

# MAYOR: Notes on the Sixties

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by  
IVAN ALLEN, JR.,  
former Mayor of Atlanta,

with PAUL HEMPHILL

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## Washington

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Unsigned letter: I wish to nominate you as Mr. Mau Mau of 1963. I understand that you are a half-brother of Martin Luther King.

New York Times editorial: On rare occasions the oratorical fog on Capitol Hill is pierced by a voice resonant with courage and dignity.

—Reactions to Senate testimony in behalf of a public-accommodations bill

By the end of my first year in office, long before the historic dinner for Dr. King, I was probably as experienced in the civil-rights fight—and I mean experienced in combat, working on the myriad problems from day to day in the trenches—as any other major public official in the South, if not the nation. It is one matter to be a Congressman or a governor or even a state legislator and be able to isolate and protect yourself from the people and their problems, but it is something else to be a mayor and have to cope with crises every hour of every day on a direct lo-

cal level. A mayor is right on the scene, easily accessible, and the problems that come to him are immediate. There is, sadly, little time to theorize or pass the buck to a committee for study or otherwise put off until tomorrow what must be done today. So I had to claw and scratch my way through the civil-rights struggle and learn the hard way. There had been the incident in the cafeteria and the elimination of the Jim Crow signs at City Hall. There had been the question over the authority of Negro policemen to arrest whites. There had been the hiring of Negro firemen. There had been, for better or for worse, Peyton Road. I had wrestled almost daily with the desegregation of swimming pools, golf courses, movie houses, schools, restaurants, hotels, neighborhoods, restrooms, parks, water fountains, and almost every other public facility known to man. The leaders on both sides of the fight, from Lester Maddox to Martin Luther King, Jr., were not names signed to letters that were notated "FYI" and passed on to me by a large office staff. They were real people whom I knew intimately from sometimes frantic discussions on simmering sidewalks and in stuffy upstairs rooms and crowded ghetto front porches. I was beginning to feel that perhaps my father had understated the case about fifteen years earlier when he predicted that my generation would be confronted with "the greatest agony that any generation ever went through." God knows, for a mayor *agony* wasn't a strong enough word.

Predictably, because I was so closely involved in it all, the experiences of that first year had a great effect on my personal view of the entire issue of racial equality. As I have pointed out, my Southern background had left me with a blind spot as far as the needs and the conditions and the ambitions of the Negro were concerned. Until I entered the office there had been only very slow, subtle changes in my attitude—from absolutely no discussions of



the racial issue while a student at Georgia Tech, to occasional outbursts when I would rant "nigger" at some black person I was somehow put out with, to the confrontations with Bertha Lewis and L. D. Milton during the Community Chest drive. I recall a time shortly after the Bertha Lewis incident when, as a young would-be civic leader, I told a group of Negro citizens that they should have a deep sense of appreciation for everything Mayor Hartsfield had done for them (it was a classic example of the same old paternalism of the South), and had the Reverend William Holmes Borders defiantly stroke my face with his finger and say, "Did anything rub off? Am I any different, or am I a man just like you?"

My liberalism was late in coming, but once I leaned in that direction I suppose I went all the way in a hurry. In that one year, that first year in office, I must have seen as much of the racial tension on both sides as most people would see in two lifetimes. Dealing with the problems at first hand, day by day, was the most important factor, of course. And there can't be any question about the effect it had on me to see Ralph McGill and Eugene Patterson of the *Atlanta Constitution* moving so vigorously and courageously into the civil-rights question. Then, too (I don't think this can be overestimated), a great polarization had already begun to take place, and I was being driven over more and more to the liberal position by the extreme racists who were so busily warping facts and condemning me for whatever action I took.

That polarization was reaching a new peak when, early in 1963, John F. Kennedy began to push for a Civil Rights Act that would include a very strong public-accommodations section requiring that any private business involved however remotely in interstate commerce would be forced to open its doors to anyone, black or white. This, of course, was aimed generally at restaurants and hotels across the

nation but particularly at those in the South which had managed to close their doors to Negroes by arguing private property rights ("Management reserves the right to refuse admission to anyone"). At this time Atlanta had made enough voluntary progress in desegregating public and private facilities that it was being lauded throughout the rest of the country as a racial oasis in the South—a "City Too Busy to Hate"—and both the city and I, as its mayor, had a generally favorable liberal image; especially when compared to our former rival, Birmingham, which often seemed under the absolute control of rednecks and rabble-rousers. Atlanta *had* made strides during the first three years of the sixties, but the battle line had been drawn quite clearly at the restaurants and the hotels. Everything I had tried in those areas had failed. There had been endless meetings with the hotel and restaurant people over the past three or four years, and no matter what agreement was reached everyone involved would be split in every direction (Maddox must have released statements that he was resigning from the Chamber of Commerce some three dozen times during that period). The issue was mounting rapidly and there seemed to be no solution for it that would please all sides. The hotel and restaurant associations would not even respond to the pragmatic argument that unless they opened their doors to everyone, Atlanta's convention and tourist business—not to mention its favorable national image—would plummet. And the outrage against President Kennedy's proposed public-accommodations section served to further inflame the city, along with the rest of the South and much of the nation. All of the usual conservative voices in the South were using the argument that a public-accommodations bill would be an affront to private enterprise, of course. They were laying the same old stresses that this wasn't a national problem, it should be left up to local governments, which was as if



to say the theory that all men are created equal was a local issue. And not only were the usual conservative forces coming out against President Kennedy's bill, they were being joined by most of the liberals. Eugene Patterson of the *Constitution*, the man who had played such a big part in my enlightenment on the race issue, shared the opinion that the bill would be unfair to the private businessman. Governor Carl Sanders, both Georgia senators, and the entire state Congressional delegation—including feisty young Charles Weltner, the liberal Democrat who would later resign from Congress rather than support Maddox when the latter became governor—had come out against the bill. In the beginning, so swamped was I by daily details that I didn't know exactly how I felt about it except that it seemed to *support* the Constitution of the United States rather than to go against it.

It wasn't long before I *had* to stand back and look at the bill and decide whether I was for it or against it. In the spring of that year I received a visit from an old friend, Morris Abram. Only a year earlier, Morris, a debonair young Jewish attorney who had grown up in the south Georgia town of Fitzgerald, had taken on a segregationist lawyer named Buck Murphy in federal court and won the long fight to end Georgia's notorious county-unit voting system. Now Morris was a prominent lawyer in New York, a friend of the Kennedys, and after I had invited him to take a seat in one of the eight Kennedy rockers in the office at City Hall, he came right to the point.

"You're familiar with the public-accommodations bill," he said.

"That's all we hear down here lately."

"The South's pretty upset, I understand."

"Upset?" I said. "I don't know of a single important official in the South who's come out for it. Patterson, Weltner, *nobody*."

"That's what I came to see you about."

"What?"

"Ivan, the President wants you to support the bill."

"The Pres—?"

"He wants you to go to Washington and testify."

This stunned me. I was a great admirer of President Kennedy, although we had only met briefly a couple of times. He knew a few things about me through Leonard Reinsch of Cox Broadcasting, which owned WSB in Atlanta, and I could assume he had kept up with what civil-rights progress we had been making and was also aware that I was championing the federal government as the last hope for cities. But for him to send Morris Abram to ask me to go and testify in Washington left me confused. For one thing I was still awed by Washington, even though I had been storming the bastions up there quite a bit lately in search of money for Atlanta. For another, I simply hadn't committed myself yet on the bill I was being asked to support with Senate testimony. And there was something else whirling around in my mind as I tried to come up with an answer.

"Morris, you know the dilemma I'm in on this thing," I said. "I've got a large Negro population down here, and they support me because I've done more for them than anybody else on the political scene in the South. But if I go up there I'm not going to pass the bill or even have a strong influence on it, and if I go I won't stand a chance of getting re-elected in 'sixty-five. It would be suicide for me to go, and you know it." He listened quietly. Being from south Georgia, he certainly *did* know what I meant. I said, "I'll leave it this way. Please tell the President what I said and ask him to weigh it. Discuss it with him personally, Morris, and be sure he fully understands all of the angles. And then if he calls on me and still wants me to do it, if he recognizes that I can't be re-elected and that my testimony isn't going to pass the bill, then I'll go."



It didn't take long for President Kennedy to make up his mind. Soon after Morris Abram's visit a phone call came into City Hall from the White House and a voice said the President was calling. In that clipped, formal Cape Cod accent he was telling me he had made a decision and he wanted me to testify. "You're right," he said, "your testimony alone is not going to pass the bill. But I don't think you are correct in thinking your testimony will defeat you. I think there will be sufficient change in the country by 1965 to where it not only will not defeat you, it will help you get re-elected." I told him I didn't agree with that part but that I felt an obligation to testify if he wanted me to, and that I would go to Washington. So it was settled. I would go.

The testimony was scheduled for July 26 before the Senate Committee on Commerce, giving me little more than two weeks to talk to certain people and prepare my testimony and get myself mentally ready to go. I knew it was not going to be a pleasant trip. I was neither a lawyer nor a man experienced in verbal combat, and I knew I was going into a lion's den. Facing me on the other side of the conference table would be an array of senators who were quite adept at cutting a witness into a million pieces if they wanted to—and I had little doubt that some of those expostulating, bombastic, bigoted Southern conservatives would like nothing more than a chance to have at this mayor of Atlanta in a hearing that was certain to get broad national coverage on television and in the papers.

But as I sat back and took a cold look at the whole situation I gained more confidence in myself and began to feel that the passage of this bill, or something like it, would be the only way all of the barriers of discrimination—not only in the South, but all over the nation—would ever finally be broken down. I looked at what was happening in Atlanta at

that very moment. In May the Chamber of Commerce had unanimously approved and then issued a "policy declaration" asking all businesses to desegregate in order to "maintain the city's healthy climate." In response to that, eighteen leading hotels and motels and thirty top restaurants had voluntarily abolished segregation—for conventions only, in the case of the hotels and motels. But that was in downtown Atlanta, and the principal motivation had been one of business pragmatism. What about the others, the thousands of public places in the dozens of small cities and towns on the periphery of Atlanta? Atlanta still would choke to death on its own prejudices if there were only a few scattered hotels or restaurants where a black man could be treated on an equal basis. And what about Macon and Savannah and Columbus and Augusta? What about the small roadside diners and motels on the main North-South route to Florida, in southeast Georgia? I was convinced now that voluntary desegregation of public facilities, worked out on a local level, had gone as far as it was going to go in the South and much of the rest of the United States. The Supreme Court had been very explicit in voiding segregation in 1954, but Congress had sat on its haunches and failed to act. Now Congress was doing the same thing, throwing up smoke-screen constitutional questions about private enterprise that were clearly belly-wash to me. It was obvious that the President was going to have to push through a very plain and airtight law that would, once and for all, abolish the practice of segregation. And segregation, as I intended to say in my testimony, was "the stepchild of slavery."

I asked Bill Howland, a former *Time-Life* reporter who was now serving me as an advisor on a part-time basis at City Hall, to help me draft the testimony. We spent long hours together on the testimony, trying to make it as blunt and as explicit as possible. We would talk about Atlanta



and how we had made progress up to a point on a voluntary basis, about why Atlanta had been successful while other cities were failing to cope with the problem. Then we went to the heart of it. "Are we going to say that it is all right for the Negro citizen to go into the bank on Main Street to deposit his earnings or borrow money," Bill and I wrote, "then go to the department store to buy what he needs, then go to the supermarket to purchase food for his family . . . but when he comes to the restaurant or the hotel . . . be refused service? I submit that it is not right to allow an American's citizenship to be changed merely as a matter of convenience." The thrust of the testimony would be that the public-accommodations bill should be passed because desegregation would proceed no further without it.

Needless to say, I didn't discuss my intentions to testify with many of my constituents or even my peers in the business community. I knew where they stood. In spite of the recent "policy declaration" by the Chamber of Commerce, I was aware that I would find few, if any, supporters there. In fact, one of the very few in my group that I confided with was Robert Woodruff of Coca-Cola. I took an excerpt of the testimony to his office one day and told him what I was going to do. "You're in a dilemma, and I know it's going to be a very unpopular thing to do," he told me, "but you've made up your mind and you're probably right about it, and I think you should go." He suggested that I modify my testimony to allow for a time delay in smaller towns, which I did. Other than a handful of liberals, Woodruff was about the only white person in Atlanta who told me I should go to Washington and support the bill. Even though the testimony was about finished and I was preparing to leave, I was still agonizing over whether I should go. There were a lot of times when I thought it would be easier to evade the issue after all. If I

refused to go, hardly anyone beyond Morris Abram and President Kennedy would ever know the difference. I had no further political ambitions past serving another term as mayor (I *did* want to do that, so I could see to the completion of projects I had begun working on), but there was still the very certain idea in my mind that if I went to Washington and spoke out for the bill I wouldn't have a prayer for re-election.

I was still thinking about backing out at the last minute when my wife, Louise, put everything in a nutshell for me. "If you fail to do what you think is right now," she said, "you will have failed in what was your whole purpose in going into the mayor's office: to do what you thought was right without worry of political repercussions. You'll have a hard time living with yourself the rest of your life if you don't do it. I don't think you can be re-elected if you *do* go, but if you feel it's right, then go and accept the consequences. You'll feel better the rest of your life." I never looked back at my decision after that.

There was one other thing I wanted to do before leaving for Washington. The day before I was to leave I called together the twenty-four top Negro leaders in the city, the people from whom I had learned so much and with whom I shared mutual respect and support. I wanted them to know in advance what I was going to do, so that they wouldn't have to find out about it in the papers or on television, and I met with them on the second floor of the Negro Butler Street YMCA. There was Martin Luther King, Sr., and William Holmes Borders and Rufus Clement and Jesse Hill and A. T. Walden and Benjamin Mays—all of the key Negro leaders who had been at my side during years of crises.

I asked them to sit down, and I told them that I was going to Washington to testify on behalf of the public-accommodations bill and I wanted to read my testimony to



them and see what they thought. I felt very good about the testimony, and I very carefully read the 3,500-word statement in the hot upstairs room while a fan droned on and on and the two dozen men quietly and intently listened. When I had read the statement I opened up the meeting for discussion, and they were obviously elated. They knew better than anyone else that no one out of the South had yet testified for the bill. But then there was sort of a straw vote taken, and it turned out that no more than four or five of the twenty-four there wanted me to deliver the testimony. I know Borders and Mays and King, Sr., felt I should go, but the consensus was that they didn't want to sacrifice me for a testimony that wasn't necessarily going to pass the bill. The Atlanta newspapers and big television stations weren't for the bill, the political leaders weren't for the bill, the white man on the street wasn't for the bill, and now even the Negro leaders didn't want me to come out for it. About all I seemed to have going for me was Louise's advice about doing what I thought was right—damn the torpedoes—and I was clinging to that like a starving man with a loaf of bread as I got on the plane alone on the eve of the hearing and flew off to the capital.

The next morning while I was eating breakfast in my hotel room I had a call from Margaret Shannon, Washington correspondent for the *Atlanta Journal* and a lady I have always admired and respected. She had heard I was in the capital to testify, wanted to come up and talk to me about it, and when I explained what I would say and why I would say it she seemed somewhat shocked and perhaps disturbed, a reaction I had gotten used to by now. Shortly after that I went on over to the Capitol, stopping by briefly to visit with Charlie Weltner, and then found the Senate chamber where the hearing was to take place. There was no question that this was going to get a lot of

attention. It was one of the larger committee rooms, and although the committee studying the public accommodations bill was small, the room was already filling up with visitors and newsmen and television equipment. The chairman of the committee was Senator John Pastore of Rhode Island, and I had a chance to chat with him for a few minutes before the hearing began. "Senator, I'm always impressed here and a little bit frightened," I told him, and I guess I sounded like a little boy talking to his father. "I'm happy you'd be impressed, Mayor, but I hope you won't be frightened," he said. Sitting in front of a battery of microphones and television cameras, I proceeded to read the testimony I had prepared back in Atlanta. Once I had read the testimony, Senator Pastore said some very kind things about me, noting that is more difficult for a Southerner to do what I was doing than for someone from "where we are reported as being for civil rights"—and ended by saying, "When a man like you comes before this committee today and recites his story in such forthright manner, with such courage, I am proud to be here to listen to you, Sir."

"Thank you, Sir," I said. "I appreciate your kind remarks."

"Senator Thurmond."

They weren't going to fool around. "Mayor Allen, I observe that you are endorsing this so-called public-accommodations bill, is that correct?" Strom Thurmond, the senator from South Carolina, had blood in his eyes.

Strom Thurmond represented the dark side of the South to me. He was the epitome of all the professional segregationists I had ever known—prejudice personified—and a man whom I could not respect in any sense. These men are dangerous only when they are sly and cunning enough to make their prejudices work (George Wallace is like that, but Lester Maddox is not), and Thurmond was smart enough to know what he was doing. As far as I'm con-



cerned, he never really did anything to help the South. He only kept it buried in prejudice and bigotry and hate, kept it so divided, kept it so preoccupied with nigger-nigger-nigger, that the South almost lost its way.

And now here I was, a mere mayor with absolutely no training in law or debate or high-flung oratory, about to be set upon by one of the masters of demagoguery. Thurmond started slowly working me into a trap, by talking in a mock-serious patronizing tone and getting me to repeat much of what I had said in my testimony.

"On separate employment listings, I believe this was voluntary action," he said.

"That is correct."

"Employing firemen, I believe, was voluntary . . ."

"That is correct."

"The handling of real estate, I believe, was voluntary action."

"That is correct."

And then he began to zero in, trying to force me to sound as though I wanted to close down every small restaurant in every small city in Georgia. He wanted to take the fact that much of Atlanta's progress had been voluntary and twist it to prove that all local governments could solve their own problems without the help of the federal government. He wanted to fake me into saying things, such as, if the bill passed, it would be necessary for non-complying restaurants to keep records and addresses of all their customers so that the owners could prove they were not serving interstate travelers. He was trying to blame me personally, in case the bill passed, for closing down businesses in the South. I think the testimony shows I didn't fold, and that this was getting under his skin. "I don't know which comes first, the one business or the two hundred thousand [black] citizens [of Atlanta]," I told him. "I would like to see all of them preserved."

Senator Pastore, as chairman of the committee, soon had enough of Thurmond's questions. He cut in after Thurmond and I had been batting it back and forth for about fifteen minutes, and drew cheers from the packed gallery by reprimanding Thurmond. "I hope that we won't begin to fling at these witnesses the type of 'when did you stop beating your wife?' sort of question, because that, I think, is most unfair," Pastore said. It took a couple of minutes for the lecture to sink in. Thurmond was wanting the floor again, and now the gallery was on him and he was beginning to boil.

"I resent it," Thurmond said.

"Let the Senator from South Carolina resent it," said Pastore, to cheers.

"Mr. Chairman, I am surprised that you permit applauding in this room."

"I didn't do anything about that."

"You did nothing to stop it."

"I can't stop it after it happens."

"Mr. Chairman, if you wish to give vent to the feelings here, and if you wish to have such a common quorum, that is a matter of view while you preside."

"Mr. Thurmond, I don't know who is in this room. It is the general public."

"I can tell you who is in here," shouted Thurmond, who was livid by now. "It is a bunch of left-wingers who favor this bill, and who are taking your position, and you know it."

So it was out now. The exchange between Pastore and Thurmond took another fifteen minutes, and during that time I began to sense the drama of the whole thing. I had gone and given my testimony, and answered a few questions, but I had been the catalyst for something much more than that. This hearing was a showdown between the two ideologies at either end of the civil-rights issue: John



Pastore, the liberal New Englander; and Strom Thurmond, the conservative Southerner. A few more questions were asked of me, one of the other committee members said he felt like the Senate had been "visited by a man of quiet courage this morning," and I was then excused from the hearing. I was headed back to the South, about to find out just how much courage I really did have.

Having been in the middle of it, in the eye of the storm, I didn't realize in the beginning what a stir had been created by the hearing and by my testimony. The next day *The New York Times* published a favorable editorial—"On rare occasions the oratorical fog on Capitol Hill is pierced by a voice resonant with courage and dignity"—as did most other Northern and Eastern newspapers. But over most of the South, where my testimony and the debate between Pastore and Thurmond dominated the papers and television news reports, I found little support. In Georgia, the *Albany Herald* said, "We shake our heads at the Mayor's slick, political moralizing." The *Augusta Chronicle* said I had spoken out for "a bill that would shackle private enterprise with one of the most restrictive burdens ever conceived in our free society." The headline over an editorial in the paper at Rome, which is less than fifty miles from my father's birthplace, read, "Glad Mr. Allen is Atlanta's Mayor." The *Atlanta Constitution* still refused to support the public-accommodations bill but did acknowledge that I had "stood courageously for what he sincerely believed and we admire him for that." Anyway, after the testimony I flew to North Carolina and was met by Louise and some friends for a week end of golf, and that is where I first began to see how deeply the animosity toward the bill and my testimony and myself really ran. I could see my friends that weekend off in the corner by themselves, obviously deeply concerned about what I had done, and all Louise and I could do was try to ignore it and ride out the weekend.

Back in Atlanta the next week, the feedback was reaching its peak. Louise told me she was getting the repercussions, that all over town they were saying I had really blown my stack and that I was through and all of that. There were "indignation meetings" going on all over the place, every night, always with a lawyer present who was playing the same tired games with interpretations of the Constitution. Even some of my relatives got into the act, letting it be known that this was the last insult—that there was no way they could deny what Ivan had done *this* time. Many of the letters and telegrams were vicious: "I wish to nominate you as Mr. Mau Mau of 1963. I understand that you are a half-brother of Martin Luther King"; but because reaction from the Negro and liberal communities was so strongly in support of me, the first week's mail brought 167 favorable letters and 90 against. It was not an easy time for me or for my long-suffering wife. We had to console ourselves with the fact that we had known what I was getting into and there was no sense, and no choice, in looking back at what might have been. I was still certain I had done the right thing, come hell or high water.

Then opinions began to shift. It probably began when the *Constitution* reprinted *The New York Times* editorial. After the passions of the moment had been allowed to simmer, a lot of people (particularly my peers in the business community) began to think, "Well, hell, maybe Ivan *did* do the right thing." Governor Carl Sanders' statement against the bill was printed, and I think those who took the time to go back and compare my stand with his could see whose was more credible and more qualified. Mayor Emeritus Hartsfield went on record as favoring my actions. Dick Rich of Rich's department stores spoke out for me. The hate mail fell off to its usual level of about thirty-five per cent, which may be the percentage of haters we will always have to live with in the South. It wasn't too



long after my testimony and the outburst of reaction to it that suddenly I could sense that the image of Atlanta and its mayor was brighter than it had ever been before, and that instead of my testimony being an albatross around my neck it had become, as President Kennedy had so accurately predicted, a medal. My secretaries quickly filled up three or four scrapbooks with the greatest amount of personal commendation *and* condemnation that I would receive during my entire stay in the mayor's office, and those scrapbooks are treasured by me more than any other memorabilia I have from those eight years.

The larger significance of my public-accommodation testimony, however, can't be clipped out and pasted in a scrapbook. It was much more personal than that. I have to be honest with myself and admit that up until the time I had to make the decision whether to go to Washington or not go, my liberalism on the race issue had been based to a large degree on pragmatism: it was simply good business for Atlanta to be an open city, a fair city, a "City Too Busy to Hate," a city trying to raise the level of its poorest citizens and get them off the relief rolls. Although it doesn't seem half so important to me *why* a person is liberal as *whether* he is, and what he does with his liberalism, I am certain that at this point I had finally crossed over and made my commitment on a very personal basis. And I think I took some of my friends with me.



LEVITON-ATLANTA

Ivan Allen, Jr.