the Civil Rights movement succeeded in Mississippi. African-Americans were no longer a fringe group in Mississippi, they were included in creating a better life for themselves, through participation in state and local government, by both electing black leaders and voting in general. Public education was now open to all races and classes, and blacks had input on curriculum and became teachers themselves. Whites, however, quickly
banded together to form new private schools and left underprepared blacks to deal with an already underperforming school system. As well-educated blacks migrated out of the Delta in search for more opportunities in the North, the society of great leaders began to slowly erode. Without a strong education system, the backbone of any successful community, the Delta has never been able to pull its residents out of poverty and into good jobs. In addition, far too many of the Delta’s educated achievers immediately leave the area for better jobs and a better way of life, rather than staying to help the community. Sharon D. Wright Austin analyzed this sizeable drain of the population in her 2006 book, *The Transformation of Plantation Politics*. The U.S. population grew steadily between 1940 and 1990, Austin notes, but the Mississippi Delta counties’ population declined in large percentages during this time. “These population declines were higher in the Delta’s core counties that had larger black populations and a heavier reliance on agricultural industry than in its peripheral counties” (Austin 2006, 37).
Table 9. Population Change in the United States, Mississippi, and Mississippi Delta Counties, 1940–2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S.</td>
<td>131,164,569</td>
<td>179,323,175</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MS</td>
<td>2,188,796</td>
<td>2,470,141</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Delta</td>
<td>623,737</td>
<td>524,568</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Core Delta Counties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bolivar</td>
<td>67,574</td>
<td>54,464</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Coahoma</td>
<td>48,323</td>
<td>46,212</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Humphreyp</td>
<td>26,257</td>
<td>19,093</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Issaquena</td>
<td>6,433</td>
<td>3,576</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leake</td>
<td>53,400</td>
<td>47,142</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quitman</td>
<td>27,191</td>
<td>21,019</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sunflower</td>
<td>15,493</td>
<td>10,758</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tallahatchie</td>
<td>34,166</td>
<td>24,081</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunica</td>
<td>22,610</td>
<td>16,826</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Washington</td>
<td>67,576</td>
<td>76,638</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Peripheral Delta Counties

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Area</th>
<th>Population</th>
<th>Percent Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carroll</td>
<td>20,651</td>
<td>11,177</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grenada</td>
<td>19,052</td>
<td>18,409</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holmes</td>
<td>39,710</td>
<td>27,090</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Panola</td>
<td>34,421</td>
<td>28,164</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tate</td>
<td>19,209</td>
<td>18,138</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Warren</td>
<td>39,585</td>
<td>42,200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yzeo</td>
<td>40,091</td>
<td>38,635</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This paper has shed light on the policies of Mississippi dating back a century, in order to show the decades and generations of hopelessness people in the Delta have had to face. The political dynamic between the State’s elected representatives and their poor (and numerous) constituents has always been and continues to be paternalistic. From Jamie Whitten, John C. Stennis, and James Eastland, to Thad Cochran and Trent Lott, Mississippi has been consistent in sending hard-driving personalities to Washington, and these Congressmen have understood the power and entitlement that comes along with being elected to as many terms as possible. Such Congressmen would be impressive in their dedication to helping their home districts had they been lone providers, but the sheer might of the men when grouped together is rather remarkable. Most Mississippians alive today cannot recall a time during which their Congressman was merely one of four hundred thirty-five members. These Senators and Congressmen granted their wealthy supporters with projects to benefit their bottom lines, but they also maintained support among their poor constituents by keeping within them a sense of dependency. This way of governing is no longer acceptable and should be avoided at all costs.

It is no secret that the Mississippi Delta has a history of being a “plantation society;” that is, residents have always adhered to a hierarchical structure in which the wealthiest few owned the majority of the land, and allowed the poorest to work for them. Though the practice of slavery was abolished with the Civil War, and the
sharecropping system fell in the early 1900s, the plantation mentality is still very much alive. In an agricultural society with an enormous gap between wealthy and poor such as the Mississippi Delta’s, it is not hard to see how the plantation mentality has flourished over the years. This paper has focused on whether the government has a moral obligation to care for its weakest, and it does; the government should not, however, attempt to take on the responsibility of lifting people out of poverty. It is up to the government to make available the best means for showing the poorest members of society how they can better themselves and why they should care.

Teach for America has done a remarkable job, not just in the Mississippi Delta, of simply being willing to teach in less-than-desirable locations. As qualified teachers dwindle year after year, the Delta has become extremely dependent on the leadership provided by these teachers. It is not enough, however, for a well-educated young person to come to the region for a two year commitment and then leave. The constant outward flow of the best and brightest in the region has led to not only a brain drain in the Delta, but also a serious insecurity within the community. If the community is too weak, too hopeless, to keep educated citizens, then how can the residents of the Delta ever feel pride in from where they come?

The truth is that the residents of the Delta should be immensely proud of their roots. The history of the region is full of tragic, beautiful, life-altering, world-altering stories. In addition to learning math and language skills, the students of the Delta need
to be taught a sense of pride. It can be painful to reminisce about the struggles these people have faced. From slavery to sharecropping to outward migration to reverse migration to Civil Rights struggles to painful poverty, the Mississippi Delta residents have faced some of the worst struggles in American history. Yet, from this pain has come art and music and literature and personalities that are unlike any other region in the world. Mississippi is slowly starting to realize the history of the Delta is something that people around the world are interested in, and its Congressional and State leaders are beginning to direct and fund programs that highlight the culture of the State.

Tourism has recently become a driving factor in the region, thanks mostly to investments from wealthy and famous men and women who were born in the Delta. Morgan Freeman has spent years buying abandoned buildings in Clarksdale, Mississippi, revitalizing them, and turning them into art stores, blues music joints, hotels, and restaurants. B.B. King recently dedicated an incredible museum on his life and the history of the blues to the town of his birth, Indianola. Fred Carl, mentioned earlier, has not only built an industry for the town of Greenwood, his hometown, he has also dedicated a portion of his profits to revitalizing historic buildings in the town and created a world-class hotel and restaurant that draw tourists, chefs, and Viking Range customers from all over the world. Thanks in part to his efforts, Greenwood was chosen as the site for a major film production in the summer of 2010, which brought hundreds of jobs to the town and millions of dollars in revenue. These
individuals have dedicated their own resources to making their hometowns noteworthy, worthy of a second look, and their efforts have brought about considerable benefits to the towns mentioned, specifically to the quality of life for Delta residents.

The Delta has a million exceptional stories to tell, an unusual landscape, relics of different era, and music history unrivaled in America. Most Americans, and sadly enough, Deltans themselves, do not understand or know about the role the Delta has played in American history. It is imperative that the residents themselves understand the unique culture, learn to be proud of where they come from, and take a dedicated interest in making living conditions better. A new cycle of life can be achieved in which one child born, perhaps to a poor, single mother, enters school and is taught by a series of caring individuals who inspire the child to rebuild the sense of community that has been lost over the years, and that child will go to college and come home to lead the town in small steps towards self-sufficiency.

In order to achieve a new community among the poor in the Delta, several steps must be taken:

1. Federal agriculture subsidies, especially those directed to crops grown in the Mississippi Delta, should be slowly reduced. The gap between the rich and the poor in this region needs to shrink considerably, and it cannot shrink if the government is paying outrageous sums of money for farm corporations to use most available land for surplus supplies.
2. Flood control policies for the Mississippi River should be revisited. There are areas within the Delta that should not be protected from floodwaters and should return to their natural wetlands state. It has been proven that hunting can be a profitable business in the area, and hunting can bring in tourists from all over the world because of the quality and abundance of wildlife.

3. Teach for America should continue to receive federal funding, and should remain a strong presence in the Delta. The KIPP program should be allowed admittance into the region, as well, so as to give confidence and educational opportunities for residents who have never had either. These teachers should add into their curriculum a portion on the State’s history, but more specifically the region’s history. Music and arts must also be included in the curriculum because of the region’s robust achievements in these arenas.

The Delta will not change overnight, but with more education and less agriculture, the region has a fighting chance to change from within. It has been proven that throwing federal and state money at the Delta’s problems does not work; it is time to start inspiring the youth of Delta to make this their own project.


Census 2000. “Mississippi by County.”

------------ “Mississippi by Place.”


------------ “Issaquena County, Mississippi.”


