

THE RURAL SOUTH: Preparing for the Challenges of the

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The rural South: From shadows to sunshine

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Watkins, Ludlam, Winter, and Stennis

Introduction

Thirteen years ago, as the nation was emerging from the recession of the early 1980s, the late George Autry and his colleagues at MDC in Chapel Hill published a distressing study of the rural South called “Shadows in the Sunbelt.” That report pointed out in a dramatic way the emergence of two Souths—the South of burgeoning cities with their upscale job development and the other South out beyond the bright lights of the metropolitan areas where the old agricultural and low-wage manufacturing system was running into trouble.

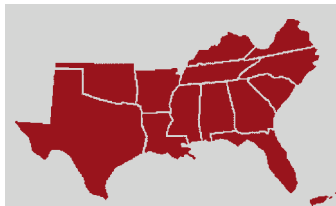
The MDC report outlined the factors that were at work in stifling rural areas—the automation of factories and the movement of labor intensive industries offshore, a deteriorating infrastructure, federal deregulation, and many educational systems that were not up to speed. Autry called on the region to face up to these harsh realities and to develop new strategies to take advantage of the region’s strengths—its vast wealth of natural resources, its Sunbelt location, and most vital of all, its huge reservoir of underdeveloped human capital.

That was 13 years ago, and many things have changed for the better, thanks to the vision of people like the late George Autry. The shadows that he described are gradually fading under the efforts of so many, but most would agree that we still have a long way to go. So, how do we find our way to the sunshine?

Building Stronger Relationships

One of the key mechanisms for reaching the sunshine is coming together across lines of race and section and class, across institutional lines, across lines

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“One of the key mechanisms for reaching the sunshine is coming together across lines of race and section and class, across institutional lines, across lines that have separated the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, to find ways to strengthen our local communities, to increase the capacity and productivity of more of our people, and to recognize that the quality of education especially in so many poor rural communities has to be improved.”

that have separated the public, private, and nonprofit sectors, to find ways to strengthen our local communities, to increase the capacity and productivity of more of our people, and to recognize that the quality of education, especially in so many poor rural communities, has to be improved. We now understand that we are all in it together and that we can no longer let people get left out of the economic mainstream simply because of where they live. As begin a new century, it is up to us to move aggressively and wisely to chart a course for the emergence of the rural South as America's new promised land.

There are, of course, the doomsayers who say that strategies to revive the rural areas of the South will confront the same conditions that have devastated the rural Great Plains area of Kansas, Nebraska, and the Dakotas. They will tell you that there will be no place in the economy for more than a handful of rural people. They will say the best thing we can do is to educate and train them for jobs in Jackson, Memphis, Atlanta, or Birmingham.

One economist insists that the market forces are already doing that in increasing numbers—sucking people away from their homes. He holds that these market forces—unlike pellagra and the boll weevil—are forces we can't defeat. The most reasonable and humane thing, he says, is simply to point them to the cities.

But, I would insist that there is something basically wrong with that approach. In the first place, the rural South—unlike the treeless plains and bare landscape of Western Kansas—is a region of fantastic diversity and natural riches. But more than that, it has this significant reserve of still undeveloped human capital.

Investing in the Region's Human Resources

For years, our development strategies lay, for the most part, in the exploitation of our incredible natural resources—timber, minerals, water, and the rich earth. Those strategies served a small percentage of the population very well—those who, by good fortune, owned the land, the timber, and the minerals. The result, however, was to create a society where the gap between the very rich and the very poor was greater than anywhere else in the country. It produced a social and economic structure not unlike that of the colonial areas of Africa and Latin America.

Because we did not invest in human capital, we relegated to second-rate lives generations of young Southerners—black and white—and thereby limited our region in the attainment of its full capacity for economic and political leadership.

The fact is, we did not prepare our people for the massive transition from a low-skill agricultural economy to a low-skill industrial economy to today's economy that is dependent on educated and trained workers, whether we label it post-industrial, information-based, or technology-driven.

We have demonstrated in many individual instances that we know how to overcome our age-old legacy of underinvestment in people. Now we have to get really serious about it.

This is what we have to do. We must develop a comprehensive and systematic plan that will enable the rural areas of the South to become

truly competitive. That obviously will involve a strategy that will recognize and take advantage of our strengths. We know we can do it, because we have done it.

Just ask George Walker of Clarksdale, Miss., the chair of the Mississippi State Board of Community Colleges. In the poorest area of the state, he developed a manufacturing enterprise that competes successfully with the world's best and brightest. Using people that went to the public schools in the Delta and trained for their jobs at Delta Wire with the help of Mississippi State University and Coahoma Community College, he showed how creative workforce training can produce \$12-an-hour workers who are as good as they come.

That is just one example. There are many others but not enough.

We diminish ourselves as a region when we fail to recognize the inherent work ethic and capacity of our workforce. The hardest working people I have ever known have been those rural farm workers whose incredible energy and endurance sustained the economy of this state in the fields and forests before the advent of machines and technology. Their descendants possess that same will to work if we will give them the training they need to compete. They have demonstrated that capacity when we have afforded them the chance to show what they can do.

Recognizing the Importance of Technology

It should attract our notice that because of the advent of computers and the other increasingly sophisticated developments in the field of communications, rural areas are in a special position to benefit. Now, with the incredible capacity of the Internet to transmit and receive information in even the most remote areas, it is no longer necessary for businesses or individuals to be located in metropolitan areas. More and more entrepreneurs are finding that the small cities and towns of the rural South offer the best of all worlds—where businesses can be carried on successfully without the traffic jams, air

The Issues

How does the South move from the shadows of the harsh realities of the last 15 years and into the sunshine of developing new strategies to take advantage of the region's strength's—its vast wealth of natural resources, its Sunbelt location, and most vital of all, its huge reservoir of underdeveloped human capital.

The Road to Sunshine

- ♦ Building stronger relationships across race, class, and institutional lines.
- ♦ Investing in the region's human capital resources to produce an educated and well-trained workforce.
- ♦ Recognizing the importance of technology as a key to attracting new business to rural communities.

Barriers to Overcome

Undereducation—The only road out of poverty and economic dependency runs by the schoolhouse.

Deregulation—Changing political climates and economic trends give advantages to urban centers over rural areas.

Difference based on race—Rural communities that are faring well and growing and competing for new jobs are the ones that are working successfully at creating good race relations.

Building capacity for local development—The rural South must find new and creative ways to get businesses to look at opportunities in places where they have been reluctant to go.

Conclusion

Residents of the rural South have a sense of optimism that was lacking in the past. They are ready to work together in thoughtful, creative, and constructive ways to give people more education skills, economic opportunities, and the will and vision to prosper wherever they choose to live.

pollution, and crime of the big cities. Technology can hold the key to the success of many rural communities if the other essentials for good living are available. This means attention to the amenities such as parks, medical facilities, and, of course, good schools.

Achieving Economic Success: Overcoming the Barriers

The first and most obvious barrier separates the poorly educated from the well-trained. We must understand that the only road out of poverty and economic dependency runs by the schoolhouse. In too many of our poorest areas, we still have not created the adequate public schools that are essential to turning out competitive workers. Communities that have poor schools not only shortchange their own kids but also send a bad signal to outside businesses who might want to locate there. New businesses, new capital, and new people will not go to communities which are not committed to quality public education. The region's universities and community colleges can play a major role in creating an understanding of this fact, and they must work together in helping our region develop the full potential of all of our people.

There are other visible and identifiable barriers that must be considered and must be overcome. Deregulation in all of its many faceted forms has created new problems for the rural areas. In the vitally important transportation field, deregulation has meant that buses and trains no longer stop at small towns. Air fares and trucking rates are disproportionately high for the rural South. The deregulation of banking means that decisions involving capital have moved from many locally-owned banks to large cities far removed from the areas of need. We do not yet know what impact the deregulation of utility services will have on rural areas.

All of this is another way of pointing out that recent political decisions and economic trends have tended to give further advantage to the urban centers at the expense of the rural South. This metropolitan growth phenomenon is itself a barrier to rural development. But excessive urban growth can also lead to a decline in the quality of life for people who live there. Many people would like to remain in rural America for that reason. Yogi Berra may have been onto something when he said, "Nobody goes to the cities anymore. There are too many people there."

As a matter of fact, this migration is already happening. As Mark Nord and John Cromartie point out in their study of rural-urban migration (published in *Southern Perspectives* at the Southern Rural Development Center), the rural South, contrary to popular opinion, is now becoming home to more and more people. The out-migration patterns of the past are being drastically reversed in the 1990s.

Nord and Cromartie estimate that in the two-year period ending in March 1997, average net domestic migration to the rural South was more than 300,000 people per year, and that does not include the thousands of international immigrants to this area. Significantly, this movement was highest for persons in the early career stages (ages 26-30) and for children. And, in the 1990s, for the first time, more college-educated people migrated into than out of the rural South. These numbers

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foretell new opportunities for a region that some of the pessimists were ready to write off a few years ago.

But, with the changing population there comes to mind another barrier that is not unique to the rural South but one which continues to afflict us, and that is the barrier of differences based on race. All of us—black and white—will agree that we have made incredible strides in the last 30 years to eliminate most of the old blatant and odious features of discrimination. This is an immeasurably better South than it was before. In fact, I believe the South is in many ways ahead of some other areas of the country in race relations now.

But, despite how far we have come, we still have a lot left to do to create the kind of good biracial and now increasingly multiracial society that is essential for our future well-being. This is going to take considerable work.

The communities that are faring well and growing and competing for new jobs are the ones that are working successfully at creating good race relations. The removal of the barrier of racial conflict is one that must rank high on our scale of priorities in charting a course for the South.

Capitalism has never been more popular than it is today—both within America and around the world. However, capitalism's successes have not included the elimination of poverty. And poverty-ridden areas, so many of which are included in the rural South, are the most difficult to develop in the traditional sense.

As a result, too many folks have given up on waiting for a rising tide to lift all boats, given up hoping that trickle-down economics will trickle down to all of the people. But, we have to remember that programs aimed at moving the poor into the economic mainstream require that there be a mainstream for them to enter. The expansion of that mainstream is what we are really talking about.

There has to be a concentration on the process of community development—the creation of the bootstraps by which rural people can pull themselves up. That means building the capacity for local development. It means finding new and creative ways to get businesses to look at opportunities in places where they have been reluctant to go. The Enterprise Corporation of the Delta is an example of the kind of innovative structure that is giving the Delta areas of Mississippi, Arkansas, and Louisiana a real shot in the arm. It is succeeding because it is involved in building not only physical facilities, but the human relationships necessary to have a true sense of community where people work together instead of pulling in opposite directions.

Conclusion

These daunting tasks present a challenge that involves us all. But, they particularly center on the kind of leadership that people are willing to provide. We find ourselves at a fortuitous time in our history when so many elements are beginning to work in our favor. I detect a sense of optimism in the rural South that was lacking a few years ago. It is up to us to see to it that we do not miss this special opportunity.

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Working together in thoughtful, creative and constructive ways, we can accomplish for this region what federal programs and market forces have so far been unable to do, and that is to give more people the educational skills, the economic opportunity, and the will and vision to prosper wherever they choose to live. I hope for more of them, it will be in the warm and familiar surroundings of their own communities of the rural South. That, it seems to me, is a purpose worthy of our continuing effort.

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