Justice, Patience, Reason: The Writings of Virginius Dabney on Matters of Race

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JUSTICE, PATIENCE, REASON:
THE WRITINGS OF VIRGINIUS DABNEY
ON MATTERS OF RACE

A Thesis
Presented to
The Faculty of the Department of History
The College of William and Mary in Virginia

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Arts

By
Bruce Alan Brown
1987
APPROVAL SHEET

This thesis is submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

Bruce A. Brown
Author

Approved, September 1987

Richard B. Sherman
Helen C. Walker
Philip J. Funigiello
TO MARY,

who understood the importance
of completing this task
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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to characterize the writings of Virginius Dabney on the subject of race relations in the South. Use is made of his newspaper editorials, magazine articles, and books. Selections from his files of correspondence are utilized to explore his views in greater detail, and to gauge the reactions of others to his writings on racial issues. Dabney frequently wrote on many other subjects, including politics, religion, organized labor, prohibition, anti-evolutionism, history, and foreign affairs. It is not the task of this study to deal with those other areas.

Following an excellent education and a year as a teacher, Dabney began his career in journalism in 1922. He worked twelve years as a reporter, first at the Richmond News Leader and then at the Richmond Times-Dispatch. Dabney took charge of the editorial page at the Times-Dispatch in 1934 and held that position for 34 years.

Within the realm of race relations, Dabney wrote extensively on certain topics. He was particularly concerned that the South had maintained, long into the twentieth century, a dual system of justice which often denied blacks even their most basic constitutional rights. Dabney was outraged that lynching persisted in many areas of the South. These brutal murders were the one racial problem for which Dabney believed, for a time, that federal intervention was necessary. Dabney was also an advocate of expanded economic and educational opportunities for blacks. But he did not believe integration to be in the best interest of either blacks or whites.

The results of this study indicate that the views of Virginius Dabney on matters of race are difficult to categorize. Consequently, no attempt is made to either prove or disprove that he was a "liberal." There is no question that he sincerely desired for blacks greater opportunities and equal treatment in the courts. He never retreated from these goals, but neither did he change with the times. Dabney feared that school desegregation would result in widespread intermarriage between blacks and whites. Even at the peak of the civil rights movement in the 1950's and 1960's, Dabney remained convinced that many years would pass before integration could succeed in the South.
JUSTICE, PATIENCE, REASON:

THE WRITINGS OF VIRGINIUS DABNEY

ON MATTERS OF RACE
INTRODUCTION

For the past twenty years or more, students of Southern history have devoted considerable research to the theme of liberalism in that region's past. This interest is natural, because the subject involves an apparent contradiction: efforts to achieve reform occurred against a backdrop of conservatism for which the South is better known. The subject of race relations has received special attention, because of the role of slavery in the South's past and the emotionalism of color as an issue in more recent times.

Editors are, of necessity, individuals who give considerable thought to the issues of the day, express their ideas frankly, and have the potential to influence the views of their readers. For this reason, the writings of many editors testify as to the course of liberalism in the South. One editor often mentioned in this context is Virginius Dabney.

An examination of Dabney's writings on race relations gives rise to a problem. The term "liberal" is at times useful in describing his views on race, yet in other instances seems inappropriate. Attempts to define liberalism do not resolve the problem. In his book on Southern liberals, *In Search of the Silent South* (1977), Morton Sosna classed as "liberal,"

those white Southerners who perceived that there was a serious maladjustment of race relations in the South,
who recognized that the existing system resulted in grave injustices for blacks, and who either actively endorsed or engaged in programs to aid Southern blacks in their fight against lynching, disfranchisement, segregation, and blatant discrimination in such areas as education, employment, and law enforcement.

Dabney's own definition appeared in his first published book, *Liberalism in the South* (1932). In terms of their stand on race relations, Dabney described "Southern liberals" as individuals who

- took part in the ante-bellum movement to rid the republic of the blight of slavery, and after Appomattox . . . directed their energies to seeking justice for the blacks in all their relationships with the whites.

The latter definition is less rigorous, especially for the post-bellum period, and stresses justice more than equality. It is a better fit, if Dabney is to be termed a "liberal," than is Sosna's definition.

The views of Virginius Dabney can be better understood if categorization is kept to a minimum. Southern editors in this century have represented the entire spectrum of positions on race and other issues. "Liberal" and "conservative" are relative terms which label, but do not explain, an individual's attitudes and beliefs.
INTRODUCTION NOTES


There was little in Virginius Dabney's family background or early life to suggest that, for much of his career as a journalist, he would be viewed by his fellow Southerners as a liberal. Time and again, when writing about race relations, labor unions, religious fundamentalism, and prohibition, Dabney's advocacy of liberal causes spoke of a changing South with little similarity to the South of his origins.

Social prominence, wealth, and higher education characterized many of Virginius Dabney's forebears. Six generations back on the maternal side was Martha Jefferson, sister of Thomas Jefferson. His father's family can be traced back to seventeenth-century Virginia, and included planters, lawyers, physicians, soldiers, and educators. Perhaps most prominent was Thomas Smith Gregory Dabney, a planter about whom much is known, due largely to the fond reminiscences of his daughter, Susan Dabney Smedes, in MemoriaIs of a Southern Planter, first published in 1887. In 1835, Thomas Dabney moved his family and slaves from Gloucester County, Virginia, to Burleigh, a 4,000-acre cotton plantation near Vicksburg, Mississippi. Though his daughter's account is hardly objective, it seems clear that Thomas Dabney was exceptional both in his managerial skills and his treatment of slaves. His progressive farming practices made Burleigh a very profitable operation, and his slaves were better treated than most. Dabney avoided sales which broke up slave
families, encouraged his slaves to attend church, and approved when his children taught several slaves to read. A Whig, Dabney opposed the secession of Mississippi and even considered moving his family to England just before the Civil War began. But in the end he cast his lot with the Confederacy and, like other planters, was reduced to modest means by the outcome of the war.  

Thomas Dabney's fifth son, born shortly before the family moved to Mississippi, was named Virginius after the family's ancestral home. This elder Virginius, educated at the University of Virginia, was a captain in the Confederate army. After the war he operated boys' schools in Virginia, New Jersey, and New York. Best known as a writer and a New York literary critic, he received very favorable reviews for one of his novels, The Story of Don Miff (1886).

Virginius Dabney, born in 1901, was thus named for his grandfather. His father, Richard Heath Dabney, after completing two degrees at the University of Virginia, received a Ph.D. in history from Heidelberg. After teaching a short time at Indiana University, Heath Dabney joined the University of Virginia faculty in 1889, where he remained forty-nine years. During that time he taught all the courses in history for thirty-four years and served eighteen years as dean of the graduate school. His career as a college professor was a distinguished one, not so much in published research as in the legions of students he instructed over a period of nearly a half century.

The traditions of the University of Virginia and the Confederacy were strong, too, in the family of Virginius' mother, Lily Heth Davis. She and her sister Alice were raised by their grandfather, Captain Eugene Davis, at Willoughby, a thousand-acre dairy farm he had acquired
near Charlottesville a few years after the Civil War. The girls' father, James Davis, had served in the First Virginia Artillery, entered the University of Virginia after the war, and later established a legal practice in Richmond. James Davis' wife died when the girls were still infants; James died seven years later of tuberculosis.7

Lily Davis married Heath Dabney in 1899, his tenth year on the University of Virginia faculty. Virginius, the first of three children, was born February 8, 1901, in their home at the University, which had not yet been annexed by the town of Charlottesville. In 1907 the family moved a short distance to Edgewood, a home which Dabney described in later years as "comfortable but by no means luxurious." Heath and Lily Dabney enjoyed entertaining, whether it was relatives coming for a long visit or college students coming to Sunday supper.8

Dabney's early education was conducted entirely at home by his father and by his mother's maiden aunt, Lucy Davis, who lived in their home. Aunt Lucy took charge of Virginius' early instruction in reading, writing, and arithmetic, as she had for his mother before him. Heath Dabney was fluent in German and French, and began teaching his son those languages when he was not yet seven years old. The method of instruction stressed conversation and reading more than memorization of tedious grammatical rules. This program worked well, enabling Virginius to "breeze through" the French and German courses in high school and college.9

Virginius did not attend public or private school until age thirteen, but the home tutoring evidently did not hamper his social development. In the afternoons and on weekends he took part in all the fun and games experienced by most boys of that era: climbing trees,
swimming "nekkid" in creeks, shooting marbles, playing baseball in a grassy field, and going to the circus. Between the ages of six and sixteen, Dabney spent part of each summer with three cousins, all boys, at Caryswood, a farm owned by relatives near Evington, Virginia. Those were carefree days, filled with "simple bucolic amusements."^{10}

At age eleven, Virginius accompanied his father on an extended visit to France, taken in part to assuage the father's grief over the recent death of Virginius' younger sister, Lucy. During their two-month visit that summer of 1912, they stayed in Sevres at the home of Heath Dabney's half-brother. Heath Dabney, a true Francophile, took his son into nearby Paris almost every day, going "to the Louvre for countless visits, and to every other important museum in Paris, as well as to all of the principal sights." The youth was thus provided, at a very impressionable age, a unique opportunity to witness another culture firsthand with the guidance of one very knowledgeable about that culture and its people.^{11}

Virginius Dabney was enrolled at Episcopal High School in Alexandria, Virginia, in September 1914. Tuition was $400 for each of the three years he attended. His father's modest salary, which even twenty years later never exceeded $6,000, meant that his son's tuition was a sizeable portion of the family budget. For most of his three years at Episcopal, Dabney received an allowance of only twenty-five cents a week. Founded in 1839, Episcopal had become known as a school which provided a challenging level of instruction in basic subjects such as Latin, mathematics, history, and government, and spartan living quarters for the boys. Many of Dabney's classmates went on to very successful careers in medicine, law, journalism, and religion. Apropos
of his future career, Dabney was on the staff of Episcopal's Monthly Chronicle for a portion of one year, but "never was able to survive the competition thereafter." The interest and ability he later demonstrated in journalism was nowhere apparent at that time.\textsuperscript{12}

At age sixteen, Dabney returned to Charlottesville and lived with his parents while attending the University of Virginia. Neither he nor his parents seriously considered the choice of any other university. This is hardly surprising, given the family's long association with the University of Virginia, though the greater expense of studying elsewhere may have been another consideration.\textsuperscript{13} To earn extra money, Dabney corrected French papers and history papers, and worked each summer. During the summer of 1918, he bolted steel on naval ships in a Newport News shipyard. In 1919 he worked thirteen-hour days on a house construction crew in Pontiac, Michigan.\textsuperscript{14}

Because he had qualified for advanced standing in those subjects he had studied at Episcopal, Dabney was able to take a bachelor's degree in just three years. He was graduated Phi Beta Kappa in 1920, at age 19, and remained at Virginia another year to complete a master's degree. Although he had been assistant editor of the college annual for two years, writing and journalism had yet to interest him. Dabney accepted an offer from Episcopal High to teach French and algebra for the 1921-22 school year, viewing it as a chance to gain useful experience and an opportunity to take his time in choosing a career.\textsuperscript{15}

Despite his youth, Dabney had a rather smooth year as a novice teacher. He found the work enjoyable, but had no desire to make it his career. Before the school year had ended, and as Virginius was considering various options without much sense of direction, his father
wrote to ask if he had ever considered journalism. The more Virginius thought about it, the more interested he became. Soon he followed his father's suggestion to talk with John Stewart Bryan, publisher of the Richmond News Leader.\textsuperscript{16}

Heath Dabney was a good friend of John Bryan's father, Joseph. In fact, Heath had met Lily Davis, his future wife, while attending a party at the Bryan estate near Richmond. Lily's father and Joseph Bryan had been fellow Confederate veterans and best friends at the University of Virginia. Joseph Bryan's sons had taken classes under Professor Dabney.\textsuperscript{17} The close linking of these families made it natural that Heath Dabney would see the Bryan newspaper offices as a good environment into which his son could settle.

In any event, Virginius traveled to Richmond to see John Stewart Bryan in March 1922. Bryan offered him a position as reporter, at $20 per week, beginning July 1. Dabney accepted, and embarked on a career in journalism which would span nearly fifty years, bring a Pulitzer prize and many other honors, and place him in the midst of many of the most controversial issues of his time.\textsuperscript{18}

\* \* \*

Considering Dabney's rich Southern heritage, it is somewhat surprising that he acquired the role of liberal. The South and the Confederacy were held in high esteem on both sides of the family. While a student at Episcopal, Dabney was among classmates who were nearly all from the South, giving that school the image of a "Dixie Eaton."\textsuperscript{19} As for the University of Virginia, scene of both his childhood and his higher education, one could hardly find an institution more closely associated with Southern tradition. Generations of Southern gentlemen
and leaders had been trained at the University of Virginia.

Nor was there in Dabney's home environment much criticism of Southern customs and mores. His parents, obviously a strong influence in his life, were decidedly conservative on many issues. Heath Dabney regarded William Jennings Bryan's "free silver" plan as unsound, firmly supported states' rights, and opposed the admission of women to the University of Virginia. He also opposed black education, believing it would only heighten competition and conflict between the races. On the basis of states' rights, Heath Dabney disagreed strongly with his son's advocacy of a federal anti-lynching bill in the 1930's. And only years after the fact was the elder Dabney able to approve of Virginius' 1943 campaign to abolish segregation on streetcars and buses in Virginia.

And yet there were other factors guiding Virginius Dabney toward criticizing the South. Heath Dabney was an outspoken opponent of prohibition at both the state and federal levels. In foreign affairs he supported Woodrow Wilson in the cause of establishing a League of Nations, and traveled to New York and Philadelphia, even before the war ended, to speak in support of a League with powers of enforcement. From his father, Virginius acquired not so much a critical eye for the South's inadequacies, but rather an appreciation of the need to make his views known when the situation demanded it. He remembered his father as one who "would not remain silent when he felt he might be deemed, by his silence, to be acquiescing in some cause or program that he felt to be wrong." This outspokenness also would serve Virginius well in his highly visible role as editor of a major Southern newspaper.

During his year as a teacher, one of Dabney's colleagues introduced
him to the writings of H. L. Mencken. In time, Mencken's views would
jar the thinking of Dabney, as was true for many Southern journalists
beginning their careers in the 1920's and 1930's.24

But lest one think that Dabney could have arrived at liberal views
only through the obvious influence of specific individuals, one must
remember that he was beginning a career in journalism with certain
assets which would shape his outlook as the years unfolded. First, even
though his parents were not wealthy, they had provided him a cultured
rearing and an appreciation for the achievements of which civilization
is capable. Second, though he had seen little of the uglier side
of Southern society, neither had he been conditioned toward
insensitivity. Dabney had spent most of his early life in the environs
of "Mr. Jefferson's University," and would often look back to that early
Virginian as an embodiment of Southern potentialities. In his writings
on race relations, as on other issues, Dabney's strong sense of Southern
pride would take the form not merely of accepting the South for what it
was, but rather of trusting that its virtues would lead the South in the
direction of needed reform.
CHAPTER ONE NOTES


4. Ibid., p. 165.

5. Dabney, *Across the Years*, p. 3.

6. Ibid., pp. 28-31, 43, 32.

7. Ibid., pp. 44-46.

8. Ibid., pp. 1-4, 42.

9. Ibid., pp. 7-9.

10. Ibid., pp. 5, 10, 14, 17-18.

11. Ibid., pp. 20-21.

12. Ibid., pp. 37, 53-63, 66-70.

13. Ibid., p. 72.


15. Ibid., pp. 72, 79-80, 96-101.

16. Ibid., pp. 102-105.

17. Ibid., pp. 33, 45.

18. Ibid., p. 105.

19. Ibid., p. 54.

20. Ibid., pp. 32-33.


The race problem did not exist for me during my college career, and I gave it no thought whatever. As far as I was concerned, the Negroes were "in their place," and that was that. I had only kindly feelings toward them, and abhorred the lynchings that were still occurring, mainly in the Deep South, but I felt no righteous indignation over the obvious discrimination against them in areas of education, health, housing and job opportunities.

This frank admission, contained in Dabney's reminiscences, *Across the Years* (1978), suggests that his concern for the plight of Southern blacks must have developed later. In fact, his detachment from the real world included areas other than race relations:

My four years at the University of Virginia... had been passed in the proverbial ivory tower. I had been fully aware of World War I... but after the war ended, events overseas or in the city, state and nation engaged my attention only at rare intervals. [My] view of the world around me was essentially immature and parochial. Fraternity matters, college elections, sports events and [Miss] Douglas Chelf were in my thoughts. I read the sports pages but not the editorials.

Leaving Charlottesville in 1921 to try his hand at teaching, Dabney was moving from one familiar environment to another. Had he possessed greater interest in instructing adolescents, he might well have remained at Episcopal High many years. Instead, those months brought out in Dabney an emerging curiosity in other directions. Important works of
Literature, both classics and contemporary novels, filled many leisure hours. A colleague, Richard Hartwell Cocke, introduced Dabney to the writings of H. L. Mencken, for Dabney had never heard of Mencken or the *Smart Set*. But while Dabney's interests broadened, his consideration of careers failed to bring a single one into clear focus. With more resignation than anticipation, he had virtually decided to seek a job in Richmond's tobacco industry when his father suggested journalism as a possibility.\(^3\)

The cub reporter arrived at the city editor's desk that first day of July with high hopes and little relevant experience. His education was far above average, but until then his writing had been only in the form of academic exercises. Of the printer's ink, the reporter's notes, and the editor's deadlines, he knew nothing.

If the close friendship between Heath Dabney and John Stewart Bryan aided Virginius in landing this job, it in no way obviated the need to start at the bottom and work upward. To him fell the task of compiling the columns of church notices contained in each Saturday edition of the *News Leader*. Lodge events and meetings received more of his time, for they were the subject of a daily column and a weekly feature prepared by Dabney.\(^4\)

But the novice reporter was not to spend all his time at the desk compiling such mundane lists and accounts. His principal assignment was to take the streetcar each day and cross the James River to South Richmond to gather material for the paper's "News of Southside and Chesterfield." His most enlightening experience was at the police court. At age twenty-one, Dabney had never before been inside a courtroom.\(^5\) In his attendance at police court, city hall, and the
Capitol, he became "tremendously excited to learn the most routine things about the way a city or a state worked." Many years later, Dabney considered that period and wrote, "I think I learned more in my first six months as a reporter than in any other six months of my life." 6

Dabney was awakening to more than a lesson in basic civics. Along with parliamentary procedure, municipal budgets, and judicial formalities, he was getting his first clear look at many facts he had not learned in school. These were the sort of things given no space in news stories, and considered unworthy of comment by most Southern editors. Most disturbing to the young reporter was the dual system of justice he saw at work.

Covering police court I saw the way they kicked these poor blacks around, ... yelled at them, and treated them as if they were just second-class human beings. ... I became aware at that time of how meanly they were treated. 7

Even after several years of reporting from Richmond police courts, Dabney still reacted to the severe sentences handed to blacks. In 1926 he covered the trial of a black woman who, convicted of stealing less than $200, was sentenced to thirty years in prison. Dabney's brief account of the trial made the front page of the News Leader. The presiding judge was criticized in many quarters for this disproportionate sentence. But Dabney was still just a reporter and could not comment editorially. 8

The previous year, Dabney had been given an opportunity to bring his work to a different audience. Hamilton Owens, editor of the Baltimore Evening Sun, enlisted Dabney and several other correspondents in various states to contribute articles to the editorial page of that
newspaper. In all, Dabney contributed several articles each year for six or seven years. These articles represented his first opportunity to write for an audience other than Virginians, and provided him practice in explaining Virginia's politics and her people to others. One whose opinion mattered a great deal, H. L. Mencken, evidently liked what he read in Dabney's Evening Sun pieces, for he favorably mentioned the young Richmonder in a book review in the August 1926 American Mercury. That same year, Dabney met the veteran reporter and magazine editor at a dinner given by James Branch Cabell in Richmond, and found the man as interesting as his writings. The work of an entire generation of journalists was influenced by Mencken. In his own case, Dabney had no doubt about the impact: "My thinking was considerably influenced by H. L. Mencken—to a greater extent, in fact, than by anyone except my father."  

The Mencken influence can be seen clearly in an article, written by Dabney, which appeared in the November 1926 issue of American Mercury. Moving quickly through a series of subjects dealing with the past and present in Virginia, Dabney found little to admire in the credos of several powerful groups of that day. He decried the "wave of Babbittry which has engulfed the country" and cheered those Virginians who sought to stop the replacement of brick sidewalks with ones of concrete, and historical buildings with skyscrapers. And yet Dabney knew that turning back the hands of time was not desirable, no matter how much it might be wished by the "cultured, old-fashioned Virginia gentleman" who asked "only to be left in peace with his volume of Thackery, his mint julep, and his glorious and apocryphal memories." If neither the Rotarians nor the FFV's were equipped to guide Virginia in such changing times, worse
yet were those who, with the Bible in one hand and the United States Constitution in the other, were bent on purifying the state. State-wide prohibition had been achieved in 1916 after "the forces of righteousness launched an intensive campaign against the powers of darkness," though a move to stop the teaching of evolution had failed in the Virginia legislative session of 1926. Some of Dabney's sharpest barbs were reserved for several ultra-patriotic groups he labeled "100% Americans," who had recently tried without success to stop the erection in Richmond of a statue of Columbus, on the grounds that he was both a Catholic and a foreigner.\textsuperscript{10}

Yet Dabney found a certain amount to praise in the current state of Virginia. Governor Harry F. Byrd, rejecting the shallow enthusiasm of boosters, was forging the strongest reform program Virginians had seen for many years. The University of Virginia, the College of William and Mary, and Randolph-Macon College were providing excellent higher education for the state's citizens, if only more money could be appropriated by the legislature. Even in these exciting years as an irreverent young journalist, Dabney pointed with pride to the "august celebrities" in Virginia's past, individuals like Thomas Jefferson, John Marshall, and John Randolph.\textsuperscript{11}

Still, the Mencken influence was unmistakable. It was evident in the ascerbic criticism of powerful groups and accepted beliefs. It was there even in the vocabulary: the "evangelical sorcerers," "dolichocephalics," and "Pecksniffs."\textsuperscript{12} This willingness to question the status quo had, by 1926, left a clear stamp of iconoclasm on Dabney's thinking. Within a few years, Dabney would editorially applaud many of Mencken's jabs, declaring that "the influence of this fearless
foe of sham and buncombe has on the whole been a distinctly salutary one in American life, and particularly in the South.13

One of Virginius Dabney's earliest close looks at a racial matter appeared in the Baltimore Evening Sun on March 1, 1928. In "Virginia and Racial Integrity," Dabney recounted the efforts of the Virginia General Assembly to amend a law, passed in 1924, which had prohibited interracial marriages. After failing twice in four years to define "colored" and "Indian" more precisely, the Legislature had succeeded only in angering many ethnic groups and eliciting charges that a great deal of racial mixing had already occurred in the three centuries that whites, Indians, and blacks had coexisted in the Old Dominion.14

This signed article was in many ways typical of Dabney's writings on race relations in the years before he became an editor. First, the piece is more an article than an editorial. Dabney did not yet have a rostrum from which to speak out strongly in the form of editorial opinion. Second, Dabney displays an obvious interest in political debate, recognizing that the Virginia Legislature was an important forum in which matters of race would continue to be decided. Third, Dabney utilizes quotations to convey the emotionalism which makes the resolution of racial problems very difficult. One Indian chief testified, "I will tie a stone around my neck and jump in the James River rather than be classed as a Negro." And the original proponent of the 1924 law forbidding interracial marriages took umbrage at one assertion in particular. He declared himself "indignant that a Virginian should charge that many of our white people have a trace of Negro blood," and considered such a comment "an aspersion of a Northerner, not a Virginian."15
In fewer than six years as a reporter at the *News Leader*, Virginius Dabney had mastered the basics and was ready for greater tasks. City hall, the courts, and the Legislature had become familiar ground. The harsh realities of tough politics and an even tougher dual system of justice now informed Dabney's outlook. Equally important, he had learned to write effectively, presenting the background facts, selecting the telling quotations, and conveying the importance of the issue, in order to inform and hold the attention of his readers.

In June 1928, Dabney joined the staff of the Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, a morning paper and chief rival of the *News Leader*. In addition to his article in the *American Mercury* and the columns in the Baltimore *Evening Sun*, Dabney had published articles on a variety of topics in *The Nation*, *Scribner's*, and *Plain Talk*. Thus, his reputation as a talented young journalist was growing, and had brought the offer of better pay and more interesting work if he moved to the *Times-Dispatch*.16

Dabney began his forty-year association with the *Times-Dispatch* as chief political reporter, and contributor of a signed article for the editorial page each Sunday.17 The latter assignment afforded him the first opportunity to use editorial space week after week to explore issues of his choosing. For more than six years, from June 1928 through September 1934, Dabney would use that space to discuss state government, prohibition, the press, anti-evolutionism, higher education and research, Congressional reapportionment, the labor movement in the South, election campaigns, Virginia history, and many other topics. A significant number of those signed articles dealt with matters of race, particularly on four subjects: "barber bills," Negro voters, the New
Deal, and Southern justice for blacks.

* * *

In March 1930 Dabney used one of his Sunday columns to review the achievements of the Virginia Assembly in its most recent session. He praised the Senate for defeating a bill calling for closer regulation of barbers in the state. Citing the private admissions of one of the bill's sponsors, Dabney declared:

Virginia has good cause to be thankful over the defeat of the iniquitous barber bill, ostensibly introduced as a "health measure," but actually designed to eliminate the colored barbers from the business and put prices up to double what they are now.

He concluded with a call for "all friends of the colored race [to] rally to the defeat of this legislation in Virginia and throughout the South." 18

Four months later Dabney brought an expanded discussion of the same topic to a much wider audience. Dealing exclusively with the issue of "Negro Barbers in the South," Dabney wrote in The Nation that twenty-six states, four of them former Confederate states, had passed barber bills. Stressing the powerful exclusionary role of examining boards, Dabney described the barber profession as an example of a national trend away from open competition. In the South, barber bills were doubly unjust, for the monopolistic climate was to be created specifically through Negroes "being driven from one of the few remaining trades in which they are able to compete on anything like even terms with the whites." 19

Quoting from a trade publication of the barbering profession, Dabney gave examples of questions already in use by some state examining boards: "Where is the arrector pili muscle located and what is its function?" "Describe the function and location of the sebaceous
glands." To Dabney, such highly technical questions were hardly designed to "elevate the profession" or "protect the public," as its proponents claimed.

Aside from the asininity of requiring a hair-trimmer to be able to locate the arrector pili muscle and describe its functions, imagine the glorious opportunity which such questions afford a board of white barbers who wish to eliminate troublesome Negro competition! Is a certain Negro shop taking too much business from its white rivals? Then a question or two to the operator concerning sebaceous glands and the problem is quickly solved.20

On two later occasions, when sponsors reintroduced barber licensing legislation at the 1932 and the 1934 Assembly sessions, Dabney again devoted his Sunday column to exposing the real intent of this "thoroughly pernicious measure." He found the 1934 bill particularly objectionable, for it attempted to establish a licensing board which would admit to the profession only persons "of good moral character and temperate habits," a power which Dabney saw as offering "unlimited possibilities for discrimination."22

In his assessment of barber bills, Dabney demonstrated a clear aversion to discrimination and sham. Negro barbers were "hard-working, industrious, respectable" citizens who deserved the same economic opportunities as white barbers.23 Any political effort to cloak economic or racial discrimination in the garb of public mindedness should be exposed for what it was.

* * *

As chief political reporter for the Times-Dispatch, it was natural that Dabney should explore the opportunity for blacks to vote. Articles devoted to this subject examined voting among blacks in Virginia and in the South as a whole. In characteristic fashion, Dabney reviewed
pertinent historical background as well as contemporary developments. He offered his own analysis of political conflicts and of the chances for expanded black participation in elections.

In August 1931, more than a year after a United States Circuit Court had struck down the rule of Virginia's Democratic Party barring blacks from voting in primaries, Dabney studied the impact of that judicial decision. In two primaries held after the court ruling, very few black Virginians had exercised their new right to vote in Democratic primaries, a phenomenon Dabney proceeded to explain. First, the majority of blacks historically had voted Republican, and thus would have neither the right nor the desire to cast ballots in a Democratic primary. Second, any black desirous of voting in a Democratic primary would be "perhaps justified in the suspicion that an attempt to circumvent the [new] law will be made by some white election officials, even in cases where the Negroes have registered."²⁴

Despite such hurdles to black participation in Democratic primaries, Dabney pointed to a view increasingly popular among black leaders in the South, that blindly voting the Republican ticket year after year would prevent black voters from gaining any political leverage. By disregarding party labels and voting for the candidate most responsive to their concerns, blacks could hold the balance of power in many Southern cities, something already seen in Memphis, Nashville, and Chattanooga. And yet Dabney saw the political developments in these Tennessee cities as far from progressive, for all three cities were controlled by political bosses. In such circumstances, participation by large numbers of blacks did not bring greater democracy if their votes were purchased by the political
machine. Dabney took time to expand on this point, and in the process offered a summary of his views on voting among blacks and whites.

While there is no implication here that Negro voters are the only venal voters, cognizance should be taken of the fact that the black race, which is only two generations removed from slavery, could not possibly have arrived in so brief a period at the same state of civilization as the white race, with its thousands of years of history.

Although usually a careful historian, Dabney had in this instance overlooked the very old civilizations of black Africa. On the other hand, he may have considered 1865 the beginning of a cultural reconstruction by blacks. To say the least, Dabney credited the white race with inventing democratic institutions long before their actual advent.

In the same article, Dabney went on to show that his reservations about black voters did not necessarily lead to the conclusion that the darker race had been given too much already.

The Negro has ... made remarkable progress since the Civil War, and the leaders of the dominant race should co-operate with him in his efforts to improve his political, educational and financial status .... It would be to the distinct disadvantage of the whites to be continually burdened by the presence of millions of backward, illiterate, poverty-stricken Negroes, and it is therefore to their own interest to aid the weaker race in its upward progress. Besides it is the only decent thing for the whites to do. Negroes are human beings, and they are entitled to be treated as human beings.

Thus, while Dabney questioned whether most blacks understood the importance of the secret ballot, he had no doubt that whites should assist in the advancement of the Negro race. Whether out of self-interest or from a sense of decency, the stronger could help the weaker race in ways which would benefit both groups.
The following spring, Virginius Dabney once again looked at "Negro Voters Below the Potomac," on the occasion of the second ruling by the United States Supreme Court against white primaries in Texas. In tracing the historical phases of Negro suffrage in the South, Dabney defended the white South against the injustices perpetrated by Radical Republicans.

The freedmen, who were almost wholly ignorant and illiterate ... were hardly ready for the ballot on a limited scale, and it was given them on an unlimited scale. Conditions naturally became intolerable, and the disfranchised whites found it necessary to take matters into their own hands to preserve their civilization. Such organizations as the original Ku Klux Klan came into being, and while outrages were perpetrated by both races during the period, one may excuse much that the whites did on the theory that circumstances made such things necessary.

After reconstruction came twenty years of "chicanery and ... wholesale violation of the election laws by the best citizens of the South." Then, about 1890, Southern legislatures began disfranchising Negroes by statute, on the pretext that blacks were responsible for the corruption of Southern politics. Concluding his historical overview with the re-entry of blacks into the polling place, Dabney voiced his concern over the willingness of many Negroes to sell their votes to whomever would pay their poll taxes. But he drew a rather surprising conclusion:

Venal and ignorant Negroes are just as undesirable wielders of the franchise as venal and ignorant whites. The important thing for the South is to disfranchise the illiterate and purchasable element of the population wherever it may be. If that is done, the race question will take care of itself.

More than his earlier writings, this article showed the blend of liberal and conservative ideas which came to characterize much of
Dabney's work. His description of the "nightmare of reconstruction" was a classic Southern account of the post-bellum era. On the other hand, instead of defending all things Southern, he had called for reform of the sort which is not based solely on considerations of race.29

Nine months later, in February 1933, the Times-Dispatch printed a third article dealing with black suffrage in the South. This was Dabney's first lengthy discussion of the poll tax, specifically as it existed in Virginia. Once again, his analysis was preceded by a clear and informative presentation of historical background, this time taken from a recently-published book by Professor T. R. Snavely. Dabney drew key facts from the historian's book in an effort to identify trends and turning points in the development of the poll tax in Virginia. For example, the existence of a capitation tax on Virginia's adult males dated back over three hundred years. During many periods it was levied on whites as well as blacks. In 1870 came the first earmarking of such funds for education, and six years later the first use of the tax as a prerequisite to voting. From that point onward, the delinquency of poll tax payments by blacks grew steadily, a trend accelerated after the statutory disfranchisement of blacks in the Virginia Constitution of 1902.30

To Dabney, the only justification for a poll tax was its usefulness in generating school funds. Aside from that single benefit, a poll tax impeded the development of a more democratic political system in Virginia. In many areas of the Commonwealth, the payment of poll taxes in large blocks by leaders of both parties demonstrated that the poll tax would not prevent the lower class from entering the polling place. They would simply enter with a purchased vote. Dabney found the
Democratic Party's support of the poll tax especially contradictory:

It seems rather anomalous for a leader in the Democratic party, the party of the "people" as opposed to the party of "privilege," to contend that the disfranchisement of large population groups on monetary grounds helps to guarantee the intelligence of the electorate. 31

Dabney maintained that one had only to look at North Carolina to see the benefits of abandoning the poll tax. In the presidential election of 1932, approximately 45 percent of adults in North Carolina had voted, nearly double the proportion of Virginians casting ballots in the same election. Dabney was certain the poll tax had "drastically reduced" the number of voters, both black and white, in Virginia. Unconvinced that a poll tax was capable of separating the wheat from the chaff, Dabney had moved to a position of believing that an expanded electorate would improve the health of democracy in Virginia. 32

* * *

Virginius Dabney's signed articles appeared on the editorial page of the Sunday Times-Dispatch for nearly six years. The last eighteen months of that period coincided with the birth and heyday of Roosevelt's New Deal. Dabney was an ardent supporter of most New Deal programs, especially in their early years. The Depression was particularly devastating in many parts of the South. Therefore, Dabney, like many Southerners, welcomed the innovative policies of Roosevelt. Given a fair chance, thought Dabney, the New Deal could bring life once more to the regional and national economies. Still, any legislation was bound to have flaws, whether in its design or its implementation. One such area to which Dabney drew attention involved the impact of the New Deal on blacks.
On September 3, 1933, only eleven weeks after passage of the National Industrial Recovery Act, Dabney expressed concern over the effects of the NRA on black workers:

The question of just what is to become of the Negroes under the NRA program is one which should give concern to all thoughtful Southerners. Already there are disquieting reports from various directions to the effect that they are being discriminated against by employers and are being displaced by white workers.

Written to include wage scale increases and a reduction in each worker's hours, the NRA codes had been aimed at expanding the work force and raising personal income even before production could be restored to pre-Depression levels. One effect of these changes was that many jobs, formerly acceptable only to blacks, became more attractive to unemployed whites. This change in attitudes among unemployed whites, along with the view of many employers that blacks neither deserved nor needed wage increases, was leading to the replacement of black with white workers in many areas. This, said Dabney, was contradictory to the intent of the legislation:

Certainly President Roosevelt does not contemplate that the benefits of NRA are to be extended to one race only. If the country's 10,000,000 Negroes are left out of the recovery program the return to prosperity will be seriously retarded and a grave injustice will be worked as well.

Although Dabney had heard "disquieting reports from various directions" as to the discharging of black workers, he maintained that Richmond had been the scene of "comparatively little agitation of the inter-racial problems to which NRA has given rise." He said with confidence that this "indicates that there has been a minimum of injustice in the City."

A brief look at Dabney's sources for this article shows two
important points. First, he was reading many newspapers on a frequent basis, using their editorials to refine his own viewpoints. For this one article, Dabney drew quotations from two Norfolk papers, a black Richmond paper, and the New York Times. Second, Dabney's sources for this column indicate his clear liberal tendencies in this period. From the Richmond Planet he drew editor Roscoe Mitchell's comment that "employers must feel the hand and steadying influence of the NRA in order to safeguard the interest of the race in the new deal." And from "The Forgotten Tenth," a National Urban League analysis of unemployment among blacks, Dabney presented the view that racial discrimination existed even in the awarding of work-relief opportunities. While he did not report the assertions of other journalists and of special interest groups as if they were facts, Dabney's inclusion of such statements confirms his liberal outlook in the Depression years.

In "The South Views the New Deal," Dabney used the first anniversary of Roosevelt's inauguration as an occasion to consider the changes wrought in the preceding twelve months. His general approval was evident early in the article, when he wrote that "there can be no question that President Roosevelt's policies have resulted in marked improvement in industry, agriculture and many lines of business in this and other Southern States." As proof he pointed to a wide range of New Deal policies and achievements: a doubling of the price of cotton and a considerable rise in tobacco prices, the revitalization of the Southern textile industry, administration support for collective bargaining, the virtual elimination of child labor, and the replacement of protectionism with a policy of securing reciprocal trade agreements.

But again, Dabney worried about the exclusion of many Southern
blacks from the relief, recovery, and reform measures of the New Deal. By this time, it was clear that the NRA programs were not the only ones used to displace black workers. A similar problem was occurring in agriculture:

Already acreage reductions in North Carolina are reported to have cut some 10,000 cotton farmers and their families adrift. Certainly this is a serious aspect of the administration's program.

In an effort to reduce crop surpluses and thereby restore commodity prices to more profitable levels, the Agricultural Adjustment Act had provided subsidies to farmers who would reduce their planted acreage. Owners of cotton lands were cutting back sharply, idling large areas of farmland, and "depriving hundreds of thousands of tenants and sharecroppers of a means of making a living."38

Back in 1928, Dabney had devoted many of his early signed articles to the support of Al Smith's candidacy. With the Crash and the onset of the Depression, he became convinced that Hoover's policies were outdated and incapable of improving the country's economic health. Thus, Dabney was predisposed toward believing in the ambitious, energetic programs of the early New Deal. He was certain that, despite the high cost of its programs and the uncertain long-term consequences of devaluing the dollar, the New Deal was improving the economic and psychological health of the South and the nation. But the full potential of the New Deal could not be realized if large elements of Southern society were excluded from the recovery process. It would be a shame if otherwise commendable legislation were abused by allowing old prejudices to work their way into the implementation of new programs. Not only blacks, but the South as a whole, would be held back as a result of such narrow views.
Within the realm of Southern race relations, no topic seemed to arouse Dabney's interest more than the system of justice provided for Southern blacks. His articles on this subject show a strong belief that a society's level of civilization is indicated, in part, by the way its judicial system treats disadvantaged groups. It is clear, too, that he was concerned about the image of the South, and especially Virginia, in the eyes of other Americans. Time and again, Dabney's reporting on the trials of blacks showed what he expected of a truly fair legal system. It must adhere to the rules of due process, prevent the formation of unruly mobs, provide a dignified and impartial judge, make every effort to provide a good defense for the accused, and, above all, abide by the dictum that anyone, black or white, is innocent until proven guilty. These views are particularly evident in Dabney's articles on three trials in this period: those of the "Scottsboro boys" in Alabama, Angelo Herndon in Georgia, and George Crawford in Virginia.

In November 1932, Dabney made an effort to inform his readers of the significance of the Scottsboro case. Concerned that many Virginians had read "only the fragmentary accounts of the case which have appeared in the Virginia newspapers," Dabney reviewed the basic facts of this case in which two white women allegedly had been raped by a group of black men while riding a freight train near Scottsboro, Alabama. Dabney did not feel that justice had been served in the first trial and was pleased to see that the United States Supreme Court had granted a new trial to the seven defendants convicted and sentenced to die. The disregard for due process seen the first trial was more disturbing to Dabney than the verdict:
I do not mean to imply, necessarily, that the seven accused youths are innocent. I do mean to say that they have not been proved guilty beyond all likelihood of error.39

Dabney readily admitted the existence of "evidence tending to show the guilt of the defendants," but drew attention to several factors which raised questions regarding the guilty verdict. First, the crowd of 10,000 present at the trial had created a hostile atmosphere which pressured the jury toward a guilty verdict. Second, the two accounts told by Victoria Price and Ruby Bates, the white women allegedly attacked, contained obvious contradictions. Third, crucial evidence was not presented, notably in the failure to obtain the testimony of Orvil Gilley, the only other white person present at the time of the alleged crime. Fourth, the defense provided the Negro youths had been wholly inadequate, with virtually no pre-trial preparation and no closing argument. Fifth, the International Labor Defense (I. L. D.), a Communist group whose attorneys represented the defendants following the first trial, hardened local sentiment even more against the defendants by berating Alabama authorities and maintaining "a continual barrage of propaganda."40

Given these handicaps to the judicial process as it had functioned in the first Scottsboro trial, Dabney saw no way the defendants could be considered guilty beyond all reasonable doubt. He hoped that the United States Supreme Court, having already called for a new trial, would also grant a change of venue in order that an atmosphere more conducive to justice could be found:

Certainly Alabama has nothing to lose and everything to gain by such a procedure. It is to her interest and to that of the South to see that... , whatever the verdict may be, [it] is not subject to question from any reasonable person or any responsible source.
Thus Dabney closed his article, concerned for both the justice provided the Scottsboro boys and the impressions others would have regarding Southern justice for blacks.\textsuperscript{41}

Five months later, when the second trial had concluded and guilty verdicts had been returned once again, Dabney devoted another Sunday article to the Scottsboro case. Chief among his observations this time was a theme common among Southern liberals: the disruption and distortion intentionally caused by extremists on both ends of the political spectrum. On the one hand was the I. L. D., whose demand for "social equality" among whites and blacks was, in Dabney's estimation, "especially distasteful to the average Southerner." On the other hand was the County Solicitor, Wade Wright, who had pointed to the defense attorneys and proclaimed that "Alabama justice cannot be bought and sold with Jew money from New York." Such extremist attitudes had, in Dabney's view, created an "atmosphere of hysteria . . . where many persons seem unable to obtain a clear view of the fundamental issues involved."\textsuperscript{42}

But for Dabney, the fundamentals in this case were becoming clearer all the time. The second trial had seen Ruby Bates refute her earlier testimony and had shown that neither Bates nor Price was qualified to stand as an example of an honorable Southern woman. To Dabney, the judicial system and the black defendants were the true victims:

\begin{quote}
Unless something is done about it, seven Negroes are to be sent to the electric chair on the testimony of one woman of easy virtue who has been shown to be a perjurer, and whose testimony has been contradicted by another woman of easy virtue who admits being a perjurer . . . . Does any one imagine for an instant that if the defendants were white, there would be the slightest question of their acquittal?
\end{quote}
After the first trial, Dabney said, he had been certain the defendants had not been tried fairly, though he had been uncertain of their guilt or innocence. Now, after the second trial, he was convinced they were innocent.43

The earlier article on Scottsboro had concluded with a note of concern over the opinion others would have of Southern justice. This time, Dabney's concluding remarks showed him to be as much a Southerner as a liberal, for the worrisome tone was replaced with a defensive sound:

It is not my intention . . . to intimate, as some are doing, that no Negro can get justice in the South or that all Negroes get justice in the North. On the whole, the Negro is treated no better beyond the Potomac than below it.44

To support his point, Dabney drew upon the words of a Northerner, a technique he used again and again to defend the South against the Northern brand of liberal. On this occasion the statement came from a piece by Heywood Broun in the New York World-Telegram. As Broun saw it, the North treated blacks differently, but no better. Their only "opportunity" in the North would be to live in overcrowded apartments, work for meager wages, and watch their own health deteriorate. "The South imposes rather more lynchings, legal and otherwise. New York and Chicago take it out in tuberculosis. We have no right," wrote Broun, "to sit in the seats of the scornful."45 Even in his most liberal moods, when he worked hardest for progressive change in the South, Dabney was convinced that liberal Southerners, not outsiders, could best prescribe the changes needed in the region.

Late in January 1933, two months before the second trial of the Scottsboro defendants opened, Dabney wrote a strongly worded article
regarding recent developments in Georgia. Although he reminded his readers that Georgia contained "many intelligent and highly civilized people," he spoke much more forcefully when he enumerated the brutalities in Georgia's system of justice. He credited Georgia with "having hung-up the all-time record for lynching," and having "put more Negroes to death with horrible torture since 1918 than any State except Texas." Georgia was also "under grave suspicion of operating a penal system worthy of the dark ages."

This harsh condemnation of justice in Georgia had been prompted by the recent conviction in Atlanta of Angelo Herndon, a 19-year-old black Communist. On June 30, 1932, Herndon had led a biracial demonstration of unemployed Atlantans protesting the insufficiency of local relief efforts. Arrested and charged with attempting to incite insurrection and possessing Communist literature, Herndon was tried and convicted the following January. Despite Angelo Herndon's stiff sentence of 18 to 20 years, very few white, Southern newspapers criticized the ruling. W. T. Anderson, liberal editor of the Macon Telegraph, was the only well-known journalist in Georgia, and one of only a few in the entire South, who attacked the sentence editorially. Virginius Dabney was among those few dissenters.

Dabney's assessment of this case focused more on the defendant's ideology than his color. Such a harsh sentence, reasoned Dabney, would have the opposite effect of that intended.

The State of Georgia, in imposing a heavy prison sentence on this youth has done more to fan the flames of radicalism than all the agitators in the city of Atlanta could have done in a decade, if they had been left unmolested.

But Dabney admitted that Georgia was not the only part of the South to
play into the hands of radicals.

Our own City administration here in Richmond... has been persecuting and hounding the small band of local Communists in every possible way. The result is that the meetings held by the Communists grow larger week by week. Thousands of unemployed who ordinarily would have no sympathy for such agitators have come to feel favorably toward them because of the City authorities' action in denying them their constitutional rights of free speech, petition and assembly.\(^49\)

Dabney's comments on the Herndon case illustrate his views on the Southern system of justice. The young editorial writer did not see this case as one principally concerned with race, although Herndon's color no doubt contributed to the harshness of his sentence. To Dabney, the system of justice in Georgia was to be faulted in this case for overreacting against Leftist demonstrators and making matters worse, a habit he saw in Richmond, too. By contrast, Dabney saw the protection of fundamental rights as the courts' primary task. Communists, like blacks, deserved this protection as much as anyone else. In these years at least, Dabney saw little threat in the protests of Leftists and of blacks. He was much more concerned about the threat to the quality of Southern justice posed by those inflexible to change and diversity of opinion.\(^49\)

The Scottsboro and Herndon trials occurred at a time when Southern justice was becoming a topic of national interest. Alabama and Georgia had not looked good in the spotlight of national attention. Late in 1933, it was Virginia's turn. Two white women had been murdered in a home near Middleburg, Virginia in January 1932. The prime suspect was George Crawford, a black ex-convict and former employee of one of the victims. Crawford was not located until a year later, when authorities finally caught up with him in Roxbury, Massachusetts.
Dabney's first piece on Crawford appeared in the *Times-Dispatch* on November 19, 1933, three weeks before his trial was to open in Leesburg.

Dabney stated the importance of the case in no uncertain terms:

In the Crawford case, Virginia and her judicial processes will be on trial, and unless the Old Dominion acquits herself well, there will be such a storm of unfavorable publicity throughout the nation that this State will not recover for many years . . . . Virginians should bear in mind that Alabama will be a long time recovering from the effects of the Scottsboro trials.

The "national significance" of the case, said Dabney, was the question of whether blacks would be excluded from the grand and petit juries, a practice common in the South. Again, Dabney made clear his sympathies. He agreed with the N.A.A.C.P., which was representing Crawford, that qualified blacks could not, justifiably, be excluded year after year from jury panels. And Dabney saw this argument as "particularly valid in cases where the defendant is a Negro."50

The trial concluded before Christmas and Dabney was able to report to his readers that, "from almost every standpoint," Virginians could be proud of the way in which the trial had been conducted. He had no doubt that anyone who cared to contrast the Crawford and Scottsboro cases would conclude that "Virginia justice appears in a much more favorable light than Alabama justice." In characterizing the Crawford trial, Dabney packed into a single sentence his own description of what constituted a fair trial:

Judge McLemore's attitude was eminently judicial, there was no disorder of any kind, the prosecution was absolutely fair in its conduct of the case and was scrupulously careful not to arouse interracial animosities, the four Negro defense attorneys were treated by every one with the utmost courtesy and consideration, and the verdict of the jury was entirely equitable.
Crawford had been found guilty, as had the Scottsboro defendants. But to Dabney the differences in the cases were considerable. Above all else, Crawford had been proven guilty beyond all reasonable doubt.\textsuperscript{51}

Of blacks on juries Dabney now had little to say. He admitted that "the complete exclusion of Negroes from the grand and petit juries in the Crawford case was "cause for regret," but chose instead to emphasize "the fact that the white men who tried Crawford were entirely fair to him."\textsuperscript{52} Evidently, Dabney considered the inclusion of blacks on juries as conducive to, but not essential for, the conduct of a fair trial in the Southern system of justice.

Dabney's signed articles dealing with Southern justice for blacks display the developing opinions of a young journalist. They show a writer best understood not as a single type, but as a blend of liberal, Southerner, and Virginian. His devotion to the Old Dominion manifested itself at times in a competitive spirit, as he sought to show that, in terms of historic achievements and promise for progressive change, Virginia was in a class above the other Southern states. But he was quick to defend the South as a whole from the scorn of outsiders who did not understand Southern customs. Blacks in the South were not given the justice they deserved. However, the problems faced by blacks in the North showed that region as merely different from, not better than, the South.

Dabney advocated the same sort of reform sought by many liberal, white Southerners of his day. He was confident that the South would continue to make slow, deliberate improvements, whether in the treatment of black defendants, the expansion of the electorate, or other areas. Reactionary elements, with their lynching fever and their comments about
"Jew money from New York," would be less and less able to stir interracial and intersectional animosities. Neither would groups like the I. L. D. set the agenda for the South; constructive criticism would be much more productive. Lasting change would be brought about only by the cooperative efforts of those whites and blacks who could remove the injustices of the present without abandoning the South's rich heritage.

* * *

The history of Southern reform was the subject of Dabney's first book, Liberalism in the South (1932). Written at the invitation of the University of North Carolina Press, this 400-page work was a survey of liberal reform movements in the South from the Revolutionary War onward. Reviews were generally favorable, but sales of the book were very light. The tone, said its author, was "descriptive rather than analytical." A broad-ranging study, the book examined politics, religion, education, literature, slavery, civil war, and labor. Dabney made no effort to hide the dominance of conservative ideas within Southern culture, but he underscored the currents of liberalism represented by the work of certain editors, professors, writers, and politicians.

Race relations were treated in several chapters. Dabney condemned the Ku Klux Klan and portrayed its leaders as experts in hatred, with nothing constructive to offer the South. He admitted that the South was known for its race-baiting demagogues, men like James K. Vardaman, Cole Blease, and Theodore Bilbo. But Dabney saw for the South a distinct trend toward improved race relations, based on the work of people like Thomas Jefferson, Henry Watterson, Booker T. Washington, Charles B. Aycock, George W. Cable, and Howard Odum.
To a large extent, *Liberalism in the South* was a book about individuals. The South could be proud, wrote Dabney, of the "influential liberals [who] exerted themselves constantly on behalf of justice for the blacks and sought to provide an antidote for the flood of hate which the 'poor whites' and their leaders were pouring forth." But he was less than convincing when he attempted to generalize from the actions of a few individuals to the Southern public at large.

The steady improvement in the relations between the white masses ... and the black masses ... is going forward in the South without any fanfare of trumpets, without any blasts of publicity, but it is nonetheless real.

One might wonder how Dabney could be so certain that race relations were improving, if the change was taking place so quietly. But Dabney was optimistic that the South was moving into a new era of improved race relations.
CHAPTER TWO NOTES


7. Interview with Dabney, June 11, 1983.


20. Ibid.


22. Virginius Dabney, Richmond Times-Dispatch, January 17, 1932; Richmond Times-Dispatch, February 11, 1934.


25. Ibid.

26. Ibid.


28. Ibid.

29. Ibid.


31. Ibid.

32. Ibid.


34. Ibid.

35. Ibid.

36. Ibid.


38. Ibid.

40. Ibid.

41. Ibid.


43. Ibid.

44. Ibid.

45. Ibid.


49. Dabney continued to write editorials supportive of Herndon until the United States Supreme Court reversed the decision of the lower court and freed Herndon in April 1937. See the following, all from the Richmond Times-Dispatch: "The Angelo Herndon Case," December 10, 1935; "Injustice in Georgia," June 16, 1936; and "Herndon Is Free," April 28, 1937.


51. Virginius Dabney, "The Crawford Trial a Credit to Virginia," Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 24, 1933.

52. Ibid.

53. Dabney, Across the Years, p. 122.


55. Ibid., p. 259.

56. Ibid., p. 269-274, passim.

57. Ibid., p. 240.

58. Ibid., p. 264.
By 1934, Virginius Dabney had grown considerably as a journalist. During his first dozen years in the trade, he had reported many kinds of stories, written hundreds of signed newspaper articles, and published a book. The articles he had written for nationally-read periodicals, along with pieces he had written for the Baltimore Evening Sun and the New York Times, contributed to his image as a capable young journalist. But Dabney was not content with his position on the Times-Dispatch. He wanted more writing and fewer reporting assignments. The position of editor had come open twice since he joined the paper, but Dabney had been passed over each time. Openings with other newspapers were scarce in the midst of the Depression. Dabney applied for and received a grant from the Oberlaender Trust of the Carl Schurz Memorial Foundation, enabling him to spend six months in Germany studying the politics of that nation. He looked forward to the sojourn as both an educational experience and an opportunity to reflect on his own career path.¹

Dabney, his wife, and their four-year-old daughter were in Germany and Austria from March until September. He continued to write Sunday articles for the editorial page of the Times-Dispatch, using them to explore various facets of German life and culture. Dabney's firsthand view of Hitler's rising appeal left him convinced that European peace
was not secure. And the anti-Semitism already spreading through the German press left a strong impression on the journalist from Richmond. The editorials he wrote in the years following this six-month experience showed the influence of the time spent in central Europe. His pieces on international relations demonstrated an understanding of the power politics and military buildup occurring in parts of Europe. In addition, his writings on race relations exhibited a concern for the view other nations would take regarding the treatment of blacks in America.

In the end, Dabney did not have to leave the Times-Dispatch to find advancement. While still in Germany, he received an attractive offer from the paper's publisher. Dabney was to become chief editorial writer. After a trial period, he would be named editor. As it turned out, that change in title came in 1936. But in point of fact, Dabney had responsibility for the editorial page of the Richmond Times-Dispatch from October 1934 until January 1969. Such a position suited him ideally:

Even as editor, I was in charge of only the editorial page, with no responsibility for the rest of the paper. This was the arrangement that I greatly preferred. I was...an editor and writer, not an administrator or executive... I wanted to write.

* * *

In his signed articles of the previous six years, Dabney had shown an acute awareness of the state of Southern justice. His opinions grew from concern for the South's image, and from his personal view of the civilized nature of most Southerners. If Dabney felt the need to assess the South's system of justice as seen in the Scottsboro and Herndon
cases, he saw these inadequacies even more clearly in events which represented the complete breakdown of due process. Lynchings, common in much of the South since the 1890's, were the negation of the justice and decency on which Dabney's Old and New South were based. He never considered such mob murders indicative of the values of most Southerners. As the problem continued through the mid-1930's, Dabney called for federal legislation to combat it.

During his first week back from Germany, Dabney wrote an editorial comparing the living conditions of blacks in the North and the South. Lynching was presented as just one of several factors to be considered. As he saw it, the unsanitary conditions and tuberculosis common in the crowded Northern slums more than offset the higher wages generally paid in the North. In addition, the higher cost of living in the North cut into any wage differential. Admittedly, no system of Jim Crow laws existed in the North, but it remained "for the Negroes themselves to decide whether they regard this circumstance as sufficiently important to outweigh the disadvantages of migration beyond the Potomac." Lynching did not yet stand out in Dabney's mind as a condition separate from others to be weighed in the balance:

While lynchings are far more prevalent in the South than in other sections, and while the existence of this phenomenon naturally creates the impression that the black man is situated less advantageously below Mason and Dixon's line than beyond it, it is uncertain whether such is actually the case.

But before the month was over, an event occurred which caused Dabney to look at lynching as a concern entirely separate from other aspects of the lives of Southern blacks. On the night of October 26, Claude Neal, a black man, was lynched near Marianna, Florida. Word of
the planned lynching had gone out more than twelve hours in advance, with the result that a crowd of several thousand had gathered in time to witness the torture and murder of Neal. Dabney used the Sunday edition to express his outrage at this "unbelievable savagery":

Why is it that such things occur only in America? Is it strange that Europeans regard Americans as culturally inferior, when American women with babes in arms stand for hours in the hope of seeing a defenseless Negro tortured and murdered?

In Dabney's estimation, changes were occurring in the pattern of lynchings in the South. Although the numbers were far below those of the 1890's, the brutality had increased. Burnings at the stake, mutilations, and torture had become much more common in the preceding fifteen years. The result of recent lynchings such as that near Marianna, warned Dabney, might well be the passage of a federal anti-lynching bill. While not actually endorsing such a bill, Dabney maintained that the planned reintroduction of the bill would receive even more support as Congress reacted to recent lynching episodes.7

The Richmond editor's belief that Virginia was different from many other Southern states was reemphasized the next month when a lynching was averted in Clifton Forge, Virginia. Philip Jones, a black man accused of murdering two small girls, might have been taken from the jail and lynched, had local police not removed him first to Roanoke and then to Richmond. Dabney heaped praise on the local police for their foresight in transporting the prisoner more than two hundred miles in order to see justice served. While admitting that "the mass hatred of the residents of Marianna, Florida ... may have been no greater than that of the citizens of Clifton Forge," Dabney nevertheless considered the saving of Jones an example of the great progress Virginia had made.
toward wiping out lynching. With no lynchings since 1926, the Old Dominion had a record "among the best in the South." He praised the prosecuting attorneys, too, for their handling of the Jones case. By requesting a change of venue to the less volatile atmosphere of Henrico County, they had done their part to insure that mob action would not occur. Whatever the trial site, said Dabney, it was now the responsibility of Governor Peery to maintain order, just as Governor Pollard had done so admirably the previous year for the Crawford trial. Dabney did not take up the question of Jones' guilt or innocence, but simply reported that he had already confessed.

In the mid-1930's, the N.A.A.C.P. tried and failed to secure passage of federal antilynching legislation. The Costigan-Wagner bill, similar in its provisions to the Dyer bill of the 1920's, shared the same fate: Congressional heel-dragging and a successful filibuster. The number of lynchings in the nation declined in 1934, rose in 1935, and dropped again in 1936. Dabney wrote little regarding lynching in the two years following Claude Neal's murder. However, he evidently gave considerable thought to the subject, eventually deciding to take a strong stand.

By February, 1937, Dabney was convinced that federal intervention was the only answer. During the early weeks of the Eightieth Congress, he made his views clear.

The Times-Dispatch favors the enactment of the [Gavagan] Federal antilynching bill just introduced in the House of Representatives and shortly to be introduced in the Senate. It sees no hope of ever wiping out lynching, the greatest crime against Southern civilization, except through Federal action.

Other Southern states had shown no inclination to pass antilynching laws
of the type approved by Virginia's Legislature in 1928, with the result that Dabney now saw other steps as necessary. Expediency must take precedence over irrelevant principles:

To put a stop to the seemingly endless series of mob murders... impresses us as far more important than the preservation of something generally referred to as "State sovereignty" or "State's rights."

He elaborated, taking issue not with the principle of states' rights, but rather with its misuse. The duties of states were being overlooked because "the rights of States" had degenerated into "a mere shibboleth behind which the State and local authorities can ignore and flout the law of the land by permitting Lynchers to go unpunished year after year."11

In the same editorial, Dabney reported the terms of the Gavagan bill. The United States Attorney General would have authority to prosecute any peace officer who had made inadequate efforts either to prevent a lynching or to apprehend members of a mob after a lynching had occurred. In addition, any county which was the scene of a lynching could be fined up to $10,000, payable to the heirs of the victim. Constitutional authorities, explained Dabney, were divided as to whether the bill was unconstitutional. Even with the difference of opinion, the Times-Dispatch advocated passage of the bill and welcomed a chance to see it tested in the United States Supreme Court. The proven indifference of many state and local authorities to the South's Lynchings left no alternative to a federal law with real teeth.12

The N.A.A.C.P., familiar with the legislative hurdles erected in front of antilynching bills in the past, pressed the House Judiciary Committee throughout February to begin hearings on the newest version of
the bill. On March 30 Dabney was "happy to report" in an editorial that hearings were to start the next day. He was certain the bill would pass the House and hoped it would not be stopped by a filibuster in the Senate. Referring to the successful filibusters of 1923 and 1935, Dabney called for passage of the present bill "without any such travesty on the democratic process as Southern senators have put on in the past to defeat previous measures of a like nature."^{13}

Within two weeks, a gruesome double lynching near Duck Hill, Mississippi prompted Dabney to react strongly to the notion that a federal law was not needed. Two black men, accused of killing a storekeeper, had been taken from the custody of local authorities, tortured with a blow torch, and killed. The murders were committed in broad daylight by a mob not wearing masks. Yet no arrests had been made. Dabney termed the episode "the latest sample of what is sometimes called 'States' rights'," and considered it proof that some states simply were not managing their own affairs. He saw no justice served by a system which had allowed 84 lynchings to occur in the South from 1931 through 1935, and had handed down only three convictions with light sentences. Dabney was certain that the only hope for improvement would come from the power to try "derelict peace officers" in federal courts.^{14}

The Gavagan antilynching bill passed the House of Representatives by a vote of 277 to 119 just one week after the Duck Hill lynching. Dabney publicly chided Virginia's nine congressmen, for not one had voted for the bill. In an account rather vivid for its day, Dabney described the mutilation which often occurred at lynchings. Such lurid descriptions were perhaps necessary, he said, if lynching was to end.
"It is the sort of thing which will never be broken up, if everybody in Congress votes with our Virginia representatives to maintain something called 'State sovereignty,' no matter how many barbarities are committed in its name."15

Following House approval of the Gavagan bill in April 1937, the Senate took up the similar Wagner–Van Nuys bill. The Senate Judiciary Committee voted in late June to send the measure to the entire Senate, where its progress was impeded by the wrangling over President Roosevelt's controversial "court packing plan." On July 20, another double lynching occurred, this time in Florida. Dabney hoped that the revulsion at yet another heinous act would spur the Senate to pass the bill before it, just as the blow torch lynchings had contributed to the quick passage of the Gavagan bill.16 But Congress adjourned in August without debating the antilynching legislation.

While Congress was not in session, Dabney became convinced that the Senate would soon pass the Wagner–Van Nuys bill. Despite the fate of such bills in the past, Dabney felt that a successful filibuster this time around was "improbable." He gave reasons for his optimism. The House had passed a nearly identical bill by a large majority. The Senate's bill had come out of committee with the momentum of a 13-3 vote, and was headed for a Senate which was "understood to be 2 to 1 in favor of the measure." Dabney, an experienced observer of legislative bodies, also reasoned that a filibuster was much less likely to succeed early in a session. He was willing to concede that some provisions of the legislation might need improvement. But such changes could wait; the bill should be passed as written. The need for it, in the opinion of the Times-Dispatch, was as clear as ever: for fourteen years, the
frequency of lynching had shown "no definite trend, either up or down." 17

The belief that only federal action could reduce the lynchings in some states remained Virginius Dabney's primary reason for supporting such legislation. But to this statement of need he soon added a complementary idea: such a law would be accepted by the South. In other words, if an unruly minority was responsible for this blight on Southern society, the majority was willing to let the necessary force be applied to restore order.

There is no question that this country wants the antilynching bill. There is no question in our minds, either, that the South is willing to accept the measure, even though a good many Southerners are either openly skeptical or actively hostile.

As proof of broad public support, he offered a recent Gallup poll showing that 72% of all Americans and 57% of Southerners favored making lynching a federal crime. The latter figure, though only a small majority, was enough to convince the editor that the South would accept the enforcement of a law he deemed necessary. 18

Unfortunately, a group of Southern senators did not subscribe to Dabney's line reasoning. A filibuster quickly blocked efforts to pass the Wagner-Van Nuys bill. The Richmond Times-Dispatch, one of the South's leading dailies, found no redeeming qualities in this obstructionism:

No filibuster which thwarts the will of better than 2-to-1 majorities in Congress and in the country as a whole, is ever justified. That is not democracy. It is the negation of democracy. And when such a filibuster also causes the legislative process to bog down at a critical period, and delays for weeks, if not months, the enactment of crucially important recovery legislation, it is more indefensible than ever. 19
That same month an article written by Dabney appeared in *The Nation*. Dabney confidently asserted that the South, in effect, had already rejected lynching as a legitimate practice. While again acknowledging that the South was not uniformly supportive of federal antilynching legislation, he said that "a change has come over the South," leaving "the diehards . . . distinctly in the minority." Dabney pointed to the shift in editorial opinion among Southern newspapers as proof of the changing viewpoint. Virginia alone had eight dailies advocating federal antilynching legislation. Major newspapers in Louisville, Miami, Birmingham, Greensboro, Houston, New Orleans, and other Southern cities had joined the cause. The editors of those papers, like Dabney, were reporting overwhelming support in the mail coming from readers. Considering this growing consensus, and yet noting that only one Southerner had voted in favor of the Gavagan bill when it passed the House, Dabney said it was "apparent that many Southern Representatives and Senators are out of touch with sentiment among their constituents on this issue." On this matter, he was certain that the people of the South were not accurately represented in Congress.20

Dabney did not let the issue rest. In his fourth item to appear in two weeks on this subject, he refuted the states' rights argument that a federal law would be invasive. Rather than undermining the responsibilities of states to manage law enforcement affairs, the federal antilynching law was designed to place that duty squarely on the shoulders of the states:

If the local and State authorities protect prisoners committed to their custody, and prevent Lynchers from getting their hands on said prisoners—as they are almost invariably able to do—the Federal law will not become operative. In other words, it will be the
fault of local and State officials if the Federal law is invoked, and local self government is undermined.

Unwilling to worship at the altar of state sovereignty, Dabney doubted the sincerity of many who did. Of those members of Congress most loudly invoking the name of States' rights against the Wagner-Van Nuys bill, some were "among the most avid seekers after Federal pap." From this fact one could only conclude that "they are terribly excited about States' rights when it suits their convenience, and not at all excited about them when it doesn't."²¹

When Congress reconvened in January 1938, the antilynching bill was the first item on the Senate's agenda. The bill had been delayed to make way for other legislation the previous summer and fall, and a short filibuster had effectively stalled the bill through the end of the special session. But Dabney was optimistic that open debate and quick action could send the bill through early in the new session. He called on the senators involved to "discuss it on its merits, and stop their admittedly futile filibustering."²² After two days of what was shaping up as a full-scale filibuster, Dabney criticized Senator Reynolds of North Carolina by name and shared with his readers the irrelevant topics of Reynolds' unending speeches. Frustrated by what was happening, Dabney portrayed the filibuster solely as an obstructionist tactic, not a legitimate tool. The only effect would be that "a bill which could be passed in a few days . . . is probably going to consume two or three weeks, and will, in the end, be passed anyway."²³

As the filibuster grew longer, so too did the Times-Dispatch editorials against it. The speeches of Senators Byrnes, Bailey, Reynolds, and Harrison had become "hysterical ravings" and were
"humiliating to anyone who values the good name of the South." In a relative sense, the pontificating senators were "doing far more to arouse intersectional antagonisms than enactment of the Wagner-Van Nuys bill could ever do." Particularly serious, thought Dabney, was their use of statistics to "prove" that lynching was dying out in the South. He saw little significance in the drop from twenty lynchings in 1935 to eight in 1937, and pointed out that a similar decline in 1932 had been followed by a rapid rise in two succeeding years. Certain states, mainly in the Deep South, showed little inclination either to reduce their lynchings or to charge the participants with murder. Dabney was still convinced that those were "states in which lynching will almost certainly never be wiped out, except through Federal legislation." 24

The shrillness of the filibuster speeches gave Dabney a good opportunity to underscore the reactionary views of the senators. He did not want rational Southerners to accept any distorting of the issue:

One of the things in [the senators'] attitude which annoys and humiliates Southerners who have a more objective attitude on the race problem, is the argument of the filibusterers that action by the Federal Government to stop lynching will in some way break down the barriers between the races. "Social equality" and "racial amalgamation" are bugaboos that have been paraded before the jaded galleries time after time.

If the speeches were lacking in quality, they were of sufficient quantity that Dabney grudgingly admitted the tactic was working. After an assault lasting more than two weeks, Dabney reported from Washington that the Wagner-Van Nuys bill might be withdrawn, "at least temporarily." 25

A Senate filibuster had killed an antilynching bill for the third time in fifteen years. The day after it ended, the Times-Dispatch
revised its assessment of the South's readiness for such a law:

In view of the misrepresentation of the bill's provisions and purposes by its senatorial critics, its passage today would have done little good. So much sentiment throughout the South has lately been aroused against the measure that it would, in all likelihood, have been unenforceable at this particular time.

Dabney was not willing to relent on his primary reason for backing the bill: the belief that it was necessary. He challenged the Southern states to "make good on their protestations that they can 'handle' the lynching problem. If they fail, they can take it for granted that a Federal bill will be passed." Dabney was not expecting the need for a federal antilynching law to diminish.26

By late May nearly eight months had passed with no lynchings in the South. Even with such an apparent trend developing, Dabney warned his readers not to draw erroneous conclusions. He saw little reason to believe the South had found its own way to end lynching. After all, asked Dabney, "is it not meaningful that the cessation of lynching happened to coincide with the drive for a Federal law, a drive which at one time seemed about to succeed?" The Wagner-Van Nuys bill failed passage, but was still, in one sense, a success:

Even when the law is merely debated... it seems to serve as a deterrent to would-be lynchers. In fact, a white man in Alabama gave the then current discussion of such legislation as one reason for urging a mob to disperse a few months ago.

Notwithstanding several months of law and order throughout the South, Dabney remained "as certain as one can be of anything in the future that there will be other lynchings, possibly many more." And if there were many, debate on a federal law "ought to be... revived." But he placed most emphasis on what he saw as the cause-effect relationship
between Congressional debate and Southern response. If the threat of legislation had caused such general compliance, the South was evidently more aware than ever of the need to control lynchers.\textsuperscript{27}

When lynchings resumed that summer, Dabney did not call for reintroducing the antilynching bill in Congress. Instead, he focused his response on Mississippi. There a mob had shot a black man, set his body on fire, dragged it through the town of Rolling Fork, and left it in the city dump. Dabney criticized Mississippi's elected officials at the national, state, and local levels. He reminded his audience that Senators Harrison and Bilbo had assured Americans from the floor of the Senate that Southern states could "manage their own affairs." Dabney proceeded to the next level, with obvious sarcasm:

\begin{quote}
We seem to recall, too, that when the Federal law appeared to be on the verge of passage, the Mississippi Legislature went through the motions of strengthening the State law against lynching, and indicated that lynchers in the future would receive rough treatment at the hands of the local authorities.
\end{quote}

At the local level, no arrests had been made in the case, and no further investigation was planned.\textsuperscript{28}

By late November, six lynchings had occurred in the South in six months, four of them in Mississippi. With wording even more biting than before, the \textit{Times-Dispatch} asked for assistance from its readers: "If lynching among us is moribund, we should like to have additional evidence of the fact." The Magnolia State was again singled out from the rest of the South:

\begin{quote}
Perhaps we should give thanks for the latest exhibition of savagery there, for the sheriff of the county where the crime occurred assures the public that the victim was merely hanged, and 'the mob did not shoot into the Negro's body or burn him.'
\end{quote}
Still, Dabney did not call for the reintroduction of the federal antilynching bill. He was content to show that, ten months after the conclusion of the successful filibuster, certain Southern states remained unwilling or unable to manage their own affairs in a manner upholding necessary standards of justice.29

The latter half of 1938 had been disheartening to anyone looking for evidence that the South was about to end mob violence. But the statistics for 1939 showed a sharp drop in the number of lynchings. The resurgence to fifteen lynchings in 1934 and twenty in 1935 had been followed by only eight in 1936, eight in 1937, six in 1938, and three in 1939. Dabney was finally convinced that the long-term trend was downward. The Times-Dispatch withdrew its support for federal antilynching legislation. Rather than suggesting that a few states might still need prodding from Washington, Dabney saw good news in the fact that only two Southern states had seen lynchings in 1939, and pointed out that one of the men lynched that year had been white.30

In fewer than three years, Dabney had moved from the view that federal action was required, to the view that lynching was "near extinction." He was still of the opinion that the threatened passage of the Wagner-Van Nuys bill in January 1937 had done a great deal to reduce the occurrence of lynching. But now, late in 1939, that reduction had become his main point. Dabney viewed the conditions in the South as much improved from those of the early 1930's, requiring a different outlook:

Passage of the Federal bill, under such circumstances, would be apt to do more harm than good. The objective of such a law is to wipe out lynching, without increasing antagonisms between the races, but lynching seems near extinction anyway. The argument can well
be made, therefore, that the situation is not urgent enough to call for the passage of a law which might increase interracial animosities, instead of lessening them.

In 1937 Virginius Dabney had called for federal legislation as an effective tool needed to bring an end to lynching. But that need no longer existed. As a consequence, white Southerners would not accept such a law; black Southerners would lose more than they would gain. Passing the law now, as a statement of principles, would do more harm than good. To Dabney, legislation was best designed as a workable solution to a problem, and passed at the correct time. A federal antilynching law was no more appropriate when the need was past than it was when the need had not yet arisen.

For lynching, as for other topics in race relations, the evolution of Dabney's thinking resists tidy summarization. When mob violence had been relegated largely to a few states, he still considered a federal law necessary for those Southerners who could not 'manage their own affairs.' When the number of murders dropped still further, Dabney simultaneously escalated his attack on one or two states and retreated from the idea of federal legislation. To conclude that Dabney had compromised his standards, or lacked conviction, would be to set him on a stage of absolutes. He viewed race relations in a more relative sense. The world's image of an American South lacking in civilized justice was undergoing revision, he hoped, in light of the clear trend toward far fewer lynchings. The onus of continuing murders was more firmly on the shoulders of backward states like Mississippi, for whom the South as a whole could not be held responsible. Once convinced that responsible Southerners were bringing the needed changes, Dabney saw federal muscle as inappropriate.
In January 1937, one month before he first endorsed the Gavagan bill, Dabney wrote an editorial in support of graduate and professional education for Virginia's blacks. His column was prompted by a $500,000 grant from the PWA for construction of three new buildings at Virginia State College for Negroes in Petersburg. This federal aid, said Dabney, would give the college the facilities necessary for high-quality undergraduate education. He was concerned, however, that graduate and professional curricula and facilities would still be lacking. The Times-Dispatch saw two reasons to provide higher education for blacks within Virginia:

Aside from the fact that the State is obligated in fairness to make graduate and professional instruction available to qualified Negroes, this group of 650,000 citizens probably has the legal weapons with which to compel such action. Is Virginia willing to perform its obligations voluntarily, or will it wait until it is forced to do so by court action, with all the bitterness and ill-will which such action may be expected to generate?

Although he was obviously concerned with avoiding legal action, Dabney placed most emphasis on the point that these changes were truly necessary, that this was a way in which the state could give "tangible evidence of its desire to do justice to its Negro taxpayers."  

The next year, in Missouri ex. rel. Gaines v. Canada (305 U.S. 337), the United States Supreme Court ruled that a state was obligated to admit blacks to its university if equal facilities were not available within that state. Virginia State was one of only two universities in the South which were already providing graduate instruction for blacks. But Virginia did not yet have programs for
blacks in various professional curricula, with the result that admissions applications from blacks would continue to place pressure on the existing system of segregation. Dabney, though he saw himself as an advocate of educational justice for blacks, drew the line at desegregation.

Following the Gaines decision, the N.A.A.C.P. made further inroads against the "separate but equal" doctrine. Because equal facilities were a rarity, the association's legal staff brought suits in several states to force the admission of blacks to previously all-white graduate and professional schools. Dabney's fears of the long-term possibilities caused him to react strongly. In July 1939, he wrote an editorial critical of what he saw as the N.A.A.C.P.'s "radical goals." Dabney reported to his readers that Charles H. Houston, special counsel for the N.A.A.C.P., had clarified the group's goals in a speech at an N.A.A.C.P. convention in Richmond. Houston had called for the enrollment of blacks at the same graduate and professional schools attended by whites. Dabney, who continued to think that equal facilities were in fact obtainable, saw no need to call for desegregation. Once begun, such integration would spread throughout the educational system:

If admission to the graduate and professional schools of all the Southern State universities is the objective of the association, why not admission to the undergraduate departments? Will we not be told, ere long, that Negro children, or their parents, are unwilling, as a matter of principle ... to be segregated in the elementary and secondary schools?

Dabney's imagination did not stop there. Looking back a few years, he remembered the N.A.A.C.P.'s call for repeal of all laws forbidding racial intermarriage. It was clear to Dabney that these two trends were related, and that the consequences would be most undesirable:
The results of such repeal, coupled with abolition of segregation in the schools and colleges of the South, can readily be foreseen. Racial amalgamation would go forward at greatly accelerated speed.

Dabney closed by reviewing the credentials of the *Times-Dispatch* as an advocate of fair and reasonable reforms to benefit blacks. He pointed to the paper's campaign against lynching, as well as its endorsement of equal pay for black and white teachers with comparable training. But he was certain that the N.A.A.C.P. was out of touch with the public's desires, so certain in fact that he was willing to speak for both races:

> The *Times-Dispatch* is frank to say that the association's program is entirely too radical, and that we do not believe the bulk of Negroes, let alone the whites, will think of supporting it. 5

Dabney, a consistent supporter of economic equality for blacks, understood that educational opportunities would have to precede any meaningful improvement in black incomes. But it was equally clear to him, that the desegregation of schools would lead inevitably to social equality and miscegenation. In this and in later discussions of integration, Dabney's negative view of racial mixing would set distinct limits to his liberalism.

Writing for a national audience in the April 1942 issue of *The Atlantic Monthly*, Dabney discussed the education of blacks without delving into the question of racial mixing. Instead, he assessed the caliber of education for Southern blacks and the best methods for future improvements. Black colleges, nearly all of which were in the South, had seen enrollment increase by more than seventeen times in twenty-five years. Dabney was also buoyed by "the constantly improving attitude of the whites toward the desirability of providing decent educational facilities and standards for the blacks." 36 He admitted that wide
differentials still existed between the salaries of black teachers and those of whites, and in the per capita expenditures on black schools and white schools. But considering the enormity of the South's task, Dabney said, the progress thus far had been largely satisfactory:

Here is a race only a couple of generations removed from slavery, whose education became the responsibility of a conquered and looted people. Although that people had wholly inadequate funds with which to finance even one satisfactory system of public schools, it was saddled with the staggering extra burden of a dual system . . . . Abolition of the dual school system would bring the objective much nearer realization, but it may as well be stated that the South has no intention now, or at any time in the measurable future, of seeking economies by the education of both races in the same public schools.37

Much of the article was devoted to the implications of the Gaines decision. Four years after that ruling, the debate over school desegregation still involved primarily the centers of higher education. Having argued that the South could not afford dual educational systems, and yet unwilling to see desegregation as workable, Dabney concluded that the only way out was to provide regional institutions for blacks. This plan, under which several Southern states would fund centralized graduate and professional schools for blacks, was popular among those Southern liberals who would not endorse desegregation. Besides, reasoned Dabney, black students "would almost certainly be happier at an all-Negro institution providing work of equal excellence" to that found in white universities. As proof, he noted the situation at Fisk University in Nashville:

Forty-two percent of the student body . . . comes from the North, and evidently prefers the homogeneity of the Fisk all-Negro student body to the mixed student bodies available to them in their home states.38

But the Gaines ruling had stated that an equal education, if
provided separately, must be available in the student's home state. Dabney's sampling of expert opinions caused him to think this stipulation might be relaxed. He quoted leading Southern educators and a professor of constitutional law, concluding that a regional compact among states would be constitutional and obviously would provide instruction far superior to that obtainable if the very limited funds were not pooled. Even if the courts were to consider such an educational system constitutional, the Congress would first have to pass such a law. Dabney saw that, in turn, as depending on the N.A.A.C.P., and whether it viewed such regional centers of higher education as inimical to the interests of black Southerners. To Dabney, such a solution seemed reasonable. It would provide high-quality education to talented blacks, which they deserved. It would make good use of available revenue, which was limited. And it would function within the framework of segregation, which Dabney was not prepared to abandon.

* * *

Like lynching, the poll tax was a topic of public debate which often led to discussions regarding the proper role of federal power. In his first ten years as editor, Virginius Dabney wrote at least ninety editorials advocating poll tax reform or repeal. At no time did he feel that federal action was necessary. On this issue, he maintained faith in the ability of the Southern states to liberalize the franchise. More specifically, he was confident that progressive journalists and liberal organizations in the South could persuade both politicians and the populace that poll taxes impeded the development of democracy in the region. But Dabney did not oppose poll taxes out of concern for their effect on black voting. In fact, many of his writings show a concerted
effort to neutralize race as an issue within matters of the franchise.

Beginning in the 1890's, Southern states had enacted poll taxes as a means of removing blacks from the polling booth. The rampant political corruption in the post-bellum South was blamed on pliant black voters, so that their removal from the electorate was, to many whites, a progressive reform. Provisions of the poll tax laws varied among states, but in general they contributed to a sharp drop in the percentage of blacks who voted. However, many poor whites were also disfranchised. As the Great Depression spread poverty to large segments of the Southern population, even fewer citizens were able to afford the tax to vote. With good reason, Dabney saw the poll tax as having become an issue of economics and politics, more than of race. But many who defended the tax still viewed it as a tool to control blacks. Dabney and other liberals would have to deal with the racial aspects of the poll tax if they were to prove the need to modify or remove the tax.

When Dabney began writing editorials calling for poll tax reform, the tax was still the law in eight Southern states: Virginia, South Carolina, Georgia, Alabama, Mississippi, Arkansas, Texas, and Tennessee. He focused his attention on Virginia's tax, set in the Constitution of 1902. It required that a voter register at least six months before the general election and pay $1.50 for each of three consecutive years. In the autumn of 1937, Dabney editorially supported a proposal to reduce the poll tax to $1.00, payable for only one year, and due three months before the election. He viewed such a change as a good start, if repeal was not yet possible, but asked his readers, "What has financial ability to do with ability to cast a discerning vote on public questions?" Eventually, he hoped, a constitutional amendment would
remove the poll tax from the Virginia Constitution, leaving the General Assembly to set franchise requirements by statute. Illiterates, though, were not desirable voters, and Dabney called for an impartially enforced literacy test to accompany any changes in the poll tax.^42

Addressing the principal argument of poll tax supporters, Dabney attempted to allay their fears:

The only so-called reason ever given . . . for retaining the [poll tax] is that it 'protects us from the Negro vote.' North Carolina, with a larger percentage of Negroes than Virginia, abolished the poll tax in 1920 as a prerequisite to voting, and the skies haven't fallen down there, neither has 'white supremacy' been endangered. North Carolina, which quickly became Dabney's favorite example showing the benefits of poll tax repeal, had moved to the use of a literacy test. Dabney described such a test as capable of eliminating "unlettered voters of both races," and failed to question whether such qualifications might be enforced in a racially discriminatory manner.^43

If racial considerations were paramount in the rise of the poll tax, they were not, said Dabney, of great consequence in its repeal:

No modification of the poll-tax laws would affect, except in a few cases, the Negro who wanted to vote. Other methods have proved effective in keeping him away from the polls . . . . If the poll tax laws are revised, and a larger number of Southerners become voters, most of them will be whites and not Negroes.^44

Dabney was correct that apathy among black voters, and various forms of pressure to keep them from voting, would greatly restrict the number of black voters even after liberalization of the franchise. He sought a general expansion of the electorate, while keeping out the illiterate. However, Dabney did not call for a broadened franchise among blacks as a group.
In advocating repeal of Virginia's poll tax, Dabney exposed the myths which had been used to justify its existence. Beyond the question of stifling the black vote, the poll tax was often hailed for its usefulness in raising funds for education and in keeping demagogues out of office. Virginia's restricted electorate, said Dabney, contributed in poll taxes an amount less than half that which would be raised for schools if the levy was demanded of all Virginians whether or not they voted.45 He was quick, too, in disputing the assumption that a small electorate was less likely to place a demagogue in office. When the Newport News Daily Press asserted that there were 'no Bleases, no Heflins, no Longs, no Bilbos, no Alfalfa Bills' in Virginia as a direct result of the poll tax, Dabney quickly demonstrated his knowledge of history. With the one exception of 'Alfalfa Bill' Murray of Oklahoma, explained Dabney, all the most notorious demagogues of recent memory in the South had been elected to office by a poll-taxed electorate.46 By the end of 1938, Dabney's editorials were effectively blasting the poll tax as an anachronistic remnant of an earlier age, a roadblock to democratic and educational progress, maintained by an unreasoning fear of the racial consequences which would accompany its repeal.

But Dabney's call for federal action against lynching did not lead him to call for similar action to end poll taxes. On December 7, 1937, the United States Supreme Court ruled unanimously to uphold a poll tax law in Georgia, a decision Dabney read as indicating that "there is no hope of eliminating the Virginia tax by an appeal to that tribunal."47 He felt that the high court would not, and the Congress should not, use federal power against poll taxes in the South. In the summer of 1939, when Representative Geyer of California introduced a bill to end poll
taxes as a prerequisite to voting in federal elections, Dabney declared the measure "almost certainly unconstitutional." As proof, he cited passages from Article 1, Article 11, and the Fourteenth Amendment to the United States Constitution. It remained Dabney's view that "repeal of the [poll] tax in the eight States which retain it, must come through action of the States themselves and their citizens, rather than by act of Congress."48

Of Dabney's many objections to poll taxes, he was probably most incensed about the block payment of poll taxes by political organizations. He was quick to point out the contradiction between this common practice and the often-stated rationale that poll taxes removed the purchasable element from the electorate.49 As supporters of the Geyer bill worked to secure its passage, Dabney warned Southerners in the eight affected states that passage of such legislation would be largely the result of their resistance to even modest reforms in poll tax laws.50

Despite the recalcitrance of many Southerners, Dabney was at times very optimistic that each poll tax state could effect repeal of its own accord. Much of Dabney's faith came from his belief in the persuasive influence of the press and of certain liberal groups in the South. When the Virginia Legislature passed a bill setting penalties for the block payment of poll taxes, Dabney credited Virginia's newspapers with applying the necessary pressure on the legislative committees which had previously blocked the measure.51 When progressive-minded groups passed resolutions against the poll tax, Dabney saw such actions as indicative of the direction in which the entire South would soon turn. Writing for the New York Times Magazine in February 1939, the editor of the
Richmond Times-Dispatch was certain that reform was coming. "From the crags above Harper's Ferry to the mesas fringing the Rio Grande a revolt is brewing against the poll tax.... The question now is how soon the movement will grow strong enough to persuade the South to abolish the levy." Dabney saw, as "striking evidence of the revolt," the fact that the 29 members of the Southern Policy Committee, of whom he was one, had unanimously approved a resolution calling for the abolition of poll taxes as a prerequisite to voting. He applauded the efforts of the Southern Electoral Reform League, which was founded at Richmond early in 1941, and called for the replacement of poll taxes with literacy tests. Like many liberals, Dabney viewed such groups as very influential. These and similar organizations might have been ahead of many Southerners in their thinking, but Dabney saw them as representative of a change in attitudes coming in the near term.

The case of Odell Waller illustrates the issues of race and class in Dabney's writings on behalf of poll tax repeal. Waller, a young black sharecropper in Pittsylvania County, Virginia, was accused of the murder of Oscar Davis, the white tenant farmer whose land he farmed. The crime was committed July 15, 1940. On September 27, Waller was convicted of first degree murder and sentenced to die in the electric chair. Dabney took up Waller's cause and wrote many editorials on his behalf. To Dabney, the central issue was whether Waller had been denied equal protection of the laws by being convicted by a jury comprised entirely of citizens who had paid their poll taxes. At issue were questions of both race and class. Dabney gave more attention to the latter.

The composition of the jury convicting Waller was a matter of some
dispute. The Workers' Defense League, a leftist organization which organized Waller's defense, claimed that the jury was chosen from a list of local citizens who had paid their poll taxes. Although that contention had not been proven, Dabney felt the matter deserved a closer look:

If Virginia juries are being chosen exclusively from lists of persons eligible to vote, and hence from persons who must have paid their poll taxes, we have one more argument against that unjustifiable levy. Jurors ought not to be drawn from the voting list, and if that was done in the Waller case, or if it is being done elsewhere in Virginia, the practice should be discontinued.55

Pittsylvania County officials maintained that jury lists were not drawn entirely from poll tax lists. But it was generally understood that every member of the Waller jury had paid his poll tax. Reporting these developments across several months, Dabney posed the question of "whether the commissioners did not consciously, or unconsciously, lean toward the choice of the relatively well-to-do" as they selected the jury for "this case involving economic and social conflict."56

The Virginia Supreme Court of Appeals upheld Waller's conviction by the trial court, the Chief Justice writing that no evidence had been offered to show that the grand or petit juries had been drawn from poll tax lists, or that Waller himself had not paid the poll tax. The Times-Dispatch admitted that this was no Scottsboro case. "The Waller case never impressed us as an ideal one with which to test the constitutionality of making poll-tax payments a prerequisite to jury service, for the reason that Waller's guilt seems so probable."57 But Dabney remained uncomfortable with the judicial process seen in this jury trial:
In a case involving economic and social conflict, as this one does, the jury should contain members of both classes of society involved in the conflict. The jury which tried Waller did not meet this specification.

In May 1942, the United States Supreme Court refused to review the case of Odell Waller, on the grounds that the poll tax issue had not been raised before the death sentence was handed down. The Times-Dispatch asked Governor Darden to commute Waller's sentence to life in prison. The composition of the jury, wrote Dabney, undermined the validity of the first-degree murder charge. However, going beyond the issue of class, Dabney now chose to see race relations as the transcendent theme. The war, he said, had brought new meaning to this case:

We are in a war for survival, in which we are depending heavily for victory on the colored races. . . . Colored peoples in both hemispheres will believe, whether rightly or wrongly, that Negroes do not get justice in America, if Waller goes to the chair. In that event, the Axis can be counted on to make the most of the electrocution, and to use it with particular effect in China and India, and throughout the Arab world. This is no local issue, but a cause of international dimensions.

Dabney, convinced that Waller was guilty, was asking only that he not be electrocuted. But executive clemency was not forthcoming. On July 2, 1942, Odell Waller was executed.

For Dabney, the racial significance of the Waller case existed only in the realm of international relations. In discussions of the poll tax in the domestic context, he continued to see race as, at most, a peripheral factor. Soon after the founding of the Southern Electoral Reform League, Dabney reported that the group preferred a literacy test to the poll tax, adding that they had "no thought of including the hocus-pocus requirement that the voter 'interpret' the constitution, a
manifest piece of political skullduggery wherever it is used.\textsuperscript{61} Dabney's choice of wording indicated his awareness that suffrage requirements could be used in a discriminatory manner. But he did not pursue the issue, and failed to point out that voter registrars could easily choose to demand constitutional interpretations from blacks more frequently than from whites.

In his second book, \textit{Below the Potomac} (1942), Dabney again looked to North Carolina as an example of effective poll tax reform. This time he admitted the occurrence of racial discrimination:

\begin{quote}
Under [North Carolina's Literacy test], hundreds of thousands of formerly disfranchised whites are voting, while the proportion of Negro participants in the elections is no larger than in the average poll-taxed state. While the . . . literacy test evidently is being used at times as a subterfuge for the disqualification of eligible colored citizens, its advocates point out that it at least allows most of the whites to reach the ballot-box. No election law is entirely proof against abuse.\textsuperscript{62}
\end{quote}

Dabney viewed the literacy test as preferable to the poll tax, even though it was subject to abuse. Later in the same book, he mentioned other means by which many Southern blacks were denied the franchise. Included were "threats, whether actually uttered or merely implied," and the "lily white" Democratic primary.\textsuperscript{63} But Dabney reported these problems dispassionately. He viewed the expansion of the entire electorate as more pressing, and more feasible, than protecting the right of blacks to vote.

When \textit{Below the Potomac} was published in the spring of 1942, the United States was at war with Germany and Japan.\textsuperscript{64} Unlike Dabney's first book, this one was not an attempt to trace liberalism through Southern history. Rather, it was a portrayal of the South as it was
emerging from the Depression. It was a land in transition, painted by Dabney as if, for the first time, it deserved the label "New South." But many very old problems remained, particularly in terms of race relations. The reforms sought by blacks during the war years would challenge the limits of Dabney's liberalism.
CHAPTER THREE NOTES


2. Ibid., pp. 123-128.

3. Ibid., p. 128.

4. Interview with Dabney, June 11, 1983.

5. Dabney, Across the Years, p. 133.

6. "Negroes North and South," Richmond Times-Dispatch, October 5, 1934. After retiring, Dabney explained that the "overwhelming majority" of the unsigned Times-Dispatch editorials on race relations had been written by him. This was true for the period from October 1934 through December 1968, with certain exceptions. In the years 1936 through 1942, William Meacham wrote a few editorials on the subject. From November 1955 to November 1958, editorials supporting massive resistance were written by others, because Dabney would not endorse that doctrine. Interview with Dabney.


12. Ibid.


24. "'Lynching is Dying Out'," Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, January 14, 1938.


31. *Ibid*.


35. *Ibid*.


39. Ibid., pp. 463, 466-467.
42. "Valid But Still Inequitable," Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 8, 1937.
44. Untitled, Richmond Times-Dispatch, December 24, 1937.
53. "For War on the Poll Tax," Richmond Times-Dispatch, March 27, 1941.
54. Dabney refused an invitation to participate in the first annual session of the Southern Conference for Human Welfare (S.C.H.W.), held in Birmingham in November 1938. He considered the group too much under the direction of Communist sympathizers. Many years later, Dabney still believed "the principal accomplishment [of the S.C.H.W.] was the infliction of great damage on the Southern Policy Committee" by dividing reform-minded Southerners into two organizations, with diminished effectiveness as a result. Dabney, Across the Years, pp. 139-140; interview with Dabney.
57. "New Waller Trial Denied," Richmond *Times-Dispatch*, October 14, 1941.


In his memoirs, Francis Pickens Miller told of a conversation he had with Dabney in 1946. Miller had first come to know Dabney when they worked together on the Southern Policy Committee in the 1930's. Recently discharged from the army and seeing Dabney for the first time in several years, Miller was surprised by what he heard:

In the course of our conversation [Dabney] startled me by saying... that while I had been absent his views had changed and that he had 'gone conservative.'

Such a generalization, though offered by Dabney himself, tends to obscure elements of continuity in his writings across several decades. During and after the war, he remained an advocate of justice and economic opportunity for blacks, as he had been in the 1930's. The concern he expressed regarding rapid social change during the war was merely an amplification of similar warnings he had sounded years earlier. If he seemed more conservative by war's end, it was largely because his views were more static than those of many liberals.

By the time of Roosevelt's third inauguration, World War II very much involved the United States. Nearly a year before Pearl Harbor, the nation had already bolstered its defense industries to supply the increasingly beleaguered Great Britain. In mid-January, Dabney wrote two editorials voicing concern over the failure of the defense effort to
include black workers. Citing as an example the near-total exclusion of skilled black workers from the construction of Virginia's Camp Lee, Dabney viewed this discrimination as serious in various ways:

'All-out' defense cannot be achieved so long as a large body of skilled men is prevented by arbitrary rulings and subtle prejudice from putting its capabilities to maximum use. This is wholly aside from the injustice involved.\(^2\)

Not only were skilled blacks not being hired, blacks were also denied acceptance into apprenticeship programs. In this regard, Dabney named three shipyards in the Hampton Roads area as well as a Lynchburg firm. And while adult vocational training in Virginia was virtually equal in enrollment of blacks and whites, Dabney saw little importance in that 'equality' if the blacks, following training, were denied all but menial jobs in defense industries.\(^3\)

When these two editorials appeared in the *Times-Dispatch*, Dabney mailed copies to newspapers throughout the state, asking their editors to devote attention to this "most urgent problem."\(^4\) The number of newspapers which reprinted his editorials and commented favorably on them caused Dabney to write P. B. Young that "the editorial response has been all that any one could wish."\(^5\) Young, the black editor of the moderate Norfolk *Journal and Guide*, considered Dabney's contribution significant:

*We are all very grateful to you for your splendid leadership in this movement, which is so vitally important to the Negro's economic future, and which has such important bearings on the future progress of both races in this State.*\(^6\)

As a result of pressures from the March on Washington Movement, headed by A. Philip Randolph, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 8802 in June 1941 calling for an end to discrimination in defense industries
and establishing the Committee on Fair Employment Practices. Though the C.F.E.P. lacked enforcement powers, Executive Order 8802 was enough to soothe many black leaders, at least for a few months.

By the spring of 1942, many black Americans had begun to push harder than ever for prompt, meaningful reforms in many areas. A significant part of the impetus was summed up by Gunnar Myrdal in 1944:

Fascism and nazism are based on a racial superiority dogma . . . and they came to power by means of racial persecution and oppression. In fighting fascism and nazism, America had to stand before the whole world in favor of racial tolerance and cooperation and of racial equality.

The increasing friction in race relations was evident in Dabney's editorials by that point, several months after Pearl Harbor.

Much of Dabney's concern focused on the radical elements of the black press, which he viewed as inciting hatred among black Americans. In April, Dabney criticized the Pittsburgh Courier for its "Double-V-for-Victory" campaign, in which it was calling for victory against the Axis abroad and against racial oppression at home. Dabney considered such publications, with their demands for rapid, sweeping changes in race relations, inimical to the interests of blacks. He viewed the N.A.A.C.P., which published the Crisis, as straying from its earlier moderate course. He reported that race riots had already occurred, most of them between black soldiers and white policemen near army camps in the South. Dabney expressed "the prevailing assumption . . . that these bloody encounters are due primarily to the campaign being carried on by such publications as the Crisis." In contrast to this "small minority of Negroes who make such a revolution the price of enthusiastic co-operation in their country's fight for survival," Dabney pointed to the
"patriotic and cooperative attitude" evident in those respected black Richmonders who were organizing an all-Negro War Bond and Stamp Parade. Dabney's priorities placed the war on totalitarianism ahead of the war on discrimination.9

There developed, in Dabney's writings, a heightened fear that race riots would become a common occurrence. His worries were evident in a letter to Gordon B. Hancock of Virginia Union University, one of the most moderate of Southern black leaders:

My genuine fear is that with the Negro press goading its readers to demand more and more, matters will be pushed to such a climax in the South, and perhaps in the North too, that bloody interracial clashes will occur, and race relations will be set back for decades. I am grateful . . . to you for the leadership which you are displaying.10

Dabney was particularly pleased when he learned that many prominent Southern blacks were to meet in Durham, North Carolina in October, to discuss the current state of race relations. He wrote to P. B. Young, who would chair the conference, wishing the group success in its search for ways of reducing interracial tension.11 Following the Durham meeting, Dabney praised the work of those who had attended:

[Their] statement on Southern race relations . . . is couched in language which contrasts pleasantly with the denunciatory harangues of the 'all or nothing' school of Negro agitators in the North. Unlike the small coterie of colored people in other sections, who are demanding an overnight revolution in race relationships, they fix no deadlines, deliver no ultimatums.

Dabney agreed with the Durham group that the next step should be a joint meeting of blacks and whites, at which would be drafted "A New Charter for Race Relations."12

The Durham movement held promise, but was still in its infancy.
The editor of the *Times-Dispatch* remained worried that the extremists held sway. He endeavored to share his concern with a national audience. "Nearer and Nearer the Precipice" appeared in *The Atlantic Monthly* in January 1943. The imagery of the title suited the ominous tone of the article:

A small group of Negro agitators and another small group of white rabble-rousers are pushing this country closer and closer to an interracial explosion which may make the race riots of the First World War and its aftermath seem mild by comparison. Unless saner counsels prevail, we may have the worst internal clashes since Reconstruction, with hundreds, if not thousands, killed.

Among 'Negro agitators' Dabney listed A. Philip Randolph and Roy Wilkins. As 'white rabble-rousers' he included Governor Talmadge of Georgia, Governor Dixon of Alabama, and Representative John Rankin of Mississippi. The inflexibility of groups like the N.A.A.C.P., the overt racism of certain white politicians, and the irresponsible editorializing of several black and a few white newspapers, said Dabney, were laying the groundwork for the calamitous strife he was predicting.13

Dabney made an effort, throughout the article, to distribute blame and credit among both blacks and whites. But he was clearly most disturbed by the attitude of the radical black press, taking particular umbrage at the way Mark Ethridge, liberal publisher of the Louisville Courier-Journal, had been blasted recently for stating that most white Southerners had no intention of giving up segregation. To Dabney, the black press was rapidly losing sight of who its friends were among white Southerners:

No matter how liberal [whites] are with respect to the Negro's needs in other directions, if they subscribe
to the view that racial segregation cannot be done away with, as the price of an all-out Negro effort in the war, they are attacked as traitors to democracy who ought to be fighting beside the Nazis.

The likely result of such blindness would be worse than a few hurt feelings or heated editorials. Indeed, warned Dabney,

if this sort of thing keeps up, it can have but one result. The white leaders in the South who have been responsible for much of the steady progress of the Negro in the past, and who can bring about a great deal more such progress in the future, will be driven into the opposition camp.

Dabney was quick to add that "no decent American expects any colored American to remain unprotesting in wartime." But Dabney was speaking as one who considered himself a pragmatist. He viewed as "impractical idealists" those individuals and organizations intent on rapid change in the relationship between blacks and whites. Their pace was wrong, as was their timing. The threat from aggressor nations required immediate action; the resolution of racial grievances required time.

The Atlantic article sparked lively reaction from many quarters. Charles H. Thompson, writing in The Journal of Negro Education, found a contradiction inherent in Dabney's premise:

Mr. Dabney is guilty of the very offense for which he castigates 'the radical element of the Negro press' and 'a small group of Negro agitators,' namely, that of taking exceptional extremes and generalizing from them as if they were typical.

Al White of the Associated Negro Press was concerned less with Dabney's generalizations than with his assignation of credit for improvements in the status of blacks. "[Dabney] admits much progress has been made, but refuses to say that this progress is a direct result of the 'radical' and 'leftist' Negro press."
The relatively moderate image of the Norfolk Journal and Guide caused Dabney to value P. B. Young's opinion. The two editors exchanged several long letters regarding the "Precipice" article, as Young took issue with several assertions and Dabney attempted to clarify his views. Young felt the article had suggested postponement of too many black grievances and warned Dabney of the difference between style and substance:

It is the same thing that Messrs. Rankin, Talmadge, Bilbo and others say, with the difference that their language is always coarse and their attitude always brutal, while your language is always cultured and your attitude dignified. The result is the same.

Furthermore, said Young, such a negative outlook failed to offer the constructive solutions associated with liberalism. "You merely... predict violence and bloodshed. Can't you offer something rational and human which would avert the dire things you predict?"

Dabney's "Precipice" article does not represent a turn toward conservatism. The admonition not to listen to extremists had long been typical of his moderate views. He had always considered gradual, evolutionary change as the type most likely to bring lasting improvements for blacks. If this article stands out from his other writings, it is because of two special concerns which prompted its writing.

First, Dabney was convinced that the world war required an undiluted national effort. His stay in Germany eight years earlier had fixed in his mind the sense of mission which motivated Hitler, as well as the German people. He had warned editorially that the policy of appeasement was a terrible mistake and had seen his prediction borne out. By January 1943 Allied forces had not even been able to land in
Europe, so completely did the Nazis control the continent. The American war effort was still focused primarily in the Pacific, where the United States confronted another enemy every bit as tough as the Nazis. In Dabney's view, any sustained diversion of national energy into sweeping social changes at such a time was "the height of folly."21

Second, Dabney saw the "radical" elements in the press, and in black organizations, as counterproductive in every way. He was convinced that such elements failed to appreciate either the immediacy of the international crisis or the gradual pace necessary if social changes were to be accepted. If he overstated the influence of radicals among blacks, he also overstated the influence of liberals among Southern whites. But on most issues of race he assumed the South could solve its own problems. If that were true, leadership would come from the South's pragmatic and moderate journalists, educators, politicians, and ministers. Such a view left no place for leadership from outside, particularly from abrasive black journalists who second-guessed the sincerity of Dabney, Ethridge, and others who had helped blacks for many years.

As the controversy over the "Precipice" article began to settle, Dabney turned his attention to the movement initiated at Durham. A group of Southern whites, hopeful of sustaining the constructive discussions begun at Durham, planned a conference for April 1943 in Atlanta. In March Dabney wrote Jessie Daniel Ames, declining the offer to serve as chairman of the conference. Although he would attend, Dabney felt he did not have the time necessary to organize the meetings and preside effectively at the many sessions.22 At the conclusion of the conference, Dabney wrote an editorial praising the group for the
"sanely conservative statement" it had issued. Referring to both the Durham and Atlanta conferences, Dabney explained how sensible were their contributions.

Neither statement thus far issued gives any hint that efforts will be made in any responsible quarter in the South to break down the segregation of the races here. At the same time, both [groups] feel strongly that so long as segregation is maintained, there is a distinct obligation upon the white race to see that equal facilities are provided in the fields of education, welfare, health, transportation and the like.

Looking forward to the planned interracial conference of members from both groups, Dabney predicted that their meeting "should mark a new era in Southern race relations..."23

That "epochal" meeting was held at Richmond in June. Dabney participated in the discussions and then reviewed the results in the Times-Dispatch. Summarizing the deliberations of the blacks and whites who met in joint session, Dabney said they subscribed to two major points. First, they believed that Negroes had every right to expect more opportunities. Second, the conferees were certain that Southern blacks would look increasingly for leadership from radicals in the North, unless this new interracial movement could show that such a shift was not necessary for progress to occur.24

In August 1943 came the fourth conference in the series, at which a 'permanent' body was formed, in Dabney's words, "to handle interracial problems as they arise, and to give our colored citizens a more tangible hope of opportunity than they now enjoy." This conference, held in Atlanta, established what would soon be known as the Southern Regional Council. As he had for many months, Dabney gave considerable credit to the moderate blacks who had launched the movement at Durham. Their
efforts, and those of the whites who had joined the process, had culminated in an organization which was about to take the improvement of race relations "out of the realm of mere discussion, and to the verge of practical action . . . ."^25

Dabney reviewed the Durham-Atlanta-Richmond movement in an article for Survey Graphic. While emphasizing the harmony with which blacks and whites had developed the objectives of the new organization, Dabney maintained that its work would be most successful if it did not launch a wholesale attack on segregation.

Segregation . . . has come to mean discrimination, and a whole series of hateful oppressions. [But] . . . any effort to force the abolition of all segregation, over the protest of a strongly hostile white South, is bound to do far more harm than good to the Negro.

Though he admitted that segregation had become virtually synonymous with discrimination, Dabney did not conclude that segregation was inherently wrong. Rather, he continued to think that the best way to reduce interracial friction was through providing equal facilities for blacks and whites. This approach, in his opinion, was reasonable both because it would provide more justice in the treatment of blacks and because it would not challenge the patterns of racial separation so deeply entrenched in the South.^26

There was, however, one area in which Dabney saw desegregation as feasible. Segregated seating was slowly being eliminated on railways and cross-country bus lines. Dabney predicted in November that "similar results for city buses and street cars may be achieved before long in certain localities."^27 Actually, his first comments on this topic had appeared several months earlier, in March 1943. As a frequent user of
public transportation, Dabney was aware that "whites on streetcars and buses in Richmond are too often inconsiderate and ill-mannered in their attitude toward colored passengers." He found it particularly vexing "when the victim of such insulting behavior is a colored soldier or sailor. These members of the armed forces are offering their lives in the cause of liberty, and . . . they are entitled to be treated like human beings." But Dabney was not yet asking for desegregated seating, merely common courtesy. He advised his readers that "bawling gruffly at colored passengers, instead of asking them politely to move this way or that, is the least effective way of achieving the desired objective."28

His participation in the conferences at Atlanta and Richmond caused Dabney to take up again the matter of racial friction on public conveyances. This time he called for desegregated seating on Virginia's streetcars and buses. The appeal came in a November 13 editorial in the Times-Dispatch. Comparing the intent of Virginia's segregation laws with their current effect, Dabney explained that conditions on Virginia's common carriers made enforcement of the laws counterproductive.

Colored passengers who get on crowded cars or buses have to push their way to the rear through a dense mass of white people . . . . It would be preferable if the Negroes were allowed to stand or sit . . . wherever they could find room, thus avoiding the push through the packed aisles.

Such pushing and shoving, said Dabney, was "a constant source of trouble, irritation and bad feeling." With desegregated seating already common on trains and cross-country buses throughout much of the South, he called on the General Assembly to repeal the relevant statutes "without delay."29
Eight days later Dabney explained his position at greater length. This time he moved beyond the argument that segregation was not feasible on crowded streetcars and buses. Instead, he lauded the goals and methods of the black leaders who had met at Durham, placing his own proposal in the context of that movement.

Southern Negro leaders are genuinely and sincerely anxious to cooperate with Southern white leaders, and they want to avoid the interracial friction which would be sure to arise, if more radical Negroes from the North should gain a foothold among the colored people of this section. Repeal of the segregation law affecting streetcars and buses ... would buttress the case of the Southern Negro leaders as hardly anything else could do.

Viewed from this perspective, said Dabney, desegregation in this one area was obviously "the conservative course in race relations." He offered other changes which would have a similarly beneficial effect: the appointment of black policemen for black sections of Virginia's cities, and the hiring of an all-Negro staff for the Piedmont Sanatorium for tubercular Negroes. Dabney mailed copies of this second editorial to all the major newspapers of the South.

Even before the appearance of the second editorial, reactions to Dabney's proposal came pouring in at the offices of the Times-Dispatch. Letters to the editor were running nearly four-to-one in favor of the idea. Dabney reported to his public that many of the letters of approval had come from white women, thereby disputing the argument that repeal would place white women in uncomfortable situations.

Reaction was swift from journalists, too. The praise they heaped on Dabney for these columns in November stood in stark contrast to the criticism he had received from many quarters just ten months earlier, following the "Precipice" article. The Boston Herald described Dabney's
recommendation as having required "a courage which should make journalists proud of their vocation." In New York, the Herald Tribune was certain that "no critic from the North could state the case against white do-nothingism better than does the Times-Dispatch." Oswald Garrison Villard, whose opinion Dabney would not normally have valued highly, complimented the Richmond editor for his "statesman-like and far-seeing stand." P. L. Prattis, writing in the Pittsburgh Courier that Dabney considered so "radical," praised Dabney as an example of "sanity in the South" and one who might be starting a revolution in Southern customs. Other liberal and black journalists were similarly supportive of Dabney's stand.

But from most of the South came a "thunderous silence." The only white newspaper in all of Dixie to voice approval of the proposal was a small daily in Kinston, North Carolina. In Virginia, the Byrd machine refused to support repeal during the legislature's 1944 session. In 1950 legislation of a similar nature was endorsed by the Times-Dispatch, but again without success.

Dabney's advocacy of desegregation on Virginia's streetcars and buses did not signify a swing to the left, any more than the "Precipice" article had represented a swing to the right. He remained true to his belief that, in most instances, segregated facilities suited the needs and desires of both races. But the public conveyances in Richmond and other Virginia cities posed a special problem. Black and white riders had for decades been seated in different sections of the same vehicle. When crowded conditions made it difficult to reach one's proper area, the constant jostling became an irritating reminder of discrimination. Dabney was uncomfortable with such reminders and questioned the wisdom
of enforcing such an unworkable part of the Jim Crow system. Dropping
this one application of segregation might reduce interracial friction
and yet not open the door to general integration. It would serve as
proof, Dabney hoped, that Southern blacks could trust the region's own
reformers, both black and white, to set the pace for reasonable change.

*  *  *

The pressures for reform during the war years had caused Dabney to
clarify, but not to alter, his views on race relations. He would
continue to call for economic and educational opportunities for
Southern blacks, while assuming that both races would benefit from
segregation in most aspects of daily life. That assumption removed
Dabney from the mainstream of racial liberalism. As the civil rights
movement began to take form, Dabney was already in the backwaters of
post-war liberalism.

Unwilling or unable to believe the South was capable of more rapid
reform, Dabney was forced to repeat the refrains of his earlier pieces.
Particularly telling was an article in *The Saturday Review of Literature*
with the rhetorical title, "Is the South That Bad?" Gone was the upbeat
spirit of the New South enthusiast seen in *Below the Potomac*. In its
place was the defensiveness of a Southerner wondering why his region was
"the most discussed, the most debated, and the most denounced section of
the United States." Dabney was not blind to the faults of the South,
for he still condemned the tactics of race-baiting demagogues and the
poll tax advocacy of machine politicians. But on other subjects he
was purely the apologist, determined to cast the South in a good light.
While admitting that the tenants and sharecroppers of the South were
"among the most disadvantaged citizens of the United States," Dabney
shifted the responsibility for those circumstances. "The system which led to their poverty grew up in the wake of the Civil War, and... the Federal government... did nothing either to alleviate it or to make some more equitable system possible." For contrast, Dabney pointed to the Midwest, which in the 1940 census had shown a higher percentage of farms operated by tenants than was the case in several Southern states. His conclusion was that "while conditions on these Midwestern farms are better, on the whole, than on those in the South, the notion that the South has a monopoly on farm tenancy is fantastic." Clearly, Dabney was more intent on citing statistics than on exploring the qualitative differences between Northern and Southern tenancy and sharecropping.37

On the subject of organized labor in the South, Dabney was even less willing to acknowledge the region's inadequacies. From Reconstruction onward, said Dabney, the railroads, power companies, and factories of the South had been owned and controlled by Northerners to such a degree that the South was "virtually an exploited colony." From that observation came a deduction which, if strained, was at least simple.

Has the South been more anti-union than the North? Yes, and excessively so... Yet given the widespread Northern control of Southern industry, it can readily be seen that many of the South's premier union-busters are either Northerners themselves or are controlled from beyond Mason and Dixon's Line.

Dabney concluded the article with the admonition that any further attempt to force rapid change upon the South would "tend to discourage, and even to crush, movements which otherwise might bring important and far-reaching advances."38

With Dabney's continuing devotion to gradualism, the
recommendations of President Truman's Civil Rights Commission, released in 1947, represented the kind of federal initiative which he could in no way support. Except for his relatively brief endorsement of federal antilynching legislation, Dabney had always believed the states were best able to manage problems in such sensitive areas as race relations. Dabney emphasized that it was "impossible for any sincere American to disagree with many of the general principles laid down in the report of the [President's] committee," but he found their "specific proposals . . . entirely too drastic." The commission had recommended immediate passage of federal legislation providing for: (1) a permanent Fair Employment Practices Commission with enforcement powers; (2) harsh penalties against lynching; (3) the elimination of poll taxes if the states did not end them at once; (4) the denial of federal aid to any public or private agency allowing discrimination; and (5) desegregation in all areas, including the public schools.39

Dabney reasoned that if existing state nondiscrimination laws were so blatantly ignored in New York and Pennsylvania, with their small percentage of Negro inhabitants, there was no way that federal laws would be any more welcome in Southern states, with their proportionately much larger Negro populations.40 Returning several months later to the point that laws do not always shape practices, Dabney extended the contrast between North and South:

In the North, where strict laws have been passed making segregation and discrimination illegal, punishable by heavy fines and imprisonment, they are evaded and ignored. In the South, where strict laws have been passed making segregation compulsory, they are often evaded and ignored.

By Dabney's estimation, advocates of using federal power in racial
matters failed to take account of the fact that the improvement of the black man's environment had in many ways progressed much further in the South than in the North. Dabney thus was able to continue believing in segregation as a fair system, in need only of more equal facilities and greater economic opportunities for blacks.

Though Dabney was well back from the front of reform on many issues, these were hardly years of stagnation within his career as a journalist and editor. Indeed, Dabney received the Pulitzer Prize in 1948 for editorials he had written the previous year. While the prize committee did not specify which columns had prompted the award, a review of the editorials Dabney had written in 1947 shows several forceful pieces on lynching. In 1949 Dabney published his third book, *Dry Messiah*. A biography of Methodist Bishop James Cannon, Jr., founder of Virginia's Anti-Saloon League, the book dealt at length with the politics and hypocrisy which characterized Cannon's long career. Dabney had written a draft of the volume twenty years earlier, but Cannon's litigious habits had prevented publication until after his death. The book received many favorable reviews, but sales were modest.

The report issued by President Truman's Civil Rights Commission in 1947 had signaled the start of a national debate on the use of federal power against segregation. Within a short time, that debate focused on segregated education. Unlike the days of the Gaines case, the issue this time was separation of the races in public schools. In June 1951, Dabney wrote an editorial discussing the implications of a case pending in Charleston, South Carolina. The N.A.A.C.P. had filed suit, citing the vastly unequal educational facilities in Clarendon County, South Carolina, asking that the courts end segregation there. Even
though the Federal District Court had not yet ruled in the case, Dabney anticipated an appeal to the United States Supreme Court. At that level, he saw three possible decisions. First, the Supreme Court might find that all segregation in the schools was in violation of the Federal Constitution. Second, the justices might rule that segregated schools were unconstitutional for the district charged in the case, because of the wide differential in the quality of the facilities provided. Dabney said such a decision would put other districts on notice to equalize their facilities if they wished to avoid similar litigation. Third, the high court might adhere to the Plessy doctrine that facilities could be separate if they were substantially equal.44

Having stated three views the Supreme Court might take in the South Carolina case, Dabney drew attention to the majority opinion written by Chief Justice Vinson in Sweatt v. Painter (339 U.S. 629) the previous year. In ordering Herman Sweatt's admission to the University of Texas Law School, Vinson had written that "the State must provide legal education for petitioner . . . as soon as it does for applicants of any other group." Dabney took this to mean that "where this issue arises, facilities must be equalized within a few months, i.e. by the opening of the next school year, if equalization is to be offered as a substitute for integration." (Italics are Dabney's). Even if the United States Supreme Court were to uphold the Plessy doctrine in the South Carolina case, explained Dabney, some sort of crossroads was coming for the South.

The very best we can hope for . . . is a decision which would, in effect, make substantial equalization of facilities mandatory throughout the South, if segregation is to be maintained. Then each political subdivision would have to decide what to do—whether
to undergo the extremely heavy expense necessary in some areas to equalize buildings, salaries, transportation and facilities.

Dabney believed that the equal facilities he had long advocated for were soon to be required by the Court in public schools. He had devoted nearly all of this lengthy editorial to the legal points involved and offered only one observation regarding the reception the South was likely to give to a demand for equal facilities. "In areas where only a few Negroes live, it seems probable that public sentiment would acquiesce in their admission to the schools reserved for whites."

Dabney did not predict a harsh reaction to the coming decision. He had even predicted integration would occur where the small number of black students would make duplicate facilities a complete waste of tax money. But Dabney's optimistic tone was due in large part to his hope that the courts would not call for immediate integration of all schools.

Later that same month, the District Court ruled in the South Carolina case that separate schools were legal. The Clarendon County district was ordered to move toward equal facilities and report its progress to the court in six months. Dabney viewed the ruling as one striking the proper balance:

This is fair enough. The court doesn't order the local authorities to perform the impossible, but it does show that it intends to have substantial equality of instruction and facilities within a reasonable time.

Dabney closed this editorial with the hope that the Supreme Court would uphold the decision and "that the South will be spared the terrific social and cultural shock of overnight abolition of segregation in the public schools. Neither race is ready for so drastic a step."

Seven months later, the United States Supreme Court remanded the
case to the District Court. Dabney speculated that the action could be "interpreted as signifying that the nation's highest tribunal will not declare segregation unconstitutional per se." Then, thinking more realistically, he described the action as one which would give the South "a breathing spell in which to equalize facilities further before the momentous decision is handed down." Dabney added that equalization should proceed not merely from fear of impending court decisions, but because it was the right thing to do in order to provide the quality of education the black race deserved. He reported that a Topeka, Kansas case might reach the high court before it considered the South Carolina case again. Dabney was already familiar with the Kansas case, and knew that the decision would be broadly applicable:

In the Kansas case, the question whether segregation is constitutional per se is said to be the only issue, since it is admitted by all parties to the suit that the public school facilities in question are altogether equal for the two races. Hence when the court decides this case, it apparently will have to rule that segregation either is or is not constitutional.7

He had hardly overstated the significance of the approaching Brown decision.

In December 1952 the United States Supreme Court began hearing arguments in the case from Kansas, and related cases from three other states and the District of Columbia. The Times-Dispatch still considered it "unlikely" that all segregation in the public schools would be declared unconstitutional, believing instead that a relatively short time frame would be established for the equalization of educational facilities and curricula.48 When, in mid-1953, the court called for reargument the following October, Dabney cautioned his
readers that there was much to be done in the available six months.

The greater the progress made between now and the court's ruling, the less will remain to be done afterward toward equalization—assuming that equalization is what the court will order as the price of continued segregation. It still seems probable that such will be its decision.49

Virginius Dabney had not ignored the possibility of a Supreme Court ruling against all segregation in public schools. In fact, he was certain that segregation could not be maintained forever.50 But he considered court-ordered school desegregation unacceptable both in its use of federal power and in its demands for overnight departures from Southern customs. Over a period of fifteen years, several cases involving universities and professional schools had led to a certain amount of integration, but only because equal facilities and programs for blacks were not available and could not be made available in the foreseeable future.

Dabney viewed the public schools as a different issue entirely. The percentage of blacks in the populations of many Southern communities would make school desegregation far different from the token integration of admitting a handful of talented blacks to institutions of higher learning. The public schools, charged with the task of training youngsters of both races, shaped the lives of all Southerners in their formative years. The schools, explained Dabney, were at the center of the system of segregation. "This is the form of racial separation which a majority of Southerners consider more important than any other. To knock it out would be to knock the keystone from the segregation arch."51
CHAPTER FOUR NOTES


4. Virginius Dabney to C. C. Carlin, Jr., January 18, 1941, Series 7690, Box 4, Virginius Dabney Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia.

5. Dabney to P. B. Young, January 25, 1941, Series 7690, Box 4, Dabney Papers.

6. P. B. Young to Dabney, January 28, 1941, Series 7690, Box 4, Dabney Papers.


10. Dabney to Gordon B. Hancock, May 27, 1942, Series 7690, Box 4, Dabney Papers.

11. Dabney to Young, August 14, 1942, Series 7690, Box 4, Dabney Papers.


15. Ibid., 100.
16. Charles H. Thompson, "Mr. Dabney and the 'Precipice'," *Journal of Negro Education*, 12 (Spring 1943), 142.


18. Young to Dabney, January 12, 1943, Series 7690, Box 4, Dabney Papers.

19. Young to Dabney, January 20, 1943, Series 7690, Box 4, Dabney Papers.


22. Dabney to Jessie Daniel Ames, March 25, 1943, Series 7690, Box 4, Dabney Papers.


27. Ibid.


35. Dabney, *Across the Years*, pp. 164-165.


37. Ibid., 84-85.

38. Ibid., 86,88.


40. Ibid.


43. Dabney, *Across the Years*, pp. 121-122, 212-213.


45. Ibid.


50. Dabney, *Across the Years*, p. 231.

Over the course of several decades, considerable progress had been made in changing the attitudes of white Southerners to a position of accepting more opportunities for blacks. The seeds of that improvement were native to the South, embodied in the moderate elements of white and black reform groups. Given time, Southern blacks would experience enough advancement to turn away from the irresponsible leadership offered by radicals from the North. Gradual, evolutionary change, the kind that leaves lasting results, would continue to improve the lives of Southern blacks while maintaining the segregation which a majority of each race desired. Such were Dabney's views as the United States Supreme Court prepared to rule on the issue of public school segregation in the spring of 1954.

The Supreme Court handed down the decision in Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka (347 U.S. 483) on May 17, declaring that "separate educational facilities are inherently unequal." The next day, Dabney devoted two full columns to an analysis of the impact the ruling would have on the South. His tone was not one of hostility:

What seems desirable today, in the light of the court's finding, is for men and women of good will in both races to keep their heads, to avoid threats and hysteria, and to seek reasonable and sane solutions.
However, he was certain that the Supreme Court had failed to understand the breadth and depth of the changes which would be required of the South. He was also concerned as to the rate at which desegregation might be expected to occur. It would have been preferable, said Dabney, if the justices had established a series of steps requiring, for example, ten percent integration after one year, fifty percent after three years, and complete integration of schools "some years after that." Dabney did not say that desegregation would not work; he said it could be achieved only slowly.\footnote{1}

Dabney saw another complication in the varied demographic patterns of the South. Believing that "the percentage of Negroes in the population of any political unit is usually the key to the interracial problem there," Dabney expected adjustment problems would be worst in areas with a large proportion of blacks in the population. In addition, cities with segregated residential areas in close proximity would experience problems somewhat different from those of rural areas with widely scattered residents. Clearly, said Dabney, compliance with the Supreme Court's ruling would require "a variety of approaches." Without questioning the authority of the United States Supreme Court to render a decision of the kind just announced, Dabney saw limits to the speed with which such "social dislocations" could be effected:

\begin{quote}
Despite yesterday's ruling by the court, epoch-making though it is, segregation in the public schools of the South is not about to be eliminated. Final achievement of that objective is years, perhaps many years, in the future.\footnote{2}
\end{quote}

If Dabney hoped that the courts might reconsider and back away from the notion of rapid desegregation, the decisions which followed dashed those hopes. In July 1955, the United States Circuit Court of Appeals
in Columbia, South Carolina ordered an end to the Jim Crow seating practices of a Columbia bus company. Dabney worried that the Brown decision had set an example of sweeping change which other federal courts were applying in areas far removed from education. Since the Brown decision, lower federal courts had ruled against the separate-but-equal doctrine as it applied to playgrounds in Maryland, public parks in Virginia, and now intrastate transportation in South Carolina. It was ironic that the bus desegregation decision should have prompted Dabney to deliver this strong complaint about "the blitzkrieg speed of race decisions." After all, it was the Richmond Times-Dispatch which had advocated just such a change for intrastate buses in Virginia twelve years earlier. But Dabney saw the circumstances as very different. In 1943, he had called for Virginians and their General Assembly to abandon a pattern of segregated seating which was not working, without touching the other manifestations of Jim Crow. This time, said Dabney, the federal courts were attempting to legislate the end of segregation. He was certain that the people of the South, both white and black, were not ready for such rapid changes in the fundamental aspects of race relations.

On May 31, 1955, as a follow-up to the Brown decision, the Supreme Court ruled (349 U.S. 294) that racial discrimination in admissions to public schools was to end "with all deliberate speed." Dabney, unwilling to advocate defiance of a Supreme Court order and yet cognizant of the differing levels of tension in various parts of Virginia, hoped the General Assembly would allow "local option." By this provision, each political entity in the state would be allowed to decide whether or not to integrate schools. Dabney considered this
approach both moderate and workable. Obviously, it fell short of beginning the desegregation of all school districts. But local option was certainly a more liberal solution than that which Virginia's government adopted.  

Senator Harry F. Byrd made it known that he expected Governor Stanley and the Democratic machine to resist all efforts to integrate Virginia's schools. Their response, which would become known as "massive resistance," found expression in legislation which required the closing of any public school rather than allow integration of its student body. The Democratic leadership, which had originally declared its intention to support local option, was criticized in the Times-Dispatch for this "breach of faith." It was the last instance, for a long time, that Dabney would use the editorial page to criticize the doctrine of massive resistance. The Bryan family, which had long owned the News Leader, had purchased the Times-Dispatch in 1940. The current publisher, D. Tennant Bryan, supported massive resistance, as did John D. Wise and Alan S. Donnahoe, who served in succession as general manager of the Times-Dispatch during these years. Without ordering Dabney to support massive resistance editorially, the publisher nevertheless made it clear that the editor's columns should not take a contrary view on this issue. Dabney obeyed from November 1955 to November 1958. 

Virginia's resistance to court-ordered school integration found its most eloquent spokesman in James J. Kilpatrick, editor of the Richmond News Leader. To justify massive resistance, Kilpatrick resurrected the doctrine of "interposition," last heard in the Civil War era. This concept, based on the compact theory of government, emphasized the
reserved powers retained by the states when the federal union was formed. It allowed the citizens of a state to "interpose the shield of State sovereignty between the Federal government and the object of the Federal government's encroachments." In February 1956 the Virginia General Assembly passed a resolution of interposition. Several other states followed suit. Dabney could not give strong support for this "long-outmoded theory." Instead, he "merely expressed approval of the resolution as a gesture, with the express proviso that it must not call for any form of nullification."

Because Dabney wrote so little concerning interposition and massive resistance on the editorial page of the Times-Dispatch, it is necessary to examine other sources from that three-year period in order to monitor his views on the school desegregation crisis. Few of his letters contained discussions of the issue. His articles during those years tended to report the reactions of Southerners to the integration question, rather than offer Dabney's own views. Nevertheless, his interpretation of the crisis and its origins can be seen in several items he wrote during the heyday of massive resistance.

In the summer of 1956, an article by Dabney appeared in the American Magazine. On the eve of the new school year, Dabney considered violence quite possible, particularly in districts with black majorities, if integration were attempted. In an effort to explain the existing state of interracial friction, Dabney looked to the pivotal years of World War II. He lauded the "restrained and reasonable manifesto" framed at Durham, and described the Southern Regional Council as "a biracial organization... whose objective was to meet the Negro halfway, and to eliminate discrimination." Unfortunately, instead of
supporting this worthy effort,

most Southern whites began dragging their feet and refusing to co-operate in attempts by a minority of white Southerners to obtain for the Negroes better opportunities.... We were unable to get the co-operation of influential segments of Southern society—notably business and professional groups.

The failure of the South's white leaders to nurture this movement, with its devotion to both aspects of the separate-but-equal doctrine, caused Southern Negro leaders to turn to the North and the N.A.A.C.P. for guidance. That organization, Dabney continued, had once served the Negro race well in advocating the equalization of black and white teachers' salaries and the admission of blacks to graduate and professional schools previously enrolling only whites. However, said Dabney, the N.A.A.C.P. had made "the big mistake" of assuming that what had been achieved in advanced education could be done as smoothly in the public schools.

This argument ignored two salient facts: (1) Negro students who are seeking degrees in law, medicine, or advanced academic subjects are mature men and women, and they come into contact in college with equally mature whites. (2) In each of these institutions, the Negroes constitute only a tiny minority of the student body.

If Dabney had little to say regarding interposition and massive resistance, his views were clear as to the practical limits of integration. He considered it far more feasible in areas having white majorities. Equally important, desegregation was more appropriate when it involved adults, rather than children or adolescents.

At the core of the opposition to school desegregation was more than a distaste for socializing between black and white children. The ultimate question was the degree to which racial mixing, or
miscegenation, would occur. In an address before the National Association of Secondary School Principals early in 1957, Dabney explained that the most influential argument against integration, in the minds of most white Southerners, was the belief that school integration would lead to interracial marriages and the "mongrelization" of the white race. That term was not one which Dabney liked to use, and the printed accounts of his speech enclosed the word in quotation marks. While not condoning the irrational bitterness represented in such a blatantly racist term, Dabney did take time to explore the matter from a more reasoned perspective.

It may be possible to argue that integration would not increase the likelihood of racial amalgamation . . . . But even if we accept this argument, which I do not, the desirability that every race strive to maintain its own integrity seems to me to be indisputable. There is nothing in my thesis of bigotry or prejudice, and nothing having to do with supposed racial superiority or inferiority. My point is that the Negro should wish, no less than the white, to retain his racial identity and his cultural heritage, to the end that his race's indisputably great achievements can be properly recognized and handed down to his posterity.

Dabney's views were far removed, especially in his own mind, from the hatred seen in those whites who blocked school integration with threatened and actual violence. By contrast with those elements of Southern society, Dabney was carefully choosing words which reflected his respect for all races and cultures. At the same time, he remained firm in his belief that miscegenation would be detrimental to both the white and the black races, and that such mixing would be the inevitable result of integration of public schools. On this latter point, he submitted as proof the racial amalgamation which had occurred in Central and South America. He did not discuss the considerable differences
between those areas and the United States in terms of history, race, or servitude.11

In the fall of 1958, at the request of Life magazine, Dabney wrote an article setting forth the views of most Virginians on the issue of integration.12 He stressed the great social change which would occur in the South if integration were forced. To understand the enormity of the South's problem, said Dabney, the North need not look very far. Five years after the first black families had moved into Chicago's Trumbull Park housing project, extra units of police were still patrolling the area night and day to protect the black families from angry whites. And the New York Times, always ready to advise the South on the virtues of integration, had recently editorialized against a non-discriminatory housing statute for that city. "We do not think the people of New York have been adequately prepared for the passage of this bill," wrote the Times. "Progress must be a matter of education and spiritual growth rather than a consequence of legislation." "The white South," said Dabney, "could not have put more perfectly the case against the 1954 Supreme Court decision."13

Dabney was challenging the Supreme Court's wisdom, but not its authority. He had no doubt that the vast majority of Virginians were law-abiding citizens. "Virginians . . . do not feel that they are 'defying the Court.' They are attempting to find legal means of coping with the immense difficulties precipitated by the 1954 decision."14

Discussing massive resistance only briefly, Dabney noted differences of opinion on the merits of that policy:

The people of Virginia are uneasy and worried. They do not know what is in store, nor do they know how long their "massive resistance" legislation will stand
up in the courts. While white Virginians are well-nigh united in their desire to prevent mixed schools for as long as possible, they are less united in believing that the "massive resistance" policy adopted by the state legislature is necessarily the best means of combating integration. 15

At no time had Dabney seen merit in the threat of closing schools as a means of avoiding integration. For three years, he bided his time and focused his writings on other subjects, while Tennant Bryan supported massive resistance and the Virginia Democratic machine. However, by November 1958, Bryan and Donahoe could see that the courts were very likely to hand down an adverse ruling. Believing that continued adherence to massive resistance would be useless, and not wishing to be in defiance of the new court orders, the two leading Richmond dailies changed their position and began supporting Governor J. Lindsay Almond's local option plan. Many years later, Dabney made no claim to have caused his colleagues' conversion. But he was pleased to see the change and once again wrote editorials endorsing the local option plan, which he felt would enable the Old Dominion to comply with desegregation requirements in a reasonable fashion. 16

Dabney has been criticized for not taking a strong stand against massive resistance. Some observers have suggested that he should have resigned. 17 He has said in response that he did consider leaving the Times-Dispatch, and that he definitely would have if the management had continued supporting massive resistance after the courts had ruled against it. As for the three years in which he quietly waited for the end of massive resistance, Dabney has written that he found solace in knowing that "no editor can be altogether free to write whatever he wishes on every conceivable subject, unless he owns the paper." Even if
he could have found a position with another paper, he doubted he could find a newspaper with which he agreed on as many issues as the *Times-Dispatch*. 18

To a large extent, Dabney's disapproval of massive resistance centered on tactics, not goals. Dabney agreed that the Supreme Court was setting an agenda for integration in education and other areas which was totally unrealistic for the South. He also saw value in using legitimate, legal means of buying time so that desegregation could occur at a workable pace. True, Dabney worried that "the closing of schools . . . carried to its ultimate conclusion, appeared likely to turn Virginia into an educational slum." 19 But he was certain that the courts would not long tolerate actual school closings, and hopeful that the *Times-Dispatch* would return to its role as advocate of reasonable reform for Virginia and the South.
CHAPTER FIVE NOTES


2. Ibid.


5. Ibid., p. 232; interview with Dabney.


9. Ibid., pp. 28-29.


11. Ibid.

12. Dabney, Across the Years, p. 234.


15. Ibid.

16. Dabney, Across the Years, pp. 235-236; interview with Dabney.

18. Interview with Dabney; Dabney, *Across the Years*, p. 236.

In the several decades that Virginius Dabney has expressed himself in editorials, articles, and books, his views on matters of race have changed very little. During the 1930's, Dabney was known as one of the most liberal Southern journalists for his advocacy of more justice and greater economic opportunity for blacks. As the war years brought heightened expectations to the black community, desegregation emerged as one of the primary goals of the N.A.A.C.P. and other black organizations. The idea of blacks and whites living and working in such routine contact had not been a leading topic of debate before the war, when Dabney had earned his credentials as a liberal.

Terms such as "liberal" and "conservative" have their usefulness, but also definite limitations. The affixing of such labels in this case can do much to hide both the consistencies and the contradictions in Dabney's set of beliefs. Considering the sort of reforms associated with liberalism, one may conclude that a "liberal" would likely revise his goals and values in the course of a lifetime, as his society changes. Such revision was not the case with Mr. Dabney. The consistency of his views regarding blacks, and the earnestness of his warnings against extremism, suggest that he is best termed a "moderate," if he must be labeled at all. This term is one which Dabney himself considers valid.¹

The New South which was developing in the twentieth century was a
phenomenon of many dimensions. Great changes were occurring in political, economic, religious, and cultural areas. Although Dabney commented on the significance of these and other areas of development, he saw particular importance in the potential to improve the lives of blacks. Lynching was to him the worst obscenity of Southern life, a tragedy of vast proportions. It was the only racial problem for which he believed, for a time, that federal intervention was the only solution. That immediate problem aside, Dabney drew attention to the need for expanded economic and educational opportunities for Negroes, so that they might break the cycle of poverty and ignorance and become productive and satisfied members of society.

The foundation of Dabney's racial liberalism included key individuals and experiences. His parents' influence was rather indirect, inasmuch as their views on racial issues were largely traditional. Within the fourth estate, the work of H. L. Mencken had a major impact on Dabney, providing a model of critical thinking and journalistic courage. Dabney's introduction to the dual system of Southern justice came in his early years of reporting. His observation of police court proceedings awakened Dabney to the degree of racial discrimination in Virginia and the rest of the South. Similarly, the 1934 visit to Nazi Germany gave Dabney a view of racism taken to the level of ideology. But ultimately, Virginius Dabney's advocacy of greater opportunities for blacks was based primarily on his own sense of fairness and justice.

The boundaries of Dabney's racial liberalism were set by the limits of his imagination. P. B. Young touched upon this idea in a letter to Dabney in 1942.
You have been very helpful in drawing the attention of the people, north and south, to the fundamental bases of our interracial disharmony, and in pointing out corrective measures. You have failed, in some respects, to understand the effects of racial separation as practiced.

While admitting that facilities provided for the two races often were not equal, Dabney was convinced that segregation, like public facilities, could be repaired and refurbished. Consequently, when the United States Supreme Court ruled in 1954 that "separate is inherently unequal," it struck at the heart of Dabney's beliefs.

Dabney valued the separation of blacks and whites, particularly in the public schools, for he was unable to move beyond the assumption that widespread racial mixing would be a concomitant of integration. He has said and has written that his were not the views of a racist. And certainly the obstructionist and vociferous elements of the post-Brown South were much more offensive than Dabney's statements regarding the relationships possible among blacks and whites growing up together. But if Dabney's worries were not those of a racist, they were those of a man who underestimated the South's capacity to change.

In the history of racial liberalism in the South, there were bound to be more writers like Dabney than like Lillian Smith or Ralph McGill. The "gradual, evolutionary change" espoused by Dabney could be defended as that of the pragmatist, for in a land like the American South, slow racial reform can seem a remarkable achievement. But by its nature such gradualism contains a contradiction. Dabney was optimistic that most Southerners were coming to see the decency of treating blacks better. But he was simultaneously pessimistic that the South could accept the agenda of a minority group whose expectations had grown enormously in
just ten or fifteen years. This contradiction was often resolved, by Dabney and other gradualists, through the assertion that the growing demands were emanating from the North, and therefore were not appropriate for Southern conditions.

In discounting so much of the work of the N.A.A.C.P. and other "outside" groups, Dabney failed to acknowledge that reform achievements are a composite of the efforts of many groups and individuals. Those improvements in circumstances enjoyed by Southern blacks had, indeed, come slowly. But it does not follow that they were the achievements of those reformers who advocated a pace of gradual, evolutionary reform. It is at least as reasonable to conclude that modest gains are obtained in a harsh environment only when the forces of change push so hard that at least some of what they seek is obtained.
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1. Interview with Virginius Dabney, June 11, 1983.

2. P. B. Young to Virginius Dabney, December 23, 1942, Series 7690, Box 4, Virginius Dabney Papers, Alderman Library, University of Virginia. Italics in original.
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