

2020 AND THE FUTURE OF ALABAMA HISTORY

ABOUT

2020 and the Future of Alabama History is a conversation with Dr. Wayne Flynt held on Wednesday, July 29, 2020. Dr. Wayne Flynt, Professor Emeritus in the Department of History at Auburn University, is the author of thirteen books, and one of the most recognized and honored scholars of Southern history, politics, and religion.

Sponsored by the [Alabama Historical Association](#) and the [Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University](#).

Visit aub.ie/2020wayneflynt to view a video recording of the program.

TRANSCRIPT

Mark Wilson:

Good afternoon, and welcome. I am Mark Wilson, Director of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities in the College of Liberal Arts at Auburn University and Secretary of the Alabama Historical Association. This is the second program we've held on the topic of 2020 and the Future of Alabama History. In our first program, we enjoyed a conversation with Steve Murray of the Alabama Department of Archives and History, Dr. Tara White of Wallace State Community College and Dr. Derryn Moten of Alabama State University. You can still find that video on the Facebook page of the Alabama Historical Association. We begin our program today with a welcome from AHA President Frazine Taylor.

Frazine Taylor:

Welcome to our second in this series of 2020 and the Future of Alabama History. The Alabama Historical Association, created in 1947, is the oldest statewide historical society in Alabama. It is volunteer led, membership supported and has provided opportunities for meaningful engagement with the story of our state through its publications, meetings, historical markers and other programs. Let us now listen to a conversation with Dr. Wayne Flynt.

Mark Wilson:

Thank you, President Taylor. Our guest today is Dr. Wayne Flynt. Although he was born in Pontotoc, Mississippi, make no mistake, he is an Alabamian who continues to make contributions through his books, presentations and op-eds and through the thousands of students he taught over the years at Samford University, Auburn University and courses abroad. From his 13 books, you can learn about southern religion and history, the people, place and politics of Alabama. His friend, Harper Lee, who called him "one of Alabama's literary treasures," and if you care about the state, you might find something about yourself in his writings whether you like it or not, because there are few people who deliver such formidable truths about the past and the present, and now today, a conversation on the future. Welcome, Dr. Flynt.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Thank you, Mark and Megan, for running the Humanities Center so wonderfully... one of the great treasures. Like Moses, I was there at the beginning, and it's just wonderful the way that's grown and exploded. Thank you, Frazine, a wonderful president of the Alabama Historical Association and a treasure as an archivist.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Today, what I would like to do is, basically, talk about the past of the future. You have to get your head around that concept, the future has a past. But none of you would argue with the idea that the present has a past, and that the present is shaped by a past. But when you try to get your head around the idea that the future has a past, then that's a little bit more complicated. We, of course, know, to some degree at least, what the past of the present is, and we operate on a whole set of assumptions that are drawn from the experiences we've had and from which we have learned. And it would be so wonderful if we could sit here and make all of our decisions for the future based upon the past we anticipate, know will happen, but, of course, we have no idea what will happen. The only thing I'm really sure about is the third axiom about the past, and that is that whatever the past of the future is, it's not going to be the same as the past of the present is, or to put it another way, we know that after every great event, calamity, turning point in American history, nothing's pretty much been the same.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Think what America was like after the Civil War in the South, in the North, completely different from the way the country was before. Think of World War I, a complete breach in history, especially followed by the great influenza epidemic of 1918, 1919. Think of the Great Depression and one side, the 1920s, the Roaring Twenties, on the other side, the calamity of the economy followed by World War II, which, in its own way, was a different kind of calamity. Or think of the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s and what life was like for African Americans and white Southerners for that or even all Americans before the civil rights movement, after the civil rights movement. Or think of the social and cultural revolution of the 1960s and what life was like before that cultural revolution and what life was like after that cultural revolution.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So what I'm going to do is simply say that I don't know the future. I'm not a futurist. I'm a historian, and, therefore, I can tell you something about past of the present, but I can't tell you anything anymore than one of the dogs running around the Humanity Center, or the cats could tell you about the past of the future. They might know something about the past of the present, but not the future.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So let me start off with a fairly simple proposition that I can tell you a lot about past as prologue. Prologue being where we are now, and past being how we got to where we are now. And I decided that the best way to do this would be to take one concrete point in time in Alabama history and talk a little bit about that point in time and how it shaped our present. And then from that, I want to morph to a kind of futurist position that is, I don't know what the future holds, but I'm going to have an argument with you about the way in which we get into that future.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So, let's go to one moment in time. Let's say January 1861, Montgomery, Alabama. The historic Alabama capital. Delegates from the various seceded states, seven states. They send delegates to the secession convention, and there they hammer out, under the careful tutelage of the pastor of First Baptist Church in Montgomery, who was the chaplain of the legislature the time, assuring them that their proceedings were proceeding under the cloud of God's and a great cloud of witnesses helping to shape what the Confederate delegates decided. I can pretty well tell you for sure that if, in fact, any of us, as historians, could winnow out from the future what the past was and, therefore could actually predict, with some degree of accuracy, what

the past of the future is, the future would have looked quite different than what happened after January of 1861.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

If an historian had been there and said, "Looking into the future, let me tell you what your past is going to be like four years from now. One in every four males between the ages of 15 and 40, living in the South, is going to be dead." That's the new estimate of good a statistical historian about the casualty and disease rate of mortality during the Civil War. And if you want to personalize this story even more, think about the South as a whole, one out of every four males of that age disappearing in a period of four years.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

But if you want to hone in on one state, Alabama, let me tell you about the... if I'm not mistaken, the third published journal article I had in my career as a historian. The article was published in 1968, but I had actually done it as a seminar paper in a course in Southern history. I looked at Alabama, our education, during the Civil War. And during the Civil War, when it began in January 1861, Alabama had 17 colleges and universities. Two of those colleges and universities were female altogether. The other 15 were all male. The two female colleges continued to operate pretty much seamlessly during the Civil War. The 15 male colleges had quite a different experience. The only school that remained in operation throughout the Civil War was Spring Hill College, a Jesuit school that managed to survive, because of local Catholic students who continued to come there. Very young students who became, essentially, prep students and also Jesuit priests who were, at the most, going into the Catholic chaplaincy in Civil War units and, more likely, staying home, taking care of parish Catholic churches. Of the 14 schools that closed, I'm going to just take the four largest ones, beginning with my alma mater in Marion, Perry County, Alabama, in the Black Belt one of... well, in fact, not one of, but the richest place on Earth, the actual measurement of white wealth in the years of the Antebellum South.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Our college, when the war began, had a total of 150 students. The president of the college decided to organize a company for the Confederate Army. The president was the colonel of the company. A number of trustees also joined the company, and virtually the entire Howard College student body joined. So by 1863, what had been a 150 students had been reduced to 27 teenagers, pre-teenagers, who were essentially in prep school, and finally, the school closed after a Union raid through Perry County.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Twenty miles up the road in Greensboro, Alabama, Southern College... Southern University was the Methodist state college at the time. They had a student body of 77 students when the Civil War began, and one-third of those students join the Army immediately, and by 1863, Southern University was down to 14 boys, also basically mid-teenagers, prep school students, and Southern University finally closed as well.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Needless to say, after the war both of these schools move Birmingham, and so the Black Belt lost two of its colleges, spatially. The University of Alabama, which was on the northern edge of the Black Belt in Western Alabama, had a total of 825 students, faculty, trustees, administrators and alumni who joined the Confederate Army, and of that 825, 172, roughly one-fifth, were killed or died of disease during the War. So it's not quite to the level of one-fourth, which was true of the entire Confederate Army, but very close to it. Then Auburn University, also opposite end of the Black Belt, but in the Northeastern part of the Black Belt, had a total of 228 students in 1861, in January. James Dowdell, a fairly famous name in the Lee County area, one of the largest planters in Lee County, and he organized a company off to war. A number of faculty members, administrators, trustees and students at Auburn joined the 37th Alabama Regiment under Colonel Dowdell,

who later became president of Auburn after the war. And by July of 1864, the one building on campus had reverted from a classroom to a military Confederate hospital.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So all four schools, in very different ways, all on the edge of the Black Belt or square in the middle of the Black Belt, send their sons and grandsons off to war. The reason this is really important is because if you think about who attended college, who had the wherewithal to go to college in 1860, it's pretty obvious that these are not sharecroppers like my ancestors. We would not have been at Auburn or Howard or Southern or the University of Alabama at the time, but rather, they're basically planters' sons, planters' daughters at the two women's college, planters' sons at the 14 non-Catholic school in the state. Therefore, there is a kind of unitary planter reaction to defending a planter culture, which is rooted in slavery.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

At this point, I'm going to do a slight segue, and so you can think, "Okay. Detour. Detour." And I'm going to show you my dogear, coming apart history of Albert Burton Moore's History of Alabama and Its People. A.B. Moore is important to Auburn people, because A.B. Moore was one of Petrie's boys. He was born in Fayette County up near Winston County in the Northwestern part of the state. His family had slave, but it was not a plantation of any consequence, because the soil was no good, and that was far north of the Black Belt. But he came here very much with a planter mentality of an understanding of the culture and the richness of that culture, which was now Gone With the Wind, to use a cliché.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

He studied with Dr. George Petrie. For those of you who are still students at Auburn, I would suggest that he is an example of hard work and prudence and getting on with your academic program. He got his undergraduate degree under Petrie and history in 1911. He received his master's degree with Petrie in 1912 and his PhD from the University of Chicago three years later in 1915. So he goes from undergraduate to PhD in four years at one of the finest universities in the world, if not the finest in America at the time and, certainly, the finest in the study of Southern history. He was a teaching fellow while he was a student at the University of Chicago. After teaching his version of history, no doubt, whatever that happened to be, he went on to Iowa State University, a Yankee Union state, and he taught there at Iowa State. I have a hunch he taught pretty much the same way he did at Chicago and the same way he did, in fact, as one of Petrie's boys teaching freshman classes at Auburn.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Then he went to the University of Alabama, and for many, many, many decades was a professor of history at the University of Alabama, dean of the graduate school at the University of Alabama and the author of the state standard history. And when I say author of the state standard history, I mean forever and forever and forever, because this was revised time after time after time. And, as a matter of fact, I had a course in Alabama history my last year in undergraduate school at Howard College in 1960, under a brilliant historian, who was one of A.B. Moore's students for his PhD at the University of Alabama, Hugh Bailey, later president of Valdosta State University, and Hugh used the textbook of his major professor, A. B. Moore. So this was my textbook and A.B. Moore actually lived long enough to be head of Alabama's Confederate Centennial or Civil War Centennial. He considered the Confederate Centennial. The Civil War Centennial Commission on the 100th Anniversary of the beginning of the Civil War. So he was head of that. He was also president of the Southern Historical Association in 1942, which meant that, despite what I'm going to tell you in just a few minutes, his colleagues elected him to the most prestigious position in the teaching and study of Southern history.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

At this point. I want to take another little detour. I've got the detour to A.B. Moore in the University of Alabama. Now, I want to do a detour to this very place, because it was in this very place, one building up the hill, where we had the meeting I'm about to read you about. This is the new preface to the new Bicentennial edition of *Alabama: The History of a Deep South State*. You may not know about this book. You might know about this book, but you certainly don't know about the events that happened about a hundred yards from here on a memorable day.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Historians can be wrong. They can be wrong, because they don't thoroughly sample their sources. Wrong, because they bring to their work too many unchallenged assumptions from their families, regions, nations, religions, races and cultures. Wrong, because they too glibly accept the dominant mood and intellectual framework of their times. In some sense, every generation has to rewrite the history of the place, people and events of the past in terms of their own evolving realities or, we don't know the future. We know the past of the present but not the future. So every generation has a new present beyond what we now call "the future" has to rewrite history.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

When four historians with Auburn connections, Malcolm McMillan, Warren W Rogers, Robert David Ward and Leah Atkins, gather around a table in Auburn in 1980 to plan this book, they were aware of these historical pitfalls. They had all read and most had used, as a textbook, some version of Albert Burton Moore's 1927 *History of Alabama and Her People*. For half a century, that tome had educated Alabamians, including me, about their history. As a venerable book by gifted writer with impeccable academic credentials, it had updated and modernized understanding of times past, generation by generation, as it was revised. Unfortunately, Moore also had lingered too long in the presence of his planter ancestors.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Although he pinned perceptive insights, his descriptions of slavery belonged to the 19th century, not the 21st. According to Moore, white Planters treated slave women with respect as required by their chivalry code. According to Moore, they encourage slaves to worship by themselves in ways that met their spiritual needs. No reference to the fact that the law also required that a white person be present, so that they might not have the wrong theology about Exodus. Furthermore, slaves were a fun-making and fun-loving people. Furthermore, planter social mores brooked no brutal treatment of slaves. And finally, Moore described the 1901 Disfranchisement Constitution as "arising from the need for reforming the suffrage and electoral systems by eliminating black voters."

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

No one, sitting around the table a hundred yards from here in Auburn, agreed with Moore's racial ideology. They agreed the time had come to enter the world turned upside down by the civil rights movement of the 1950s and '60s, arguably the most profound social and political revolution in American history. Two books. Two books, both written by Auburn people. Two different generations. The future as prologue. Now, having moved to the notion that I don't know the future, I'm going to speculate on the future, nonetheless, as if I knew it, because though I do not know the future, I have opinions about the future. So let me start off by saying that we can understand history as symbol, or we can understand history as substance. And if you understand history is symbol, then you will probably think that the big debate that going on right now is about Confederate iconography, Confederate flags, the names of buildings on college campuses, name or various kinds of Southern heroes or Southern villains, for that matter.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Say that, for instance, the multiple community colleges in the state that are named in honor of George W. Wallace. But if you start purging those schools, one of the things you immediately understand is, "What exactly do you mean by George W. Wallace?" That is, "Who do you think of him as being? Do you think of George Wallace before he was shot in Maryland, and after he repented and after he visited numerous black churches and expressed his profound regret for the things he has said and done?" So if you named Wallace College for the new Wallace, the repentant Wallace, then that's quite a different thing than if you name the college for the old Wallace. Or if you name a building on your campus, for instance, at Auburn, Wallace Hall, should you take that name off? Or there are six buildings at the University of Alabama campus, and each one of those six has its own problems with history.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

The consequence of that is that, if you decide that the symbols are the most important... That not the substantive history, but the symbolic history, is important, then you, of course, rename all the buildings. And while you're at it, perhaps you want to change the name of Jefferson County or change the name of Lee County, because both of these are named for people who had slaves. Or perhaps you want to change the name of Jackson County, because Jackson was guilty of what amounted to genocide in terms of the Creek Indians. So these are all symbolic ways of dealing with the past.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Now let me suggest an alternative to the symbolic ways of dealing with the past. I was doing some work recently for the Federal Reserve Bank, and what I discovered was that there are a number of schools that have very large endowments in Alabama. For instance, my alma mater has an endowment of about \$370 million dollars, Samford University, from the Black Belt. Southern University, now Birmingham Southern, has an endowment of about \$70 million. Auburn University has an endowment of about \$790 million. University of Alabama has the largest endowment, \$1.5 billion endowment. If you took 0.1%, not 1%, not 10%, but just 0.1% of those four colleges' endowments, and you directed those funds to revolutionary change in the Alabama Black Belt, you would have a total of approximately \$26 million with which to work. Keep in mind that those four colleges, for most of their history, for one and a quarter centuries of their history, did not admit a single African American student.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So what does compensatory justice require of a society in terms of looking back at the past and thinking about your future? Well, your future... Your endowment is really critical to your future, but, on the other hand, what responsibility does the past put around your neck in terms of that endowment, which began in the antebellum period, mainly from funds offered to schools by planters and planter offspring. I would suggest to you that one possibility of compensatory justice would be to, say, take 0.1% of the total endowments of those four schools that prospered so much from the culture of antebellum Alabama, and designate the University of Alabama to take the western Black Belt, so everything from Montgomery to the Tombigbee River, is the University of Alabama's responsibility. Everything from Montgomery to Eufaula and the Chattahoochee River is Auburn's responsibility.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Not to say that either one of these schools has neglected their responsibility to the Black Belt in the years since the racial change of the Civil Rights Movement. It's not exactly like either school volunteered to do this, but both schools were pretty much forced to do this by the changing demography and the changing racial attitudes in the state. So now you have a wonderful program of rural health delivery by the University of Alabama in the Black Belt. You also have all sorts of other programs by the University of Alabama in the Black Belt. But these have been there for a while. They're not new. They're not responding to Black Lives Matter and a new kind of racial consciousness in America.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So let me suggest that then Auburn would take the eastern part of the Black Belt. And it's not like Auburn hasn't been in the eastern part of the Black Belt. Think of the agriculture programs, historically going all the way back when almost all the blacks were either slaves or sharecroppers, but Auburn was doing something in agriculture in the eastern Black Belt. Or think about the forest program from Auburn, which is unique and has worked for years and years and decades in the Black Belt. Or think of the Rural Studio in western Alabama by the wonderful Auburn architecture school.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

I'm not talking about any of these programs, because they've been funded and they're part of the Auburn and Alabama modern identity. But I'm saying compensatory if we go back in time and we try to make up or injustice, take 0.1% and think what could happen if you did this. But, for instance, the College of Business at Auburn goes down to the Black Belt and works with, say, the Federal Reserve Bank in Atlanta in order to develop programs that would fund, from the Federal Reserve Bank loans and from this corpus of money that were going to give to Auburn and Alabama to do this, and that would have a revolutionary effect on the ability to start small businesses... barber shops by African Americans, beauty shops, meat shops, grocery stores all through the eastern Black Belt.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Or think about moving the Rural Studio to east Alabama, closer to the main campus and making that the center for a revolutionary concept of low-income housing that would be the same kind of wonderful housing that they have developed in the western Black Belt. Or the same thing with the University of Alabama, it has all sorts of programs. I just think about every law student at the University of Alabama going to the Black Belt and helping to revise codes helping to provide public defender services. Colleges of education that outsource every single student teacher to a predominantly black school. Let's face it folks, an awful lot of people who graduate from the education programs at Auburn and Alabama will be teaching in mostly black public schools, because whites are increasingly leaving those schools to go to private academies.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So this is compensatory justice, I realized that an awful lot of people will say, "This is pie in the sky, by and by. This is never going to happen. That the trustees would never permit such a thing." Well, maybe you've not been watching the news regularly, because it's quite obvious that at some point in time, this is not going to be "a white, retired professor from Auburn University's talking about compensatory justice" in terms of big universities that spent one and quarter centuries deny them access to the university. They're going to get around to this, and therefore, to me, this symbolic change of names of buildings, this symbolic renaming of anything is nothing more than a symbol, and it has no lasting consequence and no method of compensatory justice. But now when you think about substantive change from the Black Lives Matter program, from that movement, from that vision of the future, I can tell you what, you take 0.1% of the endowments of the universities, which will not bankrupt any of them, and you transfer that to substantive change in the Black Belt, and you can revolutionize the future of rural Alabama in the process.

Mark Wilson:

Thank you. Dr. Flynt. And we invite everyone who is viewing on Facebook right now to submit a question if you have one. Dr. Flynt, your friend, John Archibald, Alabama Media Group, sent a couple of questions in advance in case he could not be at the program today. And I think it's a good one to start off with, based on your comments right now. And he says that he thinks you and he may have debated this one already. Here's the question: If there was momentum in Alabama to write a new Constitution tomorrow, would you trust the people and the processes in place now to write a better, smarter, more equitable and less oppressive Alabama Constitution than the one written in 1901? Why?

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

You tell John Archibald, "If he wants to ask me a question that complicated, that he's going to have to actually attend my lecture." He can't do from Birmingham. I'm not technologically equipped like he is to deal with that kind of thing.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Democracy is always the riskiest form of government known to humanity. That is because democracy works from a whole series of the most elemental human emotions: greed, love, anger. What's good for me and mine, not what is good for the whole? Therefore, democracy anytime as it is fraught with possible bad outcomes. So short answer to John's question, historians can predict the mistakes we made in 1901. They can't anticipate the mistakes we make in 2020. At heart, I'm not only a Baptist preacher, but also a quasi-Calvinist. And, in fact, every year that I watch America, I become more of a Calvinist, and I mean that, because I think we are driven by atoms of self-interest. Number one, take care of number one.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

I'm increasingly astounded at the Founding Fathers who created a government based upon checks and balances precisely because they were not people of the Enlightenment. They were Calvinists. They were of the Puritan tradition from England. And I mean by that, you don't need checks and balances if you assume people are good. If they're going to do the right thing. And so the Constitutional Convention that I would prefer is not a Constitutional Convention, just of the well-had boys and girls. It would not be... It would be a Constitutional Convention that would be structured around certain representational groups. For instance, whatever the white population of Alabama is, and I believe at present, it's at 74%, they'd have 74% of the delegates. Twenty-six percent of Alabamians are African-Americans, and 26% of the delegates would be African Americans. They'd be a ratio of women and men appropriate to the representation. There would be a representation of different sections of the state based upon their population.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

You know, it's hard to remember, John, that not too many years ago, before forced reapportionment, that Jefferson County had one senator in a senate of 35 people, and Wilcox County... Jefferson County had 600,000 people and one senator. Wilcox County had 17,000 people, had one senator. That could not occur if you want a Constitution any better than the one we have now. That same kind of system prevailed in the 1901 Constitution. So, if you will allow me to qualify the question by saying, "If Wayne Flynt were designing the Constitutional Convention, would I have some confidence in the outcome?" I would say, "I would have more confidence in the outcome than I would have had in 1901." Which doesn't mean that it would be a better Constitution, but I think it would have a lot better chance.

Mark Wilson:

Thank you for that. You'll need to repeat the question so they can hear this.

Dr. Wayne Flynt

It's nice to know technology can fail. Makes me feel a lot better. I'll repeat the question.

Mark Wilson:

I'm going to combine a couple questions. We were wondering if there are examples of compensatory justice? And also, we were interested in what's the role of HBCUs in Alabama?

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

First question is, "Are there any examples of compensatory justice that I know about?"

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Of course. Affirmative action is a classic statement of compensatory justice. And I'm going to use myself as an example of compensatory justice. I was a first-generation college student. My grandfather was a sharecropper who, to close to the end of his life, couldn't read and write. My father was a sharecropper. Moved off the farm in 1937 as a teenager to go work in a steel mill in Birmingham. Never graduated high school, so to some degree, when Howard College was looking at me as a prospective student, they saw one of the worst risk you can imagine in the state of Alabama. There's nothing in my background that would suggest I was going to be a decent student. I had gone to 12 schools, between the ages of 6 and 14, in two different states. I was never in school more than a year and a half until high school. So I had a terrible academic background.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Worse than that, many of those years were in Georgia where I was way ahead, and when I moved there from Alabama, I was so far behind, I didn't know how to catch up. So, in a sense, Howard College took a risk on me, in a chance, in a sense. I came from a little Baptist college nobody had ever heard of, Howard College, and so Florida State took a risk with me. So I'm a good believer in risk takers. I would much prefer to teach at a place like Auburn than a place like Harvard. And the reason is because the student body would either be brilliant, or it would be legacy students who didn't get in because they were brilliant, but because they had an ancestor who went to Harvard. And a lot of them didn't turn out so well, the legacy are graduates of Harvard and Yale, and so forth. A lot of them... A disproportionate number of them went into politics, and the outcome was seldom ever good, sometimes good.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So I'm a big believer in giving people a chance. And I can say that there were an awful lot of African American and working-class white kids at Auburn when I taught there, who were wonderful students, but if you looked at their ACT scores or SAT scores, you wouldn't believe that possible. So my theory is give people a chance. I think they're all sorts of compensatory programs and frankly, I think, you know, an awful lot of what we would generally call "white racists" in Alabama, who themselves never finished high school, never went to college, would be delighted if their children we're receiving a kind of compensatory justice for the kind of world in which they grew up. So let them come to Auburn. Let's see what they can do. So yeah, there are lots of programs like that.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

What was the other question, the other?

Mark Wilson:

The role of HBCUs?

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Historically black universities.

Mark Wilson:

Yeah.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

The role of historically black universities in a fully-integrated culture will change. But what I would like to emphasize about going to college period is that when I had a chance to go to Howard College in Birmingham as a Baptist ministerial student, that just seemed like a perfect fit. Perhaps, Furman would have taken me, a much better Baptist school. Perhaps Baylor would have taken me, but I'm not sure I would have made it either place, because I needed a community. I needed a community of Alabamians, who understood my culture. I needed faculty members who were mainly from Alabama, who would understand my culture. And so, in the same way that a Baptist School fit me perfectly when I was 17 years old and from a very poor academic background and a lower middle class family, by the same token, historic black universities will always serve the same kind of role for African American students that a Baptist school, all white at the time, served for me when I went there.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So I see the historically black universities always having a central role in education in Alabama and not just for students who couldn't get into Yale. I mean, students who would feel uncomfortable at Yale, who would need a community of people like themselves to sustain them and support them. And for that daring person who grew up in a sharecropper, small family, didn't have much money, there are some people bold enough and sure enough of themselves to go to Harvard from that kind of background. I was not one of them. And I think you'll have an awful lot of African-Americans who will feel the same way. They want to comfortable, supportive culture, pros who all look like them, think like them, come from similar backgrounds that they came from. And that's where they ought to be. They ought not to be at Auburn. They ought not to be at Alabama or Samford or Birmingham Southern or Yale or Harvard. They ought to be at a historically black college.

Mark Wilson:

So, it's obviously a year of change. If I would have told you six months ago that, "Hey, Mississippi is going to change its flag. NASCAR's going to take down the Confederate flag." Your response would have been that we're all crazy, right? Because you couldn't predict that-

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Absolutely.

Mark Wilson:

... we would be at the moment of change that we're in.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Absolutely.

Mark Wilson:

So can you imagine this moment of change stretching into and through the state, so that there is change related to one question about how funding for public schools might change in the future?

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

That's actually two questions, not one question. The one question is, "Can I imagine what the change will be?" And the answer to that is, "No, I can't imagine what the change will be." And the reason for that is, as I began my presentation, historians are pretty good at teasing out the meaning of the past as we understand it from our present. We are not at all good at looking into the future with a crystal ball and saying, "This is what's going to happen." If so, nobody would have predicted the Black Lives Matter movement, triggered by

an obscure event in a way, but a universal event in another way in Minneapolis, Minnesota... None of us would have anticipated the greatest pandemic since the flu epidemic a century ago.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So no, I can't I can't at all predict what things are going to be like, but I can tell you the third axiom of my introduction, which is, "Though I don't know what things will be like, they will be different," because, make no mistake about it, we are living through one of those tipping points of American History. I think it just as important a tipping point as the Civil War, the First World War, the Second World War, the Great Depression, the civil rights movement, the cultural revolution of the 1960s, and therefore, I'm absolutely convinced, don't even think about what preceded 2020, because that's not what America is going to be like. It's going to be very different. It is when historians moved beyond that ability to rely on the past to understand the present and the future that they make terrible mistakes.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

In terms of education, Alabama, Mississippi and a lot of other southern states are very soon going to have to come head to head with very important question, whether we cut off supply chains for China and transfer them to America and start manufacturing again, and they're good salaries for people who don't want to go to college or certainly don't want to get a college degree or not. One thing is absolutely totally certain, the world that we are entering now is going to be a world where you don't get your information here. You get it from technology. Therefore, you have to be technologically literate. You have to know how to use it. If we want to lower the playing field, because we have allowed Alabama to become one of the poorest states in America. And you can say, "Well, they're awful lot of good things about Alabama." Well, I won't dispute that, but I will dispute the way in which we distribute resources and the outcome of those resources and the way which racism has shaped the way in which those institutions have been built and those systems put in place.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

And racism is like any other sin in the Hebrew Bible. There's a penalty. There's a judgment, and our judgment is the present reality of the state where we have one of the poorest educated populations, one of the sickest populations, one of the highest rates of maternal mortality, one of the highest rates of infant mortality of children who die at birth. We have a one of the worst problems of low education skills. That is not because we don't know the solution to these problems. By almost every estimate, we have one of the best early childhood programs in America. Of the 50 states, none is much better and few are as good as the early intervention early, childhood education program in Alabama, but we don't fund it at a level high enough to have every single child in that program. So that we have only something like the 55% to 60% of the children who are eligible for early childhood, desperately need it, in that program to get them ready.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

And if you are a black parent, you never went to college, you never finished high school, you live in a place where there is an early childhood program, but your child can't get in that early childhood program, where do you think the leveling is going to occur? Is the leveling going to occur in the first grade when my two sons get there, and my two sons have been in early childhood since they were just old enough to go to school? And, therefore, they sit comfortably in this early child in this first grade class, knowing what's going to happen, knowing what the teacher's going to do, knowing you have to have order in a classroom, and so forth, versus an African American or Latino kid who's in that class, who has nobody who's ever gone to college. They have not gone to early childhood, and I would argue, those kids often drop out of school, not in the 9th or 10th grade, when they get to be 16. They go through the motions of going to school in the first grade until they're allowed to drop out of school, but they dropped out of school in the first grade when they sat next to someone like my two sons, and they thought, "I'm really stupid. People act as if I am stupid, and I obviously am stupid, because I don't know anything that these two boys who are my classmates know."

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Well, if you want to level that playing field, you're not going to level it in the first grade. Alabama's just kidding itself. You know, we have a charade. Therefore, we need to switch the basis of taxation to property taxes, because property taxes are predictable. Sales taxes are not predictable. We shift the burden of school funding to sales taxes. Well, what do you do during the coronavirus? Long-term, if this goes on very long, schools are going to be in desperate condition.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Furthermore, we have shifted, especially during the coronavirus, from buying stuff in local stores to buying stuff online. Well, when they wrote the tax bill, the legislature wrote the tax bill for online, not all the tax revenue from the sales tax for online purchases go to education. So in May of this year, our revenue from sales taxes was down 17%. That's 17% you're going to shave off, and the schools won't suffer too much this year, but next year, there will be a worse problem. And if you start off of schools that are underfunded to start with, then the exponential effect of this is going to be disastrous.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Furthermore, property values almost never go up. As my good friend, Connor Bailey, at the forestry program at Auburn, has pointed out repeatedly, 62% of the large timber plantations... that's 2,000 acres and more... 62% of that land is owned by people who do not live in Alabama, who don't send their kids to school in Alabama. You know where they live? They live in Germany. They live in France. They live in England. They live in South Korea. They live in Boston. They live in Washington state. Sixty-two percent of them have a mailbox in Perry County or Monroe County, and once a year, somebody goes to the mailbox, and they get their tax assessment. And their tax assessment is the best investment they ever made for their economic future, because they're paying a few cents an acre for timber plantations, which will be worth millions and tens of millions of dollars someday. And that's not improving the quality of public schools, because the property taxes are so low, they starve public school. If we do not have substantive tax change, the quality of Alabama life for my grandchildren, if they're here, and I doubt they will be... One of my sons and his wife will never come back to Alabama, never come back to the South and they won't come back because of my lecture today.

Mark Wilson:

So you've been advocating for this kind of change for a long time. Does this moment of reckoning that we seem to be in, give you hope?

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Yeah, I view this, to use a theater metaphor, "Catching hold of a star." Maybe a meteor, because stars go pretty slowly. Meteors go really fast. I can't help but think of the difference between A.B. Moore's childhood and mine. I was born on the cusp of the civil rights movement in 1940. World War II veterans thought about justice very differently, and the GI bill allowed them to come to places like Auburn from places like my grandfather came from and build a new life for themselves.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

And of course, I went to college about... First of all, I was reading the Bible and I could not justify what I was reading in the Bible, and my commitment to being a Baptist preacher to what I was hearing from the culture in which I lived. The culture in which I lived was not Christian in any meaningful sense in so far as race was concerned. Charity, we do well. We did really well taking care of each other. Sense of community, we did really well. Treating people in such a way as when you saw a car broken down with a flat tire on the side of the road, you stopped and try to change it for a person.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

There are good things about Alabama in the apartheid era, but at the fundamental core of the apartheid era was the fact that there was injustice, and I believe that was true when I went to college, and when I went to grad school, and when I went back to college at my alma mater to teach. And when the first thing I did was start a chapter of the Young Democrats, and the second thing I did was to start a tutoring program at Rosedale High School in the middle of Homewood, Alabama, one of the wealthiest communities in the state, within the shadows of Shades Mountain High School, one of the two best schools, because Mountain Brook students all went Shades Valley at the time. So it's one of the two, along with Sidney Lanier, best high schools in the state.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

And yet in that ghetto, there were dozens of people who couldn't read and write. And Rosedale High School, the black high school in Homewood, did not have a microscope in the high school. They didn't have a foreign language class in the high school. They didn't have an advanced math class in high school. I was just stunned. I couldn't believe what we were seeing within three miles of the Howard College campus. And so from that group, came not only the first African American female who went to Samford in 1969, but also the first 90-year-old woman who voted for the first time in her life, as a result of the voter registration drive we did in Rosedale. And so I guess you could say, my formative experiences as a 24-year old professor were in that period of change that the civil rights movement had begun in the '50s and was finalized into the 1960s. I went back to my alma mater in 1965, and that's when we began all that.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So to some degree, I'm no different from my father, whose racial views were very different from mine, in that Dad grew up in his world and reflected the values of those revolutions that were part of his world... poverty, First World War, Second World War, Great Depression, and so forth. But my formative stage was the civil rights movement. And it's interesting to see what a new generation, come of age in the age of Black Lives Matter, is going to be able to tolerate, or hard they're going to push, or whether, in fact, they're going to be diverted, through Black Lives Matter, into an argument about symbols: "Take Robert E. Lee's statue down." I don't really give a hoot what you do with Robert E. Lee's statute. Leave it. Take it down. I don't care. What I'm concerned about is what's going to happen to opportunity and justice in Richmond, Virginia, whether they leave it out or take it down. I don't care. That's a symbolic matter. That's somebody else's issue. That's not my issue. I'm interested in subjective change. And if you leave it up, and you bring justice, economic justice, better education to Richmond, I'm happy with that. If you take it down, and you don't bring justice and substantive change to kids who grew up black in Richmond, Virginia, then all the symbols in the world, taking them down has not one bit of good.

Mark Wilson:

Thank you for that. And will end with this question, another one from John Archibald. Who will be our hopes for the future, our John Lewises, our Albert Brewers, our Ryan DeGraffenried Sr., who will appeal to our better angels, try to pull us up beyond pandering? Is there a chance for them in this world?

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Well, in this case, John and I tend to be on different pages. John's a journalist, and it's much easier to be a cynic when you're a journalist than when you're a historian. History assumes that you're building for a long future, and the long future is always, in my view, God's future and in the providence of God. I figure it's going to get better. I figure it's going to get better. I'm no Pollyanna, but I do believe, incrementally, if you look back over American history, we've come a long way from Thomas Jefferson and George Washington and a population of whites that couldn't understand the foggiest idea that something was wrong with slavery, much less something that we create the richest place on Earth in the Southern Cotton Belt, the richest place

on Earth. Nine of the ten wealthiest white populations in America in the 1860 census were in Southern Cotton Belt states. The only exception was Connecticut, and that's because they made cotton gins.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

So in the thrust of history to me, is there anybody in their right mind who would swap 2020 for January 1861? Maybe out there some outlying Confederate out there that I don't know, but I can't believe any of them would go back to that. And so, in the promise of God, I really believe the future is going to be better than the past, but I can understand John's cynicism, because if you write for a newspaper then your chunk of reality is the last 24-hour cycle. You can be pretty cynical about Alabama, but I don't write in 24-hour cycles. So my vision is out there way ahead of John's, I hope.

Mark Wilson:

And we are thankful that you continue to write.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Thank you.

Mark Wilson:

And we're thankful that everyone online was able to join us, and we invite you to share this program on Facebook and elsewhere, and join us right here for future programs. Thank you. Dr. Flynt.

Dr. Wayne Flynt:

Thank you, Mark.



FOR MORE INFORMATION

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