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Creating a "Respectable Area": Southerners and the Cold War

When Strom Thurmond and a host of future political leaders returned to the American South following their service overseas in World War II, they came home determined to remake the South in a more progressive mold. Intense and prolonged interaction with men from other regions of the country and immersion in the large and powerful armed forces bureaucracy shaped their thinking about the future of the South in new and profound ways. Convinced that the South lagged behind the rest of the nation economically, and that the South's stunted, colonial economy had perpetuated the political control of an entrenched moss-back elite committed to low-wage extractive industries, men like Thurmond were equally convinced that the road to economic transformation was paved with federal dollars. Many of these new funds were funneled through the military-industrial complex. As the South's political leaders from the late 1940s through the 1980s (and, in Thurmond's case, into the next century), these men were consistent supporters of a strong military and a foreign policy that took a hard line in its dealings with Communist nations.¹

As a regional historian, it is not at all surprising that I take as orthodox the notion that the peculiar, historic forces that shaped and defined the South likewise played an important role in determining the foreign policy positions of its political leaders. Their support for a strong military, as Andy Fry notes, was predicated in part on the economic benefits that the expansion of the military industrial complex brought to their communities and states. By the early 1970s, the Southern states were providing the Pentagon with 52 percent of its ships, 46 percent of its airframes, 42 percent of its petroleum products, and 27 percent of its ammunition.² The relationship between Southern states and the national security state was strong and vital.

1. James C. Cobb, "World War II and the Mind of the Modern South," in *Remaking Dixie: The Impact of World War II on the American South*, ed. Neil R. McMillen (Jackson, MS, 1997); Kari Frederickson, *The Dixiecrat Revolt and the End of the Solid South, 1932-1964* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2001), 171.

2. Bruce J. Schulman, *From Cotton Belt to Sunbelt: Federal Policy, Economic Development, and the Transformation of the American South, 1938-1980* (Durham, NC, 1994), 136; Ann Markusen, Peter Hall, Scott Campbell, and Sabina Deitrick, *The Rise of the Gunbelt: The Military Remapping of Industrial America* (New York, 1991); "Southern Militarism," *Southern Exposure* (Spring 1973): 61.

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Having spent the better part of the last ten years examining how decisions regarding the expansion of the arms race affected Southern communities, I would argue for a further refinement of this position. Military contracts and Cold War industrial facilities brought more than jobs: they possessed the power to remake entire regional economies, bringing the fruits of modernization that had alluded the South for so long. From Tenneco's Newport News shipbuilding plant in Hampton Roads, Virginia, to General Dynamics and LTV Corporation in Texas, the military and the federal government created a new high-tech industrial workforce whose cultural tastes, spending habits, and political allegiances changed the face of the South. The arrival of the military-industrial complex into underdeveloped Southern communities helped the region to overcome some of its more unsavory regional attributes. The Cold War made the South less "Southern."

Developments in Strom Thurmond's home state of South Carolina provide examples of how Cold War decision makers at the highest levels took regional patterns into account. In January 1950, on the advice of his special advisory committee, President Harry Truman authorized an accelerated program to develop the hydrogen bomb. The production of the "super" required a new facility to produce plutonium, tritium, and other products. During the spring and summer of 1950, officials from the Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) and DuPont Corporation (recruited by President Truman to operate the vast weapons complex) crisscrossed the nation, investigating over one hundred potential sites. They ultimately settled on a site in western South Carolina that bordered the Savannah River. While factors, such as the water quality of the Savannah and the drainage properties of the region's sandy soil, played an important role in the decision of where to locate the plant, so too did more historic, particularly Southern, attributes. Of the handful of sites that made it into the final round of consideration, the South Carolina location was notable for its construction wage rates—the lowest among all possible sites. South Carolina's low wage rates reflected the state's historically weak labor movement and hostile antiunion atmosphere. AEC officials responsible for making recommendations regarding the placement of the site likewise noted that most of those living inside the proposed plant boundaries were black tenant farmers. These "colored agricultural workers," noted one official, resided in houses that were of "low value." Removing such residents would be easier than removing residents at alternate sites where property values were higher.³ Here, government officials

3. "Report to the President by the Special Committee of the National Security Council to the President," January 31, 1950, U.S. Department of State, *Papers Relating to the Foreign Relations of the United States, 1950* (Washington, DC, 1977), 1: 513–23. Site specifics found in C. H. Topping, Engineering Department, E. I. DuPont de Nemours & Company, "Plant 124 Site Survey," November 27, 1950, box H-10-1, series 43, Atomic Energy Commission (AEC) Records, Record Group 326, National Archives and Records Administration, Southeast Region, Morrow, Georgia; H. F. Brown to Heads of Departments and Branch Offices, Works, and Divisions of Explosives Department, July 11, 1950, file 7, box 6, subseries C, series II, Acc.

exploited the historically vulnerable position of rural blacks trapped in the economic vice that was the South's tenant system. Such residents possessed neither the financial resources nor the political clout to fight their removal from the land. An awareness of how specific regional characteristics, such as an underpaid skilled labor force and a captive black rural population, played into decisions regarding the expansion of the arms race made at the highest levels of government only lends an appreciation of the complexity of the workings of the national security state.

The dynamic social, cultural, economic, and political transformation that accompanied the arrival of what eventually was called the Savannah River Plant (SRP) helps to explain why leaders such as Thurmond were such strong supporters of the nation's military and of an aggressive anti-Communist foreign policy. Prior to the SRP's arrival, this section of South Carolina was primarily rural, dominated by low-wage jobs in agriculture and textiles, and had one of the most abysmal rates of high school graduation in the state. Within ten years and after the arrival of nearly 25,000 new residents, the region was highly suburbanized, home to several national retail outlets, and boasted more Ph.Ds per capita than any area of the state. Simply put, the new SRP employees remade the region. They improved its schools, created a cornucopia of civic and arts organizations, and revamped the structure of local government, among other developments. They imbued the region with a notion of modernization and progress that even the long-term residents bought into. Recalling the impact of the arrival of scientists and engineers to the town of Aiken, South Carolina, located within commuting distance to the SRP, textile worker Lenwood Melton speculated that their presence had somehow brought the region into the modern era. "It [the plant and the new permanent residents] upgraded things, really, because we had never had that level of people amongst us. When you got those types coming in, and of course, they were more well-to-do [than the textile mill workers and farmers], and they built some fine houses, they brought the shopping malls, they started new churches, they started doing things like big city folks. . . . As far as the community of [greater] Aiken is concerned, it grew up into a very respectable area."⁴ As Melton's observation implies, over time, residents saw themselves as members of a progressive, modern community, a new vision of themselves that was intimately tied to their role in the Cold War arms race. This new vision was profoundly shaped by DuPont's corporate culture. DuPont fostered a local culture that privileged modernization, innovation, efficiency, consumption, and civic involvement as indispensable components in the Cold War battle with communism. DuPont relentlessly encouraged the connection between the SRP and the achievement of "the good life." In fact, few

1957, Atomic Energy Division/Savannah River Plant Papers, Hagley Library, Wilmington, Delaware (quotation).

4. Lenwood Melton, interview with author, May 2003, Graniteville, South Carolina.

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corporations in the postwar era better represented the American Cold War promise of economic prosperity through mass consumption than DuPont.

For residents and leaders of South Carolina, support for a strong national defense and a staunchly anti-Communist foreign policy, then, went beyond mere dollars and cents. Their support had a deeper, more nuanced meaning. It spoke to their best hopes for themselves and their community as well as to their sense of their place in the nation.